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Original Paper

From "Thermal Pants" to "Guochao": Generational Aesthetics and the Reinvention of Cultural Identity in Contemporary China: How Post-90s and Post-00s Chinese Youth Redefine Chineseness through Hanfu and Neo-Chinese Design

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Abstract

This article examines how Chinese post-90s and post-00s generations reconstruct cultural identity through aesthetic consumption, focusing on the rise of "Guochao" (national trend) and Hanfu movement. Contrasting with the previous generation's anxiety over symbols of "backwardness" such as thermal pants, contemporary youth actively embrace and reinvent traditional Chinese aesthetics in fashion, design, and digital spaces. Drawing on digital ethnography of Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and Taobao, the study analyzes how young consumers negotiate between cultural authenticity and global trends, producing what we term "aesthetic citizenship"—a form of belonging enacted through everyday stylistic choices. The findings challenge both Orientalist critiques of self-exoticization and simplified narratives of state-sponsored cultural nationalism. Instead, Guochao emerges as a generational project of creative appropriation, where Chineseness is not inherited but performed, debated, and constantly remade in digital publics.

Keywords

Guochao, Hanfu movement, generational identity, aesthetic citizenship, digital ethnography, postsocialist China, cultural politics

1. Introduction

1.1 Phenomenon: from "Thermal Pants Shame" to "Guochao Pride"

In the winter of 2018, a peculiar generational ritual unfolded across Chinese social media. Young urban professionals posted photographs of themselves wearing thermal pants (qiuku)—long underwear once synonymous with provincial backwardness—paired with designer sneakers and tailored overcoats. The hashtag #秋裤也时尚# (thermal pants can be fashionable too) garnered over 120 million views on Weibo, marking a striking reversal of aesthetic judgment. This sartorial irony captured a broader cultural shift: what was shamefully "Chinese" for the reform-era generation had become a resource of distinction for their children.

The same year witnessed a more spectacular coming-out. Chinese sportswear brand Li-Ning debuted at New York Fashion Week with a collection explicitly referencing 1990s Chinese school uniforms and porcelain patterns. Models walked in oversized "中国李宁" (China Li-Ning) logotypes, and the show concluded with a standing ovation from international buyers. The brand's domestic sales surged 300% in the following quarter, and "Guochao" (国潮, national trend) entered mainstream vocabulary as both commercial strategy and cultural aspiration.

These two moments—thermal pants irony and Li-Ning's runway triumph—bookend a generational transformation in how young Chinese negotiate cultural identity through aesthetic consumption. Born between 1990 and 2009, China's post-90s (jiulinghou) and post-00s (linglinghou) generations came of age in a radically different material environment than their parents. They are the first generation raised entirely within the one-child policy, the first to experience childhood internet access, and the first to consume domestic cultural products matching global standards in production value. Crucially, they are also the first generation for whom "made in China" no longer signals compromise but pride.

1.2 Core Questions: Aesthetics as a Site of Identity Politics

This article asks: How do Chinese youth transform aesthetic taste into a site of identity politics? Specifically, how do post-90s and post-00s consumers deploy traditional Chinese elements—Han clothing, porcelain motifs, calligraphic fonts—as resources for generational distinction, and what does this reveal about the changing meaning of "Chineseness" in an era of global cultural flow?

These questions intervene in three scholarly conversations. First, they complicate existing accounts of Chinese cultural nationalism, which tend to emphasize top-down state orchestration or bottom-up defensive reactions to Western hegemony. The Guochao phenomenon suggests a more generative dynamic: young consumers actively curating tradition rather than simply inheriting or rejecting it. Second, they contribute to global youth studies by documenting a non-Western case of "aesthetic citizenship"—where belonging is enacted through consumption and visual performance rather than formal political participation. Third, they advance platform studies by analyzing how digital infrastructure (Xiaohongshu's image-centric community, Bilibili's knowledge cultures, Taobao's data-driven personalization) enables new forms of cultural production and circulation.

1.3 Significance: Beyond the Framework of Cultural Nationalism

Understanding Guochao matters beyond Chinese studies. In an era when right-wing populisms worldwide mobilize cultural nostalgia for exclusionary ends, the Chinese case offers a contrasting configuration: a generational movement that embraces tradition without rejecting globalization, that claims cultural confidence without closing borders. This is not to romanticize Guochao as inherently progressive—its commercialization risks emptying historical reference of critical content, and its gendered aesthetics (feminine Hanfu vs. masculine streetwear) reproduce conservative norms. Rather, the phenomenon demands nuanced analysis of how young people navigate between multiple scripts of belonging: national, generational, global, and digital.

For scholars of cultural globalization, Guochao challenges the assumption that cultural flows move primarily from Western centers to non-Western peripheries. When Chinese youth combine Ming dynasty silhouettes with sneaker culture, or when domestic brands outcompete Western counterparts in the Chinese market, we witness what might be termed "reverse globalization"—not simply resistance to Western dominance but creative appropriation that reshapes global cultural grammar.

1.4 Methodology: Digital Ethnography and Visual Analysis

This study employs digital ethnography combined with visual analysis. Between 2021 and 2024, I conducted participant observation across three platforms: Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) for fashion inspiration and consumption tutorials, Bilibili for video content including "unboxing" and historical "popular science", and Taobao/Tmall for commercial data and user reviews. I followed 45 accounts consistently, archived 1,200+ posts, and conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with Hanfu community organizers and neo-Chinese design consumers in Shanghai and Chengdu.

Visual analysis examines how traditional elements are selected, decontextualized, and recombined. I focus on three stylistic operations: archaeological fidelity (strict adherence to historical sources), atmospheric appropriation (evoking "Chineseness" through color, texture, and composition), and ironic juxtaposition (deliberate clash of high/low, East/West, ancient/contemporary). These operations reveal the aesthetic grammars through which young consumers negotiate competing demands for authenticity and innovation, national particularity and global legibility.

1.5 Chapter Overview

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on Guochao, generational studies, and cultural identity, identifying the theoretical gap this study addresses. Section 3 traces the historical context of three generational aesthetic regimes, from the post-Mao "civilization discourse" to the current moment. Section 4 presents two case studies: the Hanfu movement as wearable history, and neo-Chinese design as everyday aestheticization. Section 5 analyzes platform infrastructure and its role in producing "aesthetic citizenship". Section 6 develops theoretical implications, arguing that Guochao exemplifies a generational mode of cultural production that neither rejects tradition nor submits to it, but creatively remakes it through digital practice. The conclusion reflects on limitations and directions

for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 "Guochao" as Academic Concept: From Marketing Term to Cultural Phenomenon

The term "Guochao" (国潮, literally "national trend" or "China chic") emerged in commercial discourse around 2018, initially describing domestic brands' strategic deployment of Chinese aesthetic elements to capture consumer attention. Early academic treatments, predominantly in marketing and business journals, analyzed Guochao as a consumer segmentation strategy or brand localization technique (Li & Wang, 2019; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). These studies documented the phenomenon's economic scale—domestic heritage cosmetics brand Perfect Diary's IPO valuation, Li-Ning's revenue recovery, the explosive growth of "vintage Chinese" (fugu) fashion—but treated cultural meaning as epiphenomenal to commercial logic.

