



**Evolution of Queenship as an Institution in
Imperial China**

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Abstract

The normative ideal in Chinese imperial tradition marginalized women to the domestic sphere in the palace. This did not stop powerful women from becoming de-facto rulers who handled the affairs of the state. After the reign of Wu Zetian (690-705) – the only Empress in Chinese history – the imperial court and her successors institutionalized mechanisms to prohibit a woman from ever-amassing absolute authority. They did this by either not appointing the princesses and concubines of emperors to the position of the empress, or choosing princesses only from non or lower elite families. This, however, did not put an end to the reign of powerful empresses in China. It is interesting to note how women in power legitimized their rule in a deeply conservative society. Their long reigns were a direct challenge to the idea of the Son of Heaven and Mandate of Heaven- ideas that were central in Chinese history. How did they dodge the normative tradition which equated female authority with misrule? Did the lineage of the dynasty affect how they treated queenships? Women only got a chance to rule when their emperor was ill, dead, or too young to handle the affairs of the state. Dynastic continuity in China, therefore, owes a lot to female rulership, which was essential during periods of political turmoil at the imperial court. Recent scholarship has emphasized areas that had been previously unexplored or under-explored, such as queenly patronage, political representation, diplomatic activity, and political agency in Chinese history. This paper will make a modest attempt to contribute to the scholarship on the institution of Queenship in China and the relationship between gender and power in Chinese history by highlighting the factors that enabled/affected the evolution of Queenship in China prowess of the empresses themselves.

Keywords: Queenship, Empress dowager, Chinese history, Female authority, Legitimacy.

The objective of this paper is to present the latest scholarship on the subject of queenship and on how this has been applied to the study of female rulers in imperial China such as Wu Zetian and the last Dowager Empress of China, Cixi.

Introduction

The feminist movements of the twentieth century altered how academics perceived women's place in the world and how women were studied. They began to reassess the link between gender and power. The new approaches to studying women in power allow researchers to move away from the biographical sketches that focus on myths surrounding individual queens and encourage us to think about their unique experiences in different geographical and cultural contexts. The study of queenship demands extensive interdisciplinary research, exploring sources and methods from socioeconomic history, political theory, gender theory, religious studies, cultural practices, and literature. Queenship observes that variants from diverse periods, places, and religious contexts, reveal both differences and constancy in the roles that queens occupied.

Before diving into the role of women in power in China and studying it in the broader framework of queenship studies, it is imperative to understand the origin of the word "queen" itself. Women in power were known by different appellations across the world. The word "queen" is a European construct. The term is linked to the idea of wife— that is, as the wife of the king— which is very limiting in scope with respect to women's diverse religious and cultural role in court politics across the globe. In queenship studies, the word "queen" is used to express the position of an illustrious woman in the socio-political context of the realm. As a queen moved through her life, her title might change. For example, a woman might first become a queen consort on her marriage to a king; then serve as a queen regent, if her husband predeceased her leaving an underage heir; finally, when her child reached maturity, her regency might finish, and she would become a queen mother or dowager queen.¹

Many historians dismiss or limit the influence of eminent women in court politics or state politics as it is difficult to quantify. It was only in the 1970s that with the influence of gender theory, considerable attention began to be given to the subject of female rulers, and evolving an

¹ Woodcare, Elena. 2018. 'Introduction: Placing Queenship into a Global Context', in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Bristol: Arc Humanities Press, p.3

understanding of their reign through the prism of their unique lived experience under the prevalent politico-cultural environment.² However, recent scholarship argues that, whether consorts were ruling visibly or using techniques of "soft power," their political activity cannot be denied.³ One of the earliest such works, *Memoirs of Queens* (1821) by Mary Hays serves as an early recollection of female rulers and consorts from beyond Europe. Hays's work covers vast periods and geographical locations and reflects an early interest in the premise of global queenship. One of the earliest examples in Chinese history is Fan Ye's biographies of the Chinese empresses and consorts in the *Hou Han Shu* of the fifth century.⁴

The relatively modern subject of queenship has built upon a long-term interest in the lives of queens but taken the study of their reigns in new directions. There has been an emphasis on areas that had been previously unexplored or underexplored, such as queenly patronage, political representation, diplomatic activity, and political agency. Although, curiosity in the field of queenship has improved the understanding of individual queens and their roles in the overall political dynamic of their realm, the field has focused almost exclusively on a European sphere, from the early medieval to the end of the early modern period. Although studies of modern queens (post 18th century), have been extensive, there is a visible gap of a comparative analysis that assesses their reigns upon the same framework employed by queenship scholars of earlier periods. A brief survey of recent works in the field demonstrates an attempt to redress this imbalance, in terms of increasing the number of studies of queens and royal women beyond the European sphere, and in terms of bringing diverse case studies together to understand queenship in other religious contexts and cultural settings.⁵

This trend in historical research has also kindled an interest in reassessing powerful female rulers in China, not just to evaluate their authority over affairs of the state, but also how they achieved such a position of prominence and the systemic restraints they had to contend with in order to

² Millie. 2012. "The Transformation of Research Methods and the Future Trend about Female Rulers' Politics" (女主政治研究的范式转移与未来趋向), *Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University* (湖南师范大学社会科学学报), 41 (5): 46-50, url: [女主政治研究的范式转移与未来趋向 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

³ Woodcare, Elena. 2018. 'Introduction: Placing Queenship into a Global Context', in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Bristol: Arc Humanities Press, p.3.

