

NI YIBIN

*Mirroring Courtesan Culture:  
A Hidden Visual Source Unveiled*



In imperial China scholar-officials lived in a rigid familial and governmental hierarchy. The pleasure quarters were a refuge where they could meet multi-talented courtesans and transcend the pressures and responsibilities imposed upon them by Confucian society.

From the Song dynasty onwards, the flourishing courtesan culture of the lower Yangzi delta region became a symbol of the sophistication and refinement of the Han Chinese cultural tradition. From this the idealized “scholar-beauty” romantic theme in theater and literature drew its inspiration. By the late Ming period, economic prosperity and the popularity of woodblock prints made visuality a prominent aspect of the developing material culture. The image of the courtesan and that of her sisters in the governing class were interestingly blurred, resulting in a mutual appropriation of cultural skills as well as appearances.

Prof. Ni will illustrate his talk with a series of hitherto unexplained images on ceramic ware to show how courtesan culture influenced the depiction of women and the female-male relationship in popular imagery in late imperial China.

Ni Yibin (Ph.D., University of London, 1996) is Assistant Professor of Chinese Art and Culture at the National University of Singapore. Among Professor Ni’s publications are, in linguistics, *Listening Comprehension for Medical Students* (Shanghai, 1984) and (as a main collaborator) the *Oxford-Duden Pictorial Dictionary* (Shanghai, 1984), and in Chinese art and culture, the chapters on fine and decorative arts and on the performing arts in *China: The Land of the Heavenly Dragon* (Edward Shaughnessy, ed.; Chicago, 2000).

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