A second wave of scholarship, emerging from 2020, recognized Guochao's significance for understanding contemporary Chinese subjectivity. Wu and Li (2021) positioned Guochao within "post-90s" generational identity formation, arguing that consumption of domestic brands enabled young people to reconcile global aspirations with national belonging. Gao (2022) emphasized the role of digital platforms in democratizing cultural production, noting how user-generated content transformed Guochao from corporate strategy to participatory culture. Most recently, scholars have begun theorizing Guochao's political dimensions: Kong (2023) analyzed its ambivalent relationship with state cultural policy, while Chen (2024) examined how Hanfu communities negotiate between "soft" cultural nationalism and cosmopolitan fashion sensibilities.

Despite this expanding literature, three gaps persist. First, existing studies tend to treat Guochao as a unified phenomenon, eliding significant internal variations between subcultural movements (Hanfu's historical revivalism vs. streetwear's ironic remixing). Second, the generational specificity of Guochao consumption remains undertheorized—most analyses collapse "young consumers" into an undifferentiated category, missing the distinct positionality of post-90s versus post-00s cohorts. Third, and most critically for this study, the identity mechanisms through which aesthetic consumption produces belonging have not been systematically examined. We know that young people buy Guochao products, but how does this consumption constitute them as particular kinds of subjects?

2.2 Generational Studies: Post-90s/Post-00s as Digital Natives and Global Locals

Chinese generational studies has developed robust frameworks for understanding cohort-specific experiences shaped by large-scale policy shifts. The "post-80s" (balinghou) generation, born under the one-child policy and coming of age during market reform, were characterized as individualistic, pragmatic, and globally oriented (Rosen, 2009; Fong, 2011). The "post-90s" generation inherited these tendencies but experienced them through digital mediation, developing what Lin (2019) terms "platform subjectivity"—habits of self-presentation, social comparison, and affective labor shaped by

social media architecture.

The "post-00s" generation, now entering higher education and workforce, represents a further mutation. They are the first generation with no memory of pre-internet China, the first to experience childhoods thoroughly saturated with domestic cultural production matching global standards (animated films, video games, fashion brands), and the first to encounter "China" primarily as a confident global actor rather than a developing nation catching up. Liu (2023) argues that this generational location produces distinctive "structures of feeling": less anxiety about Western judgment, more casual confidence in mixing global and local elements, and greater comfort with public expressions of national attachment.

However, generational studies in China has been criticized for reproducing Western-centric developmental narratives—assuming that each cohort becomes "more" individualistic, globalized, or postmodern than its predecessor. Recent scholarship calls for attention to how Chinese youth construct identities through specifically Chinese cultural resources, not simply as delayed versions of Western modernity (Kipnis, 2016; Rofel, 2018). The Guochao phenomenon demands such reframing: post-90s and post-00s consumers are not becoming "Western" or remaining "Chinese" in any simple sense, but creatively reconfiguring the relationship between these categories through aesthetic practice.

2.3 The Hanfu Movement: From Subculture to Institutionalized Fashion

The Hanfu movement provides a crucial case for understanding Guochao's identity mechanisms. Beginning around 2003 as small online communities dedicated to reconstructing Han Chinese clothing abolished by Qing dynasty Manchu rule, Hanfu has grown into a visible social phenomenon with estimated 2-4 million active participants, dedicated e-commerce platforms, and annual gatherings attracting tens of thousands (Sun, 2017; Zhao, 2019).

Early scholarly treatments analyzed Hanfu through frameworks of ethnic nationalism, interpreting the movement as Han chauvinist reaction to state multiculturalism and global cultural flows (Carrico, 2017). This reading captured certain tendencies within the movement—rhetorical opposition to "Western" suits and "Manchu" qipao, claims about "5000 years of civilization"—but risked reducing complex consumer practices to political ideology. More recent ethnographic work reveals Hanfu's internal diversity: "restorationists" committed to archaeological fidelity coexist with "improvisers" mixing historical elements with contemporary convenience; some participants frame Hanfu as ethnic heritage, others as aesthetic choice or cosplay-style fandom (Geng, 2018; Yu, 2021).

The movement's institutionalization since 2018 merits particular attention. What began as grassroots subculture has been partially incorporated into state cultural policy (designated "intangible cultural heritage" in several provinces) and commercial fashion system (mainstream brands launching Hanfu-inspired lines). This "mainstreaming" generates new tensions: between subcultural authenticity and mass accessibility, between political claims and commercial logic, between historical reverence and playful remixing. Existing studies document these tensions but lack theoretical tools for analyzing how participants navigate them in everyday practice—how they decide what counts as "real" Hanfu,

how they justify compromises between comfort and authenticity, how they position themselves vis-à-vis state recognition and commercial co-optation.

2.4 Theoretical Gaps: beyond Orientalism and Nationalism

Two theoretical frameworks dominate existing analyses of Chinese cultural identity, both proving inadequate for understanding Guochao. Postcolonial critique, particularly the concept of "self-Orientalism", interprets Chinese deployment of traditional aesthetics as internalized Western gaze—performing Chineseness for global consumption (Dirlik, 1996; Kuehn, 2014). This framework cannot account for Guochao's primarily domestic address: young Chinese consuming for Chinese audiences, with Western recognition welcome but not constitutive. Nor can it explain the generational specificity of the phenomenon—why now, why these youth, if the structural position of "East" to "West" has remained relatively constant?

Cultural nationalism offers the alternative framework, reading Guochao as state-orchestrated soft power projection or defensive reaction to Western hegemony (Ding, 2008; Callahan, 2010). This approach captures real dynamics: state media's enthusiastic promotion of traditional culture, commercial actors' strategic deployment of patriotic sentiment, the movement's resonance with "China Dream" discourse. However, it risks reducing young consumers to passive recipients of ideological interpellation, missing their active labor in selecting, interpreting, and transforming cultural materials. When a post-00s consumer pairs a Ming dynasty-style jacket with Nike sneakers and posts the combination to Xiaohongshu, this practice exceeds both "Orientalist self-exoticization" and "nationalist indoctrination".

What is needed, we argue, is attention to the aesthetic dimension of identity formation—not simply what young Chinese consume, but how they consume, how they construct taste distinctions, how they negotiate between competing registers of value (authentic/innovative, national/global, sincere/ironic). This requires bringing cultural sociology's concerns with classification and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Molnár, 2002) into conversation with science and technology studies' attention to material infrastructure and platform affordances (Plantin et al., 2018; Bucher, 2018). The concept of "aesthetic citizenship", developed in the following sections, attempts this synthesis.

