

The Four Great Beauties of Ancient China

Each of these stories has become an important part of ancient Chinese history and although each beauty suffered through tragic circumstances, they were all extremely courageous and fought for what they believed. Their stories are still taught to children today & show that women are not only known for their beauty, but their strength and courage as well.

Xi Shi – The Beauty in a Yellow Dress - 'So beautiful as to make swimming fish sink'

King Gou Jian of Yue, commissioned his men to search for a woman of such distracting beauty, that he could offer her to the Wu prince Fu Chai and invade their kingdom with ease. Xi Shi, known through all the land for her extraordinary natural beauty, was sought after and taken on the journey to be presented to Prince Fu Chai. Fan Li was instated to take her on the journey to Wu. During this journey, Fan Li was overcome by Xi Shi and by the end of their trip, they had made a secret pact of undying love for one another.

On their arrival in Wu, Xi Shi was warmly welcomed by Prince Fu Chai and it was not long, before he too was cast under her spell. Fu Chai quickly began to neglect his kingdom and his political duties, making the perfect opportunity for King Gou Jian to make his move and invade Wu. Prince Fu Chai committed suicide and Xi Shi was re-united with her love, Fan Li. They moved out of the public eye and lived a happy life together until death parted them.

Wang Zhaojun - Beauty with Mandolin) - 'So beautiful as to make flying geese fall'

Emperor Yuan of the Western Han Dynasty, is said to have chosen his companions from painted portraits, rather than in person. Mao Yanshou was the artist appointed to paint their portraits. Many women, so desperate to become the Emperors companion, would offer Mao large bribes in order for him to make their portrait more flattering. Wang Zhaojun however, was so sure of her own natural beauty that she refused to offer a bribe, causing Mao to paint a terrible likeness out of spite.

In 33BC, Hyhayne, the Khan of Huns, wanted to establish good relations with the western dynasty so he visited the capital and requested a princess he could marry as a sign of good faith. Emperor Yuan, decided to offer Hyhayne a portrait of one of the plainer concubines, Wang volunteered herself for this position as she had grown tired of her boring life.

The emperor met with Wang and Hyhayne before they travelled to her new home, and floored by her beauty, instantly regretted his decision. Tales of Mao Yanshou accepting bribes came to light and the Emperor ordered him killed. Sad at leaving her hometown, Wang started playing melancholy music on her 'Uin'. A flock of geese flying overhead, seeing someone so beautiful and so sad forgot how to fly and fell out of the sky. However, thanks to Wang's selflessness, peace remained between the middle kingdom and the Huns for over 60 years.

Yang Guifei - Beauty with cup and flowers - 'Beauty that would make any flower feel shameful'

Yang Guifei was from a very high ranking and influential family. Her sisters becoming Lady of Han, Lady of Qin, and Lady of Guo, while her cousin, Yang Guozhong, was made chief minister. With the death of her father, and at just 16, Yang Guifei was married to the son of Emperor Xuanzong, Prince Li Lei. Three years after the death of Emperor Xuanzong's wife, it was arranged for him to meet Guifei where he ordered her to divorce her husband and become a nun with the sobriquet Taizhen.

During the Anshi rebellion, the imperial bodyguard became convinced that the uprising was instigated by the Yang family. Yang Gouzhong was killed, but not satisfied, the troops ordered the death of Yang Guifei. Rather than hand herself over, she is said to have hung herself, although her body was never found.

Diao Chan - Beauty with incense and moon - 'So beautiful as to make the full moon hide behind the clouds'.

Unlike the other 3 beauties, Diao Chan is thought to be a fictional character.

Diao Chan resided with the family of Wang Yun, a great official. , under the rule of the tyrant Dong Zhou. Wang had approached Diao for her help to kill Dong Zhou. Their plan was to persuade the great warrior Lu Bu to kill his adopted father. Diao Chan was betrothed to Lu Bu, at the same time she was offered to Dong Zhuo as a concubine. When Lu found out he was outraged and persuaded by Diao quickly plotted and arranged the death of Dong Zhou.

Lu Bu and Diao Chan were then married and lived happily until both she and Wang Yun, were put to death by supporters of Dong Zhou.