Introduction

The second half of the seventh century in China was marked by the rise to power of Wu Zhao 武曌 (also known as Wu Zetian 武則天或 Empress Wu 武后; 624–705), who would, in 690, become the only woman before or since to take on the ritual position and prerogatives attendant upon the title of emperor.1 Already during Wu’s lifetime, the uniqueness of her rule was widely recognized and understood in terms of her gender. In the years after her death, as the legend of China’s only woman emperor grew, writers and thinkers continually reaffirmed, evaluated, and sought to explain the exceptionality of her power. Beginning in the twentieth century, shifting gender politics have led to positive reevaluations of Wu Zhao, but, with some exceptions, her uniqueness was throughout the Tang through Qing period cast in pejorative terms as “aberrance,” deviance from the correct state of affairs.

Wu Zhao is the most prominent of various female figures who dominated the political and cultural arena during the late seventh and early eighth centuries. The condemnatory evaluations surrounding Wu Zhao have likewise followed the “next generations” of women leaders, who came to power during and directly following her rule. They include her daughter, the Taiping Princess 太平公主 (d. 713); her daughter-in-law, Zhongzong’s 中宗 (Li Xian 李顯; r. 684, 705–10) Empress Wei 韋后 (d. 710); Zhongzong and Empress Wei’s youngest daughter, the Anle Princess

1. I follow Bokenkamp, Rothschild, and others in referring to Wu Zhao by the name she chose herself. See Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique,” 390, note 1; Rothschild, Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies, 1, note 1; and Rothschild, “Wu Zhao’s Remarkable Aviary,” 84–85, note 1.
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安樂公主 (684–710); and Shangguan Wan’er 上官婉兒 (664–710), the granddaughter of the famous poet Shangguan Yi 上官儀 (d. 665) and a member of the innermost political and cultural circles during Wu Zhao’s reign.

In the years between the death of Wu Zhao and the ascension of her grandson Xuanzong 玄宗 (Li Longji 李隆基; r. 712–56), these women consolidated their economic and political clout and formed factions as they vied to fill the power vacuum left by the absence of Wu Zhao. The faction headed by Empress Wei and the Anle Princess sought to have Anle named heiress apparent and was opposed by the Taiping Princess, who joined forces with her nephew, the future Xuanzong. In 710, following the sudden death of Zhongzong, Empress Wei and Anle attempted to take power but were executed in a counter-coup launched by Taiping and Li Longji. In the ensuing years, a rivalry developed between Taiping, who held the loyalty of a sizable and important faction at court, and her nephew, who took the throne in 712. Xuanzong, claiming that his aunt planned to stage a coup against him, destroyed Taiping’s faction in 713 and ordered her to commit suicide as a preemptive strike. Over time, Wei, Anle, and Taiping would, like Wu Zhao, become memorable figures etched onto the literary-historical landscape and described according to particular typologies of feminine power and excess.

The calligrapher, painter, and poet Yang Weizhen 楊維楨 (1296–1370), writing over six hundred years after the Anle Princess was killed by opposing forces in the counter-coup of 710, was captivated by the iconic image of her death. He wrote of how, unaware of the approaching violence, she stood before the mirror completing her toilette.

Copper drums at second watch, stars like snow,
beneath the spring clouds of her low-hanging curtain her
dreams begin to unfold,
As the thousand cavalry of the imperial guard give out their
battle cry,
she paints her eyebrows, paints her eyebrows before the break of
dawn.
Forming dragons coil, flying simurghs dance,
the person in the mirror is the heiress apparent.
She paints her eyebrows, not heeding the warning of the long-haired nun.² paints her eyebrows, paints her eyebrows — what is it for? The edict for the unlawful appointment of officials is not yet finished, as blood suffuses the Third Master’s blade.³

銅鼓二鼓星如雪，帳底春雲夢初熟，
羽林千騎開殺聲，畫眉畫眉天未明，
結龍蟠飛鸞舞，鏡中人皇太女。
畫眉不顧長髮尼，畫眉畫眉將何為?
墨書未罷斜封旨，血浸三郎三尺水。⁴

This image captures a key motif in retrospective denunciations of Anle and her powerful female contemporaries, that is, materialism or personal adornment and obliviousness to historical precedent. It also suggests a certain degree of romanticization of the princess as a figure in history and historical myth. Readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible will be reminded of the death of Jezebel, the Phoenician queen of Ahab. When Jehu raised a coup against the house of Ahab, Jezebel, awaiting her death, “painted her eyes, attired her head,” and verbally dressed Jehu down; her response to certain death appears as a moment of admirable dignity in the life of a figure who is otherwise reviled in the biblical narrative as a foreigner and overly dominant woman.⁵ Unlike Jezebel, the Anle Princess seems to be unaware of her impending doom, but the similarity in the imagery used to portray powerful female leaders is nonetheless intriguing.

In his Xin Tang shu jiiumiu 新唐書糾繆 (Errors in the New Tang History), Wu Zhen 吳縝 (fl. 11th/12th c.) points to this episode, recorded

². The “long-haired nun” is Wu Zhao, who, as a member of the harem of a deceased emperor, was a nun for a brief period following the death of Taizong 李世民 (r. 626–49).

³. Sanlang 三郎, or “Third Master,” was the child name of Emperor Xuanzong, chosen because he was third-born among his siblings. Sanchi shui 三尺水, literally “three-foot-deep water,” is a poetic kenning for a sword.


