

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the history of imperial China, the T'ang empress Wu Tse-t'ien occupies a unique place. For almost half a century she enjoyed supreme power: first in partnership with T'ang Kao-tsung, a ruler usually considered weak and ineffectual, later as de facto regent for her youngest son and finally, from 690 to 705 A.D., as China's sole female emperor.¹ Her rise from the obscurity of T'ai-tsung's harem was dramatic and her pursuit of power ruthless. Her political policies were controversial and her lifestyle flamboyant. For these reasons novelists and playwrights have found in her career a frequent source of inspiration.²

For historians, too, she has been a popular subject, and few figures of her era have been so often or so passionately discussed. Judgments of her place in history, both by traditional and modern historians, have been diverse, and to the present day scholars in China continue to debate her merits.³ It is somewhat surprising, in view of their volume, that traditional studies of the empress debate a rather narrow range of issues and, reduced to their basics, restrict themselves generally to two questions. Was the Empress Wu a legitimate emperor and, *in personal terms*, was she a good or a bad ruler? The controversy is framed in this manner, of course, because of the moralistic and didactic bias of Confucian historiography,⁴ and before turning to my own examination of her career, I might offer a short survey of the earlier views to isolate the grounds of controversy and identify some of the problems with which I shall deal later.

Turning first to the question of the empress' legitimacy, we should note that theoretical analyses of the nature of legitimate authority are of relatively recent vintage, and that while social scientists like David Easton have made useful contributions to our conceptual understanding, the original formulations of Max Weber have stood up remarkably well.⁵ Weber's suggestion that there exist three pure types of legitimate authority--the traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic⁶--is one I shall discuss later in some detail, and I shall remark here only that it was the first type which constituted the great barrier to the empress' legitimation. Second, we must bear in mind the distinction between claims to legitimacy and their acceptance--the belief of subjects that a particular individual or social order is legitimate.⁷ For the historian this distinction is never an easy one, since sources are seldom of such psychological depth that he can pass judgment on something so elusive as the reality of belief, and for the seventh century when the vast majority of the Empress Wu's constituency was wholly inarticulate, definitive statements are best avoided. What we can say with some certainty, however, is that in her lifetime the articulate among her subjects acted as if her legitimation were valid and that after her death, attempts made to deprive her of that status in official historiography met with only limited success.

For both these statements evidence is so full that only a few examples need to be raised. From the very beginning of the Chou, for instance, officials at all levels accorded the empress the proper forms of address and homage and, in contrast to their counterparts under Wang Mang, seem to have carried out her orders without question. There was no protest, as far as we can tell, when she performed such hallowed imperial ceremonies as the *feng-shan*,⁸ and even those anxious for a T'ang restoration seem to have recognized the present legitimacy of the empress. In 702, for instance, we find a scholar of this persuasion memorializing: "I have heard that the empire is the empire of [T'ang] Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung. Although Your Majesty (*pi-hsia*) occupies [the position of] rightful ruler (*cheng-t'ung*), certainly you depend on the old foundations of the T'ang clan."⁹

In view of the coercive power at the empress' command, we might be inclined to suggest an element of dissimulation in this choice of terminology, but arguing against it is the attitude of her successor, her son Chung-tsung. At the T'ang restoration in early 705, he not only accorded her the honorific "emperor" (*Tse-t'ien ta-sheng huang-ti*),¹⁰ but in his edict of accession said:

The emperor Tse-t'ien ta-sheng is of real intelligence, perfect virtue and deep wisdom. In response to the needs of the time, her excellent plans of October 16, 690¹¹ initiated the grand design of perfect unity. Moving the jade seal, she destroyed the avaricious and conferring the golden halberd, she killed the immoderate. She received the Sign of the Lo River [on which was] written she must [follow] the calendar of Hao Hsi.¹² She cared tenderly for those of virtue among the people and together they obtained humanity and long life. Finally, she embraced closely the search for the *Tao* and fixed her thoughts on *wu-wei*, enduring a life of toil for the sake of the imperial throne (*ta-pao*). Then she "restored it respectfully to the intelligent prince." . . . She made offering at the ancestral temple of Kao-tsu and respected the altars of T'ai-tsung, not disregarding the old things.¹³

In this way Chung-tsung set the "official line" on the usurpation, not only justifying his mother's legitimation but offering imperial recognition of the fact that a woman had been *de facto* and *de jure* emperor. His description of her legitimation process is most instructive, and we would do well to bear it in mind in the course of our own analysis.

