

The Research on the Power of Women in Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: This paper explores the unique power and status of women during the Tang Dynasty, a period in Chinese history characterized by political, social, economic, and cultural transformation. Tang women held a unique position, enjoying a level of influence distinct from other eras. By examining political, social, economic, and cultural aspects, this paper reveals the significant contributions of women to the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the Tang Dynasty. Through analyzing historical records, imperial edicts, and cultural relics, we discover that Tang women had more opportunities in politics, such as Empress Wu Zetian ascending to the throne, and in social life, like greater freedom in marriage and social interactions. Economically, they were involved in certain trades, and culturally, they contributed to the flourishing of art and literature. This research not only enriches our understanding of the Tang Dynasty but also provides insights into the evolution of women's status in Chinese history.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty, Women's power, Political participation, Social status

1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD) is widely regarded as a golden age in Chinese history, known for its prosperity, openness, and cultural brilliance. Amidst this backdrop, women in the Tang Dynasty held a unique position, with a level of power and influence that was distinct from other periods in Chinese history. Understanding the power of women in the Tang Dynasty can offer valuable perspectives on gender roles, social structure, and cultural development during this remarkable era.

In the past decade, the study of the status of women in the Tang Dynasty has made remarkable progress. Researchers have delved into various aspects of their lives, from social roles to cultural influence.

Gao Shiyu's *Women in the Tang Dynasty* was a milestone. It was the first monograph on this topic in China, vividly depicting the open - minded, optimistic, and lively demeanor of Tang - Dynasty women. By analyzing political, economic, and cultural factors, it expounded on the reasons for their relatively high social status. Politically, some women in the imperial court, like Empress Wu Zetian, had a significant impact on national affairs. Economically, women participated in certain economic activities, which increased their social value. Culturally, the prevalence of relatively open social mores allowed women more freedom in dress and social interactions.

However, the current research also has limitations. Most studies mainly rely on written records such as official history and literature, which may have biases. For example, these records might focus more on the lives of noble women while neglecting the experiences of ordinary women. This essay puts the perspective on ordinary women in the Tang Dynasty and fills this gap by examining a

wider range of historical sources in order to gain a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the status of women in the Tang Dynasty.

2. Related Literature

Research on the history of women in the Tang Dynasty has achieved remarkable results in the past decade or so. For example, Gao Shiyu's *Women in the Tang Dynasty*, the first monograph on Tang - Dynasty women in China, presents to us the open - minded, optimistic and lively spiritual outlook of women in the Tang Dynasty. Centering on the theme of women's status, it expounds why women in the Tang Dynasty enjoyed a relatively high social status [1]. Based on previous studies, this paper analyzes the status of women in three areas: political participation, economic activity and cultural participation.

2.1. Political Power of Women

New Book of Tang is an official historical record that provides numerous examples of women's political involvement. For instance, it details the rise of Empress Wu Zetian. It records her strategic maneuvers within the imperial court, from gradually gaining power as a consort to eventually ascending the throne, establishing the Wu Zhou Dynasty. The book also mentions other imperial concubines who, through their influence over emperors, played roles in political decision - making. Their access to the emperor, who held supreme political power, allowed them to voice opinions on matters such as appointments and policies, thus participating in the political arena in an indirect yet impactful way [2].

Similarly, the Old Book of Tang is another important source that describes the political influence of princesses in the Tang Dynasty. Some princesses, like Princess Taiping, were actively involved in power struggles. They formed political cliques, colluded with officials, and attempted to sway the course of succession or influence major political reforms. The book's accounts illustrate that women, especially those of noble birth, had the means and opportunity to engage in high - level political activities, often using their kinship and social status to carve out a space for themselves in the male - dominated political sphere [3].

Finally, the *Zizhi Tongjian*, a comprehensive historical chronicle, offers an in-depth analysis of the political events of the Tang Dynasty. It not only records the deeds of well - known political women but also provides a broader context. It shows how women's political participation was intertwined with the overall political situation of the dynasty. For example, it details how the political ambitions of certain women led to power imbalances and political unrest, while in other cases, their influence contributed to stability and reform. This indicates that women's political actions were an integral part of the Tang Dynasty's political fabric [4].

Tang Dynasty Epitaphs provide valuable insights into the political roles of women, even though they are not traditional historical texts. Some epitaphs of female officials or the wives of high - ranking officials mention their contributions to family - related political affairs. For example, they might have mediated in political disputes within the family network, or used their family connections to support political causes. These inscriptions, scattered across different regions, present a more grassroots - level view of women's political participation, supplementing the grand narratives of official histories.