⁴ Ibid, p.1.

⁵ Ibid, p.2.

secure their position. To arrive at such an understanding, it is first important to begin by assessing how the office of the Queen evolved in China.

Queenship and Regencies Through the Ages in Imperial China

In Chinese history, it might be easy to assume that once a queen consort's husband dies, her access to power dies with him, yet regency could offer a queen an enhanced access to power; even if a consort had co-ruled with her spouse, being regent would make her effectively sole ruler until her child came of age. By its very nature therefore, this period becomes transitional, and hence, prone to instability, while also providing the queen space to increase her personal influence.⁶ Jeroen Duindam and Seokyoung Han have elucidated clearly through their writings that the dowager queens, queen mothers and dowagers often played a crucial role in the succession of the realm, as a physical link between one reign and the next—whether she produced, or selected the heir.⁷

Regencies of empress dowagers became institutionalized in Later Han times.⁸ Institutionalization of the office allowed the introduction of formal traditions and rituals required for such regencies. They were recorded in the second century in *Tu tuan* by Cai Yong.

“When the empress dowager serves as regent, she will appear in the front throne hall to receive the officials; she [will be seated] facing east and the young Emperor facing west. When the officials send in memorials, two copies should be made, one for the empress dowager and one for the young Emperor.”⁹ In *Female Rulers in Imperial China*, Yang observes that nothing is prescribed about a curtain or a lowered screen, which seems to be introduced by Empress Wu.

With the onset of the Song period which witnessed the rule of many regent empress dowagers; the rules became more elaborate, and subtle distinctions were drawn between two types of

⁶ Millie. 2011. ‘The Legitimacy of the Female Rulers’ Governance in Imperialistic China’ (帝制中国女主政治的合法性研究), *Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University* (湖南师范大学社会科学学报), 40 (6): 56-59, url: [帝制中国女主政治的合法性研究 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

⁷ Han, Seokyoung. 2017. ‘Writings in the Korean Han’gul Script by and for the Women of Choson Korea (1392-1910)’, in Martyn Lyons and Rita Marquilhas (eds.) *Approaches to the History of Written Culture: A World Inscribed*, Gewerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan; Duindam, Jeroen .2011. ‘Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires’, in Jeroen Duindam, Tulay Artan and Metin Kunt (eds.) *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires*. Leiden: Brill.

⁸ Yang, Lien-Sheng. 1960-61. ‘Female Rulers in Imperial China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61, p.55.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.55.

precedents. One was that of Dowager Empress Liu (r. 1022-1033), who came to the *Chengming dian* (the throne hall) with the young Emperor Renzong and made decisions there behind a screen. Her example was followed by Grand Empress Dowager Gao (r. 1085-1093, d. 1093, aged 62), who came to the *Yingyangmen* with Emperor Zhezong on an odd-numbered day in every five days and was seated with the emperor behind a screen. The other precedent was established by Empress Dowager Cao (r. 1063-1064, d. 1079, aged 62), who attended to business only in a small throne hall with a screen in front of her.¹⁰

With time, empresses took on customs similar to emperors, for instance, a unique name for their birthday or sending envoys in their own names. These imperial liberties were assumed by Grand Empress Dowager Gao and Empress Dowager Liu.

To elaborate on the increasing authority and privilege of empresses with time, Yang cites the example of Empress Dowager Liu of the Northern Song. In the year 1032, she performed the imperial ceremonial ploughing and made offerings herself with the Emperor in the Temple of the Imperial Ancestors. Both rites were prerogatives of the emperor. In her posthumous order (*i-kao*) in 1033, she wished to pass on her regency to Imperial Concubine Yang, who was to become empress dowager. This part of her order, however, was disregarded and omitted when the posthumous order was announced to the empire.¹¹

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the office of Regency was often appointed to maintain stability when the emperor was not in the capital. This office eventually became an important political tool in the struggle between Emperor Gaozong and Empress Consort Wu Zetian.¹² The institutionalization of the office of dowager empresses reached a climax with the rules instituted by the Qing rulers. These rules prescribe that the screen has to be lowered in front of the empress dowager. With time, these rules were crystallized and modified based on the incumbent Empress.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.55.

¹¹ Ibid, p.56.

¹² Li Yong. 2020. 'A Study on the Regency in Capital During the Period between Tang Gaozong and Wu Zetian' (留守与政局:唐高宗、武则天时期的京师留守), *Social Sciences of Beijing* (北京社会科学), 2020 (12): 15-27, url: [留守与政局:唐高宗、武则天时期的京师留守 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

Chao Feng-chiai postulates that interdiction against regencies and interference in state affairs by consort families started gaining traction in 222 A.D. with the imperial decree of Wei Wendi.¹³ This opposition was echoed by Wudi, the founder of Liu Song dynasty in South China in his posthumous decree of 422, which reads – “In later generations, if there are rulers who are minors, governmental affairs should be entirely entrusted to the chancellors, and the empress dowagers need not bother to appear in court.”¹⁴

His strong resistance can be inferred as a consequence of the strong dowager empresses of the Later Han period. Similarly, the strong resistance against dowager empresses by Ming Taizu can be based on lessons from Song and Yuan dynasties. Be it as a queen consort or a dowager, any time an empress would attempt to acquire agency in governance, the imperial court would turn to Confucian ideology to curtail her influence. In most cases, the only way for an empress to gain legitimacy was by using terror and reconstructing state ideology such that it provided her with the political space to reign.¹⁵ However, despite the imperial court's best attempts at limiting female authority to govern, deliberately marginalising the influence of female rulers, and the relative lack of importance devoted to the subject in writings on Chinese history, there has been a considerable attempt to fill the missing gaps in scholarship. This process has unravelled the various means adopted by female rulers in China to navigate palace politics creatively and legitimise their reign.

