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## **Redefining Tradition: How Wu Zhao's Regulations for Ministers Turned Tang Taizong's Plan for an Emperor Inside-Out to Create a New Paradigm of Political Authority**

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*Redefining Tradition:  
How Wu Zhao's 'Regulations for Ministers' Turned Tang  
Taizong's 'Plan for an Emperor' Inside-Out to Create a New  
Paradigm of Political Authority*

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**Abstract**

In 685, at a pivotal juncture in her ascendancy, empress dowager-regent Wu Zhao, with help from her extra-bureaucratic aides, the Scholars of the Northern Gate, created a political manual for court officials, *Regulations for Ministers* (Chen Gui 臣軌). Recognizing the anomalous nature of her political authority, Wu Zhao and her co-authors rooted this signature work in Chinese tradition. She borrowed ideas from a work written by her first husband and predecessor, Tang Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-49), *Plan For an Emperor* (Di fan 帝範), like the metaphor that ruler and officials were part of a shared, interdependent “common body.” In addition, *Regulations* drew heavily upon the twin pillars of Confucianism, filial piety and loyalty, in a rhetorical manner that promoted greater loyalty to the ruler (herself). However, her adroit use of tradition was a ploy to subvert tradition. Due to her gender, *Regulations* stretched conventions to accommodate her political agenda—to become emperor—which subverted the unspoken rule that barred women from claiming the crown. In this respect and others, like timing and target audience, Wu Zhao's *Regulations*, although borrowing from cultural norms, stands independent from prior texts like Taizong's *Plan for an Emperor*.

**Introduction**

Among the diverse strategies employed to augment her political authority, China's first and only female emperor Wu Zhao 武曩 (624-705, r. 690-705) concealed her innovative ideas in the guise of tradition. As Empress (655-683) and Grand Dowager (684-690), she went to great lengths to superficially present herself in the image of a dutiful housewife, a doting mother, and a scrupulously loyal follower of Confucian tenets. Through her cunning, the parameters of these personas expanded, permitting Wu Zhao to gain entry into an otherwise exclusive patriarchal world. In

665, while Gaozong's 高宗 (r. 649-83) empress, in an early display of her capacity to manipulate tradition, Wu Zhao skillfully used Confucian rhetoric to argue her way into participating in the Shan rite 禪—part of the Feng and Shan sacrifices 封禪, grand and sacrosanct ceremonies performed to secure tranquility between earth below, heaven above, and the ruler—previously a solely male event. In the Shan sacrifice, she performed the secondary sacrifices and replaced imperial court officials with noblewomen. Including women in this event yielded a wider circle of female visibility in the public sphere—an occurrence that repeatedly transpired throughout Wu Zhao's acquisition of power.<sup>1</sup>

During the latter half of Gaozong's reign, the Tang dynasty faced a series of disasters. First, Gaozong, who struggled with health complications throughout his rule, suffered a stroke in 660.<sup>2</sup> While his ailing health marked an obvious strain on the empire, Wu Zhao used his weakened position to augment her own authority. In that same year, Wu Zhao assumed the role of co-ruler over China's vast empire and became one of the “Two Sages”—a distinction that further allowed the empress to play a conspicuous and active role in government.<sup>3</sup> Second, in 666, the government debased the currency to solve the ever-escalating expenses of the Korean campaign—an act that spurred economic failure.<sup>4</sup> The Tang empire's already dire situation spiraled in 668, 669, and 670 when famine and natural disasters struck the empire.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with these catastrophes, the deaths of Wu Zhao's mother, a useful ally in court due to her influential political connections, and chief minister Xu Jingzong 許敬宗 (d. 672), who helped actuate Wu Zhao's political supremacy, challenged her fragile position in court.<sup>6</sup> Despite these setbacks, the deaths of heirs apparent in 675 and 680 removed a major obstacle standing in the way of Wu Zhao and the throne. Written in the wake of Gaozong's death in 683, her political treatise,

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1 Chen Jo-Shui, “Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China,” *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed. Frederick Brandauer and Chun-Chieh Huang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 84.

2 N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mother* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 50.

3 Ibid.

4 Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Weschler, “Kao-Tsung (Reign 649–83) and the Empress Wu: The Inheritor and the Usurper,” *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 266-267.

