

Chapter 9

THE CHOU DYNASTY

The Chou dynasty, which lasted from October 690 to February 705, was one of the shortest in Chinese history. The restoration of the T'ang, moreover, occurred not with the death of the Empress Wu but with her deposition. Why, after capping so long and successful a political career with China's only female usurpation, did Wu Tse-tien end her career in failure? But, one may ask, was this denouement actually a failure?

Was the empress, first of all, attempting to establish a dynasty which would endure for the conventional "myriad generations"? In all likelihood, it seems not. I stated earlier that her loyalty to the T'ang, or at least to its aims and achievements, was genuine, and that her regency and possibly her usurpation were undertaken in response to perceived crises. Beyond this she seems to have given signs at the dynastic changeover that the T'ang was not to be deprived permanently of the empire, and that her aim was to legitimate her own reign rather than to found a dynasty which the Wu clan would continue. These signs were both symbolic and substantive, and the first of them appeared at the very moment of the founding since there is no evidence that Jui-tsung formally abdicated. Since the third century A.D. dynastic founders had invariably used ritual abdication as a formal preface to the transfer of power,¹ and thus from the beginning the source of the Chou mandate was questionable. In substantive terms, it is important to note further that Jui-tsung was immediately declared his mother's successor, and although his title was *huang-ssu* rather than *t'ai-tzu*,² and although he had adopted the Wu surname, he held his position until 698, and then it was his elder brother Chung-tsung who replaced him.³ Although the latter also accepted the Wu surname, contemporaries must have seen this as simple expediency, and the important fact is that throughout the Chou the succession never left the hands of the Li. The ambitions of certain members of the Wu clan were to make the succession question the most acrimonious and bloody of the period but, as I shall show, the empress only briefly considered the possibility of a Wu successor. She may in fact have anticipated both the struggle and its form, since even prior to the restoration she began to construct a close web of familial relationships between the Wu and Li clans,⁴ and was to continue to do so in subsequent years. In 699 she formalized this policy by having the leading members of both clans swear an oath of concord at the *ming-t'ang*.⁵

A second important sign which pointed throughout the dynasty to the likelihood of a T'ang restoration was the lack of genuine instructional-symbolic innovation by the empress. In this she broke the well-defined pattern both of conquering dynastic founders like Han Kao-tsu and usurpers who planned an enduring dynasty like Sui Wen-ti. We find, for instance, no new law code, the foundation of no institutions of lasting importance, and no attempt at widespread social reform. With few exceptions, even the ritual coloration of the Chou varied little from the T'ang, and though red banners replaced the yellow of T'ang,⁶

and "Wu" replaced "T'ang" in place names throughout the empire, court dress and ceremonial, official titles and office names remained largely unchanged after 690. In view of the empress' demonstrated concern with ritual and nomenclature, it is particularly striking that she seems never to have chosen a "virtue and element" (*te-yün*) for the Chou.⁷ Chung-tsung, as we have noted, could remark at the restoration that the empress "did not disregard the old things," and on grounds like these it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Chou is best seen as a caretaker regime and, indeed, was regarded in this way by the Empress Wu herself.

I am not saying, of course, that this constitutes a full explanation for what seems the relative inactivity of the empress during the Chou in comparison with the decades prior to 690. Other factors were certainly present, the most important being the growing inflexibility of the central government as the T'ang gained greater security, and also the relative success of its gradualist approach to the paramount state concerns of consolidation of imperial authority at the expense of the aristocracy. I have earlier attempted to show how closely the empress identified herself with these policies.

In addition, we must recognize that throughout the Chou the empress' position remained rather tenuous. She must have known that the acceptance of her claim to be emperor was based chiefly on personal or charismatic factors, but that at the same time a female Son of Heaven was a semantic and cultural violation of the Confucian tradition to which the elite among her subjects, the group through whom she had to work, gave perhaps their deepest loyalty. For this reason, her freedom of action was restricted, and she found herself more subject to the wishes of the bureaucracy than might have been the case with a male ruler of similarly absolutist temperament. Her political defeats, which ranged from matters like a failure to effect a planned reorganization of the provinces in the mid-690s to her inability to protect her favorites, were more numerous than is generally recognized, and although she was able to continue the trend toward dilution of ministerial power, it is of great importance to recognize that without the presence of her husband or son on the throne, she was less effective in government than she had been prior to 690.

These considerations, although suggestive, still do not throw much light on our earlier question of how the empress was able to endure even for fifteen years in her anomalous position, and how eventually she invalidated her claim. As will be pointed out, her sensitivity to bureaucratic loyalties and her skillful manipulation of the succession were factors in the maintenance of her position, but for a wider explanation we might turn to a traditional source. The *New T'ang History*, comparing her success to the failure of Empress Wei, says "reward and punishment came from her alone and she did not borrow [the authority of] ministers. She usurped above but governed well below (*chien yü shang erh chih yü hsia*) and so could rule the empire."⁸ If this is the case, it might be argued that the empress used the same combination of political acumen and popular support to which she owed her rise as the basis of rule during most of the Chou. It was only in her last years, after she had delegated authority to unworthy favorites, permitted corruption, and neglected the state, that she was forced to retire.

It is difficult to tell if her deposition occurred because she had lost popular support, though what evidence there is would suggest this was not the case.⁹

It is equally difficult to judge with certainty whether any but the very small number of ministers actually involved in the coup of 705 would have participated in it had they been offered the chance. The possibility exists, therefore, of a very simple explanation for the deposition--superior planning on the part of a small number of alienated bureaucrats. Still the absence of identifiable support for the empress at the end would seem to indicate that one of my earlier suggestions remains valid. The source of her legitimacy was personal, not normative, and her occupancy of the throne was an aberration accepted partially because it was seen to be temporary. The level of her performance was, therefore, subject to a scrutiny more rigorous than might be the case early in more conventional dynasties, and only while she continued to fulfill successfully the well-defined *role* of emperor¹⁰ were her claims actually to *be* emperor accepted.

In sum, Wu Tse-t'ien was emperor by sufferance, her authority deriving not from ritual abdication and, therefore, not in the fullest sense from Heaven. Undoubtedly certain of her ministers continued to regard her as a usurper or, at best, as a self-proclaimed regent. In these circumstances she needed to constantly demonstrate that the "young prince" was not ready for rule, or that she was more capable than he and was preserving rather than changing his heritage, or both. In these circumstances there also existed ample precedent for ministers, or for the young prince himself, to decide that the regency should be brought to an end. What the *de facto* ruler in this situation might consider treason, could be regarded from the opposite perspective as an act of Confucian loyalty and, indeed, of ministerial duty.

The history of the Chou may perhaps be more readily understood against this background.

In spite of its short duration, the Chou might be divided for analytical purposes into four stages which seem to conform, admittedly with some artificiality, to the traditional rhythm of the dynastic cycle. The division between these periods is not always clearcut, but certain turning points may be identified and, using this form of analysis, we might posit that the first five years made up the great days of the dynasty. In this period the state was prosperous, expansive and confident, and the court was characterized by administrative efficiency. In 696, however, a downturn began, and from China's massive defeat by the Tibetans early that year, serious problems of a financial and military nature arose and were not arrested until late 697 with the gradual suppression of the foreign threat and the rise to ministerial hegemony of Ti Jen-chieh. This "dynastic revival" gave the Chou a second period of at least superficial prosperity, but after Ti's death in 700 and the rise to unbridled supremacy of the Chang faction, corruption began to run rife and a rapid decline set in which even the removal of the empress in 705 was unable to stem. Throughout the period, and as counterpoints to this rhythm, there were also to be seen the general continuation of T'ang policies upon which I have already commented, and the gradual decline of the empress' health and capabilities, especially in the final period as she approached her eightieth birthday.

The Chou began, as might be expected, with several new ceremonial arrangements designed to emphasize the transfer of the Mandate. These consisted chiefly of such symbolic measures as the rearrangement of ancestral temples and sacrifices,¹¹ the changing of the banners to red, the substitution of "Wu" for "T'ang" in place names and, most importantly, the transfer of the seat of government to Loyang which had become the "Sanctified Capital" in 684. The declaration of a

new capital was, of course, an act redolent with the traditional symbolism of imperial prerogative, and we have seen earlier how in economic terms Loyang was a logical capital site.¹² At this time practical motives of a different sort were also present, for it is likely that the empress was attempting to dissociate herself from the T'ang capital and from the loyalist clans who had been drawn by official posts to settle there. As an extra measure of insurance, at least 100,000 households from seven *chou* surrounding Ch'ang-an were resettled near Loyang to strengthen the new center, and it is probably more than coincidence that they were chosen from areas where the concentration of *fu-ping* units was highest.¹³ Ch'ang-an remained the western capital and was placed in the immediate charge of one of the Wu princes.¹⁴

It is tempting also to see in this eastward shift of the capital a replication of the pattern of the Han restoration or even to suggest that Loyang's Buddhist associations and the prophecy of the commentary on the *Great Cloud Sutra* played a part. Whatever her motives, however, the empress rapidly set about turning Loyang into a worthy rival to Ch'ang-an, beginning the huge task of walling the city in 692,¹⁵ and continuing her earlier program of building temples, monuments and public works. The *ming-t'ang* complex became larger and more elaborate, and in early 695 she completed the "Pivot of Heaven" (*t'ien-shu*), a pillar of iron and bronze over a hundred feet high erected at the South Gate of the Forbidden City to commemorate the "ten thousand virtues of the Great Chou."¹⁶ These constructions were enormously expensive--the cost of the pillar, for instance, was said to be beyond estimation¹⁷--but, at the same time, their symbolic value was great. They constituted a demonstration of self-confidence by the empress, contributed to the "imperial air" (*wang-ch'i*) of her capital and, in a more concrete sense, were often measures of patronage of the type we have seen to be so important in the creation of state ideology.

I showed earlier that this was true particularly in the case of Buddhism, and fine examples of financial patronage are found not only in the expansion of the *ming-t'ang* complex, but also in the fabrication of the "seven treasures" (*ch'i-pao*, Sansk. *sapta ratna*) in 693 after Hsüeh Huai-i presented a second sutra, that of the "Precious Rain" (*Pao-yü ching*), which reemphasized the empress' identity as a *śakravartīn*.¹⁸ The Buddhist church was to benefit in numerous other ways during early Chou--by gaining precedence over Taoism, encouraging the long ban on the butchering of animals, and the stiffening of penalties for crimes against church property--but it is a measure of the empress' experience and skill that she did not forget Confucian sensitivities during this early period. As we shall soon see, her substantive concern with the linked issues of education, examinations and official appointments continued to grow at least superficially, and at the same time she distributed symbolic favors even-handedly. It is interesting to note, for example, that in the same ten-day period in which she founded the Great Cloud temples, she conferred a new honorific on Confucius, and later in the dynasty was similarly to honor his favorite disciples.¹⁹ She modestly refused early requests to magnify her own titles and hesitated when it was suggested in 691 that she perform the *feng-shan* sacrifices at Mount Sung in Honan.²⁰ When she eventually performed the rite in early 695, it was immediately after carrying out the great sacrifices to Heaven and Earth at the southern suburb, and it was followed by the declaration of a year's freedom from the *tsu* tax for the entire empire!²¹

A second major way in which the empress appealed to Confucian sentiment was

in her treatment of the few surviving members of the T'ang clan. There were well-established precedents, though too often honored in the breach, whereby a former imperial house was permitted by its successor to exist in dignity, though usually under surveillance. In the early Chou Jui-tsung and his immediate family seem to have lived under virtual house arrest,²² but as early as 691 the empress began to confer princely rank on her grandsons, beginning with the sons of the former Crown Prince Hsien and later extending the privilege to the five sons of Jui-tsung.²³ Because various members of the Wu clan also bore princely rank, this created a situation unprecedented at least since the Sui reunification but, considering the strength of T'ang loyalism, it was clearly a politic move to permit the coexistence of two "imperial" clans.

