

## Chapter 4

### THE EMPRESS WU AND THE CREATION OF STATE IDEOLOGY

Since the collapse of the Han Empire in the late second century, the reunification of China had become a constant though increasingly elusive ideal. Successive dynasties in North and South had frequently exhausted their strength in the search for ways of conquest, control and practical administration which might weld a pluralistic culture of strong and persistent regional loyalties into a coherent whole. In this process, certain military, economic and organizational mechanisms had been developed which constitute in some recent scholarship the principal explanation for the restoration of the empire in the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> There is much that is appealing in such analyses, but at the same time, they have in common a tendency to ignore the role of what Arthur Wright calls the "suasive accompaniment to the exercise of power,"<sup>2</sup> and what I call the state ideology, i.e., that which justifies the legitimation of the power-holder and disposes the people to accept and support his policies. Ideology was a basic concern of all Sui-T'ang rulers and a first priority of the Empress Wu. Without making significant changes in its traditional form, she could not have become emperor.

Before we proceed, some further clarification of terminology is required, for even among social scientists there is much debate about the definition of ideology and its relation both to comparable terms like political theory, culture and value structure as well as to its various components such as national myths and the religious and intellectual life of those it seeks to influence.<sup>3</sup> I shall give the term wide connotations in the following discussion, using it to refer to the totality of words, symbols, rituals, ideas and principles used to legitimize particular individuals, institutions and procedures. We shall also see that it is a concept subject to redefinition, for to be successful an ideology must be a process not a stasis and remain responsive to the shifts of values and constituencies. This is something seen clearly in the most successful ideology before the Sui-T'ang period, the so-called Han Confucianism which during its lengthy development in the second half of the second century B.C. came to include several of the ideas and rituals associated originally with such schools as Taoism, Legalism and *yin-yang*.

In the Later Han, however, this ideology became first outmoded then impotent, as rapid social change and the spread of Buddhism created new values and as increasingly weak rulers succeeded each other, each less responsive to these new values than the last. In spite of this, one feature of the syncretic Han ideology which survived even in the "barbarization" of North China was its perception of the imperial institution. The emperor continued to be seen as a "cosmic pivot," the harmonizer of Heaven, Earth and Man, and for this reason the formulation of state ideology became more and more an imperial responsibility. Thus in the Sui reunification of China, Wen-ti's greatest achievement lay perhaps in



his ability to turn to the purposes of centralization and the consolidation of dynastic power, the values and symbols of Confucianism, Taoism, and especially Buddhism, the faith of the vast majority of his subjects.<sup>4</sup>

The first rulers of the T'ang, facing a hierarchy of problems very similar to those of the Sui, were able to adopt similar solutions and, at least in broad outline, to espouse an ideology whose only major variation was its use of Taoist messianism.<sup>5</sup> The mid-dynasty usurpation of the Empress Wu, however, was a very different case. Because of its unprecedented nature, the Chou dynasty required different justifications for legitimation and different estimates of societal response. It is principally for this reason that traditional historiography has dwelt on the anomalies of the period, with most sources depicting the era as one of brilliant, extravagant and vulgar ceremonials, of constant omens and of a ceaseless attempt to influence both domestic and foreign affairs by the manipulation of the supernatural. Seen in contrast to the more rationalistic attitude of T'ai-tsung, this emphasis has a certain justification, but we must recall that T'ai-tsung was more firmly established in legitimate dynastic succession than was the empress and was, in any case, of a vastly different temperament.

This final point is of some importance. Because the formation of state ideology was so intimately connected with imperial prerogative, the character, background and training of the ruler were significant factors in its creation and form. We have earlier seen that the background of the Empress Wu differed in several respects from the rulers of the Sui and the early T'ang: her clan was of a lower social stratum, northeastern rather than northwestern, and she herself spent her formative years outside the capital where she must have been exposed widely to what Maoist historians term the "people's culture."<sup>6</sup> And because her ministerial body was so aristocratic and metropolitan, clashes with it were bound to be frequent. Of even greater significance, the empress was raised in a strongly religious atmosphere, and as I shall attempt to show, this particular aspect of her background was evident in each of the several stages which ultimately gave Buddhism a brief precedence over both Confucianism and Taoism as components of the ideology of the Chou.

The roots of the Empress Wu's deep religious feeling can probably be traced to the influence of her mother, Madame Yang. The Yang clan as a whole was known in Sui times for its particular generosity toward the Buddhist T'ien-t'ai or Lotus Sect, and both emperors had been lavish in their patronage of Buddhism in general.<sup>7</sup> Several scholars have commented upon Madame Yang's own piety and upon her generous support for the work of translation and the erection of votive images,<sup>8</sup> and one goes so far as to suggest that she placed her daughter, the future empress, in a convent at an early age.<sup>9</sup> Evidence for this is dubious, but it is generally acknowledged that from the mid-650s, as mother of the reigning empress, she was one of the most influential patrons of Buddhism in the land. In the *Chi sha-men pu-ying pai-su teng-shih* (PSTS), our fullest account of the obeisance controversy of 662, she is depicted as the staunchest and most steadfast of the church's allies at the court and is credited with a share in its victory.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, however, Madame Yang was typical of her times in the syncretism of her beliefs. She had once welcomed to her home the soothsayer Yüan T'ien-kang to prophesy about her children,<sup>11</sup> and it was perhaps she who introduced



to her daughter the Taoist priest (*tao-shih*) whose skill in the black arts (*yen-sheng*) almost caused her deposition in 664.<sup>12</sup> It is little wonder, therefore, that the Empress Wu was herself inclined to belief in the mystical and the supernatural, and we may note the earliest manifestation of this tendency in her attempt to exorcise from the palace the bloody apparitions of the murdered Empress Wang and Hsiao Liang-ti. Failure to do so, according to traditional historiography, led her to desert Ch'ang-an for Loyang.<sup>13</sup>

These few illustrations raise an interesting point. Prophecy, divination, exorcism and practices of the sort were not since Han times the exclusive property of any of the three principal philosophical traditions. As I shall later show, there were numerous contemporary examples of avowed Confucians engaging in such activities as the interpretation of omens and dreams, and there were many miracle workers among the Buddhists. The following discussion is, therefore, restricted to those aspects of state ideology which were directed toward the several definable and discrete groupings and beliefs. It should become evident that the empress propounded no novel system but rather "juggled" or re-assembled in her ideology existing elements of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in response to the needs of the time. We shall also see three distinct stages of her ideological development.

Both the early Sui and the reign of T'ang T'ai-tsung are regarded in the standard histories as eras of flourishing Confucianism,<sup>14</sup> and it is to be expected that the empress would have seen the advantages of a continued appeal to the educated classes, the aristocrats and officials, on the basis of Confucian ritual and values. Especially in the period following her controversial and unorthodox elevation, she was the very model of the humble, supportive, and ostensibly noninterfering Confucian empress. Her relatives were not raised to high posts, and she publicly praised the devotion to duty of those ministers who had opposed her, remaining detached at least in the public eye from their destruction.<sup>15</sup> Even the hostile Ssu-ma Kuang remarks on her initial modesty!<sup>16</sup> In this same period much attention was devoted to Confucian ethical values: a new ritual was promulgated and the rules of filial piety extended.<sup>17</sup> A new college, the Ch'ung-hsien-kuan, was founded,<sup>18</sup> and an otherwise severe critic in 657 praised the standard of education both in the capital and the countryside.<sup>19</sup> Education was, of course, a priority of Confucians, and to win the loyalty of a still developing ruling group, both Kao-tsung and his wife consistently patronize the schools and more especially the examinations, a matter I shall later discuss in detail. It may have been that in this period the Empress Wu devoted some attention also to her own studies, for she was soon to demonstrate an intimate knowledge of Confucian symbolism, nomenclature and ritual tradition which could be used both for state and personal purposes.

The first and most striking instance of her ability in this regard came in 665 when Kao-tsung decided to celebrate the most awesome of state sacrifices, the *feng-shan* on Mount T'ai, reporting to Heaven the fulfillment of harmony and acknowledging the continuing responsibilities of his mandate.<sup>20</sup> Given that rulers of the caliber of Sui Wen-ti and T'ai-tsung had felt themselves unworthy to perform the ritual, its celebration at this time was an expression of unusual personal self-confidence and dynastic congratulations, and even more unusual was the fact that the Empress Wu was able to persuade the officials of ritual that



she be allowed to participate in it. Edouard Chavannes, who has made the most thorough study of the sacrifice, translates from her request:

d'après ce qu'expose la doctrine des livres classiques, le cérémonial féminin et le cérémonial masculin sont donc distincts: lorsqu'il s'agissait de constituer des associés pour l'autel féminin, on s'est conformé au sexe de la divinité de la Terre; . . . d'ailleurs, puisqu'on invite les augustes impératrices défunctes à venir en personne participer au précieux festin, pourquoi ordonne-t-on à de hauts fonctionnaires de sexe masculin de s'immiscer à des sacrifices parfaits offerts à des femmes? Si on raisonne en bonne logique, il y a quelque chose qui jette le désordre dans une excellente ordonnance.<sup>21</sup>

With Kao-tsung's consent the empress thus became the first woman to participate in the *shan* sacrifice, and it is noteworthy that there was no overt protest at the time. In 725 the great savant Chang Yüeh was to cite this sacrilege as the cause of the T'ang overthrow and the success of the Chou usurpation,<sup>22</sup> but at the time of the sacrifice the whole court joined in congratulating the emperor and accepted the lavish rewards he offered.<sup>23</sup>

It is useful to speculate here upon the motives of the empress in requesting to participate. There is no direct evidence for the usual assumption that she herself inspired the sacrifice, but once it was decided she undoubtedly desired correctness of form. More than this, however, her request was an assertion of the imperial prerogative to define that correctness, and this was probably a more important motive than, for example, any concern she may have had to advance the position of women. More specifically, and within the context of Confucian ideology, she sought the best of both worlds, preserving the broad basis of the ancient rite while making real change in the name of the spirit of the regulations. "Why," she asked her husband, "should you conform to outmoded rules and not institute a perfect regulation?",<sup>24</sup> and with this the emperor transcended precedent and became the interpreter of a tradition which had so often tied the hands of former rulers. Chang Yüeh's later protest was essentially an attempt to repudiate this view.

