This is the ninth issue of *East Asian History* in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. The journal is published twice a year.

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Subscription Enquiries
Subscription Manager, *East Asian History*, at the above address

Annual Subscription
Australia A$45  Overseas US$45  (for two issues)
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Cover picture From the photograph-album of Rewi Alley: “After tiffin, Henli, August 1930,” Kathleen Wright Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand
THE THIN HORSES OF YANGZhou

Wei Minghua 偉明鋶

Translated and introduced by Antonia Finnane

INTRODUCTION

Wei Minghua, a teacher at the Yangzhou College of Culture and the Arts, has devoted his scholarly life largely to the study of Yangzhou culture. The more significant of his many essays on this subject have recently been compiled in a volume published by Joint Publishers: included in that volume is a slightly revised version of the article translated here. The title, “The Thin Horses of Yangzhou,” is not self-explanatory. ‘Thin horses’ (shouma瘦馬) was a term used to denote girls reared specifically for the purpose of supplying Yangzhou’s market in concubines. The term came to be indissolubly connected with Yangzhou.

In this article, Wei Minghua considers the origins of the gendered stereotyping of Yangzhou, his native place. Over a thousand years ago, Yangzhou was a great and prosperous place, a centre of merchant wealth and high culture, much celebrated in literature and later in legend as well. At this time, during the golden years of the Tang dynasty, the central literary motif for Yangzhou was established. It came from the pen of the poet Du Mu 杜牧 who, in the midst of a life crisis, repented the years he had spent indulging in the pleasures of the flesh:

Ten years and I woke from my dream of Yangzhou,
Known only for cavorting in the houses of pleasure.2

In later centuries, other ‘dreams of Yangzhou’ were written which drew directly on Du Mu’s imagery, encapsulating the experience of Yangzhou as that of the hazy, pleasurable world of the bordello. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the clustering of salt merchants in Yangzhou succeeded in recreating a semblance of the grand city of Tang times. One thousand years after Du Mu, the poet and artist Zheng Bangqiao 鄭板橋 (1693–


3 The trope has been traced in Wei Minghua, “Xi Yangzhou meng da shiren: Du Mu he tade qiannian fengliu meng” [Analysing the Dream of Yangzhou: the great poet Du Mu and his thousand-year erotic dream], in Wei Minghua, Yangzhou wenhua tanpian, pp. 109–27.
Figure 1

Woodcut of a courtesan of the Qing period, by Gu Yunchen 高云臣. Courtesans, like the ‘thin horses’, were trained in the fine arts. In eighteenth-century Yangzhou, recruitment to at least one famous house of courtesans was based on the talents of the girls rather than on their appearance. See Li Dou, Yangzhoul huafang lu [Chronicle of the painted barques of Yangzhou] (1796; reprint ed., Taiwan: Xuehai Chubanshe, 1969), 9.16b (Source: Wei Minghua, Yangzhou wenhua tanpian, frontispiece).

1765) “dreamt of Yangzhou, and then dreamt that Yangzhou was dreaming of [him].” His verses make frequent reference to prostitutes in connection with his Yangzhou days.

The appearance of typical Yangzhou characters in geographical works and novels helped reinforce the images developed within poetry. On the male side these characters were salt merchants, whose wealth provided the basis for Yangzhou’s flowering in the late-imperial period; on the female side they were ‘thin horses’, singsong girls or common whores, all prostitutes of one kind or another. The merchants are usually characterized as either vulgar or decadent, fond of “music, women, horses and dogs,” as the Chinese expression has it—at once miserly and extravagant, canny and uncouth.

The prostitutes are not represented with quite the same contumely as the merchants. It would seem fair to compare them with the gardens and teahouses for which Yangzhou was also famous. They summoned up an image of the city as a place of beauty and pleasure, the poignancy of their situation simultaneously allowing the poetic imagination to range freely from eros to pathos. ‘Thin horses’, as Wei Minghua shows, were very particularly associated with Yangzhou, and his article identifies the major texts that described the circumstances of these unfortunate girls.

This highly gendered image of Yangzhou, developed in a literary context in which southern writings and southern literati were dominant, can be understood partly as a representation of the exotic. Yangzhou, both close to the south yet far from it, was felt to be different from the cities of Jiangnan. In Dream of Red Mansions, the heroine Lin Daiyu returns to Nanjing from Yangzhou, a distance of around a hundred kilometres, and is besieged with questions by Baoyu who asks of her: “What places of historical interest were there in Yangzhou? What were its inhabitants like? What were its local customs?”

Yangzhou was also a place of economic opportunity. Men crossed the river to find a job there when they could not make ends meet back home. There was an old saying dating from a time when the word Yangzhou actually applied to a vast area of south-east China: “If girding yourself with cash is


your aim, Fly to Yangzhou on the back of the crane." The imagined availability of the prostitute perhaps summed up the idea of access to power and wealth in Yangzhou while the word ‘Yangzhou’ itself came to be equated with the image of beautiful women with extremely small feet.

There was more to this image of the city than simply the power of a metaphor. In the late-imperial period the city’s population included a considerable number of sojourners who either sought out occasional sexual partners or actually set up second homes there. Such practices were common enough throughout China at the time. In Yangzhou, probably the wealthiest city in eighteenth-century China, young girls were exploited by profiteers to the full. Given the presence in Yangzhou of so many prosperous merchants, the number of extant texts making reference to ‘thin horses’ in particular or prostitutes in general should come as no surprise. When the merchants and the money departed, so did the number of prostitutes decline: in this, as in some other respects, Yangzhou was replaced by Shanghai in the late nineteenth century.

* * *

The present article is substantially concerned with a hidden history of Yangzhou, one which featured the procurement and sale of young girls for the sexual gratification of men of means. The author guides the reader step by step through the major and minor literary references to this specialised market, demonstrating its extent and its duration over time. At one level, his aim seems merely to be the critical exposition of a barbaric practice which history has done well to leave behind.

