

Chapter 3

THE ORIGINS AND RISE OF WU TSE-T'IENT

The first problem to confront a biographer of the Empress Wu is the difficulty of determining the details of her family background and her early life. I have earlier alluded to the unreliability of the Veritable Records for the reigns of T'ai-tsung and Kao-tsung, and have suggested that the national historians of the T'ang as well as the later dynastic historians were suspicious of their sources and so tended to omit from their accounts any detail they regarded as flattering to the empress and her family. As a result, primary source references are fewer than might otherwise be the case.

I have also admitted the justice of these historians' scepticism in view of the likelihood of falsification, but we should be aware at the same time of the possibility of overcompensation on their part. For example, it is generally acknowledged that in order to bolster her legitimacy in the aristocratic climate of the early T'ang, Tse-t'ien took the not unusual step of falsifying her genealogy.¹ Several of her contemporaries succeeded in having their dubious lineages incorporated into the dynastic histories, but in her case the biography of her father Shih-huo mentions not a single one of his ancestors even though, as will be shown, his father's official career in the Sui is attested by reliable sources.

The biography of Wu Shih-huo is, of course, our standard account of the Empress Wu's background and is also an instructive example of the historiographical processes we have been discussing. This is particularly clear when we compare it with a little-known source called the *P'an-lung-t'ai pei*, a commemorative inscription the empress commissioned for her father in 699.²

The biography reads:

Wu Shih-huo was a man from Wen-shui in Ping-chou.³ His household was a wealthy one and he was rather fond of social intercourse. When Kao-tsu first brought troops to Fen-chin, he stopped at his home and [Shih-huo] was thus privileged to make his acquaintance.⁴ When Kao-tsu became *T'ai-yüan liu-shou*, he recruited [Shih-huo] as *hsing-chün ssu-k'ai*.⁵ At the time, bandits and rebels rose as [numerous as] hornets and Shih-huo would secretly urge Kao-tsu to raise troops [and rebel against the Sui]. He [also] presented him with a book [of his own composition?] on military matters, together with a *fu-jui*.⁶ Kao-tsu said to him, "Please say no more. Military books are forbidden articles, yet you still give one to me, [so] I well understand your meaning. Together we must certainly prosper."⁷

When he was about to raise his righteous rebellion, Kao-tsu levied troops and sent Liu Hung-chi and Ch'ang-sun Shun-te⁷ to share the leadership [in this task]. Wang Wei and Kao Chün-ya⁸ spoke secretly to Shih-huo saying, "Hung-chi and his men are all traitors to the Imperial Guard. This is a capital crime, [so] how can they lead troops? We want to

imprison and investigate them." Shih-huo replied, "They are all representatives (*k'o*) of the Duke of T'ang. If you do so, great confusion will follow." Wei and his group therefore hesitated and did not act. The *liu-shou ssu-ping* T'ien Te-p'ing⁹ also wanted to encourage Wei and the others to make a judicial inquiry into the situation of the levy. Shih-huo said to him, "The troops they are recruiting will all be attached to the Duke of T'ang. Wang Wei, Kao Chün-ya and their group have no power of their own, [so] how can they do this?" Thus Te-p'ing desisted.

When the [T'ang] uprising began, Shih-huo was made *ta-chiang-chün fu-k'ai-ts'ao*.¹⁰ He participated in taking the capital and for his merit [was rewarded with the titles] *kuang-lu ta-fu* and *T'ai-yüan chün-kung*.¹¹ Previously, when the rebellion was about to begin, Shih-huo was unable to predict the outcome. When the capital was taken, he claimed he had dreamed that Kao-tsu had entered the Western capital and [then] risen to be emperor. Kao-tsu [on hearing this] smiled at him saying, "You were connected with Wang Wei and [still] were able to remonstrate and prevent [him from seizing] Hung-chi and the others. Your sincerity is worthy of record and so I rewarded your devotion. Now you see that the matter is concluded and so say this absurd thing to flatter me."

In the Wu-te period, [Shih-huo] was promoted successively to the post of *kung-pu shang-shu*, and his enfeoffment was raised to Duke of Ying-kuo.¹² He also served as *tu-tu* of Li-chou and Ching-chou.¹³ In the ninth year of *chen-kuan* [635], he died in office and was posthumously entitled *li-pu shang-shu*¹⁴ with the temple name of *Ting*, Constant.¹⁵

To the casual reader this account appears straightforward and relatively unbiased. The Empress Wu came from a wealthy clan and was the daughter of a man who rose to prominence by early supporting Kao-tsu in his rebellion against the Sui. Seen within the context of T'ang biographical writing, however, the narrative is characterized by a certain implicit deprecation. Not a single one of Shih-huo's ancestors is mentioned, so that his lineage, it is implied, was undistinguished. He was wealthy. Was the source of his wealth the despised profession of commerce or is mention of the fact made because his clan had no other claim to renown? He participated in the events connected with the fall of the Sui capital. Did he play no more substantial part than this in the T'ang foundation? He held posts up to the level of president of the Board of Works (*kung-pu shang-shu*), but did he do nothing worthy of record in them? Was he really the rather timid opportunist who seems to emerge from the anecdotes chosen to give flesh to the details of his career progress?

