

Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 44: [THE EMPEROR Wu Zhao \(Wu Zetian\)](#)

00:00 - 05:04

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Olivia Meikle: Hi, Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi, Olivia!

OM: Today, we are going back 1300 years

KN: Cool.

OM: to one of the most advanced, most influential, and most important places in the world - in 600 A.D.

KN: Most advanced, most important... Boy, 600 AD is a big, big century. I'm gonna go... I'm gonna go with *China*?

OM: We're going to China! We are going to [Tang Dynasty](#) China - what many see as the 'golden age' of Chinese history.

KN: Yes!

OM: Here we are in the harem of Emperor Taizong. A 14 year old girl has just won what is essentially the world's biggest beauty contest, to become a fifth-ranked concubine in the court of the 40-year-old Emperor.

[laughter]

OM: This position is basically a maid. Her main responsibility is changing the Emperor's sheets...

KN: Wow.

OM: so that's exciting. From this position, she will rise to become one of the most feared and tyrannical rulers in world history.

KN: Oohoo!

OM[with KN laughing throughout the following]: A *ruthless, cruel, lascivious, grasping, murderous viper* who will wipe out 12 branches of the Tang clan, usurp her husband's kingdom (after enslaving him with her sexual wiles and murdering him), kill half the members of her immediate family, steal the throne of China from her son, kill her own newborn daughter in order to frame the Empress...

KN: [gasp] yikes

OM: ...and eventually, the Empress and the Number One Concubine's hands and feet will be lopped off and their bodies put into a vat of wine, leaving them to drown, saying, "Now those two witches can *get drunk to their bones!*"

KN: What!?! Are you kidding me?

OM: It's a *very* exciting story. [laughter] The problem is, of course, that almost none of that is true.

KN: No! Oh, come on. Let me have it.

OM: It's a fantastic story. But in my opinion, the real story is even better. Her name is Wu Zhao. Although those who have heard of her will more likely know her as Wu Zetian. And she was the only female Emperor in 2,000 years of Chinese history.

KN: Aha.

OM: Her story is veiled in so many layers of propaganda and revision and lies and, and *nonsense*, that it's almost impossible to track down the real woman. But we're going to try.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle

KN: and I'm Katie Nelson

OM: and this is *What'sHerName*

KN: fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: So to help us uncover the truth behind the infamy of Wu Zhao, I enlisted N. Harry Rothschild, who is a professor of Chinese History at the University of North Florida, and the author of two fantastic books about Wu Zhao.

KN: Cool.

OM: The first mention we have of Wu Zhao is when she enters the harem. She's 14 years old. She's spectacularly beautiful. She's the daughter of a merchant. She's quite well educated and

KN: and she's very good at changing sheets.

OM: [laughs] and she's very good - well, maybe she wasn't, actually. Because the Emperor was not a big fan of her.

KN: Oh!

OM: She is so well known throughout not just the court, but the entire capital - modern-day [X'ian](#), at that point Chang'an - there is a song about her called 'Enchanting Miss Wu.' She is so well known for her beauty.

KN: Ooh!

OM: Wu is her family name, because in Chinese the family name comes first, and then your personal name comes second. We don't know her name.

KN: Whoa.

OM: For most women throughout a long period of Chinese history, all we will ever know about them - if we know anything - is their family name. Their personal name does not matter. So history knows this woman as Wu Zetian. She's named after the palace gate where she was made an Empress.

KN: Really? Wow!

OM: Which is not a particularly cool way to get your name.

05:04 - 10:05

KN: That's extremely odd.

OM: But Harry Rothschild believes that the least we can do is give her the name she chose for herself.

Harry Rothschild: Zhao is a character that she creates for herself. It's an invented character, a new character, that she, as a 64 year old, takes as her own name. I feel like, as the anomalous

first and only [female] Emperor in Chinese history, she at the very least deserves to be known by her *own name*.

OM (to KN): He, and we, are going to call her Wu Zhao.

KN: How do you spell that?

OM: Oh! It's W-U Z-H-A-O.

KN: Boy, *you're so good at Chinese, Olivia*. [theatrical tone]

OM: Hah.

KN: How do you have -

OM: It's almost like I must have lived in China for several years.

KN: And almost like you speak Mandarin!

