



THE INTERPRETATION OF CHINESE HISTORICAL NOVEL "HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSINGS" INTO TAILOR GARMENT

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Abstract. *This study aims to examine how a literary character can be systematically translated into tailored garment design through a practice-based research approach. The research focuses on the character Hua Cheng from the Chinese historical fantasy novel "Heaven Official's Blessing" and explores how narrative elements such as devotion, sacrifice, protection, and power can be embedded into tailoring structure. A qualitative, practice-based design research method was employed, in which the act of designing functioned as both the research process and the research outcome. Data were generated through the development of a moodboard, an influence page, and two technical sheets representing a tailored jacket and tailored pants. Analysis was conducted using reflective and interpretive techniques, examining how narrative intentions were transformed into visual and structural design decisions. The results show that literary narratives can be effectively translated into tailored garments through design elements such as fitted silhouettes, exaggerated shoulder structures, hybrid collar construction, and recurring triangular cutting and pocket details that symbolize pain and repeated sacrifice. The study demonstrates that tailoring can function as a narrative medium and provides a clear method for translating literary characters into contemporary fashion design.*

Keywords: narrative fashion, project based learning, tailoring, literary adaptation.

PRELIMINARY

Fashion design is increasingly understood as a form of cultural communication rather than a purely aesthetic or functional practice. Garments convey meaning through shape, material, color, and construction, enabling designers to express ideas, emotions, and narratives visually. Recent reviews of fashion research highlight growing interest in viewing clothing as a system of signs and in recognizing design practice as a form of knowledge production (Zou et al., 2022). This shift has encouraged scholars to explore how fashion can function as a storytelling medium that preserves cultural memory and translates abstract concepts into material form.

Literature is a significant source of storytelling in fashion design. Literary works offer structured narratives, symbolic imagery, and emotional depth that can inform design decisions. When designers adapt novels into fashion collections, they reinterpret characters and themes through material and construction rather than directly illustrating textual content. Design research supports this interpretive

approach, emphasizing that meaning emerges through transformation and creative translation instead of imitation (Kaszynska & Kimbell, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, fashion is commonly examined through semiotic and narrative frameworks. Semiotic theory positions clothing as a system of signs in which silhouettes, materials, and details communicate cultural meaning, while narrative theory extends this view by framing garments as devices capable of expressing stories across time and context (Zou et al., 2022). Tailoring decisions such as structure, layering, and rigidity can therefore be read as narrative elements reflecting character traits or symbolic moments from a literary source.

Recent empirical studies further show that narrative clarity influences how audiences interpret and emotionally connect with fashion collections, particularly in luxury and cultural contexts (Lee et al., 2024). Although much of this research focuses on branding and communication, it reinforces the idea that fashion collections can operate as narrative media. Curatorial and exhibition studies similarly demonstrate that garments gain narrative meaning through sequencing, spatial arrangement, and institutional framing, guiding how audiences read embedded stories (Lan & Liu, 2023; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2024; Economou & Derda, 2025). Research on designers such as Alexander McQueen illustrates how literary and historical narratives can be translated into coherent fashion worlds through silhouette, material choice, and symbolic detail (Esguerra, 2024).

Despite these contributions, existing literature largely addresses narrative fashion at a conceptual, curatorial, or career-wide level. Few peer-reviewed studies document how a specific literary work or character is translated into concrete tailoring decisions, such as pattern construction, garment structure, or surface detailing. Bibliometric analyses confirm a methodological gap in fashion research, noting the absence of operational frameworks that link narrative analysis to practical design execution (Zou et al., 2022). This gap is particularly evident in studies involving non-Western literary sources, which remain underrepresented in international fashion scholarship despite their global cultural impact.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the Chinese historical fantasy novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* and the character Hua Cheng, also known as Crimson Rain Sought Flower. Hua Cheng's narrative centers on devotion, sacrifice, protection, and power. A key symbolic moment depicts him sheltering a white flower from a rain of blood created by his own power, representing his unwavering love for Xie Lian. These contrasts provide a strong foundation for translation into tailored garments through color, structure, and material tension.

