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Cover picture The walled city of Shanghai (*Shanghai xianzhi*, 1872)

CHINESE COURTESANS IN LATE QING AND EARLY REPUBLICAN SHANGHAI (1849–1925)

 *Christian Henriot*

For almost a century, the world of prostitution in Shanghai was dominated by a particular group, the courtesans.¹ This term actually refers to several originally distinct categories.² The evolution of this group and of all the other types of prostitutes reflects the profound transformations of Chinese society, especially in Shanghai from the mid-nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. To encapsulate these changes in a few words, a status-dominated society was increasingly replaced by a money-dominated society. The growing commercialization of the local economy combined with the restructuring of the various social strata—in particular the emergence of middle-class urbanites—caused a general decline in the role and status of courtesans. It generated the development of more diversified forms of prostitution, even if they all became more homogenous in their function: providing sexual services. In this paper, I shall focus on the world of Chinese courtesans from 1849 to the 1920s. My choice is based on two considerations: first, sources on this group are more numerous than those on ordinary prostitutes; second, courtesans represented a major dimension of Chinese sexual culture. I shall explore the reasons for their decline and assimilation into the mainstream of prostitution and provide a preliminary sociological analysis of this group.³

Chinese society was more rigidly stratified in the 1850s than it would be in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was dominated by a small stratum of literati (*shenshi* 紳士) who possessed knowledge, power, and, although they shared this with merchants, money.⁴ This group was able to reproduce itself and to preserve its collective power over centuries.⁵ Above all, literati enjoyed a status, a prestige and privileges that no other social group either shared or equalled. Finally, they were those who shaped Chinese culture and, in the present case, provided the dominant social tonality. In Shanghai, the latter changed rapidly—more rapidly than anywhere

¹ I would like to thank *East Asian History's* three anonymous reviewers for their rich and stimulating comments and suggestions and to acknowledge their contribution to the revision of an earlier draft of this paper. I am solely responsible for the final errors of fact and interpretation that may remain in the text.

² Although historically different from courtesans in the West, I prefer to use this term to designate the women who formed the upper strata of the 'world of flowers', rather than the usual 'sing-song girl'. By the time this expression became widespread, sing-song girls had indeed become common prostitutes. Chinese courtesans in the nineteenth century deserve a less biased terminology.

³ This paper is based on my larger study of Shanghai prostitution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially on the two chapters devoted to courtesans, "Les courtisanes du XIX^e au XX^e siècle: la fin d'un monde" and "Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes" in Christian Henriot, "La prostitution à Shanghai aux XIX^e–XX^e siècles (1849–1958)," Thèse d'Etat (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1992), 3 vols, pp.297–347 and 348–421 (to be published as *Belles de Shanghai. Prostitution et sexualité en Chine [1849-1949]* [Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1995]).

⁴ Etienne Balazs, *La bureaucratie céleste* (Paris: Gallimard [Collection NRF], 1968).

⁵ Cf. the reference works of Ho Ping-ti, *The ladder of success in imperial China*. /OVER

The ladder of success in imperial China. Aspects of social mobility, 1368–1911 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), and Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese gentry* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1962).

⁶ Leung Yüen-sang, *The Shanghai Taotai: linkage man in a changing society, 1843–1890* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p.125.

⁷ William T. Rowe, *Hankow: commerce and society in a Chinese city, 1796–1889* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984); idem, *Hankow: conflict and community in a Chinese city, 1796–1895* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁸ Leung Yüen-sang, *Shanghai Taotai*, p.162. See also Mark Elvin, “The gentry democracy in Shanghai, 1905–1914,” PhD diss. (Cambridge University, 1967).

⁹ I use here the word ‘commercialization’ to qualify the continuing and accelerating process that overwhelmed Shanghai’s economy and society from 1849 to 1949 and submitted all activities to the direct rule of money and supply and demand. The range of leisure activities, in which I include prostitution, greatly expanded while becoming more volatile and business-oriented. I cannot set forth here how the whole realm of prostitution was affected and transformed by this process. I can only refer the reader to my larger study of prostitution (*ride supra*).

Figure 1

The walled city of Shanghai (source: Shanghai xianzhi, 1872)

1. Shanghai xian magistrate’s yamen;
2. Temple of the city god (Chenghuang-miao);
3. Western garden;
4. School;
5. Examination hall;
6. Temple of the god of war;
7. Literati institute;
8. Temple of the spirit of fortune;
9. Small training ground;
10. Circuit intendant’s yamen;
11. Temple of the spirit of fire;
12. Tongdetang (charitable institution);
13. Yingyu-tang (orphan house);
14. Tongrentang (charitable institution);
15. Red bridge;
16. West granary bridge;
17. Garrison commander’s residence;
18. Temple of Guan De;
19. North gate;
20. Tianma temple;
21. Chinese internal customs;
22. Small east gate;
23. Great east gate;
24. Great south gate;
25. Small south gate

in China—as a result of its opening to the outside world and its modernization and because this evolution found its translation in the world of prostitution, especially among the courtesans.

Well before 1840, Shanghai was a commercial port where merchants formed the largest group of local notables. Nevertheless, there was also a small community of literati who worked in the various official administrations established in the walled city or had left the surrounding smaller towns in search of a more urban environment. They set the tone of local culture and served as a point of reference for the other groups, especially the wealthy merchants who were eager to associate themselves with this group.⁶ William Rowe’s work on Hankou convincingly shows that the two groups were linked in many ways. They shared the same lifestyle, the same social *habitus* and the same culture.⁷ In Shanghai at the end of the nineteenth century, the two groups had begun to melt into an undifferentiated urban élite.⁸

More generally, Shanghai underwent tremendous social transformations. As it became opened to foreign trade and integration into the world market, the city attracted people from all over China, especially from the surrounding provinces and Guangdong. The population—essentially male—increased markedly over time, with large and sudden influxes of refugees in times of trouble. The Taiping rebellion thus pushed hundreds of thousands of new residents to Shanghai in the early 1860s. These demographic changes were paralleled by a diversification and expansion of economic activities that

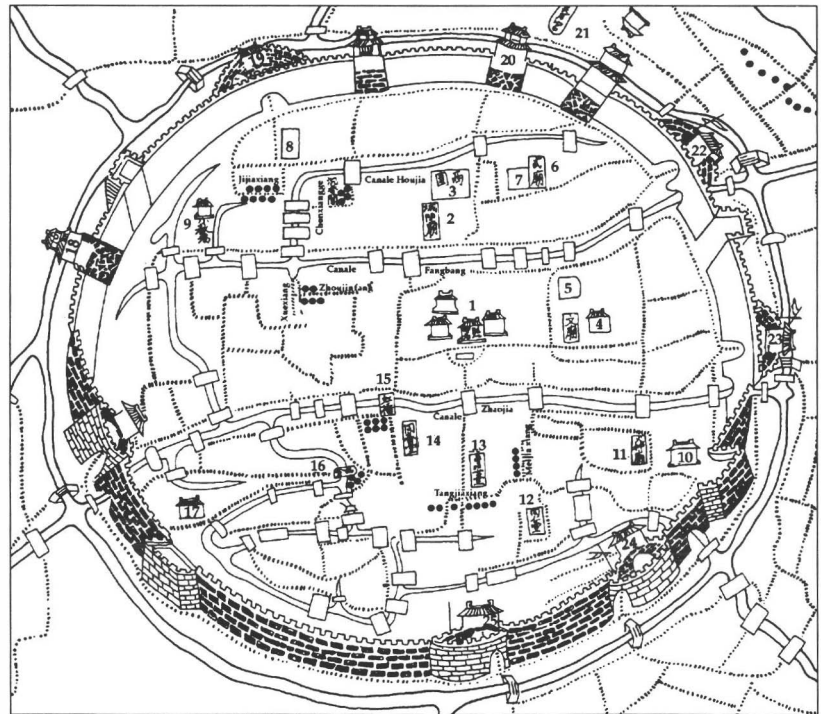
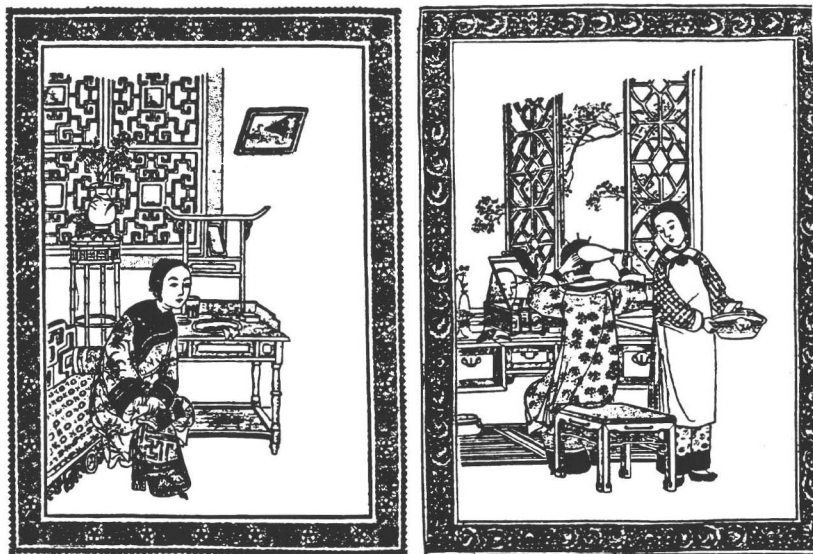


