



A Study on the English Translation of Names of Traditional Chinese Clothing

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How to cite this paper: Gao, J.R. (2026) A Study on the English Translation of Names of Traditional Chinese Clothing. *Open Access Library Journal*, **13**: e15485. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115485>

Received: May 15, 2026

Accepted: June 19, 2026

Published: June 22, 2026

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Abstract

To address the problems of imbalanced cultural connotations, semantic vacancy of culture-loaded terms, and inadequate aesthetic adaptation in translating traditional Chinese clothing, this study reviews the evolution of Chinese clothing and proposes three strategies: preserving cultural origins, conveying functional attributes, and harmonizing Chinese and Western aesthetics. Based on an analysis of representative clothing terms and their translation challenges, the study finds that these strategies effectively retain culture-specific names, communicate hierarchical identity markers, and bridge aesthetic differences, thus improving translation accuracy and cultural acceptability. This provides methodological support for the international dissemination of traditional Chinese clothing.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Traditional Chinese Clothing, Translation Strategies, Culture-Loaded Terms, Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

One manifestation of cultural confidence is the popularization and promotion of traditional Chinese clothing. From the shenyi of the pre-Qin period to the bufu of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese clothing embodies ritual systems, hierarchical markers, and Eastern aesthetics, becoming an important symbol of Chinese civilization. However, the English translation of Chinese clothing faces numerous difficulties: literal translation loses cultural connotations, free translation fails to convey structural features, and many culture-loaded terms have no equivalents in English. Therefore, how to strike a balance between preserving cultural authenticity

and accommodating the understanding of overseas readers becomes the key to clothing translation. This paper focuses on the English translation of typical Han clothing and ethnic minority clothing, and argues that it is necessary to reconsider the strategies for translating traditional Chinese clothing, so as to remove language barriers for the genuine international dissemination of Chinese clothing culture.

2. Evolution of Traditional Chinese Clothing

Clothing is not only a reflection of material life but also a carrier of spiritual culture. In ancient China, changes in clothing were closely related to dynastic transitions and social development [1]. From the establishment of ritual systems to the innovation of forms, from ethnic integration to aesthetic evolution, a unique clothing system gradually took shape, carrying the social institutions, cultural thoughts, and aesthetic pursuits of different periods.

2.1. Pre-Qin Period: Initial Formation of Ritual Clothing

The pre-Qin period established the basic paradigm of upper garment and lower skirt, as well as their ritual attributes. During the time of the Yellow Emperor, wrapped hemp cloth was divided into an upper garment (symbolizing heaven) and a lower skirt (symbolizing earth), initially establishing ritual norms. After the Duke of Zhou codified rites and music, the cap and costume system was improved. Relying on rituals, the rulers of the Shang and Zhou dynasties systematized clothing hierarchies, clearly defining the attire of different social classes. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the shenyi emerged. It adopted the separate cutting of upper garment and lower skirt, sewn together at the waist, combining practicality with ritual significance, and implying the Eastern virtues of harmony between heaven and humanity, inclusiveness, and moderation, thus laying a solid foundation for the later development of clothing.

2.2. Qin and Han Dynasties: Continuation of Shenyi

Clothing of the Qin and Han dynasties continued the form of shenyi, with a solemn and elegant style. Men valued robes, which reinforced hierarchical markers. The Qin dynasty revered black; Qin Shi Huang abolished the six ceremonial crowns, retaining only the all-black sacrificial robe junxuan, and clearly defined the boundary between officials and commoners: officials of the third rank and above wore green-robed shenyi, while commoners wore white robes of silk. The Han dynasty improved the yufu (carriage and costume) system, using junxuan as the grand court robe for the emperor. Official ranks were further refined by the color of seal ribbons—for example, the prime minister wore a gold seal with a purple ribbon—making clothing a direct symbol of status.

2.3. Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties: Ethnic Integration and Innovation

During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the political situation

was turbulent, Neo-Taoism prevailed, and aesthetics shifted towards freshness and naturalness. Loose and elegant styles became mainstream. Men wore wide-sleeved, plain long robes with open collars; women wore *guiyi* with extended hems and added streamers, giving a light and ethereal look. Meanwhile, northern ethnic groups migrated inland, and elements of their clothing merged with Central Plains attire, achieving the first large-scale integration of ethnic costumes, which laid the foundation for the peak of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

2.4. Sui and Tang Dynasties: Peak of Flourishing Clothing

The Sui and Tang dynasties saw strong national power, and clothing reached a peak of integration and innovation. In the Sui dynasty, robes and jackets coexisted with *hufu* (northern ethnic clothing); women's attire consisted of small-sleeved, high-waisted long skirts with a draped scarf (*pibo*). The Tang dynasty integrated *hufu* and Han Chinese systems, with strict hierarchical rules for official costumes: officials wore gold or silver fish bags according to rank, and rank was distinguished by the color and pattern of their robes. Women's clothing broke with tradition, incorporating elements from ethnic minorities, with diverse styles and bright colors, fully demonstrating the inclusive spirit of a prosperous age.