These are but some of the questions which might occur to one familiar with the official biographies of the period, and if their answers indicate an implied hostility, the reasons are not hard to understand. T'ang beliefs about heredity were such that by distorting the origins and minimizing the achievements of Wu Shih-huo, the historian could indirectly cast aspersions on the character and career of his daughter, the Empress Wu.¹⁶

This seems indeed to have been the case when we compare the above account with that given in the *P'an-lung-t'ai pei*. In doing so we must bear in mind that the inscription, too, is not a wholly reliable source for it is typical of its genre in the hagiography of its tone and in the dubious nature of some details. Its author, Li Chiao, was a noted official and littérateur of the Chou, and though not strictly speaking a sycophant, he was closely identified with

the Wu interests.¹⁷ The *Pei* is clearly tendentious, if only because the empress commissioned it, but by using it carefully and referring frequently to other sources for verification, we can find in it the most comprehensive account of the empress' immediate background. At over six hundred lines, it is too lengthy for complete citation, but in the following discussion, I hope to cover the salient details.

The *Pei* begins with an outline of the Wu clan's genealogy, a subject to which I shall later return, but in speaking of Shih-huo's parentage it differs from the official accounts by omitting all reference to his family's wealth. The omission may well be an attempt to dispel the persistent rumor that Shih-huo's background was mercantile, a response to the frequent charge by contemporary enemies that Wu Tse-t'ien was of low or "unsuitable" birth.¹⁸ The truth of this matter is difficult to ascertain, but most relatively recent scholarship reproduces the view that Shih-huo's family dealt in timber, a detail recorded in a ninth-century local history and repeated in the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*.¹⁹ The relevant passage, "in his youth [Shih-huo] dealt in timber together with a man called Hsü Wen-pao of the [same] city," is not conclusive and seems rather to suggest that Shih-huo's business was personal, not familial. It would not be unusual for a younger son, even of landholding or official family, to engage in a pursuit of this sort, and Lo Pin-wang's charge that the empress' origins were "truly obscure" might thus be greatly exaggerated. The point is raised here to illustrate the manner in which the *Pei* diverges from the official accounts and encourages an alternate explanation. We will pass on now to the concrete facts it relates.

According to the *Pei*, Shih-huo was born in 577, the fourth son of Wu Hua who held the position of *cheng* of Loyang in the reign of Sui Wen-ti.²⁰ The distinguished lineage provided for him goes back to the Chou, and while the earliest ancestors mentioned are probably spurious, there is good reason to believe that the genealogy from the T'o-pa Wei onward is genuine.²¹ If so, the Wu clan was closely connected with the T'aiyüan area for several generations, and if it was not numbered in the national aristocracy as the empress tried to pretend,²² it was almost certainly a clan of local prominence with some renown based upon past nobility and upon present membership in the minor official and perhaps military class.²³

The next point in the *Pei*, that it was Shih-huo who raised his clan to empire-wide prominence, is in agreement with official accounts. The manner in which this was achieved, however, is described differently. According to the *Pei*, Shih-huo was no mere opportunist who rose through a fortuitous connection with Kao-tsu, but rather was a man who gained fame for his filial actions on his parents' death and so received several *p'i-chao* summons to office from Sui Wen-ti.²⁴ On the advice of a *yin-yang* diviner, and because he had no confidence in the Sui, Shih-huo initially refused, accepting only on the intervention of the governor of T'aiyüan.²⁵ There is, however, no confirmation in Sui records that Shih-huo ever held office in the period, much less that he aroused the jealousy of the powerful Yang Su whom the *Pei* has remarking, "I have noticed that Wu's talents and appearance (*feng-ku*) are certainly of heroic degree. Now we enjoy an era of peace, so why use this man?"²⁶

Whatever the truth of the matter, the *Pei* goes on to relate that when Wen-ti died, Shih-huo feared this jealousy and so retired to private life. He

then devoted himself to a study of military matters. He was able to predict to his brothers the failure of Yang-ti's Korean expedition of 611 and also to produce a thirty-*chüan* work on strategy and tactics, called the *Ku-chin ping-yao*.²⁷ This is probably the work he is said later to have presented to Kao-tsu. In 613 he had an opportunity to test his knowledge, for he happened to be in Loyang when the city was besieged by the rebel Yang Hsüan-kan. According to the *Pei*, it was his advice which prevented surrender.²⁸ Again we find no confirmation of the incident, but the *Pei* offers an explanation, saying that Shih-huo feared the envy of Yang-ti and so insisted that his participation go unreported!²⁹

When Yang-ti fled to the South in 616, Shih-huo is reported to have told his brothers, "This is a journey from which he will not return!" but when they encouraged him to rebel himself, he refused.³⁰ Similarly, he realized that the prominent rebel Li Mi would not succeed, and he declined an invitation to join him.³¹ Only when Kao-tsu came to T'aiyüan did he recognize greatness: "How brave and heroic, yet how plain and easy [of manner?]; how intelligent, and marvelously courageous! This is a man with whom one can devote oneself [to founding a dynasty]!"³² Shih-huo soon paid a courtesy call with the result that "Kao-tsu . . . took his hand and placed his confidence in him. [It was like the way] Duke Wen of Chou obtained [the services of] Chiang Ya."³³ The partnership was strengthened when he accompanied the emperor-to-be in the suppression of brigands in Kao-yang³⁴ and when, afterwards, Kao-tsu became a guest at his home.

The *Pei* inserts in the narrative here the dream referred to in the old *T'ang History* account and, as if in anticipation of its criticism, claims that Shih-huo revealed immediately not only the dream but also some mysterious voices he had heard predicting Kao-tsu's success.³⁵ In addition, the *Pei* account of the dream differs from that of the old *T'ang History* in relating that Shih-huo also ascended to the heavens and touched the sun and the moon--an interpolation clearly designed to show that his offspring would also found a dynasty.

With the exception of conventional references to dreams and portents, the *Pei* to this point need not strain credulity; indeed, the notion that Shih-huo took the initiative in meeting Kao-tsu seems most reasonable. After this section, however, exaggerations about his achievements and honors become more pronounced. The reason lies perhaps in the general confusion of the T'ang foundation; falsification here would not easily be detected.

