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Research on the Typological Presentation of Costume Images of Late Qing Chinese Figures in The Illustrated London News and Their Transformation in Character Design

Yuhua Xue

Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Xi'an, China
vantaVKor@163.com

Abstract. Images of Chinese figures in 19th-century British illustrated news frequently achieve identity recognition through costumes, hairstyles, props and body postures. Focusing on the images of late Qing Chinese figures published in *The Illustrated London News* from 1842 to 1876, this paper selects officials, soldiers, townsfolk and female images as the main research objects. Combined with close reading of images, image-text intertextuality and character design analysis, it discusses how costume symbols transform complex social identities into communicable visual types. The study argues that the costume images in the pictorial are not direct restorations of the late Qing costume system, but character-oriented images reorganized under the influence of news media, British readers' expectations and imperial perspectives. When contemporary character design draws on such materials, it should extract methods from contours, identity hierarchies, movement relationships and media biases, rather than remaining at the collage of "Chinese-style" patterns.

Keywords: late Qing costume images, *The Illustrated London News*, typological presentation, character design, visual transformation

1. Introduction

After entering 19th-century British illustrated news, the images of late Qing Chinese figures were often processed into visual types with clear identity indications. Readers may not be familiar with the Qing Dynasty costume system, nor may they understand the Chinese context of specific events, but they can quickly judge the identity of the figures in the pictures through official hats, robes, braids, weapons, cargo loads, smoking sets, tea baskets and body postures. For this reason, costumes in the pictorial are not merely reproductions of clothing, but a set of readable visual markers. They compress figures such as officials, soldiers, peddlers, laborers and women into recognizable and communicable characters.

The Illustrated London News, founded in 1842, is regarded as an important illustrated news publication in 19th-century Britain. Relevant databases and studies have pointed out that it promoted changes in news communication methods through image reporting, forming a reading structure with text and illustrations side by side [1, 2]. This media environment changed the way Chinese figures

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were presented. Chinese images in traditional travelogues or picture albums mostly relied on written descriptions, while the pictorial required figures to be quickly understood in a single woodcut print. Costumes, props and postures thus assumed the role of compressing information.

Regarding Chinese images in *The Illustrated London News*, existing studies have mostly been conducted from the perspectives of overseas Chinese images, war reporting, news discourse and image-text relations. Ji Nian's research systematically sorted out the images of late Qing Chinese people in the pictorial from 1842 to 1876, and pointed out that they involved multiple types such as emperors, officials, soldiers and common people [3]. This research provides material basis and methodological inspiration for this paper. However, existing discussions have paid more attention to how "Chinese images" are constructed by Western news discourse, and there is still room for further analysis of the specific visual dimension of costumes. Costumes are not subsidiary details on figures, but an important entry point for the pictorial to complete identity classification.

This paper does not attempt to restore the complete genealogy of the late Qing costume system, nor does it regard the pictorial images as reliable catalogs of costume history. The paper focuses more on a specific question: how the pictorial transforms late Qing Chinese figures into recognizable news characters through costumes, hairstyles, hats, props and movements; and what methodological references these images can provide for character design today. This approach can avoid reducing traditional costume elements to simple pattern materials, and can also implement the "modern design transformation of excellent Chinese traditional cultural elements" into images and design methods. In other words, what this paper intends to discuss is not "whether late Qing costumes can be used for design", but "how to use these materials on the premise of understanding the source of images and viewing biases".

2. Typological presentation of costume images and design transformation

2.1. Scope of materials and methodological notes

The materials of this paper mainly come from image reports about Chinese figures in *The Illustrated London News* from 1842 to 1876, and take several sorted typical plates as the entry point for analysis, including *Chinese Woman Gathering Tea—From a Drawing by a Chinese Artist*, *A Group of Chinese—From a Sketch by Our Special Artist* and "Sketches from China", etc. This time period is selected because it covers the critical period when British illustrated news continuously observed China after the Opium War, and also shows the change of the pictorial from early custom descriptions to reports on war, diplomacy and social life.

In terms of analytical methods, this paper first expands costumes from "clothing" to a visual system including hats, hairstyles, body contours, accessories, professional props and movement postures, and then examines how these elements combine with picture titles, captions and reporting contexts. That is to say, this paper does not take textual research on the name of each garment as the only goal, but cares about how readers identify the identity of figures through images. This approach can connect costume research, image communication and character design: costumes are both historical materials and media through which figures are typified.