5 Twitchett and Weschler, “Kao-Tsung (Reign 649-83) and the Empress Wu,” 267.

6 Ibid.

*Regulations for Ministers* (Chen Gui 臣軌; hereafter *Regulations*) served to amplify and legitimize her political power first as grand dowager, and later as emperor.

Her predecessor (and first husband) Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-49) crafted a similar text on governance, titled *Plan for an Emperor* (Di fan 帝範; hereafter *Plan*) to provide instruction to his son, Gaozong. *Plan* emerged near the conclusion of Taizong's grand if checkered reign marked by military failures, an estranged inner court, and his waning health. As disease ravaged his body, Taizong focused on the future, mending fissures within the court; to this end, he rooted his imperial guide for Gaozong, his *Plan*, in Confucian tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In *Regulations*, Wu Zhao drew upon concepts presented in Taizong's *Plan*, such as the “common body” (tongti 同體) metaphor and a structural analogy to explain the minister-ruler binary. Contrary to what the scholars Richard Guisso and Li Hexian believe, Wu Zhao did not model *Regulations* after Taizong's work.<sup>8</sup> Although pulling from similar conventions as the earlier text, the audience, timing, and intention behind Wu Zhao's work set *Regulations* apart. While *Regulations* is reminiscent in some respects to *Plan*, sections within it like “Absolute Loyalty” (zhi zhong 至忠), and “Good Generals” (liang jiang 良將), allowed her ideas on the ruler-minister binary to toe the line of tradition while simultaneously carving out a new and ingenious path that led her to the seat of paramount power—emperor.

### **The Respective Intentions Behind *Plan for an Emperor* and *Regulations for Ministers***

Mark Lewis characterizes Wu Zhao's “think tank,” the Scholars of the Northern Gate (Beimen xueshi 北門學士), as a “sinister” or “secret” secretariat that existed outside of the bureaucracy yet participated in government actions.<sup>9</sup> In 685, while Wu Zhao scrambled to consolidate her control over the court as Grand Dowager, this group of

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7 Denis Twitchett, “How to be an Emperor: T'ang T'ai-tsung's Vision of His Role,” *Asia Major* 9, no. 1-2, (1996): 92.

8 N. Harry Rothschild, “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China,” (PhD diss., Brown University, 2003), 144.

9 Mark E. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 38. In fact, other Tang emperors worked with similar extra-bureaucratic groups; Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-56), Wu Zhao's grandson, set up the famous Forest of Brushes (Hanlin 翰林院) Academy.

scholars helped produce *Regulations for Ministers*.<sup>10</sup> Neither Wu Zhao nor her aides desired to deviate from tradition, instead they chose to reinterpret these old texts in the hope of vaulting Wu Zhao onto the throne.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, *Regulations* blended various Confucian, Daoist, and Legal texts along with thirty-five other works into its prose.<sup>12</sup> The amalgamation of various Chinese traditions provided Wu Zhao the guise she needed to issue her political ideas to her wide audience—the court ministers.

Using tradition to conceal personal ambition or an illegitimate seizure of power was not unprecedented. In 626, nearly sixty years prior to the creation of *Regulations*, Taizong seized the title of heir apparent by force and, shortly after, procured the title of emperor. After seizing the throne, Taizong sent his father, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618-26), the retired emperor, to live in a cramped castle in the western part of the city, forced to endure the hot summer months within the walls of his stifling and constricted abode.<sup>13</sup> Concerned that his singularly unfilial and unfraternal rise—he committed fratricide in addition to usurping the throne from his father—might taint his image to posterity, Taizong courted favor from his ministers, theatrically practicing Confucian virtue.<sup>14</sup> Showing deference to Confucianism, the emperor eagerly urged remonstrance and adopted the role of a student before his ministers.<sup>15</sup> He meticulously followed the Confucian precepts of frugality and moderation and responded to scholarly advice fervently.<sup>16</sup> These first few years exalted Taizong's image to that of an ideal Chinese emperor, but this was not to last.

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10 Rothschild, "Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies," 147.

