The Courtesan as a Transitional Figure during the Qing Dynasty
Studying Qing Modernization from a Gendered Angle

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**Abstract:**

This thesis explores the courtesan in the High Qing Dynasty from the 1600s to the 1800s with a primary focus on the Yangtze River area. The Qing Dynasty was particular compared to other dynasties in that China experienced political stability and a rising female population. This stability along with the Manchu support of commercialization allowed for China to undergo growth in their markets and trade with Europeans. The rising female population along with the breakdown of previous class barriers allowed for the courtesan market to flourish. During this time, the Manchus carried on the tradition of Confucian values and enforced them strongly onto the public. This thesis looks at the longstanding tradition of gender roles within the Confucian patriarchy and how courtesans showed societal discontent with the Chinese Confucian tradition. In doing so, the role of the courtesan is contrasted with the role of the common woman and put into the context of what was happening during Qing China.

**Introduction:**

In “flower boats” with intricate decorations painted on that float on the water are beautiful women tucked away. These women are full of youth and are usually in their teens or early twenties. If you have enough money and curiosity to enter, you will find women dressed in the most elaborate of clothing with luxurious silks, imported clothes and butterfly slippers. Some may be powdered up with bright red lipstick contrasting with the rest of their face while others may don trousers in an effort to dress up like a young boy. If you choose to go boat hopping, you may find that there are a variety of women dressed in different styles with each boat you go on. The women all possess simple English names such as “Delight” or “Emerald.” The ones that are most sought after are the talented ones who have a keen ear and a beautiful voice. They possess a quick wit and are easily able to make intellectual conversation. Underneath the façade they put on though is a tragic past. Most come from troubled backgrounds and have been forced to live a life of serving many men due greedy families looking for extra money. Or they just have no other means of survival. Some have been well educated and come from respectable families but one way or another, ended up in this line of work. The life they live provides them access to
wealth through men. The men who come onto these boats with them will be treated to sweet music and companionship as they smoke and drink the night away with their friends who they came with. If they’re lucky, they may even spend the night with one of these women. And if he chooses to do so, he can continue to come back, again and again, with gifts and taels of silver to waste his days away. Some may choose to host countless banquets every night with friends and these women and neglect the rest of their life as they enjoy companionship, alcohol and friends. They start to believe that these women are the true pleasures in life and some will even bring these women into their homes as permanent concubines. But then, she becomes yet another wife as he continues on, looking for the next one to court. These are the courtesans.

Courtesans have a long history in China and have records of having existed before in the Tang. The most frequently quoted story for how the system of government courtesans began in the Song can be attributed to Deng Zhicheng’s “Gu dong suo ji” in which Deng writes,

When Taizong extinguished the Northern Han, he stole their women and brought them back to the barracks. This was the beginning of ‘barracks coutesans.” Later he also established government courtesans to supply and serve the perfectural officials and officers who had not brough their families. Government courtesans had a body price of 5,000; in five years their term was up and they returned to their original positions. Those officials who took courtesans with them paid an additional 2000, and such women could also be gotten from the theater district. ‘Barracks courtesans’ were selected from among the theater entertainers and served in rotation for terms of one month. They were permitted to pay a fee in lieu of service. There were also the children of criminals, and the children of food commoner families who were in prison awaiting judgement; in extreme cases [children of food family] were kidnapped and falsely called criminals in order to trick them — this was the height of evil government. After the Southern Song was established, the system began to be changed.¹

With this establishment of government courtesans in the Song, the courtesan continued to live on in history until the Qing Dynasty where she becomes a symbol of the changing times.

**Setting The Stage: Qing Dynasty China takes a step into modernization**

While courtesans have existed as early as the Tang and Song Dynasty, this thesis focuses on courtesans during the high Qing Dynasty, primarily the 1700s and the 1800s and their unique role during the context of modernization in the Qing. During the Qing, the courtesan served as perhaps one of the most telling signs of a society ready to cast aside the shackles of past tradition. Various factors contributed to the growth of the economy and country during the Qing that put the dynasty into a transitional period. China engaged in European trade and opened up its borders to new ideas and customs. This growth is what makes the courtesan a figure worth further examination during the Qing specifically.

Prior to the Qing, China was already starting to enter into a period of rapid development. Flawed western beliefs outline that China was victim to orientalist and archaic tradition, but the country actually witnessed a renaissance of maritime trade and internal commerce that was at least as high as Europe’s after the 1600s. Agricultural productivity increased which also led to an increase in the life expectancy of Chinese people. In addition, China found themselves sitting on a massive pile of silver as the currency flowed into their country from Europe. China had become a center of the European market in the mid-sixteenth century due to high European demand for textiles, tea, spices and ceramics\(^2\). Following the collapse of the Ming Regime and the defeat of the Ming Loyalist regime in Taiwan in 1683, the new Manchu rulers of the Qing

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state took an active role in facilitating commercial growth. They removed the previous maritime trade bans in Ming China and Chinese-European trade resumed. Continued demand for Chinese products allowed for an intense commercialization of the Chinese economy. Society as a whole was also transitioning into a new mindset that was conducive for the growth of the economy. Traditional Confucian hostility toward silver, internal commerce and foreign trade had lost ground to a new school of thought that believed in allowing the market to naturally grow without government control and this became the mainstream position by the 18th century. The decline of the practice of female infanticide during the 18th century also allowed for a larger female population. This meant that more females survived into adulthood and more marriages occurred. With an increasing female population, females became a market of their own as they became more and more valuable for both physical and sexual labor.

The military prioritization and insecurity of the Manchu elite that ruled the Qing directly contributed to growth. New institutions and techniques were created to achieve a centralized government such as the Grand Council and the secret palace memorial system created in the 1720s and 1730s. The Grand Council system allowed the emperor and his closest advisors to surpass bureaucratic routines to efficiently and effectively handle urgent matters. The secret palace memorial system established a direct and secretive communication between the Grand Council and local officials at the provincial level in order to insure the emperor had access to information and could exercise greater control. With these reforms, the Qing were becoming very effective at handling the large growing population and economy to ensure that China

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3 Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China."

5 Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China."
entered into a period of stability. Peter C. Perdue (2005) argues that these institutional innovations in the Qing State in early mid-eighteenth century were related to Qing military expansion into Central Asia⁶. It was imperative that the Qing achieve state centralization as this was a function of military expansion in the mid-eighteenth century. It allowed for the mobilization of vast resources to allow the army to fight. The Qing saw success in the subjugation of the ethnic Tibetan areas in Sichuan and the incorporation of today’s Xinjiang into the empire. The current state of China at this time was one of power as it sat at the top of the totem pole in their imperial conquests and their booming trade with Europe.

The Manchu ruling elite were also very sensitive to the well-being of the people as the majority of the population belonged to the Han Chinese population which meant that it was important to avoid being viewed as illegitimate. They were reluctant to increase peasant tax burdens and the central government never hesitated to grant tax breaks to affected areas in times of regional famine. In 1713, the Kangxi Emperor pledged that the government would never increase subjects’ burden and permanently fixed the land tax quotas. New World crops such as sweet potato and maize also turned previously unproductive highlands into productive areas. These improved living conditions and increasing consumer consumption caused the population of China to triple between the mid 17th and mid 19th centuries⁷. It is important not to discount all the progress that was made during this time toward achieving modernization. The state eventually entered into a more corrupt and inefficient state as conservatives took over with beliefs that the government needed to spend less on public and payroll projects. As a result, underpaid officials took on bribery and the government began to become more inefficient.

⁶ Hung, “Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China.”
⁷ Ibid.
Despite all this, the Qing Dynasty still represented a China under a politically stable regime. And this could not stop the courtesan’s looming significance in the face of traditional Chinese Confucian values.

**The Revitalization of Neo-Confucianism**

Aside from commercial growth, the prevailing dominance of Neo-Confucianism in the Qing and its juxtaposition against the courtesan and what she was is another key factor that makes the courtesans’ role so particular to this time period. The Manchu elite were eager to establish political legitimacy and they used Confucianism as a tool to do this. The Manchus restored the orthodoxy surrounding the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism which had been the dominant political ideology in China from the 12th to 16th centuries⁸. The core of classical Confucianism has always been the principles of filial loyalty and benevolence. Subjects must exercise respect and obedience to the emperor and officials. And in return, must offer paternalist care and fatherly discipline. The Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism came to be in the 12th century and put an emphasis on the moral principle, *li*, of filial piety and made it the mission of the state and elites to enforce these principles upon others in authoritative institutions such as ones that taught Confucian morality of filial piety to youngsters. They took the philosophical teachings surrounding morality and turned it into something that could be used to govern. The Manchus made the Cheng-Zhu school the sole legitimate system of knowledge and morality through state-sanctioned curriculums and state-sponsored academies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. They adopted “governing the heaven and earth through the principle

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⁸ Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China.”
of filial piety,” *yi xiao zhi tianxia*, as their governing motto. In the late 17th century, the *Book of Filial Piety, Xiaojing*, had an opening paragraph containing “the gentlemen’s service of his parents with filial piety produces a loyalty that can be transferred to the ruler” and this was the most frequently reprinted Confucian phrase by the state printing house. In 1725, the Yongzheng Emperor authored *The Imperial Discourse on Friends and Parties, Yuzhi pengdang lun*, and assigned it as a required reading for all educated subjects. In his book, he detailed that friendships amongst literati were just platforms to advance one’s selfish interests and that subjects should maintain only the Emperor in their heart. Emperors would also often write imperial edicts, *shangyu*, that would be publicized to all officials and subjects throughout the empire. These edicts would contain the emperor’s view on policies and moral beliefs and greatly resembled how a patriarch would speak to his sons and grandsons. Rural elders were also required to attend monthly lectures on the emperor’s dictates in practicing virtue and leading a peaceful life. Regular ceremonies were also held in honor of the aged. Mid-level merchants relied on guidebooks advising them on how to become rich but also live a virtuous Confucian life emphasizing prudence and avoiding mistakes. This showed an effort to realize a Confucian vision of society whose subjects were all morally virtuous.

During the Qing, the gentry elite who were well versed in the Confucian classics remained as a dominant sociopolitical force. The imperial examination was a way for offspring of wealthy landowning families who could afford expensive education to attain imperial degrees

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9 Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China.”
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China*.
13 Ibid.
that gave them gentry or literati status. Those that did enter the elite of the gentry would enter into the bureaucracy to serve as scholar officials at different administrative levels while lower degree holders stayed as informal leaders in their local governments. Regardless of level within the gentry, it was seen as the top and most desirable place to be and showed the necessity of understanding the Confucian teachings in society. During this time period, merchants were becoming accepted as a class which also shows that despite the importance of traditions, society was also adopting new mindsets. Mercantile activities were seen as a legitimate and popular way for commoners to accumulate wealth and then invest in their children’s education for pursuit of gentry status. Because of the standardization in the examinations, the gentry class was a group with a uniform ideological outlook.

These various examples showed the overarching presence that Confucianism had over Qing Dynasty China in that it permeated into the lives of the Chinese due to the aggressive approach of the government. While Confucianism does largely cover how men should behave in terms of filial piety, it also covers the role of the wife in a patrilineal society. Classical Confucian texts depict women as having no purpose besides their husbands and family. With the revival of Neo-Confucianism in the Qing Dynasty, Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko have both discovered, through reading various primary sources written by elite women of the time, that not much changed for women when it came to the fundamentals of moral Confucian beliefs. While they did possess the revolutionary tool of writing to express themselves, they were always put into the context of the male world and the home in particular. On the opposing side was the courtesan who lived very much outside of the “inner chambers,” as Ko calls them. She was a figure of the

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14 Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China."
15 Ibid.
public and did not address moral beliefs, as even her writing and songs were laced with romance and emotion.

Thus, the courtesan emerged as an opposing figure to the traditional wife of the Qing society. The courtesan did what the wife could not. She was allowed to spend nights and nights on end playing with the men, interacting with their friends and bantering with them. In stark contrast, the wife stayed at home and managed her family and took care of children and elderly. It was immoral for her to be wasting her days away in conversation when a family needed to be taken care of. She, herself, was proud of her strong moral values and devotion. The strong enforcement of Neo-Confucianism by the Manchu was counterproductive, it only created a society even more ready to transition.

