

Poetry and Access to Power in the Court of Empress Wu Zetian (624–705)

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705) in its special relation to poetry. It suggests that Empress Wu’s importance in Chinese literary history can be observed in two ways: on the one hand, her reign was responsible for a remarkable flowering of court culture, as she directly and powerfully intervened in the contemporary literary scene, which in more than one way led to the golden age of Chinese poetry in the eighth century; on the other hand, her rule paradoxically marked the beginning of the end of court literature as a force to be reckoned with in the larger cultural sphere. This article argues that the rule of Empress Wu is characterized by access: her access to information throughout the empire and the access to her person and to power. When the hope for access was kindled and then frustrated, it led to the creation of a poetry of discontent and a new cultural community with new values, with judgment not made by a single figure of authority but by consensus of that community. This community changed court culture and court literature, and Empress Wu’s reign played a central role in this process.

Keywords: Empress Wu Zetian, early Tang poetry, court culture, court literature

Walter Map (1130–c.1210), a courtier of King Henry II of England, once wrote in an anecdotal

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collection known as *De Nugis Curialium* (Courtiers' Trifles):

"In time I exist, and of time I speak," said Augustine: and added, 'What time is I know not.' In a like spirit of perplexity I may say that in the court I exist and of the court I speak, and what the court is, God knows, I know not. I do know however that the court is not time; but temporal it is, changeable and various, space-bound and wandering, never continuing in one state.^①

Map's comment, with its emphasis on the temporality and spatiality of the court, still resonates. The court can be a slippery term because it encompasses multiple meanings: a political institution, a physical locale, a movable and moving community, and a *sense* of that community. Writing about Scottish literature of the fifteenth century, Sally Mapstone observes that "it would be quite wrong to suggest that court life and courtly literature, even the court poet, had the same character before the 1490s as they were to have after them."^② One could very well say the same about the premodern Chinese court, for the character of the court was not changeless, nor was that of court culture or literature. The concepts of court culture and court literature should therefore always be interrogated and adjudicated within a specific historic context.

This article begins with the premise that a court culture as a force to be reckoned with in the larger cultural sphere was only possible when the court was the center of literary and cultural production, when royal patronage played a crucial role in the cultural life of the society, and when literature produced at the court served as an inspiration and a model for what was going on in the provinces. This can certainly describe the situation in China during the Southern Dynasties and the early Tang or from the fifth through the seventh centuries. Throughout this period, there were few flourishing local cultural centers to produce literary models that could compete with the capital, and any well-known regional literary activities usually happened in the princely court and headquarters where an intimate connection with the capital circle was maintained. The later poetry societies of the Southern Song dynasty or the literati communities of the Ming and Qing dynasties in great southern cities were as yet non-existent. All the best contemporary writers and poets were focused in the "courtly-metropolitan ecosystem" of the capital city.^③

This article considers the reign of Empress Wu Zhao 武曌 (624–705, r. 690–705) in its special

① Walter Map, *De nugis curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, rev. edn. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2–3.

② "Was there a Court Literature in Fifteenth-Century Scotland?" *Studies in Scottish Literature* 26.1 (1991): 410.

③ Greg Walker, "John Skelton and the Royal Court," in *Vernacular Literature and Current Affairs in the Early Sixteenth Century: France, England and Scotland*, ed. Jennifer Britnell and Richard Britnell (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.

relation to poetry. Empress Wu, better known as Wu Zetian 武則天, was the only female sovereign in Chinese history who established her own dynasty. A holistic evaluation of Empress Wu's court and the poetry produced at her court demonstrates the overall importance of a historically nuanced treatment of the concepts of court culture and court literature, and through doing so, reconsiders the meaning and range of court poetry as well as reexamines some of our conventional assumptions about court poetry. Ultimately, Empress Wu's importance in Chinese literary and cultural history can be observed in two ways: on the one hand, her reign was responsible for a remarkable flowering of court culture, as she directly, and powerfully, intervened in the contemporary literary scene, which in more than one way led to the so-called golden age of Chinese poetry in the eighth century; on the other hand, her rule paradoxically marked the beginning of the end of court literature as a force to be reckoned with in the larger cultural sphere.

Powerful Intervention in the Literary Scene

Empress Wu was the *de facto* ruler of the empire since the death of her husband, Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 650–684), in 684, but she established her own dynasty, the Zhou 周, and ruled as the sovereign from 690 until her deposition in 705.^① In cultural and literary realms, her reign marked a crucial point of departure from the other early Tang rulers. This departure can be discussed in three aspects.

The most obvious element of Empress Wu's exceptionality is both her gender *and* status. For a period of fifteen years, she led the empire not as a regent and empress dowager ruling on behalf of an emperor in his minority (as had previously happened at times in Chinese history), but as a monarch in her own right and a dynastic founder. While a woman emperor and a powerful queen consort might seem identical in terms of their gender and the power they wielded over the state, their social roles and statuses were far from the same. For contemporary poets and writers, there was a fundamental difference between representing in their work a female *emperor* and dynastic founder and representing a powerful woman in court politics such as an empress dowager, an empress, or a princess, since the

① For an old biographical study in English, see C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1968); for a more recent study, see *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor*, by Norman Harry Rothschild (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008). Richard W. L. Guisso gives an account of Empress Wu's reign in Chapter 6, "The reigns of the empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684–712)" in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume Three, *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906*, Part I, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 290–321. Guisso offers a more extended study in *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in Tang China* (Bellingham, Wash.: Center for Asian Studies, Western Washington Univ., 1978). The late Rothschild was devoted to the study of Empress Wu's rule. For a comprehensive list of Rothschild's publications, see "Norman Harry Rothschild: An Appreciation of the Man and Scholar," by Jonathan Karam Skaff, in *Tang Studies* 40 (2022): 167–71.

representation of a state sovereign required distinctly different, and explicit, vocabulary and rhetoric.^①

Second, Empress Wu was most likely the one who decided to use literary composition as a featured criterion in the civil service examination, and this set the pattern for the rest of the dynasty. As Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (fl. 780) states,

Since the Xianqing reign (656–661), Gaozong was often in ill health, and Empress Dowager Wu was in charge. She made decisions in state affairs as a full equal of the Son of Heaven. The Empress was quite well-versed in literature and histories, and loved “the craft of insect-carving.” In the Yonglong years (680–681), she began to use literary composition as a criterion for recruiting talented men. After the Yongchun reign (682–683), the Empress Dowager ruled over the realm for more than two decades. At the time, all of the officials achieved eminence through their writings. This continued for a long time, and became the custom.^②

國家自顯慶以來，高宗聖躬多不康，而武太后任事，參決大政，與天子並。太后頗涉文史，好彫蟲之藝，永隆中始以文章選士。及永淳之後，太后君臨天下二十餘年，當時公卿百辟無不以文章達，因循遐久，寢以成風。

Shen Jiji’s remarks regarding Gaozong’s poor state of health are corroborated by a statement in the *Old Tang History*: “Emperor Gaozong suffered from the ‘wind disease’ since the Xianqing era, and the memorials from the court officials were invariably entrusted to the empress for decision.”^③ As the Yonglong era was in the last years of Gaozong’s rule, clearly Empress Wu’s support was crucial to the institution of literary composition as part of the civil service examination.

The third element of Empress Wu’s departure from the earlier emperors in her intervention in the literary sphere was her strong personal taste and preferences and her aggressive promotion of poems, poets, and styles to her liking. Those poems, poets, and styles did not always represent conventional choices. I will cite two examples.

The first example is a famous incident that occurred on a court outing to Longmen (Dragon Gate) near Luoyang, in or around 698.^④ Empress Wu commissioned poetry from attending courtiers and put

① For an excellent analysis of the representation of the powerful women in the Early Tang court, see Rebecca Doran, *Transgressive Typologies: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016.

② Du You 杜佑 (735–812), *Tong dian* 通典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 15.357–58. Shen’s discussion, given the title “On the Literary Examination” 詞科論, is included in Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818) et al., comp. *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文新編, ed. Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2000), 476.5565; subsequently *QTW*.

③ 帝自顯慶已後，多苦風疾，百司表奏皆委天后詳決。Liu Xu 劉昫 (887–946) et al., comp. *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 6.115; subsequently *JTS*. The “wind disease” may refer to hemiplegia after a stroke.

