

Re-interpreting a Female Chinese Emperor: A Post-structural Feminist Analysis of Wu Zetian

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This thesis is in two parts: Part 1 is this written analysis, while part 2 is a creative component that consists of a 35-page graphic novel (ISBN: 9781925376081).

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DECLARATION

I certify that the work titled “Re-interpreting a Female Chinese Emperor: A Post-structural Feminist Analysis of Wu Zetian” has not been previously submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Ny help or assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of this thesis itself have been appropriate acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Queenie Chan', written in a cursive style.

Queenie Chan (45045348)

October 2019

ABSTRACT

This thesis has two complementary parts—a written treatise and a graphic novel biography—both of which take a feminist view of Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in Chinese history.

Wu is a controversial figure who has failed to fit into the prescribed social roles for women in a patriarchal society, and as such, is viewed with a fascination that extends well into modern times. Widely-known in China but little known internationally, she began life as a commoner, before becoming an Imperial concubine, an Empress, and finally usurping the throne. Due to her flouting of established gender norms, much of her history has been distorted, yet these distortions remain unchallenged in the many popular representations of her in China. Despite the myriad of depictions, nearly all of them adhere to the same ‘Evil Dragon Lady’ archetype.

For that reason, the first part of my research is a post-structural analysis of gender bias in Wu’s historiography. This was done via the case study of an existing graphic novel called *Wu Zetian: The Mighty Woman Sovereign of China*, which was used as a basis to deconstruct the more problematic aspects of popular stories about Wu. Using the insights gleaned from that process, the second half is my own graphic novel biography of Wu’s life, intended to be a reconstruction—and therefore a revisionist history—that proposes an alternate version of events.

I make no claims to essentialist truth in my graphic novel biography. Instead, it is meant to offer other possibilities for certain incidents, and to sidestep any cultural or political conditions in modern China that make such a variant of Wu’s story difficult to produce. A gap exists regarding creative non-fiction depictions of Wu’s life that challenge the established narrative, and my research is intended to fill it, while also enlightening Western scholars on this unusual female monarch.

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INTRODUCTION

Wu Zetian is the only female Emperor in Chinese history, and as such, she is considered a controversial figure who is viewed with a fascination—and revulsion—that extends into modern times. Widely-known in China but little known internationally, she began her career as an Imperial concubine to elderly Emperor Taizong around 637 A.D. in the Tang dynasty, before allegedly becoming the mistress of his son Gaozong. After Taizong’s death, she became Gaozong’s Empress, which resulted in her co-ruling the Empire with him for 30 years before finally seizing the throne for herself after his passing. Along the way, various scandals, despotic behaviour, and accusations of murder would dog her, and for centuries after her death, Chinese scholarship would revile her for flouting gender norms and for failing to fit into any of the prescribed roles that Confucian scholars have reserved for women.

Since then, modern historians have acknowledged some—but not all—of the gendered distortions in Wu’s historiography. However, this has inspired few attempts at feminist analysis or to provide alternate narratives, and despite dozens of popular culture representations, most depictions of Wu in China still tend to uniformly traffic in the “Evil Dragon Lady” archetype (Song, 2010). This thesis aims to remedy this situation, by dissecting the more common, unquestioned versions of Wu’s life story, and by producing a work of creative non-fiction that can serve as a counterpoint. By performing these two tasks, the aim of this study will be to proffer my own revisionist history of Wu.

This form of research is known as “practice-led” research, and the intended result is a “creative thesis” that consists of two parts—critical analysis, and the process of artistic production. The goal is to present the project’s findings as two interlocking halves of the same whole, so that any new knowledge created can be proffered to the academic community in a fashion that is digestible by other disciplines (Gibson, 2010). In this project’s first half, which consists of this written component, I will conduct an examination of Wu’s historiography for patriarchal distortions, and challenge the more problematic aspects of her life narrative. To help, I will use an existing comic biography called *Wu Zetian: The Mighty Woman Sovereign of China* (1997) by Tian Hengyu as a case study, as it is one of the few comic biographies on Wu’s life that is available in English. For the second half and the thesis’ creative segment, I will use the insights gleaned from the earlier analysis to construct an alternate version of events, and thus a revisionist history. The chosen medium used for this will be a graphic novel, due to my

familiarity with the format as a practicing comic book artist, and also because “comic book narratives can work across platforms, engage younger, more visually oriented readers, and transcend cultural borders” (Priego, 2016, p. 2; Schwarz, 2002) Research has also suggested that due to its visual open-endedness and its non-linear presentation of time, graphic novels are able to challenge hegemonic historical narratives by giving marginalised views a voice, which suits my purpose (King, 2012).

In this process, there are certain issues I have to be mindful of—such as the fact that the borders of a biographer’s life and that of their subject can never be clearly demarcated. Since an author can never be easily extracted from the social processes and personal environment in which they are formed, the societal context in and processes by which biographical narratives are created must always be kept in mind (Stanley, 1993). In other words, merely analysing the tracts produced by ancient and modern historians on Wu’s life is not enough—the role that a wider Chinese societal context (which would include my own feminist sensibilities and reasons for undertaking this project) in the meaning-making process also had to be taken into account. For that reason, ancillary scholarship that shed light on the socio-cultural conditions in China that affected how historical re-interpretations occur was an important factor in this study. I made sure to preface my arguments with it in the core segment of this thesis.

Lastly, this project is located within cultural studies and the sub-discipline of gender studies, and is limited to scholarship available in English. The methodology used is discourse analysis, with the tenets of post-structuralism applied to perform a deconstruction of popular narrative tropes. A particular emphasis was placed on various controversial events in Wu’s earlier life, and the results will be used to construct my own graphic novel based on Wu’s life narrative—though it is important to point out that my intention is not to lay claim to any essentialist truths, but to create a possible variation of events. By the end of this thesis, I hope to fill a gap in western scholarship concerning Wu, and to contribute to the on-going decolonisation of western feminist studies by producing some feminist analysis on an understudied non-white historical figure. I also hope that my biography will be a worthy addition to the array of existing Wu adaptations, and help alter the way she is depicted in the many popular narratives about her life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Wu is famous in China, she is little-known outside of it, and relevant scholarship about her remains scant. To date, there has been a handful of English-language monographs written about her by western Sinologists which are thorough, but these have largely been ignored by western feminist scholars (Peng, Yu, & Mills, 2015). Due to this lack of a clearly demarcated object of study, I will instead be referencing fields that are tangentially related to Wu. Some of these include the poststructuralist methodology I used in this analysis, while others will give an academic grounding to the socio-cultural climate of China that helped shape Wu's historiography. Unfortunately, while Chinese scholarship on Wu exists, its applicability is limited. This is due to language barriers and the differing cultural standards and traditions within Chinese academia, as I shall explain below.

WU AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CLIMATE OF CHINA

The modern study of women's history began in China as early as the 1920s, and used Marxist historical materialism as the key theoretical foundation for Chinese academic treatises on women (Liu, 2012). Its core tenet was to use class analysis to challenge the historically passive/marginal role of women as "helpers of men", and to excavate the lived experiences of the many ordinary women who were otherwise "hidden" from history. This continued until the 1970s, when a split in academic approach occurred which caused "feminist history" to be decoupled from "women's history"—a division that also happened in the west (Caine, 1994; Du & Cai, 2012; Liu, 2012).

While the borders of what is loosely defined as "women's history" and "feminist history" are fluid, some key distinctions exist. One is that the former tends to be a descriptive history of women's lives which aims to unearth neglected or omitted parts of official history, while the latter is history observed and compiled from the political commitment to gender equality (Liu, 2012). Unlike the former, which are practiced by historians who may not identify as feminist, the latter suggests a new methodology using gender theory and analysis which can sometimes result in rewritten history (Liu, 2012). Since gender equality was enforced by the Chinese Socialist system and lacks the political activism and revolutionary sensibilities that informed western feminism, Chinese academics prefer to work within cultural traditions, and

are discouraged from overtly challenging them (Liu, 2012). As such, western feminist methodologies currently constitutes a minority of the research being conducted, and feminist publication platforms in Chinese research are not afforded the same prominence as they are at western universities (Liu, 2012; Peng et al., 2015).

