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The Reincarnated Female Ruler:

Emperor Wu's Rise to Power Through Tang Cosmopolitanism and Her Defiance Against Patriarchy and Confucian Critics

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

by

Rui Yuan

Professor Jarett Henderson, Seminar Instructor

Professor Anthony Barbieri, Mentor

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ABSTRACT

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The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) is commonly regarded as the golden age in Chinese history, characterized by economic prosperity, cultural exchange, and political stability. This thesis explores the socio-economic, cultural, and religious dynamics that enabled the rise of Wu Zetian (624–705 CE), the only woman to rule China as emperor. Through an analysis of the Tang Dynasty's cosmopolitan atmosphere, the influence of steppe culture, and the role of Buddhism, this study aims to understand how these factors combined to challenge traditional Confucian gender norms and facilitate female empowerment.

The research highlights the impact of the Silk Road in transforming Chang'an into a global cultural center, where diverse cultural exchanges fostered more egalitarian views on gender roles. The steppe nomadic traditions, which embraced female participation in commerce and politics, further influenced Tang society. Additionally, Buddhism provided an ideological platform that highly differentiated from the traditional Confucian patriarchal constraints, providing women with more ways to earn social respect and achieve self actualization, allowing Wu Zetian to legitimize her rule by positioning herself as a divine ruler and a protector of Buddhist institutions

By examining Wu Zetian's strategic alliances, political acumen, and manipulation of religious authority, this thesis argues that her unprecedented rise was not an anomaly but a product of the unique conditions of the Tang Dynasty. The study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, power, and religion in imperial China and presents how historical narratives have shaped perceptions of female leadership throughout the time in Middle Imperial China (900-1350 CE). Wu Zetian's reign serves as a powerful case study in overcoming societal constraints and redefining traditional leadership paradigms.

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Introduction to the Tang Dynasty

Economy and Trade

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) is often regarded as a golden age in Chinese history,[1] celebrated for its flourishing economy, vibrant cultural exchanges, and political stability. The dynasty was established after the unification of four centuries of unrest, conflict, and division, and emerged as a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan empire embracing diverse lands, peoples, and ideologies.[2] This period of prosperity and openness created unique conditions that shaped the roles and status of women, allowing for possibilities unthinkable in many other eras. The dynasty's cosmopolitan atmosphere, fueled by the Silk Road and a syncretic blend of nomadic and agrarian influences, supported the emergence of women in positions of influence and power. These conditions culminated in the extraordinary reign of Wu Zetian (624-705 CE), the only woman ever to rule China as emperor. This introduction explores the factors that enabled such a phenomenon, focusing on the Tang's economy, cultural beliefs, and evolving social structures, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of how these forces converged to make female rule possible.

The Tang economy played a central role in fostering this environment. During Wu's life, overland trade routes brought massive entrepreneurial opportunities with the West and other parts of Eurasia, making Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Empire, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world.[3] The Silk Road, which connected China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and

[1] N. Harry Rothschild, Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor. *New York: Pearson Longman*, 2008, 10.
[2] Rothschild, 11.
[3] Lee, Yueh-Ting 黎岳庭. "Wu Zhao: Ruler of Tang Dynasty China." *Association of Asian Studies* 20:2 (Fall 2015): 14-18.

Europe, served as a conduit for transmitting goods, ideas, religions, and technologies. This economic prosperity also enhanced the status of women in various ways, as wealth allowed greater opportunities for leisure, education, and cultural engagement. Steppe culture, brought by the Chinese nomadic rulers and the economic interactions between Han Chinese and the nomadic tribes, introduced more egalitarian gender roles due to the Central Asian nomads' comparatively more fluid view on gender roles. From 220 to 589 AD, and until the unification under the Tang dynasty, China was governed by nomadic rulers. Interracial and intercultural marriages were common, facilitating the blending of nomadic cultures with Han Chinese traditions. This fusion led to significant reforms across various aspects of Chinese society. Nomadic societies relied heavily on the economic contributions of both men and women, as women actively participated in herding, trade, and resource management. This practical approach to gender roles, rooted in economic necessity, influenced Tang society, where women also played visible roles in commerce, artisan work, and even court politics. Geographically, the Tang Empire bordered the vast Central Asian steppes, home to nomadic peoples such as the Turks, Uighurs, and Mongols. The Silk Road, which connected China to Central Asia and beyond, passed through steppe regions, making interaction between these civilizations inevitable. Strategically, the Tang sought to secure their western borders and maintain control over the Silk Road trade routes, which were vital for economic and cultural exchange, and this often meant forging alliances or engaging in conflicts with steppe peoples who dominated these regions. Economically, the steppe nomads provided horses—an essential commodity for the Tang military—while the Tang traded silk, tea, and other goods. The Silk Road fostered economic interdependence, with Tang cities like Chang'an (modern Xi'an) becoming vibrant hubs of cultural and commercial exchange. This economic interaction contributed to mutual prosperity and deeper ties between the Tang and

steppe cultures. Steppe women, adept in activities such as horsemanship and archery, often wielded considerable influence. It was known that women of the steppe differed from women of other Eastern nations by their greater independence and freedom; they often established a leading position and participated in taking fateful decisions of their people when men were drafted for military duties.[4] This strong female participation in society and governance set the precedence and examples for the people of the surrounding countries.

Female Rulers Around the World

In addition to the influences of the Steppe Culture, the Sino-sphere during the Tang Dynasty offers insights into the broader context of female rulership in East Asia, particularly in Korea and Japan.[5] Queens Sondok and Jindeok of Silla in Southeastern Korea and Empresses Suiko and Jito of Japan provide notable examples of women who ascended to the throne. These rulers often were born or married into the imperial clan, gained power through the male family members, and legitimized their authority through connections to divinity (mostly Buddhism), bolstering their sovereign status. However, the reigns of these women were frequently constrained by the inability to produce and select heirs, a critical factor in maintaining dynastic continuity, which was also a great challenge Empress Wu faced in her later years. For instance, Queen Sondok claimed power because all the male heirs produced by her father had passed away, leaving her as the closest blood relative to the former king. Despite her capable rule, her death without an heir allowed the court to justify the selection of a male successor. Similarly, Jindeok, who succeeded Sondok as her cousin, also left no heirs, further reinforcing the patriarchal preference for male rulers. In Japan, Empress Suiko's ascent to power was rooted in

[4] Balgabayewa, Gaukhar. "The Role of Women in Military Organization of Nomads," *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education Journal*, Vol 10, No. 12 (2016): 5274.
[5] Rothschild, 14.

her imperial lineage and her role as consort to a former emperor. She adeptly promoted Buddhism and exercised strong diplomatic influence, yet her failure to designate an heir before her death enabled powerful ministers to install a male successor. In addition, Express Irene of the Byzantine empire ascended to power through her marriage ties with the royal family, initially serving as empress and later as regent for their young son, Constantine VI. As a woman in a deeply patriarchal society, her authority was greatly questioned, and her legitimacy as a ruler faced significant opposition. Despite her political acumen and determination to consolidate power, her gender made her an unconventional and contested figure, and was ultimately overthrown by the powerful male aristocrats.

Examining the stories of the female leaders contemporary or close to Empress Wu's time throughout the world illustrated that they were able to claim the power through their kinship ties with the royal family, however, their reigns often ended abruptly due to rebellion or the problem of producing heirs inherit their last names. On one hand, the court and government officials' insistence of selecting male heirs to succeed the throne could be attributed to the deeply ingrained societal, cultural, and practical considerations. Patriarchal structures dominated most historical societies, with power traditionally associated with men. In East Asia, Confucian principles emphasized male leadership in both family and governance, creating an ideological bias against female rulers.[6] Male rulers were also viewed as essential for ensuring dynastic continuity, as they were expected to produce heirs to maintain the royal bloodline, family assets, and political stability. Furthermore, leadership was often linked to military control, and men were traditionally expected to lead armies,[7] reinforcing the perception that male rulers were better

[6] Dai Sheng, comp. "*Liji* 礼记 [The Book of Rites] ", *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 2017, 521.
[7] Ivanhoe, Philip J., Bryan W. Van Norden eds. Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy. Third Edition. *Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co.*, 2023. 8.

suited for such roles. Succession laws, either explicitly or implicitly, favored males, making it easier for courts to justify their choices. Even when capable female rulers emerged, courts often reverted to established norms to avoid disrupting traditional power structures. Additionally, influential advisors and ministers, often male, preferred male heirs who would likely uphold their authority rather than challenge it. On the other hand, ancestral worship and filial piety (*xiao* 孝) were central pillars of Chinese kinship structure and Confucian ideology, which they combined to significantly contribute to the short-lived nature of female rulership. Ancestor worship, a practice deeply embedded in Chinese culture, required male descendants to perform rituals and offerings to honor their forebears. However, women were traditionally excluded from these duties in their natal families, or even after they became part of their husband's lineage. This ritual responsibility reinforced the primacy of male heirs, as they were seen as the legitimate carriers of the family name and the preservers of ancestral traditions. In addition, the core Confucian virtue, filial piety, emphasized the duty of children—particularly sons—to respect and obey their parents, uphold family honor, and continue the patrilineal line. These values created a cultural and ideological framework that prioritized male authority in both family and governance, marginalizing women from positions of power. Female rulers, such as Empress Wu Zetian, faced immense challenges in legitimizing their authority within this system, as their ability to perform ancestral rites or produce male heirs was often questioned. Even when women held power, their reigns were seen as temporary deviations from the norm, and the expectation of returning authority to male successors remained strong. Together, these factors perpetuated the preference for male rulers, even in the face of evidence of competent female leadership.

The short-lived nature of female rulership in East Asia, despite the occasional rise of powerful women like Empress Wu, Queen Sondok, and Empress Suiko, could be attributed to

the deeply entrenched systems of patriarchy and the practical challenges of succession. While these women demonstrated exceptional political acumen and leadership, their reigns often lacked the institutional support needed to sustain female authority beyond their lifetimes. The absence of a clear female heir or the reluctance to appoint one highlights the societal preference for male succession, rooted in Confucian ideals, military traditions, and the desire for stable dynastic transitions. Moreover, the temporary nature of their rule often led to a reassertion of male dominance once they passed, as seen in the cases of Silla and Japan. This pattern underscored the broader historical trend where female rulers were exceptions rather than the norm, their legacies often overshadowed by the resurgence of patriarchal systems. In a broader context, the challenges faced by female rulers in East Asia reflect a global historical phenomenon where women in power had to navigate complex societal expectations and institutional barriers. While the Tang Dynasty's openness to steppe culture and its cosmopolitan nature allowed for a brief flourishing of female authority, the underlying structures of patriarchy and succession ultimately limited the long-term impact of these women's reigns.

Influence of Religions

Along with trade into the territory of China was not only commodities but also a rich exchange of culture, ideas, and religions, which profoundly influenced the social, political, and spiritual landscape of the region. Throughout the Tang dynasty, the diversified religious systems allowed the coexistence and interactions of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and newly introduced religions such as Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam.[8] The Tang's cosmopolitan nature, supported by the Silk Road's connectivity, facilitated the spread and

[8] Lee, Yuen Ting, "Wu Zhao: Ruler of Tang Dynasty China," *Association of Asian Studies*, Volume 20:2 (Fall 2015): Asia: Biographies and Personal Stories, Part II: 14.

assimilation of these varied religious traditions. Among these religions, Buddhism reached its peak during the early Tang dynasty, profoundly shaping the spiritual and cultural life of both Han Chinese and nomadic people. The state actively promoted Buddhism, with emperors such as Taizong and Xuanzong patronizing the construction of temples, grottoes, and monasteries, which allowed Buddhist art and literature to flourish, as seen in the Mogao Caves, which housed intricate murals and sculptures depicting Buddhist teachings. Since Buddhism spread widely between the Central Asia Steppe and the Sino-Sphere, this religion quickly became a common cultural denominator. Moreover, compared to Confucianism, Buddhism was more favored by Tang females because some Buddhist deities had female forms, and Buddhism also offered women unique opportunities for spiritual and social autonomy. Female devotees and nuns played significant roles within Buddhist communities, benefiting from the religion's egalitarian ideals. Temples and festivals became spaces where people of different genders and social classes mingled, fostering a sense of inclusivity. For example, Buddhist temples offered a sanctuary where non-Chinese and Chinese, female and male, rich and poor, monk and layman all mingled.[9] Thus, shared Buddhist faith helped gloss over cultural differences between Chinese and Central Asian subjects, including ruling strategies.

