

Chapter 5

THE ROAD TO USURPATION

Little is known of the Emperor Chung-tsung who came to the throne in January of 684. As the seventh son of Kao-tsung, the second or third born to Empress Wu, his chances of succession had seemed remote, and quite naturally his early education and training had been designed less to prepare him as future emperor than to prepare him as one who would constitute no threat to the ruler.¹ His career was to be an unfortunate one, and the sources depict his character as an unhappy combination of qualities: a weak will and sensuous nature but stubborn and quick to anger. He had been crown prince for only three years prior to his succession, and Kao-tsung may have had some reservations about his experience and general fitness, for his last testament provided for the continuation of his widow's influence in government: "When important matters of defense and administration (*chün-kuo ta-shih*) cannot be decided, the course of action [decided by] the Celestial Empress shall be adopted in both [types of problem]."²

This kind of provision was not unprecedented³ but, strictly speaking, it differed from earlier female regencies in that the power of the Empress Wu was subject to specifically defined limitations. Her interpretation of the clause, however, seems to have been free, and she immediately contravened another provision of the will, that Chung-tsung should succeed "before the coffin," by delaying his coronation a full week.⁴ We are given no explanation for the delay and might regard it, therefore, as a symbolic gesture. The Empress Dowager Wu did not yet seek the usual honored but impotent retirement and was making clear to her son that his actions would not go unobserved.

If warning it was, Chung-tsung paid little attention, and he had ruled less than a month when he committed the act which was to cost him his throne. Like his father, he was married to a formidable woman, but one very different from Empress Wu. The possessor of a proud lineage and a woman lacking in political sensitivity,⁵ the new empress persuaded her husband to elevate her father, Wei Hsüan-chen, to the post of president of the Chancellery, a violation of the customary limitation on posts granted to the consort family.⁶

The appointment created a crisis. It was unwelcome to the Empress Wu, who had been extremely careful to exclude her family from any meaningful political role and who clearly resented the rivalry of her daughter-in-law. In the higher circles of the bureaucracy, where a revival of ministerial power had been anticipated, it met an even more hostile reception. The spokesman for this group was P'ei Yen, an ambitious man who had risen through the examination system from the minor gentry of Shansi and was now paramount among the chief ministers as president of the Department of State Affairs.⁷ He had been closely associated with Chung-tsung before his elevation, and when his own prestige was enhanced still further by becoming the sole receptor of Kao-tsung's testament, he had immediately asserted his leadership over the *tsai-hsiang* members by transferring

their meeting place from the Chancellery to his own department.⁸ To him the entrance into politics of another empress and especially one who represented an extensive and powerful Kuan-chung clan was an unhappy development and he lodged a forceful protest. Chung-tsung replied with ill-considered temper, "What is to stop me from handing over the empire to Wei Hsüan-chen? So why should I be sparing with the post of Chancellery president?"⁹ Yen was angered and astounded at so strong a rebuke and reported it at once to the Empress Wu. Choosing to take her son's statement as one of literal intent, she summoned the full court, charged her son with treasonable intent, and had him forcibly removed from the throne by members of the Yü-lin Guard (*yü-lin chün*), a group which played a key role in virtually all the coups of the early T'ang.¹⁰ Demoted to princely rank Chung-tsung was soon exiled with his pregnant wife to Fang-chou in Hu-pei and was not to return to the capital until 698.¹¹

He was succeeded by his twenty-two-year-old brother Jui-tsung who was wholly unprepared for his new role, and if we may judge from his actions after the restoration, he was a reluctant ruler even at this time.¹² Wu Tse-t'ien, claiming he had a speech impediment and could not talk,¹³ "appeared in court and pronounced decrees." There is no record of Jui-tsung ever asserting his prerogatives, and as the *Comprehensive Mirror* puts it: "Political affairs were decided by the empress dowager. She installed Jui-tsung in a detached palace and he had no chance to participate."¹⁴

The legality of these acts, as we have seen, was disputed even in the T'ang, with one school of thought maintaining that Chung-tsung never lost the Mandate, and we must ask whence derived the power of an empress dowager to depose a mature emperor. Although there was at least one Han precedent for the replacement of an emperor on a dowager's authority,¹⁵ this does not seem to have been a normative act and went unmentioned in 684. Of greater importance, therefore, was the ability of the Empress Wu to draw on the authority of Kao-tsung's will and define the situation as an emergency, one in which the dynasty faced the familiar threat of an ambitious consort family. By convincing P'ei Yen and other high officials that this was the case, or perhaps by playing on their ambition, she in effect borrowed the legitimacy of their position to supplement her own and so win the support of the Yü-lin Guard who added a second essential element, that of coercion. The presence of force makes it difficult to know how sincerely to take the claim of the empress to legitimate authority was accepted, but perhaps by examining briefly the nature of legitimacy we can offer some explanation.

Since Roman times historians, theologians and politicians have speculated on the sources and nature of legitimate authority, and even in very modern times the debate continues.¹⁶ Present-day social scientists usually take as their starting point the formulations of Max Weber,¹⁷ and several convincing advances have been made by such scholars as Easton and Etzioni.¹⁸ Empirical evidence, however, which provided the basis of many of these studies, is unavailable to us. We must instead examine the Empress Wu's claims to legitimacy and, in the absence of contrary evidence, assume that their validity was accepted at least by her politically active contemporaries.

A recent manuscript¹⁹ posits the existence of five types of claim which we might use for analytical purposes: the cultural, ideological, structural, personal and instrumental. A claim to cultural legitimacy, corresponding to Weber's

"traditional" legitimation, posits a congruence between societal values and the operative form of government and political elite within it. In the context of seventh-century China, this claim would encompass such concepts as the Mandate of Heaven, the traditional role of the Son of Heaven and his bureaucracy, and the relationship of this elite to the commoners, especially as it was defined by the theorists of Han Confucianism. Wu Tse-t'ien, as a woman, could never claim complete cultural legitimacy. Her later ideological claims, on the other hand, suggest that an alternative to the existing system might derive its authority from the fact that new procedures and power holders are better than the old. In 684 the empress might well be seen as "better" than Chung-tsung or his brother, but not until the usurpation did she posit a new set of principles. As suggested in the preceding chapter, the new regime drew more force from the Buddhist world view than the Confucian.

Structural claims argue that particular power holders ought to be considered legitimate because they legally occupy positions within a structure *already* considered legitimate on cultural or ideological grounds. Because an empress dowager had no formal, legally defined prerogatives in traditional China, Wu was forced to rely on *tsai-hsiang* support to depose Chung-tsung and immediately to assume the position of regent. In no source do we find the regency formally conferred, and she seems, therefore, to have taken advantage of the lack of defined legal procedure to assume the position on her own authority.²⁰ Undoubtedly Jui-tsung gave tacit consent, and from 684 to 690 the empress possessed the structural legitimacy of a regent's status.