Legitimising Female Rule in Imperial China

The Chinese cosmological governed the political stability of China, and also influenced court order, politics, and relationships. The structure of Chinese society was also based on it. Since ancient times, and throughout the imperial period, Chinese society was organised according to a strict gender hierarchy regulated by a specific ritual order which in the case of women was based on the “threefold following” - *sancong* 三从. A woman was generally confined to the

¹³ Yang, Lien-Sheng. 1960-61. ‘Female Rulers in Imperial China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61, p.56.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.58.

¹⁵ Millie. 2008. ‘Female Rulers and Politics in Imperialistic China’ (帝制中国的女主与政治), *China University of Political Science and Law* (中国政法大学), url: [帝制中国的女主与政治 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

domestic realm (nei 內) and was dependent on the man in the following order: first, in following her father; then, in following her husband; and, finally in following her son.¹⁶

The cosmological order also influenced the relationship between the Emperor and Empress, who depicted the Sun and Moon, respectively. They were responsible for upholding the balance between yin and yang or honouring the heavenly pattern at the imperial court. If this order was dismayed, then the emperor, who was regarded as the “Son of Heaven” (tianzi 天子), lost the “Mandate (tianming 天命) of Heaven.” Thus, men and women in imperial China played codified roles pre-ordained by the cosmological order.

These gendered roles became structural restraints which limited aspirations of authority among women, and over time came to be designed to limit the influence of a possible female sovereign. While it worked for the most part, imperial China did find its fair share of powerful women in court, who either rose all the way to the dragon throne or ruled from behind it through tactful navigation of palace politics. In the following sections, an attempt will be made to look at one such ruler, who was successful in not just carving their supremacy, but whose rule was consequential in the institutions it created – both, to solidify female rulership and the response from the imperial court which sought to limit it. Empress Wu Zetian was much more than the first and last Empress of China. Assessing her reign highlights the political savvy which is found so often among empresses in civilisations outside China which aren't favourably predisposed to female rulers. At the same time, it also highlights the uniqueness of Chinese philosophical and political traditions and how they were used to limit the extent of female authority in affairs of the state.

In Chinese history, female rule was uncommon practice and often controversial. However, Queen Liao (953-1009), Empress Wu (624-705) and Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) worked hard to establish their position, adopting various strategies and mechanisms to ensure that their authority was accepted—strategies that were not always successful and challenged prevailing norms.

Elisabetta Colla in *When the Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), the “Emulator of Heaven,”* illuminates Empress Wu's constant effort to legitimize her rule by

¹⁶ Colla, Elisabetta. 2018. ‘When the Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705), the “Emulator of Heaven”’, in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Bristol: Arc Humanities, p.15.

diverse practices - enhancing her titles and associating herself with the pantheon of goddesses and “sage queens” or through religious patronage. Colla argues that Wu Zetian was able to undermine the patriarchal structures of power in Imperial China and create a “parallel universe” in which a woman could hold supreme power.¹⁷ The Mingtang Hall setup by Empress Wu in Henan province (AD 688) had a Flaming Pearl adorning its top, rather than the usual phoenix. According to Buddhism this was one of the seven symbols of *Chakravartin* – Ruler of the universe across time and space. According to Peng Lihua this denoted Empress Wu’s personal political ambition of becoming *Chakravartin* in the real world, while also using a symbol which connects the heavens to humanity, to fulfil her desire of becoming immortal.¹⁸ Wu Zetian founded the Zhou dynasty (690-705). Tang dynasty (618-906) witnessed the rise of Wu Zetian and is regarded as a landmark in Chinese history, for she was a woman and the sole female Emperor (Huangdi 皇帝).¹⁹ Wu Zetian was acutely aware of the challenges of being a woman and claiming the dragon throne. By Chinese tradition, the only claimant was the Son of Heaven. Colla writes that Wu’s most outstanding achievement was to use religion, magic, and symbolism to legitimize her swift rise to the dragon throne, where she remained for almost fifty years.

Wu Zetian was neither the first monarch to portray herself as a deity in Chinese history nor the last. Empress Dowager Cixi manipulated the malleable gender identity of Guanyin to redefine her own role as a female sovereign, and in this way challenged the traditional view of the sovereign as patriarch.²⁰ Her most revered Bodhisattva was Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, the only female god in Buddhism, who was a Taoist Immortal as well.²¹ This particular deity known as *Avalokitesvara* is depicted as a princely man in India, South-east Asia, Tibet and even China up until the Tang dynasty. However, its portrayal began to be feminised during the period of The

¹⁷ Woodcare, Elena. 2018. ‘Introduction: Placing Queenship into a Global Context’, in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Bristol: Arc Humanities Press, p.4

¹⁸ Peng Lihua. 2021. ‘Ornament of Flaming Pearl on the Eulogia Tianshu (Axis of Heaven) in Empress Wu Zetian’s Wu Zhou Dynasty’ (大周万国颂德天枢上的火珠装饰论), *Tang History Series* (唐史论丛), 2021 (01): 26-50. url: [大周万国颂德天枢上的火珠装饰论 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

¹⁹ Colla, Elisabetta. 2018. ‘When the Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705), the “Emulator of Heaven”’, in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*. Bristol: Arc Humanities, p.13.

