

# “CHINA-CHIC”: THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA’S “*GUOCHAO*” STYLE

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# 1. Introduction: “guochao” (国潮)?

In the last 8 years, new political discourse led by Xi Jinping, with slogans such as the “China Dream” and “national confidence”, has exerted a significant influence on consumption trends in the People’s Republic of China. Within this changing political landscape, “guochao” (guócháó 国潮, lit. translation: “National Tide”) has emerged. This trend is a reflection of the younger generation’s profound *and re-found* interest in China’s local culture, traditions, and domestic brands, reflecting a cultural shift towards domestic products and a celebration of the nation’s heritage.<sup>1</sup> In the past, foreign brands had dominated consumer markets and have had a leg-up on presumed quality. Now, the tables are turning, and domestic brands are starting to gain momentum.

The initial evidence of this trend emerged at Chinese sportswear brand Li-Ning’s fall collection during the 2018 New York Fashion Week. Before, Li-Ning used to be a local sports brand in the People’s Republic, trying to compete with the international giants like Nike and Adidas. During their New York Fashion Week debut, Li-Ning showed their “中国李宁” (zhōngguó lǐníng, “China Li-Ning”) collection, assertively aligning themselves with Chinese national identity and heritage, and this in an international setting. The collection was well-received and the brand has kept this popularity steady.<sup>2</sup> Li-Ning’s sudden surge in popularity since 2018 is often seen as the start of a wave of national pride and a renaissance of Chinese culture with the People’s Republic of China’s younger generation.<sup>3</sup> This came at a time when Chinese consumers were boycotting more and more western brands because of controversies ranging from luxury businesses’ marketing campaigns being deemed racist or culturally appropriating, to the boycott of global high-street brands like H&M for denouncing the use of Xinjiang cotton.<sup>4</sup> Combining these events with a strong political push for nationalism in the People’s Republic since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, consuming domestically has

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Galina Dudarenok, “Guochao Marketing: Past Its Prime Or Just Getting Started?,” *Jing Daily*, August 16, 2022, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/guochao-national-pride-marketing-li-ning>.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Hall, “Li Ning Spars With Nike and Adidas,” *Business Of Fashion*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/china/china-sportswear-giant-li-ning-spars-with-nike-and-adidas/>.

<sup>3</sup> Linzy Lam “Can ‘guochao’ give Chinese brands an edge globally?,” *Jing Daily*, May 31, 2024, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/can-guochao-give-chinese-brands-an-edge-globally>.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Holland, “Dior accused of ‘culturally appropriating’ centuries-old Chinese skirt,” *CNN*, July 28, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/dior-cultural-appropriation-accusations-chinese-skirt/index.html>.

“Nike, H&M face China fury over Xinjiang cotton ‘concerns’,” *BBC*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56519411>.

Megan C. Hills, “Three years after ad controversy, D&G is still struggling to win back China,” *CNN*, June 17, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/dolce-gabbana-karen-mok-china/index.html>.

become a dominant factor in the Chinese consumers market, with Li-Ning as an excellent example.<sup>5</sup>

As Feng Ye, general manager of Li Ning's e-commerce business, is quoted in this 2018 Business of Fashion article on Li-Ning's popularity in taking on Chinese culture in their fashion:

"With Chinese culture, foreign brands might try to express culture [too] but it gives a different feeling. If [Nike] are incorporating basketball culture, hip-hop or this street culture from America, this is their culture. I'm not saying that we can't study or try to understand or incorporate another country's culture, but Chinese culture belongs to China alone. For Chinese people, it will have the deepest feeling. (...) For Chinese people, the understanding of Chinese culture is our sense of justice and righteousness, spirit, tradition. Chinese people can see this story [in Li Ning] and immediately understand all of these things. Foreigners, they can read the meaning of the translation [in the show notes] but it's not the same."<sup>6</sup>

This trend of "consuming Chinese", both in buying local brands and promoting Chinese culture, has only grown throughout the past four years and shows no signs of slowing down. Especially on Chinese social media sites, like *Weibo* and *Xiaohongshu*, this enduring *guochao* wave is hotly debated.

Coming from a background in both Chinese language and area studies and fashion studies, Chinese subcultural fashion has interested me greatly and was the subject for a lot of my academic research (like my BA thesis in Sinology on the People's Republic of China's punk scene). Especially the interplay of identity, cultural production and politics. The *guochao* trend seemed to be well covered in western journalistic reports on marketing and business, much less in fashion and artistic reporting. Western academic research on the topic turned out to be almost neglectable. Tackling the phenomenon from a fashion studies angle, with a background in East-Asian studies and being able to understand primary sources in the native Mandarin language, I hope to bring an original and stimulating academic account of *guochao*.

In the coming pages, I will try to capture the popularity of *guochao* in fashion and how it relates to current Chinese politics and national identity. Because of the vastness of the *guochao* phenomenon, and its online primary source material, this paper will zoom in on a specific fashion trend, called "New-Chinese style" (xīn zhōngshì 新中式) which reimagines traditional Chinese culture by mixing it with popular daily fashion.

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<sup>5</sup> "Li Ning in China: leveraging national confidence to win young Chinese consumers", *Daxue Consulting*, February 24, 2023, accessed August 4, 2024, <https://daxueconsulting.com/li-ning-case-study/>.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, "Li Ning Spars With Nike and Adidas".

How does the current Chinese *guochao* phenomenon, and more specifically the “New-Chinese style” trend, reflect the Chinese People’s Republic’s political history and how is the interplay between history, politics, and fashion revealed through its appearance on social media, the fashion subculture, and its international dissemination by the PRC?

Chapter 1 begins by addressing my transcription choices and the specific terminologies used in this paper. It then moves on to discuss the methodology and provide a literature review for the research.

Chapter 2 details the research process on *guochao* on the social media platform *Xiaohongshu*, discussing the site’s interface, my personal experiences navigating it, and the approach I employed to select and analyze posts.

Chapter 3 focuses on defining New-Chinese Style, based on four recurring themes identified in the primary sources. Section 3.1 examines the fusion of global fashion with traditional Chinese dress in New-Chinese style. Section 3.2 discusses the trend-oriented nature of New-Chinese Style compared to the subcultural essence of an other similar *guochao* phenomenon, *Hanfu*. Section 3.3 explores the political undertones behind the sophisticated appearance of New-Chinese Style. Finally, Section 3.4 analyzes how the backgrounds in New-Chinese outfit photos enhance the “Chinese-ness” of the clothing.

Chapter 4 delves into the international political dimensions of *guochao*, situating it within the broader context of “soft power” in geopolitics. Section 4.1 introduces the political background of soft power in the PRC. Section 4.2 investigates how the PRC currently approaches international soft power, and how *guochao* and New-Chinese fashion could contribute to the PRC’s pursuit of soft power, drawing comparisons with other countries’ soft power “successes”. Lastly, Section 4.3 discusses the absence of an official “national dress” in the PRC as a potential gap in its soft power strategy and suggests how New-Chinese fashion might address this issue.

## 1.1. Terminology and transcriptions

This paper uses several terms related to clothing that require clarification. Additionally, I will explain my approach to the use Chinese characters and their transcription in the context of this research.

### **Dress – fashion – costume - style**

Dress is defined by anthropologist Joanne B. Eicher as “body modifications and body supplements”.<sup>7</sup> It starts with the body, and thus includes anything external added to the body, including for example pants, tattoos, make-up and hairclips. With “fashion”, dress gets a social and a temporal quality. Fashion is a social process, and is in flux with time, according to fashion studies scholar Susan B. Kaiser’s definition. “Fashion” also spans “food and furniture preferences, popular culture, language, technology, science, or any other dimensions of culture or change”.<sup>8</sup> This paper will use both dress and fashion where the right term is appropriate.

Costume, as a binary opposition to fashion, is perennial or “fixed”. While fashion fluctuates over time, costume is dress that stays the same. In this way, historical dress or traditional dress are often called historical or traditional costume.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, the terms “ethnic dress” or “national dress” will be used to refer to clothing traditionally associated with a specific ethnic group (e.g. the Han) or nation (e.g. the PRC). These terms are chosen to provide a more general reference while avoiding the implication of fixedness or the non-evolution of Chinese traditional dress, a notion often suggested in the past by dress historians, sinologists or historians of China.<sup>10</sup>

To address the phenomenon of people dressing in a similar way in a certain online space, I chose the word “style” for this research, as it is the closest translation of the Chinese character 式 (shi), from the Chinese word 新中式 (New-Chinese style). Fashion theorist Carol Tulloch uses the term “style” as “agency – in the construction of self through assemblage of

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<sup>7</sup> Joanne B. Eicher, “Introduction to global perspectives,” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Volume 10. Global Perspectives*, ed. Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg, 2010): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012): 7.

<sup>9</sup> Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Steele and John. S. Major, *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1-3.

garments, accessories, and beauty regimes that may, or may not, be ‘in fashion’ at the time of use”.<sup>11</sup>

All of these terms do overlap, but their differences are important to distinguish within the context of this paper.

### **Chinese terminology, characters and transcriptions**

From here on, People’s Republic of China and Chinese Communist Party will hereafter be referred to with their official abbreviation, respectively as “PRC” and “CCP”. “China” (or “Chinese culture”) generally point to the area of mainland China, what is now called the PRC, and not the Republic of China (or Taiwan) nor the region of Hongkong or of Macau .

Different terms are used in China to denote national pride (pertaining to cultural products and consumption). The character guó 国, generally meaning “country”, is often used as shorthand for “the nation-state”, meaning the PRC. This is why guó fēng 国风 (literally “country-wind”) is used to denote “national style” or “Chinese style” at the same time. Other words used for national styles are zhōngshì 中式 (“Chinese style”) or guócháo 国朝 (“national wave”), this last one being the most popular within (international) media.

Political slogans will be used in their most popular translation, even when these sentences don’t seem as fluent in English, like “China Dream” (zhōngguó mèng 中国梦), “cultural confidence” (wénhuà zìxìn 文化自信) and “Reform and Opening Up”(gǎigé kāifàng 改革开放).

Transcriptions of Chinese characters are done according to the international standards set for Chinese language bibliography style guides, also followed by University of Ghent’s Chinese Language and Culture department.

The Chicago Manual of Style citation quick guide states that “Citations of content shared through social media can usually be limited to the text (as in the first example below). A note may be added if a more formal citation is needed. In rare cases, a bibliography entry may also be appropriate.”<sup>12</sup> The transcription of Chinese user names making the approach to citing primary sources even harder, I decided to always add a footnote with the correct

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<sup>11</sup> Carol Tulloch, “Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-Black,” *Fashion Theory* 14, No. 2 (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 274.

<sup>12</sup> “Notes and Bibliography: Sample Citations,” Chicago Manual of Style, accessed August 10, 2024, [https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-social](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-social).

references, and to add a separate alphabetically listed bibliography/source list of Chinese social media posts (see chapter 7). Chapter 8 concludes with a complete image list.

For practical reasons, often recurring words whose original Chinese phrases are often used in western media, such as “*guochao*”, “*qipao*” and “*hanfu*”, among others, will only have their full pinyin translation and Chinese characters used at their first mention in this paper. Afterwards, these will not be repeated, but the Chinese loanword without pinyin transcription symbols will be used (in italics).

## 1.2. Methodology

This research combines theories from the fields of fashion and art history, cultural anthropology and political science. I will draw from digital ethnography to conduct my research into the online expressions of *guochao*, using theories from both subcultural studies and fashion studies to analyze my research data. Theories from political science, East-Asian area studies and post-colonial studies will frame the interpretation of my research results in the latter part of this paper.

### Primary sources

Primary sources for this paper were fully gathered online: because of the geographical distance and contemporary and digital nature of the topic, I conducted no local fieldwork nor did I visit any archives.

Initially, I selected two major Chinese social media and networking sites, *Weibo* (xīn làng wēibó, 新浪微博) and Little Red Book (xiǎohóngshū, 小红书, hereafter referred to as *Xiaohongshu*), to conduct online research. The selection was based on the sites' popularity and accessible interfaces. The use of these sites are also based on the use of keywords and hashtags, making it easier to locate "viral" articles or posts, in contrast for example to WeChat, which uses different channels and chat groups.

I quickly dropped *Weibo* research as a primary source, because the source material on *Xiaohongshu* was very abundant and I could keep my focus on one type of interface and online community, rather than having to compare multiple "New-Chinese style" communities, which would be outside the scope of this research. *Xiaohongshu* was also much more visual: while its interface is fully focused on images, *Weibo* is focused on both image and long-form text. For visual analysis, a more image-based type of interface could be more interesting and efficient. *Xiaohongshu* also seemed to work better when searching for more specific search terms and hashtags. This was helpful when doing research on New-Chinese style: when you search "新中式" ("New-Chinese style"), the app shows all top posts made that feature this keyword in any way. It also suggests other popular characters associated with your search term. *Xiaohongshu*'s AI-powered algorithm is made so that your feed shows what is interesting to you as a user, not mainly sticking to accounts you already follow (like Instagram), and prioritizing popular content.<sup>13</sup> This way, very popular posts keep circulating, even if they are not recent. This gives you a clear and general overview of what is popular under your search

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<sup>13</sup> Pearl Zhu, "How does Xiaohongshu work and why is it so popular?," *China-Britain Business Focus*, 2022, <https://focus.cbbc.org/how-does-xiaohongshu-work/amp/>.

term, rather than just showing what is currently happening under the tag, regardless of its traction.

On top of that, *Xiaohongshu* is by far the most popular and “hip” social media platform among young Chinese users: *Weibo* is seen as more established, and *Weixin* (Wēixìn, 微信, hereafter referred to as “WeChat”) is just extremely widely used. In contrast to this, *Xiaohongshu* is relatively new and mostly used by a younger audience (“digital natives”). Since its founding in 2013, it has grown to a 200 million user base, mostly consisting of young women under 30 in the PRC’s high income cities (“tier 1” cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou).<sup>14</sup> *Xiaohongshu* is also where things are “happening”: it could be considered as the most “fashionable” Chinese social media app, the most “sophisticated” (jīngzhì 精致).<sup>15</sup> It is often coined “the Instagram of China”: extremely popular but very focused on a young demographic (although not fully comparable, as *Xiaohongshu* also combines a “tips and tricks” and e-commerce element into its “showing what I love”, a bit like the site Pinterest).<sup>16</sup> Instagram’s content under the #guochao tag was so small, that research on Instagram was neglectable.

Other primary sources were western online media and Chinese state media. The “western” sites are often small websites reporting in English on subculture and fashion, with articles written by freelance journalists or fashion and culture critics. These are mainly focused on the broader Chinese region, and are not funded or controlled by state institutions. The foremost example of websites like these is Jing Daily.<sup>17</sup> Articles written by big western media-outlets were also consulted, like Business of Fashion, Foreign Policy, The New York Times and CNN.<sup>18</sup>

Chinese online state media and communication was consulted often, with Xinhua and China Daily as my main sources.<sup>19</sup> Other media sites used are not explicitly state owned, but the CCP tightly controls any media output in the PRC and the Great Firewall, the PRC’s internet

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<sup>14</sup> @青瓜传媒, “Xiao hong yonghu yunying celüe fenxi baogao 小红用户运营策略分析报告(Xiaohong user operation strategy analysis report),” Baidu article, April 21, 2021, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1697632299789003041&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

<sup>15</sup> Tanya Van Gastel, “Decoding Xiaohongshu’s success: From slang leader to product reviewer,” *Jing Daily*, January 5, 2024, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/decoding-xiaohongshu-s-success-from-slang-leader-to-product-reviewer>.

<sup>16</sup> Van Gastel, “Decoding Xiaohongshu’s success.”  
Zhu, “How does Xiaohongshu work and why is it so popular?”

<sup>17</sup> Jing Daily, <https://jingdaily.com/>

<sup>18</sup> Business of Fashion, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/>  
CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/>

Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>  
The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Xinhua, <https://english.news.cn/>  
China Daily, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>



limitation on the worldwide web, filters out media that does not comply with state regulations and political views. So we could say that all China-based media sources used comply with CCP policy, like any social media posts or posts on websites like for example Vogue China, or Jing Daily's WeChat channels.

Here I should mention that some websites were inaccessible for me due to my IP-address being blocked in China, like older CCP party website and China Daily articles. *Xiaohongshu* and *Weibo* were very difficult to log onto (see chapter 2). The general international website of the Confucius Institute was blocked when using my University of Ghent VPN, I had to log in with my VPN turned off to get access to the website.

## Secondary sources

Secondary literature was gathered on online search engines and in public and academic libraries. I mainly used Google Scholar, JSTOR and Bloomsbury Fashion Central for online sources. I consulted libraries in multiple cities in Belgium, like the University of Ghent library, the MoMu library in Antwerp and Muntpunt public library in Brussels.

I also consulted the search engine CNKI for Chinese academic papers, although not much useful material was pulled from CNKI, as the access to foreign visitors is heavily restricted and regulated for my Belgian IP address (even with extra University of Ghent access), the Chinese academic literature on *guócháó* is limited, and accessible sources often turned out to be of lesser academic quality.<sup>20</sup> My Chinese reading comprehension also hindered going into full Chinese academic texts and full, correct translation would take up too much of the limited time.

For shorter sentences, I personally translated them based on my knowledge of Mandarin. Yet for longer social media translations I used online dictionary MDBG, translation website Google Translate, AI-tool ChatGPT and translation add-ons like “Zhongwen” for Chrome.<sup>21</sup> Texts longer than two sentences were always sent through a translation app and afterwards personally checked for vocabulary and grammar mistakes. I translated most terms used and added their original character and pinyin transcription, as we will be talking often about specific hashtags and online slangs. For some longer translations, the original characters were not included for economic reasons, but links to their original texts will always be given in the notes at the bottom of the page.

Lastly, I also consulted Dr. Mieke Matthyssen, who teaches Modern Chinese to BA students at the University of Ghent and focuses her research on social and cultural change in

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<sup>20</sup> CNKI/CAJ for overseas visitors, <https://oversea.cnki.net/index/>

<sup>21</sup> MDBG, <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary>

contemporary China and cross-cultural communication with focus on China. She helped me find online repositories, language tools and gave me an insight on the current state of affairs in mainland China, as she visits the PRC frequently.

### **Digital ethnography**

As the PRC counts for an enormous population and land mass, and a very digitalized and online society, the choice for online field work was quickly made. This was an accessible way to get a general overview of how KOL's (key opinion leaders), young urban professionals and government channels interact with *guochao*. Additional in-person fieldwork would have been a valuable asset, but travel to the PRC for this Master's thesis was not possible, unfortunately.

Instead, I turned to "digital" or "virtual ethnography": field work and ethnography are adjusted to the digital sphere, to research how peoples and cultures are shaped, come together and present themselves online. In digital ethnography, we move away from traditional cultural anthropological tools like in-person interviews, observation and field research, and adjust these in favor of online image and discourse analysis. For this, the guidebook "*Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*" was essential for my first dive into online cultural anthropological research.<sup>22</sup>

In line with the methodologies of virtual ethnography and participant-observation in cultural anthropology, my personal experience on Chinese websites will be included as source material for the research.

I used the guidebook "Digital Research Methods in Fashion and Textile Studies" by Amanda Sikarskie for digital research focusing on fashion. The chapters on citing social posts, fashion blogger poses and critical reading of social media texts were of great help in analyzing the social media posts made by *guochao* bloggers.<sup>23</sup> Sikarskie bases her research on a "maximalist" methodology: mixing different research methods that were historically kept separate. My research on *guochao* is inherently interdisciplinary, leading to an evident mix of methods from the fields of fashion history, cultural anthropology, area studies and political science. I will for example employ cultural anthropological methodologies like virtual ethnography to gather primary sources, media studies and fashion studies to analyze these primary sources, and draw concepts from political theories such as soft power, orientalism and nationalist identity to build my arguments. I will thus slightly mix qualitative and quantitative research methods, for example when looking at how often certain data is featured on social

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<sup>22</sup> Larissa Hjorth, et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Amanda Sikarskie, *Digital Research Methods in Fashion and Textile Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

sites, but the research will still be rooted in qualitative research methodology, departing from Sikarskie's advocacy for extremely integrated and patch-worked research methodologies.

The paper “#parisienne: Social Media Stratification in Visions of Parisian Women” by fashion sociologist Agnès Rocamora was used as a basic exemplary work on how one could conduct online research on fashion.<sup>24</sup> Her focus on language, hashtag use and portrayal of national identity in online photography was also used when conducting this research. Of course, Rocamora's research heavily relied on the interface of Instagram and the use of uncontrolled internet access. For our case, we will have to adjust her approach to the interfaces of other social media sites more popular in the PRC (Instagram use is quite small in China) and taking into account internet censorship.

### Theoretical framework

As briefly mentioned above, this research is situated in between the academic fields of fashion studies, political studies and area studies. Different theories from these fields form the base on which I will build my argument.

The seminal work *Imagined Communities* by anthropologist and political studies scholar Benedict Anderson firmly supports my approach to area studies, framing the PRC's approach to Chinese nationalism as the creation of an “imagined community” of a shared imagined and exclusionary identity.<sup>25</sup>

Theories on “soft power” explain how nation states use fashion and subculture to promote the popularity of their nation state and national identity with domestic and global citizens. As mentioned above, political scientist Joseph S. Nye, who first coined the term, has written broadly on the concept.<sup>26</sup> I will use these to look at how the PRC tries to appeal to overseas audiences and compare it to other East-Asian nation-states' soft power “successes”.

A postcolonial approach also informed my analysis of *guochao's* international dissemination. I try to be wary of concepts that are often framed in Eurocentric ways, like “fashion” (fashion as being centered on the teleological “evolution” of western dress and its surrounding factors, often disregarding other non-western dress traditions as less valuable or

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<sup>24</sup> Agnès Rocamora, “#Parisienne: Social Media Stratification in Visions of Parisian Women,” in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, edited by Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 164–181.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

Joseph S. Nye Jr., “China's Soft Power Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 80 (Autumn 1990): 153-171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>.

less evolved), or “modernity” (also understood as a teleological concept, with the West as its touchstone, and seen as an inherently western-European concept). By concentrating on a non-western culture and art historical phenomenon in this art history thesis, I try to reroute the assumption that art history has to deal with the western European traditions of fine arts. By focusing on the political and historical contexts of *guochao*, I try to imbed it in a critical, political world view, which is often lacking in traditional art historical research. For globalization and de-colonizing of fashion studies, the arguments presented in *Rethinking Fashion Globalization* by Sarah Cheang, Erica De Greef and Takagi Yoko were eye-opening.<sup>27</sup>

I try to approach the subject in a balanced way, taking into account both Chinese-language and English or Dutch language primary sources, trying to avoid as much as possible the historical tradition of area studies where the western opinion is projected onto the non-western body or culture. This is why I will be adding the Chinese characters, or using the Chinese pinyin transcription, when describing something, as not to lose the essence of the Chinese concept when it cannot be fully translated into English. Experiences from my time studying with Chinese scholars at the University of Ghent, and seminal works like *Orientalism* by literature scientist Edward Said and *Transorientalism In Art, Fashion, and Film: Inventions of Identity* by fashion theorist Adam Geczy, have formed my approach to this research, and to my academic work in general.<sup>28</sup>

As a final note, this paper does take quite a critical approach to the CCP’s policies. I consulted critical reports of the PRC’s policies on traditional culture, often based on western journalistic accounts and political critics, to build my argument. I applied this critical reading to Chinese state accounts and speeches by political figures in the PRC. There are undoubtedly scholars and reporters that would frame the PRC’s “China Dream”, traditional cultural renaissance, and Xi Jinping’s recent policies on popular culture, as less calculated and view them more celebratory.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sarah Cheang, Erica De Greef and Yōko Takagi, eds., *Rethinking Fashion Globalization* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Adam Geczy, *Transorientalism In Art, Fashion, and Film: Inventions of Identity*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.

Edward Wadie Said, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> E. g. “Xinhua Insight: Chinese dream is a dream for all,” *Xinhua*, December 3, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/03/c\\_135878166.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/03/c_135878166.htm).

### 1.3. Literature Review

For the scope of this master thesis, I have decided to only use English-language secondary sources. In light of the abovementioned issues, like lack of accessibility of secondary Chinese language sources and lack of adequate comprehension of Chinese to read academically, I have decided to fully not take into account Chinese-language academic work written on the subject. This is a recognized blind spot in this research, which has to be looked upon in future further research.

#### ***Guócháó* and (Chinese) online subcultures or communities**

As discussed in our Methodology section of this paper, most sources (both in Chinese and English) on *guochao* and New-Chinese style will be non-academic primary sources, in the form of posts taken from social media or from Chinese and western media outlets.

New-Chinese fashion has not been extensively researched in western academia. The styles have only been looked at in western journalistic reports (see Methodology). Articles from *Jing Daily* have been important at the start of this research, like Julienna Law's report on *guochao* and New-Chinese fashion from September 2022, "Neo-Chinese Fashion Shows That Guochao Is Here To Stay".<sup>30</sup> Sau Fong Chan's account of the history of Chinese dress in *Chinese Dress in Detail* does mention New-Chinese style in her introductory chapter on "Hanfu and Gen-Z".<sup>31</sup> Although it is a small mention, she addresses the trend in relation to the youngest Chinese generation's newfound cultural pride, and mentions its scope for experimentation and self-expression.

*Guochao* as a general concept though, has been discussed widely in official news outlets and journalistic reports, but not in western academic research. The political backdrop for the rise of "national pride" and the economical background for the rise of a strong Chinese consumer society have been extensively researched, but not the *guócháó* consumerist and marketing phenomenon. While Peter Hays Gries and James Townsend both analyze Chinese (political) history and the national "renaissance" in the Xi Jinping era as a source for national pride, authors like Elisabeth Croll look at the growth of the Chinese consumer market in the last four decades, *guochao* (as a recent consumerist result of these phenomena) is barely

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<sup>30</sup> Julienna Law, "Neo-Chinese Fashion Shows That Guochao Is Here To Stay," *Jing Daily*, September 12, 2022, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/neo-china-style-guochao-genz>.

<sup>31</sup> Sau Fong Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2023), 20.

academically studied in western literature.<sup>32 33</sup> Only Ashok Sethi addresses the *guochao* effect in his more recent work *Chinese Consumers: Exploring the World's Largest Demographic*, yet stays quite on the surface of this now major factor of the current Chinese local consumer market.<sup>34</sup>

Another issue is that the focus often lies, when reported, on the fields of economics, marketing and international business politics rather than specifically on aesthetics, beauty and fashion. Reports in *TIME Magazine*, *Forbes*, *Xinhua*, *China Daily* and others all discuss the impact of *guochao* on various fields like food consumerism, luxury brand marketing, media consumerist trends and even interior design.<sup>35</sup> Focus on *guochao* inspired styles, subcultures and fashion aesthetics though, are much more limited, with *Jing Daily* and *The South China Morning Post* publishing most reports of this nature, like Linzy Lam's May 2024 account of *guochao* for *Jing Daily*, titled "Can 'guochao' give Chinese brands an edge globally?".<sup>36</sup>

Séagh Kehoe in his introduction to the "Fashion, Beauty and Nation" chapter of *Cultural China 2020* is one of the only academic English written texts that touches on the broader *guochao* phenomenon in relation to fashion.<sup>37</sup> This report appears to be very limited though, both in size and in-depth analysis of the appearance, community characteristics, and political and historical context of the phenomenon.

