

The Wordless Stele: Deconstructing the Historiography of Wu Zetian

Standing at the Qianling Mausoleum, amid the multiple densely stone-carved chronicles of the Tang imperial family remains a singular anomaly: a six-metre-tall granite monolith devoid of any inscription, the 无字碑, the Wordless Stele. This monument is as unique as the woman whose tomb it marks; Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in China's 5,000-year history.

Entering the imperial court as a concubine at fourteen, Wu Zetian came to exercise significant political power for nearly half a century, ultimately rising to the apogee of declaring her own dynasty, styled Zhou. Achieving this ascent under Confucianism, the dominant state and social ideology of medieval China, was extraordinary. Confucian doctrine envisioned universal harmony as an extension of familial hierarchy, assigning men and women to distinct roles and warning against female intrusion into politics; encapsulated in the infamous proverb: "*When the hen crows to announce the dawn, the family is doomed*".¹ To circumvent this inherently patriarchal framework, Wu Zetian synthesised Confucian and Buddhist orthodoxies to legitimise her unprecedented authority, thereby engineering a period of remarkable stability and socioeconomic expansion.

As an unprecedented sovereign in Chinese history, Wu Zetian has generated a deeply contested legacy. This essay will examine her ascent and achievements, and subsequently analyse two critical historiographical paradigm shifts that highlight the extent to which her history has been manipulated by subsequent scholars for political and ideological legitimisation.

Ascent, Legitimacy and Governance

To evaluate the historiography of Wu Zetian's reign, we must first assess the progression of her rise to emperor, her navigation of political legitimacy, and the substantive dimensions of her governance.

Wu Zetian first entered the imperial court as a fifth-grade concubine to Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649). Following his death, she was consigned to a Buddhist convent; however, by the following year she had re-entered the imperial harem as a concubine of Emperor Gaozong (r. 649-683). Whether this return was a result of Gaozong's captivation with her beauty, or a ploy by then Empress Wang to distract Gaozong from her rival, the concubine Xiao Liangdi, remains unclear.² By 654, Wu Zetian had so thoroughly monopolised Emperor Gaozong's favour that he actively sought ministerial approval to depose Empress Wang.³ Later that year,

¹ *Book of Documents*, trans. cited in Norman H. Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao* (PhD diss., Brown University, 2003), 53.

² Dora Shu-fang Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History: Female Defiance in Confucian China* (Nova Science Publishers Incorporated, 2004), 31-33.

³ R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Western Washington University, Center for East Asian Studies, 1978), 17.

the sudden death of Wu Zetian's infant daughter, blamed on Wang, provided the pretext for the Empress's removal and Wu Zetian's elevation to Empress.

Wu Zetian exercised extraordinary influence over Gaozong, and she began to manipulate Confucian ideology to consolidate her authority. In 666, Wu Zetian became the only woman to ever partake in the "ultimate act of Confucian legitimation", the Feng Shan rites.⁴ These rites were performed only when the state was perceived to be in an era of significant stability and prosperity, and signified the emperor's announcement that he legitimately bore the Mandate of Heaven.⁵ The rites consisted of two separate rituals: Feng, addressed to Heaven, and Shan, addressed to Earth. In Confucian cosmology, Heaven (陽) was associated with the male principle and Earth (陰) with the female. Wu Zetian exploited this alignment to argue that, as a woman, she was uniquely suited to perform the Shan rite.⁶ By inserting herself into the ritual, she presented herself as an integral part of the prosperity it celebrated, utilising Confucian ideology against its own patriarchal principles to assert herself as an equal partner with Gaozong in matters of state.

Wu Zetian's role in shaping imperial policy can most clearly be seen in her reforms to the imperial examination system. She revised the 進士 (jinshi) examination, which had previously emphasised rote memorisation of the Confucian classics, to include assessments of literary composition and political reasoning through essays.⁷ This reform ensured that the Tang bureaucracy was no longer populated by individuals who could merely recite canonical texts, but by officials equipped with the analytical skills necessary for effective government.

