

# Analyzing the evolution of the artistic image of "Yang Yuhuan" from a feminist perspective through the lens of arts and cultural management

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**Abstract.** Yang Yuhuan is a controversial consort from ancient China. From historical records to literary works and even contemporary film and television dramas, the image of Yang Yuhuan has been constantly reshaped. However, in the fields of stage drama and film and television works, there has been relatively limited scholarly research on her image, with even fewer touching on arts and cultural management. This paper adopts a feminist perspective to analyze the evolution of Yang Yuhuan's image over different periods, taking her drama and film portrayals as the study subjects. The aim is to explore how, in the current societal context, one might enrich the image of Yang Yuhuan from the standpoint of arts management. Through this research, the author observes that the underlying representation of Yang Yuhuan is that of a beautiful and nation-damaging favored consort. Notably, such an image is not merely the result of personal choice but a collective product of power and knowledge. In recent years, China's art market has seen abundant creative representations of Yang Yuhuan, but innovations concerning her image have been scant, largely adhering to its original mold. This does not align with contemporary societal and cultural norms and fails to meet audience demands. Therefore, to further diversify the image of Yang Yuhuan, creators should transcend her traditional objectified portrayal, emphasize the unique political aspects of her love story with Emperor Li Longji, reconsider the notion that "a woman can cause the downfall of a nation," and collaboratively innovate her image through arts management.

## 1 Introduction

Yang Yuhuan, also known as Imperial Consort Yang (Yang Guifei), is famed for her stunning beauty and exceptional talents in singing and dancing. She is celebrated as one of the four great beauties of ancient China. Historical records of Yang Yuhuan can be found in both the "Old Tang Book" and the "New Tang Book". Born into an aristocratic family, Yang initially married Prince Li Mao. However, due to her extraordinary beauty, she was chosen by her father-in-law to enter the royal palace and eventually became the favored consort of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (Emperor Li Longji). After entering the royal court, Yang Yuhuan became the most influential woman in the Tang Dynasty. Not only did she enjoy the lavish affections of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty, living a life of luxury, but her family also saw a meteoric rise in their political standing, becoming an ultra-elite nobility comparable to the royal family. According to the "Zizhi Tongjian" (Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance), "From being an imperial censor to becoming a chancellor, over forty positions were held by the Yang family members. Any official with talent and reputation who did not serve their interests was ousted". This reveals the Yang

family's supreme political position, wielding significant influence over military and financial affairs.

Furthermore, Yang Yuhuan played a pivotal role in the Tang Dynasty's transition from its zenith during the "Kaiyuan Era" to the upheaval of the "Anshi Rebellion". In 755 AD, An Lushan declared war against the Tang's capital, Chang'an, under the pretext of "opposing the traitorous official Yang Guozhong (Yang Yuhuan's cousin) and protecting the emperor." The emperor was forced to flee with Yang Yuhuan, Yang Guozhong, and their troops. Upon reaching modern-day Sichuan province, the imperial troops blamed Yang Yuhuan for the ongoing rebellion, demanding both her and her cousin's execution. To ensure his safety, the emperor ordered Yang Yuhuan's death. Over the course of history, the tragic love story between her and the emperor has been incessantly recounted. From historical poems and literary works to novels, plays, and modern film and television dramas, the image of Yang Yuhuan has been repeatedly rewritten and reshaped, with people continually renewing their interpretation of her story.

Researching on Yang Yuhuan's image began with literary works, in contemporary studies, a rough estimate based on papers indexed in the Chinese Academic Journal Database, using bibliometric methods, indicates over 1,200 articles with the keyword "Yang Yuhuan".

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These span topics from traditional culture to feminist perspectives and even studies on the impact of modern literature, film, and TV dramas about Yang Yuhuan. Despite the abundance of research and a plethora of books and articles on Yang Yuhuan, there has been relatively limited scholarly research on her portrayal in stage dramas and film and television works, and even fewer that delve into the realm of arts and cultural management.

Given the above, this paper takes the theatrical and film portrayals of Yang Yuhuan as its subject of study. Drawing from official historical records, literary works, operas, and film and TV productions, this research collates and scrutinizes various materials. With the aid of a feminist lens, this paper will analyze the evolution of Yang Yuhuan's image over different periods. The aim is to explore how, in the contemporary societal context, one might enrich the image of Yang Yuhuan from an arts management perspective

## 2 The Evolution of Yang Yuhuan's Artistic Image

In the "Old Tang Book" and "Zizhi Tongjian," it is recorded that the downfall of the Tang Dynasty and the failure of the military were all due to Yang Guozhong (Yang Yuhuan's cousin). Yang Yuhuan, representing the corrupt and reactionary political team, was closely associated with Yang Guozhong's numerous misdeeds that harmed the country and its people. Consequently, in official histories, Yang Yuhuan is portrayed as a figure symbolic of national disaster, and she bears the largest responsibility for the decline of the Tang Dynasty. Folk tales mirror this sentiment, amplifying her beauty as one of the "Four Great Beauties," rendering her a typical femme fatale. Thus, the underlying image of Yang Yuhuan is that of a beautiful but calamitous favorite.

