Courtesan, Editor, and Examination Candidate: Fashioning the Female Self in Late Ming China

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Gender, Courtesans, and Self-fashioning in Late Ming China

New Book
- Daria Berg,
- Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China, 1580-1700

I. Introduction:
Celebrated Courtesan Xue Susu

1.1 Xue Susu: Bio-Data
- Among ‘Eight Great Courtesans of the Ming era’
- 1570-1575 born either in Suzhou 蘇州 or Jiaxing 嘉興
- 1637-1652 Xue Susu dies
  ▪ Lived on West Lake in Hangzhou
  ▪ Possibly into 1640s

1.2 Entertainer
- Qinhuai 秦淮: Old Nanjing’s Pleasure Quarters in 1580s
  ▪ Residence at Peach Leaf Ford
    ◦ (Taoye du 桃葉渡)
- Beijing 北京 in 1590s
  ▪ Hostess of poetry parties
  ▪ For poets, scholars, officials, military officers
  ▪ Poetry and lute playing
- Jiangnan 江南 1600-after 1637?
  ▪ Susu disappears from public view

1.3 Lover & Concubine
II. In the Male Gaze:
Artist, Amazon, Adventurer

Artist & Amazon
- Literati praise Xue Susu's literary & martials arts
  - E.g. Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602)
    - Praises her literary talent
  - Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636)
    - Praises 1588 painting
- Knight-Er rant (nü xia 女俠)
  - Song Maocheng 宋楙澄 (1569-c. 1620)
  - Xue Susu sends Yuan Baode 袁保德 (d. 1604) to war in 1592

Xue Susu's Image...

III. Poet and Painter

2.1 Painter
- Paintings dated 1598-1637
- Pictures of orchids, bamboo, flowers, insects
  - = Courtesan's artistic repertoire

Outlined Ink Orchids (1601)

Xue Susu's Self-portrait?
- Figure painting
  - ‘Boddhisatva Guanyin’ 1588
  - ‘Portrait of a Lady Playing the Flute’
  - Unusual for courtesans!
- Self-portrait?
  - Xue Susu entertained literati playing the flute
- On the surface
  - Looks like a classical painting of an elite lady
  - Reminding of Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) woman painter Guan Daoosheng (1262-1319)
2.2 Poet
Xue Susu’s literary oeuvre:
1. *Nanyou cao* 南遊草 (*Jottings from a Journey to the South*)
   - Volume of original poetry
   - Preface by Wang Zhideng 王稚登 (1535-1612)
   - Probably published before 1612
   - No longer extant
   - Reconstructed in my new book
   - Describes life in Qinhuaí Pleasure Quarters
2. *Hua suo shí* 花瑣事 (*Trifles about Flowers*),
   - Edited anthology of literati prose vignettes (*xiaopin* 小品)

Xue Susu: Art of Self-fashioning

IV. Editor

Xue Susu’s Edited Volume

- “Editor” (*xuan jia* 選家, *bianji* 編輯):
  - selects and prepares texts for publication
- *Hua suo shí* 花瑣事 (*Trifles about Flowers*),
  - edited anthology of classical-language prose vignettes (*xiaopin* 小品)
  - 1 *juan*, 18 vignettes extant
  - Composed between 1605-1620s
  - Published before 1658
  - Among earliest known collections by a woman editor

Themes of *Hua suo shí*

- Vignettes about alluring beauties / flowers
- Courtesans and concubines only
  - In imperial and polygamists’ households
  - No wives, no elite ladies
Two main themes:

1. Women as Commodities
2. Women as Agents

From Courtesan to Exam Candidate

Flower register game (hua’an 花案, hua bang 花榜):
- Literati play in pleasure quarters
- Courtesans cross-dress as exam candidates

-> new theme for male & female authors:
- Li Yu, Rou pu tuan肉蒲團, 1657
- Ding Yaokang, Xu Jin Ping Mei 續金瓶梅, c. 1660
- Ye Xiaowan 葉小纨, Yuan yang meng 鴛鴦夢, 1636

V. Conclusion

- Valorisation of
  - female talent and
  - androgynous traits in courtesans
- Courtesans embraced editorship as a means of self-fashioning
  - Courtesan editors preceded known gentlewomen editors perhaps by several decades

-> New ideas
- Birth of new beauty ideals
- Idea of women competing in political world becomes conceivable

Thank you!