

Metaphors on “Sleeve”: A Cognitive Perspective on Chinese Characters and Traditional Clothing

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This paper examines the cultural symbolism of the character “袖” (sleeve) through an analysis of its historical evolution, linking the intricate relationship between traditional clothing design and linguistic expression. Drawing on frameworks from cognitive linguistics, particularly metaphor and metonymy, the study investigates the diverse metaphorical uses of “袖” in the Chinese language. Through corpus-based analysis, findings reveal that these metaphorical expressions are shaped by cultural traditions, daily practices, and cognitive mechanisms. While many traditional usages of the term have diminished in modern discourse, it retains a rich spectrum of metaphorical meanings, reflecting the unique interconnection between language and culture in Chinese society. This research provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between Chinese characters and traditional clothing, offering fresh perspectives for metaphor studies within cognitive linguistics.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, metaphor, “袖” (sleeve), historical evolution, corpus-based analysis

Introduction

Clothing, as a cultural artifact, emerges from specific natural and social environments, encapsulating the living habits, aesthetic preferences, and societal values of a given historical period. Among various elements of traditional attire, sleeves serve not only as functional components but also as cultural markers that record the trajectory of clothing evolution and societal development. Simultaneously, the linguistic use of “袖” has embedded profound cultural connotations within the Chinese language, creating a bridge between material culture and symbolic expression.

Leveraging data from the Modern Chinese Corpus of Peking University, alongside authoritative dictionaries and relevant literature, this study explores the intersection of clothing culture and linguistic representation. By investigating the metaphorical dimensions of “袖” within the framework of cognitive linguistics, the analysis identifies dozens of expressions rooted in ancient clothing customs, widely disseminated through idioms, proverbs, and poetry. Although many of these expressions have gradually faded in contemporary usage, they continue to reveal the layered cultural symbolism of sleeves as both physical and

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linguistic constructs. This research aims to illuminate the multifaceted role of sleeves as cultural symbols and their metaphorical significance within cognitive linguistic paradigms.

From Clothing to Language

Sleeves, as distinctive elements of traditional Chinese clothing, embody historical, cultural, and national characteristics. Beyond their functional utility, sleeves often reflect societal hierarchies, with elaborate designs and decorations serving as indicators of identity and social status. The symbolic significance of sleeves extends beyond material culture, permeating the Chinese language to create a unique linguistic phenomenon that underscores the deep interconnection between clothing and cultural expression.

The Evolution of Sleeve Design in Chinese Attire

The sleeve designs of Chinese clothing hold a unique position in the history of global attire, showcasing the interplay of practicality, aesthetic expression, and cultural symbolism. Throughout China’s dynastic history, sleeve styles varied significantly, reflecting both the functional needs of daily life and the cultural ideologies of their respective eras: from 220 BCE to 221 CE, wide robes with narrow sleeves were predominant. Centuries later, large sleeves that could extend down to the knees kicked off; during the flourishing Tang Dynasty, sleeves became even more exaggerated, with the arms, when fully extended, reaching the ankles. In the Song Dynasty, influenced by the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, clothing became more modest, with sleeves fitting closely but not tightly; in the dynasties with minorities in power favored narrow sleeves, adapted to the nomadic lifestyle of horseback riding and hunting. During the Ming Dynasty, both wide and narrow sleeves were common, with wide sleeves typically worn for aristocratic ceremonial attire and narrow sleeves worn in everyday attire by commoners. In the Qing Dynasty, arrow sleeves resembling horse hooves were part of the formal court dress, and could be rolled up during everyday activities, especially archery. (Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the evolving styles of Chinese sleeves, capturing the interplay of aesthetics and cultural meaning across various periods.)