At the restoration, of course, an element of coercion remained in that Wu Tse-t'ien was still alive and political control was vested firmly in the hands of her nephew San-ssu and the Empress Wei. Similarly, the next ruler, her last son Jui-tsung, was much under the influence of his sister T'ai-p'ing, so that the attitude of Hsüan-tsung is therefore a much better indicator of how history would view the legitimation of his grandmother. While he seems to have made no statement on the matter, the fact that in 716 he accepted her *Veritable Records* (*shih-lu*) along with those of Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung¹⁴ suggests that he was willing to see her as emperor even though she had herself renounced the title on her deathbed.¹⁵ Because the *Veritable Records* formed the principal source for the *National History* (*kuo-shih*), it seemed her legitimacy was secure.

In 780, however, the first voice to raise officially the question of Tse-t'ien's usurpation was heard when Shen Chi-ch'i, an official of the History Office, complained in a lengthy memorial that the account of Wu Ching's era had been cast in the form of an annal (*pen-chi*) in the *National History*.¹⁶ Basing

his argument on the Confucian principle of the rectification of names (*cheng-ming*), he contended that she was a usurper and her position false (*chia* 假) rather than legal (*cheng*). Since the Mandate of Heaven had not changed (*t'ien-ming wei-kai*) with the deposition of Chung-tsung in 684, the acts of the empress dowager should be placed in his annals, and even though he did not himself participate in government, his whereabouts should head each yearly entry. Te-tsung rejected his advice but, according to the *T'ang hui-yao*, historians of the time praised it.¹⁷

This seems to have ended the debate in the T'ang and when the official dynastic history was completed in 945, the Empress Wu was duly given annals and in them referred to as *shang* or emperor.¹⁸ There exists a certain ambiguity, however, in that the annals are still called those of an empress (*huang-hou*), a phenomenon duly noted by the compilers of the *New T'ang History* (HTS) in 1060.¹⁹ Their attitude is one we can judge with certainty not only in the finished work but also in a separate volume by Lü Hsia-ch'ing, the *T'ang-shu chih-pi*,²⁰ which outlines the principles on which the revision of the old *T'ang History* (CTS) was based. In it we find direct criticism of the practice of according annals to empresses and even of including their actions in those of husbands or sons.²¹ The *Chih-pi* does not list Tse-t'ien among the twenty T'ang emperors, but in the very next passage, which lists the number of chief ministers in each reign, we find that the empress had sixty-eight *tsai-hsiang*.²² The *Chih-pi* was impaled upon a dilemma: if Tse-t'ien were not a legitimate ruler, how could the events of her period of actual power be recounted consistently in the chronicle style of history which was the set form of official historiography? Ouyang Hsiu in the *New T'ang History*, makes the uneasy compromise of according her both annals and a biography (*lieh-chuan*), remarking in the latter that she "styled herself" emperor.²³ Only with Ssu-ma Kuang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (TCTC) and the several influential if less "official" works based upon it do we find a clear position. To Ssu-ma, Wu Tse-t'ien was never emperor but empress-dowager (*t'ai-hou*) from 683 until her death.²⁴

In the general perception it was ultimately this latter view which prevailed, and particularly as Chu Hsi's *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien kang-mu* because the most widely used of historical textbooks, Wu Tse-t'ien became simply a usurping empress presiding over an illegitimate regime.²⁵ By this time historians were also turning their attention to other facets of the empress and her rule, and once again because of the didactic function of history, the central question was that of "praise-and-blame." The striking feature of the Chou usurpation, and what made it wholly unprecedented, was of course the fact that it had been effected by a woman, and in order to understand better the common tendency of Confucian scholarship to darken the empress' reputation, we shall survey briefly the evolution of the traditional prohibition of female influence in government.

The origins of China's unwritten Salic principle are obscure but of great age. In spite of the impressive body of evidence which suggests that China's earliest society was matrilinear and perhaps matrilocal, and in spite of the fact that in its mythological tradition one of the Three Rulers (*san-huang*) was female,²⁶ the bias against women being active outside the home appears in the earliest works of what was to become the canonical tradition. "The hen does not announce the morning," says the *Book of History* (*Shu-ching*), "the crowing of a hen in the morning indicates the subversion of the family."²⁷ The *Book of*

Odes (Shih-ching) contains several songs, suggestive of similar attitudes, like the following:

A clever man builds strong ramparts,
 A clever woman overthrows them.
 Beautiful is the clever wife,
 But her heart as cruel as that of the owl.
 Women with long tongues
 Are harbingers of evil,
 Disasters are not sent down from Heaven--
 They originate in wives.
 These two can neither be taught nor led,
 Wives and eunuchs.
 When they start slandering people,
 At first the ruler does not hide them.
 He even says? "They can go nowhere,
 What evil could they do?"
 But they are like merchants selling at triple profit.
 All those wiles are known to the wise.
 They do not let wives meddle in public affairs,
 And keep them to their spinning and weaving.²⁸

It was, of course, because these writings were associated with Confucius, who himself declined to associate with "women and inferior persons,"²⁹ that the bias gained increasing strength, and until the early Han informal prohibition seemed sufficient to keep women out of politics. The virtual usurpation of the Empress Lü from about 187 B.C., therefore, confronted commentators with an unprecedented situation, and the Han historians had to invent the phrase "appear in court and pronounce decrees" (*lin-ch'ao ch'eng-chih*) to deal with it.³⁰ The phrase was to be used of at least eight dowagers in the Han,³¹ and so pronounced and deplorable was female influence in the period that later commentators found it a principal cause of the dynasty's fall.³² In 222 A.D. Wei Wen-ti issued a formal decree that women were forbidden to involve themselves in politics.³³

The subsequent period of disunion saw no repetition of formal prohibitions, but the growth rather of customary recognition that in certain closely defined "emergency" situations, empresses or empress dowagers might exercise a temporary regency, though in all cases they were duty-bound to "restore the throne to the intelligent prince" (*fu-t'ien yü ming-p'i*).³⁴ Both in North and South, however, we find instances of women who exceeded the definition of their role, and from the Sui-T'ang reunification we can trace a determination that such breaches of Confucian tradition not recur. The T'ang attitude is well expressed by Wei Cheng and his colleagues in a *Sui-shu* passage which also comments on the disharmony in the family lives of the Sui rulers:

In the Chin and Sung, a great number [of women] all gained their position by [imperial] favor and their rise was not due to virtue. Soon after, [their] conduct became corrupt and none observed *li* and *i*. By [women who were like] birds which devour their parents, [dynasties] were destroyed and did not return. Later examples are numerous. . . . Thus, we record the biographies of empresses to hand down a warning to the future.³⁵

Even from this briefest of surveys it should be apparent that by the T'ang the conviction that female non-interference in politics as a desirable feature of the natural order was a well-established one. The first T'ang empresses,

although of "barbarian" extraction and therefore accustomed to a relatively active life,³⁶ were models of compliance and restraint, and in the context of Confucian historiography, Wu Tse-t'ien was bound to suffer in comparison. The old *T'ang History* therefore praises the virtues of T'ai-tsung's empress while comparing the evil of Wu to that of a viper,³⁷ and the *New T'ang History* though admitting that Wu was far superior to her successor, the Empress Wei, still insists that both women serve as a warning to future rulers.³⁸

It is difficult to say, as we read the traditional commentators, whether their hostility to Wu Tse-t'ien derives more from the fact that she was a usurper or a woman, and perhaps the question is too academic to merit discussion. What we must realize is that her sins were seen as offenses against a tradition, an order, an entire way of life, to which her critics remained loyal. Even during the lifetime of the empress, the first condemnation, an eloquent indictment written as a manifesto for the rebellion of 684, took this line. In it Lo Pin-wang³⁹ charges:

The woman Wu, who has falsely usurped the throne, is by nature obdurate and unyielding, by origin truly obscure. Formerly, she was among the lower ranks of T'ai-tsung's servants and served him by changing his clothes. When she reached maturity, she brought disorder to the palace of the crown prince . . . she usurped the pheasant regalia of empress and entrapped our ruler in incest.

Then, with a heart like a serpent and a nature like that of a wolf, she favored evil sycophants and destroyed good and loyal officials. She killed her sister, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother. She is hated by gods and men alike.⁴⁰

As we shall see, some of these allegations were to find their way into later accounts, but what should be noted here is the reaction of the Confucian mind against a woman who had not only betrayed such cardinal virtues as humanity and wifely submission, but in so doing had challenged an ancient tradition which guaranteed worldly harmony and gave both livelihood and self-respect to the Confucian scholar-official. This class, with its monopoly on the writing of history, was almost bound to emphasize the ruthless and unconventional aspects of the empress' success, her "heart like a serpent and nature like a wolf," in order to defend the integrity of the state system.

