

Chapter 2

SOURCES FOR THE LIFE AND CAREER OF WU TSE-T' IEN

The chief primary sources for the life of the Empress Wu are her annals in the two dynastic histories of the T'ang, her biography in the *New T'ang History*, and the numerous references to her in Ssu-ma Kuang's *Comprehensive Mirror*.¹ In some of the large official compilations of later ages, like the *Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei*,² there are to be found several allusions and fragments of documents not elsewhere preserved, and material of this sort is also to be found in some of the private essays and anecdotes of the T'ang.³ The sizable corpus of writings attributed to the empress herself consists mainly of edicts and other official documents, but some of her poetry and ceremonial verses are extant, and even though commentators are reluctant to acknowledge her direct authorship, some seem fairly personal in tone.⁴ In addition, the biographical sections of the dynastic histories record many incidents concerning her and conversations with her, so that we are able to assemble a fuller sketch of her character and her life than is possible in the case of most of her contemporaries.

If the sources are relatively extensive, there are compensating drawbacks. Wu did not become empress until she reached her late twenties and records of her life to that time are extremely scarce. More importantly in the present context, the sources which tell of her rise and outline her subsequent career are "official" in nature, and thus their reliability is open to question. This problem arises from two causes, one of which I mentioned earlier. The Confucian *literatus*, even in his role as objective historian, was bound by his duty to provide lessons for the future, and his treatment of a woman ruler who was also a usurper inevitably reflected a certain disapproval. A second cause is the fact that the Empress Wu shared with other rulers, like her predecessor T'ai-tsung, a concern with historical reputation and, like him, was not above deliberate falsification of the record.⁵ In her case, we might point to the dubious assertions of the edict which raised her to the rank of Kao-tsung's empress⁶ and later to the appointment of "tame" historians to oversee the writing of history in her own time.⁷

In order to understand the degree to which these influences occur in our major sources, the dynastic histories and the *Comprehensive Mirror*, we might begin by trying to discover the origin of their information. Appendix A, which follows a methodology developed by E. G. Pulleyblank,⁸ compares their accounts of five incidents and reveals not only their consistent, if small, difference of attitude toward the empress, but also establishes that the few incidents recorded about her early life can be traced in most cases to the *Veritable Records* of herself and her husband.

The question of the circumstances of the composition of these records during early T'ang is a complicated one because of the disagreements in bibliographic sources,⁹ and although we are certain that Ssu-ma Kuang used the thirty-*chüan* version of the *Veritable Records of Wu Tse-t'ien* presented to the throne by Liu

Chih-chi and Wu Ching in 716,¹⁰ we find two earlier versions mentioned in other sources. The first of these was by Tsung Ch'in-k'o who, as a relative of the empress and a supporter of her usurpation,¹¹ might be expected to produce a work favorable to her. Of course, we know nothing of the scope and content of Tsung's work and whether or not it treated the controversial events of 684-690, but we might reasonably assume that it formed the basis of the slightly expanded version presented to the throne in 706.¹² The supervisor of this compilation was Wu San-ssu, cadet nephew of the empress. Although the position of supervisor was often a nominal one, he seems to have taken an active part in the work since Liu Chih-chi and Wu Ching, who worked under him on an earlier national history, both had occasion to complain of his interference.¹³ In the production of his aunt's records he may well have exercised a good deal of editorial discretion, and it was perhaps for this reason that Hsüan-tsung had them revised. Neither Liu Chih-chi nor Wu Ching were admirers of the empress but, judging from the fragments of their *Veritable Records* preserved in Ssu-ma Kuang's *k'ao-i*, they treated her with objectivity.¹⁴

In 716 the *Veritable Records* of Wu Tse-t'ien were presented together with those of Jui-tsung and Chung-tsung and it is clear, therefore, that Liu and Wu were responsible for the final version of the *Veritable Records* for the period from 684 to 713. The role of Empress Wu in government during that period was, of course, an overt one, but prior to 684 contemporaries were less certain of her role and the degree of actual influence she had over her husband. Moreover, as we shall see, there were certain aspects of her background and rise that she might logically wish to conceal, among them her relatively obscure lineage, her concubinage to T'ai-tsung, the beginnings of her liaison with Kao-tsung, and the machinations by which she helped ruin her rival, the Empress Wang. Information on these matters would be found in the *Veritable Records* of T'ai-tsung and Kao-tsung, and it is natural that she would attempt to exercise some control over their content, just as she tried to influence the historiography of the later period. Indications are that she was successful.

