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Article

Cultural Symbiosis and Symbolic Transmission in Chinese Dress Institutions: Daoist Thought and the Historical Evolution of Hanfu

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Abstract: Dress systems transcend bodily protection in the physical sense to organize social relationships and present normative models for hierarchies and morals through organizational means. This article explores the extent to which Daoist thought and its rituals interacted with the history of Chinese Yiguan (ritual attire) and how this legacy bears witness to the contemporary revival of Hanfu. Based on the works of costume historians and Daoist scholars, alongside specific case studies, this research discusses historical moments when Daoist ideas and symbols appeared prominently within attire-related institutions. Rather than considering Daoism merely as an evangelical means to produce certain costumes, this paper explores how core philosophical concepts, such as ziran (naturalness) and wuwei (non-action), are integrated into broader aesthetic controversies encompassing simplicity, strength, and ritualistic practice. Throughout history, despite significant transformations in political regimes and textile technologies, numerous fundamental components of traditional clothing remain recognizable and unchanged today. Daoist priests' robes, court regulations, and literati self-imaging each contribute to a category of shared symbols with the potential for reuse across diverse situations. Currently, amidst the popularization of Hanfu, these older motifs proliferate through digital technologies, commercial design, and cultural heritage performances. They are continuously reinterpreted according to modern contexts in ways that diverge from their original ritualistic purposes. Exploring these symbolic transformations ultimately facilitates a deeper understanding of their enduring role on the stage of historical dress and their ongoing cultural recreation.

Keywords: hanfu; daoism; ritual dress; material culture; symbolic transmission

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1. Introduction

In 2025, after surveying some Hanfu enthusiasts in Xi'an, what I observed was vivid. Among them, when discussing clothing etiquette at a distance where people could no longer see each other's robes, they began speaking only after adjusting the cross-collar robe. This subtle, body-aware gesture reflects the enduring role of clothing in both protecting individuals and facilitating social interactions. Clothing has the capacity to establish spaces and naturally alter interpersonal relationships. Scholars have noted that clothing spans three dimensions—practical, social, and symbolic—which form a dynamic system rather than independent levels. In Hanfu, these dimensions are vividly integrated: the wide sleeves of the scholar's "Confucian skirt" not only signify status but also reflect a moderate posture, while the belt's button can indicate community affiliation without verbal introduction [1]. Identity is shaped through the interaction between the body, clothing, and interpretation, and in contemporary Hanfu practice, this interaction is consciously enacted. Thanks to this communicative ability, many societies have

developed clothing systems—common rules and expectations that define what kind of clothing to wear, when to wear it, and who should wear it.

In Chinese history, the term "dress and crown system" often describes a broad range of "dress and hat systems," encompassing formal court costumes, ceremonial clothing, and their associated moral connotations. In the modern context, "Hanfu" typically refers to a reconstructed category of "traditional Han clothing," primarily characterized by cross-necked robes, belts, and multi-layered styles. Although this modern term may be debated, it serves as a concise expression summarizing centuries of historical traditions in Han-dominated clothing forms, shaped by state institutions, local practices, and extensive cross-cultural exchanges [2].

This article focuses on one aspect of that long history: the interaction between Daoist thought and the clothing system associated with Hanfu [3]. The term "Daoism" in English can refer to early philosophical works, such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, often categorized as the "Daoist school" in Chinese academic circles, as well as to organized Daoist religious groups, rituals, and priestly traditions. The influence of Tang-dynasty Daoism on material culture is best understood through this dual perspective. On one hand, the philosophical concept of natural inaction (i.e., "nature" and "inaction") shaped a simple and comfortable aesthetic style, such as the loose and irregular "Confucian skirt" favored by Ming Dynasty literati, which abandoned the strict tailoring of court attire. On the other hand, religious Daoists translated their cosmological views into clothing designs: the "cloud shoulder" robes of Tang Dynasty Daoist priests were adorned with constellations and charms, and specific colors, such as sky blue (associated with the East and eternal life), were used in ceremonial costumes. These garments and symbols extended beyond ceremonial occasions, integrating into a broader traditional cultural system, spreading Daoist thought through visual forms, and even influencing the decorative patterns of everyday Hanfu.