The Courtesan as A Transitional Figure

Regardless of negative opinions from Neo-Confucian wives and men, the courtesan has still come forth as a major player in Chinese history, trapping many men in her embrace. This thesis seeks to explore why Qing Chinese society has created this need for two different types of women and in particular the rise of courtesans in the Qing and what they symbolized in the context of a modernizing society. In a society where wives and husbands are not expected to develop deep feelings and wives serve a utility purpose, men subconsciously gravitate toward courtesans whom they dedicate their time toward in pursuit of the idealized romance. However, it is the entrenched patriarchy itself that has even created a need for courtesans. While in some ways courtesans possess more freedom, they are ultimately part of the Chinese patriarchy as well.
In this thesis, I study the increase in development and hence modernization of the Qing Dynasty from a gendered angle with courtesans as the focus. The growing consumer economy during the Qing created a thriving market for courtesans and also a demand for women. Despite societal and Confucian pressures warning against what the courtesan was, beautiful and talented, she still served a vast amount of clientele. This popularity is symbolic in showing that the mindset of the ruling males in society was transitioning away from previous traditional beliefs that centered around solely family and service to the government. Men craved the emotional experience that the courtesans brought. Chinese society was beginning to show that the dynasty fashioned around your sole duties being only to your emperor and family was unsustainable in living a fulfilling life. It didn’t leave room for happiness and experiencing emotions. The courtesans of the Qing dynasty are a transitional figure that show that males were gathering their collective interests and hitting the final nail on the Neo-Confucian values surrounding women and the Neo-Confucian patrilineal system. The courtesan tugged at two ends of the spectrum: at one side she showed people were getting fed up with the boundaries that women were confined to but at the same time, she showed that men were still consciously unwilling to allow women to be equals in that her purpose still centered around catering to men. In this sense she is an unstudied transitional figure during the Qing. She contributes to laying the groundwork for a society that was showing unconsciously through their patronage of this market that they were ready to move on from the Confucian values and gentry that have consistently been at the top of government and policy.
**Methodology:**

In conducting research, there were two initial areas of focus: the role of the traditional Confucian wife and the role of the courtesan. In exploring the contrast between the two different roles, it allowed for a connection between the two and how they relate and interact with one another throughout Chinese history. The sources that were primarily utilized were academic journal articles and books and primary sources in the form of period novels and first accounts. It is to be noted that many academic journal articles and books contained primary sources in the form of translated Confucian classics or first accounts that were also used as primary sources. The sources outlined below provide a survey of important sources that were examined and do not represent the full compilation of reading and sources utilized.

In regards to the role of the traditional Confucian woman in China, the vast majority of academic journal articles and books convey the theme that Confucianism did restrain women within the patriarchy. It demanded for them to be obedient to their in-laws and husband in order to be a supportive wife and maintain the family name. Many of these sources sought to use Confucian classics in their work in order to display how entrenched the patriarchy was in Chinese society. The sources referred back to Confucian social ideology. In *Women existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China* written by Xiongya Gao, an Associate Professor in English at the Southern University of New Orleans, Gao explores how Confucianism and society as a whole has restricted women in China. She seeks to prove that the Confucian system and classic texts transformed women into possessions for their husbands. She does this through various examples and excerpts from classic Confucian texts such as the *Book of Rites for Women*, *The Biographies of Women* and writings by Confucius’ loyal disciples such as Lu Yu. She shows that these texts from the past help show the oppression that Chinese women
faced in their daily lives. Gao ultimately argues that Confucianism has given women three roles: a sexual object in possession of man, a child-bearing tool to carry on the family name and a servant to the whole family.

The primary source that was utilized for understanding the Confucian classic teachings regarding women was *Gentlemen’s Prescriptions for Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women* written by Sherry J. Mou. Mou writes an analysis of Liu Xiang’s *The Biographies of Women*. Liu Xiang was a Confucian scholar who compiled and wrote a series of biographies about women. He chose to categorize women into seven different groups. *The Biographies of Women* is the first Confucian effort to appraise women and the author believes the text should be studied because Liu Xiang created a place for women within the Confucian study. The book focuses on Mou’s analysis of each group of woman and she extracts various biographies of women in each group in order to express her belief that Liu Xiang wrote the biographies in order to show that women can affect social change by strictly aligning themselves with the patriarchy and Confucian society. The women in his biographies serve as key role models for readers and how women should behave. This source placed women in a more hopeful light by showing that Confucianism society does allow women some mobility. However, similar to the other sources, it ultimately shows that Confucian classics only put women in relation to men and they were only offered mobility and respect if they supported their husband in the appropriate manners. Mou does a thorough job of not just focusing on analyzing the individual excerpts of *The Biographies of Women* but also on the overall message that Liu Xiang is attempting to convey by writing and compiling these stories on women. She runs an in-depth analysis on the types of women that Xiang chooses to convey and looks for similarities between biographies in order to determine what the Confucian scholar values overall.
These sources provide a wide array of primary Confucian texts that can be utilized as primary sources in order to show first-hand the patriarchal society in China that stemmed from Confucianism. This is the largest strength of these articles in that they rely on traditional Confucian text in order to show the argument’s validity. Gao’s article, particularly, also allows for access to translated Confucian classics that can be used and she also equips her own analysis with each of the excerpts that she uses to show why she believes the writing shows that women are regarded as lesser beings. The weakness of this text is that it is focused solely on oppression and injustice of women and fails to acknowledge another side to the argument that women have some areas that they can advance in, even if it is within the patriarchal society. Because many articles and sources are one-sided, it was important to consult other sources that write of successful women. Overall though, all of these women that were considered “virtuous” by Confucian standards could only exist within the patriarchy.

The second class of sources explored were in the form of period novels or memoirs written by men who lived during the Qing Dynasty and had interactions with courtesans. These sources were the core of the thesis in defining who the courtesan was. These primary sources contain men who have wives at home but still choose to entertain themselves with courtesans, suggesting that this was a common practice during this time period. They offer a deeper look at how courtesans behaved and dressed as well as how these women typically ended up becoming courtesans. Connections are drawn with the wives to see where courtesans fill in for where wives can’t. The sources largely express that men are often attracted to courtesans for the fun of courting them or when they’re lonely and seek companionship. Across all sources though, courtesans are noted for being dressed elaborately in expensive looking luxuries and being ideal
companions to enrich parties among men. The role of the courtesan appears to be to provide for men where wives cannot and to entertain through various methods.

One notable source was *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yang Zhou*, translated by Patrick Hanan and written by an anonymous author. The novel is estimated to have been written in the 1840s during the Qing Dynasty by an author reflecting on the days of his youth. The title of the novel itself is *Fengyue Meng* meaning romantic illusions and that is exactly what Courtesans are portrayed as throughout the course of the story. This novel offers valuable insight into how courtesans were expected to interact with guests and what made them appealing to the men who chose to spend their days in brothels and pleasure boats chasing them. The story is built on relationships that five men, some involved in shady businesses and others in administration, that develop relationships with courtesans and are all dedicated brothel goers. While the story focuses on five men, the story that is given the most spot light is the story of Lu Shu and his courtesan lover, Fragrance. For that purpose, this story is given more emphasis than the rest in this paper. At the core of all of these stories though, is that the men all end up ruined by the courtesans and neglect their duties to their families, a central Confucian value.

While this is a novel, the author of the book claims to have spent thirty years in the brothels of Yangzhou. This is why this source is being treated as a primary source. An assumption is made that the author has infused his first-hand experiences when describing the courtesans and some of the tragic fates that the men endured from over indulging. This novel is valuable for its descriptions of how men often interacted with courtesans and it shows how courtesans are supposed to act. Hanan, who translated the novel, also believed that it showed how courtesans supplied romance that wives often didn’t. When evaluating this source though, it is important to take into account that this a novel and that some of the scenarios may be over-
exaggerated at times. In Chapter One of his novel, the author talks about personally knowing about boys who follow the boats and then never are seen again and he criticizes the courtesans for their lies and “sweet talk.”. He says that his experiences have led him to believe that the pleasure quarters are dangerous and his novel is meant to serve as a warning and penitence for his crimes in the brothel scene. Therefore, it is clear that the author has a malicious and negative view of the courtesans this must be acknowledged when analyzing what is presented in the novel. To counter this, I also consulted more primary works such as Shen Fu’s Six Records of a Life Adrift which is an autobiography/memoir of a government clerk during the Qing Dynasty. Fu refers to his experiences and interactions with courtesans when visiting the pleasure boats.

In addition to primary sources from the Qing Dynasty, I also consulted with academic journal articles. In particular, the works of Beverly Bossler who is a Professor of the History department at UC Davis. Her work primarily studies the courtesans of the Northern and Southern Song Dynasty and their status within the social scene of China. There is a time discrepancy between the Song Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty where the rest of my sources derive from, but it is important to still incorporate Bossler’s work because she shows us how the courtesan has evolved and her research on the behavior and status of courtesans should not be disregarded as it offers some further insight into where the courtesans of the Qing Dynasty come from. In her article, Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China, Bossler argues that the Song courtesans played an instrumental role in developing forms of theatrical entertainment as well as Song literature. She talks extensively about the role of government courtesans and comes to the conclusion that the Song courtesan was a historical phenomenon due to her contrasting sophistication and degradedness.
After conducting research on wives and courtesans, it was necessary to put the courtesan of the Qing in context with everything else that was happening during the time. In particular, commercialization and Neo-Confucianism. Ho-Fung Ho’s article titled *Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China*, offered a survey of the Qing Dynasty. Hung argues against the stereotypical image of imperial China that said China was a stagnant agrarian empire governed by an inward looking ruling elite. He shows that China did enter into a period of market expansion and state centralization due to the policies of the Manchu ruling elite. In evaluating the Qing dynasty, Hung also looks at the revival of Neo-Confucianism and the teachings that were being spread onto society by the ruling regime.

Lastly, Susan Mann’s *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* and Dorothy Ko’s *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* serve as complimentary sources that both study the voices and interests of women through primary sources written by women in the form of poetries, anthologies, biographies, documents and letters. Mann’s book is meant to present a preliminary sense into how women felt and believed. She chooses the High Qing period because published work by women started to become more common. Mann relies on the women’s own writings in order to correct distortions inherent to male gaze as male Confucian scholars, such as Liu Xiang, had previously favored biographies as being the best historical writing. Mann places great importance in Yun Zhu who was a female Qing dynasty writer that compiled poems of women written in her anthology titled

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16 According to Mann, Confucian scholars believed that biographies were the best form of historical writing because individual lives illustrated basic principles of praise and blame.

**Precious Record from the Maidens’ Chambers, Langui baolu,** which details women of high purpose and moral foundation. Mann also provides insight into the courtesan and moral attitudes toward them by wives and mothers who considered themselves to be the embodiment of morality.

In Dorothy Ko’s *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* Ko seeks to integrate gender with Chinese history with a focus on seventeenth century China. She also studies the writings of women, mainly poetry, in order to answer the crucial question of how the gender system managed to function so well and for so long. She places emphasis on why women had interests in the existing gender system and allowed for it to persist. Ko urges for a realistic understanding of the strength and longevity of the Confucian gender system and disagrees with the view that women were victims in an oppressive patriarchy. In her work, Ko provides analysis on gender boundaries and believes that they were constructed, not pre-determined entities. Lastly, Ko takes a very close look at the courtesan and the gender roles that she fulfilled and her freedom in jumping gender boundaries. Overall though, the writings that were studied by both Ko and Mann were only of the elite women. Only respectable women were educated and learned to write so while these writings do show how some women felt, it needs to be acknowledged that they do not represent the majority of women during the time.

As a final note in the methodology, there was a scarcity in primary sources available. Of the primary sources that were available, I was constricted by language barriers and translation abilities. This meant that the only primary sources available to my disposition were ones that had been previously translated. Thus, I also relied on academic journals and books that drew largely from primary sources. These journals and books often offered translations of first person
accounts, writings and Confucian classics that were used to better understand the courtesan and the beliefs of Chinese society.

