

The Expansion of the Hanfu Movement in Singapore

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On 22 November 2003, a man named Wang Le tian walked down the streets of Zhengzhou, Henan province of the People's Republic of China, clothed in his own hand-made traditional pre-Qing clothing.¹ (See fig.1.) His display made history as the first person to wear *hanfu* in a public setting since the Ming dynasty over 374 years ago. It was said the *hanfu* movement transpired after him as the number of *hanfu* enthusiast and revivalists increased following his *hanfu* debut. There was also the rise of online and offline *hanfu* communities, *hanfu* social practices, *hanfu*-based businesses and commodities.² Huaxiahan.com – one of the websites dedicated to the revival of Han clothing in China, was established by 5 Han culture lovers in 2003 and by 2009, the site had garnered over 30 000 registered members.³ So why the sudden burst of interest for this ancient garment?

The entire Chinese population consists of 56 ethnic groups, 92% of which are Han Chinese. In China's final imperial dynasty, the Han clothing was forcibly removed under the rule of the Manchurians, a minority Chinese ethnic group. Han men were required to cut their hair in Mongolian fashion or face execution.⁴ Such was sinful to the Hans as they believed that one's hair, along with the body and skin were considered a gift from your parents and damaging it was an unfilial act.⁵ Hanfu as a result was forgotten in history. Instead, the *cheongsam* and *magua*, both of Manchurian origins, took its place as traditional Chinese clothing in present day. The concept of *hanfu* is further displaced with the invention of 'the 'tang suits', also known as '*tangzhuang*' (see fig.2.); designed specifically for the 2001 Shanghai Asia

¹ Zhi Ying, Mo, THE HANFU MOVEMENT AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: CONSIDERING THE PAST TO KNOW THE FUTURE, 2017.

² Ibid., 13.

³ "Hanfu: Weaving Pride With Fashion - All China Women's Federation", 2009

⁴ "Qing Dynasty", HISTORY, 2018

⁵ "Why Did All Chinese Men Have Long Hair Until The End Of The Qing Dynasty? - Quora", 2016

- Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.⁶ This showed that the Chinese government officially established '*tangzhuang*' as the nation's identity.

The ancient dress is made foreign by the fantasized image portrayed in media and are unfamiliar even within the Chinese community. A hanfu revivalist shares to SBS news "When I first started wearing it people didn't recognise this style as our own national clothing... But in China, even with our long history, it's a shame some didn't recognise their own traditional wear".⁷ This image of the hanfu is the same overseas as Mr Michael Jow, the acting president of the Singapore Han Cultural Society states that "Some people think that we are cosplayers or actors in a drama."⁸

Though many Han Chinese do not identify with the hanfu, its significance, ironically, lies in cultural identity of Han Chinese themselves. The reason the revival of hanfu started in the mainland and not by Hong Kong, Macau or overseas Chinese, where the authentic Chinese culture had remained untouched by the Cultural Revolution, was also because the Cultural Revolution left the mainlanders in a cultural crisis.⁹ As the representation of the *cheongsam* and *magua* were erased in the Liberation, the Han Chinese felt the lack of cultural pride and belonging that led them to search for their own code of ethnic dress.¹⁰

As mentioned before, the hanfu movement is not contained within the mainland. Chinese communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and even Canada have sprouted their own individual hanfu societies as well. Within the past 15 years,

⁶ Jianhua, Zhao, *The Chinese Fashion Industry*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

⁷ Katrina, Yu, "The Young Nationalists Reviving Traditional Chinese Culture", SBS News. 2017.

⁸ SEAH, PENG, "Fashioning A Revival Of Ancient Chinese Attire", *The Straits Times*, 2017

⁹ Shizuka, Satsuki, "Rethinking The Hanfu Movement, Feb. '11 (Causality And Diaspora)", Toronto Guqin Society, 2011

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

contemporary pop culture had played an important part in internationalising the hanfu movement, allowing it to reach the shores of Singapore.

Since Wang Le tian's story was first published in the Lian He Zao Bao, the hanfu scene in Singapore might have also started in 2003 as well.¹¹ However, the community only grew to size in recent years mainly with the help of social media and News coverage by Channel News Asia and The Straits Times; the latter reported twice about Singaporean hanfu revivalists in 2017. The boost in awareness is obvious in the Singapore Han Cultural Society, formed in 2012, had 32 members as of 2017 but currently has over 1000 members on Facebook.¹² Moreover, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong showed his support by featuring them on his Facebook during the Mid-Autumn festival. (See fig.3.)