④ See discussion of this dating in *Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu* 沈佺期宋之問集校注, ed. Tao Min 陶敏 and Yi Shuqiong 易淑瓊, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), “Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen jianpu,” Vol. 2, 789.

up a brocade robe as a reward for whoever completed a poem first. Dongfang Qiu 東方虯 (fl. late 7th c.), now primarily known as the friend to whom Chen Zi'ang 陳子昂 (659–700) addressed a poem with a preface calling for “Restoring Antiquity” (*fugu* 復古), finished first and won the brocade robe; but when Song Zhiwen's 宋之問 (ca. 656–712) piece was done, the empress read it and decided that it was superior, so she stripped Dongfang Qiu of his brocade robe and gave it to Song Zhiwen instead.^①

Song Zhiwen's poem, still extant, begins with four five-syllable lines, but subsequently transitions seamlessly into thirty-eight seven-syllable lines, with ten changes of rhyme altogether. The following are the first eight lines of the poem:^②

宿雨霽氛埃	Last night's rain has cleared the pall of dust,
流雲度城闕	and drifting clouds pass over the high gate towers.
河堤柳新翠	By the river levee willows put on new azures,
苑樹花先發	on trees in the park the flowers come out early.
洛陽花柳此時濃	Flowers and willows of Luoyang, heavy with moisture this season;
山水樓臺映幾重	mountains and river, tower and terrace, shine layer upon layer.
群公拂霧朝翔鳳	A crowd of nobles brushes through mist to the soaring Phoenix's court,
天子乘春幸鑿龍	the Child of Heaven takes advantage of spring to visit the dragon caves. ^③

The words “willows” and “flowers” in the second couplet are repeated in the third, and the motif of “cloud and rain” in the first couplet is continued, and developed, in the description of moisture and mist in the fourth couplet, creating an effect of chiasmus. However, the clipped “entering tone” (*rusheng*) rhyme of the five-syllable-line opening, *que* 闕 (MC: *khjwot*) and *fa* 發 (MC: *pjot*), gives way to rhymes in the sonorous and uplifting “level tone” (*pingsheng*) in seven-syllable lines: *nong* 濃 (MC: *nrjowng*), *chong* 重 (MC: *drjowng*), *long* 龍 (MC: *ljowng*).^④ The five-syllable-line opening thus serves as a rather low-key prelude that, much in the same way as a piece of musical composition is switched to a different mode, picks up speed and shifts to the light, merry, fast-paced allegro of seven-syllable lines, befitting the narrative of the imperial entourage's progress.

The poem ends with a skillful connection of the Tang legacy with the current Zhou rule, and with

① JTS 190B.5025. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) et al., comp. *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 202.5750; subsequently *XTS*.

② The translation is Stephen Owen's, with modifications; Owen, *The Poetry of the Early Tang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 304–6.

③ “At Longmen, Written to Imperial Command” 龍門應制, *Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*, in *Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*, Vol. 2, 394–95.

④ For these Middle Chinese pronunciations, I follow Paul W. Kroll's *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, Third Edition, Newly Revised and Expanded (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

an affirmation of the virtuous purpose of Empress Wu's outing:

先王定鼎山河固	Former kings took the Tripod,
	securing mountains and rivers;
寶命乘周萬物新	now the Precious Mandate falls to Zhou—
	ten thousand things are all renewed.
吾君不事瑤池樂	Our emperor does not engage
	in the pleasure of the Jasper Pool,
時雨來觀農扈春	with the seasonal rains She comes to observe
	the springtime of the farmers.

It is little known that the final couplet is in fact a direct refutation of an earlier poem by Chen Zi'ang, the poet who rose to fame because of Empress Wu's promotion. In a poem entitled "Respectfully Matching a Poem [by the Empress] Expressing Her Feelings on the Occasion of the Emperor's Presentation of a Gift: Written at Imperial Command" 奉和皇帝上禮撫事述懷應制, Chen Zi'ang urges the empress:

承平信娛樂	The world is at peace, which is truly delightful;
王業本艱辛	but the kingly enterprise is always full of hardship.
願罷瑤池宴	I hope Her Grace dismisses the banquet at the Jasper Pool,
來觀農扈春	and comes to observe the springtime of the farmers instead. ^①

① Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) et al., comp. *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 167.801; hereafter *WYYH*. Also see *Chen Zi'ang ji jiaozhu* 陳子昂集校注, annot. Peng Qingsheng 彭慶生, 3 vols. (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2015), vol. 1, 177. Both in this edition and the earlier *Chen Zi'ang shizhu* 陳子昂詩注, the annotator Peng Qingsheng adopts the variant *qiuli* 丘禮 for *shangli* 上禮, and explains *qiuli* as the imperial sacrifice to heaven (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1981; 140–41). In *Chen Zi'ang ji jiaozhu* Peng states that *shangli* would also make sense and glosses it as the "Great Sacrifice" (*dasi* 大祀). I follow *Wenyuan yinghua* in adopting *shangli*, but I believe that *shangli*, which means "presenting gifts to the throne," was not a ritual sacrifice. Instead, it was a special practice that, according to Song Jing's 宋璟 (663–737) memorial of 718, was revived and popularized in the Chuigong 垂拱 era (685–689) under Empress Wu's rule. See Wang Pu 王溥 (922–982), comp. *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955), 26.495. Li Jiao 李嶠 (ca. 645–714) wrote a poem on the same occasion as Chen Zi'ang did. See *Li Jiao shizhu* 李嶠詩注, annot. Xu Dingxiang 徐定祥 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), 20. Both *Chen Zi'ang ji jiaozhu* and *Li Jiao shizhu* date the poems to 691 and take the "emperor" in the title as Empress Wu. However, Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 710–712), Empress Wu's youngest son, had ruled in name and retained the title of "emperor" from 685 through August 690, and was formally demoted to "the Imperial Heir" *huangsi* 皇嗣 only after Empress Wu founded the Zhou in 690. Thus, I conclude that the poems were composed at Empress Wu's command, during the Chuigong era (except for 686 when Chen Zi'ang was away from the capital in spring and summer) or even in the spring of 689 or 690, to match a poem written by the empress herself on the occasion when Emperor Ruizong presented her with gifts.

While Chen Zi'ang cannot help giving moralistic instructions and showing/creating a gap between ideal rulership and reality, Song Zhiwen deftly uses praise to represent the outing as having already closed the gap and at the same time to still place stress on the right thing to do. In form and in sentiment, Song Zhiwen's poem demonstrates its worthiness of the brocade robe.

Dongfang Qiu's poem from this occasion is lost, but we do have a five-syllable-line poem by Wu Sansi 武三思 (d. 707), the empress's nephew, composed on the same occasion: "Outing to Longmen on a Spring Day: A Matching Piece Written at Imperial Command" 和春日游龍門應制.^① If Wu Sansi's poem is any indication of the average courtier's composition, it strikes the reader as more formal and stiff than Song Zhiwen's fluent and "modern-sounding" balladic song. One can imagine Empress Wu's clearly-expressed preferences and dislikes not only fostered an atmosphere of competition but also pointed the courtiers in a certain literary direction that they might not have chosen on their own.

The second example of Empress Wu's deliberate intervention in the literary scene involves Guo Zhen 郭震, better known as Guo Yuanzhen 郭元振 (656–713). When he was a minor official in the provinces, he had a mixed reputation due to illegal engagement in coinage-minting and human trafficking, but he would reportedly distribute the profit amongst his retainers.^② Empress Wu heard of him and summoned him to a court audience, ordering the state's postal horses for his expedited transportation to the capital.^③ After speaking to him at length, she was deeply impressed. Notably, at the end of their conversation, as if eager to know him in greater depth, the empress asked Guo if he had any literary writings. Thereupon Guo presented her with an eighteen-line heptasyllabic song, "Ballad on an Ancient Sword" 古劍篇. "Zetian read it and liked it so much that she ordered the court scribes to make several tens of copies of the poem, distributing the copies to scholars such as Li Jiao, Yan Chaoyin, and so on" 則天覽而佳之, 令寫數十本, 遍賜學士李嶠閻朝隱等.^④ It was clearly done with the intention that this piece be a model for her literary courtiers.

Indeed, a "Ballad on a Precious Sword" 寶劍篇 in Li Jiao's extant collection was very likely

① *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Taipei: Minglun chubanshe, 1971), 80.866–67; subsequently *QTS*.

② Guo Yuanzhen's JTS biography states that he had "kidnapped and sold more than a thousand people in his jurisdiction altogether" 前後掠賣所部千餘人. *JTS* 97.3042. His *XTS* biography states: "He had minted coinage in private, and also kidnapped and sold more than a thousand people in his jurisdiction, and distributed the gains to his retainers" 嘗盜鑄, 及掠賣部中口千餘, 以餉遺賓客. *XTS* 122.4361. However, Zhang Yue's 張說 (667–731) "account of conduct" *xingzhuang* 行狀, prepared for Guo Yuanzhen upon his death, merely says, "He had minted coinage as well as plundered the commoners to provide for people all around" 嘗鑄錢, 掠良人財, 以濟四方. *QTW* 233.2625. I am grateful to Paul W. Kroll and the anonymous reader for calling my attention to Zhang Yue's euphemistic phrasing.

③ For the details of this meeting, see Zhang Yue's "account of conduct." *QTW* 233.2565. Guo's dynastic biographies contain a more succinct account of it. *JTS* 97.3042; *XTS* 122.4361.