In measures like these it seems clear that the empress was concerned early in the new reign principally to reinforce her credentials to rule, and that she not only made provision for her own support and security, but was careful simultaneously to balance measures which emphasized dynastic change with others which could be construed as indications that the change was not necessarily permanent. Her purpose, of course, was to broaden her appeal to those literati who might be willing to serve the Chou in the belief that they were protecting the T'ang heritage. As a further enticement, she moved very quickly to alleviate the terror which had been the greatest source of bureaucratic alienation since its initiation in 684.

The Chou, for instance, was scarcely six months old when Chou Hsing, the leader of the so-called evil officials, was charged with treason, found guilty and murdered on the road to exile.²⁴ According to one source, he had been responsible for several thousand deaths,²⁵ and though we might expect a certain exaggeration in the figure, it does not seem unreasonable when we consider that an upright censor, permitted to investigate in mid-692, found him responsible for no fewer than 850 miscarriages of justice.²⁶ The empress, of course, had been long aware of this danger, but prior to the usurpation had shown little scruple about using it to her advantage. Now, however, while she permitted Lai Chün-ch'en to take over Chou Hsing's apparatus of denunciation and punishment, she responded to criticism of her harshness by the appointment of good and courageous judicial officers to balance the bad, and by herself taking a personal interest in important cases.

Most famous of the good censors was Hsü Yu-kung, a man she appointed in spite of his fearful refusals of office immediately after the dynastic change,²⁷ and she soon added to the censorate men like Yen Shan-ssu, Chu Ching-tse, and Chou Chü²⁸ who spoke with such conviction against the system of delation that after mid-691, the *Comprehensive Mirror* reports, punishments began to diminish.²⁹ In that same year, when Lai accused seven high officials of rebellious conspiracy and managed to extract false confessions from them, the empress listened to the plea of a ten-year-old boy and then released them from prison to conduct their defense before her and prove themselves innocent.³⁰

The question which must be asked here is why the empress permitted Lai Chün-ch'en to remain in office and continue his activities after his dishonesty had been exposed. Several conjectures were earlier offered about the reasons for her initiation of and support for the terror in general, and so long as a woman occupied the throne most of these remained valid. At this time, however, a more concrete reason existed in the appearance in late 691 of a campaign advocating

the establishment of Wu Ch'eng-ssu as crown prince.³¹ Initially the empress was cool to the proposal, but seems at the same time to have flirted briefly with the idea, since she permitted open representations in its favor to be made, and when the expected storm of ministerial opposition arose, Ch'eng-ssu allied himself with Lai to eliminate the most inflexible of his opponents. In subsequent months several "plots" were discovered, and numerous officials were exiled or executed. It is all too likely that the empress was not really deceived and permitted the destruction of so many persons principally to reduce the influence of T'ang loyalism and to see whether the court could be intimidated into the support of Wu claims. She was conscious, however, that she could not go too far, and so balanced the influence of the Lai-Wu faction by conferring virtual invulnerability on their most prominent enemy, Li Chao-te.

Chao-te was a *ming-ching* graduate from a family of officeholders who was vice president of the Secretariat in 691. An uncompromising and outspoken Confucian even when in office and hence unpopular with his colleagues, he nevertheless survived as paramount minister for two years from the time of his elevation to *tsai-hsiang* status in mid-692.³² He was strongly opposed to a Wu succession, and shortly after the matter arose he told the empress that "from ancient times I have never heard that a nephew became Son of Heaven and [then] set up ancestral temples for his aunt. Your Majesty, moreover, received the guardianship (*ku-t'o*) [of the empire] from Kao-tsung and if you give it to Ch'eng-ssu, then he will be without ancestral sacrifices!"³³ A few months later the empress accepted his argument that Ch'eng-ssu was a threat to her own power, and she abruptly dismissed her nephew along with his relatives and supporters from their high posts, necessitating the governmental reorganization which left Li Chao-te and his adherents supreme.³⁴ Wu Ch'eng-ssu was never again to hold *tsai-hsiang* status except for one month in 697. His fall illustrates one of the most remarkable of the differences between Wu Tse-t'ien and other female powerholders in China. Although she frequently appointed Wu princes to positions of command in expeditionary armies and the Yü-lin Guard, she cannot be said to have used male relatives in other ways to underwrite her political power.³⁵

The career of Li Chao-te served the empress' purposes even with its unhappy end. During early Chou Li served as a vigilant counteracting force to Lai Chün-ch'en, curbing Lai's excesses and even frustrating his attempts to marry into the great northeastern aristocracy,³⁶ but the empress also clearly saw that Li's role could last no longer than Lai's. When Lai was exiled for corruption in late 694, she acted simultaneously on complaints about Li's excessive power and arbitrary nature to also send him from the capital,³⁷ and in 697 she had both men executed on the same day even though Li was probably innocent of any capital crime.³⁸ Because Li Chao-te was also the most prominent defender of T'ang interests during the succession dispute, his fate shows how the empress could manipulate the court factions to simultaneously keep both her own and the T'ang restorationist partisans from dominance over the throne.

Li Chao-te's victory in expelling the Wu clan from their powerful positions in 692 was a real one, and there are indications that the empress feared that it would lead the court to regard the succession as settled and so deprive her of a valuable political weapon. Thus she began the year 693 with a magnificent ceremonial which was remarkable not so much because she personally composed the music for the 900 dancers, but because she chose her two nephews to make the secondary offerings, excluding Jui-tsung from the proceedings.³⁹ Shortly thereafter she secretly had Jui-tsung's two favorite consorts executed on charges of

sorcery laid by a slave girl. Jui-tsung was either too cowardly or too diplomatic even to raise the matter, but since one of the consorts was the mother of the future emperor Hsüan-tsung, the incident undoubtedly had its effect on his later attitude toward his grandmother.⁴⁰ As heir apparent, Jui-tsung was in the delicate position of being the most likely focus of any restoration plot, and the empress seems to have deliberately emphasized the insecurity of his position two months later when she first changed the princely titles of his five sons, and then publicly executed two officials who had paid him a secret visit.⁴¹ On this occasion he himself was denounced as a traitor, and for a brief period the T'ang family's prospects hung by a very thin thread. He was saved, however, when one of his retainers, while being interrogated by Lai Chün-ch'en, attempted to cut out his own heart to show his master's loyalty. The empress is said to have sighed at her inability to know her own son when she heard of it and halted the proceedings so that, as the *Comprehensive Mirror* remarks, "Jui-tsung, from this [time] was safe (*te-mien*)."⁴² The empress seems at this time to have decided definitively in favor of a Li succession, and she did not allow any further discussion of the matter until 698 when Chung-tsung's appointment was being considered.

I suggested earlier an element of artificiality in the succession dispute, contending that the empress' attitude was determined not by any serious intent to have a nephew succeed her, but rather by her desire to attain certain political ends. Among these the most important was undoubtedly the continued expansion of imperial prerogatives at the expense of those of the *tsai-hsiang* group. This becomes abundantly clear when we place the succession dispute within the context of other measures more overtly directed toward the same purpose.

Scholars have for some time recognized that during Sui and early T'ang a key problem for the imperial house was the reduction of the pretensions and the actual power of the great houses whose members had not only monopolized governmental authority but had also so often usurped the throne during the period of disunion. An earlier chapter discussed at length some of the ramifications of this problem and showed that the T'ang solution lay essentially in the dilution of the power of the great clans through the "bureaucratization" of status.

T'ai-tsung, as we have seen, attempted to establish the principle that status was dependent upon service to the T'ang, and as a result he could attract to the highest posts in his bureaucracy men of aristocratic or at least officeholding background. Particularly in the case of his *tsai-hsiang*, men of proud genealogy were predominant, but because of his unique talents, the collegial-style government which marked most of his reign was highly successful. T'ai-tsung was a big enough man to coopt the best of the well-born of his generation. Inevitably, however, the chief ministers developed a sense of initiative and group consciousness which T'ai-tsung's successors, Kao-tsung and Empress Wu, seem to have regarded as highly dangerous and, as suggested earlier, the united opposition of the *tsai-hsiang* to her rise led to the destruction of their leadership and a period of over two decades when they were regarded by the throne as rivals rather than partners in government. Only in the last years of Kao-tsung, and under P'ei Yen's competent leadership,⁴³ did signs of collegiality begin to reappear. It seems possible that had Chung-tsung supported the aspirations of this group and allied himself with it against his mother, he might have avoided deposition. Instead he alienated P'ei Yen by threatening to continue, in the persons of himself and his wife, the pattern of emperor-consort family government,

and thus threw the *tsai-hsiang* into the arms of the empress during her seizure of power in 684. P'ei's role in Chung-tsung's deposition was viewed by the empress as having the unwelcome effect of reinforcing the prestige and ambitions of the chief ministers and, as already suggested, this may have played a role in P'ei's downfall. His successor as paramount minister, Liu Wei-chih, perished in 687 largely because he fought the empress' assertion of imperial over ministerial prerogatives.⁴⁴ Until the rise of Li Chao-te in the early 690s and Ti Jen-chieh in the late 690s, no dominant personality rose from among the *tsai-hsiang*. The tenuous nature of the empress' legitimacy required that this be the case.

The manner in which the empress weakened ministerial power was not original nor, indeed, did it create an irreversible trend, for Hsüan-tsung's government, at least in its early years, bore greater resemblance to that of T'ai-tsung than to that of the empress.⁴⁵ This is just one more example of the general lack of innovation during Chou mentioned earlier. The insecurity of the empress' legitimacy dictated that she work as closely as possible within the traditional framework. Despite occasional appearances of fundamental reform, she changed only the de facto balance of power at the top, and when her two immediate successors proved unable to fill her shoes, the *status quo ante* of T'ai-tsung's time reappeared. The *New T'ang History* "judgment" quoted earlier demonstrates that her methods did not go unnoticed by the dynastic historians.

Her chief tactic was the manner in which she used her unquestioned right of appointment and dismissal. To begin with, she expanded the number of ministers holding *tsai-hsiang* status while at the same time shortening their tenure. Thus we find that in the late 690s as many as sixteen men held the rank, compared to a previous high of ten⁴⁵ and a much lower average. The highest estimate for T'ai-tsung's reign is twenty-nine *tsai-hsiang* in twenty-one years while the corresponding figure for the years 684-705 is sixty-six.⁴⁶ Under T'ai-tsung, the average tenure was seven years and under the empress, just over two. This contrast is suggestive, of course, of two highly different political styles, and it seems no accident that factionalism was a much more pronounced phenomenon in the Chou.

