Modern Chinese Nationalism and the Han Nation: An Analysis based on the Hanfu Movement

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Abstract: The development of the Hanfu movement in modern China reflects the Chinese people's quest for national identity. Hanfu is the traditional dress of the Han nation. Initially, some Hanfu activists attempted to use Hanfu to restore the core status of the Han nation in China. Later, Hanfu became more popular among the Chinese public and represented increasing Chinese cultural influence abroad. However, the association of the Hanfu movement with nationalism has not been widely studied. It is introduced Benediction Anderson's "imagined communities", Anthony Smith's "ethno-symbolism", and Manuel Castells's "three identities in the age of the Internet" in the paper to explore the changes in the construction of Han Chinese identity at different times in China and the flow of nationalist sentiment. In addition, the network soil and radical nationalism at the birth of the Hanfu Movement are also noteworthy. This is linked to the modern online forms of nationalism and the new issues of Chinese nationalism in the context of online media under the control of the Chinese government to remind the future Hanfu movement not to fall into a narrow nationalist dilemma. Finally, this paper argues that moderate nationalism is conducive to the cohesion of Chinese national identity and the overall cultural revival of modern China.

Keywords: nationalism, Hanfu movement, Han identity, cyber nationalism

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese-style trends have risen in Chinese society, such as traditional costumes and Chinese songs and dances, which have gained popularity among the young generation. Western media CNN and New York Times have reported on the "Hanfu fever" in modern China [1, 2]. This brought the traditional Chinese costume, Hanfu, into the global spotlight. In addition, the Internet contributes a lot to the resurgence of Hanfu in the early 2000s. The Hanfu revival originated from online communities built by Hanfu enthusiasts, and as media technology developed, Hanfu spread in more diverse forms, eventually forming the Hanfu movement [3].

However, the nature of this movement for the revival of traditional Chinese culture is debatable. Certain studies in the last decade have critiqued that the Hanfu movement insinuates a worrying Han-centrism and radical racial nationalism [4-7]. Furthermore, the Chinese Hanfu movement has been particularly vocal about its admiration for the costumes of several wealthy and powerful Han-ruled dynasties in ancient times, the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties, while rejecting the Han costumes of the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty [7]. This national sentiment has been amplified on online social media. Some of the radical remarks in the Hanfu movement, the emphasis on the superiority of Han identity, and the disparagement of East Asian costume culture are issues that

Internet communities in the era of globalization tend to raise [3]. In a more macro media context, the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the information technology framework intentionally guide the rise of Chinese cyber nationalism [8, 9]. However, in contrast to the motivations of the earlier Hanfu movement, many young people today wear Hanfu because they love its beauty and traditional Chinese culture. Extreme nationalist sentiments are thus gradually being diluted in favor of a more moderate nationalism. This nationalism may well give the new potential for the cultural revival of the Chinese nation in the age of globalization. Therefore the Hanfu movement requires a dialectical view.

This paper will first review Benediction Anderson, Anthony Smith, and Manuel Castells's theories on nationalism to explain the nation's nature and how identity was shaped by the Hanfu movement. Next, it will retrace the history of the Han nation and the development of the Hanfu movement and analyze the changes in nationalism during this period. Lastly, it will focus on the reproduction of Chinese nationalism in its online form, and a case study will be used to analyze the nationalistic overtones of the Hanfu movement. This article claims that the construction of Chinese national identity has dramatically led to the return of the Hanfu. The Hanfu movement has had a positive effect on general Chinese identity but has to be wary of the threat that narrow nationalism in the online community may pose. The future Hanfu movement must learn from previous experiences to contribute to constructing China's cultural renaissance.

2.   Nation and Nationalism

The nation is a concept that is highly difficult to define formally. Thus the differences in the definition of the nation have resulted in different perspectives in the study of nationalism.

Anderson's ingenious concept of "imagined communities" suggests that the nation is a modernized artifact and a product of the collective psychological identity of society and that national emotions, cultural roots, and print media have contributed to its rise [10]. This can broadly be used to reveal how national emotions and national identities are constructed through imagination. Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" [10]. This implies three points: all individuals in a nation are bound together by a shared memory; a nation is born in a period of alternating state legitimacy, and a nation is powerfully inclusive of internal inequalities. Although China has gone through thousands of years of dynastic changes, modern Chinese refer to themselves as "Descendants of Yan and Yellow Emperors" and "Descendants of the Dragon", so these imaginary historical marks firmly sustain the community.

