Zeteo: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*

Of courtesans, concubines, & exemplary women

Men's ideas for women in another time and place

By William Eaton, in conjunction with Heather Luciano

Review of *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000-1400* by Beverly Bossler (Harvard University Press, 2012)

"This book, the Introduction explains, "traces changing gender relations in China between the tenth and fourteenth centuries by examining how writings about courtesans, concubines and exemplary women developed changes over that period." Some readers might come to such a book looking for insight into changing gender relations and the nature of exemplary women in our own time and place: i.e. in this twenty-first century**,** when the changes in this domain seem so rapid and dramatic. Beverly Bossler suggests, in her book's final words, that increased knowledge of this other, distant culture "can perhaps enhance our understanding of our own times as well." As for what meat the preceding pages have put on this thin bone, there are occasional passages such as this:

> [L]ike the new values for upper-class women, the new ideals for men can be seen in part as a response to a more open but also more competitive elite society, in which the widespread availability of commodified entertainment, especially sexual entertainment, was gradually reconciled with the demands of family survival and success. Just as the faithful widow's sexuality was

> renounced for the good of the family, the sexual energies of her [late] husband—even with his concubines—were now theoretically channeled to the production of descendants rather than to pleasure: the ideal man was encouraged to have concubines, but discouraged from enjoying them.

An energetic, imaginative reader could think of ways in which this model does and does not describe our own culture.

These preliminary notes point toward a basic fact: Bossler's book is first and foremost for scholars of one particular period in Chinese history. It is a work of careful scholarship and notable for its clear, jargon-free writing. It is meant to take its place among the work of previous scholars of the same period and to contribute to an ever-expanding and ever-deepening understanding of Chinese culture. Thus, for example, a reader will come across more than one passage like this:

> [Another scholar, Bertine] Birge argues that these laws reversed a Song [dynasty] trend toward greater property rights for women, . . . These views have been challenged in a review of the topic by Joseph McDermott. . . . The findings of this book support McDermott's critique, . . . I have shown that across the Song and Yuan [dynasties], and especially from the thirteenth century onward, a gradual but very broad cultural shift in China increasingly favored the interests of patrilineal kin groups, . . .

There is a faith or metaphysical belief underlying such an approach**,** that history is a practice not far from that of physical scientists. Knowledge grows with each passing generation as younger scholars build on or with the work of their predecessors, at times reinforcing these predecessors' conclusions, at times proposing new structures. With each passing generation, too, there is more data—more texts and artefacts—to examine and more sophisticated tools for examining this data. And thus our knowledge grows and grows, never quite reaching, and yet approaching, complete and unquestionable understanding of the phenomena under examination.

It is worth keeping in mind that this faith is hardly unquestionable. As Montaigne proposed long ago: « Nous ne sommes non plus près du ciel sur le Mont-Cenis qu'au fond de la mer. » We are not closer to heaven on the top of Mount Cenis than at the bottom of the sea. Or as E.A. Burtt wrote in his twentieth-century classic, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*: our metaphysics, as others' metaphysics, are "but the objectification of the

mood of an age, perhaps fitful and temporary, rather than the reasoned expression of the intellectual insight of all ages."

Bossler is a Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. Her focus has been the "High Imperial period" (from the Tang through the Song and Yuan dynasties: 618-1368), with a particular focus on the social, intellectual, and gender histories of these times. *Courtesans, Concubines*, she explains, began as "inquiry into women's literacy in the Song dynasty (960-1270); but when preliminary research demonstrated the importance of courtesans in the production of poetry in the period my interests began to shift." The Song dynasty saw the development of Neo-Confucianism, a "conservative moral philosophy that advocated strict personal moral cultivation and warned against the dangers of human desire." Bossler says she was startled, therefore, to discover how prevalent courtesans were in Song social life. Clearly the West has no monopoly on hypocrisy, but in China, apparently, with time, the women who had been providing illicit pleasures, and the pleasure of illicitness, became "domesticated" (as one scholar has termed the phenomenon). The women of the *demi-monde* were brought out of the shadows; they came to be treated like family members and to provide entertainment for the whole family and its guests.

Bossler is also interested in another large change in gender relations that took place during the Song period. A fidelity cult had arisen, with women being "publically extolled for remaining faithful". Shrines and monuments were built in such women's honor, and their biographies recorded. Loyalty included not remarrying and also, in some cases, committing suicide after their husbands' deaths. For example, Bossler cites an eleventh century epitaph written by a "conservative minister who was a prolific writer of inscriptions valorizing faithful widows." In the epitaph he praises the upper-class woman as "amiable, quiet, and filial to her in-laws." She was only 20 when her husband died, and her mother suggested she remarry, but "she cried and would not permit it. Her mother was sympathetic to her principles and did not force her." The minister goes on to say that the widow discarded her ornaments, dressed simply, and devoted herself to educating her sons, and this notwithstanding that they were rich and noble. "She began as a faithful widow and ended as a virtuous mother," the minister writes. "For a thousand generations her grave should be taken as a model." (Are we better off nowadays having TV shows rather than ministers teaching us how to behave?)