Lest this interpretation seem too political, I adduce a few further examples to show the consistency with which the "Two Sages" performed resolutely Confucian actions with a subtle originality which kept them ever from becoming imprisoned by form. Confucius, for instance, was awarded the honorific title *t'ai-shih* in 666,<sup>25</sup> a term once used for the most honored of the Three Dukes (*san-kung*) of antiquity and a title held by the Duke of Chou, but one which had never before been awarded to Confucius. Similarly, the title "Celestial" which the monarchs appropriated for themselves in 674,<sup>26</sup> had classical connotations of high antiquity but had never been used for living rulers. On two occasions, in 662 and in 684, new names were created for the posts and titles at every level of the bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup> Other rulers like Wang Mang, concerned ostensibly with the very Confucian principle of the "rectification of names" (*cheng-ming*), had also made similar extensive revisions,<sup>28</sup> but there was no parallel for such thorough reform in mid-dynasty. Perhaps of greater interest is the fact that most of the names chosen in 662, such as those for the Three Departments and Six Boards, were wholly new while those of 684, for reasons I shall discuss later, were largely an echo of the *Rites of Chou* (*Chou-li*).

From the above summary we may conclude that in Kao-tsung's lifetime two aspects



of the Confucian tradition, its social-ethical and its ritual-symbolic values, were espoused to bolster the state. In both areas there were well-worn examples to follow and even where ritual innovations were made, protest was absent, a phenomenon to be contrasted with the response to similar measures undertaken by the empress after her husband's death. The lack of protest may be attributed perhaps to the skillful form into which the innovations were cast, to the simultaneous and welcome grant of patronage to schools and the examination system, and the resulting social progress made by the lesser aristocracy, and finally to the intimidation of the upper levels of the bureaucracy and the great clans. Another factor, and one to which we shall now turn, was the fact that the developing state ideology was coming in the same period to embrace Taoism and Buddhism, philosophies which had their supporters among the ruling group, but which were far more important among the lower orders and so could be crucial components in the maintenance of social order.

Taoism had occupied a special position in the T'ang since T'ai-tsung's declaration in 637 that Lao Tzu was the direct ancestor of the imperial family.<sup>29</sup> Such a claim was not unusual in the aristocratic climate of the times and was made chiefly for the purposes of dynastic consolidation--to dissociate the T'ang from the Sui with its highly Buddhistic ideology and to strengthen the royal lineage against the pretensions of the great northeastern clans. The success of Kao-tsu's rebellion against the Sui had been attributable in part to the potency of the "Saviour Li" myth of Taoist messianism,<sup>30</sup> and T'ai-tsung thus hoped to use the awe of inherited charisma to further his centralizing aims. In the same edict in which he declared his descent, he also decreed the precedence of Taoist over Buddhist representatives in all court ceremonies, and though the Empress Wu was to reverse the order in 691,<sup>31</sup> she saw the value of the myth and while Kao-tsung lived she encouraged and supported him in his patronage of Taoism. A good example of this occurred immediately after the *feng-shan* sacrifices when one Taoist and one Buddhist temple were founded in every prefecture of the empire and twenty-seven monks ordained and attached to each site, all expenses being borne by the state.<sup>32</sup> Returning from Mount T'ai, the imperial party also visited the reputed birthplace of Lao Tzu in Hao-chou and there conferred upon the sage the honorific *t'ai-shang hsüan-yüan huang-ti*, a mark of great respect.<sup>33</sup> Four years later the empress took the initiative by ordaining her only daughter, the Princess T'ai-p'ing, as a Taoist nun (*nü-kuan*), and though her motive was probably the circumvention of Tibetan requests for a marriage alliance,<sup>34</sup> the act retained symbolic value and must have pleased the Taoists.

These measures were calculated to win the support of religious Taoists whose communities had grown increasingly numerous since the fall of the Han and who, largely through a virtual monopoly of calendar-making functions at court during the period of division, had come to wield a good deal of political influence.<sup>35</sup> There existed also, however, a large number of educated men who might be termed philosophical Taoists, men interested in the wisdom or scientific writing of that tradition. In 675 the empress appealed directly to them when she formally memorialized in praise of the sagacity and relevance of Lao Tzu and requested that "all those below the rank of prince or duke, officials both inside and outside [the capital], and all the people study the *Tao-te ching*."<sup>36</sup> As a result, the Taoist classic became part of the examination curriculum and shortly thereafter was declared the equal of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Hsiao-ching*) as the most important object of study for all scholars.<sup>37</sup> Taoist philosophy received,



therefore, significant patronage.

It is difficult to know whether or not the empress had any sincere attachment to Taoism. As a philosophy of rule it was unlikely to hold much attraction for her but, on the other hand, she must have been aware of the deleterious effects on the Northern Chou of its proscription of Taoism and Buddhism between 574 and 578.<sup>38</sup> On quite another level, I have noted earlier that the empress was much attracted to the supernatural, and after the Han Lao Tzu had not only been adopted and deified by religious Taoism, but had become associated in the popular mind with numerous culture heroes, folk deities and, indeed, the cult of immortality (*shen-hsien*).<sup>39</sup> Taoist adepts were the most active practitioners of the occult--exorcism (*chang-chiao*), amulets (*fu-lu*) and conjurations (*chang-fu*)--and had moreover produced or interpreted prognostications used both by the Sui and the T'ang in taking power.<sup>40</sup> Finally, Taoism, with its rich and exotic pantheon, had created a realm of opulent imagination which might be expected to appeal to a romantic mind like that of the empress. In any case and whatever its attractions, Taoism appears in the traditional sources as a prominent feature of court life of the Chou dynasty, even though imperial patronage toward the organized religion was largely withdrawn. Traditional historiography, as we shall see, remarks that the empress was "fond of auspicious omens"<sup>41</sup> and portrays her dynasty as a time when charlatans abounded. It points, for example, to her support of a notorious brothel in the belief that it was a convent whose abbess survived on a single grain of rice per day, and to the Taoist priest associated with the abbess who became a *tsai-hsiang* because of his supposed magical powers.<sup>42</sup> Above all, it documents her relations with the Chang brothers, one of whom she believed to be the reincarnation of a Taoist divinity and for whom she created a fairyland-like setting where frequent and unseemly celebrations became something of a scandal in her last years.<sup>43</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude on the basis of evidence like this that the empress had a personal interest in Taoism which was divorced from state purposes.

The same is true, though to an infinitely greater degree, with Buddhism. It is perhaps here that we encounter the core of the empress' spiritual life, and her short dynasty was to be, in the words of a modern Buddhist historian, "a turning point, a time of rapid advance"<sup>44</sup> in the fortunes of the church. Interestingly, the empire saw little evidence of her preference before Kao-tsung's death, though this is not surprising in view of the T'ang commitment to the rival Taoist ideology. There exist several references to her private devotion in this period--the support of votive sculpture at Lung-men and the reception of a series of eminent monks<sup>45</sup>--but she eschewed the adoption of any public policy on church-state relations. Dynastic consolidation and embellishment of the imperial lineage called for the subordination of religious to state interests, and the clearest indication of her willingness to do this is found in the great obeisance (*pai*) controversy of 662.

The issue, whether or not monks and nuns of the Taoist and Buddhist churches should do obeisance to ruler and parents, was not a new one. From the Eastern Chou onward, it had arisen in almost every dynasty and while the practice had varied from one to the other, clerics in the South had been consistently free of the obligation until Sui Yang-ti's edict of 607.<sup>46</sup> It represented the most basic of clashes: the other-worldly nature of clerical vocation against the Chinese way of *li* and *i*. Moreover, should clerics be freed of the obligation to bow to the ruler, they would in effect enjoy "extraterritorial" rights, and for anyone



to refuse obeisance to parents was clearly subversive to filial piety. The T'ang, as a dynasty of doubtful pedigree, had increasingly emphasized the hierarchical relationships of Confucianism and its ethic of authority and obedience as the center of the Chinese Way.<sup>47</sup>

T'ai-tsung had opened the debate during T'ang by complaining that clerics "falsely respect themselves. Seated, they accept homage from father and mother, damaging [our] customs, perverting the Ritual (*li-ching*)."<sup>48</sup> If this is an accurate depiction of the situation, it seems that Yang-ti's edict had had no lasting effect, and as far as we can determine, T'ai-tsung had no better luck.<sup>49</sup> In 657 Kao-tsung was forced to decree that the clergy receive no homage from parents and seniors,<sup>50</sup> and either because this was ignored or because he wished to reverse the situation, he called for a full discussion of the matter in 662. In the edict, his own position was clear:

We wish now to order Taoist and Buddhist monks and nuns to do obeisance before emperor, empress and crown prince, as well as their [own] parents. [Since] sometimes we fear the loss of deeply-rooted feelings, it is proper to have the officials concerned discuss the matter critically and memorialize.<sup>51</sup>

The effect of this decree on the Buddhist community in the capital seems to have been electrifying. Within the week, over two hundred monks appeared at the gates of the P'eng-lai Palace bearing a brief of opposition prepared by the eminent cleric Wei-hsiu of the Ta-chuang-yen Temple.<sup>52</sup> In rapid succession similar petitions were carried to influential patrons: to Li Hsien, second son of the empress and still a boy, to her mother, Madame Yang, and to the several *tsai-hsiang*.<sup>53</sup> When the debate began two weeks later, more than a thousand officials were in attendance, including many from the provinces, as were more than 300 monks led by the famous Tao-hsüan who had prepared earlier briefs. Perhaps in fear of undue pressure, the chairman ruled that of the clerics, only those with civil rank (*su-kuan*) should be allowed to remain.<sup>54</sup>

The meeting rapidly polarized into two groups, and several sources preserve the positions of each, though not in a very comprehensive or systematic fashion.<sup>55</sup> The range of debate was wide and since as a whole it constitutes a summary of earlier debates on the subject, we might do well to look briefly at the opposing positions.

