
Zamperini’s book examines the literary figure of the courtesan in late Qing vernacular fiction. This courtesan was an expression of male authors' desires and a reflection of their own sense of masculinity, as “male authors, male characters and male readers” (p. 3). Focusing on the body of the literary courtesan, Zamperini delves into their violent and tragic lives. The late Qing literary courtesan had a substantially more brutal start in the profession than her predecessor in Ming and early Qing novels. Her end was also more tragic, with little hope for redemption, and a body plagued by poor health, disease and impoverishment. Zamperini argues that this hopelessness reflected the trauma of male authors after the Opium Wars and their attempts to make sense of Shanghai’s rapidly changing urban landscape.

Chapter One is concerned with the identity of the literary courtesan. Starting with her deflowering through rape and beatings, which transformed her body and person into that of a sex worker, she became available for purchase and exchange. The late Qing reader was provided with details of the perversity and crimes of those who tricked, kidnapped, and sold innocent young girls into prostitution, which was in contrast to Ming and early Qing novels, which attributed her entry into prostitution to “poverty and unjust fate” (p. 51).

Chapter Two shows how the courtesan's body and the literary space she occupied were subject to the socio-economic circuit of exchange and consumption in the new Shanghai landscape, where money trumped passion. While in earlier vernacular novels, brothels were the site for romance and love, often involving a stereotypical dreamy scholar awaiting initiation by the courtesan, in late Qing novels, Shanghai became a site in which the male hero purchased the means (or bodies) for the exploration of his sexuality and masculinity.

Chapter Three details the so-called family of the courtesan. Familial relations took the form of brutal conditioning “mothers” inflicted on their charge, usually through beatings (though some authors also wrote about the genuine concern of mothers for young women in their care). Another type of relationship was the sworn sisterhood between sex workers, modeled after male brotherhoods. However, these were rare examples of loyalty and solidarity. More commonly depicted were fights for the attention of wealthy clients. Despite all the attention these novels paid to relationships among women, men were never far away. After all, the brothel's main
function was to fulfill the needs of men who were “the lovers, the customers, the readers and the writers” (p. 104).

In Chapter Four, we witness the crumbling of the fictional “savior syndrome” paradigm, whereby the “beautiful” courtesan was saved by her soulmate the “talented” literatus. By the late Qing, the courtesan catered only to those who could pay, and the “talented” but broke educated man no longer had the means to save his courtesan. The scholar was further emasculated in the new Shanghai because he no longer had a definitive role in the rapidly changing social and economic nexus. Concurrently, the courtesan no longer pined for a talented scholar to elevate her social status through redemption and marriage. Instead, she was able to transform herself into a desirable commodity and moved freely beyond the confines of the bordello. The courtesan's self-reinvention was connected to the discourse of modernity. In the context of late Qing fiction, this meant “new characters (displaced literatus, displaced sojourner, the foreigner), exotic objects (foreign clothes, steamers, trains, chariots), and behaviours (travel, education for women, anti-footbinding movements)” (p. 127).

Chapter Five is concerned with the “pathological destiny” of the courtesan (p.150): poverty, sickness and death in the materialistic Shanghai marketplace. Earlier representations of social and economic redemption were no longer available. She was no longer the idealized beauty, but had become diseased and grotesque with syphilitic disfigurement. Against this sad fate, there were some courtesans who managed to survive. The most realistic portrayal, according to Zamperini, was the older courtesan who became a madame and ran her own brothel. A much less plausible, but popular ending, was the courtesan becoming a national hero (p. 180). The figure of the courtesan, Sai Jinhua, who slept with the foreign enemy on behalf of her country, would become immortalized in late Qing fiction.

The novels discussed in Zamperini's book were best sellers written in the late imperial vernacular language. In contrast to Lu Xun's categorization of these novels as xiaxie xiaoshuo 狎邪小說 (depravity fiction), her study repositions these works in the Chinese literary landscape and emphasizes their significance as social commentary on the seamier side of a modernizing Shanghai. Zamperini's analysis is thorough, and her descriptions of the courtesan and her life extremely dense, so dense that one could easily forget she is describing fictive figures and not real-life sex workers. Zamperini often reminds us that the literary courtesan was the product of male imagination. Yet by quoting an article published by Beijing ribao (dated July 29, 2005)
about a young girl sold by her mother to a client of her brothel for ten thousand yuan (p. 205), Zamperini suggests that the figure of the courtesan also represents real victims of sexual exploitation. By conflating literary figures from late Qing China with contemporary injustice, Zamperini sees in the literary courtesan the possibility of exposing real suffering that continues to characterize the sex trade.

Although Zamperini repeatedly tells readers that the literary courtesan was a site upon which the masculinity of male authors was defined, we do not learn much about these men. There is little attempt to contextualize or historicize the authors of the literary courtesan of the late Qing. Zamperini mentions the Opium Wars and the materialism of urban Shanghai, but does not elaborate further. We might ask, for instance, what were the same men writing besides erotic stories?

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