④ From Zhang Yue's *xingzhuang*. *QTW* 233.2625.

inspired by Guo Yuanzhen's piece.^① Guo's poem describes in its concluding quatrain an abandoned old sword like a down-and-out hero:

何言中路遭棄捐	Who would have thought it would be cast away in the middle of the road,
零落飄淪古獄邊	drifting and fallen beside some ancient prison?
雖復塵埋無所用	But though it is buried in dust and has no place to be used, ^②
猶能夜夜氣衝天	still night after night its aura rises up and strikes against the skies. ^③

Li Jiao's poem, on the other hand, has a buoyant ending with auspicious words:

承平久息干戈事	In this age of peace we have long ceased the use of weapons,
僥倖得充文武備	but it is fortunate to serve the civil and martial needs.
除災辟患宜君王	It eliminates troubles, averts disasters, suitable for a ruler,
益壽延齡後天地	to extend its master's lifespan longer than Heaven and Earth. ^④

It almost seems that Li Jiao is deliberately rewriting the ending of Guo's poem by emphasizing that the sword is left unused only because the world is at peace.

Guo Yuanzhen later became a great general and one of a handful of Tang prime ministers known for both martial and literary accomplishments.^⑤ This is one of the numerous examples of Empress Wu's acuity in recognizing talented people. Her razor-sharp instinct in scouting literary talents proved to have a far-reaching influence. Modern literary histories often speak of "the courts of Empress Wu and Emperor Zhongzong [r. 705–710, her son and successor]" 武后中宗朝 in one breath; yet, if one looks at the make-up of Zhongzong's literary courtiers, one notices that he had largely inherited the men of letters first recognized and promoted by Empress Wu, such as Song Zhiwen 宋之問, Shen Quanqi 沈佺期 (d. 713), Du Shenyang 杜審言 (ca. 640s–708), Li Jiao, and Yan Chaoyin 閻朝隱 (d. ca. 712). Very few of the twenty-four scholars in the Institute of Cultivating Culture (Xiuwen guan 修文館), appointed by Zhongzong in 708, were newcomers onto the literary scene, except for Wu Pingyi 武平一 (d. 741), a member of Empress Wu's clan who had chosen to live in seclusion during

① *Li Jiao shizhu*, 27.

② *Chen* 塵 reads *chen* 沉 in Zhang Yue's transcription. *QTW* 233.2625.

③ *QTS* 66.756; Owen's translation with slight modification, *The Poetry of the Early Tang*, 316–17.

④ *QTS* 57.689; Owen's translation with slight modifications, *The Poetry of the Early Tang*, 314–15.

⑤ "For prime ministers who possessed both civil and martial talents, people at the time would cite Li Jing, Guo Yuanzhen, Tang Xiuqing, and [Zhang] Renyuan" 宰相文武兼者，當時稱李靖、郭元振、唐休璟、仁愿云. *XTS* 111.4153.

Empress Wu's reign.^① Even the “arbiter of taste” in Zhongzong's court, his ghost-writer, secretary, and political counsel, the indomitable Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (664–710) herself, had been first discovered and endorsed by Empress Wu from among the serving women in the harem.^② This means that Zhongzong's literary court was very much a continuation of Empress Wu's.

Both Guo Yuanzhen's sword ballad and (most of) Song Zhiwen's Dragon Gate poem are in the seven-syllable line. Empress Wu had a strong preference for this meter. In 695, at the passing of a favorite courtier, Zhou Yunyuan 周允元, the empress personally wrote a poem mourning him and copied the poem out in her own hand; she chose to write the poem in the seven-syllable line. At the time, the entire court considered it a great honor, and the episode is recorded in the dynasty history.^③ Although this poem is no longer extant, Empress Wu's literary talent should be given more credit than it usually receives.^④

The seven-syllable line was often used in long ballads, but it must be emphasized that it was not confined to the song form. Seven-syllable-line regulated verse (*qiyān lǚshī* 七言律詩), a major verse form in the Chinese literary tradition, must be traced back to Empress Wu's reign. Some scholars believe that this verse form was perfected during Zhongzong's Jinglong 景龍 reign (707–710); this conclusion is mainly based on a single source for a large number of poems (369 in total) from the era, preserved through the *Account of the Literature Institute from the Jinglong Era* (*Jinglong wenguan ji* 景龍文館記).^⑤ In contrast with this serendipitous abundance, very few sets of group compositions

① For a list of these twenty-four scholars, see Jia Jinhua 賈晉華, “Jinglong wenguan ji yu Zhongzong chao wenguan xueshi qun” 景龍文館記與中宗朝文館學士群, in *Tangdai jihui zongji yu shiren qun yanjiu* 唐代集會總集與詩人群研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2001), 43–44.

② See Shangguan's biography in *JTS* 51.2175. Her *XTS* biography states that she was summoned to an audience with Empress Wu at the age of thirteen years old (fourteen *sui* by Chinese reckoning) in 677 and entrusted with drafting imperial edicts since 696/697. *XTS* 76.3488.

③ *JTS* 90.2924.

④ While scholars sometimes regard Shangguan Wan'er as possibly a ghostwriter for Empress Wu, there is no direct evidence for this supposition. Instead, the statement about Shangguan's ghostwriter identity occurs in the context of her activities during the reign of Emperor Zhongzong, and the “emperor and empress” clearly refer to Zhongzong and his wife Empress Wei 韋后, not Empress Wu: “Wan'er often composed poems on behalf of the [Zhongzong] emperor, as well as the empress [Wei] and the two princesses Changning and Anle [Zhongzong and Empress Wei's daughters]; she would write several poems all at once and their diction was quite beautiful” 婉兒每代帝及后、長寧安樂二公主，數首並作，辭甚綺麗. *JTS* 51.2175. Also see *XTS* 76.3488. Shangguan's service to Empress Wu is described as that of a political advisor and a drafter of edicts: “Since the Shengli era [698–700], Empress Wu often asked her to participate in the discussion and decision-making about various officers' memorials” 百司表奏，多令參決. Her *XTS* biography states she was “in charge of [drafting] edicts on the inside” 內掌詔命 and consulting with Empress Wu about the ministers' memorials and discussions and about state affairs” 羣臣奏議及天下事皆與之. *XTS* 76.3488.

⑤ See the oft-cited article by Takagi Masakazu 高木正一, 景龍の宮廷詩壇と七言律詩の形成, in *Ritsumeikan bungaku* 立命館文学, 224 (1964):45–81; also Jia Jinhua, *Tangdai jihui zongji*, 66, 490–95. *Jinglong wenguan ji*, a

on court outings from Empress Wu's reign have survived for scholars to come up with an accurate assessment. Yet, one such luckily extant set of eighteen poems, written on the empress's outing to the Stone Rapids (Shicong 石淙) at Mount Song in 700, shows that all poems, following the lead of the empress herself, are in the form of an eight-line heptasyllabic poem.^① Several poems from this group demonstrate a near flawless execution of the metrical pattern that was later regarded as the hallmark of "regulated verse,"^② and all poems have two perfect parallel couplets in the middle.

Access and Visibility

It is impossible to speak of Empress Wu's lasting impact on the Chinese cultural tradition without considering her rulership. Her openness to recruitment and promotion of talented men was a distinguishing characteristic of her rule, which would eventually lead to the beginning of the end of court literature as a force to be reckoned with in the larger cultural sphere. The era of Empress Wu may be described as an age of access, and this access occurred in two ways: on the one hand, the access to her person and to power; on the other, her access to information throughout the empire.

The empress was always interested in finding out what was going on in the empire; that she heard of Guo Yuanzhen, a low-level provincial official stationed in the southwest, and summoned him to an audience is but one example. When she first replaced the Tang with her own dynasty, it might have been primarily out of her apprehension of conspiracies against her person that she encouraged informers; but her craving for information went far beyond the understandable desire for self-preservation. To satisfy her desire to "know widely what happened in the world" 周知人間事,^③ she had a bronze vessel with four openings cast in 686, and called on people to deposit through it their discussions of state policies or military plans, their literary writings, their opinions about astronomical anomalies, or any information about conspiracies.^④ Anyone in the empire who wished to inform her of anything would allegedly be granted the state's postal horses as well as free meals and lodging to expedite their travel; "even farmers and woodcutters were given audience, and were provided for in the state's guesthouses;

record of court poems from the Jinglong era, has been painstakingly reconstructed by Jia Jinhua on the foundation of earlier studies by Japanese scholars. See Jia, *Tangdai*, 181–278.

① Jie Wu translated and discussed this group of poems in Chapter Four of her doctoral dissertation, "A Study of Group Compositions in Early Tang China (618–713)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2008), 163–96. Rebecca Doran discussed some of the poems in *Transgressive Typologies*, 105–7.

② These include the poems by Li Jiao, Shen Quanqi, and Song Zhiwen. *Li Jiao shizhu*, 30. *Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*, Vol. 1 (*Shen Quanqi ji jiaozhu*), 30; Vol. 2 (*Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*), 412.

③ Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956), 203.6438; hereafter ZZTJ.

④ *JTS* 50.2142–43; *ZZTJ* 203.6437–38.

if what they said pleased her, they would be given an official post out of order; if what they said turned out to be untrue, they were not held accountable” 雖農夫樵人, 皆得召見, 廩於客館, 所言或稱旨, 則不次除官, 無實者不問。^①

Empress Wu created the offices of “Rectifier of Omissions” (*buque* 補闕) and “Reminder” (*shiyi* 拾遺) in 685, filling each post with two officials (Left and Right); in 692, she added three more members to each post, so that there were five Rectifiers of Omissions and five Reminders.^② They attended on the emperor in close proximity, and were responsible for making suggestions and proposing corrections to the emperor on all manners of things, and for recommending talented or virtuous people.^③

As the empress was inquisitive about all manner of things going on in the world, those who did not understand her desire for information could lose favor. Once she asked Lu Yuanfang 陸元方, Vice Director of the Chancellery (or the “Phoenix Terrace Vice-Director” as it was renamed under Empress Wu), about “outside things.” Lu replied, “Since your servant is put in the position of a prime minister, should anything big happen, I would never dare withhold it from Your Majesty; but the small stuff of the world is not worth troubling the sagely ears” 臣備位宰相, 有大事不敢以不聞, 人間細事, 不足煩聖聽. The empress was not pleased with this answer and demoted him.^④

Empress Wu seems to have sought information of all sorts, serious or light-hearted, and made use of it. Once she asked Zhang Yuanyi 張元一: “Have there been any funny stories from the outside?” Zhang Yuanyi reported the following doggerel:

朱前疑着綠	Zhu [“red”] Qianyi wears green;
逯仁傑着朱	Lu [punning with “green”] Renjie wears red.
聞知微騎馬	Lü [punning with “donkey”] Zhiwei rides a horse,
馬吉甫騎驢	Ma [“horse”] Jifu rides a donkey.
將名作姓李千里	Taking his first name for surname—there is Li Qianli;
將姓作名吳栖梧	taking his surname for first name—there is Wu Qiwu.
左臺胡御史	In the Left Tribunal there is Mr. Hu the Censor;
右臺御史胡	in the Right Tribunal the Censor is a Hu.

Mr. Hu the Censor was Hu Yuanli 胡元禮; the Censor who was a Hu (i.e., a non-Han person) was a Tibetan. This last line refers to the fact that the empress had granted official post to quite a few Tibetans

① ZZTJ 203.6438–39.

② JTS 42.1788.

③ JTS 43.1845.

④ JTS 88.2875. The wording on which I base this translation is slightly different in ZZTJ 206.6545.

who sent memorials to the throne, and it seems to have a racist edge. The empress may have had her characteristic hearty laugh—many anecdotes describe her “hearty laugh” 大笑, and she apparently had a rowdy sense of humor—but we are told that “soon afterward the Tibetan was transferred to a different post.”^①

To people in the realm, access to the imperial person and to power had never seemed so within reach. It is well-known that the empress expanded the bureaucracy and provided men who would not have been able to rise in officialdom with direct access to power.^② In 685, and then again in 691, she issued an edict permitting gentry and commoners alike to recommend themselves for positions.^③ It is widely known that the civil-service examination underwent several reforms with Empress Wu’s intervention, first the requirement for composition of literary pieces in 681, which set the pattern for the rest of the dynasty;^④ second the concealment of the candidates’ names to ensure the objectivity of the selection examination (*huming* 糊名).^⑤ “The empress had always favored [the examination system] over the various privileged means of entry into officialdom, and in 689 had instituted the personal examination of candidates by the ruler.”^⑥ But the empress also had other means of recruiting talented individuals. In 690, after she established the Zhou dynasty, one of the first things she did was to appoint ten Relief Commissioners (*Cunfu shi* 存撫使), who were sent to the provinces for inspection and entrusted with recommending people.^⑦ In 692, she summoned the men recommended by the commissioners and gave all of them “trial offices” (*shiguan* 試官) based on their capabilities, marking the beginning of such a practice.^⑧

At first, this practice caused an uproar, and a satiric ditty was circulating:

補闕連車載	Rectifiers come by cartloads;
拾遺平斗量	Reminders are measured with bushels.
杷推侍御史	Attendant Censors can be gathered with a rake;

① Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (ca. 660–ca. 730), *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載, annot. Zhao Shouyan 趙守儼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 4.87.

② As Guisso writes, “All high officials were to recommend one person qualified for bureaucratic appointment. No Tang ruler had placed such heavy reliance as the empress upon this measure, and coupled with her frequent use of other recruitment methods beyond the examination, it has resulted in a massive numerical increase of officials.” *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, 293.

③ *JTS* 6.117, 6.122.

④ *XTS* 44.1163.

⑤ *XTS* 125.4404, 202.5753. Li Fang et al., comp. *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 185.1388. The practice of *huming* was short-lived, being abolished in 695; see *Tang huiyao* 75.1358.

⑥ *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, 311.

⑦ *JTS* 6.121.

⑧ *XTS* 45.1176.

碗脫校書郎 Collators are produced from the mold of a bowl.^①

To this someone called Shen Quanjiao 沈全交 added four lines:

評事不讀律 Case Reviewers do not read Legal Codes;
 博士不尋章 Erudites don't study paragraphs.
 麵糊存撫使 Muddle-headed are the Relief Commissioners;
 眯目聖神皇 something got in the eyes of our Sagely and Divine Emperor.^②

The Censor Ji Xianzhi 紀先知 had Shen Quanjiao arrested and suggested punishing him severely for slandering the court. “The empress, however, said with a laugh, ‘As long as you gentlemen are not unprincipled, why do you care about what people in the world all say? There is no need to punish him; just let him go’” 但使卿等不濫, 何慮天下人語? 不須與罪, 即宜放却.

In reality, the practice of “trial offices” worked well and took hold. Even the moralistic *New Tang History* concedes:

The empress dowager did not begrudge posts that would give herself help from brilliant men from all over the empire. Even a liar could be appointed to a position if he said something to her liking. However, should he prove inadequate to the position, he would soon be dismissed and disciplined without the least tolerance, with the single-minded purpose of acquiring real talents and true worthies.^③

太后不惜爵位, 以籠四方豪傑自為助, 雖妄男子, 言有所合, 輒不次官之, 至不稱職, 尋亦廢誅不少縱, 務取實材真賢.

Sima Guang, the compiler of *Zizhi tongjian* and a stern Confucian, also praises the empress:

Although the Empress Dowager aimed to win people's hearts with salary and positions, should someone prove incompetent, she would soon dismiss him from office and sometimes castigate him. She controlled the entire world with her punishments and rewards, and personally decided all policies. She was brilliantly insightful and skilled in forming decisions, so that the talented and worthy men of her time all strove to serve her.^④

太后雖濫以祿位收天下人心, 然不稱職者, 尋亦黜之, 或加刑誅. 挾刑賞之柄以駕御天下, 政由己出, 明

① The anecdote is recorded in Zhang Zhuo's anecdotal collection. *Chaoye qianzai* 4.89. Also see *ZZTJ* 205.6477–78. For the quotation below I follow the wording in Zhang Zhuo.

② The first two lines by Shen Quanjiao only appear in *Chaoye qianzai*.

③ *XTS* 76.3479.

④ *ZZTJ* 205.6478.

察善斷，故當時英賢亦競為之用。

A modern historian may be skeptical about the extent of the introduction of “a new social element into the ruling class,”^① but there is no doubt that the empress promoted many men from humble status or utter obscurity, raising them to distinguished positions. But ultimately the most important consequence of her actions was the creation of an *impression*, a *belief*, that a man could indeed by his abilities alone rise to prominence from nothing, and that access to the imperial person and to power seemed more possible than ever.^②

Closely connected to the characteristic of the age as one of information and access is Empress Wu’s use of visibility. In the early 700s, on the basis of a recommendation made by one of the Investigation Commissioners, Empress Wu summoned to an audience Zhang Jiazhen 張嘉貞 (666–729), a low-level administrator who had been dismissed from office due to some unspecified offense, and engaged in a conversation with him from behind a curtain. Zhang said,

I have entered the deep palace as a commoner—this for me is a singular encounter in a thousand years. Yet, within the distance of several feet, I feel as though separated from Your Majesty by cloud and fog, unable to see the sun and moon. I fear that there is something missing from the way of ruler and minister.

以臣草萊而得入謁九重，是千載一遇也。咫尺之間，如隔雲霧，竟不覩日月，恐君臣之道有所未盡。

Upon hearing this, the empress immediately ordered the attendants to roll up the curtain. She was so impressed after her conversation with Zhang that she appointed him an Investigating Censor on the spot.^③ Zhang turned out to be a capable and devoted official who later became a grand minister in the reign of Empress Wu’s grandson, Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), and Jiazhen’s son Zhang Yanshang 張延賞 (727–787) would serve four emperors. This anecdote that has made its way into the dynastic history is quite interesting: among other things, it is emblematic of Empress Wu’s willingness to accept suggestions and at times to keep herself open to her subjects, without segregation and mediation.

