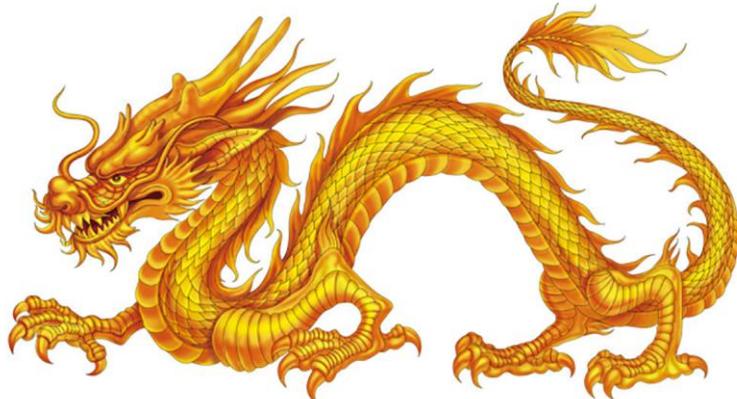


Empress Wu Zetian Activity Book



Solve Puzzles and Learn About Chinese History

Based on “Empress Wu Zetian”

by Laurel A. Rockefeller

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Wu Zhao's Story

Word Bank:

*Note: some words are used more than once.

Mei Niang Li Yuan meditation zhaoyi cai ren father chancellor son
intelligence Analects administration western ChangAn
Tang empress consort water propriety Buddhist tutors
Taizong regency secretary Gaozong dead education
Zhou government deposed civil service huangdi
social mobility writers Mao Zedong Luoyang
agricultural drowned stroke science political irrigation
Wu Zetian

Wu Zhao, the Empress Wu Zetian is the most famous of all women in Chinese history. Born the daughter of _____ Wu Shihuo in 624 of the _____ calendar, Wu was born in the early years of the _____ dynasty. At the age of fourteen, the independently-minded Wu Zhao was sent to _____, to marry the _____ emperor as his _____, or 5th rank concubine. Incredibly bright and educated by _____ hired by her father in order to encourage a rich and powerful husband, Wu Zhao soon found herself at odds with what was expected of her.

According to contemporary interpretations of the _____ of Confucius, women were expected to uphold the Four Virtues of _____, righteousness, integrity, and shame along with the Three Obediences to _____, husband, and, once widowed, to her eldest _____.

But Wu Zhao wanted more for herself. Not content to simply wait for the emperor to sleep with her, she continued her studies on her own. When at last she met the emperor, he found her skills more suited to government _____ than the tradition role she was expected to play in the bedroom. Recognizing her talent, he assigned her duties his personal _____, a job most expected of a man. For the next eleven years, Wu Zhao, whom the emperor nicknamed _____, served at the emperor's side, learning from him everything that she could about politics, government administration, and how to rule a large and diverse country.

Upon Taizong's death in July of 649 CE, Wu Zhao was sent to a _____ nunnery to live out her life in celibacy and _____. This was customary because it was disrespectful for women previously married to an emperor to remarry after his death.

But Wu Zhao was no ordinary woman. While in the imperial city, Taizong's son and successor, the _____ emperor found himself captivated by both

Wu's beauty and _____. He visited "Mei Niang" in her nunnery and fell in love with her. Only two years after his coronation, he ordered Wu recalled from the nunnery and returned to the imperial city. He elevated her to the rank of _____ which is a second-rank concubine. Only Empress Wang and Consort Xiao held more prestige among the emperors many wives.

Understandably, Empress Wang and Consort Xiao did not like Wu Zhao very much. Almost immediately upon coming to court, Wu Zhao gave the emperor first one son, then another in less than two years time. This increased her status with the emperor. Angry and upset at Wu Zhao's rising star, Empress Wang took matters into her own hands. Just weeks after Wu gave birth to her third child, a daughter, Wang _____ the baby – or so it is believed. She was seen fleeing Wu Zhao's cottage just minutes before the baby was found _____ in a basin of _____.

Wu Zhao used the murder of her baby to her own _____ advantage. Under Wu's influence, Empress Wang and Consort Xiao were both put to death. Gaozong made Wu Zhao his _____.

