

From Textual Representation to Bodily Presence: Recontextualizing Cultural Symbols through Bilingual Short Video and AR Try-On

Xifeng Zhan, Wenjing Niu, Qi Guo*

Wuhan Business University, Wuhan 430000, Hubei, China

*Corresponding author: Qi Guo, 1210999216@qq.com

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: How can a cultural symbol mean anything to someone who has never worn it, spoken its language, or shared its history? This paper argues that the cross-cultural transmission of symbols such as hanfu fails when it relies on textual representation alone, because the meaning of such symbols is generated in bodily practice rather than stored in descriptions. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and Heidegger's account of presence, we define bodily presence operationally and propose a dual-layer mechanism of recontextualization: bilingual short video supplies semantic anchors, while AR try-on supplies bodily participation. A design case, HanVision, illustrates the mechanism. We conclude that recontextualization is a bodily event, and that the task of cross-cultural media is shifting from translating meaning to creating the conditions under which meaning can be generated.

Keywords: Embodied presence; Recontextualization; Cultural symbols; AR try-on; Cross-cultural communication; Phenomenology of the body

Online publication: April 26, 2026

1. Introduction

When hanfu circulates on global platforms, it is often read as a visually novel or exotic practice, with little appetite for its historical grammar^[1]. The garment carries ritual hierarchy, textile craft, and dynastic etiquette, none of which is visible in a photograph, and little of which survives a caption. This is the decoding dilemma of cross-cultural transmission: symbols are deeply embedded in a historical and ritual order, while linguistic and cognitive differences invite misreading. Static images and translated text long dominated this transmission; short video then opened new channels for intangible cultural heritage^[2-3], and AR try-on systems for traditional Chinese costume have begun to appear^[4-5]. Yet misreading persists, which suggests the problem lies deeper than the amount of information delivered.

In a previous study, we argued that experiencing cultural symbols beats merely seeing them, and showed

that bilingual short video and AR try-on work in synergy to that end ^[6]. That argument stayed at the level of comparison. It left open a harder question: how is experience possible at all? The present paper answers that experience becomes possible when the medium detaches the symbol from textual representation and re-situates it in bodily presence. Where the earlier paper claimed that experience is better than viewing, this one asks what experience is made of.

Three questions organize the argument. R1: Why is textual representation insufficient for transmitting the meaning of cultural symbols? R2: How do bilingual short video and AR try-on cooperate to achieve recontextualization? R3: What does this mechanism imply for cross-cultural communication theory? Our thesis is that recontextualization is a dual-layer event in which semantic decoding and bodily presence complete each other: language gives semantic coordinates, and the body supplies the field in which meaning is generated.

The paper's contribution is conceptual. Section 2 grounds the argument phenomenologically, Section 3 proposes the dual-layer mechanism, Section 4 illustrates it with the design of HanVision, a bilingual short video and AR try-on project for hanfu, and Section 5 draws out theoretical implications. Phenomenology carries the argument throughout; HanVision appears as an illustrative case, not as the protagonist, and no claims about measured communication effects are made anywhere in what follows.

2. From textual representation to bodily presence: A phenomenological grounding

Knowing how to wear hanfu resembles what Polanyi called tacit knowledge: it is embodied, acquired through practice, and resistant to verbal formulation. Recent work tracing tacit knowledge from Polanyi to Merleau-Ponty argues that embodiment is the very condition of acquiring such knowledge, since skilled practice cannot be reduced to rules that a text might state ^[7]. The cross-collar wrap, the order in which ru and qun are layered, the gait that a mamian skirt imposes: these are bodily habits before they are facts. A description can list them, but it cannot make them known the way wearing does. Studies of heritage media from an embodied-cognition perspective reach a similar conclusion: users connect to cultural heritage through bodily engagement rather than information intake ^[8].

Merleau-Ponty's body-subject and body schema name the pre-reflective competence by which a body inhabits its world. Applied to costume, the point is direct: the meaning of hanfu is not suspended inside the symbol, waiting to be decoded; it is produced in the practice of wearing, moving, and being seen. Du Toit (2024) shows that this phenomenology extends to digital artifacts, because the relation between a user and a digital technology is dynamic and embodied rather than spectatorial ^[9]. If meaning is generated in bodily practice, then any account of cultural transmission that stops at representation has stopped one step too early.

