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## The Rhetoric of Transgression: Reconstructing Female Authority through Wu Zetian's Legacy

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THE RHETORIC OF TRANSGRESSION: RECONSTRUCTING FEMALE  
AUTHORITY THROUGH WU ZETIAN'S LEGACY

by

RACHAEL ROTHSTEIN-SAFRA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in History  
in the College of Arts & Humanities  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines representations of Wu Zetian in the biographical tradition of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, as well as within the subsequent vernacular literature of the Ming and Qing periods. I analyze the traditional use and construction of female stereotypes (and female-oriented flaws and vices) in the rhetoric of official histories and fictional narratives and their application to representations of Wu Zetian. I argue that authors, anxious of discord engendered and caused by women occupying positions of political authority, sought to delegitimize Wu Zetian's reign and subsequently cultivated a "rhetoric of female transgression." I further argue that the image of Wu Zetian has become a cultural signifier of the dangers of female rule. Thus, my research broadly has two foci: (1) it traces the history of delegitimizing female rulership by examining the creation and codification of topoi, and (2) by focusing on images of Wu Zetian, this study examines how these topoi influence contemporary cultural and cross-cultural values, memory, and political rhetoric.

This study is divided into three chapters. Chapter one lays out the history of Wu Zetian in the Tang dynasty and an assessment of women in Tang society, which will inform the analysis of literary portrayals of Wu Zetian in chapters two and three. The second chapter examines the earliest representations of Wu Zetian. Thematically, the second chapter explores the biographical interpretation of female authority and the discursive tradition of negotiating historic fact with formulaic and reoccurring tropes. The third chapter looks at representations of Wu Zetian in the literature of the Ming and Qing periods, in which narratives are encoded with the topoi previously established in earlier historical accounts. Ultimately, although this study examines the

persistence of rhetorical topoi regarding Wu Zetian, it also addresses the contested and fluid nature of her representations in non-traditional media.

## **DEDICATION**

*This project is lovingly dedicated to my Mom, who raised me on her own and throughout my life taught me the value of hard work, effort, and persistence. I have only come this far due to your love and support.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b><i>JTS</i></b>	<i>Jiu tang shu</i>
<b><i>XTS</i></b>	<i>Xin tang shu</i>
<b><i>ZZTJ</i></b>	<i>Zizhi tongjian</i>
<b><i>ZZTG</i></b>	<i>Zizhi tongjian gangmu</i>

## DYNASTIC CHRONOLOGY

<b>581-618 CE</b>	Sui Dynasty	Capital: Chang'an
<b>618-907 CE</b>	Tang Dynasty	Capital: Chang'an
	Zhou Dynasty (690-705)	Capital: Luoyang
<b>907-960 CE</b>	Five Dynasties Period	
<b>960-1279</b>	Song Dynasty	
	Northern Song (960-1127)	Capital: Kaifeng
	Southern Song (1127-1279)	Capital: Hangzhou
<b>1279-1368</b>	Yuan Dynasty	Capital: Beijing
<b>1368-1644</b>	Ming Dynasty	Capitals: Nanjing and Beijing
<b>1644-1912</b>	Qing Dynasty	Capital: Beijing

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Portrait of Empress Wu.<sup>1</sup>

In 653 CE, the thirty-fifth year of China's Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618-907), a peasant woman named Chen Shuozhen gathered over ten thousand men and led a peasant uprising against the government.<sup>2</sup> Overtaking the Mu district, Chen styled herself as Emperor Wenjia. In the same year, her revolt was defeated and she was executed.<sup>3</sup> Chen's short-lived attempt to become emperor serves as an appropriate prelude to the events that would transpire thirty-seven

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<sup>1</sup> The image is from an anonymously published book, entitled *An 18<sup>th</sup> century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes*.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper dates should be taken as CE, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 57.

years later. On the eve of 690, the chapter of the Tang dynasty was briefly closed as a sixty-six year old woman ascended to the throne and declared the establishment of the Zhou dynasty 周朝 (690-705). One of her many designations was Wu Zetian.<sup>4</sup> Her rule was unprecedented and a violation of the prevailing moral and political boundaries espoused by Confucian thinkers, which condemned women involved in the political realm.<sup>5</sup> These boundaries found written codification within an array of literary works that prescribed a gendered hierarchy that directly correlated with proper governance and dynastic success. The *Book of Songs (Shijing)*, a compilation of poems ranging from the seventh to eleventh centuries and asserted within tradition to have been compiled by Confucius (551 BC- 479 BC), includes a warning for the significance of proper conventions for genders: “A clever husband builds a city, but a clever wife tears it down.... Disorder does not come down from Heaven, rather it is the spawn of these women...Thus no woman serves the public, but they stay with their weaving and their loom.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite these contentions of Confucian thought, the Tang dynasty bore witness to women such as Chen and Wu. Both of these women envisioned the possibility of holding the role and title of emperor

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<sup>4</sup> I use Wu Zetian 武则天, as trends from 1950 until present rely on this designation. Wu Zetian is the primary designation employed by Chinese scholars. She is also known as Wu Zhao 武曌 and Empress Wu 武后. My choice is foremost to reflect her common designation. For a discussion of Wu Zetian's names see N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York, NY: Pearson, 2008) 1-10. Rothschild's biography on Wu Zetian chronologically examines her life, while also tracing the construction of her sovereignty and her political career.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Elvin in his article “Female Virtue and the State in China” offers a loose definition of “Confucian” virtues, beyond the separation of inner and outer spheres and male dominance. Elvin outlines that Confucian virtues “most typically honored were (i) filial behavior toward parents and grandparents, (ii) the harmonious cohabitation of many generations within a kin-group without any division of property, (iii) the fidelity of widows toward their deceased husbands, [and] (iv) the safeguarding of sexual purity by a woman, through self-mutilation or suicide of necessary...” While these virtues reside as core components of Confucian ideology, emphasis “on particular virtues also varied from time to time.” See, Mark Elvin, “Female Virtue and the State in China,” *Past & Present*, no. 104 (Aug., 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Jong Min Rhee, “Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty: Becoming the Only Female Emperor in China,” MA thesis, University of Southern California, 2008, 4.

(*huandi* 皇帝), despite the lack of precedent, and dramatically one ultimately succeeded. Both in the realm of historians and within cultural memory, Wu Zetian's narrative is one of dramatic characterization and negotiation. Some sources praise her abilities as a capable leader, who before taking the throne jointly ruled alongside her husband Gaozong. While others, particularly within the imperial histories written by Neo-Confucian scholars, promote the image of Wu Zetian as a usurper and delegitimize her reign altogether. On a smaller scale much later, Wu Zetian has been reincarnated into a champion of Legalism during the Maoist era, despite her strong connections to many ideologies, and at one point even portrayed as a democratic leader, a depiction that prefers to skim over her autocratic rule.<sup>7</sup>

While recent historical endeavors strive to present balanced reconsiderations of her reign, articles within contemporary scholarship, such as “Did Empress Wu Zetian Really ‘Defile the Imperial Palace’?” and *Empress Wu Zetian—Was She an Enlightened Ruler or a Female Disaster?*, still speak to the controversial character of her legacy. A cursory glance reveals Wu Zetian's name populating western entertainment websites under headlines such as, “The 8 Most Evil and Vicious Female Rulers in History,” and “China's First Empress Was as Cruel as She Was Cunning.” Her name dotting headlines, particularly in China, is a familiar trend. During the Republican era (1912-1949) journalists condemned women transgressing traditional spheres in

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<sup>7</sup> The philosophy of Legalism, unlike Confucianism, is not concerned with personal ethics or moral justification in relation to governing. Ebrey notes that Legalism abides by the concept that, “Law is something rulers decree for the interest of the state,” and that, “there was no law above and independent of the wishes of the rulers, no law that might set limits on their actions.” Legalist scholars advocate that rulers should focus on consolidating control and authority, minimizing disorder, increasing the wealth of the state, and overall decrees should be based upon effectiveness. See Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52-3.

sensationalizing headlines such as “More Concupiscent than Wu Tse-ti’en.”<sup>8</sup> In 1835, a periodical based in Canton for protestant missionaries offered this scathing remark on Wu Zetian’s legacy, “History, whether of ancient or modern times, of the eastern or western world, can afford but few examples, either of men or women, whose acts of cruelty and injustice equal those of the empress Woo Tsihteen.”<sup>9</sup> The conflicting appraisals of Wu Zetian’s legacy are suffused with her image initially constructed by imperial historians and later invoked in vernacular literature. Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, which witnessed the rise of narrative and erotic fiction, Wu Zetian’s personhood found continuous evocation and reimagining. During this period, characterizations informed by the annals of her reign took on an erotic tone and featured the nature of female excess both in terms of sexuality and moral deterioration.

In both vernacular literature and imperial biographies, the negotiated representations of Wu Zetian served as a charged device to suit a variety of political rhetoric and moral precedents. The traits synonymous with these representations reflect the successive typecasting of women, which originated from distinctly male-driven fears. Moving beyond studies that examine Wu Zetian’s ascension to power and her endeavors to solidify her political legitimacy, my thesis explores how Wu Zetian became synonymous in cultural memory with not only the dangers of female rule, but also the possibilities of discord and ruin engendered by transgressive women. These enduring female topoi warn that women in positions of authority are sexually deviant, violent toward their own children, devoid of maternal instinct, unnatural, blinded by avarice,

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<sup>8</sup> Roxanne Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch’ing* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977), 137-139.

<sup>9</sup> *The Chinese Repository Vol. III. From May 1834 to April 1835* (Canton, 1835), 543.

lustful for power through violent ends, and disruptive of the cosmological balance, which thus condemns the dynasty to misfortune.<sup>10</sup> By focusing on the retrospective images of Wu Zetian, my research broadly offers a traceable case study of a rhetorically codified delegitimization of a woman in a position of authority. I argue that the systematic vilification of Wu Zetian stems from cultural anxieties.<sup>11</sup> To accomplish this my thesis is structured to establish foremost Wu Zetian in her sociopolitical environment of the unique and dynamic atmosphere prevailing in the Tang dynasty. This informs later analysis of imperial biographies and vernacular literature where portrayals of Wu Zetian blend historical and dramatic elements to construct an ideological discourse. White asserts that narrativity in both factual and fictional story-telling is “intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality.” When authors encode their narratives with topoi, readers are prompted to recognize “the form of the narrative” and the “meaning produced by the discourse.”<sup>12</sup> On this premise, by giving analytical predominance to the embellishments, prejudices, and topoi encoded within imperial biographies and fictional stories regarding Wu Zetian, a broader and more nuanced understanding of the negotiation of

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<sup>10</sup> Here the word topoi is used to express “common topics that both articulate and define public and social consciousness.” George Q. Xu’s essay “The Role of Rhetorical Topoi in Constructing the Social Fabric of Contemporary China” argues that the patterns, origination, and deployment of rhetorical topoi, “are an essential part of the language used in that society and culture,” and are “reflective of the culture’s dominant ideology.” See George Q. Xu, “The Role of Rhetorical Topoi in Constructing the Social Fabric of Contemporary China,” in *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*, eds. Randy Kluver and John H. Powers (Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Using anxiety as an explanatory tool is problematic. For the purpose of this study, anxiety refers to collective concerns that correlate with a “discernible action by significant numbers.” It is important to separate anxiety from direct causation. It is not anxiety that causes the social manifestations explored in chapter two and three, but rather it serves as a conceptual approach to understand the interplay between a group’s shared cultural outlook and the development of successive elements in discourse, such as topoi and gendered rhetoric. For a larger discussion on anxiety as an explanatory device see Alan Hunt, “Anxiety and Social Explanation: Some Anxieties about Anxiety” *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (Spring, 1999): 509-528. Quoted material is found on page 510.

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 14, 43.

female authority, the anxieties of Confucian scholars, and the construction of a culturally embedded image may be gained.

The first chapter outlines historical developments surrounding Wu Zetian's reign and the Tang dynasty. While ensuing chapters will feature constructed images of Wu Zetian arranged by underlying intellectual trends. The second chapter focuses on the first prominent representations of Wu Zetian following her death, which emerged during the Later Jin 後晉 (936-946), the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127), and the Southern Song 南宋 (1127-1279) dynasties in the form of traditional Chinese historical accounts. Thematically, the second chapter explores the biographical interpretation of female authority, as well as offers attention to the dramatic elements and rhetorical techniques utilized to cultivate a historical and didactic narrative in the service of Confucian ideology. The third chapter centers upon portrayals of Wu Zetian that reemerged to capture public attention during the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1912) dynasties. Within the Ming dynasty, which witnessed the advent of vernacular literature, Wu Zetian became a prominent figure in erotic literary portrayals. She represented female excess and transgression in the public sphere through hyper-sexuality. Her repeated presence in the literature of the Ming-Qing period signals the beginning of the broader evocation of her image, which was previously cultivated in the historical realm. Subsequently, the third chapter presents an opportunity to examine how the repeated attribution of specific topoi to a historical figure can influence longstanding cultural and cross-cultural values and memory. To this end, I argue that Wu Zetian became a cultural signifier of the dangers engendered by female rule.



## CHAPTER ONE: WU ZETIAN AND THE TANG DYNASTY'S HERITAGE

*“Watching red turn to green, my thoughts entangled and scattered,  
I am disheveled and torn from my longing for you, my lord.  
If you fail to believe that of late I have constantly shed tears,  
Open the chest and look for the skirt of pomegranate-red.”<sup>13</sup>*

Possibly composed by Wu Zetian during her brief stay at the Ganye Convent, the above poem generates multiple interpretations despite its dubious origins. To some, it stands as an intimate expression of her longing toward Li Zhi—known then by his posthumous temple-name of Gaozong (628-683, r. 649-83). To others, it represents a fragment of Wu Zetian's ruse to reestablish and to gather power for herself through Gaozong's affections. This poem was written following the death of Emperor Taizong (589-649, r. 626-49), also known as Li Shimin, the father of Gaozong and the emperor who Wu Zetian originally served as a concubine within the imperial harem.<sup>14</sup> When Taizong succumbed to illness, an intimate relationship developed between Wu Zetian and his youngest son Gaozong. Yet, Gaozong adhered to the Confucian tradition following the passing of his father by sending Wu Zetian and the other women of the imperial harem to the Buddhist convent.<sup>15</sup> Whether this poem exemplifies the affections of Wu Zetian, denotes her early imperial ambitions, stands as an attempt to escape the shocking transition from a life from luxury to one more austere, or is a combination of these

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<sup>13</sup> *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, eds. Kang-I Sun Chang, Huan Saussy, Charles Yim-tze Kwong (Stanford University Press, 1999), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Taizong was the second emperor of the Tang dynasty. His father, Emperor Gaozu 唐高祖 (566-635, r. 618-26), also known as Li Yuan, reunited China following the demise of the short-lived Sui Dynasty (581-618). See Ebrey, 2010, 109-10.

<sup>15</sup> Rothschild, 2008, 23-30.

interpretations—it represents the complex nature of retracing and understanding Wu Zetian’s life.

### Wu Zetian in Scholarship

Scholars who write about Wu Zetian often reference Denis Twitchett’s eloquent love letter to the nature of her legacy. Twitchett writes,

Everything concerning this remarkable woman is surrounded by doubts, for she stood for everything to which the ideas of the Confucian scholar-official class were opposed—feminine interference in public affairs, government by arbitrary whim, the deliberate exploitation of factionalism, ruthless personal vendettas, political manipulation in complete disregard of ethics and principles. From the very first the historical record of her reign has been hostile, biased, and curiously fragmentary and incomplete.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, these contested narratives have only given rise to a multitude of scholarship dedicated to further grasping the realities of Wu Zetian’s life. Some studies heavily rely on the historical accounts of the Later Jin and Song dynasties (960-1279) to draw assessments of the effectiveness of her reign or gauge her virtues. These studies, however, have recently applied a revisionist approach to their efforts. In her 2011 dissertation, “Insatiable Women and Transgressive Authority: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China,” Doran asserts authors of revisionist histories have attempted, “to move beyond long-standing assumptions and prejudices in accounts of Empress Wu’s reign.”<sup>17</sup> She notes that Zhao Wenrun and Wang Shuanghuai’s biography, *Wu Zetian pingzhuan*, provides “a critique aimed at debunking prevailing accusations that Empress Wu accorded excessive political power to her

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<sup>16</sup> Denis C. Twitchett, *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 3, Sui and T’ang China, 589-906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 244-45.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Esther Doran, “Insatiable Women and Transgressive Authority: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011), 12.

male favorites.”<sup>18</sup> In English, the first two biographies of Wu Zetian to emerge were C.P. Fitzgerald’s *The Empress Wu* (1968) and R.W. L. Guisso’s *Wu Tse-t’ien and the Politics of Legitimization in T’ang China* (1978).<sup>19</sup> Both works are aware of the imperial histories that embrace a Confucian worldview to delegitimize her reign. Thus, they attempt to avoid the pitfall of allowing Confucian biases and prejudices to denigrate Wu Zetian in their assessments. Fitzgerald’s work, however, takes positive assessment to a level of extremity that becomes detrimental to constructing an unbiased appraisal. Guisso also appraises Wu Zetian’s rule positively, however, his assessment avoids extremities. While Fitzgerald’s work is furthered hindered by relying on imperial histories, Guisso strengthens his research with Buddhist and Daoist materials. He argues that Wu Zetian’s rule served as a caretaker regime for the Tang dynasty, while delving into the methods of legitimization she used to construct her authority. Prior to this monograph, Guisso measured the importance of Buddhism in Wu Zetian’s reign in his article, “The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung” (1979). While he initially noted in this article that to many Tang citizens it was Buddhist canon that legitimized Wu Zetian, his later monograph deviates from this stance and attests that Buddhism, “was not negligible but neither was it predominant.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>19</sup> C.P Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1968) and R.W.L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t’ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T’ang China* (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> R. W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, *Sui and T’ang China, 589-906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 305.

