

Embodied Beauty

Feminising Chinese Ceramics in Eighteenth-Century China and Europe

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Dieser Aufsatz untersucht aus transkultureller Perspektive, inwieweit Keramiken während des langen 18. Jahrhunderts Weiblichkeit verkörperten. Chinas Bildungselite etwa umschrieb die Schönheit des Steinguts aus Yixing oder des Porzellans aus Jingdezhen, indem sie Bezeichnungen verschiedener Teile oder Eigenschaften des weiblichen Körpers metaphorisch verwendete. Kunsthändler hingegen setzten Weiblichkeitsmetaphern unter anderem dadurch visuell um, dass sie mit dem sogenannten Wolkenmuster ein Schmuckelement aus dem Schulterbereich der Frauenkleidung übernahmen und an ähnlicher Position auf dem Gefäß platzierten. Bildliche Darstellungen weiblicher Figuren wiederum erfreuten sich während der Früh- und Hochzeit der Qing-Dynastie besonderer Beliebtheit. So wird am Beispiel der Tänzerin augenfällig, wie sich Motive sowohl zwischen Kulturen als auch zwischen Medien verbreiteten. Aufgefächert wird im Folgenden demnach, wie sich verschiedene Aspekte der Feminisierung von Keramik in unterschiedlichen soziokulturellen Kontexten ausdifferenzierten und auch aus konkreter sinnlicher Wahrnehmung speisten, weshalb sie von den materiellen Objekten genauso gesteuert wurden wie von menschlichen Akteuren.

Ceramics were among the most abundant commodities that travelled from China to Europe during the eighteenth century, and they are perhaps among the most magnificent examples of visual and material culture from this time still preserved today. Over the last century Chinese ceramics became a topic of interest for interdisciplinary research, which, as Lothar Ledderose nicely put, »fills a small library«.¹

When considering the cultural biographies of these artefacts, the history of Chinese ceramics in Europe appears to be transcultural in nature.² They were transcultural in the sense that the objects crossed not only territorial but also cognitive boundaries of another culture, while still casting agency onto local people in Chinese and European contexts. »Influence« of Chinese porcelain is generally considered as a historical concept, but back in the early decades of the twentieth century, many pioneering works were characterised as »europerie« or »chinoiserie«, terms coined by forerunners in the field.³ »Inter-circulation« was a key concept during the 1980s in research on the mutual influence of ceramic design between Asia and Europe. It was an effort to correct the linear narratives posited by earlier historiography.⁴ At the turn of the millennium, a group of art historians joined force and utilised the idea of intercultural exchange between Chinese and neighbouring cultures.⁵ Transfer and exchange, with their various implications, have thus become the two key concepts used since the first

decade of this century.⁶ Stacey Pierson makes it more explicit by using the term »transculturation«.⁷

Contemporary scholars have emphasised the social actors involved in various mechanisms of producing, distributing, and buying Chinese ceramics. Chinese local and regional merchants delivered not only the commodity of porcelain, but also production techniques and consumer tastes, which in turn were reassembled by Jingdezhen local residents who took part in porcelain manufacturing. Eventually these items were to reach centres of porcelain manufacture in Europe.⁸

Scholarship on the history of gender and materiality seems to have progressed at the same pace as that on the global history of Chinese ceramics, ever since Judith Butler appealed for a separate history of this type in 1993.⁹ Although the representation of Chinese women is by no means an overlooked topic in the history of Chinese art and material culture, the visualisation of sensory perception in respect of the female body is an understudied subject. Earlier studies on the relations between porcelain and figurative descriptions of women focused on the following attributes: clean, white, collectable, and luxurious. In eighteenth-century English fiction and poetry, Asian women appeared as representations of luxury and pleasure, and therefore became a source for metaphors.¹⁰ Exquisite, precious, and fragile, material characteristics of Chinese porcelain were long employed in fig-

urative descriptions of women in European cultures during the eighteenth century.¹¹ Nineteenth-century writings on porcelain related it, in addition to an imagination of the female sex, to the expression of social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of value and intimacy.¹² A recent study of eighteenth-century French porcelain, more precisely French faience prior to the 1760s and porcelain thereafter, has shown how artisans employed strategies to present French porcelain as a luxury product.¹³ This was for the purpose of competing with products from China, Japan and Saxony. The study also observes that print-renderings of faience were used to represent the Arcimboldo-like body of a male faience maker.¹⁴

In the historiography of ceramics, »body« is a term that usually refers to the major section of a given object as well as to its material. The basic meaning of the word »body«, human body, and especially that of the female body, has received little attention in academic discourse on Chinese ceramics. If the female body, as shown in previous research, is metaphorically spoken of as a porcelain vessel, can we develop an association between the materiality of the female body, ceramics, and the materialised reflection of literati writings? Chinese porcelain was an important part of the private collections of noble women in early modern Europe. It was also used for diplomatic gift-giving, showcasing gendered political power and social connections across European courts.¹⁵ Research into eighteenth-century English poetry also demonstrates that Chinese porcelain was used metaphorically in relation to the female body.¹⁶ This essay touches on the neglected dimension of gender in the study of ceramics and how femininity was embodied in the medium. Based on previous research, three essential aspects of this issue, namely textual metaphor, visual metaphor, and pictorial representation will be analysed with Chinese and European cases from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century.

Textual Metaphor: From Female Body to Ceramic Shape

As early as the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), Yangxian was the name of a county to the west of Taihu Lake. From the Sui dynasty (581–618) onwards, the county was renamed Yixing, where the famous Yixing stoneware was produced. In an edited volume entitled *Yangxian mingtao lu* (»Records of Prestigious Ceramics in Yangxian«, first published 1786; hereafter *Mingtao lu*), Wu Qian (1733–1813) collected contemporary commentaries on ceramic production and treatises regarding the aesthetic appreciation of pottery. Wu Qian was a collector of books and antiques, and a well-known poet in Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces who had published more than forty books in his lifetime.¹⁷ Wu was a key figure in several local communities, which enabled him to learn about people at different social levels, such as potters.¹⁸ In the preface to *Mingtao lu*, he briefly mentioned the legendary invention of pottery by Emperor Shun, one of the five mythological emperors in prehistoric China. Then he introduced the significant achievements of his contemporary potters, noting that »every vessel and container is valued by connoisseurs as much as the ancient bronze vessels made during the Shang and Zhou dynasties«.¹⁹ This was followed by a short statement regarding his reason for editing the volume and its purpose.