**Defining the Qing Courtesan**

The origins of the Chinese courtesan date back to approximately 2,000 years ago in the Han dynasty, but there is no clear distinction on when she came to be. The courtesans were women who excelled in entertaining men and creating a lively atmosphere. While sexual services were offered in varying levels of availabilities, courtesans sold more than just sex. They sold the commodity of companionship. They were talented in the fields of music, literature and conversation. In fact, their talents were so key to their identity that Beverly Bossler argues in her work, “*Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China,*” that the earlier courtesan played a key role in the amusement quarters and led toward the development of forms of theatrical entertainment present in Song literature and theater." The courtesan of the Qing Dynasty was redefined in some aspects as she became a commodity for more common consumer consumption after falling from her pedestal of elite culture. However, the courtesan of Qing China continues to have to exhibit an ability to create an environment of romance and entertainment for their clients. Defining the profession of the courtesan allows for the understanding of their role in relation to common women and in the greater frame of Qing China.

**Context of Song China in Creating the Courtesan Market**

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17 Bossler, "*Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China.*"
The origins of courtesan-ship show the precedence that was set for the role of courtesans to come in modern China during the Qing Dynasty. Bossler’s work analyzes and studies some of the earlier courtesans of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). She provides detailed insight into how the lives and status of the courtesan were prior to the Qing.

In the formation of the Courtesan market, women became commodities as the Song Dynasty saw a period of great commercial development. Though not as rapid as Europe’s thirteenth century commercial revolution, China’s commercial revolution also began to take place during the late 900s and 1000s of the Song. China was at the beginning of a market revolution and people transitioned from being self-sufficient in the crops they grew to specializing in growing cash crops in order to maximize profits.¹⁸ The national market developed in which certain goods were traded across all of the Song territory and the world’s first paper money emerged in Sichuan in order to facilitate this trade. The Chinese population also experienced a permanent shift from the regions of the Yellow River to the south in the rice-growing region of the Yangzi Valley. In 742, 60% of China’s population of 60 million lived in the wheat and millet producing regions of the Yellow River with the remaining 40% in the South.¹⁹ By 980, the proportions had reversed and the population neared 100 million with 63% living in the south.²⁰ These new settlers planted new and improved types of rice and new strains of doubled cropped rice allowed for much shorter growing seasons. Shorter growing seasons


¹⁹ Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600.*

¹⁷ Ibid.
meant that two crops could be produced in a year and farmers over time developed hybrid strains that would make a better doubled cropped rice. This led to an increase in production which freed some of the working population from having to grow their own food. Therefore, they were able to produce goods and participate in the market. Despite the effects of these economic changes, they were variant by region due to the fragmented nature of the Song Dynasty and not everyone was involved within the market economy. Those that were did devote themselves full-time to producing market goods though. The Song very much set the stage for another period of growth in the Qing Dynasty with this progress.

This formation of markets that was beginning in the Song prompted women into the market economy. Concubines and prostitutes proliferated into the trade as new commodities. The practice of foot binding spread from courtesans to women of all social groups as women began to become more sexualized. Seen throughout history, such as in America after World War One, improvements in markets and commercialization led to greater leisure time which led to more activities becoming popularized. Women became one of these “luxurious” commodities that began to be offered as merchants traveled across the country seeking companionship and men no longer had to slave away on the fields providing themselves with the necessities of survival.

Confucianism also experienced a revival as it transformed into Neo-Confucianism during the Song. Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a Confucian scholar, was the leading figure behind Neo-Confucianism which stressed the power of the mind in transforming human affairs. Confucianism originated as a system of rites, music, and morality in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

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21 Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600*.
22 Ibid.
Confucius or Master Kongzi (551 to 479 BCE) is said to have been the founder and father of Confucianism. Confucius lived during a time of constant turmoil during the Warring States period as kingdoms fought for control. Confucius hoped with his teachings that he would bring peace and order to society. In his teachings, he dictated how a ruler and members of society should act in order to create a harmonious society. The Confucian analects serve as the base of his philosophy and Confucius himself spent a lot of time advising rulers and took on many disciples that later wrote down the Confucian Analects that serve as the base of his philosophy. Differing from Confucianism in the past though, Neo-Confucianism took many of the philosophical teachings of Confucius and Mencius and translated them into a guide for how a government should be run and how one can live morally and ethically at the same time. It was during the 13th century when Neo-Confucianism began to exercise a dominant role in Chinese society. Neo-Confucianism became institutionalized through civil service examinations which focused on testing knowledge of the Confucian classics. Those who were able to demonstrate their vast understanding of the Neo-Confucian teachings and pass the exams were awarded positions of power in the government where they played a key role in advisement and decision making to the emperor. This allowed for Confucian literati from all levels of society to enter into positions of power. The Song Dynasty actually produced the highest per year number of scholar-officials among all Chinese dynasties. In addition, the strong emphasis on Confucian teachings can be shown in the statistic that throughout the 320 years of Song history, only three high-ranking officials were recorded in the Song Shi as having possessed a military degree. It was during the Song that Confucianism transitioned from less of a philosophy and more to a religion.

24 Wang, “The Northern Song Dynasty.”
that dictated government behaviors. There were also changes in social classes that put these scholars at the top. The demise of the traditional aristocracy led to Confucian intellectuals and scholars exercising a dominant role in society and government. The civil service exams that tested on the Confucian Classics became widely used as China moved toward a meritocracy system. These Confucian government officials themselves created the commodity of the “courtesan” and courtesans become very much institutionalized into the government system as a necessary commodity.

It is important to set the stage for the rise of Confucianism as courtesans begin to play a very contradictory role to what Confucianism dictates. Yet it was exactly the fact that Confucianism contradicted what courtesans stood for that fueled the existence of the courtesan market in modern China.

**Courtesans prior to the Qing Dynasty**

During the Song Dynasty, courtesans were considered a class of entertainers and they were trained in the art of entertaining elaborate and elegant banquets for important officials. The anonymous author of a primary Song Dynasty source titled *Dong jing men hua lu* stated that a low ranked courtesan was not one that sold just sexual services, but one that sang at a banquet table without being invited\(^\text{25}\). This quote signifies the courtesan being associated with entertainment. During the Song Dynasty, courtesans were a constant presence in the lives of the Song literati and were often present in social gatherings of all sizes to liven up the atmosphere by encouraging conversation, fun and drinking. These courtesans would often entertain in wine

\(^{25}\) Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China."
shops, restaurants and art establishments with men often looking for girls that were trained in the entertainment arts.\textsuperscript{26}.

The occupation of government courtesans displayed just how much of a fixture in the lives of Song literati the courtesan was. These courtesans set a precedence for defining what courtesans offered. Banquets in honor of imperial birthdays and state-sponsored banquets were common place in the upper-class life of government service\textsuperscript{27} and a celebration was not complete without courtesans. In addition, each prefecture would keep its own group of government registered courtesans for such occasions. Some evidence has suggested that courtesans in prefectures were registered as entertainers or musicians rather than bond servants and in an official memorial, courtesans were referred to as dizhi which means disciples/students in Chinese and shows that they were thought of as being trained and specialized.\textsuperscript{28} Further supporting the idea that courtesans have roots in being entertainers is that the government court would maintain their own training school, jiao fang, in order to provide training in dancing and musical training for these women.\textsuperscript{29} These courtesans also certainly enjoyed a position of power in some cases. Bossler suggests that it is plausible that being favored by a yamen, administrative office, provided a courtesan with benefits such as the protection of the government and allowed her to develop deeper relationships with powerful officials.\textsuperscript{30} She also infers that there is a possibility

\textsuperscript{26} Bossler points out that there were also courtesans that could be considered “independent” in that they were employed by a specific establishment or person. It is important to note that Bossler’s work moving forward focuses on non-independent courtesans.

Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China."

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. Bossler states that these women were often met with fans who would give them gifts and had almost a celebrity image.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
that these courtesans were able to receive a stipend of some sort or tips at the very least for their services\textsuperscript{31}. Despite the fact that they wielded power in their charm, these courtesans still struggled with their societal status. This struggle is telling of the age old contradiction that courtesans will come to represent in the Qing.

Despite their instrumental role and great value in government celebrations, courtesans were constantly being reminded that they were not on the same level as both the common man and woman. Courtesans and all entertainers were considered to be degraded in terms of status, known as \textit{jian}\textsuperscript{32}. Those that were part of \textit{jian} status were punished more severely for their crimes and didn’t have the same rights as an ordinary commoner. In addition, government courtesans had to perform at all costs when summoned by a prefecture. Even though they were revered for their role in providing amusement for officials, they were looked down upon for the exact reasons why they were enjoyed. This pattern has long existed in China. \textit{Qingyuan tiao fa shi le}, a collection of administrative regulations compiled in late 12\textsuperscript{th} century, states that courtesan banquets must be limited to only approved occasions and are exclusive to only a certain class of officials\textsuperscript{33}. For example, if a Supply Commissioner or Circuit Supervisor was caught attending courtesan banquets, he would be subject to two years of exile. It also wasn’t appropriate for some groups, like teachers, to fraternize with courtesans. The largest reason though was that many believed that the courtesans provided a heightened chance of corruption and bribery. Hu Taichu, the author of a mid-thirteenth century handbook for local officials, wrote in regards to corruption, translated by Bossler:

\begin{quote}
Nowadays, come the middle of the second month, [the officials] write a few lines, go out with their colleagues to the suburbs, gather the men and elders, and read [the words] to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China."
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
them. The refreshments are extremely sparse. [But] when that affair is over, they
themselves take wine and meat and courtesans and banquet the entire night.\textsuperscript{34}

In addition, throwing banquets with courtesans and musicians was very expensive. The
anonymous author of \textit{Zhouxian tigang}, pointed out that county officials had to get funds for these
events from clerks and the clerks could only get money by forcing it out of the common people\textsuperscript{35}. It is intriguing to see that a courtesan while charming and sought after, is still looked down upon
and regarded as a distraction for a man. She is appealing but warned against in official contexts.
Yet, she still finds a way to make a living off of all of the men that want her despite the rules.

Overall Bossler argues that courtesans have had several roles in Song society in that they
were private entertainers, government dependents and quasi-concubines, in affluent
households\textsuperscript{36}. She references Patricia Ebrey who has made the point that a successful man is one
that is surrounded by attractive and attentive women and this has been seen all throughout
Chinese history especially with emperors who had hundreds of attendants and the practice of
polygamy amongst officials\textsuperscript{37}. These courtesans of the Song played their role in a society where
marriages were arranged\textsuperscript{38}. A relationship with a courtesan though was one of choice.

Courtesans of the Song portrayed an unending dilemma for the courtesan that persisted
onto the Qing. She was respected and allowed to transcend traditional gender boundaries, but she
was also never considered a proper part of society. The courtesan has always been surrounded
with a sense of ambivalence and that ambivalence has transformed in the Qing dynasty. She
showed the conflicting feelings of men as a collective toward pre-established gender roles. These

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{34} Bossler, “Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China,” 15.
\textsuperscript{35} Bossler, “Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China.”
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
feelings only intensified during the Qing due to China being faced with changes in class structures which allowed for greater use of the courtesan.

The Song Dynasty was roughly 400 years apart from the Qing Dynasty and it’s essential to take that into account when discussing the courtesans of Qing China. Direct references cannot be drawn to infer that courtesans functioned in the same manner. The Song Dynasty showed the origin and purpose of the courtesan. Bossler’s work has shown that the courtesan since earlier times has played a significant role in the entertainment industry and aims to provide or create an illusion of companionship for men. This leads into modern China in the 17th century where the courtesan has changed in some aspects but remains to have the same overall purpose.