OM: How funny! [laughter] Okay, but actually, it's going to be *very* clear to anyone who *actually* speaks Mandarin that I haven't gotten much practice in the past seven years. [laughs] And that my tones are all over the place. So... [speaking in Mandarin] 对不起朋友, 我很不听话. [rough translation: Apologies, friends - I'm very bad to listen to]

[laughter]

OM: When Wu Zhao enters the court, she's *nobody*. There are 28 women ahead of her in the rankings. It's entirely probable that the Emperor is never going to notice that this concubine exists - and he doesn't seem to have taken much of a shine to her.

Harry Rothschild: At one juncture, when Wu Zhao is around 73 or 74 years old, a minister in court questions one of her decisions and she relates a story of her youth to sort-of quash his challenge: She is brought in to the harem, into the imperial seraglio of this famous bearded emperor [Taizong](#), who is famous for his equestrian prowess. One evening when he was sharing the couch with this 14 or 15 year old girl, he says to her, "I have this horse who's virtually unbreakable. His name is Piebald Lion." And she says, "Well if you gave me three things, I could break him."

And he sort of laughs - he's amused by this. He says, "What would you need to break the horse?" She says, "I need a riding whip, a mace, and a dagger." And he says, "Okay, so how would you then break Piebald Lion with these three items?" And she said, "Well, if I took the riding whip and beat him with it and he didn't submit to my will, then I would take the cudgel and smash him in the side of the head. And then if the horse *still* didn't submit to my will, I'd slit his

throat with the dagger, and leave him in the pooling blood.” And Taizong said, ‘Gosh, look at the time” [OM laughs] “I’d really like to stay the night with you here, but uh...”

The vibes that he got from her response are perhaps telling - because she was in his harem for 14 years and never rose from her fifth rank. [laughter]

OM: This story, *surprisingly*, doesn't seem to have gone over well with her husband. So, how does she rise from *that*, to the only female Emperor in Chinese history?

KN: Is it by power of a mace and a dagger and a whip?

OM: [laughs] Kind of. But also, the kind of experience that knows how and when to use that story for maximum effectiveness, right?

Harry Rothschild: I mean, this is one of the main questions - how did she pull this off? Become China's first and only female Emperor? Part of it is just this incredible sort of will and strength of character, but a lot of it is political experience.

OM (to KN): She has an extremely long period of time where she is assembling the experience needed to rule this kingdom. As Taizong is dying, she seems to have formed a relationship with his son, [Gaozong](#).

Harry Rothschild: Gaozong was allowed to do what few ‘equipped’ men were - he could enter into the imperial seraglio. And she apparently, at one point, “helped him with his toilet.” [laughter]

10:07 - 15:41

Harry Rothschild: Some chemistry sparked there. But after Taizong's death, all of the women in the imperial seraglio were sent to the Buddhist convents.

OM (to KN): Gaozong keeps making excuses to come and visit the nunnery and ‘pray for his father's soul.’ *Just happens* to run into Wu Zhao there, and eventually, they conspire to get her moved back to court as his official concubine.

KN: Wow!

OM: This is wild. This **does not** happen - and it couldn't have happened without Gaozong's [Empress](#) giving her support to this plan.

Harry Rothschild: Gaozong is already married, and the Empress has a rival - a consort who Gaozong is paying all his attentions to. And so the Empress actually encourages him to take this additional concubine, knowing that he's inclined to the ‘latest flavor.’ So the Empress encourages Gaozong to take Wu Zhao into his seraglio. Little did she know, this was a grave miscalculation. [laughter]

OM (to KN): She is now a high-ranking concubine in the court of her first husband's son, Gaozong. And she may have stayed as a fairly powerful, high ranking concubine for the rest of her life, but...

Harry Rothschild: Her husband has a stroke shortly after she eventually is elevated to Empress, and the former Empress gets deposed, supposedly for smothering Wu Zhao's child. There are all sorts of scandalous stories, and then she rises to become Empress. Within four or five years, he starts suffering these strokes, and she ends up sitting in tandem with him on the throne, and for the last 25 years of the reign, is effectively a co-ruler.

OM (to KN): Later, Confucian scholars will tell us that concubine Wu Zhao murdered her own newborn daughter in order to frame the Empress for the murder and get her kicked out of court.

