

# **THE REVIVAL OF HANFU: THE RISE AND FALL OF A CULTURAL MOVEMENT**

By  
**Leiyi Lin**

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Central European University - Private University  
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

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**Supervisors**  
Professor Alexandra Kowalski  
Professor Claudio Sopranzetti

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, many Chinese “time travelers” appeared in Chinese gardens, palaces, temples, and historic riverine towns with silky gowns from ancient China. The costumes on their bodies are called Hanfu, an ethnic costume for the Han people in China. Despite its current popularity, Hanfu has only been back in front of the public for more than a decade. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, some Hanfu enthusiasts launched a cultural movement to revive Hanfu and Han culture. In the short history of the Hanfu revival, the practitioners have met with various problems: the void of authentic Hanfu, the civil war between different camps of Hanfu practitioners, and the wave of commercialization. Inspired by the social movement framework, this thesis will provide an overview of the Hanfu revival. The significant finding in this thesis is, although the Hanfu revival started as a movement articulating the cultural discontent of the Han people, it has been captured by consumerism in recent years. It is experiencing a shift from a cultural movement to a collection of individualistic displays of fashioned culture.

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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 THE HANFU REVIVAL: THEORIES AND METHODS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT.....	5
1.2 ON THEATRICALITY .....	7
1.3 UNDERSTANDING THEATRICALITY IN THE HANFU REVIVAL: METHODS AND LIMITATIONS .....	9
<b>CHAPTER 2 THE INNATE CRISIS IN THE HANFU REVIVAL .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 THE EARLY YEARS OF THE HANFU REVIVAL: THE BIRTH OF THE CRISIS .....	14
2.1.1 <i>Between the Han and the Chinese</i> .....	14
2.1.2 <i>Rescuing the Han people from “Chinese”</i> .....	19
2.1.3 <i>China Encounters the World</i> .....	21
2.2 “THE DAY OF CHINESE COSTUMES:” THE CRISIS’ RETURN IN RECENT YEARS.....	24
<b>CHAPTER 3 CIVIL WAR: THE REVERSIONARY VS. THE REFORMIST.....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1 THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS: FINDING THE ESSENTIALS IN ARCHIVES .....	27
3.2 THE REFORMERS: A BLACK PLUM IS AS SWEET AS A WHITE .....	30
3.3 THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC HANFU.....	32
<b>CHAPTER 4 WHEN HANFU MEETS CONSUMERISM .....</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1 MAKING HANFU INTO LUXURIES .....	38
4.1.1 <i>Strategies of Hanfu Shops: “Limited Edition,” Cultural Revitalization, and Customization</i> .....	38
4.1.2 <i>Contribution from Connoisseurs: Knowledge, Experiences, and Collaborative Storytelling</i> .....	41
4.2 THE “HANFU POLICE” AND ITS IMPACTS.....	44
<b>CONCLUSION: THE RISE AND FALL OF A CULTURAL MOVEMENT .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHIES.....</b>	<b>49</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The Spring Formal was an annual feast during my undergraduate years. In this 4-hour-long gathering, students dress formally, chat as if they were successful business people, and enjoy the snacks and wines in an auditorium. However, the Spring Formal in my sophomore year gave me a pause. Among the suits and tailcoats, a girl wearing silky gowns with long sleeves impressed me and soon became the spotlight of the party. This was my first contact with Han ethnic costumes (Hanfu 汉服), and the contact spurred questions: What was that dressing? And why did she dress up like that?

I was not the only one who had such questions when seeing Hanfu for the first time. In November 2003, Wang Letian, an ordinary electric engineer in Zhengzhou, China, went to the city center with his handmade costumes. Soon a photo of him wearing such “strange” clothes went viral in newspapers. Before Wang, one could hardly find people wearing Hanfu on the street. Discussions on Hanfu were mainly online. For example, Zhao Junqiang, a military enthusiast living in Shaanxi, China, wrote an article titled “The Civilization Lost: Han Ethnic Costumes” on Valentine’s Day of 2002 and posted it on a military forum. Most of these early articles responded to an ethnic issue in China, that the Han people, which constitutes more than 90% of the population in China, was in a void of traditions and ethnic symbols under the communist regime. It was Wang’s bold steps that pulled the trigger of a long-lasting cultural movement that aims at bringing Hanfu, the ethnic costume that was almost forgotten by the Han people, back to life.

The number of Hanfu practitioners, known also as Tongpao 同袍, has grown significantly in these two decades. In 2004, the first gathering of Hanfu practitioners in Shenzhen welcomed only 20 participants. However, by 2021, the government-hosted “Day of Chinese Costumes

中国华服日,” a carnival for Hanfu practitioners, got almost 1 billion views and 1.12 million posts online.<sup>1</sup> The Hanfu industry, as is estimated in 2019, got more than 2 million consumers.<sup>2</sup> The rapid growth of Hanfu practitioners does not only make their voices louder, but it also brings factions and debates among the practitioners, especially in the past few years. From my observation, there are three significant debates in discussions of the Hanfu revival. The first question is about the wording of Hanfu. Although Hanfu refers to the costume of the Han people, the Chinese government chooses the wording “Chinese Costume 华服” in official circumstances instead of Hanfu. The difference in word choice leads to the divergence of Hanfu practitioners. Some of them, who are often criticized as Han chauvinists, insist that Hanfu should only be treated as the costume for the Han people. On the contrary, those who are more tolerant or have no intention to differentiate the Han people from the Chinese keep the lines blurred. The second prominent debate is between the reversionary and the reformist (Zhou, 2014, 2019; Gao, 2019). The reversionary camp argues that Hanfu should be formulated according to archives, be it portraits in ancient times or articles discussing dressing codes. In contrast, the other group welcomes new ideas in terms of Hanfu production. The third problem concerns the use of Hanfu, or what Hanfu is for. Some practitioners agree with what the Hanfu girl did in the Spring Formal, taking Hanfu as a formal dressing for rites and ceremonies, while the others choose to wear Hanfu in their daily routines.

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1 . For detailed data regarding online discussions on the “Day of Chinese Costumes,” see <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%8D%8E%E6%9C%8D%E6%97%A5%23>.

2. See <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/finance/2019/09/14/626124.html>, a statistical analysis of Hanfu customers and the Hanfu industry by *the Beijing News*.

No two leaves are alike. People's minds vary, so it is not surprising to find factions or divergences in a social movement. But what is worth exploring is the formation of factions and how the contentious interactions between these factions could influence the movement. My thesis, holding these debates on the Hanfu revival into account, will try to address these concerns:

- 1) How does the cultural movement cohere? And how does it splinter? What are the key factors leading to the divergences among Hanfu practitioners? Do these problems exist from the beginning of the Hanfu revival, or do they appear with the movement's evolution?
- 2) How do these factions construct their discourses? What are the keywords behind their claims, and how do these practitioners justify the legitimacy of their faction? Considering the three significant debates, are these independent issues, or are they interrelated in discourse?
- 3) What are the impacts of these debates on the participation of the Hanfu practitioners? What are the possible impacts of these debates on the Hanfu revival in general?

To answer these questions, I will divide my thesis into four sections. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework. Inspired by Charles Tilly's social movement theory, I will explain the similarities between the Hanfu revival and a social movement and the concept of theatricality in the analysis of the Hanfu revival. I will also discuss the methods, the fields, and the limitations of my thesis.

The second chapter will discuss the early years of the Hanfu revival. Based on the history of China and the documents written by the practitioners in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, this chapter

will present an innate crisis in the Hanfu revival: the authenticity of Hanfu. This chapter will focus on whether authentic Hanfu means nominally as the ethnic costume of the Han people, or it is a costume representing the Chinese.

The third chapter will connect the ethnic issue with the symbolic realm of Hanfu. Focusing on the testimonies of the reversionary and the reformist practitioners, I will explore how these practitioners argue for or against the notion of authentic Hanfu. As I will argue in the chapter, authenticity is not only about history and historiography but also about the desire to express oneself.

The fourth chapter will move from Hanfu's symbolic form to its commodity form, exploring how consumerism enters the realm of a cultural movement, how values are created and valorized by different discourses, and how commercialization contributes to the current factions of the Hanfu revival.



## CHAPTER 1 THE HANFU REVIVAL: THEORIES AND METHODS

In recent articles on the Hanfu revival, the term “Hanfu movement,” or sometimes referred to as the “Han clothing movement,” is widely accepted. The literature takes the revival of Hanfu either as an ethnic movement in which Hanfu is the material media connecting the participants to the (re)imagination of the Han people (Carrico, 2013) or as a cultural movement launched by enthusiasts to revitalize a folk culture (Zhou, 2014; Gao, 2019).

However, seldom does the literature explain why the Hanfu revival is comparable to a social movement and how we should approach the revival of Hanfu as a social movement.

Following the theoretical framework of Charles Tilly, I will argue in this chapter that the Hanfu revival is comparable to a social movement. Furthermore, I will introduce theatricality in social movements and how theatricality could be transplanted to understand the complexity of the Hanfu revival.