²⁰ Yuhang, Li. 2012. ‘Oneself as a Female Deity: Representations of Empress Dowager Cixi as Guanyin’, *Nan Nu*, 14(1):75-118, p.77.

²¹ Chang, Jung. 2013. *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*. New York: Vintage Books, p.68.

Five dynasties in China, and by the Ming dynasty, Guanyin became a sinicised goddess.²² Lydia Liu has suggested that although Guanyin was transformed into a female deity long before the early twentieth century, the trans-gender nature of Guanyin in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition might have provided a furtive way for Cixi to express her wish to be a “patriarchal sovereign.”²³

In 1903, she expressed to Der Ling her desire to dress up as Guanyin. Der Ling in *Two years in the Forbidden City* recalls:

“I want to have one taken as 'Kuan Yin' [Guanyin] (Goddess of Mercy). The two chief eunuchs will be dressed as attendants. The necessary gowns were made some time ago, and I occasionally put them on, whenever I have been angry, or worried over anything. Dressing up as the Goddess of Mercy helps me to calm myself, and so I play the part I represent... it makes me remember that I am looked upon as being all-merciful. By having a photograph taken of myself dressed in this costume, I shall be able to see myself as I ought to be at all times.”²⁴

Since other people could also dress up as Guanyin, Cixi highlighted the theatrical dimension of her role and tried to inscribe her own identity into Guanyin. She then tried to suspend this role and make it real by immortalizing it with photography.²⁵ She was also the first Chinese ruler to break the royal court’s restriction on “royal appearance” and sent paintings and photographs abroad for public display.²⁶

After the death of her husband, the Xianfeng Emperor, Dowager Empress Cixi was confronted with the unenviable task of deciding the fate of China. She successfully pulled off a coup. A woman in power was unprecedented for the Qing dynasty, but senior officials put forward a list of dowager empresses who were regent to their young sons. Wu Zetian (AD 624-705), was

²² Chun-Fang, Yu. 1938. *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.294.

²³ Chang, Jung. 2013. *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*. New York: Vintage Books, p.68.

²⁴ Ling, Der. 1914. *Two Years in the Forbidden City*. New York: Mofat, Yard and Company.

²⁵ Yuhang, Li. 2012. ‘Oneself as a Female Deity: Representations of Empress Dowager Cixi as Guanyin’, *Nan Nu*, 14(1):75-118, p.117

²⁶ Dong Lihui. 2019. ‘Game Playing and Cultural Misreading: How the Empress Dowager Cixi’s Portraits Representing the National Image of China in the Early Twentieth Century’ (博弈与错位:从慈禧肖像看晚清国家形象塑造), *Literature and Art Studies* (文艺研究), 2019 (06): 148-157, url: [博弈与错位:从慈禧肖像看晚清国家形象塑造 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

conveniently omitted from this list as she was the only woman in Chinese history who had explicitly declared herself the ‘Emperor’ and ruled the country in her own right. The support for Cixi was based on the understanding that her political role was transitional, pending her son’s coming of age.²⁷

Women played an indispensable role in the court politics of China. They inordinately influenced emperors and nobility. Keith McMohan in *Women Shall Not Rule* sheds light on how court politics and sexual politics were closely intertwined. However, their role was almost always in the background as Confucian traditions enforced patriarchal norms. Zhou dynasty (1054–221 BCE) onwards, patriarchal principles shaped the foundation of Chinese state organization and society. With the onset of the Han dynasty, Confucian principles were canonized. The subsequent sections will dwell deeper into the lives of two women of the royal court whose lives not only highlight how these norms inhibited the role of women in court, but also how they found creative means to navigate it.

Empress Wu Zetian – Crafting a Legitimacy to Rule

Women rulers in China were successful in dismantling these roles to the extent that it allowed them the political space to govern. Among the long list of such rulers, Wu Zetian has gained prominence in historical writing for challenging the pre-ordained rules for men and women in the imperial politics of China. Her unprecedented path to power - from a concubine to the mother of the heir apparent; then as empress dowager; and finally, as Emperor - is immersed in controversy. In christening herself as Emperor, Wu Zetian challenged the tradition and the cosmic order of things based on the idea of the “Son of Heaven.” According to Chinese imperial traditions, as a woman, Wu did not have the mandate to rule; neither could she be recognized as the supreme leader of “all under heaven” (tianxia 天下).²⁸

Colla argues that Empress Wu proposed an alternative model to be legitimized successfully. Colla calls this model the “parallel universe.” N. Harry Rothschild postulates, “Even if she continued to honour this canonical lineage of ideal rulers, sages, and worthies, she constructed a parallel pantheon of female divinities and paragons drawn from every ideological persuasion—

²⁷ Chang, Jung (2013) *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 50.

²⁸ Ibid, p.15.

including Buddhist deities, Confucian exemplars (like the mother of Mencius), and Daoist goddesses, such as the Queen Mother of the West.”²⁹ Empress Wu is described in many ways. Colla argues that an in-depth analysis of all the historical sources available is insufficient to deconstruct the popular fallacy of her being a cruel woman.