In terms of other articles which further explore China from an academic viewpoint, there are a handful that are useful. These tend to address the socio-cultural climate of modern China, and how the (re)interpretation of Chinese history is—and has always been—a politicised act. This body of English-language research uncovers the foundations by which historical narratives are produced and policed, and sheds light on the barriers that may have prevented an alternative view of Wu from emerging even in more recent times. An example of this would be the work of Xianlin Song (2010) and Guo Nan (2003), which examine how institutionalised history-writing in China influenced the image of Wu. While there are inevitably exclusions from this overview due to my focus on English-language research, these works offer enough insight to allow a general idea of the landscape to be formed.

Other relevant research includes analysis on Confucian attitudes towards women in ancient China, with a particular emphasis on women who sought to gain political power and influence. As one might expect, the patriarchal institutions of the scholarly class and the nobility frowned heavily upon women who trespassed from the domestic sphere into the public one, and works by Richard W. Guisso (1981), Keith McMahon (2013), and Stephen R. Bokenkamp (1998) all address the myriad of classic Confucian texts that denounced such actions. Women like Wu who transcended the boundaries of sex were considered dangerous subversions to the natural order, and her actions caused Confucian scholars both in her own time and after to treat her with fear and derision. Since so little of her original history remains, and much of what we know is from historical compilations written centuries after her death, there is scope for a re-evaluation of Wu's life narrative that will unravel the patriarchal hostility surrounding how the various known events of her life were interpreted. Poststructuralist discourse analysis, with its emphasis on dissecting how knowledge structures create systems of power that locks individuals into a particular position and worldview, can aid in this process.

FURTHER LITERATURES: GRAPHIC NOVELS, POST-STRUCTURALISM IN HISTORY, AND BIOGRAPHICAL LIFE WRITING

When we move away from Wu-related works, articles that underpin a theoretical basis for research are more abundant. The exception would be scholarship on graphic narratives, which remains an underdeveloped field as it only emerged in the last decade (Rifkind, 2017). With most of its focus on memoirs rather than biographies, the study of graphic life is only just beginning to grapple with the issues of genre, medium, and authorship that revolutionised life writing theory a decade or so ago (Rifkind, 2017). For that reason, it is difficult to find comics scholarship that will offer theoretical grounding as to how graphic narratives affect the process of biographical production. As such, most of what I have surveyed was work written on prose biographies instead.

In terms of graphic novel scholarship, however, there exists helpful work in the juncture between education and non-fiction, which examines how the multimodal presentation of information in comics can help in imparting factual events, particularly when it comes to history. Much of this scholarship from King (2012), Priego (2016), Schwarz (2002) and Buhle (2007) dovetails with other articles that delve into the specific visual, spatial, and organisational narrative techniques which comics use that differentiate them from other mediums, which will help explain the efficacy of using graphic novels for creating alternate historical narratives (as I do in my creative component). This latter scholarship, which includes Bryce, Matthews & Takeyama (2014), Ewert (2000), Lefèvre (2011) and Gardner (2011) should be of use when I analyse the visual content of my case study later on in the thesis.

Meanwhile, in the field of post-structuralism and history, E. H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961) makes the observation that history is less a series of scientific "facts" than it is a group of historically contingent narratives shaped by those responsible for producing it. This was revolutionary to the discipline, and while other works have since furthered the debate, the idea that history doesn't exist outside of the accounts of historians has become pervasive—particularly as these historical recollections function as fact, and have the tendency to impact the real world in material ways. This approach to history has caused ripples in the field of historical life writing, which regards history as rarely "a question of historical fact...but [of] historical discourse" (Geraghty, 2016, p. 614), and believes that "all accounts of a life...are

constructed, and every account reflects, on some level, the subjectivity that birthed it” (Coleman, 2010, p. 19).

All of this brings a sense of heightened awareness to the role and position of a biographer—and to the fact that a single biographical subject may have multiple selves who are situated in a complex web of relationships to others in their lives. This means that the act of biographical writing is a representation of a subject’s life as through the lens of a third party who is performing a conscious (re)telling of a story, and one which the third party (the biographer) has a certain investment in. This brings other noteworthy issues to the forefront, such as the need for a biographer to be aware of their own self-identification with the subject, and the importance of not “de-socialising” the subject from the various support structures and networks in which they would have been enmeshed (Coleman, 2010; Stanley, 1993).

It is also not an uncommon mistake for biographies to treat their subjects as multi-faceted and complex, while characterising the people around them as straight-forward personalities (Israel, 2010). For that reason, while this study is specifically about Wu, her important interpersonal relationships—such as her three decade-long co-rulership with her disabled husband Emperor Gaozong, which has long been framed within the trappings of stereotypical gender relations—must also be scrutinised. Since this couple functioned almost as a conjoined unit in their political lives, their personalities and narratives necessarily inform each other, and neither can be regarded in isolation. As changes in discourses around gender and disability evolve, so arises the opportunity to renegotiate their relationship and view it from a new angle. For this segment, scholarship at the juncture of disability and masculinity will be used, such as works by Foster (2012) and Shuttleworth, Wedgwood & Wilson (2014).

FURTHER LITERATURES: POST-STRUCTURALISM AND GENDER

In terms of post-structuralism and gender, Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) provides some of the theoretical foundations for this work. According to Butler (1993), both sex and gender are constructs, and gender in particular is performative—created through an unconscious, stylised repetition of acts, itself the result of hegemonic patterns of heteronormative gender behaviour over time. Her work deconstructs the binary-oppositional model of “man/woman”, “strong/weak”, “good/bad”, etc. by arguing that none of these categories are static or pre-existing, but are socially constituted and

historically contingent. Also relevant is “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989) by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, whose concept of intersectionality rejects the idea of an essentialist self, and argues that identity is actively (re)constructed based upon interlocking societal institutions and shaped by personal experiences. Both will be applied to the narrative of Wu’s life as documented in her historiography.

Other relevant works includes feminist revisionism in storytelling, such as the surge in fairy tale re-tellings in the 1970s and 1990s. Through novels such as Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas’s *Beginning with O* (1977), and Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), feminist writers sought to present a multi-faceted version of the female lived experience that is defined on its own terms, and not as a counterpoint to the normative male subjectivity (Schanoes, 2014). While one may initially view fairy tales as many miles away from actual history, the cultural construction of the “wicked woman” exists in both arenas, and feminist revisionism seeks to redress such imbalances by painting their subjects not as villains but as unconventional heroines (Fisk, 2011). Here, the goal of feminist revisionist story-telling dovetail with post-structuralist feminism, in that they both refute masculine ideals of how a “proper” woman, wife, and/or mother should behave. In Wu’s case, historical revisionism thus calls for her life story to be depicted with the same even-handedness afforded to male Chinese Emperors, rather than through the Confucian standards of feminine etiquette that are typical to accounts of her life.

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY SOURCES

Lastly, in terms of Wu’s historiography, the case study text of *Wu Zetian: The Mighty Woman Sovereign of China* (1997) by Tian Hengyu will be used. I will also be referencing the few modern English-language biographies that examine and critique the ancient Chinese records—namely *The Empress Wu* (1965) by C. P. Fitzgerald, *Wu Zhao: China’s Only Female Emperor* (2008) by N. Harry Rothschild, and *Wu: The Chinese Empress Who Schemed, Seduced and Murdered Her Way to Become a Living God* (2014) by Jonathan Clements. These acknowledge the Confucian hostility towards Wu’s gender in her classic historiography, but they also carry some unexamined chauvinism of their own. Where applicable, Wu’s ancient historiography will also be mentioned, as gleaned from the *Old Book of Tang*, the *New Book of Tang*, and the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, most of which were written

several hundred years after Wu's death in the more politically conservative Song dynasty (Rothstein-safra, 2017).

