

WU Zetian

Wǔ Zétiān 武则天

625–705 *China's only female emperor*

Wu Zetian 武则天 was the only woman to rule China as an emperor in name, declaring herself emperor after deposing her sons. She changed the composition of the ruling class by removing entrenched aristocrats from the court and enlarging the civil service examination to recruit men of merit to serve.

Wu Zetian entered the Chinese imperial court at the age of thirteen as a low-ranked concubine to Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649) of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). However, after he died she became concubine and later empress to her stepson, Emperor Gaozong (reigned 650–683). After Gaozong died, Wu declared herself emperor after deposing her sons and attempting to establish her own dynasty, sometimes referred to as the Second Zhou period 周, which lasted



Tang court ladies from the tomb painting of Princess Yongtai in the Qianling Mausoleum, near Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, from the year 706. Empress Wu Zetian would also later be buried at the Qianling Mausoleum.

from 690 to 705. To legitimize her position as emperor she turned to the Buddhist establishment and also invented about a dozen characters with a new script.

The overall rule of Wu Zetian did not result in a radical break from Tang domestic prosperity and foreign prestige. However, Wu altered the composition of the ruling class by removing the entrenched aristocrats from the court and gradually enlarging the civil service examination to recruit men of merit to serve in the government. Although Wu gave political clout to some women, such as her secretary, she did not go as far as to challenge the Confucian tradition of excluding women from taking the civil service examinations. By 674 Wu had drafted twelve policy directives that ranged from encouraging agriculture to formulating social rules of conduct. She also maintained a stable economy and a moderate taxation system for the peasantry. The population increased to 60 million during her reign, and when she died her centralized bureaucracy was regulating the economic well-being and social life of her empire.

Wu Zetian was a capable ruler, but she was allegedly vicious in her personal life, murdering two sons, one daughter, and other relatives who opposed her. As a woman ruler, she challenged the traditional patriarchal

dominance of power, state, monarchy, sovereignty, and political ideology. Her reign brought a reversal of the gender roles and restrictions that her society and government had constructed for her and other women. While succeeding in the male-ruled and power-focused realm, she showed traits usually attributed to men, including long-range vision, political ambition, talented organization, and hard work. Later historians have been less generous, describing her as a despotic usurper of the throne. These historians say that her reign ended in corruption and drinking, with the elderly ruler delighting in sexual relations with young men who enjoyed lavish favors. In 705 Wu Zetian was forced to abdicate, her son Zhongzong was again enthroned, and the Tang dynasty was restored.

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Further Reading

- Jay, J. W. (1990). Vignettes of Chinese women in Tang Xi'an (618–906): Individualism in Wu Zetian, Yang Guifei, Yu Xuanji and Li Wa. *Chinese Culture*, 31(1), 78–89.
- Wills, J. E., Jr. (1994). *Mountains of fame: Portraits in Chinese history*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Each sovereign maintains his own courtiers.

一朝天子一朝臣

Yì cháo tiān zǐ yì cháo chén