⁵. 2 Kings 9:30, NRSV.
in the Anle Princess's eleventh-century *Xin Tang shu* (New Tang History) biography, as one of the historical “errors” that he is attempting to rectify in his work. Wu Zhen's cross-examination of other relevant passages in the *Xin Tang shu* reveals that the coup was unleashed at night; he thus concludes that the Anle Princess would not logically have been putting on her makeup (a morning activity) at the time she was killed, and the famous eyebrow-painting scene is thus a clear instance of an unfounded (wang) statement. At this remove it is not possible to determine whether this episode is grounded in historical fact; we might also note that the princess may have needed to begin getting ready “at night” for the dawn court. Yet Wu Zhen's analysis does point to the romanticized nature of the passage, the way in which it makes the Anle Princess's death into a scene of historical high drama beyond the purview of fact versus fiction.

Yang Weizhen’s treatment of the Anle Princess's last moments also points to the ongoing fascination with her and contemporary female power-holders in sources dealing with the period spanning the complex and tumultuous courts of Wu Zhao and her sons Zhongzong and Ruizong (Li Dan 李旦; r. 710–12). The fascination is in no small part connected to the identification of the period as a unique political-cultural space dominated by powerful female figures. As the basic trajectory of Wu Zhao's rise to power is well known, I will provide only a brief outline here. She initially joined the palace harem in around 640, when she was in her early teens, as a low-ranking concubine of Emperor Taizong of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) and was compiled by a committee of historians headed by Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修 (1007–72) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061). The history was completed and submitted to the throne in 1060.

6. *Xin Tang shu* was commissioned by Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (趙禎; r. 1022–63) of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) and was compiled by a committee of historians headed by Ouyang Xiu 欧陽修 (1007–72) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061). The history was completed and submitted to the throne in 1060.


太宗 (Li Shimin 李世民; r. 626–49). According to traditional sources, after Taizong died she observed the custom of concubines following the death of their emperor and briefly became a Buddhist nun. Taizong’s son and successor, Gaozong 高宗 (Li Zhi 李治; r. 649–83), supposedly visited the convent where she was cloistered and became enamored of her. Gaozong’s interest matched the schemes of his Empress Wang 王后 (d. 655), who arranged for Wu to be recalled to the palace in order to take the emperor’s attention away from another concubine, Xiao Shufei 蕭淑妃 (d. 655). Empress Wang’s plan had disastrous consequences for Xiao as well as for Empress Wang herself. Wu proved highly adept at palace intrigue; she eventually supplanted both her rivals, who, according to the standard historical narrative, were hideously murdered at her command. Wu succeeded in having herself declared empress in 655, and as Gaozong suffered from waning health leading to periods of incapacity, she gradually assumed greater control of the government.

After Gaozong’s death in 683, the couple’s son Li Xian briefly assumed the throne as Emperor Zhongzong, but he was soon exiled following a clash with high-ranking ministers. In the ensuing seven years, Wu Zhao crushed two poorly executed rebellions against her. The first one was started in 684 by Li Jingye 李敬業 (or Xu Jingye 徐敬業; d. 684), the exiled Duke of Ying 英公, from his base in Yangzhou 揚州, and the second was spearheaded in 688 by a group of senior princes of the Li-Tang royal house in the context of the power struggles between the Li and Wu clans and Wu Zhao’s perceived promotion of the Wu clan over the Li. The rebellion was launched shortly before the princes were due to answer a summons to court, which they feared was a trap that would lead to their imprisonment or execution. During this time, Wu launched a campaign of legitimization involving political, ritual, and cosmic symbolism; the circulation of works, including Buddhist sutras, that glorified and predicted her rule; and a purge of her enemies. Traditional sources describe the purge as a reign of terror against all members of the Li house, carried out by the empress’s gang of “cruel officials” (kuli 酷吏). The multi-level legitimization campaign led to the establishment, in 690, of her own dynasty, the Zhou 周 (690–705). During the 690s, ancestral temples to the Wu house supplanted those of the Li-Tang house, and Wu Zhao became the only woman to rule in her own right as emperor.
The rule of a female emperor created an unprecedented situation, and in the mid- to late 690s, the issue of succession was hotly debated. Wu Zhao’s nephews Wu Chengsi 武承嗣 (d. 698) and Wu Sansi 武三思 (d. 707) each sought the designation of heir apparent and the continuation of a Wu ruling house, but they were opposed by powerful ministerial factions at court. By the turn of the eighth century, Wu Zhao had recalled Zhongzong to the capital; it seems that she had already resigned herself to the impossibility of continuing the Zhou regime after her own death. In 705, a coup of high-ranking ministers forced her abdication, and the throne returned to the Li clan. She died later that same year. Nevertheless, after Wu Zhao was gone the domination of the court by members of the imperial in-law (waiqi 外戚) clans, especially female figures from the Wei and Wu families, continued to characterize the ensuing regimes of Zhongzong and Ruizong. Intermarriage between the Wei, Wu, and Li clans led to a complex and incestuous brand of court politics. The Anle Princess’s first husband was Wu Chongxun 武崇訓 (d. 707), Wu Sansi’s son. After Wu Chongxun’s death, she remarried his and her cousin Wu Yanxiu 武延秀 (d. 710), Wu Chengsi’s son. The Taiping Princess’s second husband was Wu Youji 武攸暨 (d. 712), a grandson of Wu Zhao’s uncle Wu Shileng 武士讓 (dates unknown). Wu Sansi was rumored to be sexually involved with Empress Wei and Shangguan Wan’er, who, by the return to Tang rule in 705, was one of the most powerful figures at court, responsible for drafting court edicts and organizing courtly cultural activities.