Although the texts have their own historical interest, to my mind the most interesting aspect of this article is that the author has identified the problem of silence reigning over a particular aspect of local history. He is not the only person in modern times to have drawn attention to the problem of prostitution in Yangzhou’s past. In the 1930s, the publication of Yi Junzuo’s Idle Talk on Yangzhou resulted in a well-publicised court case which centred precisely on the question of Yangzhou as a place which “produces women.” In the 1950s, the cartoonist and social commentator Feng Zikai reflected on his own ‘dream of Yangzhou’, a dream in which a middle-aged woman confronted his nostalgia for the romantic past by reminding him of the price that she had paid for it in blood, sweat and tears.

These writers had their different motives for referring to the issue of prostitutes in connection with Yangzhou. Yi Junzuo was frankly contemptuous of Yangzhou as a place and as a society. In depicting it as a place which “produces women,” he was concerned to highlight a negative example: for him China’s future lay elsewhere. Feng Zikai, on the other hand, was already living in that future and had to come to terms with the disappearance of a culture whose passing in some respects he regretted. He was prepared to embrace the modest, workaday Yangzhou of the 1950s as something more honest and dignified than the glamorous Yangzhou of earlier centuries.
Wei Minghua has grappled more closely with the issue of the past. His careful excavation of the 'thin horse' texts is driven in part by a scholar's curiosity. Other of his writings show the same attention to detail, the same detective's interest in the discovery of evidence. He has no interest as such in exposing the skeletons in Yangzhou's cupboard. On the contrary, he is writing about his native place, concerning which he elsewhere states: "Make no mistake: I love Yangzhou." But it is a place which, like the Republican essayist Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948) before him, he loves, warts and all. Like Zhu, he seems irritated by native-place chauvinism which in its most recent phase has been marked by a rash of articles and essays written in celebration of Yangzhou's glorious past.

Wei's scholarly exposition of the 'thin horses' is true to a general trend away from the celebration of courtesan culture. Between the eighth and nineteenth centuries there was a certain consistency in the way in which prostitutes and bordellos were used in the depiction of Yangzhou, each generation of writers building on the words of their predecessors in a progressive elaboration of the Yangzhou dream. The twentieth-century literature on Yangzhou shows the image of the Yangzhou prostitute being deployed in a new way within the boundaries set by nationalism and modernization.

In *Idle Talk on Yangzhou*, Yi Junzuo, a product of the new culture and new politics of post-Qing China, repudiated the Yangzhou heritage as being incompatible with the needs of the modern nation, and he did so in part through a hostile depiction of Yangzhou women as prostitutes. The book was written in the context of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1932, and the figure of the Yangzhou prostitute arguably provided Yi with the gender balance he needed for his simultaneous depiction of the Yangzhou male as a traitor to the nation.

Wei Minghua, who writes in greater detail and with greater accuracy about the traffic in Yangzhou women, does so from quite a different perspective but for a purpose that may not be so far removed from Yi Junzuo's. Perhaps the clue to his article lies in its concluding paragraph, in which he observes that after all there are two Yangzhous: one cultured, the other vulgar; one sturdy, the other decadent; one civilized, the other barbaric. In this he agrees with Yi Junzuo, who described Yangzhou as both refined and vulgar. But, concludes Wei, "is this true only of Yangzhou?" If this cryptic question is in effect asking the reader to reflect on the glorious history of China, then he, like Yi Junzuo, is writing about women and Yangzhou as a way of reflecting upon the state of the nation.
THE THIN HORSES OF YANGZHOU

Yangzhou is one of twenty-four places in China to have been designated a ‘city of historical and cultural significance’. One of the consequences of this has been that everyone and everything connected with Yangzhou now seems appropriate subject matter for an essay: Jian Zhen 善真, gardens, the ‘eight eccentrics’, dimsums, hortensias—in brief, if there is a subject worthy of an essay, someone seems to have written on it. This flurry of writings is enough to bring to mind the literary debate which arose out of the “Idle Talk on Yangzhou” case in the 1930s. But it is anyway difficult to envisage an end to essays on Yangzhou. The city’s place in literature was firmly established by Du Mu’s famous line: “ten years and I awoke from my Yangzhou dream,” the inspiration for centuries of poems, stories, novels and family lore.

Given the number of articles published in recent years, it is somewhat surprising that none touches on the subject of ‘the thin horses of Yangzhou’. Perhaps the subject has been avoided because people think it reflects poorly on the place. Although myself from this locality, I think such an attitude unwarranted. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of classical poetry referring to Yangzhou will be familiar with the mentions of the literary, musical and culinary achievements of the city but at the same time can hardly have avoided noticing the frequent references to eroticism. There can be no doubting the fact that such expressions as the ‘Yangzhou dream’, ‘the wind and moon at the Four-and-Twenty Bridge’, and ‘Sui Yangdi gazing at the hortensia’ are all intimately connected with the ‘mansions of Qin and the lodges of Chu’, that is to say, with the brothels of Yangzhou.

My interest in this was sparked by reading Cao Juren’s 曹聚仁 Myself and My World, in which Cao makes reference to an article written by Zhu Ziqing.
In his article, Zhu states in part that at the mention of Yangzhou, people immediately think of a place which “produces women.” Now, Zhu Ziqing himself grew up in Yangzhou: his house can still be seen there. Yet he appears to have had no reservations about mentioning this aspect of Yangzhou’s history. Unless people of the present are to be deemed responsible for the past, one might indeed wonder why the darker side of history should be passed over in silence. As Cao Juren notes further, Zhu Ziqing goes on to say:

I spent most of my youth in Yangzhou and never saw any very remarkable women around. Perhaps at that time women still rarely ventured out in public. But this so-called ‘producing women’ which has long been talked of actually refers to concubines and prostitutes. The word ‘produce’ is thus used in the same sense as in ‘producing wool’ or ‘producing apples’. The Dream Memories of Taoan includes a passage, “The Thin Horses of Yangzhou,” which documents this, but it is something of which I have not the slightest personal knowledge.14

