

- 1  **Courtesan, Editor, and Examination Candidate:
Fashioning the Female Self in Late Ming China**
2014 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies
Philadelphia, March 27-30, 2014
Gender, Courtesans, and Self-fashioning in
Late Ming China
- 2  **New Book**
 - Daria Berg,
 - *Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China, 1580-1700*
 - (London, Routledge 2013).
- 3  **I. Introduction:
Celebrated Courtesan Xue Susu**
- 4  **1.1 Xue Susu: Bio-Data**
 - Among 'Eight Great Courtesans of the Ming era'
 - 1570-1575 born either in Suzhou 蘇州 or Jiaxing 嘉興
 - 1637-1652 Xue Susu dies
 - Lived on West Lake in Hangzhou
 - Possibly into 1640s
- 5  **1.2 Entertainer**
 - Qinhuai 秦淮: Old Nanjing's Pleasure Quarters in 1580s
 - Residence at Peach Leaf Ford
 - (Taoye du 桃葉渡)
 - Beijing 北京 in 1590s
 - Hostess of poetry parties
 - For poets, scholars, officials, military officers
 - Poetry and lute playing
 - Jiangnan 江南 1600-after 1637?
 - Susu disappears from public view
- 6  **1.3 Lover & Concubine**

7 **II. In the Male Gaze:
Artist, Amazon, Adventurer**

8 **Artist & Amazon**

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

9 **Xue Susu's Image...**

10 **III. Poet and Painter**

11 **2.1 Painter**

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

12 **Outlined Ink Orchids (1601)**

13 **Xue Susu's Self-portrait?**

- Figure painting
 - 'Boddhisatva Guanyin' 1588
 - <- 'Portrait of a Lady Playing the Flute'
 - Unusual for courtesans!
- Self- portrait?
 - Xue Susu entertained literati playing the flute
- On the surface
 - Looks like a classical painting of an elite lady
 - Reminding of Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) woman painter Guan Daosheng (1262-1319)

14 **2.2 Poet**

Xue Susu's literary oeuvre:

1. *Nanyou cao* 南遊草 (*Jottings from a Journey to the South*)

- Volume of original poetry
- Preface by Wang Zhideng 王稚登 (1535-1612)
- Probably published before 1612
- No longer extant
- Reconstructed in my new book
- Describes life in Qinhuai Pleasure Quarters

2. *Hua suo shi* 花瑣事 (*Trifles about Flowers*),

- Edited anthology of literati prose vignettes (*xiaopin* 小品)

15 **Xue Susu: Art of Self-fashioning**16 **IV. Editor**17 **Xue Susu's Edited Volume**

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

18 **Themes of *Hua suo shi***

- Vignettes about alluring beauties / flowers
- Courtesans and concubines only
 - In imperial and polygamists' households
 - No wives, no elite ladies

- Two main themes:
 - 1. Women as Commodities
 - 2. Women as Agents

19 **From Courtesan to Exam Candidate**

- Flower register game (*hua'an* 花案, *hua bang* 花榜):
 - Literati play in pleasure quarters
 - Courtesans cross-dress as exam candidates
- > new theme for male & female authors:
 - Li Yu, *Rou pu tuan* 肉蒲團, 1657
 - Ding Yaokang, *Xu Jin Ping Mei* 續金瓶梅, c. 1660
 - Ye Xiaowan 葉小紈, *Yuan yang meng* 鴛鴦夢, 1636

20 **V. Conclusion**

- Valorisation of
 - female talent and
 - androgynous traits in courtesans
- Courtesans embraced editorship as a means of self-fashioning
 - Courtesan editors preceded known gentlewomen editors perhaps by several decades
- -> New ideas
 - Birth of new beauty ideals
 - Idea of women competing in political world becomes conceivable

21 **Thank you!**