EMPRESSES, ART, AND AGENCY IN SONG DY	NASTY CHINA

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HUI-SHU LEE

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Highest good is like water

In memory of my mother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Empresses, Art, and Agency represents the end of a journey that has absorbed me intellectually and personally for two decades. The project expanded considerably over time—from the focus on a single Song-dynasty empress to a more comprehensive examination of Song imperial women as a creative force and what their creativity tells us about art and gender in China. The decision to expand from a case study circumscribed by place and time to something far broader proved more difficult than I first envisioned. It was not simply a matter of doing more research, of filling in details to an otherwise sketchily drawn picture. Rather, it was a process of discovery, one that encouraged a conceptual shift in how I view the art and culture of China. The path has not been straight, and it certainly has not been practical, but it has been rewarding.

Those who focus on issues related to women and culture recognize the impossibility of providing a true measure of the accomplishments of women in Chinese society without a balanced understanding of their male counterparts. If, as I hope, that sense of balance is apparent in this book, I owe it to the many outstanding mentors who guided my education and intellectual development. Among them, I am most indebted to my advisor, Richard Barnhart, who not only taught me how to read paintings with heart but also opened my eyes to examining the gender dimension of Chinese art with acute imagination and without bias. His Daoist way of teaching inspired me to roam freely while taking full advantage of my original training and discipline. I am also grateful to Kang-i Sun Chang, whose pioneering efforts

on women and Chinese literature momentously shaped a new field. Kang-i truly provided me with the most immediate of role models. Looking back to my initial art history training in Taiwan, I would like to acknowledge my four late teachers from the National Palace Museum, Li Lincan, Na Zhiliang, Wu Yuzhang, and Tan Danjiong. These men devoted their lives to the study and conservation of China's art treasures, and their generosity and openness, experienced over many leisurely afternoon teas, provided me with an extraordinary introduction to the great traditions of Chinese art. I am also indebted to the two late scholar-artists Jiang Zhaoshen and Qi Gong, whose initial work on Yang Meizi, or Empress Yang, provided the foundation for my own study.

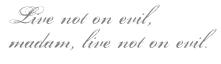
Over the years, many colleagues and friends provided me with insight and support. Richard Edwards, Richard Vinograd, Jerome Silbergeld, Jonathan Hay, Robert Harrist, Eugene Wang, Maxwell Hearn, Cary Liu, Itakura Masaaki, Ho Chuan-hsin, Shi Shou-chien, and Fu Shen all challenged and encouraged me in various ways, and I thank them for their support and guidance. My appreciation extends as well to the many readers of my manuscript, which include my dear friend Tobie Meyer-Fong and my colleagues at UCLA—Lothar Von Falkenhausen, Burglind Jungmann, and Robert Brown—as well as participants in my graduate seminar. I am grateful to the four anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their critical input and positive feedback during the review process. I offer special thanks to Naomi Richard for her masterful editing of the original text; Naomi's ability to shape up a manuscript is itself a form of high art. I am also thankful to my three editors at the University of Washington University Press, Michael Duckworth, Lorri Hagman, and Marilyn Trueblood, as well as copyeditor Jane Lichty and designer Ashley Saleeba, all of whom assisted in different stages of the process and helped bring this production to completion. Any errors that remain are solely my responsibility.

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Others who provided support, inspiration, and assistance over the years include Dr. Julie Chou, director of the National Palace Museum, and Ch'ung-ho Chang Frankel, two extraordinary women whose talents and accomplishments provide a modern counterpart to the subjects of this book. My former colleague Jowen R. Tung helped at an early stage of this project; her *Fable for the Patriarchs*, as well as her poetic writings, provided special inspiration. I am indebted to Chen Yunru, Fongling Liau, Eileen Hsu, Majorie Layden, and Yu Pei-chin for their friendship, support, and assistance at key moments. A special debt is owed to Susan Tai, Elizabeth Atkins Curator of Asian Art at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. As one who truly

understands women's agency in art, Susan helped facilitate the publication of this book in numerous ways. Lastly, my most sincere thanks go to Peter Sturman, fellow Chinese art historian and my better half. At every step of the way Peter was there to prompt, encourage, advise, and edit. Without his dedication and support this wandering soul might still be wandering.

EMPRESSES, ART, AND AGENCY IN SO	NG DYNASTY CHINA	



—BERGERSON, PALINDROMES AND ANAGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

PROMOTING PALINDROMES:
IMPERIAL WOMEN
AND CREATIVITY IN CHINA

omen in China and their roles in the making of art form the subject of this book. Specifically, I focus on imperial

women of the Song dynasty (960-1279), many supremely talented and some adept at using their talents for their own ends. In China, imperial patronage and the practice of art have long been recognized as topics of singular importance, and excellent studies exist of some of the key figures, moments, and trends. The broad-based efforts of Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649) to consolidate the new Tang dynasty, for example, included an attempt to establish national paradigms, not only in governance and social organization but also in art. Numerous studies exist of the artistically inclined Song dynasty emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1125), who oversaw the formation of one of history's great collections of art and objects and fostered professional academies for the making of painting and calligraphy of extraordinary quality. The efforts of his son Gaozong (r. 1127–1162) to utilize art in a program of dynastic revival now have an established niche in the narrative of art history in China, as do the activities of rulers of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties. And, of course, there is the Qing emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1795), whose collecting and patronage have left an immediate legacy for the modern era and by themselves constitute a veritable field of study. With some notable exceptions, however, studies of imperial involvement in the arts in China have scanted the role of women.1

Given the Song's historical importance and extraordinary cultural developments, and given the impressive advances in the study of women during the Song, the silence regarding women's role in art is especially conspicuous. In recent years much has been written about the social and cultural history of Song women, how their matches were arranged and marriages functioned, their legal and property rights, their education and literacy, and their lives as siblings, concubines, mothers, and widows.² Detailed studies have discovered the material aspects of women's work in the domestic environment, the roles they played in the household's economy, and the technologies, buildings, and spaces that shaped their daily lives.³ Studies have been done of their religious beliefs and even of women's medicine in the Song.⁴ Most relevant to my interests here are the detailed studies of the kinship and social organization as well as the power and prestige of palace women at the Song dynasty court.⁵

