

Empress Wu Transcript Season 4, Episode 10

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Empress Wu, who was one of May King Tsang's people from history she'd like to meet when I [interviewed](#) her back in season two, and the inspiration for this season.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: @GudrunLauret, or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

An online search for Empress Wu, or Wu Zetian, to give her her proper name, suggests that she's a notorious figure, described as 'ruthless' or 'misunderstood', depending on where you look. It's an intriguing start, I think you'll agree.

Described as China's only female empress (or should that be emperor?), Wu – always referred to by her surname - actually started her life as a concubine, and a fairly lowly one at that. She was born in 624, and like the Lady Hyegyyeong who we met in episode 4 was well-educated, although a thousand years earlier.

As with her Korean counterpart, Wu's father made sure she could read and write, and she was skilled in calligraphic art. She was witty, intelligent and a good conversationalist, and her mother was disappointed when she joined 100 other women in the royal harem at the age of 13. Her mother was from a powerful family, and her father's timber business meant they were comfortably off.

Nevertheless, Wu went to court in 638 and did catch the eye of the Emperor Taizong, who nicknamed her 'beautiful girl'. Although some accounts say that she spent some time with him and dazzled him with her conversational skills, she was never a favourite.

From this time comes the first account of Wu's savage streak: the emperor needed a horse breaking in and training, and found a willing volunteer in his junior concubine, surprising though it sounds.

Wu intended to equip herself with a whip and a hammer, both made of iron, and a dagger. The first two were to be used to persuade the horse to submit, and the dagger was to cut its throat if it would not. It's not clear if the emperor took her up on her offer, but apparently, he took it as sign of her bravery.

In 649, the Emperor Taizong died, and he was succeeded by Li Zhi, one of his 14 sons and child of 'main wife' Wende. It's believed that he had an affair with Wu while his father was still alive, although that did not save her from the fate of any

concubine who had not borne the ruling emperor a son – banishment from court, to live out her days as a Buddhist nun.

Wu was duly dispatched to a convent, although she didn't stay away from court for long. According to one version of events, she managed to escape and make her way home, which would be exciting enough, but another states that Li Zhi, now the Emperor Gaozong, went to visit her. Finding her more wonderful than before, the smitten young man made her his concubine.

Once back at court, Wu quickly rose to the second tier of concubines (yes, really) and became the highest ranking at that level. Gaozong's wife, Wang, took a shine to her and enlisted her help in coming between the emperor and his favourite mistress, known as 'the pure concubine'. This unfortunately backfired, as Wu simply took her place.

Wu went on to have two sons, in 652 and 653, which displeased Empress Wang further, and she went to Xiao, the former favourite, to bring Wu down. This plot was also doomed to failure. In 654, Wu had given birth to a daughter who died tragically in her first few weeks.

Again, this is where the sources diverge. Some claim that, aware of the Empress' plans, Wu smothered her daughter and blamed it on Wang, the last person to have held the baby. Others say that, mad with grief, she simply accused the Empress. Either way, Gaozong believed her, and agreed to have his wife and concubine demoted and banished to a far palace.

The way was clear for Wu to take her place on the throne, and she married the Emperor the year after their daughter died. Her husband was weak and sickly, and in fact had only become ruler because his two older brothers managed to disgrace themselves. Gaozong was easily led, and Wu manipulated him for her own means.

Her son was named heir apparent over Xiao's, and Wu set about cementing her position. She had the Pure Concubine and the disgraced Wang executed, although she's believed to have felt bad about it after. Not too bad, though, as she then had any minister who'd opposed her bumped off too, or their children if they died before she got to them.

By 658, she had ordered the executions of everyone who had stood in her way, persuaded one exiled chancellor to commit suicide, and banished several of her husband's children by other women. And when the Emperor had a stroke in 660, Wu was ready to take over.

As his health declined, Gaozong had begun to support his wife to make rulings on his behalf, so he could be sure she was doing things correctly. Over the next four years, Wu's power only increased, as did her infamy.

In 664, her husband accused her of witchcraft, or of soliciting others to perform sorcery on her behalf. By now, he felt she was interfering too much, and allowed one of his chancellors to sign an edict to have his wife demoted. Wu soon caught wind of the plan and went to beg her husband not to do it.

She was able to get him to change his mind, and in the wake of that decision managed to get several family members employed at the palace. And of course, had the naughty chancellor done in and his family punished. For the next 18 years, Wu attended all meetings the Emperor held, sitting hidden behind a screen made of pearl but taking everything in.

When the Emperor died in 680, Wu became the empress dowager and could decide who sat on the throne, and remove them if she felt like it, as well as making all government decisions. Because of her success with getting rid of any potential challengers, Wu's son Li Zhe was declared Emperor.

The new emperor didn't fancy being pushed around by his mother (although he was happy to be bullied by his wife) and opposed her influence. Wu had him deposed after just six weeks and replaced by a younger brother.

During all of this, Wu managed to deal successfully with a number of rebellions and uprisings by various disgruntled family members, many of whom had been banished from court. And she continued to execute anyone who displeased her, including several relatives and at least one son.

Fourth son Li Dan became Emperor, serving between 684 and 690, although he is referred to as 'the puppet ruler of the Tang Empire', suggesting he was more willing than his brother to have his mother tell him what to do.

In 690, Wu decided to take the throne for herself, promoting herself to Empress Regnant. She held this position for 15 years, and brought about so many changes that her reign is now described as three distinct periods by historians.

One change she brought about was replacing Taoism with Buddhism as the main religion. She continued to deal with any opposition with bloodshed, and attempts to topple her always failed. By 704 her health had declined, and Li Dan became Emperor again after his mother's death. Interestingly, the second time around he was controlled by his sister.

It should be noted that Wu was a popular ruler, despite all the controversy and intrigue. Her citizens were happy, the economy flourished and she was a fair and just Empress, if a bit bloodthirsty.

Thanks for listening! Please tune in next week for our final two episodes of season four, and let me know what you think of today's episode too.