For several decades, he had been seeking vessels made by renowned potters, yet his endeavour was in vain. With the passage of time, the names of potters were being forgotten. He could not bear to witness this happening. Therefore, he wrote down what he remembered about the potters, and collected commentaries and poetry on ceramics written by local scholars, while placing his hope on future connoisseurs of ceramics to value his work. The *Mingtao lu* recorded first-hand information of more than forty local potters who were active from the mid-Ming to the early Qing period (1573–1722), among them Gong Chun, Shi Dabin and Xu Youquan. It also included citations from earlier handbooks for connoisseurs, such as *Zhangwu zhi* (»Treatise on Superfluous Things«,

compiled 1615–1620) by Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), and *Tao shuo* (»Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain«, first published 1774) by Zhu Yan (active Qianlong period, 1736–1795).

Wu Qian collected poems that were inscribed on teapots as well, but the most interesting piece in *Mingtao lu* is the *Yangxian minghu fu* (»Ode to Yangxian Teapots«, hereafter *Minghu fu*) written by Wu Meiding (1631–1700). According to the local gazetteer of Yixing, Wu Meiding excelled at calligraphy, and was also adept at landscape and bird-and-animal painting.²⁰ In *Minghu fu*, Wu Meiding made detailed comments on potters' skills and their products based on his personal contacts and experiences. After praising Xu Youquan's archaic works, which imitated shapes of bronze vessels from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), Wu Meiding compared different shapes of Xu's other works to parts of the female body:

As for forming the ceramic shape to imitate the body, [Xu Youquan's] every endeavour has been made. Spirit consonance matches that of a beauty (shoulders of a beauty); style is beyond that of *Xi Zi* (breast of *Xi Shi*). The waist is wrapped with raw silk, reflected in a bronze mirror (girdling of water chestnut's flower); the shoulder is exquisitely sculptured (flat shoulder of lotus seed), picking the leaf base of a lotus from a golden pond.²¹

In this paragraph, Wu Meiding wrote four metaphors, putting three ceramic shapes and a ceramic decoration on a par with the body of *meiren*, a »beautiful woman«. Following every metaphor, he added an annotation to elaborate his implication. He added *meirenjian*, the shoulders of a beauty, to explain how he matches the *yun* (»spirit consonance«) of pottery vessel with that of a woman's shoulders. A specific type of Yixing stoneware, a round-shaped container called *Xi Zi teapot*, symbolised the breast of a legendary beautiful lady, Shi Yiguang (known as *Xi Shi* or *Xi Zi*), who was involved in political intrigue during the late Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE).

Decoration of the thin, middle part of a certain vessel is compared to the waist of a female covered by *yuesu* (»raw silk«). Women in earlier Chinese literary descriptions, for instance the poem *Shan gui* (»The Moun-

tain Spirit«) by Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BCE), usually wear raw materials around their waist that are thin and translucent. Chinese potters, most of the time, use a thin bamboo knife to refine the clay biscuit of the teapot before firing. The metaphor here implies that the shape of a teapot is as elegant as the shoulders of a charming woman, sitting on a boat, trying to pick up lotus fruits from a pond upon sunset. This is a discourse that had been established since the Eastern Han dynasty (25 BCE–220 CE), when Cao Zhi (192–232) wrote the famous ode to Luoshen, *The Goddess of the Luo River*. In praising the spectacular beauty of the goddess, the hero in the text told his driver »her shoulders seem sculptured, and her waist as though wrapped in a raw silk«.²² Here, Wu Meiding's description of the female body paid tribute to the renowned work by Cao Zhi. Instead of making a comparison to the two-dimensional medium of silk painting, he innovatively utilised the three-dimensional medium of pottery.

Further elaboration of the *meirenjian* shape can also be found in another book, *Tao ya* (»Pottery Refinements«), which also summarises Chinese and European understandings of the glaze *meirenji*. Its author, Chen Liu (1863–1929), who called himself *Jiyuansou* (»Old man in the Lonely Garden«), was a calligrapher, collector and connoisseur, and the author of ten books on ancient ceramics.²³ He published a book entitled *Ci xue* (»The Study of Porcelain«) in 1906; four years later, a revised edition of *Ci xue* followed, and the title was changed to *Tao ya*, which was translated by Geoffrey R. Sayer in 1959.²⁴ In this revised edition, Chen Liu discussed ceramics mainly made during the three most productive reigns of Qing porcelain, namely the Kangxi (1662–1722), Yongzheng (1723–1735) and Qianlong (1736–1795) periods.

He also gave much attention to antique markets during the late Qing and early Republican eras. Throughout the book, he wrote about *meiren* no less than thirty-eight times. He confirmed the *meirenjian* to be one of the major shapes of refined porcelain vessels,²⁵ describing it as »slender and graceful with a delicate poise« and naming it »a beautiful lady's shoulder«.²⁶ In the late Qing Beijing antique market, three types of glaze were called *meirenji*, which, according to Chen Liu, was a historical mis-

Fig. 1

Pierre Francois Giffart, Dame Chinoise Mandarine du second ordre en habit de ceremonie selon la saison d'été (»Chinese noblewoman of the second order in ceremonial dress according to the summer season«), 1697. Colour on paper, book illustration from Joachim Bouvet's *L'Estat present de la Chine en figures* (»The Present State of China in Images«), h. 39 cm, w. 25 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Réserve des livres rares.

understanding passed down for generations. During the Kangxi period, porcelain glaze in a general pink tone was called *wawa lian* (»baby's face«). Chinese connoisseurs described the tone as the colour of Chinese herbaceous peony, at the same time »this is what the Westerners called peach bloom and red of Chinese flowering crab apple«²⁷. The »baby's face« glaze first became known as »beauty's face« glaze, and subsequently as *meirenji*. This *ji* implies that the original function of porcelain with this glaze was for sacrificial ritual. The third name change turned out to be another *meirenji*, a homophone of the former one. This *ji* refers to the rosy blush on a beauty's face when she smiles out of shyness, or ceases being angry.²⁸ From the scope of material culture studies, this four-step alteration of glaze description provides a dramatic instance of the literary preference for utilising the female body. The nomenclature for this glaze transformed vividly from function to sensuous perception. The »beauty's face« was also named »colour of imperial concubine Yang's face«²⁹ which will be discussed in the section about pictorial presentation.