The *Pei* tells, for instance, of how Kao-tsu was "greatly pleased" about the dream and the military textbook and how Shih-huo advanced rapidly to the reception both of high honorific rank and of a ducal title.³⁶ On more than one occasion his military expertise is supposed to have "saved the day" in the course of the T'ang conquest, and when the capital fell, he is said to have been rewarded with a mansion, promotions, 5,000 *tuan* of silk and 3,000,000 cash.³⁷ This seems dubious since there is no official record that men even more prominent than he in the campaign received rewards of such magnitude. The subsequent honors mentioned in the *Pei* go similarly unrecorded elsewhere, and we might well be suspicious of such claims, for instance, that Shih-huo declined the two highest posts in the administration during the first year of the new dynasty.³⁸ Instead, says the *Pei*, he accepted a position without fixed duties but with rank equal to the chief ministers (*t'ung chung-shu men-hsia san-p'in*),³⁹ a designation, according to the *New T'ang History* treatise on officials,

which was not created until late 634!⁴⁰ Details of this sort we must reject.

The next major incident recounted, Shih-huo's appointment as president of the Board of Works (*Kung-pu*) in 620, is well documented in other sources, and we can find confirmation in the *Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei* that at about the same time, Kao-tsu praised his integrity and honored his brothers with appointments as a sign of his regard for Shih-huo.⁴¹ Even more striking is the allegation in the *Pei* that Kao-tsu himself served as broker (*hun-chu*) in arranging Shih-huo's second marriage into the eminent Yang clan, to a cousin of the last Sui emperor.⁴² Because of the inequality in clan status, historians have long been puzzled about how this marriage was effected, but here again the *Pei* is confirmed by a *Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei* notice which differs in detail but which shows that the emperor himself suggested both the marriage and the bride.⁴³ This union, concluded probably in 620, produced three daughters of whom the second was to become the Empress Wu.

It is interesting to note here the skill with which Li Chiao intersperses these verifiable facts with assertions of a more dubious nature. We find no confirmation, for instance, that Shih-huo's brothers were awarded the rank of *chün-kung* nor, indeed, for the statement that "afterwards, when Kao-tsu made a trip, he often ordered Shih-huo to manage the affairs of the tribunal [of censors?], to be at the same time in charge of the troops and horses of the [Palace] Guard of North and South, and to judge (*p'an*) the presidents of the Six Boards."⁴⁴ Although unlikely to be true, these notices gain an air of verisimilitude by their placement among otherwise documented facts.

In 624 Shih-huo received a temporary assignment to pacify the Yang-chou area following the rebellion of Fu Kung-shih,⁴⁵ and after an administration so successful that he received imperial commendation,⁴⁶ he returned to the capital in late 626 at the accession of T'ai-tsung. The following year saw the abortive rising of Li Hsiao-ch'ang in Shan-nan,⁴⁷ and the *Pei* reports that when T'ai-tsung asked his ministers for a suitable candidate to quell the remnants, "all considered that unless Shih-huo [were put in charge], it could not be done."⁴⁸ He was duly appointed governor-general of Li-chou and seems to have remained here until 631 when he was transferred to an equivalent post in Ching-chou.⁴⁹ Some evidence recently come to light suggests that the Empress Wu may have been born during her father's posting in Li-chou, and if so, she is three years younger than has traditionally been believed.⁵⁰

The *Pei* relates little else of interest to us here, giving few details of Shih-huo's administration in Ching-chou, but mentioning how his prayers before a statue of Aśoka at the Ch'ang-sha temple miraculously ended a long drought in the area.⁵¹ It is also the only source to offer details on his death in 635 at age 59, attributing his final illness to sorrow at Kao-tsu's death. T'ai-tsung is said to have sent him capital physicians, and his funeral arrangements were charged to Li Chi, the governor-general of his home prefecture where he was buried.⁵² The last detail is significant since it was Li Chi's voice, two decades later, which was decisive in the establishment of Shih-huo's daughter as empress. Finally, the *Pei* gives details of Shih-huo's posthumous honors.

There are numerous aspects of the *Pei* upon which I might comment, such as its relationship to the ideology of legitimation, but since my sole purpose here is to ascertain the facts of the Empress Wu's immediate background, let me point

out only that it provides enough reliable information to supplement and occasionally to revise the official account. The most important of the new perceptions it provides are that the Wu clan was not wholly undistinguished, and that the empress' father was a valued friend of Kao-tsu and a man who enjoyed the trust of T'ai-tsung. Beyond this, it is a source which encourages certain speculations about the early life of the empress herself. Of these we might list the possibility that she was born outside the capital in the Szechuan area, and probably in 627. Her earliest years were spent in the provinces, in a wealthy family with close ties by marriage to the imperial clan and high ministers of the T'ang. Her home was one in which Buddhism had a certain influence. From other sources we learn of the visit of a noted fortuneteller to the Wu home,⁵³ so it may be that popular religion generally was strong there. By offering even this much information, the *Pei* becomes our major, if still meager source on the first seven or eight years of the Empress Wu's life.

There exists also a corresponding inscription for the empress' mother,⁵⁴ but it unfortunately offers no information on the movements of the family over the next years. We are forced, therefore, to return to official sources and to resume the narrative with the entrance of the future empress into T'ai-tsung's harem at the age of fourteen. Dating of this event is problematic because of source conflicts regarding her birthdate, and Ssu-ma Kuang, discussing the matter in the *k'ao-i*, concludes that it was in 637 that T'ai-tsung "heard of her beauty" and summoned her.⁵⁵ There is, however, reason to question this.