**The Qing Dynasty Courtesan: A Fall in Status**

As the courtesan lived on in the Qing Dynasty during the 1600s-1800s, she still retained her high class at some levels, but she became more accessible to men as lower class courtesans began to emerge to satisfy demand. The courtesans of the Song were primarily limited to government affairs or to wealthy government officials that desired private entertainment or potential concubines. Christian Henriot believes that the courtesan and prostitute categories actually began to overlap in the sex market since the middle of the nineteenth century and the distinction between the two became more blurred as time persisted39. Henriot attributed this to the middle of the nineteenth century where a society that was once fixated on status transitioned to one that was dictated by whoever had money40. Commercialization during the Qing and the

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40 Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”
emergence of the middle-class urban area was a direct cause in the general decline and status of the courtesan as the female companionship that courtesans provided became not as marketable of a commodity as sex. This is a valid reason as in the Qing Dynasty novel, *Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou*, the word courtesan and prostitute is often used interchangeably when introducing women who worked in establishments/brothel houses. When the men in the book visit the *Jinyulou*, the name of brothel establishment, they address a character called Ms. Fragrance as being a courtesan. However, when the book introduces two other women called Cloud and Lute, they are referred to as prostitutes even though they have the same occupation and all reside in the *Jinyulou*. This shows us that the courtesan and prostitute were beginning to have similar connotations and that society at that time did not think to distinguish the two. As Henriot writes, courtesans certainly did fall from their thrones of the past when they became a more mainstream commodity and accessible to men of a wider range of income levels. In addition, an increase in wealth for others led other well-off customers to look for only sexual gratification.

Mann, on the other hand, argues that the courtesan already experienced a fall in status in the 1600s, following the end of the Ming regime. In the late Ming, courtesans were more elite in status and could move into the social circles of elite women as well as men. However, the Manchu rulers of the Qing made serious efforts in order not to continue to endorse the courtesans in the same fashion that previous dynasties had, as shown in the Song, as an effort to display their Confucian morality. They got rid of the long lasting custom for the government to employ a troop of courtesans for entertainment. Originally, these government courtesans had belonged

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41 Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”
under the jurisdiction of the “Ministry of Rites” beginning in the Yuan Dynasty but when the Ming took charge, they downgraded this office and eventually removed the office in charge of courtesans all together\(^{43}\). In a 1659 edict, the Manchus succeeded in ending the patronage of singing girls in the palace. While the courtesan business still continued on in the private sector, this change showed that the ruling Qing values did not consider the courtesan appropriate in social scenarios and gave way for an earlier demise of the courtesan. 

No matter how people of the Qing may have regarded the courtesan, from a historic standpoint, the courtesan was uniquely different from the prostitutes in what they provided and held a position of power in what they were allowed to do. Henriot has found that elites didn’t go to the same establishments that the normal citizens went to and the courtesans they fraternized with weren’t related to the prostitutes working in opium dens or in brothels\(^{44}\). Only wealthy literati and merchants could afford to patronize courtesans regularly but other less affluent customers could also patronize cheaper courtesans. And while not all customers were equally wealthy, customers of courtesans were all educated and shared a common literary and culture.

The Qing was a time of rapid growth and commercialization and this played a huge factor in the increasing number of courtesans during the dynasty. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, China’s economy had already entered into a period expansion as new markets were being formed and merchants were extending their businesses across provinces. The tributary system became pointless as merchants themselves were beginning to take the initiative to go out to the South China Sea and seek trading partners themselves. This economic growth only continued into the Qing. There is a common stereotype during the Qing that because it was run by Confucian

\(^{43}\) Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
scholar-officials, the Chinese government impeded economic growth since Confucianism was anti-business and anti-merchant. This could not be further from the truth though. The Qing was a large continental market where goods could easily pass through provincial boundaries, unlike that of Europe which consisted of many small states. The economy during the Qing was still largely based on farming as 80% of the population lived in the countryside so it was not a modern industrial economy. However, it did consist of a lot of markets. Those that lived in the farming communities all lived within a day’s journey of a market town so they would take their produce to the market town and engage in trading activities. Trade was commonplace during the Qing amidst the large amount of markets.

The courtesan was certainly becoming popular in this changing modern landscape that allowed for the development of more markets. The Courtesans during the Qing Dynasty still possessed a great presence in modern Chinese society in how they served men. Their services showed a longing for something more. Wang Tao, one of China’s earliest reformers during the Qing Dynasty in the 1800s, left behind one of the most detailed descriptions of the origins of prostitution and courtesans. In his writing, he details that courtesans had established their dominance in the world of prostitution by 1860. The courtesan focused on entertaining their customers with stories, music and opera, and were in some sense “the first of all storytellers” according to Tao.

The Functions of the Qing Courtesan: Illusions of Romance

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46 Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”
Perhaps one of the most telling aspects that the courtesan was greater than just sex during the Qing was the hierarchy that they themselves exercised amongst each other. The highest ranked courtesans were referred to as shuyu. Shuyu defined themselves as artists whose vocation was to entertain customers at their homes, at banquets, receptions or traditional entertainment places such as theaters, teahouses or restaurants\textsuperscript{47}. These women did not prostitute themselves and could be comparable to the geisha in that they sold art and companionship. If a customer wanted to have a relationship with one, then he must court her. In some rare testimonies, shuyu was respected enough to be able to choose to some degree which customers they wanted to have more intimate relations with, especially if they were famous. Shuyu were thought of as being the top of the courtesan community and the lower ranked courtesans were categorized based on the amount of money that they charged for their services. Older sources such as the writings of Tao provided insight into the complex rank system of the courtesans. For example, the class below the shuyu were called changshan. Changsan were part of the same community as the shuyu, but they were easier to obtain access to and they had a fixed price to spend the night and for other services. Below the Changsan were the pipa jaoshu who specialized in playing the pipa but were not qualified enough in singing and opera and they also had fixed prices for their services.

Customers who were elite and patronized the shuyu did so because they appreciated their music and conversational skills. This illustrates that there is a distinct difference between the prostitute and the courtesan. And that while they were beginning to lose status due to the inclusiveness of men of a wider range of classes, they had roles that extended beyond sexual services. The loss of patience can be attributed to that there were a limited number of high class courtesans available to men so there was no guarantee that men would be able to get sexual services from the shuyu

\textsuperscript{47} Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”
as it was required that they court these courtesans with great patience. The lower ranks of courtesans that appeared and their greater “sexualization” that Henriot refers to all go to show that the services that the courtesans provided were becoming demanded on a larger scale.

The courtesan’s breed of service is centered around creating an illusion of courtship and romance through entertainment and companionship. From the early times of the Song, many courtesans were literate and skilled in the arts. Courtesans were trained from an early age to play instruments, sing opera and popular songs and dressed in stylish clothes and expensive jewelry. Men of lower ranks would often gather in brothels, tea houses and, pleasure boats. In the case of a brothel, it was similar to a club where men could gather to meet friends, gossip, eat, drink and smoke opium. The courtesan’s part in these environments was to act as accompaniment for the men.

One of the most instrumental talents that a courtesan could possess was singing. Men highly valued women who were musical and talented singers. For example, in Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou, the men are all gathered together early on in the novel to chit chat and one of the men suggests bringing their favorite courtesan over to provide entertainment. However, another character called Wu Zhen says, “But she can’t play or sing. It would be worse than having a deaf mute on board,”. No matter how beautiful a courtesan may be on the outside, their purpose is to provide entertainment, therefore it is highly valued that she be able to do so with musical talents. In another scene in Chapter 5, the men are introduced to Ms. Fragrance who is known for her beauty and talent. The men are excited by her singing skills,

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48 Henriot, “From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy.”
eagerly applauding after she sings and invites her to their cruise. As the men sail, Ms. Fragrance plays music on her instrument and sings at the same time. They then decide to play a game of “guess fingers.” Each time Fragrance loses, she is expected to sing as a penalty. The men are portrayed in the novel as looking for any opportunity to exploit her talent of singing. Courtesans typically would sing songs of love in order to capture and tug at the heartstrings of the men. For example, one courtesan called Paria who is paired up with Yuan, sings a “Full River Red” which contains lines such as “O, my handsome one, I love your romantic looks…”50 Their job was to create emotion and singing was a way to do this.

In addition to being talented, courtesans were dressed in ostentatious fashions in order to attract men. While these women came from humble backgrounds usually, they were dressed in clothing that appeared or was the finest of what was out there in order to give an image of being glamorous and luxurious. For example, when the men in the novel are first introduced to the Jinyulou brothel house, they are met by a woman was described in the following manner:

Her hair drawn up in a fashionable chignon and fastened with a rhinoceros’ horn pin. Inserted at an angle was a silver ear-picke hair-pin decorated with a soft-wing butterfly done in gilt and kingfisher feather…. She had on a bleached white silk tunic with a black, double-embroidered lute design on the breast and, over it a Suzhou-blue sleeveless jacket of Shanghai Cotton lined with white imported cotton and decorated with a wide black satin border of hibiscus-style trim and fastened with gold cassia-bud buttons; a black imported cotton skirt; white water-crepe stocks…51

Some women would even cross dress as a way to draw interest. Fragrance is noted for being dressed as a boy in trousers and with her hair coiled in a queue when she is introduced to the men. Despite being dressed as a boy, she still wore clothing that was intricate and decorative down to the last detail of her shoes which “were in a Heavenly Twins design and had four fine

50 Hanshangmengren, Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou, 64.
51 Ibid, 34.
silver foreign-engraved buttons attached to them and pale green imported crepe laces. The shoes were less than four inches long with straight soles and round heels."\textsuperscript{52}

Shen Fu’s \textit{Six Records of a Life Adrift}, is another example that documents courtesans as being ostentatious in their appearances. His accounts also exhibit another important location aside from brothel/teahouses: the pleasure boats. On a February 15\textsuperscript{th} during the Qing, Shen Fu and three officials decide to go down to the pleasure boats, an activity known as paddling around\textsuperscript{53}. They make their way down to the “flower boats” which were arranged in two races facing one another with a waterway in between. Upon entering into one of the boats, they “heard the sounds of scurrying feet as the girls came out, some wore their hair tied in a bun, while others had theirs wound up in braids. They were all powdered up like whitewashed wall and wore rouge as fiery as pomegranate blossoms,”\textsuperscript{54}. Men were typically expected to look at all the girls that had come out and summon one that they would like to spend time with. What is most distinct about these pleasure boats though is that no boat was the same. Each of these boats were different and had girls of all different styles with the hope to appeal to men of all likings. Other boats contained girls from Chaozhou and girls from Yangzhou, who were particularly popular amongst men. From Fu’s records, it seems as though there are usually older women who run the boats and receive the guests. This is similar to the \textit{Jinyulou} which is run by Mother Xiao, an older woman, who takes charge of collecting payments from men and scheduling appointments with the women. After Fu and his friends each choose their favorite girls, they decide to get a “wine-boat” which is a boat that allows them to socialize in private. They choose one girl who they are drawn to and act as a couple and companions for the night. Shen Fu describes this scene

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\textsuperscript{52} Hanshangmengren, \textit{Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou}, 38.
\textsuperscript{54} Fu, \textit{Six Records of a Life Adrift}, 106.
\end{flushright}
as, “When our eating and drinking was over, some people reclined to smoke opium while others held girls in their arms and joked with them. Then servants came in with quilts and pillows for everyone and prepared to spread them all out side by side,”\textsuperscript{55}. If a couple wanted privacy like Fu and his courtesan, Delight, they would go back to the original pleasure boat and occupy an empty loft. The pleasure boats are an iconic image when it came to the Chinese courtesans and acted as an important way to facilitate contact between men and courtesans. The scenes that Fu describes in his first-person accounts details one of the most important roles of a courtesan: companionship during lonely times away from home.

