

From Subculture to Mass Culture? How Hanfu Became a Focus of Cultural Policy under Xi's Administration

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Abstract: Hanfu, represented as a prominent aspect of traditional culture, has gained immense popularity within Chinese society, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping. In comparison to his predecessors, Xi Jinping has demonstrated an unprecedented emphasis on culture. Based on the three self-confidences proposed by Hu Jintao, cultural confidence was added by Xi, thereby expanding the Party Central Committee's theory of state governance to encompass four confidences. It is worth mentioning that the discourse "culture" in Xi's context has differentiated from the predecessors, which refers to the deficiencies that need to be paid attention to match rapid economic development. However, Xi's administration has clearly pointing the influential object of soft power, particularly traditional culture. Within this context, Hanfu has gradually transitioned from a subculture predominantly embraced by the youth to a mainstream cultural symbol endorsed by the government in last two decades. In China's present cultural policy, Hanfu assumes a pivotal role as a quintessential representation of traditional culture. The Chinese government's stance on Hanfu's gradual revival has been influenced by three key factors: public sentiment, market demand and response, and China's global reputation.

Keywords: Chinese cultural policy, Hanfu, traditional culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a gradual expansion of the popularity of "Chinese style" and "traditional culture" in various aspects of Chinese society. This includes the resurgence of Hanfu, neo-Chinese clothing, Chinese-style makeup, traditional Chinese snacks, tea culture, and the revival of numerous traditional crafts. The widespread prevalence of these traditional Chinese cultural elements can be attributed to the Chinese government's active promotion of traditional culture, particularly under the governance policies implemented by the Xi Jinping administration, which positions traditional culture as a core component. This emphasis on traditional culture within cultural governance reflects a clear nationalist intention. China's cultural policy is evidently influenced by multiple factors. The promotion of traditional culture by the Chinese government is not solely an expression of authoritarian political institutions but rather a policy outcome shaped by interactions and exchanges among various stakeholders. This article focuses on Hanfu, the traditional ethnic attire of the Han ethnic group, to analyze how China's cultural policies are influenced by social public opinion, market dynamics, and the role of local governments, as well as the central government's own need for nationalism and global image.

2. Literature Review

2.1. China's Cultural Policy in History

China's cultural policy is often associated with the governance characteristics of Xi Jinping's administration, as frequently noted by scholars [1-2]. However, it is important to recognize that culture and cultural governance have been emphasized by successive generations of Chinese leaders in diverse ways. The first leader, Mao Zedong, demonstrated a significant focus on culture and cultural governance [3]. Although the Cultural Revolution received global criticism, it did reflect Mao's emphasis on cultural governance and his resolute approach to implementing cultural policies [4]. Previous leaders, including Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin during the 16th and 17th National People's Congresses, also made repeated references to "culture" (文化) [5-6]. Hu Jintao outlined Chinese development configuration as encompassing economic development, political development, cultural development, and social development. During Hu Jintao's tenure, cultural development primarily referred to the establishment of spiritual civilization in contrast to material civilization [7]. It was perceived as a cultural deficiency that needed prompt rectification to achieve balanced and comprehensive development amidst rapid economic progress. This broad notion of culture included, but was not limited to, art, quality (Suzhi), education, health, science and technology, social diversity development, as well as ideological aspects such as Confucian [8-9], emphasizing non-utilitarian cultural forms as counterparts to material civilization. The 16th National Congress report's chapter on cultural construction clearly emphasized the development of a national, scientific, and popular socialist culture that is modern, internationally-oriented, future-oriented, enriching people's spiritual world, and reinforcing cultural heritage and spiritual strength.

