



Sun Yi, 44, has produced a series of *hanfu*-themed songs, and he is a pioneer in opening physical stores selling *hanfu* in China. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

From public servant to singer to man of the cloth

A cultural ambassador gives full voice to his sartorial message

By XING WEN
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Sun Yi reckons that nostalgia runs in his blood, one of his fortes being composing sappy long songs and songs about lost youth.

"I like listening to traditional folk songs and classical music, which has affected my works to a large extent," Sun, 44, says.

When he was a student at Sichuan University in the 1990s, he says, he tended to express his emotions through melodies and lyrics after he taught himself how to play the guitar.

So who better to be an ambassador for that ultimate walk down memory lane, the *hanfu* movement?

Sun is well known among *tongpao*, aficionados of Han traditional clothing, for having produced a series of *hanfu*-themed songs and being a pioneer in opening physical stores selling *hanfu* in China.

However, 15 years ago he was a little more in the main stream, coming to wide public notice by composing and singing *Xiao San He Xian* ("Minor triad"), a song that became popular online in China, and then landing a contract with a record company.

Though the reserved young man often seemed self-conscious in public, he found it easy to be in the public eye, he says. His first songs, performed in talent shows, had won him popularity at university, and he used to sing part-time in bars.

After he graduated, he landed what many would have regarded as a highly desirable job with a state-owned company, but he threw that in a couple of years later to devote himself to singing and composing.

In 2004, after his success with *Xiao San He Xian* and signing the recording contract, he came across discussions about Han clothing on the online forum hanchc.com.

At the time, there was debate in



Sun Yi and his wife Lyu Xiaowei in *hanfu*.

China about the need for a traditional garment embodying the uniqueness and antiquity of Chinese culture in the same way that the kimono does in Japan and the hanbok does in Korea.

People started to use the term *hanfu* to distinguish the traditional clothes of Han from other ethnic groups and discuss online the history and cultural connotation of *hanfu*.

"It sparked my interest in the traditional stuff," Sun says. "As Han people I felt we had responsibility to restore it."

One day he saw a poem by a forum participant that impressed him and he adapted it into lyrics and composed a *hanfu*-themed song.

For *hanfu* aficionados that song, *Chong Hui Han Tang* ("Dating back to the Han and Tang dynasties"), a

paean to their culture, became a hit. Later he composed a series of songs related to *hanfu* that also struck a responsive chord with *hanfu* lovers.

Sun now insists on dressing in *hanfu* when he performs onstage, saying the attire bears the spirit and civilization of Han, and thus Chinese, people.

His wife Lyu Xiaowei has also become a *tongpao*, and they opened a *hanfu* shop called *Chong Hui Han Tang* in Chengdu in 2006. It is believed to have been the first physical *hanfu* store in China.

Playing music is now a hobby, he says, while developing *hanfu* is "my inescapable duty".

The couple now own 18 physical stores across China and an online store on tmall.com, and last year the value of sales of 10 *hanfu* stores on the online shopping platform Taobao totaled 100 million yuan (\$18 million), Sun says.

"I am very happy to have seen these changes over the past 10 years. As the government highlights the need for China to bolster its confidence in its culture and traditions, now is a good time to further develop *hanfu*."

The most traditional not always the most practical



Models dressed in *hanfu* for the brand Han Ke Si Lu.

For at least three connoisseurs of Han attire, wearing *hanyuansu*, a kind of modern dress featuring *hanfu* style, is an acceptable choice for daily life.

The *hanyuansu* dress was designed to adapt the traditional *hanfu* to modern living by applying the main characteristics of *hanfu* in the design of vogue clothes, which has raised the profile of *hanfu* and expanded its influence.

"For me dressing up in a traditional *hanfu* outfit with wide sleeves is not that practical or comfortable," says Liu Yinong, founder of the website hanfuhui.cn. However, he says he insists on wearing standard *hanfu* on formal occasions, such as the celebration of traditional festivals and weddings.

"*Hanyuansu* is a more practical and fashionable choice for casual wear."

Wang Tianjiao of Shandong province, who is an aficionado of *hanfu*, and Chen Suyue, who has produced comic book that has its characters dressed in *hanfu*, largely share Liu's view.

Xu Hui, founder of the *hanfu* brand Han Ke Si Lu, is well known among *hanfu* lovers for making exquisite clothes that were prevalent during the Ming Dynasty.

Choosing *hanfu* as wedding garb has become popular among *hanfu* lovers, so the best-sellers in his shop on Taobao.com are red.

Xu, 41, graduated from Zhejiang Institute of Silk Textile, now known as Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, and has run his own business in the textile industry for nearly 20 years.

His love for *hanfu* comes from his passion for analyzing traditional textile techniques, he says.

When he studied he specialized in textile materials and design, he became engrossed in archaeological reports of the tombs of emperors and nobles in ancient China, especially the Ming Tombs.

"I was captivated by the fineness of the brocade in the Ming Dynasty. What I wanted to do was to try to get closer to the beauty of our national dress."

As he had jacquard making machines in his workshop, he tried to restore Ming Dynasty *hanfu*, and started his own brand.

The pattern designs on the fabrics of *hanfu* during the Ming Dynasty varied among different social classes, he says, and he strictly follows the pattern designs in the replicas he makes.

"However, it's hard to weave a garment exactly the same as the relics, because the machines we use today are different to the ancient ones."

