LATE MING COURTESAN CULTURE AND CHINA'S GENDER SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This article argues against existing scholarship that sees courtesans as a transcending force that blurred social and gender boundaries in the late Ming gender system. The gendered position of courtesans is examined from two perspectives, the market economy and the kinship system, to analyse how the booming courtesan culture stemmed from and reinforced the male-dominated gender hierarchy. Firstly, in the market economy, courtesans emerged as a product of the patriarchal practice of objectifying and commodifying women, whereby the ownership of women lay with men. Under such a commercialised environment, the literary and artistic skills of courtesans were highly gendered, sexualised and essentially cultivated to increase their market value and the attraction they held for their male patrons. Secondly, in the kinship system, a clear boundary was constructed between courtesans and respectable women in the domestic sphere. The existence of courtesans prevented such women from entering the public realm. Meanwhile, the de facto freedom enjoyed by courtesans prevented themselves from entering orthodox household units, as they were constructed outside of the kinship system, and were marginalised by both men and women of the gentry class, by Ming legal regulations and by popular literary work, to ensure the continuance of the existing patriarchal family structure and the husband-wife hierarchy.

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Keywords:

Chinese courtesans, Late Ming, gender history, prostitution, literati, family structure.

INTRODUCTION

Courtesans occupied a special place in late Ming social life, urban culture, gender system and literary tradition, which has received extraordinary scholarly attention. Existing scholarship on late Ming courtesan culture, based on the prominent status of celebrated courtesans, their outstanding artistic and literary skills and the praise they received from contemporary literati, considers this special group of women as a positive force that blurred the strict gender and social boundaries and even challenged the existing male-dominated gender relations in the late Ming period. Dorothy Ko points out that certain top courtesans were so educated that they were 'hailed as equals of literati men', attending social events organised by elites as guests in men's attire rather than as female entertainers, shuttling 'physically and figuratively between the male-public and the female-domestic worlds.'[152] Jean Wetzel also identifies the unprecedented freedom courtesans possessed as women. Instead of being confined to the domestic sphere as what was expected of women by the orthodox Confucian morality, courtesans were free from familial duties, enjoying a considerable amount of 'social and geographical mobility'. Such mobility allowed them to serve as the 'middleman' who negotiated unequal gender and status, both in everyday life and in the art world.[153] Based on the 'sophisticated training' and other opportunities that courtesanship provided for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, Harriet T. Zurndorfer considers courtesans to have even transcended the late Ming social strata and questioned the orthodox definition of a good (*liang* 良) woman.[154]

However, we should not let the ambivalent social positions of courtesans, as well as their accomplishments in literature and art, obscure their gendered position in late Ming society. The gender system of the late Ming period, especially the unprecedented fluid expressions of masculinity and femininity, was closely intertwined with the existing imperial class and Confucian social systems. As Charlotte Furth argues, the construction of someone's gender identity was always overshadowed by their social roles and responsibilities, thus reflecting

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[152] Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 256.

[153] Jean Wetzel, 'Hidden Connections: Courtesans in the Art World of the Ming Dynasty', *Women's Studies* 2002, Volume 31, Issue 5, pp. 645-669, (pp. 646-647).

[154] Harriet T. Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', *The Joy and Pain of Work: Global Attitudes and Valuations, 1500-1650,* 2001, Volume 56, Issue S19, pp. 197-216, (p. 216).

and reinforcing the existing gender and social hierarchies. Among these constructions, it was the non-normative ones, such as the ambiguous courtesans examined in this article, that tended to be the most prominent examples embodying the dominant 'truths', as the display, or the celebration of their seeming gender and social transgression, were carefully controlled by those at the top of these hierarchies.[155]

Building upon Furth's perspective of analysing the identity construction of a certain gendered social group within the context of the social, class and gender systems that it emerged from, this article aims to argue against existing scholarship that sees courtesans as a transcending force in the late Ming gender system, by arguing and examining how female courtesans emerged and flourished as a product of the male-dominated gender hierarchy, and how courtesan status, already classified as a female 'mean people' social group,[156] was further constructed by both men and women from the gentry class to fit into and reinforce the existing patriarchal gender system.

