

Cultural Symbolism: Translating Costume Imagery in *Chu Ci**

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This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the costume culture in the translation of *Chu Ci*, an influential work of Chinese literature. It examines the unique features of *Chu Ci*'s costume culture, including its historical and cultural significance, as well as the role of literary imagery in expressing cultural symbolism. The paper also delves into the challenges faced by translators in translating *Chu Ci*'s highly symbolic costumes and delivering their cultural connotations. The analysis provides insights into the issues of polysemy and translation choices, which are significant obstacles that require careful consideration of contextual usage to achieve meaningful translations. Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of humanistic implications in interpreting *Chu Ci*'s costume culture, with the aim of promoting the appreciation and understanding of traditional Chinese culture worldwide.

Keywords: *Chu Ci*, Chinese literature, translation, costume culture, cultural symbolism

Research Background

As the beginning of Chinese romantic literature, *Chu Ci* is rich in emotions, magnificent in imagination, and profound in meaning with philosophical thoughts. Its unique literary style, linguistic form, and ideological content have had a tremendous influence on Chinese language and literature. The English translation of *Chu Ci*, as an epitome of the translation of Chinese classics, is a manifestation of the cultural influence of China's "cultural soft power".

Clothing, as Roland Barthes (2010) describes, is a system of signs that conveys meaning and communicates social and cultural values. In other words, clothing is a language, a way of communicating identity, status, and cultural affiliation. This idea of clothing as a medium of communication and identity is not exclusive to modern times, as similar functions were attributed to clothing in antiquity (Erisman, Palmer, & Garroway, 2022). Costume in the past also served to communicate and enact specific ideologies and relationships (Turner, 2007, pp. 83-103). Across cultures, costume functions as a language through which individuals represent their values, aspirations, style, and status (Roach & Eicher, 1979, pp. 7-21).

The Chinese costume culture, with its long and unique history, is regarded as a gem in the world's costume culture. Within *Chu Ci*, descriptions and imagery of costume frequently appear. Through unrestrained emotions, magnificent imagination, and a deep understanding of Chu culture, the poets endow the characters in the poem with distinct clothing styles, showcasing to readers the charm of traditional Chinese costume,

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especially the aesthetic style and humanistic spirit of costume in Chu culture. The symbolic significance of *Chu Ci*'s costume is highly nuanced and embodies profound humanistic meaning. Not only does it symbolize a person's character, but it is also closely related to their personality, thoughts, emotions, and life experiences. Furthermore, it expresses the poets' views on life, conveying the romantic and free spirits as well as the poetic and aesthetic traditions of traditional Chinese culture. As a cultural symbol, costume in *Chu Ci* constitutes a crucial component of Chu culture and traditional Chinese culture, reflecting the historical development and cultural ideology of the Chinese nation with profound cultural connotation. Therefore, the translation and research of the costume culture in *Chu Ci* is of great significance for the dissemination of Chinese traditional costume culture worldwide.

Overview of the Costume Culture of *Chu Ci*

The Historical and Geographical Background of the Costume Culture of *Chu Ci*

The emergence and development of the costume culture of Chu is inseparable from its regional culture. On the one hand, natural geographical factors such as climate, land, and water resources in the Chu region contributed to the formation of *Chu Ci*'s aesthetic ideology on costume. On the other hand, the historical culture and folk customs of the Chu state also had a far-reaching influence on the distinctive features and profound connotations of *Chu Ci*'s costume culture.

According to the "Geographical Records" in the *Book of Han*, the Chu region was vast with numerous rivers, lakes, marshes, high mountains, and lush forests, with a warm and humid climate suitable for the reproduction and growth of various flora and fauna. *Chu Ci* describes over thirty kinds of fragrant herbs and trees, with vivid and varied colors and delightful fragrances. At the beginning of the Chu State's establishment, the harsh natural environment of the Chu region spurred the Chu people to pursue self-reliance and patriotism, fostering a robust sense of national consciousness. The unique geographical environment of Chu also caused many natural phenomena that people could not understand, which influenced the Chu people's attitudes towards life and death and their pursuit of spiritual nobility and freedom (Jiang, 1987). All of these factors contributed to the formation of Chu's distinctive regional costume culture and aesthetic ideology.

Cultural Characteristics of Chu Costumes

The costumes of Chu, with their special shapes, gorgeous fabrics, exquisite patterns, and brilliant colors, have formed a unique landscape in the history of Chu culture and influenced the formation and development of costumes of many regions and times later. The main characteristics of the costumes of Chu include: first, the reverence for luxury, high crowns, and long clothes; second, the admiration for phoenix birds and cloud patterns; third, the reverence for gorgeous color, especially the color red; fourth, preferable accessories of fragrant herbs, beautiful jade, long swords; fifth, costume fabrics represented by light and fine fabrics such as spun silk, leno, gauze, and damask, mostly with printing and embroidery techniques, and the outfit shapes are mainly clothes, robes, and skirts.