The *Hanfu* (hànfú 汉服) movement, where people dress in ethnic Han-Chinese traditional dress (see section 3.2.), has received much more scholarly attention than any other *guochao* trend, as it is by far the most popular.

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<sup>32</sup> James Townsend, "Chinese Nationalism," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (1992): 97-130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2950028>.

Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *China's New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Ashok Sethi. *Chinese Consumers: Exploring the World's Largest Demographic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), DOI: [10.1007/978-981-10-8992-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8992-3).

<sup>35</sup> China Daily, "'Guochao' products favored by Chinese youth," *China Daily*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/05/WS6184e924a310cdd39bc739df.html>.

Pamela N. Danziger, "'Guochao' Trend May Disrupt Western Luxury Brands' Dominance In China," *Forbes*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2023/01/25/guochao-trend-may-disrupt-western-luxury-brands-dominance-in-china/>.

Yaling Jiang, "China Is Munching Toward a Fast Food Revolution," *TIME Magazine*, February 14, 2024, <https://time.com/6695341/china-fast-food-revolution-tastien/>.

Xinhua, "China Brand Day 2024 events underway in Shanghai," *Xinhua*, May 10, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240510/95bff56a4f8648c08368e5644e5dd722/c.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Linzy Lam, "Can 'guochao' give Chinese brands an edge globally?," *Jing Daily*, May 31, 2024, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/can-guochao-give-chinese-brands-an-edge-globally>.

<sup>37</sup> Séagh Kehoe, "Fashion, Beauty, and Nation," in *Cultural China 2020: The Contemporary China Centre Review*, eds. Séagh Kehoe and Gerda Wielander (London: University of Westminster Press, 2020): 5-9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv26qjj2.4>.

The link between *Hanfu* and Chinese identity and national Chinese dress is made often in literature, with scholars like James Leibold in “More than a category: Han supremacism on the Chinese internet” and Kevin Carrico in *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* bringing the *Hanfu* movement in direct linkage with the Han-Chinese ethnic movement.<sup>38</sup> These authors look at how contemporary China often looks back to its Han-dynasty era and uses the Han ethnic group’s traits and cultural products as self-identification for the nation. Leibold’s text is of special interest to our research as it focuses heavily on how “Han supremacy” is configured in online communities, with the internet as a space for identity-building. The focus on digital spaces and (national) identity is a shared research angle with this research into online *guochao* communities, fashion and identity building. Xinyi Wang, François Colbert and Renauld Legoux give a more descriptive account of *Hanfu*’s rise, looks and habits, in their article “From Niche Interest to Fashion Trend: Hanfu Clothing as a Rising Industry in China,” as well as Chris Buckley and Katrina Northrop’s report for Financial Review in November 2018.<sup>39</sup>

Agnès Rocamora’s aforementioned analysis of the “#parisienne” is also a good example of research that specifically looks at fashion and a certain aesthetics’ appearance on social media, and how fashion and identity is shaped in the online space.<sup>40</sup> She looks at which words are used in captions and hashtags, who is posting and how they are presenting themselves in photographs, what decors are used in photographs, etc. This way, Rocamora looks at who embodies the “Parisian look” and who isn’t included, what aspects of “Parisian-ness” are taken up and which are ignored, aspects that are also relevant to analysis of *guochao* posts and its understanding of “Chinese-ness” in fashion.

## National identity and fashion

Extended theory on the link between identity, the state, nationalism and cultural products, like dress and fashion, is abundant. For this research, *Imagined Communities* from 1983 by

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<sup>38</sup> Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

James Leibold, “More than a category: Han supremacism on the Chinese internet,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 203 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 539–559, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27917795>.

<sup>39</sup> Chris Buckley and Katrina Northrop, “China’s ‘Hanfu’ movement is making it hip to be old-fashioned. Here’s why,” *Financial Review*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/fashion-and-style/why-its-hip-to-be-old-fashioned-in-china-20181129-h18hql>.

Colbert, François, Renauld Legoux and Xinyi Wang, “From Niche Interest to Fashion Trend: Hanfu Clothing as a Rising Industry in China,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 23, No. 1 (Montréal: HEC - Montréal - Chair of Arts Management, 2020): 79–89, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/niche-interest-fashion-trend-hanfu-clothing-as/docview/2469845595/se-2>.

<sup>40</sup> Agnès Rocamora, “#parisienne: Social Media Stratification in Visions of Parisian Women,” in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 164–181.



anthropologist and scholar of politics Benedict Anderson was foundational.<sup>41</sup> In this work, the nation is not presented as a fixed, objective entity but rather one that is “imagined”, shaped by its leading figures and its subjects and delineated by an equally imagined accompanying “national identity”. In Anderson’s theory, the nation is formed through the people’s and government’s communal mental conceptions of it.

“What Should Chinese Women Wear?: A National Problem” by Chinese history scholar Antonia Finnane specifically looks at the position of the woman and her dress within nation-building of the PRC throughout history.<sup>42</sup> In this seminal text Finnane questions why the PRC seems to have a vacuum for national dress, and especially why this seems to be a gendered problem. While answering this, devoting a lot of attention to the history of the *qipao* and contrasting its downfall with the steady popularity of the Zhongshan suit (see section 4.3.), this account was very valuable for our research into what fashion and nationalism means in the specific context of the PRC.

## Fashion in the PRC

There exists a large body of literature concerning general historic overviews of Chinese dress, often discussing the evolution of Chinese upper class dress per dynasty, ending just after the Communist Revolution (1949 C.E.) or the Reform and Opening Up era (1980s),<sup>43</sup> or in contemporary times. These contemporary accounts are often short and not very detailed. These writings serve as a background against which this paper builds further on, yet *China Chic: East Meets West* written by Valerie Steele and John S. Major was most of use for this research.<sup>44</sup> It gives a concise overview of Chinese fashion history from the Warring States Period up until contemporary times, without falling back into the debatable historical narrative of an “unchanging Chinese fashion” that a lot of earlier western historians proposed.<sup>45</sup> What *China Chic* does quite well, is bridging China and the West within fashion history, without solely looking at European forces in Chinese fashion, but acknowledging and analyzing Chinese

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<sup>41</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>42</sup> Antonia Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?: A National Problem,” *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (SAGE Publications, Inc., 1996), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189339>.

<sup>43</sup> “Reform and Opening Up” (Gǎigé kāifàng 改革开放) is a historical (Chinese) term denoting multiple political, economical and societal changes in the PRC throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, resulting from political decisions initiated in 1978 by the CCP, in favor of economical reforms (going from a planned economy to a free-market economy) and opening up of the physical and cultural borders of the PRC to the West. (Source: Valery Garrett, *Chinese Dress: from the Qing Dynasty to the Present Day* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2019), 229-230.)

<sup>44</sup> Steele and Major, *China Chic: East Meets West*.

<sup>45</sup> Historically, the idea has long been that Chinese fashion has not changed from the origins of traditional culture during the Warring States up to the period of “modernity”, starting with the invasion of Western forces into Chinese Qing territory until the fall of the Qing empire. Recently, that claim has strongly been criticized and countered by interdisciplinary and post-colonial fashion historians and sinologists, beginning with Steele and Major, Adam Geczy and Song Fau Chan.



influence in European fashion history with equal value. The book does still look at Chinese history through a Eurocentric lens, using western fashion history and its timeline as benchmark for non-western clothing and fashion history. The academic discipline of fashion history though, and art history in general, is a very Eurocentric field and the western fashion system is now a global phenomenon, hence why Steele and Major's approach does seem like a reasonable path to be chosen considering its academic context.

Other valuable sources of Chinese dress history are *Chinese Dress in Detail* by Sau Fong Chan, Valery Garrett's *Chinese Dress: from the Qing Dynasty to the Present Day*, John E. Vollmer's edited volume *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia* and Meimei Rado's academic work on Qing dynasty fashion and Chinese lady's fan.<sup>46</sup>

On the state of the Chinese fashion industry, the question is often posed whether or not fashion can flourish in the Chinese context. While Antonia Finnane looks to the authoritarian one-party state context of the PRC in relation to its contemporary fashion landscape in "Between Beijing and Shanghai: Fashion in the Party State", other scholars like Anja Cronberg, in her text "There will never be a Chinese fashion': Staking a Claim for Shanghai as a Fashion City," analyze Chinese fashion in light of the East-West divide in the global fashion system, with Shanghai analyzed as possible "fashion capital".<sup>47</sup>

Feng Jie analyzes contemporary Chinese fashion in *Fashion in Altermodern China*, coining the term "altermodern", encourages us to view China in terms of its rapid modernization and to question the notions of a western or Eurocentric modernity, postmodernity and evolution, giving a critical and alternative view of contemporary China and the "fashion system".<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sau Fong Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*.

Valery Garrett, *Chinese Dress: from the Qing Dynasty to the Present Day* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2019).

<sup>47</sup> Anja Aronowsky Cronberg, "'There will never be a Chinese fashion': Staking a Claim for Shanghai as a Fashion City," in *Styling Shanghai*, eds. Christopher Breward and Juliette MacDonald (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 287–308.

Antonia Finnane, "Between Beijing and Shanghai: Fashion in the Party State.," in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 116–139.

Meimei Rado, "The Lady's Fan: Fashion Accessories and Modern Femininity in Republican China," in *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia*, eds. Kyunghye Pyun and Aida Yuen Wong (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 193–227.

John E. Vollmer, ed. *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Feng Jie, *Fashion in Altermodern China* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

## International dissemination of Chinese fashion: soft power

Applying global politics to fashion, David Gilbert's article "Paris, New York, London, Milan: Paris and a World Order of Fashion Capitals" discusses how fashion seems to have a certain geography with a hierarchy of cities, often called "fashion capitals", with Paris as its center.<sup>49</sup>

The theory of "soft power" was of great use while looking at the international dissemination of Chinese *guochao* styles and its political significance. Joseph Nye, who coined the term for the first time in his seminal 1990 work *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, has in later years reiterated and refined his thoughts on soft power in different works and journalistic articles, dedicating specific articles to the PRC's soft power efforts, of which his 2012 Wall Street Journal article "China's Soft Power Deficit" was of great use for this research as it addresses the traditionalist turn of the PRC in the last two decades.<sup>50</sup>

Nye's theories have extensively been applied to the PRC, these accounts were fundamental to our research, in order to nuance the concept of "soft power" and see it in a specific Chinese context. Yingchung Sun applies soft power to the PRC in "Tradition, Cultural Modernization, and Soft Power" to look at China's national rejuvenation plans, its traditional revival and its position towards the international community. William A. Callahan in *Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the "China Dream"* argues that the PRC uses soft power towards its domestic population in a negative or inverted way, to legitimize its own government, policies and one party system.<sup>51</sup> Douglas McGray's 2009 article in Foreign Policy "Japan's Gross National Cool," focusing on Japan's global soft power success, was fundamental for this research in seeing culture, and more specifically popular culture, as soft power.<sup>52</sup> Gerry Groot positions Japan's soft power approach against the PRC in his text "Cool Japan Versus the China Threat: Does Japan's Popular Culture Success Mean More Soft

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<sup>49</sup> David Gilbert, "Paris, New York, London, Milan: Paris and a World Order of Fashion Capitals", in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 72-91.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

Joseph S. Nye Jr., "China's Soft Power Deficit," *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, No. 80 (Autumn 1990): 153-171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>.

<sup>51</sup> Yingchung Sun, "Tradition, Cultural Modernization, and Soft Power", in *China in the Xi Jinping Era*, eds. Steve Tsang and Honghua Men (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 232-235, DOI:[10.1007/978-3-319-29549-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29549-7_9).

William A. Callahan, "Identity and security in China: the negative soft power of the China Dream," *Politics* 35, No. 3-4 (London: Political Studies Association, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12088>.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/>.

Power?,” looking at the possible failure of Japan’s policies against China’s (perceived) hard power approach and economic-political success.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Gerry Groot, “Cool Japan *Versus* the China Threat: Does Japan’s Popular Culture Success Mean More Soft Power?,” in *Japanese Language and Soft Power in Asia*, ed. Kayoko Hashimoto (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

## 2. China-chic styles on Chinese social media sites: methodology and experience of online field research

### 2.1. *Guochao*'s general appearance on Chinese media sites with and its subtheme, "New-Chinese style"

*Guochao* fashion in general is a kind of consumerist attitude, a trend to buy more Chinese-owned and -produced, local fashion. It can also refer to consuming Chinese brand in other fields, like food, luxury products, contemporary art, interior design and music; often tied to promoting national pride (see section 3.3. for more).

However, *guócháó* is also concerned with what people actually look like: their fashion looking more "Chinese". These styles, or online subcultures, think about what it means to have "Chinese national pride" and how that is expressed through their clothing. This will be the focus of this paper.

If we look up the general search term "国潮穿搭" (*guócháó chuanda*, "*Guochao* outfit") or "国潮衣服" (*guócháó yīfu*, "*Guochao* clothing") on *Xiaohongshu* and *Weibo* International, search results seem to fall into four different categories.

In general, when looking at the umbrella term *guochao* fashion on social media sites, a lot of results will show specific shopping tips and brand marketing that follows the consumerist *guochao* trend. Especially on sites like Little Red Book, which are based on a kind of "tips and tricks" gathering social network principle, a lot of posts promote certain brands that are Chinese owned and produced, often when worn by Chinese celebrities. These might not have certain aesthetic characteristics related to Chinese culture, but they market themselves as *guochao* brands (fig 1 and 2). Supporting them would help the national economy and "Chinese national pride". These kind of posts make up the biggest bulk of content on the *guochao* tags, both on social media searches and in journalistic reporting, but would lead us too much into branding and luxury marketing rather than fashion studies.

A lot of search results show strict traditional Han-Chinese fashion, called *Hanfu*. This style, as discussed in our literature review (see above), has been extensively researched already within the framework of Chinese (inter)national politics and identity, subcultural studies and media studies. Its revival in the last 10 years has been a major part of the *guochao*

movement's aesthetic factors, promoting "Chinese cultural aesthetics" (fig 3). I will to discuss *Hanfu* briefly in section 3.2., as it bears similarities with our final research subject (New-Chinese style) and has grown from a similar political and cultural discourse in the last (two) decade(s) within the PRC (discussed in section 3.3).

I did look at another type of posts found within the broader *guochao* search results: the ones showing the trend/style which could be characterized as "New-Chinese style" (xīn zhòng shì chuāndā 新中式穿搭).

Under the *guochao* umbrella, other subcultures also came to the fore on *Xiaohongshu*: Chinese popular sporty streetstyle, Chinese "Lolita" style (xiǎo gèzi 小个子), Chinese "Y2K" style, "Cadre Style" (tīngjú fēng 厅局风), "Old Money Style" (lǎo qián fēng 老钱风), "Too Cool" style (tǔ kù 土酷) and, as mentioned above, *Hanfu*. This is only a selection of the hundreds of subcultures or styles on Chinese social media. For this research, I will focus on one style as a case study and go in-depth. Future further research into other styles and subcultures with a distinct local PRC-character, like "Cadre Style" or "Too Cool" style, would be incredibly valuable in understanding the PRC's local fashion, youth culture and contemporary socio-politics, but this was unfortunately outside of the scope for this thesis.

New-Chinese style deals with a distinct concept of "Chinese-ness" being celebrated in the *Xiaohongshu* posts, harking back to Chinese traditional culture and fusing it with modern global fashion, popular on a big scale. This interesting interplay of fashion, politics, identity, national history and social media use drew me to choosing New-Chinese style as my main focus, as well as the topic being very under researched, especially in academia. This way, I could circumvent the part of the *guochao* phenomenon that would lead me into the consumption and marketing side of fashion studies, a field I am less comfortable in, and venture more into politics and identity in fashion, area studies, and cultural anthropological (subcultural) research, where I feel more apt.

## 2.2. New-Chinese style on *Xiaohongshu*: approach to digital research

For New-Chinese fashion on *Xiaohongshu*, I first conducted a wide range search to scope out what content and tags were the most interesting, using keywords to find certain posts relating to *guochao*, including more general terms like 国潮 (guócháo, “national wave”), 中服 (zhōngfú, “Chinese fashion”), 文化自信 (wénhuà zìxìn, “cultural self-confidence”), 国风 (guófēng, “national wind” or traditional Chinese style)...

I eventually settled on mostly looking at the search results for “新中式穿搭” (Xīn zhōngshì chuāndā, New-Chinese style), later shortening this to “新中式”.

### 2.2.1. *Xiaohongshu* interface and use

It took me a while to get access to the *Xiaohongshu* platform. Firstly, it was a challenge to log onto the app: it required either a telephone number, with an area code of a country which a large Chinese-speaking community (like Indonesia, the United States, or Malaysia), and did not offer Belgium’s area code. Secondly, you had to have a WeChat app, through which you could verify your identity. *Xiaohongshu* posts can be viewed without logging on, but any further interactions are blocked by a “log in” popup. The app’s interface is fully in Chinese, so you have to be quite fluent to be able to access any content. This in general makes *Xiaohongshu* feel extremely inaccessible to anyone who is not very well acquainted with Chinese language or culture, and thus seems to shut down a lot of interest, interaction, influence and cross-pollination from outside the Chinese cultural sphere.

In *Xiaohongshu*, one can search based on the criteria “everything”, “most new”, and “most hot”. You can also look through “Users”, “Products” and “Tips”. More filters can be applied in the specific filtering system, like looking through captions. The default setting of *Xiaohongshu* lets you look through a tab called “Top”, but the app suggest related keywords to specify your searches.

For New-Chinese fashion, those include New-Chinese style sub-genres like 清冷国风 (qīnglěng guófēng, “serene traditional Chinese style”), 老钱风 (lǎoqiánfēng, “old money style”), qualities wanted from the clothing or content creator like 温柔 (wēnróu, “supple”), 微胖 (wēipàng, “slightly chubby”), 高级感 (gāojí gǎn, “sophisticated feeling”) or 酷飒 (kùsà, “cool vibe”) or a style/subculture attached to the people wearing it, like *xiaogezi* (xiǎo gèzi 小个子,

“petite person” or “small stature”), which could point both to a person with a small build or to an (online) clothing style that heavily relies on the impression of a “petite” figure and cute yet laid-back fashion. It also includes more generic search terms like “summertime”, “hair”, “pants”, “dress”, “outfit”/“ensemble”, “two piece” or “daily wear”. It occurred that while in the *Hanfu* search results, a lot of specific *Hanfu* clothing items were suggested as additional key terms, like “horse-face skirt” (mǎmiànrún, 马面裙), yet this was not the case on the New-Chinese style search terms.

*Xiaohongshu* does not show you the amount of search results, but likes and followers of the accounts give us an indication of New-Chinese fashion’s popularity on the platform. Most popular posts had between 5000 and 9000 likes and between 50-300 reactions, most of the posts in the “Top” category have between 2000-3000 likes. A lot of posts gather around 50-300 likes though, especially when filtering the search through the “newest” filter rather than “most popular” filters (most posts here only gather between 0 and 10 likes, with the newest posts often being 20-40 mins “old”). During the period of my field research (spring and summer of 2024) posts under the “New-Chinese fashion” tags date from 2024, some from 2022 and 2023, indicating that the style is still booming currently in mainland China.

In between posts, the app also shows you “related chatgroups”. Search results here were “New-Chinese fashion” (63 people), “Chatting about New-Chinese Fashion, Second Group” (165 people), “New-Chinese fashion exchange” (144 people). Another ten groups were available to join.

Speaking from my personal experience on *Xiaohongshu*, the content on the app was so abundant, that it was hard to navigate the site in the beginning, though very stimulating: I can see how this app is used by young Chinese people in the same way Pinterest is used in Belgium: to gather inspiration, to create a vision for yourself of what you like, and to see how others do things and learn from it. The app’s algorithm keeps track of what it considers to be interesting for you, so there is an abundance of interesting content every time you log on again. The algorithm caught on very quickly to what I was searching for: often viewed posts resurfaced easily, but new and similar, even more relevant content was also suggested.

### 2.2.2. Approach to selecting and analyzing sample posts

I mainly focused on posts made by smaller profiles or local content creators. I wanted to look at what people actually wear and how they present those clothes to their followers on social media, rather than brand’s social media accounts. This would lead me to select posts

that have an “OOTD” (*outfit of the day*) concept, often with larger explications of the outfit included in the caption. I would select both more stylized images by bigger fashion bloggers or content creators, as well as OOTD-posts by smaller accounts. These would give an indication of how these styles and trends are both “created” and “popularized” online, as well as how they are “lived” by users who don’t earn their living by making these fashion posts.

For this research, “inspiration” posts were also used: the original poster doesn’t feature in the photos themselves, but uses popular images taken from the internet to discuss opinions, ideas and fashion inspiration online. These posts were interesting because they often create a lot of discussion in comments or on online forums, offering a good outline of the different perspectives and discourses on the fashion styles and subcultures discussed. This mix of personal OOTD posts and fashion inspiration posts are the cornerstone of the *Xiaohongshu* app.

The choice of which posts to look at in-depth was based on 4 rules:

- 1) their popularity
- 2) any surprising features
- 3) distinct and recurrent sartorial choices
- 4) whether or not there was an indication of discussion in the caption and/or comments

The most popular posts were included, because they give us a good view of what content users are interested in, and what drives them to engage with the style. Posts that featured surprising elements, like the multiple posts showing New-Chinese style using Paris as a backdrop, were selected on a first-view basis. If they incited interest, I looked for recurring behavior or trends. Aesthetics were also significant: to characterize New-Chinese fashion, I looked at many different posts that feature the same aesthetic or sartorial choices, and selected a few posts as examples that feature a certain sartorial element, to analyze those more deeply (for example: the reoccurrence of modified *qipao* dresses). An indication of discussion was a decisive factor to select certain posts: when a post featured a lot of characters referring to the style or political discourse, I analyzed the post and its comments in depth to look at *how* the users *speak* about New-Chinese style: which words are used, and which ideas are shared. Examples of characters that signaled my attention were for example 新中式 (xīn zhōngshì, “New-Chinese style”), 国潮 (guócháo, “national wave”), 国风 (guó fēng, “national style”), 国家 (guójiā, “the nation”/the PRC), 西方 (xīfāng, “the West”), 东方 (dōngfāng, “the East”), 文化自信 (wénhuà zìxìn, “cultural confidence”), among others.

These four abovementioned rules were applied when selecting posts, but inevitably this research is still based on samples: the content was too inexhaustible. Based on sample posts,



I characterized New-Chinese style into a few arguments. Although there might be exceptions to my findings, I am convinced my research method allows me to draw correct conclusions, as I took a large sample base of posts, and cross-referenced them with secondary reports on the topic. Taking samples and specific cases, and through those retracing recurring behaviors, can already give a clear insight on what is happening on *Xiaohongshu* regarding *guochao* and New-Chinese style.

Selected from Rocamora's approach *#parisienne*, this was the information listed when analyzing each *Xiaohongshu* post: date, user (analysis of their account, their bio, their follower amount, general content of their posts), title of the post, captions, hashtags, comments and amount of interaction ("likes", "stars" and comments).<sup>54</sup>

When analyzing photos, these questions were posed:

1. What does the model look like physically?
2. What does their hair and make-up look like?
3. Where are they standing? What does the background, their pose or used props tell us?
4. What does the outfit look like (color, details, shape, structure)?
  - Analyze meaning of outfit details (contextualize item/detail stylistically and if relevant, source its historical origins)

Analyzing around 35-40 posts in depth, and generally skimming through the “新中式” (“New-Chinese style”) tag, I rounded up 4 overarching themes and their subthemes of the phenomenon, which will each be discussed in chapter 3. These posts were then subjected to the abovementioned questions. Throughout the building of my argument, they formed a guideline to discover trends in the posts and feeds but these questions are not literally mentioned in the final text.

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<sup>54</sup> Rocamora, “#Parisienne”.

### 3. “New-Chinese Fashion” on *Xiaohongshu*

For this research, about 30 posts engaging in some way with New-Chinese style were analyzed in depth. Recurring behaviors were noted throughout these posts. To concisely characterize New-Chinese fashion’s dissemination on *Xiaohongshu*, four bigger threads throughout these posts will be discussed below. First, we will look into what stylistically characterizes New-Chinese outfits: the picking-and-choosing of certain “Chinese elements” and imbedding them into a more global, western way of dressing. This poses the question of why these aspects are seen as a representative of a “new Chinese style”? Secondly, we will discuss the more fleeting character of New-Chinese style, compared to the *Hanfu* movement. The third section of this chapter addresses the recurring standard of “sophistication” in New-Chinese fashion posts and how that relates to “Chinese-ness” versus western culture in certain posts. Lastly, we will look at the setting of these posts: how does the set-up of the photos attempt to enhance the clothing’s “Chinese-ness”?

### 3.1. “Traditional Chinese” elements: pick-and-choose

New-Chinese style takes traditional Chinese dress elements and garments, and mixes them with western, globalized fashion. As will be discussed below, New-Chinese normally does not feature full historically accurate outfits (unlike the *Hanfu* community, which does), but isolates certain details or dress typologies and infuses them into a contemporary, globalized way of dressing. In this respect, traditional Chinese clothing is modernized and revitalized, fitting for a contemporary, twenty-first century way of living and dressing.

Either contemporary, global garments like the wide-legged pants, babydoll dress or dress shirt are given a Chinese twist by adding (Orientalizing) traditional Chinese elements to them, while other New-Chinese style outfits take traditional Chinese garments, like the horse-faced skirt or the *qipao*, and give it a more “modern” twist. As will be discussed in section 3.3 and 3.4, the styling of the outfit and staging of the photograph also plays a big role in enhancing the outfit’s “Chinese-ness”.

#### 3.1.1. Global Fashion With Chinese Elements

What separates New-Chinese style from other traditional Chinese fashion revivals, is that it purposely mixes these traditional elements with modern day fashion.

“World fashion”, as it is called by John Vollmer in his chapter “Cultural Authentication in Dress” in the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*, has become the global ways of dressing since the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> The normalized way of dressing in western countries, with western typologies like the jeans, the button-up shirt, the T-shirt and the miniskirt have pushed away more regional ways of dressing and has even overtaken a lot of non-western, non-neoliberal and non-Christian cultures’ dress traditions. In the PRC, this process started in the 1980’s, after the government’s new Reform and Opening Up measures (after a brief period of predilection for western dress in the 1930’s and 1940’s, subsequently banned by the CCP).<sup>56</sup> This has created a “global fashion system”. Because these dress typologies (and the trends within this global fashion system) have become the more or less worldwide norm for dressing, we cannot call them “western fashions” anymore, yet at the same time we lack a better term, as explored by Baizerman, Eicher and Cherny in

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<sup>55</sup> John E. Vollmer, “Cultural Authentication in Dress,” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*, eds. Joanne B. Eicher and Phyllis G. Tortora (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 69–76.

