

# WU TSE-T' IEN AND THE POLITICS OF LEGITIMATION IN T'ANG CHINA

R. W. L. GUISSO

Preface by  
E. G. Pulleyblank



WESTERN WASHINGTON



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*Publishers of scholarly books on China, Japan,  
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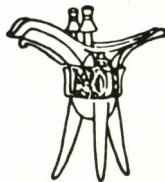
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For Joseph and Phyllis Guisso  
and for Marion Hulet, a  
most remarkable teacher.



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To a variety of other persons I am equally grateful. Julian C. Y. Ch'en, Mary C. C. Wang and Monica M. J. Lim checked the translations while Madeline Grant labored with patience and fortitude to eliminate stylistic inconsistencies and logical *non sequiturs* from the manuscript. Lin S. Keung often enlightened me about particular points and Reta Lienhardt typed the first draft with precision, dispatch, and the occasional stern remonstrance on the subject of sloppy punctuation. The final draft was the capable work of Nancy Stade. At various times in the course of writing and research I received financial support from the Rhodes Trust, the Canada Council and the Japanese Department of Education.

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There undoubtedly remain errors both of fact and logic. These, along with the more eccentric interpretations, are entirely my own responsibility.



## PREFACE

After an interlude in which interest seemed to have shifted to later periods, there are signs that T'ang studies are once more attracting the attention of a number of younger western sinologists. Without depreciating the importance of studying other parts of the seamless web that makes up the history of Chinese civilization, one can only welcome this renewed attention to the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. T'ang was, after all, a great formative period in which the political institutions of the Chinese imperial system were renewed after the decline and division that followed the end of Han and in which new beginnings in economic and cultural life came to rapid fruition in what was ever afterwards looked back on as a golden age. Celebrating past glories should not, of course, be the main aim of historical scholarship, but to investigate the interplay of forces which led to the triumphs and disasters of an age like T'ang, so full of both lasting achievements and creative innovations with fateful long-term consequences, must be of perennial interest.

Dr. Guisso's study of the Empress Wu takes a subject which has not lacked attention of a kind in the past even in English. The sensational aspects of female rule, exaggerated and distorted by popular legend, and Confucian moralizing, in a society where male dominance was as deeply entrenched as it was in traditional China have, however, often been the main focus of such interest. The more serious historical questions raised by her reign have been little explored. Dr. Guisso has opened the debate on several issues, as well as contributing to the discussion of problems concerning the role of the Empress Wu in major societal and political changes of the T'ang period that have been raised by other scholars in the past.

One of the themes that Dr. Guisso has chosen to discuss is that of legitimacy. How could a woman establish a claim to supreme authority in the Chinese state in her own name? Other women before and after Wu Tse-t'ien exercised power as empresses dowager, ruling in the name of child emperors, but she was the only one in the whole recorded length of Chinese history who went beyond this and openly assumed the style and prerogatives of the imperial dignity for herself. In spite of the affront to Confucian political theory and tradition, this claim was accepted *de facto* by her contemporaries and by historians of the T'ang period. It was left to the Sung historians, especially the Confucian theorist Chu Hsi, to undertake the "rectification of names."

Dr. Guisso attributes the empress's success in holding the allegiance of her subjects mainly to "personal and instrumental claims." This seems correct. Having shared power with her husband for nearly three decades, she still had the reins of authority firmly in her grasp when he died and was unwilling to give them up. At the same time her proved competence in government made her acceptable to the majority of her subjects, whose support enabled her to dispose of such challenges as did arise. Where the issue becomes more debatable is in regard to her ultimate aims. Dr. Guisso goes so far as to suggest that her primary loyalty was to the T'ang house and that her refusal to relinquish



power was motivated by a desire to consolidate the achievements of the three previous T'ang reigns in freeing the monarchy from "the constraints of self-seeking aristocrats and . . . factious bureaucrats," seeing in the untrammelled power of the monarchy the source of the peace and prosperity which had come to China since the accession of T'ang.

Such a conclusion will hardly go unchallenged, as Dr. Guisso himself suggests. It seems to credit the Empress Wu with altogether too much altruism and long-term political vision. The opposite view, which treats her as simply an unprincipled usurper, is as difficult to maintain, however. One of the remarkable things about the picture we get of her from contemporary sources is the respect in which she was held by Confucian ministers who served under her, even when they disapproved in principle of her unorthodox occupancy of a position reserved for a member of the male sex.

