

Severing Grandma's Phallus: A Gendered Re-examination of the Raising and Razing of Female Emperor Wu Zhao's Axis of the Sky

N. Harry Rothschild, University of North Florida

At the very heart of her capital Luoyang 洛陽 in 695, Wu Zhao 武曌 (624–705), China's first and only female emperor, erected the Axis of the Sky (Tianshu 天樞), a hundred-foot tall octagonal Buddhist pillar topped with a quartet of dragons holding aloft a radiant fire pearl. The raising of the monumental pillar arguably marked the zenith of her Zhou 周 dynasty (690–705), a fifteen-year interregnum in the Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasty that the woman sovereign had boldly named after a halcyon era in antiquity. For nearly two decades, the pillar stood as a puissant reminder of the woman emperor's far-reaching political authority. Then, in 714, her grandson Li Longji 李隆基 (685–762), emperor Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756), ordered the Axis razed.¹ This reactionary public act played an important part in his wider campaign to re-institute a traditional moral order that placed Han Chinese above non-Han peoples, situated men over women, and elevated Confucianism over Buddhism.

A number of past studies have examined the Axis of the Sky. Antonino Forte describes the Axis as an aesthetic synthesis of Chinese, Indian, and Persian civilizations—"the three great Asian civilizations of the time"—and a monument to international Buddhist pacifism "reminiscent of the pillars of Asoka."² Asoka (r. 268–232 BCE) was a celebrated ruler of Maurya India who, after carving out a vast empire in a series of bloody campaigns, embraced Buddhism, erecting monuments, stupas, and rock edicts to reinvent himself as a compassionate and merciful Buddhist sovereign—setting a pan-Asian template for the cakravartin, the universal Buddhist wheel-turning monarch. Zhang Naizhu agrees that it was "extremely likely" that the Axis was modeled on an Asokan pillar. In a similar vein to Forte, Zhang calls the Axis a monument of international cooperation (*guoji hezuo* 國際合作), a hybrid of traditional Chinese architecture and cultural and ideological elements from the Western borderlands.³ Alternatively, Ho Puay-peng sees the pillar as a monument that served as a marker of victorious conquest, comparable to the Roman column dedicated to Trajan in 113 for his triumph over the Dacians, invested with similar evocative power and serving "the same political end."⁴ In *The Empress Wu*, C.P. Fitzgerald describes the "celestial pillar" as a monument "expressly designed to celebrate the founding of the Zhou dynasty and the overthrow of the Tang."⁵ Richard Guisso has remarked that the "Pivot of Heaven," which commemorated "the ten thousand virtues of the Zhou," held great symbolic value, projecting an imperial air of her Divine Capital Luoyang.⁶

This analysis of the Axis is not intended to contest the work of Forte, Zhang, and others who have examined the pillar; rather, it is an attempt to supplement their work with a fresh, overlapping gendered perspective. To this end, this study views the Axis of the Sky as a phallic symbol, an extension of female emperor Wu Zhao. In a triptych portraying erection, ejaculation, and castration, respectively, this article examines, through a gendered lens, the shifting ideological and political grounds upon which the Axis rose and fell. There is no reason that the pillar not be considered a monument to international Buddhist pacifism, a commemorative marker of political triumph, an axis mundi, and a phallus all at the same time. Indeed, virtually all symbols contain multiple superimposed and mutually reinforcing semantic layers. Noting Wu Zhao's deft capacity to invest structures in her Divine Capital Luoyang with polysemous symbolism, contemporary scholar Ho Puay-peng has remarked upon the resourceful and original manner in which she wove "together strands of Confucian and Buddhist ideologies" to fashion a "new architectural language."⁷

The notion that the Axis was a "phallic pillar"—one that symbolized Wu Zhao's political potency—is not employed casually herein. Jung contends that as a universal symbol, the phallus manifests itself in multitude of ways—in dreams, in fantasies, in art and architecture, in subconscious and conscious projections.⁸ In *Reign of the Phallus*, Eva Keuls describes ancient Greece as a phallocracy, a cultural system symbolized by the image of the male reproductive organ in permanent erection.⁹ In ancient Greece, authority of the male elite was "buttressed by a display of the phallus less as an organ of union or mutual pleasure than as a kind of weapon: a spear or war club, and a scepter of sovereignty." While the penis is soft or hard, and has its good days and bad, the ever-rigid phallus, "the hard-on that never dies ... the weapon of invasion and destruction," lasted for far more than four hours, existing in a state of permanent erection, serving "as the grandiose universal signifier of male superiority, authority, and law."¹⁰ Under such a system, there are profound consequences for men and women alike. Keuls points out that the phallus is a distortion that denies the penis and leads to misogyny and violence, creating a system with an embedded gynophobic element: "an obsessive fear of women."¹¹

The phallus, however, is not an exclusive male prerogative or possession. As literary critic Marjorie Garber frames it, whereas the penis is a male organ, "the phallus is a structure," existing not in anatomy and nature, but on a level of unconscious and representation.¹² As such, the phallus—though a symbol of patriarchal authority and power—was "fundamentally transferrable," to lift Judith Butler's term.¹³ It could thus be wielded (and even reshaped) by a female ruler.¹⁴ Carellin Brooks restates and develops this notion:

at its simplest level, [the phallus in Freudian terms] seems merely the symbolic representation of that actual organ, the male penis. But the phallus is far more unstably mobile, universally desired, and tantalizingly unobtainable than such a commonplace connec-

tion would suggest. And its ascription to the feminine in the conjuring of the phallic mother, no matter how fantastically or provisionally, denies a biological specificity that would tie the phallus exclusively to the male member.

The power of the phallus, then, resides precisely in its "symbolic flexibility."¹⁵ Following these definitions, the phallus can be understood as a structure detached from biological sex; a transferrable "symbolic representation" that a woman as well as a man might possess and wield. One might, therefore, view the Axis as a phallic monument and Wu Zhao, its possessor, as the phallic mother-ruler to whom the majestic symbol was affixed.

Several earlier conceptions of the physical body and imperial authority are drawn upon in this essay. First, Ernst Kantorowicz's broad-based study in medieval political theology contends that there are two bodies of the king: his "body natural" (the mortal physical body which can suffer illness and infirmity) and the political body (an expansive vessel containing his "royal estate and dignity," encompassing crown, sun, mitre, throne, heraldry, tabernacle, and other symbols of legitimacy). These are conjoined into a mystical double body. Much in the same way that the ever-rigid and majestic phallus glosses over the failings of the smaller, on-again-off-again penis, so the emblematic body politic, larger and "more ample," and existing beyond time and even death, serves to erase the flaws and imperfections of the frail, vulnerable body natural.¹⁶ Second, James Frazer defines "extended self" as:

Not limited to physical being, but embracing everything that is associated with it and everything that can evoke his [or her] presence in another person's mind . . . thus the shadow, name, footpring, gait, dress . . . of a person is just as much an essential and integral part of him [or her] as his [or her] body, the more because it can bear evidence when he [or she] is absent.¹⁷

These concepts can be employed to corroborate the idea that the Axis was not merely a symbol of Wu Zhao's carefully-constructed legitimacy and sovereignty; it was a monumental part of her "extended self," an expansion of (or projection from) her body. Using concepts from literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and gender studies, this article analyzes the mindset and motives behind both Wu Zhao's construction and Xuanzong's severance of the Axis of the Sky.

