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Negotiating new cultured identities through stylizing *Wenyan*: the case of young Chinese in China and the Netherlands

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Abstract: This article focuses on cultured identity construction via linguistic stylization among young domestic and external Chinese migrants. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, China and the Netherlands, this study contends that self-defined *Hanfu* fans stylize the classical *Wenyan* register to invoke and align with a persona who is a member of the socioculturally recognizable Chinese literati. During this process, the use of the *Wenyan* register embodies the higher-order meanings of “cultured,” “elegant,” and distinctly “Chinese,” while *Hanfu* carries the indexical significance of a cultured distinction, distinguishing educated people, who are expected to be familiar with it, from those who are less educated. *Hanfu* fans appropriate these cultured attributes to construct a *Cainv* (lit. ‘talented woman’) identity in the Chinese context but a cultured Chinese identity in the Dutch context. These identities render them distinct from other migrants, thereby linking the cultured attribute to a new migratory identity. Linguistic stylization and the pursuit of a cultured identity are ingrained within the mainstream narrative in China while at the same time transnationally reflecting the efforts of young Chinese to resist the marginalizing stereotypes of Chinese migrants.

Keywords: *Hanfu*; stylization; indexicality; cultured identity; migrants; non-rebellious youth practice

摘要: 本文聚焦于中国国内及海外年轻一代中国移民通过语言风格化来实现文化身份构建的过程。基于对中国北京和荷兰的汉服爱好者群体的民族志田野调查,本文发现,汉服爱好者通过将语言风格化为古典文言语体,从而唤起在社会文化上具有辨识度的中国文人人格并与之建立联系。在这一过程中,文言承载了“有文化”、

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“文雅”以及“中国的”高阶含义。汉服则指向文化意涵,区分熟悉这一文化知识的受教育者与其他个体。通过这些文化特质,汉服爱好者在中国语境下构建出才女身份、在荷兰语境下构建有文化的中国人身份,这些身份使他们区别于其他移民,从而将文化属性与新移民身份联系起来。语言风格化为文言和对文化身份的追求既深植于中国的主流叙事,又在跨国层面上反映了年轻一代中国人对抗中国移民边缘化刻板印象的努力。

关键词: 汉服; 风格化; 指向性; 文化身份; 移民; 非反叛性青年实践

1 Introduction

This article investigates the construction of cultured identities among young Chinese with a migrant status through the act of linguistic stylization. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork about self-defined *Hanfu* (lit. ‘Han clothing’) fans in Beijing, China and the Netherlands, this article examines how these individuals, shaped by shared migration experiences and orientations, construct a *Cainv* (lit. ‘talented woman’) identity in the Chinese context and a cultured Chinese identity in the Dutch context through stylizing *Wenyan* (lit. ‘literary language’). These cultured identities and practices, which simultaneously distinguish them from other Chinese migrants, offer insights into how contemporary young Chinese navigate and respond to their migratory living conditions within and outside China.

With the implementation of the reform and open-door policy in the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter PRC) in 1978, an era of urbanization, modernization, and globalization dawned. Contemporary young Chinese (particularly those born in the post-1990s) have grown up amid extensive internal and international migrations. The ensuing rapid economic development and expanded access to higher education have provided them with better economic and educational opportunities, enabling them to acquire new skills and the ability to move within or across China’s borders (Li 2020). Internal migration in the contemporary PRC involves the large-scale movement of the population from rural or less developed regions to major cities, such as Beijing, which had a migrant population of 8.348 million in 2021.¹ According to Roulleau-Berger (2021: 6), “almost one in five Chinese youth are migrants.” They are described by many scholars as “the new generation migrants,” a term that applies to those born after the 1980s and 1990s (Peilin and Roulleau-Berger 2013). This group differs significantly from previous generations, characterized by their youth, higher levels of education and skills, migration across multiple cities, and elevated expectations for a more prosperous future and improved living standards

1 <https://tjj.beijing.gov.cn/EnglishSite/SC/202204/P020220406395809040784.pdf>, accessed October 23, 2024.

(Li 2020; Zhao et al. 2018). However, these differences do not imply that they are impervious to experiencing situations of insecurity, marginality or precarity, such as experienced by less educated and lower-skilled migrants, i.e., construction workers (Wang et al. 2017). For example, they still have to contend with the household registration (*Hukou*, 户口) system, which acts as an internal ‘passport’ by excluding migrants from legal membership in new areas (Liu 2021). Shaped by similar forces, many young Chinese pursue tertiary education and build their professional careers outside China, in places such as Europe. They are generally classified within the category of “new migrants,” distinguishing them from earlier waves of Chinese migrants from the PRC, typified by low-skilled rural migrants from the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces who settled in ethnic enclaves, such as those involved in catering and restaurants (Thunø and Li 2020). This “newer” group, as exemplified by the most recent wave of Chinese migration to the Netherlands, primarily consists of first-generation migrants – highly educated and skilled individuals who usually possess certain social, cultural, and economic capital (Aalberse and Muysken 2013; He and Colic-Peisker 2024). Yet, this does not mean they are immune to conditions of precarity often tied to migration.

The pathways of internal and international migrations can also fluidly interface, as argued by King and Skeldon (2010). For example, a young Chinese individual might first migrate internally, say, to Beijing, and then internationally, or vice versa. Therefore, considering migrants as mobile actors who make choices about their destinations (Schuster 2005) – though constrained by their sociocultural-economic capital and situations of precarity – rather than as fixed within separate categories of internal or international migration is crucial. It underscores the significance of the ongoing process of migrant status-making occurring through situated practice (Robertson 2019). This raises a key question: how do these young Chinese, labeled as “new migrants,” construct a “new” migrant status through their practices? Or, put differently, in what ways do they overlap and/or differentiate themselves from other Chinese migrant groups?

Our goal here is to elaborate on the sociolinguistic aspect of “new” identity negotiation by young Chinese who share their migration status and orientation. These young Chinese, whether situated domestically or abroad, actively engage with Chinese cultural and linguistic resources and are increasingly aligned with contemporary Chinese sociopolitical beliefs (Liu 2005; Yin 2015). In particular, amid rising anti-Chinese sentiment abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic and a domestic revival of so-called traditional Chinese culture driven by the PRC’s official cultural nationalism, many young Chinese at home and abroad have embraced cultural practices such as doing *Hanfu* to assert their national and cultural identities (Fan and Ip 2023; Jia 2023; Ling and Tang 2024). This study therefore takes self-defined *Hanfu*

fans as an example within both domestic and international contexts, namely the global *Hanfu* community of practice (for details, see below).