Why members of the human species should be described as ‘thin horses’ is less immediately obvious than why they might, however unfortunately, be regarded in the same light as produce such as wool or apples. In Liang Shaoren’s Random Notes from the Hut of Two Autumn Showers we find listed various expressions incorporating the word ‘horse’:

The word ‘horse’ has more than one usage, but only two general meanings: one relating to number and the other to appearance. In the ceremonial game of toss pot 投壶, asking who won is ‘establishing the horse’ 立馬. In present custom, we play guess fingers with what is called a ‘fist horse’ 拳馬,15 the implement for weighing silver is called a ‘law horse’ 法馬 [also written 法碼], gambling chips are called ‘counter horses’ 賭馬, and keeping score from one to nine with a brush is called ‘striking the horse’ 打馬子. All these usages employ ‘horse’ in the sense of counting.16 When a carpenter assembles three pieces of wood with the top one at an angle, the crosswise piece on top can readily be cut with an axe: this is called ‘making the horse’ 作馬. The stool used in transplanting seedlings is called a ‘seedling horse’ 秧馬. In The Rites of Zhou it is stated: “The superintendant of the residence sets up railings and reinforces them.” This is glossed as a ‘walking horse’ 行馬. Further, the Buddhist images painted on paper and burnt after a religious festival are called ‘armoured horses’ 甲馬. And the place where land and water meet by the city is called a ‘horse head’ 馬頭 [also 马头, i.e. a wharf]. Further, on the three-stringed mandolin, the part bearing the strings [i.e. the bridge] is called a ‘string horse’ 弦馬. A chamber pot is called a ‘horsey’ 馬子. All of these reflect the appearance of a horse: ‘Iron horse’ 鐵馬 for the metal leaves under the eaves of the roof and ‘horse door’ 馬門 for the side door in a boat cabin are the only terms of uncertain etymology.17

Liang’s failure to include ‘thin horse’ in this seemingly exhaustive list of usages of the word ‘horse’ must be due to the rarity or peculiarity of the term. Nor can the term be found in recently-published editions of dictionaries such as the Ciyuan or Cihai. It is listed in the Taiwanese Greater Dictionary of the Chinese Language which gives two meanings: first, ‘an emaciated horse’; and
second, 'a term for prostitute'. This dictionary, however, provides no gloss on the term, so the reader remains unenlightened as to its origins.

What is repugnant in the past deserves to have been eradicated, but as a historian might note, this does not mean it should be obliterated from the record. One could say this of the 'thin horses'. What exactly are these 'thin horses'? Not only does a learned man like Zhu Ziqing say he has “not the slightest knowledge” of them; in earlier times people seem to have sought the origins of the term without a great measure of success. For example, the Qing-dynasty scholar Zhao Yi 趙翼 wrote a passage entitled “Raising thin horses” which reads: “Yangzhou people bring up prostitutes whom they sell as concubines. This is colloquially termed ‘raising thin horses’, the meaning of which is unclear.”

But that ‘thin horses’ refers to young girls taken in and trained to serve as prostitutes or slave-girls seems not to be in doubt. Zhang Dalai 張大來 wrote:

Many people in Yangzhou buy young girls from poor families, teach them to read and write, sing and dance, and when they are older they are sold off as slave girls for prices of up to a thousand taels. They are called ‘thin horses’. 19

This is a clear explication of the term. In former times it was basically sanctioned practice for wealthy men to take in concubines and buy slave girls. In large prosperous cities, there were not only introduction agencies where people made a business of buying and selling slave girls, but also training centres specially for rearing ‘qualified’ girls as slaves and concubines for the great households: these were the ‘thin-horse breeders’ (yang shouma 瘦駄者). Yangzhou was probably the most famous place for this. Why otherwise would Kong Shangren 孔尚任 have written in Peach Blossom Fan:

Now in the ancient palace of Wu,
The women’s quarters open anew,
And in Yangzhou the slender horses
Are one by one put through their paces.
Drums of Huaiyang, Kunshan strings,
Suzhou girls and Wuxi songs. 20

The early commentaries on the ‘thin horses of Yangzhou’ are from around the late Ming period. Wang Shixing 王士性 wrote:

In Guangling [Yangzhou], there are families who bring up slave girls, a practice commonly termed ‘raising thin horses’. In general this refers to taking on other people’s children, bringing them up and educating them, just as if they were their own children. Many of the most beautiful women in the country must be from Guangling. Their foster mothers train them in female propriety and the forms of politeness. The superior ones can perform on the zither, play chess and sing. The very best are accomplished in calligraphy and painting, the less able in embroidery and other female arts. In their readiness to serve a man’s wife and show deference to their peers, they are most seemly, neither flouting convention nor giving way to stupid quarrels. They captivate men’s hearts and minds. So men who want concubines all go to Guangling. 21
Figure 6

A rock from the Garden of Nine Peaks (九峰園). Yangzhou’s gardens were famous for their strange rock formations and merchants vied with one another to find artists skilled in rockery design (photograph by the author)

It need hardly be said that the ‘thin horses’ are selected from “other people’s children.” The phrase “just as if they were their own children” is rather more difficult to credit. It seems unlikely that people would have been willing to hand over their own daughters to be brought up as whores, except in the most extreme circumstances. And in undertaking to train these pitiable girls in the forms of politeness, performance on stringed instruments, calligraphy, painting and embroidery, the ‘thin horse breeders’ were hardly performing a charitable act.

