Science and Technology and Social Development Proceedings Series

Article

2024 International Conference on Business Economics, Education, Arts and Social Sciences (EASS 2024)

Research on Lei Jin's Compilation of Notes on Courtesan Poetry

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Abstract: The three volumes Notes on Women Poets (Guixiu Shihua), Notes on Women Lyricists (Guixiu Cihua), and Notes on Courtesan Poetry (Qinglou Shihua), compiled in 1915 and published in 1916 by the renowned modern journalists Lei Jin and Lei Jian, contain significant areas for further exploration that have yet to be adequately addressed by prior research. Among these, Notes on Courtesan Poetry, most likely compiled solely by Lei Jin and differing substantially in compilation approach from the other two volumes, offers a valuable lens into Lei Jin's aesthetic preferences and the social contradictions of his era amidst a period of profound transformation. An analysis of Notes on Courtesan Poetry provides insight into Lei Jin's criteria for selecting works by courtesan poets, reflecting broader shifts in literary and cultural attitudes during the late Qing and early Republican period. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the evolving literary perspectives of modern Chinese journalists during this transitional era.

Keywords: Notes on Courtesan Poetry; Lei Jin; journalism

Published: 27 November 2024

1. Introduction

Lei Jin and his younger brother Lei Jian are renowned journalists in modern Chinese history. According to *The Gazetteer of Songjiang County*:

Lei Jin (1871–1941), styled Junyao, also known by his studio name Yuxuanshi Zhu (Master of the Yuxuan Studio), and pen names such as Yunjiandian Gong (The Madman of Yunjian) and Su'an Laoren (The Old Man of Su'an), is a native of Songjiang County. He resides near the southern end of Xiunan Bridge in the western part of the city. A cousin of Lei Bu, he earns the degree of *juren* (provincial examination graduate) in 1888 during the 14th year of the Guangxu reign. Lei is skilled in poetry and essays.

He initially works as an editor at Saoye Studio, compiling works such as *A Collection of Qing Commentaries* (Volumes I and II, totaling forty works) and *Yuxuan Essays* (sixty works). Later, he serves for many years as an editor at *Shenbao* (Shanghai News). An expert in local traditions and anecdotes, Lei is diligent in his writings, maintaining a lifelong commitment to literature. His family collection includes numerous regional manuscripts, giving him profound knowledge of local history. In 1917, he contributes to the revision of the *Gazetteer of Hualou County*, compiling the *Arts and Literature Section* and drafting the *Chronicles of Song* (initial version). He also documents significant events in Songjiang from the late Qing dynasty to the prelude of the War of Resistance Against Japan, published as *Selected Notes on Songjiang Gazetteer Sources*. His other manuscripts, including *Seventy Years of My Life*, *Fifty Years in Retrospect*, and a diary spanning 61 volumes, are of considerable historical and literary value.

Additionally, Lei curates works such as *A Grand Anthology of Ancient and Modern Poetry Criticism*. Other writings include an anecdotal novel, *One Hundred Peculiarities of Qing Officialdom* (a hundred chapters), and anthologies such as *Notes on Women Poets* (16 volumes), *Notes on Women Lyricists* (4 volumes), and *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* (2 volumes) [1].

2. Lei Jin's Aesthetic Vision and the Construction of *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*

Since the two are brothers, many works are attributed to both Lei Jin and Lei Jian as co-compilers. Such is the case with *Notes on Women Poets* and *Notes on Women Lyricists*, which are published in the same year as *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*. In the preface to *Notes on Women Poets*, Lei Jin (styled Junyao) explains:

> During the summer of Jiayin (1914), I suffer from a painful foot ailment that leaves me unable to walk for months. In my idleness and melancholy, I browse various anthologies of poetry, notes, and commentary on poets with my younger brother, Junyan. Whenever we encounter works by women poets, we transcribe them separately. Friends from all over also contribute to our collection, sending records of women poets or notable passages they have excerpted. Some contain only surnames, while others are accompanied by anecdotes sufficient to entertain readers. Each discovery is duly recorded with brush and ink. We do not restrict our selection by era or poetic form, though the collection primarily focuses on Qing-dynasty women poets. Occasionally, famous works from Yuan and Ming women are also included. After a year of effort, in the summer of Yimao (1915), the collection is completed. It comprises 16 volumes and includes over 1,300 women poets. Additionally, Notes on Women Lyricists (4 volumes) and Notes on Courtesan Poetry (2 volumes) are compiled [2].

