

Analysing the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda which devotes to the Tang Dynasty and Wu Zetian

By analysing a historical monument, I hope to gain a better understanding of why a building can have an impact on history at the time of its construction and forward. Understand what its significance brought and still brings to the people of China. To get a better understanding and cover all basis of my topic I will use various sources from video to literature and hope to get broad and varied opinions on the same topic so I can hopefully come to my own conclusion. I have chosen to analyse a monument as its new territory for me, and I'm intrigued why does the building I chose to study have any relevance, has it truly made an impact on people's lives, past and or present? I believe by gathering enough sources I will be able to find the resources I need to get a better comprehension and possibly answer this question.

I have decided to study the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda as it is significant to the time of Wu Zetian's arguably ruthless reign, but there is evidence of which she had improved food storage to keep her people fed, grew the economy and brought better equality of women in her kingdom. Also was being Buddhist impacting the lives of the people under her reign? Was she using Buddhism to manipulate the people, or did it truly impact China in a positive way? We can answer these questions by looking at the Giant Wild Goose pagoda and Wu Zetian(則天文字)'s history.

The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda or 大雁塔; pinyin: Dà yàn tǎ, is a symbol of ancient Xi'an, it is a well-preserved ancient building and a holy pagoda for Buddhists. Its location is at the southern suburb of the city of Xi'an (during Wu Zetian's reign the city was called Chang'an). It attracts an abounding number of visitors and described as a must see for its fame in the Buddhist religion, history and its simple but appealing style of construction. The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda was regarded on the 'National Key Cultural World Heritage List' on June 22ND 2014, along with other sites along the ancient Silk Road.

The pagoda was built originally in 652AD when the Emperor Gaozong ruled during the Tang Dynasty from 618AD to 907. The building during this time was used to collect Buddhist materials which were taken from India by a hierarch names Xuan Zang.

The pagoda stands at Xuan Zang Square, named after one of the most famous monks in ancient China. He left for India and lived there for 17 years, then returned to China and brought Buddhist knowledge back with him, all this knowledge was stored in the pagoda.

After entering the gate of the pagoda, you will pass the Ci'en Temple. The temple was built in 648AD by Emperor Liu Zhi to commemorate his deceased mother. Everything about this temple was meant to mimic his mother's beauty. Four years later, Xuan Zang was named Head Monk of the temple, then started the construction of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda. The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda consists of seven levels and Buddhist scriptures are found on each layer, paintings and statues. There is a park called the Tang Ci'en Site Park to the east of the pagoda where people can enjoy a quiet walk.

There are some small shops in the square which sell souvenirs which indicates tourism to the area from abroad. One of “the biggest attractions” at the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda is the fountain water and light show, it’s said to be one of the biggest fountain water shows in Asia.

Wu Zetian was a lonely concubine which perhaps through favouritism was able to eventually cleverly climbed up the ladder to becoming Emperor of China, she’s mostly known as being a tyrant or an evil dictator. “According to legend she was a tyrant whose reign brought disaster to the Empire”. But archaeologists are discovering new evidence that challenges this version of Wu’s story.

She had first entered the court at 13 years old as a young concubine in the year 637AD, a mistress serving the Emperor Tai Zong of the Tang Dynasty. He had more than 100 concubines, yet as ancient historians believe, she got herself noticed and stood out to Emperor Tai Zong. When he passed away of old age, she became the concubine to his son Emperor Gao Zong in the year 655AD. Emperor Gao Zong was an ill man therefore he couldn’t truly rule with an iron fist, so Wu Zetian became the hidden force and was able to inflict her own rules on the Empire. In 690AD she became China’s first and only female emperor.

Unlike other girls at this time, when Wu Zetian was a young child she was encouraged to learn and read books. When she was 13 years old, she was sent away by her family to become a concubine. It was said by another source that the Emperor had 121 other concubines at the time, therefore Wu Zetian did not see the Emperor often. But she was very well acquainted with his son Gao Zong. After Emperor Tai Zong’s death, Emperor Gao Zong took over his father's position. Emperor Gao Zong was often unwell and too unwell to do his duties, consequently meaning that Wu Zetian had gained authority. Wu Zetian and Emperor Gao Zong had a daughter, one evening someone had noticed the daughter was being suspiciously quiet, she had passed away. There are many theories surrounding this story, the most popular are that it was a ruthless ploy by Wu Zetian to blame the Empress Wang to take her position of power. Another theory is it was the Empress Wang who killed the baby out of jealousy that Wu Zetian and Emperor Gao Zong were so close. The baby had died of asphyxiation. Because of these happenings within the palace, Empress Wang was no longer Empress. Gao Zong’s ministers were not happy with the thought of removing Empress Wang from her position, yet Emperor Gao Zong deposed his wife and his former favourite concubine and demoted anyone who openly opposed his decisions.

There’s another tale of when Wu Zetian had locked her former rivals Empress Wang and Emperor Gao Zong’s favourite concubine in a dark room, cut off their hands and feet, then sealed them in wine jars, decapitated their corpses and changed their entire families surnames, but there is not hard evidence for this gruesome story.

