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Writer/s: [Helen Grace](#)

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The Qianlong Emperor's concubines are buried together on a site in the Qing Dong Ling, 35 of them at least (though not all together of course); perhaps there were more but also, by the way, there were at least 18 children, probably more—the records are not entirely clear on these facts, in spite of the Emperor's propensity for cataloguing his art collection and my own propensity to obsess about obscure detail of no present significance.

On the wife and concubine count alone, some records suggest there were at least two empresses and one deposed empress, as well as five Imperial Noble consorts, five Noble Consorts, three Consorts (not given the title 'Imperial Noble' or 'Noble'), plus one 'Worthy Lady'.

We have portraits of many of them, almost identical, in a number of cases, all wearing the same fur hat with red crown, pearl earrings and fur collared silk-brocade dragon costume. It's as if the court portraitist painted a life-sized cut-out and had each of them stand behind it—like a common amusement park photo-opportunity—and there's a sense that this court life was not so very different from celebrity culture today, with the complete replaceability of almost identical looking starlets—Kracauer's 'mass ornament' perhaps.

There is one portrait however which is markedly different—the one of Xiang Fei or Jung-Fei, known as the Fragrant Concubine, who was painted by Castiglione. He was the Italian Jesuit who came to the court in 1715 and stayed for fifty years, painting in this strange style combining the perspectivalism of European painting with the extended space of Chinese painting, and who in his spare time, designed the fountains and timed waterworks of the Old Summer Palace, the one which was looted and destroyed by British and French troops during the Second Opium War, a century after the Fragrant Concubine's time.

Xiang Fei's story is the one which interests me because it's a thousand and one nights kind of story and there are also a thousand and one stories about her. It's convenient that she was painted by Castiglione or Lang Shi-ning as he was known in Chinese, because it was this little art historical link which drew me to her.

Born to a poor family in the Silk Road oasis city of Kashgar, (in other accounts she was born to a noble family) it's said

that she gained her fragrance from a diet of ground Chinese date flower, or jujube, the staple upon which the family relied for its food. In Uyghur, her name is Ipahan, meaning 'Fragrant girl' and when the Qianlong emperor defeated the local tyrant, liberating the Uyghur leaders, they presented gifts to him as tribute including an exquisite jade bowl in the Islamic style he favoured and Ipahan or Xiang Fei herself, who at age 12 or 13 was dispatched with the other gifts back to Peking, to become a concubine. Legend has it that she was washed everyday along the road in camel's milk to preserve her fragrance.

Kashgar was, in Ipahan's day a cosmopolitan place, maybe like New York or Paris as an art centre, let's imagine. But in any case, those Persian and Ottoman craftsmen were producing this extraordinary work which found its way into the Ming and Qing courts—along with beautiful young women, who in Ipahan's case was also Muslim, of course, along with the whole of the region from which she came.

The Imperial Palace was a forbidding city for a home-sick young girl and the Qianlong Emperor (or, no doubt, his servants) tried hard to please her, building her a garden and even a mosque, as well as importing a jujube tree from Kashgar to make her feel at home. In one story, this tactic worked and she happily serviced the emperor for the 28 years she was at court, dying there when she was about 40, and her body was afterwards returned to Kashgar to her real home. In the more secessionist story, she refuses to surrender to the Emperor, and carries a dagger to kill him in revenge for the annexation of Xinjiang. The Empress Dowager finds out of the risk to her son and has her killed by the court eunuchs, apparently a common fate of concubines, which may account for why they do not seem to live very long.

In any case, a mausoleum in Kashgar has now become a tourist site to her memory or at least to the memory of all the storytellers who have woven tales about this region, keeping alive the history of trade and the exchange of gifts and women, the stories we retell to stay awake on the long bright moonlit night of mid autumn, in the park lit by all the paper lanterns.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ge Hai-lun (Helen Grace).*