CHAPTER TWO

Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer: A Courtesan in Late Imperial China

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The Pleasure Quarters of Late Imperial China

A seventeenth-century Chinese eyewitness called the Qinhuai, the pleasure quarters of old Nanjing, the "Capital of the Immortals in the World of Lust." In late imperial China this corner of the world exerted a considerable impact on its visitors, observers, and chroniclers, who fell prey to its charms and attractions. The Qinhuai River divided Nanjing in a curious way: to the north there was the traditional examination compound, the site of China’s examination hell, where scholars competed for entry into the civil service, China's imperial administration. Passing the examinations would open doors into the charmed circle of the elite and would provide membership of the ruling class in a meritocratic system. It was a world enticingly open to all: anyone could compete, apart from women, slaves, and the offspring of prostitutes. To the south of the river, nestled within the city walls, you would find the pleasure quarters that exercised the imagination of the literati, China’s intellectual and political elite, and have continued to fascinate modern-day students of China’s past.

The Qinhuai existed as a place of song, dance, and entertainment for centuries. When Nanjing was the capital of China in the fourteenth century, the first Ming emperor (r. 1368–1398) officially established its pleasure quarters. They flourished until the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in the
mid-seventeenth century. The place was situated within the cultural heartland of late imperial China, the Yangzi Delta region. The economic prosperity of this area in the late Ming era was mainly due to its salt monopoly, the port cities that fueled trade with Japan, the influx of silver from Japan and Peru during a time of worldwide economic growth, and the fact that the highest-ranking officials in the imperial administration tended to choose it as a place to settle and retire.

The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 reduced the Qinhui pleasure quarters to ruins. The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) took control over China, and the new Manchu government declared prostitution to be no longer official. The profession continued in the private sector but never regained its former glory. Later literati looked back with nostalgia to the days when the Qinhui had flourished. Many poets and writers imagined and recreated its past glamour in their writings. The famous scholar-official Wang Shizhen (1634–1711), for example, recalled the atmosphere as a place of bittersweet romance and tragedy:

Throughout the ages the boats of Nanjing witnessed the breaking of many hearts,
The pavilions on the banks of the Qinhui river are filled with dreams.2

The Chinese Courtesan

The inhabitants of the Qinhui were the courtesans, although the place also housed a large number of artists and their families. The Chinese term for prostitute (jiùmǔ) refers to both the common lowly prostitute and the high-class courtesan. Modern scholars have used the term geisha for the Chinese courtesan. Geisha is a suitable term as it literally means “artist,” but it remains peculiar to the Japanese context, referring to a strict training process and hierarchy. The Chinese system for training courtesans, however, did not draw such clear-cut boundaries or distinctions.

The Chinese courtesan differed from a prostitute by virtue of her fame and artistic talent. She acquired the status of mięngī (literally, famous prostitute) or courtesan, a term better suited for those jiùmǔ (prostitutes) who were literate, highly trained, and specialized entertainers, performers, and artists and not primarily paid for sexual services. The late imperial Chinese courtesan participated in and belonged to the world of letters, the domain of the literati, China’s male elite. She was not only a well-known woman who became public property by virtue of being written about but also a writing woman who usually distinguished herself by means of her poetry and whose literary works, calligraphy, or paintings circulated in public.

The history of the courtesan in China dates back to the institution of singing girls at the court of the Zhou dynasty (eleventh century BCE–256 BCE) when princes kept troupes of trained female entertainers (niuyue) who later became attributes of social prominence. Private troupes remained exclusive to ruling-class families due to economic constraints, while professional entertainers became available in commercial brothels. Courtesans began to share in literati culture only in the days of the Tang dynasty (618–907) when court entertainers became part of the Office of Music Instruction in 714.

In late Ming times courtesans appeared at the center of elite culture, featuring as prominent protagonists in poetry, plays, and prose pieces. Simultaneously they also gained fame as poetesses, calligraphers, and painters in their own right. Famous courtesans formed intellectual companionships with elite men, sharing their interest in learning and helping out in the scholars’ studios, composing poetry, compiling, collating, editing, proofreading, and annotating literary works. Courtesans of outstanding literary talent would also acquire the semihonorable title of female “collator” or “book reviser” (jiashu). In contrast to gentry women, courtesans were even able to own property in their own right. Some courtesans invested their savings in town mansions, country villas, and gardens. They used these sites to entertain elite men, often with a view to making a good match in marriage before their fame declined or old age put an end to their careers.