Court poetry gives the most memorable expression to Empress Wu’s visibility. On November 21, 703, after staying in Chang’an for two years, Empress Wu and her retinue set out to return to Luoyang, her “Divine Capital,” where they arrived on December 10. On the journey Shen Quanqi wrote a poem,

① *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, 275.

② It is instructive to compare Empress Wu’s promotion of men from humble background with Liang Emperor Wu’s (r. 502–549) attempt to advance men from lower gentry based on their literary talent and create what I have called “a cultural elite” as a way of countering the power of hereditary aristocracy: Empress Wu reached out to a much wider social stratum than Emperor Wu ever did; she also based her judgment on criteria including but not limited to literary merit.

③ *JTS* 99.3090.

“Attending on Her Majesty’s Departure from Chang’an: Written at Imperial Command” 扈從出長安應制:^①

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 漢宅規模壯 | The Han residence is majestic in scope and design, |
| 周都景命隆 | the great mandate for the Zhou capital is magnificent. ^② |
| 西賓讓東主 | The western guest defers to the host in the east, ^③ |
| 4 法駕幸天中 | and the imperial chariot graces the center of heaven. ^④ |
| 太史占星應 | The Grand Scribe observed a good omen by star divination; |
| 春官奏日同 | the Spring Officer presented an identical auspicious date. |
| 旌門起長樂 | Banner-gates depart from the Palace of Everlasting Joy; |
| 8 帳殿出新豐 | the tent-halls emerge from the township of New Feng. |
| 翕習黃山下 | Splendid and majestic, at the foot of Yellow Mountain, ^⑤ |
| 紆徐清渭東 | stately and leisurely, to the east of the clear Wei River. |
| 金麾張畫月 | The golden banners unfurl the painted moon; |
| 12 珠幃戴相風 | over the pearl-decorated curtains the wind-measure is raised. ^⑥ |
| 是節嚴陰始 | In this very season the austere <i>yin</i> begins, |
| 寒郊散野蓬 | wild tumbleweeds scatter over the cold plain. |
| 薄霜沾上路 | Thin frost congeals on the imperial highway, |
| 16 殘雪繞離宮 | remaining snow surrounds the detached palace. |
| 賜帛矜耆老 | Giving away silks, She feels compassion for the elders; |
| 褰旒問小童 | opening the crown’s pearly hangings, She asks a question of a little child. |
| 復除恩載洽 | Exempted from taxation, the folk are once again |
| | immersed in imperial grace; |
| 20 望秩禮新崇 | making sacrifices to the remote mountains, |

① *Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*, Vol. 1, (*Shen Quanqi jiaozhu*), 60.

② The Han residence and the Zhou capital respectively refer to Chang’an and Luoyang, as Chang’an was the capital of the Western Han and Luoyang was the capital of the Eastern Zhou—as well as Empress Wu’s “divine capital.”

③ The Eastern Han writer Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) “*Fu* on the Eastern Capital” begins with a “guest of the west” engaged in a dialogue with “the host of the east” about the relative merits of Chang’an (west) and Luoyang (east).

④ Luoyang was known as “the middle point of heaven and earth.”

⑤ “Yellow Mountain” 黃山 was the name of a Han palace. Yang Xiong’s preface to his “*Fu* on Plume Hunt” 羽獵賦 states that the imperial park “circles the Yellow Mountain to the north, and skirts east along the banks of the Wei River, for a circumference of several hundred *li*” 北繞黃山，濱渭而東，周袤數百里；David R. Knechtges’ translation with modifications, in *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature, Vol II: Rhapsodies on Sacrifices, Hunting, Travel, Sightseeing, Palaces and Halls, Rivers and Seas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 117.

⑥ “Wind-measure” is a weathercock.

rites are honored through renewal.

臣忝承明召 This subject humbly receives a summons to the Chengming court,
多慚獻賦雄 but is much ashamed by the great *fu* presenter Yang Xiong.

The Southern Dynasties court poet Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384–456) often begins a formal court poem by invoking earlier great dynasties—usually the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou) or the Han—and then moving on to the present dynasty, thus creating a continuity in dynastic succession and glorifying the current regime.^① At first glance, Shen Quanqi seems to be adopting Yan Yanzhi's rhetorical device in the opening couplet, but he evokes the Han and Zhou with a clever sleight of hand: Zhou is the name of both the ancient dynasty and Empress Wu's, and the temporal ordering deployed by Yan Yanzhi, when applied to the two Tang capitals Chang'an and Luoyang, turns out to be a spatial juxtaposition of two "contemporaneous" cities. In other words, one can easily read the "Zhou capital" of the second line as referring to Empress Wu's Luoyang rather than merely to the ancient Zhou dynasty's Luoyang. Then, in the third line, Luoyang is the "eastern host" relative to its "western guest," i.e., Chang'an; but in the fourth line it becomes "the center of heaven." Just as the empress is leaving Chang'an for Luoyang, we see the shift of weight and spotlight likewise taking place in the poem describing the imperial move eastward.

The next eight lines relate the beginning of the journey. Even in small details the poet shows off his craftsmanship: he pairs "star divination" 占星 with "present[ing] an [auspicious] date" 奏日, playing with the double meanings of *ri* as "date" and "sun" in the parallel position of "star." Then again using word magic he makes physical buildings—"gates" and "halls"—move out of the old Tang capital. Lines 9–10 allude to the Western Han writer Yang Xiong's rhapsody on an imperial hunting trip, thus foreshadowing the poet's modest apology at the end of the poem that he is not as talented as the earlier writer (ll. 21–22).

The middle section of the poem presents two well-orchestrated contrasts: first, a contrast between the colorful splendor of the empress's procession and the cold austerity of nature in winter; but the divergence is immediately superseded by a second contrast, this time between the harsh elements and the empress's life-giving grace to her people. The poet chooses to focus on two age groups—the old and the young—who, though likewise physically feeble, are at the two ends of the social spectrum. Normally one treats the former with deference and the latter with solicitude. Thus, the verbs used for the empress's interactions with them, *jin* 矜 and *wen* 問 respectively, seem to be inverted, all the more

① For instance, "The Zhou king's chariot tracks extended to the farthest distance; / Xia's transports traveled across mountains and rivers" 周御窮轍跡, 夏載歷山川. Or, "Yu's airs give account of the monarch's journey; / the Xia proverb praises the king's outing" 虞風載帝狩, 夏諺頌王遊. See Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry," *T'oung Pao* 102.1–3 (2016): 42, 27.

calling attention to her empathy and sensitivity: the elderly are more susceptible to cold, and she shows compassion for them; the Yellow Emperor himself had famously sought the way of governance from a little child in a *Zhuangzi* parable, hence the empress likewise puts questions to a little child.^①

The most remarkable line is this one: “Opening the crown’s pearly hangings, She asks a question of a little child” 褰旒問小童. There are very few instances of the use of this phrase, *qianliu* 褰旒 (“opening the crown’s pearly hangings”), before Shen Quanqi. The standard phrase is its opposite, *chuilu* 垂旒, “letting the crown’s hangings droop.” According to the Han historian Ban Gu, it means that the emperor must not look astray.^② Only one Tang writer earlier than Shen Quanqi—Gao Ruosi 高若思, appointed a Scholar of the Institute of Expanding Culture during Gaozong’s reign—had used the phrase *qianliu*.^③ If *qianliu* remains hypothetical in Gao’s usage, it is a realized action in Shen’s poem. Not only that, but it is done for the sake of having a face-to-face encounter with the humblest of the empire’s subjects.

The moment of revelation of the imperial visage to a child is a striking moment of the execution and manifestation of kingly power, for true kingly power resides in performing respect and kindness to those who are perceived as being utterly powerless. The thrust of this line is not in the act of putting a question to a little child, evoking the Yellow Emperor, but in that of pushing away the pearly hangings to allow for an unimpeded communication between ruler and subject. The empress is encoded, through this gesture of revelation, as a powerful physical presence, fully embodied, in a brilliant manifestation. Through focusing on a moment of direct access between the empress and her subject, the court poet captures an essential characteristic of her reign.^④ It is only appropriate that the moment is represented as a central image in this poem, which, due to its nature as a piece of public writing, serves as a double mirror projecting the empress’s image to the world at large.

The Range of Emotions

The very possibility of gaining access to the imperial person and to the center of power, achieved by

① “Xu Wugui” 徐無鬼 chapter, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, annot. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua sjuju, 1995), 8.831–33.

② “垂旒，示不視邪。” Ban Gu, *Baihu tong* 白虎通 4b.3, cited in Li Fang et al., comp. *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1975), 686.3190.

