

Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today*

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What can we learn from the self-imagination or identity of people from the clothes they wear? Why is it that, when China's National People's Congress meets, those members from ethnic minorities wear national costume while those from the Han wear clothing we might describe as international?

In this book, Kevin Carrico addresses questions of this sort through a pathbreaking analysis of a movement dedicated to reviving the clothing of the Han, by far the most populous of China's ethnic groups, numbering some 92 percent of the national population. This movement, called the Han Clothing (*hanfu*) Movement, dates from the beginning of the twenty-first century and as of 2019 had a bit less than one million enthusiasts.

In essence, Carrico believes that "members of the Han Clothing Movement are racial nationalists dedicated to celebrating the idea of China" (17). He sees it as a nationalist attempt to restore a glorious Chinese tradition, which includes ideologies like Confucianism that were so influential in formulating that tradition.

One chapter in the book deals with Han opposition to the Manchus, the ethnic group that dominated and provided the ruling family for China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). Manchu clothes were often incorrectly confused as Chinese and are a target of the Han Clothing Movement. For the Han Clothing Movement, the Manchus are "portrayed as the sole source of evil" (153). The movement even promotes a conspiracy theory of a Manchu return to power and does so "within a unifying narrative of barbaric Manchu oppression and heroic Han resistance" (141). In other words, hatred of the Manchus and the clothes they wore become a source of racially based nationalism for the Han.

Another chapter, "Producing Purity," analyzes gender roles in the imagination of the Han Clothing Movement. Wearing Han clothes is seen as a process of purification, especially for women, because it represents a return to an imagined ideal tradition. Carrico believes that members of the Movement look back to a past when harmonious gender relations reflected a stable society. Despite the fact that gender equality is actually promoted in the Chinese Constitution (Article 48), the Movement regards it as merely an imposition of the West and therefore bad.

A part of the conclusion is devoted to the ideas of Jiang Qing (born 1953), a neo-Confucianist thinker with some influence in China (and not to be confused with Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing [1914–91]). According to Carrico, Jiang Qing considers that "democracy is a thoroughly Western institution without roots in Chinese civilization" and therefore totally inappropriate for China (198). Jiang Qing is interesting as a very traditionalist Confucian philosopher in contemporary China. However, he is less relevant to the Han Clothing Movement than to showing China as moving in an anti-Western direction of nationalism where "the great Han" are supreme.

This book engages deeply with ethnography and other academic theories. The methodology is excellent. Carrico summarizes it as "engaging in long-term fieldwork and incorporating ethnographic materials to consider the complex daily life experiences, dilemmas, and attachments of Han Clothing Movement participants" (12). He

lives up to this methodology by reporting numerous conversations and experiences with members of the Han Clothing Movement, either individuals or groups.

I admire many aspects of this book. It is the first thoroughgoing study of the Han Clothing Movement. The whole idea of the interconnections between clothing, history, and ideology is both interesting and worth research. However, I finished reading it with deep reservations about the implications. The main one is that the Han Clothing Movement shows that China as a whole is a state where nationalism is based on race. Because a movement favored by a small number of people has leaders and members who hold racially nationalist views does not, however, prove anything about the country as a whole.

While there is an officially sponsored Confucian revival in China, it is very selective, emphasizing only those aspects that are not opposed to socialism, such as harmony. Moreover, the Han Clothing Movement enthusiasts complain about the lack of support they receive from authorities. Indeed, Carrico notes that the views of the Han nationalists “directly oppose the central government’s ethnic policy” (84). Among the many students I have had in China over several decades of intermittent teaching there, very few indeed have expressed great interest in Han clothing. They wear standard garb rather like what one sees in the West and what is in many ways international now. Their interests are more anchored in the contemporary world than in tradition.

Even forgetting that the Han Clothing Movement represents less than 0.1 percent of Chinese, there are alternative ways of understanding the thinking at least of its younger members. A 2019 article by Sam Gaskin offered an explanation that my experience suggests is as sensible as Carrico’s. It cites Eric Fish, a specialist on China’s millennial generation, as saying “most Hanfu enthusiasts are in it for the fashion and community more than a racial or xenophobic motivation.” The people I know in China are proud of China and Chinese culture, but when they dress in traditional Chinese clothing, it is more likely to be for fun or relaxation than as part of a sinister Han nationalist revival.

I recommend this book to ethnography practitioners and specialists on ethnographic theory. Its author is an established and respected scholar. However, I disagree with extrapolating a racially nationalist China from a movement that, while fascinating and worth studying, is hardly mainstream.

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#### REFERENCES

- Gaskin, Sam. 2019. “Fashion, Not Nationalism, Drives Chinese Clothing Revival.” *Business of Fashion*, January 23, 2019. <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/global-currents/hanfu-fantasy-not-nationalism-drives-interest-in-traditional-chinese-clothing>.

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