2.5. Song and Ming Dynasties: Refined and Understated

In the Song dynasty, influenced by Neo-Confucianism, aesthetics shifted towards simplicity and elegance, and clothing became restrained and minimalist. Men's attire inherited the Tang-style robe; women wore short narrow-sleeved tops, long skirts, and a long open-front jacket (*duijin changshan*), with gentle lines. After the founding of the Ming dynasty, *hufu* was prohibited, Han Chinese rituals were restored, and the clothing system was reestablished. Red was the official color. Officials' daily wear consisted of a black hat (*wusamao*) with *bufu*. Civil officials' *buzi* (rank badges) featured birds, while military officials' badges featured beasts, accurately distinguishing the nine ranks. Women's attire was mainly *beizi* and *ruqun*, following the right-over-left collar tradition, reclaiming the ritual core of Han Chinese clothing.

3. Difficulties in English Translation of Traditional Chinese Clothing

Traditional Chinese clothing embodies ritual norms, aesthetic sensibilities, and national wisdom. Its English translation is not merely a matter of linguistic conversion but also a process of cultural transmission. Influenced by cultural differences between China and the West as well as the uniqueness of clothing terminology, the translation task faces multiple challenges, primarily manifesting in three aspects: imbalanced transmission of cultural connotations, restricted semantic transfer of culturally loaded words, and inadequate adaptation of aesthetic imagery. To analyze the above difficulties in detail, this paper adopts the following main criteria for case selection: historical typicality (e.g., *shenyi*, *bufu*, *mangpao*),

degree of cultural load (e.g., mianfu, jiaoling youren, Tian Pu Sa), and frequency of translation controversy (e.g., qipao, mamianqun, yunjin). Representative clothing examples from both Han and ethnic minorities are selected for discussion.

3.1. Imbalanced Transmission of Cultural Connotations: Difficulty in Accurately Restoring Rituals and Symbolism

The core value of traditional Chinese clothing lies in its ritual culture and hierarchical symbolism, which is the primary difficulty in translation. The nomenclature and forms of clothing are deeply intertwined with ancient rituals, official ranks, and philosophy. The English language lacks a corresponding cultural context; literal translation easily loses the core connotations, while free translation struggles to achieve accuracy.

Take the shenyi of the pre-Qin period as an example. Shenyi is an ancient ceremonial robe. While traditional garments had separate upper and lower parts, the shenyi connects them into one piece, enveloping the body deeply, hence the name shenyi [2]. A literal translation as “deep robe” fails to convey its unique construction—“cut separately for the upper and lower parts and then stitched at the waist, covering the whole body”, let alone its philosophical connotations of “harmony between heaven and man” and “reverence for ancestors and emulation of antiquity”. Another example is the bufu (mandarin square robe) of the Ming dynasty. The prototype of the bufu system emerged in the Tang dynasty. According to the Tang Huiyao, during the Wu Zhou period, officials of the third rank and above were granted embroidered robes, each with instructive patterns; officials of different ranks were decorated with different animal motifs [3]. The bufu system evolved through the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, and was formally established and perfected during the Ming and Qing periods as a nine-rank official robe system that distinguished civil and military ranks through bird and beast patterns. Its core function was to reinforce the feudal hierarchical order through the visual insignia of the buzi (mandarin square) [4]. A literal translation as “patch clothes” only describes the appearance of embroidered patches on the garment, completely ignoring the core ritual significance of the bird and beast patterns, which denote civil or military rank and distinguish between sovereign and minister, resulting in severe loss of cultural information.

3.2. Heavy Cultural Load of Clothing Terms: Lexical Gaps and Limited Transmission

Traditional Chinese clothing terminology contains a large number of culturally loaded words—*i.e.*, terms that carry unique historical backgrounds and value systems, often lacking direct equivalents in English. Such words not only have literal meanings but also bear historical contexts, folk customs, and value systems, resulting in widespread semantic gaps in English [5] (*i.e.*, the source language concept has no equivalent expression in the target language, requiring annotation or descriptive translation to compensate). When translating such terms, either the

deep semantic meaning cannot be fully conveyed, or additional annotations are needed, which compromises linguistic conciseness. This constitutes a major difficulty in the translation of traditional Chinese clothing.