Following Guisso's research, the various works of both Antonio Forte and N. Harry Rothschild extensively investigate Buddhist texts in relation to Wu Zetian's sovereignty.<sup>21</sup> Forte's monograph, *Political Propaganda, and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (2005), focuses on the construction of sovereignty in Tang China and examines Buddhist propaganda employed by Wu Zetian to legitimize her reign and depict her as a Buddhist sovereign. Rothschild's book *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers* (2015) greatly advances the argument posed by Forte. He posits that by coalescing a diverse and even contradictory pantheon of female divinities, female Confucian exemplars, and ideologies, Wu Zetian constructed a multi-faceted and dynamic claim to legitimacy. He writes that Wu Zetian, "exhibited a profound understanding of the different constituencies within the far-flung empire she governed. Deftly, she manipulated ceremony and symbol. Skillfully and steadily, she managed civil and military affairs."<sup>22</sup>

### *The Rise of China's First Female Sovereign*

The culmination of scholarship examining Wu Zetian through sources beyond the imperial histories has greatly contributed to a less fragmentary, narrow, and vilified vision of Wu Zetian's transient time as emperor. Drawing upon this body of scholarship, I now outline the

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<sup>21</sup> Other notable works that examine the role of Buddhism in the construction of Wu Zetian's sovereignty include: Jaques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1995); Kenneth Kuan Sheng Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964); T.H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 2008; Sen Tansen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Antonio Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue, and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988); N. Harry Rothschild, "Emerging from the Cocoon: Ethnic Revival, Lunar Radiance, and the Cult of Liu Sahe in the Jihu Uprising of 682-683," *Annali dell'Universita degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale* 65 (2005): 257-282; Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 21-2.

prominent elements of her life as well as briefly note the disputed controversies regarding her reign. Less is known regarding Wu Zetian's upbringing and family relations. Her father, Wu Shihou (559-635), was a lumber merchant who had formerly served as a military commander under Emperor Yang (569-618, r. 604-18) of the Sui dynasty (581-618). While her mother, Madame Yang (579-670), descended from an aristocratic family and was the second wife of Wu Shihou. Wu Zetian would enter the imperial harem in 640, at the age of fourteen. This event marks her first emergence within later Chinese historical accounts as one of the imperial concubines of Emperor Taizong. It is generally accepted in scholarship that Wu Zetian did not enjoy any favorability during her time with Taizong, particularly as she did not have any children with him. It is further debated whether the two ever had sexual relations, as within the imperial harem, Wu Zetian held a low rank and was distinguished by the title of 'Lady of Talents' (*Cairen*).<sup>23</sup>

Taizong had twenty-one daughters and fourteen sons. His ninth son, Li Zhi, was born to Empress Wende (601-636, 文德皇后) and would later become Emperor Gaozong. When Taizong fell ill 649, as noted earlier, an intimate relationship developed between Wu Zetian and Gaozong.<sup>24</sup> When Taizong died, however, Gaozong sent her to a Buddhist Temple.<sup>25</sup> This

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<sup>23</sup> As a 5<sup>th</sup> rank concubine, Wu Zetian held this title alongside nine other women. Prior to Gaozong's reforms to ranks, the initial rankings of concubines followed previous dynasties. Traditionally, there were four consorts and ranked below them were nine imperial concubines. Wu Zetian's title belonged to an additional group outside of these rankings. See Wu Jo-shui's "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, eds. Brandauer, Frederick P. and Chun-chieh Huang (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press), 77-116.

<sup>24</sup> It is notable that Wu Zetian and Gaozong's relationship is considered incestuous, a relationship between mother and son, by Confucian standards. Rothschild, 2008, 28. Why such a relationship was ultimately allowed is explored on pages 17-8.

<sup>25</sup> This protocol is directly reflective of the Cult of Chastity, which is discussed in chapter three. It was reasoned that once concubines had known the touch of the Son of Heaven (the emperor) they would not do to know another. Thus,

separation was not permanent. A year later on the anniversary of Taizong's passing, the pair met in an emotional reunion at Ganye Convent where Gaozong sought to burn incense. This meeting was not coincidental. As Rothschild eloquently describes, "Mother and son, in society's eyes, who had consummated their love in the shadows of ailing Taizong's bed of convalescence, now availed themselves of a taboo day of mourning for their husband-father to rekindle their passions."<sup>26</sup> Gaozong's wife, Empress Wang (?-655), encouraged Wu and Gaozong's meetings, as she hoped to veer the emperor's attention away from Pure Consort Xiao (?-655) who held the emperor's favor. The frequent meetings of Gaozong and Wu eventually culminated with Wu Zetian's return to the Imperial Palace as a concubine, a move that drew substantial criticism from the Confucian court. Despite Empress Wang's assurances that her elite Han lineage afforded security in her position, she would find herself demoted to commoner status in 655 following a series of scandals surrounding the death of Wu Zetian's infant daughter and the planned use of black magic. With Empress Wang's demotion, Wu Zetian then became Empress Wu. Li Hong (652-675), Wu and Gaozong's firstborn son, was thus named Crown Prince in 656.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Li Hong was eight years of age, and still too young to take on the responsibilities of managing the state, Gaozong suffered what is speculated to have been stroke. The stroke was only one element of Gaozong's fragile health that plagued him from childhood. Until Gaozong's death in 683, Wu often assisted him with administrative duties and the pair handled the political arena together. During this time, they had two more children: Li Dan (662-716) and the Taiping Princess (665-713). While Li Hong was groomed to be heir-apparent,

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the honorable and moral path for the former one hundred and twenty-two women of the imperial harem is one of chastity and one without remarriage. Ibid, 24-28.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 23-30, 41.

taking on many daily governing responsibilities, he suddenly died in 675. Eight years later Gaozong passed away. Following Gaozong's death, Li Xian (656-710, r. 684-84 and 705-10), Wu Zetian and Gaozong's son, ruled as Emperor Zhongzong for a brief two-months until he was deposed. Wu then installed their youngest son, Li Dan, to the throne as Emperor Ruizong. He, however, did not hold any true political authority during his reign and eventually ceded the throne to his mother. Thus, in 690, at the age of sixty-six, Wu Zetian became China's only female emperor and established the Zhou dynasty. Wu's ascension to the throne marked the officialization in title of a longstanding political reality that had developed over decades. She ruled until a coup by Li Xian and his supporters in 705 and, in that same year, Wu Zetian died at the age of eighty-one.<sup>28</sup> Her final resting place was alongside Gaozong in Qianling. After resuming the throne Zhongzhong restored the Tang dynasty.

### Controversies Surrounding Wu Zetian

While her actual reign lasted fifteen years, Wu Zetian's political influence and participation in statecraft stretches across the later decades of her life. There are several controversies linked to her entire political career. The conflicting interpretations of these events as recorded in imperial histories will be explored in chapter two. For now, a brief overview. First, the dethronement of Empress Wang. Confucian scholars attest that Empress Wang's dethronement was the result of Wu Zetian's efforts to frame her over the course of three separate incidents: (1) the death of Wu Zetian's infant child; (2) accusations that she attempted to poison Gaozong; and (3) the charge that she committed the depraved crime of sorcery, a crime listed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 49-50, 68-69, 81-83, 107, 157, 199-204.

under the Tang Code of laws as one of the “ten abominations.”<sup>29</sup> Second, the cruel and violent deaths of Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao as ordered by Wu Zetian. And third, the mysterious death of Li Hong at the age of twenty-three while visiting Hebi Palace with Gaozong and Wu Zetian in the summer of 675. While certain sources contend that it was Wu Zetian who poisoned Crown Prince Hong, none of the motives ascribed to her in these sources match reality. Rothschild notes that official eulogies for Li Hong “contain references to his illness,” his frail constitution, and that he suffered from tuberculosis.<sup>30</sup> While I discuss these three incidents at greater length in chapter two, it is important to note that Rothschild describes other controversies: the use of violence to solidify authority, growing factionalism, and, during Wu Zetian’s years of declining health, the emergence of the Zhang brothers (Zhang Yizhi and Zhang Changzong) as her male favorites, as well as their subsequent role in polarizing court politics.<sup>31</sup>

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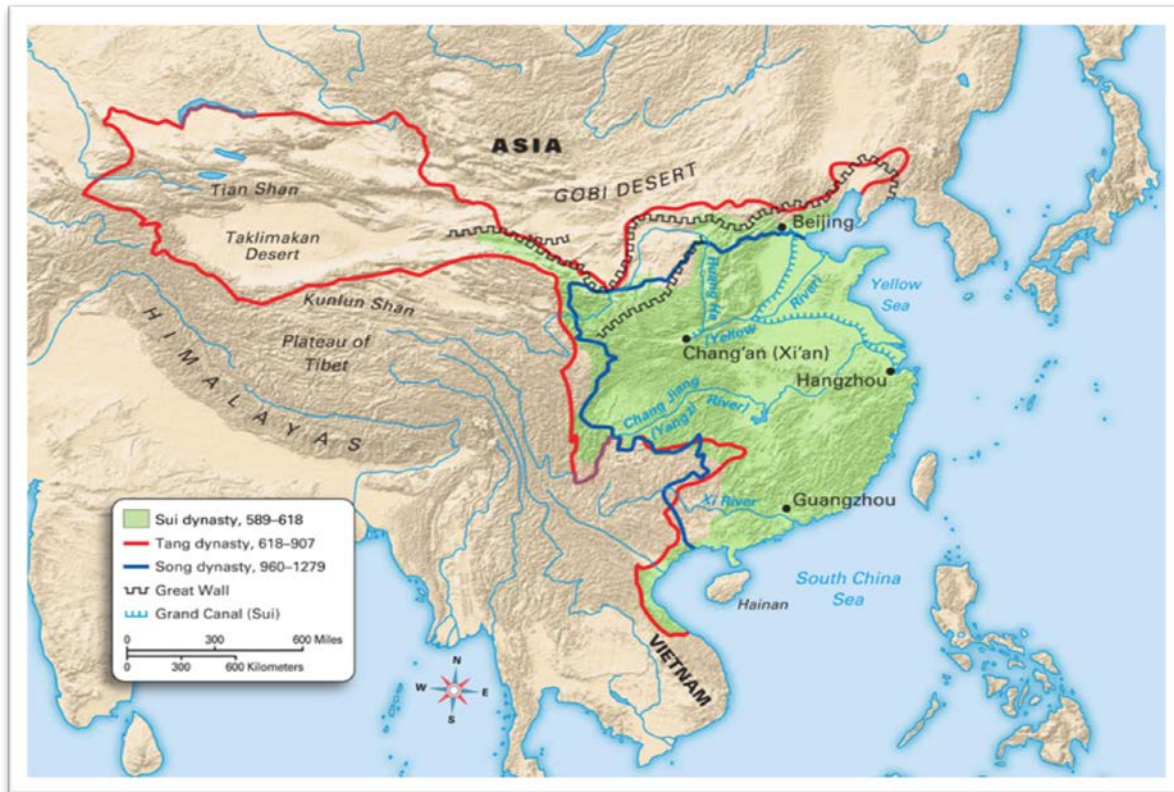
<sup>29</sup> Rothschild, 2008, 31-4

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 68-9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 93-102, 125-136, 190-204.



*The Rise of the Golden Age: The Hybrid Dynasty*



**Figure 2: A map of the Tang Empire.<sup>32</sup>**

To understand the broader context for how Wu Zetian became emperor, we must look at the cultural and political changes that occurred during the four centuries of division following the former Han empire (206 BC–220 AD). During the gradual breakdown of central authority that occurred in the latter half of the second century, the Han emperor became a puppet controlled by military generals and political authority was concentrated within military force.<sup>33</sup> In 220, “when the last powerless Han emperor finally abdicated in favour of one of his great generals,” China

<sup>32</sup> Map provided by [www.edmaps.com](http://www.edmaps.com)

<sup>33</sup> Denis Twitchett, “Introduction” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 3 Sui and T’ang China, 589-906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2-3.

split into three states: the Wei, Shu, and Wu.<sup>34</sup> These three regional states failed to replicate the centralized authority enjoyed by the Han dynasty in its prime. While a brief reunification of China occurred in 280 by the Western Jin, the regime failed to consolidate its authority and fell to internal disorders, notably disputes over succession and northern invasions by non-Chinese nomads. Known as the period of Sixteen Kingdoms, the northern invaders, including proto-Mongol, Turkish, and Tungusic peoples, “overran what had been the most advanced, richest and most populous areas of China, establishing a bewildering succession of petty, short-lived dynasties.”<sup>35</sup> Their invasion inaugurated a period in Northern China marked by constant warfare, devastation, instability, and anarchy that would continue until the Northern Wei dynasty (founded by Toba Turks) established a stable unified northern regime in 439. This dynasty, however, would prove to be short-lived as well. Although the Toba people attempted to preserve their cultural identity, they found “themselves forced to adopt Chinese institutions and to collaborate with the Chinese elite.”<sup>36</sup> The Sinicization of the Northern Wei was met with violent reactions by the traditionalist tribal aristocracy, and the Northern Wei divided into two states: the Western Wei (later the Northern Zhou in 557) and the Eastern Wei (later the Northern Qi in 550). While both ruling families of these states consisted of Toba clan members, in the Western Wei non-Chinese elements remained dominant. It would be the Northern Zhou that would finally conquer the Northern Qi in 557 and reunify northern China. The centuries outlined above represent a time of time of political and social dominance by non-Chinese people, which “left

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 3.

deep marks on the society and institutions of northern China.”<sup>37</sup> One of the most poignant and defining marks was the constant intermarriage of foreign ruling houses with Chinese elite. From these intermarriages, two elite aristocratic groups emerged in the north-west, the most powerful being the Guanlong aristocracy from the Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces. These aristocratic groups starkly contrast their traditional Chinese counterparts, as they strongly maintained nomadic customs, including allowing women to have greater independence and power in ruling decisions.<sup>38</sup> The Yang family, the successors of the Northern Zhou (589-618) and the subsequent founders of the Sui dynasty, which ultimately reunified northern and southern China, belonged to the Guanlong aristocracy. The founder of the Tang dynasty, Li Yuan (r. 618–626), who reigned as Gaozu, and his clan also belonged to this aristocratic group. From these centuries of fragmentation and decentralized authority emerged a consolidation of new practices and norms with the rise of the Guanlong aristocracy to central authority. The Sui court “did not merely perpetuate the political dominance of this small group of great north-western aristocratic clans”, they also organized their “empire by means of tried institutions that had been employed under the northern dynasties for the past century,” a practice that continued under the Tang.<sup>39</sup>

Culturally, there was a marked difference between the Li regime of the Tang dynasty and the traditional Chinese gentry. In support of this, Chen argues that by examining historical sources of the era the many cases of the Li clan’s non-Chinese cultural traits and identity are clear and that the regime was “culturally anything but a ‘native’ Chinese dynasty.”<sup>40</sup> In

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Sanping Chen, “Succession Struggle and the Ethnic Identity of the Tang Imperial House” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6, no. 3 (Nov., 1996): 381.

ascertaining other practices during the Tang by the Li family, Chen outlines that the most remarkable cases supporting their non-Chinese identity are found within the categories of language, affinity, clan relationships, clothing (explored later in this chapter), social mores, patronage of the arts, and even childhood names.<sup>41</sup> In the realm of social mores, the marriage of Wu Zetian to Gaozong deviated from the matrimonial relations allowed within traditional Confucian practices and reflected a precedent from Inner Asia: the “practice of a leader inheriting his [father’s] concubines and secondary wives.” If Gaozong had adhered to traditional Confucian practices, Wu Zetian would not have been allowed to reenter the palace, let alone marry him, following Taizong’s death. Subsequently, had she not been recalled to the palace by Gaozong in 652, her rise to power would have never occurred.<sup>42</sup> Another cultural practice reflective of the Li family’s heritage was tendency to give “barbarian” childhood names in the Northern aristocracy, a trend witnessed during both the Sui and the Tang periods.<sup>43</sup> The Toba (Xianbei) language continued to be prominent and used by the Li clan during the Tang period as well. In a passage from *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan* (*Yanshi jiaxun*) the Chinese gentry’s thoughts on this practice are reflected:

There was a court official who once said to me, “I have a son who is seventeen and has quite a good epistolary style. I shall teach him the Xianbei language and to play the *pipa* (a favored instrument), in the hope that he will gain a certain degree of proficiency in these. With such accomplishments he is sure to gain favour with men in high places. This is a matter of some urgency.” At that time I hung my head and made no reply. Strange indeed is the way this fellow teaches his son. Even if, by such means, you could become a minister, I would not wish you to do so.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Chen, 1996, 381-384.

<sup>42</sup> Rothschild, 2003, 55.

<sup>43</sup> Chen, 1996, 383.

<sup>44</sup> Sanping Chen, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 9.