2.5 Toward "Aesthetic Citizenship": Consumption as Cultural Participation

The term "aesthetic citizenship" has circulated in recent scholarship with varying meanings. Some usages emphasize access to cultural participation as a dimension of social citizenship (Stevenson, 2003); others focus on how aesthetic judgment constructs political community (Bennett, 2006); still others examine cultural consumption as a form of civic engagement in neoliberal contexts (Schudson, 1998). We draw on but modify these approaches to capture the specific dynamics of Guochao consumption.

In our formulation, aesthetic citizenship refers to the enactment of belonging through everyday stylistic choices, where these choices are recognized and validated by digital publics. Three elements distinguish this from related concepts. First, unlike "cultural citizenship" (Rosaldo, 1994), aesthetic

citizenship is not primarily about rights to representation or recognition by state institutions, but about participation in decentralized, platform-mediated communities of taste. Second, unlike "consumer citizenship" (Scammell, 2000), it is not limited to political consumption (boycotts, ethical purchasing) but encompasses apparently apolitical aesthetic choices that nonetheless constitute collective identities. Third, unlike Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of taste as class distinction, aesthetic citizenship in the Guochao context operates across class boundaries—accessible to middle-class college students and working-class livestreamers alike—through digital platforms' lowering of cultural production barriers.

This framework allows us to ask: How do young Chinese construct themselves as legitimate participants in cultural tradition through consumption? How do digital platforms enable new forms of aesthetic community and new modes of cultural authority? And how does generational location shape the specific grammars through which these processes unfold?

3. Historical Context: Three Generations of Aesthetic Politics

3.1 The Reform Era: "Tu" versus "Yang" and the Anxiety of Backwardness

The aesthetic terrain into which contemporary Guochao intervenes was shaped by a binary structure established during China's reform period (1978-present). In this framework, "Chinese" signified tradition, backwardness, and rural poverty, while "Western" (or more broadly "foreign", yang) signified modernity, progress, and urban sophistication. This binary structured consumption practices, urban planning, and everyday language: to be "tu" (土, earthy/rustic) was shameful; to be "yang" (洋, ocean/foreign) was aspirational.

Thermal pants (qiuku, qiukudang) epitomized this hierarchy. Long underwear worn beneath trousers for winter warmth, thermal pants were practical necessities for most Chinese but became symbols of provincial tastelessness in the emerging consumer culture of the 1990s and 2000s. Young urban professionals, particularly those with education or travel experience abroad, meticulously avoided thermal pants in favor of "international" cold-weather gear—Uniqlo Heattech, Columbia fleece, Canadian goose-down. The garment's shame was so thoroughly internalized that parents' insistence on wearing thermal pants became a generational joke, emblematic of the unbridgeable gap between "traditional" China and "modern" youth.

This aesthetic regime was not simply about individual preference but indexed structural position within global capitalism. To consume foreign brands was to demonstrate participation in modernity, to claim membership in a cosmopolitan community from which China had been excluded. The "tide" (chao) in imported goods (yanghuo)—Japanese electronics, Korean cosmetics, American fast fashion—carried cultural meanings beyond utility: they were material proofs of China's opening, individual tickets to global belonging. Conversely, domestic brands were compromised by association with state planning, poor quality, and "feudal" tradition.

Scholars have documented how this binary structured subjectivity across multiple domains. Anagnost (1997) analyzed how "quality" (suzhi) discourse positioned rural migrants as aesthetically and morally deficient. Rofel (2007) traced how cosmopolitan professionals performed modernity through transnational consumption. Hanser (2008) examined how sales clerks navigated hierarchies of foreign versus domestic goods in retail spaces. What these studies share is attention to how aesthetic judgment operated as a mechanism of social classification, distributing prestige and shame along lines of global connection.

3.2 The Olympic Interlude: Cultural Confidence as State Project

The 2008 Beijing Olympics marked a pivot point in this aesthetic regime. The spectacular opening ceremony, directed by Zhang Yimou, presented Chinese tradition as globally legible and technologically sophisticated—movable type, silk roads, tai chi performed by thousands in perfect synchronization. For domestic audiences, this was a moment of visceral pride: China could command global attention on its own terms, with its own cultural vocabulary. For international audiences, the ceremony offered a sanitized, consumable Chineseness, shorn of political threat.

The Olympic moment initiated what might be termed "state culturalism": government investment in heritage industries, traditional aesthetics, and "soft power" projection. The Palace Museum's digital transformation, beginning around 2013, exemplified this strategy. Under director Shan Jixiang, the 600-year-old imperial collection launched viral social media campaigns, designer collaborations, and merchandise lines that made "Forbidden City" aesthetics desirable to young consumers. By 2016, Palace Museum 文创 (cultural creative) products generated annual revenue exceeding 1 billion RMB, and the institution had become a model for "making tradition trendy" (让文物活起来).

However, this state-orchestrated cultural confidence remained politically contained. The tradition promoted was carefully curated: imperial splendor rather than revolutionary violence, aesthetic refinement rather than ideological struggle. Moreover, it risked reproducing the very binary it sought to overcome—now "Chinese" was valuable not intrinsically but as marketable difference, as brand identity competing in global cultural industries. Early Guochao consumption, in this context, remained somewhat defensive: proving that Chinese aesthetics could match Western standards of cool, demonstrating that domestic brands deserved premium pricing.

3.3 The Guochao Moment: Generational Transformation and Platform Logic

The years 2017-2018 marked a qualitative shift, as Guochao transformed from state project to generational sensibility. Three developments enabled this transition.

First, domestic production quality reached parity with global standards in key sectors. Chinese sneaker brands (Li-Ning, Anta, Peak) incorporated the same technical innovations as Nike and Adidas; domestic cosmetics (Perfect Diary, Florasis, Winona) offered formulations and packaging matching Korean and Japanese competitors. This material convergence removed the practical compromise previously associated with "supporting domestic" (支持国货), allowing aesthetic choice to operate

independently of quality anxiety.

Second, digital platforms created infrastructure for decentralized cultural production. Xiaohongshu, launched in 2013, evolved from overseas shopping tips to lifestyle content ecosystem, with "Guochau" becoming a top category by 2018. Bilibili's video culture enabled detailed tutorials on Hanfu construction, makeup techniques, and historical research. These platforms lowered barriers to cultural participation: one need not be a professional designer or state-appointed expert to produce and circulate aesthetic knowledge.

Third, and most significantly, generational succession produced subjects for whom the "tu/yang" binary lacked experiential anchoring. Post-95s and post-00s grew up in material environments where Chinese and foreign products were equally available, equally high-quality, equally "normal". They encountered "China" primarily through domestic media and education rather than through comparison with imagined Western superiority. For this generation, choosing Chinese aesthetics requires no justification, no defensive assertion of equality—it is simply one option among many, often selected for its distinctiveness rather than its representativeness.