This analysis focuses on two cases of linguistic practices by self-defined *Hanfu* fans in Beijing, China and the Netherlands, specifically the stylization of *Wenyan*. *Wenyan* is a register of Chinese that educated young Chinese, including *Hanfu* fans, have access to and use as part of their linguistic repertoire. Since stylization involves the deliberate use of out-group styles to which speakers do not typically belong, diverging from the expected norms of the current context (Coupland 2001; Jaspers and Van Hoof 2019; Rampton 2009), it can lead to a reconfiguration of language indexicalities. This paper presents how the indexical shifts of *Wenyan*, along with changes in the indexicality of *Hanfu*, contribute to cultured identity construction related to the context of migration. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the nuanced ways in which contemporary young Chinese make sense of themselves and navigate their positioning and belonging in this globalized era.

The paper is organized as follows. The following sections introduce the global *Hanfu* community of practice and the *Wenyan* register. Then the concept of stylization is presented. After that, we provide an overview of our ethnographic fieldwork and data. Next, we present our analyses based on the two cases. The final section brings the analyses together and reflects on the act of stylizing *Wenyan* and the cultured identities and their ethnographic meanings given the sociocultural ideology and migratory situations.

2 The global *Hanfu* community of practice

The cultural engagement of contemporary Chinese youth in online debates about traditional Chinese clothing led to the emergence of the concept of *Hanfu* attire (Yang 2016). During the 2001 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Shanghai, China, the leaders of APEC nations were expected to wear attire that best represented the host country. Photos that appeared online show them in *Tangzhuang* (Tang suit), which is perceived to have evolved from garments worn by the Manchu minority. However, the Han is the largest ethnic group in mainland China, accounting for 91.11 % of the entire population.² It thus prompted a discussion on “what traditional Han attire is.” Many youths then initiated the formation of related online forums dedicated to reinventing such clothing (Zhou 2012). In 2003, drawing from Chinese historical dramas and ancient literature, a young overseas Chinese living in Australia handcrafted *Hanfu* attire and posted a picture of himself wearing it on a forum (Yang 2016). In the same year, another young Chinese, Wang Letian,

2 https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-05/13/content_5606149.htm, accessed December 27, 2023.

wore the *Hanfu* garment on the streets of Zhengzhou, Henan Province, and garnered a great deal of attention. Subsequently, a growing number of young Chinese began wearing *Hanfu* in domestic and overseas public spaces. They view *Hanfu* as the Han people's traditional clothing which disappeared from history with the rise of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912).

By 2022, the number of self-defined *Hanfu* fans had surged to around 8 million.³ About 2,064 associations related to *Hanfu*, both domestically and internationally, have been founded, including fifteen associations in Europe.⁴ Such associations are made up of self-defined *Hanfu* fans living at home and abroad whose aim is to revive *Hanfu* as an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and to promote traditional Chinese culture. They usually hold offline *Hanfu*-themed activities, such as celebrations at traditional Chinese festivals and regular Yaji (lit. ‘elegant gatherings,’ recreational activities through which literati in ancient China met to appreciate literature and art) as well as provide online channels, such as group chats on WeChat (the widely used social media platform in China as well as in overseas Chinese communities). These practices (re)produce a global *Hanfu* community of practice (Eckert 2006; Wenger 1998).

However, the global scale and connections within this dynamic grouping of youth remain regrettably unexplored. Most studies focus on self-defined *Hanfu* fans within the PRC and examine how they use relevant social practices, such as dressing up in *Hanfu*, to pursue cultural and national identity (Cui 2022; Tung 2020). This includes traditional Chinese values-oriented subcultural groups that claim that the ways in which they have chosen to engage in self-expression align with state-approved cultural-political policies (Zhou 2012) and Han nationalists who pursue an exclusive imagined Han community as a means of escaping their unpleasant reality (Carrico 2017). A study by Fan and Ip (2023) was the first to examine the *Hanfu* revival in overseas settings and link it to the migrant experience. They argued that young Chinese migrants in the United Kingdom, informed by Chinese nationalism, associate both positive and negative feelings with wearing *Hanfu*. These emotions, such as pride in being Chinese and the loneliness of being sojourners, are integral to how they construct their own particular sense of Chinese identity. In this way, these young migrants also develop a migratory identity, characterized by greater confidence in expressing national pride when compared to previous diasporic generations. This, in turn, helps them cope with situations they face as migrants, including discrimination and a crisis of identity. This article extends this analysis by looking at

³ http://paper.people.com.cn/zgcsb/html/2023-05/15/content_25984314.htm, accessed September 6, 2023.

⁴ <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1W4411Q7vD?p=2> (Global Han Cultural Group Statistical Survey 2019 Edition, Official Version), accessed December 22, 2023.

young Chinese migrants not only in other European countries but also inside China within the context of domestic migration. We follow the global thread by simultaneously examining self-defined *Hanfu* fans inside China, particularly in Beijing, and outside of China, specifically in the Netherlands.

3 The *Wenyan* register

Wenyan is a sort of equivalent to Latin in the West. Its “grammar and vocabulary are almost exclusively based on old Chinese from before the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) to the Wei–Jin period (CE 220–420)” (Chen 2001: 49). Subsequently, it evolved into a standardized and prestigious written register favored by the literati and officials; for almost two thousand years (until 1919) it served high-culture functions such as being the medium of the Confucian teachings, the civil examination system, and the imperial administrative structure (Weng 2020). For example, many literati scholars employed it to create the most esteemed literary genres, such as classical poetry and prose. Therefore, *Wenyan* could be considered as the written variety that distinguishes Chinese literati (mainly associated with a male stereotype) from the general population. It is associated with elegance, refinement, cultured forms of expression, and the upper echelons of society in premodern China.