However, during the era of Xi Jinping, cultural policy and the concept of "culture" underwent significant changes. The Xi administration displayed heightened attention to cultural development. Building upon the three self-confidences proposed by Hu Jintao [10], cultural confidence was added, thereby expanding the Party Central Committee's theory of state governance to encompass four confidences. Moreover, Xi Jinping Thought conferred a more specific meaning to the term "culture," with a clear focus on traditional culture [11]. The report from the 20th National Congress exemplified this shift. It depicted cultural development during Xi Jinping's tenure not as a deficiency requiring development for the sake of maintaining a balanced trajectory, but rather as having a clear developmental purpose, marked by subjective initiative and proactiveness. The slogan of "great rejuvenation" was initially introduced by Jiang Zemin in the 16th National Congress, and ten years later, during the 18th National Congress in 2012, Xi Jinping further proposed the concept of the "Chinese Dream" as China's paramount political leader. Analyzing the frequency of mentioning the term "culture" across the 18th, 19th [12], and 20th [13] National Congresses reports highlights noteworthy changes. The 18th National Congress in late 2012 mentioned "culture" nine times, with no mention of "traditional culture." By the end of 2017, during the 19th National Congress, "culture" was mentioned 73 times, while "traditional culture" was mentioned five times. The 20th Congress held at the end of 2022 featured 58 mentions of "culture" and six mentions of "traditional culture." Over the past fifteen years, the frequency of the term "culture" has increased by more than sevenfold, with mentions of "traditional culture" in the cultural context rising from 7% to 10%. In 2017, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on the Implementation of the Inheritance and Development Project of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture" [14], underscoring the increasing importance that the CCP, under Xi Jinping's leadership, and the Chinese government place on culture, particularly traditional culture, year by year.

While articles on China's cultural policy exist, few comparative studies have delved into the distinct meanings attached to the concept of culture under Xi Jinping's leadership versus that of

previous Chinese leaders. Understanding the divergent interpretations of “culture” emphasized by the Chinese government at different times sheds light on the various stages and societal needs of China’s overall development, as well as the differing purposes and missions of the government. Establishing a clear differentiation between Xi Jinping’s notion of “culture” and that of previous Chinese leaders is crucial for analyzing the cultural policies of the Xi administration.

2.2. Nationalism in Cultural Policy under Xi Jinping

Numerous studies suggest that the policies under Xi Jinping exhibit a nationalist overtone that deviates from Marxist theory [15], particularly in cultural policy. One strong piece of evidence often cited by scholars is the emphasis placed on traditional cultural elements in Xi Jinping’s cultural policy, coupled with the discourse surrounding national identity in Chinese government propaganda. The emphasis on traditional culture serves as a typical manifestation of nationalism, as nationalists often employ traditional cultural symbols as vehicles to promote their values and express their ideals [16].

In this article, the term “traditional culture” does not possess an absolute definition. Its practical meaning varies depending on the background, context, and political environment. The Chinese government’s definition of traditional culture is fluid and evolves over time, with its cultural connotations often being vague and unclear [17-18]. However, within the Chinese government’s context, the significance of nationalism in traditional culture has always been extraordinary. All initiatives related to the declaration of traditional culture ultimately aim to foster public awareness and self-identity among the Chinese nation or the Communist Party, thereby bolstering self-confidence in identity [19]. Traditional culture itself lacks inherent meaning; its significance only emerges when it becomes closely intertwined with nationalism within the political framework. It is only when traditional culture can evoke national identity among people, counter other countries’ cultural symbols (such as those of Japan, Korea, or the West), and be recognized or promoted by the Chinese government that it acquires meaning. Traditional culture can serve as a means of action as long as it positively impacts nationalism. Similar in nature, any other vehicle capable of fostering nationalism, such as major project construction (particularly infrastructure) and cutting-edge scientific and technological research, can stimulate national honor and pride [20-21].

While Western societies often perceive the Chinese government as a dictatorship and believe that its policy decisions are hasty and driven solely by its own interests, such conclusions may be inaccurate or biased [22-24]. Western academia often considers nationalism as a concept manufactured by state institutions for political purposes. A nation is seen as an “imagined community,” a group explicitly or implicitly divided by the government, merely a byproduct of nationalism serving as a foundation for systematically unifying the population to support the government’s grand visions [25]. Consequently, it may appear that the Chinese government manipulates policies based on nationalism. However, according to Anthony Smith’s theory, nationalism can be categorized as “instrumentalist”/ “modernist” or “perennialist”/ “primordialist.” [26]. The “Eastern nationalism” represented by China aligns with the notion that a nation naturally forms and endures, being prone to spontaneous national sentiments, as opposed to Western nationalism shaped artificially by the government. This perspective also aligns with Hans Cohen’s differentiation between Eastern and Western nationalism [27-28], where the carriers of “Eastern nationalism” often encompass religion, art, literature, music, culture, and more. Based on China’s unique nationalist background, the inclination of China’s cultural policy toward traditional culture has been influenced by multiple factors and is not solely dictated by the Chinese government’s arbitrary and complete control.

