US-China Education Review A, October 2026, Vol. 16, No. 10, 746-749
doi: 10.17265/2161-623X/2026.10.008

# Reproduction of Modern Media Images From the Perspective of Publishing-Aesthetic Education—A Case Study of *What Demons and Monsters: A Compendium of Supernatural Images From the Dianshizhai Pictorial*

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*What Demons and Monsters: A Compendium of Supernatural Images From the Dianshizhai Pictorial* (hereinafter referred to as the *Compendium*) draws on abundant image documents from the late-Qing *Dianshizhai Pictorial*. It has completed the republication of supernatural-themed resources of Late-Qing popular media by systematically selecting and compiling 300 supernatural reports. From the perspective of publishing-aesthetic education, the *Compendium* moves beyond mere documentary reproduction. It achieves contemporary publishing transformation of ancient book image resources through key publishing procedures including categorized compilation, interpretative commentary, and binding innovation. By analyzing multiple dimensions of this publication, this paper explores how Late-Qing pictorials are reconstructed via contemporary publishing, so as to exert the aesthetic-educational efficacy of publications and offer references for publishing practices of traditional-culture-oriented readings.

*Keywords: Dianshizhai Pictorial*, supernatural images, media reproduction, publishing-aesthetic education

## Preface

The *Dianshizhai Pictorial* (1884-1898), China's first modern current-affairs pictorial, was issued as a supplement to the *Shen Bao*. Combining news value, popularity and entertainment, it recorded various facets of Late-Qing society in an image-dominant, text-subordinate format. Among its more than 4,000 images, 778 are themed on supernatural subjects, accounting for roughly one-sixth of the total pictorial. Far from pure fabrications by painters *and literati, these supernatural images inherited classical supernatural traditions represented by The Classic of Mountains and Seas and Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*. Adopting the shell of journalistic pictorials, they transformed stories of spirits, fox-fairies, and ominous anomalies into mass reading *materials for ordinary townsfolk, reflecting social perceptions, folk customs and aesthetic tastes of Late-Qing people.*

**Acknowledgement:** This paper is supported by the 2025 Beijing Education Reform and Innovation Project: Exploration and Practice of the Project-Based Teaching Model of "AI + Ancient Book Collation" in the Taofen Publishing Experimental Class (2025年北京市教改创新项目——韬奋出版实验班"AI + 古籍整理" 项目制教学模式探索与实践, Serial number: 22150126009).

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More than a century later, Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House released *What Demons and Monsters: A Compendium of Supernatural Images From the Dianshizhai Pictorial*. The volume selects 300 entries from massive supernatural images of the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, grouping them into six categories: nature spirits, ghosts, fox-immortals, exotic creatures, monstrous births and sorcery. Compiled and interpreted from a modern academic perspective, it represents a significant publishing reproduction of supernatural image resources from modern pictorial journalism.

From the perspective of publishing-aesthetic education, the contemporary publication of Late-Qing pictorial images is more than preservation and circulation of documentary materials; it constitutes a vital pathway for social aesthetic enlightenment. The publishing practice of the *Compendium* serves as a typical case for observing how modern image materials realize contemporary aesthetic-educational functions through republication.

## Categorized Compilation: The Selection of Supernatural Images

The thematic selection and systematic categorization constitute the core highlight of the *Compendium.* Rather than simply reproducing original images and reports from the pictorial, its editors established a lucid categorical framework for scattered supernatural images by carrying forward Chinese supernatural cultural traditions and distinguishing the cultural connotations of “jing” (nature spirits), “guai” (odd beings), and “yao” (demons).

Take the volume on nature spirits as an example: editors place plants, trees, earth, stones, birds and beasts within one classificatory system, reconstructing the traditional animist worldview. Particularly innovative is the independent volume on monstrous births. In the Late-Qing when modern scientific knowledge was poorly disseminated, deformed humans and animals were often interpreted as omens of calamity. By treating such images as an independent unit, the book revisits pre-scientific folk explanations for deformity from the viewpoint of modern medicine. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern perceptions also preserves visual historical materials for social-history and medical-history research.

Within each category, editors adopt multi-text reading as an interpretive strategy. The section on serpent-monsters assembles four reports: The Serpent-Beauty, Man Transformed Into Serpent, The Untamable Serpent-Demon, and The Serpent at Ruiguang Pagoda. Though all centering on serpents, these texts bear distinct emphases. Some deploy serpent-monsters as allegories for extravagant social mores in modern cities; some conduct intertextual comparison with *Madam White Snake Imprisoned Beneath Leifeng Pagoda from Stories to Caution the World*; some interpret folk legends of biological antagonism against natural common sense; others dissect folk narratives of demonic cultivation. Complemented by editorial commentaries, these mutually-illuminating texts jointly construct a multi-dimensional portrait of serpent-monsters spanning thousands of years. Such categorization and inter-textual reading not only accomplish intellectual organization of images but also pave a clearer reading path for audiences to approach and appreciate traditional supernatural iconography.