Following Emperor Gaozong's death, his final testament explicitly mandated that Wu Zetian retain power as regent, despite their sons having reached maturity;⁸ a decree that underscored his profound trust in her political acumen and legitimised the immense administrative authority she had wielded in the preceding decades. However, this was not without opposition; in 684, northwestern aristocratic families mounted a rebellion against her regency, which they perceived as a usurpation of Tang imperial legitimacy.⁹ Wu Zetian's response was ruthless; sending 300,000 imperial guards to crush the uprising and employing inquisitorial commissions and networks of informants to systematically destroy remnants of aristocratic opposition, nearly eradicating the centuries-old clans of Li, Cui and Zheng.¹⁰ Such ruthlessness was not unique to her reign; Emperor Taizong crushed opposition with multiple uncompromisingly violent internal military campaigns, yet Wu Zetian's reliance on

⁴ Ho Puay-Peng, "Architecture and Legitimacy in the Court of Wu Zhao," in *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, ed. Frederick Hok-ming Cheung and Ming-chiu Lai (Chinese University Press, 1999), 112

⁵ 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, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 259.

⁶ A. S. Tezel, *A Study on China's Only Female Ruler Wu Ze Tian* (PhD diss., Middle East Technical University, 2013), 20, citing *Old Book of Tang*, Juan 23, 886.

⁷ Rui Wang, *Wu Zetian's Contribution to the Cultural Development of the Tang Dynasty* (Thesis, University of Toronto, 2008), 32

⁸ Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43

¹⁰ Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, 292–293.

targeted purges and surveillance was arguably more efficient, preventing dissent from escalating into civil war and sparing the empire the devastation of prolonged conflict. Wu Zetian built upon this by employing further changes to the imperial examination system to restructure political power away from these traditional elites. By permitting civilians to self-recommend for the 進士 (jinshi) examination, she broadened recruitment channels far beyond hereditary lines;¹¹ this not only allowed her to cultivate a bureaucracy capable and solely loyal to the throne, but also systematically dismantled the hegemony of an insular and nepotistic noble class.

While Wu Zetian had successfully operated within Confucian frameworks to maintain legitimacy as regent, the unprecedented step of ruling as Emperor required a broader ideological foundation. Expanding into Buddhism, the faith that “permeated the lives of the ordinary people of the Tang”, Wu Zetian had monks in the imperial temple produce a commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra to be distributed across China.¹² The commentary focused on a conversation within the Sutra between the Buddha and the devi 淨光 (Pure Radiance); the Buddha predicted that Pure Radiance would descend to the mortal world, becoming a powerful monarch and bodhisattva in the body of a woman.¹³ The commentary catalogued proofs that Wu Zetian was this divine avatar, drawing on fragments from Buddhist, Daoist, and even Confucian works. Notably, it references her as a “mother who [...] educates millions of men as her own children”,¹⁴ still integrating familiar Confucian ideals of maternal virtue in a bold declaration of sovereignty, demonstrating Wu Zetian’s consistent ability to manipulate ideology to consolidate political authority. In 690, with this legitimacy secured, she proclaimed herself ‘Holy and Divine Emperor’ of the Zhou dynasty.¹⁵

Wu Zetian’s reign as Emperor was marked by remarkable statescraft, manifesting in the defence of China’s frontiers against Tibetan and Turkic forces, the systemic utilisation of Buddhism to support popular legitimacy, the cultivation of a fiercely loyal civil service, and the facilitation of a booming macroeconomic state rooted in agrarian stability.¹⁶ Though, as she aged, it has been suggested that her previous aptitude for selecting capable advisors faded, as shown by her increasing reliance on the infamously beautiful Zhang brothers; however, this type of salacious attack on overindulgence in later years could be levelled at most long-term rulers of the era. This fault culminated in her downfall, as in 705, her

¹¹ Wang, *Wu Zetian’s Contribution to the Cultural Development of the Tang Dynasty*, 38

¹² R. W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of Empress Wu, Cheng-tsung and Jui-tsung,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T’ang China, 589–906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 305.

¹³ N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 211.

¹⁴ Antonio Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Tunhuang Document S.6502* (Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976), 184.

¹⁵ Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History*, 47

¹⁶ Twitchett and Wechsler, “Kao-tsung and the Empress Wu,” *passim*

chambers were stormed by forces frustrated by the brothers' growing influence, executing them and compelling Wu Zetian to abdicate in favour of her son.¹⁷

Yet, this deposition should not overpower the wider success of her reign; Wu Zetian was a singular woman who wielded imperial authority over half a century of remarkable stability for medieval China. While a reign of such magnitude demands rigorous critical scrutiny, her legacy has frequently been subject to pragmatic historiographical revisionism, wherein facts and motives are recalibrated to serve and legitimise the ideological goals and political utility of subsequent historians and their patrons.