The most notable local hanfu enthusiast would be Ms Gong Pan Pan, the Manager of the Visitor Experience and volunteers programme at the National Museum of Singapore.¹³ It is estimated that she owns up to 100 sets of hanfu, all bought from the Chinese online marketplace Taobao, and has spent "at least \$10,000" on them.¹⁴ She does personal photoshoots in her home, then shares them on her blog, Facebook and Instagram of over 1200 followers. All dedicated to promoting hanfu by exploring Chinese history through aesthetic and fashion. (See fig.4.)

As compared to the Singapore Han Cultural Society Her contribution is much more recognized. Not only was she featured on Challenge, the publication of the Singapore Public Service - a government publication, she was also invited to host

¹¹ Mo, THE HANFU MOVEMENT AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, 2017

¹² SEAH, "Fashioning A Revival Of Ancient Chinese Attire", 2017

¹³ Juliana, Loh, "She Wears Her Heritage", Psd.Gov.Sg., 2017.

¹⁴ ALYSSA, WOO, "Dressing Up In Hanfu For A Lesson In Han Chinese Culture". The Straits Times. 2017.

events at the Moonfest, a Mid-Autumn festival event at the Esplanade dedicated to Chinese cultural arts, in both 2017 and 2018.

With that said, the Singapore government is clearly in support of the hanfu movement. The sudden reports of the hanfu scene in Singapore might have been encouraged by the government's efforts to fostering Singaporean Chinese culture in 2017 with the opening of the new arts centre - Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC).¹⁵ Built with S\$110 million of government funding and donations of S\$29 million from clan associations, companies and other individuals, the SCCC hopes to become as reputable as the Esplanade, and Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall.¹⁶ (See fig.5.) SCCC chairman Mr Chua Thian Poh states that they "look forward to working with schools, arts and cultural groups, organisations and individuals to come up with exciting new initiatives to engage a wider group of audience to appreciate the Singapore Chinese Culture."¹⁷ With this endorsement, things are looking up for the hanfu scene in Singapore. It is most likely to continue growing through free education in school workshops, community events and festivals like the Moonfest.

As said previously, Chinese culture in Singapore was spared of the cultural revolution on the mainland. Yet it still became diluted after being dyed by the western world. The surviving traditions are ones used to celebrate the milestones of life such as a baby's full moon (*man yue*) or marriage. If Ms Gong was introduced to hanfu at her wedding shoot in 2015 in China, it can be inferred that she is not alone.¹⁸ Back on the mainland, after the first Han retro wedding in 2006, there was a boom in

¹⁵ Mayo, Martin, "New Arts Centre Will Promote Chinese Culture That Is Singaporean-Centric: PM Lee". Channel Newsasia. 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Loh, "She Wears Her Heritage", 2017

demand in the Chinese wedding market for Han retro wedding dress.¹⁹ The industry experienced rapid growth of dress design, production, marketing, photography and wedding planning relating to Han retro wedding dress.²⁰ (See fig. 6.)

Today Taobao, China's largest e-commerce platform, has 87 531 hanfu stalls, 16 285 of which are tagged to hanfu wedding; meaning about 20% of the market caters to Han retro weddings. Ren Guanyu, the founder of Han Yi Fang, one of China's largest studios specializing in producing Han-style weddings, states that half his customers are overseas Chinese.²¹ They would even stop by his shop to buy tailor-made hanfu when they are on vacation.²² Couples that choose the Han-style wedding are usually the existing hanfu advocates which are a minority clientele as compared to the entire market that prefers the default western-style weddings. Nevertheless, the teamwork between the publicity activities of hanfu enthusiasts, appearance of hanfu merchants and timely involvement of wedding companies, gave people more opportunities to contact with han retro wedding dress; allowing it to develop and spread quickly in this context.²³

Moving on to the overseas Chinese hanfu scene, the Korean wave had played a part in expanding the youth predominant movement; by "inspiring young Chinese to an interest in their own vestimentary past."²⁴ (See fig.7.) Korean Historical drama Dae Jang Geum, also known as Jewel in the Palace, was a record-breaking hit broadcasted to 91 countries and earning a heaping US\$103.4 million worldwide; making it one of the top 10 highest rated Korean dramas of all time.²⁵

¹⁹ Niu, Li, Tingting Xia, Rongrong Cui, and Jie Lu. "Emergence Of Chinese Han Retro Wedding Dress", 2016

²⁰ Li, Xia, Cui, and Lu. "Emergence Of Chinese Han Retro Wedding Dress", 2016

²¹ Liu, Lu, "Han Me Downs", Europe.Chinadaily.Com.Cn, 2011

²² Ibid.