In literary works, Yang Yuhuan's image became more enriched. Since the Tang poems, the love story between Yang Yuhuan and Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty has been frequently mentioned. Taking "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" as an example, the poet vividly describes the tragic love story of Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan, glorifying their romance [1,2]. Following the fall of the Tang Dynasty, many artworks revolved around Yang Yuhuan were produced. Notably, during the Yuan Dynasty, the play "Tang Ming Emperor's Autumn Night Rain on Phoenix Trees" by Bai Pu emerged. Here, Bai not only upheld the notion that "females can ruin nations," implying that Yang Yuhuan was a major cause for the An Lushan's Rebellion, but also portrayed her as a deceptive woman, unfaithful in love, easily tempted, and lacking in dignity at her last moments [3].

During the Qing Dynasty, with the burgeoning idea of feminism, Yang Yuhuan's artistic image developed further, culminating in the play "The Palace of Eternal Life". The author Hong Sheng highlighted her beauty, intelligence, talent, diverse interests, and rich emotions, breaking the antiquated notion that a woman without talent is virtuous. In this portrayal, Yang Yuhuan is

depicted as someone loyal in love, actively pursuing romance, and willing to die for her emperor, challenging the age-old prejudice that she was a 'disastrous beauty' [4,5].

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, dramatists continue to adore Yang Yuhuan's image, creating even more diverse portrayals. In Huaqing Palace (the former residence of Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan), the theatrical performance of "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" is staged daily. In this play, Yang Yuhuan is depicted as a deeply infatuated consort, dedicating herself to music to win the emperor's smile, and eventually sacrificing herself for a greater cause, only for their love to be rekindled in the heavens [6].

With the rise of feminism, playwrights have offered new interpretations of Yang Yuhuan's character. In director, Chen Kaige's film, Yang Yuhuan is an "other" in a patriarchal society, where her life, fate, honors, and disgraces are all controlled by men. In the prosperous Tang era, she enjoyed glory, but as the dynasty declined, she could not even save herself. Li Longji's order to execute Yang Yuhuan was a decision to sacrifice a woman to preserve his power and self. In this light, Yang Yuhuan becomes a victim of a patriarchal worldview, bearing the burden of male redemption [7].

## 3 Analysis of Yang Yuhuan's Image from a Feminist Perspective

### 2.1. Feminist Theory

Feminism is a significant social theory and movement aimed at revealing, criticizing, and changing gender inequality and oppression in society. Its core principles focus on women's rights, status, and social roles, as well as the function of gender within the social structure. The development of feminism can be divided into several stages.

The first wave of feminism, spanning from the mid-18th to the early 20th centuries, centered on the fight for equal rights with men, primarily focusing on suffrage and equal legal status. Representative figures from this stage include Mary Wollstonecraft, whose efforts laid the groundwork for women's political participation. The second wave of feminism, arising from skepticism towards a patriarchal society, concentrated on the male-dominated power structure, emphasizing issues of gender roles and societal expectations. Feminists from this period actively advocated for gender equality, opposing discrimination and violence and promoting a series of social changes and legal reforms. The third wave of feminism, emerging in the late 1990s, stressed diversity, transgender issues, and internationalization. Feminists began to focus on intersecting issues of race, class, sexual orientation, and cultural background, pushing for a more expansive and inclusive feminist agenda.

Over time, feminism has continually evolved, giving rise to various factions and schools, such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and postmodern feminism. These factions emphasize different topics and analytical

frameworks, enriching both feminist theory and practice. Concurrently, feminism has attracted widespread attention in academia. Feminist research has explored gender, power, identity, and cultural expression, offering crucial insights into the relationship between gender and society [8].

## **2.2 Gender and Power Relations Reflected in Yang Yuhuan's Image**

Foucault's theory of power and knowledge offers a perspective for deeply dissecting the gender and power relations underlying Yang Yuhuan's image. This theory emphasizes the intimate link between knowledge and power, indicating that power realizes itself through producing and disseminating knowledge, subsequently shaping and controlling subjectivity and identity in society. Foucault's framework also reveals how this knowledge impacts and restricts individuals' behaviors and choices.

In the Tang Dynasty society, the status and role of women were strictly constrained by gender norms and power structures. Yang Yuhuan's image was not merely the result of personal choice but the collective outcome of power and knowledge. Her beauty was regarded as a form of knowledge, aligning with the aesthetic values pursued by the power institutions. However, the production and dissemination of this knowledge were not neutral; they were guided by the intentions and purposes of power institutions, limiting her autonomy and choices as an individual. She was disciplined to learn skills that aligned with male interests, highlighting to some extent how power uses knowledge to regulate and mold the female role. As previously discussed, Yang Yuhuan's image has been continually constructed in history, literature, drama, and artistic creations. This construction process, to some degree, embodies society's expectations of women and the shaping of power relations.