<sup>56</sup> Garrett, *Chinese Dress*, 229.

their text “Eurocentrism In the Study of Ethnic Dress”.<sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> Within this context, traditional Chinese clothing would not be called “fashion”, but would be categorized as “local dress” or “ethnic dress”.<sup>59</sup>

In New-Chinese Style, the boundaries between “ethnic dress” and “global fashion” are blurred by mixing and matching contemporary streetstyle with traditional Chinese elements. T-shirts are paired with horseface skirts, milkmaid-style dresses have Chinese looking patterns, sneakers and chains are added to wide, flowy garments to make them look less official, the combinations are endless. Often, the mixing and matching of global trends is done to “dress down” the strictness, exoticism and historical air of the wide-cut, expensive looking traditional elements. In general, the combination of Chinese elements with jeans is very popular and recurring (fig. 4-6).<sup>60</sup>

In one inspirational post, celebrity Yang Mi’s outfit is praised by a New-Chinese style fan: she combines a baseball cap and wide leg jeans with a butterfly-patterned Tang-style jacket and a Chinese style see-through overskirt (bǎng gè pì lián 绑个屁帘). In the caption, the user proclaims: “*Yang Mi's fashion can seamlessly incorporate Chinese elements into daily life, especially paired with jeans, which looks absolutely stunning. We don't need strict rules and regulations to constrain us; we should embrace clothing freedom.*” (fig. 7)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Suzanne Baizerman, Joanne B. Eicher, and Catherine Cerny. “Eurocentrism in the Study of Ethnic Dress,” *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Taylor & Francis, 1993): 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1179/036121193805298291>.

<sup>58</sup> The terminology “Global fashion” will be employed in this paper, informed by Cheang, De Greef and Takagi’s understanding of the term, as multi-layered and post-colonial. (Source: Sarah Cheang, Erica De Greef and Yōko Takagi, eds., *Rethinking Fashion Globalization* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021): 1-13.).

<sup>59</sup> Joanne B. Eicher, “Introduction to Global Perspectives,” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*, eds. Joanne B. Eicher and Phyllis G. Tortora (Oxford: Berg, 2010): 3–10.

<sup>60</sup> Ex. @柒玥貳叁, “167|50 Xīn zhongshi heibai chen yi ku sa nūhai chuan da heji 167 | 50 新中式黑白衬衣 酷飒女孩穿搭合集 (167 | 50 New Chinese Style Black and White Shirts - Cool and Stylish Girl Outfit Collection)”, Xiaohongshu post, April 5, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/660f6c22000000001a00e110?xsec\\_token=ABcXZsCmoGu9HdiGPhP6J1M5LY97eMuxXoWMk\\_yGYDuV0=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/660f6c22000000001a00e110?xsec_token=ABcXZsCmoGu9HdiGPhP6J1M5LY97eMuxXoWMk_yGYDuV0=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@瑾瑜的瑾, “Pan kou xin zhongshi chenshan, niuzaiku zheme chuan tai haokanle!!! 盘扣新中式衬衫, 牛仔裤这么穿太好看了!!! (A buttoned new Chinese style shirt + jeans looks so good when worn like this! ! !)”, Xiaohongshu post, April 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6618fa8b000000001a00c5af?xsec\\_token=ABORV06IWQgR-tBiRfDtDCyqGAzoZsbVU5gLYaqECM6Cs=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6618fa8b000000001a00c5af?xsec_token=ABORV06IWQgR-tBiRfDtDCyqGAzoZsbVU5gLYaqECM6Cs=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@HongMing, “Chao tiebie de xin zhongshi qunzi | 165 fen fen zhong bian 170 超特别的新中式裙子 | 165 分分钟变 170 (‘Super special new Chinese skirt | 165 cm turns into 170 cm in minutes)”, Xiaohongshu post, September 22, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/650d8e380000000013034383?xsec\\_token=ABpgiUPJVMCV\\_I dkrLKVJfrh1pWO2k3hyGO5SgNpXmHJg=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/650d8e380000000013034383?xsec_token=ABpgiUPJVMCV_I dkrLKVJfrh1pWO2k3hyGO5SgNpXmHJg=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>61</sup> @慧子姐姐 主理人, “Yangmi yizhou xin zhongshi chuanda yyds!



Fig. 7. Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with a fan of celebrity Yang Mi applauding her New-Chinese style, 2024. Screenshot by author.

Sometimes, even the smallest details with Chinese elements are added to outfits that otherwise have no features whatsoever that express a certain “Chinese-ness”. For instance, this look features one small frog knot in an otherwise fully boho-chic inspired look. The caption though, still mentions New-Chinese style (fig.8).<sup>62</sup>



Fig. 8: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! (Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!),” Xiaohongshu post, March 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f07d9800000000d00de2f?app\\_platform=ios&app\\_version=8.38&share\\_from\\_user\\_hidden=true&type=normal&author\\_share=1&xhsshare=CopyLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUlP&apptime=1717149060](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f07d9800000000d00de2f?app_platform=ios&app_version=8.38&share_from_user_hidden=true&type=normal&author_share=1&xhsshare=CopyLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUlP&apptime=1717149060).

<sup>62</sup> @嗯李温柔, “Qian shi yixia richang xin zhongshi xiao taozhuang ba!!! 浅试一下日常新中式小套装吧!!! (Let’s give the New-Chinese style casual outfits a try!!!),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified May 20, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/664b0e6b00000000c019c4f?xsec\\_token=ABsYbhXkZB0n8cq xat27vvYVRDLuliyj6n uXGrSW u k=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/664b0e6b00000000c019c4f?xsec_token=ABsYbhXkZB0n8cq xat27vvYVRDLuliyj6n uXGrSW u k=&xsec_source=pc_search).

Often, the more straight and long silhouette of traditional Chinese dress is shifted to a more contemporary appealing silhouette. New-Chinese style often shows bare arms, legs, shoulders or chests where a more strict approach to traditional styles wouldn't allow this, cutting *qipaos* into minidresses for example. Conform the current Chinese beauty standard, a lot of outfits emphasize a skinny but petite figure with a small waist. There are even posts giving tips on different New-Chinese interpretations of the *qipao* for different body-types (fig 9).<sup>63</sup>

The interesting thing here is that, compared to *Hanfu* or other historically-inspired styles and subcultures, this trend does not delineate what can be mixed and matched. There is no historical correctness to abide by (which often is the case with *Hanfu*). There are no set rules, which makes the possibilities of how traditional Chinese elements could be worn endless. The creativity and freedom to reconfigure your heritage and Chinese identity is abundant. In *Hanfu* communities, there is a similar mixing style called “*Hanyang Zezhong*” (hànyáng zhézhōng 汉洋折衷, “Han-West Compromise”), in which *Hanfu* is mixed with elements of global fashion, yet New-Chinese style goes much further, fully incorporating and re-imagining traditional dress.<sup>64</sup>

As we will see further in this chapter, there are limits to this mixing and matching, as some netizens will draw the line when they feel “authenticity” in their Chinese identity or dress heritage will be lost.

Some would call this reimagining of traditional Chinese clothing “modernizing” it, yet this is a difficult term: “modernism” is a very Eurocentric term, and excludes the idea that multiple ways of modernity can coexist, only focusing on the western art historical evolution and narrative (which is one of pre-modernity, modernity, postmodernity and globalism).<sup>65</sup> What New-Chinese style definitely does do, is create a sense of pride in local heritage and making it more wearable and attractive to a young and/or contemporary audience.

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<sup>63</sup> @ 疏影东方美学, “Wu Zhong shencai xin zhongshi xian shou chuanda chuyou bibe | mei fantian 五种身材新中式显瘦穿搭出游必备 | 美翻天 (Five Body Types New-Chinese Style Slimming Outfits - A Must-Have for Travel | Stunningly Beautiful),” Xiaohongshu post, February 11, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65c850c0000000002c036d37?xsec\\_token=ABQ6UKCDW3SI5PyFdanDY34de25U2sJSrstoR8aZJMo=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65c850c0000000002c036d37?xsec_token=ABQ6UKCDW3SI5PyFdanDY34de25U2sJSrstoR8aZJMo=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>64</sup> Sau Fong Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 20.  
@April, “What to Wear: 3 New Types of Chinese Hanfu Style,” New Hanfu post, 2021, <https://www.newhanfu.com/7056.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Jie, *Fashion in Altermodern China*, 1–14, 97–120.



### 3.1.2. Rethinking Traditional Garments

#### Manchu or Tang jacket

When analyzing the New-Chinese tag, it was interesting to note that the modernized traditional garments were of very diverse origins. Tagged by *Xiaohongshu* as the most liked post under the tag, a girl wears a Manchu-inspired style jacket in the Louvre.<sup>66</sup> (fig. 10) This contemporary interpretation has a bow-version of the traditional Chinese frog button, is cut wider and more square but still retains the traditional late Qing (early twentieth century) Mandarin stand-up collar.<sup>67</sup>



Fig. 10: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user posing in a New-Chinese Style outfit in the Louvre Museum of Paris, 2024. Screenshot by author.

Another popular post under the tag features a woman wearing what seems like a crème-colored modern-day interpretation of a Tang-style jacket, with ruffled embroideries and a faint butterfly pattern.<sup>68</sup> (fig. 11) The Tang jacket differs from the Manchu jacket in its

<sup>66</sup> @球球你了, "Chuan xin zhongshi guang lufugong FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫FR ("Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!)," Xiaohongshu post, September 26, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec\\_token=AB8jndE8sJug8IAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec_token=AB8jndE8sJug8IAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>67</sup> Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 67-68.

<sup>68</sup> @Yi\_大头, "Dongfang meixue | xin zhongshihunda 东方美学 | 新中式混搭 (Oriental aesthetics | New-Chinese style mix and match)," Xiaohongshu post, March 21, 2024,

horizontal closings going vertically down the middle of the body, while a Manchu jacket's closing goes down the side of the chest and body.<sup>69</sup> Both jackets are based on Qing-era dress, worn by the Manchurian elite who led the dynasty and imposed their dress on Han-ethnic Chinese officials. The Tang-style jacket, as it is known now, was actually designed in the early 2000's for the 2001 APEC summit, but based on the *magua* (mǎguà 马褂), a mandarin jacket worn by the Manchu's during their Qing dynasty rule (1644-1912).<sup>70</sup>

The choice for the name "Tang jacket", or *Tangzhuang* (Tángzhuāng, 唐装), was based on the well-known historical Han-Chinese Tang-dynasty (618 - 907), an era of blossoming Chinese culture and international cultural exchange. Yet, the typical Tang jacket look with vertical closing down the chest does not represent Tang-era style dress.<sup>71</sup> While the Tang dynasty is often seen as a typical "Chinese" dynasty with a rich cultural legacy that was fundamental for the Chinese cultural sphere until today, the Qing-dynasty on the contrary, is often seen as a dynasty of "foreign domination", led by the Manchus, an ethnic group originating North of the Han cultural sphere, from 1644 onwards and ultimately led to the demise of traditional, dynastical China in the revolution of 1911.<sup>72</sup> They are often seen as having been repressing of traditional Chinese culture, as the Manchu rulers enacted strict laws to establish Manchu customs, including dress styles, to secure their dominant, ruling position against previous Chinese culture.<sup>73</sup>

It is thus interesting to see that both jackets, even though one is historically seen as a sartorial symbol of a repressive and dominating foreign entity, are now equally welcome as representative of a recently adopted Chinese cultural identity under the CCP. Not only are they both accepted, but most of the Chinese-type garments under the New-Chinese tag have a Manchu or Tang-style collar and closing.

*Hanfu*-style outfits are much less frequent on *Xiaohongshu*. *Hanfu* is seen by some as "truly Chinese", because the Han ethnic group historically makes up the ethnic majority of the Chinese mainland and multiple big dynasties like the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 9, 25 qing–220)

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[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec\\_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy\\_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>69</sup> Uradyn E. Bulag, "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, ed. John E. Vollmer (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), 78-80.

Steele and Major, *China Chic: East meets West*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Bulag, "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress," 78-80.

<sup>71</sup> Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 8-10.

<sup>72</sup> Chris Buckley and Katrina Northrop, "China's 'Hanfu' movement is making it hip to be old-fashioned. Here's why," *Financial Review*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/fashion-and-style/why-its-hip-to-be-oldfashioned-in-china-20181129-h18hql>.

Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (3rd ed). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 232-240, 246-250.

<sup>73</sup> Steele and Major, *China Chic: East meets West*, 28-29.



and Tang dynasty (618 - 907) were led by ethnic Han families.<sup>74</sup> *Hanfu* inspired styles often have a cross-collar shirt, creating a V-shaped neckline, like the white top worn by user @抱走阿茗\_ (fig. 12).<sup>75</sup> Sometimes both historical styles are mixed, like shirts with a Manchu-style side closing but no upstanding collar and a *Hanfu*-like sash fastening at the bottom of the shirt (fig. 13).<sup>76</sup>

The seeming lack of *Hanfu* inspired styles in the New-Chinese style tag, can be explained by the *Hanfu* subculture's "claim" on these styles, which is much more rigid and delineated than the creative play of styles seen in New-Chinese (see section 3.2.). It could also be due to its likeliness to the Korean *Hanbok* and Japanese kimono, while *Hanfu* is much less popular and well-known globally as national dress. The origins of *Hanbok* and the kimono have been heavily debated, as some Chinese see them as an offshoot from their own traditional clothing and as such, consider them *Hanfu* (which is in turn affronting to the respective nations), see section 4.3. for more). As *Hanfu* does not enjoy the popularity its sartorial neighbors do, Tang- and Manchu-style jackets and *qipaos* might be preferred as identifiers for a general Chinese cultural identity.

## Mamianqun

The horse face skirt, or *mamianqun* (mǎmiànqún 马面裙) is a *Hanfu* garment that has reached widespread popularity in modern Chinese wardrobes. Originating in the Song (960 - 1279) and Liao (916 - 1125) dynasties, and persisting up until the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) as a typical style of skirt for women, the pleated skirt features frequently under the New-Chinese tag. The skirt has two panels that overlap in the front and share one waist band. When worn, the dress shows two flat panels, one in the back and one in the front, with the sides of the dress featuring multiple structured, smaller pleats. Often ornately decorated, the traditional *mamianqun* came in different colors and featured auspicious symbols in a band at the bottom of the skirt.<sup>77</sup> In 2023, the horse face skirt was the most popular *Hanfu* item on Chinese online

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<sup>74</sup> Leibold, "Han supremacy on the Chinese internet," 539–559.

<sup>75</sup> @抱走阿茗\_, "Ta shanchang xie yueliang, que Zhong bu xie tuanyuan 她擅长写月亮, 却总不写团圆。(She is good at writing about the moon, but she never writes about reunion.)," Xiaohongshu post, October 17, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652e5eeb000000001e031b88?xsec\\_token=AB-7nd9T04J1FwxNmPxSwB8d9f9DjumPfStD7BounmHtE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652e5eeb000000001e031b88?xsec_token=AB-7nd9T04J1FwxNmPxSwB8d9f9DjumPfStD7BounmHtE=&xsec_source=pc_search).

Steele and Major, *China Chic: East meets West*, 24-26.  
Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> @好好是超人, "Hua Liu cai shi ding liu wo pink xin zhong shi 华流才是顶流 我 pink 新中式 (Hua Liu is the top class. I'm pink New-Chinese style)," Xiaohongshu post, April 21, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6624ffde000000001c0089a8?xsec\\_token=AB3ddmiDHjIGCorwtY5oPo29iQ9Jaz2\\_EQFGMCuibuJ0M=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6624ffde000000001c0089a8?xsec_token=AB3ddmiDHjIGCorwtY5oPo29iQ9Jaz2_EQFGMCuibuJ0M=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>77</sup> Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 98, 101.

sales website Taobao.<sup>78</sup> Modern interpretations often feature only one panel with traditional decorations or are either fully mono-color (often black or white) (fig. 14).<sup>79</sup> In New-Chinese style, more traditional skirts are paired with modern style tops, bags and shoes to give them a contemporary feel (fig. 15).<sup>80</sup>



Fig. 13. Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, of the user modelling a New-Chinese style outfit including a cream white horse-faced skirt, 2024. Screenshot by author.

## Qipao

By far the most reinterpreted traditional garment in New-Chinese style is the *qipao* (qípáo 旗袍) dress (or *cheongsam* in Cantonese). The *qipao*'s origins are vague, but most scholars date it back to the *changpao* (chángpǎo 长跑), a long, wide overshirt dress worn by men in late-Qing dynasty China.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the 1920's, the wide silhouette of the *qipao*

<sup>78</sup> Tanya Van Gastel, "What are 'horse face skirts' and why are they going viral?," *Jing Daily*, February 23, 2024, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/what-are-horse-face-skirts-and-why-are-they-going-viral>.

<sup>79</sup> @贝贝王, "Weishenme xin zhongshi zheme huo 为什么新中式这么火? (Why is New-Chinese style so popular?)," Xiaohongshu post, March 17, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f674db0000000013027426?xsec\\_token=AB13871bjPvZ7URhDqMZkcoWBBkI2Aisadz2-bFvQIY=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f674db0000000013027426?xsec_token=AB13871bjPvZ7URhDqMZkcoWBBkI2Aisadz2-bFvQIY=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>80</sup> @甄甜甜, "Qinglü pei dan huang, you xiatian weidao de mamian 青绿配淡黄, 有夏天味道的马面 (Green and light yellow, summer flavored horse face)," Xiaohongshu post, June 8, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6663a60a0000000006007b49?xsec\\_token=ABQTguzmvOL1Z1bVanlUmz02yWVmf8d3Qr7Sx9QR9qE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6663a60a0000000006007b49?xsec_token=ABQTguzmvOL1Z1bVanlUmz02yWVmf8d3Qr7Sx9QR9qE=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>81</sup> Hazel Clark, "The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity," in *China Chic: East meets West*, eds. Valerie Steele and John S. Major (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 155. Martha Huang, "A Woman Has So Many Parts to Her Body, Life is Very hard Indeed," in *China Chic: East meets West*, eds. Valerie Steele and John S. Major, *China-Chic: East meets West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 138.

narrowed, and the hemline crept higher up, revealing more and more of the female body. In the same way, the meaning of the *qipao* shifted from representing modern, almost androgynous and strong female silhouette during the May Fourth revolution against dynasty-era China, to the Shanghainese cosmopolitan woman and sensual Cantonese film stars of the 1930's, a dress of the urban elite paired with slits on the sides and a high heel.<sup>82</sup>

The *qipao* traditionally has a mandarin style stand-up collar and an asymmetrical closing to the right hand side with frog knots. Most modern style *qipaos* are form-fitting and feature embroideries and orientalist patterns on a silk-like textile, based on a very tight-fitted western Orientalized and sensualized version of the *qipao*, which was in turn based on the popular 1930's and 1940's Shanghainese *qipao*.<sup>83</sup> Within New-Chinese style, the *qipao* is reinvented in a myriad of ways: the dress gets a babydoll mini-skirt, a flowy see-through skirt, puffy sleeves, an open back or frog knots with little bows on them (fig. 16-18).<sup>84</sup> Often, the original mandarin collar is retained in New-Chinese style designs.

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<sup>82</sup> Finnane, "What should Chinese women wear?," 106-121.  
Garrett, *Chinese Dress*, 147.

<sup>83</sup> Steele and Major, *China Chic: East meets West*, 72-78.

Hazel Clark, "The Cheung Sam," 157-158.

Chan, *Chinese Dress in Detail*, 71.

<sup>84</sup> @一只莓莓, "Tao si cang xin zhongshi heji! Mei tiao dou hao xindong 套私藏新中式合集! 每条都好心心动 (Sharing my private collection of new Chinese-style outfits! Each one is so captivating)," Xiaohongshu post, August 4, 2022,

[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62eb9f8b000000001603595d?xsec\\_token=ABz91BmhDAGJRATY9bzbGP9lvQffnwxyqbdloV-WUjtvR4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62eb9f8b000000001603595d?xsec_token=ABz91BmhDAGJRATY9bzbGP9lvQffnwxyqbdloV-WUjtvR4=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@Caffeine 喵喵, "Qiuqiule, jiemeimen bie zai wen wo zhe jiqn yifu de lianjile 求求了, 姐妹们别再问我这件衣服的链接了 (Please, sisters, stop asking me for the link to this dress)," Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 15, 2023,

[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/648b0a0500000000130323af?xsec\\_token=ABzHNCTt0OmWFL7vCRB1nWPAXvT9CBZjXwF4lIfYVOG8w=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/648b0a0500000000130323af?xsec_token=ABzHNCTt0OmWFL7vCRB1nWPAXvT9CBZjXwF4lIfYVOG8w=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@偷心小婷, "ootd | nai bai gailiang qipao qun zhen de hen ai! ootd | 奶白改良旗袍裙 真的很爱!

(ootd | Milk white modified qipao skirt I really love it!)," Xiaohongshu post, July 1, 2022,

[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec\\_token=ABIKHOWVogrZi8AfYz4kNczk2yucs\\_4OHTPgetOKM2nWE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_user](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec_token=ABIKHOWVogrZi8AfYz4kNczk2yucs_4OHTPgetOKM2nWE=&xsec_source=pc_user).



Fig. 17: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user modeling an open-back contemporary qipao, 2024. Screenshot by author.



Fig. 18: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user modeling a milk white contemporary qipao dress, 2024. Screenshot by author.



### 3.1.3. Mixing and matching: New-Chinese style's limits

This mixing and matching of global fashion and Chinese traditional style, gives fashion enthusiasts a lot of creative opportunities. There also seems to be a limit in this: how far can one mix one's own heritage without losing the core of one's cultural identity? Authenticity plays a big role in any trend or subculture, but with New-Chinese style another cultural layer is added: how far can there be diverged from the historical original until the outfit is not seen as authentically "Chinese"?

This question came to the front in the comments of some *Xiaohongshu* posts analyzed. In this comment section, other users could voice their limit for what is acceptable as New-Chinese. One post in particular was heavily debated. The user had published a side-by-side comparison photo of two different outfits: one on the left, titled "before tips", looks more traditional and heavy, with a long-sleeved Tang-style jacket and a long skirt in dark green and black, in dark overhead lighting. The outfit on the right, titled "after tips", shows a light-colored picture of a model in an off-white/cream colored ensemble of a seemingly embroidered jacket paired with sequin-covered shorts (fig.19).



Fig. 19: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

In the comments, another user replied: "*Chinese style typically does not expose the legs*". It has to be noted that the word 中式 was used, pointing to general Chinese culture/style, rather than 新中式, meaning new-Chinese style. Other commenters, as well as the original

poster, replied with question marks, saying “*New! Chinese!*” (to emphasize the freedom to experiment in New-Chinese style) or with the phrase “*Your Qing dynasty has fallen*” (你的大清亡了). This is Chinese internet slang to humorously criticize someone who is out of touch with reality or late to realizing something that others already knew. Other commenters take the side of the original poster saying: “*the qipao is nearly showing the butt*”.

A further discussion ensues with multiple comments (emphasis chosen by author of this paper):

“The main issue is that the design of this *qipao* is quite poor. Increasing the amount of skin exposed might make it more visually appealing, but this design clashes heavily with the modern Chinese style. More exposure ends up looking tacky and even somewhat vulgar.”

“It’s not just about adding some buttons and patterns to call it national trend or new Chinese style. Let’s have some real substance/”consume something real/truly good,” to which another user replies: “Come on, use your expertise from your master’s or doctoral studies to explain to us country folks what “New Chinese Style” and “*Guochao*” mean. Let us have something real good then.”

“Sister, the emphasis of Chinese-style clothing is not on revealing skin or accentuating body curves. It’s not quite appropriate to interpret Chinese-style clothing through the logic of western fashion, even in the case of New-Chinese Style. If it feels hot to wear in the summer, good fabric choices can solve this issue, rather than resorting to shorts or loose cuts. (...) The rise of New Chinese Style is a positive development, and wearing shorts in summer is understandable, but it’s important to be tasteful. However, I really don’t appreciate these mismatched designs.”

“But I think some small designs in Chinese style, like the slanting collar and the traditional buttons, are really beautiful. However, traditional Chinese clothing styles are indeed not very suitable for everyday wear, so I have been looking for a “New Chinese Style” that combines fashion and casual vibes. I also wonder why Chinese and New Chinese styles seem to only be used in long dresses, long sleeves, or trousers. Why must Chinese style be conservative and not show skin? I don’t believe that incorporating these Chinese designs into short sleeves, shorts, skirts, or camisoles would look bad or mismatched. On the contrary, I see it as a progressive evolution of Chinese style. Although the sequin shorts you mentioned aren’t ideal, I find the combination of the Chinese-style top and shorts overall very attractive. Honestly, as a consumer, I’m quite happy to see such designs and innovations. I don’t understand why some people criticize them.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> @ 爆爆小鱼干, “A jiemeimen! Zhe tao xin zhongshi chan yi taozhuang ye tai juele ba! 啊姐妹们! 这套新中式禅意套装也太绝了吧! (Ah sisters! This new Chinese Zen suit is so amazing!),” Xiaohongshu post, March 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65efe1ca0000000012035c4e?xsec\\_token=ABvZalp1FxrQOiO7a57o5G0pG15vHH-4noN3VEVOrUSKM=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65efe1ca0000000012035c4e?xsec_token=ABvZalp1FxrQOiO7a57o5G0pG15vHH-4noN3VEVOrUSKM=&xsec_source=pc_search).

It is interesting to see that the users engaging in New-Chinese are aware of the adaptations done to the original traditional styles, but use the argument that it is “not appropriate to interpret Chinese-style clothing through the logic of western fashion, even in the case of New-Chinese Style”. Because this research is conducted on a widely used network site under a public tag, no delineations are able to be set on what users approve as New-Chinese style or not. Apparently, “tastefulness”, “vulgarity” and “elegance” are strong parameters, and not adhering to them is related to western fashion. On the other hand, this discussion also shows the attraction of New-Chinese style for *Xiaohongshu* users: it supports innovations and gives them new ideas on how to celebrate their traditional culture in a fun, wearable day-to-day manner.

This question thus seems to be tied up with a standard of sophistication: we cannot let our traditional culture dilute and become “tasteless”. This demand for classiness in New-Chinese is further discussed and analyzed below in section 3.3.

### 3.1.4. Chinese identity configured through New-Chinese style

All of these very distinctly different historical periods and cultures, ranging from the Han to the Qing dynasty, and even up to 1940’s Shanghai, are all united under the term of “traditional Chinese”. They have all come together in one fashion trend that has to present a coherent aesthetic that identifies “Chinese-ness”. Although Manchu-inspired clothing or the 1930’s, tight-fitted westernized version of the *qipao* have traditionally been criticized as being not representative of what is truly “Chinese”, these distinctions don’t really seem to make a difference anymore in New-Chinese style. They are now all used to represent what it means to be Chinese in the PRC today.

It does make sense that traditional ethnic division would be overruled in a style that represents modern-day China, as the CCP’s policies of the last 10 years support the multi-ethnic identity of the PRC, and under Xi Jinping, great efforts have been undertaken to improve the lives and save the traditional culture of the country’s 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Buckley and Northrop, “China’s ‘Hanfu’ movement is making it hip to be old-fashioned.”  
Desheng Cao, “Xi: Promoting progress, unity of all ethnic groups,” *China Daily*, last modified October 30, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/30/WS653e8dc2a31090682a5eb507.html>.  
Yuanyue Dang, “China’s Inner Mongolia emerges as model for Xi Jinping’s ethnic affairs policy, but analysts warn of cultural ‘erosion,’” *South China Morning Post*, February 25, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3253119/chinas-inner-mongolia-emerges-model-xi-jinpings-ethnic-affairs-policy-analysts-warn-cultural-erosion>.