2.2. Empress Wu Zetian

Undoubtedly, the most prominent example of women's political power in the Tang Dynasty was Empress Wu Zetian. Rising from a concubine to the empress and eventually proclaiming herself Emperor of the Zhou Dynasty (a short - lived dynasty she established within the Tang era), Wu

Zetian's rule was marked by significant political reforms. She promoted capable officials from non - aristocratic backgrounds, strengthened the imperial examination system, and expanded the territory of the empire. Her reign demonstrated that women could effectively rule a vast and complex empire, challenging the traditional male - dominated political order [5].

The Cambridge History of China is a comprehensive volume on the history of Sui and Tang China, written by renowned historians. "It contains in-depth discussions on Empress Wu Zetian. It analyzes her political rise, the reforms she implemented during her reign, and her impact on the Tang Dynasty's political, social, and economic landscapes. The academic rigor of this work makes it a reliable source for understanding her rule within the broader historical context.

Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China by Chen. Jo-shui focuses specifically on the gender-related aspects of Empress Wu Zetian's rule. It explores how her ascension to power challenged traditional gender norms in Chinese society and the implications of her rule for the perception of women's political capabilities. It offers a unique perspective on the proto - feminist elements that could be associated with her reign [6].

2.3. Other Influential Female Figures in Politics

Apart from Empress Wu Zetian, there were other women who held political sway. Princess Taiping, daughter of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu Zetian, was actively involved in court politics. She participated in several power struggles and at times had a significant influence on imperial decision - making. Princess Anle also tried to emulate her grandmother, Empress Wu Zetian, aspiring to hold political power, although her attempts were ultimately unsuccessful.

Women in Medieval China: Gender and History explores the political activities of figures such as Princess Taiping and Princess Anle, analyzing their roles in the political arena of the Tang Dynasty from a gender and historical perspective [7].

3. Social Status and Power

3.1. Marriage and Family

In the Tang Dynasty, women had relatively more freedom in marriage compared to later dynasties. While arranged marriages were still the norm, there were cases of women having a say in their marital choices. Remarriage was also common, and widows were not stigmatized for remarrying. For example, many imperial princesses remarried multiple times. In the family, women had certain decision - making powers, especially in managing household affairs. Wealthy women could also control family finances to a certain extent. Social Mobility [8].

3.2. Social Mobility

Tang women, especially those from the upper - class, had opportunities for social mobility. They could participate in social activities such as banquets, poetry recitals, and religious gatherings. Through these events, they could expand their social networks, gain knowledge, and even influence social trends. Lower - class women, although facing more hardships, also had some avenues for economic independence, such as engaging in handicrafts or small - scale trading [8].

4. Economic Power

4.1. Business and Trade

Some Tang women were involved in business and trade. In urban areas, women could be found running small shops, such as clothing stores, teahouses, or handicraft shops. In rural areas, they

participated in agricultural production, especially in tasks like sericulture (raising silkworms for silk production). The silk produced by rural women was not only used for domestic consumption but also for trade, both within the empire and in international trade along the Silk Road [9].

4.2. Property Rights

To some extent, Tang women had property rights. Inheritance laws allowed daughters to receive a portion of the family property, especially in the absence of male heirs. This gave women a certain degree of economic independence and the ability to manage their own wealth [9].

5. Cultural Contributions

5.1. Literature and Art

Tang women made significant contributions to literature and art. There were female poets like Li Ye, Xue Tao, and Yu Xuanji, whose works were highly regarded. Their poems covered a wide range of themes, from love and friendship to nature and personal musings. In the field of art, women were involved in embroidery, painting, and the creation of handicrafts. Their artistic works not only added to the cultural richness of the Tang Dynasty but also influenced the development of art in subsequent periods.

5.2. Fashion and Social Trends

Tang women were trend - setters in fashion. The elaborate and diverse clothing styles of Tang women, such as the popular ruqun (a two - piece dress) and the adoption of foreign - influenced styles, became symbols of the era's prosperity and openness. Their fashion choices influenced social aesthetics and were emulated by women in different regions and social classes.

6. Conclusion

The power of women in the Tang Dynasty was multi - faceted, spanning political, social, economic, and cultural domains. Politically, figures like Empress Wu Zetian and Princess Taiping demonstrated that women could hold high - level political positions and influence national policies. Socially, Tang women enjoyed relatively more freedom in marriage and had opportunities for social mobility. Economically, they were involved in various business activities and had certain property rights. Culturally, their contributions to literature, art, and fashion left a lasting imprint on Chinese history.

However, it is important to note that the power and status of Tang women were still limited by the overall patriarchal social structure. Despite their achievements, they were not able to completely break free from gender - based constraints. Nevertheless, the Tang Dynasty remains an important period in the study of women's history, as it provides valuable lessons on the potential for women's empowerment within a historical context. Further research could explore more deeply the regional and class differences in women's experiences during this era, as well as the long - term impact of Tang women's achievements on subsequent generations.

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