Visual Metaphor: From Female Costume to Decorative Pattern

Besides the textual metaphors comparing ceramic shape and glaze to the female body, another type of metaphor derives from visual materials. *Yunjian*, literally »cloud shoulder«, was originally a type of collar and shoulder garment worn by women outside their coats, to keep warm and to demonstrate distinction. The garment is usually woven with colourful silk thread to form a cloud decoration, therefore named cloud pattern when it was transferred onto the surface of other materials, such as porcelain.

Dunhuang murals of the Tang dynasty (618–907) provide instances of *yunjian* clothing on the costumes of Tibetan noblewomen.³⁰ Existing textile fragments and the official history of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) provided mutual confirmation that *yunjian* was popular among aristocrats, officials, as well as communities of lower social levels such as



dancers.³¹ Cloud pattern on Yuan blue-and-white porcelain, on the other hand, is considered a faithful imitation of textile decoration.³² Both textile and porcelain, as artistic media, kept the cloud pattern as a tradition throughout Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Yuan and early Ming

Fig. 2

Bottle with peony scroll, China, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), mid-fourteenth century. Underglaze cobalt blue on Jingdezhen porcelain, h. 44.5 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

periods, textile craftspeople embroidered *yunjian* on both female and male costumes for attending governmental, religious or banquet occasions. However, from the late Ming dynasty, this costume garment grad-



ually became civilian and functional, and related more frequently to a female user.³³

In 1697, Joachim Bouvet (Bai Jin, 1656–1730), one of the six missionaries sent to Beijing by Louis XIV of France (1638–1715), published a book, which included forty-three illustrated Chinese figures painted by Pierre Giffart (1643–1723). For every figure, two illustrations are presented, with one outlined and the other coloured. Bouvet had personal contacts with Chinese noblewomen during his decades in China, many of whom later became Christians, which makes the illustrations in his book reliable rather than imaginative.³⁴ Among these illustrations, six out of a total nine Chinese noblewomen wear ceremonial dresses decorated with the cloud pattern (fig. 1), which demonstrates the formal usage of cloud pattern in court life during the early eighteenth century. What's more, everyday clothing with the cloud pattern gained much popularity among eighteenth-century female members of the middle-level communities.³⁵

Cloud pattern on Yuan dynasty blue-and-white *meiping* vases usually feature decorations of the phoenix (fig. 2), crane, lotus, or water wave. During the Ming dynasty, more and more floristic decoration appeared inside the cloud-shaped outlines. The Kangxi period witnessed a growing number of Jingdezhen vases and jars with the pictorial theme of *bogu* («a hundred antiquities»), a motif combining various valuable antiques, especially on those made for European markets. The craftspeople in early eighteenth-century Jingdezhen therefore adapted the *bogu* motif into the cloud pattern, which shows the flexibility of the cloud pattern. Ceramics with cloud pattern were in most cases relatively large objects, among which containers with lids were displayed in pairs while those without lids were arranged with flowers. Despite public occasions such as governmental or local ritual space, the interior space for their display was usually semi-public, for instance a scholar's studio or the hall of a residence. The space would have been visited by fellow scholars, or was a regular place for the everyday gathering of family members. The function of the space made it a stage for display – not only presenting the objects, but also the owner him or herself. Considering historical cir-

cumstances in eighteenth-century China, the owner was in most cases a male scholar or merchant.

On occasions of everyday encounter, vases with the cloud pattern served as unique social objects for their owner. Large Jingdezhen porcelain items of fine quality and exquisite underglaze-blue drawing reflected much more than merely economic status. A well-cultivated and capable male member of a local learned community was on display. The owner, sitting behind a desk made of hardwood, may have had casual conversation with guests while introducing them to his collection of rubbings of Han dynasty steles or bronze vessels from the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE). Precious Song edition books on shelves would have seemed rather accessible at arm's length. In this particular field of interaction, the cloud pattern on porcelain features not only the cultural capital of the owner, but at the same time manifested his taste and aesthetic sentiment through the material metaphor of the female body.

As previously explained, the trope of a beauty's shoulder, comparing part of the human body to a specific part of porcelain, was employed from the very beginning. Materialising a female shoulder garment onto the shoulder of a work of porcelain further enhanced the figure of speech. In Pierre Bourdieu's conception, the field of social encounter is also a field for the competition of cultural capital.³⁶ The cloud pattern can lead actors to a mutual understanding of a specific setting. In beholding the social settings, the beholder is twofold: both as social agent and a male figure. Female costume and decorative patterns on porcelain surfaces together form a visual metaphor that presents the female body in everyday space. Even without the presence of real women, the metaphor across various media makes it possible to forge an atmosphere of femininity. Therefore, porcelain with the cloud pattern can be considered as a social agent participating in the daily encounter within a certain living presence.³⁷ The essential concern for the textual and visual metaphors mentioned above is materiality. Some of the vital parts form the conception and making of porcelain, such as the shape of the biscuit, glaze and surface ornament, all of which imitate the materiality of the female body. For instance, the shape of the shoulders and colour of the

face. *Yujian*, the garment that intimately attached to the female neck and shoulder, was imitated on porcelain to visualise the quality of the female body, and above all, femininity as such. The visualisation of ceramic metaphors thus became a way of materialising women in a male-dominated socio-cultural context.