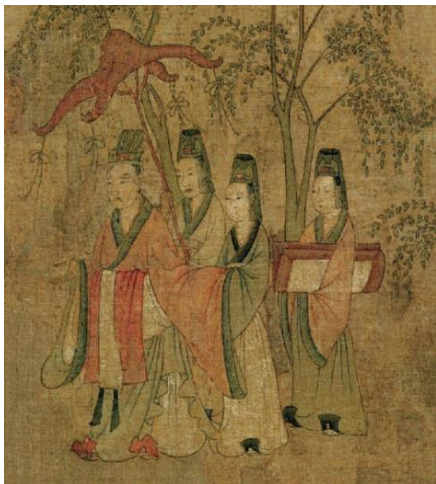


Figure 1. Gu Kaizhi, *Nymph of the Luo River* (section), Southern Song, Palace Museum, Beijing.

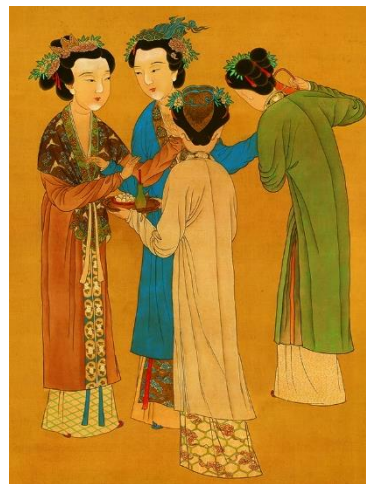


Figure 2. Tang Yin, *Court Courtesans of the Former Shu*, Ming Dynasty, Palace Museum, Beijing.

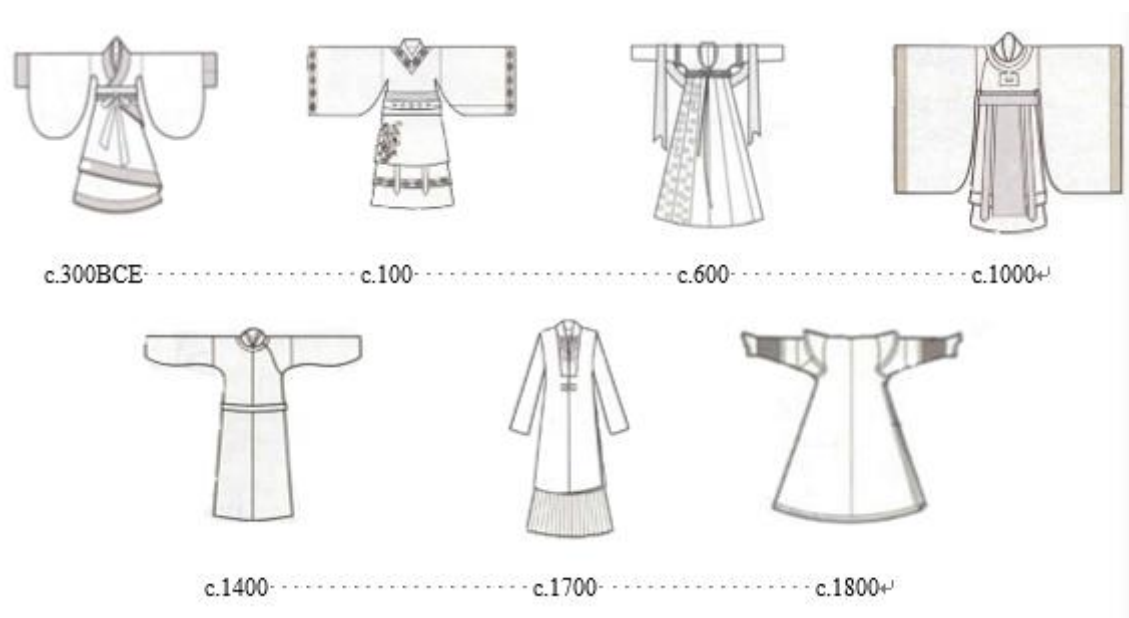


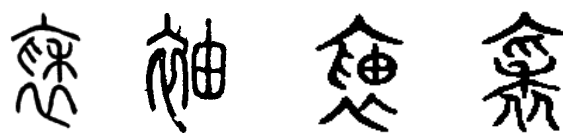
Figure 3. The evolution of Chinese clothes, photo: Ren Yi.