1: WU IN CHINESE HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Every culture has a tradition of history-writing, in which gatekeepers sift through a stream of interlocking human narratives. Key record keepers—each with personal agendas and captive to their own particular historical moment—pick, choose, and mould the narratives they deem worthy for preservation, even as they in turn become part of this on-going process. Through the iterative passage of time and its sedimented layers of historical discourse, societal myths are forged, cultural norms are established, and heroes and villains are made. And occasionally, when a lone historical figure achieves something regarded as singularly unique, peculiar, and/or abominable, their posthumous personage will be stretched, prodded, and twisted into casting a shadow longer than what anyone who lived in that figure's own time could have expected.

Within the west and western academia, this process of historical narrative construction is widely acknowledged, with the onset of post-structuralism in the 1960s deeply affecting the practice and perception of history-writing. Through works such as E. H. Carr's *What is History* (1961), historians have come to realise that interpretations of history are socially and culturally contingent; as such, the focus shifts not just to the question of whether history can be regarded as "fact", but also to the role historians play in the construction of history. This had the effect of loosely splitting historians into two camps—situating them on a continuum between the idea of history as a science, and history as literature/mythmaking (Stuart-Fox, 2007). While this debate is inconclusive, the influence of post-structuralism was such that most modern historians would regard history as subjectively constructed, and inextricably linked to the societal conditions at the time it was produced.

There are few reasons to suggest that Chinese history should be any different. Since the discursive construction of Wu's historiography is at the core of this thesis, it is necessary to first survey the culture that produced her in order to identify and understand the fluctuations in popular perception of her in China, particularly in our better-documented

current times. While it is impossible to mine the entire cultural history of China for answers, grasping a general overview of the landscape through existing scholarship is still relatively achievable. It is thus interesting to find that although Chinese history has been subject to waves of political upheavals over the centuries, from Imperial China to Communist China and the current post-Mao era, the image of Wu has remained remarkably consistent through all this time (Song, 2010). For that reason, by examining the Chinese nexus of politics and knowledge production over time, one can glean the cultural function Wu served, as China's sole female Emperor, in societal myth-making. This will allow us some inkling of why her image has been so static, even in modern times, where one may expect alternate life narratives to gain traction.

INSTITUTIONALISED HISTORY-WRITING IN CHINA

The practice of Chinese history-writing has been institutionalised since the Sixth Century A.D., though there are specific cultural conditions that governs what is considered "acceptable" within the Chinese context of knowledge production (Song, 2010). One key expression of this is the distinction between the categories of *rishi* (official history) and *yeshi* (wild history), which are concepts that persist to the present day. According to Song (2010), *rishi* is the official government-sanctioned narrative of the written Confucian annals, and *yeshi* is anything outside of this approved space. For scholars, credibility is judged by how closely one adheres to *rishi*, which means that Chinese historians live in a Foucauldian matrix of self-regulation that encourages a culture of self-policing, voluntary compliance, and submission to a pre-existing institutionalised body of knowledge. Over time, this has created a scholarly class that looks to government approval as a bellwether for what is considered acceptable discourse around a particular topic.

Not unlike western history, Chinese historiography is didactic, and the literati who consider themselves the custodians of this tradition have always occupied a privileged place in society that has allowed them to direct public discourse (Bokenkamp, 1998). Mining the country's rich history was a method by which writers could burnish their reputations and express a contemporary agenda, which the historians themselves were often conscious of (Song, 2010). Such is the discursively constructed nature of Chinese history, both as it applies to individual historical figures who scholars cast a critical eye upon for didactic purposes, and

in how history *itself* is utilised to support and reflect political beliefs specific to certain periods of time.

In this context, Wu's status as the sole female emperor of China often means that her history is recounted with a tone of patriarchal hostility, though this isn't always solely attributed to her gender. While Wu's existence inevitably makes her a lightning rod for scholars looking to make a point, she has at times become the subject of battles that has little do with Confucian ideals of "a woman's place". An example would be the early 20th Century, when Wu's purges against the oligarchic Tang aristocracy earned her praise from Communists, but which also provoked a backlash from the Kuomintang who likened her to a mass murderer from the same mould as Stalin (Clements, 2014, p. 11). Another example is the diminution of her achievements in the 1950s, which at a superficial level may seem gender-motivated, but was in fact something that all Chinese emperors suffered due to a government-mandated drive to focus on class struggle and the lives of peasant rebels over those of the ruling class (Guo Nan, 2003). Finally, when Mao's wife Jiang Qing came to political prominence after his death, her supporters and detractors would both invoke the name of Wu, albeit for diametrically opposed reasons (Clements, 2014, p. 12).

These politically-driven approaches towards historical re-interpretations did not end with the death of Mao. Discovering new meaning in past events is considered a political act in China, one which the modern Chinese government closely watches, and still actively engages in (Song, 2010). The banning of Zhang Yihe's biographical work *Lingren wangshi* (Recollections of Actors) in 2007 exemplifies this, as does the use of CCTV's historical drama *Zhenguan Change* to critique political infighting in the Communist Party that same year (Song, 2010).

Given the surveillance of the modern Chinese state apparatus on the producers of knowledge and cultural meaning, the country's scholars are hardly labouring in a system open to historical revisionism. This explains why in recent decades, between an authoritarian government and a post-Mao market economy where male biographers peddle a hyper-sexualised Wu, there is little motivation for anyone to challenge Wu's historically sanctioned image (Song, 2010). This accounts for some of the uniformity in the myriad of depictions of Wu over time, both in official documentation and in popular culture.

CONFUCIAN ATTITUDES TO WOMEN AND WU

Now that some of the institutionalised cultural forces that keep Wu's characterisation static as an "evil dragon lady" has been identified, it is time to examine the patriarchal framework in which her historiography is recounted. Much of that is steeped in Confucian traditions, the classical texts for which was first compiled in China's Spring and Autumn era (around 771 B.C. to 476 B.C.), before becoming the centre of all education curriculums and the canonical state doctrine from the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) onwards (W. Guisso, 1981). While the political agenda of the Chinese state has fluctuated over the centuries, the idealised image of women in the life-cycle roles of "daughter, wife, mother" has not, and Confucians have always maintained that "order and harmony were supreme values that were only [preserved] in hierarchy" (W. Guisso, 1981, p. 48).

For that reason, Confucian accounts of Wu as an individual are deeply rooted in patriarchal systems that venerated men and denigrated women, and steeped in tradition that existed a millennium before Wu was born (Rothschild, 2008, p. 4). In a world where Confucian edicts required women to be subordinate to men, it's clear that the Confucian conception of social hierarchy has an inherent masculinist leaning. As Rothschild (2008) recounts, the realms of the political/public/male and domestic/private/female are strictly delineated along gender lines, and women who aimed for political influence was considered by Confucians to be a dangerous subversion of the natural order (R. W. L. Guisso, 1979, p. 330; Song, 2010). As early as 400 B.C., sayings like "If the hen crows in the morning, the household will be desolated" have already been instated as a warning against the destructive nature of the unrestrained woman, which was seen to be the "cause of disorder; unteachable, slanderous and self-seeking" (W. Guisso, 1981, p. 55)

Writing Wu's history thus posed a challenge to Confucian historians, particularly the conservative Song Dynasty (960 A.D. to 1279 A.D) scholars who compiled the bulk of what we know (Rothstein-safra, 2017). From the start, not only did she fail to fit into any of the prescribed social roles for women Confucians have developed, but she also moved in and out of these categories all through her life. She was both a concubine and an Empress, an Empress and an Emperor, and the stepmother of an Emperor before becoming his wife, all of which confounded scholars in a society that prided itself on naming and categorisations (Song, 2010). In response, scholars became fixated on the boundaries of womanhood, and came to view

Wu's achievements in terms of what she did to the people around her, and how she manipulated the men in her life to get what she wanted (Song, 2010). In other words, what she did politically was less significant than her ruthlessness towards her family members, and thus, she became the symbolic praxis by which women must be kept from power.