This put Empress Wu in the right place to advance her career further. For in 660 CE, Emperor Gaozong suffered a crippling _____ and could no longer govern. Applying everything she learned from Emperor Taizong, Wu stepped

forward and offered to govern in her husband's name. Gaozong agreed and made Empress Wu the de facto ruler of China for the duration of his illness, a _____ that lasted until the emperor's death in 683 CE.

While ruling on Gaozong's behalf, Wu quietly began reforming China in her own image. Specifically, she patronized women _____, scientists, and scholars. She commissioned a massive book called "Biographies of Famous Women" (列女傳) which took almost ten years to complete.

When Gaozong died, Empress Wu put up her son Lian Xian (李顯) to succeed his father as the Zhongzong emperor. Three months later, Zhongzong was already proving himself to be a bad choice. Empress Wu _____ him and replaced him with his younger brother, eleven-year-old Li Dan to rule as the Ruizong emperor, a move that allowed her to keep the power she wielded under their father.

By 690 CE, Ruizong wanted to rule in his own right. Rather than hand over power to the emperor, Empress Wu simply declared a new dynasty, the _____ dynasty with her as _____, the emperor-sovereign.

Thoughtful, foresighted and now wielding absolute power, Empress Wu rewarded _____ innovations in both technique and technology, including new _____ methods that increased crop production and productivity to all

time highs. She made agriculture a _____ to be studied by scholars, and mandated books on best farming methods to be published broadly.

But her greatest reform was political. In the past, the pathway to a _____ job was through money and social connections. Rich families remained rich and powerful while the poor were forever poor and suffering. Empress Wu believed that talent mattered more than money or who you knew. She therefore created a test that anyone who wanted a government job had to take to prove competency. There was one for those wishing to become military officers that focused on the skills needed to command, but the most famous of her exams were for civilian or _____ jobs.

All of these reforms made Empress Wu very popular with the poor whose opportunities for self-improvement greatly expanded. Anyone could take Wu's exams and earn his way to a better paying job. Families set up scholarships to help the best and brightest among them, and the whole of the country changed to believe in _____ through _____.

The people who did not like Wu's reign were those who lost power to it. Emperor Zhongzong, whom she deposed in 684, staged a rebellion in 705 CE and seized power back from his mother, restoring the _____ dynasty and restoring the capital city from _____ back to ChangAn. In compensation,

Zhongzong ordered his mother formally recognized as an emperor of China and gave her the official reign name _____. A few months later, she died, forever known by the reign name her son gave her.

Wu's exam system lasted until the 20th Century when _____ put an end to it in the 1950s. For over 1300 years, Wu's reforms shaped how Chinese entered government service—from the lowest local job to the highest. Even today, _____ remains key to Chinese culture and is likely to remain as important to generations more of Chinese as it was to Empress Wu herself.

Word Match: Chinese Titles

Draw a line from the Chinese title to its correct version in English

Chinese titles

huangdi	Empress consort
zongli	Chancellor (in government)
shifu	teacher
laoshi	Fifth rank concubine
huanghou	Second rank concubine
cairen	Emperor (gender neutral)
zhaoyi	Master/Mistress

Word Search: Rulers and Public Servants

Rulers and Public servants

T H Z Z A C N I Q T R N S S W O L J T W
R G W Z N P C B W P A N Q Q V A K B R U
E U X Z G A O Z O N G I M Z W C B K H Z
O Z I E G V L H Y C J A Z B G F J D K H
I M Y Z U S S C U M G S Z O D U O U O A
O W O U O H M E V V S M D I N A A R H O
Y K J Q G N L T Y F T K T W T G U M Q F
Q A Q K S H G T T L N R B J O S G L I K
T F K S G A K O J E M P R E S S W A N G
R U V W K B F O C E X L P D Y Z O S I Z
I I T F I E X I M V L P A T D X Q X H H
F O O J W I D G M L E D P D P G H T K O
Q H W M U C H A N C E L L O R W F O N N
T A M A S X Z A Z D U L L D N H C U H G
F C J G H X D R Z O N R I A G A N N S Z
G W G I I C B K J L L O M O Q C M M T O
W O S C H G J E O W C C E U N U C H X N
E Y T M U D E U I M I P C Q N S E Y A G
H F H M O L W S C X V I W G N O O E J H
G O C T C Z D R X L S E C R E T A R Y P

