

A STUDY ON CHINA'S ONLY FEMALE RULER WU ZE TIAN

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims at clarifying the very basic characteristics of Wu Ze Tian's reign and her utilization of religious and symbolic propaganda for legitimizing her authority. Wu Ze Tian is the only female emperor of China's long dynastic history who founded her own dynasty, Zhou dynasty after overthrowing the Tang dynasty in 690.

The political ideal presented by Confucianism, which is the traditional state doctrine of the imperial China, refuses female participation to political arena and identifies the emperor as the Son of Heaven. In order to overcome the Confucian obstacle, Wu Ze Tian referred to the symbols and rituals of the antiquity, highly appraised by the Confucians, which enabled her participation to the political sphere. Moreover, for legitimizing herself as a female ruler, she utilized the Buddhist scholarship and concepts as tools of political propaganda. It was also a matter of fact that due to the northwestern nomadic influence on the society, female rulership was not conceived to be impossible in the Tang dynasty, as it was in the previous dynasties. Benefitting from this sociopolitical atmosphere, Wu Ze Tian occupied the throne first as the empress and later as the empress dowager for almost 35 years and at last ruled over the whole Chinese soil as the female emperor of the Zhou dynasty for 15 years.

Wu Ze Tian proved herself as a capable ruler under whose dominion the whole country reached its broadest borders and the economy flourished considerably. Not only owing to the power of her political propaganda but also mostly because of her

talent in rulership and her social and political reforms, Wu Ze Tian is one the most important Chinese rulers who left a remarkable influence on the governmental tradition of China.

Keywords: Wu Ze Tian, Tang Dynasty, Zhou Dynasty, Confucianism, Buddhism, Legitimation of Authority, Political Propaganda

ÖZ

ÇİN'İN YEGANE KADIN HÜKÜMDARI WU ZE TIAN ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA

Tezel, Aybike Şeyma

Yüksek Lisans, Tarih Bölümü

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Bu tez Wu Ze Tian'in hükümlerlik dönemi ile onun, otoritesini meşrulaştırmak için yararlandığı dini ve sembolik propagandayı incelemektedir. Wu Ze Tian Çin'in uzun hanedanlık tarihinin yegâne kadın hükümdarı olup, 690 yılında Tang hanedanlığını yıkararak kendi hanedanlığı olan Zhou'yu kurmuştur.

Çin'in geleneksel devlet öğretisi olan Konfüçyüsçülük tarafından sunulan siyasi ideal, politika alanına kadın müdahalesini reddeder ve imparatoru göğün oğlu olarak tanımlar. Wu Ze Tian, Konfüçyüsçülük'ün ortaya çıkardığı bu engelini aşmak için Konfüçyüsçüler tarafından fazlasıyla itibar edilen antik dönemin sembol ve ritüellerine atıfta bulunmuş, bu sayede politika alanına girişini sağlamıştır. Dahası, bir kadın hükümdar olarak hükümlerliğini meşrulaştırmak için Budist literatür ve kavramları siyasi propaganda aracı olarak kullanmıştır. Şurası da bir gerçektir ki, kuzey batılı göçebe topluluklarının etkisine bağlı olarak kadın hükümdarlık Tang toplumunda daha önceki hanedanlıklar döneminde olduğu gibi imkânsız telakki edilmiyordu. Bu sosyopolitik koşullardan faydalanan Wu Ze Tian önce imparatoriçe, sonra da hanım sultan olarak 35 yıl boyunca tahtta kalmış ve nihayetinde kurduğu Zhou hanedanlığının kadın imparatoru olarak 15 yıl boyunca bütün Çin topraklarına hükmetmiştir.

Hükümlerliği süresince Çin topraklarının tarihteki en geniş sınırlarına ulaşması ve

ülkedeeki ekonomik durumun farkedilir bir biçimde iyileşmesi Wu Ze Tian'in yönetici olarak yetkinliğini kanıtlamıştır. Başvurduğu siyasi propagandanın yanı sıra, yöneticilikteki yeteneđi ile sosyal ve siyasi reformları sayesinde Wu Ze Tian Çin'in devlet geleneđine etkide bulunmuş en önemli hükümdarlarından biridir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: : Wu Ze Tian, Tang Hanedanlığı, Zhou Hanedanlığı, Konfüçyüsçülük, Budizm, Otoritenin Meşruiyeti, Siyasi Propaganda

To My Female Ancestor Müşerref KUTLAY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ÖZ.....	vi
DEDICATION	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND.....	9
2.1 The Traditional State Doctrine: Confucianism.....	9
2.1.1 Brief History of Confucianism.....	9
2.1.2 Basic Assertions of Confucian Political Theory.....	11
2.1.3 The Position of Women in Confucian Ideology.....	13
2.1.4 Wu Ze Tian's Relationship with Confucianism.....	14
2.1.5 The Importance of Rituals in Confucian Ideology.....	16
2.1.6 Wu Ze Tian's Performance of Feng and Shan Rituals.....	17
2.1.7 Wu Ze Tian's Patronage of Confucian Scholarship.....	21
2.2 Buddhism as the Opponent of Confucianism.....	23
2.2.1 Buddhist Entrance to China during the Han Dynasty.....	24
2.2.2 Buddhism as an Institutionalized Religion during the Tuo Ba Wei Dynasty.....	26
2.2.3 Buddhist Zeal during the Sui and Tang Dynasties.....	28

2.3	Cultural Portrait of Tang Society.....	31
2.3.1	Influences of the Northwestern Nomadic Tribes.....	31
3.	THE LIFE OF WU ZE TIAN.....	34
3.1	Family Background and Early Life.....	34
3.2	Becoming the Empress Wu.....	41
3.3	Becoming the Empress Dowager Wu.....	49
4.	WU ZE TIAN'S REIGN.....	54
4.1	Wu Ze Tian's Preperation for the Throne.....	54
4.1.1	Wu Ze Tian's Political Reforms.....	54
4.1.2	Rebellion Against Wu Ze Tian's Reforms.....	59
4.1.3	Wu Ze Tian's Reign of Terror.....	61
4.1.4	Supporters of Wu Ze Tian.....	62
4.1.5	Construction of Wu Ze Tian's Bright Hall.....	63
4.2	Wu Ze Tian's Buddhist Patronage.....	71
4.3	Wu Ze Tian's Utilization of Buddhist Propaganda.....	76
4.3.1	The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra.....	76
4.3.2	Wu Ze Tian Having the Title of Cakravartin.....	79
4.3.3	Wu Ze Tian's Identification with the Boddhisattva Maitreya.....	84
4.4	Wu Ze Tian and the Zhou Dynasty.....	89
5.	CONCLUSION.....	93
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	97

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Wu Ze Tian (625-705) is the most significant historical figure of the Chinese imperial past. She left her mark on the long dynastic history of China as being the only female emperor who founded her own dynasty in 690, despite the patriarchal governmental tradition prevailing, then. Although she was not a member of a noble clan, she found the chance to enter the Tang palace as a concubine thanks to her father's companionship with the founder of the Tang dynasty, Tang Gao Zu, and created a path to the throne for herself which led to the collapse of Tang and the founding of Zhou dynasty, her own reign.

With the collapse of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316) in 316 China entered a period of discrepancy among Northern and Southern dynasties. Until the foundation of the Sui dynasty (581-618) in 581, the northern part of the Chinese soil has been under control of five ethnically non-Chinese dynasties whereas the southern area has been governed by four countries of Chinese descent for approximately two and a half centuries. Tang dynasty was founded in 618 by the Duke of the Tang Li Yuan, posthumously, Tang Gao Zu seizing the power of the Sui imperial house. Li Yuan was of a distinguished lineage which was linked to the imperial families of the Northern Zhou (556-581) and the Sui. He was "descended from a line of prominent military men and a member of the mixed Chinese/ Xian Bei/ Turkish aristocracy

which dominated north-western China.”¹ In the early period of the Tang dynasty, north-western gentry was occupying an important place in the court as well as in the army and was exerting immense authority in the decision making procedure of the governmental issues. It was the most powerful group opposing to Wu Ze Tian from her ascendancy to the throne as the Empress of Tang Gao Zong, the third ruler of the Tang, onwards. The major argument of the north-western gentry against Wu Ze Tian was related to her lineage. In addition to claiming descent from the northwestern aristocracy, the Tang rulers “had married heavily with Turkish and other non-Chinese nobility.”² Wu Ze Tian was from a humble origin so that she could not deserve to be the Empress. However by establishing a network of spies and having allies among the high ranking ministers Wu Ze Tian overcame this obstacle and was dethroned by Tang Gao Zong as the Empress, despite the fact that she had entered the palace as a concubine of Gao Zong’s father, the second Tang emperor Tang Tai Zong (559-649). Tang Tai Zong ascended the Tang throne in 626 after defeating his father Tang Gao Zu and murdering his own brother. He was a successful commander who defeated the eastern Kok Turks (603-630) and got them under the dominion of the Tang. Because of showing a great talent at war and featuring heavily nomadic characteristics, Tai Zong was called as *Kaghan* by Turks. After the death of Tai Zong, his son Tang Gao Zong succeeded the throne. In contrast to his father, Gao Zong was not a capable ruler and he was portrayed as a weak minded man. Moreover, his health was in no good condition. Hence Wu Ze Tian aided him in the court from 655

¹ Howard J. Wechsler, “The Founding of the T’ang Dynasty: Kao-tsu”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p. 151

² Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the Tang Dynasty*, (USA: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 37

until his death in 683. It was a big chance for Wu Ze Tian and she used the period even after his death until founding her own dynasty in 690 for setting the grounds for her ascendancy to the throne.

The main problem of Wu Ze Tian was the source of legitimation. From the ancient Zhou dynasty (1045BC-256BC) onwards, the Mandate of Heaven has been the only valid source for the legitimization of the imperial power. Heaven was considered to be the ancestor of the imperial family and the emperor was regarded as the Son of Heaven. This political ideology was a great obstacle for Wu Ze Tian since she had no right to claim for one of the three forms of legitimate authority³, the traditional legitimate authority. In order to overcome this bottleneck Wu Ze Tian “had to assert, first of all, that Heaven provided for rule by a woman and, second, that she was that woman.”⁴ For that purpose, she appealed to several ways. She utilized omens and symbols approving her claim of authority, and drew an affiliation to the antiquity by using the ancient titles of the dukes of Zhou while she was the Empress of Gao Zong. The strictest defender of the Mandate of Heaven principle was the Confucian clergy. Confucianism was the official state doctrine of Chinese dynasties from the Han dynasty (206-220) onwards. The main political argument of Confucian ideology that clashed with Wu Ze Tian’s imperial aspiration was the exclusion of women from the sphere of politics. For Confucianism, women are responsible for their domestic duties by nature and if they oppose to that and deal with the manly field, such as

³ According to the Sociologist Max Weber, there are three types of legitimate authority; traditional, (legal) rational and charismatic.

⁴ Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao”, *Religion*, 1998, 28, pp.383-392, p.384

politics, then the natural order would be corrupted. Wu Ze Tian utilized the propagandistic aspect of a foreign faith, Buddhism, for deriving support to her claims against Confucianism. Moreover, due to the diverse and pluralistic ethnic composition of the Tang dynasty, the Son of Heaven “was no longer sufficient by itself to govern such a complex empire with so many different lifestyles, ethnic groups, and religions.”⁵ In that sense, Wu Ze Tian asserted a new model for kingship in Tang China. She did not claim to be the Son of Heaven but found her legitimation basis in a foreign faith, namely, in Buddhism.

Buddhism featured remarkably in her political propaganda right after the death of Gao Zong and created the proper basis for Wu Ze Tian to gain legal authority. The Buddhist clergy, backed by Wu Ze Tian, presented a commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra and declared Wu Ze Tian to be the female Cakravartin (the universal Buddhist king) and the Bodhisatva of Mercy (Maitreya) which was prophesized in the Sutra. Moreover, the Commentary strengthened its assertion making a reference to the relation between the Maitreya and the Ming Tang complex, which was an ancient complex constructed by Wu Ze Tian to represent her absolute power, elucidated in the Sutra. The Great Cloud Sutra commentary played an important and final role in her way to the throne. Two months after the promulgation of the Commentary, Wu Ze Tian declared the collapse of the Tang and the foundation of the Zhou dynasty as the Divine Emperor of the Zhou in 690 and she ruled over the Chinese soil until 705.

⁵ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 16

In this study, it is aimed at clarifying the motives and means that were utilized by Wu Ze Tian in her challenge to the dominant patriarchal political ideology of the Tang dynasty which carried her from the rank of an ordinary concubine to the position of the only female emperor who founded her own dynasty throughout Chinese history. The significance of Wu Ze Tian did not only lay in her being the only woman emperor of China but also in her political capabilities which secured her position as the ruler of one of the most powerful dynasties of China, Tang dynasty, and finally as the ruler of her own dynasty, the only female dynasty in the history of China, Zhou. For that purpose, first of all the family background of Wu Ze Tian was elucidated in detail in the first chapter. Then her political life story starting from her entrance to the harem of Tang Tai Zong to the death of her husband Tang Gao Zong was explained chronologically in the same chapter. After Gao Zong's death Wu Ze Tian's political life was heavily predominated by Buddhism in terms of either utilizing Buddhist propaganda or offering patronage to the faith. Buddhism was considered to be a supporting force to her political authority despite the Confucian opposition. In the second chapter, the very basic ideological assertions of Confucianism and its place in the state ideology of the Chinese dynasties were discussed. In order to understand the distinction between Confucianism and Buddhism the history of Buddhism in China was explained in relation to the political history of China. In the third and last chapter, Wu Ze Tian's Buddhist utilization and patronage was explicated with a special emphasis on the Ming Tang and the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra.

The Confucians prolonged their hostile attitude towards Wu Ze Tian in history writing as well. For this study the relevant chapters of the two of the Twenty Four Official Histories of China; the Old Tang History and the New Tang History, and the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government were scanned as primary sources. In Chinese historiography tradition, each dynasty carried out the project of writing the history of the preceding one in order to inform the officials and the diplomats about both the bad and good aspects of the previous states. The Old Tang History was compiled by Liu Xu and completed in 945 under the rule of Later Jin dynasty. The New Tang History was ordered to be written by Ou Yang Xiu during the Song dynasty. The work was completed in 1060. The Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government was written by the outstanding historian Si Ma Guang and presented to the Song emperor in 1084. All these three works ignore Wu Ze Tian's Zhou dynasty and describe her reign as a usurpation period. In none of these three books Wu Ze Tian was called as the Emperor. In some parts of these books, Wu Ze Tian was mentioned highly negatively however in some parts the writers used a more unbiased tone. Let the tendentious approach of the Old Tang History, the New Tang History, and the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government leave aside, all three of these sources are useful in giving almost exact chronology and depicting the general characteristics of the events.

The secondary literature on Wu Ze Tian is not an immense number but still of enough amount. Surprisingly, Chinese scholarship is less than the Western one. This might be due to the negative portrayal of Wu Ze Tian in Confucian history writing tradition. The most prominent Chinese source related to Wu Ze Tian was written by

Chinese scholar Chen Yin Ke (1890-1969). Chen Yin Ke, elucidated the very basic features of Wu Ze Tian's Buddhist utilization with respect to the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra in his article *Wu Ze Tian and Buddhism* 武曩與佛教. He also gave detailed information about Wu Ze Tian's family background in *A Note on the Marriage of Li Wu and Wei Yang during Tang Dynasty* 記唐代之李武韋楊婚姻集團. His articles are still considered to be the most well known reference works related to Wu Ze Tian. In this study Gu Zheng Mei *From Heavenly King Tradition to Buddha King Tradition: A Study on the Patterns of the Buddhist Political Ideology in Medieval China* 從天王傳統到佛王傳統: 中國中世佛教治國意識型態研究, Chen Jo Shui *Empress Wu and Huang Zheng Jian Surmise on Wu Ze Tian's Background* 關於武則天身世的一點猜測 were also cited with their illuminating works shedding light on the different aspects of Wu Ze Tian's life and aspirations. For the Western scholarship, for more than twenty years R. W. L. Guisso's *Wu Tse-T'ian and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* and C. P Fitzgerald's *The Empress Wu* books have been regarded as the most prominent ones. In 2008, Norman H. Rothschild's book *Wu Zhao: China's Only Female Emperor*, which was an enlarged and annotated version of his PhD dissertation *Rhetoric, Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China*, was added among the most well-known Wu Ze Tian biographies. Antonino Forte's *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of 7th Century* related to the Great Cloud Sutra, with an annotated translation of the Commentary, and *the Ming*

Tang and Buddhist Utopias related to Wu Ze Tian's Bright Hall complex are often cited throughout this thesis. Besides, the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra, which holds an important part of this study, was also taken from Forte's edition.

While scanning the primary sources related to Wu Ze Tian, Jong Min Rhee's MA Thesis "Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty: Becoming the Only Female Emperor in China," in which the image of Wu Ze Tian in primary sources was discussed, was sometimes used as a manual. Also, Britt Marlow's MA thesis "Empress Wu Zhao, Son of Heaven: Uses of Religious Patronage and Propaganda to Secure Support and Quell Dissension During the Tang Dynasty" was an original work with Marlow's interpretation of Wu Ze Tian's religious patronage and propaganda with respect to her exertion of power.

CHAPTER 2

IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

Before discussing Wu Ze Tian's political life, it is essential to elucidate the very basic peculiarities of the ideological and sociopolitical background of the Tang dynasty. The two important ideological trends prevailing during the Tang reign was Confucianism⁶ and Buddhism. Confucianism, which was the state ideology of the imperial China, was an obstacle for Wu Ze Tian because of its patriarchal assertions. Wu Ze Tian utilized Buddhism, which was not a Chinese originated faith, as an ideological support for her reign. In order to understand this clash between Confucianism and Buddhism, it is also essential to shed light on the sociopolitical environment of the Tang dynasty.