This passage also interestingly makes mention of the *pipa*, a four-string plucked lute. In the image below of four seated musicians sculpted in clay, the girl on the far-right depicts how the instrument was held during the Tang. The passage’s mention of learning to play the *pipa* as a potential avenue to gain political favor is notable for two reasons. First, the *pipa* “descends from West and Central Asian prototypes” and appeared during the Northern Wei. In China the instrument was at first considered foreign and a “somewhat improper instrument,” that later gained favor in court ensembles.<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 3: “Seated Female Musicians”. Dated to the late seventh century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 23.180.4-.7). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth J. Moore, “The *Pipa*,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003). For more on the *Pipa* see [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pipa/hd\\_pipa.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pipa/hd_pipa.htm).; John Myers, *The Way of the Pipa: Structure and Imagery in Chinese Lute Music* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1992); Alan R. Thrasher, *Chinese Musical Instruments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

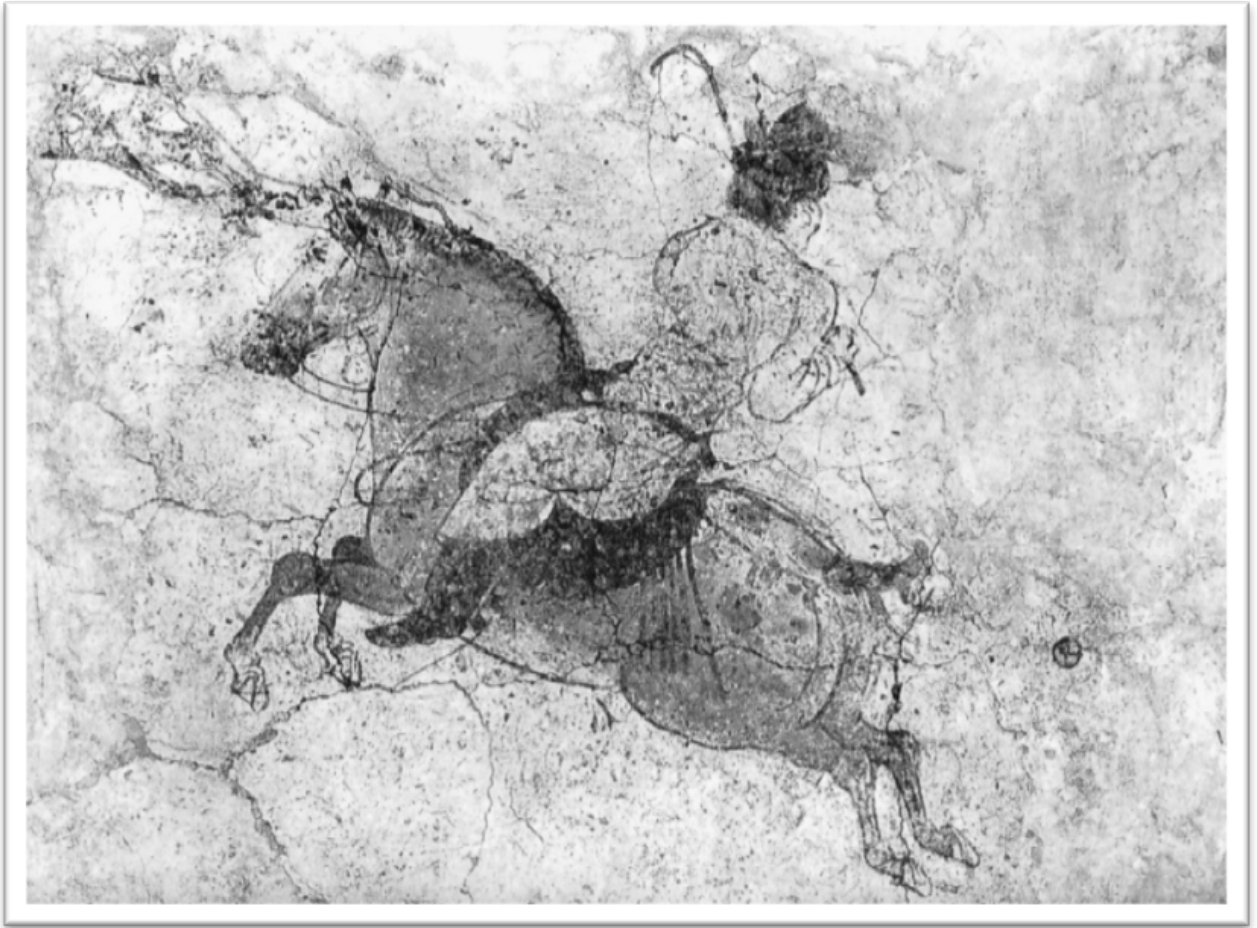
Second, the Tang imperial family also showed considerable support and extravagant patronage of the performing arts, such as music, dance, and drama performances. Confucian moralists, however, strongly disagreed with this patronage, and were horrified that “emperors often showed little reservation in bestowing artists, considered of the same social class as house slaves and prostitutes by the traditional Chinese gentry, prominent and prestigious titles.”<sup>46</sup> These various cases represent the significant influence of the Tang imperial household’s Inner Asian heritage, particularly in relation to their sociopolitical mores and practices that were often condemned by Chinese traditionalists. By examining these practices and their origins, we can further our understanding the cultural systems that allowed for Wu Zetian to become emperor, including the unique freedoms enjoyed by women of the Tang dynasty.

### *The Fashionable Tang Dynasty*

The women of the early Tang, particularly aristocratic women, were markedly influenced by Inner Asian customs, and like the ruling family they carried on these traditions in daily life. Subsequently, the unique hybridity of the Tang inaugurated a period where traditional Chinese constraints on women became subordinate to steppe culture. In the physical realm, these customs proliferated in the form of fashion and the “exotic”. As numerous figures and paintings reveal, Tang women wore male apparel, fitted blouses with low necklines, rode horseback, practiced archery, played polo, and overall took on a larger presence beyond the confines of the inner sphere. Pictured on the next pages below are several material culture examples depicting these developments.

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<sup>46</sup> Chen, 2012, 12.



**Figure 4: Mural of a female polo player from the Tomb of Li Xian. Dated to 706. Photo courtesy of the Wang Lu/ChinaStock Photo Library.**



**Figure 5: “Horse and Female Rider.” Dated to the seventh century. This figure of a woman riding a horse and wearing trousers likely originates from far northwest China, reflective of the far reach of the empire into Inner Asia, as well as the influence of nomadic customs (Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 51.93 a, b). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**





**Figure 6: “Horse and Female Rider”. Dated to the late seventh or early eighth century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1991.253.10). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**



**Figure 7: “Tomb figure of a woman on horseback.” Dated to 700-750. Likely originating from Luoyang this statue depicts a woman riding a horse, while wearing a low neckline shirt, a short jacket, and trousers. Unlike the earlier two images, her hair is in a high top-knot without a hat. (Smithsonian Institution, no. F1952.13).**

**Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, record link:  
<https://www.freersackler.si.edu/collections/edan/singleobject.cfm?ObjectNumber=F1952.13>.**



**Figure 8: “Standing Female Attendant.” Dated to the late seventh or early eighth centuries. Tomb figurine from the dry regions of the Silk Road; however, the woman is depicted in a high-waisted dress and short jacket of the Tang court style. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1997.442.7.2). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

The three fashions donned by the female riders in figures 5-7 reflect the popularity of Turkish and East Iranian modes of dress found in the Tang capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang.<sup>47</sup> Modest hats which hid the face and provided anonymity declined in favorability by the middle of the seventh century, while hats which revealed the face became far more common.<sup>48</sup> While an edict in 671 attempted to "outlaw these brazen-faced equestriennes," it was ignored and by the eighth century women "were riding about the city streets wearing Turkish caps, or even bare-headed, and dressed in men's riding clothes and boots."<sup>49</sup> A taste for collecting the exotic, particularly Iranian, Turkish, and Indian wares, gained incredible popularity during eighth century. As Abrecht notes, the extension of China's hegemony into central Asia "fueled a fascination with western fashions and customs that was already prominent in the Tang society thanks to the imperial family's mixed Chinese and Turkish heritage."<sup>50</sup> This fascination with foreign goods spurred one poet, Yuan Chen, to lament:

Ever since the Western horsemen began raising smut and dust,  
Fur and fleece, rank and rancid, have filled Hsien and Lo.  
Women make themselves Western matrons by the study of Western makeup;  
Entertainers present Western tunes, in their devotion to Western music.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, the "brazen-faced equestrienne" of the Tang, who could collect objects of non-Chinese origin, divorce and remarry, and independently leave the household, reflects the rise of a new and accepted social practice that allowed for women to be socially visible. As Rothschild writes, the trends of the Tang dynasty and the social visibility of women reflect the "burgeoning

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<sup>47</sup> Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 28

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ryan Russell Abrecht, "My Neighbor the Barbarian: Neighborhoods in Classical Athens, Imperial Rome, and Tang Chang'an" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2014), 127-128.

<sup>51</sup> Schafer, 28.

social influence and confidence of women. Women were not bound inside the house, cloistered and secreted away while men monopolized the outside, public world.”<sup>52</sup> From the early nomadic traditions that allowed for women to occupy positions of authority to the Tang dynasty, in which the social visibility of women became an accepted practice, the origins and developments spanning multiple centuries set the stage for the first and only female emperor of China.

### *Buddhism and Female Rule in the East Asian Region*

While Wu Zetian resonates in history as China’s only *de jure* female emperor, she was not without counterparts in the East Asian region, as Japan, Silla (Korea), and Dongnū guo all had female sovereigns during the seventh century.<sup>53</sup> Notably, the Chinese court two years following Wu Zetian’s enthronement received a visit from Eyan’er, the female sovereign of Dongnū guo. One of Wu Zetian’s predecessors, Queen Seondeok of Silla (?-647) shared a significant commonality with Wu Zetian: a love for and employment of Buddhism in political affairs.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Rothschild, 2003, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Dongnū guo or the “Eastern Kingdom of Women” is recorded in two separate accounts. This matriarchal kingdom first finds mention during the Sui dynasty in Pei Ju’s (547-627) *An Illustrated Account of the Western Regions (Xiyu tuji)*. Following this, Xuanzang’s (602-664) the *Great Tang Records of the Western Regions (Da Tang Xi Yu Ji)*, which studied Inner Asia and India and other geographical regions further alludes to a “Kingdom of Women.” It is notable that two vernacular works from the Ming dynasty render an exotic kingdom of women. Both *Flowers in the Mirror*, discussed in chapter three, and *Journey to the West (Xi you ji)* by Wu Cheng’en (1500-1580) employ settings of a matriarchal kingdom. See Yun Zhu, *Imagining Sisterhood in Modern Chinese Texts, 1890-1937* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Seondeok inherited her position through bloodline, however, her reign was short-lived and plagued by conflict due to external invaders and internal political contention. Bidam (?-647), the highest ranking official within the Silla government, led a coup under the slogan that “the state cannot be ruled by a female sovereign.” While the coup proved to be unsuccessful, Seondeok died during the conflict. She was succeeded by her cousin, Queen Jindeok (647-654).

## The Era of Female Sovereigns

Year	Wa (Japan)	Sui-Tang (China)	Silla (Korean)	Dongnū guo
592	Suiko enthroned			
<b>600</b>				
618	Suiko dies			Tang Pangshi (r. ca. 618-26)
<b>625</b>				
626				
632			Sōndōk enthroned	
642	Kōgyoku enthroned			
645	Kōgyoku abdicates		Sōndōk dies Chindōk enthroned	
647				
<b>650</b>			Chindōk dies	
654				
655	Saimei enthroned			
661	Saimei dies			
<b>675</b>				
685				Lianbi (on throne)
686	Empress Uno (Jitō) rules provisionally			
690	Jitō enthroned	(Empress) Wu Zetian enthroned		
692				Eyan'er (on throne)
<b>700</b>	Jitō dies			
702				
705		Empress Wu dies		
707	Genmei enthroned			
715	Genshō enthroned			
721	Genmei dies			
<b>725</b>				
741				Zhao Yefu (on throne)
748	Genshō dies			
749	Kōken enthroned			
<b>750</b>				
764	Shōtoku enthroned			
770	Shōtoku dies			
<b>775</b>				

Figure 9: Chronology of female sovereigns during the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> “Asian Female Sovereigns and the Empress Wu,” trans. Joshua A. Fogel, *Sinica* (Nov., 1999), 145.

During Wu Zetian's reign, Buddhism reached its zenith after centuries of steady growth. The Toba Turks during the Northern Wei supported and promulgated Buddhism; thus its widespread popularity during the Tang can be considered as another natural progression stemming from the customs and culture of the imperial family's non-Chinese lineage. Prior to 750, more than fifty tributary missions occurred between Indian princes and the Tang court. Buddhism for Wu Zetian offered an ideological avenue for political validation. As Rothschild describes, Buddhism contained "none of the longstanding historical and philological impediments to female rule that were imbedded so deeply in Chinese tradition."<sup>56</sup> Wu Zetian presented herself as "a protector of the Buddhist faith," and subsequently "sponsored huge translation projects and commentaries on Buddhist sutras."<sup>57</sup> Her patronage extended to staging Buddhist festivals and erecting and refurbishing Buddhist temples as well.<sup>58</sup> Two months prior to her declaration of the Zhou dynasty, Wu Zetian utilized powerful Buddhist propaganda titled *Commentary on the Meanings of the Prophecies About the Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sutra*. This extensive commentary composed by a team of Buddhist clergy functioned as poignant propaganda that foretold of her ascent by styling Wu Zetian as "the avatar of devi Vimalaprabha, Pure Radiance, whom the Buddha had prophesied would appear on earth as a female sovereign."<sup>59</sup> This form of propaganda was incredibly effective and as Rothschild asserts, "this elaborate, well-orchestrated collective effort on the part of Wu Zhao and her Buddhist propagandists" is perhaps the most important piece of writing of her efforts to legitimize the inauguration of her dynasty.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rothschild, 2008, 138.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>59</sup> Rothschild, 2015, 209, 228

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 209.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have laid out and contextualized Wu Zetian's life and political career, engaging several issues regarding her rise to power and rule. During her reign Wu Zetian drew upon language, symbolism, and ideology to legitimize and to consolidate her authority over a diverse empire, but the possibility for her to become emperor was not produced by her deft political acumen alone. The possibility for Wu Zetian to even reenter the imperial palace following Taizong's death, jointly rule with her husband Gaozong, and maintain an active presence in court politics is by virtue of the Tang's heritage. The centuries of decentralized authority engendered by the dissolution of the Han empire, which resulted in ethnocultural intermixture, intermarriages, and the ascendancy of the Guanlong aristocracy of the Northern Zhou, is a key element in the narrative of Wu Zetian's ascent. The cultural systems deriving from the Inner Asian heritage of the Sui and Tang dynasties allowed for greater social visibility of women and even called for their participation in political matters. These cultural changes and the subsequent reduced influence of Confucianism, however, did not last. In an idealized form, particularly in epitaphs, the shadow of Confucianism remained present throughout the early and mid-Tang period. While in practice Confucianism was subordinated to nomadic customs, it did not disappear wholly and by the Song dynasty a move for cultural and political retrenchment to ascertain a pure form of Chinese identity took place. It is in this reemphasis of traditional Chinese values, which consequently viewed the Tang dynasty as "semi-barbarous", that the codified rhetoric of female transgression gained momentum. It is to this point that we now turn to in chapter two.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE RHETORICAL DELEGITIMIZATION OF WU ZETIAN

*“The female predator was most infamously found in politics; she is the adventuress who gains access to the Imperial realm through intimacy and then destroys the body politic she finds. This woman is one of the regular dramatis personae in the accounts of empires, as conventional a figure as the Emperor or his ministers. Unlike her male counterparts in Court, however, she was emblematic of disorder, not order. She was the predictable cause of fine de siècle chaos, suitable for all dynasties; like an ominous punctuation mark, she accounted the downfall of a Court. The Dynastic Histories, the official compilations of Chinese history since the Han dynasty, stockpiled this stock character, labeling her with an unofficial yet official epithet: “state toppler” (qing guo) or “city toppler” (qing cheng).<sup>61</sup>*

The century following the disintegration of the Tang state, known as the period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, was one of chaos, political fragmentation, regional armies, and the loss of a central authority. While China was reunified once again by Zhao Kuangyin (927-976, r. 960-976), who reigned as Emperor Taizu and established the Song dynasty (960-1279), it never managed to achieve the same level of regional hegemony and military dominance that the Han and Tang dynasties established. This failure of the government was “profoundly disturbing to Song writers, thinkers, and officials.”<sup>62</sup> With the loss of the Northern Song and its capital of Kaifeng to the Jurchens in 1126, the period of the Southern Song began in 1127 with a new capital established at Hangzhou. The loss of the “heartland of China, the land where all major dynasties had had their capital and where the tombs of all prior Song emperors were located,” became the central concern of Song intellectuals and officials. With this loss and the looming threat posed by their northern neighbors, Song thinkers became transfixed on cultivating

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<sup>61</sup> Victoria Cass, *Warriors, Grannies and Geishas of the Ming* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 88.