Figure 2

Scenes from the daily life of a courtesan (source: Haisheng qinglou tuji, 4 vols [Shanghai: Yingzhou Xinzui Shuwu, 1892])



offered new opportunities to urban residents and contributed to the emergence of middle-class urbanites in search of an identity. Their relative affluence allowed them to imitate the way of life of the upper classes, though in a coarser and more materialistic manner. This evolution was reinforced by the vigorous trend toward consumerism—a process I call commercialization—in the various aspects of life, including leisure.⁹

Chinese courtesans belong to a long enduring tradition of educated, sometimes learned courtesans such as those described in the literary works of the Song (960–1279) or Ming (1368–1644) dynasties.¹⁰ Chinese literati have often used this topic—the beautiful lady and the talented scholar (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人)—in their writings to discuss much wider issues than the fate of two individuals. In the nineteenth century, when novels became a privileged medium for the denunciation of political and social evils, Chinese writers often set the stage of their stories among courtesans.¹¹ Most of these texts tend to give a positive image of courtesans as witty ladies with great conversational skills and sufficient talent to compete with literati in improvising poetry, writing calligraphy, etc.¹²

This representation of courtesans has been reproduced in the travel accounts of Westerners with even greater enthusiasm and exaggeration:

One should not confuse the learned courtesans of China with those who publicly display their smiles ... and run after voluptuous pleasure ... For a girl to be admitted into the society of courtesans ... , she must distinguish herself ... by her beauty, the sensitivity and scope of her spirit; she has to know vocal music, dance, flute and guitar, history and philosophy, ... she should be able

¹⁰ Robert des Rotours, *Courtisanes à la fin des T'angentre circa 789 et le 8 janvier 881: Pei-li tche (Anecdotes du quartier du Nord) par Souen K'i* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968); Howard S. Levy, "Record of the gay quarters," *Orient/West* 8.5 (Sept.–Oct. 1963): 121–8; 8.6 (Nov.–Dec. 1963): 115–22; 9.1 (Jan.–Feb. 1964): 103–10; "T'ang women of pleasure," *Sinologica* 8.2 (1965): 89–113; "The Gay Quarters of Ch'ang-an," *Orient/West* 7.9 (Sept. 1962): 93–105; Howard Levy, trans., *A feast of mist and flowers: the gay quarters of Nanking at the end of the Ming* (Yokohama, 1966); idem, trans., *Banqiao zaji* [Miscellaneous notes from the wooden bridge] (1697; new ed., Yokohama, 1966); idem, trans., *The illusory flame* (Tokyo: Kenkyōsha, 1962); Arthur Waley, "The Green Bower collection" (1957), in *The Secret History of the Mongols and other pieces* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), pp.89–107.

¹¹ See Catherine Vance Yeh, "Zeng Pu's 'Niehai hua' as a political novel—a world genre in a Chinese form," PhD diss. (Harvard University, 1990).

¹² Jean Duval, "Les aventures révélatrices d'un dandy amoureux: Etude d'un roman en dialecte Wu de la fin de l'époque Qing, *La Tortue à Neuf queues*, de Zhang Chunfan," PhD diss. (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, Paris, 1975); Mu zhen shan ren, *Qinglou meng* [The dream of the green chamber (House of courtesans)] (1878–84?; reprint ed., Hengyang: Yuelu Shushe, 1988); Han Bangqing, *Haisang hua lie-zhuan* [Biographies of flowers in the sea] (1892; reprint ed., Taipei: Wenhua Tushu Gongsi, 1984); Chi xian shu shi shi, *Haisang fanhua meng. San ji* [Extravagant dreams in Shanghai. Three volumes] (n.p.: Jinbu Shuju, 1916); Chi xian shu shi shi, *Xu haisang fanhua meng. san ji* [A sequel to *Extravagant dreams in Shanghai*] (n.p., n.pub., n.d). This is a field I have only begun to explore in my own work; it deserves a study in itself. For a penetrating view see Catherine Vance Yeh, "How to become Shanghai: courtesan handbooks and the making of the new citizen," paper presented at the annual conference of the British Association of Chinese Studies, Oxford, Sept. 1993.

¹³ Gustaaf Schlegel, "Préface," *Le Vendeur d'huile qui seul possède la Reine-de-beauté, ou Splendeur et misères des courtisanes chinoises* (Paris/Leyden: Brill et Maison-neuve, 1877), pp.ix-x.

¹⁴ Maurice Jametel, *La Chine inconnue* (Paris: Imprimerie de l'Art, 1884); Gustaaf Schlegel, *Histoire de la prostitution en Chine* (Rouen, 1880). Charles Ernest Martin, "Etude sur la prostitution en Chine," *Union médicale*, 2^e sér., T.IX, n° 25 (1872), pp.25, 401-8; n° 26, pp.29, 465-74; Maxime Durand-Fardel, "La prostitution et la condition des femmes en Chine," *Union médicale*, 3^e sér., T.XXI, n° 60 (1876), pp.68, 810; n° 64, pp.73, 869; n° 67, pp.905-6; n° 73, pp.84, 993.

¹⁵ Gail Hershatter, "The hierarchy of Shanghai prostitution, 1870-1949," *Modern China* 15.4 (Oct. 1989): 463-98.

¹⁶ Rowe, *Hankow. conflict and community*, p. 92.

¹⁷ Obviously sex and money have always been a part of the courtesan-patron relationship. In the Chinese tradition, however, this exchange was mediated through an elaborate and formal code to avoid the direct and degrading sex-for-money relationship common in the West. Increasingly from the last decades of the nineteenth century, client-consumers came to expect sexual favours for their money.

to write all the characters of the Tao-te-king ... she then becomes a free woman; she is exempted of the particular duties of her sex.¹³

Such a biased perception is to be found in several similar testimonies of that period.¹⁴

In the 'world of flowers', two groups, the *shuyu* 書寓 and the *changsan* 長三, formed the apex of what a historian might call the 'hierarchy of prostitution'. Actually, the very notion of hierarchy is not fully appropriate.¹⁵ The organization of prostitution in the nineteenth century only partially reflected the social hierarchy; various groups were overlapping, and there was a great deal of mobility and recomposition within the ranks of prostitutes during that period. Although I do not share the idea that specific groups of prostitutes corresponded to each social group present in the city, there were undoubtedly different layers of prostitutes to serve the needs of the population.¹⁶

Members of the élites did not patronize the same places as the ordinary city-dwellers and the courtesans had no relations with their sisters working in the opium dens or in the lower brothel houses. This stratification was altered by the emergence of new social groups and their assimilation into the privileged strata. Less educated than the literati or the wealthy merchants, they were nevertheless eager to acquire the appurtenances of social distinction. Furthermore, they looked for the kind of easy sexual gratification that the courtesans did not necessarily provide. Courtesans had to adapt to the demand from this new and larger market. This change in behaviour and expectations brought with it the fading-away of a form of male entertainment that had become obsolete.¹⁷ Whereas sex continued to be a marketable commodity in other forms, the kind of female companionship courtesans used to provide did not.

Courtesans and Prostitutes: the Change of Status

¹⁸ On the distribution of prostitution in nineteenth-century Shanghai see my chapter "La prostitution dans l'espace urbain," especially "L'espace prostitutionnel au XIX^e siècle" in Christian Henriot, "La prostitution à Shanghai," pp.705-23.

¹⁹ Wang Tao, *Songbin suobua* [Idle talk on the riverside] (Shanghai: n. pub., n.d.), p.202; Tang Weikang, "Shili yangchang de changji" [The prostitutes of the 'foreigners' district], in Tang Weikang et al., *Shanghai yisbi* [Shanghai anecdotes] (Shanghai: Wenhua Chubanshe, 1987), p.265.

²⁰ In his latest book Wang Tao also uses the term *cichang* (poetry hall) to designate the residence of the courtesans, but I have not come across this expression in any other source.