What is strikingly absent from the various studies devoted to Song dynasty women is the subject of their creativity. Efforts to study the literary arts of Song women have largely been efforts of recovery. As others have noted, the corpus of surviving writings by Song women is extremely small, and what exists has largely been cobbled together from miscellaneous writings.6 In fact, a common reality of many if not all of these studies on Song women is that the data are scattered and sporadic, consequently making it necessary to search widely for materials, often in uncommonly utilized sources. This book is no exception, and herein lies the most obvious reason why so few studies have been devoted to women's imperial patronage and practice of art: so little readily presents itself for examination. The problem, however, proves to be more complicated. A central tenet of this study is that the survival of materials is linked to the very nature of women's creativity in China, to its practice and reception. A celebrated story of a fourth-century woman named Su Hui and her silk-woven reversible poetry, known as *huiwen*, helps illustrate this point. The story not only offers a paradigm for understanding how women's art was perceived in traditional China, it also suggests the intrinsic barriers that have hindered its appreciation and hence, by inference, comments pointedly on the difficulties in reconstructing women's history in China.

Huiwen refers to writing that can be read both forward and backward and thus is commonly translated as "palindrome," which, in Western literature, refers to a string of letters that form the identical phrase or sentence whether read forward or backward. The huiwen differs somewhat from the Western palindrome. It consists of a string of characters that form correct and meaningful but not identical phrases or sentences when read forward and in reverse. Huiwen may also refer to multiple rows or columns or a coil of characters that forms numerous texts, depending on where one begins reading and in which direction one proceeds. The huiwen, then, is less restrictive than the palindrome: it does not demand the exact mirroring of letters (and hence meaning), but requires simply equal readability in both directions. Nonetheless, huiwen possess the qualities of wit, intelligence, and even magic that

characterize English-language palindromes. Indeed, in many respects the huiwen can be far more complex and elaborate.

According to the Jin History, Su Hui's husband was a high official who was demoted to serve in the desert areas of the far west. Longing deeply for him, she wove out of silk an elaborate diagram comprising 840 characters that combined to make reversible poems described as "sad and mournful." Such a brief notice hardly attracts attention, and the story of Su Hui would no doubt have been forgotten if not for a much more elaborate and somewhat different account attributed to the Tang female ruler Wu Zetian (r. 690-705). Wu Zetian describes Su Hui as "learned, capable, and bright," refined and lovely in appearance, quick of temper, and susceptible to fits of jealousy. At only sixteen she married Dou Tao and quickly earned his respect. After first serving in the far west, Dou was reassigned to an important military commission in central China, and he invited his young wife to join him. Su Hui refused because Dou Tao had taken a concubine, to whom he had shown great favor. Her irate husband abandoned her. Su Hui, deeply regretful, composed a palindromic verse, which she wove into silk,

using five beautiful colors that shone radiantly into one's eyes and heart. On a piece of silk a mere eight inches square, she wove more than two hundred poems from more than 800 characters. Whether one read vertically or horizontally, in whatever direction, verses would emerge with nothing missing at all. The marvels of her talent and feeling far surpass those of both the past and present. Her embroidery is called the Xuanji Diagram. Most readers, however, were unable to grasp all of the verses. At this Su Hui laughed and said, "As it lingers aimlessly, twisting and turning, it takes on a pattern of its own. No one but my beloved can be sure of comprehending it."8

Xuanji refers to astral constellations. The movements of the heavens, the shifting of stars and constellations, and the myriad glittering lights in the sky all provide a fitting metaphor for Su Hui's huiwen, "lingering, twisting, and turning," creating "a pattern of its own." Specifically, xuanji refers to the four prominent stars that form the bowl of the Northern Dipper of the Chinese sky. The circular configuration of these stars suggests the outer circumference of Su Hui's palindrome; the hosts of stars within suggest the characters that compose her poems.9 The image is one of both containment and infinite depth. Su Hui's silk-woven palindrome describes a world of private interiors, the depths of which can be comprehended only by her beloved. Su Hui's story has a happy ending: upon receiving the silk Dou Tao was deeply touched and amazed by its excellence. The concubine was sent far away, and Su Hui was wooed with carriages, attendants, and sumptuous gifts. "Their love was deeper than ever before."10

The story of Su Hui became extremely popular. Soon after Wu Zetian's account, it was illustrated by two of the most famous figure painters of the time and repeat-

edly thereafter, through the Song dynasty and beyond.¹¹ Undoubtedly, the original fascination with Su Hui was due to the ingenuity of the palindrome itself. The diagram, of which there are different extant versions, is a square or oblong of characters surrounding the single character xin (heart) at the very center (fig. I.1). The individual poems begin and end in different places depending on whether they are read in three-, four-, five-, six-, or seven-character lines (all acceptable formats).¹² Moreover, according to some, the poems can be read not only from right to left and left to right but also up or down a line, diagonally, and starting on different characters, thereby increasing exponentially the number of possible readings. Presumably, Su Hui's use of multiple colors in her weaving provided clues to these multiple readings. Precisely how many poems Su may have intended is impossible to say. Wu Zetian's record speaks of more than two hundred poems, but modern students have expanded the possible number into the thousands.¹³ Admirers of Su Hui's diagram included the early Song emperor Taizong (r. 976–997) as well as notable men of letters such as Su Shi (1037-1101), Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), and Qin Guan (1049-1101), who were intrigued enough by Su Hui's example to comment on the writing of huiwen.¹⁴ Indeed, the silk-woven palindrome spawned its own literary genre, albeit one marked largely by oddity and gamesmanship. Moreover, Su Hui's diagram inspired numerous offshoots in a range of shapes and manners, from simple circles to lotus pods, constellations, and even lanterns.