2.1. THE TRADITIONAL STATE DOCTRINE: CONFUCIANISM

2.1.1. Brief History of Confucianism

⁶ Confucianism denotes the traditional Confucianism, which dates back to the time of Confucius up until the Song (宋) dynasty, in this thesis. In Song dynasty period, a new understanding on Confucian doctrine arose as Neo Confucianism which attempted to merge the ideals of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Confucius⁷, who lived in the chaotic atmosphere of the Spring and Autumn (Chun Qiu 春秋) and Warring States (Zhan Guo 戰國) periods⁸, was always longing for a revival of the glorious days of the Western Zhou (Xi Zhou 西周)⁹ times when the (unified) political authority was in the hands of ideal rulers and advisors whose rule was compatible with the right moral principles. Confucius himself did not found any school of thought; he neither claimed to be the originator of any new ideas. Although he was not offering anything new, he was the first great moralist and political theoretician of China and still “Confucius’ importance lies in the fact that he systematized a body of ideas, not of his own creation, and communicated it to a circle of disciples.”¹⁰ By efforts of his disciples, Confucianism became “the state orthodoxy” during the Han (漢) dynasty (206BC-220) and preserved its position up

⁷ Confucius (Kong Qiu 孔丘) was born in the State of Lu (魯), which is in the present Shan Dong 山東 province of China, during the late Spring and Autumn Period in 551BC. Although he was descended from a noble family, due to the financial decline of his family, he started to work from very early ages on. In his fifties, he became an officer in the state of Lu but after working for a short time he quitted work and dedicated his life to teaching. He is believed to have taught over 3000 students, nevertheless there was no woman among them. His teachings were compiled under the name of *the Analects* (Lun Yu 論語) by his students later on and granted to be the representative work of Confucianism as a school of thought. Moreover, he was believed to be the editor or the author of the most outstanding literary works of Chinese history, namely, *the Five Classics* (Wu Jing 五經) which includes *the Book of Changes* (Yi Jing 易經), *the Book of Odes* (Shi Jing 詩經), *the Book of Rites* (Li Ji 禮記), *the Book of History* (Shu Jing 書經) and *the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chun Qiu 春秋). Also *the Book of Music* (Yue Jing 樂經) was said to be edited by Confucius however it has been lost. Confucius was died in 479 BC but has left a great impact on educational and political ideology of Chinese culture for centuries.

⁸ Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were periods of turbulent in the history of China after the collapse of the Western Zhou dynasty.

⁹ Western Zhou dynasty was founded in 1050BC and lasted until 771BC.

¹⁰ Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p.41

until the 20th century. Compatible to the Confucian ideal from the Han dynasty onwards, “the successive dynasties sought political sanction and validation by reconstituting Zhou rites, offices, and institutions.”¹¹

2.1.2. Basic Assertions of Confucian Political Theory

In its very basic political theory, Confucianism draws an analogy of the cosmic order in the universe with the kinship organization in the family and the political administration in the state. Professor Theresa Kelleher gave a detailed account of this analogy in his article *Confucianism*, expressing that the cosmic order in the universe is composed of Heaven, earth and human beings. The hierarchical relationship of Heaven and earth, in which Heaven represents the superior, creative force whereas earth acts as the inferior receptive party, is the fundamental life giving process. Human beings should bind to this order and all parts in the universe should act harmoniously due to their natures.¹² On the whole, in Confucian cosmology “the cosmic order was seen as life giving, relational and harmonious in the interaction of its parts.”¹³ In this model, Heaven was the male principle, namely, Yang 陽 and earth was the female principle, namely, Yin 陰. The male Yang principle was dominant and in the ruler position however the female Yin was considered to be submissive and it needs to be ruled.¹⁴ The relative sociopolitical positions that man and woman

¹¹ Norman H. Rothschild, “Rhetoric, Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China”, (Phd Dissertation, Brown University, 2003), p.46

¹² Theresa Kelleher, op. cit., pp.136-137

¹³ Theresa Kelleher, op. cit., p.137

occupied, was determined on the basis of Yin and Yang dualism. These two elements were not mutually exclusive, on the contrary; they should act cooperatively in order to integrate to the harmony of the universe. However, their relationship was not an equal one since “[...] in the sky there are not two suns, nor in a land two kings, nor in a state two rulers, nor in a family, two equally honorable [...]”¹⁵

In the Confucian state ideology which conceived the organizational structure of the state with the “family” metaphor, the ruler of the state had the title of ‘the son of Heaven’ (Tian Zi 天子)¹⁶ strongly representing the patriarchal characteristic of the authority, likewise it was the eldest male member who would be the head of the family. The female rulership was strictly opposed and by using “hen” as a metaphor for women it was asserted in one of the Confucian classics, *the Book of Documents* (Shang Shu 尚書) that “the hen does not herald the dawn, when the hen crows to

¹⁴ Diana Paul, op. cit., p.193

¹⁵ Richard W. Guisso, “Thunder Over The Lake: The Five Classics and the Perception of Woman in Early China”, *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship*, Edited by Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, (Youngstown, N.Y.: Philo Press, 1981), p.59

¹⁶ Tian Zi 天子 is a problematic concept when it is translated to English. Hitherto western scholars used “the son of Heaven” as a direct translation to the word, as well as denoting the emperor. However in the case of Wu Ze Tian, being a female ruler, she can not be referred as the son of Heaven but “the daughter of Heaven,” which has a different meaning in Chinese language. Throughout this thesis, Tian Zi is used for denoting the emperor. “The offspring of Heaven” instead of “the son of Heaven” might be asserted as a more secure translation for the concept. While mentioning the reign of Wu Ze Tian, she is referred as “the female emperor” due to another concept clash between Chinese and English languages. While in English “empress” is used for both the female ruler and the wife of the empress, in Chinese there are two different words for each, namely, Nu Huang 女皇 for female ruler and Huang Hou 皇后 for the empress as the wife of the emperor. For the mother of an emperor, which is also usually referred as the empress in western literature, a different word is asserted by Chinese language, namely, Huang Tai Hou 皇太后. For overcoming the possible confusion among the concepts, in this thesis Wu Ze Tian is referred as the empress while she was the empress of the third Tang emperor Gao Zong. When she was the mother of the fourth Tang emperor Rui Zong she is mentioned as the empress dowager. When she declared her reign, she was considered to be the female emperor and called so in this study.

announce the dawn, it only means that the family is doomed”¹⁷. It was expressed that the female intervention to the political sphere would inevitably cause disharmony and catastrophe. In the Confucian classics, several women such as empresses, empress dowagers who have attempted to seize the authority in the previous dynasties were heavily criticized.¹⁸ Moreover, their stories were made examples and warnings for all women.

2.1.3. The Position of Women in Confucian Ideology

In the Confucian code of conduct women were stick to ‘three obediences’, namely, obey to father before marriage, obey to husband after marriage, and obey to son after husband’s death. Besides, women were considered to attain four virtues, such as, morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work. These Three Obediences and Four Virtues 三從四德 were seen as the indicator of female submission to male authority which was the ideology imposed on Chinese women by Confucianism.

The relationship between man and woman should have been constructed in the limits of hierarchy which depended on the separation of functions, that is to say man was responsible of the outside works while woman dealt with domestic tasks. Moreover, man and woman should mutually love and respect to each other in order to preserve

¹⁷ The original phrase is as follows; 牝雞無晨, 牝雞為晨, 惟家之索. Norman H. Rothschild, op. cit., p.53

¹⁸ For more information on the empresses and the empress dowagers who attempted to seize dynastic power in throughout the Chinese history see Lien- Sheng Yang, “Female Rulers in Imperial China”, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Volume 23, (1960-1961), pp. 47-61

the harmony among the family.¹⁹ In this logic, there was no room for women in the political sphere since the women occupied an inferior position in the cosmic hierarchy and she was only in charge of household duties. The following poem which was stated in the Book of Odes is an outstanding expression of the Confucian ideal that female penetration to the political arena would lead to clash and disorder;

A clever man builds a city wall, a clever woman overthrows it. Beautiful is the clever woman; but she is an owl, a hooting owl. A woman with a long tongue, she is a promoter of evil. Disorder is not sent down from Heaven, it is produced by women.²⁰

In the last verses of the poem, women were reminded that they should deal with their domestic works instead of the public affairs:

And [therefore] the women have no public service; they have to abide their silkworm work and their weaving.²¹

2.1.4. Wu Ze Tian's Relationship with Confucianism

Although Confucianism lived its zenith in Han times, when it was formulated as the official state ideology, in Tang dynasty “there was still no greater source of

¹⁹ Ibid, p.59

²⁰ Translation is borrowed from Richard W. Guisso, op. cit, p.55. The original text is as follows; 哲夫成城, 哲夫傾城. 懿厥哲婦, 為臬為鷗. 婦有長舌, 維厲之陸. 亂匪將自天, 生自婦人.

²¹ Ibid, p.55. The original verse is as follows; 婦無公事, 休其蠶織

legitimacy and authority then Confucianism.”²² For legitimizing her authority in view of such a strong patriarchal governmental tradition which left no space for women in politics, Wu Ze Tian favoured two different ways in two different times. While she, as an empress or an empress dowager, was preparing the conditions that would assure her ascendancy to the throne, she showed a relative conformity to the Confucian norms, and although she never challenged them, she still tried to modify some where needed. The real problem arose when she founded her own dynasty which was unacceptable to Confucian ideology so that she sought for a new ground for legitimization and found it in Buddhism.

When Wu Ze Tian was the empress of the emperor Tang Gao Zong or the empress dowager of her son, the “puppet” emperor Rui Zong, she was acting in appropriation to the Confucian norms for empresses and empress dowagers²³. By that way “she drew warrant and authority from Confucian rites and symbols.”²⁴ In Confucian ideology ritual was the most important means to preserve the universal harmony; so that it held an undeniable place in the governmental organization besides through ritual the legitimate authority of the state was being acknowledged. As soon as she was elevated to the position of the empress by Gao Zong in 655, she performed the Xian Can 先蠶²⁵ and the Feng and Shan sacrificial ceremonies²⁶ which dated back to

²² Norman H. Rothschild, op. cit., p.48

²³ Diana Paul, op. cit., p.195

²⁴ Norman H. Rothschild, op. cit., p.48

²⁵ The first time Wu Ze Tian performed Xian Can sacrifice was in 656 and she performed it three more times until 683. Xian Can was a ritual to which palace women were attending and offering sacrifices to the divinity of the sericulture, Xian Can. In the article *Empress Wu Chen Jo Shui*

the antiquities, namely the Western Zhou period that was highly appraised by the Confucians.

2.1.5. The Importance of Rituals in Confucian Ideology

Rituals and ceremonies are important elements which help the one in power persuade the subjects to accept a given political authority. By declaring the legitimacy of the political authority in a ritualistic practice rulers do not only prove their rule but also attribute a kind of mystique charisma on themselves which make people to perceive the ruler to be a divine being. “Rituals, impressive ceremonies, and pomp of all kinds lend a powerful mystique to rulers, surrounding them with grandeur, exalting their status, and ultimately facilitating their sovereignty”²⁷ and so the ruler finds the secure basis for presenting himself to his subjects as a capable ruler. Likewise, throughout Chinese history, rituals and sacrificial ceremonies were seen as symbolic vehicles “for expressing the ruler’s supreme position as the “one man” under Heaven, as well as his acknowledgement of Heaven’s Mandate.”²⁸ “Chinese kingship, like that of ancient Rome, required divine sanction.”²⁹

elucidates that by undertaking the Xian Can ritual Wu Ze Tian, as the empress, was reminding women of their primary social and economic duty as silk works and weaving. For more information on Xian Can rituals see Chen Jo Shui, op. cit., pp.79-80

²⁶ Detailed information with regard to the content and undertaking of the Feng and Shan ceremonies, and Wu Z e Tian’s contributions were given in the first chapter.

²⁷ Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the Tang Dynasty*, (USA: Yale University Press, 1985), p.21

²⁸ Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p 174

²⁹ Stephen R, Bokenkamp, op. cit., p.384

The Feng and Shan rituals “may be dated to antiquity and seen as the ultimate act of legitimation by the Confucian scholars and founding monarchs.”³⁰In that sense, these sacrifices have both political and religious connotations. As Wechsler states they

[...] were an expression of ruler’s receipt of Mandate of Heaven. They symbolized that he legitimately bore Heaven’s appointment. They acknowledged and gave thanks for the blessings of Heaven and Earth. They were an announcement to Heaven and Earth that the ruler had unified the empire and brought peace to the world, that is, that the divine charge had been fulfilled.³¹

2.1.6. Wu Ze Tian’s Performance of Feng and Shan Rituals

The Feng and Shan sacrifices were such important rituals that throughout Chinese history just a few rulers³² dared to perform them. The most significant reason why these rituals were rarely undertaken is that “[...] general domestic peace; the submission of China’s border neighbors, the appearance of auspicious omens; abundant harvests; generally favorable economic conditions; and a demonstration of both the personal merit and virtue of the ruler”³³ were considered as the necessary conditions before the Feng and Shan were carried out. Apparently, the ruler who

³⁰ Ho Puay-Peng, op. cit., p.112

³¹ Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.170

³² As Howard J. Wechsler stated Qin Shi Huang Di 秦始皇帝, Han Wu Di 漢武帝, Han Guang Wu Di 漢光武帝, Tang Gao Zong 唐高宗, Tang Xuan Zong 唐玄宗, Song Ren Zong 宋仁宗 carried out the Feng and Shan sacrifices throughout Chinese history. (Wechsler, op. cit., p. 170)

³³ Wechsler, op cit., p.178

intended to perform these rituals should have had mere confidence in himself and his dynastic congratulations. Despite Gao Zong's unavailable health condition, Wu Ze Tian was self confident and ambitious enough to go under such a hard task. Besides, the time was the zenith of Tang rule both in terms of flourishing economy and expanding territory. The first attempt to celebrate the Feng and Shan were scheduled for 662 but because of the continuing warfare with Korea and the increasing attacks of the northeastern tribes, the ceremonies were cancelled.

In 665, it was one more time declared that the court would perform the Feng and Shan sacrifices at the Mount Tai 泰山 in today's Shan Dong and one year would be spent in Lou Yang for preparation. In the twelfth month of 665 the imperial entourage arrived at the Mount Tai. The Feng and Shan were not regular ceremonies; moreover, the last emperor who performed them was known to be Han Guang Wu Di and it was nearly 600 years before Tang Gao Zong. "Because of this gap, the ceremonial regulations, never completely clear, were in utter disarray, prompting protracted debates [...]"³⁴ Wu Ze Tian, grasping the unclearness of the regulations and so the speculations related to them as opportunity, raised the issue about participation of women to the ceremonies. The Feng sacrifice was to be undertaken on a round altar at the peak of the Mount Tai whereas the Shan was to be performed on a square altar in the hill She Shou which is on the south outskirt of the Mount Tai. "The announcement placed at the summit of Mount Tai was addressed to heaven,

³⁴ N. Harry Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China*, PhD Dissertation, (Rhode Island: Brown University, 2003), p.297

while that of She Shou was addressed to earth.”³⁵ Heaven was considered to be the father of the Emperor while earth is the mother and in that sense the Feng ceremony represented the Yang 陽 principle where the Shan stood for the Yin 陰. Moreover, while in the Feng sacrifice was a kind of dedication to the spirits of the first two emperors of Tang, namely, Tang Gao Zu and Tang Tai Zong, in the Shan ceremony the sacrificial offerings were made for the deceased wives of these two emperors. In both ceremonies, after the main offerings were made by the Emperor the secondary and tertiary offerings were held by the high ranking palace officers.³⁶ Wu Ze Tian

³⁵ Bokenkamp, A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao, p.384

³⁶In the Old Tang History (Jiu Tang Shu) Juan 23 this regulation was referred to as follows;

及有司進儀注，封祀以高祖、太宗同配，禪社首以太穆皇后、文德皇后同配，皆以公卿充亞獻、終獻之禮。

And in the regulation of ceremonies, Gao Zu and Tai Zong associate the Feng sacrifice. The empress Tai Mu and the empress Wen De associate the Shan at She Shou. All palace ministers perform the secondary and tertiary rites.

Zhou Jia Rong 周佳榮 and Wang Shuang Huai 王雙懷 *Wu Ze Tian's Views on Women* 武則天的女性觀 commented that

Wu Ze Tian thought that this regulation was not fair for women and she wanted to reform the etiquette of the ceremony. While making sacrificial offerings to the earth in She Shou, it was her and the palace ladies who would perform the secondary ceremony.

http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:mN_Oj-QvMIEJ:www.hkedcity.net/iworld/resource/dl.phtml%3Fiworld_id%3D158%26file_id%3D15938%26type%3Dfile+%E6%96%B0%E5%94%90%E6%9B%B8+%E5%8D%B776&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&client=firefox-a, last logged in 10/09/2009

presented a petition³⁷ to Gao Zong, arguing that the Shan sacrifice had the female essence Yin and it belonged to the inner space so that it was inappropriate for male ministers who were the representatives of Yang and the exterior space to perform the ceremony. Besides, she insisted on the issue that “[...] it was her duty as First Lady of the empire and as a dutiful daughter-in-law to honor Earth and her illustrious ancestress-in-law.”³⁸ Wu Ze Tian’s demand was masterminded in the sense that while “exploiting the contradiction between the theoretical equality and complementarity of yin and yang and the actual monopolization of the public and ceremonial spheres by males”³⁹ she was proving herself as having an equal post

³⁷ Wu Ze Tian’s petition, as it was stated in the Old Tang History, Juan 23, page 886 was as follows;

伏尋登封之禮，遠邁古先，而降禪之儀，竊為未允。其祭地祇之日，以太后昭配，至於行事，皆以公卿。以妾愚誠，恐未周備。何者？乾坤定位，剛柔之義已殊；經義載陳，中外之儀斯別。瑤壇作配，既合於方祇；玉豆薦芳，實歸於內職。況推尊先後，親饗瓊筵，豈有外命宰臣，內參禋祭？詳於至理，有紊徽章。

The rite for climbing high to perform the Feng sacrifice fits the regulation of the antiquity however I presume to say that the rite for performing the Shan rite is inadequate. Especially, on the day of sacrificing to the earth where the grand empresses associate, court ministers are on duty. With modesty and sincerity, I am afraid this is not appropriate. Why? The principles of heaven and earth are all determined, so are the duties of male and female. As it was stated in the scriptures the rites of the inner and the outer are also different. The rites on the red gem alter fit to the female nature of the earth. To present fragrant essences in jade bowls should be a duty of the inner sphere. How come is it proper for court officials who belong to the outer sphere by destiny, to participate the inner offerings presented for the previous empresses? This is an impropriety in ritual.

³⁸ N. Harry Rothschild, op. cit., p. 61

³⁹ John E. Jr. Wills, *Mountain of Fame Portraits in Chinese History*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.135

with the Emperor and solidifying her position as one of the Two Sages, yet she did not meet much objections.

