

# The changing portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty

An analysis of female beauty ideals and the male gaze as reflected  
in the portrayal of Yang Guifei in Chinese literature from the Tang to the  
Qing dynasty

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## Introduction

One of China's most famous women from the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) was Yang Guifei (杨贵妃; 719-756 A.D.). She was the beloved and favoured concubine of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong<sup>1</sup> (唐玄宗; reigned 712-756 A.D.). Xuanzong's reign is typified as the Golden Age of China. In Chinese literary tradition, Yang Guifei is considered to be one of the most beautiful women of premodern China. Several authors have written articles about her. The two leading authors are the historian Howard S. Levy and professor Chen Fan Pen of the Chinese Studies Department at the University of Albany. Levy has written numerous books on Chinese history and Chen's research mainly focuses on women in Chinese history and fiction. Themes often discussed in Levy's articles concerning Yang Guifei are the story of her lifetime (family background, career, relationships and selection) and especially focus on her tragic romance with Emperor Xuanzong. Chen has studied Yang Guifei's image in Chinese literature and drama.

Levy's and Chen's articles about Yang Guifei both begin with stating that she was "one of the most prominent beauties in Chinese history" or that "she typified the epitome of sensuous beauty".<sup>2</sup> Although her beauty is mentioned in every single article about her, it has, as far as I know, never been the main topic of discussion nor is it examined in detail. These leading scholars both have never done extensive research on Yang Guifei's beauty and because there are no existing studies on this specific aspect, I think my research can bring new insights regarding the description of Yang Guifei's image. According to Chen, the varying images of Yang Guifei "seem to have been governed by existing historical and literary traditions, by the temperament of their creators as well as by literary conventions of the genres" in the tales in which she appears.<sup>3</sup> My research will pay attention to these three aspects, tradition, genre and creators, focusing on the portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty in literature by male authors instead of the image of the historical Yang Guifei. I researched the portrayal of mainly her physical beauty from the Tang to the Qing dynasty (8-17<sup>th</sup> century). The focus lies especially on the fields of theatre and literature and the different angles of portrayal by the writers of my primary sources.

My research questions are: "What were the feminine beauty ideals from the Tang until the Qing dynasty?", "How is Yang Guifei's beauty described in literature of her own time as well as in later dynasties?", "Which aspects of the description of Yang Guifei's beauty changed and which remained consistent over time and why?" and "How is the description of Yang Guifei's

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<sup>1</sup> Emperor Xuanzong was also known as Ming Huang (唐明皇) and Li Longji (李隆基).

<sup>2</sup> Chen. (1990-1991): p.83. & Levy. (1957): p.451.

<sup>3</sup> Chen. (1990-1991): pp.83-84.

beauty influenced by feminine beauty ideals and the technique of the male gaze<sup>4</sup>”. Therefore, the objective of my thesis is not to tell Yang Guifei’s life story, but to examine the various literary descriptions of her beauty in order to understand consistent and changing patterns in the description of her physical appearance. Since her body was never found, there is no physical evidence left to study, therefore it is impossible to find out what she originally looked like. Ter Haar states that it is hard to learn more about the women of the Tang dynasty because of the limited sources available.<sup>5</sup> Visual representations of Yang Guifei are scarce and they do not yield enough information to take into account in this thesis.

The materials used for this thesis can be divided into four types: primary literature on Yang Guifei, secondary sources on Yang Guifei, writings on feminine beauty in China with a focus on physical appearance and make-up, and finally gender studies theories. The secondary sources I used about Yang Guifei and feminine beauty in China consist of both Chinese and Western materials. Gender studies theories are modern western concepts, but I keep in mind that I project it on literature from premodern China.

My research method is descriptive and comparative literary research. I used this particular method because I want to compare the descriptions of Yang Guifei’s beauty occurring in several primary literary works. Furthermore I want to gain a better understanding of the development and variations of her image in different genres across time. By making use of close reading I analysed ten different sources either in Chinese or in English translation in which she is mentioned. My information was collected from the scripts of theatre plays, dynastic histories, poems and stories. Close reading is important for my research because it allows me to focus on detailed descriptions of Yang’s beauty. To sum up, I compare the different images of Yang Guifei’s beauty from various literary sources and analyse in detail those aspects that are mentioned more frequently.

In my research I incorporate several gender studies theories, such as the male gaze. This theory, put forward by Laura Mulvey, is a concept that depicts women from a male point of view.<sup>6</sup> Since most authors who have written about Yang Guifei’s image are male, this surely must have influenced her portrayal, as I shall explain in §3.2. Finally I shall demonstrate how the relationship between the male gaze and female beauty ideals is reflected in the portrayal of Yang Guifei’s beauty.

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<sup>4</sup> The male gaze theory, put forward by Laura Mulvey (1999), is a concept that depicts women from a male point of view in for example literature.

<sup>5</sup> Haar, ter. (2011): p.51.

<sup>6</sup> Mulvey. (1999): passim.

My hypothesis is that the description of Yang Guifei's beauty mainly relies on a combination of formulaic phrases, author's preferences, the format of literary genres and the general framework of feminine beauty ideals in premodern China. To be more concrete, I think that my sources match with the social context of their own time, meaning that the representation of Yang's beauty is influenced by the aesthetic ideals of a given period. It is important to keep in mind that beauty ideals are conceptions regarded as the standard for perfection.

## **Chapter 1: Female beauty ideals in premodern China (618- 1911 A.D.)**

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is no universal standard for physical beauty: it depends on the cultural context and even then opinions might still differ from person to person. I focus on female beauty ideals as described by various scholars. This chapter contains an overview of the female beauty ideals in premodern China, and can be seen as an introduction to the beauty preferences used in my literary works by male authors from the Tang until the Qing dynasty.

### **§1.1 The aesthetic ideals from the Tang (618-907 A.D.) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.)**

Feminine beauty ideals are socially constructed aspects that can differ in each period. As there are countless beauty preferences in Asia, the scholar Kyō has shown that aesthetic ideals in China change all the time.<sup>7</sup> Therefore I shall briefly introduce general feminine beauty trends in premodern China and then continue on ideals more specific for the Tang until the Qing dynasty.

#### **§1.1.1. General feminine beauty ideals in premodern China**

According to Papadaki women feel a “constant pressure to make their bodies and appearance conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time”.<sup>8</sup> Kyō states that the criteria for a beautiful woman can vary greatly.<sup>9</sup> The search for the beautiful woman in premodern China starts with which beauty ideals were generally preferred. According to Huo Jianying, who is quoted by Jhin<sup>10</sup>, there are ten criteria for female beauty set by men in ancient China throughout time:

1. Black lustrous hair and temples “as thin as cicada wings”
2. Loosely coiled up hair on top of the head for an illusion of adding height
3. Finely shaped eyebrows
4. Large, bright expressive eyes
5. Red lips and white teeth for health and beauty
6. Graceful, slim and soft fingers with fair and fleshy arms
7. Slender waist with a willowy illusion and a fair skin
8. Tiny feet and a light, elegant gait
9. Dressing appropriately

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<sup>7</sup> Kyō. (2012): passim.

<sup>8</sup> Papadaki. (2015): passim.

<sup>9</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Jhin. (2011): p.66.

## 10. A clean, fragrant body

Not all of these requirements apply to the image of the ideal woman in all of the dynasties of premodern China. A slender waist and tiny feet are specific for the Song (960-1279 A.D.) and following dynasties, but they are not beauty ideals of the Tang (618-907 A.D.). All other aspects apply to all dynasties.

Faces which display a high degree of symmetry are generally liked best during all dynasties. Kyō explains that “delicate differences in the size of the mouth and the shape of the lips and eyes affect the balance of the face.”<sup>11</sup> Cheeks with a warm red blush and a mouth with red lips in the shape of cherries (see image 1, p.46) were aspects of the ideal woman. According to Kyō, red lips symbolize feminine beauty. The smaller the mouth, the prettier it was considered.<sup>12</sup> Slim or narrow-looking eyes in an almond-shape were favoured in many dynasties.<sup>13</sup>

According to Kyō’s research, Chinese people always have admired white skin, as it is thought to represent ideal beauty.<sup>14</sup> “White jade, snow, flowers, white lychees and the moon are commonly used to describe the skin colour of women in Chinese literature.”<sup>15</sup>

Every pretty woman in premodern China should have a balanced face with red lips and cheeks, black hair and a white skin. As these beauty ideals are generally accepted in all dynasties, I will now continue on the female beauty ideals specific for the Tang dynasty.

### §1.1.2. Feminine beauty ideals in the Tang dynasty

In the Tang dynasty there are several important beauty ideals, ranging from a face with thin eyebrows to a full and round physique. Kyō says that “judgements about beauty draw heavily on the face in premodern China”.<sup>16</sup> Women in the Tang had wide foreheads (宽额) and round faces (圆脸).<sup>17</sup> Preferences for the perfect shape of the chin, jaw and cheekbones are not extensively described in my materials. There is also little attention to other parts of the body, such as the wrist, legs, thighs, knees.

“During the whole Tang period, it was a habit of women to pluck their eyebrows and paint in new ones with tinctures.”<sup>18</sup> “Whether natural or painted, in China, long and thin eyebrows

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<sup>11</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Prasetyaningsih. (2007): p.87.

<sup>16</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Wang. (2010): p.80.

<sup>18</sup> Benn. (2002): p.108.

were considered a requirement for beauty.”<sup>19</sup> Ancient female eyebrow make-up styles are richly varied, for instance the best-known style is called moth eyebrows (蛾眉) because their shape resembles the antennae of the insect.<sup>20</sup> Long eyebrows (长眉) and eyebrows in the shape of the Chinese character for ‘8’ (八字眉) were in fashion too (see image 2&3 on p.46/47). Emperor Xuanzong even had a manual made listing the ten most popular and commonly used eyebrow styles in his time.<sup>21</sup>

According to Benn, “a pleasing appearance was extremely important to the women of the Tang. It could be obtained naturally or artificially.”<sup>22</sup> “Women of the upper class paid much attention to their appearance, especially when it came to applying make-up.”<sup>23</sup> Facial make-up was quite elaborate and extravagant.<sup>24</sup>

Tang paintings, as for instance those by the painter Zhou Fang (ca.730-800 A.D.) prove that men liked sturdy women with round, chubby faces, well-developed breasts, slender waists but heavy hips (see image 5, p.47). Concerning the female physique, only during the Tang dynasty plumpness was considered beautiful, in contrast to the slender willowy waist (细腰) preferred in later dynasties. A typical Chinese beauty was slender to the point of fragility in all other dynasties than the Tang.

To sum it all up, the perfect beautiful woman in the Tang dynasty should have a round face with a wide forehead, red lips, white teeth, fair black hair, small eyes with thin eyebrows. The body should be well filled out (plump), and her white “facial and bodily skin finely textured and smooth.”<sup>25</sup>

### **§1.1.3. Feminine beauty ideals from the Song to the Qing dynasty**

In the Song dynasty beauty ideals changed. During this time women with thin shoulders, a slender waist, a flat chest, a pale face and small feet were adored. It is striking that these beauty ideals hardly changed and almost remained the same until the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 A.D.).

According to Kyō, bound feet were an important condition for female beauty in ancient China.<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon started during the Song dynasty and continued until the Qing

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<sup>19</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.20.

<sup>20</sup> Benn. (2002): p.108.

<sup>21</sup> Wang & Li. (2007): p.42.

