

A New Inquiry Into the Contents of the Late Qing Dynasty Pictorial News Publication—The Core of “Entertainment Life” in *Dianshizhai Pictorial*

HUANG Zhuya

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China

After the opening of ports in the late Qing Dynasty, Western culture was introduced into China. The local entertainment life presented the phenomenon of the coexistence of the East and the West. A large number of folk entertainment activities were recorded in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* which have the function of cultural choice and value dissemination as well as current affairs. This research attempts to use literary analysis and case study to collate the entertainment life in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, combing the characteristics of the late Qing dynasty, and summarizing the value of entertainment in *Dianshizhai Pictorial* publishing.

Keywords: *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, late Qing Dynasty, entertainment, Western style

Introduction

In 1872, the British businessmen, Ernest Major, founded the newspaper *Shun Pao*, which reported the news based on the principle of “selecting the news that is commendable and surprising, and drawing it with a sketch of the events”. As a profit-oriented city newspaper, the newspaper was designed to attract readers by using current events and pictures to increase their interest in reading. From its inception to its closure in 1898, it published more than 4,000 paintings in total. It has made great contributions to the transformation of the form of modern Chinese communication, the enlightenment of modern Chinese graphic art design, the change of social customs, and the understanding of the world. At the same time, the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* can also be viewed as historical material to discuss the changes of social life.

During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republican period, Chinese society was in violent turmoil, feudalism and capitalism collided with the Chinese land, and traditional Chinese folk customs merged with the new Western lifestyle, which deeply affected social development. Many of these social activities have been passed down from generation to generation and have been preserved to this day. It includes both the inheritance of traditional folk customs and the acceptance of foreign cultures.

Someone focuses on the characteristics of Shanghai people’s entertainment life and summarizes them as “extravagant, new and different, and a mixture of East and West”. He argues that the characteristics of Shanghai’s entertainment life are related to the arrival of a large number of foreigners after the opening of Shanghai. Another scholar considers the concept of public space in the entertainment life of Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty and

HUANG Zhuya, post graduate, School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

argues that the act of entertainment transmission relied on a huge spatial medium and that the urban construction in the tenement area assumed more entertainment functions than the county town of Shanghai.

Most of the scholars choose Shanghai of drastic changes to research recreational life in the late Qing Dynasty, or selected women's identity to explore the social life conditions of women. For example, Zhu Li'e focused on women's leisure and entertainment activities to analyze gender relations during the social transition (2016, p. 107). Another scholar discussed the consumption characteristics of women in Shanghai from the perspective of women's clothing. In addition, some scholars had also taken “prostitutes” as the object of study to explore the construction of Shanghai's entertainment culture in the late Qing Dynasty. Since ancient times, the living conditions of prostitutes had been closely related to social development. In particular, the prostitutes in Shanghai during the late Qing Dynasty were living in a different situation inside and outside the rented area because they were located in a vastly changed commercial port. It would produce different effects between the living conditions of prostitutes in the concessions, the rise and fall of the social environment in the concessions and different contact with the traditional scholars and the emerging merchant class. It could be said that the close interaction between Shanghai prostitutes and various types of people also greatly influenced the construction of Shanghai's entertainment culture (Zhou, 2017, p. 16). In addition, charity performances, introduced from the West, gradually developed during the late Qing Dynasty and became popular as society changed. Yue Pengxing and Guo Changying (2017) suggested that one of the connotations of charity performances was to bring goodness to the people and that the actor community conveyed good ideas to the public through the activity of charity performances, either to promote or raise funds. Actors “internalize their philanthropic sentiments in their entertainment activities” (Yue & Guo, 2017, p. 137) and took on social responsibility by raising funds for disaster relief.

There were many studies conducted by the academic community for the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, but there was less refinement and systematic study of the publication content. The pictorial newspaper showed the people's entertainment life situation was not comprehensive enough to explore. From late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, the public's entertainment life in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* had been fully displayed. In the late Qing Dynasty, the daily entertainment activities were rich in variety, but also contained some unhealthy old habits or bad habits. For example, a considerable part of the pictorial chronicled the people's visits to casinos, whorehouse, and other entertainment activities. However, these activities are old habits that perpetuate the history and are harmful to the physical and mental health of the people, so they are excluded from this paper. This paper focuses on the daily entertainment activities of the common people recorded in the pictorials and tries to find the role of the pictorials in report selection and cultural selection.