The association of specific linguistic features with the *Wenyan* register is tied to the demarcation of boundaries between *Wenyan* literature, characterized by the use of *Wenyan*, and *Baihua* literature, written in *Baihua* (lit. ‘plain speech,’ the other written variety) during the New Culture Movement (1915–1923). As the use of *Wenyan* and *Baihua* had never been altogether separate prior to this period (Wei 2014), the exclusion of *Wenyan* in literary expression led to the identification of particular features with *Wenyan*. For example, the scholar Hu Shi clearly rejected the parallelism technique widely used in *Wenyan* writing. It is commonly described as a pair of sentences that have an identical number of characters and similar syntax (Lee et al. 2018). Such a grammatical parallelism/syllabic correspondence construction in *Wenyan* literature is partially determined by the monosyllabic, word-oriented *Wenyan*, as it allows a word in each line to have an exact counterpart in the following line (Kirkpatrick 1997). Qian Xuanton prioritized disyllabic compounds in *Baihua* (Wang 2020), typically composed of two Chinese characters which mostly share semantically related morphemes, over the “elliptical,” single-syllable linguistic forms. Therefore, one salient difference in form between *Wenyan* and *Baihua* is the preference for monosyllabic versus disyllabic counterparts. For example, ‘to celebrate’ in *Baihua* is “庆祝(qingzhu),” which consists of the compounding of the syllables “庆(qing)” and “祝(zhu),” both of which independently mean ‘to celebrate’ in *Wenyan*. In addition, it was recommended that features of *Wenyan* texts – a set of

typical function words, including the preverbal preposition “以(yi, to)” and the locative preposition “于(yu, at)” – be discarded or replaced by the *Baihua* counterparts (Fu 2014), such as “为了(weile)” and “在(zai).”⁵ However, calling for an end of such monosyllabic expressions and *Wenyan* particles has not led to the complete disappearance of *Wenyan* from modern China. It exists in daily life, such as Chengyu (Chinese idioms), and *Wenyan* literature has always maintained a presence in Chinese language curricula, even though *Baihua* has been established as the linguistic foundation of Putonghua (lit. ‘common speech’), modern standard Chinese in the PRC since 1956.⁶

Nowadays, Chinese youth officially encounter and become familiar with the *Wenyan* variety through studying *Wenyan* literature, including various literary genres written by ancient Chinese poets or writers. It has become a mandatory component in primary and secondary education textbooks since the 1950s, serving as a yardstick for assessing competence in Chinese (Gao 2023). Therefore, the use of the *Wenyan* register for meaning-making overlaps with the utilization of *Wenyan* literature as a written literary form/genre among contemporary Chinese who received their foundational education in China. Given that the current PRC promotes cultural pride and the distinctiveness of the national culture to legitimize its control (Rosenberger 2020), *Wenyan* literature is thus regarded as part of classical antiquity, embodying the quintessential aspects of traditional Chinese culture and one of the salient manifestations of “Chinese Characteristics (Zhongguo tese).” Many policies, such as the language policy of *Chanting the Chinese Classics*, encourage people to study and recite *Wenyan* literature and thereby cultivate Chinese cultural awareness and confidence (Yu and Johnson 2023).

4 Stylization

Recent sociolinguistic studies have highlighted a range of stylization practices employed by young people from migrant/mobile backgrounds to adopt “another’s voice” in navigating “inclusion” versus “otherness” and thereby shaping their identities (see Chun 2009; Günthner 2011; Higgins 2015; Tsiplakou and Ioannidou 2012). Stylization is a subterfuge by which speakers manipulate the ambiguity surrounding whether the voice being performed “belongs to” the performers themselves, someone else or perhaps both. In this way, people utilize “as if I owned

⁵ These are arguably the most recognizable features of *Wenyan* (literature), which is closely associated with the following analysis. A full discussion of *Wenyan*’s linguistic inventory is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ https://www.gov.cn/lssdj/content_1799191.htm, accessed May 20, 2024.

this voice” (Coupland 2001: 349) to align themselves with social personae indexed by the voicing difference in projecting hypothetical identities. Such a strategic act is originally associated with Bakhtin’s double-voicing. Speakers employ the discourse of an imagined other “in the direction of its own particular intentions” (Bakhtin 1984: 193) and thus the boundary-making between two voices can be minimized to develop a fusion of voices (also known as uni-directional double voicing). Such voicing allows social actors, through employing linguistic features, to benefit from the qualities stereotypically associated with the represented voice/persona in order to assume a specific identity (Jaspers 2011).

The connection between linguistic features and styles and associated personas underscores the fact that stylization relies on the ideological premise that linguistic elements do not exist in isolation; rather, they are located within an “indexical field” (Eckert 2008). This field comprises a “constellation of ideologically related meanings” that structure linguistic acts, including stylization, but, more importantly, can be reshaped by them (Eckert 2008: 453). This occurs because social actors reinterpret $n+1$ st order indexical meaning through associations with the perceived characteristics of a prior n th order of indexicality (Koven 2013; Silverstein 2003). The co-presence of multiple social meanings offers opportunities for stylistic manipulation, particularly in acts of identity. Thus, “stylization markers and processes may be viewed as parts of particular indexical orders” (Tsiplakou and Ioannidou 2012: 278).

Quotations are one of the canonical acts through which speakers invoke the voices of others both orally and in writing. Such an act entails both the decontextualization of the re-presented voice of the original speaker and its recontextualization within a new context. It is always a stylized device used by social actors to imbue their perspectives into the reconstructed voice for a situative communicative intention (Niemeier and Dirven 1997). Therefore, as Bogetić (2019: 62) argues, “[s]tylization works as a specific type of parodic quotation, which merits attention both in terms of language form and the social meanings it indexes” within the new context. For example, Kang (2020) shows that within the political speeches of the Chinese Communist Party leaders, the repeated citation of phrases from classic literature upholds the traditional values as a role model and essentially characterizes the leaders as equivalent to Confucian literati.

The realization of stylization requires “acculturated audiences”/interactants who are capable of decoding or interpreting the speakers’ deliberate use of a style/voice associated with specific speakers and a discourse community (Coupland 2001). The recognition also hinges on the breadth of indexical associations of styles which affects the audience’s ideological reevaluation (Jaspers 2011). Some styles gain social meanings locally and temporarily, understood only by a specific audience, while other styles connect to wider networks of meaning, making their stylization more recognizable. The *Wenyan* register is more likely to belong to the latter as it

carries linguistic, cultural, social, national and historical characteristics which resonate with the collective understanding and cultural background of the ‘Chinese’ audience.