Hence, when the bulk of Wu's history was selected, edited, and compiled, scholars were very harsh. According to their evaluations, she entered the palace as a teenage seductress who ensnared Emperor Taizong and Crown Prince Gaozong, thus committing incest with two generations of Emperors. This calculating vixen then framed Gaozong's Empress by strangling her own infant daughter, and once she was Empress, would murder many family members before usurping the throne after Gaozong's death. As Emperor, she was a despot who executed dissenters, and once her position was assured, she became a sex-crazed octogenarian with a harem full of handsome, virile young men. However, despite all these perceived moral failings characterised by conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence, Confucian scholars still grudgingly conceded that she was a competent administrator of a huge Empire who listened to her advisors, enacted policies that helped the common people, promoted talented men, and punished corrupt officials.

Most Confucian condemnation is reserved for what Wu supposedly did before she became Emperor, which coincidentally is also the least well-documented part of her life, since she was born a commoner and considered unworthy of a court historian's attention in her own time. For that reason, I would like to focus the bulk of my investigations on claims made about her earlier life, in the period of time before she seized the throne rather than her time on it.

There are two reasons for this approach. The first is that due to a lack of concrete documentation even from her time, this part of her life is most open to speculation and slander by political enemies both during her lifetime, and after. This also includes the later reconstruction of her story for political-mythological purposes to support the patriarchal status quo, and to perpetuate ideas about the destructive nature of politically powerful women. The second reason is based upon the feminist slogan of "the personal is political", which aims to refute the patriarchal (and Confucian) belief that the private and public spheres of an experiential life are strictly separate. While one may claim that the remedy for this is to elevate Wu's political accomplishments over her personal life, I argue that the assumptions we make about her younger years has implications in how her rule and legacy as Emperor is

judged. That the indiscretions of male Emperors towards their family members are generally glossed over, while those of Wu's is expounded upon at length, is the very example of sexism. Instead of trying to justify the motivations behind her alleged acts to others, or to focus on her triumphs as an administrator, I take the revisionist approach and offer an alternate narrative to the official accounts of some key events in her earlier personal life.

2: ANALYSIS OF GRAPHIC NOVEL CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

I now turn my attention to the graphic novel *Wu Zetian: The Mighty Woman Sovereign of China* (1997) by Tian Hengyu, which I will dissect in order to draw out the various hegemonic narrative tropes common to popular narratives about Wu. I consider this comic a good example of a typical depiction of Wu's life—in that it does not deviate from the generally accepted life narrative, nor does it make much of an attempt to paint her actions in a sympathetic light. However, it is possible to see the didactic tendencies of traditional Chinese history-writing through the artist's use of clear-cut heroes and villains. This is because this approach is in line with the moralistic Confucian nature of the typical Chinese biographer, with the “utilization of moral exemplars...and the encoding of a formulaic typecasting that [is] easily distinguishable to readers” (Rothstein-safra, 2017, p. 34).

SECTION A: VISUAL ANALYSIS

A cursory look at the surface aesthetics of the case study reveals this kind of moralising, with a number of cartooning shorthand and symbolism used to represent good and evil. Most of the characterisations in this story are simple and leans towards the archetypal, both in terms of narrative and in visual expression. Characters emote in a forthright, highly-stylised manner that make little attempt at naturalism—when angry, they leap into the air; when sad, tear droplets spring from their eyes; when arrogant, their noses are thrust skywards.



FIG 1. Anger (far left, p35), Sadness (top, p27), Arrogance (middle, p61), Anger (right, p41).

Tian's rendition of the characters is not subtle (nor intended to be), and one can argue that the roles of the villains, heroes, and inconsequential bystanders have already been cast, and can be easily ascertained by their aiding of—or opposition to—the anti-heroine at the center of the story. Few characters deviate from their prescribed roles, and there are almost no characters that traffic in ambiguity—not even Wu, who plays the role of the duplicitous, conniving schemer from the start. This highlights the need for alternate narratives to exist, since at least within China, the traditional distinction between *rishi* and *yeshi* means that even works intended for a younger audience stay squarely on the well-worn path.

COMPOSITION, PANELLING AND CHARACTER DESIGNS

After looking at the superficial aesthetics of *Wu Zetian*, it is necessary to survey its specific spatial and graphical organisation. According to existing scholarship, graphic novels are capable of “integrating stylised graphics, utterances and flexible framing...[and] constructing multiple layers of voices and perspectives” which creates the “spatial, temporal, socio-cultural and psychological dimensions within the narrative” (Bryce, Matthews, & Takeyama, 2015, p. 3). The key to this is not just the visuals, but the graphic organisation of a comic page itself—panel compositions, fonts type and size, speech/thought bubbles, panel gutters, the number of panels, etc. all coalesce together to shape narrative expectations and outcomes that are underpinned by ideological and socio-cultural assumptions (King, 2012).

There is also the dual-tracking, complementary nature of the verbal-visual presentation, which disrupts linearity by suggesting simultaneity, and amplifies meaning at its intersection (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2012; Gardner & Herman, 2011; King, 2012). Comics also have the ability to borrow techniques both from prose and film, although their use of hand-drawn linework distinguishes them from both by expressing a very individual and specific view of reality (Gardner, 2011; Lefèvre, 2011).

Unfortunately, if we examine the sequential panelling of *Wu Zetian*, this level of sophistication is not present. Its panels are mostly one rectangle after another with little overlap, thus creating a largely chronological sequence of events. Secondly, the English font is non-descript and poorly formatted, with text barely fitting into the word balloons, and there is also an absence of subjective visual techniques such as close-ups or dramatic lighting. Characters tend to physically perform what they are saying as well, thus ensuring that the verbal-visual tracks reinforce rather than complement each other. Again, these are not necessarily criticisms—instead, this observation highlights the possibility that the complexity and subjectivity of a lived-in, embodied experience is not what the creator was aiming for.

Instead, the story of *Wu Zetian* is told in stark, simple terms, akin to a parable or a fairy-tale, with sparse black-and-white linework to match. The lack of background detail (mostly simplified to a few pen strokes indicating a building, a rock, or furniture) seems to support this, as does the lack of historical accuracy in the clothing.



FIG 2. Sparse backgrounds, and a women’s dress that shows sleeves extending beyond the wrists, and a low waist tie (top, pg28); a Tang era woman’s dress with sleeves that do not extend beyond the wrist, and a high-waist tie that begins on the breasts (bottom left, Benn, 2002, p. 105); my own artwork (bottom right, pg. 8)

When I produced my own graphic novel, I made an attempt at historical accuracy in the clothing and architecture, since the Tang dynasty is known for a distinctive clothing style that is recognisably different to that of other dynasties. I also created my work in colour, to increase reader immersion, and to ground my narrative with a sense of historical specificity even as *true* historical accuracy is impossible. This is in opposition to *Wu Zetian*, which in contrast visually exemplifies the opposite—taking place in a rootless, ahistorical version of ancient China that seems to suggest a universality to the story’s narrative. This is problematic, since Scott McCloud proposes in *Understanding Comics* (1997) that the “less detailed the depiction of a cartoon character, the more “universal” its potential for identification: there is more room, literally, for the reader to fill the character with her own subjectivity” (Ewert, 2000, p. 97; McCloud, 1994).