First of all, T'ai-tsung had only buried his beloved Wen-te Empress in the eleventh month of 636⁵⁶ and is recorded to have mourned her "for a long time."⁵⁷ It seems unlikely he would so soon add to his harem even if Wu had been of outstanding beauty. We find no confirmation in other sources that this was the case, and the fact that she neither advanced from her initial rank of *ts'ai-jen*⁵⁸ nor bore T'ai-tsung any children might suggest he was not greatly attracted to her. An alternative explanation for her summons to the harem is provided in the fact that in the late 630s one of her cousins became T'ai-tsung's favorite concubine and used her good offices to have Wu selected.⁵⁹ If this suggestion is valid and if we accept the evidence of a later birthdate, we might place Wu's entry into the palace in 640 and attribute it to nepotism rather than her personal qualities. She seems to have had little to do with the emperor, for she totally escaped his notice in 648, when he acted upon a current prophesy that a "martial prince" (*wu-wang*) who was female would overturn the T'ang.⁶⁰

Her duties in the imperial wardrobe, however, did bring her into contact with the future Kao-tsung who had been declared crown prince in 643. Contrary to T'ang custom, he seems to have occupied the same palace as his father, and in T'ai-tsung's final illness is said to have been present constantly at his bedside.⁶¹ Some sources give the impression that an incestuous liaison was formed at this time,⁶² and while we cannot be certain that this was so, it does seem possible in light of subsequent events.

The career of the Empress Wu should have come to an end with T'ai-tsung's death if, in fact, she retired with his other concubines to a convent. The principal sources agree that she did so,⁶³ and they go on to record that she was resummoned to the palace at the urging of Kao-tsung's childless Empress Wang who hoped thereby to detach his affections from a rival concubine called

Hsiao Liang-ti.⁶⁴ The story is a curious one, with numerous source contradictions and a lack of essential details, so that it may be well to reject altogether the convent story, or to suggest that she entered under different circumstances and for a shorter period of time than is usually assumed.⁶⁵ Kao-tsung may well have planned to make her his concubine from the time of their first meetings!

From her return to the palace, Wu Chao-i, as she was now known, is said to have mounted a surreptitious and skillful campaign to discredit both Empress Wang and the concubine Hsiao Liang-ti. She bribed servants to spy on them, slandered them to the emperor, and perhaps even smothered her new-born daughter in order to find some crime to blame upon the empress.⁶⁶ The usual source difficulties are, of course, magnified here since events of this sort, occurring within the palace, cannot have been made known through regular channels to the historians. The infant's death, for example, might have been accidental, and it is perhaps significant that the incident goes unrecorded in the old *T'ang History* biographies of Wu and Wang. In any event, Wu Chao-i came rapidly to monopolize Kao-tsung's love, bearing him one or perhaps two sons in 653-4 and emerging in early 654 as his open favorite.⁶⁷ Later that year Kao-tsung began to seek ministerial approval for her elevation to empress.

This search for approval met initially with almost universal opposition among the *tsai-hsiang*, a group composed at the time of six men.⁶⁸ As one of the significant political crises of the period it is well documented in primary sources and much studied by modern historians,⁶⁹ so that its full details need not concern us here. Certain points of broad importance might be made, however, and the first is that Kao-tsung showed throughout a resolution and ingenuity not often associated with his character. We must recall that his chief opponents, Ch'ang-sun Wu-chi and Ch'u Sui-liang, were men of great prestige and, indeed, had been entrusted by the dying T'ai-tsung with the care of his son.⁷⁰ Like their colleagues, they assumed that all matters affecting the empire fell within their purview, and this attitude had been encouraged by their recent experience in the collegial-style government of T'ai-tsung.⁷¹ They had in his reign played a role in all important decisions including Kao-tsung's selection as crown prince, and when the latter argued that the choice of an empress was a domestic matter, their resort to this precedent was not unnatural. Kao-tsung seems to have accepted this limited view of his prerogative at first, and so turned to every avenue from cajolery to outright bribery and intimidation in order to gain agreement. Only when this failed did he simply overrule them, and in so doing he changed the balance of power and the style of rule which had characterized the dynasty up to that time.

In the debate itself, he stressed continually that Empress Wang had failed to bear him a son while Wu Chao-i had done so. This was sufficient ground for divorce under T'ang law, and nowhere is there recorded a reference in the debate either to the murder of Wu's daughter or to the charge of sorcery later cited to justify the Empress Wang's deposition.⁷² The arguments of his opponents therefore seem the more cogent since they could speak of the blamelessness of Empress Wang and could even point out the unfilial nature of removing an empress personally selected for her virtue by Kao-tsung's father. Moreover, they claimed, bonds of marriage were sacred, especially in the imperial household where they were an example to all. The sincerity of this argument might be questioned, however, since they admitted that compromise was possible. If

Kao-tsung were determined to change empresses, why did he not choose a lady of distinguished lineage? Wu Chao-i was not only of relatively low birth, but as a former concubine of T'ai-tsung the possibility of having an accusation of incest could only blacken the emperor's historical reputation.⁷³ In this suggested compromise we see perhaps the real basis of the *tsai-hsiang* position. They were not opposed to a new empress provided it were not Wu Chao-i; that is, they would agree to a change if they could guide the emperor's choice. Kao-tsung was probably aware of this, for he made no effort to refute their specific charges against Wu until the edict on the occasion of her accession in November of 656.⁷⁴