KN: Oh!

OM: This is nonsense. [laughter] But this is the story that starts circulating - that this is a woman who would *murder her own child* just to get a little more power. The 'favorite concubine' that the Empress was worried about follows soon after into exile, and Emperor Gaozong elevates Wu Zhao. She sits in state with him, on a throne of equal height - and she is the power behind the throne for 25 years.

KN: Wow.

OM: She builds up the court, and everyone in the court knows that most of them owe their jobs to her.

Harry Rothschild: And even then she doesn't try to become an Emperor, even though he offers her the throne in his later years. Even after his death, she waits another 6 years in a period of incubation. It's this same kind of combination of being cautious and being brazen. And she doesn't do this until she is in her mid-sixties. She takes over the court as an Empress Dowager for 6 years, so she - aligning all of the possible conditions for the pivotal moment when she would actually take the throne.

OM (to KN): She deposes the son that's supposed to be in charge. But she also had spent most of her life grooming up her favorite son to become the Emperor, and seemed absolutely committed to making sure that this son, that she and Gaozong both wanted to be the Emperor, was going to be the Emperor. And until he dies, she doesn't seem to display any sort of ambition for taking the power herself. Once he's gone, and she's left with what she sees as two totally incompetent, useless sons? That's when she seems to start thinking about the idea that maybe it *might not be a great idea* if these guys were put in charge.

This is a skill that keeps coming up throughout her life - knowing when to act, and when to wait. She is an extremely good political maneuverer. She is dangerous. She is violent. She rules with

an iron fist in her court. She has a very strong and vibrant 'secret police' and if you cross her, you **will** go down.

KN: Wow.

OM: But she is a benevolent and a stable ruler *for the people*. She institutes these really powerful reforms that *actually do* help the kingdom. And at a point when the [Tang Dynasty](#) is really starting to crumble and in danger of falling apart - modern historians now realize, you know, she is the the force that really stabilizes things, holds everything together, and allows the Tang Dynasty to continue for another 200 years. And while it seems fairly horrifying to us to hear about the Emperor *poisoning her own granddaughter*, for example [laughter] to maintain hold on power, this is fully in line with [Confucian](#) rules of government.

15:42 - 20:13

KN: Yeah.

OM: The ruler is not held to the same standards as anyone else, and you can't judge the ruler for things that would be a crime in anyone else. Their job is to keep the kingdom together, and whatever they have to do, to do that, is what they should do.

KN: Yeah, always the 'big picture.'

OM: Exactly! And she *absolutely* does that.

Some of our listeners might know about the 'system of entry' into Chinese government, until the 20th century, is by passing tests. You pass a series of tests, and you indicate your worth, and you're in. And it doesn't matter where you were born, it doesn't matter how much money you have, it doesn't matter who you are related to - that's how you get in. She instituted that system, that lasted for 1300 years.

KN: Did she really? Cool!

OM: "Anyone who is skilled should be working for me."

KN: That's awesome. It's famously, like, the hardest test in the history of the world.

OM: Yeah, this is not an *easy* civil service exam

KN: You start studying when you're... 3? And you might take the exam when you're like, 30 or something. You spend your entire life studying. You are expected to memorize *literally* every book that exists. And the questions will be like, "What is the 17th word on the 32nd page of *this* book?" And then you have to produce it. It's, it's amazing.

OM: It's an astonishing testament to the brain power that none of us are using anymore.

KN: Yeah! The power of memory that has been superseded by Google.

OM: Right, yeah. But it's clearly not looking for *innovative* thinkers, right?

KN: Oh, yeah.

OM: This is [rote knowledge](#). But, like - democratisation of access?

KN: Yeah. "Whoever the smartest people are should be running the country."

OM: Yeah, the idea that skill is more important than connection, *in China*, is astonishing!

KN: Yeah. And it was beautiful in theory, as most ideas of equality are. [laughter] But the reality was that the wealthy people could afford better tutors, and...

OM: Sure. And you can't afford to spend 27 years studying for a test if you can't... eat food.

