



Women Rulers in Imperial China

Keith McMahon

(University of Kansas)

kcmahon@ku.edu

Abstract

“Women Rulers in Imperial China” is about the history and characteristics of rule by women in China from the Han dynasty to the Qing, especially focusing on the Tang dynasty ruler Wu Zetian (625-705) and the Song dynasty Empress Liu. The usual reason that allowed a woman to rule was the illness, incapacity, or death of her emperor-husband and the extreme youth of his son the successor. In such situations, the precedent was for a woman to govern temporarily as regent and, when the heir apparent became old enough, hand power to him. But many women ruled without being recognized as regent, and many did not hand power to the son once he was old enough, or even if they did, still continued to exert power. In the most extreme case, Wu Zetian declared herself emperor of her own dynasty. She was the climax of the long history of women rulers. Women after her avoided being compared to her but retained many of her methods of legitimization, such as the patronage of art and religion, the use of cosmic titles and vocabulary, and occasional gestures of impersonating a male emperor. When women ruled, it was an in-between time when notions and language about something that was not supposed to be nevertheless took shape and tested the limits of what could be made acceptable.

Keywords

women rulers, female regents, Wu Zetian, Empress Dowager Liu, Empress Dowager Cixi

Introduction: Women Shall Not Rule¹

The last woman ruler in China was Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后 (1834-1908), who governed during the final five decades of the Qing

¹) This article is adapted from McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). I am

dynasty (1644-1911). She was the last effective monarch of the last dynasty of an imperial tradition in which women were not supposed to rule. Women had ruled many times already, even those who began as slaves and commoners. Some of the women reigned as if they were emperors, beginning with Empress Lü 呂 (died 180) of the Han.² One woman actually called herself emperor, Wu Zetian 武則天 (625-705), the only female emperor in Chinese history and probably the only one in the entire world to rule her own dynasty (known as the Zhou 周 dynasty, from 690 to 705). Like others before her, she manipulated tradition in order to legitimize her claim to the throne, but went farther than anyone before or after her, almost even choosing as successor a member of her own family. Even after her dethronement and death, three other powerful women followed in her wake and made it briefly look as though women participating in rulership might become something normal. It did not, and probably could not have. Wu Zetian marked a climax that was never reached again. The prohibition against female rulership became absolute after her. It was three-hundred years before women like her appeared again, and when they did, they did so in ways that steered clear of a woman ruling in her own right.

Rule by women in a world in which women were not supposed to rule raises questions about why and how they ruled in spite of restraints against them. What steps did these women take to assume power, stay in control, and in some cases modify tradition? How did they legitimize themselves? What possible precedents for female rulership did they envisage and begin to establish? How were they evaluated? Before elaborating on these questions, we can answer in simplest terms by saying that Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi could not have made it so far had it not been for the usual reason that allowed a woman to rule: the illness, incapacity, or death of her emperor-husband and the youth of his successor. In other words, as elsewhere in the world, women ruled when men were unfit or unavailable. In such situations, the precedent

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²) See Hans van Ess, "Praise and Slander: The Evocations of Empress Lü in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 8.2 (2006):221-54.

was for a woman to rule temporarily as regent and, when the heir apparent became old enough, hand power over to him. But many women ruled without being recognized as regent and many did not hand power to the son once he was old enough, or even if they did, still continued to exert power. Sometimes they deliberately chose a baby or toddler as successor so that they could rule for a longer period than if they had chosen someone older. Doing such a thing was an example of bending the rules without officially establishing a new precedent. Some women went further and created or manipulated precedents. They took part in rituals that women normally never took part in, or used titles or terminology normally restricted to men. Some empresses, for example, referred to themselves by the pronoun for the royal “I”, *zhen* 朕, that emperors used. Other examples include Wu Zetian calling herself emperor, not empress, or, shortly after Wu’s death, her granddaughter, Princess Anle 安樂 (654?-710), asking to be named crown princess and successor to the throne. The term crown princess had never existed before and never appeared again. Empress Liu 劉 (969-1033), the first empress regent in the Song dynasty (960-1279), repudiated any resemblance to Wu Zetian, but nevertheless wore the emperor’s robes while conducting an imperial sacrifice in the last year of her life.³

Rule by women was something of an empty category. There was little language for imagining it. Some Chinese regimes prohibited female regency altogether or else did not address it until the issue arose (as in the case of Song Empress Liu). But once women were in control, they could make or change the rules, at least to some extent. What that extent was, or might have been, is the question. To address it, we need to scan the history of women rulers from the Han to the Qing and review the examples of female rulership and the attempts to legitimize and expand it, on the one hand, and limit and denounce it, on the other. The central issue was: How, in spite of the prohibition against female rulership, did

³) A still essential article on female rulership is Yang Lien-sheng’s “Female Rulers in Imperial China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23 (1961): 47-61. Other comprehensive sources that I have used include: Yang Youting 楊友庭, *Houfei waiqi zhuangzheng shi* 后妃外戚專政史 (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 1994); Li Zhengfu 李政富, “Zhongguo gudai houfei waiqi yanjiu” 中國古代后妃外戚研究 (Ph.D. diss., Beijing University, 2012); and Zhu Ziyuan 朱子彥, *Chui lian ting zheng: Junlin tianxia de nühuang* 垂簾聽政：君臨天下的女皇 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007).

women rule anyway? Even though women rulers were disallowed, a default image of the woman ruler always existed. That meant that in spite of the overwhelming preference for male rulers, at times that preference had to be sacrificed. In that in-between time, women ruled. Another key issue was: Would female rulers be like male rulers, and if so, to what extent? In that in-between zone, at what point would they stop short of the radical and unspeakable notion that it did not matter if the ruler was either male or female? The very notion was prohibited from the start, hence our interest in why and how the question had to be approached anyway.

Female Rulers in a Worldwide Context

Female rulers in China first need to be briefly placed in a worldwide context.⁴ To begin with, female rulers were relatively rare, so the case in China was not unusual. In no matter which culture or known historical period, the usual assumption was that women and political power were not a good mix. The female rulers we generally know about were exceptional, such as: Cleopatra in Egypt (69-30 BCE), Queen Seondeok of Korea (606-47), Empress Wu in China, Empress Irene in Byzantium (ca. 752-803), Razia al-Din (1205-40; also known as Raziyya Sultan) in India, Queen Margaret of Norway (1363-1414), Queen Elizabeth in England (1533-1603), Catherine the Great in Russia (1729-96), or Empress Dowager Cixi in China (1835-1908), to name a few. Except for Margaret and Cixi, these women ruled in their own right as supreme

⁴) Books and articles on royal women that I have consulted include: Anne Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), especially 51-129; Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, A.D. 527-1204* (London: Routledge, 1999), especially 136-157; Lisa Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harems," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69.1 (2010): 123-147; Shaharyar Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal: A Dynasty of Women Rulers in Raj India* (New York: Palgrave for I.B. Tauris, 2001); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Anne J. Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997).

monarchs. Otherwise women ruled in the more commonly known capacity as regents, such as Margaret and Cixi, who were temporarily in charge of governments when their husband-rulers were indisposed or died, and their sons were too young to rule. There were many such women in China. In France and other European realms, the Salic Law of the fourteenth century prohibited women from succeeding to the throne. Britain did not follow that rule, however, and allowed queen-regnants. The Ottoman empire permitted female regents; and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had several in a row, all appearing after the reign of one of their greatest rulers, Suleyman the Magnificent (1494-1566). But whether or not they served as regents, imperial women participated in government in many courts throughout the world, either taking authority or delegating it. In 1513, Henry VIII went on a military campaign in France and left Catherine of Aragon as queen governor of England. In the Indian Mughal empire during the reign of Akbar the Great (reigned 1556-1605), he left his mother in charge of Delhi while he went on a military campaign; his half-sister governed Kabul province. The next ruler, Jahangir (reigned 1605-27), granted exceptional power to his wife, Nur Jahan (1577-1645). Under the Mughals and other Turko-Mongolian regimes of Central Asia, including the Khitan Liao of China, women regularly participated in political decision-making and could lead armies in battle. The Mongol queen Manduhai (also Mandukhai, born 1448) ruled on behalf of her much younger husband and Great Khan, Batmunkh, led troops in battle, even once while pregnant, and united the Mongols during the late 1400s.⁵

What does the phrase “women rulers” imply? The primary sense is that of women who ruled in their own right, that is, not on behalf of someone else, nor as regent. A common English term for this type of rulership is empress-regnant or queen-regnant, which is a step up from empress- or queen-regent. The empress or queen who was the wife of the living male ruler was simply empress- or queen-consort. Women ruling in their own right were extremely rare; and for them to do so and

⁵) She had eight children by Batmunkh. See Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 245. On the Khitan Liao, see Linda Cooke Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

pass the rule to a daughter or another woman was never established, though it occurred.⁶ Nor did they pass rule to a male member of their natal family, though Wu Zetian almost did. But as the medieval European historian Pauline Stafford notes, rule and power should not be construed too narrowly, that is, only in terms of the privilege of being sole ruler, including the ability to lead an army or rule by force. Even if a woman was not recognized as sole ruler, and whether or not she was officially recognized as regent, she exerted power and influence over both people and events. She took part in political affairs, could engage in “strategic action,” and make use of resources such as money, estates, relationships with other family members and members of officialdom. Her anointment as queen or empress was vital to her legitimacy and was generally formalized across the world (in Europe in particular from the ninth century on). There was also sanctioning of the woman’s rule by means of religious rituals, the use of sacred, mythical, and artistic imagery (in Europe via the Virgin Mary in her aspect as Queen of Heaven), and the patronage of religion, including religious art and architecture.⁷ Women rulers relied on prior precedent when it existed, and created new precedent when needed, quite rapidly in some cases. They ruled both while their husband-rulers were alive and especially after they died. Influence over succession was one of the most consistently shared features of female rulership. Queen Margaret of Norway governed as regent with “full royal powers” for a quarter of a century, even after the man she chose as successor came of age, as commonly happened in China. He was her sister’s grandson, far from the direct male line of descent. As

⁶ It happened for a while in the fourteenth-century Maldives. In the twelfth-century kingdom of Jerusalem, where principles of succession were still not settled, five women in a row inherited the throne in under sixty years. In Silla Korea, the father of Queen Seondeok (r. 632-47) had no sons and selected her as successor; she in turn was succeeded by a female cousin, Jindeok (r. 647-54). For the first two cases here, see, respectively, Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, 109; and Sarah Lambert, “Queen or Consort: Rulership and Politics in the Latin East, 1118-1228,” in Anne J. Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 153-69.