Heidegger's notion of presence (Anwesenheit) holds that entities show up for us in specific ways, and that technology participates in how they show up. His distinction between the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand matters here: a garment behind glass is an object contemplated, while a garment worn is equipment handled. Dreyfus's account of skilled coping, still actively debated in philosophy of technology ^[10-11], adds that fluent bodily engagement is a mode of understanding in its own right, not a deficient form of cognition. Digital environments can support such engagement. Phenomenological work on social virtual reality finds that presence online is grounded in embodiment and continuity with physical life rather than in physicality as such ^[12], and museum research shows that tangible and embodied interfaces materialize intangible heritage so that visitors can experience it bodily ^[13-14]. AR try-on, on this view, changes the mode of being of the symbol:

from an object of the gaze into something one can pick up, wear, and adjust.

We define our two terms operationally. Textual representation is the presentation of a symbol through description, image, and translation, addressed to a viewer positioned outside the practice. Bodily presence is the state in which a user invests the body, its posture, movement, and action, in the symbolic practice and thereby acquires embodied understanding. The argument of this section answers R1: text is insufficient because the meaning it tries to carry is generated where text cannot go. And it sets up Section 3: if meaning is embodied, communication must compensate representation with presence.

3. Recontextualization as a dual-layer mechanism

Translation studies has long recognized that a symbol extracted from its source context must be re-rooted in a target one, a process captured by the paired notions of decontextualization and recontextualization^[15] and by multimodal accounts of text and context^[16]. The shared limit of this work is that it stays at the level of language and text: what gets recontextualized is discourse. But if part of what a costume means is corporeal, as Section 2 argued, then recontextualization must extend to the body. That extension is this paper’s theoretical increment.

Bilingual short video performs the linguistic layer of recontextualization. Subtitles, voiceover, and cultural annotations supply what we call semantic anchors: stable points that tie a symbol to its meaning for a viewer who lacks the source context. Research on short-video platforms confirms that they now function as knowledge-communication channels for intangible cultural heritage^[2], that craftsmanship videos rely on identifiable narrative strategies to make heritage legible^[17], and that such videos can carry heritage across language communities^[3]. The limit of this layer is equally clear. Anchors address the symbol-to-meaning channel, but the viewer remains outside the practice; as Du and Liu (2026) found, audiences may settle for the exotic surface and never seek the history beneath it^[11].

AR try-on performs the bodily layer. The user wears the culture on a virtual body, and posture, motion, and the sequence of dressing become participatory rather than observed. The technical feasibility of this layer for traditional Chinese costume is established^[4-5], and adjacent work shows that intangible heritage rituals can be translated into designable digital experience through semiotic decoding^[18]. Evidence from consumer research adds that virtual try-on invites self-explorative engagement, in which users involve their self-relevant virtual body rather than inspect a product image^[19]. Reviews of immersive heritage applications likewise note that what is digitized, at its best, is embodied experience and situational engagement^[20]. This layer addresses the meaning-to-body channel that text cannot reach.

The two layers do not merely add up; they divide the labor of re-rooting a symbol. Language gives the semantic coordinate, the body gives the field in which that coordinate becomes meaningful. We state the model compactly: recontextualization equals semantic decoding multiplied by bodily presence, in the sense that weakening either layer degrades the whole. Three propositions follow. P1: semantic decoding is necessary but not sufficient for recontextualization. P2: bodily presence supplies the contextuality that text cannot carry. P3: the completeness of the coupling determines the degree of recontextualization. Field evidence gestures at what the coupling looks like when it succeeds: hanfu performance by Chinese youth at the British Museum generated what participants called an embodied connection with onlookers^[21]. AR try-on aims to make that kind of connection available at a distance, which answers R2.