Neo-Confucian Revisionism: The Fabrication of Deviance

The first major development in the historiography of Wu Zetian came with the compilation of key dynastic histories during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960) and the Song Dynasty (960-1127):¹⁸ the 舊唐書 (JTS, *Old Book of Tang*, completed 945 and largely compiled from veritable records of Tang Emperors), the 新唐書 (XTS, *New Book of Tang*, completed 1060), and the 資治通鑑 (ZZTJ, *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*, completed 1084).¹⁹ These histories, particularly the later XTS and ZZTJ, were extremely critical of Wu Zetian, portraying her as a morally bankrupt and ruthless woman who had manipulated her way to the throne and usurped the Tang Dynasty.²⁰ This perspective was a consequence of the emergence of Neo-Confucianism, a Song-era revival of Confucian thought that emphasised stricter moral discipline and social hierarchy. It developed in response to the Song Dynasty's lack of regional hegemony and frontier military dominance, conditions "profoundly disturbing to Song writers"²¹ which fostered resentment toward foreign influences and a fixation "on cultivating and ascertaining a pure 'Chinese' identity".²² Neo-Confucianism's goal was to revive Confucianism without the alien influence of Buddhism and Daoism and retain it as the core of Chinese society. As a result, the historiography of Wu Zetian in this period was shaped by an even stricter Confucian orthodoxy, which issued damning judgements on female authority and, as such, portrayed Wu Zetian's reign and personhood as a violent transgression against normalcy.

Indicative of Neo-Confucianist views on women, Sima Guang, compiler of the ZZTJ, asserted in his *Precepts from Family Life* that the most important thing in maintaining the family unit at the core of universal harmony was "the separation of male and female".²³ With this prioritisation of the family unit, the best way to frame Wu Zetian as an unnatural transgressor was to attack her motherhood, the most important quality of any Confucian

¹⁷ Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History*, 50-52

¹⁸ Hereafter referred to as 'Song-era histories'.

¹⁹ Rachael Rothstein-Safra, *The Rhetoric of Transgression: Reconstructing Female Authority through Wu Zetian's Legacy* (Master's Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2017), 38-42.

²⁰ Rothschild, *Rhetoric, Ritual and Support*, 18

²¹ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 150.

²² Rothstein-Safra, *The Rhetoric of Transgression*, 31.

²³ Sima Guang, "Precepts for Family Life," in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture*, ed. Robin R. Wang (Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 415.

woman. This attack manifests in these histories' consistent permeation of the story of Wu Zetian's murder of her own child, which she framed on Empress Wang, enabling Wang to be deposed and Wu Zetian to be elevated to Empress. The commentary on the annals of Wu Zetian in the JTS states:

史臣曰...武后奪嫡之謀也，振喉絕襁褓之兒...²⁴

*"Chronicler(s) say(s)...Empress Wu's conspiracy to seize the position of Gaozong's legitimate wife involved choking her swaddled infant"*²⁵

The placement of an event in the commentary rather than the main annals reflects a traditional historiographical practice employed when official records being referenced did not include the event, or when compilers regarded its occurrence as doubtful.²⁶ Yet, despite its sceptical placement in the JTS, in the XTS the episode was elevated to the main text and expanded upon in greater detail:

昭儀潛斃兒衾下，伺帝至，陽為歡言，發衾視兒，死矣。²⁷

*"Consort Zhao [Wu Zetian] killed her child by smothering it with bedclothes, and [she] waited for the emperor's arrival, she feigned joy, then uncovered the bedclothes to see his child, but his child was dead."*²⁸

The narrative was developed once again in the main annals of the ZZTJ:

昭儀潛扼殺之，覆之以被。上至，昭儀陽歡笑，發被觀之，女已死矣，即驚啼。²⁹

*"Consort Zhao furtively choked [her daughter], and covered [her] with bedclothes. The emperor arrived, then Consort Zhao brightly feigned joy and laughter. [Wu Zetian] uncovered bedclothes to show that [his] daughter died."*³⁰

The active decision by successive chroniclers to move this contested account into the main annals, embellishing it with details that they could not plausibly have known and which are notably absent from the earlier JTS, underscores a deliberate historiographical agenda. By retroactively inserting these allegations, later historians sought to depict Wu Zetian as a ruthless opportunist who committed infanticide, thereby framing her as the ultimate violator of Confucian motherhood.