Those who advocated the duty of obeisance maintained that because of the relationship established between Heaven, Earth and Man (*san-i*), homage to ruler and parent was essential, a gauge of civilization among all peoples, and clerical exemption thus undermined the entire Way. The power (*te*) of the Son of Heaven was, moreover, absolute and unique, spanning present and future worlds, and both the unity of the empire and the order of the universe depended on it. Even if clerics were removed by ordination from the secular world, they still lived in the empire and owed to the ruler a debt of gratitude for his protection and transmission of the religion. In a slightly different vein, proponents of the obligation argued that Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism were at the most basic level the same. It was wrong, therefore, for the two churches to withhold the sign of their respect from the Confucian relationships. They pointed out that the *Tao-te ching*, for example, numbered the ruler among the Four Greats (*ssu-ta*), and that no less than four Buddhist sutras also supported the obligation.<sup>56</sup> Other tenets of Buddhism--humility, respect and discipline--



were cited as reasons for the *pai*, and several of the briefs which pursued this line of argument contained veiled threats by referring to the arrogance of the clergy and to the "excessive" numbers of monks and nuns.

A total of twenty-nine briefs putting this side of the case are found in the *Ch'üan T'ang-wen*, and it is interesting to note that in them the question of obeisance to parents receives a good deal less attention. Here the argument can be distilled to the simple proposition that human life is a gift of one's parents. Is it not both natural and seemly that all men should wish tangibly to show their gratitude? Because this was the first ethical objection faced by Buddhist proselytism in China, answers to it had been developed centuries before,<sup>57</sup> and there may have been a feeling that since new arguments were unlikely to be adduced, this aspect of the question need not be emphasized.

The fundamental position of the clerical party was that ordination constituted an effective withdrawal from the world and was a casting aside of state, society and family to enter a transcendental sphere of existence where Confucian *li* had no place. As Tao-hsüan put it,

In his manner of living, the monk has no regard for wealth and sensuous beauty. . . . Therefore, he is proclaimed as one who has left the household life. One who has done so no longer embraces the rites of one who remains in the family, one who has forsaken the world is no longer immersed in the practices of the world.<sup>58</sup>

Though this premise was constantly repeated in the debate, the clerical party had several other propositions to advance. They contended that the sangha (congregation of monks and nuns) was subject to its own discipline, the *Vināya*, and thus had no need to acknowledge secular authority. Several sutras specifically forbade the practice of *pai* and one warned that he who accepts homage from a monk does himself harm.<sup>59</sup> They argued further that historical tradition freed clerics from the obligation and, cleverly turning back upon their opponents their own arguments, pointed out that a ruler who reinstated the practice would be betraying his own ancestors and committing a breach of filial piety! Still on the attack, they reminded the emperor of his duty to respect the spirits and, since the Buddha was a spirit, the emperor should perhaps pay homage to his representatives rather than vice versa. Moreover, they said, it is the emperor who permits a monk to leave the secular world by ordination. Was it not a denial of his own imperial action to subject a monk once more to worldly obligations? As effective as this point may have been in the debate, it was also a bald admission that the ruler had the right to control ordination and, as such, was ultimately destructive to the independence of the church.

In a more conciliatory view, several members of the clerical group suggested that obeisance was simply an external sign, and that the clerical vocation was by nature filial and respectful. They explained the merits of a monk's ordination and prayerful life extended to three generations of his family, and they further emphasized the filial piety of the funeral rites and memorial services held after a relative's death. Finally, they objected to the manner in which their opponents had interpreted the sutras and offered counterarguments.

On neither side was there much novelty in the arguments and it is unlikely that many minds were changed. The final vote, however, must have been unexpected in view of Kao-tsung's instructions. The clerical party under Ling-hu Tefen<sup>60</sup> mustered 539 votes against the *pai* obligation while their opponents under



Yen Li-pen<sup>61</sup> could gather only 354. The emperor compromised the next month with a decree that homage to the ruler was unnecessary but that parents were entitled to receive it.<sup>62</sup> This solution seems to have been unsatisfactory to the saṅgha who continued to petition their patrons, including Madame Yang, and possibly with success. The Confucian sources are silent on the matter, but the *Sung kao-seng chuan* relates that even the *pai* to parents was ended.<sup>63</sup> When the issue next arose in 714, Hsüan-tsung is found to be ordering obeisance both to ruler and parents.<sup>64</sup>

There are numerous facets of the incident which might profitably be explored, but what concerns us here is the position of the Empress Wu. She seems to have made no public expression of her view, and the clerical party, perhaps in deference to Kao-tsung, made no direct representation to her. There is evidence, however, that she was active behind the scenes, for of the extant briefs which advocate the *pai* obligation, almost one-third were produced by her blood-relatives or by men closely tied to her in other ways.<sup>65</sup> Among them was Ho-lan Min-chih, her nephew and the future heir to her father.<sup>66</sup> The outcome was, therefore, unsatisfactory to her and it was not characteristic that she bow to defeat. Why did she do so?

The answer lies perhaps in her adaptability and far-sightedness. It is significant, first of all, that she and her husband sought to settle the question by consensus rather than by fiat, and when the outcome revealed the strength of the church in the highest circles of government, it was clear that Buddhism must play an important role in the ideology of the state. To antagonize its supporters could prejudice both present and future freedom of action. Beyond this, we might recall that the inclinations of the empress were Buddhistic and she saw little threat, political or economic, from a church recently weakened by the relatively unfavorable attitude of T'ai-tsung.<sup>67</sup> In the debate a blow had been struck at imperial prerogative, but at the same time the Buddhists had acknowledged the right of the throne to control ordination and, what is more, Taoism with its T'ang associations had a share in the victory. The fact that South China, the winning of the loyalty of which was a priority of centralization policy, had traditionally rejected the *pai* obligation may have played a part in the decision, as indeed may have been the perception that if Confucian piety were weakened, so too would be its constricted view of women. In short, the empress seems to have reflected, then changed her position to one which was probably more congenial to her, and certainly offered greater long-term advantages. Kao-tsung, who was much more friendly to Buddhism than is generally recognized,<sup>68</sup> was perhaps persuaded to let the matter rest.

State patronage of religion during the next two decades was, as suggested earlier, both balanced and generous. This is best illustrated by the foundation of the Kuo-fen temples in 666, valuable to both churches in a symbolic as well as an economic sense.<sup>69</sup> Buddhist sources offer other examples. Throughout these years the Buddhists in particular made great strides in theology, conversion and translation so that they were well prepared for the new role to be thrust upon them by the regime of the Empress Wu. Though in retrospect we must acknowledge that the church was driven to unprecedented depths of sycophancy during Chou, we must also admit that it reached heights of prosperity unseen since Liang Wu-ti or Empress Dowager Ling of the Wei, and we must turn our attention now to the reasons for this development.



In the latter part of the fourth century and largely through the work of the eminent monk Tao-an, there had developed in China a special devotion to the future Buddha, Maitreya.<sup>70</sup> From a private, clerical spiritual exercise, it had developed into a cult of statewide proportions whose most prominent feature was the belief that in the last period of the Law (dharma), Maitreya would return as a universal monarch to cleanse a corrupt and confused world and to inaugurate a new golden age. This belief was not the exclusive property of any single sect and there was much variation among them in dating the apocalypse,<sup>71</sup> but judging from such evidence as the votive sculpture at Lungmen, Maitreya was the most popular object of devotion by the early sixth century.<sup>72</sup> Although the cult was potentially subversive and by the T'ang had a history of involvement with popular uprisings and consequent proscription,<sup>73</sup> it was not easy to suppress, and as late as 664 we find Hsüan-tsang, the famed pilgrim and an imperial favorite, exhorting the multitudes to pray to Maitreya in his last sermon.<sup>74</sup>

There is little evidence in subsequent years of any growth in devotion to Maitreya, and indeed there seems to have been a decline among the societal elite, but several events are recorded which kept alive the belief that the last stage of the Law was at hand and the coming of the future Buddha imminent. Among these two were of sufficient importance to find a place in official historiography. The first was a mysterious aura which appeared over a site in the capital in 677, and when a great cache of Buddhist relics was found buried beneath this site, the Kuang-chai Temple was founded on the spot.<sup>75</sup> Knowledge of the event was disseminated through the empire in 684 when the reign title was changed to *kuang-chai*. At about the same time as these relics were being discovered, Sui-chou in Shensi was becoming a popular and lucrative center of pilgrimage because of the excavation there of a buried image whose whereabouts had been revealed by a Buddha light above it. In 683 the perpetrator of what the court then regarded as a hoax declared himself the Kuang-ming sheng Emperor and rose in rebellion, seizing two *hsien* before he was suppressed.<sup>76</sup> Though his title was more closely connected with Amitābha or Candraprabha than with Maitreya,<sup>77</sup> his rebellion demonstrated the force of Buddhist legitimation and must have reinforced among the people the belief that the last period of the Law was at hand.