²³ Li, Xia, Cui, and Lu. "Emergence Of Chinese Han Retro Wedding Dress", 2016

²⁴ Tagliacozzo, Eric, Helen F Siu, and Peter C Perdue, Asia Inside Out, 2015.

²⁵ "Dae Jang Geum", En.Wikipedia.Org

Looking at its year of release in Singapore - 2005, the drama ran alongside the beginnings of the hanfu movement.²⁶ As the Korean wave becomes an intractable part of Singapore's popular culture landscape, moulding modern aesthetics and ideals, it is a plausible influence for the hanfu revival outside mainland China.²⁷

The popularity and demand for Korean culture is very apparent in Singapore with the large number of restaurants, cafes and other eateries serving Korean cuisines, as well as the increase of Singaporean visitors to South Korea. According to the Korea Tourism Organisation, the number of youths age 0 to 30 increase from 1700 in June of 2005 to 9841 in June of 2018.²⁸ In immersing in the culture of others, Han Chinese are thrown into embarrassment with the realisation that they were culturally lacking in identity.²⁹ While others flaunt their national costumes, Chinese only have the Western-style clothes.

The hanfu scene in Singapore is still very new, even in China, where it is more prominent, the movement is still very niche, and it mostly operates on grassroots level. The current aim for hanfu movement in China, is to push for the ancient garment to be use as the national costume; overwriting the counterfeit traditional clothing. Their first attempt in May 2007, was when more than 20 Chinese domestic websites jointly put forward a proposal for hanfu to be worn as the official uniform for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.³⁰ (See fig.8.) The proposal was rejected; but, their recent attempt had been a success. On 8 April 2018, the Communist Youth League, a Party-run youth organization, announced on their official Weibo microblog the

²⁶ "Dae Jang Geum", En.Wikipedia.Org

²⁷ Kai Khiun, Liew, "Commentary: Southeast Asia's Romance With Korean Drama Shows", Channel Newsasia, 2017

²⁸ Korea Tourism Organisation, 2018

²⁹ Lu, Liu, "Han Me Downs", Europe.Chinadaily.Com.Cn, 2011

³⁰ "Should China Adopt Hanfu As Its National Costume? -- Beijing Review" 2007

establishment of a new national day called the Huafu Day; celebrating the Chinese clothing of all 56 Chinese ethnic groups.³¹ The event is organized in partnership with Bilibili, the Chinese version of Youtube, and Dongjia, an e-commerce platform for artisanal products.³² This shows that the hanfu movement in China is only just getting government support and is still in the midst of developing.

To better promote the hanfu, some designers approached the garment in a contemporary fashion; modernizing the hanfu. Beijing fashion designer Chen Xing thinks to incorporate modern elements into the hanfu, relating it life in the 21st Century for more practicality.³³ (See fig.9.) This way, hanfu can be worn in both casual and formal events. He says, "We have a long history, and each dynasty has a unique style, but we don't want to wear a costume to show our value."³⁴ Another Chinese Designer that fuses traditional Chinese culture into apparels is Uma Wang. For 2014 Milan fashion week, she designed a collection based on the formlessness in Chinese philosophy, her results were experimental and extremely advent-Garde.³⁵ (see fig. 10.) As she appeals more to the international market, this method may be more efficient in gathering interest for hanfu through fashion lovers. Yet there is the issue of whether the modernization of the hanfu would stray from the original purpose of promoting traditional han clothing and lose its meaning. Perhaps, this method would be effective and appropriate in the later stage when the hanfu is recognized.

In conclusion, the flow of culture in the case of the hanfu depends heavily on trends, authority measures and most importantly globalisation, especially through online

³¹ Kenrick, Davis, "Party Youth Partner With Bilibili To Celebrate Ancient Fashion", Sixth Tone, 2018

³² Ibid.

