

Memory, Identity, and Cross-Cultural Translation: A Study of Hussein Chalayan's Fashion Translation Strategies

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Abstract

This article analyzes a series of works by the contemporary avant-garde experimental designer Hussein Chalayan, interpreting his core concept of viewing clothing as a medium that carries cultural memory and the transformation of identity. This concept is further elaborated across three dimensions: the symbolism of materials, the narrativity of structure, and the performativity of the body. Through this framework, the study reveals Chalayan's design approaches to materials, structure, and the body in contemporary practice, and explores their implications for designers working within the context of globalization and geopolitics.

Keywords

Hussein Chalayan, cultural memory, design translation.

1. Introduction

Hussein Chalayan is a British designer with a dual Turkish and Cypriot cultural background. Since entering the fashion design field, he has been regarded as one of the most representative avant-garde experimental designers of the 21st century. His creations break through the boundaries of traditional fashion design, practicing with an interdisciplinary approach. His design philosophy integrates the influences of multiple fields such as technology, science, philosophy, anthropology, politics, and architecture, making clothing a comprehensive medium of expression.

Unlike fashion systems driven by style and trends, Chalayan tended to draw inspiration from individual experience, transforming personal history and cultural identity into the core driving force of his designs. Growing up in Cyprus, a region long plagued by political conflict and ethnic division, placed him constantly in the midst of clashes and conflicts between multiple cultural identities. This experience, situated between Turkish and British cultures, not only shaped his sensitivity to identity issues but also ensured that his work consistently focused on topics such as nationality, immigration, refugees, and forced displacement.

Against this backdrop, Chalayan's designs no longer merely focused on innovation in clothing forms, but gradually evolved into a "narrative" practice. Through the multiple organization of materials, structures, and the body, he translated complex experiences such as war, migration, and identity mobility into a perceptible language of clothing, making clothing both a vehicle for expressing personal experience and a visual medium for cultural and social issues.

2. Material Translation: From Historical Images to Mailable Clothing

Materials are the first medium through which Chalayan translates his designs. In his designs, the function of materials transcends the mere material basis of clothing. By selecting materials and processing them, Chalayan translates historical trauma, cultural memory, and individual identity into a perceptible language of clothing. The material choices in his two design series,

Temporal Meditations (2004) and *Airmail* (1999), complement each other: the former uses prints to attach history to fabric, making clothing a medium for carrying memories; the latter, relying on the physical properties of Tyvek paper, transforms clothing into a carrier that can be sent.

The "Temporal Meditations" [1] series adopts a relatively direct translation method. The print patterns in this series intertwine with dual imagery: the Turkish Cypriot coastline, architecture, and 16th-century Turkish soldier motifs—the former pointing to the landscape of the designer's birthplace, and the latter representing the violent history of his hometown. The two images are juxtaposed on the same piece of fabric, forming a visual fusion of "past and present." These patterns are not merely decorations, but rather enable the fabric to take on the function of recording history and cultural memory. In this way, clothing is no longer just a garment, but becomes a carrier of historical trauma, national memory, and identity, realizing the transformation of materials from material attributes to cultural meaning.



Figure 1. SS 2004 Temporal Meditations

If *Temporal Meditations* [1] fixed history onto the surface of clothing through the imagery of materials, then *Airmail* transforms clothing into a fluid medium by leveraging the physical properties of materials. This series of designs stems from his childhood experience writing letters to his mother in Turkey—a memory that sparked his early interest in "migration" and "communication." In its material selection, Chalayan paper possesses the dual properties of both paper and fabric: it is both lightweight and foldable, yet strong enough to withstand repeated folding and transport. It is this quality, existing between "fabric" and "letters", that gives the garment a dual existence: when worn, it adheres to the body; after being folded and sent, it transforms into an independently circulated object. The skirt's surface is printed with red and blue airmail stripes and detailed folding instructions, allowing users to compress it flat and send it between different locations via the postal system.

In a 2001 interview, Chalayan described his vision for creating a cyclical scene where people could express their own interpretations of clothing, with meaning constantly generated through the user's participation. In this process, materials not only carry form but also communication, memory, and emotion, allowing individual experiences to be transmitted and reconstructed through spatial movement.

These two cases demonstrate from different perspectives how Chalayan leveraged the properties of materials to advance design expression. Whether it's fabrics printed with historical patterns or foldable, mailable Tyvek paper, materials in design have transcended their mere physical properties, taking on the function of carrying and transforming trauma,

identity, and cultural memory, enabling clothing to both accommodate the body and convey history and personal experience.