<sup>22</sup> Benn. (2002): p.107.

<sup>23</sup> Lau. (2010): p.28.

<sup>24</sup> I would like to refer to Wang & Li (2007), Benn (2002) and Van Gulik (2003) for more information about Tang dynasty make-up.

<sup>25</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.2.



period. “A pair of perfectly bound feet must meet seven qualifications: small, slim, pointed, arched, fragrant, soft and straight, to become an object of erotic desire or beauty.”<sup>27</sup> Small feet were considered feminine and were for the rich, while women with larger feet were probably from a poor family. Lotus feet were thus a symbol of wealth and prestige. Focus on ankles and heels starts in the Song dynasty, when authors start to write more about small feet.

The difference between ideals of beauty in the Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) dynasties is not very clear. Foot-binding became more widespread and was more strictly regulated during the Ming dynasty. The ‘Three Inch Golden Lotus’ standard of perfection in foot length was introduced. In contrast to Song until Ming times, the Qing tried to prohibit foot-binding, but this was only realized in 1911.

In contrast to the open-minded and extravert Tang dynasty, beauty ideals in the Song become more simple and pure. For example the make-up styles. Women now applied rouge more discretely than before. Cheeks were only slightly reddened.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, hands and feet are important while talking about female beauty, as “they are called the branches of the body.”<sup>29</sup> Graceful arms, dropping shoulders (削肩) and slim fingers were considered beautiful too in Imperial China (900-1800 A.D.).

As for body figure, a beautiful woman in these times would have had a slim willowy figure and tiny feet. The expression ‘willow waist’ (柳腰) denotes a beauty, indicating “a slender waist or lower torso associated with a thin, supple willow branch.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Santangelo, “the ideal of feminine physical beauty in the Qing era consisted of the following: cicada forehead, apricot lips, creamy breasts, eyebrows like far away mountains, lotus-petal face, cloud-like hairdo, feet like bamboo shoots carved in jade, fingers like white shoots of grass, willow waist, neither fat nor thin and of the appropriate height. These aspects are the attributes of an ideal abstract beauty.”<sup>31</sup> Van Gulik states that “beautiful women during the Qing period were young, fragile and delicate with a long, oval and thin face, sloping shoulders, a flat chest and thin arms with long, excessively slender hands.”<sup>32</sup> “This type of women was already popular in the later years of the Ming dynasty.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wang. (2000): p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Gulik, van. (2003): p.186.

<sup>29</sup> Santangelo. (2010): p.58.

<sup>30</sup> Kyō. (2012): p.15.

<sup>31</sup> Santangelo. (2010): p.77.

<sup>32</sup> Gulik, van. (2003): pp.188-189.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.294.

Female beauty ideals from the Song until the Qing, compared to the Tang, were quite different. In the Tang dynasty beautiful women were well filled out, but in later dynasties women had a slender waist. During the Song dynasty small feet were preferred, but this aspect is not seen in the Tang. These observations can also be applied to the changing description of Yang Guifei's beauty in literature, as I shall illustrate in chapter 3.

But first I will discuss Yang Guifei's beauty in Chinese literature in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2: Yang Guifei's beauty in Chinese literature

After the Tianbao period (742–756 A.D.) Yang Guifei's life and persona became a popular topic in literature and theatre. Her cultural legacy is rich and diverse. There are numerous texts about Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong in which she is described in detail. I chose my selection of primary works because these sources are mentioned many times in my secondary literature. Also, the change in descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty is clearly visible in these primary sources and, lastly, they show a great variety in genres as well; from dynastic histories to fictional stories, poetry and theatre plays.

In this chapter I take a look at the image of Yang Guifei's physical beauty in the several literary works listed below by making use of close reading. During my close reading I paid attention to all descriptions of Yang Guifei which can be associated with female (outer) beauty. The main question this chapter will answer is how Yang Guifei's beauty is described in literature of her own time as well as in later dynasties. For a complete overview of the citations and aspects of Yang Guifei's beauty in my sources I refer to my appendix on pp.48-57.

It is not surprising that the same event or character is described differently by every author. The length of the descriptions often depends on the meaning they have in the story. My hypotheses is that different genres also effect the description of Yang Guifei's beauty.

I shall briefly explain the genres:

**Table 1: List of works in chronological order**

| Title   | Author       | Genre                          | Period                   |
|---|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Qing Ping Diao (清平调)                                | Li Bai       | Poem (shi)                     | 8 <sup>th</sup> century  |
| Song of Everlasting Sorrow (长恨歌)                    | Bai Juyi     | Poem (yuefu)                   | 809 A.D.                 |
| Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow (长恨歌传)  | Chen Hong    | Biographical writing (zhuan)   | 9 <sup>th</sup> century  |
| Old Book of Tang (旧唐书)                              | Liu Xu       | History                        | 945 A.D.                 |
| New Book of Tang (新唐书)                              | Ouyang Xiu   | History                        | 1044 A.D.                |
| Zhugongdiao, Incidents of the Tianbao Era (天宝遗事诸宫调) | Wang Bocheng | "All keys and modes" genre     | 13 <sup>th</sup> century |
| Rain on the Wutong Tree (唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨)                  | Bai Renfu    | Theatre play (zaju)            | 13 <sup>th</sup> century |
| Records of Shocking Grandeur (惊鸿记)                  | Wu Shimei    | Theatre play (chuanqi)         | ca.1573                  |
| Records of Colourful Brush (彩毫记)                    | Tu Long      | Theatre play (chuanqi)         | 16 <sup>th</sup> century |
| Palace of Eternal Youth (长生殿)                       | Hong Sheng   | Theatre play (chuanqi / kunqu) | 1688 A.D.                |

## Shi

The poem of Li Bai belongs to the *shi* genre. “Modern *shi* have four or eight (*jueju* of *lǔshi*) lines usually of five or seven syllables.”<sup>34</sup> Li Bai’s short poem *Qing Ping Diao* consists of three verses of four lines, each with seven syllables. Because of the length of the poem, there is not enough space to create a more detailed image of Yang Guifei than the few lines that already exist.

In *shi* poetry, narrative examples are limited to the categories of *gushi* and *yuefu*. The narrative poem of Bai Juyi is one of the new *yuefu* style, which is a sort of folk ballad verse. “*The Song of Everlasting Regret*, at 120 lines, is considered a long poem.”<sup>35</sup> Although the portrayal of Yang is more extensive than before, it still lacks detailed information about her beauty.

## Biographical writing (*zhuan*)

Chen Hong’s *Biography of the Song of Everlasting Regret* reflects his perception of the emperor and Yang Guifei, mixing historiography and fiction. “Sinologist Wolfgang Franke describes the genre as follows: ‘In biographical writing, often no strict line can be drawn between history and literature. ... the main purpose of biographical writing in China was to pay respect to the dead and to give a final judgement on their lives.’”<sup>36</sup> “The traditional Chinese biography is usually very short.”<sup>37</sup> In this historical narrative Chen Hong uses his fantasy and describes Yang Guifei’s beauty just briefly.

## Dynastic histories

“Historiography has always been one of the most prominent elements in the Chinese literary tradition.”<sup>38</sup> “From the Tang dynasty onward, there existed an important government bureau charged with compiling the history of the previous dynasties. It was customary after the death of a ruler to compile ‘true notes’ (*shilu*) on his reign, based on the very extensive ‘court journals’ (*qijuzhu*). The *shilu* were lengthy chronicles which included excerpts from the most important documents and biographies of major personages dated according to the time at which their death had been announced at court.”<sup>39</sup> Most of the dynastic histories were compiled by committees by making use of the previous dynasty’s archives. *The Old and New*

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<sup>34</sup> Idema & Haft. (1997): p.124.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp.115-116.

<sup>36</sup> Berg. (2013): p.38.

<sup>37</sup> Idema & Haft. (1997): p.82

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.76.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp.82-83.

*Book of the Tang* both are dynastic histories. “According to the Chinese literary conception these records contain facts and are a reflection of reality.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, what is written about Yang Guifei in the *Old and New Book of the Tang* was perceived by the readers as the truth at that time.

### **Zhugongdiao**

The ‘all keys and modes’ genre tells stories alternately in prose and in verse. “The verse passages show no fixed line length but are written to suites of *qu* melodies, which are normally no longer than two stanza.”<sup>41</sup> This format creates a fragmented story, in which the verses can be all read apart from each other. Yang Guifei’s portrayal is no longer than a few lines, and Wang Bocheng repeats his short descriptions over and over.

### **Zaju**

According to William Dolby, it was during the Yuan dynasty that the first full-fledged Chinese dramas were created, called *Zaju*.<sup>42</sup> The theatre play *Rain on the Wutong Tree* belongs to this *Zaju* genre. “The length of these pieces could vary from one to seven suites.”<sup>43</sup> A large number of Yuan *Zaju* has a love theme, and the relationship between the emperor and Yang Guifei was therefore an excellent topic to write about. As mentioned earlier, the meaning of this romance was of greater importance for the story than the description of Yang’s beauty and the author pays little attention to her portrayal.

### **Chuanqi and Kunqu**

The *Records of Shocking Grandeur* and the *Records of Colourful Brush* both are considered *Chuanqi* theatre plays. This genre is highly appreciated among literati and some texts were clearly intended for reading public of the well-educated. The length of the plays become longer, and therefore it is not strange that in this genre there are more detailed descriptions. Piece by piece, the portrayal of Yang Guifei’s beauty gets more extensive than in earlier works.

According to Idema and Haft, Hong Sheng’s play *The Palace of Eternal Youth* belongs to the *Chuanqi* genre, but Mackerras disagrees and classifies this play as *Kunqu* drama.<sup>44</sup> “The *Chuanqi* drama was the forerunner of *Kunqu*.”<sup>45</sup> The *Kunqu* form of theater was a highly popular genre in the sixteenth century among literati. “Songs played a greater role, this may

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<sup>40</sup> Idema & Haft. (1997): pp.52,56.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.166.

<sup>42</sup> Dolby, edited by Mackerras. (1983): p.32.

<sup>43</sup> Idema & Haft. (1997): p.191.

<sup>44</sup> Mackerras. (1983): p.93.

<sup>45</sup> Mackerras. (1990): p.31.

be one reason why *Kunqu* was mainly loved by more well-educated”.<sup>46</sup> These plays are not only interesting to watch but also to read.

To conclude, depending on the format and length of the genre it is understandable that the portrayals of Yang Guifei are the way they are: for example in one continuous story such as *The Palace of Eternal Youth* there are more (detailed) descriptions than in the short poem by Li Bai.

## §2.1 Yang Guifei's life

Yang Guifei<sup>47</sup> was known by the names Yang Yuhuan and Yang Taizhen throughout her life. My introduction of her life is mainly based on my readings of the historical sources in the *Old Book of the Tang* and the *New Book of the Tang* as cited by Levy and Chen.<sup>48</sup>

### §2.1.1 Yang Yuhuan (杨玉环), Yang Taizhen (杨太真) and Yang Guifei (杨贵妃)

Yang Guifei's maiden name was Yang Yuhuan meaning Jade Ring. She was born in Sichuan, June 26<sup>th</sup> 719 A.D. and she had three sisters. Levy says that very little is known “about the early years of Yang Yuhuan, since the official historians were interested primarily in her relationship with emperor Xuanzong and her achievement of a dominant position in the harem.”<sup>49</sup> Yuhuan was sixteen when she entered the palace. She then became the wife of the 18th son of Emperor Xuanzong, called Li Mao (李瑁; 720/721-775 A.D.), titled Prince of Shou. As Levy shows in his article “The selection of Yang Guifei”<sup>50</sup> there are different stories concerning the marriage of Yuhuan with Li Mao and how she finally ended up as the consort of the emperor, but these are not relevant for my research.