On one level, therefore, the conflict may be regarded as a struggle over the definition of imperial prerogative, and modern scholars have extended its scope even more widely than this. Ch'en Yin-k'o, for instance, saw it as a regional struggle between rival aristocratic blocs from the Northeast and the Northwest.⁷⁵ Japanese commentators like Yokota Shigeru and Matsui Shūichi view it rather as intra-bureaucratic competition between entrenched aristocrats and newly rising officials like Li I-fu⁷⁶ who allied themselves with Kao-tsung for opportunistic reasons or to compensate for the lack of a genealogy which would open to them the highest state posts.⁷⁷ Maoist historians, like Chang Ch'ün, incline to the latter view, though they emphasize a different sort of class struggle and use a different vocabulary.⁷⁸ More recently, Lo Lung-chih has taken a revisionist position which sees opportunism as the chief motive of both camps.⁷⁹ All these approaches provide a certain insight, but the nature of our sources is such that a high degree of speculation is necessarily present in each. Perhaps it would be best to take both emperor and *tsai-hsiang* at their own valuations, for on both sides we can find such elements as genuine idealism, Confucian loyalty, and class as well as self interest. The issue of whether or not the Son of Heaven could choose his empress independently is the fundamental one, and by finding a single *tsai-hsiang*, Li Chi, who agreed that he could, Kao-tsung won an important victory. Li's view, "This is a household affair of Your Majesty. Why [do you need to] inquire further from outsiders?" would be invoked often in support of imperial claims in the T'ang.⁸⁰ In late 656, after two years of uncertainty, the matter was settled.

The Empress Wu seems instinctively to have grasped that the manner of her elevation put the *tsai-hsiang* group on the defensive, and she lost no time in pressing her advantage. Taking the initiative and overriding Kao-tsung's resistance, she had newly-promoted officials like Li I-fu and Hsü Ching-tsung bring criminal charges of dubious validity against all five of her former opponents so that by late 659 all had been driven to disgrace and death.⁸¹ In the same period, she personally effected the destruction of the former Empress Wang and Hsiao Liang-ti and with needless brutality.⁸² Both of these acts appalled the Confucian historians, but it was the first which had the greatest historical significance. Not only was the social and regional configuration of power changed at the highest level of government, a change of great importance in the context of the revision of the national clan list in 659, but the entire political climate at the same level was also altered. Ssu-ma Kuang says with only minimal exaggeration that "from the death of Ch'u Sui-liang and Han Yüan, inside and outside [the court, frank] speech was avoided. No one dared oppose the [imperial] will or strongly remonstrate. For almost twenty years [it was like this]."⁸³

We might ask at this point what role Kao-tsung played in these years. The standard sources give the impression that as his wife's vengeance unfolded, he became more and more debilitated in spirit and morale, weeping openly, for instance, at the fate of his former empress and his uncle Wu-chi.⁸⁴ Though such remarks as "My family is unlucky, and there is constant trouble with my relatives,"⁸⁵ indicate a belief in the need for severity, the strain of the punishments was great and may have been related to the illness he suffered in 660 and which resulted in the temporary delegation of his duties to the empress.⁸⁶

In this same period, on the other hand, he was proving with real achievements to be a competent and even an energetic ruler. His armies, for instance, conquered the Western Turks in 658 and incorporated into the empire the vast area of the An-hsi protectorate-general.⁸⁷ He showed his administrative ability in measures for governing the new territory and by the institution of a biennial census within the Wall, and he did not hesitate to send troops to rescue the tributary state of Paekche from an aggressive Koguryō.⁸⁸ In 659, as we shall see, he demonstrated his centralizing talents with important measures to weaken aristocratic regionalism and to confer prestige upon the examination system. With similar purpose he took steps to strengthen the ideology of the state, and recognizing the force of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist loyalties among the various groups of his subjects, he took steps to patronize them all. Thus he commissioned a new ritual and new versions of the dynastic histories from Liang to Sui, creating shortly thereafter the post of *ch'i-chu she-jen* "diarist of activity and repose" in order to facilitate the production of true dynastic records.⁸⁹ As early as 655 he showed his respect for Buddhism by publicly greeting the famed pilgrim Hsüan-tsang at the city gates and installing him in the Tz'u-en Temple.⁹⁰ Two years later he freed both Buddhist and Taoist clergy from their duty of obeisance to their parents.⁹¹ In the same year, 657, and principally for purposes of centralization and consolidation, he completed an extensive program of building and restoration at Loyang, and he designated it the Eastern Capital.⁹²

This final measure presents an opportunity to raise a central question. Traditionally, the explanation for the virtual shift of the court to Loyang from this period has been the antipathy of the Empress Wu to the Ch'ang-an palaces where she was haunted by the apparitions of her early victims.⁹³ Did she therefore inspire the shift, and was she similarly the moving force behind her husband's other actions? The evidence suggests not. First of all, there existed both precedents and valid economic and political considerations for the establishment of a second capital, and these were enunciated at the time.⁹⁴ Second, Kao-tsung rapidly recovered his strength after 660, fathering two more children and making extended tours, most notably to T'ai-shan in 665.⁹⁵ Third, in late 664 he forcibly reminded the empress of her technically subordinate position by threatening to depose her.⁹⁶ This last event is subject to frequent misinterpretation, and so we might examine it more closely.