Since Tian's depiction of Wu is that of an amoral murderer, his art style can be said to amplify his depiction of a single individual into a more generalised statement on the base nature of women who try to seize male power. While readers may not identify with Wu through her actions, the ahistorical nature of the art encourages the reader to imagine a similar woman in a different cultural setting living through the same narrative arc. My own rendition on the other hand, attempts to move away from this universality and to remind readers that Wu's circumstances are unique to her—just like every other person. By visually focussing on the specifics and dispelling any notions of a generalised womanhood, I hope that readers can grasp that while a woman can certainly be a powerful and competent ruler, any moral choices she makes is unique to her, and not a reflection of women rulers in general.

The same argument can also be made artistically in other ways, such as in diversity of character designs. While one cannot extrapolate on an author's attitude towards women from a single work, the designs of Tian's characters are worthy of criticism. Unlike my own work, which seek to give each character a distinct face, there is a stark gender divide in the differences between male and female characters under Tian's pen. The male characters, for example, are all drawn with a variety of different facial features, some less attractive than others, to denote heroism/villainy. Each are also distinctly designed and individuated—the heroes all have noble profiles, rounded designs, and well-proportioned faces, while the villains have mismatched features, grotesque countenances, and facial flaws.



FIG 3. The faces of the heroes – Zhangsun Wuji and Chu Suiliang (top left, pg23), Su Xiang (top right, pg84), Innocent ministers (middle, pg84)



FIG 4. The faces of the villains – Greedy eunuchs (top left, pg23), Li Yifu and Xu Jingzong (top right, pg40), Lai Junchen, Zhou Xing and cronies (bottom, pg89)

The women, on the other hand, are given no such care. All are drawn with similar, cookie-cutter faces of reasonable attractiveness—even when it comes to the central character of Wu. That Tian is so adept at mapping character types and therefore consequential roles to the faces of the men, but cannot summon the same ability when it comes to the women is worth noting. Even in a morality play centered around a compelling anti-heroine, the design of the female characters insinuate that women have none of the same inner qualities that allow men to be visually distinguishable from each other, and are thus mere side characters without any personal morals. One can even argue that it is a form of sexualisation—by removing women from the simplified visual signifiers of “good” or “bad” people, they become a single homogenous group of female-presenting bodies, and *only* bodies. This choice in female character design thus serve to further amplify the rootless, ahistorical version of China that the simple line art implies, but goes even further by suggesting that the base nature of women is singular, and are universal in their irrelevance to important historical events.

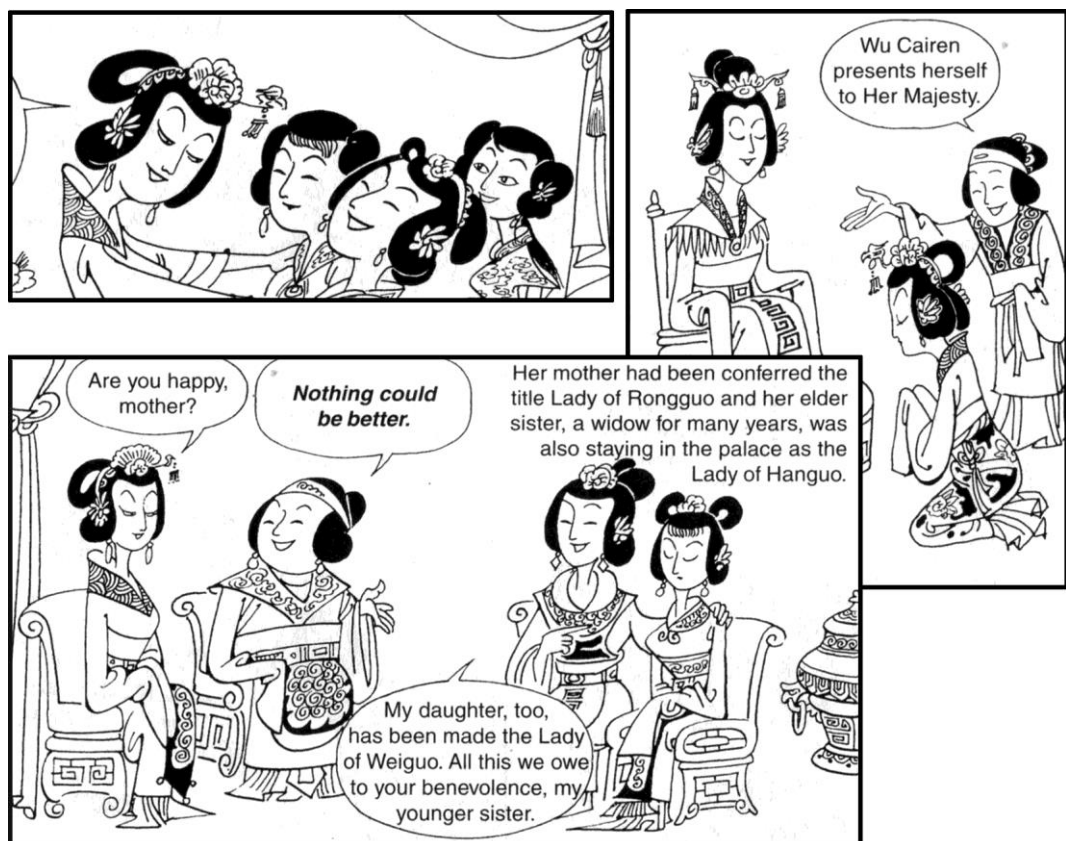


FIG 5. The faces of the women - Wu and maids (top left, pg23), Empress Wong, maid and Wu (top right, pg22), Wu, Wu's mother, sister and niece (bottom, pg50)

SECTION B: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

When one takes stock of Wu's historiography, one notes the tremendous amount of material that has been written about her, and its many inconsistencies and contradictions. Due to the "often-biased nature of the official histories" (Rothschild, 2008, p. xiii), modern historians tend to look to unconventional sources for information about Wu in order to create a coherent narrative. The end result is sometimes a mish-mash of anecdotes and unverifiable stories strung together to create a chronological timeline, and often with the modern historian's own unexamined, personal beliefs baked into it—beliefs that may contain unconscious, gender-based leanings. Thus, I shall attempt to take the most common stories historians tell, and dissect them from a feminist perspective.

For that reason, the next section of the thesis will focus largely on certain narrative tropes common to most Wu stories. By pointing out how some popular stories perpetuate certain problematic beliefs, I hope to portray Wu at key stages of her life in a different light to the prevailing narrative in my case study. While it should be said that narrative and visuals in graphic novels are integrated and cannot be easily separated, I believe that the simplicity in art style and panelling of *Wu Zetian* serves not to challenge the hegemonic assumptions made of Wu's life narrative, but to reinforce them. The parable-like artistic presentation of the case study supports the narrative tropes I am about to break down—namely those that cast an anti-heroine at its core who was born with a pre-determined role, and who is unmoveable from her ruthless and conniving base nature.

Apart from tropes, I also hope to examine narrative sequencing and any amplification or diminution of particular scenes that *Wu Zetian* employs, including scenes that were added or omitted. Whether a particular scenario is included and/or given weight can have profound effect on how a reader perceives a subject, and such narrative tinkering can often be key to how a subject is ultimately presented and judged. My own graphic novel version of Wu's life story contains a strategically chosen series of scenes that differs from the case study, which I shall explain along in my dissection.

