

## Chapter 10

### RETROSPECT

In the highly polarized historiography concerned with the reign of the Empress Wu there are only two areas of general agreement. Both Confucian critics and her modern apologists see her personal achievement as an improbable one, and the age over which she presided as one of significant historical change. Both perceptions are accurate but in their juxtaposition there is certain danger. The temptation is great to see in her impressive strength of character the chief cause for the social and political events of the late seventh century. I have tried to show, on the contrary, that Kao-tsung played a greater role than is generally recognized in the formation of imperial policy, and that it was while her husband and son formally occupied the throne that the achievements of the empress were most marked.

I have taken as a recurrent theme in this study the idea that the empress was a woman of her times. Her social, economic and judicial views could hardly be termed advanced, and her politics differed from those of her predecessors chiefly in their greater pragmatism and ruthlessness. The success of her usurpation and the longevity of her power I have attributed largely to borrowed legitimation, and have suggested that they were the result also of her ability to identify herself more closely than had the rulers of Sui and early T'ang with most of her subjects, those among whom she had been born and had spent her early life. To this degree, at least, there is validity in the Maoist interpretation which sees the masses as the driving force of history.

Indeed in many respects the Empress Wu behaved much like one of those sturdy, matriarchal T'ang widows whom we encounter in the Tunhuang manuscripts. Like them she was independent, occasionally eccentric, eager to protect her own family, and in the end, dedicated to the preservation of her husband's property and its inheritance by their son. And so, when all is said, we might best think of her as "the widow Li," protagonist of the most spectacular romance of her epoch and also the most archetypical of the women of her time.

At a higher level we might also choose to regard the career of the Empress Wu as a story of the attainment and maintenance of power, and of the sometimes unintended results of its use. In her career we can see illustrated the tendency of power to seek its own maximization, and we see this tendency collide with a tradition of only limited flexibility. The Confucian state system denied the throne to a woman, but was willing temporarily to compromise that prohibition. It remained firm, however, in its determination that no woman should establish a dynasty. The manner with which the empress treated the succession question would seem to indicate that she was fully aware of this, and when on her deathbed she renounced her imperial title it must have been in the knowledge that history would judge her a usurper. Because she displays many signs of being concerned with her historical reputation it seems reasonable to conclude that her seizure of the throne was not an act lightly undertaken. She was motivated perhaps not



so much by raw ambition as by a perceived necessity.

History and historians have been reluctant to acknowledge this possibility, and it goes unremarked even in modern studies. It is for this reason that I have made much of her service and her loyalty to the T'ang. Perhaps I have given it undue emphasis, but the fact remains that it was in the course of her very successful partnership with Kao-tsung that T'ai-tsung's work of consolidation and centralization was brought to fruition. The T'ang was thereby enabled to embark upon a confident and expansive third generation which set it off from all the ephemeral followers of the Han and, indeed, even from the Sui whose rapid fall seemed to validate the preceding pattern of short dynasties. By the time of Kao-tsung's death, and in spite of the many problems which were beginning to emerge, the T'ang seemed secure or, at the very least, to have won an enduring vote of confidence from the people. The failure of Li Ching-yeh's revolt is a strong indication that this is true, and it is important to note that since Li claimed to be in rebellion on behalf of Kao-tsung's heirs, it was the Empress Wu whom the people saw as the true guardian of dynastic and national interests.

In 684, with the rebellion suppressed, the empress must have felt a certain pride. In less than three decades she and her husband had achieved a great deal. They had maintained a high level of domestic peace and prosperity and had won the allegiance or at least the acquiescence of the aloof super elite of the Northeast. They had claimed greater successes in foreign policy than any dynasty since the Han, and they had firmly established an appointment system perceived by the middle and lower ranks of the *shih* class as a way to enhance their status and to achieve the perquisites of high office. The "Two Sages" state ideology had come to be accepted by most of the elite as both viable and balanced. These policies and others like them had achieved dynastic legitimation. By 684, the weakest points in legitimizing terms were at the center and at the top. An ambitious consort clan like the Wei or an overpowerful minister like P'ei Yen could still have undone the work of decades, and this the empress perceived.