This conforms to what the American anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson has called “the imagined community”. In his seminal 1983 book, Anderson analyzes nationalism as a socially and collectively constructed identity, built by the people who consider themselves part of this identity. The nation is thus not an objective, stable and factual reality, but rather an imagined and idealized concept, which fluctuates and is configured according to how its people identify it. The community of the imagined nation, gives it its nationalism and identity.<sup>87</sup>

As such, the patriotism expressed in New-Chinese style is formed by what the Chinese themselves consider to be “Chinese”, and what the CCP, as “vanguard of the Chinese people”, considers to be “Chinese”. It is an imagined community, built on the assigning of “Chinese” or “not-Chinese” value judgements to delineate its identity.

For example, in the above mentioned discussion about the off-white jacket and shorts combinations, there was clearly some confusion over what is “Chinese” and what is not. Certain commenters considering the twist on the Tang-style suit as going too far, and thus falling outside the box of what’s Chinese. The suit itself, with its traditional influences, is definitely seen as a symbol of Chinese culture, but when showing too much skin (and thus “becoming too western”), it suddenly cannot represent the nation anymore.

If the CCP states that the Chinese identity includes multi-ethnicity and accepts both its traditional culture, whether Han or Manchu, the Chinese nationalist feelings of its subjects will include these aspects. This could explain why, during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, traditional culture was never valued as a source for Chinese pride, but under Xi Jinping’s lead, it is. Going further in this vein, who knows what “being Chinese” will mean in the future?

In China, no clear “national dress” exists for women. For men, the Sun Zhongshan suit could be seen as a sartorial expression of national identity, but since the Reform and Opening Up period, this suit has died down in popularity for women and no alternative has been convincing enough. The *qipao*’s popularity between 1930-1950 did not survive the communist revolution of 1949, and the global fashion dominating women’s daily lives does not represent what it means to be Chinese.<sup>88</sup> The costume traditions of the different Chinese ethnic minorities still persists, and the *Hanfu* community has been reinvigorating Han ethnic dress, but these are specific to certain ethnicities and do not represent the plurality of common day PRC and its communist legacy.

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<sup>87</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>88</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?”



This might be why New-Chinese style is strongly on the rise: even though it is an amalgam of different influences and its limits are actively being discussed, it speaks to a vacuum for national identity in (women's) clothing that has taken shape in the PRC (in male dress, this role is more so taken up by the Mao suit or Zhongshan suit, see section 4.3).<sup>89</sup> It is accessible yet fashionable and trendy enough for day-to-day wear, and leaves room for creativity and personal expression of the national identity.

Despite this identity-based explanation, the self-Orientalizing and culturally generalizing trend within New-Chinese style is still very interesting. Especially the *qipao* and Tang-style jacket display a kind of projection of the Chinese or East-Asian identity that could be characterized as self-Orientalizing, a term coined by Adam Geczy in his book *Fashion and Orientalism*.<sup>90</sup> These garments project an orientalist image of their own culture. They were fashions that were not present anymore in the PRC, and were consciously created after the world's orientalist image of what "Chinese clothing" looked like (e.g. the sexy Chinese vixen in a tight *qipao* or the mandarin-collared Qing official). They do not per se represent an existing and realistic image of China.<sup>91</sup> But, as Geczy remarks, whereas Orientalism in the West silences cultures and enacts a western exotic fascination, when self-Orientalizing occurs "within formerly orientalist countries, it is predominately for nationalistic purposes, to construct a meaning of people and their belonging to a smooth and palatable continuity with place and history".<sup>92</sup> This seems to ring true for our New-Chinese case: through projecting a sometimes slightly Orientalized vision of their own culture, these younger generations of Chinese try to configure what it means to be a citizen of the PRC today.

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<sup>89</sup> Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?"

<sup>90</sup> Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism: Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17th to the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): 154–196.

<sup>91</sup> Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism*, 182–190.

<sup>92</sup> Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism*, 190.

### 3.2. New-Chinese: a trend, rather than a subculture: comparison to *Hanfu*

There is no clear distinction to be made between New-Chinese fashion and *Hanfu* (*Hànfú* 汉服, “traditional Han Chinese dress”). Some *Hanfu* creators incorporate modern elements in their dress, but still identify with the *Hanfu* subculture, while some New-Chinese outfits incorporate much more traditional elements than some of their peers would. The New-Chinese hashtags (#新中式穿搭 or #中国风) and the *Hanfu* hashtag (#汉服) are sometimes included in the same post. “Chinese national style” (*zhōngguó fēng* 中国风), or “national wave” (*guócháo* 国潮) are broad, interchangeable terms that are often used in posts of both fashions.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, there are some clear differences between *Hanfu* and New-Chinese style.

*Hanfu* is also more connected to a subculture than New-Chinese fashion: it is worn within certain spaces by people who are “into” *Hanfu*, who are part of the delineated community. There are people who will wear *Hanfu* on a daily basis, but a large group of the fans would not. New-Chinese style is focusing on this idea: to revive traditional Chinese style, make it contemporary and cosmopolitan, and incorporate it into daily wear.

*Hanfu* subcultural members are often invested in discussing their interest in traditional Chinese culture in on- and offline spaces, learning the historical backgrounds of *Hanfu*, joining online fora, consuming traditional Chinese inspired media, visiting *Hanfu* conventions and relating certain political, religious and moral beliefs to inclusion in the *Hanfu* community.<sup>94</sup> *Hanfu* communities are in line with cultural sociologist J. Patrick Williams’ characterization of subcultures as not only the forming of a community, but as a space where identity is built and that identity’s authenticity is discussed.<sup>95</sup> These *Hanfu* fans and groups are also very concerned with shaping their identity and discussing their authenticity: how radical does an outfit have to follow Chinese dress history to be considered as “authentically *Hanfu*”?

New-Chinese style on the contrary, cannot be characterized as a movement. It’s not as much of a subculture, as a style or long lasting trend. The wearers are not as invested in

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<sup>93</sup> E.g. @yo 麻麻, “Xi zhongshi de richang dapei 新中式的日常搭配 (Daily Matching Of New-Chinese Style),” Xiaohongshu post, March 17, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652bc664000000001d038773?xsec\\_token=ABtN\\_1E5weovQq76xL669kIV\\_k\\_VmEgm1nIYhG8QMa8Cs=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652bc664000000001d038773?xsec_token=ABtN_1E5weovQq76xL669kIV_k_VmEgm1nIYhG8QMa8Cs=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>94</sup> Leibold, “Han supremacism on the Chinese internet”.

Colbert, Wang and Legoux. “Hanfu Clothing as a Rising Industry in China,” 79–89.

<sup>95</sup> J. Patrick Williams, *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 126–145.

engaging with and the reviving of traditional Chinese culture, but pick and choose elements of traditional culture to infuse in their daily fashion. Although the choice for traditional Chinese elements in their outfits is often made consciously (with a patriotic or political undertone), their commitment is not as all-encompassing and in depth as that of most *Hanfu* fans.

On top of this, most of the accounts and posts looked at, are not fully dedicated to New-Chinese fashion, as opposed to a lot of *Hanfu* accounts. Most of the time, the accounts with a few hit posts on New-Chinese fashion, would only have a few posts incorporating the trend into their daily wardrobe. Although most of these accounts were dedicated to OOTD fashion, it seems that most of their outfits do not consistently incorporate traditional Chinese elements. User “Jinn99” for example, has only one very distinctly New-Chinese outfit (fig. 20). The rest of their posts are also all OOTD’s with a similar style of posing, but feature a more global fashion in 90s and early 00’s inspired popular style (fig. 21). The black and white New-Chinese style ensemble seems to be a special outfit.<sup>96</sup>

Reserving traditional Chinese fashion for special occasions, like formal dress, has been prevalent in the PRC since the decline in popularity of the *qipao* (qípáo 旗袍) dress in the twentieth century. The *qipao*, in its most well-known tight-fitting form with a high neck, originated at the end of the 1920’s and lived its heyday between 1930 and 1950. It fully lost its status as clothing suitable for daily wear in the 1950’s with the Communist Revolution. For a long time, the Zhongshan suit (Sun Yat-sen suit) or “Mao suit” was the only politically approved clothing in the PRC. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the *qipao* was expected to return as the main choice for daily women’s dress. The opening up of the PRC to economic change and foreign influence resulted in the rise of western-style clothing, which soon became the norm throughout the PRC. This resulted in the *qipao* being reserved only for formal or celebratory events, and even here it was seen as a somewhat eccentric choice compared to western-style gowns and suits or the Zhongshan suit.<sup>97</sup>

It has to be noted that there is a difference between the historical decline of the *qipao* and the use of New-Chinese fashion as formal dress: whereas the *qipao* was marginalized into formal dress, New-Chinese inspired clothing is seen as sophisticated and has been re-

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<sup>96</sup> @Jin99, “Xin zhongshi hen hen suo zhu 新中式狠狠锁住 (New-Chinese style locked in hard),” Xiaohongshu post, July 29, 2022, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62e3d387000000002402d607?app\\_platform=ios&app\\_version=8.38&share\\_from\\_user\\_hidden=true&type=normal&author\\_share=1&xhsshare=CopyLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUIP&apptime=1717149126&exSource=](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62e3d387000000002402d607?app_platform=ios&app_version=8.38&share_from_user_hidden=true&type=normal&author_share=1&xhsshare=CopyLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUIP&apptime=1717149126&exSource=).

<sup>97</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” Steele and Major, *China Chic: East Meets West*.

popularized, earning back its status as interesting and fashionable formalwear. New-Chinese style is also revitalizing the *qipao* and rethinking it, as discussed in section 3.1. above.

With the New-Chinese trend, people seem more conscious of their commitment to traditional culture than in previous decades, and the use of *qipaos* and Manchu collars seems to be much more popular in the past few years, becoming a fully normal choice of formal dress rather than an anomaly, which was what the *qipao* was conceived as in the second half of the twentieth century. The *qipao* has gained back prominence in contemporary Chinese daily wear with the New-Chinese style, albeit often in a new iteration of the *qipao*.

In general, *Hanfu* is seen as a more traditional interpretation of traditional Chinese clothing: it often sticks strictly to traditional Chinese fashion, from different historical eras, but would generally not include any western fashion elements. Thus some dress elements of *Hanfu* are seen as too historical, too traditional to be included in most New-Chinese fashion.

New-Chinese style is much less de-lineated: because of its lack of dedication to historical accuracy, elements are incorporated in general western-style daily wear on a pick-and-choose basis. *Hanfu* sticks as close as possible to its historical references and tries to authentically recreate the historical dress. This often results in silhouettes that are inconvenient in contemporary daily life, like these long, floor-length robes with wide sleeves (fig. 22).<sup>98</sup>



Fig. 22: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user modeling a full Hanfu look, 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>98</sup> @朝雾, “Gongzhu dian li zui dechong de xiaogong'e 公主殿里最得宠的小宫娥 (The most favored maidservant in the princess's palace),” Xiaohongshu post, April 10, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6616b8fb000000001a00e18d?xsec\\_token=ABEjbEL9S06YA-0fNEHSfo2NigFYT50jcex9d0rlidoxM=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6616b8fb000000001a00e18d?xsec_token=ABEjbEL9S06YA-0fNEHSfo2NigFYT50jcex9d0rlidoxM=&xsec_source=pc_search).

This makes New-Chinese style distinctly different from *Hanfu*: it often circumvents the “uncomfortable”, or stylistically “over the top” aspects of traditional Chinese dress, because it does not suit our conventional global way of dressing in the twenty-first century. Being not delineated and free for interpretation, there are some New-Chinese outfits that would incorporate traditional style silhouettes more directly, like fig. 23, but these type of fashions are a minority and the full outfits always incorporates a non-traditional element like a strappy heel, tiny leather handbag or a shoulder-padded overcoat.<sup>99</sup>

Colors and intricate embroideries are also dimmed down and less historically accurate than those of their *Hanfu* counterparts. In this way, New-Chinese stylistic elements are more easily incorporated in global contemporary fashion and are deemed “tasteful”, as will be discussed immediately below.



Fig. 23: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>99</sup> @小小倪, “Xiang kan dajia chuan mamianqun de zhaopian 想看大家穿马面裙的照片 (I want to see photos of everyone wearing horse-faced skirts),” Xiaohongshu post, November 29, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/656738ed000000003202f6a8?xsec\\_token=AB9a6sQXMwLdg2AcWNI3yEwyVXGib9qGSNPlc2zkal6vM=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/656738ed000000003202f6a8?xsec_token=AB9a6sQXMwLdg2AcWNI3yEwyVXGib9qGSNPlc2zkal6vM=&xsec_source=pc_search).

### 3.3. “Sophistication” is key

In translations and analysis of captions and comments on *Xiaohongshu*’s “New-Chinese” (新中式) tag, the words “sophistication” and “tasteful” kept popping up.

Comments and captions would call outfits: “classy, and this clothing is not something that an average person can easily pull off”, or: “tasteful and high-end” (jì yǒu pǐnwèi gāojí 既有品味高级) and hashtags like #气质穿搭 (qìzhì chuāndā, #refineddress) returning in different posts (e.g. fig. 24).<sup>100</sup> The adjectives “gentle” (wēnróu 温柔), classy/tasteful (qìzhì 气质) and high-level (gāojí 高级) and “delicate” or “exquisite” (jīngzhì 精致) are very prevalent in the analyzed posts. “Clean fit,” a term used globally online to describe fashion that is neat and comfortable, is also often coined in popular New-Chinese style posts.<sup>101</sup>

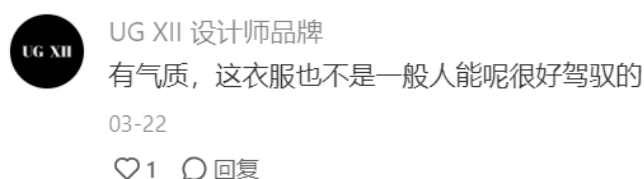


Fig. 24: Screenshot of a comment posted on March 22, 2024, by user @UG XII 设计师品牌 under a Xiaohong post by @Yi\_大头, saying “It has a refinement, and this kind of clothes is not something that ordinary people can easily control,” 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>100</sup> @Yi\_大头, “Dongfang meixue | xin zhongshi hunda 东方美学 | 新中式混搭 (Oriental aesthetics | New-Chinese style mix and match).”

@Su 苏, “Zhongguo feng cn| bu guize fashi duan xiu chenshan 中国风cn|不规则法式短袖衬衫 (Chinese stylecn|Irregular French short-sleeved shirt!!),” Xiaohongshu post, March 21, 2023, <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/641920480000000012033afa>.

<sup>101</sup> Sadie Barger, “Sorry Hypebeasts: China Says Gorpcore Is Out, ‘Cleanfit’ Is In,” *Jing Daily*, March 29, 2023, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/sorry-hypebeasts-china-says-gorpcore-is-out-cleanfit-is-in>.

A post praising the New-Chinese outfit of celebrity Yang Mi, even uses the hashtag #OldMoneyStyle (lǎo qián fēng 老钱风).<sup>102</sup> “Old Money Style” has been trending the past year or so on both western and Chinese social media as being tasteful and luxurious, without being too extravagant.<sup>103</sup> The post even had a fan in the comments write a poem, praising the elegance of the New-Chinese style (fig. 25):<sup>104</sup>

“Dressed in splendid attire, reflecting the morning glow,  
New Chinese-style garments exude elegance.  
Delicate embroidery adds refinement,  
flowing sleeves drift like those of celestial beings.  
Where modernity meets tradition, a beauty as picturesque as a painting in the heart.”

The post (already mentioned in section 3.1.3.) by user @爆爆小鱼干 of March 3d, 2024 (fig. 19), and the discussion that ensued in its comment section, also illustrates this focus on elegance, classiness and sophistication when reiterating traditional Chinese features in New-Chinese fashion. The caption stated that “the entire outfit exudes elegance and refinement” (yōuyǎ yòu qìzhì 优雅又气质). The discussion in the comment section on whether or not this outfit was true “Chinese style” was centered around it showing the wearer’s legs, but also used the words “tacky and even somewhat vulgar” (tǔ shènzhì yǒu fēngchén wèile 土甚至有风尘味了), “feels so inappropriate” (gǎnjué hǎo bùlúnbùlèi 感觉好不伦不类).<sup>105</sup>

### 3.3.1. Sophisticated Aesthetics

Not only the discourse on New-Chinese style seems to be focused on sophistication, but the clothes themselves also try to embody this ideal; strong colors are often avoided: outfits tend to feature nude- and pastel colors and are quite monochrome, strong colors, prints or clashes are scarce. If there is color blocking, it would only be by wearing a full black-and-white

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<sup>102</sup> @慧子姐姐 主理人, “Yangmi yizhou xin zhongsji chuanda yyds! 杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! (Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!).”

<sup>103</sup> Max Berlinger, “Why Is Gen Z So Obsessed With ‘Old Money Style’?,” GQ, April 5, 2024, <https://www.gq.com/story/old-money-style-aesthetic-explainer>.

<sup>104</sup> @慧子姐姐 主理人, “Yangmi yizhou xin zhongsji chuanda yyds! 杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! (Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!).”

<sup>105</sup> @慧子姐姐 主理人, “Yangmi yizhou xin zhongsji chuanda yyds! 杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! (Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!).”



outfit (fig. 26).<sup>106</sup> Prints are often small and delicate, the same goes for embroideries. The main color palette consists of black, white, cream, off-white, camel and light yellow, baby pink and soft green hues, or a light grayish-blue like fig. 27.<sup>107</sup>



Fig. 27: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag with a highlighted comment from March 19, 2024 posted by user @Real 玖然 saying: "Such a high-end color," 2024. Screenshot and highlight by author.

Dramatic silhouettes or textiles aren't very prevalent either. Most silhouettes feature soft shoulders or small puffy sleeves, flowy skirts and pants, or slightly structured mini- and midi skirts (e.g. fig. 28 and 29).<sup>108</sup> Textiles are often soft, flowy or slinky, resembling satins; or

<sup>106</sup> @嘻嘻, "Xin zhongshi get! 新中式 get! (New-Chinese style, get it!)," Xiaohongshu post, June 6, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66612969000000001303ff24?xsec\\_token=ABuRjdt7D6kQdr\\_sXvejRyIY9IaaP5LDnIfJweM28JPQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66612969000000001303ff24?xsec_token=ABuRjdt7D6kQdr_sXvejRyIY9IaaP5LDnIfJweM28JPQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>107</sup> @球球你了, "Chuan xin zhongshi guang lufugong FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫FR (Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!)."

<sup>108</sup> @WANGDAMA, "Xin zhongshi heji | 20 tao qingleng shuli youya dafang 新中式合集 | 20 套: 清冷疏离 优雅大方(New Chinese style collection | 20 sets: Cold and detached, elegant and graceful)," Xiaohongshu post, June 4, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/665ef5b00000000015009cf6?xsec\\_token=ABizlcge50fTI-LnmvamnMLwQldKEluluD6kChVh9Y=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/665ef5b00000000015009cf6?xsec_token=ABizlcge50fTI-LnmvamnMLwQldKEluluD6kChVh9Y=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@克里斯蒂娜的世界, "Ni kan na wo de suoyou dou shi wo de meili 你看我的所有 都是我的美丽 (Look, everything about me is my beauty)," Xiaohongshu post, September 15, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6503dadd000000001603356b?xsec\\_token=AB5cN7cfh2pnY1Ji-4sPdyY4Hz5O9h0SqVoFYpS6EqVQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6503dadd000000001603356b?xsec_token=AB5cN7cfh2pnY1Ji-4sPdyY4Hz5O9h0SqVoFYpS6EqVQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).



stronger and stiffer when featured in a Chinese-style jackets or *mamianqun*, but never heavy, flashy or intense (e.g. fig. 30 and 31).<sup>109</sup>

Sophistication and refinement are valued strongly by New-Chinese style users on *Xiaohongshu*, and it's appears to be a theme that is extremely recurrent throughout all of the analyzed posts and feeds.

### 3.3.2. "Cultural confidence" as basis for a sophisticated, New-Chinese style

There is definitely a notion that if traditional Chinese culture is revived and mixed with global or western fashion, it has to have an aura of taste to it. The global trends that are often linked to the most popular "新中式" posts on *Xiaohongshu*, like "Clean Fit" and "Old Money Style", are all perceived as having an element of refinement to them.<sup>110</sup> Too much showing of skin could result in tackiness, which is to be avoided at all costs.

This standard of sophistication has to be seen within the wider context of the popularity of the *guochao* trend with Chinese consumers.

In 2014, Xi Jinping popularized the phrase "cultural confidence" (*wénhuà zìxìn* 文化自信), adding to the 2012 mantra of "confidence in path", "confidence in theory" and "confidence in the institutions", first used by former secretary general Hu Jintao.<sup>111</sup> Xi's "fourth confidence" was added to the CCP Party Charter in 2017, with "cultural confidence" expressing the need

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<sup>109</sup> @littlechu, "You yi ge baobao cuoguo zhe tao xin zhongshi wo duhui nanguo ~ 有 1 个宝宝错过这 套新中式 我都会难过~ (I would be sad if even one baby misses out on this new Chinese-style outfit~)," *Xiaohongshu* post, last modified March 14, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6642dc9b000000001e0377d1?xsec\\_token=ABx118o3WxDC7le dkn4pOaZAvThv77vDriTHuSWRiH6kE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6642dc9b000000001e0377d1?xsec_token=ABx118o3WxDC7le dkn4pOaZAvThv77vDriTHuSWRiH6kE=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@wan.two3, "Guonian \* dangran yao chuan xin zhongshi 过年\*当然要穿新中式 (Celebrating Chinese New Year \* Of course you have to wear new Chinese style)," *Xiaohongshu* post, January 16, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65a63e27000000002b00e17c?xsec\\_token=ABk5MJD\\_Z1VKcGWRFU70d3r47QWYnr7AKVZIndrzwkVtg=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65a63e27000000002b00e17c?xsec_token=ABk5MJD_Z1VKcGWRFU70d3r47QWYnr7AKVZIndrzwkVtg=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>110</sup> Sadie Barger, "Sorry Hypebeasts: China Says Gorpcore Is Out, 'Cleanfit' Is In," *Jing Daily*, March 29, 2023, <https://jingdaily.com/posts/sorry-hypebeasts-china-says-gorpcore-is-out-cleanfit-is-in>.

Max Berlinger, "Why Is Gen Z So Obsessed With 'Old Money Style'?", *GQ*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.gq.com/story/old-money-style-aesthetic-explainer>.

Liang Yu 梁彥, "Clean Fit Style yue jiantian yue gaoji Clean Fit Style 越简单 越高级 (Clean Fit Style: the simpler, the more high-level)," *Xinhua*, September 8, 2023, <http://www.news.cn/fashion/20230908/667fd0d278504c21a6f156bff45a07c4/c.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Ke Meng, "Xi's Thought To Help Modernize Governance," *China Daily*, last modified October 28, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/28/WS5db625bfa310cf3e35573d5c.html#:~:text=three%20main%20lines%22%2C%20%22-,four%20confidences,-%22%20and%20%22a%20five>.

to also have faith in the country's "*identity* – to be found in a combination of 5,000-odd years of Chinese culture (zhōnghuá wénhuà 中华文化) and the rich revolutionary legacy of the CCP itself".<sup>112</sup> After years of rejection of the past and traditional culture by the CCP, with as nadir the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese traditional culture is now reinstated next to the communist values (or "socialist with Chinese characteristics" as the ideology is called by the CCP) and even helps lay down the foundations for the CCP's power legitimacy.

In recent years, CCP has struggled with a hollowing out of their original founding principles: the PRC is not strictly communist anymore and has taken on a very authoritarian route, with Xi Jinping as its leading figure. As Jiaqian Ni, Mengqiao Wang and Kai Quek have shown in "The sources of national pride: Evidence from China and the United States," contemporary Chinese nationalist feelings are strong, but very much based on material factors (like safety and economic prosperity).<sup>113</sup> Until the 2010's, economic prosperity kept their legitimacy afloat, but with a recent slowing down of the economy, crackdown on free speech and silencing of criticism on the CCP's handling of COVID19, the party might need a new legitimizing factor for their power.<sup>114</sup> This legitimacy is in recent years, (partly) found in the concept of the party as unifying factor of China and protector of its "5000-year long history" and culture. By reclaiming traditional Chinese culture, and not suppressing it, which was the case up until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the CCP identifies itself with a deeply Chinese cultural tradition and thus with the area's history, in this way legitimizing their current power.<sup>115</sup>

This concept especially caught on with younger generations of mainland Chinese, who patriotically embrace their culture and reconfigure through their (life)style and consumption

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<sup>112</sup> David Bandurksi, "And Then There Were Five," *China Media Project*, December 29, 2021, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/12/29/and-then-there-were-five/>.

"Zhongguo gongchandang zhangcheng: zhongguo gongchandang di ershi ci quanguo daibiao dahui bufen xiugai, 2022 nian 10 yue 22 ri tongguo 中国共产党章程: 中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会部分修改, 2022年10月22日通过 (Constitution of the Communist Party of China: Partially revised by the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and adopted on October 22, 2022)," accessed on July 24, 2024, <https://www.12371.cn/special/zggcdzc/zggcdzcqw/>.

<sup>113</sup> Jiaqian Ni, Mengqiao Wang and Kai Quek. "The sources of national pride: Evidence from China and the United States," *Nations and Nationalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2024), 9-11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.13007>.

<sup>114</sup> Yuchao Zhu, "'Performance legitimacy' and China's political adaptation strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 16 (Springer: 2011), 123–140, [10.1007/s11366-011-9140-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-011-9140-8).

<sup>115</sup> Sun, "Tradition, Cultural Modernization, and Soft Power," 232-233.

Callahan, "Identity and security in China: the negative soft power of the China Dream," 216-229.

Yingjie Guo, "The CCP returns to Chinese cultural roots," *East Asia Forum*, October 3, 2016, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2016/10/03/the-ccp-returns-to-chinese-cultural-roots/>.

Zhuoran Li, "The Sixth Plenum and the Rise of Traditional Chinese Culture in Socialist Ideology," *The Diplomat*, November 19, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/the-sixth-plenum-and-the-rise-of-traditional-chinese-culture-in-socialist-ideology/>.

practices what it means to be “Chinese”, which now includes both the communist legacy and a traditional legacy.<sup>116</sup> Xi Jinping visited Chinese traditional thinker Confucius’ hometown Qufu in November 2013, where he stated that the “the Communist Party had been “the loyal inheritor and promoter of China’s outstanding traditional culture.”<sup>117</sup> This is a far cry from the CCP’s days of Cultural Revolution and “overturning the four olds” (old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas).<sup>118</sup>

Not only is *guochao* thus a matter of economic confidence (“consuming Chinese”), but also one of cultural confidence. The next section looks at how that cultural confidence is upheld against “the West”, historically seen as an threatening entity by the PRC. By exporting Chinese national pride through a sophisticated and refined fashion, the PRC now competes and (in New-Chinese Style fans regard) “upstages” western culture.

### 3.3.3. Sophistication: cultural pride versus “the West”

How could this longing for sophistication within New-Chinese and *guochao* consumers, mentioned above, be contextualized within the Chinese idea of cultural confidence?