3. Structural Translation: From Physical Imprisonment to Memory Deconstruction

Structure is Chalayan's second medium for cultural translation. In his designs, the function of structure goes beyond the supporting framework of clothing. Through deconstruction, reconstruction, and loss, Chalayan translates the trauma of war, the instability of memory, and the fluidity of cross-cultural identity into a visible language of clothing.

The Spring/Summer 1995 collection, *Along False Equator*, marked Hussein Chalayan as one of the most insightful designers in the fashion world [2]. The collection explored themes such as technology and humanity, navigation and displacement. The most representative piece is the wooden corset in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which reflects his ongoing exploration of the relationship between structure and bodily constraints. The corset is bolted together and has a structure similar to a surgical orthodontic device. Through the forced support and restriction of the body, it constructs a bodily state that points to trauma and repair. It regards the body as an object that needs to be constantly reconstructed and maintained, thereby translating the survival experience in extreme situations into a perceptible structural language of clothing.

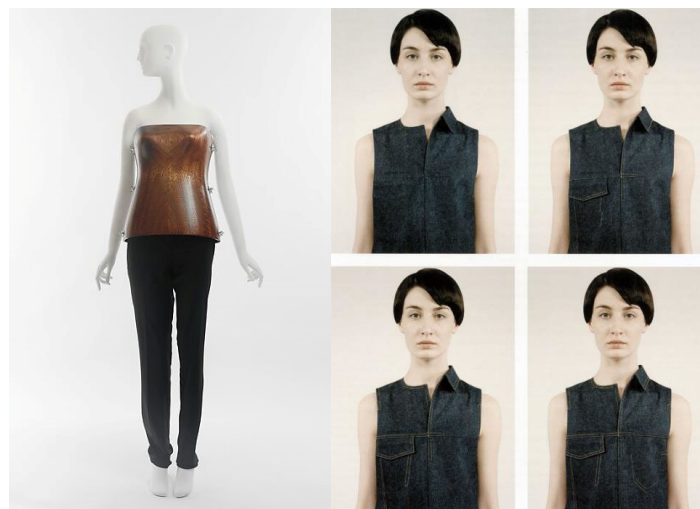


Figure 2. Spring/Summer 1995 *Along False Equator* Fall/Winter 1999 *Echoform*

If a garment itself carries the memory of history and social environment, then deconstruction is about fragmenting the garment and reconstructing it into a completely new entity. Deconstruction extracts and records fragments of memory, ultimately recombining them into a new narrative. In the "Memory Dress" of the Fall/Winter 1999 "Echoform" collection, Chalayan selected everyday garments with typical characteristics, such as denim jackets, and translated memory into a visible form through the deconstruction and reconstruction of the garment's structure. The design did not follow the complete logic of garment construction, but rather presented a state between completion and incompleteness through the absence of pockets, the remnants of lapels, and the addition or subtraction of seams. While retaining some structures, he intentionally discarded others, giving the garments an appearance similar to an unfinished image. At the same time, the collection included several garments that looked similar but differed slightly in details; they appeared in repetition, yet were slightly different from one another. This variation simulated the process of correction and reconstruction that memory

undergoes when it is recalled. Structure thus became the medium connecting individual experience and cultural memory, allowing the garments to visually present a trajectory that changes continuously under the influence of time.

Subsequently, Chalayan's Fall/Winter 2002 collection, **Ambimorphous**, extended this structural narrative to the process of cross-cultural identity transformation. The designer placed white metal frames within the runway space, using a cold, industrial feel to divide multiple visual areas. The design began with a model wearing traditional clothing from eastern Turkey, characterized by multi-layered embroidery, tassels, and traditional patterns, showcasing strong regional cultural identity and craftsmanship traditions. As models appeared one after another, the ethnic elements inherent in the garments—tassels, embroidery layouts, and traditional silhouettes—decreased sequentially. This reduction was not a simple simplification of style, but rather a gradual stripping away, transformation, and abstraction of structural elements, ultimately evolving into a purely Western-style coat on the last model. The entire runway presented a visual process of cultural transformation: starting from a concrete ethnic structural archetype, undergoing a series of intermediate changes, and finally becoming a modern, universally applicable Western style of clothing without specific regional characteristics. This process, through the gradual evolution of clothing structure, vividly demonstrates the fluidity and hybridity of cultural identity and its potential for reconstruction in the context of globalization. The structure itself constitutes a path of change from "local tradition" to "global modernity." In Hussein Chalayan's designs, clothing is no longer just an object to be worn, but a carrier of complex cultural experiences; the structure also rises from a material-level method of construction to an important bridge connecting the individual, history, and cultural background.

