Abstract

Unlike other women before and after, Wu Zetian exercised power as Empress Dowager. Wu Zetian was the only woman in the whole recorded length of Chinese history who openly assumed the style and prerogatives of the imperial dignity for herself. In the seventh century A.D., as the Empress Wu, she was a person that has given rise to much controversy. Originally, she was Emperor Tang Taizong's (唐太宗, 598 – 649 A.D.) cai ren (才人, junior concubine). As required under the regulations of the Imperial Court, all the concubines of the deceased emperor were sent to the nunnery at the death of Taizong. Unlike the others, Wu Zetian was loved by Taizong's son, Gaozong (高宗, 628 – 683 A.D.), the new emperor, and was brought back to the palace to become his imperial concubine.

Wu Zetian was not only beautiful and charming, but also talented and learned. As Gaozong was often ill, he entrusted all state affairs to her. In 655 A.D., the Empress was replaced and Wu Zetian became the empress. After Gaozong's death, their son Zhongzong (中宗, 656 – 710 A.D.) came to the throne; Wu Zetian became Empress Dowager. However, in the year of 690 A.D., when she was at the age of sixty-seven, she officially proclaimed herself "Emperor" and founded the Chou dynasty (周朝, 690 – 705 A.D.). Thus, she had held the political reins of the Tang dynasty (唐朝, 618 – 907 A.D.) for a remarkable period of thirty-one years and had become the "Emperor" of the Chou dynasty for fifteen years before she died at the age of eighty-two.
Unlike other women before and after she exercised power as Empress Dowager, Wu Zetian was the only woman in the whole recorded length of Chinese history who openly assumed the style and prerogatives of the imperial dignity for herself. Up to the present days, scholars in China and western countries have continued to debate on her merits.

The aim of this Academic Exercise is to give an appraisal of the research by past academics on Wu Zetian so as to ascertain the criteria that can make the best judgement of her place in history.