Pictorial Representation: The Dancer Motif in China and Europe

The female body has been a painting motif in Chinese art since its very early beginnings, and maintained a prevalent status throughout the early modern period. Since the mid-Ming era, women were included in the historiography of collecting and connoisseurship, together with other artistic collectables, expressing the sensitive desires of male scholars and new literati-merchant communities.³⁸ Ming dynasty artists enhanced pictorial narration for individual female portraits aiming at male audiences, while eighteenth-century vernacular paintings sought for female audiences as well.³⁹ Upon the transition of dynasties, the representation of women became a cryptic means for Ming-dynasty remnants to refresh their collective memory of their former reign.⁴⁰ There existed a few cases of female representation on ceramics made in the Cizhou and the Jingdezhen kilns until the Yuan dynasty. According to Ming dynasty records, especially in the gazetteer of Jiangxi Province, very few figural motifs appeared on products of the Jiajing (1522–1566) imperial kiln in Jingdezhen. Aside from the motif of children at play, the only figures mentioned on Jiajing imperial products are the eight Daoist immortals. Imperial products from the Wanli period (1573–1620) had more figural motifs: besides the Daoist immortals, *shi nü* (scholarly females) were also used for minor decorations on porcelain.⁴¹ Imperial kilns declined after the Wanli period, which in turn caused an increase in demand of porcelain from civilian kilns. The Chongzhen period (1628–1644) of the Ming dynasty saw a growing number of figures drawn on ceramic surfaces, but the most refined pieces with figural decoration

Fig. 3

Qiu Ying, detail from *Hangong chunxiao tu* («The Spring Morning in a Han Palace»), China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). Ink and colour on silk, h. 30.6 cm, w. 574.1 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum.

appeared following the Kangxi emperor's reign.⁴² On those produced for imperial usage, the figures were usually conservative, such as Daoist immortals and children mentioned above. Nevertheless, porcelain for scholarly households and export purposes (see cat. no. 44) had more female figures; some products even carried erotic scenes set in interior spaces or gardens.

The repetition and accommodation of previous motifs is considered a traditional approach of painting practice in China. For instance, the textual narration of the *Goddess of the Luo River* was reflected in one of the foremost paintings created in the fourth century, which was attri-

buted to Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–405); thereafter the motif was repeated and appropriated time and again by more than thirty Chinese artists until the nineteenth century.⁴³

The Luo River Goddess transferred from a literary motif to a pictorial one. Slightly different from the Goddess, the depiction of dancers (fig. 3) from the *Hangong chunxiao tu* («The Spring Morning in a Han Palace», hereafter the *Hangong chunxiao*) by Qiu Ying (c. 1494–1552) was derived from the official historical records of the Zhao sisters in the Han dynasty. A comprehensive consideration of the dancer motif illustrates how transmedia adaptation and transcultural appropriation of a motif took place over a



century. Within these two processes of transformation, an image of the female dancer gradually emerged by two different means. In the scope of translocal artefact manufacture, the dancer motif showed a complex mix of inter-Asian imagery, more specifically employing Central and East Asian cultural biographies of the female body. On the scale of global commodity design and exchange, ceramic, taken as a material vehicle, provided the essential means by which the dancer motif appeared in many details in Dutch and German artefacts, thereby allowing the transfer of the Chinese female body between China and Europe.

Pictorial representations of the female dancer, in their early stage as jade or stone carvings and tomb murals, were to a large extent truthful reflections of contemporary performance practice. Dancing with two sleeves stretched out is called, literally, the sleeve dance (*xiu wu*). It dates back to the Han dynasty. Archaeological excavation of the tomb of Nanyue King Zhao Mo (176–125 BCE) in Guangzhou revealed its ancient origin, with a jade figurine of a woman performing sleeve dance found in 1983. The sleeve dance itself enjoyed great popularity throughout following dynasties. A Tang-dynasty tomb excavated in Xi'an in 2014, the tomb of Han Xiu (673–740), revealed a mural (dated c. 740)⁴⁴ depicting a dancing and musical performance featuring a female and a male dancer. Scholars debated whether the image represented the dance of the so-called *hu xuanwu* (»barbarians' whirling dance«).⁴⁵ A possible conclusion was that the dance probably belonged to a localised exotic type of performance in the Tang cultural domain, the *hubu xinsheng* (»new sound from barbarians' musical department«).⁴⁶ While the whirling dance originated directly from central Asia and was generally performed by non-Han dancers, the *hubu xinsheng* was the Han appropriation of central Asian music.

These archaeological discoveries, all dated within the first millennium, were excavated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is not necessary to take them to be the direct and linear origins of the dancer motif, nevertheless they indeed illustrated a contemporary dancing practice, and represented the changing cultural identities of their own time. Iconographies of their type, on the other hand, could have potentially

shaped the pictorial traditions that inspired later artistic creation and re-creation regarding female dancers.

The dancer motif is defined by four constituting visual elements: one or two dancing females, a musical performance, a field for dancing (in most cases a garden scene), and occasionally a rug on which the dancer performs. A rug, either square or round, is among the standard stage props for performing *hu xuanwu*.⁴⁷ The image of a rug in the dancer motif indicates an inspiration from earlier visual traditions, and its entangled biography within various cultures. Qiu Ying's *Hangong chunxiao* features a pair of women dancing in a palace, while his *Baimei tu* (»The Hundred Beauties«) has only one female dancer. A keen observer would perceive that the single dancer is actually extracted from the pair of dancers. In these two painting scrolls, female dancers wear Han costumes, and their facial features appear more Han-like instead of Central Asian, as mentioned above. In another painting album by Qiu Ying, which was later mounted as a handscroll, a woman dances on a rug in front of an audience in an outdoor setting. The audience includes a drinking man and a woman, both dressed in non-Han apparel, and two children. Beside them is a female servant, and two musicians play the *konghou*, an instrument from Central Asia. The title of this album, *Hujia shiba pai* (»Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute«), and the inscriptions on the fourth sheet allow the conclusion that the dancing female can be identified as a non-Han figure. According to correspondence between the French Jesuit François Xavier d'Entrecolles (Yin Hongxu, 1664–1741) and his supervising missionary in 1712, women of the Han and »Tartar« peoples were depicted on porcelain.⁴⁸ It is therefore possible to connect the description with existing objects.