Empress Wang	chancellor	secretary	Wu Shihuo
Zhongzong	Taizong	Gaozong	Rui zong
eunuch	Wu Zhao		

Double Puzzle: Path to the Throne

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GZGONAO

RURDEM

SEMSPRE NAWG

8				10

11			

ROTKES

REGNACY

POUC D'TEAT

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 12

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 15

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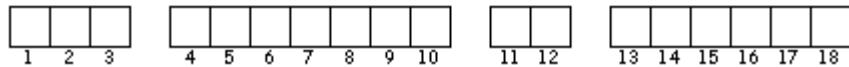
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REENRSURD

TELPEM NMEA



Unscramble each of the clue words.

Copy the letters in the numbered cells to other cells with the same number.

Double Puzzle: Geography

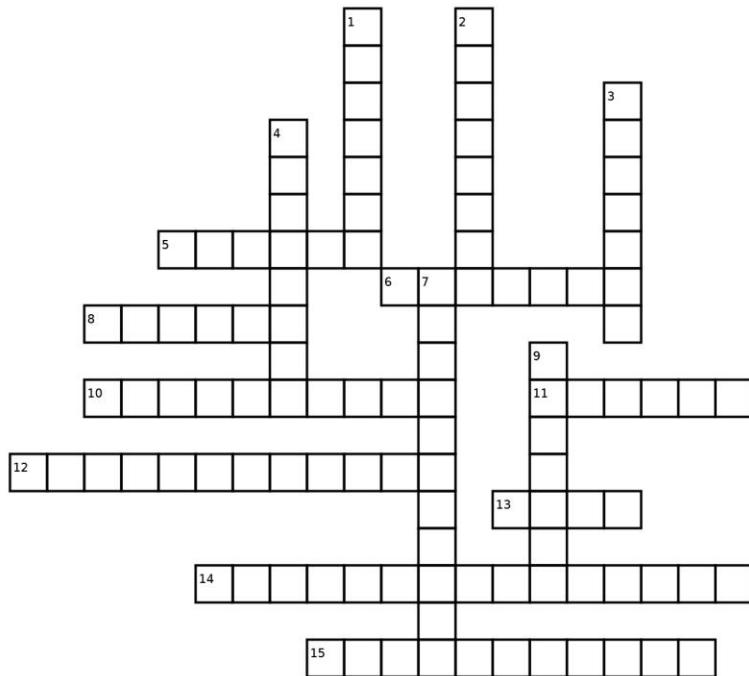
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TBRIHSI OOCESNICNS	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>			<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
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GANHC NA	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>				<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
MENWO'S QUATERRS	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
LOYUNAG	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>			
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Unscramble each of the clue words.

Copy the letters in the numbered cells to other cells with the same number.

Crossword Puzzle: Empress Wu's Life and Times

Empress Wu's Life and Times



Down:

1. the imperial city from the Qin through Tang dynasties.
2. Also known as the Second Opium War (1861).
3. The capital city of China since the Song dynasty.
4. The crippling headaches Empress Wu suffered.
7. Accused of murdering Empress Wu's baby.
9. The county where Empress Wu was born and raised.

Across:

5. Fifth-rank concubine.
6. the Chinese native parakeet once plentifully found in Tang dynasty China.
8. A second-rank concubine just below the empress consort.
10. A high ranking government officer.
11. A castrated servant in the imperial palace.
12. Noisy fireworks lit in long strings to scare evil spirits during Chinese New Year.
13. Empress Wu's dynasty centered in Luoyang.
14. The location of the British Concession in Beijing.
15. China's golden age.

Answer Key:

Wu Zhao's Story

Wu Zhao, the Empress Wu Zetian is the most famous of all women in Chinese history. Born the daughter of **chancellor** Wu Shihuo in 624 of the **western** calendar, Wu was born in the early years of the **Tang** dynasty. At the age of fourteen, the independently-minded Wu Zhao was sent to **ChangAn**, to marry the **Taizong** emperor as his **cairen**, or 5th rank concubine. Incredibly bright and educated by **tutors** hired by her father in order to encourage a rich and powerful husband, Wu Zhao soon found herself at odds with what was expected of her.

