

# *Concubines and Courtesans*

Women in Chinese Erotic Art

F.M. Bertholet



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Chinese Erotic Art

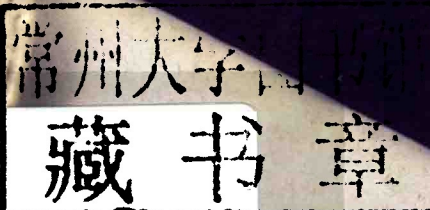
Ferry M. Bertholet Collection

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Unless stated otherwise, all measurements are given in height (H) x width (W) or in height (H) x length (L) x width (W). Unless otherwise indicated, all illustrations of paintings, prints, objects and photographs are from the Ferry M. Bertholet collection.

CONCUBINES AND COURTESANS





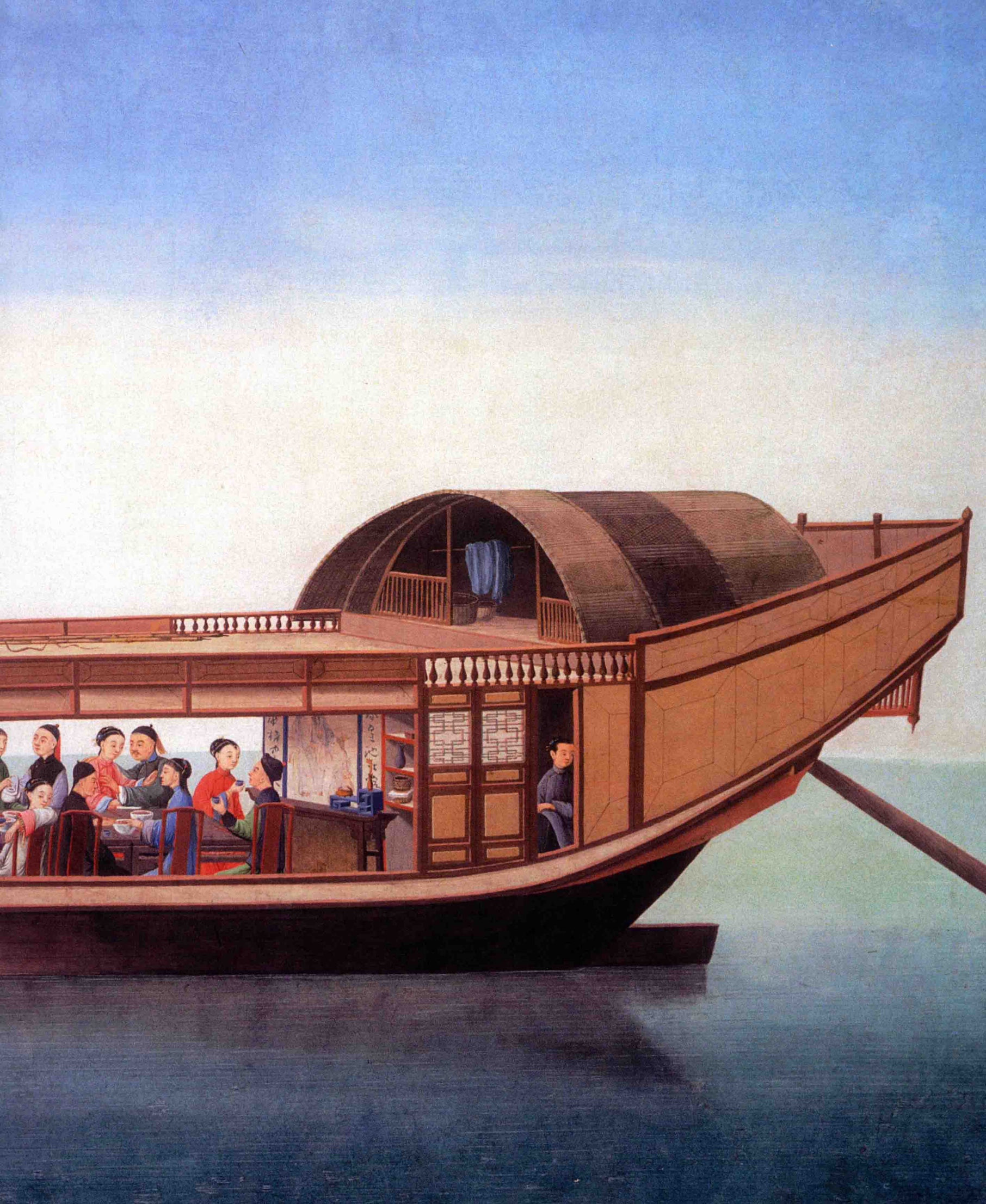


















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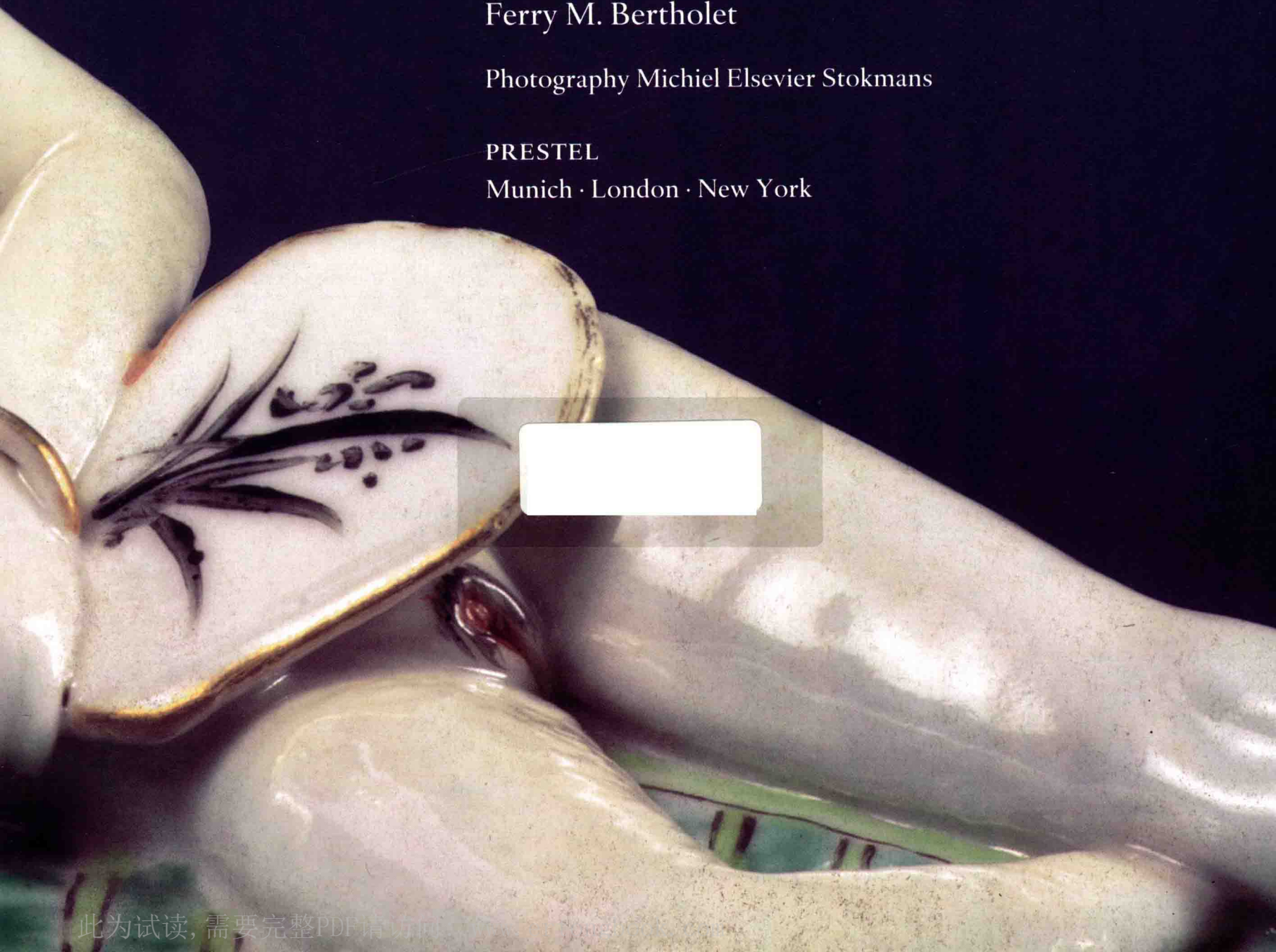
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# Foreword

