



## Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

East Asian Attitudes towards Court Women: The Legend of Yang Guifei

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### Themes and Goals

The years 755-756 were pivotal in Chinese history. The Tang dynasty (618 –906 C.E) capital of Chang'an (today's Xi'an) had become a cosmopolitan center and hub of the Silk Road, importing horses, musicians, acrobats, dances, and Buddhist scripts from Central Asia and exporting new forms of architecture, poetry, silks, paintings, government rule, and religious practice to such places as Korea and Japan. In 755, An Lushan (703-757), a general who had roots in Central Asia, led a rebellion that not only destroyed much of Chang'an but also weakened the court's confidence and openness to new ideas. Attitudes toward women, Buddhism, and foreigners changed precipitously.

This unit focuses on the shift in attitudes towards women in particular, using the case of Yang Guifei (719-756) to explore the wider transformation in values that occurred in 8th century Chang'an. Yang, the "Prized Consort" of the emperor, was blamed for the An Lushan Rebellion, possibly due to a purported relationship with the general. When An Lushan sacked the capital, the seventy year-old Emperor Xuanzong rode out of the city with Yang Guifei, but his men would go no further until she was killed. She was executed on the spot.

The shift in values in the late Tang may be attributed to any number of causes. The degree to which An's rebellion and Yang's actions spurred the transformation is subject to debate. It cannot be proven that what occurred with An Lushan and Yang Guifei kept China from developing new attitudes toward women, religion, or foreign ideas or people. But the hypothesis makes examination of these events particularly interesting. Was Yang Guifei a scapegoat or did she conspire to overthrow the emperor?

The value of the unit lies primarily in the conflicting views of Yang Guifei; from the evidence given in the written and visual texts listed in the Readings and Visuals section, she can seem either manipulative or bodhisattva-like. Students should be reminded that there is no "right" answer here. Rather, the consideration of different visual and written texts should help students to build a fuller understanding of history and its complexities. For freshman students in particular, an assignment that asks them to juxtapose different sources is helpful as they build fundamental analytical reading and writing skills.

The unit invites students to form and support their own opinions by a careful analysis of significant primary texts, both literary and visual. These include Buddhist art from Dunhuang and Bai Juyi's "Song of Lasting Pain," which the literary critic Victor Mair calls "the most famous of all Chinese poems." An exercise in which students are asked to make a case for or against Yang Guifei's execution is at the core of the unit.

The unit also offers instructors a related set of comparative readings centered on the Japanese author Murasaki Shikibu's (ca. 978- ) novel *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1010). Bai Juyi's story was widely read in Heian Japan (794-1185), and it is arguable that the attitudes and values encoded in Bai's text influenced Murasaki personally as well as broader attitudes in Japan.

### Audiences and Uses

The unit was originally developed in two freshman year interdisciplinary humanities courses, one with a worldwide scope and one an introduction to Chinese Culture and Civilization. The students had no knowledge of Chinese or Japanese language. The unit could also be useful in a wide variety of other courses, including but not limited to:

- World Literature
- Art History
- Japanese Culture and Civilization
- Women in Literature, Women in World or Asian History
- Freshmen core courses that develop analytical reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

In a general humanities or world literature course, Yang Guifei's story could be compared to Helen's story in *The Iliad*, and Eve's story in Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In a Women in History course, Yang Guifei could be compared to Marie Antoinette.

### A. Tang Poetry: Essential Student Readings

"Interlude: Xuanzong and Yang the Prized Consort" in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, Stephen Owen, ed. and trans. New York: Norton, 1996. Pages 441-457.

Most important selections:

- Bo Juyi (Bai Juyi in pinyin; 772-846), "Song of Lasting Pain" (Sometimes translated as "Song of Everlasting Regret")
- Chen Hong (early ninth century): "An Account to Go with the 'Song of Lasting Pain.'"
- Bo Juyi, "The Girl Who Danced the Whirl."

### B. *The Tale of Genji*: Essential Student Readings

Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Royall Tyler. New York: Viking, 2001. Chapter I: "Kiritsubo: The Paulownia Pavilion," pages 3-18.

Alternate translation: Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward Seidensticker. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

The Tyler translation has been selected because of its reputation for accuracy. The translation by Edward Seidensticker can also be used with confidence; in some ways Seidensticker may be more accessible to students. Arthur Waley's translation is even more readable than Seidensticker's, but it has often been criticized for inaccurate or incomplete translations.

Assignments:

Essay

Study/discussion questions