The Development of the Character “袖”

The character “袖” (sleeve) provides an intriguing perspective on the interplay between language, material culture, and cognitive processes. Originating from the seal script character “褕,” it has retained its fundamental components throughout its evolution into modern script. In seal script, “袖” is constructed from three elements: “衣,” representing a garment with a collar and sleeves; “爪,” symbolizing a hand or arm, emphasizing the sleeve’s function in covering and protecting the limb; and “禾” grain seedlings, derived from “和” (harmony), metaphorically indicating a balance between protection and freedom of movement. Together, these components create a vivid image of a person working in the fields, with their hand reaching from the sleeve to grasp a grain seedling. This reconstruction underscores how ancient agricultural practices shaped the creation of Chinese characters, merging linguistic expression with material and cultural realities.

Another variant of “袖” in seal script incorporates “衣” (clothing), “爪” (claw), and “由” (passing through), further emphasizing the movement of the arms through the sleeve. While there are slight variations in the forms of the character, they remain closely aligned with its original structure and meaning. The diagram below illustrates these elements in their seal script forms, vividly capturing scenes of ancient agrarian life.

The analysis of “袖” not only provides insight into the origins of the character but also highlights the broader cognitive and cultural processes that shaped Chinese writing. This deep interconnection between material culture and language offers a rich field for exploring the cognitive metaphors embedded in Chinese characters. The components of the character, as shown below, vividly reconstruct scenes from ancient agrarian life:



(袖 in seal script)

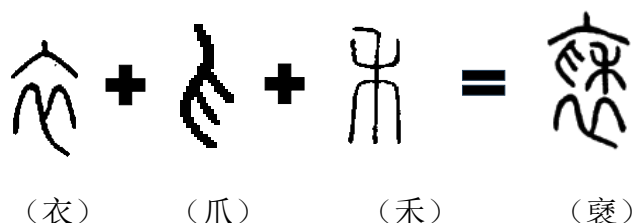


Figure 4. Evolution of the character “袖” in Seal Script: Components and Agricultural Symbolism.

The Language Use

In ancient times, clothing was primarily used to express an individual’s status, identity, honor, and wealth within a specific social group. This connotation is also reflected in everyday language, giving rise to numerous culturally distinctive uses of “袖”.

a. “color + sleeve”: female pronouns

Traditional Chinese thought is deeply rooted in the Five-Color Theory, which originates from the philosophies of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements. This system identifies blue, red, yellow, white, and black as the five primary colors, with other hues considered secondary. In ancient China, these colors were not only a reflection of natural phenomena but also evolved into a symbolic framework, permeating various aspects of daily life and cultural practices.

In the Chinese language, combinations of colors and sleeves have been widely used to depict or allude to women, particularly in literary contexts. Such expressions frequently appear in classical poetry, especially from the Tang and Song dynasties, where the colors are often vivid and striking, aligning with idealized depictions of women’s attire. In the cultural context of the time, which valued restraint and subtlety in personal expression, direct references to women were often avoided. Instead, prominent elements of their clothing, such as sleeves, were employed as euphemistic symbols, offering a refined and indirect way to convey feminine grace and presence. This use of color and attire as a literary device highlights the interplay between visual aesthetics and cultural conventions in traditional Chinese thought.

- (1) 无言垂翠袖，粉蝶窥人瘦。(Speechlessly, the green sleeves dropped; secretly, a pink butterfly glanced at her slender figure.)
- (2) 数声芦叶，两行霓袖，几处成离宴。(With the rustle of reed leaves and pairs of colorful sleeves, the parting feast began.)
- (3) 楚袖萧条舞，巴弦趣数弹。(Sleeves of dancing maids waved alone, while the strings of southwestern instruments played happily.)

b. “animal + sleeve”: representations of status

The Chinese people’s deep reverence for animals can be traced back to the totemic culture of ancient times, where totems served as intermediaries for communication with the divine, embodying the aspiration for harmony between heaven and humanity. This tradition of animal worship extended into various cultural domains, including clothing, where it found prominent expression in the official attire of government officials.

