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Misty Flowers in a Floating World
Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing

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Abstract

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) witnessed a surge in enthusiasm for anthologizing and compiling courtesans’ writings, which diversified and vitalized the conventional poetic theme of courtesans by presenting courtesans’ images from perspectives of both self and other. This dissertation maps the production, circulation, and reception of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images in the broader context of a floating world which resulted from the collapse of a fixed social hierarchy and encouraged the communication, appropriation, and adaptation of diverse cultural productions in the Ming. After identifying different layers of anthological space, this study traces the process of anthology-construction with respect to collecting and editing source materials, setting selective standards, and framing literary images within paratexts. Based on a spectral survey of the writings and images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in anthologies ranging from combined male and female writings to women’s anthologies, chapter one demonstrates that the anthologists strategically utilized transferability of amorous imagination, aesthetic appreciation, poetic appraisal, and scholarly discussion to carve a niche for courtesans within anthologies. By looking into the two courtesans’ anthologies, chapters two and three investigate images of Ming Nanjing courtesans which were created through the dynamics of courtesans’ writings, paratexts by male literati, and categories and orders designed by compilers. I argue that courtesans’ anthologies played a leading role in establishing and developing the repertoire of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images and writings which had influence beyond regional and temporal realms. By focusing on the compiling and anthologizing of the poetic works of a Ming Nanjing courtesan, chapter four examines the epitome of an image which transforms from that of a courtesan to gentry woman via its own volition. This image and others situated in different historical contexts can ultimately stimulate novel appraisals of gender relationships and their connection with political and social discourses in late imperial China.
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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................................................. 7

1. Aims of Research and Literature Review ................................................................................................. 7

2. Focus of Study ............................................................................................................................................. 16

   2.1. Courtesan Culture in Ming Dynasty Nanjing: Terms, Definitions, and Types ........ 16

      **Terms & Definitions** .......................................................................................................................... 16

      **Types** ................................................................................................................................................. 20

      I. Palace Courtesans ............................................................................................................................. 22

      II. Household Courtesans .................................................................................................................... 24

      III. Commercial Courtesans ............................................................................................................... 28

2.2. The Floating World: Social and Historical Context .............................................................................. 32

3. Concepts, Methodology, and Structure ..................................................................................................... 37

   3.1. Concepts ............................................................................................................................................. 37

   3.2. Methodology and Structure ........................................................................................................... 46

**Chapter One: Anthologizing Images of the Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing** .................................... 51

1. Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in General Anthologies ............................................................ 52

2. Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Women’s Anthologies ......................................................... 64

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 81

**Chapter Two: Reshaping and Recycling Images of the Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing in Qinglou yunyu** .................................................................................................................................................. 82

1. Reshaping the Stereotypical Images of Courtesans in Zhu Yuanliang’s Commentaries ................................. 83

2. Categorizing the Self-shaped Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing ........................................... 92

3. Visualizing the Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing .......................................................... 105

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 121

**Chapter Three: Presenting the Writings and Images of Her Group in Gujin qinglou ji** .................................... 122

1. Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Poetic Selection ........................................................................... 125

2. Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Epistolary Selection .................................................................. 127
2.1. Unifying the Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Shared Textual Space ....... 130

2.2. Restoring the Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Their Daily Life ....... 136

2.2.1. Theme of Different Emotions Experienced in a Relationship .................. 137

2.2.2. Theme of Exchanging Gifts and Revealing their Meanings ................. 142

I. The Image of Ming Nanjing Courtesans Following the Tradition of Xu Shu .................................................................................. 143

II. The Image of Ming Nanjing Courtesans Following Ding Liuniang’s Tradition............................................................................. 147

2.2.3. Theme of Banquet Organization and Commemoration ...................... 150

Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 152

Chapter Four: Images of a Ming Nanjing Courtesan in Transformation and Transmission .............................................................................................................. 154

1. The Image of Yang Wan from Others’ Perspectives .................................. 156

1.1. Yang Wan’s Image in Mao Yuanyi’s Eyes ................................................. 156

1.2. Yang Wan’s Image in the Eyes of Her Contemporaries ............. 164

1.3. A Crucial Turning Point in Representing and Disseminating Yang Wan’s Image ........................................................................... 168

1.4. Yang Wan in the Eyes of Later Generations ............................................. 171

2. Self-image and Living Spaces of Yang Wan Represented in Her Poetry .......... 176

2.1. The Qinhuai Pleasure Quarter in Yang Wan’s Poetry ........................... 179

2.2. “Gui” 閨 (boudoir) in Yang Wan’s Poetry ................................................... 189

Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 198

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 199

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................. 207
Introduction

1. Aims of Research and Literature Review
This dissertation aims to investigate the production, circulation, and reception of the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in anthologies, individual collections, flower-ranking texts, and illustrations within aforementioned books. Images of courtesans permeated late imperial literature, sometimes complementing and competing in different genres and periods. This dissertation defines its subject of research as courtesans who actually lived in Nanjing of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), focusing on the distinctive literary and cultural codes which were embedded in their fluid images that flowed freely through various media and from different perspectives. For Ming Nanjing courtesans, literary composition, especially poetry, was an important currency of great exchange value in a complex network of social relations. Their writings, which were acknowledged and commented on, collected and anthologized, published and transmitted, helped them to carve a niche in elite culture in the Ming dynasty. These writings enable scholars to map this unique group of women writers in the landscape of Chinese pre-modern literature, which had long been dominated by prominent male literati.

Research on women and gender in late imperial China has come to the fore in recent decades. The rise in interest in this topic has not only extended our general knowledge of women in Chinese history but also reshaped our understanding of women’s presence in various intellectual discourses and significant historical developments. Courtesans, as a unique group of women, formed an intriguing social and cultural phenomenon: they were of low status but highly educated and refined, living in luxury and befriending celebrities. The group were on the margins of patriarchal society yet possessed the very means to access the cultural and political centre. Courtesans were favourite subject matter in literature and among the first literate women who adapted, wrote, and compiled literary works. Their high level of visibility in both literature and reality has drawn particular attention from scholars worldwide.

The earliest extant book on Chinese history of courtesanship and prostitution was written by Wang Shunu in 1932. Given the title, Zhongguo changji shi 中國娼妓史 (History of Chinese Prostitution), this book aimed to investigate the origin, development, and institutionalization of courtesans and prostitutes from the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600-
ca. 1045 BCE) to his contemporary Republican period (1912-1949). Centred on this group of women, Wang touched upon interesting issues including the changing of makeup styles and aesthetic trends in the pleasure quarters, and the shi 詩 poems and ci 词 lyrics written to and by courtesans. Wang’s study cites rare historical materials but does not provide close examination or in-depth analysis. Inspired by this pioneering work, further studies examined courtesans and prostitutes as historical subjects key to understanding gender relations in traditional China, exploring a large range of source materials covering political documents, law codes, historical records, and occasionally literary representations.¹ The survey of Chinese courtesanship and prostitution in these further studies provides both textual and contextual interpretations of multiple aspects of courtesan culture. However, thorough investigation of the literature related to courtesan culture is long overdue. Tao Muning attempted to fill the gap and introduced the most significant writings related to courtesan culture from the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the late Qing (1840-1912) and the dynamic relationship of these writings with social, political, and psychological elements in different time periods.² Tao’s book focuses on male-authored literary works, lacking sufficient attention to courtesans’ own writings. Moreover, his choice of literary works to study is confined to the modern construction of the representative genres in different dynasties, such as Tang poetry, Song ci-lyrics, Yuan dramas, and Ming/Qing fictions, thus failing to present a comprehensive picture of courtesan literature.

In the English-speaking world, the scholarly masterpiece Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 BC. till 1644 AD by Robert Hans van Gulik is the first English study to include an historical investigation of courtesan culture in China. Compared with its Chinese counterparts, this book shows a higher academic standard. In contrast to Wang Shunu, who followed questionable Chinese legends and myths without further investigation, and applied concepts and theories from Western courtesanship studies without deliberate examination, van Gulik selected dateable historical records from reliable sources alongside visual representations and archaeological discoveries to support his arguments.

¹ For further studies on the history of Chinese courtesanship and/or prostitution, see Yen Ming, Zhongguo mingji yishushi; Hsiao Kuo-liang, Zhongguo changji shi; Wu Zhou, Zhongguo jinü wenhua. ² Tao Muning, Qinglou wenxue yu zhongguo wenhua.
Based on the general knowledge of Chinese courtesan culture established in these early studies, scholars continued their exploration into a more detailed examination of courtesan culture within a specific historical context. There are two periods in China’s history that have attracted most scholarly attention: the medieval period of the Tang and Song dynasties and the late imperial period of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Recent studies on medieval courtesanship have added considerable knowledge from which this dissertation has benefited in many ways, including source materials, the definition and classification of different forms of courtesanship, and research questions and methodologies. Ping Yao made significant contributions to our understanding of Tang courtesans by introducing a new type of source material, namely epitaphs, most of which were written by male literati for their favourite house courtesans. Focusing on the roles of house courtesans, which were the most distinct type of courtesanship, Yao also investigated other forms of courtesanship and the liaison between courtesans and literati, which as Yao demonstrated, functioned as a means for literati to affirm their social status and unique identity. Jinhua Wangling followed Yao’s classification of different types of courtesanship but paid more attention to the influence of the newly developed courtesan culture on the traditional poetic theme of “Observing Female Entertainers” in the aspects of content, style, and image-shaping.

The changes in perception and representation of female entertainers, as Wangling claimed, indicated both the development of an entertainment system and a new function of this subgenre of poetry. Beverly Bossler focused on post-Tang courtesanship and traced the development of courtesan culture over the course of the Song and Yuan. The Tang flourishing of courtesan culture, as Bossler demonstrated, continued into the Northern Song (960-1127), and was reflected both in literati romances with courtesans and their celebration of courtesans through poetic works and funerary writings. However, it entered a slow decline starting in the Southern Song (1127-1279) due to enhanced scrutiny of the private lives of literati and shifts in the identity of literati within the dominant discourse of Neo-Confucianism. The revival of courtesan culture in the Yuan dynasty added a moral dimension to the images of courtesans, which was associated with the heightened position of courtesan-turned-concubines as mothers of literati in the family system. The above research shed a new light on medieval

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5 Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*; “Shifting Identities,” 5-37.
courtesanship and its relationship with the intellectual discourse and literati culture, also an important feature of late imperial courtesanship. Although there were a few medieval courtesans famous for their literary talent, they were generally viewed as entertainers and performers in most cases. To a certain degree, this framed our approach to them through male literati writings. Moreover, the government and household courtesans formed the main types of medieval courtesanship, and thus their institutionalization through bureaucratic management or the family system has attracted the most scholarly attention.

Based on the existing scholarship on medieval courtesanship, this dissertation reveals the development of the entertainment system in the late imperial China and the concomitant popularity of another type of courtesanship in the Ming dynasty: commercial courtesans who made every effort to absorb literati culture and left us a considerate amount of literary writings. This dissertation shifts focus to their own writings, as well as their collaboration with Ming literati in anthology-making and image-constructing. Due to the time frame of this dissertation, the following review will focus on literature of courtesan culture from the late imperial period, especially the Ming dynasty.

Two pioneering works by scholars Ko and Mann conceptualize the place of women in China’s past from a social-historical perspective by integrating analyses of their culture and life experiences. In Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China, the first comprehensive study in a Western language on women’s culture in the Jiangnan area during the late Ming and early Qing periods (stretching roughly from the 1570s to the 1620s), Dorothy Ko devotes an entire chapter to the transitory female communities consisting of gentry wives, professional writers, and elite courtesans. Ko’s book challenges the traditional view of Chinese women as mere victims in an unchanging patriarchal and feudal society. Ko analyzes the shared gender position and the fleeting liaisons of women defined in normative texts as being opposites but who actually shared a similar literary culture. Their transitory communities transcended the boundaries of the public and domestic spheres, which testifies to Ko’s comparison of the culture of seventeenth-century Jiangnan to the urbane world depicted in the Japanese ukiyoe 浮世絵 (pictures of the floating world) of

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6 Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 251-293.
the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Influenced by Ko’s work, the “floating world” in this dissertation highlights “the fluidity of boundaries that characterizes the culture of the reading public,”\(^7\) and denotes the conspicuous geographical, social, ideological, and textual mobility of the Ming dynasty courtesans. This fluidity of courtesans’ identity and the “floating” of the courtesans’ images is manifested in various textual and visual representations. This process of “floating” was facilitated by the particular means of preservation and transmission in the Ming dynasty, which is revealed in this dissertation as “anthology as repertoire.”

Mann continues Ko’s meticulous social-historical study by focusing on the gendered aspect of the long eighteenth-century China. The fifth chapter of Mann’s book, “Entertainment,” deals with the records of the courtesan culture in the High Qing era composed by men.\(^8\) Here, Mann demonstrates the change in courtesans’ status between the late Ming and the Qing dynasty as reflected in male literati writings. As Mann concludes, the High Qing courtesans no longer played the leading role among writing women as the Ming courtesans had done. Instead, the wives and daughters of elite families took over the central position in the realm of women’s literature of the Qing, and their role came to overshadow that of courtesans. Mann attributes this change to the eighteenth-century classical revival movement, which emphasized the meticulous study of early texts in search of the original meaning of the classics. This classical research rediscovered a history of women’s learning and placed women in elite families at the centre. Ko’s and Mann’s work call attention to the emergence of writing women as an important social and cultural phenomenon in late imperial China, taking into account several prominent women’s collections and anthologies. Although aiming to reveal late imperial Chinese women’s culture through a socio-historical approach, these collections and anthologies also offered a foundation for detailed research on women’s writings from the perspective of literary studies. Taken together, the works of Ko and Mann delineate the historical contour of courtesan culture from flourishing to decline in late imperial China. It is this evolution of the courtesanshich which is the focus of further specific studies in late imperial China, examined in this section.

The edited volume *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* devotes one section to courtesans. This includes three articles discussing the historical changes in courtesan

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, 30

\(^8\) Mann, *Precious Records*, 121-142.
culture from different perspectives. Ko investigates the reasons behind the “vulgarization” or degeneration of the courtesan culture in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) reflected in the less elegant poems written to and by courtesans, but more overt in textual representations of their bound feet. In her analysis of the many variables that affected the courtesan’s fate, Ko emphasizes how closely this was related to literati culture. In her opinion, the decline of courtesan culture can be traced through the less elegant descriptions of the illiterate courtesans’ shabbier appearance by petty commercial writers. This close connection between courtesan culture and literati culture is the common focus shared in other articles in the same book. For example, Wai-yee Li associates the Qing reminiscence of late Ming courtesan culture with the scholarly nostalgia for their past glory and demonstrates how the late Ming courtesan became a cultural ideal through both self-invention and invention of another. Paul Ropp discusses the ways courtesans were portrayed in Ming and Qing literature and the different, or even contrasting, imagery used in their portrayal. He further points out the symbiosis linking courtesans to their chroniclers, the male literati, as the self-images of these male literati were linked to those of the courtesans they described. But at the same time, Ropp also proposes rethinking the male dominated perspectives inherent in the writing records.

As these articles demonstrate, the close association between literati and courtesans resulted in the simultaneous rise and fall of courtesan and literati culture in late imperial China. In the Ming dynasty, this interdependent relationship resulted in the incorporation of literati culture into courtesans’ training which had previously centered on musical performance. This evolution contributed to the cultivation of courtesans who were famous for their mastery of literature, calligraphy, and painting. As Victoria Cass argues, even while enslaved, some courtesans reached the pinnacle of fame as the romantic partners and aesthetic and moral advisors of the most prominent male literati in the empire. Wang Hung-tai investigates the affection and identification between literati and courtesans in their aesthetic and literary interactions. Wang emphasizes two aspects of the “amorous culture,” that is the courtesans’ imitation of literati taste.

9 Widmer and Chang, Writing Women in Late Imperial China, 17-100.
11 Li, “The Late Ming Courtesans,” 46-73.
12 Ropp, “Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China,” 17-45.
14 Wang Hung-tai, “Qinglou mingji yu qingyi shenghuo,” 73-123.
and the literati’s appraisal and appreciation of courtesans. Focusing on the Qinhua 秦淮 pleasure quarter, the Japanese scholar Oki Yasushi explores the tradition of courtesan-literatus association from the Six Dynasties (222-589) to the Republican period by referring to various accounts including literary works, historical records, and texts on the ranking of courtesans and guidance for the brothel-visitors. Oki’s work further examines the flourishing courtesan culture in the Ming dynasty that featured the strict training on musical performance and poetry composition, as well as the various customary and literary activities involved both courtesans and male literati.

The powerful sense of identification between the Chinese literati and the elite courtesans is vividly illustrated and convincingly demonstrated through multiple case studies. These studies provide detailed and in-depth analyses of individual cases with their related contextual conditions. The use of the case study as a method of analysis has long been applied as a means of chronicling and understanding the courtesan. In one of her earliest works, Kang-i Sun Chang examines the loyalist poetry that Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-1647) produced during the last few turbulent years of his life in the contexts of both the loyalist tradition and the late Ming cult of qing 情 (feelings/love). Late Ming women, especially elite courtesans, functioned as mediators between love and loyalism in the eyes of their contemporary male literati and participated in shaping the late imperial literati culture. By examining Chen Zilong, Kang-i Sun Chang provides us with the first serious study in English of Chen’s partner in poetry, the courtesan Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664). According to Chang, Liu Rushi “seems to provide a paradigm of concerns and abilities for the numerous courtesan-artists of her time.” Chang’s study is primarily based on Chen Yinke’s Liu Rushi biezhuan 柳如是別傳 (Supplementary Biography of Liu Rushi). They both exemplify the approach that combines a case study on individual literary activities with broader historical investigation, which is also widely applied in this dissertation, especially in Chapter Four where the images of a courtesan with shifting identity are examined both textually and contextually.

15 Oki, Fengyue Qinhuai.
16 Chang, The Late-Ming Poet Ch’en Tzu-Lung.
17 Ibid., xii
Oki Yasushi focuses on another great late Ming literatus-courtesan couple, Mao Xiang (冒襄, 1611-1693) and Dong Xiaowan (董小宛, personal name Bai 白, 1624-1651). Oki presents a well-annotated edition of Mao’s affectionate memoir of the favourite courtesan-turned-concubine Dong Xiaowan and the meticulous examination of the memoir’s production, circulation, and reception. Oki connects Mao’s romantic affairs and aesthetic life with his political and cultural activities during the Ming-Qing transition and associates the Qinhuaí pleasure quarter of Nanjing with a brilliant past, the lost Ming dynasty.

Additional case studies conducted by Daria Berg include analysis of the multiple aspects of the Ming courtesan Xue Susu (薛素素, ca.1564-ca.1637) and the self-fashioning of courtesan editors Xue Susu, Wang Wei (王微, ca. 1600-ca. 1647), and Liu Rushi. Berg restores the different gender roles and literary images of Ming courtesans represented in accounts from distinct perspectives of themselves, the literati, and women writers. Similar to Chang, Berg also notices the significance of courtesans’ literary and artistic creation and seeks to counterbalance the long-dominant male perspective with courtesans’ voices. Berg provides the basic data of anthologies (including courtesan poets) which paves the way for not only further investigation into the context and process of their compilation but also in-depth literary analysis of poems selected for these anthologies, two of the major aims of this dissertation.

Further cases that study courtesans alongside their writings are included in Sufeng Xu’s dissertation, intentionally selected to reflect different types of courtesans and changing historical contexts. Xu attributes the rise of the late Ming courtesans to the increasing influence and popularity of the male poetry societies, especially the group of shanren (山人, men of the mountains). Although her basic argument is similar to other works focusing on courtesan-literatus association, Xu combines the overview of the socio-cultural context with case studies on courtesans of different types and in different places of Jiangnan, thus illustrating the strong identification between literati

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18 Oki, Mao Xiang he Yingmeian yiyu.
20 Sufeng Xu, “Lotus Flowers Rising from the Dark Mud.”
21 J. P. Park pointed out the change in the definition of the term shanren. The traditional definition of shanren refers to a person who lived in solitude far away from cities or towns and did not care about worldly fame and wealth. From the early sixteenth century onwards, this term began to be used as “a mark of honour testifying to a person’s claimed talent and status” and “an elegant reference to unrecognized literati.” See Park, Art by the Book, 22.
and courtesans at both collective and individual levels. Moreover, Xu identifies anthologizing courtesans’ literary works as an effective way for literati to promote courtesan culture. However, emphasis of the male compilers’ prefaces in Xu’s analysis of the limited number of anthologies seems to oversimplify the complicated anthological space where multiple voices and perspectives of compilers, authors, and sometimes commentators, converge and converse with each other. Thus this research aims to examine this complicated anthological space and demonstrate how the history of courtesan poetry was archived through the special arrangements of these anthologies and the diverse discourses on courtesans’ literary compositions.

A review of the literature in this field of study exposes multiple problems. First, most studies on Ming courtesan culture adopt a socio-historical approach, while the literary value and aesthetic features of courtesans’ writings have not gained enough attention. This insufficiency is also partly caused by the fact that most existing scholarship is based on records authored by male literati, and thus the analytical frameworks used inevitably reflect male perspectives. Finally, even in scholarship touching upon courtesans’ writings, the extant research does not extend beyond the few most famous courtesans and their works. Kang-i Sun Chang focused her analysis and translation on Liu Rushi’s poems, while Xue Susu and Wang Wei formed the subjects of both Berg’s and Xu’s research.

Addressing these gaps in current scholarship, this dissertation argues for the significance of courtesans as writers with agency at the inception of women’s literary culture in the Ming dynasty and their impact on innovating literary convention. Nanjing was the centre of courtesan culture, literati culture, and printing culture in the Ming dynasty. Ming Nanjing courtesans not only emerged as the first group of courtesan writers whose literary works were anthologized and names recorded but also played a leading role in establishing and developing the repertoire of the courtesans’ textual and visual images which had influence beyond regional and temporal realms. A thorough examination of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ writings in the context of Ming “floating world” features conspicuous geographical, social, ideological, and textual mobility and contributes a more nuanced understanding of the “floating world,” the anthology as repertoire, and the history of courtesan poetry and its place in Ming publishing.
2. Focus of Study

2.1. Courtesan Culture in Ming dynasty Nanjing: Terms, Definitions, and Types

Terms & Definitions

There are disputations regarding the origin of Chinese courtesanship. The earliest date is given by the modern scholar Wu Zhou who, based on the later records of the last ruler Jie 夏桀 of the legendary Xia dynasty (ca. 2100-1600 BCE), suggests that the female entertainers of Jie’s court are the origin of Chinese courtesanship. However, the historical existence of the Xia dynasty has not been proved by convincing archaeological evidence. The records that Wu cites to support his argument are from Guanzi 管子, Yantie lun 盐铁论 (Discourses on Salt and Iron), and Lienü zhuan 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women), and none of these works claim to be a Xia text. The lack of archaeological and textual evidence casts serious doubt on the credibility of Wu’s argument. The same problem lies in the opinion of Wang Shunu. Wang views a group of sorceresses existed during the Shang dynasty as a Chinese counterpart of the sacred prostitutes in many other old civilizations.

According to van Gulik, the troupes of nüyue 女樂, consisting of trained dancing girls and female musicians kept by princes and high officials of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BCE) to provide musical entertainment and sexual services to their masters, retinue, and guests, formed the first group of courtesans in Chinese history. Van Gulik mentions a legal document dated 513 BCE recording an official involved in a lawsuit sending a troupe of such girls to the judge as a bribe. Ping Yao holds a similar opinion that courtesanship was an essential social institution of the gender system which appeared in the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE), undergoing significant development throughout Chinese history. Ping Yao cites the record in Zhanguo ce 戰國策 (Bamboo Records of the Warring States) that the King Huan of Qi established a Female Quarter (nü lü 女閭) housing seven hundred courtesans. Apart from the substantial textual evidence, Yao’s argument is supported by the archaeological discovery of Marquis Yi’s (d. 433 BCE) tomb which contained

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22 Wu Zhou, Zhongguo jinü wenhuashi, 16.
23 Ibid.
24 Wang Shunu, Zhongguo changji shi, 12.
26 Ping Yao, “The Status of Pleasure,” 27
27 Ibid.
the remains of twenty young women with musical instruments. This dissertation thus follows Yao’s research and regards the female entertainers in the Spring and Autumn period as the origin of Chinese courtesanship.

Although various designations were used to address courtesans, the most common Chinese terms are ji 妓 and chang 娼. According to Bossler, there were differences between ji 妓 and chang 娼 in early history. The term ji 妓 “implied craftsman-like skills of various types,” and the term chang 娼 “tended to imply performers, especially singers.” From the third and fourth centuries on, some ji began to be associated especially with musical performances in terms like shengji 聲伎 (musician-courtesan). However, ji and chang were still distinguishable through the venues of their performance in early Tang dynasty, ji provided entertainment in the private households of upper-class families and chang served in public venues. Despite this difference, Ping Yao concludes that ji 妓 and chang 娼 are neutral in terms of gender and emphasize singing/musical talent over sexual services.

The two characters with “female” radical (妓 and 娼) are derived from the characters with the “people” radical (伎 and 倡). Jinghua Wangling examines the usage of these four characters in Tang literary texts, and points out that in the ninth century, the more gender-specific characters ji 妓 and chang 娼 appeared and were interchangeable variants of ji 妓 and chang 娼. Wangling attributes the existence of many variants in the ninth century to the way of poetic circulation: oral transmission, such as singing and reciting, was much preferable to copying but caused more variants that shared the same pronunciation. Apart from this reason, the appearance of more gender-specific variants may also suggest more and more females entered and later dominated this realm.

Another character which began to be frequently used to refer to courtesans and concubines in the ninth century is ji 妾, which was the royal surname of the Zhou dynasty and later turned into a euphemistic term for charming concubines and

29 Bossler, “Vocabularies of Pleasure,” 73.
30 Ibid.
32 Jinghua Wangling, Gechun yishi xianyu kan, 15.
entertainers of a noble household. All these appellations could be seen in textual representations of the courtesan in the Ming dynasty, with the apparent predominance of more gender-specific characters such as ji 女 and chang 娼. Meanwhile, there were increasing masculine appellations applied to courtesans in the Ming dynasty such as sheng 生 (scholar), jun 君 (lord), and zi 子 (master). Although some of the appellations may have been used before, such large-scale appropriation of masculine appellations was unprecedented and their prevailing popularity should be attributed to the features of the courtesan culture in the Ming dynasty particularly. As the following discussion on the attributes of Ming courtesanship will show, the Ming dynasty witnessed an enthusiasm in courtesan circles to absorb literati culture and adopt the lifestyle of educated men; this is conceptualized by the modern scholar Kang-i Sun Chang as “cultural androgyny” and will be further identified in this dissertation as the combination of gender relationships with aesthetics, connoisseurship, and identity.

Translation is another problem regarding the appellations of the Chinese term ji and its diverse categories in English research. The most essential aspect of ji was her mastery of performing arts. Beverly Bossler concludes that in the Song dynasty (960-1279) even a xiadeng jinü 下等妓女 (low-ranking courtesan) was not a prostitute who sold exclusively sexual services, but rather “an entertainer who approached the banquet table and began to sing without having been invited.” Because both ji and geisha received similar training in performing arts, Victoria Cass translates ji as “geisha” to highlight their art-centred skills. “Entertainer” is also used to translate the Chinese term ji by many scholars specializing in ji culture of pre-Ming dynasties. Victor Xiong justifies his translation of ji in the Tang dynasty as “entertainers” because the “ji were trained in a variety of entertainment skills… Prostitution was involved, but it was by no means the main calling of the ji.” Sharing this view, Jinghua Wangling translates ji as “female entertainers” in her analysis of a poetic sub-genre themed on “observing female entertainers.” Beverly Bossler generally uses the term “entertainer” or “courtesan” to translate the Chinese terms such as ji 女 and chang 娼. To translate ji as “entertainer”

33 Ibid., 17-18.
34 Chang, “Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny,” 24.
36 Cass, Dangerous Women, xii.
37 Xiong, “Ji-Entertainers in Tang Chang’an,” 149.
does make sense considering the fact that during the pre-Ming periods, the main function of ji was to provide musical and sometimes sexual entertainment at elegant banquets. However, when it came to ji in the Ming dynasty, “entertainer” became insufficient to convey the range of activity associated with this group of women and their new roles in literati gatherings and elite life. Many scholars working on gender and sexuality in late imperial China concur with this observation. Articles devoted to the discussion of ji in Writing Women in Late Imperial China use the term “courtesan.”

Also, most studies on the representation of ji in Chinese literature tend to use the term “courtesan” which conveys some sense of the gentility that was possessed by ji. R. H. van Gulik divides two kinds of ji in the Tang dynasty. The illiterate one is translated as “prostitute” and the other who is “skilled in music and dancing and with a smattering of the literary language” is translated as courtesan. Daria Berg observes different rankings within the ji group and the diverse standards for division, “[t]he Chinese term ji refers to both the common lowly prostitute and the high-class courtesan. . . . High-class courtesans (ming ji 名妓) differed from common prostitutes (ji nü 妓女) by virtue of their fame and artistic talent as poets, painters and performers who were not primarily paid for sexual services.” Consequently, Berg uses “prostitute” to translate ji nü and “courtesan” to translate ming ji.

In this dissertation, I appropriate the term “courtesan” because it captures the nuance inherent in ji’s persona in the Ming dynasty: they entertained their patrons first and foremost through their charming grace, artistic or literary talent, and intelligent conversation, although sex could be part of their service. This aspect of a ji’s persona is, as articles focusing on a diversity of cultures in The Courtesan’s Arts have revealed to us, shared by the courtesanship of different cultures, in which the status of courtesans as “bearers of artistic tradition” was expressed through “a repertory of rhetorical, gestural, sonic, and visual idioms that accompanied courtesans and complemented their sensual power.”

40 Widmer and Chang, Writing Women in Late Imperial China, 17-143.
42 Van Gulik, Sexual Life in Ancient China, 171.
43 Berg, Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China, 88-89.
44 Feldman and Gordon, The Courtesan’s Arts, 3.
However, despite the shared emphasis on arts and literature in various courtesan cultures, Chinese jī, more accurately mingjī of the Ming dynasty, differed in many ways from the Greek hetaria, the Italian cortigiana, the Japanese geisha, the Korean gisaeng, and the Indian tawa’if since their commerce in sex and their traffic in intellectual and artistic currencies were constructed within distinctive gender discourses that should be understood in respective cultural contexts.\(^{45}\) Dorothy Ko compares Chinese mingjī with the salonières of seventeenth-century France. They both contributed to the development of arts and literature, but their differences could be apprehended at a glance. *Salonières* were “daughters of wealthy holders of the highest professional offices,” and supposed to “marry husbands from older and higher families than their own.”\(^{46}\) On the contrary, Chinese mingjī were mostly from humble families, and the fact that some most celebrated ones among them married leading scholar-officials cannot be read as a universal phenomenon.\(^{47}\) According to the primary sources reviewed in my study, the number of mingjī who married into gentry families increased in the late Ming, but their marital status was more that of concubines instead of wives. Ko also compares Chinese mingjī with the Japanese tayū who flourished in the urban centres of Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo in the seventeenth century. They were both first-class courtesans and distinguished by their accomplishments in arts and literature, but “there were salient differences in the political worlds they inhabited and the legitimacy of that urban culture.”\(^{48}\) Tayū relied on the affluence generated by urban merchants and manufacturers. Chinese mingjī culture was also sustained by the wealth generated in urban centres, but mingjī associated much more with literati and identified with their political views and literary taste until the eighteenth century.\(^{49}\)

**Types**

The Ming dynasty witnessed the unprecedented prosperity of courtesan culture which was achieved by means of inheriting the courtesan legacy from the previous dynasties on the one hand, and innovating new roles, types, and identities of the courtesan on the other hand. There were three main types of courtesans in the Ming dynasty: gongjī (palace courtesans), jiajī (household courtesans), and shijī (commercial courtesans).

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 12-16.  
\(^{46}\) Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 253-54  
\(^{47}\) Ibid.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 254.  
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 254-55.
courtesans). Among them, the commercial courtesans formed the most conspicuous category of courtesans in the Ming dynasty not only because they accounted for the largest portion of Ming courtesans, but also due to their outstanding achievement in music, literature, and fine arts. They are the focus of this dissertation largely because of their visibility in literary works and historical records. A key type of ji in medieval China, guanji 官妓 (government courtesans) were owned by the government and served provincial officials at formal banquets and private occasions. While the guanji seem to have disappeared throughout most of Ming history, there is a dispute over the formal abolition of government courtesans. In the memorial presented by Yang Junmin 楊俊民 (1531-1599), it is mentioned that the government courtesans and entertainers were dismissed in the last years of the Hongwu reign (1368-1398) and could not be used either in public ceremonies or at private banquets.50 However, the records in both Wu za zu 五雜俎 (Five Miscellanies) and Xu Jinling suoshi 續金陵瑣事 (Sequel to Jinling Trifles) claimed that the ban was not issued until the early years of the Xuande reign (1425-1435).51

The disappearance of government courtesans was a long process. The division between the government courtesans and commercial courtesans was never very obvious. Tang records show that some commercial courtesans were registered with the government and occasionally summoned for performances at official functions.52 On the other hand, a government courtesan could also have personal associations with literati who were not officials and in that case her role resembled her commercial counterpart.53 Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) witnessed the radical merging of these two types of courtesans.54 In the Ming dynasty, all commercial courtesans, now called yuehu 楽戶 (musician household), were obligated to be registered with the government and serve

52 Xiong, “ Ji-Entertainers in Tang Chang’an,” 154. Xiong cited the account of Funiang 福娘 as an example. One day Funiang asked her lover and patron Sun Qi 孫啟 to “buy her out” as a concubine and said: “Fortunately, I am not on the register of the Imperial Music Bureau. If you so wish, it’s but an expense of one or two hundred pieces of gold” (某幸未係教坊籍，君子尚有意，一二百金之費爾). Sun Qi, Beili zhi, 33-34. Xiong read Funiang’s words as an implication that a commercial courtesan could be registered with the government. Xiong, “ Ji-Entertainers,” 166, no. 39.
53 For example, a famous Tang government courtesan named Xue Tao 薛濤 (fl. 806-820) who “belonged to the Entertainment House of Chengdu and was good at literary compositions and capable of rhetoric,” kept up a literary correspondence with many prominent literati, some of whom never took any official post. Jin Huan, Mushu xiantan, 139. For detailed research on Xue Tao’s life and poetry, see Larson, “The Chinese Poet Xue Tao.”
54 Wu Zhou, Zhongguo jinü wenhua shi, 112.
governmental needs,\textsuperscript{55} thus rendering the systematic existence of government courtesans unnecessary.

I. Palace Courtesans

To meet the various musical needs of his new empire and to manage a multitude of musicians employed at court, the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368-1398), although seeming to dislike the presence of female musicians at important occasions before the formal establishment of the Ming empire,\textsuperscript{56} continued court music tradition by setting up four court music offices, among which the Jiaofangsi 教坊司 (The Court Entertainment Bureau) was in charge of hundreds of professionally trained female musician-dancers for court performances.\textsuperscript{57}

Palace courtesans went through a long history of institutionalization. This group of female musician-dancers fell into the most ancient category of courtesans, the origin of which could be traced back to ancient times. Many records attributed the collapse of the Xia dynasty to its last king Jie’s 桀 (ca. 1728-1675 BCE) indulgence in consorting with female entertainers.\textsuperscript{58} As early as the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), an institution of fengchang 奉常 (Chamberlain for Ceremonials) was set up to take charge of court music, which was still kept in the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) but with a different name, taichang 太常, and was divided into two parts: One was the taiyue shu 太樂署 (Imperial Music Office), in charge of yayue 雅樂 (refined music) and providing performance for important ritual occasions and state sacrifices. The other was yuefu 楽府 (Music Bureau), in charge of suyue 俗樂 (“popular” or “folk” music) and providing entertainment for banquets and other less formal occasions. Palace courtesans belonged to the latter. Although the names and structures of these institutions were frequently changed afterwards, their basic division and function remained the same until the Tang dynasty when the Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756) created the independent zuo

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 114-115.
\textsuperscript{56} Even before declaring himself the Emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang had already begun to restrict the role played by female musicians on important ritual occasions. It is recorded that he decided not to use female musicians in court celebrations as soon as he proclaimed himself King of Wu in 1365. See Yu Jideng, Diangu jiwen, 11.
\textsuperscript{57} The four court music offices were taichangsi 太常司 (State Sacrificial Music Office), jiaofangsi 教坊司, zhonggusi 鐘鼓司 (Bells and Drums Office), and siyuesi 司樂司 (Palace Women Music Office), all of which operated as hierarchical troupes of officials, musicians, and dancers. For their administration, function, and their relationship with other court offices and personnel, see Lam, “Imperial Agency in Ming Music Culture,” 277-278.
\textsuperscript{58} Guanzi jinquan, 558; Huan Kuan, Yantie lun jiaozhu, 28.
you jiaofang 左右教坊 (Left and Right Music Offices) in the palace to train court musicians in popular music and entertainment which did not belong to taichang anymore. The jiaofang continued to exist for hundreds of years as the main administrative body managing palace courtesans, in spite of temporary disbandment due to war or limited budget and minor modifications due to changes in political environment and musical taste.

The institutionalized court musical system lasted throughout the Ming dynasty, during which significant reforms took place for political reasons, and minor changes were made according to each emperor’s personal taste or shifts in vogue of popular musical performance and entertainment. Despite being mere low-ranking palace women, palace courtesans played a remarkable role in popularizing music and as a means of communication across subcultural groups. The court courtesans who were recruited from outside the palace (or even outside the capital) brought memories and practices with themselves from beyond the court. After leaving the court, some of them became household and commercial courtesans. They stimulated the musical interaction of different subcultures and “connected the Ming court with the Ming musical world at large.”

59 Bossler, Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity, 15. Bossler also cited Kishibe Shigeo’s study that an earlier jiaofang was established in the 620s by the Tang founders, which was meant to provide music for the women of the inner court and thus was very different in function from that established by Xuanzong. Ibid., 15-16, n. 5.
60 The jiaofang in the Northern Song was run on a much smaller scale, and was disbanded in the Southern Song. The performance repertoire of the Yuan jiaofang was featured by remarkable religious elements and a significant increase of music from Central Asian regions. Wu Zhou, Zhongguo jinü wenhua, 84-86.
61 The Jiajing Emperor (r. 1521-1566) initiated the discussion of ritual and musical matters which led to both creation of new state sacrificial music and revision of banquet music. This case exemplified the significant reforms of court music made for political reasons, see Lam, “Imperial Agency in Ming Music Culture,” 297-298. The emperor’s personal taste also impacted the musical entertainment provided by the court music offices. For example, the Zhengde Emperor’s (r. 1505-1521) preference for Central Asian music made the court music offices recruit more Uighur musician-dancers. The shifted musical vogue also influenced court music, which was vividly represented in paintings commissioned by the Xuande and Chenghua (r. 1464-1487) emperors. In one long handscroll Xianzong yuanxiao xingletu 憲宗元宵行樂圖 (Amusement of Emperor Xianzong during the Lantern Festival), the emperor who is seated on a terrace in informal robes under a tent was watching a troupe of acrobats perform. Meanwhile, another theatrical troupe is passing by. Among them are the players of musical instruments and the performers who are ready to play in full make-up and dress of Zhong Kui and ghosts. Sensabaugh, “Gold and Jade,”18.
II. Household Courtesans

The emergence of household courtesans in aristocratic families can be dated back to the Shang dynasty which is already attested by both textual and archaeological evidence.\(^{63}\)

The practice of keeping household courtesans in princely establishments in the Ming dynasty was also designed by its founding emperor. Shortly after his accession to the throne in September 1368 at Nanjing, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu Emperor, enfeoffed his twenty-four sons and one nephew as princes and invested them with substantial military and political powers to hold strategically important locations across the empire, in hope that they could grow into *fanping* 藩屏 (fences and screens) of the familial and dynastic framework on the one hand to balance the new aristocracy of generals and ministers in court; and on the other, to ward off the barbarian enemies at the borders.\(^{64}\)

To provide music for formal occasions and private banquets, Zhu Yuanzhang decreed that twenty-seven musician households should be chosen from local registered entertainers and sent to serve the musical needs of each princely establishment.\(^{65}\)

According to statistics gathered from historical documents by the modern scholar Chiu Chung-lin, compared with palace courtesans, the courtesans belonging to princely establishments were fewer and functioned on a much smaller scale.\(^{66}\) Although they were still expected to fulfil certain ceremonial roles as required by the extended royal family, their role as musical entertainers drew more attention when under close examination.\(^{67}\)

Learning from his own experience, the Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di 朱棣 (r. 1402-1424), who usurped the throne from his young nephew placed strict surveillance and restrictions on the princely courts of his brothers, stripping them of their military, political, and administrative powers. Meanwhile, to cultivate loyalty, Zhu Di followed his father in giving the princes generous annual subsidies and certain social and legal privileges. These highly educated princes lived in luxury but outside the centre of power devoted themselves to arts, literature, and music. Following the royal family tradition, many of the princes not only became famous connoisseurs of theatrical literature and

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\(^{63}\) At Hubei Suizhou Leigudun, the famous tomb of Marquis Yi (d. 433 BCE) contained the remains of twenty women aged between thirteen and twenty-five together with musical instruments leading scholars to believe that these women were female musicians. Furniss, “Unearthing China’s Informal Musicians,” 25.

\(^{64}\) Hok-lam Chan, “Ming Taizu’s Problem with His Sons,” 48-55.

\(^{65}\) Yao and Xia, *Ming taizu shilu*, 2287-2288.

\(^{66}\) Chiu Chung-lin, “Ming Qing de yuehu,” 128-132.

\(^{67}\) Ibid.
performance, but also productive playwrights.\(^{68}\) Their achievement in theatre should largely be attributed to the female musician-dancers of the princely establishments who provided chances for the princes to experiment with their theatrical compositions and theories. Moreover, like court courtesans, they also contributed to music popularization and innovation by combining royal taste with regional features. Occasionally they were summoned to the court for performance which broadened their horizons, enriched their stage experience, and facilitated their exchange with the court musicians.\(^{69}\)

Although throughout the Ming dynasty it was forbidden for princes to marry female musician-dancers of their establishments, the instances of princes nevertheless taking in female musician-dancers as concubines pervaded in the Ming dynasty and even drew attention from the court. The most common way to take a female musician-dancer into the princely harem was to get her officially released from the musician registry. Even so, her musician origin still incurred disapproval and contempt from both the emperor and his ministers, who interpreted the marriage of princes with these low-born women as disobedience of the royal rites and protocol laid down by Zhu Yuanzhang as well as a radical departure from Confucian norms in general, and would thereby cause severe transgressions and potential instability in the social hierarchy.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{68}\) This tradition could be dated back to the founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang who was said to be fond of theatre. He once highly praised Gao Ming’s 高明 (ca. 1305-ca. 1370) *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The Lute) in comparison with Confucian classics. See Xu Wei, *Nanci sulu*, 239. He also sent large numbers of theatrical texts to each of his sons, which he believed to have both functions of education and entertainment. See Liang Qingyuan, *Diaoqiu zalu*, 772. According to the record in *Quan Ming sanqu* 全明散曲 (A Collection of Song Poems throughout the Entire Ming Dynasty), there are three Ming princes who have their sanqu handed down to our time, namely Zhu Quan 朱權 (1378-1448), Zhu Youdun 朱有燉 (1379-1439), and Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 (1536-1611), see Xie Boyang, *Quan Ming sanqu*, 257-392, 2975-2982. Among them, Zhu Youdun also wrote and personally published thirty-one plays which contained both the texts of songs as well as the prose dialogue. See West and Idema, *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals*, xxiv. Based on a survey of the writings on music by Ming princes, there were thirty-two books covering topics of musical instruments, song poetry and drama, tonality and metrical pattern, and dance, see Chen Jing, “Mingdai fanwang de yinyue zhushu kao,” 22-24.

\(^{69}\) Chiu Chung-lin, “Ming Qing de yuehu,” 114.

\(^{70}\) The princely marriage was strictly regulated in legal documents such as *Da Ming Huidian* 大明會典 (Collected Administrative Status of the Great Ming), which prescribed that the wives and concubines of princes must be chosen from decent families and the marriages should be arranged in accordance with the rituals. The institutes also forbade the princes from being on intimate terms with entertainers and courtesans. Shen Shixing, *Da Ming huidian*, vol. 790, 164. It is indicated in *Libu zhigao* 禮部志稿 (Records of the Ministry of Rites) that the offspring of female musicians and women of degraded status, even if they were sired by princes should not be granted titles, ranks or subsidies. See Yu Ruji, *Libu zhigao*, vol. 598, 328. In a memorial by the Ministry of Rites during the Zhengde reign after an investigation of the establishments of Princes Jin, Dai and Zhou had been conducted, it is reported that there were 139 sons and daughters of the princes in total born by female musicians. Yao and Xia, *Ming Wuzong shilu*, 1545-1546.
The privately-owned musical troupes of the literati were another type of household courtesans in the Ming dynasty. The practice of courtesanship in literati’s households gained popularity in the Six Dynasties and reached a peak in the Tang and Song dynasties. Similar to their predecessors, the Ming literati’s household courtesans were also regarded as personal property from diverse sources: selected from existing family servants, purchased from society at large, and received as gifts from friends. Although folk songs and famous arias were still sung by them, the main repertoire of Ming household courtesans was theatrical performance and they thus differed from their predecessors. From the mid-Ming on, kunqu became the favourite form of musical entertainment of the scholar-officials and literati who not only passionately participated in composing, reading, and commenting on chuanqi literature, but were also obsessed with assembling private troupes, directing their troupes’ performances, and designing the stage settings and special effects. According to incomplete data collected from various accounts, there were approximately 75 private troupes owned by famous elites over the country in the Ming dynasty. Female members, if not the only component, played significant roles in most private troupes.

In addition to performing the female protagonist or object of desire in romantic dramas, the privately-owned actresses also accommodated the owners and sometimes their guests with sexual services. The expectation on the household actresses to shiqin 寄寢 (waiting on [his] sleep) rendered them a certain degree of status mobility since the master’s favourite ones may be taken as his concubines or spouses. This ambiguity was also reflected by the vague appellation ji 姬, which was shared by both courtesans or concubines. Their images combined intelligence, seductiveness, beauty, and talent, echoing predecessors like Taoye 桃葉, the beloved courtesan-turned-concubine of

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There were rigid restrictions on musician households that belonged to jian min 賤民 (dishonourable persons) in order to differentiate them from liangjia 良家 (decent households). These children of female musicians, although sired by princes, were still despised by some local officials. The local official Lu Shen 陸深 (1477-1544) once rejected the request of a musician-born child of a prince to study in the state-owned school and indicated that accepting these kinds of people would destroy the reputation of school. See Tang Jin, Longjiang ji, 586.

For detailed records on how literati-owners combined their writing of chuanqi literature with directing and training of kunqu performance, see Lu Eting, Kunju yanchu shigao, 174-193, 236-248.

Wang and Ren, Kunqu yu Ming Qing yueji, 159-163.

Shen, Elite Theatre in Ming China, 59.

According to Shen, at least four of Qian Dai’s 錢岱 (1541-1622) eleven actresses ended up as his concubines whilst still acting in the troupe. Kang Hai 康海 (1475-1540) married an actress from a musician household after he left office who later helped him to train and manage their private troupe after marriage. Ibid., 59-69, 63.
Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386), as well as Xiaoman 小蠻 and Fan Su 樊素, two favourite household courtesans of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) in poetic representations.\textsuperscript{75}

However, there are two points worthy of notice. First, the participation of literati-owners in their female entertainers’ training and performance became more active. Literati not only meticulously selected and trained their female entertainers, but also theorized their practice and experience.\textsuperscript{76} Second, the large-scale commercialization of the Ming society also left its mark on the privately-owned troupes, differentiating them from their counterparts in the medieval period. The household female entertainers who performed for their master’s enjoyment in the medieval period began to occasionally perform for economic benefits in the Ming dynasty. There were literati who failed in imperial examinations and took their household troupes on numerous journeys to seek potential patrons, during which they participated in literati gatherings and visited scholar-officials. On some of these occasions, their female musicians were summoned to entertain the ones with whom they were trying to associate. The mediation of female musicians at literati gatherings not only helped their master to build networks and get access to the potential patrons, but sometimes also

\textsuperscript{75} In a \textit{ci}-lyric written by Wang Maoling 汪懋麟 (1640-1688) to Zha Jizuo 查繼佐 (1601-1676) when watching the performance of Zha’s private troupe, Wang compared Zha’s household actresses to Xiaoman and Fan Su, and thus set Zha’s image in the culture of romance represented by the Tang poet Bai Juyi. Wu Weiyu 吳偉業 (1609-1672) once wrote a poem at a banquet hosted by Wu Changshi 吳昌時 (jinshi 1634) and compared his treasured actress to Taoye 桃葉, see Wang and Ren, \textit{Kunqu yu Ming Qing yueji}, 41-42. This kind of comparison not only complimented the actresses’ beauty and skill, but also flattered the literati-owners and placed the friendship and community of the hosts and guests within the literati culture and tradition which connected them with the prominent elite in the past.

\textsuperscript{76} For example, Pan Zhiheng 潘之恆 (1556-1622) was an experienced connoisseur of theatre. He was immersed in theatre ever since childhood as both his father and grandfather were enthusiastic audiences of theatre. After reaching adulthood, Pan combined his experiences of owning a household troupe and of watching a great deal of theatre during years of travel, writing down his observations and comments in his book, \textit{Luansxiao xiaopin} 霍嘯小品 (Essays on Simurgh Whistling). He emphasized the significance of literati-owners in “helping the performers understand the play, adapting the play for the stage, and planning the mise-en-scène” during the rehearsal processes. Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680) was another example who owned his own troupes and meanwhile passed on his experience through his book, \textit{Xianqing ouji} 閒情偶寄 (Casual Notes in a Leisurely Mood), in which he included one section on “Shengrong” 聲容 (Voice and Appearance). It gives instructions and suggestions on how to select a future belle with potential talent for singing among all the small girls in the market, how to enhance her beauty with cosmetics and dresses, as well as how to improve her manner by cultivating literacy and artistry in her. Other sections such as “Ciqu” 詞曲 (Lyrics and Songs) and “Yanxii” 演習 (Performance and Training) also theorized his experience as both playwright and director. For the theories of Pan and Li, see Fei, \textit{Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present}, 58-60, 77-90.
helped provide economic support, bringing in virtual income. In the late Ming, some literati even rented out their well-trained private troupes for public performances as a way not merely to gain profits, but more importantly to promote their reputation and their newly-composed plays. In most cases, these private troupes were only rented to famous men of letters who were also connoisseurs of music and theatre and wanted to add more fun to their gatherings.

III. Commercial Courtesans
Differing from the court and household courtesans whose attention was mostly, if not totally, paid to musical training and performance, commercial courtesans made forays into the realms of literature and art and eventually “colonized” elite life as painters, poets, scholars, and connoisseurs. Cass explains that while the few courtesans who composed poetry and mastered art in previous dynasties could not represent the vast majority of their contemporary courtesan peers, who never expressed themselves through literary or artistic creation, the later Ming commercial courtesans emerged as a visible, vocal group who left a mark as artists and authors. They enthusiastically embraced their roles as creators and connoisseurs of elite culture. Some of them achieved such impressive aesthetic discernment that they became instructors of literati. Their obsession with diverse “masculine” realms turned the pleasure quarters into a site of elite gatherings, a venue of literary and artistic collaboration, and a forum of intellectual, aesthetic, and political discourse. The Ming commercial courtesans were never merely entertainers. They were important participants of elite culture, and what once defined literati as a class now defined them in terms of their affiliates.

77 According to Jie Zhang, travelling with a private troupe was one of the many ways Li Yu used to expand a social network. See Zhang, “The Game of Marginality,” 11. Patrick Hanan states that although the troupe was not necessarily used to please his patrons, it still very likely played an important role in his socialization with other literati. See Hanan, The Invention of Li Yu, 7-8. Li Yu’s concubine and troupe actress Wang Zailai 王再來 saved money from the audience to prepare clothes for the baby she thought she was carrying, showing that household courtesans not only helped to network but also provided economic support. See Li Yu, “Qiao Fusheng Wang Zailai erji hezhuan,” 99.

78 The private troupe of Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮 (1587-1646) also performed in public theatres. When Dong Xiaowan followed Mao Xiang to Nanjing, their friends in the Fushe 復社 (the Revival Society) collected money to rent Ruan’s troupe as a welcome. See Mao Xiang, Tongren ji, 378. However, it seems that Ruan was keener to promote his plays than to profit from them.

79 Cass, Dangerous Women, 17.

80 Cass viewed these Ming commercial courtesans as an important source on aestheticism, taking Dong Xiaowan as an example. Cass, Dangerous Women, 32. According to the account by the renowned literatus Mao Xiang, Dong once taught him the properties of various types of incense, including every detail from the source materials to the gathering and manufacturing process, and finally to their distinctive aromas. Mao, Yingmeian yiyou, 591-592.
The flourishing of courtesan culture was based on the highly urbanized Ming cities which grew to have populations in the millions, becoming centres of business and manufacture. Among all the opulent Ming cities, Nanjing stood out as one of the most impressive, not only in Chinese historical memories but also in the eyes of then-contemporary foreign visitors such as Matteo Ricci (1522-1610). Ricci was a noted Jesuit missionary who resided in China for almost three decades (1583-1610) and wrote his observations in 1595. He described Nanjing in his record as follows:

In the judgement of the Chinese this city surpassed all other cities in the world in beauty and grandeur, and in this respect there are probably very few others superior or equal to it. It is literally filled with palaces and temples and towers and bridges, and these are scarcely surpassed by similar structures in European cities… this city was once the capital of the entire realm and the ancient abode of kings through many centuries, and though the king changed his residence to Peking [Beijing]… Nanking [Nanjing] lost none of its splendour or its reputation.