The Empress Wu, it seems, had been seeing at this time a Taoist priest known to be skilled in the occult (*yen-sheng*). These activities could easily be construed as sorcery, the crime to which Empress Wang's fall had been attributed, and it was as such that a eunuch reported it to Kao-tsung. In anger he sought advice from one of his chief ministers, Shang-kuan I, a man who had been closely connected with the former Crown Prince Chung and also with the fallen elder statesmen.⁹⁷ Warned that the empress' unrestrained influence was detrimental

to the empire, he had Shang-kuan draft a decree of deposition. What happened next is not recorded in our earliest source, the old *T'ang History*, and so may be suspect, at least in detail. The *New T'ang History* says the empress heard what was happening, hastened to her husband to confess, and "the emperor therefore repented. He also feared her anger and so said it was done on the advice of Shang-kuan I."⁹⁸ Shang-kuan and his eunuch accomplice were executed on charges of conspiracy with the former crown prince, and the *Comprehensive Mirror*, following the *New T'ang History*, says,

from this [event], whenever the emperor attended to business, the empress then hung a curtain [and listened] behind. There was no matter of government, great or small, which she did not hear. The whole power of the empire passed into her hands; reward and punishment, life and death, she decided. The emperor folded his hands and that is all. In court and country, they were called the Two Sages.⁹⁹

This passage, although dubious in origin and extravagant in expression, has been extraordinarily influential in creating the quite common perception that from 664 Kao-tsung was no more than a puppet ruler. The old *T'ang History*, in the parallel section, offers a different view: "From this, the empress for several decades aided (*nei-fu*) in government with power and authority no different from that of the emperor. They were designated at that time as the Two Sages."¹⁰⁰

Whichever interpretation we choose to accept, it is clear that only in 664 did contemporaries begin to regard the empress even as an equal partner in government, using a phrase, incidentally, which had been similarly applied to Sui Wen-ti and his wife.¹⁰¹ Until 664 Kao-tsung was almost certainly the senior partner, and it was possibly only when he began to lose ground after 660 that he considered deposition. We might even speculate from the rapidity of his "repentance" that deposition was never a serious alternative in his mind, for he had the evidence, the power and the support necessary to do it had he been determined to do so. It seems more reasonable to suggest that essentially Kao-tsung ruled just as his father had, co-operatively; only in his case, the Empress Wu played the supportive role traditionally assigned to the ministerial body. Kao-tsung apparently recognized the unusual talents of his wife and, sharing with her a concurrence of purpose, used the events of 664 simply as a warning, never thereafter withdrawing his trust. There is no sign that the relationship between the "Two Sages" became antagonistic after 664, and indeed Kao-tsung's first reaction on the return of his illness in 675 was to offer his wife the regency.¹⁰²

Kao-tsung was to live for another two decades, presiding with the Empress Wu over a largely successful administration and a prosperous state. The policies of these years are examined in subsequent chapters, but before we pass on to them, we might outline here some of the more intimate events of court life as they touched the empress' career and, to a degree, were determinants of her public actions.

The year 665 was notable for the celebration of the *feng-shan* sacrifice, the most important of state rituals whose function it was to announce to Heaven the successful achievement of a ruler's tasks and to beg continued blessings.¹⁰³ Both Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung, feeling unworthy to perform this most solemn of rites, had refused ministerial requests to do so, the latter on five different

occasions.¹⁰⁴ In 665 the initiative seems to have been the rulers', and while certainly related to domestic prosperity and the success of Chinese arms abroad, may incidentally have been symbolic of the restored harmony of Kao-tsung's family life. As we shall note, this represents the unique instance in Chinese history of female participation in this ceremonial, and though this later came to be considered a sacrilege, it seems at the time to have done nothing to dim the luster of the occasion.

The aftermath of the ceremony was not, however, so happy. Because of Confucian sensitivity to her own unusually great role in politics, the Empress Wu had always been careful to avoid the charge that her family, the *wai-ch'i*, benefited too greatly from her position. In 656 she had, therefore, presented a public "instruction" to her clan which resulted in the transfer of her half-brothers and their families to provincial postings.¹⁰⁵ Most sources suggest that the real reason for the transfer was the empress' long-standing dislike of them occasioned by their disrespect for her mother.¹⁰⁶ Both brothers had died at their posts, but the sons of the elder, Wei-liang and Huai-yün, were invited to the *feng-shan* celebration and returned afterwards to the capital with the imperial party. Also in the capital was the empress' niece Ho-lan Kuo-ch'u, daughter of her elder sister and, the histories allege, recipient of Kao-tsung's favors as her mother had been before her.¹⁰⁷ Though their vocabulary here is deliberately vague, Kao-tsung seems to have made it known that he wished the girl as a concubine, so that the allegations may have been true. The empress was in any case jealous of her, and in the eighth month of 666 at a banquet in the home of her mother, Madame Yang, the girl died in convulsions. The empress' nephews were executed as poisoners, but suspicion was naturally directed toward the empress herself. This is the first of a series of deaths within her family circle for which she is implicitly blamed in the histories.

It is impossible, so long after the fact, to pass judgment on the empress' guilt or innocence, but on the basis of what evidence we have, an alternative explanation is possible. We know that Madame Yang greatly disliked her stepfamily and at the same time she was naturally anxious that her daughter retain the emperor's favor. Her banquet may therefore have been given to rid herself of the stepfamily which seemed to be regaining favor and simultaneously to destroy her daughter's rival. This interpretation is supported by the fact that when Wei-liang's execution left Wu Shih-huo without a descendant in the male line to carry on the ancestral sacrifices, he was replaced not by a surviving member of the Wu clan but rather by Ho-lan Min-chih, Madame Yang's real grandson.¹⁰⁸ As her rival's brother, he is not likely to have risen to this honor and been granted the Wu surname by the empress if she had been jealous enough to murder his sister!

Min-chih, in the event, proved an unworthy candidate, soon discrediting himself in various ways. Not only is he said to have seduced the palace ladies who attended the T'ai-p'ing Princess but also to have raped the betrothed of the crown prince. In 670 he callously ignored the mourning regulations for Madame Yang, who had been his constant protector, and in punishment was exiled to the provinces. He committed suicide on the road, thus opening the way for the return to court of the last survivors of the Wu clan, Ch'eng-ssu and San-ssu,¹⁰⁹ men who would have great prominence during their aunt's usurpation.