During the Ming dynasty, strict regulations dictated that specific animal patterns correspond to different ranks of officials, reflecting their status and roles. Nobles such as dukes, marquesses, princes, and barons adorned their garments with embroidered designs of legendary creatures like the Qilin and Bai Ze, symbols of

divine power and protection in Chinese mythology. For civil and military officials ranked from the first to the ninth, attire was further differentiated by specific animal motifs: civil officials wore patterns of flying birds, symbolizing literary elegance and intellectual refinement, while military officials displayed designs of wild beasts, representing strength, courage, and martial prowess. These patterns not only conveyed hierarchical order but also served as a visual language, embodying the values and aspirations associated with each rank and role in the imperial bureaucracy.

- (4) 俺本是凤城中黎庶，端的做龙袖里骄民。(I am but a commoner from phoenix city, how could I become a favored citizen in dragon sleeves?)
- (5) 是知在位之臣服此豹袖之羔裘也。(Thus, it is known that the minister in office wears this lamb fur with sleeves made of leopard fur.)
- (6) 羔裘豹褭，自我人究。(Wearing lamb fur and leopard-fur sleeves, what an arrogant man he is!)
- (7) 狐裘不合须羊袖。(Fox fur cannot be matched with sheep-fur sleeves.)

Both “phoenix city” and “dragon sleeves” refer to the capital city. In the Song Dynasty, residents of the capital enjoyed many special privileges, and were thus known as “favored citizens in dragon sleeves”. “Fox sleeves” metaphorically refers to valuable clothing, while “leopard sleeves” referred to the attire of ancient ministers and nobility. In ancient times, commoners could only wear inexpensive garments made from sheep skin or dog skin, while noble families wore fur garments such as fox and leopard furs to display their status. Moreover, in ancient times, there was a strict hierarchy in fur garments, for example, the emperor wore the most luxurious silver marten fur, while high-ranking ministers wore purple-black sable fur, and lower-ranking officials wore sand fox fur.

c. Sleeve idioms: demonstration of qualities

- (8) 因颜老爷在日，为人正直，作了一任县尹，两袖清风，一贫如洗，清如秋水，严似寒霜。(In his days, Lord Yan was a man of integrity. He served as the county magistrate but led an impoverished life; his sleeves were filled with nothing but the gentle breeze.)
- (9) 领导干部在就职时应当“洗手奉职”，退职时也应当“摆袖却金”。(One should, upon taking office, “wash his hands and devote himself to his duties,” and upon leaving office, he should “wave his sleeves and say no to wealth.”)

The idiom “两袖清风” originates from the Ming Dynasty loyal official, Yu Qian, and symbolizes that, apart from the gentle breeze, there is nothing in the sleeves. It is commonly used to metaphorically represent the integrity of an official who is not corrupted. Similarly, “摆袖却金” (literally, swinging sleeves and rejecting gold) is related to the Tang Dynasty prime minister, Wang Jin, another official refuses bribes. These expressions stem from the practices of ancient officials whose wide sleeve designs allowed for the hiding of bribery within them. Thus, the idiom “袖金入囊” (gold hidden in sleeves and pockets) refers to take bribes.

- (10) 城中好高髻，四方高一尺。城中好大眉，四方眉半额。城中好广袖，四方用匹帛。(In the city, they favor high buns, so those in the countryside make them a foot higher. In the city, they favor broad eyebrows, so those in the countryside have eyebrows that extend halfway across their forehead. In the city, they favor wide sleeves, so those in the countryside use a whole piece of cloth to make their sleeves.)

