WU ZETIAN DOC



- The Early Years of Wu Zetian

From an early age, Wu Zetian received a thorough education. Her mother, Madame Yang, a noblewoman known for her piety and literacy, personally taught her daughter Confucian philosophy, classical poetry, history, and Buddhism. Wu Zetian also gained early insights into governance. Her father, Wu Shiyue, had been appointed by the emperor to restore order in unstable regions such as Yuzhou and later Lizhou. Instead of ruling with severity, he chose a tolerant and diplomatic approach that won the people's support and earned him imperial recognition. This balanced, people-centered style of leadership left a lasting impression on young Wu Zetian, shaping the way she would later govern as empress.

After Li Shimin, widely known by his posthumous title Taizong, seized power from his father Gaozu in 626, Wu Shiyue was recalled briefly to Chang'an, then appointed Commander-in-chief of Yuzhou. The Wu family remained there, roughly 100 miles south of Luoyang, for about a year. Then, after two successive commanders-in-chief in Lizhou, a crucial region in mountainous Sichuan to the southwest, proved disloyal, Taizong sent faithful Wu Shiyue to administer this lawless region. Rather than trying to bring this borderland to heel through harsh measures, Wu Shiyue followed a policy of broad-minded tolerance that won over the local populace. He was so successful that Taizong issued an edict praising his exemplary work.

While Wu Shiyue was busy with his official duties, Madame Yang, with no son to dote upon, educated Wu Zhao and her other daughters in poetry, history, and Confucian etiquette. The devout Madame Yang also frequently visited Buddhist temples with her daughters. Carved inscriptions testify that both of Wu Zhao's parents consecrated Buddhist images in the area. Even

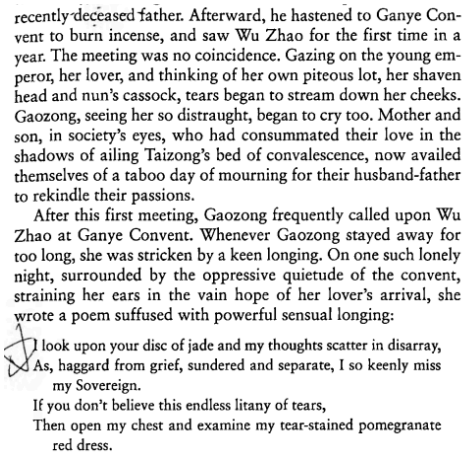
(Crystalized Intelligence)

She endured a life marked by hardship, frequent travel, harsh and perilous landscapes, and years spent living among commoners and the poor. After the death of her father, she was left alone

with her mother. When she was summoned to serve as a concubine, her mother wept with sorrow, while Wu remained stoic and resolute.

(Adversity Capacity: Stress Tolerance & Mental Fortitude)

As a Concubine she Manages to seduce Li Zhi, the son of Emperor Taizong and future emperor himself. He falls for her so deeply that he continues to love her even after she was forced into a convent after Emperor Taizong died and had her head shaved. His feelings were so strong that he resorted to using religious pretexts just to visit her.



recently deceased father. Afterward, he hastened to Ganye Convent to burn incense, and saw Wu Zhao for the first time in a year. The meeting was no coincidence. Gazing on the young emperor, her lover, and thinking of her own piteous lot, her shaven head and nun's cassock, tears began to stream down her cheeks. Gaozong, seeing her so distraught, began to cry too. Mother and son, in society's eyes, who had consummated their love in the shadows of ailing Taizong's bed of convalescence, now availed themselves of a taboo day of mourning for their husband-father to rekindle their passions.

After this first meeting, Gaozong frequently called upon Wu Zhao at Ganye Convent. Whenever Gaozong stayed away for too long, she was stricken by a keen longing. On one such lonely night, surrounded by the oppressive quietude of the convent, straining her ears in the vain hope of her lover's arrival, she wrote a poem suffused with powerful sensual longing:

I look upon your disc of jade and my thoughts scatter in disarray,
As, haggard from grief, sundered and separate, I so keenly miss my Sovereign.
If you don't believe this endless litany of tears,
Then open my chest and examine my tear-stained pomegranate red dress.

(Charisma)

- The Ascent of Wu Zetian

After spending years in a convent, Wu Zetian still managed to hold Emperor Li Zhi's (now Emperor Gaozong) heart captive. This is crucial because she would soon be brought out of the convent, surprisingly, not by the emperor himself, but by his wife, Empress Wang.