There is perhaps little to be gained in speculating upon the guilt or

innocence of the empress in matters like these except insofar as they relate to her character and to the progress of her career. Domestic tragedy seems to have had little effect on her role in government though it may be possible that it contributed to a weakening of her self-confidence. We see signs of this in 670, the year of her mother's death, and also a year of calamity both in domestic and foreign affairs. At the same time, a number of ill omens were observed,¹¹⁰ and the empress seems to have blamed herself, for in the [intercalary] ninth month she offered to resign her position (*pi-wei*). The *New T'ang History* suggests that her request was a false one,¹¹¹ but even Ssu-ma Kuang, who is usually ready to believe the worst of her, does not question her sincerity.¹¹² Kao-tsung, as we might expect, declined the offer, reaffirming his confidence in her and demonstrating it even more clearly four years later when, at her suggestion, he appropriated to both of them the unprecedented title "Celestial" (*t'ien-huang*, *t'ien-hou*).¹¹³

This measure is well known and is usually attributed simply to a whim of the empress: her desire to avoid the style of all former rulers.¹¹⁴ As we shall see, this motive was present but in all likelihood was not the sole one. The titles were taken in a mood of celebration, part of a general measure to correct and standardize the posthumous honorifics of the imperial clan, so that Kao-tsung and the Empress Wu made themselves, while still alive, part of a recognized tradition of good government. This aspect of motivation became clearer within a few months when the empress presented her husband with a twelve-part memorial on the subject of governmental improvement.¹¹⁵ In it she proposed a comprehensive program which envisaged in a state of peace and plenty, low taxes, light corvée and only a small army so that transformation could be carried out by virtue not force. The administration was to be more frugal, opening reserved lands to cultivation and economizing on public works and donations to monasteries and temples. The government was also to be more open, prohibiting all slander but welcoming free representation on any matter from all subjects. The servants of the state were to be better rewarded, with salary raises in the capital and promotions for those in low ranks who had no one to recommend them. Two measures were new: the first extended the mourning period for a dead mother to the full three years hitherto reserved for a father, and the second encouraged the study by all, of Lao Tzu's *Tao-te ching*. I shall comment on these later.

Although one source says that to some degree all the suggestions were implemented,¹¹⁶ practical considerations would seem to have made impossible, for instance, any large-scale demobilization of troops.¹¹⁷ At the same time, however, the symbolic nature of the act was perhaps most important and its basic principle--concern for the people's welfare generally and for the lower orders of society and bureaucracy in particular--must have been a popular one. Hostile historians have tended thus to see the memorial as a transparent device to win popular support and pave the empress' way to usurpation, but on examination we must reject this view. The encouragement of Taoist studies, for instance, could only strengthen the T'ang, and of greater importance, in the years 684-690 when the empress was preparing her usurpation and was most in need of public support, her policies diverged widely from the suggestions of the memorial, encompassing corvée-built public works, the lavish patronage of Buddhism, and the dependence on ruthless and slanderous officials. Administration in the Chou, conversely, was based closely enough on the principles of 674 that we might instead accept the program as a sincere one.

One of the reasons that historians see the memorial in the context of usurpation is that in 674-5 the succession question was becoming central. Kao-tsung's old illness was returning, and in the third month of 675 he suffered so serious a relapse that he suggested his wife become regent, desisting only when Hao Ch'u-chün, vice-president of the Secretariat, protested that "the Son of Heaven manages the external and the empress the internal. This is the way of Heaven."¹¹⁸ A second reason was that less than two months later the Crown Prince Hung died in mysterious circumstances and, as Ssu-ma Kuang puts it, "people of the time considered that the Celestial Empress [Wu] poisoned him."¹¹⁹

Evidence for the crime, as Ssu-ma admits in the *k'ao-i*, is of the most tenuous sort, arising from a court rumor in the time of Su-tsung (756-62),¹²⁰ but the accounts agree at least on the details of the story. Hung was a popular prince, rapidly gaining reputation as a humane, filial and serious man and, as his independence grew, he came occasionally into conflict with his mother on policy matters. The most recent of those occasions was his persuading of Kao-tsung that the two daughters of Hsiao Liang-ti, confined at the empress' wish since 656, should be released and allowed to marry. The empress showed her resentment by finding them husbands of low degree. Shortly after this Hung accompanied his parents to the Ho-pi palace near Loyang where he died.

The *New T'ang History* is the only one of the primary sources to suggest he was poisoned,¹²¹ and other evidence exists which points rather to a natural death. In the first place, it seems unlikely that the empress was planning a usurpation that early, and even if she did, to poison her son in the very presence of a father who loved him, seems an extreme and foolhardy tactic. Also arguing against murder is the fact that Prince Hsien, the next in line, was possibly not the Empress Wu's son at all¹²² and, therefore, was not a man she would have been anxious to have succeed. Finally, there are indications that the dead heir was not of a healthy constitution.¹²³

Hsien, who became crown prince in the sixth month of 675, was a man interested in scholarship and Buddhism; he was open, lively and fond, we are told, of wine and women.¹²⁴ The rumor of his illegitimate birth, so soon to surface, must have been known in certain circles at his accession, but there is reason to believe that even so, the empress was willing to see his succession to the throne. She took a personal hand in his education, writing him letters of instruction and reprimand, and permitting the appointment as his counsellors (*pin-k'o*) of four men not known to be friendly to her, among them Hao Ch'u-chün.¹²⁵ Hsien seems to have begun well, and he won praise from his father in 676, the same year he presented to the throne his *Hou Han-shu* commentary.¹²⁶ Soon after that, however, his reputation began to deteriorate. He was told that his mother had been advised by one of her intimates, a man holding regular office and also skilled in fortunetelling, that he had not the look of a future emperor and was less noble than his younger brothers. His response, according to a palace servant with whom he had an improper liaison, was to procure the fortuneteller's murder,¹²⁷ and although proof of this was lacking, the empress was naturally suspicious.