To deconstruct the interplay between Daoist thought and the historical development of Hanfu, three central questions guide this research [1]. First, how did the clothing and cap system (*Yiguan Zhidu*) maintain the continuity of core symbolic elements, such as cross-collar closures and cloud motifs, despite significant changes in textile technology, tailoring techniques, and dynastic politics? Second, what forms of "cultural symbiosis" emerged among Daoism, Confucianism, and folk practices when they interacted? For example, how were the dress codes for emperors in the imperial court combined with Daoist rituals, and how could a commoner's attire reflect such aesthetic concepts? Third, what processes facilitated the transmission of traditional symbols to new contexts during the modernization of Hanfu? Rather than presenting a unidirectional narrative, this paper emphasizes patterns of transmission: how symbols remain recognizable, how they are reinterpreted in new forms, and how they attract new audience groups.

2. Materials and Analytical Framework

Study of clothing based on history pays attention not only to physical materials but also to the social implications that have been added over time [1]. Sources in text form include regulations from courts, philosophical essays, and ritual works which describe various kinds of the ideal; however, these descriptions differ from actual practice. Archaeological finds as well as tomb paintings and surviving textiles have provided snapshots of material culture that preservation and elite burial habits have influenced. Therefore, there is an issue of contradiction here; hence, combining archaeology with historical texts synthesizes data on costume development, studies focused on how dress represents culture, and research into Daoism and ritual practices.

Anthropology-of-Dress can help avoid mistakes when discussing traditional clothing at present, namely, treating garments with a certain uniform meaning over long periods [2]. Different meanings are often attached to the same form in reality due to various wearers and situations. Identity is formed by the "dress system," which includes body, clothes, and social interpretation. Likewise, fashion works as a kind of language that has a set of signs to be read repeatedly. This paper works these ideas quite simply, regarding

forms related to Hanfu as a type of vocabulary and grammar that other groups could take as their basis.

Given that the project is both historical and cross-disciplinary, sources in various disciplines must be carefully considered. Whenever possible, references to particular garments should not be directly derived from quotation; rather, they can originate from conversations with archaeology and museums' holdings. Classic works serve as references in discussions, and they do not directly reveal how ordinary people dressed every day. Finally, as links between Daoist concepts and clothing aesthetics, interpretations are given rather than being statements of direct causality. Daoist influence is understood in terms of it being a cultural resource that could be deployed, pushed back, or redefined in the broader context of politics and ritual [4].

Table 1 summarizes the basic analytical lenses used in the discussion. The objective is not to take the reader too far with a complex theory but to keep track of four recurring layers of meaning: institutional rules (who is allowed to wear what), material built-up (how textiles or tailoring contribute to particular silhouettes), performative (how clothing's movement and social interaction are shaped), and symbolic (how patterns and color layers communicate cosmology or moral values). These layers tend to overlap in the history of Chinese dress [5].

Table 1. Analytical lenses for interpreting dress as material culture.

Lens	Guiding question	Example in this study
Institutional	Who is allowed (or expected) to wear what, and in which ritual or political settings?	Court regulations and clerical jobs affect the visibility of Daoist robes and forms of Hanfu [11][13].
Material/Technical	How do textile technology and tailoring enable certain silhouettes, colors, and durability?	Silk production and decorative technique expand what motifs can circulate across dynasties [5][12].
Performative	How does clothing shape movement, posture, and public interaction?	Layered robes and sleeves structure ritual gestures and public self-presentation [1][10].
Symbolic/Semiotic	What are the meanings placed upon colors, motifs, and patterns and how do these meanings change?	The reception of Daoist images in the market of Hanfu has shifted from ritual mediation to trendy fashion branding in modern times. [14][15][18].

As shown in Table 1, "meaning" in clothing is generated through the interaction of rules, materials, performance, and symbolism. The later historical sections refer back to these lenses in ways of describing change over time [1].

3. Foundations of Chinese Dress Institutions

Chinese dress institutions grew with the formation of the early state. More lay at stake in clothing, in classical ritual thought than in personal choice: It was a visible statement of social order. Texts later brought together in the *Liji* (Book of Rites) link wearing appropriate clothes with ritual appropriateness, with the implication that the body, the clothes, and the development of virtue should be in harmony. Even though such texts describe ideals rather than everyday reality, they show that "getting dressed correctly" could be treated as a political and ethical practice.