Nanjing, located in the northwestern corner of the lower Yangzi delta, served as the primary capital for the first half-century of the Ming dynasty (1368-1421). To make Nanjing the symbol of his glorious empire, the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang ordered the city’s walled space significantly expanded and its metropolitan area (Yingtian prefecture) reconstructed. Maps of Nanjing featured the grand palace and gates, magnificent temples, neat residential quarters with broad streets and thriving markets. Demographic records show us that in the reign of the first emperor, the population of Nanjing grew to over half a million. Ming courtesanship started as early as the establishment of the empire. Zhu Yuanzhang ordered the construction of the pleasure quarters to collect more revenues from wealthy merchants and entertain the new official elite at banquets, although the private association of officials and courtesans was banned most of the time in the Ming dynasty. The famous pleasure quarters he built in the zone adjacent to the south city wall survived and thrived after the capital was removed.

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82 Fei, Negotiating Urban Space, 2. Mote investigated the components of the moving population from other areas to “fill out the capital,” and found they were mostly “wealthy households” and craftsmen. See Mote, “The Transformation of Nanking,” 145.
83 There is a dispute over when the ban was issued and carried out due to ambiguous and contradictory records. Shen Defu recorded the establishment of sixteen buildings by Zhu Yuanzhang to entertain scholars and officials, see Shen, Wanli yehuo bian, 899-900. A different record was given by Liu Chen who traced the ban back to the Hongwu reign, pointing out that Zhu Yuanzhang only allowed merchants to enter Fuleyuan and associate with courtesans, see Liu, Guochu shiji, 12. Xie Zhaozhe indicated that since the Xuande reign, courtesans had been banned for official occasions but not banned for private banquets held by gentry at home, see Xie, Wu za zu, 225-226. However, Yu Jideng described the decree in the Xuande reign in more strict terms, saying that even at home, officials were banned to consort with courtesans, see Yu, Diangu jiwen, 167. The same uncertainty exists in a relevant issue, namely the formal abolition of government courtesans. For this issue, see footnote 50 and 51.
to Beijing. The entertainment house *Fuleyuan* (Court of Abundant Pleasures) was established in the south of the city along the Qinhua River, between Lishe 利涉 Bridge and Wuding 武定 Bridge. Apart from this state-managed entertainment house, sixteen more buildings were ordered to be built nearby as accommodation for the courtesans and venues for their performance. All the courtesans worked and lived in these compounds were required to register with the *jiaofangsi*, an institute located in Nanjing and responsible for providing songs and dramas for court performances throughout the Ming dynasty.

When the Yongle Emperor relocated the primary capital from Nanjing to his former fief of Beijing in 1420, Nanjing’s population went through a drastic decline, but later gradually recovered and, by the middle of the dynasty, Nanjing was not only one of the largest metropolises in the empire, but also a city of great wealth and ease. It was well known as a centre of inland and international water transportation, and in the late Ming, a centre of silk and brocade production. In the post-1421 years, Nanjing functioned as the secondary capital of China and the southern hub of education, art, and literature. Its distance from the political centre granted the city freedom of thought and lifestyle. The official posts there carried rank and emolument without demanding duties and thus cultivated a regional atmosphere of wealth, ease, and intellectuality. The provincial civil service examination, taken every three years in Nanjing, attracted to this city numerous talented scholars from the richest and most cultivated areas of the empire. The Qinhua pleasure quarter was situated just across the river from the examination hall not far from the Imperial College and thus easily accessible to the

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84 Merlin, “The Nanjing Courtesan Ma Shouzhen (1548-1604),” 634.
85 In the article “Emerging from Anonymity,” Tian Yuan Tan examined the social milieu and governmental institutions that made Nanjing a major centre for musical entertainment and theatrical performance. Tan quoted Tao Muning’s 陶慕亭 “Ming jiaofang yanju kao” 明教坊演劇考 (Examination on Performances of the Court Entertainment Bureau in the Ming) to reveal that after 1421, both Nanjing and Beijing had a *jiaofangsi* which were in charge of songs and dramas for court performance, though the *zhonggusi* which was in charge of inner court performance had moved to Beijing along with the royal family. Tan also mentioned Li Shunhua 李舜華 Liyue yu Ming qianzhongqi yanju 禮樂與明前中期演劇 (Rites, Music, and Performances in the Early and Mid-Ming) and Zhang Ying 張影 Lidai jiaofang yu yanju 歷代教坊與演劇 (The Court Entertainment Bureau and Performances through the Ages) for studies on the significance of the *jiaofangsi* in the Ming dynasty comparing with such institutions in preceding dynasties. See Tan, “Emerging from Anonymity,” 128.
86 Fang, China’s Second Capital, 4-5.
87 For the detailed information on the institutionalization of Ming civil service examinations and how the examinations influenced mobility of the candidates of different origins and regions, see Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 247-260.
candidates of the examination, literati, and officials. Literati and artists coveted Nanjing for its urbanity, material affluence, promising cultural market and entertainment industry. Thus Nanjing provided the ideal stage for the romantic encounters of alluring courtesans and talented men in the Ming dynasty. Their voices and deeds resonated with the historical and literary memories of the city replete with finely cultivated, gallant, and witty heroes. Each courtesan played a role in shaping Nanjing into a world of ease and pleasure. Xie Tiao 謝眺 (464-499) once eulogized this region as a “land of loveliness” (jiali di 佳麗地) in his poetry, which according to Owen’s opinion that “good writing creates a place,” has influenced later perception and representation of Nanjing. The famous Song poet Zhou Bangyan 周邦彥 (1057-1121) began his ci-lyric on Nanjing with the same phrase. Byrant reveals that in the eyes of some literati who survived the Ming-Qing transition, such as Wang Shizhen 王士禎 (1634-1711), the Ming literati and courtesans, similarly to their charming predecessors in the Eastern Jin (317-420) and the Southern Dynasties (420-589),

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88 Oki, Fengyue Qinhuai, 86-103; Merlin, “The Nanjing Courtesan Ma Shouzhen (1548-1604),” 634.
89 The urban culture in pre-modern China reached its peak in some Ming cities, see Cass, Dangerous Women, 6. Cass further told the different styles of urbanity in northern and southern China: “If Beijing in the North offered power and wealth, the cities of South offered a degree of experiment.” Ibid., 8. As the southern centre, Nanjing represented prosperity in crafts, trades, and private life. The rapid development of the entertainment industry in Nanjing provided diverse forms of recreation such as theatre, storytelling, and music, trying to involve all classes from the illiterate commoners to the highly educated elites. The Qinhuai pleasure quarter was not merely one product of the entertainment industry, but actually the very epitome of the whole mechanism. Apart from different but sometimes overlapping groups of entertainers such as courtesans, singers, dancers and actresses, the pleasure quarter “also sustained an elaborate subsidiary network of crafts and service occupations, with a population of workers, cooks, and attendants, all of whom absorbed a hefty share of Nanjing[’s] wealth.” Ibid., 9-10.
90 Xie Tiao, Xie Xuancheng ji jiao zhu, juan 2, 149.
91 Owen traced how the cultural memories, embodied in poetry, shaped our understanding of Jinling [Nanjing]. He analyzed in Li Bai’s 李白 (701-762) poems on Nanjing, the brilliant, sophisticated and achieved literati such as Xie An 謝安 (320-385) and Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) were recalled as representatives of the cultural beginning of Nanjing in the Eastern Jin. The past of Nanjing in poetry overwhelmed readers and influenced later poets who dealt with the trope of “mediation on the past at Jinling.” See Owen, “Place,” 428.
92 Liu Yangzhong, Zhou Bangyan ci xuanping, 94.
contributed to the city’s doom, which they thought always haunted and never failed to follow the fulfilment of sensual pleasures.  

2.2. The Floating World: Social and Historical Context

The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 reduced the Qinhuai pleasure quarter to ruins, again attesting to the vainness of human effort and the ephemerality of glory and prosperity in the face of the uncontrollable and inevitable pattern of rise and decline, a belief shared among an enormous body of literary and historical writings in pre-modern China. Actually, this irresistible and mystical power which created the “floating world” had been reflected upon in ancient Chinese philosophy and lamented in numerous poems long before the Ming-Qing transition.

Compared with its better known Japanese counterpart, ukiyo 浮世 (the floating world), the Chinese term fushi 浮世 made an earlier debut in “Daren xiansheng zhuan” 大人先生傳 (Biography of a Great Man), written by Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263), a famous poet and musician during the late Eastern Han dynasty (25-220) and Three Kingdoms period (220-280), who is also known as one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (zhulin qixian 竹林七賢).

That great man shared the same body with the creation and coexisted with heaven and earth. [He] wandered freely in the floating world and reached completion with the Dao, transformed, dispersed himself or gathered himself together, never keeping a constant form.

夫大人者，乃與造物同體，天地並生，逍遙浮世，與道俱成，變化聚散，不常其形。94

As a metaphor of free spirit, this great man mixed the images of a Confucian sage who understands the way of change and a Daoist perfect man who keeps adjusting to this changing world without a constant form. In this text, the term fushi 浮世 could be interpreted in two ways. First, it could be read as a noun-compound and translated as

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93 In his analysis of Wang Shizhen’s “Qinhuai zashi” 秦淮雜詩 (Miscellaneous Poems on the Qinhuai), a series of twenty poems on Nanjing, Danial Bryant points out that two particular periods in the history of Nanjing attracted Wang Shizhen and many other early Qing poets. One is the Southern Dynasties when “the southern courts were, almost from the very beginning, distinguished by the aristocratic elegance of cultural life. That the elegance often, and increasingly, tended towards decadence only made it more interesting to later ages. Cluck as they might, late writers found in this spectacle of splendour and then decay a source of continual fascination.” The other period is the Ming dynasty, especially the last years of the Ming “when a combination of material affluence, moral laxity, and the unattractiveness of government service in an age of political decay combined to create a world of elegant dissipation that revolved about the singing-girl quarters of Nanking [Nanjing], located on the banks of the Ch’iin-huai [Qinhuai].” Bryant, “Syntax, Sound, and Sentiment in Old Nanking,” 28-29.

94 Ruan Ji, “Daren xiansheng zhuan,” 165.
“floating world.” In this case, *xiaoyao* 逍遙 should be read as a verb and the whole phrase *xiaoyao fushi* 逍遙浮世 translated as “to wander about freely in the floating world”. Second, the term *fushi* could be read as a verb-compound and translated as “to float in the world.” In this case, *xiaoyao* 逍遙 should be read as an adverb and the whole phrase translated as “freely floated in the world.” Both interpretations make sense in terms of Chinese grammar, and have a similar emphasis on the state of “floating,” no matter whether it is the “world” or the status of the great man. However, investigation into the usage of the term *fushi* in the texts of the Ming dynasty reveals a dominant preference for the first reading. Under the brush of the Ming literati, the floating world included almost everything belonging to this earthly realm—happiness and sorrow, love and hatred, pleasure and hardship, success and failure, gain and loss. One could reject it by becoming a recluse and caring nothing about this world, but one could also embrace it by living life to the fullest. We find both choices in Ming literature without any imposed yes-and-no or black-and-white judgement. This phrase, as comprehensive as the human world itself could be, was also used in translating Buddhist sutras, representative of the phenomenal world within which nothing can last forever with a fixed form. The Chinese term *fushi* 浮世 and its usage in Buddhist translation played a decisive role in the transformation of Japanese *ukiyo* 憂世 (this world of sorrow) to its homonym, *ukiyo* 浮世 (the floating world), in order to encompass multiple aspects of the human world.

The essence of the “floating world,” regardless of the various layers attached to it due to the expansion of human experience in this world or the diverse cultural elements incorporated into it through its overseas transmission, lies in the key concept of “floating”, which could be comprehended both realistically and metaphorically. As in

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95 According to the examples that I have gathered from *Siku quanshu*, there are notable patterns in the usage of the term “fushi” in the Ming writings, most of which are poetic compositions, but other forms such as letters, prefaces, and brief notes from encyclopaedias are also included. First, it was often used to describe a worldly realm as opposed to an immortal land or in contrast with a remote abode of a recluse, monk, or Daoist, such as the legendary Penglai 蓬萊 isle or “the pleasant land” (*letu* 楽土) which appeared in classics as political utopia or in religious texts as Buddhist paradise. Second, it often appeared in writings on travel and separation to describe a deep feeling of unsettlement. Third, it was sometimes used as a synonym of “life” and included diverse moods and experiences, some of which revealed a strong religious influence and emphasized the emptiness of life by comparing life with a bubble, illusion, and dream, or highlighted the ephemerality of existence by introducing allusions such as *sangtian* 桑田 (mulberry field) which was said to be transformed into sea three times. Some other poets simply accepted the “ups and downs” (*shencheng* 升沈) and “prosperity and decline” (*shengshuai* 盛衰) as inevitable life experience, and embraced the pleasures of enjoying delicacies, drinking wine, and appreciating singing and dancing as ways to fully enjoy “this journey in the floating world” (*fushi ziyou* 浮世茲遊).
many early civilizations, the ancient Chinese relied much upon boats when travelling and the image of “floating” on waters was embedded in their perception of travelling on the road. Metaphorically speaking, the intense feeling of unsettlement and unpredictability in one’s pursuit of achievement enhanced this perception of the life course of this world as “ups and downs in the floating world.”

What was special about the Ming “floating world” was its fluid social boundaries that characterized the urbane world. The rapid commercialization of the social economy created havoc in social hierarchy, which was supposed to be stable and unchangeable according to Confucian ideal.96 The rise of the merchant class as an increasingly rich and influential group posed a considerable threat to the stability of social ranks and created social mobility.97 The opulence which resulted from commercialization also laid the material foundation for the prosperity of Ming courtesan culture.

The social mobility reflects one aspect of the “floating world” when we read “floating” as “freely flowing.” When the concept of the “floating world” applied to the pleasure quarters, it encouraged another reading of “floating” as “fleeting”—the ephemerality of everything that is beautiful, adorable, and admirable in the earthly realm. The simplest example is the euphemism for courtesans, yanhua 煙花 (misty flowers).98 The most glorious time for a flower cannot even last one season, not to mention the mist covering around it. However, a broader “floating world” beyond the lament for ephemerality reveals itself to us when we take a closer look at the Qinhua pleasure quarter in Ming dynasty Nanjing.

As introduced in the first section, across the Qinhua River, right opposite the pleasure quarter, were the Examination hall and the Imperial College. The adjacency of the southern education centre and the Qinhua pleasure quarter facilitated communication between the courtesans and the male elite, and made the pleasant Qinhua River an ideal site for various gatherings at which they enjoyed wines,

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96 Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 30-34.
97 Brook, The Confusions of Pleasure, 210-218.
98 This euphemism “misty flowers” is often seen in Song ci-lyrics and Yuan dramas written about or devoted to courtesans. In the preface to Banqiao zaji 板橋雜記 (Miscellaneous Records of the Plank Bridge), a memoir focusing on the pleasure quarters in the Ming dynasty Nanjing, Yu Huai 余懷 (1616-1696) uses euphemisms such as “misty flowers of the south” (nanbu yanhua 南部煙花) and “disciples of the Yichun [quarter]” (Yichun dizi 宜春弟子) to refer to the courtesans. See Yu Huai, Banqiao zaji, 3.
composed poems, and performed music on decorated and spacious boats, thus turning the entertainment quarter literally into a pleasure world “floating” on the river.

If “floating” on the Qinhua River made up a large part of their daily experience, the Ming Nanjing courtesans had another strong sense of “floating” in mid and late Ming society. When Zhu Yuanzhang established the Nanjing pleasure quarters, he and his advisors were fully aware of the potential threat of this group of educated, beautiful, and talented girls from low social classes. Their intelligence and attractiveness could be used as their sharpest weapon to escape from walled brothels and climb the social ladders to the position that could influence the decisions of the most powerful men. Anxiety about courtesans was reflected in many legal documents of the Ming dynasty, such as the Great Ming Code and the Great Ming Commandment, which on the one hand imposed strict sumptuary regulations on entertainers, differentiating them from the rest of the society, and on the other hand forbade the marriage between entertainers and gentry class.

However, no matter how successfully these regulations might have been enforced in the early Ming, the mid and late Ming witnessed a highly mobile and penetrable society caused by the growing economy and its strong influence on social relations and hierarchies. The sumptuary regulations “received no updating or reinforcement” and “were no longer enforceable in the face of universal disregard for the sanctions they contained.”

Sarah Dauncey demonstrates the late Ming women’s sartorial emulation of those of higher social status despite the sumptuary regulations, which exemplifies the breakdown of the clothing hierarchy on the female side. In this social context, the article on “Marrying Musicians as Wives or Concubines” was also openly and consistently ignored. Courtesans not only could marry male elites as a favourite concubine but it was even possible to become the principal wife and mistress of gentry household. As a group of women without either “root” or “anchor,” courtesans “floated” in the fluid Ming society. The fortunate ones recreated new “roots/anchors” by marrying powerful husbands or giving birth to promising sons, taking the Han dynasty empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (ca. 32-1 BCE) as their legendary model. Chapter Four of this thesis will examine the case study of Yang Wan 楊宛 (ca. 1600-ca.1647), whose

100 Dauncey, “Illusions of Grandeur,” 43-68.
101 Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 152. For the detailed information about the article on “Marrying Musicians as Wives or Concubines,” see Yonglin Jiang, *The Great Ming Code*, 87.
life course before the Ming-Qing transition represented this type of successful courtesan ladder-climbers. Some less fortunate courtesans, upon growing old and losing radiance, converted to Buddhism or Daoism, as was the case with Xu Jinghong 徐驚鴻 whose poem written upon her leaving for a Buddhist nunnery will be examined in Chapter Two. In some cases, elder courtesans may also have become music teachers and mentors of younger courtesans, or operated brothels if they had enough savings. Ma Shouzhen 馬守真 (1548-1604), whose writings we frequently encounter in various anthologies, assembled a theatre troupe of small girls and trained them in musical performance. The unfortunate ones might have fallen into poverty and even died miserable deaths, such as Zheng Ruying 鄭如英, whose epistolary writing will be discussed in Chapter Three, lived through the Ming-Qing transition losing her youth, beauty, and property. Their identities were never fixed, but rather kept “floating” from the highest position a woman could achieve in pre-modern China to the lowest social status in the most miserable and hopeless living conditions.

Finally, commercial publishing added the last dimension to the “floating world” of the pleasure quarters in Ming dynasty Nanjing. The Ming printing boom challenged the conventional hierarchy of different genres and texts, and provided the prosperous book market with the juxtaposition of various writings. One of the most famous publishing centres of Ming China was located in Sanshan Street 三山街 (Three Mountain Street) of Nanjing, a street that was full of printing houses and book markets and physically shared the same space with the Examination hall and the Qinhuai pleasure quarter. This geographical adjacency smoothed the way for the production and circulation of courtesans’ images on printed pages, which also catered to the desire of a growing reading public belonging to the printed world far beyond that space. Images of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing were shaped from different perspectives of female writers including themselves, male literati of their time and later. Their

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102 For the growth of the commercial publishing in the Ming dynasty, see Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China*, 71-89. In his discussion of the Ming printing boom, Zhang Xiumin provided lists of commercial publishers in several publishing centres such as Nanjing, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Jianyang. See Zhang, *Zhongguo yinshua shi*, 343-402. Oki Yasushi attributes the rapid growth of commercial publishing in the late Ming Jiangnan to factors including the advantages of woodblock printing, sufficient provision of source materials and experienced carvers, and the increasing demand for books. See Oki, *Mingmo Jiangnan de chuban wenhua*, 30-66. Dorothy Ko connects the commercial publishing boom with the birth of the reading public, especially female readers, indicating a gender dimension of Ming commercial publishing. See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 29-67.

103 For more information about the Sanshan street and its role in the network of commercial publishers and book markets of the Ming dynasty, see Chia, “Of Three Mountain Street,” 111-132.
images were transmitted through such diverse media as paintings, encyclopaedias, drinking-game cards, and literary works. Furthermore, the visual and textual representations of Ming Nanjing courtesans provided source materials for later creations: they were detached from original contexts and “floating” among various cultural products in forms of recycled images, imitated emotions, and appropriated stories.

3. Concepts, Methodology, and Structure

3.1. Concepts

Although not devoted to a full-scale gender study on the self-representations of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing, this study is greatly inspired by the development of feminism. Over the past few decades, the scholarly focus on women’s experiences has cultivated a trend in the Sinological field of placing increasing importance on constructing a new narrative of history against male-dominant discourses. Some of the key concepts central to feminism have also informed the theoretical framework of this study. To better explain my approach, I start with a critical examination of core concepts and terms, paying particular attention to their application and modification in the cultural context of late imperial China.

(1) Gender and Sex

According to the Women’s Studies Encyclopedia, “gender is a cultural construct: the distinction in roles, behaviours, and mental and emotional characteristics between females and males developed by a society.” The cultural-orientation of gender differentiates it from the more biologically-based concept of sex, “sex is a term that encompasses the morphological and physiological differences on the basis of which human (and other life forms) are categorized as male and female. It should be used only in relation to characteristics and behaviours that arise directly from biological differences between men and women.”

Based on the established concept of gender, Joan Scott further proposes to use gender as a category of historical analysis. The core of her gender definition “rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary...”

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104 Tierney, Women’s Studies Encyclopedia, 563.
105 Ibid., 564.
way of signifying relationships of power.” The emphasis of gender as a form of sexually-based and power-related social relationship is applied in Dorothy Ko’s examination of the gender system in traditional China which was embedded in the Confucian classics and precepts, the social institutions of kinship and education, women’s own writings, and the metaphorical link of family and country. Ko’s usage of gender as an analytical tool, combined with other parameters such as class, region, ethnicity, and historical context, casts a new light on our perception of gender norms and practices in Chinese history which also convincingly argues against “the oversimplified construction of women as victims in the ahistorical Chinese tradition that is feudal, patriarchal, and oppressive.”

When applying the concept of gender in Sinological field, some scholars also noticed that “gender” operated differently in traditional China than in Europe where gender, as Scott claimed, is used to refer to the roles, behaviours, and symbols attached to anatomical sex in a particular culture. Tani Barlow observed the historical primacy of social gender, especially the more specific social categories based in family relations such as “son,” “daughter,” “father,” “mother,” “husband,” “wife,” over anatomical sex in traditional China. Brownell and Wasserstrom follow the observation of Barlow and demonstrate that pre-modern Chinese “gender concepts were anchored in beliefs about family structure and social roles more so than in beliefs about biological sex (and even beliefs that we might call ‘biological’ were based in classical Chinese medicine, not western science).”

Susan Mann raises her concern about the limited explanatory power of the paradigms of Western historiography for the Chinese historical record, especially in the realm of gender relations. She lists several arenas of differences between the late imperial Chinese and Euro-North American cultures, such as family systems, social stratification, and writing. In the newly-published Gender and Chinese History, which is dedicated to Susan Mann, Beverly Bossler suggests studying how gender hierarchies which operated in China “confront the limited and culturally bounded nature

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106 Scott, “Gender,” 1067.
107 Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 5-6.
108 Ibid., 3.
110 Brownell and Wasserstrom, Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities, 34.
111 Mann, Precious Records, 9.
112 Ibid., 11-18.
of concepts of gender—including those typically employed in Anglophone scholarships” and challenge the understanding of the idea of gender itself.113

This study follows the definition of gender as a cultural construct, but at the same time highlights the unique discourse of gender in Chinese tradition which was conceptualized with reference to a cluster of dichotomies, among which the two most important are yin 陰/ yang 陽, and nei 内 (inner)/ wai 外 (outer).

This gender discourse usually associates yang with masculine features and yin with feminine features. However, Alison Black examines the relationship between gender and Chinese cosmology and demonstrates that, etymologically, yin and yang do not mean “feminine” and “masculine.”114 Yin and yang are used to express a contrastive relationship between two or more things.115 According to Lisa Raphals’ study, its usage as a gender analogy became dominant mainly due to activities of the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) who applied the metaphysical terms to designate gendered human relations.116 Although the yin/yang distinction can be interpreted as complementary, oppositional, or hierarchical, the core connotation of this distinction points to dynamic and constantly changing relationships. This connotation also shapes the traditional Chinese perception of gender as relative qualities and positions. A male official would be yang in the husband-wife bond but yin in the subject-ruler bond. This relationship-based perception of gender gives rise to what Ambrose Y. C. King termed the “elasticity” of social roles as well as the flexibility or fluidity of gender stance.117 Elasticity and fluidity are further explored in this study through analyzing the textual and visual representations of courtesans’ gender ambiguous images in Ming dynasty Nanjing.

The nei/wai dichotomy is commonly understood as the prescribed separate spheres for men and women enforced by Confucianism. Raphals traces the establishment of the gendered space back to the late Zhou when it became common to contrast the feminized ‘inner’ (nei) space with the masculine ‘outer’ (wai) realm beyond the home.118 Similarly with the yin/yang dichotomy, according to Dorothy Ko’s study,
the borders between inner and outer are never fixed and always open to negotiation.\textsuperscript{119} Being confined in the inner space, women have managed to transform this space and reconstruct their experience by means of writing as Xiaorong Li indicates in her research.\textsuperscript{120} Meanwhile, women have also developed many strategies to cross the border and their influence reaches further out to the outer space. As public women, courtesans were not subjected to strict regulation of gender segregation, hence enjoying relatively free communication with the male literati whose guidance was instrumental in their mastery of literature and fine arts. However, courtesans were the property of brothels, trapped in the pleasure quarters, and thus shared the same frustration of spatial confinement as ordinary women. The case study on a courtesan-turned-concubine named Yang Wan in Chapter Four of this thesis reveals how a woman perceived and interpreted her changing status by framing her self-representation and emotional expression within these two confined feminine spaces. This case study contributes to our knowledge of a gendered space that does not belong to the nei\textsuperscript{1}/wai\textsuperscript{2} dichotomy prescribed by Confucian gender norms and deepens our understanding of a diverse gendered rhetoric that has long been established and developed within and beyond the Confucian discourse.

(2) Femininity, Masculinity, and Androgyny

According to the Women’s Studies Encyclopedia, femininity and masculinity respectively mean the characteristics claimed to constitute femaleness and maleness. Although the definitions seem simple, the connotations of this pair of concepts are rather complicated when taking into account cultural and historical differences in relationships between the sexes. As Brownell and Wasserstrom claim, “the categories of men and women contain no universal, absolute truths. Rather they are cultural constructs that vary across culture and across time.”\textsuperscript{121} As cultural constructs, both masculinity and femininity are sets of characteristics or traits that could be learned and performed according to the gender norms of a certain culture in a certain time period. Each of the two concepts is always constructed in relation to the other. Brownell and Wasserstrom draw upon the traditional Chinese philosophy of yin and yang to indicate the ever-changing and mutually inclusive nature of these two concepts, “as the proverb

\textsuperscript{119} Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 12-14.
\textsuperscript{120} Li, Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China.
\textsuperscript{121} Brownell and Wasserstrom, Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities, 32.
goes, there is femaleness in maleness, there is maleness in femaleness, and the two are in constant motion relative to each other.”

Chinese masculinity keeps changing throughout history, so does femininity. Even within one dynasty, the ideal images of men and women could change according to the shift of aesthetic trend. Robert Hans van Gulik examines various visual representations of men and women in the Ming dynasty and reaches the conclusion that painters around the early 16th century preferred “a sturdy feminine beauty, plump women with round, chubby faces and fully developed figures.” However, the latter half of the 16th century witnessed a tendency toward a more slender, sentimental, and delicate type. Meanwhile, the similar change of ideal masculine beauty was also reflected in the contemporaneous paintings from the middle-aged, bearded men with strong muscular build to younger refined men without a beard, moustache or whiskers. This change became more conspicuous in the Qing dynasty when Han subjects objected to the Manchu martial masculinity being too vulgar and established the ideal male image as the frail, scholarly type.

Apart from femininity and masculinity, the phenomenon and concept of “androgyny” has also gained increasing scholarly attention in the field of gender studies, as it closely relates to some significant topics such as the third gender, gender bending and gender ambiguity, as well as gender crossing and transgression. The Women’s Studies Encyclopedia defines “androgyny” as “the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics of a person.” In her pioneering study on Ming-Qing women poets, Kang-i Sun Chang formulates a new term, “cultural androgyny,” to frame an interesting literary phenomenon during the Ming-Qing transition in which “male literati became more and more absorbed in the feminine culture.” Meanwhile, “many Ming-Qing women poets began to develop a lifestyle typical of the educated male.” Chang justifies her usage of “cultural androgyny” by drawing on the view of “androgyny” as “a symbol of truth and beauty, and ideal of primordial totality and oneness” in Western

122 Ibid., 22.
123 For studies on how Chinese masculinity has changed within the “traditional past” and from traditional times to now, see Louie, Changing Chinese Masculinities, and Theorising Chinese Masculinity.
124 Van Gulik, Sexual Life in Ancient China, 294.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 296.
128 Tierney, Women’s Studies Encyclopedia, 86.
130 Ibid.
philosophy and aesthetics. This view corresponds with the literary and cultural state of wholeness and balance which was reflected in the Ming-Qing literati/women collective promotion of women’s literature and achieved through the joining of yin and yang.\textsuperscript{131} When applying this concept to Ming-Qing women poets, Chang emphasizes that they “pursued their poetic careers and other cultural activities as though they were men, without abandoning their femininity and sexuality.”\textsuperscript{132} Further examination shows, especially in the case of courtesan poets, this kind of pursuit in the masculine field did not undermine but even enhanced their femininity and sexuality in the eyes of the contemporaneous male literati.

Based on Chang’s observation of the “cultural androgyny” in late imperial China, Zuyan Zhou defines “androgyny” as “not only one’s capacity for dual sexual roles—one’s inclination to transcend gender dichotomy—but also one’s drive to deviate from or resist culturally/politically prescribed gender positions, particularly the institutionalized yin status of women and marginalized men, for the pursuit of a wholesome identity.”\textsuperscript{133} Zhou highlights the transcendental and even subversive power that androgyny granted to people of marginalized status. Similarly with Chang, Zhou draws on yin and yang to demonstrate the expression of androgyny in a cultural context different from the West. Yin and yang, although being respectively assigned to feminine and masculine features, are basically terms about relationship. Both yin and yang features exist in an individual whose display of a certain feature depends on his position relative to another person. As mentioned before, a man is yang to his wife but yin to his ruler.

My research on the androgynous image of Ming Nanjing courtesans is, therefore, built on the development of psychological androgyny and established scholarship in the field of traditional Chinese culture and literature which introduces the perspective of androgyny. Generally speaking, androgyny is used in this study to describe courtesans who manifested a combination of characteristics labelled as masculine and feminine in the Ming society either through personality or behaviour. Moreover, “androgyny” is unstable not only because it covers a wide range of sexual roles and gendered characteristics, but also because both masculinity and femininity are going through

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{133} Zuyan Zhou, Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature, 4.
endless changes in different times, regions, and cultures. Thus, there could be various
types of androgynous courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing internalized different
attributes which were at that time regarded as constituting manliness, such as the
literary talent displayed by *shiji* 詩妓 (courtesan poets) and the martial talent displayed
by *xiaji* 俠妓 (knight-errant courtesans). Also, from the perspective of psychological
androgyny, a charming courtesan with extremely feminine appearance and manners
could still represent her self-image as androgynous by expressing her masculine
ambitions.

(3) Agency

Although in the last decades the issue of “agency” has become the renewed focus of
thoughts on feminist and social theory, it has long been underestimated in the field of
Chinese studies. As Wimal Dissanayake remarks on the study of the cultures of China,
India, and Japan, “traditional Western approaches to the study of these cultures have
emphasized, unduly and counterproductively, the pervasive influence of family and clan
(China), caste and fatalism (India), and groupism (Japan), to the exclusion of the
salience of agency.”134 This section is hence devoted to investigating agency in the
cultural context of late imperial China, and to applying the concept of agency to the
Ming Nanjing courtesans’ writing practice and identity performance.

At the very start of his introduction of the concept of agency and its importance
in cultural understanding and cultural redescription, Dissanayake points out that “the
notion of human agency is a complex and multivalent one, displaying a great measure
of cultural variability.”135 Western study of human agency in general is centred on the
interrelationship between individual subject and social organization, and based on
Foucault’s concept of power as dispersed constellations of unequal relationships,
discursively constituted in social “fields of force.”136 Scott conceptualizes human
agency as “the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of
relationships, a society with certain limits and with language—conceptual language that
at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance,
reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination.”137

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134 Dissanayake, “Agency and Cultural Understanding,” xi.
135 Ibid., xiv.
137 Scott, “Gender,” 1067.
Another influential definition regarding human agency is proposed by Paul Smith. Although Smith does not believe in the whole and coherent individual that is free and self-determining, he rightly observes that “a person is not simply an actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/her-self into them.”\(^\text{138}\) The term “human agent” is borrowed from the social sciences, but has gained increasing attention in humanities scholarship and begun to play an important role in formulating the concept of personhood. Smith conceptualizes it as “the place from which resistance to the ideological is produced or played out... by virtue of the contradictions and disturbances in and among subject-positions”\(^\text{139}\) Smith’s conception and usage of the term have greatly inspired Dissanayake who later suggests focusing on the notion of agency is a way of opening up a cross-cultural discussion.\(^\text{140}\)

Current research on gender and agency demonstrates a new trend that questions the negative paradigm of subjectification and the subsequent confinement of agency in the dichotomous logic of domination and resistance. Representative of this trend, Lois McNay offers a broader notion of agency as “the subject’s capability to deal with difference or otherness in terms other than exclusion or denial.”\(^\text{141}\) McNay frames agency in a generative paradigm which emphasizes the creative or productive aspect of agency. Through the act of agency, individuals autonomously and innovatively build their subject forms and respond to social changes.\(^\text{142}\)

Grace S. Fong introduces agency as an analytical tool in her study of women’s writings in late imperial China. According to Fong, “the notion of agency, contested as its origin or production is in recent feminist theorizing, suggests the ability and will to take action purposefully and self-consciously.”\(^\text{143}\) Following the constructivist position that subjects, identities, and bodies are constituted by discourse and ideology, Fong contextualizes late imperial Chinese women’s writings in their differential positioning within a normative female hierarchy, meanwhile describing “woman as [a] subject simultaneously implicated in conflicting and contradictory ‘discursive injunction.’”\(^\text{144}\) Fong views writing as a significant way for late imperial women to exert agency

\(^{138}\) Smith, Discerning the Subject, xxiv-xxxv.
\(^{139}\) Ibid., xxxv.
\(^{140}\) Dissanayake, “Agency and Cultural Understanding”, x-xi.
\(^{141}\) McNay, Gender and Agency, 155.
\(^{142}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{143}\) Fong, Herself an Author, 5.
\(^{144}\) Ibid.
because writing “testif[ies] to their self-consciousness about the need to take action on
their own and each other’s behalf to represent themselves as subjects in history through
self-inscription.”145 Through writing, women managed to assume, although temporarily
or figuratively, non-kinship defined roles which exceeded the family or lineage-centred
structure. Their various efforts to make a space for a degree of difference, of change,
even of authority and autonomy exemplifies the notion of agency which “connotes the
ability of a subordinated group or member to negotiate, to bring about action, to change
and transform oneself and others, even in a limited way within restrictive ideological
and social structures.”146

This study explores the operation of agency in the courtesan circles of Ming
dynasty Nanjing. Differing from the gentry women studied in Fong’s book, courtesans
did not have a position within a normative female hierarchy of the family or lineage-
structure. However, as objects of male desire, “they shared the fundamental gendered
position in imperial China: the social station of a woman [which] was defined by that of
the men in her life,” either through marriage or informal sexual favours.147 Borrowing
Fong’s usage of agency as the ability and will to take action purposefully and self-
consciously and to bring about changes to oneself and others, I examine how courtesans
opened up a space for agency through donning male attire of scholars, knights-errant, or
generals, and adventuring to fields which exclusively belonged to males, being
perceived as features of either wen 文 (cultural attainment) or wu 武 (martial valour).
On one hand, courtesans’ display of agency which crossed the gender border can be
viewed as both their identification with male patrons whom they knew well from a very
young age and their strategies in reacting to the shifting aesthetic tastes and the
changing perceptions of sexuality in the Ming dynasty; on the other hand, similarly with
Butler’s analysis of drag performance, it also questions “the notion of original or
primary gender identity” in a way that “reveals the imitative structure of gender itself —
as well as its contingency.”148

145 Ibid., 160.
146 Ibid.
147 Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 252-253.
3.2 Methodology and Structure

To capture the “floating world” which Ming courtesans inhabited, my approach combines analysis of textual and visual representations with investigation of the historical contexts of their creation, transmission, and reception. This dissertation deals with the diverse images of the courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing scattered in various genres and media including brothel treatises, *biji* (random jottings), individual collections of literary writings, poetry anthologies, and illustrations. Moreover, their images represent different perspectives and are used for distinct purposes. I plan to approach my subject of research by exploring the interactions between different genres and media, examining various writings by courtesans themselves and by others, as well as investigating the creation, circulation, and reception of their images in both individual collections and anthologies.

Through investigating the process of anthologizing courtesans’ poetic works and the representation of their images in both general and women’s anthologies of the Ming dynasty, Chapter One will answer such questions as: What was the first group of courtesans recorded by name and to have their poetic works anthologized? Why were all of the courtesans from Nanjing? What was the earliest cluster of anthologies which selected courtesan works and what were the anthologists’ motivations? How did these pioneering anthologies gather their sources, set standards of selection, and construct images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in a complex textual space co-created by authors and anthologists? How did these poetic compositions by Ming Nanjing courtesans and their self-represented poetic images “float” in the network of anthologies, ready to be appropriated, reorganized, and transformed within different frameworks consisting of biographical information, anecdotes, and various forms of remarks and comments on their work and their lives?

To reveal the comprehensive landscape of Ming anthologies that involved courtesans’ writings, I have conducted an exhaustive examination by referring to catalogues compiled in gazetteers and edited by modern scholars, especially Hu Wenkai’s *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Examination on Women’s Writings through the Ages). The accessibility of primary sources has greatly improved during recent years as numerous male literati’s collections and women’s anthologies have been reprinted in the *siku* 四庫 (Four Treasuries) series. Moreover, the Ming Qing
Women’s Writings database held at McGill University provides convenient access to a great number of writings by women in late imperial China. However, writings of the courtesans, especially those before the Wanli reign (1572-1620), and anthologies involving unexamined courtesan writers and lesser-known compilers remain difficult to find online or in reprints, thus requiring access to rare collections of libraries in the UK, Japan, and China. The rich set of primary sources gathered through various means has rendered possible a comprehensive analysis of a wide range of courtesans’ writings along with diverse anthological paratexts including editorial principles, prefaces, categories, and commentaries in this chapter.

A courtesan played various roles in the realm of literature: the object under a literati’s brush, “the bridge between written words and musical performance,” the author of literary works, and the editor of collections and anthologies. The case studies conducted in this dissertation will shed light on both traditional and novel roles assumed by Ming courtesans. Chapters Two and Three focus on two courtesans’ anthologies of the Ming dynasty: *Qinglou yunyu* 青樓韻語 (Enchanting Words from Green Tower, 1616) and *Gujin qinglou ji* 古今青樓集 (Collection from Green Tower: Ancient and Modern, 1623). The existence of these anthologies that exclusively published courtesans’ writings demonstrates the active participation of courtesans in literary creation and the increasing interest in courtesans’ writings. These two courtesans’ anthologies provide increased literary works and diverse images of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing while also demonstrating how reorganization of the same pool of “floating” materials could create different images and novel reading experiences.

*Qinglou yunyu* was compiled by two Hangzhou literati, but the largest part of its selection consists of poetic works by Ming Nanjing courtesans. This selection demonstrates the circulation of Nanjing courtesans’ writings in a broader Jiangnan area of the Ming dynasty. Moreover, *Qinglou yunyu* framed the poetic works by courtesans within a brothel treatise entitled *Piaojing* 嫖經 (the Classic of Whoring) and compiled the illustrations before the text as an album to visualize some of the selected poems. Compared with courtesans’ individual collections, some of which have been lost while

149 Zeitlin, “Notes of Flesh,” 84.
others are remnants without any editorial or publication information,\textsuperscript{150} using a case study on \textit{Qinglou yunyu} is advantageous. \textit{Qinglou yunyu} was reprinted in the Republican period with prefaces and a dated statement of editorial principles, and was thus more convenient to use.\textsuperscript{151} Moreover, the form of this book renders the possibility of presenting the most comprehensive images of courtesans which had been constructed in daily-use encyclopedias, collections and anthologies, and visual arts. Although this book includes Nanjing courtesans and courtesans from other regions of the Jiangnan area, the writings of Nanjing courtesans account for the most significant part of this anthology.\textsuperscript{152} Hence \textit{Qinglou yunyu} reveals the important role of Nanjing courtesans in shaping the courtesan culture of the whole Jiangnan area.

This striking Nanjing flavour is also reflected in the illustrations of this book. Zhang Mengzheng designed twelve illustrations, each of which was drawn for a couplet selected from the anthology. Among the twelve couplets, seven were written by courtesans of the Ming dynasty and four coming from Nanjing. In this sense, the conspicuous Nanjing flavour demonstrates the circulation and reception of Nanjing courtesans’ images in the broader Jiangnan area. \textit{Qinglou yunyu} encourages exploration of the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans which were shaped from various perspectives and through different approaches before being circulated within the larger Jiangnan area.

Based on close reading of the selected courtesans’ writings, the framework consisting of \textit{Piaojing}, annotations from daily-used encyclopedias, new elucidations and commentaries, and categories and illustrations, Chapter Two discusses the following questions: How did the visual and textual representations of Ming Nanjing courtesans

\textsuperscript{150} For information about individual courtesans’ collections in the Ming dynasty, see Hu Wenkai, \textit{Lidai funü zhuzuo kao}, 65-169. He examined various gazetteers and anthologies which were edited in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and recorded 30 individual collections by Ming courtesans which could be found in these resources.

\textsuperscript{151} There are five extant editions of \textit{Qinglou yunyu}. One is the Wanli four-juan edition 万曆四卷本, with complete 12 illustrations (printed in 1616). The second is the Chongzhen edition 崇禎本 which also consists of four volumes but is divided into eight juan 卷 (printed in 1631). The third is the \textit{Yinhongxuan} 隱虹軒 edition (printed in 1914, unseen). The fourth is included in \textit{Guoxue zhenben wenku} 國學珍本文庫 (printed in 1935) but is incomplete both in contents and illustrations. \textit{Qinglou yunyu} is retitled \textit{Xianqing nüsi} 閒情女肆 \textit{(Idle Feelings in Brothel}, 1633) by Li Wanhua 李萬化. For more detailed descriptions of the editions and their relationship, see Li Hsiao-ning 李曉寧, “Wan Ming fengyue wenhua,” 9-10.

\textsuperscript{152} According to the data collected by Li Hsiao-ning, among the five most prolific courtesan writers, namely Jing Pianpian 景翩翩 (fl. 1570’s), Xue Tao, Ma Shouzhen, Xue Susu, and Zhao Jinyan, four of them are of the Ming dynasty (Jing, Ma, Zhao, Xue Susu), and three of them are from Nanjing (Ma, Zhao, Xue Susu).
interact with each other? What was the relationship between courtesans’ own writings, popular handbooks for brothel visitors, and the categories and comments by literati? How were the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans represented through the complicated juxtaposition of different media, perspectives, and language registers?

_Gujin qinglou ji_ is a Nanjing work co-edited by a literatus and a celebrity courtesan, both from the Qinhui pleasure quarter of Nanjing. The earliest known participation of a courtesan in an anthology-compilation, _Gujin qinglou ji_ has long been ignored due to confusion caused by another well-known text compiled by Xia Tiangzhi 夏庭芝 (fl. ca. 14th Century) of the same title. Differing from _Qinglou yunyu_, _Gujin qinglou ji_ reveals the agency of a courtesan co-compiler who anthologized the writings of her courtesan predecessors and fellows in chronological order and under genre categories, which had long been the traditional format of male literati’s collections and anthologies. Arranged in this way, _Gujin qinglou ji_ not only presents the lineage of courtesan writers along with their tradition and innovation, but it also provides a comprehensive picture of courtesan writers by including poetic and narrative genres by courtesan celebrities whose poems pervaded contemporary anthologies alongside letters from mediocre courtesans with relatively lower literacy. Chapter Three focuses on how a courtesan was involved in editing the writings and presenting the images of her group. It explores how the courtesan dealt with the conflict between being comprehensive to include more courtesan writers and cover diverse genres and being selective to elevate their position in contemporary literature and carve a niche in the history of literature.

Chapter Four takes a case study of the famous Nanjing courtesan Yang Wan who represented the type of “misty flowers” that crossed the social boundary of a courtesan and gentry woman and “floated” from the pleasure quarter into the inner chamber. Yang Wan married a male literatus as a concubine and later became his principal wife and the mistress of the gentry household. After her husband died, Yang Wan remarried a notorious royal relative and was later killed by bandits while trying to leave the fallen capital to return to Nanjing during the Ming-Qing transition. The value of this case study lies in the legendary transformation of Yang Wan’s identity and how it was perceived by herself and interpreted by the mostly male literati not only of her time but for decades and centuries later.
Yang Wan is the subject of this case study for several reasons. First, her identities of both courtesan and gentry lady are representative of her time. As a courtesan, Yang Wan gained all the resources to be a celebrity. Beautiful, graceful, and skilled in calligraphy, painting, and poetry, Yang Wan was from a famous and well-connected courtesan household in the Qinhuaí pleasure quarter known for producing many courtesan celebrities ranked highly in the *huabang* 花榜 (flower-ranking texts). As a gentry lady, her first marriage into a local gentry household lasted for decades, and as a family woman, she was a wife, mother, stepmother, daughter, sister, and mistress. Second, writings about and by Yang Wan are widely available. Yang Wan’s poems were compiled into four collections and prefaced by her first husband and handed down to the present, with many selected for various anthologies of the Ming, Qing and Republican periods. Biographical notes and compilers’ commentaries on her poetry are available either in modern reprints or in rare collections of libraries. This accessibility to source material renders it possible to compare Yang Wan’s voice against that of others. Chapter Four addresses how the change of her identity was perceived by herself and others, as well as how the transformation of her image was represented in her own poetry collections which were compiled and prefaced by her husband, in the writings about her by her husband at different stages of his own life, and in anthologies with added biographical notes and commentaries by literati of and after her time.
Chapter One: Anthologizing Images of the Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing

Although many renowned late-Ming courtesans began to publish their own individual collections, it is not easy to glean literary writings of courtesans in earlier periods of the Ming dynasty. Lacking the established mechanics that were used to preserve male literati’s writings, the literary works of courtesans were usually scattered about in biji, recorded by chance in fragments. The anthologies can thus be viewed as much more substantial and reliable sources, especially for our research on courtesans in earlier periods of the Ming dynasty whose works were not compiled into individual collections extant or otherwise.

The significance of compiling anthologies has long been acknowledged. Ever since the Grand Historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 BCE-?) attributed the compiling of Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry) to Confucius, poetry compilation had become a cultural tradition throughout imperial China and was highly regarded as the most privileged of literary practices to uphold the poetic standard of the time, to collect and preserve the fine lines scattered amongst various records, and to display the best writings representative of one region and/or one dynasty. The functions of compiling poetry anthologies were highlighted by the meticulous editors of Siku quanshu 四庫全書 (Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries) in the Qing dynasty.

The writings and books were prospering day by day, [but] scattered without being organized and recorded, thereupon the anthologies were created. On the one hand, to seek and collect those discarded and lost, making fragmentary works and incomplete pieces all have their due places; on the other hand, to eliminate and sift out the redundant and disordered, making the undesirable and trivial all be removed, and the best stand out. Thus, [the anthologies are] the yardstick of texts [and] the fountainhead of works.

文籍日興,散無統紀,於是總集作焉。一則網羅放佚,使零章殘什,並有所歸;一則刪汰繁蕪,使莠稗咸除,菁華畢出。是故文章之衡鑑,著作之渊藪矣。153

According to the extant historical record, during the Ming dynasty, there were about 8000 literati in total who were involved in literary composition, while only about 2000 of them had their individual collections passed down to us.154 For the writers who had no individual collections or whose individual collections had long been lost, readers of later generations could only rely on various anthologies to appreciate their literary

153 Ji Yun, Siku quanshu zongmu, juan 5, 1.
154 Ma Hanqin, Mingdai shige zongji yu xuanji yanjiu, 1.
works and perceive their life story. Anthologies provide us with a window into the comprehensive landscape of poetic creation by writers of different literary styles, intellectual schools, and social strata.

It is not coincidental that the first group of courtesans emerging from anonymity with their images fully unfolded to us are the Ming Nanjing courtesans whose writings were anthologized. The selection of their poems in anthologies became a model for further anthologizing courtesans in and out of Nanjing. Compared with the freestyle *biji*, anthology-compilation has its long-established convention which devotes to preserving and transmitting the selected writings along with their writers and their biographical information, the categorization of selections and the allocation of anthological space, and sometimes the provision of punctuation, highlighting marks, and comments. It is a process of creating and reconfiguring the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans by gathering and organizing fragmented and “floating” materials, such as the anecdotes in *biji*, brief records in art history, and the well-circulated hearsays from casual conversations. If there was none of these kinds of materials that existed for the courtesans under compilation, the anthologist may transplant these “floating” materials from other courtesans, or invent brand new materials which could later “float” into other anthologies. Examining the selection and organization of literary works by courtesans in later anthologies shows both the norm established by the first cluster of anthologies that included Ming Nanjing courtesans’ writings, and the appropriation and development of their literary styles and images among later generations of courtesans in and outside of Nanjing. In this floating world of texts the creation, circulation, and reception of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images went through continuous attachment and detachment of contexts, unceasing coding and decoding of cultural meanings, and ongoing discourse of talent, power, gender, and sexuality.

1. **Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in General Anthologies**

Among the most famous general anthologies compiled in the Ming dynasty, some stand out for their special attention to women writers. However, comparing the unprecedented number of women writers that appeared in the Ming dynasty, the editorial practice of these general anthologies which treated women’s poetry as a marginal category has proven to be inadequate in revealing the literary achievement of women in the Ming dynasty who were enthusiastically involved in writing and reading.
One of the most influential anthologies is *Sheng Ming baijia shi* (One Hundred Poets of the High Ming, preface dated 1571), compiled by Yu Xian 俞憲 (jinshi 1538), a native of Jiangsu. It consists of one juan devoted to Ming women’s poetry, a slim collection entitled *Shuxiu zongji* (General Collection of Virtuous Ladies) coming after the monks. Both the limited number of the selected women’s poetry (compared to his own vast compilation of mainstream male literati’s writings) and the marginal textual position attest to Yu Xian’s view on women’s literature which is clearly stated in the “Fanli” 凡例 (General Principle).

Women’s poetry should be discussed separately, and the amount is not large, thus [I] only collected and appended [them] to the [male] poets, making it clear that [they are] not what is to be highly regarded, but merely because [they are] different. 女婦詩自當別論，數且不多，故但彙集以附諸家之後，明非所重，亦祗以異耳。156

Yu Xian indicated a separate standard should be applied when judging and selecting women’s poetic writings, which he reiterated in the preface to *Shuxiu zongji* by demonstrating his editorial intention as preserving the diverse legacy of the Ming dynasty instead of appreciating women’s literary achievement.

Among the seventeen women whose poems were selected, only four have their own names recorded, all from gentry families. For most of the rest, they were identified by their surnames. The exception was the only courtesan selected whose poem ends this volume. She was recorded as a courtesan from Huai’an 淮安妓 because even her surname was unknown to Yu Xian, who gave her this name very likely due to the first line of her own poem: “The grasses by Huai [River] are green, the water of Huai is muddy” (淮草青青淮水渾).

The lack of name, as Grace S. Fong pointed out, is a counter element for canonization, “[n]ear anonymous women with the single poems do not transform into canonical authors, no matter how frequently they are anthologized.”157

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155 Based on the prefaces written by Yu Xian and Huangfu Fang 皇甫汸 (1497-1582), Ma Hanqin surmised that Yu Xian began his compilation in 1563 when he retired from the official post and finished the “Qian bian” 前編 (the Former Compilation) in 1566. One year after (1567), Yu started the “Hou bian” 後編 (the Later Compilation), and he completed this project in the year 1571. Apart from *Shuxiu zongji*, four individual collections of women writers are included in the “Hou bian.” See Ma Hanqin, *Mingdai shige zongji yu xuanji yanjiu*, 36.
156 Yu Xian, “Fanli,” vol. 304, 403.
157 Fong, “Gender and the Failure of Canonization,” 135.
marginal status of women writers is fully revealed in this general anthology through the statement of editorial intention, the textual position and space allocated to women’s poetry, as well as the anonymity of the women writers which prevented them from carving a niche in literature history.

Almost at the same time, Gu Qilun 顧起綸 (1517-1587), also from Wuxi of Jiangsu, was working on another general anthology entitled Guo ya 國雅 (The Elegance of the State, preface dated 1573), in which we can sense a different view on women’s literature which reflected the diverse attitudes toward women’s education and literary creation in the Ming dynasty.

In the “Fanli,” the compiler Gu Qilun explained why he changed the general practice in anthology compilation, and removed women’s poetry from the very end to the less marginal place of that before the Daoists and Buddhists.

I observed the Six Poets of the Tang and the Graded Compendium [of Tang Poetry]. They both put the palace ladies and gentry women behind the immortals and Buddhists, which is in accord with historical precedents. Only the National Gazetteer of our Ming put the notable women before the immortals and Buddhists, [which] slightly differentiates those in and out of this worldly realm.