⁷ The points about defining rulership are taken from Pauline Stafford’s discussion in “Emma: The Powers of the Queen in the Eleventh Century,” in Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship*, 3-23, 11, 13, and also summed up in Duggan, *Queens and Queenship*, “Introduction,” xv-xxii, xix.

unusual as choosing such a son may be, it exemplifies the independence women often exerted in the selection of royal successors.⁸

About a century after Wu Zetian ruled China, it happened that a woman in Byzantium also referred to herself as emperor, Irene. She provides a few basic points of comparison and contrast with Wu Zetian. Irene was born in about 750-55, and became empress when her husband assumed the throne in 775. When he died in 780, she became regent and co-ruled with her nine-year-old son, who was declared emperor. She then claimed that role over him, issuing coins that showed her with the scepter of office. When he grew up, he deposed her and held the throne from 790 to 797, but in 797 she took the throne back, blinded him (a common way of eliminating rivals in Byzantium), and became sole ruler until 802. Coins issued during that time named her as empress, while legal documents referred to her as emperor, using the Greek masculine word *basileus*. She was overthrown and died in exile in 803.⁹

Wu Zetian and Irene became regents, took power from their sons, and declared themselves emperors, all coincidentally within a century of each other. In Byzantium many powerful women appeared after Irene, including another who likewise called herself emperor, Theodora (reigned 1055-56), in her case using the word *autokrator*. A major difference between China and Byzantium was that the latter allowed and encouraged widowed empresses to remarry, as Irene almost did with the Frankish King Charlemagne. Some of the empresses co-ruled with their new husbands, whom they were expected to raise to emperor. Other widowed empresses did not remarry but ruled as emperors without calling themselves such. In China, it was unthinkable for an empress to remarry, although several in the Period of Disunity and the Tang appeared to have taken lovers, including Wu Zetian. It is said that the Byzantine Theodora succeeded because she and her sister Zoe (died 1050)—who also wielded great power and had a series of three husbands—had no brothers and were considered the legitimate heirs to their father's throne. Wu Zetian enjoyed no such legitimacy. Because of

⁸) Margaret was "elected as regent for life" in Norway and ruled the unified kingdoms of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. See Steinar Imsen, "Late Medieval Scandinavian Queenship," in Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship*, 53-73, 59.

⁹) On Empress Irene, see Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 51-129, and Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 73-94.

their noble birth, Tang princesses enjoyed unusual privilege and power and commonly remarried, though princesses in later times did not. Among the powerful Tang princesses were Wu Zetian's daughter, the Princess of Taiping 太平 (died 713) and granddaughter, the Princess of Anle. Neither they nor any other princesses could be considered legitimate heirs to the throne, even if they had no brothers.¹⁰ In general, Wu Zetian and others like her in China succeeded because of their personal strength and skill and the support they received from family and officialdom. One thing common to all these and other women was that they were never given the chance to establish precedents for female rulership that continued beyond their reigns.

“Hens Should Not Announce the Dawn”

How was the wariness about women rulers expressed? The ancient dictum from the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of documents) that stood for centuries as a warning against women holding political power was: “Hens should not announce the dawn” (*pin ji wu chen* 牝雞無晨). Examples of other such sayings from ancient times included: “If no distinction is made between male and female, it will be a case of two masters. If there are two masters, then all is lost” (*nan nü wubie, shi wei liangzhu, liang-zhuzhe, ke wang ye* 男女無別，是謂兩主，兩主者，可亡也); and the bluntly worded, “Women taking part in governing is the root of chaos” (*furen yu zheng, luan zhi ben ye* 婦人與政，亂之本也).¹¹ If women ruled, they were considered meddlers in politics. They were a sign of male weakness and decline. Heaven abhorred them because rule by women was unnatural.

¹⁰ On princesses, see Jennifer Holmgren, “Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming,” in Rubie Watson and Patricia Ebrey, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 58-96, especially 67-68.

¹¹ See Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753-1818), *Shangshu jingwen zhushu* 尚書今古文注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 11.286, which appeared sometime between the sixth and third centuries BCE. The second quote is from Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280-233 BCE.), in Zhang Jue 張覺, *Hanfeizi yizhu* 韓非子譯注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), 15 (in chapter called Wangzheng 亡徵). The third is from Chen Shou 陳壽 (233-97), *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 2.80, which itself originates in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849), ed., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 214, 316.

Nevertheless, the simple presence of women in the palace and the fact of their giving birth to children, sons in particular, made their involvement in political decisions inevitable, especially regarding the selection of successors. Some women tried to stay out of politics even when they were given the opportunity to participate. Others asserted themselves anyway, whether to manipulate the relationships between the ruler, his wives, and sons, or to enter the politics of state affairs. As we have noted, women mainly became powerful when men were unqualified to rule, whether because they were too young, or they were ill and incapacitated. It also happened that a wife was more competent than her husband. Some of the influential women were respected, while some were condemned, even if they succeeded in exercising power strongly and effectively. Wu Zetian was condemned as a usurper, but even accusers such as Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-86) admitted that she was a competent ruler.¹²

The next question is: how was female rulership suppressed? Although history is not a novel with a constructed plot, if the story of women rulers had a plot, then as said above the climax would be the reign of Wu Zetian. She was immediately followed by three women with further grand ambitions, Empress Wei 韋 (died 710), her daughter the Princess of Anle, and Wu Zetian's daughter, the Princess of Taiping. After these women, a pattern established itself for the rest of the Tang whereby most emperors refused or failed to name empresses. Of fourteen emperors after Wu Zetian and her two sons, only four enthroned empresses. The failure to enthrone empresses is an outstanding example of suppressing the position of empress, by simply not naming one. Since Wu Zetian's rule was such an important moment and was followed by such a void of powerful women, let us briefly examine how this came to pass.

After Wu Zetian's death, Emperor Zhongzong 中宗 (656-710) took the throne, but Empress Wei continued to dominate him. Wu Zetian's personal secretary, Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (664-710), even urged Empress Wei "to continue in the mold of Wu Zetian," says the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old Tang history; *Shangguan chang quan hou xing Zetian gushi* 上官常勸后行則天故事).¹³ It was as if a change was in the

¹² Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1974), 205.6478.

¹³ Liu Xu 劉昫 (888-947), *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 51.2172.

air and that female participation in rulership was gaining momentum. The Princess of Anle asked her father, Emperor Zhongzong, to be named crown princess (*huang tainü* 皇太女), as just mentioned, a term and a position that had never existed before. Although her father refused to grant her wish, and although it might be said that she was persuaded to do this by her uncle Wu Sansi 武三思 (died 707), the proposal was nevertheless unprecedented. According to the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (New Tang history), Empress Wu used to say that her daughter, the Princess of Taiping, was “like me” (*lei wo* 類我).¹⁴ The characterization seemed to come true after the coup in which the Princess of Taiping placed her brother Emperor Ruizong 睿宗 (662-716) on the throne and planned to rule in his stead. But the trend of female rulership, if it can be called that, ended after the death of these women. Only one other woman in the Tang came close to having as much influence on state politics as Wu Zetian, Emperor Suzong’s 肅宗 (711-62) Empress Zhang 張 (died 762), though she was never regent.¹⁵ For the rest of the Tang, few women were even installed as empresses. Emperors for the most part simply refused or failed to enthrone empresses and instead kept consorts at ranks just below that of empress. No explicit decree or manifesto was ever issued to that effect, but it became a kind of de facto policy.

Did this happen purely by accident? Did Wu Zetian have such a great effect that she discouraged later emperors from appointing empresses? In fact, there is a clear pattern of suppressing the position of empress, though it is difficult to discern consistent or conscious intent. If there was intent, we would have to call it subliminal. The first successor after the brief reigns of Wu Zetian’s two sons was Xuanzong 玄宗 (reigned 712-55), who named an empress in the normal fashion, but deposed her in 724 and enthroned no one else for the rest of his reign. He tried to name a favorite concubine as empress in 726, but officials opposed her (she was the daughter of one of Wu Zetian’s nephews). Next came

¹⁴ See Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2172; 86.2837-2838 (crown princess), and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-72) and Song Qi 宋祁 (996-1061), *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 83.3650.

¹⁵ She was described as having interfered in government to an intolerable degree; the emperor did not know how to stop her. In the end, after his death, she tried to manipulate imperial succession, but was defeated and imprisoned. See Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2185-2186 and 116.3383.

Suzong and the powerful Empress Zhang, then Daizong 代宗 (reigned 763-79), who named no empresses. The woman he married while still a prince disappeared during the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755-63), which occurred before he became emperor. He had a favorite consort, but named her empress only after she died in 779. Perhaps loyalty to his first empress kept him from replacing her until it was more dignified to do so with another dead empress, his second. Officials would probably have opposed his naming a favorite as empress anyway, especially in the aftermath of the disastrous affair between Xuanzong and Honored Consort Yang (Yang Guifei 楊貴妃).¹⁶ The next Tang emperor, Dezong 德宗 (reigned 780-804), named one of his consorts empress on the last day of her life in 786 and enthroned no one else after that, dying in 805. Raising a woman to empress when she was about to die could be looked at as a way of honoring her while giving her no chance to gain political influence. The Qing dynasty Kangxi 康熙 emperor (reigned 1661-1722) similarly named two successive consorts as empress knowing that they were ill and would not live long (the second was likewise enthroned the day before she died).¹⁷ He did so as a gesture of respect to them and their clans, who could not pose a threat to the motherless heir apparent whom he was keeping in line as successor. The next Tang emperor, Shunzong 順宗 (reigned 805), was about to enthrone his main wife as empress, but was already ill and died before doing so. Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (reigned 806-20) stands out among the others in that he purposely refused to name an empress because of his apprehension about her potential power. Officials requested that he enthrone Honored Consort Guo 郭, the mother of the future Emperor Muzong 穆宗 (reigned 821-24), but Xianzong rejected the proposal. According to the *Xin Tangshu*, he said that their birthdates were astrologically at odds and, furthermore, he had many favorites in the Rear Palace and was worried

¹⁶ In a similar gesture of loyalty, the Jin 金 dynasty Emperor Shizong 世宗 (reigned 1161-89) never enthroned an empress after the death of his first wife, who had committed suicide rather than submit to the adulterous summons of Emperor Hailing 海陵. As Shizong once said tearfully, "It has been impossible for me to enthrone an empress because there has been no one who could match her in virtue." See Tuotuo 脫脫 (1314-55), *Jinshi* 金史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 63.1515, and 64.1521-1522.