## Publishing Innovation: Editorial and Binding Practices in the Context of Related Publications

Placed within the genealogy of derivative publications of the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, the editorial innovations of the *Compendium* become more salient. Representative circulating re-editions include *The Complete Dianshizhai Pictorial* (Da Ke Tang Edition) published by Shanghai Pictorial Publishing House in 2001 and *The*

*Annotated Dianshizhai Pictorial* released by China Literature and History Press in 2019. Both prioritize full reproduction and textual annotation to conserve documentary authenticity.

Against this backdrop, the *Compendium* charts an alternative path of thematic anthology. Instead of pursuing complete inclusion, it screens images and furnishes editorial commentaries focusing on the niche theme of the supernatural, realizing a transition from "documentary reproduction" to "thematic interpretative publication".

Furthermore, layout and binding design of the Compendium reinforce its supernatural thematic expression. It adopts landscape format: Original pictorial plates occupy double-page spreads, while original texts and commentaries are arranged on single pages. The clear separation of text and images fits the viewing habits for ancient woodblock prints. Dominated by a black cover with contrasting red-and-green traditional hues, the binding echoes the uncanny and mysterious atmosphere of supernatural subject-matters. Such color aesthetics inherits Tang-Dynasty artistic traditions and bears indirect influences from Japanese Edo-period yokai ukiyo-e prints. Visual design strengthens thematic atmosphere and achieves unity between textual content and book aesthetics. Readers obtain intuitive aesthetic experience in the process of page-turning, whereby the publication imperceptibly exerts its social efficacy of aesthetic education.

## Publishing Value: Dual Perspectives on Cultural Inheritance and Publishing Practice

From the longitudinal perspective of publishing history, this book initiates a cross-temporal dialogue with millennium-old Chinese supernatural traditions. Rooted in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, supernatural culture was enriched by Wei-Jin anecdotal notes and Ming-Qing fictions. It later declined under the Confucian maxim "keep aloof from ghosts and spirits". Prosperous printing industries in the Ming and Qing Dynasties enabled the outward spread of Chinese supernatural lore, which nourished the formation of Japanese yokai studies. The Late-Qing *Dianshizhai Pictorial* brought supernatural images back to public view via modern periodical media, only for this visual tradition to sink into oblivion upon the pictorial's discontinuation. Today, the *Compendium* retrieves these surviving modern-media visual relics and reconnects with classical supernatural cultural lineage. As noted in the book, this constitutes a "distant and long-standing echo". It encourages readers to abandon simplistic dismissals of "ghosts and anomalies" and to interpret social psychology embedded in supernatural narratives from an objective historical standpoint, thus carrying significant value for historical communication.

On the other hand, the *Compendium* assembles traditional Chinese supernatural figures, demonstrating for contemporary readers the evolution and rich cultural connotations of supernatural imagery across thousands of years of Chinese history. For publishers engaging with modern periodical image documents, the book illustrates that their role extends beyond mere preservation. Acting as content selectors and interpreters, publishers can realize secondary transformation of historical documents for modern public audiences through thematic framing, classification, compilation, interpretation, and binding design. A core challenge lies in balancing documentary authenticity and popular readability.

In the present-day context, supernatural themes resonate with contemporary public interest in fantasy narratives rooted in traditional culture. During the Late-Qing transition era when Western new knowledge flooded into China, supernatural narratives functioned as imaginative outlets for common people to reconcile cognitive conflicts. Today, these newly edited and republished supernatural images still arouse public curiosity over folk traditional culture. The value of the *Compendium* resides not merely in sorting Late-Qing pictorial supernatural images, but in exemplifying pathways for activation and reproduction of modern media resources. It reminds

publishing practitioners that numerous under-explored niche themes remain embedded within modern media and texts. Through thematic anthology, in-depth interpretation, and aesthetic design, dormant historical texts and images can be transformed into cultural products accessible to modern audiences. Meanwhile, it offers useful references for the planning, editing, and research of traditional-culture-themed books.

Finally, publishing-aesthetic education is not an abstract theoretical concept, but is embedded in the whole process of publication editing and production. The practice of the *Compendium* also offers insights for the publishing sector: Greater emphasis should be placed on aesthetic education for publishing practitioners, guiding them to foster a publishing philosophy that integrates readability, communicative potential, and aesthetic value.

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