The Manchu rulers ended state patronage of official courtesans and restored orthodoxy during the Qing dynasty. As a consequence courtesan culture declined, while gentlewomen from ruling-class families began to take part in elite culture instead. This process entailed the vulgarization of the courtesan as her caliber plummeted and the economic basis of courtesan culture dissipated.

Girls in Gaily Painted Boats

The girls of Qinhui lived in “gaily painted boats,” as male connoisseurs described their vision of the establishments on the river. The male observers conjured up images of banquets, songs, and dance on the floating brothels. One poem tells us that the music never ceased in the realm of mist and flowers. Another writer evoked the profusion of lanterns and boats on the Qinhui River and depicted the scene thus: “When dusk fell, it did not take long until the lantern boats accumulated like the wriggling of a fire-spitting dragon and their lights glowed so bright that they lit up both the land and the sky.”3 The resonance of the drumbeats shook the waves, and the noise of
gaudy celebration continued until dawn. This is how male observers perceived the sights of the Qinhuai.

However, the girls on the gaily painted boats lived a life of servitude, not much different from slavery. Some of them had been sold into prostitution, while others came as war trophies or Mongol captives. They spent their days in subservience and often ended them in poverty, even if they had enjoyed fame and fortune in their prime. Others committed suicide in desperation. These aspects of their lives do not feature prominently in the writings about courtesans, nor in the courtesans’ own works. Feelings of pity and the awareness of the link between sex, bondage, and shame came to the literati only later, across the distance of time, when the world of Qinhuai had vanished. Looking back in time, they suddenly perceived the waters of the Qinhuai to be “soaked in tears.” The courtesans by contrast would express their anger, if they did so at all, only through wit and sarcasm.

Modern scholars who write about female entertainers in China have reminded us of the more prosaic sides of the courtesans’ lives. The exchange of sex work for money finds mention only in the accounts of modern historians. This choice of vocabulary would not have occurred in the late imperial Chinese discourse, neither in the words of the literati nor in those of the women writers. The concept of exchange, however, played an important role on another level, as we shall see below.

In the view of the law, the girls on the boats counted among the social outcasts. Traditional opinion relegated actresses, artists, and prostitutes to the bottom of the social scale, and as we have noted, imperial Chinese law excluded their offspring from the civil service in perpetuity.

**Bohemian Beauty**

Listen to the voice of one of the beauties of Qinhuai, the courtesan Xue Susu (ca. 1565–ca. 1650), inviting the scholar-official Censor He to drink on an autumn day:

> Inside the city walls of stone in the pleasure quarters,  
> I feel deeply mortified that my talents outshine all the others,  
> The river glitters, the waters clear, and seagulls swim in pairs,  
> The sky looks hollow, the clouds serene, and wild geese fly in rows.  
> My embroidered dress partly borrows the hue of hibiscus,  
> The emerald wine shares the scent of lotus.  
> If I did not reciprocate your feelings,  
> Would I dare feast with you, Master He? 

Xue Susu counted among the most accomplished artists and entertainers in late imperial China. A bohemian free spirit so full of paradoxes and complexities, she merits a closer look to see what her story can tell us about women, life, and culture in late imperial China. Xue Susu stands at the center of a social network of negotiations and exchange that revolves around not only seduction and money but also poetry, paintings, emotions, elegance, luxury, and dreams of gentility.

The sources are divided about the details of Xue Susu’s place and date of birth, background, career, and death. She was probably born in either Suzhou or Jiaxing sometime between 1565 and 1573; she must have been at least fifteen years of age when a famous art critic admired her painting sometime prior to 1588. She gained fame as a courtesan and artist in the Yangzi Delta region and spent a number of years in Nanjing.

One of Xue Susu’s admirers, Hu Yinglin, composed an erotic poem for Susu when she was living in Nanjing in her teens:

> Who transplanted this flower of a renowned species to the imperial garden?  
> Hers is a smile worth a thousand pieces of gold.  
> She lives near the mooing like Tao Ye [Peach Leaf], under the wind.  
> She resembles rushes, standing in the water, embracing the moon and humming.  
> The red phoenix (shoe) is half raised because of her mate.  
> Her eye-brows are slightly frowning, expecting a heart to share.  
> This is the moment to read “Eternal regret,” the poem of Bo Juyi . . .  
> Beside the bed, she is awaiting the lute of jade. 