KN: Yeah, exactly. But one of the things I love about these exams is that you can see that humans have always been humans, throughout all centuries. We have some archaeological evidence of the testing site - they had that age-old problem of people just, like, looking on other people's papers. So they tried to prevent that by making individual testing huts. But even then, they still figured out ways to cheat. Because we have some existing scholars' robes - so these are like the classic medieval Chinese robes, where the sleeves go all the way down to the ground. And they have some of those where, if you turn it inside-out, the *entire* inside of the robe is covered in 'cheats' of information for the exam. [laughter] Humans are humans.

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20:13 - 25:07

OM: So while she might not be prizing innovation in her *employees*, she *is* instituting really innovative new processes and values into a society that is *very* resistant to change. She's

making massive changes - but always finding ways to frame them in terms of tradition, in terms of what's proper, in terms of 'what has been done before.' And it works extremely well. People are very excited about these innovations, because they've been given the 'hook to hang it on' to make it okay.

KN: Right! Classic, classic manipulation of history to justify whatever it is you're doing in the present. It's a very, very effective political tool.

OM: Right. And one of the things she does is elevate the status of women in ways that are very grounded in tradition. She is highlighting the achievements of important women in the past. She's publishing books on important women. She is finding places in the structures and the ceremonies to put women in places of much higher visibility - and not just herself. She's bringing in lots of women in the court structure to be publicly visible in ways they've *never* been before.

Harry Rothschild: She gives new names to all of the different ranks of concubines to make them parallel to those of bureaucrats, the nine ranks of bureaucrats.

OM (to KN): That's signifying, like: these women's jobs are as important to the kingdom as those guys over there. They serve official state functions, they're not just baby machines. One of the most shocking - to me - innovations that she comes up with is: she creates new words. Now, to people who do not speak Chinese, that does not seem like a big deal. [laughter] But you **do not** make up new words in China. If you have a new concept, you have to find a way to explain it with the words you've had for a thousand years.

KN: Really?

OM: It's my favorite, because you end up with *delightful* names for things.

KN: So like..?

OM: So like, a cell phone is a shouji 手机 - a 'hand machine.'

KN: Really?

OM: Computer is a diannow 电脑 - an 'electric brain.'

KN: Oh my gosh!

OM: The other fun part is that once you figure out how this all works, you can sort of *guess*. For example, what might a kangaroo be called? If you had to come up with a new name, with no new words...

KN: So I guess you need a jumping, uh... ears...

OM: It's a 'bag rat.'

KN: [laughs] It's a bag rat!?

OM: It's a bag rat.

KN: [gasps] I love that!

OM: A sloth is a 'tree lazy.'

KN: Ahhh! I love it so much.

OM: Which, really, when you think about it, that's what a sloth is!

KN: It's a tree lazy. A bag rat. Oh my gosh. I love it.

OM: Skunk. What might a skunk be?

KN: Um, stink... rat?

OM: So close. It's a stink weasel! [laughter]

So you have to come up with ways to describe things without ever *ever* creating a new word.

KN: That's delightful.

OM: So this decision to create *entirely new* characters - words that have never existed before - is shocking. This is a *shocking* thing to do. But she understood the power of language, and how important it was to create new *concepts*, and to take hold of that power in the most fundamental way. Her name - Zhao - is one of those characters that she created.

KN: Oh that's awesome! Wow!

OM: She made up *her own name*. Which is why it's especially important, I think, to call her by her correct name.

She embraces Buddhism and Taoism, which brings her closer to the common people. She builds a famous pagoda tower called the [Big Wild Goose Pagoda](#).

[laughter] Again, the way you name things - the 'Big Wild Goose Pagoda.' It was the biggest Buddhist temple in the world, and it may have been the tallest building in the world at that point.

KN: Whoa!

OM: It was 180 feet tall, in seventh century China. I've been there and I've seen it.

KN: Where is it?

OM: It's in modern day Xi'an - which was Chang'an, her capital - and it's still extremely impressive. And it lost three of its stories in the 16th century during the earthquake, so it's only seven stories tall now, and it's *still* impressive.

KN: Cool.

OM: This is my favorite innovation: she created, probably, the world's first suggestion box.

KN: Ah! [laughs] Really?

OM: And she put this specially-designed suggestion box out in the public square.

KN: No way!

OM: Anyone can put a suggestion in the box, for direct consideration by the Emperor.

00:25:08 - 00:30:22

KN: Wow! I love that.