As alluded to by Yang Weizhen, the powerful faction of Wu Sansi, Empress Wei, and the Anle Princess sought to have Anle named heir-apparent to replace the actual heir apparent, her half-brother Li Chongjun 李重俊 (d. 707), Zhongzong’s son by a consort other than Empress Wei. In 707 Wu Sansi and Wu Chongxun were murdered by Li Chongjun in the course of the heir apparent’s unsuccessful coup, which was prompted by his fear that he would be replaced by his half-sister and which also resulted in Li Chongjun’s own death. During this period, an intense rivalry developed between the Wei faction and a faction headed by the Taiping Princess, who was allied with her brother Ruizong. The Wei faction initially managed to pacify their prime political rivals with huge estates and revenues. In 710, the last year of the Jinglong 景龍 reign period (707–10), however, the Anle Princess unwisely attempted to move against the Taiping Princess and Ruizong, leading Taiping to garner strength to
retaliate and seek power for herself. Temporarily allying with her nephew Li Longji, Taiping engineered another coup in which the Wei leaders, including Empress Wei, the Anle Princess, and Shangguan Wan’er, were killed. But in the wake of their victory, aunt and nephew grew suspicious of each other, and their mutual mistrust culminated in Xuanzong’s execution of the Taiping Princess and her faction in 713.

In the collective historical imagination, this tumultuous period is inextricably linked with stories about powerful women leaders, who are some of the most vibrant yet elusive characters to populate the landscape of Chinese history. My choice of the word “characters” is not inadvertent; the compelling nature of these women is closely related to the way in which they have been constructed and reconstructed as characters in historical, quasi-historical, and fictional narratives. Wu Zhao ruled competently, first jointly with Gaozong and then on her own, for about fifty years, quelling internal and foreign rebellion and generally fostering stability. Yet in most later sources, her rule is remembered primarily in terms of excess, cruelty, and dalliance with much younger male consorts.

The decade or so during which politics was dominated by the next generation(s) of powerful women is also retrospectively constructed in terms of female-led aberrance. Although the particulars can and do shift over time, portrayals of these women form into consistent thematic molds, all of which emphasize transgression of gender roles or taboos: their failure to recognize their appropriate cosmological role and, correspondingly, their denunciation by cosmic missives; their greed and conspicuous consumption, especially in the significant form of the landed estate; and a condemnatory focus on sexuality and a sexual culture that is unique to this period. This holds true both for standard histories and collections of historical anecdote purporting to represent things as they really were, and for works—including unofficial histories and various forms of literature—thought to be less concerned with precise notions of historicity.
The early thirteenth-century historian Lü Xiaqing (呂夏卿, jinshi 進士 1215) directly addresses the issue of legitimacy (or de-legitimacy) and female power when he criticizes the tenth-century standard history Jiu Tang shu (Old Tang History) for granting Wu Zhao and Empress Wei (real and de facto heads of state) a measure of legitimacy by including their acts of state in the annals of rulers (benji 本紀), which he believes should be reserved for the actions of the (male) emperor alone.9

The actions of empresses are not recorded in the emperors' annals:

For example, in the fifth year of the Xianqing reign [660], Empress Wu banqueted ranked women among her relatives and neighbors in Bingzhou . . . In the second year of the Jinglong reign [708], Empress Wei proclaimed a state-wide amnesty because a five-colored cloud rose from her skirt . . . Events like this are all detailed in the biographies of Empresses Wu and Wei. When the Old History recorded them in the Annals of Gaozong and Zhongzong, this was losing the correct way of history.

皇后所行之事，不書于紀:
如顯慶五年，武后宴親族鄰里命婦于并州 . . . 景龍二年，韋后以裙上有五色雲，大敕天下 . . . 如此之類，亦皆具武，韋，二后傳。舊史載之高宗，中宗紀，失史法也。10

When the Jiu Tang shu compilers placed their actions in the “wrong” section, they “[lost] the correct way of history”; their subtle moral assessment failed to adequately support Lü Xiaqing’s understanding of the moral-gender hierarchy.

The literary-historical tradition through which these women are delegitimized and essentialized into particular typologies underscores their embodiment of transgression, which is often encoded in gendered forms. This study explores portrayals of the key female figures in the complex, shifting factions of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, with an aim to situate them within their contemporary sociocultural context and to understand their retrospective constructions in terms of conceptualizations of their power as women. Central to these portrayals

9. Jiu Tang shu was compiled by a committee of historians sponsored by the Later Jin (936–45) regime and headed by Liu Xu (887–947). The completed work was presented to the throne in 945.
10. Lü Xiaqing, Tang shu zhibi, 2.32.
are sources produced by the elites closest to the operations of power. The women against whom they reacted made use, through surrogates, of religious phenomena and religious literature, providing another body of source material. The tales of female power as revealed in these religious materials, however, do not necessarily embody the same values as literary sources, which project a coherent if partial view reflecting, in particular, the outlook of the well educated. It is this literary-historical tradition that will be the focus of my book. I seek to approach an understanding, first, of what progressions or variants might exist in literary-historical constructions of these women and, second, of what their portrayals tell us about conceptions of gender and sexuality as a metaphor for and actual indicator of sociopolitical position. I analyze in detail the inter- and intra-source similarities and contradictions, focusing on the literary components and functions of these portrayals and the uses of the early Tang female power-holder as a historical example and/or figure of historical myth.