The PRC and its leading CCP party often coin the term “the century of humiliation” for the twentieth century which began with the first Opium War (1839–1842) and ended with the Communist coming in power (1949). There is a clear idea China has to rise up again, after multiple defeats at the hands of the Russians, Europeans and the Japanese. This rise to superpower status stems from the (debated) idea that China has to regain its position of historical unbroken and unchallenged Chinese predominance in Asia.<sup>119</sup> From the beginning of Xi Jinping’s rule in 2012, this goal has been named the “China Dream”, a broader plan to let

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<sup>116</sup> Wing-Chung Ho, “The Surge of Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *China: An International Journal* 20, no. 4 (Singapore: NUS Press Pte Ltd, 2022), 1-22, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/chn.2022.0032>.

Law, “New-Chinese Fashion Shows That Guochao Is Here To Stay.”

<sup>117</sup> Chris Buckley, “Leader Taps Into Chinese Classics in Seeking to Cement Power,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/world/leader-taps-into-chinese-classics-in-seeking-to-cement-power.html>.

<sup>118</sup> “The Communist Party is redefining what it means to be Chinese,” *The Economist*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/china/2017/08/17/the-communist-party-is-redefining-what-it-means-to-be-chinese>.

<sup>119</sup> David Arase, “The Geopolitics of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream: Problems and Prospects,” in *Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 15 (Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 6-8, [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/FB76F7A2BA43675E385F51ED870C78FA/9789814762748c\\_p1-31\\_CBO.pdf/geopolitics\\_of\\_xi\\_jinpings\\_chinese\\_dream\\_problems\\_and\\_prospects.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/FB76F7A2BA43675E385F51ED870C78FA/9789814762748c_p1-31_CBO.pdf/geopolitics_of_xi_jinpings_chinese_dream_problems_and_prospects.pdf).

David Scott, *China Stands Up: The PRC And The International System* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 136-141.

China blossom into a steady and global superpower, “the great rejuvenation”, by 1949, the centenary of the Communist Revolution.<sup>120</sup> The PRC’s recent economic growth and subsequent dominant position within East-Asia and globally, has given the country newly infused “self-confidence” to achieve the “China Dream”.<sup>121</sup>

Adding cultural confidence, as a pride in “Chinese cultural identity”, to this, has caused an idea of re-claiming the status of a culturally advanced society in the PRC, a sentiment lost in the “century of humiliation” and ignored during the past reign of the CCP. There is a sort of sentiment in the PRC of China being historically undervalued and mistreated, politically as well as culturally.<sup>122</sup> The Chinese nationalism of the Xi Jinping era is thus partly based upon animosity against other nations, a seemingly new development in contrast to Chinese nationalism of the late twentieth century, with a percentage of young people even expressing outright anti-western sentiments.<sup>123</sup> On top of that, throughout China’s growth as an economic superpower, it has been seen as an economy based on low-quality manufacturing and manual labor. Currently, the PRC wants to evolve its economy by moving away from the industrial manufacturing market (and the cheap “Made in China” image that came with it), and transition into a more sustainable and qualitative manufacturing economic model that focuses on advanced technology and consumption.<sup>124</sup>

In short, the Chinese cultural confidence and self-assertiveness has grown under economic prosperity and Xi Jinping’s political focus on a “Chinese revival”.<sup>125</sup> For Chinese culture to be “taken serious again”, a sense of sophistication, strength and authenticity is deemed indispensable. In this way, New-Chinese style’s emphasis on tastefulness and elevated fashion could be explained: we have to find pride and distinguishedness in our culture and will not be underestimated as “tacky” or “low-quality” again. For example, this user models a reimagined *qipao* dress, while the caption of the post says: “You pursue your western ideals,

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<sup>120</sup> Meng, “Xi’s thought to help modernize governance.”

<sup>121</sup> Sun, “Tradition, Cultural Modernization, and Soft Power,” 221.

<sup>122</sup> Ni, Wang and Quek. “The sources of national pride: Evidence from China and the United States,” 4. Ho, “Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 5.

<sup>123</sup> Ho, “Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 8-9.

Eric Li, “The CCP’s Greatest Strength Is “Self-Reinvention”,” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/02/ccp-reinvention-anniversary-youth-popularity/>.

<sup>124</sup> Francisco Betti, “How China’s shifting industries are reshaping its long-term growth model,” *World Economic Forum*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/06/how-china-s-shifting-industries-are-reshaping-its-long-term-growth-model/>.

James McBride and Andrew Chatzky, “Is ‘Made in China 2025’ a Threat to Global Trade?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated May 13, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/made-china-2025-threat-global-trade#:~:text=Released%20in%202015%2C%20Made%20in,developing%20ten%20high%2Dtech%20industries.>

Dudarenok, “Guochao Marketing,” *Jing Daily*.

<sup>125</sup> Sun, “Tradition, Cultural Modernization, and Soft Power,” 241.

I love my eastern beauty” (Nǐ zhuī nǐ de xīfāng gǔ wǒ ài wǒ de dōngfāng xiāng 你追你的西方骨 我爱我的东方相), showing a clear relation between Chinese beauty and elegance, and a sentiment critical of the West (fig. 32).<sup>126</sup> Another user threw a Chinese-style dress-up party for her western friends abroad, and mentioned in the caption how she was proud to share her culture and how “living in an era of cultural confidence is a rare fortune” (Shēng zài yīgè mínzú wénhuà zìxìn de niándài, sān shēng yǒuxìng 生在一个民族文化自信的年代, 三生有幸) (fig. 33).<sup>127</sup>



Fig. 33: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, showing the user and her female friends clad in New-Chinese Style, 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>126</sup> @燕燕有梨涡, “Ni zhui ni de xifanggu wo ai wo de dongfang xiang 你追你的西方骨 我爱我的东方相 (You pursue your Western ideals, I love my eastern beauty),” Xiaohongshu post, April 30, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6630b9e6000000001e0304f1?xsec\\_token=AB2IDDDOlCuwUmoG3j-TBQOpwDfsMAgySqSZzp-vBPA94=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6630b9e6000000001e0304f1?xsec_token=AB2IDDDOlCuwUmoG3j-TBQOpwDfsMAgySqSZzp-vBPA94=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>127</sup> @Angela Xue 薛逸歌, “Liuxue plog | liuchuan qiannian de zhongguo meixue yao rang ouzhou kandao 留学 plog | 流传千年的中国美学 要让欧洲看到 (Study abroad blog | Chinese aesthetics that have been passed down for thousands of years should be seen by Europe),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified February 4, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65af8483000000001003cfc5?xsec\\_token=AB2ppit0\\_3Tj\\_NYmx-i-l\\_WqrfovloHOWgCTZuTnbpFTfQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65af8483000000001003cfc5?xsec_token=AB2ppit0_3Tj_NYmx-i-l_WqrfovloHOWgCTZuTnbpFTfQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).

It has to be noted that this argument is nuanced. The political is not *enforced* in New-Chinese style: it can be read as a trend with clear political origins, but there is no enforcement involved in promoting traditional culture. The political influence is based on soft power in this case: making something look attractive, so that the subject will agree with the political discourse rather than forcing it upon them directly (more in chapter 4 of this paper).<sup>128</sup>

This means that while most users create these posts driven by personal interest and enthusiasm, some express a more direct sense of patriotism. Yet, the space for New-Chinese style's current popularity can only be framed within a wider political framework established by the CCP.

### 3.3.4. Chinese beauty standards: “sophisticated” versus “tacky”

Aside from this political explanation, one of the abovementioned comments uses the sentence “土甚至有风尘味了” (tǔ shènzhì yǒu fēngchén wèile, "It's so soil-y/tacky that it even has a hint of dustiness"), to express the tackiness and even vulgarity of wearing a very short skirt or shorts in New-Chinese style.<sup>129</sup> This choice of characters points us to the concept of “土” (tǔ, literal translation: earth or soil), which in Chinese slang means “tacky” or “unsophisticated”. It's a derogatory term which expresses tastelessness, referring to China's rural population not knowing “how to dress”. Although recently having been claimed by a select community of urban youth as a countermovement that accepts a more diverse and creative type of beauty standard, the broad population of the PRC would not want to be deemed “土”.<sup>130</sup> The focus on sleek hair, white skin, petite and skinny body shapes and a clean cut or cutesy look are still much more prevalent in Chinese culture.

Thus, although New-Chinese style's apparent focus on sophistication could be framed against the broader political background of *guochao*'s link to China's “cultural confidence” and the “China Dream” of recent years under president Xi Jinping's lead, this beauty standard could also be linked to the PRC's inner urban-country cultural divide.

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<sup>128</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*.

<sup>129</sup> @爆爆小鱼干, “A jiemeimen! Zhe tao xin zhongshi chanyi taozhuang ye tai juele ba! 啊姐妹们! 这套新中式禅意套装也太绝了吧! (Ah sisters! This new Chinese Zen suit is so amazing!).”

<sup>130</sup> Jiang, “Decoding “Too Cool”.”



### 3.4. Setting the scene: enhancing “Chinese-ness” in staging photos

The “Chinese identity” is not only formed within the actual clothes, or the characters used to discuss them, but also takes shape in *how* people post about it.

Casually lounging on side posts or stairs, looking straight into the camera or posing in a straight position while taking an OOTD selfie: poses vary and follow the popular ways of posing for social media throughout East-Asia (and globally). Beauty and make-up is also conform the general China-wide norm: natural-style make-up, long hair in a natural color, never anything too extravagant (tying in with the abovementioned “Clean Girl” and sophisticated beauty standard).

#### 3.4.1. “Chinese” accessories and props

A more overt expression of New-Chinese identity, is seen in the chosen accessories and props. A lot of posts feature props like fans and cups of tea. These props embody Chinese culture on a very immediate level, they are emblematic of traditional Chinese history and culture.<sup>131</sup> Accessories would sometimes include a special small bag with Chinese aesthetic details, a jade necklace, or (very frequently featured) a traditional Chinese hair comb or -clamp with beading and jewelry. In line with the sartorial difference between *Hanfu* and New-Chinese style fashion, New-Chinese hairstyles take traditional elements but tone them down by mixing them in with contemporary global styles. In *Hanfu*, hair combs are often worn with big, structural hairstyles, true to their historical origins. New-Chinese hairstyles take the hair combs from these traditional coiffures, but add them to a half-up half-down hairstyle or a loose bun (fig. 34).<sup>132</sup> Easygoing sophistication is once again paramount when it comes to New-Chinese style.

When scrolling through the “新中式” (New-Chinese Style) tag, half of the posts feature the poster’s personal apartments or undefined, liminal-style spaces like hallways or staircases.

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<sup>131</sup> James Alexander Benn, *Tea In China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015).  
Rado, “The Lady’s Fan,” 193-227.

<sup>132</sup> @球球你了, “Chuan xin zhongshi guang lufugong 穿新中式逛卢浮宫 FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫 FR (“Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!”).”

### 3.4.2. “Chinese” setting: architectural elements

Often, pictures are taken outside, and two tendencies in the choice of background can be noticed. The biggest chunk of outside photography features “typical” traditional Chinese style architecture. The pictures show a lot of pagoda-style tile roofs, wooden lattice work, big grey stone-tiled courtyards and occasionally a shrine or temple with walls showing traditional style Chinese characters (read from top to bottom). Sometimes, the Chinese references are quite subtle: a part of a brown-tiled pagoda roof in the corner of a photo. Inside, models pose in front of calligraphy scrolls and cream walls with low doors lined with latticework, invoking the idea of a typical traditional East-Asian interior (fig. 18, 26, 35, 36, 37).<sup>133</sup>



Fig. 35: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user modeling a New-Chinese style outfit in what looks like a traditional Chinese temple, 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>133</sup> @子回頭是浪, “Ganlu si tie t 甘露寺铁 t (Ganlu Temple Iron Tower),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified January 28, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65b4e5b800000000a0316c4?xsec\\_token=AB828\\_QJKgCcyrXArziXxdoT0Ni8Bf9rH5gjxJqajFq2Q=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65b4e5b800000000a0316c4?xsec_token=AB828_QJKgCcyrXArziXxdoT0Ni8Bf9rH5gjxJqajFq2Q=&xsec_source=pc_search).  
@早安樊樊, “Fu wujin chun 赋无尽春 (Endless spring),” Xiaohongshu post, April 5, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/661002ca000000001b009645?xsec\\_token=ABhRWHwgR4xUXvtLZX0gFKRSvm\\_IDAHKkVE9K81817hjU=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/661002ca000000001b009645?xsec_token=ABhRWHwgR4xUXvtLZX0gFKRSvm_IDAHKkVE9K81817hjU=&xsec_source=pc_search).  
@偷心小婷, “ootd | nai bai gailiang qipao qun zhende hen ai!! ootd | 奶白改良旗袍裙 真的很爱! (ootd | Milk white modified qipao skirt I really love it! !),” Xiaohongshu post, July 1, 2022, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec\\_token=ABGhu3-8h5A1WBICzHpYXP7-nN2hD5mNQVBhdaXsQPfZs=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec_token=ABGhu3-8h5A1WBICzHpYXP7-nN2hD5mNQVBhdaXsQPfZs=&xsec_source=pc_search).  
@显汀, “Heji | lai ba! Zhide yi shi de xiarixin zhongshi 合集|来吧! 值得一试的夏日新中式 (Compilation | Come on! New-Chinese Summer Worth Trying),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 26, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/667b53e4000000001d01b62d?xsec\\_token=ABmZHK0HE6jpK2broib5-Zxxd\\_Y9CpxbxDI58ECFiZjwU=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/667b53e4000000001d01b62d?xsec_token=ABmZHK0HE6jpK2broib5-Zxxd_Y9CpxbxDI58ECFiZjwU=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 36: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.



Fig. 38: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the user modeling a New-Chinese outfit in Baisha Old Town, 2024. Screenshot by author.

This again plays up to the abovementioned “creation of a Chinese identity”: a lot of Chinese buildings do not feature this traditional style of building, which is often reserved for heritage sites or “traditional style” towns (like Suzhou (fig. 17), and the provinces of Jiangnan and Yunnan (fig. 38) that often attract a lot of national and international tourism).<sup>134</sup> The urban (and most of the rural) landscape in China features a very different type of architecture: contemporary high-rise buildings and modern style living quarters.<sup>135</sup>

Most people posing in these photographs, would have to have made a travel to find architectural elements like this. This means the background setting of these photos is far from casual: it is a conscious act to link the clothes worn, to a certain idea of “traditional China”, with pagoda roofs, round gates, serene ponds and Daoist temples. It perpetrates a fantasy, an idea of “a common Chinese culture and history” that is valued recently by the Chinese subjects and their CCP government. We have to note though that this does not mean the posters are consciously trying to push a political agenda: they very well may have just chosen this background because it looks cute and matches the general vague characteristics of a “national style”. One could assume that a mandarin collar naturally matches with a brown tile roof and off-white wall of a Chinese temple site, but taking into account the history of the PRC, its multi-layered ethnic and dynastic history and recent efforts by CCP big bosses to reinstate traditional Chinese culture, these choices appear to be less-straightforward.

### 3.4.3. “Chinese-ness” in foreign settings

Another surprising trend noticed, although much less prevalent as its traditional Chinese counterparts, was the choice of a western style background. Paris’ streets and Seine river were by far the most popular but Italian piazza’s were also noted. One account shared pictures of her New-Chinese outfit in a Japanese metro system (fig. 39).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> @Caffeine 喵喵, “Qiuqiule, jiemeimen bie zai wen wo zhe jian yifu de lianjiele 求求了, 姐妹们别再问我这件衣服的链接了 (Please, sisters, stop asking me for the link to this dress).”

@小曲同学, “Baisha guzhen 白沙古镇 (Baisha Old Town),” Xiaohongshu post, February 4, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65bf2431000000002d001195?xsec\\_token=ABH04Qchh7n6K3gGW8DzlwRPO0HG0gokv0qynSMfUTA-E=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65bf2431000000002d001195?xsec_token=ABH04Qchh7n6K3gGW8DzlwRPO0HG0gokv0qynSMfUTA-E=&xsec_source=pc_search).

<sup>135</sup> Jianfei Zhu, Wei Chen and Hua Li, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>136</sup> @Via 姐姐, “Chuan xin zhongshi zai riben bei kua bao la 穿新中式在日本被夸爆啦 (Wearing new Chinese style is praised in Japan),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified April 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6619304a000000001b008198?xsec\\_token=AB8cnN631FQrswh1rSuNBW74V539ZpSK8xOQhvGmjba5o=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6619304a000000001b008198?xsec_token=AB8cnN631FQrswh1rSuNBW74V539ZpSK8xOQhvGmjba5o=&xsec_source=pc_search).

Not only streets, but culturally significant European spaces are also recurring: Versailles, the Louvre in Paris (fig. 10), the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris (fig. 40), the Milan Cathedral (fig. 41), among others. This choice was quite interesting: these pictures do have some sense of purposefulness: the clothes seem to stand out even more behind a not-so-typical east-Asian style backdrop, and the posts almost always mention the fact that the model is wearing Chinese-style fashion in (X) place, as if to highlight their choice of dress even more.<sup>137</sup>

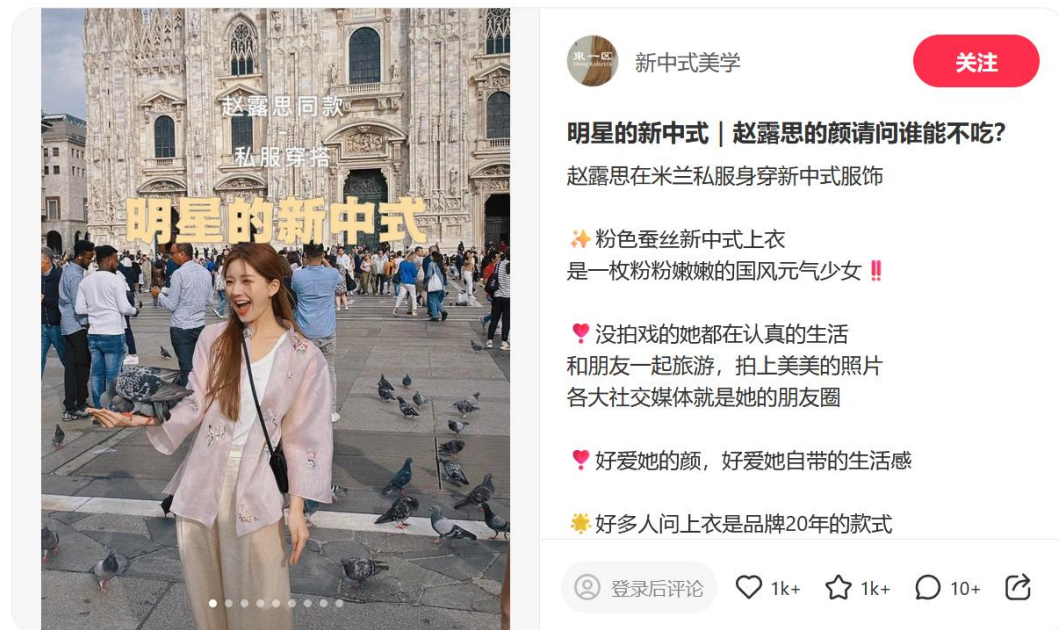


Fig. 41: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under *新中式* tag, with the user applauding celebrity Zhao Lusi's New-Chinese Style, 2024. Screenshot by author.

This deliberate focus on choosing non Chinese backdrops points to the reclaimed “Chinese self-confidence” and the Chinese beauty standard longing for sophistication, both mentioned above in previous sections.

<sup>137</sup> @球球你了, “Chuan xi zhongshi guang lufugong FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫 FR (Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!).”

@ Kelly\_芝芝媽.\*, “Dang zhongguo dongfang chuansuo zai FR bali 当中国东方穿梭在FR巴黎 (When China Orient shuttles through FRParis),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 7, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6663246200000000e030bed?xsec\\_token=ABQTguzmvOLl1Z1bVanlUmz-zLnlYCxlVzL1kadjJ2Ziw=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6663246200000000e030bed?xsec_token=ABQTguzmvOLl1Z1bVanlUmz-zLnlYCxlVzL1kadjJ2Ziw=&xsec_source=pc_search).

@ 新中式美学, “Mingxing de xin zhongshi | Zhao Lusi de yan qingwen shei neng bu chi? 明星的新中式 | 赵露思的颜请问谁能不吃? (Celebrities' New Chinese Style | Zhao Lusi's Looks - Who Could Resist?),” Xiaohongshu post, November 8, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/654b70a2000000003300089b?xsec\\_token=AB9-ECRAKXQfmBVlx4FC QR1LUabGh31gYD4 2vuzdKaw=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/654b70a2000000003300089b?xsec_token=AB9-ECRAKXQfmBVlx4FC QR1LUabGh31gYD4 2vuzdKaw=&xsec_source=pc_search).

The newfound pride in traditional Chinese culture is not only configured by consuming Chinese products and sharing its beauty online, but also spreading it internationally. Showing off to their followers how New-Chinese stands its ground abroad and shines even when worn in a non-Chinese context. It could be that these accounts want to show that Chinese culture is having a renaissance and is not subordinate to the traditionally seen as “cultural capitals” of the world. In this way, it fully ties in with the China self-confidence idea: the PRC is not to be ignored on a political, economic and (here) cultural level, taking a step away from eurocentrism and even rise above other nations in quality and sophistication.<sup>138</sup> Even when contrasted with Paris, often still seen as the quintessential icon of elegance, style and culture, the New-Chinese pride shines bright(er) (fig. 42).<sup>139</sup> At the same time, users show their followers that they have taste and are culturally educated, seeing the world and taking sophisticated pride in their own culture, at the same time.

The online space, and representation of identity within it, enhances New-Chinese style’s claim to “authentic Chinese-ness”.



Fig. 42: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, with the caption “When Paris meets New-Chinese style,” 2024. Screenshot by author.

<sup>138</sup> Ho, “The Surge of Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 8-9.

<sup>139</sup> Valerie Steele, “Paris, “Capital of Fashion”,” in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 10-49.

@Ashely 酱, “Dang bali yujian xin zhongshi 当巴黎遇见新中式 (When Paris meets New-Chinese style),” Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 11, 2024,

[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66178bd8000000001a015747?xsec\\_token=ABHerdR20TBCurNOseHBaw8NMuDmnVfLlZab8xuS4aQ1A=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66178bd8000000001a015747?xsec_token=ABHerdR20TBCurNOseHBaw8NMuDmnVfLlZab8xuS4aQ1A=&xsec_source=pc_search).



### 3.4. Conclusion

Through its dissemination on *Xiaohongshu*, as a broadly carried and long-lasting trend rather than a subculture, New-Chinese style proposes a revived “Chinese-ness”. By blending traditional Chinese dress elements with global fashion, this style contemporizes and revitalizes Chinese traditional culture. With an emphasis on sophistication and a “refined aesthetic”, New-Chinese style reignites national pride in Chinese cultural heritage, which “holds its head high” against historically perceived foreign influence and dominance by the PRC. By showing the outfits in combination with Chinese cultural signifiers like traditional backdrops, fans and cups of tea, New-Chinese style users on *Xiaohongshu* enhance the style’s “Chinese-ness” and amplify its projection of national pride.

While New-Chinese style celebrates Chinese heritage and a creative and freeing approach to its culture, it also functions as a political tool to legitimize the current CCP leadership, conflating communist legacy with traditional culture into one “Chinese cultural identity” under Xi Jinping’s “China Dream”.

Through its spread on *Xiaohongshu*, New-Chinese style emerges as a widely embraced and enduring trend, rather than a subculture, offering a revived sense of “Chinese-ness.” By blending traditional Chinese dress elements with global fashion, this style contemporizes and revitalizes traditional culture. With an emphasis on sophistication and a refined aesthetic, New-Chinese style rekindles national pride in Chinese cultural heritage, presenting it as resilient against historically perceived foreign influence and dominance by the PRC. Users on *Xiaohongshu* enhance this “Chinese-ness” by showcasing outfits alongside cultural signifiers like traditional backdrops, fans, and cups of tea, further amplifying the style’s ability to project national pride.

While New-Chinese style celebrates Chinese heritage with a creative and liberating approach to culture, it also serves as a political tool to legitimize the current CCP leadership, merging communist legacy with traditional culture into a unified “Chinese cultural identity” under Xi Jinping’s “China Dream.”

As a result, this style, rooted in political discourse promoted by the CCP, embodies a constructed and “imagined” identity of what it means to be Chinese in the 2020s. This identity is visually represented by a blend of global street-style fashion with a subdued and sophisticated reinterpretation of traditional Chinese dress, worn with (national) pride.

## 4. Guócháo internationally: still “China-chic”?

The discussion of *guochao* in this paper, with New-Chinese fashion as a case study, has been focused mainly on how the trend functions within the context of the PRC. To discuss New-Chinese style, we have to discuss China and its political, historical and current cultural context, as it is so inextricably linked with feelings of national identity, nationalism and patriotism. As mentioned above, this nationalism and cultural confidence is in part configured through its position vis-à-vis the rest of the global community, and especially “the West”. A “Chinese cultural renaissance” only exists because there is a sentiment of culturally “losing out” against global, often Eurocentric cultural dominance, created by historical events. If the national identity is partly defined in relation to “the Other”, it is interesting to analyze the outward facing position of Chinese national identity works.

In this chapter, we shift our angle from a national political analysis of the New-Chinese style, to how it can be framed within international politics.

After looking at New-Chinese style’s national political context, this raises the question of how *guochao* and New-Chinese style is framed internationally. This chapter will position New-Chinese style within the PRC’s international soft power efforts, subsequently contrasting it with other nation-states’ soft power efforts and lastly, looking at the question of Chinese national dress vis-à-vis its East-Asian neighbors.

## 4.1. The PRC and international soft power

Soft power, as characterized by American political scientist Joseph Nye, is the ability to make others do what you want by influencing them, rather than forcing them to.<sup>140</sup> In Nye's words: "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants".<sup>141</sup> This means that a government, to get what they desire on a political level, will persuade another state, NGO or multinational corporation, to give them what they want. It is often a less militaristic approach to politics. Soft power, diplomacy for example, is in this way supposed to be opposite to hard power, like a political coup. Soft power often revolves around producing a good reputation and subsequent attraction, and could be categorized in three broad categories: "culture", "political values", and "policies".<sup>142</sup>

Soft power can appear in many different forms, for example: negotiation (e.g. diplomacy), youth organizations, construction of positive historical narratives, migration (e.g. missionaries), heritage, international support by aligning with others in political debate (e.g. supporting either Palestine or Israel in times of Middle-eastern political conflict), language promotion (e.g. supporting local language education), sending aid (e.g. the PRC's COVID-19 medical aid policies for other nations), religious affiliations, public image of your heads of state, and popularity of your local culture (e.g. food, music, fashion, art, design, etc.).

First mentioned in 2007 by then-Secretary General of the CCP Hu Jintao, soft power has been on the PRC's agenda for over a decade. In his speech for the seventeenth Party Congress, he called to "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country" and to "strengthen international cultural exchanges to draw on the fine achievements of foreign cultures and enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide".<sup>143</sup> Hu's incentive really took off under Xi Jinping's lead since 2013, who broadened Hu's appeal for cultural growth into his call for national self-confidence under his "China Dream", mentioned in the chapter before. These ideological slogans were supplemented by the Belt and Road Initiative (yīdài yīlù 一帶一路) and the set-up of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). While the Belt and Road Initiative aims to create a "New Silk Road" via a global infrastructure development strategy, the establishment of the AIIB focuses on creating positive

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<sup>140</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*.