This is the most basic explanation for the form taken by historical criticism, and it is consistently applicable down to the present century. In many works, of course, the "blame" is balanced by some degree of praise, and in the two *T'ang Histories* and the *Comprehensive Mirror* we find the historian looking favorably upon the empress for her decisiveness and ability to accept remonstrance, her veneration of upright men, her final settlement of the succession on the Li clan, and the control she exercised over her family, her favorites, and her "evil" officials.⁴¹ The overall judgment, however, remains negative and many scholars representative of their age--Yüan Shu and Chu Hsi, Wang Fu-chih and Fang Hsiao-ju, as well as such prolific and perceptive Ch'ing essayists as Chao I and Wang Ming-sheng--have ensured that unfavorable opinion prevailed.⁴² The rise of the Empress Dowager Tz'u Hsi in the latter part of the nineteenth century brought inevitable comparison with Wu Tse-t'ien, and the latter's inability to arrest dynastic decline must have validated in some minds, at least, the old strictures against women in power.

Prior to 1911 the Empress Wu thus found few admirers, and although we can identify among them at least one scholar of stature in most periods,⁴³ it was not until the new intellectual climate of the twentieth century that revisionist views began to appear. Marxist historians have been most active in her rehabilitation, but well before 1949 the notable studies of Ch'en Yin-k'o were finding new social significance in the regime of the Empress Wu. In one article, in particular, he attacked several of the old stereotypes, including that of her lewdness by suggesting that as a female emperor she was perfectly entitled to a male harem!⁴⁴

For Marxist historians, at least prior to the Cultural Revolution, the Empress Wu was a heroine, champion of the masses in the historic class struggle against the aristocracy and great landlords. Two important authors, Ts'en Chung-mien and Lü Ssu-mien, are not persuaded that her achievements outweigh her brutality and other "feudal" characteristics,⁴⁵ but theirs is the minority view. The authors of three of the most important textbook surveys of Chinese history all portray her in a favorable light, seeing her as being ahead of her time in attacking the privileged classes, elevating the position of women, and fostering the examination system and the culture of her people.⁴⁶ Other academic and cultural leaders in China have echoed these views, and because names like Kuo Mo-jo, Yang Chih-chiu and Wu Han were found among them,⁴⁷ the rehabilitation of Wu Tse-t'ien was rapid.

At the end of the 1950s, however, a wide-ranging debate on the empress broke out. Arising principally out of an article by Wu Tse,⁴⁸ it was to last for several years and was to develop the interpretation considered standard until the Cultural Revolution. Professor Wu's basic point at the time was that several previous works had failed to stress adequately the class struggle of their period, and to show that the masses, not the ruling classes, are the driving force of history. At the same time, there was failure to recognize that the influence of an individual is not incompatible with historical materialism, and the Empress Wu is a case in point. The *lü-ling* system of the Sui and T'ang, he goes on to suggest, was essentially a control mechanism designed to ensure the continuing power of members of the aristocratic-landlord class. T'ai-tsung began to weaken their power, but it was only with the advent of the Empress Wu, whose background had made her more class-conscious than her predecessor, that an alliance was effected among merchant, small landlord and bureaucrat to challenge them. By fostering their rise and simultaneously attacking the old ruling class in other ways, she broke their power even before the declaration of the Chou at which time conflict became internalized within the ruling class. During Chou the empress remained representative of the class she had fostered, but as the dynasty became increasingly corrupt, the remnants of the T'ang family were able to ally themselves with small and middle landlords to bring about a restoration. Throughout the process the Empress Wu carried out many policies to benefit the peasant, but did so not out of altruism but because of the exigencies of class struggle. She was a great ruler but, nonetheless, a "feudal" emperor.

This very interesting analysis was the last detailed study of the empress prior to the Cultural Revolution, and in the present climate of ideological uncertainty, the debate has yet to be resumed. It is interesting to note that only in the present century have historians begun to transcend the questions raised in Confucian historiography, and as the reevaluation progresses, especially in social history, the regime of the Empress Wu is coming to be seen as

a period of rather marked transition. The process of reappraisal, however, is a lengthy one, and as three fairly recent non-Marxist book-length studies⁴⁹ of her period show, the old stereotypes of the empress are durable, and her life is by itself so fascinating that historical change is still rather poorly documented in comparison. I hope that my study does not neglect the old questions but also sheds some light on the position of the Empress Wu, on how she gained it and how she used it. In addition, I hope to examine her policies, particularly those which relate to social change, politics and the examination system, Buddhism, and China's external affairs in the seventh century. Finally, I shall attempt to show more clearly the origins of the Empress Wu's historical reputation and, in so doing, draw a more accurate picture of one of China's most controversial rulers.