According to contemporary interpretations of the **Analects** of Confucius, women were expected to uphold the Four Virtues of **propriety**, righteousness, integrity, and shame along with the Three Obediences to **father**, husband, and, once widowed, to her eldest **son**.

But Wu Zhao wanted more for herself. Not content to simply wait for the emperor to sleep with her, she continued her studies on her own. When at last she met the emperor, he found her skills more suited to government **administration** than the tradition role she was expected to play in the bedroom. Recognizing her talent, he assigned her duties his personal **secretary**, a job most expected of a man. For the next eleven years, Wu Zhao, whom the emperor nicknamed **Mei Niang**, served at the emperor's side, learning from him everything that she could about politics, government administration, and how to rule a large and diverse country.

Upon Taizong's death in July of 649 CE, Wu Zhao was sent to a **Buddhist** nunnery to live out her life in celibacy and **meditation**. This was customary because it was disrespectful for women previously married to an emperor to remarry after his death.

But Wu Zhao was no ordinary woman. While in the imperial city, Taizong's son and successor, the **Gaozong** emperor found himself captivated by both Wu's beauty and **intelligence**. He visited "Mei Niang" in her nunnery and fell in love with her. Only two years after his coronation, he ordered Wu recalled from the nunnery and returned to the imperial city. He elevated her to the rank of **zhaoyi** which is a second-rank concubine. Only Empress Wang and Consort Xiao held more prestige among the emperors many wives.

Understandably, Empress Wang and Consort Xiao did not like Wu Zhao very much. Almost immediately upon coming to court, Wu Zhao gave the emperor first one son, then another in less than two years time. This increased her status with the emperor. Angry and upset at Wu Zhao's rising star, Empress Wang took matters into her own hands. Just weeks after Wu gave birth to her third child, a daughter, Wang **drowned** the baby – or so it is believed. She was seen fleeing Wu Zhao's cottage just minutes before the baby was found **dead** in a basin of water.

Wu Zhao used the murder of her baby to her own **political** advantage. Under Wu's influence, Empress Wang and Consort Xiao were both put to death. Gaozong made Wu Zhao his **empress consort**.

This put Empress Wu in the right place to advance her career further. For in 660 CE, Emperor Gaozong suffered a crippling **stroke** and could no longer govern. Applying everything she learned from Emperor Taizong, Wu stepped forward and offered to govern in her husband's name. Gaozong agreed and made Empress Wu the de facto ruler of China for the duration of his illness, a **regency** that lasted until the emperor's death in 683 CE.

While ruling on Gaozong's behalf, Wu quietly began reforming China in her own image. Specifically, she patronized women **writers**, scientists, and scholars. She commissioned a massive book called "Biographies of Famous Women" (列女傳) which took almost ten years to complete.

When Gaozong died, Empress Wu put up her son Lian Xian (李顯) to succeed his father as the Zhongzong emperor. Three months later, Zhongzong was already proving himself to be a bad choice. Empress Wu **deposed** him and replaced him with his younger brother, eleven-year-old Li Dan to rule as the Ruizong emperor, a move that allowed her to keep the power she wielded under their father.

By 690 CE, Ruizong wanted to rule in his own right. Rather than hand over power to the emperor, Empress Wu simply declared a new dynasty, the **Zhou** dynasty with her as **Huangdi**, the emperor-sovereign.

Thoughtful, foresighted and now wielding absolute power, Empress Wu rewarded **agricultural** innovations in both technique and technology, including new **irrigation** methods that increased crop production and productivity to all time highs. She made agriculture a **science** to be studied by scholars, and mandated books on best farming methods to be published broadly.

But her greatest reform was political. In the past, the pathway to a **government** job was through money and social connections. Rich families remained rich and powerful while the poor were forever poor and suffering. Empress Wu believed that talent mattered more than money or who you knew. She therefore created a test that anyone who wanted a government job had to take to prove competency. There was one for those wishing to become military officers that focused on the skills needed to command, but the most famous of her exams were for civilian or **civil service** jobs.

The people who did not like Wu's reign were those who lost power to it. Emperor Zhongzong, whom she deposed in 684, staged a rebellion in 705 CE and seized power back from his mother, restoring the **Tang** dynasty and restoring the capital city from **Luoyang** back to ChangAn. In compensation, Zhongzong ordered his mother formally recognized as an emperor of China and gave her the official reign name **Wu Zetian**. A few months later, she died, forever known by the reign name her son gave her.