Originating from official history, the two dancers in the *Hangong chunxiao* tell a story with political implications. During Emperor Cheng's reign (33–7 BCE) in the Han dynasty, the Zhao sisters, Feiyan and Hede, gained exalted positions, as the empress and the *zhaoyi*,⁴⁹ respectively, due to the emperor's favour. The name Feiyan, literally a flying swallow, refers to her superior dancing ability. When the emperor died, the empress dowager and some powerful officials accused the Zhao sisters of con-

spiracy and seducing the emperor, which resulted in the sisters' suicides.⁵⁰ Thereafter, Chinese orthodox historians and scholar-officials used the story as a warning for monarchs to be aware of the charm of women, which was deemed the reason for the downfall of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE).⁵¹ Emperors of later dynasties would occasionally order a painting of this theme to show their awareness of former failures. Literati painters and court artists of the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as You Qiu (active Wanli period), Leng Mei (active Kangxi period) and Ding Guanpeng (active 1726–1771) among others, repeated this artistic theme and most of them followed the style of Qiu Ying.

It is generally believed in the field of Chinese ceramics that woodblock prints served an important role in the formation of narrative decorations on porcelain. Through an investigation of existing Ming and Qing woodblock prints, the dancer motif appears in at least four different narrative dramas. In 1601, the *Jizhi zhai* workshop in Nanjing printed an illustrated book titled *Chongjiao hongfu ji* (»Re-collated Story of the Lady with Red Sleeves«), written by Zhang Fengyi (1527–1613). The heroin of this drama is Zhang Chuchen, a singer working for one of the prime chancellors, Yang Su (544–606), in the Sui dynasty (581–618). In representing the moment when Zhang met her life partner Li Jing (571–649), the designer depicts her as dancing on a square carpet in front of Yang Su. Rather than looking at the dominant chancellor, Zhang looks the other way to the edge of the woodblock frame, indicating the affection for her hero. Tu Long (1543–1605), a playwright and renowned connoisseur of antiquities, published a drama titled *Xinke quanxiang tanhua ji* (»Newly-Carved Fully-Illustrated Story of the Night-blooming Flower«, hereafter the *Tanhua ji*), with woodblock illustrations carved by the *Jizhi zhai* workshop. By 1619 at the latest, Wang Tingne (1573–1619), a well-off playwright and publisher, finished a drama titled *Huancui tang xinbian toutao ji* (»Newly Edited Story of Peach«, hereafter *Toutao ji*) printed by the Huancui tang workshop, one that was run by himself. Illustrations in the three books mentioned above all have one motif in common: a young female dancing on a carpet, with varying body gestures. The setting of the dancing activity, natural or architectural, was depicted as a scholar's garden, with

renderings of a handrail, garden plants (osmanthus or banana trees), and Taihu rocks.

The theatrical narrative of the dancer shifted to the figure of Yang Taizhen (719–756) during the last few years of the Wanli period, and the pictorial narrative followed this shift accordingly. Yang Taizhen was an imperial concubine of the Tang-dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (685–762). She was originally the wife of Prince Li Mao (?–775), Xuanzong's eighteenth son. Xuanzong seized his daughter-in-law in 736 CE, and nine years later gave her the title of imperial concubine, a long-vanished title of honour. Yang and her family presumed the emperor's favour, and grabbed the political and military power of the empire, which partly led to the rebellion of An Lushan (703–757) and Shi Siming (703–761), and later the decline of the Tang. At the firm request of loyal officers such as general Chen Xuanli (active 710–760), Xuanzong reluctantly ordered Yang Taizhen to commit suicide.⁵² This historical fact, together with other anecdotes, became the origin of later literary and pictorial productions concerning the Tang court romance.

A Yuan-dynasty drama written by Bai Pu (1226–c. 1306) featured this romantic story. The drama, titled *Tang minghuang qiuye wutongyu* (»Tang Minghuang Listening to the Rain Falling on Chinese Parasols on an Autumn Night«, hereafter *Wutongyu*), was collected in at least three different anthologies of Yuan dramas. Published in 1616, 1619 and 1633 respectively, the narration of *Wutongyu* was illustrated by three slightly different yet affiliated illustrations.⁵³ In these illustrations, Xuanzong is either playing a drum or gazing at the performance, while Yang dances on a square rug.

Xuanzong was criticised for being unable to learn from the mistakes of his uncle and predecessor, Emperor Zhongzong (656–710). What the two monarchs had in common was, as reviewed by Song-dynasty politician and historian Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), the failure to resist »the disaster of women«.⁵⁴ Although the stories of the Zhao sisters and Yang Taizhen became romantic legends in secular literature in later dynasties, the official and political implications of these stories were always a reminder, to men of noble character and Confucian ideology, to keep away from women's charms.

Fig. 4

Wang Tingne, *Huancui tang xinbian toutao ji* (»Newly Edited Story of Peach«), China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Wanli period (1573–1620). Woodblock printed book illustration, h. 21.5 cm, w. 13.9 cm. Cambridge, Harvard University, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Chinese-Japanese Library.