A number of topics stem from the story of Su Hui and her silk-woven palindrome. The most engrossing is the gendered association of the palindrome itself. The only earlier figure said to have written *huiwen* was also a forlorn woman, and although a number of men tried their hands at it, they were all later figures and were no doubt inspired by Su Hui.¹⁵ In later China the *huiwen* was almost exclusively a female literary activity. The link between Su Hui's palindrome and women's creativity is strengthened by the manner in which she committed her verses to form, literally weaving her emotions into silk using that most fundamental tool of women in traditional China—the loom—to express her poetic thoughts. I return to the gendered aspect of the palindrome below, but first I note what has been overlooked or disregarded in the story of Su Hui: that the narrator of her story was Wu Zetian, the most formidable woman in the history of China and a figure who looms large in the background of this book.¹⁶

Born Wu Zhao, Wu Zetian began her court career as a *cairen*, or "person of talent," in the harem of Tang Taizong.¹⁷ During Taizong's reign she never rose above the fifth rank, and upon the emperor's death she was sent to a Buddhist monastery, where she probably would have spent the rest of her life as a nun had not Empress Wang, the childless consort of Taizong's successor, Emperor Gaozong (r. 649–683), facilitated her reentry into the palace in order to distract the emperor from another high-ranking concubine. This move proved to be a fatal error. Wu Zhao insinuated herself into the emperor's favor and in 655 was enthroned in place of the now deposed



1.1 Guan Daosheng, attributed, portrait of Su Hui and her palindrome. Seventeenth century. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 29.3 × 253.7 cm, Harvard University Art Museum.

Empress Wang. Shortly thereafter, Gaozong began to suffer ill health, and within five years Empress Wu ruled the empire in fact if not in name. Emperor and empress were known as ersheng, "twin rulers," but power was firmly in the hands of Empress Wu, who made all of the decisions from behind a lowered curtain (chuilian). To rule from "behind the curtain" later became a common expression to describe dominant empresses like Wu Zetian.18

When Gaozong died in 683, Empress Wu continued to hold the reins of power as regent to her two sons, who ascended the throne in quick succession. Over the next six years Empress Wu and her ministers paved the way for her usurpation of the throne itself. Work on a new capital to the east at Luoyang was accelerated, with the intention of creating a separate power base that centered on Empress Wu. A Buddhist sutra, Mahāmegha, or Great Cloud Sutra, was singled out for attention because of its claim that Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, would be reborn as a woman. A contemporary commentary specified that the woman would be Empress Wu. More and more prominent public displays and rituals evoking the ancient Zhou dynasty centered on the empress in the new capital of Luoyang—all a prelude to her assumption of ultimate power. A vital step occurred in 688 with the discovery of a white stone in the Luo River bearing a prophecy: "A Sage Mother shall come to Rule Mankind; and her Imperium shall bring Eternal Prosperity." Empress Wu immediately declared the Luo River sacred and took for herself the title Sage Mother, Sovereign Divine. After another two years of preparations and omen sightings, Empress Wu had finally assembled enough support and momentum to take the critical step. On the ninth day of the ninth month, in the year 690, her son Ruizong abdicated, and Empress Wu assumed the title Holy and Divine Emperor of the Zhou dynasty. Empress Wu would rule as emperor for fifteen years, until just before her death in 705 at roughly eighty years of age.

Empress Wu's record of Su Hui's silk-woven palindrome, dated to the first day of the fifth lunar month, 692, was written less than two years after she had assumed the throne of her new dynasty. It ends with a clear description of her motivation for writing it. She notes that Su Hui had written more than five thousand items of prose and verse in her lifetime, yet all were scattered and lost with the exception of her palindromic verse.

It serves to represent all of the laments of recent generations from the inner chambers and is a model for all literary scholars. In my leisure time away from handling affairs of state, I concern myself with the texts of antiquity, and by chance I came across this diagram among some fragmentary writings. Thus I narrate the story of Ruolan's [Su Hui's] talent and praise Lianpo's [Dou Tao's] regret and self-correction. I compose this record simply for the benefit of future generations.²⁰

Wu Zetian's concluding signature musters all of the power of a newly ascended emperor: "the imperial writing of the Heavenly-Crowned Golden-Wheel Emperor of the Great Zhou."

Traditionally, it was a woman's virtue that was celebrated, not her skill in letters, and that virtue was typically demonstrated through acts of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Far from being self-sacrificing, Su Hui was a woman admittedly prone to unseemly jealousy. Yet this inclination seems to have counted little with Wu Zetian, who was enchanted not merely by the remarkable talent of Su Hui but by the talent and depth of feelings with which she was able to reform a wayward husband. The juxtaposition of the two women is truly striking. Emperor Wu, who ruled over the greatest civilization on earth and saw herself as the center of the universe, empathized sufficiently with a little-known young wife, three centuries past, to relate her story, in order "to represent all of the laments of recent generations from the inner chambers." Wu Zetian recognized a kindred spirit in Su Hui, and she assumed the responsibility of giving voice to her story.

Wu Zetian has been described as possessing proto-feminist consciousness because of her efforts to elevate the status of women and increase their opportunities. She made the mourning period for a mother equal to that of a father. She initiated the inclusion and participation of women in public rituals, such as the Feng and Shan state sacrifices, and she made a point of inviting women to major events, such as the opening of the spectacular Mingtang, or Bright Hall, in the new capital

at Luoyang. Moreover, she oversaw and promoted the compilation of a series of texts that dealt with the subject of women, including model books for female behavior and biographies of eminent women, filial daughters, and even imperial nursemaids.²¹ In that context, Wu Zetian's interest in Su Hui is less surprising, but even in that context it remains a special case: the empress's attempt to preserve a bare anecdote, to embroider it into the tale of a long-ago woman possessed equally of literary and domestic talents, and to promote it as an example of one woman who used her own abilities to make her own luck. Ultimately, there was no better figure to bring that story into the public domain than an empress who dared to defy tradition and assume the ultimate position of male power, a woman who could fully appreciate the expression of female agency in a society that actively suppressed it.