<sup>62</sup> Ebrey, 2010, 150.

and ascertaining a pure “Chinese” identity. Subsequently, they became “less open to borrowing foreign styles and more sensitive to issues of Chinese cultural identity. Writers more readily rejected things foreign on the grounds of their origins.”<sup>63</sup> Even Buddhism, which existed for centuries throughout various Chinese dynasties to varying degrees of popularity, was rejected because it was not indigenous to China.<sup>64</sup> These growing concerns led many Song intellectuals to turn inward and press for a revival of Confucianism to restore “core” Chinese values. Scholars sought to not only further develop Confucian ideas to rival Buddhism, but also to ensure that its ideas would be relevant to the current problems of the Song.<sup>65</sup> One intellectual who played a prominent role in this revival of Confucianism was Zhu Xi, whose historical writings and personal views on Wu Zetian and women are explored later in this chapter. In one passage, Zhu Xi writes, “The Tang dynasty originated from the Barbarians. It is for this reason that violations of the Confucian standard of governing a woman’s proper behavior were not regarded as anything unusual.”<sup>66</sup> In the Southern Song, violations of Confucian standards in relation to women, seen as a result of the Tang dynasty’s non-Chinese heritage, became one of the first points of concern raised by intellectuals.<sup>67</sup> Below as we examine the historical writings of Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholars following the Tang dynasty, it is important to keep in mind the broader sociopolitical concerns of scholars, the questions they posed regarding Chinese identity through art and literature, and the resulting implications for women, whose previous rise

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 150-151.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>66</sup> Chen, 2012, 68.

<sup>67</sup> Chen, 1996, 383.

in social visibility was blamed upon the Tang's barbarian roots and garnered disdain amongst traditionalists.

### *The Biographical Tradition*

Examining Chinese biography for western scholars presents a unique undertaking. On the one hand, translated sources are scarce, which means western scholarship involving China's biographical tradition presents difficulties. On the other hand, the biographers themselves combined the goal of constructing a veritable historical record with literary didacticism—thus shaping the account to focus on exemplars of good and bad behavior. The ideal of determining praise and blame (*baobian* 褒貶) was aided by the reforms to the Bureau of Historiography in 629, which gave the responsibility of writing Standard Histories to committees of court historians. These committees systematized the writing process, and their works both reflected the moral expectations placed upon Confucian scholars and underwent rigorous editing.<sup>68</sup> Despite diminished authorial freedom, the pursuit of veritable histories continued to maintain significance to many court historians. Huang notes, “To get at the real facts has been an all-consuming passion of Chinese historians, so much so that some of them sacrificed their lives in opposition to their rulers’ pressures on them to write otherwise than what they believed to be true.”<sup>69</sup> Yet, the expectation to adhere to Confucian standards in the construction of historical records, particularly with the popularization of the multi-authorial review process, cannot be overlooked. As Twitchett points out, Western historians interpreting a Chinese biography must

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<sup>68</sup> Denis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12-16.

<sup>69</sup> Huang, Chun-Chieh, “The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 2 (May, 2007): 180-181.

ask, “how much was ascribed to the life by the Chinese biographer in the search for ideal moral consistency and didactic meaning?”<sup>70</sup> This discussion of the moralization of Chinese history is continued in Twitchett’s essay “Chinese Biographical Writing”, which details the utilization of moral exemplars in Chinese biography and the encoding of a formulaic typecasting that was easily distinguishable to readers.<sup>71</sup> He notes that in Confucian China ideologies surrounding virtue were not abstract concepts left to find definition in discourse, but rather virtue was demonstrated through action, and action for the populace was demonstrated through literary example.

In official histories biographical chapters were organized in a manner to present Confucian virtues in distinct categories. Chapters dedicated to men centered on demonstrating exemplary conduct in leadership and the community.<sup>72</sup> Virtue for women was less static and definitive, as will be explored in chapter three. Thus, when examining the biographies of Wu Zetian, this study operates on a premise that accounts for these considerations. As will be noted within Wu Zetian’s biographies, whether she was accorded historical status as an emperor or a usurper of the Tang dynasty, as well as her portrayals of demeanor, are entrenched in a desire to convey a moralized history in accord with Confucian or Neo-Confucian philosophy. The primary events of the period are present, but Wu Zetian’s historical narrative and verdicts of her reign are malleable.

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<sup>70</sup> Denis Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese Biography” in *Confucian Personalities*, eds., Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 35.

<sup>71</sup> Denis Twitchett, “Chinese Biographical Writing,” in *Historians of China and Japan*, eds., W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleybank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 95-114.

<sup>72</sup> For more on the Chinese biographical tradition and its moralistic premise see Twitchett, 1992, 74-76.

### Theoretical Background

As the abstract notions of representation, image construction, and historical narrativity play an integral role in my analysis from this point onward, here I outline their considerations. By giving preference to the theories of historical narrativity established by narrative antirealists such as Louis Mink and Hayden White, the term “representation” refers to an appropriation of an individual within an encoded narrativized history. The idea that historical discourse either consciously or unconsciously takes a formulated narrativized form is aptly conveyed by White, who writes:

In historical discourse, the narrative serves to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agent, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as story elements; that is, they must be characterized as the kinds of events, agents, agencies, and so on, that can be apprehended as elements of specific story types. On this level of encodation, the historical discourse directs the reader's attention to a secondary referent, different in kind from the events that make up the primary referent, namely, the plot structures of the various story types cultivated in a given culture.<sup>73</sup>

On this premise, if Chinese historical accounts are composed with narrative form, such as being “an epic romance, tragedy, comedy, or farce,” the logical progression points toward an indisputable authorial viewpoint, cultural function, and moral ascription.<sup>74</sup> White also notes that historical accounts are imbued with narrativity, so that readers who recognize the narrative form can be said to have “comprehended the meaning produced by the discourse.”<sup>75</sup> Lefevere’s theory of refraction regarding the translation of historical sources is of a kindred spirit to this notion of “historical narrativity.” He writes:

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<sup>73</sup> White, 1987, 43.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 43.

“[Refraction] [d]enotes the rewriting of texts (the production of plays) in order to make them acceptable for a new audience. In the process, virtually every feature of the original may be changed, or else very little may be changed. Changes will usually fall under three categories: a change of the language in which the original is written, with its concomitant socio/cultural context, a change of the ideology of the original (i.e., its ‘word view’ in the widest, not just the political sense of the word) and a change of the poetics of the original (i.e., the presuppositions as to what is, or is not, literature that can be seen to have guided the author of the original, whether he/she follows them or rebels against them).”<sup>76</sup>

That is, the refraction, or the rewriting of texts, parallels the interpretation and composing of historical accounts into a new narrative form. This is not to imply that the historical accounts examined here are without informational value, but rather, as Mink states, “the significant conclusions of historical arguments are embedded or incorporated in the narrative structure of historical writing itself.”<sup>77</sup> Subsequently, I will focus on rhetorical devices that are used to construct the narrative of Wu Zetian in historical accounts, as well as the sociopolitical needs of their authors. Whether these accounts are historically sound is not the main interest of this examination; however, considerations of the veracity of the work provide a foundation for understanding the prevailing narrative qualities.

### Gender and Language

Underscoring the rhetoric employed by Chinese scholars is the language of gender.<sup>78</sup>

Notably, perceptions of gender in China, compared to the West, do not “reflect institutionalized

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<sup>76</sup> André Lefevere, “Refraction – Some observations on the Occasion of Wole Soyinka’s Opera Wonyosi”, in *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation, Volumes 48-50* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Publishing, 1984), 192.

<sup>77</sup> Louis Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>78</sup> There are many difficulties in employing the word “gender” in studies of China. The word gender, present in western discourse, lacks a Chinese equivalent. Since the 1980s, “gender” has been an imported term and translated into *xingbie*, literally meaning “sexual difference.” In the 1990s, *shehui xingbie*, meaning social and sexual difference, emerged as a new word and found popularity. With this in mind, discussions of “gender” and its presence in rhetoric will be informed by early conceptions of gender identity in China, which perceives *nu* and *nan* as social constructions, rather than a given state of being. For further discussion on translating “gender” and the debates surrounding translating Western feminist concepts for Chinese readers see Dongchao Min, *Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 59-65.

male dominance.” Hall and Ames maintain that, “in China masculine and feminine gender traits form complementary characteristics that together suggest the range of possibilities for self-cultivation.”<sup>79</sup> In tandem with this, Guisso describes that while male and female were perceived as inextricably connected with “each assigned a dignified and respectable role, and each expected to interact in co-operation and harmony...the fact remains that the relationship is not an equal one.”<sup>80</sup> In discussing the *Five Classics*, Guisso further attests to the idea that the early hierarchies of gender are based upon a *difference* rather than of subordination. He states,

While there may be an implicit connotation of superiority and inferiority in the cosmology, the greater emphasis fell on the difference between male and female. Each sex had a distinct and complementary function and woman’s place was neither dishonorable nor necessarily inferior to a man’s expect in so far as earth was inferior to heaven or moon inferior to sun.<sup>81</sup>

Subsequently, the *difference* between a woman and a man was rhetorically encoded in early written Chinese. As a historically male-controlled discourse, it is male evaluation that dictated the transmission of characterizations of the female gender in Chinese language.

In written Chinese, characters containing the radical for a woman (*nu*, 女) present recorded insights of the perceived *differences* between men and women. One of the earliest Chinese dictionaries, the *Shuowen Jiezi*, contains 9,353 characters, with 245 of the characters containing the radical for woman. Within the 245 characters, “the vast majority are proper names, verbs, or identifying nouns”; however, there are twenty-eight that can be used to describe an individual’s disposition. While Guisso carefully notes that “there is no doubt that some of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ames, Roger T. and David L. Hall, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 90.

<sup>80</sup> Richard W. Guisso, “Thunder Over the Lake: The Five Classics and the Perception of Woman in Early China,” *Historical Reflections* 8, no. 3 (Fall, 1981), 59.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

[*Shuowen Jiezi*'s] etymologies are fanciful or erroneous” due to the long evolution of Chinese language, he asserts that overall the dictionary displays a gender-based rhetorical trend congruent with the development of patriarchy in other societies.<sup>82</sup> Guisso further suggests that the characters designating attitudes associated with women may be grouped into the following sets: jealous and envious, cunning and artful of the tongue, willful, disobedient and obstructive, ambitious and avaricious, weak, timid, and lazy, and emotionally unstable and lascivious.<sup>83</sup> Utilizing these sets as a framework, the traits linked with the female radical this study focuses on are jealousy (*ji*, 嫉), greed (*lan*, 婪), anger (*nu*, 怒), adultery (*jian*, 姦), chaos, false blame, and absurdity (*wang*, 妄), and excessive lasciviousness (*hao se*, 好色). These traits, which from their conception conveyed female-identified flaws, form the rhetorical topoi used to delegitimize Wu Zetian and other female authority figures. Thus the records of Wu Zetian in historical accounts reflect the discursive tradition of negotiating historic fact with the formulaic and reoccurring tropes derived from the traits discussed above.

### Identifying a “Narrative Core”

As successor dynasties traditionally composed the annals of their predecessors, the first histories of Wu Zetian emerged in the *Old Tang History* (*Jiu Tangshu* or *JTS*) during the Later Jin, forty years following the collapse of the Tang. Three supervisors oversaw the completion of the *JTS* and subsequently members aiding the compilation of the document switched as well. Between repeated changes in the committee, its remarkably short time to completion, four years,

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>83</sup> While the characters identified under these sets evolved to have flexible usage between men and women, it may be concluded that in their early usage they designated female traits. Ibid, 51.



and the likelihood that the history was largely copied from the Veritable Records (*Shilu*)<sup>84</sup> of the Tang, it may be surmised that no single individual's biases dominated the entirety of its composition.<sup>85</sup> Liu Xu, however, does craft a commentary at the end of Wu Zetian's basic annals that stands as possibly "the hardest verdict of Wu Zhao's rule."<sup>86</sup> Following the *JTS*, the *New Tang History* (*Xin Tangshu* or *XTS*), was created to amend the *JTS*. Originally ordered for revision by Emperor Renzong of the Song dynasty in 1044, the *XTS* was not completed until 1060, seventeen years later. Heading the project were Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, two classical Confucian scholars from the Northern Song. Ouyang Xiu's *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* (*Wu da shi ji*), presents women who deviate from traditional boundaries as harbingers of "political and moral decay."<sup>87</sup>

Following the *XTS*, the two other notable histories with records of Wu Zetian are the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian* or *ZZTJ*) written in 1084 during the Song Dynasty by Sima Guang and the *Outline and Digest of the General Mirror* (*Zizhi tongjian gangmu* or *ZZTG*) written by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) during the Southern Song dynasty in 1172. It took nineteen years from the initial order by Emperor Yingzong of the Song in 1065 for Sima Guang and his assistants to complete the *ZZTJ*. Finally published in 1084, the work represents a compilation of Chinese dynastic eras, ranging from the Zhou (1046-256 BC) to the Later Zhou (951-960 CE). These dynastic chronicles consist of 294 volumes, with the Tang dynasty boasting the most of any era at 81. The text is notable for Sima Guang's utilization of

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<sup>84</sup> Veritable Records are composed following the death of an emperor.

<sup>85</sup> While the *JTS* gives credit to only one author, Liu Xu, two individuals, Zhao Ying and Sang Weihuan, predated him as head supervisor. For more on the production of the *JTS*, see Rhee, 9-10 and Twitchett, 1992, 192-196.

<sup>86</sup> Rothschild, 2003, 18.

<sup>87</sup> James T. C. Liu, *Ou-Yang Hsiu: An Eleventh Century Neo-Confucianist* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 107-108 and Rhee, 11.

kaoyi, “extensive text-critical notes,” in which he provides commentary on passages and “alternative accounts from sources which are often no longer extant,” as well as occasionally states which primary source he chose to adopt.<sup>88</sup>

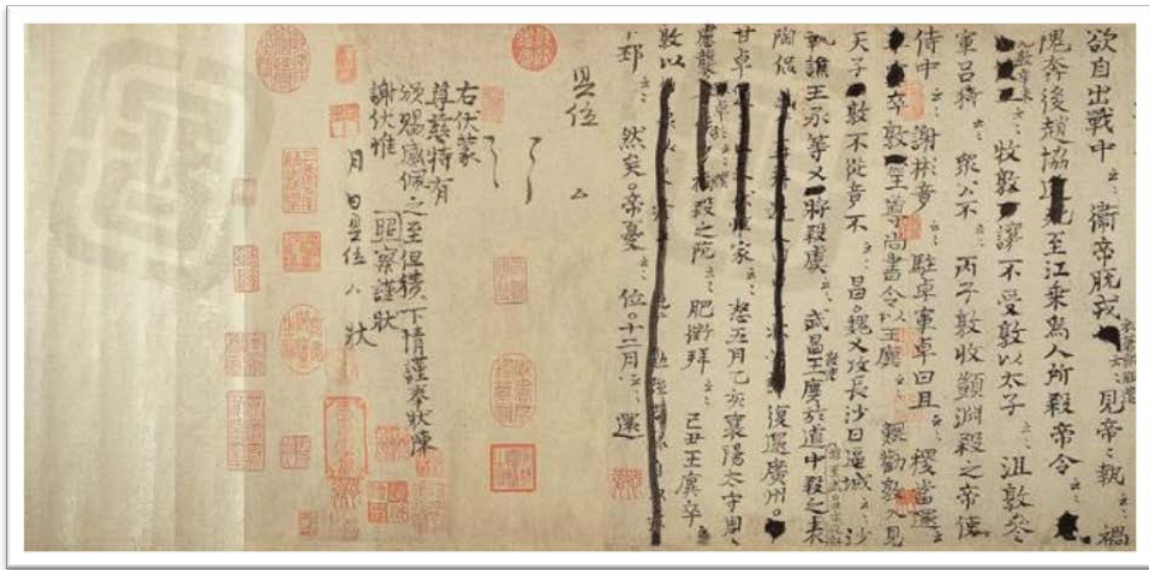


Figure 10: Original draft of the *Zizhi Tongjian* by Sima Guang. The draft is located in the National Library of China.<sup>89</sup>

As a scholar attempting to restore Confucian teachings, Sima Guang’s attitudes toward family and women, as Ebrey points out, “are largely congruent with his views on social and political organization.”<sup>90</sup> Believing that discipline, ritual, and clear hierarchal boundaries are necessary for political and domestic harmony, Sima Guang’s beliefs regarding the family and women are reflected in the *ZZTJ*. In his Song dynasty manual for familial ethics, *Precepts for Family Life (Jiafan)*, he specifies that “the most important thing in managing a family is observing the rules of proper conduct, and the essence of these rules is the separation of male and

<sup>88</sup> Doran, 30. For more on Sima Guang and his adherence to traditional Confucian mores see, Ji Xiao-bin, *Politics and Conservatism in Northern Song China: The Career and Thought of Sima Guang (1019-1086)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005).

<sup>89</sup> Image provided by: [http://www.nlc.gov.cn/service/exhibit/culture/html/01\\_03\\_03.htm](http://www.nlc.gov.cn/service/exhibit/culture/html/01_03_03.htm).