At the heart of the problem is her intention in changing the dynastic name from T'ang to Chou in 690. In the light of earlier precedents this should have meant a transfer of the Mandate of Heaven from the Li family to the Wu family, and this is clearly what her Wu relatives expected. There is no clear evidence, however, that this was ever her intention. Instead of making the titular emperor, her son Jui-tsung, go through a ritual abdication and so leaving the way clear for a change of dynastic line, she merely demoted him to Imperial Successor (*huang-ssu*), making him in addition change his surname from Li to Wu. Was this, as Dr. Guisso suggests, merely an audacious way of testing her success in consolidating the strength of the imperial institution, while subtly indicating to T'ang loyalists that she really had no intention of changing the succession? Or was it just a first cautious step that was never followed up because she perceived that the opposition to a permanent change of dynasty was too great?

A factor that should not be overlooked is Wu Tse-t'ien's feminism, perhaps not consciously articulated but obvious enough in some of her actions. Her reign was unprecedented not only in the position which she herself occupied but also in the roles played by her female advisers and daughters, particularly the youngest, the T'ai-p'ing Princess, of whom she was particularly fond. Dr. Guisso has little to say about this but it is surely not without significance when we try to understand her vacillating indecision with regard to the succession. It is evident that she had as poor an opinion of the male members of her own clan as she had of her sons and the thought of handing over the continuation of her work to the former rather than the latter, who were after all the offspring of her own body, held no attraction for her. What she wanted, one may guess, was to find a way of perpetuating her *own* line as a dynastic founder; but the Chinese patriarchal political and family system provided no means of achieving such a goal. To make her son reign as *her* successor, using *her* surname rather than her husband's, would have been a partial victory. Even better would have been to pass the succession to a daughter. Though there is no evidence that the Empress Wu herself ever contemplated such a step, her granddaughter, the An-lo Princess, did actually ask her father, Chung-tsung, to make her heir to the throne. To Confucian minds female succession was unthinkable but in the atmosphere of female advancement started by the Empress Wu there were women who were beginning to think the unthinkable.

If this suggests that in offering these prefatory remarks to Dr. Guisso's book I do not think he has said the last word on the subject, I hope he will forgive me. What his book has done is to stimulate me to think again about



these and other questions relating to an important epoch in T'ang history. I trust that it will do the same for others and provide a basis for further studies in the same depth by himself and others in future.

E. G. Pulleyblank

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* is an attempt to examine and to describe the career of China's only female "emperor" and an attempt also, by using a particular frame of reference, to place in perspective her very controversial regime. I have not set out consciously to write a biography but could not avoid, of course, the inclusion of a good deal of biographical detail. In general, the life of the Empress Wu has been subordinated to larger themes, and it is for this reason that we can see her remarkable force of character and virtuosity of mind only through the darkest of glasses.

This study has three emphases. The first is the question of legitimation, the nature of the Empress Wu's position and power. How did she win recognition as the legitimate sovereign of a state and a culture which had never before permitted a woman to be Son of Heaven? And why, after this unique achievement, did she fail to preserve her position until her death? What influence did her unorthodox rise and her anomalous position have upon her times, and what does her career tell us of the process of legitimation in T'ang China?

These considerations lead to the second emphasis, that of the tension between Confucian state theory and the contradiction of a female ruler. In the resulting clash I attempt to show that the tradition proved to be of greater flexibility than is generally recognized but at the same time proved to be so durable and resilient that in the Chou, the empress found herself increasingly frustrated and finally defeated by it. This study suggests that while husband or son occupied the throne she was able to borrow their legitimacy and make genuine strides toward the accomplishment of her chief goals, namely the creation of a viable centralization and of an imperial institution which would be free, secure and supreme in its relationship with a new bureaucracy. In the Chou, when the empress ruled alone, the contemporary power structure came increasingly to resist innovation and with growing success. As a result, I suggest, the dynasty is best regarded as it was at Chung-tsung's restoration, as a caretaker regime, a period of consolidation and of the continuation of policies initiated in the preceding quarter century. In all probability Empress Wu seized the throne to preserve rather than to innovate.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Confucian tradition and the value system it represented survived unchanged. Certain of its components were less durable than its whole. The traditional hierarchy, for instance, was forced into a process of gradual change, with the aloof and self-sufficient aristocracy whose political and societal role had shaped the character of the age of disunion, beginning its transformation into a quite different sort of ruling class in response to creation of state status registers and the growth of the examination system. Thus the centralizing and absolutistic thrusts of the empress' regime helped to modify the customary stratification of early T'ang society and the perception of status it supported. Certain institutions, such as the *fu-ping* system, were forced into decline because the empress saw the state, its environment and its priorities in rather different terms than did the first