Recent artistic works also reflect this relationship between power and knowledge. For example, in the movie "The Legend of the Cat Demon," Yang Yuhuan's image is objectified as a political symbol of the emperor and a projection of male desire rather than an independent, flesh-and-blood individual. This portrayal, to a certain extent, reflects the control over women in that era and even in today's society, echoing Foucault's proposition of how knowledge is used by power to influence and constrain individual claims.

In summary, the construction of Yang Yuhuan's image is not only a fabrication of knowledge but also the shaping and controlling of individual identity and behavior by power. This analysis aids in a deeper understanding of the gender and power relations reflected in Yang Yuhuan's image against the backdrop of historical, social, and cultural contexts.

## **3 The Influence of Art and Cultural Management on the Image of Yang Yuhuan**

### **3.1 The Impact of the Art Market and Commercialization on the Image of Yang Yuhuan**

Overall, China's art market has produced a rich array of works centered on Yang Yuhuan. However, in recent years, there has been a decline in innovative representations of her, with most adaptations stemming from classic historical dramas. Taking the dance drama "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" as an example, Yang Yuhuan, in the play, is portrayed as a stunningly beautiful and devoted woman. Every facet of her—from her beauty to her talents—seems tailor-made to please the emperor. Despite her tragic end, she continues to long for him, eventually reuniting in the afterlife, their love enduring. Here, Yang Yuhuan's character perfectly embodies the ideal woman in a patriarchal society: beautiful, talented, deeply affectionate, and undyingly loyal. In a capitalist art market, financial returns dictate what gets produced and popularized. Within this framework, the primary target audience, still deeply rooted in patriarchal views, is men. This skewed perspective is evident in the plays and reveals the unhealthy tendencies in today's theater market [9].

At the same time, audience feedback plays a crucial role in shaping the market. With the rise of feminist awareness, audiences no longer want to see women continuously portrayed as the "other" subjected to male dominance. Feedback from these enlightened viewers drives changes in the market, pushing the art industry to evolve. Under the influence of commercialization, feminism further shapes modern artistic creations, resulting in works that resonate with contemporary sentiments. In the movie "The Legend of the Cat Demon," director Chen Kaige strongly critiques the patriarchal society. In the age-old feudal dogma of China, women often exist merely as vessels for male desires or for procreation. Thus, the emperor's affection is not truly for Yang Yuhuan as an individual but for what she represents—a symbol of the Tang Dynasty's prosperity. Compounding this tragedy is women's acceptance and compliance with this male-dominated narrative. Yang Yuhuan internalizes the emperor's expectations and conforms to her prescribed role, inadvertently becoming a co-conspirator in her own tragic tale. However, influenced by feminist perspectives, Yang Yuhuan's portrayal is undergoing a transformation, exhibiting a newfound self-awareness. In the film, she opts to uphold her dignity and love on her terms. Even when faced with deceit and impending doom, she remains loyal to her love, demonstrating integrity and passion. Her tragic end, while poignant, does not rely on grand notions of sacrifice but focuses on a woman's innate desire for pure love, offering audiences a glimpse into a woman's perseverance in the face of personal tragedy, ensuring she retains her dignity and treasured emotions [10].

### **3.2 The Reinterpretation and Innovation of Yang Yuhuan's Image**

Compared to traditional representations, the modern image of the imperial consort Yang Yuhuan has undergone significant changes. Firstly, the traditional portrayal often limits her character depth, focusing primarily on her beauty and devotion, where all her skills and talents are showcased only to please the emperor. Modern interpretations, however, delve deeper into her psyche, showcasing her independent thought processes, intelligence, and genuine emotions. Here, she is an individual, not just the favored consort of the emperor.

Moreover, the depiction of the romantic relationship between Emperor Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan has evolved. In traditional portrayals, their love is unwavering and intense. Yang Yuhuan's unparalleled devotion leads her to a heroic demise, leaving this world without any resentment. Their love is often depicted as unbreakable and poignant. Contrarily, in modern narratives, playwrights have begun to challenge the emperor's love for Yang Yuhuan. Simone de Beauvoir, in "The Second Sex," points out, "Since women are fated to be, in essence, 'by men', their bodies must manifest this passivity, this inertia." From the emperor's perspective, Yang Yuhuan's spirit and individuality fade into oblivion. She becomes nothing more than an object of possession rather than a beloved partner, underscoring the commodification and objectification women face even in supposedly romantic contexts.