One, No One and One Hundred Thousand is the title of the famous Luigi Pirandello novel, which can be borrowed aptly in order to stress that the image we have of Wu Zetian, is the result of multifaceted descriptions, most of which have come from mere speculation. The way Wu Zetian was perceived could result in different stories, changing over time: she was “one” before the eyes of the emperor, but, at the same time, “a hundred thousand” before her court ladies and scholars, and “no one” when she was wiped out of some sources by Confucian historian.³⁰

After referring to the popular literature about Empress Wu over the last few decades, Colla concludes that Empress Wu cannot be reduced simply to a single character, but that she played “one, no one and a hundred thousand” roles, exactly as Moscarda, the main character of Pirandello’s novel.³¹

Historians observe that there is no record of Wu Zetian’s birth name. Documents show that she was known as Wu Zhao 武曩, where Wu meant 武媚娘 – “Wu, the Charming Maid.”³² As a woman at the Chinese imperial court, she was addressed by different names and titles during her life. According to Rothschild, she “was reputedly born in Lizhou 利州” (in Sichuan province), where she is still looked upon as a goddess. Her father, Wu Shiyue, was a resident of the Shanxi province during the Sui dynasty (581–618). He gained popularity after joining the army. At the end of the Sui dynasty, he took part in the foundation of the Tang dynasty (618–907), which was headed by the future Tang emperor Gaozu - 唐高祖 (r. 618–626).³³ Wu Shiyue’s ascending social status allowed him to be closer to the imperial family.

Wu Zetian's mother, Lady Yang (579–670), was the daughter of Yang Da 楊達, cousin of [Sui] Yangdi [隋]煬帝 (569–618), also known as Emperor Ming 明帝 (r. 604–618). Wu Zetian was the second of three daughters. She also had two half-brothers, who died in exile, where their

²⁹ Ibid, p.15.

³⁰ Ibid, p.16.

³¹ Ibid, p.16.

³² Ibid, p.16.

³³ Ibid, p.16.

father sent them. As a result, Wu Zetian grew up in a family with powerful political connections on both her parent's sides.³⁴

In 640, Wu Zetian, who was then still a teenager, set foot in the imperial court. She joined Emperor Taizong's court as a concubine of the fifth rank and was called "Lady of Talents." Emperor Taizong [唐]太宗 (r.626–649), né Li Shimin 李世民, died in 649, Wu Zetian shaved her hair and became a nun (nigu 尼姑) of the Buddhist Ganye temple (感業寺) in Chang'an (today's Xi'an, Henan province), where she was supposed to spend the rest of her life.³⁵

Emperor Gaozong [唐]高宗 succeeded Taizong on the dragon throne. Many contemporary records postulate that the incumbent Emperor had been intimate with Wu Zetian. Many historians infer that he was in love with Wu Zetian, and he visited her time and again at the Buddhist Ganye temple. In 654, the Confucian funerary obligations were waived, and Wu Zetian was permitted to come back to the imperial palace. One of the reasons she did not spend the rest of her life in the nunnery was the fact that the Empress Wang, who was jealous of one of Gaozong's favourite concubines, Xiao Shufei 蕭淑妃 (d. 655), hoped that she could more easily control Xiao Shufei's influence if Wu Zetian came back to the imperial palace.³⁶

Xiao Shufei bore the emperor a son and two daughters. Her status at the imperial court changed radically after giving Emperor Gaozong a male descendant. She was popularly known as the "emperor's favourite" concubine. Given the circumstances, Xiao Shufei could become Empress. As Empress Wang could not bear children, she coaxed Emperor Gaozong to allow Wu Zetian to come back to the imperial palace. However, Empress Wang and concubine Xiao were soon defenestrated, and Wu Zetian was proclaimed as *chenfei* (宸妃) or the "Celestial Consort."

Wu Zetian gave birth to a daughter, who died under mysterious circumstances. Within the year, Lady Wu would successfully defenestrate Empress Wang and Xiao Shufei. Wu Zetian actively participated in state affairs owing to Emperor Gaozong's ill-health. As the Emperor increasingly entrusted Wu Zetian with his duties and powers, he increasingly lost control over his empire. As empress consort, Wu Zetian eliminated any influence of the Li clan to augment her position. Apart from weakening her opposition in the imperial court, Wu Zetian also took steps to

³⁴ Ibid, p.16.

³⁵ Ibid, p.17.

³⁶ Ibid, p.17.

legitimise her reign among the masses by reconstructing temple chants in the suburbs to emphasise the legality of her rule, which was ordered by the heavens and the emperor.³⁷

Wu Zetian organized a team of scholars, known as *Beimen xueshi* 北門學士 (Scholars of the Northern Gate). This group compiled many works in Wu Zetian's name and dedicated numerous political and economic memorials to the throne. However, Wu Zetian's support was not limited to the intellectuals. She extended her patronage to Buddhism and Daoism. Colla postulates that the Empress surrounded herself with magicians. Wu was quite involved in religious ceremonials and superstition-based performances, which were considered a way to both gain power over her husband and, consequently, over the empire.³⁸ Her path to success witnessed many auspicious omens (which are believed to have been orchestrated by her). In 688, there was a mysterious discovery of a "Precious Diagram" (baotu 寶圖). It was a white stone stele with the inscription: "A Sagacious Mother shall come to rule mankind, and her empire shall bring eternal prosperity."³⁹

This event was naturally regarded as a positive sign, not only announcing the arrival of a new ruler but also suggesting the gender of this new sovereign. The stone was named *Tianshou shengtu* 天授聖圖 - "Heaven-bestowed holy stone." The place where the stone was discovered, was changed to Yongchang jian 永昌江, "Eternal Prosperity."