According to Levy's research, “Yang Yuhuan was given the religious name Taizhen”, which means ‘Grand Verity’, when she became a Taoist nun in 741 A.D.<sup>51</sup> Taizhen was selected in 745 A.D. as an imperial consort mainly because of her unsurpassable beauty as well as her talents (dancing and singing). Yang Guifei's beauty and talents are always mentioned in texts about her.

In 755 A.D. the An Lushan Rebellion started and the emperor and Yang Guifei fled to Sichuan in 756 A.D. . When they stopped for a rest at Mawei station, some of the soldiers mutinied and demanded the life of the consort, because they held her responsible for the downfall of

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<sup>46</sup> Idema & Haft. (1997): p.195.

<sup>47</sup> ‘贵妃 Guifei’ or ‘Precious Concubine’ was the highest rank for imperial consorts in her time.

<sup>48</sup> Levy. (1957), Levy. (1962) & Chen. (1990-1991).

<sup>49</sup> Levy. (1957): p.460.

<sup>50</sup> Levy. (1962): passim.

<sup>51</sup> Levy. (1957): p.454.

the dynasty. During their love romance she would have distracted the emperor to such an extent that he began to neglect his duties to the nation. The emperor decided to sacrifice Yang Guifei and he was forced to let her commit suicide.”<sup>52</sup> She died on July 15<sup>th</sup> 756 A.D. when she was only 37 years old.

In all the texts I have read about Yang Guifei’s life the love story between her and the emperor is a main theme. It is not surprising that the same locations or scenes reappear in many of my sources. These frequent returning scenes are: the admiring of the peonies in the garden, bathing in the pools of Huaqing Palace, the pledge of eternal love between Yang Guifei and the emperor, Yang Guifei’s death at Mawei station and the mourning of Emperor Xuanzong near the Wutong trees.

## **§2.2 Yang Guifei’s beauty in dynastic histories**

Yang Guifei figures in a few dynastic histories, but contemporary information on her beauty is scarce. I researched the *Taiping Guangji* (太平广记) as well as the *Taiping Yulan* (太平御览), both collections of stories compiled under imperial direction during the Song dynasty. Some of these stories are historical anecdotes. “There is room in true literature for anecdotes, myths, sagas and legends only if they can be presented as actually historical. When Chinese myths and legends were put into written form, they tended to be sobered up into dry “factual” accounts. ... the original authors regarded these texts as historical,” but later historians rejected them as being too full of the supernatural or insufficiently credible.<sup>53</sup> These collections, however, do not contain any significant information about Yang Guifei’s beauty and are therefore disregarded in this research.<sup>54</sup> In the Tang and in the early Song dynasty there are very few descriptions of Yang Guifei’s beauty, except for a some general ones. The two dynastic histories I discuss, *the Old Book of the Tang* (旧唐书) and *the New Book of the Tang* (新唐书), illustrate this. These records were written down two centuries after her death.

### **Old Book of the Tang (旧唐书) and New Book of the Tang (新唐书)**

In the *Records of the Old Book of the Tang* (旧唐书), dated 945 A.D., there is no special mentioning of the beauty of Yang Guifei, except for the fact that she was “a splendid

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<sup>52</sup> Haar, ter (2009): p.151.

<sup>53</sup> Idema and Haft. (1997): p.57.

<sup>54</sup> Normally information from the Chinese historiography weights stronger than fictional works as they contain facts and could be used as examples for other works. But because of the lack of information in these sources I pay more attention to semi-fictional works.

voluptuous beauty (太真姿质丰艳).”<sup>55</sup> In the *New Book of the Tang* (新唐书), 1044 A.D., it is mentioned that “Yang Guifei is exceptionally beautiful (妃资质天挺、资质丰艳).”<sup>56</sup>

To conclude, as the dynastic histories mostly focus on Yang Guifei’s life and not on the description of her beauty, the relevant material collected for my research from these sources is minimal.

### **§2.3 Yang Guifei’s beauty in literary Tang sources**

Although the descriptions of Yang Guifei that I discuss in this paragraph date from after her death, they yield interesting information on her image in the Tang dynasty.

#### **Qing Ping Diao (清平调)**

The first primary source of the Tang that I discuss is the poem *Qing Ping Diao* (清平调) written by Li Bai (李白; 701 – 762 A.D.), one of the most famous poets of the Tang dynasty. According to the records, it is not sure whether Li Bai actually met the Precious Consort. The question remains whether Li Bai portrayed Yang Guifei as she really was, or that he was influenced by the emperor, by the taste of his time or by personal preference. This is also a consideration to take into account when I discuss literary works of later periods.

His poem describes Yang Guifei and the emperor when they went to see the peonies in the gardens of the Palace of Eternal Youth. In this poem Li Bai writes that Yang Guifei is ‘the beautiful one’.<sup>57</sup> “Clouds remind us of her raiment, flowers of her appearance (云想衣裳花想容).”<sup>58</sup> Finally Li Bai compares Yang Guifei’s beauty to the peony (名花) a comparison often used by later writers to describe her looks. “The peony and the state-toppler are both loved (名花倾国两相欢).”<sup>59</sup> State or city-toppler (倾国) is a term often used for female beauty. These women are extraordinarily beautiful, in such a way that they distract men with their looks. These men neglect their duties and in this way women could subordinate or destroy a nation. This term appears in several other primary sources of this research.

#### **Song of Everlasting Sorrow (长恨歌) and Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow (长恨歌传)**

Both in the poem of the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌) written in 809 A.D. by Bai Juyi (白居易; 772-846 A.D.) and in the *Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌传),

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<sup>55</sup> Liu. (1936): 卷 55.

<sup>56</sup> Xiu. (1975): p.3493.

<sup>57</sup> Li Bai, translated by Alley. (1980): p.61.

<sup>58</sup> Li Bai, edited by Wang Yunxi. (1998): p.44.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.45.



written a few years later by Chen Hong (陈洪), “Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei enjoy a blissful life, but it is cut short by the An Lushan rebellion and her abrupt execution. The inconsolable emperor enlists the help of a Taoist priest, who finds out that Yang Guifei has become an immortal in Penglai<sup>60</sup>. When Yang Guifei receives the priest, she not only reveals a secret pledge of eternal love between her and the emperor, but also conveys her loyalty to him and her longing for their future reunion.”<sup>61</sup>

In the poem *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* the descriptions of the beauty of Yang Guifei are as follows:

“Nature endowed her with beauteous charms. Her satiny skin she gently bathed in the silken warmth of the hot spring waters. Delicate and frail with bewitching graces she came forth. (...) Cloudlike hair, a flowerlike face, she was a raven-browed beauty. (...) Seeing her face in each hibiscus, her brows in the bending willow trees. (...) Her snowy skin and flowerlike face”.<sup>62</sup>

In the *Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, “Chen Hong labels Yang Guifei as a ‘creature of bewitching beauty (尤物)’, embodying the source of the emperor’s political troubles.”<sup>63</sup> She dies as an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Yang Guifei’s appearance is described as follows:

“Only fifteen years old, the girl named Yang Yuhuan was exceptionally beautiful and intelligent. She had cloudlike black hair; a fair, flowerlike complexion; a fine molded figure; and above all, a charming and sweet disposition.”<sup>64</sup>

Although Yang Guifei is often compared to other beautiful women, Chen Hong mentions Madam Li for the first time in my sources. “The moment she [Yang Yuhuan] was presented, Emperor Xuanzong thought her the peer of Madam Li, the mistress of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty.” Madam Li was so beautiful that Emperor Wu (140 B.C.-88 B.C.) wrote a poem to describe her with the lines: “One glance from her is enough to destroy a town and another glance, to destroy a nation.”<sup>65</sup> This is another reference to the term state or city-toppler (倾城倾国).

Yang Guifei’s beauty is also described by Chen Hong as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> Penglai is the island of the immortals in the Chinese mythology.

<sup>61</sup> Luo. (2015): p.28.

<sup>62</sup> Bai Juyi, translated by Wang. (1961): pp.122-132.

<sup>63</sup> Luo. (2015): pp.28-29.

<sup>64</sup> Chen Hong, translated by Wang. (1961): pp.110-111.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

“Her radiant face with eyes sparkling like twinkling stars. (...) He [Xuanzong] also gave orders that Yuhuan wear long golden earrings and a hair ornament made in the shape of a phoenix. She looked all the more beautiful with these jewelled adornments. (...) She exerted herself in her make-up and manners to win the heart of His Majesty. Gifted with talent as well as with beauty, she knew how to talk and act around the emperor. Her artful smile, her graceful dancing and her charming singing voice made the emperor fall in love with her. (...) Guifei was of unsurpassable beauty, she was intelligent and an expert in coquetry and flattery.”<sup>66</sup>

## §2.4 Yang Guifei’s beauty in later literary works

Apart from poems and dynastic histories, Yang Guifei also figures in many theatre plays and operas either as the main character or in a supporting role. My focus is on the descriptions of Yang Guifei’s beauty in these plays, not on specific actors.

### **Zhugongdiao (诸宫调)**

The *Zhugongdiao* form of literature, also known as ‘all keys and modes’<sup>67</sup>, is dating from the Song dynasty (13<sup>th</sup> century), “is noteworthy for its love themes and its eroticism”.<sup>68</sup> There is in this genre and narrative great emphasis on feminine beauty.

As Chen pointed out, “Wang Bocheng (王伯成), the writer of the *Incidents of the Tianbao Era* (天宝遗事诸宫调), depicts Yang Guifei’s beauty in great detail.”<sup>69</sup> “She is clearly the protagonist of the *Zhugongdiao*.”<sup>70</sup>

Wang repeatedly refers to Yang Guifei as ‘the state-toppler’ (倾国), ‘the state’s most beautiful’ (绝国), ‘the nation’s beauty’ (国色), all general descriptions. She is also referred to a variety of flowers, such as ‘lotus blossom’ (荷花)<sup>71</sup> or ‘hibiscus’ (芙蓉), ‘pear flower’ (梨花), ‘begonia’ or ‘crab-apple blossom’ (海棠).<sup>72</sup>

“Wang’s favourite adjective is the word ‘jade-like’ (玉), which he attached to many of the consort’s body parts. Hence, she has a ‘jade-like face’ (玉容), ‘jade-like shoulders’ (玉肩),

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<sup>66</sup> Chen Hong, translated by Wang. (1961): pp.111-113.

<sup>67</sup> Idema. (1993): p.69. For more information about this genre I would like to refer to Idema (1993).

<sup>68</sup> Chen. (1990-1992): p.2.

<sup>69</sup> I made use of Chen’s research (1992), as I only have read some fragments of the *Incidents of the Tianbao Era* myself.

<sup>70</sup> Chen (1992). p.116.

<sup>71</sup> The lotus flower (荷花) is frequently used in poems and is associated with female beauty. A ‘lotus-like face’ is the greatest possible compliment for a women’s external charm.

<sup>72</sup> Chen. (1992): p.118.