Finally the empress won acceptance in 684 through personal and instrumental claims, categories closely related to Weber's "charismatic" legitimacy and the real key to her successful usurpation in 690. Personal legitimation is that type derived from superior qualities and capabilities, and is closely related to the instrumental type in that these particular qualities are seen by subjects to be necessary for or beneficial to the attainment of specific values or benefits. The special feature of these types of legitimation is that power holders who possess them can usually defy at least some of the cultural-traditional requisites of legitimacy, thus presenting their constituents with a choice of legitimized objects: either the integrity of a traditional system or the benefits which might accrue from the rule of superior or charismatic personalities.

This dichotomy presents us with an interesting perspective on the period prior to the usurpation. It may be recalled that my discussion of state ideology suggested that while the Confucian tradition was extensively patronized by Kao-tsung and Wu Tse-t'ien, it was also the tradition upon which they most often imposed their innovations. The form of the *feng-shan* sacrifices, the new titles appropriated by the rulers and bestowed on official posts, new mourning regulations for mothers, and the innovations in the examination system are examples of this process. I suggested that one of the reasons behind it was the unwillingness of the "Two Sages" to become prisoners of tradition and, in the context of legitimation, I might posit that Confucianism was singled out for attack because of its prohibition on female influence in government. If this was the case, we are witnessing a dual process. Confucianism was patronized sufficiently to enable it to remain primary among the three philosophies as a legitimizing ideology, but at the same time it was subtly weakened by acquiescence in innovation or modification, and the net result was that by 690 personality overshadowed tradition and a woman could become *huang-ti*.

It is difficult to know whether or not the Empress Wu was consciously seeking personal legitimation in this manner prior to 684, but her actions as regent suggest that she was. Within the first month of the new regime she began to cast aside the former conventions of female rule, for instance appearing in imperial regalia and disdaining to "hang the curtain" in the audience hall.²¹ She ignored the protests of her elder statesmen, P'ei Yen and Liu Jen-kuei, who suggested that she was beginning to conduct herself like the Han Empress Lü,²² and uncharacteristically not only appointed her senior nephew to *tsai-hsiang* rank but created for him the new title *huang-ssu* which seems to have had the sense of "emperor-expectant."²³ This was an ominous sign since Jui-tsung had produced an heir five years earlier, and it must have appeared even more suspicious when word reached the capital that the former Crown Prince Hsien had committed suicide in exile on the arrival of an envoy from his mother.²⁴

The possibility of usurpation seems now for the first time to have occurred to the empress and shortly after, she sent up two trial balloons. The first of these was an Act of Grace (*ta-she*) in the ninth month of 684, and the second the decision to establish at Loyang seven ancestral temples (*miao*) for the Wu clan, a number customarily reserved for the imperial family.²⁵ Both these decisions met with protest, the temples causing P'ei Yen to compare her once more with Empress Lü,²⁶ and the Act sparking the armed rebellion of Li Ching-yeh.

Before passing on to the rebellion, we might pause here to examine some features of this Act not only because of its particular historical role, but because it was typical of many in the T'ang. The original purpose of the Act of Grace was the reward of merit and the pardon of convicted felons on auspicious occasions, but at the same time, they were often used to promulgate important administrative measures. While only a small number have survived in their entirety,²⁷ those which have are of wide scope and are useful sources for the general policy lines of their period.

The first portion of the Act²⁸ of 684 was the one which confirmed suspicions of approaching usurpation by transforming the external symbolism of the regime. Banners henceforth would be gold with violet trim, and certain officials would wear different robes and insignia. Loyang was to be renamed "Sanctified Capital" (*shen-tu*) and its palaces called the "Great Beginning" (*t'ai-ch'u*). The deep concern of the empress with symbolism and nomenclature and their relation to state ideology were reflected in her claim that official titles and posts were defective, and for the second time since she came to power, all were to be renamed. This time most of the new names harked back to the first Chou dynasty--a demonstration of Confucian reverence bearing a close resemblance to the use of *Chou-li* symbolism by other successful usurpers like Wang Mang.²⁹ Some of the new names were also drawn from a mythology principally Taoist, and several of these, like Phoenix Court (*feng-ko*) and Luan Terrace (*luan-t'ai*) have remained unique in Chinese history.³⁰ Since the Act of Grace was itself issued to commemorate the discovery of Buddhist relics,³¹ we might see in the symbolic manipulation here the balance common to the empress' entire ideological policy. Finally, she pointed out that her mother's posthumous title was not of sufficient dignity and so raised it to empress dowager (*hsien-t'ien t'ai-hou*), a measure whose clear implication was that she was herself of imperial birth.

Though many in the empire were convinced that these measures were open indications of an intention to seize the throne, there is in the Act of Grace no

mention of the signs of heavenly approval necessary for a successful transfer of the Mandate, and when we examine the rest of the document an alternative explanation becomes possible. Chung-tsung in 705 was to remark on the desperate situation in 684,³² and while he probably had in mind the rebellion itself, we can see from the Act that the problems of the early 680s required a strong and experienced ruler.

In the next section of the Act of Grace, and in measures reminiscent of her lengthy memorial a decade earlier, the empress demonstrated by her concern for the people's welfare that this is precisely what she was. Here were expressed her benevolence, humanity and frugality as she pardoned criminals, made gifts to the aged and filial, offered relief to the poor and sick, and went on to restore lost ranks, grant temporary tax holidays to some areas, seek improvement in the distribution of military rewards and release a number of serving women from the palace.³³ None of these measures were unique to the empress' Acts of Grace, and though some contemporaries regarded her as overgenerous in her awards,³⁴ there is little evidence that she differed in any appreciable degree from her predecessors. These were not tactics to "win the hearts of the people," as some historians allege, but rather were representative of the spirit of the Acts and were designed to maintain rather than to enhance her position.

