

A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY ON THE PROMOTION OF CHINESE CULTURE

—A CASE STUDY OF HANFU

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Abstract: In recent years, Hanfu, as a symbol of Chinese traditional culture, has gained increasing global influence. Nevertheless, its dissemination abroad has faced considerable challenges. This thesis defines and analyzes the concept of Hanfu and examines major obstacles in its overseas communication, including issues related to online promotion, skepticism and misconceptions, and the fragile development of Hanfu associations abroad. Drawing on theories of cross-cultural communication, the study identifies the underlying causes of these problems and proposes practical strategies. These include rediscovering the contemporary value of Hanfu, addressing the needs of foreign audiences, and balancing universal cultural perspectives with the unique identity of Hanfu. The findings aim to provide theoretical insights and practical guidance for the global dissemination of Hanfu and other forms of traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Hanfu; Promotion of Chinese Culture; Cross-Cultural Perspective

1 Introduction

In the 2009 French film *Le Hérisson* (The Hedgehog), an unforgettable scene unfolds when a guest claims that Go was invented by the Japanese. Paloma, the young protagonist, immediately corrects him, noting its Chinese origin. This exchange not only highlights Paloma's intellect but also symbolizes a shift in Western perceptions of China, moving from outdated stereotypes toward greater accuracy.

Since joining the WTO in 2001, China has become more engaged with the world, economically and culturally. Globalization requires not only learning from others but also presenting China's heritage. Among these, Hanfu—the traditional clothing of the Han people—stands out as a powerful symbol of cultural identity, reflecting Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and continuity.

The modern “Hanfu Movement” has grown rapidly in China, driven by cultural confidence and younger generations' interest in tradition. Today, Hanfu is worn not merely as fashion but as cultural expression and pride.

This thesis examines Hanfu as a lens for understanding how Chinese culture is recognized globally. It explores how Hanfu can make tradition accessible to foreign audiences and how it serves as a medium of cross-cultural communication, bridging civilizations and enhancing China's cultural presence worldwide.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Studies Abroad

Foreign research on Hanfu is still limited, as most Western scholars focus on their own clothing traditions. Yet some works offer useful insights. Dieter Kuhn, in *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*, describes Song dynasty clothing in detail, showing its role in social and cultural life. Comparative studies on other traditions are also relevant: Raluca Creangă (2020) highlights how reinventing Romanian dress stimulates cultural identity^[1], while Jenny Hall (2015) examines the decline of the kimono and explores ways to refashion it for modern Japan.^[2] Some scholars directly address Hanfu: Zhou Xing (2014) identifies “origin,” “continuity,” and “purity” as central to its definition, stressing its link to identity and authenticity.

2.2 Studies at Home

Domestic research is far richer. Scholars emphasize that Hanfu is not only clothing but also a cultural symbol embodying memory and identity. Zhang Yi (2013) views Hanfu as representing Han culture and suggests its revival helps counter both globalization's pressures and

blurred identity.^[3] Zhang Qiqi (2019) argues that Hanfu fosters cultural pride, especially among youth, and strengthens national self-esteem. Other studies stress its educational and social functions, noting that wearing Hanfu is a living form of cultural transmission. Research also highlights its potential in cultural and creative industries such as fashion, tourism, and media.

In short, foreign studies are relatively descriptive or comparative, while Chinese scholarship explores Hanfu's symbolic, educational, and industrial roles, situating the movement within China's cultural renaissance.

3 Definition and History of Hanfu

Hanfu is generally defined as the traditional clothing system of the Han people, originating from Huaxia attire before the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and evolving until the fall of the Ming in the 17th century. Rather than a single garment, it comprises styles sharing features such as cross-collar, right-over-left closure (*jiaoling youren*), belts instead of buttons, and wide sleeves. Today, Hanfu is both a revival of historical dress and a marker of cultural identity.