In *Hunting in the Wild*, Wang Shixing’s contemporary Shen Defu 沈德符 includes a passage entitled “Guangling Harlots,” in which the circumstances of the ‘thin horses of Yangzhou’ are recorded in rather greater detail:

Nowadays men wanting to buy concubines can usually be found in Guangling. There are some who sneeringly refer to these women as ‘thin horses’ but I certainly do not. “A woman’s looks are her destiny”: this is Li Wenrao’s dictum. Among prostitutes and concubines, where are those from wealthy families? In fact there are not many remarkably beautiful women in Yangzhou, but there are people there who make a business of buying and selling women. Even officials and rich families keep numbers of girls for profit, and some raise dozens. They are taught deportment from an early age—entering and retiring, sitting and standing—so that in walking and greeting precedence is observed. Furthermore, they are taught to be satisfied with their lowly position, and to serve the mistress of the house. For this reason, the ladies of wealthy households might be jealous of girls from other places but nice to those from Yangzhou. The men thus enjoy peace at home. I was in Yangzhou for a long time and day and night saw the bridal chairs coming and going ceaselessly to the sound of drums and music. Furthermore, there were sometimes wealthy
visitors there in search of their mothers' relatives. Grief and joy were frequently to be seen at the one time. I also observed among those buying concubines many who did so on the basis of the girl's skills. This was really absurd. Those performing on the zither could execute no more than "Yan Hui" or "Plum Blossom." Those able to paint could produce only a few branches of bamboo. Those able to play chess could make only the opening moves. Those who could sing could render no more than a couple of bars of "Belt of Jade" or "All the Worthy Guests." If after the interview the women were asked to sing anything further, they were immediately embarrassed. There were also those who could write, which was even more ridiculous. If the visitors were officials the women would write characters such as  ‘禮部尚書大學士’ ['libu shangshu daxueshi—President of the Board of Civil Appointments and Grand Secretary]. If visitors were provincial graduates, the women would write ‘第一甲第一名’ [diyijia diyiming—first place in the first rank]. If the visitors were scholars, the women would write `解元' [jieryuan—top provincial graduate] or ‘會元' [huiyuan—top metropolitan graduate]. The observer would be amazed and thinking the calligrapher wonderful, would ask for her hand without suspecting the truth. On arriving home she would be asked to take up her brush, but would prove to know none but these characters. In these cases, the women were generally not of great beauty and would be instructed in other arts so as to be sold off more quickly. The gullible could not fail to be taken in. Only the very astute were able to see through the practice.\(^2^3\)

From this passage it is clear that those in the business of 'raising thin horses' were not only ordinary households but included “the great households of officials,” some of which “brought up several girls,” others “scores of girls.” The motive for giving them a little training in the skills of playing the zither, calligraphy and painting was nothing other than ensuring a “speedy sale,” so as to “recoup the original investment with profit.”

‘Raising thin horses’ flourished in the Ming dynasty and continued unabated through to the later Qing dynasty. Thus Xu Ke 徐珂 in *Gleanings from the Qing* states:

Yangzhou was dependent on the salt monopoly. By the beginning of the Tongzhi reign [1861-74] the wealthy merchants and powerful traders were no longer what they had been but the demand for sing-song girls and pretty women continued as of old. Hunting for powder and fishing for paint [i.e. searching out concubines] had become a firmly established custom. Older women from the locality bought up lovely young girls, binding their feet, painting their faces and coiling their hair. They controlled their eating in accordance with whether the girls were fat or thin and trained them in singing, dancing and to perform on stringed instruments so as to enhance their value. The daughters of poor families were put to this use. The practice was known as ‘raising thin horses’.\(^2^4\)

The ‘thin horse breeders’ could, then, be considered educators of a kind. In training the thin horses in female propriety and the forms of politeness, they provided them with a spiritual education which prepared them psychologically to be the willing slaves of their future masters; in “teaching them singing, dancing and the stringed instruments,” they provided them with an
Figure 7

"Carrying the qin" (Xie qin) by Huang Shen 黃慎 (1687–1779). Huang, a native of Fujian, spent a number of years in Yangzhou and like Zheng Banqiao is regarded as one of the ‘eight eccentrics’ (Source: Lu Hao, ed., Yangzhou baguai huaji [Collected paintings of the eight eccentrics of Yangzhou] [Nanjing: Jiangsu Meishu Chubanshe, 1985], p.39)

artistic education which equipped them with the skills to be competent entertainers for their future masters; and in “controlling their eating in accordance with whether they were fat or thin,” they gave them their physical education, which made them physically ideal playthings for their future masters. Such was this great educational entreprise.

Even more perturbing was the process of the thin horses’ graduation and obtaining a position. There were scores of so-called matchmakers or old wives who relied exclusively on the thin horses for a living. The methods and steps they went through in examining and selecting the appropriate ‘thin horse’ were detailed and thorough in the extreme—as rigorous as might be employed today in the selection of a ballet dancer. In the passage, “The Thin Horses of Yangzhou,” from The Dream Memories of Taoan mentioned by Zhu Ziqing, the process of selling off the ‘thin horses’ is described in detail:

There are hundreds of people in Yangzhou making their living from ‘thin horses’. If someone is thinking of acquiring a concubine, he should on no account let it be known, for once the news leaks out the old wives and brokers will all be at his door like so many flies around rank meat: he can shoo them away and they still won’t go. At daybreak they will be hurrying him out the door. The first matchmaker to arrive will be the first to drag him off, the others all trailing in her wake, queuing up for their turn to wait on him.

On reaching the house of ‘thin horses’, he is seated and served with tea. An old wife brings out a ‘thin horse’ and says: “Young lady, greet the guest!”—and the girl drops a curtsey. “Young lady, walk forward!”—and she walks forward. “Young lady, turn!”—and she turns to face the light, so that her face is displayed. “Young lady, show us your hand!”—and she lets her sleeve fall right back: her hand, her arm and her skin are displayed. “Young lady, look at the honourable gentleman!” She steals a sideways glance, and her eyes are displayed. “Young lady, how old are you?” She answers, and her voice is displayed. “Young lady, walk again!” She walks, holding up her skirts, and her feet are displayed. But there is a method to observing feet: if the sound of skirts rustling precedes the girl coming out, her feet will certainly be large; if her skirts are held high and she steps out boldly, her feet must be small. Finally, it is “Young lady, please withdraw”—and as one goes, another comes in.