For example, Hanfu, as a typical culturally loaded word, does not merely refer to a type of clothing; it also embodies the cultural identity, ritual traditions, and national spirit of the Han people. A literal translation as “Hanfu” only preserves the proper name, leaving overseas readers unable to grasp its cultural core. Another example is mianfu (ceremonial crown robe). The ritual robe system related to mianfu can be traced back to the time of Emperor Shun. The *Analects of Confucius-Taibo* records that Yu wore “Fu Mian”, which is considered the prototype of the Xia emperor’s mianfu. Similarly, the *Book of Documents-Shangshu-Taijia* describes Prime Minister Yi Yin wearing “mianfu” as ceremonial attire when welcoming the emperor back to the capital. In the Zhou dynasty, with the establishment of the hierarchical system, the mianfu system also took initial shape. The embroidered “Twelve Ornaments” (shi’er zhang wen) not only “manifested the virtues of the wearer” but also symbolized the status of the royal family or nobility [6]. A literal translation as “crown robe” can only convey the surface attribute of imperial attire, losing the core cultural connotations of symbolizing supreme imperial power and bearing the ritual norms of sacrificial ceremonies and court assemblies.

3.3. Inadequate Adaptation of Aesthetic Imagery: Difficulty in Restoring the Artistic Conception of Traditional Chinese Clothing

There are fundamental differences between Chinese and Western aesthetic concepts of clothing, posing significant adaptation challenges in translation. Traditional Chinese clothing pursues “vivid and rhythmic vitality”, with loose cuts and soft lines expressing a subtle, introspective Eastern artistic conception. Western clothing emphasizes “three-dimensional tailoring”, using precise lines to highlight the human body curve. The two aesthetic cores are completely different [7].

Taking the “Mang Pao” of the Qing dynasty as an example, scholar Wang Yehong used the Mang Pao as a supplementary research object to corroborate the period characteristics of the Qing dynasty dragon robe. He believes that “the Mang Pao is very close to the dragon robe, with differences lying in the wearer’s status, clothing patterns, and colors” [8]. As a ceremonial robe for ministers, it not only has unique formal aesthetics but also contains clear official rituals and moral implications. English expressions tend to be objective and concrete, making it difficult to reproduce this Eastern artistic conception that blends aesthetics and ritual connotations. If “mangpao” is literally translated as “mangpao”, only the pronunciation and literal reference are retained, failing to convey its identity as a minister’s robe or the deeper meaning during the Qianlong period of using the mangpao to distinguish it from the dragon robe, warning officials to cultivate themselves, act responsibly, and live up to the court’s expectations. This kind of artistic con-

ception, which integrates aesthetics and ritual, cannot be fully transmitted by literal translation alone, easily resulting in a double loss of aesthetic information and cultural connotation.

4. Translation Strategies for Traditional Chinese Clothing

Traditional Chinese clothing embodies a rich cultural heritage, integrating multiple connotations such as traditional rituals, ancient ceremonial systems, and national spirit. Its English translation must strike a balance between preserving cultural characteristics and adapting to the understanding of overseas readers, achieving cross-cultural communication by taking into account the audience's cognition. In response to the three major difficulties mentioned above—imbalanced transmission of cultural connotations, restricted meaning transfer of culturally loaded words, and inadequate adaptation of aesthetic imagery—the following section follows the logic of “problem-attribution-solution” and proposes three types of translation strategies in order: “preserving the cultural origin” to compensate for semantic gaps, “conveying functional attributes” to highlight social identity, and “integrating Chinese and Western aesthetics” to balance form and artistic conception.

4.1. Preserving Cultural Origins to Fill Semantic Gaps

Most proper nouns of Chinese ethnic minority clothing and traditional Han Chinese clothing are culture-loaded terms without exact equivalents in English. A single transliteration tends to cause semantic ambiguity. This type of translation uses a combination of transliteration as the main method and brief annotations as a supplement, preserving native cultural symbols while compensating for semantic gaps through explanation, thus balancing cultural uniqueness and readability.

