

# Courtesan Women in Chinese History from 618 - 1279

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## Abstract

Courtesan women in China may be described by many names, names such as entertainers, artists, and in general alluring women with talent and sex appeal. My paper will seek to address the reasons why these women were known as such. It is said that the courtesan women first appeared during what we now refer to as the T'ang dynasty era from (618-907) and then continued into the Song dynasty era of (960-1279). T'ang and Song China and the courtesan women and men that performed during this era have been dubbed by historians to have taken part in a "golden" era in the arts.



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To classify one of China's greatest dynasties, we must look back in time to the period of (618–907). It was during these almost three centuries that an elaborate golden era in the arts was formed which would last clear into the Song Dynasty of (960-1279). Some may ask, why was this era in China specifically considered golden? To answer this many factors must be noted. T'ang rule was a very economically prosperous time for the country of China. There were many traders and merchants of all kinds dealing in exotics. They worked within various trade routes on the silk trail, which further increased China's wealth. Buddhism became a budding religion, which gained tremendous popularity when the Imperial family adopted it as their religion during T'ang rule. Leisure, literature, art, poetry, and young beautiful women became the center of attention in this elaborate and ornate artistic Dynasty. Not only was T'ang China accumulating wealth but also it was showing the rest of the world what this wealth could buy. Author Edward Schafer said, "It was an age when taste for all sorts of foreign luxuries and wonders began to spread from the court outward among city dwellers."<sup>1</sup> The world would become envious of these artistic dynasties filled with poetry, pottery, song and dance, instrument playing, acrobatic performing, and overall filling the court with beautiful, young, and skilled women in all of these fields. This is why it is considered a golden era.

These women were the courtesan performers who emerged during the T'ang Dynasty in China. They not only looked stunning but also were clean, and heavily perfumed which added to their appeal by others. Their garments were usually made of colorful silks and were long and flowed on the ground when they walked. In Edward Schafer's book, *the Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, there is a lovely poem that I believe describes these courtesan women very well. It is titled (*Cold Mountain* by Han-Shan) and here is an excerpt of the poem, "I chanced to see a gaggle of girls, erect and straight, fair of feature from their heads bore flowers in the style of Shu, they were sleek with rouge and powder-daubed; their golden bracelets- chased silver blossoms, their gauzy garments were pink, puce and purple, their vermeil faces-akin to goddesses and sylphs; their perfumed girdles- richly fuming vapors. Being men of the age, all looked back to stare and doting affection dyed their hearts and minds."<sup>2</sup> This poem is a lovely opening to the type of women that my paper will be addressing which are the courtesan women of the T'ang and Song courts in China. Most likely the women mentioned above were a traveling troupe of courtesans who were on their way to a performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand-A Study of T'ang Exotics*, University of California Press, 1985, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 162.

This paper will seek to address some reasons as to why these courtesan poets, musicians, dancers, and singers were such highly sought after commodities and who were an essential form of entertainment during the T'ang and Song Dynasties in Chinese history. The time frame between these two dynasties spanned nearly six centuries. Women courtesan entertainers were not only around at court to look aesthetically pleasing to one's eyes, but they also had a very specific skill set that they were brought in to perform in front of powerful and wealthy gentlemen. It should be noted that court performers were mainly young women, but were also comprised of talented men too, This article will bring to light the role that these courtesan women played as entertainers throughout not only the court life publically, but also the privatized home courtesans who lived day to day in the homes of many wealthy and powerful men.

In Ping Yao's, *Journal of Women's' History Article, Titled: The Status of Pleasure: Courtesan and Literati Connections in T'ang China*; she breaks down the three forms of courtesan ownership with in this dynasty. First there was Government owned courtesans who were at the disposal of ranking military officials, high-ranking government officials, ministers and their staffs.<sup>3</sup> These men were known in the Song Dynasty, which closely followed the T'ang from (960-1279) as the "outer court" and fell under government owned courtesans.<sup>4</sup> The Second form of courtesan ownership was a private or palace courtesan that belonged specifically to the Emperor of China himself and his royal family in the "inner court". Beverly Bossler, author of a chapter in the book, *Servants of the Dynasty*, "Gender and Entertainment in Song Court" also uses the words palace maids or palace women to refer to the inner courtesan during the Song Dynasty. These women attended to the day-to-day needs of the Imperial Family and many times actually ended up in the bed of the Emperor himself.<sup>5</sup> During the second half of T'ang rule a third form of entertainment on a broader scale became known as house courtesan, and was very popular. This essentially meant that all generals in the military and local governors were allowed to maintain entertainers in their homes in order to advance their day to day pleasure and joy in order to suppress their sexual desires.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ping Yao, "The Status of Pleasure: Courtesan and Literati Connections in T'ang China (618 – 907)" *Journal of Women's History*, 2002 summer, Vol. 14 (2), (Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. 2002) 29.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Bossler, "Gender and Entertainment in the Song Court," in *Servants of the Dynasty*. Edited by Anne Walthall. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 261.

<sup>5</sup> Bossler, *Gender and Entertainment in the Song Court*, 262.

<sup>6</sup> Yao, *The Status of Pleasure*, 30.