Wu Zhao's Rule in Wider Dynastic Context

French feminist theorist Helen Cixious argues that men define the dominant symbolic discourse, associated with logos, culture, and the active; in opposition, women are a part of a subordinate mode, connected to pathos, nature, and the passive—an inherently unequal system containing the ever-present, looming threat of violence.¹⁸ Freighted with culturally embedded masculine language and structures, traditional China presented just such a skewed battlefield. Roger Ames and David Hall matter-of-factly observe, “From China’s classical beginnings to the present moment, it has been and still is male-dominated and sexist.”¹⁹ This claim is echoed in a comparative ethnological and anthropological study by Nancy Bonvillain, who characterizes traditional China as an “intensely patriarchal” society in which “male dominance was manifested in numerous social, economic, political and religious spheres.”²⁰

Confucianism, the dominant social, political and ethical system in traditional China, has, in the words of Li Chenyang, “a reputation for its degrading and repressive attitude toward women and for its history of women-oppressive practice.”²¹ Yet, powerful as the patriarchal edifice may have been in traditional China, it was never all-encompassing. Though Confucianism remained socially and culturally embedded, other powerful influences shaped the diverse, pluralistic Tang dynasty, prompting the emergence of bolder, more assertive women. Wu Zhao lived during this open, multi-ethnic, and cosmopolitan era. The rule of Central Asian peoples, who had long dominated northern China, effectively blended elements of nomadic steppe life with the sedentary agrarian practices of the Han Chinese. The Silk Road connected the Tang empire to Central Asia, India, and Persia, bringing caravans carrying not only new goods and fashions, but ideas that challenged existing cultural assumptions. Of this influx of new ideas, Buddhism was most influential (the Axis of the Sky was a Buddhist Monument).²² Having been in China for more than 500 years, Buddhism became a powerful social and cultural current in the Tang, woven into the very fabric of daily life.²³

Women of steppe tribes, many of which had matriarchal origins, were not sequestered to the inner, domestic sphere. They played active roles hunting and herding. Socially and sexually, they were freer than their Chinese counterparts. In fashion, society, and culinary culture, Central Asia exerted a tremendous impact on the early Tang. The hybrid Chinese-Central Asian culture of the time loosened the hold of Confucian values, and there was evidence of this change during Wu Zhao’s reign. The *Old Tang History’s* “Treatise on Carriages and Clothing” records that, “From the time of Wu Zetian [Wu Zhao] forward, hats and scarves became widely popular and women rarely hid themselves with veils and gauzes.”²⁴ Unafraid of the roving gazes of passersby, the self-assured women of the late seventh century appeared unabashedly and openly.

In addition to the influence of Central Asian women, given the free flow of ideas, culture and commerce in her times, Wu Zhao may have drawn inspiration from contemporary female rulers like Queens Sondok 善德 (r. 632–647) and Chindok 真德 (r. 647–654) who ruled the state of Silla in southeastern Korea, and Empresses Suikō 推古 (r. 592–628), Kōgyoku 皇極 (r. 642–645)/Saimei 斉明 (r. 655–661), and Jito 持統 (r. 686–697), paramount sovereigns of Japan.²⁵ The *Old Tang History* records a neighboring “Eastern Nation of Women” (東女國 Dongnūguo) with a female ruler and a bureaucracy dominated by women.²⁶

While this free-wheeling milieu presented new opportunities for women, it also prompted a powerful inward conservative response. On this fraught gendered landscape, the sensational erection and abrupt deracination of the Axis can be apprehended in terms of the clash between these rising new currents and the aggressive reassertion of traditional patriarchal prerogatives.

Erection: “Gender Trouble” in Late Seventh-Century China

Rather than simply accept prescribed performative roles, certain iconoclastic individuals stir up what Judith Butler terms “gender trouble.” They complicate and destabilize existing gender roles, questioning the nature and structure of the patriarchal edifice, while

subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist construction ... through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.²⁷

Gender that is troublesome, that can not be neatly packaged in historical and cultural narrative, and that is difficult to define and quantify, tends to blur existing lines and boundaries, enabling ambiguity and providing potential discursive space to redefine and reinvent.

There are certain times and cultural moments when a confluence of events and trends enables a rare visionary to contest, bend, and change performative norms and conventions—to reshape traditions, ideas, and socio-cultural roles. While in late seventh-century China female Emperor Wu Zhao may have lacked the disciplinary jargon of contemporary gender scholars, she was keenly aware of the ambiguities, spaces, and opportunities afforded by the turbulent times in which she lived. She availed herself of these to make “gender trouble”—to blur, confuse, challenge, appropriate, subvert, usurp, redefine, contort, reconfigure, and/or rearticulate gender roles and constructions.

Among other factors, the three influences mentioned in the previous section—Central Asia, the Silk Road, and Buddhism—reshaped the gendered terrain in seventh-century China, de-centering the Confucian orientation. A benefactor of this historical serendipity, Wu Zhao lived in a time where gender roles were in flux, amidst a process of dynamic redefinition and renegotiation. She did not wait for political opponents to define the changing terms of the gendered landscape. Rather, having control of the court, with the help of a stable of literary and aesthetic masters, she deftly wielded rhetoric and language to foment “gender trouble,” to afford herself discursive space to take an unprecedented step. After almost three decades co-ruling the empire with husband Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–683) and then presiding after his death as a grand dowager during the feckless initial reigns of her two sons Zhongzong 中宗 (r. 684) and Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 684–690), Wu Zhao ascended the dragon throne as emperor and established her own dynasty in 690.

As regent and grand dowager (*taibou* 太后), in the fifth month of 688, Wu Zhao took the title Divine and August Sage Mother (*Shengmu Shenhuang* 聖母神皇), a designation that, like all of her previous titles, defined her biologically as a woman.²⁸ Late in 689, on the eve of inaugurating her own dynasty, one of her political supporters, Zong Qinke 宗秦客 (d. 691), created a set new characters for Wu Zhao, including the “Zhao” 曷 for her name.²⁹ Both male sun and female moon—set above a void—are components of this character. Incorporating both celestial orbs, she became something other; something greater.

Once Wu Zhao became Emperor, this effort to fashion a gendered duality—this calculated interpenetration of male and female symbols—served to conceal her biological sex, transforming her from a flesh and blood woman to a vessel of power. In 690, when Wu Zhao formally ascended the throne, she inaugurated a new Zhou dynasty and assumed the title Sage and Divine August Emperor (*Shengshen huangdi* 聖神皇帝), becoming China’s first and only woman emperor.³⁰ No longer did she bear a title that marked her as female; no more was she merely an Empress, a Grand Dowager, or a Sage Mother. She was an emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝); accordingly, the amplitude of her redefined gender expanded.