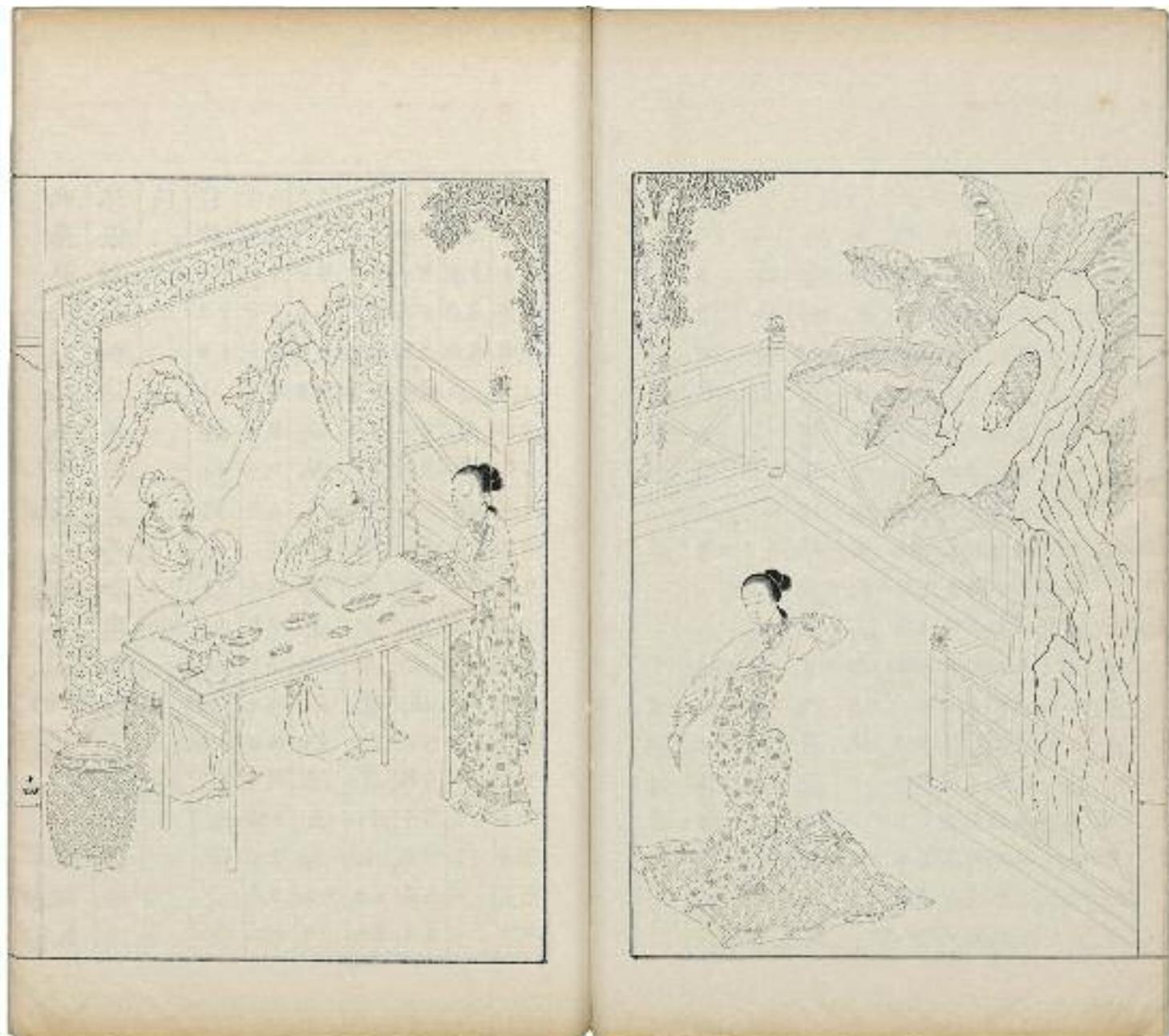


Fig. 5

Jar, China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Shunzhi period (1644–1661). Polychrome overglaze enamel on Jingdezhen porcelain, h. 36.6 cm, d. rim 20 cm, d. 33.8 cm, d. footring 20.3 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Toutao ji portrays a Song-dynasty romance between a student Pan Yongzhong and Huang Shunhua, the daughter of General Huang Chang. The young couple had an intimate encounter, and became privately engaged to each other. In the nineteenth chapter, however, an influential official, Xie Duan, the emperor's brother-in-law, aggressively lobbied General Huang to marry his daughter. In the twenty-first chapter, the father had no choice but to oblige his daughter to marry Xie. It is between these two chapters that the illustration of the dancer occurs. In the twentieth chapter, a friend of ill repute visited Pan, and lured him into a brothel to have fun with the prostitute Wang sisters. The elder sister Yiniang was a singer, while the younger sister Erniang was a gifted

dancer (fig. 4). Since singing was difficult to draw, the designer of the print depicted Yiniang serving wine. Meanwhile, Erniang dances on a square carpet in an enticing atmosphere, looking back towards Pan over her shoulder. Embedded in this pictorial narrative was the seductive role of the Wang sisters in luring Pan away from being a righteous man and a moral scholar.

Besides the Zhao sisters and Yang Taizhen, the Wang sisters are also characters with recognisable identities, and they all share the same negative overtone of female seduction. Like the two pairs of sisters, Yang Taizhen was also a talented dancer as recorded in history, good at singing and musical theory as well.⁵⁵ The ability to dance, together with dancing performance, was an indispensable part of a woman's charm, which infringed conventional moral rules for regulating the female in male-dominated historiography. Pictorial demonstrations of their charming bodies, ironically, were cemented within Ming-Qing literati and merchant communities in an unexpected and opposite way from what would be expected.

On media of a scale larger than book illustrations, such as lacquer screens, most of the pictorial motifs in the *Hangong chunxiao* were used. These twelve-section lacquer screens were mostly custom-designed, and functioned primarily as birthday or retirement gifts.⁵⁶ When it comes to media with three-dimensional surfaces such as porcelain, the dancer motif again won the favour of designers and patrons with its entangled theatrical narratives, at the heart of which lay the visualisation of the female body.

Not until the Shunzhi period (1644–1661) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) did the dancer motif appear as decoration on porcelain for the first time. A porcelain jar (fig. 5) with polychrome enamel in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam features the dancer surrounded by female musicians playing instruments such as the bamboo flute, wooden clapping boards, the *sheng* (a wind instrument), the *shugu* drum and the *yunluo* (a percussion instrument). Under the Kangxi emperor's reign, underglaze cobalt blue porcelain vessels produced by official and civilian kilns featured this motif with proper variations: adding costume and furniture details,



Fig. 6

Dish, China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Kangxi period (1662–1722). Underglaze cobalt blue on Jingdezhen porcelain, h. 5 cm, d. rim 34.7 cm, d. footring 19.2 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung.

miniaturising a musician, or constructing private performance spaces with architectural settings. Jingdezhen ceramic craftspeople even added exquisite details to form multi-layered spaces with different groups of beholders, such as a blue-and-white plate (fig. 6) from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden. As large quantities of Chinese porcelain travelled with the monsoon winds to European ports, the dancer motif also was used to decorate fireplaces in five-piece sets.⁵⁷