### 1.1 The Concept of Social Movement

What does the term “social movement” mean when it appears in an article? What is it like? Do different social movements have something in common? Social movement scholars have already produced piles of papers discussing the notion of social movement (i.e., Smelser, 2011; Tarrow, 2011; Jasper, 1997; Tilly, 2008). In general, social movements include a plurality of agents (i.e., individuals, organizations, or institutions), a political or cultural conflict, a shared identity, and a network mobilizing people to come together (Diani, 1992; Tarrow, 1994; James and van Seters, 2014). For example, a temple fair is not necessarily a social movement despite the participation of plural agents, but a temple fair could be a spectacular part of a social movement if it raises funds for a religion repressed in a country. Likewise, a well-organized basketball season is not a social movement, but it could be integrated into a social movement if all players kneel before every game to show respect for George Floyd, a black American

murdered by the police. Simply put, a social movement is about making a public statement, be it a request to reform social structure or to redistribute wealth or resource in the society (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), or a discourse concerning the issues of culture, identity, and lifestyle (Offe, 1985; Pichardo, 1997).

Most studies of social movement question the rise and fall of a social movement from the massive get-together of agents, i.e., the occupation of Wall Street or the yellow vests gathering in Paris. However, not every social movement will hold such spectacular events as the climax of the movement. In Charles Tilly's (1993) article, he defines a social movement as "a complex form of social interaction" that could be parallel to "a loosely-choreographed dance, a fund-raising pancake breakfast, a quilting bee, a street-corner debate, a jam session with changing players, a pickup basketball game, or a city-wide festival" (p. 5). Tilly's definition points out two essential properties of social movements. Firstly, the massive gathering of participants, namely the "city-wide festival," is not the only repertoire used in social movements. A social movement is a collection of events happening discretely in different time and spaces, some of which could even happen in a very casual manner that requires much fewer participants than a parade. For example, a walk with Hanfu in a Chinese garden, a lecture on Hanfu in a public library, or a display of Hanfu in a market. These methods adopted by Hanfu practitioners to increase the influence of Hanfu are all the tiny events constituting a social movement. Secondly, a social movement, whatever the repertoire it takes, is dialogical. A debate needs an affirmative side and a negative side. A pickup basketball game needs communication among team members. Similarly, a social movement is not a presidential speech on the radio or a monologue in films. It creates dialogues, even though some of them, as I showed in the introduction section, will lead to the birth of factions within its participants.

After analyzing the properties of social movements, it is evident in what sense the Hanfu revival could be comparable to a social movement. It has, first and foremost, a cultural purpose. As I will show in the next chapter, the pioneers of the Hanfu revival had a political subtext under the cultural surface, arguing for official recognition of the social status of the Han people. Though it did not bring hundreds of thousands of people together to march on the street, the Hanfu revival never stops organizing these “pickup basketball games.” However, the study of a social movement includes many sub-topics like the organization of individuals and the construction of a shared identity. As the following chapters will argue, these critical features could not be easily found in the Hanfu revival. To conclude, I consider the revival of Hanfu not as a narrowly defined social movement but as a cultural phenomenon that presents a few critical features a social movement has. In the next section, I will continue with Tilly’s (1993) framework, highlight the critical property of a social movement that I call “theatricality,” and explore the theatrical nature of folk cultures' revival.

## **1.2 On Theatricality**

It is not a brand-new idea to combine the study of social movements with theatre and dramaturgy. Presenting a repertoire in a social movement like a drama is a communication of power (Benford and Hunt, 1992). With different agents participating in a social movement, there might be competing stories or plots from different power relations (Polletta, 1997). However, before complicated sociology jargon, there is one question: how is a social movement similar to a theatre? To answer the question, we should first make a detour. What does the word “theatre” refer to? Firstly, theatre is a form of performing art that organizes specifically trained people to present a series of meaningful events, either they are real or merely a product of imagination. Secondly, it also refers to the space, often a designated stage, in which performances happen. In making a theatre, we should not just take the scriptwriter

and the experienced actors and actresses into account. The director, who is in charge of the whole *mise-en-scène* — the background, the places of the actors and actresses on the stage, the costumes, the lighting — and the pace of the theatre, is also a crucial staff member in conducting a theatre.

Besides the producers, a theatre needs audiences and interacts with its audiences. The interaction, usually mediated by the setting, happens in two different forms. For Bertolt Brecht (1964), his notion of the “estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*)” points to the alienation of the audiences from the play. With fewer stage decorations and a third-person narrative, the audiences are distanced from the performance itself. They will not project their emotions to the characters in the theatre, but they are encouraged to keep intellectual empathy, a rational reflection of the events in the theatre. The other school, considerably influenced by Antonin Artaud (1958), holds the audience as subjective. In other words, audiences are in the theatre when watching it. Theatre in this context is not simply an intellectual project for passive observer-audience. Through gestures, sounds, lighting, and other multi-sensory means, the theatre makes the audience engage with the performance on an emotional or even instinctive level.

Now let us go back to Tilly’s definition of social movement, which brings to light how a social movement could be comparable to a theatre. A social movement is environmental. Every event mentioned by Tilly needs a space to make it happen, be it a dancing room, a breakfast bar, or a basketball court. The environment, just like the *mise-en-scène* of a theatre, mediates how an audience interacts with the performance. For example, in a street-corner debate, the audience might be more emotionally engaged with the content and might join the debate when convinced or infuriated by a particular argument. Whereas in a fund-raising breakfast, the audience is

more alienated from emotions and is more likely to decide rationally whether to give money and how much money he or she should give.

Moreover, a social movement, as Tilly terms it, is teleological. A successful social movement should fully meet Tilly's (1993) criteria: "NUMBERS x COMMITMENT x UNITY x WORTHINESS" (p. 14). Every move in a social movement should have a claim of significance answering why such an event is worthy: a breakfast for fund-raising, a street-corner debate for communal issues, or even a dance to express passion. If we see the unfolding of a social movement as a well-written script in a theatre, there should be a meaningful question raised or a meaningful reflection made regarding a particular problem. In summary, the theatricality of social movements refers to a relationship between the setting and the worthiness, between the media and the messages.

### **1.3 Understanding Theatricality in the Hanfu Revival: Methods and Limitations**

As is argued in the previous section, theatricality is not only about performances and practices but also about scripts and settings. Moreover, what is worth further explorations in theatricality is how different directors, plot writers, and actors design the setting, write the plots, perform on stage, and finally deliver messages to their audiences. So, I choose to proceed with a study that starts from the scripts and settings and ends with performances.

Scriptwriters may let their minds fly when writing a plot, creating an imagined world for their stories, but a world of imagination does not come from nowhere. Science fiction novels are confined to reasonable extensions of the current physical world. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is written regarding historical records and appropriate linguistic inventions. Similarly, discourses

on the Hanfu revival are based on what happened in China's past. Hence, my study of discourses goes into the realm of folklorism.

The word “folklorism,” as Hans Moser (1962) points out, refers to the increasing passion for folk matters and the practice to satisfy or dissatisfy the passion with “second-hand mediation and presentation of folk culture” (p. 180). Herrmann Bausinger (1984) later explains what Moser means by “second-hand,” arguing that second-hand mediation makes the folk culture foreign to its original tradition. This mediation could be completed in different ways: by recontextualizing the folk culture via painting or literature or by transforming the past into a cultural industry. Thus, the German tradition of folklorism echoes what Eric Hobsbawm (2012) calls “the invention of tradition.” In Hobsbawm's words, what is claimed to be old might be invented recently for commercial, cultural, or political purposes.

The literature on folklorism reveals that the revitalization of folk culture is never a simple, static move to present something disappearing or dead. It is dynamic. It encourages the labor of those passionate for folk culture and even “poaching” efforts from these enthusiasts — borrowing what Michel de Certeau (2011) writes — to create a narrative of their own to define and explain the contents in a given archive. When we look at the Hanfu revival, it is such politics of folk culture that becomes the main reason leading to the split of the practitioners. There comes then the question of authentic Hanfu, and authenticity turns out to be the keyword behind the three crucial debates in the Hanfu revival.

To analyze how different discourses are constructed around the notion of authenticity and how these discourses influence the Hanfu revival, I have divided the Hanfu practitioners into two groups with different methods of study: those who produce discourses and those who receive

them. On the producers' side, I start with an archive of the documents produced by Hanfu practitioners. My archival work targets influential posts, websites, videos, and records of collective activities published online. With these documents, I will present a discourse analysis in the following chapters, uncovering how the producers create a theatrical effect by taking both the text and the context into consideration. Inspired by Ulrich Dolata and Jan-Felix Schrape (2016), I will also include the techno-condition of the text in my analysis. For example, a theatre popular in Staatsoper in Vienna will not be produced the same way in the Hungarian state opera house. For online fieldwork and discourse analysis, the social media where these texts were published is a coordinating factor influencing the production of discourses.

On the receivers' side, I have conducted participant observation in different online platforms where Hanfu practitioners discuss Hanfu-related issues. The platforms include Hanfu Tieba (the Hanbu BBS from 2004, one of the most influential fora), Weibo (a Twitter-ish social media, where people gather under tags), Bilibili (a YouTube-ish social media for Hanfu vloggers), and Zhihu (a Quora-ish discussion platform). These social media platforms witness most of the active Hanfu practitioners. There were some popular social media among Hanfu users, for example, Xiexiu, but most of them went silent in the past years, and the records on these media were hard to recover, so they are not included in my research. Besides participant observation, I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with Hanfu practitioners from different backgrounds: those currently enrolled in Chinese universities, those who spent their college life overseas, and those who recently graduated from universities and started working. I have also interviewed Professor Zhou Xing, a Chinese ethnologist at Aichi University who is an expert in Hanfu and the Hanfu movement. These interviews complement the data I have collected in my participant observation, as they provided detailed personal experiences and emotions absent in online discussions.