This is a breakthrough in organizing historical documents and literary texts. The differentiation of mundane and ultra-mundane goes before the gender segregation. This principle of textual organization is followed by many later monumental general anthologies, such as the most comprehensive one in the Ming dynasty, Shicang lidai shixuan 石倉歷代詩選 (Shicang’s Selections of Poetry through the Ages) by Cao Xuequan 曹學佺 (1574-1646).

Guo ya also devoted one volume entitled Gui ya 閨雅 (The Elegance of the Boudoir) to women writers. Although the poems by courtesans were put together at the very end of this volume, all the courtesan writers selected had their names recorded whilst most gentry women writers remained unknown to readers. Among the twenty-five women poets selected, four are recorded as courtesans and all of them are from the pleasure quarters of Nanjing. These four courtesans are all identified by their names: Lin Nu’er 林奴兒, Zhao Yanru 趙燕如, Jiang Shunyu 姜舜玉, and Wang Wenqing 王

Courtesan writers from Nanjing became the first group of courtesans emerging from anonymity in the Ming dynasty.

Lin Nu’er, literary name Qiuxiang, a courtesan of the Court [of Abundant Pleasures] in Nanjing during the Chenghua reign [1464-1487].
Zhao Yanru, a courtesan of the [Court Entertainment] Bureau in Nanjing during the Jiajing reign [1521-1566].
Jiang Shunyu, literary name Hermit of Bamboo and Snow, a courtesan of the [Court Entertainment] Bureau during the Longqing reign [1567-1572], skilled in poetry and regular script.
Wang Wenqing, literary name Saiyu, a courtesan of the [Court Entertainment] Bureau in Nanjing during the reigns of Jiajing [1521-1566] and Longqing [1567-1572].

The sources of the selected poems are difficult to trace—they may be chosen from these courtesans’ individual collections and other anthologies circulated at that time, or gathered from biji and huabang. This anthology, well published and widely circulated, becomes an important source for later literary productions. It is on the book list that Mei Dingzuo 梅鼎祚 (1549-1615) cited as references for compiling Qingni lianhua ji 青泥蓮花紀 (Record of Lotuses in the Dark Mud, 1602), a record of courtesans’ life stories and literary works. Moreover, there is no extant anthology before Guo ya that records poetic writings by courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing identified by their names; while many later women’s anthologies select the same poems of these four courtesans to represent literary creation before the Wanli reign. Literati’s obsession with romantic legend is reflected in their contextualization of selected poems, and the transmission of the poems is also integrated into the process of expanding the contextual narratives and developing the malleable images. This process of expanding and developing is based on two foundations—discovery of new materials and creation from old materials. In most cases, it is impossible to differentiate these two foundations, not only because of the lack of evidence, but also due to their intertwining and interweaving nature.

The image of Lin Nu’er is fleshed out from that of talented courtesan skilled in painting who later married a semi-professional painter and stayed loyal to him. This image of talent coupled with loyalty was the courtesans’ idealized mode of self-

159 Gu Qilun, Guo ya, 659.
representation in poetry, highlighted and developed by anthologists in their contextualization of the selected poems. Lin was said to have learned painting from reputed teachers and possessed distinctive personal style. In Guo ya, Lin’s single selected poem is framed within a story that explains how and why this poem was created: “There was an old pal who wished to see her after [she] got married, [she] declined by painting a willow and writing a poem on a fan” (從良有舊欲相見，以扇畫柳題拒之).161 The purported compiler Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574-1624) selected the same poem (Sources of Notable Women’s Poetry, ca. 1625),162 and praised her fidelity although still identifying her as “a courtesan of Jinling [Nanjing]” (金陵妓).163 In the most comprehensive women’s anthology entitled Mingyuan shiwei 名媛詩緯 (Classics of Poetry by Notable Women, 1667), Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621-ca. 1706) listed the source materials to which she had referred for her record of Lin Nu’er, such as Mingyuan shigui, Gonggui shishi 宮閨詩史 (Poetry History of Palace and Gentry [Women]), and Minggui zhengsheng 明詩正聲 (Standard Voices of Ming Poetry, 1591). None predate Guo ya or include more information than Guo ya reveals to us. In Mingyuan shiwei, Wang Duanshu pointed out the last two lines were actually borrowed from the linked verse (lianju shi 聯句詩) of Xie Tianxian 謝天香.164 Xie is the courtesan protagonist in Guan Hanqing’s 關漢卿 (1219-1301) play on the romance of this imaginary courtesan and the famous writer of ci-lyrics, Liu Yong 柳永 (984-1053), in the Song dynasty.

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161 Gu Qilun, Guo ya, 659.
162 Some Qing scholars, such as Wang Shizhen, doubted that Zhong Xing was the editor because the anthology contains works with questionable authorship. See Ji Yun, Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao, juan 193, 4301. However, Kang-i Sun Chang points out that in the Ming dynasty, the tradition of women’s anthologies was in its infancy; thus editorial inexactitude is understandable. She also notices that juan 34 of the anthology contains 81 poems by Bo Shaojun 薄少君 (?-1625) that were not written and published until 1625 and 1626, at least one year after Zhong Xing died. This evidence, according to Chang, suggests that while the collection may have been put together by bookdealers who did not understand much about scholarship, is not sufficient to veto the possibility that Zhong Xing did edit Mingyuan shigui, but bookdealers later added more material before publication. See Chang, “Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women’s Poetry and Their Selection Strategies,” 151-52. Grace S. Fong suggests that Zhong Xing’s younger friend, Tan Yuanchun 譚元春 (1586-1637), might have a hand in its compilation given their prior collaboration and the inclusion of an unusually large number of poems by Tan’s lover, the courtesan poet Wang Wei 王微 (ca. 1600-ca. 1647). See Fong, “Gender and the Failure of Canonization,” 146. Based on the evidence, this dissertation takes Zhong Xing as the attributed compiler and allows the possibility that he may be the actual compiler, or chief among many compilers, of Mingyuan shigui.
163 Zhong Xing, Mingyuan shigui, 406.
164 Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, juan 19, 2b.
Wang might have made a mistake here since there is no linked verse in that play at all, or perhaps they have been lost in transmission. However, Xie Tianxiang’s poem was borrowed by another courtesan in Nanjing during the Zhengde reign (1505-1521), and was recorded in all extant Ming women’s anthologies which include poems by Ming Nanjing courtesans, including Mingyuan ji’’nang 名媛璣囊 (Bag of Pearls of Notable Women, 1595), Mingyuan huishi 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan shigui 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan shigui 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan shigui 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan huishi 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan huishi 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan huishi 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620), Mingyuan huishi 名媛彙詩 (Classified Poetry by Notable Women, 1620). The anthologists did not record her name, but circulated a short background introduction with this poem entitled “Yong shaizi” 詠骰子 (Verse on Dice), telling readers that she improvised this poem in a literati gathering, but actually she appropriated the poem from the courtesan protagonist Xie Tianxiang in Guan’s play with slight changes. Many readers of Guan’s play have noticed that the courtesan protagonist Xie Tianxiang has her prototypes in real life. For example, her sigh before a parrot, comparing herself with a caged parrot that needed to please others for a living reminds us of the famous courtesan Zhou Shao 周韶 in the Song dynasty who regained freedom from a prefect by improvising a poem about a white parrot applying the same self-referential metaphor. The mutual borrowing and continuous appropriation between courtesans as historical and literary figures blurred the boundary of reality and imagination.

Tang Shuyu 湯漱玉 of the Qing dynasty painted a full picture of Lin Nu’er’s life by assembling all the available details. One of the source materials that she used was entitled Ming shuhua shi 明書畫史 (History of Calligraphy and Painting in the Ming, 1515). Predating Guo ya by half a century, it offers us another name of Lin Nu’er, “Lin Jinlan gave herself the literary name One in the Autumn Fragrance Pavilion. [She was] a courtesan of the southern capital. Her paintings of landscape and figure followed Ma Yuan [ca. 1140 - after 1225]. Although the strength of brush has not arrived, [such standard is] also not easily obtained among women” (林金蘭，自號秋香亭中人，南都妓也。畫山水人物宗馬遠，筆力雖未至，亦女流所難得). Following this line on her artistic talent, Tang Shuyu added another piece of information in Jinling suoshi

166 For the story of Zhou Shao, see Mei Dingzuo, Qingni lianhua ji, 725.
167 Quoted by Tang Shuyu, Yutai huashi, 70.
金陵瑣事 (Jinling Trifles, 1610) to trace her artistic learning, “[She] learned painting from Shi Tingzhi and Wang Yuanfu. [Her] brush is the most clear and sleek” (學畫於史廷直、王元父二人，筆最清潤). The relationship between courtesans and male literati is much more complicated than described in romantic anecdotes. While gentry women in the Ming dynasty were educated within the inner chamber according to familial line, the Ming courtesans were the first group of female students to be educated in a broader context. It is undeniable that romantic and amorous undertones existed in interactions and communication between male literati and talented courtesans. When Lin Nu’er sent her painting to the famous literatus-painter Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509) for guidance and comments, Shen inscribed on her painting a *ci*-lyric to the tune of “Linjiang xian” 臨江仙 (Immortal by the River) to praise her artistic talent. At the end of this lyric, Shen revealed that he did not merely appreciate her talent, “[I] have not met [you] but already feel utmost concern. [I] only worry the day when [we] meet, the blossom aged and the oriole will resent” (未曾相見盡關情，只憂相見日，花老怨鶯鶯). Blossom and oriole are both common images of spring scene in premodern Chinese literature, closely connected with love and desire. As we have read in *Guo ya*, Lin Nu’er once painted a willow to decline an old pal who still wanted to visit her after she got married. Willow is a frequently used metaphor for courtesans but once being painted on a painting, Lin viewed its artistic image differently from its counterpart in real life for the reason that the artistic transformation made it impossible to be sexually stirred anymore. However, in the eyes of Shen Zhou, a courtesan’s painting itself was sexually-coded, inviting romantic expectation and amorous imagination.

Not all the courtesans were as fortunate as Lin Nu’er whose name was recorded not only in *Guo ya* but also in many other extant materials. Our knowledge about the life and poetry of Jiang Shunyu is mostly limited within the information provided in *Guo ya*. However, her literary name was shown as Zhuyun jushi 竹雲居士 (Hermit of Bamboo and Cloud) instead of Zhuxue jushi 竹雪居士 (Hermit of Bamboo and Snow) in some copies of later anthologies such as *Mingyuan shigui* and *Mingyuan shiwei*. This is likely caused by transcriptions errors. Both names reveal her strong literati leanings and hint that her image should be regarded as similar to male elite. In *Mingyuan shiwei*,

169 Ibid.
the compiler Wang Duanshu, who was also an important woman writer in the late Ming and early Qing, briefly added her marriage to her biographical sketch,\(^{170}\) while in *Mingyuan shigui*, short comments were appended to her two selected poems which showed sympathy towards her forlorn hope and miserable fate, but also pointed out the possibility of artificiality in her poetic expression.\(^ {171}\)

There is more detailed biographical information about Wang Wenqing left to us due to her top ranking in a sensational gathering of literati and courtesans held by Cao Dazhang 曹大章 (1521-1575) in Nanjing in 1570. Wang Wenqing won the title of *nü xueshi* 女學士 (female Chancellor [of the Hanlin Academy]). Compared with Jiang Shunyu, whose literary names were intended to ally her with her male counterparts, Wang Wenqing further developed this idealized image through her personality as represented in many sources. In the biography written by Nanhai jushi 南海居士 (Hermit of the Southern Sea), her talent in literary writing is not mentioned, instead her sexuality and beauty, demeanour and cleverness are vividly described, serving as a charming twist to her personality which is described in the biography as being similar to a member of the lofty male elite, obsessed with literature and history and appreciating true talent rather than wealth and power. Pan Zhiheng 潘之恆 (1556-1622) selected this biography for *Gen shi* 丘史 (Extended History),\(^ {172}\) and also borrowed information from this biography when he composed *Quzhong zhi* 曲中志 (Records of the [Pleasure] Quarter), but added the death of Wang at the end: “Later [she] followed the Student Jiang of the National University who was violent-tempered and not refined. [She] eventually died of melancholy and depression” (後從蔣太學，戾而不文，竟鬱邑以死).\(^ {173}\)

The two selected poems in *Guo ya* were respectively sent to her two lovers, Mr Jiang 蔣子 and Lover Wu 吳郎 in which she revealed her anxiety over the transience of life and the vicissitude of love.\(^ {174}\) This anxiety, as Wang Duanshu pointed out, was shared by many courtesans. In the poem sent to Wu, she sharply complained about Wu’s betrayal and showed her resolve to end their relationship, which could be


\(^{172}\) Pan Zhiheng, *Gen shi*, vol. zi 子 193, 524.

\(^{173}\) Pan Zhiheng, *Quzhong zhi*, 2046.

\(^{174}\) Gu Qilun, *Guo ya*, 659.
expected from her image shaped in the biography as a tough, gusty woman, who possessed the virtue of a *shi* 士 (scholar), never yielding to power and money. In the poem sent to Jiang, she expressed her eagerness to marry him, which finally led to her miserable death. The titles and the content of these two poems actually outlined her emotional experience and life course. For these courtesan poets, poetry was not only written for self-expression or social courtesy, but also an activity woven into their daily life and impacting their life trajectory. Wang Duanshu produced her biography largely based on these two poems: “Wang Saiyu, courtesy name Ruqing, another courtesy name Wenqing. [She] is a native of Nanjing and fond of classics and histories. At first [she] was on good terms with Wu Shaonan. Later [she] married the Student Jiang Zhisheng of the National University” (王賽玉，字儒卿，又字文卿，南京人，嗜書史，初與吳少南善，後歸蔣太學芝生)。

Zhao Yanru’s niece Zhao Liancheng 趙連城 also attended the same gathering with Wang Wenqing and was ranked as *nü huikui* 女會魁 (Female Metropolitan Graduate with Distinction). In the biography written for Zhao Liancheng by Scholar Dongfang 東方生, Zhao Yanru was depicted as an ideal model whom Zhao Liancheng made every effort to imitate. The Zhao family had a reputation in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing. Zhao Yanru’s father Zhao Rui was said to have served the Emperor Wuzong in the Zhengde reign with his remarkable skill in singing songs of the music bureau. Zhao Yanru was registered with the Court Entertainment Bureau at the age of thirteenth *suì*. She was capable of composing short *ci*-lyrics which then were adapted into [tunes of] stringed instruments (父銳以善歌樂府供奉康陵，如燕年十三錄籍教坊，能綴小詞，被人絃索). Among the four courtesan writers of Ming dynasty Nanjing, she is the only one whose capability in literary creation is mentioned in the biography. Zhao Yanru is also different from the other three courtesan poets with respect to her poem being selected in *Guo ya* not being the same as those of hers selected in later anthologies. This means she wrote more than a couple of poems and they were very likely widely circulated and well preserved. It might be attributed to the close relationship her family maintained with the Court Entertainment Bureau as

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175 Wang Duanshu, *Mingyuan shiwei*, juan 19, 2b. The introduction in *Mingyuan shiwei* is slightly different from that in *Guo ya*. In *Guo ya*, Wang Wenqing was recorded as the personal name and Saiyu as the literary name.
revealed in her biography. This close relationship facilitated the adaptation of her poetry into musical form which is an effective means of transmission.

Not only in musical form, her literary writings and artistic compositions were also transmitted in the form of inscriptions on fans and ink-stones which were even handed down to the literati of the Qing dynasty. Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629-1709) mentioned the fan he obtained by chance on which two poems of hers were handwritten by herself in kaishu 楷書 (regular script). These two poems are also recorded in many anthologies.

感君寄吳牋，
上雙飛鵲。
但效鵲雙飛，
不效吳牋薄。

Moved by your letter from Wu,
On it a pair of flying magpies.
Just imitate the magpies paired in flight,
Not Wu paper’s flimsiness.

On Separation
妾舟西發君舟東，
頃刻天生兩處風。
此去雲山天際渺，
寸心千里附冥鴻。

My boat goes west, yours east,
In an instant heaven brings forth wind from two directions.
Once leaving for Cloudy mountain, the edge of the sky is indistinct,
Our hearts, across a thousand li, entrusted to the soaring wild geese.

The first one which was written upon receiving a letter from her lover, shows her wish to be together with him like the pair of magpies printed on the letter paper, while worrying that his passion for her would cool down due to their long separation. The other one expresses her reluctance to part from her lover. After eulogizing her extraordinary calligraphy, Zhu further introduced the content of Zhao’s inscription on the fan, which not only offered us the context of the artistic creation, but also the personality of Zhao Yanru: “On the Mid-Autumn of the yimao year [1555] with the Recluse of the Western Pond and Scholar of Mount Zhi, [we] gathered at the Heaven Fragrance Book House by the Sea. [When I] finished writing this, [I] heard the General Ren won an overwhelming victory over enemies in Lujingba, and had already led the army back in triumph. [It is] also a joyful event” (乙卯中秋同西池徵君，質山學士集海濱天香書屋。書此竟，聞任兵憲在陸涇壩御寇大捷，奏凱回戈，亦快事也). 177

177 Zhu Yizu, Jingzhiju shihua, 762.
178 Ibid.
This inscription reminds Zhu Yizun of the biography written for Zhao Yanru by Shen Jiaze (沈嘉則 1518-1596): “Although Zhao is a beauty in the pleasure quarters, if she was a man, she would not be inferior to [the renowned knights-errant] Ju Meng and Zhu Jia” (趙雖平康美人，使其鬚眉，當不在劇孟朱家下). The juxtaposition of her handwritten poetry and inscription on a single fan combined her strikingly different poetic style and military concern. The poetry represents a sentimental young woman sick with love, suffering from separation in a feminine voice indicated by the conventional feminine self-deprecatory term qie 妾 (your handmaid), while the inscription shows a scholar-like image, enjoying literati gatherings and contemplating military affairs in a masculine voice indicated by the way in which she addressed her male literati friends and the tone in which she exclaimed for victory.

Her poem selected in Guo ya entitled “Dongye bie Gu canjun xishang de chun zi” 冬夜別顧參軍席上得春字 ([I] was assigned the character “Spring” [to use as a rhyming word] in the farewell party for Adjutant Gu on a winter night) shows a different style from the two handwritten poems on the fan.

| 舉酒憐心舊， | Raising wine, holding dear our hearts of old, |
| 看衣識淚新。 | Looking at [our] clothes, [we] see tears new. |
| 才為詩酒友， | Having just become poetry-and-wine friends, |
| 又作別離人。 | Once more are parting ones. |
| 今夜一天月， | Tonight, the moon fills the sky, |
| 明朝兩地春。 | Tomorrow morn, spring in two [different] places. |
| 好因江上柳， | Take advantage of these riverside willows, |
| 折得寄頻頻。180 | Break [some] off and send frequently. |

Although sharing the same topic of parting, this poem does not assume the feminine voice of a sentimental lover, but takes the role as a literatus friend. The emotional connection between the Adjutant Gu and herself shown in this poem is not romantic attachment but the intimacy between two like-minded friends both obsessed with poetry and wine. Wang Duanshu attributed Zhao’s masculine voice to her heroic personality by incorporating these two features in one comment: “Yanru was generous and gallant, unconstrained by formalities. Even a thousand ounces of gold would not make her mind change. [She] was highly esteemed within the seas like this. [Her] poetry is virile and

179 Ibid.  
180 Gu Qilun, Guo ya, 659.
powerful and does not possess the feature of powder and kohl” (蓋燕如為人豪爽任俠，不拘小節。雖千金亦不易心，其為海內所重如此。詩雄健，無粉黛氣). 181

Wang Duanshu’s remarks on her poetic style are greatly influenced by many of her biographies written by male literati in which they unanimously emphasized the heroic aspect of her image, “[She] associated with famous scholars, threw away all the powder and kohl, closed the gate and shut out visitors. While regarding the association of gentlemen with her, their mutual affection was like that of brother and sister” (與名士...遊，盡捐粉黛，杜門謝客。而諸君與之遊玩，愛好若兄妹). 182 However, the self-image Zhao Yanru strived to construct is no single facet, but a combination of seductive courtesan, talented literatus, and heroic knight-errant. Her name Zhao Yanru hints that she modelled herself after the femme fatale Zhao Feiyan, an entertainer of low birth who managed to climb the social ladder through her extraordinary beauty and superb dancing skill. Zhao Yanru further made it more explicit by calling herself “Zhaoyang dian zhong ren” (the One in the Zhaoyang Palace) since Zhao Feiyan was said to live in the splendid Zhaoyang Palace when she received special favour from the Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE). 183

Apart from Zhao Feiyan, in a poem Zhao Yanru wrote while drinking with her literati friends, she compared herself with the celebrated beauty Nan Wei 南威 in the Spring and Autumn period. In the same poem, she also expressed her frustration for not being able to be the knight-errant Zhao 趙俠 despite sharing with him the same interest in hosting worthy visitors. 184 Another poem entitled “Gongsun daniang wujian xing ze 周公瑕” (A Song Following Zhou Gongxia on Mistress Gongsun’s Sword Dance), which is selected for many anthologies including Qinglou yunyu and will be minutely discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, also exemplified her poetic style of combining feminine and masculine voices in which the enticement of the female dancer and the strength of the sword dance were both depicted and admired in alternate lines. 185

181 Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, juan 24, 12b.
182 Ibid.
183 Zhu Yizun, Jingzhiju shihua, 762.
184 Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, juan 24, 13b.
185 Ibid., 13a.
The androgynous images shaped by Zhao Yanru, combining that of female knight-errant, like-minded literatus-friend, and the more stereotypical image of a charming courtesan, separated from her lover and pining away with lovesickness, were imitated and developed by many courtesans of later generations, among them the most famous are Xue Susu and Liu Rushi. Xue Susu represented an ideal image of a courtesan during the Wanli reign, when both courtesan cultivation and literati culture reached their peak. As a distinguished student of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), Xue Susu was versatile in literature, calligraphy, painting, music, and martial arts. Moreover, she was also famous for embroidering, once a reserved field for gentry ladies, and she was the only female chess-player recorded in history as professional. The androgynous image of Liu Rushi has been visualized in two portraits that were handed down to our generation. One depicted her as an alluring beauty and the other rendered her as a cross-dressed refined scholar.

2. Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Women’s Anthologies

Kang-i Sun Chang once pointed out in her pioneering article on Ming and Qing women’s anthologies that the blind spot in general conception and methodology prevented researchers from locating the right poems and other source materials.186 It is true that compared with anthologies which record women’s works exclusively, “standard” anthologies marginalized women’s poetry through reducing the number of poems selected and placing them at the end, which “makes for a misleading profile of women’s place in Ming and Qing literature.”187 The “standard” anthologies Chang mentioned, “Zhu Yizun’s Mingshi zong (1701), Shen Deqian’s Mingshi biecai ji (1739) and Qingshi biecai ji (1760), Zhang Yingchang’s Qingshiduo (1869), Ding Shaoyi’s Qingci zong bu (1894), and Xu Shichang’s Qing shi hui (1929)”188 are all Qing and even Republican compilations, none of them is a Ming product.

If we conduct a comparison between the general anthologies and the women’s anthologies in the Ming dynasty, we can find that both of them revealed the same trace of development in women’s poetry, and the general anthologies provided important source materials to women’s anthologies, especially before the Wanli reign. A quick glance at several early anthologies leads us to the fact that the selection of Ming women

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186 Chang, ““Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women’s Poetry and Their Selection Strategies,”” 148.
187 Ibid., 149.
188 Ibid., 148.
poets and their writings are almost the same in general anthologies and women’s anthologies. However, their difference is undeniable. In general anthologies, the women’s part seems like an appendix—attached at the end with a comparatively smaller amount; while in women’s anthologies, although Ming women and their poetry are still placed at the end, the chronological arrangement of selected poets and their writings shows the editorial attempt to establish a distinctive history of women’s literature.

When it comes to courtesans’ writings in the Ming dynasty, *Guo ya*, a standard general anthology, turns out to be the earliest extant anthology including poems written by Ming courtesans with these courtesan poets’ full names recorded. In early women’s anthologies before the seventeenth century, there are merely three anonymous and semi-anonymous courtesans included: a poem without a title written by Huai’an ji 淮安妓 (a courtesan of Huai’an [in present Jiangsu province]) was selected in *Shi nüshi* 詩女史 (Lady Scholars of Poetry, preface dated 1557), compiled by Tian Yiheng 田藝衡 (1524 – after 1583), which is the earliest extant women’s anthology that includes Ming courtesans’ writings.\(^{189}\) The same poem of this Huai’an ji was given a title “Song juzi fujing yingshi” 送舉子赴京應試 (Seeing off a Graduate Candidate to the Capital for Examination) when selected to be included in (*Gusu xinke*) *Tongguan yibian* (姑蘇新刻 彤管遺編 (Compilation of Works Left by Red Writing Brushes [Newly Printed in Gusu], 1567), compiled by Li Hu 醒琥.\(^{190}\) *Mingyuan ji ’nang* compiled by Chishang ke 池上客 (pseudonym) in 1595 includes two anonymous/semi-anonymous courtesans. One is recorded as Jinling zhengdejian ji 金陵正德間妓 (Jinling [Nanjing] courtesan in the Zhengde reign) whose appropriated poem entitled “Yong shaizi” 有聲筳亇 has been discussed previously.\(^{191}\) The other one is also a Nanjing courtesan named Cuiqiao 翠翹 whose poem is recorded without a title.\(^{192}\)

We have to wait until the first year of the Taichang reign (1620) to see the emergence of Ming courtesans with known names in women’s anthologies. *Mingyuan huishi*, compiled by Zheng Wen’ang 鄭文昂, is the earliest extant women’s anthology to record the names of Ming courtesan poets. It includes the two earlier anonymous and

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\(^{189}\) Tian Yiheng, *Shi nüshi*, 788.

\(^{190}\) Li Hu, *Tongguan yibian*, vol. 30, 650.


\(^{192}\) Ibid.
semi-anonymous courtesans—Jinling courtesan in the Zhengde reign and Cuiqiao. A similar case with the poem written by the courtesan of Huai’an, Cuiqiao’s poem in this anthology was given the title “Ji Zuo gong shi” 寄左公詩 (To Lord Zuo) probably through summarizing the content of this poem.¹⁹³ Not only had the courtesan writers emerged from anonymity, their poems did also.

One of the most distinctive features of Mingyuan huishi is its selection of contemporary courtesans with their names recorded. Among the eleven selected Ming courtesan poets (including one from Korea), eight have their full name recorded and six of them were from Nanjing, a generation later than the four Ming Nanjing courtesans who got their full names recorded in Guo ya. Nanjing courtesans in the Ming dynasty stand out conspicuously in public view through anthology compilation, publication, and transmission.

Nanjing, as the southern capital, linked many different regions relevant to printing and publishing. Famous Fujian publishers coveted Nanjing for its massive market with huge commercial opportunities, and thus made every effort to seek collaboration and even open branches in Nanjing. Anhui provided plenty of most skilled woodblock cutters and illustrators who frequently travelled to Nanjing where their work was much more lucrative.¹⁹⁴ The role of Anhui merchants cannot be underestimated in the network of commercial printing. They transported raw materials for low-cost paper-making to Nanjing, and circulated books produced in Nanjing among the broader Jiangnan area.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, this cross-regional collaboration could also be found in compiling and editing books, especially among the literati in the same poetry societies. They participated in this collective enterprise not only aimed at promoting their shared literary views, but also tried to profit from the publishing boom.

Mingyuan huishi exemplified this type of local production created and consumed beyond the local context. On the last page preceding the list of selected poets, Zheng Wen’ång recorded the members on his editorial board and their native places. Although most board members were from Anhui and Fujian, the anthology was compiled and printed in Nanjing as indicated in the preface written by Zhu Zhifan 朱之

¹⁹³ Zheng Wen’ång, Mingyuan huishi, 243.
¹⁹⁴ Lu, “The Literary Culture of the Late Ming (1573-1644),” 72
¹⁹⁵ Oki, Mingmo Jiangnan de chuban wenhua, 37-38.
藩 (1546-1624). Originally from Liaocheng 聊城 (in present Shandong province), Zhu spent most of his life in Nanjing and identified himself as a native of Nanjing by signing his paintings, calligraphy, and writings with “Jinling Zhu Zhifan” (金陵朱之蕃). His devotion to preserving and promoting Nanjing local culture is fully reflected in the book he compiled after retiring, which is entitled Jinling tuyong 金陵圖詠 (Illustrated Odes on Jinling, 1624). It combined poetic depiction, visual presentation, and short essays introducing historic and natural sites in Nanjing.

Further investigation into the biographical information of the board members reveals that most of them are also members of the two successive poetry societies in Nanjing, namely the Jinling sheji 金陵社集 (Society Gathering of Jinling) and Baimen xinshe 白門新社 (New Society of the White Gate). These poetry societies, consisting of male literati from different parts of China, not only provided occasions for them to meet and discuss issues of philosophy, literature, and politics, but also offered chances for courtesans to expand their networks and display their talents. Some talented courtesans were invited to participate in literati gatherings organized by the poetry society as a formal member instead of an entertainer. The shared aesthetic taste and collective poetic creation undoubtedly enhanced mutual appreciation between literati and courtesans and nurtured a sense of intimacy.

This mutual appreciation motivated the anthologists to include more and more courtesans’ works in their selection, and the intimate relationship between courtesans and literati which was established, maintained, and strengthened in various literati gatherings of different poetry societies provided a reliable avenue to collect and circulate courtesans’ poetry. Nanjing offered the most ideal site for romantic encounters,

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196 Both Gen shi and Liechao shiji xiaozhuan record that in a society gathering by the Qinhuai River of the year 1609, the Nanjing courtesan Zhu Taiyu 朱泰玉 was invited to write together with the male literati. Once her poem was composed, all the literati wanted to abandon their own writings. See Pan Zhiheng, Gen shi, vol. zi 子 193, 559. Qian Qianyi, Liechao shiji xiaozhuan, 767.
197 Sufeng Xu noticed two examples of courtesans attending poetry society meetings as literati-celebrities, “[the] shanren literatus Wang Ye 王野 once proposed to convince the noted courtesan Zhou Wen 周文 of Jiaxing (in present Zhejiang province) to join his society, the Huainan she 淮南社 of Yangzhou. He openly claimed that Zhou’s participation would enhance the reputation of their society (以張吾軍). His idea was applauded immediately by his society members, such as Lu Bi 陸弼 and Li Weizhen 李維桢. They helped prepare for the trip, buying a boat and clothes for him. Each of them composed four quatrains to see him off (諸公大喜, 相與買舟具裝, 各賦四絕句以祖其行). Wang Manrong, a multitalented courtesan, attracted many admirers. But after she developed a more serious relationship with a Mr. Zhang, other society members became disappointed and the society fell apart (社客稍稍星散).” See Sufeng Xu, “Lotus Flowers Rising from the Dark Mud,” 83-84.
literati gatherings, and book printing and publishing. All the factors work together to answer the question why Nanjing courtesans stood out to be the first group of visible and respectable courtesan poets with their names recorded in both general anthologies and women’s anthologies in the Ming dynasty. Thus the appearance of Mingyuan huishi, the earliest extant women’s anthology recording named courtesans, is a natural result of the cooperation of a matured literati culture and active cosmopolitan environment. Its popularity in the printed world and its influence on the construction and circulation of courtesans’ images thus can be postulated. Eight years later, another widely circulated women’s anthology entitled Gujin nüshi was published in Hangzhou and completely copied Mingyuan huishi in its selection of courtesan poets and their poems. Zhao Shijie 趙世杰, the compiler of Gujin nüshi, added another layer to his compilation by writing marginal and interlineal comments for almost all these poems. Zhao Shijie seemed to be a passionate reader of women’s anthologies, later becoming a compiler himself. In his statement of editorial principle, he criticized Tongguan yibian for its lack of insightful comments or discerning appraisal, and also spoke out about his dissatisfaction with Zhongqing ji 鐘情集 (Collection of Falling in Love) and Huaichun ji 懷春集 (Collection of Thinking of Love) for their including of forged women’s poems, which he said would not happen in his anthology.198

In Mingyuan huishi, the increased number of poems written by Nanjing courtesans who have their names and biographical notes recorded diversifies their images and frees them from stereotyped images created by previous works. The women’s anthologies before Mingyuan huishi only include a couple of anonymous courtesans’ poems, among which the poem by Jinling [Nanjing] courtesan in the Zhengde reign is actually an appropriation of a poem by a courtesan protagonist in a famous Yuan drama. This example on the one hand, shows the legacy of courtesan images transmitted and integrated beyond time and space, crossing the boundaries of real life and literary imagination; on the other hand, some doubt thus has been cast upon the authenticity of courtesans’ writings, or at least their originality. How creative could a courtesan be? What was the difference between this real Ming courtesan and the fictitious courtesan in a drama created hundreds years before in terms of personality and life experience?

Mingyuan huishi, by enlarging the number of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ poems and expanding the spectrum of poetic topics, introduces their different concerns under distinct circumstances in various writing styles. The traditional literary images permeated their poems but were placed in new context, attached with new meanings, and reformed by their personal touches. Ma Shouzhen shaped her lonely image in an open area, being separated from her lover.\(^{199}\) She framed her sexually-charged self-image in a pure world with clear water and luxuriant bamboo around her, rainbow and geese over an azure sky, which is more like an immortal realm than a mundane residence, and thus reminds readers of the conventional trope of yuxian 遇仙 (romantic encounters with goddesses). However, the same lonely image was transformed into a secluded orchid under the brush of Xue Susu, although growing among the weeds without others’ recognition, still proud of itself for bearing delicate fragrance.\(^{200}\) The orchid has long been a symbol of the upright gentleman from Li sao 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow) but is feminized in this poem as a graceful beauty in a deserted valley (konggu jiaren jueshi zi 空谷佳人絕世姿). The only poem touching upon the topic of missing and longing is written by Zhao Jinyan 趙今燕 of late Ming Nanjing, yet this poem is not sent to her lover, but to a courtesan friend who also resided in Nanjing while at that time she was travelling in Suzhou.\(^{201}\) Zhao recycled the conventional courtesan images in an innovative way. Instead of directly copying lines, she embedded the images of legendary Nanjing courtesans into her poem by using literary allusions such as those of Taoye 桃葉 and Mochou 莫愁. Yang Wan is an exception because at the time when Zheng Wen’ang set out to compile Mingyuan huishi, she had already married into a gentry family and her husband Mao Yuanyi 茅元儀 (1594-1640) was listed in the editorial board and was also a key member in the Nanjing poetry society. Thus differing from other courtesans, she was introduced as “a native of Changgan [Nanjing] whose courtesy name was Wanshu and married Mr Mao of the Western Wu” (字宛叔，長干人，歸西吳茅氏), without mentioning her previous identity as a Nanjing courtesan.\(^{202}\) Very few courtesans would touch upon family life in their writings as she did, but also not many gentry women would deal with this topic in the same way. One of her selected ci-lyrics to the tune “Man gong hua” 滿宮花

\(^{199}\) Zheng Wen’ang, Mingyuan huishi, 194.

\(^{200}\) Ibid.

\(^{201}\) Ibid.

(Flowers All over the Palace) describes a family dinner with her husband on a summer night and at the same time explores the understated amorousness of the inner chamber.203

Another striking feature of Mingyuan huishi in its selection is the increase of personal information revealed by the titles of the poems and the introductions before the poems, which not only enhanced the sense of authenticity, but also framed the reading and interpretation of these poems. The name of the person to whom a certain courtesan’s poem was sent is normally recorded in the title, as well as the occasion for which this certain poem was created. For example, the famous Ming Nanjing courtesan Hao Wenzhu’s 郝文珠 (fl. 1572-1620) poem is entitled “Song Zhang Longfu huan Min” 送張隆父還閩 (Seeing off Zhang Longfu back to Fujian), which indicates this poem was very likely composed in a farewell party for the departing literatus Zhang Longfu.204 The poem itself reads like a cliché but the title more or less individualized this poem, as well as personalized the otherwise ordinary voice and emotion.

Courtesans’ farewell poetry had grown into a highly formalized and conventionalized poetic category with frequently used and endlessly recycled tropes, rhetoric, images, and allusions by the Ming dynasty, which guaranteed that any courtesan with basic literary training could improvise a farewell poem on paper or stage. To distinguish her poem as having been authored by a talented courtesan writer possessing true sentiment and to make the anthology stand out and surpass the numerous similar ones, the courtesans and the compilers made efforts to leave a personal mark on the titles, biographic notes and background introductions, tying a piece of writing with a named writer and her private experience. For courtesans, probably in most cases, they wrote for certain occasions rather than out of the eagerness of self-expression which to a large degree erased the individuality of their poems of this sort, but this “individuality” was foregrounded in the late Ming culture and was a selling-point in the book market, which made it not only tempting but also necessary to provide the widely circulated and highly conventionalized poem with the paratext consisting of more detailed background and more personal settings.

203 Zheng Wen’ang, Mingyuan huishi, 262-263.
204 Ibid.
Sometimes, the “individuality” of a certain anthology is owed much to the erudite reader, who noted down his knowledge about a certain courtesan on the margin while reading her selected poems which may “float” into future anthologies. In this case, he was no longer a passive reader, but an active participant in the process of anthologizing by providing paratext and perspective, turning the book he was reading into a unique edition, and himself into a key link in the chain of production, circulation, and reception of courtesans’ images. Some of these notes are even handed down to the present. There is a hand-written introduction before the Nanjing courtesan Qi Jinyun’s poem entitled “Zeng Xiangshi Fu Chun Zheshu shi” (Poem Presented to the Government Student Fu Chun Being Exiled to Guard the Frontiers). This introduction sets the tone for the following poetic expression, in which a courtesan represents her self-image as a loyal lover.

Jinyun, a courtesan of the Entertainment Bureau in Jinling [Nanjing], was capable of poetry and good at playing the zither. [She] was sentimentally attached to the literatus Fu Chun. Chun was framed and fettered in prison. [She] took off [and exchanged] hairpins and earrings for [his] food. Chun [was sent to] guard the remote place. [She] wanted to follow him, [but] Chun tried his best to stop her. Therefore [she] composed a poem to present to him.

錦雲，金陵教坊妓也。能詩，善鼓琴。與文士傅春眷愛。春受讒繫獄，脫簪珥為餽。春戍遠方，欲隨行，春力止之，乃作詩以贈之

Reading Qi’s poem with or without the details provided by the anonymous reader could be vastly different experiences. The poem itself does not convey the slightest trace of what exactly was happening during the time of poetic creation. Instead, it begins with the conventional tropes and images we encountered numerous times in courtesans’ farewell poetry: the wine set out for the farewell feast, the thriving grasses spread far away, the heart-breaking singing of an oriole, etc. From the third line on, the poem moves from describing the coded nature to revealing the inner feelings, the courtesan poet wishes that her tears could transform into the rain and stop her lover from leaving.

205 In the table of contents and the text body of juan 12, this name is recorded as Qi Jinyun 齊錦雲, see Zheng Wen’ang, Mingyuan huishi, 186, 193. However, in the introduction of the names and native places of the selected women, this name is recorded as Qi Jingyun 齊景雲, see Ibid., 43.


一呷春醪萬里情，
斷腸芳草斷腸鶯。
願將雙淚啼為雨，
明日留君不出城。

A sip of the spring ale, feelings across ten thousand li,
Heart-breaking fragrant grasses, heart-breaking oriole.
[I] wish to turn these streams of tears into rain,
So tomorrow you are detained and cannot leave the city.
Although unique in rhetoric, the emotion it conveys has not been marked with any personal seal, which on the one hand makes it almost impossible to be ranked as top-class literature, but on the other hand guaranteed its entry into a poetic repository, facilitating its being recycled among courtesans and singing girls on the occasion of separation. However, the anonymous reader provided the information which personalized the poetic voice and distinguished it from tons of poems sharing the same topic, rhetoric, and diction. We can find the similar record of Qi in many other sources, such as Qingni lianhua ji, almost two decades preceding Mingyuan huishi; Mingyuan shiwei and Liechao shiji (Poetry from the Dynasties, 1652), two influential anthologies of the early Qing. Although neither the source from where the reader obtained the information, nor the date when the reader added this introduction is known to us, his position in the network of different texts represented the significant role of the growing reading public in creating the floating world of knowledge, information, and texts in late imperial China.

Following the mass production and publication of women’s anthologies, the anxiety of how to distinguish one’s compilation encouraged innovation in both content and format. Different layers and perspectives were added into these women’s anthologies—intricate illustrations, various types of comments, more comprehensive selections in terms of poets and genres. The images of Ming Nanjing courtesans were thus presented in overlapping and complementary media.

The most comprehensive women’s anthology to appear in the late Ming was entitled Mingyuan shiguì, long attributed to Zhong Xing, one of the two leading lights of the Jingling 竟陵 school, an influential poetic school of the late Ming dynasty which advocated “individuality” and “native sensibility.”207 This 36-volume anthology dedicates 12 volumes to Ming poets, among them are courtesan poets whose poems are placed side by side with those of gentry women. There is even one volume devoted exclusively to the renowned courtesan poet Wang Wei 王微 (ca. 1600-ca. 1647) from Yangzhou. It may be because of her well-acknowledged achievement in poetry, but may also due to her close connection with Tan Yuanchun 譚元春 (1586-1637), the other

207 Jingling school was led by Zhong Xing and Tan Yuanchun, both of whom were natives of Jingling (modern Tianmen, Hubei). Poets of this school used fresh, unusual, and even awkward expressions to express their innermost feelings, which often featured as “loneliness,” “solitude,” and “aloofness.” See Taiping Chang, A Dictionary of Chinese Literature (Online Edition), entry of “Jingling pai.”
founding member of the Jingling school. Apart from the special treatment of Wang Wei’s poetry, the number of other courtesan poets also radically increased in *Mingyuan shigui* when compared with any women’s anthology preceding it. However, as in other women’s anthologies, most Ming courtesans were from the city of Nanjing.

For most courtesans, the anthology not only recorded their names but also their courtesy names, literary names, and their talents in literature, art, and music. Their biographical notes were provided by the male compiler through gathering, filtering, and tailoring information. The male compiler’s choice of subjects and of ways to shape them, as Zurndorfer argues, served and were highly influenced by contemporary political and scholarly trends. Two different types of comments, interlinear comment and final comment, added different layers and framed the selected poems. These paratexts, attached by the male compiler, not only presented the courtesans’ poems within a framework, but also complicated and pluralized the self-images created in the courtesans’ poems. In this way, an anthology turns into a forum where the meaningful discourse between the poetic voices of courtesans and the male perspective in the framework (biographical notes and commentaries) is perpetuated.

The effect of paratextual frameworks has attracted scholarly attention. Some previous research indicates that this kind of framework imposed the male compiler’s reading on the reader’s perception of the selected poems. In a case study on Wu Zongai 吳宗愛 (1650-1674), the modern scholar Wei Hua shows how Wu’s poems were anthologized to serve the purpose of male compilers, particularly in respect of the influence of titles, prefaces, and commentaries. Zhang Lijie holds a similar view in her analysis of male compilers’ strategies to control the reader’s perception and interpretation of women’s poetry. Some other scholars, such as Kai-wing Chou in his study on the printing culture of Ming-Qing China, argue against this view by showing the agency of the reader. However, this kind of framework clearly deserves further investigation in terms of its flexibility of function and its transformability in the eyes of different readers.

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208 Zurndorfer, “How to Write a Woman’s Life Into and Out of History,” 86-102.
209 Wei Hua, “From Private Life to Public Performances,” 145-160.
The comments which most frequently appeared in *Mingyuan shigui*, no matter the interlinear comment or the final comment, associated poetry with the real lives of the courtesan writers. Although establishing this kind of association is a traditional way to interpret literary writings, the comments in *Mingyuan shigui* sometimes go to an extreme due to the anxiety of authenticity or the sexually-charged appreciation of poetic talent. As discussed in the section on general anthologies, the poem entitled “Yong shaizi” under the name of “Jinling courtesan during the Zhengde reign” is borrowed from a Yuan drama. However, the comment on this poem shows the commentator’s reading of this poem as a personal and sincere poetic expression.\(^{212}\) More often than not, the appraisal of poetry transformed into the appreciation of the person. In the poem entitled “Hualan” (Painting Orchid) written by Xue Susu, the comment reads, “comparing herself [to the orchid] by means of a metaphor, [her] feeling is also lovable” (託比語以自況，情亦可憐).\(^{213}\)

Associating the poetic image with the courtesan poet in some cases generated more complicated effects, especially when the poem itself does not suggest a serious self-expression. A poem by Jiang Shunyu is entitled “Xiti” (Written in Jest), but the commentator seemed to read it as a virtual description of a romantic tryst of the courtesan poet with her lover, and intentionally blurred the boundary of reality and literature. Meanwhile, her courtesan identity encouraged the commentator, who read the poetic voice as authorial voice, to interpret the girl’s shyness in the poem as an intentional performance. Under the lines “several times [I] wanted to untie [my] silken belt, only worrying the parrot would spread word to others” (幾度欲將羅帶解，只愁鸚鵡向人傳), the commentator wrote his remarks in smaller characters, “Intentionally shows a shy expression facing him, marvellous” (故作羞顏對人，妙).\(^{214}\) The comment mixed the poetic voice and the authorial voice, and created a new flexible image shifting between a talented courtesan who playfully dabbled in erotica-tinted poetry, and a love-intoxicated young girl who was presented in an amorous atmosphere. The final comment, which is “her manner is tender and delicate, intimately attached to the person” (婉孌之態，昵昵近人), transformed the valorization of the poem into the appreciation

\(^{212}\) Zhong Xing, *Mingyuan shigui*, 322.

\(^{213}\) Ibid., 358.

\(^{214}\) Ibid., 360.
of alluring feminine features. Was he referring to the courtesan poet in reality, the young girl in the poem, or the beauty mixed with the poetic and authorial images of possessing literary talent, revealing sentimental attachment, and mastering the art of seduction in his imagination?

This reading of poetic voice as authorial voice could partly be attributed to the poetic view held by Zhong Xing and his Jingling school. As indicated in the preface, the compiler views women as a whole without differentiating social status. In his eyes, women’s poetry, not being “polluted” by various regulations and hackneyed skills as men’s poetry had been, is free of expressing their native sensibilities, and thus has privileged access to the natural, the private, and the pure. It explains the commentator’s straightforward criticism about the overworked rhetoric and banal phrases. When encountering clichés, the commentator shows zero tolerance. Even for poems he appreciates, the existence of any cliché, in the opinion of the strict commentator, should be pointed out relentlessly. For example, the poem entitled “Muchun jiangshang songbie” 暮春江上送別 (Bidding Farewell by the River in Late Spring) written by Zhao Jinyan is praised by the commentator for the witty transferring of the sentimental attachment between her and her departing lover to the mutual affection between the willow and the river. Nevertheless, the commentator also criticized this poem for using the image of the willow which appears in almost all poems about parting and separation.

The commentator’s definition of cliché is worth noting. It seems to refer merely to poems imitating the well accepted and widely circulated tropes and expressions in literati literature, while the poems imitating zhuzhici 竹枝詞 (Bamboo-branch ci-lyrics) actually manage to avoid being blamed as yanxiyu 淹襲語 (the corny words copied without change). The commentator does not set a definite standard, but if it is the case, it may indicate the commentator’s awareness of the existence of two types and two traditions of courtesans’ poems: they could be self-expression as in elite literary

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215 Ibid.
216 Ibid., 401.
217 Ibid., 348.
tradition, and they could also be the recyclable performance in folk oral tradition. Different standards should be applied to these two types of poetry which still may share the same topic.

These two types of courtesans’ poems, together with their different traditions and various ways of interpreting, turned the courtesans’ images in poems into a stream of light cast through a prism, decomposed, refracted, and multifaceted. Thus in their poems, we see their idealized self-images as erudite scholars, secluded recluses, female knights-errant, loyal lover, and trustable friends, etc., while at the same time we see the stereotypical images of courtesan, dancing and singing at feasts, welcoming and seeing off guests, and pining away for lovesickness.

All these images, due to the wide circulation of their poems, were read and appreciated in different social strata. They shaped readers’ perception of courtesans. Among these readers are passionate supporters for women’s literature, potential compilers or commentators of future women’s anthologies, as well as readers who just read for entertainment. The commentator of Mingyuan shigui was one of these readers, and he further embedded his perception and interpretation of courtesans’ images in the interlineal and final comments. He is also an example of a Ming reader with literati background whose education was solidly rooted in classical studies, whose training was as diverse as the literary convention could be, and whose taste followed the contemporary literary schools. As the compiler and commentator of the most comprehensive Ming women’s anthology, he also represented those market-oriented literati that emerged in the Ming dynasty who closely connected themselves to the profitable printing boom. As Kai-wing Chow points out, these market-oriented literati significantly contributed to the late Ming commercial publishing boom by taking up writing, editing, compiling, and even publishing as viable means of living, and thus

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218 Many Ming literati seemed to share the same awareness. In the preface to a Ming popular Song collection entitled Shan’ge (Mountain Songs), the compiler Feng Menglong (1574-1646) traced both songs and poetry back to the Shijing: songs were developed from Feng 風 (folk song), while poetry developed from Ya 雅 (elegant song). See Feng, “Xu Shan’ge,” 1. For more information about the origin and evolution of popular songs, see Oki, “Women in Feng Menglong’s ‘Mountain Songs’,” 131-143. Kathryn A. Lowry, based on her investigation into a large number of Ming popular song collections, explains that traditions of Chinese song were separate from the written literature tradition and points out that “[t]he value of popular song texts lay not in their content, but in their intrinsic form and its capacity to be imitated, repeated, varied, or used.” See Lowry, The Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16th-and 17th-Century China, 6.
created a new position in the economic field as literary workers and businessmen.\(^{219}\) They paid close attention to the book market, catering to and creating trends and fashions among the reading public as exemplified by their ventures into fiction and women’s literature.\(^{220}\) They were innovative creators of and passionate participants in Ming popular culture.

The compiler-commentator of *Mingyuan shigui* framed and re-created the courtesans’ images by applying various strategies and drawing on different textual sources and diverse literary conventions. The framed image of Yang Yuxiang 楊玉香 (ca. 1465-ca. 1484), a famous courtesan of Ming dynasty Nanjing, exemplifies the combination of contextual and intertextual reading, as well as the coalescence of literary pursuit for immortalization and commercial need for profit.

The anthologist selected six poems composed by Yang Yuxiang, and wrote brief comments on each of them.\(^{221}\) Before the poems, there is a long story discussing the complete process of Yang’s love affair with a Fujian literatus Lin Jingqing 林景清 (ca. 1464-ca. 1487) who came to Nanjing for the imperial examination, with details such as precise dates and private conversations recorded. It reads like a Tang tale instead of a reliable biography not only due to the obvious imitation of generic features in weaving its narrative, but also because of the incredible ending that the soul of the dying beauty bade farewell to her lover in his dream. The popularity of Tang tales in the Ming dynasty can be proven by the mass compilation, adaptation, and publication of the Tang legendary stories which filled the Ming book market. The tale-like biography of Yang Yuxiang preceding her selected poems catered to the Ming audience’s desire for the extraordinary, and also guaranteed its profitability in the book market since Tang tales had long been a publishing success.

The commentary on the selected poems shows the same passion in connecting poetic images with the poet and transferring poetic appraisal to connoisseurship of feminine beauty. The commentator’s seeking for genuine sentiment reached the extreme when commenting on the two poems written by Yang’s soul. The commentator stated

that life and death are no more than a dream, but only regrets are endless. Yang shares the malleable image with many courtesan poets, not only due to the common integration of poetic image and the courtesan poet in commentators’ eyes, but also because of the similar appropriation of the images and plots from previous tales in composing their biographies. Moreover, in some comments, the flexible image of Yang Yuxiang even flew beyond the temporal limitation and textual hierarchy, conversing with the poetic voices and merging with poetic images in Shijing.

Shijing was said to have been compiled by Confucius and to include many women’s poems, thus it was often mentioned as an exemplary compilation for male literati of the Ming dynasty to justify their enthusiasm in gathering, editing, and discussing women’s writings. Despite the special position of Shijing in the trend of promoting women’s literature, not many anthologies directly connect the courtesans’ poems with the poems in Shijing. However, the commentator of Mingyuan shigui, upon reading the first two lines of Yang Yuxiang’s poem “Tibi” (Inscription on the Wall), “not managing to play the tune of the Rainbow Skirts, reluctantly [I] came to the other compound to hear the gemmy pipe” (一曲霓裳奏不成，強來別院聽瑤笙), wrote down the following commentary, “‘[I] drive and travel outside to vent my sorrow’ can be its annotation” (駕言出遊，以寫我憂，可為註腳).

According to the biography, Lin Jingqing visited Yang Yuxiang’s courtesan sister Shao San when he arrived at Nanjing for the imperial examination. After spending a night with Shao, Lin wrote on the wall two poems to praise her elegant beauty. The second day, Yang called on her sister living next door and saw these two poems. She was impressed by the young man’s talent and could not help composing another poem entitled “Inscription on the Wall” to respond.