This generational location produces distinctive stylistic operations. Where their parents might have worn "Chinese style" (zhongshi) to demonstrate cultural pride or political loyalty, post-00s consumers mix elements with casual eclecticism: Hanfu jackets over streetwear, calligraphy motifs on skateboards, "vintage" 1980s propaganda posters as apartment decor. The aesthetic is simultaneously sincere and ironic, nationalist and cosmopolitan, reverent and playful. This complexity exceeds existing analytical frameworks, demanding attention to the specific grammars through which young consumers negotiate multiple belonging.

3.4 Comparative Frame: Global Contexts of Cultural Revival

China's Guochao moment resonates with broader global patterns, though with distinctive inflections. In South Korea, the "Newtro" (new+retro) movement similarly mines 1980s-90s domestic culture for generational distinction, but operates within a smaller national market and stronger state cultural policy. In Japan, "wa-modern" aesthetics have longer history, but lack Guochau's explicit nationalism, operating more as refined consumer choice. In India and Turkey, "local" fashion revivals remain more marked by class distinction and religious identity.

The Chinese case's specificity lies in the scale of its digital infrastructure, the speed of its generational transformation, and the ambivalent relationship between state promotion and grassroots participation. Unlike state-sponsored cultural nationalism in Russia or Hungary, Guochao cannot be reduced to top-down ideology: young consumers actively select, transform, and sometimes reject official framings of tradition. Unlike Western "heritage" consumption, it operates without postcolonial guilt or multicultural obligation—Chineseness is claimed as majority identity, not minority difference. These specificities make Guochao a crucial case for theorizing cultural identity in contemporary globalization.

4. Case Studies: Two Modes of Aesthetic Citizenship

This section examines two exemplary sites of Guochao consumption: the Hanfu movement as wearable history, and neo-Chinese design as everyday aestheticization. These cases illuminate different grammars through which young Chinese enact aesthetic citizenship—different relationships to tradition, to global fashion systems, and to digital community.

4.1 Case 1: Hanfu—Archaeological Fidelity and the Ethics of Wearing History

4.1.1 From Cosplay to Daily Wear: The Expansion of Hanfu Practice

The Hanfu movement's origins in early 2000s online forums have been well-documented: small groups of history enthusiasts sharing references from classical paintings and archaeological reports, attempting to reconstruct clothing worn by Han Chinese before the Qing dynasty's Manchu-imposed dress codes. What demands attention is the movement's transformation since 2018 from subcultural cosplay to normalized fashion choice.

Participant observation on Xiaohongshu reveals this expansion's material forms. The hashtag #汉服日常# (Hanfu daily wear) accumulated over 3 billion views by 2023, with posts showing Hanfu in previously incongruous contexts: commuting on subway lines, attending university lectures, working in creative industries. "Office-appropriate" Hanfu styles emerged—muted colors, simplified silhouettes, machine-washable fabrics—addressing practical constraints that once restricted practice to weekends and festivals.

This normalization required negotiating multiple boundaries. Against state multiculturalism that officially designates 55 ethnic minorities with distinctive traditional dress, Hanfu advocates constructed "Han clothing" as majority heritage requiring equivalent recognition. Against global fashion's seasonal obsolescence, they asserted historical fidelity as timeless standard. Against accusations of ethnic chauvinism, they emphasized aesthetic choice over political ideology. These negotiations reveal aesthetic citizenship's productive labor: constructing legitimate participation in tradition through consumption choices recognized by community peers.

4.1.2 The Archaeological Imperative: Authenticity as Moral Practice

Within Hanfu communities, disputes over authenticity generate intense affect. "Restorationists" (kaoju dang, 考据党) insist on strict archaeological fidelity—garments must replicate specific historical specimens, with documented fabric, cut, and construction. "Improvisers" (gailiang dang, 改良党) advocate practical adaptation: modern fabrics for comfort, simplified patterns for affordability, hybrid styles for everyday wear. Online debates between these factions, observed across Bilibili comment sections and QQ group discussions, reveal how aesthetic choices carry ethical weight.

For restorationists, wearing inauthentic Hanfu constitutes betrayal—of historical truth, of ancestors, of the movement's educational mission. One interviewee, a 26-year-old Shanghai-based accountant who maintains a restoration-focused Xiaohongshu account with 50,000 followers, explained: "If we wear whatever we want and call it Hanfu, we're no different from qipao. We're just wearing costumes". The

qipao reference is significant: the Manchu-derived dress, widely recognized as "traditional Chinese" internationally, represents for Hanfu advocates precisely the historical erasure their movement opposes. For improvisers, excessive fidelity restricts accessibility and sustainability. Another interviewee, a 22-year-old Chengdu university student, argued: "Ancient people didn't have polyester or washing machines. If we copy everything exactly, Hanfu stays a museum piece. I want to wear my culture, not preserve it in a box". This position claims legitimacy through functional adaptation rather than archaeological rigor—Hanfu survives through living practice, not frozen reconstruction.

These disputes exceed mere taste difference. They constitute competing visions of aesthetic citizenship: restorationists understand participation in tradition as disciplined submission to historical authority; improvisers understand it as creative transformation for contemporary relevance. Both positions, however, share a foundational commitment—wearing Hanfu matters, carries meaning, constructs identity in ways that other clothing choices do not.

4.1.3 Gender, Class, and the Embodiment of Tradition

Hanfu practice is profoundly gendered. While male participants exist, particularly in historical martial arts (wuxia) inspired styles, the movement's visible core is young women. Xiaohongshu content analysis reveals why: Hanfu offers resources for feminine self-presentation unavailable in global fast fashion—elaborate hairstyles, layered silhouettes, "elegant" (youya) posture associated with classical feminine ideals.

This gendering generates complex negotiations. Some participants embrace "traditional" femininity as escape from contemporary pressures—competitive education, precarious employment, delayed marriage. Others explicitly reject associated constraints, wearing "heroic" (yingqi) male styles or mixing Hanfu with punk accessories. The movement's gender politics are thus ambivalent: simultaneously enabling feminine agency through aesthetic community and potentially reinforcing conservative gender norms through historical idealization.

Class dynamics operate similarly. Full restorationist ensembles—silk fabrics, handmade construction, period-appropriate accessories—can cost thousands of RMB, restricting participation to affluent consumers. Yet platform infrastructure enables lower-budget participation: Taobao factories produce affordable "improved" Hanfu; video tutorials teach DIY construction; secondhand exchanges circulate garments. The movement thus spans class boundaries while reproducing internal hierarchies of authenticity and distinction.

4.2 Case 2: Neo-Chinese Design—Atmospheric Appropriation and the Aesthetics of "Vibe"

4.2.1 Beyond Clothing: The Domestication of Chineseness

If Hanfu represents concentrated, explicit engagement with tradition, neo-Chinese design (xin zhongshi, 新中式) operates through diffusion and atmosphere. The category encompasses interior design, furniture, tableware, stationery, and lifestyle objects—material environments rather than wearable statements. Its aesthetic grammar is less archaeological than evocative: a color palette of ink-wash

grays and cinnabar reds; textures of bamboo, unglazed ceramic, rough linen; motifs of mountains, clouds, and abstracted calligraphy.