This article is divided into two sections. Focusing on the commercial nature of the courtesan industry, the first section discusses how the booming courtesan culture perpetuated the existing gender hierarchy, whereby ownership of women lay with men. Celebrated courtesans symbolised the widespread late Ming practise of objectifying women's bodies and services as commodities that could be sold and exchanged by men. The literary and artistic talents that were praised by many were, in fact, business tools, a highly gendered set of skills, cultivated only to increase the courtesans' own market values and attract male clients. The second part of the article examines the role courtesans played in the late Ming kinship system and their relations with literati and gentry wives, as well as how courtesan status was constructed legally and culturally outside of the orthodox family structure to ensure the continuity of the existing kinship system and the husband-wife hierarchy.

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[155] Charlotte Furth, 'Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China', *Late Imperial China*, Volume 9, Issue 2, (December, 1988), pp. 1-31, (pp. 14, 24).

[156] Courtesans were classified as 'mean people' (*jianmin* 賤民), outside the 'commoner' (*liangmin* 良民) status group, according to Ming judicial regulations, as described in Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', (p. 200).

COURTESANS IN THE MARKET ECONOMY

The developing monetary economy and a rising urban culture revolving around elite men and the literati community in the economically and culturally advanced late Ming urban centres made the burgeoning courtesan industry feasible.[157] The selling of women, ranging from servants to concubines, to upper-class families in a commodity market, had flourished through most of the late imperial period.[158] In this increasingly commercialised environment, the rising popularity of courtesan culture, with the growing public status and perceived monetary value of courtesans, further solidified the practice of objectifying and commercialising women as commodities whose ownership lay with men.

The fact that young girls being sold into courtesanship was accepted by late Ming society was consistent with the male-dominated gender system and its patriarchal values. Rather than seeing the selling of daughters for financial gain as evil or immoral practice, the Chinese tended to have a 'rather sympathetic view' towards these girls sold by their fathers, as they were considered as helping with their families' economic burdens and were even praised for fulfilling their filial duties.[159] Despite the overall economic growth, rising living costs and the widening gap between the rich and poor left increasing numbers of disadvantaged families struggling financially in the late Ming.[160] Selling a daughter became a profitable solution for many disadvantaged families.[161]

Some scholars consider the selling of girls into courtesanship as a means of providing poor girls with unprecedented opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. As Paul S. Ropp puts it, from the perspective of a 'poor family with ten children', the sale of a daughter to be trained as a courtesan might, in fact, have represented the girl's best chance of survival and even of upward social mobility.[162] Similar views are shared by

[157] Sufeng Xu, *Lotus Flowers Rising from the Dark Mud: Late Ming Courtesans and Their Poetry*, 2007, PhD thesis, McGill University, p. 309.
[158] Paul S. Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds.), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 44.
[159] Wetzel, 'Hidden Connections', p. 666.
[160] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 163-167.
[161] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, p. 342.
[162] Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', p. 32.

Harriet T. Zurndorfer, who points that out such a girl from a disadvantaged background might have seen the entertainment quarters she were sold into as 'an opportunity to improve her own material circumstances in a location where beauty, talent and accomplishment were valued.'[163] However, the commercial nature of this exchange should not be overlooked or romanticised. Since, after all, it was a transfer of the ownership of a woman in the market, from one male, the father, to another male, the new owner, a process of trading a girl's future in which she could not make any independent choices for herself.