(Charisma)

At first, this might seem confusing, so here's the context: Pure Consort Xiao had given birth to Gaozong's child, and Empress Wang saw her as a growing threat. In a calculated move, Wang decided to redirect the emperor's attention away from Xiao and toward Wu Zetian. Why Wu? Unlike Xiao and Wang, Wu was a former concubine of the late Emperor Taizong and the daughter of a commoner, making her socially inferior and, in theory, politically harmless. Wang's plan was to divide Gaozong's affections to weaken her rival, essentially a strategy of manipulation and control. But this plan would backfire badly.

It’s likely that Wu Zetian was fully aware of the situation, as her actions upon returning to court were vastly different from the seemingly indifferent demeanor she had shown toward Emperor Taizong, now she behaved as someone with a clear goal.

Once back in the palace, she immediately began a campaign to gain influence. Her moves included:

- Gaining Empress Wang’s trust by acting with exaggerated humility and flattery, completely unlike her earlier personality.
- Becoming pregnant with several of Emperor Gaozong’s children—out of his twelve offspring, six were hers.
- Forming strategic alliances by charming lower-ranked concubines and turning them into informants, allowing her to monitor and control the flow of palace information.
- By persuading Emperor Gaozong to posthumously honor those who had contributed to the founding of the Tang dynasty, Wu Zetian submitted a list that, conveniently, included her father, Wu Shiyue. This subtle, strategic, and shrewd decision enhanced her family's standing and helped mitigate the stigma of her lowborn background.

squander her second chance.

Utterly enamored with Wu Zhao, Gaozong ignored his erstwhile favorite, Pure Consort Xiao, and remained oblivious to Empress Wang, who had hoped merely to divert Gaozong's favor for the Pure Consort with a passing fancy. Wu Zhao, however, was no passing fancy: Having gained the Emperor's affection, she had no intention of relinquishing it. Perhaps the greatest indication of her sexual and emotional hold over Gaozong is that of his twelve children, she mothered the final six, four sons and two daughters.

Wu Zhao's designs went beyond the boudoir. She had learned to manipulate others, as she had masterfully shown by humbly currying Empress Wang's favor when she first returned to the Inner Palace. Such humility was a strategy, not a genuine reflection of her heart. A dozen years of quietly observing harem rivalries under Taizong had taught her to be a discerning judge of character.

This last action raises suspicions. Wu Zetian likely understood that, as the daughter of a commoner, her rise would be limited unless she redefined her family's status. Her efforts to elevate her clan suggest she had ambitions for power from the very beginning and was carefully laying the foundation for a much greater role.

By virtue of her intimate contact with Gaozong, she began to make her influence felt beyond the walls of the Inner Palace. She convinced Gaozong to bestow posthumous honors upon the officials who had helped found the Tang dynasty. One of

the foremost on the list, of course, was her father Wu Shiyue. Keenly cognizant that by birth she was vastly inferior to Empress Wang and even Pure Consort Xiao, Wu Zhao took every opportunity to bolster the status of her Wu clan.

(Emotional Perception, Charisma, Acting Skills Info Gathering, Strategy Foresight, Indirect Manipulation, Influence Building)

Wu Zetian had surpassed both Empress Wang and Consort Xiao, winning Emperor Gaozong's unwavering devotion. Seeing Wu as a rising threat, Wang attempted to outmaneuver her through two calculated moves:

- First, she adopted a son, Li Zhong, and with the support of conservative Confucian officials, had him named Crown Prince in 652, securing her political standing.
- Second, she allied with Consort Xiao to slander Wu Zetian, hoping to undermine her growing influence.

But Wu would respond with one of the most ruthless and brilliant countermoves in history, outwitting them both.

Let's first break down Empress Wang's moves. Her first move, adopting Li Zhong and making him crown prince, was meant to secure her position. Wu Zetian needed to find a way to dismantle that protection. The second tactic involved Wang and Consort Xiao spreading rumors to damage Wu's reputation, to weaken her influence.

However, this second tactic posed little threat. Gaozong was deeply in love with Wu, making it unlikely that slander alone would sway him, for the moment, at least.

Wu realized that the only way to truly resolve the situation was to eliminate both of her rivals completely. Though she lacked the power to act directly, she understood that only Emperor Gaozong held the authority to remove them. Her strategy became clear: manipulate him into disposing of both Empress Wang and Consort Xiao.

To achieve this, she devised a cold and calculated plan.

To put her plan in short, Wu Zetian planned to take the life of her own newborn and frame Empress Wang for the crime and ruin her reputation.

The plan unfolded in 4 steps:

1. **The Setup**: Wu waited for Empress Wang to visit and play with her newborn, creating a moment that could later be weaponized.
2. **The Act**: After Wang left, Wu strangled the infant herself.
3. **The Illusion**: She remained composed, staying near Gaozong and allowing him to discover the child's death while she appeared distraught but innocent, ensuring she wouldn't be suspected. (Take this as Coverage of her Plan)
4. **The Final Blow**: Trusted palace servants, loyal to Wu from her earlier influence-building campaign, then told Gaozong that Empress Wang had been the last to hold the baby (Ordered by Wu before the scheme).