This poem gives evidence that Xue Susu did live in the Qinhuai pleasure quarters during her time in Nanjing, or at least that she was associated with the place in the literati’s minds. The Peach Leaf Ford (Tao Ye du) near the Bridge of Convenient Fording was a well-known tourist attraction in the Qinhuai. Its name reminded visitors of the Jin dynasty calligrapher, painter, and scholar Wang Xianzhi (344–386) who wrote a poem about the place where he parted from his lover and concubine, the courtesan Peach Leaf, who then crossed the canal at this point.

Susu thus appears as one of the many bohemian beauties, artists, and entertainers that populated the Qinhuai, a place that boasted the most talented and high-ranking courtesans of late imperial China. Perhaps she lived there only for a few years, not long enough to make it into the diaries and notes of Qinhuai visitors such as Yu Hui (1616–1696) who depicted the delights of the place and recorded the names and details of its most famous inhabitants, or Pan Zhiheng (1556–1622). Perhaps there were simply too many celebrated
courtesans to list and catalog them all. Or perhaps, at least in Yu Huai's case, the omission is simply due to the fact that she lived in Qinhuai over half a century before his time.

In the literati's eyes Xue Susu, too, belonged to the Qinhuai and its world of pleasure and seduction. It is likely that she only became truly famous later on, after she had left the Qinhuai. She seems to have established her reputation as a celebrity in literati circles only during her stay in Beijing in the 1590s where she hosted poetry parties and literary soirees for poets, scholars, officials, and military officers. She would entertain her patrons with her poetry and play a jade lute at banquets. Her martial spirit earned her a reputation as an archer, a horsewoman, and a knight-errant, and she would display her Amazonian skills on horseback in public. She even became involved in political campaigns and adventures. And yet, despite her public prominence, she almost disappeared from sight for nearly half a century when her career as a courtesan in the public eye appears to have ended.

After 1600 her traces become blurred. At around that time she probably married and left courtesan life behind. It is possible that she lived into the 1650s, as she seems to have joined a circle of prominent women writers and artists with whom she exchanged poems and paintings in mid-seventeenth-century Hangzhou. Her invisibility over the decades between her time as a celebrated courtesan and her death might be connected to her marital history during those decades. As a wife and concubine, she seems to have become a much-prized and jealously guarded commodity.

Flowers and Flute: The Courtesan Painter

As an artist, Xue Susu’s reputation soared beyond that of many other courtesans, and in the minds of later generations she acquired a place among the “Eight Great Courtesans of the Ming Dynasty.” Xue Susu’s paintings can be dated from 1598 to 1637, although other undated works also exist.

Like many courtesans, she excelled at depicting orchids. This flower symbolized purity and seclusion and was perceived as a secluded, hidden rarity, just like the courtesan herself. One scholar wrote with admiration of Dong Xiaowan (1624–1651), another renowned Qinhuai courtesan: “I found her again like a fragrant orchid flower growing in a secluded valley.” The orchid was also associated with a young girl’s chamber or a marital chamber, symbolizing love and beauty. A union of golden orchids denoted the bond of friendship or love. In the ancient classic Yi Jing (Book of Changes), the orchid refers to harmony. In the late imperial Chinese imagination the orchid was seen as a symbol of gentlemanly and scholarly ideals. In all its different connotations, it aptly epitomizes the courtesan’s situation in the social no-man’s-land between feminine eroticism and masculine erudition.

Susu also painted bamboo, plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, and other flowers, as did other courtesan painters. One painted fan by Xue Susu shows a cicada on a leaf. The cicada was thought of as an emblem of resurrection because of the insect’s life cycle. The imagery of the cicada also evoked associations of beautiful women.

Xue Susu also displayed her skills in figure painting—a subject less commonly tackled by courtesan painters. The leading painter and art critic of the day, Dong Qichang (1555–1636), is said to have fallen in love with her painting in ink of the bodhisattva Guanyin the moment he saw it. Full of enthusiasm for her work, he copied out the Heart Sutra to accompany the painting and affixed it with a colophon.