T'ang rulers. In a positive vein, other institutions were fostered. The Buddhist church and the examination system are the most prominent of these, and their rapid development is to be seen partly in terms in the empress' need for support, but also in terms of her inclinations and temperament and in the close identification she developed with her people and their aspirations. The tension between orthodoxy and the rule of a usurping woman was, therefore, an important force for change and it is to be hoped that I have given it due stress.

The third emphasis is historiographical. Few figures in the history of China's middle period have been the object of so much discussion, and one result of this has been the creation of durable stereotypes and recurrent misconceptions. Many of these are referred to and examined in the following study, and largely through the introduction of new evidence such as the *P'an-lung-t'ai pei*, the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra*, and the *Samguk Sagi* account of the Korean war. I paint rather a different picture of the empress and her policies than that which emerges in traditional historiography.

Finally, we may do well to note that the scope of the study is a wide one. Because it seeks to portray the spectrum of change over a large area both in temporal and geographical terms, depth has sometimes been sacrificed to breadth of treatment. The balance between biography and history, description and analysis has been difficult to strike, and some aspects of the period, such as economic policy, have been treated too lightly. In choosing what to omit, selection has been based on the quality of other secondary literature available and, wherever possible, an attempt has been made to identify this literature.

The effort of producing a full study of the reign of the Empress Wu Tse-t'ien has been a worthwhile one. It is to be hoped that this study will weaken the tenacity of outworn paradigms like that of the political rivalry between the Northwest and the Northeast and the "lewdness" of Empress Wu, and that it will provide insights into new ones such as the force of Buddhist legitimation. Its deficiencies will perhaps identify those many areas in which additional research would be fruitful.

R. W. L. Guisso

## TERMINOLOGY AND ABBREVIATIONS

The romanization of terms in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean follows the recommendations of the *Journal of Asian Studies Style Sheet*, while Sanskrit transliterations are based upon the *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* by W. E. Soothill and L. Hodous. T'ang place names are hyphenated, while the familiar, unhyphenated form is used for names describing present locations. Dates containing the name of a month have been converted to the Western calendar on the basis of *Tōdai no koyomi* by Hiraoka Takeo. A distinction is made between the regime and the reign of the Empress Wu, the latter used only to refer to the period from 690 to 705.

The following abbreviations have been used in this work:

BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
CTS	<i>Chiu T'ang Shu</i>
CTShih	<i>Ch'üan T'ang-shih</i>
CTW	<i>Ch'üan T'ang-wen</i>
CYYY	<i>Kuo-li chung-yang yen-chiu yüan li-shih yü-yen yen-chiu-so chi-k'an</i>
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
HTS	<i>Hsin T'ang-shu</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>
MSOS	<i>Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin</i>
PSTS	<i>Chi sha-men pu-ying pai-su teng-shih</i>
SKSC	<i>Sung kao-seng-chuan</i>
SPPY	<i>Ssu-pu pei-yao</i>
SS	<i>Samguk sagi</i>
TCTC	<i>Tzu-chih t'ung-chien</i>
TD	<i>Taishō daizō kyō</i>
TFYK	<i>Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei</i>
THY	<i>T'ang hui-yao</i>
TLSI	<i>T'ang-lü shu-i</i>
TRSI	<i>Tōryō shūi</i>
TT	<i>T'ung-tien</i>
TTCLC	<i>T'ang ta chao-ling chi</i>
TTLT	<i>Ta-T'ang liu-tien</i>
WHTK	<i>Wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao</i>
WYYH	<i>Wen-yüan ying-hua</i>



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