



Empress Wu Zetian

- **Born:** February 17, 624 Lizhou, China
- **Died:** December 16, 705 in Luoyang, China
- **Reign:** October 16, 690 to February 22, 705
- **Best known for:** The only woman to be Emperor of China

Growing Up

Wu Zetian was born on February 17, 624 in Lizhou, China. She grew up in a wealthy aristocratic family and her father was a high ranking minister in the government. Unlike many girls of her time, Wu was given a good education. She was taught to read, write, and to play music. Wu was an intelligent and ambitious girl who learned all she could about politics and how the government worked.

The Imperial Palace

When Wu was fourteen she moved into the imperial palace to serve the Emperor Taizong. She continued her education at the palace until the emperor died in 649. As was the custom, when the emperor died she was sent to a convent to become a nun for the rest of her life. Wu had other plans, however. She became romantic with the new emperor, Emperor Gaozong, and soon found herself back at the imperial palace as consort (like a second wife) to the emperor.

Becoming Empress

Back at the palace, Wu began to gain influence over the emperor. She became one of his favorite wives. The emperor's main wife, Empress Wang, became jealous and the two women became bitter rivals. When Wu's daughter died, she hatched a plan against the Empress. She told the emperor that Empress Wang had killed her daughter out of jealousy. The emperor believed her and had Empress Wang arrested. He then promoted Wu to Empress.

Over the next several years, Wu established herself as a significant power behind the throne. She built up strong allies in the government and eliminated rivals. When the emperor became sick in 660, she began to rule through him.

Becoming Emperor

In 683, Emperor Gaozong died and Wu's son became emperor. Wu became regent (like a temporary ruler) while her son was still young. Although she didn't yet have the title of emperor, she had all the power. In 690, Wu had her son step down as emperor. She then declared a new dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty, and officially took the title of emperor. She was the first and only woman to become emperor of China.

Secret Police

It was difficult for a woman to maintain power in Ancient China. Wu managed this by using secret police to spy on people. She developed a large system of spies who helped determine who was loyal and who wasn't. Wu rewarded those who were found loyal, but had her enemies put to death.

Ruling China

Another reason that Wu was able to keep power was because she was a very good emperor. She made intelligent decisions that helped China to prosper. She surrounded herself with competent and talented people by promoting people based on their abilities rather than by their family history.

During her reign, Empress Wu expanded the borders of China by conquering new lands in Korea and Central Asia. She also helped to improve the lives of the peasants by lowering taxes, building new public works, and improving farming techniques.

Death

Empress Wu died in 705. Her son, Emperor Zhongzong, took over as emperor and reestablished the Tang Dynasty.

Interesting facts about Empress Wu Zetian

- Because Confucianism didn't allow women to rule, Wu elevated the religion of Buddhism as the state religion in China.
- Three of Wu's sons ruled as emperor at some point.
- Some scholars believe that Wu killed her own daughter in order to frame the Empress Wang.

Answer the following questions.

1. Which of the following best describes the childhood of Empress Wu?
 - a. She grew up as a poor peasant farmer
 - b. She grew up in a noble family and was given a good education
 - c. She was a slave working on the Great Wall
 - d. She was an orphan who was adopted by the Emperor's wife
 - e. She was the daughter of a wealthy merchant
2. What happened to Empress Wu after Emperor Taizong died?
 - a. She became the Empress of China
 - b. She was sold as a slave
 - c. She was sent to a convent to be a nun
 - d. She returned home to her family
 - e. She was executed
3. Who was the official ruler of China while Empress Wu ruled as regent?
 - a. Empress Wu's nephew
 - b. Empress Wu's son
 - c. Empress Wu's uncle
 - d. Empress Wu's daughter
4. When Empress Wu became emperor, what did she name her dynasty?
 - a. Tang Dynasty
 - b. Song Dynasty
 - c. Qing Dynasty
 - d. Ming Dynasty
 - e. Zhou Dynasty
5. According to the article, how did Empress Wu maintain power while emperor of China?
 - a. She used public relations
 - b. She raised taxes
 - c. She used secret police to spy on people
 - d. She maintained a huge army
 - e. She didn't have to do anything to maintain power
6. How did Empress Wu improve the lives of the peasant people in Ancient China?
 - a. She lowered taxes
 - b. She built public works
 - c. She improved farming techniques
 - d. All of the above
 - e. None of the above
7. What religion did Empress Wu elevate to the state religion during her reign?
 - a. Confucianism
 - b. Buddhism
 - c. Tao
 - d. Islam
 - e. None of the above

Using the multiple choice questions and answers, write complete sentences for each question.