11 Ibid.

12 Rothschild, "Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies," 150.

13 Howard J. Weschler, "The Founding of the T'ang Dynasty: Kao-Tsu (Reign 618-26)," *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3, 186.

14 To cite an example of Taizong's performative Confucian morality, Howard J. Weschler describes an event that occurred in 628, when the emperor saw a swarm of locusts ravishing his city. In response to the pestilent spectacle, Taizong journeyed to the Imperial Park, grabbed a fistful of the insects and cried, 'the people regard grain the same as life itself, yet you devour it. Better that you devour my own lungs and bowels!' He then lifted his fist towards his mouth causing his attendants to rush over, restraining him from eating the locusts. They pleaded with the king, saying that if he consumed the locusts he may fall ill. In response to their protestations, Taizong exclaimed, 'how can we try to avoid illness!' He then lifted his fist to his mouth again and consumed the insects. See Howard J. Weschler, "T'ai-Tsung the Consolidator (Reign 626-49)," *The Cambridge History of China*, 190.

15 Howard J. Weschler, "T'ai-Tsung the Consolidator (Reign 626-49)," *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and T'ang China, 589-906 AD, Part One*, ed. by John K. Fairbank and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 190.

16 Weschler, "T'ai-Tsung the Consolidator," 191.

Towards the latter half of Taizong's rule, his adolescent tendencies of ambitious, self-aggrandizing expansion returned. The prosperity of the empire allotted Taizong the confidence to convert his attention to military campaigns and provoke court factionalism as a means to amplify his power.<sup>17</sup> By 643, his success ebbed. As a result of his failed manipulations of both court factions and his eldest son, Li Chengqian 李承乾 (618-45), Taizong lost political face.<sup>18</sup> To recoup prestige, he launched a series of late-reign military campaigns. However, his martial (wu 武) focus only served to increase the dissatisfaction of his ministers.

While Taizong achieved great success in terms of civil reforms and his early military achievements, but he did so at the cost of splintering relations with his inner court. Failed military campaigns like the disastrous Liaodong 遼東 campaign of 645 cast a shadow over his reign.<sup>19</sup> After deliberately ignoring the advice of counsellors during that fiasco, he continued developing plans to seize and destroy neighboring North Korean kingdom, Koguryo (Gaogouli: 高句麗), which only resulted in further futility.<sup>20</sup>

Stricken in 648 with a debilitating disease, Taizong grew more concerned about passing the large if fragile empire to his heir and, therefore, composed *Plan for an Emperor*.<sup>21</sup> In this text, in an effort to summarize and pass on knowledge of rulership to his ill-prepared fourth son Li Zhi 李治, the future Gaozong, Taizong removes his crown, and speaks as a father directly to his son. Within his manual, Taizong includes time-honored approaches to rulership and governance while discussing the shortcomings and successes of his reign.<sup>22</sup>

Besides this eleventh hour paternal circumspection and humility, there is another possible ulterior motive for his composition of *Plan*. In view of Taizong's protracted struggle to regain political prestige in the 640s, the work may present an extension of his initial efforts to mend fissures within the court and to re-cast himself as a model sovereign. Moreover, by adhering to and revering Chinese tradition in *Plan*, Taizong

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17 Andrew Eisenberg, "A Study in Court Factionalism: The Politics of Tang Taizong," *T'ang Studies* 2002, no. 20-21(2013): 39.

18 Eisenberg, "A Study in Court Factionalism," 53.

19 Weschler, "T'ai-tsung the Consolidator," 239.

20 Ibid.

21 Twitchett, "How to be an Emperor," 92.

22 Twitchett, "How to be an Emperor," 92-93; Jack Chen, *Poetics of Sovereignty: on Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), 104.

recognized the superior authority of convention over his ambition, effectively making amends for his earlier hubris.

Both Taizong and Wu Zhao utilized tradition to legitimate their reigns. At the beginning, and textually at the end of his reign, Taizong sought to burnish his historical reputation by embodying Confucian virtue. Taizong used ideas passed down by ancestors to create a time-proven guide for Gaozong, and in doing so sought to leave an enduring positive image of himself to posterity; Wu Zhao did not. Compared to Taizong, Wu Zhao's aides crafted her signature text, *Regulations*, at the ascendancy of her career while she was Grand Dowager—a time of maturation and cultivation of her political power. By weaving Confucian precepts into her text, she upheld a superficial, culturally sanctioned moral standard. Yet, utilizing Confucian ideas enabled Wu Zhao to breach Confucian gender roles and stretch the parameters of her Confucian duties, once limited to the imperial family, and extend their application to the country.