The trading of courtesans as a highly commercialised industry, especially in Yangzhou, was depicted in *Wu Zazu (Five Miscellanies 五雜俎)* by Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛, a renowned social and cultural observer of that time:

> The people of Yangzhou have long treated their beautiful women as precious merchandise. Merchants bought young girls from everywhere. They taught them crafts such as calligraphy, drinking games, and chess, expecting a handsome return. The girls were called 'thin horses'.[164]

As this passage showcases, a young girl's 'beauty, talent, and accomplishment' – again borrowing Zurndorfer's statement – were indeed valued. However, her worth was purely valued against the standards set by men and judged by the attractiveness she possessed as an object to her male clients in the market, whereas a girl's self-worth was not taken into consideration and her own subjectivity was completely silenced. Moreover, throughout this whole valuation process, money remained the only indicator of a girl's value and was what separated the profitable 'thin horse' who was 'fortunate' enough to be picked by elite men from other ordinary impoverished girls.

Indeed, some famous courtesans were extremely highly valued. According to Craig Clunas, in the early 1640s, the scholar Gong Dingzi 龔鼎孳 paid a thousand ounces of silver for the celebrated courtesan Gu Mei 顧媚, and such large sums of money spent on courtesans were not unacceptable to men of the elite class.[165] Yet no matter how famous or expensive a

[163] Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', p. 205.
[164] Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛, *Wu Zazu 五雜俎*, 8.7a, cited in Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 261.
[165] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, p. 118.

courtesan was, she was either subjected to brothels or dependent on her clients, selling services in exchange for money to survive.[166] Courtesans' freedom of movement and socialising on public occasions went hand-in-hand with their dependence on male patronage. The nature of their business required constant travelling and sojourning in order to build connections in the networks of the gentry, and while on the road, these women mostly relied on their male clients for expenses, accommodation, introductions and protection. During her courtesan career, from 1631 and 1641, the famous courtesan, Liu Rushi 柳如是, hardly stayed in the same place longer than one year.[167] Thus, compared to ordinary housewives, courtesans did enjoy certain levels of social freedom; still, they were far from being the autonomous actors in the public realm portrayed by many, as the de facto freedom they enjoyed was actually a by-product of their reliance on men and was required by the commercial nature of the industry.

Known for their literary and artistic achievements, late Ming courtesans were praised by many as a significant cultural agent contributing to female self-expression and even as a positive sign of expanding female education.[168] Courtesanship did offer girls from humble families opportunities for education outside the family system, during a time when education was mainly available only to daughters from upper-class families that could afford it.[169] However, although overlapping in some areas, the education courtesans received and that received by gentry daughters were fundamentally different.

Courtesans' skills were essentially their professional expertise, a product more of the nature of the trade that developed to cater to their clients' tastes and to attract more business. Scholar-officials remained courtesans' primary clientele until the 18th century.[170] According to Shen Hongyu 沈弘宇's *Piaodu Jiguan (A Guide to Brothels and Gambling Dens 嫖賭機關)*, in order to cater to scholar-officials' tastes, a good courtesan needed to acquire the 'perfect ten', consisting of 'cultural elegance, freedom from vulgarity, reading and writing excellence, artistic skills, singing talent, playing of musical instruments, sense of

[166] Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', p. 43.
[167] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* pp. 273-275.
[168] Judith Zeitlin, "'Notes of Flesh' and the Courtesans' Song in Seventeenth-Century China", p. 78.
[169] Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', p. 33.
[170] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 255.

discrimination, romantic charms, professionalism, and Suzhou-style aestheticism.'[171] Among these 'perfect ten', a distinct emphasis was placed on professional stage performance, which was not required of gentry daughters, who were expected to remain in the inner chamber, rather than entertain strangers outside of the household with their cultivated skills.