WU AS PRE-DESTINED: CHALLENGING WU'S CHILDHOOD

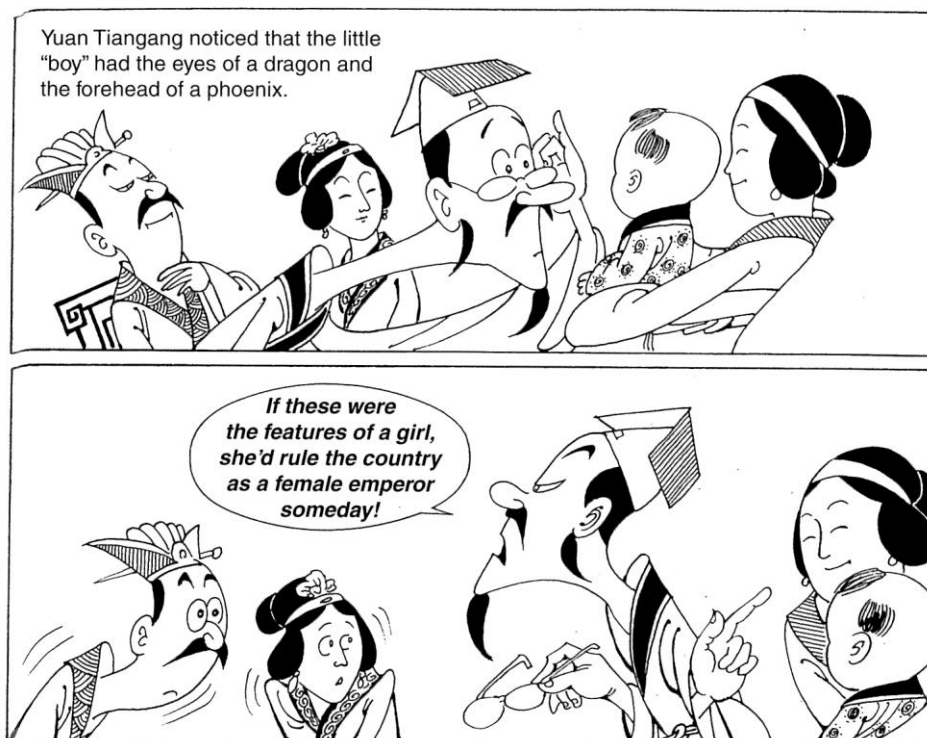


FIG 6. A story depicting a prophecy from Wu's childhood (pg5)

The page above is from the beginning of *Wu Zetian*, which creates a foundational block for the narrative trajectory of Wu's life. Our story begins with a face-reader who visits the Wu household when she was born, and his subsequent claim that the infant Wu will be the future Emperor—a declaration that casts her later ascent to the throne in a prophetic light. This is problematic, not just because it frames Wu's fate and nature as predetermined, but it also robs her future self of agency by implying that a greater power was guiding her. It also insinuates that every ruthless thing she did henceforth was done purely to reach her final goal of Emperor-ship, which permits little room for alternate interpretations.

It is interesting to note that this tale about Wu's childhood, which modern historian Fitzgerald (1968) used to preface his story about her, is also one that other historians attributed to propaganda from later in her reign (Clements, 2014, p. 20). To challenge this in my own graphic novel, I endeavoured to shift the emphasis in Wu's origin story to some of the lesser known facts about her childhood, which may situate her in different light. This is a post-

structuralist approach, and is also a specific choice in narrative sequencing that foregrounds some of the disadvantages suffered by women.

According to historians, as a child, Wu was a beautiful and clever girl who was widely travelled due to her father's work as a provincial governor. However, when she was 11 years old, she and her mother were cast out of the family home by her half-brothers after her father's death, and forced to survive on their own (Clements, 2014, p. 24; Rothschild, 2008, p. 22). Oddly enough, this specific event was not depicted in *Wu Zetian* as per historical record. Instead, as a result of using a prophecy to illustrate her birth, Wu's father dies asking her mother to send Wu into the palace, so that the prophecy can be fulfilled. This indicates that the choice of using a prophecy has far-reaching consequences, as it creates a scenario where the socio-economic climate of women at the time is not touched upon since the narrative seamlessly launches Wu straight from her house into the Imperial harem. In contrast, I chose to omit any references to prophecies in my own story, and instead reframe the child Wu as a survivor of harsh conditions imposed upon her.

By omitting the prophecy and prioritising these lesser known details about Wu's life instead of the fortune-teller story, the readers' expectations are subtly altered. The emphasis on this different key event in her childhood suggests it had some influence over her need to secure power as an adult, and highlights other societal factors at the time which would have afflicted Wu because of her gender. Thus, my decision to emphasise alternate aspects of Wu's early life a feminist one, since I am presenting her story in such a way that draws attention to the socio-economic barriers that women face in a male-dominated culture.

WU AS TEENAGE SEDUCTRESS: CHALLENGING A MALE FANTASY

Once Wu became an Imperial concubine, *Wu Zetian* depicts her as an alluring beauty who used her charms to captivate Emperor Taizong and crown prince Gaozong. Due to the consequences of beginning the story with a prophecy, several pages were spent showing Taizong attempting to resist her charms due to advice from his own fortune tellers, thus framing the teenage Wu as an irresistible and scheming "dragon lady". This was in contrast to what modern historians believe—that Taizong only had a passing interest in Wu, and nothing more (Clements, 2014, p. 24; Rothschild, 2008, p. 25).



FIG 7. Wu entrancing Emperor Taizong (left panel, pg8), Wu seducing Crown Gaozong (right 3 panels, pg16)

Wu as “teenage seductress” is a common trope in many Wu narratives. It points to both ancient and modern historians’ fixation on Wu’s sexuality, as seen through the male gaze. Modern historians may complain about Confucian historians depicting Wu as hypersexual, but when it comes to her relationship with the 17-year old crown prince Gaozong, these same (male) modern historians also imagine Wu as a 21-year old seductress eager to beguile a naïve younger man in order to escape an aging husband (Clements, 2014, p. 45; Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 17; Rothschild, 2008, p. 28). This was despite the fact that at the time, Wu hadn’t left the Imperial palace since she entered as an adolescent, and hasn’t seen or been intimate with any man other than Taizong. She was also childless and never particularly favoured by her husband, had no aristocratic blood, and knew that any sexual transgression would mean instant death. Perhaps, in light of her later spirited and pro-active nature, modern historians are too eager to paint her as something she has yet to grow into at that stage in her life.

It could also be an unconscious masculinist prejudice against the sexually active, politically influential woman that Wu would later become. This underlines the social construction of sexual women as “wicked” and “manipulative”, both within a scholarly context and outside of it. After all, this fixation on “Wu as hypersexual” is hardly new. It goes back for centuries, and can even be seen in two fictional Chinese novels that feature Wu—the Nineteenth Century novel *Flowers in the Mirror*, and the Sixteenth Century *Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*. While the former takes a more sympathetic feminist approach, the latter is a pornographic novella about Wu’s sexual adventures which can be compared to the modern

day “yellow books” (ie. pornography) still being written about her for a largely male audience (Clements, 2014; Song, 2010).

Wu’s hyper-sexualised image even seemed to have some influence on how scholarly treatises were written in the past, as her “sexual appetite is shown in official histories as growing in direct proportion to her ascendant political power” (Rothschild, 2008, p. 96). As Fitzgerald (1986) asserted, the *New Tang History* and the *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* claimed that she would “abase her body and endure shame in order to conform to the Emperor’s will” (p.44), which was an allusion to the sexual positions she would contort herself into to please Gaozong’s sexual proclivities (Clements, 2014, p. 7). These constant but coy references to Wu’s sexual appetite by Confucian historians would only fuel her salacious image with the public, something that not even her and Gaozong’s final resting place could escape. To this day, the two hills that bracket Gaozong’s tomb are still nicknamed “nipple hills” in local legends (Clements, 2014, p. 1).