A short while later, when the Emperor arrived, Wu Zhao put on a cheerful face and pulled back the covers to show Gaozong their little jewel. She revealed the suffocated child, blue and cold. As Wu Zhao cried out, Gaozong asked the attendants, the selfsame women so often derisively brushed aside by Empress Wang, who had most recently entered the chamber. To a woman they replied, "The Empress."

In a towering rage, Gaozong howled, "The Empress has murdered my child!" Seeing that her plan had worked, Wu Zhao chimed in, tearfully accusing Empress Wang. Dumbstruck by the suddenness and vehemence of the grave charges thrust upon her, Empress Wang stuttered. Tongue-tied, she was unable to muster a defense.

Sickened and appalled, Gaozong began, for the first time, to seriously consider deposing Empress Wang. Indeed, were it not for the presence of court ministers, many of them holdovers

The emotional weight of the scene, combined with the testimony, convinced the emperor that Wang was guilty. In doing this, Wu masterfully framed her.

Just as Wu Zetian had predicted, Emperor Gaozong turned against Empress Wang and wanted her removed. But Wu had miscalculated one thing: even though Wang's reputation was in ruins, the "Old Guard", senior officials loyal to tradition, still protected her from being formally deposed. This was Wang's contingency plan, and Wu needed to act fast.

Wu's Strategic Flexibility

This moment reveals how adaptable Wu's strategy truly was. With Gaozong on her side, she attempted to persuade the Old Guard to depose Empress Wang, but initially failed. So Wu resorted to what had always worked for her: another carefully constructed lie. One more deception, after all she'd done, was just part of the game.

She accused Empress Wang and her mother of practicing witchcraft, one of the "Ten Abominations" under Tang law, a capital offense.

tack. However, others who dared oppose their plan saw a more vengeful, less civil aspect of the duo. Seeking to isolate Empress Wang from her support base outside the palace walls, Wu Zhao accused her of conspiring with her mother to perform black magic within the Inner Palace. According to the Tang Code of laws, sorcery was listed under the category of "depraved crimes," as one of the "ten abominations," the most egregious sort of capital crime. Gaozong issued an edict that forbade the

Because the accusation came directly from both the emperor and Wu, it carried enormous weight, despite being entirely fabricated. The fallout was swift: Wang's influential uncle, who had helped her secure Li Zhong as crown prince, was exiled. Wu herself was briefly barred from entering the inner palace, but the tide had already turned.

Then, as Machiavelli might say, a true rival must be crushed so they can never rise again; Empress Wang and Consort Xiao were accused of conspiring to poison the emperor. Thus they were stripped of all titles and reduced to commoner status, utterly destroyed, both politically and socially.

Late in 655, Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao, accused of conspiring to poison the Emperor, a gratuitous fabricated charge, were demoted to commoner status. The coffin of Empress Wang's deceased father was unearthed and broken to bits. Members of the eminent Wang family were executed or driven into exile.

Shortly thereafter, having weathered the political tempest, with all due pomp and ceremony, Wu Zhao, at thirty-one years of age, became Empress Wu.

Following this, Wu Zetian ascended to the position of empress at the age of 31.

(Strategy Foresight & Flexibility, Planning Coverage, Contingencies, Emotional & Indirect Manipulation, Emotional Understanding, Adaptability, Trap Setting, Fabrication, Sophistry, Acting Skills, Prediction, Tactical Response)

- Empress Wu Zetian

After Empress Wang and Consort Xiao were demoted, they were imprisoned in horrific conditions, locked in a tower and fed through small slits in the door. Powerless and already defeated, they seemed forgotten. But one day, Emperor Gaozong happened to pass by, heard their voices, and was overcome with emotion. He even proposed renaming their prison "Court of the Restored Heart," suggesting he still felt pity for them, something Wu Zetian quickly noticed.

To her, any trace of sympathy from Gaozong toward her former rivals was a threat.

His emotional fragility meant that he could easily undo all her efforts. To eliminate that risk, Wu acted decisively and cruelly: She ordered both women flogged with 100 lashes, then their hands and feet were severed, then their mutilated bodies tossed into a vat of wine.

Lastly, mocking them, she said, "Now you crones can get drunk to the very marrow."

date. In the "Restored Heart" she saw grave danger, the potential for a restoration of Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao. Therefore, she took immediate and drastic measures to crush her rivals. She had each beaten 100 strokes, after which their hands and feet were severed. Both amputees were cast into a vat of fermented wine, prompting Wu Zhao to snort, "Now you crones can get drunk to your very marrow!"

