

# On Characters in Cities in the Late Qing Dynasty: Taking *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* (1884-1898) as the Core Research Object

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*Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* (1884-1898) is the earliest and most influential news pictorial in modern China, creating a new form with pictures and text. Taking *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* as the research object, this paper mainly studies how the pictorial uses words to shape the image of characters in cities, especially the image of women, and analyzes the shaping of urban characters' identity, personality, social status, and behavior in different news reports, so as to understand the image of urban characters and civil activities in the late Qing Dynasty. At the same time, the accurate use of words and the attitudes and values contained in pictorial have important reference significance for modern media.

*Keywords:* *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, characters in cities, late Qing Dynasty, the category of collected literary

## Preface

In 1884, *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, founded by British businessman Ernest Major in Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty, is the first pictorial of news and current affairs in modern Chinese history. The creation form of pictorial, which is mainly based on pictures and supplemented by articles, has brought about a historic change in the status of images in news reports. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the closed door foreign policy was broken, and Shanghai, as a concession, poured into a large number of Western things and ideas, so the image of urban characters was also changing. In recent years, with the strengthening of social research and mass culture in the late Qing Dynasty, the research on *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* has been deepened, involving many disciplines, including literature, fine arts, design, journalism and communication, architecture, economics, and so on. At present, there are few literatures about the image of "urban characters" in *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*.

*Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* is a pictorial of news and current affairs, so its content is objective. This paper studies the characters in pictorial and analyzes the shaping of urban characters' identity, character, social status,

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and their behavior in different news reports, which is of great significance to understand the social environment and urban characters in the late Qing Dynasty.

### Female Images

The first group is maidservants and maids. In the late Qing Dynasty, the small-scale peasant economy gradually disintegrated, with the separation of farming and weaving and textile, making a large number of women move from the countryside to the city. They are bound by their own level of knowledge, talents, and traditional feudal ethics. The occupations that are relatively low requirements and easy to choose are female maids and maids. In a report *On the Abuse of a Female Maid* (虐婢报女) (WU,SUN,CHEN,2018,p.4, Wen collection), “whip marks, stick marks, shear marks, cone marks, branding marks, claw marks and tooth marks are all over the body” shows the picture of the maid being abused and bruised by her master. In addition, because private maids can be bought and sold freely, they will also be used as a bet. For example, in the chess competition for beautiful maids, it is said that “the servant has a pet, and the maidservant Lan Ying has unique talent and color. He is willing to take this as a lonely bet, and the winner will return”. “So he ordered his family to call Jiang Nanchun, and the maidservant was as rich as God, and the fruit was no less than Lan Ying. The first child carried beautiful tourists”. This article is about a salt merchant in Yangzhou who played chess with people, betting on the beautiful maidservant around him, the story of giving your maidservant to others after losing chess. The maidservant became a gamble in playing chess, which shows the tragic experience and low status of the maidservant.



Figure 1. the Chess Competition for Beautiful Maids (Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial—Ge collection).

The second group is prostitute. Prostitutes have a long history in ancient occupations. It is said that they originated in the spring and autumn period. With the continuous changes of the policies of the dynasty,

prostitutes gradually changed from the earliest geisha to sex prostitutes. In *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, there are many reports on the role of prostitutes.



Figure 2. the Prostitute Soliciting (Dian-shi Zhai pictorial—Ren collection).

For example, in the *Prostitute Soliciting* (流妓拉客) (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.85, Ren collection), the number of brothels in the late Qing Dynasty was reflected by the “residents and walkers, such as the number of sand in the Ganges, and so were the rows of brothels”. At the same time, Western prostitutes began to prevail. In *The Poem of a Western Prostitute* (西妓弹词) (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.102, Ren collection), it is written that “another Western prostitute will be invited. It will be a few days later”. The song “Eighteen Touch” in the Chinese pornographic words: It is not very acceptable to hear it. In the *Song and Dance of a Japanese Prostitute* (日妓歌舞) (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.2, Ren collection), it also describes the forms and actions of a Japanese prostitute. “The prostitute is dancing together, dressed in fresh clothes, with her hair in a bun like a cloud, and her face covered with white powder” (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.2, Ren collection), which depicts the beautiful clothes of a Japanese prostitute, headwear details.

One holds a folding fan and the other holds a wooden stick. The tip of the stick is sticky like a dust tail. It is accompanied by an orchestral string to preach all the way, playing songs and dances, which is very audio-visual entertainment. (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.2, Ren collection)

which shows the performance process of Japanese prostitutes’ songs and dances.

