



## Fashion, Tradition, and Identity: Comparative Analysis of zhigong tu 職貢圖 and European Costume Books

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores and compares certain examples of *zhigong tu* 職貢圖 (illustrations of tributary states) and its European counterparts, costume books, emphasizing their crucial role in understanding cultural diversity. Both traditions in China and Europe provide valuable sources offering insights into the customs and identities of various regions. Chinese *zhigong tu* document foreign emissaries and tributary states and illuminate China's self-perception in the context of global interactions. European costume books reflect curiosity about new lands and their diverse cultures. The research includes an introduction to the genre and an overview of the corresponding traditions. It analyses how *zhigong tu* and costume books contribute to the comprehension of the cultural identity of a specific country. It culminates in a comparative analysis of Qing dynasty (1644-1912) *zhigong tu* and European costume books of the 19th century.

**Keywords:** costume books, ethnography, cultural identity, art tradition, fashion

### **The genre of costume books**

A costume book can be described as a distinctive album focused on ethnic clothing. It presents hand-painted or printed illustrations (often wood or copperplate engravings), along with descriptions of clothing, fashion, and traditions of different regions, past epochs, and foreign peoples. Because they were often pioneering and precise works, conducted with – as far as possible – encyclopaedical accuracy, they can be perceived as specific ethnographic materials. Illustrated ethnographic albums were utilized not only among entities actively engaged in expansion or geographic discoveries but also among countries not directly involved in such pursuits. These albums depicted individuals from diverse cultures, whether within a single state or beyond, occasionally romanticizing them as primitive or exotic while also portraying them as menacing and dangerous. One of the functions of such pieces of pictorial, literary works is the distinction of "self" versus the "other." The concept of "otherness" explores the sociocultural dichotomy between an in-group and an out-group. It involves the identification of individuals or groups based on shared characteristics, often leading to the perception of an "us" with commonalities and an "other" defined by differences. (Shanley 1997, 165-173) This binary distinction can contribute to the formation of stereotypes, prejudices, and, at times, discriminatory behaviours.

In Chinese *zhigong tu* 職貢圖 (illustrations of tributary states) or costume books, this concept was utilized to underscore China's self-image as a sophisticated empire, differentiating itself from other territories. These books documented the cultural practices of tributary states, thereby establishing a hierarchy with China at the cultural and imperial centre. This not only reflected China's view of itself as a dominant power but also emphasized the perceived cultural distance from these territories. Noteworthy is the portrayal of tributes with occasional errors, underlining the diplomatic nuances of these encounters. This opposition, however, should not be simplified to a dualistic division of "civilized" and "barbarian" since *zhigong tu* developed a system that measured that distance by examining the specifics of others' practices. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 15) At any rate, the linkage to ruling power is evident.

Conversely, the European tradition can be connected to the discovery of new lands and cultures and can manifest the evolution of fashion trends. In Europe, during the Age of Discovery (15th-16th century) and Western colonialism (15th-20th century), the concept of 'otherness' took a different form. Through their costume books and other artworks, European countries began to define themselves as cultured and civilized in contrast to the societies they encountered and often colonized. This self-perception was reflected in their artistic representations, which often exoticized or simplified the cultures they depicted. Such portrayals played a role in justifying colonial ambitions and reinforced a sense of European cultural superiority. Nevertheless, in terms of artistic representation, paramount importance was placed on detailing, thereby contributing to the broader pool of knowledge of historical fashion and social hierarchy.

### **The costume books tradition in China**

In Chinese history, portraying foreign emissaries who paid tribute at the imperial court emerged as a special tradition. The tribute system began in China around the 3rd century BCE, although this dating is only hypothetical. (Zhang 2013) *Zhigong tu* as an artistic genre arose following the emergence of this system. (Ge 2019, 124-148) It is a testimony not only to Chinese aesthetics and art tradition but also to the Chinese perception of the relationship between China and the outer world. It served as a pioneer visual representation in contrast to the prevalent oral traditions. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 6-15) In terms of artistic approach, these albums were characterized by their distinct style: subjects, usually in traditional attire, were portrayed against blank backgrounds without the use of three-dimensional perspective, a feature not common in traditional Chinese painting. This aligns with the broader characteristics of Chinese

