

Nonverbal Communication Strategies on Diplomatic Occasions—How to Wear Chinese Attire

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Abstract

On diplomatic occasions, attire, as a core carrier of nonverbal communication, functions not only as a form of aesthetic expression but also as a medium for sending diplomatic signals, conveying cultural identity, and building emotional connections. Focusing on Chinese-style attires worn by foreign dignitaries during their visits to China between 2023 and 2025, this study examines the strategic logic behind such attire choices. Case analyses reveal that these attire selections primarily follow three interrelated strategies: “Color”, “Form”, and “Pattern”. Strategically chosen colors with cultural resonance, such as Chinese red, express diplomatic respect; classic silhouettes, including cheongsam and Chinese tunic, suit align with host cultural etiquette; and traditional patterns like peony patterns subtly convey auspicious wishes. Visually, these three dimensions together form a coherent attire system for intercultural nonverbal communication in diplomatic contexts.

Keywords

Intercultural Nonverbal Communication, Diplomacy, Chinese Culture, Attire

1. Introduction

Birdwhistell (1970) found that no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or interaction is carried by words; therefore, nonverbal communication accounts for as much as 65 to 70 percent. And Mehrabian (1971) revealed that “Total liking = 7% verbal liking + 38% vocal liking + 55% facial liking”, so it is of far-reaching significance to study intercultural nonverbal communication. While the popular statistic attributing 93% of communication to nonverbal behavior has been widely misapplied beyond its original experimental context

(Burgoon et al., 2022), this does not diminish the genuine and multifaceted impact of nonverbal communication in shaping our exchanges.

Samovar et al. (2015) consider that “nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source and/or receiver.” Then they divide nonverbal messages into two comprehensive categories: 1) those that are primarily produced by the body (appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage) and 2) those that the individual combines with the setting (space, time, and silence), as shown in **Figure 1**.