[9] Rothschild, N. Harry. P. 16.

Han Chinese Donor Portrait of Lady Wang of Taiyuan, cave 130 Mogao Grottoes, high Tang Dynasty 705-780 A.D.

Khotanese Princess Donors, cave 61 Mogao Grottoes, Five Dynasties 907 - 979 AD

Female Status

To explore the cause behind the relatively high status of women in the Tang Dynasty, it is essential to examine three key aspects: their roles within marriage, their participation in politics, and their engagement with religion. Tang women experienced a nuanced marital structure that, while rooted in patriarchal norms, allowed for a degree of agency uncommon in earlier dynasties. Political involvement, particularly for women connected to the imperial court, opened pathways for influence and authority, as seen in the case of empresses and dowagers who played critical roles in governance. Furthermore, religion, particularly Buddhism, provided women with opportunities for spiritual and social empowerment. By discussing these dimensions, one gains a clearer understanding of the cultural and institutional factors that contributed to the distinct status of women in Tang society.

Within marriages, the Tang law code officially placed the wife in an inferior and subservient position to her husband and obliged her to obey him.[10] The establishment of this law

[10] Qian Daqun 钱大群. *Tanglu Shuyi Xinzhu* 唐律疏义新注 [New Commentary on the Tang Code with Annotations], *Nanjing Normal University Press*, 2007, 454.

would be potentially influenced by Confucian ideologies in which men were regarded as Yang (阳) and females were regarded as Yin (阴). In Chinese cosmology, the universe created itself out of a primary chaos of material energy, organized into the cycles of yin and yang, form and matter. 'Yin' was retractive, passive and contractive, while 'yang' was repelling, active and expansive in principle. By linking these concepts with gender, females received a naturally disadvantaged position in society because they were expected by the Chinese philosophy to be submissive and supportive towards male kin. In practice, the yin-yang philosophy shaped societal views of gender roles by emphasizing their differences and interdependence. Women, as representatives of yin, were seen as critical to maintaining balance and harmony within families and society. This perspective provided a conceptual framework that valued women's contributions, in nurturing roles such as motherhood and household management.[11] Therefore, in the later dynasties that were highly affected by Neo-Confucianism, strict constraints were enforced on females' familial roles, to an extent that they were forced to stay in the inner quarters and forbidden from presenting themselves in public throughout their lifetimes. Females were also highly limited on their divorce policies, in which only men could divorce women based on the virtue and ethics that they failed to achieve according to Confucius standards. For example, men often divorce their wives because of the "seven misconducts in marriage," which included disobedient, childless, lust, envy, sickly, talkative, and thieving.[12] However, women failed to establish any socially acceptable marriage separation reasons because the society forced females to support the male kin or partners on all of their conduct. In addition to cultural expectations, female marriages were often highly restricted for economic reasons. When women married, they typically brought dowries into their husbands' households, and these

[11] Liu Xiang, *Lienu Zhuan* 列女传 [Exemplary Women of Early China]. The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang, trans. and ed. Anne Behnke Kinney. *New York: Columbia University Press,* 2014, 47.
[12] Fang Xiangdong. *Dadai Liji* 大戴礼记 [Dadai Book of Rites]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 2008, 1283-1310.

assets became part of the family's collective wealth. However, in the event of a divorce, the husband's family would be required to return the dowry to the woman, resulting in a financial loss for the husband's family. This economic dynamic made families cautious about marriage arrangements and divorce, as the dowry represented both a significant contribution and a potential liability. However, unlike the later dynasties, Tang Law Code allowed couples to divorce or separate for any reasons, which provided females with more freedom and rights within the marriage.[13]

Even though marriages forced numerous restrictions upon females, this union between people could sometimes result in a positive impact on female status. Women were expected to assume social ranks comparable to their male kin,[14] especially their fathers, husbands, and sons. In elite families, parents often arrange marriages to benefit the family as a whole, and aristocratic women tend to choose their partners from a similar social class as themselves to maintain their social status and assist the growth of their original families.[15] In return, their natal family would also act as support and a source of her power, in their marital relationships.

The comparatively less restrictive governmental control on female marriages was rooted in the greater problem of the population shortage. The Tang dynasty united China after over four hundred years of constant warfare and unrest since the collapse of the Eastern Han dynasty (220 CE). The long-lasting conflicts resulted in a reduction of population in certain areas due to migration, and it was the government's responsibility to encourage families to produce children and promote population growth to ensure the proper function and production of the country. To increase population density, the government started to protect female rights in marriages and

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[13] Qian Daqun 钱大群. *Tanglu Shuyi Xinzhu* 唐律疏义新注 [New Commentary on the Tang Code with Annotations], *Nanjing Normal University Press*, 2007, 460.
[14] Hinsch, Bret. Women in Tang China. *Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield*, 2022, 16.
[15] Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 [The New History of Tang], annotated by Song Qi, Dong Jiazun, et al. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 24:530.

advocate for remarriages.[16] Women' capability of getting remarried in pre-modern China could be viewed as a representation of high social status because the concept of "serving two men or two masters" highly defied the Confucian norms, representing that they were less restricted by the Confucian-influenced social expectations. Moreover, the law protecting remarriages also illustrated the government's recognition of female desires and their social contributions rather than binding them with rigid moral expectations. Remarriages ensured women could continue to contribute to their families and society, valuing their reproductive and economic roles. However, unlike elite families, marriages among commoners had less constraints, in which some wed their close relatives, while others married someone from a different ethnic group.[17] The normality of inter-ethnic marriages among commoners represented the respect and openness Tang people had to different cultures, and this further illustrates the cosmopolitan and diverse nature of the Tang dynasty.

Historians often praised Tang for providing females with the best opportunities to receive distinctive wealth and power.[18] Unlike Han Chinese affected by Confucius teachings that highly appreciated male leadership, nomadic people often choose competent adults to lead them regardless of their gender.[19] Therefore, this tradition provided wives and mothers with a voice while making crucial decisions. As an empire with nomadic ancestry and during a period highly influenced by Steppe culture,[20] the classical Han Chinese rites were relatively weak and less restrictive, which opened up space for female actions. Since females receive their social status based on the families they married into, the ones who married into the royal families would

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[16] Ren Haiyan, *Lun Tangdai Funu Shengyu de Yingxiang Yinsu* 论唐代妇女生育的影响因素 [The Factors Influencing Women's Fertility in the Tang Dynasty], *Shoudu Normal University Press*: 1 (2009): 29-32.
[17] Tan Chanxue, *Dunhuang Hunyin Wenhua* 敦煌婚姻文化 [Dunhuang Marriage Culture]. *Lanzhou: Gansu Renmin Publishing*, 1993, 85, 112-17, 122-25.
[18] Hinsch, Bret. p. 39.
[19] Hinsch, Bret. p. 45.
[20] Hinsch, Bret. p. 45.

enjoy and gain extensive wealth and privileges. However, not all families would be able to marry their daughters into the royal clans. Tang empresses often were raised in important aristocratic families. Their high birth allowed them to be born with prestige, and strengthen their position and influences in the palace as well as the political sphere.[21] These noble ladies received comprehensive education at a young age, and sometimes alongside their male relatives, which allowed them to read complicated documents and understand politically-used languages. Their capabilities in literacy enabled them to participate in politics and develop their own opinions. Moreover, filial piety enabled empress dowagers to assume a leading role in politics at critical moments when their sons were too young or when their husbands were too ill,[22] since filial piety forced children to obey their parents and the elder members within the family regardless of the situation. However, while women often receive their social status and recognition through their male kin, they could also occasionally earn a title for themselves in their own right as a reward for outstanding achievements. For example, a courageous woman received a title of rallying women and children to defend the walls of a city besieged by Khitan troops.[23] This example illustrates that the Tang Dynasty's relatively flexible and meritocratic approach, which recognized and rewarded female agency and capability, enabled women to rise to prominence through acts of bravery or exceptional contributions. By combining opportunities through marriage and personal achievements, women in the Tang Dynasty were offered multiple pathways to gain social recognition and political influence.

The Tang dynasty provided an atmosphere where women gained significant opportunities to achieve autonomy, respect, and recognition through marriage and governmental support.

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[21] Hinsch, Bret. p. 46.
[22] Yang Lien-sheng. “Female Rulers in Imperial China.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23 (1960): 47–61.
[23] Liu Xu. *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 [The Old History of Tang]*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975. 193:5145-46.

However, religion—particularly Buddhism—emerged as an important platform that empowered women and provided them with ways to influence their spiritual and social life. Unlike secular roles dominated by men, religious practices in the Tang Dynasty were often inclusive, granting women equal opportunities, rights, and respect.[24] This demonstration of equality of Buddhism allowed ambitious women to channel their talents into spiritual pursuits, offering them autonomy and creative space distinct from traditional gender constraints.

Buddhist teachings emphasized the potential for spiritual enlightenment for all individuals, regardless of gender, which resonated deeply with many women and encouraged their active involvement. The ideology that men and women were equal and capable of achieving the same level of knowledge awakened the desires of the female characters and provided them with confidence to pursue meaningful spiritual lives. Inspired by Buddhist teachings, women, regardless of class, started to devote themselves to Buddhism piously, and their approaches of presenting their dedication, included but not limited to donating money to help construct Buddhist grottoes and Buddhist temples with the hope that these actions could alleviate themselves and their families from eternal suffering.

[24] Hinsch, Bret. p. 71.

Male and Female Commoner Donors at Longmen Grottoes, Northern Qi dynasty

550-577 CE

Empress as Donor with Her Court at Longmen Grottoes, c. 522 C.E.

Religious activities were not limited to the elite. Common women also found opportunities to participate in and contribute to the Buddhist community. Inscriptions and records from grottoes like those at Dunhuang, Longmen, and Pujiang reveal how women from various social strata financed religious art and added their images to sacred spaces. These contributions reflected their deep devotion and the role of religion as a unifying force that transcended class and ethnicity. Angela F. Howard, in her analysis of Buddhist sculpture in Pujiang,[25] emphasized how common people received the equal opportunity to exercise and practice their religion, and they were allowed to carve their images near the Buddha or the Bodhisattva to ensure their devotion was seen. Documents from the Dunhuang caves also provide evidence of poor laywomen participating in religious life. Many of these women bore names with Buddhist connotations,[26] indicating their devotion and the significance of the faith in shaping their identities. Through acts of piety, even women of modest means could gain spiritual merit and societal recognition. Buddhism thus served as a platform where common women could

[25] Angela F. Howard, "Buddhist Sculp-ture of Pujiang, Sichuan: A Mirror of the Direct Link between Southwest China and India in the High Tang," *Archives of Asian Art*, 42 (1989): 53.
[26] Li Yuzhen, *Tangdai de Biqiuni* 唐代的比丘尼 [Nuns in Tang Dynasty], *Taiwan: National Tsing Hua University History Publishing*, 1988, 39.

assert their presence, contribute to religious culture, and elevate their social standing. Similar to common women, elite females also presented a great level of devotion to Buddhism. Approximately 10% of women's epitaphs from the Tang Dynasty identify the deceased as lay Buddhists, while an additional 5% commemorate women who became nuns.[27] These statistics highlight the strong connection between elite women and the Buddhist faith. For many aristocratic women, Buddhism provided a means of navigating their roles within a patriarchal society, offering spiritual solace and a sense of purpose beyond familial obligations. Elite women often devoted themselves to Buddhism for both personal and familial reasons. By sponsoring temples, commissioning religious art, or joining convents, these women could display their piety and elevate their status. Their actions not only reflected individual devotion but also served as a means of enhancing the prestige of their families. Religious engagement became a socially acceptable way for elite women to exert influence and gain respect, both within their households and in broader society. Regardless of social classes, showing piety not only could help women to increase their family reputation, but also could work as a way to help elevate their own social status. Women were able receive education, networking opportunities, and develop a supportive community within the Buddhist monasteries.[28] These established Buddhist monastic communities created state-funded and all-female networks of support from which they enacted new forms of virtue creation in society as chaste women a step removed from the sexual politics of the patriarchal family unit, and provide women a new place that help women to not be constrained by the sexual politics and the societal expectation on women based on Confucius ideologies. The spread of Buddhism and the rose of female status caused anxiety among men,

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[27] Yao Ping. "Women's Lives in Tang China," *Shanghai: Classic Publishing House*, 2020. 149: asserts that about 10 percent of epitaphs identify the female deceased as a lay Buddhist, and an additional 5 percent are for nuns.