The existence of all this proves that Wu holds symbolic value in the public imagination when it comes to the nexus of sex and power. It also points to the repackaging of a powerful woman’s image into a safe, non-threatening sexual fantasy and thus a commodity within a patriarchal system, to be consumed as popular culture by titillated audiences, and as historical “fact” by historians (Brown, 2015).

To refute this hyper-sexualisation in my own graphic novel, it was important to move away from placing undue emphasis on her sexuality. I achieved this by using a cartoony, child-friendly style of art that avoids any exaggeration of secondary sexual characteristics, and by focusing on Gaozong rather than on Wu in their relationship. For example, according to Imperial birth records in the *New Book of Tang*, Gaozong already had a handful of children from several unranked concubines at their time of meeting. Clearly sexually experienced and in a privileged position, a viable alternate narrative could suggest that Wu and Gaozong’s relationship was based on mutual attraction rather than the machinations of Wu as an opportunistic seductress. This angle also has the benefit of sowing the seeds of a more equitable future long-term marriage between Wu and Gaozong, and sets a favourable stage from which this couple would later co-rule.

However, even as I challenge the hegemonic narrative of a hyper-sexual Wu, I was careful not to strip her of too much agency. Gaozong may have been in a safer position than Wu to engage in an affair, but Wu was at that time chained to a sickly and dying husband, so

her own motives were also self-serving. This demonstrates that in a male-dominated society, women can be forced to “jump ship” for self-preservation when faced with the possibility of losing their protector. Again, by opting to reference the socio-economic bondage of married women that ties them to the well-being of their husbands, I utilise a feminist form of narrative revisionism.

WU AS “KILLER MOTHER”: CHALLENGING A MURDER ACCUSATION

After Wu becomes Gaozong’s high-ranking concubine, perhaps the most controversial plot development in the hegemonic Wu narrative is the accusation that she, in order to usurp the existing Empress’ position, would strangle her own infant daughter and frame the Empress for the crime. Nearly all popular culture depictions of Wu include this infamous act, not least because of the titillation that such a cruel feat would provide the audience.

This characterisation of Wu is no mistake, and it is built directly upon the pre-established image of a manipulative, hyper-sexual teenage Wu. Mothers who kill their own children are a common trope, and they occupy a particularly binaristic space where women are either loving nurturers or evil murderers, with little scope in between. In our society, “maternal folklore abounds, and the ideal mother has changed little from the description [...] presented more than three decades ago, [as] the woman who ‘loves her children completely and unambivalently’” (Barnett, 2013, p. 507). The fact that Wu would later become Emperor and thus upend the gender spheres of Confucian ideology would only buttress the belief that Wu is deeply unnatural—so psychopathic in her womanhood that she is able to commit the most heinous crime a woman is capable of. This single act irreversibly characterises Wu as amoral, so much that it seems natural to attribute every other death henceforth in Wu’s family to her murderous impulses.

Wu Zetian is no exception to this rule. Much like other popular culture representations of Wu, Tian would later show Wu murdering her sister, her niece, her eldest son, two of Gaozong’s concubines, her half-brothers, all while attempting to murder Gaozong himself. To say that the trope of “Wu as baby killer” is significant in the typical Wu narrative is an understatement—it stands as the pivotal moment where her characterisation as a “scheming hyper-sexual vixen” merges with that of the “inhumane murderous monster”. The

consequences of this plot event echo through the entire story, adding a sinister, psychopathic undertone to every action of Wu's henceforth.



FIG 8. Wu smothering her infant daughter (top left, pg29), Wu poisoning her own sister (bottom right, pg52)

This is even though few modern historians believe this event actually transpired the way the Confucian histories claim. While Wu was capable of many things in later life, there is little evidence to suggest that direct harm to her own children was something she pursued (Clements, 2014, p. 57; Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 23). Most English-language biographies attributed the child's death to something more mundane, such as poor ventilation or a sudden illness, and would note that when Empress Wang was eventually dethroned, the reason Gaozong gave for her demotion was her childlessness (Clements, 2014, pp. 56–67; Fitzgerald, 1968, pp. 22–26; Rothschild, 2008, pp. 31–34).

It is also worth pointing out that one can also chronologically track the various incarnations of this story through Wu's official histories. In the *Old History of Tang*, which was finished in 945 A.D., this crime Wu supposedly committed is not listed in the main body of the text, but in the commentary section. The wording was also vague and circumspect, and was recorded as "Chronicler(s) say(s)...it was Empress Wu's conspiracy to seize the position of Gaozong's legitimate wife by choking the breath from her own child, a swaddling infant" (Rothstein-safra, 2017, p. 49). However, by the time of the *New History of Tang*, compiled in 1060 A.D., this event had been embellished to include a distraught Gaozong. It remained so for successive histories such as the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* from 1084 A.D., which now included a deceitful Wu feigning horror when showing her dead child to the Emperor (Rothstein-safra, 2017). According to Rothstein-Safra (2017), while the true cause of death is unverifiable, the expansion of an original barebones piece of commentary into something more substantial suggests that this was a rumour that was recorded as fact: "The inclusion of rumour, often from questionable sources, to cast doubt on the subject and conceal bias is a common feature of the ancient historian's toolkit" (p. 50).

This allegation of infanticide is a part of how Wu's history is discursively constructed, with later generations of scholars continually embellishing this story in order to punish Wu. By emphasising her ruthlessness towards her own infant, they posit her outside the patriarchally-constructed norm of a "nurturing mother" by portraying her as inhumane. No matter how sympathetic a narrative is towards Wu's reasoning, this plot point unconsciously reproduces patriarchal ideologies about the binary nature of motherhood, and the psychopathic tendencies of women who usurp male power.

In my own story, I proposed a different version of events regarding the death of Wu's infant princess. This flows naturally from the changes already made in my revisionist story,

since the omission of Wu's prophetic birth already removes the fatalistic sense of inevitability to her later actions. This opens the possibility of having an infant die without any foul play, through either simple cot death, disease, or even still birth. Still birth as a possibility even has historical substantiation, since Wu was purported to have given birth to her second son and her dead daughter in the same year, suggesting that the latter child might have been prematurely born.

The removal of this murder from the account of Wu's life has far-reaching effects for the rest of the story, as it also removes any insinuations that she may have murdered others. Without the sinister undertones that the trope of "Wu as baby killer" provides, it is now possible to assume that her relatives died of diseases or accidents, and as such, they become largely external and thus irrelevant to Wu's political and personal journey towards the throne. My narrative frames Wu's origins as historically contingent and socially constituted, and deflects any patriarchal binary frameworks that automatically denounces her as "unnatural". Consequently, instead of anchoring her personality to two supposed events in her early life, readers are now free to judge her later actions without the burden of thinking that she murdered her own family in pursuit of power before she was ever in any position to consider grasping such power.

WU AND GAOZONG: A MORE BALANCED LOOK

After unpacking some of the key tropes of the hegemonic Wu narrative, I now arrive at Wu's husband, Emperor Gaozong. As the next-most important character in Wu's life, it is crucial to examine some of the narrative conventions that frame this relationship.

This is pertinent for biographical subjects, who lead complex lives emmeshed in a matrix of interpersonal relationships which mutually influence the subject and those around them. As such, one must be careful to refrain from characterising the subject as a multi-faceted individual, while depicting those around them as simple, straight-forward accessories (Israel, 2010). Likewise, it's important to avoid viewing the interpersonal relationships of the subject through the lens of stereotypical gender relations. In the case of Wu, one of her most important connections were to her husband Gaozong, with whom she co-ruled for thirty years. As a couple who acted together as a single inter-connected political unit, and who

sometimes worked in harmony and other times at cross-purposes, one cannot discuss Wu without also examining her marriage to Gaozong (Rothschild, 2008, p. 49).