Only a few months after the rebellion Kao-tsung died and, as will be suggested in the next chapter, the Empress Wu became almost immediately the de facto ruler of the state. The precise timing of her decision to usurp power must remain surmise but between 684 and 690 she turned first to the Confucian supports for legitimation. Prominent among the symbolic measures of the period was the renaming of all posts and offices in 684 using the *Rites of Chou* as the major inspiration,<sup>78</sup> the choice of *ch'ui-kung*, a phrase from the *Book of History*, which was of course one of the Confucian classics,<sup>79</sup> and the erection in 688 of a *ming-t'ang* (cosmic hall), a typical Han institution but one based on the *Book of Rites* (*Li-chi*) and one which former Sui and T'ang rulers had feared to emulate.<sup>80</sup> There are several other examples, such as the creation of new forms for several Chinese characters,<sup>81</sup> but in the face of growing opposition which was kept in check largely by a system of terrorism, it must have been apparent to the empress that Confucian strictures against a woman ruler retained their force. She was forced, therefore, to seek a new ideology, and to legitimize her power found in Buddhism a source of support which would make her the sole female emperor in Chinese history.

The man chiefly responsible for this development is known to history as Hsüeh



Huai-i, a virile, unlettered seller of sedge and other herbs who appeared at Loyang in the mid-680s and there formed a liaison with a maid servant of the Princess Ch'ien-chin.<sup>82</sup> When the princess reported to the empress that he was a man of "unusual ability" (*fei-ch'ang ts'ai-yung*), he was summoned to an imperial audience and before long given unrestricted entry to the palace. His official biography scrupulously avoids the suggestion that he became the empress' lover, and though this is broadly hinted in later Chinese sources and generally accepted by modern historians, the evidence which exists is wholly deductive. Perhaps one source of the belief is her refusal to have him castrated, and to avoid the scandal this entailed, her choice of the alternative of Buddhist ordination. While serving with certain *bhadanta* like Fa-ming in the palace chapel (*nei-tao-ch'ang*),<sup>83</sup> Huai-i became a familiar figure in the capital--an arrogant, eccentric man and a chauvinistic Buddhist referred to by the people as "Master Hsüeh." By late 685 he had been installed as abbot of the reconstructed White Horse Monastery west of the capital, a site traditionally regarded as the most ancient repository of the Law in China. Though the official sources are reluctant to accord him either piety or learning, he may have acquired at least the latter in subsequent years, for when omens of dynastic change began to appear in 688-89, he was quick to offer his services. With Fa-ming and seven other monks, he seized upon the *Mahāmegha* or *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Ta-yün ching*), and seeking justification for female rule outside the Confucian tradition, provided a commentary to demonstrate that when Maitreya was reborn as a woman, the long-awaited reincarnation would be the Empress Wu.<sup>84</sup>

There is a good deal of contradiction among primary sources about the nature of the sutra, and the most persistent belief is that it was quite simply a forgery.<sup>85</sup> Japanese scholarship, however, has demonstrated the authenticity of the work and shown that it was translated five times prior to the T'ang, and from Tunhuang findings we know that it was the Northern Liang version of Dharmarakṣa that was most commonly used in the seventh century.<sup>86</sup> Ironically in view of the use to which it was put, the sutra had been a favorite of T'ai-tsung.<sup>87</sup> The *New T'ang History* is alone among the standard sources in suggesting that the Empress Wu commissioned the commentary,<sup>88</sup> and given her demonstrated piety, the assumption seems a dubious one. She was, in any case, gratified when the work was presented and lost no time in promulgating the sutra and its commentary throughout the land. In 690, immediately after the dynastic change, Great Cloud temples were founded as repositories in every prefecture, and over a thousand monks were specially ordained to go forth and chant the sutra, explaining to the faithful its real meaning.<sup>89</sup>

The effect of these two measures was incalculable. Not only did they constitute an act of patronage to Buddhism staggering in scope but, as symbols of the end of equal support for Taoism, served notice that the new regime would base itself upon a different ideology.<sup>90</sup> More importantly, they were part of one of the most ambitious attempts in medieval China to mold men's minds, to use religious feeling to justify the very existence of a regime and even to rationalize its most unpopular acts.

Until the discovery of the Tunhuang manuscripts, a statement such as the preceding would have been difficult to justify. Fortunately, however, some of these valuable fragments are connected with the *Great Cloud Sutra*, and two of them--Stein 2658 and 6502--can almost certainly be identified as the commentary presented to the throne in mid-August 690. A fair reconstruction can be made on



the basis of these documents,<sup>91</sup> and although the document is worthy of full-length study,<sup>92</sup> I have chosen to translate below only the shorter of the two manuscripts, Stein 2658, in the hope that it will be sufficient to illustrate my view.

As noted above, the *Sutra* and its commentary have been surrounded by confusion for many centuries and it is not my intention to comment here on the debate. I shall, however, make the following observations which emerge from the document itself and which are relevant to the historical circumstances of the *Sutra's* presentation.

First, the commentary offers sufficient quotation from the extant version of the *Great Cloud Sutra* to make clear that we are not dealing with a forgery of the sutra or even with a version filled with interpolation. Second, the work must have been carried out by sophisticated exegetes, monks who were perhaps unscrupulous in their ambitions for the church but certainly more knowledgeable than Hsüeh Huai-i. The latter probably did no more than serve as a stimulus. Third, and contrary to most scholarly opinion, the identification of Wu Tse-t'ien with Maitreya constitutes only a minor part of the commentary and its authors seem far more interested in depicting the empress as a *śākravartīn* and as a Bodhisattva-savior. Moreover, the document makes abundantly clear that as a legitimizing tradition, Buddhism was still immature. Indigenous prognostic texts and omenology drawn from Confucianism and Taoism play a role as great as or greater than the prophecies of the *Sutra* and although synthesis of tradition is a constant goal of the authors, the result often seems contrived and artificial. In spite of this, only the most foolhardy of historians would deny that the device was an amazingly effective piece of propaganda.

Stein 6502, the longer of the commentary fragments, begins with about thirty lines describing the nature of the *Sutra* and the meaning of its title, and then reproduces the prophecy about a female ruler who would govern a quarter of the realm of a *śākravartīn* and, while eliminating heterodoxy, would bring about utopia.<sup>93</sup> At this point the two versions converge.

*Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*<sup>94</sup>

The Buddha then praised the goodness of [the queen] Ching-kuang who had been ashamed, and went on to manifest the prophecy of the devi (*t'ien-nü*). [He said that] she should rule over the land in the body of a woman. This woman is she who is called *Sheng-mu shen-huang* [Empress Wu]. How do we prove it? We prove it by the omen of the *Cheng-ming ching*<sup>95</sup> which says: "The Venerable One has said to Maitreya that when the Bhagavat is reborn he shall eliminate all evil. If there are arrogant and recalcitrant men, I will send the young devi with rods of gold to punish them . . . East of the river one meets the Luminous Head (*ming-chu*) and the King of the Brilliant Law (*ming-fa-wang*). . . . The Venerable One wanted Maitreya to build for him a City of Transformation (*hua-ch'eng*) with a pillar of white silver above and an inscription for the myriad generations below. The devi will don heavenly robes, hang golden bells on the pillar, and summon [Buddha's] disciples to enter all at once the City."

Thus we say that Maitreya corresponds to the empress. She must be the one and the meaning agrees.<sup>96</sup>

[Examining the text above, we find that] the elimination of evil and the



dispatch of the devi to punish the recalcitrant clearly means the destruction of violent men and the purging of the world. [The reference to the] Luminous Head and the King of the Brilliant Law east of the river is from the *Book of Changes (I-ching)* where it says, "The emperor comes from Chen. Chen is in the East."<sup>97</sup> This is clear [for] the empress comes from Chen and rules the empire. She also lives in the Sanctified Capital [Loyang] which is "east of the river." The City of Transformation is the *ming-t'ang*<sup>98</sup> and the silver pillar is its central column. The inscription for the myriad generations is the *Kuang-wu ming*.<sup>99</sup> [The phrase about] the devi donning heavenly robes is a clear reference to the dragon robes (*kun-lung*) worn by the empress [at the great ceremonial of January 689]. The golden bells hung on the pillar refer to the sage teaching of the four seasons at the *ming-t'ang*. The summoning of the disciples is the myriad states, like rivers returning to the sea, [to make submission] at the *ming-t'ang*.

[The same text] also says:

"The Luminous King and the Sage Lord will both be in the City of Transformation and on top of the tower will beat the golden drum to proclaim to all disciples [this message?]. It will immediately reach to all those who believe this law [even if they are] ten thousand miles away, [but] for those unconnected with this Law, they will hear nothing even if they are in the adjoining room."