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222 Ibid.
223 Sima Qian attributed the compiling of Shijing to Confucius in the biography of Confucius, see Sima Qian, Shiji, juan 47, 1936-1937. Zhu Xi (1130-1200) states that there were poems in Shijing written by women. For example, in his opinion, “Getan” (The Kudzu Vine Spreads) was written by a palace lady. See Zhu Xi, Shi jizhuan, 4. Although modern scholars cast serious doubt on the editorship of Shijing and authorship of some of its selected poems, it is likely that in the Ming dynasty Zhu Xi’s interpretation was regarded as orthodox doctrine dominating the intellectual circles. To use Shijing as a justification for compiling women’s anthologies also fits the late Ming pattern of using Confucian classics to justify the publishing of non-canonical genres.
224 Zhong Xing, Mingyuan shigui, 302-303.
The poem starts with the reason why she paid this visit to her courtesan sister. She could not finish the tune of the Rainbow Skirts, so she came to appreciate her sister playing a pipe. However, failing to play music reminds experienced readers of a stirred heart. Similarly with poetry, music has long been regarded as a way to express one’s inner feelings. The title of the tune she could not play is the Rainbow Skirts, which is said to be composed by Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and his favourite consort Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (also known as “Imperial Consort Yang,” 719-756) and thus a symbol of deep mutual affection, thus suggesting the association between her stirred heart and her frustration in seeking love. The last two lines reveal her admiration for Lin Jingqing, whose poem, like a gust of warm breeze in spring, dissipated her sorrow and frustration.

The verse “[I] drive and travel outside to vent my sorrow” appears twice in Shijing, both in the context of a bride who married far away from her natal family thinking of her parents and siblings. These two brides chose the same method of venting their sorrow—taking an excursion. Just as a thousand years later, this frustrated Yang Yuxiang vented her sorrow by taking a short trip to visit her sister, although their sorrow is caused by different reasons. The two brides feel grief for not being able to see their parents and siblings, while Yang feels frustrated for having not met an ideal lover. This comparison is thus rather superficial but at the same time subversive in terms of using a line from Shijing to annotate a courtesan’s poem.

This intertextual reading which was embedded with subversive connections is also applied to Qi Jingyun’s poem. We have already been familiar with this courtesan whose poem we encountered in Mingyuan huishi. She sold all her jewellery to support her lover in prison. Her love was so deep and intense that she was willing to follow her exiled lover to the remote borderland. After being stopped by her lover, she wrote a farewell poem, and under the lines “[I] wish to turn these streams of tears into rain, [So] tomorrow you are detained and cannot leave the city” (欲將雙淚啼為雨，留君明日不出城), the commentator pointed out the similarity of this poem and the poem entitled “Baiju” 白駒 (White Pony) in Shijing, “only wishes that ‘tomorrow you are detained and cannot leave the city,’ that is all, how restrained and tactful! This can be connected up with the words ‘lengthen the joy of today’ in the ‘White Pony’” (但欲留君明日不出城, 只為留君明日不出城).
The commentator demonstrates that the similarity does not only lie in the emotion and content, but also in the self-restrained and elegant expression of even the most profound and intense emotion, this style is pointed out as “restrained and tactful” in the comment, which is highly esteemed in the Confucian poetic teachings.

Two observations could be drawn from the comments which associated Ming Nanjing courtesans’ poems with poems in *Shijing*: not all the poems by Ming Nanjing courtesans can be connected with *Shijing* but only those famous for their expression of loyalty and chastity; and second the connection, although sometimes seemingly superficial and frangible, is a step moving forward to break down the textual hierarchy which was, in most previous cases, propaganda merely seen in prefaces.

In *Mingyuan shigui*, the poetic images of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing were presented in an exquisite framework with their biographical notes before their selected poetry, the compiler’s interlinear comments and highlighting marks amidst the poetic lines, and final remarks after some poems. This framework exemplified how a certain reader or a certain group of readers in the Ming dynasty approached courtesans’ poetry and perceived their images at the intersection of their formal scholarly training, diverse reading experiences and writing expertise, as well as personal preference to a specific literary trend and intellectual school. The framework is also an organic space in which poetic images, like coded genes, disintegrated and recombined through the interaction of poets and compiler-commentator, as well as through the interplay of contextual and intertextual reading. Moreover, in the late Ming printing boom, the framework also performed many functions in circulation: it could be disintegrated, selected, and used as source material in a new anthology, which could be viewed as recycling of anthology compilations; it also invited further conversation and communication on courtesans’ poetry based on the provided information and comments, which made the amorous imagination, aesthetic appreciation, poetic appraisal, and scholarly discussion safely transferrable.

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Conclusion

By the time when courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing emerged from the anonymity, their talent had already been recognized and appreciated by the contemporary male literati. *Liancai* 慮才 (appreciating the talent) is one of the key topics in literary tradition and the emphasis on one’s talent actually provided a channel through which people of humble origin, men or women, could carve a niche in the world of literature. Although for women, especially courtesans with available sexuality, the appreciation of their talent is often mixed with the admiration of their sexuality, and the reading of their poetry was also connected with the imagination of sharing romantic moments with them.

However, the undeniable fact is that their poems attracted more and more attention from the male literati and the reading public. According to the information we can gather now, the first group of courtesans who got their full names recorded is the group which was active during the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century in the city of Nanjing. The earliest extant anthology that initially recorded their names is a general anthology rather than a women’s anthology. It may be partly due to their distinct editorial purposes during the sixteenth century: women’s anthologies were in their initial stage, trying to establish a lineage of women’s literature and its legacy which was handed down to their time and thus paid more attention to those renowned women writers in previous dynasties. However, general anthologies focusing on their current dynasty aimed to preserve the representative works of their time with long-established categories: literati, women, Daoists, and Buddhists. This also explains why from the early seventeenth century on women’s anthologies gradually took over the selection, interpretation, and circulation of contemporary courtesans’ poetry. The increase in the number of selected courtesan poets and their poems diversified their images. Multiple layers were added to these diverse images when presented within the well-designed frameworks. Thus the images of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing in the Ming anthologies were a collaborative effort of both courtesan poets and male compilers. As a cultural invention, these images are transformable and recyclable, flowing beyond the borders of reality and imagination, time and space, and texts of different genres.
Chapter Two: Reshaping and Recycling Images of the Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing in Qinglou yunyu

The late Ming has been marked as the beginning of the first high tide of women’s literature when large numbers of women engaged in one way or another in literary culture. The numerous literary works produced by literate women including gentry ladies, educated concubines, and talented courtesans radically changed the practice of compiling women’s anthologies from the seventeenth century onwards. Women’s anthologies not only increased greatly in numbers, but also diversified in terms of the selected women writers, their literary works, and ways of presenting the selections.

More and more contemporary women from diverse backgrounds had their writings on various themes selected in women’s anthologies. Moreover, some women’s anthologies became more specific with regard to region, period, theme and style, as well as the identity of women writers. One type of these specific anthologies exclusively selected courtesans’ works, among which Qinglou yunyu, “Fanli” dated 1616, stood out as the earliest extant anthology of this type and distinguished itself from numerous publications by and about courtesans given its innovative way of recombining disparate sources and juxtaposing different media, voices, and perspectives.

QYLL was compiled by two Hangzhou literati Zhu Yuanliang and Zhang Mengzheng during the Wanli reign. It contains four parts which were organized in such a unique way that parodied the traditional fourfold bibliographical classification consisting of jing (classics), shi (history), zi (philosophy), and ji (belles-lettres). The first part of QLYY is a brothel treatise entitled Piaojing (Classic of Whoring) which was normally included in daily-use encyclopedias and aimed to impart insider knowledge to brothel visitors. The second part is a selection of old annotations on some entries of Piaojing from several daily-use encyclopedias by Zhu Yuanliang and his own commentaries on each entry of Piaojing and elucidations on

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226 Idema and Grant, The Red Brush, 347.
227 According to Shao Jie, QLYY possessed the editorial features of the fourfold classifications, namely the form of commentary and sub-commentary in the “classics” category, the form of outline and entries in the “history” category, the form of encyclopaedia in the “philosophy” category, and the form of general anthology in the “belles-lettres” category. See Shao Jie, “Luelun Qinglou yunyu de xingzhi chengshu yu tili,” 150.
228 As Yuming He indicates, Piaojing “circulated in the late Ming purporting to provide advice for visitors and courtesans, insider knowledge, and lore of the bewildering world of the brothel.” She also analyzes the linguistic novelty, the rhetorical effect, and the subversion potential of this kind of text. See He, Home and the World, 261-73.
some old annotations. The third part is a selection of the poetic works by courtesans from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960/979) to the Ming dynasty arranged by the themes summarized from the entries of *Piaojing*. Within each thematic category, the poetic writings were organized in chronological order. The fourth part is the twelve illustrations drawn by Zhang Mengzheng for certain poetic lines from the third part, and engraved by Huang Yibin 黃一彬, Huang Duanfu 黃端甫, and Huang Guifang 黃桂芳, all from the Huang family of Anhui which produced the most prominent engravers from the Wanli reign to the early years of the Qianlong reign (1736-1796).²²⁹

In such a complicated and multi-layered anthology like *QLYY*, the images of courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing were constructed through discourse and interaction between different texts and between textual and visual representations. The compilers provided paratext and framework to guide the reader’s perception and interpretation of courtesans’ images without sacrificing diversity. They incorporated different voices, tastes, and values to represent as many aspects of courtesans’ images as possible in the anthology.

1. Reshaping the Stereotypical Images of Courtesans in Zhu Yuanliang’s Commentaries

The salient feature of parody is shown to the readers at their first sight of *QLYY*. In his “Fanli,” Zhang Mengzheng indicated that the complete text of *Piaojing* had been included in this book. Although the text seemed vulgar, Zhang believed that it would not only benefit people who were about to visit brothels, but could also be used in a broader way to cultivate a wise man.²³⁰ To name a brothel treatise with the sacred character “classic” (*jing* 經) already revealed an ironic tone, that of writing commentaries and sub-commentaries in accordance with the tradition of classical studies further reminds readers of the subversive nature of this anthology. The parody and satire continued when Huayin shangren 花裀上人 wrote a preface for *QLYY*, in which he compared the compiler-commentator to the famous Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), whose interpretation of Confucian classics was authorized as a standard answer in imperial examinations in the Ming dynasty. Moreover, Huayin

shangren also compared readers who gained insights from *QLYY* to “scholars who fully understand classics” (*ming jing zhi shi* 明經之士). 231

This is the textual context we have to keep in mind when we go further to analyze the courtesan images being represented in the *Piaojing*, old annotations, and Zhu Yuanliang’s commentaries. 232 On the one hand, Zhu Yuanliang inherited this playful attitude with an awareness of the subversive potential being embedded in these amusing writings; he continued to play with various writing styles and genres, especially the classics. In a section discussing whether a man should visit a brothel alone or with his friend, Zhu Yuanliang quoted a well known sentence in the *Mengzi* to recount the fun of visiting a brothel with one’s friends. 233 Readers who are familiar with the Confucian canon would immediately sense the comic effect caused by juxtaposing these two incompatible texts. On the other hand, Zhu Yuanliang not only followed the rhetorical devices in *Piaojing*, but also took a step further to apply these rhetorical devices to his commentaries on *Piaojing* and to his elucidation on the old annotations. Zhu made fun of the clichés about courtesans in *Piaojing* and some old annotations, and reshaped courtesans’ images through his playful discourse with the texts on which he was commenting.

The flourishing urban vernacular writing and the printing boom in the Ming dynasty set an important context in which the courtesans’ images were stereotyped and reshaped. To outsell their competitors, the publishers and editors strove to distinguish their books by creating eye-catching selling points which catered to the readers’ interests in uniqueness, newness, and comprehensiveness. The selling points could be the new modes and fashionable styles of writing, commentaries and illustrations by celebrities, and ancient editions which had never been seen before. 234 In the case of *QLYY*, making fun of the stereotypes, reshaping them, and shedding new light on them can also be viewed as strategies to attract readers.

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232 In “Fanli,” Zhang Mengzheng clarified that the new commentaries were written by the co-compiler named Zhu Yuanliang, and Zhang mainly selected courtesans’ writings, classified them in different categories, and painted the twelve illustrations for the book. See Zhang Mengzheng, “Fanli,” 2.
233 Zhu Yuanliang cited the famous conversation between Mengzi and the King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 in his commentary. Mengzi once talked with the King Xuan in the state of Qi, and told him that his willingness to share pleasure with his people would definitely lead to the prosperity of the state. For the complete text of this story, see *Mengzi yizhu*, 26.
234 For the marketing strategies applied by commercial printers, see Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 129.
The compilers of *QLYY* not only borrowed and enhanced the rhetorical effects which had already existed in *Piaojing*, but also made changes to accommodate the literati’s aesthetic taste. As Zhang Mengzheng stated in the “Fanli,” the compilers purged most of the old annotations which they viewed as vulgar and inappropriate. Moreover, unlike the “how-to” texts in daily-use encyclopedias which displayed more general and stereotypical images of courtesans and aimed to give practical instructions on how to deal with the complicated relationships and transactions in the brothel, *QLYY* innovated the images of courtesans by building upon the literati’s perspective.

The literati’s perspective was revealed in Zhu Yuanliang’s commenting on and reshaping of the stereotypical images of courtesans. *Piaojing*, which was normally included in the category of “Fengyue jiguan” 風月機關 (Traps of Breeze and Moon) in various daily-use encyclopedias, cooperated with some other popular productions in creating the stereotypical images of courtesans which were often represented as two extremely opposite types. On the one hand, it viewed a young courtesan as a girl from a normal family who dreamt of falling in love with a handsome and talented young scholar, and thus admitted the possibility of genuine love between courtesans and their male patrons. Sometimes, the ignorance of courtesans as a different group could reach such an extreme that the courtesans were judged against the moral rules set for ordinary women. On the other hand, it emphasized the special environment of a brothel where emotion could be traded for money, showing affection could be merely a performance, and courtesans with their artistic skills were no more than merchandise belonging to the brothel.

Zhu Yuanliang created diverse images of courtesans in three different ways in terms of their relationships with the stereotypical images in popular publications such as encyclopedias. Sometimes, he rejected the widely held views on courtesans and the didactic tones in *Piaojing* and its old annotations, replacing them with elite values. In some other cases, he revealed the hidden intentions behind the superficial depiction of

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235 The literati were one of the most important reading and consuming groups in the book market of the Ming dynasty, who had more money and time to spend on various publications. Moreover, many changes made to *QLYY*, such as the purge of the old annotations and addition of the elaborate illustrations, revealed that their fellow literati were the main target readers for the editors. Robert E. Hegel examined many illustrated fictions with their target readers and pointed out that “Ming and Qing editions of novels specified their audience by use of varying grades of illustrations and painting, matching the differing selling prices due to production costs with the differences in financial resources, and hence to at least some degree differences in training and abilities, among the literate in old Chinese society.” See Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 302.
courtesans’ behavior in *QLYY* and thus showed his intellectual superiority. Comparatively rarely, he also adopted the literary tradition of self-expression in someone else’s voice (often a gender other), and projected his thoughts and feelings on courtesans’ images. Due to the different approaches he used, the courtesans’ images which were reshaped in his commentaries managed to display multiple aspects of this group.

In the first approach, Zhu Yuanliang reshaped courtesans’ images by rejecting their stereotypical images in *Piaojing* and suggesting other possibilities or solutions. Moreover, in most cases, these other possibilities or solutions often corresponded to contemporary literati’s intellectual trends or aesthetic tastes.

Classic of Whoring: [Those who] behave in a light and floating manner end their lives stuck in [the profession of] selling their charms; only [those who] are reserved in manner may return to decent life [by marriage].

The old annotation: *Newly Carved Blocks, Fully Supplemented—For Ready Use throughout the Subcelestial Realm, Wondrous Brocades from the Forest of Letters: Complete Book of Myriad Treasures* (hereafter abb. *Complete Book of Myriad Treasures*) says: Physique and gesture light and floating, figure and appearance willowy and slinky, people as such, end their lives stuck in [the profession of] selling their charms. [As for those who] are steady and prudent in manner, and decorous and stern in deeds, although in the brothel, [they] will later certainly return to decent life [by marriage].

Selecting the Essentials from the Full Range of Books for Ready Use by Gentry and Commoners, Seek No Further for One Affair (hereafter abb. *Seek No Further for One Affair*) says: those licentious women, slender and delicate as a willow in the wind, [they] end their lives stuck as mere whores. Those girls who, due to lack of alternatives, temporally fall into brothels, after a while, there will eventually be good men to marry them, as was the case of Liu Panchun, Li Yaxian, Yuxiao and so forth.

Zhu’s commentary: Nowadays, those who returned to decent life [by marriage] are plenty, if there is no way to rein them in, it is better to choose the steady and prudent ones who may be easier to tame. However, [for] those who are light and floating but with a genuine nature, and then to sell their charms or follow a husband, they are the same.

《嫖經》：舉止輕盈，終於賣俏；行藏穩重，方可從良。

舊注：《新板全補天下便民文林妙錦萬寶全書》(以下簡稱《萬寶全書》)體態輕盈，形容葺柳，如此之人，終為賣俏。行藏穩重，作事端嚴，雖在柳巷，後必從良。

《群書摘要士民便用一事不求人》(以下簡稱《一事不求人》)言有等淫蕩婦人，嫋娜如迎風之柳，則終於妓而已。有等女子出乎無奈，暫落煙花，久後自有好人娶之，若劉盼春、李亞仙、玉簫之類是也。

朱評：今從良者比比矣，若無駕馭之法，斬取穩重，庶幾易馴。
As a guidebook for brothel visitors, *Piaojing* offered practical suggestions on how to choose concubines from one’s paramours in the brothel. It classified courtesans into two platitudinous categories and emphasized the manners of courtesans as a key standard against which a man could make a wise decision and marry the “right” one. The old annotations in various encyclopedias completely agreed with the standard set in *Piaojing* and some editions even provided examples to prove the validity of this opinion. Moreover, all the courtesans being listed as examples in the commentaries in the *Seek No Further for One Affair* are protagonists of popular publications, especially of drama. The Ming dynasty witnessed the popularity of drama in almost all walks of society and the power of popular publications in spreading information, imparting knowledge, and creating stereotypes. The *Seek No Further for One Affair* shared with other popular publications the same intended readership, most of whom were very likely to take the embedded message without much doubt. The encyclopedia, together with drama, created two types of courtesans’ images according to their external behavior: one was light and floating (*qingying* 輕盈), and the other was steady and prim (*wenzhong* 穩重), both associating their external behaviour with their personality and eventually their fate. The preference for modest courtesans corresponded to the moral rules set for ordinary women. The didactic messages were conveyed in various forms of popular culture in the Ming dynasty such as storytelling, vernacular fiction, and drama.

Zhu Yuanliang was obviously not one of the readers who accepted the didactic messages being embedded in these stories of courtesans in popular literature. He held a strikingly different opinion: the most important indication of a courtesan’s personality was whether she had a genuine nature rather than how she looked or conducted herself. The emphasis on one’s genuine nature could be viewed as his response to a significant ideological trend at that time, namely “the cult of qing” (*qingjiao* 情教), which differing

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236 Zhang and Zhu, *QLYY, juan* 1, 26. The old annotations are collated by Liu Shiyi 刘士義, see Appendix 1: *Piaojing zhijingzhu tiaomu* 嫖經之經注條目 (The entries and annotations of the Classic of Whoring), in Liu Shiyi, “Xiaxie qingyu yu wenren fengsao,” 231.

237 Liu Panchun is a protagonist in Zhu Youyun’s 朱有墩 (1379-1439) drama *Xiangnang yuan* 香囊怨 (The Resentment of Sachet), while the other two named Li Yaxian and Yuxiao are legendary Tang courtesans and their stories are adapted in various genres of which drama made up the largest part.
from Zhu Xi’s claim of “an understanding of the Way through the study of principle,” proposed “a more intuitive approach to the highest truth.” Its followers believed that “all human beings were born with an innate ‘knowledge of the good’ that would enable one to understand the Way directly by trusting one’s authentic or ‘genuine’ feelings.”

This ideological trend encouraged the literati to reflect on literary creation. Instead of imitating the ancient writings, the literati began to admire the unmediated and spontaneous expression of qing, which can be proved by the following example.

*Classic of Whoring:* Writing poems to lodge thoughts, singing songs to expand on feelings.

The old annotation: *Carved Blocks — a Comprehensive Compilation of Chongwen Studio for Myriad Uses by Gentry and Commoners, Authentic Standard for Seek No Further* (hereafter abb. *Authentic Standard for Seek No Further*) says: [As for] Ms. Cui’s fame in the western chamber, [and] Lady Han’s poem on the red leaf, [they and their lovers] match writings with each other,241 and then achieve perfect happiness. [As they] sing and recite ci lyrics and songs to express [their] sincere feelings, sympathetic listeners will certainly lend their ears to them.

Zhu’s commentary in *QLYY:* [With] poems not written by someone else and songs containing no clichés, she is certainly a fine beauty.

《嫖經》: 題詩而寄意，歌曲以伸情。

舊注: 《鼎鋟崇文閣彙纂士民萬用正宗不求人》(以下簡稱《正宗不求人》)崔氏西廂之名，韓姬紅葉之詩，彼此賡和，遂成美好，歌詠詞曲，以寫衷情，知音者必傾聽之。

朱評：詩不倩人，曲無習氣，自是佳麗。242

*Piaojing* indicated the great role of literature in expressing one’s affection for his/her lover. The old annotation again provided two examples widely disseminated through dramas. It seems that the old annotation was devoted to elaborating on the brief statement in *Piaojing* thus making it easier to be accepted by the growing reading public of basic literacy. However, Zhu’s commentary took a totally different direction. Instead of explaining or proving the statement in *Piaojing*, Zhu conducted a discourse with

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238 The Dao 道 (the Way) is a key concept in Chinese philosophy and was used by all schools of thought. Basically, the Way envelops all nature and the process by which nature manifests itself and the process in which and by which things are created and events change. Thus, it transcends time and place, and represents laws, limitations, and the destiny which things much obey and follow. See Cua, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, 203.


240 Ibid. For more information about the emergence and development of the “Cult of qing” and its relationship with the contemporary Confucian school, see Wai-ye Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 89-100.

241 “Genghe” 廣和 means matching writings with each other. The normal practice is to exchange poetic works with each other using the same rhyme.

242 Zhang and Zhu, *QLYY, juan* 4, 73. As for the old annotation, see Liu Shiyi, “Xiaxie qingyu yu wenren fengsao,” 236.
by continuing this topic and expounding on the key words (“poems” shi 詩 and “songs” qu 曲). He further explored the types of poems and songs which could “lodge thoughts” and “expand on feelings,” and he defined a beauty through her literary composition which should be written by herself to express her own feelings and original thoughts. This innovative criterion of defining a beauty represented a new trend in literary creation which preferred the spontaneity and purity in women’s writings and the elevated position of literary education in cultivating a real beauty. By conducting a discourse with Piaojing, Zhu Yuanliang managed to replace the didactic messages with the contemporary ideological and literary trend and reshaped the courtesans’ images according to the new criterion for a talented beauty.

The second method that Zhu Yuanliang applied to reshape the courtesans’ images reveals the hidden intentions behind the courtesans’ conduct which were ignored or simplified in the Piaojing. Piaojing held the opinion that although generally courtesans regarded money as paramount, some of them also longed for true love as sincerely as any ordinary girl. Zhu disagreed with this opinion and believed that he himself was the only one who saw through the guise of the cunning courtesans and recognized the tricks played by them.

Classic of Whoring: Even if [she is] associated with a thousand patrons, it is [possibly] true that her love lies in one person.
The old annotation: Complete Book of Myriad Treasures says: Generally speaking, an indecent woman receives a thousand patrons, [she is] only responding to summons and nothing more. Otherwise, [she] has nothing to live on. If there is a man who suits her fancy, then although she is accompanying other patrons, her heart is with that man.
Zhu’s commentary: the strategy of extensive cultivation (literally, a strategy of wide sowing but meager harvest).

Both Piaojing and the old annotation admitted the possibility that a courtesan might have true love for someone. The old annotation even showed sympathy towards courtesans and explained that they kept relationship with different clients just for livelihood. However, Zhu Yuanliang argued against this opinion by pointing out that the emotional expression of a courtesan was no more than a strategy to make a considerable

\[243\] Ibid., 115, 240.
profit. The images of courtesans in his commentaries were, in some cases, represented as unscrupulous, ruthless, and scheming. They would use whatever means to squeeze as much money out of male clients as they could. One of the intentions for circulating *Piaojing* and writing commentaries was to protect the male clients from being cheated and trapped in the brothel. Zhu Yuanliang, as an experienced tutor devoted to teaching his disciples who were the intended readers to differentiate the authentic from the artificial. Although he might have some ideal images of courtesans that were indicated in a few commentaries which I have shown in the examination of the first approach that he adopted to reshape courtesans, he had a more practical attitude towards most courtesans in reality. He repeatedly emphasized the priority of money over other factors, such as flirtatious skills and handsome appearance, in winning a courtesan’s mind, and thus problematized the pursuit of true love in brothels.

The third way through which Zhu Yuanliang reconstructed courtesans’ images was by projecting his own feelings and thoughts on the images of courtesans, and attaching to them new symbolic meanings.

*Classic of Whoring:* Any encounter with inferior horses must entail a hidden legendary steed. In a shining oyster, there must breed a precious pearl.

Zhu’s commentary: This is what is meant by [the saying] “what place would not produce talent?” Forging, recognizing, and promoting (talents) is indeed the most virtuous knowledge. If fish eyes and pearls are mixed up, then a hero cannot stop sighing for lying in the stable.

《嫖經》:駑駘遭遇，必藏騏驥之良。蚌蛤生輝，決蘊貝珠之 貴。朱評:所謂何地不生才者，此也。陶鑄識拔，實在大善知識。倘魚目混珠，則伏櫪之嘆，豪傑所不能已。244

In this entry, *Piaojing* indicated that some courtesans who had not been appreciated might have the potential to become the most prominent ones. This statement reminded Zhu Yuanliang, as well as his literati friends, of their own experience in the arduous process of climbing the social ladder and achieving political ambitions.245 Zhu concluded the meaning of *Piaojing* in one sentence and further elaborated it by using

244 Ibid., vol. 1, 14.
245 Wai-yee Li analyzed the sympathy of the literati in the late Ming and during the Ming-Qing transition towards courtesans. Born from low-class families, courtesans made great efforts to shape themselves into elegant beauties of equal talents with their male literati friends. Literati who had to study hard in order to pass the imperial examinations and those who experienced the trauma of dynastical transition would feel identified with this ability to “rise above humiliation and create new destinies.” See Wai-yee Li, “The Late Ming Courtesan,” 46-73.
allusions. “Fuli zhi tan” 伏櫪之嘆 (sighing for lying in the stable) refers to Cao Cao’s poem “Buchu xiamen xing” 步出夏門行 (Striding Out the Xia Gate), but Zhu changed the original meaning of Cao’s verse in order to express his own disappointment toward the social reality. He highlighted the importance of “taozhu shiba” 陶鑄識拔 (forging, recognizing, and promoting [talents]), and views it as “dashan zhishi” 大善知識 (the most virtuous knowledge). His attitude actually reflected the literati’s sense of insecurity in an increasingly competitive environment. With the rapid economic development in the middle and late Ming, there were a radically increased number of qualified candidates for the imperial examinations, but the number of official posts remained largely unchanged. Consequently, to pass the examinations at that time was not merely a matter of capacity, but also a matter of chance. Zhu’s applying of this allusion also introduced an inter-textual discourse which revealed the disappearance of the heroes who made their own fate such as Cao Cao did and the increase of literati who had to rely on luck for success such as did he and his contemporaries. The projection of male literati’s longings for being appreciated on the images of courtesans added one more layer to courtesans’ images under construction, as well as shedding new light on the relationship between literati and courtesans.

Zhu Yuanliang, together with Piaojing, created a fascinating and amorous “green tower,” where various courtesans lived. A few of them were idealized as talented beauties well-versed in writing and singing, and genuine in expressing their feelings. Some of them were worthy of sympathy since they were forced to be involved in the business. However, most of them in reality were depicted as cunning, greedy, and snobbish, threatening other human relationships in society. All that added to their allure, such as beautiful appearance, elegant manners, and smart flirtatiousness, was strategically applied to defraud the male clients of their money. In very few cases, Zhu also projected his perception of the society and his anxiety as a late-Ming literatus on the images of courtesans, and thus embedded symbolic meanings within them.

246 Tina Lu points out that “for most of the Ming and the whole of the Qing, passing the civil service examinations [imperial examinations] was extremely difficult. Although the number of official positions remained relatively constant over the course of the Ming dynasty, the number of examinees greatly increased.” Being successful in the examinations was especially hard for Zhu Yuanliang and his literati friends in the neighboring areas since “the quota for candidates from the prosperous Yangzi river delta was kept artificially low.” See Chang and Owen, the Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, 76-78.
2. Categorizing the Self-shaped Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing

Zhang Mengzheng, the other compiler of QLYY, was in charge of compiling courtesans’ writings, including poems, ci-lyrics, and songs. These poetic works were written to different people—courtesans’ male clients, their female friends, and themselves, for various events—festival celebrations, birthday parties, and farewell feasts, as well as in diverse moods—happy, sad, depressed, and longing. Despite the huge number of courtesan poets and the great diversity of poetic topics being included in QLYY, the writings by Ming Nanjing courtesans made up the largest part of the selection in QLYY. They recorded their lives and feelings through writing, and writing itself became a way for courtesans to obtain agency and empower themselves. Being equipped with authorial agency, courtesans actively participated in shaping their own images and manipulating the outsiders’ imagination of the pleasure quarters.

Apart from selecting poetic works for QLYY, Zhang Mengzheng also classified the poetic works into different categories which he set by choosing the key words or phrases from various themes in Piaojing.\textsuperscript{247} By using these thematic keywords to categorize courtesans’ writings, he built a frame within which courtesans’ writings were presented. Some categories, when being read together, actually sketched the life course of a courtesan beginning from the first time she was involved in the business in the category shulong 梳櫳 (receiving a patron for the first time), to her heyday in the brothel in the categories shengrong 盛容 (appearance in her prime) and shengming 聲名 (fame), and finally to the last years of her life as a courtesan when she became old and tired of it in the category cangji 蒼姬 (grey-haired courtesans), then she might have

\textsuperscript{247} The categories used to organize the poetic writings by Ming Nanjing courtesans in QLYY are as follows: chudan 初耽 (indulging for the first time), cangji 蒼姬 (grey-haired courtesans), jinrong 久濃 (great tenderness [grows] after [being together for a long time]), zhicheng 志誠 (sincerity), dongkuang 動狂 (unrestrained vitality), aiyin 愛飲 (fond of drinking), chuoyu 出語 (speaking), heyi 合意 (catching the fancy), touxie 偷鞋 (stealing shoes), duiyou 對友 (facing a friend), zhijiu 置酒 (setting forth wine), congliang 從良 (returning to decent life [by marriage]), miyue 密約 (a secret date), siyu 私語 (whispering privately), libie 離別 (parting), taoqing 談情 (begging for love), jimi 奇詭 (sending a riddle), fula 復爐 (reunion), tiaocao 跳槽 (discarding one lover for another), shulong 梳櫳 (receiving a patron for the first time), jiyi 寄意 (lodging thoughts), shusi xiangqiu 敷四相求 (begging many times), lingmeng 麗夢 (a beautiful neighbor), zijhu 逐絮 (running after catkin), jingying 經營 (management), jingnian 經年 (throughout a year), cangsheng haose 蒼生好色 (grey-haired scholar fond of women), liuke 留客 (asking a patron to stay), rudao 入道 (entering the Way), jishu 寄書 (sending a letter), zengshan 贈扇 (presenting a fan), fazeng 附贈 (a gift enclosed), duoqing pinjian 多情頻見 (ardent lovers meet frequently), qianyin 牽引 (linking up for lovers), sheshi 設誓 (swearing), wuyan 無言 (wordless), shichang 失常 (abnormal), shengrong 盛容 (appearance in her prime), shengming 聲名 (fame), shangchun 傷春 (grief over spring), bingjiu 病酒 (sickness over wine), houyue 候約 (waiting for a date).
decided to live as a nun or Daoist priestess in the category *rudao* 人道 (entering the Way). Sometimes, if a courtesan was lucky enough, she might have been able to meet someone to love and marry her in the category of *congliang* 從良 (returning to decent life [by marriage]). Readers can thus trace a courtesan’s life by piecing together these categories.

Some other categories described the activities in which a courtesan would take part, focusing on her interaction with male clients, such as *zhijiu* 置酒 (setting forth wine), *miyue* 密約 (a secret date), and *siyu* 私語 (whispering privately). The construction and presentation of a courtesan’s image, in most cases, always included the image of a male literatus. This close connection, not only in daily life but also in literary representation, partly explained literati’s fascination with editing, publishing, and circulating the courtesans’ writings. These categories highlighted some specific activities in a courtesan’s daily life, and called readers’ attention to certain moments when *qing* 情 (feelings/love), one of the most significant concepts in late-Ming intellectual trends, was thoroughly revealed in courtesans’ writings and fully embodied in their images.

As pointed out above, the male images were omnipresent in the construction of courtesan images. Even in some categories which explored the various moods of a courtesan, such as *shangchun* 傷春 (grief over spring) and *bingjiu* 病酒 (sickness over wine), there was always a certain lover in her mind who triggered such a mood. As *Piaojing* indicates, “sleeping in daytime with a pillow in her arms, if not grieving over spring then sick over wine; sitting at night with the wick raised, if not waiting for a date then thinking of someone” (抱枕昼眠，非傷春即病酒；挑燈夜坐，不候約便思人). A male reader would find these categories unfolding the different moods of courtesans the most interesting and attractive because they guided him, as a voyeur, to peep into the inner world of a courtesan. Moreover, the invisible male image added fun to the reading experience, and was very likely to be replaced by the male reader’s own image in his imagination, thus helping to develop an intimate relationship between a male reader (in some cases also a male admirer) and a courtesan author in the reading process. Sometimes a male reader in his imagination assumed the role of the courtesan’s

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lover for whom she was longing and to whom she wrote a certain poem, and thus shared the amorous scene and sentimental attachment represented in the poem.

Reading courtesans’ writings in the framework being constructed by various categories turned out to be a game in which the compiler provided clues through these categories and encouraged readers to actively participate in seeking and imagining the lives and images of courtesans. Moreover, categorizing poems by different occasions for which they were created facilitated the further “recycling” of courtesan images. The readers, including fellow courtesans or literati who were about to write in a courtesan’s voice, could appropriate phrases and lines from the anthologized courtesan’s poems when they wrote for similar occasions in daily interaction or amusement.249

The category of libie (parting) illuminated the process of courtesans’ poetry floating from personal poetic expression to the shared repertoire, and eventually to other courtesans’ adaptations according to their individual situations, thus blurring the border of individual and collective creation. Publication of anthologies like QLYY smoothed the path of recycling as they produced and transmitted the shared repertoire on a large scale and at a higher speed. The poems in this category of QLYY accounted for the largest part of selected courtesans’ writings: sixty-one poems, six ci-lyrics, and one song. Among all these poetic works, forty-four poems, one ci-lyric, and one song were written by courtesans in the Ming dynasty, whilst the Ming Nanjing courtesans alone wrote twenty-seven poems. The great amount of courtesans’ writings belonging to this category gave readers the impression that the act of seeing her lover off was the most common situation a courtesan had to face, and also the most frequently represented theme in courtesans’ writings. After careful perusal of courtesans’ writings in this category, readers would find them highly repetitive in many aspects. Most of them used similar vocabularies, applied identical rhetorical devices, and expressed similar feelings.

249 In her analysis of how popular songs were circulated in the late Ming, Kathryn A. Lowry pointed out that arranging songs by topic could facilitate the finding of songs to perform for a given occasion, and a song anthology being arranged in this manner could serve as a resource for clever phrases and structural models which helped to compose new popular songs. Moreover, she also demonstrated that drama-miscellanies which were compiled to help readers to understand the dramatic plots and rehearse songs could also provide vocabulary, phrases, or lines for daily interaction and amusement. See Kathryn A. Lowry, the Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16th-17th-Century China, 38-39, 67.
The image of the willow frequently appeared in courtesans’ poems on seeing someone (a friend or a lover) off since *liu* 柳 (willow) and *liu* 留 (ask to stay) are homophonous and the willow was a widely accepted metaphor for courtesans. Planting more willows to entangle a leaving lover or tie up his departing boat as well as his capricious mind became a rhetorical device which was repeatedly used in the category of *libie*. A piece of information in *Qingni lianhua ji* provided a useful example for us to trace different layers of courtesans’ writings in *QLYY*, and thus helped investigate how a courtesan appropriated her predecessors’ poems when facing the same occasions, as well as how a certain courtesan’s image in *QLYY* was established, circulated, and recycled through appropriation and imitation. Zhang Mengzheng selected a poem entitled “Zengren” 贈人 (Presented to Someone) by a Nanjing courtesan surnamed Yang 楊.

By the Yangzi River, [I] see off my jade lover,
Willow catkins pull along, willow wands are long;
[If] willow branches can hold my lover back,
[I’d] plant two more rows against the banks of the river.

By the Yangzi River, [I] see off my jade lover,
Willow catkins pull along, willow wands are long;
[If] willow branches can hold my lover back,
[I’d] plant two more rows against the banks of the river.

Mei Dingzuo also recorded this poem in *Qingni lianhua ji*. Immediately following this poem, Mei cited an anecdote from *Woyou loushi* 臥遊樓史 (The History of the Armchair-travelling Tower) as follows:

The *History of the Armchair-travelling Tower* by Peng Nanqiao states:
In the old compound, there was a former courtesan named Zhu Dou, whose appearance was not very attractive, [but] she was rather skilled with brush and ink-slab. Scholars with collar blue often talked about classics and histories, [and] most of them were outdone by her.

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251 Means young scholars.
252 Mei Dingzuo, *Qingni lianhua ji*, 786.
Qingni lianhua ji showed to us how a poem might be reused with little adaptation by a later courtesan who inherited its rhetorical device as well as its image and emotion. The change made by the later generation, although very small, should not be ignored. It connected the shape of willow twig with the action of entangling and tying in an explicit way. By revising and recycling, the courtesans inherited and developed their literary legacy, whilst also enriching the repertoire of their images and writings. QLYY includes another similar poem written by Suo Siniang 索四娘, about whom we know very little.

Held raindrop, spread cloud, hundred-feet long,
Breaking off [branches] only makes people heartbroken.
[If] willow branches could tie up the boat of my lover,
[I’d] stick several more rows into the riverbank.

帶雨多雲百尺長，
折來空自斷人腸。
柳絲繫得郎舟住,
再向江邊插幾行。²⁵³

According to the textual place assigned for this poem in QLYY, we can assume that Suo Siniang was a courtesan of the Ming dynasty and her living period was a little bit later than the courtesan surnamed Yang.²⁵⁴ It is very likely that she was a courtesan from a small city or town rather than Nanjing. Suo’s poem cited above is similar to that of the Nanjing courtesan surnamed Yang. Both Suo and Yang imitated their predecessor, the famous Ming Nanjing courtesan Zhu Dou, by sharing with her the same rhetorical device and emotion in poetry on willows. Moreover, they both developed Zhu’s poem by including the shape of the willow branches in their writing to further explore the connection of liu 柳 (willow) and liu 留 (asking to stay). Yang connected the shape of willows with the action of entangling the departing lover, and Suo associated the shape of willows with the action of tying up the lover’s leaving boat. Suo Siniang, who lived in the latest period among the three, applied this device in the most skilful way since the image of the boat fit the scene of departure by the riverbank more vividly than the image of a mere traveller.

From this example we can see the influence that Nanjing courtesans exerted on courtesans of later generations and in other places during the Ming dynasty through the

²⁵³ Zhang and Zhu, QLYY, juan 2, 53.
²⁵⁴ In “Fanli,” Zhang Mengzheng declares his principle of organizing courtesans’ writings. For the poems in the same category, they were arranged in chronological order. See Zhang Mengzheng, “Fanli,” 1. Since the poem of Suo Siniang is after courtesan Yang’s poem among the courtesans’ writings of the Ming dynasty, we can presume that Suo Siniang is very likely a courtesan of the Ming dynasty and younger than courtesan Yang.
power of writing, publishing, and circulating. Moreover, this example also shows how a local courtesan won literary fame through borrowing lines, imitating emotion, and appropriating images from other more renowned courtesans living in Nanjing, the centre of courtesan culture. However, sometimes this kind of appropriation and imitation also involved improvement through adaptation as this case shows, or at least facilitated the recycling of courtesans’ images and kept them for future use and refinement.

Close investigation into the categories in *QLYY* and the courtesans’ writings arranged under them reveals the complicated relationship between the male-designed framework drawn from popular publications and the female voice conveyed by poetic works. The courtesans’ images floated among various categories. Even within a single category, these images were never fixed. Instead, they were fluid and flexible in presenting different possibilities and providing specific examples for a certain category. Some of the images being represented in courtesans’ writings broadened the connotations of the category and explored multiple aspects of singular occasions or experiences. For example, in the category of *dongkuang* 動狂 (unrestrained vitality), the poem written by the famous Nanjing courtesan Zhao Yanru depicted the impressive sword dance performance of a prominent dancer, Gongsun danian 業孫大娘 (Mistress Gongsun, active first half of the eighth century). This poem provided readers a picture-like explanation of what *dongkuang* could mean in the context of pleasure quarters:

Ever since a delicate fifteen,
Drinking along, knitting beautiful eyebrows, dimpled cheeks,
Learning to sing, learning to dance, and enduring the hardship,
Giving them up to learn the sword dance.
The vigor of the Lotus [Sword] is overflowing, chilly as autumn water,
The star-patterned [sword] moves like lightning, formidably as severe frosts.
Bashfully applying powder and kohl, small hands hanging down,
Turning around, like a flying phoenix, startles the swallows.
All her life, to be an knight-errant, permit nothing else,
―Nie Yin and Hongxian are my companions.‖
Wheeling about on a palm like on an emerald disk,
Revolving with the wind, lifting into the air.
Gongsun has long been excelled in swordsmanship,
Eyebrows are dancing [with joy] while watching it.
Only Administrator Zhang [can be] regarded as outstandingly intelligent,
All of a sudden, [his] calligraphy adds vigor.
The poem reminds us of a certain type of courtesans called *xiaji* (knight-errant courtesans) by referring to Nie Yin and Hongxian as the counterparts of the equally legendary Mistress Gongsun. Nie Yin and Hongxian are typical *nüxia* (female knights-errant) in Tang tales, famous for their superb martial arts and strong sense of justice. Two more implicit allusions hide in the lines: “Wheeling about on a palm like on an emerald disk; revolving with the wind, lifting into the air” (掌上翻飛擬翠盤，隨風旋旋空中舉). In these two lines, the courtesan poet Zhao Yanru compared Mistress Gongsun’s graceful movement to that of the renowned beauty Zhao Feiyan who was said to be so slender and lissom that she could even dance on one palm. Once she was dancing in front of the emperor, a fierce gale suddenly sprang up, and it seemed that Zhao Feiyan would fly away with the wind like an immortal. The Imperial Consort Yang Yuhuan, who also excelled at dancing, was said to have had an emerald disk made on which she performed the famous *Nichang yuyi wu* (The Dance of the Rainbow Skirts and Feathered Coats). These allusions were combined together to create an androgynous image of a beautiful and seductive courtesan who was also endowed with knight-errant temperament. These two complementarily different charms enhance each other and therefore make the dancer even more desirable. The androgynous image was also created through alternately depicting images with either masculine or feminine features. For instance, in the line “The star-patterned [sword] moves like

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255 Zhang and Zhu, *QLYY, juan* 1, 10.
256 Wai-ye Li, “The Late Ming Courtesan,” 59-64.
lightning, formidably as severe frosts” (星文電轉霜威繁), the courtesan poet highlighted the powerful sword and masculine strength, while in the following line, “bashfully applying powder and kohl, small hands hanging down” (羞勻粉黛小垂手), the courtesan poet revealed the feminine allure of the dancer.

What interests me most is not only the androgynous image of Mistress Gongsun being shaped in the poem, but also how this invention of the other’s image finally referred to the celebrated Nanjing courtesan Zhao Yanru herself. The last two lines of this poem mentioned Zhang Xu 張旭 (fl. 700-750), an outstanding calligrapher in the Tang dynasty. In the preface of his own poem “Guan Gongsun Daniang dizi wujianqi xing” 觀公孫大娘弟子舞劍器行 (On Seeing a Student of Mistress Gongsun Dance the “Sword Dance”), Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) recorded an anecdote indicating that Zhang Xu was inspired by the dance of Mistress Gongsun and then greatly improved his own style of cursive script:

Some time ago Zhang Xu of Wu was skilled in calligraphic pages done in cursive script. In Ye, he often saw Mistress Gongsun dance the Turkestan Sword Dance, and from that point on he made great advances in his cursive script. In bold vehemence and strong stirring, Mistress Gongsun can be recognized.

昔者吳人張旭，善草書書帖，數嘗於鄴縣見公孫大娘舞河西劍器，自此草書長進。豪蕩感激，即公孫可知矣。257

By sharing the same topic, subject, and allusion, Zhao Yanru implicitly assumed the role of an heir of Du Fu, one of the most talented and respected male poets in Chinese literature. Like Mistress Gongsun in Zhao Yanru’s poem, Zhao herself showed an androgynous image that combined the seductive attributes as a courtesan and the supposedly masculine talent of literary creation. Moreover, this was manifest by shaping an idealized image of a knight-errant courtesan who had the strength to take initiative as implied by her powerful sword dance, Zhao Yanru displayed her own agency as an author who departed from the conventional perception of courtesans as being passive and took the action of shaping an idealized knight-errant courtesan in writing. In this sense, this poem not only elucidated the meaning of dongkuang in the special circumstance of brothel by showing a marvellous sword-dance and an androgynous image, but also deepened readers’ understanding of the connotation of

257 Qiu Zhaaoao, Dushi xiangzhu, 1815. For translation, see Owen, Poetry of Du Fu, vol. 21, 335. I used this translation with minor changes.
*dongkuang* by demonstrating the initiative and agency embedded in the idealized image of knight-errant courtesan as well as in the act of self-shaping through writing.

In some cases, each poem in a certain category depicted a specific scene for readers to imagine how affectionate interaction between a courtesan and her lover unfolded in an amorous environment. When read together, these poems presented multiple possibilities of a category from diversified perspectives in vivid and detailed ways, and thus shaped various images of courtesans with distinct personalities and divergent characteristics. This diversity showed the courtesan poets’ collective effort in enriching their image repertoire. As *QLYY* indicated, courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing took the leading role in constructing and expanding this repertoire. In the category of *siyu* 私語 (whispering privately), the renowned Ming Nanjing courtesan Xue Susu depicted a romantic date at night in her song entitled “Shi Li sheng” 示李生 (Shown to Student Li).

The fading sun sets into darkness,
Grey-green steps, the moon chills.
To my adoring lover, [I] desire to reveal my innermost feelings,
But fear being overheard.
Softly calling my love,
Softly calling my love,
With you, furtively walk along the flower path,
Secretly confirming our wish.
Once more [I] urge [you],
Not to speak in front of others,
Risking the undeserved reputation of a fickle lover.
纖陽墮暝，
蒼階月冷。
向多情欲訴衷腸，
又恐怕傍人私聽。
高低喚郎，
高低喚郎，
與你潛行花徑，
把心期偷訂。
更叮嚀，
莫向人前語，
空耽薄倖名。²⁵⁸

The song described a scene in process. The first two lines depicted the natural sights which divulged both the time and the courtesan’s feelings. The rest of the song unfolded a date in a detailed way: the girl was worrying about being overheard, so she whispered

²⁵⁸ Zhang and Zhu, *QLYY, juan 2*, 43-44.
to her lover. They walked furtively and exchanged vows secretly. What she said and thought revealed her consideration for her lover. She asked her lover not to tell others only because she did not want him to be called a fickle man. Xue Susu described herself as a passionate, shy, and considerate lover in the song. However, by recording the highly private and amorous moment in a song, Xue also shaped herself as a female writer who openly defied restrictions and conventions. The contradiction in her image as a shy lover and a brave writer made her even more attractive. As Zhao Yanru demonstrated in her poem on the sword-dancer Mistress Gongsun, Xue Susu also realized and made full use of the authorial agency of self-shaping in the act of writing.

This song was initially written to her lover, but after being published, it could be read by anyone. The application of the second person *ni* 你 (you) in the song encouraged the reader to replace the courtesan’s lover with his own image and to share the amorous moment with her in his reading. In this way, the self-image being created in the song and displayed by the act of writing was consumed by the male reader and also shaped his desire and imagination. Moreover, considering that songs were often created and repeatedly performed in the pleasure quarters, this private and specific moment could be duplicated in public countless times, and so could the courtesans’ images and the audience’s desire and imagination. Thus the courtesans’ images floated in the cycle of personal expression, common repertoire, and specific performance. Specific temporal and local features were attached to individual images in the process of recycling due to the need for involving a certain patron in the specific time and space through each writing or performance.

The same image-cycle can be found in various poems in many categories which explored the diversities of a certain activity, and the temporal and local features helped to broaden the connotations of a certain category by showing multiple aspects of the experience. Taking the category of *zhijiu* 置酒 (setting forth wine) as an example. There are 14 poems by Ming Nanjing courtesans in this category and they were written at different times and for different occasions. The specific time and occasions were often indicated in the title, for example: “Drinking with Friends on a Boat over Qinhua [River] on a Spring Day” (春日同友飲秦淮舟中) and “On the Night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, Sitting Under the Moon with Huang Jifu” (中秋夜月黃吉甫坐月). For most Nanjing courtesans in the Ming dynasty, the three groups of people with
whom they often drank were high scholar-officials, nonconformist shanren literati in pursuit of self-fulfillment outside of government service and candidates for imperial examinations.

Courtesans explored different ways of expression and developed sensitivity to divergent aesthetic tastes in order to please their clients of distinct groups. To a high-official, a courtesan would highlight his respectable position in court through lines such as “the lofty and brilliant thronging and dragon gate extensive, auspicious aura wafting round the phoenix palace” (高明雜遝龍門敞，佳氣氤氳鳳闕回);\textsuperscript{259} To a shanren, a courtesan would emphasize his care-free lifestyle and literary achievement through lines such as “in his mind hide [numerous books of] the two you [mountains], on his head he wears three flowers [of immortality]” (腹中藏二酉，頭上戴三花);\textsuperscript{260} To an examination candidate, a courtesan would express her wish for his success in the exams through lines such as “[I] shall see the day of designation after the palace examination, fragrant names meet their matches” (會見傳臚日，芳名遇等倫);\textsuperscript{261} It seems that the courtesans had already built up a repertoire of vocabulary, image, and emotion to meet different needs on different occasions, and thus they could choose any suitable words and lines freely and flexibly from the repertoire. The most striking feature of this repertoire was the omnipresence of Nanjing with all the symbolic meanings in history and literature. The miscellaneous allusions and alternative names in different historical periods referring to Nanjing or a specific place of Nanjing mixed together in the repertory, such as shitou cheng 石頭城 (Fortress on the Rock), Mochou xiang 莫愁郷 (Never-Grieve Town), Taoye du 桃葉渡 (Peach Leaf Ford), Qinhua shui 秦淮水 (Water of the Qinhua [River]), and Yushu ge 玉樹歌 (Song on the Jade Tree), which added local features and historical dimensions in the repertoire. Thus, the images of

\textsuperscript{259} Zhang and Zhu, \textit{QLYY}, juan 1, 23.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 24
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
different groups of male intellectuals, as well as the courtesans themselves, were closely connected with the city of Nanjing. 262

While constructing and expanding their self-image repertoire in literary compositions, courtesans often worked together not only by sharing themes, imitating emotions, and adapting rhetorical devices, but sometimes also by matching each other’s poems. By matching poems, they exchanged life experiences, expressed mutual affection, and also showed support to each other. In the category of rudao 入道 (entering the Way) in QLYY, Ming Nanjing courtesan Xu Jinghong expressed her tiredness of the life as a courtesan and her willingness to leave the pleasure quarters for a nunnery in the two poetic lines, “ashamed of facing the mirror with a Phoenix hair-coil, pulling the ox cart alone is convenient for cracking my whip” (羞將鳳髻重臨鏡，獨挽牛車好事鞭). 263 By viewing her experience in the brothel as wrong and shameful, Xu Jinghong implied that she was innocent and pure by nature.

Immediately following this poem in the same category is another Ming Nanjing courtesan Cui Chongwen’s 崔重文 poem entitled “Song Xuniang rudao” 送徐娘入道 (See Mistress Xu off to Enter the Way). 264 Cui cooperated with Xu in shaping the image of the latter as a naturally pure courtesan, who had never been really happy in the brothel and frequently thought about converting to Buddhism. However, Cui did not simply repeat what was implied in Xu’s poem. In the last line of Cui’s poem, she compared Xu Jinghong to the flower-scattering goddess, which expressed her own reflection on life in the brothel and its relationship with Buddhism by referring to a story from The Vimalakirti Sutra.

At that time there was a heavenly being, a goddess, in Vimalakirti’s room who, seeing these men and hearing them expound the Law, proceeded to make herself visible and, taking heavenly flowers, scattered them over the bodhisattvas and major disciples. When the flowers touched the bodhisattvas, they all fell to the floor at once, but

262 Wai-kam Ho demonstrated the effect of certain geographical names with historical importance on the construction of imagery, “the use of geographical or personal names… had been a favourite to give colour and atmosphere to imagery.” See Ho, “Tung Ch’i-chang’s New Orthodoxy and the Southern School Theory,” 127. In another article, Ho discussed the geographical names as specific picture-like signals of literary convention. Among the names, Nanjing was one of the most frequently used due to its rich legacy of literary icons which was endowed with privileged sentimentality, see Ho, “The Literary Concepts of ‘Picture-like’ and ‘Picture-Idea’ in the Relationship between Poetry and Painting,” 374.

