

## A Woman of Power, Remembered Poorly

In this chapter, I offer a new translation of the full text of the empress dowager's biography in the *Book of the Wei* that is offered in sections supplemented by necessary historical and historiographical information aimed at helping us to immerse ourselves in the empress dowager's world.<sup>1</sup> Before offering the reader the translation, however, I argue that dynastic histories, in general, are not well suited to document the lives of women because the men who wrote them had restricted access to women's spaces and because they authored texts that circulated within a patriarchal court and social structure. Following the translation, I show how the representation of the empress dowager in her biography made its way into important, later texts of medieval historiography that continue to characterize her through gendered tropes that are inadequate for biographizing her in any dynamic way. In documenting the tropes that emerge from her biography, I set us up for the further chapters of this book, which use Buddhist sources to tell a different, more compelling story of the empress dowager—that is, the story of how women were able to capitalize on the invention of new social roles within the Buddhist and multiethnic urban fabric of sixth-century Luoyang.

### A TEXT FROM WHOSE PERSPECTIVE?

The empress dowager's biography in the *Book of the Wei* has been the main source for reconstructing her history.<sup>2</sup> As a source, however, it is problematic: embedded within a historiographical tradition concerned with imperial legitimation and dynastic continuity, it records her life through the collapse of the Northern Wei. This historiographical tradition of writing dynastic histories is the cultural

product of the class of elite male scholars that we have already discussed—namely, the Ru. These scholars and their texts are associated with a single yet amorphous social category in East Asia—the cultural, political, and literary tradition that is often called “Confucianism.” In English, the word *Confucianism* is commonly used as a translation for the Chinese word that designates the community and traditions of these scholars, *Rujiao*. I use the term *Confucianism* more expansively. Confucianism, here, follows one of the many useful definitions of the tradition laid out by Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, who argue that Confucianism is an established institutional structure that “directly impinged on people’s lives and behavior” in which systems of “kinship and kingship provided the concrete contexts in which such Confucian virtues as filiality and loyalty were to be realized.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Confucianism was more than the just the tradition of the elite male scholars that it is often identified with. It was also the tradition of those who participated in the systems of kinship and kingship that the scholars wrote about. We will see in this study, for example, how Buddhists were Confucian (and Confucians were Buddhist) and how women, too, participated in Confucian cultural institutions as agentive actors. This is not to discount the dominance and influence of the Ru scholars in the creation, definition, and standardization of Confucian institutional structures like kinship and kingship, which, are, in general, patriarchal and traditionalist; rather, this is to argue that Confucianism is a wide tradition that includes various actors and that often describes the relationship of social actors of varying gender, class, age, religion, and ability to those who hold elite forms of power, as well as the means to police it.

One form of power delineated within the Confucian tradition is literacy. If literacy is power, then the Ru scholars carry a lot of it. This power is articulated through reading and writing. As scholars who were frequently in the employ of the court, these men were able to consult the ancient records of the historical and historiographical past in order to influence policy decisions as well as to legitimate empires and monarchs. They were also able to transmit notions of social good, of right and wrong, and of family hierarchy through their reanimation of the authoritative past invoked in their composition and compilation of the official history of various dynastic lineages. As discussed in the introduction, these histories tell a version of imperial history that stresses historiographical continuity through patrilineal dynastic descent. For our purposes, here, though women feature in these dynastic histories, the genre of the text itself is generally unsuited to document them. As texts that document imperial continuity dependent on notions of kinship and kingship whereby elite and normally Han men hold both high public status and social authority, the complicated social and cultural lives of actual people—especially women and ethnic Others—are not well explored in their pages.

Women have been largely left out of such dynastic histories. Jowen Tung argues that this absence was not only known to Ru scholars while they were compiling their histories but was excused by them on the pretense that the details of women's lives were unavailable to them because they were men without access to women's spaces. On this, Tung cites a eulogy appended to the section on the "Biographies of Princesses" in the *New Tang History* (*Xin tangshu*), which laments:

Women dwell inside their husband's houses; even for noble ladies, historians are left out and could not know their lives. In addition, after the upheavals at the reigns of Emperors Xi and Zhao, documents were destroyed, with only their birth and death dates remained; those that are lost are hence left unrecorded.<sup>4</sup>

Tung argues that because the Ru lacked the ability to uncover substantive information about women's lives, they instead imagined the women who feature in their texts as fables for the patriarchs, wherein shrewd wives, cunning witches, versatile courtesans, and wayward Daoist priestesses stand in for real women living at the dynamic court of the Tang as written about in the court's official dynastic history. Such a predicament can also be seen in the dynastic history of the Northern Wei where Empress Dowager Ling has been cast in similar roles throughout her brief biography. Such a caricature of a person fails to grasp the complexities of living life as a woman in a male domain and it fails also to provide a nuanced interpretation of women's activities at court and in wider society.

The texts of the Ru scholars are political texts, not anthropological texts, particularly in the sense that they represent the perspective of elite, male, and Han political and social worlds and do not describe the daily lives of those they govern who participated in a wider tradition that we can call Confucianism. Written by male members of the literati class whose familiarity with women's lives was restricted by both gender and, often, class, these texts participated in what Ko, Haboush, and Piggott further call a "Confucian discourse" in writing the lives of women. Texts of this discourse "envision a universal and undifferentiated womanhood, defined as the mutually constitutive Other of manhood,"<sup>5</sup> meaning that women are seen and written about in such texts only against the frame of their male relations and contemporaries. Such an optic flattens the life circumstances of real, historical women, turns them into a superficial caricature, and renders their work, their creativity, and their innovations obsolete. Furthermore, such viewing of women as the "Other" of manhood endorses a mechanism of moral judgement often at play in biographical writings about women whereby a woman who stood out on her own terms is often remembered poorly.

As we will see in the translation of her official biography below from the dynastic history of the Northern Wei, Empress Dowager Ling is just such a woman—that is, a woman of power, but poorly remembered. The story of her life that we are presented with in her biography fails to capture the complex social space between her real-life activities and the authorial choices made in writing about

them. Nonetheless, the text offers a chronicle of the empress dowager's life and rule just as it has shaped further writing about her. It is therefore the place where we must begin.

#### THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

In this section, I will move slowly through the biography, translating it in its entirety but doing so in sections. I have provided framing for each of the sections, as well as relevant historical information that aids our interpretation of the text. The biography is retained in two places, and in more or less the same way. The two places it can be found are: (1) the dynastic history of the Northern Wei, or the *Book of the Wei*; (2) the more expansive *History of the Northern Dynasties* (Bei shi). The *Book of the Wei* was compiled in the Northern Qi by Wei Shou, a scholar and historian who had once worked for the Northern Wei. It was presented to the Northern Qi emperor in the year 554. The *History of the Northern Dynasties* was compiled by Li Yanshou (fl. 660–65) in the Tang and therefore postdates the *Book of the Wei* by more than one hundred years. It should be the case, then, that the *Book of the Wei*'s biography of the empress dowager is the source for the *History of the Northern Dynasty*'s almost identical biography; however, the history is not that simple. The version of the *Book of the Wei* that we have today was reconstructed under the Song dynasty (960–1279) because many chapters of the original Northern Qi text had been lost. The entire section on the biographies of empresses (Huanghou zhuan) was among these lost chapters. The biography for the *Book of the Wei* was therefore mostly reconstructed from the *History of the Northern Dynasties*.<sup>6</sup> As such, though it may well be that the biography of the empress dowager in Wei Shou's originally compiled *Book of the Wei* was the source for the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, it is also the case that the *History of the Northern Dynasties* was used to reconstruct the *Book of the Wei* during the Song. In referring to the empress dowager's biography throughout this study, I will use the Song era text of the *Book of the Wei* with the caveat that it may not be the earliest text. I do this in order to comport with my general use of the *Book of the Wei* throughout this study and also because the two versions of the biography have only minor differences between them, a fact that will be noted. Finally, the *Book of the Wei* version is slightly longer. Since I am interested in investigating how the empress dowager was remembered, I prefer to use the fullest possible memory of her that is available to us.

#### *A Miraculous Birth and a Nameless Girl*

With the notable exception of a number of biographies of Buddhist monks and nuns, biographies of known people in Chinese historical sources commonly begin with an enumeration of the family of the person in question, often extending multiple generations backward through the patriline. Regarding this method of biography, Kate Lingley argues that "The Chinese historiographical

convention of history as biography gives most premodern sources a strongly patrilineal flavor.”<sup>7</sup> Our empress dowager is no exception. Her biography in the *Book of the Wei* begins with such a lineage, albeit a brief one. It starts as follows:

Xuanwu’s Empress Dowager Ling of the Hu clan was from Lingjing in Anding<sup>8</sup> and was the precious daughter of [Hu] Guozhen, the minister of education (*situ*). Her mother was from the Huangfu clan.