Many studies have shown how young people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds construct (non-)immigrant identities through the stylizing of multi-ethnic and multiracial varieties, such as those associated with Arab, Turkish, and Chinese groups (see Madsen and Svendsen 2015; Rampton 2003, 2015). These practices are framed within the broad context of the social stratification of the host communities, yet they often downplay the role of migration-related aspirations and the dynamics within intraethnic community settings. In response, Rampton (2018) has called for further research into how their status as migrants influences young people’s sociolinguistic self-positioning within their ethnic communities. This article focuses on young individuals from intra-Chinese ethnicities with migrant backgrounds, with a particular focus on self-defined *Hanfu* fans. It explores their identity construction in relation to their migrant status via the stylization of *Wenyan*.

5 The methodology and data

This article is based on a larger project investigating the relationship between language and dress practices and the identity construction of *Hanfu* fans in Beijing, China and the Netherlands (Jia 2023; Jia and Smelik 2024). Between September 2020 and January 2021, the first author conducted online and offline fieldwork in Beijing, China among five *Hanfu*-related associations comprised primarily of self-defined *Hanfu* fans who migrated to Beijing for work or study, with the majority being in their twenties. The online fieldwork was mainly carried out through WeChat group chats. Initially, Yan Jia reached out to the presidents of associations to obtain their informed consent forms. Subsequently, they invited her to join the associations’ group chats on WeChat. Before commencing the fieldwork, Yan advised participants about her research on group chats. As a member of the group chats, Yan observed and engaged in online interactions with other members, ranging from discussions on association-related activities to casual conversations on diverse topics, such as sharing information and feelings regarding association events, discussions about the *Hanfu* attire they bought, and organizing informal weekend meet-ups. As a ‘personal’ friend of some of the participants (they added each other to friend lists) on WeChat, Yan sometimes interacted with them via WeChat Moments (lit. ‘circle of friends,’ similar to Facebook Feed). Through this platform, participants shared updates on their status, such as posting their *Hanfu* photos, and Yan expressed her opinions by clicking “like” or leaving comments. For her offline fieldwork, Yan utilized participant observation, where she joined in offline-themed activities and conducted

interviews. The fieldwork in the Netherlands, spanning the period from March 2022 to August 2023, focused on one *Hanfu* association in the Netherlands basically made up of young Chinese immigrants. Similarly, Yan conducted online fieldwork through the WeChat group chat of the association and participated in their offline events and conducted interviews.⁷ In total, the data gathered in Beijing, China and the Netherlands comprises roughly 39.32 h of audio recordings, 8.24 h of video recordings, 654 photos, numerous pages of field notes, chat history and screenshots (amounting to around 8.2 GB), along with other materials. During the fieldwork, Yan's linguistic background and sociocultural experiences enabled her to take on multi-faceted roles, including that of a researcher, a young Chinese, and an immigrant who had lived in Beijing and who was currently studying in the Netherlands. This enhanced her rapport and trust with participants and allowed her to gain deeper insights into their lived experience of *Hanfu*, including relevant language practice.

For the purpose of this article, we concentrate on the linguistic data selected from the Chinese and Dutch ethnographic fieldwork. The two cases are mainly based on the photographs with texts. They were chosen for their salience in showing the vital role of the stylization of *Wenyan* in constructing cultured identities. The first case (see Section 6) consists of a screenshot including the post of a participant from China in her own WeChat Moment and two audience members' comments (Figure 1), supplemented with a brief audio transcript (Table 1) and an excerpt from the transcript of one interview (Table 2). The second case (see Section 7) includes a photo of a memorial notebook page shared by the Dutch *Hanfu* association as part of their commemoration of an offline event celebrating a traditional Chinese festival (Figure 2). It is also supplemented with a pertinent excerpt from the group chat discussion on WeChat (Table 3) and an excerpt from the transcript of one interview (Table 4).

6 Constructing a Cainv identity through stylizing *Wenyan* in China

On April 9, 2024, Yan Jia held a brief audio call over WeChat with a participant in China, Miss Zhu, to inform her that one of her posts, Figure 1 (below), would ultimately be included in the article. During the call, a brief dialogue (Table 1) ensued

7 This research received ethical permission from the Ethics Review Committee Inner City Faculties of Maastricht University. The names in the article are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

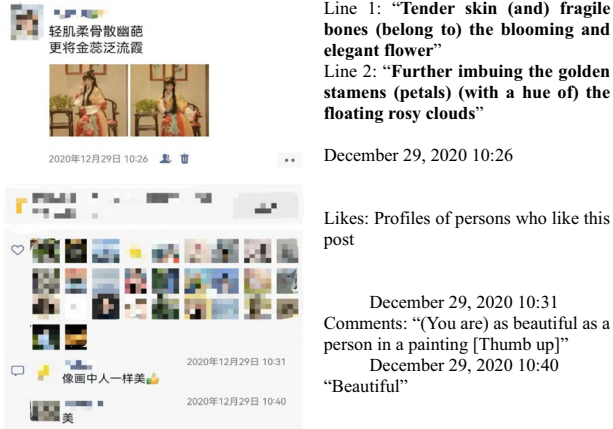


Figure 1: A mixed text-and-image post and the following two comments, screenshot by Miss Zhu. Reproduced with permission.

Table 1: The dialogue between Yan and Zhu.

Yan:	我很好奇你为什么选择这样的文字。是因为更符合汉服吗? I am curious about why you chose such texts. More in line with <i>Hanfu</i> ?
Zhu:	嗯,是的,而且普通的文字配不上我这么精致的妆容!呵呵呵 Er, yes, and normal texts cannot describe my exquisite (<i>Hanfu</i> and) makeup! Hehehe (laughter)

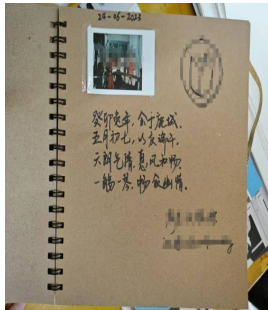
Table 2: Excerpt from an interview narrated by Sun.

我觉得确实是,如果要是他/她的文化水平特别低的话,他/她确实不会关注到这些东西(关于汉服),就是关于文化类的东西,他/她应该不会关注到的。而且像这种人,一般他/她的认知会比较局限,就好比他/她看你穿的,他/她就觉得是奇装异服。

I think it really is true, that if his/her cultural level is particularly low, he/she really would not pay attention to these things (relevant to *Hanfu*), specifically culture-related matters, he/she probably wouldn't notice. Moreover, he/she usually has a rather limited understanding. For instance, when he/she sees what you're wearing, he/she just thinks it is bizarre clothing.

after Yan described the post as containing very beautiful *Hanfu* pictures, supplemented with equally beautiful texts.