③ “I humbly express my wish that Your Majesty open the crown’s hangings to shine upon us, and give consent to the pleading from your various subjects” 伏願褰旒寫照，洽群請於帝俞；*QTW* 156.1806. This appears in a petition to the throne for performing the *fengshan* ceremony, likely during Gaozong’s reign. Gao Ruosi is mentioned as being a Hongwen guan 弘文館 Scholar in 656; *JTS* 191.5109.

④ Indeed, one may argue that Empress Wu’s increasing isolation, self-imposed due to her failing health, in the last couple of years of her rule, with only a few favorites having access to her person, contributed to her downfall.

members of lower social class through many different venues, awakened the hope that a man could rise through his abilities regardless of family lineage: this was a milestone in medieval Chinese society. Poetry from Empress Wu's era was imbued with a positive sentiment and a sense of hopefulness.

In discussing emotions in classical Chinese literature, scholars tend to focus on a limited range of sanctioned emotions, which are typically negative in nature: grief, disappointment, melancholy, frustration, and despair. Upon close examination, these emotions revolve around a male elite individual's lack of success and recognition in the public world; in a woman, they are usually of a kind that forms a metaphorical counterpart of those sanctioned emotions in a man: longing, loyalty, bitterness at abandonment, or sorrow about solitude. In such a conceptual framework, there is a wide spectrum of feelings that does not receive equal attention from researchers: boredom, jealousy, annoyance, or stress, but in particular emotions on the positive side such as elation, contentment, confidence, pride, ease, gratitude, and appreciation. Court poetry is often criticized for its perceived lack of emotions. The misperception is rooted in the very assumption about the narrow range of sanctioned emotions outlined above. Thus, ironically, if a courtier expresses frustration and sorrow in exile, his feelings are taken seriously and validated by scholars; but whenever court poems express optimism, appreciation, pride, and a sense of belonging in the court community, these emotions are either ignored or denounced by literary scholars as artificially staged, poetically insignificant, and morally suspect. Poems written on a public occasion are often regarded with undeserved skepticism, as if any such poem were necessarily inauthentic. But the expression of positive emotions is never more, or less, authentic than that of negative emotions. Since emotional authenticity is something we can never prove or disprove, not only are all speculations idle, but it is also pointless to treat it as part of the criteria in our assessment and judgment of poetry—not to mention that it is usually irrelevant to any critical issue at hand.

Much poetry was written during Empress Wu's reign, some commissioned by her, some in a broader court context, and some away from the court. These poems encompass a wide range of positive emotions. We can begin with a poem that is lost. The poem was written by Du Shenyan, a well-known poet of his day but now perhaps better remembered as the grandfather of arguably the greatest Chinese poet, Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770). According to his *Tang History* biography, Du Shenyan once lost his office due to some offense and lived in idleness in Luoyang. Empress Wu heard of his reputation and summoned him to court, talked to him, and at the end of the interview promised to employ him again. Then she asked him, “Are you happy [with the news]?” Shenyan responded with a resounding “Yes!” and performed a little courtly dance expressing his delight. He subsequently composed a “Poem on Happiness” 歡喜詩, which received much commendation from Empress Wu.^①

While Du Shenyan's “Happiness Poem” is no longer extant, we do have a poem by Yan Chaoyin,

① JTS 190A.4999. Subsequent to this meeting the empress appointed him to a post in the palace library.

a court poet from a humble origin who wrote with a flamboyant style. The poem was presumably produced some time before 699, known as “Composed Orally While Attending Her Majesty on a Journey” 侍從途中口號應制:^①

疵賤出山東	This low-born man comes from east of Mount Taihang, ^②
忠貞任土風	loyal and upright, bearing the customs of his origin.
因敷河朔藻	Upon displaying the literary elegance north of the Yellow River,
得奉洛陽宮	I get to serve in the palace of Luoyang.
一顧侍御史	One glance from you, I became an Attendant Censor;
再顧給事中	with another glance, a Supervising Secretary!
常願粉肌骨	I ever wish to sacrifice my flesh and bones
特答造化功	to repay the molding of the Creator.

As an extemporaneous performance the poem does not have too much to distinguish itself as a fine piece of literature; still, it may have elicited a smile from the empress with its cheeky third couplet. This couplet echoes a famous song from the Western Han, performed by the court musician Li Yannian 李延年 for Han Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE):

北方有佳人	In the north there is a lady fair,
絕世而獨立	who stands alone without peer.
一顧傾人城	With one glance she makes a city fall for her,
再顧傾人國	with another glance an entire country.
寧不知傾城與傾國	Don't you know that in making a city and a country fall
佳人難再得	such a fair lady is hard to find again! ^③

If the fair lady in Li Yannian's song is a femme fatale who topples a city and a country with her glances, then Yan Chaoyin turns himself into the object of her glances, whose career is made rather than ruined by the peerless lady. She is literally his “creator,” and he is willing to paradoxically destroy himself to repay her “making” of him.

① QTS 69.769. In 699 Yan Chaoyin was promoted to the position of Vice-Director of the Unicorn Pavilion (Palace Library) 麟臺少監, rank 4b1, which was of a higher rank than Attendant Censor (6b2/6a) and Supervising Secretary (5a1) mentioned in the poem. JTS 190B.5026.

② Yan Chaoyin was from Zhaozhou 趙州, the region known as “north of the [Yellow] River” 河北 or “Shandong” 山東, here referring to the east of Mount Taihang.

③ Ban Gu et al., *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 97A.3951.

Du Shenyang and Yan Chaoyin sang praises of the empress because they were the direct beneficiaries of her favor, but poets also gave voice to upbeat sentiments in poems written on more private occasions. I will cite two examples. The first is a long poem in fifty lines written by Li Jiao on the empress's return journey from Chang'an to Luoyang in the winter of 703, the same journey during which Shen Quanqi wrote the poem discussed above. If Shen Quanqi's poem was commissioned by the empress, then Li Jiao addressed his poem spontaneously to his colleagues.

扈從還洛呈侍從群官 Attending on Her Majesty to Return to Luoyang: I Present This Poem to the Various Fellow Officials^①

四海帝王家	The entire sea-girt world is the emperor's home,
兩都周漢室	the two capitals have housed Zhou and Han. ^②
觀風昔來幸	Observing customs, Her Majesty graced Chang'an with a visit;
4 御氣今旋蹕	the imperial aura is now returning on the cleared path.
雷奮六合開	Thunder shakes earth, as the six directions open up;
天行萬乘出	heaven on the move, ten thousand chariots emerge.
玄冥奉時駕	The Dark Lord attends on Her timely carriage,
8 白拒參戎律	the White Prince stands guard. ^③
後隊咽笳簫	The rearguard sounds the panpipes;
前驅嚴罕畢	the vanguard's banners are kept in solemn order.
輝光射東井	Splendid light beams from the eastern Well Constellation; ^④
12 禁令橫西秩	strict commands are given to protect the autumn harvest. ^⑤
帳殿別陽秋	Tent palaces are distinguished like spring and autumn;
旌門臨甲乙	banner gates erected for the orderly curtained enclosures.
將交洛城雨	As we are about to cross paths with the rain of Luo,
16 稍遠長安日	we gradually draw away from the sun of Chang'an.
邛鞞雲外來	Mang and Gong arrive from beyond the clouds;

① *Li Jiao shizhu*, 31–32.

② *WYYH* 171.829 reads Ji 姬 for Zhou. That is, Chang'an and Luoyang had been the capital of the Ji Zhou dynasty and the Han dynasty. *WYYH* also includes this poem in 249.1257.

③ The Dark Lord refers to the god of winter; the White Prince refers to the god of the west, in the direction of Chang'an.

④ The Qin region, where Chang'an is, corresponds to the Well Constellation.

⑤ That is, the imperial entourage was taking care not to trespass and damage the farming fields along the way. West is the direction of autumn. According to the compiler of *Li Jiao shizhu*, *xizhi* is a condensed form of *pingzhi xicheng* 平秩西成, a phrase from *The Book of Documents*.