In a single household, one has to view five or six girls: it is the same in all others. If a man sees the right girl, he takes a hairclasp or hairpin and sticks it in her hair. This is known as ‘staking a claim’. Otherwise, he produces a few hundred coppers as a tip for the old wife or the household attendants, and proceeds to the next viewing. If the old wife tires, there are many others lined up waiting to serve him. A day, two days, up to four or five days—if he is not worn out—will not have exhausted the possibilities. But once he has seen fifty or sixty girls, with their white powdered faces and their red gowns, they all look the same. It is like someone learning characters who writes a single character a hundred, a thousand times, without even knowing what this one character means.

The guest makes mental calculations on what he sees, but really has nothing to go on. He has no choice but to make some sort of move and just settle on a girl. After he has ‘staked his claim’, the household comes up with a red-
coloured bill on which are listed so many pieces of coloured silk, so many jewels, so many wedding gifts, so many bolts of cloth. The guest is presented with a well-inked brush to mark off the items. When he has endorsed the wedding gifts and bolts of silk as acceptable to him, the household pays its respects to him and he returns home.

Well before he has arrived, musicians and drummers are at his door, along with panniers of elegantly presented lamb and wine. Another moment, and the gifts, pastries and sweetmeats are ready, and musicians and drummers go off with them. Before they have gone half a mile, the bridal chair and lanterns, lights and torches, sedan carriers and bridal attendants, paper candles, sacrificial fruits, meats and sweet wine are waiting at the door. The cook arrives, carrying yet another load, so altogether there are vegetables, roast meats, dumplings, a decorative awning, pastries, tablecloths, cushions, jars of wine, crockery, dragon-and-tiger longevity charms, bridal largesse and money packets, a small choir and stringed instruments. Without waiting for a word from the bride’s end, and even without orders from the master, the bridal chair, together with the smaller chair for the relative who accompanies the bride, is off to fetch the bride. Amidst music and drums, lanterns and torches, the chair bearing the bride arrives back, along with the attendant chair. The bride bows before the alter, her attendants take their seats, the singers and strings perform, all is commotion.25

In Strange Things Encountered in the Course of Dalliance Li Yu sought to show off his talent for selecting beautiful women:

Once in Yangzhou I was choosing a concubine for a certain gentleman. There was considerable variety among the beautifully dressed girls who came before me. They all started off with heads bowed, standing until ordered to look up. One made no show of shame and lifted her head directly. Another was really very shy: I pressed her repeatedly before she would lift her head. Yet another would not lift her head straight away, only doing so after urging, first with a brief glance, seeming to look at one but not really looking, then resuming her posture before raising her head, waiting till she had been looked at, then with another darting glance lowering her head again. This is real ‘charm’.26

It is clear that ‘charm’ is what Li held most important. In the Compendium of Unofficial Histories of the Qing there is a comparable account:

Jiang Xiqi was the grandson of Lord Wensu. … He had a weakness for sex and had long since particularly enjoyed intimacies with tall women. So he had in readiness a long tape measure and those who matched its length were acceptable for his use. They were known at the time as ‘measured beauties’.27

Jiang, it is clear, was most interested in height. Both these accounts pale in comparison with Taoan’s, for in the buying and selling of the ‘thin horses’, face, hands, bosom, belly, eyes, voice...
and feet were all examined one after the other until the hairpin was fastened, at which point the basic transaction had been accomplished. For the completion of the business, one has to look to the results of the haggling between buyer and seller, which was conducted on the basis of “so many pieces of coloured silk, so many jewels, so many wedding gifts, so many bolts of cloth.” The comparison with a livestock market, with people buying and selling mules and horses, is compelling.

Although the term ‘thin horses’ originated in Yangzhou, from the time of the Qing dynasty there was no want of imitations in the so-called ‘flourishing’ areas of Jiangnan. For example in the Qianlong period one Shi Yunyu of Wu county, wrote a poem entitled “The Thin Horse Market”:

What a hardship when the horse you breed is thin;  
What a hardship when the girl you raise is plain!  
For a thousand strings of cash, the steed is sold;  
For a lovely girl the rich pay more in gold.  
Suzhou girls but three or five—they look so sweet  
With eyebrows trimmed and little crippled feet.  
A look will cost one thousand cash at least,  
Ten thousand and she’ll serve you at a feast.  
The parents talk of money, not the match:  
A lousy Handan merchant gets her for his catch.  
A bird of prey, the go-between—she matches high with low:  
A bird of paradise, the girl; the merchant but a crow.  

Shen Qingrui of Changzhou also wrote a poem called “The Thin Horse Market.” The preface states: “Depraved matchmakers in Suzhou take in and raise the daughters of poor families, holding them as rare commodities. This is called ‘raising thin horses’. I have written a poem lamenting this.”

The poem reads as follows:

Figure 9

A late-Qing copy of a painted barque (huafang) or pleasure craft standing before the Rainbow Bridge, which marked the starting point for a tour of the famous sites of Yangzhou’s Thin West Lake (瘦西湖). Prostitutes frequented the lake in distinctive boats and exchanged pleasures with potential clients—or were abused by them (photograph by the author)
You ought not raise a skinny horse:  
It should be nice and plump.  
And for a girl, you like to have  
A beauty, not a frump.  
Even though a horse be thin,  
It can still be mounted,  
But in a girl a plain face  
Cannot be surpassed.

First comes the crafty go-between saying: "I've the skill to make the plain pretty. If you will, your daughter can be raised by me. I'll teach her dress and make-up, to read and write and play upon the strings. A year or two and she'll look grand. If she doesn't marry, you can ask me to sup, but when she's married off you must pay up.

An official comes to buy a concubine: the noise of horse and carriage fills the streets. He enters, takes a seat, and she comes out: curtsies deeply, and again, and then stands up. He asks her age: fifteen will not do, and even thirteen is too old. The matchmaker sings her praises, though falsely, and the village whore becomes a fairy queen. Ugly Lack-o'-salt, the lovely Xizi,—he cannot tell apart.  