<sup>141</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 12.

<sup>142</sup> Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*.

<sup>143</sup> "Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress," *China Daily*, October 24, 2007, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content\\_6204564.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm).

economic and social outcomes for Asia through a collective Asian financial institution.<sup>144</sup> In these efforts, the PRC mostly built “policy” and “political value” based soft power.

Nye’s third soft power category, “culture”, is where “China’s cultural renaissance” is aimed to take place. Since 2004, the PRC has built about 496 Confucius Institutes in 160 countries, creating a network of state-controlled educational centers that spread Chinese culture around the globe (data provided by Confucius Institute itself and counted as of December 31, 2023).<sup>145</sup> On top of that, international Chinese cultural festivals, Lunar New Year’s celebrations and Chinese media channels are heavily subsidized by the government.<sup>146</sup> Chinese literature, athletics and material heritage are heavily promoted abroad.<sup>147</sup>

An important criticism on this has been raised by scholars of international politics, among which Janice Baily Mattern, who took into question the binary between hard and soft power. She states there are cases where it is hard to distinguish between the two, and could be mixed.<sup>148</sup> This is true for the PRC: their dominant position in international politics is built partially on hard power (asserting their dominance in regions like Tibet, Xinjiang and the South China Sea) and partially on soft power, but specifically on an *economic* soft power.<sup>149</sup>

In a 2015 article for *Foreign Affairs*, David Shambaugh, a famous scholar of East-Asian studies and Chinese contemporary politics, describes how a lot of the PRC’s soft power initiatives are realized because of its economic wealth, which creates space for gigantic investments in setting up Chinese institutions (domestically as well as internationally). “The

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<sup>144</sup> Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified on February 9, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>.

<sup>145</sup> Shuhua Fan, “Confucius Institutes in the Xi Jinping Era: From Peak to Demise in the United States,” in *China under Xi Jinping: A New Assessment*, eds. Qiang Fang and Xiaobing Li (Leiden University Press, 2024), 165–200, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/ji.15136086.12>.

Zhongguo guoji zhongwen jiaoyu jijinhui 中国国际中文教育基金会 (Chinese International Education Foundation), *Kongzi xueyuan niandu fazhan baogao 孔子学院年度发展报告(Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2023)* (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji zhongwen jiaoyu jijinhui 中国国际中文教育基金会 (Chinese International Education Foundation), 2023), [https://ci.cn/en/qkylxq?file=/profile/upload/2024/07/03/471606610\\_20240703165613A988.pdf](https://ci.cn/en/qkylxq?file=/profile/upload/2024/07/03/471606610_20240703165613A988.pdf).

<sup>146</sup> David Shambaugh, “China’s Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>.

<sup>147</sup> Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”.

<sup>148</sup> Janice Baily Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, Vol. 3 (SAGE, 2005): 583–612, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>.

<sup>149</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007).

Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Rise of China’s Soft Power,” in *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition. China and Globalization*, ed. Joseph S. Nye (Springer: Singapore, 2023), 97–99.  
Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”.



Chinese government approaches public diplomacy the same way it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure—by investing money and expecting to see development.”<sup>150</sup>

Despite this economic soft power, any scholars and key opinion makers have described the PRC as having a “soft power deficit”.<sup>151</sup> Both in relation to western powers and within its own cultural sphere (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia), the PRC is reported to be failing in *attractiveness*. As mentioned before, although their international policies are not only based on hard power, the PRC is generally perceived by other states as “threatening”.<sup>152</sup> As Shambaugh puts it: “While China’s economic prowess impresses much of the world, its repressive political system and mercantilist business practices tarnish its reputation.”<sup>153</sup> Yet the investments the PRC has made, seem to not be giving as big of a return. The challenge for China’s international soft power endeavors thus lies in fixing its *image*. How this works and how New-Chinese style could maybe help fill this vacuum, will be analyzed in the next section.

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<sup>150</sup> Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., “China’s Soft Power Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>.

Zuri Linetsky, “China Can’t Catch a Break in Asian Public Opinion,” *Foreign Policy*, June 28, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/28/china-soft-power-asia-culture-influence-korea-singapore/>.

Guy C. Charlton and Xiang Gao, “China’s Preference for Hard Power Is Creating Major Headaches for Beijing,” *The Diplomat*, January 26, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/chinas-preference-for-hard-power-is-creating-major-headaches-for-beijing/>.

<sup>152</sup> Linetsky, “China Can’t Catch a Break in Asian Public Opinion”.

Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power”.

<sup>153</sup> Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”.

## 4.2. New-Chinese style as soft power: “Cool China”?

The PRC’s “soft power deficit”, mentioned in the section above, gets an especially painful edge for the CCP when we compare the country’s lack in cultural attractiveness to its east-Asian neighbors Japan and South Korea and their boom in soft power, powered by popular culture.

### 4.2.1. Popular culture as soft power: “Cool Japan”, “*Hallyu*” and “Cool Britannia”

Japan’s popularity has often been coined the “Cool Japan” phenomenon. Due to its popular culture exports like anime, manga, J-pop music, computer games and their brands (Nintendo and Sega), Japan enjoyed a rising positive image in the early and mid 2000’s.<sup>154</sup> By 2007, the Japanese government officially picked up on this popularity and fed into the “Cool Japan” phenomenon, with its New Prime Minister Taro Aso promoting manga as a way to build international bridges.<sup>155</sup> An 2009 article by Douglas McGray for *Foreign Policy* dubbed this rise Japan’s “gross national cool”.<sup>156</sup> Anime and the likes became so big that words for foreign Japan-fans like *otaku* (serious anime fans) and *weeb* or *weaboo* (Japanese wannabe’s) have become quite mainstream in our everyday language.<sup>157</sup> Japan’s popularity spilled over from pop culture, to almost all aspects of Japanese culture: its fashion, its cuisine, its values and its architecture all enjoyed global popularity, one that is still very ubiquitous to this day with brand names like Hello Kitty, Nintendo and Pokémon still very popular in the last decade.

Specifically in fashion, Japanese designers have been praised since the 1970’s for their unique approach to design, characterized as innovative, qualitative and deconstructing the western accepted notions of clothing and fashion. In this, designers like Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo were hailed for their newness and their “Japanese-ness”: “the source of their design inspiration undoubtedly comes from products that symbolize Japanese culture, such as kabuki, Mount Fuji, geisha and cherry blossoms, but their uniqueness lies in the ways they deconstructed existing rules of clothing and reconstructed their own interpretation of what

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<sup>154</sup> Groot, “Cool Japan *Versus* the China Threat,” 15-17.

<sup>155</sup> “Manga shares gain on leader hopes,” *BBC*, September 12, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/6991720.stm>.

<sup>156</sup> Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/>.

<sup>157</sup> Groot, “Cool Japan *Versus* the China Threat,” 23.

fashion is and what fashion can be.”<sup>158</sup> From the late 1990s onwards, Japan was also seen as the mecca for street style and subculture, with magazines like *Fruits* and the original girls of Harajuku having become cult figures.<sup>159</sup>

With Japan’s sputtering economy and gigantic public debt of which the country hasn’t recovered since the 1990’s, hopes were set on its newly accrued soft power to bring in big money.<sup>160</sup> As McGray described it: it seemed as if Japan was suddenly more of a superpower due to its cultural influence, than it was when it was an economical one in the 1980’s.<sup>161</sup>

McGray dedicates Japan’s popularity to its accepting of western influences. He describes the culture as postmodern: it has always been a weird mix of modernism and traditionalism, but never bothered too much with cultural authenticity or correctness: “cultural accuracy is not the point. What matters is the whiff of Japanese cool”.<sup>162</sup>

Recently, it seems South-Korea has taken over the torch of being “the coolest country” of Asia (and maybe, globally). South-Korea’s K-pop, K-drama, K-beauty and K-fashion have taken the world by storm, with cultural products like boyband BTS, the movie “Parasite” (2019) and viral Netflix shows like *Squid Game* (2021) topping global charts and showing off South-Korea’s entertainment business to a global audience.<sup>163</sup> This success has rubbed off on the country’s broader image and economy: in the PRC, for example, *hallyu* has created a craze for Korean beauty, fashion and cosmetic surgery. To a lot of Chinese youth, Korea has become synonymous with “stylish” and “fashionable”.<sup>164</sup> Hallyu has indirectly contributed quite a lot to the South-Korean economy through trade opportunities, diplomatic relations and tourism revenue, which has doubled in the last decade. It has also made fans aware of political issues surrounding South-Korea’s national history and future goals, like for example the occupation

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<sup>158</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion: Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 93.

<sup>159</sup> Osman Ahmed (host), “How Harajuku became the blueprint for Instagram style,” *i-Identity* podcast, January 28, 2023, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2ZgmudE1POCjyesQ7GDh0l?si=b4383b83f88c4b92>.

Christy Tidwell, “Street and Youth Fashion in Japan,” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, ed. John E. Vollmer (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), 398–403.

<sup>160</sup> Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan was the future but it’s stuck in the past,” *BBC*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63830490>.

Groot, “Cool Japan Versus the China Threat,” 15–18.

<sup>161</sup> McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool.”

<sup>162</sup> McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool.”

<sup>163</sup> Sanya Anand and David Seyheon Baek, “Understanding Hallyu: the Impact of Korean Pop Culture,” *Marketing Journal*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.marketingjournal.org/understanding-hallyu-the-impact-of-korean-pop-culture-by-sanya-anand-and-david-seyheon-baek/>.

Jymmin Parc, “Korea’s cultural exports and soft power: Understanding the true scale of this trend,” *University of Melbourne Asialink*, August 9, 2022, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/koreas-cultural-exports-and-soft-power-understanding-the-true-scale-of-this-trend>

<sup>164</sup> Soo Hyun Jang, “The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship,” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 19, No. 2 (Seoul National University, 2012), 102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43107242>.

of Korea by Japanese forces in WWII and the Korean War.<sup>165</sup> In the PRC, *hallyu*'s overwhelming popularity even led to a ban on Korean cultural content and a crackdown on beauty brands from 2017 until it 2023, when the ban was partially lifted.<sup>166</sup>

It could also be said that the popularity of East-Asian culture also has an aspect of orientalism or exotica to it, especially in the West. While this question is relevant, it is outside the scope of this research. South-Korea and Japan's rise to popularity are relevant to our case in their strained relationship with the PRC, but are not the sole examples of a pop culture soft power boom. The United States or the United Kingdom for example, enjoy a great deal of soft power influence to their popular culture.

In fact, the term "Cool Japan" was taken from the earlier slogan "Cool Britannia". The concept was first characterized in 1997 by journalist Stryker McGuire's article in *Newsweek*, in which he explained "Why London rules" and described London at the end of the 1990's as "the coolest city on the planet".<sup>167</sup> The British government's Department of National Heritage took up the idea of "Cool Britannia," just before the Labour party's Tony Blair ended over a decade of Conservative leadership in 1997. His political flair coincided with British pop culture's global rise.<sup>168</sup> With the Spice Girls, Harry Potter, Britpop's rock-'n-roll image led bands like Blur and Oasis, Hugh Grant's romcom popularity, David Beckham, and even Lady Diana Spencer, the U.K.'s reputation became fashionable and forward looking. Called a "youthquake" in *Vanity Fair*'s "Swinging London" issue of 1997, this boom was powered with a sense of youthful pride instead of the pessimist character British youth- and subcultures had throughout the 1970's and 1980's.<sup>169</sup> Union Jacks became a fashion: used on magazine covers and cropped shirts, as a sign of pride in Britain's pop culture (rather than used as political satire).<sup>170</sup> This surge in popularity was not only international: it led to great feelings of patriotism and triumphalism.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Parc, "Korea's cultural exports and soft power".

<sup>166</sup> Linbin Wang, "The Korean Wave's Rocky Road in China," *The Diplomat*, January 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/the-korean-waves-rocky-road-in-china/>.

<sup>167</sup> Stryker McGuire, "This time I've come to bury Cool Britannia," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/mar/29/cool-britannia-g20-blair-brown>

<sup>168</sup> John Harris, "Cool Britannia: where did it all go wrong?," *The New Statesman*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2017/05/cool-britannia-where-did-it-all-go-wrong>.

Alina Cojocaru, "Revisiting 'Cool Britannia': The Cinematic Construction of London as a Global City in Four British-Asian Films," *Altre Modernità*, No. 20 (Milano University Press, 2018), 89-91, [Dialnet-RevisitingCoolBritanniaTheCinematicConstructionOfL-6707811.pdf](https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6707811).

<sup>169</sup> Harris, "Cool Britannia: where did it all go wrong?."

<sup>170</sup> Charlie Culverhouse, "Union Jack Fashion: What Does It Mean Today?," *Guap*, June 9, 2022, <https://guap.co/union-jack-fashion-what-does-it-mean-today/>.

<sup>171</sup> Harris, "Cool Britannia: where did it all go wrong?."

Here, not only the image of the state's politics and economics made its reputation, but pop culture played a huge part in making its attractiveness. The U.K., as well as Japan and South-Korea, wasn't just valued and respected, but was "cool".

Alina Cojocaru in "Revisiting 'Cool Britannia': The Cinematic Construction of London as a Global City" characterizes how "Cool Britannia" was a way for the Blair administration to merge the cultural, social and economic domains in a slogan that marries both the glorification of British heritage and the country's recent modernization. As Cojoracu states: "Examining the notion of 'Cool Britannia' in itself, the oxymoronic association of 'coolness' – suggesting an open-minded, youth-oriented society – with the archaic form 'Britannia' – a direct reference to the link between the evolving present and its history – invokes a sense of cultural renewal, most visible in television, film, fashion and music."<sup>172</sup>

While "Cool Britannia" (and in its wake "Cool Japan" and the "Hallyu" wave) of course had its own specific temporal, spatial and cultural context, the successful marriage between tradition and heritage, and modernity and progression-driven national pride, especially among young people, and spurred on by state-governing bodies and economic stability, shows a striking similarity to the Chinese renaissance phenomenon.

New-Chinese style, as an example of Chinese traditional renaissance, works in a similar way as Cool Japan and the Hallyu Wave. It is based on a mix of western global culture with the values and aesthetics of traditional culture, made popular again because of a recent reinvigorated national pride. With a government adopting traditional culture as its own, as "Chinese" again, and an economy that is stable and able to invest in the export of its culture, the theoretical situation is favorable. Adding a 2020's layer to the phenomenon: New-Chinese style's consumption is heavily digitized, so it could connect to global consumption easily.

This is what these abovementioned investments in cultural promotion by the PRC seem to be failing at: not only to spread Chinese culture, but to make it "hot", make it attractive. Can Confucius Institutes and trade routes succeed at making the PRC and its culture look fun, attractive and young, in the way popular culture can? Could New-Chinese style, and broader, this renaissance of traditional culture by the new generation of urban, young Chinese be a solution to the PRC's so-called "soft power deficit"?

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<sup>172</sup> Cojocaru, "Revisiting 'Cool Britannia'," 91.

## 4.2.2. Chinese cultural renaissance goes global: theory or reality?

### Censorship of youth culture

Yet, there is no international wave of “China craze” or a “Chinese wind” to speak of at the moment. China’s pop culture has been steadily rising, but has not (yet?) hit global popularity like its neighbors. Finding a definite reason for this is largely guesswork, and would need extensive research. However, some notes can be made, stemming from my research.

It has to be mentioned that maybe, China does not need or want to look “attractive” to foreigners. In the current Chinese government and policies under Xi Jinping Thought (read: socialism, a free market, authoritarianism and strengthening the nation), a very powerful and creative pop culture scene is not too welcome, and in fact, not possible.<sup>173</sup>

Historically, the CCP believes that art should serve the national interest, from Mao Zedong’s speech at the Yanan forum in 1942, stating art should serve the socialist direction of the new nation, to Xi Jinping reiterating this idea in the form of his own policies.<sup>174</sup> In a 2014 speech, of which a summary was released on Xinhua, Xi emphasized the role of art and literature in realizing the “China Dream” and the country’s “great rejuvenation”.<sup>175</sup> With multiple crackdowns on celebrity culture and heavily regulation or even bans on pop culture in the Xi Jinping era, the President of the PRC has stuck to this promise.

In general, free speech and youth culture, two elements of pop culture, have been heavily regulated in the PRC. The country ranked 179 out of 180 countries on the matter of free speech (with only North-Korea doing worse), reported in 2023 by international non-profit organization Reporters without Borders.<sup>176</sup> Under Xi, the country has seen a heavy crackdown on dissident voices.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Chris Buckley, “Xi Jinping Thought Explained: A New Ideology for a New Era,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/asia/xi-jinping-thought-explained-a-new-ideology-for-a-new-era.html>.

Mercy A. Kuo, “The Political Aims of ‘Xi Jinping Thought’,” *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/the-political-aims-of-xi-jinping-thought/>.

<sup>174</sup> Eva Man Kit Wah, “Evolution of Art and Moral Concerns in New China: From Mao Zedong’s Yanan Talks to Xi Jinping’s Speech on Artistic Practice” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Art*, ed. James Harold, 152–166 (Oxford Academic, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197539798.013.11>.

<sup>175</sup> Wang Shuang 王爽, “Xi Jinping: Wenyi buneng zai shichang jingji dachao zhong mishi fangxiang 习近平：文艺不能在市场经济大潮中迷失方向 (Xi Jinping: Literature and art cannot lose their way in the tide of market economy),” *Xinhua*, October 15, 2024, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/15/c\\_1112840544.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/15/c_1112840544.htm).

<sup>176</sup> “China,” Reporters Without Borders, accessed on August 3, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/china>.

<sup>177</sup> “What’s Driving the Current Storm of Chinese Censorship? A ChinaFile Conversation,” *ChinaFile*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/whats-driving-current-storm-chinese-censorship>.

Heavy regulation of youth culture has a long history in the PRC. While before the 1980's, any form of creative freedom was virtually impossible, after the Reform and Opening Up, the CCP has had to learn to deal with sub- and youth cultures adopted from the West. Ranging from more marginal punk events in Wuhan to shutting down electronic music clubs and queer spaces, creative freedom is made difficult in the PRC.<sup>178</sup>

Larger, more broadly carried cultural expressions are also heavily censored. In 2018, the state cracked down heavily on the country's rising hip hop scene.<sup>179</sup> On January 19, 2018, Chinese state media channel Sina reported that the government issued "Four Absolutely Do-Not-Use" standards for inviting guests to broadcast and television programs: "actors who are disloyal to the party or lack noble character should not be used; vulgar, kitschy, and low-brow actors should not be used; actors with low ideological standards or poor taste should not be used; and actors with blemishes, scandals, or moral issues should not be used. Additionally, SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television of the PRC) explicitly stated that tattooed artists, hip-hop culture, subculture (non-mainstream culture), and decadent culture should not be used".<sup>180</sup>

Now, hip hop's popularity is back in full swing, the genre simply being too popular with Chinese youth, but it has to adhere to state guidelines, banning mentions of drugs and sex (generally very common in hip hop culture).<sup>181</sup>

C-pop has also gained great momentum in the PRC: the countries' popular music, heavily based on K-pop's Korean beauty standards and industry management, generally conforms to state guidelines. C-pop stars can opt for nationalist lyrics, like majorly popular boyband TFBoys's song "We Are The Heirs of Communism," or, more frequently, avoid politics and focus on more generally shared feelings like heartbreak, self-confidence, feeling happy.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Jian Xiao, *Punk Culture in Contemporary China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).  
Jemma Polanski, "Can China's underground club culture survive the country's rise in state surveillance and control?," *Mixmag*, June 11, 2019, <https://mixmag.net/feature/china-undeground-club-culture>.  
Casey Hall, "Shanghai's 'voguing' dancers step lightly to avoid official gaze," *The Independent*, July 8, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/lgbt/shanghai-voguing-dance-lgbtq-photos-b2366351.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Pei Li and Adam Jourdan, "China takes aim at hip-hop, saying 'low-taste content' must stop," *Reuters*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/china-takes-aim-at-hip-hop-saying-low-taste-content-must-stop-idUSKBN1FB12V/>.

<sup>180</sup> Gong Mowu 公莫舞, "Zongju tichu jiemu jiabin biao zhun: gediao di wenshen xihua wenhua buyong 总局提出节目嘉宾标准:格调低纹身嘻哈文化不用 (SARFT Sets Standards for Show Guests: No Low-Class, Tattoos, or Hip-Hop Culture)," *Sina*, January 19, 2018, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/tv/zy/2018-01-19/doc-ifyquptv7935320.shtml>.

<sup>181</sup> "No drugs, no sex: how hip hop in China bounced back from censorship and exploded in popularity," *South China Morning Post*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3261317/no-drugs-no-sex-how-hip-hop-china-bounced-back-censorship-and-exploded-popularity>.

<sup>182</sup> Cyril Ip, "Can Chinese pop music's soft power push ever match K-pop's success?," *South China Morning Post*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3207471/can-chinese-pop-musics-soft-power-push-ever-match-k-pops-success>.



The CCP has heavily criticized the non-masculine aesthetics and “overly entertaining” aspects in C-pop though, calling current male celebrities “娘炮” (niángpào, “effeminate, sissy”) in an official government statement.<sup>183</sup> Not only the music and its stars itself, but the fans and their group behavior has been regulated by the Chinese state: group gatherings and fan clubs have been regulated by the state. K-pop influenced C-pop music and fandom seems to threaten the Chinese state’s idea of nationalism and the new, strong Chinese identity, with its effeminate and frivolous atmosphere (and often queercoded aspects).<sup>184</sup>

This censorship also extends to the fashion sphere: Chinese brands are pushed heavily on the international sphere, but are rarely political. The most popular international Chinese brands among young people, like Shushu/Tong, Rui and Uma Wang steer clear of any political affiliation or outward nationalistic references.<sup>185</sup> Famous haute couture designer Guo Pei outwardly uses traditional Chinese culture in her designs, but seems to be in line with party guidelines of national pride, and is additionally based in Paris, slipping out of the loopholes of PRC censorship.<sup>186</sup>

#### 4.2.3. Chinese cultural renaissance goes global: Lacking infrastructure and foreign contact

While New-Chinese style and *guochao* are generally very much in line with party lines, the tide can change quickly when the CCP decides to change course. On top of that the general censoring by the state does not leave a lot of space for cultural expressions to export themselves. What hinders these “allowed” cultural expressions to really gain traction abroad, has partly also to do with China’s self-inflicted isolation. In order to keep dissident comments in line, the PRC also shuts itself off from too much foreign influence and with it, from possible critique. The best example of this, is China’s Great Firewall. Nicknamed after the PRC’s most

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Karoline Kan, “In China, It’s the Party That Keeps the Boy Band Going,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/world/asia/china-tfboys-boy-band.html>.

<sup>183</sup> “Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju bangong ting guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang wenyi jiemo ji qi ren yuan guan li de tongzhi 国家广播电视总局办公厅关于进一步加强文艺节目及其人员管理的通知 (Notice from the General Office of the National Radio and Television Administration on further strengthening the management of literary and artistic programs and their personnel),” Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju 国家广播电视总局 (National Radio and Television Administration), September 2, 2021, [https://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2021/9/2/art\\_113\\_57756.html](https://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2021/9/2/art_113_57756.html).

<sup>184</sup> Aja Romano, “The Chinese government’s unlikeliest standoff is with ... fandom,” *Vox*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/23404571/china-vs-fandom-danmei-censorship-qinglang-social-media>.

<sup>185</sup> “From east to the runway: the irresistible ascent of Chinese designer brands,” Daxue Consulting, March 18, 2024, accessed August 6, 2024, <https://daxueconsulting.com/chinese-designer-brands/>.

<sup>186</sup> “About Guo Pei,” Guo Pei, last accessed August 5, 2024, <https://www.guopei.com/bio>.

famous heritage site, this restriction to access in the PRC to the world wide web has been in place since the year 2000 and exists of a combination of technologies and legislations blocking free internet use. In general, it mostly slows down cross-border internet traffic and restricts certain internet pages from being viewed in the PRC.<sup>187</sup>

Not only literal blocking, but active censorship on allowed sites is rife in the PRC. During the last decade, active censoring of users and terminology has increased.<sup>188</sup> Many research has been done to look on the blocked terminology of the Chinese web, how censors work and how Internet users circumvent the censorship by using Internet slang.<sup>189</sup>

Speaking from personal experience trying to gain access to Chinese pop culture: it is very hard to get to PRC-produced content from abroad. Chinese sites are often shielded off and hard to get onto if you can't read Mandarin. As chronicled in chapter 2, logging onto social media sites is hard. Streaming services often don't offer a wide range of Chinese content, only the content produced collaboratively with western streaming services (like "Meteor Garden" (2018) on Netflix) or globally acclaimed films (like Wong Kar Wai movies on mubi.com). PRC-based media platforms, like Iqiyi, frequently show episodes with a delay, without subtitles or are stuck behind a paywall, which is not easy to access when not a native Chinese speaker.<sup>190</sup> English-language sites of Chinese media are often much more censored and don't feature as much content as their Chinese original versions.

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<sup>187</sup> Paul Mozur, "Partnership Boosts Users Over China's Great Firewall," *New York Times*, September 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/14/business/partnership-boosts-users-over-chinas-great-firewall.html>.

Yaqiu Wang, "In China, the 'Great Firewall' Is Changing a Generation," *Politico*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/01/china-great-firewall-generation-405385>.

Robin Wauters, "China Blocks Access To Twitter, Facebook After Riots," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2009,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/07/AR2009070701162.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Jeremy Goldkorn, "The Chinese Internet: Unshared Destiny," in *Shared Destiny*, eds. Jeremy Goldkorn, Geremie R. Barmé, and Linda Jaivin (ANU Press, 2015),

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19893k8.18>.

Simon Hansen and James A. Lewis, "China's Cyberpower: International and Domestic Priorities," *Special Report ASPI* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2014),

<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/chinas-cyberpower-international-and-domestic-priorities>.

Wang, "In China, the 'Great Firewall' Is Changing a Generation."

<sup>189</sup> Xuan Wang, Kapser Juffermans and Caixia Du, "Harmony as language policy in China: an Internet perspective," *Language Policy* 15 (Springer, 2016), 299–321, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-015-9374-y>.

Weiming Ye and Luming Zhao, "'I know it's sensitive': Internet censorship, recoding, and the sensitive word culture in China," *Discourse, Context & Media* 51, Art. no. 100666 (Elsevier, 2023),

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100666>.

"Pho noodles and pandas: How China's social media users created a new language to beat government censorship on COVID-19," *Amnesty International*, March 6, 2020,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/china-social-media-language-government-censorship-covid/>.

<sup>190</sup> "Homepage", IQIYI, [https://www.iq.com/?lang=en\\_us](https://www.iq.com/?lang=en_us).