The process of historical construction was, however, accompanied by another process of historical destruction. Many details concerning the actions of powerful women were eliminated from the record, so that it is now easier to describe the images that were created than to look at the history of which they are, even on their own terms, undoubtedly only a partial reflection. The embellishments, prejudicial accounts, and outright fictions that have accumulated around these women can often tell us more about conceptions of their power than can an attempt to define the objective historical “truth” of their lives. This study thus deconstructs cultural image, as revealed through accounts and interpretations of the early Tang women power-holders.

Cultural image is created within particular frameworks of historical interpretation. In his analyses of the relationship between history and narrative, Hayden White has explored the cultural specificity of these interpretive frameworks. Here I make no attempt to apply White’s insights to the larger historiographic environment. This must remain a task for the future, especially in view of the research of scholars such as Andrew Plaks, who suggest that Chinese narrative is characterized by structures quite unlike those typical of Western literature. The literary

articulation of the historical period of female power, however, can and should be studied as a discrete topic, bearing in mind what White has argued about the writing of history. White suggests that although “fully realized ‘history,’” or narrativized history, presents itself and is understood as being objective, in fact it is distinguished by “its latent or manifest purpose [as] the desire to moralize the events of which it treats.” Every narrative has a point of view or judgment; this is equally true of historical narrative as it is of fictional narrative. Our desire to narrativize history bespeaks not the narrative as the form that most naturally represents our experience of events, but rather our need to conceptualize, or “emplot,” events in terms of culturally encoded narrative forms.

Essentially, no work of historical narrative is without authorial viewpoint and thus message; the existence of the “hero” and the “villain” is intrinsic to the narrative form. The shape taken by the historical narrative and the judgments meted out therein are rooted in particular cultural environments, suggesting particular perspectives and values. This is not to negate the value of historical accounts in conveying “information,” but it indicates an approach not limited to a conception of historical narrative as data and argues in favor of a critical reading method that pays close attention to repeating narrative formulas, tropes, and character types.

The process through which the Tang women’s historical images coalesced began with materials compiled during their lifetimes and shortly after their deaths. The images of important political-cultural figures are always subject to some compilation process, and, of course, the critical reader is wise to be particularly suspicious of retrospective materials about the members of losing factions, whose lives are constructed through an unsympathetic lens. Indeed, scholars have long noted that in traditional Chinese historiography, as in all historiographical systems, certain pronounced biases exist. Denis Twitchett and others have analyzed the processes through which historical records were shaped into the sources we have at our disposal today, emphasizing the way in which the worldview of the historians informed their understanding of the function of history.

The official history of a regime was compiled after its demise based upon a progressive series of records revised step by step. After the mid-seventh century, the Tang employed two pairs of court diarists. The precise titles changed over the course of the dynasty, but the diarists were always theoretically understood to divide their functions based upon the ancient interpretation of Diarists of the Left and Right, whereby the Diarists of the Left (the Chunqiu/Zuozhuan tradition) were responsible for recording the ruler’s actions, and the Diarists of the Right (following the Shujing and Guoyu tradition) recorded his words. As noted by Twitchett, the “basic outline” of the compilation process is no mystery; the court diaries (qiju zhu) and administrative records (shizheng ji), supposed to have been assembled contemporaneous to the events they recorded, were edited into a daily calendar (rili) for each year, which subsequently made up a veritable record (shilu) for each reign. The veritable record was reworked into a national history (guoshi), which, after the fall of the dynasty, was edited by the conquering regime into the standard history (zhengshi) of the period. The component parts of the standard history—the annals of rulers, tables (biao), biographies (liezhuan), and monographs (zhi)—were compiled using different types of source texts. Whereas the benji, considered the most authoritative, were put together by a court-appointed group of officials based on the earlier court documents mentioned above, the biographies, at least in the case of positively evaluated figures, were often taken directly from materials, mainly obituary-style “Accounts of Conduct” (xingzhuang), submitted by relatives or disciples of the deceased.

17. Twitchett, The Writing of Official History, 33. The process of editing was generally the purview of the Historiographical Office (shi guan), which underwent multiple incarnations over the course of the first century of the Tang. See Hung, “The T’ang Bureau of Historiography before 708,” 93–107. Hung discusses how the reigns of Gaozu (Li Yuan; r. 618–26) and especially Taizong also saw the compilation of the standard histories of the majority of the Northern and Southern regimes (Nan Bei chao; 420–589); these histories are thus the product of the same compilation process and worldview.
The historians who compiled historical records were, of course, aware of the potential for bias inherent in the writing process. Various measures were undertaken to ensure the relative independence of the historical offices from the central government, and Tang historians were certainly conscious of the subjective nature of the “Accounts of Conduct.” On an even deeper level, however, the worldview of the compilers mandated a conception of history fundamentally different from our own. The idea of the moral force of history is central to conceptions of the historian’s duty. Historical works were meant to provide moral judgments and exemplars of “praise and blame,” to the extent that noted historian Liu Fang’s (fl. mid- to late eighth c.) *Tangli* (Record of Tang History) was criticized by contemporaries for improper use of “praise and blame” (not for inaccuracy or bias). Arthur Wright has also discussed the conflict engendered by the didactic conception of history; at the same time that historians were anxious to be “recognized as ‘good historians’ (liang-shih),” meaning unbiased historians, their conviction in the historian’s moral duty led them to sanction the practice of “appropriate concealment,” or biased editing based on their moral interpretation of the past.