In China there was little tolerance for the overt expression of female agency. Agency includes the dual aspects of subjectivity and power, and agency wielded by women inevitably confronted the patriarchal values that dominated traditional Chinese society. In contrast, veiled expression was tacitly acceptable, though with the obvious possible consequences of going unnoticed or being lost. But is veiled the right word to describe the expression of women's subjectivity in China? Veiled implies "covert" or "hidden," and neither is precisely applicable. As Su Hui's reversible poetry demonstrates, subjectivity is not necessarily hidden; rather, it operates according to rules that make it appear inwardly directed, unassertive, and circuitous. These are the qualities that made it palatable, even admirable, to the male audience, though such subtlety again left the creative expression of women vulnerable to neglect and loss.

This study focuses on imperial women, rather than those of other social strata, simply because information exists about the role women of the palace played as artists and patrons. Women of the imperial palace—empresses in particular—enjoyed wealth, privilege, and power, which allowed them to engage with the most talented artists and craftsmen of their time and to patronize major cultural enterprises. Moreover, most of these women were of the educated and cultured elite, and many of them, though rising from low ranks in the imperial harem, were trained in various forms of art. Imperial women, in other words, especially in the medieval and first part of the early modern period in China, were in general the most artistically productive and talented. Equally significant, the women of the palace formed a distinct culture, which proves to have been surprisingly self-reflective. Empresses and consorts largely studied the same curriculum, dedicated to proper deportment, much of it devoted to earlier historical figures as examples to be followed or shunned. They knew of their predecessors, and they understood the lessons of history. Collectively, imperial women in China established, developed, and perpetuated their own cultural history, which forms a significant part of China's rich heritage.

That cultural history is barely known, however, because even for these women historical data are scattered and difficult to piece together. For the most part, their achievements were elided from the traditional historical narrative, and today what can be researched and told is largely fragmentary, even though the making of some of the most prominent works of architecture, sculpture, painting, and calligraphy, as well as ceramics and other objects, was facilitated by empresses and other high-ranking palace women. To understand this elision in context, I briefly consider three notable predecessors active centuries before the Song dynasty: Ladies Feng and Hu of the Northern Wei (386–534) and Wu Zetian herself.

During the last twenty years of her life, while acting as regent to her foster grandson, Emperor Xiaowendi (r. 471–499), Lady Feng (442–490) had a significant hand in some of the most prominent Buddhist art projects of her time. The Northern Wei was a non-Han Chinese dynasty, but it is claimed that Lady Feng, or Empress Dowager Wenming (Cultured and Enlightened), as she was known posthumously, was a woman of Han ethnic descent. She appears to have been a primary figure behind the three imperial twin cave-chapels at Yungang, whose design implies her co-rule with the young emperor as twin sages, and she may well have functioned similarly in the increasing dominance of Chinese themes and styles in the sculptural program beginning in the early to mid-480s. For that matter, Empress Dowager Wenming may well have been one of the strategic architects behind the full-fledged sinicization program that the court promoted under the name of the young emperor, culminating in the move of the capital to Luoyang in 494 and the emergence of a fully developed Chinese style of Buddhist sculpture.²²

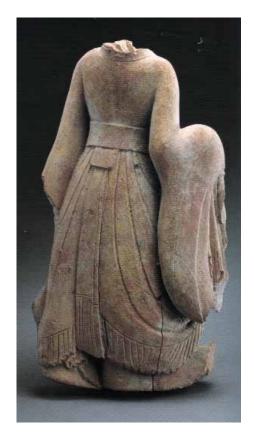
Lady Hu (d. 528) was equally prominent in the patronage of Buddhist art. Consort of Emperor Xuanwudi (r. 499–515) and regent to Xiaomingdi (r. 515–528), Empress Dowager Ling, as she is known, was a fervent and lavish patron of numerous Buddhist establishments. These included a monument of extraordinary beauty and scale: the Yongning Si, or Temple of Eternal Tranquility. The temple is the highlight of a contemporary account of the major Buddhist monuments in the new capital at Luoyang.²³ Standing in the center of the temple complex was a towering nine-story wooden pagoda some "nine hundred Chinese feet [*chi*] tall." Recent excavations of the base of the Yongning Temple pagoda allow one to extrapolate a height of over 133 meters, largely confirming this account.²⁴ The pagoda's mast extended another fourteen meters upward. Painted in vermilion and sumptuously decorated with shining gold bells, knockers, and nails, the pagoda towered over the capital and was said to be visible thirty miles away. When it was completed, Empress Dowager Ling ascended the tower with the young emperor and "gazed down upon the capital as if looking into their own courtyard."²⁵

One year after the completion of the temple, in 517, Empress Dowager Ling made a trip to inspect the Buddhist caves being excavated at Longmen. The focal point of the excavation project was the Binyang Caves, where work went on until 523. Many years ago, Alexander C. Soper hypothesized that the famous Empress's Procession, originally carved into the limestone wall flanking the entrance of the Binyang Cen-



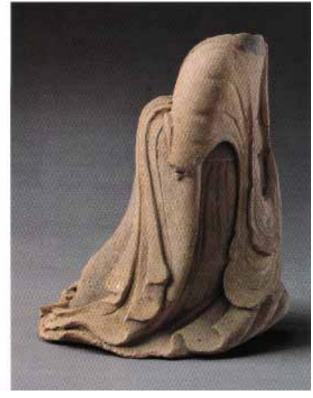
1.2 Offering Procession of the Empress as Donor with Her Court. Relief, from the Binyang Central Cave, Longmen. First quarter of the sixth century, Northern Wei period. 1.93 \times 2.77 m. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo.

tral Cave (and facing the Emperor's Procession on the opposite side of the entrance), is a depiction of Empress Dowager Ling (fig. I.2). Soper pointed out that the exquisite quality of the carving seemed to match the empress dowager's noted taste for refined clothing and adornments.²⁶ Others have contended that if the principal figure in each procession was intended as a specific individual, they would have been the empress dowager's parents-in-law, in whose honor the Binyang Caves (two were planned, but only one was carried out) were first conceived.²⁷ As well as hypothetical, however, specific identities are perhaps beside the point. The final stages of the work on the Binyang Central Cave coincided with the period of Empress Dowager Ling's regency, when her influence was paramount. Soper's suggestion that the empress dowager set the fashions in dress points to her more significant role as patron and arbiter of taste for the arts. Refined and extremely elegant pottery figurines of religious and secular figures have been excavated from the site of the empress dowager's Yongning Temple (fig. I.3); many illustrate the same kind of elaborate, flowing robes so beautifully rendered in the empress's procession scene, which reinforces the asso-



