

Hello and welcome back to World Herstory, the podcast that discovers the lives and legacies of lesser-known, badass women from around the world and throughout history. I'm your host, Tabitha Bear, a traveling multimedia specialist with a passion for exploring the hidden tales of the amazing women who have helped shape our lives today.

Today we're diving into the annals of medieval China, where the winds of history whisper tales of a remarkable woman who defied the conventions of her era - Empress Wu. We'll transport you where the fragrance of plum blossoms mingles with the gossip of courtly intrigue.

We're going to explore the sprawling landscapes of the Tang Dynasty, an epoch that resonates with cultural vibrancy, political intrigue, and societal evolution. Not only are we going to break open the legacy of Empress Wu, but we're going to explore the lives of women in medieval China, a story that transcends centuries and echoes the resilience and audacity of women.

The Tang Dynasty, often hailed as the Golden Age in Chinese history, unfolded between the 7th and 10th centuries. It was an era of artistic brilliance, technological innovation, and dynamic social changes. Against this rich backdrop, Empress Wu Zetian emerges as a captivating figure, challenging the norms of a patriarchal society and ascending to a throne traditionally reserved for men.

In this episode, we'll illuminate the life and times of Empress Wu, examining the intricate dance between power and gender in medieval China. We'll explore the corridors of the imperial court, where political machinations and strategic brilliance paved the way for one woman to rewrite the narrative of her destiny.

We'll unravel the layers of Empress Wu's reign, scrutinize her policies, acknowledge her achievements, and the enduring legacy she left etched in the scrolls of time. Expanding beyond Empress Wu's reign, we'll examine how her story serves as a beacon, challenging and reshaping the perceptions of femininity and power.

The Tang Dynasty, as mentioned before, is often known as the Golden Age of medieval China. It lasted from 618 - 907 CE. Now, the Tang Dynasty had a really good running start because the Sui Dynasty before them. The Sui Dynasty managed to end the Northern and Southern Dynasties and create a unified China. The Sui Dynasty only lasted for thirty seven years, as they were rather ambitious about their goals.

They continued developing large scale projects, such as the extension of the Great Wall, the Grand Canal, and reconstruction of Luoyang, which was the Sui Dynasty capital.

For example on how large scale these projects were, the Grand Canal is still the longest manmade river in the world, stretching over 1100 miles and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. While the idea of the canal, and other large scale projects, were led by a centralized bureaucracy, it forced millions of workers to participate.

The Sui Dynasty also led a series of failed military campaigns against the Korean peninsula.

Between overextending resources for construction projects, and ambitious military efforts, the Sui Dynasty ended quickly with the Tang Dynasty entering the picture after the assassination of Emperor Wen, who was the only emperor during the Sui Dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty saw some particularly amazing technological advancements in the world of engineering. The world's first striking clock was invented around 725, and it became so well-known throughout the country that it was a requirement to write an essay about it on the Imperial Examination.

As for structural engineering and architecture, the Tang Dynasty saw the emergence of government standard building codes.

In 747, Emperor Xuanzong had a 'cool hall' built in the Imperial Palace with water-powered fan wheels for air conditioning.

One of my personal favorite advancements was woodblock printing. Written material made its way to a wider audience, improving literacy rates, and increasing the amount of people who could study and ultimately take the Imperial Exam.

The invention of woodblock printing also led to the invention of playing cards.

In regard to knowledge and medicine...

In 657, Emperor Gaozong of Tang commissioned the literary project of publishing an official medical encyclopedia. It contained text and illustrations of 833 different medicinal substances taken from minerals, metals, plants & herbs, animals, vegetables, fruits, and various crops.

The Tang Dynasty encouraged learning in medicine through imperial medical colleges, state exams for doctors, and publishing forensic manuals. Authors of medicine during this time period also identified that diabetic patients had sugar in their urine and should stay away from alcohol and starchy foods.

Thyroid glands of sheep and pigs were successfully used to treat goiters, which wasn't used until 1890 in the west.

Starting in 659, the use of tin and silver mixtures became common for dental procedures.

