

The Cultivation of the Goddess— Analysis of the Image Transformation of Yang Guifei in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*

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Abstract. In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the poet bestows Yang Guifei with the image of an idealistic and pure lover, thus fulfilling the poet's ideal of love, patriotism, and the embodiment of the purest and most virtuous beauty.

Keywords: *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Yang Guifei, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, goddess narrative, love

1. Introduction

The image of Yang Guifei has always been the subject of debate. However, in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, whether it is Yang Guifei's appearance, the affectionate and playful scenes between her and Emperor Xuanzong, or her ultimate demise at Mawei Slope and her final ascent to the heavenly realm, her image remains unparalleled in beauty. So, in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, how does Bai Juyi's portrayal of Yang Guifei shed the label of "a beauty who brings disaster," step by step transforming from a "celestial beauty" into the noble, immaculate, and sacred "goddess" image?

2. The Imagery Transformation of "Hibiscus Face" and "Pear Blossom Tears"

In traditional Chinese literary creation, the imagery of "flowers" is ubiquitous. Among the many floral images, "hibiscus" and "pear blossom" hold significant importance.

"Hibiscus" was often seen by the ancients as a flower that is large and beautiful, with lush leaves and vibrant petals. Its blossoms resemble peonies when in full bloom, which is why in the *Widely Manual of Aromatic Plants* it is also called "the gentleman awaiting his fate." For instance, in the Tang Dynasty poem *Mu Furong (Hibiscus)*, the line "If the roots were in the Qin palace, how many beauties would weep in the morning makeup," compares the hibiscus flower to a beauty, expressing the idea that "people are more charming than flowers." Zheng Yu's line "If encountered in spring, the peony may not necessarily be the flower queen" further highlights the noble temperament of the hibiscus flower. Thus, in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the poet's use of hibiscus to compare Yang Guifei's beauty and noble status is most appropriate. Additionally, in a later work, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, there is a scene in the twelfth act Composition of the Score where Emperor Xuanzong says to Yang Guifei, "Concubine, look at those mandarin ducks sleeping side by side on the pond and the twin lotus blooms," indicating that the imagery of "hibiscus" and "twin lotus" symbolizes the passionate romance between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei.

In ancient imagery, "pear blossom" often signifies purity and short-lived beauty, and since the Tang Dynasty, it has also conveyed emotions of longing, parting, and sorrow. According to *Flower Arrangement*, pear blossoms rank only "fourth grade, six destinies," often used to depict the unfortunate fate and experiences of young girls or to express the melancholy of characters in stories. The homophony between "pear" (梨) and "parting" (离) establishes a foundation of tragedy for this imagery. For example, in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the destruction of people's homes, Yang Guifei's execution at Mawei Slope, and the eternal separation between Xuanzong and his beloved all reflect this tragic symbolism [1]. At the same time, the pure white pear blossom is also a symbol of "loyalty." For instance, Yuan Zhen writes in Five Poems of Longing: "Ordinary hundreds of flowers bloom together, but I only pluck the pear blossom for my wife," highlighting that although his wife comes from a noble background, she does not covet wealth and maintains an elegant and peaceful disposition [2]. This aligns with *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, where the celestial fairy Yang Yuhuan, upon reuniting with Emperor Xuanzong, rushes to her lover with tears streaming down her face, like pear blossom petals touched by a few drops of spring rain, further validating the mutual dedication in their love.

Therefore, from “hibiscus” to “pear blossom,” these two images have long foreshadowed the inevitable tragic ending and poignant emotions between them. These images have become signs of the love between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei, simultaneously setting up a reasonable prelude to their emotional tragedy.

3. The Cultivation History of the Goddess Yang Yuhuan Without Resentment

Whether in the late Tang Dynasty or in later generations, there has been no shortage of various imaginations about Yang Yuhuan after her death, and numerous poems have emerged. For instance, Zheng Tian’s *Mawei Slope* directly states that the decline of the Tang Dynasty was due to the emperor’s inaction: “In the end, it was the matter of the enlightened emperor; who else was there at the well of Jingyang Palace?” Similarly, in Li Shangyin’s *Two Poems on Mawei*, the lines “If the emperor could overthrow the state, how could the jade palanquin pass Mawei?” and “How could an emperor of four decades not compare to Lu’s family with no worries?” criticize the emperor and, at the same time, express sympathy for Yang Guifei. Additionally, some late Tang poems, from Yang Guifei’s perspective, express deep and hidden sorrow, such as in *Tai Zhen Xiang Nang Zi*: “Who could untie it for the emperor again? A lifetime of regret ties the heart.” Contrastingly, the image of Yang Guifei in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* raises questions—why does Yang Guifei, despite being executed by the emperor’s decree, hold no resentment and still maintain her love?