²⁴ Liu Xu, 舊唐書[*Old Book of Tang*], Juan 6, Benji 6, in Chinese Text Project, accessed July 19, 2026, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=456206>.

²⁵ Translation modified from Jong Min Rhee, *Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty: Becoming the Only Female Emperor in China* (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 2008), 23.

²⁶ Denis Twitchett, "Chinese Biographical Writing," in *Historians of China and Japan*, eds. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 95.

²⁷ Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, 新唐書[*New Book of Tang*], Juan 76, in Chinese Text Project, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=182378>.

²⁸ Translation modified from Rhee, *Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty*, 23.

²⁹ Sima Guang, 資治通鑑[*Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*], Juan 207, in Guoxue, accessed July 21, 2026, <http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/zztj/zztjml.htm>.

³⁰ Translation modified from Rhee, *Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty*, 24.

Additionally, the language of these embellishments is not that of objective scholars, growing in intensity and mirroring the Song Dynasty's rising Neo-Confucianism. What is described as '斃' ("violent death") in the XTS is replaced with the more evocative '潛扼殺' in the ZZTJ; with '潛' implying lurking or secrecy and '扼殺' meaning to strangle, together constructing a Wu Zetian who is portrayed as actively deceptive and calculating, not merely violent. The inclusion in the ZZTJ of the character '笑' ("laughter") further deepens this portrayal, suggesting not only deception but a chilling, almost sadistic delight in the death of her own child.

These subsequent chroniclers' accounts of Wu Zetian murdering her own child are likely false given its omission from more contemporary critiques. During the 684 rebellion, Luo Binwang, one of the 初唐四傑,³¹ issued the 討武曌檄 (*Declaration against Wu Zhao*), a scathing denunciation of her character. In it, she is accused of having had sexual relations with Emperor Taizong, rendering her status as Gaozong's Empress incestuous, and is described as possessing the "heart of a viper";³² yet no reference is made to the murder of her child. The absence of such a charge in a text designed to vilify her suggests that the episode was not widely known or accepted during her lifetime but was retroactively inserted into the historical record to serve Song-era Neo-Confucian agendas.

Through this false narrative, Wu Zetian is framed as the Confucian 'anti-mother', defined by a lack of maternal instincts and a ruthless hunger for power. In Confucian thought, the relationship between an emperor and his subjects was often modelled on that between a parent and child. By portraying Wu Zetian as the polar opposite of motherhood, these chroniclers implied she was inherently unfit to embody the role of emperor, incapable of ruling, and solidified her image as a usurper. This determination to deny her legitimacy is further evident in the XTS, where her reign was subsumed into the annal of her son Emperor Zhongzong, and in the ZZTJ, where Sima Guang referred to her only as 'Empress Dowager,' refusing to acknowledge the fifteen years in which she ruled as emperor in her own right.³³

Ultimately, the Song-era historiography of Wu Zetian functions less as a record of her reign and more as a deliberate rhetoric of deviance. By sensationalising an implausible narrative of infanticide, intensifying its language, and embedding it into the annals, it transformed her effective half-century of political authority into a moral exemplum of failed womanhood. This revisionism was fundamentally an ideological exercise that reinforced Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, and positioned Confucian ideals as the ultimate measure of leadership and moral character.

³¹ Translated as the "Four Paragons of the Early Tang," referring to a highly influential group of seventh-century literati.

³² Original Chinese: 加以虺蜴為心. Luo Binwang, *Wei Xu Jingye tao Wu Zhao xi* [Declaration against Wu Zhao], Chinese Wikisource, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/為徐敬業討武曌檄>. Translation is my own.

³³ Rothstein-Safra, *The Rhetoric of Transgression*, *passim*.

Maoist Revisionism: The Proletarian and ‘Legalist Queen’

Under the early People’s Republic of China (PRC), Wu Zetian’s legacy underwent another radical historiographical reconfiguration. Driven by Mao Zedong’s desire to root Marxist ideology within China’s history, the state actively encouraged the re-evaluation of controversial figures through a Marxist lens.³⁴ As such, Wu Zetian was framed as a proletarian and Legalist ruler. Furthermore, the new state’s rejection of Confucian gender ideals, upholding that “man and woman are all the same”,³⁵ enabled Wu Zetian to be reassessed beyond the primacy of her gender.