It should be noted that there is a gap between the pictorial images and the real life of the Qing Dynasty. Some images come from the observations of special artists, and some are redrawn based on hearsay, sketches or Chinese paintings; woodcut reproduction will further alter lines, proportions and details. Therefore, this paper adopts a cautious attitude when using these images: on the one hand, it acknowledges that they preserve some visual clues of late Qing figure costumes and social

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life; on the other hand, it does not regard them as transparent historical photographs, but understands them in the context of 19th-century British news production and cross-cultural viewing.

2.2. Images of officials: hats, robes and hierarchical order

Among the Chinese figure images in *The Illustrated London News*, the images of officials are most easily recognized through costumes. Official hats, long robes, court beads, wide sleeves, boots and retinue queues constitute the basic visual structure of the "official" character. For British readers, the specific ranks of Qing official costumes may not be accurately identified, but the tall or prominent hat ornaments, layered robe contours, and postures such as sitting upright, traveling and meeting are sufficient to create a hierarchical impression of Oriental bureaucracy.

This typification process is related to the Qing costume system itself. Qing costumes had a clear identity-marking function, and official costumes were connected with the hierarchy system in terms of hats, rank badges, colors and accessories [4, 5]. But the pictorial did not always accurately reproduce these institutional details. It tended to transform the complex costume system into several visual symbols that could be read from a distance: hats indicated authority, robes indicated status, retinues indicated rank, and seats or sedan chairs indicated the position of being served. As a result, the costume system was compressed into "contour recognition" in the sense of character design. This compression may not be accurate, but it can explain how news images turn institutional identity into instantly visible visual judgments, which is also one of the keys for this paper to turn to design issues.

Figure 1. Official travel and ritual procession: *Proceedings of the Chinese Commissioners at Hong-Kong*, published in *The Illustrated London News*, February 1846

From the perspective of image-text relationship, official images are often connected with news events such as diplomacy, war, negotiation and local governance. The clothing of the figure does not only indicate "he is a Qing official", but also assumes a narrative function in the picture: he may be the object of negotiation being watched, or a symbol of the system being evaluated. When discussing British visual and ritual narratives of the Qing court in the 19th century, James L. Hevia pointed out that war, diplomacy and images jointly participated in the interpretation of the Qing political order [6]. In this context, official costumes were easily treated by British news media as external representations of the Qing Empire's power.

For contemporary character design, the value of such official images lies not in directly copying official costumes, but in suggesting how character identity is established through "recognizable contours". The height of hat ornaments, shoulder width, cuff volume, hem drape, accessory positions

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and retinue relationships can all serve as visual clues to character rank. If only rank badges, auspicious clouds or dragon patterns are added in design, the character will easily fall into a vague "Qing Dynasty style". A more effective way is to first distinguish the character's situation: whether he is traveling, hearing a case, receiving foreigners, or being placed under the gaze of war reports. Different situations will generate different character temperaments with the same costume symbols.

2.3. Images of soldiers: weapons, formations and body postures

The typification of soldier images is mainly achieved through weapons, formations, uniform tendencies and body postures. Around the Second Opium War, a large number of images related to Chinese military affairs appeared in the pictorial, with titles often containing words such as "war", "battle" and "Chinese soldiers". Compared with official images, soldier images emphasize more on actions and scenes: holding weapons, lining up, running, guarding, fighting or being defeated. These movements make costumes no longer just identity markers, but enter the narrative about national capability and military order.

It is worth noting that Chinese soldiers in the pictorial were not always portrayed as stable and dignified military characters. Quite a few images would reinforce the impression of "disorganized formations", "mixed equipment" or "loose bodies", so as to serve British readers' understanding of the backward military of the late Qing Dynasty. When sorting out the pictorial materials, Ji Nian noticed that the images of Chinese people in the pictorial were jointly related to journalists' experience, battlefield reports, hearsay and imperial consciousness [3]. In soldier images, this consciousness is particularly obvious: costumes and weapons are used to judge whether an army is modern and effective.

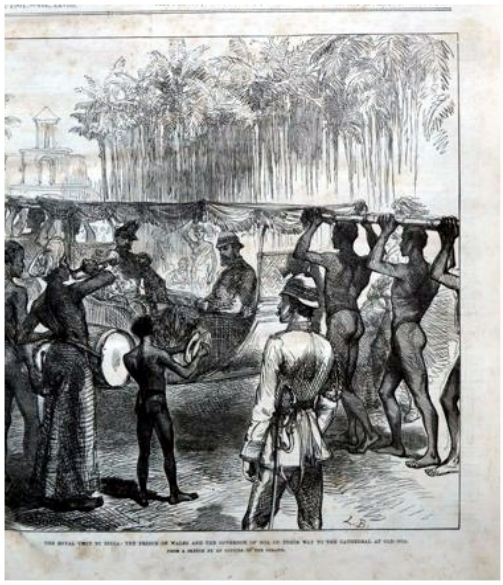

Figure 2. Chinese soldiers/formation scene: Chinese soldiers, weapons and formation scenes on the page of *The Illustrated London News*, January 1876