263 Zhang and Zhu, QLYY. juan 4, 104.

264 Ibid.
when they touched the major disciples, they stuck to them and did not fall.\textsuperscript{265}

She compared Xu to a goddess who scattered blossoms to test the cultivation of the bodhisattvas and major disciples. Both beautiful goddesses and blossoms are phenomena from the Buddhist perspective, and an individual could achieve enlightenment through experiencing the ultimate ephemerality and emptiness of this world of phenomena. The comparison also reminded us of the story of Malang fu 馬郎婦 (the Wife of Mr. Ma), in which the Bodhisattva was incarnated as the prettiest woman in a brothel for the purpose of enlightening the mortal world.\textsuperscript{266} Courtesans, despite possessing attractive appearance and artistic skills to add to their allure, were no more than empty phenomena to test how obsessed a man could be in the secular world. Consequently, the licentious life in a brothel was also connected with the chance of enlightenment. Cui associated the image of the courtesan with that of a goddess, combining the transient beauty and happiness with the eternal emptiness and enlightenment, and thus transcending the secular construction of courtesans’ images and creating their images from the spiritual and philosophical perspective.

As Piaojing indicated, it was very common for a courtesan in the Ming dynasty who was aged and tired of life in a brothel to convert to religious beliefs. Zhu Yuanliang, in his commentary, viewed a courtesan’s conversion as her self-redemption from a deep sense of sin, and meanwhile as a practical decision since affection lost when beauty withered away. However, the poem by Cui Chongwen showed her reflection on courtesan life from a different perspective, and as the following example will demonstrate, many other courtesans shared the same point of view. Jing Pianpian 景翩翩 (fl. 1570’s), a very famous courtesan at the same time with Cui but from a different region, took sanmei 三昧 (Samadhi) as her courtesy name and also named her poetry

\textsuperscript{265} Watson, \textit{The Vimalakirti Sutra}, 86-87

\textsuperscript{266} The Bodhisattva of Golden-Chain Bones 黃金鎖子骨菩薩 was depicted as a beautiful fisher-woman known by the name Wife of Mr. Ma in the Song dynasty, see Ye Tinggui, \textit{Hailu suishi}, 645. It was developed from a short Tang tale, see Li Fuyan, \textit{Xu xuanguai lu}, 212. This story is recorded in many collections of vernacular fictions, among which the most detailed version is in \textit{Gujin xiaoshuo}. It describes how the great Bodhisattva Guanyin, due to her concern with the excessive lust of the beings of this world, incarnated herself as the most attractive woman in a brothel and satisfied the lust of men who were overwhelmed by her beauty. After her death, people excavated and opened the coffin to test the words of a monk who insisted on the Bodhisattva identity of this woman. They were amazed by what they saw: the bones were connected in an unbroken chain with the colour of gold. Consequently, people erected the Temple of the Bodhisattva of Golden-Chain Bones on that very grave. Feng Menglong, \textit{Gujin xiaoshuo}, 435.
collection *Sanhua yin* (Recitation of Scattering Flowers). Unfortunately, the poetry collection has been lost, but Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664) recorded 52 poems of hers in *liechao shiji*. Similar with poems in *QLYY*, most of her poems in *Liechao shiji* were themed on drinking parties, amorous scenes, separation and longing, which were typical and common in brothel life. However, they were all placed within the poetry collection entitled *Sanhua yin*. Jing Pianpian seemed to reflect on her life as a courtesan in the same way as Cui Chongwen, and shaped her image in the poetry collection as an incarnation of a heavenly being, whose momentary beauty and fame were evidence of the essential emptiness in the phenomenal world, and whose experience in the transient courtesan life could warn men in the secular world of their obsession, thus leading them to eternal enlightenment and moksha.

3. Visualizing the Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing

Zhang Mengzheng painted illustrations based on twelve couplets chosen from the courtesans’ writings in *QLYY*, among which, seven were written by courtesans in the Ming dynasty, namely Xu Jinghong, Wei Ziying, Ma Shouzhen, Jing Pianpian, Zhao Guan 趙觀, Ma Shou 馬綬, and Wang Guanwei 王觀微 (1600-1647). Due to the lack of biographical information, we only know Zhao Guan and Ma Shou were courtesans in the Jiangnan area, but cannot locate them to a more specific place. As for the other five courtesans, Xu Jinghong, Wei Ziying, and Ma Shouzhen were from Nanjing, Wang Guanwei was from Hangzhou and the story of Jing Pianpian is complicated. Jing Pianpian was said to be a native of Yangzhou or Suzhou, which could be attested by the two lines in her poem entitled “Qingxi qu” 青溪曲 (Song of the Green Brook)— “I am a native of Wu [Suzhou], and I prefer the softer Wu dialect” 妾本吳中人,好就吳儂語. She was said to take up the profession of a courtesan in Jiangxi and was also a frequent visitor to Fujian where she expanded her network, published her poetry, and got married. Thus to the best of our knowledge, the writings by courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing accounted for one-fourth of the total number of the illustrated couplets.
The section that follows will be an examination of the three illustrations which were painted for the writings by the three Ming Nanjing courtesans, namely Xu Jinghong, Wei Ziying, and Ma Shouzhen.

In the final entry of “Editorial Principles,” Zhang Mengzheng mentioned the illustrations he painted for QLYY.

The illustrations imitate Longmian, Songxue, and many other masters. How can they be called refined works? But most carved editions made false claims to imitate the brushwork [of famous painters], which defamed the ancients. It is what I dare not do.

Zhang Mengzheng claimed that he modelled the work on Li Gonglin 李公麟 (literary name Longmian jushi 龍眠居士, 1049-1106) and Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (literary name Songxue daoren 松雪道人, 1254-1322), both were famous literati painters instead of merely professional artisans. Although Zhang painted all the illustrations in QLYY, he placed himself in the lineage of renowned literati who mastered painting as an artistic form, and rejected being viewed as an artisan only capable of drawing illustrations. Zhang’s self-position reflected his awareness of “a socially structured-discourse of the ‘elegant’ and the ‘vulgar’” in the late Ming. In the lively Ming cultural debate, the highly-cultivated elite regarded illustrations as common, vulgar, or philistine. The stance they took contrasts with the reading public who generally welcomed or even catalyzed the popularity of illustrated books. The so-called elite group listed many reasons to justify their contempt towards the carved and printed illustrations. Li-Ling Hsiao has pointed out the most important ones, “illustrations are mass-produced, while every painting is unique. So too illustration is rendered through the medium of the printing block, while painting is rendered through the more subtle and expressive medium of brush and ink.” The distinction between the two genres was quite obvious for literati of the Ming dynasty, as being revealed in one of the prefaces to QLYY written by Zheng Yingtai 鄭應台 (fl. early seventeenth century) of Puyang (in present Fujian province), entitled “Yunyu Huapin” 韻語畫品 (The Evaluation of the Paintings in Yunyu).

267 Zhang Mengzheng, “Fanli,” 2.
268 Clunas, Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China, 55.
269 Park, Art by the Book, 104-111.
270 Li-ling Hsiao, The Eternal Present of the Past, 227.
None of the current carved painting manuals of famous masters I’ve read is not cramped in the composition. I cast them aside and feel sorry for those famous masters. Alas! How can paintings be [made into] manuals? The thoughts go before the brush, and the ink is controlled by energy. Only the Creator can mould objects with energy and fill the universe. Only painters can represent objects with spirit. The heavens move and the spirit comes, [then] the universe is enclosed within a foot long scroll. Even if learners set their minds to imitating and copying, they suddenly lose it. How can manuals be paintings?

予閱世所刻名公畫譜, 未嘗不齷齪, 僞卷為名公稱屈。噫！畫可譜耶？意在筆先，墨以氣運。惟造物能以氣鑄物，充盈兩間。惟畫家能以精神像物，天動神來，束兩間於尺幅。即學步者著意臨摹，忽已失之。譜豈畫耶？

The preface starts with Zheng Yingtai’s criticism of the contemporary trend that “most carved editions made false claims to imitate the brushwork [of famous painters].” Illustrations had been incorporated into almost every genre of publication by the late Ming as a selling point to attract an audience in a highly-competitive book market. As Meng-ching Ma indicates, there was a “common tendency to favour visuality over narrativity.” Even Zhang Mengzheng, the illustrator of QLYY, tried to follow this trend by stating that his illustrations were imitations of paintings by Li Gonglin and Zhao Mengfu in the “Editorial Principles.”

After a general critique of the painting manuals, Zheng Yingtai turned to extol Zhang Mengzheng for transcending the limits of illustration as a genre, and his illustrations are similar with the masterpieces of the best painters in Jin, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties in terms of both methods and techniques. Zheng argues that Zhang’s illustrations not only include all the types of paintings but also reach the artistry of painting.

The young man Mengzheng, how about his view? How can [his illustrations] possess the [painting] methods of masters in the Jin, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties? The appearance of the mountain and the nature of the river, the luxuriant outlook and the long branches, the figures and objects, nothing is not comprehensive. [They are] represented thoroughly and movingly under the brush, which is unequalled today and comparable to the antiquity.

夢徵少年，胸次何似，何以晉、唐、宋、元之師法無不具。山形水性，夭態喬枝，人群物類無不該。淋漓筆下，絕於今爾當於古也。

Zheng Yingtai, “Yunyu huapin,” 1. I use the Li-ling Hsiao’s translation with minor changes. Hsiao, The Eternal Present of the Past, 228.

Meng-ching Ma, “Fragmentation and Framing of the Text,” v.

Ibid.

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Zheng Yingtai, through his preface, guided us to appreciate the illustrations the same way as paintings. Elevating the aesthetic value of these illustrations could be viewed as part of a marketing strategy to distinguish this anthology from other illustrated books. Meanwhile, his guidance matched the literati’s taste prevalent in this book, and also prepared certain attitudes and perspective for viewers before they conducted further reading and interpretation of the courtesan images depicted in these illustrations.

The trend of comparing illustrations to paintings was based on the development of printed illustrations in the Ming dynasty. Chinese printed illustrations reached their peak during the reigns of Wanli and Tianqi (1621-1627). The increasingly advanced printing and carving techniques promised a further convergence of illustration and painting. It has been shown in the exquisite illustrations in some books like QLYY, which shared with paintings not only drawing devices and pictorial compositions but also the format and arrangement. On the one hand, the size of printed illustrations was more significantly enlarged than before, and in QLYY, they often occupied the two facing framed half-folios, “constituting a single picture the height and width of the open book.”

Not only the figures but also the mountains, rivers and gardens were depicted in great detail. On the other hand, the printed illustrations in QLYY were not inserted in different parts of the book, which was a normal practice in many illustrated books. Instead, they were collected and put together as an album at the beginning of the book along with prefaces before the main text. Robert E. Hegel demonstrated that the separating of illustrations from the corresponding texts allowed the illustrations to be appreciated as an independent element and “more aesthetically pleasing to the viewers.” From this perspective, an independent illustration could be viewed as a painting, and similar with other forms of visual arts, its own aesthetic values could be recognized and realized as more than a mere enhancement of the text.

274 This is a standard format for high-quality illustrations at that time period, see Ibid., 84; Hegel, Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China, 192.
275 J. P. Park noticed that many illustrations showed obsession with landscape, a genre typical of scholarly art, by delineating the figures in “such an inexpressive and insignificant manner that they are reduced to mere decorative motifs in the landscape,” which in his view, “may reflect an emerging interest in landscape prints at that time and further suggests the desire of readers to incorporate the ideals of high culture into popular culture.” See Park, Art by the Book, 113. Some of the illustrations in QLYY shared this feature with many other illustrated books such as Xixiang ji 西廂記 (Story of the Western Chamber, 1614), Caibi qingci 彩筆情辭 (The Words of Love through a Colourful Brush, 1624), and Wusao hebian 吳騷合編 (Combined Edition of the Songs of Wu, 1637).
276 Hegel, Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China, 314.
As an illustrated anthology, QLYY provides both visual and textual representations of courtesans’ images. The following discussion touches upon several issues about the images being produced and circulated through illustrations and their relationship with textual represented images: how did the illustrations drawn for the poems by Ming Nanjing courtesans apply various devices and compositional strategies to represent courtesan images in diversified themes? What was the relationship and interaction of these illustrations with pictures in painting manuals and illustrations for books of other genres? How were the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans produced, circulated, and recycled in different genres and media? How did reception of images in textual and visual forms influence each other through the interplay of reading texts and viewing illustrations?

Although based on the poetic lines of courtesans, Zhang Mengzheng depicted courtesan images with his own focus and viewpoint by “invit[ing] readers to visualize the scene, provid[ing] a verse description dense with imagery to suggest what to ‘see’.”277 Zhang’s visualization of the poetry not only offered his understanding of the illustrated lines, but also guided readers to see what he wanted them to see in the verses from a specific perspective. These illustrations thus played the role of visual commentaries and complicated the reading of the text by adding new layers.

The images of courtesans were presented as the visual focus through various eye-guiding devices. The illustration painted for Ma Shouzhen’s poem showed one conventional eye-guiding device (Picture 1). The original poem is entitled “On a Spring Day, Gentlemen in the Literary Society, Visited My Garden, Enjoyed the Peonies, Respectively Composed a Jueju Poem and Sent it to Me. I Used Their Rhymes to Write Four Poems in Reply” (春日諸社丈過小園賞牡丹各賦絕句見投用韻和答四首) in the category of “zhijiu” 置酒 (setting forth wine). The illustrator placed a courtesan and three scholars in a secluded garden surrounded by plants, decorative rocks, and winding railings. The bridge in the illustration seems to be the only connection of this garden to the outside world, on which two servants walk by, carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle and refined food, which “remind[s] the viewer about the broader spatial context in which the scene takes place, the bustling city of Nanjing.”278

277 Ibid., 324.
The illustrator led viewers’ eyes to the courtesan, the focus of this illustration, by depicting all three scholars in the illustration fixing their gaze on her whilst she plays the zither. This eye-guiding device is commonly applied to visual representations of such motifs as “jiaren” 佳人 (a beauty), “yanxi” 燕席 (feast), “bieyan” 別宴 (farewell party). The courtesan is invited to show her talent and skill while others (in most cases, the male audience) are absorbed in her impressive performance.\footnote{279 Wu Shuping, \textit{Zhongguo lidai huapu huibian}, vol. 11, 77, 123; Liu Xin, \textit{zhongguo gubanhua (xiju renwu)}, 9b, 11a, 99b, 241b.}

In another similar scene depicted in the illustration of the drama \textit{Qingshan lei} 青衫淚 (Tears on the Blue Gown), which is included in the printed drama miscellany \textit{Gu Zaju} 古雜劇 (Ancient Drama) of Guqu zhai 顧曲齋 (Studio of Enjoying Songs) edition printed in the Wanli reign (Picture 2).\footnote{280 Liu Xin, \textit{zhongguo gubanhua (xiju renwu)}, 9b.} Unlike the illustration in \textit{QLYY}, this one only depicts one corner of the garden instead of the whole scene. However, the similarity in pictorial composition and figural representation entices us to view this kind of illustration as a bridge between the depictions of specific subjects in \textit{huapu} 畫譜 (painting manuals) and the complicated and exquisite illustrations in \textit{QLYY}, which...
provided the different ways of combining pictorial images and displaying figural relationships. In this case, similarly with their poems, courtesans’ images also floated from the storehouse of visual representations in *huapu* to the individual illustrations. The following analysis of illustrations in *QLYY* shows us the methods of visually shaping Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images, and the relationship between the visual images of courtesans and their poetic images in the lines written on the illustrations.

![Picture 2](image-url)

Picture 2, an illustration in *Qingshan lei* (Tears on the Blue Gown), in *Gu Zaju* (Ancient Drama) of the Guqu zhai 魏曲齋 (Studio of Enjoying Songs) edition (printed in the Wanli reign).

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281 According to extant records, *huapu*, commonly translated as painting manual, existed in China from the southern Song and reached its peak in the late Ming. It was a tool to facilitate the process of learning to paint by paraphrasing the practice and knowledge of painting in individual motifs and encyclopedic entries. Similar to a catalogue, *huapu* provided graphic examples of a wide range of subject matter, including flowers and birds, figures, landscape, and architecture, and guidelines to show how the specific image can be combined with other pictorial elements to form a complete painting. The late Ming painting manuals began to provide visual patterns of combining images to form particular aesthetic motifs. Thus, a painting could be composed by merely selecting and configuring various images and motifs from the painting manuals. See Park, “The Art of Being Artistic,” 10-33.
The illustration in *QLYY*, which was drawn by Zhang Mengzheng for the famous Ming Nanjing courtesan Ma Shouzhen’s poem, depicts a feast in a magnificent garden where three male literati are watching a prettily dressed courtesan playing the zither. Two of the literati facing the viewer fixed their eyes on the courtesan and one of them is keeping a beat with his right hand, showing how transfixed they are by the delightful melody, as well as the courtesan’s beautiful appearance and elegant demeanour. As for the third literatus sitting face-to-face with his two friends with his back to the viewer, the illustrator ingeniously painted him slightly leaning to the side of the courtesan, and thus the viewers can assume that he is also looking at her with breathless attention. This eye-guiding device applied generally in the theme of “watching a courtesan’s performance” not only shows focus and connection, but is also a method of transforming the courtesan into an object of desire under the male gaze.

This illustration was made for the last two lines of a poem written by Ma Shouzhen, which is the second one of a set of poems written by Ma Shouzhen in reply to her male literati friends. To better contextualize this set of poems, Ma gave it a long title which could be read as a preface, informing the readers that this event happened on a spring day when many literati visited Ma’s garden to appreciate the peonies growing there. These literati friends, after enjoying a beautiful day in Ma’s garden, sent her poems to express their gratefulness, and Ma responded to them respectively with four corresponding poems. Exchanging poems with friends often shows shared interest as well as equivalent gifts in literary composition and intellectual creation, and thus stands for a relatively equal relationship between the two parties. Reading the specific poem side-by-side with the illustration reveals the relationship between images being shaped through different media and from different perspectives.

Stone bridge, drifting stream, a cosy nest,  
Warm Spring, blooming flowers, [I] am pleased to have visitors.  
Jade cups fly randomly with the moon over the riverbanks,  
Brocade-adorned zither executes the song of Ying.  

石橋流水是行窩,  
春暖花開喜客過.  
玉斝漫飛涯浦月,  
錦箏還趨郢人歌.  

282 The song of Ying means an elegant tune, see Song Yu, “Dui Chu wang wen,” 981.  
Zhang Mengzheng illustrated the last two lines, which was also inscribed on the illustration. In this poem, the jade cups and the brocade-adorned zither demonstrate the luxury and splendour of the feast being held in Ma’s private garden on a warm spring day. The genteel taste of this small gathering is also revealed through “the song of Ying” which alludes to the music of elegant refinement. In this poem, Ma expressed her happiness to meet with like-minded friends and her pride as a host to entertain her guests with palatable wine and superb music. Meanwhile, Ma also projected her mood and personality on the images in the poem. She delighted in the beautiful environment of “stone bridge and drifting stream” and “warm spring, blooming flowers,” as well as enjoying the wine and music with her literati friends. By combining her own feelings and perceptions with the occasion being organized by her in her own private garden, Ma’s voice dominated the poetic expression and her self-image was shaped as a key member of a literary gathering through her authorial agency.

However, in the illustration following the traditional theme of “watching a courtesan’s performance,” Ma was shaped more as an entertainer under the male gaze than a host of this gathering with privilege of expressing her feelings and perceptions. It was also shown by the spatial arrangement of the images. The illustration was split in two pages perhaps for purely practical reasons. But as Monica Merlin argued, splitting the illustration might also serve the purpose of separating the space of the courtesan from the group of men, hinting at their differences in gender and class. But the orchids placed in a vase on the table, being a symbol of Ma’s literary and artistic talent, is on the same side as the literati.

The illustration also shapes readers’ reception of the original poem. If not placed together with the illustration, the last two lines could suggest many alternative readings since there is no indication regarding who is drinking or performing in the sentence. In the late Ming, it was very likely for an upper-class courtesan like Ma to participate in literati gatherings as a member who composed poems and watched performance with her literati friends instead of entertaining male literati with their own musical performance. However, the reading of the final couplet is fixed in the illustration, with each line referring to figures of specific identities—the former line, describing the

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285 The hao 號 (literary name) of Ma Shouzhen is Xianglan 湘蘭 (Orchid of the River Xiang) by which she signed many of her works. She obtained this name due to her artistic achievement in painting orchids.
happiness of drinking, refers to the literati only, while the latter one, displaying the
skills of entertaining others, refers to the courtesan.

Differing from the traditional theme of “watching a courtesan’s performance,”
there is one illustration in which the eye-contact is intentionally avoided (Picture 3).
This illustration, depicting the first encounter of literati with courtesans, was drawn for
a poem by Xu Pian 徐翩 (courtesy name Jinghong 驚鴻) entitled “Chaoyou” 嘲友
(Teasing a Friend) in the category of chudan 初耽 (indulging for the first time). In this
case, the representation of courtesans’ images as the focus of the illustration was
achieved through placing in a higher position similar to the stage in a theatre which was
designed to effectively attract audience’s attention. The three courtesans are placed
several steps up in front of a pavilion behind a railing, looking at each other, chatting
and smiling. The pavilion works as a sub-frame, distinguishing them from other
compositional elements in the illustration. The continuous pattern from the carved
railing to the embroidered dresses of courtesans visually merges the figures and
architecture by “dismissing distinctions between individual physical entities,”287 and
thus creates a figure-architecture combination which forms a comparatively independent
component of the illustration. Moreover, the mutual reflective relationship within the
combination goes beyond the resemblance in patterns on the surface. Other objects
within the frame, such as the book, the incense burner, and the potted plant on the desk,
reflect the erudition and refined taste of the three courtesans.

287 Hung Wu noticed the intrinsic contradiction between framing and patterning: “if framing distinguishes
‘text’ from ‘context’, patterning dismisses distinctions between individual physical entities.” See Wu, The
Double Screen, 14.
The diagonal composition of this illustration also helped to shape courtesans’ images. The two pairs of trees and decorative rocks in the top-right and lower-left form a frame for the two halves of this illustration which face each other across a distance and externalize the mutual attraction of courtesans and literati. The romance of falling in love in the first encounter was also described from the perspective of the courtesan poet. The last two lines of her poem were inscribed on the illustration, reading “Not used to seeing [such a beauty] as the Minister of Works, his heart is captivated immediately when encountering the moth brows” (不是司空頻見慣，蛾眉纔遇便銷魂). The allusion of the Minister of Works indicates the significant role of a man’s power and wealth in his possession of beautiful women. Meanwhile, both the groups of courtesans and literati in the top-left are gazing at the wrapped gifts carried by the horse and servants in the lower-right, which on the one hand showed the identity crisis of some anxious and unconfident literati in the late Ming whose capability and status needed to be measured by material wealth; and on the other hand, implicated that

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288 The allusion is about the famous Tang poet Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842). Due to his failure in political reformation, Liu spent most of his life in exile and poverty. Li Shen 李紳 (772-846), the powerful and affluent Minister of Works, admired Liu’s talent and invited Liu to his family party. During the party, Li summoned his household courtesans to entertain Liu. Although common for Li, Liu was astonished by the luxury of the party and the beauty of the courtesans. See Meng Qi, Benshi shi, juan 1, 11.
despite the talent and refinement of courtesans, what they really cared about was the wealth of their male patrons. This side of images and relationship was only able to be seen from the perspective of the male illustrator who was also an experienced brothel visitor.

This illustration exemplified some visual representations of the Ming and Qing dynasties which used the objects and environment to shape our perceptions of the characteristics of the pictorial figures, to externalize their inner state, and to indicate their relationships. After being appropriated and reused several times, certain objects, images, natural surroundings, and their combinations grew into recognizable patterns which drew the viewers’ attention at a single glance, working as a breakthrough point for further exploration and appreciation of an illustration and an identifiable hint to connect visual and textual information.

The recognizable symbolic patterns are widely used in the illustration drawn for Wei Ziyi’s poem “Zengyou” 贈友 (Presented to a Friend) in the category of chuyu 出語 (speaking) (Picture 4). From this illustration, we can learn about the circumstances and conditions in which the floating images, including figures, objects, and environmental surroundings, flowed freely from a visual storehouse, consisting of albums, painting manuals, and art treatises, into different recognizable symbolic patterns before finally appearing in individual artistic creations. Meanwhile, investigation of this process of “flowing-combining-dissecting and re-combining” also tells us how the repertoire of these patterns was constructed and expanded in the lively environment of exchange and appropriation.

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289 The most common example is to present the woman together with books and antiques in order to reflect her cultural refinement, see figure 5.1, figure 5.5, figure 5.9, figure 5.13, figure 5.20, figure 5.21, in Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 151, 156, 169, 174, 186, 189. Moreover, Cahill also pointed out some other details that could be viewed as externalization of figures’ moods or characteristics, such as peonies, butterflies, rabbits, grasses, and even the drapery lines of the figure’s dress, see figure 5.10, figure 5.16, figure 5.17, in Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 171, 181.
In this illustration, the courtesan and the young scholar are placed in an exquisitely decorated pavilion in an elaborately designed garden, which offers a haven of peace and serenity away from the bustle of the outside world. The bamboos and pines around the pavilion symbolize the virtue of the young scholar; whilst evergreen trees and pines in the illustration also indicate their ever-lasting love. The winding path and the twisting river, not only add the visual depth and scope of the garden, but also implicate their mutual affection and the twists and turns in their minds. Behind them is an interior room which could be partially viewed through an open door, where the books, as an externalization of her erudition and refinement, are piled neatly on a bookshelf. Seeing through several layers of the illustrations—the secluded garden, the balustrade of the pavilion, and the door of the inner chamber—also satisfies the voyeuristic desire of the viewers. The courtesan is fiddling with the incense burner and keeping her eyes on it. The scholar is watching the incense burner and her hand raptly. They do not look into each other’s eyes but they do fix their gaze at the same thing, which intensifies their subtle affection considering that this affection has already been externalized by the surrounding river and path. The similar facial expression and shared facial
characteristics, as James Cahill said, “[bring] out its implication of a perfect matching of qualities and temperament.” Cahill further examined many paintings to expound on the blurring of gender boundaries through “near-identity of the two lovers’ faces” and “the completeness of their mutual absorption,” and combined it with the caizi jiaren 才子佳人 (scholars and beauties) ideal in late imperial China. Keith McMahon also found in such paintings, “the beauties and scholars… each contain the other in cross-gendered symmetry, each having the looks or taking on the attributes of the other.”

Jiaren 佳人 (a beauty) is a rather ambiguous word in the Ming dynasty. It emphasizes the attractive appearance of a woman without any indication of her identity and social status, thus she could be a guixiu 閨秀 (gentry lady) or a courtesan. If viewers ponder this illustration without any background knowledge, they may read it as a depiction of harmonious domestic life. This ambiguity in image facilitates the appropriation of visual representations of beautiful young women in various illustrated books, from biographies of virtuous women to fictions and dramas and even brothel treatises. This appropriation of paintings “[kept] production costs low” and “[took] advantage of the most popular and proven material in circulation,” thus it was widely

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290 Cahill, Pictures for Use and Pleasure, 150.
291 Ibid.
292 McMahon, Misers, Shrews, and polygamists, 14.
293 Women in different illustrations for different books sometimes look similar in terms of the association of gentry ladies or courtesans with young scholars. For example, in the drama illustrations of Xixiang ji 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing), Qiannü lihun 倩女離魂 (Qiannü’s Soul Leaves Her Body), and Mudan ting (The Peony Pavilion), the illustrators depict Cui Yingying, Zhang Qiannü, and Du Liniang in a similar way with courtesans in the illustrations of QLYY. For the illustrations in Qiannü lihun and Mudan ting, see Liu Xin, zhongguo gubanhua (xiju renwu), 15, 181a. For the illustrations in Xixiang ji, see Yuming He, Home and the World, 177. Fiction illustrations such as in Jin ping mei 金瓶梅 (mengmei guan edition) are also similar with illustrations in QLYY due to their identical garden settings, as well as their shared theme, pictorial composition, and figural depiction. Most strikingly is the fact that some virtuous women are also illustrated in the same way as courtesans by sharing appearance and gestures, which can be found in Lienü zhuan 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women). We can see that through borrowing and appropriating images, the boundary between women of different social status is gradually blurred. For example, the illustration for the entry of “Zhiniao ruiyun” 芝鳥瑞雲 (Propitious Bird and Auspicious Cloud) can be read as a courtesan showing her literati friends around her garden without the caption telling the story in Minxian la 名賢錄 (Record of the Famous Worthies), see Liu Xin, zhongguo gubanhua (jiaohua renwu), 232b. Moreover, the similarity in illustrations of gentry women and courtesans also reflected the increased blurring of sartorial boundaries among women of different social statuses. See Dauncey, “Illustrations of Grandeur,” 55-61; also see Carlitz, “The Social Uses of Female Virtue,” 127-128.
used in most publishing houses in the Ming dynasty and greatly influenced the circulation and reception of women images in a conscious or unconscious way. This ambiguity leads to a transcendence of identity and social status being defined by Confucian teaching, transforming beautiful females into a symbol of aesthetics and desire which conveyed the male literati’s ideal of romantic love and refined culture.

Although Zhang Mengzheng painted all the illustrations in QLYY by himself, it is undeniable that he borrowed images, pictorial compositions, and painting devices from many other sources of similar themes. As Zheng Yingtai pointed out in “Yunyu huapin,” the most obvious source that Zhang engaged with is huapu, “[The illustrations] for the verses were drawn by Mengzheng, [and] the images are roughly similar with the painting manuals” (夢徵之為韻語，圖像略近於譜). The printing and publishing of painting manuals in large numbers during the Ming and Qing dynasties facilitated the appropriation, borrowing, and circulation of images, since these painting manuals functioned as a repertory of visual images including miscellaneous pictorial elements—figures, animals, architectures, and landscapes.

In most painting manuals, these images are often organized and classified into different categories for users’ convenience. For example, one of the most famous painting manuals titled Jieziyuan huapu (The Painting Manual of Mustard Seed Garden) is organized by categories such as “painting trees,” “painting flowers,” and “painting birds” and so on. In these categories, there are further divisions, such as specific flowers in the category of “painting flowers.” Aside from these comprehensive painting manuals, there were specific ones focusing on one particular category which were also very popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as Tianxing daomao (Heavenly Forms and Exemplary Manners), Gaosong lingmaopu (高松翎毛譜).

294 Yuming He, Home and the World, 150. In some cases, in order to cut costs, the publishers might even have adapted extant illustrations or paintings and inserted them into a not-so-matched context. For example, in one illustration for the vernacular fiction collection Xingshi yan (Stories for the World to Model on), the illustrated chapter tells a story of a young girl from a poor family and indicates a backyard behind her house. However, in the illustration, the backyard behind her room seems like a splendid garden with decorative rocks, plants, and balustrade, which we encounter countless in illustrations of courtesans’ residences in QLYY, as well as in illustrations on the inner chambers of gentry women. Although the two poetic lines, “the drifting willow catkins stick to people’s clothes, spring wind is very blameworthy for startling them to fly away” (楊花漂泊滯人衣，怪殺春風驚欲飛) on the illustration are selected from the fiction, it did not necessarily reduce the ambiguity when read out of the context, because the willow catkins are often used as a metaphor of courtesans, while the spring wind is usually related to love affairs as well as capricious and unpredictable fate, see Zhongguo gubanhua (xiaoshuo renwu), 117a.

(Gao Song’s Feather Painting Manual), and Suyuan shipu 素園石譜 (The Stone Painting Manual of the Unadorned Garden). These works categorized figures, plants, and animals in various situations, with distinct gestures and from different perspectives, which made them easier to be inserted into a great diversity of pictorial compositions. Categories in painting manuals remind us of their counterparts in poetry anthologies like QLYY, although in different media, they worked in the similar way in terms of promoting the reuse and recycling of images.

Among all painting manuals being circulated in the Ming dynasty, the illustrations in QLYY are mostly similar with a specific type of painting manual devoted to poetic works, such as Tangshi huapu 唐詩畫譜 (Painting Manual of Tang Poetry) and Shiyu huapu 詩餘畫譜 (Painting Manual of Ci Lyrics). By drawing a painting for a poem or by presenting a poem on a painting, this kind of painting manual associated visual representational patterns of concrete images with poetic expressional modes of abstract emotions. QLYY showed the dynamic relationship of mutual-interpretation and mutual-modification between text and illustration in a similar way. Another important element on the illustration is the poet’s name shown after the inscription, which helped to eliminate the ambiguity in both visual and textual representations caused by the unceasing appropriation and recycling in Ming illustrated books. For example, when appreciating the illustration drawn for Wei Ziyings’s poem, together with the inscription “in a secluded chamber, falling in love with each other; [it is] especially suitable to talk about beautiful emotion” (曲室從傾倒，偏宜說麗情), the viewer could understand the relationship between the charming girl and the young scholar as a married couple or a pair of lovers from decent families, and not necessarily have any connection with the image of the courtesan. However, the name of the famous courtesan poet being shown on the illustration revealed her identity and guided the viewer to read the romantic scene in the illustration as the visual representation of a “green tower.”

Not only the signature, but also the book as a whole provided a context for elucidating both the visual and textual images of courtesans being enclosed within it. The illustrations visualized courtesans’ images within well-designed pictorial compositions and provided a specific viewpoint to watch them by applying eye-guiding devices and inscriptions. Meanwhile the woodblock-printed books in the Ming dynasty actually operated in a similar but more complicated way on a larger scale. They
enclosed the textual and visual images within the framework consisting of prefaces, editorial principles, and postscripts, and embedded a certain perspective to read them by providing commentaries and illustrations.

**Conclusion**

The uniqueness of *QLYY* lies in its complicated anthological space which juxtaposed brothel treatises, literati commentaries, courtesans’ poetic works, and woodblock illustrations. This juxtaposition invited discourse among different subcultures, media, and perspectives. The binary images of courtesans as either dissolute or self-restrained were reshaped into a spectrum of images and diversified personalities, and the oversimplified standards of judging a courtesan by her appearance and manner were replaced with the more internally focused criteria, such as talents, sensibilities, and genuine feelings, which were also applied to define the *jiaren* ideal in the cult of *qing*.

Although being compiled and published in Hangzhou, the poetic selection in *QLYY* featured a strong preference for the writings by Ming Nanjing courtesans. By categorizing these poems with thematic key words from *Piaojing*, *QLYY* on the one hand stimulated dynamics between courtesans’ poetic representations of their self-images and the stereotypical images in popular texts, whilst on the other hand facilitated the building, appropriating, and recycling of the imagery repertoire of courtesans within and beyond the pleasure quarters. This repertoire is not only textual but also visual. Twelve woodblock illustrations visualized courtesans’ images through various devices and techniques, and related with the inscribed courtesans’ poems in one way or another. The common aesthetic of female beauty and feminine sentiments blurred boundaries between women from different backgrounds in their visual representations, which also smoothed the process of expanding and recycling the imagery repertoire of courtesans.
Chapter Three: Presenting the Writings and Images of Her Group in Gujin qinglou ji

Seven years after the publication of QLYY, in the third year of the Tianqi 天啟 reign (1623), another anthology of courtesans’ writings entitled Gujin qinglou ji 古今青樓集 (Collection from Green Tower: Ancient and Modern) came out. Being compiled by a Ming literatus Zhou Gongfu 周公輔 and his courtesan friend from Nanjing named Kou Wenhua 寇文華 (fl. ca. 1572-1620), it was the earliest extant Ming anthology involving a courtesan as co-editor. Courtesans began to assume the new role of anthologists whose agency went beyond self-expression to the realm of evaluating others’ literary creations and deciding their destiny in transmission. In this case, Kou Wenhua also participated in defining and establishing the tradition of courtesan literature by choosing what she viewed as most qualified and representative. The courtesan’s new role and the concomitant agency could not be imagined without the context of the floating world which featured an unprecedented mobility in the social spectrum and cultural structure of the time.

This anthology includes writings by courtesans from the Southern Qi 南齊 (479-502) to the Ming dynasty. Its table of contents shows the striking increase in both the number of the courtesans and the sum of their writings which ranged over diverse genres—shi poetry, ci lyrics, songs, and letters (shu 書). The list of writers is organized by dynasties, while the main body of the anthology is categorized according to different genres. It was divided into four juan, but eight sections, using the genre and subgenre to entitle each section: Pentasyllabic ancient-style poetry (wuyan gu 五言古), pentasyllabic regulated verse (wuyan lü 五言律), pentasyllabic quatrains (wuyan jue 五言絕), heptasyllabic ancient-style poetry (qiyan gu 七言古), heptasyllabic regulated verse (qiyan lü 七言律), heptasyllabic quatrains (qiyan jue 七言絕), lyrics (including ci lyrics and songs), and letters. The diversity in genre provides us with more comprehensive images of the courtesans because it allows a glimpse into the writings and lives of courtesans from various backgrounds. They ranged from the most famous courtesan celebrities skilled in poetic works who showed off their literary talent in luxurious banquets to the mediocre ones of lower status with basic literacy who merely wrote simple and colloquial letters to exchange messages with their male clients. The
inclusion of the letters by barely literate courtesans may partly be due to the courtesan editor’s intention to reveal a complete picture of the pleasure quarters; she showed her sympathy to less literate courtesans and gave them a chance to tell their stories and express their concerns. Moreover, selecting and publishing letters by these courtesans who often wrote in colloquial language catered to the enthusiasm of the Ming reading public for letter collections and colloquial literature, which could promote the selling of the anthology in the competitive Ming book market.296

Although this anthology includes a wide selection, the majority of the selected works were written by courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing. The priority which was given to Nanjing courtesans can be attributed to two contextual reasons. First, Nanjing was the centre of courtesan culture in the Ming, and enormous literati gatherings facilitated the collection and circulation of courtesans’ romantic anecdotes and writings. Second, the two compilers, Zhou Gongfu and Kou Wenhua, both identified themselves with the city of Nanjing. Zhou styled himself “Baimen lianxi jushi” 白門蓮溪居士 (Hermit by Lotus Brook of White Gate), while Kou called herself “Taoye yanshi” 桃葉豔史 (Alluring Scribe at Peach Leaf [Ford]). The White Gate and the Peach Leaf Ford are both famous sites in Nanjing, the former was used as an alternative name of Nanjing, and the latter was always associated with the love affairs in Nanjing. By compiling works of Nanjing courtesans, they promoted local beauties, some of whom were very likely their acquaintances.297

We have very little information about the male literatus compiler Zhou Gongfu. He might be just like his literary name indicated, a man who had never taken any official positions and spent most of his life leisurely in Nanjing. He named his studio

296 For the popularity of letter collections in the Ming and early Qing period, see Pattinson, “The Market for Letter Collections in Seventeenth-Century China,” 135-40. Many Ming literati were inspired by and highly praised colloquial literature for its witty expression of genuine feelings, as well as its freshness and realism. See Oki and Santangelo, Shan’ge, the Mountain Songs, 1-6. 297 There are letters directly addressed to Zhou Gongfu in Gujin qinglou ji, such as Jiang Yueshen 蔣月生, “Youyue Li Guangyuan Zhou Gongfu liangjun shang yulan” 又約李光垣周公甫兩君賞玉蘭 (Again Inviting Mr. Li Guanguan and Mr. Zhou Gongfu to Enjoy Magnolia), juan 4, 7a. Zhang Zhaoyin 張招隱, “Ji Zhou Gongfu” 寄周公甫 (To Zhou Gongfu), juan 4, 14b. Kou Yeru 蒯燁如, “Yao Zhou Gongfu liuxiong shanglian” 邀周公甫六兄賞蓮 (Inviting the Sixth Brother Zhou Gongfu to Enjoy Lotus), juan 4, 26b-27a. Kou Wenhua exchanged poems with other Nanjing courtesans in which they eulogized each other’s beauty and talent. Xu Pian 徐翩 (courtesy name Jinghong 驚鴻) once wrote a poem entitled “Zuiwo meiren wei Kou Wenhua fu” 醉臥美人為寇文華賦 (A Beauty lying in inebriation: Poem for Kou Wenhua) and Kou Wenhua responded to her friend’s poem with another poem entitled “Da Xu Jinhong” 答徐驚鴻 (Reply to Xu Jinhong). See Zhou and Kou, Gujin qinglou ji, juan 1, 15b-16a.
Duolü zhai 墮綠齋 (Studio of Falling Green) to show his interest in historical beauties since this name was derived from the story of the favourite concubine Lüzhu 綠珠 (?-300) whose loyalty to her master, Shi Chong 石崇 (249-300), left her with no choice but to commit suicide by jumping off a balcony. The preface he wrote for this anthology revealed his knowledge of historical and literary records about women of all types: talented and sensitive, chaste and virtuous, seductive and dangerous. He appreciated talented women and could not bear to watch their literary writings being discarded and lost without taking any action. At the end of this preface, similarly to other male compilers of women’s anthologies, he cited Confucius’ preservation of erotic poems from the state of Zheng in Shijing, and quoted Song Yu’s 宋玉 (ca. 298-ca. 222 BCE) renowned rhapsody on a neighbouring beauty in order to justify his own obsession and compilation. 298

Contrasting with the lesser-known literatus compiler Zhou Gongfu, the other compiler Kou Wenhua was a shining star in the courtesan circles of the late Ming. She was from the famous Kou family in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing which cultivated many courtesan celebrities like her. The leading scholar Qian Qianyi once composed a poem for the courtesans of Kou family, eulogizing the glamour of “the Kou sisters” (Kou jia zimei 寇家姊妹) and lamenting their miserable fate during the Ming-Qing transition. 299 Kou Wenhua had her biography recorded in Gen shi:

The name of scholar Kou is Wenhua, courtesy name Yanruo, and childhood name Ding’er. She was registered in Zhushi. Zhushi produced many alluring entertainers. According to what I’ve seen, Hao Wenzhu, Tong the seventh, little Qin the second and Lin the eldest all have outstanding reputations… Kou’s fame rose late but surpassed the four lords. [She] possessed the spirit of lakes and seas, 300 and was placed with dignity among celebrities. [She was] fond of ink and brush and never ceased to recite. [Whenever she] received scrolls in running script, [she] recited in a lengthened and graceful voice. Occasionally, [she] raised one or two brilliant phrases to ask guests. [Her] house and curtains were neat and stately, and [her] servants and maids were well-trained. [She] kept good drinking manner even in deep inebriation, and [her] distinguished talent and charming demeanour were also sufficient to shock everyone at a feast… She was tall and slender, standing utterly

298 Zhou Gongfu, “Tici,” 3a-3b.
299 Qian Qianyi, Muzhai youxue ji, 291.
300 Huhai qi 湖海氣 (the spirit of lakes and seas) alludes to Chen Deng 陳登 (fl. 190-200). His biography in Sanguo zhi 三國志 (Records of the Three Kingdoms) highlights his unrestrained spirit which was said to be a feature of “a man of lakes and seas” (hu hai zhi shi 湖海之士) who has seen much of the world. Chen Shou, Sanguo zhi, 229.
apart. She walked like embracing a jade mountain.\textsuperscript{301} Her eyes darted around [like] flowing ripples, and [she was] especially good at cunning seduction.

The biography further reveals her personality by inserting an anecdote in which Kou Wenhua refused to ingratiate herself to the well-known literatus Tu Long 屠隆 (1544-1605). Her self-respect won admiration from her contemporaries, inspiring them to compare her with another Nanjing courtesan, Xu Pian 徐翩, who tried to please Tu in order to promote herself. As the biography says, according to their different treatment towards the same arrogant literatus, people held Kou in higher esteem. Although sometimes misfortunes befell her due to the discrepancy between her noble self-respect and humble social status, she never thought of relying on a powerful lover to settle all her problems. It is probably because she preferred an independent and free life and enjoyed giving rather than receiving help, which won her the reputation of \textit{jiexia} 節俠 (upright knight-errant). Kou’s aspiration for agency also motivated her to participate in the activities that exclusively belonged to male literati, one of which was compiling the anthology entitled \textit{Gujin qinglou ji}.

1. Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Poetic Selection

There is an obvious overlap in \textit{Gujin qinglou ji} and many other courtesans’ anthologies of the Ming dynasty, such as \textit{QLYY}, with regard to their selection of the courtesan poets and their works. Being tempted by the huge profitability of the vogue of women’s writings, these anthologists very likely copied and appropriated each other’s work. However, the distinctive ways of presenting the same works from different perspectives helped shape different images and encouraged divergent interpretations, creating an innovative reading experience which was of utmost importance in the highly repetitive and intensely competitive Ming printing world. The floating world blurred the border of texts following different sub-cultural traditions and targeted audiences of different classes with diverse levels of literacy. In this sense, the context of the floating world not

\textsuperscript{301} \textit{Yushan} 玉山 (jade mountain) alludes to the renowned literatus Ji Kang 稽康 (223-262), one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove during Wei and Jin dynasties. He was said to be tall and straight. While drunken, he looked like a jade mountain about to collapse. Liu Yiqing, \textit{Shishuo xinyu jiaojian}, 553.

\textsuperscript{302} Pan Zhiheng, \textit{Gen shi}, vol. \textit{zi} 子 193, 556.
only facilitated appropriation and adaptation within anthologies, but also stimulated innovation in anthology-construction based on creative configuration of miscellaneous materials.

QLYY inserted courtesans’ writings into each entry of *Piaojing*, a popular Ming brothel treatise, and hence framed courtesans’ writings within the context of imparting practical brothel-visiting knowledge. This organization provided both the perspective of male patrons and the courtesan’ writings which represented their self-images in their own voices and responded to male’s perspective in various ways.

If QLYY presented to us the complicated and multi-layered images of courtesans by inviting discourse between the perspective of male patrons and the courtesans’ writings framed within it, *Gujin qinglou ji* treated the courtesans’ poetry more seriously as independent and self-sufficient literary productions. It applied the same editorial arrangement as mainstream anthologies of male literati. The table of contents classified courtesan writers by dynasties, recording each one with the amount of literary works being selected. In the main body of the anthology, the writings were categorized by genres, such as *shi* poems, *ci* lyrics, songs, and letters. Within the same genre, the works under the names of their writers were arranged in chronological order.

The emphasis on genre placed value on the literary features of selected works by courtesans and the inheritance and innovation of their literary creation through the ages, which presented the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in a similar way to male literati of identical tastes of particular poetic topics and writing styles. Through this arrangement, some compositional characteristics closely connected with their careers became more conspicuous. They shared not only the allusions referring to the famous courtesans before them such as Su Xiaoxiao 蘇小小 (ca. 479-ca. 502) and Xue Tao 薛濤 (768-831), but also the thematic emphasis on lovesickness in parting and sexuality in rendezvous. Moreover, a glimpse at the data collected in the very front of each generic section shows that most courtesans had the same preference for verses with fewer lines. Pentasyllabic quatrains and heptasyllabic quatrains were their favourite genres and most of their poetic works fell in these two categories. It may be because the shorter quatrains met the needs of the occasions of their creation. Most courtesans improvised poetic works at various banquets when quick wit was highly regarded. These occasions also generated the similar inclinations in courtesans’ artistic creation. They preferred
sketches of orchid and bamboo to the more meticulous (gongbi 工筆) paintings which took much longer to compose.

2. Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Epistolary Selection

The innovation of Gujin qinglou ji lies in its epistolary selection which was rarely seen in anthologies of courtesans’ writings. According to extant sources, some of the selected epistolary writings had never been compiled or published before Gujin qinglou ji. Anthologizing letters indicated the popularity of epistolary writings in the late Ming, which attested to another side of the floating world of the mid and late Ming when travelling became a necessity for merchants and a fad among the leisure class. Geographical knowledge, including place names, local products, and distances of water and land routes, was widely circulated via varied publications, such as daily-use encyclopedias, route books, and merchant manuals, greatly facilitating travel all over the country.³⁰³ As travelling became more and more common, epistolary writing, which could overcome the barriers of spatial distance to maintain personal relationships and social networks, acquired growing attention from people of a wider social spectrum. Apart from travelling, there were many other reasons for the increase in letter-exchanging in Ming society. These include the development of the postal system, the elevation of friendship in the traditional five cardinal relationships (wulun 亀倫), and the tendency of replacing face-to-face meetings with epistolary communications in daily life.³⁰⁴

Epistolary writing fell in the category of shu 書 (letter/epistle), but some of them bore prominent poetic features, such as sharing the same topoi, motifs, and structural principles, as well as applying end rhymes and semantic rhythm.³⁰⁵ Meanwhile, some shu were written in a colloquial language which created a strong sense of spontaneity and intimacy. This genre gave writers individual freedom in choosing an expressive style to fit the mode, purpose, and condition of creation. According to David Pattinson, the earliest letters can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period, and were mainly composed for diplomatic purpose, while by the Han dynasty letter-writing between individuals for practical and social reasons was well established.³⁰⁶ According to extant

³⁰³ Yuming He, Home and the World, 104-112.
³⁰⁵ Zong-Qi Cai, How to Read Chinese Poetry, 1-9.
documents, authenticated letters began to be categorized by genre in Wenxuan 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature), compiled under the general editorship of Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531). Among the genres in Wenxuan which can be described as letters, only shu 書 were used for non-official functions, though some shu might have political aims.³⁰⁷

Apart from the formal shu, Pattinson describes a tradition of exchanging short informal letters in social intercourse, which can be traced back to excavated family letters written by soldiers around 221 BCE.³⁰⁸ This type of letter was later given several alternative names, most commonly chidu 尺牘, to indicate its brevity and informality.³⁰⁹ These short and personal letters became an object of literary interest and appreciation in the Ming dynasty likely due to two great Northern Song men of letters, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036-1101) and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105).³¹⁰ Most letters selected for Gujin Qinglou ji are of this type and under the category of “shu,” which may suggest that the use of consistent names or terms for different types of letters was not strictly regulated in some Ming courtesan anthologies. However, the use of “shu” as a generic label, which generally implies a more formal type of epistolary writing, may also indicate an editorial attempt to make the selected letters appear more respectable.

Gujin Qinglou ji selected 56 letters from 51 courtesans from the Tang dynasty to the contemporary Ming dynasty. Apart from the five well-known courtesans of the previous dynasties, the remaining 46 were Ming courtesans. Among the 31 Ming courtesans whose residence could be identified, 25 were from Nanjing or spent most of their careers in the pleasure quarters of Nanjing. According to their biographical information in courtesans’ anthologies and records in many flower-ranking texts, these courtesans could be divided into three categories. 1) Top courtesans who were trained to be versatile in art, music and literature; 2) Well-known courtesans whose fame was not gained from literature, presumed the most difficult realm for a young woman to master,

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³⁰⁷ Ibid., 129.
³⁰⁸ Ibid., 129-130.
³⁰⁹ For example, one alternative name is chidu 尺牘, which is “derived from the measure of length chi (foot) and obviously refers to the length of the wooden writing tablet, which, during the Han dynasty, when the term was coined, amounted to approximately twenty-three centimetres.” Other similar compounds being used to refer to a letter are chishu 尺書 (a foot of writing), chisu 尺素 (a foot of plain silk), chihan 尺翰 (lit., “a foot of brush”) and chili 尺鯉 (a foot of carp). See Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China, 35-36.
but rather from their peerless appearance and achievements in painting, calligraphy, and theatrical performance; 3) The mediocre courtesans who had not mastered literary, artistic or musical skills thoroughly but had basic literacy or superficial knowledge of art and music which differentiated them from those who only sold their charms. But we need to keep in mind that the ranks were not unchangeable. It was possible for a mediocre courtesan to cultivate herself, climb the ladder and become a courtesan star, and the same was possible for a top courtesan ultimately losing all her fortune and radiance to a twist of fate.

The freedom of epistolary writing both in style and length allows letters to touch upon almost all the topics in everyday life. The subject matter tends to be practical and mundane, shared concerns of both sender and recipient. The letters by courtesans of Ming dynasty Nanjing in *Gujin qinglou ji* provided a window into their main activities, personal and social networks, and their most significant concerns.

Furthermore, by appending letters to poetic compositions in an anthology, the compilers actually established the image of Ming Nanjing courtesans at the crossroads of the aesthetic and mundane, literary creation and the real world. For courtesans who were famous for their literary talent, their letters enhanced our understanding of their poetic works by providing a context in which their poetry should be read, as well as by revealing other aspects of their personalities and images which could be either complementary or contradictory. For courtesans who were not capable of composing poetry or any other genre of literariness, the flexibility of epistolary writing allowed them to express their emotions and shape their images in a much easier and freer way, and overcome the obstacles of time and space to maintain friendships when face-to-face communication was impossible. Without these letters, although we could still understand some of them through records by male literati, such as random jottings and flower-ranking texts, there would be no access to their inner world and self-representation.

However, the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in their self-representations tended to be changed by the compilers when the letters were selected in anthologies like *Gujin qinglou ji*, especially those written by mediocre courtesans with lower levels of literacy on mundane topics and in prosaic form. When we applaud the flexibility of epistolary writing and its contribution to our comprehensive understanding of
courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing, we should also be warned of how easily letters, especially those prosaic and quotidian ones, could be manipulated, mutated, and even forged. Compilers could trim the selected letters without the slightest suspicion from the audience since there was no semantic rhythm, rhyme, parallel or any textual pattern to follow. The poetic and epistolary writings of the courtesan co-compiler Kou Wenhua were also selected for this anthology, which reminds us of Liu Rushi, a courtesan-poet who married the leading scholar-official Qian Qianyi and assisted him in compiling Liechao shiji. She played a role in the compilation of “Runji” 閏集 (Intercalary Collection), a section of women’s poetry in Liechao shiji. As Kang-i Sun Chang demonstrates, Liu Rushi “seemed to be concerned primarily with elevating the status of courtesan poetry” in order to “establish a literary position.” Sharing the same concern, Kou Wenhua also tried to present herself and the courtesan coterie in an elegant, refined, and intelligent light by wielding her editorial power. The strongest example of this is in the section of letters. Here, she and the other compiler Zhou Gongfu not only determined which should be included and which should not, but also revised the letters written by courtesans who were not good at literary writing or composing letters which included vulgar language or improper topics.