Over 49,000 poems written by over 2,000 authors remain intact to present day. Skills in poetry became required study for the Imperial Exam.

Short story fiction and tales were incredibly popular. Tang love stories became the basis of plays for the Chinese Opera. Most love stories followed a type of equation: In the beginning there is quick passion, there's the inescapable societal pressure leading to the abandonment of the romance, followed ultimately by a period of melancholy.

There were encyclopedias published during the Tang Dynasty. Many histories of previous dynasties were written during the Tang period. While very awesome to have this information written down, it puts a specific perspective on a history that happened, for example, seven hundred years ago.

Chinese geographers wrote accurate descriptions of places abroad, such as India, Persia, and the Middle East.

Other literary contributions during this time included pieces about natural phenomena, mythical tales, foreign legends, and notes on various subjects.

In regard to religion...

Since ancient China, some Chinese believed in folk religion and Taoism.

Buddhism flourished during the Northern and Southern Dynasties and was the prominent ideology during the Tang Dynasty. However, in 845, Emperor Wuzong of Tang shut down 4600 Buddhist monasteries, including 40,000 temples and shrines, forcing monks and nuns into secluded lives. This was later known as one of the Four Buddhist Persecutions in China. Although the ban was lifted a few years later, Buddhism never quite found its footing after. This did cause a revival in native Chinese ideologies, such as Confucianism and Taoism.

They did officially recognize foreign religions, such as Christianity. Christianity mostly died out after the Tang Dynasty, but saw a revival following the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.

There was the spread of Zoroastrianism - an Iranian-based organized religion. This community is responsible for spreading Manicheism, a once prominent religion of the medieval world. However, in 843, Tang government ordered the confiscation of Manichean property due to the outbreak in war. In 845, there was a ban on foreign religions where Manicheism was buried and never flourished again.

There are oral traditions that Judaism existed in China during the Tang Dynasty, and I don't steer away from oral histories. But for those of you more interested in records, there is evidence of the Jewish community in China during the Song Dynasty, which is only a few decades after the end of the Tang Dynasty.

Due to religious bans towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, it wouldn't be surprising if the Jewish community were small in numbers and kept it under wraps. There are still practicing Jews in China to this day, but face ongoing suppression by authorities since 2015.

The Tang Dynasty was known for their investment in leisure and time off, especially aristocrats. They observed holidays such as the Chinese New Year, Lantern Festival and Cold Food Festival, but in addition to that, depending on your social status, you were given plenty of time off to visit family, enjoy hobbies and just enjoy not doing anything if you wanted.

The sports of the day were tug-of-war, polo, soccer, archery, and hunting.

In regard to clothes, they were made of silk or wool, depending on what you could afford. However, it was also government mandated to wear particular clothes based on rank and social status.

Tea was an up and coming beverage in the Tang Dynasty and was affiliated with everything sophisticated. Not only did they wrap and fold their paper to house their tea, but it inspired paper as the use of toilet paper.

Tang encouraged people not to eat beef, as the bull and cow were seen as good working animals. From 831 - 833, Emperor Wezong of Tang banned the slaughter of cattle due to his Buddhist beliefs.

From trade, China acquired peaches, date palms, pistachios, figs, pine nuts, ginseng root, and mangoes. There was also a great need for sugar, and Indian envoys taught the Chinese how to cultivate sugarcane.

Food preservation was huge and the Emperor and aristocrats had ice pits to keep their food chilled, especially for treats during the summer.

Women led some amazing lives during the Tang Dynasty. They disobeyed any laws that prevented them from performing in burlesque, they wore men's clothes, played sports, and were involved in politics and improved upon their education. They were allowed to remarry and lead sexually healthy lifestyles. The women of Tang were incredibly active and took on their new roles of almost equals seriously. We'll discuss more about this later in the episode, but Empress Wu also inspired women of the court to become more involved politically.

Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, there was the Huang Chao Rebellion, that killed an estimated 8 million people and took a decade to quiet. But the damage had been done. There was a collapse in central government, a rise in military rivals, occupied capital cities, and a unified China falling apart at the seams. By 907-ish, China was once again multiple kingdoms and didn't see unification again until 960 with the Song Dynasty.

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The year is 618 CE, and there is a lot going on. The Tang Dynasty has just established themselves, China is unified, Gaozu of Tang is Emperor, and there are a lot of fresh faces in government with the new reign. Now, Gaozu doesn't hold power for long, because in 626 his one son, who is considered the Co-Founder of the Tang Dynasty for the role he played and the contributions he made to help overthrow the Sui Dynasty, deposed his father. And also killed his brothers. In comes Emperor Taizong.

Wu Zetian was born in 624 CE. Her family had a booming timber business and is incredibly comfortable and fortunate. They also have ties to Emperor Taizong because he often stays at their house while holding meetings and appointments in their province. So he's basically a family friend. He gives them money all the time, clothes, supplies, and so it's not surprising that in 638, when Wu Zetian was 14, she became a concubine to the Emperor.

Before she leaves her life at home to join the Imperial Palace and court, Wu was well educated, and encouraged by her father to be educated, which is incredibly rare for the time. So she's super skilled in music, government affairs, politics, writing, and is overall rather intelligent for her age and being a woman.

So when she joins the court at the Imperial Palace, she ends up becoming a secretary for the Emperor. So because of her usefulness, and her family's friendship and rank within social constructs, she is ranked fifth out of nine for consorts to the Emperor.

There is record of Wu and the Emperor having sexual relations, but he didn't favor her particularly. Although he often admired her audacity.

When the Emperor died in 649, potentially from the medicines the Buddhists and alchemists were giving him, Wu was taken to a temple to live the rest of her life in a monastery. And this is the way for consorts who were childless after the Emperor died.

My assumption is this is to make room for other women who could potentially bear children, and also alliances and friendships and social status and younger women, etc. etc.

Now, Emperor Taizong names his youngest son his heir because his older sons had disgraced him. This wasn't necessarily a popular decision because he was 21, inexperienced, and was often sick with dizzy spells.

And rumor has it, he had an affair with Wu before his father passed away.

In 650, when Wu was 26, she's at the Temple minding her own business when in walked the Emperor to light some incense. They saw each other, they wept, according to Empress Wang, and Emperor Gaozong is so enamored with her beauty and intelligence, he brings her back to the palace as his concubine.

It's not too long until Wu is second rank in the nine rank system because the Emperor really favors her, and she starts popping out kids. But this whole thing isn't without its own drama.

In 652, Wu gave birth to her first son, and in 653 to her second son. In 654, she had a daughter who unfortunately died shortly after birth.

There was allegedly evidence, claims by Wu, and allegedly eyewitnesses that saw Empress Wang near the daughter's room right before she was found strangled to death. Empress Wang had no children to speak of, had no alibi for the incident, and managed to anger the Emperor over the whole thing. The Emperor brought up her childlessness in multiple meetings with his chancellors. And he wanted to depose Wang and promote Wu.

There are three theories as to what really happened:

1. Wu was power-hungry and wanted to have something serious to blame on Wang, so she strangled her own child. However, this “information” didn’t emerge until 400 years later.
2. Empress Wang really did strangle the child out of jealousy and hatred for Wu.
3. The child died from asphyxiation by the environment. There was poor ventilation in the palace at the time, and they used coal to heat the rooms, and she potentially died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Regardless of what really happened, Empress Wang was blamed.

Now, the thing about a lot of courts, there are alliances and people related to each other and continuous self-interest and inbreeding and whatever else. So it was proving rather difficult to depose Empress Wang, even though the Emperor had the right to depose her because of her childlessness.

In the summer of 655, Wu accused Empress Wang and her mother of using witchcraft. Later that year, the Emperor summoned his chancellors to the palace to discuss deposing Wang again. One guy didn’t show up, one guy said ‘nope.’ and the rest were silent with disapproval.