During the Chou only a tiny proportion of ministers reached *tsai-hsiang* rank before the age of sixty and that even then ministers were shifted with such frequency that consolidation and entrenchment were impossible. Lou Shih-te, whose career was otherwise remarkable for lengthy tenure in high posts without demotion,⁴⁷ held four different positions and was four times sent away from the capital on military duty during his six years as *tsai-hsiang*. Even Ti Jen-chieh, who enjoyed the fullest trust of the empress, held no fewer than seven different positions during his three years as *tsai-hsiang*! Furthermore, a fairly large number of such appointments were preceded by such terms as "provisional" or "acting" (*chien-chiao*, *shih* 試)⁴⁸ so that appointees were openly made conscious of a certain instability in regard to their tenure or qualifications. An astounding eighty percent of the Chou *tsai-hsiang* suffered dismissal, some to exile or death and others simply to a lower post. For the reign of T'ai-tsung, the corresponding figure is thirty-three percent.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that among the early writings of the perspicacious historian Liu Chieh-chi is a *fu* of 695 which warns of the dangers of aspiring to high office. He entitled it, "Think Carefully" (*Ssu-chen fu*).⁵⁰

The overlap of function and responsibility inherent in the role of the

tsai-hsiang could be exploited by the empress to foster dissension and rivalry. She did this by simultaneous, and sometimes also parallel, appointment of political enemies. Ti Jen-chieh, for instance, was the first elevated to *tsai-hsiang* on the same day as Wu Yu-ning, and when Ti became Chancellery president in mid-698, Wu San-ssu was made his opposite number in the Secretariat. Imperial relatives, sycophants, and the occasional mystic expert only in Taoist magical practices⁵¹ were seldom to have lengthy tenure, but they were often appointed simply to balance the opinions of their better qualified colleagues. Their very appointment tended to devalue *tsai-hsiang* status and, by contrast, to elevate the imperial institution.

Other traditional control methods were directed to the same end. Special rewards, usually in the form of personal commendations, silks or official rank for the recipient's sons were conferred in ways that would remind ministers that distinction was earned not merely by passing an examination or gaining high office, but by pleasing the ruler while in office. The empress used ministerial remonstrance, something for which she is often praised,⁵² to encourage criticism directed against her as a person, and discourage attempts to limit the scope of imperial power. She permitted ministers to openly ridicule her fondness for auspicious omens or her penchant for making excessive numbers of appointments,⁵³ but at the same time she discouraged the use of arguments based on precedent in memorials to her, lest such precedents limit her prerogatives. She also punished participants in unseemly quarrels which occurred in the imperial presence.⁵⁴ Certain questions, like the succession or the role of her favorites, she regarded as "household matters" and throughout the Chou refused to permit ministers to raise them, often on pain of death.⁵⁵ This, of course, made nonsense of the ancient *tsai-hsiang* claim of omnicompetence, but skillfully preserved the appearance of free discussion in the court and undoubtedly enhanced the empress' popularity among those too far removed to perceive the reality.

Finally, there were times during Chou when the empress simply excluded the *tsai-hsiang* from her counsel, preferring to seek advice from outside their circle. Early in the dynasty her chief alternative seems to have been a group of non-official advisers, popularly called the "North Gate Scholars" (*pei-men hsüeh-shih*). Often considered the predecessors of the Hanlin Academy,⁵⁶ these men are first mentioned as a group in the year 674, when Ssu-ma Kuang tells us that they began not only to compile the literary works later ascribed to the empress but were "secretly ordered to participate in decisions in order to divide the power of the *tsai-hsiang*."⁵⁷ It is difficult to know how extensively their services were used, though the empress did turn to them, for instance, when her regular ministers balked at the grandiose nature of her *ming-t'ang* plans, and she had the group's leader, Liu Wei-chih, second P'ei Yen in recommending Chung-tsung's deposition.⁵⁸ The standard sources make little mention of them during the Chou, and perhaps because many entered the regular bureaucracy, their coherence as a group was destroyed by then. It is also possible that the empress found less use for them as she turned more to her own family and favorites, some of whom she realized were not without talent. Wu San-ssu, for instance, came almost to monopolize capital architectural projects, and the Princess T'ai-p'ing and Shang-kuan Wan-erh seem to have served as confidantes and secret advisers.⁵⁹ In the last years of the dynasty the Chang brothers and their many hangers-on played a similar role, enjoying privileged access to the empress and sometimes refusing access to her even to the *tsai-hsiang*!

It is important, as we view this process, to recognize two things. First, the empress enjoyed only a partial success in reducing the prerogatives of her ministers and was forced on occasion to accept defeat in matters as trivial as the curbing of her extravagance and as fundamental as her ultimate admission that the succession concerned not just her household but the entire empire.⁶⁰ Second, although the bureaucracy was progressively weakened and restricted at the top, it continued to expand and develop in the lower levels as both entry into and promotion within it were facilitated. As a consequence, an ever-larger sphere of bureaucratic activity tended to slip out from under imperial control.

Early in 692, for instance, when the empress appointed to lower capital positions a large number of provincials recommended by special commissioners and did so "without inquiring [whether they were] worthy or stupid," there was a common saying to the effect that even sawyers and pottery menders had become officials.⁶¹ In 695 Liu Chih-chi pointed out in a much admired memorial that the empress' yearly Acts of Grace conferred so many promotions and honorific ranks that official robes and insignia were encountered everywhere. He compared her "excessive" appointments to gravel in need of sifting.⁶²

Without exact figures it is difficult to estimate, except in this impressionistic sense, how greatly the bureaucracy expanded during the Chou, and the task is made even more difficult by the fact that the new men seem to have been absorbed either into nominally menial jobs or through auxiliary appointments, rather than through the creation of new positions.⁶³ But for our present purpose it is perhaps sufficient to demonstrate the existence of the trend. The Chou bureaucracy may not have been characterized by quality below the fifth rank, but it was opening a way to genuine social mobility. Its lower ranks constituted a huge pool from which those who showed ability might be drawn out and elevated to the charmed circle of fifth-rank officialdom. For approximately one-fifth of the Empress Wu's *tsai-hsiang*, we have no information whatever on their antecedents or previous careers, a fact which suggests that men of obscure origin were at last reaching the highest posts and that at least some succeeded in doing so even without formal examination.

The pressure from below which this phenomenon brought to bear upon those already occupying high posts helps to explain, for instance, why the coup which deposed the empress was the work exclusively of high officials, and it also helps to explain why the Chou saw no further attack on the great aristocracy in the form of clan lists or marriage bans. Such measures were no longer needed. If the *tsai-hsiang* group in the Chou constituted a representative sample, it seems clear that the scions of the great clans were coming to define their status in bureaucratized terms by writing examinations and accepting capital positions but, at the same time, were able to control only a small proportion of the most pivotal offices.⁶⁴ In other words, even if they continued to fight for their own interests, they now did so on a field chosen by the throne and which undermined their old regional power bases. Little attempt seems to have been made to balance appointments on a regional basis, and this would suggest that the great aristocracy was coalescing into a more coherent, less divided interest group. Subject to pressures both from above and below in their bureaucratic role, the great clans were clearly on the defensive during the Chou and sought more to maintain than to advance their positions. They were by no means impotent and revived under Hsüan-tsung,⁶⁵ but by the eighth century power struggles had become more internalized than before, and the throne now played

a more powerful role thanks to the work of the Empress Wu.

One more consequence of the widening of the road to office was the extremely high quality of those officials who reached the top. The traditional historians who so frequently criticize the empress are also consistent in their admission that her abilities were great enough to attract into her service men like Ti Jen-chieh, Li Chao-te, Hsü Yu-kung, Wei Yüan-chung, and many others whose talents were hardly inferior to the ministers who had surrounded T'ai-tsung. Ssuma Kuang, summarizing earlier views found in the dynastic histories, says that although the empress made too many appointments, she rapidly dismissed or executed the incompetents, and that because of her decisiveness and her abilities to use reward and punishment and to recognize talent, "the brilliant and worthy of the time were all in rivalry to be employed by her."⁶⁶ This is undoubtedly true, but surely it was also the case that these talented men recognized the validity and the value of many of her wider aims and desired to contribute to their achievement.

Perhaps the strongest indication that this was so is that the political uncertainty, factionalism, and the continued existence of the terror of early Chou could not undermine its efficient if unambitious administration. The sharpest contemporary criticism of the government, as we have seen, centered upon excessive number of punishments and appointments. There were no signs of unrest outside the capital. Corruption, even when it involved the empress' closest supporters, was dealt with swiftly.⁶⁷ For reasons to be mentioned shortly, a demographic shift was beginning to come to the notice of the court, and in this period attempts were made to tighten the census procedure and to create new administrative units to deal with the growth of population in the Yangtze valley.⁶⁸ Both the Boards of Civil Office and of War were expanded, presumably to keep pace with their work load, and decree examinations were held, sometimes at the rate of two a year.⁶⁹ We find little evidence anywhere of maladministration but rather that "the minds of the people were made up [in the empress' favor]."⁷⁰ Another sign of her self-confidence was the creation of the *Record of Current Politics* (*Shih-cheng chi*) which recorded her every pronouncement and sent it monthly to the History Office.⁷¹

The Chou suffered no setback in foreign affairs until 696 and, indeed, China's prestige among its neighbors seemed to rival its mid-century height. Tribute missions appeared from Central Asia, India and Indochina, a new king was invested in Silla in 693,⁷² and by 696 over 1,000,000 foreigners had sought and been granted permission to settle within the empire. The largest group to enter were 670,000 Western Turks of the Shih-hsing tribe, and large numbers of Ch'iang and Man tribesmen were also incorporated.⁷³ In December of 692 two of the finest generals of their age, Wang Hsiao-chieh and T'ang Hsiu-ching,⁷⁴ who had earlier persuaded the empress that the time was ripe for the recovery of the Four Garrisons, inflicted heavy defeats on the Tibetans and reestablished the An-hsi protectorate at Kucha for the first time in twenty-two years. It is interesting to note that the empress seems not to have regarded this as expansionism, for on being informed of the victory, she remarked that the old borders of the *chen-kuan* era [627-650] had been restored completely and now were quiet.⁷⁵ The frontier remained peaceful until early 694 when the Eastern Turks found themselves a brilliant if erratic leader in the new khan, Mo-ch'o (Qapagan), who soon dominated much of Central Asia and became the most formidable enemy of the Chou.⁷⁶ He wasted no time in testing China's border defenses but Chinese

arms, even when led by Hsüeh Huai-i or one of the Wu princes, were still formidable. These early raids were sporadic and brought Mo-ch'o so little profit that he soon asked to submit, and in the winter of 695 he was permitted to do so with a generalship and a ducal title.⁷⁷

Mo-ch'o's submission was in a sense the high-water mark of the Chou. It was the last foreign policy success the dynasty was to enjoy for quite some time and, moreover, was symbolic of the success of the policy of buying acceptance through growth of rewards which had characterized domestic administration and, with the single exception of the Four Garrisons, foreign affairs also. In the widest sense, the aim of this policy for the empress was to secure her legitimation, permitting prosperity and inertia to do their work of reconciling bureaucrat and commoner to the unprecedented rule of a female emperor. This policy was, however, costly. Bureaucratic expansion, public works and patronage of Buddhism accounted for much of the budgetary increase, but defense costs also mounted rapidly as some of China's neighbors began to take advantage of internal dissension. The empress had been successful in augmenting the *fu-ping* system and in the establishment of some new garrisons, especially in the South,⁷⁸ but it rapidly became evident that the demands on the state treasury were simply too great. Thus as early as mid-694 the empress had tried to assess her officials the equivalent of two months' salary to support the military, but had been forced to withdraw the assessment in the face of general opposition.⁷⁹ In the same month, the growing shortage of metal was demonstrated when farm implements had to be melted down for the construction of the *t'ien-shu*.⁸⁰

At about the same time, officials began to identify still other causes of the financial problem, foremost among them the failure of earlier attempts to tighten census registration. In 695 Li Chiao, a censor of distinguished lineage, a *chin-shih* graduate and a man of recognized literary talent, drew attention to the growing number of vagrant households, a problem which he asserted had existed for some years.⁸¹ He did not directly blame the central government for the phenomenon but rather the indifference of local officials who were lax about identity cards (*chien-ch'a*), and he pointed out the futility of recent attempts to have local officials reform the situation. He offered four solutions. First, the present law should be clarified and the government should show a tolerant attitude to present offenders. Second, a time limit of 100 days should be set, during which the squatters could give themselves up and opt either to remain where they were or return to their original homes. Third, in either case they were to receive amnesty and financial aid to get a new start. Fourth, the whole reform should be supervised by special censors sent out from the capital.