2.3. Why Hanfu?

Clothing serves as a significant medium for reflecting specific social backgrounds, containing abundant information within its structure [29]. Among various global cultural traditions, national or ethnic costumes represent one of the most distinctive features that showcase their cultural characteristics [30]. Many Asian cultures have managed to preserve their traditional national costumes, such as the Japanese kimono, Korean hanbok, and Indian sari. Similarly, countries like Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Singapore utilize traditional costumes for special occasions like weddings, graduations, and funerals. However, China, as a prominent Asian nation, appears to have fewer reservations about its traditional national costumes compared to other Asian countries. Consequently, the Han ethnic group in China has a noticeable lack of traditional cultural expression, leaving them with limited means to convey their national identity [31]. In contrast, other ethnic groups in China, such as the Tibetan, Yi, and Mongolian, have managed to preserve their traditional cultures, particularly in terms of costumes worn on special occasions. For the Han ethnic group, their traditional clothing is known as Hanfu, which has only recently been officially recognized as their traditional attire. Over the past decade, Hanfu has resurfaced as a youth subculture and has gradually gained support from official media outlets and certain local governments. This resurgence is closely tied to the Chinese government's nationalist policies aimed at promoting traditional culture in recent years. The growing popularity of Hanfu aligns strongly with the tenure of Xi Jinping and his cultural confidence policy. Therefore, this article will use Hanfu as a focal point to analyze the factors that have influenced the Chinese government's cultural policies.

3. The Influence from Various Actors on the Chinese Government

3.1. Public Opinion

Within the context of traditional culture, ordinary people and society can be regarded as influential actors who exert significant impact on the Chinese government. The revival of “Chinese style” (国风) and “traditional culture” initially emerged organically among grassroots communities. Hanfu serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. Through grassroots activities and trends, various forms of traditional culture have found alternative channels of communication, beyond the conventional methods of transmission.

Initially, the emergence of Hanfu was seen as a peculiar subcultural clothing trend among young people, with mainstream society failing to recognize its value and significance as traditional culture [32]. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Hanfu ceased to be representative of the mainstream culture of the Han ethnic group since the Qing Dynasty. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution led to the erosion of traditional culture, leaving those with influential voices in mainstream society lacking awareness of traditional culture as a significant cultural symbol [33]. Secondly, during the early stages of the Hanfu revival movement, there was a lack of a supporting Hanfu industry and market, resulting in a dearth of high-quality Hanfu products with accurate tailoring, design, and craftsmanship [34]. Initially, most Hanfu garments were either crafted by enthusiasts themselves or obtained from fashion tailors using inferred restoration drawings. These factors contributed to an unfavorable environment for Hanfu, characterized by subpar craftsmanship and a lack of authoritative recognition as a traditional culture. However, as Hanfu activities and promotions began to impact a wider range of people, the market for Hanfu gradually developed and expanded. Dedicated businesses specializing in Hanfu production emerged, offering products that adhered to strict standards of tailoring, structure, and quality. The Hanfu industry gradually standardized its practices, establishing clear functional divisions and regulation.

It is worth noting that the term “Hanfu” is not explicitly mentioned in official documents issued by the State Council. Instead, it is referred to implicitly as traditional clothing. This is largely due to China’s political structure, which involves both central and local governments. Given the vast territory and diverse conditions across different regions, the central government provides general policy guidelines and macro-level guidance, while local governments formulate specific policies tailored to their local conditions under the guidance of the central government [35-36]. The State Council’s document on traditional culture highlights the importance of preserving the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, and the responsibility of completing specific traditional cultural symbols, such as Hanfu, lies with local governments. An example of this can be seen in the Xiuwu County People’s Government Office [37].