1.3 Standing figures from the Yongning Temple. Ca. 516, Northern Wei period. Terracotta with pigments, h: 22.7 cm.





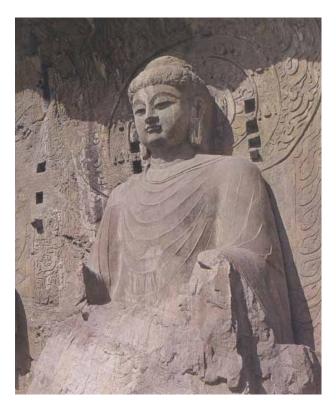
ciation of style and artistry with the patronage of Empress Dowager Ling. She was a woman who understood both grandeur and beauty.

Approximately 125 years later, Wu Zetian became yet another great patron of Buddhist art. Wu Zetian's commitment to Buddhism may have begun as an expression of religious faith (her mother was a Buddhist devotee), but over time she effectively and consistently utilized the faith as a means to legitimize her power. The material remains of these efforts are among the most splendid examples of Buddhist art in the history of China, including an exquisite set of nine gold and silver reliquaries made specifically to hold relics discovered at the Famen Monastery, the monumental sculptures of the Vairocana Buddha and attendants at the Fengxian Temple at Longmen, and the Qibao Tai, or Tower of Seven Jewels, of the Guangzhai Temple.²⁸ The original reliquaries of the Famen Monastery are not extant, but the discovery in recent years of four sets of inlaid nested reliquaries at the site attests to the magnificence of the originals. Similarly, although the extraordinary murals of the Qibao Tai by the leading painters of the day, Yuchi Yiseng (act. ca. 650–710) and Wu Daozi (act. ca. 710-760), are long lost, spectacular sculptures from the site again reveal the importance of Wu Zetian's commission. At Longmen the massive sculptures towering almost fifty feet high speak for themselves. The most monumental of Empress Wu's undertakings was the refashioning of the city of Luoyang into her "divine capital," shendu, which included building a three-story ritual Mingtang, a Heavenly Hall that housed a dry lacquer Buddha of gargantuan proportions (it was claimed the little finger could hold tens of people), and a bronze mechanical device to mark the movements of the heavens. As Yen Chüan-ying has written, Empress Wu transformed the traditional imperial palace into a cosmopolitan center of the greater Buddhist world.²⁹ Outside the realm of the monumental and religious, Wu Zetian was a collector of fine arts (calligraphy and painting), a noted calligrapher, and an author of prose and poetry. In short, Wu Zetian was a remarkably active builder of culture.

All three women made highly significant contributions to the formation of culture during their time, but their achievements have been very differently assessed. Nothing is known with certainty regarding Empress Dowager Wenming's role at Yungang. Modern historians have relied on circumstantial evidence and conjecture to place her at the center of the profound shift in artistic style that occurred in the late fifth century. In contrast, there is no question of Empress Dowager Ling's accomplishments; she flaunted them. Her official biography and that of her most trusted advisor, Cui Guang, present her unconventional and licentious lifestyle in considerable detail. She enjoyed outings, mountain climbing, martial arts (she was a superb archer), literary gatherings in which she composed poetry, and the company of male favorites. Cui Guang found this improper, as did Yuan Shun, a royal prince who upbraided her for her excessive use of cosmetics and finery as well as her pleasure excursions. Yuan Shun credited the empress dowager for governing the realm like

a mother, but he demanded to know how her addiction to adornment and appearance would look to posterity.30 It was the historian's task to fit Empress Dowager Ling into a comprehensive and historically sacrosanct narrative; consequently, her unconventional behavior, eye for style, and lavish patronage of art and culture were pejoratively emphasized as having led to the downfall of the Northern Wei and the death of Empress Dowager Ling at the hands of their less sinicized cousins from the north. The empress dowager's accomplishments, in other words, were cast in such a light as to corroborate history's view of her as a "last, bad ruler."31

Of course, the historical view of Empress Dowager Ling, as of every other wayward woman in Chinese history, pales beside the venom and hostility heaped on Wu Zetian. As modern historians have noted, "Everything concerning this remarkable woman is surrounded by doubts, for she stood for everything to which the ideal of the Confucian scholar-official class was opposed."32 Empress Wu did not simply seize control and then the throne; she actively worked to legitimize the alien concept of a woman ruling and in the process took grand steps to glorify herself. The most spectacular example of this endeavor is the monumental carving of the Vairocana Buddha at Longmen (fig. I.4). According to a long-standing speculation, Wu Zetian had the image carved in her likeness. The association is encouraged by the feminine elegance of the Buddha's visage. Later Empress Wu claimed to be a reincarnation of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, which also encourages this line of speculation.



1.4 Vairocana Buddha at Fengxian Si, Longmen. 672-675, Tang dynasty. H: 13.77 m.

One year after Wu Zetian proclaimed the founding of her Zhou dynasty, she led an entourage of ministers to a site across the Yi River in order to view the Vairocana Buddha in all its magnificence. Whether or not there was a close physical resemblance between the sculpture and the female emperor, no one could have mistaken the presumed association, as there was a long-standing tradition of identifying the Vairocana Buddha, whose name indicates the radiance of the sun extending everywhere, as an alter image for an all-powerful earthly ruler.³³

Male rulers were also subject to criticism for extensive absorption in the arts and lavish acts of patronage, but, unquestionably, imperial women were held to a much stricter standard. As in the cases of Empress Dowager Ling and Wu Zetian, when historians noted such actions, it was, more often than not, in order to condemn them. Without that motive, there was less likelihood of such activities entering the historical record. Wu Zetian, formidable though she was, understood the need nevertheless to maintain a proper, virtuous image. At various times in her career she promulgated instructions for proper decorum in the inner quarters, and she made a point of demonstrating magnanimity and selflessness by returning valuable works of calligraphy to their owners after first having copies made.³⁴ Yet such acts of decency have largely been ignored, since they counter history's characterization of her as a self-aggrandizing usurper. This example shows that without material remains, it is unlikely that much of anything can be learned of imperial women's involvement with art, since the historical record is both biased and grossly incomplete. Very little is known about imperial women's roles in the production of art in the very early eras, but it is safe to assume that they did play a role.35