Wu's exam system lasted until the 20th Century when **Mao Zedong** put an end to it in the 1950s. For over 1300 years, Wu's reforms shaped how Chinese entered government service—from the lowest local job to the highest. Even today, **education** remains key to Chinese culture and is likely to remain as important to generations more of Chinese as it was to Empress Wu herself.

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Chinese titles

huangdi		Empress consort
zongli		Chancellor (in government)
shifu		teacher
laoshi		Fifth rank concubine
huanghou		Second rank concubine
cairen		Emperor (gender neutral)
zhaoyi		Master/Mistress

Word Search: Rulers and Public Servants

Rulers and Public servants



Empress Wang

chancellor

secretary

Wu Shihuo

Zhongzong

Taizong

Gaozong

Rui zong

eunuch

Wu Zhao

Double Puzzle: Path to the Throne

Emperor Taizong

cairen

secretary

Gaozong
murder
Empress Wang
stroke
regency
coup d'Etat
Zhou dynasty
surrender
temple name

Secret Message: The Empress Wu Zetian

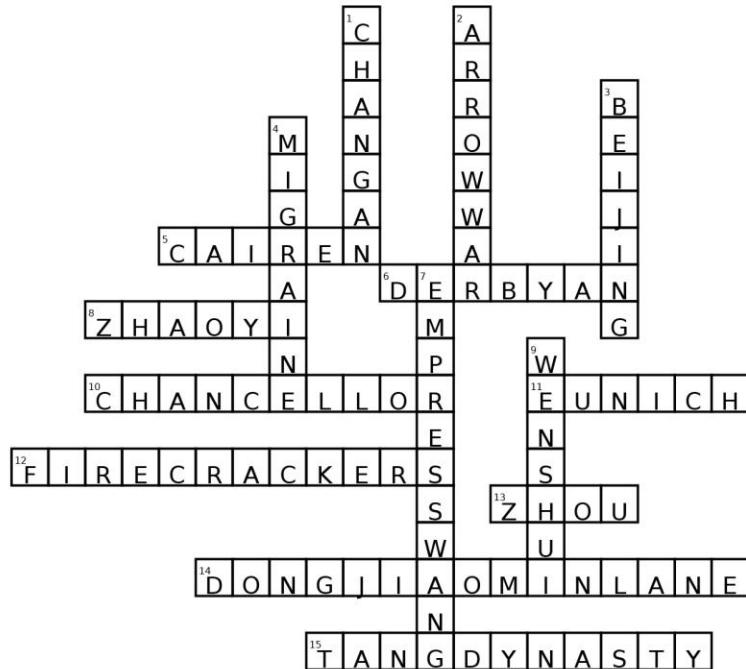
Double Puzzle: Geography

Dong jiao min Lane
British Concession
Beijing
Wenshui county
nunnery
Imperial Palace
Chang An
Women's quarters
Luoyang

Secret message: Long Live Empress Wu

Crossword Puzzle: Empress Wu's Life and Times

Empress Wu's Life and Times



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Excerpt from “Empress Wu Zetian”

Chapter One: Cai Ren

Wu Zhao dipped her brush pen into the murky black inkwell in front of her, an imprint lined practice page in front of her. Rolling the brush against the lip of the inkwell to refine its point, she counted her strokes carefully as she practiced the character “li” 礼 meaning “propriety,” writing the character repeatedly until it filled up the first line. Looking up at her tutor reading the “Analects of Confucius,” the thirteen-year old chancellor’s daughter raised her voice, “Laoshi, why is propriety important for women?”

“Propriety in speech protects the family’s honour, especially when it comes to women,” answered her twenty-five-year-old teacher. “Your father Chancellor Wu Shihuo wants you to fully understand all four virtues of women under the teachings of Confucius before he finds you an honourable match.”

“An honourable match? Why all this focus on marriage and housekeeping skills? I would much rather read than spin, weave, or sew!” declared Zhao assertively.

Her tutor stood up harshly, closing his book with a thump, “Your father indulges you far more than is proper! You think even the daughters of the emperor are given such an education? Education is for men, not women!”