Because of China's Great Firewall, the Chinese speaking world has its own PRC-based, Mandarin language and character based variations of internet platforms. Where people globally opt for Google, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Google Maps, Apple Pay or Revolut; Chinese users have *Baidu* (search engine), WeChat (chat-based social media), *Weibo*, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Pay, to name a few sites. Even internationally popular PRC-based tech companies like ByteDance have two different apps: *Douyin* for the PRC, TikTok for the rest of the world.<sup>191</sup>

In this way western users never come into contact with Chinese content, and vice versa. This is different for Japanese and Korean content: although South-Korean users for example mainly prefers to use KakaoTalk and KakaoMaps, they will still use Instagram for example. If you add the Firewall to the existing Chinese-language alternatives, not a lot of Chinese see the need to have an Instagram account (for which you often have to use a VPN to access in the first place).

When the country doesn't share globally used internet platforms and social media, the creative industries and pop culture that are allowed, don't easily an international audience. This nips the popularity of Chinese pop culture abroad already in the bud before it can even gain access to these audiences.

Lacking infrastructure and management have been mentioned as a direct influence on C-pop potential for global soft power. In an article for the South China Morning Post, Cao Xuenan, assistant professor of cultural studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, stated: "China's soft power has not really taken on the pop culture or entertainment industry, and it doesn't follow the formula that we see in K-pop, which relies heavily on an industrial chain," while saying that using music and popular culture as a currency or influence is more of a western trait.<sup>192</sup>

Cao characterizes C-pop's fail to capitalize on soft power more to international views of the PRC, rather than internal domestic censorship. Cao states that the Chinese national identity will be greatly politicized in the West, referring to China's unfavorable image in the West.<sup>193</sup> It could be characterized as a vicious circle: Chinese popular culture can't seem to consolidate abroad, because of China's general soft power problem, and vice versa. But Chi Zhang, a postdoctoral international relations researcher at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, argues that China's own strong focus on national pride, on "national loyalty", causes

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<sup>191</sup> Claire Fu and Daisuke Wakabayashi, "There Is No TikTok in China, but There Is Douyin. Here's What It Is," *New York Times*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/25/business/china-tiktok-douyin.html>.

<sup>192</sup> Ip, "Can Chinese pop music's soft power push ever match K-pop's success?."

<sup>193</sup> Ip, "Can Chinese pop music's soft power push ever match K-pop's success?."

Chinese popular culture to be inherently politicized already, from within the country itself.<sup>194</sup> Chinese cultural exports seem to struggle on the tightrope between expressing the desired “national pride”, and anti-China sentiments in the West.

Nye characterizes the weakness of Chinese soft power, in the CCP’s inability to release control over the cultural narrative. He sees the weakness of Chinese soft power in its refusal to celebrate “the heroes of today in civil society, the arts and the private sector” and its choice to focus on national pride and Chinese history. He cites Zhang Yimou, the acclaimed Chinese director, who replied to the question of why his films are always set in the past, that movies about contemporary China would be neutered by censors.<sup>195</sup> If the PRC cannot let go of controlling its cultural narrative and propaganda, which in 2024 includes traditional Chinese culture as a politically safe attraction point, its soft power efforts are doomed to fail.

Often, the actual impact of the “soft power of cool” is debated by reporters and scholars of international politics. As Japan’s popularity has slowly been declining in the past decade, and the economy is struggling more than ever, what has Japan’s cultural respect brought the country? Its economic and global political position have not benefited greatly, according to Gerrit Groot in his analysis of “Cool Japan”.<sup>196</sup>

A full analysis of the political and economic impact of youth- and subcultural soft power is outside the scope of this paper, but with the PRC’s economic and political power coming off as “threatening”, “cool” and “likeable” might just be the image the CCP has been missing to keep a stable international (and domestic) position.

As Joseph S. Nye put it in his Foreign Policy article from 1990: “There is an element of triviality and fad in popular behavior, but it is also true that a country that stands astride popular channels of communication has more opportunities to get its messages across and to affect the preferences of others.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Ip, “Can Chinese pop music’s soft power push ever match K-pop’s success?.”

<sup>195</sup> Nye, “China’s Soft Power Deficit.”

<sup>196</sup> Groot, “Cool Japan *Versus* the China Threat,” 16.

<sup>197</sup> Nye, “Soft Power”, 169.

### 4.3. New-Chinese style as “national dress” for women? Giving East-Asian context

An important part of creating international cultural soft power, apart from political hard power and economic soft power, is the promotion of “national dress”. Both the kimono and *Hanbok* are symbols of respectively Japanese and South-Korean culture, and contribute to the countries’ international attraction.

As Finnane has argued in her 1996 text “What Should Chinese Woman Wear? A National Problem,” the PRC has a vacuum for national dress, especially when it comes to women. She discusses how the Mao suit, or Zhongshan suit, has become the sartorial symbol of the nation globally.<sup>198</sup> This suit though, only reflects the Communist legacy of the PRC, and not any other part of Chinese culture or history. To support her argument, Finnane contrasts the Chinese woman with her Japanese counterpart, “always and everywhere clad in kimono”.<sup>199</sup> Finnane questions the role of the woman in the myth of the nation, and how that woman lacks a distinct “look”. The Communist legacy, with first its non-gendered yet androgynous look, has not left the PRC with a strong symbolic image of the Chinese woman.<sup>200</sup> In more recent times, inspiration for female dress through China’s communist identity is still hard, as contemporary “CCP fashion” can be characterized as very masculine. While the “new Mao suit” seems to be a western-style suit mixed with Xi Jinping’s signature windbreaker jacket and polo shirts, a female equivalent is hard to find.<sup>201</sup> Especially with recent reinstating of traditional culture as a fundamental part of the PRC’s heritage as discussed above, the absence of a new national symbol for women apart from the Mao suit, or even of an “ethnic dress”, has been described as a vacuum.

While the *qipao*, or *cheongsam* in Cantonese, has become the equivalent of national dress in Hong Kong, the dress lost its popular status on the mainland after the Communist Revolution of 1949. Before this, the looser, 1910’s and 1920’s *qipao* was seen as the equivalent of the young, intellectual Chinese woman of the May Fourth Movement, while the 1930’s and 1940’s *qipao* represented the urban, cosmopolitan and upwardly mobile Chinese woman of

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<sup>198</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 100-101.

<sup>199</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 101.

<sup>200</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 101.

<sup>201</sup> Joy Dong, “So Square It’s Hip: Gen Z Tries on the Communist Cadre Look,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/07/world/asia/china-communist-cadre-fashion.html>.

Matthew Sweet, “Little red look: 100 years of Chinese Communist Party style,” *The Economist*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2021/06/22/little-red-look-100-years-of-chinese-communist-party-style>.

the Chinese Republic (1912-1949).<sup>202</sup> During the Mao era, ranging from the 1950's to the end of the 1970's (and especially from the Cultural Revolution in 1966 onwards) Mao suits, braided hair and red neckerchief pushed away any pre-Revolution dress symbolic of the Chinese nation, or any other form of dress at all.<sup>203</sup> By the 1980's, when dress regulations relaxed, the *qipao* was expected to return as the look for the Chinese woman, yet global fashion's influx into the PRC left the *qipao* hidden away.<sup>204</sup>

Uradyn Bulag in his text "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress" even traces the search for a national identity through dress in China back to China's dynastical past.<sup>205</sup> As mentioned before, Chinese dynasties were often ruled by different ethnic groups than the Han, who are said to have initially populated the Chinese heartland. Bulag claims that with every foreign dynasty or kingdom of "Inner Asian pastoral nomads," and subsequently with the invasion of western and Japanese forces (and their dress customs) in the nineteenth century, the Chinese have lost their traditional manners of dress (based on Confucian rules) and through rounds of adoption of non-Chinese dress, the Chinese have been faced with a "profound identity crisis".<sup>206</sup>

Japan and Korea, on the other hand, have been able to ride on the wave of their pop culture influence to make other cultural products popular, like their traditional clothing. Both kimono and *Hanbok* have stayed part of what it means to be Japanese or Korean, even in times of rapid change and modernization, and now these are being broadcasted to a global audience. Modified versions of Korean *Hanbok*, much like New-Chinese fashion, have been donned in large K-pop performances to global audiences (American talk shows, for example), propelling a sort of Korean nationalist pride to the world stage and, to their dedicated overseas fans.<sup>207</sup>

As mentioned above, the Japanese kimono is one of the most globally famous examples of ethnic dress. It has been vetted by the global fashion world for its loose, volumetric silhouette and rectilinear cut, and its unisex structural ingenuity has had lasting impact on

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<sup>202</sup> Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?," 108-120.

<sup>203</sup> Garrett, *Chinese Dress*, 218-223.

Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?," 120-123.

<sup>204</sup> Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?," 124-125.

<sup>205</sup> Bulag, "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress," 75-80.

<sup>206</sup> Bulag, "Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress," 75.

<sup>207</sup> Yeon-Soo Kwak, "Hanbok sweeps global K-pop fans off their feet," *The Korea Times*, July 10, 2020, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/08/398\\_292563.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/08/398_292563.html).

Yoori Chae, "Hanbok in the Twenty-First Century," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, ed. John E. Vollmer (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010).

design theory and fashion designers, both western and Japanese.<sup>208</sup> The kimono is admired or even worn by *otakus* all around the globe.<sup>209</sup> Daisaku Kadokawa, the mayor of Kyoto, says in the introduction to *Kimono Now* by Manami Okazaki:

“Kimonos encapsulate the soul of Japan and Japanese culture, and are an exquisite national costume that we are proud to show to the world. (...) When I put my kimono on, I think how happy I am that in Japan there is Kyoto, and in Kyoto there are kimonos. (...) Kimonos are the pillar that supports Japanese culture and generates other top industries. In Kyoto, kimonos are at the roots of the people’s identity.”<sup>210</sup>

Although these are the words of one man, they seem to reflect a general national pride in Japan for the kimono, seen by many as the materialization of the national identity. Both forms of traditional dress are synonymous to their respective nation states, it physically symbolizes the history and identity of the nation to its citizens. The stability and recent rise in popularity of dress like *Hanbok*, has sparked heated debates in the PRC and South-Korea. The painful element lies in *Hanbok*’s origins and overall look being quite close to Chinese traditional dress. The same goes for the kimono, which has its origins in cultural exchange between the Japanese island and the Chinese Tang court in the seventh century, although it has to be noted that feuds between Japanese and Chinese over ethnic dress have been much more rare than with their South-Korean neighbors.<sup>211</sup>

Bulag’s historical account of Chinese ethnic dress mentions Chinese traditional dress’ relation to the *Hanbok* and kimono, stating that “some dress historians view *Hanbok* and the kimono as Chinese civilization’s gifts to the Koreans and Japanese, respectively” and “feeling acute pain that they have given away too much of their culture to the Koreans and Japanese”.<sup>212</sup> Even though Bulag cites no actual scholars or sources for this claim, recent reports seem to echo this sentiment.

Multiple reports in the last four years have surfaced of Korean-Chinese online feuds over the origins of *Hanbok*, ranging from Chinese ethnic minorities wearing *Hanbok* in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics opening show, over a Vogue spread featuring Ming-style hanfu

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<sup>208</sup> Karen van Godtsenhoven, “The Tiger’s Leap: Kimonos and Couture,” in *Kimono Style: Edo Traditions to Modern Design : the John C. Weber Collection*, eds. Mónica Bincsik, Karen Van Godtsenhoven, and Arai Masanao (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022), 34-45.

<sup>209</sup> Isabelle Martinetti, “Paris exhibition explores kimono, from Japanese icon to global trend,” RFI, December 10, 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/culture/20221210-paris-exhibition-explores-kimono-from-japanese-icon-to-global-trend>.

<sup>210</sup> Manami Okazaki, *Kimono Now* (Munich: Prestel, 2015), 6.

<sup>211</sup> Liza Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993). Quora, “Some Chinese are claiming that the Japanese Kimono copied the Chinese clothes, what do the Japanese think of this?,” last accessed August 10, 2024, <https://www.quora.com/Some-Japanese-are-claiming-that-the-Chinese-copied-the-Japanese-Kimono-what-do-the-Chinese-think-of-this>.

<sup>212</sup> Bulag, “Wearing Ethnic Identity: Power of Dress,” 80.



looking similar to *Hanbok*, to Chinese actor Xu Kai's set selfies and even a famous game character having been criticized for their dress. Often the criticism erupts from Korean netizens, reporters and academics, who call China's *Hanbok*-similar traditional dress "cultural appropriation".<sup>213</sup>

Although *Hanbok* and *Hanfu*'s Ming-dynasty dress style *mianfu* share a same V-shaped cross-collar, there are significant differences between the two types of dress, such as the length of the top, the volume of the *Hanbok* skirt and the prominent tie or sash on the *Hanbok*'s top's bodice.<sup>214</sup> Chinese netizens claim that South-Korea's *Goryeo* kingdom (918-1392) was a tributary or vassal state of the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644), as proof for the Chinese influence in Korean *Hanbok*.<sup>215</sup> Other historical accounts show that this claim might not be fully correct, as the *Goryeo* Kingdom became a vassal state of the Yuan dynasty (1279 - 1368), after an invasion by the Moghols.<sup>216</sup> Yet in general, a lot of cultural exchange took place throughout both the Chinese Tang (618–907), and later Yuan and Ming dynasties, in all probability informing the dress culture of the Korean peninsula. John E. Vollmer in his chapter on "International Fashion in East Asia" of the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, states that "the seventh-century Sui-Tang styles influenced *Hanbok*, or Korean national dress, which flourished until the reforms of the early twentieth century".<sup>217</sup> Determining the exact origin of historical dress is hard, especially for areas such as East-Asia which saw a lot of historical cultural exchange and shared rulers. Yet in the light of recent cultural authenticity and national identity questions, these questions are hotly debated.

The Chinese criticism of its East-Asian neighbors "stealing culture" and vice versa doesn't stop at dress heritage questions: the origin of kimchi, South-Korea's national dish which has been gaining huge western popularity in the past five years, has sparked debate

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<sup>213</sup> Hailey Lee, "Hanbok vs Hanfu: Chinese Cultural Appropriation Stirs Outrage in South Korea," *Catalyst*, April 15, 2022, <https://catalystmcgill.com/hanbok-vs-hanfu-chinese-cultural-appropriation-stirs-outrage-in-south-korea/>.

Yosuke Onchi, "Korean traditional dress at Beijing Olympics sparks outcry," *NikkeiAsia*, February 8, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Sports/Beijing-Winter-Olympics/Korean-traditional-dress-at-Beijing-Olympics-sparks-outcry>.

<sup>214</sup> Lee, "Hanbok vs Hanfu: Chinese Cultural Appropriation Stirs Outrage in South Korea." Grace Kim, "Hanbok or hanfu? Controversy swirls around Vogue feature as Korean professor and Chinese YouTuber weigh in," *NextShark*, February 15, 2022, <https://nextshark.com/hanbok-or-hanfu-controversy-swirls-around-vogue-feature-as-korean-professor-and-chinese-youtuber-weigh-in>. Siqi Ji, "Hanfu vs hanbok: Chinese, Koreans dispute costume's origins after actor's Weibo selfie goes viral," *South China Morning Post*, November 6, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/3108748/hanfu-vs-hanbok-chinese-koreans-dispute-costumes-origins>.

<sup>215</sup> Siqi Ji, "Hanfu vs hanbok: Chinese, Koreans dispute costume's origins after actor's Weibo selfie goes viral."

<sup>216</sup> Henry Em, *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea* (Duke University Press, 2013), 26.

<sup>217</sup> John E. Vollmer, "International Fashion in East Asia," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, ed. John E. Vollmer (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), 71–74.

too. Reports in Chinese state media like the Global Times claiming China has led the development of an international standard for “*pao cai*” (pàocài 泡菜), the Chinese term for a Sichuan dish and pickled vegetables in general (very similar to kimchi), has ignited strong criticism by South-Korean netizens.<sup>218</sup> *Kimjang*, the collective making of kimchi in Korea, has been recognized as UNESCO Intangible Heritage, fueling the Republic of Korea’s defense of their claim on kimchi as their national cultural heritage.<sup>219</sup>

No official Chinese state reports or CCP member speeches have come forward on the topic of the Korean-Chinese “culture war” and claiming of national or cultural heritage. Yet the fact that Chinese state media, like the China Daily and Global Times, which are often equaled to mouthpieces for the CCP, have powered some of these online discussions is seen as a sign of the PRC’s conscious claim on South-Korea’s booming popular culture, and it trying to benefit off of Seoul’s soft power successes. Seo Kyoung-Duk, professor at Sungshin Women’s University in Seoul, stated to Yonhap News that South Korean “cultural content expanding its influence on a global scale, it seems that China is making efforts to claim that such content was traced to them.”<sup>220</sup>

It is interesting how domestically, “cultural authenticity” is often interpreted quite vague, and different cultural influences can be taken up into a modern-day understanding of national identity, while internationally, cultural correctness is debated strongly. In the context of the PRC’s fraught relations with its East-Asian neighbors, their popular and traditional culture’s popularity is a sensitive topic to the Chinese. In the PRC, under the “China Dream”, cultural identity is now a “hot topic” and its discussions with East-Asian neighbors on different cultural matters, highlights the PRC’s growing international focus on the matter, next to its domestic “national confidence” campaign.

The question of the authenticity of cultural heritage is suddenly on the table, especially when looking at Japan and South Korea’s national dress’ global success. In this context, this chapter addressed how the PRC seems to indeed be struggling with how its national identity can take a sartorial shape, and has turned more and more to traditional Chinese dress and

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<sup>218</sup> Youmi Kim and Mike Ives, “Is China Laying Claim to Kimchi, Too? Some South Koreans Think So,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/world/asia/south-korea-china-kimchi-paocai.html>.

Justin McCurry, “Stealing our culture’: South Koreans upset after China claims kimchi as its own,” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/01/stealing-our-culture-south-koreans-upset-after-china-claims-kimchi-as-its-own>.

“Kimchi ferments cultural feud between South Korea and China,” *BBC*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55129805>.

<sup>219</sup> “Kimjang, making and sharing kimchi in the Republic of Korea”, UNESCO, accessed August 8, 2024? <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kimjang-making-and-sharing-kimchi-in-the-republic-of-korea-00881>.

<sup>220</sup> Kim and Ives, “Is China Laying Claim to Kimchi, Too?.”

hanfu to configure its identity. Could New-Chinese style fill this gap in the future? It is hard to tell how much New-Chinese style will grow in popularity, both domestically and abroad.

Yet, Finnane states in “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” that “the *qipao* as everyday wear was a garment specific to its time”. “It became the definitive dress for the Chinese woman in a period of great national ferment.” <sup>221</sup> Finnane published her seminal text in 1996, when the CCP had not yet allowed support nor a revival of traditional culture. Speaking now, with traditional culture’s popularity supported by a strong economy, a unified CCP leadership under “Chinese cultural self-confidence”, and a need for (internationally successful) cultural soft power, it could maybe be an era of great national ferment once again.

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<sup>221</sup> Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 125.

## 4.4. Conclusion

This chapter situates *guochao* within a broader geopolitical framework of "soft power." While the PRC invests in soft power, it tends to focus more on building infrastructure rather than enhancing its global appeal. To explore how *guochao*, and particularly New-Chinese style, could address this gap, we examine the successes of the PRC's East Asian neighbors. Japan and South Korea, often cited as soft power successes, have garnered significant international followings and positive reputations through their popular cultures. In the Chinese context, efforts like these might clash with the CCP's policy of censorship. By cracking down on the morals of contemporary Chinese pop culture and enforcing a strict internet censoring policy, thus isolating itself from the global community, the CCP tightly controls the cultural narrative, both domestically and internationally. This strongly hinders any room for a Chinese political "charm offensive".

Another soft power challenge for the PRC is the absence of a national dress, a void that is often discussed in relation to the similarities between Chinese traditional clothing and South Korea's *Hanbok*, which effectively serves as a soft power tool for Korea. I argue that New-Chinese style, if given creative freedom and international promotion, could fill this "national dress" vacuum, providing the PRC with a contemporary sartorial symbol for the Chinese woman, which it could proudly showcase to the global community.

This chapter has explored how the domestic popularity of the *guochao* trend could be aligned with the PRC's broader international political policies. We analyzed the PRC's soft power initiatives in the context of its "Chinese rejuvenation" and "Chinese confidence" campaigns, and considered how New-Chinese style might fit into these efforts. This analysis has primarily focused on the political perspective of the PRC and the CCP. However, this raises the question of how New-Chinese fashion is *perceived* by non-Chinese communities, both online and offline, and how it is *received* within the broader fashion industry. Currently, research on the international impact of New-Chinese style is limited, and studies on the global reception of recent Chinese popular culture are scarce. Further research in the future on whether this "Chinese renaissance," particularly *guochao* phenomena like New-Chinese style, has had a measurable impact on foreign audiences and the PRC's soft power would be highly valuable.

## 5. Final Conclusion

The emergence and development of the *guochao* trend is a multifaceted reflection of the People's Republic of China's political history, where fashion, politics, and national identity converge.

New-Chinese Style, as a sub-trend within the broader *guochao* movement, exemplifies a resurgence of traditional Chinese culture by blending it with contemporary global fashion, giving rise to what could be seen as a new, innately "Chinese" fashion. Unlike Hanfu, its subcultural sibling, New-Chinese style is adapted to current-day life in the PRC. The style reimagines classic elements of Chinese dress, such as the *qipao* and *mamianqun*, and merges them with modern wardrobe staples like miniskirts, baseball caps, and jeans. By doing so, it allows a younger, fully digitized generation in the PRC to reconnect with and reappraise traditional aesthetics, proudly displaying their Chinese identity on social media platforms like *Xiaohongshu*. Their Chinese identity is proudly performed on social media like *Xiaohongshu*, adding other signifiers of Chinese heritage to their photos, like lady's fans, Chinese calligraphy and pagoda-tiled roofs. New-Chinese Style grants a creative freedom in interpreting traditional culture, fostering a sense of national pride that has not always been possible under Communist rule.

The style aligns with the political narratives promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping, including the "China Dream" and the emphasis on "cultural confidence." The newfound pride in Chinese culture aligns with the CCP's vision of a culturally unified nation, where the reimagined Chinese identity combines elements of both Communist history and traditional, pre-revolutionary China. This identity, often framed against a backdrop of critique towards the West, supports the CCP's agenda to "rejuvenate the nation" and overcome the legacy of the "century of humiliation", by uniting the Chinese people under a singular cultural and political banner.

Not only can *guochao*, or specifically New-Chinese Style, legitimize Chinese cultural identity and Communist rule to its domestic audience, it could also be utilized on a geo-political scale. Through "soft power," nations can attract foreign audiences, reinforce diplomatic connections, and create favorable positions on the world stage for themselves. While significant financial investments, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Confucius Institutes, have been made to enhance China's international image, the country still struggles to achieve the same level of cultural appeal as its neighbors Japan and South Korea, who have successfully leveraged their cultural exports to gain global popularity. Creating a "good reputation", likeability, or even a "cool image" for itself, seems to be a problem in the PRC's

international policy: the PRC can not count on “a gross national cool”. By repressing youth culture and digitally isolating itself from the outside world, the CCP prioritizes state-approved cultural heritage through Confucius Institutes to maintain strict control over its cultural narrative, effectively stifling any organically developed interest in Chinese culture.

A further challenge to Chinese culture’s global popularity and the creation of a cohesive "imagined Chinese community" domestically, is the absence of a widely recognized national dress for the PRC. The Communist Revolution of 1949 diminished the status of traditional Chinese dress as a sartorial symbolization of the Chinese people. While the Zhongshan suit has come to represent the Chinese nation for men, there is no equivalent for women. In its quest for a national dress, the PRC has occasionally faced accusations of "cultural appropriation" from South Korea, which has accused China of attempting to appropriate elements of Korean culture (like its national food and dress) to bolster its own cultural confidence.

However, the New-Chinese Style may be poised to fill this gap. With a robust economy and an increasingly culturally unified population under CCP leadership, the PRC has created a strong new national identity. As it is embraced and showcased by China's youth on social media, the New-Chinese Style not only reflects this identity but also signals a growing national confidence. Its future development will be an intriguing lens through which to observe the ongoing political, economic, historical, and cultural evolution of the Chinese nation.

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@一只莓莓 . “Tao si cang xin zhongshi heji! Mei tiao dou hao xindong 套私藏新中式合集! 每条都好心动 (Sharing my private collection of new Chinese-style outfits! Each one is so captivating).” Xiaohongshu, August 4, 2022.  
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@甄甜甜. “Qinglü pei dan huang, you xiatian weidao de mamian 青绿配淡黄, 有夏天味道的马面 (Green and light yellow, summer flavored horse face).” Xiaohongshu post, June 8, 2024.

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## 8. Image list



Fig 1.: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 国朝 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@StyleRecord, Guónèi wài míngxīng dōu ài de guó cháo dān pǐn nǎiē wú xìngbié chuān dǎ 国内外明星都爱的国潮单品 拿捏无性别穿搭 (Guócháo trendy items loved by celebrities at home and abroad for easy gender-neutral outfits), Xiaohongshu post, December 12, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6577d1a3000000000901d6ed?xsec\\_token=ABtiPgspirherDKBEG3eFAHel7zQXkMxC5O7K0msemSWmQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6577d1a3000000000901d6ed?xsec_token=ABtiPgspirherDKBEG3eFAHel7zQXkMxC5O7K0msemSWmQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 2.: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 国潮 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@麻辣烫烫侠, SMFK|fèi tǔ, xìng lěngdàn fēngcháo nǚ zuì ài SMFK|废土、性冷淡风潮女最爱 (SMFK|Wasteland, cool trendy female-favorite), Xiaohongshu post, last modified July 6, 2024,  
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Fig. 3.: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 中国风 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@小小倪, Hànfú jiēlì | tiǎozhàn chuān hànfú qù tàiguó zhī xíng lóng zài shēn 汉服接力|挑战穿汉服去泰国之 行龙在身 (Hanfu Relay | Challenge to wear Hanfu to Thailand), Xiaohongshu post, April 18, 2024,  
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Fig. 4: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@柒玥貳叁, 167|50 Xīn zhōngshì hēibái chèn yī kù sà nǚ hái chuān dā hé jí 167 | 50 新中式黑白衬衣 酷飒女孩穿搭合集 ("167 | 50 New Chinese Style Black and White Shirts - Cool and Stylish Girl Outfit Collection"), Xiaohongshu post, April 5, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/660f6c22000000001a00e110?xsec\\_token=ABcXZsCmoGu9HdiGPhP6J1M5LY97eMuxXoWMk\\_yGYDuV0=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/660f6c22000000001a00e110?xsec_token=ABcXZsCmoGu9HdiGPhP6J1M5LY97eMuxXoWMk_yGYDuV0=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 5: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@瑾瑜的瑾, Pán kòu xīn zhōngshì chènshān, niúzǎikù zhème chuān tài hǎokànle!!! 盘扣新中式衬衫, 牛仔裤这么穿太好看了!!! ("A buttoned new Chinese style shirt + jeans looks so good when worn like this! ! !"), Xiaohongshu post, April 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6618fa8b000000001a00c5af?xsec\\_token=ABORV06lWQgR-tBiRfDtDCyqGAzoZsbVU5gLYaqECM6Cs=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6618fa8b000000001a00c5af?xsec_token=ABORV06lWQgR-tBiRfDtDCyqGAzoZsbVU5gLYaqECM6Cs=&xsec_source=pc_search).