After the dancer motif entered Europe through the flow of Chinese commodities, it was appropriated by Dutch and German decorative arts during the second half of the seventeenth century and the entire eighteenth century. For example, a wooden dolls' house (fig. 7) was custom-designed for Petronella Oortman (1656–1716), the wife of a Dutch upper-class merchant. The extremely realistic model was made by a French craftsman. The owner filled the doll's house with miniature objects, which she collected from 1686 to 1710 according to actual interior decorative practices. On the lower left side of the dolls' house is a typical seventeenth-century Dutch formal kitchen (rather than a cooking place), where a cabinet holds many miniature Chinese and Japanese porcelain objects.⁵⁸

On the porcelain cabinet there hung four painting panels, the one on the far left featuring a female dancer performing in front of two musicians and a beholder (fig. 8). The other three painting panels were proved to be mirror images of prints from an album entitled *Picturae Sinicae ac Suratteneae*, published by Petrus Schenk Sr. (1660–1718/19) in 1702.⁵⁹ Depending on the resemblance of style and details, it is highly possible that the four paintings were all works by Schenk Sr. himself. Previous research suggested that the artist followed illustrations from a Chinese schoolbook as his prototype for the album.⁶⁰ The dancer motif was not included in the *Picturae Sinicae ac Suratteneae*. In around 1725, Petrus Schenk Jr. (1698–1775) published an album of engravings depicting Chinese landscapes and figures, titled *Nieuwe geinventeerde Sineesen*. It was designed as a pattern book for ceramic production (for a similar example see cat. no. 43).⁶¹ The album included several prints that borrowed pictorial elements from book illustrations in Olfert Dapper's (1639–1689) *Gedenkwaerdig Bedryf Der Nederlandsche Oost-Indische*



Maetschappye, op de Kuste en in het Keiserijk van Taising of Sina, which was published in 1670 in Amsterdam.⁶² Another engraving by Schenk Jr., which was not included in his album, features a scene of a Chinese female dancer and three musicians (fig. 9). It also followed an illustration in Dapper's book, and due to technical limits, the two compositions are mirrored.⁶³

However, the visual source for Schenk Sr. could not be Dapper's illustration, judging from style and composition, as well as many other details. It can be assumed that around the time when Schenk Sr. painted the first album, there existed another image of the dancer motif that served as an inspiration for him. Several unpublished albums of early Chinese export paintings have been under restoration in the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden. One of the albums contains a series of eighteen paintings with the dancer motif. Dated to the second half of the seventeenth cen-

Fig. 7

Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman, c. 1686–c. 1710. Enamel on wood, h. 255 cm, w. 190 cm, d. 78 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 8

Detail of the formal kitchen of Petronella Oortman's Dolls' house (see fig. 7), h. 54.5 cm, w. 70 cm, d. 69.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 9

Petrus Schenk Jr., *Muzikanten en dansende Chinese vrouw* («Musicians and a Chinese woman dancing»), 1727–1775. Engraving, h. 17.3 cm, w. 25.2 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

tury, the paintings each measure about 30.4 × 23.3 cm with small scale variations in size.⁶⁴ Considering the size of these paintings, it could be in proper scale relative to the real paintings mounted as panels or pasted as wallpaper in a room in Oortman's real house. With more information to lend validity to this hypothesis, it could be possible to argue that the Dresden albums belong to the same series as the paintings that were later copied in the doll's house.

On May 18, 1678, the Delft potter Pieter Fransen van der Lee (?–1680) was summoned to Berlin by Friedrich Wilhelm (1620–1688), the Great Elector in Brandenburg.⁶⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm appointed van der Lee as the supervisor of a manufactory to produce Delft-like faience in Brandenburg, and granted him administrative, market and property privileges until his death.⁶⁶ Gerhard Molin (?–1693) took the position, and after Molin passed away, his widow married Gerhard Wolbeer in 1697 and so transferred the



Fig. 10

Gerhard Wolveer's manufactory, Gourd-shaped vase, 1700–1710. Faience with white glaze and cobalt blue enamel, h. 57.6 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum.

ownership of the factory to him.⁶⁷ It was under the supervision of Wolbeek when a gourd shaped faience vase with the dancer motif was produced in Berlin (fig. 10). The vase bears an illustration of a woman dancing on



a square rug, with one musician on either side of her. It is possible that the pattern book was passed down during the transition of leadership in the Berlin faience manufactory, thereafter the dancer motif entered Germany.

Yet, Delftware forerunners could be an alternative source for the image on the Berlin faience. Compared to Dapper's illustration or Schenk's pattern book, the motif on the Berlin vase appears more closely related to a Delft faience bowl and saucer in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.⁶⁸ The Delft bowl was attributed to the factory »De Grieksche A«, made between 1702 to 1715, and bears the dancer motif as its central decoration, though replacing the musicians with an admiring young attendant.⁶⁹ In the Charlottenburg Castle in Berlin, a harpsichord designed around 1700 by Gérard Dagly (ca. 1660–1715), with white lacquer and painted enamel, features the dancers as a pair.⁷⁰ Red-lacquer tables and cabinets, with one Chinese female dancer or a pair of them, were also designed by Dagly in the first decade of the eighteenth century.

From the perspective of inter-Asian visual and material cultures, the dancer motif first emerged as Han figure performing a Han dance. Within the socio-cultural encounters of various Asian ethnic groups during the Tang dynasty, paired dance imagery of Han and non-Han figures increased, reflecting current performance practices, especially the *hubu xinsheng*. Following the sweeping popularity of drama and book culture since the mid-Ming period, the dancer accumulated different identities due to the necessity of theatrical narrative. Chinese ceramics served as one of the most far-reaching means by which the image of the Chinese dancer circulated in European everyday life during the long eighteenth century.

On the other hand, the arrival of the dancer motif brought iconographic codes, but with no cultural capital to interpret them. The dancer motif, therefore, was culturally translated as a mere symbol of Chinese women, in numerous incarnations. Together with European curiosity regarding the Chinese emperors, the search for Chinese beauties turned into a new burst of interest in people living in exotic lands. Unlike the emperors' image that appeared mainly in books for cultivated audiences, secular

representations of Chinese women blended in hybrid commodities, and ended up on shelves and in closets.