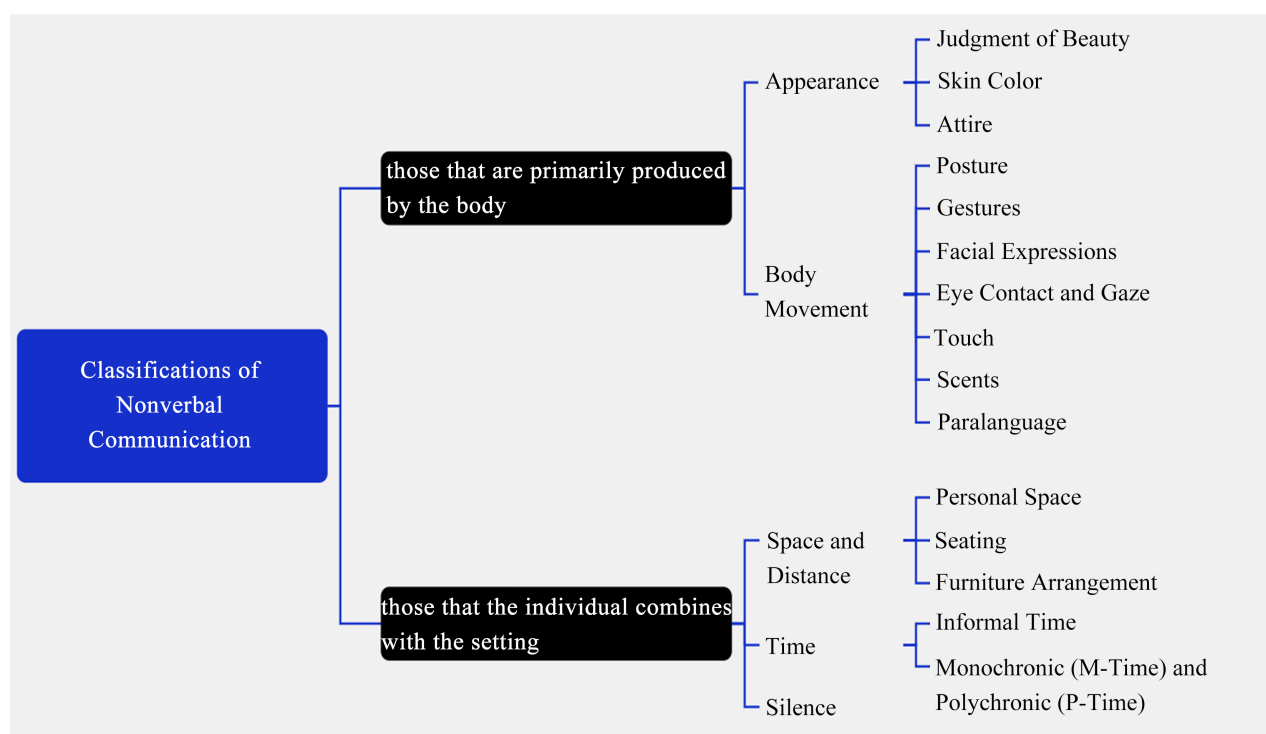


Figure 1. Classifications of nonverbal communication.

With the theme of “Nonverbal Communication” and the time span “2023.1.1-2025.12.31” on CNKI, the author retrieved 371 papers in total (CNKI, 2025). Excluding the broad keyword “communication”, scholars studying nonverbal communication have mainly focused on fields including “Autism Spectrum Disorder” (Total Link Strength: 39), “Facial Expression” (TLS: 36) and “Human-robot Interaction” (TLS: 34), whereas relatively little attention has been paid to the research on “Attire” (TLS: 4). Therefore, this field boasts broad research prospects.

Especially on diplomatic occasions, attire-based communication carries crucial strategic significance. Attire constitutes the first impression that the people of a country leave on the international community, and the information conveyed by this first impression serves as the basis for subsequent interactions and image positioning. This is what is referred to as the “primary effect” in psychology (Wu,

2009). Attire can intuitively convey respect and understanding for the host country's culture, laying a visual foundation for friendly dialogue. Such carefully selected attire not only strictly adheres to diplomatic etiquette and highlights a country's image, but also transcends language barriers to become a silent language for expressing political goodwill, and serving as an indispensable strategic tool in intercultural communication.

To analyze the attire strategies employed by foreign dignitaries during their visits to China, this research draws upon a combination of literature review and visual image analysis. On the one hand, drawing on foundational texts such as Shen Congwen's (Shen, 2011) *Research on Ancient Chinese Costume* and related academic studies papers from CNKI, such as *Artistic Features and Origins of Ruqun Dress in the Sui and Tang Dynasties* (Tao et al., 2023) in order to establish a theoretical framework for understanding the significance of color, form, and pattern in Chinese attire. On the other hand, this research draws upon publicly available information from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2025). Using "visits to China" as the search keyword, with the time span set from "January 1, 2023" to "December 31, 2025", and the search scope limited to "title" only, a total of 147 relevant news reports and on-site images were collected as analytical samples. Based on the above information and other public online materials, the online materials correspond precisely to the "Color", "Form", and "Pattern" framework derived from the literature, as shown in Table 1, which will be examined in detail through case analysis below.

Table 1. Classification of strategies for foreign dignitaries' selection of Chinese Attire.

Strategy	Case
Color	Red
Form	Cheongsam, Chinese Tunic Suit
Pattern	Plant, Flower and Bird Pattern

2. Case Analyses: Color, Form and Pattern

2.1. Color

Vision has become the primary sense of modern humans. Within the first 20 seconds of observing an object, the sense of color accounts for 80% of the impression, demonstrating just how profound the impact of color is on people (Guangming Daily, 2010). As a nonverbal communication tool, color is often endowed with rich cultural connotations. Therefore, in intercultural communication, it is crucial to accurately grasp the connotations of colors in different cultural contexts to ensure smooth communication.

Red is the totem culture and spiritual anchor of the Chinese people, symbolizing auspiciousness, joy, prosperity, longevity, and dignity. In contemporary society, "Chinese Red," as a traditional color culture of the Chinese nation, carries symbolic meanings related to national power and politics (Yang, 2011). On dip-

lomatic occasions in China, dignitaries, regardless of gender, tend to favor attire incorporating red elements.