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@HongMing, Chāo tèbié de xīn zhōngshì qúnzi | 165 fēn fēnzhōng biàn 170  
 超特别的新中式裙子 | 165 分分钟变 170 ("Super special new Chinese skirt | 165 cm turns  
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@慧子姐姐 主理人, Yángmì yīzhōu xīn zhōngshì chuān dā yyds!  
 杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! ("Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!"),  
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Fig. 8: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@嗯李温柔, Qiǎn shì yīxià rìcháng xīn zhōngshì xiǎo tàozhuāng ba!!! 浅试一下日常新中式小套装吧!!! (“Let’s give the New-Chinese style casual outfits a try!!!”), Xiaohongshu post, last modified May 20, 2024,

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Fig. 10: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@球球你了, Chuān xīn zhōngshì guàng lú fú gōng FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫FR ("Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!"), Xiaohongshu post, September 26, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec\\_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 11: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Yi\_大头, Dōngfāng měixué | xīn zhōngshì hùndā 东方美学 | 新中式混搭 ("Oriental aesthetics | New-Chinese style mix and match"), Xiaohongshu post, March 21, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec\\_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy\\_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 12: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@抱走阿茗\_, Tā shàncháng xiě yuèliàng, què zǒng bù xiě tuányuán “她擅长写月亮，却总不写团圆。” ("She is good at writing about the moon, but she never writes about reunion."), Xiaohongshu post, October 17, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652e5eeb000000001e031b88?xsec\\_token=AB-7nd9T04J1FwxNmPxSwB8d9f9DjumPfStD7BounmHtE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/652e5eeb000000001e031b88?xsec_token=AB-7nd9T04J1FwxNmPxSwB8d9f9DjumPfStD7BounmHtE=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 13: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@ 好好是超人, Huá liú cái shì dǐng liú wǒ pink xīn zhōngshì 华流才是顶流 我 pink 新中式 (“Hua Liu is the top class. I’m pink New-Chinese style”), Xiaohongshu post, April 21, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6624ffde000000001c0089a8?xsec\\_token=AB3ddmiDHjIGCorwty5oPo29iQ9Jaz2\\_EQFGMCuibuj0M=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6624ffde000000001c0089a8?xsec_token=AB3ddmiDHjIGCorwty5oPo29iQ9Jaz2_EQFGMCuibuj0M=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 14: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@贝贝王, Wèishéme xīn zhōngshì zhème huǒ 为什么新中式这么火? ("Why is New-Chinese style so popular?"), Xiaohongshu post, March 17, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f674db0000000013027426?xsec\\_token=AB I 3871 bjPvZ7URhDqMZkcoWBBkl2Aisadz2-bFvQIY=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f674db0000000013027426?xsec_token=AB I 3871 bjPvZ7URhDqMZkcoWBBkl2Aisadz2-bFvQIY=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 15: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@甄甜甜, Qīnglǜ pèi dàn huáng, yǒu xiàtiān wèidào de mǎ miàn 青绿配淡黄, 有夏天味道的马面 (“Green and light yellow, summer flavored horse face (skirt)”), Xiaohongshu post, June 8, 2024,

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Fig. 16: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@一只莓莓, Tào sī cáng xīn zhōngshì héjí! Měi tiáo dōu hǎo xīndòng 套私藏新中式合集！每条都好心动 ("Sharing my private collection of new Chinese-style outfits! Each one is so captivating") Xiaohongshu post, August 4, 2022,

[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62eb9f8b000000001603595d?xsec\\_token=ABz91BmhDAGJRATY9bzgP9lvQffnwxyqbdloV-WUjtvR4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62eb9f8b000000001603595d?xsec_token=ABz91BmhDAGJRATY9bzgP9lvQffnwxyqbdloV-WUjtvR4=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 17: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Caffeine 喵喵, Qiú qiúle, jiěmèimen bié zài wèn wǒ zhè jiàn yīfú de liànjīēle 求求了，姐妹们别再问我这件衣服的连接了 (“Please, sisters, stop asking me for the link to this dress”), Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 15, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/648b0a0500000000130323af?xsec\\_token=ABzHNCTt0OmWFL7vCRB1nWPAXvt9CBZjXwF4IIfYVOG8w=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/648b0a0500000000130323af?xsec_token=ABzHNCTt0OmWFL7vCRB1nWPAXvt9CBZjXwF4IIfYVOG8w=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 18: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@偷心小婷, Ootd|nǎi bái gǎiliáng qípáo qún zhēn de hěn ài! ootd | 奶白改良旗袍裙 真的很爱! (ootd | Milk white modified qipao skirt I really love it!), Xiaohongshu post, July 1, 2022, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec\\_token=ABIKH0WVogrZl8AfYz4kNczk2yucs\\_4OHtPgetOKM2nWE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_user](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62bee6e3000000000a0022db?xsec_token=ABIKH0WVogrZl8AfYz4kNczk2yucs_4OHtPgetOKM2nWE=&xsec_source=pc_user).





Fig. 19: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@ 爆爆小鱼干, A jiēmèimen! Zhè tàoxīnzhōngshìchányì tàozhuāng yě tài juéle ba!  
 啊姐妹们！这套新中式禅意套装也太绝了吧！(“Ah sisters! This new Chinese Zen suit is so amazing!”), Xiaohongshu post, March 12, 2024,  
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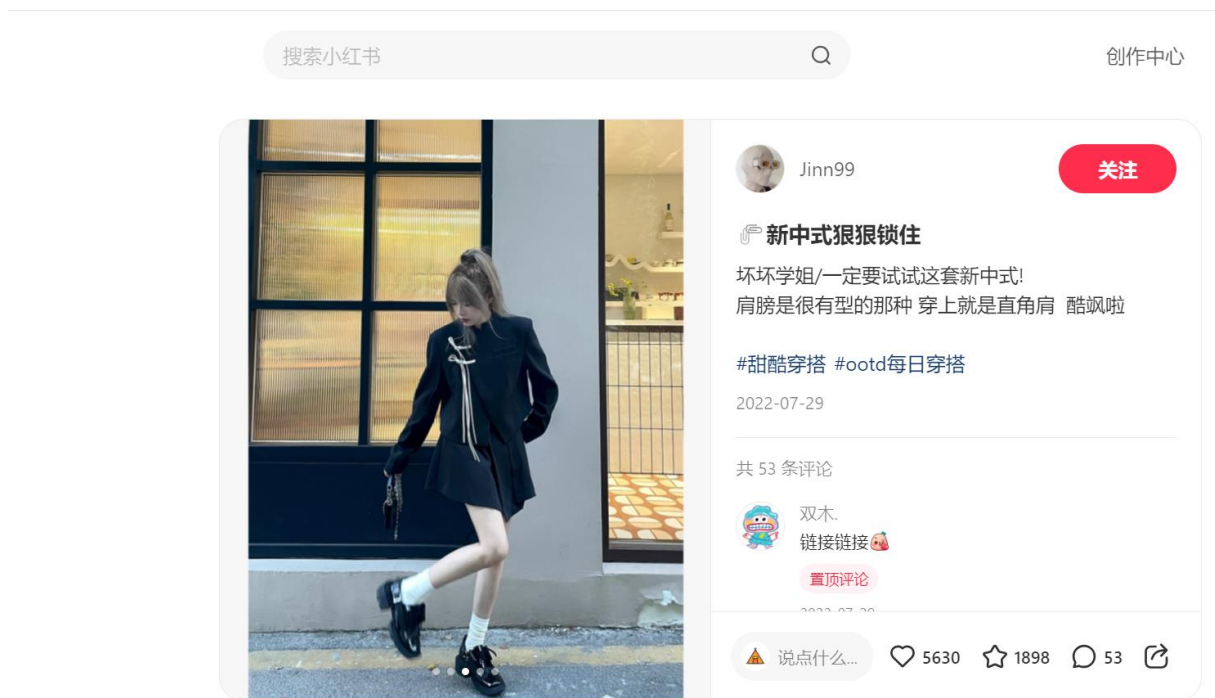


Fig. 20: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

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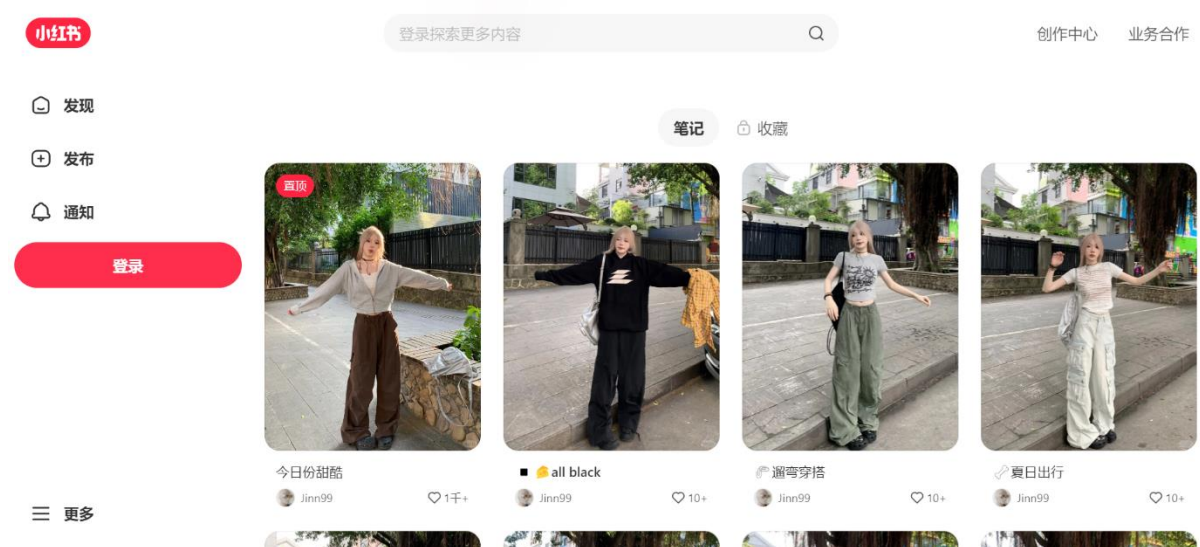


Fig. 21: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu feed of account @Jinn99, 2024. Screenshot by author.



Fig. 22: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@朝雾, Gōngzhǔ diàn lǐ zuì déchǒng de xiǎo gōng'é 公主殿里最得宠的小宫娥 ("The most favored maidservant in the princess's palace"), Xiaohongshu post, April 10, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6616b8fb000000001a00e18d?xsec\\_token=ABEjbEL9S06YA-0fNEHSfo2NigFYT50jcex9d0rlidoxM=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6616b8fb000000001a00e18d?xsec_token=ABEjbEL9S06YA-0fNEHSfo2NigFYT50jcex9d0rlidoxM=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 23: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@小小倪, Xiǎng kàn dàijiā chuān mǎ miàn qún de zhàopiàn 想看大家穿马面裙的照片 ("I want to see photos of everyone wearing horse-faced skirts"), Xiaohongshu post, November 29, 2023,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/656738ed000000003202f6a8?xsec\\_token=AB9a6sQXMwLdg2AcWNI3yEwyVXGib9qGSNPlc2zkal6vM=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/656738ed000000003202f6a8?xsec_token=AB9a6sQXMwLdg2AcWNI3yEwyVXGib9qGSNPlc2zkal6vM=&xsec_source=pc_search).

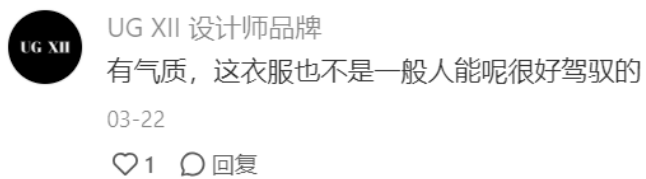


Fig. 24: Screenshot of a comment posted on March 22, 2024, by user @UG XII 设计师品牌 under a Xiaohong post of user @Yi\_大头, saying "It has a refinement, and this kind of clothes is not something that ordinary people can easily control," 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Yi\_大头, Dōngfāng měixué |xīn zhōngshì hùndā 东方美学 | 新中式混搭 ("Oriental aesthetics | New-Chinese style mix and match"), Xiaohongshu post, March 21, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec\\_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy\\_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65fbab6000000000140060ed?xsec_token=AB09-X3wdKOEmlYdTqs2sMxxLmy_vzXw0arUK22stTZI=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 25: Screenshot of a comment posted on March 23, 2024, by user @国风服装饰品 under a Xiaohong post of user @慧子姐姐 主理人, saying: "Dressed in splendid attire, reflecting the morning glow, New Chinese-style garments exude elegance. Delicate embroidery adds refinement, flowing sleeves drift like those of celestial beings. Where modernity meets tradition, a beauty as picturesque as a painting in the heart," 2024. Screenshot by author.

@慧子姐姐 主理人, Yángmì yīzhōu xīn zhōngshì chuān dā yyds!  
 杨幂 一周新中式穿搭 yyds! ("Eternal Goddess Yang Mi New-Chinese outfit this week!"),  
 Xiaohongshu post, March 12, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f07d9800000000d00de2f?app\\_platform=ios&app\\_version=8.38&share\\_from\\_user\\_hidden=true&type=normal&author\\_share=1&xhsshare=Cop yLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUIP&apptime=1717149060](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65f07d9800000000d00de2f?app_platform=ios&app_version=8.38&share_from_user_hidden=true&type=normal&author_share=1&xhsshare=Cop yLink&shareRedId=ODw3NkhHNj82NzUyOTgwNjY6OTc4SUIP&apptime=1717149060)





Fig. 26: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@嘻嘻, Xīn zhōngshì get 新中式 get! ("New-Chinese style, get it!"), Xiaohongshu post, June 6, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66612969000000001303ff24?xsec\\_token=ABuRjdt7D6kQdr\\_sXvejrRyIY9laaP5LDnlfJweM28JPQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66612969000000001303ff24?xsec_token=ABuRjdt7D6kQdr_sXvejrRyIY9laaP5LDnlfJweM28JPQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).



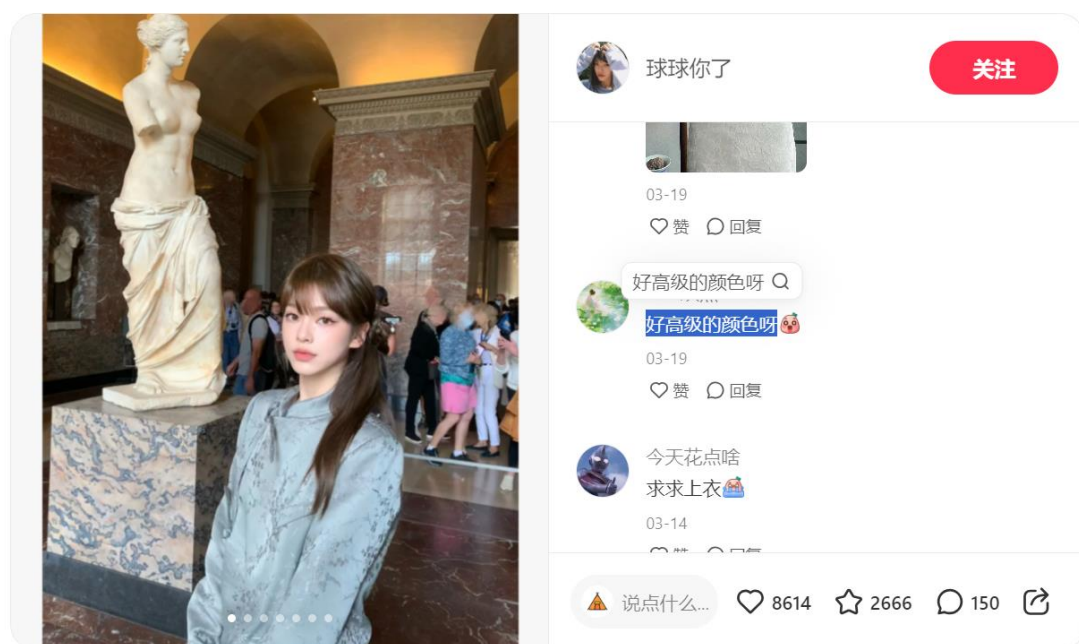


Fig. 27: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag with a highlighted comment from March 19, 2024 posted by user @Real 欢然 saying: “Such a high-end color,” 2024. Screenshot and highlight by author.

@球球你了, Chuān xīn zhōngshì guàng lú fú gōng FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫FR (“Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!”), Xiaohongshu post, September 26, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec\\_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNqekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec_source=pc_search)



Fig. 28: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@WANGDAMA, Xīn zhōngshì héjí | 20 tào·qīnglěng shūlí yōuyǎ dàfāng 新中式合集 | 20套·清冷疏离 优雅大方(New Chinese style collection | 20 sets: Cold and detached, elegant and graceful), Xiaohongshu post, June 4, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/665ef5b00000000015009cf6?xsec\\_token=ABlzlce50fTI-LnmvamnMLwQldKEluluD6kChVh9Y=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/665ef5b00000000015009cf6?xsec_token=ABlzlce50fTI-LnmvamnMLwQldKEluluD6kChVh9Y=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 29: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@克里斯蒂娜的世界, Nǐ kàn nà wǒ de suǒyǒu dōu shì wǒ dì měili 你看呐我的所有 都是我的美丽 (Look, everything about me is my beauty), Xiaohongshu post, September 15, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6503dadd000000001603356b?xsec\\_token=AB5cN7cfh2pnY1Ji-4sPdyY4Hz5O9h0SqVoFYpS6EqVQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6503dadd000000001603356b?xsec_token=AB5cN7cfh2pnY1Ji-4sPdyY4Hz5O9h0SqVoFYpS6EqVQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 30: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@littlechu, Yǒu 1 gè bǎobǎo cuòguò zhè tào xīn zhōngshì wǒ dūhuì nánguò ~ 有 1 个宝宝错过这套新中式 我都会难过~ (I would be sad if even one baby misses out on this new Chinese-style outfit~), Xiaohongshu post, last modified March 14, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6642dc9b000000001e0377d1?xsec\\_token=ABx118o3WxDC7ledkn4pOaZAvThv77vDrITHuSWRiH6kE=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6642dc9b000000001e0377d1?xsec_token=ABx118o3WxDC7ledkn4pOaZAvThv77vDrITHuSWRiH6kE=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 31: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@wan.two3, Guònián \* dāngrán yào chuān xīn zhōngshì 过年\*当然要穿新中式 (Celebrating Chinese New Year \* Of course you have to wear new Chinese style), Xiaohongshu post, January 16, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65a63e27000000002b00e17c?xsec\\_token=ABk5MJD\\_Z1VKcGWRFU70d3r47QWYnr7AKVZIndrzwkVtg=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65a63e27000000002b00e17c?xsec_token=ABk5MJD_Z1VKcGWRFU70d3r47QWYnr7AKVZIndrzwkVtg=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 32: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@燕燕有梨涡, Nǐ zhuī nǐ de xīfāng gǔ wǒ ài wǒ de dōngfāng xiāng 你追你的西方骨 我爱我的东方相 ("You pursue your Western ideals, I love my Eastern beauty."), Xiaohongshu post, April 30, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6630b9e6000000001e0304f1?xsec\\_token=AB2IDDdOlcuwUmoG3j-TBQOpwDfsMAqySqSZzp-vBPA94=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6630b9e6000000001e0304f1?xsec_token=AB2IDDdOlcuwUmoG3j-TBQOpwDfsMAqySqSZzp-vBPA94=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 33: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Angela Xue 薛逸歌, Liúxué plog|liúchuán qiānnián de zhōngguó měixué yào ràng ōuzhōu kàn dào 留学 plog | 流传千年的中国美学 要让欧洲看到 ("Study abroad blog | Chinese aesthetics that have been passed down for thousands of years should be seen by Europe"), Xiaohongshu post, last modified February 4, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65af8483000000001003cfc5?xsec\\_token=AB2ppt0\\_3Tj\\_NYmxi-l\\_WqrfvIoHOWgCTZuTnbpfTfQ=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65af8483000000001003cfc5?xsec_token=AB2ppt0_3Tj_NYmxi-l_WqrfvIoHOWgCTZuTnbpfTfQ=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 34: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag by user @球球你了 posing in the Louvre in New-Chinese outfit and matching hairstyle, while user @一只酸奶球 shows other users in the comments where to buy the hair comb featured in the photos, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@球球你了, Chuān xīn zhōngshì guàng lú fú gōng FR 穿新中式逛卢浮宫FR (“Visiting the Louvre in New-Chinese style FR!”), Xiaohongshu post, September 26, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec\\_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNgekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6512a450000000001d0396bd?xsec_token=AB8jndE8sJug8lAPXvlqoNgekaO6u22pVKvSdW0OGA-r4=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 35: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@子回頭是浪, Gānlù sì tiě t 甘露寺铁 t (“Ganlu Temple Iron Tower”), Xiaohongshu post, last modified January 28, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65b4e5b8000000000a0316c4?xsec\\_token=AB828\\_QJKgCcyrXArziXxdoT0Ni8Bf9rH5gjxJqajFq2Q=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65b4e5b8000000000a0316c4?xsec_token=AB828_QJKgCcyrXArziXxdoT0Ni8Bf9rH5gjxJqajFq2Q=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 36: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@[早安樊樊](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/661002ca000000001b009645?xsec_token=ABhRWHwgR4xUXvtLZX0gFKRSvm_IDAHKkVE9K81817hjU=&xsec_source=pc_search), Fù wújìn chūn 赋无尽春 ("Endless spring"), Xiaohongshu post, April 5, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/661002ca000000001b009645?xsec\\_token=ABhRWHwgR4xUXvtLZX0gFKRSvm\\_IDAHKkVE9K81817hjU=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/661002ca000000001b009645?xsec_token=ABhRWHwgR4xUXvtLZX0gFKRSvm_IDAHKkVE9K81817hjU=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 37: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@显汀, Héjí |lái ba! Zhídé yī shì de xiàrìxīn zhōngshì 合集|来吧! 值得一试的夏日新中式 ("Compilation | Come on! New-Chinese Summer Worth Trying"), Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 26, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/667b53e4000000001d01b62d?xsec\\_token=ABmZHk0HE6jpK2broib5-Zxxd\\_Y9CxpbdI58ECFiZjwU=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/667b53e4000000001d01b62d?xsec_token=ABmZHk0HE6jpK2broib5-Zxxd_Y9CxpbdI58ECFiZjwU=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 38: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@[小曲同学](#), Báishā gǔzhèn 白沙古镇 ("Baisha Old Town"), Xiaohongshu post, February 4, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65bf2431000000002d001195?xsec\\_token=ABH04Qc hh7n6K3gGW8DzlwRPO0HG0gokv0qynSMfUTA-E=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/65bf2431000000002d001195?xsec_token=ABH04Qc hh7n6K3gGW8DzlwRPO0HG0gokv0qynSMfUTA-E=&xsec_source=pc_search).





Fig. 39: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Via 姐姐, Chuān xīn zhōngshì zài rìběn bèi kuā bào la 穿新中式在日本被夸爆啦 ("Wearing new Chinese style is praised in Japan"), Xiaohongshu post, last modified April 12, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6619304a000000001b008198?xsec\\_token=AB8cnN631FQrswH1rSuNBW74V539ZpSK8xOQhvGmjba5o=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6619304a000000001b008198?xsec_token=AB8cnN631FQrswH1rSuNBW74V539ZpSK8xOQhvGmjba5o=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 40: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@ Kelly\_芝芝媽.\*, Dāng zhōngguó dōngfāng chuānsuō zài FRbālí 当中国东方穿梭在FR巴黎 (When China Orient shuttles through FRParis), Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 7, 2024, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66632462000000000e030bed?xsec\\_token=ABQTguzmvOL11Z1bVanlUmz-zLnIYCxlVzL1kadjJ2Ziw=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66632462000000000e030bed?xsec_token=ABQTguzmvOL11Z1bVanlUmz-zLnIYCxlVzL1kadjJ2Ziw=&xsec_source=pc_search).

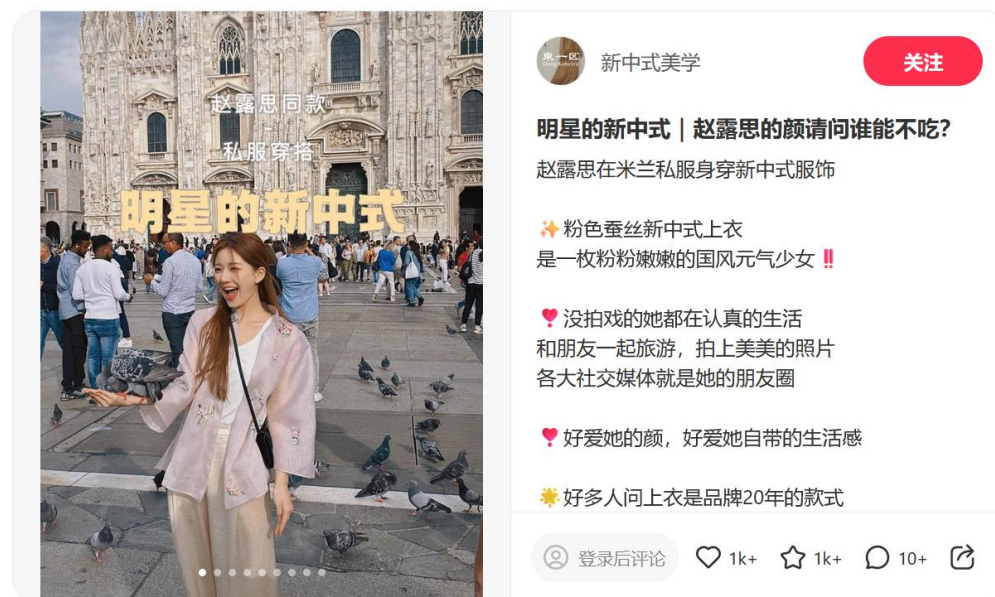


Fig. 41: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@ 新中式美学, Míngxīng de xīn zhōngshì | zhàolùsī de yán qǐngwèn shéi néng bù chī? 明星的新中式 | 赵露思的颜请问谁能不吃? ("Celebrities' New Chinese Style | Zhao Lusi's Looks - Who Could Resist?"), Xiaohongshu post, November 8, 2023, [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/654b70a20000000003300089b?xsec\\_token=AB9-ECRAKXQfmBVlx4FC\\_QR1LUabGh31gYD4\\_2vuzdKaw=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/654b70a20000000003300089b?xsec_token=AB9-ECRAKXQfmBVlx4FC_QR1LUabGh31gYD4_2vuzdKaw=&xsec_source=pc_search).



Fig. 42: Screenshot of Xiaohongshu post under 新中式 tag, 2024. Screenshot by author.

@Ashely 酱, Dāng bālí yùjiàn xīn zhōngshì 当巴黎遇见新中式 (“When Paris meets New-Chinese style”), Xiaohongshu post, last modified June 11, 2024,  
[https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66178bd8000000001a015747?xsec\\_token=ABHerdR20TBCurNOseHBaw8NMuDmnVfLlIzab8xuS4aQ1A=&xsec\\_source=pc\\_search](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/66178bd8000000001a015747?xsec_token=ABHerdR20TBCurNOseHBaw8NMuDmnVfLlIzab8xuS4aQ1A=&xsec_source=pc_search).