It was perhaps more for this reason than as a step toward eventual usurpation that she took the regency in 684, and the terror which followed can be seen as part of a much wider policy than one designed simply to eliminate bureaucratic opposition to her rule: it can be seen as the essential component of a plan to free the imperial institution from bureaucratic domination. It was, therefore, the logical culmination of the T'ang policy of disarming potential and actual rivalry to the throne by the great aristocratic clans by inveigling them into bureaucratizing their status.

This is not to excuse the terror. By regarding it in this light, however, we can see the proclamation of the Chou with its female founding emperor as the most audacious way of all for the empress to test the success of T'ang policies rather than as a sign of the megalomania of a remarkable woman.

Numerous objections can be raised to this interpretation and just as many to my related proposition that the empress founded the Chou with every intention of restoring the T'ang. The most pertinent of these objections is also the simplest--that it is far-fetched. After all, if Wu Tse-t'ien sought simply to create a freer and more independent monarchy, why was it necessary to found a new dynasty when Jui-tsung had shown himself amenable to a regency of indefinite



length? Several answers are possible, but the most convincing is to be found in the fact that for three decades Wu Tse-t'ien had been in reality if not in name the equal of the emperor. During that period she had come to identify the interests of the monarchy with her own and to see that as an institution evolving away from the constraints of self-seeking aristocrats (and more recently from the factiousness of bureaucratized aristocracy), the monarchy had united China and had brought to its people the greatest measure of peace and prosperity they had known since the Han. In short, in her eyes this was the achievement of an independent monarchy and it was also her achievement. Formal recognition by all of a female emperor would symbolize for all time the freedom of the imperial institution. If the emperor could be a woman, the emperor could be and do anything! Moreover, when we recall that she had always shown a deep faith in the supernatural, it seems reasonable to believe that she was convinced by the *Pao-t'u* and the *Great Cloud Sutra* that Heaven itself was demanding that she accept the Mandate. Could it not have been that this was what made her decide to risk the opprobrium of history?

During the Chou, continuity was the rule and the watchword. Only in her patronage of Buddhism did the empress depart substantially from T'ang precedents, and even this departure may be seen as a measure to aid legitimation. If Taoist messianism were by no means a spent force, it was less relevant in the mid-T'ang than at the dynasty's foundation and Taoism had always been a less effective force than Buddhism for dynastic consolidation among the people. Real innovation and real conflict in the Chou were political and were restricted chiefly to the upper bureaucracy. It was here that the empress saw the new rivals to absolutism and here that both her fate and her historical reputation were determined. Chung-tsung's statement at his restoration that she had respected the heritage of the T'ang was probably more than filial convention. The battles she fought against the throne's would-be limiters helped strengthen the hands of her eighth-century T'ang successors.

There remains still the question of ultimate aim, of whether Wu Tse-t'ien at any point contemplated the foundation of a line of Wu emperors. I admit that in saying she did not, I appear to stand on shaky ground. To remark that in 698 Chung-tsung's reappointment secured a T'ang restoration proves nothing, and some might wish to read my account of the succession struggle during the Chou in quite a different light. Were not the empress' manipulations of sons and nephews designed to "test the wind," and could not the novelty of her symbolism--a new capital and a new calendar, her monuments and her palaces--be seen, as some contemporaries saw them, as signs to be associated with the beginnings of a dynasty whose aim was to endure the conventional ten thousand generations?

This view is tenable but I hold to my interpretation. Never during the Chou dynasty did the succession rest with the Wu clan and, what is more, innovation of both a symbolic and a substantive type was more marked in the six years of the preceding regency than in the fifteen of the Chou. And, finally, it need not follow that because the empress had a reputation for excess in her punishments, her spending and her pleasures, she was similarly excessive in her desire for familial power and historical immortality as a dynastic founder. Her entire career is a testament to her acute and seasoned understanding of the nature of female legitimation, and in her own dynasty, as I have shown, she was always willing to listen to those ministers like Ti Jen-chieh who reminded her of its limitations. She owed far more to the Li clan than to the Wu and she knew also



that, like any other woman of her time and place, it would be in the ancestral temple of the T'ang that her sacrifices would be made.