Courtesans provided men with relationships that were filled with excitement, courtship and emulated very much so a real relationship. Men desired these relationships and often times considered the courtesans their real companions when compared to their wives. These were the women that they spent time with during the day and evening. Meanwhile, wives were often times left at home to tend to the family. This phenomenon can be observed in the fictional character of Lu Shu in \textit{Romantic Illusions}. Lu Shu does have a wife, however, his wife will not have children with him so his father sends him to Yangzhou with the purpose of buying a concubine to have children with. Upon visiting Yangzhou, Lu Shu falls heads over heels for the young courtesan, Ms. Fragrance. Lu Shu decides that Fragrance is the courtesan that he would like to take back with him, however, because she is a virgin, he is required to pay a fee to her uncle in exchange to take her. Throughout the rest of the novel, he goes toward great lengths to court Fragrance, even though it is clear throughout the novel that she is playing with him for money. Lu Shu, however, readily agrees to her every request for money and jewels. Fragrance’s virginity costs him fifty taels, a gold hairpin, gold rings, a gown made of imported crepe silk, a pleated skirt of imported

\textsuperscript{55} Fu, \textit{Six Records of a Life Adrift}, 108.
crepe silk and a gown of Hangzhou gauze for Fragrance to wear\textsuperscript{56}. The extent to which Lu Shu must go to in order to acquire Fragrance is extreme and he agrees to each request with great joy because he holds in himself the belief that him and Fragrance are soul mates. Despite the fact that forming relationships with men and having intimate relations with them is the name of Fragrance’s occupation, Lu Shu falls into this illusion so easily and never once has any doubts about the nature of his relationship with her. He is blinded by love and in Chapter 21 he proclaims his love to Fragrance by saying “When I was still at home, perhaps I did play the field, but in Yangzhou you’re the only one I’ve ever loved. I’m ready to swear to it,”\textsuperscript{57}. He often doesn’t even come home to where he is staying either, forcing his loyal servant Felix to cover for him. However, even Felix has started to seen through Ms. Fragrance’s charade, expressing his opinion:

I’ve noticed the way the people at Miss Fragrance’s place have been treating you recently; it’s nothing like what it was, but you continue to dote on her in the same way as before. Sir, your money is gone, your valuables are sold, and your clothes in hock. In my humble opinion, those people will insist on payment for Miss Fragrance; they’ll never give her to you for nothing. Each day you stay here gets you deeper in debt, and in a few more days, when the autumn wind starts to blow, it’ll be no joke, I assure you! If you care for Miss Fragrance and can’t give her up, in my humble opinion you ought to hurry home and explain everything to your father, get a few hundred taels from him, and then return to Yangzhou, buy her, and take her back with you. Why stay on here to no purpose? Think about it sir, Am I right or not?\textsuperscript{58}

Despite the fact though that Lu Shu is being played by Fragrance, their relationship goes to show that the courtesan’s did provide romance in a traditional society, not just sex. The two spend countless nights together talking and sleeping together with Lu Shu never even going to live at his place in Yangzhou. His friends refer to them as “newly-weds.” This kind of behavior

\textsuperscript{56} Hanshangmengren, \textit{Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou}.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 200.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 209.
and constant time spent together is more of a relationship than that of a prostitute-client relationship. Lu Shu has real feelings for Fragrance. Courtesans created real feelings and relationships. It’s not just Lu Shu who has this kind of relationship with courtesans. His friends, while they haven’t fallen as hard, have similar close relationships with the courtesans that revolve around developing a banter and consistent contact and conversation. What is more interesting though, is that most of these men do have wives but the courtesans offer them a method of escape from their daily pressures in office and at home.

Another example that shows how men rely on courtesans for their companionship over their wives is in the case of Yuan You in *Romantic Illusions*. Yuan is in the loan shark business and is often away from home at the *Jinyulou* and this leads him to have many vicious fights with his wife. This led to his wife giving this monologue:

When a woman marries, she always wants the best from her husband, but I've had wretched fate. During the years when you were always getting into trouble, you were tried and locked up in jail, and I was scared out of my wits and couldn’t sleep at night… I thought then that you were that pearl beyond price, a prodigal son who had turned over a new leaf. But you tricked me into pawning all the clothes and jewelry from my trousseau. You said you would lend the money out at interest to supplement our family income and enable us to get by… you’ve lost your soul to those whores. And I let you do it! And now today you want to trick me out of my money again! What hope do I have? I don’t want to go on living anymore! ⁵⁹

This goes to show that the wife’s role was to support the husband so that he can achieve the best. The Confucian wife is one that’s core role was to do whatever she needed to do in order to make sure her husband successful, and in this case, the wife sold off her belongings to allow the husband to gain enough capital to start a business. And even in this case, Confucian rules dictate that a wife must be obedient. This can be seen when Yuan angrily says “A wife ought to know

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⁵⁹*Hanshangmengren, Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou*, 190.
something about the Three Obedience’s and Four Virtues. When people hear such jealous talk as that, they’re bound to laugh at you,”\textsuperscript{60} The Three Obedience’s refer to who a woman was to obey: her father, her husband and her sons. From this, it is shown that a woman’s life was one that is shown to supplement the lives of the males around her. Individually, she is not significant but she is only significant within her relationships with the males around her. The Four Virtues consisted of wifely virtue, wifely speech, wifely manner and wifely work. Notice how the term “wifely” is included in front of all these virtues. This further goes to illustrate that a woman had no place outside of being an obedient wife.

It is fair to say that Yuan’s wife has sacrificed a lot for him and even so, the institution of the courtesan exists. Even though men are in relationships with their wives, they turn to the courtesans for relationships as well. There’s this need for men to have it both. A woman who does whatever to give him what he needs and another to provide him with comfort and entertainment. After Yuan’s wife gives her monologue about how unhappy she is with his actions, they get into an argument and it results in Yuan hitting her and his wife clawing him in the face with her nails, leaving him with marks everywhere and her with a bruised head. Following this argument, Yuan precedes in the next chapter to visit his favorite courtesan, Paria. It is interesting that the moment he has a falling out with his wife and is no longer welcome, he seeks solace with the courtesan. Men do hold their relationships with courtesans on a high level and they regard them as their true counterparts in some ways. They’re vulnerable with them and seek comfort from them. When Yuan does visit Paria, he divulges the details of what happens with her and seeks her advice. Paria is a confidant for Yuan and someone he feels absolutely secure with in that he is willing to come to her in a time of need. It also shows that being with

\textsuperscript{60} Hanshangmengren, \textit{Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou}, 189.
her allows him to calm down. The courtesan is all encompassing in her role when it comes to men. She provides sexual services but her main purpose is that she develops relationships with her clients, giving them the sense of stability and commitment that a “normal” relationship may in their conversations and interactions.

In fictional biographies written about courtesans, the love that men have for them and that courtesans express back is positively portrayed as being pure and true. Paolo De Troia studies a collection of anecdotes and biographies about Suzhou’s courtesans of the early 19th century. He uses and translates a book called *Wumen huafang lu* which translated means *Notes from the painted boats of Wumen*. The author is anonymous but goes by the nickname of the Hermit of the Western River. Throughout the book, he introduces us to 45 courtesans. The courtesans of Wumen were often educated just enough to entertain scholars and talk about literature and quote basic poems as well as prose. This journal article highlights the stories of three courtesans. Each story shares a common theme of portraying the courtesan’s relationship with a man to be noble and loving.

The first story is for the courtesan Zhao. “She was courteous and very diplomatic, and was able to gain anyone’s favor with her gift of the gab. At grand banquets she would invite each and every guest to drink with her and they all accepted with pleasure because of her incredible charm,”61. Eventually, she falls for a man who she hoped to marry but he loses all his money. However, Zhao still goes to his house after and they become like husband and wife and she refuses to sleep with any of her other clients after62. Zhao is praised for her loyalty and for seeing her man beyond just his wealth and fortune. This shows that through the lens of a man, there was

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62 De Troia, “Love and Passion in Late Imperial China: The Painted Boats of Suzhou” 86.
nothing wrong with a man and a courtesan being together and that the courtesans were not a scam who spent time with many men. She, like a wife, was also devoted. Another story tells the tale of Yang Yujuan. “She was called Sweet-Smelling Beauty,” and was known for being extraordinarily intelligent. She falls for a man called Jingqing but he refuses to buy her freedom as he is very cheap. A wealthy man tries to spend a night her but she refuses, however, he bribes the matchmaker and does obtain his night with her. She ultimately is so ashamed at what happened, that she commits suicide by drinking a large cup of wine after toasting to Jingqing’s health. This story highlights Yang’s bravery and loyalty toward the man that she loved. It displays that the author who wrote the biography believed strongly that courtesans existed for the purpose of providing men with companionship and that it is encouraged for courtesans to develop deep relationships with men. Of course, it is arguable in some cases the degree to which courtesans actually fell for these men as seen in the case of Romantic Illusions with Fragrance. However, these stories and novels do show that the job that courtesans possessed. They evoked emotion, feeling and care from their clients and portrayed an image of a thrilling and free relationship with the time they had with them. Their bodies were part of what they provided but intimacy was used to fulfill a complete experience along with the deception of romance.

The pleasure quarters flourished from the fall of the Ming to the outbreak of the Opium War. Young women were of high demand and women willingly entered into the market with hope of entering into respectable families as concubines or a second wife. Men desired the feeling of nostalgia for youth and they appreciated the idealized world that the courtesan presented. They enjoyed the excitement that these girls provided on the pleasure boats and they

63 De Troia, “Love and Passion in Late Imperial China: The Painted Boats of Suzhou.”
64 Ibid.
craved that intimacy and time together. The most prized of courtesans were the ones that were exclusive in who they chose to serve and this gave men an elated feeling of being special. According to Mann, men desired the intimate moments with a chosen courtesan in which they could exchange letters or poetry and admire her without make up in her barest form. These women were presenting men with the image and feeling of love and closeness, an emotion that was widely disregarded in the face of Confucian tradition.

**Defining Traditional Confucian Values Toward Women**

On the opposing side of the courtesans were the wives who were dictated what they could and couldn’t do by the patriarchal society strengthened through Confucian classics. Confucianism has had a strong history in China and there is no doubting its unyielding presence. Confucianism has influenced Chinese culture, tradition and literature with teachings such as filial piety persisting to this day. With Confucianism influences dripping into all crevices of Chinese society, women are no exception. Women were forced to adhere to strict rules and rites that were outlined by Confucian classics. And while families most likely did not teach women how to act word for word based on Confucian classics, the Confucian text shows the widespread patriarchal nature of China’s society and outlines many core values that were later shown in the Qing. In addition, it shows us how society believed the ideal wife was to act. The courtesan, on the other hand, was completely removed from the Confucian classics. She was not viewed as being proper and part of the society that Confucians strived toward. When she is mentioned, she is cautioned against and looked down upon in that she is a distraction with ulterior motives. And while teachings in classics and society showed that the ideal woman was supposed to be family

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orientated, the courtesan with her wit and flashiness still entertained customers in the pleasure quarters or boats. This is symbolic of a larger issue. Society as a whole was starting to question the culture surrounding marriage and wives by giving business to courtesans.

While teachings such as filial piety, importance of learning, and compassion toward others, have become widely studied, Confucianism and Confucian classics also look at the role of the women to a limited degree. It was rare for women to have a central role in Confucian classics, but this did not mean that an opinion wasn’t established toward them. Confucian teachings toward women played a strong influence on relationships between man and wife and how women should act throughout their lives. There were countless rules and sayings in Confucian classics that were touched upon that forced women in Chinese society to exhibit certain behaviors. The relationship between man and woman was not one of love. It was one of necessity. The typical wife in China under Confucianism played a very contrasting role from that of the courtesan. Her sexuality and individuality were not celebrated as they were seen as a tool and support system for men. This was a contrast from the courtesan that used her sexuality and talents to stand out amongst her peers in order to earn the attention of prying men.

**Established Inferiority**

One of the major points that Confucianism emphasizes is the inferior nature of the woman in face of the man. In a famous Chinese cosmology book called *Book of Change*, that was later formulated by Confucius, we can trace sexism back to even the iconic Yin and Yang image\(^\text{67}\). A woman was the yin (moon) and was dark, hidden, cold, weak and passive. While a

man was the yang (sun) and was bright, open, warm, strong and active. This imagery displays well what women were expected to be. A woman was not supposed to have a strong personality as she was expected to be submissive and work in the shadows. In a Book of Poems from the Song written in approximately 200 BC, it is written “When a baby boy was born, he was laid on the bed, and given jade to play with and when a baby girl was born, she was laid on the floor and given a tile to play with,”68. The birth of a girl was called a “small happiness,” because women were normally married off in their teens when she was just becoming the most useful physically69. There’s an old Chinese saying that says “A married daughter is like the water that is thrown out of the doors,” because once she was married, she was legally no longer a part of her parent’s family therefore all expenses that were spent on her would become lost70. Gao believed that the practice of foot binding was a symbol of seclusion and suppression71. The process of foot binding would begin in early childhood between the ages of one and three and caused pain and permanent crippling. There’s a vast amount of sexual inequality present in Chinese society. In a Confucian text, Lun Yu, Chapter XVII, it writes about women, “it is not pleasing to have to do with women or people of base condition, if you show them too much affection, they become too excited, and if you keep them at a distance, they are full of resentment,”72. By referring to women as “base condition,” Lun Yu is saying that they are “inferior men” who are unable to communicate and understand on a normal level73. In particular, when he says that it is not

69 Ibid, 119.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid, 115.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
“pleasing” to deal with women, it shows how Confucianism and society looks at women. They think of them as being below men and complicated beings who cannot function in society without being controlled well by a strong man. Confucianism has created a society where women must be dependent upon men. In addition, Gao makes the point that this is the only quote in a 20-chapter book about women and it shows that Confucianism is suggesting that women are to be forgotten, ignored, and passed over in silence. This attitude toward women has created a culture where wives were to be like servants to her husband and his family and looked down upon for having other interests and desires besides her family.