After several days of being steeped in blood and liquor, Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao finally died agonizing deaths. In the midst of this lingering torment, Pure Consort Xiao cursed, "Only because Little Miss Wu is an enchantress of

This wasn't just a punishment,it was psychological warfare. Wu Zhao turned their execution into a brutal warning to the entire court: mercy toward her enemies would not be tolerated.

(Psychological Warfare: Demoralization, Risk Assessments, Emotional Understanding)

Even after ascending to the throne, Wu Zetian actively worked to reshape the narrative of her background through propaganda. An official decree portrayed her as having noble origins,

despite her modest family background. It falsely claimed that she had loyally served Empress Changsun, though Changsun had died before Wu ever entered the court,and asserted that Emperor Taizong had formally “bestowed” her to his successor Gaozong, reframing their controversial relationship as sanctioned by imperial will. To further elevate her status, Wu placed her father’s ancestral tablet in the temple of Emperor Gaozu, symbolically linking her lineage to the founding of the Tang dynasty. She also had her father posthumously honored as the Duke of Zhou, evoking the legacy of ancient sage-ministers. Through these moves, she not only elevated her family’s standing but also cast her reign as Confucian, righteous, and aligned with China’s idealized traditions of wise and moral rule.

It is never easy to escape one's past. From the moment Wu Zhao became Empress, she took great pains to reshape her background. Her ascent from obscurity may have made her a champion to those of humble origins whose advance through the bureaucratic ranks had long been stifled by the "old guard," but while Wu Zhao might have precipitated a social revolution, she was no social revolutionary. She sorely desired an exalted genealogy and was profoundly concerned with status. Just before she was elevated to Empress, an imperial decree was set forth claiming that Wu Zhao had come from an eminent family, that her deportment within the imperial harem had marked her

(Strategy Foresight, Fabrication, Influence Building, Mass Manipulation)

Even as Empress, Wu Zetian faced resistance from the entrenched "Old Guard" who still held major influence at court. Determined to dismantle their power and replace them with loyal supporters, she initiated a calculated and ruthless purge:

The Old Guard Purge:

- **Han Yuan and Lai Ji**, The first to fall were two high-ranking officials loyal to Empress Wang. Wu Zetian kept them close in their positions as chief ministers, using the old strategy of keeping your enemies near, but it was all a calculated bluff. She made them believe they were safe, pretending to treat them as trusted allies. In reality, she was waiting for the perfect moment to strike. That moment came when they requested the return of Chu Suiliang, another of Wu’s known adversaries. Seizing the opportunity, Wu and her allies fabricated charges of treason against them. Both were punished and exiled, sending a warning: support Wu's enemies, and you’ll be wiped out.

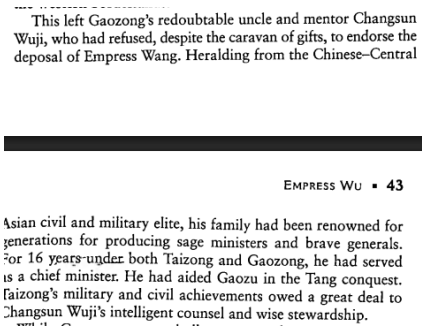
Only two days after Wu Zhao was elevated to Empress, Gaozong conferred robes of honor upon Han Yuan and Lai Qi, two members of the "old guard" who had staunchly supported Empress Wang. Ill at ease, both men tried to decline and begged leave to retire. Following the time-honored strategy of keeping one's friends close and one's enemies closer, initially both were retained as chief ministers in Gaozong's court at Chang'an. During the Tang, there was not a single paramount "Prime

Stubbornly holding fast to their convictions, Han Yuan and Lai Qi petitioned Gaozong to recall their exiled colleague Chu Suiliang. For their efforts, they were accused of conspiring with Chu Suiliang to revolt, and banished to distant provincial posts. Han Yuan died a few years later on the distant shores of Hainan Island, on the extreme southern fringe of the empire. And a few years after that, Lai Qi perished fighting the Turks in the western borderlands.

- **Chu Suiliang**, the very man Han and Lai tried to bring back, was the next to fall. Wu Zetian gradually humiliated and demoted him, sending him to increasingly remote and

dangerous posts, ensuring his influence and legacy would be erased.