‘jade-like bones’ (玉骨), ‘jade-like flesh’ (玉肌), ‘jade lotus [cheeks]’ (玉莲腮) and ‘jade arms’ (玉臂).”<sup>73</sup> Jade is a smooth and mild stone that shimmers and is semi-transparent. It is highly valued and appears in different colours as green, white and pink. “‘White jade-skin’ (玉肌) usually describes the soft feminine skin and body.”<sup>74</sup> These features played an interesting role in Wang’s word choice.

Wang is also the first author who pays attention to Yang Guifei’s feet, ‘jade bamboo shoot’ (玉笋) for her feet and ‘jade stamen’ (玉蕊花) for her toes. This refers to foot-binding, which had only just become popular in the Song.

Wang Bocheng describes Yang Guifei’s beauty, like the majority of beauties in traditional literary works written after the Tang, as follows: “She had ‘crimson cherry-like lips’ (朱唇、绛唇、樱唇), ‘a snow-white skin’ (雪腻肌肤), a ‘creamy bosom / soft and white breast’ (酥胸), ‘white wrists’ (素腕) and ‘delicate fingers and hands that resemble bamboo shoots’ (嫩指、纤指、春笋).”<sup>75</sup>

“Wang describes Yang Guifei as a consort with a ‘slim waist’ (楚腰、柳腰、纤腰) and ‘tiny convex feet’ (半扎金莲). She typifies the beauty preferences of Chinese men of the Song dynasty and later periods. Certain terms recur constantly. Wang describes Yang Guifei as ‘beautiful, delicate and seductive’ (娇) twenty times, as ‘alluring’ (风流) thirteen times and as ‘bewitching’ (妖娆) six times.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Rain on the Wutong Tree (唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨)**

In the first half of the play *Rain on the Wutong Tree* by Bai Renfu (白仁甫; 1226 – 1306 A.D.) An Lushan revolts and General Chen breaks up the two love birds (Emperor Xuanzong and the Precious consort). The second half of the play is about Yang Guifei who is eating fresh sweet lychee fruits during daytime and Emperor Xuanzong shares his feelings to the Wutong tree while it is raining at an autumn night.

The most interesting reference to Yang Guifei’s beauty in this drama is that the emperor tells the audience that when he met the consort Yang, she very much resembled Chang’e (杨妃绝

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<sup>73</sup> Chen. (1992): p.118.

<sup>74</sup> Santangelo. (2010): p.79.

<sup>75</sup> Chen. (1992): p.118.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.119.

类嫦娥), the beautiful Goddess of the Moon.<sup>77</sup> According to Chinese legends Chang'e was an elegant dancer and of unsurpassable beauty.

In the first part of the play, Xuanzong says that the beauty of Taizhen can topple cities and nations (太真妃倾国倾城).<sup>78</sup> He sings a song to Yang Guifei that is as follows: "Startled the charming and graceful one quickly receives the royal sedan chair. Her flushed, beautiful face cannot be either drawn or painted. In each step, she reveals her charm. In every way, her beauty is full-shown" (娉婷、娇).<sup>79</sup>

The emperor also briefly mentions her 'jade hands' (玉手).<sup>80</sup> Arriving at Mawei station Yang Guifei must die. Xuanzong sings a song in which the Precious Consort is described for the last time. "She is like a tender, charming crab-apple flower (她是朵娇滴滴海棠花) (...) No longer can she paint her eyebrows like the colour of distant mountains (再不将曲弯弯远山眉儿画). And arrange her hair fluffily like a cluster of magpies (乱松松云鬟堆鸦). A long white rope has been prepared to strangle her tender throat (袅袅咽喉)".<sup>81</sup> "The famous flower (名花) in my royal garden is no more. (...) A beautiful crab-apple blossom had fallen (把一朵海棠花落了). I see the mimosas [flowers]<sup>82</sup> I cherish, that charming face and when I meet willows I remember her tiny waist. (见芙蓉怀媚脸。遇杨柳忆纤腰。)(...) I do not see her city-toppling appearance (不见倾城貌)".<sup>83</sup>

### **Records of Shocking Grandeur (惊鸿记)**

In the Ming play *Records of Shocking Grandeur* by Wu Shimei (吴世美; ca.1573 A.D.), the storyline in which the emperor and his beloved consort are feasting in the royal garden is a popular theme. As they were admiring the peonies, the emperor summoned the poet Li Bai to write three poems to mark the joyous occasion, a reference to the poem *Qing Ping Diao*.

Wu tells us over and over again that Yang Guifei was a real beauty. "Yang Yuhuan was a woman of unique matchless beauty (杨玉环天姿国色, 绝世无双).<sup>84</sup> (...) Beauty Yang had good looks (杨美人姿色果美).<sup>85</sup> (...) The imperial concubine was pretty (娘娘貌美)."<sup>86</sup> "The

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<sup>77</sup> Bai Renfu, translated by Yang. (1972): pp.109,112. Chinese version by Zang. (1955): pp.348, 350.

<sup>78</sup> Bai Renfu. p.113 & Zang. p.350.

<sup>79</sup> Bai Renfu. p.115 & Zang. p.351.

<sup>80</sup> Bai Renfu. p.120 & Zang. p.354.

<sup>81</sup> Bai Renfu, translated by Yang. (1972): pp.129-130 & Zang. (1955): p.359.

<sup>82</sup> 芙蓉 is also another name for 荷花 which means Lotus.

<sup>83</sup> Bai Renfu, translated by Yang. (1972): p.133. & Zang. (1955): p.361.

<sup>84</sup> Wu Shimei, edited by Kang, Baocheng. (2004): p.18.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.21.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p.22.

peony is the famous flower and the concubine is exceedingly beautiful (牡丹是名花, 妃子是绝色). The famous flower topples states (名花倾国).”<sup>87</sup> ‘名花’, or the famous flower peony, is a metaphor for ‘girl’, in this case it refers to Yang Guifei. “An empress that outshines the moon and put flowers to shame (一个闭月羞花的母后).”<sup>88</sup> (...) “White Yuhuan (白玉环).<sup>89</sup> Beautiful Yang Yuhuan with her gorgeous flesh is the Gaotang goddess (美丽的杨玉环 (...)艳肌 (...) 高唐神女).<sup>90</sup> (...) Yang Guifei’s moon appearance (杨贵妃月貌).<sup>91</sup> (...) Taizhen’s lovely songs and erotic dances (太真娇歌艳舞).”<sup>92</sup>

### **Records of Colourful Brush (彩毫记)**

The play *Records of Colourful Brush* by Tu Long (屠隆; 1542-1605 A.D.) is mainly about the life of the poet Li Bai. Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei also figure in it, but they are not the protagonists. Yang Guifei is referred to by her Taoist name Yang Taizhen.<sup>93</sup> The most important act is where Yang Guifei and the emperor watch the flowers together and Li Bai composes the three verses of the poem *Qing Ping Diao*. Other parts in which the two appear are when they are in Huaqing Palace, when Guifei dies at Mawei station and the emperor mourns for her. Another act Yang Guifei plays a part in, is the scene at the Moon Palace where she and Li Bai meet each other and have a conversation.

Tu Long describes Yang Guifei’s beauty as follows: “The emperor loves Taizhen’s breasts (皇上爱太真娘娘的双乳). The beauty of the imperial concubine [Yang Guifei] is incomparable (娘娘颜色应无比). (...) The jade breasts of the imperial concubine are really lovely (玉乳酥胸真可喜).”<sup>94</sup> (...) “My concubine [is so beautiful that she] puts flowers to shame and outshines the moon (我娘娘(...)羞花闭月万种丰姿).”<sup>95</sup>

### **Palace of Eternal Youth (长生殿)**

In the *Palace of Eternal Youth* written by Hong Sheng (洪昇; 1645-1704 A.D.), Xuanzong gives Yang Guifei two love tokens; a golden hairpin and a casket. Chang’e, the Moon Goddess, wishing to pass on the beautiful music of the Rainbow-skirt Feather-jacket Dance to mortals, summons Yang Guifei's soul to her in a dream and teaches it to her.

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<sup>87</sup> Wu Shimei, edited by Kang, Baocheng. (2004): pp.33,88.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p.39.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p.53.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p.58.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p.95.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p.96.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pp.101,103.

<sup>94</sup> Tu Long, edited by Mao, Jin. (1955): p.14.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p.41.

The emperor and Yang Guifei make a pledge on the seventh of the seventh month to the Herd Boy and Spinning Damsel, vowing eternal love to each other. After Yang's death at Mawei station, the Spinning Damsel persuades the Jade Emperor of Heaven to permit Yang Guifei to become an immortal in Penglai. The emperor dreams that she has sent for him and afterwards he commands a Taoist priest to seek her. When the priest reaches Penglai, Yang gives him half of the hairpin and part of the casket to take to Xuanzong. Later the two lovers are reunited, match the halves of the hairpin and the casket and stay in paradise forever.

In this play there are many descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty.

Hong Sheng uses two types of descriptions: she is either described in the third person or in the first person when her character speaks herself. I first discuss the descriptions of Yang Guifei in the third person followed by Yang Guifei's self-descriptions.

The first description of Yang Guifei is "Yang Yuhuan was gentle and beautiful."<sup>96</sup> (...) "You come of an illustrious family, and are as beautiful as you are virtuous."<sup>97</sup> She is 'the new found Jewel' of the palace. When she receives gifts of the emperor she says she can't thank him enough, not even with her 'poor looks'.<sup>98</sup>

Hong Sheng also compares Yang Guifei to other women, "For I have found a lady as fair as a goddess."<sup>99</sup> The portrayals of goddesses and fairies are almost always positive and represent the perfect flawless woman. According to Rouzer, "the goddess figure is often used as the primary representation of female idealization in male sexuality."<sup>100</sup> This is not a new theme, Yang Guifei turns into a lovely goddess/fairy in *Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow* as well.

One of the phrases Xuanzong uses to describe Yang Guifei is as follows: "Your unearthly beauty makes me think you must once have been a fairy of the moon."<sup>101</sup> (...) Loveliest of all, my favourite shall outshine the rest."<sup>102</sup>

Yang Guifei pays a lot of attention to her make-up and clothing. For example "Lady Yang comes back wearing an embroidered headdress, embroidered white tunic with green sleeves, a cape with coloured cloud design and a red dancing skirt."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): pp.7,46.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.9.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p.7.

<sup>100</sup> Rouzer. (2001): p.11.

<sup>101</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.127.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.173.

In the third scene Yang Guifei is dressed by her maid, introduces herself, and puts on rouge and powder.<sup>104</sup> Her maids give her an emerald hairpin and tell her to pencil her eyebrows and to pin on the flower.<sup>105</sup>

Later the two maids describe Lady Yang as follows: “Her skin is so smooth one fears a breeze may harm it. Her feet are light enough to walk on water. A thousand charms are mirrored in her glass.”<sup>106</sup> “She is a beautiful woman, like rose jade she is lying so frail.<sup>107</sup> (...) a peerless beauty.<sup>108</sup> (...) Lady Yang as if she was a jewel.<sup>109</sup> (...) She is proud of her gifts and accomplishments, for all of the court ladies, which one can remotely compare with her in the favour she finds in the emperor’s eyes.”<sup>110</sup>

Xuanzong says [while talking about a music tune]: “My darling has all the accomplishments that grace a lovely woman. My darling is not only unmatched in beauty, but the genius she shows here has never been surpassed.” “She was an “Outstanding talent.<sup>111</sup> My beauty<sup>112</sup> with her silvery voice.”<sup>113</sup> Not only her gift for music is mentioned, her dancing skills as well: “Whirling, rising and falling like flowering sprays, like quivering willows or phoenix flying on high. That was an exquisite dance.”<sup>114</sup>

Some other phrases of Xuanzong describing her beauty are: “When you cast off your cloud-like garments, your pearl-bright, jade-fine beauty is revealed.<sup>115</sup> (...) Her slender body is floating like a lotus on the waves. In all its limpid beauty; there she moves her supple ankles, her smooth, scented arms and her willowy waist through the translucent water. Look how fine-boned she is and what a snow-white skin! Her slender waist.<sup>116</sup> (...) Her voice was pure and clear.<sup>117</sup> (...) Delicate hands and sweet lips.<sup>118</sup> (...) Her white skin.<sup>119</sup> (...) Her shapely feet.<sup>120</sup> (...) Charming eyes.<sup>121</sup> (...) Her silken hair.<sup>122</sup> (...) Your slender fingers.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.29.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p.31.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p.33.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p.35.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p.47.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. pp.49, 337.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p.67.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p.467.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. pp.123, 515.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p.141.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p.175.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.233.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p.235.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p.439.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p.459.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p.491.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p.495.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p.363.