Wu Zhao was not merely a widow and a mother to the imperial family; she was Sage Mother (Shengmu 聖母) to her court officials and the matriarchal head of the empire.<sup>23</sup> Featured in the fascicle of *Regulations* titled “Good Generals,” Wu Zhao presented the actions of virtuous and sagacious past women such as Zifa's mother 子發母 and Zhao Kuo's mother 趙括母 (both widows of the late Warring States era—third cent. BC—who were honored in the Confucian manual *Biographies of Exemplary Women* 列女傳) to explicitly argue ‘mother knows best,’ thereby justifying her stately duty as mother to her court ministers.<sup>24</sup> Including these women in her narrative echoed the Sage Mother's intention to stretch the motherhood paradigm to include both ministers and China as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Facing the condemnatory gaze of the Confucian patriarchy, Wu Zhao needed to bolster her legitimacy; she did this by articulating a demanding and clear-cut set of behavioral expectations for court ministers rather than, as *Plan* had, attempting to postulate a plan for ruling. In summary, the onus was placed not upon the ruler (herself), but on the ministers.

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23 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon*, 32. “Sage Mother” was the title Wu Zhao assumed in 688 that edged her closer to full acquisition of power under the title of Emperor.

24 *Chen Gui* 臣軌 [Regulations for Ministers], *Zhongjing ji qita wuzhong* 忠經及其他五種, *Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編 0893, ed. Wu Zetian 武則天, trans. N. Harry Rothschild (Taipei: Shangwu, 1936), Chapter 9.

25 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon*, 140.

By expanding the motherhood paradigm through the inclusion of virtuous mothers of the past, Wu Zhao obtained access to the public sphere. Each of these celebrated mothers challenged the morality and the competence of their sons, eminent generals. To sway their errant sons, these maternal figures upheld aspects of Confucian virtue, urging their wayward offspring to practice remonstrance, moderation, frugality, and moral uprightness. In doing so, they made themselves enduring archetypes of moral virtue. Moreover, these maternal paragons implicitly argued that they had a rightful role within the bureaucracy by superseding familial devotions in favor of correcting the morality in their wayward sons in service of the state.<sup>26</sup> Another reason Wu Zhao incorporated these women into this signature text was to artfully illustrate that she was a follower of Confucianism who revered past exemplary women.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, recognizing Confucian women who occupied traditional female roles yet who wielded significant sway over their families, in theory, helped soften criticism against Wu Zhao, who, as grand dowager-regent, already wielded great authority.<sup>28</sup>

### **Sharing a Common Body**

Although China failed to legally bar women from dynastic succession, conventions prohibited them from becoming emperor.<sup>29</sup> Despite the unspoken rule that excluded women from the public sphere, as empress and empress dowager-regent, Wu Zhao shed the traditionally passive role held by women in exchange for fulfilling a visible and active role in politics. While her place as grand dowager-regent was not uncommon, being recognized as sovereign was. Yet, in 690, Wu Zhao ruled as emperor.

*Regulations'* utilization of the "common body" metaphor masked Wu Zhao's desire for power by mimicking tradition. Like Wu Zhao's incorporation of women into state ritual like the Feng and Shan to justify her political presence, her use of the "common body" metaphor permitted her to breach the veil that concealed her from officials, and visually conveyed her superior role within the government. In

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26 N. Harry Rothschild, "Beyond Filial Piety: Biographies of Exemplary Women and Wu Zhao's New Paradigm of Political Authority," *T'ang Studies* 2005 no. 23-24 (2013): 162.

27 Rothschild, "Beyond Filial Piety," 162.

28 Ibid.

29 Lien-Sheng Yang, "Female Rulers in Imperial China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23, no. 1960-1961 (1960): 50. doi:10.2307/2718567.



this opening fascicle of *Regulations*, the clever grand dowager-regent held that “the relationship between ministers and the ruler is like that of the four limbs bearing the eminent head...the ruler is the eminent head. The minister is the legs and arms. The above and below are mutually dependent and become a single body.”<sup>30</sup> By weaving the metaphor of the “common body” into the text, the ruler and ministers belonged to the same body, thus, effectively blurring Wu Zhao’s conspicuous feminine form.

