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课程名称 中国文化概要

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**Please write an essay about 500-800 words in English, explaining a cultural phenomenon in China. A comparative perspective is encouraged.**

Tang Dynasty: the Pomp, the Plump

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英语笔译1班

周四下午5、6节课堂

For many young girls who consider themselves fat, it is simple enough to say that I wouldn’t have been so worried about my weight if I lived in the Tang Dynasty. Underlying this repeated utterance is the popular belief that people in the Tang Dynasty adore fat women. But is that really the absolute standard of beauty during that period? The answer may be not as simple as we expected.

When it comes to beauties in ancient times, the first names that come to mind may be Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan, and Yang Guifei, most of whom, according to relevant historical records, are delicate ladies with a slim figure. Actually, slimness has been known as the mainstream standard of beauty throughout the Chinese history. As early as the Spring and Autumn Period, according to *Mozi,* some people starved to death to stay slim since then the king of Chu favored thinness[[1]](#footnote-0). Moreover, images of beautiful ladies in poems and other artistic works in ancient China mostly feature a slight build. In *The Goddess of the Luo*, the fair lady has a slender figure with her waist narrow as though bound with white cords[[2]](#footnote-1). And in Cao Xueqin’s depiction, Lin Daiyu features a tender beauty graced by her thinness and frailty.

According to the archaeological materials and artistic works from the Tang Dynasty, slimness was still admired by people throughout the Tang Dynasty, which could be demonstrated by paintings in early Tang Dynasty like *Bunian Tu*[[3]](#footnote-2) and poems in middle and late Tang Dynasty like *Verses in Mid-spring XVI of XX* written by Bai Juyi[[4]](#footnote-3) and *Verses in Yangzhou III of III* by Du Mu[[5]](#footnote-4). But in the middle Tang era, particularly between the reign of Emperor Gaozong and Emperor Xuanzong, there was something different that was going on. Yang Guifei, as the representative figure in that era, was admired and her beauty was modeled after by the public. According to the records of Wang Renyu, Yang was a bit fleshy[[6]](#footnote-5). Besides, Libai compared Yang to the full blossom of peony[[7]](#footnote-6) and Bai Juyi compared her to hibicus[[8]](#footnote-7), both of which were meant to show her chubbiness and splendid beauty in an abstract way. In addition, female figurines from that period are typically stronger than ever and beautiful ladies in paintings like *Ladies Wearing Flowers in Their Hair[[9]](#footnote-8)* generally display high buns, round faces, and, most conspicuously, bigger body sizes. Out of the 6257 poems written by famous poets in the middle Tang era, 635 feature the depiction of women, 163 of which describe the plump beauties[[10]](#footnote-9). If we go greater length into all those records and descriptions, we may find that being voluptuous, or slightly fat in a healthy and pleasant way, was indeed a beauty fashion with a large group of followers back then. Moreover, such an aesthetic preference was extended to almost every aspect of their life including their choices for highly coiffed hair styles, loose and bold gowns, and even their artistic creations like sculptures, ceramics and calligraphy.

The admiration for plumpness can actually be traced back to *the Duke’s Bride* [[11]](#footnote-10)and *the Pond Slope*[[12]](#footnote-11) in *the Book of Songs*, but it flourishes in the middle Tang Dynasty and becomes a distinct characteristic of that splendid era. This aesthetic standard was in part led by the rulers with Xianbei ancestries, who, originally being northern nomads, preferredstrong and athletic women fit for reproduction and social production. More importantly, the aesthetic standard got popular at a time when the political structure was stable, the economy thriving and the culture was flourishing with the infusion of the Hu fashion and Buddhism. So people enjoyed a relatively rich and colorful life both physically and mentally, which laid a solid foundation for healthier, more inclusive and diverse aesthetic preferences.

The broad definition of feminine beauty in the Tang Dynasty represents an open mindset and strong confidence, but it just flourishes briefly in those rosy days. Today, the beauty of standard cannot be stricter. The popular obsession with A4 skinny waist and white, long “chopstick legs” as well as the craze for brands like Brandy Melville are fueling an anxiety about appearance across the society, leading to increasing cases of eating disorders and body shaming. Such harmful aesthetic standard is killing the diversity of beauty, and hurting our society as a whole. The broad aesthetic preferences in the Tang Dynasty serve as a great inspiration that slimness is definitely not the absolute standard of beauty. The real charm of beauty, lies, instead, in its diversity and unpredictability. Underlying the admiration for the plump is the unprecedented inclusiveness and confidence which, among other elements that underpin the pomp of the Tang Dynasty, should be valued and inherited.

1. 出自《墨子·兼爱中》,原句为“楚王好细腰，宫中多饿死”. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. 出自《洛神赋》,原句为“秾纤得中”“腰如约素”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. 即《步辇图》, 系唐代画家阎立本的名作之一. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. 即《和春深二十首》(其十六), 原句为“秋千细腰女，摇曳逐风斜”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. 即《扬州三首》(其三), 原句为“纤腰间长袖，玉佩杂繁缨”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. 选自《开元天宝遗事》,原句为“贵妃素有肉”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. 选自《清平调》(其一), 原句为“云想衣裳花想容，春风拂槛露华浓”. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. 选自《长恨歌》, 原句为“芙蓉如面柳如眉”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. 即《簪花仕女图》,传为唐代周昉绘制. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. 葛塞: 《研学旅行中研究性学习的指导策略——以《从唐诗再探唐朝以胖为美》为例》, 载《教育科学论坛》,2018年第3期, 第44页. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. 即《卫风·硕人》, 原句为“硕人其颀，衣锦褧衣”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. 即《陈风·泽陂》,原句为“有美一人，硕大且卷”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)