The subjective nature of moral judgment exerted a powerful influence over which subjects were included in or excluded from the historical record, as well as how various subjects were treated. In biographies of important individuals, character typology comes into play; the desire to display an individual as a moral exemplar of a particular “type” (virtuous recluse, upright official, chaste woman, evil woman)

is related to the prevalence of narrative “formulas,” formulaic episodes long established in the literary-historical tradition that were seen to encapsulate the behavior typical of certain “types.” As Twitchett notes elsewhere, such conventions would have been easily recognizable to educated readers. Yet the presence of such formulaic passages highlights the didactic purpose of the standard historical biographies and also evokes their source material, which was, as noted above, always of a more personal and unreliable nature than the source material for the annals and monographs. This is especially true in the case of negative biographies; as Twitchett has pointed out, because Accounts of Conduct would not have been written for “evil” members of losing factions or enemies to the current ruling house, historians in these instances had to rely on biased or suspect accounts. I would add that historians operating under the moral dictum conceptualization of history were not necessarily “forced” to resort to this type of prejudicial or uncorroborated account. Rather, those same prejudices would probably have informed their worldview as well and thus fit into the moral judgments they chose to promulgate.

These scholarly discussions raise important issues about the nature of history that inform my study of the historical constructions of the late seventh- through early eighth-century female power-holders. The situation of negatively evaluated women, however, presents special challenges beyond those involved in portrayals of “evil” male figures. Their identity as women engenders particular types of condemnation based in conceptualizations of appropriate gender roles. The corpus of relatively recent writing on Wu Zhao includes a book entitled, in Chinese (originally in Japanese), Empress Wu Zetian—Was She an Enlightened Ruler or a Female Disaster? Try to imagine the same title for a work about a male ruler—

22. See Twitchett in The Writing of Official History, 74–76, and “Chinese Biographical Writing,” 95–114. See also Franke’s discussion of the posthumous historiographical slander of Emperor Shun or Shundi 顺帝 (Toghon Temür; r. 1333–68), the last Yuan emperor, in “Some Remarks,” 120–22.
any male ruler, most beloved or most reviled—Sui Yangdi—Was He an Enlightened Ruler or a Male Disaster?—and the gender bias will become glaringly clear. The non–gender-neutral “female disaster” (nühuo 女禍) is a specific term within the Chinese tradition and implies transgression by women. This is a recurring category of historical disaster wherein women in positions of “unnatural” power cause disaster different from the problems created by incompetent male rulers (who would be termed non–gender-specific “disasters”).

Terms such as nühuo are an especially blatant example of the way in which sexism is written into the very rhetoric conceptualizing history and female historical figures. Scholarly awareness of issues surrounding gender and bias in historical compilation is long-standing, and scholars have touched upon these issues in various contexts. As for Wu Zhao and the Jinglong-era women, several scholars, including Jowen Tung and Keith McMahon, have attempted to place Wu Zhao within prevailing gender discourses of the Tang and later periods. No systematic analysis exists, however, of the way in which the powerful women of the early Tang have been negotiated in the literary-historical tradition.

Scholarship on Wu Zhao and the “second generations” of powerful women politicians has, up until now, been split into two main areas of interest. First, scholars have paid considerable attention to the cult of personality of Wu Zhao. Numerous biographies have been devoted to her, and more specifically oriented revisionist studies have attempted to reconstruct previously obscure or misunderstood aspects of her reign.

26. For a historical discussion of “female disaster” in the pre-Qin through Han periods, see Liu Yongcong (Clara Ho), *De, cai, se, quan*, chaps. 1–3.

27. For a discussion of these issues in relation to perhaps the most famous Tang femme fatale figure, Honored Consort Yang (Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 or Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環, 719–56), see Fan-pen Chen, “Problems of Chinese Historiography.”


Xuanzong’s execution of the Taiping Princess in 713 have attracted a
different sort of academic attention. Scholars have been drawn to the
literary, in particular poetic, developments taking place at Zhongzong’s
court, especially in relation to the cultural flourishing of the High Tang
(712–56) under Xuanzong. Jia Jinhua and others have focused on the
development of regulated verse and the sociocultural role of poetry,
which was often composed during courtly outings and functioned as
a vehicle for both entertainment and political advancement or demo-
tion.30 While the context of female rule provides the backdrop for these

In terms of more specifically oriented monographs, Guisso’s Wu Tie-t’ien and the
Politics of Legitimation in T’ang China China examines in detail Wu Zhao’s policies in
regard to religion, the state examination system, and foreign affairs, attempting to “show
more clearly the origins of the Empress Wu’s historical reputation” and to “draw a more
Antonino Forte also works in the area of state ideological apparatus, paying special attention
to the Buddhist ideology of Wu’s regime so as to address and disprove previous misconceptions. See Forte, Political Propaganda and Ideology in China and Mingtang and
Buddhist Utopias. Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias deals with the construction and signifi-
cance of the Mingtang (Hall of Light). On this topic, see also Rothschild, Rhetoric, Ritual,

30. Jia explores the literary output of the prominent court literati of Wu Zhao’s and
Zhongzong’s reigns and attempts to place the poetry of the period in the overall liter-
ary-historical development of poetic genre, form, and style. See Jia Jinhua, “The ‘Pearl
Scholars,’” “A Study of the Jinglong wenguan ji,” and Tangdai jihui zongji, 43–73.