In addition, Anderson emphasizes the importance of print media as an intermediary in the production and transmission of shared memories. Similarly, today's online media are playing the same role.

However, Anderson's model of nationalism is, to some extent, inapplicable to the analysis of Chinese nationalism. Since his study of nationalism is situated in the industrialized Western capitalist society of the 18th century, the absence of a study of Chinese nationalism reflects its lack of theoretical explanation. It is also important to realize that the process of national construction in China differs significantly from that in the West regarding historical and cultural origins.

An essential difference between Smith's and Anderson's views is that Smith does not view the nation as a modern construct or invention. He believes that the reinterpretation of the traditional culture of the ethnic group is the key to the formation of the nation [11]. On this basis, he mainly develops the research method, ethno-symbolism. This approach emphasizes using myths, symbols, memories, values, and traditions to fill the gap in the study of modern nationalism for the enduring continuity of community [11]. These cultural elements give each community distinctive symbolic meanings in terms of language, religion, customs, and institutions and help distinguish the members of that community from others. By highlighting its particular image, it strengthens the opposition to

the other. This could explain modern Chinese youth choose to reinterpret the meaning of Hanfu to present a unique national culture to the world and potentially challenge the Western discourse that dominates the global culture. It is also vital that Smith's idea provides a lens for reflecting on Han-centrism in modern China, concerning how the Han construct relations with other minority nations.

In addition, collective symbols that are universally accepted by a nation can significantly enhance the emotional cohesion of the community. While the meaning of the symbols may change over time, the form is relatively fixed. Moreover, these symbols are especially significant in the rituals and ceremonies of public culture, and they can consolidate national identity in stages [11]. Hanfu is a cultural symbol of China that embodies fine, traditional behaviors and values, and its clothing form has been passed down to today. The Hanfu movement provides a field of practice that helps to observe the externalization of the participants' inner national identity. Therefore, Smith's theory is highly relevant to the continuity of Chinese society, self-image and identity, and changes in Han national identity.

Contemporary nationalism studies also have to be contextualized in today's information age. Castells focuses on the state, nation, community, and individual identity in the background of globalization and networking. As the Hanfu movement incubates and relies on 21st-century online communities, it is necessary to explore whether identity construction in the online environment has new characteristics.

Castells proposes legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity from the perspective of social movements [12]. The Hanfu movement shows less legitimizing identity. It was primarily initiated and led by the grassroots and was overlooked and promoted by the official government in the media until 2012 Xi Jinping's administration [2]. The Hanfu movement is primarily a manifestation of resistance identity and project identity. In a Chinese context, it is a protest initiated by the Han nation in search of representative clothing and to draw a line between the Tang costume and Manchu cheongsams [6]. In the international context, it is a projected action arising from China as a community to expand the influence of Chinese culture and break the dominance of Western cultural discourse.

The evolution of the identity in the Hanfu movement also proves that identity starts from resistance and may turn into a project identity under certain conditions and eventually achieve a more prominent position in society, thus becoming a legitimizing identity [12]. Castells's identity theory facilitates understanding the differential national identity presentation in the Hanfu movement on Chinese and overseas online communities from the perspective of online collective action. It also provides ideas for examining the operation of the national network system and the use of nationalism by political parties in contemporary cyber nationalism.

3. Complex Chinese Nationalism: Dynamic Han identity

To better understand the Hanfu movement as a field of observation, it is crucial to know the history of the transformation of Han identity, which probably accounts for the complex nationalism in modern China. There are three junctures involving the reconstruction of national identity, the feudal-imperial period, the Republican period, and the People's Republic of China [13].

During the ancient imperial period, China's division of national identity relied on shared homeland and civilization rather than race and bloodline. Specifically, the Han originated from the Central Plain, and they commonly called their homeland Huaxia (华夏), Zhongguo (中国), Zhonghua (中华), meaning the country at the center of the world [14]. This reflects that the Han did not start as a political construct but rather because they shared a common and grandiose imagination of the nation. In addition, there were nomadic civilizations of man (蛮), yi (夷), and hu (胡) at that time, and the difference in national civilization did not enable the Han identity to cross over with these neighboring

nations [14]. However, Han's conquests, trade, and cultural exchanges gradually incorporated other nations into Han's boundaries and political rule [13]. During this process of national integration, Han Chinese clothing also absorbed the characteristics of other nations' clothing, such as the hu clothing of the Warring States and the yuanlingpao (圆领袍) of the Tang Dynasty [15]. Therefore, the history of China reveals that the Han identity is constantly fluid and it embraces many other nations. Ancient China is a political and cultural community that integrated many ethnic minorities and had the Han as its core.

