



# Empress Wu Zetian

Tang Dynasty China (625-705 AD)

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Even though according to the Confucian beliefs having a woman rule would be as unnatural as having a "hen crow like a rooster at daybreak," during the most glorious years of the Tang dynasty a woman did rule, and ruled successfully. She was Wu Zetian, the only female in Chinese history to rule as emperor. To some she was an autocrat, ruthless in her desire to gain and keep power. To others she, as a woman doing a "man's job," merely did what she had to do, and acted no differently than most male emperors of her day. They also note that she managed to effectively rule China during one of its more peaceful and culturally diverse periods.

The Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) was a time of relative freedom for women. They did not bind their feet nor lead submissive lives. It was a time in which a number of exceptional women contributed in the areas of culture and politics. So it is no surprise that Wu, born into a rich and noble family, was taught to play music, write, and read the Chinese classics. By thirteen years of age she was known for her wit, intelligence, and beauty, and was recruited to the court of Emperor Tai Tsung. She soon became his favorite concubine. But she also had eyes for his son, Kao Tsung.

When the emperor died and Kao Tsung took over, Wu was now twenty seven years old. In time she became a favorite concubine of the new emperor, giving birth to the sons he wanted. As mother of the future emperor of China, she grew in power. She managed to eliminate Kao Tsung's wife, Empress Wang, by accusing her of killing Wu's newborn daughter. Kao Tsung believed Wu, and replaced Empress Wang to marry the up and coming Wu Zetian.

Within five years of their marriage, Emperor Kao Tsung suffered a crippling stroke. The Empress Wu took over the administrative duties of the court, a position equal to the emperor. She created a secret police force to spy on her opposition, and cruelly jailed or killed anyone who stood in her way, including the unfortunate Empress Wang. With the death of Emperor Kao Tsung, Wu managed to outflank her eldest sons and moved her youngest and much weaker son, into power. She in effect ruled, telling him what to do.

In order to challenge Confucian beliefs against rule by women, Wu began a campaign to elevate the position of women. She had scholars write biographies of famous women, and raised the position of her mother's clan by giving her relatives high political posts. She moved her court away from the seat of traditional male power and tried to establish a new dynasty. She said that the ideal ruler was one who ruled like a mother does over her children.

In 690, Wu's youngest son removed himself from office, and Wu Zetian was declared emperor of China. In spite of her ruthless climb to power, her rule proved to be benign. She found the best people she could to run the government, and treated those she trusted fairly. She reduced the army's size and stopped the influence of aristocratic military men on government by replacing them with scholars. Everyone had to compete for government positions by taking exams, thus setting the practice of government run by scholars. Wu also was fair to peasants, lowering oppressive taxes, raising agricultural production, and strengthening public works.

During her reign, Empress Wu placed Buddhism over Daoism as the favored state religion. She invited the most gifted scholars to China and built Buddhist temples and cave sculptures. Chinese Buddhism achieved its highest development under the reign of Wu Zetian.

As she grew older, Empress Wu lessened the power of her secret police. But she became increasingly superstitious and fearful. Sorcerers and corrupt court favorites flattered her. Finally, in 705, she was pressured to give up the throne in favor of her third son, who was waiting all these years in the wings. Wu Zetian died peacefully at age eighty the same year.

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1. How do the gender attitudes of the period cause a dispute over the interpretation of the nature of her rule?
  2. How did Wu Zetian's upbringing reflect the Tang's relative freedoms for women? What in her early life enabled her to assume the position of emperor?
  3. How did the politics and gender assumptions of Tang China dictate her attitudes and policies towards the Chinese ideologies and religions?
  4. Make some predictions about the aftermath of the Empress' rule. How and why might later Tang rulers have changed their policies?