

The Role of Hanfu Cultural Translation in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: A Case Study of Ming Dynasty Hanfu Terminology

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Abstract. As a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, Hanfu has seen its terminological translation play an increasingly significant role in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). This study focuses on Ming Dynasty Hanfu terminology to investigate its impact on learners' language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, and the integration of linguistic and cultural knowledge. The research reveals that translating Ming-era clothing terms requires strategies such as literal translation, explanatory annotation, and cultural contrast. These approaches not only aid learners in mastering specialized vocabulary and grammatical nuance, but also enhance cultural understanding through symbolic conversion, thereby mitigating cross-cultural misinterpretations. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that a pedagogical model integrating historical context, rhetorical features, and handicraft connotations in translation instruction can effectively improve language learning outcomes and cultural propaganda. By systematically bridging linguistic and cultural dimensions, the proposed framework enhances both language acquisition and cultural literacy in TCFL contexts. It offers educators a structured methodology for teaching historical terminology while preserving authenticity, emphasizing the interdependence of language accuracy and cultural awareness. This study contributes practical insights to international Chinese education, demonstrating how targeted translation pedagogy can serve as an approach for transmitting traditional cultural knowledge without compromising linguistic rigor.

1 Introduction

Translation is a necessary skill for second language (L2) learners, serving both as a learning tool and a component of L2 acquisition. Symboling a vital carrier of traditional Chinese culture, Hanfu has seen its terminology translation become increasingly prominent in international Chinese language education. The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) focused on reviving Han ethnic clothing while simultaneously exhibiting unique anti-traditional features. Ming Dynasty Hanfu refers specifically to the traditional Han clothing system of this period, which represents the peak of Hanfu development and serves as a model of ancient Chinese attire. Its key characteristics can be divided into four aspects: Traditional beauty seen in

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designs like panlingyi (round-collar robes) and dragon patterns; Innovative beauty in features such as buzi (rank badges), the popularity of buttons, and changes in women's clothing proportions; Ornate beauty reflected in fengguan xiapei (phoenix crowns and capes) and vibrant colors; Individualistic beauty expressed through clothing that broke social rules or used unconventional styles. Ming Hanfu combined elements from Mongol-Yuan dynasty clothing, creating a formal and structured style. It also established strict clothing hierarchies, which helped restore and strengthen Han ethnic identity [1]. As a core part of Chinese culture, the translation of its terms directly affects learners' comprehension of the language. This study focuses on Ming Hanfu terminology translation to explore its role in language learning, cross-cultural communication, and the connection between language and culture. Employing methods like literature review, case studies, and comparative analysis, the research examines differences between Hanfu culture and learners' native cultures. It also evaluates how translation strategies can mitigate cultural misunderstandings and foster cultural awareness. By analyzing Ming Hanfu terminology, this study aims to show its value in L2 learning, propose new teaching ideas for Chinese language education, and provide practical resources for sharing culture globally.

2 The role of Ming Dynasty Hanfu translation in language learning

2.1 Vocabulary selection

Translating Ming-era Hanfu terminology requires learners to select the most accurate and understandable English equivalents from multiple options. This process enhances vocabulary selection skills and expands learners' vocabulary.

“比甲”, also known as “半臂”, refers to a sleeveless garment. During the Ming Dynasty, “比甲” featured styles such as straight collar, square collar, and round collar. Its name originated from its resemblance to waist-length armor worn by soldiers, and it is also called beida or beixin [2]. A direct translation of “比甲” as “Sleeveless Jacket” distinguishes it from the common “Vest.” To avoid confusion with everyday clothing, terms like “quilted” and “worn over robes” can clarify its layered usage. For instance, translating it as “Quilted Waistcoat Worn Over Robes (for winter layering)” helps learners grasp its design, function, and cultural context while enriching their vocabulary.

In Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, instructors should emphasize three key training components to cultivate lexical selection competence. Firstly, systematic instruction in specialized vocabulary enables learners to establish a knowledge base of terminology. Secondly, extensive comparative analysis of synonymous words through contextualized examples helps learners distinguish nuanced usage variations across different scenarios. Thirdly, focused training on processing polysemous words should be implemented by utilizing authentic text examples where students initially annotate potential meanings of words and then discuss optimal translation strategies. This progressive training framework assists learners in efficiently identifying contextually appropriate lexical equivalents during translation, ensuring both semantic loyalty to source texts and natural expression in target languages [3].