Before 1821, according to Chinese sources, all activities related to prostitution took place on boats moored along the Huangpu river. Afterward, the most sophisticated group of prostitutes, the courtesans, began to settle in the walled city.¹⁸ As there remain hardly any data on this move, it is not possible to give particular explanations of this process. The sources I have used do not mention for this period any specific name to designate the courtesans. The term *shuyu* is said to have appeared only in 1851 in Shanghai, following its use by a famous courtesan, Zhu Sulan 朱素蘭. It did not become widespread, however, until 1860 when the courtesans established their predominance over the world of prostitution.¹⁹

The word *shuyu* refers to the apartment of the courtesan, the place where stories are told or read.²⁰ Indeed, the primary function of the courtesans was to entertain their customers with stories, music, and opera. They were *stricto sensu* story-tellers. Progressively, the name of the place became synonym-

ous with the girls themselves. Obviously, 1851 is a fictitious date. Shanghai *shuyu* were heirs to the long tradition of courtesans so prevalent in the cities of Jiangnan for centuries. More specifically, they had their source in Suzhou, the main commercial metropolis of the Lower Yangzi area before 1821, a place famous nationwide for the beauty of its women and its pleasure quarters.²¹

Shuyu defined themselves as artists whose vocation was to entertain their customers, either at home for banquets and receptions, in the city's traditional places of entertainment (theatres, *shuchang* 書場, teahouses, restaurants), or in their own apartments. In principle, they did not prostitute themselves: "they sell their art, not their body."²² Indeed, it was impossible to buy them or even obtain their favors just by giving money or gifts. They provided company at banquets, served wine and distracted customers with their songs.²³ This rule was not absolute, but, as with Japanese geisha in the same period, a customer had to court the courtesan with whom he wished to establish an intimate relationship. According to rare surviving testimonies, the *shuyu* were quite independent and had the power to select their close customers.

Wang Tao 王韜, famous as one of the earliest Chinese reformers,²⁴ less so as an assiduous customer of *shuyu* houses, reports that when a customer invited courtesans of an inferior rank—for example *changsan*—the *shuyu* immediately set themselves apart in order to avoid mixing with the others. If the customer invited the *changsan* to sit next to him, the *shuyu* would leave

the table.²⁵ Although Wang Tao's text is difficult to date, he seems to be referring to the 1860s.²⁶ We can infer from this that at that time there were at least two categories of courtesans, one of which (*shuyu*) was eager to be distinguished from girls they considered as prostitutes. Does this reflect an actual difference and should it be interpreted as the reaction of a group in decline? I shall come back to this question below when I deal with the *changsan*. Let us note here that *shuyu* did not consider themselves common prostitutes. The *changsan* later adopted the same discriminatory attitude toward the next lower ranking category of prostitutes, the *yao'er* 妖兒. This indicates that elite customers patronized various groups of courtesans and prostit-

²¹ On the role of Suzhou before the Taiping rebellion see Lynda C. Johnson, "The decline of Soochow and rise of Shanghai: a study in the economic morphology of urban change, 1756–1894," PhD diss. (University of California, Santa Cruz, 1986).

²² 'Mai yi bu mai shen' or 'mai zui [mouth] bu mai shen'.

²³ Wang Tao, *Songbin suobua*, p.202 .

²⁴ Paul Cohen, *Between tradition and modernity. Wang Tao and reform in late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974). Wang Tao's works were especially useful, as I explain in footnote 26, for their depiction of the world of courtesans in the nineteenth century. Wang is famous for his writings about reforms in China. This aspect has been studied by Paul Cohen who does not, however, deal with Wang Tao's private life. Wang was a regular customer of courtesans throughout his life. This is not something exceptional. His diary reveals that he often went along with friends to enjoy the pleasures of an evening in a *shuyu*'s place. In a letter to a friend, he writes at sixty: "All my life I have been rather a Bohemian, fond of girls and wine, and even to-day I am always in the garden and other resorts here in Shanghai. This has always seemed to me a perfectly normal recreation and not the sort of thing a man has to hide from other people." Cohen, *Between tradition and modernity*, pp.8, 13–15, 47, 181, 293.

²⁵ Yu Baosheng [pseudo. of Wang Tao], *Haizou yeyou fulu* [Supplement to *The tale of a libertine at the seaside*] (Shanghai: Hanwen Yuanshushi, 1929), vol.1, p.7; Wang Tao, *Songbin suobua*, p.201.

²⁶ I have made extensive use of Wang Tao's works for this period, especially Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou lu* [The tale of a libertine at the seaside] (1870; reprint ed., Shanghai: Hanwen Yuanshushi, 1929); idem, *Haizou yeyou fulu*; idem, *Haizou yeyou yulu* [A sequel to *The tale of a libertine at the seaside*] (Shanghai: Hanwen Yuanshushi, 1929); idem, *Huaguo jutuan* [A chat about the (theatre of the) realm of flowers] (1878; reprint ed., Shanghai: Hanwen Yuanshushi, 1929). I was not able to find an original edition of Wang Tao's books, which could have helped me to date them more precisely. The 1929 edition gave no indication of the time of publication. Therefore, I systematically noted down all the dates that appeared in the text itself. It is an approximation, /OVER

Figure 3

Scene of sacrifice and prostration before the altar of the patron of prostitutes (Haishang qinglou tuji)



/but it does provide an idea of the period covered by each volume. The first volume of *Haizou yeyou* only mentions the period 1846 to 1853. The second, *fulu*, offers a larger scope, covering the years 1853 to 1878, although most citations refer to 1860 and 1861. The last volume, *yulu*, covers the years 1864–75. *Huaguo jutan* covers the period 1860–76. This corresponds fairly well to what is known of Wang Tao's life.

²⁷ Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou fulu*, vol.1, p.5.

utes. The dividing line between the various categories was not so precise and became even less so over time.

The *shuyu* formed a small community, even if there exist no statistical data. Wang Tao cites the names of around fifty famous girls.²⁷ Their maximum number can be estimated to be 200–300 persons in the middle of the nineteenth century and 400 around 1896.²⁸ Strict rules actually governed access to the profession. All prospective and active *shuyu* had to meet a certain number of qualifications that were examined once a year. A kind of festival used to take place in the seventh lunar month at the East gate where all the male and female story-tellers of the city met. Each person had to sing

Figure 4

Performance by a celebrated elderly courtesan (Dianshizhai huabao, 44 vols [Shanghai, 1884–98; reprint ed., Guangzhou, Guangzhou Renmin Chubanshe, 1983])



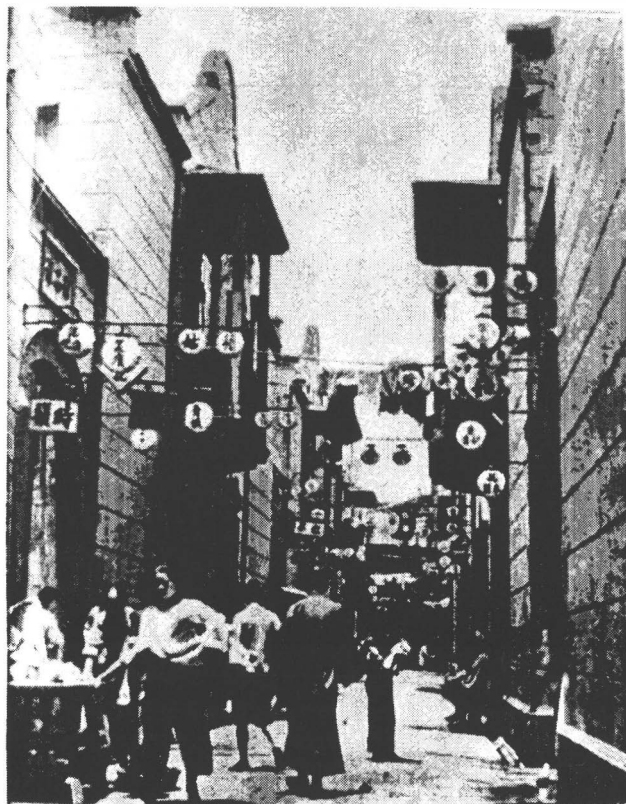
a melody and perform a piece of opera. There could be no repetition. Only the last one to sing had to repeat the same melody and piece of opera the first participant had played. This was meant to guarantee the scope of each participant's repertoire. Those who did not take part in the festival or who were unable to meet these standards were not allowed to appear in the *shuchang*, the very place where the *shuyu* used to perform and attract customers.²⁹ With the passing of time, the rules became less strict. Two categories were introduced: those who could both sing and perform opera, and those who could only sing. Nevertheless, as long as it existed, the festival had a malthusian role aimed at limiting the number of courtesans.³⁰