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portraiture, where facial features were not typically emphasized. The portraits usually presented the subject in a side view rather than frontally, with a focus on standard, familiar representations. This style aimed to create a general, recognizable image of both Chinese and foreigners. In traditional Chinese art, portraiture was not initially as prevalent as in European art. When portraits were created, they were typically of eminent figures such as emperors, scholars, and later, members of the growing merchant class. (Dietrich 1993, 7-26) Chinese portraits contrasted with the more lifelike representations found in European art. The portraits often included the entire body, with the face being smaller, in contrast to European portraits, which focused more on the face and upper body against a uniform background. For Chinese painters, the emphasis was often on capturing the spirit or essence of the subject rather than detailed physical likeness, reflecting the philosophical background of the artistic tradition. (Encyclopaedia Britannica) The beginnings of *zhigong tu* as a literary and artistic genre are associated with the *Liang zhigong tu* 梁職貢圖 (Liang Imperial Illustrations of Tributary People), which, according to the legend was painted by emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty (Liang Yuandi 梁元帝; r. 552-554). (Hans 2019, 5)

This piece was not merely an artistic creation but also a potent symbol of the era's political and cultural ethos. Its significance lies in its portrayal of tributary envoys, which served as a visual testament to the Liang dynasty's broad influence and diplomatic reach. By illustrating these foreign figures, *Liang zhigong tu* underscored China's central position in East Asian geopolitics and its self-perception as a cultural and political hegemon. As such, the portrayal of foreign emissaries in *zhigong tu* was significant not only for its artistic merit but also for its role in documenting and asserting China's worldview and status.

Moreover, this work established a standard in how foreign subjects were artistically represented, influencing generations of Chinese artists. Its style and thematic focus were replicated and adapted in later dynasties, reflecting the evolving nature of China's interactions with neighbouring states and the broader world. Thus, *Liang zhigong tu* was exceptionally influential not only in shaping the artistic conventions of *zhigong tu* but also in embodying the dynastic identity and foreign policy perspectives of its time.

The *zhigong tu* not only left an enduring imprint on the aesthetic history of China, shaping artistic traditions for generations but also catalysed the emergence of a distinctive intellectual tradition. By depicting foreign emissaries, these artworks effectively communicated China's sense of pride and self-assurance. The deliberate comparison of these emissaries with representations of unfamiliar customs, like

exotic attire, distinct forms of greetings or ceremonial rituals, musical instruments, or dances, served a dual purpose. It not only highlighted China's perceived uniqueness and superiority but also enriched the narrative, presenting the state as an empire at the world's centre, at least from around the 6th century CE. That narrative played a significant role in shaping China's cultural identity and worldview at that time. (Ge 2019, 124)

This tradition experienced an increase during Song dynasty rule (960-1279) and survived uninterrupted until the rule of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). In the eighteenth century, Qing China, due to a remarkable territorial expansion, developed an interest in different ethnicities and nations, which was manifested in its literary works. (Zhou 2022) For example, *Tongcheng pai* 桐城派 (Tongcheng School) scholars, such as Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797), demonstrated a cosmopolitan perspective in their poetry and essays, exploring various ethnic groups within and beyond the Qing Empire, evident in his *Suiyuan Shihua* 隨園詩話 ("Poetry Notes of Sui Yuan") (1790). The *zhigong tu* tradition reached its peak at that time, culminating in the *Huang Qing Zhigong tu* 皇清職貢圖 (*Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples*) (1769), an extensive work profiling the diversity of people and places on an unprecedented scale. The album testified to the outstanding achievements of Qing rule. Hence, the self-congratulatory text of the *Kangxi* 康熙 emperor (r. 1662-1722) was included in 1696 in its preamble. In this text, the monarch declares that his state controls *tianxia* 天下 (all under heaven), which pays him tribute. (Ge 2019, 144-145)

Several versions of *Huang Qing Zhigong tu* have been released. The first version was completed in 1759 and was followed by an additional part six years later. (Ulrich 2010) The most elaborate version contains 304 colourful paintings on silk. There are three relatively complete albums held at the National Library of France, the Beijing Palace Museum, and the Taipei Palace Museum. (Ming and Wei 2019) The versions were significantly different. To demonstrate this, below is a comparison of a commoner from the Ryukyu image prepared by Ulrich Theobald.



"Commoner from Ryukyu." In: *Huang Qing Zhigongtu* 皇清職貢圖 luxury edition. (c. 1790).

Portal: *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55010283d.item>>. Accessed: 2023-11-27.



"Commoner from Ryukyu." In: *Huang Qing Zhigongtu* 皇清職貢圖 *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 edition. (c. 1790)

Portal: *China Knowledge.de*. <<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Science/huangqingzhigongtu.html>>. Accessed: 2023-11-27.