Marriage and Family

The institution of marriage in pre modern China during the Qing Dynasty itself was one based on family and wealth, not individual preferences. Marriage was regarded as a family matter and as a result, a girl’s personal preferences and advantages desired might have to be sacrificed. The core meaning of what a good marriage was one where a girl would marry a family with better resources as this would allow her to escape labor burdens that fell to families at the bottom of China’s hierarchy. The main cultural message found was that a woman’s martial wealth trajectory should only go upward and that movement downward was regarded as shame. A marriage was an alliance between two households as well that would be beneficial or at least not harmful so there was also a preference and strong motivation for marriages between

74 Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.”

families of equal wealth stature. In The Biographies of Women, there are many biographies that outline the belief that marriage got all parts of the families involved and very rarely just two individuals. This culture surrounding marriage can give birth to marriages that serve more utility than they do personal good. A marriage relationship can be seen as a business transaction in that dowries are negotiated and families must meet for approval. Thus, when men aren’t receiving the love that they humanely desire in their marriages, they seek relationships that are more organic with the courtesans who are encouraged to be free spirited and show off their personalities.

Wives were also subjected to a multitude of rules for how they must act. Confucianism has caused the marriage system to become a severe bondage of women and the cult of feminine chastity became an obsession to men. In the Book of Rites, which was developed by Confucius’ followers, the ceremonial “rites” for women are detailed. Some of these rules include extremes like married sisters cannot eat at the same table as brothers. Overall according to these rites, a woman was supposed to be quiet, obedient, good mannered, neat, cook, spin, sew and be kind to her husband’s family but only courteous to his friends. In addition, according to Pan Zhao’s Percepts for Women:

“In truth, as far as knowledge goes, a woman need not be extraordinarily intelligent. As for her speech, it need not be terribly clever, as for her appearance, it need not be beautiful or elegant; and for her talents, they need only be average… This is why the Nuixian says ‘If a wife is like a shadow or an echo, how can you fail to praise her’.

A woman’s place was the home, and nowhere else. Her life was meant to be dedicated toward her husband. A woman who chose to commit suicide after her husband’s death was held in the

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76 Brown, "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation."
77 Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.”
78 A loyal female disciple of Confucius.
highest esteem and greatly honored. There is a story of a widow who cut her arm off because a hotel keeper refused her entrance on the way home from accompanying her husband’s coffin. While this may be drastic in normal circumstances, her actions were highly praised by Confucian males. This was one of the many stories recorded in *The Biographies of Virtuous Women*, which will be further discussed later on. This book contained a collection of stories of women that had committed suicide after their husbands’ death in order to protect their purity, this doctrine was an official institution during the Ming Dynasty\(^80\). The encouragement and reverence toward a widow committing suicide showed how extreme society was toward the idea that a woman did not have a place outside the bond of marriage.

In the context of the Qing, the strict rules placed upon widows continued. During the early Qing, rulers deplored widow suicide with the Yongzheng Emperor publishing an attack on the custom. He said women who did commit suicide violated their wifely duties and threatened the family system that the Qing wanted to nurture\(^81\). Thus, celibate widows were more common during the Qing. However, the moment that the Manchus conquered China in 1644, they began issuing edicts to set the standards for female conduct and gender relations, signifying the Manchu’s commitment to the Confucian ideals of governance\(^82\). Manchu’s enthusiastically supported the cult of the “chaste widow,” *jie fu*, and there were various government campaigns used to promote female chastity. One such system offered rewards in which leaders of local communities would nominate women for consideration of imperial honors. A woman had to be widowed before the age of 30 and have remained celibate past the age of 50 to be considered. The names of all the women honored were inscribed in special shrines.

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\(^80\) Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.”


\(^82\) Ibid.
A woman’s prominent purpose was her position in the family and ability to give birth. A mother’s key role according to Confucius was their ability to produce sons that would carry the family name, they had no legal or property rights. Confucianism believes that the purpose of women is for reproduction of sons to carry the family name. If a woman did not produce a son, it was regarded as having committed the “worst moral crime”\(^\text{83}\). Confucius himself actually believed that the worst accusation of Bu Xiao, failure of filial piety, was being unable to produce a son for the family. If a wife failed to bear a son for the family within a year, this could cause humiliation so there was a possibility of her being returned to her parents while the man would have the duty to take another wife. If a man overindulges himself on his wife though, this was also a failure on the wife’s part. There’s another saying in this case, *Hong yan huo shui*, which translates to “beauty is the troubled water that brings disasters,”\(^\text{84}\). Everything is blamed on the woman. Instead, her sole purpose should’ve been one to support the family:

The girl in any case had less of a childhood than the boy, and from the age of fourteen she began to seclude herself and learn the manners of womanliness, for the Chinese conception emphasizes the womanly woman: She rises earlier than her brothers dresses more neatly than they, helps in the kitchen, and often helps to feed her younger brothers. She plays with fewer toys, does more work, talks more quietly, walks about more delicately and sits more properly…\(^\text{85}\)

A woman had to please her husband, mother-in-law and siblings-in-law. She had to be sweet but at the same time, she could not be talkative as there was a chance that could lead to trouble. In addition, she could never show in front of others that she was happy about having her husband’s favor as this could lead to tensions with the mother-in-law. A married woman must wake up the first in the morning to serve the family and she had to go to bed the latest at night. Gao likened

\(^{83}\) Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.”
\(^{84}\) Ibid, 118.
\(^{85}\) Ibid, 153.
her to a polite and homeless stranger once she got married\textsuperscript{86}.

\textbf{The Biographies of Women}

Expectations of women cannot be discussed without examining Liu Xiang’s \textit{The Biographies of Women}, a Confucian classical text. The book is a compilation of biographies on exemplary women compiled by Han Dynasty scholar Liu Xiang in c. 18 BC. It contains 125 accounts of women that exemplified virtuous and proper women. Liu’s grandfather had been the great grandson of the half-brother of Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, and he had enjoyed his life as a scholar. He was appointed to the Chamberlain for the Imperial Clan which meant that he maintained the genealogy of the imperial family and monitored the conduct of imperial relatives. The position was passed down in the family and Liu Xiang eventually took this position as well where he served three emperors. He witnessed the inappropriate behavior of the imperials first hand and Ban Gu, a biographer of Liu Xiang, believes that Liu’s concerns over Emperor Yuan’s indulgence in the Zhao sisters and Consort Wei had prompted him to write his book\textsuperscript{87}. Most scholars accept Gu’s view, but Mou believes that the text should be read without considering motivation as it is still the first book that is solely devoted to celebrating the actions of women and it initiated a tradition of including women’s biographies in official histories and it was used as a learning material for educating women\textsuperscript{88}. This was the first Confucian effort to create a place for women within the Confucian social scheme\textsuperscript{89}. Liu Xiang, according to

\textsuperscript{86} Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.”


\textsuperscript{88} Mou, \textit{Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women}.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
Shimomi Takao, believed that women had the potential to affect social order. For example, empresses and imperial consorts who were directly associated with the emperor had the responsibility to influence their husbands into making logical decisions. Despite this, a woman only had the ability to affect change by strengthening and supporting the patriarch or emperor of their family.

In writing his book, Liu chose to categorize women into seven groups:

1. The exemplars of mothers
2. The capable and intelligent
3. The benevolent and wise
4. The determined and obedient
5. The principled and righteous
6. Those able in reasoning and communication
7. The pernicious and depraved

All of the chapters, with the exception of chapter seven, represent how Liu believes the ideal women should act. Mou also argues that the chapters show Liu’s opinion of the Confucian social hierarchy of women. The Confucian relationships that are usually talked about are: sovereign and subordinate, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friends. The woman only has a place in these relationships within the husband and this is why it is the starting point of the biography. Of the 104 biographies, only two of them have women that do not marry before or during their biography. This further cements the values of marriage for women. Mou believes that Xiang’s purpose in writing this book is to ultimately reinforce the Confucian hierarchy. Richard Guisso writes, “When the Classics touch upon the

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90 Mou, Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
nature of women, they seem to do so for one of three reasons: to justify and reinforce existing stereotypes of the female, to teach and warn the male; and finally, to foster a sexual hierarchy,“\textsuperscript{93}.

The first chapter of book is titled “The Exemplars of Mother,” and outlines how a woman ought to act as a mother. The mother is regarded as the highest position that a woman holds in society which is why it is chapter one. The introduction excerpt to this chapter reads,

Because they are the exemplars of mothers, they are capable, sage, and wise. Their behavior and appearance are exemplary, and their words fall within the confines of righteousness. They have carried and reared their offspring, thereby permeating them with education and cultivation. Having helped them to become accomplished in morality, they help them in career achievement. Once the wives’ mothers-in-law and mothers learn this, they cannot help but emulate them.\textsuperscript{94}

The role of the mother is compared to that of teacher, putting them of the highest regard. Teachers held a very special position within Confucian social status and Mencius himself believed that even a king had no ground for making a teacher travel to answer his call\textsuperscript{95}. The mother figure played an essential role in a child’s education according to these teachers and Liu believed that a mother should play the role of imparting ethical teachings onto her son and daughters-in-laws.

Women also played a supportive role toward their husbands as they were expected to encourage ethical and filial behaviors. They were the ultimate care takers and mothers. This could be seen in the first biography of the book which is dated between the 26\textsuperscript{th} and 22\textsuperscript{nd} centuries B.C.E. It features Ehuang and Nuyung, the two daughters of one of the five mythical

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, 33.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
kings, who were married over to the ruler Shun in order to observe his management ability. Mou is careful to point out that these biographies are “legendary” meaning that they are not necessarily strict historical facts but more so resemble myths. Throughout the story, the two wives support and affirm his actions throughout the biography and they do not “act proudly or disparagingly, but were unassuming, respectful and frugal.” Wives are described as “frugal” while courtesans were expected to dress up in intricate and ostentatious outfits. The two sisters encouraged their husband to remain a filial demeanor in the face of life-threatening schemes from his father, stepmother and half-brother. The relationship strengthens between the wives and the husband and when Shun becomes Prime Minister and he continues to consult his wives in all matters and he eventually becomes a Son of Heaven. Shun later dies on a journey to the south and his two wives also die in the south shortly after. Liu views these two women as the mother of the state as they are the ruler’s wives, as pointed out by scholar Yamazaki Junichi. It is noteworthy to point out that the wives die shortly following their husband. It is as though Liu is conveying the message that a wife does not serve a greater purpose than her husband and family and thus when they do not exist, she should not either. Mou supports this belief as she writes that the purpose of mothers, as described by Liu, is to strengthen the foundation of the patriarchal family and that Liu highlights the importance of the mother-son relationship, implying that a woman’s life is centered around giving birth to a son and successfully bringing him up.