Although such a stock introduction to the biography of the empress dowager seems hardly noteworthy, it does allow for some investigation into her ethnic identity and social location. The Hu clan of Anding were known as a family of Han descent who lived in the ethnically and culturally diverse society of modern-day Gansu.<sup>9</sup> Such families were important to Northern Wei politics because they acted as cultural go-betweens. Literate in the spoken and literary languages of Han peoples and conversant in Han legal systems, they were culturally fluent in the social norms of their non-Han peers. The empress dowager’s father, Hu Guozhen, held a minor title in Anding but was granted the title of the minister of education after the empress dowager became regent at the central court in Luoyang.<sup>10</sup> During this period, a number of other women from the Hu clan of Anding went on to marry men of the Northern Wei court, many of whom continued to play important political roles throughout the collapse of the Northern Wei and the subsequent dynasties of the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi and even into the Tang.<sup>11</sup> On her maternal side, the empress dowager is said to have been descended from an illustrious lineage, the Huangfu clan of Anding. This would make the empress dowager a presumed descendent of the Han general Huangfu Song (d. 195) and the scholar Huangfu Mi (215–82).<sup>12</sup>

Research into Buddhist materials from the fifth century shows that both the Hu clan and the Huangfu clan of Anding were Buddhist families of high repute.<sup>13</sup> Using Buddhist epigraphical sources, Wang Xingrui argues that the Hu and the Huangfu were the most important families for the development of Buddhism in their region in the fifth and sixth centuries. In support of this, Wang shows that the Huangfu family were major donors to a number of monastery-building projects. As for the Hu clan, not only did the eminent nun Sengzhi come from this family in the fifth century but names of certain clan members are also seen on some of the same dedicatory stele as those of the Huangfu clan, a fact that leads Wang to conclude that the families were united both through marriage and their shared commitment to Buddhist building projects in their region. What we know, then, of the empress dowager is that both of her natal families played integral roles in the development of Buddhism in her region and that her paternal aunt was an eminent nun. Furthermore, there are many points in the biography that highlight her own connection to Buddhist persons, texts, ideas, objects, and

institutions. The first of these points comes in the very narrative of her birth. It says:

On the day that the empress was born, a red glow shone all around. In the capital of Shanbei County there was one called Zhao Hu who was good at divining marks. Hu Guozhen asked him [about the glow]. Zhao Hu said: "This is an indication of the great nobility of the worthy girl: She will become the mother of heaven and earth and will give birth to the lord of heaven and earth. Do not let more than three people know this."

The empress dowager's miraculous birth, the rush to a fortune teller, and the prophecy concerning the newborn might remind us of another famous birth: the mythologized birth of the historical buddha, Śākyamuni. After his birth out of the right side of his mother's body, Śākyamuni, too, was taken to a diviner who offered a prophetic divination about his future kingship. The scene of this divination by Asita over the infant body of the buddha is depicted in Yungang Cave number six and was thus known by the Northern Wei court prior to the times of our empress dowager and the writing of her biography. On the surface, this connection seems a stretch: the story of Śākyamuni Buddha is significantly older, culturally different, and specific to a male, and we might question how widely it had circulated by the sixth century. However, one further story from the *Book of the Wei* clearly shows that the story of the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha was known at the court and was considered a model birth even for a female. That story is of a child whose name reveals her fate: Ling Ji or "Honored Concubine." The story is contained in the "Annals of Numinous Omens" (Lingzheng zhi) section of the *Book of the Wei*, and it suggests that the story of the birth of the buddha was known to Empress Dowager Ling. As the story goes:

On the *jiwei* day of the eleventh month of the second year of the Reign of Bright Tranquility [November 30, 517] of Emperor Suzong [Xiaoming], a representative from Bingzhou<sup>14</sup> was sent to Qi District<sup>15</sup> because a person named Han Sengzhen had a daughter, Ling Ji, who had been born out of the right side of her mother's body. The empress dowager then commanded that the daughter be admitted into the women's chambers of the court.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing more is said of this child's miraculous birth or of her life at court. We know neither her birth name nor that of her mother. The only thing we know is that she is said to have come into the world in a miraculous fashion—in the exact same fashion as the historical buddha did—and that this was enough for the empress dowager to bring her to court. The veracity of such a story is doubtful; however, such doubt is misplaced. What matters is that the trope of being born like a buddha appears to have been applied to at least one woman other than the empress dowager and that such a birth was seen as a reason for entrance to the court. The questions here that need to be considered include: Could a

woman be born a buddha? Could she actually *be* a buddha according to the belief of the people of her time? If so, what did that mean for her political career? These questions will be addressed in chapter 4.

### *A Woman of the Inner Chambers*

For now, a different matter of Buddhist concern awaits us in the empress dowager's biography—that of her appointment at court. Our text continues with a brief chronology of her various court positions, beginning with the account of her having been brought to court by her aunt:

The empress [dowager]'s aunt was a nun who was particularly talented in preaching on the Way. At the beginning of [the reign] of Shizong [Emperor Xuanwu], she went to lecture in the forbidden area [of the palace]. Throughout many years, she had recited [texts] all over the place and had praised the empress [dowager]'s appearance and behavior. Shizong heard about this and therefore invited [her] to enter the inner courts as a hereditary consort bearing flowers.<sup>17</sup>

Emperor Xuanwu is remembered as having been an active Buddhist patron as well as a student of Buddhist texts and teachings. The final chapter of the *Book of the Wei*, the “Annals on Buddhism and Daoism” (Shilao zhi), reports that Xuanwu invited eminent monastics to court and personally lectured on Buddhist teachings while he also saw the numbers of monasteries and nunneries in the realm increase dramatically under his reign,<sup>18</sup> and was himself the chief patron of a particularly important one: the Jade Radiance Nunnery (Yaoguang si), which housed the women of the court. The inner, or women's, court of the Northern Wei was undergoing redefinition during the fifth and sixth centuries as the court itself adopted and modified Han-dynastic court ranks for women.<sup>19</sup> Pitted against each other in a patriarchal court system, the women of the inner chamber moved in and out of the Jade Radiance as it suited their livelihoods and careers. This was a necessary safeguard for court women whose very lives were dependent on their relationships with the men of the court and who therefore lived a precarious existence.<sup>20</sup> For example, Empress Gao, who attempted to murder the empress dowager and whom the empress dowager then had murdered, was resident in the Jade Radiance Nunnery from the commencement of Empress Dowager Ling's regency to the time of her own murder. We get a glimpse of what such precarity looked like for the women of the court in the next words of the empress dowager's biography, which tell us that:

While in the women's chambers of the court,<sup>21</sup> and on account of the country's antiquarian laws, the women prayed together, with all of them wishing to give birth to a prince or a princess—not wishing to give birth to an heir to the throne. Only the empress [dowager] unwaveringly addressed the wives, saying: “How can the son of heaven be alone without a son? What reason do you have to fear the death of one person and thereby cause the imperial family to not produce eldest sons through the wife?”

This conversation is said to have happened in the inner and upper reaches of the women's area of the court and it references the previously discussed policy of the murder of the mother of the heir enshrined in the dictum, "If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies." The biography chronicles how the empress dowager was committed to giving birth to an heir, even if it meant her death. It tells us that:

When the empress [dowager] was pregnant with Suzong [(Emperor Xiaoming)], all those in her rank became afraid on account of it and they exhorted her to concoct a plan. The empress [dowager] was firm in her intention and remained resolute. In the depths of the nights, she made a solitary vow: "If it turns out that what I am carrying is a boy and that the boy becomes the eldest son, then the child will live and I will die so as not to shirk [my responsibilities]."

When Suzong was born [the empress dowager] was promoted to the position of concubine of complete loveliness [*chonghua pin*].<sup>22</sup> Prior to the birth, Shizong had been already bereaved by [the death of] the princes, and considering himself already quite advanced in years,<sup>23</sup> he placed [the boy] deep in attentive guardianship. In order to select his wet nurse, he gathered together all the suitable candidates from the illustrious families. [The child] was raised in a separate palace where neither his empress [Gao] nor the concubine of complete loveliness (Empress Dowager Ling) was able to nurture and behold him.