In comparing the depiction of the Ryukyu man, both the *Huang Qing Zhigong tu* luxury edition and the *Siku quanshu* edition showcase a consistent pose and attribute. However, a notable difference emerges in visual richness: the luxury edition, features vibrant colours and intricate details, while the *Siku quanshu* edition is a simpler black-and-white reprint. This difference underscores different intended audiences and purposes: the luxury edition potentially aimed at a more elite viewership, emphasizing the empire's grandeur, while the *Siku quanshu* edition served a more utilitarian and educational role.

Therefore, from an alternative perspective, *zhigong tu* was addressed to the travellers and provided a means for them to observe and categorize diverse peoples and cultures. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 10)

*Huang Qing Zhigong tu* all contained illustrations (not always in colour), most often of a woman and a man during traditional activities. As a third element, a culture-specific attribute like a weapon or musical instrument was often added. Items such as jugs, spears, staffs, or stringed boxes were recurrent motifs, adding layers of cultural and symbolic significance to the illustrations. For example, *Dougou* and other *Fanmin* people are depicted with the teapot (woman) and the curved sword (man), which shows the gender roles and positions in that society. The teapot could symbolize domesticity, nurturing, or the role of caretaker. It might suggest that women in that society are primarily responsible for household tasks, hospitality, or nurturing relationships. The sword, on the other hand, symbolizes strength, protection, or authority, suggesting that men in society are primarily associated with defence, leadership, and safeguarding the community. Another interpretation could be that this kind of sword represents tools used in farming or agriculture, implying that men also play a significant role in agricultural activities and land cultivation.



*Xining xiantu* 西寧縣土 "Xining County." In: *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (Huang Qing Zhigongtu)*. (Leiden, NL : Koninklijke Brill NV, 2022), p. 340-341.

Importantly, each graphic in *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples* was provided with a basic description, usually with simplified geographical and cultural features, written in classical Chinese. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 6) It consists of 9 *juan* 卷 ("scroll" or "fascicle") and has more than 600 illustrations in total. The author of the illustrations was the painter *Jin Tingbiao* 金廷標 (?-1767). The creation of the book was overseen by *Fuheng* 傅恒 (1720-1770) – a significant Qing dynasty official. (Ulrich 2010)

Texts of such albums were based on local gazetteers, which were regularly revised and expanded from the sixteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries. Works were mostly anonymous. Instances where authorship, specifically the acknowledgment of the artist's and calligrapher's names, was infrequently signified and meant the creators' pride in their work. Popular topics of albums texts were marriage, courtship, death, and diet rituals. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 6-15)

Primarily, the *zhigong tu* served utilitarian purposes with the overarching goal of glorifying the dynasty and the emperor's reign. The *zhigong tu* were intended to function as a representation of the order established by the empire, simultaneously justifying and preserving the relationships between the dynasty and its tributaries. There are also examples of albums devoted especially to minority ethnic groups from frontier regions under imperial Chinese control, like *Miaoren tu* 苗人圖 (Miao People Illustrations) (c. 1800), also called *Bai Miao tu* 百苗圖 (Hundred Miao Illustrations). The term "Miao" here broadly covers various minority groups in China's southwest, beyond just the self-identified Miao (Hmong) or those labelled as such by the Han majority. Albums featuring illustrations, writing, and poetry started becoming popular in the 18th century as a form of art. The *Miaoren tu*, commissioned for Manchu and Han elites, depicted ethnic minorities from China's southern and southwestern frontiers during the late imperial era. These albums reflect ethnic awareness and statecraft and provide anthropologists, geographers, and historians with perspectives on China's frontier populations. They are also prized by art collectors. (Deal and Hostetler 2006, 6-15)

### **Chinese costume books tradition compared with European**

Chinese and European costume books share similarities but also have distinct differences. Both traditions focus on artistic expression and serve to document the cultural diversity of their regions. They

feature detailed illustrations that showcase the intricacies of clothing, offering insight into various cultures and their fashion styles. Chinese costume books illustrated the customs of various ethnic groups, e.g., *Huang Qing Zhigong tu* depicted people from Korea, Ryukyu, Annam, Siam, and foreign emissaries. European costume books depicted the regional clothing styles within Europe as well as the traditional clothes of autochthons encountered during geographical discoveries and colonial rule. (Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary People 2022)