This section focuses on the 'non-normal texts' of Figure 1 and explores Zhu's microlinguistic act of showing and constructing herself as a particular type of person.



24-06-2023

The group photo The logo of the association

Line 1: **In the Guimao year of the Rabbit, (we) gather at the Deer City.**

Line 2: **On the seventh day of May, (we come here) to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival.**

Line 3: **“The sky (is) clear (and) the air (is) refreshing, the gentle breeze prevails.”**

Line 4: **“(With) one wine vessel (and) one Guqin, (we) fully express (our) deep feelings.”**

The name of the association

Instagram account

Figure 2: A sheet of the memorial notebook, photographed by Ms. Zhou. Reproduced with permission.

Table 3: Online discussion about the names for Rotterdam.

Zhou: 鹿城这个名字好风雅呀!

Deer city (,) this name sounds so elegant!

Qian: 咱也可以叫丹城

We can also call (it) Cinnabar city

Liu: 鹿城没有鹿[鹿图标]

Deer city (,) no deer [deer emoji]

[...]

Xu: 我真的太爱了 但是创作过程我不在 在场的姐妹快讲述一下

I love it (refers to Figure 2) so much (.) I was not there when the texts were written(.) People who were present (,) please quickly tell the story(.)

Table 4: Excerpt from an interview narrated by Liu.

额,(汉服是)一个文化的积累吧!就说明,代表你的内心的一个强大。。。。。。因为我觉得我有很多的东西可以跟大家(荷兰人和在荷兰的华人)分享。我也可以代表一下,小小代表一下。。。。。。就是一个我们新一代的小代表,就是我们新华人的一个代表吧!。。。。。。这么一个新一代,这么个移民的小形象,跟上个世纪的移民不一样的。。。。。。我们都是有一点自己的小学历,当时我们是来上学的,以上学为目的的话,我们是有一些知识储备,有一些小文化。Uh, (*Hanfu* is) kind of a cultural accumulation! It shows, represents a strength within your inner heart... because I feel I have a lot to share with everyone (Dutch people and Chinese people in the Netherlands). I can also represent, just a little bit... be kind of a small representative of our new generation, a representative of the new Chinese migrants! ... this new generation, this little image of a migrant, is different from the migrants of the last century... We all have a bit of our own little education; when we came, we came to study, so we have some knowledge reserves, a bit of our own culture.

As “people create their linguistic systems so as to resemble those of the groups with which from time to time they wish to identify” (Tabouret-Keller and Le Page 1985: 182), using such a personal act as an example for the purpose of analysis makes it possible to reveal the relationship between deploying the stylized voice of *Wenyan* and the identity formation of self-defined *Hanfu* fans in China.

Miss Zhu is approximately 26 years old. Like many other self-identified *Hanfu* fans in Beijing, she is not a local Beijinger. She comes from the north-central part of China. In order to pursue better job opportunities and a better life, she migrated to Beijing after completing her college degree in the city of Tianjin, close to Beijing. Her journey exemplifies that of the “new generation” of domestic migrants in contemporary China. Dressing up in *Hanfu* is one of her hobbies in her spare time, and she occasionally supplements her income by working as an amateur *Hanfu* model. During her initial encounter with Zhu during an offline event organized by an association in Beijing, Yan Jia was captivated by Zhu’s exquisite *Hanfu* attire. After some casual conversation, they exchanged WeChat account information and became WeChat friends. In subsequent encounters, Yan observed Zhu’s consistent adherence to the *Hanfu* dress code, complete with subtle makeup and hairstyles in both “online and offline nexus” (Blommaert 2022). She actively participated in offline *Hanfu* events held by many *Hanfu* associations in Beijing and demonstrated a keen interest in capturing photos of herself in *Hanfu* attire. After that, she uploaded her *Hanfu* pictures as her WeChat profile and meticulously curated and posted selected images on WeChat Moments. Interestingly, she rarely posts just pictures; instead, her posts are always accompanied by a few lines of text reminiscent of the *Wenyan* register (some include lines quoted from famous *Wenyan* literature). Figure 1 is an instance of this practice. The semi-close nature of WeChat (within comparatively closed personal networks) foregrounds the audiences of posts encompassing users’ online and real-life friends. In the case of Zhu’s post, it is viewable by her contacts in her friends list, including Yan, other *Hanfu* fans and her other friends.

The post in Figure 1 is divided into two sections. The upper portion features brief two-line texts without punctuation, while the lower section showcases two images of Zhu in *Hanfu* attire predominantly of a rosy golden color, complemented by matching makeup and hairstyles.⁸ Zhu is demurely seated on a Chinese-style wooden chair, set against a backdrop of two ornamental paintings. Adjacent to her right hand, a green plant rests on a shelf, contributing to the overall ambience reminiscent of a traditional Chinese living room. Additionally, the filters employed in the two photos evoke the effect of aging, akin to the yellowing of paper over time, which makes the photos look like old paintings. Below the post are likes and responses from the

⁸ The omission of the punctuation can be interpreted as following the traditional Chinese writing (Jia 2024) or informal digital writing (Androutsopoulos and Busch 2021).

audience. It is worth noting that users typically tap the camera button first to select the images or videos they wish to share. Subsequently, they compose the accompanying text above the images when their posts include both text and photos. This highlights the intertextuality between the textual and visual elements in such multimodal posts.

The two-line texts by Zhu consist of fourteen monosyllabic characters, with each line comprising seven characters, ensuring parallel structure in word count and maintaining visual symmetry in format. Such features of texts, as we stated before, are closely associated with the *Wenyan* register. They do not align with Zhu's practices in daily life, as Putonghua (and *Baihua*) serves as her everyday language(s). In other words, the texts accompanying the post (in bold) can be considered marked and stylized and imbued with Zhu's deliberate intentions. In fact, they are quoted from two different poems composed in the *Wenyan* register that describe chrysanthemums (Li and Liu 2007; PUA 2017). Line 1 is extracted from the first line of a poem written by the renowned poet Su Shi from the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), describing *The Cold Chrysanthemum* painting by Zhao Chang, thereby expressing appreciation for the cultural significance of the chrysanthemum. It draws a parallel between the appearance of chrysanthemums and that of a young girl, metaphorically linking codes of Chinese femininity, such as vulnerability and delicacy, to the qualities of the flower. In this way, it emphasizes the beauty of chrysanthemums. Line 2 is a reference to the poem *The Chrysanthemums* by another famous poet and writer of the same historical period, Ouyang Xiu. It depicts the practice of incorporating golden chrysanthemum petals into alcoholic drinks as a delightful activity, since rosy clouds metaphorically refer to great alcohol in ancient China and golden petals is another name for chrysanthemum.