Even though the empress dowager is said to have bravely accepted the death that would come to her if she mothered an heir apparent, she did no such thing. In the absence of any more powerful figure than her at court who might enforce previous policies, there was nobody available to challenge the empress dowager's regency by forcing either her suicide or her murder. The policy of imperial matricide came to an end and the empress dowager lived to be a mother to an emperor as well as to become empress dowager. Pu Xuanyi has investigated the conclusion of the aforementioned policy of imperial matricide and argues that the contemporaneous construction of the Jade Radiance Nunnery was integral to the policy's demise; sheltering Empress Gao and many other court women who had experienced the loss of their court status owing to the deaths of their powerful male kin, the nunnery provided a safe haven for imperial women.<sup>24</sup>

#### BECOMING REGENT

When Xuanwu died and his son took the throne as a five-year-old child, the empress dowager seized the opportunity to exert her power and influence. The biography tells us that:

When Suzong took the throne, the honorific of the empress was the "imperial mother" [*huang taifei*] and after that it became "empress dowager" [*huang taihou*]. She held court and heard governmental affairs, was called "her highness" [*dianxia*], gave orders, and handled matters. Later on, she changed her commands to



imperial edicts and the ministers as well as the chief minister called her “your majesty” [*bixia*]. She herself used the “royal we” [*zhen*].

The biography here reads as though this was an unremarkable progression of a woman’s career after the death of her husband and the accession of her son. It was not. Powerful empress dowagers have long been a part of Chinese history; however, few of them have ruled directly. According to her biography, the empress dowager ruled directly and publicly:

The empress dowager, because Suzong was young and not able to perform the ancestral ceremonies, desired to put in use the model of the mutual offerings of the wife and the lord<sup>25</sup> from the *Rites of Zhou*<sup>26</sup> as a way for her to take the place of her son in performing the sacrifices, and so she investigated the old ceremonies. The chancellery summoned together the ritual officers and erudite [scholars] to discuss [the matter], and they considered it impossible. Yet the empress dowager wanted to use a canopy to conceal herself and oversee the matters of the three dukes,<sup>27</sup> and so she again asked Palace Attendant Cui Guang. Guang then found evidence in the story of Han Empress Hexi (81–121) who presented sacrifices. The empress dowager was very happy and she went on to make the initial sacrifices.<sup>28</sup>

This excerpt from the empress dowager’s biography suggests that her rule depended on her ability to enact Han-dynastic rituals of state. Looking for precedent for her direct rule in the records of the Han court, the empress dowager’s courtier Cui Guang looked to the rule of the aforementioned Empress Hexi of the Han, a woman remembered for being a virtuous and capable female ruler.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Empress Dowager Ling also seems to have amplified her personal links to the Han dynasty and its cultural symbols. Not only did she build a Buddhist monastic complex at the site of the Han imperial observatory, or numinous platform, in Luoyang, but she also had her own, personally commissioned grotto at Longmen decorated with figures from Han mythology: the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East are engraved on the façade of the grotto and flank the entry to the upper left and the upper right. We do not have a clear picture of what the rest of the grotto looked like, for it was destroyed by fire. Hence it is known to history as “huoshao” (“burned by fire”).<sup>30</sup> The Huoshao grotto was the highest and largest of the Northern Wei grottos at Longmen. Amy McNair argues that it was also the most expensive. Its destruction by fire is a poignant metaphor for the empress dowager herself: As regent in control of the empire’s resources at the height of the Luoyang era, the empress dowager was murdered and her city was destroyed. Although she invested in Buddhist building projects that made a nod to her identity as a Han woman during her reign, neither her religion nor her ethnicity saved her or her city. We will see later in this study how both her Buddhism and her social location allowed her male, Confucian courtiers to link her to a different, and terrible, Han ruler—her namesake, Emperor Ling (r. 168–89). We will read about this in chapter 5.

In the subsequent section of our text, the biography of the empress dowager details some of what she did at the height of her power:

The empress dowager was intelligent by nature. Many were her talents. Since her aunt had become a nun, [the empress dowager] was entrusted to her in her youth, and [thus] had some grasp of the larger meanings of the Buddhist sūtras. [The empress dowager] personally oversaw all affairs and issued judgements in her own hand. When she visited the Hall of Dharma Dissemination in the Park of the Western Grove, she commanded her officials to shoot [arrows] and those who were unable to do so were punished. Moreover, she herself shot the needle through the hole, hitting the center. Overjoyed, she bestowed all manner of cloths and silks on everyone, in accord with their differences.

In the beginning, she ordered the building of a dispute-reporting cart,<sup>31</sup> which was a cart for bringing disputes to court. When she was driving it, she would herself depart from the Great Sima Gate of the Cloudy Dragon, go past the palace in the northwest and then reenter at the Gate of a Thousand Autumns, having received the grievances to take to court. She also personally questioned the filial and refined as well assessed officials of the provinces and prefectures.

Here we see the empress dowager praised for her intelligence and varied talents. This praise is continued with a description of her archery and her driving, both of which stand out as remarkable abilities because of her gender. For male leaders, neither skill would be noteworthy; however, for a female leader both skills stand out as gender transgressions. We have already seen how her archery had been criticized by her Confucian advisor Cui Guang, who told her that archery, along with ruling, were not arts that a woman could (or should) cultivate. Similarly, her driving her own dispute-reporting cart, which would fall into the category of arts not fit for women, is tantamount here to ruling. For an example of a more appropriate means of transport for women, the “Annals on Ritual” section of the *Book of the Wei* contains descriptions of carts for women’s use; however, these carts are all for assisting in the sacrifices at suburban temples and are to be part of the larger imperial entourage. Consider the record of the cart normally reserved for the empress or empress dowager:

The elephant carriage: It is adorned on the left and the right with phoenixes, white horses, and transcendents preparing to take off in flight, and it is pulled by two elephants. With wings of grass and streamers like the tail of a bird, and dragon banners, flags, and standards, the adornment was just like that of the men’s elephant carriage. It is used for the mother of the emperor, the empress dowager, and the empress to journey to the suburbs in order to perform their rites at the ancestral temples.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, when we consider that the empress dowager went out on her personally constructed cart—by herself—to collect grievances from the populace to take to court, what we should understand is that in so doing she created a means for taking on imperial tasks that were typically associated with men. Her ability to shoot,

to drive, and to rule marked her as a woman that enjoyed the autonomy normally associated with male rulers in dynastic histories.

Finally, even though the empress dowager was said to be of Han ethnicity, in this last section of her biography we see her behaving in her role as regent in the same precise way as did prior khagan rulers of the Northern Wei. The text above tells us that after a particularly good shooting competition, the empress dowager was overjoyed and that “she bestowed all manner of cloths and silks on everyone, in accord with their differences.” The key phrase here that clues us in to how she was behaving as a ruler is that she bestowed wealth to her courtiers “in accord with their differences.” This is a characteristic practice of Northern Wei khagan, who distributed the booty from war among their soldiery “in accord with their differences,” and it was one of the strategies by which the khagan amassed centralized power around them.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, this type of consolidation of centralized power at the frontlines has been replicated by many different polities—for example, the later Mongol empires—whose rulers distributed goods and booty to their troops. We see the practice in even the southern regimes of the period, regimes that employed such strategies in their military garrisons in order to create a system of social relationships and resource allocation.<sup>34</sup> What is different in the case of the empress dowager, however, is that although she is amassing her own centralized power in a way that evokes the khagan of the past and their leadership from the military frontlines, she is a different sort of ruler. Located in the opulent capital city and in control of Luoyang’s comparatively much greater wealth, she is able to bestow goods in a more luxurious and, perhaps, more indulgent manner. The empress dowager did not serve on the frontlines, where goods and wealth are hard to come by, and so her bestowal of silks on her courtiers seems like an expensive gift aimed at creating support for her reign from within the capital. As such, she is behaving directly as the ruler has and should; however, since she and her court are no longer nomadic peoples serving at the frontlines of military conquest, but rather settled people serving in a wealthy and famed city, the gift is itself of a different nature. This nature perhaps befits her own personality. She is a Buddhist ruler with significant resources at her disposal; her giving away silks is therefore an act of her own religious charity born of wealth. Indulging in this act of charity also positions her as the unquestioned ruler of her realm.

### *Poetry and Ritual*

The following section of the empress dowager’s biography continues to detail further aspects of her creative use of her rule. Here the biography briefly describes an extraordinary moment in her regency—a ritual banquet at which she engaged her courtiers in a poetry contest where she and the child emperor, Xiaoming, each delivered one seven-character line of poetry. When read together, the poetry of Empress Dowager Ling alongside that of Emperor Xiaoming illuminate how the empress dowager publicly depicted her rule. The story goes as follows:

The empress dowager and Suzong [Xiaoming] went to the Park of the Flower Grove in order to fête the lords and the minsters at the Capital Pavilions for Winding Streams.<sup>35</sup> She commanded the princes and dukes to compose a line of seven-character verse.

The empress dowager's verse said:

Transformations of light create things,  
[And so] embracing vital energy is righteousness.

The emperor's verse said:

Reverencing the self is non-action,  
[And so] relying on motherly love is heroism.

The princes, dukes, and others below them were bestowed silks in accord with their differences.