Since Chinese costume books date back to the 6th century BCE, they are significantly older than the first European examples. On the European continent, costume books emerged during the Renaissance (14th-16th century) in the 16th century. In the spirit of the era, a human being became the centre and measure of all things, while interest in foreign cultures was reinforced by European geographical discoveries. (Cartwright 2020) The first costume book was Francois Desprez's (1530-1580/1587) *Le recueil de la diversité des habits qui sont de present en usage tant es pays d'Europe, Asie, Affrique et Isles sauvages* ("The collection of the diversity of clothes which are now in use in the countries of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Wild Isles"), published in Paris in 1562 by Richard Breton. Costume engravings by the Italian engraver Enea Vico (1523-1567) served as models for costume illustrations. The most popular costume books were Hans Weigl's (1549-1578) *Habitus praecipuorum populorum* ("The attitude of the principal peoples," 1577), Jost Amman's (c. 1539-1591) *Gynaeceum* (1586) and Ceasare Vecellio's (c. 1521 – c. 1601) *Degli habitantichi* ("Ancient habits," 1590). (Mielnik 2008, 32) The popularity of these publications, as Rolf Walther argues, was caused by the great accuracy and meticulousness to the clothes' details. (Women's costume book by Anton Möller and its predecessors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century 1963, 452) Worth noticing that Vecellio's work was published four times. (Iwanoyko 1960, 312)

The purposes of these Chinese and European traditions differ significantly. Chinese costume books aimed to convey China's sense of pride and self-confidence, using representations of foreign customs as a foil for China's image as a universal empire. On the other hand, European costume books were often created to document and preserve changing fashion trends, as well as the exotic traditions of inhabitants of the New Land, frequently including moralizing elements from religious texts, such as the Bible. (Mielnik 2008, 37) While highlighting costumes in diverse states and ways of wearing, the album may also possess a moralizing function, aligning with contemporary clothing regulations and societal calls for modesty. (Mielnik 2008, 20.42)

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that Chinese albums were not immune to inaccuracies. Within the pages of *Huang Qing Zhigong tu*, notable errors are apparent, including the information that France, before adopting Catholicism, was initially a Buddhist state, or the conflation of France and Portugal as a single nation, and depicting Polish people with Mongolian face features. (Hosteler and Xuemei Wu 2022) However, as previously mentioned in the article, the genre of portraiture was not as common in China as it was in Europe. Therefore, these inaccuracies could indeed be attributed to differences in tradition rather than solely to inaccuracies. Therefore, one could infer that, for China, the crucial aspect lay in the mere fact that people from distant lands visited and engaged in trade with China rather than the individuals themselves being of primary importance. It would also imply China's perspective and a sense of pride in the tribute and homage paid by tributary states and envoys to the emperor. However, it is also applicable to Europeans who, by showing the primitive nature of the autochthons, emphasized their superiority. At the same time, some can argue that those details can prove European scientific and ethnographic motivation, which is lacking in the Chinese examples.

Artistic styles distinguish the two traditions. European depictions showcase individuals often accompanied by partial backgrounds and with the presence of light and shadow. In contrast, the Chinese illustrations, exemplified by the attached examples from *Huang Qing Zhigong tu*, do not utilize backgrounds and light. It is worth noting that group depictions were likely more commonly seen in European costume books.

As an example, can serve depictions below:



Matejko, Jan. „Noblemen 1697-1795” in: *Ubiory w Polsce 1200-1795*, Cracow, 1875.

The illustration below is from Jan Matejko's (1838-1893) *Clothes in Poland 1200-1795*, a 19th-century album. It showcases the history of Polish attire through lithographic illustrations across various centuries and social classes, with editions published in 1860 and 1875. The work is patriotic and historical in nature, aiming to preserve the culture and tradition. (Czajka 2016, 123) It is seen as the most prominent example of a Polish costume book with accuracy depicting fashion details and social hierarchy. The "Noblemen 1697-1795" reflects the social status and cultural identity of the Polish nobility. Matejko's attention to detail in the fabrics, colours, and accessories of noblemen offers a vivid insight into the period's sartorial elegance.



Polish man in *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (Huang Qing Zhigongtu)*. (Leiden, NL : Koninklijke Brill NV, 2022), p. 63.