OM: It's amazing anywhere. But in a society that is as strictly stratified... to give people a way to leapfrog over dozens of layers of bureaucracy? That's *astounding*.

KN: That's gonna make the bureaucrats really mad.

OM: [laughs] Well, ironically the bureaucrat who was tasked with creating it was also the first victim of the *other* aspect of this suggestion box - which is another good example of her dual brilliance: It's a suggestion box - it is also a *tattling* box. If you know of a corrupt official, you are welcome to submit your story and his name to the suggestion box for the Emperor to review.

KN: Wow wow.

OM: Again, providing massive amounts of information for her secret police, to maintain the tightest possible control over her Court.

She sort of makes *change* her hallmark. Change is the stability with her. And where other Emperors will have - Emperors institute 'Reign Eras,' so they will name the era and choose a very important, auspicious name for their reign. And when a Reign Era begins, time starts over. You are *literally* starting time. "It is the first year of Reign Era: Peace and Prosperity."

Harry Rothschild: There are some Emperors who, for 30 years, have one reign era. She has about 15 different reign eras. Whenever something good has happened that she wants to announce to the whole empire, that something awesome has happened “and it’s because of **me!**” It’s like the entire empire is on ‘Wu Zhao Standard Time.’

OM (to KN): Wu Zhao starts a new reign era every couple of years. She understands the power of a big party, which you always have to institute a new Reign Era. But also this legacy that she’s building of *change as the stable* -

KN: Yeah.

OM: And so she is installing new reign eras for things like: the year after she officially became Emperor, she sent out a proclamation that she had re-grown a tooth, and therefore is establishing a new Reign Era which will be called Longevity.

KN:[laughs] Woohoo!

OM: She throws a massive party with a parade, with 100,000 soldiers in parade, building giant public monuments - that are rebuilding ancient monuments that have been lost and destroyed, only better. And writes an anthem for all of the people to sing at the opening of the monument. I mean, she *understands* public spectacle. She is, like, ‘media savvy.’

KN: Yeah, cool.

Harry Rothschild: And then later in her reign, she has a Taoist wizard concoct an Elixir of Immortality. When she drinks this - at this time she’s in her late seventies - she feels slightly better. Then she, once again, inaugurates a new era. You know, there’s this orientation of the larger state calendar to her extended physical self.

OM (to KN): She’s willing to take this *role* extremely seriously - if you cross her, you’re gone - but not take *herself* too seriously. She has a huge temper, and a huge sense of humor.

Harry Rothschild: When she first becomes, not Emperor but Grand Dowager, there are a couple of different rebellions. And one of them is led by one of the princes. But one of his underlings Luo Binwang is a famous poet. He writes these essays, these polemics, attacking her, and it’s brought to her attention. And the manifesto says: ‘*Miss Wu*’- he refuses to recognize her as Grand Dowager -

‘Miss Wu, who has falsely usurped authority to run the court, is by nature cold and unyielding, by birth lowly and obscure... Innately jealous, her moth-like eyebrows...

[voice of Dr. Xiaojing Miao overlaps and reads the rest of the essay excerpt] *...her moth-like eyebrows allow other women no quarter. All embroidered sleeves and artful*

slander, her vulpine glamour beguiled the ruler. Beneath her pheasant's plumage, the former Empress Wang was trampled. This musky doe once plunged my true sovereign into rutting frenzy, vying with his own father. Her heart is half viper and half chameleon. Her disposition is that of a ravenous jackal or wolf. She is hated by men and spirits alike! Neither heaven nor earth can stand her!

00:30:15 - 00:35:23

Harry Rothschild: When she hears this, you know, you would think that she would fly into this rage. And she turns to her court when she learns of this, and says to the Prime Ministers, "This is your fault!" They were sort of taken aback, and then she says, "Why isn't this man on my payroll?!?" [OM laughing hard]

Harry Rothschild: "Anyone who can write rhetoric this good, anyone who can get people fired up with this flamboyant, bombastic propaganda - they should be writing for **me!**" [laughter]

OM (to KN): I mean, she is so deeply pragmatic, and yet aware of the ridiculousness of this entire situation.

KN: Wow. But mastering the whole bureaucratic system so well, but also knowing it's all just a game?

