

What is Going on in China? A Cultural Analysis on the Reappearance of Ancient Jili and Hanfu in Present-Day China

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This paper seeks to address one aspect of the interesting phenomenon of the revival of classical ancient culture in present-day China. Modernization or westernization has brought to China an unprecedented prosperity. Meanwhile, amidst the fast-growing economic process many Chinese also experienced some sort of identity crisis. Never ever before have the Chinese felt so threatened in terms of their cultural identity by such an engulfing force as globalization does. They questioned, what would become of their spiritual home when the whole world seems to be melting into a big global village? What would happen to those values that were cherished by generations of Chinese, their forefathers? The attempt to restore the ancient ritual Jili (笄礼) along with ancient clothes Hanfu (汉服) is by no means accidental. It is one facet of the larger movement namely the attempt to revive Chinese classical culture as a reaction against globalization. It is an attempt to assert who the present Chinese think they are, i.e. a world citizen, but a Chinese world citizen.

Background

The year 1978 is a turning point for China since it is in this year that China adopted the reform and opening-up polity proposed by Deng Xiaoping. Since then China's economy has undergone such rapid even dramatic changes that one wouldn't be able to recognize his hometown upon returning if he had left it more than 10 years ago. Indeed, twenty years ago, when I was a middle school student, people in China (city citizens – people in the countryside did not have this privilege) were buying most of their daily necessities with some sort of coupons, and every family had a little book which recorded the amount of rice, flour and oil it purchased. Ten years ago such coupons were already a history but there were still quite many state-owned shops and these shops offered only a limited variety of goods. Now people go to the supermarkets or hypermarkets, many of them foreign-funded, and they can find whatever products they want, many of which come from abroad. (Two years ago I was able to find in Carrefour only one brand of cheese – now the number is about 20. Western food and other commodities not only come, but come at an amazingly fast speed and with an incredible variety.) All sorts of foreign products flow in, from cheese to digital cameras, from kitchen knives to racing cars. While economically many people are better off, many (especially the young) also experience an "identity crisis": "We wear T-shirts and Jeans, go to the McDonald's, drink Coca-Cola, watch American films, listen to Jazz and rock music, talk in foreign languages, and learn the western manners. Except that we are yellow in skin and black in hair, what else do we differ from the westerners?"¹ Modernization is to a large degree synonymous with "westernization" according to many theorists (Pieterse, 2004); unfortunately, this is true at least with the case of China. We not only become more

accustomed to western style of dieting (e.g. bread and milk for breakfast, salad and steak for lunch or dinner) dressing (suits, and all fashion products from the West) and entertaining (balling, golfing, Disney-park going etc.), our mind is also becoming more westernized through more and more westernized schooling and business dealings: we become more aggressive, more aware of our own rights, have a stronger sense of privacy and are more critical towards many of the traditional values. However, during this process of modernization or westernization, many Chinese also experience an “identity crisis” as described above. As reactions against modernization (westernization) there have appeared various trends and movements which aim to restore ancient Chinese culture. In these endeavors people seek to gain solidification with what is considered the essence of being a Chinese. Here I’d like to talk about a present trend in China which started not long ago but is right now on its height if not going even higher.

Jili Reappeared in Modern China

Jili (笄礼), an ancient Chinese ritual which was conducted when a young girl in the family came of age², could trace its history to more than 2,000 years ago. This ritual survived for more than 2,000 years until the invasion of the Manchus³ about 400 years ago. The Manchus were considered barbarians by Han people⁴ but Manchus’ military strength finally conquered the empire of Han people. To impose their rule over the Han people, the Manchu leaders forced a series of laws forbidding Han people’s conduction of many long-held traditional rituals. They even forced Han people to change their habitual way of dressing. It is against this background that Jili gradually faded into history and was lost.

However, with China’s more interaction with other cultures in the process of fast-developing market economy, the growing national awareness of the on-going process of globalization, the Chinese people began to quest for the meaning of being a Chinese. Indeed, this quest for identity did not appear suddenly; rather, the present situation has made the quest all the more exigent. This growing awareness is a reaction to the previously dominant attitude that “whatever foreign is good.” Under that attitude, even a domestic product would adopt a strange foreign-sound brand name in order to have a good sale. The Chinese have always been proud about their rich cultural heritage. By bringing back the tradition, the Chinese believe that they can regain the dignity they used to have but which was killed by the humiliating rule of the Manchus.

