

Wuhou



Figure 1: The Chinese empress Wuhou is depicted in an 18th-century portrait.

Introduction

(624–705). The only woman to rule China in her own name was Wuhou (or Wu-hou), who was empress during the Tang dynasty. She ruled effectively for many years, at first as the wife of the emperor, who was ill and had a weak character. For the last 15 years of her reign, from 690 to 705, Wuhou ruled in her own name. She won respect for her great ability as an administrator, for her courage, and for her dominant personality. Above all, however, Wuhou was known for her ruthlessness in crushing any potential opponent in order to maintain power.

Rise to Power

Wuhou is a name the empress was given after her death. She was born as Wu Zhao, in Wenshui (now in Shanxi province), China, in 624. She was also called Wu Zetian. At the age of 14, she entered the palace of the Tang emperor Taizong as a low-ranking concubine. After his death, Wu was sent to a Buddhist convent, as was the custom. However, the new emperor, Gaozong (Taizong's son), soon brought her back to the palace to be his own favorite concubine. Through a series of complex plots, Wu had her female rivals within the palace—the existing empress and the leading concubines—eliminated. In 655 Wu gained the position of empress for herself.

The elder statesmen who had served under Taizong opposed Wuhou's becoming empress. They objected mainly because she was not from one of the great noble families, though her father had been a relatively senior military officer. Within a few years, Wuhou had all of these statesmen exiled and, in many cases, executed.

Ruler of China

In 660 Gaozong suffered a stroke. He remained in poor health for the rest of his reign, and Wuhou took charge of the government. She continued to eliminate potential rivals, even including members of her own family. Wuhou governed the empire with great efficiency. She employed ministers and other officials based on their talent, regardless of their social standing. In the years between 655 and 675,

the Chinese empire conquered Korea under military leaders who were picked and promoted by the empress.

Wuhou greatly expanded the bureaucracy, increasing the number of government posts. Many of these new civil service posts were filled by scholars who had passed an examination after long years of study. These scholars, who were not from noble families, began to advance into the highest offices, which had in the past been filled only by nobles.

Gaozong died in 683. He was succeeded by his and Wuhou's son Li Xian, who is now known as the Zhongzong emperor. Wuhou realized that she would not be able to control Zhongzong. After one month, she had him removed from power and exiled. Wuhou then had another one of her sons, Li Dan (now known as the Ruizong emperor), installed as emperor in 684. She kept him secluded in the Inner Palace while she continued to rule. Members of the ruling class staged a rebellion in the south. The main armies were loyal to Wuhou, however, and the revolt was quickly crushed.

The empress instituted a reign of terror among the members of the Tang royal family and officials, employing armies of agents and informers. Fear overshadowed the life of the court, as she continued to have her enemies put to death. Wuhou herself became more and more obsessed with Buddhist religious symbolism. In 690 she proclaimed herself empress in her own right. Every district was ordered to set up a Buddhist temple at which the monks put forth the idea that Wuhou was an incarnation of the Buddha. The empress and her court moved to Luoyang (now in Henan province), the eastern capital. She had Zhongzong named as heir to the throne.

In the last years of her life, Wuhou allowed control of events to slip from her fingers. She made two brothers, who entertained and flattered her, her favorites at court. The empress fell ill and increasingly began to depend on these brothers. They were intensely resented by the court and senior officials. In February 705, when Wuhou was 80 years old, a group of leading ministers and generals seized the palace and forced her to give up power. They made Zhongzong the emperor, and he reigned until 710. Wuhou retired to another palace in Luoyang; she died there on December 16, 705.

Chinese historians have traditionally portrayed Wuhou as a woman of extreme cruelty who had seized power without the right to rule. Nevertheless, her policies helped transform Chinese society during the Tang period. To help secure

her own authority, Wuhou supported the development of a scholarly bureaucracy to replace rule by aristocratic families. She helped the empire to remain unified. The empress also brought about needed social changes that stabilized the Tang dynasty and ushered in one of the most fruitful ages of Chinese civilization.

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