¹⁷ Kangxi's first empress had died. After the third empress, from 1689 to his death in 1722 he never again named an empress. See Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844-1927) *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 214.8910-11.

that she would be intolerant of his affairs with other women.¹⁸ She was from an illustrious family (her mother was one of Emperor Daizong's daughters), was named empress dowager after he died, and went on to live through the reigns of the next five emperors. The next three emperors, Muzong, Jingzong 敬宗 (reigned 825-27), and Wenzong 文宗 (reigned 827-40), named no empresses. After them, Wuzong 武宗 (reigned 841-46) wanted to name a favorite as empress but was discouraged by his officials because she was not from an illustrious family. Officials did not like favorites, especially as just noted with the memory of Honored Consort Yang still fresh in everyone's minds. Xuanzong 宣宗 (reigned 846-59), Yizong 懿宗 (reigned 860-73), and Xizong 僖宗 874-88) named no empresses. Zhaozong 昭宗 (888-904), the next to the last emperor, finally enthroned an empress, but the dynasty was already finished by then. The last emperor was too young to be married. In sum, of the twelve men after Suzong, only two enthroned an empress, of whom one was enthroned when she was about to die. Three others almost did, but Shunzong died first, Xianzong refused to follow through, and Wuzong was dissuaded. Yet, both before and after the Tang, enthroning empresses was quite a normal and serious thing to do.

Weakening or abandoning the position of empress was practiced in other periods and cultures as well. By the fifteenth century, Ottoman sultans, for example, favored slave concubines over legal wives and began to produce successors solely from the concubines.¹⁹ The Ming prohibited female regents, and both the Ming and Qing deliberately took empresses from non- or lower-elite families in order to deprive them of a familial power base. That the impact of Wu Zetian caused Tang emperors to refrain from naming empresses can only be suggested. Nevertheless, she became the apogee of the negative example of women rulers. She became such a negative example that later women consciously

¹⁸ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2196; Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3504.

¹⁹ One of the main reasons was the "disdain for alliances with lesser powers." Until this time sultans had contracted marriage alliances with other Muslim dynasties, but ceased doing so. Although some concubines did acquire significant power, in general, as Leslie Peirce notes, a concubine "did not carry with her either the political aspirations that the family of a foreign princess or a woman of the indigenous elite might entertain as a result of alliance with the dynasty, or the political leverage that they might attempt to exert." See Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 30-31, 39.

avoided being compared to her or her daughter and granddaughter. I can only find one example of a later empress who reportedly desired to be like Wu Zetian, Xuanzong's (玄宗) Empress Wang 王. Enthroned in 712, she was childless and because of this lived in fear that she would be deposed. In hopes of her getting pregnant, her brother sought the help of a Daoist priest, who performed some magic.

He made a wooden charm for her on a piece of wood split by thunder and lightning, on which he carved the characters for heaven and earth and the taboo name of the emperor [*ke pili mushu tiandi zi ji shang hui* 刻霹靂木書天地字及上諱]. She was to wear this at her waist. He blessed her, saying that if she wore the charm she would bear a son and that she would be the peer of Empress Zetian [*pei you ci zi, dang yu Zetian huanghou wei bi* 佩有此子，當與則天皇后為比].²⁰

The matter was discovered, Empress Wang was deposed and soon died, and her brother was ordered to commit suicide. For him to say that she would be “the peer of Empress Zetian” indicates that Wu’s influence still echoed a decade after her death and that to be her peer was still considered something desirable. The source in which the story is recorded, the *Jiu Tangshu*, is known to be sympathetic to Wu Zetian, unlike the *Xin Tangshu*, in which the story cannot be found.

Perhaps the earliest case of a woman who avoided such comparison was the consort whom Emperor Xianzong refused to name as empress, Honored Consort Guo. She became dowager under her son Muzong’s reign. According to the *Xin Tangshu*, when Muzong died in 824 and his fifteen-year-old son Jingzong took the throne, eunuchs tried to persuade Dowager Guo to take power. She replied angrily: “Are you saying that I should become another Empress Wu?” [*wu xiao Wushi ye* 吾效武氏耶?] In spite of the youth of the heir apparent, he is still capable of selecting worthy and virtuous advisors. Who would I be to interfere?” The *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive mirror to aid in government), like the *Xin Tangshu* composed in the Song dynasty, has her further saying: “Since ancient times, when has a woman ever ruled the world and established order like Yao and Shun?” (*zi gu qi you nüzi wei tianxia zhu er neng zhi Tang Yu zhi li hu* 自古豈有女子為天下主而能致唐、虞之理

²⁰⁾ See Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2177.

乎).²¹ The *Jiu Tangshu*, which as said is more sympathetic to Wu Zetian, does not record this event. In a similar vein, the histories record Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 disciplining two of his daughters in order to ensure that they not behave like the Princesses of Anle and Taiping of Wu Zetian's time. Before the marriage of his daughter, the Princess of Wanshou 萬壽, he warned her never to interfere in state affairs, for "we must always guard against the calamities caused by the Princesses of Anle and Taiping." He once cancelled the marriage of another daughter, the Princess of Yongfu 永福; he had been eating with her when she became angry and broke her spoon and chopsticks in front of him. "With a temper like this," he told his chief ministers, "how can she be wed to a man of the official class?"²²

Setting Precedents and Legitimizing Themselves as Women Rulers

What new precedents did women rulers establish? How did they legitimize themselves as rulers? What language was used to describe them and what language did they use about themselves? Some of the most famous examples of women rulers prior to Wu Zetian include Queen Dowager Xuan 宣 of the Kingdom of Qin 秦 (died 265 BCE), Empresses Lü 呂 (241 BCE-180), Deng Sui 鄧綏 (81-121 CE), and Liang Na 梁嬀 (116-50) in the Han, Empress Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 (257-300) in the Jin 晉 dynasty, and Empresses Feng 馮 (442-90) and Ling 靈 (died 528) in the Northern Wei 北魏. Their stories are well known and need not be repeated except to note a few essential points and to say that the cumulative weight of their examples created a large set of precedents for Wu Zetian. That an empress would be involved in matters of succession when her husband the emperor died was not questioned. That she would rule on behalf of a boy successor still too young to rule was likewise part of the set of expectations, though still at times contested. Some precedents were controversial, such as the empress-regent's reliance on the

²¹ See Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3504, and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 243.7830-7831.

²² See Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu*, 83.3672 (calamities) and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 249.8075 (breaking chopsticks). The anecdote about the temperamental daughter does not occur in the *Jiu* and *Xin Tangshu*.

help of male members of her natal family, that is, father, uncles, and brothers (instead of court officials). Queen Dowager Xuan, the first recorded female regent in Chinese history, relied heavily on her younger brother, who pushed to have her son selected as king. Empress Lü empowered members of her clan, even appointing four members as kings, in violation of the oath Emperor Liu Bang 劉邦 (247-195 BCE) had made with her and other supporters that only members of his bloodline would ever rule. In fact the natal families of empresses were powerful throughout the Han, in spite of the protests of emperors and officials.²³ Another strategy of women rulers and their allies was to deliberately install young emperors whom they could control, as in the case of Han Empress Deng Sui. This became a precedent simply because of its steady recurrence to the end of dynastic history, but never officially sanctioned. Some ruling women killed male members of her husband's clan, even her own sons, whom she saw as threats. In Empress Lü's case, she installed two puppets after her son Emperor Hui 惠 died, then had the first puppet ruler killed and had four of Liu Bang's sons killed. Elimination of rivals was of course a normal part of ruling, whether the ruler was male or female.

As happened in many dynasties, having a weak or incompetent husband was a strong factor in an empress's favor. In the Tang alone, Gaozong 高宗 (628-83) and Wu Zetian, Zhongzong and Empress Wei, and Suzong and Empress Zhang showed varying degrees of this situation. Back in the Jin dynasty, Jia Nanfeng was the wife of the mentally incompetent Emperor Hui 惠 (reigned 290-306), the son and successor of the first emperor of the Jin, Emperor Wu 武 (Sima Yan 司馬炎, 236-90). In the words of the *Jinshu* 晉書 (History of the Jin) "she was jealous and full of conniving schemes. The heir apparent feared her and was bewitched by her" (*duji duo quan zha, taizi wei er huo zhi* 妒忌多權詐,

²³ See Michael Nylan, "The Rhetoric of 'Empire' in the Classical Era of China," in Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag, eds., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39-64, especially 59; and for a relevant discussion of the power and political motivations of elite women (e.g., Empress Lü) and their loyalty to natal families in the Han, see Nylan, "Golden Spindles and Axes: Elite Women in the Achaemenid and Han Empires," in Li Chenyang, ed., *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 199-222, especially 204-214.

太子畏而惑之).²⁴ She launched a coup in 291 and with the help of her natal family took control of the court, though she was eventually deposed and forced to commit suicide in 300. In general, women like Jia Nanfeng could not have succeeded without the assistance of not only family members but male court officials who lent her support, whether because they saw the danger of an incompetent emperor or because the empress won them over.

Women of nomadic regimes present another set of examples, since in general Inner Asian nomadic groups allowed elite women greater participation in political and military decisions than did the Han Chinese. Was the influence of northern customs a factor in the appearance of the series of powerful women in the early Tang? Or were such precedents already in place since the Han? The historian Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890-1969) asserted that the Tang was heavily influenced by the northern dynasties. Yet it is clear that women, both commoner and elite, had more freedom in these early times than in later imperial China.²⁵ The answer is probably a combination of both, since the Tang ruling family came from the north and since Han precedents were well established, though still contested. Two women of nomadic conquest regimes stand out, Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Dowager Ling, both of the Northern Wei. Feng was the empress of the fifth ruler, Emperor Wencheng 文成 (440-65), after whose death she became regent twice, the second time in 476 after killing her son, the retired Emperor Xianwen 獻文 (454-76), and seizing power. She was described as a sharp, intelligent, and able administrator, and to have ruled virtually as if she were emperor.²⁶ The other major female ruler of the Northern Wei, Empress Dowager Ling, ruled after a power struggle in 518. At times she took on the appearance of a male emperor in that, as Jennifer Holmgren has noted,

²⁴ See Fang Xuanlin 房玄齡 et al., *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 31.963.