Scholars writing after Jia have continued her focus on the Jinglong court literary
culture and yingzhi shi 應制詩 (poetry written to imperial command during group
courtly outings). Tao Min has further analyzed the background of the Jinglong wenguan ji
景龍文館記 (A Record of the Jinglong Literary Institute), in particular, its relationship
to the later Tanshi jishi 唐詩紀事 (Record of Stories Related to Tang Poems), from
which it was reconstructed by Jia. See Tao Min, “Jinglong wenguan ji kao.” Jie Wu’s 2008
dissertation examines group composition during the early Tang, focusing on the literary
features of the poetry, as well as the context and social functions of group composition.
See Jie Wu, “A Study of Group Compositions.” Works on Jinglong-era literary culture
tend to reaffirm Jia’s conclusions on topics such as the expansion of scope in landscape
description in the yingzhi poems from Wu Zhao’s time on, or the development of
regulated verse forms during the period. See Nie Yonghua, Chu Tang gongting shifeng liubian
kaolun, chaps. 3 and 4; and Sun Qin’an, Tanshi yu zhengzhi, chap. 4. See also Ding Yan,
“Lüe lun Chu Tang yingzhi shi,” 30–33; and Hu Han, “Chu Tang yi gongting nüxing
zuojia wei zhongxin shi läelu,” 78–80. Discussion of yingzhi poetry also
generally involves apologetic attempts to offset the notion that such poems are actually
not, in Ding Yan’s words, “overall boring, lacking flavor, and lacking artistic value” (在總
discussions of literary culture, they are not primarily concerned with attitudes toward gender or rule by women per se.

Monographs devoted to portrayals of women in the Chinese tradition have often focused on the later imperial period, but their approaches to gender issues have proved valuable to me in my research. Yenna Wu’s monograph on the development of the “virago” theme in Chinese literature offers an insightful discussion of how to approach portrayals of women in relation to traditional notions of gender roles. Because elements of exaggeration, essentialization, and “fictionalization” are integral to narrative constructions of these women, “[w]hat is at stake is not so much what actually happened but how historians envisaged the roles women played.”31 Judith Zeitlin’s work on ghosts and gender in the late imperial tradition likewise emphasizes the importance of an approach focused not on the “question of belief or fictionality,” but rather on “the issue of representation” and “the complex meanings, both literal and figurative, of these representations.”32 Her definition of the feminine specter as “always an image, culturally and historically constructed” also applies to the narrative figure of the condemned, powerful woman leader.33

Narrative Typology and (Re)construction

My analysis takes as its jumping-off point the concepts of narrative construction and reconstruction. How did the images of the female leaders from the Wu-Zhou period of Wu Zhao’s dominance (mid-seventh c.–705) through the Jinglong era become crystallized in the rhetoric of history, historical romance, and fiction? What assumptions inform the process of negative “canonization”? I approach the late seventh- through eighth-century period of female rule as an era united not only culturally but also in terms of its reconstruction in the retrospective imagination of history. I seek to understand the cultural lenses through which these

women were portrayed in the years, decades, and centuries after their dominance in government, focusing on their narrative construction as gendered typologies: What tropes are identified with them and how are they reworked and developed over time? How was their legitimacy or lack of legitimacy as women rulers interpreted and appropriated by later writers? What do they represent in the moral-cosmic schemas forming various historical and literary narratives? What is the meaning of “female power” in relation to these women?

In approaching the archetypal representations of this group of female power-holders, I have concentrated mainly on Tang through Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) sources. As Guisso has noted, by the Song, their classic conception in the literary-historical tradition was basically fixed.\textsuperscript{34} The annalistic, descriptive, and biographical materials found in the standard historical works of Jiu Tang shu, Xin Tang shu, and Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019–86) Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror of Government)\textsuperscript{35} are, of course, critical sources for Tang history, and they have also been very important to my specific research focus, although I have approached them from the perspective of narrative formulations and what they reveal about attitudes towards gender and power. The material selected during the Five Dynasties 五代 (907–960) and Northern Song 北宋 (960–1126) for inclusion in the standard historical descriptions of these powerful Tang women was culled from a wide variety of historical chronicles, anecdote collections, and circulating legends. In exploring these developments, early anecdote compilations (biji 笔記) dating to the eighth through early ninth centuries have proved invaluable sources. I have in particular made use of Chaoye qianzai 朝野僉載 (Comprehensive Record of Affairs within the Court and Without), compiled by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (ca. 660–ca.740)\textsuperscript{36}; Sui Tang jia hua 隋唐嘉話 (Table Talk

\textsuperscript{34} Guisso, Wu Tse-t’ien and the Politics of Legitimation, 201–2, note 43. As Guisso discusses in this same passage, there are a few notable dissenting evaluations of Wu Zhao from the mid- to later imperial period from such historians and literary men as Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202) and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602).