Leisure Activities in the Late Qing Dynasty: Taking a Trip

Whether it was spring or autumn, the Chinese were willing to hang out to enjoy the scenery. At the beginning of summer, a three-day orchid party would be held at the Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai. And there was an endless stream of visitors who came to enjoy the orchids. Besides, some people enjoyed snow even in the bitter winter. There was a pictorial depicted a literary scholar in Hangzhou who climbed up Mount Wu to enjoy the snow in the first month of the lunar year. What was a shock was that he felt relaxed and happy even if he accidentally fell off the mountain. This showed those ancient Chinese people's persistence and love of trips to enjoy the scenery regardless of the time or place.

People have the habit of going out to enjoy the scenery in every season. And the Chinese have always had

the traditional habit of “being close to nature”. In addition to the well-known custom of ascending to high altitudes in Chung Yeung Festival, the custom of ascending to high altitudes in Ningbo on the occasion of the Lantern Festival was also mentioned in *Dianshizhai Pictorial*. The times had evolved from simple trips to enjoy the scenery in the past to a variety of recreational and leisure activities available to everyone.



Figure 1. “Luofu Wonderland”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 5.



Figure 2. “Painting Boat Flying Disaster”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 2.

In modern times, some pleasure customs are directly inherited from ancient “elegant activities”. During traditional festivals, the river in Wu County was full of boats with constant music at night which coincides with



Figure 4. “Record of Yingyang Banquet”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 2.

Leisure Activities in the Late Qing Dynasty: Rich Amusement

In Chinese Folklore, folklore scholar Wu Bing’an discusses the term “Youyi folklore” as a major category of folklore, which means amusement. And this paper follows part of its definition to explore the entertainment activities of the late Qing Dynasty. According to Wu Bing’an, the term “youyi” (游艺) is a comprehensive concept of recreational activities such as games and competitions and also includes such recreational activities as talking, singing, dancing, etc. It is a relatively general term that includes folk art and folk competition activities (Wu, 2014, p. 315). Looking through the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, we can also find that, the entertainment life of the whole nation has undergone tremendous changes under the influence of the westerly winds.

As for the reports on amusement activities, there were many pictures depicting Shanghai people watching the circus. The report showcased the spectacle of the circus coming to Shanghai. “Straight up to the Sky” (直上干霄) (Chen & Xia, 2001, p. 303) depicted the cast performing acrobatics in the air, the actress walking a tightrope and other amazing scenes. “The Beast Is Good or Evil” (兽分善恶) focused on the image of circus animals: “A man was squeezed into the water and hooked by an elephant nose to avoid death and a spectator approached the cage, and was almost grabbed by the tiger’s paw, losing his head”. Gentle elephant will save people, but the stimulated tiger nearly hurts people. Many scholars have carefully analyzed the publicity and marketing of the Cheliny Circus in Shanghai. Xia Xiaohong and Zhang Wei both mentioned that Cirque Cheliny set five levels of ticket prices for its performances in Shanghai, differentiating various audiences and achieving the coexistence of all levels of people. The circus was a novelty in China. Animal performances including elephants’ food feeding, added to the interactive fun. For Chinese people, it was rare to tame animals and watch them perform for humans. And the curiosity of the masses was satisfied.



Figure 5. “The Beast Is Good or Evil”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 6.

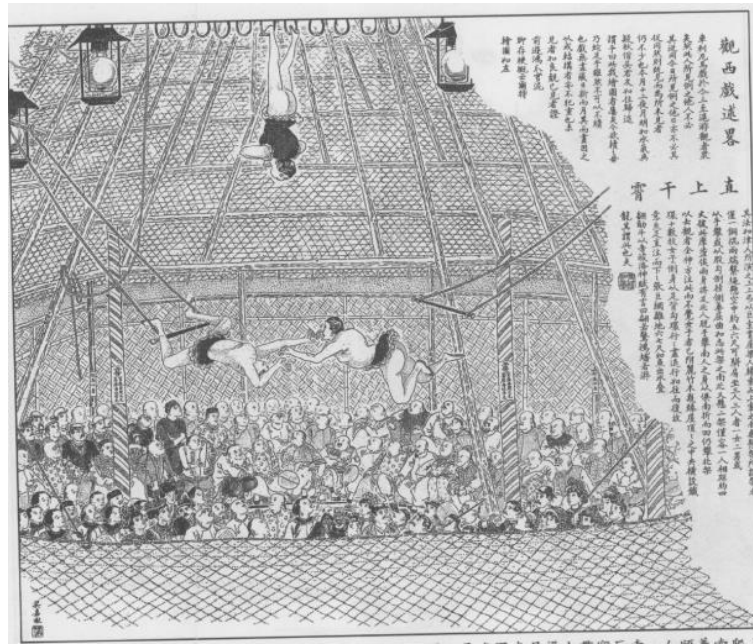


Figure 6. “Straight up to the Sky”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 6.