²⁵ See Chen Yinke, *Sui Tang zhidu yuanyuan luelun gao* 隋唐制度淵源略論稿 (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2001), 3; and Michael Nylan, "Administration of the Family (*Qihuai bisi*)," in Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe, eds., *China's Early Empires: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266-95, and see 282. Nylan refers in particular to "new legal and visual evidence" from the period between approximately 323 BCE. and 316 CE.

²⁶ See Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.495-497. I have also consulted Song Qirui 宋其蕤, *Bei Wei nüzhū lun* 北魏女主論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 207-14.

instead of being referred to as “Your Highness,” *dianxia* 殿下, which was used to address an empress or dowager, she had herself addressed as “Your Majesty,” *bixia* 陛下. She issued what she referred to as “edicts,” *ling* 令, rather than the humbler “instructions” *zhao* 詔. Like Empress Lü and other empress-regents, she used the special word for “I,” *zhen* 朕, which was usually reserved for emperors alone. She performed sacrifices that only male emperors had performed, went on tours to scenic spots, took part in archery contests, consulted with officials in the palace audience hall, and personally sought petitions about injustice as she rode in a carriage outside the palace (this being an ancient custom, but not for a woman). Historians report these things matter-of-factly. Dowager Feng participated in similar activities and likewise was not considered unusual during her time—though to Confucian historians, especially from the Song dynasty on, such activities were absolutely unfeminine. Probably the fact that such women were from a nomadic dynasty made their behavior more understandable. As in the case with Empress Feng, a rift later developed between Dowager Ling and her son, whom she had murdered in 528. She was finally captured and killed by the Northern Wei general, Erzhu Rong 尔朱榮 (493-530).²⁷

In general, when women such as these served as regents, they were the de facto rulers and ruled as if they were emperors. But the words “as if” beg many questions. The language used to refer to them specifically defined them as temporary stand-ins, as in the common expression, “to preside at court,” also worded as “to preside at court and issue imperial decrees” (*lin chao cheng zhi* 臨朝稱制), which appeared as early as the Han when describing women attending to government. The eventual most common expression was “attending to government from behind lowered curtains” (*chui lian ting zheng* 垂簾聽政), which became the

²⁷ See Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 13.503-505; and Jennifer Holmgren, “Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T’o-pa Sinicization Question,” *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18 (1978): 123-70. See also Holmgren, “Women and Political Power in the T’o-pa Elite,” *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1983): 33-74, and the same author’s “The Harem in Northern Wei Politics—398-498 A.D.: A Study of T’o-pa Attitudes towards the Institutions of Empress, Empress-dowager, and Regency Governments in the Chinese Dynastic System during the Early Northern Wei,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 26.1 (1983): 71-96. See Zhu Ziyang, *Chui lian ting zheng*, 10; and Wei Shou 魏收 (506-572), *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.337-338 (use of *zhen*).

single most identifying signifier of the empress-regent.²⁸ But it was not the custom in early times. Lady Nanzi 南子 did address Confucius from within a curtained divide (she was the wife of Lord Ling 靈, 534-493 BCE, of the state of Wei 衛), but she was not a regent.²⁹ In the Warring States and Han periods, female regents still met face to face with court officials, as in the case of Queen Xuan of the kingdom of Qin.³⁰ When Han Empress Lü ruled for the young Emperor Shao 少, they received officials together in the throne hall, she in the position of honor on the left, he on the right. No screen separated her from the court officials.³¹ The first empress-regent to divide herself from courtiers by a curtain was Chu Suanzi 褚蒜子 (324-84) of the Eastern Jin.³² A few centuries later when Wu Zetian governed along with her husband, Gaozong, she sat behind a curtained divide behind his throne. After Gaozong died, she deposed his successor, Zhongzong, and set up another son as emperor, but she met officials at court by herself, using a purple curtain as screen.³³ The Song dynasty finally formalized the procedure for all dowager-regents, as recorded in the chapter on the rites in the *Songsshi*.³⁴ Em-

²⁸ For *lin chao* and/or *lin chao cheng zhi*, see Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445), *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 10.430 and elsewhere; Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 7.169.

²⁹ See Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 47.1920-1921.

³⁰ See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 72.2323-2330.

³¹ See Zhu Ziyuan, *Chui lian ting zheng*, 10, citing the Han writer, Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133-92), *Duduan* 獨斷, in *Sibu congkan sanbian* 四部叢刊三編 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 2.39b (*hou she zheng, ze hou lin qiandian, chao qunchen, hou dongmian, Shaodi ximian, qunchen zou shi shang shu, jie wei liangtong, yi yi taihou, yi yi Shaodi* 后攝政，則后臨前殿，朝群臣，后東面，少帝西面，群臣奏事上書，皆為兩通，一詣太后，一詣少帝).

³² See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 8.191. In her case, the words for her attending to government were: "she presided at court and acted as regent" (*lin chao she zheng* 臨朝攝政) and, "the dowager put up a white gauze curtain in the Taiji Palace and held court with the emperor in her arms" (*huang taihou she baishawei yu taiji dian, bao di lin xuan* 皇太后設白沙帷於太極殿，抱帝臨軒).

³³ For the period with Gaozong, see Hou Jin and Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 5.100 (*tianhou chui lian yu yuzuo hou* 天后垂簾於御座後); and for the period with the puppet emperor, see Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3477 (*chang yu zichen dian, shi canzi zhang lin chao* 常御紫宸殿，施慘紫帳臨朝). See also Lien-sheng Yang, "Female Rulers," 50-54; and for a brief history, Zhu Ziyuan, *Chui lian ting zheng*, 6-9 (on Queen Xuan), 10 (on Lü), 13 (on Chu Suanzi).

³⁴ See Tuotuo 脫脫, *Songsshi* 宋史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 117.2774-75. For later adjustments of protocol, in particular having the empress-regent move from the outer to inner court, see Zhu Ziyuan, *Diguo jiuchongtian* 帝國九重天: 中國後宮制度變遷 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2006), 179.

presses in the non-Han Liao and Yuan, however, still met courtiers and foreign envoys face to face, whether with their husband-emperors or alone as regents. Female regents were prohibited in the Ming, but nevertheless the notion of “lowering the curtain and governing” was still a part of both the royal vocabulary and the set of expectations. At the death of the Xuande 宣德 emperor (reigned 1425-35), ministers asked Empress Zhang 張 to rule from behind the curtain, using those key words. She refused to do so because it was a violation of ancestral mandate, but agreed to rule informally for the young successor from 1425 until her death in 1442. The same words were again used to refer to the failed attempt by a favorite consort of the Ming Taichang 泰昌 emperor (reigned 1620) to rule from behind the curtain.³⁵ The Qing likewise decreed against women interfering in politics, but was finally ruled by a female regent, Empress Dowager Cixi, who followed the custom of holding court from behind a divide, but never held court in the palace’s main audience hall, which was reserved for emperors only.³⁶

What pronoun the empress-regent would use to refer to herself likewise became stricter in later times. Records show Han Empress Lü, Northern Wei Dowager Ling, and Tang Wu Zetian all using the masculine imperial first person singular, *zhen*. But Song officials prohibited female regents from using the word, instead directing them to use *yu* 予 or *wu* 吾. A Liao emperor gave special dispensation for Empress Chengtian 成天 (954-1009) to use *zhen*, but following Song precedent, no Ming or Qing women used the word.³⁷ As for Wu Zetian’s use of the word emperor to refer to herself, this was a unique case and never considered at other times during Chinese history. The symbolic barrier of language always remained a difficult one to cross. Women could act as

³⁵ See Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (1672-1755), *Mingshi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 113.3513 (Zhang), 114.3539 (failed attempt). In refusing to adopt the method of sitting behind a curtain to meet officials in the outer court, Empress Zhang chose a more remote way of ruling, probably from the inner palace through eunuch intermediaries.

³⁶ Regarding the stipulations for protocol during Cixi’s reign, see Zhu Ziyuan, *Diguo jiuchongtian*, 185-88.

³⁷ For Empress Lü’s use of *zhen*, see Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 3.96; for Empress Ling, see Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 13.495-497; for Wu Zetian, see Hou Jin and Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 6.129. For directions about the first person singular that female regents in the Song were to use, see Tuotuo, *Songshi*, 117.2774-2775; and for the Liao reference, see Tuotuo, *Liaoshi* 遼史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 8.95.

men, but could not be men, where to be a man would mean what?—to be recognized not only as empress-regnant, but also as having privileges as yet unimagined and unarticulated. No one knew what such a person was, not even the woman herself, although Wu Zetian may have come closer than most. I will return to these points in the conclusion.

The Symbolic Acts of Wu Zetian

We cannot know how well acquainted Wu Zetian was with predecessors such as Empresses Feng and Ling, but they nevertheless supplied her with a continuity that looked at in retrospect appears to have been broken after her. Marking such a point of culmination, she serves as one of the best examples for addressing the question of how women legitimized themselves as rulers. She combined what was accepted and what was controversial and then added to that mixture by creating her own dynasty and calling herself emperor. As with others like her, the question of whether or not a woman deserved to rule was automatically an issue. Symbolic acts were a key way in which she and her supporters responded to that challenge. During her co-reign with Emperor Gaozong 高宗 in 666, for example, she persuaded the emperor to perform a set of sacrifices at the holy Mount Tai 泰 that had only been performed six times previously, the last time in the Han dynasty. The purpose of the rites was to announce to heaven and earth the success of the dynasty. Women had not participated in them, but Empress Wu succeeded in leading the part of the rites dedicated to the earth goddess.³⁸

Her goal was to legitimize her role and enhance her aura. As in the case of Empress Dowager Ling, symbolic acts involved both the use of language and the manipulation of self-image. She gave herself auspi-