OM: Right. And even this insult, I think, gives us another clue to why she's so successful. She's famously young and beautiful, even until she died. She's eighty when she dies, and yet there are still poems written about her beauty, *even by the people who hate her*. That 'moth-like eyebrows'? That's not an insult. That's a compliment.

KN: Oh!

OM: And so even while throwing shade, they are complementing her. 'She's so, so beautiful and she uses it for *evil*.' This is a woman, at this point, in her mid-sixties!

KN: Cool.

OM: And she was very aware of the power of this image. And this is, I think, what's interesting - we don't know how much of her own rhetoric she really believed. She was deeply superstitious. She absolutely believed implicitly in the power of omens and signs, and although she used them to reinforce her reign, she really seems to have been a genuine believer - and actively seeking these out as *confirmation* that she was doing the right thing in ruling, not as an excuse.

KN: I see. So, like, re-growing a tooth. That's not just a weird excuse to throw a big public party, she really thought that was a huge important sign?

OM: Right! It's a symbol. Local officials around China start sending in reports that flowers that usually bloom in the spring are blooming in the fall.

KN: Ooh!

OM: That she had this magically regenerative effect on the kingdom, that her re-growing a tooth, and keeping her perpetual youth and beauty is a sign of the perpetual 'youth and beauty' of the kingdom.

But this superstition did make her vulnerable in some interesting ways, too. When she had the Empress and the First Concubine dismembered and put into the vat of wine (maybe)...

KN: Aw, I really want that one to be true.

OM: She definitely had them killed.

KN: Okay.

OM: Whether she dumped them in a vat of wine - that might be harkening back to *another* evil villain from Chinese history that did a similar thing, and they're trying to make her into...

KN: Oh, so *somebody* at some point put somebody's chopped off arms and legs...

OM: Yeah, a previous 'terrible Chinese Empress.'

KN: [[laughs] Okay.

OM: But while the Number One Concubine is dying, she threatens that when she is reincarnated, she's coming back as a cat and Wu Zhao is going to be a mouse. And she is going to inflict all manner of unspeakable tortures on the mouse that will be Wu Zhao.

This *really* freaked Wu Zhao out, and she banned cats from court!

KN: Woooow, I love that.

OM: She really seems to have believed these things.

KN: That's awesome.

OM: But once Wu Zhao becomes the Emperor, she decides, *All right, enough of this. I have to prove that I am stronger than this threat.* So she trained a cat and a parrot to get along. She trained the cat to leave the parrot alone.

The [Chinese] word for parrot is a homophone of Zhao, but with different tones, right? the [tones](#) of Chinese that mean different things. And so homophones in Chinese are extremely important, language is so important - that for instance, because the word for the number four sounds like the word for death, many Chinese people *still today* will not say the number four if there's a child in the room. Because you're basically daring the evil gods to come and kill them. So it's meant to be this really profound symbol of her ultimate power: *even this cat won't attack a parrot.*

As soon as they are publicly displayed, the cat *immediately* tore the parrot to pieces.

KN: [gasps] Whoa!

OM: It was an ...unfortunate moment. [laughter]

KN: Yikes. She must have read a lot into that symbolism! Whoa.

OM: Yeah, imagine how terrifying that would be.

00:35:23 - 00:40:14

OM: So - she's extremely successful. She is fighting off revolutions, she is fighting off contenders, she is keeping her power and control for almost 50 years. Until [the year] 705 - she's 80 years old, and she is finally overthrown by one of the sons that she has sidelined and exiled decades before, and she's forced to abdicate. She spends a little less than a year sort of sequestered away, depressed and miserable - and then she dies.

Her [tomb](#) is the only one in the world that contains two emperors.

KN: Huh!

OM: There is her tomb, and there is the tomb of Gaozong, her second husband. It's this beautiful, symmetrical tomb complex. In Chinese architecture, of course, everything is always symmetrical. Hers is on one side, her husband is on the other. And then there are two giant memorial tablets.

Harry Rothschild: They already have a stele on one side of this path with the achievements of Gaozong's reign on it. Later, for Wu Zhao, they erected this second stele. Her son Zhongzong, in theory, is the one who is supposed to inscribe something for her. Why he doesn't is a good question. We don't know exactly why. He's incompetent, that may be one reason. [laughter] But maybe he doesn't know, at that point, what to say? And so it became known as the 'wu zi bei,' as the 'blank stele' [or 'uncharacterized stelae' 无字碑].