The Buddhist faith—Buddhist titles, ceremonies, and monuments—played a pivotal role in the complex construction of Wu Zhao’s emperorship.³¹ The Buddhist establishment rallied behind her. As Sen Tansen succinctly puts it, “Between 685 and 695, Wu Zetian [Wu Zhao] secured crucial support from Buddhist clergy to legitimize her authority and her formal role as “emperor” of China.”³² Rita Gross has pointed out that there is an androgynous aspect to Buddhism: in some texts buddhahood, “neither male nor female” exists “beyond gender altogether.”³³ Contemporary historian Hu Ji has observed that to legitimate her position as female ruler, Wu Zhao effectively “utilized the Buddhist canon to fight against the patriarchal impulse—the conception that the ‘male is honored and the female denigrated’ (*nanzun nibei* 男尊女卑)—at the core of Confucian ethics.”³⁴ In art and propaganda, Wu Zhao deftly linked herself and her emperorship to several Buddhist deities, to

Māyā, the mother of the historical Buddha, and Vimalaprabhā, a bodhisattva-goddess of Pure Light.³⁵ The Axis, a project initiated shortly after Wu Zhao became emperor, was one of the crowning markers of her Buddhist sovereignty.

Wu Zhao proposed the erection of the Axis of the Sky on the banks of the Luo River, next to Ecliptic Bridge (*Huangdao Qiao* 黃道橋).³⁶ The ecliptic, literally the Yellow Path, marked the celestial career of both sun and moon.³⁷ Poetically evoking the pillar in his congratulatory verse, poet-official Li Jiao 李嶠 describes the Axis of the Sky as a structure whose “dazzling luminosity approaches the shared brilliance of both celestial orbs.”³⁸ As in the female ruler's self-determined designation “Zhao” and in the conjoined orbits of the Yellow Path, gender was confused in her radiant phallic pillar. In an era of ideological pluralism and ethnic diversity already astir with all sorts of “gender trouble,” Wu Zhao's carefully selected titles and names further blurred the boundaries of sex.

Even among her impressive repertoire of grand architecture and monumental symbols, the Axis of the Sky—the spectacular Buddhist maypole of Wu Zhao's multiethnic empire, a celestial pillar that celebrated at once the contributions of her myriad non-Chinese constituents and her welcoming embrace of subjects from every quarter—stood out, a remarkable testament to her authority, rising tall and proud in the heart of her Divine Capital (Shendu 神都).³⁹

From the commemorative epitaph of Quan Xiancheng 泉獻誠 (Korean: Yeon Honsong, d. 692), we know that this son of Koguryan dictator Quan Nansheng 泉男生 (Korean: Yeon Namseong, 634–679) was appointed to an unprecedented position, Come-as-Sons Commissioner (*Zilai shi* 子來使) of the Axis of the Sky, in the second month of 691.⁴⁰ Lifted from the canonical *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), featuring a verse in which subjects thronged like cheerful and willing children to build the Numinous Estrade (*lingtai* 靈台) for the virtuous founder of the Zhou dynasty (1045–221 BCE) of antiquity, King Wen 文王, in less than a day, the term “Come-as-sons” (*zi lai* 子來) evoked the spirit of inspired voluntarism.⁴¹ To keep its utility, the concept had to be expanded to encompass the open, cosmopolitan era, expanding to enfold the throngs of foreigners inhabiting Luoyang and Chang'an. Wu Zhao extended “Come-as-sons” to encompass this wider international vision of sovereignty. The sons erecting monuments to exalt her sovereignty were not limited to Han Chinese. Within months, when Quan Xiancheng refused notorious “cruel official” Lai Junchen's 來俊臣 (d. 697) demand for a bribe, Lai accused the Koguryan expatriate of rebellion and ordered him strangled. Seemingly, this development delayed the construction of the Axis for several years.⁴²

During this interval, perhaps in part to mobilize personnel and resources for the project, Wu Zhao relocated throngs of non-Han chieftains, elders, and merchants to Luoyang. In his *Examination of the Two Tang Capitals and their Wards* (*Tang liangjing chengfang kao* 唐兩京城坊考), Qing scholar Xu Song 許松 (1781–1848) indicates that,

In the Changshou 長壽 era (23 October 692 to 9 June 694), because the foreign peoples of the Western borderlands (fan hu 蕃胡) desired to perform a meritorious action, they requested permission to erect the Axis of the Sky. Wu Zhao divided Luoyang and Yongchang counties and established Coming to Court County (Laiting xian 來庭縣), setting up diplomatic offices in Congshan Ward 從善坊 to receive foreign dignitaries from the Four Quarters.⁴³

The *Old Tang History* also records Wu Zhao's establishment in 692 of this new county in metropolitan Luoyang, administered from Congshan Ward.⁴⁴ Congshan Ward is located in the Southern City, south of the Luo River and not far from the site of the Axis. Thus, in the several years leading up to the erection of the Axis, the female emperor bureaucratically restructured her Divine Capital to welcome foreign emissaries and dignitaries, providing administrative offices, residential quarters, and protection in a specially-designated ward. In short, the mother housed her foreign sons.

The Axis project was resuscitated in the eighth month (August 26 to September 24) of 694 when her nephew Wu Sansi 武三思 (d. 707) led barbarian chieftains, foreign dignitaries, and tribal elders to petition for resources to construct the pillar outside the Meridian Gate (*Duanmen* 端門). Wu Zhao supported the project, appointing pro-Buddhist minister Yao Shu 姚璠 (632–705) Superintendent.⁴⁵

Money, material, and design were furnished by Wu Zhao's foreign "sons," the non-Han merchants, leaders, and dignitaries who amassed the huge volume of resources necessary to complete the project.⁴⁶ Their voluntary contribution dovetailed nicely with her expansive vision of universal Buddhist kingship. The multi-national team involved in fundraising and construction for the Axis of the Sky included Koguryans Quan Xiancheng and Gao Zuyou 高足酉 (625–695), celebrated Indian (or Nepalese) architect Mao Poluo 毛婆羅,⁴⁷ and Persian Aluohan 阿羅漢 (616–710).⁴⁸ For Koguryans like Quan Xiancheng and Gao Zuyou—men with neither home nor country—Wu Zhao's desire to develop a broad-based and inclusive ethnic, political, and ideological consensus, and to found not a Han Chinese state but a hybrid Han-Hu (non-Han) empire, welcoming foreign subjects provided they supported her sovereignty, held a tremendous appeal. Such a vision gave them a stake in her political success.⁴⁹

Built under the supervision of Korean foremen, funded by Persian and Central Asian leaders, the Axis of the Sky was publicly situated at the Meridian Gate where all entering Wu Zhao's Divine Capital might witness its splendor.⁵⁰ Construction required 375 tons of bronze and 2500 tons of iron, prompting later Confucians to criticize the extravagance of the project, the wasteful excess of labour and resources.⁵¹

In any event, despite the opposition of the Confucian court, an impressive monument was erected, a great Buddhist shaft funded and built at the behest of a female sovereign by non-Han Chinese leaders and craftsmen. In *Every Inch a Woman*, Carellin Brooks maintains that:

The textual woman who appropriates masculine presentation or masculine desire or who sports a penile substitute addresses, however obliquely, her own phallic investiture. Her transgressive encroachment on what the phallus symbolizes and ultimately grants—masculinity, freedom of desire, the ability to move within the world—also reflects upon and refers back to the potentially physical.⁵²

Through the erection of this spectacular pillar, a flagrant act of “phallic investiture,” Wu Zhao gave tangible shape to her *de jure* position as emperor. If, indeed, this eye-popping symbolic assertion, the woman emperor's bold material announcement, can be understood, in Brooks's sense, to “reflect upon and refer back to the potentially physical,” then while her gender identity might be blurry, her subjects viewing the monument—a measuring stick for her authority—could have no question concerning her impressive endowment, and could not but respect her political authority.

