

# Wu Zhao: *Ruthless Rise to Power*

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One day the Chinese emperor Tang Taizong was having difficulty taming a particular horse. As a young mistress in his court, Wu Zhao offered ruler some advice on how to tame the animal. Her advice would both reveal her boldness of character and foreshadow the actions she would take to achieve her goals. She would use three tools to tame the horse, she said. First, she would use the whip and mace to subdue the beast. If that did not work, she would use the third tool – a knife to cut the animal’s throat.

In 625, Wu was born to a wealthy family allied with the rulers of the Tang Dynasty. When she was about 14 years old, rumors spread of her beauty. As a result, Emperor Tang Taizong brought her to the palace to become one of his many wives. Soon after she arrived, the emperor’s son Gaozong fell in love with her.

Upon the death of Taizong, Wu was sent to a nunnery with all the other minor wives. But a year later, Gaozong visited her and his passion was renewed. After her return to the palace, Wu began a determined quest for power.

Gaozong had a primary wife, the empress. Though that wife had not borne any children, tradition gave her a powerful claim to authority and respect. Wu found a shocking but effective way to remove her rival. Wu gave birth to a daughter, whom the emperor deeply loved. After the empress had played with the baby one day, Wu entered her daughter’s room secretly and strangled her. When the infant’s death was discovered, the empress was blamed and sent away. Gaozong made Wu Zhao his empress in 633.

Wu’s drive for power was not finished, however. She managed to transfer or reduce the power of officials who did not back her. As Gaozong grew older and weaker, she took increasing control. By 674, she took the title Heavenly Empress, matching her husband’s title of Heavenly Emperor. She also instituted a shrewd set of reforms aimed at gaining support for herself. She cut taxes, raised the salaries of government officials, reduced expensive military operations, and both reformed the government and permitted criticism of it.

In the next few years, the eldest son she bore with Gaozong died mysteriously. It is believed that Wu had a hand in her son’s death, since the two disagreed frequently. A few years later, she had their second son sent into exile. In 683, Gaozong died and another son replaced him. When he tried to act independently, Wu

solved the problem. She threw that son off the throne and put another son in his place.

In 686, opposition to her rule produced a rebellion. However, Wu’s soldiers defeated the rebels, and she began a careful campaign to formally seize the royal seat. First, she tried to win popularity by increasing aid to the poor and by removing corrupt government officials. Second, she had a stone placed in a river inscribed with the words, “A sage mother will befall and her [empire] will be prosperous forever.” The stone was accidentally “discovered” and then revealed. She also caused a fake Buddhist scripture to be discovered – one that predicted that a female god would appear to become the greatest ruler in the world. Finally, she may have caused three petitions to be signed, one with 60,000 signatures that begged her to assume the throne. In 690, she agreed and became the first female Chinese emperor.

For the next 13 years, Wu Zhao ruled successfully. Her reign was filled with economic development and the entry of many brilliant men into an honest and efficient government. Nevertheless, rule by a woman was wrong in Confucian teaching. When she died and was buried, tradition was broken. No words were carved onto the monument marking her tomb.

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## Discussion Questions

*Answer the following in complete sentences.*

1. What does the story about taming a horse reveal about Wu’s character?
2. Describe two methods Wu used to gain power. Do you agree with the use of these methods? Why or why not?
3. Describe two positive things Wu did as empress.
4. What did Wu do to make it appear she had a right to the throne? Why did she take those steps?