When read together against the backdrop of classical notions of kingship in early Chinese literature, these two short verses provide rare commentary on the relationship between the empress dowager and her son, Emperor Xiaoming or Suzong. Two things are important to bear in mind when reading this couplet: The empress dowager was ruling independently of her son and she was doing so, in part, by having recourse to classical Han symbols and rituals. With this in mind, we can understand that her verse, though playing on gendered language of female passivity, is in praise of her own active rule; the emperor's verse, though similarly playing on gendered language of strength, is justification of his passive rule. How? Both verses play on classical literary allusions: The empress dowager quotes from the classical and now-lost commentary on the *Book of Changes* (Yijing), the "Elegant Words" (Wenyan);<sup>36</sup> the emperor quotes from the *Analects* (Lunyu); both of them use contrasting concepts from the *Zhuangzi*. When the empress dowager uses the phrases "transformations of light" and "creating things," she recalls the "Elegant Words" discussion of the trigram *kun* (坤), from the *Book of Changes*.<sup>37</sup> As a trigram, *kun* represents pure *yin* or the feminine source. Of *kun*, the "Elegant Words" say:

*Kun* is most gentle and weak, but, when put in motion, is hard and strong; it is most still, but is able to give every definite form. By following, it obtains its [proper] lord, and pursues its regular [course]. *It contains all things in itself, and its transforming [power] is glorious* [含萬物而化光]. Yes, what docility marks the way of *Kun*! It receives the influences of heaven, and acts at the proper time.<sup>38</sup>

The silent quotation in the empress dowager's verse reproduces four characters from this section of the *Book of Changes* in her own seven-character creation: "Transformations of light create things/ [and so] embracing vital energy is righteousness" (化光造物含氣貞). Furthermore, the seventh character in the empress dowager's verse, *zhen* (貞), is also a common characteristic of the trigram *kun* and, as an adjective, is used to describe feminine ideals of righteousness, often of chastity.

As to the emperor's verse, his own seven-character verse (恭己無為賴慈英) includes four characters from the following section of the *Analects*, the collected sayings attributed to Confucius:

The Master said: "Is Shun not an example of someone who ruled by means of *wuwei* [無為]? What did he do? He *made himself reverent* [恭己] and took his proper [ritual] position facing south, that is all."<sup>39</sup>

The effect of such quotations is radical. By referencing the trigram *kun*, the empress dowager invokes the feminine aspect of creation while simultaneously suggesting that her embrace of this ideal characterizes her as a model of feminine uprightness. Contrasting this with the emperor's verse therefore completes the political commentary. By referencing the *Analects*' discussion of the mythic ruler Shun who ruled by nonaction, the emperor is able, like Shun, to declare himself heroic, although passive in rulership. Furthermore, both verses reverse syntax in order to set two important concepts from the *Zhuangzi* against each other. When the empress dowager references the creation of things, or *zaowu*, in characters 3 and 4 of her verse, she recalls the *Zhuangzi*'s creator or *zaowu zhe* (造物者),<sup>40</sup> which is the force in the world behind the active creation of phenomena. When the emperor echoes her by placing nonaction, or *wuwei*, in the third and fourth characters, he is recalling the text's insistence on the benefit of passive action in the phenomenal world. Finally, the two verses are well contrasted in the fifth character, the verbal unit on which my interpretation hangs: The empress dowager "contains," whereas the emperor "relies." What he is relying on, of course, is parental love, or *ci* (慈), which can also be read as a short form for one's mother, or *cimu* (慈母). Although the emperor is said to have spoken these words, he did not compose them. We see, by following the chronology of the biography, that this event would have happened between the beginning of the empress dowager's regency in 515 and the death of her father in 518. During this period, Emperor Xiaoming was between five and eight years old and therefore too young to compose such a verse himself. This was a political display orchestrated by the empress dowager and her courtiers in order to show to banquet attendees just who wielded power. The two verses justify both active rule by the empress dowager, whose virtue remains "righteous," and passive rule by the emperor, whose virtue remains "heroic."

The composition of such a verse, as well as its delivery at a ritual banquet for her courtiers, is extraordinary but not unexpected. In the next section of the biography we encounter subsequent events that the empress dowager facilitated in order to include herself in the ritual occasions of the court and thereby express her magnetism and cement her power. From taking part in burials to building pagodas, the empress dowager never missed an opportunity to position herself as a leading ritualist. For more examples, her biography records this:

When the empress dowager's father died, the hundred officials wrote a memorial requesting that he be made a posthumous duke. The empress dowager did not permit it. Then she continued on to the Eternal Peace Monastery and personally constructed a temple with a nine-story base. The monks, nuns, ladies, and gentlemen in attendance were in the several tens of thousands. When the tomb of Empress Wenzhao of the Gao Clan needed to be moved, the empress dowager did not want Suzong [Emperor Xiaoming] to preside over these matters, and thereupon she personally became the presider at the funeral. Having excavated it, it was finally brought to Peace Tumulus [*ningling*], and she personally set up the mortuary items and returned to weep in the Hall of the Great Ultimate. When the matters had been concluded, she had presided over all of them.

Later, [the empress dowager] went for an imperial visit to Mount Songgao and ascended the summit with the court ladies, the nine consorts, the princesses and lower ranks following after her, several hundred persons in all. There, she abolished all licentious sacrifices; however, the Inner Asian sky god<sup>41</sup> was not [included] in this list.

Later still, she went to the left (east) storehouse with princes, dukes, female attendants, lords, and lower ranks following after her—more than one hundred people. She commanded all of them to take as much silk and cotton as they could bear so that she could bestow it on them: many took more than two hundred bolts, fewer took more than one hundred bolts. Only the Changle princess took in her hand twenty bolts and then left, showing that although she was no different from anyone else, she did not put herself out [to get the silk]. The whole world praised her honesty. Of equal prestige, Li Chong, Duke of Chenliu, and [Yuan] Run King of Zhangwu—because they were carrying too much—fell to the ground: Chong injured his back; Run harmed his leg. At the time, people adopted a saying that went: “Chenliu and Zhangwu injured their backs and injured their thighs; covetous people are losers and sully our enlightened ruler.”<sup>42</sup>

Wanting to make an imperial visit to Quekou [Longmen] and Wenshui, [the empress dowager] climbed to the summit of Chicken Head Mountain, herself shot an ivory hairpin and hit the target on her first try, and then made proclamations to both civil and military society.

Here, we learn more about the empress dowager's style of statecraft. Setting herself up as chief ritualist, she took charge of all political matters but also all matters of public ritual concern, including the moving of graves, the building of memorials, the policing of heterodox religious beliefs and groups, and the rewarding of servants through the disbursement of goods from the treasury. In sum, with all these actions we see the empress dowager ruling directly, as an emperor or a khan would do. But she was also ruling as a Buddhist ruler and a filial daughter. Her journey back to Chicken Head Mountain is noteworthy because Chicken Head Mountain is in the region of her birth and it is home to an important Buddhist site that began to flourish in the fifth century. That site is known as the Monastery of the Hollow Rock (*Shikong si*) and it houses Buddhist grottos that both her Huangfu

family and her Hu family were active in patronizing. Her trip there seems to suggest that, as regent and independent ruler, the empress dowager retained ties to her family and their Buddhism. The empress dowager exerted her tenuous hold on power through public ritualism—much of it, Buddhist—but although she ruled independently, she did not go unchallenged.

### *The Coup d'État*

The next section of her biography in the *Book of the Wei* provides an example of some of these challenges, detailing a coup d'état during which the empress dowager was under house arrest before resuming her regency. According to the biography, the coup d'état was mounted by a member of the imperial family, Yuan Cha, who was the empress dowager's own brother-in-law because he was married to her sister. The conflict erupted over an affair that the empress dowager was supposedly having with yet another member of the Yuan family, Yuan Yi, the half-brother of Emperor Xuanwu, the latter of whom was the father of her son, Emperor Xiaoming.<sup>43</sup> According to the biography, the empress dowager forced her intimacy on Yuan Yi; however, I read this accusation as an example of the type of gendered tropes used in her life writing that will be discussed at the end of the chapter. With Yuan Yi dead, the empress dowager had lost her lover and closest advisor. The conflict also saw her lose other advisors and confidantes. The biography states that when she returned to power, she relied on the bad advice of other courtiers while showing them extreme favor. She is faulted for doing so, and yet one wonders whom she could possibly trust at this time of conflict and contestation. It appears that some of the high-ranking members of the Yuan clan were no longer supporting her; moreover, her closest Yuan family confidante was dead. The biography narrates all of this as such:

When the empress [dowager] had grasped her ambition, she forced intimacy on Prince Yi of Qinghe [Qinghe *wang* Yi]. All under heaven detested her for being licentious and promiscuous, unrestrained and passionate. General of the Palace Guard [*lingjun jiangjun*]<sup>44</sup> Yuan Cha, the Minister of the Domestic Service [*changqiu qing*], Liu Teng [464–523],<sup>45</sup> and others waited on Suzong in the Hall of Manifest Yang, held the empress dowager in the Northern Palace, and then murdered [Yuan] Yi in the restricted areas [of the palace]. After that, the followers of the Empress Dowager—the Monastic Supervisor [*doutong*] Sengjing,<sup>46</sup> the Guard in Personal Attendance [*beishen zuoyou*] Zhang Dongqu,<sup>47</sup> and several tens of others—planned to murder Cha so that they could again serve the empress dowager as she oversaw the court. The plan was not successful: Sengjing was sent into exile and corvée labor at the borders; Dongqu was murdered; and many of the members of the Hu clan were removed from office. Later on, Suzong went to the empress dowager in the Park of the Western Grove to fête the civil and military officials and ministers, and they feasted until dusk. Cha thereupon went to face the empress dowager, and explained that it was being said all around that the empress dowager had wanted to harm him and Teng. The empress dowager replied, saying, “It is not as you say.” Then, in the



depths of the night, the empress dowager grabbed Suzong with her hands and took him from the hall, saying, "Mother and son have not been together for a long time. We will spend this entire night together. All the great ministers will see us out." The empress dowager and Suzong went to the little pavilion in the northeast. The General of the Left Guard Xi Kangsheng, schemed to murder Yuan Cha but it did not happen.

Liu Teng himself died and Cha then became increasingly careless. The empress dowager, together with Suzong, Gao Yang, and Wang Yong, planned to remove Yuan Cha from leading the generals. The empress dowager again oversaw the court, made a great pardon, and changed the reign title. Accordingly, the court's administration was sloppy; might and favor were not established; and the officials and guards of the realm were covetous and greedy. Cheng Yan corrupted and upset the palace apartments, and power collapsed [in the regions] between the four seas. Li Shengui and Xu Ge were both looked upon as dear servants. Within a year or two they became indispensable, and with their hands grasping the imperial ranks and with indecisive hearts, they spread depravity at court so that all in the four directions abhorred them. Civil and military all disintegrated and everything became disorderly and rebellious. The earth collapsed like rotting fish on account of it all. Sengjing then assembled together the members of the clan and, weeping, stated, "Our Majesty's mother is the model for all within the four seas, how is it proper that she neglects all of this?" The empress dowager was enraged and accordingly never summoned Sengjing.

Jennifer Holmgren has analyzed the circumstances surrounding the coup d'état and has shown that they are much more complex than suggested above. By investigating the empress dowager's favoritism at court, criticism of her rule by certain factions of the court, and the ethnic tensions embroiling the court itself, Holmgren argues that although the empress dowager relied on certain factions at court to strengthen her regency after the coup d'état, they were not factions that she created. According to Holmgren, when the empress dowager began her regency in 515, the dynasty was already in rapid decline owing to famine in the northern garrisons and the subsequently increasing political factionalism.<sup>48</sup> This decline, and the factionalism that ensued, is what brought down her dynasty even if she was herself the last independent ruler of it.

In the biography we see that the empress dowager had lost favor with many of her high-ranking courtiers in the years of the coup d'état and its aftermath; this claim, however, is much less certain if we look to Buddhist epigraphs and Buddhist building projects from the period. There is a notable rise in Buddhist grotto construction and donative epigraphy throughout the Zhengguang reign (520–25), which included the years of the coup d'état. This increase continues through the Xiaochang reign, which was when the empress dowager was returned to her regency with Emperor Xiaoming. Such projects were heavily invested with symbols of Buddhist monarchy and they document support for the coreign of Emperor Xiaoming and Empress Dowager Ling. In Luoyang, Crown Prince Yuan Yue, whom we have seen before was the patron of the Nunnery of the Joyous View after the death of his brother the aforementioned Yuan Yi, commissioned many



projects during the Zhengguang. Two of these projects were specifically in support of Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xiaoming. From a stele inscription at the Northern Wei imperial burial cluster at Mount Mang, we read that he refurbished a stūpa originally commissioned by his father, Emperor Xiaowen. The inscription is complete and references Yuan Yue's contrition for his life choices, as well as his commitment to becoming a great Buddhist donor. The important part, however, comes in his dedication of merit. Using the previously discussed term for regency rule strongly associated with Empress Wu in the Tang dynasty, Yuan Yue refers to the Northern Wei Emperor Xiaoming and Empress Dowager Ling as the "Two Sages" and requests that their reign continue on "for 10,000 years without limit."<sup>49</sup> Also in Luoyang, and also during the Zhengguang reign when the empress dowager was under house arrest, Yuan Yue commissioned the building of a stūpa at the site of the Han-dynasty numinous platform.<sup>50</sup> We have already seen how the numinous platform was an important site for the empress dowager who commissioned a monastery there for her deceased father and thereby connected herself to Han-dynasty symbols and sites of imperial legitimation. Yuan Yue was full a brother to Yuan Yi, the lover of the empress dowager who died in the coup d'état against her, and half-brother to the primary husband of the empress dowager, Emperor Xuanwu. That Yuan Yue commissioned these two massive and expensive projects in support of her reign immediately following the death of Yuan Yi suggests that he was a supporter of hers and that he expressed his political support for her through the medium of Buddhist building projects.

Such patronage of the empress dowager continued over at Longmen, most notably during the few years after she resumed her regency and, according to the *Book of the Wei*, was losing the support of her courtiers. For example, Amy McNair draws our attention to a rare donor epigraph at Longmen that was commissioned by a group of nuns from a Luoyang nunnery and dedicated to the women of the imperial court, including the empress dowager.<sup>51</sup> This was inscribed in the year 525, just after the resumption of the empress dowager's regency with Emperor Xiaoming. In the year 527, the empress dowager's maternal uncle commissioned the building of a grotto very close to the grotto that is conjectured to have been the empress dowager's own project, the Huoshao grotto. Her uncle's grotto has a pictorial program that shows buddhas of past, present, and future, but what is truly remarkable is that, as we saw in the previous chapter, the grotto contains images of imperial processions that arguably depict Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xiaoming. In this case, in a Buddhist medium, the image presented is one of co-rulership: With Xiaoming following along behind her in the women's procession, it appears that support for her rule was still seen among some Buddhist donors at Longmen in the year 527.

Even in the epigraphical record, however, there is evidence of court factionalism: If the empress dowager's family and her brother-in-law, Yuan Yue, showed their support for her through Buddhist images of kingship at Longmen and in

Luoyang, other sites of donation suggest less support. For example, the earliest buddha-image grottos in Shandong province also date to the time of the Northern Wei coup d'état in Luoyang and are found at a site called the Yellow Cliff (Huang shi ya).<sup>52</sup> Although there is a demonstrable relationship between the processes of building and donorship between Longmen and the Yellow Cliff, the few donative epigraphs at the Yellow Cliff do not appear to mention the empress dowager. In 526, when the empress dowager had resumed her regency although Emperor Xiaoming had grown into manhood and could rule on his own, an inscription cites only him as a dedicatee, not her. A similar inscription is seen in the year 527. In the year 528, another inscription cites the child emperor propped up by the empress dowager's murderer as a dedicatee, but not her. In sum, what all of this suggests is that Buddhist epigraphy documents some of the contours of political and court factionalism during the years that include the coup d'état, the resumption of the empress dowager's regency over Emperor Xiaoming, and the deaths of both of them. Some of this factionalism shows support for her and some of it does not. Such epigraphs are therefore indispensable sources for us to use in interpreting the biography. They allow us to see that the biography simply recounts the narrative of one such faction. In chapter 5, we will return to the question of whom this political faction includes and why the members of it created a narrative of lack of support for the empress dowager.

### *Regicide/Filicide*

The second regency (525–28) of the empress dowager is characterized in her biography as one of paranoia, retaliation, and murder. This was a regency that should never have come into being in the first place because the empress dowager should have stepped down. It is difficult to pinpoint with accuracy the age at which a child emperor was thought to be able to rule in his own right during the Northern Wei period, but precedent guides us here: Emperor Xianwen was seventeen years old when Empress Dowager Wenming forced him into retirement so that she could rule behind his son. At the time of Empress Dowager Ling's second regency, Emperor Xiaoming was fifteen years old. It stands to reason, then, that he no longer required a regent. The empress dowager's second regency was therefore contested and violent. We see contestation of this second regency throughout the remainder of her biography that describes how she became increasingly reliant on new and questionable advisers because many of her confidantes had died during the coup d'état. The empress dowager did not step down and relinquish power to her son; this second regency was therefore fraught. As the biography puts it:

Considering, herself, that her own actions had been improper, the empress dowager feared that the royal family had become suspicious of her. She thereupon formed a clique with those on the inside to guard [Suzong's] eyes and ears. Of those dear to Suzong, the empress dowager brought much harm to them. [For example] there was a monk named Miduo [Skt. Maitreya] who was able to speak the language

of the [Western] non-Han [peoples] and whom Suzong placed in his retinue. The empress dowager thought that he was passing down information and so, on the third day of the third month he was killed in a large alleyway in the south of the city. At that point, [the empress dowager] offered bounties to enlist outlaws to enter the palace and kill the commanders of the emperor's personal guard, as well as the Lesser Ministers for Making Loud Announcements [*honglu shaoqing*],<sup>53</sup> Gu Hui and Shao Da, who were both favorites of the emperor.