Though pa and ma are first to get the money,  
The go-between is very quick to come:  
"Before she's wed," she says, "ask me to sup,  
But when she's married off you must pay up."

With interest it will clearly be hundreds or thousands; you must certainly pay, and without delay.

Off with the money the matchmaker goes,  
The parents weep and curse,  
They money they got from selling their girl,  
All gone to the matchmaker's purse:"

How repulsive the matchmaker, how hateful the official, how pathetic the parents and how pitiable the girl—all could be said to leap off the page. This poem suggests just how flourishing the trade in 'thin horses' was in Jiangnan. On coming to the late Qing, we find a couplet written by Zhang Nanzhuang of Shanghai:

To earn yourself a bowl of rice,  
Get yourself mounted on a thin horse. 

Further, in flourishing, commercialized Jiangnan, there were from early on people skilled in malpractice in the 'thin horse' business. In the Kangxi period [seventeenth century], Gong Wei 龔燧 of Kunshan included in his Chaolin Writings a passage on "Thin Horses and White Ants":

Among the people of my district are those who take in women, adorn them with cosmetics and jewels and sell them off as concubines. They are called 'thin-horse breeders'. The residents of these households are called 'white ants' because they neither sew nor spin. The two operate in concert, so someone intent on buying a concubine hastens along to them to make his choice. If a
girl takes his fancy, her price shoots up. Otherwise he has to pay a small gratuity; this is called 'showing the money'. Accordingly, there is the occasional idle drifter who just undertakes to 'show the money' but is then moved by lust to make a choice. And the 'thin-horse breeder', hastily urging the 'ants' forward, does so with manifold deceits. In revealing the girl's looks, she changes the ugly for the beautiful; she conceals age, making the woman out to be a girl. It even happens that with much sounding of drums and music, the girl is seen off to the boat, the gleeful retinue talking deceitfully of a blushing bride, but the union never takes place. With the excuse that luggage has been left behind, the matchmaker ascends the bank and makes good her escape. The victim of the fraud rushes to claim his prize, lifts the veil for a look, and it is nought but a clay mannikin in full dress! When he turns to look, the retinue has dispersed. He goes back to take up the matter, but the neighbours all say that the house was just temporarily rented the previous night, and they know not where the people have gone. He wants to take it to law, but has no name to put forward. All he can do is vent his wrath. This sort of fraud is common practice.32

Again, in Night Rain and Autumn Lights Xu an Ding of Tianchang, active in the Tongzhi-Guangxu period [mid- to late-nineteenth century], wrote as follows:

A gentleman of high position gathered together his wealth and went to Suzhou to buy a concubine. The matchmakers summoned dozens of girls but none took his fancy. Then an old woman who had been following him around came up and said: "Master sets his sights high, choosing none of these women. Miss Precious Spirit, of my aunt's family, cannot fail to please him, but she prizes herself and her price will be high." On hearing this, the gentleman said: "If she is truly beautiful, how can price be an obstacle? I only fear that the reality will not match her reputation. Bring the young lady along and let me have a look." The old woman smiled and said: "I know the master just likes looking at thin horses, inviting them along for his inspection and then not partaking of the repast. How could I be willing to send off this lovely young girl to be looked at by someone?" The gentleman apologized and said he would like to go together with her to pay a call. The old woman said: "I will try having a word. I don’t know whether or not she will agree." The gentleman was willing to pay her well, so the old woman went to ask the girl if she would consider him.

After five or six days the gentleman was getting tired of waiting when the old woman came along elatedly and said: "Depend on me, there is no cause for despondency. She is willing to meet with the master." Accordingly, he went to see her. The girl greeted him with a curtsey and then withdrew. She was graceful of
bearing and lovely of face. The gentleman completely lost his heart to her. Then on hearing the jangle of her zither, the sweet chirp of her chatter, the melody of her song, he became more and more besotted. With some urgency, he asked the price. The old woman hastily covered his mouth, pulled him outside and said: “Master is mistaken. The matter of this girl should not be treated heedlessly. You must ask to take her as a secondary wife, only then, since her father is greedy and ambitious, might you persuade him. When she arrives at your place, she will just have to put up with the distinctions between wife and concubine.” Then she added: “The betrothal will cost only one thousand taels. The girl needs clothes and jewellery, and on top of that a decorated sedan chair to receive her. If one of these is lacking, your proposal will not succeed.”

The gentleman, still quite beside himself, followed all these instructions. So the marriage contract was drawn up, the bride price paid, lots cast, and the bride sent for. The gentleman hired a grand barque to serve as the bridal chamber, desiring to repeat the story of Fan Luo and Xizi travelling the five lakes. He also purchased a slave girl to wait upon them. On the day, the decorated sedan chair arrived, the bride entered the cabin supported by the old woman and the slave girl, then the old woman took advantage of the commotion and slipped away. The gentleman removed the veil over the bride’s face: her expression was glowing, but she neither moved nor spoke. Desiring to take her to the nuptial couch, the gentleman dismissed the slave girl and took her unto his arms. The bride lost her footing, but made no sound. He took a light and shone it upon her—and before him was nothing but the wooden image from some temple! He hastily sent a messenger to the girl’s house, but the door was locked. He called on all the neighbours but they said: “The family just happened to take this house for the purpose of marrying off their daughter. They have already sent the girl off, and now we do not where they are.” He made inquiries of all the matchmakers, but none knew the old woman. Calculating that he had spent more than a thousand taels, he was left with no recourse but to return home in disappointment, his coarse little slave girl in tow.34

This sort of fraud is also known in the north, where it was referred to as ‘diddling’ (chuo baoer). The Ming writer Lu Rong of Miscellaneous Notes from the Garden of Pulses, states:

In the capital there was a woman who was married off to a man from out of town. His first sight of her was of a beautiful woman coming out to greet him with a curtsy, but come the marriage he found an ugly girl had been placed in her stead. This is known as ‘a diddle’.35