However, there is a prevalent misconception that attributes line 1 and line 2 in the post to a single poem authored by Su Shi, who is the creator of line 1. Then, line 2 is often reinterpreted as a description of the color of chrysanthemums, drawing a comparison to the hue of rosy clouds, rather than depicting the act of placing chrysanthemum petals into the alcohol.⁹ It is unclear whether Zhu juxtaposes these two lines according to this misconception and is mixing up both authors. Zhu, however, does not use quotation marks, reporting verbs, or refer to the original speakers/writers of the quoted lines, which renders the (so-called) quotation more implicit and indirect. Such an unmarked quotation, similar to what Recanatì (2008) called an “open quotation,” has to do with what people do with these words, instead of with what the words mean. This is evidenced by the lack of chrysanthemum

⁹ <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%B5%B5%E6%98%8C%E5%AF%92%E8%8F%8A>, accessed November 23, 2023.

imagery and other hints related to tradition in her posts, which is different from the original theme – praising chrysanthemums – of the quoted contents.

In this manner, Zhu does not mean to express the semantic content of quotations, chrysanthemums. Instead, she intends to work with the voice invoked in the quotations and speaks “as if I endorsed what this voice says” to the fullest extent possible in depicting her beauty (Coupland 2001: 349). Meanwhile, such a quotation leads to voices attached to two layers of indexical meaning. The first order of voice is linked to that of the male poet(s) who actually created the two-line texts. The second order involves the association with the voice of a broader persona who fits in with the notion of classical literati, characterized by cultural and internal cultivation (Kao et al. 2021), typical of those who utilize the *Wenyan* register and engage in creating *Wenyan* literature/genre. Since “voices are not attributes of persons but entextualized figures of personhood” (Agha 2005: 43), here Zhu creates an ‘overlapping’ voice between herself and the literati. This uni-directional stylization enables her to employ the evaluative position of, and, more important, the qualities stereotypically attributed to the literati. As presented above, the two *Hanfu* images depict Zhu’s attractive appearance wearing *Hanfu*. This foregrounds the connection to the theme of the accompanying texts. By embracing a supportive stance regarding the association between women and flowers in the literary tradition, Zhu offers a recontextualization of lines 1 and 2 in the post. Line 1 pertains to her exquisite appearance by delineating Chinese femininity using floral imagery, while line 2 relates to her beauty in *Hanfu* attire by describing the colors of the flower that correspond to the hues of her *Hanfu* attire, such as “golden” and “rosy.” In this sense, Zhu manages to present her ‘outer’/physical beauty both visually and textually. At the same time, Zhu associates herself with the literati by employing quotations and indexical ideologies of the *Wenyan* register, which is associated with refined and sophisticated cultural expression, thereby attributing presumed cultured and intelligent qualities to herself. In this sense, her ‘inner beauty,’ represented by her possessing rich cultural knowledge, is also presented in a poetic and cultured manner in ‘the description’ of her beauty.

The image of such a “pretty outside and intelligent inside (秀外慧中, *Xiuwai huizhong*)” shows that Zhu attempts to construct herself as a beautiful “*Cainv* (才女, lit. ‘talented woman’)” (Zhang 2014). The term *Cainv* refers to an elite minority of gifted women engaging in artistic and literary pursuits, in contrast to the traditional ideal women whose lack of talents is regarded as an indicator of virtue “(without talent is virtuous [无才便是德, *Wucai bianshi de*]).” In other words, she characterizes the correlation between Chinese literati and *Wenyan* as an *n*th order, which is assigned the *n*+1st meaning of “cultured and intelligent,” implying the identity of a cultured woman possessing the emblematic features of literati, based on this contextual self-presentation of her gendered image. This interpretation is further

supported by the higher-order meaning of *Hanfu* as indexing cultured distinction, setting apart educated people who are supposed to know *Hanfu* well (prior-order signaling traditional Chinese culture) from those who are less educated. This is illustrated in the excerpt from an interview (Table 2) of a self-defined *Hanfu* fan, Sun, who is also a college-educated migrant currently working in Beijing. Sun achieves this by using the generalized “he/she” in referring to other migrants in Beijing.

However, the ‘non-normal’ texts indicating the cultured aspect of Zhu’s presentation do not seem to have garnered a lot of attention from the audience, as the comments both have to do with praising Zhu’s physical beauty, particularly the first one likening her *Hanfu* photos to traditional Chinese paintings. This indicates that they are not able to recognize such stylization marked by “cultural worship.” In other words, they are likely not the intended audience and might possibly be Zhu’s friends. As mentioned earlier, Zhu’s post is accessible to *Hanfu* fans and her other friends. In the following section, we demonstrate that self-defined *Hanfu* fans can appreciate this stylization; similar to how *Hanfu* itself functions, it has become an in-group identifier and is closely associated with the construction of a cultured identity, a way in which they differentiate themselves from others.

7 Constructing a cultured Chinese identity through stylizing *Wenyan* in the Netherlands

On June 25, 2023, one recap post, consisting of many photos, including Figure 2, about an offline activity celebrating the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu), was shared in the group chat by the Dutch *Hanfu* association. This association was founded around six years ago and comprises young Chinese immigrants who study, work or live in the Netherlands. Most of them are first-generation Chinese immigrants and either received or are currently pursuing higher education in China or the Netherlands.¹⁰ Therefore, members of the association are educated and possess Chinese cultural background and knowledge. Apart from the self-organized activities during traditional Chinese festivals, the association is sometimes invited by other organizations or institutions in the Netherlands to jointly hold events to promote Chinese culture. One such event was this Duanwu celebration event, which was welcomed by the organizers of an exhibition featuring the history of Chinese immigrants held at the Museum Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen located in Rotterdam. After the gathering, the association was invited to leave handwritten comments in the memorial

¹⁰ This is confirmed by the association’s president and a query posed by Yan Jia regarding the presence of second- or third-generation Chinese immigrants in the group chat. While three claimed to be second-generation, they migrated to the Netherlands while attending elementary school in China.

notebook commemorating that special day. Figure 2 is a photo of this page, which received significant attention and elicited responses from the group members (Table 3). Here “Deer” and “Cinnabar” are direct translations of the first and third syllables of Rotterdam into Chinese, with “鹿 (lu, ‘deer’)” and “丹 (dan, ‘cinnabar’)”. They are used to indicate Rotterdam.