- 咸秦霧中失 Xian and Qin disappear into the fog.^①
 孟冬霜霰下 At the beginning of winter, frost and sleet descend,
 20 是月農功畢 in this very month, agricultural labor is completed.
 天道向歸餘 The Way of Heaven approves “moving the remaining days,”^②
 皇情美陰鷺 imperial feelings favor silently benefitting the people.
 行存名嶽禮 Her Highness travels to preserve the ritual at sacred mountain,
 24 遞問高年疾 and inquire after the ailments of the elders in turn.
 祝鳥既開羅 As fowlers open up the nets for the birds,
 調人更張瑟 the Harmonizers further tune the zither strings.^③
 登原采謳誦 Ascending the plain to collect songs and ballads,
 28 俯谷求才術 going down to the valleys to seek talented and learned men.
 邑罕懸磬貧 Rarely is “suspended chime-stone” poverty seen in towns;
 山無掛瓢逸 mountains have no gourd-ladle-hanging recluse.
 施恩浹寰宇 Her Highness spreads her grace all over the world,
 32 展義該文質 displaying propriety, She encompasses patterning and substance.
 德澤盛軒遊 Her nurturing leniency is more grand than Xuanyuan’s expeditions were;^④
 哀矜深禹恤 her compassion goes deeper than Yu’s did.
 申歌地廬駭 When the folk burst into song, even the earth is shaken;
 36 獻壽衢尊溢 they present their longevity wishes as the vessel on the road overflows.^⑤
 瑞色抱氤氳 An auspicious aura embraces the perfect blending of *yin* and *yang* energy;
 寒光變蕭颯 the wintry light from the sun changes the rustling of the fall.
 宗枝旦爽輔 Royal kinsmen, the likes of Dan and Shi, offer assistance;^⑥
 40 侍從王劉匹 attendants are all matches for Wang and Liu.^⑦
 並輯蛟龍書 Joining forces we compile writings in the form of coiling dragons,

① Mount Mang and Gong County refer to Luoyang; Xianyang and the Qin region refer to Chang’an.

② *Zuozhuan* Duke Wen 1: [the former kings] “moved the remaining days to the end of the year” 歸餘於終. This is interpreted as putting any intercalary month at the end of the year. *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu* 春秋左傳注疏, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), ed. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1965), 18.298.

③ The Harmonizer was the name of an office in Zhou times; its function was to negotiate and adjudicate when there was a disagreement or argument between two parties.

④ Xuanyuan refers to the Yellow Emperor.

⑤ This is an allusion to a passage in *Huainanzi*: “The Way of the Sage resembles setting up a wine vessel in the midst of a road: passers-by pour however much or little from it according to their capacity to receive.” *Huainanzi* 淮南子, annot. Liu Wendian 劉文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 10.319.

⑥ Duke of Zhou and Duke of Shao, members of the Zhou royal house who assisted King Cheng in governing. This refers to members of the Wu clan.

⑦ Wang Can 王粲 (177–217) and Liu Zhen 劉楨 (d. 217), famous writers serving under Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220).

- 同簪鳳凰筆 together we fasten the brush of phoenix on the hat.^①
 陶甄荷吹萬 To mold and cultivate, we rely on the gale blowing through myriad holes;
 44 頌嘆歸明一 our praise and marveling all go to the Wise One.
 歡與道路長 Our joy grows with the road we travel;
 顧隨談笑密 our regard for one another increases with merry conversations.
 叨承廊廟選 Honored and humbled by being admitted into the house of State,
 48 謬齒夔龍弼 I find myself among worthy peers like Kui and Long.^②
 喜構大廈成 Rejoicing in the successful construction of the great building,^③
 慚非棟隆吉 I am only embarrassed that I am no grand beam.

This poem is written in high style, with elegant, densely allusive diction. The poet praises not only the journey but also the empress's reign in general, and eventually pays great compliments to his colleagues in court, commending them for their talent, devotion, and hard work (ll. 39–46). He paints a picture of a congenial community, with the ministers enjoying themselves and enjoying one another's company, "laughing and talking" on the road. There is a palpable sense of pride, satisfaction, and self-worth, a sense of being part of, and contributing, to something larger—a worthy enterprise under a capable leader.

For the second example I return to Du Shenyan. Du wrote two poems on the Great Feast (*dapu* 大酺), a national banquet celebrating festive or other special occasions. Although Taizong and Gaozong had both ordered the Great Feast before, the *dapu* celebration in Empress Wu's reign generally lasted longer than in previous eras.^④ Du Shenyan's first "Great Feast" piece was written in 690, the first time Empress Wu issued the command for seven-day *dapu* festivities. The following poem, in seven-syllable lines, was written when he was serving a provincial post in the south:^⑤

① Courtiers fasten a brush on their hat when having audience with the emperor so that they can take notes during the conversation.

② Kui and Long were officers under the mythical sage emperors Yao and Shun.

③ WYYH 171 reads *yizhu* 意屬 for *xigou* 喜構. In that case, the line should be rendered as, "I focus my intent on the successful construction of the great building."

④ Taizong's *dapu* activities lasted two days; Gaozong's usually went on for three days. Empress Wu's great banquets always lasted five, seven, or even nine days.

⑤ The modern annotator dates this poem to a time after 690. *Du Shenyan shizhu* 杜審言詩注, annot. Xu Dingxiang 徐定祥 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 27. Since Du Shenyan was still in the capital in 691 (indicated by his poem bidding farewell to Li Sizhen 李嗣真, who was sent as one of the ten "Relief Commissioners" throughout the realm; *Tang huiyao* 77.1414), the time of the Great Feast that best fit the seasonal context was in the spring of 695, when Empress Wu changed the reign name to Zhengsheng 證聖, accepted a new honorable title, proclaimed a general amnesty, and granted the entire country a great feast for seven days. *JTS* 6.124.

毗陵震澤九州通	Piling and Zhenze are connected with all Nine Provinces; ^①
士女歡娛萬國同	men and women share a joy with ten thousand kingdoms.
伐鼓撞鐘驚海上	Beating drums and ringing bells bring amazement and wonder to the seashore;
新妝袿服照江東	fresh make-up and opulent dresses shine a light on the East of the Yangzi River.
梅花落處疑殘雪	Where plum blossoms fall, methinks they are the melting snow;
柳葉開時任好風	when willow leaves open, let the fine breeze blow.
火德雲官逢道泰	The Virtue of Fire and the Cloud Officers encounter the wide-open Way, ^②
天長地久屬年豐	as heaven is eternal, and earth long-lasting, may we always enjoy such prosperity.

In this fast-paced, joyful poem, the festive atmosphere is vividly conveyed, with sound and sight, in the second couplet. Spring wind blows down plum blossoms but also unfurls willow leaves; the transition from the sterile winter white of fallen plum blossoms and the last snow on the ground to the vitality of spring green is matched with the uplifting and life-giving force of the amnesty celebrated across the empire. The mythical references in the seventh line conjure up the aura of the Golden Age in antiquity, and the last line represents the poet's New Year wish, not just for this year, but also for all future years.

The strong opening couplet is particularly interesting: when writing the poem, the poet was in Piling (in modern Jiangsu); he begins with Piling, but immediately follows the reference with Zhenze, also known as Lake Tai, in the same region, and uses the fluidity and openness of the image of the great lake to expand his attention to the Nine Provinces, the term for the entire country. The keyword here is connection and access, *tōng* 通, which is also the keyword that characterizes Empress Wu's reign. This sense of *tōng* leads to the feeling of *tóng* 同, "sharing," and is echoed by the image of "the wide-open way" at the end of the poem.

Normally, a poet who served in an office anywhere away from the capital would always feel marginalized; it is rare to come across a poem with such a strong sense of belonging and harmony

① Du Shenyan has a poem entitled, "Partying at Jiangyin on the Ninth Day" 重九日宴江陰, and Jiangyin was under the jurisdiction of the Piling 毗陵 (also written 毘陵) commandery in Tang. *Du Shenyan shizhu*, 23.

② Based on the belief in the Five Elements theory, the Tang was represented by the element of Earth, and Empress Wu's successor Zhou dynasty exemplified the Virtue of Fire; "Cloud Officers" is an archaic term describing the Yellow Emperor's ministers.

emerging from a single individual and radiating, through his vision, to the rest of the empire and beyond. The mood of elation more than anything speaks to the empire's general sense of well-being under Empress Wu's rule.

The optimistic mood permeating the poem is representative of a number of poems composed both on public occasions and in private during Empress Wu's reign, such as Du Shenyan's other poem on the "Grand Feast," in five-syllable-line regulated verse, written in 689, as well as his long five-syllable-line *pailü*, "Grandee Li Sizhen Going on a Mission to Relieve Hedong" 李大夫嗣真奉使存撫河東, written in 691, or Shen Quanqi's poem on witnessing the empress issue an edict of general amnesty ("Watching the Announcement of Amnesty and the Change of Reign Title on Zetian Gate Tower" 則天門觀赦改年).^① The sanguinity and optimism in private poems about large-scale national events such as the Grand Feast and the general amnesty lend further credence to the positive sentiments pronounced in poems written on public occasions.

After the empress passed away, Cui Rong 崔融 (653–706), another important writer recognized and promoted by Empress Wu, was commissioned to compose her memorial essay (*aicewen* 哀冊文). He was said to have invested so much energy in crafting the piece that he died of exhaustion soon after its completion.^② The memorial essay contains the most unreserved acclaim of Empress Wu's rulership, forming a dramatic contrast with the begrudged approval of her in later histories or downright vilification, as in the following passage:

洸洸我君	Majestic and magnificent was our Sovereign Lord,
四海無氛	the sea-girt world was without trouble under Her reign.
英才遠略	With extraordinary wisdom and far-reaching plans,
鴻業大勳	grand was Her enterprise, immense Her accomplishment.
雷霆其武	Like thunderclaps was Her martial power,
日月其文	like the sun and moon was Her cultural achievement:
灑以甘露	blessed by heaven with sweet dew,
覆之慶雲	protected with five-colored clouds. ^③

① Du Shenyan *shizhu*, 8, 39–40. Shen Quanqi *Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu*, Vol. 1 (*Shen Quanqi ji jiaozhu*), 21. *Zizhi tongjian* records four times when Empress Wu proclaimed an amnesty on the Zetian Gate Tower, in 689 (when she was still Empress Dowager and ruling as regent), 690, 692, and 694. The 690 amnesty was proclaimed upon the founding of the Zhou. ZZTJ 204.6456, 6467, 205.6487, 6494.