Costumes thus have a dual function in soldier images. On the one hand, it makes figures recognized as "soldiers"; on the other hand, it is often used to form an implicit contrast with the uniforms, formations and weapons of the British army. If the clothing, hat styles and weapons of Chinese soldiers appeared scattered, they would be included in the visual narrative of backwardness,

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chaos or non-modernity. Edward W. Said's so-called "Orientalism" is not only reflected in the generalization of the East in words, but also in how images select, arrange and interpret differences [7]. The differences in military costumes are amplified here into differences in civilization levels.

When drawing on such materials for character design, one should be wary of directly taking the military images in the pictorial as "templates for Qing soldier modeling". A more preferable approach is to analyze it as a case of mediatized characters: which elements come from Qing military costumes, which come from British painters' observations of the battlefield, and which come from presuppositions about Oriental armies. Design transformation can retain image clues such as weapons, hat styles, protective gear and formation postures. Therefore, in design, the images of Chinese soldiers in the pictorial cannot be directly used as modeling templates. Instead, they should be corrected in combination with the Qing military uniform system, contemporary photos, Chinese documents and physical materials. The identity, situation and action purpose of the characters should also be explained in the character story, so as to avoid following the pictorial's implications of the Qing army as "backward", "chaotic" and "comical".

2.4. Townsfolk figures: professional props and the production of "everyday China"

Townsfolk figures are a type of images in the pictorial that best reflect the relationship between costumes and occupations. Different from officials and soldiers, the identities of peddlers, sedan chair bearers, barbers, coolies, opium smokers and street onlookers are often not confirmed through institutional costumes, but recognized through clothing texture, body movements and props in hand. Short jackets, loose trousers, straw hats, carrying tools, baskets, smoking sets and street scenes together constitute the visual vocabulary of "everyday China".

Images such as *A Group of Chinese—From a Sketch by Our Special Artist* precisely reflect the way the pictorial treats crowds as social types [8]. The figures in the picture may not all have clear names; they more often appear together with postures, hairstyles, clothing and watching movements. Such images transform Chinese society into an observable folk scene, giving British readers a reading feeling of "I have seen Chinese daily life". Roland Barthes' analysis of image meaning reminds us that images are not naturally transparent, and titles and captions will guide the picture to specific interpretations [9]. In the pictorial, occupational titles, picture titles and captions often prescribe identities for the figures.

Figure 3. Professional Figures in a Beijing lantern shop: painted by Thomas Allom, *Show-room of a Lantern Merchant, at Peking*, circa 1843

The design value of townsfolk costumes lies in that it provides the relationship between characters and labor movements. A character is not given a set of clothes first and then placed into a scene; on the contrary, the length, tightness, wear, sleeve-rolling method and attached items of

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clothing are often determined by the working state. The shoulder stress of a cargo carrier, the toolbox of a barber, the basket of a fruit seller, and the leaning posture of an onlooker can all explain the character's identity better than individual patterns.

But it is precisely in this type of images that the pictorial often puts streets, opium, poverty and physical spectacles together to create a consumable exotic daily life. In the 1858 "Sketches from China", image titles such as "Chinese Female Fruit Seller" and "Chinese Opium Addict" appeared [10]. If contemporary design directly adopts these images, it is easy to repeat the gaze of 19th-century news media on Chinese lower-class figures. A safer approach is to retain the structural relationship between occupational movements and daily utensils, while avoiding decorating suffering, poverty or addiction states.

2.5. Female images: labor scenes, body postures and gendered gaze

Female images in the pictorial are often placed in scenes of tea picking, selling, home life or streets. Compared with officials and soldiers, the identity hierarchy of female costumes is not necessarily explained in detail. The pictorial pays more attention to body postures, labor movements and the construction of gentle, elegant or exotic temperaments. The 1857 *Chinese Woman Gathering Tea—From a Drawing by a Chinese Artist* is a notable example [11]. The image title specifically emphasizes that it comes from "a Chinese artist's work", which gives the picture a credibility close to native images in front of British readers.

The costumes in the tea-picking girl image do not take institutional hierarchy as the core, but generate a gentle imagination of Chinese women in coordination with labor movements and natural backgrounds. Sleeves, hairstyles, lowered heads and picking postures together constitute a quiet, diligent and viewable female character. Such images may not directly belittle Chinese women, but they still place women in the position of being watched. Stuart Hall's discussion on "representation" emphasizes that images do not passively reflect reality, but produce meaning in a symbolic system [12]. Female costumes in the pictorial are precisely read in such a symbolic system.