For Wu Zetian, this was the point of no return. Due to Gaozong's weak health, the ambitious and crafty Wu Zetian was ready to challenge his heir for the throne. In 683 Gaozong died of an illness. Wu Zetian's third son ascended the throne but was soon deposed by his own mother and substituted by his younger brother, who became known as Emperor Ruizong (r. 684–690). In 690 a phoenix appeared above the imperial palace, after which Emperor Ruizong is said to have abdicated the throne and Wu Zetian proclaimed herself "Holy and Divine Emperor" (Shengshen huangdi 聖神皇帝) of the new Zhou dynasty (690–705).

³⁷ Guan Linlin. 2020. *A Study of National Suburbs and Songs in the Wuzhou Period* (武周时期国家郊祀及歌辞研究), Masters Dissertation. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Normal University, url: [武周时期国家郊祀及歌辞研究 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

³⁸ Colla, Elisabetta. 2018. "When the Emperor is a Woman: The Case of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705), the "Emulator of Heaven", in Elena Woodcare (ed.) *A Companion to Global Queenship*, Bristol: Arc Humanities, p.17.

³⁹ Ibid, p.17.

While her achievements are noteworthy when it comes to administering the empire and bringing about prosperity, and also increasing the empire's sphere of influence in the neighbouring kingdoms, the response to her reign was to vilify her legacy to a point where any woman of the imperial court would not want her aspirations to be equated with Wu Zetian. While the legacy of female rulership in China has witnessed its fair share of highs and lows, there has been a consistency in the manner in which the system operated to limit their influence.

Towards an Institution of Queenship in Imperial China

Imperial China (221 BCE to 1912 CE) encompassed a societal structure that was predominantly patrilineal and patriarchal. However, it is imperative to note that female rulers governed China for an extended period in its history and exerted considerable influence, going against the pre-ordained rules set out by Chinese tradition. Empress dowagers served as regents for both Chinese and alien dynasties, and they were powerful under the Han, the Northern Wei, the Liao, the Song, the Yuan (Mongol), and the Qing (Manchu). As discussed in the previous section, the Tang dynasty was also ruled by the only female Emperor in Chinese history, Wu Zhao, who founded her own dynasty (r. 690-705, d. 705, aged 80).⁴⁰ Although contemporary Chinese scholars have paid some attention to regencies of empress dowagers, their discussions are often sketchy and tend to be overloaded with conventional ethical judgments.⁴¹

While translating a section called "Empress Dowagers as Regents," of a book titled *Chung-kuo fu-nii tsai fa-lii-shang chih ti-wei* (The Woman's Position in Chinese Law) by Chao Feng-chiai, Lien-Shang Yang argues that there is a strong deterrence against the regency of an empress dowager in the Classics, and no written law sanctioning it exists in history. Further, numerous orders throughout Chinese history forbid empress dowagers from interfering in government. This was very prominent in the Ming dynasty. Actual cases, however, have existed, beginning with Empress Li of the Western Han and ending with Empress Dowager Cixi toward the end of the Qing dynasty. This type of regency has a history of over two thousand years, and certainly it should not be regarded merely as something accidental.⁴²

⁴⁰ Yang, Lien-Sheng. 1960-61. 'Female Rulers in Imperial China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61, p.48

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 49.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.49.

From the Han dynasty on, whenever there was a regency of an empress dowager, precedents from earlier dynasties were cited. In the Qing dynasty, one finds that chapter 291 of *Da Qing Huidian* (Collected statutes of the great Ch'ing dynasty) even includes a section on empress dowagers called, "Attending to the business of government behind a lowered screen" (*Chuilian tingzheng*), which constituted a significant dictum of the dynasty. There seems to be no doubt that it had become a dynastic institution.⁴³ Feng writes that although the regency of an empress dowager was a dynastic institution in Chinese imperial history, it did not imply that all empress dowagers would serve as regents. Regency was possible when certain conditions were met. These conditions are not outlined in any written law.

Feng identifies three instances which permitted regency of an Empress Dowager. Firstly, when the emperor was young, like in Han period when Empress Dowager Tou acted as Ho-ti's regent when he was ten years old. Feng however notes, this was not a norm as when Empress Lu of the Western Han assumed the rule, Hui-ti was already seventeen. Feng infers that this happened as Empress Lu was greedy for power. The second instance where the regency of an Empress was permitted was when the emperor was indisposed and unable to oversee state affairs. When Sung dynasty's Song Yingzong was ill, Empress Dowager Cao was asked to decide on civil and military affairs. The third case which permitted the regency of an Empress Dowager was when the emperor died suddenly, or left a posthumous edict.⁴⁴ For instance, Empress Dowager Deng served as a regent after the death of Han Andi, and then decided to put Shaodi on the throne. Feng also cites the example of Empress Wu, who, upon the death of Tang Gaozong, took over all military and civil affairs- as ordered by a posthumous edict.