Despite the data I have, there are a few questions that my research cannot fully answer. As the report from iiMedia (2019) points out, the number of female Hanfu practitioners has been increasing remarkably since 2014. In the years 2017 and 2018, more than 88% of the Hanfu practitioners are female. The report highlights the gendered participation in the Hanfu revival, which could only be partially supported regarding my research experiences. Besides Zhou Xing, all of my other interviewees are females ranging from 22 to 25 years old. However, when it turns to the authors of the Hanfu-related documents, especially those in the early years of the Hanfu revival, most of the documents I have collected were written by men. Does it mean that men set the rules in the field of Hanfu, and women are playing within the patriarchal framework? Not necessarily. Female activists in the Hanfu revival produced a few notable works, for example, the technology of the dressing codes in the Tang Dynasty.

Gender participation is undoubtedly crucial in understanding the cultural movement, but the research on gender participation is hard and complicated. Firstly, the fieldwork I completed is primarily online. In these forums, Hanfu practitioners usually call their peers “Tongpao 同袍,” which is gender-neutral. Although some social media, for example, Weibo, display the gender of the user in his or her profile, it is still complicated to figure out his or her real gender identification behind an avatar. Secondly, the ways people communicate in Chinese contributes to another difficulty in questioning the gender perspective of the Hanfu revival. The gender pronouns “he” and “she” pronounce the same in Mandarin. As a result, when one sees a sentence like “he is wearing an authentic Hanfu,” it is unclear whether the person referred to in the sentence is male or female when the author types such a sentence. Given that my thesis focuses more on discussing the genesis and genealogy of the Hanfu revival, I will mention the



gender perspective if necessary in the following chapters instead of providing a thorough review on gender participation in the Hanfu revival.

After setting the stage with an introduction of the social movement framework, the notion of theatricality, and my approaches toward an analysis of theatricality, the next chapter will open the door to the ongoing Hanfu revival. Before we look into what is happening recently, we need a time machine bringing us back to the early years of the Hanfu movement. There we could see the pioneers and their theatres on revitalizing a folk culture.

## CHAPTER 2 THE INNATE CRISIS IN THE HANFU REVIVAL

### 2.1 The Early Years of the Hanfu Revival: The Birth of the Crisis

As is mentioned in the introduction, the rise of the Hanfu revival was a result of the Han people declaring their cultural discontent. However, before we look into how the Han people address the importance of their cultural legacies, we need to question first the construction of the Han people. Who are they? What is their relationship with other ethnic minorities in China? Why do they need to stress their ethnic uniqueness?

#### 2.1.1 *Between the Han and the Chinese*

Rome was not built in one day, and the Han identity is also not a result of an epiphany. “History was the principal mode whereby non-nations were converted into nations,” wrote Prasenjit Duara (1995, p. 27) in his work on Chinese historiography. To understand the notion of the Han people at present, we have to look into Chinese history to find how it was imagined in the past. Three thousand years ago, China was not yet a unified country. The Han people, who believed themselves to be the descendent of the mythological Emperor Yan 炎帝 and Emperor Huang 黄帝, lived in the “land of the centre (*zhongyuan* 中原)” surrounded by the ethnic minorities. The Sino-barbarian dichotomy, a byproduct of Confucianism, culturally differentiated the orthodox Chinese (*Huaxia* 华夏) constituted by the Han people and the “barbarians (*Yi* 夷)” around the habitat of the Han. The differentiation between the “Chinese” and the “barbarians” is usually based on the acceptance of Confucian/Han values. In the third chapter, the “Eight Dancers,” of *The Analects*, Confucius (1910) stresses the ultimate important role of rites and mentions that “the tribes of the east and north have their princes, and are not, like our great land, without” (p. 187). According to Confucius, the barbarians were naturally inferior to the orthodox Chinese, even though they had princes, because they did not and would not follow the rites and values of the more civilized Han people.

The Confucian tradition made categorically distinguished outsiders excluded from the group of orthodox Chinese. The neo-Confucians later inherited this categorical difference encompassing Han supremacism in modern Chinese historiography. Tu Wei-Ming (1991), a professor of Chinese history at Harvard University, argues that “China” is more a cultural notion instead of a racial one, and an alien equal has never succeeded in challenging it in the past: all barbarians founding new dynasties were educated by the Confucian rites and became part of the Chinese. Scholars in the People’s Republic of China also adopt this “cultural China” term in nation-building projects. Wang Hui (2015), a neo-Confucian historian, uses the term “Sinicization” to argue that the barbarians in the past had no choice but to follow the Han rites. They had to get themselves assimilated to claim their regimes as legitimate heirs to previous dynasties. In the words of these historians, the Han culture is the inevitable destiny of these barbaric and belligerent ethnic minorities.

The narrative highlighting the Han people as orthodox Chinese was not the only nation-building project in Chinese history. As Rogers Brubaker (2004) notes, national identity is neither a static nor a given quality but a response to the contingent moments when people feel collective solidarity. A dynamic nation-building project includes multiple competing nationalism claims if there is more than one moment in history when the boundaries of a nation were negotiated. The alternate nationalist claim of being Chinese, also the very claim that we now use as if it is taken for granted, was born at the dawn of the 20th century. When the Qing dynasty (AD 1368-1644), the final imperialist period in Chinese history, was defeated by the British and the French in the First Opium War, the ruler had no choice but to cede a section of its territory (part of current Hong Kong) to the intruders and to grant the foreigners with concessions in a few coastal cities. The sovereignty of China, although its rulers were sinicized

Manchurians, became at stake. The patriot elites and political activists, among which the most prominent is Sun Yat-sen, argued for a new country with “Five Races Under One Union (*wuzu gonghe* 五族共和).”<sup>3</sup> As Fei Xiaotong (1999) articulates, it was during the confrontation between China and the West when the notion of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) emerged. The newly defined “Chinese nation” was then recognized and deployed both by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (also known as Kuo Ming Tang, KMT) during the Sino-Japanese War as a means to unite all peoples within the territorial border of China to fight against foreign enemies (Huang, 2006). After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the notion of “the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) was replaced by its communist metamorphosis during Mao Zedong’s time: the Chinese people (*Zhongguo Renmin* 中国人民). However, the conceptualization of such a term remained the same. As the PRC’s constitution states, China is a “unitary multiethnic country” with a “socialist interethnic relationship” based on “equality, unity, mutual help, and harmony” (Central Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

This new nation-building project was promoted for the political loyalty of all ethnicities within China (Hechter, 2000). The party leaders then criticized Han supremacy as a political and ideological problem. Chairman Mao Zedong (1977) warned his comrades in his directive that “Han chauvinism” (*Dahan zhuyi* 大汉主义) was prevailing among the party members and the masses, and it needed to be eliminated. However, when Mao’s directives were turned into political movements, they ended up destroying the Han identity. In 1966, the first year of Mao’s

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3. At the very beginning, Sun and his Chinese Alliance (*Tongmenghui* 同盟会, a society for Chinese compatriots overseas) made their slogan “to expel the barbarians and to recover the [orthodox] Chinese (*quchu dalu, huifu Zhonghua*),” a form of Han supremacy. However, Sun shifted to the new slogan to create a republic with these four ethnic minorities (the Manchurians, the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Hui people) recognized as equal to the Han.

Cultural Revolution, Chen Boda's *People's Daily*, one of the most influential newspapers in China representing the voice of the communist party, published an op-ed titled "Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons (*Saochu yiqie niuguisheshen* 扫除一切牛鬼蛇神)." The publication of this article triggered a political movement to sweep away the "Four Olds 四旧": old ideas, old culture, old habits, and old customs. In the final years of the Cultural Revolution, after Lin Biao, the "successor" of Chairman Mao, betrayed the party and died in a plane crash when fleeing away from Beijing, Mao launched another political movement to criticize Lin Biao together with Confucius. Discussions on traditional culture and values were, as a result, silenced. Contrary to the symbolic violence against Han culture, the central government devoted itself to promoting and preserving minority cultures by establishing museums, troupes, and other institutions (Gladney, 2004).

After Mao's death, China experienced the Reform and Opening-up period, during which western thoughts and western manners were introduced into China. The intellectuals at that time, under such a big cultural shock, favored western thoughts and denounced Chinese/Han values. For example, a TV documentary titled "River Elegy 河殇" was shown on China Central Television in 1988. The multi-episodic documentary was "reflectional" in that it claimed that the traditions of China were the reason preventing China from further political and economic development.<sup>4</sup> The rupture of Han culture in the post-Mao era led to the "thusness" of Han identity in the cultural realm, making the Han an ambiguous word that could be used without further explanation (Harrell, 2001).

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4. Full video access from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpCmGc7AP1Q>.