This client-oriented training system was also described in Li Yu 李漁's *Xianqing Ouji* (*Random Repository of Idle Thoughts 閑情偶寄*), which can be taken as an 'ideal representation of education for women in various grades of establishments in the entertainment world.'[172] Certain instruments were only taught in order to increase a courtesan's feminine appeal to clients, for example, the *xiao* (簫 flute) was taught because a woman was considered to look best when playing it as it made her mouth appear attractively smaller. Also, musical performance and sex appeal have long been intertwined, as 'blowing the *xiao*' could also be seen as a 'flowery term for fellatio'. By similar logic, playing the shawm was to be avoided, as such an instrument would distort women's faces in front of the audience.[173] Thus, Li Yu 李漁 clearly points out how to appreciate female entertainers' musical skills：'What's important for a man in playing an instrument is the sound, for a woman it's her looks.'[174]

Based on the levels of their clienteles and varying demands, lower-class entertainers only needed to go through the basic elements of such complicated training in order to achieve a certain erotic charm. First-class courtesans, in contrast, were expected to achieve at a literary and artistic level high enough to socialise with literati and entertain them at social events, by participating in calligraphy and painting contests or engaging in literary exchange such as reciting and writing poems.[175] From the male perspective, some courtesans were so gifted that not only did they become the poetic inspiration for the

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[171] Shen Hongyu 沈弘宇, *Piaodu Jiguan 嫖賭機關*, Ming edition, juan shang, cited in Hsu Pi-Ching, 'Courtesans and Scholars in the Writings of Feng Menglong：Transcending Status and Gender', p. 49.
[172] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 265.
[173] Zeitlin, "'Notes of Flesh' and the Courtesans' Song in Seventeenth-CenturyChina", pp. 78-81.
[174] Li Yu 李漁, *Xianqing Ouji 閑情偶寄*, Shan Mianheng (ed.) (Hangzhou：Zhejiang guiji chubanshe, 1999), 3, 138 -139, cited in Zeitlin, "'Notes of Flesh' and the Courtesans' Song in Seventeenth-CenturyChina", p. 98.
[175] Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', pp. 201-202.

literati but were also immortalised in a stylised literary genre based on their talents and essentially the companionship they offered.[176]

Some courtesans' poetry skills were indeed praised by many and their poems were even published. However, as Maureen Robertson points out, the thematic range and self-presentation of their poems were still associated with 'the identification of women with the body and sexuality, consistent with their address to the expectations of a male audience and relationship'.[177] A courtesan's ability to write poetry was also a practical business skill developed to manage client relations since poetry was the primary means for her to communicate with her clients outside of the pleasure quarters. Jing Pianpian 景翩翩, widely celebrated as one of the best courtesan poets of the Ming period,[178] wrote a considerable number of poems to impress and attract male clients. For example, *Guisi* (*Boudoir Thoughts 閨思*), which she wrote and sent to a 'Master Chen', included these tantalising lines:

> Flute sounds in this quiet room fill the morning with feeling.
> Piece by piece, floating blossoms brightly shimmer in the sun.
> A sprinkling of lonely tears has stained the pair of pillows;
> For short songs and long ones, I tune and return the *zheng*.[179]

This poem depicted a vivid and inviting picture of her boudoir, the most private place in a woman's life that could only become accessible to her husband when marriage was consummated. The usage of 'lonely tears' and 'the pair of pillows' implied a sad yet expectant sense that the author was alone in her bed, waiting to be visited by the recipient of this letter, for whom she might perform instruments such as the erotic 'flute', the gendered meaning of which has been discussed above, as well as '*the zheng*.' Although, in general, most poems by courtesans were more ambiguous than Jing's *Guisi*, as it is hard to figure out whether they were written for one specific lover or for a larger group of men. This ambiguity, intertwined with seductiveness, served as the lures of courtesan culture, as

[176] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, pp. 229–231.
[177] Maureen Robertson, 'Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China', p. 99
[178] Kang-i Sun Chang, Haun Saussy and Charles Yim-tze Kwong (ed.), *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, pp. 224–226.
[179] Jing Pianpian 景翩翩, Guisi 閨思, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women, Volume II: Tang Through Ming 618–1644*, p. 176.

flirtation was institutionalised as one of the main attractions of the late Ming pleasure quarters.[180]