The most I can admit is that in the heady days of the *Pao-t'u* and the *Great Cloud Sutra* and all the other signs that she was Heaven's chosen, she toyed with the idea of an enduring Chou, but soon faced with the realities of an immovable tradition, she quickly deferred again to its interpreters.

The Empress Wu was in power for almost half a century, and I have mentioned that her accomplishments were many. In attempting to explain her successful legitimation I have also suggested that in some respects she came to embody the cosmopolitanism, self-confidence and eclecticism which were characteristic of the first half of the T'ang. In other respects she embodied the flaws of her age, most particularly in the static, almost timeless, view she held of the world, and consequent failure to realize and act upon the problems engendered by the growing complexity of her society.

Chinese historians have not treated her kindly, yet her legacy was a real one. For better or worse, she modified the relationship between the imperial family and the greatest of the old clans, and that between the ruler and his ministers. In neither case did she complete the task she had set upon, but she furthered or perhaps initiated a trend, and her tactics would be used, though not acknowledged as hers, by ambitious rulers of later times. The examination system, at least in its literary emphasis, was as much her creation as it was that of its founders, and the results of the reforms she made in the system were to be seen not only in the superb bureaucracy she bequeathed to Hsüan-tsung but also in the poetic creativity which graced his reign and that of his successors. Her orchestration of the evolving relationship among Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and of the tensions between church and state were to have consequences throughout the T'ang. Moreover, even if certain of her policies, such as the misuse of the *fu-ping* and the unwarranted expansion of the bureaucracy achieved only short-term goals for which the dynasty would later pay too high a price, almost to the end of her life she acted with resolution, panache, and a constant awareness of her subjects' interests. It is little wonder that in the popular imagination of later times she was monumentalized, and that in a novel like *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Ching-hua-yüan*) we find her not only instituting civil service examinations for women but successfully commanding in mid-winter that all the flowers bloom for her pleasure.

It might be well before concluding to point to a dimension of seventh-century history almost wholly neglected in this study: the condition of the country in general and that of the peasants in particular during the empress' regime. On this matter many questions could be raised but, as I said earlier, the narrow focus of contemporary sources must preclude definitive answers. At the same time, popular attitudes were a key element in the success of Wu Tse-t'ien's legitimation and since we find no primary sources which articulate these attitudes, we are perhaps justified in some careful speculation about their origins.

There is ample evidence, to begin with, that the reign of Kao-tsung was generally prosperous. Agriculture suffered little disruption except in areas affected by natural disasters or the expansiveness of his foreign policy and, with only minor problems, equal-field redistribution was successful. It is only from the time of his death that we begin to hear of economic difficulties which would affect the people at large--inflation, counterfeiting, food

shortages and declining government services, registration abuses and the appearance of fugitive households. Complaints about these matters became more frequent throughout the Chou but, as we have seen, there was no substantive economic reform.

Such matters are relative. It must also be conceded that the Chou saw no signs of popular unrest nor any of the omens which indicated that Heaven desired a change of Mandate. The people had twice demonstrated their support for the empress by refusing to join rebel movements against her and, as far as we can tell, they remained constant to the end. The source of their loyalty is difficult to define and it may be that inertia, conservatism and love and respect all played a part. What we know for certain is that her legitimizing policy was aimed at the people as a whole. Her patronage of Buddhism and her foundation of the Great Cloud temples, her public humiliation of great ministers and proud clans during the terror, her measures to raise the status of women, the record number of her Acts of Grace with their lavish conferrals of goods and honorific rank, her twelve-point memorial and other measures of this kind were designed to benefit the people and, whether sincere or not, served as public affirmation of her concern for them and so won their support. It seems fair to suggest that the people came to see Wu Tse-t'ien as a competent, decisive and clear-sighted ruler, frank both in her virtues and in her vices. In their eyes at least, possession of these qualities made the fact of her sex irrelevant.

Kuo Mo-jo, in the final appendix to the 1963 edition of his play *Wu Tse-t'ien*, cites several instances of the popularity of the Empress Wu among the people of Kuang-yüan county in Szechwan where there has long existed the belief that this was the place of her birth. Most striking is the fact that right up to the present day the people of the area have continued to observe the twenty-third day of the first month of the lunar calendar as the day they believe to be her birthday. No emperor of traditional China could ask for a finer tribute!