[28] Balkwill, Stephanie. The Women Who Ruled China: Buddhism, Multiculturalism, and Governance in the Sixth Century. 1st ed. *University of California Press*, 2024, 80-81.

and some accused Buddhism for distracting "women to abandon domestic life and household crafts to engage in modes of leisure".[29] However, this accusation also showed that by engaging in Buddhism and religious practices, females would be able to establish more choices, and did not need to rely solely on their patriarchal family.

In addition to gaining power, females exercise Buddhism for numerous other reasons as well. Many of the women practiced this religion with hope to alleviate their family members from pain and suffering because according to the Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate chapter on *Guanyin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva*,[30] when people on the same boat as you were in danger, as long as a single person recited the name *Guanyin Bodhisattva*, all these people would be freed from the dangers. There were also numerous spells and charms promised to cure disease and induce fertility. Women deeply devoted to praying for their family's well-being and the prosperity of their offspring were highly respected by both their families and the community.

The Tang Dynasty's remarkable socio-economic, cultural, and religious conditions created a unique environment where women could achieve influence and authority unprecedented in Chinese history. This progressive atmosphere, marked by a cosmopolitan worldview, interactions with diverse cultures, and the egalitarian aspects of Buddhism, provided opportunities for women to participate in political, economic, and spiritual spheres. The evolving social structures, combined with the Tang Empire's wealth and openness, allowed female autonomy and recognition rarely seen in other eras.

The spread of Buddhism across all social classes gave royal families a powerful tool to legitimize their rule and consolidate authority. By aligning themselves with divine forces, rulers claimed moral and spiritual legitimacy, often portraying themselves as protectors of the faith or

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[29] Balkwill, 85.
[30] Kumārajīva, Tsugunari Kubo, and Akira Yuyama. *The lotus sutra*. Berkeley, *Calif: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research*, 2007.

even divine figures. Religion also unified society, fostering social cohesion through shared beliefs and values while justifying social hierarchies through doctrines like karma, encouraging acceptance of the status quo. Monumental religious projects, such as temples and cave complexes, served as symbols of royal piety, wealth, and divine favor while functioning as political propaganda.

Within this context, Wu Zetian's ascent was not merely an anomaly but the result of her exceptional ability to navigate and exploit these favorable conditions. Wu Zetian utilized her intelligence, political insight, and alliances to secure power despite entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional succession laws. Her rise to the throne as China's only female emperor was a testament to her ability to adapt to and manipulate a system that seemed inherently opposed to female rulership.

The next chapter will examine the critical political strategies and maneuvers that enabled Wu Zetian's unprecedented ascent to power. It will explore her early years at court, her calculated use of alliances, her ability to outmaneuver rivals, and the ways in which she cultivated legitimacy. By combining these tactics with the existing socio-economic and cultural conditions, Wu Zetian forged a path to the throne, demonstrating the power of strategic adaptability in a rigidly hierarchical society.

Chapter 1: Strategic Alliances with Buddhism

This research paper will examine the possible ways the Tang emperor Wu Zetian leveraged religious power to defy gender norms and legitimize her reign. During the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the Silk Roads reached their height, creating vast entrepreneurial opportunities through overland trade routes with the West and other parts of Eurasia. The Silk Road was an ancient network of trade routes that connected China with the Mediterranean, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, culture, and technology across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Spanning over 4,000 miles, it played a crucial role in developing civilizations, linking East and West through the trade of silk, spices, precious metals, textiles, and other valuable commodities. This booming commerce, especially in textiles, minerals, and spices, made the Tang capital the most cosmopolitan city in the world.[31] These thriving trade connections prepared Tang China for significant societal and cultural shifts. Due to extensive trade within the country, the society shifted to be more open and flexible. People's acceptance of the nomadic culture, where women had comparatively prominent political and social roles, also influenced the Tang people's perspectives on women's societal roles. As a result, Tang women were assertive and visible, riding horses, wearing male attire, and even participating in politics. Frequent trade between countries also brought new cultures. This period was marked by great religious diversity, but Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism were still the dominant belief systems compared to those relatively new and foreign religions due to their long-lasting legacy that forced the Chinese society to incorporate the core ideologies of these religions into the

[31] Liu Jin. "Wu Zhao: Ruler of Tang Dynasty China." *Education About Asia* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2007). Accessed November 4, 2024.

Chinese population, governance, and worldview. Under the promotion of the Tang government, diverse religions continued to spread, supporting people's spiritual lives and becoming a political tool for the rulers.

Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) and quickly spread throughout the continent. Unlike Nestorian Christians, Manicheans, and Muslims remained foreign and unfamiliar to the Han Chinese people because their theological concepts were difficult for the Chinese to integrate with their existing beliefs, Buddhism was able to adapt and syncretize with existing Chinese beliefs — particularly Daoism and Confucianism — to sinicize into a religion that would be understood and accepted readily by the Chinese population. Many imperial families supported the growth of this religion during the Southern and Northern dynasties (420 - 589 AD) by selecting it as the royal religion, which attracted many followers of the royal families and commoners to convert to Buddhism. The prosperity of this religion reached its peak during the Tang dynasty, with records indicating that there were 4600 state monasteries and approximately 40,000 smaller, private institutions by 845.[32]

However, the Tang royal families had not always respected Buddhism as the royal religion. The first emperor of Tang, Emperor Gaozu, declared Daoism as the royal and national religion and "Daoist priests would be in front of the buddhist monks and nuns"[33] in both rituals and social status, which subverted the centuries-old dominance of Buddhism in China, and marked Daoism as the most respected religion in the country. The emperor's words were recorded in *Da Tang Zhao Ling Ji*, a collection of edicts and decrees from the Tang dynasty.

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[32] Dongli Zhang, "China's Buddhist Community Gained Extraordinary Wealth and Influence: A Close Look at 845 CE," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 253.
[33] Minqiu Song, *Da Tang Zhao Ling Ji* 大唐诏令集 [The Collection of the Tang Edicts], *Taiwan: Huawen Shuju*, 1968. 113: 2339.

These covered all topics of actual state politics, from military affairs and economic questions to social affairs.

In order to understand Emperor Gaozu's decision, his background must be explained. Tang Gaozu Li Yuan, born in 566, was the founder of the Tang dynasty and its first emperor (618–626 CE). As a member of the powerful Li clan, Li Yuan served as a military commander under the Sui dynasty. In 617, amid widespread rebellion against the weakening Sui, he declared himself emperor, securing the capital Chang'an and establishing the Tang dynasty. However, as a military commander born and raised in cities around the borders with foreign mixed ancestry, Li Yuan desperately wanted to prove to the Han Chinese officials his capability to govern the country. He traced his patrilineal ancestor to the founder of Daoism, Li Er, or people commonly known him as Lao-Tzu. Li Yuan took advantage of their identical last names by linking one's family lineage back to the inventors of Daoism, who was a Han Chinese known for his ideologies and virtues, which provided himself with a rise in family background and could be effective in mitigating court officials' impression that a military general with limited literacy cannot be the best candidate for emperor. By establishing an official ancestry, Li Yuan would use this political strategic move to reduce the debate over royal bloodlines and recognize himself as a Han Chinese. This connection between Daoism and the Tang royal family would help him consolidate his rule over the vast population of the Han people who resided in the Central Plains of China and establish a similar identity to gain approval. Li Yuan's approach demonstrated how rulers could use religion to legitimize their authority. This likely inspired Wu Zetian to form a strategic alliance with Buddhism, as it offered a way to challenge Confucian norms that marginalized women. Just as Li Yuan used Daoism to bolster his legitimacy, Wu Zetian leveraged Buddhism to create a new ideological framework that justified her unprecedented rise

as China's only female emperor, presenting the strong relationship between religion and politics in imperial China.

Wu Zetian emerged during this time as a female who married two emperors and desired to become an emperor herself; she must conquer numerous challenges. Some significant disadvantages that she had included her female identity, the Li family's tight linkage with Daoism, the absence of legitimacy of ruling granted by heaven, and her desire to exclude herself from the Li family lineage to establish a new dynasty with the royal family's last name as Wu. Wu Zetian (625–705 CE) was the only woman to rule China as emperor in her name, establishing herself during the Tang Dynasty. Rising from the concubine of Emperor Taizong, she eventually took the throne as the sole ruler, founding the Zhou Dynasty (690–705 CE) within the Tang period. Known for her political acumen and often ruthless tactics, Wu Zetian consolidated power through strategic alliances and religious patronage. Her extensive support of Buddhism helped legitimize her reign, making her one of the most influential figures in Chinese history. She was a fascinating figure to historians not only because of her achievement of rising from a lower concubine who needed to rely on the emperor for necessities to an emperor herself who controlled the empire entirely for 15 years but also because of her ability to break through the Confucius gender norms and social expectations to challenge and reshape the conventions of imperial authority. Studying her relationship with Buddhism would help scholars to understand the association between gender and power in the Tang dynasty. This chapter will investigate the strategic alliance between Wu and Buddhism from the perspective that Buddhism represented Wu Zetian and Daoism represented the Li family. The conflict between Buddhism and Daoism could be attributed to the power struggle between these two political enemies.

Li Yuan's promotion of Daoism was partially in consideration of the practical governance concerns. The Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589 CE) had extensively patronized Buddhism, directing significant government resources toward constructing temples, supporting monastic communities, and promoting Buddhist teachings. While this patronage had bolstered the spiritual and cultural life of the period, it also placed substantial strain on state finances, diverting resources from other critical needs. Li Yuan decided to avoid repeating this economic burden by elevating Daoism, a religion that historically required less state funding and infrastructure support because Daoist temples and practices were generally less elaborate and less centralized than Buddhist monasteries. Daoism often emphasized individual cultivation and harmony with nature, which required fewer large-scale institutions or costly rituals. Even if there were ritual practices, Daoism was deeply integrated into local and familial traditions, such as ancestor worship and community rituals. These practices were often funded by local communities or individual families rather than the state. By prioritizing Daoism, Gaozu aimed to establish a more sustainable religious policy that aligned with his goals for economic stability and consolidation of power. Additionally, favoring Daoism allowed Emperor Gaozu to forge a unique identity for the Tang dynasty distinct from its predecessors. Daoism, rooted in Chinese philosophy and deeply intertwined with the country's cultural heritage, served as a unifying force for the Tang's predominantly Han population.