Although there were ‘thin horses’ in Jiangnan, the ‘thin horses of Yangzhou’ had their distinctive characteristics, which like the city of Yangzhou itself were “both refined and vulgar”—to quote an expression used by Yi Junzuo in Idle Talk on Yangzhou. “Yangzhou,” wrote Mr Yi, “is more than any other a place with resonances for people. Virtually everyone who likes travelling to scenic spots, or has literary ability, hankers after Yangzhou. Not only this, Yangzhou is also a salt-producing area, and thus wealthy salt...
merchants congregate there. Further, Yangzhou is a place which produces women, and this attracts dilettantes and sensualists.”36

The loftiness of the scholar mixed with the profanity of the merchant, the beauty of the scenery alongside the equalitiveness of human society—this is an accurate enough representation of the Yangzhou of that time. From this Yi Junzuo concluded that Yangzhou was “both refined and vulgar,” writing: “We do not have to examine the geography of this at once refined and vulgar place: a glance at its history and a survey of its present circumstances will be sufficient to adjudge its real worth.” Although many Yangzhou people feel no great affection for Yi Junzuo, I consider this description of Yangzhou as “both refined and vulgar” a singularly perceptive one.

And is it not? Raising thin horses is trading in human beings: this is vulgar. But then such elegant designations are applied to the bodies of the ‘thin horses’. Thus during the Qing, Fei Xuan 費軒 in his “Fragrant Verses of the Yangzhou Dream” intoned:

Marvellous Yangzhou!  
I recall the chief households:  
The girls with hair like beetle wings,  
In the ‘apricot leaf’ style—  
Or four locks combed up into an orchid flower  
Married off and gone to distant parts,  
They broke their hearts with grieving.37

The author commented: “Poor families who identified their daughters by a certain coiffure were called ‘Head Households’, or were said to be ‘breeding thin horses’. Apricot Leaf, Plum Flower, Daoist Cap—these all denoted different hairstyles. Orchid Flower Heads had their hair divided in four parts at the temples and combed to resemble an orchid, hence the name.” What with the apricot leaves, plum flowers and orchids, all vulgarity had been refined out of sight.

While trading is taken as ‘vulgar’, ‘raising thin horses’ could be viewed as stylish and celebrated in verse. It is even the subject of some quite well-known poems. In the Qing, Jin Zhi 金直 wrote not without some pride about his uncle:

My uncle Xuan Dao was early known for his talent. He wrote thirty stanzas of the Bamboo Verses of Guangling, one of which was on everyone’s lips:  
At thirteen she’s painting and studying chess,  
At fourteen, it’s music and verse.  
Who cares about talk of ‘raising thin horses’?  
The girl’s an adornment to the family house!38

The bamboo verses of Yangzhou are well known: many people wrote them, so they became widespread. Jin’s Bamboo Verses of Guangling were not of course to be found among the classics. It was just this verse with its mention of ‘raising thin horses’ which “was on everyone’s lips” refined to the point of vulgarity.
The business of refined yet vulgar, vulgar yet refined, does not stop here. Take the famed Thin West Lake of Yangzhou, of which Zhe Ziqing, in his essay *Summer Days in Yangzhou*, wrote:

Half the pleasure of a Yangzhou summer is to be found on the water—what people refer to as the “Thin West Lake.” The name is derived from West Lake, but it is really far too ‘thin’—refined to the point of vulgarity. Frankly, I don’t like it.39

If the thinness of West Lake can so discompose someone, what then of the thinness of ‘horses’?

What are the origins of the term ‘thin horse? Cui Lu 崔魯 in *Diary of a Changan Spring*:

The traveller laughs at himself, and doesn’t return.
How sad to ride a thin horse, humming on one’s own.

Tang Yanqian 唐彦謙 in “Changling”:

Mounted on a thin horse, this scholar of great renown
Takes a last look at the city of Wei beneath the setting sun.

Su Shi 苏轼 in “Parting from Zi You on Horseback at West Gate, Zhengzhou”:

I will think of you in the bitter cold, with your furs worn thin
Riding alone on a thin horse beneath a waning moon.

Chao Chongzhi 晁冲之 in “Morning Journey”:

Ambition departs with age: now I desire
To mount a thin horse, and travel the long road.40

Qiao Ji 喬吉 in “Leaning on the Rail: on Jinling Road”:

Thin horses carry poems to distant parts;
In the village, the weary crows sound sad.”41

Ma Zhiyuan 马致远 in “Sands of Tianjing: an Autumn Reflection”:

Rotting fences, aged trees, the dusty crows;
A small bridge, households where the water flows;
A thin horse on the ancient road: the west wind blows.42

The term “thin horses” used in these examples generally refers to actual thin horses. Not so Bo Juyi’s 白居易 “Regrets”:

Do not feed thin colts
Do not teach young whores
It’s clear what will happen:
If in doubt, sirs, look around
The fattened horse gallops away,
The grown whore can sing and dance.
After three years, before five harvests,
I hear a new master has been found.
Let me ask the masters, new and old,
Which one is happy, and which bitter?
Take a pen, sirs, and on a large sash
Please set these words down,43

40 All cited in Zhongwen da cidian [Dictionary of Chinese literature], vol 22, p.329. (I am indebted to Victor Cheng for help with the translation of this and the preceding three passages.)
43 Bo Juyi ji [Collected works of Bo Juyi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1979), vol 2, juan 21, p.469.
This poem not only explicitly refers to ‘raising thin horses’ but also mentions ‘thin horses’ alongside ‘young whores’. There would seem to be little doubt that the term has its origins here.

But there is no real necessity for this sort of exhaustive etymological research, for regarding the female sex as horseflesh is an ancient and widespread phenomenon. Women are referred to among some unenlightened peoples as mere ‘beasts of burden’. In “The Ballad of Han Peng,” from the Dunhuang manuscripts, the virtuous wife is described as weeping for Han Peng and citing the line “One horse cannot wear two saddles, one woman cannot serve two husbands.” In Love Songs and Secret Lore of Cangyangjiala, there is a poem which goes:

Although a wooden boat has no heart,
A horse’s head can turn to look at one.
But my unfeeling sweetheart
Will not deign to turn her face towards me.