Ejaculation: Effusive Worship of the Mother-Phallus

Completed on the first day of the fourth month of 695 (May 19), Wu Zhao's sky-piercing Axis presided over Luoyang. It stood immediately outside Meridian Gate, the central southern entry to the imperial city, overlooking the trifurcation of the Luo River and Heaven's Ford Bridge (*Tianjin qiao* 天津橋). Surrounded by stone-carved guardian beasts, lions and *qilin* 麒麟, the 105 *chi* 尺 octagonal pillar stood upon an iron mountain fixed upon the stalwart backs of four massive bronze dragons. A quartet of standing water dragons perched on a cloud canopy, held aloft in their forefeet the crowning ornament of the Axis, a scintillating fire pearl.⁵³

Wu Zhao personally wrote the calligraphy for the pillar's title plaque: “Axis of the Sky of Myriad Nations Extolling the Virtues of the Great Zhou.”⁵⁴ In addition, composed by her nephew Wu Sansi and graven on the great bronze column were the names of the foreign generals, merchants, elders, and chief-

tains—as well as court officials, Chinese and non-Han alike—who had donated funds for the project or performed other meritorious service to add luster to her newly-established Zhou dynasty.⁵⁵

To celebrate the erection of the Axis, Wu Zhao held a banquet and staged a poetry competition, prompting countless courtiers and officials to take up their brushes and write florid verses. Resultantly, an effervescent cascade of poetry gushed forth. Gazing on the brilliant fire pearl illumining the surrounding lands, poet Cui Shu 崔曙 (d. 739) waxed rhapsodic, writing, “Coming by night, two full moons; at dawn still shines a solitary star.”⁵⁶ The winning effort was Li Jiao’s “Poem Respectfully Composed for the Emperor at the Celebratory Banquet for Chinese and non-Chinese Officers Commemorating the Completion of the Axis of the Sky”:⁵⁷

West to Mount Yan, it illumines the cart-tracks;
North to the state of Yan its merit is broadcast.

What better occasion for the ten thousand nations to congregate,
Lauding this grand achievement before the nine imperial gates?

In dazzling luminosity it approaches the shared brilliance of both
celestial orbs
Entering the glowing purple haze in the lofty ethers high above.

Dew gathers in the canopy of the immortals,
As the lofty pillar upholds the firmament.

Above it rise cumulus mountains of cloud,
And the refulgent pearl hangs in the sky like a great sun.

Her fame echoes through the world for countless kalpas;
Her karma fixed eternal, until the seas become rice-fields.

The emperor’s anointment⁵⁸ like tippling Yao’s heady liquor,
Her aromatic zephyrs⁵⁹ interwoven with the strains of Shun’s zither.

Joyfully we encounter the days of the reincarnation [of Maitreya],
A time resembling the glorious years of ancient sage rulers.

In this rapturous evocation of being consecrated by the phallic mother, the sexual dimension in Li Jiao’s verse is evident.⁶⁰ Joyous subjects receive her delectable imperial beneficence, her salubrious “anointment” (霏 澤), reveling as the delicious ejaculate sent forth by Wu Zhao’s bronze phallus, her effusive “clouds and rain,”

sprinkles down from on high.

The completion of the Axis of the Sky also occasioned a massive gathering of non-Chinese peoples in the Divine Capital—Wu Zhao's aforementioned foreign "sons." Unearthed in the spring of 1990 in the suburbs of Luoyang, the epitaph of Gao Zuyou, a leader of vanquished Koguryo who served as both a civil and military official under Wu Zhao, provides valuable insight into the grand ceremony marking the full erection of the monument:

In the first year of Verified Sagehood [*Zhengsheng* 證聖 1, 695], when the construction of the Axis of the Sky was complete, the people, delighted, came as sons. The carving of the names [of contributors on the pillar] was then undertaken. The pillar reached beyond the firmament, manifesting the Emperor and her self-realization. The refulgent pearl spewed forth brilliant light, like the conjoined refulgence of sun and moon. Beneath it sported auspicious dragons, inclining their heads toward the clouds and vapors.⁶¹

This epitaph inscription makes it explicit and abundantly clear: the Axis was a symbol of Wu Zhao's political authority: her imperial sovereignty.

Castration: Toppling the Axis

The deposal and death of Wu Zhao in 705 did not bring about an immediate restoration of normative Confucian order. Despite the renewal of the Tang dynasty, during the second reigns of Wu Zhao's two sons, inept Zhongzong (r. 705–710) and fainthearted Ruizong (710–712), a quartet of powerful women—Empress Wei 韋皇后 (d. 710), the Taiping Princess 太平公主 (d. 713), the Anle Princess 安樂公主 (684–710), and Shanguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (664–710)—dominated the court.⁶² During these years, the Axis of the Sky stood tall, continuing to preside over Luoyang. Indeed, Empress Wei built a stone tower of her own near to the pillar, her own phallic monument.⁶³ The Anle Princess, Wu Zhao's granddaughter and Ruizong's daughter, clad in elaborate five-colored skirts, demanded to be designated Crown Princess. Shanguan Wan'er was a gifted poet who drafted edicts for Wu Zhao; after the female emperor's death, she was deeply intertwined in court politics and intrigue. A powerbroker in the fractured court of the restored Tang dynasty, the Taiping Princess accumulated a massive fortune and attempted to overthrow Xuanzong.⁶⁴

As Xuanzong's accession marked the revival of the Confucian patriarchy, Jowen Tong warns against generalizing the Tang as a liberal era when plump, healthy women freely and publicly paraded along city streets on sturdy horses. Insightfully remarking that this image of the era is "partial myth," she contends that by the fall of Empress Wei seeds had been sown for the gradual decline of women's status.⁶⁵ Similarly, Chen Jo-shui has observed the negative "backlashes against . . . pro-women

measures in the decades immediately following the end of female dominance in politics.⁶⁶ Indeed, this critical juncture marked an “inward turn,” when, as Tong argues, the “center came back to reclaim its legitimacy, and the dialectic of power, both of gender and race, exacted countless victims on both sides.”⁶⁷ After Empress Wei’s demise, women were resituated in their Confucian roles. Xuanzong disbanded princesses’ administrations and “ordered palace women from consorts down to raise silkworms and to learn the art of embroidery, the quintessential feminine labor.”⁶⁸

An examination into the peculiar childhood and youth of Li Longji, the future Xuanzong, may shed light upon the vehemence with which he sought to effect these larger social and political transformations as the Tang sovereign. Gender historian Joan Scott has observed that in patriarchal cultures masculinity is signified not only by possession of a penis and by paternity, but by the statuses of soldier, property-holder, scientist and citizen, statuses from which women were often excluded. Therefore, Freudian castration anxiety is tied to political fear, to the dread that “the throne and altar are in danger.”⁶⁹ In the case of the Axis, it is more than just castration anxiety—these fears had been fully realized: the phallus has been appropriated. A poignant visible symbol of Wu Zhao’s possession of “the throne and altar,” the Axis stood prominently and publically, a cynosure announcing to one and all her political authority. Li Longji was born to his father’s concubine, née Dou 竇 (d. 693), in 685, shortly after Wu Zhao began to act as Grand Dowager-regent, “presiding over court and issuing edicts” (*lin chao chengzhi* 臨朝稱制).⁷⁰ He grew up in his grandmother’s shadow, in the long shadow of the Axis.