The courtesans received their training from musicians in their childhood. As masters of musical knowledge, professional musicians actually also had a degree of control over the entry into the profession. To open a *shuyu* house, a substantial sum of 30 taels had to be paid to the musicians' guild (*gongsuo* 公所). This practice seems to have disappeared in the 1870s–1880s.³¹ Later, as courtesans opted for the Peking opera instead of *kunqu* 昆曲, or even gave up singing altogether to play the *pipa* 琵琶, the role of musicians declined. From these insights, the *shuyu* appear to have been closer to story-tellers—Wang Tao compares them to the women who told *tanci* 彈詞 in the past³²—than to prostitutes. They were entertainment ladies whom customers addressed with the respectful term of *xiansheng* 先生 (sir). Within their own community, this was a sign of social recognition. The lower category of *changsan* was called *jiaosbu* 校書, a less distinguished term, but one that also expressed respect.³³

The development of other categories of courtesans cannot be dated with certainty. It appears that from the beginning, say by the 1820s, there were probably one or several groups of sexually more accessible courtesans than the so-called *shuyu*. They formed a community in which the *shuyu* emerged as *primus inter pares*. The other groups split up, creating various categories of courtesans of a lower rank. Besides the *shuyu*, Chinese sources often mention other categories of courtesans who are designated by the amount of money that had to be paid for their services. This is the case for the *chang-*

Figure 5

View of a prostitution lilong (source: Du Shipin, ed., Shanghai shi daguan [Shanghai: Zhongguo Tushu Zazhi Gongsi, 1948])



/See my chapter "Les courtisanes du XIX^e au XX^e siècle: la fin d'un monde," especially "Les *shuchang*: un espace intermédiaire," in Christian Henriot, "La prostitution à Shanghai," pp.332–6.

³⁰ Wang Tao, *Songbinsuobua*, p.202.

³¹ Ibid. From all the sources I have used for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have been unable to identify any guild related to the courtesans. Wang Tao is the only one to mention the musicians' guild and to describe the examination process. Although access to and exploitation of local *yamen* archives may contradict this assertion, I think that there never existed a guild for courtesans or their madams.

³² Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou fulu*, vol.2, p.1.

³³ Wang Tao, *Songbinsuobua*, p.201.

²⁸ "Demi-monde of Shanghai," *China Medical Journal* 37.9 (1923): 783; Tang Weikang, "Shili yangchang de changji," p.266.

²⁹ Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou fulu*, vol.1, p.7. The *shuchang* were a kind of 'music-hall' where the *shuyu* performed and where they often had their first contact with new customers.

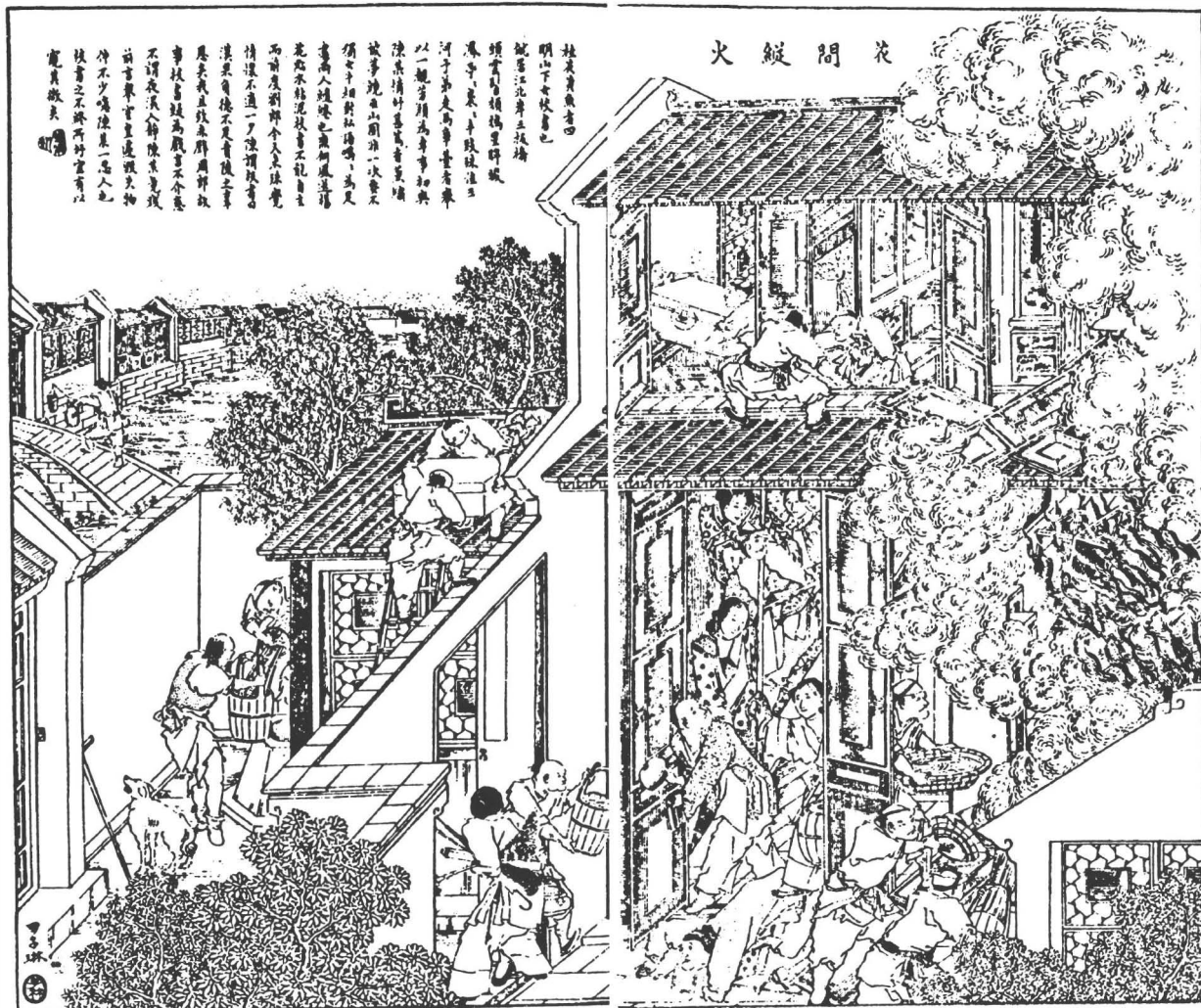


Figure 6
Fire breaks out in a prostitution house (Dianshizhai huabao)

³⁴ *Shanghai zhinan* (Guide to Shanghai: a Chinese directory of the port) (1909: reprint ed., Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1919), vol. 5, p. 18.

san, whose name referred to the 'long three', a piece in Chinese *majiang* 麻將. It meant three yuan for an invitation outside (*tangchai* 堂差) and three yuan to spend the night.³⁴ There were also *er'er* 二二 (double-two), *ersan* 二三 (two-three) and *yao'er* (one-two). The first two categories were ephemeral ones and were assimilated later into either the *changsans* or the *yao'eras* only these groups remained. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the various groups progressively merged together in a 'downward movement' that led to the greater 'sexualization' of the courtesans. It is difficult to document this process as there remain no sources for the years 1821–1850, that could serve as a reference period, and hardly any material on the following period, 1851–1875, that witnessed the basic transformation of the prostitution landscape.

Terminology can provide a partial answer. In the oldest texts—those of

Wang Tao—the *changsan* were called *changsan shuyu*, which tends to indicate that they belonged to the same community, but that they were characterized by a greater accessibility and a fixed tariff that did not exist among the ‘genuine’ *shuyu*. This is also true for the *yao'er* who were named *pipa jiaosbu*, which means they formed a category of *changsan* who could play the *pipa*, but did not qualify in singing and opera.³⁵ What can we infer from this? Elite customers who patronized the *shuyu* did appreciate their musical and conversational talents, but they also expected or hoped for sexual gratification, even if they had to go through a subtle game of seduction and courtship to get such a reward. They therefore had to be patient and, given the limited number of girls available, success was not guaranteed to all. This would explain why there appeared quite early other categories who offered comparable artistic qualities while being more accessible. The social and economic evolution of Shanghai, especially the side-effects of the Taiping rebellion, contributed to an acceleration in this process.