CCTV, under the jurisdiction of the central government, holds more representativeness and displays a positive attitude towards Hanfu as a prominent public media outlet. As the primary platform for official party media, CCTV’s influence, shaped by the Chinese government and the Communist Party [38-40], is evident in documentaries, variety shows, special reports, and other important occasions where Hanfu is increasingly featured. This reflects the growing acceptance and tolerance of traditional culture, represented by Hanfu, within mainstream media and society under the leadership of the government. Additionally, “China HuaFu Day” (中国华服日), established by the Chinese Communist Youth League and Bilibili (China’s largest youth-oriented video website and social networking platform) in 2018, focuses on promoting traditional Chinese clothing and exchanging Chinese culture with domestic and international audiences [41]. To date, four sessions of HuaFu Day have been held in cities such as Xi’an, Kaifeng, and Macau. The Communist Youth League, as a youth organization under the CPC, serves as a platform for young people to learn about socialism with Chinese characteristics and engage in practical communism. It is also one of the most active government departments in direct communication with the public through social media. The establishment of HuaFu Day demonstrates the support of the Chinese government, represented by the Communist Youth League, for traditional culture, particularly “Hanfu,” which holds a more subcultural significance compared to other traditional cultural symbols. Moreover, HuaFu Day’s concept highlights that the public’s acceptance and participation in the central government’s decisions are acknowledged. The Chinese government actively collects public opinions and disseminates information through social media platforms [42]. The incorporation of the “Hanfu” subculture by mainstream society, represented by the central government and the Communist Party, is an ongoing process [43].

Furthermore, the Chinese government employs multiple methods to understand public opinions. Hanfu has increasingly become a prominent topic of discussion at the People’s Congress and political associations. For instance, in 2018, Ling Youshi and Zhang Gaiqin proposed that leaders wear Hanfu during traditional cultural occasions to demonstrate the Chinese spirit [44-45]. In 2021, Cheng Xinxiang, a representative of the National People’s Congress and an inheritor of Hunan Embroidery Intangible Cultural Heritage, submitted a proposal for the establishment of a national “Hanfu Day” [46]. These examples indicate that the topic of Hanfu has gained attention within the central government and is being addressed on the highest-level public opinion survey platform in China. However, it is important to note that the specific proposals from the Chinese People’s Congress and the Political Consultative Conference, as well as their adoption or implementation, are not publicly accessible on open platforms. Therefore, the transparency and reliability of this channel for collecting public opinions still require further discussion and verification.

3.2. Market and Local Governments

In recent years, Hanfu has developed a large-scale market and a complete supply chain, attracting numerous customers²⁴. According to Iimedia [47], the Chinese Hanfu market is experiencing rapid

growth, with an estimated market size of 12.54 billion yuan in 2022 and 19.11 billion yuan in 2025. Data from iResearch Consulting reveals that China's Hanfu market exceeded 10 billion yuan in 2021 [48], rising from 1.19 billion yuan in 2015 to 6.36 billion yuan in 2020, and reaching 10.1 billion yuan in 2022. The Hanfu industry, along with its supporting sectors, encompasses multiple industries, such as textiles, agriculture (cotton cultivation), animal husbandry (silk production), manufacturing, clothing, design, warehousing, logistics, and trade [49]. Furthermore, the popularity of Hanfu has also stimulated the rapid development of related industries, including traditional crafts, traditional lifestyles, and traditional literature. Throughout this process, the Hanfu industry and its associated sectors have undergone continuous iteration, resulting in refined divisions of labor and craftsmanship. Notably, the Hanfu industry has witnessed distinct stylistic differentiations based on historical dynasties, accompanied by clear market segmentation. The high-end market primarily focuses on exquisite materials and craftsmanship, while the mid-to-low-end market caters to high-performance materials and high-volume sales with lower profit margins. Additionally, the revival of Hanfu, coupled with the promotion of traditional culture through cultural policies, has provided significant support for previously endangered intangible cultural heritage skills, such as Velvet flower(绒花) [50]. Many traditional crafts were previously unknown, lacked promotion, and were deemed time-consuming and labor-intensive, making them incompatible with the fast-paced lifestyle and industrialization of the modern market. Consequently, these crafts were at risk of cultural extinction. However, the resurgence of traditional culture, driven by the cultural significance of Hanfu, has sparked renewed interest in and emphasis on traditional craftsmanship, opening up opportunities for these ancient crafts to re-enter the market and capture public attention. The revival of Hanfu represents not only the resurgence of traditional attire but also the rapid growth of a significant emerging market [51-52].