When visiting Chinese cultural landmark, the Forbidden City, Lahbib chose a red shawl, belt, and inner garment, as shown in **Figure 2**. The Forbidden City features red walls and yellow tiles. The partial red elements in her attire naturally echo the background—avoiding clashing with the environmental colors while strengthening the visual connection of “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” through subtle details. The red shawl served as a visual focus, signaling cultural respect and adaptation; the belt added layered symbolism; and the inner garment subtly extended the theme. This integration ensures that the red elements are not deliberate decorations but natural, detail-oriented expressions embedded in the logic of her attire. According to relevant media reports “Belgian Prime Minister Croo and Foreign Minister Lahbib embraced local customs by wearing colors with Chinese characteristics. Lahbib paired a bright red scarf with a belt of the same color—this thoughtful combination is distinctly Chinese.” (Sohu News, 2024), it can be known that this was a successful intercultural communication. In the period following the visit, a discernible inclination toward incorporating Chinese elements was observed in other Belgian public and cultural engagements. A notable example is the Cheongsam exhibition held in Brussels (Xinhua News Agency, 2024), as **Figure 3**, which highlighted the aesthetic and cultural significance of traditional Chinese dress within a Belgian context. Such developments suggest that Lahbib’s attire choice not only achieved its intended communicative effect during the state visit but also contributed to a broader receptivity toward Chinese cultural symbols in Belgian public life.



Figure 2. Belgian Foreign Minister, Hadja Lahbib (Left) Visits the Forbidden City on January 11, 2024. (https://www.sohu.com/a/752509809_121659516)



Figure 3. The Cheongsam and Shanghai-style Culture Exhibition in Brussels on May 14, 2024. (<https://english.news.cn/20240514/8a44752a98604a6b8cf0939b19db3b12/c.html>)

Brigitte Macron arrived in Beijing wearing a red coat and carrying a red handbag, as shown in **Figure 4**. The airport reception serves as the ceremonial opening of a state visit. The high saturation and visual impact of the red coat established the ritualistic positioning for the start of the official visit, achieving an initial connection of intercultural emotions. Meanwhile, the red handbag formed a color coordination with the coat, elevating the red element from an individual item to an overall visual symbol, avoiding color fragmentation and endowing the nonverbal expression with greater integrity. The positive coverage by French fashion magazine *Closer* (2025) “Avec son manteau rouge et son sac Lady Dior assorti, Brigitte Macron distille la magie des fêtes en Chine” (With her red coat and matching Lady Dior bag, Brigitte Macron distills the magic of holidays in China) attests to the success of Brigitte’s attire choice. In addition to positive media commentary, the success of such intercultural communication through red attire had already been demonstrated during the Chinese leader visit to France in 2024, when Brigitte Macron appeared in a red dress. This elegant look was even featured in *Vogue* (2024) as **Figure 5**, further validating the diplomatic and aesthetic success of her choice of red as a cultural symbol.

If red dresses are often seen as a way for women to express respect for Chinese culture, a red tie serves as the male counterpart in conveying the same sentiment. During his first visit to China as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam and President of Vietnam, Tô Lâm was received at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on August 19, 2024. He stated, “My first overseas visit as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee and President of Vietnam is to China, which fully demonstrates the consistent stance of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Government in attaching great importance to developing relations with China, and that China is a strategic choice and top priority of Vietnam’s foreign policy.” His diplomatic friendship towards China is also reflected in his attire—a red tie. As a finishing touch to the suit, the tie embodies his sincerity in intercultural communication and conveys his proactive attitude towards dialogue through the adaptation of local color elements.