The empress is said to have approved this plan and actually to have appointed the censors before she was forced to shelve it because of ministerial objections whose grounds we are not given.⁸² There is evidence from Tunhuang that a similar plan was implemented about 702-3, but its effect could not have been great since Hsüan-tsung faced the problem in greatly magnified form early in his reign.⁸³ It seems likely rather that the Chou continued to suffer from the problems Li Chiao connected with the vagrants--tax evasion, local conflicts, and the too-rapid growth of urban population--but that they were not viewed as serious enough to require a concerted effort at reform.

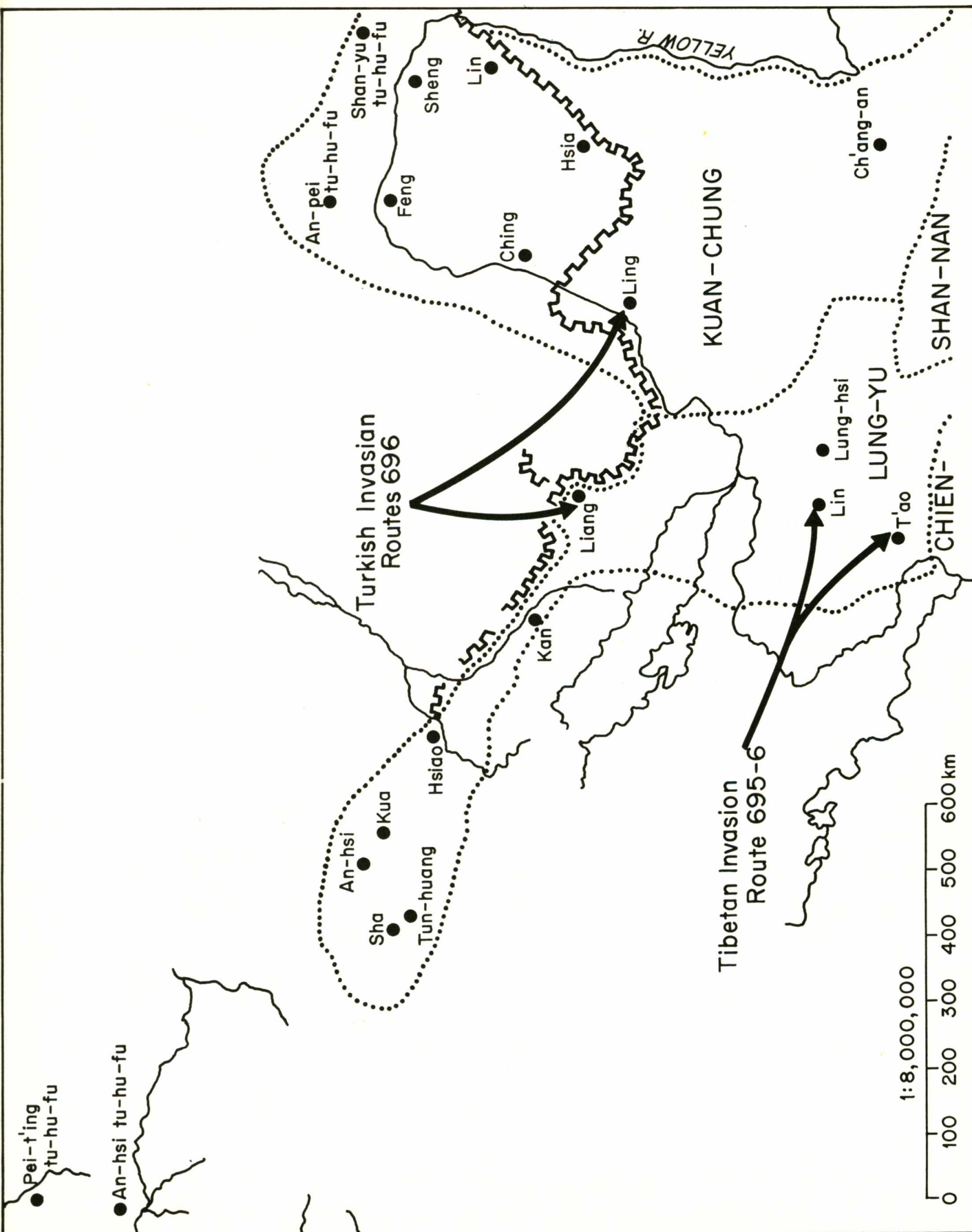
These first signs of economic strain, followed by two successive political defeats, coincided for the empress with the severe personal disappointment and

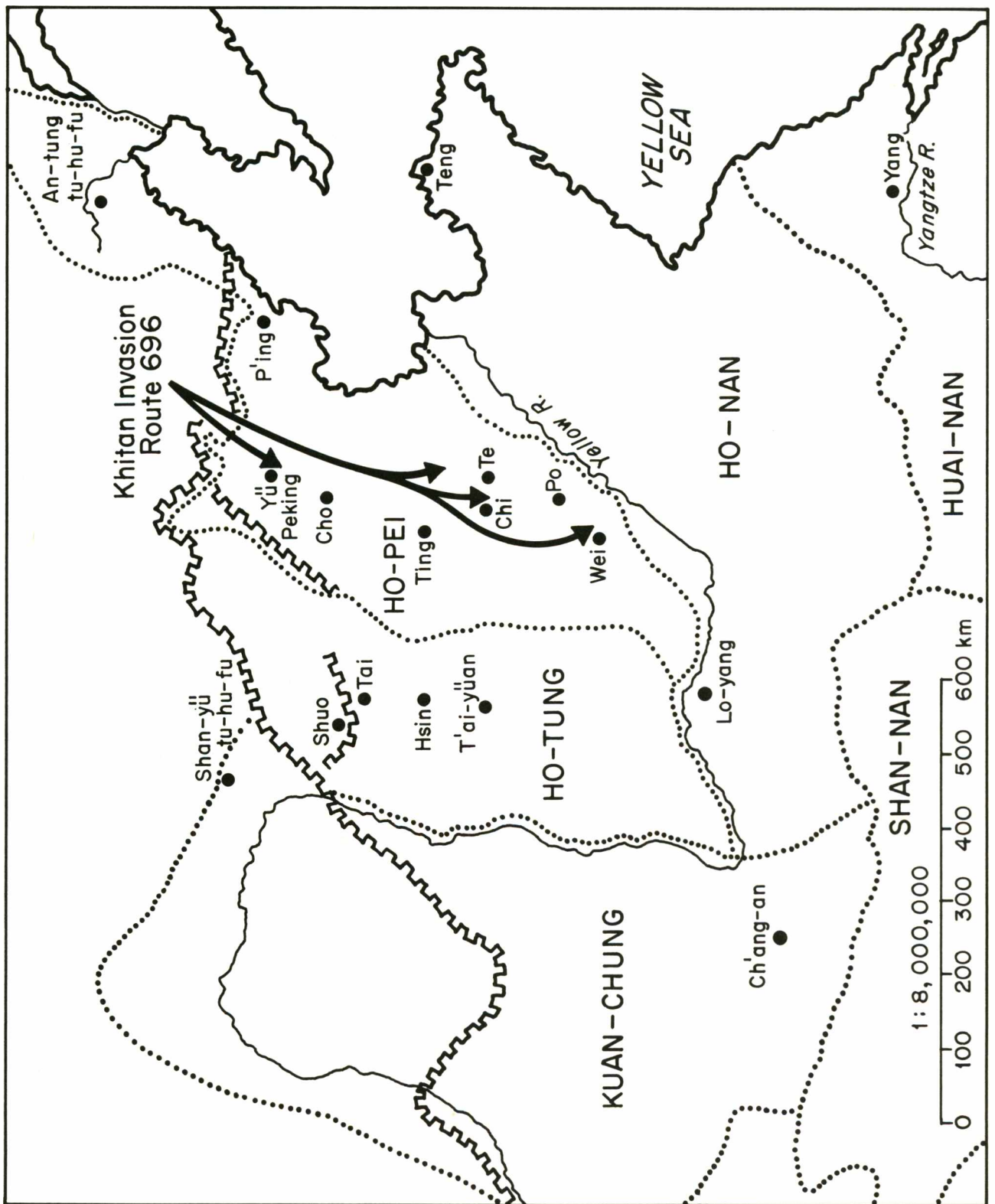
weakening of prestige caused by Hsüeh Huai-i's burning of the *ming-t'ang* complex in early 695. We have already noted how this event led to a shift in her ideological priorities from Buddhism to Confucianism, particularly in symbolic terms.⁸⁴ Moreover, it seems to have fostered an atmosphere of freer speech at the court. Frank criticism of her plans to rebuild the *ming-t'ang*⁸⁵ were voiced as well as complaints, already noted, about excessive appointments and rewards and lax provincial administration.

The empress' response varied: she agreed to build a smaller version of the *ming-t'ang*, rid herself of Hsüeh Huai-i and other favorites⁸⁶ and, toward the end of the year, abolished the principle of anonymity (*hu-ming*) she had herself introduced into the examinations, probably in 690.⁸⁷ While her reasons for this are not altogether clear, it seems likely that such a measure would have appealed to those already in office who would now find it easier to help their friends and relatives gain entry into the bureaucracy. Although her response to the problem of vagrancy was a positive one, it seems that in these other areas she continued to rely on palliatives rather than take the positive steps which might have jeopardized her popularity. As we have seen, and in spite of the fiscal problems so evident in 695 when she offered the *feng-shan* sacrifice at Mount Sung, at the end of that year she declared an empire-wide holiday from that year's *tsu* tax!⁸⁸

What impact this might have had we are not told, for domestic problems were soon overshadowed by the renewal of the foreign threat with the massive defeat sustained by the hitherto invincible Wang Hsiao-chieh and his deputy, Lou Shih-te, at the hands of the Tibetans in April 696.⁸⁹ The underlying causes of this defeat are hard to identify since the sources provide no more than the briefest outline of events among the Tibetans since the accession of the young *btsan-po* in 679. From what we can gather, the young ruler had initially lacked the strength to wrest state control from the mGar clan who had been in power since his grandfather's time. It was a member of this clan, Lun Ch'in-ling, who was responsible for the victory.⁹⁰ Shocked by her first defeat during the Chou, and with the Tibetans only a hundred miles from Ch'ang-an, the empress had no time for retaliation before a new threat arose on her northern flank. This was the great Khitan rebellion which broke out in early summer.