C. P Fitzgerald in *The Empress Wu* writes, "The Empresses of the Han dynasty had played the role of a Trojan horse, introducing a crowd of ambitious relatives to the citadel of power, but themselves only providing the lure and remaining the tool of their kin." There is little truth in this; although the empresses were used as link to the throne, it will be an injustice to limit their role and power to that of a tool of their kin to reach the dragon throne. Yang concludes that regencies of empress dowagers prevailed in Chinese history as a full-fledged established imperial institution. It was often prohibited and criticized but at the same time was often resorted to in times of emergency. Although mechanisms to check the empress dowager and her powers

⁴³ Ibid, p.50.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.51.

as a regent existed, they became more robust from the third century onwards. These encompassed the emperor, his bureaucracy, his clansmen, and aristocratic families during the period of the Six Dynasties and included literati-officials in Tang, Song, and later times.

Song dynasty officials added the word *tong*, which implied “together with or jointly,” in proclamations of the regency of empress dowagers in order to emphasize the principle that the emperor, even in minority or in illness, remained sovereign of the state.⁴⁵ Contemporary historians observe that Empress Lu of the Han dynasty issued decrees and orders independently. She was known as the *nü-zhu* or “Female ruler,” and her reign was recorded in the section called “Annals” in the *Shi ji*. Later, Han Emperor Kuang-wu order her tablet to be removed from the Temple of Emperor Gaozu as a sign of disapproval.⁴⁶

As the Empresses of China created narratives from historical and religious antecedents – imagined or otherwise - in order to create institutions which would legitimise their rule, the state also had its subtle ways to limit the extent of their influence. To this end, terminologies had immense significance and were used to undermine the power of queens and dowagers who wanted to be rightfully recognized as the sovereign. Alternatively, there are also numerous examples of female rulers coming up with official terminology which established their authority to some effect.

Empress Dowager Cixi used the term *xunzheng*, which implied “tutoring (the emperor) in government,” in 1886 to justify the continuation of her regency when the emperor was coming of age. Terminology thus played a significant role in limiting the power of a woman regent in Chinese imperial history. Terminology or wordplay is significant in the documentation of history. Its significance is reflected in the fact that women in power often used terminology to either amplify or justify their own power or to sustain it. Empress Wu undertook many titles to justify her rule, and Empress Dowager Cixi elongated her reign by adding a phase of tutorship to the young Emperor’s life before he be allowed to take on his official duties.

A study of Queenship in China would be incomplete without looking at the structure which resisted it. The history of female rule in China is as much about the political resistance to such an

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.54.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.54.

outcome, as it is about the powerful women who fought the social and political restraints on their aspirations.

Resistance to Female Rule in Imperial China

Criticism of female regents began as early as the Later Han period, when in 107, a courtier, criticized Empress Dowager Deng. He petitioned that she reinstate all governmental power to the emperor. The Empress was infuriated and ordered the petitioners to be placed in heavy silk bags and beaten to death.⁴⁷ Criticism of monarchy is a significant feature of historical documentation. It is often a part of subaltern history as very few rulers across the world have documented the weaknesses of their reign through court historians. It is not unique to women in power, but it is certainly amplified.

It can be observed in Chinese imperial history that women in power were disproportionately criticised for decisions and actions which were not very different from those of their male counterparts. Further, what is worse is, certain logical decisions and actions have often been blamed on incompetence due to their gender. For instance, criticism of the dragon throne has been punished by death by several male monarchs in Chinese history numerous times; however, Dowager Deng's decision was criticized heavily by many.

Dowager Empress Cixi was criticised by traditional Chinese commentators and western observers alike, and also by contemporary historians and members of the imperial household. She was criticized by contemporary Western scholars who had little understanding of Chinese customs and traditions. While Cixi was not the only monarch in Chinese history to gain such infamy, a case can be made that the criticism is amplified and influenced by her gender.

Scholars suggest that Kang Youwei's account of Cixi, "attempted to introduce avarice and licentiousness into the Palace, in order to tempt our Sovereign [Guangxu] to destruction." Cixi was "the antitype of those vile and licentious ancient Empresses Lü and Wu," who "poisoned the Eastern Empress-Consort of Hien Fêng; she murdered with poisoned wine the Empress of Tung Chih; and by her acts made the late Emperor Hien Fêng die of spleen and indignation."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Chng Khin Yong. 1977. *Portents of the Reign of Emperor An (106-125)*. Masters Thesis. Canberra: Australian National University.

⁴⁸ Cited in Hayter-Menzies, Grant. 2008. *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p.71.

It is imperative to articulate her reign with a fresh perspective and question the existing literature that maligns her and blames China's political and economic failures on her alone. Cixi inherited a corrupt bureaucracy. It is vital to appreciate her role in seeing China through an unprecedented crisis and taking up the challenge to modernize an orthodox nation. It is vital to acknowledge her contribution to China's transition from an imperial dynasty to a republic. According to one line of reasoning, the traditional Chinese governance, which sought to establish the imperial family and the country under one sovereign, was disrupted due to the power relationship between Emperor Guangxu and Dowager Empress Cixi. The events which transpired after the failed coup of 1898, solidified Cixi as the sovereign, thereby reinstating the traditional power structure in China, and ensuring political stability.⁴⁹

Most accounts don't portray Cixi as a distinguished and formidable ruler gracing the Dragon throne and ruling over one-fifth of the world.⁵⁰ Instead, she is portrayed as a frightened and power hungry woman, who while pleasant and sophisticated in good times, became irritable and quarrelsome when things didn't go her way, and outright ferocious when her actions were questioned.⁵¹

Yang attributes the success of an empress and women in power at the Chinese imperial court to their intellectual abilities. However, he places an equal premium on their charm and luck. Their potential to bear a son determined their success at the imperial court and shaped their path from a concubine to an Empress.