Figure 4. French First Lady, Brigitte Macron (Left) Arrives in Beijing on December 3, 2025. (<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-12-03/French-president-arrives-in-China-for-state-visit-1INPuWlytFK/p.html>)



Figure 5. Brigitte Macron (Center) at the Élysée Palace on May 6, 2024. (<https://www.vogue.fr/article/brigitte-macron-chic-francais-style-looks>)

As the first foreign government leader to visit China in 2025, Prime Minister Mitchell deliberately incorporated red into his attire to convey sincere respect for Chinese culture and to resonate with the festive atmosphere of the Spring Festival. He chose a red tie, pocket towel, and socks during his interview in *Leaders Talk*, as shown in **Figure 6**. The red tie, as the core accessory of his suit, enhanced the friendly communication tone of the interview; the red pocket towel further added a sense of ritual to the details, conveying thoughtful adaptation from the overall look to the subtle elements; the red socks, with their implicit festive atmosphere (China's Spring Festival), not only aligned with the Chinese tradition of “wearing red socks to pray for good fortune” but also strengthened the sense of empathy in integrating into the festive mood. As Mitchell stated “Thank you for inviting me to your program. I am delighted to be in China. First of all, I would like to take

this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Chinese New Year!” (China Daily, 2025). Such systematic use of red elements transforms their attire into a nonverbal symbolic system. On a visual level, it aligns with the Chinese cultural context, conveying respect and integration. In this way, it transcends language itself and achieves effective intercultural communication.



Figure 6. Prime Minister of Grenada, Dickon Mitchell (Right) in Leaders Talk on January 18, 2025.

(<https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202501/18/WS678b7b5fa310be53ce3f2524.html>)

Beyond the visual impact of color, “Form”—the silhouette and structure of attire, serves equally as a core strategy for dignitaries to express cultural identity.

2.2. Form

Studies in cognitive psychology have shown that visual perception is a dynamic process. In the initial stage, features such as color dominate perception. As attention becomes focused, however, the focused attentional processing of details like silhouette and structure becomes the key to comprehending the meaning of an object (Park et al., 2010). On diplomatic occasions, elements of attire including silhouette, tailoring, and line structure convey the wearer’s communicative attitude.

Cheongsam is one of the representative ethnic costumes of China. On the international stage, cheongsam has long been regarded as the attire embodying Chinese cultural elements. The Chinese tunic suit has long served as the formal attire for China’s political leaders, bearing profound ideological and political significance and holding a lofty status in the hearts of the Chinese people (Wang, 2016). They are often worn by foreign dignitaries as a gesture of respect and cultural appreciation.

Anna Hakopyan wore a silk cheongsam when attending the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, as shown in Figure 7. China is the birthplace of silk, silk culture constitutes an important symbol of Chinese civilization, and the Silk Road has long served as a vital channel connecting the civilizations of the

East and West. Her choice of silk elements echoes the Belt and Road Initiative, demonstrating Armenia's positive stance towards jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt. Regarded as a visual symbol of Chinese culture, the cheongsam boasts a high degree of recognition on the international stage. Choosing the cheongsam as her dinner attire for the summit reflects her respect and recognition of Chinese culture, and showcases Armenia's open attitude toward Chinese culture as a member state of the SCO. As reported by *Xinhua Baoye* (2025), "The wife of the Armenian President made an elegant appearance in a custom-made cheongsam embroidered with bamboo patterns. The grace and solemnity of this Oriental attire took the international stage by storm. Every stitch and thread of this bespoke cheongsam, which embodies China's intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship and cultural connotations, serves as a global expression of Oriental aesthetics." From the perspective of public response, this attire choice has achieved the expected effect of intercultural communication. In addition to favorable media reports, the friendly remarks left by TikTok users also serve as strong evidence for the success of this attire choice, such as "The Chinese cheongsam is truly exquisite" and "This reflects recognition of Chinese culture" indicating broad public approval and effective intercultural resonance.



Figure 7. Wife of the Armenian Prime Minister, Anna Hakopyan (Left), Attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit on August 31, 2025.

(https://www.toutiao.com/article/7544774950599541289/?&source=m_redirect)

Because Queen Mother Sirikit of Thailand died not long ago, Queen Suthida avoided bright colors during her visit to China. While retaining Thai traditional elements, she subtly incorporated Chinese design details such as Chinese knot buttons to showcase her fondness for Chinese aesthetics, as shown in **Figure 8**. The aesthetic appeal of the cheongsam can be interpreted through its external silhouette, collar, placket, knot buttons and other components. The distinctive placket and knot buttons endow the cheongsam with strong traditional charm (Zhang & Li, 2020). On the important diplomatic occasion, the Great Hall of the People, Queen Suthida's attire featuring Chinese knot buttons reinforced the cooperative tone of "cultural integration".