At Li Longji’s birth, his weak-willed and tractable father Ruizong was nominally Emperor, but Grand Dowager Wu Zhao occupied the Forbidden City and relegated Ruizong to the Crown Prince’s quarters.⁷¹ When Wu Zhao became Emperor in 690, she formally reduced Ruizong to Crown Prince.⁷² To consolidate her authority, Wu Zhao engaged in a systematic campaign of terror, utilizing cruel officials to trim the branches of the imperial Li family drastically.⁷³ In 693, when Li Longji was eight, a resentful palace servant favored by Wu Zhao accused his household of plotting witchcraft. The sovereign summoned Ruizong’s Empress and his Consort Dou to an audience, and summarily ordered them murdered and secretly buried in the palace. Intimidated and weak as ever, quaking before his mother, Li Longji’s father dared not mention the disappearance of his wife and consort, and behaved as if nothing unusual had transpired.⁷⁴

Drawing on the Freudian notion of castration anxiety, Michael Eigen has proposed that a male child may fantasize that his mother has castrated his father to amplify her power with that of the paternal penis.⁷⁵ For Li Longji, it was not the mother but the looming Grandmother who emasculated his father. Timorous Ruizong cowered before her—he lacked both spine and balls. If his father lacked these essential tools of maleness, Xuanzong came of age in a court and culture where all understood that Wu Zhao possessed them.

Contemporary Chinese scholar Guo Shaolin observed that while Wu Zhao's sons dared not dismantle all of the political monuments of their redoubtable mother, her grandson Xuanzong decisively "resolved the problem with great sword and broad ax, finally expelling the humiliation of the political authority of Wu Zhao's Zhou dynasty."⁷⁶ A curious observation by Liang Hengtang may further explain Xuanzong's loathing of the giant phallic pillar. Xuanzong could not tolerate the fact that the Axis was built on top of a "foundation of dragons" (*longji* 龍基), a homophone for his personal name, Longji 隆基.⁷⁷ Symbolically, he was pressed down, diminished, and emasculated by the pillar.

In any event, Xuanzong could not abide the presence of the Axis. Zhang Zhuo's early eighth-century *Chaoye jianzai* contains the passage:

In the Jingyun 景雲 era (710–712), a prophetic verse circulated, 'A single strand of hemp will pull down the Axis of the Sky. It shall be severed.' When the Divine Martial One (*Shenwu* 神武; Xuanzong) inherited the throne he issued an imperial order to knock down the Axis of the Sky. The collected bronze was then taken to the Directorate of Imperial Manufactories. This marked the fulfillment of the prophecy.⁷⁸

The supplemental chapter of Liu Su's *Da Tang Xinyu* contains a brief description of the grand column's demise: "In the Kaiyuan 開元 era the Axis was knocked down. The bronze was sent to the Directorate of Imperial Manufactories."⁷⁹ In the same source, the passage including Li Jiao's poem extolling the Axis also provides a brief account of its toppling: "At the beginning of the Kaiyuan era, an imperial proclamation ordered the destruction of the Axis of the Sky. Soldiers were sent to melt down the pillar. Even after a month, the process was not complete."⁸⁰

The official Tang histories and the *Comprehensive Mirror* corroborate this account and provide a clearer time frame for the destruction of the Axis of the Sky. Xuanzong's basic annals in the *Old Tang History* records that "On *jiaxu* 甲戌 (8 August 713), the order was given to destroy the Axis of the Sky and to appropriate its bronze and iron for the military and the state."⁸¹ In the annals of the third month of 714 it is recorded that, "In the ninth month of the previous year an edict was issued to destroy the Axis of the Sky. Now, this spring, the project commenced."⁸² The *Comprehensive Mirror* provides the following account of the destruction of the Axis in the spring of 714: "The Axis of the Sky was destroyed. Craftsmen were sent to melt its iron and bronze. Within a month, it was gone. Prior to this, Empress Wei also had erected a stone tower (*shitai* 石臺) several *zhang* tall to celebrate meritorious Buddhist achievement along the Avenue of Heaven (*Tianjie* 天街). At this juncture, it was also razed."⁸³

Just as the erection of the Axis occasioned euphoric outpouring of poetry—many poet-officials being shameless aesthetic mercenaries—so its destruction brought forth eager lyricists to exult in its fall. Celebrating the fall of the monument, Luoyang Commandant Li Xiulie 李休烈 wrote “Chant of Destroying the Axis of the Sky”:

East of the Street of Heaven’s Gate fell the Axis of the Sky,
 First get rid of the fire pearl with the urgency of fire.
 If a single silken strand can pull it down then
 Why trouble with the laborious pushing of two counties’ men?⁸⁴

From both the prophetic verse and Li Xiulie’s chant, it would seem that the pillar was pulled down rather than razed. Li Xiulie was clearly aware of the prophecy and echoed it in his verse. Among commoners and gentlefolk alike, it was said, not a one failed to mockingly chant this verse.⁸⁵

The “Treatise of Ceremonial Records” (*Liyizhi* 禮儀志) in the *Old Tang History* records the continuation of Xuanzong’s ongoing campaign to raze and erase all protrusive symbols and monuments that projected Wu Zhao’s authority. Other officials like Left Suppletter of Defaults Lu Lübing 盧履冰 chimed in, justifying the destruction in terms of precedent (the 714 destruction of the Axis) and the appropriate reinstatement of normative symbolic authority. In the fifth year of Kaiyuan (717), he memorialized:

Empress Zetian’s Altar of Worshipping the Luo and Receiving the Chart and Stele were constructed because of the stone Tang Tongtai 唐同泰 reportedly discovered bearing the inscription ‘When the Sage Mother comes among the people, the imperium will forever prosper.’ Thereupon the reign era was changed to Yongchang 永昌 (Eternal Prosperity) and Yongchang County was established. The county has since been abolished; Tongtai has been stripped of his office—only the stele and the altar still stand. Following the precedent of the Axis of the Sky and the Buddhist Tower of Merit, they can no longer remain standing.⁸⁶

Xuanzong approved of Lu Lübing’s memorial. He ordered the destruction of the altar and stele. Later, he also commanded that her Temple of the Marquis of Manifest Sagehood (*Xianshenghou miao* 顯聖侯廟) be razed.⁸⁷

As part of a conscious effort to erase her presence, the young emperor dismantled nearly every vestige of Wu Zhao’s political authority that rose from female earth toward male heaven. Xuanzong posthumously castrated his grandmother Wu Zhao, de-masculinized her, and re-made and re-defined her as a woman. He thus re-situated her in her proper Confucian place, restoring—in the minds of fu-

ture scholars and historians—a more familiar, conventional order.

Conclusion

Judith Butler convincingly argues the “plasticity, transferability, and expropriability” of the phallus, contending that what is sometimes mistaken (in a Lacanian sense) for a symbol of patriarchal and androcentric authority is “always in the process of being signified and resignified,” and is “unstable and open” to subversion. Butler presents an “alternative imaginary” vision of a lesbian phallus that possessed the power to displace “hegemonic symbols of sexual difference” and create a new site of eroto-political authority.⁸⁸ Female emperor Wu Zhao came to possess the phallus: the Axis of the Sky was an expression and a manifestation of her distinctive—and gendered—political authority.