In summary, positioning courtesans in the commercialised market in which they operated, this section has examined how the booming courtesan culture grew from, and further reinforced the male-dominated hierarchy. The commercialised courtesan industry symbolised the practice of objectifying and selling women as men's property, thus perpetuating the patriarchal idea that the ownership of women belongs with men, and marking women's dependence on men. Rather than being genuine signs of self-expression and female subjectivities, the literary and artistic skills of courtesans were also products of the commercialised market, developed to increase courtesans' market value and to help them to better serve their male patrons. Nevertheless, all of these achievements, experiences and skills which courtesans gained in the commercial world also marked their outsider status with respect to the traditional household units and the kinship system, as the next section will further examine.

COURTESANS IN THE KINSHIP SYSTEM

The ambiguous status of courtesans was also constructed to reinforce the late Ming orthodox kinship system, which was built upon the male-centred gender hierarchy. Having been designed to fulfil the female role in literati public life, courtesans were a group separated from housewives, who were confined to the domestic sphere and whose entry to the public realm was therefore blocked by the presence of courtesans. Furthermore, courtesans' status was legally and culturally constructed outside of the traditional household and kinship system by Ming society to ensure their disruptive nature did not cause a threat to the existing family structure and husband-wife relations.

Some scholars, such as Paul S. Ropp, consider that, in contrast to the 'rigid segregation' of males and females in Ming society, the courtesan world has provided 'a meeting ground where women could openly socialise with men who were not their husbands'.[181] Nevertheless, the only women allowed in this 'meeting ground' were female entertainers,

[180] Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', p. 22.
[181] Ibid., p. 19.

a small portion of all women in Ming society, whereas housewives, as well as gentry daughters, were strictly excluded. Expected to remain dedicated to their husbands, respectable women were supposed to concentrate on wifely domestic duties, rather than venturing outside to socialise with other men.[182] As the 'antithesis of their wives' in the eyes of literati,[183] courtesans fulfilled the female role of wives in literati public life, serving as the public hostesses of literati gatherings, communal occasions that were so significant that they are considered to have helped 'define the literati as a class' and served 'as a source of accreditation for membership in the elite.'[184] With professionally trained courtesans being gradually institutionalised as an integral part of elite men's public life and even a symbol of literati's refinement and taste in the late Ming period, housewives' entrance to these social occasions was further denied.

Scholars also argue that the 'nominal wife-entertainer boundary' was eroded by courtesan culture, as Dorothy Ko points out, personal contacts between women from the two worlds increased, friendships started to form between these two groups of women, and some housewives even started to imitate art and fashion trends from the pleasure quarters.[185] Holding similar views that courtesans transcended late Ming social boundaries, Zurndorfer also points out that courtesans "operated at the elite level of society and were often indistinguishable from gentry women, thus indicating late Ming's blurry social strata."[186] However, there were deliberate attempts to highlight the boundary separating women in the public world from those in the domestic sphere, made by both women and men of the gentry class. Kang-i Sung Chang observes the tendency of late Ming gentry woman writers to separate their poetry from that written by courtesans and published within the same poetry collections. In an anthology by Wang Duanshu 王端淑, one of the most prominent late Ming female gentry poets, about one thousand female poets were arranged in descending order of social status, with gentry women being grouped into the category of '*zheng* (the proper 正)' and courtesans into the category of '*yin* (the erotic 淫)'.

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[182] Zeitlin, "'Notes of Flesh' and the Courtesans' Song in Seventeenth-Century China", p. 67.
[183] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 258.
[184] Victoria Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies and Geisha of the Ming* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 27.
[185] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 259.
[186] Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', p. 197.