In the Ming play The Phoenix and the Hairpin, Huang Sheng leads off on the topic of “loving the lass and swapping the horse” by intoning:

By the feed trough his beast, by the pillow his wife,
He mounts them in turn, as day follows night.
If his woman he chooses to swap for a nag,
At night he might mix up his horse with his hag.

Xu Ke glosses the expression ‘leaping the feed trough’ thus: “Leaping the feed trough was originally used in reference to prostitutes who wantonly take their instruments from one boat to the next; the allusion is to horses going from one trough to the next to take food or water.”

It is said that in ancient Greece, the philosopher Socrates married a formidable woman. When asked why, he replied: “The finest horseman likes to ride a spirited steed. For the same reason, I have taken a fiery wife.” This is probably the earliest instance in Western literature of women being compared to horses. Among Chinese people to the present day, there is a saying: “The wife I won and the horse I bought: I mount them and I beat them both.” Strangest of all, in Yangzhou patois the expression for ‘taking a wife’ is still ‘taking a horse’.

For a long period in the evolution of human society, women have undoubtedly been seen as horses for men to ride. The use of the word ‘mount’ in reference to ‘mounting a woman’ carries deep resonances. The addition of the word ‘thin’ to horse gives expression to the desire for the fragile beauty fashionable in the Ming and Qing dynasties, but this word also has a descriptive realism: with body and heart alike shrivelled and so many tears of misery shed, how could they but be thin?

Why is it that this perverted practice was especially prevalent in Yangzhou? According to Xu Qianfang, the reason lay in the low sex ratio. In A Brief Account of Yangzhou Customs he quotes Zhang Dalai’s description...
of the ‘thin horses’, cited above, noting it served only to give weight to hidebound attitudes. He goes on:

The ancients wrote of Yangzhou that “for every two men there were five women [wu nu er nan],” so the practice of selling girls flourished. In the Ming Dynasty, many men purchased concubines in Yangzhou: these were known as ‘thin horses’. Nowadays the little daughters of humble families become concubines when they grow up, a custom which is difficult to prohibit. But this does not entail the purchase of girls. There are still some people who actually buy young girls, but they are limited to professional procuresses. The latter are commonly said to be from Yangzhou, and there seems to be some truth in this.49

To posit the sex ratio as a reason for the sale of women is certainly an explanation of sorts, but this can hardly be the most significant reason. From the Sui-Tang period through to the Ming and Qing dynasties, Yangzhou was consistently important as a centre of government, economy and culture. There can be no argument that this made it a great and flourishing place, but these same factors were also responsible for deep misery. Much has been said of Yangzhou's prosperity, but this is only one aspect of the city’s history. Who knows how many ‘daughters of poor families’ were being humiliated and abused while men of letters sentimentally intoned lines such as “Under the heavens on a moonlit night, Yangzhou gets two-thirds the light,”50 or “The Guangling beauties' fragrance rises even to the skies, And Heaven's flowers, irritated, envy them their charm?” Who knows how many unhappy stories along the lines of ‘raising thin horses’ were then being lived out?

But “moonlit nights” and “Guangling beauties” are certainly not all of Yangzhou. For a glimpse of the real Yangzhou we can turn to the local gazetteers, edited by officials. Even here, however, there is no possibility of concealment. The following passage is from the Gazetteer of Yangzhou Prefecture.

In this locality there are rascals who seek to make a profit from buying up young girls from poor families with few moral principles. Their aim is to dress them up, train them in the various arts of singing, dancing, writing, painting and sell them at a profit to matchmakers for marrying off to wealthy merchants and travelling officials. They may first be had for no more than ten or so strings of cash, but on marriage the price suddenly goes up to many hundreds. Poor families, observing the profits, do not hesitate to thrust their own daughters into the business. For this reason,
merchants and travelling officials desiring to purchase a concubine all talk of Yangzhou: the deer comes and the flies gather, flooding the market. Frequently there are cases where someone pretends she is a matchmaker and then fraudulently registers the girl as a musician. Of all degraded customs, none is as bad as this.\footnote{Chongxiu Yangzhoufu zhi [Gazetteer of Yangzhou prefecture, revised ed.], ed. and comp. Akedanga and Yao Wentian (1810; repr. in Chengwen gazetteer ser., Zhongguo Fangzhi Congshu, Huazhong section, 145, Jiangsu province (Taipei, 1974), juan 60, p.12a.}

Do we not have here an obvious reference to ‘the thin horses of Yangzhou’? It is a matter for little wonder that Yangzhou is a city renowned for its history and culture, but this ‘historical’ and ‘cultural’ period cannot be considered only from the perspective of its wealth, for it was a prosperity underpinned by human suffering and degradation.

There are in fact two Yangzhous, and not only in the sense invoked by Yi Junzuo when he distinguished the “refined” from the “vulgar.”\footnote{Yi Junzuo, Xianhuan Yangzhou, p.1.} One is robust, the other decadent; one creative, the other parasitic; one civilized, the other barbaric. Fan Changjiang\footnote{Fan Changjiang (1909–70), a journalist of national renown in the 1930s and ’40s, served as editor and director in media organisations in the 1950s before entering the field of science administration.} wrote a poem entitled “Visiting Yangzhou” which begins: “There are two Yangzhous, one corrupt, one great.”\footnote{Fan Changjiang, "You Yangzhou" [Traveling to Yangzhou, cited in Nanjing Shifan Xueyuan, Wenjiao ziliao jianbao 5 (1979): 52. (Fan Changjiang (1909-70), a journalist of national renown in the 1930s and ‘40s, served as editor and director in media organisations in the 1950s before entering the field of science administration.)}

But is this true only of Yangzhou?