The strategic elevation of Daoism by Emperor Gaozu established a strong association between the Tang dynasty and Daoist tradition, tightly combining the Li Tang lineage within a Han Chinese cultural framework. However, for Wu Zetian, who intended to assert her authority as a ruler independent from the Li Tang patriarchal lineage, embracing Daoism would have only reinforced the connection to her predecessors, enhancing the power of the Li's family, and

limiting her ability to establish a distinct identity and dynasty. Therefore, Wu needed to seek for another religious choice to help her clear the potential blame of disobeying the decree of Daoist god Lao-Tzu by taking over the country while providing her with heavenly recognition of her legitimacy of ruling.

Wu Zetian chose to use religion rather than some other more forceful and violent but expeditious methods to indoctrinate the Tang people into accepting that she received "mandate of heaven" to rule the country not only because religious approach was a relatively gentle method, but also because of her personal experiences in her early years. When Wu Zetian was younger, there was a prophet who passed by her home and told her mother about the future of her children. This prophet named Yuan Tiangang predicted her brothers could only achieve the third-ranking officials, her sister would be a noble woman but not favorable to her husband. However, when Yuan saw the little Wu, he was so shocked and stated that "she had dragon's pupils and phoenix's neck, which signaled extremely honorable fate; if this kid was a woman, she would become the emperor".[34] As a renowned Tang dynasty astrologer and diviner, Yuan Tiangang predicted the rise of a woman who would rule as emperor during the Tang Dynasty. In a society heavily influenced by Confucian norms that emphasized male dominance in governance, such a prophecy made by a well-respected diviner could be interpreted as divine or cosmic approval of Wu Zetian's rule. According to Momoyo Hara, she believed that the so-called Mandate of Heaven was the foundation of Wu Zetian's power. Wu Zetian relied on the inspiration of this fortune-telling to be indomitable in her later struggles in life.[35] In Wu Zetian's mind, this childhood prophecy not only confirmed that she was destined to be more advanced than her male relatives, in whom the family had placed great expectations, but also provided her

[34] Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 [The New History of Tang], annotated by Song Qi, Dong Jiazun, et al. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 204:1060.
[35] Hara Momoyo. Wu Zetian. *Beijing: China Youyi Publishing*, 1985, 2:107.

with the confidence and ambition to pursue a political career—a path few women dared to envision or undertake. Many years later, another incident enhanced her belief that she was indeed the chosen one. There was a rumor going around in the Chang'an city during Taizong's reign that after the third succession of Tang, there would be a female lord, king Wu, who had the world under her control. The diviner Taizong consulted suggested that the female had already resided in the harem, which greatly alerted Taizong and demanded to kill all the suspicious people, but Wu Zetian managed to hide and escape from this incident,[36] causing herself to be more convinced that she was selected to receive the mandate of heaven. The fortune-telling stories reinforced her belief in her exceptional destiny and provided her with a sense of cosmic validation that enhanced her resolve to overcome societal and political barriers. By internalizing these predictions, Wu Zetian transformed them into a psychological foundation that drove her indomitable spirit in the face of challenges. Therefore, she decided to harness these religious rooted psychological effects on her people, aiming to create a deep conviction that she was the divinely chosen ruler.

However, the reliability of the accounts surrounding Wu Zetian's prophetic experiences and supernatural associations remains highly contested, as they may have functioned more as political propaganda than as factual records. Narratives such as Yuan Tiangang's prophecy and the rumor of a "female lord" during Taizong's reign, while compelling, require critical examination to assess their historical accuracy and potential for strategic manipulation. On one hand, these stories align with Wu Zetian's strategic use of religion to consolidate power. By framing herself as a divinely chosen ruler, she could appeal to the deeply spiritual and superstitious beliefs of the Tang people, presenting her rise to power as preordained by cosmic forces. The prophecy of Yuan Tiangang, for instance, not only validated her ambition but also

[36] Liu Xu. *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 [The Old History of Tang]*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 79: 2717-18.

provided a psychological foundation for her confidence and resilience. Similarly, the rumor of a "female lord" during Taizong's reign could have been strategically revived or even fabricated to reinforce her claim to the Mandate of Heaven. These narratives served as powerful tools to challenge Confucian norms that marginalized women and to justify her unprecedented rule. On the other hand, the reliability of these stories was questionable, as they may have been constructed or exaggerated by Wu Zetian or her supporters to legitimize her authority. The Tang court was known for its political intrigue, and it was plausible that these prophecies were disseminated as part of a broader propaganda campaign to sway public opinion. The fact that these stories often emerged at critical moments in Wu Zetian's rise to power suggested a deliberate effort to shape her image as a destined ruler. Additionally, the lack of independent historical records verifying these events also raised doubts about their authenticity.

Wu Zetian's deep reliance on religious authority drove her to seek a belief system that could support her ambitions, and her time as a nun at Ganye Temple following the death of her first husband, Emperor Taizong, greatly influenced her perception of Buddhism as a potential ally in consolidating her power. According to the *New History of Tang*, after the death of Taizong, Wu Zetian shaved her hair and became a nun at the Ganye Temple.[37] Historians often considered this period of her time as an enforced withdrawal from the central political stage, but this experience allowed her to form one of the most crucial political strategic alliances with the Buddhist monasteries. The tradition of the royal families in the Tang dynasty would force all retired concubines to shave their heads and become nuns after the death of their husbands to pray for his soul, and live their rest lives in confinement.[38] This form of forced religion onto the

[37] Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 [The New History of Tang], annotated by Song Qi, Dong Jiazun, et al. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 4: 81-105.
[38] Liu Jin. "Wu Zhao: Ruler of Tang Dynasty China." *Education About Asia* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2007). Accessed November 4, 2024.

imperial concubines emerged after the spread of Buddhism, in which temples provided female concubines with a choice that would prevent them from becoming the human sacrifice of their husbands because the Buddhist monastic community was able to create a state-funded and all-female networks of support from which they enacted new forms of virtue creation in society as chaste women a step removed from the sexual politics of the patriarchal family unit,[39] which provided females the opportunities and support to live their lives a step removed from the male family members.

Wu Zetian understood this special quality of Buddhism as a political opportunity for herself, so she illustrated a great respect towards Buddhism long before she was even close to the central power. Wu was born and raised in a highly religious Buddhist family[40] with her maternal relatives as the royal family members of the former Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), which promoted Mahayana Buddhism and supported the spread of the religion within the country. According to the record, she worshiped the relics, vowing to build 840,000 stupas,[41] and sponsored Buddhist activities at Famen Temple, the temple of the famous finger-bone relic, outside of Chang'an.[42] She also supported the translation of 186 scriptures and 1496 scrolls of sutras, which was three times more than the total translation during the Sui dynasty.[43] Therefore, Wu Zetian gained acceptance and close relationships with the powerful Buddhist monasteries due to her childhood familial connections and her personal monastery experience with those influential monks. In

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[39] Balkwill, Stephanie. The Women Who Ruled China: Buddhism, Multiculturalism, and Governance in the Sixth Century. 1st ed. *University of California Press,* 2024.
[40] Wu Wei, and Liu Zhenlin. "Mandated by Buddha: Buddhist Political Theory and the Legitimacy Construction of the Wu Zhou Regime." *Modern Communication*, no. 1 (2016): 38-39.
[41] Forte, Antonino, and Istituto Italiano di Cultura (Tokyo) Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale (Kyoto). 2005. Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century : Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S.6502 : Followed by an Annotated Translation. 2. ed. *Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale*, 2005. Ibid., 40. Asoka is said to have built 84,000 stupas.
[42] Karetzky, Patricia E. "Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty." *Tang Studies* 20/21 (2002–2003): 113–150.
[43] Zhang Qingqing. "Patronage System of the Rewriting Theory:Empress Wu Zhao's Manipulation of Translation of Buddhist Sutra" *Foreign Language and Literature 27*, no. 6 (2011): 125-28.

return, Empress Wu succeeded at the end of year 674 in revoking the edict issued by Taizong giving the Daoists precedence over the Buddhists at all religious ceremonies, which reversed the inferior status of Buddhism in the Tang religious world and restored its position of being a royal religion. Because of her family background and her experience of becoming a nun after the death of her ex-husband, she started to blend religion into every aspect of her life. As Empress to Emperor Gaozong, Wu Zetian wielded power equivalent to that of the Emperor, as she managed state affairs during his illness. With sorcerers and wizards among her close advisors, many regarded the couple as "co-emperors." [44] As part of the Buddhist monastery female supporting system, she extended the mourning period for women to allow the death of women to be equally respected and mourned by their family members as men,[45] in which initially a dead father would be mourned by his offspring for three years, while a dead mother would be mourned by her offspring for only one year if the father were still alive.[46] Scholars found that Empress Wu also attempted to raise the status of women by appointing women as lower-ranking officials to allow females to gain political power.[47] Empress Wu defied all traditions, planned to play a major role to lend legitimacy to her status as equal with the emperor, and she led a second procession of the imperial consorts and women related to the imperial clan to perform the Feng and Shan sacrifice.[48] Scholars believed that her action of leading the females participating in the sacrifice was viewed as a significant challenge to gender norms and Confucian ideals about governance

[44] Liu Xu. *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 [The Old History of Tang]*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 6: 115-134.
[45] Guisso, R. W. L., "Wu Tse-T'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China" (1978). *East Asian Studies Press*. 29.
[46] Peng, Niya, Tianyuan Yu, and Albert Mills. "Feminist Thinking in Late Seventh-Century China: A Critical Hermeneutics Analysis of the Case of Wu Zetian." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion an International Journal* 34, no. 1 (2015): 67–83.
[47] Zhang, Jie. "Feminist Thinking in Late Seventh-Century China." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 34, no. 1 (February 2015): 67-83.
[48] Twitchett, 259.

and divinity because these ancient rites were traditionally reserved for male emperors and symbolized the ruler's divine legitimacy to govern under Heaven's mandate.

Moreover, it was crucial to understand the ways in which Wu Zetian utilized religious power to educate her people on her ruling legitimacy. In July of Wu Zetian's first year on the throne, she released the Da Yun Sutra as a "propitious sign".[49] In the Da Yun Sutra, a prophecy was made to indicate that she was the reincarnation of the Maitreya Bodhisattva, in which she was prophesied by the Buddha to appear as a "female reincarnation"[50] to employ the expedient means to help spread wisdom and relieve people from universal suffering. The Maitreya Bodhisattva was also a carefully chosen character because the current Buddha Siddhartha prophesied the Maitreya Bodhisattva would be born in the future life and became a successor of his, which this prophecy corresponded to one of the predictions of the Da Yun Sutra that there would be a female leader born to lead thousands of countries in the future.[51] Moreover, the Maitreya bodhisattva was highly popular among the Buddhists in the Southern and Northern dynasties. The teachings of the Maitreya Bodhisattva indicated that when the Maitreya Bodhisattva reborn on earth as the Buddha "The lifespan of humans would expand to 48,000 years" (a woman would not get married until she was 500 years old), the earth was flat, the trees were clothed, there would be no plague or disease, the crops would harvest seven times a year, the winds and rains would be favorable and there would be an abundance of grains, and everyone in the world would be kind and revered the Buddha's teachings.[52] This fantastic world was what Wu Zetian hoped to bring to the people, and she also hoped that whenever the people worshiped

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[49] Forte, Antonino, and Istituto Italiano di Cultura (Tokyo) Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale (Kyoto). 2005. *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century : Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S.6502 : Followed by an Annotated Translation*. 2. ed. Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 140.
[50] Forte, Antonio, 130.
[51] Forte, Antonio, 241.
[52] Luhua Ye, trans. *Mile Shangsheng Xiasheng Jing* 弥勒上生下生经 [Maitreya Sutra]. *Taiwan: Fo Guang Publications*, 2013, 101.