When Yang Guifei must die at Mawei station there is another short description of her beauty. “The girl with the graceful eyebrows is doomed to die. She was fairer than the peach blossom. Her warmth and fragrance and beauty are gone.<sup>124</sup> (...) Oh, such a beauty.”<sup>125</sup>

In the following passage the artist Li, who is one of the characters in this play, tells the audience about Yang Guifei, saying he can’t give a true picture of her charms. “Once there was a lovely girl named Yang, like flawless jade in her maiden bower. What did she look like? She was more like a fairy than a mortal; I can give no true picture of her charms. Flowers are not as fair as her cheeks, nor willows more slender than her waist. She was lovelier than the famous beauties of the old, like the goddess Guanyin who rises from the waves or the moon goddess stealing from the deep blue sky. Not even the finest painter could paint her infinite charms. Our sovereign treasured her as a matchless pearl.”<sup>126</sup> In short, the greatest beauty is ineffable.

In this play Yang Guifei is also compared to flowers, but none in specific, except for the following sentence: “You are like a willow in the breeze, a lotus glimmering in the lake; with that orchid in your hair, your face is doubly enchanting.”<sup>127</sup>

Yang Guifei describes herself as: , “I shall repaint my eyebrows for the evening and change into a fragrant butterfly gown.” (...) “My willowy waist.<sup>128</sup> (...) Enchanting laughter and adorable frowns.<sup>129</sup>(...) I had such beauty that one smile of mine was worth a thousand golden coins.<sup>130</sup>” (...) “My beauty is gone. When I think of my former beauty my tears start falling; for with my charms and splendid robes I was lovelier than a painting.”<sup>131</sup> Hong Sheng portrays Yang Guifei in a narcissistic way. These ‘self-descriptions’ clearly illustrates her love for her own beauty. To conclude, in all the literary works discussed above, Yang Guifei is endowed with both beauty and talent by the male authors. In the next chapter I shall analyse the descriptions of her beauty in further detail.

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<sup>122</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.79.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p.265.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p.289.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p.313.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. pp.435,437.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p.125.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p.269.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.p.475.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p.417.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p.339.



## Chapter 3: Analysis of Yang Guifei's beauty through time

As Yang Guifei's story often has been retold by several authors in different dynasties, her image never is completely the same. This last chapter consists of four parts in which I analyse the portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty through time. In the first part of my analysis I illustrate which (physical) female beauty ideals match the descriptions of Yang Guifei in my sources. The way Yang Guifei's physical beauty is represented by male authors is discussed in the second paragraph. The fragmented way of presenting her physical beauty corresponds with the techniques under laying the male gaze theory. In the third paragraph, I list the descriptions of Yang Guifei's outer beauty in my model of the Outer Person.<sup>132</sup> The categories I defined for my model are Physique, Expression and Additions, which I shall explain in more detail in §3.3. I focus on the physical aspects of Yang Guifei, because Chen already researched the different faces of Yang Guifei in literature: the femme fatale, the fallen angel, the victimized beauty, the nymphomaniac, and the romantic heroin.<sup>133</sup> She focused in her articles on Yang Guifei's characteristics and behaviour that I define as Inner person.

**Table 2: Categories of the Inner and Outer Person**

| Inner Person      | Outer Person |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Characteristics   | Physique     |
| Behaviour         | Expression   |
| Abilities/Talents | Additions    |

In the fourth part of this chapter I analyse the changes in the portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty in Chinese literature through time. To answer the question "How the description of Yang Guifei's (physical) beauty in literature changed over time" and "Which aspects of the description of Yang Guifei's beauty in literature changed and which remained consistent over time and why", I explain that Chinese aesthetic conceptions changed and that Yang Guifei's image in literature changes accordingly.

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<sup>132</sup> I intentionally use Outer Person in my list instead of the commonly accepted value-judgement terms outer beauty, because I regard these as non-objective and non-neutral terms. I personally came up with this checklist of the Outer Person and it is not based on an already existing model. The terms used in the Inner Person list are derived from my BA thesis (2014).

<sup>133</sup> Chen (1992): passim.

### §3.1 Yang Guifei's beauty and feminine beauty ideals

Yang Guifei's image in literary works varies widely, but one characteristic always remains the same, namely that she is very beautiful. The description of her appearance however, differs from text to text. As we come further in time, the descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty change and become more and more specific instead of only generic phrases as used in the Tang and early Song dynasty.

In this paragraph I will elaborate on my findings from the close reading of my primary sources and bring them together with the information of female beauty ideals collected from chapter 1. First I discuss the general feminine beauty ideals as reflected in the portrayal of Yang Guifei. Secondly I shall illustrate which beauty ideals match the descriptions of Yang's beauty in Tang sources and finally I will show which beauty ideals are used in the description of Yang Guifei in literary works of the Song until the Qing dynasty.

The following two general preferences return frequently in various sources about Yang Guifei: her cloud-like hair and her white skin. Although red lips and cheeks are general feminine beauty ideals as well, it is mentioned less often than her hair and skin. The portrayal of Yang Guifei with cloud-like (black) hair appears in almost every source. The first description in the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* of Yang Guifei's beauty is that her hairdo is cloud-like. In *Rain on the Wutong Tree*, Yang Guifei is described as cloud-like hair and as hair fluffily like a cluster of magpies. In *the Palace of Eternal Youth* it says "her dark hair ruffled like the evening clouds after a shower".<sup>134</sup>

Van Gulik notices that Yang Guifei is often described as a remarkable beauty of snow-white teint, as the fashion of that day demanded.<sup>135</sup> This is also true for the descriptions of Yang Guifei in my sources. For example in the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* her skin is white and soft: 'snowy skin' and 'satiny skin'. In the *Zhugongdiao* Yang Guifei literally is described as a woman with a snow white skin and in the *Records of Shocking Grandeur* she is referred to as White Yuhuan. In *the Palace of Eternal Youth* it is said that her snow-white skin is so smooth. In the voyeuristic scene *Yang-Fei takes a bath* her natural jade-like appearance (天真玉容) is mentioned.<sup>136</sup>

In the Tang dynasty there are very few descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty. In my primary sources, the following references to Yang Guifei's beauty are made. In the *Song of*

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<sup>134</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.237.

<sup>135</sup> Gulik, van. (2003): p.191.

<sup>136</sup> Chen. (1992): p.95.

*Everlasting Sorrow* Yang Guifei's face is flowerlike, like a hibiscus, but not specified as round with a wide forehead. Her eyebrows are mentioned twice: "a raven-browed beauty" and brows like bending willow trees, describing colour and shape. The *Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow* mentions that Yang Guifei had "cloudlike black hair" and "a fine molded figure". Again these descriptions remain general.

In the poem *Qing Ping Diao* she is compared to a flower, the peony. The peony symbolizes feminine beauty and it is often associated with stoutness in Chinese literature. There is however no explicit reference to Yang Guifei's physique. The only reference to Yang's stoutness is in the chengyu<sup>137</sup> "Yang Yuhuan was plump, while Zhao Feiyan (趙飛燕) was skinny" (环肥燕瘦), but it is not known whether this proverb was already in use in Tang times. This chengyu illustrates that she was considered well rounded. In this way her body shape was in line with the preference for an ideal beauty in the Tang. According to Wappenschmidt, Yang Guifei was the personification of aesthetic ideals in Tang times.<sup>138</sup> My sources however show no direct evidence for this statement. The representation of Yang Guifei's beauty in my sources of the Tang dynasty only reflect some general beauty ideals.

In Tang sources no references are made to artificial body changes such as bound feet and a tightened chest, due to the fact that these beauty ideals did not exist yet.

The Song until Qing dynasty literary works emphasize on the description of Yang Guifei's waist and feet. It is not likely that the genuine Yang Guifei would have had small bound feet, as this phenomenon was introduced in the Song dynasty.

According to Chen, most of Wang Bocheng's descriptions of Yang Guifei's physical features in the *Zhugongdiao* tend to be general. The terms he uses simply indicate that Yang is exceptionally beautiful or they merely reflect common preferences.<sup>139</sup> These observations are actually applicable for any of my primary sources.

In the *Zhugongdiao*, descriptions which focus on Yang Guifei's feet and toes appear for the first time. I may illustrate this with an example. In *Yang-Fei trims her toes* "the frosty-white beauty of her relaxing warm feet is revealed. Tightly bound are the scallion-tip toes, so soft [are the feet] that they match two lotus [buds] and so narrow that they are slimmer than half of a tablet. (带温霜华，解放轻松下，并春葱指密匝。软糯糯堪衬双莲，瘦怯怯刚迭半札)。"<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> A chengyu is a type of traditional Chinese idiomatic expression, most of which consist of four characters.

<sup>138</sup> Wappenschmidt. (1977): p.49.

<sup>139</sup> Chen (1992): p.118.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p.117.

Yang Guifei's waist is described a few times in the play *Rain on the Wutong Tree*. For example: "She dances with cloud-like hair loosened revealing her waist as thin as a wasp (云鬟、蜂腰)." <sup>141</sup> And "I meet willows I remember her tiny waist." <sup>142</sup> In the *Zhugongdiao* Yang Guifei's slim waist is mentioned as well. In *the Palace of Eternal Youth*, Hong Sheng pays great attention to her body. He describes Yang Guifei as fine-boned with a slender body and willowy waist many times.

In *Rain on the Wutong Tree* Yang Guifei's physical attributes are portrayed only vaguely. Besides some general descriptions of her beauty, such as comparisons to flowers, the author Bai Renfu only refers to her 'jade hands' and 'tender throat'.

In the *Zhugongdiao* the author Wang Bocheng pays attention to Yang Guifei's delicate fingers and jade arms. He shortly says some general lines about her wrists, shoulders, cheeks, flesh, bones, and face. Other descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty in Hong Sheng's play *the Palace of Eternal Youth* are supple ankles, scented arms, slender fingers and soft delicate hands. These beauty ideals all reflect the preferences of their time.

There was no special attention for the portrayal of female genitals or the buttocks of a woman in literature. Women would have had a generous décolleté. I want to add the aspect of creamy white breasts to Huo Jianying's list of female beauty ideals (see p.5). Yang Guifei's exquisitely shaped bosom is emphasized many times in the *Zhugongdiao*. In the *Records of the Colourful Brush*, Tu Long pays special attention to Yang Guifei's jade breasts as well. Other descriptions remain general.