Suspicious and rifts frequently arose between mother and son. Zheng Yan was worried that this would be a disaster and he thereupon plotted with the empress dowager to take the daughter of the Lady of Complete Loveliness<sup>54</sup> from the Pan family [who was the wife of Emperor Xiaoming], and then to have the empress dowager pretend that she was a boy and then declare a pardon and change the reign name. The death of Suzong came about so rapidly that, at the time, there was a theory discussed by all that Zheng Yan and Xu Ge had planned it. The courtiers were therefore unrestrained in their indignation. The empress dowager took the baby girl from Concubine Pan and, saying that she was a prince, established her as such. After several days, seeing that people's hearts were totally at ease, she began to say that Concubine Pan had actually given birth to a girl and that there would be a further selection of the heir. Then she established the son of the prince of Lin Tao, Yuan Zhao, as heir, who was three years old. All under heaven were aghast.

According to the biography, in the last fervent years of her reign (and her life), the empress dowager formed a clique against her son, murdering his confidant, the Buddhist monk, Miduo. She then, in consultation with her courtier, Zheng Yan, planned to promote her granddaughter to the throne. At this point, though the biography does not say that she was guilty of Xiaoming's murder, it does connect Zheng Yan to that murder and go on to say that the empress dowager completed the plan they had discussed by placing her granddaughter on the throne. Chapter 4 of this book explores the reasons why they may have plotted to place a girl on the throne.

Other places in the *Book of the Wei* bear witness to the fact that the rumor about the empress dowager's hand in murdering her son had spread beyond her court. Famously, this rumor surfaces in the story of the empress dowager's own murder at the hands of the Xiongnu general Erzhu Rong (493–530). A general from the disenfranchised and impoverished northern garrisons, Erzhu Rong led an army to the gates of Luoyang after the death of Emperor Xiaoming; he is said to have done so in retaliation for Xiaoming's suspicious murder. When he arrived in Luoyang with allied forces, he murdered the empress dowager, her new child emperor, and her courtiers, he sacked the city, and he burned down the Eternal Peace Monastery. As to his apparent belief that the empress dowager had a hand in the murder of her son, he is said to have proclaimed:

How could it be the case that when the emperor [Xiaoming] was not well, doctors were not called for immediately and that his clansmen and great ministers were not

by his side? How can this not have caused astonishment both near and far? And furthermore, [how is it that] the emperor's daughter was made crown prince and a meaningless pardon was given? Above, this is a deception of heaven and earth! Below, this is misleading of court and the common people.<sup>55</sup>

Although Erzhu Rong's stated doubt regarding the empress dowager and his subsequent murder of her can be interpreted in the biography as a form of noble retaliation, this interpretation is not accurate. Erzhu Rong and his collective forces from the northern garrisons had many reasons for invading Luoyang. The death of Xiaoming and the accession of his daughter were simply a pretext for the long planned military takedown of the city and the empress dowager. In his nine-volume historical overview of Northern Wei governance, Zhang Jinglong devotes much of his final volume to chronicling the precise circumstances that fueled Erzhu Rong's invasion of Luoyang. Zhang specifically argues against the veracity of Erzhu Rong's recorded statement about being invited by Emperor Xiaoming to intervene in Luoyang politics and overthrow the empress dowager by showing that, by the time of the Xiaoming's death, Erzhu Rong had already been amassing a force in the north and looking for reasons to invade the capital.<sup>56</sup> These reasons have much less to do with the empress dowager than they do with her predecessors: With the change of the court's location to Luoyang in 494 and the redistribution of agricultural land to Han people in the central plains, the economic heart of the empire moved southward and left the northern populations impoverished and isolated. One can also point to an early medieval clash of culture wherein the Taghbach/Yuan family that ruled the Northern Wei became a new sort of empire in the Luoyang era, with a new type of leader and a new language for administration. This Luoyang political culture was also a source of tension in the late stages of the Northern Wei itself. We must therefore read Erzhu Rong's championing of his retaliation in Luoyang as a kind of propaganda initiated on his own behalf, as well as an ideological attempt to drum up support from the countryside.

### *Rape and Murder*

Finally, with the collapse of the northern garrisons and the arrival of Erzhu Rong and his collective forces at the gates of Luoyang, the empress dowager's life came to its end. Whether or not the empress dowager actually killed her son, Erzhu Rong appears to have capitalized on the idea of that possibility in order to justify his murder of the empress dowager and more than two thousand of her courtiers. Regarding the events surrounding her murder, the biography states:

In the first year of the Wutai era [528], Erzhu Rong raised an army and crossed the Yellow River. The empress dowager summoned all the women from Suzong's women's chambers and commanded all of them to enter the Way [i.e., the Buddhist nunnery]. The empress dowager herself shaved her head. Rong dispatched

his mounted soldiers to escort the empress dowager and the young lord [Youzhu; Yuan Zhao, 526–28] to the south bank of the river. The empress dowager responded to Rong with copious explanations; however, Rong pulled up his jacket [for a fight] and the empress dowager and the young ruler were both drowned in the river. The empress dowager's younger sister, Mistress Pingyi [Pingyi jun] gathered [the bodies] and interred them in the Buddhist Monastery of the Two Lings [Shuangling si]. During the reign of Emperor Xiaowu [r. 532–35], rituals were commenced at the tomb and she was given a posthumous name.<sup>57</sup>

The empress dowager met her demise alongside that of her new, boy child emperor. Regarding the specifics of her murder, the Northern Song (960–1125) governmental history compiled by Sima Guang (1019–86 CE), the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (Zizhi tongjian), provides an expanded, although similar, summation:

The empress dowager brought together Suzong's harem and commanded all of them to "leave home," and the empress dowager also shaved her own head. [Erzhu] Rong assembled the hundred officials and greeted them and received the imperial carriage, and in the *jihai* day, the hundred officials presented [him] the imperial seal and prepared his legal carriage and [he] brought Jingzong [Emperor Xiaozhuang] to the bridge on the Yellow River. In the *gengzi* [following] day, [Erzhu] Rong dispatched his riders to seize the empress dowager and the young lord and bring them to the south bank of the Yellow River. The empress dowager faced [Erzhu] Rong and uttered many explanations, but [Erzhu] Rong straightened his jacket [for a fight] and drowned the empress dowager and the young lord in the river.<sup>58</sup>

In the above telling, the empress dowager appears to have attempted to depoliticize herself by entering the Jade Radiance Nunnery as a Buddhist nun. This was a short-lived strategy of just a few days before Erzhu Rong murdered her. After her murder and the murder of her courtiers, Erzhu Rong propped up his own child emperor in an attempt to restabilize the dynasty. Furthermore, on his triumph over the empress dowager and her court, Erzhu Rong is said to have declared, "The Yuan Clan has perished; the Erzhu clan has risen!"<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that not a single one of our sources expand on it, even in the empress dowager's death, we see the presence of the Buddhist institution. On the approach of Erzhu Rong's troops, the empress dowager commanded the women of the court to enter monastic life, presumably in order to protect them by hiding them in the nunnery. The empress herself did the same.<sup>60</sup> Her ploy did not work. She was murdered. The fate of her court ladies is unknown, although the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* records a popular joke related to the further sacking of Luoyang by Rong's nephew and successor, Erzhu Zhao (d. 533). That joke suggests the women of the nunnery were raped by his invading army: "Hurry up, you males of Luoyang!" the joke runs, "Plait your hair in the non-Han fashion, so the nuns of the Jade Radiance Nunnery will take you as their