³⁸ See R.W.L. Guiso's "The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-tsung, and Jui-tsung (684-712)," in Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, part 1: *The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 244-332. There are many studies of Wu Zetian, including: Ch'en Jo-shui, "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," in Frederick P. Brandauer and Chun-chieh Huang, eds., *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 77-116; Jennifer Jay, "Imagining Matriarchy: 'Kingdoms of Women' in Tang China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 116.2(1996): 220-229; and Jowen R. Tung, *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

cious-sounding reign titles, for example, which she frequently changed. One set of years was called “Heavenly Granted” (*Tianshou* 天授), another “Perfect Satisfaction” (*Ruyi* 如意). She had eleven others. She created a new character for her name, Zhao 曌, which consisted of the sun and moon over the sky, as if to say that she were the sun and moon shining over everyone under heaven—this character and others she created were abolished after she died. She created an image of herself as mother of the realm, which she and others accomplished in various ways, including, as Stephen Bokenkamp has demonstrated, linking her with the primordial notion of the Dao 道, the birth-giver of the world, or to the ancient goddess Nügua 女媧. She identified herself as a *cakravartin*, a Sanskrit term for a universal, enlightened ruler (in Chinese, *zhuanlun wang* 轉輪王, meaning a ruler whose wheels roll everywhere without obstruction). Other Chinese rulers had used the term before her, but no woman had. She modified traditional ritual and protocol by, for example, making the mourning period for a deceased mother the same as for a deceased father, three years. She promoted her mother to empress dowager, something normally never done (a dowager was normally a former empress and mother of an emperor). After becoming emperor, she performed sacrifices not only to the Li clan but her own Wu ancestors. She once reversed the usual custom of sending a Chinese princess to marry a foreign king or prince and instead sent a Chinese prince to a foreign princess.³⁹

Another of her key methods, also used by other female regents, was the cultivation and patronage of the arts, including poetry, calligraphy, painting, sculpture, and architecture. To these were added religious elements, since in many cases the art or architecture was religious in nature. Wu Zetian was a lavish and devoted patron of Buddhist art and architecture and employed experts who engaged in monumental projects, including great murals of episodes in Buddha’s life, magnificent buildings, and statues. Before becoming emperor, in 688 she had a group of buildings constructed that included a Confucian temple called the Hall

³⁹ See Stephen Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: the Case of Wu Zhao (r. 690-705),” *Religion* 28 (1998): 383-392. The foreign ruler was insulted and vowed that he would help restore the Li clan to power (Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 206.6530). *Ruyi* later became part of the title of a Ming dynasty pornographic story about Wu Zetian, the *Ruyi jun zhuan* 如意君傳.

of Light (*mingtang* 明堂), to the north of which she built a five-story tower, called the Hall of Heaven (*tiantang* 天堂), with a statue of the Buddha several hundred meters high in it. Nearby she also installed a mechanical device made of bronze that marked heavenly movements. In about 695 she had another bronze monument constructed at the southern gate of the imperial city, a column thirty-five meters tall and four meters in diameter, called the Heavenly Axis (*tianshu* 天樞). Executed by craftsmen from Persia, India, and Korea, it was like a pillar at the center of the world and served as a symbol of her imperial centrality. One did not create such things unless one had monumental messages to deliver. The various projects stood as emblems of her role as a kind of cosmic ruler ushering in a new Buddhist era. The further implication was that, if there could be rulers who were sons of heaven, there could also be rulers who were daughters of heaven.⁴⁰

Two crucial steps in her move to take over the throne involved in one case the use of an omen, in another a sacred text, both fabricated by her supporters to point her in the direction of usurpation. Using omens to support imperial intentions was of course an old tradition, the Han usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE-23 CE) being one of the best prior examples. The point was to make it appear that the cosmos intended that one become ruler. In 688, supposedly without her knowledge, a nephew of Wu Zetian's had words carved in a white stone saying, "a sage mother shall be upon us and her imperial reign will flourish forever" (*shengmu lin ren, yong chang diye* 聖母臨人, 永昌帝業).⁴¹ The stone was referred to as the "precious diagram" (*baotu* 寶圖) and was presented to the empress, who was told that it had been found in the Luo 洛 River, which since the legendary past had produced omens of similar sort. Then there was a Buddhist text called the *Dayun jing* 大雲經 (Great cloud sutra), which prophesied the incarnation in female

⁴⁰ Regarding Buddhist and other architectural projects, see Yen Chuan-ying, "The Tower of Seven Jewels and Empress Wu," *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 22.1 (1987): 1-18; and the excellent work of my colleague Amy McNair, who offered generous help with this aspect of Wu Zetian's rulership; see her *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), Ch. Seven. See also Antonio Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per Il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988).

⁴¹ See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 204.6448.

form of the Buddhist deity Maitreya who would rule the world and bring bounty and joy to all human beings. A new interpretation of the sutra was specially written asserting that she was the reincarnation of that deity. It was presented to the empress in 690. Two months later, petitions appeared asking her to found the Zhou dynasty, one signed with 60,000 names. At first she refused, but then acquiesced (again recalling Wang Mang in his usurpation of six hundred years before). This was an extraordinary moment in Chinese history.⁴²

Women Rulers after the Tang: The Song Dynasty

How did women rulers fare after the era of Wu Zetian? Such a question presumes that she marked a major break, which observers for centuries have tended to accept. There was indeed a major break in terms of the easy-to-observe fact that no other woman called herself emperor or formed her own independent regime. Women rulers continued to exist from the Tang to the end of the dynastic period, however, though with important differences. Those differences had to do with the fact that the taboo against women rulers had acquired a new tenor in the form of the language used to condemn them. Now instead of just referring to Empress Lü, who before Wu Zetian was the main example of the usurping woman, the language of post-Wu Zetian dynastic histories—all written during the Song and after—refers to her as an even worse example. By the Ming and Qing, as already noted, dynastic administrations devised new institutional methods to prevent women from gaining power, mainly in the form of taking empresses from non- or lower-elite families in the attempt to remove the woman's potential base of power in her natal family. But the main way women became powerful nevertheless remained in place, the occurrence of weak and unavailable men, which no institutional rule was capable of preventing. In other words, *female power because of male weakness remained the single formula for the em-*

⁴² See R.W.L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 1978), 36-45 (sutra), 65 (white stone), 68 (names). Guisso states that Empress Wu did away with hanging the curtain (54), but I believe his reading is wrong. See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 203.6419 and note 31. See also Guisso, "The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-tsung, and Jui-tsung (684-712)," 244-332; and Sima Guang, *Zishi tongjian*, 204.6448 (white stone).

powerment of women. This formula predicted not only the protocol and expectations for female rulership, but also the way such rulership was framed and interpreted. In short, for female rulership there existed an implicit formula equating strong women with weak men. It was as if weak men engendered strong women, a state of affairs that could only be seen as inauspicious and only temporarily tolerable. Women were a last resort that was merely an interval between qualified men. Women rulers after the Tang in effect becomes a study of how they continued to occur anyway, in spite of newly defined limits against them.

Let us survey women rulers after the Tang, beginning with the Song dynasty, whose official history proudly proclaimed that during the dynasty there were no calamities caused by women rulers, specifically referring to the calamities of Empresses Wu and Wei of the Tang.⁴³ Unlike the Tang after Suzong's Empress Zhang, Song emperors regularly enthroned empresses, while dowager-regents served a total of nine times. Six of them were especially honored for their virtue and sagacity. Nevertheless, allowing no more Wu Zetians was of key importance, and the Song succeeded with minor exceptions. Empresses studiously avoided the appearance of someone like Wu; and officials strongly objected whenever they saw Wu Zetian-like behavior. After Empress Wu, it took three hundred years before another woman like her appeared again, Empress Liu 劉 (969-1033), the first of the nine dowager-regents and one of the most powerful. How did she differ from Wu Zetan but still used some of her symbolic methods? What were the issues of protocol and precedent, both already existing and newly created? As John Chaffee has written, Empress Liu was a special case in the history of empress regents in that she established a "new model of regency, one that contrasted sharply with its Han and Tang predecessors in its lack of dependence upon the empress's family."⁴⁴

⁴³) See Tuotuo, *Songshi*, 242.8606.

⁴⁴) See John Chaffee, "The Rise and Regency of Empress Liu (969-1033)," *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 31 (2001), 1-25, quote from 23. For more on Empress Liu, see Ding Chuan-jing 丁傳靖, *Songren yishi huibian* 宋人軼事彙編 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1966), 18, which has an abridged English translation: Ting Ch'uan-ching, trans. Chu Djang and Jane C. Djang, *A Compilation of Anecdotes of Sung Personalities* (Taipei: St. Johns's University Press, 1989), 28. A convenient summary of Empress Liu's reign can be found in Zhang Bangwei 張邦煒, *Hunyin jiazou shilun* 婚姻家族史論 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2003), 233-64. See also Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle:

In principle, Song emperors took their empresses from prominent families, especially military ones, but Liu was one of two powerful empresses who began as entertainers with unclear family origins. She was the first of three women rulers in a row. When her husband, Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (968-1022), became ill in 1020, she handled most affairs of the court for him; and when he died in 1022, she became regent for the twelve-year-old Renzong 仁宗 (reigned 1022-63), in both cases in spite of opposition and controversy. She was the supreme ruler during her regency and was praised for her performance both during and after, though there were detractors as well. Two of the main reasons officials opposed her was her lowly family background and her lack of a son. She had adopted Renzong from another palace woman, whose motherhood was kept secret from Renzong until after Empress Liu's death. Empress Liu succeeded both in overcoming her poor background and in winning the devotion of Renzong. When he was old enough to rule, and officials demanded that she retire, she refused to do so and remained powerful until she died.

The contrast between Empress Liu and Wu Zetian is instructive in showing how the symbolic methods of Wu Zetian and other such women still remained part of the repertoire. If Empress Wu went so far as to promote the image of cosmic, universal ruler, Empress Liu did likewise, but less emphatically. As Hui-shu Lee has pointed out, in a famous painting Liu is shown wearing a splendid crown containing what is probably a figure of a major female goddess, the Queen Mother of the West. During the Tang, the Queen Mother had been the highest goddess in Daoism, especially the Shangqing 上清 school, which was the most favored by emperors and literati. She had long since been a key figure in Chinese mythology, where she reigned over her own realm in the far west of the cosmos, to which earthly rulers occasionally went to meet her, with Zhou 周 King 穆 Mu being the most legendary.⁴⁵ As Suzanne Cahill has written, in the Tang she was the ruler of immortal women

University of Washington Press, 2010), 31-40; and Denis Twitchett and Paul J. Smith, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, part 1 *The Sung and Its Precursors, 907-1279* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Others included: the King Father of the East, whom she met once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month, the ancient mythical rulers Huangdi 黃帝, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹, as well as the historical ruler Emperor Wu 武 of the Han.

and, for earthly Tang women in particular, she represented a role and a position that appealed to those who did not fit the normative roles of mother, wife, and daughter, especially nuns, prostitutes, and female artists. Although Empress Liu was none of these, as empress regent she did not fit the normative roles either, nor did she have the type of family background an empress normally should have had. One is tempted to believe that if Wu Zetian had been available as a more positive image, Empress Liu would have made use of her as well. The Queen Mother of the West was more appropriate because, we might imagine, she was more remote and lofty at the same time. She was an independent woman who ruled an independent realm without a man, but not in real time and history. Moreover, she had a positive image, unlike the by now tainted Wu Zetian, who distantly evokes the image of Grendel's mother, the prime example of the bad queen in medieval England, who in the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, ruled her own household without a man.⁴⁶ Another key act of self-enhancement in Empress Liu's case was the fact that she added a statue of herself to a temple dedicated to the royal ancestral cult, placing it next to the one already there of her husband, Zhenzong. In addition, some scholars suggest that she patronized a temple in Shanxi 山西 province, called the Jinci 晉祠, dedicated to the ancient sage mother Yi Jiang 邑姜, a model wise woman whom her husband, King Wu 武, appointed as one of his nine ministers of state.⁴⁷

As in the past, issues of protocol and precedent repeatedly came up during her reign. The core question at first was how to define her rule as temporary and contingent and, at various points later on, how far she was to go in acting like an emperor. As Chaffee notes, in the decree to

⁴⁶ On Empress Liu and the Queen Mother of the West, see Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*, 59 and illustrations on 58, 60, and 61. Also see Suzanne Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3, 33, 38, 45-56, 58, 213, and 215. For a relevant reference to *Beowulf*, see Pauline Stafford, "Emma," 20-21.