The great appreciation for Figure 2 among self-identified *Hanfu* fans, along with such new ways to call Rotterdam and the attribution of elegance, immediately draw our attention. This section mainly analyzes the texts of Figure 2, instantiated by such a linguistic practice. In this way, we aim to demonstrate how self-defined *Hanfu* fans in the Netherlands take up *Wenyan* to construct an identity for themselves in practice.

The sheet in Figure 2 contains a photo and handwritten comments that detail the activity. At the top of it, the date is written in the Dutch format, with the day first, followed by the month and year, which is different from the Chinese dating tradition. This suggests that the date notation is influenced by the local practices of the association’s location. Right below the date is a group photo showing those who attended the event and dressed up in *Hanfu*, with a Chinese musical instrument, the Guqin, in the foreground. The scene is captured by the Instax Mini. Next to the photo is the association logo. The four-line texts are located in the middle, followed by the name of the association and its official Instagram account.

Every line of text is comprised of eight monosyllabic words. Each sentence consists of two time-related characters separated by commas and with final-position periods, forming parallel expressions. The unusual writing of the four-line texts involves revisions and quotations from the classical Chinese work of prose, *Preface to the orchid pavilion gathering collection* (Lanting ji xu), written by the calligrapher Wang Xizhi, living during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). It describes the scene of an “elegant gathering (Yaji)” among literati and the author’s sentiments and reflections on life inspired by the occasion. It is also renowned as one of the most cherished short prose pieces and the most exalted calligraphic pieces in the entirety of Chinese literature. Line 1 depicts the year and the location of the *Hanfu* activity in a traditional way. According to the traditional Chinese calendar, “Heavenly stems and earthly branches (Tiangan dizhi)” and the Chinese zodiac, the year 2023 is the year of the “Gui Mao” and “Rabbit.” The location “Deer City” is a Sinicized term coined by this group of people to refer to the city of Rotterdam. Line 2 indicates the Chinese lunar date of the event, May 7th, and the intent to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival. These highlight the significance of the traditional Chinese festival and also make the “Chinese characteristics” of the *Hanfu* association overt. In terms of linguistic forms, adopting monosyllabic characters, such as “Gather (会, hui)” and “At (于, yu)” in line 1 and “To (以, yi)” and “Celebrate (庆, qing)” in line 2, instead of disyllabic counterparts

in modern Chinese, demonstrates the association's intention to stylize the *Wenyan* register.

The strategy of stylistically appropriating a subset of features, particularly the monosyllabic one from the *Wenyan* register, is particularly evidenced by the invention of the term “Deer City” in line 2. As Rotterdam is comprised of three syllables, Rot-ter-dam, its Chinese transliteration consists of three single-syllable characters: Lu (lit. ‘deer’), Te (lit. ‘special’), and Dan (lit. ‘cinnabar’). However, only one monosyllabic word, “Deer (Lu),” is employed here to refer to Rotterdam rather than the full three syllables, supplemented with the monosyllabic word “Cheng (‘city’)” instead of the more prevalent counterpart “Chengshi (‘city).” Such a strategy involving the deletion of one or more syllables, also seen in Qian’s advice designating Rotterdam as “Cinnabar city,” aligns with the monosyllabic structures in the *Wenyan* morphological formation. This practice, as Thomason (2007) called it, involves the application of “correspondence rules” which typically overgeneralize correspondence patterns between related language variants. Self-defined *Hanfu* fans display their knowledge of the correspondence between the monosyllabic structure in *Wenyan* to the disyllables (polysyllabic in this translation case) in Putonghua. Based on this correspondence pattern, they “invent” two alternate names for Rotterdam, where the multisyllabic “lu-te-dan” is replaced by a monosyllable. In this way, the *Hanfu* association is able to adopt the voice of classically educated Chinese literati and to signal the attributes of culture, elegance, and solemnity to the association and this grouping of people as well, because these qualities have become amalgamated as traits of the literati. Meanwhile, the “Chinese (identity) characteristics” of the *Hanfu* association become overt in this non-Chinese context.

Line 3 describes the good weather quoted from the prose. Similar to the first case, the absence of quotation marks, verbs, and the omission of the quoted author’s name allows the association to position itself in a strategic way in reference to *Wenyan*, which it is stylizing. This makes the stylized voice synchronous with the association’s own voice, as this quotation works as an icon “of credible utterances from culturally specific types of personas” who are proficient at creating such prose (Koven 2001: 514). Meanwhile, the content of such an unmarked quotation also undergoes recontextualization, transforming the pleasant weather of the elegant gathering among literati described in the essay into that of the *Hanfu* fans’ current gathering. In this way, their collective activity is imbued with elegant and cultural values while their Chinese identity and status are also elevated. The association’s alignment with the literati in terms of activities is even more evidenced in line 4. Line 4 involves some slight variations to the prose quotation. It describes the scene where self-defined *Hanfu* fans engage in the activities of drinking tea and playing the Guqin (shown in the above photo), two of the most common forms of leisure activity among

the Chinese literati (Zhao and Wu 2022), as well as enjoying a delightful conversation. The tea-drinking and the Guqin in the first part of line 4 are expressed in four monosyllabic characters “Yi Shang Yi Qin (‘one wine vessel, one Guqin’).” The original text is “Yi Shang Yi Yong (‘one wine vessel, one poem’),” metaphorically referring to drinking alcohol and chanting/writing poetry. Here “Shang (‘one wine vessel’)” is reinterpreted by the association to be generalized as the activity of drinking tea, with the reference shifting from the wine-drinking container to the tea-drinking container. The monosyllabic word “Yong (‘poem’)” is replaced by the monosyllabic word “Qin,” rather than the disyllabic word “Guqin.” On the one hand, this substitution emphasizes the distinctive activity of playing the Guqin rather than chanting poems on that day. On the other hand, it also reflects a propensity to adhere to the monosyllabic feature of *Wenyan*. The last part of line 4 about the collective interchange is cited from the prose but omits three words – “Also sufficient for (Yi zu yi)” – present in the original prose in order to remain consistent with the overall number of characters, following the parallel structure of *Wenyan*.

