

# A Case Study of A Dream of Splendor (Menghua lu)

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**Abstract:** A Dream of Splendor (Menghua lu) TV series brings to life the Song's (960–1279) prosperity, especially women's business. So, this paper analyzes how and why women ran shops like teahouses or taverns.

**Keywords:** A Dream of Splendor; Song Women; Teahouses; Taverns; Sing-Song Girl Culture

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## Introduction

A Dream of Splendor was a smash hit in 2022, but actually it is based on Guan Hanqing's (c 1234–c 1300) play Rescuing a Coquette (Zhao Pan'er fengyue jiu fengchen) and its name is extracted from The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor (Dongjing menghua lu). Set in the Song time, the series portrays the deserted proprietress Zhao Pan'er, the tortured pipaist Song Yinzhong and the runaway chef Lady Sun. By trial and error, the three women finally ran a grand hotel, which proves the popularity of women businesses.

## 1. Business career

As the economy prospered, a deepening division of work prepared women for a business career.

Most women sold items, such as silks in Xu Ji's (1028–1103) lines

Weavers have never worn any fine silks

as they sell fine silks to buy plain silks.

These lines depict women's skill and toil. As Chen Daoren was blind, his wife became a mirror-grinder. A woman of eastern Sichuan "knelt selling wines;" "a woman often hawked pollen at the county yamen and won the head's favor;" a woman sold her homemade tea and a rural wife vended her garden's vegetables.

Some owned shops such as Ghosts Cave Tea (Yikugui chafang), Ugly Granny's Drug Shop (Choupopo yaopu) in Kaifeng. Also, there were brands like Granny Cao's Meat Pie (Caopo roubing) and Fifth Auntie Song's Fish Congee (Song wusao yugeng). Each brand blends its owner's name and a food.

### 1.1 Teahouse running

The three women reached Bianliang and ran a teahouse named after Bai Juyi's (772–846) line

A pipa in her hands and something above her face.

The first tier offered upscale tea and the second tier offered bulk tea. Besides, Lady Sun made bean cakes and osmanthus tea cakes. Even the teaware was rare. Zhao Pan'er's sky-blue teacup came from the Ru kiln in the Northern Song (960–1127). Emperor Huizong (1082–1135) wrote,

The blue sky breaks clouds after a rain—

This clear hue is perfect for teaware.

The hue became the royal color of the kiln. Besides, tea-whisking (diancha), tea acrobatics (cha baixi), etc are presented in the series.

Teahouses offered tea and a leisurely space. The Notes of Bianliang Dreams (Mengliang lu) says, "Wang's teahouse is named 'Ghosts Cave Tea.'" A storyteller was hired to boost its business and the shop name was inspired by "Ghosts Cave on West Hill (Xishan yikui gui)." The book also says, "A granny beat the drum thrice and hit the mug while going the clappers. So, everyone

laughed.” Zhuang Zhuo also said in the Collected Tidbits and Trivia (Jilei bian), “I went down the moat of Yanzhou, seeing a young teahouse owner in a pretty makeup and dress.” She must have been successful. When leaving, Ping and his wife asked their daughter to watch the teahouse. In brief, women held the key to running shops.

## 1.2 Hotelkeeping

As the teahouse was destroyed, the three women opened an Eternal Peace.

Hotel (Yong’an lou). On the opening day, lion dance, fire-spurting, etc brought the tumult to a climax. At the banquet, they wore garments like the Beating Silk Scroll (Daolian tu) or Ladies with Flower Hairpins (Zanhua shinü tu). Hence, dance and music thrived in the Song. In Zhao Pan’er’s view, the hotel had Primal Pavilion (Yiyuan ge) for nobles, Many Hills Pavilion (Qianshan ge) for all and Myriad Waters Pavilion (Wanshui ge) with a pleasure venue (wazi) where shows were available daily. The venue’s success arose from the women’s sharp acumen. Besides good foods and wines, the hotel offered popular songs. Even the hotel layout and women operation are reflected by the TV series.

Despite a stern policy, wine-trading boomed. Lady Xu’s family of Huainan had been in wine-making for generations. In the late Northern Song, there were 72 famous hotels, such as Fan’s Hotel. Yijian’s Record (Yijian zhi) argues, “In the spring of 1121, Ren Jiong went past a hotel and stopped, gazing at its fine decor. The granny boss walked out saying, ‘I’ll return tonight. Please look after our hotel.’ He saw a girl behind the curtain, stunned by her beauty.” This tale may be false, but indeed there was nothing strange about a woman hotelier. Also, Ye Shi wrote the Song of Lady Zhu (Zhuniang qu),

My thatched cottage lay adjacent to  
her tavern beside the long bridge.  
Her family had sold wine for three generations  
since the head quit the 10,000 hu salary post.  
Her mother-in-law was 70 and her son not young.  
Could there be a grandson to help brew wine?  
Buying a pair of white clay teacups in a lane,  
She thought it would fit her daughter-in-law.  
All her efforts came to naught  
when their business collapsed.  
Urban drunkards loitered at night  
as the bright moon sank northwest.  
Like the water flowing into the sea,  
the shop’s lees heaps crumbled to dust.  
She didn’t please her father-in-law.  
In a daze, she saw the ad banner wafting.  
As she ran the pub, the sales slumped pitifully.