- The most dramatic takedown, however, was that of **Chancellor Zhangsun Wuji**, Emperor Gaozong's uncle and one of the last revered figures of the early Tang. He had refused to support Wu Zetian's rise, even rejecting bribes of wealth and honors. In response, Wu deployed her ruthless ally Xu Jingzong, who fabricated evidence that Wuji was plotting a coup and compared him to the infamous usurper Wang Mang. Although Gaozong hesitated, he eventually yielded. Wuji was exiled with his family, his sons were executed, and he was driven to suicide through relentless persecution. With Wuji's death, the traditional Tang elite lost its backbone, and Wu Zetian's dominance over the court became undeniable.



This left Gaozong's redoubtable uncle and mentor Changsun Wuji, who had refused, despite the caravan of gifts, to endorse the deposal of Empress Wang. Heralding from the Chinese–Central

EMPRESS WU ▪ 43

Asian civil and military elite, his family had been renowned for generations for producing sage ministers and brave generals. For 16 years under both Taizong and Gaozong, he had served as a chief minister. He had aided Gaozu in the Tang conquest. Taizong's military and civil achievements owed a great deal to Changsun Wuji's intelligent counsel and wise stewardship.

(Fabrication, Risk Assessments, Bluffing, Tactics, Psychological Warfare: Demoralization)

After the purges, Wu Zetian built a new elite loyal to her. Xu Jingzong and Li Yifu acted as her enforcers, crushing aristocratic clans, reshaping family ranks, and discrediting rivals. She also reformed the civil service exam, breaking the dominance of elite families and allowing talented commoners to rise. This created a new class of officials who owed their power, and loyalty, directly to her.

(Leadership)

As Empress, she went public:

- She performed major state rituals in front of ministers and foreign dignitaries.
- She led women in sacred rites like mulberry-leaf gathering, linking herself to the Silk Goddess (a divine feminine symbol).
- She portrayed herself as the ideal female leader, ceremonial, pious, maternal, even as she pulled the strings of state.

She knew appearances mattered. Through ritual, symbolism, and motherhood, she turned herself into a sacred political figure, the divine woman above all others.

(Influence Building, Fabrication, Mass Manipulation)

By 666 AD, Wu Zetian held substantial power, but her position remained precarious due to internal court tensions, particularly involving romantic competition. Her own niece, the Lady of Wei, young, beautiful, and increasingly favored by Emperor Gaozong, was becoming emotionally influential over him during a delicate time. This posed a serious threat to Wu Zetian, who understood how dangerous romantic influence over the emperor could be, she had once used it herself to rise in power.

Sensing the danger, Wu told **her nephews (not herself)** to organize a celebratory banquet after accompanying the emperor to a grand sacrifice at Mount Tai.

A detail that would later serve a crucial purpose.

At this banquet, Wu allegedly poisoned the dumplings meant for the Lady of Wei, who died suddenly and in agony before witnesses. Wu then turned on **her own nephews**, blaming them for the poisoning. A swift, symbolic trial was held, and they were executed, allowing Wu to eliminate both the threat and the evidence in a single move.

she found the platter earmarked for the Lady of Wei and then, deftly peeling back a loose dumpling wrapper, slipped the poison in unobtrusively. Unlikely, because at a Chinese meal individual dishes are not served. Rather, a variety of platters are placed on the table, and people help themselves. Perhaps they were seated close together and, with affected sweetness, the Empress picked up the fatal dumpling with her own chopsticks and proffered it to the Lady of Wei as a token of her friendship and esteem, a great honor the young woman could hardly decline. This seems implausible as such a scenario would likely implicate Wu Zhao. More probably, one of Wu Zhao's close subordinates, a serving girl or attendant, did her mistress' bidding.

(Risk Assessments, Planning Coverage, Concealment)

There was a critical moment when Wu Zetian nearly lost her position. This crisis arose when it was discovered she had been involved in dark magic rituals with a Daoist named Guo Xingzhen. Emperor Gaozong was enraged and confided in Shangguan Yi, a senior official who was not loyal to Wu. Shangguan advised that Wu should be deposed.

However, Wu's intelligence network quickly alerted her, a clear sign of how effective her surveillance and information-gathering were.

Acting swiftly, she confronted Gaozong directly, catching him with the draft of the deposition edict in hand. Faced with his powerful and imposing wife, Gaozong panicked, shifted the blame entirely onto Shangguan Yi, and tore up the document on the spot.

This highlights that Wu's influence over Gaozong wasn't rooted in official status alone, it was psychological. She held dominance over him through sheer presence and fear.

Soon after, Wu had Shangguan Yi executed for "conspiracy." It's likely she did so not just as punishment, but as a preemptive move, aware that he posed a long-term threat to her hold on power.

> Once again, Wu Zhao was saved by the alacrity of her wide network of eyes and ears. The news reached her swiftly, and she rushed to find her husband sitting with a draft of the edict in hand. Confronted by his wife, in a trice Gaozong's terrible resolve melted, softening into weak indulgence. Holding up the edict with cringing deference, he prevaricated, "This was never my intention. This is all due to Shangguan Yi's instruction." With that, he tore the edict of deposal to pieces.