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As mentioned previously in this article not all of these entertainers were women. Some entertainers who were men also performed alongside with eloquent musical, instrumental, acrobatic and comedic skills. In the Song Dynasty these troupes with both gender performers were specifically known as the Entertainment Bureau Troup. “In some instances their numbers totaled more than 400+ entertainers of men, women and children who were under the eye of a dozen or more officials.”<sup>7</sup> Women however, became courtesans for all kinds of reasons. The first was so that they could bring fame and fortune to their families if they were admired by the emperor himself. The women were also offered lavish gifts, and training to further develop their specific skill set. Those who gained extreme favor with the emperor by supplying their talent and/or intrigue of themselves as a lady would receive precious gifts and riches. Since palace courtesans were all housed in lodgings strategically close to the Emperor’s bedroom, one can imagine that tensions among the women at times must have been very awkward. “This cloistered inner court was ran mostly like the other typical harems in Persia, and became the subject of rampant speculation and fantasy by those men civilians who lived outside of the outer court.”<sup>8</sup> House courtesans who lived with their wealthy high-ranking military or government officials were not only responsible for entertaining their masters with music and dance and their beauty, but they also provided sexual pleasure and companionship like the girls of the palace did.<sup>9</sup>

Gentlemen during the T’ang and Song Dynasties generally had one wife, one concubine, and at least one or more house courtesans. The first two mentioned were in charge of bearing a son, preparing meals and/ or arranging the cleaning assignments of the house to their servants. A house courtesan however technically had lower status than both the wife and the concubine because she didn’t have a legal marital bond with her master. She was bought for entertainment and emotional support for her master, which many times was conducted with sexual gratification to their man. A house courtesan could be dismissed at any time the master felt necessary, and many times house courtesans were given as gifts to their master’s friends.<sup>10</sup> In a sense they were like common slaves who were at the beckon call of a master, but who happened to live very comfortable lives. Concubines and wives of these wealthy men themselves were by law covered by their husbands. It should be added that the main reason for a

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<sup>7</sup> Bossler, *Gender and Entertainment*, 265.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>9</sup> Yao, *The Status of Pleasure*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

concubine to be thrown into the mix was to bear a male heir if his wife could or did not.

The main reason that these Entertaining performers were bought to begin with was to show off their physical beauty and special skills of song, instrument playing, dancing, poetry reading and composition, skits, and acrobatic displays to name a few. All of these skills were showcased at the royal palace, government banquets, teahouses, marketplaces, and in private homes and offices. The gentlemen who hosted these elaborate and important affairs exhibited not only theirs, but also their emperor's power and prestige to his court and beyond his empire. It also showcased Imperial hospitality among the Emperors military and government elite or his friends and family. Yao sums it up perfectly by saying, "merrymaking with courtesans apparently fostered an image of wealth and power."<sup>11</sup> In Schafer's book he says, "During the first half of the eighth century "Western twirling girls" would arrive at court clad in crimson robes with brocaded sleeves, green damask pantaloons, and boots made of red deerskin, skipped, tripped, and twirled on the tops of balls rolling about on the dance platform to the delight of the surfeited the hearts of the rich and noble."<sup>12</sup> Young aristocrats or scholars could even enjoy a night with one of these famous courtesans if he could afford the 1,600 cash price. Then she was all his for the night to entertain by dancing, music, and flattery.<sup>13</sup>

Civilians on the outside world, mainly men, fantasized and speculated about these courtesan entertainers who performed "inside" the court. However, common Chinese women did not like nor respect these entertaining courtesans because they were considered "debased persons" which was due largely to the fact that many of these courtesan women were available for sexual pleasure as well as other forms of amusement on a constant basis.<sup>14</sup> Chinese author and Poet Yuan Zhen had nearly 57 of his poems of "seductive allure" compiled after the fall of the great T'ang Dynasty around the year of 950, which was nearly ten years prior to the start of the Song Dynasty. In Anna Shield's 2002 article *Defining Experience*, "The Poems of Seductive Allure" which was published in *the Journal of American Oriental Society*, she has critiqued many of the Poet Yuan Zhen's work. It is through his work which shows what an exotic and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>12</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>14</sup> Bossler, *Gender and Entertainment*, 264.

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highly sought after commodity house, palace, or government courtesan were. An example of Yuan's work is this erotic poem, which is titled *Various Memories*:

*This year at the Cold Food Festival, the moon has radiance;  
Shades of evening have already crept upon my bed  
I recall Shuangwen-when I had achieved her inner (chamber)  
Deep inside her jade lintels, I sensed her hidden fragrance.<sup>15</sup>*

Anna Shields suggests this, “portrays Yuan’s attempt to point to the beautiful and ornamented surfaces of things- poetry and women included- and moreover suggests a kind of power or pull exerted by those “alluring” objects.”<sup>16</sup> Shields further argues that Yuan said, “Every time I encountered something that was different from usual, I wanted to make a poem about it.”<sup>17</sup> After reading through some of Yuan’s work, one could argue that it is considered to be provocative and racy for the times during the 800’s. But nonetheless Yuan is writing about a woman courtesan he was once with and remembered in vivid detail.

Poetry, painting, dancing, singing, instrument playing, rehearsing skits, acrobatics, pottery, clothing, music styles, even food, animal pelts and furs of all kinds all became highly sought after goods during the T’ang Dynasty in China. “It was a Golden age for its arts and with that came wealth and power to the land of china.”<sup>18</sup> These courtesan performers were very similar to the Geisha women of Japan and as previously mentioned in my article the harem women in Persia. They were alluring and sought after objects due to their skills mentioned above along with their beautiful disposition. Courtesans could have been in the Emperor of Chinas bed one night and performing at a government or military festival the next. They always had somewhere to be in order to entertain and show off their elaborate skill sets. These women were part of a historically golden age of Chinese art and will always be remembered as such, artists.

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<sup>15</sup> Anna M. Shields, *Defining Experience: The “Poems of Seductive Allure”(Yanshi) of the Mid-Tang Poet Yuan Zhen (779-831)* Reviewed work (s): Source: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 122, No. 1 (Jan – Mar.2002) 76.

<sup>16</sup> Shields, *Poems of Seductive Allure*,70.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,70.

<sup>18</sup> Britannica Encyclopedia Online, “Tang Dynasty”

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/582301/Tang-Dynasty> Accessed February 17, 2013.

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