Lovely, tender and seductive, is the ideal woman in Chinese erotic art. As if in a dream she floats on her tiny, slender feet and satisfies the wishes of her lovers. Artists and craftsmen have portrayed her endlessly on paintings and objects. Who was this woman and what was her world like? In books on art little or nothing is said about her, but the general cultural background is widely discussed, most particularly the classic Taoist philosophy which emphasizes the ideal balance between man and woman. Study of the works of art shows that they indeed give emphasis to harmony, tenderness and elegant pleasure, but how far this reflects reality is open to question.

For centuries the Chinese man from the upper classes looked for the woman of his dreams in the tea houses and brothels of the big towns. Only courtesans and prostitutes could, after all, offer him romance and sexual amusement, because respectable women were kept in strict seclusion, and their marriages were arranged by their parents. The lives of the 'fallen flowers', as public women were sometimes called, were not as rosy as the works of art make them appear; sadly they were often the exact opposite of the image portrayed.

*Concubines and Courtesans* offers for the first time a richly documented view of Chinese erotic art<sup>1</sup> and in so doing pays a great deal

of attention to the role of the woman. The Bertholet collection contains a variety of objects and paintings, most of which were made from the late Ming dynasty (1386-1644) up to and including the blossoming of Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this period, which was marked by fundamental changes in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, characteristic expressions of erotic art arose which were gradually permeated by western influences. In addition, all kinds of new materials and techniques were introduced, such as the famille-rose glaze and painting on canvas, glass and pith paper.

Photographs of brothels and their occupants taken between circa 1870 and 1920 will help the reader to have a better understanding of the Chinese culture of eroticism and will make comparisons possible with the world portrayed in the works of art.

The transcriptions are in the modern *pinyin* spelling, with the exception of historic place names and mentions of the Manchu population, for which the traditional spelling has been retained.

Ferry M. Bertholet







# History

## The cultural background

*She dusts the pillow, perfumes her red hairnet,  
Swivels the lamp and slips off her clothes.  
Her maids know the night will be long  
But no call means they may go home.*

Dai Hao, 6th century<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Chinese considered the act of love an inseparable part of the natural order. Making love was a sacred duty for every man and woman. Great importance was attached to sexual satisfaction. The family system was seen as polygamous; men of the upper classes might have concubines. Prostitution was interwoven in the social structure and there was a lively trade in sexually stimulating products. The fascination with the pursuit of the pleasures of love has led to a centuries-old tradition of erotic art.<sup>3</sup>

In order to come to a better understanding of the various aspects of this art, we shall first consider the three most important philosophies which determined social life in China. Then we shall discuss the curious tradition of the binding of women's feet as well as the social backgrounds and living conditions of the concubines, courtesans and prostitutes.

## Confucianism

Unlike in the Western world, there was in China no link between eroticism and 'sin'.<sup>4</sup> This does not however mean that the Chinese in the past were sexually liberal. They, too, had rules which laid down boundaries. In the course of the centuries all kinds of complex legislation, rules of decency and rituals in the area of order and public behaviour were imposed. These were mainly the result of Confucianist thinking, which owed its basic orientation to Kong Fuzi (551-479 BC), better known to us by his Latinized name of Confucius. The ideal was a return to the harmonious, feudal society as it was believed to have existed in the early days of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1100-256 BC).

Confucius wanted to reflect the way of thinking and interests of the good and powerful rulers of this period. The Confucianist system, which was introduced in 124 BC by Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 BC) of the Han dynasty as the state ideology, aimed primarily at establishing stable social relationships which would prevent violence within society. Virtues such as piety and brotherly love, obedience, justice, respect, loyalty, ancestor worship and the observation of traditional conventions were basic values which were necessary in order to maintain good mutual relationships.

Confucius argued that rules could only be followed if they were accepted on a voluntary basis and were practised from childhood. The moral example should be set by those who wielded power. Rites could only gain acceptance in society if they were first applied in the family. Hence great importance was attached to upbringing and family life. It was the family, not the individual, that was the most important building block of society. The source of morality lay in the respect of

Pl. 5 Inlaid box with a base of bamboo veneer, 18th century, 29.5 x 23.7 cm.