Over the years as a result of the interaction between court mores and craftsmen skills, some perceptible components had become stable and later became part of the modern Hanfu imaginations. Crossed robes, multi-layered clothing with belts and long sleeves appeared in different periods, although the details of tailoring, fabric and decoration have changed significantly. These elements have never been completely isolated from external influences [6]. The tradition of horse-riding on the grassland influenced trousers and boots; the exchange of the silk road brought the new method of weaving and pigments; and often the court encouraged the style of internationalization when it came to supporting political legitimacy.

Archaeological evidence is very important for the study of early Hanfu, as textiles are very difficult to preserve (especially in the part of China where climate is rainy), and ancient documents often do not provide very specific description of the cutting, just the meaning of rituals. The comprehensive analysis of unearthed cultural relics (such as the silk robe of Mawangdui) and burial art reveals obvious continuity and changes: the basic contours of Hanfu (cross-necked scarf, belt binding) are preserved, while the decoration (including patterns influenced by Daoism), sleeve width and layering style are followed by weaving technology and cultural products. Change by the change of taste. For example, robes and wrap-around clothing can be found in different dynasties, but the social meaning of "loose" and "fitting" clothing will vary depending on the specific situation [7]. In other words, stable visual grammar does not necessarily mean stable interpretation.

In the Han Dynasty, clothing and etiquette were gradually integrated into the imperial rule [4]. Costumes have evolved to be a way of setting classes apart and are employed to impose political order in public ceremonies. Since then, the relationship between clothing, moral discourse and the national authority have been re-interpreted in various periods. This institutional foundation is very important to Daoism, because Daoist groups do not exist apart from the state; they consult with it, learn from it, and sometimes offer other symbolic systems that can move across social boundaries.

4. Daoist Concepts as Aesthetic and Symbolic Resources

Daoist philosophy introduces a set of concepts that can function as an aesthetic vocabulary. Early Daoist texts refer to the Dao as the underlying "way" or process by which things come to be and change, and the Dao authors frequently try to point out the artificial "desire" created by rigid social conventions. Two related ideas are especially important for thinking about clothing symbolism.

First, Ziran (frequently translated as "self-so" or "naturalness") is an ideal of allowing things to unfold according to their own tendencies, not trying to force them into assigned categories. Second, Wuwei is often translated as "non-action," but many scholars believe it is more accurate to think of it as non-coercive or non-grasping action—doing things in accordance with the larger patterns rather than imposing willful control. Daoist values shaped dress not by direct specification but through influencing what was considered tasteful and justified. They provided ideological support for preferences toward simplicity and comfort while also offering a rhetorical basis to critique rigid, hierarchical, or overly ornate norms of fashion [6].

These Daoist ideals of Ziran and Wuwei assumed diverse forms in ancient Chinese society, serving different social groups in distinct ways. Imperial literati used a sartorial demeanor of "naturalness" and unpretentiousness, often characterized by loose, plain Hanfu, to signal their moral distance from court political rivalries [8]. At the same time, Daoist ritual practitioners interpreted certain fabrics and colors as concrete expressions of their cosmic order, such as the vermilion red on their undyed linen or dharma clothing. In both cases, these Daoist concepts were not strict rules but a rich explanatory resource: they provided a common vocabulary for exploring what kind of dress was considered decent, real, and elegant.

Religious Daoism has also formed its own unique clothing system, which is more clearly regulated as a symbolic system in Chinese ceremonial clothing. Daoist priests wear ritual costumes, including Daoist robes, ceremonial crown ornaments, and talisman belts,

all marked with symbols indicating bloodline, rank, and religious roles. These sacred costumes are decorated with image elements such as cloud patterns, vermilion runes, and bagua pictures to connect the wearer with the sacred universe of Daoist rituals [9]. Recent research on Daoist material culture regards this kind of clothing as a symbol system, where the patterns act as a visual "text," explaining the role of clergy as intermediaries between mortals and gods. These robes also reflect cultural integration: they draw on the aesthetic elements of court and traditional Chinese ceremonial costumes, such as multi-level outlines and symbolic colors, while imbuing them with unique Daoist cosmological meanings.