2.1. Unifying the Images of Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Shared Textual Space

The diversity of courtesan letter-writers who came from the three different ranks was not fully reflected in Gujin qinglou ji due to the revision of the courtesan compiler and her literatus friend. Comparison of the selected letters with the source materials leads us to the discovery that the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans from different backgrounds were unified in two ways.

311 Anyone with basic literacy could forge a letter which was written in prosaic language and contained only everyday matters. This has been proved by a lawsuit recorded in Xinke tiben 刑科題本 (Board of Punishments Routine Memorial). It includes sixteen love letters which were said to have been exchanged between a gentry wife and her lover who was the live-in tutor for her children. However, the sixteen lover letters turned out to be forgeries by a servant who, under interrogation, confessed his own guilt of trapping the household mistress: “I studied a bit in my youth and am able to write. The language of those love letters is merely everyday talk. I can handle that sort of writing. I did worry that Master would not believe me, so I copied a published poem into them.” (小的幼年讀過書，原會寫字的。那情書內字句不過是家常話。小的寫出來的。恐怕大主不信又抄一篇刻賦在內。) See Theiss, “The Letter as Artifact of Sentiment and Legal Evidence,” 515.

312 Kang-i Sun Chang, “Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women’s Poetry and Their Selection Strategies,” 154.
The first one was on the level of language and format. The compilers replaced the colloquial and vulgar language with refined lines that were replete with poetic images and literary allusions. They also deleted the narrative elements of epistolary writings, and removed the epistolary form from selected letters, thus transforming fiction-like reading into poetry-like appreciation. For example, differing from love letter collections of seemingly low quality, the background introduction before each set of epistolary exchange which was usually added by compilers to their selections was completely absent from *Gujin qinglou ji*. Epistolary exchanges were also fragmented since this anthology only included one party (the courtesan) of each set of exchange between a courtesan and her literatus friend. The epistolary formulas were erased as well.

The selected letters were also unified on the level of aesthetic taste. The compilers revised courtesans’ letters according to literati’s aesthetic taste and even imitated their tones and habits. The following section examines the sources of the selected letters and the adaptations made in *Gujin qinglou ji* in order to show how its compilers bridged the style gap between poetry and letter and unified the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in an integrous anthological space.

When *Gujin qinglou ji* was under compilation, there had been many prominent women’s anthologies and popular courtesans’ anthologies at the disposal of the compilers, and they did refer to these anthologies while selecting poetic writings. However, most influential women’s anthologies often shut letters out of their selection. In comparison to the richness of women’s writing in the “early modern era” in England and continental Europe, Ellen Widmer has noted that there is a relative lack of actual letters proven to be written by historical Chinese women of the Ming and Qing.313 Widmer claimed that societal and generic factors hindered the preservation and publication of women’s letters. For some gentry women, their reluctance to publish letters may be attributed to family disapproval or broader societal censorship, since letters could reveal details of familial affairs in the inner chamber. For other women, such as Wang Duanshu, whose letters are not found in her own collected writings, they

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313 Widmer, “Letters as Windows on Ming-Qing Women’s Literary Culture,” 744.
simply “thought of them as [a] lesser form of writing and did not bother to include them in their collected works.”

However, women’s letters, especially those of courtesans who received no disapproval from family and less censorship from society, found their way to the prosperous market for letter collections in seventeenth-century China. As Pattinson demonstrates in his study on collections of letters, numerous letter collections were published and circulated, targeting different but overlapping groups of readers who read them for entertainment, aesthetic appreciation, and practical guidance. Letter collections seemed to be ubiquitous in the market of popular reading materials, and there are at least eighty extant titles of printed epistolary works. Letters were often published in individual collections, anthologies, biographies, random jottings, and even fictions, among which we can take women’s letters as exemplary historical records and literary creations. Apart from these sources, Lowry noticed some letters were frequently included in two chapters of household encyclopedias, which could be viewed as a Ming feature of preserving and circulating epistolary writings, “one devoted to models for writing in public life, wenhan men 文翰門, and one giving detailed instructions for writing invitations and private correspondence, shuqi men 書啟門.” These two chapters could be published within daily-use encyclopedias, but they were also published independently as epistolary guides and letter collections in which women’s letters could usually be found in the categories of jiashu 家書 (family letters) and qingshu 情書 (love letters).

Courtesans’ letters in daily-used encyclopedias, epistolary guides, and letter collections provided the most significant and reliable sources for the epistolary selection of the mediocre and less-known courtesans in Gujin qinglou ji. Gujin qinglou ji also includes the letters sent to famous scholars and prominent literati by top courtesans from Ming Nanjing who were famous for their literary talent and close to Kou Wenhua or her upper-class courtesan household. Not like poetry, the epistolary writings by top courtesans were rarely found in popular printings and book markets which may be because of the control and pressure from the influential male officials and scholars with whom they exchanged their letters. It partly explains why they could be collected and

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314 Ibid., 771.
316 Lowry, “Duplicating the Strength of Feeling,” 241
published in *Gujin qinglou ji*, and why most of the selected letters were written by top courtesans from Ming dynasty Nanjing. The courtesan compiler, Kou Wenhua, whose household had been established in the Nanjing pleasure quarters for decades must have had resources and means to get support and permission from the Nanjing top courtesan circle of which she was also a prominent member, and those powerful males with whom she frequently associated.

Comparing *Gujin qinglou ji* and one of its possible sources, *Fengyun qingshu* 豐韻情書 (The Gracious Love Letter, 1618), which was compiled by the devoted editor of epistolary guides named Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨 (fl. 1596, pseudonym Baizhuo sheng 百拙生), the most obvious change lies in the format. As Lowry generalizes through perusing many letter collections, including *Fengyun qingshu*, “each of the letters is read as part of a pair. Each pair of letters is given a title (‘So-and-so and so-and-so are fond of one another’) listing the two surnames (mou and mou qinghao),”317 which is followed by the “brief narrative introduction [to] set up the context for each exchange of letters and introduce the writer and recipient, their place of origin and the circumstances that caused them to part.”318 The letter-text is placed after the introduction, accompanied with interlinear notes, and marginal and summary comments. *Gujin qinglou ji* deleted all the paratexts and replaced some of the repetitive titles with the titles of more personal origins, revealing detailed information and summarizing the gist of the letter, such as “Yao Zhou Gongfu liuxiong shanglian” 邀周公輔六兄賞蓮 (Inviting the Sixth Brother Zhou Gongfu to Enjoy Lotus), “Xie Xu Boren hui cha” 謝許伯仁惠茶 (Thanks to Xu Boren for Kindly Sending Me the Tea), and “Yu Cheng Wenyu suo zhu” 與程文宇索燭 (Asking Cheng Wenyu for Candles). The change of some titles may be due to the deletion of the paratexts, especially the brief introduction preceding each set of letters. The brief introduction in *Fengyun qingshu* worked as a short narrative frame that contextualized the epistolary exchange and made it possible to read them as fiction set in a particular place and time with comparatively complete plot and identifiable characters whose personality and feelings were revealed with the unfolding of the letters. As a compensatory strategy, titles in *Gujin qinglou ji* were revised to introduce the person involved and the main event in a terser way resembling some poetic titles.

This is also a meaningful move, which helped transform fiction-like reading of courtesans’ letters into poetry-like reading.

This transformation was achieved not only by deleting framing narrative and changing the titles, but also by selecting letters that fit the editorial purposes and standards and by making changes to the selected letters if necessary. Compared with Fengyun qingshu, which recorded the complete version of each epistolary exchange by including both the letter from the sender and the reply from the recipient, Gujin qinglou ji only selected the letters by courtesans (either as senders or recipients) which formed merely part of the correspondence, and thus fragmented the previously complete narrative. In Fengyun qingshu, each set of letters constructed a complete conversation and delineated the whole picture of an event comprised of a beginning, climax, and ending in which the images of the courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing were presented. It resembled the way fiction used to shape protagonists. The narrative framework and communicative dialogicity invited a fiction-like reading of their images. The compiler also added varied forms of comments in order to draw the reader’s attention to the unfolding of qing 情 (feelings/love) with the development of plot. However, Gujin qinglou ji fragmented the epistolary communication and presented the self-shaped images of the Ming Nanjing courtesans in their own letters without correspondences. There was thus a lack of certain elements related to the whole event. When we read the Ming Nanjing courtesan Zheng Hong’s 鄭紅娥 letter sent to her literatus friend Wu Jingxiang 吳景祥, asking for pearls in Gujin qinglou ji, we do not know the outcome of this request. Sometimes the reader becomes even less concerned with how the event ends, partly due to the interlinear dots added by the compiler(s). These shift the reader’s attention from the development of plot to the literary allusions and refined parallels for appreciation and imitation.

The communicative context and epistolary form are completely erased in Gujin qinglou ji, thus rendering each letter a “de-epistolarized” form. Epistolary form is reflected most conspicuously through the prescript (self-designation and addressing to the recipient), the proem (usually a warm-up for the renewal of a relationship), and the postscript which closed the letter with an expression of reverence and expectation for a
Most of these elements cannot be found in *Gujin qinglou ji*. The “de-epistolarized” letters resembled those informal notes exchanged between male literati which featured a causal writing style and was said to be fostered and developed by Su Shi whose complete works included some fifteen hundred writings of this type. However, in numerous cases, the editorial revision in *Gujin qinglou ji* went even one step further to transform a letter with pragmatic purpose into parallel prose of literary value. The narrative elements were replaced by the strong emotional expression embedded in a form replete with poetic features, and thus the fiction-like reading was no more suitable when reading the selection of courtesans’ letters in *Gujin qinglou ji*.

Not only refined language, but also refined taste was applied even in letters by mediocre courtesans who had no fame in literature. In the letter by a mediocre Nanjing courtesan Guo Chunhua 郭春華, she asked her lover Cheng Wenyu 程文宇 for some candles, which as the brief introduction in *Fengyun qingshu* says, “it is also an attractive anecdote of Green Tower” (yi qinglou zhi meitan亦青樓之美譚). Guo wrote this letter in a straightforward way and started it with the reason why she needed the candles. The version in *Fengyun qingshu*, very likely the original one, gives the reason in merely one sentence which sounds like a note on common sense: “The night is extremely dark without candles” (ye wuzhu bushing hunmei夜無燭不勝昏昧).

But the version in *Gujin qinglou ji* puts forward a totally different reason: “By the river, in front of the flowers, it is not sufficient to hold up against the strength of wind if without the marvelous product from Mount Qian. Moreover, I always have an addiction for travelling and enjoying by sight” (水面花前，非鉛山妙品不足以敵風威，且妾素饒遊賞癖). The passion for travelling was popular among the Ming literati, and they often set their poetic and visual self-images in scenes of aesthetic pleasure like “by the river” or “in front of flowers.” In addition, this version also replaced the common word “zhu” 燭 (candle) with the more refined phrase “qianshan miaopin” 鉛山妙品 (the marvelous product from Mount Qian). This reference to a candle would only be used by

319 For a detailed investigation of the letter formula, see Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*, 76-110.
322 Ibid.
a small circle of high-status literati who shared such professional knowledge and could afford the best of each item in their daily lives.

Although it includes works by courtesans of diverse statuses, Gujin qinglou ji does not allow this diversity to be fully reflected in the epistolary writings, nor the images of mediocre courtesans. Images of the courtesans in Gujin qinglou ji may differ in terms of different personalities, trainings, beliefs and values which may further impact their different features of artistic and literary creation, as well as different ways of solving problems in life. However, they are unified under the editors’ brushes in terms of the level of literacy and intelligence—proficient in writing, elegant in aesthetic appreciation, and refined in their way of expression. Not like Fengyun qingshu which sometimes cites the “teachings” delivered by brothel treatises such as Piaojing (Classic of Whoring) and attests to its general applicability, Gujin qinglou ji strongly refuses the stereotypes shaped in these “teachings” which were aimed at less-cultivated people of lower status. In the letter by a lesser-known courtesan Min Chuyun 閔楚雲 selected for Fengyun qingshu, the reader is exposed to the vulgar practices in brothels, such as cutting hair and scalding skin to prove loyalty and love, as being forewarned in the “teachings” in Piaojing. However, this part is completely deleted in Gujin qinglou ji, which would never tolerate vulgar images or unrefined writings. The revisions which were made in some of the letters in Gujin qinglou ji unified both the images of courtesans from diverse backgrounds and the reading experience offered by this anthology as harmonious integrity. Although including both poetic and epistolary writings, the fiction-like reading of the epistolary writings had been transformed into a new kind of poetry-like reading.

2. 2. Restoring the Images of the Ming Nanjing Courtesans in Their Daily Life

Anthologizing the letters of courtesans from different backgrounds facilitated our reading them as an integrous body which represented a unified but also multifaceted image of courtesans in various scenarios. Sharing textual space with lower-ranked courtesans not proficient in literature caused anxiety from the top courtesans, thus their representative Kou Wenhua and her friend Zhou Gongfu wielded their editorial authority and extensively revised the letters by lesser-known courtesans on levels of language, format, and aesthetic taste.

324 Deng Zhimo, Fengyun qingshu, juan 3, 24a-24b.
However, the theme of a letter was often not amenable to change, which could be attested through a comparative reading of the lower-ranked courtesans’ letters in *Fengyun qingshu* and *Gujin qinglou ji*. Three recurrent themes which were shared in the letters by courtesans of different ranks demonstrate that as a group, courtesans did have much in common regarding their daily life experience. The three prominent themes were: 1. Expressing different emotions experienced in a relationship; 2. Exchanging gifts and revealing their meanings; 3. Inviting friends, replying to invitations, and commemorating banquets. Moreover, a letter usually included more than one theme and the three themes were often intertwined to form a letter. A courtesan may have begun her letter by expressing her longing for a male friend whom she had not seen for a long time and then either invite him to her garden for a cup of wine or send him some gifts as love pledges. The following section studies these themes one by one to show how letters constructed the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in their daily lives.

### 2.2.1. Theme of Different Emotions Experienced in a Relationship

One of the most significant themes in courtesans’ epistolary writings was centred on their relationships with male clients on whom they relied for both survival and promotion. It is thus no wonder there were so many letters addressed to the male clients which represented the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans experiencing different emotions at different stages of their relationship. The content may have centred on a courtesan’s longing for the addressee from whom she was temporarily separate and her earnest expectation for a reunion; her memories of the past happiness shared with the addressee and her pity for their unfulfilled love; her seething resentment at being betrayed and abandoned; and her decision to end their relationship.

The letters can reveal an amorous affair at its different stages. The letters also shaped the courtesan’s image and fully revealed her complicated emotions. In *Gujin qinglou ji*, there is a letter sent to Zhou Gongfu, the male literatus compiler of the anthology, by a Nanjing courtesan named Zhang Zhaoyin 張招隱 who also had her poetic works sent to the same person included in *Gujin qinglou ji*. Her name appeared once in a widely circulated flower-ranking text entitled *Jinling baimei* 金陵百媚 (*A Host of Charms in Jinling*). She was ranked the fourteenth among *huikui* 會魁 (Metropolitan Graduates with Distinction) and was given a brief introduction: “Zhang Gui, her courtesy name is Zhaoyin, literary name Xilin, and childhood name Qingqing,
living on the street of [the old quarter]. She is beautiful, bearing elegant demeanor” (張桂，字招隱，號郄林，小字卿卿，住大街。貌美，有致) . Neith
er the poetic commentaries nor the final remark in Jinling baimei mentioned her literary talent, and her literary compositions were not included in any anthologies of her time or later generations. Thus, the preservation of her works should be attributed to her relationship with Zhou Gongfu, which attested to the significance of a courtesan’s network in collecting and circulating her writings.

This letter was written on the eve of a marriage that had been arranged for Zhang Zhaoyin against her will. Although the letter was simply entitled “Ji Zhou Gongfu” 寄周公甫 (To Zhou Gongfu), the urgent crisis Zhang faced and the complicated emotion embedded made it complex. The beginning of this letter followed the convention of epistolary proem which was “dedicated to the recollection and reaffirmation of the correspondents’ preceding relationship.”

Zhang deliberately chose the moment when they bid farewell to begin her letter.

I remember when plum flowers broke open in white, we bade farewell before the lamp. I asked in tears for your date of return. You promised me: “After the cease of peach blossom rain, and when willow snow flutters, then swallows will be my leading banner. You should sweep the path [to welcome me].

憶得梅花破白時，與君話別燈前。儂含淚問歸期。君且誓謂儂曰：“桃雨霽後，柳雪飄時，燕子即我之前旌也。卿當掃徑。”

Her vivid description of that particular scene on parting drew the recipient Zhou Gongfu, her intended reader, back in his memory and thus turned the reading experience into a bridge that connected both the physical distance and the temporal span. When the bond was picked up and the pledge was heard again in a more fixed form (written on paper), Zhang jumped out of her memory and twisted the affectionate tone into deep resentment by contrasting his passionate pledge in the past with his deep neglect in the present.

Now swallows are carrying their fledglings and the lotus are going to remove their make-up. [One] should not speak of you being detained as a sojourner, but even letters [from you] are rare. You are truly heartless. Don’t you remember the moments when our feelings were bound beneath the blossoms and our affection contained in the goblets? The matter of my whole life is indeed not in my own

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325 Li Yunxiang, Jinling baimei, upper juan, 83.
326 Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China, 79
327 Zhou and Kou, Gujin qinglou ji, juan 4, 14b.
328 It means their love was bestowed on each other while drinking or at drinking parties.
hand. It will probably be during the eighth and ninth month [to decide] whether to stay or leave. I am afraid when your horse heads back south, I would already have been placed in the inner chamber. I do not have the fate to be with you in my present life, but I wish to follow the model of Yuxiao in future life. My bosom is filled with deep-seated resentment which even Marquis Brushtip cannot bear to divulge thoroughly. My letter is entrusted to wild geese, and my heart is broken as love died.

今燕已將雛，菡萏又欲卸妝。毋論人被羈栖，而鱗鴻亦自渺沒。君真薄倖。獨不憶花下牽情，杯中留意時乎？儂終身事，實難自主，去留多在八九月間。恐君馬首南日，儂已置身閨閣矣。儂與君今世緣慳，願學玉簫來世。滿腔幽恨，即穎侯亦不忍盡吐。書付鴻來，腸隨情斷。

Both Zhang and her lover referred to time by using typical seasonal images. The emphasis on conventional images is one of the poetic features shared by other forms of writings in order to showcase the high literacy of the author. In some letters written by mediocre courtesans, the compilers often replaced the straightforward temporal words with conventional images. Zhang’s mastery of these images features throughout the whole letter. She responded to her lover’s mentioning of his return date by using similar phrases and images, thus reminding her fickle lover of his failing to live up to promises. Also, the resemblance in language, image, and style indicated their matched intellectual and literary talent and associated their relationship with the idealized trope of “caizi-jiaren” (scholars and beauties). This trope was further developed by inserting the allusion of a Tang dynasty courtesan Yuxiao, whose love for a young scholar named Wei Gao was eventually fulfilled in her afterlife, thus endowing love with a power that could transcend life and death. This letter by Zhang Zhaoyin,
written with deep affection, transcended the physical distance and was endowed with a power that may have been able to change her fate in this life.

The amorous memories in this letter were pieced together from particular scenes consisting of certain images, such as “beneath the blossoms” and “in the goblets,” which depicted the occasions their affection was aroused and deepened. Zhang also described her imagination of the impending future in a vivid way. Her lover was whipping his horse’s back in the hopes of reuniting with her whilst she had been trapped in the inner chamber of a gentry family. The key piece of information, however, was revealed clearly through narrative in a realistic tone: “The matter of my whole life is indeed not in my own hand. It will probably be during the eighth and ninth month [to decide] whether to stay or leave” (儂終身事，實難自主，去留多在八九月間). Clarity is one of the advantages of narrative when compared to the ambiguity of poetic expression. Moreover, in this letter which is replete with poetic images and neat parallels, this sentence catches attention of the reader at first glance due to the sudden change of writing style which made this sentence seem more urgent than the rest. Compared with other genres, letters are more effective with regard to combining both pragmatic function and infectious expression. The shift of language registers and writing styles formed a driving force within the letter, the switch of different scenes guides the eyes and imaginations of the audience, whose emotion is evoked and mode is changed when they read through alternate sentences of poetic sentiments and compelling requests.

Another two pieces of Zhang’s writing, one shi poem and one ci lyric, were selected for the poetic section of Gujin qinglou ji. The shi poem was addressed to the same person as her selected letter as indicated by its title “Bingzhong bie Zhou Gongfu” (Parting from Zhou Gongfu in Sickness). Zhang incorporated many stock images in her poem, such as separated lovers, one lying sick by the window and the other trekked on the road. By contrast, a pair of swallows clung to each other, resting on a carved beam. However, the scenes formed by poetic images were juxtaposed before the eyes of the reader rather than being arranged and unfolded in certain order. The same juxtaposition of conventional images also appeared in her ci lyric entitled “Qiu chou” (Sorrow in Autumn) to the tune of “Pusa man” (Bodhisattva Barbarian), which depicted a sorrowful woman longing for her lover in a
bleak raining day in autumn. The piled images of misty drizzle, the returning birds, the towering building, and the cold quilt embroidered with mandarin ducks constructed a familiar picture of conventional *ci* lyrics which framed the lovesick woman in endless longing and melancholy. Although the stock images compounded in the *shi* poem and *ci* lyric could immediately evoke the reader’s proper emotional reaction due to long-established literary convention, there was no driving force to organize these images into an ordered narrative or entrust them with any definite message since the short regulated poetry or *ci* lyrics usually possessed aesthetic value rather than pragmatic function.

Moreover, as a pragmatic text, epistolary exchange represented the courtesan-client relationship in more realistic light and thus revealed multiple dimensions of courtesans’ images and thoughts. One intentionally avoided topic in poetic works by courtesans was the tension between wife and courtesan, although gentry wives often touched upon this topic and warned their husbands of staying outside of the pleasure quarters in a tone supported by Confucian morality. Courtesans instead turned poetic discourse from morality to aesthetics by shaping their self-images in the realm of literature and art, which matched the aesthetic and spiritual pursuit of male literati without causing any anxiety and conflict in the mundane realm. However, it does not mean a courtesan really did not care her lover’s marital life which may have threatened her relationship with him. In more private and flexible writings like letters, they confessed their worries and anxiety straightforwardly to their lovers, no matter how controversial these feelings could be, for example, “[I] wish you not to indulge in marital happiness and abandon me on the Zhangtai [road]” (幸勿戀伉儷之歡,冷落我章臺也), 335 “[I] heard you returned west and fulfilled your marital wish. You the satisfied Xiangru, have abandoned the luxuriant willows on the Zhangtai [road]” (聞君西歸，已遂成鶯之喜；得意相如，竟冷落章臺柳色也). 337 This tension appeared so many times in letters by different authors in a similar way that indicated it was a common concern for courtesans whose relationships with the male literati were not as stable as being shown in their poetic exchanges. For the mediocre courtesans of lower status, sometimes maintaining a relationship even entailed humiliation. In her letter to Zhang Shudiao 張叔調, a lesser-known courtesan Qin Yue’e 秦月娥 expressed her

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335 *Zhangtai* 章臺 (literally Zhang Terrace) was a name of a street in the Han dynasty where brothels gathered, and thus later became a term referring to pleasure quarters.


337 Ibid., 19b-20a.
gratefulness and promised her loyalty to Zhang for his willingness to resume their relationship after being severely scolded and cursed by him.338

2.2.2. Theme of Exchanging Gifts and Revealing their Meanings
The second theme regarding exchange of gifts also frequently appeared in courtesans’ letters which were often sent together with gifts, or sometimes triggered the exchange of gifts, especially for courtesans who expected gifts from their lovers as love pledges or as evidence of intimacy despite physical separation. These gifts were also sources on which they relied to survive difficult times of their lives. In Gujin qinglou ji, the courtesans’ letters regarding gifts can be divided into two categories which belonged to two different traditions in women’s writings: One could be traced back to the epistolary exchange between the famous couple Qin Jia 秦嘉 and Xu Shu 徐淑 in the Eastern Han (25-220).339 The other was established by a courtesan named Ding Liuniang 丁六娘 in the Sui dynasty (581-618). The images of Xu Shu and Ding Liuniang fitted the model of Ming ideal women who should be both talented and passionate. However, their images were represented differently in their distinct writing styles conforming to their respective social statuses. Xu Shu represented her image as a loyal wife whose conversation with her husband was conducted on the same intellectual level by revealing the symbolic meaning embedded in the gifts exchanged. She also placed her image within the lineage of talented and virtuous women by alluding to the famous predecessors whose writings also involved gifts exchanged between couples. Ding Liuniang represented her image as a smart and seductive girl flirting with her lover by showing her intimacy in colloquial language with erotic undertones. The following section examines how the letters by Ming Nanjing courtesans appropriated the respective features of these two different traditions to construct their self-images in relation to women’s literary legacies.

Ibid., 25a-25b.
339 The earliest source for the exchange of letters between Xu Shu and her husband Qin Jia is the Yutai xinyong 玉臺新詠 (New Lyrics from the Jade Terrace) which dates from the Six Dynasties, so we cannot presume their authenticity, which, as Pattinson points out, is “a problem with many of the apparently personal letters which have come down to us from the Han period.” See Pattinson, “Privacy and Letter Writing in Han and Six Dynasties China,” 100. Handwritten copies of these letters are found in the Dunhuang corpus of manuscripts which, while evidencing their popularity in fourth- or fifth-century China, is insufficient to prove that Xu Shu and Qin Jia were the authors of the letters bearing their names. See Mu-chou Poo, Daily Life in Ancient China, 194. However, it is the self-fulfilling ideal relationship between husband and wife depicted in these letters that the Ming courtesans tried to imitate in their epistolary self-representations, thus the problems of authorship and authenticity are irrelevant to this dissertation.
I. The Image of Ming Nanjing Courtesans Following the Tradition of Xu Shu

The great nineteenth-century scholar Yan Kejun (1762-1843) composed a brief biography for Xu Shu and thus provided us with the context of the epistolary exchange between Xu Shu and her husband Qin Jia.

Qin Jia’s style name was Shihui. He lived during the reign of Emperor Huan [r. 147-167] of the Eastern Han dynasty. In his official career he rose to the rank of imperial chamberlain… The wife of Qin Jia from Longxi was a daughter of the Xu family; also from Longxi. Her personal name was Shu; she had literary talent and married Jia. Jia served in office in the capital of the commandery and Shu, because she was ill, she lived in their home in one of the outlying districts of the commandery. Jia was appointed clerk for the presentation of the end-of-the-year reports in the national capital… Jia then left and travelled to Luoyang, where later he was appointed chamberlain. After staying there for a number of years, he fell ill and died in Jinxiangting.

嘉字士會，後漢桓帝時人，官黃門郎。……隴西秦嘉妻者同郡徐氏女也。名淑，有才章，適嘉。嘉仕郡，淑居下縣，有疾。嘉舉上計掾。……嘉遂行，入洛，尋除黃門郎。居數年，病卒于津鄉亭。

The illness of Xu Shu prevented her from travelling with her husband, thus she stayed behind at home while her husband Qin Jia was in Luoyang. During the time they were separated, Qin Jia sent his wife some gifts, including a precious mirror, treasured hairpins, silken shoes, valuable incense, and a zither together with a letter in which he emphasized the delicacy and value of these gifts, and meanwhile demonstrated the functions of each gift:

间得此鏡，既明且好。形觀文彩，世所希有。意甚愛之，故以相與。并致寶釵一雙，價值千金。龍虎組履一緉。好香四種，各一斤。素琴一張，常所自彈也。明鏡可以鑒形，寶釵可以耀首，芳香可以馥身去穢，麝香可以闢惡氣，素琴可以娛耳。

While preparing these gifts for his wife, Qin Jia imagined the use of his gifts in his wife’s daily life. However, to highlight their value and functions in the circumstance of everyday life limited his expression within the material dimension of the gifts as

341 Yan Kejun, *Quan Shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen*, 673.
342 Ibid.
objects. The high price and rarity of an object may indicate Qin Jia’s affection for his wife, but the lack of symbolic meaning of the gifts which could elevate their communication to a spiritual level made his wife feel unsatisfied, as revealed in her letter of reply, “these words are wrong [and] have not captured what is in my mind” (此言過矣，未獲我心也). In her reply, the material dimension of these gifts only reminded her of their mutual affection and longing for each other. When she held the mirror and the hairpins, their touchability attested to the real existence of the marital love. When she played the zither and recited the poem, their shared emotion was given an acoustic form. She further connected these gifts with the loyal voice of model wives in literary classics.

In the past, the poet [felt] regret for the “flying weeds,” and the Lady Ban sighed “who could feel honor.” [I] should play the unadorned zither when you return, and look into the bright mirror when you come back. Before [I] receive your gracious presence, the treasured hairpins will not be worn. Before [I] serve you behind curtains and hangings, the fragrance will not be emitted.  
昔詩人有飛蓬之感，班婕妤有誰榮之嘆。素琴之作，當須君歸；明鏡之鑒，當待君還。未奉光儀，則寶釵不設也；未侍帷帳，則芳香不發也。343

Feipeng zhi gan 飛蓬之感 (regret for the “flying weeds”) alludes to a poem in Shijing, which was written in the voice of a loyal wife who was waiting anxiously for her husband to return from a battle. The poem explains why this woman had no mind to adorn herself through a rhetorical question: “Ever since Bo’s gone east, my head’s like flying weeds. Not that I haven’t the oil or grease, but for whom would I make myself up?” (自伯之東, 首如飛蓬。豈無膏沐, 誰適為容).344 The second line alludes to Zidao fu 自悼賦 (Rhapsody of Self-Commiseration) written by Ban Jiyeu 班婕妤 (also known as Lady Ban, ca. 48-ca. 6 BCE) when she lost the favour of Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty. Ban lamented her lonely and dreary life after being abandoned in a remote palace, “If you do not grace me, who is my glory?” (君不御兮誰為榮).345 Just like these women, Xu Shu found it meaningless to wear hairpins or apply fragrance while her husband was far away.

Following the epistolary model established by Xu Shu, many courtesans in their letters involving gifts highlighted the symbolic meaning of the gifts beyond their

343 Ibid.
344 Chu Shou-liang, Shijing pingshi, 197.
345 Ban Gu, Han shu, 3987. For translation, see Idema and Grant, The Red Brush, 81.
material dimension. The price of a gift was no longer mentioned in most letters by courtesans. Even if mentioned occasionally, it was always in a negative way. In the letter entitled “Fu Zhou Hanqing” (Reply to Zhou Hanqing), the Nanjing courtesan Lu Fengxian indicated her intention to send her lover an embroidered satchel was not for him to put into gold and silver (shou jinyin 收金銀), but to be put into a settled mind (shou fangxin 收放心). While asking her lover for pearls, Zheng Hong’e 鄭紅娥 did not mention the high price of the gift at all, instead, she alluded to the romantic story of Shi Chong and Lüzhu 綠珠 (lit. Green Pearl) whose name was said to be derived from the three bushels of pearls Shi used to purchase her. A fan was a popular gift in the Ming dynasty among literati which mixed pragmatic function and aesthetic value. It could be made of precious materials such as shujin 蜀錦 (silk from Sichuan), embroidered with gold or silver thread, or decorated with calligraphy or paintings from celebrities. However, in most cases, when courtesans received fans as gifts, the first association which appeared in their minds was the poem written by Lady Ban entitled “Tuanshan ge” (Song of the Round Fan), in which she compared herself with the round fan which although greatly favoured by its owner and was always held in his hand in summer, could never escaped from the fate of being abandoned in winter. When the Nanjing courtesan Du Xiaohong 杜小紅 received a valuable round fan made of shujin from her lover Cheng Zhengqing 程正卿 who was travelling in Sichuan, she said nothing about the preciousness of this round fan in her thank-you letter to Cheng, but worried about the future of their relationship. She was worried about whether there would be a happy ending indicated by the shape of the round fan, or whether she would share the same miserable fate as Lady Ban and the fan in Ban’s poem, eventually being abandoned.

There is a letter in Gujin qinglou ji which could be viewed as representative in inheriting this type of literary tradition of writing about gifts. This letter was written to show gratefulness for the gifts the courtesan Jiang Honghong 蒋紅紅 received from her literatus lover, as well as to demonstrate the meaning embedded in the gifts she sent to him in return by alluding to the anecdotes recorded in historical and literary texts.

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346 Du used the Chinese compound tuanyuan 团圆, which has two meanings: 1) Happy ending (usually refers to family reunion or two separated lovers finally get together) 2) The round shape (usually refers to fans or mirrors which thus are often used as love tokens).

347 Zhou and Kou, Gujin qinglou ji, juan 4, 33a.
I received your gifts of hairpin and mirror which made me think of your gentleness and mildness, as well as your brightness and purity. Thanks. In return, I send you the patchouli fragrance and onycha powder. I wish to soon lean on the fragrant Director Xun, and not to abandon the powdered Mr. He.

Jiang Honghong expressed her gratefulness for the gifts in the same way as Xu Shu. They both ignored the material value of the gifts but immediately connected the gifts with the person who sent them. While Xu Shu connected the gifts to the shared marital love with her husband, Jiang Honghong associated the gifts with the admirable qualities of her lover. The jade which was used to make the hairpin reminded her of her lover’s “gentleness and mildness” (wenrun 溫潤) and the mirror reminded her of her lover’s “brightness and purity” (guangjie 光潔). Jiang Honghong was not the first to discover the shared quality of a gentleman with jade and mirror, and she borrowed the symbolic comparison from transmitted texts. The connection between gentleman and jade was built in many ancient texts. Liji 禮記 (Book of Rites) emphasized the close relationship between jade and gentleman in both realms of daily life and spiritual pursuit. It regulated the everyday wearing of jade for a gentleman, and requested a gentleman to cultivate his virtue according to the qualities of a jade. This relationship was also reflected in Shijing, the earliest Chinese poetry anthology, which included some poems that used the images and qualities of jade to eulogize a gentleman. Mirrors were not so often used in describing the virtue of a gentleman as jade, but there were admonitions asking people to take someone loyal and upright as a mirror to examine their own behavior. When the honest and reliable minister Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) died, Emperor Taizong of Tang 唐太宗 (598-649) therefore sighed for “losing a mirror.”

After appreciating the gifts sent by her lover, Jiang Honghong demonstrated the symbolic meaning of her gifts sent to him in return. She associated her gifts, the patchouli fragrance and onycha powder with anecdotes of the two talented young scholar-officials, Xun Yu 荀彧 (163-212) and He Yan 何晏 (195-249), who were also famous for their handsome appearance. Xun Yu was said to carry fragrance wherever he went and thus the aromatic smell would be left behind for several days, but later the

348 Ibid., 31b.
349 Liu Xu, Jiu Tang shu, 2561.
fragrance was also interpreted as naturally originating from his spirit and charm. He Yan had such a white face that people suspected he applied loads of powder. However, the doubt was proved to be baseless when one day the emperor treated him with hot soup noodles and it turned out that his face became even whiter while sweating, and thus his white skin was connected with his purity by nature rather than his use of any kind of powder. Jiang Honghong eulogized the talent and appearance of her lover by skillfully alluding to the anecdotes of renowned historical figures, which happened to include the same “props,” fragrance and powder, and explored their symbolic meaning.

II. The Image of Ming Nanjing Courtesans Following Ding Liuniang’s Tradition

The second tradition involving gifts in women’s writings was established in “Shisuo qu” 十索曲 (Asking for Ten Items) by Ding Liuniang, a courtesan of the Sui dynasty. It was said to be a series of ten poems, each ending with the line, “asking my love for...” (從郎索…) but by the time when this series of poems was selected into Yuefu shiji 楽府詩集 (Poetry Collection of Music Bureau Style) by Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 (1041-1099), only four original poems were left with another two written by an anonymous author who imitated this poetic style. Guo Maoqian cited the introduction in the Yueyuan 楽苑 (Collection of Music) which claimed that “Asking for Ten Items” was a song suite to the yu tune (羽調曲). In the Sui dynasty when Ding Liuniang created “Asking for Ten Items,” it was very likely she intended it to be sung rather than being appreciated as literary works because musical performance was once the centre of a courtesan’s training. The emphasis on music in courtesan culture continued until the Ming dynasty when an increasing interest in literature and fine arts was aroused. The ending pattern of this series of poems also indicated its musical origin, since the closing part of a folk song was often sung repetitively in a round.

Apart from the unified ending pattern, another two features stood out in this series of poems: First, the purpose of the courtesan who wrote the poems was to ask her lover for gifts including a sash (yidai 衣帶), a fancy candle (huazhu 花燭), rouge (hongfen 紅粉) and a ring (zhihuan 指鐶). The gifts she wished to receive were

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350 Xi Zaochi, Xiangyang qijiu ji, 362.
351 Liu Yiqing, Shishuo xinyu jiaojian, 552.
352 Guo Maoqian, Yuefu shiji, 1818-1819.
straightforwardly stated in the last line of each poem in a coquettish way. Second, this series of poems showcased the intimacy between the courtesan and her lover which was expressed in an erotic undertone. When asking for a sash, the courtesan did not tell her lover the size, but supposed he must know her waist well. The language was colloquial, and the sense of intimacy to a large degree was created by the absence of any literary allusion or conventional symbolism. The erotic tone sounds natural and innocent as a spoiled girl teasing her lover. The sexually charged language was further developed in the next poem which revealed the amorous atmosphere of a pleasant night shared with her lover. Later imitators made the sexual undertone more explicit and this series of poems thus exemplified an erotic writing style. Many poets who were famous for erotic poetry had experimented with this writing style.

It was still a common practice for a courtesan to ask her lover for gifts in the Ming dynasty. The Ming *Piaojing* included many entries instructing brothel-visitors how to deal with various requests from girls in pleasure quarters. However, the popularity of this custom was not fully reflected in *Gujin qinglou ji*, which only included very few letters written to ask for gifts. Even for the letters which originally followed the tradition of “Asking for Ten Items,” the compilers of *Gujin qinglou ji* revised them in two ways. One was to add the symbolic meaning of the gifts in refined language, while covering its erotic undertone in colloquial language. The other was to simply delete the particular part in a letter that imitated the ending pattern which featured the writing style of “Asking for Ten Items.”

There is a letter in both *Fengyun qingshu* and *Gujin qinglou ji* but under different authorial names, which was written by a courtesan to ask her lover for five items: rouge powder (*zhifen* 脂粉), a perfume satchel (*xiangnang* 香囊), a gauze fan (*wanshan* 紧扇), a silk sash (*luodai* 羅帶), and a jade hairpin (*yuzan* 玉簪). Some of them, as we observed in the first tradition of writing about gifts, have long been attached with symbolic meaning established by literary convention, which was also revealed in her lover’s reply to her request. But the courtesan did not mention any symbolic meaning of the gifts, nor did she refer to any literary allusion. Instead, her letter body included five poems in the “Asking for Ten Items” style, asking for five items one by one. Following Ding Liuniang, this courtesan also created a face-to-face conversation set in everyday circumstances, replete with erotic images and amorous
scenes. She complained that in such hot weather, her silk shirt was wet by fragrant sweat (luoshan tou xianghan 羅衫透香汗), and thus she asked her lover for a gauze fan.

In another poem asking her lover for a sash, she playfully blamed her lover for letting her pine away for lovesickness which made her silken gown loose and easy to fall off (luoyi zhe kuan tui 羅衣摺寬褪). The marginal comment compared her lovable words to the chirps of orioles, highlighting the ingenuous and unaffected expression, just like the beautiful sounds from nature. But in Gujin qinglou ji, this series of five poems, which formed a great part of the letter, was totally erased. The incomplete version of this letter in Gujin qinglou ji only consists of proem and epilogue. It shows that for the compilers, the information conveyed in a letter, which is usually supposed to be the most crucial part of epistolary exchange, is not as important as the language, style, and other literary elements and aesthetic taste of a letter.

Meticulous investigation of the letters involving gifts in Gujin qinglou ji reveals the editorial preference for the first tradition of writing about gifts in the voice of a model wife while avoiding letters which followed the second tradition established in “Asking for Ten Items” by a courtesan predecessor. There could be multiple reasons to explain this preference. It might be a personal taste, or perhaps some coincidences happened in the process of circulation and transmission. However, if we take into account the overall organization and foremost concerns of this anthology, this preference is actually predictable. The courtesan co-compiler of this anthology, Kou Wenhua, was among the top courtesans of Nanjing, the centre of courtesan culture of the Ming dynasty. One striking feature of courtesan culture in the Ming dynasty was its emphasis on literary cultivation and its absorbing of the literati’s aesthetic taste. Top courtesans who were immersed in this new cultural environment became less identified with the courtesan tradition before the Ming dynasty which had a singular focus on musical performance. The courtesans in previous dynasties, except the very few highly educated ones, were trained merely to adapt poems to fit in certain tunes in order to facilitate performance. The folk-song style poems, although still popular as entertainment on certain occasions, were not regarded as serious literary composition by top courtesans in the Ming dynasty.

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353 Deng Zhimo, Fengyun qingshu, juan 3, 9b-10a.
354 Zhou and Kou, Gujin qinglou ji, juan 4, 32a.
2.2.3. Theme of Banquet Organization and Commemoration

The last outstanding theme of the letters by courtesans centred on activities with friends in literary circles, such as sightseeing, drinking wine or tea, enjoying flowers, engaging in musical performance and chess games. These activities facilitated the establishment, maintenance, and expansion of courtesans’ social networks, as well as the production and circulation of their images in the literary and artistic works by and about them. In these activities, courtesans were often asked to showcase their talents, and their admirers usually wrote poems or painted portraits for them.

Courtesans’ letters in this category could be divided into two types, the letters that triggered these activities and the letters that commemorated them. While describing these activities, whether retrospectively or prospectively, these letters mixed amorous atmosphere with aesthetic appreciation, integrating the etiquette in literati’s circles and the protocol in pleasure quarters. The letters shed light on the shared quest for gentility of both literati and top courtesans. Thus, the letters concerning this theme emphasized the versatile and elegant aspect of the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans and associated the images with their private connection or social network.

These thematic features determine that letters falling in this category were much more probably written by top courtesans than mediocre courtesans of lower status, which has been proved by the fact that the brothel treatises usually do not include these kinds of letters. The writers of these letters are mostly top courtesans from famous courtesan households of Nanjing, such as Ma 馬, Kou 寇, Zheng 鄭, and Zhao 趙. These surnames pervaded not only the Ming anecdotes, poetic and artistic collections, and flower-ranking texts, but also the memoirs decades after the Ming-Qing transition. These letters provide us with a window into the amorous life and aesthetic aspiration of top courtesans, who turned sexuality and seduction into the art of showing gentility, intelligence, and charm. This in turn transformed the image of courtesans originally as entertainers into an androgynous image which incorporated new elements from literati’s tastes and lifestyles.

While inviting literati friends, the courtesans often wrote in a way that emulated literati’s writings, but with a hidden erotic undertone. In the letter written by a famous Nanjing courtesan, Zheng Ruying, she asked her literatus friend Zheng Fengqi 鄭逢奇...
to come for a cup of afternoon tea in a humble but elegant way by tactfully employing literary language and poetic images: “Would your fragrant carriage condescend to tread on the green moss in my courtyard for me?” (第屈香輪，為妾一破庭前苔緣耳). However, the erotic undertone was still detectable since this letter began with the familiar line describing a lovesick woman, “looking at the distance leisurely in a tall tower, for no reason, the splendor of spring stirs my heart” (高樓閒眺，無端春色撩人). The image of a woman climbing high and looking at the distance had long been attached with the meaning of waiting for her lover to return, while “the splendor of spring stirs my heart” (chun se liaoren 春色撩人) was also a conventional expression of a young girl suffering from her desire for love. The following line, “not facing the one full of affection, [I] feel it difficult to while away the time” (不對多情，覺難消遣), suggested the target reader, the addressee of this letter, was exactly the affectionate man with whom she wished to fulfill her passion and desire, which added a seductive layer under the superficial tea invitation in a literatus’s tone.355 The two-tiered structure mixed the aesthetic pursuit with sensual pleasure. The self-image of the courtesan is represented as a refined literatus on the one hand, and a cunningly seductive beauty on the other.

One interesting point regarding courtesans’ invitations was their different ways of dealing with the conflict faced by male literati between associating with courtesans and studying hard to pass the imperial examinations. One of the selected letters by the courtesan co-compiler Kou Wenhua was written to invite a literatus friend to a drift on the Qinhuai River. She began her invitation with a poetic description of the pleasant sights of the river as a temptation, which was followed by a contrast between the image of a lonely and diligent pedant stuck still in his studio and the image of an unrestrained and romantic scholar with soaring spirit.356 Another Nanjing courtesan Hao Ruizhu 郝蕊珠 applied a different strategy when comforting her literatus friend who was anxious about the upcoming examination. She employed the conventional “scholar-beauty” trope to parallel the fulfillment of love with success in the examinations. 357

355 Zhou and Kou, Gujin qinglou ji, juan 4, 22b.
356 Ibid., 11a-11b.
357 Ibid., 30a.
After being invited to a banquet, courtesans would usually write the host a thank-you letter or a letter of commemoration. This kind of letter often contains several formulaic elements, such as appreciation for the invitation, praise of the host’s generosity and the participants’ talent, description of the beautiful sights, the magnificent feast, and dream-like memories. In most cases, these letters were written in the form of parallel prose, replete with allusions and literary phrases which showcased their mastery of high literacy as well as the social etiquette among male elites. It is noteworthy that when the folk songs and brothel treatises became popular among men of literacy, the textbooks on aesthetic taste of an ideal gentleman also quickly spread among courtesans. Their communication was based on mutual understanding of each other’s cultural legacies and coterie customs and inspired the further merging of their respective conventions which created a Ming fashion integrating diverse components from a wide social spectrum, whilst simultaneously crossing the border of elite culture and popular culture.

Conclusion

_Gujin qinglou ji_, the earliest extant courtesan anthology that involved a Ming Nanjing courtesan co-compiler, Kou Wenhua, showcased the agency of a courtesan in the process of anthology-making, an activity that had long been embedded with cultural privilege. By selecting, editing, and organizing the literary works of courtesans from the past to the present, Kou participated in constructing the lineage of courtesan poets, defining the legacy of courtesan culture, and foregrounding the shared features and collective achievements of courtesans’ literary creation.

The selection of courtesan poets and their poems in _Gujin qinglou ji_ had a conspicuous overlapping with other courtesan anthologies being circulated in the late Ming such as _QLYY_, which attested to the “floating” of source materials among varied publications. However, the different ways of presenting the same poems, including the paratexts, categories, and orders, distinguished each anthology from the others and revealed the distinct perspectives and purposes of different anthologists. The section of poetic works in _Gujin qinglou ji_ was edited in the same way as poetry anthologies of mainstream male literati. It recorded the amount of the selected poetic works of each courtesan poet, classified the poetic works by different genres and subgenres, and
gathered the poetic works of the same style in chronological order. This editorial arrangement elevated the position of courtesans’ poetic creation by guiding the reader to appreciate their literary value in the same way as those of male literati, and constructed the lineage and legacy of courtesans’ literature by highlighting their shared thematic interest and stylish features in poetic creation.

The compilers included epistolary writings in Gujin qinglou ji as a response to the popularity of letter collections in the late Ming book market, which reflected the increasing physical mobility in Ming society. It showed another dimension of the “floating world,” in which people “as pilgrims, merchants, couriers, and tourists... took to the road, canals, and rivers that extended seemingly in all directions from their door with an unprecedented enthusiasm.” Letters thus assumed a more important role in exchanging messages and maintaining relationships in daily life. Although epistolary writings possessed the most flexible styles, diversified themes, and involved authors of diverse backgrounds and different levels of literacy, the courtesan compiler and her literatus friend meticulously chose, adapted, and presented the letters and images of her group in a way that was not only refined in language, style, and taste, but also followed the epistolary tradition of virtuous, passionate, and erudite gentry women in the past, as well as being modelled on the contemporary Ming Nanjing courtesan stars in their pursuit of gentility. The tension between being inclusive and being selective in the process of anthology-making originated from the Ming “floating world,” which was featured by highly physical, social, and cultural mobility that on the one hand caused anxiety due to the uncontrollability of images and writings after being created because they could be read, reproduced, and recycled freely in the floating world of texts; and on the other hand crossed the boundaries of gender and genre, allowing the participation of people who previously would not be included in privileged cultural activities.

358 Brook, Geographical Sources of Ming-Qing History, 8.
Chapter Four: Images of a Ming Nanjing Courtesan in Transformation and Transmission

The last chapter contains a case study of Yang Wan whose layered images in transformation and transmission exemplified the social and textual mobility of the Ming floating world. The image of Yang Wan that we encountered in former chapters was constructed through her poems in Ming anthologies, most of which were compiled by male literati during her lifetime. This chapter deepens the exploration of her images and examines them further in the light of her individual collections and anthologies that selected and commented on her poems after her death, by both male and female compilers during the Qing and Republican periods.

Yang Wan was a well-known courtesan of late Ming Nanjing who left us with possibly the only extant series of individual collections by a Nanjing courtesan around her period. This poetry collection entitled Zhongshan xian 鍾山獻 (Sacrifice to Mount Zhong), together with three sequels, was compiled by her husband Mao Yuanyi, a famous literatus from a gentry family of the Jiangnan area whom she married at sixteen sui. He and his friends devoted prefaces to her poetry collection and sequels in which they enthusiastically eulogized her talent and diligence. Her poems were also selected for many influential anthologies compiled by literati, both male and female, of different eras. They wrote her biographical notes and poetic commentaries, which were circulated and transmitted alongside her selected poems beyond time and space.

Yang Wan was a courtesan-turned-concubine who eventually became the mistress of a famous gentry household whose transformation of identity showcased the huge potential of social mobility of a top courtesan in the floating world of the Ming dynasty. Moreover, her images which “floated” from the pleasure quarter to the inner chamber were represented by herself and others from different perspectives and circulated along with varied forms of paratexts, also inspiring an analogical reading of the Ming textual world as a floating world in which both its forms as books and its contents including information, language, and style, were appropriated, recycled, and reconfigured. This chapter examines Yang Wan’s diverse images shaped and circulated by “others.” Most of them are male literati of her time and later generations, as well as her self-image fashioned and represented in her four individual poetry collections. The questions I address in the first section of this chapter which deal with Yang Wan’s
images in others’ eyes include: How was Yang Wan and her identity, which transformed from courtesan to gentry woman, perceived and represented in various accounts and from different perspectives? What caused differences in the collective project of constructing Yang Wan’s images which lasted several hundred years? What did this image-building project mean to literati of several generations in their distinct historical contexts?

When we shift our focus to Yang Wan as a woman writer and her self-image being represented in the four individual poetry collections, a more critical question, as Grace S. Fong points out, lies in the question of approach. Should we read her poetry under the guidance of the prefaces written by her husband who was also the male compiler of her individual collections, and poetic comments and biographic notes written by male literati around her period? Isobel Armstrong’s remark on the predicament in studying women poets of the Romantic Period, cited by Fong, also applies to our reception of women’s writings in late imperial China in general, and Yang Wan’s self-representation in particular.

We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies for reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialectic; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power and language, in productive ways that, whether it is Mathew Arnold or Paul De Man who writes, make these poets mean for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with the female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them.

The second section of this chapter aims to provide another approach to Yang Wan’s poetry and read her self-representation from another perspective, differing from and complementing the interpretation suggested by Mao Yuanyi and other male literati. The image of Yang Wan, as well as her life story, can be regarded as complete only after observing it in the combined light of both her own representation and others’ construction.

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359 Fong, Herself an Author, 2.
1. The Image of Yang Wan from Others’ Perspectives

1.1. Yang Wan’s Image in Mao Yuanyi’s Eyes

As Yang Wan’s most intimate companion, and the compiler of her individual collections, her husband Mao Yuanyi provides us with first-hand information about Yang Wan through writing poems on and to her, whilst also prefacing her poetry collections. Mao Yuanyi was a productive writer who left us with forty-nine books covering all the four categories of jing 經 (classics), shi 史 (history), zi 子 (philosophy) and ji 集 (belles-lettres). Like many of his contemporaries, he embedded a strong historical sense in his poetry, reflecting on historical events, commenting on current social and military crises, as well as connecting his life with the larger context of historical transition. Under his brush, Yang Wan was described differently at different stages of his life according to his shifting identities from a talented and unrestrained young literatus to an upright and loyal official. The more private aspect of his emotion and family was put side by side with his social network, political ambitions, and military concerns in his literary collections. Moreover, compared with his most favoured courtesan-turned-concubine named Tao Chusheng 陶楚生 (1593-1613), who died prematurely and then immortalized as “Xixuan dongzhu” 西玄洞主 (Master of The Western Mysterious Grotto), we can see how the images of courtesan-turned-concupines were shaped distinctively as one remained as a lasting call for sensual pleasure and transcendental desire, and the other transformed into a longing wife being confined in the inner chamber while her husband was pursuing mundane success.

At the very beginning, Yang Wan did not show much difference from Tao Chusheng, partly due to their similar background as famous courtesans in Jiangnan area. Yang Wan’s first appearance was recorded in “Wangji Tao Chusheng zhuan” 亡姬陶楚生傳 (Biography of [My] Deceased Concubine Tao Chusheng) written by Mao Yuanyi.361 Because of her failure to bring an heir to Mao’s family, Tao Chusheng recommended Yang Wan in order to continue the family line. As other parts of this biography, this episode shaped images of both Tao Chusheng and Yang Wan, as well as their fated relationship with Mao Yuanyi in a legendary light.