In table 3 I summarize the most interesting female beauty ideals as reflected in the portrayal of the fictional Yang Guifei. Especially the descriptions of Yang Guifei in the later dynasties convey an impression of the beauty ideals of those times.

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<sup>141</sup> Bai Renfu, translated by Yang. (1972): p.121 & Zang. (1955): p.355.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p.133.

**Table 3: Female beauty ideals as reflected in the portrayal of Yang Guifei**

|                              |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| General female beauty ideals | Cloudlike-hair       |
|                              | White skin           |
|                              | Creamy white breasts |
| Tang dynasty                 | Thin eyebrows        |
|                              | Round physique       |
| Song-Qing dynasty            | Thin waist           |
|                              | Small feet           |

### **§3.2 The ‘creators’ of Yang Guifei’s beauty and the male gaze**

Many premodern Chinese literature works were created by men and read mostly by a male audience. Man emphasizes the fact that “men are the speaking subject in the Chinese patriarchal system, and that male imaginations construct the ideal and the aesthetics quality in a woman as the projection of their wishes or regrets and as the production of various forms of their fantasies.”<sup>143</sup> Larson states that “the textual focus on female beauty in traditional literature is a good example of how literati constructed female images to express and concoct their own desire.”<sup>144</sup> According to Hsieh, fantasy provided an excellent outlet for male desire and literati could satisfy their longings in this genre.<sup>145</sup> The core concepts of the patriarchal system, desire and fantasy play an important role in the male gaze theory.

The male gaze theory, as put forward by Laura Mulvey, is a modern western concept, used in gender studies, that depicts women from a male point of view, presenting them mainly as objects of male pleasure.<sup>146</sup> Mulvey applied this theory mainly to film, but it can also be applied to literary genres. As literature in premodern China was a male-oriented discourse, the representation of female gender in male-authored texts is most likely influenced by this male gaze. There are almost no works about Yang Guifei written by women, so a female perspective or gaze is not applicable. I am aware that the term male gaze is a Western feminist concept, but the Western feminist aspects of this theory do not interest me here,

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<sup>143</sup> Man. (2000): p.169.

<sup>144</sup> Larson. (2004): p.60.

<sup>145</sup> Hsieh. (2008): p.60.

<sup>146</sup> Mulvey. (1999): passim.

only the technique of looking. This technique consists of fragmentising the description of the female body. “The male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”<sup>147</sup> “Female images, especially in theatre, are shown to be used as props to satisfy male fantasies.”<sup>148</sup> As I am focusing my research on her portrayal in fictional literature, the description of Yang Guifei’s beauty can be adapted to the wishes of male authors and their audience. Her beauty can therefore embody all that a man prefers in a woman. The portrayal of women in real life and women as they appear in literature are not necessarily the same. Female characters need to be made appealing to the readers and therefore literary images of women do not always conform to reality.

According to Huang, literature, especially drama and prose fiction, was becoming increasingly preoccupied with male desire during the late Ming.<sup>149</sup> He states that “the obsession of authors with individual desire is an essential quality that defines traditional Chinese fiction as a narrative genre. (...) Many literati were eager to talk about desire, not in general or in the abstract, but in terms of their personal experiences and preferences.”<sup>150</sup> Fiction, and especially theatre, is a suitable genre for the male gaze, because “rather than representing historical truths concerning the behaviour and lives of women, the images of women in these plays are more appropriately reflections of the desires and fears of their male playwrights and audiences. They are mirrors which reveal private yearnings of individuals as well as public demands of [male] society.”<sup>151</sup>

Another gender studies’ term is Voyeurism, which is the secretly observing of other people, sometimes in a sexual context. Huang states that voyeurism becomes one of the most important narrative features in the Ming.<sup>152</sup> However, male voyeuristic depictions of the female were already in favour in Song erotic literary works, such as the *Zhugongdiao*. Some of the titles of the songs are sexual and satisfy a voyeuristic desire of male readers. Literati used beautiful women often as an object of desire and they created an image in line with their fantasies.

De Lauretis also states that “women are considered merely as the object of (male) desire in narrative.”<sup>153</sup> As premodern China was a patriarchal society, most women held a subordinate position. This also often applies to characters in fictional literature: the man is the active subject and the woman is portrayed as the passive object. According to Laura Mulvey,

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<sup>147</sup> Mulvey. (1999): pp.10-11.

<sup>148</sup> Chen. (1994): p.98.

<sup>149</sup> Huang. (2001): p.3.

<sup>150</sup> Huang. (2001): p.21.

<sup>151</sup> Chen. (1994): p.98.

<sup>152</sup> Huang. (2001): p.59.

<sup>153</sup> Lauretis, de. (1984): p.111.

“women are just (textual) images and men the bearers of the look.”<sup>154</sup> Men (the author and audience) look at women (for example Yang Guifei) and create an image of them.

The authors project their look on to the objectified body of Yang Guifei and show us only fragments. Her body is broken down into pieces and in none of my sources the authors give a complete picture of her physical beauty and character. Certain aspects of her body are highlighted by making use of detailed descriptions or ‘close-ups’. For instance the following description in the *Palace of Eternal Youth*: “The scented sandalwood castanets in her soft hands, the words falling like pearls from her red lips and dazzling teeth.”<sup>155</sup> The author quickly switches from the hands to the face, only showing the viewer bits and pieces of her glorified beauty.

The author Bai Juyi (*Song of Everlasting Sorrow*) did not limit himself to a factual portrayal of the life of Yang Guifei. As Chen Hong’s story (*Biography of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow*) is based on Bai Juyi’s poem both are fictional. Because they are fictional, Yang Guifei’s description can be fully adapted to the author’s wishes.

Chen states that in many scenes of the *Zhugongdiao*, Yang Guifei “seems a mere sex object that reflects all the desirable traits of beauty valued by the author and his audience.”<sup>156</sup> She states that “the portrayal of Yang Guifei as a sex symbol can be explained by the type of entertainment to which the genre belonged.”<sup>157</sup> The most emphasized physical feature of Yang Guifei are her ‘creamy breasts’. Chen says that “Wang Bocheng, the author of the *Zhugongdiao*, makes five references to them throughout the text and even devotes an entire suite of songs to the topic.”<sup>158</sup> In the ballade *Xuanzong Caresses her Breasts*, the audience is actively looking at Yang Guifei’s body and in particular focusing on her bosom. The first line of the third verse gives a description of her breasts: “[they] seem like the gorgon fruit (初熟鸡头肉/芡实).”<sup>159</sup> This gorgon fruit is a term only used to describe Yang Guifei’s breasts. In this representation of the female body, the author explicitly pays attention to her female sexuality.

The author Hong Sheng of the *Palace of Eternal Youth* focuses on both the self-representation of the narcissistic Yang Guifei as on the portrayal of her beauty by others. For example: “The bright mirror awaits me, as I comb and dress my hair, my eyes keep straying to the mirror.”<sup>160</sup> In the play there even are instructions for Xuanzong to actively look at

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<sup>154</sup> Mulvey. (1999): p.10.

<sup>155</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.439.

<sup>156</sup> Chen. (1990-1992): p.7.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>159</sup> Wang Bocheng, edited by Zhu Pingchu. (1987): p.185.

<sup>160</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): p.31.

Guifei while she is sleeping or for the maids that dress and simultaneously watch her.<sup>161</sup> The audience does not interact directly with the object of interest and merely voyeuristically observes her.

To conclude, male authors manipulate the audience's conception of Yang Guifei's body. As certain physical traits are preferred her image is adapted to it. Authors use their own fantasies and desire to create an alluring picture of her sexuality and persona.

### **§3.3 Yang Guifei's Outer Person**

In premodern China feminine beauty (美/女色) was an important feature of a woman, apart from virtue (德) and talent (才).<sup>162</sup> In this paragraph, my model of the Outer Person gives an overview of the aspects of Yang Guifei's outer beauty. The categories I defined for the Outer Person are Physique<sup>163</sup>, Expression<sup>164</sup> and Additions<sup>165</sup>. I emphasize again that I do not reconstruct an image of the historical Yang Guifei, because of lack of evidence. My research rather focuses on the aspects of (physical) beauty which are used in the portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty by male authors in literature.

#### **Outer Person**

Yang Guifei's physical attractiveness depends on the aspects Physique, Expression and Additions. In this list of the Outer Person (see Table 4, p.33) it is important to take into account whether a person's physique and expressions are natural or artificial in order to say something about the beauty of that person. Table 4 consists of information collected from the most important beauty ideals discussed as by Kyō, supplemented with aspects that are specifically mentioned about Yang Guifei in my primary sources. The order in which the aspects of the 'Physique' category are presented, are not listed alphabetically but anatomically: from head to toe. I chose 'Yes' if the aspect is discussed in one or more sources, regardless of the times mentioned. I only used 'No' if there is no mention of this aspect at all. The latter are 'Balance of the face', 'Body length', 'Forehead', 'Temples', 'Eyelashes', 'Ears', 'Dimples', 'Cheekbones', 'Jaw', 'Chin', 'Neck', 'Back', 'Hips', 'Elbows', 'Fingernails', 'Legs', 'Thighs', 'Knees' and 'Toenails'.

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<sup>161</sup> Hong Sheng, translated by Yang, Xianyi & Yang, Gladys. (1999): pp.33,35.

<sup>162</sup> Liu. (1998). *passim*.

<sup>163</sup> My definition of Physique is 'the bodily structure or the characteristic appearance of a person'.

<sup>164</sup> Expression is 'the manner or means of representation of a person's countenance, voice, language and attitude'.

<sup>165</sup> Additions are all the artificial add-ons to the body, such as hairdo, make-up, jewellery and garments. Artificial body changes such as bound feet also fall into this category.



I think the reason an author chooses whether or not to describe a particular body part is a matter of personal preference.

Every aspect in the 'Additions' category is artificial. Yang Guifei's outer beauty is influenced by what she is said to wear, such as embroidered garments and jewellery. Her hairdo and make-up also play a major part in the way she is portrayed by authors.

Descriptions used for the 'Expressions' category are for example that Yang Guifei had an artful smile, enchanting laughter, or that she moves and walks very gracefully. Her voice was charming, silvery, pure and clear. During my research I learned that the authors of my primary sources were more interested in portraying Yang Guifei's 'physique' than her 'expressions' and 'additions', therefore the first category deserves more attention in my final analysis.