The construction of Han identity during the Republican period was a tense period of state legitimacy change, and people longed for a complete end to the feudal imperial system. Han Chinese experienced the darkness of the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty, especially the Manchus who humiliated and persecuted Han Chinese by shaving hair and changing costume [7]. Moreover, the last Qing Dynasty suffered from the bullying of the Western powers, thus leaving a double trauma to the Han Chinese. The new legal regime of the country did not choose the ethnic inequality policy of the Qing Dynasty and proposed a national republican picture of ethnic relations. The term Zhonghua minzu(中华民族)is used to define national identity in China during the Republic of China [13]. Its purpose is to unite all ethnic groups and build a harmonious national community. However, Hanfu was discarded as a product of feudal rituals during the Republican era. The "changing costume movement" of Xinhai revolutionary created some new Chinese style clothing, such as Tang costume, Zhongshan costume, and cheongsam, to represent the identity of the Chinese people [15]. This results in Han Chinese feeling the displacement of their national identity and the removal of their cultural roots and is the motivation for the modern Hanfu movement.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, ethnic policies have also been changing, which again shook the Han identity. In 1954, the CCP adopted regional ethnic autonomy and gave ethnic minorities a range of preferential treatment in education, politics, and economics [14]. These initiatives have gone some way to maintaining multi-ethnic relations in China. However, the policy distinguishes Han Chinese and ethnic minorities in geographic space, culture, and political affairs, so Han Chinese tend to feel unequally treated. Ironically, the Han nation has always been the leading national group in China. Regardless of which historical period, the core cohesion of the country mostly comes from the Han nationality. However, on the one hand, the CCP's policy makes the Han nation independent of other ethnic minorities.

On the other hand, it constantly conveys the concept of the Zhonghua minzu community to the Han Chinese, which is likely to lead to confusion in the Han Chinese identity. Also, the Han identity is often replaced by a broadly defined Chinese identity on the international stage [7]. It leads to a resistant identity resulting from the feeling that their Han identity is diluted.

Thus, modern Han Chinese have turned their attention to the Hanfu movement to reclaim their forgotten identity and promote Han culture and historical heritage in their traditional clothing.

4.   Hanfu Movement: The Roots of Nationalism and the Development

The systematic birth of the Hanfu movement in modern China stems from the website Hanwang (汉网）, which was established in 2003 and is rife with Han-centrism [14].

The establishment of Hanwang was related to the overall changing social environment in China at the time. In terms of popular culture, since 1990, Qing Dynasty Court dramas have dominated television screens in far greater numbers than dramas from Han-ruled dynasties [7]. On the political front, the CCP's ethnic policies have fueled the independence of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia [14]. The 2001 APEC meeting in Shanghai triggers the revival of Hanfu in the 21st century [6, 13, 14]. Since the Tang costume worn by Chinese leaders when meeting with foreign guests was not considered representative of Han costume, some Han Chinese criticized the Tang costumes for not

reflecting respect for traditional Chinese culture. The accumulation of these factors eventually ignited the sentiments of Han centrists and created Hanwang [4, 14].

The rise of the Hanfu movement has a significant connection to the Hanwang. Surrounded by globalization and Westernization in the 21st century, there has been a general awakening of national consciousness worldwide. In China, the originators of Hanwang expressed a strong desire to revive Han culture in community announcements [4]. Furthermore, China's rise in the modern era has led to a desire for a matching and unique national identity for the Chinese. Hanfu, due to its national and cultural attributes, is seen by Hanwang as a materialized symbol for awakening the roots of Chinese identity. Hanwang believes that the glorious history of the nation symbolized by the Hanfu precisely bridges the anxiety of modern Chinese identity [7].

However, extreme nationalistic rhetoric, such as a distaste for minority blood, supremely obsession with Han culture, and scorn for Japanese and Korean culture, has also floated during the growth of Hanwang [5]. In the end, Hanwang was shut down by the state in 2009 because it was considered a threat to national unity [14].