When the cultural identity of the Han was belittled, the Han people were politically singled out by the Chinese “affirmative actions” (Leibold, 2007; Zhao, 2004). The ethnic policies of the communist party, which was, in theory, to foster the unity and mutual help between the Han and the ethnic minorities, favored ethnic minorities more than the Han people and provided the minorities with easier access to socio-economic resources and excluded them from punitive measures. For example, top universities in China give ethnic minorities a quota in their annual admission headcounts, whereas the Han people should go through the country-wide college entrance examination where the ethnic minorities are granted bonus points automatically. The One-Child Policy, which restricted the reproduction of the Han people, was not applied to the ethnic minorities. When a Han couple was troubled by the fines for breaking the government’s birth control, the ethnic minorities could have multiple children without being bothered by the infamous National Population and Family Planning Commission. The Han people saw themselves as positively discriminated against with a reverse of social status: the Han culture had assimilated the barbarians in the past, but the barbarians became privileged with the Han turned subaltern in recent times.

To summarize, the Han people is an ethnic identity constructed by its cultural background, and the constructing processes include the antagonism between Han and inferior non-Han ethnicities. However, during the communist period, governmental power has been trying to promote the sense of being Chinese, with all ethnicities included in an overarching concept. Besides the political effort leading to the vagueness of Han identity, intellectual reflections in the 1980s also devaluated Han culture. Consequently, in the late 1990s and early 21st century, there existed simultaneously a void of Han culture and a motivation to make the subaltern Han speak. It was the tension between the conceptualization of the Han and the Chinese that motivated some early Hanfu practitioners.

### 2.1.2 *Rescuing the Han people from “Chinese”*

When it comes to the early years of the Hanfu revival, it is hard to ignore some big names like Zhao Junjiang and Wang Hongbo. As mentioned in the introduction, Zhao published the article “The Civilization Lost: Han Ethnic Costumes” in 2002. This article was considered one of the most influential documents in the early years, but this was not Zhao’s first attempt to bring Hanfu to public discussions. As he wrote in his blog, he tried twice in 2001 with a post titled “My suggestions to restore Han ethnic costumes,” but, unfortunately, his effort did not attract the attention of his fellows (Zhao, 2016). The success of Zhao’s 2002 article, from his own words, was due to his use of various photos to illustrate the beauty of Hanfu. However, from what I call theatricality, the photos used in Zhao’s article were no more than the stage settings engaging his audiences, and a successful theatre delivering a message required more than that.

Zhao’s 2002 article started with a tragic story:

The Manchurian Qing Dynasty led to an essential change in the Han people’s dressing codes and buried Han ethnic clothing, which had been there for 2000 to 3000 years, into tombs. In the second year of the Shunzhi Era [1644], the Manchurian troops conquered provinces in southern China, and the Qing regime started promoting their codes on clothes and hairstyles. The Qing government announced that all men should have their hair braided and their clothes changed within ten days after the announcement..... Numerous Han people were arrested and then killed (Zhao, 2016[2002], translated by the author).

The story does not directly address what Hanfu is. On the contrary, it gives the readers a detour to Chinese history, during which the conflicts between the Han and the non-Han people were prominent. The Han people in Zhao’s story were weak under the hooves of the Manchurians, and they experienced an inevitable loss of culture with their lives under threat. The reason for the Manchurians to force the Han people to change their customs, as Zhao (2002) wrote in the article, is that the “barbaric Manchurians without civilization” feared that the civilized Han

people would despise a regime of barbarians. Consequently, it would be better to make all Han people dress and behave like the Manchurians.

A spectre of Confucius is haunting in Zhao's scriptwriting. His pseudonym was "the blood of Huaxia" when writing this article, and the pseudonym, as is mentioned in the previous section, shows his identity as a descendent of orthodox Chinese. The Manchurian was culturally inferior, and the Han was culturally superior. Such Confucian legacy is hidden in an emotionally provocative story: the Manchurians tried to destroy a superior civilization on purpose, and the Han people were slaughtered merely because of their unwillingness to practice barbarian culture. With the Han people described as victims, it is reasonable for the victims to restore what they should have got.

Zhao's theatrical strategy was not his patent. A similar discourse could be found in the articles of Wang Hongbo. Nicknamed Xishanqingkuang 溪山琴况, Wang was the first administrator of the Hanfu Tieba and one of the most famous figures among Hanfu practitioners at that time.<sup>5</sup> He passed away in 2007, but other practitioners collected most of his articles and his interviews in *the Collection of Xishanqinkuang* (2009). In the first chapter, Wang stated that "the goal of the Hanfu movement was to wipe out the psychological disgrace of the Han people with the sunlight of Han culture." The Han people, "the most brilliant nation recognized by the history of the human race," should shoulder the responsibility to make China great again (p. 9).

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5. Wang's pseudonym is borrowed from a book written by Xu Shangying. The book discusses the aesthetics of music played by guqin 古琴, a seven-stringed plucked instrument similar to a zither.



Compared to Zhao's script, Wang's article was more emotionally engaging in that he brought two elements into his writing. The first one was a connection to reality. Wang (2009) wrote in his article that, in contemporary China, "some people not only object Han culture as a legitimate representative of China, but they also wanted the Han to be represented by other ethnicities in the name of ethnic unity" (p. 9). Though he did not directly single out the communist government for his criticism, his words pointed out that the Han people became the subaltern at the dawn of the 21st century. The social status of Han people, as a result, connected well with a sense of nostalgia. Wang did not only mention the victim mentality of the Han people, but he also referred to the sunlight, the glorious past of the Han people when they were at the center of the world. By looking backward to the imperial grandeur, the golden age of the Han people, Wang re-established "an imagined landscape invested with all they find missing in the modern world" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 25), producing a theatre through which time travel seemed possible.

### *2.1.3 China Encounters the World*

Both Zhao and Wang argued for a return to the times when the Han people were treated as superior, a rescue of the Han people from the overarching nation-building project of being Chinese, in which ethnic minorities enjoyed privileges. Despite their objection to the communist party's nation-building project, Zhao and Wang did not completely overthrow the notion of "Chinese." If we see their discourses as a response to social and political issues, both of them were not just responding to the subaltern social status of the Han people nor simply to the misery of the Han people in history. Their efforts to bring Hanfu back to life had a grander scheme, that Hanfu should become a cultural symbol of the Chinese with its revival.

In his blog post, Zhao Junqiang (2016) mentioned another factor that motivated him to write “the Civilization Lost,” that the ethnic costume of China presented in the 2001 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) unofficial meeting in Shanghai was the new-Tang-style attire (*xintangzhuang* 新唐装). The dispute over the new-Tang-style attire is whether it could represent the Chinese in front of foreigners. The gown of the new-Tang-attire is developed genealogically from the costumes in the Qing Dynasty, which Zhao considered the enemy of the Han people. Moreover, compared to the “Chinese” tops, the pants for such attire are similar to the pants of formal suits in western culture, making the new-Tang-style attire a cultural hybrid instead of an ethnic costume (Zhou, 2008). As a result, Zhao did not recognize the new-Tang-attire as the costume for the Han people, let alone the Chinese.

Zhao was not the only one suffering from anxiety over a proper cultural representation in international cultural communications. In the early 21st century, China joined the WHO and became part of the world economy. With its economy reformed after the sluggish 1980s, cultural contacts between China and the rest of the world became more frequent than ever. Spectacular cultural events, for example, the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 World Expo, also came to China. On this occasion, Wang Hongbo and his fellow Hanfu practitioners tried to bring Hanfu to an international stage. In 2006, two years before the Beijing Olympics, Wang and his fellows proposed to use Hanfu as the clothing for the Chinese delegation during the opening ceremony of the Olympics. The opening paragraph of the proposal was written in a parallel structure:

As is known for all, the clothing of our sportsmen in the Olympics, especially in the opening ceremonies, lacks distinctive ethnic features; as is known for all, all people in China and the Chinese descendants overseas hope to present the authentic culture and temperament of an old civilization during the Olympics; as is known for all, Hanfu is returning to the life of the Chinese people with the great rejuvenation of China; as is known for all, all people in China will appeal to the Chinese delegation for choosing ethnic costumes in the opening ceremony (Wang, 2009, translated by the author).

Although the Chinese government responded indifferently to this proposal, such an attempt highlighted the ambition of these early Hanfu practitioners. Thus, the Hanfu revival witnessed its first climax: Hanfu should not only become the costume of the Han people, but it should also be representing the Chinese when China encounters the world.

However, the clothing of ethnic minorities in China was not completely excluded in the proposal. Indeed, the proposal spoke for a dual system. Hanfu was only compulsory for the Han people in the delegation. For the sportsmen from ethnic minorities, they could wear their ethnic costumes instead of Hanfu. Wrapping everything up, Wang and his fellows did not name their proposal “the Hanfu project for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.” Instead, they named it “the project of Chinese costumes for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.” The “Chinese costume” in their lexicon referred to a collection of ethnic costumes in China, and Hanfu should be the most important one in the collection.