② JTS 94.3000. Empress Wu had seen Cui Rong's stele inscription for the Temple of Qi's Mother and deeply admired his writings; JTS 94.2996.

③ "Zetian dasheng huanghou aicewen," QTW 220.2504

An English translation is obliged to supply gendered pronouns where Classical Chinese has none; it is, however, worth stressing that the phrasing of this passage is strongly associated with a man and not with a woman because of the social structure of power. The adjective modifying “our Sovereign Lord,” *huanghuang* 洸洸, is explicitly defined as the quality of a warrior.^① By using these traditionally male-inflected expressions to describe Empress Wu, a woman, Cui Rong keeps her gender out of the evaluation, and inadvertently turns the expressions into a more gender-neutral language. He also cleverly embeds her name in the third couplet: Wu, her surname, means “martial,” and her personal name, Zhao 曌, is a character coined by the empress herself whose composite parts mean sun and moon in heaven. *Qiwén* 其文, “Her cultural achievement,” carries a double meaning: her cultural achievement, and her marking/mark.

Even more telling of how some of the courtiers felt upon her passing are two mourning poems (*wange* 挽歌, “pall-bearers songs”) by Song Zhiwen, extant in fragments. These were private compositions, since the poet was still in exile when he wrote the poems. One of the fragments also betrays a grief that might not have been considered wholly appropriate had it been commissioned by the “orphaned son,” Emperor Zhongzong:

象物行周禮	With painted banners, Zhou’s ritual is carried out;
衣冠集漢都	caps and gowns gather at the Han capital.
誰憐事虞舜	Who feels sorry for the one who, having served Yu Shun,
萬里泣蒼梧	now ten thousand miles away, weeps at Cangwu? ^②

The last two lines refer to the mythical sage emperor Shun, who died in Cangwu (modern Guangxi), and whose two consorts were not with him at his death and wept so bitterly that their tears stained the bamboos by the Xiang River. We cannot infer much about the whole poem, but in the fragment the correct ritual practice of burial and mourning depicted in the first two lines, with the hollow metonymic “caps and gowns” (i.e., the courtiers), is contrasted with the unceremonious tears wept by the poet who is far away from the capital.

When there is ambition, there is bound to be disappointment and thwarted desire. By encouraging

① The usage of the phrase evokes the *Shi jing* poem, “Yangzi and Han” 江漢: “The Yangzi and Han are swelling and surging; / the warriors are fierce and macho” 江漢湯湯，武夫洸洸。The Mao commentary glosses *huanghuang* as “descriptive of the martial appearance” 武貌。Maoshi zhushu, in Ruan Yuan, ed. *Shisanjing zhushu*, 18.685.

② Shen Quanqi Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu, Vol. 2 (Song Zhiwen ji jiaozhu), 436.

and allowing access through her own eager seeking of access to information, knowledge, and efficiency of governance, Empress Wu created a sense of possibility and hope for advancement that nevertheless could be achieved by only a few. Thousands came to Chang'an to take the examination; only a fraction usually passed. Those who passed without the right connections often spent their careers in low-level jobs in the provinces. As Dennis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler point out, a man from a humble family could only hope to be entered for the examinations by being recommended by their local prefectures, but the proportion that passed the examination was quite small: "In 670, for example, only one out of eleven successful *chin-shih* was a provincial candidate; in 681, one out of fifty-one, and in 682 one of fifty-five."^① This led to the creation of a new cultural community with new values, with judgment not made by a single figure of authority but by consensus of that community.

Chen Zi'ang, who had been recognized and promoted by Empress Wu but eventually lost her favor and was allowed to go home to Shu (modern Sichuan), has been pinpointed as an early advocate of such alternative values. In Chen's collection we cannot find a single seven-syllable-line poem, and most of his five-syllable-line poems are written in the so-called old style. The preface he wrote for his poem "Tall Bamboo" ("Xiuzhu pian" 修竹篇), addressed to his friend Dongfang Qiu, is commonly regarded as a manifesto of the *fugu* argument whose critical thrust is directed at the tonally-regulated poetry commonly practiced at court. Yet, the poem itself is nothing but a manifesto of Chen's desire for access to the court, especially to the powerful women of the court, appearing in the conventional comparison to immortals in paradise.^②

It is hard to determine if Chen's preference for the "old style" was due to his background in the provinces and thus lack of training in the courtly milieu or to his self-conscious conviction about the moral superiority of the poetic form, although the two might be mutually reinforcing. But we see a much clearer agenda in an important eighth-century poetic anthology, *Collection of the Finest Souls of River and Alp* (*Heyue yingling ji* 河嶽英靈集). Its compiler, Yin Fan 殷璠 (fl.

① *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 2, 275.

② *Chen Zi'ang ji jiaozhu*, vol. 1, 163–64. The bamboo in the poem is an allegorical representation of the poet himself. Starting out in the mountains, it is cut down and made into a flute, undergoing a transformation in both exterior and interior: "Truly it has been made beautiful through cutting and carving / now it wishes to always serve the immortals" 信蒙雕斲美，常願事仙靈. The poet expresses in particular the desire to be close to the Ying princess: "To form a friendship with the lady of Ying's Terrace, / and chant the Ballad of Ascending Heaven, / hand in hand, soaring together in broad daylight, / roaming far and frolicking on the Red Wall" 結交嬴臺女，吟弄升天行，攜手登白日，遠遊戲赤城. The lady of the Ying terrace refers to the legendary Princess Nongyu, a daughter of Duke Mu of Qin (r. 649–621 BCE), who loved music and eventually ascended to heaven with her flute-player husband. In poems of this period, Nongyu is frequently used as a figure for the powerful princesses in the Early Tang court. See, for instance, Doran's discussion of poems about Princess Taiping, Empress Wu's daughter, in *Transgressive Typologies*, 86.

753), a southerner who probably had never served any public office, shows a strong sympathy for poets who, in his words, possessed “great talent but enjoyed little career success” 高才而無貴仕。^① The anthology includes numerous more “old style” poems than the tonally-regulated poems in courtly style.^②

If Empress Wu’s reign saw the formation and perfection of regulated verse, then the eighth century witnessed the emergence of a different sort of poetry, a poetry of discontent in conscious revolt against the well-crafted, tonally-regulated verse practiced by court poets. This poetry represents the values of men who were outsiders to the court circle and felt strongly about being outsiders. They would eventually form another center away from the court, a center with its own standards and values, and the court would never be the same again. Before, we had courtiers with literary skills; but now, we would have men defined by their literary skills who sometimes take on offices. These are the people we shall later come to call the literati, the *wenren* 文人.

武則天時代的詩歌與權力的進接

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摘要：本文探討武則天時代與詩歌的特殊關係，提出武則天在中國文學史上的重要性可以從兩個方面進行觀察：她的統治導致了宮廷文化令人矚目的繁榮，而她直接和主動地參涉並影響當時的文學景貌，以種種不同方式帶來了八世紀也即盛唐時期中國詩歌的黃金時代；但與此同時，武則天時代也標志了宮廷文學衰落的開始，自此之後，宮廷文化，特別是宮廷詩歌，在帝國更廣大的文化場域中不再占據主導地位。本文認為武后的統治以進接 (access) 為其主要特徵：這既包括武后本人對整個帝國各種信息的進接，也包括帝國臣民對權力的進接及其與武后本人的直接觸。進接希望的點燃和破滅導致了一種新型怨憤詩歌的誕生和一個新文化社區的興起。這個新社區不服從一個單一的權威，卻服膺于社區的共識，從而改變了宮廷文化和宮廷文學。武則天的統治在這一過程中扮演了重要的角色。

關鍵詞：武則天 初唐詩 宮廷文化 宮廷文學

① See *Heyue yingling ji*, in Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, ed., *Tangren xuan Tangshi xinbian* 唐人選唐詩新編 (Shaanxi: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 115.

② According to Paul W. Kroll’s statistics, even with a much relaxed standard, “not quite a quarter of the poems included in *Heyue yingling ji* qualify as recent-style verse.” Kroll, “*Heyue yingling ji* and the Attributes of High Tang Poetry,” in *Reading Medieval Chinese Poetry: Text, Context, and Culture*, ed. Paul W. Kroll (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 178.