<sup>90</sup> Ebrey, 2003, 22.

female.”<sup>91</sup> This emphasis on division and hierarchy, both in family and governance, is partially motivated by Sima Guang’s anxiety toward three trends: (1) misconduct amongst officials, (2) the ensuing damage to kinship relations caused by sexual excess and financial extravagance, and (3) the commercialization of marriage through the practice of luxurious dowries.<sup>92</sup> Sima Guang decried the growing trend of dowries, penning,

Nowadays, it is the custom for covetous and vulgar people first to ask about the value of the dowry when selecting a bride and the amount of the betrothal gift when marrying a daughter. Some even draw up a contract saying “such goods, in such numbers...” thereby treating their daughters as an item in sales transaction...How can such a transaction be called a marriage among gentlemen-officials?<sup>93</sup>

Alongside this, accusations of officials lavishly wasting government funds on courtesans and the common narrative of kinship relations being destroyed and managed poorly due to men being unable to control their concubines. In one case, a prominent official by the name of Su Shunqin faced accusations of “using funds from the sale of government waste paper to hire two government courtesans for a party he had arranged for his colleagues.”<sup>94</sup> Aware of stories such as Su Shunqin’s, Sima Guang’s literary works stand as an attempt to redress the dissolution of what he considered moral conduct through the defining of rules for family ethics and by condemning excess and greed in historical accounts. To Sima Guang, it was not only male officials led astray by their desires toward concubines that threatened the prosperity of the government and traditional family dynamics. In the *ZZTJ*, women subverting the clear hierarchal

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<sup>91</sup> Sima Guang, “Precepts for Family Life,” in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture*, ed. Robin R. Wang (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 415.

<sup>92</sup> Ann A. Pang-White, *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 76.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>94</sup> Ebrey, 2003,17.

boundaries, particularly female rulers who have obtained excessive power, are associated with conspicuous consumption, self-indulgence, and destruction. Doran describes the development of such accounts as a process in which an established “narrative core is amplified so as to accord with the objective(s) of individual authors.”<sup>95</sup> The narrative core of Sima Guang’s *ZZTJ* is characterized by greed and excess and compelled by the objective of safeguarding the traditional family institution, which he viewed as threatened by the trends of the Song dynasty.



**Figure 11: Painting titled *An Elegant Party* by Emepror Huizong (1100-1125) of the Song dynasty. This painting depicts a banquet attended by officials of the Song.**

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<sup>95</sup> Doran, 271.

The philosophies of Sima Guang left a profound impact upon Zhu Xi, who during his lifetime also saw similar growing threats that held the “potential to undermine family unity” and invited “temptation to selfishness and other vices.”<sup>96</sup> He reiterated and quoted many of Sima Guang’s writings, particularly regarding family management and women. Zhu Xi’s 1187 published work *Elementary Learning (Xiao Xue)* draws heavily upon *Precepts for Family Life* when addressing “parent-child and husband-wife relationships.”<sup>97</sup> In 1194, Zhu Xi established a shrine to honor former worthies. The shrine “included statues for four ancient worthies (Confucius and his disciples) and seven Song scholars, Zhou Dunyi, Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao (1032-1085), Zhang Zai (1020-1077), Shao Yong (1011-1077), Sima Guang, and Zhu Xi’s own teacher Li Tong (1093-1163).”<sup>98</sup> While Zhu Xi produced no text formally dedicated to discussing women, his didactic texts often address spousal relations and the hierarchy of gender. His Neo-Confucian anthology *Reflections on Things at Hand* draws on the cosmology of *yin* and *yang* by placing emphasis on “the inferiority and subordination of *yin*/female to *yang*/male.”<sup>99</sup> He writes, “Between man and woman there is an order of superiority and inferiority, and between husband and wife, there is the principle of who leads and who follows. This is a constant principle.”<sup>100</sup> Following this, in *Further Reflections on Things at Hand*, Zhu Xi strongly advocates for obedience and gender separation through spatiality:

To do wrong is unbecoming to a wife, and to do good is also unbecoming to a wife. A woman is merely to be obedient to what is proper. If a daughter does nothing wrong, that is enough...Only spirits and food are her concern, and not to occasion sorrow to her parents is all that is called for...And Mencius’ mother said, “all a wife needs to do to

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<sup>96</sup> Pang-White, 76.

<sup>97</sup> Ebrey, 2003, 35.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Pang-White, 76.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 76.

fulfill her proper station in life is to prepare the five dishes, cover the wine, take care of her in-laws, and mend the clothes.” Therefore, a woman should bear the [propriety] of the inner chambers and desist from any ulterior motives.”<sup>101</sup>

Zhu Xi’s and Sima Guang’s views toward women, in which transgressive women entering the outer “male” sphere engender familial disunity and political discord through female greed, fundamentally color their construction of Wu Zetian.<sup>102</sup>

### Wu Zetian in Imperial Histories

Textual analysis of how the *JTS*, *XTS*, *ZZTJ*, and the *ZZTG* treat Wu Zetian will be arranged by three points of interest: political legitimacy, Empress Wang’s dethronement and subsequent death, and the death of Li Hong. By comparing these histories in conjunction, I will further argue that the pressing concerns of Zhu Xi and Sima Guang detailed above, as well as the Confucian and Neo-Confucian beliefs of Liu Xu and Ouyang, incited the creation of a “narrative core” that draws on the rhetoric of female transgression. How this “narrative core” is constructed, however, varies in each text. Regardless of methodology, the negotiation of Wu Zetian’s image in these historical accounts marks the starting point for her image to be clearly associated with and defined by the transgressive nature of female rule. Arguably, as will be addressed in the concluding remarks of this study, this association continues in present day and cross-culturally. While comparative research of these texts in relation to Wu Zetian are extant, this study will focus on the construction of topoi in relation to Wu Zetian’s image and the legacy subsequently derived from these histories. I will further examine the rhetorical techniques of

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 79-80.

<sup>102</sup> Here “female greed” is an umbrella term to reference multiple avenues for conspicuous consumption, namely a lust for power, sexual lasciviousness, and displays of lavish spending.

including variant primary sources to enhance authorial credibility and conceal bias as well as the importance given to hearsay.

In the table below, the basic structures of these four texts is outlined.<sup>103</sup> Notably, while the *JTS* and the *XTS* both include a separate section for monographs and memories, the *ZZTJ* and the *ZZTG* do not. In the *JTS*, Wu Zetian is accorded a place in the basic annals of emperors and she is not included in the memoir section featuring the biographies of Empresses and Consorts.

	Total	basic annals	monographs	memoirs
<i>The Old Tang History</i>	200 Chapters	20 Chapters	30 Chapters	150 Chapters
<i>The New Tang History</i>	225 Chapters	10 Chapters	50 Chapters	165 Chapters
<i>The Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government</i>	294 Chapters	294 Chapters	N/A	N/A
<i>The Outline and Digest of the General Mirror</i>	59 Chapters	59 Chapters	N/A	N/A

**Figure 12: Basic structures of the *JTS*, *XTS*, *ZZTJ*, and *ZZTG*.**

Deciding where to position Wu Zetian in these texts posed a significant issue to Confucian scholars. As Rothschild describes, “Within the logical and rational categories of dynastic histories, she posed a pressing problem. Should she, like the other emperors, be accorded a ‘Basic Annals’ at the opening or should she be relegated to ‘Biographies of Empresses and

<sup>103</sup> Rhee, 14-5.

Consorts' [?]" The answer the authors of the *JTS* and *XTS* arrived at, Rothschild asserts, came from the influence of the Grand Historian Sima Qian. Both the *JTS* and the *XTS* ultimately decided to afford Wu Zetian her own basic annals, a precedent set when Sima Qian even gave the "notorious Empress Lu of Han her own basic annals."<sup>104</sup> The inclusion of her annals with the other emperors of the Tang in the *JTS*, rather than with the Empresses and Consorts, does not mean, however, that Liu Xu offered a positive assessment of her reign or viewed her as a legitimate and enlightened ruler. As mentioned earlier, following the basic annals of Wu Zetian in the *JTS*, Liu Xu composed a commentary of her reign and cast a harsh verdict. His commentary reads:

When one governs in a time of chaos, the preservation or ruin of a dynasty hangs in the balance. If a Jie or a Chou sits at the apex of power, even ten Yaos could not regulate the empire. Whereas if a Yao or Shun were at the apex of power, even ten Jies could not foment turmoil. Even when cowards and women avail themselves of the times to gain influence, they still, with their reckless and indecorous ruling conduct, determine and govern the fate of the common people.

Observe, for instance, the years in which Wu issued edicts. Men of superior talent were joined in distress, dragged unwillingly into the perils of her court. None but felt great apprehension for his family. And in the end, they could not reciprocate the kindnesses of the former emperor [Gaozong] or protect the imperial sons [Zhongzong and Ruizong]. For a time, the innocent were ensnared, and those who stuck their necks out were executed. All earth and Heaven were a cage—where was there a safe haven? How tragic! From antiquity, such suffocating slander is called poison. Generations have echoed grievances against the cruelty of the "human swine."

Empress Wu's conspiracy to seize the position of Gaozong's legitimate wife by choking the breath from her own son, a swaddling infant; her mincing and pickling of enemies, grinding their bones into pepper dust—who would not claim this is extreme? This is the disposition of a licentious and jealous woman!

Nonetheless, among the preponderance of heedless counsel and factions arose men of ritual propriety. Though in the beginning the hen crowed to welcome the dawn, in the

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<sup>104</sup> Rothschild, 2003, 16.



end, she restored the throne to her son, the enlightened ruler. Her lofty speech defended Wei Yuanzhong from punishment. Her kind words assuaged Di Renjie's heart. She respected the paragons of the time and suppressed court favorites. She heeded the words of the loyal and eradicated the harsh officials. How splendid! How splendid!

治亂時也，存亡勢也。使桀紂在上，雖十堯不能治；使堯舜在上，雖十桀不能亂。使懦夫女子乘時得勢，亦足坐制群生之命，肆行不義之威。觀夫武氏稱制之年，英才接軫，靡不痛心於家案，扼腕於朝危，竟不能報先帝之恩，衛吾君之子。俄至無辜被陷，引頸就誅，天地為籠，去將安所？悲夫！昔掩鼻之譏古稱其毒；人彘之酷世以為冤。武后奪嫡之謀也，振喉絕隆禪之兒，藉醢碎椒塗之骨，其不道也甚矣，亦姦人妒婦之恆態也。然猶泛延讜議，時禮正人，初雖牝雞司晨，終能復子明辟，飛語辨元忠之罪，善言慰仁傑之心，尊時憲而抑幸臣，聽忠言而誅酷吏。有旨哉！<sup>105</sup>

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Liu Xu closes his remarks on Wu Zetian by alluding to the restoration of order over chaos through reinstatement of the rightful heir Li Xian to the throne. He describes a narrative where Wu Zetian, in her old age, defers to the wisdom of Confucian scholars Di Renjie and Yuanzhong, who convince her to adhere to ritual propriety. Prior to Di Renjie and Yuanzhong's interjection into court affairs, however, Liu Xu recounts a period characterized by disorder, and to do so he draws on the rhetoric of female transgression. In this commentary, he draws heavily on chaos, false blame, and absurdity (*wang*), anger (*nü*), and jealousy (*ji*), as he tells of Wu Zetian killing her own child to frame Empress Wang and her exaction of cruel punishments upon her rivals. While *JTS* accords Wu Zetian a basic annals with the other emperors of the Tang, it is notable that throughout his commentary, Liu Xu refers to her as Empress Wu (武后) and not Emperor (皇帝). Similarly, while Ouyang Xiu, Sima Guang, and Zhu Xi accord Wu Zetian varying degrees of legitimacy as a ruler, all chose not to refer to her as Emperor. Sima Guang

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 17-8.

predominantly refers to her “by her eventual posthumous title ‘Zetian, Empress who Accords with the Sages.’ ”<sup>106</sup> Following Gaozong’s death, he then chooses to call her Grand Dowager (太后). Zhu Xi takes this a step further and ceases referring to Wu Zetian as Grand Dowager during her Zhou dynasty. Rather than Empress Wu or Grand Dowager, as was preceded in the three prior historical accounts, he chooses to call her Madam Wu or Madam Wu of Zhou and withholds from giving her any titles. Zhu Xi further declares the reigning dates of Zhongzong as between 684 and 710, thus claiming the continued existence of the Tang dynasty during this period and portraying Wu Zetian as a usurper rather than a regent.<sup>107</sup> Zhu Xi records,

In the first month of the ninth year, spring, the emperor stayed at Fangzhou. Madam Wu of Zhou presented someone at the court recommended by the Relief Commissioner...

九年春正月帝在房州。周武氏引見存撫使所奉人...<sup>108</sup>

While the *ZZTG*, *ZZTJ*, *JTS*, and *XTS* vary in their designations and recorded reigning titles in relation to Wu Zetian and the Zhou dynasty, they feature a shared proclivity for imbuing their histories with accounts of “female greed” and other female-identified flaws. This inclination is definitively perceptible and encompassing in accounts of Wu Zetian, which seek to delegitimize and negatively frame her rule by casting her as an “anti-mother.” Doran, in examining the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Rhee, 17-8. It should be noted that, a conversation recorded between Zhu Xi and his disciples in *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* shows that he was unsure if Wu Zetian should have been executed for her crimes against the Tang as others lamented. Zhu Xi felt execution was only a possibility if considered solely from the perspective of her crimes and the Tang, Zhu Xi expresses a recognition of a more complex historical reality and the presence of moral dilemmas. Despite Zhu Xi’s appraisal of Wu Zetian presenting one of the more biased condemnations of her and her Zhou dynasty, it is important to recognize him as an individual steeped in the tradition of Chinese biography described earlier in this chapter, rather than solely as an ardent Neo-Confucian scholar. For more on Zhu Xi as a historian and the *ZZTG* see, Tsong-han Lee, “Making Moral Decisions: Zhu Xi’s Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, no 39, (2009).

<sup>108</sup> Rhee, 18.

discursive tradition of the “anti-mother,” states that in the “accounts of Empress Wu’s rise to power, the motifs of harm towards children and single-minded drive to out-manuever female rivals are combined, creating an image of Empress Wu as a woman governed solely by calculated and heartless ambition.”<sup>109</sup> For Confucian scholars, Wu Zetian is an anathema that they delineate as the epitome of discord, while occasionally, and begrudgingly, alluding to her excellence in political affairs.

In embodying the anti-mother driven by female greed and by encroaching upon and shattering the spatial separation of the inner and outer spheres of female and male, Wu Zetian embodies the “unnatural,” that engenders discord. This “unnaturalness” stands as the centerpiece in the accounts of Empress Wang’s dethronement and the death of Wu Zetian’s infant child.

This incident is recorded in the commentary of Wu Zetian’s basic annals in the *JTS*:

Chronicler(s) say(s)...it was Empress Wu’s conspiracy to seize the position of Gaozong’s legitimate wife by choking the breath from her own child, a swaddling infant...

史臣曰... 武后奪嫡之謀也，振喉絕襁褓之兒... <sup>110</sup>

This commentary, notably not included in the main text of the *JTS*, recounts Wu Zetian as excessively lustful for political power, to the point that she chose to kill her own child to frame Empress Wang. As this event is not recorded in the main text, it may be posited that the initial records on which the *JTS* relies either does not include this event or are inconclusive regarding what truly happened. Regardless, this commentary formed the basis for including this event in the *XTS* and the *ZZTJ*. The biography of Empress Wang in the *XTS* embellishes the event:

Lady of Bright Deportment [Wu Zetian] furtively killed her child by smothering it with bedclothes, and [she] waited for the emperor’s arrival... [The emperor] uncovered the

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<sup>109</sup> Doran, 117-8.

<sup>110</sup> Rhee, 23.

bedclothes to see his child, but his child was dead. In alarm he asked the attendants. Everybody said that Empress [Wang had just dropped by. The emperor could not investigate it, and angrily said, “the empress [Wang] killed my daughter...”

昭儀潛斃兒衾下, 伺帝至... 發衾視兒, 死矣. 驚問左右, 皆曰  
后適來... 帝不能察, 怒曰 后殺吾女...<sup>111</sup>

By the *ZZTJ*, this uncertain event, now positioned as an official record, is taken a step further to highlight Wu Zetian’s deceit:

...Lady of Bright Department [Wu Zetian] furtively choked [her daughter], and covered [her] with bedclothes. The emperor arrived, then Lady of Bright Department [Wu Zhao] brightly welcomed him with smile. [Wu Zetian] uncovered bed clothes to show that [his] daughter died. In alarm, [she] cried. [The emperor] asked attendants. Everybody said “the empress [Wang] had just dropped by.” The emperor was furious and said “the empress [Wang] killed my daughter.

...昭儀潛扼殺之, 覆之以被. 上至, 昭儀陽歡笑, 發被觀之, 女  
已死矣, 即驚啼. 問左右, 左右皆曰, 皇后適來此. 上大怒曰,  
后殺吾女...<sup>112</sup>

While definitive answers regarding the death of Wu Zetian and Gaozong’s child do not exist, it may be supposed that the answer perpetuated and elevated into an official record in later accounts likely originated from rumor and is incorrect. The difficulties in ascertaining a single, clear answer regarding this event may be due to the infant dying from natural causes unknown to those of the time. Supporting this likelihood is the successive presence of rumor in Wu Zetian’s histories.

The inclusion of rumor, often from questionable sources, to cast doubt on the subject and conceal bias is a common feature of the ancient historian’s toolkit.<sup>113</sup> Sima Guang’s treatment of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>113</sup> This rhetorical technique is notably predominant amongst ancient Greek and Roman historians, such as Thucydides and Herodotus. For studies on the manipulation of written and oral tradition, the application of hearsay,

Li Hong's death in the *ZZTJ* demonstrates the adoption of rumor in historical accounts. In the main text of the *ZZTJ* Sima Guang records that Wu Zetian poisoned her son:

...on the day Jihai, the crown prince died at Hebi Palace. People that lived in that period suspected that the Heavenly Empress had poisoned him.