One of the things these advocates of tradition are doing is trying to restore the traditional clothes of ancient China. This way of dressing was forced away by the Manchus’ rule. Beginning from 2003, some daring individuals began to wear Hanfu (literally meaning “clothes of Han people”) in parks as well as in downtown areas

What’s more, efforts had been done to restore the ancient Jili. Since the year 2002 Wuhan (capital city of Hubei province) has designated May 16th as the official day for “ceremony on coming of age.” This year, i.e. on May 16th 2006, 516 young people in Wuhan participated in the ceremony.

The ancient Jili basically goes like this: when the girl is 18 years old (in the ancient times it may be from 15 to 20), she should have a solemn ceremony to celebrate this important stage

of entering into adulthood. Her mother (other female relatives may serve the purpose when occasions call for them) would lead the whole ceremony, and only female guests were invited. The girl should perform certain rituals like bowing to her parents, sprinkling wine to the ground, etc., and would receive blessings from the elderly. This ceremony would result the entering into an important life stage of hers.

When asked why she'd like to have Jili, Pan Lihua couldn't suppress her excitement. She said she was chosen by Wenyuan Society to be the one to perform a whole series of Jili according to the instructions of an ancient manual. Wenyuan Society wished to restore some traditional rituals on important occasions in China such as coming of age, getting married as well as other traditional festivals. They wish that by so doing Chinese people can have a better understanding of and a deeper love for their culture. Pan would soon enter the society and start her professional career. She said Jili would be a good preparation for her in the sense that it made her feel more responsible for what she's going to do – the awareness that she's become an adult and will take charge of herself and meanwhile be responsible for the society.

Discussion

According to Turner, ritual in a primitive society is “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests” (in Deflem, 1991, p. 5). Studying rituals of a society can lend important insights into our understanding of the society because rituals “provide the clues to how a culture functions within its own symbolic world” (Turner in St. Clair, 2006, p. 119). Turner observed rituals performed in Ndembu, a primitive tribe in Africa and found that ritual serves as glue for that society. But the idea of “ritual” can also be used in a modern sense and serves to “challenge the wider social structure by offering social critique on, or even suggestions for, a revolutionary re-ordering of the official social order” (Deflem, 1991, p. 16). These Chinese efforts to restore the ancient Jili should be interpreted in the latter sense. The modern world is full of conveniences and pleasures. The Chinese are becoming better off economically, but although they live more comfortably in the materialistic sense, they find that spiritually they feel more “empty.” They feel they have nothing to hang on to. They don't believe in any religion, Christianity or Buddhism or any others. They have ideas much different from that of their parents. These well-educated young cherish a deep love for Chinese classics, but they find in reality many traditional values are forgotten. What's more, they're saddened by the fact that many valuable rituals as well as some other cultural conducts that originated in China are kept in some neighboring countries like Japan and Korea, but are lost in China. This universal mood finally expresses itself in movements like those mentioned above.

Similar to the renewed enthusiasm in learning classical Chinese scholarly works, advocates for restoring the ancient ritual of Jili also spread throughout the whole country. This movement is actually part of another grand idea of these young people: to regain pride in being a Chinese by wearing traditional Chinese clothes and performing some typical ancient rituals. In May 2006 some students from Peking University dressed in Hanfu performed some ancient outdoor games in Purple Bamboo Park. Also in May, another group of students from

the People's University gathered in the same park reciting loudly a memorial lyric for a most famous ancient poet named Quyan.

Attitudes towards the present promotion campaign of wearing Hanfu vary. Luo Bing, a girl from Guang Zhou, has a dozen Hanfu in her closet. She wears it when she goes shopping, visits friends, etc. She wishes to have her wedding attire designed in Hanfu style. When asked why she'd like to promote Hanfu, she said: "I sincerely wish that our people can wear again what we used to wear and have our own traditional culture back again, instead of blindly adore the western style, or the Japanese, or the Korean."

Another advocate said:

We want to revive the traditional Han culture, that doesn't mean we're against cultures of other ethnic groups. I'm against narrow-minded nationalism. In such a free society, Hanfu definitely won't be the only choice for many people; but it is, at least, a possible choice among others.