Emperor Gao Zong had become very ill, and while Wu Zetian’s opponenets were able to restrict her from becoming a named regent, they could not stop her from rising to power. Roughly ten years into her tenure as Empress, she was directly running the empire from behind a curtain. There is another theory for her getting into power which is she had been poisoning Emperor Gao Zong over a long period of time which made his health decline until his eventual death, but there is no evidence to this story, it is merely a theory.

Wu Zetian’s oldest son was then put on the throne as the new face of the Empire (he was her third eldest son, but she had both her other sons killed). He was a very suggestible and obedient. So suggestible and obedient in fact that he not only took orders from his mother, but also took orders

from his wife, even his wet nurse at age 30. He did not keep hold of the throne for long as his mother had her generals take him away by force and put under arrest, then shipped off to exile.

He was then replaced by her fourth son, but he wasn't given any power. He wasn't allowed in the Emperor's quarters and couldn't talk to his officials. Wu Zetian didn't even hide behind a curtain anymore; she would whisper in his ear and he would then give the order. Of course, Wu Zetian became tired of these games and she became the new Emperor. She gave herself the name Wu Zetian (武则天) Wu being the surname, Ze meaning rule or to follow, and Tian meaning sky/day/heaven. As she was now Emperor, she was an all-powerful force and therefore she chose this name to show she was between heaven and earth she was so powerful. Before Wu Zetian became Emperor, her name was Wu Zhao.

What she had implemented whilst in power includes taking China's imperial exam system which was to test nobles working in the government and opened it up to everyone, she promoted Buddhism at the expense of Daoism. But there was still bloodshed under her reign, Zhu Tian eventually got the better of the Tibetan Empire, she suppressed rebellions and ruled with the terror of secret police, also nearly killed her youngest son. Several years into her reign, passing the age of 70, her health began to decline, and the empire was given back to the third son which had been exiled. Wu Zetian died a few months later and was buried alongside some of her children and grandchildren, some of which she had killed.

As was tradition, a monument was raised to list all of her accomplishments during her reign, but it was blank. Ancient historians despised her because of all the murder she had caused and the fact that she was female, therefore ancient historians wrote unpleasant and nasty stories of her, sometimes would make up stories about her, so future historians have an even harder time figuring out her life because they're very deprived of reliable sources.

Chang'an during Wu Zetian's time would have been an enormous city, allegedly there was almost a million people living with the city walls and another million outside which is an enormous Empire, one of the biggest in the world at that time. Jonathan Dugdale from Birmingham University believes he knows one reason for Wu Zetian's remarkable success. She would win the support of the common people through the reinvigorated religion that was sweeping China which was Buddhism. Wu Zetian realized patronizing Buddhism was a great way to please her people and what better way to do this than building new temples and pagodas for her Empire. The Great Wild Goose Pagoda was the main pagoda that she built.

The pagoda was an important temple housing sacred Buddhist writing, but just 50 years after its construction, it had been destroyed in an earthquake. Wu Zetian, who had been brought up in the Buddhist faith and spending time in a nunnery, decided to rebuild the pagoda but on a much bigger scale. Jonathan Dugdale suspects that this new building was a record breaker and that Wu surpassed herself in her desire to make her mark in her people's faith. He attempted to prove his theory by solving a problem, Wu Zetian's pagoda was partially damaged by a second earthquake and the top three floors collapsed. Dugdale had to formulate how high her structure would have been with the missing floors. Every staircase decreased in number the higher he walked up the pagoda.

Dugdale calculates with the missing three floors the true height of Wu's pagoda. It was close to a astonishing 300 feet high! Which would have made it not only the tallest brick pagoda in Asia, but

possibly one of the tallest buildings in the world at that time. Wu Zetian built this record-breaking structure as a statement targeted directly towards her people. There were many different things she stood to gain from building an enormous pagoda in such a visual space, clear for all to see in the city scape. Most of Chang'an's population at this time were Buddhists hence the people would have seen that she's supporting their faith, supporting their religion and their way of life, which made the people warm up to her as an Emperor. Wu Zetian ordered the construction of new Buddhist temples in every town in her empire to create allies among the common people.

Wu not only had an influence on her own Empire, but of others too. In a tomb located 50 miles northwest of Wu's capital city Chang'an, there are murals which indicate Wu's influence and power beyond China. In the tomb there are murals of foreign ambassadors coming to court, they came from as far as Mongolia, Korea, Rome, Greece and Persia. This shows the sheer power she had, also these murals suggest Wu Zetian was a highly respected international leader. Professor Tonia Eckfeld believes Wu Zetian was a "consummate politician" and saw the advantage in using diplomacy instead of warfare which led the society that was "quite open and open to foreigners".

Conclusion

To conclude, when researching a past emperor's history it can become confusing with many different sources from ancient and modern historians, but I found researching about Emperor Wu Zetian especially challenging because of the lack of sources left from her time. Therefore, many theories about her surfaced which also adds to the confusion whilst understanding the timeline of her becoming a concubine to becoming an Emperor. Whilst researching I noticed many holes in this timeline which I now know many archaeologists are trying to find the true story of Wu Zetian and they've already made great progress in their field. Professor Zhang Jianlin (Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology) is the world's leading archaeologist to the Tang era "The findings that come from our excavations enrich our knowledge of Wu Zetian, they give us new clues to the true history of the Tang era".

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