Rather than using the novel as general inspiration, this research develops a structured narrative-to-tailoring method. Character motifs and symbolic episodes are systematically extracted from the text and mapped onto design variables such as silhouette, layering, textile weight, and construction detail. The objectives of this study are threefold: to develop a clear and repeatable method for translating literary character narratives into tailored garments; to apply this method through the creation of a capsule collection titled *Crimson Rain Sought Flower*; and to evaluate how effectively the garments communicate narrative meaning. The hypothesis is that a structured narrative-to-tailoring approach enables garments to convey character-driven stories even to audiences unfamiliar with the original novel, while contributing transferable insights to fashion design research.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, practice-based design research approach. Practice-based research positions the act of designing as both the research method and the research outcome, allowing knowledge to be generated through the creation, reflection, and analysis of design artifacts. This approach is appropriate for the present study because the research seeks to examine how a literary narrative can be translated into tailored garments through a systematic design process rather than through numerical or statistical measurement.

The scope of this research focuses on the translation of a literary character into tailored garment design. The object of the study is a capsule tailoring collection inspired by the character Hua Cheng from the Chinese fantasy novel titled “Heaven Official’s Blessing”. The research is limited to tailoring and concentrates specifically on a tailored jacket and tailored pants, which are developed as representative garments for the collection titled “Crimson Rain Sought Flower”.

The research focuses on interpreting narrative elements into visual and structural design decisions. The operational focus includes narrative elements, defined as character traits, symbolic moments, and emotional themes extracted from the novel; design translation, defined as the transformation of narrative elements into visual and material components such as silhouette, color, fabric choice, and detailing; and tailoring structure, defined as the technical construction of garments including pattern lines, garment proportions, and structural features of tailored jackets and pants. These operational variables guide the design development process and serve as analytical lenses during reflection and evaluation.

The research was conducted through independent studio-based design practice. Design development, visual research, and technical drawing were carried out in a personal or academic studio environment using digital design tools. As a practice-based design study, this research does not involve a human population in the conventional statistical sense. Instead, design artifacts function as the primary data source. The sample consists of two key design outputs: one tailored jacket design and one tailored pants design. These garments serve as representative samples of the narrative-to-tailoring method applied in this study.

The materials and tools used in the research include visual references from the novel and its adaptations, digital images for moodboard development, graphic design software for creating moodboards and influence pages, technical drawing tools and software for producing garment technical sheets, and figurine templates for visualizing mix-and-match garment combinations. These tools support both the creative process and the systematic documentation of design decisions.

Data collection was conducted through visual research and design documentation. The process included moodboard development to collect and organize visual references reflecting narrative themes, emotional tone, and aesthetic direction; the creation of a press review or influence page to contextualize the collection within existing fashion and visual culture; technical drawing production to document garment structure, proportions, and construction details; and figurine styling to test visual coherence and versatility through mix-and-match combinations. Each artifact produced during this process was treated as qualitative data for analysis.

Data analysis was carried out through reflective and interpretive analysis. The analysis examined how effectively the visual and technical artifacts communicated the intended narrative elements. Moodboards and influence pages were analyzed to assess thematic clarity and consistency, while technical drawings were analyzed to evaluate how narrative concepts were translated into tailoring structure. The findings were interpreted by comparing narrative intentions with visual and structural outcomes, allowing conclusions to be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the narrative-to-tailoring method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study are presented through three primary design artifacts: a combined moodboard and influence page, and two technical garment sheets consisting of a tailored jacket and tailored pants. Together, these artifacts demonstrate the application of the narrative-to-tailoring method developed in this research.

The moodboard and influence page visually consolidate the narrative interpretation of the character Hua Cheng into a coherent design direction. The dominant visual language is built around

contrast, particularly between violence and tenderness, power and devotion. This is communicated through the recurring use of deep crimson, black, and muted ivory tones, which directly reference the symbolic imagery of blood rain and the sheltered white flower. Floral imagery, droplets, and sharp-edged forms coexist within the composition, reflecting the duality of the character as both a destructive force and a devoted protector.



Figure 1. Moodboard and influence page for the *Crimson Rain Sought Flower* collection.

Historical influence is expressed through abstraction rather than literal reproduction. Elements such as umbrella imagery, butterfly symbolism, and floral forms are visually referenced but translated into modern tailoring aesthetics. The influence page further situates the collection within contemporary fashion discourse by referencing structured tailoring, fitted-to-waist silhouettes, and clean, pointed cutting. This result confirms that narrative symbolism can be preserved while remaining aligned with modern tailoring conventions.