... 己亥，太子薨于合璧宮，時人以爲天后酖之也<sup>114</sup>

While Sima Guang chooses to pose the possibility that Wu Zetian poisoned Li Hong in the main text, his *kaoyi* compare contradictory narratives of this event in other primary sources. In the *kaoyi*, Sima Guang notes that *JTS*, an earlier text, does not include poison and implies that Li Hong's died from natural causes:

In the summer, fourth month, the day Jihai, the Crown Prince, Hong, died at Qiyun Pavillion in Hebi Palace.

夏四月...己亥，皇太子弘薨于合璧宮之綺雲殿<sup>115</sup>

The *XTS* conversely diverges from this account in its predecessor the *JTS* and in three separate locations, the basic annals of Gaozong, the basic annals of Empress Wu, and Li Hong's biography, declares Wu Zetian as the murderer of Li Hong:

(1) Fourth month...the day Jihai. The Heavenly Empress killed the Crown Prince.

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and how ancient Greek and Roman historians claimed authority see, John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and D.A. Pauw, "Impersonal Expressions and Unidentified Spokesmen in Greek and Roman Historiography and Biography," *Acta Classica* 23, (1980): 83-95. See also, J.A.S Evans, "Oral tradition in Herodotus," in *Herodotus: Volume 1, Herodotus and the Narrative of the Past*, ed. Rosaria Vignolo Munson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113-123; Andrew Feldherr, "The Poisoned Chalice: Rumor and Historiography in Tacitus' Account of the Death of Drusus," *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 61, (2009): 175-189; Bruce J. Gibson, "Rumours as Causes of Events in Tacitus," *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 40, (1998): 111-190; and R.H. Martin, "Tacitus and the Death of Augustus," *The Classical Quarterly* 5, no. 1.5 (Jan.-Apr., 1955): 123-128.

<sup>114</sup> Rhee, 39.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 37.

四月... 己亥, 天后殺皇太子

- (2) ...Empress was about to attain her intention, but Hong gave opposing requests against the empress to the emperor several times. In 675, [Hong] followed [the emperor] to Hebi Palace, and was killed by poison. He was twenty-four years old.

... 后將驕志, 弘奏請數佛旨. 上元二年, 從幸合璧宮, 遇酖

- (3) ...Empress got angry, and poisoned Hong

...后怒, 酖殺弘<sup>116</sup>

In the *XTS*, the compounding cases of Wu Zetian strangling of her infant child and poisoning her son to seize political authority and positions legitimately held by others serve as evocative portraiture of her “unnatural” behavior. While implied jealousy underlies the animosity between Wu Zetian and Empress Wang described in the *XTS*, it is female greed that defines Wu Zetian’s motives, and it is her lack of natural maternal instincts that allow her to commit atrocities against her children for her own gain. Within the *XTS*, Wu Zetian is remembered primarily for her appropriation of roles not cosmologically sanctioned for women. In occupying an unnatural space for women, both the inner and outer spheres, Wu Zetian’s excessive greed threatens both the court and her family. To the compilers of the *XTS*, the paternalistic role expected of the Emperor over his subjects, could never be properly wielded by Wu Zetian who lacks maternal

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 38.

instinct.<sup>117</sup> To this end, by asserting her unnaturalness as a mother these texts further negate her potential to be a ruler capable of following a virtuous path.

The question is thus raised: why did Sima Guang in the main text of the *ZZTJ* choose to base his information on the later and more hostile account recorded in the *XTS*? As Doran answers, “The answer itself comes back to gossip.” In the passage of his *kaoyi*, which compares the primary sources pertaining to the poisoning of Li Hong, Sima Guang, without citing a source, details “a conversation which supposedly took place between Li Mi (722-789) and Suzong (756-762), in which Li Mi told Suzong that Empress Wu ‘was planning to hold court [as the ruler], so she murdered Xiaojing [Li Hong] by poison...’”<sup>118</sup> There is one critical flaw in the recorded conversation between Li Mi and Suzong: the conversation occurred nearly a century following the poisoning of Li Hong. Li Mi was not present as the events unfolded or present to even hear the “contemporary gossip circulating in 675.”<sup>119</sup> Despite these gaps and even acknowledgement in his *kaoyi* that “the circumstances are inconclusive,” Sima Guang recorded the more hostile, sensational, and rumor driven account.<sup>120</sup> Historians such as Rhee assert that Sima Guang’s commentary and *kaoyi* are meant to cast “doubt on the murder case” and contrast the bias of the *XTS*.<sup>121</sup> This argument, however, overlooks the technique of ancient historians to include variant

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<sup>117</sup> As ‘the father of his people,’ emperors and his subjects were bound by a reciprocal agreement, which defined the absolute authority of the ruler as circumstantial and set expectations for his people. While the emperor “just as the father’s law is supreme [in his family,]” maintains authority over his subjects, his power is maintained through duty fulfillment to his people. It is the responsibility of the people “to render a loyal and willing obedience to the emperor, so long as his rule is just and beneficent, it is equally incumbent upon them to resist his authority, to depose him, and even to put him to death, in case he should desert the paths of rectitude and virtue.” See Trumbull White, *Manners, Customs, Life and History of the People of China, Japan and Corea* (Philadelphia, PA: P.W. Ziegler & Company, 1897), 118.

<sup>118</sup> Doran, 120.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>120</sup> Rhee, 39.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 39.

versions of an event to garner credibility by denying omniscience. The dominant narrative of Wu Zeitan poisoning her son recorded in the main text of the *ZZTJ* utilizes hearsay as evidence. To distance himself and conceal authorial bias, Sima Guang includes conflicting primary sources in his commentary and does not cast “praise or blame”, but rather points toward the ambiguity of evidence. While it could be posited that Sima Guang pursued historical truth as many Chinese biographers did, his choice of positioning the sensational account of Li Hong’s death as the central possibility, his relegation of earlier sources to commentary, and his application of fragmentary evidence is telling of a separate objective. Throughout the *ZZTJ*, events framed through hearsay are consistently present in passages pertaining to women in positions of political authority and serve as an indicator of the construction of a rhetoric of female transgression.

In the *ZZTJ* women who transgressed their sanctioned roles are rarely objects of balanced historical inquiry. Rather than driven by a primary motive of uncovering historical truths, the presentation of a series of powerful women overindulging in excess serve as an antithesis to the moral exemplars that populate Chinese biographies. In a passage dedicated toward describing the greed of the Taiping Princess and the Governor of Yizhou, Duo Huaizhen, Sima Guang describes their relationship and alliance in terms of hearsay as sourced from the *XTS*. Sima Guang writes,

people at the time said that Huaizhen had previously been the Empress’ steward and now he was the Princess’ estate manager

時人謂懷貞前為皇后阿瞽，今為公主邑司<sup>122</sup>

In recording Li Hong’s death, Sima Guang parallels this choice of words by writing that people that lived in that period suspected Wu Zetian of murdering her son. Sima Guang frames his

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<sup>122</sup> Doran, 289.



historical records as informed by the “people who lived in the period,” to borrow their reputation and authority. By relying upon the audience’s interpretation of authority, which is often implicitly given to the past, Sima Guang constructs legitimacy as a historian while simultaneously asserting a formulaically designed narrative. In tandem with this, to produce a narrative of female transgression that would be recognizable to his audience of Confucian scholars, Sima Guang’s historical accounts reference conversations of problematic origin as evidence, relegate more veritable and earlier sources to commentary, and often originate from the *XTS*, a work that Denis Twitchett describes as “implacably hostile to empress Wu.”<sup>123</sup> In doing so, Sima Guang’s *ZZTJ* unfolds a narrative that reinforces his audiences’ attitudes, which perceive women who have transgressed the spatial boundaries delineated by cosmological forces as dangerous.

The historically familiar narrative of female excess that would be perceived by Sima Guang’s audience, is perhaps clearest in its treatment of the death of Empress Wang. Both the *JTS*, *XTS*, and the *ZZTJ* record Empress Wang’s death as ordered by Wu Zetian in a cruel fashion. The *JTS* states:

[The emperor went to the palace where Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao were imprisoned. He felt sympathetic and they had plaintive conversations.] Empress Wu was aware of it and ordered to give a beating of one hundred strokes each to the commoner [Empress Wang] and Madam Xiao, and to chop off their hands and feet, and to throw them in a wine barrel...After a few days, they died.

武后知之，令人杖庶人及蕭氏各一百，截去手足，投於酒甕中...數日而卒<sup>124</sup>

While the *XTS* similarly records:

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<sup>123</sup> Twitchett, 2003, 65.

<sup>124</sup> Rhee, 28, 29.

Empress Wu was aware of it, and quickly ordered a beating of one hundred strokes be given to the two people [Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao], and to cut off their hands and feet, have them trussed, and then throw them in a wine jar...A few days later, they died.

武后知之，促詔杖二人百，剔其手足，反接投醢甕中...數日死。<sup>125</sup>

Finally, in the most dramatic and emotive rendering of the incident, the *ZZTJ* writes of the fate of the bodies of Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao:

Empress Wu heard of it, and she was very angry. She sent people to give a beating of one hundred strokes each to Madam Wang and Madam Xiao, then to cut off [their] hands and feet, and then throw them in a wine jar...A few days later, [they] died. She also beheaded them.

武后聞之，大怒，遣人杖王氏及蕭氏各一百，斷去手足，投酒甕<sup>126</sup>

While all three sources parallel each other, which would logically hint that this event may have occurred, the nature of Wu Zetian's cruelty in these passages draws suspicion. As both Rothschild and Doran identify, this incident closely models the information recorded about Empress Lu of the Han dynasty (BC 206-AD 220) in the *Shiji*.<sup>127</sup> Written by Sima Qian between 109 BC and 91BC, the "Basic Annals of Empress Dowager Lu" in the *Shiji* detail Empress Lu's excessively cruel and violent treatment of her rival, Lady Qi, who also sought after Emperor Gaozu's affections. When Gaozu passed away Empress Lu's son ascended to the throne as Emperor Hui; however, his authority was eclipsed by his mother. Empress Lu proceeded to imprison Lady Qi and summoned Ruyi, Lady Qi's son, to court to have him killed. While

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>127</sup> See N. Harry Rothschild, "Rhetoric, Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2003), 18-9 and Doran, 113.

Emperor Hui attempted to intervene and save his half-brother, he ultimately failed.<sup>128</sup> The *Shiji* records during Lady Qi's imprisonment, Empress Lu herself exacted horrific torture and mutilation upon her former rival:

The empress dowager [Empress Lu] then cut off Lady Qi's hands and feet, took her eyes out, seared her ears...ordered [people] to call her the "human pig."

太后遂斷戚夫人手足，去眼，燬耳...命曰人彘。<sup>129</sup>

The mutilation described in this passage bears a striking resemblance to the torture Wu Zetian reportedly inflicted upon her own rivals. Even the commentary on Wu Zetian in the *JTS* discussed earlier mentions of the travesty of the human swine, and strongly invokes the image Empress Lu.

### Conclusion

In the *JTS*, *XTS*, and *ZZTJ* didacticism supersedes accuracy when recording the accounts of women who encroached on the masculine outer sphere and violated the prevailing cosmological boundaries for men and women. By successively connecting the topoi of female transgression to female rulership, scholars such as Sima Guang constructed literary models to demonstrate behavior discordant with proper roles. Just as exemplary men and women serve as historical models for moralistic behavior, Wu Zetian, Empress Lu, and the other princesses of the Tang dynasty, such as the Taiping Princess, provide contrast in their impropriety. Scholars considered these female rulers fundamentally flawed as "women." They were unnatural in their

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<sup>128</sup> Following his failed attempt to save his half-brother, historical accounts cite that Emperor Hui was eventually driven to a state of near-insanity after Empress Lu forced him to view a mutilated Lady Qi: "Upon realizing that it was Lady Qi, [Emperor Hui] cried out in distress, became sick, and was unable to get up for over a year. He sent someone to inform the Empress Dowager, 'This is not something which a human being would be capable of doing. I am the Empress Dowager's son, there is no way I will ever be able to govern the world again!' Because of this he drank excessively, debauched himself with women and music, ignored the government, and died after seven years." For further discussion on Lady Qi and Empress Lu, See Doran, 53-57. Quoted material is found on page 55.

<sup>129</sup> Rhee, 31.

dominance of the inner and outer spheres and in their lack of maternal instinct. To condemn the presence of women in political affairs, and in response what scholars perceived as a dire threat to the stability of the dynasty, historical accounts served as the primary outlets for sociopolitical discourse and the reinforcement of such beliefs within the aristocracy.

### CHAPTER THREE: WU ZETIAN AS AN EXEMPLAR OF TRANSGRESSION

*“Today these people still insist on calling me child,  
But tomorrow another family will call me concubine.  
This is why my heart is broken and I sigh with sorrow,  
Late at night I wipe my tears as my innards are crushed.  
Had I known that my powered face would be sold for gold,  
I should long ago have plunged into the moonlit Yangzi River.”*<sup>130</sup>

While biographies of men, which defined moral qualities for an exemplary individual remained relatively constant, virtue for women was less static and definitive. For the women of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the paramount virtues that took shape were *jie*, sexual purity and absolute fidelity to one’s husband, and *lie*, a commitment to fidelity and purity bound by the ideal of self-sacrifice in suicide or death.<sup>131</sup> The Ming dynasty, which stressed the virtue of *lie*, marks the rise and pinnacle of the cult of chastity, where suicide in pursuance of upholding chastity upon the death of a husband, death of a fiancé, or amid wartime struggles, was celebrated. The cult of chastity was further solidified through government incentives, which offered to reward families that could present evidence of the fidelity of a chaste widow.<sup>132</sup> The celebration of martyrdom by Ming emperors further reinforced familial dynamics to align with Neo-Confucian values. This philosophical grounding may be noted within the moral narratives that emerged during the Ming dynasty, which recalled tales of women choosing to commit suicide in the presence of their dying husbands or to serve her husband’s family without

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<sup>130</sup> *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, eds. Idema, W. L., and Beata Grant (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 517.

<sup>131</sup> Fangqin Du and Susan Mann “Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China,” in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, eds., Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 220.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

remarriage.<sup>133</sup> One such story in the *Mingshi*, the official dynastic history of the Ming, follows Lady Sun, who chooses filial devotion to her husband's family rather than remarriage. Lady Sun, in response to being asked why she chose a difficult life without remarriage, quotes Zhu Xi by stating, "Starving to death is a minor matter; whereas losing one's chastity is an extremely important matter."<sup>134</sup> The Ming dynasty wholly embraced the Neo-Confucian conviction that a widow who remarries forfeits her moral virtue. It is perhaps ironic then, but fitting, that the dynasty that held the cult of chastity at a high premium would also be the dynasty to witness the advent of erotic literature and represent a period of unparalleled obsession and anxiety toward desire.

The rise of erotic literature during the Ming dynasty stems from the unprecedented scale the publishing industry reached and the proliferation of vernacular literature. As Ebrey ascertains, "the boundaries between literati and popular culture were being breached bit by bit by urban culture."<sup>135</sup> In the early seventeenth century, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian missionary, described his astonishment at the exceedingly large numbers of books in circulation and their incredibly low prices.<sup>136</sup> Rather than being composed in the "terse and allusive literary language used in the classics," books were increasingly being published in the vernacular. Countless years of devoted study were no longer necessary to enjoy written works, and this development meant that literature was now open to previously marginalized individuals who had only received a rudimentary education, namely merchants, shop clerks, and women from

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>135</sup> Ebrey, 2010, 201.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 201.

educated families.<sup>137</sup> The popularity of vernacular literature continued under the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), and within the Ming-Qing period four novels emerged to help redefine and legitimize fiction and drama on the literary hierarchy, which were traditionally ranked low in prestige. *Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, regarded as the “Four Great Classical Novels”, combined classical prose with fictional narratives in the vernacular style. It is notable that the famous erotic novel *Golden Lotus* (*Jin Ping Mei*), first printed 1610, is often considered the fifth Chinese classic. Anonymously composed, the author of *Golden Lotus* claims that his work was influenced by *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, an erotic novel featuring Wu Zetian described later in this chapter. Featuring the consequences of excessive sexuality, *Golden Lotus* attests to the prevalence of cautionary and moral tales regarding desire that accompanied the advent of the vernacular style.

At the center of erotic literature during the Ming dynasty, where novels often closely resembled historical fiction with pornographic elements, stands evocations of Wu Zetian. As Mitchell asserts in his essay, “Representation”, the “representation of fictional persons and events can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions; one might argue, in fact, that representation is precisely the point where these questions are most likely to enter the literary work.”<sup>138</sup> In the case of Wu Zetian’s depictions within imperial histories, portrayals reflect Confucian concerns by demonstrating the dangers of moral decay induced by all-encompassing decadence and sexuality attributed to female rule. While Ming-Qing evocations of Wu Zetian draw upon this typecasting, her use as an ideological vehicle extends

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 201-202.