The behind-the-scenes nature of imperial women's patronage fits into a broader pattern of the subordination of women in the palace, though the role of women, and specifically of the empress, was not necessarily so restricted until the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.). At this time intellectual developments began to reinforce the emergence of a Chinese patriarchy. This influence appears in a transformation of yin/yang thought, the fundamental mode of philosophical speculation that attributes the mechanics of phenomenal change to the dynamic interchange of female and male principles.³⁶ At the hands of Han commentators to the Book of Rites (Li ji), the nature of the feminine principle yin changed: formerly complementary and equivalent to the male principle of yang, during Han it became subordinate and inferior. One passage in the Rites reads, "The Son of Heaven [i.e., the male ruler] and his supreme consort [hou \Box] are like the sun and moon, yang and yin; they assist and complement one another to create [a unity]." Han commentaries on this passage reveal the shift, utilizing the homophonic character hou 後, "behind," to define a subordinate role: "The reason why hou is thus called is because the empress's position is behind that of her husband."37

Once the imperial system became established, a clear gender division was demarcated. The emperor presided over the outer court, consisting of the official

bureaucracy, and the empress headed the inner court, comprising the various ranks of imperial consorts, female officials, and female service personnel. Metaphorically, emperor and empress were likened to the parents of the empire. The standard phrase describing the fundamental role of the empress is "model mother to all under Heaven" (*muyi tianxia*), and her primary duty was to "assist and promulgate the teachings of the ruler." In practice her function consisted of governing the women of the court and educating the imperial descendants, as well as performing public ceremonies and rituals, such as those related to sericulture. Certain empresses proved to possess particular skills that earned the respect of their emperor-husbands, who allowed them to share in official duties. The Song empresses Liu and Wu, who figure prominently in this book, are prime examples. Generally speaking, however, an empress who took part in outer court matters became subject to criticism by scholars and officials. More notable are the empresses of weak emperors, who, like Wu Zetian, seized and used the power their husbands could not hold.

Power in the hands of a woman was officially sanctioned only when there was a recognized need for a regent. This could occur when an emperor took ill or died unexpectedly or, most commonly, when the heir-apparent was too young to wield power. An empress dowager could legitimately wield power only as mother to the young emperor. His behavior and status, in turn, were partly governed by the strictures of filial piety. Ostensibly, an empress dowager acted to assist her young male charge from behind the scenes, thus preserving the image, if not reality, of a functioning patriarchal system. The expression "to rule from behind the curtain" (chuilian tingzheng), in other words, does not indicate an all-powerful female regent manipulating in secret; rather, it denotes a recognized expediency and makes that expediency acceptable through the segregation of gender space. Although the history of regencies is as long as the imperial system itself, stretching from the Qin to the Qing, the idea of ruling from behind the curtain or screen was not formally institutionalized with attendant ceremonies until the Song dynasty. 40 It is important to note that there were few if any established checks on the regency system, and consequently regencies created fluid and potentially volatile situations.

The threat of volatility was especially real after the reign of Wu Zetian, whose long shadow extended over the Song dynasty three hundred years after she had ruled as emperor. With the death of Emperor Zhenzong (r. 997–1022) early in the Song, the need for a regent already emerged and with it a strong push to bypass the reigning empress, once traditional in this role, precisely because of the uncomfortable memory of Wu Zetian. Institutionally, the crisis led high officials to play a more active role in monitoring female imperial behavior. More significantly, memories of the notorious female emperor of the Tang made Song empresses keenly aware of the need to balance power with image. Ultimately, the successful regency of Zhenzong's consort, Empress Liu, whose story constitutes the first chapter of this book, paved the way for other Song imperial women to take up the reins of power.



1.5 Anonymous, Portrait of Empress Cao. Northern Song period. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The triumph of the Song imperial women has been recognized as one of the hallmarks of the dynasty's history. The official *Song History* itself concludes its preface to the biographies of the imperial consorts with the observation that, during the more than three hundred years of the Song, there were no calamities caused by imperial relatives, nor any by individuals of the inner harem (such as Wu Zetian, who is mentioned by name). "Is this not extraordinary and worthy of exaltation?!"41 It is typical of the traditional historian's bias against powerful women to commend them here not for accomplishing good but for refraining from causing harm. Before this, however, the preface has gone out of its way to single out in particular the accomplishments of two Song empress dowagers: Empress Cao (1016-1079), consort of Renzong (r. 1022-1063) (fig. I.5), and Empress Gao (1032-1093), consort of Yingzong (r. 1063–1067). In fact, Empress Gao is referred to as a Yao or Shun (legendary

sage king) among women. Altogether there were nine empress dowagers in the Song dynasty, and if one adds to the lengths of their regencies the considerable periods during which Song empresses were significant advisors to their husbands, or even dominated their husbands' courts, then the full extent of their importance to the governance of the dynasty becomes clear. Six of these women earned four-character posthumous titles, a sign of extraordinary respect and honor. These six women, known by the special designation *xianhou*, "an empress of wisdom and virtue," led later historians to characterize the Song as a dynasty blessed with extraordinary women of power.⁴²