Zhao eyed him coolly, “And yet you accepted my father’s commission to teach me. Interesting is it not?”

“Wealthy men like your father can afford eccentricities like this. He pays me well.”

“Ah! But will he still pay you upon learning you are too prejudiced to do your duty?” countered Zhao shrewdly.

Wu Zhao’s tutor shifted the subject slightly, “Duty? It is your duty to write “li” until I tell you to stop. How many times have you written it just now?”

Zhao counted, “yi, er, san, si, wu, liu, qiu, ba, jiu. Nine!”

“Keep writing until you have written it thirty times,” commanded the tutor.

Zhao acquiesced as she dipped her pen back into the ink, “Shi, laoshi!”

“You asked to see me, Baba?” asked Wu Zhao as she knelt to sit at the feet of her father by the fire, her eyes downcast respectfully.

Chancellor Wu Shihuo pushed up the long voluminous sleeves of his coat before laying his hands-on top of her head, “Yes, baobei.”

Zhao met his eyes, “What is it, Father?”

“I have both good news and bad news for you at the same time. Come spring, you will be leaving here for Chang An.”

“The imperial capital city?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why I think. Of all my sons and daughters, you are the brightest, the most learned. Your sisters are more than happy to sit with a needle; you are ever restless if any dares put needle, spindle, or loom anywhere near you!” smiled Chancellor Wu.

“You’ve made a match for me, haven’t you?” frowned Wu Zhao.

“I have.”

Zhao sighed, using her mental discipline to conceal her irritation and disappointment, “Who?”

“Emperor Taizong. You are to be one of his cai ren, a low-ranking concubine. Forgive me, it was the best I could do. When my peers learned of your … peculiar habits, I am afraid none of them wanted you for their sons.”

“Any man who cannot handle a woman of intelligence and education is not worth my time – let alone my body!” declared Wu Zhao proudly.

“My daughter, do you know how disrespectful that sounds?”

“Disrespectful to whom? A long dead politician whose only interest was power? Why do we care about these books, these Analects anyway? It’s pure propaganda! Sexist propaganda no less! We call the peoples north of the Great Wall savages, but how can this be so? They have women leading them – secular and religious women – and pray to goddesses and gods both! Maybe we Han are the savages and the northern peoples are the civilized ones!”

“That is treason, Zhao!” corrected the chancellor.

“And impropriety because I am a young woman!”

“Yes,” agreed Wu Shihuo. “Which is why it is best you serve the emperor as cai ren. Surely you cannot make any trouble among the multitudes of women belonging to him.”

Zhao smirked, “Don’t bet on it!”

Chancellor Wu stood up, offering his hand to his daughter to help her rise as well, “Well at least as cai ren you are unlikely to ever see the emperor or come to his bed. That should limit your mischief.”

Zhao shook her head as her father strode out of the room, muttering quietly, “We shall see!”

Spring came to Wenshui County in Shanxi province far too quickly for Wu Zhao who herself had never before travelled the one thousand one hundred eight Chinese li between her home and the imperial palace, a distance of three hundred seventy miles. After months of blissful forgetfulness regarding the arranged marriage, Wu Zhao found herself confronted with its reality as her father’s servants inevitably packed two trunks filled with her most prized possessions and placed them in a wagon along with the chancellor’s gifts to the emperor. Finally the day arrived with little ceremony or fanfare. Dutifully she boarded the carriage, never to return home again.

Two weeks later Wu Zhao’s carriage passed through an ornately carved wooden gate set among Chang An’s thick earthen work walls. Following the carefully aligned grid of city streets, the carriage driver steadily drove through the entire capital city, the northern wall of Chang An forming the southern wall of its Imperial City.

Pinning back the silk curtains to her carriage, Zhao observed the sights, smells, and sounds of the bustling capital. Nowhere in the world held such a mix of cultures, religions, and products for sale, not even in Constantinople, capital of what remained of the formerly glorious Roman Empire.

As the carriage pulled through Chang An’s northern gate into the Imperial City, the keen minded teenager noted the sounds of music and women’s voices which were sometimes melodic and sometimes very chaotic.