The final section of the Act of Grace deals with current problems, and here the empress began with the most basic of these, namely the rapid expansion of population, with a consequential decline in the standards of provincial administration. This was revealed in false registration, tax evasion and other forms of corruption. To combat it, a new branch of the Censorate was to be formed to closely supervise the provinces and make frequent inspection tours, while at the same time counties and prefectures were to be standardized to contain populations of 10,000 and 30,000 households respectively. New ones were to be created where necessary.³⁵ Because the census was closely related to the tax, equal-field and military systems,³⁶ household registration was a continuing and thorny problem for the government. The empress was later to approve a rather radical suggestion from Li Chiao to divide the empire into twenty provinces for the purposes of closer supervision, but was thwarted in this by hostile bureaucratic opinion.³⁷

Another problem of the period was the growth of military abuses, principally the decline of morale which resulted from careless and excessive conferral of rewards (*hsün*) and their purchase by wealthy persons who had never served.³⁸ Because of the nature of the *fu-ping* militia (which will be discussed later) this was extremely serious, particularly since it dated at least from the Korean expeditions of the 660s. The Act of Grace called for investigation and punishment of offenses but had no new solutions to offer and, judging from later observations, the deterioration was not arrested. Some scholars during the T'ang and later were to blame the empress for the destruction of the *fu-ping*.³⁹

If this was the case, there is no sign that it was intentional, for the empress was genuinely concerned with administrative improvement and in the Act put forward again the Confucian panacea for all governmental problems, the recruitment of "men of virtue" (*hsien*). On this occasion she decreed that virtually each high official was to recommend for office one man of either civil or military ability.⁴⁰ While it is difficult to know whether she used this

form of recruitment more than earlier rulers, there is doubt she used it often, and under her almost every form of recommendation was used at least once.⁴¹ Historians often tend to comment on the growth of the bureaucracy which was partly a result of this. They seldom notice, however, that the empress also thereby created a highly qualified bureaucracy, largely loyal to her, which in turn would have the heavy responsibility of recommendation. Penalty for errors in this duty could be heavy and, as will be shown later, officials were often intimidated and, therefore, anxious to conform to the ruler's definition of "virtue."

In summary, it might be remarked that the Act of Grace of 684 provides a useful starting point for any assessment of the Empress Wu's political concerns over the next two decades and, in addition, reveals her priorities in the context of the restless political climate of Chung-tsung's deposition. It shows that she was concerned first with the viability of the T'ang and secondly with her own place in it. It was only within this framework that usurpation could be considered.

As already mentioned, by 684 the institutions of the early T'ang were showing signs of strain. The long internal peace and the acquisition of empire had spurred population increase, commercial development and demographic mobility. In turn, these placed pressure on the mechanism for registration of population and the various systems of taxation, equal-field distribution and *fu-ping* service which depended upon it. The rapid expansion of civil and military bureaucracy found some justification in this but, at the same time, the emoluments of officialdom and the costs of defense were becoming the largest items of state expenditure. Furthermore, the widening opportunities for bureaucratic employment, principally by means other than the examination system, were creating something akin to a "revolution of expectations" among men whose lack of a suitable genealogy had prevented their advancement to high office earlier in the dynasty. All these developments are explored in detail in later chapters.

The point here, however, is that in 684 a turning point, albeit an artificial one, arrived with the deposition of Chung-tsung. Officials were beginning to call for reform, and some, like the important critic Ch'en Tzu-ang, wanted it to be thorough: "Those who would rectify the end must first correct the beginning, and those who purify a stream must first cleanse its source. . . . The abuses in the empire have existed already for a long time."⁴²

As we shall see, however, there is little evidence of thorough reform by the empress during the next few years, and the reason for this is the basic concern of this chapter. We must remember, first of all, that the administrative problems we have been discussing were the result of policies initiated by the first T'ang emperors and brought to fruition by those the empress and Kao-tsung had pursued. Together the Two Sages had not hesitated to innovate in areas like state ideology and in their treatment of the upper bureaucracy and the old aristocracy, but they had been wholly loyal to the *lü-ling* system of codified law upon which the dynasty was based. A clear sign of this was their regular issue of regulations (*ko*) which amended and supplemented the penal code (*lü*) and administrative statutes (*ling*). The last set of regulations had been issued in 677 and the empress was to promulgate a shorter one in 685, but from that time until the restoration there were to be no more.⁴³ Institutional reform seems therefore to have had low priority. Now in some cases like that of the *fu-ping*,

rejuvenation may have been impracticable, while in others, like the *tsu-yung-tiao* taxation system, the problem was not yet serious. For still other problems, like registration and vagrant households, solutions were sought but only in a piecemeal and ineffective fashion. I suggest, therefore, that the nature of the problem may have determined the approach to its solution. A second possibility is that the empress never really intended to deprive the T'ang permanently of the empire, and so eschewed radical change lest it be identified with her usurpation and nullified at the restoration. In this view she saw her role as that of a caretaker.

A further possibility, and the most likely of the three, lies in the evolution of the imperial institution or, at least, in the empress' perception of it. During the preceding thirty years, she and Kao-tsung had progressively diminished the prerogatives of the upper bureaucracy with the result that both the spectrum of opinion and the scope for administrative innovation had narrowed. Increasingly rule by fiat had been replacing cooperative decision-making and the ruler became, therefore, more and more the pivot of statecraft. We need not make too much of this, for the empress was following some well-worn precedents, and her political style marked a turning point only within the context of her examination policy and her success in putting the great aristocracy on the defensive.

My point here is different. The empress truly saw herself as the pivot or, to switch metaphors, as the mortar which held together the state structure. It was, therefore, her greatest priority to win for the imperial institution the confidence and support of the people, rather than to undertake reforms which would inevitably alienate certain segments of the population. If she could win this type of support for the ruler, she could afford to leave the task of institutional and economic reform to a strong emperor in the restored T'ang who would know how to use the new bureaucracy she would continue to build. If so, it is in the legislation of the reign of Hsüan-tsung that we must measure her success.

I have made this lengthy digression in the hope of providing an alternative to the usual view that the empress' policies in the years 684-690 were basically little more than preparatory steps on the road to usurpation. I am suggesting instead that she perceived a dynastic crisis with which legitimate succession could not cope, a challenge from the new emperor's consort family and from powerful ministers like P'ei Yen, and she took extreme steps to meet it. Her usurpation must then be viewed as the result of necessity and not ambition.

These steps, however, compounded the crisis in the short run, for it was largely in response to the Act of Grace of 684 that the rebellion of Li Ching-yeh broke out. Ching-yeh was the grandson of Li Chi, conqueror of Korea and one of the early supporters of the Empress Wu.⁴⁴ When he died in 669, reportedly foreseeing his grandson's disgrace,⁴⁵ his accumulated honors had assured his descendants of privileged entry (*yin*) into the civil service and Ching-yeh had begun a career in the bureaucracy. Dismissed from his post for a misdemeanor, he had taken up residence in Yang-chou at the junction of the Yangtze and the Grand Canal.⁴⁶ In the brash yet indolent atmosphere of this commercial center, his closest companions were disgraced officials of good family,⁴⁷ anxious to restore their lost fortunes. By the end of 684 the empress' actions had created what seemed an ideal climate for rebellion, and in November the insurrection broke out.