Over 800 years before Wu Zhao acquired the crown, Empress Lü 呂后 (d. 180 BC) of the Western Han 西漢 (206 BC-8 AD) utilized her position as grand dowager-regent to wield power. Confucian historians of subsequent eras cast her reign as a perversion of cosmic and human nature, a deformity on the patriarchal order that should be prevented from recurring.<sup>31</sup> In seventh century China, there was no precedent for a woman to occupy the throne; given the ill-remembered reign of Empress Lü, Wu Zhao’s intention to seize paramount power required her to navigate an unorthodox route, countering court officials who opposed her bid for power.<sup>32</sup> So, to supersede the “old guard’s” resistance, she harnessed her yin essence through the manipulation of her title “grand dowager.” Traditionally, a widow acted as the matriarchal head who, in the absence of a strong competent male heir, might act as the head of the family, charged with maintaining and controlling her late husband’s estate.<sup>33</sup> For Wu Zhao that “estate” was all of China. Wu Zhao relied on her power as empress dowager-regent and the manipulation of Confucian ideas—the “common body”—to discreetly succeed the throne, while distancing her reign—although unsuccessfully—from the memory of the disreputable Empress Lü. Wu Zhao made the state, the empire, her extended family. Hence her position as grand dowager-regent justified her role as the head and the mind-heart of the larger body politic, the metaphorical “common body.”

Although Taizong’s approach to governance in the latter half of his rule became more autocratic as he distanced himself from ministers and court, his valedictory work, *Plan*, conveyed a different ideal. Summoning up his early collaborative rapport with his officials, Taizong described an interdependent bond between minister and ruler, a link also reflected in Wu Zhao’s manual, *Regulations*. *Plan* stated, “in

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30 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 1.

31 Yang, “Female Rulers in Imperial China,” 51.

32 Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 38.

33 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon*, 127.

establishing the state and controlling the people, [officials] provide the ruler's arms and legs, by means of which he brings together his strength."<sup>34</sup> This excerpt reflects a mutual dependency between sovereign and his ministers. This espoused desire to establish a cooperative bond between ruler and ministers stood in stark contrast to the hubris that characterized Taizong's later years as emperor, distancing him from the paradigm of an ideal sovereign he sought to embody.

Both Wu Zhao and Taizong drew upon the notion of the body politic from earlier Confucian texts. Confucian scholar Mencius 孟子 (372-289 BC) expounded a similar concept of the minister-ruler relationship, claiming that, "if the ruler views the ministers like the hands and feet, then the ministers view their ruler like their stomach and heart/mind."<sup>35</sup> However, unlike the two emperors, the celebrated scholar-philosopher of the Warring States era instituted the idea as a general ideal of governance. In contrast, Taizong and Wu Zhao included the "common body" in their respective guides as part of an effort to communicate their respective political messages. For Wu Zhao, the metaphor acted as countermeasure to displace the unprecedented nature of a female occupying the throne. For Taizong, the "common body" metaphor stressed the importance for an interconnected relationship built on the organic adhesive—kinship ties—to, as Jack Chen states, "transform the impersonal teachings of government into the flesh and blood bonds of family."<sup>36</sup>

Reflective of precedent, in *Regulations*, Wu Zhao compared the body metaphor to constructing a building or structure; thus, perpetuating the idea of a symbiotic relationship between ruler and ministers. The text includes the passage: "if a ruler desires to build a great edifice, he must avail himself of the raw materials of the multitudes—columns, pillars, ridge posts and rafters...if not for the raw material of the body, the entire structure could not be completed."<sup>37</sup> In the fourth section of *Plan*, Taizong illustrated a similar point that translated into selecting ministers. His manual stated, "the enlightened ruler's employment of men is like the skilled carpenter's cutting timber: he makes a cart's shafts out of the straight timber and the wheels from the curved pieces; he uses the long timbers for rafters and ridgepoles

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34 Twitchett, "How to be an Emperor," 68.