Its iconic presence was more than Xuanzong and the horrified Confucian establishment could swallow. Therefore, Xuanzong ordered it pulled down, in effect reclaiming the phallus in the name of the patriarchs and the establishment. According to Confucian records from later centuries, the Axis had been erected to “commemorate the Grand Dowager’s merit and virtue, in order to disparage the Tang and exalt the Zhou,” to “amplify the merits of [a female ruler] severing the mandate.”⁸⁹ By razing the pillar, Xuanzong restored proper order.

So, these are the gendered contours of the story. Wu Zhao usurped the phallus: Xuanzong took it back (doing what uxorious Gaozong, buffoonish Zhongzong, and feckless Ruizong could not), and rescuing the patrimony to bequeath to posterity. Subsequently, he was written into the Confucian historiography as the hero-ruler presiding over the “flourishing era of Kaiyuan” (*Kaiyuan shengshi* 開元盛世). He castrated his redoubtable grandmother’s sky-piercing bronze phallus, ordering strong-armed soldiers to uproot it and melt it down. The Axis of the Sky, a symbol of Wu Zhao’s transgressive power and sovereignty, included many non-Chinese elements that underscored and brought into clearer resolution her otherness as a female ruler. It stood as a triple threat to establishment: as a giant phallus of the mother-ruler it menaced the patriarchy; its eye-popping Buddhist aesthetics challenged the ideological and political centrality of Confucianism; and the enthusiastic support of foreigners who invested in and raised the monument represented a brazen ethnic affront to Han Chinese. Through this act of phallic reclamation, the young sovereign Xuanzong sought to emerge from the long female *yin* 陰 shadow cast by his Grandmother and her Axis into the *yang* 陽 sunlight, re-instituting a normative course of rule, not misrule, by men, not women; an order that was Confucian, not Buddhist; a dominion that was Han Chinese, not barbarian.

NOTES

¹ Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance; hereafter ZZTJ], comp. Sima Guang 司馬光 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1995), 211.6699.

² See Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, the Statue and the Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu* (Rome: Italian Institute of East Asian Studies, 1988), 242–243. This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive review of scholarship on the Axis.

³ Zhang Naizhu 張乃翥, “Wu-Zhou Wanguo tianshu yu Xiyu wenming” 武周萬國天樞與西域文明 [The Wu-Zhou Axis of Sky of Myriad Nations and the Civilization of the Western Borderlands] *Xibei Shidi* 西北史地 (2.1994), 46.

⁴ See Ho Puay-peng, “Architecture and Legitimacy in the Court of Wu Zhao,” in *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China*, eds. Frederick Hok-ming Cheung and Ming-chiu Lai (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), 111. Li Song similarly sees it as a large-scale “commemorative stele” (jinian bei 紀念碑) announcing the advent of a new dynasty and a new order, a potent symbol of political and ideological authority; see Li Song 李松, “Tianshu: Wo guo gudai yizhong jinianbei yangshi” 天樞: 我國古代一種紀念碑樣式 [The Axis of the Sky: An Example of My Nation’s Commemorative Stelae] *Meishu* 美術 4 (1985), 41–44.

⁵ C.P. Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1955), 136.

⁶ Richard Guisso, *Wu Tse-i’ien and the Politics of Legitimation in Tang China* (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1978), 129. Though in fn. 16 he agrees with Rao Zongyi’s contention that the monument was Manichean, rather than Buddhist.

⁷ Ho, “Architecture and Legitimacy in the Court of Wu Zhao,” 119. Ho notes that multiple ideologies, often a synthesis of Buddhism and Confucianism” were combined in a single building.

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), throughout, whether in snakes appearing in patient’s dreams (316), in Hermes caduceus (295 fn. 5), or in kundalini yoga symbolism (357).

⁹ Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2–3.

¹⁰ Keuls, 244, 373.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3, 204.

¹² Marjorie Garber, “Fetish Envy,” *October* 54 (1990): 46–47.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 32. Butler examines and deconstructs the Lacanian view which asserts that the phallus is a primordial signifier, “an originating and controlling power,” a “structuring principle” that dictates the “androcentric character” of all knowable objects—see chapter 2, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” esp. 28–37.

¹⁴ Representations of the phallus proliferate: snakes, pillars, obelisks, cairns, steles,

mountains. Freud, in "Dreams," *Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 15 (London: Hogarth, 1974), 154, lists an array of phallic symbols, "objects which share with the thing they represent the characteristic of penetrating into the body and injuring—thus sharp weapons of every kind, knives, daggers, spears, sabers, but also fire-arms, rifles, pistols and revolvers."

¹⁵ Carellin Brooks, *Every Inch a Woman: Phallic Possession, Femininity, and the Text* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁶ See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Scott Pearce draws on Kantorowicz's study, observing that "manipulation of rites and symbols" was vitally important in the process of fifth-century ruler Wei Wenchengdi 魏文成帝 (r. 424–452) "constructing a self," transforming himself from a king to a King. See Pearce, "A King's Two Bodies: The Northern Wei Emperor Wencheng and Representations of the Power of his Monarchy," *Frontiers of Chinese History* 7, no. 1 (2011): 90.

¹⁷ Sir James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New Jersey: S.G. Phillips, 1965), 132. Brackets have been added.

¹⁸ Helen Cixious, "Sorties," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 90–98.

¹⁹ David Hall and Roger Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, ed. Li Chenyang (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 83.

²⁰ Nancy Bonvillain, *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 144–145.

²¹ Li Chenyang, "Introduction: Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?" in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, 1.

²² This is intended to serve as the most cursory introduction for this rich and complex era. For more on the social, political, and cultural environs of Wu Zhao's time, see N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao, China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York: Longman, 2008), chapter II, "Historical Preconditions for the Ascent of a Female Emperor," 11–18.

²³ See Arthur Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 70.

²⁴ Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書 [Old Tang History; hereafter JTS], comp. Liu Xu 劉昫 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 45.1957.

²⁵ Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, 24; also see Jennifer Jay, "Imagining Matriarchy: Kingdoms of Women in Tang China," *Journal of American Oriental Studies* 116, no. 2 (1996): 220–229. For an initial foray into gender politics in the Tang, see Chen Jo-shui, "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, eds. Frederick Brandauer and Chih-chieh Huang (University of Washington Press, 1994), 77–114; Duan Tali 段塔麗, *Tangdai funü diwei yanjiu 唐代婦女地位研究 [Research on the Position of Women in the Tang]* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2000); Jowen Tong, *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics*

in *Tang Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Gao Shiyu, “A Fixed State of Affairs and Mis-positioned Status: Gender Relations in Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties,” in *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture*, ed. Min Jiayi (Beijing: Academy of Social Sciences, 1995), 270–314; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao (r. 690–705),” *Religion* 28, no. 4 (1998): 383–392; Diana Paul, “Empress Wu and the Historians: A Tyrant and a Saint of Classical China,” in *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, eds. Nancy Falk and Rita Gross (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1979), 191–206; Jennifer Jay, “Vignettes of Chinese Women in Tang Xi’an (618–906): Individualism in Wu Zetian, Yang Guifei, Yu Xuanji, and Li Wa,” *Chinese Culture* 31, no. 1 (1990): 77–89.