Its aims were ambiguous. Although the rebels claimed to be partisans of the deposed Chung-tsung, they soon placed nominally at their head a "look-alike" of Prince Hsien who had committed suicide earlier in the year.⁴⁸ In view of this duplicity on the part of Ching-yeh, we might be justified in thinking he planned no restoration but rather had dynastic ambitions of his own. This conjecture gains force when we examine the rebel manifesto, a brilliant polemic by Lo Pin-wang,⁴⁹ which stridently blackens the reputation of Empress Wu while remaining noncommittal about Ching-yeh's ultimate aims. It runs as follows:

The woman Wu, who has falsely usurped the throne, is by nature obdurate and unyielding, by origin truly obscure. Formerly, she was among the lower ranks of T'ai-tsung's servants and served him by changing his clothes.⁵⁰ When she reached mature age, she brought disorder to the palace of the crown prince, concealing her private [relationship] with the former emperor. She then plotted covertly to gain favor in the Inner Chambers . . . and concealing her mouth behind her sleeve, she skillfully slandered the other women. With cunning flattery and perverse artfulness she deluded the ruler. She then usurped the pheasant regalia of empress and entrapped our ruler in incest.

Then, with a heart like a serpent and a nature like a wolf, she favored evil flatterers while destroying her good and loyal officials. She has killed her elder sister, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother!⁵¹ She is hated by gods and men alike; neither heaven nor earth can bear her. Still, she harbors calamitous intentions and plans [to steal] the sacred regalia [of the ruler]. The beloved son of the ruler she keeps in a separate palace, and she has given the most important offices [of state] to her own group of bandits.⁵²

The statement continues with a series of historical allusions to the evil effects of female political dominance in earlier times and concludes:

I, Ching-yeh, am a former minister of the great T'ang, the eldest son of a noble family. I received the testament of our former emperor and I owe gratitude for the liberal graciousness of our ruling house.⁵³ . . . My spirit rises in anger like the wind and the clouds; my will is determined to restore tranquility to the altars of soil and grain. The whole world has lost hope and the people of the empire have placed their trust in me. I therefore raise the standard of righteous rebellion in order to purify the empire of the baleful omens of disaster. . . .

You my lords! . . . Some of you have been entrusted by weighty charges by the words [of the late emperor], and others have received his dying commands in the audience chamber. His words are still in your ears. How can loyalty have gone from your hearts? The earth on his tomb is not yet dry and where are his young orphan princes? We may yet change bad fortune to good, show homage to the dead emperor and serve his living successor.⁵⁴ May you one and all arise and devote yourself to the cause of the ruler. Do not permit our former emperor's orders to be brought to nothing. . . . I ask you to look at the world today. Which house possesses the empire?⁵⁵

Though many of the allegations made against the empress are false, they must at least reflect some contemporary beliefs, and as the tract became more and more familiar as a model of T'ang literary style, various of its details were adopted by hostile historians. We cannot fail to notice, however, the absence from the list of murders that of the empress' infant daughter and of her son

Hung, the very crimes to which historians most frequently allude. We might, therefore, conjecture either that she was innocent or that she had successfully concealed these events in her own time. She herself showed a sardonic appreciation of the polemic when a copy came into her hands, blaming her *tsai-hsiang* for their incompetence in leaving a man of such literary talent as its author to languish in provincial obscurity.⁵⁶

In retrospect, the rebellion of Li Ching-yeh seems hardly to have constituted a serious threat to the empress, lasting only three months and affecting only three prefectures. Part of the reason for its failure undoubtedly lay in the rapidity and skill of imperial response,⁵⁷ but Ching-yeh's failings as a commander may have been even more important. In the first days of the rising 100,000 men are said to have joined him, and perhaps encouraged by this, he refused to move from his Kiangsu base in spite of the advice of lieutenants who urged a march north into Hopei where, they claimed, were to be found the finest fighting men and the greatest resentment and disappointment at the empress' "dictatorship" (*ch'uan-chih*).⁵⁸ Some recent scholarship has tended to confirm the soundness of this strategy,⁵⁹ and in rejecting it, Ching-yeh revealed once more his own ambitions. Instead he sent a part of his forces to take Nanking (Chin-ling), the old southern capital, which he believed still to have an "imperial air" (*wang-ch'i*).⁶⁰ This seems to have been a serious error, for a month of siege warfare yielded only the eastern garrison town of the city, and by that time imperial forces comprising over 300,000 men were advancing in a pincer movement. Despite the ineptitude of the T'ang prince who led the northern army, the issue was not long in doubt, and in the eleventh month of 684 the rebels were destroyed and their leaders slain.⁶¹

Had this been the extent of the rebellion, it seems likely that its consequences would have been less serious. From the empress' point of view, however, a greater danger was present in rebel connections at the court, and shortly after the rising began the capital was shocked to learn that P'ei Yen had been arrested and charged with treason.

This was the event which led directly to a virtual reign of terror during the next few years, and for that reason the guilt or innocence of P'ei Yen has been the subject of much debate. Only in his biography in the *New T'ang History* do we find the direct charge that he was planning to seize the empress during a projected journey to the Cave Buddhas of Lungmen and was thwarted when rain canceled the trip,⁶² but at the same time we must recall his earlier signs of ambition and the presence of his nephew as a prominent rebel.⁶³ We are told, moreover, that he early advised the empress that her retirement would end the rebellion without fighting,⁶⁴ and at that time a number of ministers seem to have regarded his motives as suspect. To his several defenders the empress claimed to have proof of guilt,⁶⁵ but since we have no record of its presentation, we might assume that her consistent fear of the growth of ministerial power played at least some part in her decision to bring the matter to trial. She seems to have acted, after all, only when a censor pointed out that "P'ei Yen served in the court of the late emperor for over twenty years. He received the testament of guardianship [of the state] and [already] enjoys great power. If he had no disloyal design (*i-t'u*), why would he ask you to return political control [to Jui-tsung]?"⁶⁶ After a tribunal found P'ei guilty, he suffered the degradation of public execution, and the most prominent of his defenders, General Ch'eng Wu-t'ing, met a similar fate in the very midst of his unprotesting

troops.⁶⁷ The empress, therefore, had found herself betrayed not only by the scion of an eminent clan but also by men in highest of civil and military positions and, according to one source, she assembled her entire court to confront them with this fact. Raising in turn the example of her three slain enemies, she warned:

These three men were looked up to [with respect, but] they were harmful to me and I was able to destroy them. If [any of] you have abilities [which] surpass these three men, then you must act accordingly. If not, you should change your hearts and serve me, not making [of yourselves an object of] ridicule for the empire.⁶⁸

Ssu-ma Kuang, who relates this anecdote, doubts that the empress would speak in such a fashion to her ministers,⁶⁹ but perhaps only because he fails to perceive the depth of her anger and shock. The rebellion itself, and what she seems clearly to have seen as a betrayal by ungrateful and overambitious officials, came as a profound disillusionment. Convinced of her own indispensability and regarding herself as the legitimate representative of the throne, she determined never again to be threatened in such a way. To this end she initiated what is termed, not inappropriately, a reign of terror which was to claim thousands of victims over the next six years and become a feature of her reign which is almost universally condemned.