⁴⁷ See Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*, 48-49, 52-69. In the case of the Jinci, the style and type of sculpture and scale of design suggest direct imperial patronage. See also Priscilla Ching Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Song 960-1126* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981); and Amy McNair, "On the Date of the Shengmudian Sculptures at Jinci," *Artibus Asiae* 49.3/4 (1989), 238-253 (on Yi Jiang, King Wu, and the empress as patron of the Jinci). Thanks to Amy McNair for supplying me with this article. Also see Liu Heping, "Empress Liu's 'Icon of Maitreya': Portraiture and Privacy at the Early Song Court," *Artibus Asiae* 63.2 (2003): 129-190.

establish her regency, for which there was no precedent in the Song, one official proposed omitting the word indicating that she would rule “temporarily” (*quan* 權). He was overruled.⁴⁸ That word remained in use for other empress regents as well. It had to be established how she would hold court, including the question of whether she and the emperor would hold court in the same hall. The eventual decision was that they would hold court in the same hall every five days. Renzong would sit to the left facing the officials, the left being the position of honor, while the empress, the true ruler, would sit to the right (thus the opposite of Han Empress Lü when she ruled on behalf of Emperor Shao). Also specified were that she not hold court by herself, without the emperor, that she use a curtain to divide herself from officials, and that she not use the imperial pronoun *zhen*.⁴⁹ In line with the advent of male rulers, the personal names of Empress Liu’s father and grandfather were declared taboo. But a proposal that she imitate Wu Zetian by establishing ancestral temples for the Liu family went nowhere. Such an act was too similar to what an emperor would do, in particular because it implied a new line of descent, which in fact Wu Zetian had tried to create.⁵⁰ When she once asked an official his opinion of Wu Zetian, he replied: “She was a Tang criminal who nearly destroyed the dynasty!” To this the empress “responded with silence,” the historian writes, as if to imply that she was rightly put in her place, or perhaps that she disagreed but dared not say so.⁵¹ In another dramatic moment she showed her proper rejection of the Tang usurper. When another official presented her with a painting of Wu Zetian visiting her ancestral temples, Empress Liu threw the painting on the floor.⁵²

⁴⁸) Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 12-13, citing Li Tao 李燾 (1114-83), *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979-95), 98.2271. Later empress-regents were directed to hold court only from the inner precincts, never in the outer court; see Zhu Ziyuan, *Diguo jiuchongtian*, 179.

⁴⁹) Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 13-14, citing Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, 99.2295-2296 (including the reference to her ruling from “behind a curtain” and to the pronouns for “I” that she was to use to refer to herself, not including *zhen*, for which also see Tuotuo, *Songsbi*, 242.8613 (left/right).

⁵⁰) Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 18, citing Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, 107.2494, and Tuotuo, *Songsbi*, 242.8615, 286.9628.

⁵¹) See Tuotuo, *Songsbi*, 286.9628 and Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, 107.2494.

⁵²) Chaffee, “The Rise and Regency,” 18, citing Tuotuo, *Songsbi*, 242.8615.

Nevertheless, she did engage in acts of self-assertion. Shortly after the incident of throwing the painting on the ground, the empress wished her carriage to precede the emperor's in a procession to a palace temple. An official insisted that she follow, citing the famous motto about the three successive figures a proper woman must obey: first, her father; next, her husband; and when both of them were dead, her son (referred to as *sancong* 三從). The empress finally agreed to ride in the carriage behind her son. But she caused controversy on at least two more occasions at the end of her life. In 1033 she desired to wear the emperor's robes and crown to perform sacrifices at the Imperial Ancestral Temple. This was a grave ritual usually carried out only by emperors. Presumably no one would physically stop her from doing as she wished in such cases, but officials did not hesitate to voice their opposition, as they did when she wished to wear the robes.⁵³ In one final act she exemplified yet again her displaced way of acting like an emperor. At her death, she left a decree proposing that her closest female ally, Dowager Consort Yang 楊 (984-1036), continue as regent for the young Renzong. Consort Yang had been a constant caregiver to the young emperor, as sanctioned by Empress Liu.⁵⁴ Although Renzong and his ministers strongly rejected the proposal, it recalls in miniature the similar almost-continuation of female rulership after Wu Zetian. In sum, it appears that, like many before her, Empress Liu was intent on acting on behalf of the emperor as long as possible, while occasionally acting as if she were emperor. She constructed conscientious ways of staying within the boundaries of what could be allowed, in some cases going as far as she could without exciting excess opposition, and in particular being careful when it came to the image of Wu Zetian, as exemplified in the proposal to create her own ancestral temples.

The next prominent woman in the Song was Empress Dowager Gao 高 (died 1093), the principal wife of Emperor Yingzong 英宗 (1032-67;

⁵³) Chaffee, "The Rise and Regency," 17-18, citing Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, 112.2605, Tuotuo, *Songsbi*, 242.8614, and Wen Ying 文英 (eleventh century), *Xu Xiangshan ye lu* 續湘山野錄, in *Xiangshan ye lu Xulu, Yuhu qingyu* 湘山野錄, 續錄, 玉壺清語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 75-76. I believe Chaffee misreads Wen Ying as saying that she desisted and did not wear the robes. But the passage in Wen Ying does not say so.

⁵⁴) Chaffee, "The Rise and Regency," 7-8.

reigned 1063-67).⁵⁵ She brought about a major and controversial change of policy while at the same time fashioning herself as an exemplar of the non-meddling woman. She gave birth to Yingzong's eldest son, the future Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1048-85; reigned 1067-85), and, when Shenzong became ill in 1079, assumed power and presided over the installation of the heir apparent, Shenzong's sixth and eldest surviving son, the eventual Emperor Zhezong 哲宗 (1077-1100; reigned 1085-1100). Great Empress Dowager Gao was opposed to the policies of the powerful statesman Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-86) and joined with eunuchs to slander him to the emperor. When Shenzong died in 1085, Gao became regent when the nine-year old Zhezong assumed the throne, remaining so until her death in 1093. In one of the most dramatic events of Song political history, she completely reversed the Wang Anshi reforms. Inexperienced in court politics, she relied on trusted officials for help and placed eunuchs in powerful positions, which they had been denied during Wang's time in power. But Dowager Gao took after other Song imperial women who policed themselves by applying the lessons learned from past empresses and dowagers who abused power. Continuing the precedent of Empress Liu, she dealt strictly with imperial relatives, it was said, allowing none of her uncles or brothers to be granted honors during her lifetime. Influential members of the palace staff had to stand aside as well. She initiated a process that terminated all orders from the inner palace that skirted the normal process of official review (called *neijiang* 内降). This meant that the empress dowager in effect prohibited herself from issuing directives, thus avoiding the taint of appearing to be an imperial wife who meddled in politics. For actions like this she was lauded as "a Yao or Shun among women" (*nüzhong Yao Shun* 女中堯舜), one of the highest praises a woman could receive.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ She was the second female regent after Empress Liu. The first was Renzong's Empress Cao 曹 (1016-79), who briefly stepped in as regent when Yingzong's successor, Yingzong, became ill. But Sima Guang and other officials soon urged Yingzong to return to the throne and persuaded the dowager to step down. See Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, 198.4792-4793, 198.4815, and 199.4838, and for the episode in which she is persuaded to step down, 201.4862, 4864, and 4866; Priscilla Ching Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Song 960-1126*, 75; and *Songren yishi huibian*, 32. Also see Xiao-bin Ji, *Politics and Conservatism in Northern Song China: the Career and Thought of Sima Guang (A.D. 1019-1086)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 80-85.

⁵⁶ Zhezong did not like his grandmother's policies and, when she died, put the reformers back in power. See Tuotuo, *Songsshi*, 242.8625-8627.

The reign most likely to read as though the lessons of the Han and Tang might have been forgotten is that of Guangzong 光宗 (reigned 1189-94), which no longer sounds like that of a Song emperor. His wife, Empress Li 李, insisted that her son, Prince Jia 嘉, be named heir apparent. He was the future Emperor Ningzong 寧宗 (reigned 1194-1224). Guangzong's father, retired Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (1127-94; reigned 1162-89) repeatedly and angrily refused. But Guangzong was under the empress's influence and, in a stunning transgression of the principles of filial piety, stopped visiting his father. The empress's most extreme acts of jealousy included the episode in which she sent the emperor a container holding the severed hands of a palace woman who had captivated his eyes a few days before. In 1191 she had one of the emperor's favorites murdered. The emperor's mental illness grew worse after this, according to the historians, and he stopped presiding at court, leaving matters to Empress Li to decide. She became more arrogant than ever, says the history, empowering members of her clan and other favorites, "to a degree never seen since the beginning of the restoration." Her power waned after the retired Emperor Xiaozong died in 1194, however, when Guangzong was forced to abdicate and Prince Jia became emperor in 1195.⁵⁷ I will only mention briefly two other female regents in the Song, Empress Meng 孟 (d. 1135), who had the longest biography of all in the chapter on empresses and consorts in the *Songshi*, but was known for her hesitance to take power; and Empress Yang 楊 (1162-1232), who was more powerful. Like Empress Liu, she came from a humble background. The wife of Ningzong, she was influential in the demise of the official Han Tuozhou 韓侂胄 (1151-1207) and the last minute selection of Ningzong's successor, Emperor Lizong 理宗 (reigned 1224-64).⁵⁸ She became empress dowager with Lizong's coronation and was influential as regent for the young emperor until her death in 1232.