Zhang Xian (张跣) criticizes the nature of Hanfu as a fictitious totem that sickly reveres Han Chinese orthodoxy, severs national emotions, and distorts traditional culture, and that the Hanfu movement is a racial nationalist movement [4]. Carrico, in his 2010 field study, also points out that the Hanfu movement hints at ethnic tensions and political nationalist conspiracies in China [6]. However, their arguments are limited to the early Hanfu movement and lack convincing and informative value for the recent Hanfu movement.

The Hanfu movement has become increasingly prevalent since 2013 with social media and e-commerce [13], leading many young Chinese to fall in love with Hanfu and join the Hanfu movement. The Hanfu movement at this stage was no longer strongly nationalistic. Young people wear Hanfu more often because they like its beauty and traditional culture [1, 2]. On the issue of intra-ethnic tensions, Zhang is optimistic that the millennial generation of young Chinese has been taught from an early age to unite all nations [16]. Hence, the conclusion that today's Hanfu movement reflects narrow nationalism is somewhat arbitrary.

Thus, the Hanfu movement in contemporary China is a cultural revival movement intertwined with national identity, the right to interpret cultural symbols, online media, and grassroots nationalism. However, due to the roots of its birth, it is hard to eliminate the shadow of nationalism. In particular, the close connection between Hanfu Movement and the network community makes it difficult to escape the traction of the national network system internally and to avoid friction with the global, national culture externally. Therefore, it is essential to examine the association of today's Hanfu movement with online forms of nationalism.

5. The Ripple Effect of China's Cyber Nationalism on the Hanfu Movement

The maturation and development of nationalism have been accompanied by the influence of media. Anderson notes that modern nationalism in the twentieth century is a capitalist standardization of social language by the print media [10]. Smith suggests that the mass media's ability to communicate over long distances and across geographical boundaries allowed nationalism to spread globally [11]. Later, digital media, especially the Internet, makes media events possible. For example, digital communities enabled sporting events to create patriotic sentiments and generate popular ecstasy [17]. Thus, cyber nationalism, in this perspective, can be seen as a continuation of traditional nationalism in the Internet era and a product of nationalism's transformation under the wave of digital media.

Liu summarizes the factors that create cyber nationalism in China [8]. The popularity of the Internet has opened channels for people to express their views and emotions on social issues, which has directly contributed to the rapid formation of public opinion and provided technical support for the emergence of cyber nationalism. In addition, China's increased national economic power has

indirectly boosted Chinese people's national confidence, and China's increasingly frequent interactions with other countries have led to a corresponding increase in the frequency of friction. Chinese people's rethinking and re-conceptualization of their identity after exposure to other societies also result in the rise of nationalism.

Although the core and mainstream of cyber nationalism in the Chinese context is patriotism, it has the potential to evolve into narrow nationalism induced by spontaneous or external forces. The Internet has been seen as intensifying national exclusion and nationalist interventions and gathering massive amounts of hateful, more extreme, and fragmented nationalist opinions [18]. Since China entered the Web 2.0 era at the beginning of the 21st century, cyber nationalism with identity resistance as its central theme has been prevalent in online media. For example, the case of the Diba Expedition is an organized online public opinion counterattack by netizens in mainland China against Taiwan independents, full of the use of symbols, fierce mockery of the Taiwan public, and championing of mainland China [8]. It mirrors that the nation is an imagined political community and that the identities of the people on both sides are constructed by the corresponding parties resulting in nationalism.

Schneider points out that online media are used by the Chinese government as a mediator to construct the collective memory of the nation and maintain an imagined community [9]. In the case of mainland China, the Zhonghua minzu community is constructed in online communities by the government's selective presentation of Chinese history through vivid audiovisual images. The themes of the graphs and texts aim to promote political correctness and national sentiment and provide oriented commentary on certain national disputes and traumas to consolidate the Chinese people's sense of attachment to modern Chinese society [9].