96 Mou, Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women.
97 Ibid, 35.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Mou, Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women.
In examining chapter two, The Capable and Intelligent, the idea that a woman has no place outside of her family is further enforced. This chapter includes women of all ranks and the women are included for their roles as wives. The wives discussed in this chapter though are not as submissive and obedient as other classics and writings have implied they should be. They often go against their husband’s will. This is because the role of a wife is not necessarily to her husband but to her family. Mou writes, “the purpose of marriage is to make goodness of two surnames, serving the ancestral temple on one end and continuing posterity on the other,” 101. Wives must obey not only their husband, but also her father-in-law, mother-in-law and mix in with her sisters-in-law. Wives in these biographies in chapter two often take it upon themselves to prevent their husbands from making poor decisions that would affect the rest of the family. One example, is in the fourth biography in this chapter. Duke Mu of Jin captured his wife’s brother, the King of Jin, and planned to use him as a sacrifice. His wife, Duchess Ji, threatened to commit suicide along with their son and daughter so the Duke would back out. The wives of officials were expected to be filial to their family and parents-in-law at all costs. In biography six in chapter two, the woman of Zhounan makes a speech detailing the role of the wife:

“He serves the state well so that no one faults him, thus sparing his parents worry; he toils with laborious work to provide for his parents; if they are old and have to carry water and pound mortar, he should not be choosy in finding a wife; and even if the government is corrupt, he still serves it so that he can support his parents. If the husbands cannot live up to such expectations, the wives take it upon themselves to serve their parents-in-law,” 102

In biography eight, a character called Dazi embezzled money and his wife who was suspicious of the sudden wealth took her son and left him in order to avoid criminal charges. Eventually Dazi

102 Ibid, 40.
was caught as well as the rest of his family and only his mother was spared because of her old age. Dazi’s wife still returned though with her son to take care of her mother-in-law until she died. From these biographies, we see that it is acceptable for wives to meddle but only if it was advantageous toward her husbands’ clans and the state. Her role was not solely to service her husband but to ultimately ensure that her husband fulfilled his endeavors in promoting the welfare of the clan or state in any means possible. Despite giving wives some power, the male line is still the most important since males are carry on the family line where as women are married off to different families. A wife’s place only existed within this patriarchal system and she had to carefully monitor her husband and the needs of her family. She differs from the courtesan in that her talents and individuality were not necessary in the face of devotion.

The last chapter, “The Pernicious and Depraved,” warns of negative relationships with women and describes how a woman should not act and it can be seen that many of these warnings are actually attributes that courtesans possessed and resemble relationships that men did have with them. In the introduction for this chapter, Liu starts off with:

Because they are pernicious and depraved, they are also insulting and changeable. They are licentious, jealous, deluding and bewitching, they betray moral principles and desert righteousness. They refer to the wrong as the right, thus they eventually are destroyed by calamities.\(^{103}\)

Scholar Shimomi Takao believed that Liu recognized in women the unique social knowledge, experience and ability to overpower and destroy men and that Liu believed this would result in them destroying society\(^{104}\).

In Liu’s biographies, he expresses the point that women are dangerous in that they can be

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\(^{103}\) Mou, Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women, 58.

\(^{104}\) Ibid.
distractions as well as that a woman that is beautiful is a handicap toward men. The first three biographies feature three consorts, Moxi, Daji and Baosi. All three are described as being beautiful or implied to be and were later on referred to as femme fatale figures by writers and historians\textsuperscript{105}. Moxi was described as “beautiful in appearance, but poor in virtue, and she threw the entire palace into confusion in an unvirtuous way. She acted like a woman but had the heart of a man by wearing a sword and a camp,”\textsuperscript{106}. Women who were aggressive and displayed ability are largely looked down upon by Liu. In addition, for these biographies, he is careful to point out that the women are beautiful, making it clear that beauty is often a hindering trait. Daji, was looked down upon by Liu because King Zhou “never left [Daji] at all; he valued highly whatever [Daji] praised and he destroyed whatever [Daji disliked],”\textsuperscript{107}. Once Daji laughed at Zhou’s invention of a cruel punishment so he implemented it and criminals were forced to climb a greased copper pole with live coals under it\textsuperscript{108}. In these biographies, women were not described as being really seductive or wicked and it was the man’s fault mostly in that they indulged in women. The other twelve biographies though feature women who are described as agents of their own behavior. There are five with women who tried to replace crown princes or heirs with their own sons by manipulating kings and all five are consorts or secondary wives. In addition, nearly all of them are noted for their attractive appearances which they use to their advantage. Then there are seven biographies with women who enjoyed sex or had extramarital relations which all led to the deaths or political upheavals of their husbands or significant others. While extramarital relations are a universally undesirable action, for a women to be looked down for enjoying her

\textsuperscript{105} Mou, \textit{Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women}.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 60.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
sexuality showed the strict restrictions placed on women for expressing themselves. Xia Jiang, in biography nine of this chapter, was said to have been “three times the wife of kings and seven times the wife of dukes,”¹⁰⁹. Mou believes that Liu mainly puts the blame on Xia for being attractive as well as talented. She is described as being beautiful, talented in art and diplomatic in rejecting men without offending them. Unfortunately, despite her talent and class, all the nobles who had relations with her ended up dying because they were involved with her. Xia, however, according to Mou, was described as being a woman making the best of the situation she had and she never accused her husbands or other companions of cheating on her.¹¹⁰ By making all the male characters involved with her die, Liu urges men to avoid women with strong personalities, talent and beauty for the danger he believes they pose.

These rigid standards set for women throughout history in Confucian Classics persisted on into the Qing and are the driving force in the creation of the Qing courtesan. These standards and family centric traditions set the stage for a female figure that defied these standards. She was one that was colorful, bright and existed outside of the home. She redefined these clear boundaries established in Confucian classics and Confucian rule.

**Conclusion**

The courtesan has become the antithesis to the proper traditional wife in China. Her relationship to the wife is one of necessity. It is because of the lack in what the wife offers that the courtesan has been able to flourish in business. The wife is traditionally seen within the context of classical Confucian values. Her value was based on her devotion to her family and

¹⁰⁹ Mou, Gentlemen’s Prescriptions For Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women, 63.
¹¹⁰ Ibid.
moral values. She was there for utility as she managed the household and insured that the family was well taken care of. Liu Xiang’s biographies featured women who focused on their families and husband and the vast majority of them were married women. This exemplified the belief that women didn’t have a purpose outside of marriage and family. Through examining courtesans of the earlier times and also through Qing Dynasty era novels, courtesan value has time and time again been one of entertainment and experience. She was well read, well-spoken and well trained in feminine charms.

Courtesans have played a role that emphasize emotional labor and their emotions and humane characteristics became a commodity in the Qing commercial economy. Courtesans were allowed to show emotion, jealousy, and happiness and this played into what made them more attractive to men. They are in all aspects portrayed as a more approachable and a human person in that they are to create an illusion of romance. She is shown as having a mind of her own and her own interests and desires in life. This draws into a larger issue. The men of the patriarchy were beginning to rebel against the neo-Confucian beliefs that the ruling Manchu elite enforced onto Chinese society. As Qing Dynasty China experienced a heavy wave of modernization in the 18th and early 19th century, relationships and gender roles were also beginning to be seen in a modern lens. This can be seen in the pushback against the past that had long started with the men that created the Qing courtesan market.

**Perpetuation of the Patriarchy**

The courtesan occupation was an avenue for women to diverge from the traditional neo-Confucian family structure. Through Mann and Ko’s respective works, it is shown that throughout the Qing Dynasty, women have always had other methods of putting themselves in
power within the patriarchy. Mann and Ko both focus on women writers of the time that allow for historians to reevaluate the Qing Dynasty transformations with a focus on the role that women played. Both authors draw a special focus to the area of the lower Yangzi River, in particular Jiangnan, as more than 70% of the elite women writers came from this area\textsuperscript{111}. The area also experienced a demographic explosion and exploding consumer economy during the High Qing which allowed for the improved life chances of women and placed women at the center of various social transformations\textsuperscript{112}. The Lower Yangzi area also had rapid growth in cotton cultivation which led to the growth of textile industries. This caused local officials to begin to notice the importance of female labor in spinning and weaving in the context of the farm economy\textsuperscript{113}. Wives and mothers thus rose to power in the family. Outside of the family, women were becoming a choice commodity in not just in labor but also the courtesan market\textsuperscript{114}.

Mann argues that elite women that were “literate” in Jiangnan gave women a voice in the late imperial society and that they used their talent in order to further place themselves into the context of traditional family learning\textsuperscript{115}. These women were highly valued by elite families and they enhanced the stature of the family. And while these women did strain womanly Confucian obligations by engaging in literary works, they used their education to develop their own place in family and society and offering commentaries on life and art. She stood for tradition and family. She did not want to change gender roles, she focused on having a “higher purpose.” In their eyes, they were not powerless in the patriarchy. They possessed a moral responsibility to their family and social situations. Mann writes, “learned women of the classical age exemplified a pure

\textsuperscript{111} Mann, \textit{Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century.}\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
erudition untainted by the competition for degrees and office that had co-opted men’s creative energies as China’s bureaucratic state expanded,\(^\text{116}\). Women writers were conscious of their moral authority and believed it was their duty to uphold their families to these morals. They had newly attained power because of their crucial role in the farm economy as well as their de facto ruler of the household in that they managed it. And they used this power to provide social commentary on the family and uphold traditions. One historical Qing period scholar, Jiang Lan’s wife, writes a sarcastic letter to her husband looking down on his behaviors:

> When a man leaves home and goes into the outside world, he should not be distracted by concerns and his domestic affairs. So if you run short of money, my two elder brothers holding office in the capital will be glad to help you out. If you grow depressed staying alone in your lodgings, by all means get out and enjoy yourself with the beautiful women in the pleasure quarters! My brothers won’t begrudge you their money! For myself, I long ago cast aside any dream of ‘growing old together,’ that old mandarin duck fantasy. As for you, concentrate on this: Serve wise men; befriend humane persons; succeed in your studies; conduct yourself in accordance with the Dao; spread your fame; bring glory to your ancestors! These are your responsibilities.\(^\text{117}\)

As Mann points out, Jiang Lan’s wife’s letter is dripping of moral authority and displays that wives focused on providing commentary on already pre-existing traditions outlined in classical values. She urges him to bring glory to his ancestors which aligns with Confucian values of piety and also encourages him to study, with meritocracy being another important Confucian teaching. While elite women were finding ways to express themselves that were non-traditional, they were only re-affirming the patriarchy. They did not dare to step outside of the classic Confucian patriarchal system and did not think to. This portrays how deeply engrained these values were in society. They further enforced the patrilineal family system and show the triumph of the


\(^{117}\) Ibid, 124.
patrilineal kinship systems\textsuperscript{118}. Women’s writing gave women the opportunity to reconstruct gender relations, but this reconstruction was only done in the context of the patrilineal system as learned women derived their powers from classical learning and educated women only thought to create an identity in the context of Confucian high culture\textsuperscript{119}.

In pursuing writing as a way to express moral beliefs, literary women marginalized the courtesan and enforced the idea that the courtesan would always be an outsider to the family unit. Even to men, a Qing courtesan was a “living tragedy: a woman of talent who list her virtue,”\textsuperscript{120}. She was a polluted woman in that she was an entertainer so she neither spun nor wove which meant she had no economic value to a family\textsuperscript{121}. Women that were writers looked down on these courtesans. Yun Zhu\textsuperscript{122} purposely leaves out courtesans in her famed anthology, showing that while courtesans may have been considered talented up to the Ming, they were no longer the standard. Her work was not considered honest as she was inferior to even the lowliest peasant woman. Changes in Manchu state policies toward female entertainers and sex workers showed that societal values no longer considered courtesans to be women of refinement and class. The government also began to lower investment in the entertainment industry. Yun Zhu herself wanted to contain the woman’s poetic voice to that of marital and kin relationships rather than one of emotion that courtesans embodied\textsuperscript{123}. Other scholars and officials such as Zhang Xuecheng and Chen Hoongmu were also insisting that a woman’s learning and education be only

\textsuperscript{118} Mann, Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century.
\textsuperscript{119} Mann, Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 121.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Yun Zhu (July 29 1771 – June 1 1883) was a Qing Dynasty writer who gathered thousands of poems written by women in her anthology.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
within the family.\textsuperscript{124} Despite this moral belief of elite woman and other scholars-officials that courtesans were “polluted,” pleasure quarters of Nanjing, Yangzho and Suzhou thrived in business as never before by the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{125}

**A Motif of Dissatisfaction**

I argue that the courtesan plays a role during the Qing modernization like no other figure and she showed a society in transition amidst modernization. It is essential to study the development and changes during the Qing period from a gendered approach with the courtesan at the center as she is a motif of a changing societal mindset. The patriarchy was not a black and white system of oppression and did provide women with methods of self-expression but ultimately, these methods all played back into the system. The courtesan is a figure created by male demand that showed that men were starting to redefine what gender roles encompassed. Mann and Ko focus on literate women and both come to the conclusion that these women were not attempting to resist or escape but rather creating a space within the already existing gender system that gave them meaning and dignity,\textsuperscript{126} courtesans are different and revolutionary in that they were not creating a new space. Literate women contribute in setting a future where individuals can move with fluidity between gender roles. But the courtesans were forging a new path for women as they interchangeably moved between different gender roles and spheres. Ko says that women never lived in completely separate spheres from men and that Confucian tradition changed with the times, and while this is true, courtesans are the key figure in rejecting

\textsuperscript{124} Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century.*

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.

these Confucian traditions. For the first time, a female figure has come to represent a contradictory force to the archaic classical values. She comes into existence due to men and shows that men themselves were starting to break away from the dominant traditional role of a family.