Some may argue that Wang’s differentiation between Hanfu and the Chinese costume is nothing but nominal. However, it was this tiny issue that led to the innate crisis of the Hanfu revival. As we have seen in the previous sections, early Hanfu practitioners produced documents answering what Hanfu should be like, and these documents, like the one Zhao Junqiang published, used numerous pictures. This method was efficient in telling the audiences “What is Hanfu” — those costumes with the same design, same color, and same symbols are a hundred percent Hanfu — but it could not help tell the audiences “What is not Hanfu.” When the “Chinese costume” meets its affiliated concept Hanfu, it is hard to negotiate the boundaries between Hanfu and non-Han Chinese costumes. It was like a ship of Theseus: when can we call a ship “new” if we replace the wooden parts of the ship one piece per day? Similarly, to

what extent can we call a costume Hanfu if we start replacing Han cultural elements with something else? In other words, what is an authentic Hanfu?

This question did not have a “correct” answer when the theatre written by these early Hanfu practitioners had come to an end. From then on, it was the time for the audiences to do their job, to interpret the script, the setting, and other things shown in the theatre, and to create discourses of their own.

## **2.2 “The Day of Chinese Costumes:” the Crisis’ Return in Recent Years**

Before we turn to the audiences' voices on the debate of authentic Hanfu, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by calling the crisis “innate.” As is shown in the previous section, the word “innate” means, first and foremost, that the crisis exists by the outburst of the Hanfu revival. The search for authentic Hanfu, which will lead to the divergence of Hanfu practitioners, was motivated by the nominal differentiation between Han and Chinese and by the lack of theoretical effort in defining Hanfu. At the same time, by using the adjective “innate,” I also mean that the crisis is an essential part of the Hanfu revival that could be recurring under certain circumstances. The question posed in the early years could not be easily muzzled throughout the two decades of the Hanfu revival. It is still there, with the Chinese government reminding the Hanfu practitioners about its importance since 2018.

Although the Chinese government kept indifferent towards Hanfu and its practitioners before the 2008 Olympics, the government noticed the growth of Hanfu practitioners and sought its influences in the Hanfu revival. Therefore, starting from 2018, the Communist Youth League of China 中国共青团 advertised “the Day of Chinese Costumes” on its social media. The Day of Chinese Costumes is an annual event happening on March 3rd in the lunar calendar, on

the birthday of Emperor Huang, the mythological ancestor of the Han people. In this governmental action, Chinese officials organizing this event used the term “Chinese costumes” instead of Hanfu, even though most participants were there for Hanfu-related events.

It is not hard to delineate the discourse of the Youth League from its advertisements. Hanfu appeared in its posts, the costumes of ethnic minorities appeared in its posts, but the newly invented or reformed costumes, for example, the new-Tang-attire chosen for the 2001 APEC, were missing. Hanfu and the costumes of ethnic minorities have equal weight, and both are the sub-concepts of the Chinese costume. The message in Youth League’s advertisements was a tricky response to Hanfu practitioners from the government’s side. It was a metamorphosis of Wang Hongbo’s proposal for the 2008 Olympics, which did not highlight Han supremacism hidden in the Hanfu revival by using Hanfu as a sub-concept of the Chinese costume. The problem existing in Wang’s proposal was, consequently, reminded but not resolved. The search for authentic Hanfu was at stake.

To summarize, this chapter starts with an overview of two competing conceptualizations of the Chinese people: the Confucian way defining Han as the orthodox Chinese, and the contemporary construction of the Chinese as an alliance of all ethnicities in the territorial boundaries of China with all of them treated equally. The outburst of the Hanfu revival was a result of such competition. When the latter conceptualization went too far, the request for equality turned out to be the burden of the Han people, who once had a glorious past in Chinese history. The revival started then as a resistance against the social fact with the pioneers conducting their tragedies to mobilize the Han people, and these theatres left all Hanfu practitioners a question: What is an authentic Hanfu? Thanks to the government’s participation in the Hanfu revival in recent years, this question became the spotlight of discussions among

practitioners. The next chapter will discuss Hanfu practitioners' answers and analyze the meaning and significance of authenticity in the Hanfu revival.

## CHAPTER 3 CIVIL WAR: THE REVERSIONARY VS. THE REFORMIST

For all Hanfu practitioners, the April of 2019 was an important month in the history of the Hanfu revival. A debate on authentic Hanfu, which happened on various social media like Tieba, Weibo, and Bilibili, separated Hanfu practitioners into two camps: Hanfu and the Goddess costumes 仙服. After the split, Hanfu refers to the costume whose form and style could be found in historical archives, whereas the newly invented notion, the Goddess costume, refers to the clothing which has Chinese or Han elements but does not necessarily conform with the ones in archives.

This Hanfu vs. Goddess costumes controversy was the culmination of the debates around authentic Hanfu. What are their answers to the authenticity question? How do they justify their answers? What lies behind the quest for authentic Hanfu? After analyzing the drama presented by early Hanfu practitioners, I will look into the symbolic realm of Hanfu in this chapter from the voices of Hanfu practitioners from these two camps.

### 3.1 The Archaeologists: Finding the Essentials in Archives

As Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 220) notes: “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” Of the seven interviewees who participated in this research, five stood on the side of the archaeologists, who claim that Hanfu should have its origin from historical archives. However, hardly can one find unity inside the reversionary camp. The question leading to the dissonance is to what extent should Hanfu be conformed with the ones found in archives. The answers, as is shown in the following quotes, differ:

Y.W.: Yes, archives! I think one of the most urgent things we Hanfu practitioners should do in these years is to create an archive collecting what has been recognized as authentic Hanfu. I know some Hanfu shops are working on the documents. They collaborate with local Hanfu groups to look for pictures [of Hanfu] in the books of ancient times or the relics found in archaeological sites. After we have a database, we

could start innovating, but the form and style should keep the same as they were in ancient times.

T.C.: The original goal of the Hanfu revival is not just to bring the costume back. You are a researcher, and you must know about the project bringing all the rites, festivals, and customs back, right? It is more than the form and style; it is a system of codes that worked thousands of years ago but forgotten in these years, and we need to bring the codes back. Can you imagine someone wearing a gown, which was designed for a wedding ceremony, on the festival celebrating the birthday of Confucius?

Both answers point to the importance of archives as the source of authentic Hanfu, but what they mean by “archive” are different. The first interviewee takes archive as a collection of costumes, and the founding of an archive is a method of induction. Having an archive means that Hanfu practitioners could find a few basic rules for Hanfu, namely the “form and style.” The practitioners holding this position, as a result, do not entirely reject the ideas from reformers but argue for a limited revision.

On the contrary, the practitioners agreeing with the second quote have less tolerance for innovation. The “archive” means more than a collection of costumes. Influenced by some early pioneers like Wang Hongbo, they consider Hanfu a part of the bigger picture, namely the cultural revival of the Han people. To these practitioners, an archive includes Han rites, festivals, and other events, and each of them has a specific, non-negotiable dressing code. Hanfu without Han rites and ceremonies is no more than a mechanized reproduction of what existed in the past. What is more important than reproduction is to retrieve its aura, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 220).

Despite the difference in the meaning of an archive, practitioners in the archaeologist camp share a sense of essentialism. Presuming that there exists some tangible and objective properties of a particular group of people, essentialism is helpful in negotiating the boundaries between one group and the other (Wiggins, 1974). The essence could be biological, working



on the physical differences between people of different races (i.e., Bastian and Haslam, 2006), or it could be cultural, focusing on the cultural patterns carried with individuals (Verkuyten, 2003). Whatever form it takes, the essence is always marked by visual cues: skin color, sexuality, or a cultural pattern. In the case of Hanfu, some of the reversionary practitioners pick form and style as the essence of Hanfu. The other part sees Hanfu as an essential part of the coming back of Han culture and the revitalization of the Han people.

Moreover, from the words of the early Hanfu practitioners and my interviewees, essentialism in the Hanfu revival has a unique feature. The essence, no matter what it refers to, is something lost and then recovered, something that was “concealed through the work of forces which are external to that essence” (Smith, 1994, p. 175). In this way, these practitioners claim their legitimacy in the revival of Hanfu. By stressing the importance of the essence, they protect Hanfu or Han culture from being “concealed” once again in the 21st century.

Making the essentials obvious thus contributes to a powerful counter-narrative when Hanfu meets challenges from external counterparts, for example, the Korean costumes. One of my interviewees mentioned the necessity to create an archive by referring to the Hanfu vs. Korean costume debate in late 2020:

If you know what the Koreans are doing — they are stealing *our* culture, and they have done it several times! — and then you will understand why I stand with these archaeologists. A picture on Twitter cannot convince these crazy Koreans. It would be best if you had something academic, something like a genealogical study. You need to give a logical argument to let these idiots know that they are wrong!

The Hanfu vs. Korean costume controversy started when Korean netizens commented on a Twitter post from a Chinese artist. The artist produced a picture with a man wearing Hanfu, and the Koreans claim that the man is wearing Korean costumes. In the war between Chinese

and Korean netizens, some referred to history, arguing that Korea was once the vassal state of China, and the Koreans were thieves stealing culture from its suzerain. However, from the words of my interviewee, what happened on Twitter was hitting around the bush. Although she shared a racist perspective as other Chinese netizens irritated by the Koreans, she thought her argument was stronger and more convincing than hate speeches: what is found in historical archives is objective, unalterable, and irrefutable. The essentials are the most potent evidence to shut Koreans' mouths, draw a line between *our* culture and their culture, and defend Han culture's orthodoxy.