His business is both a driver and beneficiary of the increasing of *hanfu* fashion.

Chu Yan, chief costume designer for leaders at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum leaders' meeting in Beijing in 2014, studied traditional culture for many years and has created stylish clothes with a fusion of characteristics of traditional Chinese costume.

"Costume is one of the carriers of our culture, especially on some international occasions," she says.

In the context of consolidating Chinese people's cultural confidence, Han people are seeking an identity for their culture, and the public is trying to find a visible cultural symbol to show the country's uniqueness, she says. That could partly explain the *hanfu* renaissance.

"The elegance and beauty embodied in the fabrics, pattern designs and colors of *hanfu* cannot be replaced by fast fashion. We should take advantage of it instead of just following Western fashion trends."

— XING WEN

Clothing: Technology helps preserve old traditions

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organized by *hanfu* aficionados in recent years to promote the traditional culture and clothes of Han people.

Regional *hanfu* organizations have sprung up across the country. The annual Hanfu Cultural Festival held in the ancient scenic town of Xitang, Zhejiang province, draws more than 150,000 visitors. The event is streamed live by the online-broadcasting platform Yingke and in November is said to have attracted 167,000 viewers over four days.

Wang herself founded a *hanfu* club after enrolling at the University of Jinan in Shandong province in 2014. In preparation for its opening she and some friends donned *qiju*, a type of *hanfu* with its right lapel wrapped around the body, and performed dance for the university's art festival. The background music was *Chong Hui Han Tang* ("Dating back to the Han and Tang dynasties"), the theme song sung by a singer called Sun Yi for the *hanfu* movement.

Wang says she encourages club members to wear *hanfu* on traditional Chinese festivals. For example, on every 12th of the second lunar month, or "flower festival" which, according to Chinese folklore, is the birthday of flowers, she holds ceremonies with her friends at Daming Lake in Jinan dressed, of course, in *hanfu*.

"I want to wear it in public so those who are curious about it or the traditional etiquette behind it can learn about it. The revival of *hanfu* is not about turning back

the clock or about cosplay. It's about passing down the culture of the largest ethnic group in China, which runs from way back to ancient times."

One aspect of passing on that message is making the most of the technology at her disposal, and Wang says she often takes photographs when dressing in *hanfu* and posts them on Sina Weibo, China's answer to Twitter. She has nearly 70,000 followers there.

A pioneer in promoting *hanfu* on the internet was the website hanfuhui.cn, which Liu Yinong, 27, set up four years ago and is said to now have more than 200,000 registered users.

Liu, of Shenzhen, was well placed to make the marriage between *hanfu* and new technology work, having earlier been a programmer for a software developing and having coded Web pages in his spare time.

"At that time, Tieba was the largest online community for those who love *hanfu*, and there was no website for it. I wanted to design a platform on which *tongpao* (a nickname for *hanfu* lovers) could share pictures, organize online activities and post articles, all about *hanfu*."

The site soon branched out into an online discussion board and shopping guide for all things *hanfu*. About 80 percent of the users are aged 18 to 28, Liu says.

"The term *hanfu* extends beyond clothes, covering other cultural treasures such as tea art, archery and the zither."

There are of course more traditional ways of propagating the *han-*



From left: The Hanfu Cultural Festival held in the ancient scenic town of Xitang, Zhejiang province; Chen Suyue (right) at the festival. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

fu lifestyle, such as on paper.

Chen Suyue, in a comic book called *Jiao Ni Xue Guiju* ("Teach yourself social etiquette"), has characters dressed in *hanfu* discuss in a humorous way how to behave appropriately on certain occasions, especially by adopting traditional social niceties that most people are unaware of.

Weaving culture and clothing into these stories makes them more interesting for people of different ages, Chen says.

Chen says she started working with the third Hanfu Cultural Festival in Xitang in 2015 and needed to learn about the standard shapes and structures of Han attire.

"I thought designing and painting the cartoon posters for the festival would be a synch, but the organizers saw things completely differently."

Just how difficult her job was

became clear to her when she prepared the main illustration for the festival: 16 men in *feiyufu*, clothes worn by the imperial guards of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

"There was so much detailed stuff I had to learn. The hats, the collars, the patterns. ... I revised them again and again based on instructions from three *hanfu* experts."

Chen says the organizers' and experts' scrupulousness about every detail of *hanfu* impressed her, and she put hours into researching *hanfu* and then putting it to practical effect.

"I used to care only about whether the piece fitted me well or not. I couldn't name its type and didn't know anything about its cultural background. Three years of working with *hanfu* has turned me from a *hanfu* layperson into a real *tongpao*."



From left: The Hanfu Cultural Festival held in the ancient scenic town of Xitang, Zhejiang province; Chen Suyue (right) at the festival. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

She is now a member of the organizing committee of the *hanfu* cultural festival and says it is a great opportunity to bring greater cohesion to the *tongpao* group nationwide.

"I have really been encouraged to see so many people who share my passion get together to dress in *hanfu*. Some *tongpao* traveled thousands of kilometers to take part. Some came with their parents and children and some worked as volunteers day and night, all because of the *hanfu* and its glamour."

Sometimes when Chen travels she wears her *hanfu* attire, and once when she went to Japan, some of the locals mistook her garb for Korean traditional clothing, she says.

"In my view, *hanfu* should be developed into a Chinese cultural symbol that can be given currency worldwide."