Ko further explores the idea of the Chinese courtesan being one that was immersed in two worlds: the male-public and female-domestic. The pleasure industry did well in the private sector but lost respect in the government during the Qing and the courtesans who survived this fall in status continued to write, paint and discuss. At her peak in the Ming, she was similar to a man in that she became as well educated as the literati men. She possessed a gender ambiguity to her in that she was feminine like a female but at the same time, she was expected to have a mastery of gentlemen’s arts. This was crucial in that courtesans often interacted with influential men like examination candidates, scholar-officials and wealthy merchants. She was a charming woman and at the same time, an educated man. She was able to play both the private sphere that women dominated and the public sphere of men. She had a unique freedom in jumping between gender boundaries. The similar thread that binds courtesans and literary women however is that they all continue to perpetuate the patriarch to various degrees.

Courtesans and their clients may have had relationships that resembled real relationships and these women may have defied current gender roles, but their occupation was still one of service and reliance on male. Being a courtesans was still an occupation and what they sold was romance. A lot of courtesans dreaded the circumstances that they were in and there were some that were sold into the profession by evil, unethical family members. Romantic Illusions paints a

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128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
tragic backstory for most of the courtesans and none of them are portrayed as enjoying what they do. They liken their role to prostitution at the core and the dignity to the profession in the Song Dynasty is lost amongst the common courtesan. One of the courtesans in *Romantic Illusions*, Phoenix, is asked for her story and she tearfully tells her story:

I lost my mother when I was very young, and my father, who was both a drunkard and a gambler, promised me as a child bride to a son of Lan Siniang, a hairdresser in a brothel. At the age of six I was taken to Qingjiang to learn to play music and sing, but I refused to learn and suffered goodness knows how many beatings and curses. My mother-in-law opened a house of her own in Qingjiang with a dozen or more girls, and at the age of twelve I was forced into the same filthy business. I can’t tell you how much money I made for them! But my husband and his brother whored, gambled, and smoked opium. They also slept around among the girls, played any number of tricks, got involved in several lawsuits, and piled up over a thousand taels in debts. They couldn’t keep the house going anymore and did a flit to Yangzhou. And now my mother-in-law, husband, and brother-in-law have rented a one-room shanty and need four or five hundred cash every day for their living expenses. I’m in here, and although I’m supposed to be on a split-fee basis, all my bedding was bought with a high interest loan. The jewelry and clothes I had in Qingjiang have been pawned, and every day now I have to use high-interest loans to buy cakes, flowers for my hair, cosmetics and other odds and ends, as well as a few pellets of that accursed stuff. Every day my family clamors for money. I’ve not been here very long and I have no steady clients. Tell me, how am I going to get by?

This particular story, showed that courtesans were ultimately still a part of the patriarchy. They filled in a place for men that wives couldn’t which is why they existed to begin with. No matter how much she was loved and how well read she was, her whole profession centered around catering to the patriarchy. She was in a unique position as she was greatly admired, but at the same time, she had no higher purpose than men. Like the wife, she served the same group of men and for many of these courtesans, their best chance at a good life was to attach herself to a

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130 Hanshangmengren, *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou* 72-73.
respectable man as his concubine. Thus she would gain the legal protection of her man. As seen with Paria, she desperately schemes to become a concubine of Yuan’s as she believes this will allow her to live comfortably. Fragrance herself pursues her relationship with Lu Shu because she believes he has the capabilities to take care of her and make her life easier. Despite all their efforts though, the courtesan would never be accepted into the family unit that was so key to Chinese society. The men in *Romantic Illusions* never have the intention of leaving their wives and neither does Shen Fu as he enjoys his time with various courtesans. The men are painted as patrons and saviors of these young girls that were portrayed as victims. According to the law, courtesans were also not legally permitted to become first wives and would always remain outside of the kinship unit. Thus despite her transitional and empowering role in defining gender, she herself was still restrained by the Confucian patriarchal traditions.

Her significance is in that she represents that Chinese men themselves were laying the groundwork for the modernization of traditional Confucian values. By patronizing courtesans, they too were unconsciously showing their dissatisfaction in China’s strict emphasis on filial roles within family and empire. When the Qing rulers took over, they made sure to impose their subjects with morally virtuous Confucian values and attempted to control these behaviors. But men were beginning to show they were not satisfied with what they had at home and this showed that society needed to start to reconsider what it meant to be a woman.

**Signs of Change**

There were other tell-tale signs in China that there was a need for change in values.

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132 Ibid.
133 Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China*. 
During the Ming Dynasty, a new school of Neo-Confucianism known as the Wang Yingming school emerged. This school of thought became popular amongst independent minded intellectuals who believed that \( li \) was part of the human mind and men did not need to be instructed on how to achieve morality by state elites\(^ {134} \). They proposed that you could approach it with subjective self-learning and open discussion regardless of class, ethnicity, gender and level of education. Everyone was equal and there was saying used known as \textit{man jie shi sheng ren}, which translated to “the streets are full of sages,”\(^ {135} \). This new ideology was liberal and anti-authoritarian and called out the Emperor and his officials for being corrupt and repressive and ultimately led to revolts against the central government at the end of the Ming. They stressed the relationship of friendship over that of a subject to the Emperor and this was a huge contrast from the classical school of Neo-Confucianism. The Manchus that entered into power made the Cheng-Zhu school as the core of their government out of fear and advice from the Chinese conservative literati who blamed the Wang Yingming school for their moral laxity causing political chaos\(^ {136} \). This development of a new branch of Confucian philosophy that very much so called for a breakdown of the traditional Confucian relationships showed that there was already resistance in society toward imperial Chinese teachings. And while it was squashed when the Qing came to power, it was a spark toward people seeking to end the old Dynastic regime. There was more to life than service to family and government.

Qing China’s increase of contact with the Europeans through trade was another cause for China to start to consider new ideologies. In the 1600s, the Qing court took their first steps

\(^ {134} \) Hung, "Market Expansion, State Centralization, and Neo-Confucianism in Qing China."
\(^ {135} \) Ibid.
\(^ {136} \) Ibid.
toward establishing policies to manage commercial and political relations with the Europeans\textsuperscript{137}. In previous dynasties such as the Ming, China had always attempted to limit direct interactions with the Europeans but this new reign was unwilling to curb commercial growth. The Qing government attitudes toward Europeans were those of watchfulness but still confidence in their ability to maintain control\textsuperscript{138}. The Canton System of Trade, founded in 1757, allowed for China to instill control over their trade with Europeans while still giving westerners the ability to conduct trade with them. In the late 1700s, even the Canton system became inadequate in handling trade due to the large volume of trade that was occurring as an increasing number of European private traders reached Canton\textsuperscript{139}. There was also the growth of connections between Chinese and private European traders oversees in Southeast Asia and the Chinese coast that could not be controlled by the central government. The Manchus were preoccupied with the northern nomadic region and could not give as much time to deal with increasing Western contact\textsuperscript{140}.

This constant interaction exposed China to new ideas that were not Confucian. In the past, China’s world view had been one that was very Sinocentric. They believed that they were the heart and order of the universe with the existence of a “Son of Heaven” and that China could not be considered part of the rest of Asia. China embodied everything that a civilization was as they were superior in size, power, history and resources which made them a natural center for the East Asian World\textsuperscript{141}. This line of thought dictated much of China’s previous foreign relations in that they viewed trade as an extension of their rule and preferred hierarchy and nonnegotiable

\textsuperscript{137} Peterson, The Cambridge History of China.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Peterson, The Cambridge History of China.
terms. Changes in foreign policy views transitioned from Confucian idealistic attitudes to ones of pragmatism in the 1860s\textsuperscript{142}. China began to try to understand and emulate the west. By then, western affairs were beginning to become a focal point of nation-wide concern in China. The world-wide geography was studied again by scholars Wei Yuan and Hsu Chi-Yu from the 1840s-1850s\textsuperscript{143}. In the 1870s, western political and educational institutions were being discussed by foreign affairs experts such as Kuo Sung-tao and Ma Chien-Chung\textsuperscript{144}. China was no longer exposed to just one dominant ideology and this gave way for social movements to come regarding women.

**Women: Moving Forward**

Moving forward in the Qing Dynasty, movement for the liberalization of women started to take shape in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} Century. Many of the early Chinese reformers were men who believed the empowerment of women was crucial toward the independence of the nation\textsuperscript{145}. Reformist Liang Qichao promoted women’s education, arguing that China’s poverty stemmed from women not being allowed to be productive members of society\textsuperscript{146}. Liang’s mentor and famous reformer Kang Youwei further argued that foot binding had weakened the Chinese race and was a point of humiliation from abroad\textsuperscript{147}. By the early 1900s, women began to join male reformers and began demanding the right to vote.

The May Fourth Movement of the late 1910s was a defining moment showing that

\textsuperscript{142} Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China.*  
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{146} Jones, “Nationalism and Women’s Liberation: The Cases of India and China.”  
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
women were frustrated with their role of being confined to the home. One of their rallying points centered around Henrik Ibsen’s Drama, A Doll’s House, in which an oppressed wife called Nora leaves her home in frustration\(^{148}\). Diane M. Jones writes that Nora’s oppression was a symbol of protest against the Confucian ethics and of all the social norms that China weak\(^{149}\). Those of the May Fourth Generation saw themselves as warriors throwing off the Confucianism bonds, including patriarchy\(^{150}\). When China became the People’s Republic in 1948, the Communist party made sure to reaffirm their commitment of women’s liberation and change of traditional family values\(^{151}\). The Marriage Law passed in 1950 was a huge step forward for women and signified the end to a lot of the tradition surrounding women. It abolished polygamy, child marriages, the purchase of brides and also the end to arranged marriages without participants’ consent with women gaining the right to seek divorce\(^{152}\).

In the face of these changes, the courtesan is one of the earliest signs of a society ready for a revolution and break down of tradition. The Confucian ideology which has always exercised an existence in Chinese government and was enforced rigorously during the Qing dynasty had broken the last straw. Women were starting to depart from their role in just the household as shown by Mann and Ko in their commentary and expression through writing. And while these women only addressed family and moral values in line with Confucianism, they showed that women were breaking away from the strict mold of being just a housewife by engaging in literary activities. Ko is right in saying that women often perpetuated the Confucian system themselves, but it is incorrect to infer that women were not victims of the system. They

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\(^{148}\) Jones, “Nationalism and Women’s Liberation: The Cases of India and China.”

\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) Ibid.

\(^{151}\) Ibid.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.
underwent years of hurt through foot binding and were forced into loveless marriages against their will to better than family. They were victims of a system that convinced them they weren’t really victims. They were not allowed to pursue activities such as music and dance that the courtesans did. While in no means is the courtesan figure a total rebellion against the patriarchy, she was the start. The particular circumstances of the Qing, commercial development and changing ideologies, is what made the courtesan such an intriguing figure during this time. She was a part of the change that was happening and conveyed gender roles were being broken down by not just the women that were courtesans but by the men that patronized them. Gender is a social construct in that it is defined by society and historians pay much attention to other social constructs such as the economy and religion. Gender is one social construct that needs to be evaluated further and this thesis does so through the study of courtesans to illustrate how their defiance of pre-established gender roles was symbolic of a protest against Confucian Chinese tradition.
Bibliography