²⁶ JTS, 199.5277.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33–34.

²⁸ Xin Tangshu 新唐書 [Old Tang History, hereafter XTS], comp. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 4.87; ZZTJ 204.6448.

²⁹ ZZTJ 204.6462.

³⁰ ZZTJ 204.6467, XTS 4.90, and JTS 6.121.

³¹ It is far beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of the multifarious dimensions of Wu Zhao’s Buddhist kingship. The role of Buddhism in Wu Zhao’s political career has a vast bibliography, including, but certainly not limited to the works of Antonino Forte, Chen Jinhua, Timothy Barrett, Chen Yinke, Wang Shuanghui, Wen Yucheng, Gu Zhengmei, Dorothy Wong, Patricia Karetzky, Richard Guisso, Stanley Weinstein, Zhao Wenrun, Zhang Naizhu, and Ning Qiang.

³² Sen Tansen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 95.

³³ Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 10.

³⁴ Hu Ji 胡載, *Wu Zetian benzhuan 武則天本傳* [Essential biography of Wu Zetian] (Xi’an: Shaanxi Shifan daxue chubanshe, 1998), 165. While Buddhism did afford Wu Zhao novel opportunities, the Buddhist faith in Tang China was far from free of patriarchal influence. See Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), esp. 24–27. Faure illustrates that within the Buddhist monastic community there was a “fundamental asymmetry” between the sexes, so that nuns, in effect, were a “second order,” subordinated to monks.

³⁵ See N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 195–226.

³⁶ This location is based in part upon the mention of Li Jiao’s poem in the *Da Tang Xinyu* 大唐新語 [New Writings of the Great Tang; hereafter DTXY], comp. Liu Su 劉肅 (fl. 806–820), in *Tang-Song shiliao biji congkan* 唐宋史料筆記叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 8.126. This source is excerpted in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記

[Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era; hereafter TPGJ], comp. Li Fang 李昉 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), 240.1850–1851.

³⁷ Sun Xiaochun, “The Ecliptic in Han Times and Ptolemaic Astronomy,” in *East Asian Science: Tradition and Beyond*, eds. K. Hashimoto et al. (Osaka: Kansai University Press, 1995), 65.

³⁸ The translation “both celestial orbs” here is an alternative rendering of *huang dao* (yellow path), the term for the ecliptic. In the West, “ecliptic” generally describes the sun’s annual path on a celestial sphere. In early China, the “ecliptic” is similar to the “polar ecliptic” and which measured both solar and lunar careers. See Sun, “The Ecliptic in Han Times and Ptolemaic Astronomy,” 65–72.

³⁹ Wu Zhao’s designation of Luoyang as her Divine Capital is recorded in XTS 4.83 and JTS 6.117, among other places.

⁴⁰ Zhao Zhenhua 赵振华, “Zhuchi jianzao Tianshu de waifan renwu yu ‘Zilai shi’” 主持建造天枢的外蕃人物与‘子来使’ [The ‘Come-as-Sons Commissioner and foreigners who supported the construction of the Axis of the Sky], in *Wu Zetian yu Shendu Luoyang* 武则天與神都洛陽, ed. Wang Shuanghuai 王雙懷 and Guo Shaolin 郭紹林 (Beijing: China Cultural History Press, 2008), 297.

⁴¹ Antonino Forte, *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias*, 238–239.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 236–237.

⁴³ Yang Hongnian 杨鸿年, *Sui Tang liangjing fangli pu* 隋唐两京坊里谱 [Walls and Wards in the Two Sui and Tang Capitals] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1999), 275.

⁴⁴ JTS 38.1423. Not surprisingly, Laiting County was abolished in 705 after Wu Zhao’s death.

⁴⁵ JTS 6.124, 89.2902; XTS 4.95, ZZTJ 205.6496. DTXY 8.126 and “supplemental passages” (jiyi 輯佚), 204 (also cited in TPGJ 236.1816) locate the Axis outside of Dingding Gate 定鼎門, the central gate of the southern city rather than Meridian Gate. Guo Shaolin 郭紹林, “Da Zhou Wanguo songde tianshu kaoshi” 大周万国颂德天枢考释 [An Explanatory Investigation into the Axis of the Sky of Myriad Countries Exalting the Merits of the Great Zhou], *Luoyang Shifan xueyuan xuebao* 洛阳师范学院学报 [Academic Journal of Luoyang Normal University] no. 6 (2001): 73, 76, persuasively argues that the Meridian Gate is the actual location of the Axis.

⁴⁶ DTXY, supplemental passages, 204. Records are contradictory on the question as to who raised the money and provided the labour for the Axis: Chinese peasants or foreigners. Some sources insist that the Axis of the Sky was an indulgent and extravagant project, the brunt of which was borne by the common folk. XTS 6.124 remarks that Wu Sansi memorialized, requesting requisition and gathering of huge volumes of bronze and iron in Luoyang. TPGJ 163.1180 claims that because of the Axis of the Sky, Chinese peasants suffered excessive taxes and were recruited for labour. ZZTJ 205.6496 and Yao Shu’s biography in the *New Tang History* (102.3980) both record that when the massive contributions of the non-Han peoples proved insufficient, metal from agricultural implements and other sources belonging to the common folk were requisitioned to complete the project.

⁴⁷ Guo Shaolin (“Da Zhou Wanguo songde tianshu kaoshi,” 73) remarks that the name Mao Poluo may be of Nepalese origin. Lidai minghuaji 歷代名畫記 (Records of Famous Painters through the Ages), chapter 8, mentions him as one of several craftsmen possessing “transcendent ingenuity.” For more on Gao Zuyou, see Bai Genxing 拜根興, “Gaoli yimin Gao Zuyou muzhiming kaoshi” 高麗移民高足西墓誌銘考釋 [An Investigation and Explanation of the Funerary Epitaph of Koguryan Immigrant Gao Zuyou], Beilin jikan 碑林集刊 vol. 9 (2003): 27–35. For Aluohan, see Antonino Forte, “On the Identity of Aluohan (616–710), a Persian Aristocrat at the Chinese Court,” in *La Persia e l’Asia Centrale: Da Alessandro al X secolo* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1996), 187–197.

⁴⁸ Antonino Forte, “Iranians in China: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Bureaus of Commerce,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 11 (1999–2000): 282.

⁴⁹ After a protracted war with Tang China, Koguryo fell in 668 and became a protectorate of the Tang. For more on the role of Koguryans in Wu Zhao’s era, see N. Harry Rothschild, “The Koguryan Connection: The Quan (Yon) Family in the Establishment of Wu Zhao’s Political Authority,” *China Yongu: The Journal of Chinese Studies of Pusan National University* 14, no. 1 (2008): 199–234.

⁵⁰ TPGJ 163.1180; XTS 76.3483; ZZTJ 205.6502–03. In *Mingtangs and Buddhist Utopias* (243), Forte translates the full title of the monument as “Celestial Axis of Myriad Countries exalting the merits of the Great Zhou” (Da Zhou wan guo songde tianshu 大周萬國頌德天樞); Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, 136, also remarks upon the prominent locale of the “Celestial Pillar.”