This event seems to have been totally unexpected. The Khitans had been quiescent since 648 when T'ai-tsung had incorporated them into the Ying-chou *tu-tu-fu*⁹¹ under which they had come to enjoy a good deal of self-government. The two rebel leaders Li Chin-chung and Sun Wan-jung had risen to high administrative posts there but, as was sometimes the case, the Khitans had not been fortunate in the Chinese officials placed over them, and the current governor-general seems to have been a hard and self-willed man who not only treated the chieftains like slaves but had refused relief during a recent famine.⁹² This is usually given as the immediate cause of the rebellion, but the dissatisfaction with Chinese rule may have run deeper, since within a week Li and Sun had thousands of rebels under arms. Since the Khitans were a relatively sophisticated enemy and already lived inside the Wall, official response was both swift and in earnest. Twenty-eight generals at the head of an unspecified force were sent against them, but in the first major battle, near present-day Peking, the imperial troops were almost annihilated. The disaster was compounded when the Khitans used captured Chinese seals to forge orders which led the relief force into an ambush.⁹³





In what was admittedly a desperate situation the empress initially over-reacted. She made an unprecedented offer of official rewards to criminals and private slaves who would enroll in the army,⁹⁴ she quickly began to transfer all the troops from the Northwest as well as from Huai-nan and Shan-nan to Yü-chou, and ordered the latter to make the 4,000-*li* march in a hundred days! Even the grain transport ships from the Yangtze valley were to be diverted and continue with their present crews to the front.⁹⁵ Critics at court objected to all of this, and it is difficult to tell how many of these measures could be carried out, for in the same month, June 696, Mo-ch'o's Turks drove into Liang-chou, and the Tibetans, still in Lung-hsi, threatened to advance unless Chinese forces were withdrawn from the Four Garrisons.⁹⁶ Though now beset on three sides, the empress recovered from her initial panic, and decided to rely upon the calm expertise of officials like Kuo Yüan-chen and Ch'en Tzu-ang who had firsthand experience of the frontiers.⁹⁷ These men rapidly evolved a series of policies which were ultimately to prove successful.

Turning first to the Tibetans, and acting on Kuo's perception of serious rivalry between the ruler and Lun Ch'in-ling, the empress immediately sent envoys to parley about a marriage alliance and an exchange of territory, but with secret instructions to exploit the factional rivalry.⁹⁸ Ch'en Tzu-ang had considered the Turks and Tibetans to be a greater threat than the Khitans and, acting on his advice, the empress turned next to Mo-ch'o. Fortunately for her, the Turk had already revealed the nature of his ambitions, requesting not only that the Turks settled inside the Wall be returned to him, but also that the empress adopt him as a son and arrange an imperial marriage for his daughter.⁹⁹ Knowing, therefore, that he had designs on the Chinese throne, the empress was able to temporize while still encouraging his hopes, and to this end she promised to consider his requests while meanwhile confirming him as khan and appointing him an imperial general.

These marks of favor coincided with the death of the Khitan leader Li Chin-chung, and Mo-ch'o seized the opportunity to attack the unprotected Khitan base and capture the families of the absent leaders, as a result of which he was granted still more distinctions from the empress.¹⁰⁰ It may be that the Turk had his own interests at heart in this attack on a rival foreign power but, whatever his motives, he substantially weakened the Khitans who now had no option but to advance further south, and they rapidly reached Wei-chou, less than two hundred miles from Loyang. Here they halted for the winter, providing the empress with a breathing space but ominous news soon arrived that the Khitans were seeking local support for her deposition and the restoration of Chung-tsung.¹⁰¹

The year 697 opened gloomily. Mo-ch'o had become impatient, and he began once more to plunder the border prefectures. At the same time, a well-connected prefect named Liu Ssu-li was persuaded by a fortuneteller that he possessed signs of greatness, and he rapidly began to form a party at court to help him seize the throne. The conspiracy seems to have been well advanced by the time it came to the ears of Lai Chün-ch'en who saw in it a chance to regain his lost favor and reported it immediately by the special (*shang-pien*) procedure to the empress. Not fully trusting Lai, she put the investigation in the hands of a grandnephew, Wu I-tsung, but he soon proved to be fully as unscrupulous as Liu, forcing the guilty Liu to implicate many innocents, in all probability those

most opposed to the Wu interests. In all, we are told, thirty-six families, "all distinguished *shih* of the empire," and over a thousand of their adherents and relatives suffered the penalties of exile or death in this final purge.¹⁰² It also brought Lai back to power, and although the empress used her typical ploy and elevated his enemy Chi Hsü at the same time,¹⁰³ Lai's power was great enough to again create a climate of fear and dread in the court, and once again to raise questions about the succession.

The atmosphere of the court was becoming even more confused just then because of the meteoric rise of two unknowns, the half-brothers Chang, I-chih and Ch'ang-tsung.¹⁰⁴ These young men, probably only in their twenties at the time, were the grandsons of a distinguished minister, Chang Hsing-ch'eng, and the elder of them had used the *yin* privilege to take up an official career. He was also "white of complexion, of great beauty and skilled in music and song," qualities seemingly shared by his younger brother Ch'ang-tsung who attracted the attention of Princess T'ai-p'ing and won her recommendation. Taking advantage of his access to the palace to speak to the empress of his brother, he secured an introduction for him, and before long both were awarded high rank and showered with brocades, horses, slaves and other gifts. In the popular literature of later times and, indeed, even at the time, the rise of the brothers was attributed to a sexual liaison with the empress,¹⁰⁵ yet the standard sources not only portray them as somewhat effeminate but specifically state that they were castrated (*ch'eng p'i-yang chih ch'ung*). Moreover, the empress was seventy at the time and, although she was "skilled with cosmetics" and so able to conceal her age,¹⁰⁶ it seems more likely that she favored the youths because they were diverting company and, more particularly, because she believed that Ch'ang-tsung was the reincarnation of the Taoist immortal Wang Tzu-chin.¹⁰⁷ The empress had apparently begun to show the interest in personal immortality which characterized so many rulers late in their lives.¹⁰⁸

Whatever the reasons for their rise, the Changs were soon the dominant personalities at court, with even the various members of the Wu clan waiting at their mansion gate and contending for the privilege of holding their bridles!¹⁰⁹ The Changs' relatives were also awarded gifts and honors seemingly without limit, and life at court began to take on an almost frivolous cast. The empress was pondering whether to gild her nine recently cast tripods¹¹⁰ even as the Khitans smashed an army of 170,000, killed Wang Hsiao-chieh, and occupied Yü-chou with great carnage.¹¹¹

As if this were not enough, Mo-ch'o at the same time presented what was virtually an ultimatum threatening rebellion unless he were awarded the entire Shan-yü protectorate and unless all the Turks who had previously settled in six prefectures inside the Wall were returned to him.¹¹² The ensuing debate seems to have jolted the court back to reality, and the empress inclined first to the "hard line" of Li Chiao and T'ien Kuei-tao,¹¹³ but was finally forced to the side of the appeasers by the magnitude of the Khitan threat. Thus she returned to Mo-ch'o several thousand tents of settled Turks, along with huge bribes of textiles, seed grain, farm implements and iron, as well as the promise of an imperial marriage,¹¹⁴ hoping this would temporarily satisfy him. As summer approached, she sent two more huge armies, one 200,000 strong, against the Khitans. The source of these troops is unknown, but considering the enormous levies of the past two years, these armies might be seen as one last great effort at national salvation. The overall commander was Wu I-tsung, a grandnephew of the

empress whose military career was not a distinguished one.¹¹⁵ His appointment suggests that the troops might not have been wholly reliable and that the empress was now more concerned with keeping close rein on the military than with a frontier army's efficiency.

Fortunately for her, the tide now turned. The Khitans seemed to have no appreciable success in winning over the Chinese in occupied areas and so sought an alliance with Mo-ch'o, intending later to betray him. The Turk, however, anticipated their bad faith by seizing their newly built storehouse and base in Manchuria, taking all the booty they had hitherto gained. It seems unlikely that he planned any direct attack on the Khitans but news of his raid reached them while they were engaged in battle with the Chinese and, fearing attack from the rear, their Hsi allies mutinied and the rest of the army scattered. Sun Wan-jung was killed by his subordinates while in flight and the remnants of the rebellious tribes joined Mo-ch'o.¹¹⁶ Thus at an enormous cost in men and money and after the devastation of much of the Northeast, the Khitan rebellion came to an end.

As was often the case with the empress, success brought a relaxation of the harsher aspects of her rule. Even as this final campaign against the Khitans was in train, she had moved, albeit unwillingly, against Lai Chün-ch'en and had destroyed him before the final victory. His fall was of his own making, for since his return to favor he had, in open disregard of the law, denounced several high officials in order to seize their wives, concubines and possessions, and had become ever more arrogant and unrestrained. Either because he sought supreme power for himself or because he was by now demented, he accused the Wu princes and Princess T'ai-p'ing of engaging in a conspiracy with Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung. The princess, whose shrewdness seems almost to have matched her mother's, responded by leading the accused in a countersuit. Lai's rise had been based, of course, on the fact that among his many false denunciations, he had identified the occasional genuine plot, and on the basis of this service to the state, the empress thought to pardon him. Ironically, it was Chi Hsü who had once been accused by Lai, who persuaded her otherwise and she permitted his execution though, as we have seen, she sent his chief enemy Li Chao-te to the same block.¹¹⁷ She also made her peace with Lai's faction. The decree outlining Lai's crimes also pardoned the many officials whom he had intimidated into making false appointments.¹¹⁸ Later that year she called together her ministers and, explaining why she had placed such trust in Lai and in Chou Hsing before him, acknowledged that she had been deceived and promised henceforth to eschew such methods.¹¹⁹

It is impossible to gauge the sincerity of the empress' repentance, but it is a fact that in mid-697 the terror finally came to an end. Moreover, contemporaries seem to have sensed the change of climate, for when Wu Ch'eng-ssu and San-ssu renewed their succession claims early the next year, the ministers united in opposition, showed no fear of remonstrance, and in fact were able to speak frankly with impunity. Led by Ti Jen-chieh, who was henceforth to enjoy the complete trust of the empress,¹²⁰ several went so far as to suggest the regularization of the succession by the elevation of Chung-tsung, and Ti disposed of the old argument that the question was a "household matter" by pointing out that for a ruler, all within the empire constituted his household.¹²¹ The empress took time over her decision and, although in Ssu-ma Kuang's judgment it was Ti who persuaded her definitively against a Wu succession,¹²² ironically

enough, it was the Chang brothers who successfully urged Chung-tsung upon her.¹²³ It is unlikely that the initiative for this lay with them, but although they are seldom credited with any political acumen at all, they could well have at least recognized that their survival would depend on others once their protector died. In the third month of 698, ostensibly for medical reasons Chung-tsung was brought back to the capital.¹²⁴

These events raise interesting questions about the nature of Wu Tse-t'ien's power, foremost among them perhaps the question of how important coercion was in its maintenance. The answer seems to be that until the bureaucracy was satisfied that the will of Kao-tsung was to be carried out and Chung-tsung was assured succession to the throne, punishments were an integral part of the Wu regime, as important to its survival as its state ideology or the winning of popular support. If this is so, my earlier suggestions on the highly personal nature of the empress' legitimation are strengthened for, at the risk of repetition, it must be pointed out that her rule had to produce divided loyalties within officialdom. Though most high officials recognized that her ability exceeded that of the rightful heir and therefore deferred to her claims, they also saw themselves as guardians of the well-defined tradition requiring the Son of Heaven to be a male. Thus the empress, whose whole career was in violation of this tradition, could never be certain whether loyalty to her ability would remain uppermost in her officials' minds. Perhaps more than anything else, it is a measure of the flexibility of T'ang Confucianism that compromise was possible but, since this compromise came about only with the second decade of the empress' de facto rule and since the compromise was essentially a Confucian victory, it too was a measure of the strength of tradition. With the succession now regularized, the empress would be permitted to remain in power but only so long as she continued successfully to fulfill the obligations of ruler.