Tao Chusheng was born with the gift of physiognomy. When she first met Yang Wan, whose childhood name was Yang Meisheng 楊媚生, in Nanjing, Yang was too young to show up in public alone and thus accompanied by her elder sister, Yang Zhaosheng 楊昭生. However, she appreciated Yang Wan’s great potential given her beautiful eyes, and foretold Yang’s marriage to Mao Yuanyi in two years, which was realized in an unexpected and dramatic way. Two years later, Mao Yuanyi failed in the imperial examination and returned to the south with Tao Chusheng. They settled down in Nanjing and frequently socialized with their literati friends.

The literati and scholars, with whom I made friends previously, occasionally came and talked with me. Someone said that Yang Wanshu of Changgan had pure talent and outstanding qualities, [and she was] not inferior to the ancients. I disregarded it. I did not know that [my] concubine [Tao Chusheng] heard it behind the screen… [She] said to me: “[We] have no means to break our solitude and loneliness. Yang Wanshu, previously mentioned by a visitor, sir. Please try to invite her to come and I will talk with her. I promised. Wanshu happened to leave for some other place. A visitor held her running script and showed it to me. I placed [it] in my sleeve, returned home, and showed to my concubine. My concubine said: “Since Mme Xu of the Southern Song, it cannot be acquired for a thousand years. Invite her for me immediately.” After she came, [my concubine Tao Chusheng] was greatly delighted and said: “I am assuredly good at reading people’s character, while this beauty did not fail me either. This is Yang Meisheng whom I spoke of before. Now she has grown up.” When [we] asked, Wanshu still used her childhood name to rank [in her family], while the two visitors I met before both called her by her courtesy name. I had been ill and had not the time for the details. Therefore, we gathered joyfully and that’s all.

向所定交之士大夫,時有就余談者。或言長干楊宛叔,清才穎質,不下古人。余不以為意。不意姬從屏障後聞之……謂余曰:”無以破寂寥,向客所言楊宛叔者,君試致之來,兒將與之譚。”余諾。適宛叔已他出,客持其書箑以示余者,余袖歸以示姬。姬曰:”自南宋徐夫人而後,上下五百年不可得也,輒為我致來。”來則大喜曰:”我固善相人,姝亦不負我。此即向者所言之楊媚生也。今已長。”及詢之,則宛叔猶以小字行,而余偶所見之兩客,皆以字稱。余病不及詳也,遂歡會而罷。

Soon after this meeting, Tao Chusheng arranged Yang’s marriage to Mao Yuanyi.

From the sparse and scattered accounts of Yang Wan in this biography, we know Yang Wan became a famous courtesan at a very young age and probably spent her childhood in the Qinhuaí pleasure quarter of Nanjing with her elder sister, which to a certain degree explained her complicated emotion and attitudes toward that place.

362 Mme Xu refers to the famous female calligrapher Xu Yunxing 徐蘊行, mother of Cai Shen 蔡詵 (jinshi 1172), see Li E, Yutai shushi, 400.
Yang mentioned Qinhua as “my home” (妾家) in one poem, while she described Qinhua as “a stretch of the muddy” (一片渾) in another poem. Yang Wan’s reputation was established more through her talent than her beauty, and her talent was told to be comparable with the ancients, which is one of highest comments a person could obtain from his/her contemporary in a culture which admired the antique taste. In addition, Tao Chusheng’s gift for physiognomy actually connected Yang Wan’s distinguished talent with her attractive appearance, and thus shaped an ideal woman image. This image was fashioned differently from the passive role courtesans often played. Yang Wan showed her agency as an independent woman whose promise carried weight. After becoming a close friend of Tao Chusheng and giving Tao her promise of marrying Mao Yuanyi, she firmly declined other patrons and insisted on marrying into Mao’s family.

On the day before their wedding, Mao Yuanyi sent Yang Wan a series of five *cuizhuangshi* (poems to urge the bride’s make-up for a wedding), which depicted a talented courtesan with ethereal beauty, imagined a luxurious wedding, and spun a fairy tale of companionate marriage. He weaved all these aspects into this series of poems with threads of allusions from various literary contexts and different time periods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>迎宛叔催妝詩</th>
<th>Welcome Wanshu and Urge Her Make-up for the Wedding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>青蟲間玉試釵初，</td>
<td>Green insect hairpin inlaid with jade, its first use,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>徐約輕衫理珮琚。</td>
<td>Languidly tying the light garment and adjusting the girdle-jades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>無用新妝墮馬髻，</td>
<td>No need for the fashionable falling-from-the-horse chignon,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>門前已駐碧油車。</td>
<td>Outside the gate, the varnished carriage already waits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first poem begins with vivid descriptions of her ornaments and dresses. In classical Chinese poetry the elegant adornments usually hint a girl’s beauty, and the gossamer-like attire implies her slenderness. It was said that wearing the green insect hairpin could enhance the love between husband and wife. By wearing this hairpin at a wedding, she expressed her wish for happy marriage and life-long devotion. The falling-from-the-horse chignon appeared as early as the Eastern Han, and regained popularity in the late

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365 Ibid., juan 2, 12.
366 Mao Yuanyi, *Shimin shangxin ji*, 293.
Ming. According to *Hou Han shu* (History of the Later Han), Sun Shou 孫壽 (?-159), wife of the General-in-chief Liang Ji 梁冀 (?-159), designed this hairstyle.

Shou’s appearance was beautiful and [she was] good at making bewitching posture, [she] took on sorrowful eyebrows, weeping-eye makeup, falling-from-the-horse chignon, wriggling-waist gait, and painful-teeth smile.

壽色美而善為妖態，作愁眉，啼粧，墮馬髻，折腰步，齲齒笑。367

Sun Shou was depicted in official history as seductive and jealous, indulging in sensual pleasures whilst brutally killing her husband’s concubines. The falling-from-the-horse chignon was not only a popular hairstyle in late Ming but also symbolized bewitching beauty, and this implication had been attached to it from its origin. Refusing this hairstyle thus indicated Yang Wan’s independence from the current trend and her shifting role from a seductive courtesan to a virtuous wife. Her identity as a talented courtesan is revealed in the last line. The varnished carriage first appeared in a poem which was said to be written by Su Xiaoxiao 蘇小小, a courtesan of the Southern Qi dynasty, and later became a specific term referring to a courtesan’s carriage. After describing her dressing up for the wedding, the second poem depicts the scene of leaving her “old home.”

其二
裁就新詩辭故廬，
任餘筆塚積瑤除。
平頭奴子擎箱盡，
侍女休忘書五車。

The Second
Having styled a new poem, you bid farewell to your old cottage.
Let be the remaining brushes in the tomb, piling up on the jade-like stairs.
Servants in scarves have taken away all the chests,
Maids, do not forget the five carts of books.

This poem highlights her talent in poetry and calligraphy, her rich knowledge and her passion for intellectual pursuit. She assumed the demeanour of a talented girl and bade farewell to her home by composing a new poem. The brush-tomb in the following line reminds us of the diligent calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), who was traditionally referred to as the Sage of Calligraphy (*shu sheng* 書聖). One of the anecdotes boasts of his countless worn-out brushes buried in a tomb due to his frequent practice. The last line uses five carts of books, an allusion from *Zhuangzi*, to show her wide readings. Their shared interest in books, as the following poem will reveal, turns out the key to building the connection between her and her lover.

367 Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, 1180.
The third poem creates an immortal image with ethereal beauty, wearing skirt made of gauze as white as frost and silk as clear as ice, which looked like a flying cloud in the breeze. Her image is shaped as a goddess in this poem and thus forbids any flirtation and offence. Even the poet, her mundane lover, cannot recognize her. Not daring to address to her directly, he merely wants to ask her servant for the book stored in the case. By referring to her servant as an immortal boy who attends Queen Mother of the West, Mao Yuanyi enhanced her sacredness. However, her unavailability makes her even more desirable in the poet’s eyes and the only access to her seems to be the cased book he requested, which can be viewed as a symbol of his intellectual talent and rich knowledge.

From the fourth poem on, the poet Mao Yuanyi gradually shifted his focus from Yang Wan’s talent and beauty to the forthcoming magnificent wedding.

The first line of the fourth poem, by using the similar descriptive phrases from “Jiuge” 九歌 (The Nine Songs) of Chuci 楚辭 (Lyrics of Chu), associates the decorated and amorous boats which were arranged to escort her to the wedding with the legendary boat taken by the Lady of the Xiang River 湘夫人 in her long journey seeking her husband. The second line introduces the acoustic aspect of the wedding by mentioning the exquisite musical instruments. There are several different versions of the story of the legendary Nanjing figure Mochou 莫愁 (literally, Never-Grieve) which shaped her multi-layered image: a gifted singing girl, a devoted lover, a deserted concubine, and a longing wife. Her charming image granted Nanjing a romantic alternative name—“Mouchou xiang” 莫愁鄉 (Never-Grieve Town). Witnessing the companionate marriage from afar, she felt sad for herself and broke her kingfisher hair clasp without
saying anything. By breaking the kingfisher hair clasp which was usually a gift from a lover, she expressed her disappointment towards him. By means of this comparison, Mao Yuanyi seemed to be making a pledge to never fail Yang Wan nor their mutual tenderness. In the next poem, which is also the last one of this series, Mao Yuanyi made another comparison, alluding to the story of Taoye 桃葉 (Peach Leaf).

The Fifth

其五

The Fifth

滿岸秦淮萬戶多，
Along both banks of Qinhua [River], more than ten thousands houses,
齊聲呵贊遏流波。
Shout out praise in unison, [their voice] stops the flowing water.
競傳一自來迎汝，
Compete to transmit since [I] came to welcome you,
不數當年桃葉歌。
Not inferior to the Peach Leaf Song of the past.

The last poem described a splendid wedding by showing the great number of witnesses, all of whom applauded for what was presented before their eyes. Moreover, it also assures Yang Wan’s identity as a courtesan not only by mentioning the place name Qinhua straightforwardly, but also by comparing her with the courtesan-turned-concubine, Peach Leaf, whose love with her husband, the famous calligrapher Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386) was even deepened after their marriage. The Peach Leaf Song represented a loving husband who sent off his beloved concubine at the ford every time she left to visit her natal home. Mao Yuanyi compared his welcome of Yang Wan to Wang’s caring of Peach Leaf, and thus demonstrated his equivalently profound affection for Yang Wan.

This series of poems depicts a beautiful and talented courtesan who was ready to adopt a new identity by rejecting seductive fashion. Moreover, her ethereal beauty reminds us of her recommender, Mao Yuanyi’s favourite courtesan-turned-concubine, Tao Chusheng, who was said to be of a divine origin and returned to the immortal realm soon after this wedding. In the preface to Yang Wan’s first poetry collection written by her husband’s friend Fu Ruzhou 傅汝舟 (1584-1630) in 1627, he attributed Yang’s distinguished talent to her original identity as a deity coming down from the Chalcedony Pool (yaochi 瑤池) which was associated with Queen Mother of the West. In the same year, Mao Yuanyi also wrote a preface to Yang Wan’s first collection. Instead of an immortal, Yang Wan was shaped as a gifted student who made

368 Fu Ruzhou, “Zhongshan xian tici,” 8.
every effort to practice and improve her skills in calligraphy and literature under the meticulous guidance of Mao Yuanyi, who according to the preface, was implicitly proud of discovering and cultivating her talent.

When Wanshu [courtesy name of Yang Wan] was brought into my home, she was just sixteen sui. She was capable of reading, and skilled in small regular script. I observed that her brows and beautiful eyes inherently possessed [the air of] brush and ink, and thus taught her the Diagram of the Brush Battle. [Her] calligraphy quickly reached the level worthy of appreciation. I instructed her in the study of poetry and ci-lyrics. Based on the Three Hundred Poems, her study gradually followed on and finally reached the literary works of today. With regard to calligraphy, Wanshu built the tomb for [worn-out] brushes and blackened the pond with ink. She scribbled on clothes and beddings until they were worn out. [While] with regard to poetry, she took fun and pleasure and touched upon roughly, as if [she] did not pay attention. After three years, [she] suddenly completed a few short poems. They were outstanding and profound, also capable of reaching the level [worthy of appreciation]. And [her poems] were not in the slightest inferior to her calligraphy. I was half delighted and half suspicious. However, every time [she] finished compositions, even though a single stanza or a short line, she would undoubtedly fall ill as soon as it was finished. At last, she became haggard and weak because of this. [She was] often admonished by doctors, [but] in the end, she continued without regret. Only then I knew that she was superficial on the outside, but concentrated deep inside.

宛叔歸于余,年纔十六耳,能讀書,工小楷。余察其眉瞴宿具翰墨,乃授以筆陣圖,書駸入品。授以詩詞之學,本之三百篇,業竟始循而下之,極于今之藻。宛叔于書則冢筆池墨,衣被畫破。于詩則遊戲涉略,若不經意。三年而忽成小咏,其秀拔邈幽可與入也,又不减于書尺寸。余喜與疑者半。然每有搆結,則雖單章片句,甫出而必病矣,竟以是弱。每為醫所規,終不悛。始知其略于外者,凝于中也。372

In this preface, Mao Yuanyi effaced the courtesan origin of Yang Wan by starting his account with the year Yang Wan married him. Moreover, Mao addressed her by her courtesy name Wanshu 宛叔, in the same way a literatus would refer to any of his fellows, which showed that in the eyes of Mao Yuanyi, her distinguished talent and impressive achievement made her an honourable member in the circle of literati. This preface can be viewed as one of the turning points in constructing Yang Wan’s image, which began to depart from that of Tao Chusheng, a deity immortalizing sensual pleasure and symbolizing transcendent desire in writings by Mao Yuanyi and his friends. Yang Wan was shaped by male desire for artistic and literary achievement in this world.

369 Refers to her beautiful appearance which revealed her unexplored gift in calligraphy.
370 The Diagram of Brush Battle was a book introducing both theoretical and pragmatic knowledge on calligraphy. It was said to be written by the famous female calligrapher Wei Shuo 衛鑠 (272-349, also known as Lady Wei 衛夫人) of the Jin dynasty (265-420).
371 The Three Hundred Poems refers to Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry).
Around the year of writing this preface, Mao Yuanyi also encountered a turning point in his career. Shortly after joining Sun Chengzong’s 孫承宗 (1563-1638) army as a military advisor in the defence of the northeast frontier, Mao Yuanyi was forced to terminate his service in the army due to Sun’s resignation. He was also disqualified for future official posts because he unyieldingly stood against the powerful eunuch at the court. Prefacing and publishing the poetry collection of Yang Wan, whose literary achievement should be attributed to his cultivation, could be an elegant pastime which made sense of his idle life at home, but more importantly, Mao Yuanyi also entrusted to this collection his desire to establish himself in this world through words, one of the three things that would not decay (san buxiu 三不朽).

Soon after this turndown, a new opportunity presented itself to Mao Yuanyi. He was restored to his previous official post, and his book on military affairs entitled Wubei Zhi 武備志 (Treatise on Military Preparation) gained great attention from the new emperor Chongzhen 崇禎 (r. 1627-1644). During these years achieving his ambition in managing the frontier and fighting wars, Mao Yuanyi wrote most poems to socialize with other generals or to straightforwardly express his excitement for fulfilling his pursuit. Only a few poems in this period were devoted to Yang Wan, in which he showed his understanding to her by touching upon the traditional theme of a longing wife being confined in the inner chamber, whilst using her image as a mirror to reflect his own image as a young promising commander who, despite deeply missing his delicate wife, prioritized his loyalty to the emperor and his concern for the country. Under the brush of Mao Yuanyi, the image of Yang Wan was more complicated than the conventional longing wife of a drifter and another layer placed upon her image was that of a wise wife who understood and supported her husband’s dream. Also in his imagination, Yang Wan, although confined in the inner chamber, was still able to entertain herself by reading and writing like a recluse, thus combining the images of a longing and virtuous wife that mirrored his image of a loyal commander, and a talented woman enjoying intellectual pursuits that symbolized his ideal retirement life after fully achieving his ambition of rebuilding a peaceful and prosperous era.

However, Mao Yuanyi’s prime time quickly passed. He was imprisoned and then exiled to Fujian province due to factional conflicts, and was never restored to an official post again until his death. After leaving his official post, he was allowed to be at
home for a short time when he published the sequels to Yang Wan’s first poetry collection. In his prefaces, Mao Yuanyi called Yang Wan “wife of a frontier guard” (shuren fu 戍人婦), and employed the traditional view of adversity developing poetic skills (shi qiong er hou gong 詩窮而後工) to connect his frustrations with Yang Wan’s improvement in literary composition. Mao claimed that because of their shared “time” (shi 時) and “ambition” (zhì 志) in companionate marriage, their relation and affection combined those of marital partners and intimate friends. Mao thus compiled and published his wife’s poetry collections and entrusted his own intentions to them. In Mao’s own poems written during this time period, we observe the image of Yang Wan transformed again. If representing a young and beautiful wife confined in the inner chamber longing for her husband travelling afar still implies a slight trace of sensual desire and invites erotic imagination, the transformed image of the rustic wife of an old exiled border guard washing clothes by a stream wiped away the traditional feminine aesthetic and thus represented a secular wife in reality who shared happiness and sufferings with her husband, stayed loyal to him, and remained optimistic about the future. Every turning point in constructing Yang Wan’s image reflected the change of Mao Yuanyi’s self-identification from a young unrestrained talent to a loyal general keeping his country in mind and fulfilling his ambition on the frontiers, before finally coming to the frustrated minister without his dream fully realized, imprisoned and exiled, but never yielding to corrupt officialdom. Yang Wan’s image was transformed again and again to be a perfect match, an anchor in the mundane world, a self to the other gender.

1. 2. Yang Wan’s Image in the Eyes of Her Contemporaries

There are few accounts on Yang Wan involving her early courtesan life. The only extant biography written before her marriage was in Gen shi compiled by Pan Zhiheng, a book abounding with the records of celebrated courtesans in various areas of China. Due to the production and circulation of this book, Pan Zhiheng was called “Historian for the Courtesans” (ji zhi Dong Hu 姬之董狐). The biography began with an introduction of the courtesan tradition in Yang’s household which was famous for the cultivation of boudoir elegance comparable with gentry ladies (dajia feng 大家風). Pan further

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connected the surname of Yang with the plump beauty Yang Yuhuan of the Tang dynasty, since the previous courtesans in this household similar to Yang Yuhuan were celebrated for their full builds. Yang Wan, who regarded herself as an heir of this renowned courtesan household, also contributed diversity to its legacy. She was as slender as a flying swallow which also refers to Zhao Feiyan who was said to be able to dance on one’s palm. Differing from the boudoir elegance of gentry ladies, Yang Wan’s personality bore a resemblance to that of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*linxia feng* 林下風), which was first used to eulogize the nonchalant and carefree disposition of Xie Daoyun 謝道韜 of the fourth century, known as a classical model of the brilliant prodigy and a symbol of women’s erudition. Later in the late Ming, the phrase was often used to describe erudite courtesans. The variants that she added to her household convention revealed to us the range of types of beauty, deportment, and personality that was used to shape courtesan images, as well as the diverse tradition with which courtesan culture in the late Ming had discourse.

According to Pan Zhiheng, Yang Wan had already gained a reputation as a poet, calligrapher, and painter before marrying Mao Yuanyi, although Mao might have helped improve her artistic skills and promote her literary compositions. Her versatility was recognized and appreciated by many of her contemporary male literati. Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), an influential poet and artist of Yang Wan’s time, highly praised her calligraphic style:

Yang Wan’s calligraphy, does not only adopt an alluring and exquisite manner, but [she] twists her wrist and shows the sharp tip [of her writing brush], [which] absolutely has no alluring frame.

楊宛書，非直媚秀取姿，而迴腕出鋒，絕無媚骨。\(^{378}\)

Another contemporary literatus Wang Lixia 汪歷賢 inscribed on Yang Wan’s calligraphy, which eulogized her innovation in learning the rules and imitating models,
whilst her achievement of making her own work was a new model for the later generations. 379

Moreover, three well-known and highly regarded anthologies of women’s writings in the late Ming which have been passed down to our time and discussed in Chapter One include Yang Wan’s poems, *Mingyuan huishi* by Zheng Wen’ang, *Mingyuan shigui* attributed to Zhong Xing, and *Gujin nüshi* by Zhao Shijie. Zheng Wen’ang did not give any biographic information about Yang Wan, while the biographic note offered by the compilers of *Mingyuan shigui* and *Gujin nüshi* read the same: “Yang Wan, whose courtesy name is Wanshu, is from Changgan, and married Mr Mao of western Wu” (楊宛，字宛叔，長干人，歸西吳茅氏). 382 This piece of information is identical to the preface Mao Yuanyi wrote for Yang Wan’s poetry collection in the sense that they both concealed her previous courtesan background. This is understandable considering the wide network Mao Yuanyi built with contemporary literati and scholars of various regions and his impact on many poetry societies. Moreover, Mao Yuanyi was also a member of the editorial board for *Mingyuan shigui*. The only hint as to Yang Wan’s original identity was the placement of her poems in the volume after the poetic selection of gentry women, and among the poetic selection of courtesans and concubines, which was adopted by both *Mingyuan huishi* and *Mingyuan shigui*.

By examining Yang Wan’s poems selected in the three late Ming anthologies, as Qing scholars have pointed out, they very likely copied each other’s selections. *Mingyuan shigui* selected one poem entitled “Qiuhuai” 秋懷 (Feelings in Autumn). The other two anthologies, *Mingyuan huishi* and *Gujin nüshi*, selected her three poetic works and edited them in the same order, one poem entitled “Qiuhuai” and two *ci*-lyrics respectively entitled “Moli” 茉莉 (Jasmine) to the tune of “Maihua sheng” 賣花聲 (Sound of Selling Flowers) and “Shuye yu zhu nülang tong wai jiyan” 暑夜與諸女郎同外家宴 (Family Dinner with Several Young Ladies and My Husband on a Summer Night) to the tune of “Mangong hua” 滿宮花 (Flowers all over the Palace). 383 The

379 Ibid.
380 Present Nanjing.
381 Present Zhejiang.
383 This tune has another name “Lang tao sha” 浪淘沙 (Waves Scour the Sands).
limited amount of Yang Wan’s poetry included in contemporary anthologies might firstly be because of the wide temporal range these anthologies strived to cover and thus could not offer enough editorial space for every individual poet, or otherwise due to the publication and circulation of Yang Wan’s individual poetry collections, which rendered the anthologizing of her poetic works seemingly less urgent.

After Mao Yuanyi’s death, his wife Yang Wan and several of his literati friends wrote mourning poems for him. One of the poems written by the leading scholar-official and well-known poet Qian Qianyi reads:

明月西園客散時， In the bright moon, when the guests of West Garden have left,

錢刀意氣總堪悲。 Dagger-coins, the emotional spirit, always worthy of grief.

白頭寂寞文君在， White hair, lonely Wenjun remains.

淚濕芙蓉製誄詞。 Tears wet the lotus, making a mourning poem.384

The dagger-coins and the emotional spirit are references to “Baitou yin” 白頭吟 (Song of White Hair), a poem said to be written by Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君 (175 BCE -121 BCE) to challenge her faithless husband: “When a man prizes the emotional spirit, what need has he of dagger-coins” (男兒重意氣，何用錢刀為).385 This citation of “dagger-coins, the emotional spirit” (qiandao yiqi 錢刀意氣) emphasizes the latter part (“the emotional spirit”) of this phrase, and eulogizes Mao Yuanyi’s chivalry and generosity. The following line compares Yang Wan to Zhuo Wenjun, who was known for her gift in music and literature, and more importantly for her ability to recognize a talented literatus and her courage to elope with him. Qian himself wrote an annotation for this poem: “Yang Wanshu [the courtesy name of Yang Wan] of Mount Zhong made a mourning poem for Shimin [the literary name of Mao Yuanyi] which is quite skilful” (鍾山楊宛叔製石民誄詞甚工).386 Qian Qianyi, during this time period, just like his fellow male literati, appreciated Yang Wan’s talent, eulogized her companionate marriage with Mao Yuanyi, and showed his sympathy towards Yang Wan for her husband’s death.

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384 Qian Qianyi, Muzhai chuxue ji, 599.
385 Guo Maoqian, Yuefu shiji, 1128-1129.
386 Qian Qianyi, Muzhai chuxue ji, 599.
1. 3. A Crucial Turning Point in Representing and Disseminating Yang Wan’s Image

When Qian Qianyi was about to marry the courtesan celebrity Liu Rushi from the Qinhuai pleasure quarter around 1638-1641, he was markedly proud of their perfect match. In his opinion, Liu Rushi was one of the three most talented and refined beauties of the country, and the other two were Yang Wan and Wang Wei. In the late Ming, the romance between renowned elite and celebrated courtesan enhanced the reputation of both, and their marriage was a legend worth circulation and admiration.

Among the stylishly refined beauties under heaven, only Wang Xiuwei [the courtesy name of Wang Wei] and Yang Wanshu can be rivals of you [Liu Rushi]. How can [I] let Xu Xiacheng and Mao Zhisheng monopolize the title of state elite and celebrated beauty?

天下風流佳麗，獨王修微、楊宛叔與君鼎足而三。何可使許霞城、茅止生專國士名姝之目。387

However, Qian Qianyi’s remarks about Yang Wan changed greatly at the time when he compiled Liechao shiji with his courtesan-turned-wife Liu Rushi from 1646 to 1649. This anthology includes an appendix of about two thousand biographies (liechao shiji xiaozhuan列朝詩集小傳), and appeared in print under Qian Qianyi’s name around the year 1652. Many modern scholars surmise that Liu Rushi was the main editor of the section on female writers entitled “Runji” 閏集 (Intercalary Collection) in the fourth juan卷 (volume) and she also wrote the appended biographies of women writers and critical appraisals of their works.388 In her analysis of Liu Rushi’s agenda, Berg points out that “by virtue of editing women’s poetry Liu Rushi inscribed herself and the other courtesan poetesses into history… and promoted the literary talents of the courtesan.”389 To pursue this agenda, Liu Rushi included much more literary works by courtesans than by gentlewomen, which is rather uncommon in anthologies of women’s writings.

The amount of Yang Wan’s poetic works is much greater in this anthology. There are nineteen poems under her name. This is not only because of Liu Rushi’s editorial agenda when involved in editing the compilation, but also due to Qian Qianyi’s desire to preserve historical memory by selecting poetry. During the Ming-Qing

387 Chen Yinke, Liu Rushi biezhuan, 3-4.
389 Berg, “Female Self-Fashioning in Late Imperial China,” 286
transition, countless literary works were scattered and lost in the war, and thus Qian Qianyi strived to protect as many extant poems as possible from further damage. Comparing Yang Wan’s selected poems in *Liechao shiji* with poems in her individual poetry collections, we find that the compiler(s) of *Liechao shiji* left two categories of her poems out of this anthology. One is those with the character *wai* 外 (my husband) in the title such as “Sent to my Husband” (*ji wai shi* 寄外詩) or “Farewell to my Husband” (*bie wai shi* 別外詩). The other is those with the character *gui* 閰 (boudoir) in the title, which emphasized her new identity as a gentry wife in the inner chamber. Actually, just like Mao Yuanyi tried to conceal Yang Wan’s courtesan background, Qian Qianyi also made efforts to hide the details of her marital life. If the reader got to know Yang Wan only from Qian Qianyi’s selection, they would merely view her as a courtesan longing for her lover or a poet practicing the traditional subgenre of love poems.

Qian Qianyi attempted to restore Yang Wan’s image as a courtesan instead of continuing Mao Yuanyi’s construction of her transformed image or his own narrative of companionate marriage in his mourning poem for Mao. The reason for this change of attitude can be found in the biography of Yang Wan written by either Qian Qianyi or his wife Liu Rushi.

Yang Wan’s courtesy name was Wanshu and she was a famous courtesan from Nanjing. She was capable of poetry, and her works contain many fine lines; she was good at cursive script. She married Mao Zhisheng from the area by the Tiao Brook who admired her talents and treated her with exceptional courtesy; [while] Wan had many relationships and betrayed Zhisheng. Zhisheng thought himself an unreserved and prominent elite, and did not forbid even though he knew about them. Zhisheng died, and Tian Hongyu, a relative of the dynastic family by marriage, was ordered by the emperor to present incense to Mount Putuo. On his return to the capital, he passed through the White Gate [Nanjing]. His idea was to marry Wan in order to get his hands on her riches, while Wan wanted to leave the Mao family in order to marry someone else. Thinking that Tian would help her to accomplish this, she eloped with him, bringing along all her possessions. But Tian treated her like an old serving woman and put her to work teaching his young daughter. After Tian’s death, she was preparing to elope again, this time with Liu Dongping, but just as they were about to set out, the city [of Beijing] fell. She then disguised herself as a beggar woman, but when she attempted to return to Nanjing by a shortcut, she was killed by bandits out in the fields. Wan was a sworn sister of the Daoist in the Straw Cape [Wang Wei], who repeatedly strongly admonished her [for her behaviour], [but] Wan was unable to follow her advice. Wang Wei was as shining and pure as a green lotus that rose high above the dust, straight and gracefully, while Wan finally sunk into the mud and dirt and became a laughing stock. Is this not lamentable?
This biography of Yang Wan was possibly written by Liu Rushi, another courtesan-turned-gentry woman who, in spite of sharing the same life experience from the pleasure quarter to the inner chamber with Yang Wan, severely criticized her without the slightest trace of sympathy. The late Ming witnessed the prevalence of divorcement and remarriage in the courtesan circles, and very few were attacked as severely as Yang Wan was. Some courtesans were even praised for their courage in pursuit of true love. Mistress Li (李大娘), the famous courtesan from the Qinhuaí pleasure quarter of Nanjing, first married Wu Tianxing 吳天行 of Xin’an 新安. Wu later died and she eventually married Mr. Xu in whose company she had previously delighted when she was a courtesan in Nanjing. They remained in contact when she was a concubine of Wu. When she remarried, she brought silver, pearls, and valuables from Wu’s family.391 Kou Mei 寇湄 (ca. 1613-ca. 1658) first married the Duke of Baoguo 保國公 named Zhu Guobi 朱國弼. After Zhu surrendered to Manchu conqueror, Kou bought herself freedom from Zhu’s family and married to a certain Provincial Graduate from Yangzhou, but was dissatisfied and returned to Nanjing where she fell in love with a certain Mr. Han, much younger than herself.392 For these two courtesans, their remarriage and other relationships did not hurt their great reputation as “female knights” (nüxia 女俠) at all. Even Wang Wei, who was praised as shining and pure in virtue and listed as a striking contrast to Yang Wan in the biography, married twice before she finally became a Buddhist devotee.393

For many early-Qing yimin 遺民 (remnant subjects) who refused to serve two dynasties, a woman’s remarriage hinted change of her loyalty and was thus deemed

390 Qian Qianyi, Liechao shiji xiaozhuan, 773-774. I use the translation in The Red Brush with revisions. See Idema and Grant, The Red Brush, 370-371. In The Red Brush, Yang Wan’s biography is presented next to the biography of Wang Wei to show the different life trajectories of these two courtesans. The comparison has already appeared at the end of Yang Wan’s biography in Liechao shiji xiaozhuan, which casts light on the diversity within the courtesan group. In my analysis, I focus on the values behind the comparison, such as how it was formed and what impact it would have on later generations’ understanding of Yang Wan’s life and literary works.

391 Yu Huai, Banqiao zaji, 28.

392 Ibid., 51.

393 Chen Yinke, Liu Rushi biezhuan, 431-433.
despicable. However, as we can see from the above examples, courtesans’ remarriages could also be interpreted as an embodiment of free will in choice and individual agency when confronted with personal misfortune and historical calamity. Multiple meanings could be encoded in similar images and decoded in different ways when both writing and reading were conducted for distinct purposes and within certain frameworks. This requires us to analyze records and biographies on a case-by-case basis, considering a whole package of influential factors such as literary tradition, historical context, and authorial intention. In the case of Yang Wan, we find the real reason for the detestation revealed in the biography lies more in the person to whom Yang Wan remarried than in the mere fact of her second marriage. Her second husband named Tian Hongyu was the father of a favoured imperial consort. In the factional conflicts during the late Ming, Tian stood on the opposite side to the group of literati and scholars in the Fushe 復社 (the Revival Society) and thus was shaped as a minister given to flattery and avid for power and money in many literary works such as Taohua shan 桃花扇 (Peach Blossom Fan) and Yingmeian yiyu 影梅庵憶語 (Reminiscences of the Plum Shadows Convent), and his bad reputation also affected the images of his friends and family members.

This biography of Yang Wan in Liechao shiji formed one of the most striking turning points in constructing and disseminating her image—a courtesan in Ming dynasty Nanjing who was versed in poetic composition and cursive calligraphy, but unqualified to be a wife of a gentleman because she was ungrateful and knew only betrayal. This turning point should be read in the historical context of Ming-Qing transition, during which politics, morality, and ideology were discussed, tested, and reconstructed. Individuals, especially women who were largely deprived of their own voice and agency, were often used as images to convey symbolic meanings, to inscribe the collective memory, and to illustrate the discourse of dynastic transition.

1. 4. Yang Wan in the Eyes of Later Generations

Qian Qianyi and Liu Rushi’s point of view in Liechao shiji greatly impacted anthologists of later generations. In her seminal anthology of women’s writings entitled Mingyuan shiwei, completed and published in 1667, Wang Duanshu wrote the following comment on Yang Wan.

Zhisheng had a gallant spirit that could reach the clouds. His mind was as pure as snow. Although he was ranked in military terms, he was actually a talented scholar
of the generation. Wanshu had eyes but could not see. She was unable to make a
distinction between the wise and the unworthy. She served Qin in the morning but
Chu in the evening. She betrayed Zhisheng many times. Later, she wandered about
in destitution and finally got killed, which was what she brought upon herself. It is
not worth having pity on her. [Some] literati have no moral character, and likewise
[some] women.
止生俠骨凌雲,肝腸似雪,雖歷戎間乃一代才士也。宛叔雙目無珠,不辨賢
肖,朝而秦暮而楚,有負止生多矣。其後流落被殺一段情事,乃其自取,
不 足惜也。文人無行女子亦然。394

Wang Duanshu’s remark on Yang Wan is largely based on the biography of Yang
Wan recorded in Liechao shiji, an anthology which Wang Duanshu used as an
important sourcebook while compiling Mingyuan shiwei. Yang Wan, in the eyes of
Wang Duanshu, lacked both wisdom and loyalty and thus brought the misfortune
upon herself, a deserved fate for a woman without moral principles.

Apart from this, an alteration in this anthology worthy of our attention is that
the widely circulated ci-lyric of Yang Wan entitled “Shuye yu zhu nülang tong wai
jiyan”暑夜與諸女郎同外家宴 (Family Dinner with Several Young Ladies and My
Husband on a Summer Night) to the tune of “Mangong hua”滿宮花 (Flowers all
over the Palace), which depicted a harmonious and warm family dinner, is not
included in this anthology. Instead, the only ci-lyric by Yang Wan in this anthology
is entitled “Yong qiuhaitang”詠秋海棠 (On the Begonia) to the tune of “Jinren peng
lupan” 金人捧露盤 (Golden Statue Holding a Dew Basin with Both Hands), which
to many scholars, can be read as an allegory of her courtesan experience.395

詠秋海棠396
記春光，
繁華日，
萬花叢，
正李衰桃謝匆匆。
儂家姊妹，
妖枝豔蕊笑東風。
薄情仍共春光去，

On the Begonia
Recalling the views of spring,
Days of splendour and glory,
Ten-thousand flower clusters,
Just as the plums are fading, peaches wither in haste.
Sisters of my family,
Bewitching branches, alluring blossoms, smiling
in the eastern breeze.
The faithless, as always, gone with the views of
spring.

394 Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, juan 19, 8b-9a. I use Xu’s translation with slight revisions. See
Sufeng Xu, “Lotus Flowers Rising from the Dark Mud,” 238. Xu pointed out the influence of Yang
Wan’s biography in Liechao shiji xiaozhuan on Wang Duanshu’s comment. I further explore how Wang’s
attitude impacted her selection of Yang Wan’s writings and the anthological representation of Yang
Wan’s image in Mingyuan shiwei.
395 Deng Hongmei, Nüxing cishi, 232.
396 Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, juan 36, 2a-2b.
惆悵庭空。 Melancholy, the courtyard is empty.

到如今， Come the present，
餘孤幹， Remains a solitary stem，
羞桃李一園中。 Shy peaches and plums, in a single garden。
憐嬌妹試沐新紅, Moved by the lovely young sister, tentatively
恐傷姊意， bathed in new redness,  
含芳斂韻綺窗東。 Concealing fragrance, supressing charm, to the 
東風。 east of lattice window。
鄰家不忿伊偏占, Neighbours, resentful of her single occupation,  
放出芙蓉。 Send forth a lotus。

In this poetic work, Yang Wan described a garden in spring full of colourful blossoms, and imagined their sisterly affection towards each other. Although belonging to the category of *yongwu shi* 詠物詩 (poems on objects), this particular work provides us with a window into the collective life of courtesans in pleasure quarters, including their common resentment to heartless lovers, their shared grief over the flying time and faded beauty, and their mutual sympathy for each other’s miserable fate. By embedding girlish feelings and characteristics in the blossoms, Yang Wan showed courtesans’ self-confidence in their beauty and talent especially when competing for the laurel of the most charming belle. At the same time, she also depicted them as warm-hearted and considerate, not willing to steal other’s proverbial thunder.

Like Qian Qianyi, Wang Duanshu also seemed to prefer poems of Yang Wan which reminded the reader of her courtesan background over those describing her boudoir life or her concern for her husband and children. In their eyes, she could not be regarded as a qualified gentry lady worthy of respect largely because of her remarriage and her second husband’s identity which was deemed unsuitable and even went against the literati’s agenda in the early Qing. Early Qing literati were concerned with such issues as self-justifying their existential choices in a new regime, reflecting on the political stances of the Donglin Faction and Revival Society and their impact on the dynastic transition, as well as empowering themselves through reconstructing the mainstream Confucian value system.
Many later anthologies and records, such as *Zhongxiang ci* (Ci-lyrics of Numerous Fragrances, 1690), *Jingzhiju shihua* (Discussions of Poetry of the Jingzhi Dwelling), *Mingdai Jinling renwuzhi* (A Record of Figures in Jinling of the Ming Dynasty, 1907), and *Mingci huikan* (Collection of Ci-lyrics of the Ming Dynasty, 1936), followed the biography in *Liechao shiji* and the comment in *Mingyuan shigui* when introducing Yang Wan to the reader but also developed different layers. The transmission of her biography circulated her image as a beautiful and talented courtesan-turned-concubine who betrayed her husband in their marriage and after his death. The impact on some of these later compilations can be so powerful that it even shifted readers’ eyes from appreciating her poetic skills to looking for the evidence of her betrayal in her poetry.

The poem “Feelings in Autumn” says: “Along, [I] rest chin in palm; Alone, [I] feel sorrow. Since olden times, the unfortunate should be like this, how dare [I] compare [us] to mandarin ducks [that can be together] until grey hair [grows].” The thorny heart was already revealed.

秋懷詩云: “獨自支頤獨自愁,深情欲語又還羞。從來薄命應如此,敢比鴛鴦到白頭。”棘心已露矣。\(^{397}\)

This comment in *Jingzhiju shihua* exemplified the trend of turning away from poetic evaluation to peeping for more personal and private details. All of the three late Ming anthologies included this poem as well, and two of them added comments, but neither read the poem in this way. In *Mingyuan shigui* after the line “since olden times, the unfortunate should be like this,” there is an interlinear comment: “‘should be like this’ is a self-consolation for her own regret” (應如此自解自恨). After the line “how dare [I] compare [us] to mandarin ducks [that can be together] until grey hair [grows],” there is another interlinear comment: “‘How dare [I] compare’ is an analogy she made to forecast herself into the distant future” (敢比況遠以徵).\(^{398}\)

Although the anthologies of the Qing dynasty and Republican period listed above followed the basic contour of Yang Wan’s image constructed by Qian Qianyi, some of them were less influenced. They cast a slightly different light on this image and complicated it by adding details that divulged new fact and/or diverting attention to her literary and artistic talents, thus developing her image into a layered one. In

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\(^{397}\) Zhu Yizun, *Jingzhiju shihua*, 767.

Mingci huikan, her style of ci-lyrics is compared to the first-class works of the Northern Song, a period generally acknowledged as the prime of this genre.\textsuperscript{399} Her poetry and paintings are viewed as peerless (shihuawushuang 詩畫無雙) in Zhongxiang ci.\textsuperscript{400}

Differing from the biased comment in Mingyuan shiwei, the following record offered more details about Yang Wan’s death, which refused the conventional and over-simplified approach to deal with a disloyal wife.

After Zhisheng died, [Yang Wan] considered relying on Tian Hongyu, a relative of the dynastic family by marriage. She took her dowry and moved [to Tian’s house], [but she] did not expect that Tian only treated her like a commoner and soon put her to work teaching his youngest daughter zither and calligraphy. The rebellion rose in the jiashen year [1644]. Wanshu took Tian’s daughter to Jinling and hid in the mountains. Bandits suddenly broke into their room, and attempted to defile the daughter of Tian. The daughter refused to submit, and Wanshu tried her best to protect [the daughter] beside her, thus they were both killed.

止生亡後，思倚國戚田宏遇。以其賄遷，不期宏遇第以眾人蓄之，尋俾其授琴書於季女。甲申寇變，宛叔攜田氏女至金陵，匿山中。盜突入其室，欲污田氏女。女不從，宛叔從旁力衛之，遂同遇害。\textsuperscript{401}

Rather than adopting the indifferent attitude towards her death like Wang Duanshu, Zhu Yizun revealed his pity and compassion in writing her biographic note. Readers of this piece of information might be impressed by Yang Wan’s braveness in the face of bandits and self-sacrifice in protecting Tian’s daughter at the expense of her own life, given that Tian only treated her as a commoner and that this girl is not her own daughter but pupil at best. This fact which is very important for us to gain a comprehensive understanding of Yang Wan, is completely deleted in Liechao shiji.

For some other anthologists, who had no interest in political issues or had no experience of dynastical transition, Yang Wan’s image as a legendary courtesan overshadowed her image as a betrayer. The inevitable decline of courtesan culture in the Qing dynasty invoked literati’s imagination of the past glories of the Qinhuai pleasure quarter, hence some anthologies, such as Linxia cixuan 林下詞選 (Selected Ci-lyrics of the Bamboo Grove, 1671), Cuilou ji 翠樓集 (Collection of the Jadeite Tower, 1673), and Lichao guiya 歷朝閨雅 (Elegance in Boudoir of Successive Dynasties, 1696-1708), emphasize her versatility and her identity as a famous courtesan in Nanjing instead of

\textsuperscript{399} Zhao Zunyue, Mingci huikan, 299.
\textsuperscript{400} Xu and Qian, Zhongxiang ci, shu ji, 23b.
\textsuperscript{401} Zhu Yizun, Jingzhiju shihua, 767.
her extramarital affairs and remarriage. These anthologies completely ignore the biography written by Qian Qianyi and comment by Wang Duanshu. Instead, they focus on appreciating her transmitted poems. Moreover, a niche is also carved for her in Chinese art history. She is remembered for her paintings of orchid and stone, and had her name recorded in Yutai huashi (History of Paintings of the Jade Terrace, 1831), among the outstanding female painters, past and present; as well as in Wusheng shishi (History of Silent Poetry, 1720), among the distinguished Ming painters, male and female.

2. The Self-image and Living Spaces of Yang Wan Represented in Her Poetry

As we have already witnessed in the last section, under her husband Mao Yuanyi’s brush, the image of Yang Wan chronologically transformed from an innocent and precocious courtesan with ethereal beauty, a talented and respectful young lady emaciated in the inner chamber longing for her husband far away, to a loyal and resourceful wife sharing happiness and sufferings with her husband. The phased transformation of image was deliberately arranged, marked by the important events in Mao Yuanyi’s life, which reflected the prevalent view of taking poetry as another form of history shared by Mao and his contemporaries, associating private life experience with larger political upheavals and social crisis.

The case remains the same for the prefaces written by Mao Yuanyi to Yang Wan’s poetry collections, which highlighted the connection between Yang Wan’s poetic creation and his own life trajectory while paying less attention to literary aesthetics of the poems themselves. His compilation and publication of Yang Wan’s poetry collections undoubtedly testified to the significant role of an encouraging husband in preserving and circulating woman’s literary works. In the meantime the prefaces also revealed the real motivation of the project, which reminds us of modern scholar Wei Hua’s remarks on the late Qing male literati’s enthusiasm for an early Qing heroine Wu Zongai (1650-1674).

Male literati participation in the editing, rewriting, and transmission of women’s works in late imperial China was largely implicated in their own networks of male

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402 Zhou Ming, Linxia cixuan, 619; Liu Yunfen, Cuilou ji, 166; Kui Xu, Lichao guiyu, 11.
403 Tang Shuyu, yutai huashi, 79.
404 Jiang Shaoshu, Wusheng shishi, 134.
405 Ho, “Encouragement from the Opposite Gender,” 337-338.
friendship and self-expressive needs… Perhaps it is true that when judging women poets, male critics examined the “person” (ren 人) as, figuratively speaking, the “main text,” and her poetry as only the “paratext.” In the case of Wu Zongai, it also appears true that her story of self-sacrifice was mere “paratext,” whereas the mid-nineteenth-century crisis of the empire was the “main text.”

By merely taking Yang Wan and her poetry as the paratext of his own life and self-expression, the project of building Yang Wan’s image launched by Mao Yuanyi thus only told half of the story. Later, other male literati and gentry women who were interested in Yang Wan also participated in this project and further transformed this project into a forum to discuss the issues with which they were confronted in their historical and intellectual contexts. This image-building project thus extended beyond the writings and concerns of Yang Wan as a woman author and deviated from the self-image represented in Yang Wan’s own poetry. They are telling varied adaptations of her story, or more precisely, telling their own story by appropriating and reshaping her image.

In order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of Yang Wan’s diverse images, we need the other half of her story told by herself. It is crucial to gather from Yang Wan’s poetry collections her self-image as well as her own perception of her life experience and the world around her. For pre-modern Chinese women writers, although having their work be edited means being filtered, their individual collections, if extant, are still by far the most reliable sources revealing their self-identification and self-awareness of familial and social roles that later generations can get to know. Their own poetic voices, to a certain extent, demonstrated the “female realities” though we at a minimum have to keep the following two points in mind. First, the poetic languages, topoi, and rhetoric which female writers used to describe her realities are mostly generic, having long been constructed by the writings of the mainstream male literati. Second, the “female realities” represented in women’s writings could also be “female fantasies.” Women writers could play with different personas by wearing distinct role masks and articulating in diverse voices. They could also be embedded in their poetry, dreams and wishes, like their male counterparts always were, turning what was into what should have been within literary imagination.

Despite the phase-based transformation of her image and the chronological shift in her identity which Mao Yuanyi deliberately presented to us through his organization

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406 Wei Hua, “From Private Life to Public Performances,” 172-173.
of Yang Wan’s poetic works and his prefaces to her collections, from what I observed in Yang Wan’s own poetry collections, I would prefer to read her self-representation as more multifaceted, divided by different living spaces rather than different stages of life. The establishment of her self-identity is firmly attached to the distinct feminine spaces with coded cultural meanings, either the pleasure quarter or the boudoir, instead of mirroring the change of her husband’s identity throughout his life trajectory.

Being confined in either the pleasure quarter or the boudoir, women in late imperial China spent their time on rather repetitive tasks: either the drinking parties courtesans needed to attend or the domestic duties gentry women needed to fulfil. The monotonous daily work made them somehow unconscious of the passing of time. Lacking the achievements men tried to attain in the outside world which could be regarded as milestones to mark different stages throughout one’s life, the majority of pre-modern Chinese women perceived time as cyclical instead of linear, deriving from their experience of nature outside and bodies inside, which partly explains their inclination to establish identification with different residential places and portray self-images in meaningful spaces to indicate transformation.

The following section focuses on the self-image of Yang Wan represented in her poetry collections, with its connection to different living spaces, namely the Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing and the boudoir in a gentry household of the Jiangnan area. This other half of the story is untold in Mao Yuanyi’s prefaces which guides us to read her poems chronologically as footnotes to the different stages in his life. Moreover, this other half can only reveal itself before our eyes when her poems are accessed via another approach. By examining Yang Wan’s self-image from the perspective of space, I try to restore, in a certain sense, a late Ming woman’s perception of her life experience and the world surrounding her.

407 Nature presents itself as a seasonal cycle, women writers in late imperial China were rather sensitive to and sentimental about seasonal transition and expressed their deep feeling of loss of youth and beauty and their longing for love in poems themed on the seasonal transition. But the seasonal transition in nature is a cycle which, to a certain degree, leads to the highly repetitive images and emotions in their poems and thus turned their self-expression into generic self-performance. On the other hand, the female body itself experiences a biological cycle. As Charlotte Furth points out, the most important events in a woman’s life, menstruation and pregnancy, were handled in a repetitive and regulated way. See Furth, A Flourishing Yin, 74-77, 101-116.
2. 1. The Qinhuai Pleasure Quarter in Yang Wan’s Poetry

Nearly a decade after Mao Yuanyi wrote the series of five *cuizhuang shi* to urge her to make-up for their wedding and took her away from the famous Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing, Yang Wan composed a series of poems on the pleasure quarters. Now in the role of a confined and longing wife, she imagined the poetry contests and extravagant banquets there and implicitly complained about her husband who still indulged in the pleasure quarters and consorted with those young and charming courtesans just like herself ten years prior.

The first poem begins with "[I] hear from afar" (遙聞) and shows Yang Wan’s physical distance from the Qinhuai pleasure quarter. It seems necessary to foreground her purity before starting to touch upon the “improper” place. However, with the poetic description unfolded, the aesthetic instead of the sensual pleasure is explored. Yang Wan imagined crowds of brilliant literati participating in the sensational poetry contest, among whom the winner looked resplendent and excited by his own distinguished talent as well as the vintage wine. Yang Wan depicted the most attractive event held in the pleasure quarter and set a genteel and romantic tone for this series of poems.

Yang Wan’s imagination of the poetry contests and wine banquets is most likely based on her real life experience. As the second poem implies, the romantic encounter between Yang Wan, a young courtesan and her husband Mao Yuanyi, a talented literatus, happened in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter, maybe in one of these gatherings and banquets.

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In this poem, the brightness and vitality of the sunny spring day set the most beautiful stage for a love story, and the five-coloured silk indicates their first meeting during the Dragon Boat Festival, the fifth day of the fifth month, the same day Yang Wan composed this series of poems many years later. The last two lines of this poem strategically ensure her temporal and spatial distance from the pleasure quarters. The poet on the one hand emphasized the striking comparison between *jinzhao* 今朝 (today) and *xi* 昔 (the past), and on the other hand re-shaped her self-image as a wife in the boudoir expecting to hear from her husband, who was indulging himself in the pleasure quarters far from home. Since there was no new poem sent to her from her husband, Yang Wan continued her imagination of her husband’s infatuation with the enchanting pleasure quarter in the third poem.

This poem tentatively teases the boundary of a courtesan writer and a gentry lady writer because the vivid description of such details as the bright-red colour of the singing girl’s dress, the fragrant incense, and the private feelings in the most intimate moments in the pleasure quarter blurs the border of imagination and reality. Nevertheless, the last line of this poem withdraws the female poet to her proper boudoir from her imagination of the pleasure quarter which was based on her personal experience as a former courtesan. In that line, Yang Wan expressed her regret at not being able to spend the festival with her husband that year, which can be read as an alibi and also shows that she did not belong to the pleasure quarter anymore. As a respectful wife, her appropriate space now is the inner chamber. Thus the following poem, also the last of this series, tells us how this respectful wife in the inner chamber spent the day of Dragon Boat Festival.
death, 長命繩能續命還無。 Are the colourful threads\textsuperscript{409} able to extend [your] life?

Compared with the poetry contests, lively performances, and wine parties on the festival in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter, the celebration in the boudoir reveals the loneliness of the poet and her longing for her husband away from home. By painting a pair of ducks swimming together in the river, she expressed her wishes to regain her husband’s loving company. As a wife, she began to view the pleasure quarter and the courtesans there as potential rivals for her husband’s love. Yang Wan’s representation of these two spaces (the Qinhuai pleasure quarter and the boudoir) is complicated. As a courtesan-turned-wife, Yang Wan made every effort to keep a safe distance from the pleasure quarter, as well as her discreditable past. She became estranged from the pleasure quarter also because of the virtual threat she felt from the courtesans there in competing for her husband’s love and attention.\textsuperscript{410} However, in most lines of this series of poems, the vivid description of the Qinhuai pleasure quarter seems to flow under her brush so naturally and irrepressibly because it is the place that was associated with all her life experience before marriage, including her most precious memory of love. Furthermore, the courtesan life, despite its dark side, promised a certain extent of freedom in literary and artistic pursuit, which is demonstrated in the lines depicting the poetry contests and musical performances in the pleasure quarter.

The Qinhuai pleasure quarter, where Yang Wan was brought up to be an elegant and charming courtesan with at least basic literary and artistic skills, left merely vague traces in her poetry collections. Apart from the series of poems analyzed above, there are only five poems that mentioned the pleasure quarters, all in the earliest collection, \textit{Zhongshan xian}, and none in any of the sequels. During the first several years of her

\textsuperscript{409} \textit{Caishen} 彩繩 (colourful threads), or more precisely \textit{wuchaceishen} 五彩繩 (the five-coloured threads), were given as gifts to dispel evil on the fifth day of the fifth month, also known as the Dragon Boat Festival. The five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water were represented by the five colours of azure, red, yellow, white, and black, all working in harmony to banish bad luck. Thus the five-coloured threads were also called \textit{changming si} 長命絲 or \textit{changming li} 長命縷 (longevity threads), which were worn during the Dragon Boat Festival in hopes of extending one’s life. Ying Shao, \textit{Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu}, 605-606. For the English introduction of this custom, see Bodde, \textit{Festivals in Classical China}, 306-307; Ajmer, \textit{The Dragon Boat Festival on the Hupeh-Hunan Plain}, 50-51, 86-87.