Wide sleeves were known for their vast expanse, with the sleeves often reaching the ground when the arms hung at the sides. An example can be found in a folk rhyme from the Han dynasty “广袖高髻” (literally, “wide sleeves, high buns”), which described the fashion preferences of people from the capital city and the countryside. The city dwellers favored high buns, wide sleeves, and broad eyebrows; thus, the rural people followed the fashion with more proportions. Over time, this saying came to reflect the extravagant and ostentatious tendencies of the urban elites.

- (11) 将历年所积的宦囊，并家属人等，送至原籍安顿妥当了，却自己担风袖月，游览天下胜迹。(After taking care of the accumulated wealth and arranging for his family members to settle in their hometown, he himself set off to wander across famous landmarks, with “the wind on his shoulder and the moon in his sleeves.”)
- (12) 训美容仪，善进止，文章之美，为后进领袖。(Wang Xun is distinguished by his handsome appearance, refined demeanor, and eloquent prose, positioning him as a role model for the younger generation.)

“领袖” literally means collar and sleeves, and represents a leader, someone who serves as a role model or a person with exceptional abilities. It can also be used as a verb, meaning to lead. Additionally, other expressions related to one’s character include “担风袖月”, used to describe a carefree life, and “槊血满袖” (literally, the blood from the spear wound stains the sleeve), symbolizing brave and valiant fighting.

The Cognitive “袖”

Metaphor studies are a major branch of cognitive linguistics. Traditional views of metaphor consider it a rhetorical device used for substitution and comparison. In the 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson proposed the theory of conceptual metaphor, arguing that metaphors involve a systematic mapping from a concrete conceptual domain to an abstract one. According to this theory, metaphors are a matter of thought rather than language expression (Li, 2008, p. 131). Metaphors are often based on correlations we perceive in our experience. As a key component of human clothes, the sleeve is closely tied to daily life, encompassing a rich array of metaphorical characteristics and functions.

Metaphorical Basis: Space and Containers

Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphors categorizes metaphors into three types, including orientational, ontological and structural metaphors. Orientational metaphors use spatial orientation to understand another conceptual system, like up-down, in-out and deep-shallow. Such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 15). From the perspective of fashion design, sleeves are typically cylindrical in shape, enveloping the arms, which is why they are often referred to as “sleeve tubes” or “sleeve barrels” in Chinese. Traditional Chinese clothing design is exceptionally ingenious, with sleeves often being long and wide, capable of completely covering the hands when lowered. In addition to their aesthetic value, they also serve as a practical function for storing items.

- (13) 大仙把玉蘂左遮右挡，奈了他两三回合，使一个“袖里乾坤”的手段。(The great sage used a technique of “universe within the sleeve,” hiding the jade powder in his sleeves, successfully deceiving his opponents for two or three rounds.)

(14) 东篱把酒黄昏后，有暗香盈袖。(After sunset, in the eastern fence, I drink wine with an intoxicating fragrance filling my sleeves.)

(15) 这聘礼也不过邓元龙三人袖里来袖里去，所以外人并不知得。(This marriage gift merely passed between the sleeves of Deng Yuanlong and his two companions, so outsiders were unaware of it.)

The phrase “袖里乾坤,” originating from *Journey to the West*, encapsulates the idea of a sleeve containing the vastness of the cosmos, symbolizing miraculous illusions or ingenious tricks. Similarly, the idiom “袖里来袖里去” (passing things between sleeves) initially described the discreet gestures of bargaining in ancient markets, where traders concealed their negotiations within the folds of long sleeves to maintain privacy and avoid interference. Over time, this phrase evolved to metaphorically denote secret transactions, often with a connotation of clandestine or underhanded dealings. Both expressions highlight the symbolic depth of sleeves in Chinese culture, blending vivid imagery with subtle connotations.

In classical literature, “袖” frequently appears as a metaphor for human emotions and states of mind, including memory, secrecy, longing, and sorrow. For instance, Li Qingzhao’s depiction of fragrance-filled sleeves evokes her profound yearning and affection for her husband, linking a tangible part of clothing to intangible emotional experiences. This literary device exemplifies how classical Chinese thought often employs material objects as metaphors to convey abstract emotions, reflecting an aesthetic deeply rooted in embodiment.