Figure 4. Tea-picking woman and labor scene: *Chinese Woman Gathering Tea—From a Drawing by a Chinese Artist*, published in *The Illustrated London News*, February 7, 1857

From the perspective of costume history, there were inherent Manchu-Han differences, regional differences and class differences in late Qing women's clothing [5, 13]. But the pictorial often

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compressed this complexity into readable female types: tea-picking girls, female peddlers, housewives or street women. This compression makes figures easier to be used in news illustrations, and also makes them seemingly convenient reference materials in contemporary character design. The problem is that if only clothing contours and hairstyles are extracted while ignoring the media stance of the pictorial, the design result may continue the old stereotype of "docile Oriental women".

Therefore, the contemporary transformation of female characters should consider costumes, movements and subjectivity together. Taking the tea-picking girl as an example, designers can extract the head contour, sleeve structure, tea basket and picking movement, but should not only emphasize the gentle posture. The mobility of the character can be enhanced through gaze direction, body center of gravity, labor environment and tool details, making her not just a viewable custom symbol, but a character with professional experience and life situation.

2.6. From costume symbols to character design: transformation paths and boundaries

The above types of images show that the late Qing costume images in *The Illustrated London News* have strong potential for character design, but this potential does not mean that they can be directly copied. Character design needs to establish the relationship between character identity, contour recognition, movement logic and narrative situation. When discussing character design, Brian Tillman emphasizes that the appearance of a character should serve identity, personality and story [14]. From this perspective, what the late Qing pictorial costume images can provide is not ready-made modeling, but a set of historical cases of "designing figures into readable characters".

The specific transformation can be divided into three levels. The first is contour extraction. The hat ornaments and robes of officials, the weapons and standing postures of soldiers, the carrying tools and body tilts of peddlers, and the sleeves and picking movements of tea-picking girls can all form differentiated contours. The second is the reorganization of identity relationships. A character's costume cannot exist in isolation; it must be connected with retinues, tools, space and events. The third is the correction of media bias. The pictorial images carry the selectivity of British news reports, and contemporary design needs to realize that they are not neutral materials.

This also involves the scale issue of the transformation of traditional cultural elements. Many "Chinese style" or "Qing Dynasty style" designs tend to understand traditional elements as a pattern library, taking symbols such as dragon patterns, cloud patterns, frog buttons and official hats for collage. Although this approach is intuitive, it is difficult to support complex characters. In contrast, the pictorial materials remind us that where costumes really work is often not in individual patterns, but in how the character's identity is understood by readers through contours, movements, scenes and picture titles.

Victor Papanek once criticized design for being divorced from real social needs and falling into superficial consumption [15]. Putting this reminder back into the object of this paper, a clear boundary can be drawn: the contemporary transformation of late Qing costume images should not turn historical figures into mere visual spectacles, let alone package the colonial gaze in the pictorial into a novel style. Designers should establish an explanatory relationship between image sources, historical contexts and character narratives, so that traditional visual resources retain recognizable historical depth when entering contemporary design.

3. Conclusion

The costume images of late Qing Chinese figures in *The Illustrated London News* do not simply record "what people wore in the late Qing Dynasty". It is more like a journalistic visual system:

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through hats, robes, hairstyles, weapons, cargo loads, tea baskets and body postures, it transforms complex Chinese social figures into character types that British readers can quickly recognize. Official images emphasize hierarchy and rituals; soldier images are related to military capability and war narratives; townsfolk figures generate "everyday China" through occupational movements and props; female images are often shaped in labor scenes and gendered gazes.

This typological presentation provides usable materials for contemporary character design. Its value lies not in directly copying the late Qing costumes in the pictorial, but in understanding how costumes jointly produce character meaning with identity, movements, props, scenes and media explanations. If methods can be transformed from contour recognition, identity relationships and narrative situations, late Qing pictorial images can become effective samples for the modern design application of traditional visual resources; if their news media and imperial viewing backgrounds are ignored, it is easy to repackage historical prejudices into "Chinese style".

Therefore, this paper argues that the research on late Qing costume images based on *The Illustrated London News* can establish a relatively specific transformation path between art history image analysis and contemporary character design. Follow-up research can further establish an image case library, label and sort out the costumes of officials, soldiers, townsfolk and women in the pictorial, and cross-verify them with Qing costume relics, photographs and Chinese native images, so as to improve the accuracy and ethical awareness of design transformation.

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