Finally, the carriage stopped. Five eunuchs surrounded her carriage as another surrounded the wagon from home carrying her father’s gifts to the emperor. With dizzying efficiency she found her personal belongings and her father’s gifts whisked away with barely a sound as a senior eunuch looking older than her father helped her step down, “This way, my lady!” Uncertain what protocol said to do, she followed the eunuch to what looked like some sort of simple bedroom shared with four other women. The eunuch took her to the empty bed, her trunks already stowed beneath, “This is your home now.”

“When do I appear before the Son of Heaven?” asked Wu Zhao assertively.

“You do not,” replied the senior eunuch.

“I do not understand. How can I be his concubine and yet not meet him?” queried Wu Zhao intelligently.

The eunuch laughed, “You are only cai ren, his consort-in-ordinary. You are not worthy of his divine and holy presence!”

“Then what am I worthy of?”

“Doing what you are told!”

“By whom? Who is my master if not the Son of Heaven?”

“Empress Zhangsun, of course! She is mistress of all that is here! After her, you shall obey Consorts Xu Hui, Yang, Yin, Yan, and Wei as they command,” proclaimed the eunuch.

“And what shall I call you?”

“I am a eunuch. I have no name,” replied the eunuch simply. “Your belongings are here. Take your time to acquaint yourself with where you are and those living with you. Expect no help from anyone. Come when you are called.” With the slightest of bow of his head to acknowledge her, the eunuch left her alone.

As soon as he was out of sight, Zhao pulled out one of her trunks. Opening it, she located her copy of “Explaining and Analysing Characters,” the standard Chinese character dictionary. Clutching the heavy book to her heart, she closed the trunk, replaced it under her bed, and then sat upon her bed to read.

“Wu Zhao! Wu Zhao!” called the senior eunuch whose gruff welcome Wu Zhao never forgot.

Sitting on a comfortable cushion and with a lap desk comfortably over her, Wu Zhao practiced her calligraphy, intentionally ignoring the eunuch until his shadow covered her desk. Zhao looked up at him, “Yes?”

“The Son of Heaven calls you into court,” barked the eunuch.

Wu Zhao put down her pen, “Did he say why?”

“One does not question the Son of Heaven.”

“Since you are not his majesty, my question still stands.”

“I do not know why; my job is to obey,” growled the eunuch.

Wu Zhao set her desk off to the side so she could rise, meeting his eyes as she did so, “Very well. Take me to him.”

The senior eunuch led Wu Zhao past several official buildings until they reached the emperor's own private apartment. Surprised, Zhao wondered if the emperor now expected her to serve him with wifely duties, something she found herself now wholly unprepared to do after months of assertions from others that she would never so much as meet the emperor.

At a desk sat the Taizong emperor clad in imperial yellow, his massive outer coat heavily embroidered with blue Chinese dragons. Ten paces from where the emperor sat, both the eunuch and Wu Zhao kowtowed before him, their heads reverentially touching the wooden floor. Taizong stood up, "You may sit." Wu Zhao obeyed, raising her head and back to a comfortable sitting position, but keeping her eyes lowered respectfully. Taizong motioned to the eunuch, "Thank you for bringing her; you may go!" Obediently, the eunuch slithered out of the royal presence while Taizong focused on Zhao, "You are Chancellor Wu Shihuo's daughter?"

"I am."

"You are well educated I am told."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Stories have reached me that you are wholly unsuitable to be my cai ren. Have you heard them?"

"Yes."

"What say you about them? Speak plainly."

"I say that it is for the Son of Heaven to best decide how I may best serve him. If it is his will to quicken me with his son, then so be it. But if I may serve in another way, I am pleased to offer my life and my skills to him," offered Wu Zhao.

"I heard a story that you read the dictionary every day. Is that true?"

"One never knows when one may need to know how to write a certain word precisely. I study that I may serve you."

"Then serve me."

"How, Your Majesty?"

"My court is filled with politicians I do not trust, most of them after power or wealth. I cannot trust them to render my rulings accurately. I need an aide, someone I can trust to write my words as I speak them – not as they would twist them for selfish motives. Will you serve me in this way?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"May I ask one other thing of you?"

"Always, Your Majesty."

“Rise and let me see you.” Wu Zhao complied, breaking protocol and meeting his eyes. Emperor Taizong walked around her to take a better look at her, “You are beautiful! Therefore, I name you Mei Niang: charming and lovely. Serve me Mei. I command it.”