In the beginning of the 1860s, Shanghai received a large influx of population from the various surrounding cities affected by the rebellion, in particular from Suzhou.³⁶ Among these were well-off families whose male members belonged to the educated classes, both gentry and merchants. Many such refugees, however, did not have a high level of education and expressed an interest in courtesans who were not as demanding as the *shuyu*, while having a certain prestige. This transformation can also be explained in economic terms: the large influx of population increased the demand for courtesans, while their supply was limited. Wang Tao reports that the troubles caused by the Taiping forced many women out of good families (*liangjia* 良家) into houses of courtesans and prostitutes.³⁷ The women who entered the trade had not received the same training as the *shuyu*, the more so as many were forced into the profession by circumstances.

Another source records that by the time they migrated to the foreign settlements, especially after 1865 when they moved *en masse*, the *changsan* formally abolished the rule of the ‘double-three’ to adopt the same practice as the *shuyu*, although they remained more accessible than the latter.³⁸ The actual downgrading of the *shuyu*, even if it meant a gain in respectability for their rivals, the *changsan*, represented the first step down the ladder of glory. In the 1860s, the distinction between *shuyu* and *changsan* still corresponded to an actual difference in the social status and roles of the two groups. After 1875, there was a downward trend that resulted in a *de facto* fusion and, even if the term *shuyu* was still in use, it was losing more and more any real content.³⁹ There actually remained only one group of courtesans, the *changsan*, whose numbers increased tremendously.⁴⁰ From 500 women by 1875, it had grown to 1281 around 1918, according to various sources.⁴¹ While this group was able to maintain its name and status well into the 1920s, its members progressively became high-class prostitutes. Although no precise date can be given for this transformation, it seems that the process of ‘sexualization’ of courtesans accelerated during World War I and was completed by the early 1920s.⁴²

³⁵ *Jiaosbu* was another term to designate the *changsan*.

³⁶ Leung Yüen-sang, *Shanghai Taotai*, p.153.

³⁷ Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou fulu*, vol.2, p.1; see also *SB*, 5/5/1872.

³⁸ “Demi-monde of Shanghai,” p.785.

³⁹ Wang Jimen, *Shanghai liusbi nian lai buajie shi* [Sixty years of Shanghai’s flowery world] (Shanghai, Shixin Shuju, 1922), p.6.

⁴⁰ Fortuitous events—like the invasion of South Manchuria by the Japanese in 1905 and the expulsion of courtesans by the new authorities—contributed to an increase in the number of courtesans as the women moved southward to China’s various coastal cities (*Chinese Recorder*, 5 June 1905, pp.307–8).

⁴¹ “Demi-monde of Shanghai,” *Cbina Medical Journal* 37.9 (1923): 784; *Shanghai lanyou zhinan* [A sightseeing guide of Shanghai] (Shanghai: Zhonghua Tushu Jicheng Gongsi, 1923), p.1; *Lao Shanghai* [Old Shanghai] (Shanghai: n. pub., n.d.), p. 122; Wang Jimen, *Shanghai liusbi nian lai buajie shi*, pp.186–214. See also Tang Weikang, “Shili yangchang de changji,” p.264, and Xie Wuyi, “Minchu Shanghai changji yi pie [A glance at prostitution in Shanghai in the early republican period] in *Jiu Shanghai de yan du chang* [Prostitution, gambling and opium in old Shanghai], Shanghai Shi Wenshiguan Bian (Shanghai: Baijia Chubanshe, 1988), pp.172–3.

⁴² By the end of the period of prohibition of prostitution between 1920 and 1925, the Shanghai Municipal Council resuscitated the term *shuyu* to avoid a loss of face when it allowed so-called *bona fide* courtesans to operate legally. The name endured until the Sino-Japanese war. Nevertheless, all that remained behind the prestigious name was the sex trade.

Figure 7

Wooden placards displaying courtesans' names
(Private collection, source unknown)



⁴³ As a genre, it deserves the attention of historians. It is, however, a questionable source for those in search of 'hard data'. My own use of Wang Tao's writings show the limits of sources like this that require a careful preliminary critique. Cf. Waley, "Green Bower collection," or des Rotours, *Courtesanes à la fin des Tang*. Both are translations of collections of courtesan biographies, of the Yuan (1272–1368) and Tang (618–907) periods respectively.

A Portrait of Shanghai Courtesans

For the nineteenth century, I have found no archival sources that would allow me to draw with precision a sociological portrait of courtesans. Documentation is more generous for the following century, but it is relevant for that period only and it is not applicable to the past. I have been forced to rely on very fragmentary sources, especially the 'biographies' of courtesans written by literati such as Wang Tao in the nineteenth century or Wang Jimen in the 1920s. Rather than being genuine biographies, the literati actually recorded their personal reminiscences of encounters with courtesans, often describing their character, appearance, talents and skills or a particular episode of their life. It is an old literary genre in China, which is hardly useful to the social historian.⁴³ The elements provided in these biographies are unsystematic and usually very sketchy. They reflect mainly the subjectivity of their authors and, more fundamentally, the superficiality of the relations the courtesans actually had with their customers. In fact, these biographies most frequently do not do more than relate an event the author heard of at the very time he himself patronized the courtesan concerned or, more generally, the rumours and anecdotes widespread among the community of courtesans.

Given these reservations concerning the quality and nature of the sources used, it is possible, nevertheless, to draw a reliable profile of the courtesans and to question some of the myths attached to them. Who were the courtesans in the nineteenth century? Once again, I am indebted to Wang

The decline in the status of courtesans was part of a larger process of the growing commercialization of prostitution and leisure activities in Shanghai. These aspects are beyond the scope of this paper. The social transformation induced by the growth of population, the increasing prosperity, the emancipation of women, and the fading away of the predominantly literati élites were accompanied by a subtle change in attitudes towards courtesans and in the expectations of customers. While there remained social notables interested in the charms of the 'genuine' courtesans with whom sex was secondary to courtship and companionship, the market—newly affluent people—dictated a trend that over fifty years brought about the demise of this elaborate way of life and robbed the courtesans of their specificity in the world of commercial sex. Other forms of entertainers, especially taxi-dancers, took over to provide the kind of emotional satisfaction Chinese males—élite and non-élite—were in search of.

Tao for most of the documentary evidence I have been able to collect. I have relied mainly on the first two books he wrote on this topic, *Haizou yeyou lu* (The tale of a libertine at the seaside) and *Huaguo jutun* (A chat about the [theatre of the] realm of flowers).⁴⁴ These are also collections of reminiscences focussed on Shanghai courtesans. The author mentions altogether 155 women he personally met or patronized to varying degrees. I have systematically analyzed the content of these memoirs in order to extract all the relevant elements that could identify the courtesans. The harvest, in terms of concrete and precise information, is not very abundant. What does it say?

Originally, there were several groups of courtesans formed on the basis

⁴⁴ Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou lu*; *Haizou yeyou fulu*; *Haizou yeyou yulu*; *Huaguo jutun*.

Figure 8

A meal in the the apartment of a courtesan (Dianshizhai huabao)



⁴⁵ Following its opening to foreign trade, Shanghai received a large influx of population from different parts of China, principally men in search of jobs or trade opportunities. Not all of them succeeded in their ambitions. Local authorities did not have the power to monitor these rapid changes, and Shanghai became a sort of urban 'new frontier' or even 'far west'.

⁴⁶ Wang Jimen, *Shanghai liushi nian lai buajie shi*, p. 9. The provincial origin of the *changsan*, heirs to the *shuyu*, in the years 1918–22 is as follows: in Jiangsu, the main centres were Suzhou, Changzhou, Songjiang and, to a lesser degree, Zhenjiang and Jiangning; in Zhejiang, there were Ningbo, Hangzhou and Jiaxing.

⁴⁷ There are varying definitions of Jiangnan and Jiangbei. In my work and in this paper I have adopted a strictly geographical one—i.e. southern and northern Jiangsu—although I am aware it is defective. For a discussion of this issue see Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese ethnicity. Subei people in Shanghai, 1850–1980* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Lynda C. Johnson et al., eds, *Cities of Jiangnan in imperial China* (New

of their regional origin. According to Wang Tao, in order of quality, there were courtesans from Suzhou, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Ningbo, Huzhou, Hubei and Jiangxi. The diversity of provincial origins is doubtless a reflection of the heterogeneity of Shanghai's population up to the 1870s.⁴⁵ Each regional community had its own group of courtesans. Later on, even if this heterogeneity remained, the Jiangsu-Zhejiang community increased much more rapidly than the other provincial groups, which became small minorities. Most of the regional groups of courtesans disappeared to the advantage of those originating from Jiangsu and, secondarily, from Zhejiang.⁴⁶

In his memoirs, Wang Tao mentions the geographical origin of 106 courtesans. It is not surprising to find here a key element of the identity of an individual in China. Wang is able to give for most of the women the name of their exact place of birth, usually a village, which makes it paradoxically difficult for the historian to identify these places. My own incomplete reconstruction shows that fifty-four courtesans were born in Jiangsu. Among them, sixteen came from the Suzhou area, ten from other parts of Jiangnan and eight from Jiangbei (half of them from Yangzhou).⁴⁷ Eight of them came from Zhejiang. The others (seven) originated in various parts of China (Guangdong, Hunan, Hubei, South Shandong). Thirteen came from villages I was unable to locate. I make the hypothesis that these villages were located in nearby provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang), otherwise Wang Tao would have noted the name of the province.