Figure 8. Queen of Thailand, Suthida Vajiralongkorn Na Ayudhya Attended the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on November 14, 2025.

(https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/14/WS69169ca9a310d6866eb29819_2.html)

This was not the first time Queen Suthida had worn attires with Chinese elements on formal occasions. She also appeared in a cheongsam during her inspection tour of Bangkok's Chinatown (**Figure 9**) and the celebration of Thailand's Lunar New Year, (**Figure 10**). Such consistent and selective sartorial practices go beyond a one-off courtesy gesture; instead, they have evolved into a stable non-verbal communication strategy for her to build cultural affinity and convey lasting respect and recognition.



Figure 9. Suthida's Cheongsam During the Tour of Bangkok's Chinatown on December 6, 2019. (<https://news.cri.cn/2019-12-07/58fea530-b69f-dfde-b9d1-e532d6b42214.html>)



Figure 10. Suthida's Cheongsam at the Celebration of Thailand's Lunar New Year in 2024. (https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20240211A02ZXL00?suid=&media_id=)

President Ndayishimiye wore a Chinese tunic suit when attending the opening ceremony of the Chengdu FISU World University Games, as shown in **Figure 11**. Regarded as China's national attire, the Chinese tunic suit is an indispensable part of Chinese culture. The World University Games, with youth exchange, mutual learning and integration at its core, is highly aligned with the cultural connotations of openness and equality embodied in the Chinese tunic suit (Li & Sun, 2006). By wearing a Chinese tunic suit, President Ndayishimiye turned attire into a tangible carrier of the philosophy of exchange and mutual learning. Known to the media as “the president who loves wearing Chinese tunic suits” (Shanghai Observer, 2023), he has long been fond of this attire. His wife, Angeline Ndayishimiye, also commented, “My husband loves wearing Chinese tunic suits very much, and they fit him well and look great on him.” The Chinese tunic suit has become a regular and iconic choice for President Ndayishimiye during his visits to China, further attesting to the long-term success of this culturally resonant diplomatic dressing approach.



Figure 11. President of Burundi, Evariste Ndayishimiye (2nd From Right) at the Airport on July 28, 2023. (https://www.news.cn/photo/2023-07/28/c_1129772509_3.htm)

Similarly, when attending the event at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on June 27, 2025, Prime Minister Sonko wore a specially tailored Chinese tunic suit. Li Zhigang, Chinese Ambassador to Senegal, stated “As we often say, the key to state-to-state relations lies in treating each other equally, with courtesy and mutual respect—just as the ancient Chinese maxim goes, ‘Courtesy is essentially about respecting others’ Prime Minister Sonko’s gesture fully demonstrates his respect for China and Chinese leaders, as well as his high attention to advancing Sene-gal-China relations.” *The Paper* (2025) directly used the headline “During his visit to China, the African Prime Minister customized a Chinese tunic suit overnight” for its report, which highlights the positive outcomes of this intercultural communication and confirms the communicative value of attire as a non-verbal symbol.

Beyond expressing respect through silhouette and structure, “Pattern”—the motifs and details on attire, serve equally as a core strategy for dignitaries to establish emotional connections.

2.3. Pattern

Relevant studies have shown that people’s visual attention to attire follows the rule of progressing from the overall silhouette to local details (Zhang et al., 2023). After appreciating the overall outline, such as color and form, people’s attention will focus on details like attire patterns, which embodies the typical visual principle of “Distant appreciation for color and close observation for pattern” (Li, 2010). Patterns play the role of a micro-language in close-range diplomatic interactions. When eyes fix on attire details, exquisite patterns become carriers of in-depth cultural information, transforming diplomatic goodwill into interpretable cultural symbols.

