

Empress wu's rise to
power is interesting



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There is A Confucian dogma that pushes women ruling as “unnatural”. However, in China there lived one woman who rose to power. Wu Hou, also called Empress Wu Zetian, ruled China during the Tang dynasty, the only female to do so. While some depict Empress Wu's regime as autocracy, it could not be denied that she ruled China effectively, preserving the country's diplomatic relationships with other nations. Empress Wu's rise to power is interesting. The Tang dynasty is described as a time when women experienced some freedom, at a time when women were not limited to being subservient. It was a period where women became part of cultural and political endeavors. We came from a noble family and thus was taught music, how to write and read Chinese classics. Her father was one of Emperor Kao-Tsu's supporters while her mother descended from the Sui royal family. When she was 13 years old, she was sent to Emperor Tai Tsung's court to be a servant.

Soon, Wu became Emperor Tai Tsung's favorite concubine. When the emperor died, Wu was removed from the palace, as customary. The emperor's son, Kau-Tsung became the emperor at age 21. However, the new emperor, as fate would have it, was also enamored with Wu, giving him sons. We soon became the emperor's favorite concubine and soon was hungry for power. Rumors have it that Wu killed her own child and blamed Empress Wang (Kau-Tsung's wife) of the crime. Kau-Tsung believed Wu and married her, making her the new empress. Five years into their marriage, the emperor was struck with stroke and soon gave power to Empress Wu. When Emperor Kau-Tsung died, Empress Wu used her power to renounce the new

emperors, her sons and by 690, Empress Wu was crowned as the Emperor of China. She ruled China until 705.

Empress Wu soon began her campaign to uplift the women in a relatively men-dominated environment. She ordered scholars to write biographies of prominent women. She also saw to it that her mother's clan was given high positions in the political arena. The new empress favored religion and symbolism. Rituals were changed during her reign. Names of officials were even altered, and the emperor or empress, in her case, was dubbed with the new title "Heavenly Emperor". Empress Wu manipulated the government to follow her, employing informers and agents. She made Buddhism as the preferred state religion. Empress Wu was able to engineer the Buddhist scripture into building a Ming T'ang or "Hall of Light", a shrine to Heaven as depicted in the Classics. She was even able to convince every prefecture to create a temple that alludes to Wu being an incarnation of Buddha. The empress' given surname 'Wu' was also exploited. Everyone who had the same surname as the empress was exempted from paying taxes. In 690, Empress Wu changed the dynasty from T'ang to Chou. She had become China's female ruler.

During Empress Wu's reign, China was in the midst of foreign battles. Despite being depicted as a dictator, Empress Wu was instrumental in China's diplomatic relationships. Together with Kao-Tsung, Wu mediated in the Korean Civil War. At that time, Koreans were able to dominate in the Korean state of Silla, they acknowledged Wu's reign. When Empress Wu was 80 years old, her power had started to diminish. She was finally abdicated and the T'ang dynasty was restored. Empress Wu is truly an interesting

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leader. For one, she is female. At a time when males were dominating the political arena, she rose to power. It is remarkable especially since Asian culture tends to be patriarchal and for a female to rule and succeed, that is exceptional. True, Empress Wu's reign was plagued with intrigues and scandals. She was a dictator, a usurper and while this is not new to some leaders, it is still rather surprising to find a woman who is such. That is not to say that only men can be dictators. Women can also be dictators but sometimes they simply do it subtly. Empress Wu was shrewd and she let the world know it. It is even shocking to discover that she may have murdered her own child just to fulfill her desire to become empress.

Although this was never confirmed, the thought of parents harming his/her child is disturbing. It is something that people read in newspapers or see on the television now but to think that it happened way before it has become a norm, to say the least, it is truly startling. Stories of leaders conning people to get what they want are normal, albeit wrong. This just goes to show that even during those times; power and greed were already present and destroying individuals. On a positive note, Empress Wu was one who paved the way for women empowerment. She used her position to uplift the status of women in her country. It is interesting to know during a time when women were thought to be subservient; there rose a woman who wanted to change the norm. Leaders, regardless of gender, can learn something from Empress Wu- good traits and bad ones.

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