The period Bossler is studying begins with what has been called the "Tang-Song transition," a time of major demographic, economic, political, technological, and cultural change in China. As Bossler writes, beginning in the eighth century and continuing onward for several hundred years, the Chinese population grew and shifted southward, agricultural output grew rapidly, and trade and urbanization increased. The quasi-aristocratic ruling class lost power and the merit-based examination system for government officials became the main route to political success, while landholding and commerce provided the elite not only with wealth, but also with a new independence from the government. In addition, "the spread of printing technology and education . . . contributed to the dramatic growth of a literate elite class."

Readers can well imagine that such fundamental changes must also have profoundly affected gender relations. They also led to the production of the literary works—poems, biographies, funerary texts—that form the basis for Bossler's descriptions and analyses of Chinese gender roles. As she notes, and as is the case in many studies of gender roles in the past, *Courtesans, Concubines* is "more about men's writing about women than it is about the experiences of women themselves." The book might be said to trace changes in the ideas of men from an elite class—ideas for women and for how they should be and behave.

In outline, the book first covers "how the growth of commerce and the broadening of the elite contribute to the commercialization of women's bodies for entertainment and reproduction." Secondly, Bossler writes about how "the popularity of both courtesans and concubines spread throughout society" and the "proliferation of female entertainers caused disruption to families and government alike, . . . Moralists railed against the pernicious influence of courtesans . . . while both funerary inscription writers and judges in law cases increasingly emphasized the familial rights of concubines." The third and final section of the book describes how toward the end of the period being studied, during the Yuan dynasty:

> the talents and humanity of courtesans came increasingly to be appreciated by literati men, while the entertainment functions of concubines were even further downplayed. As the idealized role of concubines became ever closer to that of wives, an explosion of text production celebrated the fidelity of upper-class widows, depicting them now not only as models for the behavior of others, but as central to the expression and survival of Confucian culture.

This review is being written for a "generalist intellectual" publication, and thus we would stress that Bossler's book may be of greatest interest to those who enjoy history for history's sake. It offers the satisfaction of losing oneself in another culture, far from one's own. Readers are given a glimpse of Song and Yuan culture and a view into this period's government courtyards, literati hallways, and homes. Lovers of Chinese literature may especially appreciate the many quotations. For example, from one Liu Guo:

> At night, we head out to the emerald pavilions,
> Deep and dark like mysterious caves.
> The courtesans sing a thousand tunes.
> The guests mingle the sounds of the five directions.
> Lotus-white, the jade pendants tinkle;
> Yellow-orange, the gold piles up;
> Tipsy songs are free and abandoned
> And are no longer the "songs of Yue."

Or there is the more erotic "Watching Liu Yuanzhong's Little-Serving Maid Dance":

> The young peach hasn't yet blossomed; but the springtime feelings are deep.
> The green leaves on the tree-tips glint with faint pink.
> In your home the songs and pipes urge each other on:
> The fragile branch can't stand up to the flower-blossoming wind.

Appropriately for an academic book, Bossler also provides the Chinese characters of the original texts and footnotes informing readers of such things as that an "emerald pavilion" was a brothel, and that the "songs of Yue" meant songs of the homeland, which had been lost to invaders. The main text offers commentary such as that the erotic poetry functioned, among other things, as a vehicle for bonding between the men, who exchanged the poems and appreciated the sexual attractions of one another's concubines. "At the same time, in imagining the entertainer as the object of her master's sexual desire, these poems also invested her with somewhat more humanity than those that made her simply a decoration."

Although the book focuses on social relations and forces, Bossler has an eye out for psychological forces as well. For example, in the Conclusion she writes:

> Desire and romantic love helped to fuel the popularity of courtesans and concubines; affection for concubine mothers and grandmothers contributed to the breakdown in status boundaries; compassion for young women who died valiantly inspired early writers on female fidelity; filial sentiment inspired many a writer on faithful widows.

In explaining how certain stories "emphasize changes in social position, the power of money, and the importance of personal integrity," she adds that these stories' "popularity suggests new anxieties about social status, and about dangers posed by commodified sexuality to norms of personal and family morality."

Finally, we would note that, as Bossler's book traces changes in gender ideology over five centuries, it may have a calming influence on readers. The events and attitudes it recalls not only feel remote, they are freighted with time.[*] And this may encourage a reader to imagine how, a thousand years hence, the more recent changes in gender roles in the West may come to seem more glacial and less volcanic. In the future we may be better able to appreciate, too, how large a role changing economic relations are playing in our own, current gender-role changes.

William Eaton writes on ethics and the limits of human understanding, and is the Executive Editor of Zeteo. *Heather Luciano, now Regional Account Manager for Macmillan Science & Education and Chair of* ***YPG Cares****, was the first Managing Editor of* Zeteo*, as well as the person who came up with the journal's name!*

The image is from a blog about **Women of the Tang Dynasty**.

[*] *Bossler writes of the "*longue durée*" of her study. This has called to mind a remark of quite another historian, the late Lawrence Goodwyn (best known for* Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America*): "Long views are by definition remote, distant, and therefore tending toward a measure of calm. They are by no means inoculated against error, but they provide room for engaged reflection not easily found in the heat of battle." (As quoted in an interview published on Alternet: "****Lawrence Goodwyn: The Great Predicament Facing Obama****." Interview by Jan Frel, October 30, 2010.)*