This is not to say, however, that she became a "lame duck," a prisoner of the upper bureaucracy, in the last years of her reign. For instance, when Ti Jen-chieh became paramount minister, she took care, as always, to balance his appointment this time with a new position for Wu San-ssu.¹²⁵ She also stopped short of proclaiming Chung-tsung as crown prince immediately and, as we shall see, she insisted on the invulnerability of the Changs in spite of their increasingly flagrant corruption. To increase her base of support in the lower bureaucracy, she put Li Chiao in charge of the selection system in late 697 where he "began the establishment of several thousand *yüan-wai-lang*,"¹²⁶ and permitted the more rapid advancement of lower officials within the bureaucracy.¹²⁷ In spite of these measures, however, the effect of the terror's end and the return of Chung-tsung was still enough to produce a greater spirit of cooperation between the empress and her ministers and one which led to happy results, particularly in foreign policy.

The defeat of the Khitans, and the necessity of placating Turks and Tibetans to achieve it, seems to have led to the rise of a strong and articulate pacifist party at court, and one which advocated for the first time the abandonment of some previously gained territory. In the winter of 697 Ti Jen-chieh put the case for this into an erudite memorial¹²⁸ which first outlined China's natural barriers against the foreigners, and pointed out that the wise rulers of ancient times had recognized that conquest beyond these borders was the use of national wealth to acquire worthless and unproductive land which would yield no revenue. Ambitious rulers like Ch'in Shih-huang-ti and Han Wu-ti had impoverished the

state with their expeditions. Recently, he pointed out, successive campaigns had eaten up huge sums of money and still continued to do so, in spite of the fact that "in Kuan-tung there is famine, in Shu and Han [households] flee their registration, and south of the Chiang and Huai the levies never cease, [so that] people cannot return to their livelihood and one after another turn to banditry." He recommended that the empress abandon her present policy and return to that of T'ai-tsung. For the North and West,¹²⁹ this would mean utilizing largely native administrations, eschewing far-off garrisons and attacking foreigners only if they rebelled. A-shih-na Hu-se-lo¹³⁰ should be made khan and placed in charge of the Four Garrisons, while a scion of the old ruling family of Koguryŏ should be given An-tung to hold. Chinese troops should store up supplies and guard the borders against attack while spying on potential enemies. If the Turks and Tibetans attacked in force they would risk defeat, and mere raids would reap little profit.

According to the *Comprehensive Mirror*, those conversant with foreign affairs agreed with Ti.¹³¹ Although the empress did not implement Ti's specific recommendations, she tended during the remainder of the Chou to follow the general policy lines he had set down. Judging from memorials which Ch'en Tzu-ang submitted that year, the empress began to economize as early as 698. She abolished the T'ung-ch'ang army and the huge annual corvée which transported supplies to the northwestern garrisons, and ended the levies and corvée in Chien-nan.¹³² Even with Mo-ch'o, whose presence had made Ti's specific proposals impossible to grant, the empress attempted conciliation. Obviously seeing him as a greater threat than the Tibetans whose invasion route she was content to garrison,¹³³ she abruptly agreed to a marriage alliance in the sixth month of 698, sending Wu Yen-hsiu, the second son of Ch'eng-ssu, to marry Mo-ch'o's daughter.¹³⁴ The dispatch of a prince of the blood to marry a foreign woman (rather than a Chinese princess to marry a foreign male) was wholly unprecedented, a fact quickly pointed out by orthodox officials. The empress quickly stilled her critics by demoting one of them, Chang Chien-chih, to a remote southern prefecture.¹³⁵ He would return in 704 as *tsai-hsiang* and then take charge of the restoration coup.

The sending of a male "bride" to the Turks turned out to be a serious miscalculation, for Mo-ch'o saw immediately that the empress had no intention of granting his major demands and by this time he must also have realized that the succession was to be the Li and not the Wu. Thus he pointed out to the envoy who had accompanied Wu Yen-hsiu that he had wanted his daughter to marry into the Li clan who had always treated his people well, and he threatened to restore the T'ang. In the eighth month of 698 he sent forth troops for that purpose and achieved several rapid successes, with one of the three frontier armies upon which he made a surprise attack submitting voluntarily and without a fight. At the same time, he sent angry missives to the court, listing five grievances against the empress and threatening to seize Ho-pei for himself.¹³⁶

Her response was to rouse the empire for yet another great effort, recruiting four armies said to total 450,000 men and drawn in all probability from throughout the country.¹³⁷ Even a force of this size, however, proved unable to pin down the mobile foreigners, and she was forced to call for even more troops. This time the people balked. In over a month, we are told, no more than 1,000 men responded to the call to arms,¹³⁸ and she was finally forced to play her trump card. In form acceding to a request from Jui-tsung, she declared Chung-tsung heir apparent and two days later made him supreme commander (*yüan-shuai*)

of the Ho-pei armies, supplanting her grandnephew Wu Chung-kuei.¹³⁹ The appointment of Chung-tsung was, in fact, a nominal one with Ti Jen-chieh actually filling the post, but its propaganda value seems to have been great since the sources tell us that before long 50,000 men joined the army.¹⁴⁰ Ti was able to lead an additional 100,000 men into the field, and this seems to have convinced Mo-ch'o that the combined Chinese forces were too strong to fight and so he withdrew to the steppes, leaving behind a death toll estimated by one source at 80,000 to 90,000 persons.¹⁴¹ His own army had swollen to 400,000 and as the various tribes north of the Wall submitted to him, he briefly became the greatest power in Central Asia, almost reconstituting the great T'u-chüeh empire of the mid-sixth century and exhibiting "a highly contemptuous attitude toward China."¹⁴²

The empress' failure to complete the subduing of Mo-ch'o is the principal reason traditional historiography tends to regard the Chou as a weak dynasty, but in retrospect this seems unfair. The Turks, after all, were driven from China and, although Mo-ch'o was to return once more, his last raid was in no sense so serious a threat as the invasion of 698. It is unlikely, moreover, that the empress had either the ability or the inclination to go onto the offensive. As mentioned earlier, she faced a strong peace party at court, and she also had some doubts about the reliability of her troops when those she did send in pursuit of Mo-ch'o "did not dare to press [him]."¹⁴³ She undoubtedly interpreted the reluctance of the people to enroll in the army in 698 as a sign of their desire for rest and, always sensitive to the popular mood, when Mo-ch'o withdrew she seems to have decided that she would henceforth play a waiting game and use diplomacy rather than war to deal with her enemies.

She was fortunate, therefore, when her Tibetan policy of fomenting internal dissension at last bore fruit in the summer of 699. While Lun Ch'in-ling was out of his capital, the young *btsan-po* used subterfuge to escape confinement and struck hard at his enemy, seizing and executing 2,000 of Lun's supporters in the capital. He then attacked and routed Lun himself. Lun committed suicide and his followers, including over 7,000 tents of T'u-yü-hun, sought refuge in China.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps in an attempt to consolidate his position, the *btsan-po* invaded China the next year but was driven back when the experienced general T'ang Hsiu-ching bested him in six successive battles.¹⁴⁵ Rather than follow up these victories, the empress chose to consolidate, putting Kuo Yüan-chen in charge of strategic Liang-chou. During the next decade his capable administration is said to have secured the borders, brought prosperity to the area, and won the respect of the Tibetans.¹⁴⁶ In 703 after yet another defeat, they resumed tribute payments to China and requested a marriage alliance.¹⁴⁷ The sources do not record whether or not this was granted, but the accession of a seven-year-old ruler in the following year (704) ensured that the Tibetans would pose no threat for the remainder of the Chou.

Of Mo-ch'o little was heard in China until he again invaded early in 702. He swept deep into Shensi and reached the empress' home prefecture of Ping-chou before halting. Chinese countermeasures were swift. The "Shan-tung Defense Army," made up entirely of northeastern troops had earlier been established for just such an eventuality¹⁴⁸ and, shortly thereafter, a still larger force was levied, and nominally headed by Jui-tsung who received the title of supreme commander. Although the Turks could not be pinned down, the rapidity of the Chinese response seems to have impressed Mo-ch'o, and he retired without engaging in a major battle. In the sixth month of 703 he sent an envoy to request that his daughter be

married to a son of Chung-tsung.¹⁴⁹ The sources are not specific on whether or not his request was granted, but a marriage of some sort was certainly arranged since Mo-ch'o sent a message of gratitude at the end of the year.¹⁵⁰ That he remained active outside the Wall is evidenced by certain administrative changes on the frontier,¹⁵¹ but after one more great victory at Ming-sha near Tunhuang in 706, he caused no further trouble in China. He was assassinated by a rival in 716.¹⁵²

In view of these facts, the later stages of the Empress Wu's foreign policy should be seen neither as unrealistic, overambitious, nor as a failure.

The diminution of foreign threats after 699 should perhaps have made possible an attempt to solve some of the longstanding internal problems, but this was not the case. Part of the reason lies, of course, in the empress' age. Although early in 699 she is said to have grown new eyebrows, shortly afterwards she suffered her first recorded illness while visiting Mount Sung, in Taoist legend the site of a miraculous ascent to the land of the immortals by Wang Tzu-chin in the sixth century B.C.¹⁵³ Although she recovered slightly, she suffered a relapse the next year. She improved again when she took an elixir of long life fabricated by a Buddhist monk.¹⁵⁴ Her health seems gradually to have declined thereafter and with it her extraordinary administrative abilities seemed to diminish. She may also have felt that the time for relaxation had come, that she was at last secure in her legitimation. Indicative of this is the fact that immediately after her second illness she divested herself of the last of her grandiose titles.¹⁵⁵

A second reason for the administrative decline which characterized the last years of the Chou is the death of Ti Jen-chieh in the autumn of 700. As the empress put it, his death left the court empty¹⁵⁶ and, though she lamented his absence each time an important decision was called for, she was to find no one to replace him. It was partially for this reason that she made perhaps the worst decision of her career, turning more and more to the Chang brothers for company and for stimulation.