\textsuperscript{35} Zizhi tongjian is a chronological record of Chinese history from 403 BCE through 959 CE. The narrative of Zizhi tongjian is enhanced by Sima Guang’s inclusion of extensive text-critical notes, or kaoyi 考異, quoting alternative accounts from sources which are often no longer extant. For further information about Sima Guang and Zizhi tongjian, see Ji Xiao-bin, Politics and Conservatism in Northern Song China; and Wang Debao, Sima Guang yu “Zizhi tongjian.”

\textsuperscript{36} Zhang Zhuo, originally from Luze 陸澤 in Shenzhou 深州 (modern-day Hebei),
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from the Sui and Tang), compiled by Liu Su 劉肅 (fl. 742–55)\(^{37}\); and Da Tang xinyu 大唐新語 (New Words from the Great Tang), compiled by Liu Su 劉肅 (fl. 806–20).\(^{38}\) While these works contain the greatest amount of lore about Wu Zhao, Empress Wei, the Taiping and Anle Princesses, and Shangguan Wan’er, I have also made use of other Tang collections, such as Fengshi wenjian ji 封氏聞見記 (Record of What Mr. Feng Heard and Saw), compiled by Feng Yan 封演 (jinshi 進士 756), and Kai Tian chuanxin ji 開天傳信記 (Record of News Transmitted from the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Eras), compiled by Zheng Qi 鄭棨 (Tang).

The anecdotal collections initially compiled roughly two to four generations after their deaths played a powerful role in crafting the canonical, transgressive image of these women. The content and some surviving information regarding authorial intent suggest an emphasis on politics, the life of the court, and the moral evaluation of key figures.

was a well-known writer whose career spanned the reigns of Wu Zhao, Zhongzong, and Ruizong and the first three decades of Xuanzong’s rule. Chaoye qianzai is a collection of anecdotes that mainly concentrate on the period of Wu Zhao’s dominance and the reigns of Zhongzong and Ruizong, but it also contains sketches from earlier and later times. The collection focuses on historical material, but also includes geographical, zoological, and medical information and episodes that have been characterized as “anomaly” in nature. For Zhang Zhuo, see JTS 149.4023–24 and XTS 161.4979–80. For the composition of Chaoye qianzai, see “Dianjiao shuoming” 點校說明, CYQZ 3–5; and Zhou Xunchu, Tangdai biji xiaoshuo xulu, 7–14.

37. Liu Su was the son of prominent historian Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721), who is today perhaps most famous for his opposition to Wu Zhao’s desire to tamper with historical records for her own gain. Like his father, Liu Su served as a historian, and, in addition to Sui Tang jiahua, was the author of several other now-lost works that seem to have been historical in content. For the biographies of Liu Zhiji and Liu Su, see JTS 102.3168–74 and XTS 132.4519–23. See also “Dianjiao shuoming,” Sui Tang jiahua, 3–5 and Zhou Xunchu, Tangdai biji xiaoshuo xulu, 1–6.

38. Liu Su was active during the Yuanhe 元和 reign period (806–20), during which he served as a regional official in Jiangdu 江都 and/or Xunyang 潭陽. Da Tang xinyu follows the structure of Liu Yiqing’s 劉義慶 (403–44) famous Shishuo xinyu 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World), a collection of anecdotes about prominent personages and events during the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317–420) dynasty. Like Shishuo xinyu, Da Tang xinyu is divided into moral categories, under which are given anecdotes about individuals whose behavior was deemed to exemplify those categories. Liu Su’s work discusses the period from the beginning of the Tang through the Dali 大歷 reign (766–779) and is politically focused and didactic in nature. For further discussion of the textual transmission and ideological orientation of Da Tang xinyu, see Zhou Xunchu, Tangdai biji xiaoshuo xulu, 27–31. For a discussion of the shishuo tradition, see Qian, Spirit and Self.
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The preface and postscript to *Da Tang xinyu*, for example, explicitly affiliate the work with the historical tradition of character evaluation and assignation of moral significance. In general, the treatments of the early Tang women power-holders found in these collections delegitimize and condemn them through groups of narratives with repeating themes involving cosmic rejection, conspicuous consumption, and other forms of transgression.

In certain respects, the image of these women created therein was cemented and reaffirmed throughout ensuing generations. In other ways, there are significant areas of contrast between earlier and later representations. Narratives are embellished so as to emphasize the female leader's culpability in a given situation, and her female-identified crimes (corruption, sexual misconduct) become rhetorically enhanced. In this vein, I have evaluated some later sources from Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) times, paying careful attention to developments in specific narratives and in the broader narrative of their perceived place and moral role as characters in the literary-historical tradition.

Because my research focuses on cultural values and especially on gendered perceptions as rhetorically embodied, my source texts are by no means confined to “reliable” works, meaning those works generally judged to be historically accurate. If we discount the worth of “unreliable” works because they are deemed factually inaccurate, we miss key evidence suggestive of worldview and cultural definitions of gender roles. My analysis encompasses explicitly fictional primary sources, including poetry, prose fiction, and pornography, and sources not directly related to these women and/or their era, such as later anecdotal collections and *shihua* (notes on poetry or discussions of poetry). It is often in these incidental appearances that we can gauge the nature of their retrospective images and designated cultural-historical roles. In examining

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40. As John Wills has noted, some of the most damning anecdotes about Wu Zhao can be traced back to sources compiled very soon after her death. This information is, however, based upon the claims of eleventh-century historians. Wills surmises that this does not prove the veracity of all of these accounts, but indicates that “in her own time people already were ready to believe the worst about a woman who did not know her place.” Wills, “Empress Wu,” 132.
the negotiation of these women in the Chinese literary-historical tradition, I have, for reasons of length and scope, focused on the primary sources. I do not engage extensively, for instance, with the rich corpus of Japanese sources pertaining to this period, a direction in research that awaits future work.