the Maitreya Buddha they would also think of her and the blueprint of the future that she had shown them. After decades of development, the followers of the Maitreya Bodhisattva grew into a large community of believers, covering both the noble and commoners, therefore, by presenting herself as the reincarnation of the future Buddha, Wu Zetian was able to attract and gain support from different classes.[53] Most importantly, females appeared to have a high status among the Maitreya bodhisattva believers because in the *Old Tang History*, a female follower called Ningjing Liu gained a high social status from her pious virtues, which she was able to have eighty to ninety male servants, and was highly respected by the local officials during Gaozong's reign.[54] Because there were female leaders in the past, Maitreya Buddha's followers were more comfortable with the idea of being led by both male and females. The Da Yun Sutra became Empress Wu's most successful political tool in leading public opinions, and enabled her to smoothly transition from a Li-Tang emperor to a Wu-Zhou emperor in 690.[55]

The sutra itself also provided numerous sentences strategically convincing the public on Wu Zetian's legitimacy of ruling. The Da Yun sutra suggested that "The Great Cloud, which covers the ten directions extensively and pervades everything",[56] which demonstrated Wu's spirituality and divinity. By describing Wu's power as the great cloud that covers everything emphasized Wu's femininity and her gentle, soft, inclusive, but powerful nature. The sentence "spreads the shade of mercy over all sentient beings and sprinkles wisdom over the infinite" allowed people to attribute the country's prosperity and nature's vividness to the benevolence and wisdom of the great female emperor. The Da Yun Sutra continued "the person that I described has a last name of Wu", which validated Wu Zetian's maid name, and granted her the

[53] Wu, Wei, and Liu Zhenlin. Mandated by Buddha: Buddhist Political Theory and the Legitimacy Construction of the Wu Zhou Regime. *Modern Communication*, no. 1 (2016): 39.
[54] Liu Xu. *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 [The Old History of Tang]*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 35: 1293-1315.
[55] Wu, Wei, and Liu Zhenlin. "Mandated by Buddha: Buddhist Political Theory and the Legitimacy Construction of the Wu Zhou Regime." *Modern Communication*, no. 1 (2016): 38.
[56] Forte, Antonio, 184.

rights to gain her last name back and detach from her husband's lineage. Finally, the Sutra revealed the reason why this lady should be greatly appreciated because "originally was the emperor of all gods, this female will rule over ten thousand (all) countries", which clearly defined the ruler's female identity and her capability of ruling over large regions. After the publishing of the Da Yun Sutra, Wu Zetian ordered each state to construct a Da Yun Temple and supported over thousands of monks to learn about the sutra and teach this to the commoners to deliver the core idea and present a public image that Emperor Wu was ordered by the Buddha to rule the country, and her governance would bring prosperity to the people. Onishi believed that the Da Yun Sutra was utilized during the revolution as a symbol of the empress's ordination to decorate her revolution,[57] and that she had been preparing for this symbol of revolution and established her ambition to claim the throne during the reign of Ruizong.[58] Wu's promotion of Buddhism also provided women with a safe space for men and women to act equally with the judge from societal expectations[59] because the Buddhist temples often were regarded as the extraterrestrial realm and not strictly controlled by Confucius standards.

Political struggle against Gaozong was another perspective to understand Wu's support of Buddhism. Following his family tradition, Gaozong highly respected Daoist teachings, and his support of Daoism took more positive forms than the patronage of individual adepts, including the oppression of the development of other religions. For instance, he stopped all projects of translating Buddhist texts and manuscripts in the year 664,[60] which drew the displeasure of the well-respected monks and nuns, as well as their followers. Because of disappointment and fear of

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[57] Onishi, Makiko. "Wu Zetian and Buddhism." *Dunhuang Nianbao* 13 (March 2019): 33–50.
[58] Xu, Zongze. "The Compilation and Abandonment of the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra: An Analysis of Buddhist Trends During the Tang and Zhou Dynasties." *Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press* (2010), 266-278.
[59] Balkwill, Stephanie. The Women Who Ruled China: Buddhism, Multiculturalism, and Governance in the Sixth Century. 1st ed. *University of California Press*, 2024.
[60] Twitchett, 261.

losing status, many powerful Buddhist monasteries and their followers turned to Empress Wu and started to view her as patron and protector of Buddhism.[61] In return, Empress Wu succeeded at the end of year 674 in revoking the edict issued by Taizong giving the Daoists precedence over the Buddhists at all religious ceremonies, which reversed the inferior status of Buddhism in the Tang religious world, and restored its position of being a royal religion. This reversed decree ordered by Wu Zetian was an indication that she started to actively participate in court and gained indispensable support from a group of officials holding powerful positions. This strong support enabled her to alter the decision of the Emperor while the world and his ministers clearly knew what the emperor would favor. This reversal of the Gaozong's decree was a foundation of trust that Wu Zetian had established for the Buddhist political institution that had just turned into an ally, and it was also an implicit announcement to the outside world that all the forces that defected to her would be rewarded with a considerable amount of benefits. Later on, Wu was given even greater power and was able to foster her own supporting power and conduct state affairs because of the tradition that the imperial Chinese court would allow women to be included in political decision-making if conditions were met.[62] The most powerful woman, either the empress or the empress dowager, would act as regents if the emperor was too young, too ill, or experienced a sudden death with no posthumous edict. Wu Zetian benefited from this convention, and ruled China completely under her husband's name for five years when her husband was experiencing loss of sight and strokes.[63] Gaozong voluntarily gave Empress Wu the power to make decisions on reported issues out of his trust on Wu's political instruments and experiences in governance.[64] These five years of grace allowed her to accumulate political

[61] Twitchett, 262.
[62] Yang, Lien-sheng. "Female Rulers in Imperial China." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23 (1960): 47–61.
[63] Twitchett, 272.
[64] Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 [The New History of Tang], annotated by Song Qi, Dong Jiazun, et al. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1975, 4: 81-105.

supporters, form alliances, appoint her family members to important positions, and find things to further consolidate her legitimacy of ruling.

Because of the sudden loss of status and the political complex nature of Daoism, conflicts often arise between the Buddhists and Daoists regarding their competing roles as state religion and ideological rivals in Chinese society. To ease the situation, Empress Wu ordered that Buddhist monks or nuns and Daoist priests who dare to defame Buddhism or Daoism would be punished with the cane and ordered to return to secular life.[65] This decree could be viewed as Wu's action of protecting Buddhism from being targeted by the Daoist, and this prevention of argumentation was seen as an expression of the attitude that she was firm about her rulings and no second opinions would be allowed. Wu Zetian utilized the "Buddhism first" incident to test the public reaction to her ruling with her own name, showing power, and emphasizing the importance of her personal decree by prohibiting all types of argumentations or discussions. Another way of interpreting this decree was that the supporters for the Li's family clan — the Daoists — were power struggling with the Wu's supporters. Under these circumstances, Wu decided to declare peace for the current situation because she still needed time to secure her own power and recruit more capable personnel.

However, Wu could form alliances with the Buddhist monasteries out of her self-serving purposes, she could also break this alliance if Buddhism was no longer useful to her. Wu Zetian declared in 693 CE that Buddhism and Daosim should have the same importance and be respected equally by the court and the public.[66] This statement suggested that Buddhism would no longer be considered as the most important religion within China, and reflected a strategic

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[65] Dong Gao, comp. *Quan Tang Wen* 全唐文 [Complete Prose of the Tang]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju,* 1983, Book 1, 96: 990-991.
[66] Dong Gao, comp. *Quan Tang Wen* 全唐文 [Complete Prose of the Tang]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1983, Book 1, 96: 990-991.

shift in her approach to religion and governance, indicating that her reliance on Buddhism as a political tool was no longer as central to her rule. The reasons for her declaration included the consolidation of her power, the goal of neutralizing the religious rivalries, and the purpose of selecting her personal successor. By the time of 693 CE, Wu Zetian had been the emperor of Tang for around three years. After three years of rigorous work, she had firmly established her authority as emperor. Her earlier reliance on Buddhism, particularly the support of Buddhist clergy and symbols such as the Maitreya Buddha, had helped her legitimize her unprecedented rule as a woman in a Confucian society, but was no longer as crucial as before. Throughout her reign, the conflicts between Buddhism and Daoism had long been observed and intensified, and it was the responsibility of the emperor to mitigate these conflicts of the two largest religious institutions to prevent further destabilization within the country. Most importantly, Wu Zetian faced a significant dilemma over selecting her future heir. As a female emperor, her position was unique, and she had no sons who carried her own surname. Traditionally, the throne was passed to someone who shared the emperor's surname, ensuring proper succession, the continuation of the royal lineage, and the emperor's veneration through ancestral worship after death. However, Wu Zetian doubted whether her nephews, if chosen as successors, would honor her legacy and perform rituals for an aunt rather than a patriarchal figure.[67] This left her with a difficult choice: to secure her own posthumous respect by returning the throne to the Li family of the Tang dynasty, which highly respected Daoism ideologies, where she could be venerated as a empress, or risk the uncertainty of establishing a successor from her own Zhou lineage. Therefore, due to the combined reasons, Wu Zetian must establish a great relationship with both Buddhism and Daoism to ensure the stable and prosper future of the country.

[67] Sima Guang. *Zizhi Tongjian* 资治通鉴 [Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1956, 206: 8586.

Wu Zetian's reign stands as a remarkable chapter in Chinese history, defined by her exceptional ability to navigate the complexities of politics, religion, and gender norms to secure her unprecedented position as emperor. Her strategic alliance with Buddhism, rooted in her personal experiences and early connections to the religion, was instrumental in legitimizing her rule and countering Confucian patriarchal opposition. By positioning herself as the reincarnation of Maitreya and blending spiritual authority with political acumen, she effectively garnered widespread support from both elites and commoners, particularly women who found empowerment in her promotion of Buddhist ideologies. As her power solidified, Wu Zetian sought to balance the influence of Buddhism and Daoism, not only to mitigate religious rivalries but also to address the challenges of succession and ensure the stability of her Zhou dynasty. Her declaration of equal importance for Daoism and Buddhism in 693 CE reflected her ability to adapt her strategies to evolving political needs, demonstrating her unparalleled flexibility as a ruler. Wu Zetian’s legacy highlights the intersection of religion and politics in imperial China and underscores her unique ability to leverage ideological tools to maintain authority. Her reign challenged traditional norms and reshaped the perception of female leadership, leaving a lasting impact on Chinese history.

Chapter II: Criticism and Perceptions from Confucian Scholars

Introduction

Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in Chinese history, was a ruler whose legitimacy and authority were persistently challenged by Confucian scholars. As a woman in power, she defied the entrenched Confucian principles that dictated male dominance in governance, leading to relentless criticism that framed her as a ruthless usurper and an unnatural ruler. Confucian ideology that emphasized strict gender roles and patriarchal hierarchy left little room for female leadership. The scholars who trained through the traditional Chinese civil service examination system naturally accepted Confucianism as the fundamental building block of society and used these frameworks to condemn Wu Zetian for her political strategies and her existence as an emperor. While assessments of her reign evolved, the foundational hostility toward her rule remained constant and gradually intensified as later historians continued to critique her governance through a gendered lens.

One of the aspects of Wu Zetian's reign that provoked Confucian disapproval was her strategic alliance with Buddhism. Unlike Confucianism, which inherently opposed the idea of female rulership, Buddhism provided her with an ideological foundation to justify her legitimacy. Through Buddhist doctrines and symbolism, Wu Zetian cultivated an image of herself as a divinely chosen ruler, aligning with religious prophecies that depicted her as an enlightened and reincarnated sovereign. She actively promoted Buddhist institutions, commissioned religious texts, and supported the construction of temples to reinforce her position. However, while this alliance strengthened her rule in the eyes of Buddhist followers and the ordinary people, it only

intensified the hostility of Confucian scholars, who viewed her reliance on religion as a manipulation of spiritual authority to justify an otherwise illegitimate reign. Instead of recognizing her patronage as a legitimate political strategy, Confucian historians viewed her use of Buddhism as deceitful and self-serving, in which they intended to minimize her religious influence and strategic political efforts by neglecting most of her connections with Buddhism in the historical chronicles they constructed, further discrediting her rule, and directly condemned her claim of the throne as unorthodox.