In some respects this system of delation was simply an extension of the empress' earlier policies: the frequent demotions and shifting of posts through which she had long attempted to ensure that loyal men surrounded the throne.⁷⁰ Ssu-ma Kuang, however, sees its origins in an incident of 684 when a privately expressed protest at Chung-tsung's deposition brought summary execution to the protester and generous reward to the informant.⁷¹ There is justification in this view but, at the same time, we have no indication that it would have been repeated had the rebellion not occurred. It was not until early 685 that there began to appear in the Censorate and the Board of Punishments the agents of the terror--men of obscure origin whose biographies are grouped in the old *T'ang History* under the special category "cruel" (*k'u*).⁷² Most prominent among them were Chou Hsing and Lai Chün-ch'en who soon set in operation a network of spies and informers, ostensibly to eliminate the remnants of the rebellion. Before long, however, their victims included the patently innocent. In a new prison they extracted "confessions" by forgery, torture and other methods later described by Lai in a handbook called the *Classic of Entrapment* (*Lo-chih ching*),⁷³ and the empress seems to have been convinced of the existence of plots everywhere. In early 686 she established a great bronze urn (*kuei*) which in modified form was to endure as an institution until the end of the dynasty.⁷⁴ At the beginning the urn was constructed of four compartments, each for the reception of a particular sort of report: self-recommendation, criticism of the government, grievances and wrongs, and finally, omens, calamities and secret plans. Soon it was little more than a repository for a growing number of denunciations and, ironically, claimed its inventor among the first of its victims.⁷⁵

Because the terror stretched on until the usurpation was secure, the climate it created in court and countryside may well be imagined. Protests poured in, and in frankness and eloquence that of Ch'en Tzu-ang in 689 is representative:

From [the start of] this year, your servant has seen secret denunciations in every corner [of the empire]. We imprison hundreds and thousands of men, and the majority are [still] denounced in connection with [the]

Yang-chou [rebellion]. When we examine carefully [the charges], not one in a hundred is true.

Your Majesty is humane and merciful . . . [but] you have appointed a deceitful and evil group [of officials], reckless and in rivalry with each other. With angry looks of suspicion, they then report the existence of secret [plots]. One man is accused and a hundred fill the prisons. . . . Some say that for every man Your Majesty loves, there are a hundred you harm. The empire gasps and no one knows a place of rest.⁷⁶

Seen in these terms, the terror is indefensible. On the other hand, however, centuries of Confucian historiography may have gone too far in unremitting condemnation, so that a more balanced view might be appropriate here. The terror was born of well-grounded fear--the response of a woman ruler to a tradition which did not accept her because of the biological accident of her sex. She permitted the terror to continue even after seeing its evils, because she saw in it values beyond the elimination of disloyalty, and because she also knew that the phenomenon itself enhanced her power and hence her ability to control its excesses.

This view seems the more tenable when we isolate certain ramifications of the terror. The most obvious, as suggested earlier, was the further transformation of the political climate. Almost all of the victims were officials above the fifth rank, a pattern consistently maintained both before and after the usurpation.⁷⁷ The result of this was fear and uncertainty in the upper bureaucracy, and no minister could gain over the empress the degree of influence which ministers like Wei Cheng had exercised over T'ai-tsung. In 630 Tai-tsung had even gone so far as to encourage officials not to follow his edicts blindly and on several occasions withdrew them in deference to ministerial opinion.⁷⁸ In 687 when the paramount minister, Liu Wei-chih, refused an edict not ratified by his own department of the Secretariat, the empress was so angered by the ingratitude of one "to whom We have given employment" that she ordered his immediate suicide.⁷⁹ Traditional historians have found here a vivid contrast to the "good government of *chen-kuan*," but we might note instead the consistency of the empress' determination to reduce the power of high officials relative to that of the throne.

A second set of implications seldom noticed concerns the social effects of the terror. As will be shortly pointed out, several steps were taken early in the T'ang to put on the defensive the great aristocratic clans which had dominated political life in the period of disunion. Since mid-century these clans had been increasingly bureaucratized and, profiting from cohesion among themselves, their court connections, their wealth and education, they had become the predominant element in the upper bureaucracy. Less suited by temperament and training than officials of lower social origin for coexistence with a female ruler, they became easy targets for the trumped-up allegations of Lai Chün-ch'ien. Since the charges brought against them were usually those of treason, the penalties extended to their families who were exiled or enslaved, and to their property which was confiscated by the state.⁸⁰ A good illustration is the final purge, that of 697, which followed the conspiracy of Liu Ssu-li. Of its thirty-six chief victims, the *Comprehensive Mirror* says that "all of them were renowned [members of the] *shih* 士 of the land," and goes on to say that over a thousand of their relatives and friends suffered the secondary punishment of exile.⁸¹

As far as we can judge, this incident was not atypical, and particularly because the Ling-nan exiles were more than once massacred by self-seeking inspectors from the capital,⁸² we cannot estimate how many families were wholly extinguished. Those who survived were able only gradually to regain *liang* or free status with its attendant rights of examination and officeholding, so that in spite of amnesties before and after the restoration they were weakened in the competition for office and often took generations to recover. The roots of some of the factional strife under Hsüan-tsung can be traced to this time.

Less tangible but no less important were a series of decrees in 686 which empowered informers of any social class to travel at public expense to the capital to make denunciations and to receive the provisions of fifth-rank officials along the way.⁸³ In 628 T'ai-tsung had decreed death for any slave attempting to bring charges against his master,⁸⁴ but now incidents of this sort became frequent, and there were several examples of illiterate commoners rewarded with high official posts for informing.⁸⁵ The *Comprehensive Mirror* speaks of a wave of fear so great that "people all marked time and held their breath,"⁸⁶ and there was a stream of protest against excessive punishments throughout the 680s. These critics were undoubtedly also aware of the social disruption which accompanied the imperial commissioners who combed the provinces in search of disloyal elements and the sad processions of once-mighty families plodding the long road to exile in Ling-nan.

For most of her reign, even in the 690s when from our perspective her position seemed relatively secure, the empress ignored the protests. In this there may have been a certain paranoia but, at the same time, she could hardly have been unaware that whatever its drawbacks, the terror always served as a tangible, nationwide reminder of the power of the central government and of its head, herself.