Since *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* is compiled contemporaneously with *Notes on Women Poets* and *Notes on Women Lyricists*, the rationale behind the three collections' creation, as stated in the preface to *Notes on Women Poets*, should be considered applicable to all three. However, the title pages of *Notes on Women Poets* and *Notes on Women Lyricists* attribute the compilation to "Lei Jin (Junyao) and Lei Jian (Junyan) of Songjiang," while the title page of *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* credits only "Lei Jin (Junyao) of Songjiang." In the absence of other evidence, *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* is most likely the work of Lei Jin alone, rather than a collaborative effort with his brother.

The three collections' publication dates also warrant further examination. This article is based on lithographed editions of the three books. In terms of printing and binding, all the lithographed editions indicate on their title pages: "Printed in mid-spring of the year of Bingchen (1916)" and "Distributed by Saoye Studio." However, on the second page, only the *Notes on Women Lyricists* and *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* bear the "Saoye Studio" insignia, while *Notes on Women Poets* has an additional note: "Published in the 11th year of the Republic of China (1922)." It is clear that the three collections were completed in the summer of 1915 (Yi Mao year) and printed in mid-spring of 1916 (Jia Chen year). However, earlier scholars often concluded that *Notes on Women Lyricists* and *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* were published in 1916. Considering the close timing of their completion and printing, as well as the similarities in their lithographed editions, it seems more reasonable to date all three books to 1922 in the absence of other explanations.

Since *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* is most likely compiled solely by Lei Jin, it is both possible and necessary to analyze the content of this book to examine Lei's criteria for selecting works and the aesthetic preferences reflected in it. Neither *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* nor *Notes on Women Lyricists* contains an independent preface, making it necessary to refer to the preface of *Notes on Women Poets* to understand the purpose and criteria behind their compilation:

> From ancient times to the present, talented and virtuous women have often expressed their thoughts and emotions through poetry and lyrics, hoping that literati with a taste for fine writing would record some of their heartfelt works for

> others to savor and admire. However, without careful collection and compilation, these exquisite works would soon vanish, along with their creators' names, leaving no trace within a few decades.

Indeed, a review of *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* reveals that some of the selection criteria mentioned in the preface to *Notes on Women Poets* are also followed. Among the 124 individuals included in *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* are well-known figures like Su Xiaoxiao, Xue Tao, and Liu Rushi, as well as less familiar names such as "Miss Ji," "a courtesan from Huating," and "Red Bean Proofreader." Lei Jin's selection, descriptions, and evaluations primarily focus on the poetic talents of these individuals, consistent with his intention to "carefully collect" the "finest poems" of courtesans into a single volume.

However, despite these similarities, *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* also diverges from *Notes on Women Poets* in ways that reflect Lei Jin's differing aesthetic standards for courtesans and women poets. The most noticeable difference lies in the chronological distribution of the poets included. The three collections do not arrange the poets in chronological order, seemingly following the random order in which the compilers browsed their source materials. In the preface to *Notes on Women Poets*, Lei Jin states, "The collection primarily focuses on Qing-dynasty women poets, though notable works by Yuan and Ming women are occasionally included." In contrast, the chronological composition of poets in *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* does not align with this standard. Excluding those whose time periods are unknown, most of the 124 individuals are from the Ming and Qing dynasties, far outnumbering poets from earlier eras. However, the number of Ming courtesan poets is nearly equal to that of Qing courtesan poets, with Ming poets far from being "occasionally included"; they are instead a central component of the collection.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the popularity of poetry among Ming courtesans, especially in the Jiangnan region during the late Ming. It also reflects Lei Jin's aesthetic preferences. For example, under the entry for "Qiao Yunsheng," Lei writes:

> Qiao Rong, styled Yunsheng, was from Jinling. Though she lived in the pleasure quarters, she was unique in her refined character, delicate thoughts, and innate elegance, which left all who met her deeply impressed. She authored *Falling Clouds Lyrics*. In her "Replying to a Gift in Harmonious Rhyme," she writes:
>
> *Faded beauty in front of the mirror, dreams linger still; spring breezes follow your chariot everywhere.*
>
> *I pity my frail form, as delicate as flowers, yet rejoice in our shared bond under the moon.*
>
> *Not yet have I sung the ballads of Sima, nor danced in duet with crimson sleeves.*
>
> *A piece of mist floats far on the riverbank, leaving my worried brows untouched by a brush.*
>
> With such talent, how can she not rival Ma Xianglan and Bian Yujing?