Shortly after this, when Hsien rejected the advice of one of his secretaries to end his liaison, the empress seized the chance to have a formal inquiry made into his affairs. In searching his residence, the investigators found in his stables several hundred suits of armor which they reported as evidence of treason.

Kao-tsung, although he had also had earlier reservations about Hsien's suitability,¹²⁸ was willing to pardon him, but on the empress' insistence, the armor was publicly destroyed and Hsien demoted to the status of commoner.¹²⁹ He was soon exiled to the provinces where he committed suicide in 684, with suspicion falling on the empress as the instigator of his death.¹³⁰ His position as crown prince was taken by his younger brother, the future Chung-tsung.

Was Hsien, like his elder brother, a victim of Empress Wu's ambition? Once again, the nature of our sources makes certainty impossible. The evidence of the armor seems damning enough for the penalty of degradation and, given the circumstances, the empress had little to gain from the heir's removal. Two sons remained and would always stand between her and the throne and, besides, Chung-tsung was not only allowed to succeed but was later to comment specifically on the kind treatment he received from his mother.¹³¹ In 682 Kao-tsung, presumably with his wife's agreement, took the unusual step of establishing Chung-tsung's son as *huang t'ai-sun* "Heir Apparent Grandson,"¹³² a measure which might be regarded as an expression of his fear that Empress Wu would deprive the Li clan of the throne. Yet this interpretation is also dubious in view of the long partnership of the "Two Sages," and especially in view of the great power Kao-tsung was to leave the empress in his last testament. More likely, the measure was designed to quiet the fear and suspicions inspired at the court by the unaccustomed influence of an empress and the disappearance of two heirs to the throne. When Kao-tsung died at the end of 683 it seems to have been in the belief that the succession was assured and that his heir would benefit from the expertise of the Empress Wu.

Kao-tsung's death presents us with a suitable opportunity to summarize some conclusions. From the discussion thus far one of the strongest impressions to emerge is that of the weight of historical bias against the empress. I have cited a number of instances where unprecedented or discreditable acts are ascribed to her without convincing evidence, and have shown that on occasion the historian prefaces his allegation with the phrase, "people at the time believed . . .". This is important, for the "people" to whom the historian refers were principally the bureaucratic element at the court, a group consistently ready to believe the worst of the empress. I have suggested that their attitude arose from loyalty to the Confucian tradition which was highly resistant to female influence in government even if the woman exercising it was highly competent.

The existence of this attitude had two principal effects. First, it helped to delineate the empress' constituency and to define the form taken by her search for legitimation. As I shall point out, the prejudice against female rule was not so strong among the masses. Second, the overt presence of the empress in her husband's administration meant that his reign was a period of exceptional tension in the highest circles of government. It was a tension which hastened historical change, and perhaps the most notable aspect of this was the relative decline of ministerial power. Since very powerful ministers had been a chief cause of dynastic change in the period of disunion, it could be argued that this development contributed to the longevity of the T'ang.

Dynastic consolidation, as I shall shortly suggest, was the central policy of Kao-tsung's reign, and in view of her eventual usurpation, the loyalty of the Empress Wu to this aim is striking. Historians who see her plotting to

seize the throne in Kao-tsung's lifetime neglect to consider, for instance, that she and her entire clan owed their rise to the T'ang. As we shall see, policies of the period in which her hand is obvious, the celebration of the *feng-shan*, the extension of Buddhist patronage, and the emphasis placed on examinations, literature and the polite arts, were all elaborate and effective means of expressing dynastic self-confidence and convincing the empire that the T'ang was essentially different from its short-lived predecessors.

It is in this light that I have taken my position on the succession question. If we accept the possibility that Hung's death was accidental, then Hsien's degradation could hardly have advanced a putative usurpation by his mother, and he is most plausibly viewed as simply one more example of the overambitious crown prince seen in every reign of the T'ang up until that time. If, indeed, he was the son of the Empress Wu's sister, we could even construe his fall as the result of Empress Wu's extreme concern for legitimate succession and thereby strengthen our conjecture that at Kao-tsung's death, the Empress Wu had not yet conceived any intention of establishing a dynasty of her own.

I have devoted so much attention to the succession question not only for the light it sheds on the empress' career but also because of its great importance in 683. From the late 670s the prosperity of the dynasty was beginning to appear jeopardized as successive years of natural disaster and meager harvest brought about regional scarcity and general economic uncertainty. By 681 these conditions had brought about something of a crisis as grain prices fluctuated wildly and the government was forced to take the unusual step of permitting the starving households of Ho-nan and Ho-pei to change their registration by settling farther south.¹³³ The next year, 683, the *fu-ping* units of Kuan-nei were set to the work of cultivation in the Southwest,¹³⁴ a good indication of the severity of the situation since the government was at the same time attempting to constitute expeditionary forces to meet the resurgent Turks. A strong ruler, therefore, seemed to be an absolute necessity.

Before turning to the question of why Wu Tse-t'ien should have been thrust into that role instead of her mature sons, it is necessary to raise a theoretical matter of central importance, how an ideological basis for exercising sovereignty can be created.