As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest, human cognition is inherently embodied, grounded in the experience of the body as a container with an in-out orientation. This embodied perspective shaped ancient Chinese conceptual frameworks, where the body served as a model for understanding the external world. Terms like “mountain head,” “mountain waist,” and “mountain foot” (Qi, 2003) reflect this alignment between the human form and natural phenomena. Similarly, clothing terminology, including “sleeve head” and “sleeve mouth,” draws on this body-based orientation. The metaphorical function of sleeves extends from their capacity to encompass vastness, as in “袖里乾坤,” to their ability to hold the smallest objects, as in “袖犬枕钟” (a tiny dog in the sleeve, a clock by the pillow). This duality underscores the interplay between material culture and metaphorical thought, revealing how embodiment informs both linguistic and cultural expression in Chinese tradition.

(16) 刘大妈在大家的笑闹里放下包袱，用袖头揩揩额上汗。(Aunt Liu, amid the laughter and chatter of the group, set down her bundle and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the tip of her sleeve.)

(17) 以前大家根本不敢穿白衬衣，否则没有半天工夫，领子和袖口就全黑了。(In the past, no one dared to wear white shirts, as within half a day, the collar and cuffs would be completely stained black.)

(18) 但人活一张脸，树活一张皮，别人有个大小事，他又爱送个情，用山里人的话说，这叫“手长衣袖短”。(As the saying goes, “a person lives by their face, and a tree by its bark.” When others encounter even a small issue, he would love to send a favor. In rural terms, this is referred to as “the arms are long, but the sleeves are short,” a metaphor for wanting to help but lacking the power or means to do so.)

Furthermore, “sleeve” is also a verb, meaning to hide something in your sleeve. For example, in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, it is mentioned that Zhu Hai “sleeved” forty pounds of iron hammers to secretly kill Jin Bi. Other expressions include, “袖占” (divination done by placing objects in the sleeve) “袖

刃” (hidden weapons stored in the sleeve) “袖珍” (small or miniature items kept in the sleeve, now used to describe compact or miniature objects) and “袖手旁观” (put your hands in the sleeves and watch, meaning to remain uninvolved). “袖”, therefore, serves not only as a physical part of the attire but also as a rich source of metaphorical meaning in Chinese culture, encompassing both practical and symbolic functions.

Metaphorical Functions

Generally speaking, different metaphors serve distinct functions. Some metaphors can evoke vivid imagery, others have cognitive functions, while some create a particular atmosphere. However, most metaphors perform multiple functions simultaneously (Shu, 2000, p. 112). In daily life, the sleeve has numerous practical functions. It can serve as a handkerchief or towel for wiping sweat, tears, or covering the face. For instance, in the poem “故园东望路漫漫，双袖龙钟泪不干” (Looking eastward to my hometown, the road is long and endless; my sleeves are soaked with tears), the sleeve serves as a metaphor for sorrow and longing. It also mirrors the customs of covering one’s face during a toast. Moreover, sleeve also extends to a rich set of pragmatic functions in language. For example, the expression “长袖善舞” originally referred to the practicality of long sleeves in facilitating graceful movements, particularly in traditional dance. Over time, however, it evolved into a metaphor for someone skilled in social maneuvering, capable of using various methods to reach their purpose. In summary, the metaphorical functions of sleeve can be categorized into three main aspects: metonymy, euphemism, and emotional expressions. These functions reflect the adaptability of the sleeve as a metaphor, which can serve to symbolize various aspects of human behavior, social interactions, and emotional states.

a. “袖” for metonymy

Cognitive linguistics regards metonymy as a fundamental cognitive tool, similar to metaphor, where it is also a matter of concept and thought. “Why is metonymy so prevalent? The answers become apparent as soon as we recognize that metonymy is basically a reference point phenomenon. More precisely, the entity that is normally designated by a metonymic expression serves as a reference point affording mental access to the desired target... and it occurs in the first place because it serves a useful cognitive and communicative function” (Langacker, 2000, p. 199). As an indispensable part of everyday clothing, the sleeve naturally forms a cognitive channel of “sleeve—people” in language use. Through this channel, the sleeve represents the person, where a small part (the sleeve) symbolizes the whole (the person).