The guy who didn’t show up did send a message that said “This is your family matter, your Imperial Majesty. Why ask anyone else?” So the Emperor was like ‘you’re right. I’m Emperor.’

So he demoted the guy that spoke out against him in the meeting, and had Empress Wang and another concubine she allied with arrested, and promoted Wu to Empress.

Shortly after the women were arrested, Emperor Gaozong did say something about having them released. Empress Wu wasn’t having any of their shit, so she ordered for them to be put to death.

Here we are in 655, Wu is 31 and Empress Consort. Empress Wu was quite the political force to behold with heavy influence over the Emperor. And it makes sense, at 31 she already has 17 years experience in the court of the Imperial Palace. She’s well educated. Her husband is a few years younger, gets sick often, and probably wasn’t exposed to as much to have backbone and callousness when it comes to court because he was the youngest son.

In 656, the Emperor made Wu’s son the heir apparent/crown prince, and merrily we roll along. She replaced chancellors who opposed her ascension with ones that adored her.

By 657, plots of treason were allegedly uncovered. A handful of ex-chancellors were exiled, stripped of titles, and executed. At this point, no one is ballsy enough to criticize the Emperor and Empress. The Empress had a nose for corruption in her court and wasn't having it.

In 659, Empress Wu made the Imperial Exam available to talented people from lower classes, to give them an opportunity to become government officials. This was a hit to the power of aristocracy. She's already pissing people off about replacements throughout the court and Imperial ranks, and now she gives common people the opportunity to rise up - what gives with this lady?!

In 660, Emperor Gaozong started to experience painful headaches and loss of vision. Thought to be hyper-tension related, it's said he also started showcasing symptoms of a stroke.

In 661, Empress Wu changed the title of the consorts to something that lacked femininity and was devoid of their superficial quality. Considering what Wu did throughout her reign for women and the feminism that was awesomely running rampant during the Tang Dynasty, there is a chance this was in effort to make the consorts have more of an equal status to males that held similar ranks in the Imperial court.

Over the next couple of years, Wu chose generals who participated in successful military campaigns, exiled corrupt officials, and continued to exercise her influence and power while her husband's health continued to decline.

By 664, Empress Wu was in control. She would remain on the other side of a pearl screen when the Emperor held meetings with his chancellors. He'd often respond with things like, "Did you speak with the Empress/I need to speak with the Empress" before providing any direction. Often, the Emperor would say he wasn't feeling well and told people to seek out the Empress for her opinion and/or for work.

At one point, a chancellor drafted an edict to remove Empress Wu, who was shortly thereafter accused of treason and executed with several others.

Empress Wu was said to wear yellow robes, which was a color reserved for the Emperor only.

Wu's mother and sister were richer than all noble families. Her sister died, thought to have been poisoned by Wu, for an unconfirmed affair with the Emperor.

Wu allegedly targeted children the Emperor had with his concubines and did her best to prevent them from seeing him.



In 683, Emperor Gaozong passed away. He suffered from severe dizziness throughout his life and had several strokes in his final years before succumbing to one of them.

Empress Wu forbade anyone from seeing him, which of course started rumors that she killed him.

One of Wu's younger sons became Emperor, but was a figurehead, really. Empress Wu, now Empress Dowager and regent held the influence and power.

Emperor Zhongzong started appointing his in-laws to some of the highest positions in court, allegedly he appointed the son of his wet nurse to a high office. Empress Wu had them removed, deposed her son, and appointed her youngest son as Emperor.

Throughout 684 - 690, Tang loyalists and Tang princes attempted to depose Wu, but she was able to thwart their efforts. In 690, she named herself 'Holy and Divine Emperor', founded her own dynasty, Zhou Dynasty, named Luoyang the capital, and ruled for the next fifteen years.

As Empress Wu grew older, she relied heavily on two officials, the Zhang brothers. In 704 when she became incredibly ill, she saw only them and they carried out her business for her. By early 705, she was quite ill again. A bunch of Tang loyalists killed the Zhang brothers and surrounded her palace demanding she forgo her power and influence, and give all the power to her son. She abdicated her position, and by March of 705, Tang dynasty was once again reformed. And in December of 705, Empress Wu passed away at age 81.