⁵¹ DTXY 8.126 records that Wu Zhao requisitioned 500,000 jin 斤 of bronze and more than 1.3 million jin of iron. Roughly corresponding with this figure, XTS 76.3483 records that two million jin of bronze and iron were used.

⁵² Brooks, *Every Inch a Woman*, 8.

⁵³ XTS 4.95 records this date of construction. Also see XTS 76.3483; ZZTJ 205.6502–6503. For other descriptions of the Axis, see Forte, *Mingtangs and Buddhist Utopias*, 233–246; Ho, “Architecture and Legitimacy in the Court of Wu Zhao,” 111; Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, 136–137. There are some contradictions in descriptions of the monument. Whereas the New Tang History and DTXY 8 maintain that a “cloud canopy” (yungai 雲蓋) was set at the top of the monument, the Comprehensive Mirror claimed the finial featured a “dew-gathering basin” (lu pan 露盤) and the DTXY “Supplement” (204) describes a bronze basin (tong pan 銅盤), suggesting a concave rather than convex structure. This concave vessel atop the column was designed to receive amrita, in Hinduism and Buddhism, the nectar of the gods. Given that the Axis could receive nectar from on high, of course, it opens up fascinating potential additional gendered dimensions: might the Axis itself be better understood as both phallic and yonic, as a symbolic fusion of male and female genitalia? This Axis was a complex monument with many symbolic layers. Representing only one part of a larger project, this essay primarily examines the Axis as a phallic symbol. One of the sections that further explores the shared presence of yoni and linga, of

moon and sun, in the monument is provisionally titled “Tantric Sexuality and the Interpenetration of Linga and Yoni: Symbolic Interchangeability in the Axis of the Sky” (unpublished, forthcoming).

⁵⁴ XTS 76.3483; ZZTJ 205.6502–6503. Both DTXY passages (8.126 and Supplemental, 204) record that the inscription title of the Axis reads “Declaring Virtue” (shu de 述德) rather than “Extolling Virtue” (song de 頌德).

⁵⁵ XTS 76.3483; JTS 89.2902; ZZTJ 205.6502–6503.

⁵⁶ TPGJ 198.1485.

⁵⁷ Quan Tangshi 全唐詩 [Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry, hereafter QTS], comp. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1995), 61.724–725. The earlier version of Li Jiao's poem recorded in Liu Su's *Da Tang Xinyu* (8.126) has several significant variants.

⁵⁸ DTXY 8.126 uses “sage” (sheng 聖) rather than emperor (di 帝). Given the presence of “Sage” in many of her titles, either term might refer to Wu Zhao.

⁵⁹ Here I have used “aromatic zephyrs” (xun feng 薰風) from DTXY 8, rather than “imperial song” (zhen ge 宸歌) from QTS 61.

⁶⁰ The erotic overtone to Li Jiao's verse is not unique. In “The Erotic Empress: Fantasy and Sovereignty in Chinese Temple Inscriptions,” *Tang Studies* 26 (2008), J.E.E. Pettit has persuasively argued that a decade before the erection of the Axis, Yang Jiong 楊炯 (650–ca. 694)—a literary and aesthetic master like Li Jiao—eroticized Wu Zhao in “tantalizing language of male and female union” in stelae inscriptions for plaques on Mount Song, fashioning “an alpine landscape fit for a goddess.” Cast in the “erotic images” of Yang Jiong's verse as a “voluptuous goddess” possessing “supernal elegance,” the apotheosized sexagenarian Wu Zhao is depicted floating through the air, attired in silks, flowing gossamer robes aquiver, hanging pendants chiming as she moves (131–137).

⁶¹ Sui-Tang-Wudai muzhi huibian 隋唐五代墓誌匯編 [A Comprehensive Collection of Tomb Inscriptions from the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties Eras], ed. Luoyang Gudai yishuguan 洛陽古代藝術官 [Luoyang Museum of Antiquities] (Tianjin: Tianjin guji Press, 1991) vol. 7, 84.

⁶² For a brief account of these intrigues, see Richard Guisso, “The reigns of the empress Wu, Chung-tsung, and Jui-tsung (684–712),” in *Cambridge History of China, vol. 3: Sui and Tang China* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 321–328.

⁶³ ZZTJ 211.6699.

⁶⁴ For portrayals of these women, see Rebecca Doran, *Transgressive Typologies: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017) and N. Harry Rothschild, “‘Her Influence Great, Her Merit beyond Measure’: A translation and initial investigation of the epitaph of Shangguan Wan'er,” *Studies in Chinese Religions* 1, no. 2 (2015): 131–148.

⁶⁵ Jowen Tong, *Fables for the Patriarchs: Gender Politics in Tang Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 216.

⁶⁶ Chen Jo-shui, “Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China,”

100.

⁶⁷ Jowen Tong, *Fables for the Patriarchs*, 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁹ Joan Scott, *Gender and Politics in History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 204.

⁷⁰ JTS 8.165.

⁷¹ ZZTJ 203.6418.

⁷² ZZTJ 204.6467.

⁷³ Rothschild, *Wu Zhao, China's Only Woman Emperor*, chapter 9, 125–136.

⁷⁴ ZZTJ 205.6488; see also Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, 149.

⁷⁵ Michael Eigen, “On Pre-Oedipal Castration Anxiety,” *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1974): 489.

⁷⁶ Guo Shaolin, “Da Zhou Wanguo songde tianshu kaoshi,” 76.

⁷⁷ This argument is made by Liang Hengtang 梁恒唐 in “Wu Zetian shidai de Tian-shu” 武則天時代的天樞 [The Axis of the Sky of Wu Zetian's Era], *Jinyang xuekan 晉陽學刊* 3 (1990): 55.

⁷⁸ Chaoye jianzai 朝野僉載 [Collected Records from Court and Country], Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (667–731), in *Tang-Song shiliao biji congkan 唐宋史料筆記叢刊* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 1.10. This chant is also recorded in QTS 878.9924, where it is called the “Prophetic Ditty of the Axis of the Sky” (Tianshu yao 天樞謠).

⁷⁹ DTXY, supplement, 204.

⁸⁰ DTXY 8.126.

⁸¹ JTS 8.170. Xuanzong's “basic annals” in Ouyang Xiu's subsequent New Tang History (XTS 5.122) mistakenly records that on August 8, 713 the Axis of the Sky was destroyed, confusing the issuing of the order with the later date on which the Axis of the Sky was destroyed. The Kaiyuan era was inaugurated on the first of the twelfth lunar month of Xiantian 先天2, December 22, 713, which made 713 the inaugural year of Kaiyuan.

⁸² JTS 8.173.

⁸³ ZZTJ 211.6699. DTXY (8.126) records the destruction of the tower (north of the Axis) belonging to “Commoner Wei” (as Empress Wei was disparagingly known after her titles were posthumously stripped), as an event occurring prior to the razing of the Axis.

⁸⁴ Li Xiulie's “Chant for Destroying the Axis of the Sky” appears in QTS 869.9852 and DTXY 8.126. QTS 120.1211 gives it an alternative name—the “Chant of the Bronze Pillar.” There are significant variations. This translation draws heavily upon QTS 869.

⁸⁵ DTXY 8.126.

⁸⁶ JTS 24.925

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 56–57.

⁸⁹ XTS 76.3483.; DTXY 8.126.