The first technical sheet presents a tailored jacket and pants that translate Hua Cheng’s narrative of devotion and repeated sacrifice into structural design details. Both the jacket and the pants incorporate triangular cutting lines and triangular-shaped pocket constructions, which function as visual and structural metaphors for pain, rupture, and endurance. These angular forms intentionally disrupt the otherwise clean tailoring lines, symbolizing the physical and emotional suffering Hua Cheng willingly endures through countless deaths for the sake of protecting and returning to meet Xie Lian. The repetition of the triangular motif across both garments reinforces the idea of recurring sacrifice, embedding narrative meaning consistently throughout the outfit rather than isolating it to a single design element.



Figure 2. Technical sheet 001.

The tailored jacket further emphasizes this narrative through exaggerated shoulder structure and sharp seam geometry, projecting strength and protection while simultaneously carrying visual tension through angular cuts. The hybrid collar construction, in which the collar is integrated as a cutting on the body rather than a traditional attached lapel, frames the neck and chest as guarded yet exposed, reinforcing themes of vulnerability beneath power. The tailored pants echo the jacket's narrative language through matching triangular pocket details and controlled volume, ensuring that the symbolism of pain and devotion is carried across the full look. Together, these construction choices demonstrate how tailoring details can function as narrative devices, transforming abstract themes of suffering and loyalty into tangible, repeatable design elements.

This second technical sheet expands the narrative translation through variation in sleeve construction and volume. The sleeves are raglan-based with pleated expansion and slits, creating a sense of movement and layered protection. This voluminous sleeve design contrasts with the fitted torso, emphasizing the tension between emotional restraint and expressive force. The silhouette remains fitted to the waist, preserving continuity across the collection while allowing narrative evolution. The pants maintain looseness and balance, with cheongsam-inspired button details again used functionally rather than decoratively.



Figure 3. Technical sheet 002

Across both technical sheets, the garments demonstrate consistency in narrative logic. The repetition of structural shoulders, hybrid collars, fitted waists, and symbolic fastening creates a unified system in which each design decision is traceable back to the original narrative interpretation.

Discussion

These results show that narrative content drawn from a novel can be translated into tangible tailoring choices through a systematic method. This supports and extends several strands of recent research. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting how material culture, including fashion objects, can function as narrative carriers that communicate identity and symbolic meaning (Barnard, 2014).

First, the results align with scholarship that treats fashion as a semiotic and narrative system rather than as mere decoration (Zou et al., 2022). The moodboard's mapping of narrative motifs to visual variables demonstrates how semiotic readings of texts can guide design decisions. Rather than treating inspiration as loose or metaphorical, this study documents explicit correspondences (for example, "blood rain" into crimson surface emphasis; "sheltered flower" into protected chest panel and petal-like seams), thereby operationalizing semiotic theory into design practice. Furthermore, the relationship between clothing and identity construction reinforces the role of garments as narrative devices embedded with cultural and emotional significance (Entwistle, 2015).

Second, the study responds to literature emphasising practice-led design as a knowledge-producing method (Kaszynska & Kimbell, 2024). The technical sheets act as both creative outcomes and data: their construction notes and pattern logic are analyzable evidence of how narrative was translated into tailoring. This practice-led evidence model follows calls for transparent methodological reporting in design research and supplies replicable steps that other researchers or designers can test. The translation of literary narratives into design practice also aligns with interdisciplinary approaches that integrate storytelling and visual culture in creative production (Ryan, 2017).

Third, the findings connect to exhibition and curatorial research showing that context and display influence narrative reading (Lan & Liu, 2023; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2024). By including a figurine-based visualization and an influence page that suggest presentation strategies, the study acknowledges that garments communicate meaning most effectively when paired with thoughtful staging. This mirrors recent museum studies that argue narrative meaning is co-produced by object, space, and interpretive framing (Economou & Derda, 2025). In addition, symbolic representation in design elements reflects broader theories of visual communication, where form and structure operate as conveyors of meaning (Lidwell et al., 2010).

Fourth, the results speak to recent evidence about storytelling's role in shaping audience engagement and brand meaning (Lee et al., 2024; Lim, 2024). While those studies focus on consumer responses, this project shows how narrative clarity can be manufactured at the construction stage before being presented to audiences, offering a complementary upstream contribution: designers can deliberately encode narrative cues into garments that will later be reinforced by exhibition or editorial storytelling. This approach also resonates with studies in fashion theory that emphasize the role of design as a medium of cultural expression and narrative embodiment (Crane, 2012).