For the people from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, the daily entertainment life of “watching performances” included not only the Western circus and acrobatics but also traditional Chinese theatre. However, there were also some class characteristics in Chinese theater performances at that time. The people were not allowed to watch the performance of the government, and they would be blown away by the officials. But even the strictest restrictions could not resist the enthusiasm of the people. At that time, in the Yangzhou area of Jianghuai, salt merchants who had made a fortune from salt trading could already support a theatrical troupe with their strong family fortune. For ordinary people, there was a paralyzed old man from Zhuozhou who still

wanted to go to the neighboring village to watch drama. So his sons carried him in their homemade palanquins. The people of Shashi, Hubei, already have six “ten thousand people stage” in three districts, which showed the enthusiasm of the community to see the play at that time.



Figure 7. “Frogs Playing”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 2.



Figure 8. “One More Hand”, *Dianshizhai Pictorial Daketang Edition*, Book 5.

In addition, there were also some sports and athletic activities that gradually flourished. Especially in Shanghai, where foreigners gathered, horse racing was often held. Every spring and autumn, a three-day horse race is held. The *Western Child Racing* (Chen & Xia, 2001, p. 295) reports on horse racing events held in the West to celebrate the 60th year of the British throne. Ma Weiwei said that “this kind of ornamental equestrian

performance is better than the Chinese circus family-style solo performance, and there is no language barrier, indulgence, and sensuality, to fit the level of public appreciation” (2016, p. 123); whenever horse racing and other entertainment activities hold, most Chinese always surround and watch. Another hobby is buying the lottery. Top to the scholar, down to the negative peddler, regardless of whether they were Chinese or Western, people would like to watch the race and buy the lottery.

The Value of the Publication of the Entertainment Activities Reported in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*

Folk entertainment is closely related to public life, and the commercial newspaper, *Shun Pao*, always reported them. This kind of report is easy to understand and easy to read for the audience. Entertainment is one of the representatives of folk life, containing features to expose the evolution of customs. As a significant role in the history of the Chinese newspaper industry, those reports of the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* also present rich quality cultural genes for the world (Chen, 2022, p. 170).

This paper uses the tiny entry point of entertainment and leisure activities in the late Qing Dynasty as a research perspective, in the hope of discussing the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* newspaper and peeking into the publishing value of newspaper distribution in the late Qing Dynasty, and helping the public understand the changes in social customs and culture better.

In Line With the Positioning of the Public Reading Value

Throughout the history of the study of the *Dianshizhai pictorial*, there are many scholars who have studied its pictorial narrative in depth. It can be said that the combination of pictures and texts selected in the pictorial newspaper greatly increased the appeal to the public. Current affairs and customary paintings initiated the “pictorial newspaper” genre, in which illustrations were combined with text and enjoyed by both the elegant and the popular. The drawings in the pictorial newspaper, combined with the Western painting method, the perspective, anatomy, and other techniques, were different from Chinese traditional painting techniques, opening up the “sea school” painting method.

The Western painting techniques displayed in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* allowed Chinese audiences to see a different form of presentation, greatly satisfying the sense of novelty.

This form of the pictorial newspaper also distinguished itself from the traditional canonical ancient books by choosing to draw fresh events for wide dissemination, expanding the possibilities of public reading. In the past, reading books and newspapers was an activity that only literate people could engage in. However, the pictorial newspaper was based on drawings, so more people had the opportunity to read the newspaper to get information and knew what happened in the world. By choosing entertainment activities to cover, they also choose topics that are easier to understand and attract readers.

Different entertainment activities in different zones fully demonstrated the social and cultural trends of the late Qing Dynasty. The two reports “Retribution Can Be Feared” and “Showing People’s Lung and Heart” both mentioned old women who were seriously ill or died accidentally as the retribution of pimping; these reports not only entertained the public and satisfied their curiosity, but also admonished people. The *Dianshizhai Pictorial* tried to incorporate the idea of transmission into the report, through the easy-to-understand graphic form to warn the world. In addition, after the opening of Shanghai, different cultures collided violently, and people were not only concerned about what was happening around the world but also curious about the new and strange

knowledge, and technology when the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* was just for its reading options. Reporting on the entertainment life around the world enhanced the effect of news coverage, and the use of this type of coverage could more easily attract the public and helped them understand the world.