In a certain way, it is the ideal monument to Wu Zhao. The blankness, the emptiness. The bottom of the character for Zhao [曷] is this void, or emptiness - and it sort of defies and deflects easy labels.

OM (to KN): And it's *still* blank.

KN: Wow!

OM: No one ever wrote on it.

KN: [gasps] Wow.

OM: This is the perfect symbol for the reign of Wu Zhao.

KN: Whoa, it really is!

OM: Nobody knows what to say about her. What do you say?!

KN: We're still deciding what to say.

OM: I think that's a perfect symbol, too, for how it felt compiling this episode. No matter what we talk about, we're leaving part of it out. She is this study in opposites. She's like... she's *all the things*. She is cruel and benevolent, and cautious and bold, and ambitious and restrained, and traditional and innovative - and you *can't tell her story*. There's no way to tell this story.

This **is** the perfect memorial to her. *What do we say?!?*

KN: Cool.

OM: So - what is her legacy then? She has a blank tomb. What is her legacy?

She's mostly unknown in the western world, but she's wildly famous in China. So how did she become so vilified? How did her life become this - this *textbook villainess*?

Harry Rothschild: Her Dynasty has sort of been erased. 1300 years of Confucianism has sort of tried to turn her into this caricature, sort of - of monstrous appetites, of being lascivious, corrupt, lewd... and sort of de-legitimizing her.

OM (to KN): They turn her into a cautionary tale. And they rewrite everything to make her the worst possible human being that has ever lived.

KN: Yeah, so that they can say, *'That's what happens when a woman is in charge. Let's all make sure that never happens again!'*

Harry Rothschild: And there's the classic double standard that's often applied. That all these male rulers have their hundreds and hundreds of women, we take as sort of an article of faith,

just sort of 'the way that the system works' - but she ends up having a couple of lovers in her later years, the Zhang brothers...

OM (to KN): They would dress up in, basically, cos-play as [Taoist Immortals](#). And sort of, like, ride stick horses around court for her entertainment. [laughter] Thereby casting *her* as the Taoist [Queen of Heaven](#) - if they are these Taoist Immortals and they are there in her Court, she's the Queen of Heaven.

00:40:14 - 00:45:05

OM: And this is utterly intolerable to all the men around her - who seemed to be conveniently forgetting that she was *14 years old* when she married the Emperor, and no one seemed to think that was a problem.

Harry Rothschild: This is often used as evidence of her extreme deviance and lasciviousness.

OM (to KN): She is caricatured mercilessly about this. She shows up in Ming Dynasty porn, a thousand years after she dies, as the butt of the joke.

KN: Wow.

OM: A *thousand* years!

KN: They really won that battle for control of the narrative.

OM: [laughs] Right. But in the past 30 or 40 years, things have finally started to become a little more nuanced in the way that China is talking about Wu Zhao. There's Wu Zetian perfume.

KN: Ooh, what does it smell like?

OM: Very expensive.

KN: Does it smell like *blood* and *death*?!?

OM: [laughs] There is a Wu Zetian fashion line. She's in soap operas. Even her hometown got in on this rehabilitation of Wu Zhao - they have built a Phoenix Tower.

Harry Rothschild: It has nothing to do with *anything* historically. [laughter] It has been built as the Wu Zetian tower there, and instead of the [dragon boat races](#) that you have on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, they have 'phoenix boat races' with all-women crew.

KN: I like that. I like the symbolism of the phoenix, too, that her character is rising up from the ashes now and reborn into something new and beautiful. Cool.

OM: There is Wu Zetian baijiu - like, posh grain liquor - that is specifically *her* brand of baijiu, and it is a very high end liquor. She is an expensive commodity now. And as funny as that seems in the US - in China, where an *ostentatious display of wealth* is the real, true marker of success? that feels like the best victory. She has come out on top, and she is *the* mark of poshness and wealth. And there's no better way to be remembered in China than that. This *is* the victory.

KN: That is beautiful.

[music]

Credits: A huge thanks to our guest Harry Rothschild. If you'd like to learn more about Wu Zhao, you can find links to his books and many other resources [on our website](#) at whatshernamepodcast.com.

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