Although the actual ritualistic practice is generally undertaken by a small group, as it was the Emperor and the high ranking officials of the Tang court who practiced the Feng and Shan sacrifices, “the goals of ritual, either directly or indirectly are always collective or social”⁴⁰ as the rituals fulfill the task of unifying the society where there is social fragmentation and conflict, and the task of interconnecting the ruler and the ruled.

2.1.7. Wu Ze Tian’s Patronage of Confucian Scholarship

Another feature of the Confucian state tradition that Wu Ze Tian utilized was the patronage of the scholars. She gathered a group of scholars who were commissioned to compile or write books, draft state papers for the empress and give her ideas about the governmental issues. This group was called as the Scholars of the Northern Gate 北門學士 (Bei Men Xue Shi)⁴¹ among which some were assigned to higher official posts in the court during Wu Ze Tian’s reign. Wu Ze Tian ordered the Scholars of the Northern Gate group to produce political writings which would secure the ideological basis for both a new style of “Confucian” imperial rule and a new type of

⁴⁰ Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.21

⁴¹ For more information about the Scholars of the Northern Gate group and their works see Denis Twitchett, “Chen Gui and Other Works Attributed to Empress Wu Ze Tian”, *Asia Major*, Volume 16, part 1, 2003, pp.33-109

minister.⁴² The most well know compilation was *the Regulations for the Ministers* (Chen Gui 臣規) in which Wu Ze Tian's views on the relationship between ruler and the minister were stated. In the Preface she "speaks of herself as occupying the position of *kunyuan* 坤元, the symbolic of the empress, or of the supreme female (yin) power in the empire."⁴³ As it is clear enough in the following paragraph that Diana Paul cited from Chen Gui, Wu Ze Tian modified the Confucian father metaphor for ruler into mother metaphor;

If one considers both the child and the subject, one's [ruler's] compassion and giving of incentives are without distinction. ... Only the mother to her child has compassion and love which are especially deep. Although the child has already acquired loyalty and goodness, still she thinks of urging him [to be even better].⁴⁴

She was trying to open the way up for her future rulership to be considered on legitimate basis by asserting herself as the ideal mother ruler. Also with some other books, produced by the Scholars of the Northern Gate, such as *the Biographies of Women* (Lie Nu Chuan 列女傳), *the Biographies of Filial Daughters* (Xiao Nu Chuan 孝女傳), *the Ancient and Modern Models from the Inner Chambers* (Nei Fan Yao Lue 內範要略) and *the Biographies of Teachers and Wet Nurses* (Bao Fu Ju Mu

⁴² Denis Twitchett, op. cit., p.33

⁴³ Denis Twitchett, op. cit., p.54

⁴⁴ Diana Paul, op cit., p.196

Chuan 保傳浮母傳) she was acknowledging the Confucian values like filial piety or the place of women in inner space. Apparently,

The compilation [by the Scholars of the Northern Gate] was not a project undertaken merely for the sake of knowledge, it was a political endeavor calculated to situate the project's chief architect as the natural heir to the authority that accrued to that written tradition.⁴⁵

2.2. Buddhism as the Opponent of Confucianism

Either back in the time that she was the empress of Tang Gao Zong or during her own dynasty Wu Ze Tian has always pursued an attentive political strategy towards Confucianism. She has never asserted any harsh opposition to the traditional state ideology on one hand, on the other hand whenever she has been restrained by any Confucian principle, she has found out exceptions or depended on the flexible tone of the ideology which would give her the chance to modify or manipulate it. However, when she claimed to be the female ruler of her own Zhou dynasty which would not be tolerated by Confucian code of state, Wu Ze Tian shifted her concentration to Buddhism as an ideological source of legitimization. Throughout Chinese imperial history, Buddhism was used as a means for legitimization for several times before. In order to understand Wu Ze Tian's Buddhist propaganda, it is essential to analyze the Buddhist impact on Chinese governmental tradition with respect to the early history of China until the Tang dynasty.

⁴⁵ N. Harry Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China*, PhD Dissertation, (Rhode Island: Brown University, 2003), p. 150

2.2.1. Buddhist Entrance to China during the Han Dynasty

It is a well known story that in the 3rd century BC Buddhism was promoted by Indian prince Asoka to spread out of India. At around the 2nd century BC, by helping of some Central Asian merchants, Buddhism reached over to the Central Asia. On the route of Silk Road some cities like Khotan has already become an important center for Buddhism. Meanwhile, China began to consolidate its power in Central Asia in the 2nd BC. Depending on this information, Zürcher asserts that “the first entrance to China must have slowly infiltrated from the northwest by two branches of Silk Road goes through Dun Huang and Gan Su.”⁴⁶ The first written sources about Buddhism in China dates back to 1st century, so it is apparent that under the reign of Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) Buddhism was introduced to China. Most of the Buddhist accounts on the entry of Buddhism to China have legendary narratives in order to enhance the prestige of Buddhism⁴⁷. When it comes to the Chinese official historical accounts, religion was noticed in the context of its direct relation to politics or government. For that reason, there is not a well organized history writing of Buddhism in China.

As the first introduction of Buddhism to China dates back to the Han period, it is essential to know the general situation of Han dynasty at those times. When Buddhism made its first appearance in the Chinese soil it was met by a very efficient

⁴⁶ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, (Leiden: Sinica Leidensia Ed., 1959), p. 23

⁴⁷ One of the most widely known legends was the dream of Emperor Ming (58-75 AD). According to the narrative in his dream Emperor Ming saw a golden deity flying in front of his palace. He asked his ministers about the meaning of this dream. One of them said that he heard that there was a sage in India who attained salvation and was able to fly in the guise of a golden hue, and the deity in his dream could be this Buddha. Emperor sent his men to India to learn about this deity and they came back with *Sutra in Fourty Two Sections*. By that way, Buddhism began to spread around China.

system of thought in Chinese society, namely, by Confucianism. From Han period onwards, Confucianism became the official state doctrine of China which asserted that the emperor, being the Son of the Heaven, was obliged to rule with wisdom and justice in return, the subjects should obey the rules of the imperial house just like a child obeyed to his father's words. Confucianism has been imposing a kind of collective system in which man was not considered as a free individual but a part of the system. In order to get rid off the bounds of this collective system, individuals were turning to another belief system, namely, to Daoism. Daoism was in search of material immortality of individual and in that way it did not deny the role of desires, passions, and joys of life. When Buddhism took its first step in China, the politico religious environment of China was dominated by these two belief systems and the most severe reactions to Buddhism came from them. The first and the only shared argument of Confucianism and Daoism in their criticism of Buddhism was that it was a non-Chinese trend. Especially, Daoists even argued that "the Indians, being naturally evil, needed a doctrine like Buddhism to reform them, whereas the Chinese, being naturally good, had no need for reform."⁴⁸ It was until 4th century, when Confucianism weakened and Daoism began to be seen as system of medicine, that Buddhism found its ground to be effective in politics and government. Hucker indicated that in late Han times "governments were generally so weak that rulers seem to have seen the church less as a threat than as a useful prop"⁴⁹ and that made easy for Buddhists to enter governmental affairs and to be supported by imperial house. Supporting Hucker's claim Fairbank and Reischauer argue that "only because

⁴⁸ C. O Hucker, *China's Imperial Past*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 216

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.217

the Han synthesis of Confucian ideology, pseudoscientific superstitions, and Legalist practices had proved spiritually unsatisfying and politically inadequate were the Chinese receptive to Buddhism.”⁵⁰ Moreover, the Buddhist doctrines of the common brotherhood of men and the belief of every good act would infallibly cause good results attracted the ordinary people to a great extent. As showing tolerance to the ethnic faiths of people, Mahayana sect of Buddhism spread around China and articulated to the local beliefs and deities.

2.2.2. Buddhism as an Institutionalized Religion during Tuo Ba Wei Dynasty

Buddhism was institutionalized as the state religion during the Tuo Ba Wei 拓拔魏⁵¹ dynasty. As a foreign oriented dynasty Tuo Ba Wei benefited from Buddhism, as a foreign oriented religion, for breaking the power of Confucian gentry by founding the legitimization problem of dynastic rule on Buddhism, meanwhile the Tuo Ba Wei dynasty contributed to the Buddhist implementation in China by elevating Buddhism to the position of the state religion. The most prominent notion of Buddhism that Tuo Ba Wei rulers especially favoured was the equality of both Han and Non-Han, who were regarded as ‘barbarians’ by the Han Chinese Confucian ideology, in relation to Buddhism. According to famous sinologist Wolfram Eberhard the relation between

⁵⁰ J. K. Fairbank and E. O. Reischauer, *China; Tradition and Transformation*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 83

⁵¹ Tuo Ba Wei which was also called as the Northern Wei 北魏 or the Yuan Wei 元魏 was founded in 386 and ruled until 534. Originated from the Northern non-Han tribes Tuo Bei state managed to unify the Northern China in 436 under its rule and ended the turbulent era caused by the several states of Northern tribes.

Tuo Ba court and Buddhism was a two way relationship, meaning that, Buddhism presented a ground for emperors to legitimize their authorities as being foreigners ruling over China in return for gaining its own legitimization as an established religion. Eberhard states that: “The Buddhist monks at the Toba court now submitted to the emperor, regarding him as a reincarnation of Buddha. Thus the emperor became protector of Buddhism and a sort of god.”⁵² The emperor founded a Buddhist monastic order, “Buddhist church” as Eberhard named, and charged a Buddhist monk as the head of it. In contrast to the Confucian gentry, Buddhism provided the state “with a group of educated advisers totally dependent on the ruler’s favor.”⁵³ Not only at the ruling level but “in all the strata of a deeply divided population: among the non-Chinese rulers and their kinsmen, among the surviving Chinese gentry, among the mass of the peasantry”⁵⁴, Buddhism found acceptance to different extents.⁵⁵ As a result of that, not only the domestication of Buddhism became successful in that era but also owing much to the Buddhist notion of equality, the ethnic divergences loosened to some extent and the unification of China under one hand, no matter it was a foreign hand, was secured. Buddhism was started to leave its landmark to a

⁵² W. Eberhard, *A History of China*, University of California Press, USA, 1971, p. 146

⁵³ Arthur F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, edited by Robert M. Somers, (USA: Yale University Press, 1990), p.16

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.15

⁵⁵ In *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* Marc S. Abramson analyzes the implementation of Buddhism on Chinese soil with respect to the ethnic divergences and conceptualizations of Han and non-Han parties of China. In page 53, he states that;

The divergent opinions that emerged, particularly those of Buddhism’s harshest critics and its most trenchant defenders, reveal an important distinction within the overall discourse on ethnicity, namely, the difference between constructing manifestations of the Other as evil and constructing them as something separate or apart [...]

For more information on the discussion see Marc S. Abramson, “Buddhism as a Foreign Religion”, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp.52-83

greater extend on Chinese culture from society to politics from the Tuo Ba Wei dynasty onwards.

2.2.3. Buddhist Zeal during the Sui and Tang Dynasties

Buddhism lived its most glorious period under the rules of Sui and Tang dynasties from 6th century to 10th century. In terms of political system, social organization, and ethnic diversity Sui and Tang dynasties are the representatives of more or less the similar patterns. The very basic characteristic of Sui and Tang dynasties was the ethnic variety of their subjects. Mostly the northern nomadic tribes began to live under Chinese rule at the 6th century. In order to secure the regulation and peace among the society, Chinese emperors appealed to the assistance of Buddhism in those periods. In societal level, Buddhism served constituting the social solidarity among different identities and was equally accepted by both foreign and Chinese subjects since Buddhism belong neither to those northern tribes nor to Chinese but stayed at the same distance to both northern subjects and Chinese ones. So that, by promoting Buddhism emperor kept his position in the same distance towards all subjects. So that, Buddhism kept its position in society almost at the same level in these two periods. Buddhism apart from being a religious faith, served to the Chinese government in societal, political, and economic aspects. The court and scholars might still find it right to pay traditional respect to the non-Buddhist systems of Confucianism and Daoism, but it was obvious that it was Buddhism which dominated the religious life of the age and penetrated every aspect of Tang culture.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.7

In politics Buddhism asserted a new model for kingly behavior. The Buddhist narratives of king Cakravartin who was a very successful ruler because of his full devotion to Buddha and his teachings and of the mighty donor Mahadanapati whose gifts to Buddhist order makes him a living bodhisattva were the most affective anecdotes. Arthur Wright asserted that “these models had strong appeal to monarchs whose life and power were always uncertain, whose claims to ‘legitimate’ descent from the Han were scant reassurance after decades of political instability.”⁵⁷ The best known emperor who devoted to Buddhism and its kingly behavior model was Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (ruled 502-549). He took the Buddhist vows ordered the destruction of Daoist temples. His titles were also full of Buddhist connotations as well as Chinese ones such as Bodhisattva Emperor 皇帝菩薩 or Bodhisattva son of Heaven 菩薩天子. Furthermore, as being the most powerful religious force of imperial China, Buddhist temples also acted as a sort of spiritual army of the imperial government. Although at first, it was the atmosphere of religious tolerance of Sui and Tang China that gave way to the ascendancy of Buddhism, then Buddhism began to be used as a basis to justification of imperial rule and by that way it justified its own existence on Chinese lands. It was in those times that Buddhism was mostly favored by all elements of society from ruling elite to peasants.

⁵⁷ Arthur F Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, (California: Atheneum, 1965), pp. 50 - 51

Buddhism is said to have lived its zeal just after the pilgrimage of Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang 玄奘 (602-664) on the Silk Road to learn about Buddhism. After returning to China he met with the emperor Tang Tai Zong, in whose harem Wu Ze Tian was a young concubine, then. Until that time, Chinese emperors were not in a wholly friendly manner towards Buddhism. Tang Tai Zong who was trained in archery and horsemanship, and who killed his elder brother to succeed in thorn (shortly who is very much nomadic oriented and very flexible for new ideas) asked Xuan Zang to write his travel accounts country by country and to translate the Buddhist texts to Chinese language. It was definitely because Tang Tai Zong wanted to know about the southern and western regions and to put up political relations with them. In that case, he used Buddhism for his diplomatic aims. He was the most important emperor of Tang period who settled firm relationships with Northern tribes and he was looking for new allies. By Tang Tai Zong's encouragements Xuan Zang wrote his travel accounts and translated lots of Buddhist works to Chinese. By these efforts Buddhism spread along to China rapidly and lots of Buddhist temples were built in those times. Although Tang Tai Zong was a devoted Daoist, he was very much influenced by the Buddhist scriptures and glorified them by uttering the sentence of "looking at these Buddhist works is like gazing at sky or sea, they are so lofty that one can not measure their heights".⁵⁸

Especially through the end of Tang period the process of degeneration began in Buddhism. Many Buddhist monasteries turned into serious business organizations

⁵⁸ K. K. S. Chen, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, (USA: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 218

and dealt with farming, trade, and money lending for their own benefits. Strangely, in a very uncharacteristic way, the Buddhist monasteries cultivated the farm lands, ran mills and oil presses using slave labor and low ranking monks. They owned vast amounts of valuable stones and metals. Buddhist monks began to make trade on the Silk Road and many Buddhist monasteries were used as public houses for travelers. Apart from the degeneration of Buddhism, especially during the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) Buddhism was challenged by Neo Confucianism which asserted that ancient Chinese culture was corrupted by Buddhism. All these decline and degeneration processes gave way to the rise of Confucianism and Daoism instead of Buddhism, after Tang period.

2.3. Cultural Portrait of Tang Society

2.3.1. Influences of Northwestern Nomadic Tribes

Tang dynasty was founded in the northern region of China where has been occupied by northwestern, nomadic and non-Chinese tribes for almost two and a half centuries. Hence, the cultural atmosphere of the Tang dynasty was predominated by steppe culture due to the density of northwestern tribes both in the ethnic composition of the empire and in the administrative and military levels in the court. On the one hand, Wu Ze Tian faced the severe opposition of the Guan Long bloc (the northwestern gentry in the court) to her dethronement as the empress of Gao Zong sine she was not a member of the steppe originated gentry. On the other hand, she was benefitted from

the non Confucian northwestern cultural influences on the Chinese society. The multiethnic and nomadic cultural characteristics of the empire were presenting the most suitable condition for a woman claiming for the throne. Since the concept of inner and outer sphere belongs to the sedentary societies, on the steppe there was not any inner space for women to be secluded to. They were able to participate in the public, political, and even militaristic affairs. Not only common people, but the women of the ruling class was favoring equal right with their husbands, for example the Khatun, the wife of the Kaghan in Kok Turk empire, had the right to issue edicts with her husband.

The relative freedom of women on the steppe and the equality among man and woman was making the idea of a female ruler more probable. “Open range, hide yurts, and grazing flocks took place of city walls, endless partitions, and the rigid symmetry that separated men and women, high and low, in Confucian China.”⁵⁹ There were also examples of female rulership from the neighboring countries to Tang China. As Jennifer W. Jay depicted in the *Imagining Matriarchy: Kingdoms of Women in Tang China* Tang dynasty was aware of female rulers in Korea, Tibet, and Japan⁶⁰ so that ideally a woman emperor was not harshly unacceptable, then.

⁵⁹ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 12

⁶⁰ Jennifer W. Jay, “Imagining Matriarchy: ‘Kingdoms of Women’ in Tang China”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1996, n. 2, pp. 222-227

Due to the increasing intimate relationships with the western regions 西域 through the Silk Road, which served as a link to Central Asia, India, and Persia, not only new goods but also new ideologies entered China.⁶¹ The most influential ideology carried by the Silk Road was Buddhism. Buddhism was mostly utilized by alien dynasties in China with respect to its challenge to present Chinese cultural assumptions and especially to the traditional Confucian state doctrine. As a non Chinese faith, Buddhism was offering a legitimation basis for non Chinese dynasties. Moreover, Buddhism was also offering a more privileged position for women when it was compared to the Confucianism. Despite the Confucian refusal of female authority, Buddhism was leaving some place for women asserting female bodhisattvas and nuns.

Both the influence of Buddhism and the nomadic cultural patterns loosened the strict Confucian state ideology which did not allow women to intervene politics. Wu Ze Tian depending on Buddhist legitimation, climbed the ranks to the throne in such a societal atmosphere which made her way easier despite the oppositions of the Confucian gentry.

