

# Empress Wu Zetian and the Development of Buddhism: Historical Significance and Contemporary Implications

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The paper focuses on Wu Zetian, the only empress in China's history, and her relationship with Buddhism. This study focuses on the book *Zizhi Tongjian* and compares the differences in the portrayal of Wu Zetian's connection with Buddhism with the ancient texts of the *Old Tang Book* and the *New Tang Book*. It uses historical contextualism to analyze the epochal implications of these differences in the Northern Song Dynasty. Additionally, the paper discusses how historians downplayed or marginalized Wu Zetian's achievements while emphasizing the negative aspects of her reign. Notably, historian Sima Guang, who was influenced by Confucianism and his own political situation, produced a biased description of Wu Zetian and the Buddhism which she promoted during her reign.

*Keywords:* Wu Zetian, *Zizhi Tongjian*, Buddhism, character image, implication of time

## The Basis and Significance of This Topic

As the only formally recognized empress in Chinese history, Wu Zetian has been a very controversial historical figure in different dynasties and even in modern history. Different historians use different standards, such as Confucian orthodoxy, the Three Guiding Principles, and Five Constant Regulations, etc., to evaluate Wu Zetian, and get diversified conclusions. At the same time, the original historical materials about Wu Zetian are relatively scarce, and often contradict each other, so that future generations may have differences in the shaping of Wu Zetian's image in historical narratives according to personal preferences. Therefore, by analyzing the differences in the image of Wu Zetian in historical narratives by different historians in different dynasties, this paper will focus on explaining the epochal meaning of the Northern Song Dynasty by comparing differences in *Zizhi Tongjian* (资治通鉴), *Jiu Tangshu* (旧唐书), and *Xin Tangshu* (新唐书). *Jiu Tangshu* was written in the Late Jin Dynasty, which is near to the Tang Dynasty so the source of historical materials is relatively accurate; *Xin Tangshu* was an influential, official history book written in the early North Song Dynasty; *Zizhi Tongjian* was written in the middle of the North Song Dynasty, when the country was prosperous and safe which made historical materials relatively rich. It is a famous, long-respectable chronicle-style general history of China. These three history books have misled readers to defame Wu Zetian's image, which not only caters to the trend of the times in which historians live, but also reflects historians' spirit of objectively recording history. In other words, historians respect Wu Zetian's political status in the history of Tang, but they also reflect historians' values and their personal intentions in different periods of times.

The Tang Dynasty was a golden age for ancient Chinese religions, namely Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The imperial family of Li vigorously developed Daoism to ensure its own authority because the

founder of Daoism, Li Er, had the same surname as the emperors of Tang; during the reign of Wu Zetian, she implemented policies beneficial to Buddhism, which had already spread among civilians in previous dynasties. It became the starting point for the prevalence of Buddhism in ancient China; scholars and government officials always respected Confucianism, which was also developing in the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, this paper will take Buddhism as the starting point to study ideology and culture during the reign of Wu Zetian, which received little attention from academia.

### Literature Review

As the only admitted empress in Chinese history, Wu Zetian's reign had a profound impact on the Tang Dynasty. During her reign of Wu Zetian, she suppressed political opponents, developed the imperial examination system, and employed cruel officials; economically, she focused on agriculture; and militarily, the territory of the Tang Dynasty was basically maintained. From the time of Wu Zetian's death to the Kaiyuan period, people in the Tang Dynasty had a more positive evaluation of Wu Zetian, and after Kaiyuan, the evaluation tended to be negative. Taking the *Jiu Tangshu* as an example, *Old Tang Book: The Chronicles of Empress Zetian*, which gave some positive comments and criticisms, recorded:

Empress Wu planned to capture the heir by shaking his throat and smearing his bones with minced peppers. Her action was very immoral, and she was in a constant state of adultery and jealousy. However, there was still a lot of slander when the time was right. At the beginning, although she was a female dominating the political scene, she was able to give power back to her son and understood clearly. She defended imperial ministers against their crimes, comforted the hearts of benevolent heroes with kind words, respected the constitution of times and suppressed useless ministers, and listened to the loyal suggestions and punished the cruel officials. (Liu, 1975, Volume 6)

武後奪嫡之謀也，振喉絕縊襪之兒，菹醢碎椒塗之骨，其不道也甚矣，亦奸人妒婦之恒態也。然猶泛延讜議，時禮正人。初雖牝雞司晨，終能複子明辟，飛語辯元忠之罪，善言慰仁傑之心，尊時憲而抑幸臣，聽忠言而誅酷吏。

*Old Tang Book: Xuanzong Benji* severely criticized Wu Zetian by saying:

Thirty years or more after the imperial family of Li gave its power to Wu Zetian, there were few decent people in the court, and supporting officials were nothing but dangerous people. They went to high rank officers' homes often; they were like eagles and dogs galloping as they slandered loyal officers. As a result, the royal family was cut off. The loyal ministers, who were repeatedly framed, were sent to jail. (Liu, 1975, Volume 9)

李氏自武後移國三十餘年，朝廷罕有正人，附麗無非險輩。持苞苴而請謁，奔走權門；效鷹犬以飛馳，中傷端士。以致斷喪王室，屠害宗枝。骨鯁大臣，屢遭誣陷，舞文酷吏，坐致顯榮。

During the Song Dynasty, *Xin Tangshu* and *Zizhi Tongjian* were completed. Regarding Wu Zetian's image, the description in *Jiu Tangshu* is gentler in terms of the wording of historical materials; *Jiu Tangshu* and *Zizhi Tongjian* describe more accurately in terms of historical facts; *Xin Tangshu* and *Zizhi Tongjian* criticize Wu Zetian more violently in terms of evaluation.

From a macro perspective, there are many studies covering a wide range of Wu Zetian in the academia, but most of them deploy research from the perspective of political history, mainly focusing on her background, the struggle between her and Queen Wang, and the relationship between her and Emperor Gaozong. These studies are all tendentious records by analyzing second-hand historical data. The purpose of this paper is to identify and analyze the different images of Wu Zetian in historical materials so as to restore a more realistic image of Wu Zetian. On the other hand, the existing research on the image of Wu Zetian mostly concentrates on feminism, and there is very little research on the relationship between Wu Zetian and Buddhism or the difference in Wu Zetian's

image in different historical books or its implication of times. This paper will cover these abovementioned aspects. This research will focus on *Zizhi Tongjian*, supplemented by *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*, to thoroughly analyze the historical reasons behind the different descriptions of the relationship between Wu Zetian and Buddhism, and to have a deeper understanding of the feudal dynasties' treatment of empress' evaluation.

## Wu Zetian and Buddhism

### The Relationship Between Wu Zetian and Buddhism in the Three Historical Books

In order to consolidate her dominance, Wu Zetian replaced the previous Daoism with Buddhism, which had been powerful and wide-spread during the Six Dynasties. As a result, Buddhism became the official religion for the first time in the Chinese history. *Zizhi Tongjian*, *Jiu Tangshu*, and *Xin Tangshu* all cover this theme, and there are similarities and differences in their descriptions.

All three books mentioned that Wu Zetian promulgated *Da Yun Sutra* in the early days of her reign. *Jiu Tangshu* believed that ten Buddhist monks forged *Da Yun Sutra* and dedicated it to Wu Zetian; *Xin Tangshu* only briefly stated that Wu Zetian “promulgated *Da Yun Sutra* to the public 頒大雲經於天下” (Ouyang, 1975, the fourth edition), which is the only record of Wu Zetian's attitude towards Buddhism; *Zizhi Tongjian* stated that:

A Buddhism monk of the Eastern Wei Kingdom Temple, along with other wrote four volumes of *Da Yun Sutra*. In the sutra, it is stated that the Wu Zetian was born under Maitreya, and she should replace the Tang Dynasty as the master of Jambudi. Wu Zetian ordered the states of Luoyang and Chang'an to each build a Da Yun Temple to place *Da Yun Sutra*, and invited monk to explained the sutra. (Sima, 1956, Volume 204)

東魏國寺僧法明等撰四卷，表上之，言太后乃彌勒佛下生，當代唐為閻浮提主；制頒於天下……敕兩京諸州各置大雲寺一區，藏大雲經，使僧升高座講解。

All three historical books mentioned Wu Zetian's promulgation of *Da Yun Sutra*, but *Jiu Tangshu* emphasized that it was “written by ten Buddhist monks”, while *Zizhi Tongjian* only said it was “written” (Sima, 1956, Vol. 204). Judging from the how rich historical materials were, the time when the book was written, and the history of forgery of auspicious officials, it can be concluded that *Da Yun Sutra* should be a counterfeit. It is a common tactic of Chinese feudal monarchs to use auspicious auspiciousness to trigger a nationwide fanaticism for a religion. In the Song Dynasty, Emperor Zhenzong directed the appearance of *Heavenly Texts* (大中祥符), which made the whole country fall into obsession with Daoism. *Da Yun Sutra* served for the same purpose. Wu Zetian suppressed the imperial family of Li, who regarded Daoism as the official religion, by advocating Buddhism and suppressing Daoism, thereby consolidating her dominance.