In other cases, courtesans' poems would just not be included at all in anthologies of women of the gentry class.[187]

Some gentry women did befriend courtesans and grew to appreciate their skills,[188] but the underlying pithiness they felt about courtesans' lives and sufferings, due to the fact that courtesans belonged to a group in the outside world so different from themselves, could still be seen in their writings. Such conflicted feelings were evident in the poem, *Bai Zhuci* (*Song of White Linen 白燭詞*), by gentry wife Lu Qingzi 陸卿子, in which she first acknowledged the glamorous side of her courtesan friends' lives: "Beauties of Handan, worth whole cities, their glamour outshines springtime itself. For gentlemen, sleeves twirl to the song of white linen." Without doubt, the popularity which courtesans enjoyed in the public realm and the attention they received from 'gentlemen' were things a proper gentry housewife like Lu Qingzi could never dream of. Nevertheless, she also expressed deep sympathy towards them, "as the sun sets behind blue hills, sadness intensifies,"[189] since courtesans remained alone at the pleasure quarters at the end of a night when the men had left to go back to their wives and their homes, where courtesans did not belong. Thus, such 'sadness' which the glamorous lifestyle of courtesanship could bring was highlighted by female gentry writers. Moreover, an underlying boundary marking the fundamental differences between themselves and courtesans, or more precisely, a patronising sense of moral superiority towards their counterparts in the pleasure quarters, was implied.

Also in exploring gentry wives' subjectivities showcased in their poetry work or literary exchange with courtesans, Zurndorfer gives an interesting insight as she suggests that gentry wives, apart from appreciating courtesans' beauty and pitying their lonely situations, might also have 'resented the courtesans' relative freedom from domestic responsibilities and burdens'.[190] Such resentment might have also contributed to a stronger sense of collective identity of gentry wives that was shared through family duties

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[187] Kang-i Sung Chang, 'Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies', in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds.), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 158-159.
[188] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 266.
[189] Lu Qingzi 陸卿子, *Bai Zhuci 白燭詞,* cited in Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', p. 27.
[190] Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644)', p. 213.

and similar domestic experiences, thus further ‘othering’ courtesans and denying their entrance into the domestic world.

Men of the gentry class also acknowledged and attempted to maintain the boundary between the women of these two worlds. This was true even for those men who had married courtesans as their concubines, as they tried to dissociate these concubines, once married, from their courtesan past. It is seen in *Yutai Huashi (History of Jade Terrace Painting 玉臺畫史)*, an important biographical source on late imperial Chinese female painters, in which 32 courtesans were praised for various artistic skills. Again, a distinct boundary with the womanly characteristics that constituted respectable wives that set them apart from courtesans could be clearly observed, as none of the courtesans mentioned here was praised for embroidery, a skill normally considered to belong to domestic wives, rather than female entertainers in the brothels. The only exception made was for the famous late Ming courtesan Dong Xiaowan 董小宛, who became a concubine of the literati Mao Xiang 冒襄. Mao emphasised Dong’s needlework skill and her lack of interest in instruments and paintings in his *Yingmeian Yiyu* (*Reminiscences of the Plum-shaded Convent 影梅庵憶語)* to hide her past as a talented courtesan and to erase any traits that might be associated with it:[191]

> She confined herself in a separate apartment with the door locked, desisting from playing instruments and dispensing with powder and rouge, but applying herself to practising needlework… cutting paper flowers, carving gold leaf into ornamental designs, and making palindromes.[192]

As analysed in the first section, ‘playing instruments’, especially certain instruments with erotic meanings for entertaining and commercial purposes, was closely related to courtesans’ cultural image, and also symbolised the pleasure quarters.da ming It was therefore something that Mao was clearly stating that his concubine now ‘desisted from.’ Apart from playing instruments, Mao also highlighted that his concubine had desisted herself from ‘powder and rouge’. This also underlined the existing husband-wife

[191] Wetzel, ‘Hidden Connections’, p. 649.
[192] Mao Xiang 冒襄, *Yingmeian Yiyu 影梅庵憶語*, 37, cited in Wetzel, ‘Hidden Connections’, p. 650.

hierarchy and implied the patriarchal values that domestic women were expected to follow. A decent domestic woman, once married, should not bother herself with cosmetics or spending too much effort on appearance since there is no longer a need for her to attract attention or please others outside the household with her looks, something that was only acceptable for female entertainers to do to make a living. What Dong's priority now was to simply make contributions to the household by taking up the gendered domestic tasks designated for women, such as doing 'needlework' and making decorations to make the home look more pleasing, rather than to make herself look pleasing.