2.2 Linguistic structure

The sentence structure and word order challenges inherent in translating Ming Dynasty Hanfu terminology can guide learners to recognize grammatical, expressive, and rhetorical contrasts between Chinese and English. Understanding such grammatical-cultural differences serves as a critical method for reducing barriers in cross-cultural communication [4].

2.2.1 Grammatical structural differences

“袄裙” refers to the traditional Ming Dynasty female attire comprising an upper jacket (“袄”) and a lower skirt (“裙”), also known as “衫裙” or “裙袄”. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, this two-piece clothing style has remained a staple of women’s informal wear and persisted into modern times [2]. For instance, translating “绿袄裙” requires clarifying that “绿” (green) modifies both “袄” (jacket) and “裙” (skirt). In English, the phrase must be split and reordered as “green jacket paired with a skirt” to avoid ambiguity.

“云肩通袖膝襴袍”, often shortened to “通袖袍” in the Ming Dynasty, features distinctive decorative motifs such as “云肩” (a cloud-collar), “通袖襴” (sleeve bands), and “膝襴” (knee bands), which are iconic patterns of the era [2]. Translating this term highlights the contrast in modifier placement: Chinese usually places modifiers before the noun, while English adjusts the order to “robe woven with python design around the shoulders, along the arms, and at the knees.” Such comparisons help learners grasp structural differences between languages, improving grammatical accuracy and expression [3].

To address differences in modifier order, targeted translation exercises can be designed. For example, through comparing the Chinese noun phrase “织金妆花缎” with its English equivalent “gold-woven brocade with floral patterns”, students are able to analyze how the modifier-noun structure shifts focus. This approach can extend to teaching grammatical elements such as Chinese classifiers and directional words.

2.2.2 Differences in expressive styles

Traditional Chinese clothing terms often use four-character phrases to simplify complex designs, while English translations require breaking down and expanding their logical relationships. For example, the four-character term “宽广衣袖” can be translated as “sleeves of wide breadth (round sleeves, symbolizing the harmony of heaven and earth, reflecting the pursuit of graceful beauty and cultural values like tolerance) [5]”. Thereby, a literal translation is followed by explanatory notes to clarify the design and cultural meanings.

In teaching, instructors should initially guide learners to understand the literal meaning of four-character phrases, then break down their structure to explain design features and cultural connotations. Comparing Chinese and English expressions helps students master translation methods.

2.2.3 Differences in rhetorical techniques

Ming Dynasty clothing terms often include historical references. For instance, “马面裙”, a basic style of women’s skirts from the Ming era, remained popular until modern times. Directly translating “马面” as “horse-face” may cause misunderstandings in Western contexts due to its negative connotations. As a substitute, adding cultural context such as “horse-face skirt, named for its pleated front panels resembling a horse’s face, symbolizing dignity in Ming women’s attire.” clarifies the term. This balances literal meaning with readability, achieving cross-cultural adaptation of traditional metaphors.

To address rhetorical differences, teaching strategies should emphasize identifying cultural allusions or metaphors in Chinese texts. Instructors can train learners to analyze potential misunderstandings arising from literal translations, guiding them to supplement contextual imagery or adjust phrasing. Comparative discussions of Chinese and Western metaphorical cognition may further enhance students’ ability to preserve rhetorical uniqueness while avoiding misreadings.

3 The role of Ming Dynasty Hanfu translation in cross-cultural communication

3.1 Cultural comparison and cultural identity

Significant grammatical and cultural differences often exist between source and target languages. By comparing these differences specifically between Hanfu and learners' native clothing traditions, students can develop cross-cultural awareness and reduce communication barriers. For instance, in David Tod Roy's English translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (《金瓶梅》), the term “霞帔”, describing noblewomen's attire, is translated as “a grand crimson stole embroidered with gold motifs” [6]. Namely, the formal Ming Dynasty garment “霞帔”, is translated as “stole”. In Ming Dynasty, “霞帔” was a formal garment worn by empresses, imperial consorts, female officials, and officials' wives, with designs varying by rank. Historically, “霞帔” resembled two long, colorful ribbons draped from the shoulders to the chest, adorned with gold or jade pendants. Similar styles existed as early as the Jin Dynasty, gained popularity in the Sui period and Tang period, and became formal attire for noblewomen in the Song Dynasty. By the Ming Dynasty, “霞帔” was paired with “凤冠” (phoenix crown) to signify social status [7].