She also produced a portrait of a girl on a garden terrace, playing a flute. The figure is seated in the midst of a rock garden, framed by flowers and a bamboo tree. Modern art critics surmise that it might be a stylized self-portrait. Like the girl in the painting, Susu would play the flute at parties. On an allegorical level, representations of flute-playing women also had erotic connotations; a picture by the Yuan dynasty painter Qian Xian, for example, shows the archetypal lover, the Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), teaching his favorite concubine Yang Guifei (700–755), China’s most famous femme fatale, to play the flute.

Amazon and Archer

Legends also ranked around the reputation of Xue Susu as an archer and horsewoman. Her Amazon style inspired artistic and literary representations not only in the late Ming era but also in later times, as a woodblock carving of Susu on horseback practicing archery shows. In her childhood she spent some time in Beijing and practiced archery on horseback outside the city walls on the open fields. Hu Yinglin describes her skills in vivid detail:

She also excels at horse riding and archery. She is able to shoot two balls from her crossbow one after another and make the second ball strike the first ball and break it in mid-air. Another trick she can do is to place a ball on the ground and, by pulling the bow backwards with her left hand, while her right hand draws the bow from behind her back, hit it. Out of a hundred shots, she does not miss a single one."
Susu was not too shy to display her skills in public. Her performances on horseback attracted large crowds, and she also entertained the guests at her parties with her archery. The poet Lu Bi composed a poem entitled “The Song of Observing Susu Perform Archery”:

Tipsy on wine we request her to perform a game of archery,
She ties a thin shirt around her waist and nonchalantly gives it a trial shot.
Her red sleeves wrapped up slightly half expose her archer’s armguard,
Her hair tied like a cloud in a knot, she tilts her head to estimate the distance
and stretches her arms [to guide the crossbow and arrow].
When the servant girl takes a ball in her hand and places it on top of her head,
She turns around, hits it with another ball, and both balls fall to the ground.
She is ready much faster than it takes to recount,
And while we still wish she would carry on a bit longer, she is done.9

In the Literati’s Eyes

Xue Susu primarily appears in the historical sources through the filter of male-authored discourse. In her earlier years, the poet, scholar, and bibliophile Hu Yinglin (1551–1602) was smitten with Susu’s skills as an artist and archer. Here he describes her beauty and talent: “Xue Wu [Susu] has a lovely and elegant appearance. She talks in a sophisticated way and her comportment is graceful. She excels at regular style calligraphy and surpasses anyone in painting bamboo and orchids. She employs swift strokes of the brush and her paintings testify to her liveliness.”10

By the time Hu Yinglin’s notes on Xue Susu were published in 1581, she must have been at least a young teenager. This would also suggest that she was born between 1565 and 1570. Hu Yinglin recalled that, on their first meeting, she had called him the “most outstanding scholar of his time.” He in turn addressed her with the gender-neutral honorific “Master Xue” and enthused, “Even those famous painters with excellent skills cannot surpass her.”11

Hu also exchanged poetry with Susu. His poems describe the parties she hosted; praise her prowess as a poet, artist, and horsewoman; and reminisce about mutual faraway friends.

Xue [Susu] was good at playing the zither and lute, styling her eyebrows, and curling the hair on her temples. This made her so lovely and delightful that she would seduce men one after another. However, when she advanced in age, men would be tempted elsewhere and there was little she could do about it. Here again she has painted a delicate image of the Bodhisattva to pray for all couples in love in this world to have offspring. As she makes up for a great deficiency in this way, I am delighted to express my praise for her.12

This is one of the few surviving comments on Xue Susu from the first decades of the seventeenth century, written sometime before 1635.

After her death another scholar remembered her glamour and charm:

In spite of her long life, ingenious Xue retained her glamorous reputation. After she passed away, legends grew around her saying that she had possessed witchcraft by means of which she attached younger men to her. But this is fiction only. Studying her portrait, one sees a fastidious but unpretentious woman. It is more likely that, as Daoist tradition has it, her high spiritual power preserved her charm.13

Culture and Commerce

Xue Susu’s native Yangzi Delta region in late Ming China appears as a hotbed of cultural activities. The era witnessed a flourishing of the creative arts and new developments in literature, painting, and color printing. But it was also an era characterized by the literati’s inward turn as many scholar-officials withdrew from public life, frustrated with corruption at court and at all levels of the civil service. Many of them began to devote more time to the arts and became obsessed with elegant living, religious events, and unorthodox cults.