Finally, we must acknowledge that in the terror the T'ang judicial system survived a most severe test. Injustice was too often the rule, but a review of the trials of the period shows that it was found mainly where the secret police acted upon confessions extracted by torture or by promises of clemency toward the family of the victim.⁸⁷ When these were presented to the empress she had little alternative but punishment. Often, however, she presided personally at important proceedings, and several sources offer evidence that when courageous censors like Hsü Yu-kung pointed out miscarriages of justice, she acted immediately to rectify them.⁸⁸ After 697 when she destroyed the last of her evil officials and was puzzled that denunciations ceased, she replied to an explanation by Yao Yüan-ch'ung by saying, "Recently the *tsai-hsiang* followed their own interests and deceived me into acting as a ruler [too fond] of excessive punishments."⁸⁹ This avoidance of responsibility somehow lacks the ring of sincerity, but it is a fact that from this time the executions stopped and prominent victims of the terror like Wei Yüan-chung were rapidly restored to office.

The initiation of the terror is often taken as the definitive sign that Wu had made up her mind to usurp sovereignty. Indications are equally strong, however, that she made no firm decision to do so until the discovery of the *Pao-t'u* in 688. One sign that she was becoming less single-minded in her political pursuits was the intimate relationship she formed in 685 with Hsüeh Huai-i, whose origins and early career were discussed above. We have noted the ambiguous suggestion of a sexual relationship, but whatever the truth of the matter, the

empress seems to have fallen into a state of unaccustomed infatuation. His visits to the palace were frequent, and despite his arrogance and impropriety which she had to excuse to irate ministers,⁹⁰ she refused to dissociate herself from him. She began the year 686 with a decree restoring power to Jui-tsung but, says the *Comprehensive Mirror*, he "knew the empress dowager was not true-hearted"⁹¹ and so refused. The offer was perhaps insincere, but it is at least possible that the empress was considering for herself a less exhausting role in government since she was about sixty at the time. Her association with Huai-i continued for the next decade, and he was to serve her in several capacities: unsuccessfully as a general against the Turks, and more notably in 688 as chief architect of the *ming-t'ang*.

The years immediately prior to the usurpation are depicted in the Confucian sources as years dominated by the terror, by the rise of such favorites as Huai-i and the Wu nephews, and by the advancement of the empress' usurping aims. This last perception is certainly a valid one, but it could also be suggested that the end of the policies she pursued at this time was not necessarily the overthrow of the T'ang. Jui-tsung had just indicated his unwillingness to assume power, and if we bear in mind that legitimation is not a static but a continuing process, the repairs the empress now made in the administrative structure become not simply devices to win support but rather the continued application of the political expertise she had demonstrated for so long.

The new regulations were promulgated in 685 and that same year special censors were set up to oversee the activities of Buddhist monks in the capital. Migration to the South continued throughout the post-684 period, and new administrative units were set up each year in Chiang-nan to accommodate the shift. In response to the increasing number of border raids by Turks and Tibetans, several large expeditions were dispatched and the An-pei protectorate reorganized⁹² though without lasting success. Informed officials, appalled by the state of *tu-hu-fu* administration, were beginning to predict the loss of the entire Ho-hsi region unless decisive steps were taken but, as we shall see, this was not a priority of the empress and the garrisons were not augmented.

Emphasis during these years was clearly on domestic affairs, and symptomatic was the rapid growth of the bureaucracy. Though statistical evidence is lacking, the trend to expansion is seen in such developments as the encouragement of self-recommendation, already extensive since the foundation of the U'n, the increase of *chin-shih* degrees, especially at Loyang,⁹³ and the creation of new posts like market commissioners (*shih-ling*), registrars (*lu-shih*), and correctors of the imperial oversights (*shih-i, pu-ch'üeh*).⁹⁴ Commissioners made frequent tours of the provinces, and among their duties was the recruitment of personnel for the new positions.⁹⁵ Appointment of auxiliary (*yüan-wai*) officials became more frequent, and especially in the Six Boards the number of such positions was increased.⁹⁶ In some cases, like that of the Board of Civil Office, the increase was probably justified by the simple need to classify and place new officials. In others, for instance at the level of provincial administration, the proportion of bureaucrats to the general population had typically been very low. Here the increase might well have brought about a tighter administration and a government of improved quality.

It is, of course, impossible to know whether administrative improvement was as important to the empress as her more obvious need for bureaucratic support but, as mentioned earlier, she knew the importance of performance in overcoming

prejudice against female rule. It was probably for this reason that, even as she expanded the bureaucracy, she began to turn her attention to the economic problems which had surfaced in the last years of her husband's reign.

As early as 666 and especially with the failure of the new *hsien-feng* coinage, counterfeiting and inflation were beginning to receive official notice, and by the death of Kao-tsung the cost of rice was said to be a hundred times that of the prosperous 630s.⁹⁷ Sumptuary regulations were issued, but with little effect, and the problems were exacerbated by a series of bad harvests and the growing costs of defense. In the early 680s the first instances occurred of tax evasion by households fleeing their registration, and while the problem was still very much localized in the border areas,⁹⁸ it increased the financial strain on the government. None of these problems were unprecedented, and solutions were proposed by several ministers, though invariably they fell into the time-worn categories of reduction of military activity and bureaucratic recruitment and the end of the building schemes and religious patronage which were so costly in man-hours and money. This would rejuvenate agriculture and strengthen the state's revenue base.

Unfortunately, political expediency seems to have precluded any sustained effort in these directions. If the empress were to maintain confidence in the dynasty and in herself, the borders must remain secure and the bureaucracy active, smooth-running and receptive to new recruits. If she were to increase confidence, the "sanctified capital" of Loyang must be a worthy center for the dynasty. Economic reform consisted, therefore, of palliatives, extra slaves instead of a raise in salary for the lower bureaucracy and rapid suppression of the rare instances of resistance to taxation,⁹⁹ but no coherent reform program. In fairness we must also acknowledge that measures like these seem to have been considered sufficient by the majority of the empress' constituency as they were soon to make clear in the so-called Princes' Rebellion.

In this sense also, the economic measures of the period were closely related to the question of legitimation. Since out-of-work officials had been the guiding force of Li Ching-yeh's rebellion, the cost of bureaucratic expansion might be justified. Similarly, since the very existence of female rule was a source of opposition to the existing regime, the temples, palaces and monuments which made Loyang as brilliant a city as Ch'ang-an were expressions of imperial self-confidence and, moreover, the buildings themselves were often designed to win Heaven's sanction. The same was true of the court itself, as ceremonials became more frequent and more magnificent and more often evoked the ritual of the first Chou dynasty.

This last tactic is a most interesting one, for ever since Wang Mang the *Rites of Chou* had had a particular attraction for usurpers. Why this was the case is not altogether clear, but it seems to be related to recognition of the excellence of the institutions begun by the Duke of Chou and Confucius' admiration of them.¹⁰⁰ The Chou, moreover, had held the Mandate longer than any other of the historical dynasties and so must have been exceptionally pleasing to Heaven. Finally, for a usurper the greatest source of opposition was the Confucian loyalty of existing officialdom, and thus if a new dynasty could clothe itself in the purest and most exalted form of this tradition, it could dilute some of this natural hostility.