In many respects, a reputation for xian, "virtue" or "worthiness," as I translate it in a later chapter, was the primary motive for the cultural accomplishments of the Song imperial women. It was the public face of female imperial involvement with the arts—the promotion of established orthodox programs congruent with the traditional role of the empress as a model to all women. From as early as the Han dynasty this modeling of behavior constituted one important feature of imperial female patronage, but it has not always been so recognized. Traditionally, texts and images illustrating proper female behavior have been read as products of the Chinese patriarchy, whose only function was to reinforce the subordinate position of women in Confucian society. Ban Zhao (b. 45-51, d. 114-120), whose Precepts for Women (Nü *jie*) heads the canon of female didactic texts, has always been perceived as working in the service of Emperor Hedi (r. 89–105), yet Ban is known to have been a close advisor to the model empress dowager Deng. Given this relationship, is it not possible that the empress dowager was the main imperial figure behind the promotion of Ban Zhao's didactic text?⁴³ Zhang Hua's Admonitions of the Court Instructress (Nü shi zhen), a text well known through the famous illustrated scroll attributed to Gu Kaizhi, has traditionally been read as criticism of or cautioning to the cruel Empress Jia (d. 300), whom Zhang Hua served. Yet, as at least two modern scholars have noted, Zhang Hua served very successfully during Empress Jia's reign.44 If the empress was indeed so cruel, would she have tolerated Zhang Hua's remonstrations? Is it not possible that Empress Jia promoted Zhang Hua's text, using it to counter public perceptions of her intemperate behavior? As mentioned earlier, Wu Zetian also promoted texts advocating proper female behavior, though this point has conveniently been overlooked by most traditional historians. The point is simple but important: imperial women utilized the concept of virtue as a means of self-promotion. The tradition was carried forward into the Song dynasty and constitutes one of the primary expressions of female agency.

A fundamental and perhaps contradictory aspect of female agency in Song China was that it was expressed through the promotion of the ideal qualities of self-effacement and yielding. These ideals were especially strongly felt in the aftermath of the Tang and the negative paradigm represented by Wu Zetian. Yet the power and influence that some of these women wielded were considerable. The conflict

between public stand and private reality, and the efforts taken to moderate it, constitutes a recurring theme in this book. As the following discussion makes clear, two impulses contributed to the failure to recognize the cultural achievements of Song imperial women: on the one hand, the women themselves adopted a posture of reserve; on the other, later historians have been willfully blind to these women's accomplishments, even when the data were fairly clear.

No clearer example of this lack of recognition exists than the confusion regarding Empress Yang, otherwise known as Yang Meizi, the subject of the fourth chapter of this book. Ascending to prominence at the turn of the thirteenth century to become the consort of Emperor Ningzong (r. 1194-1224), Empress Yang was a major player in court politics. She presided over the foremost events at the court for more than a quarter of a century, and her influence extended to the reign of Ningzong's successor, Emperor Lizong (r. 1225–1264). Empress Yang's formidable presence in the political arena was matched by her extraordinary engagement with the production of art: she worked closely with favored court painters (Ma Yuan and Ma Lin) to help produce paintings with poetic inscriptions that are both exquisite works of art and meaningful modes of expression. Empress Yang was arguably the most important female art patron of the Song dynasty, and she joins Empress Dowager Ling and Wu Zetian among the most important in the entire history of China. Yet, despite her political and art-historical importance, for centuries Empress Yang remained an obscure and little-understood figure. Traditional historical sources provide only sketchy details, describing her simply as a mysterious woman whose origins were essentially unknown. Worse, her role as patron and participant in the production of art was not only unstudied but remained hopelessly mired in mistaken identity until recent times. For seven hundred years scholars created out of her signature, Yang Meizi (Little Sister Yang), the colorful figure of Empress Yang's lascivious younger sister, whose charms were enjoyed by Ma Yuan, the professional court painter who supplied the images to her inscriptions. The development of this fantasy, and its clarification by modern scholars, is worth recounting.

Wu Shidao (1283–1344) provided the first relevant record when he wrote a poetic inscription for a Ma Yuan fan painting titled *Autumn Moon over the Immortal Terrace*. The painting no longer exists, but according to Wu Shidao's inscription, Ma Yuan's painting accompanied a poem written by Empress Yang. He also clearly states that Empress Yang, consort of Song Ningzong, "called herself Yang Meizi." ⁴⁵ Wu Shidao lived within a century of Empress Yang, and his statement should be reliable. In the poem that Wu added, however, the seeds of a later misperception are already recognizable. Wu comments on the fact that Ma Yuan's "alluring painting" and Empress Yang's "pristine words" were meant to stir her lord's heart. That was cause enough for Wu Shidao to end his own poem with the following moral pronouncement: "Even after a hundred years the eternal mirror will not be forgotten, / Leaving the fan's shadow for the world to observe." ⁴⁶ Wu's concluding lines refer to the fall of the Song

dynasty in 1279, never to be forgotten by the "mirror" of history and, according to the orthodox notion, occurring because the Song had become overly feminized. To a Confucian moralist, Empress Yang's poem would have prompted thoughts of the infamous femme fatale Yang Guifei (Noble Consort), whose seductive charms distracted Emperor Minghuang (Tang Xuanzong, r. 712–756) and were excoriated for the near ruin of the Tang ruling house.

The idea of an empress expressing romantic thoughts was fundamentally unpalatable to most scholars. Consequently, when Tao Zongyi (1316-1403) compiled his Shushi huiyao (Essentials of the History of Calligraphy) a few decades after Wu Shidao wrote his poem, he created a separate entry for this Yang Meizi whose calligraphy often accompanied Ma Yuan's paintings. He wrote: "The younger sister of Ningzong's empress sometimes calls herself Yang Meizi. Her calligraphy resembles that of Ningzong. Oftentimes her inscriptions are seen on Ma Yuan's paintings, and from time to time her poems are of love themes. People sometimes mock them."47 For Tao Zongyi, the Yang Meizi signature offered the possibility to create a young sister, who was a much more acceptable target than was Empress Yang for the censure of Confucian scholars. His fabrication gradually became so influential that not only was it widely cited in texts and inscriptions, but it even discredited Wu Shidao's original identification of "Yang Meizi" with Empress Yang. Moreover, Tao's mistake became compounded by others: Empress Yang's seal Yang xing 楊姓, "Surnamed Yang," was misread as Yang wa 楊娃, "Beautiful Maiden Yang."48 In time, the fictitious Yang Meizi completely obscured Empress Yang, and collectors had a juicy subject for gossip: Yang Meizi, the empress's younger sister, whose provocative words on Ma Yuan's paintings suggested an illicit affair in the palace of a dynasty that many regarded as effeminate. It was not until the 1960s that the efforts of Qi Gong and Jiang Zhaoshen unveiled the Yang Meizi fiction.49

The fabrication of a younger sister to Empress Yang was the consequence of what might be called a cultural and historical accident. Most of these paintings with the empress's inscriptions were not intended for broad public consumption, but they acquired value and consequently were collected and passed down. Those who encountered them had no point of reference from which to understand an empress's expression of what appeared to be private emotions; the fiction of a younger sister helped make them acceptable. In the end, the art of Empress Yang was buried, elided from China's cultural record.