The third group is female workers. With the development of commodity economy, the disintegration of small-scale peasant economy, and the separation of textiles, many foreign businessmen come to China to make factories, and a large number of poor women come to textile factories to apply for jobs to supplement their

families. However, in *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, the description of industrial women workers is often biased and negative. For example, in the story *Being Punished for Being Frivolous* (轻薄受惩) (ZHANG,2018,p.13,Gui collection), the author laments that women are molested because of their own “frivolity”; in the view of some traditional people, women’s going out to work is the root cause of obscenity.

The fourth group is chivalrous women. In the late Qing Dynasty, it was very common for women to practice martial arts and men to compete. In *A Female Swordsman Vented Her Anger* (女侠泄愤) (WU,SUN,CHEN,2018,p.31, Wen collection), it describes the picture of men and women fighting each other in Beijing.

My girlfriend angrily said, “although you are strong, you are straight and free, please fight with a weapon to decide whether you are male or female”... At the end of the period, each holding a sharp blade and fighting in the garden, the women’s army will show great power. (WU,SUN,CHEN,2018,p.31, Wen collection)

In the article of *Siamese Female Soldiers* (暹罗女兵) (ZHANG,2018,p.52,Chou collection), “fragrant and emerald sleeves wave a willow leaf knife, and the wind rolls a red skirt to control the ride of peach blossoms... You call yourself the women’s army, which is majestic and does not win the seat alone”. It shows the woman’s powerful image. At the same time, the author praised women’s martial arts practice, and did not sigh that women’s martial arts practice was obviously contrary to etiquette.

The fifth group is female teachers and students. Women’s private school education in the late Qing Dynasty was not uncommon. After the Opium War, Western missionaries opened many missionary schools, which provided many girls with learning opportunities. In the report *Establishment of Women’s Schools* (女塾宏开) (XING,ZHANG,2018, p.91, Ge collection), it was written that “another girls’ college was set up in the Western children’s College”. “Every girl in the embroidered Pavilion is beautiful, or she is old and broken, or she looks like Hua Yan. She goes to the school and has a good tour, and each takes a career” (XING,ZHANG,2018, p.91, Ge collection), which reflects the importance she attaches to women’s studies. The story *Women’s University* (女立大学) (HOU,2018,p.105,Xin collection) also tells about the equal rights of men and women in Japan and attaches importance to women’s education. Quoting a sentence from *Su Bao* (It was originally a business tabloid seeking profits, and later became a newspaper creating agitation in the course of its following currents),

there are no women’s universities in Japan. Now there are sets and Tibetans. They say that the Japanese atmosphere is open, men and women have the same power, and there is no women’s university. How can we cultivate them? The idea of son preference is indeed contrary to the equality of men and women. (HOU,2018,p.105,Xin collection)

The establishment of the missionary women’s school provides a model for Chinese people to run women’s schools themselves.

Finally, it is particularly noteworthy that women’s activities and scope of activities in the late Qing Dynasty were gradually increasing. For example, women go out to burn incense and worship Buddha. In the report *Trapped When Burning Incense* (烧香被围) (WU,SUN,CHEN,2018,p.85, Wen collection), it is written that “there is a young woman with a surname of about 30 years old, with heavy makeup, taking Lanyu to the Taisui hall in Wushan...” It can be seen that women begin to come out of their home and move towards society, and the spiritual society is constantly satisfied. In addition, carriage, charter, and other new tools provide convenience for women to travel. Western women also have some recreational activities, such as Cuju (ancient

game of kicking a ball). The report named *Western Women Playing Cuju* (西女蹴鞠)( WU,DIAO,2019,p.2,Wu collection) is described in detail in Western women's Cuju.

There are more than ten wine bottles in the field, which are intricate and randomly arranged. A ball is as big as a fight and occupies the center. When a woman comes out, she climbs with tweezers, and the ball rotates with her feet. The gap around the bottle changes from east to west, from north to south, and twists and turns like an ant penetrating a hole. It is already there. Another plate is like a flower wall, about two feet high, standing upright... (WU,DIAO,2019,p.2,Wu collection )

The above two articles show that women's activities are increasing and their fields are expanding.

### Male Images

In *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, he criticized and satirized officials and idle people. For example, in *The Absurd Sentry* (哨官荒谬) (ZHANG,2019,p.57,Zhu collection) , the sentry neglects his duty and does not seek his post in his position.