The Chaerwa, a distinctive garment of the Yi ethnic group, is an outer cloak worn daily by the Yi people. It is woven from coarse wool yarn, featuring a unique design with colorful trimmings and tassels along the edges. The material is thick and durable, serving multiple practical functions such as windproofing, keeping warm, and serving as a mat for resting. If translated directly as Chaerwa or idiomatically as Colorful Cloak, the former retains only the pronunciation without any semantic clue, while the latter, though indicating “cloak”, omits the woolen material and ethnic proper name—both leading to overseas readers' inability to understand its basic function and cultural affiliation. In contrast, the translation Chaerwa (Woolen Cloak) clearly conveys the garment's material and basic attributes, briefly summarizes its practical value, and fully preserves the ethnic cultural proper name, making it more suitable for the target audience. Another important folk cultural symbol of the Yi people is Tian Pu Sa, a traditional hairstyle for men in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province. It involves shaving all hair around the crown, leaving only a single lock in the middle, which can range from one to three meters in length and is coiled into a bun. It is also known as the “Hero Knot” or “Sky-pointing Thorn”. The Yi people regard Tian Pu Sa as

the dwelling place of a man's soul—sacred and inviolable, absolutely not to be touched by anyone [9]. If mistakenly translated as Heavenly Bodhisattva or simply transliterated as Tianpusa without explanation, the former may mislead overseas readers into associating it with a Buddhist bodhisattva, causing religious cultural confusion, while the latter fails entirely to convey the hairstyle's characteristics. In response to this culturally specific symbol, the translation adopts the form Tian Pu Sa (Men's Hairstyle of the Yi people). This translation not only fully preserves the indigenous folk appellation but also clearly and intuitively explains its cultural attributes and deeper connotations to overseas readers, achieving a better balance between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to the understanding of the target audience.

The classic translation “Cheongsam” for “qipao” derives from the Cantonese pronunciation. It is more widely recognized than “Qipao”. To balance international recognition and cultural interpretation, an annotation “a traditional Chinese women's dress with a high collar and side slits” can be added. “Suxiu” (Su embroidery), as one of China's four famous embroideries, is named after its place of origin, Suzhou. The translation “Su embroidery” uses the place name abbreviation (Su) as a culture-specific symbol rather than “Jiangsu embroidery”, and the suffix “embroidery” indicates the category, allowing overseas readers to recognize its regional origin while understanding its essential nature as an embroidery craft.

Through such treatment, translators enable overseas readers to identify the cultural identity of these clothing items while forming a basic understanding of their material, use, or origin, thereby effectively filling the semantic gaps caused by culture-loaded terms and removing cognitive obstacles for the external communication of Chinese clothing culture.

4.2. Conveying Functional Attributes to Highlight Social Identity

Traditional Chinese clothing carries markers of identity, hierarchical status, ritual norms, and practical functions. If the English translation ignores these aspects, overseas readers will find it difficult to understand the social roles embodied in the clothing. Translation should strive to reveal the value and symbolism of the clothing, using descriptive language to clearly convey its functions.

Taking the “cross-collar with right overlap” (jiaoling youren) as an example: “Cross-collar” (jiaoling) is an ancient form of collar that connects downward to the lapel; the lapel and collar are joined and cross over the chest, hence the term “cross-collar.” Ren refers to the overlapping front parts of a garment on both sides; the lapel is also called ren. “Right overlap” (youren) means the left lapel covers the right lapel and is fastened with a tie under the right armpit. The opposite of “right overlap” is “left overlap” (zuoren), which has the reverse construction: the right lapel covers the left lapel and is fastened under the left armpit. “Cross-collar with right overlap” is a symbol of Han Chinese clothing. Yan Shigu commented: “Right overlap follows the Chinese civilizing influence.” [10] If translated literally as “Crossing Collar with Right Lapel”, though the direction of the collar and lapel is

described literally, it fails to convey the cultural orthodoxy of “Central Plains ritual civilization” and the “distinction between Hua and Yi” that “right overlap” carries. Overseas readers would only receive information about the form and would not grasp the underlying identity and ritual symbolism. Historically, “cross-collar with right overlap”, as the most core structural feature of traditional Chinese clothing, is not merely a tailoring method but also serves the social function of distinguishing Hua from Yi and marking cultural orthodoxy: “right overlap” represents the ritual civilization of the Central Plains, while “left overlap” is regarded as the attire of non-Han or barbarian peoples. Therefore, it is uniformly translated as cross-collar with right overlap. This rendering describes the form while implying its orthodox status through “right overlap”, enabling readers to appreciate the cultural identity implicit in the term. The “bufu” (official robe with embroidered insignia) directly reflects the ancient Chinese official rank system. If literally translated as “bufu”, it would only describe the appearance of patches, completely losing the core function of the buzi patterns corresponding to civil and military ranks and distinguishing between sovereign and minister. The translation “official robe with embroidered insignia” uses the word “insignia” to accurately convey the functional attribute of the buzi as a marker of status, while “official robe” indicates its nature as a court garment, enabling overseas readers to understand the strict hierarchical order and identity symbols behind this garment.