⁵⁷) Other cases of jealous rivalry occurred, but Empress Li was singled out as "jealous and brazen," *duban* 妬悍. For all references, see Tuotuo, *Songshi*, 243.8653-8655.

⁵⁸) For Empress Meng, see Tuotuo, *Songshi*, 243.8637; and for Empress Yang, *Songshi*, 243.8656; Beverly Bossler, "Gender and Entertainment at the Song Court," in Anne Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty*, 261-79; and Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*, 163-64.

Women Rulers in the Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing

If Wu Zetian was by now a foil against which women rulers were measured, as we saw with Empress Liu, so were the women of the nomadic regimes of the Liao and Yuan. The Liao alone would have proven the point that nomadic women were granted too much power in political and military decision-making. The Khitan Liao did one thing in particular that Han regimes and even the Manchu Qing would never do, give women armies. The dynastic history of the Liao describes Empress Yingtian 應天 (879-953), the wife of the founder Abaoji (872-926), as “austere and imposing, resolute and decisive, and a brave strategist” (*jianzhong guoduan, you xionglüe* 簡重果斷, 有雄略). She had her own army, which she once led to save Abaoji from a dangerous ambush. When a Chinese ambassador from the Later Tang (923-36) visited the Liao in 926, he encountered Abaoji and the empress sitting on facing couches, an impossible situation in a Han regime. A famous and dramatic moment occurred when, instead of following the Khitan custom of sacrificing her life at the death of her husband, she cut off her right hand to place in his coffin. The other most notable female leader of the Liao was Empress Dowager Chengtian 成天 (953-1009), who was said to head civil and military branches of government with equal confidence and authority. She is the one who was granted the privilege of using *zhen* 朕 to refer to herself. She rose to prominence when her husband, Emperor Jingzong 景宗 (948-982; reigned 969-982), died and her son, the eleven-year old Shengzong 聖宗 (971-1031), assumed the throne in 982. She was thirty at the time and took the reins of government, dominated her son, and with the help of loyal officials ruled until her death in 1009. During her rule, she led the Liao army to defeat the Song, likewise an impossible situation for a Han regime.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The quote from Empress Yingtian's biography is in Tuotuo, *Liaoshi* 遼史, 71.1199. For the ambassador, see Frederick Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 45, citing a Liao historical source called the *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 (Mote provides a full translation of the ambassador's report); and K.A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, *History of Chinese Society, Liao (907-1125)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949), 538, also citing the *Qidan guozhi*. For the cutting off of her hand, see Tuotuo, *Liaoshi*, 71.1200 and Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Wudai shi* 新五代史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 73.902-903. On Chengtian, see Tuotuo, *Liaoshi*, 71.1201. On these and other Liao empresses, see Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties* also citing Ye Longli 葉隆禮, *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1968), 13.127-128.

As for the Jin dynasty, if we look in the two chapters on empresses and consorts in its dynastic history, we find that they are dominated by the story of one man, the profligate Prince Hailing 海陵 (1122-61), not the story of powerful empresses. Compared to the Liao and Yuan, the Jin underwent greater Han influence. There were at least three notable imperial women, but none who ruled as strongly as the women of the Tang or Song and none with a record of martial achievements. The first was the wife of Emperor Xizong 熙宗 (1119-49, reigned 1135-49), Lady Peiman 裴滿, posthumously known as Empress Daoping 悼平 (fl. twelfth century). A series of able members of the imperial clan ruled on behalf of Emperor Xizong, who was young when he assumed the throne, but when the last of those advisors died, Empress Daoping began to meddle flagrantly in imperial politics, says her biography. She lorded over the emperor, who at first suppressed his frustration, but finally killed the empress and later four other consorts, after which Prince Hailing assassinated him and took over as emperor.⁶⁰ During the last years of the Jin, the Mongols reduced it to the size of a province around the Southern Capital of Bianjing 汴京. Two Chinese sister-consorts named Wang 王 became prominent in the imperial family, the younger of whom was noted for her strictness with the imperial son. The sisters were married to Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (1163-1224), the first having entered his harem when he was a prince. She was shortly followed by her elder sister, who gave birth to the eventual last Jin ruler, Emperor Aizong 哀宗 (1198-1234; reigned 1224-34). The younger sister raised Aizong as if he were her own and became empress in 1214, a year after which the boy was declared heir apparent. Both she and her elder sister became dowagers when Aizong assumed the throne in 1224. “Deeply familiar with history from ancient times to the present,” Empress Wang was strict with the boy even after he became heir apparent and “only ceased applying the switch when he became emperor.”⁶¹ As affirmative of the empress as such words may be, they can only indicate the unworthiness of the young emperor, the implication again being that women like her must step in during times like these—though in this case the dynasty was already beyond hope.

⁶⁰) Tuotuo, *Jinshi*, 63.1503-1504.

⁶¹) See Tuotuo, *Jinshi*, 64.1532-1534.

Mongol-Yuan empresses were like those of the Liao in that it was normal for them to take part in political and military activity. Some elite Mongol women controlled entire domains, known as ordos, and owned large amounts of property. They had tax income, engaged in commerce, and earned interest from loans. They commanded armies and fought in battle. Genghis Khan had already named four of his daughters as queens of their own realms.⁶² After Khubilai Khan, the Yuan was ruled by a rapid succession of emperors, most of whom only governed for a few years, some incompetently. Succession was often violent and irregular, giving rise to conditions in which powerful women could and did exert influence. Two of the most powerful empresses were Targi (Daji 答己, late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries) and Budashiri (Budashili 卜答失里, born ca 1332-1333). Targi was the power behind the scenes in the power struggle between her two sons and dominated the reign of her grandson Shidebala (Emperor Yingzong 英宗, 1303-1323), whom she thought “soft and cowardly.”⁶³ Like Targi, Budashiri leagued with influential ministers and remained powerful for years, though she and the ministers were much hated and she was eventually exiled. Targi and Budashiri never became revered examples of imperial women. The models of Yuan empresses that carried into the Ming and later were Khubilai Khan’s mother, Sorghaghtani Beki (Suoluhetieni 唆魯禾帖尼, d. 1252), who fought vigorously for her sons against their rivals and who was highly praised in Chinese, Italian, Persian, and Hebrew sources; and the wife of Khubilai Khan, Chabui (Chabi 察必, thirteenth century), who was praised by Ming historians for preventing a large part of northern China from being turned from agricultural use to pastureland, for her frugality, and her sympathy to the fallen Song. There was also the second emperor’s mother, Kōkōjin (Kuokuozhen 闊闊真, d. 1300), who was instrumental in getting her son Temür (鐵木耳) chosen as successor.⁶⁴

⁶² Genghis Khan declared equality between man and woman in the marriages of these queens, although as Jack Weatherford has shown the Mongol histories have largely erased this episode from the records. See his *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 33. Regarding economic activity, see Li Zhengfu, “Zhongguo gudai houfei waiqi yanjiu,” 125-128.

⁶³ Song Lian 宋濂 (1310-81), *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 116.2902.

⁶⁴ See Xue Lei 薛磊, *Yuandi gongting shi* 元帝宫廷史 (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2008), 136-39, and Morris Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” in Wolfgang Bauer, ed., *Studia Sino-Mongolica* (Wiesbaden: Verlag, 1979), 153-80.

Both the Ming and Qing applied lessons about women learned from the past by creating institutional means of preventing and monitoring powerful women. Many centuries earlier, the leaders of the Wei 魏 dynasty (220-65) had already taken conscious steps to address the problems of meddling women whom they saw as the major cause of Han decline. An edict of 222 stated that “Women participating in government is the root of disorder,” using words long known from the ancient *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo tradition). Henceforth, empresses, dowagers, and their families were to be kept from direct participation in government, and members of their families were no longer to be awarded noble rank. The dynasty was too short to judge how effective the policies were, but no empresses or dowagers were ever as powerful as the ones in the Later Han. Other regimes took similar measures, such as the founder of the Liu Song 劉宋 dynasty (420-79) who just before dying decreed that, if a child emperor succeeded to the throne, male officials were to take temporary charge, but dowagers should not.⁶⁵ As for the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-98), he took a major step in institutionalizing the prevention of women rulers by directing his descendants to take imperial wives from relatively low ranks of the elite and even from entirely non-elite backgrounds. The Qing dynasty did the same. The point was to reduce the potential of interference by powerful in-law families. In the Ming, no women ever served as official regent during the entire dynasty. But as usual the stricture against women interfering in politics did not work when emperors were young and weak or when they had favorites. Moreover, as had happened before, it did not matter if women were from lowly origins; they could still exert tremendous influence.

Only one politically powerful woman in the Ming received a respectable reputation, Empress Dowager Zhang 張 (died 1442), referred to above, who was from a humble background and ruled as unofficial regent when her grandson, Emperor Yingzong 英宗, was still a child. Other powerful women in the Ming were far less respectable and exerted influence in ways that only barely reflected the kind of rulership of an official female regent. Emperor Xianzong’s 憲宗 (1447-87)

⁶⁵ See Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi*, 2.58, 2.80, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi*, 214 and 316, and Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513), *Songs shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 3.59.

childhood nursemaid and sexual companion, Honored Consort Wan 萬貴妃 (1430-87), was a generation older than he and dominated his reign in a way hardly seen since the Han or Tang. He assumed the throne at age fifteen when she was thirty-four and his sole favorite. She bore the emperor his first son in 1466, but the baby died and she never became pregnant again. Officials and others worried about the emperor's lack of heir and, in classic fashion, urged him to "spread his beneficence and go out and widely beget" (*pu enze yi guang jisi* 溥恩澤以廣繼嗣), which he at first refused to do. Consort Wan had gotten him to depose his empress. If a palace woman became pregnant, she saw to it that the fetus was aborted. The emperor finally discovered that he in fact had a successor, who had been raised secretly, unbeknownst even to him, after being born to a palace woman whom the emperor had surreptitiously impregnated (and who was probably killed by Consort Wan).⁶⁶ In two other cases, women exerted power mainly at the level of imperial succession. The Wanli 萬曆 Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (reigned 1563-1620) had a favorite, Honored Consort Zheng 鄭 (ca 1568-1630), who tried to replace the heir apparent, Zhu Changluo 朱常洛 (1582-1620), with her son (some say she had Zhu Changluo killed). Zhu Changluo became the short-lived Taichang 泰昌 emperor, who had a favorite, Chosen Attendant Li 李選侍. She unsuccessfully pressured his son and heir apparent, Zhu Youjiao 朱由校 (1605-27), to name her empress. When Zhu Changluo died, she kept officials from getting to the heir apparent and preparing him for enthronement. A brief standoff occurred, with one official declaring that "the calamity of Wu Zetian is again before us" (*Wushi zhi huozai jian yu jin* 武氏之禍再見於今).⁶⁷ The last such case in the Ming involved a spectacular usurpation of power, when Zhu Youjiao's wetnurse, Madame Ke 客氏 (died 1627), allied herself with the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568-1627) and engaged in years of interference in imperial politics. Ruling as the Tianqi 天啓 (reigned 1620-1627) emperor, Zhu Youjiao was closely attached to Madame Ke, who was like a mother to the young emperor, who had lost his own in

⁶⁶ Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi*, 113.3521-3522, 3524; 176.4685; Xia Xie 夏燮 (1799-1875), *Ming tongjian* 明通鑑 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1962), 33.1258-1259. For a concise account of Wan Guifei, see John Dardess, *Ming China, 1368-1644: A Concise History of a Resilient Empire* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 44-45.