The term “Hanfu” first appeared in the Eastern Han Dynasty (*Hanshu*, Volume 96), where it referred to the Han court's costume system. Archaeological finds, such as Mawangdui tomb records, also attest to its use. During later dynasties, Hanfu was recognized as a cultural marker: for instance, the History of Liao records that Khitan rulers adopted Hanfu in certain contexts while retaining their own dress elsewhere.

With the rise of the Hanfu Movement in the 21st century, the term has acquired renewed meaning. Scholars generally define it as “a series of costumes with a distinctive style based on the dress of the Han people.” Across four millennia, Hanfu encompassed garments such as *shangyi xiashang* (upper garment and skirt), *shenyi* (deep robe), and *ruqun* (jacket and skirt), with the overlapping rightward collar as a consistent feature.^[6] *Shenyi* differ from robes in the fact that the former was not passed down, whereas the latter were worn till modern times.^[7]

To sum up, Hanfu has existed in ancient times, but its meaning has shifted over the centuries.^[6]

As a national costume, Hanfu reflects philosophy, etiquette, and aesthetics, visibly distinct from other ethnic styles. While its ancient role included marking class and status, its modern revival emphasizes cultural identity and continuity. In this paper, “Hanfu” refers mainly to this contemporary sense: the recreation and reinterpretation of traditional Han attire in today's society.

4 Concept of Cross-Cultural Communication in the Context of Hanfu

The notion of cross-cultural communication was first articulated by Leo Frobenius in *Der Westafrikanische Kulturkreis* (1897/1898) to describe the diffusion of cultural elements such as ideas, technologies, and religions across boundaries. Later interpretations, such as Chen Guoming's, highlight that cross-cultural interaction entails negotiation, transformation, and even tension, rather than simple information transfer.

Viewed through this lens, the overseas promotion of Hanfu exemplifies cultural diffusion. It is not a unilateral projection from China to foreign audiences^[5], but a dynamic exchange in which Hanfu is received, interpreted, and redefined by diverse groups. Both Chinese advocates and foreign participants serve as communicative agents, collectively shaping its meaning. In this process, Hanfu gains renewed vitality, functioning as a cultural bridge that reflects broader patterns of diffusion, adaptation, and mutual influence in a global context.

5 Hanfu Promotion in Contemporary China and Beyond

The modern Hanfu revival is often traced to November 22, 2003, when Wang Letian walked the streets of Zhengzhou in handmade robes, an event later seen as a symbolic milestone. Since then, the Hanfu Movement has expanded rapidly, led mainly by younger generations but gradually embraced across age groups.

Government policy has further encouraged this revival. The 2017 Opinions on the Implementation of the Excellent Chinese Traditional Culture Inheritance and Development Project called for integrating tradition into education and fashion. Hanfu has since appeared in major cultural events and on global platforms such as New York's Times Square. Annual festivals, such as the Xitang Hanfu Cultural Week, now attract hundreds of thousands of participants. In January 2020, Hanfu was even displayed on the big screen of New York Times Square. From 2017 to 2019, the global Hanfu Culture Association underwent a growth rate of 46%. Each year, from April 17 to 18, Hanfu enthusiasts gather in Xitang, an ancient town over a thousand years old, to celebrate Hanfu Culture Day by wearing traditional garments and strolling with

friends. In 2020, the event attracted a total of 187,000 visitors, among whom more than 86,000 people wore Hanfu. In the following years, the event gradually evolved into the “Xitang Hanfu Cultural Week,” which has usually been scheduled in the autumn months (October–November) and extended in duration, no longer limited to just two days.

Overseas promotion is driven largely by associations, enterprises, and individuals. While the Chinese diaspora remains the main audience, non-Chinese groups are gradually engaging with Hanfu. Media play a central role: over 60% of Chinese netizens report that historical dramas and platforms like Weibo, TikTok, and WeChat shape their understanding of Hanfu. Influencers such as Li Ziqi demonstrate how visual culture can overcome language barriers and spread traditional aesthetics worldwide.