Imperial favour was challenging to maintain or secure. Murder and conspiracies were commonplace at the imperial court. Intellectual abilities were a cornerstone in the success of a monarch, but especially significant in the success of an Empress at the Chinese imperial court. Earlier observers and historians often undermine it. They dismiss the Empress as too "clever", not in touch with the ancient cosmological order, which required the Empress to balance the emperor's intellectual abilities, not supplement them.

⁴⁹ Liu Qiang. 2018. 'Dominator of the Imperial Family and the Country: On the Relationship Between Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi after the 1898 Coup' (国主”与“家主”的异化与统一——再论戊戌政变后光绪帝与慈禧太后之关系), *Journal of National Museum of China* (中国国家博物馆馆刊), 2018 (05): 120-127, url: [博弈与错位:从慈禧肖像看晚清国家形象塑造 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

⁵⁰ Johnston, Reginald F. 1937. 'New light on the Chinese Empress Dowager', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, 9(1): 27-31, p.27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Yang also attributes the success of an Empress Dowager to self-discipline. Successive female rulers declined excessive honours, wealth, and power for members of their own families, and exercised control over their ambition or unlawful activities.⁵² Empress Dowager Cixi serves as an exemplary example of a union of sound intellect and self-discipline – she recovered China’s plummeting economy, and was keen on recruiting purely based on merit. She was aware of how excessive honours and privileges for family members garner criticism, and always maintained a healthy balance between fairness and favours. At the same time, she found relative success in ensuring political stability inside China at a time when, as a ruler, she was expected to tenaciously defend traditions, while gently guiding the society and the imperial court to an inevitable transition to modernity.⁵³

Conclusion

Although, the regency of an empress was contingent on illness of an emperor or the age of the heir apparent; it is interesting to note that the Chinese definition of minority in terms of an emperor’s age changed from time to time. Thus, it was a variable that could be easily manipulated by the Dowager Empress’, and it often was. An empress’ regime was also based on a woman’s role as a mother or a wife. In Chinese societal structure, and especially in higher classes, mothers traditionally held power. The extent of their power, although varying from case to case, was on the whole considerable.⁵⁴

The wife’s rights at the Chinese imperial household were immune from her reproductive duties or her ability to bear a son. Thus, toward the end of the Manchu dynasty, Empress Dowager Ci’an took precedence over Empress Dowager Cixi, because, although Cixi was the mother of the Tongzhi emperor, Ci’an was the first wife of the Xianfeng emperor.⁵⁵

⁵² Yang, Lien-Sheng. 1960-61. ‘Female Rulers in Imperial China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61, p.58.

⁵³ Du Lexiu. 2016. ‘Defending the Old and Pursuing the New——On the Dualistic Value Orientation of Empress Dowager Cixi’ (卫旧与求新——论慈禧太后的二元价值取向), *Journal of Leshan Normal University* (乐山师范学院学报), 31 (02): 90-121, url: [卫旧与求新——论慈禧太后的二元价值取向 - CNKI](#), Accessed on: 15 October 2021.

⁵⁴ Yang, Lien-Sheng. 1960-61. ‘Female Rulers in Imperial China’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61, p.60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.60.

The position of women in the prevailing dynasty also influenced the scope and limit of power of a dowager empress. After the Han, the position of women in north China seems to have been relatively higher vis-à-vis the rest of China. Women in the Northern Dynasties were more active in politics and society; for instance, a woman could independently seek official posts for her son. In contrast, women under the Southern Dynasties rarely had any activities outside their households.⁵⁶ This is also reflected through the power of Empresses of the Northern Dynasties.

The Empresses of the Northern Dynasties were notoriously jealous, and it was at least partly because of their influence that few princes or officials dared to have more than one wife. This higher position of women in North China may have helped to inspire Wu Zhao to declare herself Emperor. In turn, the Song empress dowagers may have been influenced by Wu Zhao and by the powerful empress dowagers of the Qidan. The case of the Manchu dynasty was similar to that of the Jin, but it lasted long enough to witness the reign of Cixi for nearly half a century.⁵⁷

These socio-cultural nuances in the role of Chinese women in imperial rule are seldom highlighted. It is no surprise then, that a critical evaluation of Queenship in imperial Chinese history has so many gaps to fill in scholarship.

The legacy of female rule in China can be seen as a cultural and political tug-of-war between powerful female rulers who crafted narratives to legitimise their right to rule, and an imperial court which found justification in tradition to mute such aspirations. A cursory calculation of the number of Empresses in Imperial China would imply that the latter was more successful in its effort; however, the statistics merely betray the fact that several dowagers had mastered the craft of ruling from behind the dragon throne. Their rule, while not unchallenged during their times, deserves better than to be dismissed as mere exceptions to a long continuous monarchy held together by a “Son of Heaven” with a “Mandate of Heaven” to rule. Perhaps it does some justice to their legacy that the last powerful ruler of imperial China was Dowager Empress Cixi who navigated a tumultuous period of transition in China from the helm for over five decades.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.60.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.60.

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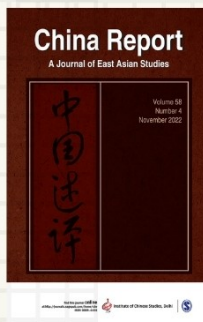
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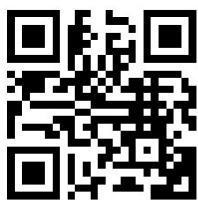
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