Conclusion

The cultural practice of feminising ceramics perceives the materiality of ceramics, including shape, glaze, and decorative patterns, in comparison to the female body. From an analytical framework of gendered materials, metaphors such as beauty's shoulders, Xi Shi's breast, or rosy blush on a beauty's face all concentrate on the trope of the female body. The phenomenon of feminising ceramics reflected sensuous perception of the surface design of the artefacts by eighteenth-century literati, the groups of cultural elites who resided in Chinese regional centres. There, they were the social actors who equipped themselves with economic and cultural capital to use and appreciate Yixing stoneware and Jingdezhen porcelain. They dominated the historiography of ceramics on a local and middle level, at the same time they provided a practical context for ceramics' function in social encounters aside from the contemporary handbooks of connoisseurship. Their writings also provided a critical supplement to historical narratives in addition to imperial discourses on ceramics, such as those by the Qianlong emperor.

From metaphors like shoulders of a beauty, we can find that the figurative visualisation and materialisation of the female body was not merely the literati's unilateral wishful thinking. Skilful artisans took a major part in the making of specific designs, such as when Xu Youquan made every effort to imitate the female body in forming the shape of a teapot.⁷¹ The application of the cloud pattern on underglaze blue porcelain likewise showed the agreement between certain parties of consumers and producers, which made possible the display of the anonymous female body in the space of daily life.

The relationship between women and Chinese ceramics in long-eighteenth-century Europe went beyond the medium. The body of the Chinese female served as a decorative image and sometimes as an entire motif. It entered different strata of English, Dutch and German social life. Within decades, the Chinese female body was variously displayed in different forms and media. They were localised by European craftspeople as culturally hybrid images.

The phenomenon added much to the growing cultural biographies of the motif of the Chinese female, changing from being foreign goods to a part of local tradition. Images of the body are divided into the physical and the mental, as argued by Hans Belting, and media and body are both capable of playing the role of each other.⁷² Physical images of Chinese women travelled across cultural boundaries, while due to limits of coded cultural cognition, the textual metaphors dropped away. While the concept of body is, to a large extent, the product of a specific time and society,⁷³ the cases of feminising Chinese ceramics nevertheless revealed the possibility of conceptualising common cultural practices in a global perspective. The eighteenth-century transcultural possession of ceramics relates to a notion of femininity, which declares, silently yet explicitly, the possession of embodied beauty.

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- 1 LEDDEROSE 1991, p. 223.
- 2 PIERSON 2016.
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- 4 JÖRG 1983. GERRITSEN 2016, p. 237.
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- 13 JONES 2013, p. 6, 9, 22.
- 14 JONES 2013, p. 14–16.
- 15 BISCHOFF 2014. BROOMHALL-VAN GENT 2017.
- 16 PORTER 2010.
- 17 CHEN 2015–1, p. 92.
- 18 LÜ 2011–2, p. 13–129.
- 19 Wu 2013, p. 115. Translation by author.
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- 21 Wu 2013, p. 151–152. Translation by author.
- 22 CUTTER 1983, p. 279.
- 23 JIYUANSOU 2010, p. 1–2.
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- 27 JIYUANSOU 2010, p. 204. Translation by author.
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- 32 Liu 1982, p. 10–13.
- 33 WANG 2013, p. 127.
- 34 DU HALDE 2001, p. 45–49.
- 35 SHEN 2011, p. 696.
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- 38 WANG 2011–2, p. 203, 223.
- 39 CAHILL 2010, p. 20.
- 40 WANG 2011–2, p. 245–248.
- 41 CHEN 2015–2, p. 65–73.
- 42 FRASER 2016.
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- 44 ZHOU 2015, p. 73.
- 45 YANG 2014, p. 107–117.
- 46 ZHOU 2015, p. 73–79.
- 47 CHENG 2015, p. 23.
- 48 DU HALDE 2001, p. 100.
- 49 Zhaoyi is the highest rank of imperial concubine in the Han dynasty, lower only than the empress.
- 50 BAN 1962, p. 301–331, 3988–3999.
- 51 BAN 1962, p. 330.
- 52 OUYANG-SONG 1975, p. 121–154, 3493–3496, 3613.
- 53 LIN 2009, p. 152–163.
- 54 OUYANG-SONG 1975, p. 154. Translation by author.
- 55 OUYANG-SONG 1975, p. 3493.
- 56 For a survey of lacquer screens featuring *The Spring Morning in a Han Palace*, see CHOU 1995. More folding screens of similar theme can be found in museums and private collections in Europe and North America since 1995.
- 57 See a set with the dancer motif in the Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. C.894&A–1910, et al. See also a similar set in the Freer Gallery of Art, inv. no. F1980.190a–c, et al., originally on display in the Peacock Room.
- 58 PIJZEL-DOMMISSE 1994, p. 22. PIJZEL-DOMMISSE 2000, p. 265. CORRIGAN 2015, p. 129–131.
- 59 FONTEIN-DEN BLAAUWEN 1964, p. 100. DEN BLAAUWEN 1964, p. 38.
- 60 FONTEIN-DEN BLAAUWEN 1964, p. 91.
- 61 DEN BLAAUWEN 1964, p. 35–47.
- 62 DUCRET 1966, p. 19–28.
- 63 DUCRET 1966, p. 22.
- 64 Inv. nos. CA 154/115 to CA 154/132. Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Christiaan Jörg first mentioned that this series of albums could be among the earliest Chinese export paintings to have reached Europe, on the occasion of the symposium *Chinese Export Paintings: Studies and Interpretations*. November 29, 2016, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden.
- 65 MAUTER 1986, p. 40.
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- 68 Inv. no. BK-NM-12400-278. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.
- 69 KEISCH 2001, p. 43. DAM 2004, p. 126.
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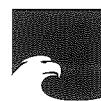
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Mit Beiträgen von Cordula Bischoff, He Feng, Claudia Kanowski, Wang Ching-Ling, Wang Lianming und
Matthias Weiß

With Contributions by Cordula Bischoff, He Feng, Claudia Kanowski, Wang Ching-Ling, Wang Lianming and Matthias Weiß



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MICHAEL IMHOF VERLAG

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