This chapter will examine how Confucian scholars critiqued Wu Zetian's reign through the lens of gender and ideology by analyzing one highly renowned and contemporaneous critique of Wu Zetian, originating during the same era in which she reigned and three major historical chronicles. The three historical chronicles: *The Old History of Tang* (*Jiu Tang Shu,* 945 CE), *The New History of Tang* (*Xin Tang Shu*, 1060 CE), and *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (*Zizhi Tongjian*, 1084 CE) were written in different periods, reflecting the enduring and the evolving Confucian opposition to Wu Zetian's rule, portraying her as an aberration in the natural order. These works not only condemned her political contributions but also dismissed her attempts to legitimize her authority through religion because the text pointed to her unorthodox succession directly as a warning to the future emperors to keep females away from power. By comparing the portrayals in these three chronicles, this chapter argued that the criticism of Wu Zetian was deeply tied to Confucian anxieties about female rulership and the threat it posed to traditional hierarchies. The criticism also evolved as the impact of Confucianism enlarged, putting females in even more disadvantaged positions.

Through this analysis, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the historiographical treatment of Wu Zetian was not solely an evaluation of her policies or governance but a

reflection of the broader ideological struggle between Confucian legitimate succession and their perception towards females in power. The persistent criticism of her rule, particularly in relation to her female identity, highlights the extent to which Confucian scholars resisted any deviation from patriarchal political structures. Ultimately, the negative portrayal of Wu Zetian in historical narratives was as much an attack on her gender as it was on her political strategies, illustrating the profound challenges faced by female rulers in a system dominated by Confucian ideals.

Comtemparaties' Critique of Wu Zetian

Luo Binwang (c. 640–684) was a renowned poet of the early Tang Dynasty, celebrated for his eloquence and literary mastery. As a child prodigy, he gained fame for his refined poetic style, rich imagery, and philosophical depth, earning a place among the Four Great Poets of the Early Tang. While his early works focused on traditional themes, his writings later took on a sharp political edge, particularly in opposition to Wu Zetian.

While Luo Binwang initially thrived as a scholar-official, his relationship with the imperial court gradually became strained with the rise of Wu Zetian. As Wu Zetian consolidated power, first as empress and later as China's only female emperor, Luo Binwang's discontent with her rule deepened. His opposition was not merely political but could be attributed to a broader ideological struggle, in which, as a scholar trained in Confucian ideals, Luo found the prospect of female rulership fundamentally at odds with the established moral and social order. To Luo and many Confucian intellectuals of his time, Wu Zetian's ascension represented a dangerous deviation from the traditional patriarchal framework, threatening the empire's stability.

Therefore, Luo joined a rebellion against Wu to fight for the legitimate imperial succession in terms of Confucian ideology that he had always believed in. This culminated in his

most famous political work, *The Declaration of War Against Wu Zetian* (讨武曌檄文), written in 684, with the purpose of rallying opposition against Wu Zetian's rule by framing her as an illegitimate and tyrannical usurper.[68] This piece, a masterful combination of poetic rhetoric and political denunciation, criticized Wu Zetian as an illegitimate usurper who had manipulated the imperial system for personal gain. In his writing, he not only attacked her gender as a justification for her unfitness to rule but also framed her governance as tyrannical and morally corrupt. The edict exemplifies how Luo Binwang's literary skills evolved from pure poetic expression to a powerful weapon of political resistance.

The Declaration of War Against Wu Zetian could be viewed as a contemporary extreme critique on this female emperor, and could be used by historians to identify the potential falsified information and misconceptions spread within the country with the purpose of weakening Wu's political legitimacy. Luo stated that "the Wu who illegally held the court was not a gentle and kind person who came from a humble background" as the first sentence of the declaration set off extreme resentment towards Wu Zetian.[69] He specifically quoted "the Wu" could not only refer to the emperor Wu Zetian herself, but also the entire "Wu" lineage appointed into government officials by Wu Zetian. For example, Wu appointed her second cousin Wu Youning as assistant minister[70], and her nephew Wu Chengsi as the Left Prime Minister.[71] By Luo Bingwang's understanding, Wu misused her natal family members as powerful government officials, which could be considered as Wu embracing her Wu lineage by elevating the social status for her family members, and could be thought as a sign that she intended to further oppressed the Li-Tang royal family and their supporters by removing them from important positions and

[68] Luo Bingwang. *Luo Linhai Ji Jianzhu* 骆临海集笺注 [Collected Notes of Luo Linhai]. *Shanghai: Guji Publications*, 1985, 329-337.
[69] Luo Bingwang, 330.
[70] Liu Xu. 6:120.
[71] Liu Xu. 6:199.

replace them with Wu's favored people. Therefore, Luo Bingwang explicitly claimed Wu's illegal status of ruling the country despite the fact that she gained her social status and power of ruling through her marriages with the royal family. The paradox was that instead of considering Wu's background as the same as her husband's family, in which the idea marriage was a way to welcome females into their husband's lineage that was highly embedded in the Confucian tradition, Luo Bingwang pointed out Wu's humble natal family origin and utilized this as a reason to make her unjustified for ruling. Luo treated her as an outsider based on her birth status, thus disregarding the Confucian notion that a woman fully assimilated into her husband's lineage once married. This accusation against Wu Zetian revealed Luo Binwang's selective application of Confucian ideology, highlighting his deep-seated prejudice and deliberate efforts to undermine her legitimacy. In addition, this "humble background" could also implicitly critique Wu's female identity because in Confucian society, women were inherently positioned as subordinate within the social hierarchy, regardless of their family background. This double layered critique allowed Luo Binwang to frame Wu Zetian's rule as illegitimate in two different ways—her non-elite birth and the deeply entrenched belief that women should not govern. Thus, his attack on her background was not merely about social status but was also a gendered critique that intended to delegitimize her authority by reinforcing traditional patriarchal values.

Moreover, this edict also listed a set of accusations commonly used against Wu Zetian. For instance, Luo illustrated that Wu Zetian committed incest with Eemperor Gaozong because she was originally Gaozong's father emperor Taizong's concubine.[72] Luo regarded this socially unacceptable marriage as a total fault of Wu, and claimed that this vicious woman put an emperor into a disadvantageous and judgeable position in the society. In Chinese society, the emperor was supposed to be the ultimate authority, divinely mandated to rule with wisdom and

[72] Luo Bingwang, 332.

strength. If an emperor was portrayed as being seduced or manipulated by a woman, it suggested weakness and a failure to uphold Confucian ideals of righteous governance. This accusation implied that Wu Zetian had disrupted the proper functioning of the imperial court, corrupting the ruler and thus endangering the stability of the state. Her seductive action altered this emperor into a figure that could no longer be regarded as a righteous and virtuous ruler, which was highly condemned under Confucian standards. Luo viewed Wu's seductive and ruthless nature as a crime because Confucianism emphasized strict moral conduct, particularly for women, who were expected to embody chastity, modesty, and submission. A woman accused of seduction was seen as morally corrupt and manipulative, undermining the virtues expected of an empress or consort. By portraying Wu Zetian as a seductress, critics framed her as an immoral woman who gained power through improper means rather than through merit or destiny.

Wu Zetian was also blamed of being a liar, in which Luo referred to an incident recorded in the New History of Tang that Wu suffocated her daughter to death in order to use this as an excuse to target Empress Wang and ultimately cause Empress Wang to loss favor from Emperor Gaozong.[73] In a Confucian society, lying was considered morally unacceptable for anyone, but it was particularly condemned in women due to the strict gender roles and virtues imposed on them. Confucianism emphasized the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" (三从四德), which dictated that women should be obedient to their father, husband, and sons, and embody virtues such as chastity, propriety, and sincerity. Within this framework, truthfulness was linked to a woman's moral purity and her role in maintaining familial and social harmony. Females who lied would be perceived as deceitful and lacking in moral character, and could be viewed as a direct threat to political stability. However, while females were greatly targeted for committing lying and deception, male rulers' similar actions were often justified as political strategy. For example,

[73] Ouyang Xiu. 77: 3474.

Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty, was known in Chinese history for frequently utilizing deception to outmaneuver his rivals, including breaking treaties and making false promises. Liu Bang's clear acts of lying were later justified by Sima Qian in his *Record of Grand Historians*. For example, Liu Bang claimed "I never expected to enter Guanzhong first and defeat Qin, and now I am fortunate to meet you here,", in which his words were highly deceptive, as he had already taken control of the former Qin capital and secured a strong power base. However, Sima Qian did not explicitly condemn this as an immoral act. Instead, he framed this story into a praise of Liu Bang's strategic move to ensure his own survival against a much stronger rival.[74] Therefore, this perceived double standard in writing of history was used by Luo Bingwang to attack Wu Zetian, by portraying her to become a deceitful usurper rather than a knowledgeable and flexible political leader. Interestingly, the most surprising part of the edict was Luo Binwang's condemnation of Wu Zetian's plot to murder Emperor Gaozong. There was no historical evidence to support this claim, and in fact, Gaozong passed away as a result of chronic illnesses and strokes.[75]

Hence, although this edict was written during Wu Zetian's reign, it contained a significant amount of falsified information. Its purpose was not to provide an accurate portrayal of Wu Zetian but rather to justify Luo Binwang's rebellion against her. To achieve this, exaggeration was deliberately employed to capture public attention and minimize condemnation. By exaggerating Wu's "crimes" such as killing the "son of heaven", Luo sought to provoke a widespread public resentment towards Wu Zetian and undermine Wu's ruling legitimacy. Luo actively portrayed Wu as the villain to enable himself to position the Li-Tang family as the

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[74] Sima Qian, approximately 145 B.C.-approximately 86 B.C*. Records of the Grand Historian. The Annals of Xiang Yu.* Hong Kong : New York :Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong ; *Renditions-Columbia University Press*, 1993, 7:37-76.
[75] Sima Guang. *Zizhi Tongjian* 资治通鉴 [Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1956, 200: 8341.

legitimate ruler of the country and justify his rebellion against her. Wu Zetian's female identity provided Luo Binwang with another avenue of attack. Accusing her of killing her emperor husband not only vilified her but also provoked outrage among Confucian adherents. This portrayal cast her as a disruptive force that threatened the Confucian hierarchy of ruler and subject, father and son, reinforcing fears that her rule could destabilize the social order.

However, unlike Luo Bingwang's edicts, which were sharply critical of Wu Zetian, Confucian scholars from later dynasties adopted a more historical and reflective approach in their writings. As official historians compiled records and chronicles, their assessments of Wu Zetian evolved, often shaped by the political and ideological contexts of their time. These later accounts, while still influenced by Confucian ideals, presented a more nuanced and multifaceted view of her reign, departing significantly from the direct denunciations found in Luo Bingwang's writings.

Historical Chronicle Records

The *Old History of Tang* (旧唐书), compiled in 945 during the Later Jin dynasty, was one of the earliest official histories of the Tang Dynasty. Commissioned by the imperial court, it was primarily authored by Liu Xu and a team of scholars who drew from earlier records and official documents to construct a comprehensive historical account. The text became part of the official *Twenty-Four Histories* (二十四史), a collection of dynastic histories considered authoritative in Chinese historiography. This work was historically significant because it served as the first detailed official record of the Tang Dynasty, covering its rise, governance, and decline. It played a crucial role in shaping the historical perception of Tang rulers, including Wu Zetian. Written under the influence of Confucian ideals, the *Old History of Tang* presented a critical view of her

reign, reflecting the biases of later historians who disapproved of female rulers and political disruptions. Its accounts of Wu Zetian's rule, often unfavorable, became foundational in shaping her historical legacy, portraying her as a controversial and unconventional ruler.