⁶¹ Shao Tai Xin 邵台新, Dai Jin Xin 戴晉新, Song De Xi 宋德熹, Ji Ruo Xin 稽若昕, Huang XiangYang 黃湘陽, *The Cultural History of China*, ed by., Sun Tong Xun 孫同勳, (Taipei: Da Zhong Guo Tu Shu Gong Si Yin Xing, 1976), pp. 51-54

CHAPTER 3

THE LIFE OF WU ZE TIAN

3.1. Family Background and Early Life of Wu Ze Tian

The first female emperor of China Wu Ze Tian 武則天⁶² was born in 625⁶³ as the second daughter of Wu Shi Huo 武士護 who was a lumber merchant. Her mother Yang Rong Guo 楊榮國⁶⁴ was said to be descended from the imperial family of Sui

⁶² Wu Ze Tian was born as Wu Zhao 武照, meaning “Wu the bright”. She changed the character of 照 into 曌 later in 689, aiming at representing both the male element “sun” 日 and the female element “moon” 月 above the emptiness 空 while she was preparing for founding her own dynasty. Her preference of the character 曌 might have been intentionally. Because, as a challenge to the Confucian patriarchal political ideal which excluded women from the political arena and conceived the ruler as the Son of Heaven, Wu Ze Tian was always insisting on the female intervention to the political sphere as well as asserting her aspiration for a female rulership. In order to strengthen her argument, she favored both male and female elements above the void, namely, universe while writing her own name. As Jowen R. Tung argued, Wu Ze Tian was not claiming herself to be the Daughter of Heaven but more than that “she was heaven itself, with the two birhgttest planets overarching it, giving out unobstructed light.” See Jowen R. Tung, “Monument without Inscription: The Case of Wu Zhao” in *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics in T’ang Discourse*, (USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 57. She kept using this symbolization in different terms during her reign. However, like all other Chinese emperors, Wu Zhao got also an imperial title when she ascended to the throne. She was named as Wu Ze Tian, “Wu the pattern of Heaven.” Since the main concern of this thesis is Wu Ze Tian’s becoming the first and the only female emperor of Chinese history and her seeking grounds for legitimizing her authority, Wu Ze Tian, her imperial title, will be used throughout this thesis.

⁶³ Her date of birth is almost a matter of dispute. Both primary and secondary sources argue for different dates in between 623 and 628. For the sake of a coherent chronological outlook, throughout my thesis I am following C.P. Fitzgerald’s Annual Table of Events (C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, Sydney: Halstead Press, 1955, p.211). for more information on her birth date see Richard W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-T’ian and the Politics of Legitimation in T’ang China*, (Washington: Occasional Papers – Program in East Asian Studies Western Washington University, 1978), p.210, n.50

隋 dynasty (581-618), Yang 楊 family.⁶⁵ Her parents' marriage was a reward to her father in return for his service in the rebellion in Tai Yuan 太原 region which gave way to the collapse of Sui dynasty and founding of Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907) by Li Yuan 李淵, later known as Gao Zu 高祖. As being a member of the local Wu clan in Tai Yuan, Wu Shi Huo encouraged Li Yuan to rise against the Sui authority. For his service, Gao Zu not only mediated Wu Shi Huo's marriage to Yang Rong Guo but also gave him a dukedom.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ In primary sources, such as Xin Tang Shu 新唐書 (which was compiled by Ou Yang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁 in 1060) and Jiu Tang Shu 舊唐書 (which was edited by Liu Xu 劉昫 in 945) she was called as Yang Shi 楊氏, as Yang is her clan's name and Shi denoting the woman descended from a specific clan.

⁶⁵ Her mother's lineage is also debatable. Chinese historian Chen Yin Ke 陳寅恪 stated that Wu Ze Tian's mother Yang Shi was the daughter of Lord Yang Da who was the brother of Lord Yang Xiong from the Sui imperial family(隋宗室觀王雄弟始安侯達之女), Chen Yin Ke, “武曩與佛教 Wu Zhao and Buddhism”, 陳寅恪先生全集上冊 Complete Works of Mr. Chen Yin Ke, published by 徐秀榮 Xu Xiu Rong, (Taipei: Li Ren Bookstore, 1979) pp. 429

Whereas, as opposed to Chen Yin Ke Chinese scholar Huang Zheng Jian 黃正建 argued that Wu Ze Tian's mother Yang Shi might have been a person coming from a low/humble family background and living in the same region with Wu Shi Huo or in today's Shan Xi region. Moreover, he states that as Wu Ze Tian was aware of her low family background after becoming an empress she started to fabricate her mother's lineage for defending herself against the parties that used her background to insult her. Huang Zheng Jian 黃正建, *Surmise on Wu Ze Tian's Background 關於武則天身世的一點猜測*, <http://www.xiangyata.net/old/thesis/t108.htm>, last logged in 10/09/2009)

⁶⁶ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, “Kao-tsung (reign 649-83) and the empress Wu: the inheritor and the usurper”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p.246

Wu Ze Tian was born in Li Zhou 利州 where her father was posted as the governor general until 631. When she was a little baby, one day her father invited the famous fortune teller of the time Yuan Tian Kang to their home and asked him to say something about the fortunes of his family members. Yuan Tian Kang accepted this invitation and started to cast on the family members one by one. When he saw Wu Ze Tian in the arms of her nurse, since Wu Ze Tian was wearing boy's clothes he thought she was a boy and felt that there is something strange about this child's future. When her nurse put her on the bed and let her toddle, the fortune teller screamed with a big surprise and said that this child had resemblances with the physical appearance of a dragon and a phoenix so that if the child was a girl, she would be the ruler of the empire one day.⁶⁷

Old Yuan Tian Kang's prophecy got closer to being real by Wu Ze Tian's entrance to the Tang palace at the age of thirteen as a low ranking concubine (Cai Ren 才人) of the emperor Tang Tai Zong 唐太宗.⁶⁸ Guisso argues that not only because of her outstanding beauty but also since her cousin was one of Tai Zong's former concubines, Wu Ze Tian was chosen for Tang Tai Zong's harem, despite the fact that she was not descended from a politically important clan.⁶⁹ During Tai Zong's reign

⁶⁷ See. C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1955), p. xii and N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p.21

⁶⁸ Tang Tai Zong (Li Shi Min 李世) was the second Tang emperor who was born in 599 and he ruled between 626-649

⁶⁹ see Richard W. L. Guisso, op.cit., p.211, n.59

Wu Ze Tian's status did not change and she did not hold a high position among concubines, since she did not bear a child.

Prophecies tagged after Wu Ze Tian during her early years in Tai Zong's harem. In the last years of Tai Zong's reign, Venus was seen in the daytime. According to the royal astrologer, it was symbolizing ascendancy of a female ruler. Meanwhile, there was a story related to a 'martial prince' 武王⁷⁰ who would overturn the Tang reign in the future. Because of these two omens Tai Zong did not feel himself at ease and looked for the palace officials naming Wu but he never thought of Wu Ze Tian. According to Richard Guisso, the reason why Tai Zong did not suspect Wu Ze Tian might have been that he did not have much time with Wu Ze Tian and so that did not know her well.⁷¹ With respect to these two prophecies, N. Harry Rothschild, who has written a very comprehensive biography of Wu Ze Tian, argued that;

One must view prophecies like this with a guarded skepticism, as such a story might well have been projected backward once Wu Zhao came to power to make it seem as though her ascent was an inevitability, ordained by Heaven and written in the stars.⁷²

⁷⁰ Wu Wang. Wu Ze Tian's surname was also Wu, meaning, martial.

⁷¹ see Guisso, op. cit., p.16

⁷² N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008) p.26

Guisso mentioned the resemblances of these stories with *the Commentary on Great Cloud Sutra* 大雲經疏⁷³ in the sense that both narratives asserted a female ruler tradition. Guisso's point was consistent with Rothschild's argument and both of them were supported by Wu Ze Tian's assertion of the Commentary on Great Cloud Sutra as a means for political propaganda to strengthen her claims as a female ruler.

According to traditional sources, during her presence in Tai Zong's harem Wu Ze Tian came to intimate contact with Tai Zong's heir apparent Li Zhi 李治, namely, future Tang Gao Zong 唐高宗.⁷⁴ Traditional sources criticize their relationship as being improper and even incestuous since Wu Ze Tian was Tai Zong's concubine, "their proper relationship should have been as that of mother and son"⁷⁵ This affair would later open the way to Tang palace for Wu Ze Tian one more time in the future. After Tai Zong's death in 649, Wu Ze Tian was sent to Gan Ye Convent 感業寺⁷⁶, became a Buddhist nun and mourned for Tai Zong with all other concubines since

⁷³When she founded her own dynasty, Wu Ze Tian mostly appealed to Buddhism for justifying the idea of a female emperorship despite the refusals of the Confucian ideals which pushed women out of political life. Her most outstanding effort was to make the Buddhist canon that supported her rulership to write a commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra, namely, Mahamegha Sutra in which the Buddha declared the future rulership of a female ruler who would become a pious king, namely, cakravartin. The full name of this commentary is Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu 大雲經神皇授記義疏 *Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra*. The Great Cloud Sutra was a Mahayana sutra which was originated in China. The third chapter of this thesis gives detailed information about the Great Cloud Sutra and Wu Ze Tian's utilization of it.

⁷⁴In the Xin Tang Shu Juan 76 Lie Chuan 1 (the biography of Wu Ze Tian) detailed account of this affair was given.

⁷⁵ N. Harry Rothschild, op. cit., p.28

⁷⁶ A Buddhist temple in Chang An 長安

“the dynastic laws rigorously forbade a former Emperor’s concubines to reappear in the world”⁷⁷. On the anniversary of his father’s death, Tai Zong’s son Gao Zong paid a visit of ceremony to the Gan Ye Convent as the new emperor for showing his respect to the spirit of the former emperor Tang Tai Zong. When he saw Wu Ze Tian with her shaved head and in nun clothing, he was said to burst into tears. From that day on Gao Zong’s increased number of visits to the temple caught the Empress Wang’s 王皇后 notice who was feeling uneasy about Gao Zong’s close relationship with one of the secondary consorts, Xiao Shu Fei 蕭淑妃, who has borne a son to the Emperor. The Empress Wang, “hoping to introduce a rival who would supplant Xiao in the Emperor’s affections”⁷⁸ persuaded Gao Zong in Wu Ze Tian’s returning to the imperial harem as being Wu the Secondary Concubine, namely, Wu Zhao Yi 武昭儀 in 651.

Soon after her entrance to the harem, she gave birth to a son, Li Hong 李宏, and by this way strengthened her position over against the childless Empress Wang. Moreover, she established firm relations with a variety of people from low ranking concubines to high ranking officials. She was laying the groundwork for her way to become Gao Zong’s empress but still the elder statesmen were opposing to Wu Ze Tian by laying emphasis on her low family background while Empress Wang’s clan

⁷⁷ C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.17

⁷⁸ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, “Kao-tsung (reign 649-83) and the empress Wu: the inheritor and the usurper”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p.247

was one of the most important families in Tang dynasty. In the Cambridge History of China, Dennis Twitchett and Howard Wechsler annotated from Chen Yin Ke and referred to this opposing group as Guan Long bloc 關隴集團⁷⁹. The Guan Long bloc was constituted by the aristocratic families of north western China and lead by Chang Sun Wu Ji 長孫無忌⁸⁰ and Chu Sui Liang 褚遂良⁸¹. In search for eliminating the Guan Long bloc's support to the Empress Wang, Wu Ze Tian started to seek an opportunity to degrade her. First, she accused the Empress Wang of killing her baby daughter since she was the last person who was seen playing with the baby before Gao Zong found her death.⁸² Then she proved that the Empress Wang and her mother appealed to sorcery against Wu Ze Tian, moreover she claimed that the Empress Wang and the secondary consort Xiao Shu Fei tried to poison the Emperor. That was an unforgiveable crime. By using all these accusations, after settling the opponent voices of the elder statesmen, either by convincing them or exiling to far places, the Emperor Gao Zong by using his full authority managed to enthrone Wu Ze Tian as the Empress Wu 武太后 in 655 by declaring the following decree:

⁷⁹ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.250 and Chen Yin Ke, *A Note on the Marriage of Li Wu and Wei Yang during Tang Dynasty* 記唐代之李武韋楊婚姻集團, op. cit., pp 639-665

⁸⁰ Chang Sun Wu Ji was the brother of Tang Tai Zong's beloved Empress Chang Sun and was one of Tang Tai Zong's most trusted fellows.

⁸¹ Chu Sui Liang presented a memorial to explain the Emperor that their bloc was not opposing the Emperor to dethrone a new empress but they wanted the Emperor to choose her among noble families. See 資治通鑑 Zi Zhi Tong Jian The Comprehensive Mirror to the Aid in Government Juan 200 page 6290

⁸² According to traditional accounts Wu Ze Tian smothered her own child and put the blame on the Empress Wang. For detailed information see C.P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 22 - 23

The Lady Wu comes from an illustrious and honorable family originating in a land famous for its warriors and scholars. She was chosen to enter the Palace for her talent and virtue. She gained the goodwill and respect of all the ladies of her own rank and served her superiors with honor and merit. When We were Crown Prince and attended on Our late mother, the Lady Wu was constantly at her side both day and night. She was careful and diligent in her duties, and had no quarrels or disagreements with other ladies. The Late Emperor, realizing her good qualities, constantly praised her and after conferring honors upon her, bestowed her on Us. Thus it is fitting that she should be raised to the rank of Empress.⁸³

This decree was showing “the Emperor’s anxiety to justify his actions”⁸⁴. He was trying to clarify his acquaintance with Wu Ze Tian and to calm the Confucian canon who was accusing the Emperor as having an improper affair with his father’s former concubine. Besides, by praising Wu Ze Tian’s family he was refuting Guan Long bloc’s objections on the grounds that Wu clan was not a noble clan and Wu Ze Tian did not deserve to be an Empress.

3.2. Becoming the Empress Wu

From 655 to her reign in 690, Wu Ze Tian “spent over thirty years of her life preparing for a dynasty that lasted only fifteen.”⁸⁵ She followed a very strategic route. First of all, she got rid of her rivals and opponents by either killing⁸⁶ or degrading

⁸³C.P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.29

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.30

⁸⁵ Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao”, *Religion*, 1998, 28, pp.383-392, p.384

⁸⁶ The former Empress Wang and Xiao Shu Fei were imprisoned and left to die brutally.

them to lower ranks. Especially after eliminating the elder statesmen, “all power and influence in the government remained in the hands of the Empress and her supporters.”⁸⁷ Besides, she found allies among statesmen and established a network of informers and spies among the low ranking people in the court. Then, she paid a visit to the imperial ancestral temple and placed a spirit tablet for her father Wu Shi Huo in the temple of Tang Gao Zu, the founder of the Tang dynasty. Ancestor worship, as being ‘an integral part of the family and the wider kinship system’⁸⁸ is one of the most outstanding dynamics of Chinese culture. By visiting the temple, she was “formally entering the Imperial Family”⁸⁹ since by performing the ancestor worship, ‘the farther back one traced a family’s ancestors, the larger the size of the kinship group thus consolidated with the help of the cultic bond’⁹⁰. The Confucian code of conduct related to marriage ceremonies offers that the bride should pay a visit to the ancestral temple after the third month of the marriage. By completion of this temple visit the bride formally occupies a place in the ancestral line of the groom, “something she never had in her natal family.”⁹¹

Five years after Wu Ze Tian became the Empress Wu, Gao Zong had a paralytic stroke and because of his health problems he asked Wu Ze Tian to assist him in governmental affairs. For the next five years, Wu Ze Tian was an equal partner to

⁸⁷ C.P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.41

⁸⁸ C.K. Yang, “The Role of Religion in Chinese Society”, *An Introduction to Chinese Civilization*, ed. by John Meskill, (USA : Colombia University Press, 1973), pp.644-674, p.645

⁸⁹ C.P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.30

⁹⁰ C.K. Yang, op. cit., p.648

⁹¹ Theresa Kelleher, “Confucianism”, *Women in World Religions*, Ed by Arvind Sharma, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p.142

Gao Zong. This incident helped Wu Ze Tian enlarge her purview in Tang court as well as on all over the country. Although Gao Zong was not wholly incapacitated physically by his uneasy health condition, still “his spells of illness were intense and recurring”⁹² For that reason it was no one other than Wu Ze Tian who mostly had the last word in state affairs. Wu Ze Tian’s such open exertion of “overt administrative power”⁹³ started to harass the Emperor Gao Zong. Moreover the opponents of Wu Ze Tian were always waiting for an opportunity to depose her. They got this chance which they endured for so long, in 664. Wu Ze Tian was always interested in prophecies and omens but in that year her interest took the form of repetitive meetings with a Taoist sorcerer who was practicing magical rites in the palace. According to Tang Code of Law, sorcery or witchcraft was such a big crime “in respect of which none of the legal privileges accorded to men of high status was operative, and which were specifically excluded from the terms of amnesties.”⁹⁴ That was actually the crime of which Wu Ze Tian accused the former Empress Wang and sentenced her to death. When Gao Zong was informed by a eunuch about these meetings, he asked one of his chief ministers Shang Guan Yi 上官義 about his advice related to this situation. Shang Guan Yi was connected to fallen elder statesmen, namely the Guan Long bloc, who were opposing to the Empress Wu. He reminded the Emperor about the Tang Code of Law and advised him to depose the Empress Wu.

⁹² N. Harry Rothschild, op. cit., p.50

⁹³ Diana Paul, “Empress Wu and the Historians: A Tyrant and Saint of Classical China”, *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed by Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross, (New York: Harpers and Row, 1980), pp. 191-207, p.195

⁹⁴ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.256

Gao Zong accepted his advice and made him to draft an edict on the deposition of the Empress. Thanks to her network of spies inside the palace, Wu Ze Tian not so long heard about this edict and she did not lose time to come face to face with the Emperor. Gao Zong “forcibly reminded the empress of her technically subordinate position by threatening to depose her”⁹⁵ however he was emotionally so weak towards Wu Ze Tian so that he confessed that it was Shang Guan Yi’s idea to depose her and abolished the edict. After that the Empress removed Shang Guan Yi from the palace by first exiling him and then imprisoning him. He committed suicide and all members of his family were killed. By that way, the Empress Wu managed to intimidate her either present or possible opponents and strengthened her authority both in the eyes of the officials in the court and of ordinary people in all over the country for one more time. As it was stated in *資治通鑑* *Zi Zhi Tong Jian The Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* which is a prominent reference work in Chinese historiography;

“天下大權，悉歸中宮，黜陟，殺生，決於其口，天子拱手而已，中外謂之二聖。”⁹⁶

The whole authority over the empire, everything going on inside the court, promotion and punishment, death and life were all determined by her words. The Son of the Heaven was having his hands tied. Inside and outside the court the two were called as Two Sages⁹⁷.