An examination of Qiao Yunsheng's identity reveals that she is likely the same person as "Qiao Rong" recorded in *Fragrant Cough Anthology*:

> Qiao Rong, styled Yunsheng, was a courtesan from Jiangning, Jiangsu. She authored *Falling Clouds Lyrics*.
>
> *Replying to a Gift in Harmonious Rhyme*:
>
> *Faded beauty in front of the mirror, dreams linger still; spring breezes follow your chariot everywhere.*
>
> *I pity my frail form, as delicate as flowers, yet rejoice in our shared bond under the moon.*
>
> *Not yet have I sung the ballads of Sima, nor danced in duet with crimson sleeves.*
>
> *A piece of mist floats far on the riverbank, leaving my worried brows untouched by a brush.*

In the absence of new materials, the entry "Qiao Rong" in *Fragrant Cough Anthology* should be considered the source for the entry "Qiao Yunsheng" in *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*. Supporting evidence includes the entry "Lu Yaoxian" in the same collection, which states:

> Lu Yaoxian, her place of origin unknown, is recorded in *Fragrant Cough Anthology* for her poem sent to an acquaintance: ... (text omitted).

Not only the entries for "Lu Yaoxian" and "Qiao Yunsheng," but several other entries in *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* also bear clear traces of being directly compiled from *Fragrant Cough Anthology*. This shows that Lei Jin not only had access to the materials in *Fragrant Cough Anthology*, but that this anthology was an important source for *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*. The identification of "Qiao Yunsheng" as a reference to "Qiao Rong" is thus beyond doubt. However, in compiling *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*, Lei Jin added many subjective judgments and imaginative elements to the material from *Fragrant Cough Anthology*. These include descriptions without corroborating sources, such as "Though she dwelled in the pleasure quarters, she was uniquely refined, with delicate thoughts and innate elegance, deeply impressing all who met her," and emotional commentary such as "With such talent, how can she not rival Ma Xianglan and Bian Yujing?" These additions reflect Lei Jin's aesthetic standards. While his general praise for Qiao Yunsheng's refinement and talent can be seen as typical commendations for courtesan poets, the comparison of her poetic skill to Ma Xianglan and Bian Yujing is particularly notable.

This is not an isolated case. A similar evaluation appears in the entry for "Jin Su":

> In Shanghai, there was a courtesan named Jin Su, a celebrated figure in the northern pleasure quarters. She was skilled at painting orchids, creating the *Orchid Paintings of Tianxiang Pavilion*, and invited prominent scholars to inscribe poems for her works. She herself wrote, "The sentiment of the flower is like my own; encountering a soulmate, I bow my head." When a certain scholar encountered financial difficulties during his studies, Jin Su offered him financial support to sustain his efforts. With a heart as pure as an immortal and a chivalrous spirit, how could she not rival Ma Shouzhen?

In his compilation, Lei Jin frequently comments on these courtesan poets, comparing Qiao Yunsheng's poetic talent to Ma Xianglan and Bian Yujing, and likening Jin Su's chivalry to that of Ma Shouzhen. Clearly, Lei Jin regards late-Ming courtesans like Ma Xianglan as a benchmark of aesthetic excellence, with Ma Shouzhen being his foremost ideal for combining poetic talent and a chivalrous spirit.

Under the entry for "Ma Xianglan," Lei Jin not only praises her poetic talent but also recounts her life events. He mentions how she celebrated Wang Zhideng's birthday with performances lasting through the night, and shortly after returned home to pray, bathe, and passed away peacefully. Wang Zhideng wrote a preface for her poetry collection, highlighting her chivalrous spirit. In the entry for "Bian Yujing," Lei Jin provides similar accounts, describing her proficiency in painting and music, her clean and serene dwelling, and her choice to adopt the attire of a Daoist after the fall of Nanjing. She later shaved her head, lived for over a decade in seclusion, and passed away, being buried at Huishan Monastery. Wu Meicun wrote *Song for Listening to the Daoist Nun Bian Yujing Play the Zither*, and Bian herself left a self-portrait poem, both of which Lei Jin admired.