5. Historical Case Studies of Symbiosis

The following case study elaborates on how the symbolic meaning of Daoism is integrated into Hanfu and Chinese ceremonial costumes in different historical contexts. Each case focuses on key turning points, such as political turmoil, the transformation of court ideology, or the enhancement of Daoist influence, which open up new opportunities for the reinterpretation of traditional clothing [10]. Figure 1 provides a concise timeline, depicting these critical moments in the development of Daoism and Hanfu. This timeline is not intended to be a comprehensive record of the history of Chinese clothing, nor does it fully describe the changes in Hanfu design. Instead, it emphasizes periods of intense conflict between royal clothing norms and experiments in clothing aesthetics.

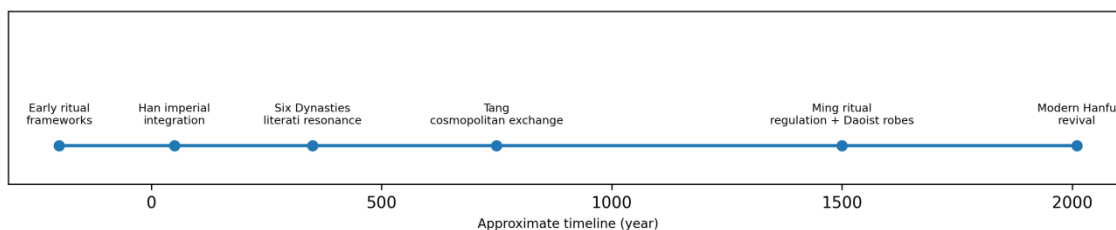


Figure 1. Simplified timeline of selected moments in which Daoist ideas and symbols became especially visible in dress culture.

Figure 1 highlights that the visibility of Daoist sartorial symbolism in Hanfu is uneven throughout historical time. These meanings of Daoist clothing become significantly prominent during specific occasions, particularly when they gain socio-political resonance through intellectual movements, imperial ideological agendas, or dynastic ritual institutions.

5.1. Six Dynasties Literati Resonance

The Six Dynasties period witnessed the process of "socialization" of Daoist thought [11]. Against the background of political division and ideological activity, the ruling class no longer relied on Daoist temples but turned to Daoist classics, especially Laozi and Zhuangzi, as resources to cope with the turbulent world. Modern scholars later referred to this interaction as "new Daoism" (metaphysics), which focused more on shaping an educated self than on religious beliefs. Philosophical thought became a tool for ethical, metaphysical thinking and aesthetic expression.

In this cultural environment, clothing served as an obvious sign of the attitude of scholars. A comprehensive study on historical clothing points out that during several periods, including the Six Dynasties, loose outlines and wide sleeves tended to become recognizable styles, even though the particular tailoring varied according to region and identity [12]. A loose robe was not necessarily a "Daoist style," but it could be interpreted as aligning with values such as restraint, non-competition, and a preference for comfort rather than ostentation. In other words, the same dress could not only express comfort but also reflect an aesthetic attitude.

At the same time, this is also a good example of why symbolic interpretations must remain cautious. Clothing choices were influenced by climate, the availability of textiles,

and social signaling rather than purely philosophical considerations. A literati robe could communicate wealth and leisure as much as it conveyed spiritual freedom. For this reason, the relationship between the ideals of Daoism and Six Dynasties clothing can best be described as one of resonance rather than direct causation: Daoist language provided a way to discuss taste but did not necessarily dictate tailoring.

5.2. Tang Cosmopolitanism and Daoist Visibility

The Tang Dynasty presents a complex narrative regarding the influence of Daoism. During this period, Tang culture was notably open, embracing commodities, foreign technologies, and decorative elements from Eurasia. Amid this diversity, Daoism achieved unprecedented symbolic visibility. The question is not whether Daoism influenced Tang Dynasty costumes, but how its meaning permeated such a multifaceted aesthetic landscape. Part of the explanation lies in the royal strategy. Tang rulers actively supported Daoist institutions and integrated Daoist symbols into their system of political legitimacy. This patronage had tangible effects: sacrificial colors, celestial patterns, and cosmic imagery extended from temple settings into the broader visual culture of festivals and court life. Colors once reserved for Daoist attire appeared on the belts of nobles, while cloud patterns derived from Daoist robes adorned the sleeves of women.