⁹⁵Richard W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p.19

⁹⁶*Zi Zhi Tong Jian 資治通鑑* *The Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, The Written Account of Chapter 201. Moreover, in *Xin Tang Shu*, Juan 76, Lie Chuan 1 it was also stated.

⁹⁷ Named after the Two Sages 二聖 who were the ideal rulers of the Zhou dynasty in antiquity.

The Empress Wu proving to be one of the Two Sages played an important role in any of the administrative practices inside the court. In 662 when the court changed most of the official titles in central government, titles of the consorts were also restored although they were not holding any post in bureaucracy. The Empress “altered the titles to make them sound as though they were bureaucratic, akin to those of the ministers in the outer court”.⁹⁸ The new titles were as follows⁹⁹:

⁹⁸ Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, p. 59

⁹⁹ The list is taken from Chen Jo Shui, “Empress Wu”, *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed by Frederick P. Brandauer and Chun- chieh Huang, (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1994), p. 81

Old Titles	Rank	New Titles	Rank
Fu Ren 夫人 Consort	1a	Zan De 贊德 Lady to Assist in Virtue	1a
Jiu Pin 九嬪 Nine Concubines	2a	Xuan Yi 宣儀 Lady for Spreading Deportment	2a
Jie Yu 婕妤 Lady of Handsome Fairness	3a	Cheng Gui 承閨 Recipient from the Inner Chamber	4a
Mei Ren 美人 Beauty	4a	Cheng Zhi 承旨 Recipient of Edicts	5a
Cai Ren 才人 Lady of Talents	5a	Wei Xian 衛仙 Guardian Immortal	6a
Bao Lin 寶林 Ladies of the Precious Bevy	6a	Gong Feng 供奉 Lady to Offer Service	7a
Yu Nu 御女 Secondary Concubine	7a	Shi Jie 侍櫛 Coiffure Attendant	8a
Cai Nu 采女 Selected Ladies	8a	Shi Jin 侍巾 Towel Attendant	9a

By changing the titles, Wu Ze Tian was not only transforming “these women, at least nominally, from the Emperor’s private companions into bureaucrats in the inner palace”¹⁰⁰ but also laying the grounds for both her present assistantship in the state affairs and her future reign against the Confucian principals which strictly forbade women from the political arena.

Wu Ze Tian favored religious ceremonies and rituals to make her authority considered on legitimate basis. She was “[...] anxious to employ the conventional means of proving her right to rule [...]”¹⁰¹ for that reason it is highly probable that she might have convinced Gao Zong to practice the Feng 封 and Shan 禪 sacrifices.¹⁰² In 666 for the fourth time in Chinese history¹⁰³, the Tang house undertook the Feng and Shan sacrifices. Wu Ze Tian, insisting on the female element of the Shan, participated to the ceremony and undertook the sacrifices made for the Earth and the spirits of the first two Tang empresses whereas Gao Zong directed the Feng sacrificial ceremony.

The performance of the Feng and Shan sacrifices was a shared political triumph, exalting both Emperor and Empress. The Two Sages ascended eternal and imposing Mount Tai,

¹⁰⁰ Chen Jo Shui, op. cit., p.82

¹⁰¹ Ho Puay-Peng, “Architecture and Legitimacy in the Court of Wu Zhao”, *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, ed. Cheung Frederick Hok-ming and Lai Ming-chiu, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), p.112

¹⁰² Detailed information about the history, the ceremonial regulation, and the importance of the Feng and Shan sacrifices was given in the first chapter.

¹⁰³ The previous three practices were held by Qin Shi Huang Di 秦始皇帝, Han Wu Di 漢武帝 and Han Guang Wu Di 漢光武帝.

straddling the divine realm and the earthly world, prostrating themselves before the gods while symbolically joining their company.¹⁰⁴

After declaring the Heaven's consent on their reign by fulfilling the Feng and the Shan ceremonies, the Emperor Gao Zong and the Empress Wu Ze Tian attempted to please the subjects of the whole country as well as to show the ample means and the generosity of the Tang court. For that purpose, new Daoist and Buddhist temples were erected in each prefecture; honorary ranks were given to plenty of people and the areas that the palace entourage passed through were held free from tax for one year for celebrating the completion of the sacrificial rituals.

In 674, Gao Zong and Wu Ze Tian petitioned that they got the new titles as Celestial Emperor Tian Huang 天皇 and Celestial Empress Tian Hou 天后 as their imperial titles which differentiated them from their predecessors. As Stephen Bokenkamp also emphasized in his article named *A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao*, Wu Ze Tian motivated by her interest in the antiquity wanted to use these titles as reminding the paired kingship of Fu Xi 伏羲 and Nu Gua 女媧.¹⁰⁵ By using Fu Xi and Nu Gua narrative, she legitimated her intervention

¹⁰⁴ N. Harry Rothschild, op. cit., p. 63

¹⁰⁵ Fu Xi and Nu Gua was not a single ruler but a paired kingship. It was the first sovereign of the Three Sovereigns 三黃 of the ancient and mythic ages of China. "The two parts of the deity, Fu Xi (male) and Nu Gua (female), are generally depicted as half human, half dragon, with their serpentine tails coiled." Bokenkamp, op. cit., p.386 In the Tang dynasty political rhetoric, it was an outstanding

to the governmental affairs claiming to be the female part of the paired and ideal kingship which was occupied by both male and female agents.

In the same year, the empress Wu Ze Tian announced twelve decrees¹⁰⁶ through which she intimidated the high ranking officials who were representing the Northwestern gentry and severely opposing her, and promoted the low ranking officials and the lower strata of society, instead. She was pursuing a populist policy to gain the support of the entire ordinary people. “The common people were relieved of taxes and comforted with promises of peace and public economy; the lower grade officials were given uphoped for promotion and encouragement.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, while she was forbidding lavish temple building process in all over the country and utilizing Confucian ideals in that sense, she was challenging the patriarchal side of Confucianism by increasing the period of mourning for a deceased mother to three years, the same mourning period for father. Those twelve decrees that were accepted and promulgated by the Emperor Gao Zong, were altogether presenting “a clear picture of the line of policy which the Empress (Wu Ze Tian) had decided to pursue.”¹⁰⁸

3.3. Becoming the Empress Dowager Wu

fashion to follow the rituals and symbols of the Antiquity. Wu Ze Tian also appealed to this trend for legitimizing her authority by identifying herself with the ancient and ideal sovereigns who were considered as divine rulers of the golden ages.

¹⁰⁶ For all those twelve decrees, see C.P. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 78

¹⁰⁷ C.P. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 79

¹⁰⁸ Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 78-79

Beginning with the early 670s Gao Zong's health was changed for the worse. He was hardly able to attend to the governmental affairs and it was started to be disputed that who might ascend to throne in case of his death. Wu Ze Tian's eldest son Li Hong 李宏 was the most popular heir apparent and he was considered to be clever and responsible. However, his attitude in matters of policy was mostly different from his mother and after Gao Zong's death Li Hong as a capable heir apparent was considered to be fitting for the reign instead of his mother, Wu Ze Tian. For both of these reasons, Li Hong was a big obstacle for Wu Ze Tian's authority. In 675 Li Hong accompanied his parents to summer palace in Lou Yang where he "mysteriously" passed away. "Contemporaries, the historians relate, were convinced that the Crown Prince died of poison, administered by the Empress, or on her orders."¹⁰⁹ Since her three other sons were not characteristically fitting for the throne, with the death of Li Hong Wu Ze Tian was feeling at ease for she was considering herself as the only heir who would hold the reign after Gao Zong's death.

Gao Zong got almost disabled in the twelfth month of 683. Not long before his death in 683 he summoned his last will "commanding that the heir apparent should ascend the throne in front of his coffin, and that important affairs of state which could not be decided by the young emperor alone should be settled in consultation with the empress Wu."¹¹⁰ Traditional accounts considered Gao Zong as weak and incapable compared to his father Tai Zong and grandfather Gao Zu. Nevertheless, Gao Zong

¹⁰⁹ Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.84

¹¹⁰ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.273

and Wu Ze Tian's paired kingship showed a great success in military and gained a remarkable prestige over countries. "For a brief moment, in the late 650s and 660s, China controlled territory of unprecedented dimensions, stretching from the Sea of China to the borders of Persia."¹¹¹

After Gao Zong's death in 683, Wu Ze Tian's second son Zhong Zong 中宗, who has been the heir apparent for three years before Gao Zong's death, ascended the throne with a ceremony held in front of his father Gao Zong's coffin. During the young emperor Zhong Zong's short reign period, Wu Ze Tian was still attending the court affairs in the equal position with the emperor. As Zhong Zong started to refuse her intervention and gave posts to his wife's relatives in the court, Wu Ze Tian deposed him in the second month of his reign and exiled him away from the capital. After the deposition of Zhong Zong, Wu Ze Tian enthroned her youngest son Rui Zong 睿宗 who was inexperienced and uneducated for the throne. Wu Ze Tian was no longer the female agent of the paired kingship but more than that, she was exerting more influence on both court and country affairs as an empress dowager. From the very beginnings of Chinese dynastic history "the [ruler] position of empress dowager had been reluctantly institutionalized as an expedient in situations of emergency,"¹¹² such as a lack of authority due to young age of a heir apparent or

¹¹¹ Howard J. Wechsler, *op. cit.*, p.40

¹¹² Diana Paul, *op. cit.*, p.193. The history of Chinese dynasties witnessed several examples of regency of empress dowagers. In his article *Female Rulers in Imperial China*, Lien- Sheng Yang gives an account of the most well known empress dowagers in Chinese history, who ruled over different dynasties but never managed to held the title of 'the emperor'. He discusses the criticizing tone of the Classics and the official histories towards the unconstrained authority of an empress dowager reciting

health problems of an emperor. Wu Ze Tian utilizing the traditional consent on the conditional authority of the empress dowager might hold, soon after dethronement of her son, alleged Rui Zong's disability of talking and so that instead of the Emperor, "she appeared in court and pronounced decrees."¹¹³ Rui Zong "was kept out of the way in a separate palace and allowed to play no part in government."¹¹⁴ From Rui Zong's dethronement in 684 to the date she founded her own dynasty in 690, Wu Ze Tian exerted full authority as de facto ruler where Rui Zong was the puppet emperor. "Gao Zong had at least sat on his Throne, in the view of his ministers, but Rui Zong was not even present when state affairs were discussed, and was kept virtually a prisoner in the Inner Palace."¹¹⁵ Wu Ze Tian was exerting full control over any fields of government and her authority was being considered as acceptable since she proved herself on state affairs after almost thirty year long paired kingship. As C. P. Fitzgerald mentioned in *The Empress Wu*,

She was efficient; she understood the whole art of government and politics, she excelled in administration, she chose her men wisely, she cared nothing for ties of kinship if they cut across her policy.¹¹⁶

Because of her personal characteristics and political abilities, even Confucians who would oppose female rulership did not show a severe reaction to the rule of Wu Ze

those actual cases. For more information see Lien- Sheng Yang, "Female Rulers in Imperial China", Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Volume 23, (1960-1961), pp. 47-61

¹¹³ Richard W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p.52

¹¹⁴ John E. Jr. Wills, op. cit., p.139

¹¹⁵ C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 91

¹¹⁶ C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 92

Tian as an empress dowager and a de facto ruler. That six year period was used as a waiting period by Wu Ze Tian, while she was preparing the Buddhist support for a female rulership in spite of the Confucian refusal.

In this chapter, Wu Ze Tian's family background, and her rocky road from her entrance to palace and being an empress dowager, while she acted as de facto ruler, was illuminated. For the next chapter, a detailed account on the official state doctrine of the Tang dynasty, namely, Confucian doctrine which refused female intervention to political sphere will be given. In challenging to Confucian ideal, Wu Ze Tian benefitted from Buddhism which was a non Chinese so, non Confucian doctrine.

CHAPTER 4

WU ZE TIAN'S REIGN

4.1. Wu Ze Tian's Preparation for the Throne

4.1.1. Wu Ze Tian's Political Reforms

Wu Ze Tian gained full political authority from the Emperor Gao Zong's death in 683 onwards. She started to carry out some reforms that were considered to be symbolizing a new reign era. First of all, in spite of the fact that her incapable son Rui Zong was holding the title as the Emperor, it was Wu Ze Tian who managed any kind of governmental or military affairs and was issuing the formal edicts by using the phrase "Royal We" 朕 (Zhen).¹¹⁷ She made a remarkable renewal related to administration. She asserted new administrative units and posts; and renewed the examination system in bureaucracy. Her "special 'decree examinations' supplemented the regular ones in qualifying more men for service each year, and gentry and commoners alike were permitted to recommend themselves."¹¹⁸ By that way, she gained the preordination of common people as she pursued a policy depended on meritocracy and presented the economic and social opportunities to common people as well as the noble ones equally in Tang soil. She gathered successful bureaucrats in the court through this examination system.

¹¹⁷ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 91

¹¹⁸ Richard W. L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)", in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, pp. 300-301

In 684, Wu Ze Tian declared an Act of Grace 大赦. In the historical context of the governmental tradition of Chinese dynasties, “the original purpose of the Act of Grace was the reward of merit and the pardon of convicted felons on auspicious occasions, but at the same time, they were often used to promulgate important administrative measures.”¹¹⁹ Through her Act of Grace Wu Ze Tian issued regulations either related to the welfare of the common people outside the court or to the governmental affairs inside the court. She released many prisoners, dealt with health conditions of sick and old people; she rewarded the aged people with gifts and offered plenty of favors showing her grace as the head of the court. Moreover, she “ordered changes to imperial symbols and paraphernalia used by the Tang rulers.”¹²⁰ The color of the imperial banners was changed to gold and certain officials were assigned to wear certain robes. She modified most organs of the bureaucracy and official titles, renamed them with the names belonged to the antiquity.

Meanwhile, with the Act of Grace Wu Ze Tian changed the name of Lou Yang, to which she has transferred the capital after the death of Gao Zong in 683, to the Divine Capital 神都 (Shen Du). After becoming the empress of Gao Zong, one of the first acts of Wu Ze Tian was to transfer the court from Chang An¹²¹, the imperial capital of the Tang dynasty, to Lou Yang. According to Wolfram Eberhard, Chang

¹¹⁹ Richard W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-T'ian and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, (Washington: Occasional Papers – Program in East Asian Studies Western Washington University, 1978), p.54

¹²⁰ Sen Tansen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations 600-1400*, (The USA: Association for Asian Studies Inc., 2003), p.95

¹²¹ Modern Xi An 西安 city of China.

An was the political center of the Northwestern gentry which was constituted by Turkic oriented families. Northwestern aristocrats, namely the Guan Long bloc,¹²² occupied an important position in the foundation of Tang dynasty so that they were dominating the civil bureaucracy of the government and also they have severely opposed to the dethronement of Wu Ze Tian as the Empress instead of the Northwestern originated Empress Wang. Wu Ze Tian favored the support of the Eastern Chinese gentry as an alternative group to Northwestern one¹²³ from which she might derive support.

The designation of a new capital at a place which had been the eastern alternative centre of imperial political power since early in the first millennium BC, near to the eastern plain, was a symbolic affirmation that the apogee of north-western political power was passed.¹²⁴

Furthermore, Lou Yang was an important centre for the Buddhist patronage of the state, either in terms of Buddhist arts or temple building, from the Tuo Ba Wei dynasty onwards. It was a strategic move for Wu Ze Tian to transfer the capital definitely to Lou Yang in 683 since she would declare Buddhism as the state religion

¹²² For detailed information on the dispute between the Northwestern gentry and the Eastern one see Chen Yin Ke, *A note on the Marriage of Li Wu and Wei Yang During the Tang* 記唐代之李武韋楊婚姻集團, op. cit., pp 639-665

¹²³ Wolfram Eberhard, op. cit., p. 180

¹²⁴ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, "Kao-tsung (reign 649-83) and the empress Wu: the inheritor and the usurper", in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p.258

in 690 when she would found her own dynasty, having Lou Yang as the Divine Capital. As Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler asserted in *Kao-tsung (reign 649-83) and the Empress Wu: the Inheritor and the Usurper* apart from the characteristics of Lou Yang being the centre of Eastern gentry, which was a political support group for Wu Ze Tian over against the Northwestern gentry, and being the prominent place of Buddhist patronage that she would utilize as a means for political propaganda in founding her own dynasty, the most important reason for Wu Ze Tian to carry the capital from Chang An was something more personal.

It is said that after her hideous murder of her rivals the empress Wang and Xiao Shu Fei, the superstitious empress was haunted by their specters, and found continued residence in Chang An intolerable.¹²⁵

Another attempt of Wu Ze Tian that could be considered among foregrounds of a new reign era and a new emperor was her decision to construct seven ancestral temples in Lou Yang for commemorating the ancestors of her Wu clan. Founding significantly seven temples for ancestors was a tradition which was “customarily reserved for the imperial family.”¹²⁶ For that reason, Wu Ze Tian confronted harsh oppositions from inside the court. The very basic grounds for those opposing voices

¹²⁵ Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, op. cit., p. 258

¹²⁶ Richard W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p.54

was the example of the empress dowager Lü (呂太后)¹²⁷ of the Han dynasty and it came from one of the high ranking ministers Pei Yen 裴炎. Pei Yan argued that;

... 宜存至公，不容追王祖考，示自私。且獨不見呂氏事乎¹²⁸

... It is proper for you to deal with public affairs, you should not allow your ancestors to be ascended to the ranks of princes, it might look like you are seeking for private advantage. Do not take the empress Lu [of the Han] as an example for yourself.

Wu Ze Tian refused the warning of Pei Yan asserting filial piety towards the deceased ancestors as the motivation of her attempt to establish ancestral temples nevertheless her decision was disturbed by a sudden revolt led by an ex- provincial governor Li Jing Ye 李敬業 in 684.