These figures have no statistical value, but they highlight the well-known phenomenon of the domination of Jiangsu women, noted by all the observers of the time across the world of courtesans. The most numerous group, those from Suzhou, even ended up in supplanting all its rivals and in dominating the *shuyu* group. Even the courtesans issuing from other regions of China adopted the Suzhou dialect whose softness to the ear was said to have been a key element in its success.⁴⁸ In all Chinese cities, the world of prostitution was divided into various strata. Quite systematically, Jiangnan women formed the core of the upper strata or dominated it.⁴⁹ In Shanghai, the only 'foreign' group of courtesans that remained were the Cantonese, that is, three or four houses near Nanking Road around 1890. They later moved northward to Hongkou where the vast majority of the Cantonese population was concentrated.⁵⁰

The domination of Jiangsu women remained unchallenged well into the twentieth century. It even tended to increase. An author writing in the early twenties noted that the *shuyu* group was composed exclusively of women originating from Suzhou.⁵¹ Such a statement is corroborated by a police report on the applications of courtesans to set up shop in the French Settlement in 1923.⁵² Eighty-two percent of these women came from Suzhou (see Table 1). If we add this figure to those originating from Shanghai, Wuxi and Changzhou, the proportion of Jiangnan natives represents ninety-three percent. A second remarkable feature is the young age of the large majority of courtesans. Wang Tao mentions the age of fifty-eight women.⁵³ The data are presented in Table 2.

Table 1

Provincial origin of a group of 77 courtesans (1923)

Place of birth	Number	Percentage
Suzhou	63	82%
Changzhou	5	6%
Shanghai	3	4%
Ningbo	2	3%
Hangzhou	1	1%
Wuxi	1	1%
Yangzhou	1	1%
Jiaqing	1	1%
Total	77	100%

(Source: Archives de la direction des services administratifs, Concession française, Archives municipales de Shanghai, dossier 1934 25 MS 1554.2, "Maisons de chanteuses—Demandes de licence" [1922–1924])

The courtesans began their career at an early age and usually left quite soon, after five to ten years at most for those who were lucky enough to find a husband.⁵⁴ We have here the confirmation of a reality never talked about in the Chinese sources, that is the obvious inclination of nineteenth-century Chinese for 'young sprouts'. The extreme youth of the courtesans seems to be something natural and no author, whatever the period, appears to be offended by this. This phenomenon is not so widespread after 1911, partly due to the more severe sanctions adopted in the successive penal codes promulgated after the revolution. One should note, however, that the youngest courtesans provided only company to customers at banquets or parties. They were usually deflowered by the age of fifteen.⁵⁵

Conversely, although there was no formal rule—some famous courtesans exercised their craft well into their fifties—it seemed difficult for a courtesan to maintain herself after the age of twenty. She would be considered already an 'old' courtesan. Wang Tao explicitly notes this in two instances: "although she was more than twenty years of age," and "although she was already twenty years old."⁵⁶ I conclude from this that the twenty-year-old line represented a kind of physiological limit beyond which a courtesan was expected to have found a husband. Otherwise, she ran the risk of losing her charm and beauty and seeing her house deserted by her customers (or, as Wang writes many times, "*chema leng luo men qian*"—Horse carts seldom stop at her doorstep).

Wang Tao also sheds some light on an important, though not well-known, dimension of courtesans—their social origin. I have managed to find information on only forty-three of them. The definition is often very vague. Twelve of these women came from 'good families' (*liangjia*), two from 'great families' (*dajia* 大家, eight from 'modest' or poor families (*xiaojia*), six were adoptive daughters (*yangnü* 養女), and in each of the following categories there were: madam (one), peasant (three), fisherman (one), butcher (one), clerk (one), merchant (two), literatus (five). If we exclude the literati and the 'good families' (though this term does not necessarily signify a high socio-economic level), the distribution given above leaves the impression of a

Table 2
Age structure of a sample of courtesans (nineteenth century)

Age	Number
13 years	6
14 years	4
15 years	24
16 years	5
17 years	6
18 years	3
19 years	2
20 years	4
24 years	1
28 years	1
20 years +	2
Total	58

(Sources: Yu Baosheng [pseud. of Wang Tao], *Haizou yeyou lu*; *Haizou yeyou fulu*; *Haizou yeyou yulu*; Wang Tao, *Songbin suohua*)

York: SUNY Press, 1994), Preface; and Antonia Finnane, "The origins of prejudice: the mal-integration of Subei in late imperial China," *Comparative studies in society and history* 35.2 (April 1993): 211–37.

⁴⁸ Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou fulu*, vol. 3, p. 4; Wang Tao, *Songbin suohua*, p. 105. An author reports that Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Jiangbei courtesans used to sing in the Suzhou dialect, while those originating from Hubei or Hebei (Tianjin) sang only in their own dialect. Chi Zhicheng, "Hu you mengying lu" [Notes and impressions of a trip to Shanghai], *Dang'an yu lishi* [Archives and history] 1 (1989): 5.

⁴⁹ Xu Ke, ed., *Qing bai lei chao* [The hundred categories of the Qing dynasty] (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1920), "changji lei," p. 15. A report of the League of Nations notes in 1924 that in Guangdong, many 'first-class' prostitutes came from Suzhou and Shanghai. This was also true of Changsha. Société des Nations, *Renseignements concernant la prostitution et la traite des femmes et des enfants dans divers pays et colonies asiatiques*, C.T.E.F. [Experts] 44 (confidentiel) (Genève: Imp. de la "Tribune de Genève," [1924]), pp. 57, 62.

⁵⁰ Xu Ke, *Qing bai lei chao*, p. 31.

⁵¹ *Shanghai lanyou zhinan*, p. 4.

⁵² Analysis of seventeen applications for a license between 5 and 16 July 1923, Archives de la direction des services administratifs, secrétariat, Concession française, Archives municipales de Shanghai, dossier 1934 25 MS 1554.2, "Maisons de chanteuses—Demandes de licence" [1922–1924].

⁵³ I added up here the data collected in *Songbin suohua*—that is, fourteen courtesans. In this work Wang Tao writes about around fifty girls.

⁵⁴ Some courtesans exercised their trade much longer, but they usually recruited young girls to bring more excitement to their house and, probably, to offer their charms to the customers.

⁵⁵ Wang Tao uses two terms to describe the state of the courtesans. The first one, *pogua* (to break up, to pierce the melon) refers to deflowering. The second one, *shulong* (literally to comb) seems to mean that a girl has become the regular courtesan of a customer. This did not preclude changing customers or having several regular ones at the same time.

⁵⁶ Yu Baosheng, *Huaguo jutun*, vol. 1, p. 3.

⁵⁷ The notion of 'good family' (*liang jia*) is to be taken *lato sensu*. It does not point to a particular socio-economic category, even if we take the distinction Wang Tao introduces between *liang jia* and *xiao jia* as having economic significance. In a legal sense, 'good families' were opposed to the 'mean families' (*jianmin*), a term and a legal status that were attached to certain groups of the population, including prostitutes, until the eighteenth century. On these categories and their evolution see Harry Hansson, "Regional outcast groups in late imperial China," PhD diss. (Harvard University, 1988). Although adoption was a very common practice in China, especially of boys, the adoption of girls (*yangnü*) was mainly a disguised form of appropriation of labor—or even sheer slavery—among ordinary families or, as in the present case, in houses of prostitution. On adoption see Arthur Wolf, *Marriage and adoption in China, 1845–1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1980); on adoptive daughters see Rubie S. Watson, "Concubines and maids: servitude and kin status in the Hong Kong region, 1900–1940," in Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Marriage and inequality in Chinese society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991); Maria Jaschok, *Concubines and bondservants. The social history of a Chinese custom* (London: Zed Books, 1989).

⁵⁸ Yu Baosheng, *Huaguo jutan*, vol. 1, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Jean Duval, "Les aventures révélatrices d'un dandy amoureux: étude d'un roman en dialecte Wu de la fin de l'époque Qing, *La tortue à neuf queues*, de Zhang Chunfan," unpublished dissertation (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, Paris, 1975), p. 99.

generally modest social background.⁵⁷ This is not especially surprising, but we shall see below that it brings into question the traditional image of courtesans *qua* learned women.