At this point we have come full circle to Su Hui and her silk-woven palindrome, for interesting parallels with Empress Yang emerge. Su Hui's poems were romantic verses intended for a private audience of one. Her poems express genuine, heartfelt emotions, but as they are embedded in an endless puzzle of characters, they ostensibly exist in a space of intense privacy. Readers of the poems become voyeurs. We pry, configure, and unlock the secrets of the palindrome, ultimately becoming furtive admirers of both Su Hui's private feelings and her exceptional talent. This secrecy is a

by-product of an intuitively accepted principle in China: self-expression is an extension of the body, and a woman's revelation of inner thoughts and feelings consequently is like a public disrobing. Su Hui's silk-woven palindrome describes a world of private interiors. In Empress Yang's world feminine expression was also conceived in terms of interiors, of private thoughts and feelings. Exposure does not happen of its own accord but rather takes a particular effort, such as that of Wu Zetian, who brings Su Hui's creativity to public notice.

These are surface thoughts that the story of Su Hui's silk-woven palindrome elicits, but a closer look reveals something different: Su Hui's interior world was never intended to be truly private. Implicit in Wu Zetian's telling of the story is Su Hui's own admission of display: she laughs at those who cannot decipher her creation, thereby revealing the expectation that her palindrome would be circulated. She brandishes her talent, knowing that she can only stand to gain by a public recognition of her skill. She proudly describes her Xuanji Diagram as taking on a pattern of its own, "lingering aimlessly, twisting and turning." Within its confined world of interior spaces and emotions, the palindrome contained an endless, unpredictable, and unfettered creativity. And is its world truly confined? As its positive effect on Su Hui's husband reveals, the palindrome had the power to effect change. Although Su Hui's creativity operated within closed borders, its agency extended outward.

Empress Yang also took pride in her talent and accomplishments, and her practice and patronage of art similarly operated within well-defined boundaries. Moreover, Empress Yang recognized that the interiority of her world was part of a necessary illusion. As I demonstrate later, her effectiveness as a ruler from behind the screen depended on her willingness to obey the same rules of agency, even though the nature of those rules was such that her talent and creativity, even her very person, would become misconstrued and lost.

The underlying premise of this book is that there have always been women like Su Hui and Empress Yang in China, women whose creativity has been either lost or misunderstood and others in the imperial ranks whose contributions through patronage have largely passed unnoticed. For the imperial women of the Song, we possess their public image as conveyed through their official biographies, the occasional anecdote told in miscellaneous writings, and a select few superb portraits, yet much is missing. Empress Dowager Cao is one whose portrait survives, and her image, flanked by two stylish attendants wearing flowered headdresses, is both extraordinary and tangible (fig. I.5). She was one of the most celebrated of all the "sage" empress dowagers of the Song, and official historical accounts are rich in their description of her courage, benevolence, and wisdom and of her actions as a model to the empire. Apparently, she was also a fine calligrapher—a specialist in the "flying white" style, commonly practiced by emperors. Moreover, as Mi Fu's *Painting History* notes, she was a collector of the landscape paintings of the great master Li Cheng, even utilizing the talents of Li Cheng's granddaughter to authenticate what

she had acquired.⁵⁰ But that is all that is known. None of Empress Dowager Cao's calligraphy has survived, and if Mi Fu had not wished to trumpet the pedigree of one of his Li Chengs, the empress's interest in collecting art would never have been known. The story of Empress Dowager Cao's contribution to the cultural legacy of imperial women, in other words, will probably always remain beyond our grasp. All that can be said for certain is she, like so many others, was a contributor.

This book is structured around the three Song imperial women for whom extant materials allow detailed study: Empress Liu, early in the dynasty; Empress Wu, who assisted Emperor Gaozong during the difficult transition to the south following the Jurchen invasions of the twelfth century; and Empress Yang, the successor to Empress Wu, whose influence extended to the end of the dynasty. Together, these three women span a good portion of the three hundred-year history of the Song dynasty, a time of critical developments in the arts. The Tang-Song transition is generally recognized as epochal in the history of China. Politically, socially, economically, and culturally there occurred an abrupt rift between the two historical eras. This clear shift is presented in the chapters that follow. The focus of Empress Liu's cultural participation and influence was temple building, the imperial cult, and Sage Mother worship. All of these activities and themes had been a part of the Tang landscape. In contrast, Empresses Wu and Yang focused more on the arts of painting and calligraphy. This change of focus clearly emerged from the rise of literati culture in the late eleventh century and from important developments in court culture that took place under Emperor Huizong at the beginning of the twelfth century. Writing had always been a significant component of imperial women's cultural activities, but its value increased during the late Northern Song, and this shift in turn profoundly altered the arena of imperial art practice and patronage. Chapter 2 bridges these two distinct areas of cultural achievement by considering some of the broader questions regarding writing as an institutional practice by Song imperial women. Chapter 3, devoted to Empress Wu, focuses on didactic art, which figured prominently in imperial patronage of all periods but was particularly important in the early years of the Southern Song. An epilogue concludes the book by considering Empress Yang's lasting influence, which continued into the reign of Emperor Lizong, and the retrospective view of the Song as a feminized dynasty after its fall to the Mongols, a view that helps to explain why the achievements of the Song imperial women have largely been overlooked. The book consequently is thematic as well as chronological in structure. It is intended to go beyond the recounting of three women's contributions to Song dynasty culture to present, through the careful reading of visual materials and texts related to these women, a view of a tangible, continuous, and consciously perpetuated legacy.