The illustration in *Huang Qing Zhigong tu* depicts a Polish nobleman with some inaccuracies. Firstly, the Pole also has an Asian face. He wears a high cap with fur, a Chinese-style tassel, and a simple brown-maroon coat called *żupan* without the ornate patterns typical of noble attire. The outfit includes a narrow

belt, non-traditional shoes, and a sabre but lacks the distinctive eagle-headed handle of a Polish *karabela* (sabre). These elements suggest a blend of Polish and Asian influences, deviating from authentic Polish noble fashion. The overall presentation of the nobleman contains several historical errors.

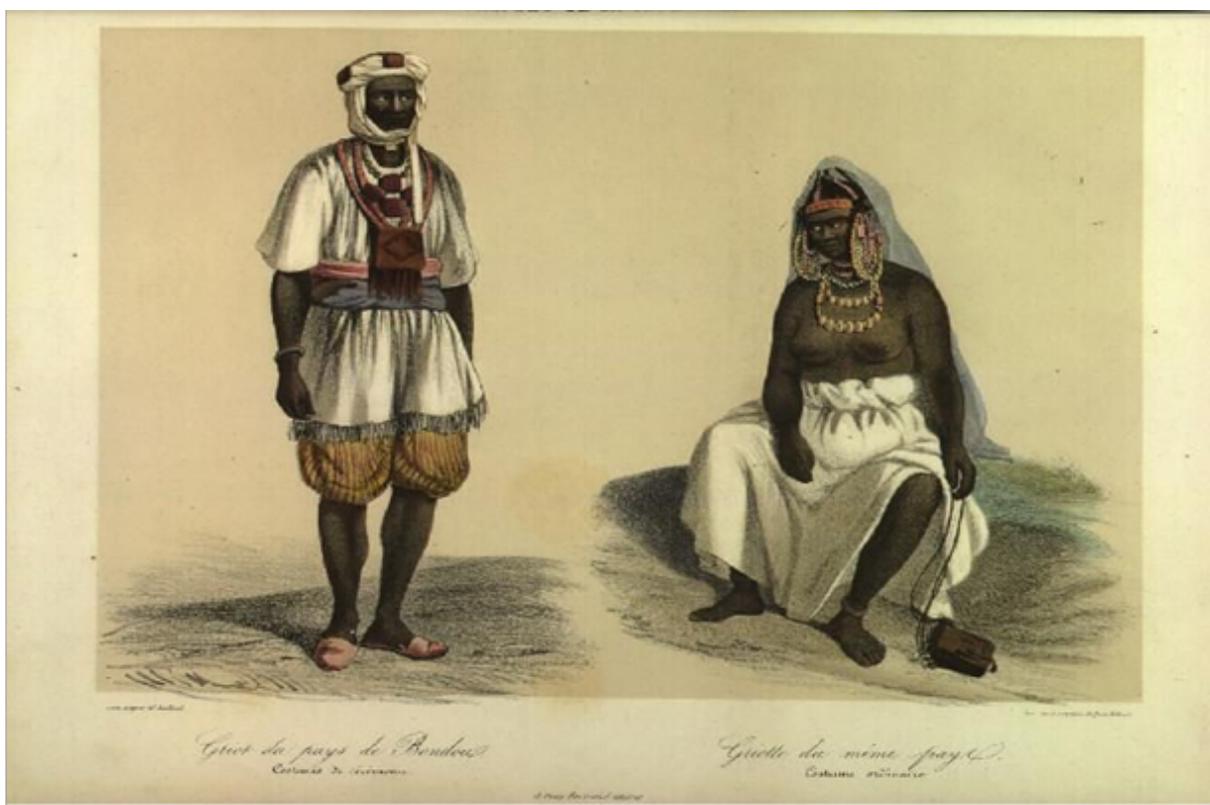
Jan Matejko's "Noblemen 1697-1795" and the Qing's "Illustrations of Tributary Peoples" offer contrasting ethnographic insights. Matejko's work focuses on the detailed representation of Polish nobility, highlighting European fashion and social structures. The Qing illustration, however, depicts a diverse range of groups, including a Polish man, emphasizing the empire's extensive influence. Both serve as historical ethnographic documents but with differing scopes: Matejko's showcases a specific European class, and the Qing's offers a unique perspective on how a foreign culture was viewed.

The illustration's portrayal of a Polish nobleman incorporates a blend of traditional Polish elements and foreign influences, reflecting both accuracy and historical deviations. The cap and attire, while reminiscent of Polish styles, incorporate details suggestive of Chinese influences. The depiction of garments and accessories, including the sabre, differs from authentic Polish fashion of the period, showcasing a mix of cultural elements.