The Old History of Tang recorded a scholarly debate on the topic of whether or not Wu Zetian's story should be included in the Emperor biographies, or Benji.[76] In Chinese historiography, *benji* (本纪) refers to the "Annals" or "Emperor Biographies" section of a dynastic history. These records acted as chronicles for the lives and reigns of emperors, serving as the official narrative of their rule and the central timeline of the dynasty. The *benji* was reserved for sovereign rulers who held the Mandate of Heaven, emphasizing their legitimacy and centrality to the state. Therefore, the argument of whether Wu Zetian should be included in the Benji was ultimately a dispute on Wu Zetian's ruling legitimacy. One group of scholars argued that historical accuracy should prevail, treating Wu Zetian as an emperor since she ruled independently under her own name and established her own dynasty. In contrast, scholars led by Shen Jiji contended that Wu Zetian would be more appropriately placed under the Empress biography. To support this view, Shen Jiji wrote an essay titled "Why Wu Zetian Should Not Be Included in the Biographies," where he expressed his firm stance and concern that, as a woman, Wu Zetian should not have been included in the emperor's annals.[77] In order to demonstrate his contempt and condemnation of Wu Zetian, the title of this article used her first name instead of any honorifics to refer to the former female emperor. Shen Jiji supported his argument with three main points. First, he argued that Wu's usurpation of the throne was not a legitimate succession, so that historians should eliminate her emperor honorific and only refer to her as empress

[76] Liu Xu. 149: 4034-4036.
[77] Dong Gao, comp. *Quan Tang Wen* 全唐文 [Complete Prose of the Tang]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983, Book 3, 476: 5564.

dowagers.[78] Shen argued that, as a woman, she violated the traditional male-dominated succession system, thus challenging long-respected Confucian ideologies. Shen viewed her rule as an overstep of authority, believing that she had taken the ruling power from her son, which he regarded as theft. Second, Shen argued that the *Benji* (or Emperor's annals) should be reserved only for emperors who had succeeded the throne with legitimate authority, so Wu Zetian should not be included in Benji but record all of her conduct under Emperor Zhongzong (her son 's reign to preserve the continuity of the Tang Dynasty. Although Wu Zetian ascended to power through her imperial marriage, Shen believed that her female identity inherently disqualified her from being recognized as an emperor. He further suggested that including a female ruler who defied fundamental Confucian principles and sparked extensive scholarly debate could undermine the integrity and reasonableness of historical chronicles. Shen feared that future generations might interpret this inclusion as an endorsement of Wu Zetian's actions, potentially leading them to emulate her behavior. Third, as a Confucian scholar, Shen found Wu Zetian's political strategies highly unappreciative, so he preferred to place Wu's story chronologically under Empress Wang to downgrade her position as an empress of renewal. One of the most frequent criticisms of Wu Zetian was her harsh treatment of political rivals. She took extreme measures to secure her rule, even removing key officials and, at times, family members who threatened her authority.[79] In some instances, this included the execution of her children and those who supported them. For Confucian scholars, who held family bonds—particularly filial piety and loyalty—sacred, these actions were deeply shocking. The idea that a mother could order the death of her offspring was

[78] Han, Hongtao. Wu Zetian Rujigongan Yu “Zhengtong” Lun 武则天入纪公案与‘正统’论 [The Issue of Including Wu Zetian into Benji and the Argument on Succession Legitimacy]. *Wen Shi Zhe*, no. 6 (2014): 68.
[79] Liu Xu. 184: 4727-4732.

seen as an unforgivable breach of the moral order and an abuse of power surrounding family and authority.

While Jiji was persuasive to many of his fellow Confucian scholars, his argument ultimately did not hold significant influence in the long term. By the end of the Li-Tang dynasty, Wu Zetian's rule had left a lasting legacy, and the cultural openness of the Tang Dynasty contributed to her eventual acceptance as a legitimate ruler. When the *Old History of Tang* was compiled during the Jin Dynasty, Wu Zetian was officially included in the imperial annals under the title "The Sixth Imperial Annal of Empress Zetian." This marked the *Old History of Tang* as the first official history to recognize her as an independent ruler. However, the text failed to refer to her chapter as the "Zetian Annal," as was customary for other emperors. Instead, it used the term "Empress," a title that acknowledged her status as the wife of Emperor Gaozong. This wording diminished her position as a sovereign ruler, suggesting that her authority was derived more from her marriage and connection to the Li-Tang imperial family than from her own independent rule. Influenced by Confucian ideologies, historians of the time often held a male-centric view of history. The inclusion of the word "Empress" likely served as a subtle reminder of Wu's gender, highlighting her defiance of traditional gender roles and reinforcing the notion that her reign was an anomaly in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the use of "Empress" may have been an attempt by the author and officials to frame Wu as part of the Tang Dynasty's lineage rather than as a ruler who founded her dynasty. These decisions reflected a nuanced stance in the *Old History of Tang*, which both "accepted" Wu Zetian as a ruler in a formal sense while simultaneously "banishing" "her complete legitimacy as an independent sovereign.[80]

[80] Han, Hongtao. Wu Zetian Rujigongan Yu “Zhengtong” Lun 武则天入纪公案与‘正统’论 [The Issue of Including Wu Zetian into Benji and the Argument on Succession Legitimacy]. *Wen Shi Zhe*, no. 6 (2014): 67-79.

Later on, as the influence of Steppe culture gradually replaced by traditional and conservative Confucianism, and the influence of Wu Zetian declined after the fall of the Tang dynasty, historians started to place new comments and changed their perspectives on Wu Zetian. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Ouyang Xiu and other historians undertook a significant revision of Tang Dynasty history, reshaping Wu Zetian's portrayal and reflecting changing perspectives on her reign. This revision was part of a broader effort to reinterpret the past through the lens of Song-era values, particularly those influenced by Neo-Confucian thought, which emphasized hierarchical social structures and traditional gender roles. Wu Zetian, as the only female emperor in Chinese history, posed a challenge to these ideals, and the *New History of Tang* (新唐书) sought to navigate this complexity by adopting a dual approach to recording her legacy. On the one hand, the *New History of Tang* followed the precedent set by the *Old History of Tang*, recognizing Wu Zetian within the official annals of emperors.[81] She was positioned in the chronological order of rulers, placed after Emperor Gaozong and before Emperor Zhongzong, gave her biography a sarcastic title: *Empress Zetian-Conforming to the Way of Sages*, and recorded her reign under her own name. This formal acknowledgment of her rule suggested a reluctant but undeniable recognition of her historical role as an emperor who independently governed the empire. However, on the other hand, the *New History of Tang* also introduced a separate biography for Wu Zetian, placing it within the section dedicated to empresses, specifically under Empress Wang, Gaozong's first wife.[82] By including Wu Zetian in the category of empresses, the compilers subtly reinforced the idea that, despite her time on the throne, she was fundamentally tied to her identity as Emperor Gaozong's consort rather than a legitimate sovereign in her own name. This dual placement indicated an attempt to reconcile her

[81] Ouyang Xiu. 4: 81-105.
[82] Ouyang Xiu. 76: 3474-3484.

unprecedented rule with Confucian traditions that rejected the notion of female rulership. While the text acknowledged her reign as a historical reality, it simultaneously framed to redefine her within the constraints of conventional gender roles, reflecting the ideological tensions surrounding her legacy in later dynastic histories. Clearly influenced by Shen Jiji's historical perspective, the *New History of Tang* wavered in its classification of Wu Zetian. While it partially diminished her status as an emperor, it did not go as far as Shen Jiji's suggestion of placing her beneath Emperor Xuanzong's deposed Empress Wang.[83] Furthermore, the *New History of Tang* took a harshly critical stance against Wu Zetian, portraying her in a deeply negative light. It denounced her as "more evil than Baosi,"[84] accused her of "mourning the royal family by slaying its lineage,"[85] "usurping the government," and "theft of state power."[86] By labeling her "more evil than Baosi," a reference to the infamous concubine who contributed to the downfall of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BCE). Baosi was traditionally blamed for causing King You of Zhou to foolishly abandon governance in favor of pleasing her, causing the society to fall into constant warfare. By comparing Wu Zetian to Baosi, the *New History of Tang* attempted to associate her reign with chaos, disorder, and the betrayal of dynastic integrity. This comparison suggested that Wu Zetian's presence in politics disrupted the natural order and contributed to instability, reinforcing the Confucian view that women in power posed a fundamental threat to societal harmony. The accusation that Wu Zetian "mourned the royal family by slaying its lineage" further strengthened this negative portrayal by drawing attention to her ruthless elimination of political threats, particularly members of the Tang imperial family. Throughout her rule, Wu Zetian took decisive action against rivals, including the execution or

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[83] Han, Hongtao. Wu Zetian Rujigongan Yu "Zhengtong" Lun "武则天入纪公案与'正统'论." *Wen Shi Zhe*, no. 6 (2014): 69.
[84] Ouyang Xiu. 3: 79.
[85] Ouyang Xiu. 76: 3468
[86] Ouyang Xiu. 4: 113.

exile of princes and officials who posed challenges to her authority.[87] While these measures were largely strategic moves to secure her position, the historians framed them as acts of cruelty that violated the Confucian ideals of familial duty and dynastic loyalty. Filial piety and reverence for one's ancestors were central tenets of Confucian thought, and the idea that a ruler could purge her own imperial lineage was seen as a direct affront to these values. This accusation was meant to paint Wu Zetian not only as an illegitimate ruler but as a figure whose reign would impose great threat to the thousand years long Chinese tradition of male dominance and perhaps challenge the image of exemplary women Confucianism intended to publicize since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).[88] Additionally, the charges of "usurping the government" and "theft of state power" reflected the deeply ingrained belief that rulership was a male prerogative. According to Confucian tradition, sovereignty was passed down through the male lineage, and any deviation from this order was perceived as a dangerous breach of political and moral stability. Even though Wu Zetian successfully governed China, expanded its influence, and maintained stability, the *New History of Tang* framed her reign as illegitimate simply because she was a woman who seized power rather than ruling as a regent for a male heir, and return the power back to the male kin once a regent was no longer needed. The accusation of theft implied that she had taken something that did not rightfully belong to her, further defaming her character and discrediting her authority. By emphasizing these criticisms, the compilers of the *New History of Tang* seeked to delegitimize Wu Zetian's rule and reinforce the Confucian belief that women should stay away from the center of power. This historical framing was not just an assessment of her reign but also a reflection of broader efforts to reinforce patriarchal norms and prevent any future challenges to the male-dominated imperial system.

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[87] Liu Xu. 6: 115-134.
[88] Liu Xiang, *Lienu Zhuan* 列女传 Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang, trans. and ed. Anne Behnke Kinney. *New York: Columbia University Press,* 2014, 47.

Unlike the two traditional historical chronicles presented above, the book Zizhi Tongjian was commissioned by Emperor Shenzong of Song with the intention to guide the rulers on governance. The *Zizhi Tongjian* (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*) was one of the most influential historical works in Chinese historiography, compiled under the direction of Sima Guang during the Northern Song Dynasty. Completed in 1084, this massive chronicle spans from the Warring States period (403 BCE) to the end of the Five Dynasties period (959 CE), offering a continuous and detailed account of over 1,300 years of Chinese history.