Although there is no external evidence supporting Lei Jin's descriptions of Qiao Yunsheng or Jin Su, the chronological arrangement of *Fragrant Cough Anthology* suggests that Qiao Yunsheng belonged to the Qing dynasty and Jin Su was likely from the Qing or even the Republican period. What stands out in Lei Jin's aesthetic preferences is his deliberate comparison of Qing and late-Qing courtesans with their late-Ming counterparts. He even emphasizes that the former are not inferior to, and may even surpass, the latter in both poetic talent and chivalrous spirit. This reveals a conscious effort on Lei Jin's part to highlight the excellence of Qing courtesans. Such comparisons further explain the differences in the chronological distribution of poets between *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* and *Notes on Women Poets*.

Lei Jin's evaluation of late-Qing courtesans naturally parallels his analysis of late-Ming courtesans, who also lived during a period of dynastic transition. Although Ma Xianglan and Bian Yujing were not primarily known for their poetic talent, Lei Jin's focus

differs from earlier commentators when discussing late-Ming courtesans who were deeply involved in political events.

For instance, the entry for "Li Xiang" states:

> Li Xiang, styled Xiangjun and named Zhenli, was a courtesan from Shangyuan and a famous figure of the Qinhuai pleasure quarters. Known as "Falling Fan," she pledged herself to Fang Yuchu, a scholar from Shangqiu. During the Southern Ming regime under Prince Fu, Ruan Dacheng attempted to recruit Fang into his government. Li Xiang strongly opposed it, and Fang did not comply. When Fang later served in the staff of Minister Shi, Li Xiang remained faithful. Hearing of her fame, the corrupt official Tian Yang sought to purchase her with a large sum of money. She refused and scarred her face to escape him. When performers were forcibly conscripted for the court of Prince Fu, Li feigned illness and refused to participate. After the collapse of the Ming dynasty, she reunited with Fang and became his wife. *The Collection of Regrets* includes a biography of Li Xiang, and Kong Shangren commemorates her in the play *The Peach Blossom Fan*. Her spirit and courage earned universal admiration. She once wrote an inscription for Lu Yunzhen's painting *Morning Boat on the Cold River*, stating:
>
> *The cool west wind clears the distant sky; mountains and rivers reflect like paintings in a mirror.*
>
> *Where is the old fisherman in the mist? The sun rises, and he calls his son to set sail.*
>
> Her brushwork is elegant and unrestrained, far from conventional clichés.

The entry for "Liu Rushi" reads:

> Liu, styled Rushi and also known as Miwu, was from Jiaxing. … In May of the year Yiyou under the Shunzhi reign, she urged her husband, Qian Qianyi, to sacrifice himself for his country. When he could not, she attempted to drown herself in protest but was rescued. After experiencing family misfortunes, she eventually took her own life, earning a reputation for her final integrity. Zhu Yizai wrote a poem on her portrait:
>
> *The delicate charm of the russet reeds, the sparse elegance of the willows,*
> *Reminds one of Lady Wenjun in her carefree youth.*
> *Who could have foreseen, after the autumn winds withered her leaves,*
> *She would end her days with a sacrifice for the scholar-official?*
>
> Her refined sensibilities and intellect are truly captivating.

In fact, even a comparison between the entry for "Li Xiang" in *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* and the depiction of her in Kong Shangren's *The Peach Blossom Fan* reveals Lei Jin's aesthetic tendencies during the compilation of his work. Lei refers to Li Xiang as styled Xiangjun and named Zhenli, equating her with Li Zhenli—who is often considered the mother of Xiangjun in *The Peach Blossom Fan* and other popular literature—though this claim lacks a clear source. Nonetheless, Lei's detailed focus on Xiangjun's steadfastness and loyalty is particularly noteworthy.

Similarly, in the entry for "Liu Rushi," Lei diverges from the common narrative that she was forced into suicide by the Qian family's oppression after Qian Qianyi's death. Instead, Lei adopts the view that Liu committed suicide out of love and loyalty for Qian. As evidence, he cites Zhu Houzhang's poem *On a Portrait of Liu Rushi*:

> *The delicate charm of the russet reeds, the sparse elegance of the willows,*
> *Reminds one of Lady Wenjun in her carefree youth.*
> *Who could have foreseen, after the autumn winds withered her leaves,*
> *She would end her days with a sacrifice for the scholar-official?*
>
> Available sources for Zhu Houzhang's poem are limited to two records [3]:
>
> *After Qian Qianyi's death, his descendants oppressed Liu Rushi, forcing her to commit suicide. Zhu Houzhang wrote the poem On a Portrait of Liu Rushi:*
> *"The delicate charm of the russet reeds, the sparse elegance of the willows,*

Reminds one of Lady Wenjun in her carefree youth.
Who could have foreseen, after the autumn winds withered her leaves,
She would end her days with a sacrifice for the scholar-official?"