Despite a majority's approval (for example, an internet survey shows that 80% of the 12,000 participants favor the idea of wearing Hanfu on certain occasions), there are also a minority who disapprove of the idea:

When we inherit what our ancestors left us, we should inherit those of excellence, not those that are already thrown into the dustbin of history. When we hold a ceremony to celebrate a young person's coming of age, we should also do it according to what people in a modern society is supposed to do, that is, to suit the modern style. It is erroneous to hang on Hanfu to save the traditional culture as if it were a life jacket. Such behavior is the same with climbing up a tree to get a fish, to pursue the superficial rather than address the real issue.

While there's overriding optimism about Hanfu's reappearance in China among ordinary folks, the academia views the issue rather with caution. Professor Feng Tianyu of Wuhan University believes that "cultural evolution is a natural process and should not be intervened. It is the same with the appearance of Hanfu: it's only natural for phenomena as such to surface; we should neither think too highly of its influence nor belittle it; just let it develop along its own course."

An Expression of Nationalism?

Quite a few scholars warned people not to fall into nationalism in its negative sense. "Nationalism is a concept customarily treated with cautions, if not deep suspicion, in intellectual circles" (Head, 2002, p. 118). While in the past 200 years nationalism could be interpreted as narrow-minded and detrimental, some present scholars would rather view it (a new form of nationalism) "as tending towards new forms of social organization":

... that new forms of nationalism might represent a way of resisting the encroachment of economic globalization, specifically where existing nation-states are seen to co-operate too obligingly with the objectives of multinational companies. (ibid)

Professor Zhou Yunqing of Wuhan University comments:

Development of culture is diversified. The present enthusiasm towards Hanfu is one facet of cultural pluralism. ... Many of us still tend to view things as either good or bad; this over simplification of turning everything into a binary opposition is problematic. Neither approval nor disapproval should go to extreme; as to the view that promotion of Hanfu reflects a tendency toward narrow-minded nationalism or even populism, it's absolutely not the case.

Ye Mao is probably the first teacher to appear on the platform in Hanfu and lectures his students on "American spoken English" in Oriental School, Wuhan Branch. An American Studies graduate of Hopkins University and at present a doctoral student at Wuhan University, he even designed a "Chinese robe for graduation ceremony" which was later suggested to the Education Ministry of China for consideration.

Ye said that he can't see why the traditional Chinese clothes can't fit in the modern world. For him, he sees wearing Hanfu perfectly harmonious with the modern society he's in. Another young advocate expressed the similar idea. "I love rap, I love to wear Jeans", he said, "but I also love to sing rap when I am in Hanfu." Indeed, for these young people, wearing Hanfu or performing Jili doesn't mean they want to live the same kind of life lived by their ancestors: that would miss the point. Whether it be Hanfu or Jili, it's a symbol of their culture orientation. "... it is not the symbols themselves that matter, but how they are used in specific social situations" (Turner as quoted by St. Clair, 2006, p. 119).

Further impacts of Hanfu

At present, enthusiasm in Hanfu is carried as far as to suggest ceremonious dresses for the coming 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Different attires for different minority groups are also taken into consideration; for example, a specific example was a design of attire for a minority group named Achang (阿昌).

An Internet surfer comments: "I'm an ethnic minority, but I don't mind wearing Hanfu. Why should I? We are one people." In fact, minority groups have integrated into Han culture well. They intermarry and intermingle with Han people for a long time. Han culture is basically the culture of Han ethnic group, but it also absorbs characters of other minority groups (Li, 2003). "All ethnic groups in China are united as one people" is what little kids in China are taught even before they enter primary schools.

The Hanfu craze spread not only through the whole country of China, but has also caught the attention of some other countries like Singapore, a dominantly Chinese speaking country. What's more, champions of Hanfu are planning exhibitions of Hanfu in Hong Kong, Korea

and Australia later this year.

Conclusion

Rituals are dying out in China. So are the memories of the past. When globalization is becoming a reality, many young Chinese, like young people in many other countries in the process of modernization, seek to identify themselves as unique human beings. They resort to the traditional culture, because they not only want to be a world citizen, but a world citizen with distinct cultural background.

Notes

- ¹. This paper owes much to the result of internet searching. This comment, as well as many others followed, appear as HTMLs in Chinese and were translated by the author.
- ². For the boy, the ritual is called “Guanli (冠礼)”.
- ³. A minority ethnic people inhabit(ed) mainly in the north-east of China and Inner Mongolia
- ⁴. The dominant ethnic people in China

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