A period of worldwide economic growth at the turn of the seventeenth century fanned the economic boom in China. As silver dollars rolled into China from as far as Japan and Peru, the coastal cities in particular, those centers of trade close to ports and canals, saw the arts flourish on an unprecedented scale. One Qinhuai visitor described the opulence and conspicuous consumption of the place at that time:

The markets and shops in the pleasure quarters looked neat, tidy and rather unusual. They only sold luxury goods of the highest quality such as perfume sachets, embroidered slippers, well-known wines, delicious teas, malt-sugar candies, pickled savouries, pan pipes, flutes, strings and lutes. The male buyers
from the outside world did not mind the exorbitant prices and thus the girls never received vulgar or ordinary gifts.\textsuperscript{14}

New developments in print technology and book distribution let the publishing industry boom. Commercial publishers produced not only textbooks for the rising numbers of examination candidates and aspiring scholars but also literature for entertainment, catering to a new audience of urban dwellers, newly rich merchant families, and educated women. The publishing industry responded to an increasing demand for fictional narratives; poetry; anthologies; guidebooks on style, elegance, and gentility; erotic handbooks; pornography; and a flood of romantic literature, including works of prose, poetry, and drama on love and emotions.

In the late Ming women appeared in ever-increasing numbers as the authors of works of poetry and drama and as the editors of literary anthologies. Changes in the perceptions of women led to the formation of a new beauty ideal. The literati began to celebrate women who combined talent, beauty, and virtue and showed a particular fascination with female child prodigies and talented teenage girls who often tragically died young. In the literati’s perception these young females appeared to embody purity, simplicity, and sincerity in a way no man could.

In the late Ming intellectual climate, the cult of emotions played an important part in the lives of the literati. They celebrated love and romance in the creative arts and valorized the courtesan in their prose, poetry, and drama. In the eyes of the connoisseurs, the courtesan would enact the drama of emotions in her life and give her literati lovers a part to play in the spectacle. Mixing myth, fantasy, and memory, the elite men would perceive the courtesan as the emblem of literati culture, embodying aestheticism, talent, and beauty. The tragic fate of many a courtesan—bondage, servitude, subordination, and even premature death or suicide—appeared to the literati as an apt allegory for their own political situation at the end of the Ming dynasty and also later on when the foreign Manchu rulers had forced China into submission. The courtesan acquired an aura of glamour and fame in the minds of her audience.

The Gentlewomen’s Gaze

We see Xue Susu not only through male eyes but also from the female perspective, depicted through the gentlewomen’s (guīxiū) gaze. In late Ming times gentlewomen, or gentry women from literati or scholar-official families, members of the ruling class and intellectual elite, did have some contact with high-class courtesans and shared with them the same literary culture. They even composed poems for courtesans.

Xu Yuan (1560–1620) was an unconventional poetess from Suzhou and the wife of a high-ranking scholar-official, the secretary in the Ministry of War Fan Yunlin (1558–1641), another admirer of Xue Susu and her paintings. Xu Yuan wrote a series of five poems for Susu in which she goes into raptures about the beauty of the courtesan’s body:

Beneath the curves of your soles and the delicate petticoats lotus grows, Your waist so willowy and feather-light you could dance on a palm.\textsuperscript{15}

Xu Yuan might have overstepped social boundaries in forging friendships with courtesans, but her readers did not criticize her for it, and she enjoyed literary fame.

Lu Qingzi (fl. 1590), another gentry poetess from Suzhou who shared Xu Yuan’s literary circle, also composed verse for the courtesans she counted among her friends and visitors. Here she depicts the beauty of one of them:

Poem for a Courtesan
In a frock the hue of balcaon and a gown purple as peony, You arrive deep in a meadow dotted with flowers on your ornamental carriage. Picking a red leaf to inscribe some impromptu verse, You have no need to envy Collator Xue [the courtesan poetess], of bygone days.\textsuperscript{16}

It is not clear whether Lu Qingzi, a close friend of Xu Yuan’s, also knew or met Xue Susu. Her reference to Collator Xue, the Tang dynasty courtesan and poetess Xue Tao (768–ca. 832) could be read as an allusion to Xue Susu, as in Xu Yuan’s poems for Susu. Hu Yinglin confirms that people referred to Susu as “collator” when she was only a teenager living in the Qinhuai. Xue Susu herself used the term “female collator” as her sobriquet in the seal on one of her paintings in 1633. Hence it is possible that the above poem by the gentlewoman Lu Qingzi addresses none other than Xue Susu.