Another record from *Selected Poems of the Qing Dynasty* by Shen Deqian provides the following:

Zhu Houzhang (styled Yizai) was a native of Kunshan, Jiangsu, who later lived in Jiading. He was a government student and authored *The Collected Works of Many Teachers*.

On Viewing a Portrait of Liu Rushi in Her Early Years at Banyetang[4]:
"The delicate charm of the russet reeds, the sparse elegance of the willows,
Reminds one of Lady Wenjun in her carefree youth.
Who could have foreseen, after the autumn winds withered her leaves,
She would end her days with a sacrifice for the scholar-official?"
(Note: The phrase "delicate charm" refers to Liu Rushi's courtesy name, Miwu.)

From these sources, it is evident that neither Guo Zeyun nor Shen Deqian, both of whom referenced Zhu Houzhang's poem before Lei Jin, supports Lei's interpretation that Liu Rushi committed suicide out of love and loyalty to Qian Qianyi. Guo Zeyun explicitly attributes her suicide to coercion by Qian's descendants, while Shen Deqian describes the poem as subtle and open to interpretation, with no clear stance on Liu's motivations. Shen's ambiguity suggests that he did not share Lei's view that Liu's death was an act of love or moral sacrifice.

It is therefore surprising that Lei Jin, who frequently relied on earlier accounts, ignored these interpretations and instead promoted the romanticized view of Liu's suicide. This selective adoption of sources aligns with Lei's tendency to shape his narrative to fit his aesthetic ideals, underscoring the subjective nature of his compilation.

Beyond its title, *Notes on Courtesan Poetry* encompasses more than just poetry in the traditional sense. For example, the entry for "Shu Courtesan" states:

A Shu courtesan was known for her literary talent, inheriting the legacy of Xue Tao. A guest from Shu brought a courtesan back to his household and kept her in a separate chamber, visiting her every few days. However, when he fell ill and his visits became infrequent, the courtesan grew suspicious. The guest wrote a lyric to explain, and the courtesan responded in rhyme:
"Pledging vows, exchanging emotions,
Every word becomes spring sorrow upon the page.
I should recall the emptiness of Buddhist texts—
Who was the teacher that taught this?
No tea, no meals, no words, no sound,
Leaving me forlorn and pale.
My longing is already too much to bear;
How could I spare the energy to curse you?"

The time of this story remains uncertain, but based on other sources, it likely originated in the Song dynasty. Although the courtesan's work is categorized as a lyric, it exhibits the straightforward and vibrant style of *sanqu* (a form of vernacular verse). While Lei typically praises the "elegance" and "melancholy beauty" of courtesan poetry in other entries, his inclusion of this lively and candid piece suggests his admiration for the courtesan's wit and talent.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*, likely compiled solely by Lei Jin, encapsulates his aesthetic vision and the cultural tensions of his era. Lei foregrounds the poetic talent of renowned courtesans while often highlighting the physical beauty and charm of lesser-known figures, reflecting a synthesis of traditional Confucian ideals and emerging modern concepts of the "new woman." His admiration for their independence and "chivalrous spirit" coexists with a reinforcement of traditional moral values, as exemplified by

his praise for acts of chastity and loyalty, including his interpretation of Liu Rushi's purported self-sacrifice. Through deliberate comparisons between late-Qing and late-Ming courtesans, Lei elevates the former's poetic and moral virtues, revealing the influence of his sociopolitical context and his own negotiation of identity and loyalty.

Lei's empathy for the courtesans' tragic circumstances and his appreciation for their responses, ranging from acts of withdrawal to religious devotion, illustrate the interplay between Buddhist notions of karma and modern secular thought in his work. While he demonstrates an openness to candid and straightforward expressions, Lei's overall aesthetic preferences remain rooted in traditional literary ideals. This duality underscores the broader cultural and intellectual tensions of his time, which are deeply embedded in the compilation and structure of *Notes on Courtesan Poetry*.

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