[In this passage] the golden drum is the great ceremonial (*ta-i*) of the *ming-t'ang*, and the "ten-thousand-mile hearing" means that those who are far away and seek transformation and offer loyalty will see the *ming-t'ang* and hear the great ceremonial. The "deafness of the adjoining room" means that if among those of the myriad regions whom the empress rears as a mother rears her children, there are some who cause disorder, they will surely be destroyed, and the cunning and vicious will ruin themselves. The *Ho-t'u* says: "All those who are evil become good [for] if they rebel they destroy themselves."<sup>100</sup>

Because the *ming-t'ang* was raised and sacrifice was to be offered to the Three Sages,<sup>101</sup> [the empress] summoned provincial and frontier officials<sup>102</sup> as well as the [imperial] relatives to gather at the Sanctified Capital for the grand ceremony. Then all the members of the Hui clan<sup>103</sup> rebelled and reaped defeat and destruction. Those who survived were pardoned and exiled to distant areas where they did not hear the grand ceremony. This is proof for [the statement about] the deafness of the adjoining room.

[The same text] also says: "I shall send the Rakṣāsavira King,<sup>104</sup> and on his head shall be the K'un-lun Mountains, and from the earth shall come streams and springs." This refers to the [new] Hsin-feng Ch'ing Mountain from which issues the Sacred Pool.<sup>105</sup>

It also says, "To the east will be the Po-shan Palace." This is the Flying Cloud Chamber of the great White Horse Monastery.<sup>106</sup> "To the west will be the P'an-lung Court." This means the *ming-t'ang*.<sup>107</sup> "Spiritual pearls and shining moonbeams will be above the side of the city." This means that above the *ming-t'ang*, sun, moon and stars show in the *chen* [early morning] configuration.<sup>108</sup> Because of these meanings the reference is to the Empress Wu.

The [Great Cloud] Sutra says: "[She] will obtain one quarter of the realm of the cakravartīn."<sup>109</sup> Now the empress has united the empire [i.e., China] and



rules south to Jambudvīpa. This is really one-quarter of the domain of the cakravartin.

The *Sutra* [also] says: "The people will flourish, secure from desolation, illness, worry, fear and disaster. All that is auspicious will be achieved at a stroke. All the lands of Jambudvīpa will come under her sway and there will be no opposition in far-off places."<sup>110</sup> This shows that right now the great ministers and the people are wholly loyal. They will have many sons and grandsons; the years will be without scarcity and all will be happy without sickness or other misfortunes. All these happy things happen at once. And because of the great wisdom, prestige and virtuous transformation [of the empress] which extends everywhere, the "four foreign people" will all come to submit. If their allegiance is wholehearted and eternal, all will receive these same blessings. If they waver and rebel, even if they escape punishment from our state, Great Heaven (*shang-t'ien*) will chastise them and they will destroy themselves. Thus the *I-t'ung-shih chi* says: "Wherever in the world there is sedition, it will come to naught."<sup>111</sup> This proves it.

The *Sutra* [also] says: "[She] will obtain the great [sovereignty?] and be self-existent" (*te-ta tzu-tsai*).<sup>112</sup> [This means] the empress has brought all states to submission and her power is without equal.

According to the *Kuang-wu ming*: "It is an inferior man (*hsiao-jen*) who will discover this inscription" and this refers to the [unknown?] man who found it. [But she who] reads this inscription will be the Sage Ruler." This refers to the empress who has read it with her own eyes.

The [*Kuang-wu*] *ming* says: "[She who is] unlike the leopard or the wolf is called Wu, and as king is in Loyang." This corresponds to the kingship of the empress in the Sanctified Capital. [In the phrase] "the great king, three [plus?] two [years?], then the inscription will appear," the word "great" means her sage virtue spreads far and encompasses all things. From the *wen-ming* era [i.e. 684] five years in all have passed since [we who] wanted to see but did not see [were rewarded] in the *wu-tzu* year [i.e. 688]. [The reason the *ming* says] "the superior man (*chün-tzu*) in yellow robes is called 'long life'" is that when augural gifts are given, "long life" is always written. "One with the virtue of earth (*t'u-te*)"<sup>113</sup> will rule with the greatest prosperity," means the empress. "None of the common folk will go mad," means that the people of the empire will serve the state wholeheartedly and not lose their senses and rebel. [The phrase] "a bright cat far away shall be your guard in the four directions" refers to the *Book of Changes*<sup>114</sup> which says that "far away" (離位 *li*) means "bright" (日 *ming*) and the position is in the South. Moreover, it says "middle daughter." This refers to the empress who faces south and rules the empire.<sup>115</sup> And again we have a reference to the *wen-ming* period. The cat is the representation (*hsiang*) of the Wu [surname] and Wu belongs to the [category of?] sage clans (*sheng-shih*).

[In the *ming*, the phrase occurs] "three times six youths will sing [a ballad called] T'ang-t'ang." Three times six is eighteen and the eighteen sons are the Li [clan]<sup>116</sup> of the T'ang dynasty. "Later they changed the ballad to that of Wu Mei-niang."<sup>117</sup> This clearly means that the empress will rule the empire after the Three Sages [of the T'ang]. [In the phrase] "not to travel too far nor fly too high, remaining motionless in the center," the word "center" means that the Sanctified Capital is at the center of the Earth (*t'u-chung*)<sup>118</sup> and shows that the empress rules majestically in Loyang. "The Sage Way extends far



to those who accept the light in all directions," means that the sage transformation of the empress reaches everywhere, to all and without limit.

"A Buddha transformed, come down from on high, will stroke her head [as when preaching] and prophesy [to her]." This corresponds to the *Great Cloud Sutra*. "She will enlighten and reside (*kuang-chai*) in the four continents and [her power] will reach the eight extremities all at once." [In this phrase], "enlighten and reside" means the empress rules and enlightens the world and favors wholly the myriad states. "Four continents" means all within the four seas and "eight extremities all at once" means the states of the eight farthest corners will receive together the sage transformation and will come [to court] to submit. "The people are all peaceful and happy; civil and military officers will develop," means that civil and military officials will grow [in number?].<sup>119</sup> "For a thousand years the ancestral temple remains unmoved," means that the time of the sage will last forever.<sup>120</sup> [The phrase] "eighteen forms the emperor" means the reigning emperor [Jui-tsung].

A ballad says: "not old, not new." This means that the empress is not [too] old to rule<sup>121</sup> and that she had already nourished [people] as a mother. Thus she is not new [i.e., inexperienced in rule], and these words are used. "Crossed sevens become a body" means the word for "woman" (*nü*),<sup>122</sup> and [the phrase] "along the base of a mountain, invert the exit, appears a Sage" means that the characters for "mountain," "exit" and "sage" make up that of "woman" (*fu*). Twice, therefore, is the sage virtue of the empress in evidence.

The *Sutra* says: "Relics [sariras] cannot be obtained. If the leg of a mosquito could be used to make a bridge [strong enough for] all beings to cross at once, relics could be obtained. If leeches in the water could grow white teeth the size of an elephant's tusk, relics could be obtained. If rabbits could grow horns which could be used as ladders to the sky, relics could be obtained. If a small boat could carry the Hsü-mi Mountain across the great sea, relics could be obtained."<sup>123</sup>

These metaphors are very numerous and show that the relics of the tathāgata (*ju-lai*) cannot be obtained. In the *Sutra*, however, we are told that the ruler of Jambudvīpa would become the Guardian of the True Law and would obtain many relics, [and also that she] would desire to venerate them and [so would] build stupas of the Seven Treasures everywhere.<sup>124</sup> [It also says that she] will venerate and respect [the Law] and when she sees those who keep to the Law and observe their pure rules, she will venerate and respect them. When she sees those who break the Law and disregard their rule, she will rebuke and destroy them.<sup>125</sup> Now the empress rules the empire and has obtained more and more relics. First of all, omens began to appear in the *kuang-chai* era [684]<sup>126</sup> and now appear [again] in the *tsai-ch'u* era [689]. Thus [the passage in] the *Kuang-wu ming*, "*kuang-chai . . . i-shih chih*," makes clear that the empress has vowed to build 840,000 stupas for the relics<sup>127</sup> and to distribute them throughout the world. They are distributed not by the power of mere men but by the spiritual achievements of all the eight cords (*pa-piao*) [which bring order to the eight extremities]. This is proof that [the empress] protects the True Law and has obtained many relics.

The *Sutra* says: "[She] will teach and convert all the places she rules, and men and women, young and old will observe the Pañcaveramāni."<sup>128</sup> We believe that because the empress embraces the precepts of the bodhisattva (*p'u-sa*),



transforms the people and keeps them from crime, good spirits protect their persons.<sup>129</sup> This proves that she teaches and converts mankind and has accepted and embraced the Pañcaveramāni.

The *Sutra* says: "[She] will destroy the heterodox and the various perverse doctrines." The Holy Mother Empress teaches and transforms all beings. Thus she makes Deva Māra<sup>130</sup> sigh and look up in respect and makes heretics return to the truth. This is the conversion of the yellow-capped [Taoists] by the White Horse [of Buddhism].

The *Sutra* says: "In another kalpa she will truly be a bodhisattva and will receive a female body to transform all beings."<sup>131</sup> According to the *K'ung-tzu ch'an*:<sup>132</sup> "[When] Heaven gives birth to a Sage, [the Sage] emerges from the grass." It does not refer to a male and in this cryptic saying is a prophecy that the empress will rule the empire. Also, as the *Yüan-sung ch'an*<sup>133</sup> says:

"A unicorn is born with two horns and for generations the people (*shih-min*)<sup>134</sup> do not know it. When it is grown, full in majesty, its sponsors receive offices and posts. Virtuous and loyal ministers are found at court and the unworthy expelled from the ruler's sight. [This ruler] is capable and able to discriminate, bringing everlasting prosperity (*yung-lung*)<sup>135</sup> and security to the state."

