

Asian Female Sovereigns and the Empress Wu¹

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In 690 Wu Zetian 武則天 (known in Western scholarship as the Empress Wu, 623-705) acceded to the imperial throne and thus transpired the sole occasion in all of Chinese history when a woman became emperor. When we look at this distinctive instance in Chinese history of the accession of a female sovereign within the larger context of Asian sovereigns of the era, we soon become aware that this was not necessarily such a distinctive event.

Before a female emperor took the throne in Tang dynasty China, a female emperor, Suiko 推古 (554-628), acceded to the throne in 592 in the state of Wa 倭 (Japan). She was the first in an era of female sovereigns in East Asia. After Suiko, a woman took the throne in the neighboring kingdom of Silla 新羅: in 632 Queen Sōndōk 善德—through the bloodline of King Pōphūng 法興王, King Chinhūng 真興王, Tongyun 銅輪, and King Chinp’yōng 真平王—came to reign in Silla.

The rule of this Queen Sōndōk sent immense shock waves out at home and abroad. In 643, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (596-649) of the Tang noted that because the sovereign of Silla was a woman, it had been attacked by the states of Koguryō 高句麗 and Paekche 百濟. Also, the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (History of the three kingdoms) notes that in 647 the *sangdaedūng* 上大等 (“extraordinary rank one”) Pidam 毗曇 planned a coup d’état to depose her because “the state can not be ruled by a female sovereign.” Sōndōk died in this coup attempt. It would appear, then, that the accession of women sovereigns were seen as the acme of the admonitory notion enunciated in the *Shujing* 書經 (Classic of documents): “The hen is announcing the dawn” 牝鷄之晨 (rightfully the rooster’s job). Also, a clear denial of women rising to rulership and rule by female sovereigns can be seen both in the great Tang state and in Silla as well.

One of the points of great interest in seventh-century Asian history, though, is that, despite such a tendency writ large, women successively came to the throne before and after. In the state of Wa, Empress Kōgyoku 皇極 (594?-661) ascended the throne in 642, and Tang Taizong’s denunciation notwithstanding, following the death of Sōndōk, Silla brought to the throne Queen Chindōk 真德 in 647. In 886 Silla also witnessed the ascension of Queen Chinsōng 真聖, the last female sovereign in ancient East Asian history. Kōgyoku abdicated in 645, and she accended the throne a second time in 655 as Saimei 齊明.

The accession to the throne of the Empress Wu in 690 followed the rise to the throne of these other women sovereigns. Ironically, in that very same year, Empress Uno 鸕野, consort of Emperor Tenmu 天武 (d. 686), brought an end to the *shōsei* 禰制 system of regency, a

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provisional rulership following the death of Tenmu, and formally took over the reins of state as Empress Jitō 持統 (645-702). Thereafter, Japan produced from the eighth century three female sovereigns (in four reigns): Genmei 元明 (r. 707-15), Genshō 元正 (r. 715-24), Kōken 孝謙 (r. 749-58), and Shōtoku 稱徳 (r. 764-70), the last two being the same person.

One fascinating fact we should note in this connection is a reference made in the “Nanman zhuan” 南蠻傳 (Treatise on the southern barbarians) of the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old Tang history) to one “Dongnü guo” 東女國 (State of Eastern Women), a land in southeast Asia governed by queens in which a “female sovereign” (*nüwang* 女王, according to the text) by the name of Binjiu 賓就 [as pronounced in modern Mandarin] ruled. According to the *Jiu Tangshu*, during the Wude 武德 reign period (618-26) of founding Tang Emperor Gaozu 高祖, the female sovereign of “Dongnü guo,” known as “Tang Pangshi” 湯滂氏, sent an emissary to the Tang court to pay tribute. In 685 the female sovereign “Lianbi” 斂臂 sent a high minister of state and was given gifts of bureaucratic titles and rough clothing made of brocade. Then, in 692, after the accession of the Empress Wu, female sovereign “Eyan’er” 俄琰兒 herself came to court, and in 696 as well she sent an ambassador. Thereafter, in 741 during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685-762), female sovereign “Zhao Yefu” 趙曳夫 sent an envoy and the following year (742) held a banquet at Qujiang 曲江 and was enfeoffed as “Guichang wang” 歸昌王. The *Jiu Tangshu* notes that this state later came to have male kings, and in 793 male sovereign “Tang Lixi” 湯立悉 among others sought repatriation under the Tang.

As the historical record testifies, “Dongnü guo” was a state from the early seventh century through the late eighth century with female sovereigns, four of whom came to the throne: Tang Pangshi, Lianbi, Eyan’er, and Zhao Yefu. Most interesting is the fact that in 692 female sovereign Eyan’er herself came to the very Chinese court over which only two years earlier the Empress Wu had become “emperor.”

How did the Empress Wu who had risen to the pinnacle of power in the imperial institution in China—a country which had evaded women’s participation in governmental affairs and early on emphasized the “family-state order” illustrated clearly in the warning of “the hen announcing the dawn”—greet Eyan’er? Was this embassy to the Chinese court not a chance affair but well planned? There are many such questions to which we would love to know the answers, but unfortunately sufficient historical materials are simply unavailable.

The era in which Wu Zetian, the Dasheng 大聖 Emperor, ruled witnessed a temporary rupture in the dispatch from the kingdom of Wa (early Japan) of the embassies to China. The Tang exercised no control over the accession to the throne of Empress Jitō in Wa, and the embassy sent by the Japanese court and aristocrats in 702 did not know until it had returned in 704 that a woman had come to the throne in the Tang court.

Accordingly, a meeting between the Empress Wu and Empress Jitō was never really a possibility. The report to Emperor Monmu 文武 (r. 697-707) which accompanied the return of Awata no Mahito 粟田真人 (d. 719) and others from their embassy to China which could not have known about the coup in the first lunar month of 705 that toppled the Empress Wu and her death in the eleventh month of that year took is as a favorable point that “in the great Tang as well they have installed a woman on the throne.” Empress Genmei (r. 707-15) then came to the throne, and we are left to surmise if this might have been one of the reasons for the continued production of female sovereigns in eighth-century Japan.

It is astounding that seventh-century Asia was such an era of female sovereigns, the likes of which cannot be found in centuries before or after. This connection can only be established by using an approach which heeds the dual directionality of such international moments.

The Era of Female Sovereigns

Year	Wa (Japan)	Sui-Tang (China)	Silla (Korean)	Dongnü guo
592	Suiko enthroned			
600				
618	Suiko dies			Tang Pangshi (r. ca. 618-26)
625				
626				
632			Sōndōk enthroned	
642	Kōgyoku enthroned			
645	Kōgyoku abdicates			
647			Sōndōk dies Chindōk enthroned	
650				
654			Chindōk dies	
655	Saimei enthroned			
661	Saimei dies			
675				
685				Lianbi (on throne)
686	Empress Uno (Jitō) rules provisionally			
690	Jitō enthroned	(Empress) Wu Zetian enthroned		
692				Eyan'er (on throne)
700	Jitō dies			
702				
705		Empress Wu dies		
707	Genmei enthroned			
715	Genshō enthroned			
721	Genmei dies			
725				
741				Zhao Yefu (on throne)
748	Genshō dies			
749	Kōken enthroned			
750				
764	Shōtoku enthroned			
770	Shōtoku dies			
775				