My analysis centers on progressively exploring and unpacking the construction of these women’s moral-cultural roles vis-à-vis conceptions of history and gender. Some of the most often repeated episodes involving, in particular, Wu Zhao are the extreme “evil woman” episodes, such as her possible murders of her infant daughter and various rivals and her dysfunctional relationships with her adult sons. Discussion of these rather repetitive episodes tends to devolve into an attempt to prove or disprove whether Wu was, in fact, guilty of the crimes of which she has been accused. Though well-known, these episodes are neither the most interesting nor, I would argue, the most important in terms of retrospective images of female power in the era as a whole. My work is thus structured thematically, according to the most central aspects of their typology as it coalesced over time.

The first chapter of this book examines the literary constructions of pre-Tang women leaders to assess the ways in which portrayals of the Tang figures draw upon or depart from existing precedents. Good precedents for female rule do exist in the Chinese tradition, and chapter 1 explores celebrated and censured pre-Tang women in order to understand the circumstances under which female rule was sanctioned versus condemned as transgressive. Positive heroines, even when they were in reality quite powerful, are often praised for their “natural” womanly virtues of chastity, modesty, and knowing their ritual place. Building upon earlier studies, my analysis suggests that a major factor in determining posthumous evaluation is whether or not the woman in question attempted to directly take power herself and/or to rule through her family members. Although Empress Wei and Wu Zhao especially attempted to follow some time-honored traditions of the virtuous empress, they are absolutely not remembered in this way by later generations of historians and writers, who place them within the tradition of the destructive female power-holder, a tradition that attaches specific tropes to this “type” of woman.

The second chapter shifts focus to a complementary perspective on
the image-making surrounding these women. This chapter approaches an understanding of their self-image through analysis of the writings, including poetry, prose, and other documents, produced at the courts of Wu Zhao, Zhongzong, and Ruizong either by these women, to their command, or to suit their tastes. Analysis of these laudatory works enables a fascinating glimpse into not only the aesthetic tastes of these women, but also the way in which they preferred to see themselves and their power figured rhetorically. In turn, we can trace the transformation, indeed, the inversion, of these same images and tropes in later portrayals.

Each of the ensuing chapters takes as its focus an important, broad thematic aspect of the rhetorical creation of female power in retrospective accounts of the women who dominated politics during the late seventh through early eighth centuries. The third chapter focuses on the richly varying themes surrounding ritual, signs, and meaning. Cosmic messages are ubiquitous throughout the classical Chinese tradition but acquire a special meaning when deployed in the context of this unique era of female rule. Arthur Wright, Howard Wechsler, and Jack Chen have done discerning work on the legitimation campaigns, including various auspicious signs and events, of famous male rulers such as Emperor Wen of the Sui and Taizong of the Tang. Richard Guisso likewise discusses state symbolism in his analysis of the mechanisms of legitimation utilized by Wu Zhao. Building upon these insightful earlier studies, chapter 3 approaches the issue of legitimacy from a different angle: that is, from the narrative destruction of these women’s legitimacy in retrospective materials.

The fourth chapter analyzes the narrative use of conspicuous consumption as a de-legitimizing force in portrayals of the female power-holders of this era. Material memory is a crucial component in their narrative constructions; across all genres, writers have overwhelmingly emphasized their lavish residences, resort complexes, clothes, and other luxury possessions. The disproportionate amount of attention paid to conspicuous consumption, found in some of the earliest sources compiled just decades after the Taiping Princess’s death, combines nostal-

41. Wright, The Sui Dynasty; Wechsler, Offerings of Jade and Silk; and Jack Wei Chen, The Poetics of Sovereignty.
42. Guisso, Wu Tse-tien and the Politics of Legitimation, especially the introduction and chap. 4.
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gia for a lost historical moment and condemnation of female-led and
-enabled greed. Chapter 4 explores how their greed is interpreted in rela-
tion to the growing narrative identification between the private holdings
of powerful women and various forms of intrigue.

The fifth chapter centers on the idea of inversion in terms of explicit
depictions of gender relations and sexuality. Famous later works of fiction,
drama, and pornography emphasize the “scandalous” relationships between
older female power-holders, in particular Wu Zhao, and younger male
concubines. The chapter traces the development and significance of the “male
concubine” theme, arguing that these depictions reinforce, in a particularly
graphic manner, the coalescing image of the era as defined by the dangerous
reversal of appropriate male and female roles. Sexualized gender inversion
completes the image of the “insatiable woman” who usurps unsanctioned
symbolic, material, and sexual prerogative.

Throughout, I keep returning to the unifying issues of legitimacy
and gender. Utilizing anecdotal, historical, and literary sources about the
early Tang women power-brokers, the study explores changing attitudes
toward gender and power and the establishment of the rhetorical identi-
fication between their power as women and their transgression.