**Table 4: Aspects of the Outer Person of Yang Guifei**

| Outer Person |                     | Mentioned |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Physique     | Gender              | Yes       |
|              | Age                 | Yes       |
|              | Skin                | Yes       |
|              | Balance of the face | No        |
|              | Fine-boned          | Yes       |
|              | Body Length         | No        |
|              | Figure              | Yes       |
|              | Hair                | Yes       |
|              | Forehead            | No        |
|              | Temples             | No        |
|              | Eyebrows            | Yes       |
|              | Eyes                | Yes       |
|              | Eyelashes           | No        |
|              | Ears                | No        |
|              | Nose                | No        |
|              | Lips                | Yes       |
|              | Dimples             | No        |
|              | Mouth               | Yes       |
|              | Teeth               | Yes       |
|              | Cheeks              | Yes       |
|              | Cheekbones          | No        |
|              | Jaw                 | No        |
|              | Chin                | No        |
|              | Throat              | Yes       |
|              | Neck                | No        |
|              | Shoulders           | Yes       |
|              | Breast              | Yes       |
|              | Chest               | Yes       |
|              | Back                | No        |
|              | Waist               | Yes       |
|              | Hips                | No        |
|              | Arms                | Yes       |
|              | Elbows              | No        |
|              | Wrists              | Yes       |
|              | Hands               | Yes       |
|              | Fingers             | Yes       |
|              | Fingernails         | No        |
|              | Legs                | No        |
|              | Thighs              | No        |
|              | Knees               | No        |
|              | Ankles              | Yes       |
|              | Feet                | Yes       |
|              | Toes                | Yes       |
|              | Toenails            | No        |
|              |                     |           |
| Expression   | Gestures/ Movement  | Yes       |
|              | Laughter            | Yes       |
|              | Smile               | Yes       |
|              | Voice               | Yes       |
|              | Way of speaking     | Yes       |
|              | Way of walking      | Yes       |
|              |                     |           |
| Additions    | Garments/ Clothing  | Yes       |
|              | Hairdo              | Yes       |
|              | Jewellery           | Yes       |
|              | Make-up             | Yes       |
|              | Foot binding        | Yes       |

### §3.4 Changes in the portrayal of Yang Guifei's beauty in literature

Yang Guifei is described by many authors, therefore the whole image of her beauty is not fairly constant. According to Xia, “the image of Yang Guifei in literary works is getting further

away from the historical Yang Guifei every dynasty.”<sup>166</sup> But how did the description of Yang Guifei’s beauty change over time? To be more precise, which aspects of ideal feminine beauty remained constant and which changed as reflected in images of Yang Guifei? In line with the beauty ideals of the Tang dynasty, she must have been a woman with a full and round body contour. She probably would have applied extravert facial make-up. In the *Old Book of the Tang* only her natural beauty is emphasized. Starting from the Song dynasty her tiny feet and willowy waist make their debut. These beauty ideals stay in fashion in literary works until the Qing dynasty. At the same time these changes in the description of her feet and physique are most easily detectable, because these beauty ideals are particularly time-bound. Her image is styled accordingly to the beauty ideals of those periods. Certain trends that remain constant are her cloud-like [black] hair adorned with hairpins, red cheeks, tiny red lips and her white skin.

Yang Guifei is portrayed in many literary works. Ter Haar states that “the theme of her proverbial beauty has undoubtedly been very influential in later times.”<sup>167</sup> After my close reading, I used Excel to create some cross-sections to illustrate the frequency of ‘Beauty’ related idioms and words used to describe Yang Guifei in the literary works discussed in chapter 2, resulting in table 5. I set out the most commonly used idioms, adjectives and descriptions under the term ‘Beauty’ and contains general descriptions. In my opinion none of the descriptions are specific for Yang Guifei. My assumption is that those aspects which are mentioned in more than one of the examined works should tell us something about Yang Guifei’s beauty that is generally accepted. Those aspects mentioned by more than one author might be commonly shared descriptions of her beauty as well. Aspects mentioned only by a single author are likely to be his personal touch, or they are dictated by the taste of his time. All the descriptions mentioned only once in my sources are therefore not taken into account in this list. Below I listed a short overview of the remaining descriptions and comparisons of Yang Guifei in my primary sources:

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<sup>166</sup> Xia. (2000): p.18.

<sup>167</sup> Haar, ter. (2011): p.51.

**Table 5: Descriptions and comparisons of Yang Guifei's beauty**

| Aspect         | Literary source                 | #         | Aspect          | Literary source                 | #         |
|----------------|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Arms</b>    |                                 | <b>2</b>  | <b>Hair</b>     |                                 | <b>6</b>  |
|                | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                 | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |                 | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 1         |
| <b>Beauty</b>  |                                 | <b>54</b> |                 | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |
|                | Qing Ping Diao                  | 3         |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |
|                | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 5         | <b>Hairdo</b>   |                                 | <b>5</b>  |
|                | Records of Colourful Brush      | 1         |                 | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 6         |                 | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |
|                | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 1         |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |
|                | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 6         | <b>Hands</b>    |                                 | <b>4</b>  |
|                | The Old and New Book of Tang    | 2         |                 | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 24        |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 2         |
|                | Zhugongdiao                     | 6         |                 | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |
| <b>Body</b>    |                                 | <b>3</b>  | <b>Jade</b>     |                                 | <b>14</b> |
|                | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 2         |                 | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                 | Records of Colourful Brush      | 1         |
| <b>Breasts</b> |                                 | <b>3</b>  |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 4         |
|                | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |                 | Zhugongdiao                     | 8         |
|                | Records of Colourful Brush      | 2         | <b>Lips</b>     |                                 | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Cheeks</b>  |                                 | <b>3</b>  |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 2         |
|                | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                 | Zhugongdiao                     | 2         |
|                | Zhugongdiao                     | 2         | <b>Moon</b>     |                                 | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Cloud</b>   |                                 | <b>4</b>  |                 | Records of Colourful Brush      | 1         |
|                | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |                 | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 2         |
|                | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 1         | <b>Painting</b> |                                 | <b>4</b>  |
|                | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |                 | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                 | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |

| Aspect           | Literary source                 | #         | Aspect              | Literary source                 | #         |
|------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Eyebrows</b>  |                                 | <b>6</b>  | <b>Person</b>       |                                 | <b>11</b> |
|                  | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |                     | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 1         |
|                  | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 2         |                     | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 1         |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |                     | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |
| <b>Eyes</b>      |                                 | <b>2</b>  |                     | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 8         |
|                  | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         | <b>Skin</b>         |                                 | <b>6</b>  |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                     | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 2         |
| <b>Face</b>      |                                 | <b>10</b> |                     | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |
|                  | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 2         |                     | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |
|                  | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 3         | <b>State</b>        |                                 | <b>7</b>  |
|                  | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |                     | Qing Ping Diao                  | 1         |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 3         |                     | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 2         |
|                  | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |                     | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 1         |
| <b>Feet/Toes</b> |                                 | <b>7</b>  |                     | Zhugongdiao                     | 3         |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 2         | <b>Waist/Willow</b> |                                 | <b>9</b>  |
|                  | Zhugongdiao                     | 5         |                     | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 1         |
| <b>Fingers</b>   |                                 | <b>2</b>  |                     | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 2         |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 1         |                     | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 5         |
|                  | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |                     | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |
| <b>Flesh</b>     |                                 | <b>2</b>  | <b>White</b>        |                                 | <b>7</b>  |
|                  | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 1         |                     | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 1         |
|                  | Zhugongdiao                     | 1         |                     | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 1         |
| <b>Flower</b>    |                                 | <b>28</b> |                     | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 2         |
|                  | Qing Ping Diao                  | 2         |                     | Zhugongdiao                     | 3         |
|                  | Rain on the Wutong Tree         | 3         |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | Records of Colourful Brush      | 1         |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | Records of Shocking Grandeur    | 2         |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | Song of Everlasting Sorrow      | 3         |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | Biography of Everlasting Sorrow | 1         |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | The Palace of Eternal Youth     | 10        |                     |                                 |           |
|                  | Zhugongdiao                     | 6         |                     |                                 |           |

For the elaborated list of the data gathered, I refer to table 1 in my Appendix on p.48. This list consists of the following categories: aspects, citation, literary sources and time periods.

The most promising category in table 5 which can help with the creation an image of Yang Guifei's beauty is the category of 'body parts'. The descriptions in this category could tell us more about her outer beauty in particular. After a close look on the data, I came to the conclusion that all of the descriptions of Yang Guifei's 'body parts' are in fact general and that they do not tell anything specific about Yang Guifei at all, except that she was a very beautiful woman. This finding is also supported by the fact that the category 'general beauty' has the most results (54).

Secondly, Yang Guifei is compared to a variety of flowers, with a total of 28. Another interesting comparison of her beauty is to jade, both in colour and smoothness mentioned 14 times.

The next category is the comparison of Yang Guifei with other persons, especially beautiful women who are in favour by the authors. This was counted 11 times. For example, comparisons were made to Chang'e, Madam Li and the Goddess Guanyin. She also is compared to the Plum Blossom Consort Meifei<sup>168</sup> and the other three ancient famous beauties: Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun and Diaochan, but these women are not mentioned in my primary materials.

As Kyō already pointed out, the face of women is of great importance. This is illustrated by the fact that the descriptions of Yang's face seem to be more interesting than the rest of her body, counted 10 times versus 3. Authors especially like to describe her eyebrows in particular.

A beautiful woman in the Song dynasty to the Qing dynasty was supposed to have tiny lotus feet and a slender waist. That is exactly the way Yang Guifei is portrayed by Wang Bocheng. Slenderness is also a favourite adjective when authors are talking about her fingers. These changes are not remarkable as they are time-bound. The categories 'Feet/ Toes' and 'Waist' therefore gained more attention after the Tang dynasty and are mentioned respectively 7 and 9 times. Her genuine physique or fleshy body however is quite the opposite of the descriptions used in later dynasties.

Cloudlike hair adorned with hairpins, tiny red lips, cheeks naturally coloured in beautiful red and a white skin are Chinese beauty ideals shared by all periods and are also applicable to Yang Guifei. Especially the categories hair (6) and white skin (6) are frequently used to describe Yang Guifei's beauty. These aspects of ideal feminine beauty remained constant in premodern China through time as reflected in her images.

The categories for 'Moon' and 'State' are both frequently used to describe feminine beauty. The chengyu “倾国倾城”, which means ‘state- or city toppler’, is one of the most often used idioms concerning Yang Guifei, counted 7 times. The idiom “闭月羞花”<sup>169</sup> literally meaning

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<sup>168</sup> Idema, edited by Lee & Wiles. (2014): p.168 and Levy. (1957): p.461. both regard her as a fictional character. The image of Meifei was probably constructed to complement and be the opposite of Yang Guifei. The most familiar comparison between the two women is their physique. It is likely that Yang Guifei was plump and Meifei was thin.

<sup>169</sup> The idiom “Yang Guifei put flowers to shame” (貴妃羞花) derives of the story *Yang Guifei watches flowers*. In this legend, Yang Guifei wanders in the palace garden and sees the blooming peonies and

“outshines the moon and put flowers to shame” and figuratively “female beauty exceeding even that of the natural world”, was initially made up specially for Yang Guifei and indicates that she was a natural beauty.

Throughout Chinese literature, the moon is often used as a metaphor for female beauty. With regard to Yang Guifei, authors during all dynasties pay special attention to her face and often compare it to that of the full moon (面如满月). For example, in Tang and Song poetry, “the moon often refers to a pure, beautiful and passionate woman.”<sup>170</sup> According to Prasetyaningsih, “it could be a signifier for skin-colour, depicting light-skinned beautiful women.”<sup>171</sup> A full moon is round and obviously refers to voluptuousness. These interpretations can explain why male authors used the moon for describing and comparing Yang Guifei’s beauty.

The fact that Yang Guifei was more beautiful than one could ever paint, is my personal favourite description, even though it is only mentioned 4 times. Beauty almost appears to be something ‘higher’ and capturing it in a mere painting would detract from her real beauty. This category shows that her genuine beauty never could be truly recorded or painted. To portray the perfect flawless woman in an image is simply impossible.

The descriptions of Yang Guifei that remained constant are cloud-like hair adorned with hairpins, red cheeks, tiny red lips, creamy bosom and a white skin, as these are all common Chinese beauty preferences throughout time. Her physique and feet are the aspects that change. From a full and round figure during the Tang dynasty she changes to a slender woman with a willowy waist with tiny convex feet during the Song until Qing dynasty. Yang Guifei is also often compared to flowers, other women, and jade. The general descriptions of her beauty are used the most by the authors in my sources.