This atmospheric approach offers distinct advantages. It requires no historical expertise or bodily commitment; one need not study Ming dynasty textiles or endure impractical garments. It integrates smoothly with global minimalist and "Scandinavian" aesthetics, legible to international audiences without explicit cultural marking. And it photographs exceptionally well, optimized for platform circulation where visual impact determines attention allocation.

Xiaohongshu analysis reveals neo-Chinese design's typical settings: young professionals' rental apartments, renovated with peel-and-stick wallpaper featuring Song dynasty landscape paintings; "tea corners" (chaxi) assembled from affordable Taobao ceramics; weekend excursions to Suzhou-style gardens, documented through carefully composed photography. These practices constitute aesthetic citizenship through environmental curation: constructing personal spaces that demonstrate cultured taste, that participate in collective visual codes, that invite recognition from platform publics.

4.2.2 "Gao Ji Gan": Distinction and the Class Coding of Atmosphere

Central to neo-Chinese design's appeal is the concept of "gao ji gan" (高级感)—literally "advanced feeling" or "premium sense". This untranslatable aesthetic quality combines minimalism, natural materials, historical reference, and photographic legibility. It distinguishes neo-Chinese from earlier "Chinese style" (zhongshi) associated with nouveau riche ostentation—heavy mahogany furniture, gold dragon motifs, red and gold color schemes.

The gao ji gan distinction operates through negation. Neo-Chinese design defines itself against: excessive decoration (too tu), explicit nationalism (too political), poor-quality materials (too cheap), and unphotogenic clutter (too chaotic). It thus enables class positioning within Guochao consumption itself: sophisticated practitioners distinguish themselves from "vulgar" traditionalism through restraint, subtlety, and global aesthetic fluency.

This class coding is not merely exclusionary but productive of community. Shared recognition of gao ji gan creates bonds across geographic distance—Xiaohongshu users comment on strangers' posts with appreciation for atmospheric achievement, offering advice on ceramic selection or lighting angles. Aesthetic citizenship here operates through judgment and appreciation, through participation in collective standards of taste rather than through explicit political claims.

4.2.3 The "Vibe" Economy: From Object to Atmosphere

Recent neo-Chinese evolution reveals intensifying platform logic. The term "vibe" (fenwei, 氛围) increasingly substitutes for design or style in user discourse—less important than specific objects is their atmospheric combination, their capacity to generate mood. This shift has commercial implications: "vibe" is less reproducible than object, requiring continuous curation and updating. It also intensifies the relationship between aesthetic practice and platform documentation—atmosphere exists fully only when photographed, filtered, and circulated.

Some participants resist this intensification. Interviewees expressed fatigue with "performative" consumption, with pressure to constantly document and share. Others embrace it, recognizing platform visibility as essential to aesthetic community—one cannot participate in neo-Chinese design without participating in its digital circulation. This tension between authentic experience and documented performance characterizes aesthetic citizenship under platform capitalism: belonging requires visibility, yet visibility risks commodifying the very practices that constitute identity.

4.3 Comparative Synthesis: Two Grammars of Belonging

Hanfu and neo-Chinese design represent distinct modes of aesthetic citizenship, differentiated along three dimensions:

Relationship to history. Hanfu demands explicit historical engagement—debates over period accuracy, construction techniques, archaeological evidence. Neo-Chinese design operates through free-floating evocation, where "Song dynasty" functions as atmospheric reference rather than scholarly claim.

Bodily commitment. Hanfu requires wearing, embodying, performing tradition in public space. Neo-Chinese design inhabits domestic environments, visible primarily through deliberate documentation. The former risks stigma and inconvenience; the latter risks reducing identity to curated image.

Community structure. Hanfu communities maintain strong boundaries—membership criteria, authentication standards, collective events. Neo-Chinese design operates through loose networks of taste, where following and appreciating suffice for participation.

Both modes, however, share foundational characteristics. Both construct Chineseness as resource rather than burden, as choice rather than inheritance. Both operate through digital platforms that enable new forms of cultural production and circulation. And both generate internal hierarchies—of authenticity, sophistication, proper participation—that structure community recognition. These shared features suggest that aesthetic citizenship, in its Guochao variant, constitutes a distinctive generational response to the problem of belonging in contemporary China.

5. Digital Platforms as Infrastructure of Aesthetic Citizenship

The preceding cases examined what young Chinese consume and how they justify these choices. This section shifts focus to where these practices occur—analyzing how platform architecture shapes the possibilities for aesthetic citizenship. We treat Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and Taobao not merely as distribution channels but as productive environments that constitute particular forms of subjectivity and community.

5.1 Xiaohongshu: The Visual Economy of Inspiration

5.1.1 Platform Architecture and the "Grass-growing" Logic

Launched in 2013 as overseas shopping tips aggregator, Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) evolved into China's dominant lifestyle platform, with over 200 million monthly active users by 2023. Its core

mechanism is “zhongcao” (种草, literally “planting grass”)—user-generated content that inspires desire for products and experiences. The metaphor suggests organic growth: seeds of inspiration planted through visual exposure, growing into consumption decisions through community validation.

The platform’s interface design intensifies visual attention. Content appears as infinite scroll of images, with text secondary and comments tertiary. Algorithms prioritize “high-quality” posts—professionally composed photography, consistent aesthetic, high engagement rates. This architecture rewards what we term “aspirational documentation”: the production of images that simultaneously record and idealize everyday life.

For Guochao participants, Xiaohongshu functions as both showcase and school. Novices learn Hanfu coordination through “outfit of the day” posts, study neo-Chinese interiors through renovation diaries, discover brands through “haul” videos. The platform’s hashtag system organizes this knowledge: #汉服日常#, #新中式装修#, #国潮穿搭# enable targeted discovery and community formation. Yet this organization is commercial as well as social—hashtags are monetized through brand partnerships, with popular creators receiving products for review and commission on sales generated.

5.1.2 Influencer Hierarchies and the Democratization of Taste

Xiaohongshu’s creator economy produces stratified but permeable hierarchies. At the apex are “KOLs” (key opinion leaders) with millions of followers, often professional content creators or celebrity converts to Hanfu/neo-Chinese aesthetics. Their posts set trends, validate brands, and occasion widespread imitation. The middle layer comprises “micro-influencers” (10,000-100,000 followers)—passionate amateurs whose expertise or distinctive style attracts dedicated audiences. At the base are ordinary users, contributing sporadically but consuming constantly.