### 3.2 The Reformers: A Black Plum Is as Sweet as a White

After analyzing what the archaeologists say, it is time to take a look at their antagonists. In contrast to those belligerent archaeologists, the reformers are more tolerant and hold an archive as secondary:

L.W.: I know what the practitioners say about Hanfu, about the forms and styles that are authentic. Nevertheless, I would not pay too much attention to these restrictions. Those insisting on an unalterable form and style are hypocrites. They tell other people that they want Hanfu to be recognized by the mass, but what they are doing is to keep those interested in Hanfu and Han culture out of their circle. Survival, survival, survival. They keep repeating this, and at the same time, they expect that the social media fanatics will spend hours or days reading and understanding the documents in their archives. Deng Xiaoping once said: 'No matter it is a black cat or a white cat, it is a good cat if it can catch rats.' Now the black cat says that it is the only good cat.

L.W. was classified as a member of the Goddess costume party in the split in 2019. When talking to me, she used a quote from Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party who launched the Reform and Opening Up policies in the late 20th century. Considered a pragmatist, Deng pointed out that economic development was the most important goal for China, whether it be achieved via socialist or capitalist measures. In the revival of Hanfu, most practitioners agree that it is vital to secure the survival of Hanfu, but there could be multiple

explanations on what survival means and thus multiple ways to secure the survival. For the archaeologists, the survival of Hanfu is secured by creating a library for the public. However, what L.W. offered is an alternative and more pragmatic definition of survival: to be seen by as many people as possible. A library, which requires a student ID or a membership card for accessing the data, is a wrong choice to make Hanfu visible.

Besides the divergence in the meaning of survival, L.W. also provided an alternative understanding of the essentials of Han culture:

I had been a practitioner for five years before the split, and I know some of them, especially those in the early years of the Hanfu revival, are influenced by Han supremacism. Yes, China was once a country of the Han people. But when was the country genuinely a Han country? When was our culture genuinely the Han culture? Try to ask them [the archaeologists] these questions, and they will mumble.

To understand why L.W. mentioned the genuine Han culture, we need to look into her subtext, namely the 5000 years of Chinese history. As is mentioned in the previous chapter, Confucianism draws a line between the Han people and the barbarians. However, drawing a line does not mean that the Han people and the ethnic minorities living around the Han land could keep a peaceful relationship near the borders. The Xiongnu, the Mongols, the Jurchens, and the Manchurians, warfare with those neighboring peoples happened together with cultural contacts. Thanks to these contacts, the boundaries of Han were constantly shifting when the Han people absorbed foreign cultures, and it is thus impossible to define the very beginning of Han history and return to the very time to find the essentials. When Han culture becomes in question, the authenticity of Hanfu loses its aura.

Acerbic as her words are, L.W.'s perspective hits the Achilles' heel of the archaeologists. Although the archaeologists speak highly of the value of archives, Barbara Kirshenblatt-

Gimblett (2004) notes that “archive” or “library” are no more than common metaphors. The construction of such an archive is to keep the culture going or to let others think that the culture is surviving. This archive transcends time and space. “People come and go, but culture persists.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 58). However, culture is not a fortress of essentials but a process of evolution. People understand culture differently at different times. Hence, talking about culture is a process of remembering and forgetting, of preservation and suspension. Creating an archive in modern times is part of the process, selecting what is worthy of being practiced in modern times from the originals in the past. Stressing the importance of archives is merely a means to influence the balance between preservation and suspension, to slow down the rate of cultural evolution. Then why would it be a problem to breathe some fresh air and encourage new forms and styles of Hanfu in the 21st century?

### **3.3 The Quest for Authentic Hanfu**

The debate between the reversionary camp and the reformist camp in the Hanfu revival, as is shown in the previous two sections, is about the extent to which authenticity matters in the Hanfu revival. Though Hanfu practitioners are divided into two camps, the answers from both camps are not mutually exclusive. Some Hanfu archaeologists admit that it is necessary to have some new ideas, but the form and style should remain unchanged. On the other side, even L.W., who was expelled from “Hanfu practitioners” because she supported the reformists, recognizes the value of a Hanfu archive. Indeed, different interviewees have different opinions on the importance of authenticity. Pro, con, or neutral, it is all about individual choices. Such a phenomenon opens the ground for a closer look into authenticity. Where do these practitioners, especially those who support the reversionary camp, learn about authentic Hanfu? What does authenticity mean to these individuals?

For L.K., a friend of mine who has been practicing Hanfu for five years, authenticity was not her first concern when becoming a practitioner. Her interest in Hanfu was raised from a TV series depicting ancient China, where these protagonists were dressed up in traditional Chinese costumes. After she saw a similar dress from an e-shop, she bought it without any hesitation. It was not until she read the practitioner's discussion online when she learned the lesson. The dress she bought could only be classified as *Weijing Feng* (魏晋风), a genre that provides a modern redesign of cultural elements from a specific period in Chinese history.

L.K.: In my junior year, I started using TikTok, where you could find people dancing with Hanfu. Among the comments, you could find people discussing like “he/she got the costume from xxx e-shop, and what they have produced could not match the forms and styles based on the document or book xxx.” Then I realized that there had already been a Hanfu group, and there were concrete regulations for group members. For example, you must not simply wear the costume without combing or tying up your hair, and you must not wear such a costume with a pair of sports shoes. Those people will mock you if you do so.

L.K.'s story is exemplary among the supporters of the reversionary camp. Few practitioners start their careers with abundant knowledge of authentic Hanfu. Some, like my friend, even started with a “counterfeit.” Some of them learned the rules from TikTok comments; others got access to the archive via Bilibili, Tieba, or other social media where Hanfu practitioners gather. In other words, their knowledge on authenticity, which helps them justify the importance of an archival approach towards Hanfu and the Hanfu revival, is acquired. The negotiation of authentic Hanfu happens in social media where individuals could associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and reach a common judgment where possible (Hauser, 1999). To give an example, a discussion on authentic Hanfu went in Tieba as follows:

Qingruoru: I heard people say that the *Qixiong Ruqun* 齐胸襦裙 [a form of Hanfu for women] should not be laced in shoelace knots, or at least the people in the past never did so, and I want to see whether this is the case. Indeed, it has different ways of lacing, and the shoelace knot is allowed. Some recorded paintings show even simpler ones, the dead knots. We do not need to be confined into [the shoelace knots].

Qingruoru: The most straightforward way is to make it braided. [with a photo showing the historical record]

Green Tea in the Summertime: Yes, the braided one was the mainstream.

Qingruoru: Here come the shoelace knots. [with another photo record]

Green Tea in the Summertime: This is not a shoelace knot but an alternative to the braided version.

Qingruoru: But it is what people say as “the shoelace knot,” correct?

Green Tea in the Summertime: Well, this is ok. But I have seen people lacing with the Korean codes [using the shoelace knots], which makes me uncomfortable. The one [shown in your photo] is acceptable,

Qingruoru: Now comes the dead knots. [with the photo record]

BigBee6688: Look at their sleeves. These are short and with embroideries.

Qingruoru: You can find ones without embroideries, for example, the ones in *Daoliantu* 捣练图 [a painting in ancient times].

Linbiluo: I doubt that they are wearing underwear with a U-shaped neckline ^O^ [which is not accepted as authentic Hanfu].

Qingruoru: Possibly yes. I have seen terracotta figurines with these dressing codes elsewhere, but it is still debatable whether it belongs to the geology of Hanfu. Let us put it aside.<sup>6</sup>

In such a conversation, all participants use pseudonyms. Someone raises a question, and discussions follow. What is interesting in this conversation is that, although all discussants are to a certain extent in favor of the reversionary camp because of their use of various references, none of them mentions the existence of an archive. A living archive is, even to the archaeologists, a metaphor. When they qualify or disqualify a feature as Hanfu, they directly go to the photos and the books or cross-reference other practitioners' contributions. The archive, which exists nominally, is a collection of all these discussions happening online. These discussions online make the Hanfu archive a collaborative knowledge production. The knot, the sleeves, the neckline, knowledge of authentic Hanfu is produced and then circled via mass communication.

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6 . This is an excerpt of a long discussion. The original post can be found here (in Chinese): <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/2471065321>. Translated by the author.

From this perspective, we could see an interesting metamorphosis of the authenticity debate between the archaeologists and the reformists. It is no longer about the value of an archive, no longer about the survival of a folk culture, but it is about the possession of knowledge. Mass production and reproduction of knowledge set a threshold in the Hanfu revival. Those who respect and have a good command of such knowledge crossed the threshold and entered the house of genuine Hanfu practitioners, whereas the others who do not know or care about the knowledge were left outside the door.

Such a metamorphosis may explain why authenticity matters to the individuals: they could show off their knowledge. However, experiences from my interviewees provide a richer context:

L.K.: When I wear the costume and shoes, I will unconsciously adjust my gait to something like the Yuanchangbu 圆场步 in Peking Opera. I walk slowly and move step-by-step. It was like, if you do not walk this way, it would be a disgrace. We [Hanfu practitioners] do not have a tight leather belt tightening your waist, we use silk strips to hold the costume [which would break down easily], so we have to take care of it. After I dealt with my hair [to meet the standard], I should also take care of it if they are disheveled, especially when we bow before another practitioner.