#### 4. Reflection

For the future portrayal of the image of Yang Yuhuan, there can be the following suggestions:

Firstly, we should transcend the existing objectified image and craft a more well-rounded character for Yang Yuhuan. Throughout history, Yang Yuhuan has mostly been represented as "Yang Yuhuan", the concubine of Emperor Li Longji, the culprit behind the downfall of the Tang Dynasty, and a projection of male desires, but never as her own self. Past cultural depictions clearly show that Yang Yuhuan's characteristics and actions revolve around male figures, lacking an account of her own motivations. Hence, future works should depict Yang Yuhuan as an independent individual, focusing on her personality and emotions, creating a more comprehensive character.

Secondly, when crafting stories, emphasize the unique political attributes of the love between Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan. While celebrating their grand love story, playwrights must not overlook the political intricacies underlying their relationship. As the supreme authority, Emperor Li Longji had a duty to protect his nation and consolidate his rule, a responsibility that could not be ignored. Love is precious but is not everything in life. If playwrights solely glorify the greatness of love without addressing the rights and obligations of the emperor and his concubine, it could mislead audiences into irresponsibility, advocating the idea of sacrificing everything for love. Therefore, future creations should emphasize the political aspects of Li and Yang's relationship and incorporate grand narratives in the storyline.

Thirdly, re-evaluate the notion that women bring about the downfall of nations. In all stories concerning Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan, the An Lushan Rebellion is a pivotal event. Over the millennia, various interpretations of the rebellion's causes have been proposed, with the "women lead to the nation's downfall" and the "innocent imperial concubine" theories being the most prevalent. For instance, in the Yuan Dynasty drama "Wutong Rain", the author Bai Pu depicts Yang Yuhuan as a woman who bewitched and misled the emperor, blaming her for the fall of the Tang Dynasty. From a modern perspective, Yang Yuhuan, confined within traditional feudal norms, lacked the power and authority to bring down the dynasty. At the same time, historical records like "Old Tang Book" and "Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government" indicate that her mediocre family members gained significant political and financial influence due to her favoritism, accelerating the Tang Dynasty's fall. Given this context, Yang Yuhuan indeed bears substantial responsibility for the An Lushan Rebellion. Thus, playwrights should re-evaluate traditional narratives surrounding the "women lead to downfall" theory and strive for innovation in their works.

Fourthly, draw parallels between the past and the present, promoting the idea that everyone is the master of their destiny. As one of the most esteemed women of the Tang Dynasty, Yang Yuhuan had beauty, talent, and favor but could not choose her destiny, which is tragic. Through her image, audiences can glean insights into the lives of ancient women: even as central figures in their own lives, they could not determine their actions or fates, which is an even greater tragedy. Therefore, playwrights should delve deeper into the underlying tragedies masked by romantic tales, drawing parallels to highlight the importance of women's independence and autonomy, advocating that everyone is the master of their destiny, and encouraging women to pursue their rights, status, and freedom.

Lastly, the innovation of Yang Yuhuan's image requires a collective effort. The government should recognize the impact of Yang Yuhuan's image, encouraging the creation of works with grand narratives. Educationally, there should be a stronger emphasis on promoting feminism and highlighting human agency. The capitalist market should keep up with the times, focusing on evolving audience preferences, promoting feminism, and producing refined art pieces. Performers should thoroughly prepare by understanding historical contexts to portray their roles better. Facing diverse works, audiences should provide more feedback and suggestions, further driving market innovations and adjustments.

#### 5. Conclusion

In summary, academic research on the image of Yang Yuhuan, especially in the domain of drama and film cultural works, is relatively limited. Most studies either delve into specific aspects of her image or only focus on traditional literary works. Therefore, this article attempts

to collate and analyze the evolution of Yang Yuhuan's image in artistic works based on previous scholars' research findings and the author's data. As one of the four great beauties of ancient China, the foundational image of Yang Yuhuan is that of a bewitching concubine who brought disaster to her country. In drama and film productions, while there have been enrichments and modifications to her image, she is often portrayed as an accessory, a projection of male desires, rather than an independent individual, resulting in a rather shallow depiction.

Hence, in future productions, playwrights can draw inspiration from a feminist perspective to enhance the portrayal of this historical figure. Firstly, they should move beyond the stereotypical objectified image and craft a more comprehensive character for Yang Yuhuan. Secondly, they should emphasize the unique political intricacies underlying the love between Emperor Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan. Thirdly, it would be valuable to re-explore the notion that women can bring about the downfall of a nation. Last but not least, it is essential to draw parallels between the past and present, promoting the idea that everyone is the master of their destiny. This article, bridging both artistic management and feminism, deepens our understanding of the construction of Yang Yuhuan's image. However, due to constraints in length and the author's cognitive limitations, the article does not delve deeply into the reasons behind such depictions or offer specific solutions. Future research can put forth more practical suggestions to improve the current challenges in shaping female characters..

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