

The role of courtesans in northern song china essay sample

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When talking about Song history, most scholars were focusing on political, economic and cultural aspects that the role of courtesans in Song social life has seldom shed a light. This paper will first define the word of “ courtesans” and its origin. Some case studies then will be cited to examine how the relationship between courtesans and literati is and to illustrate the role of courtesans in Song China. Finally, the significance of courtesans in Song history will be discussed.

To begin with, the meaning of courtesan will be introduced. Courtesan is commonly recognized as ji 妓 in Chinese but it mainly refers to prostitute that is not accurate enough to the meaning of courtesan in this paper. In terms of “ Beichang 北窗” of “ Huayan Jing 华严经”: “ ji is beautiful lady 妓, 娼.” And, from “ Yin Yun”, it explained that “ ji is female musician 妓, 乐人.” The definition of courtesans in this paper is far more than ji. According to Edward Schafer, the term prostitute is “ hardly adequate” to refer to the rigorously trained and highly cultivated women who entertained at elegant banquets in Tang and Song. Moreover, as Bossler suggested that courtesan in Song China meant a performing artist who might be a dancer, a singer, a musician, or a poet and might provide sexual service by approaching the banquet table and beginning to sing without invitation. Here, I will employ Bossler’s idea of courtesans. Actually, courtesans were divided into two types, which were government courtesans (guan ji or ying ji 官妓, 营妓) and household courtesans (jia ji 家妓). As space limited, I will focus on government courtesans in this paper.

Next, the origin of courtesans will be traced back to Northern Song. In accordance with Deng Zhicheng 邓之诚, Gu dong suo ji 古东琐记, “ When Taizong <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-courtesans-in-northern-song-china-essay-sample/>

extinguished the Northern Han, he stole their women and brought them back to the barracks. This was the beginning of 'barracks courtesans' (ying ji 营妓). Later he also established government courtesans (guan ji) to supply and serve the prefectural official and officers who had not brought their families. Government courtesans had a body price of 5,000; in five years their term was up and they returned to their original positions. Those officials who took courtesans with them paid an additional 2,000, and such women could also be gotten from the theater district. 'Barrack courtesans' were selected from among the theater entertainers (guo lan ji 国乐妓) and served in rotation for terms of one month. They were permitted to pay a fee in lieu of service. There were also the children of criminals and the children of good commoner families who were in prison awaiting judgment; in extreme cases [children of good family] were kidnapped and falsely called criminals in order to trick them—this was the height of evil government. After the Southern Song was established, the system began to be changed.”

As mentioned above, it can be shown that government courtesans were stemmed from Song Taizong who created the courtesan system. Which the official organization to manage courtesans, was jiao fang 教坊 where provided training like playing musical instruments, dancing and writing poems etc. to courtesans. The management of jiao fang was very rigorous. It can be seen by “Song shi·lezhi” which pointed out that jiao fang was directed to Xuanhui Yuan 宣徽院 and nearly all officials were responsible to jiao fang for teaching courtesans. Besides, according to Mengliang lu 梦粱录, there was a record indicating that different skills in arts were assigned to officials in accordance with their professional specialty to train courtesans. There even were

children courtesans groups to be trained. Government courtesans thus were highly literate and skilled in other arts by receiving such professional training in Northern Song. Furthermore, government courtesans were bound to service in the prefecture: they had to perform when summoned by the prefecture, although they may have free to accept private engagements as well. More specifically, they could not leave government service— “ be dropped from the registers” (luo ji 落籍) without the express permission of the presiding prefectural official as all courtesans were degraded (jian 减) status, and thus were subject to certain legal restrictions.

By strict training, courtesans were outstanding in different arts in Northern Song. Once there were celebration of emperor birthday, court gathering and government event, the courtesans would be invited to make performances as an entertainment. In addition, some local governments would request courtesans to present to “ urge the winecup” (you zun 侑尊, you shang 侑觞) by providing musical entertainment and clever banter. Some sense of this constant presence is captured in Za zuan xu 笑言 (Collected aphorisms, continued), a text of humorous dicta composed in the mid-eleventh century. However, officials were not permitted to have relationship with courtesans privately and they would be punished if they were discovered that without permission. Here, two case studies will be cited.

In 1182, Zhu Xi 朱熹, as an official went on an inspection tour to Taizhou 台州 and realized that Zhizhou 知州 Tang Zhongyou 唐宗友 was problematic that Zhu Xi wrote a letter to the throne for complaining Tang Zhonyou and his son were involved with government courtesans in that prefecture. In this case, Tang

Zhonyou was reproached for falsely claimed that the Taizhou courtesan Yan Rui 颜蕊 was getting old, and then dropped her from the registers so that he could take her into his own household. As a result, according to “ Yi Jian Zhi 易简志 易简”, Yan Rui was under arrest by Chu Xi, who sentenced five hundred hit on her back and took into custody. A businessman, Mr. Yue pleaded for Yan Rui who was released finally. Although Yan Rui was free from jail finally, this case reflected that in Northern Song, ‘accommodating courtesans’ (Su chang, 苏昌) was forbidden.