L.W: Once, I was in a cab in Great Britain, and the driver asked me why I was wearing a Korean costume. I tried then to tell him that this is Hanfu and how it is different from Korean costumes. I talked and talked and talked so that the cab driver could understand, at least briefly, the history of China. Of course, you know there are also many Chinese people living or studying in Britain, but still, I feel like they care less about Chinese culture, so I would like to say to them, ‘hey, come and see Hanfu, the Chinese costume. You have never seen that, huh?’

These two cases could illustrate how the Hanfu revival, a cultural movement at the beginning, was transformed into a contemporary lifestyle project of the self (Ferrara, 1998; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). On the one hand, authenticity is not only discussed online but is also practiced by these practitioners via their bodies. The costume, together with the cultural codes from Han rites, mediates one’s bodily actions. One should adjust the gait, take care of the strips, hairpins,

and other gadgets on one's body when wearing this costume. Other examples from my interviewees include the control of volume when talking and the control of postures when sitting on the ground. In short, it is about cosplaying a figure who lived in a time foreign to modernity. On the other hand, the pathos of authenticity is also consumed by individuals when they try to impress others with their emotions encountering the culture from a foreign time and space. From L.W., what she was trying to convey to the cab driver and the indifferent Chinese living in Great Britain is not about the cultural codes — she does not care too much about it as a reformist. What matters in wearing Hanfu is her pride in being Chinese, a “sentimental type of discourse” which expresses who she is (McCarthy, 2009, p. 241).

It is now the time to conclude this long chapter full of stories and experiences. The debate of authentic Hanfu responds to the question raised in the early years of the Hanfu revival. The discussion of what authenticity means is a battle of discursive power. Both the archaeologist camp and the reformist one tried to valorize the value of a cultural archive and promote different means in securing the survival of Hanfu. When we turn to individual practitioners and their experiences in the field of authenticity, we find that authenticity is not given but acquired from knowledge produced by mass participation. The individual practitioners are not just discussing the meaning of authenticity, but they are also completing the quest for authentic Hanfu via their bodies, creating additional value of authentic Hanfu with their impulses of self-discovery and self-expression.

However, when it comes to value valorization, a costume has already exited its symbolic realm. It becomes a commodity. The next chapter will examine the commodity form of Hanfu, find the agents controlling the valorization processes, and figure out how the new theatres from these agents influenced the Hanfu revival.



## CHAPTER 4 WHEN HANFU MEETS CONSUMERISM

When Wang Letian, the hero of the Hanfu revival, went to the city center with Hanfu, the costume on his body was made by himself. In the early years, Hanfu practitioners usually customized the costume from pieces of cloth (Yang, 2016). Twenty years later, by the second decade of the 21st century, the Hanfu revival has already spawned an industry. Most Hanfu stores operate online. On TMall, Jingdong, and other e-commerce platforms, consumers can find Hanfu in different stores at different prices. An ordinary Hanfu set is tagged for \$50 to \$100. The more expensive ones, for example, the Hanfu sets from Minghuatang 明华堂, a famous brand among practitioners, will cost more than \$1000. Among seven interviewees participating in this research, 6 of them possess more than one set of Hanfu, and most of the Hanfu sets in their collections are within the cost of \$100. At the same time, luxurious Hanfu sets are so attractive to some practitioners that they would rather live from hand to mouth to afford a Hanfu set.<sup>7</sup>

Every product has a price in the world of capitalism. However, for a luxury, it has to persuade the customers that it is worth the price. As Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2016) point out, the price of a luxury is justified by its value, and the stories behind the product enrich its value. In this chapter, I will look into the luxury Hanfu market and will focus on the stories told in valorizing the price of luxurious Hanfu. Following Boltanski and Esquerre's discussion on the economic life of things, this chapter will try to answer the following questions: What

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7. My interviewees used “Chitu 吃土” when expressing their desire to purchase an expensive Hanfu set. The word, when directly translated into English, means “eat soil.” During the famines in the late Qing Dynasty and the Mao era, people who could not find ordinary food might choose to eat Kaolinite 高岭土, a clay material, to survive hunger. Now the word Chitu is widely used online and refers to a dirt-poor situation.

stories are told? Who is telling the stories? What are the consequences of consumerism when it encounters the Hanfu revival?

## 4.1 Making Hanfu into Luxuries

### *4.1.1 Strategies of Hanfu Shops: “Limited Edition,” Cultural Revitalization, and Customization*

The focal point of this section is Minghuatang, a renowned e-shop among practitioners for luxurious Hanfu. Unlike other Hanfu e-shops in TMall and Jingdong, Minghuatang never rents a showcase on these e-commerce platforms. Instead, Minghuatang develops its official website for the customers to place an order, and it is via this website that Minghuatang justifies the value of its products.

The most eye-catching part of the website is an announcement at the top of Minghuatang’s front page (See **Figure 1**): “The earliest time to start producing your product will be late January 2022. The customer service is dealing with the orders placed on March 22<sup>nd</sup>.” Highlighted with orange characters between star marks, the announcement bits potential customers with a message indicating two temporal gaps: one between the time you place your order and the time your order is processed; the other between the time you place your order and the time you receive your product. In other words, a customer could not get the product in a few days after placing the order. The date to get a Hanfu set from Minghuatang is determined by a schedule beyond the intervention from customers: only the e-shop knows how long it will take to produce a product. Such a schedule differentiates Minghuatang from other standardized, mass-produced Hanfu. It is a clear signal that the number of specimens produced in this shop will not be huge. To further conceptualize rarity, Minghuatang also adopts a marketing strategy similar to these fashion luxuries like Dior or Louis Vuitton, updating the product list regularly.

At the bottom of the main page, there is a section titled “new products,” where customers see the latest and forthcoming product prototypes. Previous designs will then become obsolete and are no longer recommended on the front page. If a customer wants to purchase an old design, he or she may use keyword searching or spend some time browsing the list of all products available on the website. The extra labor required to purchase the old helps direct the attention of potential customers to the new ones, limiting the number of specimens of a particular product.



**Figure 1** Minghuatang Official Website Front Page, retrieved on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021

What Minghuatang does on its website, as Boltanski and Esquerre (2016) argue, is enriching the value of a product by limiting the number of specimens: the fewer a product has been produced, the more valuable it becomes. However, it is not the only technique sellers could use. The other dimension in enrichment capitalism is the memory effect of a product, the “accompanying narratives and genealogical reconstructions” leading to the social recognition

of the product (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2016, p.44). When connected to a story from the past, a product becomes memorial heritage, a trigger that brings back personal or collective memory, and it is the prevailing historiography that determines the memory strength.

Minghuatang will not let the chance slip away from its hands. On its website, a customer could find its tenet: “To recollect, inherit, and promote authentic Han ethnic costumes in the new era, to fill in the void of traditional Han costumes, to popularize traditional handicrafts, and to make contributions to the constellation of Chinese costume culture.” The tenet echoes the prevailing historiography promoted by the communist party. After President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, the term “cultural confidence 文化自信” frequently appeared in newspapers and social media. In his speech at Forum on Literature and Artwork in 2014, Xi claimed that the Chinese people should be “confident” about displaying their own culture instead of accepting ideological and cultural products from the west.<sup>8</sup> Where, then, can we find *our* culture to make the Chinese confident? The answer is simple: the imperialist times when China was still leading all countries under the heaven. There came subsequently a thirst for traditions, and what Minghuatang wrote in its tenet implies its effort in combining Hanfu with its memorial values, through which the Chinese could have their cultural confidence.

Following Boltanski and Esquerre’s framework, we have exhausted the objective value enriched in the case of Minghuatang via the limitation of numbers and the connection to the past. However, as is mentioned in the previous chapter, the consumption of authentic Hanfu is a means of self-expression. If a story of collective memory could be used in enriching a product, would it be possible to extract the value of individual memories and add it to the product before

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8. For a collection of Xi Jinping’s notion of “cultural confidence,” see the Chinese Communist Party journal *Qiushi*, No. 12, 2019, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-06/16/c\\_1124628547.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-06/16/c_1124628547.htm)

it goes to the customer? Minghuatang's customer service tells us how it is possible. Like what other luxury brands are doing, one has to register as a member of Minghuatang before placing an order. To get membership, Minghuatang requires more than a username and an email address. One has to provide the information of a Tencent QQ account.<sup>9</sup> Following the online registration, one could reach customer service via QQ and get instant feedback on the order's progress. Instead of using artificial intelligence in customer service, Minghuatang keeps the communication between sellers and customers authentic. Moreover, the employees in customer service not only work as receptionists, but they also welcome the customers as curators, offering the customers a private shopping experience with a Hanfu and Han culture expert. When one places an order in the system, they will recommend gadgets, gowns, shoes, and other appropriate accessories. The customer could choose what to add to the Hanfu order, purchasing a complete set of formal dressing under customization. Some may choose silk gowns; others may consider gowns bedecked with jewels. Whatever the choice is, Minghuatang is encouraging consumer participation in product design processes and thus enabling its customers to create distinctive cultural narratives of their own.