TABLE 1. Chronology of Important Events in the Life of Empress Dowager Ling

477	Sengzhi appointed to the Northern Wei court in Pingcheng.
Late 400s	Birth of Empress Dowager Ling. No recorded birth name or date.
494	Court and capital moved from Pingcheng to Luoyang.
500s?	Sengzhi recommends Empress Dowager Ling to court.
500s?	Emperor Xuanwu appoints Empress Dowager Ling to position of imperial consort.
510	Birth of Emperor Xiaoming by Empress Dowager Ling.
510	Empress Dowager Ling promoted to senior-ranking concubine.
515	Death of Emperor Xuanwu.
515	Empress Dowager Ling begins first regency, appointed to rank of empress dowager.
517	Construction begins on the Huoshao Grotto at Longmen.
515–18	Empress Dowager hosts banquet for her politically charged poetry contest.
516	Sengzhi dies and is buried with great fanfare and the personal mourning of Emperor Xiaoming.
516	Empress Dowager Ling said to have murdered Xuanwu's Empress Gao.
518	Empress Dowager Ling sends monastic emissaries to the western regions.
519	Empress Dowager Ling's stūpa at the Eternal Peace Monastery is completed.
520–25	Coup d'état by Yuan Cha.
525	Yuan Yue dedicates the refurbishment of his father, Emperor Xiaowen's stūpa to the "Two Sages" of Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xiaoming.
525	Empress Dowager Ling resumes her regency.
527	Building of the Huangfu Gong Grotto with its portrait of the empress dowager.
528	Assassination of Emperor Xiaoming by poisoning.
528	Empress Dowager Ling places granddaughter on the throne for a few days.
528	Empress Dowager Ling places a different child emperor on throne.
528	Erzhu Rong drowns Empress Dowager Ling and child emperor.
528–34	Various puppet emperors propped up by Erzhu or Gao factions.
532–34	Empress Dowager Ling given honorific name, "Ling."
534	Final collapse of Northern Wei.
554	<i>Book of the Wei</i> presented to the Northern Qi court.

husbands.”<sup>61</sup> And finally, although it seems that the ladies of the court were to find no peace in the nunnery, the empress dowager did find that peace, at least in death. Her corpse and that of the child emperor were interred in the Buddhist monastery of the Two Lings, the name of which is likely a reference to herself and the child emperor behind whom she was ruling. This monastery is not referred to in any other source and it has not been located by archeologists working in the region.<sup>62</sup>

#### LICENTIOUS FEMALE USURPER

Canonical biographies of rulers in dynastic histories are normatively constructed through the method of “blame and praise” (*baobian*), a literary strategy of impartiality employed in biographical writing from as early as the records of the rulers of the Han empire. The empress dowager’s biography in the *Book of the Wei*, however, offers little in terms of praise: The text unambiguously tells us that she was

licentious and that everyone detested her.<sup>63</sup> This depiction of her continues in later accounts of her life in Ru texts of political historiography. The following example is illustrative of the general tendency in this regard. Even though we know that the circumstances surrounding her death were woven into the collapse of the northern garrisons and the rising factionalism in the empire, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* borrows the narrative of the murder of her son from the *Book of the Wei* in its narrative of the invasion of Luoyang. Regarding this matter, the text sites one of Erzhu Rong's own generals, who is said to have proclaimed that:

The empress dowager was debauched and had lost her way. Her favoritism and manipulation were such that all within the four seas are befuddled. Therefore, in order to illuminate public affairs and create justice and prosperity, we must employ our soldiers to [also] purge her court.<sup>64</sup>

Here we confront the idea that the empress dowager had led her realm into chaos and corruption so deep that it could only be rectified by her own political murder, a murder that occurred alongside the murders of her corrupted courtiers. This is an example of historical scapegoating. Such scapegoating was aided and abetted by the power of cultural and literary tropes about women who ruled, tropes that are seen in the *Book of the Wei* but that are also continued in later accounts of her and her rule. In the following sections, I discuss the ways in which the empress dowager was troped in biographical writing about her; I conclude by asking who made these tropes and why.

From the perspective of the Chinese historiographical tradition, the empress dowager's second regency after the coup d'état should never have happened: she should have stepped down.<sup>65</sup> If the biography's heavy criticism of the empress dowager hinges on the moment when she should have stepped down and handed direct rule to her son but did not, then two important historical questions emerge: Why can a woman not legitimately hold power in her own name? And what happens if she does?

As Keith McMahon has pointed out, the Chinese tradition has long held the premise, first formulated in the *Book of Documents* (Shangshu), one of five classic texts of the Confucian tradition that deals explicitly with governance, that "hens should not announce the dawn,"<sup>66</sup> and hence that women should not rule. Regarding the dangers of women acting as political advisers and de facto rulers, the *Book of Documents* is explicit:

The king said: "The ancients said: 'Hens are not for the dawn.' In the case of a dawn hen, this is nothing other than the dissolution of the family.' Nowadays, the King of Shang considers his wife's speech to be of use; befuddled, he has abandoned his sacrifices and not answered for it; befuddled, he has abandoned the ways of his grandfather and his uncle. Thereupon, only those criminals who have fled in all directions are honored and esteemed, trusted and given employ, and installed as senior officials, ministers, and gentlemen. [This has] enabled tyranny over the common people and created debauchery in the towns of the Shang."<sup>67</sup>



The *Book of Documents* is therefore unambiguous in its declaration that rule by women results in chaos: Just as a hen cannot arrive at dawn to announce the day, neither can a woman be listened to in political matters. Rule by women is interpreted as not only a rejection of normative social roles but, more criminally, an offense against heaven. The result of such an infraction against both the material and the transcendent world is that the social order will fall to ruin because heaven's mandate (tianming) will have been lost on account of having been given to a woman. While there have been counterexamples to the maxim that a woman should not rule throughout Chinese history, McMahon has shown that the women who have been able to rule have not been remembered positively by later historiographers and historians. Relegated to the status of meddlers and usurpers, female rulers have been subject to critical judgement by dynastic historians, who have held various assumptions about women in power, such as: "Women taking part in government is the root of chaos"; and "If no distinction is made between male and female, it will be a case of two masters. If there are two masters, then all is lost."<sup>68</sup> The stories of female rulers told in dynastic histories portray them as incapable, power hungry, and unrestrained in their sexual desires. As McMahon argues, "If," in the opinion of Chinese historians, "women ruled, they were considered meddlers in politics. They were a sign of weakness and decline. Heaven abhorred them because rule by women was unnatural."<sup>69</sup>

One of the most egregious examples of this literary trope of the licentious female usurper is found in the biography of Empress Jia (256–300) of the Jin (266–420). She is said to have ruled over the emperor and she is therefore blamed for various political disasters during the period. Compiled in the Tang from earlier records, the *Book of the Jin* (Jin shu) is uncompromising in its depiction of Empress Jia. In an overview of her biography, Michael Farmer argues that the text "uses extremely pejorative language, describing her as 'jealous and power hungry,' 'a butcher,' and a 'tyrant'" and that it borrows its gendered, biased, and exaggerated language from the biography of Empress Lü of the Han (241–180 BCE) contained in Sima Qian's (145–86 BCE) Han era history of ancient China, the *Records of the Historian* (Shiji).<sup>70</sup> Empress Lü was the first woman in Chinese history to hold the title of "empress" (hou) and she was strongly criticized for exercising political power. Both the Jin empress and the Han empress are said to have exercised some degree of independent power at their courts and they were blamed for being cruel, murderous, and sexually promiscuous. These stories should remind us of a further collection of stories of licentious female usurpers contained in the Han era biographical collection, the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (Lienü zhuan).<sup>71</sup> That text generally extols the virtues of women considered eminent from the perspective of the previously discussed "Confucian discourse" on the lives of women; however, the last chapter of the collection focuses instead on counterexamples. Titled the "Depraved and Favored,"<sup>72</sup> the women whose biographies are contained in this section of the text are infamous historical models of the "licentious usurper"



who uses sex and debauchery to distract men of high rank, steal their power, and, inevitably, bring political instability into their realms. Perhaps the most graphic of these stories is that of the concubine of King Zhou (trad. r. 1154–1123 BCE), the last ruler of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600 BCE–ca. 1046 BCE). The text tells us that King Zhou lost the Shang owing to the actions of his favored concubine who distracted him from his own power by building a lake of wine and by hosting parties where naked people were made to chase each other through a forest of hanging meat, and who then exerted her power in order to encourage the king to roast his dissenting lords alive. In the text's narrative, it was the king's actions, induced by the concubine, that saw the end of the Shang line. As Farmer notes in his discussion of Empress Jia, though, we have no way of knowing what the precise circumstances of the powers and reigns of elite women were in early and medieval dynasties.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, as observers of history, we should be very cautious when dealing with historical tropes—in this case, gendered ones—that serve to uphold national narratives and legitimate normative history.