Peonies, with their large, vibrant blooms and layered petals, exude a graceful and magnificent beauty. Honored as the “National Flower” in the Tang Dynasty, it is the finest symbol of the spirit of a prosperous age. Rich in auspicious connotations, peony patterns have also been widely used in design (Wang, 2008). In diplomatic occasions, it is not uncommon for foreign guests to incorporate peony motifs into their attire.

Queen Letizia chose a coat adorned with large-scale peony motifs for the high-profile welcome ceremony at Tiananmen Square, as shown in **Figure 12**. The extensive peony patterns transform cultural elements from subtle details into prominent focal points. Compared with small-scale motifs, these large patterns are more likely to evoke cultural empathy. Meanwhile, as noted by *NetEase News* (2025), “The collision between Western three-dimensional facial features and elegant Oriental-style attire has sparked stunning sparks. It not only retains the dignity and grandeur of the royal family but also interprets the unique charm of Chinese aesthetics, making it an exemplary model of East-West integrated dressing!”, As commented by *Toutiao* (2025), “At the welcoming ceremony, the Queen wore a gray coat embroidered with peonies, bringing ‘fashion diplomacy’ to the fore-

front.”, relevant media reports confirm that this attire stands as a successful model of intercultural nonverbal communication. Notably, during the Beijing visit, the heads of state of China and Spain jointly witnessed the successful signing of 10 cooperation documents covering economy and trade, science and technology, education, and other fields, which attracted widespread attention (Zhao, 2025). This significant diplomatic outcome further validates the success of Queen Letizia’s culturally attuned attire choice.



Figure 12. Queen of Spain, Letizia Ortiz Rocasolano (Left) Attended the Welcoming Ceremony in Tiananmen Square on November 12, 2025.
(<https://www.hellomagazine.com/hfm/culture/867073/queen-letizia-barbie-pink-chinese-state-visit-wardrobe/>)

Queen Letizia’s fondness for Chinese elements is well-documented. At the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, she wore a cheongsam with ink-wash bamboo (Figure 13), hailed by Vanity Fair as “the most elegant diplomatic attire”. In 2018, receiving Chinese leaders, she chose a pink crane-flower embroidered dress (Figure 14), praised by Hello! as “the most thoughtful cultural tribute”. Through such choices, her attire is seen as a sign of respect and successful cultural dialogue, earning positive intercultural resonance.



Figure 13. Letizia’s Ink Bamboo Dress for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.
(<https://www.chineseherald.co.nz/news/international/queen-letizia-of-spain/>)



Figure 14. Letizia's Crane Embroidered Skirt When Meeting with Chinese Leaders in Madrid on November 28, 2018. (https://m.sohu.com/a/278743988_100271920/)

3. Conclusion

This study examines how foreign dignitaries strategically employ Chinese attire as nonverbal communication during diplomatic visits to China between 2023 and 2025. Based on analyses of public images and media reports, this research identifies three core strategies—"Color", "Form", and "Pattern". "Color", particularly the use of red, establishes immediate emotional and cultural rapport; "Form", embodied in attires such as cheongsam and Chinese tunic suit, reflects deliberate cultural integration and diplomatic respect; "Pattern", represented by motifs, including peonies and bamboo, functions as an intimate visual language that conveys profound symbolic meanings and strengthens emotional resonance. Collectively, these strategies embody the traditional aesthetic principle of "distant appreciation for color and close observation for pattern", thereby facilitating effective and nuanced intercultural communication.

Despite its insights, this study has limitations. 1) It is confined to 2023-2025, lacking a longer time span for comparative analysis to reveal evolutionary trends of attire strategies. 2) It only focuses on foreign dignitaries, ignoring Chinese diplomatic personnel's attire choices, resulting in a one-sided research perspective. 3) Reliance solely on public images and media reports without direct interviews with relevant parties may lead to subjective biases in interpreting the communicative intentions behind attires.

To address these limitations, future research can take three steps. 1) Expand the sample period to cover more years for cross-temporal comparison to identify long-term changes. 2) Include Chinese diplomatic personnel's attire in the analy-

sis to form a two-way research perspective. 3) Supplement qualitative data such as official statements or interviews to verify interpretations, reducing subjective biases and enhancing the study's depth and objectivity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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