There is some disagreement about the compilation of T'ai-tsung's *Veritable Records*, but an impressive body of evidence suggests that Hsü Ching-tsung¹⁵ was a major, if not the principal contributor to them.¹⁶ Ssu-ma Kuang, for instance, refers to the version he used as the *Hsü Ching-tsung T'ai-tsung shih-lu*.¹⁷ Hsü's name appears again in 659 as the compiler of a twenty-*chüan* *Veritable Record* covering the period from T'ai-tsung's death to 658, and he may have supplemented this before his death in 672 since the old *T'ang History* mentions a *Veritable Record* in thirty *chüan*.¹⁸ It seems unusual that a young emperor like Kao-tsung would have his own *Veritable Record* begun so early in his reign without some special reason, and the conjecture that the Empress Wu was the instigator is strengthened by two facts. Her open concern with how history would treat her rise and her role in her husband's reign was shown in the fact that the final version of Kao-tsung's *Veritable Record*, in a hundred *chüan*, was issued under her name.¹⁹ Besides, Hsü Ching-tsung was the most important of her close supporters.

Hsü, born in 592, was of southern origins, the son of a high Sui official killed by Yü-wen Hua-chi. He was a precocious scholar, one of the handful of men who passed the difficult *hsiu-ts'ai* examination in the Sui, under which he first held office. After serving the rebel Li Mi, he switched his allegiance to the T'ang and joined the staff of T'ai-tsung who seems to have heard of his literary abilities. His career thenceforth was a distinguished one. After a

succession of promotions which ended in the presidency of the Board of Rites, he began to work in 634 on the compilation of the national history and then on the Veritable Records. He twice suffered mild disgrace, once for a breach of propriety and once for his avarice when he married his daughter to a "barbarian" chieftain. It was just as he emerged from the second demotion that the issue arose of Wu's elevation to empress and by immediately espousing her cause, he won the gratitude of Kao-tsung and assured himself of a successful future. His relationship to the new empress was a close one, and it was he who undertook for her such delicate tasks as persuading Kao-tsung to elevate her son to crown prince and to exile or execute the chief ministers who had opposed her rise. After their fall he became the paramount civil official of the realm, a status he did not relinquish until his retirement, and at his death in 672 Kao-tsung paid him the great honor of himself donning mourning clothes. Needless to say, his reputation in Confucian historiography is an infamous one.

As an historian he was an entrepreneur, and the opportunism and lack of scruple suggested by other aspects of his career are confirmed by reliable sources which accuse him of falsifying the record on more than one occasion.²⁰ In 673 Kao-tsung found several blatant falsehoods in his account of T'ai-tsung and ordered them corrected,²¹ but how far these corrections went we can only guess. It is interesting to note that Ssu-ma Kuang is unable to date Wu's entrance into T'ai-tsung's harem since the event goes unrecorded in any source he considers reliable.²² For the same reason confusion has long existed in such matters as the date of her birth, her supposed entry into a convent on T'ai-tsung's death, and the birthdates of her two eldest sons, one of whom may have been born to her elder sister. The existence of rumors about these things even in her own lifetime suggests how carefully they were obscured.

Later historians, from Liu Chih-chi onward, have expressed scorn or puzzlement on the reliability of the primary sources for the early T'ang,²³ and there is little doubt that their attitude is justified. Particularly in the case of the Empress Wu, and because of her relationship with Hsü Ching-tsung, later official historians, like the authors of the old *T'ang History* found it necessary to openly reject certain details of her father's career because of their conviction that Hsü exaggerated or falsified his achievements.²⁴

The task of the modern historian is, therefore, not an easy one, and he must attempt to distinguish the truth which lies between the operation of two opposing principles. The following chapter, which deals with the most controversial period of the empress' life, seeks to identify the specific areas of historical uncertainty and to offer at least some conjecture on what the truth might have been in these matters.