Entertainment Highlights the Value of Literary Communication

People badly need to be comforted by entertainment when society was constantly under the impact of the West. How select attractive news was very important in the process of publishing. The initial function of the ancient *Tipao* (邸报) was only political indoctrination, but later commercialized newspapers developed with an entertainment function. The entertainment life reports in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* were not only a natural feature deriving from the development of the newspaper, but also a demand for public reading, and a necessary path for the dissemination of literature.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the development of entertainment culture reached a certain height, and the novel was highly prosperous as a literary form. The popular demand for entertainment life was developed as never before. Different classes of people also had different entertainment activities during this period. The report “Guici Tour of the Lake” (龟兹游湖) mentioned that the happiness of boat trip on the Qinhuai River was only for the famous people to enjoy, and ordinary people could not participate in such entertainment activities. However, the pictorials reported a lot of entertainment and leisure activities such as horse racing, theater watching, circus, and juggling that everyone could participate in at any time. The entertainment life of the public was fully displayed. The graphic form of the pictorial newspapers directly lowered the reading threshold, and the public could understand the content of the events more intuitively and quickly through the pictures. The public obtained fashion information through entertainment reports and their sensory needs were met.

Entertainment is an integral part of popular culture, the most widely disseminated and enjoyed symbolic culture. The extensive coverage of entertainment in the publication is a need for solace in a troubled society, and a new cultural expression of the strange and the unusual, fulfilling the commercial orientation and entertaining purpose of the pictorial (Chen, 2020, p. 29).

Imperceptibly the Value of Customs Changing

Entertainment Groups Increasing and Entertainment Methods Diversifying

From the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, popular entertainment and aesthetic needs emerged, and performance and recreational activities increased significantly (Wan, 2014, p. 55). “Bicycles, the instrument of a generation of walking, are also—not yet seen at Shanghai in the previous years, and have become popular in recent years” (Chen & Xia, 2001, p. 301). When bicycles were first introduced to China, it was not obvious as a means of transportation, and the public focused more on their entertainment function. The poem “Two Wheels in Front and Behind, No Need to Hold Hands to Ride” and “A Rattling Sound, People Rush to Avoid, a Bicycle Comes From Behind” fully illustrated the public’s love for cycling. A more intense activity was horse racing. The “West Child Horse Racing” (西童赛马) and “Lively Horse Racing” (赛马志盛) showed the enthusiasm of the people for horse racing at that time. As mentioned before that horse racing activities and circus activities were set up with different ticket prices for seats, from the literati and scholars to the peddlers, all had the opportunity to see the running horses. On this basis, women’s participation or viewing of entertainment was also gradually accepted by society. Influenced by Western-style entertainment such as horse racing and exhibition watching, strange men and women could be in the same unfamiliar space. Women could watch entertainment

activities together with men, showing they enjoyed the entertainment rights as equal to men.

The most contemporary entertainment in the late Qing Dynasty was the Western circus. Cheliny circus came to Shanghai three times, and there were a lot of bystanders. The Western circus to China to perform numerous items includes tightrope walking, horse racing, bottle show, pig show, and other animal performances. One of the most famous is the aforementioned “Hanging Acrobatics”; the author described the performers as elegant as a startled swan goose and supple as a swimming dragon. In addition, the exotic animals in the circus also enriched the knowledge of the Shanghai people at that time. Another flourishing activity was touring in this period. As mentioned earlier, people often went out to enjoy the scenery during the best season. but in ancient China, private gardens were seldom open to the public and were only available for viewing at special festivals. The opening of “private gardens” in Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty also increased amusements.

Entertainment Space Expanding and Social Ethos Changing

As mentioned above, the opening of private gardens enriched the public’s entertainment, but before the completion of Bund Park in 1868, parks in the modern sense were not yet available in China. When “Leaves Can Walk” showed the image of a garden in Hong Kong, the figures in the painting were all Westerners, but Chinese not. It was only with the opening of private gardens in Shanghai that the Chinese people were able to visit a park as entertainment. Until this time, visiting a park had become an available activity for all ages.