35 Tao Liang and Ian M. Sullivan, "Political Thought in Early Confucianism," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 5, no. 2 (2010): 229.

36 Chen, *Poetics of Sovereignty*, 97.

37 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 1.

and the short pieces for roof brackets and eaves-rafters.”<sup>38</sup> Although similar, both construction metaphors facilitated each emperor’s independent aim. For Taizong, the metaphor reminded his heir apparent to search for worthy officials and to employ them where their talent was best utilized. For Wu Zhao, the building analogy reinforced her interconnected relationship with ministers—a bond that glossed over her gender. Both interpretations of the construction analogy agreed that a ruler was the master builder, capable of piecing together fragments—ministers—to bring into realization the effective governance of the state.<sup>39</sup>

### **Filial Piety and Absolute Loyalty**

To further bond ministers to her sovereign body, Wu Zhao had to rely on something greater than metaphor. As grand dowager-regent and later as sovereign she needed a belief as adhesive and culturally potent as filial piety within a family. So, within *Regulations* she rhetorically blurred the distinctions between the twin Confucian pillars—filial piety (xiao 孝), the alpha virtue cohering the corporate family, and loyalty (zhong 忠), the paramount virtue upon which the sanctity and stability of state was built—to fashion a greater bond, one encompassing both family and state, which bound ministers to their ruler.

Wu Zhao’s lowborn roots led her to challenge the structure of society. Her co-rule with Gaozong, regency, and reign spurred a vital shift within social classes. She directly attacked the “old officials” and upended the aristocracy and, with it, the fubing system 府兵制 (personal militia)—the influential families’ prop.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, to seize the throne and quash the elite’s authority, Wu Zhao co-opted the twin pillars of Confucianism, urging for filial relations to exist beholden to the state, not the family. Family was a bond that challenged her supreme position in the kingdom.<sup>41</sup> Hence the issue was with blood-ties, not the concept of filial piety itself. *Regulations* held that “the ruler is the root of the parents. Without the ruler, the parents would not exist. The nation is the foundation of the household.

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38 Twitchett, “How to Be an Emperor,” 66.

39 Denis Twitchett, “Chen Gui and Other Works Attributed to Empress Wu Zeitan,” *Asia Major* 16, no. 1 (2003): 73.

40 Ibid.

41 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon*, 142.

Without the nation, the family could not exist.”<sup>42</sup> She developed this idea further, deeming kinship ties the “lesser loyalty” compared to the greater loyalty owed to the ruler.<sup>43</sup> The same notion is projected in “Good Generals,” where Zifa’s mother and the mothers of other generals consistently urged their sons to place the interest and well-being of the state above private concerns and familial obligations.

Traditionally, family constituted the primary unit of Chinese society.<sup>44</sup> However, Wu Zhao challenged this notion stating, “although the bond between father and son are extremely close, they are not like ruler and minister... There have been fathers without sons. There have been families without fathers. Yet there has never been a ruler without ministers... therefore it can be said that these relationships are not the same.”<sup>45</sup> In short, this notion is an extension of the “common body”: fathers and sons are separate beings, both can exist separately and function independently, yet, rulers and ministers are one being, each inseparable and interdependent on the other’s function. This passage articulates the crux of her novel ideology, a twist on Confucianism that intimated the ruler and the state superseded the family. Thus, *Regulations* demoted the domestic sphere, and proposed that the state was the foundation of families.<sup>46</sup>

Wu Zhao expanded the compass and authority of her title “grand dowager-regent” to strip two emperors regnant—her sons Zhongzong 中宗 (r. 684 and 705-10) and Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 684-690, 710-12)—of authority and to assert her supreme position in government, as mother of the state, with an unbreakable bond to her “sons” in the court. To explain her stance, Wu Zhao, in *Regulations*, first articulated filial duties stating that if one “sees the father or mother in bodily discomfort, then he himself cannot sleep: when one sees his father and mother without a full belly, then he himself cannot eat.”<sup>47</sup> A few lines later, the treatment of parents is elided with a minister’s duty to a ruler to confuse Confucianism’s alpha virtues of filial piety and loyalty, proposing that they are nearly one and the same. “When a man serves the ruler,” *Regulations* states, “he does not concern himself with whether the task is difficult or easy. There

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42 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 2.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Twitchett, “Chen Gui and Other Works,” 75.