The 1960 play *Empress Wu*, written by the prominent and state-endorsed historian Guo Moruo, was born of this movement of re-evaluation and sought to turn Wu Zetian into a “historical embodiment of socialist ideals”.³⁶ Within the play, Emperor Gaozong defends Wu Zetian from ministers’ accusations that she murdered their infant child; directly responding to the Song-era defamation, an explicit attempt to officially rehabilitate her image. The dramatised Empress Wu responds to these ministerial attacks, stating “You are not instigated by your conscience but by the nobilities”, transforming Wu Zetian’s political disagreements with officials in court into a struggle between Wu Zetian and the elites.³⁷ By recasting her struggle as one against entrenched elites, Guo positions Wu Zetian as a proletarian figure, answering Mao’s call for a native genealogy of proto-socialist rulers.

However, the reality contradicts this Marxist framing. While Wu’s expansion of the imperial examination system did restructure political power away from the traditional northwestern aristocratic stronghold, this was not driven by proto-socialist sentiment, but a need to weaken families allied against her and secure a loyal bureaucracy. Moreover, although not from the northwest, Wu Zetian clearly belonged to the elite class; her father, Wu Shihuo, served as a provincial governor-general, and her mother belonged to the Yang clan of the Sui imperial family.³⁸ Such origins highlight that these policies were rooted in dynastic consolidation, not class struggle against a social order to which she herself belonged. Therefore, Guo’s proletarian depiction of Wu Zetian was a deliberate distortion engineered to align with the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) broader political objectives. The fact that Guo subsequently enjoyed ‘special protection’ during the Cultural Revolution exposes his scholarship as an act of propaganda for which he was rewarded.³⁹

³⁴ This push to re-evaluate historical figures notably began with Cao Cao. See *The Great Leader: Mao Zedong’s Stories in Hubei* (Hubei: Hubei People’s Publishing House, 2016), quoted in Jing Chen, “‘The Emperor is a Woman!’ Changing Representations of Empress Wu in Chinese Popular Culture, 1939-2010,” *Rising Asia Journal* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2021), <https://www.rajraf.org/article/the-emperor-is-a-womanchanging-representations-of-empress-wu-in-chinese-popular-culture-1939-2010/1026>.

³⁵ “Chairman Mao and Chairman Liu talking freely about the Ming Tombs’ Reservoir,” *People’s Daily*, May 1965.

³⁶ Chen, “‘The Emperor is a Woman!’”.

³⁷ Guo Moruo, *Empress Wu* (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 1979), quoted in Chen, “‘The Emperor is a Woman!’”.

³⁸ Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History*, 30

³⁹ Chen, “‘The Emperor is a Woman!’.”

Wu Zetian's legacy was also shifted by the 批林批孔 ('Criticise Lin Biao Criticise Confucius') campaign, with Mao releasing historians from labour camps to work in state-sponsored writing groups to construct historical commentaries around the 儒法斗争 (Confucian-Legalist Struggle).⁴⁰ During the Cultural Revolution, Mao was looking to justify centralising political power and the use of political violence; this justification was found in the ideology of Legalism. Originating from the Warring States period, Legalism advocated proper governance through strict penal codes, a centralised administrative bureaucracy and the reduction of the power of the aristocracy.⁴¹ It was at odds with Confucianism, which placed greater emphasis on virtue and moral governance. Presenting the perfect opportunity to validate the modern political actions of the CCP, Legalism was elevated as a 'scientific and revolutionary' alternative to Confucianism, which was reframed as an oppressive ideology, obsessed with rigid social hierarchies and, as such, inherently dismissive of the proletariat.⁴² While Legalism and Confucianism were distinct, Mao artificially amplified their conflict within Chinese history to serve his own goals; Wu Zetian's reign presented a unique opportunity to promote this conflict.