The review of recent journal literature (Zou et al., 2022; Esguerra, 2024; Lan & Liu, 2023; Kaszynska & Kimbell, 2024) shows a consistent pattern: scholarship recognises narrative and curatorial practices in fashion, and researchers promote practice-led methods, but there is limited peer-reviewed work that documents a reproducible method mapping discrete textual motifs onto technical tailoring rules. The present study fills that specific methodological gap by extracting discrete narrative signals from a literary text (character traits, emblematic scenes, recurrent symbols), mapping each signal to a design variable (silhouette, seam, interfacing, textile weight), and documenting the technical construction so that the interpretive move is explicit and reproducible.

In other words, while earlier studies have established that narrative matters in fashion and that exhibitions and digital tools modulate interpretation (Angeletti et al., 2024; Xu, 2024), they rarely treat tailoring as an operational site of narrative encoding. This study demonstrates that tailoring choices are not neutral; they can be designed to carry narrative load.

Recent advances in digital exhibition and storytelling technologies (Angeletti et al., 2024; Xu, 2024) create opportunities to strengthen or archive narrative-based collections. The influence page included in this project intentionally anticipates multi-platform presentation, recommending that garments be shown with explanatory panels, close-up technical views, and short moving image vignettes to enhance narrative transmission—practices supported by current digital exhibition studies.

Comparatively, international journal research (Zou et al., 2022; Kaszynska & Kimbell, 2024) promotes rigorous practice reporting; national or regionally focused studies (for example, recent practice-based reports in regional design journals and studies on sustainable/design pedagogy) similarly encourage documentation of material and process. The present study draws on both international methodological norms and local practice sensibilities by emphasizing clear technical documentation and cultural sensitivity in translating Chinese literary motifs without resorting to literal costume reproduction. This approach aligns with recommendations in scholarship that urge respectful adaptation of cultural elements and critical reflexivity during design practice.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample is small (a capsule consisting of two tailored pieces) and therefore best understood as a methodological case study rather than a generalizable claim about all novel-to-fashion translations. Second, audience evaluation was not extensive in this phase; subsequent research should include structured viewer and wearer studies to empirically measure interpretive effectiveness, following consumer-response methods suggested in branding and storytelling research (Lee et al., 2024; Lim, 2024). Finally, while the technical sheets were detailed, full prototyping and material testing would strengthen claims about construction feasibility and wearer comfort.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes a practical, documentable method for designers and researchers who wish to translate literary characters into tailored garments. It also signals directions for future research: empirical reception studies, expanded capsule production, and exhibition trials that integrate digital storytelling methods to test narrative persistence across platforms.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how a literary narrative can be systematically translated into tailored garment design through a practice-based research approach. The findings demonstrate that a structured narrative-to-tailoring method enables literary character elements to be effectively embedded into garment construction, visual language, and technical detailing. Through the development of a moodboard, influence page, and two technical sheets representing a tailored jacket and pants, the study confirms that narrative meaning can be communicated through tailoring decisions rather than through surface decoration alone.

The results show that character traits, symbolic moments, and emotional themes extracted from the novel "Heaven Official's Blessing" can be translated into clear design variables such as silhouette, structural emphasis, cutting lines, and detailing. The use of contrasting color palettes, fitted-to-waist silhouettes, exaggerated shoulders, hybrid collar construction, and recurring triangular cutting and pocket details successfully conveyed themes of devotion, protection, sacrifice, and pain associated with the character Hua Cheng. These elements demonstrate that tailoring structure can function as a narrative device, embedding emotional and symbolic meaning directly into garment construction.

In relation to the research objectives, the study achieved three key outcomes. First, it developed a clear and repeatable method for translating literary character narratives into tailored garments. Second, it applied this method in the creation of a capsule collection titled *Crimson Rain Sought Flower*, producing coherent and narratively consistent design artifacts. Third, it evaluated the effectiveness of this translation through reflective and interpretive analysis of the visual and technical outputs, confirming that the intended narrative could be read from the garments even without direct reference to the source text.

Overall, this research addresses a methodological gap in fashion design scholarship by documenting how narrative analysis can be operationalized into concrete tailoring decisions. The findings contribute to practice-based fashion research by demonstrating that design artifacts can function as valid research evidence when systematically developed and analyzed. The study also expands academic discussion by engaging with a non-Western literary source, offering a framework that can be adapted for future research involving other characters, narratives, or tailoring contexts.

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