45 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 1.

46 Rothschild, “Beyond Filial Piety,” 164.

47 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 2.

is nothing he will shirk. He will not be remiss. There is no task he will avoid.”<sup>48</sup>

This excerpt from *Regulations* framed the expectation that, like a dutiful son to his family, a minister fulfils his filial duties to his surrogate political mother, Wu Zhao. By presenting these ideas, Wu Zhao skirted typical social relationships. Ministers no longer served their own families but became the Sage Mother’s political sons and owed her their filial devotions.<sup>49</sup>

To smoothly issue her dogmatic beliefs that sought to demote ministerial prestige and the prominence of the great clans, Wu Zhao dissected filial demands. Reducing the family in favor of the state marked a critical strategy to diminish the authority of officials and shift the center of power to herself. Most chief ministers came from prestigious families, a birthright that excluded Wu Zhao.<sup>50</sup> Besides rhetorically re-mastering pivotal concepts of governance, her textual contributions elevated her status by devaluing filial relations amongst ministers and their families and exalting the loyalty of a court official to the ruler. Filial needs pertained to the domestic sphere and, therefore, conflicted with the demands of a ruler; thus, *Regulations* mandates that the minister, “adopt the public sphere and cast aside the private.”<sup>51</sup> To embed this notion, she ingeniously infused her ideology into the character for ministers. Just prior to the inauguration of her Zhou dynasty 周 (r. 690-705) and her accession to emperor, Wu Zhao created new characters: the combination of the characters, zhong 忠, “loyal,” under a pie or yi 一, “one” replaced the former character for minister or subject, (chen 臣).<sup>52</sup> To be an official for Wu Zhao meant having a single-minded loyalty.

## Conclusion

Wu Zhao established that tradition was a malleable concept, one that in the hands of a capable ruler with a grasp of language and rhetoric might be custom-shaped to suit distinctive political demands. She toed the line of tradition, pulling from established ideas expressed since antiquity. Although drawing on time-honored principles from

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48 Ibid.

49 Rothschild, “Beyond Filial Piety,” 150.

50 Richard Guisso, *Wu Tse-T’ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T’ang China* (Bellingham: East Asian Studies Press, 1978), 27, <https://cedar.wwwu.edu/easpress/29>.

51 *Chen Gui*, Chapter 2.

52 Twitchett, “Chen Gui and Other Works,” 73.

Confucian sages like Mencius and borrowing elements from Taizong's *Plan*, such as the "common body," structural analogies, and passages that criticized flattery, her work was original. The purpose, audience, and timing behind the creation of the individual works marks a clear divergence between *Plan for an Emperor* and *Regulations for Ministers*.

*Regulations* tore away from precedent as a result of Wu Zhao's personal desire to overcome gender constraints, refute charges of illegitimacy or usurpation of power, and offset resistance from the "old officials." To facilitate this, *Regulations*—published five years before the beginning of her reign—aimed solely at suppressing the authority of ministers by organically binding them to her sovereign body via absolute loyalty. While the text already contained undercurrents reflecting the malleability of Confucian culture, her elevation of *Regulations* to canonical status in 693 represented the ultimate display of the pliability of tradition.<sup>53</sup> Unlike other canonical texts that excluded women from the public sphere, *Regulations* justified and condoned the political involvement of Wu Zhao, a woman. She was the heart/mind of the "common body," the quintessential element aiding the function of the greater body politic.

In contrast, Taizong composed *Plan* setting forth conventional ideas on rulership as a blueprint for his ill-prepared successor, Gaozong, to emulate. By providing a work that aimed at being and becoming an upright ruler, Taizong sought to, once again, gain the favor of his Confucian ministers and to frame his reign in a more positive historical light. Due to these significant differences, Wu Zhao's work stands independent from *Plan*. She may have pulled from similar ideas, but ultimately her signature text, *Regulations*, morphed and stretched traditional beliefs and concepts until they mutated into a convention that was all her own.

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53 Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon*, 127.

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