However, this proliferation did not translate into dominance. The fashion industry of the Tang Dynasty was highly competitive, with Buddhist patterns introduced via the Silk Road, Confucian norms shaping official attire, and styles from Central Asia influencing garment outlines and fabrics. Daoist aesthetics contributed to this vibrant exchange but did not dominate it. What is particularly intriguing is how this intense competition led to the stabilization of certain elements, enabling their identification across diverse contexts and their reuse in future designs. In the symbolic marketplace of the Tang Dynasty, popularity was achieved not through regulation but through adaptation [13].

5.3. Ming Regulation and Daoist Ritual Dress

The Ming Dynasty formed a sharp contrast with the Tang Dynasty: during the Tang Dynasty, the state strengthened imperial power through clear clothing regulations. Historical research on clothing norms during the Ming Dynasty indicates that these decrees are closely connected with the governance of etiquette and the establishment of political legitimacy. From this perspective, clothing serves as a material form of imperial power, controlling human behavior in social and ceremonial spaces, and visually reinforcing the rigid social hierarchy of the empire through fabric, tailoring, and decoration.

Daoist institutions adapted and operated within this strict clothing supervision system, rather than outside it. Daoist clergy led state-recognized ceremonies and maintained their own internal order [9]. Their robes symbolized religious roles through standardized elements such as crowns, holy belts, and patterned Daoist robes. Recent studies on Daoist material culture regard this costume as a "spiritual communication system," in which symbols and diagrams establish the status of clergy as intermediaries between the human world and the Daoist ritual universe.

In view of the Ming Dynasty's ceremonial order as the basis of rule, Daoist costumes became a vivid embodiment of the integration of the state and religion. On one hand, Daoist clothing drew on the visual language of the royal ceremonial costumes of the Ming Dynasty to ensure its recognizability within the visual order of the state [14]. On the other hand, the meaning of Daoism extended beyond the definition of the royal family, as these costumes were associated with views of the universe, immanence, and the effects of charms. This dual symbolic positioning explains the importance of Daoist elements—many of which persist today—demonstrating both the formal status and the spiritual aspirations of Daoism.

5.4. Contemporary Hanfu Revival and Recontextualization

Since the early 2000s, "Hanfu" has given a name to something more than a historic category of costume. It marks a living movement—a self-conscious practice in which

participants put on "traditional" identity in public locations, internet venues, and commercial events. Scholars have commented that this staging weaves together personal aesthetics, moral narratives, and political imagination in a manner that defies easy characterization.

What interests me here is what happens to Daoist symbolism when it enters this contemporary field. The phenomenon experiences what can be called a second life. No longer primarily an element of ritual technology, Daoist signs come to fulfill the role of fashionable motifs. The images of heaven and clouds pass from priest's wear to sleeves, while crane and cloud images play the role of modern accessories. Diagrammatic designs lose their meaning of cosmic mediation and have become aesthetic preferences. This process is symbolic transmission with reinterpretation—older forms are still recognizable, but the authority is transformed from the sacred to the realm of style.

This transformation was brought about by forces beyond the imagination of Daoist priests. These priests could not have envisioned such a change when they first wore these signs. The digital platform teaches the audience coordination of garments, choosing accessories that complement them, as well as following "traditional" etiquette, thereby making the art of attire something that can be taught and spread. The fashion presentation realizes the feminine aesthetics paradigm of Hanfu, while simultaneously negotiating between historical allusions and modern media expectations. Behind all this is a complex nationalist trend—sometimes manifested as cultural self-confidence and education, and sometimes evolving into exclusive national politics. Ethnological research captures this ambivalence and shows that this movement can contain both real cultural creativity and pure fantasy of racialization in different situations.

So, what the contemporary revival phenomenon reveals is that over time, when symbols adapt to new uses and new audiences, they tend to be continued. The reason why Daoist patterns can remain is that they not only serve aesthetic branding like religious ritual mediation but also symbolize cultural self-confidence akin to the order of the universe. Their durability depends on their flexibility—history may have taught us this truth long ago [15].

In short, the contemporary practice of Hanfu is not just a repetition of historical clothing [13]. It remixes old elements to form a new symbol economy shaped by the consumer market, tourism, and social media exposure. In particular, the Daoist pattern shows how religious symbols can be translated into popular culture while retaining traces of their original cosmic meaning.