“As you wish, so it shall be.”

“Thank you – now sit here and take my pen. I require your help in writing to your father,” beckoned the emperor, showing Mei Niang his work in progress.

Eleven years passed. Almost every day Wu Zhao rose early and worked past sunset as the emperor’s favourite and most trusted secretary, helping him craft many of his reforms like the restructuring of Chinese clans based on merit. Though the emperor continued to call her by the nickname “Mei” and remained mindful that he could exercise his rights as her husband at any time, Taizong himself felt far too close to Mei personally and professionally to change their relationship, preferring instead to simply smile at her when he observed her beauty or when she made a cunning political argument while working together.

“Come here, Mei,” beckoned the emperor.

Summoned, Wu Zhao bowed her forehead to the floor once, and then rose to stand next to him, “How many I be of service?”

“I want your input on this battle plan I’m finalizing. Do you think we can defeat the Goguryeo?”

Zhao took the reports from the emperor’s hands and skimmed them, “Maybe – but not easily. I honestly cannot tell based on this intelligence if we can make any progress against them. Our people are war-weary, Your Majesty. Another foreign war – I just do not know if we can be victorious.” Taizong coughed heavily, a look of fatigue in his eyes. Wu Zhao studied him, “Are you well, Your Majesty?”

Taizong met her eyes, “No. I should stay in bed today, but I fear if I do so the palace gossip will be all over it and some quack of a healer will give me mercury to drink or some foolish thing they think will help me.” Wu Zhao tried to conceal her worry – and her disregard for the palace physicians but her face said everything. “What is that supposed to mean, Mei? I am fifty-one years old, you know!”

“You are still young,” asserted Wu Zhao.

“I was quite the warrior in my youth, you know. Before you came here to the palace I forced my father to abdicate the throne.”

“Is it true you killed two of your brothers in order to become your father’s heir?”

“I did. Oh I know it must sound terrible to you, but it was the only way to become emperor.”

“You have been a good emperor, Your Majesty, a true champion of the common person – woman and man both. My tutor thought that I was arrogant and far too masculine to ever make anything of myself.”

“Because you prefer to debate public policy with me instead of debating which shade of blue to use on a cloud in a tapestry?”

Zhao smiled, “Yes! Great example, isn’t it?”

“Well, I am a Buddhist you know!”

“And a patron of a version of that strange religion from the west. What do you call it?”

“Christianity. Yes. Not the Roman style of course, but one of the forms popular in the remaining Byzantium Empire. There is a Roman Catholic church here in Chang An, but mostly traders from the west attend its services. This literal trinity idea simply makes no sense to us – nor should it I suppose.”

“You are quite remarkable – in your ideas, your policies your – “

“– my choosing of one of my cai ren to be my secretary and aide?”

“Yes, that too!”

“I know I will die soon, Mei. I want to tell you something though before I relent and head to my bed, perhaps for the last time.”

“What is it?”

“I never touched you as your husband. But it was not out of any deficit on your part. Rather it was that I have always respected you far too much to let myself summon you.”

“I do not understand.”

“Then let me speak plainly. There is little time left to speak. When I am a husband, I behave – differently – more selfish. It is a very one-sided matter for me; I do not think about her when we’re together. You, however, I honour and respect. The idea of treating you like that is unthinkable. You deserve love, Mei. I cannot offer you romantic love – only the esteem I feel for you as my aide and my friend. I suppose in that way I love you best.”

“May I speak plainly then, Your Majesty?”

“Please.”

“You are kind, generous, and have always ruled wisely and well. We have worked together drafting the right words for your policies, after all. But never once have you mistreated me nor disrespected me. I wish to thank you for that, for giving me a far better life here than I could have asked for.”

Emperor Taizong rose weakly, “You are dismissed from my service, Mei Niang. May your life after my passing be forever happy.” Wu Zhao put her forehead to the hand still holding

hers respectfully. Taizong caressed her face with his other hand before releasing her. Zhao turned, looking upon the Son of Heaven before leaving. She would never see him again.

The story continues in "[Empress Wu Zetian](#)." Available in your choice of kindle, paperback, and audio editions. Audio edition narrated by Richard Mann.