#### *4.1.2 Contribution from Connoisseurs: Knowledge, Experiences, and Collaborative Storytelling*

The previous section discusses the official website of Minghuatang. Compared to a theatre, what is offered on the website is no more than the settings on the stage: colorful but static, waiting to be explored by the audiences. What is missing in completing such a theatre is the dynamic, emotional performance of actors and actresses. In enrichment economy, the protagonists are played by what Boltanski and Esquerre (2016, p. 45) call "collectors." Then,

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9. Tencent QQ is an instant messaging software developed by Tencent, and is very popular before WeChat, another Tencent software, takes its position.

in the case of Minghuatang, who is speaking for the value of luxurious Hanfu? How does a collector construct an argument? This section will examine the connoisseurship of luxurious Hanfu by referring to a video comparing a ¥5,000 Hanfu by Minghuatang with a ¥5,000 summer shirt by Dior.

The video has a very long title: “¥5,000 branded shirt and ¥5,000 Hanfu, which one is better? [Dior vs. Minghuatang]” Made and uploaded by Shiyin 十音, a Hanfu vlogger who won the Bilibili Top 100 award in 2019, the video gets more than 880k views and presents a comparison between two products of similar price. Firstly, there comes the Dior summer shirt, limited edition with Sagittarius symbol, and later a minute on the white Chinese coat with phoenix embroidery by Minghuatang (See **Figure 2**).



***Figure 2** Dior summer shirt (left); Hanfu by Minghuatang (right)*

Just like a researcher preparing for a presentation, Shiyin presents at the beginning her findings and leads her audience to her detailed analyses, in which she compares these two products from five different perspectives (See **Table 1**).

Category	Dior Summer Shirt	Hanfu by Minghuatang
Material	Yarn and silk	Brocade for the surface and 100% cotton for the inside
Means of Production	Handmade	Made and tailored by machine, ironed and cared for by experts
Profile of Producer	A fashion/luxury brand Dior	Minghuatang, one of the most famous among Hanfu practitioners
Difficulty to Preserve	Requires dry cleaning, gets dirty easily	Requires dry cleaning, easier to preserve than Dior
Comfortableness	Rough, brand label leads to her neck itching	Smooth, brand label in a good place in the sleeves, inconvenient long sleeves

*Table 1 Comparisons made by Shiyin*

In justifying the value of her Hanfu set, Shiyin adopts a strategy mixing Boltanski and Esquerre's (2016) value valorization model — rarity and a connection to the past — with her feelings. For example, when comparing the material of these two clothes, Shiyin describes the Dior shirt as a mosquito net, something one could easily afford, belittling the value of yarn and silk. In contrast, she mentions that the brocade used in this Hanfu has a specific name called Yunjin 云锦, which was favored by the imperial families in the past and was selected into the UNESCO list of oral and intangible heritage. Furthermore, the handmade Dior shirt, which is supposed to be valued higher than the machine-made Hanfu in Boltanski and Esquerre's model, is also discredited by Shiyin thanks to the embarrassing thread residues leading to her uncomfortableness when wearing this shirt. However, such a problem will never appear in traditional Chinese embroidery, i.e., the Suzhou Embroidery 苏绣.

By analyzing the case of Shiyin and Minhuatang, we could see the role a connoisseur plays in the theatre of luxurious Hanfu. As Giovanni Morelli (1883, p. vii) notes, connoisseurs work for a “real Science of Art.” They dissect the product into different domains: material, symbol, or technique in production. They find the match or similar things in the archives and decide to which category the product belongs. Nevertheless, the connoisseurs are not the same as art historians. Art historians go to the abstract realm. In Minghuatang’s tenet, it talks about traditional Han costumes, traditional handicrafts, and the constellation of Chinese costume culture. Shiyin’s video provides detailed information on what these phrases point to: Yunjin and Suzhou embroidery. Connoisseurs are active in the market. They have to purchase these products before commenting. At the same time, they have to present forensic arguments adopted by the art historians in a laconic way so that less knowledgeable buyers could understand why a product will cost that much.

#### **4.2 The “Hanfu Police” and Its Impacts**

Minghuatang is not the only brand in the world of Hanfu, and Shiyin is not the only influential connoisseur among Hanfu practitioners. However, when the value of authentic Hanfu is transformed into brand and price, consumerism has reshaped the community of Hanfu practitioners. Some practitioners, who are extremely sensitive about the brand of Hanfu other practitioners are wearing, are named the “Hanfu police.” For these Hanfu policemen, there are two principles to decide whether a Hanfu e-shop is good or not: authenticity and originality. Authenticity refers to the bottom line of those archaeologists, that the products in an e-shop should conform with the forms and styles in the archives. Originality means whether an e-shop offers original designs. The Hanfu policemen categorize those e-shops which do not offer products in correct forms and styles or those which plagiarize designs from other e-shops as “Shan 山,” an abbreviation of the word “Shanzhai 山寨” which means counterfeits. When



these policemen find a practitioner wearing a Shan costume, they will mock and criticize the practitioner.

From the experiences of my interviewees, Hanfu policemen usually police online. A few of my interviewees are deeply embarrassed about these policemen:

L.K.: I have not met a Hanfu policeman in my life, but I witnessed them gathering in the comment area of a TikTok video. It was about a mom purchasing a Hanfu set for her 3-year-old child. Many people pointed out that the Hanfu in the video was from a shop plagiarizing designs from other Hanfu shops, but some Hanfu policemen were highly aggressive. They questioned whether the video uploader did a survey before placing an order and left comments like ‘if you do not have the money to buy a Hanfu set from xxx shop, then get out of our circle.’ You know, my first Hanfu set was not authentic, and for god’s sake, I did not take a photo of mine and put it online. Otherwise, I might be bullied.

Y.W.: I know there are many of them, and I have heard about their [Hanfu policemen’s] stories. It is not weird. You may find it in other subculture groups like Lolita costumes or JK [female high school students in Japan]. They are not practitioners. They are cosplayers. ‘Ah, xxx shop plagiarized xxx shop.’ ‘Ah, someone bought a counterfeit from xxx shop.’ They will type it in a forum, and they will be proud of themselves because they bought the more expensive one, the ‘right’ one.

The testimonies show why Hanfu policemen are disturbing the practitioners. Commercializing ethnic culture, as John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) point out, is creating an “exploitable collective self” (p. 5). A commercialized ethnic identity is not just confirmed and expressed through consumption. It is also ostensibly fashioned. These Hanfu policemen, as my interviewees said, are not practitioners but cosplayers. A cosplayer chasing fashion cares about brand and price. They no longer care about the cultural connotation in Hanfu, let alone the political subtext in the early years of the Hanfu revival. When consumerism meets Hanfu, the prerequisites of being a practitioner include not only the knowledge to recognize an authentic Hanfu but also the economic capability to afford it. Economic capital and intellectual capital are carved on the costume one purchases. By finding and mocking those practitioners wearing Shan costumes, the Hanfu policemen display their superiority in knowledge and wealth. “See,

we know what authentic Hanfu is, and you do not.” “See, we could afford authentic Hanfu, and you could not.”

In short, Hanfu itself has become a mark of distinction during commercialization (Bourdieu, 1973, 1993). The emergence of Hanfu policemen once again separates Hanfu practitioners. Unlike the authenticity question, which separated practitioners into two camps, the elitist nature in Hanfu policemen demarcates two hierarchies: the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor. The wise and the rich stay in the center, whereas peripheral actors who have little access to money, leisure, and knowledge might be forced out of the community of Hanfu practitioners thanks to the aggressiveness of these Hanfu policemen.

## CONCLUSION: THE RISE AND FALL OF A CULTURAL MOVEMENT

After a long journey from the beginning of the Hanfu revival to its latest controversies, it is time to answer the questions I raise in the introductory section. The Hanfu revival emerged as a cultural movement with a political purpose. As is analyzed in Chapter 2, the pioneers conducted a tragedy about the subaltern status of the Han people in modern times and the necessity to revitalize Hanfu as a prelude to the rejuvenation of the Han people and the Chinese. Despite their efforts, practitioners in the early years did not manage to produce theoretical knowledge on authentic Hanfu, which led to the debate on authenticity in recent years.

As shown in Chapter 3, the practitioners then splintered due to different understandings of authenticity and were divided into two camps. One supported a return to historical archives, and the other one embraced modernity. With the authenticity debate going on, authenticity became not only a container of culture and history, but it also became a way through which practitioners could express themselves. It became something to be consumed. Collectivity in cultural revitalization in the early years was dissolved into individualistic participation.

With the growth of the Hanfu industry, we witnessed new theatres conducted by the industry thanks to the contribution of both the Hanfu e-shops and the Hanfu connoisseurs online in Chapter 4. When Hanfu becomes a commodity, the political impulse at the beginning of the Hanfu revival was further alienated. Consumerism is capturing the revival as branded Hanfu become signifiers of one's knowledge and wealth.

The genesis of the Hanfu revival points out an essential feature in theatricality. Theatricality is diachronic. It does not vanish by the end of one theatre. On the contrary, the text of one

theatre will become the context of another one. The rise of Hanfu pioneers provided a context for the authenticity debate, and the authenticity debate arranged the settings for the intervention of consumerism. The flow of theatricality is not within the control of any single agent, but we could sense where the flow will go. In the authentic debate, those who do not care about authenticity were expelled from the practitioners' community. In the commercial turn, those who could not afford an authentic costume were made peripheral or expelled. Social movements may fall when the participants got radicalized. For a cultural movement like the Hanfu revival, it is now on the same track, going downhill with the elitist turn among practitioners.

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