In 1973, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, Yang Rongguo, a prominent Legalist scholar, was released from a labour camp to become a member of the Peking and Tsinghua University writing group, called Liang Xiao.⁴³ The group published an article titled "Wu Zetian, an Accomplished Female Politician", which claimed that Wu Zetian was the 'Legalist Queen' and that she had fought against Confucianism, empowered the Tang Dynasty's rising 'commoner landlord class', and undermined nobility with necessary violence.⁴⁴ The article's framing is open to many critiques. Wu Zetian's alterations to the examination system prioritised a strong central bureaucracy, but changes were not motivated by class and hence do not conform with Mao's politicised definition of Legalism. The article frames Wu Zetian's use of brutal violence as politically necessary rather than a reflection of personal character, demonstrating a shift from the Song-era narratives that collapsed female authority into immoral ruthlessness. Yet, the eagerness to validate this political violence in the name of Legalism is inconsistent with Wu Zetian's response to the 684 Rebellion, as her reliance on an informant network and ad-hoc denunciations lacks the institutional discipline central to Legalist notions of necessary violence.⁴⁵ However, the article's labelling of Wu Zetian as a ruler 'against' Confucianism is potentially its greatest manipulation. While the Liang Xiao writing group correctly observed that much of the criticism of Wu Zetian in later histories stemmed from Neo-Confucian hostility to her gender, equating this with opposition to Confucianism in her own time is reductive. Wu Zetian extensively worked to legitimise her political authority through Confucianism, participating in the Feng Shan rites and framing

⁴⁰ Yaowen Dong, *Constructing the Revolutionary Past: Mass Movements, Traditional Worldviews, and Cultural Memory in Mao's China* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022), 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 91

⁴² *Ibid.*, 87

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89

⁴⁴ Liang Xiao, "Youzuowei de nvzhengzhijia Wuzetian" 有作为的女政治家武则天 [The Accomplished Female Politician Wu Zetian], *Renmin Jiaoyu*, no. 8 (1974)

⁴⁵ Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, 292–293

herself as ‘a mother to all men’ as she declared her sovereignty.⁴⁶ To conclude that Wu Zetian was ‘against’ Confucianism simply because later Neo-Confucian histories attacked her gender is itself a gendered misreading, projecting and misinterpreting the bias of those sources rather than acknowledging her ingenuity in navigating Confucian frameworks.

Ultimately, this interpretation of Wu Zetian was created to secure a revolution and meet the needs of the CCP; fabricating a wider history of Marxist leadership within China, praising ruthless political violence to justify their own, and inventing opposition to Confucianism to validate the denunciation of the ideological framework that had guided China for millennia.

Conclusion

A critical assessment of these two key narratives of Wu Zetian’s legacy reveals that neither offers an accurate reflection of her sovereign reality. Both are manipulated accounts which expose far more about the ideological insecurities and ambitions of scholars and their patrons than Wu Zetian herself. This divisive historiography yields one central assertion: she has been defined by her singularity. Whether a ruthless opportunist who committed infanticide or a proletarian outsider fighting against entrenched elites, these distortions take root in her uniqueness as China’s only female emperor and seek to use her gender to inform how her reign can be manipulated to align with wider social and political aims. This continues to permeate modern culture, as Wu Zetian is attributed the label of a “feminist icon”;⁴⁷ a hasty and incorrect assumption that fails to recognise that she did little to dismantle Confucian structures for other women.

With sensationalist historiography, discovering the verifiable realities of her reign, let alone assessing them, is difficult. Contemporary historians rightly abandon the urge to moralise her actions, instead identifying her “tremendous originality, cold-blooded audacity, and staggering political genius”,⁴⁸ as any rigorous historical assessment must recognise that the stability and progress she engineered was inextricably linked to her ruthless drive to consolidate personal power. However, this mastery of statecraft was not immune to the vulnerabilities of a prolonged rule. Her final years, marred by indulgence and corruption, inadvertently lend credence to those seeking to tarnish her legacy.

Ultimately, Wu Zetian’s Wordless Stele, whether an act of supreme arrogance, assuming her reign spoke for itself, or a cynical realisation that her narrative would forever be subject to manipulation, is a poetic finality. Stripped of sentiment and immune to the revisionist distortions of subsequent eras, the blank stone stands as the perfect monument for a singular ruler.

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⁴⁶ Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China*, 184

⁴⁷ “Rana Mitter’s Chinese Characters on Radio 4,” Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, news release, April 4, 2018, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://www.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/rana-mitters-chinese-characters-radio-4>.

⁴⁸ Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon*, 4

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