(19) 骑马倚长桥，满楼红袖招。(Riding a horse, leaning against the long bridge, the red sleeves in the mansion beckon.)

(20) 一年相逢白下门，短衣窄袖呼郎君。(Meeting again at the gate of Baixia, the man with short clothes and narrow sleeves is her husband.)

“红袖” (red sleeves) refers to the sleeves worn by dancers, a distinctive feature of ancient Chinese women’s clothing. Here, “袖” serves as a reference point affording mental access to the dancing maids. “短衣窄袖” is a typical clothes from northern ethnic minorities, and in this context, the clothing refers to the person, for at the sight of this kind of clothes, one would know the ethnic background of the individual as a Hu (non-Han) person.

b. “袖” for emotional expressions

In ancient times, sleeves were long and wide, often draping down to conceal the hands. This design gave rise to the action of rolling up sleeves, as seen in Cao Zhi's poem, *On the Beauty*, “攘袖见素手” (rolling up sleeves to reveal her fair hands). Although modern sleeves are not as wide as those in ancient times, people still roll up their sleeves before undertaking certain tasks for convenience, comfort, or hygiene. This shared life experience result in a synchronic use of the word.

- (21) 青年们的口号是：“卷起袖子来！”为新生的祖国而志愿劳动的浪潮，已经普及全国，形成了一个经常性的“卷袖子运动”。(The slogan of the youth is, “roll up your sleeves”. The wave of volunteer labor for the newborn country has spread across the nation, forming a regular “roll-up-your-sleeves movement.”)
- (22) 我准备继续扩大养殖规模，用实际行动向大家证明，有党和政府的帮扶，撸起袖子加油干，过上好日子并不难！(I am preparing to continue expanding the breeding scale, using practical actions to prove to everyone that with the help of the Party and the government, rolling up your sleeves and working hard makes living a good life easy!)

A diachronic analysis of the corpus reveals that the metaphor “卷起袖子” has consistent significance through time. For instance, the “roll-up sleeves movement” of the 1960s, and the more recent slogan “撸起袖子加油干” (roll up sleeves and work hard) both serve as calls to action, stirring emotions and rallying the masses. Additionally, in classical Chinese, phrases like “拂袖而去” (swing the sleeve and leave), “袖手旁观” (watch with hands folded in sleeves), and “袖中挥拳” (swinging fists within sleeves) express emotions of anger, indifference, and readiness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the metaphorical significance of “袖” within the context of clothing provides a compelling framework for examining the complex interplay between material culture and linguistic expression. The evolution of sleeve designs, reflecting broader societal and cultural transformations, underscores how material artifacts not only fulfill practical functions but also operate as carriers of metaphorical meaning. Grounded in conceptual metaphors of containers and space, these expressions transcend their material origins, offering insights into the ways human emotions, experiences, and cultural values are encoded in language. Although such metaphors often trace their origins to classical texts and have diminished in prominence within modern Chinese, they persist as vital remnants of a shared cultural heritage, illuminating historical modes of thought and expression.

The exploration of clothing-related metaphors, particularly those centered on sleeves, advances scholarly understanding of the dynamic interactions between linguistic structures, cultural practices, and cognitive processes. By linking tangible artifacts to abstract linguistic concepts, this study situates clothing metaphors as a critical domain for interdisciplinary inquiry, bridging material culture studies, cognitive linguistics, and cultural history. Through this lens, the analysis of “袖” contributes to broader discussions on the ways language both reflects and shapes human perception, reinforcing the importance of metaphor as a tool for understanding the evolving relationship between materiality, culture, and cognition.

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