At the same time, the purpose of Western-style entertainment was inevitably accompanied by the emergence of new entertainment spaces. It’s necessary to build the racecourse for Horse-racing and to set up venues for the circus. Therefore, public entertainment spaces developed further.

Hu Tianbi believes that the opening of private gardens was a subtle sprouting of public consciousness of democracy and nationalism (2016, p. 31). Combing with the fact that people were accustomed to watching exhibitions and visiting museums at that time, and most people were curious about new types of entertainment such as circuses, it can be assumed that the mass had initially formed a trend of new curiosity.

Entertainment Culture Developing and National Aspirations Flourishing

Scholar Wan Jianzhong (2014) argues that entertainment can connect the thoughts and emotions of people of all races and promote national identity. In fact, the entertainment culture of the late Qing Dynasty was influenced by the complex background of the times and contained the complex emotions of the nation. National entertainment life in the late Qing Dynasty was influenced by Western-style culture and became more colorful. However, the great progress of entertainment activities brought a great impact on the national people at that time. For example, the traditional gentry still maintained the mentality of a “Heavenly Kingdom”, subjectively rejecting Western culture, and even categorizing Western entertainment as “strange and obscene”. Another part of the population looked at Western-style entertainment with a combination of Chinese and Western eyes, linking some Western-style entertainment activities with traditional Chinese entertainment activities, and using the Chinese “ancient” attitude to mitigate the impact of Western culture. All of the above was the Chinese people who were unwilling to admit that their country was backward.

In the late Qing Dynasty, starting from Shanghai, a commercialized mass entertainment culture was born; “Western-style entertainment for commercial profit, located in mass communication, satisfied the entertainment needs of consumer groups” (Ma, 2016, p. 122). On this basis, Western-style entertainment activities have more than entertainment functions. Sports activities such as horse racing and soccer were inherently positive and competitive in spirit. The spread of these activities in China helped to cultivate the spirit of the nation. Hu Tianbi

believes that Western-style sports and entertainment activities in pictorials highlight a political role. In particular, after the construction of some of the arenas was completed, they were not only places for holding sports and athletic events, but also places for Western powers to hold political events and festivals. Watching or participating in these events also held the desire of the nation to be strong and healthy and to be rich and powerful.

References

- Chen, F. F. (2022). Aesthetic expressions of Song Dynasty folk culture and modern meaning transformation. *Journal of Social Science of Jiamusi University*, 40(1), 167-171.
- Chen, J. H. (2020). *Research on the graphic artistic communication and publication of the Dianshizhai pictorial newspaper (1884-1898)*. Beijing: Beijing Printing Institute.
- Chen, P. Y., & Xia, X. H. (2001). *Dianshizhai pictorials—Images of the late Qing Dynasty*. Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Publishing House.
- Hu, T. B. (2016). Study on the “publicness” of *Dianshizhai pictorial* (Master’s thesis, Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2016).
- Ma, W. W. (2016). The dissemination path of western-style entertainment and the construction of entertainment concept in Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications (Social Science Edition)*, 28(3), 121-126+131.
- Wu, J. Y., Sun, Y. M., & Chen, Y. (2019). *The Wen volume of the Dianshizhai pictorial newspaper*. Beijing: China Art & History Publishing House.
- Wan, J. Z. (2014). The evolutionary trend of western ethnic entertainment culture. *Cultural Heritage*, 8(5), 53-59.
- Wu, B. A. (2014). *Chinese folklore*. Changchun: Changchun Publishing House.
- Wu, Y. R. (2001a). *The fourteenth volume of the Dianshizhai pictorial newspaper Daketang edition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press.
- Wu, Y. R. (2001b). *The first volume of the Dianshizhai pictorial newspaper Daketang edition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press.
- Wu, Y. R. (2001c). *The tenth volume of the Dianshizhai pictorial newspaper Daketang edition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press.
- Yue, P. X., & Guo, C. Y. (2017). Charity, entertainment and community identity in urban space in the late Qing Dynasty: Charity benefit performances as a point of view. *Social Sciences in Guangdong*, 34(5), 136-144.
- Zhou, W. (2017). “Hooker singing and playing” and the construction of Shanghai entertainment culture in the late Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Changshu Institute of Technology*, 31(6), 16-21.
- Zhu, L. E. (2016). A glimpse of women’s leisure and entertainment life in Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty—Centering on the *Dianshizhai pictorial* and the *Picture daily*. *Lantai World*, 31(14), 107-109+112.