Now the family of the empress' mother is called Yang 楊 and the sheep (*yang* 羊) has two horns. "Shih-min" is the given name of T'ai-tsung. [the passage about] the reception of posts when the unicorn is grown in majesty means that during the years of the empress great majesty is achieved and that those of wholehearted loyalty have received offices and enjoy honor and emoluments. This corresponds. [The phrase] "virtuous and loyal ministers are found at court" means that right now all at court are wise and good. "The unworthy are expelled" means that the empress in her sagehood examines good and bad, sends away the evil [persons] and purifies the conduct of the court. Thus it is said, "the unworthy are expelled." [The phrase beginning] "is capable and well able to discriminate" [refers to] the rebellion of the commoner [and former Crown Prince] Hsien at the beginning of the *yung-lung* era [680]. The empress in governing for the greatest public good did not show partiality [even] to her own son. Able to discriminate, she exiled him to Pa-chou. Thus we say that she brought everlasting prosperity and security to the land.

The *parahita* of the bodhisattva is without set form and varies [to aid human beings] according to circumstances. This is why the present form is female.

[There may be] a question: "The prophecy of the Buddha<sup>136</sup> is unclear and does not explain [the details of] family and clan. On examination, there are several rulers who were female so how do we know that she who presently rules is the right one?" The answer lies in the fact that in the prophecy, the king of the country is in the fifth place of the six [in the hexagram].<sup>137</sup> From the Han period to that of the Empress [Wu] there have been various female rulers who were served and accepted, but they were called empress dowagers (*t'ai-hou*) and did not conform to the *Sutra*'s prophecy. Our Holy Mother Empress fits the prophecy exactly and this is why the *Sutra* says that the female ruler of Jambudvīpa will erect precious stupas everywhere and will benefit the work of the Buddha.

We also find it said in the *T'ien-shou sheng-t'u*<sup>138</sup> that "a Holy Mother shall rule mankind and her imperium shall bring eternal prosperity." This means that



the empress governs the world and makes prosper forever the foundations laid by the [first] three [T'ang] emperors.<sup>139</sup>

An auspicious stone (*ju-i-shih*) says: "stop, one woman, everywhere, blessings." [In this augury] "stop" means "end war,"<sup>140</sup> and the "one woman" is the empress. It also says, "one person, sage, eighteen thousand," and "woman ruler, thousands and thousands," and "one woman, one person, thousands of years." In these [phrases] Heaven-on-high has given signs that the years of the empress will be long.

The *Diagram of the Dragon's Disclosure* (*Lung-t'u t'u*)<sup>141</sup> says: "In the *wu-tzu* year [688] a mother-sage emperor will lay thousand-year foundations and make bright the T'ang. Uniting the minds of Heaven and Earth, she, the one, will maintain the Li [clan], and will endure long."<sup>142</sup> We believe that the [building of a] ming t'ang has been neglected for a thousand years. The empress began the Yang-kuan (i.e., ming t'ang) in the *ch'ui-kung* era [685-89] and completed it in *wu-tzu*. [Thus] when it says "mother-sage emperor . . .," it means that she knows the True Way in her rule, and this is why it is said that she "will lay thousand-year foundations . . . ." [The phrase], "uniting the minds of Heaven and Earth, she is the one . . ." means that Heaven needs the one to be pure, Earth needs the one for tranquillity, the spirits for holiness, the valleys to be filled, all beings to be born, and the nobility to rectify the empire. This shows clearly that the empress, reaching the highest Tao, transforms men and unites [them with] the minds of Heaven and Earth. [The phrase] "maintain the Li and endure long" means that the Li are the imperial clan and that the empress will restore peace to the land and cause the dynasty to endure long. Thus the manifest and the obscure come together and the omens, ancient and modern, agree. This makes clear that the sage rule of the empress is without limit and her years will long endure.

The *Sutra* says:

"The Bodhisattva Ta-yün-mi-tsang asked the Buddha: 'I simply beg the jathagata to tell mankind about the future [coming] of this devi.' The Buddha replied: 'From the time I have shown the way to instrumental nirvāna, after 700 years there will be a small state in southern India called Without-Thought (*Wu-hsiang*). In this state is the Black River and on its banks is the city called Bountiful Harvest. In the city is a king called Teng-ch'eng and his wife will give birth to a daughter called Seng-ch'ang.'<sup>143</sup>

[There may be] a question [on this passage]: "If we draw our evidence from the *Sutra*, [we do not know whether] this country is the same as ours or not." The answer is that the teachings of the jathāgata are of both clear and obscure [types]. The fourth chapter [of the *Sutra*] is clear, and [this] of the sixth is obscure. If we calculate the time from the Buddha's nirvāna to the present, it is 1,700 years. The fact that the *Sutra* says 700, not mentioning the thousand, is obscure [teaching]. Other sutras and śāstras tell us that after the Buddha's nirvāna the periods of the True Law and the Semblance Law last each a thousand years. In the period of the True Law many men will be pure and faithful and in the Semblance Law, the work of [the evil] Māra will gradually spread and a sage ruler of power and majesty must appear to protect and spread [the Law]. Now the [*Great Cloud*] *Sutra* speaks only of the 700 years of Semblance Law, not of the 1,000 of True Law. It is like the [words of the] *Nirvāna Sutra*:



"Seven hundred years hence will come the time of demons and Māra will destroy and confuse my True Law."<sup>144</sup> We know, in fact, that evil gradually arises in the era of the Semblance Law. [The phrase in the *Sutra*] "southern India" means that since our land [China] lies within Jambudvīpa which is the southern [continent], it is referred to as "southern." Also to explain, [we say that] in the *Mahāvibhāsa-śāstra*, the Four Noble Truths correspond to the four directions.<sup>145</sup> The South is the truth of the Way [to extinction]. The Way is the eightfold path which destroys the eightfold perversities, and it is thus shown that the empress is a ruler of the Way and converts the South. [The passage] only mentions "South" and nothing else. [The word] "India" is Sanskrit and means "moon." When the moon comes out it has two powers—one to cool and one to warm. Since the empress' rule of the empire can show equally these powers, the word "India" is used.

[The *Sutra*] says: "There will be a small country," and earlier, "she shall obtain one-quarter of the domain of the cakravartīn." [Now] the cakravartīn guides and transforms [all] the four worlds and the empire of Great T'ang which rules Jambudvīpa is small in comparison. [The *Sutra*] says, "called Wu-hsiang," and earlier had spoken of the devi Ching-kuang who had practiced the samadhi of Wu-hsiang [i.e., the meditation of no-thought or no-form]. This is why the country is called Wu-hsiang. Now the empress in her activities cultivates no thought that is selfish, thinking [of the welfare?] of all beings and the name of the country is [thus] Wu-hsiang.

The *Sutra* says: "In the state will be a river called the Black River." Generally, we see birth and death as a river and passions and worries as black. Thus the empress is born by metamorphosis of the goodness and mercy of a bodhisattva, and she transforms all life in the great river, banishing passions and cares. Moreover, we know that Wu is one of the Yü surnames found in the North and that the color of the North is black. Yü is also used for water. Thus it says "Black River." And the surname formed from "black water" (*hei-shui*) indicates the black robe (*hei-i*) which corresponds to the black river (*hei-ho*) of the *K'ung-tzu ch'an*. We know that the empress already wore black robes as a child<sup>146</sup> and this is certainly the meaning of the term.

Also, in Ping-chou by the tomb of her ancestor (*t'ai-huang*)<sup>147</sup> there was of old a well called by the people the Well of Wu. At first there was water but afterwards it dried up. From the end of the Sui, water began to reappear, and [the well] filled with the T'ang foundation. Now it overflows, forming a wide stream which flows into the Fen River. Thus in the Sui there was a popular ballad which ran: "The river of 水 大 <sup>148</sup> dries up but the well of Wu fills. From it a Sage must emerge." Thus it means that the flowing water refers to the empress who is not of Kuan[-chung] nor of the Liu surname. Liu Wu-chou heard the popular saying: "If it overflows, the water will flow (*liu*) [and Liu will succeed], but if it fills to the top (*li* 李) [the Li will succeed]." Wu-chou was not perceptive and did not understand the saying. Thinking it meant the Liu surname, he rose in rebellion, was killed and his line destroyed. What a mistake! But how could he know that the Black River meant the Well of Wu?"

[When] the *Sutra* speaks of the City of Bountiful Harvests on the south bank and later says that because of the birth of the king's daughter, there will be limitless joy, it is for this reason that the city is called Bountiful Harvests. The explanation is that our Yellow River corresponds to the Black River and the



city on the south bank is the Sanctified Capital. Here the harvests are bountiful.

According to the *T'ui-pei t'u*,<sup>149</sup> "great accumulation in the eighth month, wisdom and brilliance reach everywhere, stop war, prosperity. Female ruler, stand straight, raise high the T'ang. Evil men, driven from court, a dragon comes as guard, purify [all within] four seas, standardize eight directions." [In this text], "great accumulation in the eighth month" means that in the eighth (*yu*) month, the empress' regency will be completed [and she should be emperor]. Both "spread of wisdom" and "stopping of war" refer to Wu. "Prosperity" is a proof that the throne will flourish. The "female ruler standing straight and raising the T'ang" refers to the name of the state and shows that the empress establishes the straight and revitalizes the task of the imperial clan. "Evil men driven from court and a dragon as guard" shows that the empress expels flatterers and K'uei and Lung [the legendary good ministers of Shun] stand guard. This is another proof that divine dragons (*shen-lung*)<sup>150</sup> protect the sage-body [of the empress]. "Purify [all within] the four seas and standardize the eight directions" makes clear that even now the sage transformation is extending throughout the universe, purifying the eight directions and putting in order and bringing harmony to the people.