FIG 9. Gaozong oblivious to Wu's machinations and murders (pg54)

Neither Confucian scholars nor modern historians have been kind to Gaozong. *Wu Zetian* does not differ—depicting Gaozong as a weak, love-struck buffoon who is oblivious to Wu's machinations and cold-blooded murders. While this comes across as overtly simple, this viewpoint is produced by a number of interlocking gender role reversals that involve subverted expectations of patriarchal power. It's also important to note that gendered distortions do not exist just against women—men are just as likely to fall victim to it when

they fail to fulfil a patriarchal ideal of masculine control. For that reason, my greatest criticism of modern Wu biographies is that they don't sufficiently challenge, or seem oblivious to, the gendered way Gaozong is portrayed, both in Chinese history and within their own work.

As I previously mentioned, modern historians seem wedded to the idea of "Wu as sexually rapacious teenager", which cannot help but force Gaozong into the stereotypical narrative position of a weak man held captive by a seductress. Even when deconstructing the Confucian sexualisation of Wu, modern biographers are still fixated by the idea of a strong woman railing against a patriarchal system, which again, automatically casts Gaozong as a stepping stone to be used. This can be seen in the dismissive language they use in regards to Gaozong, which also undermines Wu's agency by depicting her as the possessor of some kind of hypnotic power. An example can be found in Clements (2014): "It seems Wu's hold over Gaozong lessened when she was pregnant...Gaozong might have been able to think for himself when Wu was absent, but was powerless to resist her when she was in the same room" (p.94). Likewise, Fitzgerald (1968) stated that "[Wu Zhao saw in Gaozong a] chance in this situation, and was to spare no means, however ruthless, to attain her aim. The appointment of [Gaozong] was the first cause of the ascendancy of Wu Zhao and the Crown Prince was the means by which she climbed to power" (p16). Both statements highlight modern historians' perception of Gaozong as devoid of agency, and entirely subject to his wife's whims.

This is a problem even among historians who make a concerted effort to recast the Wu-Gaozong relationship as fair and equitable. An example of this can be found in Rothschild (2008), who writes: "Gaozong is often described as a feckless, indulgent, and timorous ruler wholly controlled by his wife. This assessment is both unkind and unfair...Rather, Gaozong and Wu Zhao developed a genuine partnership" (p. 49). Despite this, Rothschild still finds the prism of "strong woman/weak man" difficult to escape from, later writing: "Confronted by his wife, in a trice Gaozong's terrible resolve melted, softening into weak indulgence. [He held] up the edict with cringing deference..." (p. 53). That this description somewhat contradicts his earlier statement goes seemingly unnoticed.

What causes this dissonance among even modern historians? One is the gender role reversal of a married woman transgressing accepted gender boundaries in a patriarchal society, *without* the expected resentment from her husband. Another may involve Gaozong's poor health and weak constitution from birth, and how this may have influenced the verdict on his character from the perspective of gender. Since "culture has long viewed the physical

body as important for indicating manly vigour,” it is possible that ideas of hegemonic masculinity govern historians’ view of Gaozong—in that they unconsciously equate physical disability with deficiency of character (Foster, 2012, webpage).

In a male dominated society, male authority figures such as an autocratic Emperor embody the institutional and familial power structure of the “father-rule” basis of patriarchy. Studies in disability and masculinity, including works by Foster (2012) and Shuttleworth, Wedgwood & Wilson (2014), have shown that when the exalted virility of the ideal male melds with the presumed helplessness of a disabled body, dissonance can occur. This is because a clash between different hierarchies of masculinities can warp a historian’s perspective of relational power. In Gaozong’s marriage, this is even amplified, due to Wu’s additional role as a transgressing woman. Since the gender expectation is that a male Emperor in a patriarchal society is supposed to be “strong” and able to “keep his wife under his thumb”, when an Emperor fails to do so for whatever reason (including personal choice), he is automatically designated as “weak”.

To counter this narrative in my graphic novel, I depicted Wu and Gaozong’s relationship as equitable and loving. While I acknowledge that Gaozong suffers from ill-health, I am careful to show that his mental capabilities remain sharp, even as I am aware that this is only *one* way to depict their relationship.

This is important to keep in mind, since the way Wu and Gaozong’s relationship is portrayed historically has direct implications for depictions and interpretations of her political agency. By understating Gaozong’s role, there is a risk of overstating Wu’s influence, which creates the problem of depicting Wu as more powerful than she really was. It also undermines her political and administrative competence by over-emphasising her domestic life and portraying her as a manipulative seductress. The current historiography of Wu and Gaozong creates a gap for a more nuanced depiction of their relationship, which I hope that my creative work can fill.

CONCLUSION

Wu Zetian was competent ruler with a scandalous personal life, which has been distorted by Confucian historians over the years. Even in modern times when historians are more aware of feminist issues, an analysis of the available scholarship uncovers that

stereotyping still exists—not only for female rulers, but also for male rulers who don't act within strict gender confines. In regards to Wu, this unequal view of gender relations has permeated most narratives about her, and has contributed to a number of Chinese popular culture productions (in the Twentieth Century and before) which, along with official Confucian histories, continue to shape societal conceptions of her.

The end result is a public image of Wu that has remained remarkably consistent. Even with the explosion of TV, movies, novels, comics, and video games in modern China which have multiplied the number of popular depictions of Wu, attitudes towards her have not changed. Despite Wu's ubiquity, almost none of the imaginings stray from the "lascivious seductress" or "ruthless concubine" archetype which are a staple of Confucian narratives about her (Song, 2010). The "sex sells" nature of the post-Mao market economy has only fuelled this portrayal, by prompting male biographers to cater to the sensational (Song, 2010). Likewise, scholars labouring in current and ancient China are still bound by the institutionalised nature of Chinese history, where credibility is dictated by adherence to the official narrative, and are thus unlikely to challenge written history.

For that reason, it was necessary to undertake an investigation and create an alternate version of Wu's life story, by challenging the core assumptions made by the hegemonic Wu narrative. The choice of creative medium to do this in is significant—as a revisionist feminist history, I would argue that a graphic novel allows a suitably complex representation while remaining accessible to a wider audience. This is because of the techniques I was able to use, which include stylised graphics, and page/panel compositions that disrupts linearity by suggesting simultaneity. The latter in particular is useful for creating revisionist histories, since it permits multiple interpretations of visual representations, and thus encourages ruptures in hegemonic narratives.

The graphic novel biography I created achieves this. By analysing the existing case study graphic novel *Wu Zetian*, I identified that the harshest denunciations of Wu's character originate in allegations by historians regarding her earlier, personal life. This is also the most poorly-documented part of her life, which has allowed generations of disapproving Confucian scholars to discursively construct her image into that of the stereotypical "wicked dragon lady". By pushing back against some of these claims and challenging common narrative tropes, I felt that I have been able to disrupt the rigid framework that masculinist Confucian historians have boxed her into. It is also worth noting that while I was able to offer an alternate narrative

for Wu's earlier life, my depiction of her later years was almost identical to that of traditional historians. This shows that the fatalistic origin story from the hegemonic Wu narrative—one which attempted to use a prophecy to anchor her base nature as amoral—need not be the only accepted telling. This is significant, since the discursively-constructed psychopathic younger Wu is often used to excoriate Wu's later deeds as Emperor, by insinuating that these deeds originate from her natural-born amoral tendencies. By undermining these foundations, I successfully challenge attempts to push Wu into the limiting category of “lascivious, murderous concubine”.

Hopefully, as feminist scholarship about Wu becomes more common, a fairer depiction of Wu *and* Gaozong will emerge and exert influence over the cultural landscape. Through my creative thesis, which aims to deconstruct Wu's historiography and offer an alternate interpretation to her most oft-retold stories, I hope to contribute to the discourse that will shape our ideas of this remarkable female Emperor in the present, and also into the future.

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