Despite the rare case of Dong Xiaowan, who was taken as a concubine, late Ming courtesan status was constructed legally and culturally as a marginalised group outside of the orthodox family structure in order to neutralise their ambivalent and potentially disruptive social position with respect to the gender system. Marriage between courtesans and scholar-officials was explicitly forbidden in the *Da Ming Lü (Great Ming Code 大明律)* and was culturally denounced in Confucian ideals, as courtesans, coming from a polluting 'mean people' class, were not destined to be decent wives and mothers. According to the *Da Ming Lü*, under Article 119 Qu yueren wei qiqie (Marrying Musicians as Wives or Concubines 娶樂人為妻妾):

> In all cases where officials or functionaries marry musicians as wives or concubines, they shall be punished by 60 strokes of beating with the heavy stick. The marriages shall be dissolved in both cases... A record of their transgression shall be made, and on the day when they inherit the title of honour, their rank shall be reduced one degree and they shall be appointed to distant places.[193]

The same punishment also applied to 'the official's sons or sons' sons'.[194] Such measures might have been taken to ensure the hereditary nature of the courtesans' 'mean people' class and to prevent their status from polluting the decent patrilineal line of the gentry class as well as the purity of their household units. Although there were a few celebrated cases of

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[193] Da Ming Lü *大明律*, Article 119, translated by Yonglin Jiang, *The Great Ming Code: Da Ming Lü* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), p. 87.
[194] Ibid., p. 87.

courtesans marrying scholar-officials, these remained isolated examples of individual mobility, according to Dorothy Ko.[195]

In addition to official Ming regulations, the marginalisation of courtesans from the orthodox family household units was also evident in late Ming literary work that emphasised courtesans' disruptive and ambiguous social identity. Many scholars of courtesan culture, such as Wai-yee Li, point out that in Ming vernacular stories, courtesans were represented as a 'cultural ideal', the sagacious and faithful lover embodying 'the *qing*' (romantic feelings 情), thus 'overcoming the boundaries between private and public spheres.'[196] Nevertheless, in these stories, again, it was courtesans' outcast status within the kinship system that writers constantly stressed to create tension or to base their storylines upon, thus culturally reinforcing this outsider image of courtesans. In Feng Menglong 馮夢龍's story, *Du Shiniang Nuchen Baibaoxiang* (*Du Shiniang Sinks her Jewel Box in Anger 杜十娘怒沉百寶箱)*, the fact was highlighted that the contradictory nature of courtesan status made marriage between courtesans and literati highly controversial and unacceptable in society. Deeply worried that his father would be angry at finding out that he was marrying a 'singsong girl' from 'low haunts', and convinced that 'all relatives and friends' would refuse to support him, the literatus Li Jia was persuaded to give up his marriage to the courtesan Du Shiniang and to sell her to another man. Disappointed by Li's decision, Du Shiniang jumped into the river and ended her life after throwing away her whole fortune.[197]

Sad endings, such as Du Shiniang's tragic death, further perpetuated the cultural image of courtesans as problematic outsiders with respect to the normal orthodox family accepted by society, and the idea that marriages between literati and courtesans would never be blessed but could only end in sadness and separation. Meanwhile, in spite of being portrayed as outcasts from the family structure, courtesans' dedication and loyalty to men were nevertheless encouraged and praised, as they were encouraged to follow the same

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[195] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* p. 254.
[196] Wai-yee Li, 'The Late Ming Courtesan: Invention of a Cultural Ideal', in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds.), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 49.
[197] Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Du Shiniang Nuchen Baibaoxiang 杜十娘怒沈百寶箱*, translated by Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang in *The Courtesan's Jewel Box* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957).

husband–wife hierarchy that had emerged in the domestic sphere, regardless of the fact that they would never be accepted as proper wives.