The reasons for entry into prostitution are also indicated for forty women. Four were coerced into the trade by poverty, thirteen were sold to a madam or a courtesan (three of them by their own parents), fourteen were orphans (including four who lived with their mother), and one was the natural daughter of a madam. The others fell into prostitution after losing their husband (two), after being kidnapped (three), expelled by their parents (one), or as a result of war (two). The general cause was undoubtedly poverty, whether as an enduring condition or the consequence of an accident. The death of parents, especially of the father, is a frequently-cited cause. Troubles associated with the Taiping rebellion are also mentioned eight times in relation to the death of parents. This tends to confirm the generally modest origin of these girls, usually sold at a young age to a madam who took care of their training to become courtesans.

Wang Tao is not very forthcoming about the talents and skills of the courtesans. Their physical appearance is always described in conventional language, with small variations on the same theme:

She was as beautiful as morning dew, her skin glittered like the almond, her bones were weightless and her body could be held in one hand, her gait was like a willow tree in the wind.⁵⁸



Figure 9

Portrait of a nineteenth-century courtesan
(Private collection, source unknown)

It is simply impossible to know from such descriptions what any particular courtesan actually looked like and what distinguished one from the other. Even literature does not shed much light on this dimension. Writers generally tended to focus on clothing more than on the person herself and expressed first of all their own subjective reaction, as either admirers or critics of the courtesans.⁵⁹ With regard to their artistic skills, we learn that nineteen of them were famous for their singing, for playing the *pipa* (six), the Chinese lute (six), the flute (two), or singing and playing an instrument (two), for story-telling *tanci* (two) and for the art of hospitality (three). Presumably all the others possessed qualities indispensable for the exercise of their craft, but Wang Tao makes no special mention of them.

There is a last point on which the author provides some rare though valuable indications: the level of education of the courtesans. This seems to have been pretty limited.

Table 3 is intended to provide a qualitative review of the courtesans' ability; it has no statistical value in itself.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, out of a large group of 155 courtesans, Wang Tao specifically mentioned a 'literary' education for only seventeen women. The others he also evoked apparently had a superficial knowledge of Chinese writing. This is very little, even if we take into account the subjective and hazardous character of Wang Tao's choice. Did it conform to reality? Many more courtesans doubtless had a certain level of education, but this is not the point. Wang Tao recorded only those whose literary knowledge struck him. We cannot deny the fact that few actually had any command of the written language (poetry and calligraphy). Many had only a rather elementary knowledge of Chinese characters that allowed them to read and write simple texts, such as letters. This is a far cry from the idealized image of leamed courtesans, competing with wit in intellectual games such as improvising poems, as described in the novels of the late nineteenth century or in the travel accounts of Westerners. This vision is a myth which does not stand up to a close examination of the elementary data, nor to simple logic. The level of education of courtesans and prostitutes in the twentieth century was extremely low, no matter what category they belonged to.⁶¹

In actual fact, it is not unusual to find a similar low level of education among their nineteenth-century predecessors. Most came from modest or poor families, and had therefore received no formal education. Only a minority—probably those from better-off families—could have received a more advanced education before joining the ranks of the courtesans. Raised from an early age by a madam, the girls were given lessons in singing, playing music and performing opera. Their training was directed towards making them professional entertainers, not intellectuals. The madams, who considered the girls as 'money trees' (*yaoqian-shu* 搖錢樹), had no financial interest in giving them a formal education by a private tutor. They limited their investment to the minimum required: "Within a few months, she had learned her art and could go around singing and attending banquets."⁶² Finally, given the early age at which the girls began



Table 3

Education level of a sample of 25 courtesans (nineteenth century)

Able to read and write calligraphy	9
Able to read poetry	2
Able to read	5
Able to write poems	1
Family education	1
Able to talk about poetry	1
Able to write letters	1
Average reading ability	4
Illiterate	1

(Sources: Yu Baosheng, *Haizou yeyou lu*; *Haizou yeyou fulu*; *Haizou yeyou yulu*; Wang Tao, *Songbin suohua*)

⁶⁰ Given the vagueness of Wang Tao's appreciations, no real ranking by order of level of literacy can be construed. Only the first four lines of the table seem to refer to a high level of education. The other categories are less uniform and expressive.

⁶¹ See my chapter "Les prostituées au XX^e siècle: essai d'anthropologie sociale" in Christian Henriot, "La prostitution à Shanghai aux XIX^e-XX^e siècles," pp.515-64.

⁶² Yu Baosheng, *Huaguo jutun*, vol.1, p.2.

Figure 10

Portrait of a nineteenth-century courtesan

(Private collection, source unknown)

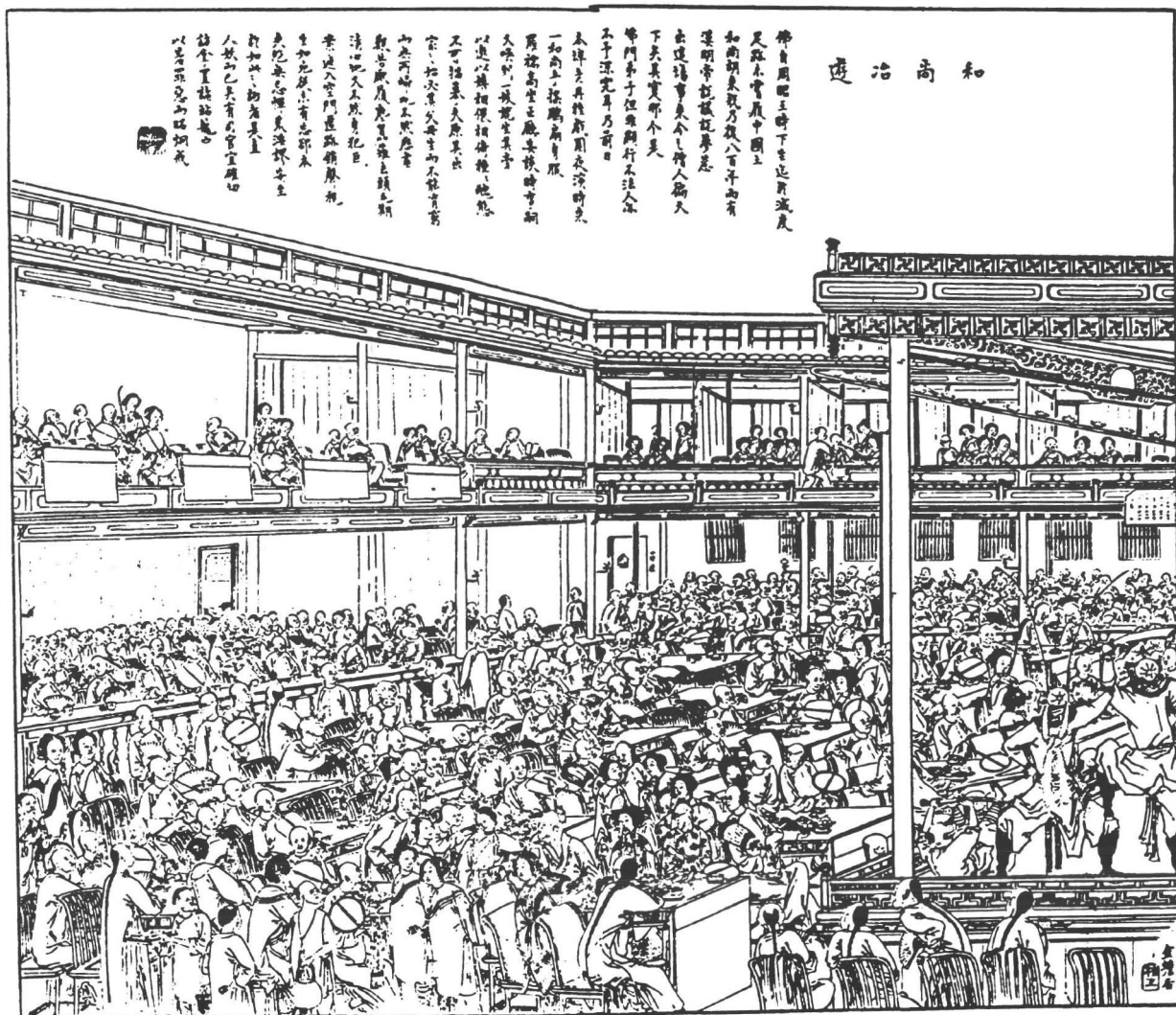
⁶³ Wang Jimen, *Shanghai liusbi mian lai buajie sbi*, pp.156-7.