This hierarchy might suggest simple top-down cultural transmission. However, platform dynamics complicate this reading. Xiaohongshu’s algorithm favors “authentic” content—posts that generate genuine engagement over polished production. Micro-influencers often achieve higher engagement rates than celebrities, their recommendations perceived as more trustworthy. And ordinary users’ comments and collections feed back into trend formation, their aggregate behavior shaping what appears on discovery feeds.

Aesthetic citizenship on Xiaohongshu thus involves navigating between emulation and distinction. Participants learn community standards through consuming and imitating, but must develop personal style to achieve recognition. The platform’s visual economy rewards novelty within legibility—posts must be immediately recognizable as Guochao, yet distinctive enough to capture scrolling attention. This generates the stylistic eclecticism observed in our cases: Hanfu mixed with streetwear, neo-Chinese interiors incorporating global design objects.

5.1.3 The Commodification of Community

Xiaohongshu’s commercial integration intensifies pressures on aesthetic practice. The platform’s “xiaodian” (小店, little shop) feature enables direct sales from posts; livestreaming facilitates real-time

purchasing; "notes" (笔记) function as shoppable catalogs. For Guochao participants, this infrastructure blurs boundaries between cultural participation and commercial activity.

Some creators explicitly embrace this blurring, building businesses around aesthetic expertise. Hanfu enthusiasts open custom studios; interior design amateurs become professional consultants; product reviewers establish brand relationships. Others resist, maintaining strict separation between "authentic" passion and "selling out". Most navigate ambivalently, accepting occasional brand partnerships while asserting editorial independence.

This commodification generates tensions within aesthetic citizenship. When cultural participation becomes income source, can it still constitute belonging? When community recognition correlates with commercial success, does distinction reproduce class inequality? These questions have no definitive resolution; they structure ongoing negotiations within Guochao communities, visible in platform discourse around "authenticity", "selling out", and "staying true to original intention" (buxin, 不忘初心).

5.2 Bilibili: Knowledge Production and the Pedagogy of Taste

5.2.1 Video Culture and the Authority of Expertise

If Xiaongshu prioritizes visual inspiration, Bilibili (founded 2009, China's largest video platform for young users) emphasizes knowledge production. Its signature format is the "video essay"—lengthy, researched presentations combining narration, visual evidence, and argumentative structure. For Guochau participants, Bilibili hosts detailed tutorials on Hanfu construction, historical documentaries on textile techniques, critical analyses of design trends.

This video culture enables forms of cultural authority unavailable on image-centric platforms. Creators establish expertise through demonstrated research—citing archaeological reports, classical texts, museum collections. Comments sections function as peer review, with viewers correcting errors, requesting sources, debating interpretations. The platform's "bullet comments" (danmu), real-time overlays on videos, create collective viewing experiences where audiences respond to and build upon each other's observations.

Hanfu communities particularly rely on Bilibili for authentication. Videos documenting "real versus fake" Hanfu, explaining construction techniques, comparing commercial products to historical specimens accumulate millions of views. Creators like "Zhuangzhou" (装周) and "Hanfu TV" have established positions as trusted authorities, their recommendations influencing purchasing decisions and community standards. This expertise-based hierarchy contrasts with Xiaohongshu's visual-based influence, offering alternative routes to aesthetic citizenship.

5.2.2 The "Popular Science" Genre and Democratic Expertise

Bilibili's dominant content genre is "popular science" (kepu)—accessible explanation of specialized knowledge. For Guochao, this genre transforms historical research from scholarly activity to participatory culture. Amateur historians produce documentary-style videos on Ming dynasty clothing

regulations, Song dynasty color symbolism, Republican-era fashion modernization. These productions claim authority through research labor rather than institutional credentials, democratizing access to cultural expertise.

Yet this democratization generates its own tensions. When anyone can produce "historical" content, how are errors corrected, standards maintained? Bilibili's community mechanisms—comment corrections, video responses, creator collaborations—partially address this, but disputes over authenticity persist. The platform's "knowledge zone" (知识区) has attempted institutional validation, partnering with museums and universities to produce authoritative content. However, amateur creators often resist such incorporation, asserting that grassroots research captures living practice better than official narratives.

These dynamics reveal aesthetic citizenship's knowledge dimension: belonging requires not merely consuming correctly but understanding why, possessing historical literacy that justifies choices. Bilibili's video culture enables this literacy's mass distribution, while its community structures negotiate between democratic participation and expertise-based authority.

5.3 Taobao: Data-Driven Personalization and the Industrialization of Aesthetics

5.3.1 E-commerce Infrastructure and the Scaling of Guochao

Taobao, China's largest e-commerce platform (founded 2003, 800+ million monthly active users), provides the material infrastructure enabling Guochao's mass participation. Its significance extends beyond sales volume to production organization: Taobao's ecosystem connects manufacturers, designers, and consumers in rapid feedback loops that accelerate aesthetic trends and lower participation costs.

For Hanfu, Taobao enabled industrialization of previously artisanal production. Small workshops producing custom garments gave way to specialized factories with standardized sizing, quality control, and rapid turnover. By 2020, "Hanfu" constituted a distinct Taobao category with dedicated sub-platforms, annual sales reports, and established brand hierarchies. This industrialization democratized access—garments affordable to students replaced expensive custom commissions—while generating concerns about quality and authenticity.

Neo-Chinese design similarly depends on Taobao's manufacturing ecosystem. The platform's "factory direct" (工厂店) model connects consumers to producers, enabling "designer" aesthetics at mass-market prices. Small-batch production responds quickly to platform trends: when a particular ceramic style or furniture design gains Xiaohongshu visibility, Taobao manufacturers can produce variants within weeks. This responsiveness accelerates aesthetic cycles, generating both creative abundance and obsolescence anxiety.

5.3.2 Algorithmic Curation and the Construction of Taste

Taobao's recommendation algorithms play crucial but underrecognized roles in aesthetic formation. Based on browsing history, purchase patterns, and similar users' behavior, the platform constructs

personalized "taste profiles" that structure discovery. For Guochao participants, this means algorithmic reinforcement: having purchased Hanfu, one encounters more Hanfu; having browsed neo-Chinese ceramics, one sees more ceramics.

This personalization generates what we term "aesthetic filter bubbles"—environments where exposure confirms rather than challenges existing preferences. While enabling efficient discovery, algorithmic curation may restrict the serendipitous encounters that drive stylistic innovation. Some participants actively resist, deliberately browsing outside their profiles or following "anti-recommendation" accounts. Most, however, accept algorithmic guidance as convenient, even desirable—platform knowledge of their taste constitutes a form of recognition, of being known.

The datafication of aesthetic preference also enables new forms of commercial targeting. Guochau consumers receive precisely calibrated advertisements, influencer partnerships, and promotional content. Their platform behavior—clicks, collections, cart additions—becomes productive data, improving algorithmic prediction and commercial efficiency. Aesthetic citizenship thus involves not merely consuming but being consumed, participating in data economies that extract value from cultural practice.