To summarise, this section has positioned courtesans in the late Ming kinship system and analysed the power dynamic between courtesans and both men and women of the gentry class. The existence of courtesans helped maintain the existing family structure and husband–wife hierarchy as they blocked the entry of women from the domestic sphere into the public sphere. To minimise the disruptive impact of courtesans to the kinship system, a clear boundary separating them from respectable housewives was constructed by both men and women of the gentry class. Similarly, marriage between courtesans and literati were prevented by Ming legal regulations and further problematised culturally by late Ming literary work.

Conclusion

Contrary to the existing literature that sometimes considers courtesans as a transcending force that challenged orthodox gender boundaries and existing hierarchies, this article argues that courtesans were a product of the existing patriarchal gender system, and the blossoming of courtesan culture in the late Ming period further reinforced the very male–dominated hierarchy from which it emerged. The life of a courtesan, at different stages, as discussed in the article, was affected by the gender system. In the beginning, they were sold into courtesanship by their fathers as commodities, and into a career of service to male clients. As they grew up, they were trained to speak the language of their potential male clients and to cultivate the skills that would be appreciated by these men. The de facto freedom and resources they enjoyed in the public realm came as a by–product of their dependence on male patronage. In the final stage of a courtesan's career, upward mobility and their ideal of 'respectability' were achieved through marriage to men, marking their ultimate dependence on such men.

However, the outsider status of courtesans in the kinship system was constructed legally and culturally by Ming society to create a boundary separating the public realm and the domestic sphere, and to ensure that the orthodox family structure and the husband–wife

hierarchy were not threatened. Ironically, courtesans were nevertheless accepted and praised culturally as 'filial daughters', even though they had little connection with their parents once sold into courtesanship at a young age. They were also praised as 'loyal and faithful lovers', even though marriage to courtesans was not encouraged. This cultural 'praise', as well as the de facto freedom and resources they enjoyed, might have contributed to incentivising young girls to remain in courtesanship and to ensuring the courtesan culture remained robust in the late Ming period.

The gendered position of courtesans can easily be overlooked or overshadowed by the praise these women received, as well as by their achievements in arts and literature. This is probably one of the main reasons that romanticised visions of courtesans have dominated the related literature, both by contemporary literati and today's Sinologists. The romantic vision of the former group could easily be a productive line of research if approached with literary criticism and rhetorical analysis, as well as through taking the authors' positionality and subjectivity into consideration. Having re-positioned courtesans into the gender system they emerged from and analysed their relationships with other men and women, this article contributes to the process of rethinking the romanticised images of certain marginalised gender and social groups in late imperial China, and brings this process to the attention of future researchers.

The cause of the romanticised visions of today's Sinologists and western scholarship towards courtesans is equally intriguing and worth exploring, a topic that this article has not addressed, at least directly. Can these romanticised views reveal certain patterns or limitations in western feminists'/gender historians' approaches to non-western regions? Or do these romanticised views have something to do with the western translation of 'courtesans', a term associated with another group of women that emerged from totally different gender systems and unique social settings in the west? Does the use of this translation risk the anachronism of borrowing a western group identity and then using it to identify its past in Chinese history? In adopting this western term, which parts of the experiences and subjectivities of this group of Chinese women have therefore been over-emphasised or silenced? And were women from similar backgrounds excluded by the categorisation of 'courtesans'? If so, should we stick with the use of the western translation

‘courtesans’ in future research or just refer to these women in Chinese simply as ‘*mingji* (famous prostitutes 名妓)’? These are all interesting questions that await further debate.

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