

Instructor's Introduction

Yang Guifei

The following information should be sufficient background for students. Extensive lecturing about Yang Guifei should not be necessary. There is actually a disadvantage to a teacher saying more; it leaves less for students to discover on their own.

“Yang” is a family name, and “Guifei” is an official title, translated as “Prized Consort,” held by the woman ranked most highly by the Emperor. Yang Guifei’s uncle and siblings rose to power from the time she was 27 until her death eleven years later in 756. There are many legends about her. When tourists go to Huaqing Springs in Xi’an today, they can bathe in hot water as she allegedly did when the aging Emperor first saw her among the court women. She is said to have formed a friendship with An Lushan, who became a general of Chinese troops despite his Central Asian origins; she may have even adopted An Lushan as a son. Both Yang Guifei and An Lushan are described as dancing the “whirl,” a Central Asian dance which can be seen in pictures of the Tang court preserved in Dunhuang’s caves on the Silk Road. The Emperor is believed to have been so in love with Yang Guifei, he neglected his duties. The location of Yang’s death is as famous as that of her bath; guidebooks will tell you exactly the location of Ma Lei Station, the place where she was throttled, hanged, or forced to commit suicide by the Emperor’s disgruntled associates.

The historian Susan Manning points out that paintings and plays about Yang Guifei made her a household name in China over the centuries. Many Tang dynasty sculptures said to resemble Yang Guifei are exquisite pieces of art. Bai Juyi’s poetry was also well known in tenth-century Japan. In the first chapter of the illustrious eleventh-century Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu quotes his poetry repeatedly; and, indeed, depictions of both Genji and his mother may have been influenced by descriptions of Yang found in Bai Juyi’s writings.

Women in the Tang Dynasty

In imperial China, alliances of consorts to the Emperor or the Emperor’s extended family could elevate the consorts’ families and served to tie outlying regions to the central government. Because women were useful for these marriage-like arrangements, families with ambitions would carefully tend to women’s upbringing, whether in dress or skills of music, dance, reading, and composing poetry. There was no foot-binding by the Tang dynasty; there are many images of women riding horses and even playing polo. Perhaps because of Yang Guifei’s promotion of her relatives, the importance of marriage alliances as a vehicle for political advancement diminished after the Tang dynasty. As in East Asia and the West today, family influence was held under control and meritocracy advanced by a strong system of rigorously maintained examination systems. This shift from a system that benefited many women to one where families funded the formal education exclusively of men is a major aspect of Chinese economic, political and social history. Women became more sequestered, and foot-binding of women gradually spread from aristocratic women to laborers. Reversion to earlier attitudes toward women was also accompanied by lower receptivity to Buddhism and arts from Central Asia.

In discussing slides depicting Yang Guifei in the Tang dynasty, students might be intrigued with the following information which is also reflected by Bai Juyi's poem:

- Women in the Tang had a hundred different styles of putting up their long hair. These were given names such as *yunji* (resembling clouds), and *hudie ji* (resembling the wings of a butterfly). Hairpins with bird and flower designs became a main accessory. Plucked eyebrows were considered a main feature of women's beauty. (*Women of the Tang Dynasty*, pamphlet published by the Shaanxi History Museum, 1995, p. 8.)
- In *Dunhuang Art*, Duan Wenjie writes, "Dong You of the Song dynasty observed, 'Human figures are painted in exuberance and in full bloom.... This is the Tang style. It is often said that Lady Yang had a delicate frame in full bloom. After seeing the paintings, I can appreciate what Master Han has described about the past, the arched eyebrows and plummy cheeks. It was the Tang fashion to admire plump figures'" (Duan, Wenjie. *Dunhuang Art: through the eyes of Duan Wenjie*. Ed. Chung Tan. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1994. Page 150. Also available online: http://www.ignca.nic.in/ks_19.htm)

An Lushan

While An Lushan is not the central focus of this unit, more information about his background and motivations may be helpful. An Lushan is often described as of Turkic or Sogdian ethnicity. While he was not Islamic, the name "An" later became associated with ethnic groups in Central Asia who did later convert to the Muslim religion. These groups had never been won over to a Confucian ideology that placed one secular emperor at the top of an administrative hierarchy and sent taxes and tribute to the capital. An Lushan was powerful because he controlled three contiguous areas northeast of Chang'an, and he had been allowed to maintain control of these troops for at least a decade. Eventually, he led 200,000 troops. The exact nature of his relationship with Yang is the subject of some debate. In the popular imagination, some of the association of An Lushan and Yang Guifei was because both were portrayed as hefty, a body-type that might have been linked to what was perceived, from the Han Chinese point of view, as being of similar foreign extraction.

The Tale of Genji

Students are often confused about three basic facts in Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*: 1) *The Tale of Genji* is written about two hundred years after Bai Juyi's poem about Yang Guifei; 2) Genji is a fictional character; and 3) all of *The Tale of Genji* occurs in Japan.

It is useful to explain how Murasaki knew this Chinese source. Murasaki lived in the Heian Period (794-1185). She started writing about Genji about the year 1000. Kyoto, the capital city of Japan at that time, was modeled after the Chinese capital of Chang'an, with similar parallel streets, gardens, and architecture. The life of aristocratic Japanese women was also somewhat similar to that of Tang Chang'an, even though that court life had largely disappeared in China by the year 1000.

Aristocratic women in Heian Japan were highly educated, clearly for the purposes of marriage alliances. Murasaki and some other court women, such as the famous writer Sei Shonagon, could read poetry written in Chinese characters, even if they knew no spoken Chinese. Manuscripts from China entered Japan and were recopied, including illustrations.