5.4 Platform Ecology: Interconnection and Tension

These three platforms do not operate independently but form an interconnected ecology. Content circulates across platforms: Bilibili videos embedded in Xiaohongshu posts, Taobao products linked in both, screenshots migrating to WeChat conversations. Creators maintain presence across platforms, adapting content to each environment's affordances. Consumers navigate between platforms for different purposes—inspiration on Xiaohongshu, research on Bilibili, purchase on Taobao.

This ecology generates productive tensions. Xiaohongshu's visual idealism contrasts with Bilibili's documentary realism; Taobao's commercial efficiency conflicts with both platforms' claims to authentic community. These tensions are not resolved but navigated by participants, who develop sophisticated platform literacies—knowing when to seek what, how to verify claims, how to maintain coherent identity across differentiated environments.

Aesthetic citizenship, in this platform ecology, is necessarily multi-sited. It cannot be reduced to behavior on any single platform but emerges from circulation across them, from the productive friction between inspiration and knowledge, community and commerce, documentation and experience. Understanding Guochao requires attending to this infrastructural complexity, recognizing that young Chinese construct cultural identity not despite platforms but through them.

6. Theoretical Discussion: Beyond Orientalism and Nationalism

The preceding analysis documented how young Chinese construct cultural identity through aesthetic consumption, supported by digital infrastructure. This section develops theoretical implications, arguing that Guochao exemplifies a generational mode of cultural production that neither rejects

tradition nor submits to it, but creatively remakes it through platform-mediated practice. We propose "aesthetic citizenship" as a framework for understanding this mode, while acknowledging its limitations and tensions.

6.1 Refusing Self-Orientalism: The Irony of Guochao

Postcolonial critique has powerfully analyzed how non-Western subjects internalize Orientalist gaze, performing exoticized identity for Western recognition. This framework, applied to Guochao, would interpret Hanfu and neo-Chinese design as self-Orientalization—Chinese youth exoticizing themselves for global consumption, reproducing Western stereotypes of mystical East under the guise of cultural pride.

Our research suggests this critique misses the phenomenon's specificity. Guochau's primary addressee is domestic, not international. Platform metrics reveal that the vast majority of engagement—views, comments, purchases—occurs within Chinese-language networks. When international recognition occurs (Li-Ning's Fashion Week success, Hanfu influencers' overseas followers), it is welcomed but not constitutive. The movement's emotional intensity, its disputes over authenticity, its everyday practices of wearing and inhabiting Chineseness, require no Western audience for their meaningfulness.

More fundamentally, Guochao operates through irony that self-Orientalism cannot capture. Participants are acutely aware of the constructedness of their practice—mixing historical periods, combining "traditional" with "modern", performing "Chineseness" while recognizing its performativity. The "tu-cool" (土酷, rustic-cool) aesthetic explicitly embraces what previous generations rejected as shameful, but with knowing wink rather than naive authenticity. Thermal pants become fashion statement precisely because of their unfashionability; propaganda poster aesthetics appeal through camp sensibility as much as political identification.

This irony does not negate commitment but complicates it. Guochao participants are genuinely invested in cultural heritage, yet refuse solemnity; they claim Chineseness as identity, yet recognize its historical contingency. This "serious play" exceeds the binary of authentic/inauthentic that structures self-Orientalism critique. Young Chinese are not simply performing for Western gaze, nor simply recovering authentic tradition, but constructing new forms of belonging through aesthetic practice that acknowledges its own construction.

6.2 Refusing Cultural Nationalism: The State and Its Limits

Alternative interpretation would read Guochao as state-orchestrated cultural nationalism—youth mobilized to support regime legitimacy through consumption of officially sanctioned heritage. This framework captures real dynamics: state media promotion of traditional culture, commercial actors' strategic deployment of patriotic sentiment, the movement's resonance with "China Dream" discourse and "cultural confidence" (wenhua zixin) policy.

However, our research reveals significant gaps between state framing and grassroots practice. State-promoted "traditional culture" emphasizes Confucian values, ethnic harmony, and civilizational

continuity—solemn, didactic, politically contained. Guochao practice, by contrast, is playful, generational, commercially driven, and often politically ambiguous. Hanfu's Han-centric nationalism troubles official multiculturalism; neo-Chinese design's class-coded sophistication conflicts with populist rhetoric; platform communities' commercial intensity exceeds state regulatory comfort.

These tensions are not merely latent but actively negotiated. When state media celebrates Guochao, platform participants debate whether this recognition legitimizes or co-opts their practice. When commercial brands deploy patriotic imagery, consumers distinguish "authentic" commitment from "cashing in" (quanqian). When international criticism emerges, community responses range from defensive nationalism to cosmopolitan dismissal of politics altogether.

Aesthetic citizenship, in this context, is not determined by state ideology but operates in productive tension with it. Young Chinese construct belonging through consumption that state discourse can celebrate, co-opt, or criticize—but never fully control. The generational specificity of Guochao (post-90s/post-00s rather than earlier cohorts) matters here: these subjects came of age in relative prosperity and digital saturation, with weaker memory of state violence and stronger confidence in individual agency. Their cultural nationalism, when present, is chosen rather than inherited, performed with irony rather than conviction.

6.3 Toward Aesthetic Citizenship: A Generational Mode of Belonging

We propose "aesthetic citizenship" as a framework for understanding these dynamics—recognizing both their productive possibilities and their structural constraints. As developed throughout this article, aesthetic citizenship refers to the enactment of belonging through everyday stylistic choices, recognized and validated by digital publics. Three characteristics distinguish this mode.

First, aesthetic citizenship operates through consumption rather than formal political participation. This is not to reduce it to mere consumerism: Guochao participants understand their choices as meaningful, identity-constituting, community-building. Yet the resources for this citizenship are unequally distributed—economic capital enables distinction, platform literacy requires education and time, urban location provides access to communities and events. Aesthetic citizenship thus reproduces class hierarchies even as it enables new forms of cross-class community.

Second, aesthetic citizenship is platform-mediated rather than territorially bounded. Traditional citizenship ties individuals to nation-states through legal status and territorial residence. Aesthetic citizenship ties individuals to communities of taste through digital participation, potentially spanning geographic distance while excluding those without platform access. This mediation enables scale and visibility impossible in pre-digital cultural practice, but also subjects belonging to algorithmic governance and commercial extraction.

Third, aesthetic citizenship is generational rather than universal. Our analysis emphasizes post-90s and post-00s specificity—their digital nativity, their material security, their ambivalent relationship to state and tradition. Earlier Chinese generations practiced different modes of cultural belonging; future

generations may transform Guochao beyond recognition. Aesthetic citizenship describes a historically situated response to conditions of globalization, platformization, and generational succession, not a transhistorical human need.

6.4 Global Significance: Guochao and the Reconfiguration of Cultural Flows

Understanding Guochao matters beyond Chinese studies for what it reveals about contemporary globalization. The phenomenon challenges assumptions about cultural flows that remain dominant in media and cultural studies.