⁶⁷ Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi*, 244.6330, 114.3541.

1605. Officials who objected to the influence of Wei and Ke were brutally purged. It was only at the death of the young emperor in 1627 that Wei and Ke were themselves purged.⁶⁸

The Qing did not know it was China's last dynasty, but in retrospect applied the lessons of history in what it thought was efficient fashion. Reacting to the flagrant abuse of power by Ming eunuchs, for example, the Qing founders severely shrank the eunuch administration and succeeded in containing their influence for most of the dynasty. By way of stemming the power of empresses, the Qing continued the policy of taking imperial wives from lower ranks and took special measures to isolate palace women from their families. As Evelyn Rawski has explained, in contrast to the Ming, the status differences between Qing empresses and other consorts were not as sharp. It was even possible for a concubine to become empress, as happened in seven of eighteen cases in the Qing (including women who were posthumously promoted to empress). In general, empresses were no longer as powerful in choosing successors, while women from lower ranks enjoyed a potentially greater form of upward mobility. When empress dowagers did exert power, as Rawski continues, they differed from earlier dynasties in that they allied with the emperor's brothers and not with their own kin.⁶⁹

Only two women stand out as being particularly powerful, Bumbutai (Bumubutai 布木布泰, 1613-88) and Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908). Bumbutai was wife of the first Qing emperor. She became Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang 孝莊 under the second Qing ruler, her son the Shunzhi 順治 emperor (reigned 1644-61). Though not highly ranked during her husband's time, she was the strongest palace woman during her son's reign and became great empress dowager during her grandson the Kangxi 康熙 emperor's reign (1661-1722). At the death

⁶⁸ See John Dardess, *Blood and History: The Donglin Faction and its Repression, 1620-1627* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), Gu Yingtai 谷應泰, *Mingshi jishi benmo* 明史紀事本末 (Shenyang: Liaoshen shushe, 1994), 1359-1407, and William Atwell, "The T'ai-ch'ang, T'ien-ch'i, and Ch'ung-chen Reigns, 1620-1644," in Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7 part 1: *The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 585-640. Another source on Ming imperial women is Ellen Soulliere, "The Imperial Marriages of the Ming Dynasty," *Papers on Far Eastern History*, 37 (1988): 15-42.

⁶⁹ See Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

of Shunzhi, she declined the request to “attend to government from behind the curtain,” preferring to handle matters from a more remote position.⁷⁰ She played influential roles during the regencies of both her son and especially grandson, taking charge of the latter’s education because of the early death of his mother. She promoted Kangxi as successor to her son and, after he assumed the throne as a young boy, eventually pushed aside the regents who had ruled during the first few years. The thirteen-year-old Kangxi then began his personal rule, independent from them. Kangxi’s relation with his grandmother was such that he would consult with her in secret, not allowing court diarists to accompany him. She held a prominent place during his entire reign until her death in 1688 at age seventy-five.

The story of Empress Dowager Cixi is long, and is the subject of several recent and innovative studies.⁷¹ Suffice to say that she was the last effective ruler of the Qing and was in power for forty-seven years beginning in 1861. Unlike Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang, Cixi became regent officially and exerted more power for much longer. She commanded the loyalty of the highest officials of the empire, though she was often caught between battling factions and made difficult choices among them in a time of unprecedented crisis. People have vilified her ever since, especially after the failure of the 1898 One Hundred Days of Reform, accusing her of leading the Qing to ruin and failing to make the necessary changes to meet internal and external challenges. In vilifying her, critics resurrected old motifs about meddling female rulers, accusing her of living extravagantly in times of turmoil, having an affair with a eunuch, and even having lovers smuggled into the palace. She was said to be irascible, mean-tempered, cruel, and vindictive, even to the point of murder. Rumors and sensationalism became so rampant that some information about her may have become permanently corrupted. Witnesses who were close to her did not produce such negative images, especially eunuchs and women, including foreigners.⁷² The

⁷⁰) See Zhu Ziyang, *Diguo jiuchongtian*, 182.

⁷¹) See the recent special issue of *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 14.1 (2012), and studies such as Pamela Crossley, *The Wobbling Pivotal: China Since 1800* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁷²) See for example Katherine Carl, *With the Empress Dowager of China* (New York: The Century Company, 1906); Sarah Pike Conger, *Letters from China; with particular reference*

recent studies, moreover, have argued away the vilification and given a sounder basis for evaluating her accomplishments. Nevertheless, her appearance at the end of imperial history follows the basic rule of the appearance of women rulers in general: when qualified men are weak and unavailable, women take the reins of government. She proved that the rules both for and against women rulers were still in place.

Conclusion

It may be difficult to assign an ultimate reason for the rule against women rulers, but we can at least describe how the rule was articulated and how it worked, and we can speculate. In effect, excluding women rulers was a way of defining social harmony as something based solely on male rulership. The ideology of male rulership, in other words, maintained that as long as men ruled, there would be social harmony. When women ruled, they were the sign of the lack of harmony and they were meddlers. As Hanfeizi said, if there were two masters, man and woman, “then all was lost.” There could only be male masters. Basing social harmony upon the exclusion of women touches upon the “nature of kingship itself,” which as Pauline Stafford summarizes has to do with the founding of kingship upon the notion of the “undying body united across generations by blood.”⁷³ The earliest known religious practices associated kingship with divinity, as Arthur Hocart reminds us. The king was the “embodiment” of a god, the sun god in particular, and passed that embodiment down through his successors. Succession was like a constant victory in which the sun conquered the darkness and rose again every day. The king was the symbol and guarantor of prosperity and abundance. Descent through men defined the undying body, beside which the woman’s body was secondary. He was the sky, she was the

to the Empress Dowager and the women of China (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1909); Princess Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, Inc., 1977, reprint of 1911); and a palace woman’s memories in Jin Yi 金易 and Shen Yiling 沈義齡, *Gongnü tanwang lu* 宮女談往錄 (Hong Kong: Jiangyuan wenhua qiye, 1991). For a more in-depth discussion of these points, see Li Yuhang and Harriet Zurndorfer, “Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi through the Production of Art,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 14.1 (2012): 1-20.

⁷³ Stafford, “Emma,” in Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship*, 16-17.

earth. Rule by the natural right of being a man was based on the belief that male ruler held a magic and divine essence that distinguished him from women and all other men. The occurrence of a woman ruler was only due to the fact that, as empress or queen, she shared a portion of the man's natural right, his magic essence.⁷⁴

In Chinese history there was the principle of the Mandate of Heaven. A ruler ruled because he was sanctioned by Heaven. If he behaved wrongly, he would lose the Mandate and be replaced. The principle of the Mandate of Heaven was by way of recognizing that no one ruled innocently and justly for long. The time-honored myths of Yao and Shun were another way of saying the same thing. Yao and Shun saw that their own sons were unworthy to inherit the throne and therefore passed it to worthier men who were not their sons. Their actions symbolized the fact that hereditary succession inevitably derailed itself. The principle of the Mandate of Heaven, on the one hand, and the mythical ideal of passing the throne to a successor other than one's son, on the other, were two ways of defining the position of emperor as a kind of neutral abstraction, that is, *devoid of the contaminating contents of the hereditary bloodline*. The throne was open to the one who truly deserved it; whoever gained and held the throne deserved it because of Heaven's support. Wu Zetian took the principle of the Mandate of Heaven into her own hands and pushed it to its logical extreme. If Yao's sons were unworthy, why not choose a Daughter of Heaven or a Sage Mother? As quickly as she legitimized herself, however, she could not overcome centuries of historical custom and precedent. Her rule was defined as a usurpation, not a revolution, which is what it would have taken to overthrow the law of hereditary male rulership.

If we were to imagine China granting the Mandate of Heaven to women, what would female rulership have been like? What would it mean to have a woman as ruler in her own right? Would she regularize succession to the throne by women only, would rule revert to men, or would it be a matter of who was next in line, whether male or female? Would a corps of women be trained from youth to be her advisors? A key issue would be the status of her husband, if she had one. In

⁷⁴ See Arthur M. Hocart, *Kingship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), chapters one and two and 26, 33, and 105.

England where queen-regnants were a possibility, there were nevertheless no precedents for a king consort, as evidenced in the case of Queen Mary Tudor and her Spanish husband Philip, who at their marriage was pointedly deprived of executive authority. Would the hypothetical Chinese queen-regnant be required to stay loyal to one husband? Would she be careful about which man fathered her children? Would it matter if she was the biological mother? If an empress failed to have a child, would she adopt a niece or nephew, for instance, or resort to a surrogate mother and have her husband or one of her male concubines impregnate her? Because of considerations of space, I leave questions and hypotheses like these for another study on women rulers and the issues of sexual intimacy and marriage.⁷⁵ But suffice to say that those issues would play crucial roles in the definition of female rulership. Also suffice to say that the fact that an institution of dynastic queenship never appeared in recorded history says in itself how unimaginable such a prospect must have been. In China it remained the case that a woman in charge was primarily a widowed regent who served temporarily until the male emperor, usually a young son or grandson, was ready to rule on his own. Polygamy stayed supreme, rivalry among wives never disappeared, and succession to the throne remained the weakest link, which little was able to remedy.

⁷⁵ See also McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*.