Lu Qingzi celebrates in her poetry the emotions she shares with female friends, both other gentry wives and female entertainers. She does not refrain from expressing her feelings of love and longing for these women. In the poem quoted above she highlights both the courtesan’s physical beauty and her literary ability.

Huang Yuanjie (ca. 1620–ca. 1669), a professional artist and writer from an impoverished literati family in Jiangxi, Zhejiang province, exchanged calligraphy and paintings with Xue Susu. She was known as a Ming loyalist who, after losing her husband, supported herself by selling her paintings and...
poetry. She lived with some famous gentry women poets and also the courtesan Liu Rushi (1618–1664). After the fall of the Ming dynasty, Xue Susu became Huang Yuanji’s neighbor in Hangzhou on the shores of the West Lake, and the gentry woman and the courtesan began to entertain each other. During the late 1640s, Susu must have already been in her eighties. These examples show how courtesans and gentry ladies occasionally shared the same literary culture in late imperial China.

Emancipation, Power, and Politics

Courtesans reached male-level proficiency in literature and the arts. Calligraphy, painting, and poetry traditionally counted as male-gentry arts. In Xue Susu’s earlier days, a few gentry women followed in the courtesans’ footsteps and distinguished themselves in these domains, too. Talented courtesans often literally earned their reputation as “collators” or “book revisers” as they participated in their literati partners’ literary activities in the studio, helping to collate, edit, discuss, and compose poetry.

The literati removed the courtesans from cultural constraints by gentrifying and masculinizing them. They amused themselves by cross-dressing courtesans as members of the elite, a pastime made possible by the luxury trades in fashions in late Ming times. Such events took place at a time when gentry wives only gradually and slowly began to push gender boundaries in literacy and the arts.

Another favorite literati pastime in the pleasure quarters was to play the flower register game. The literati ranked and crowned courtesans as examination candidates. They performed a kind of cross-dressing in status terms, making the courtesans parade as degree holders. They entered the girls’ names in a mock honor roll, pretending they equaled the highest degree holders, or “advanced scholars.” The game contained double irony as not only women but in particular the prostitutes and their offspring counted among the few social groups barred from participating in the public examinations. In this ironic and bizarre way the entertainment quarters reflected the competition and rat race for success in the official world, as if holding up a grotesque mirror to the examination system and power politics that were being played out in the triennial provincial examination compound across the river. By way of punning on the word ye—meaning to melt, fuse metal; to seduce; and also used to refer to Nanjing—the Qinhuai became the melting pot of power politics as well as a place of temptation and seduction.

Xue Susu enjoyed autonomy over her life to a certain extent and exerted authority in her world as she was in the position to choose her lovers. Her contemporaries depict her as rejecting generous and extravagant offers by love-struck suitors who would lavish thousands of taels in gold on her. One observer tells us that she held herself in high esteem and refused to receive common people, accepting only learned and intelligent men. Rumors circulated that the Pacification Commissioner Peng Youyang in Sichuan spent a fortune on her, but to no avail. The same fate befell a Mr. Feng from Suzhou who falsely boasted he could possess Xue Susu andlavished an enormous amount of gold on her without getting anywhere.

Seventeenth-century sources inform us that Xue Susu was married several times, but none of the unions lasted. This is a curious statement in the context of late imperial Chinese society with its Confucian hierarchy and maledominated lifestyle, raising questions about a courtesan’s emancipation and autonomy. It is conceivable that she outlived her husbands, as courtesans often married older men. Another possibility is that her husbands terminated the marriage as men often did with courtesan concubines who were then passed on from one to another. Or perhaps the courtesan herself decided to end the relationships. We know that Xue Susu terminated at least one of her affairs, and other courtesans also managed to escape from unsatisfactory or disappointing unions.

Xue Susu’s husbands or long-term partners included high-ranking and influential men from various walks of life: a military officer, called Li the Subduer of Barbarians; famous literati such as the scholar and painter Li Rihua and the dramatist and essayist Shen Defu (1578–1642); and finally a wealthy merchant from Suzhou who was her last husband as she was growing older.

It was not unusual for a celebrated courtesan to propose marriage to men, as Xue Susu did when she sought a relationship with her military officer. Another prominent example is that of the courtesan Liu Rushi, who visited the distinguished and elderly scholar-official Qian Qianyi (1608–1664) to propose marriage to him. Other courtesans acted in similar ways: the Qinhuai courtesan and painter Bian Sai proposed to the poet Wu Weiye (1609–1671), and another star of Qinhuai, the courtesan Dong Xiaowan, proposed to the poet Mao Xiang (1611–1693).