<sup>138</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Representation,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11-22.

beyond condemning female interference in government. Her erotic representations emerged as an avenue for discourse amid the unprecedented and intimate discussion amongst Late Ming literati regarding desire. As Huang has noted, the multitude of their recorded concerns and exchanges by letter, “point to a widespread anxiety as well as a deep sense of loss of control,” toward desire.<sup>139</sup> Alongside this, Zhu Xi’s popularized and established Neo-Confucian doctrine propagated the strict containment of excessive desire, an ideology that both reflects male-driven anxieties and why the cult of chastity found prominence in the Ming. By examining differing, yet often ideologically paralleling, Ming-Qing period fictional texts, it becomes clear that Wu Zetian’s image is not only able to be evoked to criticize female political authority, but also that the longstanding and fundamental tropes synonymous with her legacy due to Confucian scholars were employed to suit a variety of tenets on the political spectrum. For the literati of the Ming-Qing period, Wu Zetian represents unmitigated, obsessive sexuality. Accordingly, the narratives that feature Wu Zetian thematically conclude with the restoration of the Confucian patriarchal order, reinstatement of natural balance, and the triumph over female-initiated discord. Even vernacular works that do not focus upon Wu Zetian, however, often draw upon the representation portrayed within imperial histories. These small mentions encode the narrative with cultural topoi and thus indicate to readers their sociopolitical bearings. In Cao Xueqin’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the lead character’s niece-in-law, Qin Keqing, collects items from infamous women who are notorious for their association with discord and upsetting balance through sexual transgressions. One of the items Keqing displays is a mirror that once belonged to Wu Zetian.

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<sup>139</sup> For further discussion regarding the “unique narrative capacity and representation power” fiction offered Late Ming literati, see Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9, 21.



The main character of the novel, Jia Baoyu, at one point becomes disoriented from looking into the mirror and is described as being affected by the lingering excess sexuality of Wu Zetian.<sup>140</sup>



**Figure 13: Photograph of exhibition outside of Beijing that depicts various scenes from Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Wu Zetian's brief mention in the novel is depicted here.<sup>141</sup>**

<sup>140</sup> See Louise P. Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 83-86; Cao Xueqin, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. H. Bencraft Joly (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 70.

<sup>141</sup> Ivan Walsh, "Cao Xueqin, Dream of the Red Chamber," <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ivanwalsh/4140085266>.

*The Emperor of Satisfaction, Wu Zetian in the Ruyijun zhuan*

Of the Ming-Qing period works featuring Wu Zetian, the *Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (*Ruyijun zhuan*) is one of the most poignant and (in)famous examples. Written by an unidentified author during the early sixteenth century, the *Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* continues to draw controversy among scholars due to its unique nature of pairing graphic, yet awkward, pornographic descriptions with historical accounts of Wu Zetian's violent, cruel, and improper ascent to power. In deviating partially from historical records and moving into the realm of fiction, the narrative follows the promiscuous affair between Xue Aocao, an individual of the author's creation, and Wu Zetian. Sex paired with moral remonstrance dominates the plot, as Xue Aocao renders loyal service by sexually gratifying Wu Zetian, offers counsel in his unique position, and avoids corruption by rejecting her favoritism. The narrative reaches its boiling point when Xue Aocao threatens to castrate himself if his counsel for Li Xian to be reinstated as crown prince is not accepted. Wu Zetian, horrified by this prospect and her heart moved by his counsel, later restores Li Xian as crown prince. *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* thus centers on Xue Aocao, who as the embodiment of *yang*, subjugates Wu Zetian through sexual means, and convinces her to accede to his counsel. The work ultimately concludes with the ascent of Li Xian to the throne and the restoration of propriety and balance with the reestablishment of the Tang. While it may be posited that the historical elements of the text, as well as the inclusion of Wu Zetian, are a backdrop and device for erotica, this claim does not account for the nuanced scholastic nature of the work, as deliberate and precise historical allusions pervade the text to

extents that average readers will be unable to identify.<sup>142</sup> It further does not account for the moralistically driven plot, in which remonstrance, the importance of upright Confucian ministers, and the restoration of the Tang underpin interactions between Xue Aocao and Wu Zetian.

If *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* is not intended to entertain the greater populace, but rather to appeal to erudite and trained scholars, then the author's motives must reside within philosophical considerations in the context of the moralistically driven Ming dynasty. To demonstrate the political nature of the narrative and the significance of Wu Zetian's specter within it, this chapter will examine the text through three considerations: (1) erotic realism; (2) the understanding of pre-nineteenth century pornography as a vehicle for political rhetoric and power structures; (3) the fluid use of the rhetoric of female greed, particularly sexual lasciviousness, codified in earlier histories to address present concerns. The paradigm of erotic realism, outlined by Kronhausen and Kronhausen, is an essential premise to discerning Wu Zetian's role in the abundance of erotic works surfacing during sixteenth century China. Stone attempts to synthesize the major contributions of Kronhausen and Kronhausen, noting that while their work suffers from numerous fallacies, it is an effective tool for literary analysis of fictional narratives.<sup>143</sup> Stone cites, "...In pornography (hard core obscenity) the main purpose is to stimulate erotic response in the reader. And that is all. In erotic realism, truthful description of the basic realities of life, as the individual experiences it, is of the essence, even if such portrayals (whether by reason of humor, or revulsion, or any other cause) have decidedly anti-

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<sup>142</sup> Charles Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica: The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>143</sup> E. Kronhausen and P. Kronhausen, *Pornography and the Law: The Psychology of Erotic Realism and Pornography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1959).

erotic effect.”<sup>144</sup> Often erotic scenes are obstructed at their climax with anti-erotic and deflating descriptions, such as in one instance where the author interrupts the height of a sexual encounter between Wu Zetian and Xue Aocao with banal physiological descriptions akin to a medical text. As Stone aptly concludes regarding the questionable erotic nature of the text, “It has too much history. The history is far too accurate. There is too much moral remonstrance...and most of all, it interrupts even the most explicit descriptions with ironic references and odd observations that almost always detract from erotic ambiance.”<sup>145</sup>

If *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* is masquerading as an erotic work, then its choice of Wu Zetian as a central character and concealed moral structure signals examiners to consider the prevailing doctrines and anxieties of the Ming. As an ideology focusing on an examination of one’s self, the rise of Neo-Confucianism, decades before the suspected conception of the *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, marked a new season in Chinese thought. To philosophers who laid the foundation for Ming Neo-Confucianism, such as Zhu Xi and Cheng Yi of the Song dynasty, desire harbored a destructive character if left unregulated. In reaction to the decadence that prevailed during the Song dynasty, Zhu Xi, stressing the importance of avoiding indulgent and excessive desires, pens, “Desire such as those of the mouth, nose, ears, eyes, and the four limbs are indispensable to a human being. If one has too many of them and does not restrain oneself one will inevitable lose one’s original heart.” Zhu Xi’s philosophies were transformative and integral the Ming’s attitude toward sexuality and desire.<sup>146</sup> Stone poses the possibility that *The*

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<sup>144</sup> Stone, 15.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>146</sup> See Ping-Cheung Lo, “Zhu Xi and Confucian Sexual Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (1993): 465-77. For more on Zhu Xi’s doctrine in relation to the cult of chastity and the anxieties of the literati during the Ming see Huang, 23-35.

*Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* could be a subtle criticism or expression of fear toward schools breaking away from Neo-Confucian doctrines, particularly when beliefs relating to the regulation of desire were challenged. He notes that Wang Yangming's emerging philosophy, which was highly controversial and subject to disapproval at the time of the novels conception, may have been the target. While *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* may not be a political treatise "whose ultimate purpose is to critique the thought of Wang Yangming," it does "detail the destructive consequences that contemporaries feared would be produced by a radically subjective philosophy." Thus, regardless of whether *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* served to critique other schools of thought during the Ming, the narrative does strongly invoke influence from Zhu Xi's ideologies.<sup>147</sup>

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the novel's ideological origins, reliance on nuanced Tang historical sources, and use of Wu Zetian's image as a stark warning of the dangers of excessive desire resides in its sources. As mentioned earlier, the two Confucian scholars praised for their moral remonstrance of Wu Zetian and their role in the reinstatement of Li Xian were Di Renjie and Yuanzhong. In *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* a poem posed to readers captures the efforts of Di Renjie to restore the Tang dynasty, as well as persuade Wu Zetian to reinstate her sons Li Dan and Li Xian. The poem alludes to the restoration of a young phoenix and a dream Wu Zetian supposedly had before reinstating her son Li Xian to the throne:

One sentence calls back  
The dream of the parrot;  
Snatched back from the highest heavens

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<sup>147</sup> Stone, 39-49.

He returns as a young phoenix.<sup>148</sup>

The dream this poem references has multiple iterations in Tang histories, with the one of the earliest versions found in the *Chaoye qianzai* (*Comprehensive record of affairs within and without the court*). The text is a minor history from the Tang period written by Zhang Zhuo and is listed in a catalogue by Ouyang Xiu in the *XTS* under the headings of *zaishi* (miscellaneous histories) and *za zhuanji* (miscellaneous biographies).<sup>149</sup> Zhang Zhuo records:

Empress Wu Zetian once had a dream about a parrot; its plumage was magnificent but both of its wings were broken. She asked her senior ministers what it meant, but they all remained silent. Administrator Di Renjie said: “The word parrot is homophonous with Your Majesty’s surname; the two broken wings are your two sons, the prince of Luling and the prince of Xiang. If your Majesty were to elevate these two sons then the two wings would be restored.”<sup>150</sup>

*The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* employs another poem shortly after, which also mentions Di Renjie’s role in the restoration of the Tang.<sup>151</sup> Alongside introducing the poem, the author furthers the historical setting of the narrative by relying upon Tang histories. The author writes that Wu Zetian executed countless individuals to maintain her power against the people, as she knew that “her personal conduct was not correct,” and cites that an official historian wrote the poem “to deride her.”<sup>152</sup> Below is an excerpt from the poem:

With the crow of the hen  
the purple palace was empty;  
It took but the fallen lowers from a few trees  
and the ground was covered with red.  
In that age the Fair Flatterer

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<sup>148</sup> For the remainder of this paper with regard to *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* I rely on Stone’s translation. Op. cit., 137.

<sup>149</sup> Oliver J. Moore, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China: Reading an Annual Programme in the Collected Statements by Wang Dingbao (870-940)* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2004), 58-61.

<sup>150</sup> Stone, 89.

<sup>151</sup> Di Renjie is referred to as Duke Di in the poem.

<sup>152</sup> Stone, 137.

resided in the Northern Palace;  
One morning the son of heaven  
occupied the Eastern Palace.  
The chambers of the empress engendered disorder  
because of the Zhang brothers;  
The restoration of the state itself  
depended upon Duke Di.<sup>153</sup>

Described by the author of *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* as being “inwardly lascivious and outwardly ruthless,” Wu Zetian as a usurper and as a threat to stability is further portrayed in this poem’s inclusion. The poem’s opening line references the expression of the hen crowing at dawn originating from the *Shujing*, a phrase later successively utilized in both the *JTS* and the *ZZTJ* to denote a woman who has usurped sanctioned roles and who threatens disaster in her impropriety. Lines drawn from the *JTS*, *XTS*, and the *ZZTJ* and other compilations of Tang history and literature pervade the text, particularly when the narrative portrays Wu Zetian as seduced by excessive desires. Even when describing Wu Zetian’s ascent to power, the author paraphrases historical records. In the case of the death of Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao, the author informs their narrative through the *JTS* and the *XTS*, “Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao were framed and punished for crimes they did not commit. Each was flogged with a cane two hundred times, their hands and feet were cut off, and they were tossed into a wine crock.”<sup>154</sup> Even the specter of Empress Lu of the Han dynasty, which echoes as a vehicle for delegitimization in the commentary of the *JTS* and underlies the records of Wu Zetian’s cruel treatment of Empress Wang, is present in the text. Aocao, in counseling Wu Zetian, alludes to

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 136

the extermination of the Lu clan following the death of Empress Lu in 180 BC.<sup>155</sup> He states, “All under heaven say that Your Majesty intends to usurp the Tang. I fear that after your thousand autumns and ten thousand years have expired, the calamity that befell the Lu clan may occur. The hearts of the people do not yet despise the Tang.”<sup>156</sup> Stone observes that this statement directly paraphrases a speech made by Di Renjie to Wu Zetian recorded in the *XTS*, in which Di Renjie similarly counsels, “As I see it, neither heaven nor the people have yet come to despise the virtue of the Tang.”<sup>157</sup>

Underlying to the narrative of *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* is “the [direct] relationship between promiscuous infatuation and the loss of power.”<sup>158</sup> Wu Zetian’s pursuit of her extreme desires results in ruin for those who engage in sexual relations with her, as both Taizong and Gaozong become ill and die following their infatuation with Wu Zetian. Wu Zetian herself loses her power as she returns the throne to Li Xian following her affair with Xue Aocao. Thus, the narrative offers a warning to readers that strongly reverberates the anxieties of Ming scholars: those who indulge in desire to extremes and pursue excess will ultimately lose control. The author goes as far as to explicitly state, “Generally speaking, pleasure in the extreme leads to sorrow. This is the nature of man.”<sup>159</sup> In tandem with this warning, Wu Zetian’s female greed is repeatedly emphasized throughout the narrative. Early in the text, the author pens that even “veteran prostitutes and nymphomaniacs were not able to match [Wu Zetian,] and her desires

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 214, footnote 133.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 214, footnote 134.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 153.



grew incandescent.”<sup>160</sup> The author then briefly details Wu Zetian’s initial meeting and affair with the Zhang brothers, Changzong and Yizhi. Wu Zetian is taken by their captivating beauty and indulges in all means of excess with the brothers to the point of even subverting the normative order of nature. In the winter, desiring to “roam through the imperial garden with Yizhi and Chanzong to take pleasure in the flowers,”<sup>161</sup> Wu Zetian announces the following edict:

Tomorrow morning I will roam the imperial garden;  
With great dispatch let spring be informed.  
The flowers must bloom overnight  
Without waiting for the morning zephyrs to blow.<sup>162</sup>

The following morning all the flowers, in the dead of winter, followed her decree and bloom.

The inclusion of this edict in *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* holds high significance. Foremost, it further supports Stone’s argument that the text is riddled with historical allusions that would be recognizable to trained Confucian scholars. This edict was never promulgated by Wu Zetian, but is rather a poem from the Tang dynasty, which may now be found compiled in the *Quan Tang shi* (*Complete Tang Poems*)—a work commissioned by the Kangxi Emperor during the Qing dynasty in 1705.<sup>163</sup> The edict also implies the female greed harbored by Wu Zetian, who goes as far as to subvert the order of nature to fulfill her desires. This subversion of order is reflective of her own “unnaturalness” as a ruler. Finally, as will be examined in this chapter, this poem reappears in a later narrative work in a new form and is again employed to portray Wu Zetian as transgressive.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 207, footnote 71.

Alongside the threat of excessive desire is the linchpin theme of the importance of upright Confucian scholars to combat through remonstrance the threat of discord engendered by uncontrolled desire. While later in the narrative Di Renjie plays a role in echoing the counsel initially provided by Xue Aocao, it is ultimately Xue who functions as the narrative's "hero."<sup>164</sup> Readers may ask, however, how does Xue Aocao, who did not pass the civil service examination and who gained his role as a Confucian minister to Wu Zetian through physical means, truly embody a scholar worthy of praise? Stone, as well as Huayang Sanren who penned the preface to the novel, posit that *The Lord of Satisfaction* presents the notion that "moral exhortation in difficult times can take peculiar if not repugnant forms."<sup>165</sup> Compared to earlier lovers of Wu Zetian in the novel that are briefly mentioned, such as the Zhang brothers, Huaiyi, and Shen Nanqiu<sup>166</sup> who all exploit their presence in Wu Zetian's inner chambers to gain favor, Xue Aocao staunchly rejects any of her offers. In one case Wu Zetian offers to strip the offices given to the Zhang brothers and give them to Xue Aocao, as well as provide him with a magnificent residence. Unwavering from his beliefs and role as a proper Confucian minister, Xue Aocao replies, "your Majesty has many favorites on the outside, and the harm caused to your imperial virtue is not insignificant. Why would you then make such a promotion? Furthermore, I live by myself alone. Why would you need to build a residence for me?"<sup>167</sup> Throughout the affair, Xue

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<sup>164</sup> It is notable, however, that Xue Aocao is introduced to Wu Zetian by none other than Di Renjie. Patrick Hanan, in his paper presented at the conference on *Jin Ping Mei*, poses a contrasting purpose underlying Xue Aocao in the narrative. Hanan "considers Xue Aocao's relationship with Wu Zetian as described in the *Ruyijun zhuan* a parody of the 'whole stereotyped theme of the ruler's destruction at the hands of his favorite.'" For a discussion of Hanan's paper and the varying interpretations of Xue Aocao's significance, see Huang, 120-123.

<sup>165</sup> Stone, 214.

<sup>166</sup> Corresponding with the theme of promiscuous affairs leading to ruin, both Huaiyi and Shen Nanqiu fail to "overcome [the] disease of lust" and die from illness. Ibid, 139.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 147.

Aocao uses his position to counsel and persuade Wu Zetian to reinstate Li Xian. His threat to castrate himself to “propitiate the people of the empire” should she not accede to his counseling demonstrates that his loyalty to serving as a proper Confucian minister supersedes his role as her lover.