Both *Jiu Tangshu* and *Zizhi Tongjian* clearly recorded that Wu Zetian ordered Buddhism to be superior to Daoism, and there was no negative evaluation on this event. First of all, the move was politically motivated. In order to promote her authority higher than the imperial family of Li, which respected Daoism, Wu Zetian hoped to obtain religious authority through Buddhism. Secondly, the popularization of Taoist alchemy in the Tang Dynasty caused many social problems. For example, since Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty fanatically concocted alchemy and cultivated immortals, which led to the death due to poison and the imitation of princes and nobles, it was criticized by scholars and officials. Therefore, the chroniclers of the Song Dynasty objectively recorded the important historical event of the conversion of Buddhism as the official religion during the reign of Wu Zetian.

*Zizhi Tongjian* used considerable amount of ink to record Xue Huaiyi's actions:

...The imperial horses were used for him to enter and exit, and he had more than ten eunuchs following him. Those who come across would all flee. Those who come close to would have their heads bleeding, and they would be left to die. (Sima, 1956, Volume 204)

……出入乘御馬，宦者十餘人侍從，士民遇之者皆奔避，有近之者，輒搃其首流血，委之而去，任其生死……縱橫犯法，人莫敢言。

With Wu Zetian's reflection:

She appointed monk Xue Huaiyi as the general of the right guard, and bestowing the title of Duke E...He used wealth like nothing, and Wu Zetian didn't ask any questions. (Sima, 1956, Volume 204)

以僧懷義為右衛大將軍，賜爵鄂國公……懷義用財如糞土，太后一聽之，無所問。

*Zizhi Tongjian* pays attention to Xue Huaiyi, a male favorite not mentioned in *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*, and from Sima Guang's comments, such as "violated laws willfully 縱橫犯法", "acted arrogantly 益驕恣" (Sima, 1956, Volume 204), and so on. It can be found that in the Song Dynasty, which advocated the Three Guiding Principles and Five Constant Regulations, Xue Huaiyi was not allowed to exist as an arrogant male favored by the empress, and there were a lot of accusations against Wu Zetian, who was seen as had usurped Li Tang's throne, and more unacceptable because a woman had usurped man's power. However, whether Sima Guang was intentional or not, he inadvertently ignored the historical role of male favorites during the reign of Wu Zetian.

### The Implications of Times

Sima Guang had critical attitude towards Buddhism, Wu Zetian, and Xue Huaiyi mainly because of his own traditional Confucianism thinking. There are many records in *Zizhi Tongjian* of Buddhist monks that confuse the public with demonic words, monks that were arrogant and extravagant, and monks that participated in rebellions and the over-construction of temples. However, there is no mention of eminent Buddhist monks and important events in the development of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty. Scholars of the Song Dynasty believed that Buddhism threatened the monarch's rule and opposed the Confucian values of loyalty and filial piety, and intimidated the relationship between emperors and government officials and the relationship between fathers and sons; scholars also believed that Buddhism preached the separation of form and spirit, because it claims that spirit is immortal even if body is destroyed. People believe in reincarnation and do not pay attention to political affairs, but Confucianists advocate the unity of body and spirit, the unity of human spirit and body, and attach great importance to the world; scholars and officials also believe that Buddhism's so-called karma has no basis, and it is a waste of money to build temples. Confucianism advocates that the ruling class should be people-oriented.

They made a large statue with a small finger that could contain dozens of people. The temple was first constructed, destroyed by the wind, and it was constructed again. Ten thousand people were employed every day, and the woods were harvested. In a few years, the cost was counted in trillions, and the government possessions were exhausted. (Sima, 1956, Volume 204)

作夾紵大像，其小指中猶容數十人，於明堂北構天堂以貯之。堂始構，為風所摧，更構之，日役萬人，采木江嶺，數年之間，所費以萬億計，府藏為之耗竭。

The records were to exhort the monarch and colleagues, and had a warning effect. Sima Guang wrote *Zizhi Tongjian* in order to review the rise and fall of previous dynasties, examine the gains and losses of the present, and help make right decisions. Likewise, Buddhist monks were criticized because they enchanted people from

emperors to common people, and participated in rebellion. In order to maintain the stability of feudal rule and the inheritance of feudal etiquette, Sima Guang deliberately vilified Wu Zetian and Buddhism to a certain extent.

In addition, Sima Guang was frustrated for his demotion to Luoyang when he was writing *Zizhi Tongjian*. The only way to vent his depressed feelings and the only way to prove the meaning of his existence was to write books and convey his thinking. Therefore, his words were especially fierce when he was criticizing people and events he hated, especially the combination of a female, who dominated the political scene by violating the basic principles of Confucianism, and the “pagan religion” introduced from India. As a conservative scholar, Sima Guang held an innate hostility towards the empress and foreign religions.

### Conclusion

By mainly studying *Zizhi Tongjian*, supplemented by *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*, using the method of literature, comparison, and historical contextualism, it is found that historian Sima Guang was influenced by Confucianism and his own political situation. Influenced by historical narratives, the image of Wu Zetian and her admired Buddhism was evaluated unfairly. This can be used as a reference for others to study and restore historical figures.

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