3.1. Writing of Emotional Imagery

First, in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the poet’s portrayal of Yang Yuhuan undoubtedly symbolizes the most beautiful woman in the world. Compared to Li Bai’s ethereal and beautiful description, “Clouds think of her clothes, flowers think of her appearance, spring wind brushes the railing, dew thickens,” Bai Juyi gives Guifei a concrete image of beauty, making her a tangible and imaginable peerless beauty. From her initial entrance into the palace with “A single glance back and a hundred charms arise, all the palace powder and dainty have no color,” to the scene from Emperor Xuanzong’s perspective of her skin like creamy fat, and then to the poignant scene after her death with “Jewelry and flowers scattered on the ground, no one to collect them,” all these richly adorned descriptions of the worldly Yang Yuhuan confer upon her the first fundamental characteristic of a “goddess” in the traditional Chinese sense—beauty. This image of Yang Yuhuan, as a goddess of beauty akin to Aphrodite, also represents primal desire and lays the foundation for Yang Yuhuan’s favor over the six palaces.

Furthermore, by portraying the still passionate love between Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong when they reunite in the heavenly realm after her death, the poet completes the second step in Yang Yuhuan’s transformation into a “divine” being—the possessor of idealized love. The poem begins with, “Born with beauty that is hard to abandon, once chosen beside the emperor,” implying that like the Greek goddess of beauty Aphrodite, Yang Yuhuan was born extremely beautiful and pure, hence her pursuit of the supreme emperor’s love was her innate choice. This aligns with the poet’s recognition of the rationality and idealism in the love between Yang Yuhuan and Li Longji. In a sense, the poet deifies Yang Yuhuan as the practitioner of ideal love. Therefore, the celestial reunion of Li and Yang represents the ultimate realization and sublimation of their beautiful love, achieving an ideal state of love where “the mountains have no edges and the heavens unite.”

3.2. Writing of Social and Political Aspects

From the perspective of state governance, the praise and criticism of Yang Guifei serve as the best medium to convey the poet’s personal attitude. In ancient China, the theories of “beautiful women causing calamities” and “earthly enchantresses” were incessant. For instance, Du Fu’s *Lament along the Winding River* criticizes Yang Guifei and others for their extravagant indulgence, subtly condemning Emperor Xuanzong’s folly: “I recall the time when the rainbow banners lowered to the southern garden, everything in the garden came alive with color. In Zhaoyang Hall, the first among women, accompanied the emperor in his palanquin. Talented people before the palanquin carried bows and arrows, the white horse gnawed on the golden bit.” Similarly, Su Zheng’s *Passing Mawei Slope*: “Ever since the killing of the noble consort, the flowers of spring are indifferent. This place, even after a thousand years, the soil still carries the scent that offends the nose. Favor that exceeds reason, disgrace that is not a common death. Distinct from the others, their downfall is the same.” The words of this poem are not as sharp, expressing sympathy for Guifei’s death, but still containing the entrenched accusation against her.

In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the poet’s attitude in the first half of the poem is also intriguing. At the beginning, the poet directly states, “The Emperor of Han was deeply moved by beauty, he sought a woman who could overthrow a state for many years without success,” abandoning the traditional theory of “women causing calamities” and instead directly blaming the emperor’s obsession with beauty, setting the stage for the subsequent narrative. The poet then describes the scenes of their passionate love affair, “From then on, the emperor no longer attended morning court,” “Feasting in the jade tower, drunk in the spring,” “Her siblings and kin all given noble titles,” “All day long, the emperor’s eyes could not have enough of her,” painting a picture of extreme extravagance. Søren Kierkegaard once said, “Freedom is standing on the edge of a cliff, and fear comes from the utmost revelry.” The utmost indulgence often signifies impending downfall. If the emperor is so absurd, and Yang Guifei, upon gaining favor, elevates everyone around her, the ensuing chaos in the court and among the populace is imaginable. As the

saying goes, “King Chu liked slender waists, so the palace had many who starved to death,” the poet continues to describe, “Thus causing all parents in the world to no longer wish for sons but daughters.” In such a scenario, social order has already been overturned, so both the emperor, as the instigator, and the peerless beauty Yang Yuhuan, as an accessory to the emperor and a symbol of a chaotic era, must give the public a satisfactory explanation.