4. The case of HanVision: Recontextualization in design

HanVision is a design-stage project that combines bilingual short videos with an AR try-on module to communicate hanfu culture to overseas audiences. Its communicative problem is exactly the decoding dilemma of Section 1: hanfu is frequently read abroad as costume or cosplay, detached from the ritual order that makes it a cultural symbol; as one recent study puts it, hanfu circulates as a wearable cultural text whose grammar few outside readers can parse^[22]. A boundary must be stated before proceeding. HanVision is a design proposal without operating data, so this section describes the recontextualization mechanism as embodied in the design, in the vocabulary of design intent rather than measured effect.

The video side of HanVision is organized into three series. Hanfu in Life shows the garment in ordinary situations, commuting, studying, festivals, anchoring it in lived contexts rather than museum vitrines. Behind the Stitch follows textile, cut, and pattern, anchoring visible form in production knowledge. AR Challenge guides users from watching toward the try-on module. Across the series, a bilingual parallel corpus and a translate-plus-annotate convention keep terms such as ruqun or mamianqun in transliteration and then annotate them, so the symbol retains its name while gaining a semantic coordinate. This is the design's semantic decoding layer.

The AR module lets users dress a virtual body mapped to their own movements: choosing a dynastic style, layering the garments in the proper order, adjusting posture before the mirrored view. The design intent is that the user handle the garment as equipment rather than inspect it as an image. The dressing sequence itself becomes the annotation; the body learns an order that a subtitle can only name. This is the design's bodily presence layer.

The case shows that the dual-layer mechanism is designable: the two layers can be given a concrete functional division, and the translate-plus-annotate convention shows how the layers hand off to each other. What the case cannot show is whether understanding actually improves. We make no claims of that kind. The case makes the mechanism visible, and that is its whole job in this paper.

5. Theoretical implications and discussion

If the argument holds, the cross-cultural transmission of cultural symbols is undergoing a paradigm shift from representation-reception to presence-participation. The task of the medium changes accordingly: from translating meaning toward creating the conditions under which meaning can be generated. The medium stops being a channel and becomes a site of practice.

The proposal converses with three bodies of work. Cultural translation theory treats meaning as negotiated rather than transferred^[15]; we agree, and add that negotiation has a bodily phase. Work on media and technology shows how technical form reshapes communicative possibility^[2]; phenomenology of technology explains why, since artifacts alter how entities present themselves to embodied users^[9, 11]. Our increment is to introduce the body as the unit of analysis for recontextualization in cross-cultural communication. The description of hanfu as a wearable cultural text^[22] converges with this move; the dual-layer mechanism specifies how such a text gets read.

The framework is falsifiable in principle. Bodily participation can be operationalized as an experimental variable, comparing try-on with viewing, and cross-cultural understanding can be measured as an outcome; P1 to P3 make predictions about their relation. The limitations are plain. The paper rests on a single design case, offers no empirical data, and compresses a rich phenomenological tradition into working tools. Future

research should test the propositions and extend the analysis to other symbol types such as ritual, cuisine, and craft.

6. Conclusion

The three questions now have their answers. Textual representation is insufficient because the meaning of a cultural symbol is generated in bodily practice, which text cannot enter (R1). Bilingual short video and AR try-on cooperate through a coupled division of labor, semantic anchoring joined to bodily presence (R2). And for theory, the unit of recontextualization shifts from text to body (R3). Recontextualization, in short, is not a purely linguistic event; it is a bodily one. This also marks the advance over our previous work: the earlier paper argued that experiencing beats seeing, while this one explains how experience can happen at all. For the practice of taking culture abroad, the implication is concrete: media design should budget for the body, not only for the subtitle.