Though it was not until the summer of 688 that the empress decided

on usurpation, the event which occasioned her decision was one closely related to the omen tradition of Han Confucianism and one which exactly paralleled a portent of Wang Mang's usurpation,¹⁰¹ the discovery in the Lo River of what came to be called the *Pao-t'u*.

The *Pao-t'u* was a white stone bearing the eight-character legend, "A Sage Mother shall come to [rule] mankind and eternally prosperous shall be her imperium" (*sheng-mu lin-jen yung-ch'ang ti-yeh*).¹⁰² Beyond this we know little of the omen,¹⁰³ but all sources agree that it was fabricated by Wu Ch'eng-ssu who still held the title of *huang-ssu* and whose motives are, therefore, obvious. No source implies collusion on the part of the empress and it seems certain that she was convinced of its validity, for in the next two months she made the prophecy known everywhere. An Act of Grace was issued and a public ceremony held to give thanks. The Lo River was made sacred and fishing banned there, and the empress took a new title, "Sage Mother, Sovereign Divine" (*sheng-mu shen-huang*).¹⁰⁴ At the same time she announced a magnificent festival to formally venerate the omen and to change the reign title to *yung-ch'ang* to accord with it. The festival would also celebrate the opening of the *ming-t'ang*, an achievement of note since, although T'ai-tsung had proposed its construction as early as 631, the dynasty had thus far failed to act on it.¹⁰⁵ It was decreed that every single notable in the empire should assemble for the celebration--prefects, governors-general, and of course the numerous princes of the T'ang clan most of whom held provincial posts at the time.

For them the invitation was not a welcome one. Since 684 when two scions of the clan, sons of Kao-tsu, had fallen under suspicion as potentially subversive,¹⁰⁶ they had been progressively excluded from any meaningful role in politics or ceremonial, "orphaned outside [the capital] without a place to lodge their feet."¹⁰⁷ The empress, of course, had consistently claimed that Jui-tsung's interests demanded such exclusion, and Li Ching-yeh's claim that he would restore Chung-tsung by rebellion gave it some validity, but from the perspective of the princes it must have seemed she was now committed to usurpation. The opening of a *ming-t'ang*, so often used in the past as a legitimizing device,¹⁰⁸ added to their suspicions, and the princes began to fear they were being assembled in the capital to be massacred.¹⁰⁹ At the same time they realized that refusal en masse to attend would also condemn them and, faced with this dilemma, they chose to rebel in the cause of "saving the state" (*k'uang-fu*).

The moving spirit in their rising was Li Chuan, an uncle of Jui-tsung and at that time prefect of T'ung-chou 通州 in Shan-nan. Forging edicts and sending out messengers to his relatives in every direction, he worked against time and poor communications to coordinate the insurrection. His plans were ruined, however, and the secrecy of the enterprise destroyed by a premature levy of troops in Po-chou, Ho-pei, where the prefect was Li Ch'ung, a grandson of T'ai-tsung. This area, where there was a strong militarist tradition as well as separatist tendencies, would seem to have been fertile ground for rebellion, yet Li Ch'ung could raise no more than 5,000 men. Even these were not enthusiastic and melted away before engaging the imperial troops, killing their leader to avoid punishment. In Yü-chou near Loyang, Li Ch'ung's father, Li Chen 李貞, was prefect. He, realizing that his son's actions had doomed him, rebelled in turn. His small force also fled as imperial troops approached and with his defeat and suicide, the so-called Princes' Rebellion came to an end.¹¹⁰

Though this rebellion, lasting only a few weeks, scarcely constituted a threat to the empress' position, she permitted her judicial officers to implicate in it the entire Li clan so that horrifyingly disproportionate punishment fell on innocent and guilty alike. In this she far exceeded earlier usurpers like Wang Mang, and it seems fair to conclude that after the initial reprisals the executions were carried out chiefly to facilitate the usurpation. By mid-690 several hundred households had probably been extirpated, and only a few children survived as exiles in the remote South.¹¹¹

This particular aspect of the rising, of course, receives a good deal of attention in traditional historiography but, at the present time, the historians admit that neither the prestige of the T'ang name nor the (forged) edicts bearing the seal of Jui-tsung used by the rebels had evoked any significant support. The *Comprehensive Mirror*, while attributing the princes' failure to their lack of coordinated action and daring, admits that of the 500 members of Li Chen's group who bore official rank, all but one had been coerced into joining!¹¹² The empress' legitimacy seems, therefore, to have been accorded recognition at least by the provincial bureaucracy.

No force now stood between the empress and the throne, but still she was reluctant to move without further ideological legitimation. Signaling the end of the T'ang by divesting Lao Tzu of the honorific bestowed in 666,¹¹³ she presided over her delayed ceremonials in early 689. At the Lo River, what the sources call the most magnificent ceremonial since the T'ang began gave publicity to the omen of Heaven's favor, and at the *ming-t'ang* the empress preceded Jui-tsung in the offering, while sacrifices to her father followed those to the T'ang emperors. She herself carried the regalia (*ta-kuei*, *chen-kuei*) of the ancient Chou and later that year decreed the implementation of its calendar.¹¹⁴

In the same act which proclaimed the new calendar¹¹⁵ she promulgated an unusual piece of propaganda, one which not only reflected the common concern of usurpers for the rectification of names but showed the same flair for subtle modification which had characterized her earlier measures of ideological patronage of Confucianism. Suggesting that in the development of the writing system anomalies and corruptions which made understanding difficult had crept in, she created a dozen new characters for such common words as "day" and "month" as well as a new name for herself, using forms which would illustrate the foundation of the words and still preserve their meaning.¹¹⁶ In this measure she may have intended an implicit comparison of herself with the legendary inventor of Chinese script,¹¹⁷ but from another perspective it suggests a certain desperation. As the foundation of the palace examination a month later¹¹⁸ shows, she was still uncertain of the support of officialdom at the capital and so must have been particularly gratified when, in the seventh month of 690, Hsüeh Huai-i presented his commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra*. Recalling the strength of Buddhist loyalty within the bureaucracy from the *pai* controversy of 662, she must have known that the commentary could be as effective among them as among the Buddhist commoners.