Gun boats are densely distributed in inland rivers, and the governor is a sentry officer, so he is also a plan to arrest thieves for the people. However, recently, the harm of gun boats is unspeakable. They are connected with thieves, or they are no different from thieves, and turn to harm the people instead of thinking of the people... however, it is said that soldiers are brave enough to steal, and those who sleep with cats and mice are crying. What nonsense! (ZHANG,2019,p.57,Zhu collection )

It is also written in *The Crazy Officials Are Ridiculous* (疯官可笑) (ZHANG,2019,p.66,Zhu collection) .

Now, I saw those in power today. Regardless of their humble origins, they despise the Tao. They sit high and sit in the emperor's seat. They judge right and wrong upside down and whip horizontally, which is not particularly amusing at home and abroad. However, those who have their own knowledge view it, which is no different from Crazy officials... (ZHANG,2019,p.66,Zhu collection)

The two stories both express the author's satire on confused officials.

An interesting news *Romantic Nature* (风流跌宕) (ZHANG, 2018, p.53, Gui collection) describes an idle man who "wants to go to the gentle countryside by himself, neither like Li Ye waiting on the screen, nor like Yang Ziyun throwing himself into the pavilion". However, it is not difficult to find that the men, whether officials, monks, or others, like looking for flowers and asking willows. For example, *Officials and Monks Are Suffering* (官酸僧苦) (ZHANG,GAO,2018,p.24,Ren collection ) goes like this, "Having the habit of becoming an apprentice as a Buddhist disciple" and "a member of a certain department also looked for flowers and asked Liu Ke".

### Children Images

It can be seen from *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* that children in the late sunny period are versatile. For example, *The Four Girls Compete* (四女比武) (ZHANG,2018,p.77,Chou collection) tells a picture of four girls competing in martial arts in their hairpin years. There are many action descriptions, environmental descriptions, and side descriptions, such as "a woman takes hundreds of money, pinches its two ends with her two fingers and grabs it, but she can't take it off, but laughs and throws it to the ground" (ZHANG,2018,p.77,Chou collection ).

There are dozens of rows of piles, five feet above the ground, about three feet away from each other, with sharp nails between them, and the pile wood is slightly next to half a foot. Jade sees this, and jumps up. (ZHANG,2018,p.77,Chou collection )



“four pairs of embroidered soles are made, which are magnetic, tied to each foot, climbing together, and making every move with determination. Each makes his best use of his strengths”, “because of courage, no one dares to hire”, all reflect the high martial arts of the four women. Foreign children are also extremely talented.



Figure 3. A Clever Little Girl in England (Dian-shi Zhai pictorial—Ge collection).

A nine year old girl named McGrady, who is extremely intelligent and proficient in phonology, is described in the story *A Clever Little Girl in England* (英京慧女) (XING,ZHANG,2018, p.74, Ge collection) .

The girl plays the piano in the prime minister’s house. Her skills are particularly superb, and the sound of the piano is particularly harmonious and beautiful. Suddenly, a lot of people came around to listen to her playing the piano, and the room became very crowded. (XING,ZHANG,2018, p.74, Ge collection )

The report continued the traditional expression of ancient Chinese prose and set off the girl’s exquisite piano playing skills with the surrounding people competing to listen to music.

In terms of education, girls have access to education. As Shanghai is a trading port, many foreign businessmen come to China with their children and are taught by priests. For example, it is written in the report *Establishment of Women’s Schools* (女塾宏开) (XING,ZHANG,2018, p.91, Ge collection) that “In schools where children in the West are educated, additional colleges are set up to teach girls”, and so on. Private schools were privately run schools in ancient China, as opposed to official schools. Private learning originated in the Spring and Autumn Period. Although Confucius was not the initiator of private learning, Confucius’ private learning has the largest scale and the deepest influence, which lasted more than 2,000 years and occupies an important position in the history of Chinese education. This form of education had developed very fully in the Qing Dynasty. During this period, private schools for female students were not uncommon, and there were even formal women’s schools that charged tuition fees.



Figure 4. Establishment of Women's Schools (Dian-shi Zhai pictorial—Ge collection).

### Conclusion

This pictorial shows all kinds of urban figures to people at that time and later. It is a pictorial of news and current affairs, mainly based on pictures and supplemented by words, with strong objectivity. Through *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial*, we can study the characteristics and changes of urban characters in the late Qing Dynasty. At the same time, it also reflects the continuous changes of society and citizens' living conditions, which provides an intuitive perspective for us to understand the late Qing society.

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