Similarly, the English term “stole” refers to a long, narrow shawl worn over the shoulders in Western cultures, often during religious ceremonies by bishops or formal events like evening gowns. Like “霞帔”, it carries cultural significance, reflecting respect for tradition and social hierarchy. Both garments serve as accessories for formal occasions, combining decoration with symbolic meaning. Translating “霞帔” as “stole” highlights shared cultural values while preserving its unique Chinese context. This approach not only clarifies the garment's purpose but also invites learners to reflect on their own cultural frameworks through comparative analysis. Such cross-cultural comparison fosters mutual understanding, reducing cultural barriers, and strengthening respect for both source and target cultural identities [8].

3.2 Reducing cultural misunderstandings

Cultural misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication often arise from unfamiliarity with cultural symbols and meanings. Translating Ming Dynasty Hanfu terminology can help address this issue. For example, translating “曲水如意云纹罗裙” as “Qushui Ruyi Cloud-patterned Gauze Skirt (symbolizing cosmic harmony through winding water motifs, auspicious wishes via ruyi clouds, and elite status with Ming silk craftsmanship)” retains the cultural uniqueness of “曲水”(qushui) and “如意”(ruiyi) through transliteration, while explaining the physical features (“cloud-patterned gauze skirt”) and cultural connotations in parentheses. This strategy clarifies the philosophical, social, and symbolic meanings embedded in the garment, such as its connection to Confucian and Taoism values, natural symbolism, and Ming social hierarchy, thereby reducing misunderstandings caused by cultural gaps.

Cultural translation must balance language, culture, and communication. It is not merely decoding and encoding but also a tool to promote Hanfu culture globally. Thus, translations should achieve functional equivalence in English rather than focusing solely on literal descriptions [9]. For culturally specific terms, strategies like functional equivalence or domestication can minimize misinterpretations.

3.2.1 Ming Dynasty colors

Table 1. Translation Strategies for Ming Dynasty Hanfu Terminology

Category	Original Term	Literal Translation	Functional Equivalence/Domestication
Colors	雪青色	Snow Cyan	Twilight Lavender
	素色	Plain Color	Unbleached Ecru
Patterns	斗牛纹	Bullfighting Pattern	Horned Dragon Pattern
	飞鱼纹	Flying Fish Pattern	Dragon-Finned Serpent Pattern
Craft Terms	缂丝/刻丝	Carved Silk	Silt-Tapestry With Cut Designs
	织金	Woven Gold	Imperial Gold Brocade

As shown in Table 1, Ming-specific colors like “雪青色” may be misinterpreted as shades of blue or white if translated literally as “Snow Cyan.” By contrast, adopting the functional equivalence approach as “Twilight Lavender” clarifies its actual hue as a cool-toned pale purple.

“素色” in Ming garments like “素纱裙” does not mean “white” or “plain” but refers to undyed raw silk or pale beige. Since Western languages lack an equivalent term, domestication strategies like “Unbleached Ecru” (borrowing the Western concept of natural linen tones) avoid confusion caused by cultural gaps.

3.2.2 Ming Dynasty patterns

“斗牛纹”, literally “Bullfighting Pattern”, could mislead learners to associate it with Spanish bullfighting. However, in Chinese mythology, “斗牛” (douniu) refers to a horned dragon-like creature. Therefore, translating it as “Horned Dragon Pattern” aligns with its cultural meaning.

The “飞鱼” pattern, documented in the Ming *Shi*, resembles a serpent with dragon fins and horns rather than an actual fish. Thus, employing the functional equivalence approach to translate it as “Dragon-Finned Serpent Pattern” allows learners to intuitively grasp the design, reduces misunderstandings arising from cultural differences, and enhances cross-cultural communication.

3.2.3 Ming craftsmanship terms

The Ming-era textile technique “缂丝”, when literally translated as “Carved Silk”, risks being conflated with ordinary embroidery. Nevertheless, adopting a functional equivalence approach as “Silt-Tapestry With Cut Designs” emphasizes its unique “cut-silk” technique. Similarly, “织金”, translated as woven gold, may be misinterpreted as generic gold-thread fabric, whereas domestication as “Imperial Gold Brocade” aligns with pre-existing notions of luxury textiles in target cultures, bridging cultural gaps.