The emerging and rapidly expanding Hanfu market requires official support and recognition from the Chinese government, particularly in terms of the cultural symbols representing this industry. Local governments play a crucial role and share a vested interest with local enterprises in the economic benefits derived from the thriving Hanfu industry. The interests of local governments can be observed in three aspects within this booming industry. Firstly, the substantial market demand and job opportunities created by the industry contribute to local economic development and increase income for residents. This holds particular political significance for incumbent local officials, especially those responsible for economic and cultural affairs, as their accomplishments in these areas can draw attention from higher-level government officials. Secondly, the development of the Hanfu industry can spur the growth of local cultural tourism. For instance, in Xitang, Hangzhou, Zhejiang province [53], various Hanfu-related events, cultural festivals, and local market clusters can be organized to promote tourism, stimulate the local economy, and enhance residents' income. Thirdly, the vigorous growth of enterprises and markets in the Hanfu industry can lead to increased tax revenue for local governments, enabling them to have more flexible fiscal budgets. Furthermore, the support for the Hanfu industry reflects, to some extent, the local government's response to the central government's emphasis on traditional culture in its policies.

While most existing literature primarily focuses on the channels through which the central government issues policies and conveys information to local governments, it often neglects the reciprocal interactions between the central and local governments [54-55]. The central government needs to gather information, receive proposals from local governments, approve designated policies, respond to emergencies, and obtain feedback for policy adjustments. Although the interests of local governments may not always align with those of the central government, particularly in economic matters [56], effective communication between the two sides is necessary. Generally, the central government engages in real-time communication and information exchange with local governments through liaison offices, grassroots investigation teams, expert seminars, internal or external party

discussions, and other means. Through bottom-up reporting from local governments, the central government can acquire comprehensive information on the development of traditional cultural industries, represented by Hanfu, including economic market conditions, local political achievements, and internal government reports. By gaining insights into the Hanfu industry's development process in different regions, within the broader social and cultural context, the central government can accurately comprehend its trajectory.

3.3. Global Image of China

In addition to domestic factors, China's policy decisions, particularly its stance on Hanfu, are influenced by various international-background factors. For a long time, the cultural features of the Han ethnic group have been either intentionally or unintentionally neglected [57]. In comparison to the distinct ethnic cultures and traditions of other minority groups, the Han ethnicity has been overshadowed in the context of ethnic unity [58]. This is partly due to the Han population's significant majority, accounting for over 90% of China's total population [48]. In order to address the substantial disparity between the Han and other ethnic minorities, many ethnic symbols that originally belonged to the Han, such as Hanfu, have not been adequately recognized and promoted as distinctive ethnic features. The recent revival of Hanfu within the last decade can be attributed to economic, social, and political factors, with globalization playing a significant role [59]. While globalization has brought about high socioeconomic development and reduced individuals' reliance on communities and organizations, it has also led to an individual identity crisis and unstable social relations [60]. Building on globalization, particularly cultural globalization facilitated by the rapid growth of the Internet, young people have been exposed to a diverse range of global cultures. In this globalized environment, Hanfu has emerged as a means to reconstruct self-identity [61-65]. Through a relatively mild and depoliticized cultural form, Hanfu helps young individuals differentiate their "self" from the "others," making it an important vehicle for resisting globalization and reclaiming cultural identity. The Chinese government seeks a strong and stable cultural symbol to exert soft power, and it does not sharply distinguish between domestic and international cultural policies [63]. Hanfu, being relatively mild and depoliticized, can simultaneously influence domestic citizens and serve as a symbol of cultural export globally.