Xue Susu’s Amazon spirit showed in her prowess not only as a horsewoman and archer but also as a political activist on the national stage. During her stay in Beijing she met the National University student Yuan Baode (d. 1604) who became her lover. In 1592 she urged him to suppress a rebellion and later encouraged him to lead an expedition against the Japanese in
Korea and offered to provide the necessary funding. When he failed to comply Xue Susu left in a huff and ended the relationship:

With great composure she said to him: “Although you have elderly parents, you still linger here in idle recreation. Is this because of me? As I cannot emulate the Duchess of Qian and assist you in bringing glory to your family, I certainly cannot bear to let you offend against propriety. Even if some day you were to consume my flesh, that would still not be adequate as an expiation for my offence. I should leave.” Weihi [Yuan Baode] was too attached to her to go along with this, so Susu without warning mounted her quick steed and set off for the south. Only after three days had passed did Weihi learn of her departure. En route she dispatched a servant with a packet of one hundred taels to deliver to Weihi, accompanied by a letter bidding him farewell and declaring that she would no longer be his lover.17

This episode as recounted by Song Maocheng (1569–ca. 1620), an unconventional scholar and classical storyteller from Songjiang, casts Xue Susu in the shape of a female knight-errant (nǐxìa).

The Female Knight-Errant

The concept of chivalry (xia), a powerful force guiding human behavior, appears as even more important than love and passion (qīng) in the late Ming era. The concern with chivalry reflects the literati’s attempts to restore a martial spirit to late Ming culture. As an Amazon, artist, and adventurer, Xue Susu became the symbol of such aspirations.

Xue Susu chose “Fifth Boy,” as one of her sobriquets, and considered herself a bold, generous, and chivalrous heroine.18 She described herself as a knight-errant. Hu Yinglin confirmed that her spirit was “heroic” and called her a knight-errant. Xu Yuan’s husband Fan Yunlin, who acquired one of her ink orchid fans and treasured it like a piece of precious jade, praised this quality in Susu, too. He commented in his colophon on her painting of flowers dated 1615:

Once during the time when Sujun [Xue Susu] was in the “blue building” [brothel], from even a Tiger Hill [excursion] boat did I espy half her face, and then I realized that she was not just another pretty powdered [face] . . . As for the other stories about Sujun, such as the account of downing birds with pellets, of not sparing a thousand pieces of gold to rescue someone from the most desperate circumstances, they testify truly to her reputation as a female knight-errant of all ages—deserving far more praise than a mere mention on a page of discourse from a treatise on painting.19

Other courtesans portrayed as knights-errant include the famous Ming loyalist Liu Rushi; the Qinhua poet, painter, and dramatist Ma Shouzhen (1548–1604); and the Nanjing courtesan Yang Wan (ca. 1600–ca. 1647). Another Qinhua beauty, Kou Bai’men (fl. mid-seventeenth century), also claimed the status of a knight-errant after buying herself out of an unsatisfactory marriage to a wealthy military commander; she then lived her life as she pleased, received poets and statesmen at her garden studio, and later ended a union with a scholar when she lost interest in him.

The courtesans themselves echoed the male discourse that endowed them with this martial and chivalrous spirit. This phenomenon resonates through the late Ming discourse: the Suzhou courtesan Du Wei, who like Susu selected her partners herself, called herself a “knight among women.”20 The anthology Qingshi leilüe (Anatomy of Love) compiled sometime after 1628 by the master storyteller Feng Menglong (1574–1646)—a contemporary of Xue Susu—also features a story about a courtesan knight-errant called Zhang.

Paradoxes

In the stories and lives of late imperial China’s courtesans, paradoxes abound: despite their lowly status, they gained recognition as artists and poetesses ahead of ruling-class women. Despite their condition of servitude, they enjoyed autonomy of body and spirit as no elite lady did. The courtesans also found themselves free to travel, in contrast to the cloistered gentlewomen.