¹²⁷ Empress dowager Lü of the Han (241BC-180BC) was the Empress of Han Gao Zu 漢高祖, namely, Liu Bang 劉邦, who was the founder of the Han dynasty. She was a capable woman in court affairs who ruled over the Han soil 22 years, as the Empress of the Emperor Han Gao Zu for five years and the empress dowager of the Emperor Hui (惠) of the Han. Related to the empress dowager Lü, John E. Jr. Wills expresses that “[she] might have established a new dynasty if she had lived longer.” (John E. Jr. Wills, op. cit., p.139)

¹²⁸ It was stated in Xin Tang Shu, Juan 117, Lie Chuan 42.

4.1.2. Rebellion against Wu Ze Tian's Reforms

Li Jing Ye was the grandson of Li Shi Ji 李世績 who was before a general in the army of the founder of Tang dynasty, Tang Gao Zu and then became the conqueror of Korea. He was also one of the earliest supporters of the Empress Wu Ze Tian. In return for all his services to the government, his descendants were rewarded with the opportunity of preferential acceptance to the civil service and by that way, Li Jing Ye built up a career in the bureaucracy. After leaving his post, he resided in Yang Zhou 楊洲 where several old officials, who have held posts in the government but then were dismissed, settled. Since they have been seeking an opportunity to regain their posts, those officials did not hesitate to support Li Jing Ye when he decided to rebel against Wu Ze Tian's authority. Their main motivation was to dethrone Zhong Zong, who was deposed by his mother Wu Ze Tian and was sent in exile. One of his followers Luo Bin Wang 駱賓王 produced a manifesto¹²⁹ in which Wu Ze Tian was accused of killing several officers, palace women, her own children, her brothers and even poisoning her mother and the ruler in pursuit of usurping the throne and establishing her own rule. In the name of Li Jing Ye, Luo Bin Wang was calling ex-officers, commanders, and ordinary people to take sides with him against Wu Ze Tian's rule. Wu Ze Tian's reaction to this manifesto was unexpected. She blamed her ministers "to allow a man of such literary talent as its author to languish in provincial

¹²⁹ For the whole translated text see C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., pp. 97-98; R. W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p. 58; Richard W. L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)", in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, pp. 295-296

obscurity without official appointment.”¹³⁰ Although the manifesto was strong in its propagandistic tone but still it did not suffice to gather the support of the ordinary people both for Wu Ze Tian’s remuneration of those who refused the rebels’ call for joining them and for Li Jing Ye’s failure in commanding his troops and managing a well calculated strategy. The rebellion was crushed in three months but it taught Wu Ze Tian that she had to be alerted for other probable oppositions. First of all, she looked for the connections of the rebels inside the court. She arrested and the high ranking minister Pei Yan who benefitting of the chaos that the rebellion created, was thinking about returning the real authority to Rui Zong, the puppet emperor on throne and executed him in the market place by making an example of him. Moreover, she ordered the execution of the prestigious general Cheng Wu Ting 程務挺, who gained a good reputation as a commander in fighting against the Turks in the steppes, accusing him of having connections with both Pei Yan and the rebellion of Li Jing Ye. As he was defeated, Li Jing Ye was murdered by his own men. Following the execution of these three notable men, Wu Ze Tian gathered the full court and made a speech in which she proclaimed herself have fulfilled the charge of being the head of the state and warned all by showing the pathetic ends of Li Jing Ye, Pei Yan and Cheng Wu Ting;

¹³⁰ Richard W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, pp. 296

且受遺老臣仇虜難制有若裴炎乎？世將種能合亡命若徐敬業乎？宿將善戰若程務挺乎？彼皆人豪，不利於朕，朕能戮之。公等才有過彼，蚤為之。不然，謹以事朕，無詒天下笑。¹³¹

Among those statesmen who received the Will there are some who are insubordinate and treacherous such as that Pei Yan. There was a scion of generals, who could yet become a rebel, that Li Jing Ye; an old general skillful in war, that Cheng Wu Ting. All these were looked upon as heroes, but they were hostile to Us, and We had strength to destroy them! If you gentlemen think that you are more able than they were, then act accordingly; if not, serve Us with respect, and do not give the Empire cause to laugh at you.¹³²

4.1.3. Wu Ze Tian's Reign of Terror

Li Jing Ye's rebellion was a remarkable turning point in Wu Ze Tian's policy. She started to make provisions for possible outbreaks against her rule and she instituted a reign of terror especially. She gathered a group of the most cruel officials, who were also loyal to her, inside the court and strengthened her network of spies that she has been constituting from the time she became the Empress of Tang Gao Zong on. The system was based on espionage and intelligence. Her anger was directed especially to high officials instead of the common people. Several ordinary people were rewarded by high posts in government in return for their useful espionages about bureaucrats.

¹³¹ The edict was mentioned in Xin Tang Shu, Juan 76, Lie Chuan 1

¹³² Fitzgerald's translation more fitted to the meaning. C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 108

Wu Ze Tian was proving that she was the only authority either in the court or in ordinary life outside the court and throughout her reign until her death “[...] no minister ever gained over her the degree of ascendancy [...]”¹³³ although in previous reigns some examples of officials holding over the emperors were seen. Wu Ze Tian’s reign of terror lasted until 697 when she deposed the last official among her cruel official group. She killed lots of notable men and ruined their families for the sake of muting possible opposing voices in her way towards ascending the throne. Besides, she gained the companionship of new people that would make her path easier among which one of the most outstanding men was Xue Huai Yi 薛懷義.

4.1.4. Supporters of Wu Ze Tian

Xue Huai Yi was introduced to the court by Wu Ze Tian’s daughter, the future princess Tai Ping 太平公主 as a peddler of cosmetics and medicine. Because of Wu Ze Tian’s special treatment on him and his frequent visits to the court, which was an unusual for men to enter the inner court unless they were not eunuchs, rumblings were spread around the country related to the love affair between Wu Ze Tian and Xue Huai Yi. As the ministers inside the court started to show uneasiness because of the spreading scandals, with the purpose of rendering Xu Huai Yi acceptable to them, Wu Ze Tian appointed him as the abbot of the most famous and prestigious

¹³³ Richard W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p. 298

monasteries of China, namely, Bai Ma Si 白馬寺 (the White Horse Monastery). Bai Ma Si has been built up in the area where “the pilgrims who brought the first copies of the sacred books from India, carried on the back of a white horse, had deposited their precious load and settled down to preach the Buddhist evangel.”¹³⁴ Being the head of such an important temple, Xu Huai Yi was enjoying an almost full freedom either inside the temple or in the court. He collected several young Buddhist monks in the monastery “who profited by his protection to break laws and maltreat the populace.”¹³⁵ Depending on Wu Ze Tian’s patronage, Xue Huai Yi was insulting officials and beating up Daoist monks against which he was representing the Buddhist clergy. He was favored by Wu Ze Tian not only because of being her lover but also with his noteworthy talent in architecture and great success in formulating and spreading the symbols and rhetoric of Buddhist political propaganda; he was the most useful man for her. Wu Ze Tian put him in charge of building up a ritual center as a symbol of her absolute political authority. Xue Huai Yi was the chief architect of Wu Ze Tian’s divine building, Ming Tang 明堂 (the Bright Hall).

4.1.5. Construction of Wu Ze Tian’s Bright Hall

The Ming Tang was one of the most important symbolic structures representing the ruler’s success and self confidence in establishing the perfect state and government.

¹³⁴ C. P. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 130

¹³⁵ C. P. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 131

“An architectural symbol of virtuous government, the Ming Tang exerted a powerful spell over Chinese rulers, who were drawn to it in the hope of benefiting from its legendary association with China’s epic heroes.”¹³⁶ Likewise, Wu Ze Tian appealed to the project of constructing Ming Tang complex for obtaining additional support in legitimizing her political ascendancy. Although few rulers have afforded to build up Ming Tang before Wu Ze Tian, because of its vital symbolic role in her political career she ordered the construction of the complex with neither hesitation nor consulting to the ministers about its design or structure, in 686¹³⁷ in the Divine Capital, Luo Yang.

The construction of the Ming Tang complex took three years and ended in 689. It was the most lavish physical enterprise of Wu Ze Tian and needed a huge labor force to carry timbers from modern Guang Dong region to Luo Yang and a great amount of capital. Wu Ze Tian provided the consent of the court officials on high amount of financial support to the complex, assuring them about the importance of the Ming Tang in Chinese imperial tradition by setting the previous rulers who have built this building throughout Chinese history. Furthermore, the first two Tang rulers Tang Tai Zong and his father Tang Gao Zu have made plans to construct the Ming Tang, so that Wu Ze Tian was promoting herself to pursue and fulfill a governmental tradition

¹³⁶ Howard. J. Wechsler, op. cit., p.195

¹³⁷ Depending on the traditional sources, Antonino Forte elucidated that the debate on the construction of the Ming Tang complex began in 685 and in 686 the first building of the complex was casted. The whole project was finished in 689 with the completion of the Tian Tang, which was the big tower at the center of the complex. Since Ming Tang is used as referring to the whole complex, not only the single Ming Tang building, the dates given by Forte are used throughout this thesis. For more information on the dates related to the first Ming Tang complex, see Antonino Forte, *Ming Tang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, (Roma: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), pp. 142-152

of the Tang. However, building the Ming Tang was “viewed in a different light by the early T’ang rulers. For them, recreating a Ming-Tang that was structurally independent from the imperial palace was the best means of enhancing their political position.”¹³⁸ Wu Ze Tian was deviating from the tradition both in constructing a complex instead of a single Ming Tang building and in creating the complex inside south gate of the palace not an independent entity from the palace. Wu Ze Tian’s Ming Tang complex was constituted by three separate buildings, as the Ming Tang 明堂 in the south; the Ling Tai 靈臺 with the Tian Tang 天堂 and the Da Yi 大義 located in the center and the Bi Yong¹³⁹ 辟雍 situated in the north.

The main building which was called the Ming Tang, the hall of government, constituted by three floors; two square lower floors and a circular upper floor.¹⁴⁰

The lower storey [of the Ming Tang] is said to symbolize the four seasons and each side was painted the color of the cardinal direction; the central storey is said to symbolize the twelve divisions of the day and contained a circular ceiling supported by nine dragons; and the top storey is said to symbolize the twenty agricultural seasons and was topped with a

¹³⁸ Howard. J. Wechsler, *op. cit.*, p. 211

¹³⁹ There is no documentation on the physical structure of Bi Yong. Antonino Forte referred to the Buddhist monk Nian Chang who lived in the 14th century. See Forte p.253

¹⁴⁰ C.P. Fitzgerald, and Ho Puay-Peng, depending on the traditional accounts, described the building as having three floors; two square floors and a circular one as the third floor. See C. P. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p.132; Ho Puay-Peng, *op. cit.*, p. 106. However Antonino Forte, depending on two edicts of Wu Ze Tian related to the Ming Tang, asserted that the Ming Tang was constituted by a rectangular base and a circular second floor. See Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-177. Since Forte accepted that it was his hypothesis and he did not have enough material to support it, the description of three-storied Ming Tang is referred to in this thesis.

circular roof with a golden iron phoenix crowning the apex.¹⁴¹

The phoenix figure was the symbol of Wu Ze Tian, representing both femininity and sovereignty in Confucian rhetoric. Moreover, the phoenix was “the emblem of the dawning of a new Golden Age, the resuscitation of the epoch of Kings Wen and Wu, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius.”¹⁴² Wu Ze Tian was utilizing traditional symbols which helped her create an affiliation with the ancient Zhou dynasty in order to gain support from Confucian political ideology for legitimizing her sovereignty which she would declare two years after the completion of the Ming Tang.

The Ling Tai, the Sacred Tower, which was located in the center of the Ming Tang complex, was constituted by two buildings, namely, the Tian Tang and the Da Yi. The bigger tower of the Ling Tai was Tian Tang, the Heavenly Hall, which was made out of wood and in the form of a five-storied pagoda. In *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, with respect to the height of the Tian Tang it was stated that it was possible to look down on the Ming Tang from the third storey of the Tian Tang.¹⁴³ The Tian Tang was housing a giant Buddha statue which was standing in the north of the Ming Tang and facing it just like a sovereign¹⁴⁴ representing a Buddhist kingship. With the giant Buddha statue, that big building, the Tian Tang, “was a religious monument which

¹⁴¹ Ho Puay-Peng, op. cit., p. 106

¹⁴² N. Harry Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China*, PhD Dissertation, (Rhode Island: Brown University, 2003), p. 204

¹⁴³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Juan 204, p. 6455

¹⁴⁴ John E. Jr. Wills, op. cit., p. 141. In Chinese courts, the ruler sits in the north and faces the south.

was built as high as possible- in response to the high religious aspirations of the time and to the political requirements of the ‘universal’ reign.”¹⁴⁵ The Da Yi, the Great Regulator, was the small astronomical tower attached to the Tian Tang. It was housing the astronomical instruments, like the great armillary sphere where celestial bodies could have been observed, a demonstrational armillary sphere, and an armillary clock.¹⁴⁶ Despite Wu Ze Tian’s claims on the traditional identity of the Ming Tang dated back to the ancient Zhou times, the giant Buddha statue in the Tian Tang was figuring a highly religious style. Attachment of the Da Yi to the Tian Tang and the appearance of the Ming Tang in the south with a phoenix on the top of it lessened the Buddhist implications of the Tian Tang. The whole complex was the testimony of Wu Ze Tian’s efforts for deriving sources of legitimation from both Buddhism and the traditional Chinese political symbolism which traced back to the ideal government of the ancient Zhou.

The Ming Tang complex was completed on 23rd January 689 as the construction of the Tian Tang was finished. Wu Ze Tian, who has already taken the title of the Sage Mother and the Divine Sovereign 聖母神皇 (Sheng Mu Shen Huang)¹⁴⁷, named her Ming Tang complex, which was “designed to serve as a shrine to the supreme deity

¹⁴⁵ Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, p. 254

¹⁴⁶ Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, p. 254

¹⁴⁷ In the early summer of 688 an ordinary man found a stone in Luo river with the inscription “when the Sage Mother is among people, the realm will enjoy eternal prosperity” engraved on it. He was said to be charged by Wu Ze Tian’s nephew Wu Cheng Si 武承嗣 to present that fake stone to the court for evoking the mysterious Luo river inscription which was seen as a sign for the arrival of a sage sovereign who would be as capable as the ancient sage rulers in displaying the perfect rulership. One month after the discovery of that Luo river inscription, namely, Bao Tu 寶圖, Wu Ze Tian got the title of Sage Mother and Divine Sovereign in 688.

of Heaven, and also as a Hall of Audience for great occasions,¹⁴⁸ as Wan Xiang Shen Gong 萬象神宮 (The Divine Palace of the Eternal Images)¹⁴⁹ “because of its astronomic equipment that included the images or representations (xiang 象) of the heavenly bodies.”¹⁵⁰ Wu Ze Tian faced opposition of an official claiming that the ancient Ming Tang has had a more humble structure compared to her gorgeous complex; nevertheless she did not take into consideration. Four days after the completion of the Ming Tang complex, an ostentatious ceremony was held during which Wu Ze Tian stressed her imperial claims in public with some significant practices. She attended the ceremony wearing “the Imperial robes, and [carrying] the jade scepters called Gui, the ancient symbols of the supreme authority.”¹⁵¹ In the ceremony she made offerings for commemorating her deceased father Wu Shi Huo, after honoring the first two emperors of the Tang dynasty Tang Gao Zu and Tang Tai Zong, putting him in the same place with the ancestors of Tang family. Moreover, she promulgated five generations of her ancestors from the Wu clan as princes as well as raised the imperial ranks of her two cousins. All these acts were traditional

¹⁴⁸ C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 131

¹⁴⁹ In *Xin Tang Shu*, it was stated that after the attachment of the Da Yi to the Tian Tang the name of the complex was changed into Wan Xiang Shen Gong, the Divine Palace of the Eternal Images. See *Xin Tang Shu* Juan 4. However, in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* after elucidating the physical structure of the Ming Tang building, it was expressed that it was named the Divine Palace of the Eternal Images. Only after this sentence, the construction of the Tian Tang was started to be explained. See *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Juan 204, p. 6455

¹⁵⁰ Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S. 6502, Followed by an Annotated Translation*, (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2005), p. 234

¹⁵¹ C. P. Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 126

political maneuvers indicating a new reign and a new sovereign, and Wu Ze Tian performed them successfully without leaving any space for opposing voices.

With regard to the rites that would be held in the Ming Tang, Wu Ze Tian ordered an edict in which she, first of all, referred to the previous Tang emperor Gao Zong's attempts to construct the Ming Tang and emphasized that she actualized that project by herself. By that way, she "framed the grandiose project as a Confucian wife's effort to commemorate her husband."¹⁵² In her edict, Wu Ze Tian cited the tradition related to the location and the usage of the Ming Tang from the ancient texts. She, however, made a plenty of changes either in the physical structure of the complex or in the ceremonies that would be held in it. She declared that the Ming Tang was not only a place for worshipping but also for issuing the government edicts, so that she announced the upper hall should be the place for glorifying the Heaven and the promulgation of the edicts should be held in the lower hall. "The Ming Tang thus appears to have been a center of politico-ceremonial activities."¹⁵³ She concluded with the following sentences which was giving the signal of a new sovereign;

... Since the rules were set in the antiquity,
maybe there is no need to follow them. Things
will start with me and [I will make sure that
they] will be suitable for the task of building
the hall. ...¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 114

¹⁵³ Howard. J. Wechsler, op. cit., p. 196

¹⁵⁴ Ho Puay-Peng, op. cit., p. 107

Wu Ze Tian was, apparently, depending on the propagandistic aspect of the Ming Tang instead of acknowledging the practical usage of the structure. As Howard J. Wechsler expressed the Ming Tang

... was not a structure designed to achieve any kind of clarity of vision or deep knowledge, but rather to overwhelm the senses by virtue of its sheer size and extravagant ornamentation. Its purpose was patently political and propagandistic, a device by which to enhance the empress's legitimacy and to bolster her authority.¹⁵⁵

Compatible with Wu Ze Tian's lifelong political strategy, the Buddhist-Confucian hybrid¹⁵⁶ Ming Tang complex was carrying both Buddhist and Confucian elements and aiding in her search for legitimation from both of these two disciplines. However, as she was nearing her goal, ascendancy to the throne, she concentrated more on Buddhism. Her agenda of Buddhist propaganda was mostly featured by Xu Huai Yi. Apart from being the chief monk of the White Horse Monastery, he presented the most important the most important means of propaganda aiding in Wu Ze Tian's legitimization of her power by creating the Commentary of the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經疏 (Da Yun Jing Shu), through which Wu Ze Tian was promoted as the Bodhisattva Maitreya and the universal king Cakravartin.