This resistance to cultural globalization is evident in Hanfu enthusiasts' aversion to specific styles of Hanfu. Over the years, Hanfu has greatly improved in terms of market integrity, product diversity, and industrial scale. It has adapted to modern society and embraced aesthetic diversity, resulting in various styles. However, consumers often reject Hanfu products that incorporate patterns and styles influenced by Japanese and Korean cultures, and some even openly boycott them [64]. This particular style has acquired the name "Using Wo to replace Hua" (以倭代华). On the other hand, consumers demonstrate a more tolerant attitude towards Western elements in Hanfu designs, such as lace and Western-style shirts. This style is referred to as Hanyang Eclectic (汉洋折衷). Clearly, consumers are more receptive to the fusion of Westernized elements. These different attitudes towards cultural symbols may reflect individuals' perspectives on self and otherness and their resistance to the wave of cultural globalization. Westernized elements have become integral to modernization, with technology, capitalism, market economy, and consumerism being pervasive in everyday life. Western elements in clothing, such as suits, shirts, tailored garments, jeans, and T-shirts, are now essential in daily life. In today's highly developed technological and economic landscape, it is challenging for the public to reject these Western elements that have become deeply integrated into their lives [65]. To some extent, Western elements have been deconstructed into modernity and embraced, similar to other countries worldwide undergoing industrialization and modernization. However, Hanfu has maintained its distinct identity despite the influence of other relatively weaker cultures such as

Japanese and Korean, which represent alternative forms of nationalism that resist globalization. While Hanfu has not been able to fully resist the comprehensive wave of globalization, its relatively flexible approach positions it as a carrier of nationalism that combines entertainment, consumerism, market economy, and depoliticized elements, making it more palatable in contemporary society. Moreover, it provides a more flexible avenue for the Chinese government to engage and involve people, especially young individuals, in their endeavors and policy implementation aimed at rejuvenating China and achieving the Chinese Dream led by Xi Jinping.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, China's cultural policy under Xi Jinping's leadership has garnered significant attention due to its explicit emphasis on traditional culture and implicit nationalism. The West tends to hold strong prejudices against the Chinese government and its policies, often perceiving them as solely driven by the government's goals and interests. Particularly within mainstream Western nationalist schools of thought, the concept of a "nation" is seen as an artificial construct created by governmental institutions. Consequently, many Western scholars view China's pursuit of "great rejuvenation" with a strong nationalist inclination as reflective of the government's authoritarianism.

However, when examining the case of Hanfu, it becomes evident that China's cultural policy is influenced by a multitude of factors, including society, local government, the market, and the government's global image. Hanfu has evolved from an initially spontaneous youth subculture to being officially recognized by the Chinese government as a traditional culture and symbol of China. Additionally, the economic benefits associated with Hanfu have compelled local governments and market stakeholders to seek its promotion and support from the government. Furthermore, in the context of China's rapid development, the government requires a cultural vehicle to enhance its soft power both domestically and internationally. Traditional culture, with its nationalist undertones yet apparent depoliticization and commercialization, presents a suitable choice. Hanfu, as a representative cultural symbol, holds broad appeal due to its entertainment value and commercial viability, particularly within the vast market of ordinary people.

Thus, the modern trend of Chinese traditional culture and the revival of Hanfu can be understood as the result of various factors, including spontaneous nationalist sentiment among the people, market-driven profit motives, the economic development aspirations of local governments, and the nationalist policies of the central government. The cultural policy aimed at promoting traditional culture is an outcome of the Chinese government's receptiveness to opinions from various stakeholders through diverse communication channels.

However, beyond these domestic and government-centric factors, international and external elements, as well as the cultural strategies and developments of other countries, have also played a decisive role in shaping the Chinese government's policies. It is essential to note that cultural strategies cannot be neatly separated into domestic and international domains. This essay has primarily focused on significant domestic factors, but further research is warranted to explore the comprehensive internationalization factors. For instance, leveraging the unique aspects of Chinese civilization in cultural exports can strengthen soft power and establish a powerful national image. Additionally, it may lead to cultural confrontations and civilizational conflicts with other countries.

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