[Another] prophecy says: "In this year, on *k'uei-yu* day, the powerful bandits are all thwarted. The empire is at peace and no one sad or anxious. Everywhere the five grains flourish with carts and oxen for sowing." Accordingly [we point out] that the first day of the first (*cheng*) month of the coming year is *k'uei-yu*,<sup>151</sup> and this coincides. The rebels P'ei Chien, Li Ch'ang and others planned to rebel and seize the Western Capital.<sup>152</sup> Now they have incriminated each other and have suffered the penalty. In court and countryside there is perfect peace. That is why it is said that the strong bandits are all thwarted.

In this year the harvest is an especially rich one. From ancient times whenever harvests were abundant, they were regional. There was famine in the East and plenty in the West, or a meager harvest in the North and a rich one in the South. Never was it like this! There is now a surplus everywhere and under the heavens, all the grains ripen. How can it fail to show that next year, *k'uei-yu*, will accord exactly with the omen? All that is evil will disappear and it is for this reason that it is said that the world will find peace. . . .<sup>153</sup>

Within the context of state ideology of the seventh century, the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra* holds a unique place. It was, first of all, the basic justification for the Chou usurpation and the principal source of legitimation for China's only woman emperor. It is unquestionably the strongest of several appeals to Buddhist legitimation made in the middle period of Chinese history,<sup>154</sup> and marks the beginning of a brief primacy of Buddhism over all other doctrines in the formulation of state ideology.

The commentary is noteworthy for this reason alone, but its implications go far beyond a simple assertion of the transformation of Maitreya and his incarnation in the person of the Empress Wu. Invocation of the myth of the *mo-fa*, the last period of the Law, enabled her to stigmatize her enemies, foremost among them the imperial Li clan, as *devadatta* or demons who had to be destroyed to purify the world. On similar grounds, specific unpopular acts like the murders of P'ei Yen and of former Crown Prince Hsien were rationalized and, by extension,



other acts of bloodshed, past and future, could find justification. Even the infamy of the terror was made more comprehensible. It is somewhat ironic that the cult of Maitreya, so long a subversive movement, should thus be turned into a bolster for the exercise of secular power, and doubly ironic when we consider that the commentary makes clear the wish of Maitreya incarnate that the Buddhist church confine itself to spiritual matters. The parable of the king of Jambudvīpa who destroyed the errant clergy was a clear warning that the state would regulate the church. And this final point illustrates a feature of the commentary we must not ignore. Widely disseminated through the empire, it was virtually a blueprint for rule. Its omens and prophecies referred not only to past and present but also to the future. Forming a network of mutual reinforcement, they served initially to strengthen the position of the empress but later locked her into a pattern of economic and foreign policy decisions whose results were not always beneficial to the state.

The center of this problem lies in the resumption in the commentary of the *Sutra's* chiliastic vision:

Harvests will be bountiful, joy without limit. The people will flourish, free of desolation and illness, of worry, fear, and disaster. . . . The rulers of neighboring lands will all come to offer submission. . . . At that time all her subjects will give allegiance to this woman as the successor to the imperial throne. Once she has taken the Right Way, the world will be awed into submission.<sup>155</sup>

With these words the empress promised that her dynasty would be one of material prosperity, of domestic peace, and of domination of foreign lands.

The vision itself, to return to the question of Buddhism in state ideology, had an additional significance. It constituted the first dynastic espousal of an alternative to the Confucian utopia described in the *Book of Rites*<sup>156</sup> as well as a transformation of the Chinese world view. No longer was China to be the center of a hierarchical, familial universe but rather one part of a universal Buddhist empire presided over by "Maitreya the Peerless, Golden Wheel, Sage and Holy Emperor," titles the empress appropriated in stages over the next few years.<sup>157</sup>

The title was itself a unique one and, to a degree, anomalous, since it combined the realms of Maitreya and Cakravartin who in classical Buddhist doctrine do not appear in the same kalpa.<sup>158</sup> Not until the *k'ai-yüan* period (713-742), however, is there any recorded protest. Although at that time the claims of the empress to be Maitreya reborn were classified by Chih-sheng as one of the "three evil treasures (*hsieh-san-pao*) of the *t'ien-shou* period,"<sup>159</sup> the church seems generally to have acquiesced in the use to which its teachings were put in the Chou dynasty. And this marks an important stage in its development, for with the reversal of the Taoist precedence over Buddhism in 691<sup>160</sup> and with the attachment of the church to the *tz'u-pu* in 694,<sup>161</sup> it was embraced by the secular power as a virtual state religion and thrust, therefore, into an unexpected and unsuitable role. The rewards of this collusion started the church upon the road to the persecutions of 841-45, and of greater importance, the Buddhist idea was twisted, expanded, and intensified to the point of exhaustion. It seems no coincidence that with the Hua-yen systematization of the Chou period, the doctrinal creativity of philosophical Buddhism in China came to an end. Once Buddhism was espoused as a state doctrine by a dynasty which ruled the entire empire, its earlier spirit of evangelism and proselytism disappeared.<sup>162</sup>



This development, however, was hardly apparent at the time, for in an atmosphere of lavish patronage, both official and private, the church must have seemed more prosperous than ever before. There is as yet no detailed accounting of state expenditure on Buddhism in the Chou dynasty but it must have been enormous. The continuous expense of maintaining the Great Cloud temples was of course great, and the sources speak in some awe of the numerous new foundations at the time, of the erection of images at Lungmen and in the capital and, above all, of the *ming-t'ang* complex which was soon characterized by gold and jewels, by the "Seven Treasures" and by a gilded statue so large that several tens of men could stand on its outstretched finger.<sup>163</sup> The classical *ming-t'ang* was to have been a simple thatched hut, but we must recall that the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra* saw it as the City of Transformation or of Temporary Nirvāṇa<sup>164</sup> and, as time went on, it was modified to accord with the omens. It was also here that Hsüeh Huai-i staged his "no-barrier" rites (*wu-che-hui*), a form of ritual dating back to Liang Wu-ti and deriving its name probably from the free mingling of social classes.<sup>165</sup> Each of these rites, according to one source, "cost 10,000 strings of cash (*min* 緡). Men and women gathered like clouds and ten cartloads of money were scattered [to them], causing them to fight to gather it, with some [trampled to] death in the scramble."<sup>166</sup> Orthodox officials made frequent protest about these expenditures, and though the empress occasionally enjoined others to religious frugality,<sup>167</sup> she only belatedly became aware of the financial drain on state resources caused by her own generosity. The first example is not found until the year 700 when she proposed a special tax on monks and nuns for a great statue, and dropped the entire plan when the most trusted of all her ministers memorialized on the parasitical nature of the church and pointed out that "the temples and monasteries of today [already] surpass [in splendor] the imperial palaces."<sup>168</sup>

There were other ways, however, in which the empress could demonstrate her love for Buddhism. She is, for instance, unique in history for the frequency and duration of her bans on the butchery of animals and the taking of fish. From the time of Liang Wu-ti, various dynasties had recognized this first commandment of the Pañcaveramanī, usually with three-day prohibitions. Incredible though it may seem, the Empress Wu forbade her subjects to take life to eat for the entire period between 692 and 700!<sup>169</sup> As another sign of favor, the penalties for crimes against temples and monasteries were in 694 made equivalent to those for crimes against state property.<sup>170</sup> Measures of this sort aptly illustrate the expanding and mutually beneficial relationship between church and state in the period. The frequent signs of imperial favor could not but "bring benefit to the shrines of the Buddha," but each one had also its ideological content and, for example, used the religion for centralizing purposes, as a vehicle to carry civil enactments everywhere. In brief, the relationship was becoming symbiotic, and its chief symbol was the existence in every prefecture of the empire of the Great Cloud monks, many of whom wore the insignia of *hsien-kung*, a civil position of the fourth rank.<sup>171</sup>

The relationship, however, was not an equal one, and those scholars who characterize the Chou as a "golden age" or a "high point" of Buddhism<sup>172</sup> are only partly correct. As mentioned earlier, Buddhist affairs were attached in 694 to the Bureau of National Sacrifice (*tz'u-pu*), and if this measure gave the religion state sanction, it also rationalized state control. In the *k'ai-yüan* (713-42) period this organ came to exercise wide functions: the preparation of a clerical



registry, the limitation and review of the legality of ordination, the appointment of monastery leaders (*san-kang*), and the determination of prayers and services for state occasions.<sup>173</sup> It is extremely doubtful, however, that the first three functions were exercised with any consistency during the Chou, and we know, for example, that clerical registration was not regularized until 729 and that in 714 private ordination was still a matter of concern.<sup>174</sup> In these matters, the empress was content, it seems, with the symbol of control and while she did reassert the throne's right to "ordain by grace" (*en-tu*) in 701,<sup>175</sup> she relied largely upon the morale and responsibility of the church to prevent abuse.

The same may be said about clerical discipline, a vexing question since the church had long resisted the application of secular law in the belief that the Vināya was sufficient. The T'ang had failed to accept this argument, issuing in about 637 a code of governance called the *Tao-seng ko*,<sup>176</sup> and incorporating into the Code presented in 653 numerous provisions to deal with secular offenses by clerics.<sup>177</sup> Civil officials had also for some time had a duty to "admonish publicly and privately" misbehaving clergy, but since the *pai* controversy in 662, it seems reasonable to assume a certain reluctance to do so. Except where a specific secular offense was committed, the scope of discipline was ill-defined. In the Chou the difficulties of those ministers who wished to subject Huai-i and his followers to secular law is a good case in point. The Empress Wu, as far as we can tell, issued only three disciplinary edicts in the period--two designed to reduce friction between Buddhists and Taoists and the third forbidding monks to bury relics and show improper emotion at the death of one of their community.<sup>178</sup> Because these edicts threaten the penalty of laicization and empower civil officials to enforce them, they may be seen as a continuation of the erosion of the saṅgha's independent status, but the fact remains that the empress resorted only rarely to state intervention.