¹⁵⁵ Howard. J. Wechsler, op. cit., p. 210

¹⁵⁶ N. Harry Rothschild, op. cit., p. 114

4.2. Wu Ze Tian's Buddhist Patronage

Because of her mother's devotion to Buddhism, being exposed to Buddhist influences from her early childhood, Wu Ze Tian showed a remarkable interest in Buddhism from her early years of being the Empress of Tang Gao Zong onwards and finally in 691, one year after founding her own Zhou dynasty, Buddhism was declared to be the state religion and given a privileged position over both Confucianism and Taoism. She established a two way relationship with Buddhism in which she offered patronage for Buddhist clergy during her sovereignty and in return she derived legitimization for her authority, as a woman ruler, despite Confucian oppositions.

Wu Ze Tian supported Buddhist expansion in Chinese soil in a variety of fields from architecture to scholarship. While she was an empress dowager between the years of 672 and 675 she promoted the Buddhist architecture and sculpture all over the country. The most outstanding indication of this promotion was her aid in the erection of the famous cave temples at Long Men 龍門. Although the construction of cave temples has been started before Wu Ze Tian's time, however during her reign the project increased to the extent that the total number of the images graven on the caves was more than fivefold of the total produced before her.¹⁵⁷ Besides, she gave an extreme financial support to the construction of Buddhist temples which was not escaped notice of the ministers and finally one of the most prominent ministers

¹⁵⁷ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 39

warned Wu Ze Tian that “the temples and the monasteries of today [already] surpass [in splendor] the imperial palaces.”¹⁵⁸ Especially after promulgation of the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra she gave way to founding of Great Cloud Temples 大雲寺 (Da Yun Si) “in every prefecture of the empire, some of them new foundations, others existing temples which brought under imperial patronage.”¹⁵⁹ By that way, she both offered support to Buddhist monasteries and kept them under state control.

During Wu Ze Tian’s reign, Buddhist scholarship was flourished by the Buddhist clergy with translating immense number of sutras to Chinese and producing commentaries on them. She “not only provided the financial support for a number of able translators but also personally participated in their work much as the Buddhist rulers of the fifth and sixth centuries had done.”¹⁶⁰ Through scholarly work, Buddhism was integrated in imperial politics and this foreign oriented religion provided grounds for legitimization of authority in the place of the Han Chinese Confucian doctrine. Apart from the Scholars of the Northern Gate group that was assigned to produce political writings for the ideological basis of the imperial rule compatible to the Confucian doctrine, under Wu Ze Tian’s rule “continuing a tradition that began in Sui, within the imperial palace, a coterie of monks worked to

¹⁵⁸ Richard W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-T'ian and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, (Washington: Occasional Papers – Program in East Asian Studies Western Washington University, 1978), p. 46

¹⁵⁹ Richard W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)”, in *the Cambridge History of China-Sui and Tang China 589-906*, ed by Denis Twitchett and John F. Fairbank, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Vol. 3, part 1, p. 305

¹⁶⁰ Stanley Weinstein, *op. cit.*, p. 44

design prophetic sutras to buttress her sovereignty in the Imperial Chapel 內道場 (Nei Dao Chang).¹⁶¹ Her patronage of Buddhist scholarship mostly focused on some certain parties of the Buddhist clergy and the Buddhist schools. As Richard Guisso stated that in 6th and 7th centuries China, social and political circumstances played an important role in the doctrinal formation of the Buddhist schools that were founded or became famous at that time. He further analyzed the political relationship between the ruler and the Buddhist sects and asserted that

... imperial patronage of a leading monk was based first of all on the needs of a particular ruler and this, in turn, not only determined which sect would be paramount in his reign but also played a role in shaping the sects characteristics.¹⁶²

Following Guisso's argument, Wu Ze Tian's patronage to Hua Yan 華嚴 School and her relationship with the famous Sogdian monk Fa Zang 法藏 set as precedent for understanding the mutual interaction between the state and the Buddhist clergy during her reign. Prior to her, Tang state has offered patronage to the Fa Xiang 法相 School but since it was not utilized by any of the previous dynasties Wu Ze Tian turned her concentration on the Hua Yan School. The main doctrine in Hua Yan School which attracted Wu Ze Tian most was the principle of the universality and

¹⁶¹ N. Harry Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China*, PhD Dissertation, (Rhode Island: Brown University, 2003), p. 259

¹⁶² Richard W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p. 48

interconnectedness of the things in nature. “This universality applied both to the boundless extent of the Buddha’s compassion and, implicitly, to the infinite reach of the ruler’s authority.”¹⁶³ From this principle, which was formulated and explained by Fa Zang, Wu Ze Tian derived a base to her claim for being a ruler with absolute power. Fa Zang’s influence also strengthened her ties with the sect. Fa Zang (643-712) was a brilliant scholar and a talented writer who has assisted in Xuan Zang’s translation group in his young ages and carried out an immense number of Buddhist translation projects starting from his late 20s until his death under the rule of Wu Ze Tian. Among all these works the most remarkable one was the translation of Hua Yan Sutra 華嚴經 from which Wu Ze Tian’s concept of sovereignty was derived. Fa Zang through his commentary on the Hua Yan Jing 華嚴經傳集 (Hua Yan Jing Zhuan Ji), which he completed between the years 690 -693, acknowledged the reign of Wu Ze tian as the reign of bodhisattva Maitreya 彌勒菩薩 and of the universal king Cakravartin significantly asserting that

The holy, divine august Emperor [聖母聖皇 Sheng Mu Sheng Huang] of the Great Zhou Dynasty [namely, Empress Wu Ze Tian] has planted the seeds of the [Buddhist] path for countless aeons of time and should be joyously esteemed by the common people. The Great Cloud [Da Yun Jing] reveals that the Emperor turns the Golden Wheel [namely, she is the *cakravartin*] to govern them [the people] ...¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China’s Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 143

¹⁶⁴ Hua Yan Jing Zhuan Ji. Diana Paul, op. cit., pp. 201-202

The tradition of associating a ruler with the Bodhisattva Maitreya and cakravartin was a prevalent Khotanese tendency among Chinese rulers started with the Western Jin dynasty 西晉朝 in 4th century, practiced by Sui Wen Di 隋文帝 in late 6th century and once more utilized by Wu Ze Tian.¹⁶⁵ Fa Zang's commentary was influencing ordinary people strongly because he was considered to be an independent minded monk instead of being Wu Ze Tian's ally. Because of that, he kept his esteemed status, even after Wu Ze Tian's deposition in 705, until his death in 712. Ordinary people, as well as the court officials, were showing respect to him since he was "regarded as the Third Patriarch and the systematizer of the doctrines of [Hua Yan] school."¹⁶⁶ From the time Wu Ze Tian assigned Fa Zang as the abbot of the Tai Yuan Monastery 太原寺, which was founded for commemorating Wu Ze Tian's deceased mother, in 700 onwards "Fa Zang was at the center of the empire's cultural, religious, and political life, and was a recipient of great public recognition and imperial support."¹⁶⁷ Fa Zang gained Wu Ze Tian's trust and appreciation so much that she

¹⁶⁵ For more information, see Gu Zheng Mei 古正妹, "Buddha King Tradition and Buddha King Image of Hua Yan Jing in Wu Ze Tian 武則天的 <華嚴經> 佛王傳統與佛王形象 (Wu Ze Tian De Hua Yan Jing Fo Wang Chuan Tong Yu Fo Wang Xing Xiang", *From Heavenly King Tradition to Buddha King Tradition: A Study on the Patterns of the Buddhist Political Ideology in Medieval China 從天王傳統到佛王傳統:中國中世佛教治國意識型態研究*(*Cong Tian Wang Chuan Tong Dao Fo Wang Chuan Tong: Zhong Guo Zhong Shi Fo Jiao Zhi Guo Yi Shi Xing Tai Yan Jiu*), (Taipei: Shang Zhou Publications, 2003), pp. 224-274

¹⁶⁶ Stanley Weinstein, op. cit., p. 46

¹⁶⁷ *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed by Robert E. Buswell Jr., (USA: Macmillan Reference, 2004), Volume 1, p. 343

honored him with the title Xian Shou 先首 (Foremost Eminence) and the Hua Yan School was also called as the Xian Shou School.¹⁶⁸

Wu Ze Tian's patronage to Fa Zang and the Hua Yan School held an important part of her Buddhist patronage in general, in return she derived legitimation for her authority and furnished it by utilizing Buddhist propaganda depending on the Mahayana commentaries that reaffirms her claim of being the reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya and the pious king Cakravartin who would found the universal Buddhist kingship. Among those propagandist sutras the most influential one was the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra which created the proper atmosphere for Wu Ze Tian to declare her own dynasty just two months after the promulgation of the sutra in 690.

4.3. Wu Ze Tian's Utilization of Buddhist Propaganda

4.3.1. The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra

The Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經 (Da Yun Jing) was a Mahayana sutra which was translated several times before Wu Ze Tian and regarded to be the favorite sutra of the second Tang emperor Tang Tai Zong. The original draft of the sutra is no longer available in Sanskrit. *The Commentary on the Meaning of the Prophecy About the*

¹⁶⁸ William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, (USA: Vintage Book Edition, 1972), p. 167

Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) was written depending on the most well known version of the Chinese translation which was made by the Buddhist monk Dharmaksema (385-433) in 417. Dharmaksema has lived during Northern Liang 北涼 (Bei Liang) dynasty and produced an immense number of Buddhist scholarly works, including one of the most important Mahayana sutras, the Lotus Sutra. The commentary was completed by a scholarly coterie of ten prominent Buddhist monks that was supervised by Wu Ze Tian's monk lover Xue Huai Yi and placed into circulation in the seventh month of 690. In the biography of Wu Ze Tian in Jiu Tang Shu, the compilation of the sutra was stated as follows;

有沙門十人偽撰《大雲經》，表上之，盛
言神皇受命之事。¹⁶⁹

Ten monks interpreted the Great Cloud Sutra falsely, they presented it [to the court], asserted that the Divine Sovereign received the mandate [of the Heaven].

Although the Jiu Tang Shu left a suspicious remark on the compilation of the Sutra by expressing that the monks interpreted it falsely, both of the other two classical histories, namely, Xin Tang Shu and Zi Zhi Tong Jian did not use a negative tone indicating any mistrust related to the Commentary. The issue about whether the Commentary was an independent project or, as it was stated in 76th chapter of Xin

¹⁶⁹ It was stated in the Jiu Tang Shu, Juan 6.

Tang Shu, the commission was ordered by Wu Ze Tian to compile it, has been a matter of dispute among both classical sources and the contemporary ones. However, Antonino Forte in *Political Propaganda and Ideology* argued that the claim related to Wu Ze Tian's intervention to the project asserted in the Xin Tang Shu could not be confirmed by any other sources so that it might be "due to a bias of Confucian historiographers [...] against Wu Zhao."¹⁷⁰

Despite the fact that the validity of the Sutra and the parties carried out the project has remained as a matter of dispute, the propagandistic function of the Sutra left a remarkable impact on Wu Ze Tian's reign as well as on the ideological tradition of the seventh century governmental structure of China. Richard Guisso expressed that

[The Great Cloud Sutra] was, first of all, the basic justification for Zhou usurpation and the principal source of legitimation for China's only woman emperor. It is unquestionably the strongest of several appeals to Buddhist legitimation made in the middle period of Chinese history, and marks the beginning of a brief primacy of Buddhism over all other doctrines in the formulation of state ideology.¹⁷¹

The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra was featuring the two significant Buddhist symbols depicted in the Sutra, reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya and the universal king Cakravartin, and identifying Wu Ze Tian with both of them.

¹⁷⁰ Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S. 6502, Followed by an Annotated Translation*, (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2005), p. 8

¹⁷¹ Richard W. L. Guisso, op. cit., p. 44

Essentially, “the sacral political unity of the Son of Heaven [meaning, the Emperor] was reconfirmed and reinforced by means of appeal to”¹⁷² these two figures of Buddhism. The core argument of the Commentary centered around the reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Jing Guang 淨光 as the Cakravartin which gave way to Wu Ze Tian’s claim of being the Bodhisattva savior emperor of the professed ideal kingdom, her Zhou dynasty.

4.3.2. Wu Ze Tian Having the Title of Cakravartin

In the Chinese governmental tradition, prevailed from Zhou dynasty (1045BC-256BC) onwards, the sovereign of the Chinese state was the Son of Heaven 天子 (Tian Zi) who ruled over the soil of the Middle Kingdom 中國 (Zhong Guo) which was ideologically considered to be at the center of the world 天下 (Tian Xia). The Son of Heaven was not only responsible for the Chinese land but also he was regarded to be “a true universal sovereign who must guarantee the harmony between heaven, earth, and man.”¹⁷³ The political ideology of Chinese state was placing the Heaven at the center of the legitimization mechanism and accepting a ruler as legitimate as long as he deserved the Mandate of the Heaven and declared himself as the Son of the Heaven. Wu Ze Tian, as a woman, was not fitting to the traditional Chinese portrayal of the sovereign. Moreover she was in need of a new legitimating

¹⁷² Antonino Forte, op. cit., p. 242

¹⁷³ Antonino Forte, op. cit., p. 204

figure for sovereignty in order to cut the ties from the Tang imperial ideology, in which the right for rule was also depended on the Mandate of the Heaven. In order to stress on “her secular legitimacy as a ruler with the religious authority of Buddhist deities, she drew on a tradition of Buddhist kingship long known in both India and Central Asia: the idea of Cakravartin.”¹⁷⁴ In the Commentary the figure of Cakravartin was asserted referring to the conversation between the Buddha and one of the Buddha’s disciples the Bodhisattva Jing Guang cited from the Great Cloud Sutra. In the conversation, the Buddha foretold Jing Guang that she would be reincarnated into a female body in the future and prophesied the following events which would happen, then.

即以女身當王國土得轉輪王所統領處四方
之一。人民熾盛無有衰耗病苦憂惱恐怖禍難。
成就具足一切吉事。閻浮提中所有國土悉來
承伏無違拒者。得大自在教化所屬城邑聚
落。¹⁷⁵

With female body you will be the ruler of a country and have the one of four of a land that Cakravartin can rule over. People will be abundant without any weakness or waste, illness or pain, sadness or anger, fear or terror, misfortune or hardship. When this is accomplished every propitious events will be attained. All of the countries in *Jambudvipa*

¹⁷⁴ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China’s Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 145

¹⁷⁵ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 1.24 – 2.28 (Plates I-II)

will come to submit you, without any disobedience or resistance. You will obtain big freedom [authority]; you will educate [people] and change the cities.

Depending on the conversation between Buddha and Jing Guang, the authors of the Commentary argued that Wu Ze Tian was the female Cakravartin 轉輪 (Zhuan Lun).

As it was mentioned in the Sutra, Jing Guang would reincarnate as a woman however in the following lines of the Sutra the Buddha warned Jing Guang emphasizing that 知乃是方便之身非實女身¹⁷⁶ “You should know that it [the body you would reborn into] is an instrumental body, not a real female body.” “[...] the patriarchal Confucian establishment [of the House of Tang] found the very idea of a female ruler repugnant in the extreme.”¹⁷⁷ The Cakravartin pictured as occupying a female body was more tolerable than a real female Cakravartin in the context of the Confucian state ideology. In that sense, the prophecy was fairly acceptable to the Confucians.

The female Cakravartin, literally meaning “the wheel turner,” was foretold to be ruling over the Jambudvipa. In Buddhist cosmology Cakravartin rules over Four Continents (Worlds) 四天下 (Si Tian Xia) and Jambudvipa denoted one of the Four Continents. In this formulization, the ruler of the Jambudvipa could not be regarded

¹⁷⁶ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.31 (Plate II)

¹⁷⁷ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 145

as the Cakravartin. Nevertheless, the problem was solved with an interpolation. For the sake of identifying Wu Ze Tian with Cakravartin, the authors of the Commentary forged the concept of Cakravartin citing from the ancient Buddhist texts that

... the King of the Golden Wheel (Jin Lun Wang 金輪王) governs the Four Continents; the King of the Silver Wheel (Yin Lun Wang 銀輪王) governs the Three Continents: Eastern, Western and Southern; the King of the Copper Wheel (Tong Lun Wang 銅輪王) governs the Two Continents: Eastern and Southern; and finally, the King of the Iron Wheel (Tie Lun Wang 鐵輪王) reigns only over the Southern Continent, Jambudvīpa.¹⁷⁸

Although, as governing the Jambudvīpa, Wu Ze Tian could only have had the title of the Iron Cakravartin, she assumed the title of the Sage and the Divine Sovereign of the Golden Wheel 金輪聖神皇帝 (Jin Lun Sheng Shen Huang Di)¹⁷⁹, “which was a curious mixture of Indian and Chinese terminology,”¹⁸⁰ in 693. Antonino Forte, in his annotation to the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra¹⁸¹, offered an interpretation to this discrepancy appealing to the difference in the meaning of the

¹⁷⁸ Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, p. 209

¹⁷⁹ In *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Juan 205 it was mentioned that 魏王承嗣等五千人, 表請家尊號曰, 金輪聖神皇帝. [...] 太后御萬象神宮, 受尊號. “With the request of Wu Cheng Si [Wu Ze Tian’s nephew] and other five thousand men, the Empress assumed the title of the Sage and the Divine Sovereign of the Golden Wheel in the Ming Tang.” See *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Juan 205, p. 6492

¹⁸⁰ Stanley Weinstein, *op. cit.*, n. 27, p. 164

¹⁸¹ Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, n. 76, p. 270

concept Tian Xia in Indian and Chinese context. While Tian Xia denoted one of the four continents in Indian cosmology, it carried a more comprehensive meaning in Chinese culture signifying the whole world. Both Chinese one Tian Xia and Indian four Tian Xias are representing the same thing in different cosmologies, thus they are equivalent in that sense. Utilizing this hotchpotch of concepts, the authors of the Commentary saw no harm in declaring Wu Ze Tian as the sovereign of the four Continents (Worlds), namely, the Cakravartin of the Golden Wheel.