(Tactical Response, Trap Evasion, Info Gathering, Emotional Understanding)

By the year 676, Li Hsien had been officially named Crown Prince. However, he soon positioned himself as a political adversary to Wu Zetian. Not only did he oppose her influence at court, but he also rallied Confucian scholars to support his stance against her. Wu took careful note of this defiance and began planning his downfall, taking advantage of both his missteps and certain aspects of his background.

One major vulnerability was that Li Hsien wasn't Wu Zetian's biological son, he was born to another consort. This detail gave rise to rumors questioning his legitimacy, which Wu allowed to spread. To top it all off, around the same time, a respected mystic named Ming Chongyan died under suspicious circumstances. Li Hsien became the prime suspect and was eventually confirmed as the killer, further damaging his reputation.

Even though he still held the title of Crown Prince and enjoyed a degree of protection, Wu Zetian turned to Confucian law as a weapon. She cited the classic moral principle: "Heaven and Earth will not tolerate a son who harbors rebellious designs," using it to position herself as upholding righteous order. This appeal to morality forced the court to support severe action.

> [illegible] Li Hsien, badly wanted to pardon him. However, Wu Zhao, confident that she had the backing of the court, now took the moral high ground afforded by wielding hardline Confucian principle, saying, "Heaven and Earth will not tolerate a son who harbors rebellious designs, so how can the intent of the Crown Prince to eradicate his own flesh and blood be forgiven so lightly?" To display evidence of Li Hsien's treachery to the common people, the armor was burned publicly south of Heaven's Ford Bridge, in the heart of Luoyang. The Crown Prince was demoted to commoner status and taken to Chang'an, where, along with his three sons, he was secreted in an out-of-the-way palace. Those considered his accomplices and associates were rounded up and summarily killed.

As a result, Li Hsien was stripped of his status, demoted to the level of a commoner, and sent into exile. His sons suffered even worse fates: they were imprisoned and subjected to years of torture. Most died in silence, their names forgotten.

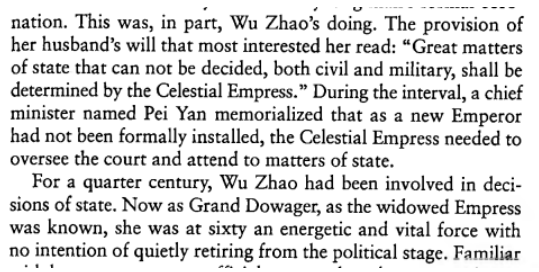
(Logical Manipulation, Associative Thinking)

- Wu Zetian's rise to the Throne

After Emperor Gaozong's death, his designated successor, Li Xian, was expected to take the throne. At first glance, it seemed Wu Zetian's political career might be over. But in truth, it was only just beginning. So how did she manage to seize control?

Before his death, Gaozong's will granted Wu Zetian residual authority, stating vaguely:

"Great matters of state that cannot be decided… shall be determined by the Celestial Empress."

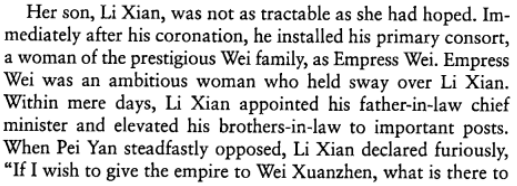


nation. This was, in part, Wu Zhao's doing. The provision of her husband's will that most interested her read: "Great matters of state that can not be decided, both civil and military, shall be determined by the Celestial Empress." During the interval, a chief minister named Pei Yan memorialized that as a new Emperor had not been formally installed, the Celestial Empress needed to oversee the court and attend to matters of state.

For a quarter century, Wu Zhao had been involved in decisions of state. Now as Grand Dowager, as the widowed Empress was known, she was at sixty an energetic and vital force with no intention of quietly retiring from the political stage. Familiar

Though ambiguous, Wu saw this clause as her opening, and she would use it strategically. Right before Li Xian's formal coronation, Wu deliberately delayed the ceremony for five days. During that critical window, she maneuvered herself into power, justifying her actions by claiming the court needed oversight. And in those 5 days, she managed to become *Grand Dowager*, a title that maintained imperial decorum while granting her real authority.

Now that her position was secure and there was no risk of being deposed or exiled, Wu Zetian could move forward with removing Li Xian. And truthfully, it wasn't going to be difficult, she had confidence in his inability to govern. She was certain he would slip up eventually; all she needed to do was wait.