³³ Katrina, Yu, "The Young Nationalists Reviving Traditional Chinese Culture", SBS News, 2017

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "A Fusion Of Ancient And Modern Fashion[1]- Chinadaily.Com.Cn", 2017

social platforms. Tangible events do also expand the hanfu movement to a certain extend. For example, the Han Couture Design Competition last held in 2013 in New York³⁶ and Chinese actress Xu Jiao wearing a hanfu-style dress to the premier of “The Shape of Water” at the Venice Film Festival.³⁷ (See fig.11.) Both events are international with high profile, including the participation of people all around the world. This adding on to the fact that hanfu is not known in practice, the probability of stirring public interest will be multiplied. Though the growth had been rather slow, created 15 years ago yet still a niche market, the future of hanfu, in Singapore and in China, is promising.

³⁶ "The Global Han Couture Design Competition" 2018

³⁷ "Xu Jiao Debuts Hanfu Look At Venice Film Festival" 2017.

Images



Fig. 1 Wang Le Tian wearing *Hanfu* with modern trousers and leather shoes. (Huang, Charlie. 2007. Wang Le Tian. Image. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanfu_movement.)



Fig. 2 APEC leaders wearing *Tangzhuang* (Russian, US And Chinese President At The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit. 2018. Image. Accessed November 18. <https://qz.com/1064404/young-people-in-china-have-started-a-fashion-movement-built-around-racial-purity/>.)

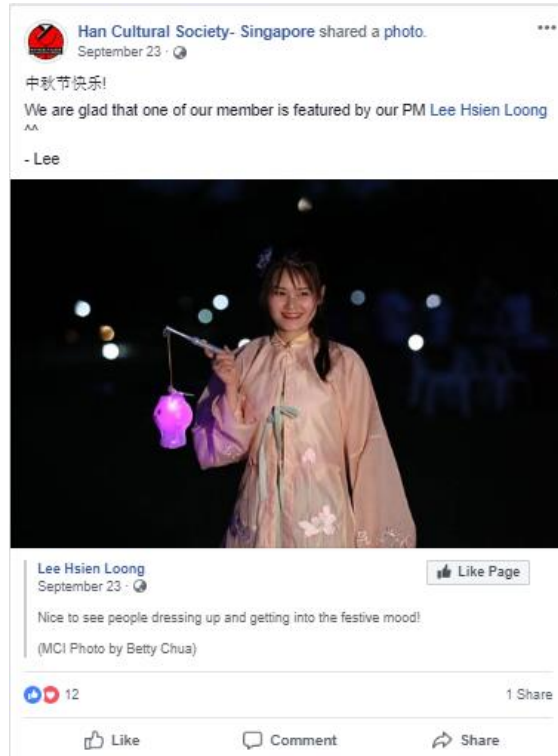


Fig. 3. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's hanfu Facebook post (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong'S Hanfu Facebook Post. 2018. Image. <https://www.facebook.com/leehsienloong/photos/a.2062835760445786/2062835887112440/?type=3&theater.>)



Fig.4. One of Ms Gong Pan Pan's latest Instagram post (Gong, Pan Pan. 2018. One Of Ms Gong Pan Pan'S Latest Instagram Post. Image. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn23d1dHAM1/.](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn23d1dHAM1/))



Fig. 5. The SCCC's 530-seater auditorium suited for concerts, dance or theatre performances (Kai Khiun, Liew, 2017)



Fig.6. Hanfu Retro Wedding (Liu, Lu, 2011)



Fig. 7. Tourists renting the hanbok in South Korea
 (Tourists Renting The Hanbok In South Korea. 2018. Image. Accessed November 18.
<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160707004600315.>)



Fig. 8. Sketch of hanfu proposal for 2008 Beijing Olympic Games
 ("Should China Adopt Hanfu As Its National Costume? -- Beijing Review". 2007.
 Bjreview.Com.Cn. http://www.bjreview.com.cn/forum/txt/2007-07/10/content_68673_2.htm.)



Fig.9. Beijing Designer Chen Xing using chinese motives in his designs (Katrina, Yu, 2017)



Fig. 10. A piece of Uma Wang's Spring Summer 2014 Ready-To-Wear Collection (Wang 2018)



Fig. 11. Xu Jiao (left) and Celina Jade (right)
(Xu Jiao At Venice Film Festival. 2018. Image. Accessed November 18.
[https://cfensi.wordpress.com/2017/08/31/xu-jiao-debuts-hanfu-look-at-venice-film-festival/.](https://cfensi.wordpress.com/2017/08/31/xu-jiao-debuts-hanfu-look-at-venice-film-festival/))

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