

CHAPTER 7 | LESSON 1 Reunifying China

Wu Zhao: China's First Female Ruler

According to Confucian beliefs, men should rule society. The rule of a woman would be as unnatural as a “hen crowing like a rooster at daybreak.” Even so, one woman did rule China, and she ruled effectively. Wu Zhao reigned from 690 to 705 in her own name. But even before she officially took control of the empire, Wu ruled for many years behind the scenes.

Wu Zhao (625–705) arrived at the court of Emperor Taizong in 638, at the age of 13. Her father was a general. She came from a wealthy and noble family. Like other daughters of nobles, Wu knew how to play music, read literature, and write. She was known for her wit, intelligence, and beauty. She soon became one of the emperor’s favorite court members. Taizong died in 649.

As required by tradition, Wu entered a Buddhist convent after the emperor’s death. But the new emperor, Gaozong—the son of Taizong—brought her back to the palace.

Gaozong’s chief wife, the empress, did not have any children. But Wu gave Gaozong the sons he wanted. Gaozong made Wu his chief wife, or empress. Because she was the mother of the future emperor, she became very powerful. Many advisers disapproved of her return from the convent and of her rise above the other wives.

Rise to Power Gaozong was a sickly emperor. Five years after he brought Wu Zhao back to the palace, he suffered a stroke. (A stroke is a blocked blood vessel in the brain. It can cause a person to feel weak and to have trouble moving and talking.) After his stroke, Gaozong was often ill and unable to rule effectively. Wu soon began to use her political skills behind the scenes.

When the emperor heard reports from officials, Wu stayed behind a curtain, listening to all that was said. Some experts say that she and the emperor ruled as a team. Others believe that she had all the power.

Wu gave her husband a 12-point plan for improving the government. The plan suggested



lowering taxes, giving reserved land to farmers, and letting ordinary people make reports of unfair treatment by merchants and officials. Almost all of her suggestions were carried out. Wu became popular among the Chinese people.

After Gaozong died, Wu’s son became emperor. But Wu was the real ruler of China. She forced out of the imperial court many of the advisers who had objected to her. She also created a secret police force to spy on those she suspected of acting against her. On her orders, nearly all of her opponents were jailed or killed.

Court officials learned to respect Wu’s brilliant leadership abilities. They also feared her anger. When her sons tried to oppose her, she removed them from power. When rebellions broke out, she crushed them. Finally, in 690, she seized power in her own name. Calling herself Holy and Divine Emperor, she founded her own dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty. She was the supreme ruler of China for the next 15 years.

Policies as Ruler Like the male emperors

HISTORY MAKERS: WU ZHAO CONTINUED

of China in her era, Wu was a harsh ruler. However, she was also generous to the poor. She lowered taxes, increased food production, and funded public projects. Wu also tried to reduce the power of the military. She cut the size of the army. She also replaced many aristocratic military men with scholar-officials. These officials competed for government positions by taking state exams. When there were rebellions against Wu, the officials stayed loyal to her.

Support for Buddhism Unlike other emperors, Wu supported Buddhism. For example, in 673 she helped pay for the construction of a large statue of the Buddha at Longmen. Many people thought that this statue looked a lot like the empress. One possible explanation for her preference for Buddhism over Confucianism is that Buddhism showed more respect for the abilities of women.

Wu Zhao continued to use religion to support her authority. To win the support of Daoists, she took the title Sage Mother. Then she had statues of the original “Sage Mother” of Daoism’s founder, Laozi, placed in all Daoist temples. Further, in 685 Wu had her adviser Xue Huaiyi appointed as head of a well-known Buddhist temple. Xue then claimed to have found a religious text that predicted the coming of a goddess who would rule China.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

[Under her rule,] harvests will be bountiful, joy without limit. The people will flourish, free of desolation and illness. . . . The rulers of neighboring lands will all come and offer allegiance.

Source: Great Cloud Sutra

Wu wanted the Chinese people to believe that a woman could be a good ruler. She had scholars write books about famous women in Chinese history. She gave her mother’s relatives important political jobs. This made her mother’s family more important and powerful than it had been before. Wu also said that the best ruler was someone who watched over people the way a mother watches over her children.

Final Years When Wu Zhao declared herself emperor in 690, she was 65. As she got older, she began to lose her judgment. Bribery and corruption spread through the imperial court. Courtiers and senior officials hated her favorite advisers.

Finally, in February 705, leading ministers and generals seized the palace. The next day, the empress gave up the throne and retired to another palace. Wu’s son Zhangzong became emperor. The Tang Dynasty was restored. Wu died peacefully in December 705, at the age of 80.

Many Chinese historians criticized Empress Wu. They believed that it was wrong for a woman to rule, and they pointed out that she stole power from her sons. However, Wu’s reign had a lasting impact. Her policies strengthened the scholarly bureaucracy and helped unify the empire. These changes helped bring about one of the greatest periods of China’s history.

Review Questions

1. In what year and during what dynasty did Wu Zhao arrive at China’s imperial court?
2. What were two strategies that Wu Zhao used to strengthen her political authority?
3. What impact did Wu Zhao’s policies have on China?

Critical Thinking

4. **Understanding Cause and Effect**
Explain why scholar-officials might have felt more loyalty to Wu than did members of the military aristocracy.
5. **Forming and Supporting Opinions**
Explain whether you think Wu used religion well to support her political authority.
6. **Comparing and Contrasting** How might the rule of Wu Zhao have compared with the rule of men during that era?