Her son, Li Xian, was not as tractable as she had hoped. Immediately after his coronation, he installed his primary consort, a woman of the prestigious Wei family, as Empress Wei. Empress Wei was an ambitious woman who held sway over Li Xian. Within mere days, Li Xian appointed his father-in-law chief minister and elevated his brothers-in-law to important posts. When Pei Yan steadfastly opposed, Li Xian declared furiously, "If I wish to give the empire to Wei Xuanzhen, what is there to

Li Xian didn't take long to err. One of his first acts was to elevate his wife, making her Empress Wei. He then quickly promoted her family: her father was made chief minister, and her brothers were handed influential positions. He even said:

"If I wish to give the empire to Wei Xuanzhen, who can stop me?"

That was a fatal error. Speaking so absolutely, as if he had the unchecked right to hand over the empire to his father-in-law, sounded like he was surrendering the throne to a rival clan. Pei Yan, acting as Wu's informant, relayed the statement to her. Wu recognized this as the perfect pretext she had been waiting for. She still held enough influence to act decisively. She gathered the ministers, most of whom were already under her sway. They unanimously agreed: Li Xian's statement was unacceptable and dangerous.

With their backing, Wu launched a swift response.

Troops loyal to Wu Zetian, led by generals and palace guards aligned with her and Pei Yan — entered the palace. Li Xian was deposed just two months after taking the throne. He was demoted to the title of *Prince of Luling*, stripped of all imperial authority, and confined within a secluded area of the palace. When he dared to ask what crime he had committed, Wu replied sharply:

"You wished to hand the empire to Wei Xuanzhen. How is that not a crime?"

Wu Zhao gathered the court officials, who on this occasion were in unanimous accord with her, to help force her wayward son off the throne. Pei Yan and several generals led a group of imperial bodyguards, and Li Xian, after a brief and ignominious two-month stint as Emperor, was promptly deposed and demoted to Prince of Luling. As he was led off, Li Xian petulantly asked his mother what his crime was. She responded, "You wished to hand the empire to Wei Xuanzhen. How is that not a crime?" He was dragged off and secreted in another part of the palace. After three decades as Empress, seeing her weak-willed son treating the imperial office in such a cavalier fashion, she did not hesitate to use her influence to rally the court and remove her own child from the throne.

With that, she had removed him, legally, symbolically, and forcefully, cementing her grip on power.

(Prediction, Emotional Understanding, Persuasion, Strategy Logistics, Logical Manipulation)

With Li Xian removed, Wu Zetian began a sweeping purge to eliminate any remaining threats as she prepared for her next move. She exiled senior princes, including other sons of Emperor Gaozong and various imperial consorts, anyone who could pose a challenge to her authority.

Even Prince Li Hsien, though already exiled, was considered a potential danger. To ensure he could never return, she secretly sent a general to intimidate and pressure him until he took his own life. Afterward, she staged outrage and punished the general, only to quietly reinstate him later. It was a cold, calculated act of manipulation, masked by a false display of virtue.

Once the court was fully cleared of rivals, Wu Zetian named her youngest son, Li Dan, as the official emperor, but this was purely symbolic.

She assumed full control herself:

- She moved into the central palace, the seat of true power.
- She began issuing imperial edicts under her own name.
- Li Dan, lacking both experience and resolve, served merely as a puppet.

This marked the end of any pretense of shared governance. Wu Zetian now ruled directly and openly, no longer from behind the scenes, as she had during Gaozong's reign, but as the true sovereign in all but name.

(Psychological Warfare: Abusing Insecurities, Strategy, Coverage, Logical Manipulation)

After Emperor Gaozong's death, Wu wrote a public **eulogy** praising him. In it, she said:

> "I must overcome this deep distress and brace myself... be resolute."

This sounds like a grieving widow, but strategically, she casts herself as a model Confucian wife; dutiful, restrained, mourning but responsible. In Confucian tradition, a widow must protect the family estate after the husband's death. By invoking this principle, Wu reframes her continuing political control not as ambition, but as her sacred obligation

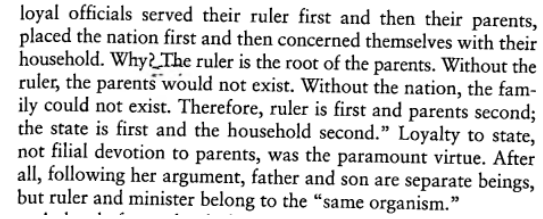
(Communication)

With the deaths of key ministers like Pei Yan and Liu Rengui, those few remaining in court were weakened and scared. Wu Zhao had a long-term goal: remove aristocratic, charismatic, independent-minded ministers who could challenge her. Instead, she surrounded herself with docile, dependent officials who owed their careers solely to her.