At the beginning of 699, and probably in response to complaints that the Changs did nothing to deserve their favor, she had established for them a new institution, the *k'ung-hao fu* or Office of the Crane. The crane, of course, was a symbol of longevity and the means by which Taoist immortals were conveyed to Heaven,¹⁵⁷ and the purpose of the office was ostensibly that of literary compilation. Not only were a number of competent scholars appointed to it, but in 701 its members produced at least one large and important work.¹⁵⁸ In mid-700 its name was changed to the *feng-ch'en fu* or the Office of Imperial Attendants, but by that time it had already acquired a rather unsavory reputation as the site of evenings of drinking, gambling, and other unseemly and undignified activities in which the empress herself and high officials who wished to curry favor with the Changs often participated. Needless to say, this gave rise to scandalous rumors and, the old *T'ang History* tells us, the empress went so far as to order that handsome youths be recruited as attendants, an act which caused one official to remonstrate:

Your Majesty has already granted intimate favor (*nei-ch'ung*) to Hsüeh Huai-i and to Chang I-chih and Ch'ang-tsung. Surely this should be enough. Recently I heard that a head of the Servants of the Imperial Apartments, called Liu Mu, himself claimed that his son Liang-pin was white and pure, beautiful in beard and eyebrow. The chief administrator

of the Gate Guard of the Left, Hou Hsiang, said that his virility (*yang-tao*) and robustness surpassed that of Hsüeh Huai-i, and unassisted he wanted to recommend himself as fit for membership in the Office of Imperial Attendants.¹⁵⁹

It seems clear, therefore, that in the popular perception the office was viewed as something akin to a male harem, and the empress' reputation suffered. She is said to have rewarded the author of the blunt memorial quoted above and remarked that had it not been for his plain speaking, she would not have known the situation existed.¹⁶⁰ In all likelihood this was true, for the empress' attraction to the Changs seems to have been based more than anything else on their youth and her belief that Ch'ang-tsung, whom she dressed in feathers and mounted on a wooden crane, was the reincarnation of Wang Tzu-chin¹⁶¹ and hence in possession of the secret of longevity. When we recall that even the great T'ai-tsung, who seems to have been far less superstitious than many of his contemporaries, was not immune from the lure of immortality, her infatuation becomes more comprehensible.

These activities of the Changs, aside from the fact that they distracted the empress from more important concerns and somewhat lowered her prestige, were relatively harmless, and there is no record of Ti Jen-chieh, for instance, offering any protest. More harmful, however, was their growing tendency to interfere in politics and to indulge in corruption on a grand scale. This latter activity became apparent almost from the beginning of their careers at court. In fairness it must be acknowledged that the two favorites were less corrupt than other members of their parvenu clan. Chang Ch'ang-i, for instance, sold posts lavishly. On one occasion, when he forgot the given name of a client, he had all sixty persons of the same surname on his lists appointed to office!¹⁶² When he and two other brothers were tried for corruption in 704, the three of them were found guilty of accepting over 4,000,000 cash in bribes, and others of the Changs' protégés were just as bad.¹⁶³

None of the Changs, it seems, possessed any degree of political talent or literary ability and had been notable failures even in relatively unimportant provincial appointments.¹⁶⁴ The old *T'ang History* explicitly remarks that when Ch'ang-tsung was vice-president of the Board of Rites, he had to have documents ghost-written for him.¹⁶⁵ In spite of this, however, the two favorites had no qualms about intervening in state affairs, and the empress, says one source, often entrusted political matters to them.¹⁶⁶ As a consequence late in 701 they were responsible for an inner-court tragedy with wide ramifications when they denounced Chung-tsung's son and daughter along with her husband, a Wu prince, for criticizing the favor they enjoyed. The empress, in a burst of anger, ordered all three to commit suicide, thus leaving Chung-tsung without an heir. The existence of such an heir might have helped prevent the intrigue and bloodshed which marred the next two reigns.¹⁶⁷ The Changs allied themselves with the shrewd Wu San-ssu who was himself playing a double game by this time,¹⁶⁸ and this formidable alliance so intimidated even the Li clan that in 701 Chung-tsung, Jui-tsung and T'ai-p'ing joined together in the sycophantic request that Ch'ang-tsung be granted princely rank!¹⁶⁹ Most of the ministers, needless to say, now feared to raise their voices against the favorites, with the single exception of Wei Yüan-chung, an outspoken and upright man who had four times endured disgrace at the hands of unworthy officials, but whose integrity and military ability had gradually brought him to the somewhat diminished position of paramount minister

after the death of Ti Jen-chieh.¹⁷⁰ He had twice indirectly attacked the favorites and now openly warned the empress against the "inferior men" (*hsiao-jen*) with whom she surrounded herself. The Changs accused him of treason and in 703 his trial involved much of the court.¹⁷¹

The details of the trial have been recounted elsewhere,¹⁷² but its outcome illustrates how high the Changs had risen and the effect their rise had on the court. Although in the course of the trial it became clear that Wei Yüan-chung was innocent, and although the empress was warned that her behavior was beginning to cause good men to "slap their thighs at home" even though they had to "gag their mouths at court"¹⁷³ for fear of the Changs, she knowingly overrode justice for the first time in her career, exiling Wei Yüan-chung to a low provincial assignment in the Far South. Even in the face of a concerted effort by ministers to have the verdict reversed,¹⁷⁴ she insisted it be carried out and by so doing she began to convince some key people that she was no longer competent to rule, and for a woman that was enough to undermine her legitimacy.

Deficiencies began to be noticed in other areas and, as problems went unsolved, the support of various constituencies began to dissipate. The upper bureaucracy, already somewhat alienated by her appointment policies and her support of unworthy favorites was the first to defect. Though the empress was highly successful in the first years of the dynasty in minimizing high official opposition by her patronage of Confucianism, by the late 690s it was becoming widely recognized that her support had been more apparent than real. In 699, for instance, one of the grand secretaries, Wei Ssu-li,¹⁷⁵ memorialized on the state of education, inspired, according to the *Comprehensive Mirror* by the fact that the empress often used unscholarly (*fei ju-shih*) members of her own clan and relatives by marriage for administrative and teaching positions in the imperial schools and supplemented them with their own poorly trained students who gained their positions as rewards for assisting her in ceremonials.¹⁷⁶ Largely for this reason, Wei contended, over the last two decades the youth of the empire had come to have contempt for those charged with Confucian learning and, as a result, shunned both the schools and the doctrines they taught. This made little difference to the scions of powerful clans (*kuei-men*) who could still easily gain appointment through favoritism, but poorer people were unable to rise and thus the bureaucracy was becoming riddled with unworthy and incompetent officials. From the time of Chung-tsung's deposition the bureaucracy had expanded rapidly, and at the same time evil officials had risen to intimidate or execute those honest officials who remained. Corruption in the selection system and the avarice of local officials had aggravated a bad situation. Wei's solution was to expand the school system and order the sons of the nobility and upper classes to enroll so as to ensure that they could use no other method to gain office. At school they should be required to obey the rules, to venerate Confucianism, and assist at the lectures of virtuous and erudite men. As a practical inducement to the adoption of this plan, Wei pointed out that it would assure a supply of highly qualified officials at all levels, and instead of the present situation where "more than half the empire's households have fled their registration, the *tsu* and *tiao* [taxes] shrink, and our budget is insufficient," the state would be prosperous and happy.¹⁷⁷

There is probably an element of exaggeration in Wei's argument, but evidence from other sources tends to confirm his views on the extent of corruption in the selection system and the declining standards of provincial administration.¹⁷⁸

The nature of our sources does not give us access to details of appointments to the capital schools, but Wei is probably correctly identifying a trend since, as we have seen, the literary emphasis in the examinations was regarded by some as detrimental to a more substantive Confucianism, and the several "decree" examinations of the Chou seem also to have been literary in bias.¹⁷⁹ For these reasons the last years of the empress may have seen the beginnings of a progressive failure of the Confucian component of her state ideology, and although she made Wei Ssu-li rector of the state university, the imbalance was exacerbated as she turned more frequently to the mystical comforts of Taoism and Buddhism.

Recent scholarship has shown that quite aside from her relationship with the Changs and her visits to Mount Sung, the empress seems to have developed a greater interest both in Taoist festivals and literature in her last years, and she bestowed her patronage on both.¹⁸⁰ Still more conspicuous and more unpopular with Confucians, however, were the fruits of her long support of Buddhism, a patronage of whose dangers, I have tried to demonstrate, she was consistently aware. Nonetheless, by the year 700 officials could complain of how Buddhist foundations surpassed even the imperial palaces in magnificence and of how monks squeezed the people and disregarded their own Law.¹⁸¹

There were signs that after 700 the empress sought to compensate for her earlier patronage by, for example, ending the ban on butchery and attempting to tax the clergy rather than the people at large for new images she wished to erect.¹⁸² These, however, were palliatives and, as we have seen, she remained intensely Buddhist until the end of her life. The effect of this partial withdrawal of support may, however, have further weakened her position, by raising doubts among the Buddhists about the reliability of her support without really appeasing the Confucians. Certainly the report of a miraculous appearance by the Buddha immediately after the ending of the butchery ban suggests an attempt by perhaps opportunistic Buddhists to warn the empress not to abandon her Buddhist loyalties.¹⁸³ Some dramatic act was necessary to restore this crumbling ideological hybrid.

This may be why in November 701 the court returned to Ch'ang-an for the first time in twenty years,¹⁸⁴ and remained there for almost exactly two years. Although it is sometimes suggested she made the move for reasons of health, it is far more likely that the empress' motives were political and ideological. Just prior to the move, she had ordered the suicide of Chung-tsung's children, and in that same month there had appeared the first open suggestion that she abdicate, in the form of a memorial from an otherwise unknown scholar, Su An-heng. Su pointed out that she had held the empire in trust for over twenty years and that since Chung-tsung had shown himself to be both respectful and mature, it was time the throne be returned to him. She had, moreover, more than twenty grandsons who should occupy the princely ranks now held by the Wu clan, thus ending the anomalous situation of having two imperial clans and avoiding trouble in the future.¹⁸⁵ While the empress failed to act on his suggestion, she rewarded rather than punished him, thus showing a clear recognition that his viewpoint was not an isolated one. The return to the T'ang capital, accompanied by the proclamation of the new era name of *ch'ang-an*, was designed, therefore, both to reduce political pressures and to show the sincerity of her Confucianism, for like the Duke of Chou she was preparing now to "hand over the throne to the intelligent prince."

Although once back in Ch'ang-an the principal concern of the court was how to deal with Mo-ch'o, the empress was also able to make some repairs in her ideological policy and to tighten the administration somewhat. She now extended the examination principle to its logical conclusion by the establishment of the military examination,¹⁸⁶ and she declared an absolute moratorium on punishments concerned with the early rebellions against her while ordering a reinvestigation of Lai Chün-ch'en's cases, an action which resulted in the rehabilitation of many of his victims.¹⁸⁷ Several popular appointments including those of Li Chiao and Wei An-shih were made, Wei Ssu-li was put in charge of the state university (*kuo-tzu chien*), and a new type of censor was established.¹⁸⁸ The order for the composition of a national history in 703¹⁸⁹ was a Confucian act, and the placing of Wu San-ssu at the head of the compilers may indicate that the empress was about to withdraw from active life and wished to determine her place in history before doing so.