## 1.3 Women singers’ business

The gifted pipaist Song Yinzhang exerted her powers. At first, she came to promote the teahouse. As the banquet started, the three women in Tang apparel performed a grand show with sing-song girls, judging from some texts.

Northern Song sing-song girls were grouped into palace singers (jiaofang geji), local singers (difang guanji), market singers (shijing siji) and home singers (jiaji). With the rulers’ support and prospering economy, such girls were seen in brothels or teahouses. Naturally, this paper dissects singers’ activities. A luxury hotel would offer hundreds of singers, judging from The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor, “Each virtuoso played some music in a teahouse or tavern;” “hundreds of pretty hookers crowded at the hallway, waiting to be called. Oh, they were fairies!” It meant a welcome. “Besides, girls singing at the banquet were called banquet singers (zhake).” Their activities separated themselves from operators and implied wishes of discarding their low status.

## **2. Chief reasons**

### **2.1 Advances in property inheritance rights facilitated such engagement**

Women's property inheritance rights were initiated in Qin and Han (221 BC–220 AD), legislated in Tang and Song and kept declining from Yuan (1271–1369) to Ming and Qing (1368–1911). The Song Criminal Code (Song xingtong) says, "If an aunt or a sister stays at her parents' home, this woman can get half of the bride price offered by an unmarried man; if a widowed wife or concubine is sonless, she may inherit what is granted to her husband; if his brothers or paternal cousins are dead, she may get the same amount of property as his paternal nephew. Besides, a woman may take her dowry if she marries or remarries."

### **2.2 The Song government enacted proper policies**

Women had run businesses very early. The Grand Scribe's Records (Shiji) says, Widow Qing ran cinnabar ores from the Warring States period (403–221 BC) to the Qin (221–207 BC). In the Tang (618–907), Fifth Lady Ko (Ko wuniang) and Auntie Yu (Yu daniang) emerged, but there were no policies. Later the Song government urged women to do business. "A woman rice booth at the fair should pay the tax of 1 coin if she comes from Yongzhou, the tax of 4 coins if she comes from Qiongzhou and sells round rice or 5 coins if she comes from the same place and sells glutinous rice. Overall, all the women are exempted from the taxes." "If a peddler makes piecemeal deals, a merchant or businessperson from Lingnan handles crude drugs or any commoner sells thick silk and none of their deals occurs in the market, they will be exempted from taxes."

### **2.3 The prosperity created many opportunities**

The prosperity created many opportunities. Meng Yuanlao said in *The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor*, "Hookers sang popular songs amid the pipes or strings in a teahouse or tavern. Besides, rarities and tasty dishes were available." Patricia Ebrey said in *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*, "It was about as populous as the T'ang capital, Chang'an, had been at its height, but was a more commercial city, dominated as much by markets of all sorts as by palaces and government offices."

### **2.4 Family poverty forced them into business**

Most businesswomen worked as per economic needs. The Song History (Songshi) claims, "Zhu of Kaifeng sold accessories to support her husband, but he drank and gambled with gallants. Later he was found guilty and exiled to Wuchang." According to Yijian's Record, as Dong Guoqing found him poor after resignation, his concubine invested much in flour-milling. "As seven or eight donkeys and dozens of hu of wheat were bought, she sold new flour every few days." Thus, she made a pile.

## **3. Main effects**

Song women were more active than Tang women. Tang's developed economy ignited women's interest in business while Song's proper policies made more women succeed.

### **3.1 Made high income**

Businesswomen, such as the concubine, made high income and mattered to their families.

### **3.2 Boosted economic prosperity**

Businesswomen are portrayed by the lines

As all the markets are built newly,

well-dressed women hawked temptingly.

The Song Business Tax Studies (Songdai shangshui wenti yanjiu) says that in 1077, the business taxes were 762 or so coin strings, over 1/3 of the agri-taxes. Increasing women in business paid more taxes and boosted prosperity and the prosperity brought them more opportunities.

### **3.3 Gained higher status**

As women succeeded in business, they gained higher status and desired self-expression. Yingying, for instance, spoke her mind openly,

Don't you see the weeds over the bronze camels east of Chang'an?

The gold and jade bits adorned your snowy horse  
when you were gallant 30 years ago.  
Now you are quite old.  
When could we drink the nectar  
and lie amid the rosy sunset?  
Zhu Shuzhen also wrote,  
I learned to paint my eyebrows,  
but to whom I lose my heart now?  
When the Moon Festival comes,  
I would have sent my lover 10,000 letters.

Patriarchy had ruled China, but Cheng-Zhu school pressed heavily on women. The quote “Losing chastity is worse than starving to death” and foot-binding led to fewer remarriages. Patricia Ebrey said,

My hypothesis is that whatever authority or autonomy upper-class women inadvertently obtained by the forces that escalated dowries and enhanced their education, and whatever authority or autonomy lower-class women gained from the growth of the economy, were counteracted by the growth in the market for women as maids, concubines, courtesans, and prostitutes and a general tendency toward the strengthening of patrilineal principles. However, such engagement had indelible effects on society.

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