Furthermore, Xue’s wiliness to mutilate himself in order to adhere to his virtues is the catalyst for Wu Zetian to consider restoring Li Xian as crown prince. *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* describes her reaction and the results, “The empress’ heart was moved. From this time on Aocao often exhorted her along the same lines, and afterward, having obtained the similar counsel of Di Renjie, she summoned the prince of Luling to again be crown prince.”<sup>168</sup> Later in the narrative, Li Xian attempts to locate Xue Aocao out of gratitude following his ascent to the throne, however, he cannot be found. Throughout *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, Xue Aocao traverses the threat of becoming corrupted during his time with Wu Zetian. While Xue ultimately does resist corruption, Stone notes that “his virtues are perilously close to what should normally be considered vices.” Thus, while the “hero” of the story, Xue is not an individual to be emulated, but rather stands as a reflection of “the desperate measures to which ministers must resort when a dynasty has sunk to such depravity.”<sup>169</sup> In the *Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, the dynasty has reached a state of depravity due to Wu Zetian’s extreme lascivious, excessive desires, and her occupancy of an unnatural role for women.

Studies of *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* often trend toward considerations of the Ming dynasty and ideology rather than the narrative’s historical setting of the Tang or Wu Zetian. The

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 99-100.

analytical discourse purported by scholars like Stone, however, lend credence to the overarching development of Wu Zetian's representation in relation to the rhetoric of female transgression and greed.<sup>170</sup> For in *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, a work which emerged during the height of the cult of chastity, the sensual decadence and descent into excess displayed by Wu Zetian inhabits the spectrum of female sexual impropriety and imbalance. It was not coincidental that Wu Zetian was chosen to head the novel. Following Wu Zetian's rhetorical delegitimization and scrutiny in historical records penned by Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholars, *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, in embracing the same Confucian mores, draws upon Wu Zetian's established image of transgression for literary potency. In doing so, the novel offers a political commentary fueled by the anxieties prevailing at the time.

#### *Female Greed and the Jinghuayuan*

Following *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, the 1827 expansive Qing dynasty fantasy novel *Flowers in the Mirror (Jinghuayuan)* continues the association of Wu Zetian's image with female transgressive behavior. Li Ruzhen's *Flowers in the Mirror* is often considered to be a satirical work directly criticizing Confucian subjugation of women. To support this claim, scholars often note that in the novel Wu Zetian presides as the ruler of the kingdom and in one instance, male concubines undergo foot binding to serve as imperial consorts in a satirical

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<sup>170</sup> Junjie Luo is one scholar who provides a new strategy for examining *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*. Luo gives centrality to the presence of foreign entities throughout the narrative and asserts that "One strategy adopted by the authors of Ming erotic stories is to associate sexual expressions that challenge the existing social order with portrayals of the foreign." By employing a foreign setting, Ming authors "exoticized the erotic in order to exclude unsettling elements of sexual desire from China." While Luo's argument does not examine the employment of Wu Zetian's image, it does further attest to the anxieties of the literati that reached predominance during the late Ming. Junjie Luo, "When the Exotic Met the Erotic: The Representation of the Foreign in Ruyijun zhuan and 'Jinhailing zongyu wangshen,'" *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 8, no. 2 (June 2014): 279.

reversal of roles.<sup>171</sup> Such examinations of *Flowers in the Mirror*, however, are often fragmentary and focus upon peculiarities contained within the work, often due to the novel's episodic structure. Holistic approaches to *Flowers in the Mirror*, such as Epstein, seek to understand the overarching framework, characterization, and connective ideas prevalent in Chinese motifs that pervade the text.<sup>172</sup> Such an approach to this work often serves as a direct counterpoint to more fragmentary and episodic examinations. Thus, *Flowers in the Mirror* is wrought with controversy. Studies utilizing a compartmental framework, all elevate *Flowers in the Mirror* as a work possessing distinct feminist qualities. For example, Shih states that an episode in *Flowers in the Mirror*, "will surely become immortal in the world history of women's rights. And his ideas about women's chastity, education, and election will occupy a glorious position in the Chinese history of women's rights."<sup>173</sup> Yet, Epstein argues and as this paper upholds, it is more likely that *Flowers in the Mirror* reflects the literati's anxiety toward instability during the period rather than serving as a feminist manifesto. Thus, this paper gives preference to the conclusions supported by holistic approaches and lays out the charged nature of Wu Zetian's representation through the following premises: the *ying-yang* allegorical framework asserted by Epstein and prominence of foxes in Chinese tradition and literature.

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<sup>171</sup> Two studies that assert that *Flowers in the Mirror* is fundamentally a work of early feminism are: Qingyun Wu, *Female Rule in Chinese and English Literary Utopias* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 8-13 and Liang Luo, "Problems of Translation and Transnational Feminisms: On Gu Ruopu and Li Ruzhen," in *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought*, ed. Susan Bordo (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 169-182.

<sup>172</sup> Maram Epstein, "Engendering Order: Structure, Gender, and Meaning in the Qing Novel *Jinghua yuan*," *Chinese literature: Essays Articles, Reviews* 18, (1996).

<sup>173</sup> Op. cit., Ying Liang, "Jing Hua Yuan and Its Equal But Separate Sexual Ideology," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 169-81, 169.

Li Ruzhen's *Flowers in the Mirror* is foremost a creation of the Qing dynasty. While contemporary analysis champions certain episodes as feminist, this conclusion prevails from a mindset divorced from the archetypes, motifs, and perceptions that dominated Ming-Qing literature.<sup>174</sup> Epstein's comprehensive argument that *Flowers in the Mirror* utilizes a *ying-yang* framework supports its conclusions by rooting analysis in Ming-Qing cultural context and paralleling the work with other literature from the period. By the Western Han, the duality of *yin-yang* increasingly became associated with gender and an array of aspects in daily life. *Yin*—associated with death, private, negative, cold, water, and dark components of life—embodies the feminine. While *Yang*—life, public, positive, hot, fire, and light—stands in harmonious opposition to *Yin*. When these qualities are balanced, order reigns over disorder in the Universe. By the Qing dynasty, Confucian philosophers had fixed the dichotomy of *yin-yang* into a hierarchical order. Defined by the thematic balance of *yin* and *yang*, the world of *Flowers in the Mirror* perceives irregularities and natural calamities as intrinsically linked to an imbalance.<sup>175</sup> Epstein describes *yin* and *yang*'s interplay of superior and subjugation by noting, “whereas *yang* connotes regulative order in society and nature, *yin* when properly controlled supports and regenerates the metaorder, and when not properly contained can be a transgressive force that subverts the metaorder.”<sup>176</sup> *Yin* is a transformative element in Chinese perception, and in extreme

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<sup>174</sup> Amy Dooling posits that while the reversal of gender roles in the famous episode of *Flowers in the Mirror*, “Kingdom of Women,” may lead readers to assume progressive implications, these implications are “arguably canceled out by the emphatic association between female domination and sociopolitical upheaval framing the novel as a whole.” See, Amy D. Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2005), 216.

<sup>175</sup> For a brief history of *yin-yang* see Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 162-66. Also for an exploration of *yin-yang* in relation to health see Cordia Ming-Yeuk Chu, “Menstrual Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Women,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 1 (1980): 41-42.

<sup>176</sup> Epstein, 108.

amounts it subverts order and inherent to its imbalance is feminine transgressions. In this sense, such as within *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, Wu Zetian exemplifies the subversive qualities of excess yin, which are subjugated and contained by Xue Aocao, who is the epitome of yang. In *Flowers in the Mirror*, Epstein notes that the chapters of the novels coincide with the numbers associated with yin and yang. The chapters 1-6 and 33-37, numbers aligned with yin, “narrate the disruption of order, [while] certain yang chapters, based on the yang number nine, focus on the regulation of disorder.” Descending to earth on the coldest day of winter, *Taiyin*, when yin is at its highest, Wu Zetian appears in chapter three and subverts normative order until overthrown in the last six chapters by Tang loyalists.<sup>177</sup>

While Li Ruzhen’s Wu Zetian is subdued, and her sexuality and cruelty muted, the deep-rooted ideologies of Confucian China still dictate her depiction. By casting Wu Zetian as the reincarnation of the evil Spirit of the Heart-Moon-Fox, Li Ruzhen draws upon a conventional and popularized literary theme. In Chinese literature, fox-spirits have symbolized sexually violent younger women, whose beauty enables their transgressions amongst men.<sup>178</sup> *Flowers in the Mirror* may not outright describe the lasciviousness of Wu Zetian, but its choice of casting her as a reincarnated fox-spirit signals an underlying sexually charged portrayal that readers of the Qing would recognize. Beyond this, Wu Zetian’s transgressions and excess manifest in the narrative in other forms. In a show of moral decadence, a drunk Wu Zetian decrees that all flowers are to bloom, despite it being the dead of winter. She orders, “Let it be known to spring.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 112-115.

<sup>178</sup> Examples of this typecasting may be noted with Xue Sujie of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* and Pan Jinlian of *Jing Ping Mei*, two sexually deviant and violent female characters who are both reincarnated fox-spirits. For an examination of the presence of foxes in Chinese literary tradition see Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006) and Epstein, 119, 120.

I am coming to the Palace gardens in the morning. All flowers are ordered to make preparations at once and to be in bloom before dawn tomorrow.”<sup>179</sup> This event is a stark reference to the content of the very same poem employed by *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* to demonstrate the excessive desires of Wu Zetian, while subsequently linking her with the unnatural. While the flowers in *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* hurriedly bloom the next morning to meet Wu Zetian’s wishes, this is not the case in *Flowers in the Mirror*. When the peonies fail to initially bloom, Wu Zetian takes this as a personal affront and in her outrage threatens to “eliminate peonies from the earth.” Even once the peonies bloom following a show of extreme force by Wu Zetian, she determines to still punish the flowers for their offense and orders for them to be “banished to Loyang.”<sup>180</sup> The overall actions of Wu Zetian in these passages echo the topoi of transgressive women, such as overflowing and excessive desire, moral deterioration, lust for political authority, and a cruel nature backed by violence that threatens natural order and will bring ruin to the dynasty.

### Conclusion

*Flowers in the Mirror* and *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* demonstrate the potency of repeated melding between political rhetoric, literary commonplaces, and a historical figure. Despite the lack of an authorial identity, there is no question that each text embraced the anxieties, doctrines, and the prevailing atmosphere of the Ming and early Qing dynasties regarding desire and the spatial regulation of women to the inner sphere. In both of these works, female greed and impropriety are met with restoration of the Tang dynasty, which stands to

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<sup>179</sup> Li Ruzhen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, trans. Lin Tai-Yi (Bronx, NY: Ishi Press International, 2015), 27.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 29-31.



represent the triumph of balance and sanctioned order over discord. Wu Zetian's personhood, already pervasively associated with transgression in historical records, offered an already defined rhetorical vehicle to convey the new moral precedents espoused by Neo-Confucian scholars. Consequently, the continued employment of Wu Zetian's image in these two novels further solidified her legacy's synonymy with the rhetoric of female transgression, particularly when relating to rulership.

## CONCLUSION: THE COMMODIFIED REINCARNATION

*“The fifteen years I spent as emperor was the loneliest time of my life. Except for power, I have nothing.”<sup>181</sup>*

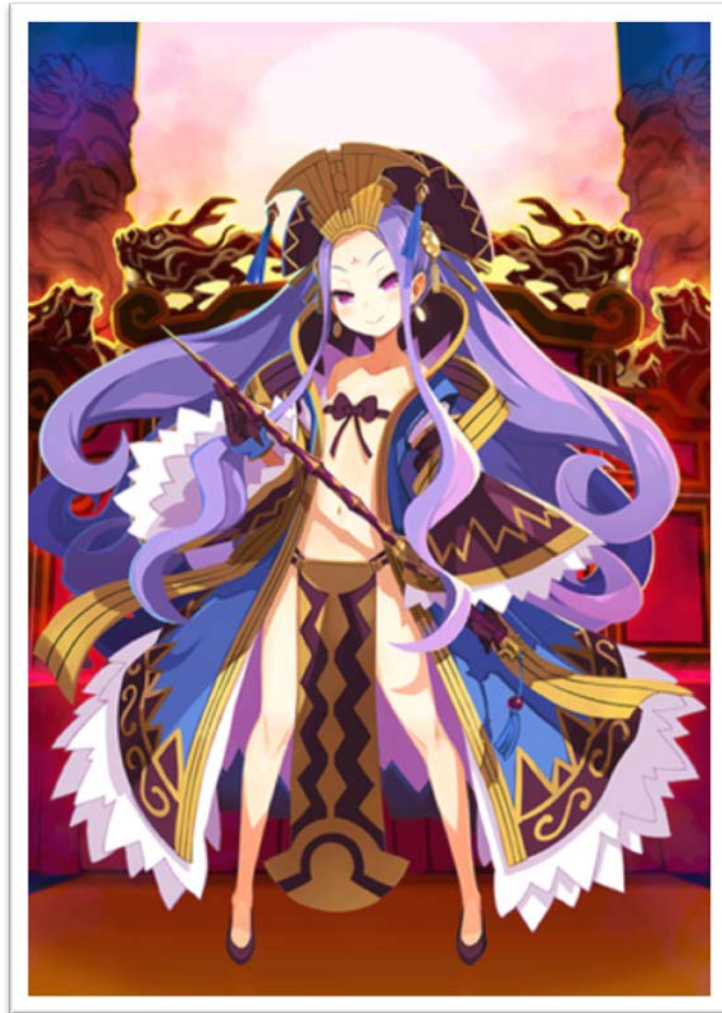
The above quote is the last line spoken by Wu Zetian in the 2014 television drama *The Empress of China*. The ninety-six episode series focuses on her time as a concubine to Emperor Taizong, her rise to become Empress, and, quickly covers her time as emperor in the final fifteen minutes of the series. The first half of the drama resonates as a modern-day Cinderella story, in which a young, romantic, and naïve Wu Zetian struggles against ruthless rivals and constant betrayal. Her time as emperor, nearly undepicted, is portrayed as lonely and as an act of a martyrdom due to her son Li Xian being wholly incompetent as a ruler. As Wu Zetian ascends to become emperor, she successively asks during her coronation where her enemies, friends, husband, and children are. She is met with the response, “dead.” The controversies of her life and her deft manipulation of politics are largely stripped from the show or attributed to another individual. In short, this drama is one of the many new contemporary evocations of Wu Zetian, reflective of an evolving landscape that trends toward commodification.

In this transforming landscape, where Wu Zetian’s image populates television dramas, films, and even video games, we may ask, “to what degree do her initial significance and contextual roots remain intact within these representations?” In the 2015 Japanese video game *Fate/Grand Order*, players can summon Wu Zetian as a servant, who is classified in the game as

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<sup>181</sup> “The Empress of China,” 2014, episode 96.

lawful and evil. In the game Wu Zetian's ultimate power is the ability to torture and drown her enemies through two familiar concepts: a wine vat and poison. In another video game,



**Figure 14: A highly sexualized Wu Zetian depicted in Fate/Grand Order.**

Civilization V, Wu Zetian makes an appearance and interestingly she is the only leader without a line for peaceful relations between her and the player. The linking factor between these diverse and occasionally familiar representations is the process of commodification in Capitalist societies. As Jameson details, “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally,” and “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more

novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.”<sup>182</sup> In the face of an ever-demanding market, where an obsession for novelty incites the commercialization of culture, the images of historical figures such as Wu Zetian are stripped of their original context to suit mass-production and appeal. These depthless images reflect “the culture of the simulacrum,” where “exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in an extraordinary phrase, that in it ‘the image has become the final form of commodity reification.’”<sup>183</sup> The phenomenon of ancient historical figures and events as refashioned within capitalism offers an avenue for future research. Another area, partially explored but often overlooked, is the phase between the commodification of Wu Zetian and her negotiated image in Confucian rhetoric: her portrayal as a champion of the working class by May Fourth and Communist thinkers. In the reevaluation of historical figures, Jiang Qing (1914-1991), Mao’s wife, and her group of writers extolled Wu Zetian as a “Legalist Empress.” Interestingly, the qualities praised positively below by these writers were the same qualities depicted by Confucian scholars to denounce and vilify Wu Zetian:

She was experienced in using violent dictatorship, which enabled her and her innovative political group to rule for as long as fifty years, a period of progressive significance in Chinese history...During her fifty years in power, Wu Zetian ‘never consulted with Confucian scholars’ about political issues; and she pursued the legalist innovative line with a spirit of going against the tide...With her own personal experience, Wu Zetian effectively criticized the Confucian fallacies of ‘man being superior and woman being

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<sup>182</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 4-5.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

inferior’ and ‘woman being difficult to deal with.’ She has proven herself a remarkable stateswoman in Chinese history.<sup>184</sup>

Both the fluid and persistent nature of rhetorical topoi in relation to Maoist reevaluations and the growing trend to commodify the images of Wu Zetian offer the potential for exciting future studies. To many individuals living outside of China, Wu Zetian is only known through her reimagined and commodified reincarnations—thus heightening the significance of pursuing research that traces and examines contemporary images. My thesis, in mapping the rhetoric of female transgression in its successive employment across multiple dynasties, offers a foundation and starting point for such research. Even in representations stripped nearly of all historical context, the image of female greed constructed by Confucian scholars continues to permeate and determine cultural memory.

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<sup>184</sup> Workers Theoretical Group of Qinghua University Kindergarten, “Several Opinions on Wu Zetian,” *Beijing University Journal*, no. 4, (Aug. 1974).

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