Through deploying salient linguistic features of the *Wenyan* register and quotations as well as the reworking of quotations from *Wenyan* literature in portraying the collective activities of the “literati,” the *Hanfu* association projects the Chinese literati and appropriates the associated qualities to craft its (representing *Hanfu* fans’) distinctive cultural traits, tastes, and style. It forges a cultured Chinese image imbued with profound knowledge of Chinese culture and literature. This is achieved in an orderly manner by interpreting *Wenyan* as an index of cultured Chinese identity within non-Chinese, migrant contexts, based on the prior ideological connection between the *Wenyan* register and the Chinese literati, known for their prominent “cultured” characteristics. The active engagement of WeChat group members suggests that such a stylization is a shared resource, serving as a grouping function and distinguishing members who can read the semiotic meanings of the projected affiliated social persona and identify with the same *Hanfu* culture as others, like Zhou’s perception of elegance and Qian’s “Cinnabar city.” In addition, such stylized texts are composed with an awareness of the expectations of the intended audience, who are knowledgeable about China’s rich traditional culture, inadvertently excluding others, such as Dutch people and uneducated Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands who lack knowledge of Chinese culture. The purpose of such an act of distancing is revealed by a self-defined *Hanfu* fan, Liu, who moved to the Netherlands to study and who later became a Dutch citizen. In an interview, she narrates one meaning of wearing *Hanfu* as a cultured emblem, further positioning herself among the new migrants in the Netherlands (Table 4).

8 Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we employed a sociolinguistic approach to examine how contemporary young Chinese migrants construct “new” identities, positioning themselves both within and beyond China. We discussed the cultured identity construction processes and *Hanfu* group dynamics of contemporary young Chinese and how this can be understood by analyzing the stylization of *Wenyan* among self-defined *Hanfu* fans in Beijing, China and the Netherlands. Here the stylistic use of *Wenyan* includes quotations and the reworking of quotations from *Wenyan* literature and deploying a subset of *Wenyan* features, including monosyllabic words and the syntactic parallelism structure. At a local grouping level, stylizing *Wenyan* serves as an important shared practice that helps *Hanfu* fans distinguish themselves from other groups and fosters the formation of a global *Hanfu* community of practice. Meanwhile, in a broader sense, through stylization, self-defined *Hanfu* fans create an associated socioculturally recognizable voice to enact *Cainv* and cultured Chinese identity. During this process, *Wenyan*, associated with the Chinese literati, possesses the higher-order meanings of “cultured,” “elegant,” and “Chinese.” *Hanfu* similarly signals the quality of being cultured, based on the *n*th order of *Hanfu* as indexing traditional Chinese culture and further associating educated individuals who are familiar with this heritage. Therefore, the stylistic use of *Wenyan* in the first case enables the *Hanfu* fan in China to align herself with Chinese literati and to produce an overlapping voice, thereby asserting that, like the literati, she too possesses the attributes of being cultured, intelligent and elegant, establishing a *Cainv* identity. Similarly, in the second case, the stylization of *Wenyan* is used within a non-Chinese situation as a marker of someone who is Chinese and possesses the cultured traits of the literati, thereby constructing a cultured Chinese identity. The two cases illustrate that in their use of *Wenyan* *Hanfu* fans do not aim to depict themselves as poets or writers who create specific *Wenyan* literature. Instead, their ultimate intent is to adopt more broadly the persona of someone who is a member of the Chinese literati and thereby signal the qualities of this persona within the particular contexts of migration.

Through stylizing *Wenyan* and constructing cultured identities, contemporary young Chinese actively shape how they and their status as migrants are collectively portrayed and perceived. The pursuit of cultured identities makes them distinct from other migrants, thereby linking the attribute of being cultured to a new migratory identity. The construction of an identity that focuses on being seen as educated and cultured underscores self-defined *Hanfu* fans’ awareness of the high esteem with which these qualities are regarded by society; the importance of educational level is a key point of orientation these days for young Chinese whose status is that of a

migrant. This focus underlines their shared experiences of migration and the potentially precarious conditions they face both domestically and internationally. As domestic migrants in Beijing or external migrants in the Netherlands, these young Chinese individuals share the experiences of displacement and face similar precarity in their lives as migrants, despite their different geographic locations and societies. Through stylizing *Wenyan* and constructing cultured identities, these youth differentiate themselves from other migrant groups who face greater marginalization in dominant imaginaries, such as the previous generations of Chinese migrants seen as less educated or only qualified for lower-wage work. In this sense, stylizing *Wenyan* serves as a way to stylize the new migrant status of Chinese youth (Sultana et al. 2013), reflecting their efforts to resist the marginalizing stereotypes of Chinese migrants. However, as Karimzad and Catedral (2021) have warned, this practice might further perpetuate the marginalization of other, even more disadvantaged Chinese migrant groups. The stylization of *Wenyan* also reinforces the sociocultural ties of these young Chinese to Chinese collectives with shared sociocultural backgrounds. They thereby derive some psychological relief from their state of precarity. By highlighting the similarities manifest in their linguistic stylization, cultured identity construction, and migrant experiences, this study breaks the dichotomy between internal and external migration.

This study further reveals that the representations of young people and their linguistic practices also contribute to the establishment of normative orders, which aligns with established sociocultural and political norms (Jaspers and van de Weerd 2023; Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou 2003). In the process of stylizing *Wenyan* by self-identified *Hanfu* fans, *Wenyan* is seen as remarkable and evaluated as a positive Chinese semiosis, a representation of literacy and a symbol of authentic Chinese culture, which is in line with the official agenda of “Chinese Characteristics.” Based on such an ideologically charged stylization, *Hanfu* fans invite their audience to adopt a wider sociocultural understanding to engage in interpreting their linguistic practice. In this way, they establish an alignment between themselves, the *Hanfu* youth group, the larger Chinese people, and perhaps the government, which advocates for the promotion of traditional culture, thus facilitating the embedding of the *Hanfu* youth culture within mainstream cultural narratives.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

Transcriber comment	()
The stylized texts in the analysis part	Bold
Quotations in the analysis part	“ ”
Emojis in the analysis part	[]

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