to exercise their trade and the difficulties of learning the Chinese classical language, it is basically impossible that the vast majority of courtesans could have been learned women. More prosaically, they played the role of ladies of company, from whom customers expected wit and spirit, but mostly entertainment, that is, singing and music. One of the first initiatives taken by a group of 'politicized' courtesans after 1911 was to establish a school to provide the girls with an exit through education.⁶³

Whatever the weakness of the statistical data presented here, there is no reason to think that Wang Tao's writings—he was an active and assiduous patron of courtesan houses for more than four decades—present an excessively biased view of reality. His books offer an insufficiently clear view of Chinese courtesans at a time when western influence was still weak—from

Figure 12

Interior of the Dan'gui Theatre in Shanghai, nineteenth century
(Dianshizhai huabao)



**Figure 12**

Qinglian 'ge Teahouse
 (Private collection, source unknown)

the dates given here and there in the texts, the girls were active between 1860 and 1872—but they are one of the very rare direct testimonies available on this topic. The general impression one gets from such reading is that the courtesans formed a group of prostitutes, most of whom were originally hardly better off than those thrown into houses of prostitution. What made the difference of itinerary were the circumstances of their fall, their sometimes singular beauty, or more simply good or bad luck.

Several authors, including Wang Tao himself, emphasized the decline in the level of education of the courtesans. A book published in 1891 states that those who can sing and play an instrument are not easy to find, while those who still know how to receive and treat their customers properly are even rarer.⁶⁴ In 1923, the situation seems to have deteriorated further, if we are to believe a writer who notes that a growing number of girls do not know to play the *buqin*, though a small minority still knows how to handle the

⁶⁴ *Haisbang yeyou beilan* [Omnium of licentiousness in Shanghai] (Shanghai: n. pub., 1891), vol.3, p.14.

⁶⁵ *Shanghai lanyou zhinan*, p.6. The author of this guide calls for the establishment of a school to train the girls in the craft of courtesanship, to be financed by the houses, where the girls would receive an education for three years before they started to work. *Shanghai lanyou zhinan*, p.42.

⁶⁶ *Huabao* [Journal of flowers], 18 Sept. 1926.

⁶⁷ Wang Shunu, *Zhongguo changji shi* [A history of prostitution in China] (Shanghai: Shenghuo Shudian, 1934, reprinted Taipei, 1971), p.286.

pipa. The majority of them can only sing pieces from the Peking opera, which creates a noisy and not very refined environment when several courtesans happen to be in the same place.⁶⁵ A short biography of a courtesan published in the press in 1926 notes that after losing her two parents, the twelve-year-old girl had taken lessons in singing with her aunt, and after one year had mastered thirty songs. She was then placed in various entertainment centres (Great World, etc.) before being rented out to a madam as a courtesan.⁶⁶ The education of that girl, therefore, was limited to the practice of a few songs. The same decline in quality was also noted in Beijing's courtesans in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷

Although there is a good deal of nostalgia in these accounts, courtesans came to serve different needs over time and sex took over from songs and music. The situation in the past was certainly less uniform and brilliant than is suggested by this literature, but it is also undeniable that some skills were no longer required. In an apparent paradox, the data I have collected on

Figure 13

Street scene: a courtesan passes by in a palanquin (Dianshizhai huabao)



courtesans in the twentieth century are much poorer than those, already limited, found in Wang Tao's writing for the nineteenth century. This clearly points to a greater homogenization of the different categories of prostitutes. The contrast between the two periods is sufficiently emphasized to confirm the slow decline of the courtesans; as social demands changed a different profile for them was determined. One of the most obvious changes was that the demand for sexual services overwhelmed the enter-tainment function of this particular group of prostitutes that had been their primary characteristic in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Chinese courtesans belonged to a cultural tradition and a social structure that did not resist the onslaught of modernity. As in ancient Greece or modern Japan, the existence of a group of women especially devoted to the entertainment of male members of the élites—who had full freedom to have several wives and concubines in their house—could be conceived only in a society characterized by a rigid separation of the sexes and a very restrictive definition of the role of women. China kept on living on this mode until late into the nineteenth century, whereas in the West such a social structure had disappeared centuries earlier.⁶⁸ The opening of Shanghai to foreign trade, the slow but growing externalization of Chinese women, transformations in local society, and the emergence of competing female entertainers progressively debased the status and the role of the courtesans. In this new social system there were only common prostitutes, even if there remained various categories of them. This change started early and accelerated under the combined effect of foreign influence—the 'internationalization' of Shanghai and change in its lifestyle—and social upset caused by internal rebellions. The process was fully completed half a century later with the economic take-off of the city. This gradual transformation points to the fundamental role the courtesans played in the social *habitus* of the Chinese upper classes, and explains their resilience in a drastically changing world.

The image we have of this milieu is undoubtedly strongly idealized. Nevertheless, that the reality was different from the representations the literati gave of it is not so important *per se*. What matters here is the discourse that was elaborated about this community. This positive discourse dominated the perception that the literati and the population in general had of the courtesans. The myth thus created permeated the collective consciousness to such a degree that the notion of the courtesan endured well after her actual disappearance in the twentieth century. It is not inappropriate here to refer to the idea of 'dominant ideology', so complete and universal was the monopoly of the written language and of high culture by a narrow educated élite. Its consequence was, in the present case, the widespread diffusion of a particularly biased discourse on courtesans and prostitution. Although I cannot develop this point here, let me state simply that the

⁶⁸ The use of the term 'courtesan' is bound to create some confusion with the courtesans of the West. Chinese courtesans were not common prostitutes until they were assimilated into the mainstream of prostitution. Only then did they become luxury prostitutes equivalent to the courtesans in the West. Furthermore, the status and role of women in these societies were very different. Chinese women, especially those of the élites, were literally sealed away from public space. For a comparison see Alain Corbin, *Women for hire. Prostitution and sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), and Marie-Erica Benabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 1987).

⁶⁹ Although my use of the term 'discourse' refers to Michel Foucault's work, I have come to the conclusion that what characterized China was the absence of a real and structured discourse on prostitution. This was at most an embryonic discourse (*un discours infirme*). See my chapters "Droit, morale et littérature: la mutation des sensibilités" and "La prostitution dans l'opinion publique: discours médical et *vox populi*" in Christian Henriot, "La prostitution à Shanghai aux XIX^e–XX^e siècles," pp.856–97, 898–940.

idealization of courtesans in the literati's discourse contributed to hiding the contempt the Chinese élites actually nourished for common prostitutes and therefore to projecting a distorted image of the attitude of the Chinese toward prostitution.⁶⁹

In nineteenth-century Shanghai, courtesans enjoyed a socially recognized status that the poorer sectors of the city's population probably envied whenever they had the opportunity to steal a glance at them in their dashing evening attire. The patronizing of courtesans was guided by relatively strict rules that emphasized the respect their customers had for them. These were not mere rituals aimed at hiding a squalid sex-for-money relationship. The

men who went to these houses looked for something other than mere sexual gratification. The courtesans provided company, spirit, entertainment and a place for relaxation and conviviality. The courtesan houses clearly represented the centre or the focal point of the leisure space of the privileged strata. There, merchants and literati found quietness and intimacy in which to distract themselves in pleasant company. Key moments of an individual's life—birthdays, success in examinations, business deals, etc.—were celebrated in these places. Patronizing a courtesan house, on a regular or sometimes daily basis, was part of a normal social life for Chinese urban élites.

Courtesans were the Ariadne's clew that unified the time and space of the élites' leisure activities. If we except women from the more popular classes, courtesans were the only women who moved in a male-dominated public space. One has to keep in mind the particular structure of urban society in nineteenth-century China—which differed radically from that of western cities where the women practised various crafts and trades that took them daily into the streets—to appreciate the very special role of courtesans. The kind of privileged status that resulted from this situation was undermined by the increasing entry of women into the labor market and public space. Other modes of entertainment emerged that eliminated or modified the traditional places of leisure of the well-to-do. The courtesans withdrew into their proper domain—their own houses—and went out only to entertain customers in restaurants. The other places slowly

vanished. The circulation of courtesans in the public space was limited to these brief 'return trips' that highlighted the decline in their function. From being artists praised for their spirit, their talents, and their sense of sociability, the role of courtesans dropped to that of luxury prostitutes who could still be taken out publicly as objects of social status, but whose services were chiefly limited to the sexual domain.

Figure 14

Paying a visit to Longhua Pagoda in a barrow
(Haishang qinglou tuji)



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