With the development of media, social networks have gradually become increasingly important in promoting Chinese traditional culture. Statistics show that more than 60% of Chinese internet users are affected by ancient costume drama, and over half of them have deepened their understanding of Hanfu via platforms like Microblog, Tik-Tok, and WeChat. According to statistics, more than 60% of Chinese netizens are influenced by ancient costume films and TV plays, and more than half of them have deepened their understanding of Hanfu through microblog and other social networks, believing that Hanfu is a good way to carry forward traditional culture.^[8] The reputation of Li Ziqi’s food videos has spread fast in both domestic and foreign social media. She has won a large number of fans clicking, watching and making comments and interactions. Under one of her videos entitled “potato’s life”, one careful audience (a Youtube netizen) left a comment saying, “I watched the video for 17 minutes and only heard the girl talking for 24 seconds in a language I didn’t understand at all.” Although the difference of language is the main obstacle to Li’s promotion of her videos outside China, it will never become a cognitive obstacle to the receivers, as long as they love delicious food and pleasant drinks.^[10]

The Hanfu industry has grown into a thriving cultural economy. By 2019, its market value exceeded 1 billion yuan, with annual growth of around 150% and turnover on Taobao surpassing 2 billion yuan. At that time, the consumer group was relatively small, but the scale was growing. The number of Hanfu fans reached 3.561 million, 74.4% than that last year.^[8]

In sum, Hanfu promotion today is sustained by both cultural enthusiasm and market forces, advancing domestically through festivals and policy, and internationally through media and diaspora networks, with growing potential to influence global cultural landscapes.

6 Problems of Hanfu’s Overseas Communication and their Reasons

6.1 Problems

6.1.1 Online Promotion

Although online platforms such as Hanfu Map once attempted to collect associations and merchants, poor maintenance, inaccurate data, and the short lifespan of many overseas organizations have limited their effectiveness. Moreover, most Hanfu videos are in Chinese, with few English-language materials available, which hinders accessibility for international audiences.

6.1.2 Skepticism and Misconception

The Hanfu Movement has also faced skepticism. Some critics argue that it reflects Han-centric nationalism^[10] and may alienate China’s ethnic minorities, questioning whether Hanfu can represent all Chinese culture. Others challenge the historical authenticity of its claimed origins, such as the link to the Yellow Emperor. Misconceptions abroad further complicate matters: for example, some South Korean netizens have misidentified Hanfu as Hanbok, provoking cultural disputes. International media coverage has at times portrayed the movement as nationalistic or even oppressive.

According to the theory of Professor Zhou Xing about the “origin”, “continuity” and “purity”^[11], Hanfu is believed to originate from the times of Yellow Emperor, Huangdi. However, some non-supporters of Hanfu movement argue that the story of Yellow Emperor is a mere mythology, because there was no firm historical evidence that can prove Huangdi truly existed, for at that time Chinese characters was not invented yet, that the story about Hanfu and Huangdi, as mentioned earlier, still requires further verification.

6.1.3 The Overseas Hanfu Societies

Overseas Hanfu organizations, while central to global promotion, face serious challenges. Membership is unstable due to student turnover, and leadership frequently changes. Activities often remain superficial, focusing on display rather than deeper cultural education. Their

audience is largely confined to Chinese international students, with limited outreach to local communities. In addition, they underutilize local and international media platforms, reducing their visibility and influence abroad.

6.2 Reasons

6.2.1 Cultural Differences

Fundamental differences between Chinese and Western cultures often create stereotypes and misunderstandings, making Hanfu difficult to communicate abroad. Some designers adopt Western aesthetics over traditional styles, while foreign audiences may misinterpret Hanfu or conflate it with other cultural clothing.