6. Discussion: What Cultural Symbiosis Explains

In the above cases, "cultural symbiosis" is reflected through at least three common mechanisms. First of all, there is a phenomenon of institutional symbiosis: Daoist etiquette costumes draw on the authority and visual clarity of the court and etiquette system, and at the same time provide the country with more symbolic resources to highlight legitimacy and rituals. Secondly, there is an aesthetic symbiosis phenomenon: Daoist philosophical concepts such as "nature" and "nothing" can resonate with the period of self-shaping of the elite, especially when scholars want to show alienation from competitive official life. Third, there is a modern business symbiosis phenomenon: the logo of Daoism has become a marketable design element in the Hanfu economy, thus creating new audiences and new meanings.

What these historical models do show is that transmission of symbols is achieved by a certain mechanism: the visual invariant elements hold the flexibility of function. A model is not spread through a completely unchanged meaning, but by retaining sufficient formal recognition to achieve the possibility of reinterpretation. This star pattern was once the symbol of the order of the universe on the robes of monks in the Tang Dynasty. Hundreds of years later, this pattern was decorated on the fabric of the Ming Dynasty court, and later appeared in the sleeves of modern Hanfu lovers in the form of prints [16]. In every historical period, this pattern may look similar, but the social background that gives it authority will change significantly, such as the effectiveness of etiquette, the

prestige of the royal family or the taste of consumers. This is why Hanfu is able to make people feel both ancient and modern: on the one hand, its form is able to offer the viewer a stable visual grammar; on the other, its meaning can still be reinterpreted according to the new institutional and technical context.

Therefore, the influence of Daoism is neither the only driving factor in the history of Chinese clothing, nor an empty label. It should be understood as a lasting cultural combination that exists in a larger symbol ecosystem - a resource library containing concepts and patterns, which will be activated when favorable conditions arise. When the political turmoil makes the evacuation of the elite quite attractive, the minimalist style with Daoist color provides a language that highlights moral differences. When the legitimacy of imperial power requires the blessing of the celestial body, the Daoist symbol provides this blessing. When contemporary people who seek identity want to show their cultural confidence, the aesthetics of Daoism can still be used. In these different periods, what remains unchanged is not a constant clothing style, but a flexible symbolic resource - this resource has been used by people of all generations to express who they are and the values they cherish [2].

7. Conclusion

From a long historical perspective, the relationship between Daoist thought and Hanfu has become clearer. In China, the clothing system is not developed in isolation but is formed alongside related etiquette practices, which link clothing with social order and moral cultivation. Within this enduring institutional framework, Daoist philosophy has introduced unique aesthetic principles centered on "nature," "restraint," and "doing nothing." Concurrently, organized Daoist religious practices have fostered distinctive ceremonial costumes and symbolic imagery suitable for mediating sacred rituals.

Throughout various Chinese dynasties, the wisdom and symbolic resources of Daoist thought dynamically interacted with the clothing decrees of the royal court, shifts in textile economic production, and cross-cultural exchanges along the Silk Road and beyond. These interactions shaped the dynamic interplay between symbolic continuity and stylistic transformation in the design and cultural interpretation of Hanfu and traditional ceremonial attire.

The case studies presented in the article demonstrate that the preservation of Daoist cultural symbols over centuries is not due to their static or rigid nature but rather their inherent interpretative flexibility. The visual elements and philosophical concepts of Daoism resonated deeply with the self-cultivation needs of elite literati during the Six Dynasties. These symbols gained widespread appeal in the international fashion tastes of the Tang Dynasty and were formally integrated into the strict etiquette governance framework of the Ming Dynasty.

In the contemporary Hanfu revival movement, these symbolic resources have been repositioned and repurposed within the context of digital social media and commercial consumer markets—sometimes fostering meaningful cultural education and historical awareness about traditional Chinese culture, while at other times fueling debates surrounding identity politics. Viewing Hanfu as an evolving symbolic system clarifies its continued relevance in contemporary cultural life. This revitalized traditional form offers an accessible avenue for individuals to explore Chinese history, classical philosophy, and traditional etiquette culture, particularly for younger generations in China and Hanfu enthusiasts worldwide. Moreover, the millennia-long cultural symbiosis between Daoist thought and Chinese clothing culture underscores an essential truth: the concept of "tradition" is shaped through ongoing communication, debate, and reinterpretation across diverse historical contexts.

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