Thus, this becomes the third step in Yang Yuhuan’s transformation into a “divine” being—dying as the embodiment of “beautiful women causing calamities” and as a reflection of the emperor’s faults, bearing all the sins and mistakes. This form of political writing, at its core, is inseparable from the poet’s patriotism and sense of responsibility for the rise and fall of the nation [3]. At the same time, Guifei’s death is also a reflection and conclusion of her personal and the emperor’s mistakes, “She twirled and died before the horse with painted eyebrows,” thus she dies fittingly, fulfilling the poet’s political sentiments.

4. Final Formation of the “Divine Lady” Image

In ancient China, whether in mythology or legendary stories, the common characteristics of a “divine lady” were undoubtedly selflessness and universal love. Examples include the goddess Nüwa from pre-Qin mythology and the Goddess of the Wu Mountain in *The Song of Gaotang*. However, there were also divine ladies who broke rules and defied ethical norms, such as the Seven Fairies, who, after violating heavenly rules, would face severe punishment. Additionally, the praised female figures throughout history often aligned with the intentions of rulers or served beneficial roles, thereby becoming exalted as divine ladies, like Lady Fu Hao. Hence, the image of a “divine lady” implicitly includes attributes of perpetual sanctity, beauty, and inclusiveness, similar to the compassionate Guanyin, who endures all suffering and remains ever loyal to the ruler.

This is akin to what Simone de Beauvoir mentioned in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Essentially, the narrative of a divine lady stems from the aesthetic sentiments derived from men’s distant observation and imagination of women under patriarchal systems, representing a longing for love and beauty [4]. Precisely because Yang Guifei deeply loved Emperor Xuanzong, she continued to hold a high status as a divine lady in the celestial realm. The poem describes, “Knocking on the jade latch at the western wing of the golden palace, instructing Xiao Yu to report to Shuang Cheng,” “Frightened awake from dreams in the nine-flowered curtain,” “Pearl curtains and silver screens unfold in splendor,” all indicating her high living conditions and status in the celestial realm. This unyielding loyalty, despite all, is a crucial element cementing her love with Emperor Xuanzong. Yang Guifei’s willingness to sacrifice her life for love indirectly justified Xuanzong’s initial folly of losing the nation for beauty, making his personal errors as a ruler more forgivable. Moreover, Xuanzong’s beloved was not an ordinary woman but a “divine lady,” thus elevating the nobility of their love. Additionally, the poet created a “celestial court,” a uniquely privileged environment free from the constraints of worldly morals and ethics. While reality may restrict the interactions between men and women on earth, it cannot bind the deities, allowing divine and human relationships more freedom in love. This setting fills the gaps in the love story of Li and Yang, elevating the aesthetic appeal of their idealized love to its pinnacle.

Simultaneously, Yang Guifei’s death at Mawei Slope becomes the final leap in solidifying her image as a “divine lady.” First, her death reflects the broader backdrop of political corruption and the decline of aristocratic families. The worldly beauty that Yang Guifei embodied must perish, symbolizing the end of the Tang Dynasty’s golden age and the glory of the aristocracy, heralding the destruction of all beauty.

Secondly, Yang Guifei’s death is a historical inevitability and signifies her transformation from a worldly beauty to a divine figure. This not only affirms her emotional bond with Emperor Xuanzong but also validates the poet’s personal feelings. Additionally, her death serves as a punishment for infidelity in earthly emotions. Originally, Yang Yuhuan was the wife of Prince Shou, yet Bai Juyi veils this fact at the poem’s beginning with “A girl from the Yang family, maturing in seclusion, unknown to the world.” Thus, the ethical issues between Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong are eternally unacceptable by societal norms, and she is destined to die in traditional views. As Yasunari Kawabata said, “Life changes its form, and that moment is the boundary.” Therefore, only through the purification of death can Yang Guifei be sanctified, becoming a noble symbol of love, a “divine lady.”

In summary, the “divine lady” Yang Yuhuan symbolizes the spiritual beauty of that era. The cultural connotation of Yang Yuhuan’s aesthetic writing lies in her representation of “appearance like Shunhua” and “virtue as bright as a brilliant star,” an aesthetic experience of flourishing culture. “Appearance like Shunhua” signifies her physical beauty, while “virtue as bright as a brilliant star” signifies her spiritual beauty [3]. Therefore, whether in Li Bai’s “A branch of red blooms with fragrant dewdrops” or Bai Juyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Yang Yuhuan becomes an embodiment of “truth, goodness, and beauty” in the poets’ eyes, symbolizing the poets’ relentless pursuit of eternal love and aesthetic transcendence over harsh reality.

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