

Emperor Wu of China

[Dr Amanda Foreman]

The Great Vairocana Buddha, paid for by Empress Wu Zetian, the wife of the third Tang Emperor, Gaozong.

Said to have been modelled in the Empress's own image, it's a bold statement of power, showing how Tang women used Buddhist imagery to give themselves a public face.

Empress Wu defied the Confucian model for womanhood. She came from a very humble background. She was the second daughter of a lumber merchant, but because of her pretty face, the Emperor dispatched her to become a concubine in the Emperor's palace.

She was only 5th rank, but she was able to claw her way to the top, going from being concubine to the old Emperor, to wife of the new Emperor Gaozong. And to be intimate with both father and son was considered incest by the Confucian scholars, and that in itself was a shocking crime.

But they literally accused her of hundreds of crimes, and topping them all was deposing her 2 sons and ruling not just as Empress, but Emperor for 15 years and founding her own dynasty. Empress Wu literally shattered the cosmic order of yin and yang.

Empress Wu was a woman of tremendous energy and she wasn't afraid to implement radical changes. She instituted the first professional civil service; she completely reformed the tax code; and she increased China's trade and diplomacy. But to my mind, what's really impressive is what she did for women.

She wasn't afraid to challenge Confucian norms. For example, she promoted both men and women equally, and on merit alone. So that included her daughter Princess Taiping, her niece Empress Wei and even Shangguan Wan'er, the first female prime minister, who was a palace slave, and who rose all the way to the top job 1400 years before her modern counterparts.

There will always be unanswered questions about Empress Wu, but one thing is for certain: she was a true visionary.