In the preceding chapter I alluded to the key role played by the Buddhist tradition in facilitating the usurpation, and it is time not to place this judgment in context. First, we must recognize that the use of Buddhist legitimation was not new in medieval China and had, for instance, played an important role in the ideology of the Sui.¹¹⁹ Nor was it unknown for rulers to adopt Buddhist

titles, though usually in an informal fashion. Liang Wu-ti had been called Huang-ti p'u-sa and P'u-sa t'ien-tzu and certain of the T'o-pa Wei rulers were referred to by the sangha as tathāgata (*ju-lai*).¹²⁰ Conversely, the persecution or proscription of Buddhism seems to have been detrimental to dynastic survival.¹²¹ Antagonistic Confucians always maintained that excessive Buddhist patronage weakened a dynasty, but the point is that by the T'ang there was wide recognition that Buddhism could not be neglected in the formation of a state ideology. The case of the Empress Wu was distinctive in that, unlike earlier rulers, she was not simply a model of Buddhist kingly behavior but insisted upon the titles both of Ākavartīn and Maitreya. Her claim to be the Buddha incarnate was an attempt not only to disarm a potentially subversive cult, but also to inaugurate a new era in Buddhist world history.

Second, we must ask whether the *Great Cloud Sutra* and its commentary were of equal or greater importance than the various symbols of the Confucian tradition used in legitimizing Wu Tse-t'ien as emperor. To answer this question, we might first note that the *Sutra* itself was not by its nature an effective legitimizing device. T'ai-tsung had seen nothing subversive in it and, aside from its chiliastic vision, it did no more than tell that when Maitreya was reborn it would be in female form. The commentary is therefore crucial, for it not only identifies the empress as the tathāgata of the *Sutra* but supports the identification with all the weight of native prognostic tradition, both Confucian and Taoist. I commented previously on the ideological value of the commentary as a legitimizing force and here might expand these observations to clarify its relationship with other aspects of legitimation.

The invocation of the *mo-fa* is extremely important, for it permitted the stigmatization of all the empress' enemies, including the T'ang princes, as *devadatta* whose purge was righteous and necessary for the purification of the world. On similar grounds, acts like the murders of Li Ching-yeh and the former Crown Prince Hsien were specifically rationalized and by extension, other acts of punishment, past and future, could be justified. The infamy of the terror became more comprehensible and legitimation, once obtained, could be preserved by force. It is significant that immediately prior to her usurpation, the empress substantially augmented the Yü-lin Guard.¹²²

At least half the commentary deals with the omens of dynastic change proper to the tradition of Han Confucianism, and so is just as interested in depicting Wu Tse-t'ien as a culturally legitimate secular ruler as in showing her as a *parahita*. These signs of Heaven's favor seem to have been of more interest to the Chinese than claims of divinity, and it is interesting to note that when a skilled diviner enumerated for Chung-tsung the signs of usurpation and restoration, he made no mention at all of the *Sutra*.¹²³ In some senses, moreover, the Buddhist prognostications of the commentary were the least convincing of all and in 693, when Huai-i presented a new translation of the *Precious Rain Sutra* (*Pao-yü ching*), the interpolations attempted to clarify the time sequence of Maitreya's rebirth, to portray the empress even more strongly as a Ākavartīn, and also to supplement the conventional omens of the commentary with others, like the appearance of a five-colored cloud.¹²⁴

What seems to emerge here is that Buddhism alone was deficient as a legitimizing force. Stated in positive terms, it might be suggested that although the commentary provides a classic example of charismatic legitimation, it

emphasizes traditional or cultural legitimation to an equal degree. This is clear not only in its frequent resort to Confucian tradition, but in the very nature of the *Sutra's* prophecy: "You must know, therefore, that this is an instrumental (*fang-pien*) body and not a real woman's body."¹²⁵ If Chinese tradition outlawed female rule, a male deity in "instrumental" female form might win acceptance. The transformation, therefore, gave Wu what I have called structural legitimation.

Finally, to show that Buddhism played a subordinate role in the success of the usurpation, we must recall that the *Sutra* appeared only two months prior to the Chou foundation and at a time when the symbolism of the first Chou was already well established. Knowledge of its contents and their meaning could not have been widespread until at least a month *after* the usurpation when the temples were founded and the interpreters of the *Sutra* ordained. We see, moreover, no signs of Maitreya symbolism in the early days of the new regime: the color white was never used, and the empress did not assume the first of her Buddhist titles, "Golden Wheel," until the autumn of 693. She added "Maitreya" only in early 695 and divested herself of it less than a year later, after the *ming-t'ang* was burned.¹²⁶ Finally, I cannot overemphasize the fact that the *Sutra* was itself interpreted within the context of the native legitimizing tradition--classical works like the *Book of Changes* and the *Rites of Chou*, oracular texts like the *Ho-t'u*, and "Taoistic" devices like popular songs.

The influence of Buddhism in Wu's legitimation was, therefore, not negligible but neither was it predominant. Two months after the presentation of the *Sutra*, in September of 690, petitions which requested the empress to found the Chou dynasty began to appear.¹²⁷ One of them bore 60,000 names, representing officials, monks of both churches, commoners and foreigners. At the same time Jui-tsung requested that he be granted the Wu surname. The empress followed the custom of modest demurral until she was informed of the sighting of a phoenix, a sign since ancient times of the impending appearance of a sage-king.¹²⁸ A second omen, a flock of red birds in the audience hall, reminiscent of the red bird of the first Chou,¹²⁹ made it clear that Heaven could no longer be denied. Jui-tsung abdicated, becoming "emperor-expectant," and Wu Tse-t'ien ascended the throne as "holy and divine emperor" (*shen-sheng huang-ti*), choosing as her first reign title "Heaven-bestowed" (*t'ien-shou*), a reference to the omen of the Lo River whose confirmation she seemed to consider to be the key element in her successful usurpation.¹³⁰

In summation, it might be argued that the legitimation of Wu Tse-t'ien was the result of a long and, on her part, a partially unconscious process. Her outstanding administrative ability, her lengthy devotion to the aims of the T'ang, and her instinctive concern for the people made her in the course of thirty years a familiar, respected, and almost indispensable part of T'ang government. In the context of her achievements, the fact of her sex diminished in importance and to the vast majority of her subjects, those who supported her against the princes and against the rebels of 684, narrow and legalistic considerations of legitimacy became largely irrelevant. To the guardians of tradition, who were found mostly in the upper bureaucracy and whose opposition might have been directed as much against a forceful and absolutist temperament as against a woman ruler, she remained unacceptable well into the 680s. In the years immediately prior to the usurpation her dual policy of delation and manipulation of Confucian and Buddhist legitimation rendered them amenable to her

dynasty, but because of the central role of coercion, we cannot judge how sincerely they accepted her claim. I shall return in later chapters to this question.

Events in the Chou, particularly the manipulation of the succession, would demonstrate the need constantly to renew her legitimation, and this was to be a principal motif of the next fifteen years. As we will see, it was principally through the continuation of T'ang policies that the empress maintained her position, and it is time now to examine those policies in order to establish the lines of continuity.