The essence of Chu-style costume in *Chu Ci* lies in its profound and multi-faceted symbolic significance. The attire and accessories worn by the literary figures in *Chu Ci* are imbued with spiritual connotations, encompassing characteristics such as shape, pattern, color, and material that are inherently symbolic. In the pre-Qin to the Han Dynasty era when *Chu Ci* was compiled, costume played a significant role as a symbol of social hierarchy, moral standing, personality traits, aspirations, and emotions, beyond serving as a mere practical tool

for warmth and protection of the body. As a result, costume acted as a medium of cultural symbolism and expression, endowed with an abundant and unique cultural heritage, reflecting people's rank, status, character, temperament, aspirations and so on.

In *Chu Ci*, costume accessories function not only as embellishments, but also as vehicles for reflecting the personality traits and spiritual values of the characters. Jade, for instance, is regarded as a symbol of moral attainment, highly esteemed by gentlemen. The Chu people utilized fragrant herbs to describe beautiful objects, but Qu Yuan, the prominent author of *Chu Ci*, endowed such herbs with deeper meaning. He employed herbs to represent his own noble temperament, loyalty to his country and ruler, and his non-conformist sentiment. Similarly, wearing a sword as an accessory not only reflects the martial spirit of the Chu people but also reflects Qu Yuan's sense of responsibility and mission, embodying the consciousness of the Chu people's willingness to use their swords to protect their country and its people.

The costume imagery in *Chu Ci* is based on the social and cultural reality of the author's era, while also incorporating his imagination, associations, personality, and emotions. In doing so, it enriches the cultural connotations of Chinese costume at a unique level and exhibits an aesthetic feature of literati culture, laying the foundation for the literati aesthetic tradition of Chinese costume. Overall, the *Chu Ci* exemplifies how costume accessories can function as an important cultural artifact that reflects the values and beliefs of a particular society.

Challenges and Difficulties in Translating Costume Culture in *Chu Ci*

Polysemy and Translation Choices

Chu Ci, as an ancient literary work, poses substantial obstacles to translators, as its vocabulary and rhetorical devices have undergone significant changes over time, resulting in cultural differences and difficulties in language comprehension. In translating this work, attention must be paid not only to changes in language and writing but also to the evolution of social and cultural contexts.

The issue of polysemy and translation choices is particularly salient in translating *Chu Ci*'s references to costume. A typical example is the term "fu", which appears in twenty-three instances in the text, each with different meanings such as clothing, obedience, service, submission, to wear, to use, etc. Thus translating this term requires a meticulous analysis of its contextual usage, which is essential for achieving an accurate and meaningful translation.

For instance, in the fifth section of the first chapter of the famous *Chu Ci* poem, "Li Sao", there is a verse where the poet reflects on his own failure and contemplates retreating into solitude. The sentence can be literally translated to mean "Although my advice was not accepted by the ruler and I bear the blame, I will retreat and put on my initial costume again". The character "fu" in this verse refers to clothing or costume. But in the context of the poem, the image of the "initial costume" actually extends to the poet's "initial intentions". Translating this sentence to convey the additional meaning of "recovering one's original simplicity" or "return to one's original nature" presents a challenge for translators while retaining the original action of "putting on my initial costume". Some translators choose to omit the original image and translate the sentence as "cultivate my grace" (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 2001) while others retain the original image such as "don my old clothes that seem best" (Sun, 2020). The implied meaning of this term within the specific context is crucial for the reconstruction of meaning here.

Another example is from the prominent poem "Nine Songs", where the character "fu" literally refers to the horse on the right side of a carriage. However, considering the structure of the other paired term in this verse which means "driving a dragon", the horse of a carriage is used metonymically to connote "control" or "drive"

rather than its literal meaning. Thus, this sentence can be translated to illustrate the image of the Deity of the Moon who drives a dragon and a tiger, circling and flying in the air.

Cultural Connotation and Transmission of Humanistic Meaning

The delivery of cultural connotations and humanistic implications is a central theme in the interpretation of *Chu Ci*. The highly symbolic costume in *Chu Ci* embodies profound humanistic meanings, presenting a challenge for translators.

The text of *Chu Ci* is replete with imaginary symbols, such as flying dragons and phoenixes soaring through the skies, wandering deities with radiant beauty, magnificent and beautiful palaces, and fragrant and exotic flowers and plants. These ethereal images reveal a mysterious and fantastic world, fully displaying Qu Yuan's extraordinary imagination and romantic artistic temperament. The Chu people's costume is exquisitely luxurious, breaking through the conventions of ritual propriety, indicating their desire for freedom and liberation from constraints.

The use of herbs as a form of adornment among the Chu people is an expression of their admiration for beauty and spiritual purity. In *Chu Ci*, fragrant herbs and precious woods are frequently used to highlight the good and pure qualities of the characters. Consequently, this literary genre has established a long-standing tradition in Chinese literature of using herbs as symbols for noble and pure character traits, or virtuous gentlemen.