6.2.2 Limited Domestic Consensus

The cultural value of Hanfu is not yet fully recognized within China. While some scholars argue that strong domestic identity is a prerequisite for international acceptance, debates persist at home over Hanfu's authenticity and relevance. This lack of consensus weakens its symbolic power abroad, although certain foreign audiences—especially educated groups—remain receptive.

6.2.3 Shortage of Talents

Sustained overseas promotion requires skilled practitioners with knowledge of Hanfu's history, production, and cultural practices. Many Hanfu societies abroad lack such expertise, resulting in superficial displays rather than deeper engagement. Talent shortages and high turnover in overseas associations significantly hinder long-term cultural diffusion.

7 Solutions to the Problems

Recent research suggests that the overseas communication of Hanfu should be audience-centered and balance universal human values with the uniqueness of Hanfu. Based on existing problems, the following strategies can be proposed:

7.1 Online Promotion

Platforms like Hanfu Map require better maintenance and regular updates. More English-language content, such as films, animations, and short videos, should be produced to improve accessibility for global audiences. Successful Bilibili creators like ChiXia show the potential of combining commerce with cultural storytelling.

7.2 Skepticism and Misconception

Skepticism and misunderstanding are common in cultural diffusion. The government and media should provide accurate historical information through educational programs and public campaigns, strengthening awareness and countering misrepresentations abroad.

7.3 Overseas Hanfu Societies

To overcome instability and lack of expertise, trained professionals should be dispatched abroad, similar to the model of Confucius Institutes. This would ensure continuity and raise the cultural depth of overseas Hanfu activities.

7.4 Contemporary Values of Hanfu

Hanfu promotion should emphasize its relevance to modern society. Following Japan's example of wearing kimono formally, Hanfu could be introduced into professional or ceremonial contexts in China. Such integration would strengthen its legitimacy and demonstrate its adaptability.

7.5 Balancing Universality and Uniqueness

While the uniqueness of Hanfu can attract attention, long-term success depends on aligning with universal values such as aesthetic, cultural, and humanistic significance. Presenting Hanfu as both distinctively Chinese and universally meaningful will enhance its acceptance abroad.

7.6 Audience-Centered Approach

Effective communication requires considering the needs and expectations of foreign audiences. Drawing on "Uses and Gratifications"

theory, dissemination should aim to create cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resonance. Li Ziqi's success on YouTube exemplifies how relatable storytelling can bridge cultural gaps. Similarly, Hanfu can be promoted by linking it to pop culture—through animation, games, fashion shows, or international design competitions—appealing especially to younger generations. Confucius Institutes can also serve as platforms to introduce Hanfu from an early age.

To decide whether the promotion of Chinese culture is effective, we have to put ourselves in the shoes of people in the target culture. Next, we need to observe if the dissemination has caused any change in cognition, emotion, attitude, and behavior of those people—and see if there is any intentional or non-intentional impact on them.^[9]

8 Concluding Remarks

With a history of over 4,000 years, Hanfu has recently undergone a remarkable revival. In little more than a decade, the Hanfu Movement has seen steady growth in both the number of enthusiasts and the depth of cultural understanding. Patience and persistence are needed: before Hanfu can be widely appreciated abroad, it must gain broader recognition and acceptance at home.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Some designers overly rely on Western aesthetics, key platforms such as Hanfu Map lag in updates, and critics view the movement as a form of nationalism. Overseas communities also struggle with unstable membership and a shortage of knowledgeable advocates.

Addressing these issues requires strategies that emphasize Hanfu's contemporary value, meet the needs of international audiences, and balance universal human values with the uniqueness of Han clothing. If these efforts succeed, Hanfu can transcend obstacles and emerge as both a symbol of Chinese identity and a meaningful contribution to global cultural exchange.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my thesis adviser Pro. Wang Lu for always encouraging me. Thank you for giving me this topic of thesis. I am very interested in Han clothing and its history. Thank you for your patient listening, critiquing, and directing in the past few months, without which this thesis would not exist. Thank you for your inspiring words.

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