This case was not a single case that there were cases about officials who had a relationship with government courtesans, getting trouble, even lost his prefecture. According to Xu zi zhi tong Chang Bian 徐子志通常变, for examples, in 1034, the official Liu Huan wrote a letter to a government courtesan but the letter fell into wrong hand so that Liu lost his post as a result. In 1044, a courtesan banquet thrown by Su Shunqin 苏舜钦 became the scandal of the capital, and led to demotions for all involved. Su was sentenced to be a commoner though his crime was not involvement with courtesans, but he had paid for the service of courtesans by selling off old paper money drawn from the official coffers. Nevertheless, the prefect Jiang Tang 江唐 lost his position in part for “repeatedly privatizing government courtesans” (江唐). As the cases have been cited, it can be clearly to see that there was prohibition to the official having a relationship with government courtesans in Northern Song.

Why Song Government not permit the officials having a relationship with courtesans? There are three main reasons. First, having relationship with

government courtesans lower the concentration of officials on the government matters that reduced the efficiency of the administration in the whole Government structure as the prevalence of having involvement with courtesans was worth to be aware in Northern Song. According to Zhuoxian Tigang 晁补之, “ As people are limited in physical energy, addicting with wine and women must weaken one’s physical strength and mental quality. Although an official desires to have a good job, he just cannot have such strength to achieve the goal. As a result, the government work will be failed to do so or leave aside.” Hence, to maintain the efficiency of government operation, the inhibition of having relationship with courtesans was implemented.

Additionally, it was immoral to an official who employ the hard-won possessions of the people to keep in touch with courtesans. Also, it damaged the reputation of the officials as well. In accordance with “ Zhoulian Xulun” 周礼 疏, “ Being a local prefect, gathering with colleagues and having courtesans to be there for entertainment, was a customary practice, which spent at least 20-30 min 日. These public treasuries were all come from people. Officials used them by informal ways for entertainment. Don’t they feel ashamed?” Therefore, Song government desired to control the relationships between officials and courtesans.

Furthermore, officials were addicted in having relationship with courtesans that disadvantaged the local administration. As remarked above, having relationship with courtesans was lower officials’ strength to do their work well and immoral to use public funds for having courtesans to amuse

themselves. Apart from moral aspect, what a practical drawback of involving into courtesans to the officials were, even though the Government had planned a series of fantastic policy, the local government was not able to carry out the effects of the policy since the officials were wallowing in sensual pleasures and they were reluctant to assign resources on promoting policy. As a result, people were suffering from the ineffectiveness of local government and damaging the social stability. Taking a glimpse of “zhi zhi men liu 直直門流”, “As a state prefecture, once a banquet related to courtesans by officials’ arrangement, the prefecture would be punished by law that was 80 hits and no discretion.” It can be seen that seriousness of official whoring in Northern Song and central government dealt with this matter with conscientious attitude as it ruining the operation of the government.

How is the role of courtesans in social life in Northern Song? Indeed, government courtesans were mainly as an entertainer, as they were presenting at virtually any social gathering, from quiet drinks among friends to huge state banquets at the imperial court, to “urge the winecup” (you zun 勸酒, you shang 勸上) by providing musical entertainment and clever banter. Besides, in Song times, government courtesans in the prefectures were not registered as bondservants, but rather as entertainers or musicians (yue 樂) on the model of entertainers in the capital. However, all courtesans were degraded (jian 賤) status, and thus were subject to certain legal restrictions. As Bossler pointed out that under the law, a person of Jian status did not have the same rights as an ordinary commoner: any crime he or she committed was punished more severely, and any crime against her punished more lightly, than if she had been a commoner, it was obvious to observe

that courtesans, even government courtesans, who were highly cultivated, was inferior in the social hierarchy.

Despite of the social status of government courtesans, they were significant in Northern Song history. Government courtesans encouraged the cultural development as known as Song ci. The main contribution of government courtesans in Song can be categorized into three aspects, which were promoting the melody of Song ci innovation, inspiring the creation of literati and helping construct the style of Song ci. For these advantages rendered by government courtesans, it could be demonstrated in Liuyong 柳永 yushan zhen 雨霖铃: “ Several paragraphs of pure song shown new melody of my work and inspire me to recreate ci. 几段韶音新曲调” Here, Liu indicated that most literati recreated their work in accordance with “ the new melody”, which was sung by courtesans. Literati thus had created many fresh and new ci that the literature of Song was advanced greatly and the style of Song ci was formed in particular ways.

Additionally, government courtesans encouraged the commercial activities and also increased the government revenue as well. As government courtesans were always involved into quiet drinks among friends and huge state banquets, there was a proper chance for selling alcohol, which was the popular drink in social and imperial gathering. Commercial activities thus became much more prosperous. More specifically, Wang anshi 王安石 insisted that courtesans were encouraged “ zuo shi mai jiu 作诗买酒”. The courtesans here, of course was including government courtesans. Wang’s propose of this policy was, by the use of courtesans, increasing the revenue to the

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