Chinese cyber nationalism is xenophobic. The CCP's strict online regulation has somewhat exacerbated China's sense of nationalist identity superiority and difficulty interacting with people with diverse identities in international online communities. This has resulted in more intense xenophobia of Chinese online nationalism. In 2022, Chinese netizens engaged in a heated battle of opinion with Korean netizens on Instagram over the national heritage of Hanfu, with each side arguing that their national costumes were copied by the other. Some of the terms used, such as "plagiarize", "steal", and "shameful", are seen as expressing the radical nationalist sentiments of Chinese and Korean netizens [13]. Interestingly, Chinese netizens who use international social media such as Instagram are often more sensitive to identity-related topics and may feel obligated to speak out on behalf of Chinese netizens within the wall. Thus these groups are prone to extreme nationalistic arguments in cross-country communication. Chinese YouTuber Shiyin (十音) declares in her statement video that the similarity between Korean and Chinese costumes is due to the historical fact that ancient Korea was a vassal state of China's Ming Dynasty, so Korea was influenced by Chinese culture [13]. It can be inferred from this reason that Chinese people are deeply proud of their national culture and even have a clear sense of superiority. Although Shiyin speaks of historical facts, Chinese netizens ignore the autonomous derivation of Korean costumes from Chinese culture in later years, which implies that there is Korea's own cultural and national uniqueness.

The controversy has further festered on some Chinese social media, with multiple nationalistic reactions. For example, some well-known bloggers with the label Hanfu have encouraged Chinese netizens to watermark their Hanfu videos with the Chinese flag to prevent Korean netizens from stealing them. The concern is that Hanfu may be tainted with radical nationalism by similar actions that dissolve its purely cultural nature.

Overall, the clothing debate between China and Korea shows a strong correlation between cyber nationalism and the Hanfu movement. First, when Chinese national identity rises to the level of the Zhonghua minzu community, it temporarily sets aside internal conflicts and shifts uniformly to a project identity against the outside world. Second, cultural heritage is distinctly defined by national

boundaries; thus, both China and Korea feel that national identity is being plundered. Third, the network form of nationalism will likely lead to an ecstatic ritual of cultural symbolism. It risks eliminating the connotations of cultural representation while trapping the masses in an irrational fever of identity, ultimately exacerbating the echoes of narrow nationalism in the online community. Fourth, Chinese identity superiority should be promptly corrected, and the state has a responsibility to take a stand and persuade on this issue that involves the national sentiment and cultural heritage of countries.

6. Conclusion

This paper uses the Hanfu movement as a field to analyze the construction of Han identity and nationalism in modern China. The fluid Han national identity reflected by the Hanfu is related to China's changing boundaries, rules, and culture in different historical periods. The Han in the imperial period was a community that absorbed and embraced other ethnic groups; the Han in the Republican period was named the *Zhonghua minzu* to unite the political community due to the political legitimacy of the new regime; the modern Han was delineated by the ethnic policy of the government of the People's Republic of China with clear boundaries of national identity. However, the overlap between the identity of the *Zhonghua minzu* and the identity of the Han has to some extent, led to the difficulty of the Han people to be self-consistent.

Consequently, the Hanfu movement was born as a protest by Han centrists against the current blurred Chinese identity, aiming to restore the leadership of Han identity and use Hanfu to reclaim the power to unite the Zhonghua minzu community. Although the early Hanfu movement is characterized by radical nationalism, the increasingly routinized Hanfu movement has shed its Han-centrism in recent years. Because most of the Chinese public views the Hanfu as a representation of traditional aesthetics and culture, as well as a link to the imagined community of the nation, the Hanfu movement exhibits a more moderate nationalism. In addition, in an international context, the rise of the Hanfu movement is a projected response by China to globalization and Western discourse, providing a fitting national identity to China with an elevated international status. Therefore, this paper claims that the modern Hanfu movement implies a positive vision of Chinese nationalism, evoking a lost national spirit and identity, providing China with a possible pathway for cultural revival, inheritance, and innovation, and ultimately enhancing overall national cohesion.

Moreover, Chinese nationalism today tends to be presented mainly in online forms. However, the conflict between Chinese and Korean traditional costumes on social media shows the risk of polarizing nationalist narratives in the current online environment. Also, the Chinese government's online control has contributed to the xenophobic nature of Chinese nationalism, which has increased the sense of identity superiority of participants in the Hanfu movement. The state, therefore, needs to prevent the negative impact of online nationalism on the Hanfu movement.

The case of this paper does not elaborate on the influence of the media environment on nationalism and focuses more on Han identity and radical nationalism. Hence, future research could focus on how current online media affect nationalism positively or negatively, such as the extent to which media algorithms lead to ethnic hatred or understanding and how collective ecstatic behavior is shaped and presented online.

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