Unfortunately, any restoration of her popularity among her ministers which might have resulted from these measures and from the successful resolution of the foreign problem was dissipated by her actions in the aforementioned trial of Wei Yüan-chung, and when she returned to Loyang immediately after the trial, she deemed it prudent to leave her grandnephew Wu Yu-i in charge of (*liu-shou*) Ch'ang-an.¹⁹⁰

Back in Loyang, and with an energy and competence surprising in a beleaguered and ailing woman nearing her eightieth birthday, the empress at last confronted some of the long-standing problems of her dynasty. Probably at the suggestion of Li Chiao, who had regained *tsai-hsiang* status in 703, she sent special commissioners throughout the empire to examine the standards of provincial administration on the basis of the six categories (*liu-t'iao*) used by the Han and perhaps to deal directly with the vagrancy problem.¹⁹¹ Shortly afterwards she held a discussion on the problem of local administration. Li Chiao and T'ang Hsiu-ching argued that she was largely to blame for bad local government because she used demotion to the provinces as a punishment for unworthy capital officials. As a consequence, officials "all value capital posts and have contempt for provincial posts." Her remedy was to take twenty experienced and able capital officials and concurrently appoint them as prefects. According to Ssu-ma Kuang, this experiment was a failure,¹⁹² but it demonstrated the empress' consistent concern for the people and her willingness to attempt unusual tactics to better their lot. It was on these grounds, too, that she was dissuaded from completing a huge image of the Buddha in mid-704¹⁹³ and, perhaps because of measures of this sort, we find a good deal of evidence to suggest that to the very end she retained her great popularity among the people.¹⁹⁴

The same cannot be said, however, of the feelings of her bureaucrats. Although her staff increase in the second university at Loyang in early 704¹⁹⁵ and the amnesty and rehabilitation of all the earlier victims of Chou Hsing and Lai Chün-ch'en at the beginning of 705¹⁹⁶ were undoubtedly popular, her expansion of the number of sub-fifth-rank officials within the bureaucracy still frustrated all her efforts to win the united support of the higher officials. The empress had always seen as one of her tasks the reduction of ministerial power relative to that of the throne. Her "excessive" appointments and rapid promotions within the lower bureaucracy had been a useful weapon in this conflict and one which had evoked numerous protests from high-ranking officials. With the rise of the Changs, however, and the death of Ti Jen-chieh who seems to have served as a

kind of buffer, there are signs that the empress finally reversed this policy. In 701, for instance, the promotion process (*k'ao*) was tightened.¹⁹⁷ Acts of Grace, of which there had been eleven in the preceding eleven years, ceased and when new posts were established, as in the case of the provincial censors, the number of officials to hold them was specified.¹⁹⁸ At the end of 704 she abolished all the new posts established since 701.¹⁹⁹ It is unlikely that economic motives alone were behind these decisions for she was still to suggest the erection of new Buddhist images and build new palaces.²⁰⁰ Rather the policy seems to represent an attempt, belated though it was, to woo the upper bureaucracy. In so doing, of course, she risked the alienation of her allies below the fifth rank, and it is perhaps because of this policy shift that she found no support among them at the time of her deposition.

In retrospect, we may conclude that any attempt at this stage to win over her ministers became impossible for the simple reason that they could not be reconciled to the role of the Changs at court. To the empress, of course, her favorites were a solace and a diversion, not to be taken seriously. The perspective of her ministers, however, was different. To them the brothers were dangerous. They had been responsible already for more than one miscarriage of justice and for the spread of corruption and scandalous rumors which diminished the prestige both of the empress and those whose duty it was to remonstrate with her. They were, moreover, dangerous in a more direct way, for their party of hangers-on was large, their association with the shrewd and ambitious Wu San-ssu was close, and increasingly they alone determined who should have access to the empress.²⁰¹ In the event of her sudden death, it was not impossible that they could yet overturn the succession. It seemed imperative to certain ministers that action be taken quickly.

In the end, it was the continuing attempt of the empress to conciliate her great ministers which brought about her downfall though short of returning to a policy of terror, it is difficult to know what other course she could have taken. In mid-704 she permitted the trial of three lesser members of the Chang clan for corruption and unwisely suggested that I-chih and Ch'ang-tsung be investigated at the same time. She was probably of the opinion that they were not directly involved in their kinsmen's bribery and that by permitting the conviction of lesser members of the clan, she would demonstrate her impartiality and thereby disarm the critics of the favorites. The tribunal found these men guilty. It also found that Chang Ch'ang-tsung had illegally occupied someone else's land and imposed upon him a light fine which the empress was happy to confirm. But when the tribunal went further and pointed out that the law demanded he be dismissed from all posts because of his brothers' proven crimes, she balked. Securing the agreement of one of her *tsai-hsiang* that Ch'ang-tsung "had meritorious service to the state," she immediately amnestied him, and before Wei An-shih and T'ang Hsiu-ching could complete their simultaneous investigation of I-chih she transferred them to the provinces.²⁰² T'ang Hsiu-ching was probably speaking for all the other high officials when he secretly warned Chung-tsung before his departure that the Changs' abuse of favor was certain to cause a revolution.²⁰³

This thought must by now have occurred both to the empress and to the Changs. Her response was an unfortunate mixture of conciliation and overconfidence. She appointed T'ang loyalists like Huan Yen-fan²⁰⁴ and, most notably, Chang Chien-chih to *tsai-hsiang* rank, and while she attempted to keep the customary balance,²⁰⁵ she thus provided her enemies with a focus of leadership. The

Changs, undoubtedly aware that in their recent crisis Wu San-ssu and his faction had offered no support, responded by abandoning their policy of using Wu against Li and decided instead to act on their own.

Whether or not the Changs made actual preparations to seize the throne is difficult to know, but in January of 705 wall posters accusing them of conspiracy began to appear. The empress refused to heed reports of these until on the nineteenth of the month, specific charges of treason were laid against Ch'ang-tsung.²⁰⁶ According to his accuser, he had consulted a fortuneteller who told him he had the physiognomy of an emperor and that if he erected a Buddhist temple at Ting-chou, the empire would turn to him in support. This, of course, was a capital charge and, taking no chances, the empress appointed a tribunal of three, two of whom could be expected to vote for acquittal.²⁰⁷ As was also expected, the third judge, Sung Ching,²⁰⁸ dissented and as the court rallied around him, she used her former tactic of appointing him as a provincial commissioner in order to eliminate his opposition. His courageous response was to point out that such a commission was improper for one of his rank and when the empress, returning to her customary respect for the law, permitted him to remain in the capital, Ch'ang-tsung's case was lost.

As Sung Ching continued to press his suit, he was joined by others, most notably Huan Yen-fan, and even by a genuine supporter of the empress, Ts'ui Hsüan-wei.²⁰⁹ Both attempted to convince her that it was in her own interest and, indeed, necessary for her survival to let the law take its course and, reluctantly, she sent Ch'ang-tsung to be tried once more by Sung Ching at the Censorate. While the trial was still in progress, however, she changed her mind and dispatched a messenger with an extraordinary pardon, freeing Ch'ang-tsung and thus making him immune from further prosecution.

This act convinced the court officials that the ascendancy of the favorites was complete and, as the empress returned to seclusion in a remote section of the palace (*ch'ang-sheng yüan*) where the Changs alone were permitted to see her, they determined to act. According to most sources, Chang Chien-chih, who was now *tsai-hsiang* and chief imperial librarian, had determined to restore the T'ang during his provincial exile,²¹⁰ and now he set about recruiting a party to destroy the Changs by force. Easily persuading Ts'ui Hsüan-wei and Huan Yen-fan to join him, he added to his conspiracy the censor and prominent opponent of both the Chang and Wu parties, Ching Hui,²¹¹ as well as Yüan Shu-chi who had formerly served in Chung-tsung's household and was currently a member of Jui-tsung's staff.²¹² His presence was probably necessary to associate the princes with the conspiracy, and it was he who gave Chung-tsung what little advance warning of the coup he received.

All that remained now was to muster sufficient force, and Chang Chien-chih turned naturally to the Yü-lin Guard, suborning the General of the Right, Li To-tso, who some twenty years earlier had aided the empress in effecting Chung-tsung's deposition. On both occasions he seems to have been motivated by concern for the welfare of the state.²¹³ Chang also insinuated Huan Yen-fan, Ching Hui and Li Chan, the son of Li I-fu, into positions of command in the Yü-lin Guard, almost "tipping his hand" for the Changs immediately countered by having Wu Yu-i reappointed as general.²¹⁴ More than anything else this move demonstrates the skill of the Wu interests. Since "several tens" of officials were later to be disgraced as their adherents,²¹⁵ the Changs might well have chosen

another of their supporters for the post instead of a member of the Wu clan which had already demonstrated its unreliability as an ally. The appointment smacks of manipulation by Wu San-ssu, who had already assured his own future through a clan-destine relationship with Chung-tsung's wife and the marriage of his nephew to the heir apparent's favorite daughter.²¹⁶ In any case, Wu Yu-i seems to have remained inactive while the coup unfolded, thereby ingratiating the Wus with the conspirators.

Their preparations complete, the conspirators moved quickly. On the night of February 20, 705 they gathered a force of just over 500 men at the Hsüan-wu Gate, and sent for Chung-tsung. Although he had earlier approved the plan, Chung-tsung now lost his nerve. While agreeing that the Changs should be destroyed, he did not wish to alarm his sick mother.²¹⁷ Li Chan, one of the messengers, persuaded him that only his presence could now halt the action, and thus he agreed to accompany the conspirators to the northern gate. As soon as they caught sight of him, however, the others smashed the gate and swept into the palace grounds. Reaching the western pavilion where the empress slept, they ran into the startled Changs in the courtyard and decapitated them on the spot. Awakened by the clamor, the empress confronted the plotters, but must immediately have recognized that the coup was a success. After addressing words of scorn to her son and certain others of the plotters,²¹⁸ she returned to bed, her half century of power at an end.

The next day Chung-tsung took charge of the state and sent commissioners through the provinces to announce the restoration. On the twenty-second of the month he became emperor once more, though seemingly without a formal ceremony of abdication by his mother. He granted her the title "Follower of Heaven, Great Sage, Emperor" (*Tse-t'ien ta-shen huang-ti*)²¹⁹ and transferred her to the Shang-yang Palace west of the city where for the next year she remained an ill but honored political spectator receiving bi-monthly homage from the court. There is ample testimony, as mentioned earlier, that she remained popular among the people and, it seems, even with some ministers who remained at court.²²⁰ It must have been with sardonic amusement that she saw Wu San-ssu so rapidly maneuver himself into a commanding position in government, reenact some of her old provisions, and render the five chief conspirators against her impotent.²²¹ Nevertheless she was probably relieved to see the Li and Wu clans avoid strife and instead join in close alliance to impose their will on court and empire. On December 16, 705, as she prepared to die quietly in her bed at about the age of eighty, she could afford to magnanimously renounce the title of emperor which she had held so long and finally to forgive her earliest enemies, those who had stood in her way so long ago when by becoming Kao-tsung's empress, she began the climb which would end on heights greater than any other woman in China would ever scale.