Man refers to some interesting points that can be noted in connection with female physical appeal. Her research is about the female bodily aesthetics in the *Book of Songs* (dating from the 11th to 7th centuries B.C. ), but her findings are also applicable to the descriptions of Yang Guifei I found in my sources. She states that “a large range of adjectives relating to beauty were applied to female historical characters” in the songs. She focuses for instance on the

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realizes that she wasted her youth. She cries and a palace servant tells her that her face was so beautiful that it could not be compared to the flowers. It was out of shame the flower-heads suddenly hung down. It is possible that this story was created in later times just to illustrate her beauty.

<sup>170</sup> Liu. (2006): p.13.

<sup>171</sup> Prasetyaningsih. (2007): p.89.

praise for whiteness and slenderness and the use of metaphors ( for example the moon and flowers).<sup>172</sup> These points are also visible in the description of Yang Guifei.

To find the genuine Yang Guifei is difficult, because the descriptions of her beauty could apply to any beautiful woman. In Santangelo's research he uses various works from Late Imperial China. In these works "several images and symbols are employed to describe the excellence of beauty, especially borrowed from flowers and precious jade, but also from mythological fairies and goddesses, focusing on skin, bosom, face, the shape of eyebrows, the brightness and limpidity of eyes, the whiteness of teeth, lips, nose, fingers, hands, feet, cloudy and black hair. Also dressing and make up recall female beauty, from hairpins to powder, and colours and perfumes concur to describe it."<sup>173</sup> He says that "the lexicon for describing female beauty is very rich, which reflects the male's erotic imagination and perception of beauty" and that "there are several cliché expressions that concern the appearance of the body, the seductiveness and elegance of a beauty."<sup>174</sup> These formula-type expressions for describing beauty are not specific and tell us little if anything of the particular person who is being discussed. He concludes that it is not possible to reconstruct an unique ideal beauty in literary works from late Imperial China.

My research can be seen as a case study, which expands over a longer period of time. The descriptions of Yang Guifei's beauty in my primary sources are applicable to any beautiful woman in premodern China. My findings are that her image was based on the formulas of general feminine beauty. The representation of her image changes accordingly to female beauty ideals of a given time. The various examples of descriptions show a pluralistic notion of the female body and of the feminine beauty of Yang Guifei.

Santangelo concludes, and I agree with him, that the topos of a perfect beauty "were just frameworks from which each Chinese author borrowed some basic rhetorical elements to create his own patterns of ideal female beauties."<sup>175</sup> This means that it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the looks particular of Yang Guifei.

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<sup>172</sup> Man, edited by Ho. (2012): pp.116-118.

<sup>173</sup> Santangelo. (2010): p.415.

<sup>174</sup> Santangelo. (2010): p.74.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. p.85.



## Conclusion

Known as Yang Yuhuan in her early life, as Yang Taizhen the nun and finally in her 'later' years as Yang Guifei, she is considered to be one of China's most beautiful women. Although her beauty is a unique subject, it is rarely discussed, and my research aims at gaining a better understanding of the portrayal of Yang's beauty in literature. Lack of physical evidence makes it hard to determine a true description of her outer beauty, therefore I chose to make use of a close reading of my primary sources.

The answer on the question what the feminine beauty ideals in the Tang until the Qing dynasty were is that every pretty woman in premodern China should have a balanced face with red lips and cheeks, black hair and a white skin. These aspects could be considered the general female beauty ideals. In the Tang dynasty women with a full figure were liked best and in later times it was preferred that a woman had small feet and a tiny waist.

As for my next research question "How is Yang Guifei's beauty described in literature of her own time as well as in later dynasties?", I want to conclude that Yang Guifei is seen as a paragon of female beauty. The descriptions of Yang Guifei in literature are dictated by the format and length of the different genres. Sources of her own time, the Tang dynasty, only give us a basic description. As we come further in time, the portrayals of Yang Guifei's beauty become more and more elaborate instead of only generic phrases.

The following research question is "How is the description of Yang Guifei's beauty influenced by feminine beauty ideals and the technique of the male gaze?". The portrayal of Yang Guifei's physical beauty in literature was dictated by cultural and personal taste. The results of my analysis show that her description is influenced by general aesthetic ideals of feminine beauty of a given period, as well as the male gaze. The male gaze projects the fantasy and desires of a male author on to the female figure, which is then styled accordingly. Yang Guifei's (fictional) objectified body is portrayed fragmentarily, especially in voyeuristic scenes. I discussed that her beauty is described along with the ideals of the period in which the play or story is made. The word choice and preferences of each individual author as well as the genre both play an important part in Yang Guifei's representation.

The last research question is "Which aspects of the description of Yang Guifei's beauty changed and which remained consistent over time and why?". In my analysis I conclude that Yang Guifei is often compared to flowers, other women, and jade. The general descriptions of her beauty are used the most by the authors in my sources. These descriptions are not explicitly made for her and could be applied to any beautiful woman in premodern Chinese

literature. So most of the descriptions of Yang Guifei's physical features tend to be general and are probably speculative as well and fully depend on the authors preferences.

The change in description of Yang Guifei's beauty over time mainly lies in the way of portraying her physique. She went from having a full and round figure during the Tang dynasty to a slender woman with a willowy waist and tiny convex feet during the Song until Qing dynasty. The tradition of foot-binding began in the Song dynasty and it is therefore an anachronism to suggest that Yang Guifei had tiny feet. Trends that remain consistent are cloud-like hair adorned with hairpins, red cheeks, tiny red lips, creamy bosom and a white skin, as these are all common preferences through time. These descriptions are some examples of the vocabulary traditionally used to describe beautiful women in premodern Chinese literature.

However, how the real Yang Guifei would have looked like remains guesswork and the search for the genuine beauty of Yang Guifei is a quest without end. To conclude, Yang Guifei could be considered a timeless beauty in literature nonetheless.

As there is no standard work of female beauty in premodern Chinese literature, I suggest that further research on this topic could be done. For example, it would be interesting to compare the portrayal of the other three ancient beauties in Chinese literature to the image of Yang Guifei's beauty. Another possible topic for research could be the descriptions of 'ordinary' beautiful women in premodern Chinese literature.

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## Appendix

### Image 1: Lip painting styles from the Han until the Qing dynasty

In: Hua. (2004): *Chinese Clothing*, p.80.



### Image 2: Eyebrow styles from the Tang dynasty

In: <http://gatita.pixnet.net/blog/post/49680524>

<sup>176</sup> and in: Hua. (2004): *Chinese Clothing*, p.37.

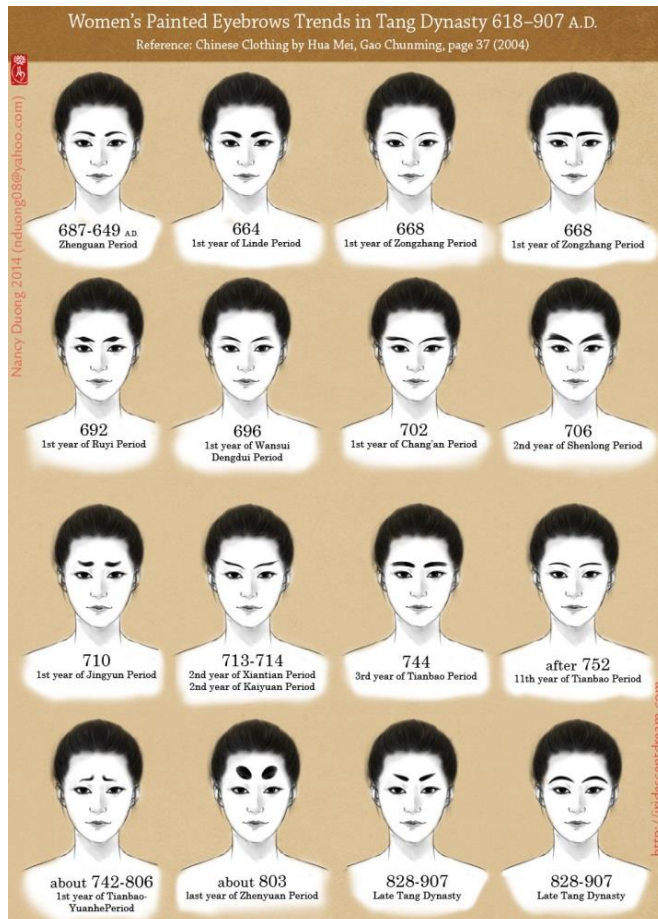


<sup>176</sup> Chen Yen-hui's blog with quite accurate entries about makeup techniques from China's Tang Dynasty is a useful source to get a good impression of the beauty ideals and make-up styles of that time. I used her eyebrow style guide to illustrate the different styles (image 3). As a National Taipei University of Education graduate, she majored in Arts and is interested in ancient Chinese Make-up styles. She spent at least a month researching Tang women aristocrat make-up styles. In her "Mimicking Tang Dynasty Makeup Techniques" post, she used herself as a chart and explains the steps of four different styles.



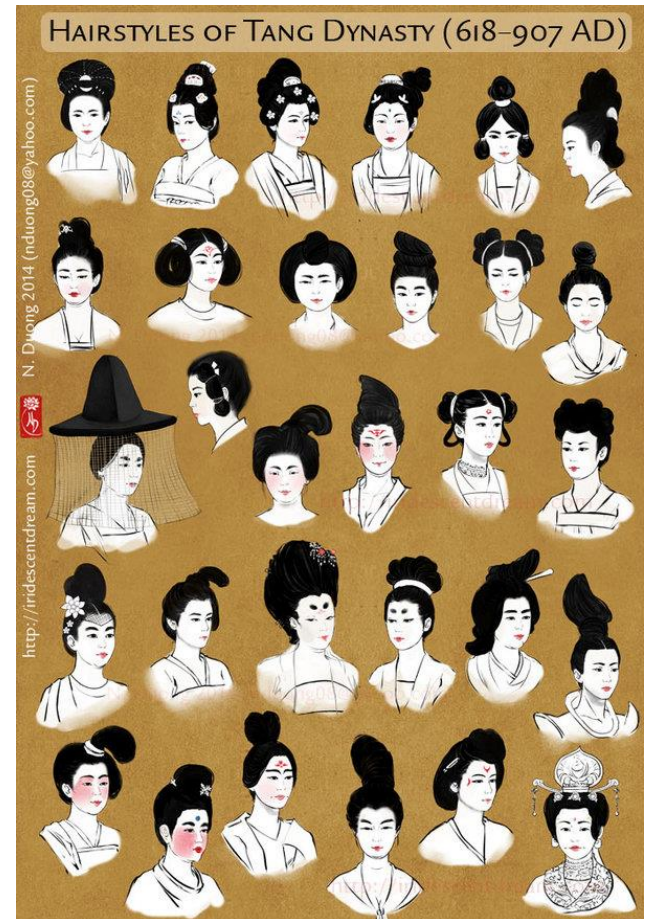
**Image 3: Women's painted eyebrow trends in the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.)**

In: Hua. (2004) in *Chinese Clothing*, p.37.



**Image 4: Hairstyles of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.)**

In: <http://www.iridescentdream.com/gallery.php>



**Image 5: Court Ladies wearing flowered headdresses**

Zhou Fang, 8<sup>th</sup> century.