In contrast to *The New History of Tang*, Sima Guang's attitude towards Wu Zetian was relatively neutral, as he neither completely denied her historical contributions nor fully legitimized her rule. This balanced approach reflected the complex attitude of ancient historians toward female rulership—while they acknowledged Wu Zetian's intelligence, administrative skills, and political achievements, they struggled to reconcile these qualities with the deeply ingrained Confucian belief in male supremacy. On one hand, Sima Guang recognized that Wu Zetian was an effective ruler who was able to see clearly and deal decisively with incompetent officials, demonstrating outstanding political skills.[89] Unlike many other historical records that outright condemned her reign, the *Zizhi Tongjian* presented a more measured account, noting her strategic governance and ability to consolidate power. However, Sima Guang also emphasized the controversial aspects of her rule, such as that she became suspicious of the people from the imperial lineage and governmental officials because of Xu Jingye's rebellion, and opened the door to denunciation, leading to a series of wrongful imprisonment and social unrest.[90] Sima Guan's account conveyed that although Wu Zetian's rule was effective, it came at the cost of disrupting the established order. On the other hand, Sima Guang still could not fully embrace this

[89] Sima Guang. *Zizhi Tongjian* 资治通鉴 [Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance]. *Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju*, 1956. 205: 5424.
[90] Sima Guang, 204: 5390.

unique female ruler's ruling legitimacy. He included Wu Zetian's reign within the *Tang Biographies* rather than creating a separate *Zhou Biography*, despite the fact that Wu Zetian had formally established her own dynasty under the name Zhou. This decision was significant, as it reinforced the idea that her rule was merely an interruption in the Tang Dynasty rather than the foundation of a legitimate, independent dynasty. By integrating her reign into the historical framework of the Tang, Sima Guang effectively diminished the influence of the Wu-Zhou regime and upheld the continuity of the Tang imperial lineage. This approach reflected a broader Confucian effort to uphold dynastic continuity and orthodoxy, stressing that the legitimate rulers of China were the male heirs of the Li family, not Wu Zetian or any females in power. By incorporating her reign into the *Tang Biographies* rather than establishing a separate Zhou biography, Sima Guang framed her rule as an exceptional event within the broader narrative of the Tang Dynasty, rather than recognizing it as a legitimate and lasting political period. This historiographical decision effectively portrayed Wu Zetian's reign as an anomaly—an interruption to the natural order—rather than a genuine challenge to the dynastic system. It also suggested a conscious effort to influence how future generations would view her legacy, ensuring that her rule would be seen not as the establishment of a legitimate dynasty, but as a temporary disruption in the larger, unbroken lineage of the Tang.

However, one of Sima Guang's colleagues strongly opposed Sima Guang's approach on Wu Zetian to an extend that he left the group of historians and composed a Tang history himself named *Tang Jian*, which he placed Wu Zetian's reign under the reign title of Zhongzong, effectively banishing her from historical acknowledgment.[91] Fan Zuyu completely denounced Wu Zetian's rule, deeming her actions a violation of fundamental Confucian principles,

[91] Fan Zuyu. *Tang Jian* 唐鉴 [The Reflection of the Tang Dynasty]. *Shaanxi; Sanqin Publisher*, 2003. 4: 100-107.

particularly those related to the family hierarchy, such as the father-to-son relationship. Therefore, he intended to place all her rule and efforts under her son's name, and would only refer to her as Empress Dowager throughout the writing. His work criticized Wu for failing to obey both her husband and her son, figures who held central roles in Confucian family values. As a woman who defied the traditional male authority within her family, Wu was regarded as deviant and unacceptable. Fan Zuyu believed that acknowledging her rule and positioning her biography in the chronological order with other emperors could potentially encourage other women to seek power within the imperial family, which, he argued, would undermine the stability of the Confucian family system. To safeguard this system, he insisted that Wu's reign be condemned. His approach sought to preserve the continuity of the Tang dynasty, obscuring the fact that a female ruler had once held power and that the country had been "stolen" by someone outside the Li family. The contrasting approaches of Sima Guang and Fan Zuyu reveal the differing perspectives among Confucian scholars of the time. While Fan adhered strictly to Confucian orthodoxy, Sima Guang aimed to balance historical accuracy with political stability. Yet, despite their differences, neither historian fully affirmed or respected Wu Zetian's reign.

Conclusion

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) was a crucial and unique era in Chinese history, marked by unprecedented economic prosperity, cultural exchange, and political innovation. Within this dynamic period, the status and roles of women experienced significant transformation. They reached its peak in the extraordinary reign of Wu Zetian (624–705 CE), the only woman who ruled China as emperor. Wu Zetian's claim to power was not merely a historical abnormality but a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors that created a unique environment for female empowerment. Her reign challenged traditional Confucian gender norms and provided an example of achieving female leadership under strict patriarchal constraints in imperial China. This thesis has explored the multifaceted conditions that enabled Wu Zetian's rise, focusing on the Tang Dynasty's cosmopolitan atmosphere, the influence of steppe culture, the role of Buddhism, and the evolving social structures that allowed women to exert influence in ways previously unimaginable. By examining these factors, this study has presented the interaction of gender, religion, and politics in Tang China, offering a deeper understanding of how Wu Zetian navigated these forces to secure her ruling position.

The Tang Dynasty: The Cosmopolitan Atmosphere

The Tang Dynasty's openness and acceptance of foreign cultures and ideologies, facilitated by the transmission of the Silk Road, created a fertile ground for social and cultural development. The dynasty's capital, Chang'an, was a cosmopolitan hub where people with diverse cultural backgrounds, religions, and traditions intersected. This cultural exchange,

particularly with the nomadic tribes of Central Asia, introduced different perspectives on gender roles that contrasted sharply with the patriarchal norms of Confucianism. Steppe women, known for their independence, leadership, and active participation in governance, provided a model of female empowerment that influenced Tang society. The nomadic ancestry of the Tang ruling class contributed significantly to the acceptance of the nomadic traditions, which allowed women to assume more prominent roles in public and private spheres, challenging the rigid gender hierarchies introduced in Confucianism by the Han Chinese.

In addition, the prosperity of the Tang economy brought by the Silk Road trading networks also contributed to the enhancement of female status. Economic prosperity provided women with greater access to education, religious freedom, and cultural engagement, enabling them to participate more actively in society and make their own choices without tight control of their families. While still highly influenced by Confucian principles, the Tang legal code offered women rights and freedoms in navigating familial duties, particularly in matters of marriage and divorce. These legal protections, combined with the dynasty's emphasis on population growth, encouraged remarriages and allowed women to contribute more significantly to their families and society.

Religion as Female Empowerment

Religion, notably Buddhism, emerged as a powerful force for female empowerment during the Tang Dynasty, attributed to the hundreds of years of historical influence. Unlike Confucianism, which emphasized strict gender roles and male dominance, Buddhism offered women opportunities for spiritual and social autonomy. Buddhist teachings, which emphasized the equal potential for enlightenment and alleviation of suffering regardless of gender or species,

resonated and awakened many women and encouraged their active involvement in religious life. Temples and monasteries became spaces where women of all social classes could learn about Buddhist teachings, seek peace of mind, and form support groups against the oppressive patriarchal society. Together, these women contributed to the diversified Tang religious culture and elevated their social standing by introducing an independent assessment of female virtue that significantly differed from the Confucian expectations but was another path to help females earn social acceptance. Elite women, in particular, used their patronage and piety of Buddhism to gain influence and respect through commissioning religious art, sponsoring temples, and even becoming a part of the Buddhist monastery.

Buddhism maintained a strong following among the aristocracy and commoners while exerting a profound influence on the royal family. Emperor Wu Zetian strategically employed Buddhism as an approach to legitimize her rule. By presenting herself as the reincarnation of the Maitreya Bodhisattva—a figure associated with numerous female religious leaders—she framed her authority as both a religious and political authority. This alignment with Buddhist prophecies strengthened her claim to the throne and secured widespread support from elites and the general populace. Moreover, her patronage of Buddhism reinforced her legitimacy, created pathways for women to challenge traditional gender norms, and gradually changed the social perceptions of women in power. Through her promotion of Buddhist institutions and her advocacy for the elevated status of women, Wu Zetian demonstrated the potential of religion as a strategic tool for both political consolidation and social transformation.

Moreover, Wu Zetian presented exceptional political acumen and the ability to navigate the complexities of Tang politics, in addition to her strategic alliance with Buddhism, which ensured she could climb to the heights of power. From her early years as a lower-ranked

concubine to her eventual succession to the position of emperor, Wu Zetian utilized a range of strategies to consolidate her power, including forming strategic alliances, purging rivals, and leveraging religious authority. Her ability to adapt to changing political circumstances and exploit the opportunities presented by the Tang Dynasty's cosmopolitan environment allowed her to overcome the entrenched patriarchal norms that could potentially threaten her influences and political achievements. By asserting her authority as a female ruler, Wu Zetian demonstrated that women could govern effectively and make enduring contributions to the state. Her reign directly challenged the Confucian ideal of male dominance, paving the way for new possibilities in female leadership, even if such opportunities remained limited in subsequent dynasties. Wu Zetian's legacy as a ruler who defied gender norms and redefined perceptions of female authority continues to resonate in Chinese history, serving as a powerful testament to the potential for women to achieve greatness despite societal constraints.

Changing of Historical Criticism

Despite her achievements, Wu Zetian's reign was met with persistent criticism from Confucian scholars, who viewed her rule as a dangerous deviation from the natural order. Confucian ideology, which emphasized strict gender roles and patriarchal hierarchy, left little room for female leadership, and Wu Zetian's access to power was seen as a threat to the stability of the imperial system. Therefore, many Confucian historians, such as Luo Binwang and Shen Jiji, condemned Wu Zetian as an illegitimate usurper, framing her reign as a period of moral corruption and political instability. These critiques were deeply rooted in gendered anxieties about female rulership and reflected the broader ideological struggle between Confucian ideals and the realities of Wu Zetian's rule.

The historiographical treatment of Wu Zetian revealed a complicated attitude towards Wu and her ruling and the extent to which Confucian scholars intended to delegitimize her authority and reinforce patriarchal norms. While later historians, such as Sima Guang, adopted a more nuanced approach to her reign, many still struggled to reconcile her achievements with the deeply ingrained belief in male supremacy. By framing her rule as an anomaly within the broader narrative of the Tang Dynasty or just embedding her rule as part of the Tang dynasty to ensure dynastic continuity, these historians sought to minimize the impact of her reign and prevent future challenges to the male-dominated imperial system. The negative portrayal of Wu Zetian in historical narratives was as much an attack on her gender as it was on her political strategies, highlighting the profound challenges female rulers face in a system dominated by Confucian ideals.

However, even though the challenges imposed on Wu Zetian were significant and inevitable, her reign still stood as a remarkable chapter in Chinese history, defined by her ability to navigate the complexities of politics, religion, and gender norms to secure her unprecedented position as emperor. Her strategic alliance with Buddhism, rooted in her personal experiences and early connections to the religion, legitimized her rule and countered Confucian patriarchal opposition. By positioning herself as the reincarnation of Maitreya and blending spiritual authority with political acumen, she effectively garnered widespread support from elites and commoners, particularly women who found empowerment in her promotion of Buddhist ideologies.

Wu Zetian's legacy extended beyond her reign as emperor. Her ability to challenge traditional norms and reshape the perception of female leadership left a lasting impact on Chinese history. While her rule was met with resistance and criticism, it also opened up new

possibilities for women to exert influence in a society that had long marginalized them. Wu Zetian's reign served as a powerful reminder of the potential for women to achieve greatness in the face of societal constraints and highlights the importance of recognizing and celebrating the contributions of female leaders in history.

In conclusion, the Tang Dynasty's distinctive socio-economic, cultural, and religious landscape fostered an environment where women, particularly Wu Zetian, could attain unprecedented influence and authority. Her rise to power was not merely an anomaly but proof of her exceptional ability to navigate and exploit these favorable conditions. Wu Zetian's reign challenged entrenched gender norms imposed by Confucianism, redefined perceptions of female leadership, and left a lasting legacy that continued to inspire and provoke scholarly debate. By analyzing the factors that facilitated her ascent, this thesis intended to present the intricate interplay of gender, religion, and politics in imperial Tang China, offering a deeper understanding of how one woman defied societal constraints to become one of the most influential figures in Chinese history.

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