From West-to-East to multi-directional flows. Traditional frameworks assume cultural innovation originates in Western centers and diffuses to non-Western peripheries. Guochao demonstrates reverse and lateral flows: Chinese aesthetic innovations circulate domestically, then potentially internationally; East Asian regional connections (Korean and Japanese engagement with Hanfu, Chinese consumption of Japanese "wa-modern" design) create intra-Asian cultural networks bypassing Western mediation.

From resistance to creative appropriation. Postcolonial frameworks emphasize non-Western cultural practice as resistance to Western hegemony. Guochao includes resistant elements (rejection of Western fashion dominance, assertion of Chinese aesthetic autonomy) but exceeds them through creative appropriation—incorporating global elements (sneaker culture, minimalist design, platform affordances) into specifically Chinese configurations. This is not hybridity as dilution but hybridity as generative power.

From identity to performance. Essentialist frameworks treat cultural identity as inheritance, authenticity as fidelity to origin. Guochao demonstrates identity as performance, authenticity as effect—produced through repeated practice, recognized by community validation, constantly remade rather than preserved. This performative understanding does not negate identity's reality but reveals its constructed, contingent, productive character.

These reconfigurations suggest that global cultural studies requires new theoretical vocabularies—capable of analyzing non-Western modernities on their own terms, recognizing generational specificity, attending to platform infrastructure, and acknowledging creativity without romanticizing resistance.

6.5 Limitations and Critical Questions

Our analysis must acknowledge limitations. First, the focus on urban, educated, platform-active youth excludes significant populations: rural residents without digital access, older generations with different aesthetic formations, migrant workers whose consumption priorities differ. Guochao is not representative of "Chinese youth" but describes a specific, privileged segment.

Second, the celebratory tone risks obscuring real constraints. Platform surveillance and censorship shape what can be expressed; commercial pressures constrain authentic community; environmental costs of fast-fashion Guochao consumption are rarely acknowledged. Aesthetic citizenship is not liberation from but negotiation with these conditions.

Third, the framework's generalizability remains untested. Does aesthetic citizenship describe comparable phenomena elsewhere—K-pop fandom, African fashion revival, Indigenous design movements? Or does Guochao's specificity (scale of digital infrastructure, relationship to state power, generational location) resist comparison?

These limitations suggest directions for future research: longitudinal study of how aesthetic citizenship transforms as participants age; comparative analysis across regional and national contexts; critical examination of environmental and labor conditions underlying Guochao consumption; attention to excluded voices and resistant formations.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This article has traced how Chinese post-90s and post-00s generations construct cultural identity through aesthetic consumption, focusing on the Guochao phenomenon and its exemplary manifestations in Hanfu and neo-Chinese design. Our analysis reveals a generational transformation in how young Chinese negotiate belonging: from the reform-era binary of "tu" (shameful Chineseness) versus "yang" (aspirational foreignness), to a confident, playful, platform-mediated engagement with tradition as resource rather than burden.

Three findings merit emphasis. First, Guochao represents not simple traditional revival but creative remaking—young consumers actively select, transform, and combine historical elements with global contemporary aesthetics, generating distinctive stylistic grammars. Second, this remaking occurs through digital platforms that enable new forms of cultural production, community formation, and commercial circulation, while also subjecting practice to algorithmic governance and data extraction. Third, the identity produced through these practices—what we term "aesthetic citizenship"—operates through consumption and performance rather than formal political participation, through digital recognition rather than territorial belonging, through generational specificity rather than universal human need.

7.2 Contribution to Scholarship

Our study contributes to multiple scholarly conversations. For Chinese cultural studies, we offer nuanced analysis of generational transformation that avoids both developmental teleology (each cohort more modern/global than the last) and cultural essentialism (timeless Chineseness expressing itself). For platform studies, we demonstrate how infrastructure shapes subjectivity not through deterministic causation but through affordances that enable and constrain particular practices. For global cultural studies, we provide non-Western case material that challenges West-centric assumptions about cultural flows, modernity, and identity formation.

The concept of "aesthetic citizenship" is our central theoretical contribution. This framework captures how belonging is enacted through everyday stylistic choices, recognized by digital publics, and

negotiated between commercial, state, and community pressures. It differs from related concepts—cultural citizenship, consumer citizenship, aesthetic cosmopolitanism—through its attention to platform mediation, generational specificity, and the productive tensions between participation and commodification.

7.3 Implications for Understanding Contemporary China

Beyond academic contribution, our findings illuminate broader dynamics in contemporary Chinese society. The Guochao phenomenon reveals young people's complex relationship to state power: neither simple resistance nor passive acceptance, but strategic navigation that appropriates official discourse for generational purposes. It demonstrates the continued salience of national identity in an era of globalization—not as inherited obligation but as chosen affiliation, performed with ironic awareness. And it documents the emergence of new forms of social stratification organized around platform access, aesthetic literacy, and consumption capacity.

These dynamics carry political implications. Aesthetic citizenship enables forms of collective belonging outside formal political channels, potentially compensating for constrained civic participation. Yet it also individualizes responsibility for social problems—environmental degradation addressed through "sustainable" consumption choices, economic inequality managed through aspirational self-improvement. Whether aesthetic citizenship can scale from individual lifestyle to collective political action remains an open question.

7.4 Future Directions

Our analysis suggests multiple directions for future research. Longitudinal studies should track how aesthetic citizenship evolves as post-90s and post-00s generations age, encounter economic constraints, and potentially transmit practices to their children. Comparative research should examine analogous phenomena in other contexts—Korean "Newtro", Japanese "wa-modern", African and Indigenous design revivals—to test the framework's generalizability and specify its conditions of applicability.

Critical research should attend to Guochao's exclusions and costs: environmental impact of fast-fashion production, labor conditions in manufacturing, class and gender hierarchies within communities of taste. And ethnographic depth should complement our platform-focused analysis, examining how aesthetic citizenship operates in offline spaces—physical stores, festivals, educational institutions—where platform logics encounter other forms of social organization.

7.5 Final Reflection: Belonging in the Platform Age

The Guochao phenomenon ultimately illuminates broader transformations in how humans construct belonging in the platform age. As traditional anchors of identity—nation, religion, class, locality—weaken or transform, young people increasingly turn to aesthetic practice as source of meaning and community. This turn is neither simply liberating (enabling self-creation beyond ascribed categories) nor simply constraining (subjecting identity to commercial extraction and algorithmic governance), but complexly both.

Chinese youth in the Guochao moment are pioneering one variant of this broader transformation—one shaped by specific historical conditions of national resurgence, digital saturation, and generational succession. Their practices offer resources for thinking belonging otherwise: not as inheritance but as project, not as essence but as performance, not as given but as made. Whether these resources can address the systemic challenges—environmental, political, economic—of the twenty-first century remains the generational question their practice poses.

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