When translating culturally specific symbols lacking direct equivalents, instructors should avoid literal translation without contextual research. Unclear cultural connotations necessitate consultations with experts or archival verification to ensure learner comprehension [10]. When mechanically applying uniform translation approaches while neglecting the correspondence between cultural contexts and semantic connotations, textual misinterpretations may arise, potentially triggering cross-cultural ambiguities or conflicts in value systems. To address this, educators can employ combined strategies such as literal

translation with cultural annotations, functional equivalence or domestication based on cultural disparities and contextual demands, thereby minimizing semantic loss [11]. Supplementing explanations with physical artifacts further enhances learners' perceptual comprehension of the aesthetic and cultural significance inherent in traditional Chinese attire.

4 The role of Ming Dynasty Hanfu translation in bridging linguistic and cultural contexts

4.1 Integration of language and culture

Translating the Ming Dynasty Hanfu exemplifies the fusion of language and culture. As a cultural symbol, Hanfu terminology, which encompasses names, designs, craftsmanship, and decorative motifs, carries profound cultural connotations. Translations must linguistically articulate these connotations while preserving their cultural essence. In this process, language acts as a vehicle for cultural transmission, while culture imbues language with deeper meaning, reflecting the inseparable bond between Chinese vocabulary and cultural symbolism [12].

For instance, translating the prevalent Ming-era “麒麟” motif as “Qilin, a mythical creature symbolizing auspiciousness” illustrates this integration. The explanatory addition “symbolizing auspiciousness” clarifies the creature’s cultural significance as an emblem of good fortune in Chinese tradition. By avoiding domestication strategies that equate “麒麟” with the Western “unicorn” (a culturally distinct symbol), the translation maintains cultural specificity. This approach demonstrates how language and culture can be mutually reinforcing, ensuring both fidelity to source-cultural values and accessibility for target-language audiences.

4.2 Multidisciplinary synergy

Hanfu pedagogy integrates knowledge from history, art, sociology, and other disciplines. For example, translating the Ming Dynasty’s iconic “交领右衽” as “The right overlapping collar (originating from the traditional Chinese concept of ‘right is respected’, with symmetrical collars intersecting at right angles to symbolize the ‘squareness of the earth’, reflecting Confucian ideals of moral rectitude and impartiality)” illustrates this interdisciplinary approach [5]. Structurally, the collar connects directly to the garment’s front panels, with the left panel overlapping the right. The translation not only describes the collar’s physical form “右衽” (rightward orientation), but also implicitly conveys the cultural principle of “以右为尊” (rightward orientation as a symbol of respect). The symmetrical design further embodies the philosophical concept of “天圆地方” (heaven as round and earth as square), representing balance and ethical integrity. This translation strategy bridges garment structure with cultural symbolism, merging the “form” and “meaning” of Hanfu culture. Learners must engage with both the cosmological idea of “天圆地方” and the socio-historical significance of “以右为尊”. Such multidisciplinary collaboration enriches language instruction by fostering multidimensional cultural literacy, enabling learners to decode the philosophical, historical, and aesthetic values embedded in linguistic and cultural symbols.

In second-language teaching, instructors can implement a tiered pedagogical framework: progressing from basic translation to cultural interpretation, then to creative instructional design. In additionally, instructors should be committed to developing a “cultural translation corpus” for Hanfu education, compiling annotated terminology, case studies of cultural mistranslations, and pedagogical solutions to optimize learning outcomes. This approach

ensures synchronized language-culture acquisition, empowering learners to navigate both linguistic and cultural dimensions effectively.

5 Conclusion

Research findings demonstrate that translating Ming Dynasty Hanfu terminology transcends mere linguistic conversion, representing instead a dynamic process of cultural transmission. This process reveals a mutually reinforcing relationship between language acquisition and cultural cognition: When translation strategies balance linguistic accuracy with cultural readability, learners not only acquire vocabulary but also actively explore underlying cultural meanings, fostering a virtuous cycle of “promoting understanding through translation and advancing language learning through cultural engagement.” The study offers two pedagogical implications for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL): Firstly, instructors should adapt the depth of cultural input based on learners’ proficiency levels. Secondly, translation strategies must be flexibly adjusted to contextual demands. Neglecting cultural differences risks producing translations that cause learner confusion, cultural misinterpretations, or even value conflicts. Systematically integrating these strategies enhances the coherence of cultural pedagogy.

Future research could explore the integration of VR and AR technologies to develop visual teaching tools, addressing the limitations of traditional translation methods that often “capture form but fail to convey essence.” Additionally, establishing a cultural translation corpus for international Chinese education, incorporating cultural annotations and teaching case studies would deepen the synergy between language instruction and cultural dissemination, facilitating the global resonance of Chinese cultural heritage.

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