Xue Susu, like many other courtesans and gentlewomen of her time, became devoted to Buddhism and began to prefer the life of a recluse. In 1633 she inscribed the following poem about her life as a recluse on a painted fan depicting chrysanthemums and bamboo:

After the frost the twig turned pale gold,
Its blossoms by the wattle fence in the mellow twilight of dusk about to unfold.
Why should I bother to drink again with another in the hills of the South?
Dwelling in seclusion I have plenty of dry provisions in my house.21

Another seventeenth-century courtesan painter from Qinhua who was known as Fan Jue appeared to her male observers as even more extreme:

She discarded all her clothes and ornaments, musical instruments, and all other items that looked gay, luxurious or extravagant. The only thing she did was to shut her doors, burn incense, make tea and sit down with nothing but a stove for brewing medicines and several volumes of sutras.22
The theme of the courtesan's hermit lifestyle and withdrawal from the world also echoes the late Ming literati's frustration with official life and their desire to leave the world of politics. In their depictions of courtesans these male writers constructed these women as mirror images of their own fantasies and desires. Xue Susu imagined herself as a hermit in another poem entitled "Painting Orchids":

In a deserted dale there is a beauty who surpasses all the others,
Her belt sports kingfisher-blue gauze, her body is made of jade.
But I regret to say that she gets confused with the common grasses,
Her secret scent remains her own unknown surprise.23

Another paradox of the discourse on courtesans lies in the conflation of the concepts of chivalry and chastity. The scholar and artist Chen Jiru (1558–1639) defined the term knight-errant (xia) in the late Ming as follows: "A chivalrous official is a man who is loyal, a chivalrous lady is a woman who is chaste, and a chivalrous companion is someone who is reliable."24 This shows that in late Ming perceptions the courtesan who is described as chivalrous takes on a male or androgynous role—that of the official or friend—rather than that of a woman. Or perhaps she embodies a masculine version of chastity on an allegorical level, as a mirror image of a loyal official or a reliable companion. In depicting the courtesan as combining chivalry and chastity the literati yet again envisaged her as crossing and transcending traditional gender boundaries.

The extraordinary story of Xue Susu might leave us wondering whether a woman artist and adventurer like her was perhaps above all a Bohemian, a figure of free-and-easy habits, an eccentric lady in an almost modern sense who defied convention but for whom her contemporaries had no other classification than that of a courtesan. In her lyrical imagination, she does not always appear as a performer and entertainer but also as a solitary poet and artist who has found fulfillment in life. Let her have the last word, as the woman of pleasure portrays herself as a woman whose pleasure is hers alone:

Drinking in Solitude
Full of aroma is the taste of wine beneath the bloom,
Tinged in azure the gate surrounded by bamboo.
In solitude I watch the seagulls sail across the sky,
Carefree and content, I feel fully satisfied.25

Further Reading


Notes

1. I am indebted to Professor Alan Barr for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
4. Xue Susu had many names. Apart from Susu, her personal names include Wu, Suju, Suqing, Runniang, Runqiang, Qiaoqiao, and Su.
9. Qian Qianyi, Liehao shiji xiaozhuan (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), 770.
18. This term appears on one of her painted fans. See Tang Shuyu, Yutai huashi, Meishu congshu edition (Shanghai: Shenzhou guquanguan, 1928–1936).
CHAPTER THREE

Zou Boqi on Vision and Photography in Nineteenth-Century China

Oliver Moore

In 1869, on an unrecorded day in late June or early July, Zou Boqi (1819–1869), a well-known member of the gentry in Guangdong province died prematurely and unexpectedly at fifty. His death followed several years of apparently deliberate attempts to avoid notice from the political establishment and to not court too much attention within late Qing scholarship. Only a few years earlier, Zou Boqi had turned down two separate job offers from the leading actors in national politics inviting him to work in the newly established and most forward-looking academic colleges of the day. Aside from his contribution to a topographical work on Guangzhou, he had published none of the writings that he bequeathed to his relatives and admirers. They at least saw fit to edit and print a portion of them. The remaining facts of Zou Boqi's life are few, so that he is unlikely to gain the same lengthy attention that biographers devote to more richly documented subjects of his period. Certainly, he is by no means a household name on a par with the famous Ming savant Li Shizhen, also featured in this volume, but, as a scholar and a member of China's ruling class, his life attracted considerably more of his contemporaries' notice than those discussed in most other chapters.

More valuable than the scant biographical record, however, is what concerns Zou Boqi's scientific interests. These provide the means to relate the man and his ideas to some of the major intellectual and social changes of the nineteenth century. Zou Boqi was one of a number of men and women who