Daxiyanguo hei monu 大西洋國黑魔奴 (Black Demon Slaves) in: *Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (Huang Qing Zhigongtu): A Cultural Cartography of Empire*. (Leiden, NL : Koninklijke Brill NV, 2022), p. 64.

The illustration "Black Demon Slaves" shows figures in vivid, contrasting colours with a stylized, almost caricature-like execution, indicative of an external perspective on the portrayed subjects. Socially, the depiction of the individuals in red clothing with simplified facial expressions can reflect the Qing dynasty's perception of these individuals as 'exotic' or 'other.' The title "Black Demon Slaves" itself suggests a dangerous, dehumanizing perspective. The simplified facial expressions and intensive colours could also reduce them to caricatures.



Raffenel, Anne. *Illustrations of a Voyage in Western Africa: Understanding the exploration of Senegal in 1843 and 1844*. Paris, 1846.

Raffenel's "Illustrations of a Voyage in Western Africa" (1846) employs a naturalistic style with background, capturing the figures with attention to detail and a sense of individual personality. The woman's seated posture and the man's upright stance suggest a social hierarchy or division of roles. The clothing and adornments are depicted with details, emphasizing their cultural significance and the era's interest in ethnographic detail.

Some may argue that the European portrayal offers a detailed, naturalistic representation of West African individuals, suggesting a focus on ethnographic interest and likely cultural authenticity of othered, when the Qing illustration titled "Black Demon Slaves" employs exaggerated features and vibrant colours to emphasize the otherness.

The concept of otherness played a significant role in both Chinese and European costume books, albeit in different ways. China distinguished itself from the other territories by emphasizing its cultural and political hegemony, showcasing the diverse customs of tributary states as a foil for its own image. In contrast, European costume books during the Age of Discovery and colonial period often depicted non-European peoples as exotic and othered. These representations were influenced by the prevailing Eurocentric worldview, which viewed European cultures as inherently superior to those encountered in the New World and other regions. The depiction of autochthons and inhabitants of colonized territories as primitive or uncivilized served to reinforce European notions of cultural and racial superiority. European costume books often included moralizing elements, drawing on religious texts that could also justify colonial expansion and the subjugation of indigenous peoples.

The differing perspectives on otherness in Chinese and European costume books reflect broader cultural and historical differences between the two traditions. While Chinese costume books aimed to glorify the empire and assert its central position in the world – as those "others" came to China; European costume books show what "others" they encountered during territorial gains. It often served as tools of colonial "propaganda", reinforcing European perspective of their hegemony position and justifying colonial exploitation.

It is essential to note that drawing definitive conclusions about the entire artistic tradition of each culture based on a few examples from each tradition is not warranted. Additionally, it is crucial to differentiate between artistic tradition and historical perspectives. While the European depiction may imply a focus on individual features and ethnographic detail, it does not necessarily imply the absence of othering within European society. Therefore, while the artistic styles may differ, both pieces serve as visual records of the cultural and societal views of their respective periods, requiring further examination to fully comprehend the complexities of each tradition's representations of foreign cultures.

## Conclusion

Costume books had a great influence on the fields of art and ethnography and offered insights into the identities of various regions. Chinese costume books, rooted in the history of documenting foreign emissaries and tributary states, provide a unique lens into China's self-image as the empire and global interactions emphasized by tributes. European costume books, originating during the Renaissance, reflect a period of exploration and curiosity about new lands and their cultures.

Both parallels and distinctions between the Chinese and European costume book traditions can be seen. Irrespective of the continent, costume books emphasize artistic expression and document cultural diversity with visually appealing illustrations capturing clothing details. While Chinese costume books depict foreign emissaries and diverse cultures, European counterparts mainly feature regional European clothing styles and traditional attire from non-European regions.

These traditions ultimately reflect how both Chinese and European societies projected their identity and asserted a sense of superiority. Behind the sole idea, China showcased its position through the tribute paid by foreign states, when Europe demonstrated its dominance by depicting conquered "primitive" cultures. That is the dichotomy – there were "others" who came to visit and assert the superiority of China, while Europeans needed to travel to encounter them. In terms of illustrations, some may argue that the lack of personalized depictions, details, and backgrounds in Chinese depictions suggests that what mattered most was that someone came and paid tribute – the individual was not as significant as the symbol and the gesture. Conversely, for Europeans, it might have been important to depict that the new territories were inhabited by specific and most importantly – conquered people.

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