4. Body Translation: From Deconstructing Clothing to Reconstructing Identity

From materials serving as carriers of cultural translation to structure as a means of constructing narrative logic, the act of wearing and performing further imbues clothing into a dynamic process of meaning generation. At this level, clothing is no longer seen as a finished object, but rather as a continuously unfolding process. Through acts of wearing, disassembling, transforming, and moving, clothing constantly changes over time, its meaning being reconstructed in the process. The body thus transforms from a passive bearer into a participant; simultaneously, concepts no longer remain at the level of symbolism or metaphor, but are generated, unfolded, and acquire perceptible forms within specific behavioral and spatial contexts.

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In his Autumn/Winter 2000 collection, *After Words*^[3] Chalayan combined clothing, the body, and space in a performative way, allowing the clothing to present a constantly changing state in the process of wearing and transforming. The collection was full of references to Chalayan's symbols and memories of national culture, through which he made a powerful political statement on the trauma of war and exile. Chalayan presented his collection as an art

performance, unlike a typical fashion show. He put on the show at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London. In addition, he also produced a video, *After Words*, based on the performance and incorporated it into his art project.

The designer set up the stage like a living room, with white walls, four sofa chairs, a round coffee table, and a television. Later in the fashion show, four models in grey straight-cut dresses walked to the chairs, unzipped the covers, and removed them, transforming the covers into new dresses. The static furniture instantly became fully functional, wearable garments. Finally, a model in a blue top and brown skirt walked through a circular hole in the coffee table, turning it into a new tablecloth. The models then appeared carrying suitcases that had transformed from sofa chairs, directly echoing how personal belongings, and even culture, are packed and carried during migrations. These dynamic transformations of the clothing were not only on the runway but also a direct visual metaphor: even when we leave our homeland, our history, our home, and our stories remain integrated into our clothing.

The core theme of the Fall/Winter 2000 collection was "migration," a theme that remains relevant in the context of ongoing globalization and geopolitical changes. Migration is no longer merely an individual choice, but often a passive state of being. Large-scale wars, border reorganizations, and displacement—under these conditions, individuals crossing national borders not only face spatial movement but also undergo a constant reconstruction of their identity and cultural belonging. Chalayan did not directly reproduce the specific circumstances of migration, but rather translated the identity changes and cultural flows involved in migration into a perceptible form through the transformation and variability of clothing.



Figure 3. Fall/Winter 2000 *After Words*

5. Conclusion

By examining Hussein Chalayan's design practice, it becomes clear that the core of his work is not merely formal experimentation or stylistic innovation, but rather a continuous process of cultural translation. In this process, clothing is redefined as a medium for carrying memories, identity, and experience. The designer transforms complex cultural issues into a perceptible language of clothing through the three levels of materials, structure, and the body.

First, materials become the primary medium of translation. Materials such as Tyvek paper and printed patterns not only carry visual forms but also imbue clothing with historical memory and personal experience, giving it a fluid and transmissible quality. Second, structure serves as the second medium, using deconstruction, loss, and gradation to visualize the fluidity of trauma and memory, as well as the transformation of cultural identity. Finally, the body and behavior constitute the third medium, allowing clothing to continuously generate meaning in time and space through wearing, disassembly, and performance, transforming the experiences of migration and displacement into a participatory visual narrative. These three mediums intertwine in Chalayan's designs, forming a complete translation mechanism, making clothing not merely garments but also carriers of identity and memory.

In today's increasingly complex globalized and geopolitical landscape, the dilemmas of forced migration and cultural belonging are no longer confined to a minority group, but have become a reality faced by a growing number of people. More than two decades ago, Chalayan explored visual translation paths for these issues using clothing as a medium, demonstrating his foresight and practical significance. For contemporary designers, this practice offers important insights: first, design can transcend the superficial narratives of style and trends, responding to individual experiences and social issues; second, materials, structure, and the body can work together to carry rich cultural connotations; and third, in an era of fluid identity and constantly reshaping cultural boundaries, design can become a practice of "repositioning," helping wearers express belonging and find themselves visually.

In short, Chalayan's work demonstrates a possibility: clothing can not only respond to personal memories but also intervene in social issues. When design goes beyond serving consumption and trends, taking on the functions of recording, expressing, and translating, it acquires cultural value that transcends the material itself. In today's world, where turmoil and uncertainty are the norm, this design attitude is particularly important, reminding us that clothing can serve as a bridge between individual experience, cultural memory, and social reality.

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