Let's review some of her major achievements.

Her knack for recruiting officials. In the beginning, she did exile a bunch of officials for opposing her or who were accused of treason, but her main focus was on educated and intellectual capabilities. She broadened the eligibility for bureaucracy than keeping it to just certain aristocratic clans. She even wrote a two volume series called 'Rules of Officials'. Her Imperial exam reforms served as foundations for later dynasties, which developed stronger examination systems.

She expanded the Tang territories and had cultural influence over Japan and Korea. She managed threats to China well.

Her economic development focused on agriculture. Wu ordered the creation of farming texts, constructed irrigation systems, and reduced taxes. In 695, Wu offered the entire empire a

tax-free year. Her office still benefited from trade opportunities. Wu was a favorite among the people. She's still honored today during an annual agriculture festival.

Wu was a patron of Buddhism, she did serve as a Buddhist nun after all. She erected Buddhist temples so priests could explain texts. Her patronage paved the way for future Buddhists when Buddhist texts were translated, edited, and published.

There was a massive promotion of literature and art. She formed a group called 'Scholars of the Northern Gate' for the promotion of literary pursuits. Gaozong and Wu were fond of literature and poems. And as mentioned before, Gaozong ordered for the creation of encyclopedias and poetry skills were a requirement for the Imperial exam.

And one of the biggest achievements from Empress Wu was women's rights and feminism. She led a series of campaigns to uplift the position of women. She advised scholars to write and edit biographies of exemplary women. Wu extended the mourning periods for a deceased mother to equal that of a deceased father. She raised the position of her mother's clan by offering her relatives high official posts. Her daughter and daughter-in-law became involved in Imperial politics, as well. Although her daughter-in-law took it too far, poisoned her husband the Emperor, and hoped to stage a coup to become Empress, in the same capacity as Empress Wu. She did not weather fair in this situation and was executed.

She also influenced the attitude around women's sexuality. She had a promiscuous reputation, even installing mirrors in her bedroom to watch herself with her lovers. This provided leniency towards women remarrying and their sexual lifestyles.

In concluding our exploration of Empress Wu's indomitable presence in the tapestry of medieval China, we find ourselves standing at the crossroads of history and legacy. The echoes of her reign reverberate through the corridors of time, leaving an enduring imprint on the narrative of the Tang Dynasty and the intricate roles played by women within its confines.

Empress Wu, a woman of unparalleled vision and resilience, navigated the treacherous waters of the imperial court, ultimately ascending to the throne, a feat previously deemed unthinkable for a woman. Her reign, marked by political astuteness and cultural refinement, defied the constraints of gender norms, challenging the very foundations of a patriarchal society.

As we reflect upon the accomplishments and controversies surrounding Empress Wu, it becomes evident that her legacy is not confined to the pages of history but resonates in the

evolving roles of women in Chinese society. She stands as a testament to the potency of ambition, intellect, and determination in transcending societal expectations.

The Tang Dynasty, a chapter of grandeur and cultural efflorescence, bears the marks of Empress Wu's imprint - a sovereign who left an indelible legacy in the spheres of governance and cultural patronage. The dynasty's golden age was shaped not only by the strokes of calligraphy and the melodies of courtly music, but also by the resilience of a woman who dared to seize the reins of power.

Our journey through this epoch unveils the intricate dance of power and influence, where women, despite societal constraints, wielded significant impact. Empress Wu, as a central figure in this narrative, emerges not as an anomaly, but as a harbinger of change, opening pathways for future generations to challenge and redefine their roles.

As we draw the curtain on this episode, let us carry forward the lessons embedded in Empress Wu Zetian's story - a tale of audacity, intellect, and the unwavering pursuit of one's ambitions. Her story is a beacon that continues to illuminate the path for those who seek to transcend the limitations imposed by tradition and societal expectations.

Thank you for listening - I'm Tabitha Bear and this is World Herstory.