(Psychological Warfare: Demoralization & Reinforcements)

One of the most radical ideas in Wu Zhao's *Regulations for Ministers* is the assertion that loyalty to the state must outweigh loyalty to one's family, directly challenging centuries of Confucian tradition. In classical teachings such as the *Analects* and the Tang Code, filial piety, absolute

devotion to one's parents, was upheld as the highest moral obligation, even to the point of shielding a father who had committed a crime, unless it involved grave offenses like treason. Wu Zhao, however, declared that "the ruler is the root of the parents," arguing that without the ruler, even one's family could not exist. This redefines the very foundation of social order, suggesting that the state is the necessary condition for familial life, and thus loyalty to the sovereign must take precedence over blood ties. By inverting the Confucian hierarchy, placing state above family, ruler above parents, and public duty above private obligation, Wu Zhao reshaped political ethics. She reinforced this argument with her "same organism" metaphor: while fathers and sons are merely separate individuals, the ruler and the minister are like organs within a single body, whose health depends on total unity and mutual function.

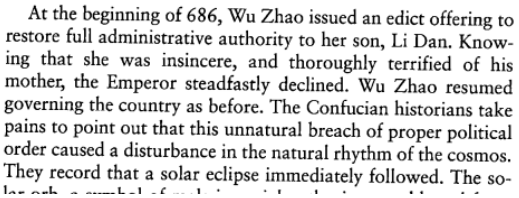


loyal officials served their ruler first and then their parents, placed the nation first and then concerned themselves with their household. Why? The ruler is the root of the parents. Without the ruler, the parents would not exist. Without the nation, the family could not exist. Therefore, ruler is first and parents second; the state is first and the household second." Loyalty to state, not filial devotion to parents, was the paramount virtue. After all, following her argument, father and son are separate beings, but ruler and minister belong to the "same organism."

Wu is using abductive reasoning here because she proposes a new explanatory framework that reinterprets the foundation of moral duty. Instead of relying on traditional Confucian logic, she reframes the relationship between ruler and subject by claiming that the ruler is the "root" of the parents, suggesting that the state makes family life possible.

(Logical Manipulation, Abductive Reasoning)

In 686, aiming to appear humble and align herself with Confucian ideals, Wu Zhao made a public show of offering to hand power back to her son, Emperor Li Dan. However, this was merely a calculated performance; she knew he would be too afraid to accept. As expected, he declined, and she effortlessly reclaimed control, treating the whole display as if it had been sincere.



At the beginning of 686, Wu Zhao issued an edict offering to restore full administrative authority to her son, Li Dan. Knowing that she was insincere, and thoroughly terrified of his mother, the Emperor steadfastly declined. Wu Zhao resumed governing the country as before. The Confucian historians take pains to point out that this unnatural breach of proper political order caused a disturbance in the natural rhythm of the cosmos. They record that a solar eclipse immediately followed. The so-

(Emotional Understanding, Bluffing, Acting Skills)

Wu Zetian's relationship with the supernatural offers us a glimpse into her abstract reasoning.

To put in Context:

In the year 690, when she officially declared herself emperor and established the Zhou Dynasty, someone presented her with a mythical creature: a sunbird, a three-legged crow from Chinese mythology said to inhabit the sun and symbolize Heaven's favor. When one of her ministers pointed out that one of its legs appeared fake, Wu simply smiled and responded,

"Let the Court Historian record it. What does it matter if it's real or fake?"

This seemingly offhand comment reflects more than just cynicism, it suggests that Wu Zetian did not genuinely believe in the supernatural, or at least not consistently. While she did sometimes respond to curses or mystical threats, her actions were driven by caution or concern over public perception, such as in the case of Li Xiaoyi, where she felt compelled to act because the omen surrounding him could sway others. It's quite plausible she was agnostic (though the idea that she outright rejected the supernatural altogether is not far-fetched either).

Wu understood the political utility of omens. In the 680s, as a woman pushing against entrenched patriarchal norms, she needed symbols of Heaven's approval to legitimize her claim to the throne. She embraced auspicious signs, such as the so-called rising of Mount Felicity, not out of faith, but to shape public perception. And even after she had consolidated power, Wu continued to endorse trivial and absurd "omens," like a giant radish or a flower blooming out of season, which her court dutifully praised. These instances reveal that she regarded omens as instruments of propaganda. Her cynicism reflects an intellectual distance from the literal content of belief. She understood the cultural structure, the people's faith in Heaven's will, and used it to her advantage, rather than being shaped by it. This capacity to step outside the system of belief, assess its symbolic power, and employ it strategically demonstrates a high level of abstract reasoning, superior, arguably, to many of her contemporaries.

(Abstract Reasoning)