

Wu Zetian's Manipulation of Confucianism and Buddhism*

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This paper discusses the overseas dissemination of Wu Zetian's image as a stateswoman and a pragmatic "thinker".

The author studies Wu Zetian's attitude towards Confucianism and Buddhism, and analyzes her manipulation of Confucianism and Buddhism for political purposes.

Keywords: Wu Zetian's images, confucianism, Buddhism, overseas dissemination

Introduction

Wu Zetian is the only orthodox female emperor in ancient Chinese history. Her image in literature and art has been as controversial as in history study. With the development of academic research on her, her image becomes increasingly complicated. Some people believe that she is a wise stateswoman and a thinker in every sense of the word to consolidate the centralized government, because although she violates the principles and ethics of Confucianism, she makes full use of Confucianism to consolidate her reign. Besides, she also actively promotes and supports Buddhism to manipulate public opinions in order to reduce people's hostility to female sovereign. This paper analyzes the overseas dissemination of Wu Zetian's image as a stateswoman and a pragmatic "thinker", hoping to provide useful information and advice for the overseas dissemination of Wu Zetian as an influential symbol of Chinese culture.

Wu Zetian is not only an excellent politician, but also a thinker. In the Tang Dynasty, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are all accepted by the ruling class. In principle, Confucianism was orthodox, but it was not exclusive. When the Tang Dynasty was founded, in order to sanctify the imperial power of the Li family, Taoism was respected as the state religion. In the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, Taoism was demoted below Buddhism in order to replace the Tang Dynasty and establish the Zhou Dynasty. And there was a close relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism. She knew that Confucianism was the most effective governing program and ideology. In order to seize power and maintain it, she made full use of Confucianism to justify her name, declared the theory of the relationship between the monarch and the subjects, and emphasized the importance of imperial

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examinations to promote civil officials. At the same time, she promoted and supported Buddhism, using Buddhism to support the legitimacy of her rule and to attract the hearts of the people through her followers.

Wu Zetian's Manipulation of Confucianism

Confucianism is a kind of extensive and profound ideological system which was initiated by Confucius and developed by his disciples and his successors. Since the reign of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty (汉武帝), it outstood from all other schools of thought, and has dominated the Central Plains dynasty in most ancient China as an orthodox ideology. In most of ancient Chinese dynasties, the emperors obtained ideological support from Confucianism, but Confucianism had a very strong patriarchal streak, and the idea that a woman should be emperor was not acceptable at all in Confucianism. From an early age, Wu Zetian was opposed to the armchair reversion of Confucianism, and she knew how difficult it would be to defeat generations of Confucianism. But Wu Zetian, who had been involved in politics for a long time, was well aware of the role of Confucianism in political governance. Although some Confucian theories, especially ethics and morals, were indeed big obstacles for Wu Zetian as a harem woman to interfere in government affairs, that didn't stop her from declaring herself emperor. On the contrary, Wu Zetian was very clear that in order to maintain her ruling, she had to rely on Confucianism, especially the theory of the relationship between the monarch and the subject, loyalty and filial piety, which were of great significance for her to consolidate her governance of the country after she seized power. And in this respect she just made full use of and developed Confucianism.

In Lin Yutang's (林语堂) story, Wu Zetian subverted the ethical principles of Chinese feudal society, such as the "three principles and five virtues" and "three from the four virtues" in pursuit of power. Lin says, "When a woman's nature is stimulated, she is not respectable or not: scandal or incest, what does it matter!" Second, she would kill her own daughter to gain power. As a mother, Wu Zetian was derelict in her duty, and the child was just a bargaining chip for her to fight for power and a tool for political gambling. She could easily have strangled her 10-day-old daughter in the cradle, she could have stained her hands with the blood of her five own children, and she could have sat on the throne with no problem. Wu Zetian poisoned her niece after the death of her sister, Mrs. Hanguo (韩国夫人), who was very close to Gaozong. She also took advantage of the death of Mrs. Weiguo (魏国夫人) to have her two brothers executed. "These three people who Empress Wu didn't like, these three insidious, vicious and talkative people to Empress Wu, under the clever plan of Empress Wu, they dealt with it so easily." It can be said that there is no queen in history, and no mother in the world can kill relatives to such an extreme level. Thirdly, Wu Zetian broke the relationship of ethics, which shook the ruling position of the monarchy and the husband in the ancient Chinese feudal society. After becoming empress, Wu Zetian forced the emperor to live a monogamous life. In the name of worrying about the emperor's health, Wu Zetian realized the possession and control of Gaozong, and she also controlled the power in Gaozong's hands. After the death of Emperor Gaozong, she kept gigolos. Lin Yutang believes that although Wu Zetian became the emperor in an unethical operation, although she hunted for beautiful men in an unrestrained manner, although she controlled the whole of China, she was always in fear. Wu Zetian is still a tragic figure, she still has to hand over the throne to the Li Tang family, therefore, she fails in the end which implies his criticism of Wu Zetian for violating Confucianism.