This well-established trope of the “licentious female usurper” is also found in gendered criticisms of the rule of Empress Dowager Ling contained in the political narratives and courtly biographies of the *Book of the Wei*. One place of criticism of the empress dowager that occurs across the *Book of the Wei* is the description of her relationship with the aforementioned prince of the imperial house (and her brother-in-law), Yuan Yi. As we saw, her biography claims that she forced her intimacy on him. Not only that; the biography also states that her actions in this regard brought about the coup d'état that itself contributed to the final collapse of the dynasty. The coup d'état also saw the murder of Yuan Yi, who, in his own biography in the *Book of the Wei*, is lauded for the prudent caution that he gave to the difficult empress dowager while acting as her courtier. It also generally positions him as one of her victims.<sup>74</sup>

The most direct of the gendered criticisms made against the empress dowager center on her attempt to place a female successor to Emperor Xiaoming on the throne. Regarding this, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* provides a slightly more expanded discussion than does the *Book of the Wei*. The text tells us that prior to his poisoning and death, Emperor Xiaoming had called on Erzhu Rong to help him wrestle power away from his mother. In the time it took for Erzhu Rong to reach the capital, however, the emperor had been poisoned, his daughter had been put on the throne with a great pardon given, and a new child emperor had been placed on the throne after the sex of the first successor was revealed. Here, even though Erzhu Rong's gendered critique of the empress dowager is simply a pretext for his planned invasion of Luoyang, an invasion necessitated by the impoverishment of the northern garrisons after the court's move southward, it functions as a plausible pretext because it rests on gendered ideas about the failings of women who rule. Erzhu Rong's gendered critique is seen in

the way in which he describes the empress dowager's attempt to put a girl on the throne and in the labeling of her granddaughter's promotion as a crime against heaven, earth, court, and polity. His gendered take on her rule, then, is consistent with the manner in which she is generally depicted in the *Book of the Wei* and its derivative texts. In such texts, the empress dowager is largely remembered through the perspective of those who stood to gain from her death. The "last-bad-ruler" trope from the *Book of the Wei* has been adopted across later political and historiographical writings. Furthermore, the "last-bad-ruler" trope in her biography dovetails with the second trope of the "licentious female usurper." These intersecting tropes, which are clearly seen in writings on the empress dowager, have made her an uncomplicated political target for those looking to explain the fall of the dynasty.

By the time of the Song, although influential encyclopedias (*leishu*) frequently contain references to Empress Dowager Ling that come from the *Book of the Wei* and the *History of the Northern Dynasties*,<sup>75</sup> there appears to have been an effort to purge some of the contentious and unsubstantiated details from her story, details that may speak to the bias of the presumed original text. As a notable example, we can look to the entry on Empress Dowager Ling in the voluminous and early Song era encyclopedia, the *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping yulan*). Much of her record there is directly copied from her biography in the *Book of the Wei*, although there are important differences. Aware, perhaps, of the many recorded biases and problematic accounts contained in the *Book of the Wei*, the compilers of the *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era* excised sensitive and potentially libelous material from their account of the empress dowager and her life. Not included in the *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era* is the suggestion that she was involved in her son's death. Nor is the allegation that she attempted to place a girl on the throne. Similarly, her relationships with members of the Buddhist clergy of questionable repute have been excised; notable stories of her intercourt dealings that place her in a negative light have received similar treatment. At the end of the entry, however, there is a small section which records that she was remonstrated for dressing in fine clothes and showing herself off around town when she should have been in mourning for the deceased emperor, her husband. The record of this remonstrance is also included in the *Book of the Wei*, although not in the biography itself.<sup>76</sup>

Even though, by the time of the Song, there appears to have been some attempt to purge unsubstantiated details from historiographical writing about the life and reign of the empress dowager, this was too little, too late. As a result of her generally negative depiction in historical sources—a depiction that relies on long-standing gendered tropes to blame her for the fall of the Northern Wei—little attention has been paid to her in any kind of writing or research since the medieval period. As a female ruler who saw the collapse of her empire, and, as a ruler of a dynastic

house hat was considered foreign from the perspective of Chinese historiography and therefore not a legitimate subject of historical inquiry, she is doubly silenced.

#### FACTIONS AND FATES

The historiographical materials of the medieval Ru scholars that mention the empress dowager silently characterize her through the gendered trope of the “licentious female usurper.” This trope has facilitated the historiographical process of blaming her for the fall of the Northern Wei. To understand who would have wanted to place the blame on her, we need to understand something about the compiler of the biography itself, Wei Shou. Wei Shou was a rising scholar during the empress dowager’s time. His own biography in the *Book of the Northern Qi* (Bei Qi shu) tells us that he escaped the murderous purge of the court led by Erzhu Rong and then went on to live through the overthrow of the Northern Wei, the establishment of the Eastern Wei, and, finally, the establishment of the Northern Qi.<sup>77</sup> According to his biography, Wei Shou’s own professional achievements mounted quickly in the tumultuous years that followed the death of Empress Dowager Ling. Under Emperor Jiemin (r. 531–32), a puppet propped up by the Erzhu faction, Wei Shou was given official titles and duties at the age of twenty-six.<sup>78</sup> Following Jiemin, a second puppet emperor, Xiaowu, was established by a powerful general named Gao Huan (496–547) who had raised a successful challenge against the Erzhu faction, with which he had previously cooperated in the overthrow of the empress dowager. Not himself a member of the Taghbach/Yuan clan but needing to show his allegiance to it,<sup>79</sup> Gao is presented in the *Book of the Wei* as a loyalist to the clan eager to reestablish its rule after the demise of Erzhu Rong. His representation as a champion of the Northern Wei in the *Book of the Wei* perhaps contradicts historical reality: His own family benefitted greatly from the empress dowager’s death—so much so, in fact, that his own son later became emperor of the Northern Qi. Gao Huan’s opinions on the empress dowager and her reign are made clear in his own biography in the *Book of the Northern Qi*, where he is said to have called her “licentious and rebellious.”<sup>80</sup> Although Gao established Xiaowu as emperor after the death of Erzhu Rong, Xiaowu himself fled the capital and established the Western Wei (535–57). Gao, in turn, promoted another member of the royal family and founded the Eastern Wei. After Gao’s death, his son, Gao Yang (526–99)—who was ethnically related to the Taghbach clan through his mother—went on to establish the Northern Qi as the successor to the Northern Wei.

Wei Shou compiled the *Book of the Wei*—and hence, the presumed original biography of the empress dowager—under the direct patronage of Gao Yang, otherwise known as Northern Qi Emperor Wenxuan (r. 550–59). Unlike the writings of other dynastic histories, which were undertaken by committee, the *Book of the Wei* was compiled by a sole agent, Wei Shou, whose benefactor considered himself the direct successor of the Northern Wei after the murder of the empress dowager and the massacre of her court. The text has long been criticized for its political

biases. It was even labeled a “foul history” (*huishi*) shortly after its compilation.<sup>81</sup> The Northern Qi bias in the text is played out significantly in the story of our empress dowager because the very men who considered themselves the true successors of the Northern Wei and who sponsored the writing of its history were none other than those who assisted in bringing down the dynasty while directly benefitting from the murder of the empress dowager. To justify their own rise to power and the eventual transition to their family’s leadership of the Northern Qi, it was advantageous to depict the empress dowager as “licentious and rebellious.”

Furthermore, since the biography of the empress dowager was written very shortly after her death and by men who would have known her and witnessed her at the height of her power, it is perhaps the case that they were worried about the legacy of her own political faction. After the murder of the empress dowager, Erzhu Rong led a total purge of her court. The *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* claims that more than two thousand of her supporters were murdered in this event, which is known to history as the Heyin massacre.<sup>82</sup> The stories about the blood that was shed in the Heyin massacre suggest that, in the eyes of her enemy, the empress dowager was so powerful that everyone close to her needed to be eliminated lest they embark on a campaign of retaliation. The people of Luoyang who witnessed the murders and dealt with the tremendous violence that affected their lives and the lives of their families were undoubtedly owed an explanation. Making the empress dowager the scapegoat for the fall of the empire was one such explanation, and this is perhaps why we see such prejudicial treatment of her in her biography.

When Erzhu Rong invaded Luoyang, he murdered the empress dowager and those who were aligned with her. The sacking of the city that ensued included the destruction by fire of her famed Eternal Peace Monastery with its nine story pagoda, as well as many other Buddhist structures she had personally sponsored. The grotto at Longmen that she had supposedly patronized was also destroyed by fire at some point and has therefore been known throughout history as the Huoshao grotto or the grotto that was “burned by fire.” After Erzhu Rong drowned her in the river, her corpse was treated without ceremony. No funeral was given. Her sister gathered her body and interred it in a monastery that has not been identified in the archeological record. Empress Dowager Ling’s birth name and her body are lost to history. The buildings and structures that she commissioned have long been destroyed. Her life and legacy have been erased. If women have a way of disappearing from the historical record because of the dominance of sources written by men, how much more so in the case of Empress Dowager Ling, who was forcefully and violently disappeared and whose official biography was written shortly after her murder by the very men who inherited the empire that she ruled? For these very reasons, we need a better story. The subsequent chapters of this book embark on telling that story through a wide variety of primary sources from the medieval period.