In sum, we might conclude that while she insisted on state supremacy and encouraged integration of the religious communities into the body politic, her relations with the church were singularly harmonious because she never lost sight of the mutual advantages of their cooperation. The worst that can be said of her patronage of Buddhism is that she created the climate which fostered the selling of ordinations, false registration of clerics and large-scale land dealings which blighted the next two reigns.<sup>179</sup> In the Chou orthodox officials were quick to attack any Buddhist abuse, but it is significant that beyond the standard complaints against the wealth and non-productivity of the church, the only charge leveled prior to 705 was that it neglected its obligation of charity to the poor.<sup>180</sup>

These remarks seem to suggest that the Buddhism of the Empress Wu was cynical, insincere, and subordinate to state interests, but there is much evidence to the contrary. The biographies of eminent monks of her period, collected principally in the *Sung kao-seng chuan*,<sup>181</sup> are filled with references to her support for their translation projects and to the lectures they gave before her. There can be no doubt that her relations with the church were good primarily because her piety and doctrinal understanding won lively clerical respect for her. Prior to the Chou dynasty, she had already shown a desire for knowledge and probably listened to Hsüan-tsang and Tzu-en explain the tenets of the Fa-hsiang school.<sup>182</sup> Perhaps because this school was in the process of eclipsing the T'ien-t'ai which was so closely associated with her maternal clan, she seems to have shown it no



particular favor, but in 670 she took a great interest in Fa-tsang, the brilliant young disciple of Chih-yen and the systematizer and real founder of the Hua-yen sect.<sup>183</sup> What first attracted her to this most recondite and sophisticated of Chinese sects is difficult to say, but when Fa-tsang was summoned to the capital and placed at the head of the T'ai-yüan Temple founded to commemorate the empress' mother,<sup>184</sup> he was only twenty-seven and was to retain a close association with her until her death. It was the empress who in 674 gave him the name "Sage Head" (*hsien-shou*) by which he is best known, and who had ten of the most honored of capital *bhadanta* confer on him the holiest form of ordination (*man-fen-chieh*) in 680.<sup>185</sup> In the same year she installed the famed translator Divākara<sup>186</sup> in the T'ai-yüan Temple with him, and together they decided upon the need for a new translation of the huge *Hua-yen (Avatamsaka, Gandavyūha) Sutra*. The empress cooperated by summoning from Khotan an even more eminent scholar, Siksānanda, who brought his own copy of the work to Loyang and, taking charge of the project, completed a new translation in eighty fascicles in 699.<sup>187</sup> The empress herself is said to have participated in the work, editing and assisting at lectures; and she wrote a preface for the final version taking note, as might be expected, of the Great Cloud omens.<sup>188</sup> Another well-known participant in the project was the pilgrim and prolific translator I-ching who also received from the empress support for his work and respect as a master.<sup>189</sup>

While there can be no doubt that the Empress Wu reserved her highest interest for the Hua-yen sect, and her inspiration of one of its most famous texts, the *Treatise on the Golden Lion (Chin-shih-tzu chang)*, is a good example, she was not exclusivistic in her desire for instruction. Among the famous monks she received are names like Chih-hsien of the Pure Land sect, Heng-ching of T'ien-t'ai and many others.<sup>190</sup> She was especially interested also in Ch'an or Zen, and if Hui-neng, the patriarch of the southern school refused her summons to the capital,<sup>191</sup> the northern Ch'an patriarch, Shen-hsiu, was one of her favorites. His biography relates that on his arrival at the palace, the empress knelt before him and by the admiration she showed, made him an object of lionization in the capital.<sup>192</sup> This is undoubtedly one of the reasons Buddhist sources serve as a counterweight to Confucian works, almost invariably seeing the empress in a favorable light. In the new catalog of the Tripitaka she had compiled in 695, the editor Ming-ch'üan speaks of her as the long-awaited Universal Ruler who would bring salvation to all.<sup>193</sup>

The preponderance of Buddhism in the state ideology of the Chou seems, on the basis of the foregoing discussion, to have served well the empress' purposes. Before we look more closely at this question, however, we might briefly raise another matter, the effect upon Buddhist doctrine and sectarian balance of imperial patronage. Historians in recent years have begun to take note of social and political influences in the sixth and seventh centuries as determinants of the doctrinal form of the eight schools which arose at that time. What seems to emerge from this research is the notion that imperial patronage of a leading monk was based first of all on the needs of a particular ruler and this, in turn, not only determined which sect would be paramount in his reign but also played a role in shaping the sect's characteristics.<sup>194</sup> In this way the Sui dynasty, as unifier, supported Chih-i and T'ien-t'ai the genius of which lay in the synthesis and unification of doctrine and scripture from preceding exegetical traditions.<sup>195</sup> The T'ang rejected T'ien-t'ai because of its Sui associations and turned to Hsüan-tsang and the Fa-hsiang school, a regressive Indian



form of Buddhism which accorded with the dynasty's cosmopolitanism. I might add that it was also a school less congenial to the Chinese mind and so less likely to challenge the Taoist bias of the dynasty.

If the above argument holds, the Empress Wu chose Hua-yen to set off her dynasty from the T'ang, and because the central concept of the school, the doctrine of totality or the complete and harmonious interfusion of the worlds of phenomena and ultimate principle converging on the single point of the Buddha, served her centralizing, totalitarian ends. The paradigm is a persuasive one, but in the case of the empress, can constitute only a partial explanation. Her favoring of Hua-yen, we must recall, was demonstrated as early as 670 when she could have had a T'ien-t'ai foundation commemorate her mother and when she was probably considering abdication rather than usurpation. Her patronage, moreover, was not exclusive and, as we have noted, Ch'an was not far behind Hua-yen as a recipient of her patronage. Though the basic doctrines of this school ranked high in Fa-hsiang's fivefold hierarchy of Buddhist doctrine,<sup>196</sup> its basic and profound egoism can hardly be considered useful to centralizing, totalitarian ends.

It is perhaps more accurate to see the empress' special fondness for Hua-yen as the product of sincere faith and of a metaphysical sophistication which found few parallels among T'ang rulers. Hua-yen is quite simply the most demanding in intellectual terms of all the sects, and is even today regarded by many as the "perfect teaching" of the Buddha.<sup>197</sup> It is also a school with a strongly altruistic bias: the bodhisattva reaches enlightenment in ten stages and along the way gains the power to perform miracles, to unite the universe and to deliver sentient beings from pain and desire.<sup>198</sup> Since the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra* had also cast the empress into the role of a bodhisattva, she could only find this a most congenial doctrine.

In assessing the relationship of the Empress Wu to state ideology over the half century in which she played a role in its formulation, I would like to make the following suggestions. In the first place, her ideology was developed in stages and was characterized by an acute perception of the needs of each period and an ability to respond to them. For this reason, Taoism and Confucianism were given precedence during her husband's lifetime and continued to rank above Buddhism, though not necessarily in the same order, prior to the composition of the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra*. For the usurpation itself, legitimation was sought principally in the symbols of Buddhism and Confucianism, but Taoism was permitted to retain its court precedence over Buddhism and the *Tao-te ching* remained a part of the examination curriculum. The Chou dynasty saw Buddhism paramount but, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, there was occasional resort to Confucian symbolism and, more importantly, the constant presence of a substantive Confucianism in the attitudes of the empress toward the bureaucracy, education, examinations, literature and music, and war. Taoism, because of its special significance to the T'ang, necessarily lost ground, but with the coming of the Chang brothers to court, its symbols began once more to appear, and by the end of the Chou the three traditions were more in balance than had been the case at the beginning of the dynasty. The grand compilation of 1,300 volumes called the *San-chiao chu-ying*, produced early in the eighth century by the institute of which the Chang brothers had charge,<sup>199</sup> symbolized as well as anything else the awareness of the empress that balance was the key to a successful ideology.



To the question of whether or not her ideology was successful, my answer is a qualified yes. In the largest sense, I base this conclusion upon the successes of the regime based on this ideology: the domestic peace, briefly interrupted only twice during her period of activity, upon the trend to cohesion and consolidation which permitted both usurpation and restoration to be effected with relative peace, and upon the factious but brilliant galaxy of ministers who consistently emerged to offer their services to the state. A second measure of success is the simple fact that her ideological manipulation, supplemented of course by intimidation and the exercise of raw power, overturned centuries of tradition and enabled a woman to ascend the throne. The fifteen years of power she enjoyed were characterized by the gradual relaxation of force and coercion, and by the growth of confidence and affection on the part of her subjects. The palace coup which deposed her was the reluctant work of a small minority of her ministers.

We shall never know whether the Empress Wu ever overcame wholly, even for a short time, the Confucian prejudice against female rule. The fact of her deposition argues against it, and the judgment of traditional historiography, as we have seen, would indicate that the effect of her reign was to strengthen this very prejudice. For this reason, her ideology was but a qualified success--qualified because in the Chou, at least, it was so highly personal that there was never any real chance that her dynasty would survive her. The people of China would support her but not her nephews and not any other woman, as the cases of the Princesses An-lo and T'ai-p'ing would show in the next reigns.

But in these remarks we anticipate ourselves too greatly. It is time now to return to our narrative from which we departed on the occasion of Kao-tsung's death.