Through such translation methods, translators can effectively convey to target readers information about the practical functions, social status markers, and ritual norms of traditional Chinese clothing, compensating for the cognitive gaps caused by cultural differences, and promoting the “going global” of the identity symbols and ritual spirit inherent in Chinese clothing culture.

4.3. Harmonizing Chinese and Western Aesthetics: Balancing Form and Artistic Conception

The English translation of traditional Chinese clothing must also face aesthetic challenges. The names of patterns and descriptions of colors in clothing often embody unique Eastern aesthetic concepts, while English readers are accustomed to concrete, functional expressions. This type of translation focuses on transforming Chinese aesthetic imagery into a form perceptible to the target language, conveying the inner artistic beauty while preserving the structural features of the clothing.

The term “mamian” (literally “horse face”) originally appeared in Minggong Shi (Annals of the Ming Palace): “Yisan, its back is seamless, side pleats on both sides, the front consists of two sections, and below there are mamian pleats that rise to both sides.” This garment originated in the Song dynasty, flourished and became widespread during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The smooth, flat central panel formed by the overlapping skirt doors of the mamianqun (mandarin square skirt) has symmetrical pleats on both sides, resembling the “mamian” (horse face) defense system of ancient city walls, hence the name “mamianqun” [11]. If it were literally translated according to the Chinese characters as “mamianqun”, it would only

achieve superficial correspondence, failing to convey the historical and structural connotations and diminishing the unique cultural charm of Hanfu. A translation that better fits the cultural connotation is “mandarin square skirt”. This translation originates from its structural features, borrowing the relatively familiar Western concept of “mandarin square” (rank badge of Ming and Qing officials) to analogize the smooth, square panel of the mamianqun, guiding readers to associate its structural attributes, avoiding aesthetic misunderstandings caused by erroneous literal translation, and balancing the structural attributes with cultural dissemination.

The translation of “Yunjin” (cloud-patterned brocade) also needs to take aesthetic imagery into account. If it is literally translated as “Cloud Brocade” or simply transliterated as “Yunjin”, the former retains the word “cloud” literally but fails to convey the luxurious and splendid texture symbolized by “cloud”, while the latter completely loses the dual information of pattern and material, making it difficult for overseas readers to perceive its aesthetic value. In the term “Yunjin”, “cloud” is not merely a cloud pattern; it also symbolizes the luxurious and radiant texture of the fabric. Therefore, it is translated as “cloud-patterned brocade”. This translation balances the pattern’s appearance and the fabric’s aesthetic connotations: “cloud-patterned” preserves the image of the cloud motif, while “brocade” specifies its nature as a high-quality figured fabric, conveying the unique gorgeousness of the textile and transforming the Chinese artistic conception of “using clouds to metaphorically represent splendor” into a comprehensible pattern description in English. The term “Nichang Yuyi” (rainbow-colored and feathered costume) literally means using rainbow clouds as a skirt and feathers as a garment, but it is actually used to describe the beauty and elegance of ancient women’s attire. If it is literally translated as “rainbow-colored feather garment”, although it corresponds word-for-word, it neglects the literary beauty and descriptive function of “Nichang Yuyi” as a poetic allusion, and “feather garment” could easily be misunderstood as clothing made of feathers. For this poetic clothing term, the translation adopts “rainbow-colored and feathered costumes, to describe women’s magnificent attire”. This translation preserves the literal imagery through free translation and adds an explanation that it is used to describe the magnificent elegance of women’s attire, balancing image retention and meaning transmission, allowing overseas readers to appreciate the poetic expression of traditional Chinese clothing at an aesthetic level.

Through such translation methods, translators can transform the unique aesthetic qualities of Chinese clothing into a linguistic form perceptible to English readers, achieving cross-cultural transmission of the artistic conception of Chinese clothing culture, and allowing the beauty of traditional Chinese clothing to truly go global.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the English translation of names of traditional Chinese clothing, with the core aim of promoting Chinese culture. Cultural confidence is a more

fundamental, deeper, and more enduring force in the development of a country and a nation. The international dissemination of traditional Chinese clothing not only showcases cultural confidence but also enriches global cultural diversity, promotes mutual learning among civilizations, and enhances the world's understanding of Chinese aesthetics. We should actively promote the global dissemination of traditional Chinese clothing culture through diverse English translations, so that this treasure can be understood and appreciated by the world, thereby enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture and contributing to the construction of a more harmonious and diverse world cultural ecology.

Acknowledgements

The author extends heartfelt thanks to the teachers for their expert guidance and thorough revisions, contributions that were indispensable to the finalization of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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