Wu Ze Tian's identification with the Cakravartin of the Golden Wheel was strengthened with the translation of the Precious Rain Sutra 寶雨經 (Bao Yu Jing) which was carried out by Indian monk Bodhiruci¹⁸² in 693. Similar to the Great Cloud Sutra, in the Precious Rain Sutra the Buddha was prophesying about the female Cakravartin who would rule over Jambudvipa. The Sutra was seen as an interpolation to the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra contributing to the portrayal of Wu Ze Tian as a female Cakravartin. Just a few days after the promulgation of the Precious Rain Sutra, Wu Ze Tian assumed the title of Cakravartin in 693. In the late 694, Wu Ze Tian performed the No Bounds Gathering 無遮大會 (Wu Zhe Da Hui) at the Ming Tang to which people from all over China participate and enjoy any kinds of charity offered by the Sage and the Divine Sovereign of the Golden Wheel. The most important feature of the No Bounds Gathering was that both the ruler and the subjects were united in the same place and the discrimination among people was ceased. "It thus offered the occasion to knit

¹⁸² His original name was Dharmaruci and it was changed into Bodhiruci by Wu Ze Tian.

together that intimate communion of ideas and purposes, utopianized by the Buddhist political theorists, which were so difficult to implement in practice.”¹⁸³ The festival tradition of the No Bounds Gathering was related to the Indian legendary ruler Asoka (304 BC-232 BC) who united almost all of the Indian soil and made Buddhism the official religion. Through his conquests Buddhism spread out of Indian border and he proclaimed himself as the Cakravartin ruler by holding a No Bounds Gathering. Likewise, Wu Ze Tian featured herself as the Cakravartin ruler and her country as the center of the Buddhist world through this festival.

4.3.3. Wu Ze Tian’s Identification with the Bodhisattva Maitreya

Despite the Commentary’s approval of Wu Ze Tian as the universal king Cakravartin coming out in a female body, her political claims were still in need of ideological support. For that reason the Buddhist clergy, studying on the Great Cloud Sutra, attempted to identify Wu Ze Tian with a more mystical figure depicted in the Sutra. In the conversation related to the prophecy about Jing Guang Buddha after elucidating that Jing Guang would be reincarnated into an instrumental female body and would govern the Jambudvīpa as the Cakravartin and people would live at ease under her rule, continued that; 摧伏外道諸耶異見汝於余時實是菩薩¹⁸⁴ “When

¹⁸³ Antonino Forte, *Ming Tang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), p. 232

¹⁸⁴ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.29-30, (Plate II)

you destroy and conceal the outer ways and distorted views, then you will be a real bodhisattva.” With regard to these sentences, the authors of the Commentary claimed Wu Ze Tian to be the Bodhisattva foretold in the Sutra. In Buddhist terminology

... the bodhisattva was a being at an advance level of spiritual development, progressing toward Buddhahood, the highest Buddhist ideal. [...] The distinction between a bodhisattva and a Buddha rested in the fact that the former remained subject to rebirth and thus could practice the bodhisattva’s legendary qualities of generosity and compassion, helping lesser beings and striving to bring dharma, or truth and proper order, to the world.¹⁸⁵

With regard to the economic prosperity and the success of the military during her rule, Wu Ze Tian was fitting in the notion of the bodhisattva savior. She was proclaimed to be the incarnation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, the apocalyptical figure of the Buddhist faith. According to the legend, Maitreya was the future Buddha who was dwelling in the Tusita heaven and would reborn in the distant future almost 30.000 years after the Buddha Shakyamuni. The belief in the Bodhisattva Maitreya was articulated into a kind of Buddhist millenarianism in time. According to the mainstream Buddhist thought while “the arrival of a messianic and triumphant figure was based on the Indian ideal of the Cakravartin, a virtuous universal monarch who is divinely destined to unify the earthly realm,”¹⁸⁶ the advent of the Maitreya denotes the final stage of the earth, namely, the Maitreyan Golden

¹⁸⁵ Diana Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 200

¹⁸⁶ Buswell Encyclopedia of Buddhism, p. 538

Age. In the Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra, it was remarked that 謹按弥勒者即神皇應也。弥勒者梵語也此翻云慈氏¹⁸⁷ “We attentively admit that the Divine Sovereign [namely Wu Ze Tian] is the Maitreya. Maitreya is a Sanskrit word and it can be translated as Ci Shi [the Merciful Person].” Although the Chinese translation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya was Mi Le Pu Sa 彌勒菩薩, the Commentary offered the Merciful Person 慈氏 Ci Shi instead of it. For Wu Ze Tian, the myth of the Bodhisattva Maitreya was a symbol aiding in her attempt to legitimize her political position as an absolute ruler. Apparently, she did not consider Maitreya as an apocalyptic image hence the authors of the Commentary offered a different explanation for the term, still keeping the name Maitreya. As Antonino Forte stressed on Wu Ze Tian accepted the notion of Maitreya not “in substance” but “in appearance.”¹⁸⁸ Forte further asserted that the twofold explanation presented for the concept of Maitreya in the Commentary can be understood more clearly with regard to the Buddhist Two Truths Theory which draws the distinction between the vulgar truth 俗諦 (Su Di), which is both practical and instrumental, and the real truth 真諦 (Zhen Di). Wu Ze Tian’s identification with the Maitreya could have been considered to be a vulgar, instrumental truth

¹⁸⁷ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.41-42 (Plate II)

¹⁸⁸ Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S. 6502, Followed by an Annotated Translation*, (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2005), p. 229

... in as much as it was directed at the simple people who were unfamiliar with the abstruseness of the learned exponents of official Buddhism, and inasmuch as it was immediately denied and surpassed by the superior truth of the authors of the Commentary: according to them, Wu Zhao was a simple bodhisattva.¹⁸⁹

Wu Ze Tian utilized the concept of Maitreya instrumentally in order to strengthen the legitimation of her rule. The authors used quotations from the Attestation Sutra 證明經 (Zheng Ming Jing) to affirm Wu Ze Tian as the Maitreya with regard to the link between the Ming Tang and the bodhisattva of Mercy, Maitreya. In the Commentary the first passage which told about the Ming Tang and the Maitreya was a citation from the Attestation Sutra referring to the construction of the Mingtang: 尊者願弥勒: 為我造化城¹⁹⁰ “The respectable one asked the Maitreya to construct the Hua Cheng for him.” The Hua Cheng denoted the Ming Tang as it was stated in the Commentary that 化城者明堂也¹⁹¹ Hua Cheng is the Ming Tang. Despite the fact that in traditional Buddhist ideology the Cakravartin acts as a precursor to the arrival of

¹⁸⁹ Antonino Forte, *op. cit.*, p. 228

¹⁹⁰ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.39-40 (Plate II)

¹⁹¹ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.47 (Plate II)

Maitreya¹⁹², the authors of the Commentary argued that both Cakravartin and the Bodhisattva Maitreya was the same person, namely, Wu Ze Tian. Compatible to the role of Cakravartin as the universal ruler, Maitreya depicted in the Commentary declared that 召我諸法子一時入化城者，此乃萬國朝宗會於明堂也。¹⁹³ When my sons of Law [dharma] enter the Hua Cheng, ten thousand countries will submit in the Ming Tang. Wu Ze Tian was considered to have actualized this prophecy by having invited the foreign ambassadors after the completion of the Ming Tang to celebrate her architectural symbolization of authority. For further imposing her identification with the Bodhisattva of Mercy, in the early 695 Wu Ze Tian added the Merciful Person 慈氏 Ci Shi, which was asserted as the Chinese word corresponding to Maitreya, to her title. Her holding of Maitreya as the imperial title was considered to be an instrumental attempt to gather more support from both the common people who understood the title denoting Maitreya and the mainstream Buddhist clergy to whom the concept represented the Bodhisattva of Mercy. Besides the influence of Xue Huai Yi who was the leading author of the Commentary and also a disciple of apocalyptic Maitreyan Buddhist sect, was a matter of fact in Wu Ze Tian's assumption of the new title. Not long after the big fire which was suspected to be caused by Xue Huai Yi due to his jealousy of Wu Ze Tian's having a new lover¹⁹⁴,

¹⁹² See Buswell Encyclopedia of Buddhism, p. 539

¹⁹³ The Commentary on the Meaning of The Divine August Prophecy in the Great Cloud Sutra 大雲經神皇授記義疏 (Da Yun Jing Shen Huang Shou Ji Yi Shu) S. 6502, 2.51-52 (Plate II)

¹⁹⁴ It was never proved that Xue Huai Yi burnt the Ming Tang but he was suspected to have done. Traditional sources also accuse him of having set the fire to the Ming Tang, raging with jealousy. However, Antonino Forte gave a new interpretation on the causation of the fire. He thought that it might have been "a terrorist act by conservatives seeking to provoke a government crisis." Antonino

burned down the whole complex, Wu Ze Tian ordered the execution of Xue Huai Yi and she quitted the title Maitreya in 695.¹⁹⁵

4.4. Wu Ze Tian and the Zhou Dynasty

The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra created the suitable environment for Wu Ze Tian both as a Cakravartin and the Bodhisattva of Mercy, Maitreya, to gain absolute power and declare her own dynasty. After the presentation of the Commentary, the ministers in the court petitioned Wu Ze Tian to ascend the throne officially, putting up the argument that while her son Rui Zong was named as the Emperor, Wu Ze Tian was the actual sovereign and according to the traditional Chinese political consciousness ‘there can not be two suns in Heaven, nor can there be two kings on the Earth’.¹⁹⁶ However, she did not proclaim herself as the Emperor as long as gaining the approval of the Heaven through traditional symbolism. In the late 690 when it was reported that a phoenix, the Confucian symbol for sovereignty, was seen flying over the Ming Tang Wu Ze Tian attained the appeal that she has been waiting for. At the age of 65, Wu Ze Tian

革唐命，改國號為周。改元為天授，大赦

Forte, *Ming Tang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), p. 255.

¹⁹⁵ In the *Jiu Tang Shu*, Juan 6

¹⁹⁶ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao China's Only Woman Emperor*, (The USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2008), p. 157

天下. [...] 加尊號曰聖神皇帝.¹⁹⁷

Overthrew the Tang rule, changed the name of the dynasty into Zhou. [She] changed the name of the reign era into Tian Shou, showed grace to all over the country. [... Then she] added the respect title Sage and Divine Emperor.

The name of the dynasty Zhou was drawn from the ancient Zhou dynasty which was praised to be the ideal kingdom perfectly ruled by the sage rulers. In Chinese political culture, for a ruler of the newly founded dynasty to be considered legitimate, there is a procedure of significant actions to be fulfilled. According to Stephen F. Teiser's formulization in the article *Spirits of Chinese Religions* after finding a proper name for the new dynasty,

The emperor installs his family's ancestral tablets in the imperial ancestral hall; he performs the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth that are the emperor's duty; he announces new names of offices and institutes a reorganization of government [...]¹⁹⁸

After declaring herself as the Emperor of the Zhou dynasty, Wu Ze Tian established seven imperial temples, which was a tradition that could only be performed for the members of the imperial family, for her ancestors from the Wu clan. She has previously attempted to construct seven temples for her ancestors in 684 but has been

¹⁹⁷ Jiu Tang Shu, Juan 6, p.121

¹⁹⁸ Stephen E. Teiser, "The Spirit of Chinese Religions"
<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/lopez.html>, last login 10/9/2009

forced to give up due to the rebellion of Li Jing Ye. Wu Ze Tian changed the office names and the ranks of officials and in spite of the fact that no one other than the members of the imperial family could hold the title of prince, her nephew Wu Cheng Si was honored as prince. In 696 she performed the Feng and Shan sacrifices for the first and the last time as a woman in the ruling position in Chinese history, in Mount Song instead of Mount Tai.

Ming Tang was a prominent architectural tool of strengthening the legitimacy and the influence of the Chinese sovereign. For that reason, it was of great importance for Wu Ze Tian as well. After the big fire burnt down the whole structure, she did not lose any time to a new one. Xue Huai Yi again was charged for the construction however because of his death in 695, the work was completed by his team of workmen. The construction of the second Ming Tang was completed in the fourth month of 697 and it was called 萬歲登封通天宮 Wan Sui Deng Feng Tong Tian Gong named after the new reign era 萬歲登封 Wan Sui Deng Feng. The second Ming Tang was small building including the three separate structures of the first Ming Tang complex, namely, the Bi Yong, the Ling Tai and the Hall of the Government in a single structure. However, in the first Ming Tang all those three independent buildings were laying along a north-south axis.¹⁹⁹ The most important element of the second Ming Tang which made it remarkably distinct from the first Ming Tang was the installation of the nine big bronze tripods in the hall of the

¹⁹⁹ Antonino Forte, *Ming Tang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), p. 256

structure. The tradition of placing nine tripods dated back to the mythical Xia 夏 dynasty (2070BC- 1600BC) and was ascribed to ancient hero of the Xia, Yu the Great 大禹. Each tripod was representing one of the nine regions of China, affirming the absolute control of the ruler among all regions in the country. According to the Sinologist Riccardo Fracasso the main purpose of implementing the nine tripods to the new Ming Tang was her search for reinforcement for her political authority after the death of Xue Huai Yi, who was acting as her political strategist and “she brilliantly decided to do that by means of something -the tripods- that had great public impact.”²⁰⁰ Above all, from the ideological symbolization to the architectural style “the second version of [the Ming Tang] was different from the first, because the political climate in late 694 and early 695 required new architecture and new rituals.”²⁰¹ Wu Ze Tian has always been successful in utilizing different means of propaganda and appealing to different mechanisms for legitimization. Moreover, she was a talented ruler securing the order inside the country by her ministers, who were selected through examinations instead of being chosen due to their lineage, and her troops commanded by famous generals (many of whom were non- Chinese) victories in the wars made against the tribes threatening the Chinese borders. Her reign lasted until 705. She was deposed by a group of rebels and her son, ex emperor, Zhong Zong was enthroned to restore the Tang dynasty.

²⁰⁰ Riccardo Fracasso, *The Nine Tripods of Empress Wu*, in *Tang China and Beyond: Studies on East Asia from the Seventh to the Tenth Century*, ed by Antonino Forte, (Kyoto: Istituto Italiano di Cultura Scuola di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 1988), p. 95

²⁰¹ Antonino Forte, *Ming Tang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), p. 256

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In her way to the throne, Wu Ze Tian, the only woman emperor of China, utilized Buddhist propaganda for legitimizing her authority while founding Zhou dynasty after overthrowing Tang court without exerting physical force. Her political life story may have been divided into two parts; the first period starting with her enthronement as the Empress of Tang Gao Zong lasted until his death whereas the second part lasted from that time to her death. Buddhist propaganda was heavily layered in the second period. While Gao Zong was still alive, Wu Ze Tian mostly utilized the legends and symbols of the antiquity, of the ancient Zhou period. She participated in the Feng and Shan sacrificial ceremonies which were the most challenging rituals of the ancient past and were hardly dared to be performed by the previous dynasties. Wu Ze Tian performed the Feng and Shan ceremonies for two times which in the first one she assisted to Gao Zong while in the second one she was the Emperor and carried out the whole ceremony. Performing these ceremonies strengthen her political position as symbolically affiliated to the antiquity. She declared herself and Gao Zong to be the Two Sages, which was referring to the Two Sage Sovereigns, of whom one was woman, of the antiquity. It was the first step to impose the ideal of a female sovereign. She attained her goal after the death of Gao Zong, being an Empress Dowager she expanded her field of control and finally usurp the Tang throne for founding her dynasty.

In Tang China, there were three dominant religious traditions; Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Among these three, Confucianism was the state ideology of Chinese dynasties for centuries and Daoism was the imperial philosophy of the Tang while Buddhism was still regarded as a foreign faith. The motive behind Wu Ze Tian's utilization of Buddhism lies in the fact that as an Indian oriented religion; Buddhism was totally non-Chinese, thus non-Confucian. Since the idea of the female rulership was also non-Confucian, it was an instrumental strategy to derive political legitimation from Buddhism. This strategy was practiced by Turkic oriented Tuo Ba Wei dynasty almost three centuries before Wu Ze Tian. The relationship between Wu Ze Tian and the Buddhist clergy was a two way relationship in which while offering patronage to Buddhism; Wu Ze Tian was utilizing Buddhist propaganda and setting a legitimation basis for her authority.

Wu Ze Tian's political efforts should not be viewed only as a woman's fight for throne in the traditional patriarchal Chinese environment. If it was merely so, she would have had derived support from Daoism, which gave women a more privileged status than Confucianism did. However, Wu Ze Tian was in need of political support to portray herself as a legitimate ruler. Instead of insisting on the ideal of a female sovereign, she emphasized her claims for political authority and used the symbols of Buddhism, such as the Cakravartin king and the Bodhisattva of Mercy, instrumentally. She should be considered as a ruler candidate who was striving for proving her legitimacy.

Assessing Wu Ze Tian's legitimacy through Weberian²⁰² it is a matter of fact that she lacked in building traditional legitimate authority since it was an anomaly in the state tradition for a woman to claim for the Mandate of Heaven or to be the Tian Zi (the son of Heaven) in the imperial China. However, with her strong characteristic features and talents in government, Wu Ze Tian exerted a great deal of charismatic authority and proved herself to be a legitimate ruler. She also strengthened her charisma by utilizing the omens and sutras of Buddhism as well as referring to the symbols and rituals of the ancient Chinese past, which was highly appraised by Confucians. Although Wu Ze Tian created a strong charismatic and rational authority by issuing new laws and regulations as well as founding new institutions and offices; her governmental style did not prevail after her being deposed. When her son Zhong Zong overthrew the Zhou dynasty, he restored the Tang dynasty instead of continuing the rule of Wu Ze Tian's Zhou house. Due to this fact, it might be argued that Wu Ze Tian's dynastic rule could not be institutionalized and her reign might be seen as a period of usurpation instead of a legitimate rule. However, it is also a matter of fact that Chinese imperial rule was an institution in itself and the throne was being occupied by different imperial families one after another. There were not always clear cut distinctions between different dynasties; moreover sometimes the institutional structure of one single dynasty might have been prevailed through centuries under the rule of different dynasties. For example, the governmental tradition and the state structure of the Tang dynasty dated back to Tuo Ba Wei dynasty. In this context although Wu Ze Tian's rule did not continue for more than

²⁰² For more information on Max Weber's conceptualization of the legitimate authority see Max Weber, *Bürokrasi ve Otorite*, translated by H. Bahadır Akın, edited by M. Atilla Arıcıoğlu and H. Bahadır Akın, (Ankara: Adres Yayınları, 2005), pp. 41-88

one generation, her reign should be considered as a single instance of the long institutionalized dynastic history of China, as there were several cases of the houses having one ruler.

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