Although Wu Zetian did violate ethics advocated by Confucianism during her rise to power, she also used Confucianism to her advantage. This is mainly manifested in the following aspects: firstly, she rectified her own identity and regime. Secondly, she wrote the book *Chen Gui* (《臣轨》) to promote the Confucian loyalty to the emperor, and constantly strengthened the imperial ruling of Wu Zhou. Thirdly, she reused civil and military ministers with Confucianism and made them important pillars for the consolidation of political power. For an emperor like Wu Zetian who usurped power, the rectification of her name is extremely important. She first worshiped the River Pailuo book, and used auspicious to rectify her name, which was also because after Dong Zhongshu's (董仲舒) theory of "the reaction between man and nature", such political auspices became legitimate. Then she changed the reign title to Tianshou (天授) to rectify the name of the Wu Zhou regime. She also used the worship of heaven and earth, an important part of Confucian political theory, to advocate the divine right of Kings and the connection between heaven and man, and used this opportunity to expand her political influence. Wu Zetian compiled the *Chen Gui*, vigorously publicizing the way of loyalty to the monarch. A large part of Confucianism talks about the way of emperor and ministers. She required her courtiers to learn *Chen Gui*, which required unconditional loyalty and assistance from her courtiers to strengthen her regime. In addition, the contents of the imperial examinations are mostly Confucian classics. Wu Zetian not only emphasized the imperial examination but also used the civil servants who were selected from the imperial examination.

Wu Zetian's Manipulation of Buddhism

As early as Emperor Mingdi's reign in the Eastern Han Dynasty (东汉明帝时期), Buddhism was introduced into China. But the development of Buddhism in China has gone through a series of twists and turns. By the early Tang Dynasty, the royal rulers of Li Tang Dynasty, who had the same surname as Lao Zi (老子), the founder of Taoism, tried their best to improve the status of Taoism in order to elevate their family background. Li Yuan (李渊), Emperor Gaozu of the Tang Dynasty, once declared that among the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Taoism had the highest status, which formed a situation of worship of Taoism and suppression of Buddhism. However, during the Empress Wu Zetian's reign, the situation changed a lot. Buddhism prospered quickly and has been prosperous ever since, leading to the overall flourishing of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty until the end of the reign of Emperor Wuzong in the Tang Dynasty (唐武宗). Compared with other periods of the Tang Dynasty, the position of Buddhism in Wu Zetian's period was the highest, which was closely related to the great promotion of gods and Buddha, promotion and support of Buddhism after Wu Zetian mastered the actual power. Some scholars say that Buddhism flourished during Wu Zetian's reign because of her family's religious beliefs, political needs and other factors. In order to change Tang into Zhou, Wu Zetian adopted the policy of elevating the status of Buddhism and promoting the development of Buddhism. At the same time, Buddhism provided great support for Wu Zetian's ruling.

Why did Wu Zetian have such preference to Buddhism? Many scholars have studied this, such as Chen Yinke's (陈寅恪) *Wuzhao and Buddhism*, which explains the inevitability of Wu Zetian's belief in Buddhism from two aspects of family belief and political need. However, most researches show that the real purpose of Wu Zetian's Buddhist belief is out of political need. She needed to constantly emphasize and justify her ascendancy to the throne. First she established herself as the reincarnation of Maitreya. The Buddhist sutra of the time, *the Great Cloud Sutra* (《大云经》) says: "A Bodhisattva was incarnated as the Goddess of Heaven, and the Buddha

foretold that Goddess of Heaven would become king in the future, and that anyone who dared to resist would be punished.” Xue Huaiyi (薛怀义), Wu Zetian's toyboy, organized monks to write a book called *Commentary to the Great Cloud Sutra* (《大云经注》) to explain *the Great Cloud Sutra*, saying that the pure heavenly girl was the incarnation of Maitreya Buddha, who would be reincarnated as a king, and Wu Zetian was the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha. At that time, Maitreya Buddha was the most popular Buddhist image, and Wu Zetian gained great prestige by making her the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha. N. Harry Rothschild wrote in his biography: “Wu Zhao needed reinforcement to corroborate her image as Cakravartin.” Wu Zetian also made great efforts in civil engineering. With her support, a large number of Buddhist temples were built, and there were still many Buddhist temples including Guangyuan Huangze Temple (皇泽寺) built during Wu Zetian period. Apart from Zen forest temples, according to statistics, grottoes and shrines built during Wu Zetian's reign accounted for more than two thirds of the total built during the Tang Dynasty. According to records, the famous Longmen Vairocana Buddha (龙门卢舍那佛) was built with Wu Zetian's funding. Wu Zetian was an active supporter of Buddhist activities. For example, during her reign, Monlams were held every year to celebrate the Obon Festival (盂兰盆会), which is an important festival of Buddhism. She held two events in honor of the sarira. She also supported the translation of Buddhist scriptures. During her reign, Wu Zetian invited monks from all over the world to translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, and many of them even came from the Western Regions and India. In that period, Buddhism developed very rapidly, and the whole society also had a strong atmosphere of believing in Buddhism, which led Buddhism to the most popular belief in China. In a word, Wu Zetian's great promotion of Buddhism is of great significance to her own belief and ruling, and also has far-reaching influence on later generations and the development and spread of Buddhism.

Conclusion

When analyzing and studying Wu Zetian, most scholars focus on her political actions and ignore her manipulation of Confucianism and Buddhism. In fact, as the only orthodox female emperor in China, she understood the obstacles and advantages that Confucianism and Buddhism could bring to her and used all intellectual weapons in an appropriate way to maintain her ruling. Studying the ideology and culture of Wu Zetian as well as her personal thought is of great significance for scholars at home and abroad. The analysis of Wu Zetian's manipulation of Confucianism and Buddhism is helpful to the academia to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Wu Zetian.

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