Funding

Wuhan Business University College Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Project, “Han Vision: A New Path for Cultural Going Global via Bilingual Short Videos and AR Try-On” (Project No.: 202511654206).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Du Y, Liu Y, 2026, Encountering China on TikTok: Youth Engagement and Cross-Cultural Interpretation. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 13: 249–270.
- [2] Wang H, Zhao M, Hu W, et al., 2024, Critical Heritage Studies as a Lens to Understand Short Video Sharing of Intangible Cultural Heritage on Douyin. *Proceedings of the 2024 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–21.
- [3] Cao H, 2025, Exploring the Promotion of Musical Intangible Cultural Heritage under TikTok Short Videos. *Scientific Reports*, 15.
- [4] Lu Y, Zhang M, Huang W, et al., 2023, Digitalizing the Dress-Up Experience: An Exploration of Virtual Try-On for Traditional Chinese Costume. *2023 IEEE 18th International Conference on Industrial Informatics (INDIN)*.
- [5] Lin J, Xie Q, Cheung NM, et al., 2025, The Reality of Silk: An AR Try-On System for Traditional Chinese Costumes. *International Conference on Extended Reality*, Springer, 243–258.
- [6] Zhan X, Guo Q, 2026, From Seeing to Experiencing: The Theoretical Logic of AR Try-On Empowering Cross-Context Communication of Cultural Symbols. *Hill Publishing*.
- [7] Hadjimichael D, Ribeiro R, Tsoukas H, et al., 2024, How Does Embodiment Enable the Acquisition of Tacit Knowledge in Organizations? From Polanyi to Merleau-Ponty. *Organization Studies*, 45(4): 545–570.
- [8] Zhang J, Xu C, 2024, A Grounded Theory-Based Model of Information Communication in Cultural Heritage Digital Reading on Social Media from the Perspective of Embodied Theory. *Heritage Science*, 12.

- [9] Du Toit J, 2024, A Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology of the Virtual: Disembodied Challenges and Embodied Prospects. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 43(4): 307–322.
- [10] Karamercan AO, 2023, Getting Mindful about Dreyfus’s Mindless-Skillful Coping. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 37(2): 197–210.
- [11] Zhao X, 2026, Worldliness and Causal Binding in Intelligent Machines: A Heideggerian Response to Dreyfus. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.
- [12] Erofeeva M, 2026, Why Does Social Virtual Reality Feel So Real? A Phenomenological Study of Spatiality, Embodiment, and Continuity between Digital and Physical Realities. *Human Studies*, 49(1): 223–245.
- [13] Duranti D, Spallazzo D, Petrelli D, 2024, Smart Objects and Replicas: A Survey of Tangible and Embodied Interactions in Museums and Cultural Heritage Sites. *ACM Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage*, 1–32.
- [14] Wang S, 2023, A Bodies-on Museum: The Transformation of Museum Embodiment through Virtual Technology. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 66(4): 107–128.
- [15] Liao MH, 2023, Translation as a Practice of Resemiotization: A Case Study of the Opium War Museum. *Translation Studies*, 16(3): 48–63.
- [16] Gambier Y, Lautenbacher OP, 2023, Text and Context Revisited within a Multimodal Framework. *Babel*, 70(6): 1–16.
- [17] He B, Luo Z, Chai Z, et al., 2026, Narrative Strategies in Short Videos for Traditional Craftsmanship in Intangible Cultural Heritage: Empirical Evidence from Douyin. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 13: 1240.
- [18] Zeng Y, Zhang Y, Song Y, 2026, Semiotic-Based Digital Translation of Song Dynasty Tea-Whisking Ritual: A Human-Computer Interaction Framework for Virtual Fashion and AR Try-On Experience. *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, Springer.
- [19] Lavoye V, Sipilä J, Mero J, et al., 2023, The Emperor’s New Clothes: Self-Explorative Engagement in Virtual Try-On Service Experiences Positively Impacts Brand Outcomes. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 37(10): 1–18.
- [20] Xu Z, Liu F, Xia G, et al., 2025, Immersive HCI for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Tourism Contexts: A Narrative Review of Design and Evaluation. *Sustainability*, 18(1): 153.
- [21] Dong S, Li S, 2025, From Conflict to Peace: Hanfu Performance and “Embodied Connection” in the Chinese Youth’s British Museum Initiative. *Global Media and China*, 11(3): 375–395.
- [22] Yan S, Yang C, Mai B, et al., 2026, Cultural Heritage Narrative Innovation and Adaptation Mechanisms: A Case Study of the Intercultural Communication of Chinese Han Dynasty Heritage. *Heritage*, 9(1): 14.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.