\textsuperscript{410} Dorothy Ko demonstrates the complicated relationship between two groups of women, namely wives and courtesans: “The competition between wife and concubine-to-be was all the fiercer because of their membership in the same cultural world of male elites and their common gendered position.” Moreover, she reveals the irony was also at work on the community level, “wife and entertainer were positioned to ‘follow’ the same group of male elites, hence they were as united by their gendered position as they were divided by their competition.” See Ko, \textit{Teachers of the Inner Chambers}, 251-252.
marital life recorded in *Zhongshan xian*, Yang Wan seemed to retain a strong identification with her courtesan background, especially when she referred to the Qinhua pleasure quarter as her home, and her reminisced about her sisters and friends there just like a married young woman missing her blood relatives. The series of *cuizhuang shi* written by Mao Yuanyi that was sent to her on the eve of their wedding mentioned that Yang Wan, assuming the demeanour of a sentimental and talented girl from a decent family, had composed a poem right before leaving the pleasure quarter.

What kind of poem should a gentry girl write before leaving her natal home to get married? In “Lamenting the Dead: Women’s Performance of Grief in Late Imperial China,” Anne E. McLaren draws our attention to “the oral traditions of Chinese women, who were known for the practice of elaborate bridal laments (*kujia* 哭嫁) and funeral laments (*kusang* 哭喪) from imperial times until the late twentieth century.” She points out that “in the case of wedding laments, the performing bride demonstrated her attachment to her natal home. In funeral laments, the married-out woman negotiated the contradictory pulls of filiality towards the patriline of the husband (*pojia* 婆家), her own ‘uterine family,’ and her natal home (*niangjia* 娘家).” Although gentry women of the upper-class were usually excluded from this sort of public performances, they often wrote poetry to express their emotional attachment and display their filial piety when facing the same situation of a traumatic separation. Most gentry girls, just like those girls from lower classes who exclaimed their grief over leaving their closest kinsmen and fears of living with a completely strange family, also needed an outlet for their anxiety and sadness, and they thus turned the seemingly vulgar oral tradition into a more delicate literary tradition of women’s culture that became a genre of farewell poetry before leaving home for marriage. This genre, paralleling and complementing the genre of *cuizhuang shi* which was often written by the bridegroom, revealed the other

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412 Ibid.
413 As many researchers have demonstrated, how to help a newly married daughter adapted into her husband’s family has long been a key concern of female learning since the Han dynasty. Modern scholar Yu-Shih Chen reads Ban Zhao’s *Nüjie* (ca. 45-ca. 117) as an art of self-defence which was indispensable in the education of a upper-class girl fated to enter a titled family as wife and daughter-in-law, and was written to teach her how to survive the intense power politics in her future home. See Chen, “The Historical Template of Pan Chao’s *Nü Chieh*,” 232. Another researcher Lin-Lee Lee also questions the traditional view that Ban silenced Chinese women and argues that Ban’s teaching provided newly married women with the ways to “exercise agency within their marital families in order to gain respect and influence in this somewhat hostile environment,” see Lee, “Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness,” 52.
side of a magnificent wedding, thus providing us with an opportunity to examine the cultural meaning of wedding and marriage, as well as the different perceptions of gender relations being embedded from perspectives of both men and women.

Based on the prevailing practice of a bride writing farewell poetry upon leaving her natal home before being married in the Ming dynasty, we can presume that the poem Yang Wan wrote just prior to her wedding might be the following one. This one is also collected in Zhongshan xian, Yang Wan’s first poetry collection and placed relatively forward in the collection, perhaps indicating an earlier composition date since her husband Mao Yuanyi, also compiler of her poetry collections, tried to organize her poems in chronological order.

![Bidding My Parents Farewell](baimen yangliu 白門楊柳)

“Bidding My Parents Farewell” (baimen yangliu 白門楊柳) was a frequently used metaphor for beautiful courtesans in Nanjing since baimen 白門 (the White Gate) was a well known southern city gate of Nanjing and often synecdochically referred to the whole city. The willows, swinging gracefully in the spring wind, had long been viewed as a vivid representation of charming courtesans. A series of books about “Willows at the White Gate” later appeared in the Qing dynasty, focusing on the lives of courtesans. After the first line which implied her courtesan background through a conventional metaphor, the following verses eliminated any traces of courtesan writings by assuming a gentry girl’s tone to express her sorrow on separation from her parents and siblings, demonstrating her awareness of her own

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414 Yang Wan, Zhongshan xian, juan 1, 12-13.
415 To name some, Baimen xinliu ji 白門新柳記 (Record of the New Willows at the White Gate), Baimen xinliu buji 白門新柳補記 (Supplement to the Record of the New Willows at the White Gate), Baimen shuailiu fuji 白門衰柳附記 (Addendum to the Old Willows of the White Gate).
shifting identities from a willowy courtesan to a woman of a decent family who should know well about both her responsibility to her husband and her filial piety to her parents. Yang Wan skilfully constructed her self-image in this poem by drawing on different conventions. The highly conventional image of willows at the White Gate hinted to her Nanjing courtesan background, but it could also read as the scene-setting of this poem at the very beginning. The main image in this poem was the gentry girl on the way to her husband’s home who was thinking of her parents, which fitted well in the “bridal laments” tradition and culture of “bridal farewell poetry,” ultimately a feminine way to express filial piety which accorded well with mainstream Confucian values.

As a newly married daughter, Yang Wan kept thinking of her parents and wrote the following poem in which the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter was first mentioned directly.

懷親

夜夜瞻雲魂夢遠， Every night, [I] look upward to the clouds and my dreaming
魂夢遠。 soul wanders far away.
醒來依舊隔天涯。 When awake, still in the other corner of the world.
愁心相託唯明月， My sorrowful mind can only be entrusted to the bright moon,
照入秦淮是妾家。 It casts light into the Qinhuaï, this was my home.

The last line, without any rhetorical embellishment, straightforwardly asserts that the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter was the place she dreamed of every night and she identified as her home. Not like that which was described in many vernacular fictions at that time, namely showing courtesans’ delight at being able to escape from the pleasure quarters, Yang Wan conversely revealed her sorrow because of her distance from the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter, entrusting her sorrowful mind to the bright moon since it was at that time the only connection between her and Qinhuaï as her “natal home,” shining on both places at the same time. However, although the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter might have become attractive in reminiscence, the brutal fact could not be simply covered up especially when being exposed in the bright moonlight. This complicated image of the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter appears multiple times in Zhongshan xian, as we see in another poem written to her elder sister Feiqing 蜕卿.417

416 Yang Wan, Zhongshan xian, juan 1, 13.
417 As for sisters in a courtesan household, it was possible that they were biological sisters. But more often the case was that they were adopted by the same madam of the brothel at a very young age.
Feiqing 蜚卿 is the courtesy name of Yang Zhao 楊昭 (also Yang Zhaosheng 楊昭生), who we have encountered in the last section when reading the biography of Tao Chusheng, another concubine of Mao Yuanyi who died young. The first time when Mao Yuanyi and Tao Chusheng caught sight of Yang Wan, she was too young to show up in public alone and thus accompanied by her elder sister Yang Zhao, who was also said to be a celebrity in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter of Nanjing. Yang Zhao was ranked *tanhua* 探花 (third in the imperial examination),^418^ and got her portrait painted and collected in one of the authoritative “flower-ranking” books entitled *Jinling baimei*. Her ethereal beauty was highly praised by Yang Wan in a poem entitled “Song Feiqing zi fu Huangshan zhi yue” 送蜚卿姊赴黃山之約 (Send off [my] elder sister Feiqing to an engagement on Mount Huang).^419^ Yang Wan depicted the magnificent Mount Huang as even superior to the legendary Mount Wu (*wushan* 巫山), where the ancient kings were said to have romantic encounters with the goddess. By doing so, she was actually enhancing the celestial charm of her elder sister Yang Zhao, who was comparable with the goddess of Mount Wu.^420^ On the day before Yang Wan’s marriage, Yang Wan also wrote a farewell poem to her entitled “Bie Feiqing zì” 別蜚卿姊 (Bidding Farewell to [My] Elder Sister Feiqing),^421^ in which their sisterhood was revealed in the most affectionate tone. They spoke from the heart, drank and teared up on departure until the boatman urged to set off. Although the spring comes every year along the road by the Yangzi River, they knew it could not be the same anyway since from that day on their dreaming souls would frequent that road regularly to visit each other just like the spring. After Yang Wan’s marriage, their sisterhood was still carefully maintained by exchanging poems and gifts, as well as paying visits. As Yang Wan indicated in the farewell poem “Bie Feiqing zì” above, their souls were never really separate.

The Qinhuai pleasure quarter was represented as a shared space and memory between the two sisters since they grew up together there and was thus often mentioned in their poems sent to each other. Although this place was used as a sisterhood bond, their attitude towards the pleasure quarter was unanimously negative and the real

^418^ In “flower-ranking” books, courtesans were ranked and named playfully according to the degree titles of the imperial examinations. See Ko, “The Written Word and the Bound Foot,” 82-86.

^419^ Yang Wan, *Zhongshan xian*, juan 1, 12.

^420^ The romantic legend about the goddess of Mount Wu (*wushan shenü* 巫山神女) was eulogized in the two rhapsodies written by Song Yu 宋玉 (ca. 298-ca. 222 BCE), respectively entitled “Gaotang fu” 高唐賦 (The Rhapsody of Gaotang Terrace) and “Shennü fu” 神女賦 (The Rhapsody of Goddess).

motivation of writing about that place was to share their sympathy for each other’s miserable fates of being brought up as courtesans and to express their admiration for each other’s efforts to be able to rise up gracefully from such a “muddy” place as the following poem shows.

秋夜寄嘲蜚卿姊

To Tease Sister Feiqing on an Autumn Night

The autumn moon gracefully covers [my] dreaming soul,
The empty steps, freshly dewed, tinted with traces of flowers.
Clear and pure, the bright moon on an autumn night,
Casts light on Qinhua, revealing a stretch of mud.

This poem to Yang Zhao showed a striking contrast between the superficial glory and the hidden filth of the Qinhua pleasure quarter. The empty steps which were wet with dew and tinted with traces of flowers reflected the clear and pure autumn moon. However, if examined thoroughly in the bright moonlight, this place was just a stretch of mud. The flowers fell down and scattered on the steps can be read as a metaphor of the girls trapped in the pleasure quarter whose life was trampled down, and whose youth and beauty was ruthlessly abused. The reason for Yang Wan to recall that “muddy” place in the poem was because her sister Yang Zhao, at that time, was still stuck in the Qinhua pleasure quarter. Although entitling her poem with the word “tease”, we can sense her heartfelt worries about her sister since she knew very well of her sister’s pure and unyielding nature as revealed in another poem entitled “Wen Feiqing zi zhi Wumen bu wo guo fu ji” (Sending the Rhapsody for [I] Heard Sister Feiqing Arrived at Suzhou without Visiting Me): “[I] expect how you could be addicted to the place of singing and dancing” (料爾豈耽歌舞地).

It seemed that Yang Zhao’s high rank in Jinling baimei, a widely circulated connoisseurship book on courtesans, might bring her reputation-burden and sufferings, and even might account for her relatively late marriage.

Apart from sharing poetic topics on the Qinhua pleasure quarter, the two sisters also sent each other gifts to enhance their sisterhood. The emphasis was not on the price

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422 Ibid., juan 2, 12.
423 Ibid., juan 3, 10.
424 For more details about the popularity of the connoisseurship books in late Ming, see Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 34-39; Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 224-226. When these kinds of books began to include courtesans, they actually commercialized the girls in the pleasure quarters and the ranking of these girls gradually became a form of advertisement. Thus the ones who got high ranks would find themselves harder to get rid of prostitution because the managers of the brothels would try to make more profit out of them and hold them for a higher ransom.
of the gifts but on the meaning conveyed by the gifts. In one poem entitled “Feiqing xiemei jianzeng" (Feiqing Brought [Me] a Plum Blossom as a Gift) 425, Yang Wan represented her self-image as a respectful woman in the boudoir and Yang Zhao’s image as pure and lofty as the plum blossom whose spiritual pursuit was transcendent.

盡日閒門掩不開， All day long the idle door is closed, never open,
梅花邀與故人來。 The plum blossom invited an old friend to come with.
花魂仍逐朝雲去， The soul of the flower yet followed the morning cloud,
止留瘦影伴黃昏。 Only the thin shadow left to accompany [me] at dusk.

The door in the first line which is kept tightly closed, shutting out all the visitors as well as any possible rumours, shows Yang Wan’s strong awareness to behave as a respectful gentry lady. The closed door framed a feminine space which only belonged to Yang Wan, her elder sister Yang Zhao, and the plum blossom. The second line playfully twists the reality of Yang Zhao bringing a plum blossom to visit her; instead, Yang Wan presumed that it was the plum blossom invited her old friend Yang Zhao to pay a visit together. The friendship between the plum blossom and Yang Zhao suggests the reading of the former as symbolic of the latter, thus “the soul of the flower” (huahun 花魂) in the third line, which followed the morning clouds, probably also indicates the transcendental spiritual pursuit of Yang Zhao. This analogical reading is assured by the allusion of “the morning cloud” (chaoyun 朝雲), which implies the romantic encounter between the goddess of Mount Wu and the king of Chu. The goddess of Mount Wu is familiar to the reader of Yang Wan’s poetry since her image was used to foreshadow Yang Zhao’s ethereal beauty in another poem. The last line reveals that after the leaving of Yang Zhao, the inner chamber was restored to its quietness and the poet stayed alone with the only accompany of the plum blossom at dusk. The image of the “thin shadow,” combined with the temporal setting of dusk, reminds us of the most famous verse eulogizing the plum blossom: “Their scattered shadows fall lightly on clear water, their subtle scent pervades the moonlit dusk” (疏影橫斜水清淺，暗香浮動月黃昏). This verse was written by the Song dynasty poet Lin Bu 林逋 (967-1028), an aloof recluse who took a plum as his wife and crane as his child. Just like the recluse whose superior virtue was manifested by rejecting corrupted officialdom, Yang Wan shaped her self-

425 Yang Wan, Zhongshan xian, juan 2, 7.
image as a decorous young lady within the boudoir without any improper contact with the outside world.

The analogical use of flowers in creating images of the courtesan by male literati or by courtesans themselves was a prevalent poetic practice. Daria Berg takes another celebrated Nanjing courtesan Xue Susu in the Ming dynasty as an example to analyze the projection of her self-image as “solitude and independence of body and spirit” in her painting of orchids.426 The courtesans’ choice of certain plants was often predictable due to their obvious preference for bamboo, orchids, and plum blossoms, in accordance with the specific cultural meanings attached to these plants by the mainstream male literary tradition because of the cultural position of courtesans’ writings as “minor literature,” which was “written in a language that is of the dominant but formed differently due to a necessity that springs from some difference in position.”427 Courtesan writers, of the most marginal status, consciously assimilated mainstream literary tradition and made creative changes. By adopting highly generic rhetoric and language, as well as the culturally-coded symbols and images, a courtesan writer connected her writings to a larger literary tradition and exhibited her erudition and intellectual equivalency to male literati, and thus rendered herself as a voice in the mainstream literary discourse despite her marginal cultural position and humble gender status. By inserting her creative adaptations, she demonstrated her agency as an author and individualized her poetry with her personal touches and unconventional stamps on generic expressions.428

Apart from the plum blossom, the multifaceted image of Yang Zhao in Yang Wan’s poetry can also be read as an allegory of Yang Wan’s self-image due to their shared life experience: they grew up together in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter, receiving the same artistic and literary training; they both married into gentry families of the Jiangnan area as favourite concubines; and they built an overlapping social network, having many mutual friends in both courtesan and literati circles.

Figuratively speaking, the image of Yang Zhao in the poetry of her younger sister Yang Wan, like a mirror, reflected part of the latter’s self-representation—a high-

428 For example, in one poem entitled “Yongzhu” 詠竹 (On the Bamboo), Yang Wan feminized the image of bamboo. Bamboo, which was often used as a metaphor for the virtuous gentleman, is now described as a girl wearing emerald hairpins and leaning on flowers, see Yang Wan, *Sanxu Zhongshan xian*, lower juan, 9. This is also revealed in another poem on bamboo entitled “Yong Zhu furen” 詠竹夫人 (On the Lady Bamboo). See Yang Wan, *Zhongshan xian zaixu*, lower juan, 6.
ranking courtesan in the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter with seductive charm and ethereal beauty, engaging in intellectual and spiritual pursuit. The other side of Yang Wan’s image, which had not been reflected in this “mirror,” was her self-representation as a respectful wife who confined herself to the boudoir, absent inappropriate contact with the outside world, and a filial daughter who bore the deep sorrow of leaving her parents and could not stop longing for her natal home. Yang Wan’s representation of her close relatives and natal family also complicated the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter in her poetry, since this was the place she identified as her natal home and in the meanwhile was a place she described as a “muddy stretch.” Despite being covered with beautiful flowers and fragrant dew, it could not be exposed in the bright moonlight.

2. 2. “Gui” 閨 (boudoir) in Yang Wan’s Poetry

When Yang Wan composed a mourning poem for her sister Yang Zhao, who at that time also married into a gentry family in the Jiangnan area, she carefully erased all traces of their courtesan backgrounds even in her writing of their childhood which was supposed to be spent in the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter. Instead, she reshaped their childhood memory into the one sharing the same experiences with any gentry girl in her boudoir before marriage, with activities such as reciting poems, reading books, and playing games in the family-owned garden. Soon marriage came, as well as the separation. We encounter this routine frequently in gentry women’s mourning poems for their sisters or best friends in the boudoir. This imitation of boudoir childhood experience fit well with Yang Wan’s transformed identity shown in the first line of this mourning poem: “The idle boudoir shut out shadows and echoes” (xiangui jue yingxiang 閨閨絕影響).429 This emphasized her identity as a decorous wife by highlighting her physical location. However, this physical location, if examined from architecture and interior decoration perspectives, was not very different from the buildings in the pleasure quarters since they were all dominated by the literati’s aesthetic taste and the conventional architectural presentation of feminine spaces. The real difference lay in the moral hierarchy assigned to these two spaces.

The word “gui” 閨 (boudoir) frequently appears in her poetry collections and is often used in combination with other elements to form a range of words. Sometimes it is

429 Yang Wan, Zhongshan xian zaixu, lower juan, 14.
associated with different seasons to indicate the passing of time, such as *chuigui* 春閨 (spring boudoir) and *xiaguí* 夏閨 (summer boudoir); sometimes it is associated with the poet’s life style, such as *xiangguí* 閒閨 (idle boudoir) and *yougui* 幽閨 (secluded boudoir); and sometimes it is associated with certain features of the boudoir such as *shenggui* 深閨 (hidden boudoir) and *kongguí* 空閨 (empty boudoir). The most interesting point is that the majority of her poems which touched upon her romantic longing and sexual desire were usually under titles with the word “gui.” Ironically, this large category bore the most resemblance to poems written by courtesans, and thus the physical location seems to be the only sign by which we can recognize authorial identity.

By consciously locating her self-image within the boudoir, Yang Wan managed to not only keep a safe distance from the opposite site, the pleasure quarters where she originally lived, but also legitimize the erotic implications in some of her poems such as detailed depictions of a young and languid woman suffering from lovesickness, as well as her reminiscence of passionate dreams and sexually-charged moments. All these themes and descriptions had already been highly stylized in the well established tradition. *Yutai xinyong* 玉台新詠 (New Songs from A Jade Terrace) set the tone for this style of writing. *Huajian ji* 花間集 (Anthology of Poems Written among the Flowers) developed the boudoir aesthetics in the lyrics. Song *ci* further explored the “subtle, delicate, and fluid feminine beauty and pathos.” As Xiaorong Li pointed out in her study on boudoir themes in women’s poetry, with the highly conventionalized themes, sentiments, settings, and imagery, the works of anyone in the Ming writing about the boudoir could have been viewed as merely an exercise in this conventional poetic subgenre rather than serious and sincere self-expression. In this sense, this physical location had long been loaded with cultural meaning and literary tradition which carved out an “appropriate” niche safe and free for gentry women writers to express seemingly “not-so-appropriate” emotions.

Other poems of Yang Wan, although neither were entitled with the word “gui” nor explicitly described the physical location of the woman poet, represented diverse activities and multiple aspects of her boudoir life. Yang Wan’s daily routine included

430 Xiaorong Li, *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China*, 47. For a historical review of the boudoir theme in poetic convention, see ibid., 20–47.
431 Ibid., 47–51.
literary composition and womanly work. The significance of literary composition in Yang Wan’s life is conspicuous since the large number of her poems being compiled into the four poetry collections have been handed down to our own time. The crucial meaning of literary creation for women in late imperial China is demonstrated by modern scholar Susan Mann, who claims that “for women, entering the domain of 
wen could be equally overpowering…they yearned—like men for transcendence. This they achieved in two ways: through sentiment, relived in memory and revitalized in poetry, and through pious disciplines that transformed body, mind and spirit.” For Yang Wan, as well as many other women writers in Ming and Qing dynasties, writing had already been incorporated into their lives, which means it was not only a way to record life, but also a way to experience and even to recast life.

Writing, by the act itself, was not necessarily attached with particular moral meanings or identity labels, but writing about the womanly work to which the female writer attended shows her fulfilment of, or at least her efforts at, domestic responsibilities of a wife, daughter, or mother. Some of Yang Wan’s poems involved her womanly work at home, including weaving, cutting and sewing, needlework, and embroidery. Womanly work (nü gong 女紅) was one of the four attributes—along with womanly virtue (nü de 女德), womanly speech (nü yan 女言) and womanly conduct (nü xing 女行)—prescribed by Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45-ca. 117), the famous female scholar of the Han dynasty, in her primer for womanhood, Nü jie 女誡 (Instructions for Women). These four attributes manifested a women’s tradition of combining work, practical profits/economic contribution and virtue/decorum. Therefore, work was viewed as the crucial line dividing courtiers who seemed idle and played around all day from respectable women who laboured honestly and industriously. The four attributes did not explicitly mention literary composition and thus writing remained an ambiguous and disputable arena when talking about female virtue. However, by writing about womanly work, women writers in late imperial China tried to attach moral

432 Mann, Precious Records, 119.
433 Grace S. Fong pointed out the association of talent and virtue in women’s writing about embroidering: “Poetry is the expression of women’s literary talent, and poems by women on doing embroidery, that is, performing woman’s work (nügong), could be perceived as positive representation of virtuous conduct.” See Fong, “Female Hands,” 4.
434 Bray, Technology and Gender, 184.
435 Mann, Precious Records, 143.
meaning to the act of writing itself, and thus made it seem more acceptable to those with conservative and stubborn minds.

In regard to associating womanly work with literary writing, Yang Wan can be viewed as representative of gentry women writers in the Ming dynasty. Differing from their counterparts in the “long eighteenth century” who assured the reader that they wrote only “after finishing embroidery” in order to reconcile the competing demands of wifely roles and artistic creation, women writers in the Ming dynasty seemed to incorporate both womanly work and poetry in their daily life without much tension. Yang Wan, as well as other women writers in the late Ming, faced the historical disputation in a much more liberal and friendly environment which was created by the supporting male literati.

On the other hand, Yang Wan’s writings about womanly work showed her individual way of building this association by highlighting their similarity and communicability. Both writing and womanly work were her companions when she was alone, showed her intelligence and artistic craft, and helped build a social network beyond the inner chamber. Appreciating one would give her the inspiration to create the other. One night after seeing her husband off, Yang Wan could not sleep and thus cut and sewed in order to kill time, which reminds us of those lines in which she mentioned books were her companion after her husband left. She also made clothes for her husband, sent embroidered flowers to her husband, and received embroidered gifts from friends, such as quilts and sutras. All these showed how womanly work, sometimes just like the literary works, could be used to express care and love, as well as establishing and enhancing social networks. The most refined womanly work like embroidery could be viewed as an aesthetic form conveying either religious piety such as with the

436 Ibid., 77. Grace S. Fong suggests a more positive reading to the titles of particular poems and poetry collections that included “after finishing embroidery” (xiuyu 繡餘) as “connoting a perception that writing was a womanly occupation that was as important as the canonically recognized woman’s work represented by embroidering.” See Fong, “Female hands,” 12. In this article, Fong also listed some other poetry titles that included the character xiu, such as Juanshi ji 倚繡集 (Collection [Produced] after Tiered by/of Embroidering) and Baxiu ji 罷繡集 (Collection [Produced] after Giving up/Stopping Embroidering), and revealed the subversive ambiguity of both titles as they showed “resistance to the orthodox demands of woman’s work as the women put down their embroidery or turn[ed] away from it to write about it or some other experience that ha[d] caught their attention,” ibid., 12-13. The reason why Ming women writers, including those of the upper class like Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635) and her daughters, normally did not highlight the priority of womanly work as the Qing women writers often did partly lies in the different intellectual trends in the Ming and Qing. However, it does not seem to me that Ming women demeaned womanly work, but they did not feel these two—writing and weaving—were mutually exclusive.
embroidered Buddhist sutras, or sensual pleasure, evident in the image of a pair of butterflies flying together being embroidered on the quilt. The similarity and connection between embroidery and poetry was also explored by Yang Wan when she obtained poetic inspiration from the exquisitely embroidered quilt. Furthermore, as delicate aesthetic forms, the production of both embroidery and poetry involves creativity and ingenious conception, which is *qiaosi* 巧思 in Chinese, and the character *si* 思 (thought) is a homophone for *si* 絲 (silk). Due to its similarity to writing, the euphemism of delicate embroidery was used to describe well written literary works in phrases like *jinxiu wenzhang* 錦繡文章 (an embroidered piece of literature) and *jinxin xiukou* 錦心繡口 (lit. brocaded mind and embroidered mouth). Moreover, *cai* 裁 (tailor) could mean either cutting in terms of cloth-making or composing in poetry-writing because of its connotation of applying careful weighing and exercising judgment when making either fabric or language fit into a rigorous and intricate pattern. Yang Wan, following the conventional tropes, associated womanly work with literary work instead of articulating their competing demands for her time and energy. She gleaned inspiration for poetry from fine embroidery, and she viewed her poetry-composition as cutting and weaving.

Apart from literary composition and womanly work, many enjoyable events and delightful moments are also recorded in her poetry which enrich our perception of entertainment in the inner quarters, such as flying kites on sunny days, watching musical performances with other concubines and maids on moonlit nights, and visiting temples or other famous sites nearby with neighboring girls. These vivid descriptions of boudoir entertainment experiences which she enjoyed as a gentry wife provide an all-encompassing vision of boudoir life which shared much more in common with courtesan life than we might think. Moreover, Oki Yasushi examines the illustrations of many literary works on courtesans in the Qinhuai pleasure quarter during the Ming dynasty. This work provides basic knowledge about the function of the buildings and

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437 For the religious meaning conveyed in the act of embroidery as spiritual practice, see Fong, “Female Hands,” 19-21.

438 Refers to an elegant and refined literary style. Instead of citing proverbial phrases, Fong quoted the “Wenfu” 文賦 (Rhapsody on Literature) by Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), an early canonical piece, as well as many late imperial Chinese women’s poems in which embroidering and writing formed parallel couplets to demonstrate the analogy between “the art and beauty of embroidery” and “the refinement of literary composition.” See Fong, “Female Hands,” 17-18.

439 Ibid., 12.
the aesthetics of interior design in the pleasure quarters, which bore a resemblance to that of the inner quarters.\textsuperscript{440} As female spaces, the boudoir of a wealthy household and the bedchamber of a high-end brothel were luxuriously decorated and appointed with things that men were not supposed to use or have in their own quarters: these included bo-silk, which was exclusively used for a woman’s bed curtains; and parrots, which were only found in women’s suites.\textsuperscript{441} The similarities of the boudoir and the pleasure quarter in terms of architecture, interior design, and the women’s life within them could be revealed through the simple fact that the “green tower,” a euphemistic term for upmarket brothels, originally referred to the inner quarters of well-off families where women members lived. It is reasonable to suspect that the most significant difference between these two spaces is more of a conceptual construction by male culture since they served the different needs of a man and their identities were divided by the distinct roles they played in different dimensions of a man’s life.

The division in self-identification of a gentry woman and a courtesan as a cultural and social construction was exemplarily revealed in the following series of poems written when the gentry wife Yang Wan was seriously ill. She prayed to heaven with her deepest concerns which could not be found in any deathbed writing of a courtesan.

“In the guihai year [1623], I was stirred by critical illness, [thus] I composed three sad songs to tell heaven. Who can escape from death in life? I also regard it as a return. But why does it come so quickly? I have three sorrows. Therefore, I write these songs to inform heaven” (癸亥病篤有感，賦此三悲歌告天。人生誰無死？我亦視如歸。歸哉何太速？而有三可悲。故歌而告之).\textsuperscript{442}

The first sorrow is for my father and mother,
Who gave birth to me as a son.

Although they did not raise me morning and evening,
They developed high expectations for me.

If I die before them,
On whom will they rely in the middle of their life course?

I especially tell this to heaven [for it to] know.

\textsuperscript{440} Oki, Fengyue Qinhuai, 111-126.
\textsuperscript{441} Mann, Precious Records, 132-133.
\textsuperscript{442} Yang Wan, Zhongshan xian, juan 3, 9-10. I use Xu’s translation for this series of poems with slight changes, see Sufeng Xu, “Lotus Flowers Rising from the Dark Mud,” 240-243. Xu studied the normative values represented by this group of poems. My reading of the series of poems, based on investigation of her virtual familial and social relationships as well as the rhetorical strategies she applied, reveals how Yang Wan compromised her self-identity in transformation with the social and cultural construction of gender norms by telling layered stories of her life and highlighting the boudoir as her living space.
The first concern was about her parents, who relied on her in their twilight years. In the second line, she recalled her early years with her parents and indicated she was doted on and treated as a son of the family, which sounded like a cliché in gentry women’s poetry when they attributed their erudition to their family learning. She knew very well of her parents’ expectation for her and was determined not to fail them. Although her filial piety is expressed clearly and definitely, no one can deny the ambiguity in this poem which is covered under the superficial narrative of a decent woman’s attachment to her natal family. The third line implies that she actually did not receive daily care from her parents, but without divulging any further information about the person who really brought her up. If the reader is familiar with her background, he/she might read the following line as an obscure defence of her parents who sold her to be a courtesan. They hoped for her to have a better future rather than possibly die of starvation.\(^4)\) But for the reader who does not know anything about Yang Wan’s past, this line also makes sense since it can be interpreted as the parents hoping their daughter could marry into better circumstances and enjoy happiness and longevity. Yang Wan showed her ingenuity by weaving two different but related patterns into one texture, and by her strategy of empowerment through representing herself as a paragon of filial piety, thus placing herself in a superior moral position as defined by the Confucian value system.

The second concern revealed in the following poem was about her husband, who devoted himself to the country and entrusted the family to her, and thus we can make out its large difference from a courtesan’s romantic longing for her far-away lover, especially in the sense of belonging and responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>其二</th>
<th>The Second</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>二悲遇君子，</td>
<td>My second sorrow: I have met a gentleman,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>勵志千秋期。</td>
<td>Who is determined to be with me for a thousand years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>他身已付國，</td>
<td>He devotes himself to the state,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>闔閫我當持。</td>
<td>I should take charge of the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>微軀未足酬，</td>
<td>With my unworthy self, I have not repaid him enough,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>半途肯分離。</td>
<td>Am I willing to part midway?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>此情寧不苦，</td>
<td>How could this feeling not be bitter?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4)\) Even a “high-class” courtesan who was “extremely wealthy, living off their patrons as well as off the rent from the properties they owned” usually came from an extremely poor family. Her parents had to sell her for money and also for the hope that she would make her own future, preferable to starving to death. See Zurndorfer, “Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China,” 197-200. As we can see from Wai-yee Li’s study on courtesans’ self-invention, some of these sold girls made every effort to rise above humiliation and managed to create their own destinies. See Li, “The Late Ming Courtesan,” 53-64.
In Yang Wan’s poetry collections, the poems which she wrote to exchange with her husband and express her longing for him bear the most visible resemblance to the poems written by courtesans. Her image as a beautiful young woman pining away from lovesickness in a feminine space with decorated toilette table and fragrance incense can be ascribed to any gendered identity such as palace lady, gentry wife, or courtesan. However, in the specific context of this poem, which touches upon the divided responsibility of man to his country and woman to her family, Yang Wan reveals her self-identity as a housewife without any obscurity. The country as a public sphere and the family as a private sphere defined themselves by the existence of the other. A loyal minister and a devoted wife were reflective of each other on both realistic and metaphoric levels. In this Confucian cultural construction, there is no position for the pleasure quarters because it belongs to the public sphere but cannot be placed in the discourse of the “country,” which explains its voicelessness in this series of poems. However, the pleasure quarters eventually managed to find a way into this culturally coded “country-family” union and vocalized itself in the chaos of the Ming-Qing transition.

The last concern was about her dependants, her children, the servants and concubines in her household, which demonstrated her self-awareness of her status as a mistress of a gentry family.

其三
三悲有幼子，
犹在襁褓时。
女笄未及嫁，
婢媵谁管之？
我忽有他虞，
君子尚天涯。
此情宁不苦，
特告袵天知。

The Third
My third sorrow: I have a young son,
Who is still an infant.
My daughter is fifteen, but she is not yet married.
Who will take charge of the maids and concubines?
[If] I suddenly met with some adversity,
My husband is still at the far end of the world,
How could this feeling not be bitter,
I especially tell this to heaven [for it to] know.

In this poem, she expressed her worries that no one would carefully raise her baby boy, manage a proper marriage for her stepdaughter, and take over the domestic duties. After recovering from severe illness, Yang Wan wrote about her daily life with her children, reading and composing poems together, carving a shared intellectual space out of the inner apartments, which reminds us of the life Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635) had led.
with her three daughters before they married. Yang Wan’s image as a loving mother is represented in a poem written on an extremely rainy night. She was thinking of her son far away and counting the days when he would receive the warm quilt and winter clothes she had sent to him. She would rather get cold herself than know her son was suffering. Another poem written to see her adopted son off for the imperial examinations showed her confidence in this young man’s intellectual superiority and future success. She also wrote a poem on her stepdaughter’s fifteen-sui birthday celebration, in which she eulogized the beauty and talent of this lovely girl and expressed sincere wishes to find a caring husband like Zhang Chang 張敞 (fl. ca. 74-48 BCE) for her. Moreover, Yang Wan also built a harmonious relation with the concubines and maids, and her daily life also included teaching them to read and write. The mourning poem Yang Wan wrote for one of her maids recalled the time they spent together sewing and embroidering. The maids under her brush seemed much younger than her, instead of playing the role of an elder sister as most courtesans would to their maids, Yang Wan represented herself as an empowered matriarch, both caring and controlling in her household, especially as her husband was away from home all the year round.

Yang Wan’s poetry collections left us a substantial record of a gentry wife’s daily life—writing, womanly work, household management, entertainment, as well as her deepest concerns. As a courtesan-turned-wife, she herself exemplified the instability of female social labels such as “wife,” “concubine,” and “courtesan,” which caused the occasional ambiguity in her self-representation which was open to various interpretations of different readers who may or may not have known about her courtesan background. This ambiguity, which was also represented in other women’s writings of late imperial China, can be partly attributed to the striking resemblance between these two spaces, the pleasure quarter and the inner quarter, in terms of gendered architecture embedded with feminine emotions and replete with womanly activities. However, it is undeniable that despite all the similarities, these two physical locations are essentially different in terms of their distinct social and cultural constructions. For men, they provided different symbols, rhetoric, and languages for their self-expression of ambition, virtue, and desire, playing different roles and performing distinct functions in their private and social lives. For women, these two locations represented different identities
and showed them disparate realities in which they handled distinct tasks, dealt with divergent concerns, and pursued various dreams.

**Conclusion**

The transformation of Yang Wan’s image from a courtesan in the pleasure quarter to a gentry woman in the inner chamber was one of the most representative in the category of “courtesan-turned-concubine/wife” since her marriage lasted for decades and her role as a family woman was fully developed. The Ming society’s flux presented her with possibilities to climb the social ladder and assume diverse roles as a talented courtesan to her male patrons, a favoured concubine and a dutiful wife to her husband, a loving mother to the children of her household, and a prestigious mistress of a gentry family.

The floating textual world also provides us with the matrix of different accounts that demonstrated the transformation of a Ming Nanjing courtesan’s image in different ways and from different perspectives, thus shaping the image into a diverse and layered one. Her husband Mao Yuanyi compiled her poetry collections chronologically and connected her transformation with various stages in his life trajectory. Anthologists, biographers, and poetic critics organized and manipulated her image in transformation to build an exclusive circle for communicating their opinions about womanhood, discussing its relevance to contemporary challenges, and promoting their own political and social agendas. Yang Wan expressed her perception of this transformation by shaping her self-image framed in the two opposite feminine spaces—the pleasure quarter and the inner chamber, and discoursed with the cultural meaning and literary tradition attached to these two different spaces. The legacy of this image-building project which took place across time and space and involved both self and others of different genders tells us not only a story of a courtesan-turned-concubine/wife and its many meaningful adaptations, but also an allegory about how the representation of a controversial image functioned in the floating textual world of late imperial China.
CONCLUSION

As this study has shown, the earliest group of courtesans to emerge from anonymity and have their poems anthologized under their names were those around the latter half of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. However, this does not mean courtesans who were both well known and well versed did not exist in the first hundred years of the Ming dynasty. Their “non-appearance” was possibly due to most of them being female members of the Yuan noble household or the official families who stayed loyal to the Jianwen Emperor (r. 1398-1402), anthologizing their works with their names recorded seemed inappropriate with the potential to bring about disasters. Moreover, their names seemed much less important than the male members who caused their misfortune, and their bodies became a site of competing moral-political discourses.

Many historical records and poetry anthologies included two daughters of the loyal minister Tie Xuan 鐵鉉 (1366-1402) who died in the Jingnan Campaign launched by Zhu Di 朱棣 (1360-1424), the purpose of which was to usurp the throne. Tie Xuan’s female relatives were then sent to the Court Entertainment Bureau (jiaofang 教坊). The two daughters would rather die than receive any guests, and they each wrote poems to express their unshakable determination. A former colleague of their father obtained their poems, felt strong compassion at their misfortune, and presented the two poems to Zhu Di, at that time the Yongle Emperor 永樂帝 (r. 1402-1424). Zhu Di was moved by the poems and released them from the entertainment quarters before marrying them to decent young scholars. The two poems were under the names of “the elder daughter of the Tie” (Tie shi zhangnǚ 鐵氏長女) and “the younger daughter of the Tie” (Tie shi cinǚ 鐵氏次女), which implicitly attributed their crystalline virtue to their family tradition established by their upright father. For the supporters of Zhu Di, the way with which he treated the daughters of his enemy showed his great mercy, according with the mandate of heaven.

In this competing discourse, the supposedly important issues such as the authenticity of the poems and the poetic voices seemed to be of no more relevance. It was not until the late Ming that poetic critics began to pay attention to and carefully examine the poems themselves. Qian Qianyi found evidence to disprove the authenticity

444 Wang Shizhen, chibei outan, 287.
445 Song Duanyi, Lizhai xianlu, 576-588.
of the poem attributed to the elder daughter, and he also raised doubts over the poetic voice of the second daughter’s poem which sounded improper for a gentry girl.\(^{446}\) However, my exclusion of these two poems and their like from this dissertation on the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans is not because of their questionable authenticity. On the contrary, the issue of questionable authenticity applies to many other courtesans with merely one or two extant verses. Ronald Egan in his study on the famous female poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–ca. 1155) and her history in China warns us of literati’s tendency to romanticize courtesans by attributing literary talent to them which could add to their lure and mystique.\(^{447}\) The poems being attributed to courtesans, although some of them may very likely have been written by their admirers, are still relevant to my research in at least two aspects. First, these men who wrote under courtesans’ names would, in most cases, try to imitate the voices and writing styles that had long been expected from courtesans to ensure the authenticity of these poems would not be questioned. Second, these poems are circulated both in and outside the courtesan coterie, transmitted during the time of their creation decades or even centuries later, and thus defined what and how courtesans should write, shaping our perceptions of courtesans’ images. But the poems by the two daughters of Tie Xuan, whether by themselves or someone else, showed us gentry women who firmly declined the courtesan’s identity, never lived a day as courtesans, and were never viewed as courtesans by others. Therefore, these two daughters of Tie Xuan and their poems were omitted from my research.

Apart from the possible censorship and political factors which may have prevented early Ming courtesans from being known for their literary talent, the scarcity and obscurity of the early Ming courtesan poets and their works was also due to the conventional courtesan culture which foregrounded courtesans’ identities first and foremost as musical entertainers. This situation changed from the mid-Ming onwards when courtesans’ poetic talent was gradually proved to be a “new currency of cultural capital”\(^{448}\) through which courtesans not only promoted themselves and raised their prices, but also found their way into the elite culture as autonomous and active participants. This vogue was led by the Ming Nanjing courtesans who were located in the heart of courtesan culture and one of the most commercialized urban centres

\(^{446}\) Qian Qianyi, Liefchao shiji xiaozhuan, 740
\(^{447}\) Egan, The Burden of Female Talent, 18.
\(^{448}\) Berg, Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China, 251.
supervising the southern and wealthiest part of the Ming empire. Their ways of living and writing on the one hand were the products of the Ming floating world featured by highly physical, social, and cultural mobility. On the other hand, they reacted in a lively way to this floating world and transformed into one of the shaping forces of the Ming cultural landscape.

Having long been an object under the male gaze and brush, the Ming Nanjing courtesans began to claim agency and subjectivity by encroaching on realms conventionally reserved for the male elite, such as painting, calligraphy, writing, and even martial arts. During the Ming-Qing transition, Nanjing once again acted as the central stage for literati and courtesans in the last decades of the Ming who wrote their own history whilst attempting to save their declining dynasty, the last Han-ruled one in Chinese imperial history. Eventually, Ming Nanjing courtesans managed to carve out a space outside the Confucian state/family analogy, turning the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter into a forum where they displayed complex androgynous images empowered by gender-crossing, and voiced their political position and moral standards resonant with the literati they admired, supported, and loved deeply. Their roles and positions in both history and literature inspire us to reponder the dynamics between the margin and centre, and between major literature and minor literature. This dissertation on Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images has revealed the possibilities and potentials which were generated from the periphery and could discourse with, wrestle with, and even subvert the centre. Moreover, research on Ming Nanjing courtesans’ writings also exemplified how the minor literature, through its adoption and adaption of the major literature, changed the meaning of major literature. As Robertson has pointed out, late imperial Chinese women’s writings could be viewed as minor literature because of their marginal status of the minority writers who “borrowed” the literary conventions established by male elite, but they also possessed the potential to bring about historical changes, which has been approved by researches on the writings by gentry women and concubines whose authorial agency respectively transformed the boudoir and the side room. Courtesans, the most marginalized group among women writers, in some sense obtained the most freedom in experimenting with a diversity of roles, ideas, images, and genres.

449 Robertson, “Literary Authorship by Late Imperial Governing-Class Chinese Women and the Emergence of a ‘Minor Literature,’” 383-386.
450 Xiaorong Li, *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China*; Fong, *Herself an Author*, 67-69.
The Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images were represented in a variety of media co-produced by courtesans themselves and the literati across generations and dynasties. Investigating the image-construction of courtesan “others” also casts light on the self-shaping of the literati. The mid-Ming Nanjing courtesans’ versatility and elegance demonstrated their male contemporaries’ reputation for experienced connoisseurship and romantic sentiment as refined lovers. The late Ming Nanjing courtesans’ passionate devotion mirrored their male contemporaries’ political loyalty. To male literati, invention of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images was part of their own image-building project which showcased their fulfilment of various roles defined by different conventions: loyal minister, filial son, reliable husband, kind father, trustful friend, passionate lover, upright scholar, and fengliu literati. Male literati not only shaped and perpetuated their own images through representing the images of courtesans with whom they associated, but also built, enhanced, and expanded male bonds through appreciating, ranking, and writing about courtesan stars who were well known to all of them. By analyzing the engagement of male elite in the construction, circulation, and reception of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images, this research also contributes to a deeper understanding of the male emotional world, including their dreams, desires, and imaginations, which further illuminated complicated interactions in gender relations.

This dissertation examined the production, circulation, and reception of the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in anthologies and individual collections, connecting them with other historical and literary sources. The first chapter examined the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in general and women’s anthologies. Anthologizing the writings by courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing was a process of these courtesans who emerged from anonymity to the effect of their talent being recognized and appreciated by the contemporary male literati.

Based on the information we can now gather, the first group of courtesans who got their full names recorded were those active during the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century in the city of Nanjing. The earliest extant anthology that firstly

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451 Ying Zhang, Confucian Image Politics, 219.
452 Similarly to what Rouzer noted in his study on Tang courtesans, the interaction between courtesan and literatus still worked as “a testing ground for social behaviour and convention” in the Ming. Rouzer, Articulated Ladies, 256. This way of male bonding continued into the early twentieth-century. Gail Hershatter’s study on the consciousness of modernity in twentieth-century Shanghai also showed “men defined themselves in relationship to each other” by sharing either celebration of courtesans or criticism towards prostitution. Hershatter, Dangerous Pleasures, 11-12.
recorded their names was a general anthology rather than a women’s anthology. This anthology entitled *Guo ya* was compiled by Gu Qilun around 1573, who referred to courtesans’ individual collections, other anthologies circulated at that time, random jottings, and flower-ranking writings for sources. Gu strategically made use of the long-standing principles for anthology-compilation, as well as the flexibility and compromise in Confucian poetics, to carve a niche for named courtesan poets and their works. His selection was widely circulated and recycled by later women anthologies, in which the increased number of selected courtesan poets and their poems enriched their literary legacy and diversified their images. Many factors participated in shaping the diverse images, such as the poetic voices of courtesan poets, the editorial principles of male compilers, and the literary conventions of different genres.

The images of Ming Nanjing courtesans include their idealized self-representations either as erudite scholars, talented literati, and gallant knights-errant, all showing intellectual equality and stalwart support for their male friends, or as secluded recluses and enlightened goddesses, both empowering themselves through spiritual pursuit and religious practice. There were also the stereotypical images of courtesans welcoming and seeing off guests with musical entertainment at feasts and longing for their patrons once separated. The diverse images again were complemented by multiple layers when presented in the well-designed frameworks of the compilers, consisting of biographical sketches, highlighting marks, various comments, and illustrations. Thus, the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in their contemporary anthologies are collaborations of both courtesan poets and male compilers. As a cultural invention, these images are transformable and recyclable, flowing beyond the border between reality and imagination, the hierarchy of texts of different genres, as well as the limits of time and space.

The second and third chapters, through comparing the two courtesans’ anthologies, *Qinglou yunyu* and *Gujin qinglou ji*, present an obvious overlap between anthologies with regard to their selection of the courtesans and their works in poetry sections, attesting to the “floating” of source materials among varied publications. However, the distinctive ways of presenting the same works from different perspectives helped shape different images and encouraged divergent interpretations, thus creating an innovative reading experience which was of the utmost importance in a highly repetitive and intensely competitive Ming printing world.
*Qinglou yunyu* provides us with complicated and multi-layered images of courtesans by stimulating discourse between the framework, consisting of *Piaojing*, old and new annotations, and various categories, and the courtesans’ writings within the framework. It also enriched the experience of reading courtesans’ images in concert with the addition of framed illustrations of Ming courtesans mostly from Nanjing. Both the literati’s viewpoint and the popular perception of courtesans were assembled into the framework which was previously scattered around among completely different texts. The stereotypical representation of courtesans in both *Piaojing* and old annotations as two opposite images, either licentious or virtuous, being judged against their appearance and manner, was challenged by the views of literati and reshaped in the compiler’s commentaries as a spectrum of courtesans’ images from the most evil and heartless ones who sucked the blood of their male clients, to the most talented and sentimental ones who incarnated the ideal of *jiaren* in the cult of *qing*.

Courtesans’ writings, most of which were by Ming Nanjing courtesans, were categorized by thematic key words selected from *Piaojing*. These poems established and developed the imagery and literary repertoire which was appropriated and recycled beyond regional and temporal realms. The thematic categories smoothed this process by providing a system for organization and an index for reference. Moreover, the framed illustrations in this anthology offered a specific viewpoint to observe courtesans’ visual images by applying eye-guiding devices and using captions, which resembled the strategies applied in the making of woodblock-printed books of the Ming dynasty. The Ming woodblock printings operated in a similar but more large-scale and complicated way. They enclosed their textual and visual images within the framework, consisting of prefaces, general principles, and postscripts, and embedded a certain perspective through which to read them by providing commentaries and illustrations.

The publishing of *Gujin qinglou ji* involved a Ming Nanjing courtesan as co-compiler and treated courtesans’ poetry more seriously as independent and self-sufficient literary productions. *Gujin qinglou ji* applied the most common editorial arrangement, being same as the individual collections and anthologies of male literati. The emphasis on genre in its categorization put value on the literary features of the selected works of courtesans and the inheritance and innovation in their literary creation through the ages, which presented the images of Ming Nanjing courtesans in the similar way to the male literati of a poetry club, sharing interest in certain poetic topics and
particular writing types. One striking feature of *Gujin qinglou ji* was its selection and adaptation of epistolary writings by courtesans in Ming dynasty Nanjing, which reflected both the freedom and the uncontrollability originating from the Ming floating world. This floating world allowed the voice of mediocre courtesans to be heard and permitted the participation of people who previously would not otherwise be included in such privileged cultural activities as anthology-compilation. On the other hand, the floating world exemplified the courtesan co-compiler’s anxiety over presenting the collective images of her group. This anxiety in turn was caused by the uncontrollability of images and writings in circulation and reusage thereafter.

The fourth chapter contains a case study of a famous Nanjing courtesan, Yang Wan in the late Ming. The case study included her images shaped under the brushes of male literati both during and after her generation, and her self-representation in her poetry collections compiled by her husband. The transformation of Yang Wan’s image from a courtesan in the pleasure quarter to a gentry woman in the inner chamber was one of the most representative in the category of “courtesan-turned-concubine/wife” since her marriage lasted for decades and her role as a family woman was fully developed. Different accounts demonstrated this image transformation in different ways and from different perspectives, thus shaping it into a diverse and layered one. Her husband, Mao Yuanyi, compiled her poetry collection chronologically and connected her transformation with the various stages of his own life. Anthologists, biographers, and poetic critics organized and manipulated her image in transformation to build an exclusive circle for communicating their opinions about womanhood, discussing its relevance to contemporary challenges, and promoting their own political and social agendas. Yang Wan expressed her perception of this transformation by shaping her self-image framed in the two contrasting feminine spaces, the pleasure quarter and the inner chamber, and discoursed with the cultural meanings and literary traditions attached to these two spaces. The legacy of this image-building project which took place across time and space and involved both self and others of different genders offered a way to observe, understand, and map the late imperial Chinese society in flux.

Ming Nanjing courtesans as a group of pioneering women writers had disappeared with the Qinhuaï pleasure quarter which, once the national hub of sensuous pleasures and battlefield for competing political-moral forces, was reduced to ruins in 1645. In the Yongzheng reign (1723-1735), the juridical category of dishonourable
persons (jian min 賤民) was abolished, thus courtesans lost their legal position in Qing China, as well as the strict training system which created their manner, talent, and aura. Prostitution still secretly existed but almost none of the women in this business could reach the standard of courtesans in the Ming dynasty who were admired by both talented gentry ladies and leading male scholars.\textsuperscript{453} The brushes of Ming Nanjing courtesans were taken over by Qing gentry ladies in the Jiangnan area who despite inheriting part of the literary legacy of the Ming courtesans, cautiously distinguished themselves from the so-called “courtesans” in the Qing and Republican periods who were mostly shallow or at best amateurs at literature and art.\textsuperscript{454}

Future study of Ming Nanjing courtesans’ images, or broadly speaking, the Ming courtesan culture centred on Nanjing, could bring in comparative perspectives which would also help to map the relationship between courtesan culture and the intellectual history in a larger context. For example, the Ming courtesan culture was also transmitted to Japan, which could be a starting point for further investigation. As Seigle traced the historical development of Japanese prostitution, she found that the Yoshiwara was modelled on the first walled pleasure quarter in Japan built by Hara Saburō in 1598 in the area of Nijō Yanagimachi (also known as Reizei Madenokōji) in Kyoto. This first walled pleasure quarter in Japan was very likely patterned on the pleasure quarters of Ming dynasty China.\textsuperscript{455} The pleasure quarters of Nanjing and Edo were similar in that their prosperity was based on the commercialization and urbanization of the two largest cities of their respective countries in pre-modern periods. Courtesans’ training in both cases focused on literature, art, and music, and their association with men of upper-class inspired new literary and artistic experiments and development. Further study comparing the images of courtesans in Nanjing and Edo being represented on the eve of modernity will reveal how gender relations were connected with the cultural innovation of each country based on lasting communication. Courtesan cultures in China and Japan, in spite of conspicuous resemblance, nevertheless generated different metaphors, symbols, and discourses under influence of differing social, cultural, and political transformations, and historical circumstances.

\textsuperscript{453} Ko, \textit{Teachers of the Inner Chambers}, 266-274. For the decline of courtesan culture in the Qing dynasty, see Ropp, “Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China,” 31-41; Ko, “The Written Word and the Bound Foot,” 95-100.

\textsuperscript{454} Mann, \textit{Precious Records}, 220.

\textsuperscript{455} Seigle, \textit{Yoshiwara}, 8.
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