A notable instance of the use of herbs as adornment can be found in "Li Sao", where the protagonist describes himself as wearing a necklace of orchid and wild ginger, a belt of autumn orchid, clothes made of iris and lotus, and a skirt made of hibiscus. However, the protagonist laments that the king abandoned him because he wore fragrant orchid and hibiscus as adornments.

Verses in "Nine Songs" also feature deities who adore fragrant herbs. In this poem, the Deity of the Cloud bathed in an orchid soup and washed his hair with white angelica water, making him fragrant and pleasant like herbs. After bathing, the deity dressed in magnificent clothes like a flower. Similarly, the Lesser Master of Fate wore a lotus robe and a belt made of woven herbs, coming and going like a fleeting moment. The Mountain Spirit also wore clothes made of *Ficus pumila*, *DiffRACTA*, *Folium pyrrhosiae*, and *Asarum forbesii*, and they use magnolia to make their vehicles and tie laura to make their flags.

The attire and physical appearance depicted in Chu poetry frequently exhibit a tall and slender aesthetic (Shen, 2002), with a preference for lofty headwear and lengthy robes that embody a sublime and graceful beauty. This is evidenced by various verses, such as in "Li Sao", where the speaker's hat is described as "towering high" and the pendant as "fluttering". In the poem "Crossing the River", the "long jade belt" is depicted as "swaying and fluttering", and the crown "cuts through the clouds and towers high". Similarly, the poem "Alas That My Lot Was Not Cast" portrays the "high and towering crown" that "cuts through the clouds" with the same term. In the poem "Sorrow for the Wise", the speaker holds the fragrant herbs named *Zanthoxylum* and *Polia japonica*, while "the crown floats like a cloud and towers high". And in the poem "Far-off Journey", the speaker is clothed in white with a majestic appearance, shining and different from the common, which denotes the lofty and towering features of the headwear worn. Obviously, various terms in the above verses are used to mean high and towering.

Moreover, certain descriptions of tall hats and long robes in Chu poetry are implicit and demand careful consideration during translation. For instance, the verse from "Crossing the River", written by Qu Yuan during the reign of King Xiang of Chu, describes the poet's journey southward along the Yangtze River and expresses his frustration with the contradictions between his ideals and reality. In this opening sentence, Qu Yuan refers to

what he likes to wear as “unusual costume”. The exact nature of this “unusualness” has aroused various interpretations by translators. For example, “rare brilliant dress” (Xu, 2012), emphasizes its unusual form and striking qualities, or “gorgeous” (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 2001), lay stress on its splendor and magnificence. Another translator uses the word “novel” (Sun, 2020) to convey the idea that the costume was new and different from anything seen before.

Specifically, this unusualness is likely more closely related to its original sense of “unique” or “uncommon”. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the character to mean unusual here can also mean tall or long, which suggests that the costume was not just unusual in appearance but also had a distinctively majestic shape. Qu Yuan’s description of his attire may therefore be seen as a symbol of his lofty aspirations and noble character. In this sense, the translation of the “unusualness” as “gorgeous” considerably conveys the symbolic meaning of the costume which stresses on its grandeur and magnificence.

Except for the high crown, the costume described in *Chu Ci* is characterized by its loose robes and long sleeves, embodying an elegant beauty that was highly valued in the Southern Chu culture. The poem “The Greater Master of Fate” contains the line which vividly portrays the image of a long, gracefully flowing gown.

Similarly, in both poem “Deity of Clouds” and “Nine Changes”, there are verses depicting the characters freely flying and soaring in the sky or through the wind and rain. Although the poems do not directly describe the floating appearance of the costumes, the image of the costumes fluttering in the wind are indirectly presented. These graceful costumes soaring in the air evoke a sense of elegant, sublime, and romantic beauty, which indicates the reverence for spiritual nobility and sense of freedom in Chu culture.

It is evident that the descriptions of costume in *Chu Ci* not only serve an external function, but are imbued with symbolic meaning, representing a manifestation of the character’s spiritual pursuit. The transmission of this symbolic significance is a pivotal concern in translating the costume descriptions in *Chu Ci*.

Conclusion

The costume of characters in the *Chu Ci* contain rich cultural connotations, and therefore the translation of costume in *Chu Ci* into English can be regarded as a cultural translation that requires careful consideration of the Chu cultural ideology and traditional values of Chinese culture. However, due to the differences in the form of language between Chinese and English, as well as the different cultural psychologies of the East and West, the translation of costume in *Chu Ci* is likely to undergo changes and omissions in expression and cultural connotations.

The complexity and differences in culture require a thorough examination of the superficial and profound meanings in the translation of classic literature as well as flexible and adaptable translation strategies. Against the backdrop of China’s “going global” cultural strategy, a re-evaluation of the translation of costume in *Chu Ci* from a new cultural perspective is necessary. This involves reflecting on the purpose of translation, the selection of translation content, and the translation strategies adopted in costume and accessories culture output. This approach will aid in the reconciliation of cultural conflicts in costume translation, which in turn will facilitate the dissemination and development of Chinese costume culture overseas.

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