

# *Analysis of the Creation and Demise of the WuZhou New Characters in Tang Dynasty Politics*

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**Abstract:** After a long political struggle during the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty, Wu Zetian finally changed the name of the empire from Tang to Zhou in 690, thereby establishing her authority and rule. Despite this, opposition forces persisted against her within the court and the country. In response, Wu Zetian initiated a series of political and cultural reforms to further solidify her personal authority. One of these reforms was the WuZhou New Characters, introduced during her reign. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the main reasons for the emergence and demise of the new characters during the WuZhou period (690-705). Through the analysis of physical objects and historical documents and by referencing the results of previous studies, this research reveals the close connection between the WuZhou New Characters and the political situation of the time. To a certain extent, it also highlights the social and cultural changes that occurred. While Wu Zetian was alive, the new characters began to play a role alongside her authority. However, with Wu Zetian's death and the decline of the political power she represented, the new characters eventually faded away. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the political system and cultural evolution of the Tang Dynasty, providing new perspectives and references for research in the field of Chinese historiography.

**Keywords:** Tang Dynasty, Wu Zetian, Create Characters, WuZhou New Characters, Tang Dynasty Politics

## 1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty was a period of dramatic political and cultural transformation in China, during which cultural modifications, driven by political aims, played a major role. One example of this was the emergence and subsequent disappearance of WuZhou New Characters during the reign of Wu Zetian. Studying WuZhou New Characters can help us understand the complex interplay between language and political power.

In the field of Tang Dynasty studies, although scholars from ancient to modern times have elaborated on the meanings and annotations of WuZhou New Characters, the relevance of WuZhou New Characters and the political motives associated with them still needs to be further investigated. This study contributes to this evolving field by specializing in the origins and demise of WuZhou New Characters and the creation of political perspectives on its glyphs, deepening the understanding of Wu Zetian's script reforms in the context of the political dynamics of the period in which she had

just come to power. In addition, despite the extensive and in-depth scholarly research on Tang dynasty politics, the unique linguistic features of Wuzhou New Characters are still worthy of attention and form the basis of this study.

This study aims to fill the gap in existing scholarship by analyzing in detail the production and demise of WuZhou New Characters in Tang Dynasty politics. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical sources with linguistic and philological research findings, the rationale behind the creation of WuZhou New Characters and its demise is examined in depth. Through a comparative analysis of historical records and linguistic artifacts, this study will reveal the impact of political power struggles in the Tang Dynasty on language and writing.

## 2. Significance and Motivation of the WuZhou New Characters

For Wu Zetian, the creation and popularization of the new characters were not only a reform at the script level but also a political maneuver to seize the supremacy of the Tang Empire. Earlier, after purging Crown Prince Li Zhong, minister Shangguan Yi, and the courtiers implicated in the plot to depose Wu Zetian, and due to the serious health problems of Emperor Gaozong, Wu Zetian gained supreme power almost equal to that of the emperor in the latter part of his reign. According to the *Zizhi Tongjian (Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government)*, "Whenever there was a matter to be dealt with, Wu Zetian would hold court from behind a screen. All political affairs, whether important or not, were reported to her. The power of the entire empire, including the authority to appoint, dismiss, and execute, was centralized in Wu Zetian. Emperor Gaozong willingly surrendered his power, and they were known as the Two Saints, both inside and outside the court"[1]. However, despite the strengthening and consolidation of her position of power, Wu Zetian faced the presence of ministers supporting the Li Tang family, particularly represented by Pei Yan, in the court. Additionally, considering the rarity of women being supreme rulers throughout Chinese imperial history, Wu Zetian aimed to legitimize her rule through political reforms. The creation of the Wuzhou New Characters was one such reform.

In the Chinese cultural tradition, scripts and ideologies are regarded as sacred and only the most authoritative rulers are authorized to alter them; thus, they are often used as a tool to consolidate and manifest political authority. According to the *Records of the Historian*, Emperor Qin Shi Huang "unified the standard of weights and measures, the shape of vehicles, and the writing system"[2]. He promoted the lesser seal character as the standard writing system throughout the country, which greatly strengthened his authority as the emperor. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty also adopted Dong Zhongshu's suggestion to promote Confucianism. Wu Zetian, as a powerful ruler needing to strengthen her political authority, was no exception. According to the *Zizhi Tongjian*, Zong Qinke, the assistant minister of the secretariat, "recomposed twelve characters for heaven, earth, etc., and presented them to Wu Zetian"[1], who then declared herself as the empress dowager. She stated, "[...] I have specially created twelve characters, and I am going to use the new character 'zhao (𪚩)' as my name, leading the use of all the officials"[3]. The new characters retain the characteristics of the ancient form and introduce some innovations to ensure a long-lasting foundation for the empire and express the desire to pursue purity. In the first year of the Zaichu era (689), Xue Huaiyi, abbot of the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, presented the *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*, which cited a large number of prophecies that skillfully supported the legitimacy of Wu Zetian's claim to the throne, and Wu Zetian then used the new characters he created in the *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*, which was promulgated to the world in the first month of the first year of Zaichu era (689). According to Shi Anchang's research, Wu Zetian made a total of five revisions, totaling eighteen characters, which lasted fifteen years throughout the country until the end of the fourth year of the Chang'an era (704)[4].

The creation of new characters can be analyzed broadly from two perspectives: religious and political. Analyzed from the religious perspective, the creation of the Wu Zhou New Characters was closely linked to Wu Zetian's tendentious policy towards Buddhism. In dealing with Buddhism and Taoism, Wu Zetian's attitude differed from that of Emperor Gaozong. After a period of intense conflict between Buddhism and traditional rituals between 655 and 662, Gaozong gradually paid less attention to Buddhism and favored Taoism. In particular, after the first year of the Qianfeng era (666), he honored Laozi as "Emperor Taishang Xuanyuan", who was the founder of Taoism, and in the second year of the Shangyuan era (675) he compiled the *Preface to All Taoist Scriptures* for the late crown prince Li Hong. Additionally, the suspension of Buddhist scripture translation in the first year of the Lin De era (664) seems to be related to Emperor Gaozong's attitude. In contrast, although Wu Zetian used the status of female deities in Taoism (e.g., Xi Wangmu [Seiobo, the Queen Mother of the West]) to seek more power for herself and engaged in activities such as sacrifices and Zen ceremonies, she gradually favored Buddhism. This shift was influenced by Taoism's strong ties to the Li Tang family and the rise of rebellious forces loyal to the Li Tang family in the 680s. In the process of creating new characters, Wu Zetian incorporated Buddhist elements[5]. For example, the character for "moon (月)" in the new character was initially "〇", containing a swastika (卐), which symbolizes good fortune in Buddhism. In the first year of the Zaichu era (689), Xue Huaiyi's *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra* not only elaborated on the legitimacy of women as rulers but also helped Wu Zetian free herself from the influence of the Li Tang family's religious and mythological beliefs. Thus, it was quickly combined with the new character to popularize it throughout the entire empire.

From a political point of view, the new character was also one of Wu Zetian's strategies to carry out political reforms and enhance her political status. As early as when Wu Zetian was not yet an empress, she had already frequently engaged in political struggles, and even more so after she became empress. In the sixth year of the Yonghui era (655), she plotted to abolish Empress Wang and Concubine Xiao; in the fourth year of the Xianqing era (659), she denounced Zhangsun Wuji and others; and in the first year of the Linde era (664), she executed Shangguan Yi, who had attempted to depose her. However, despite the fact that after the execution of Shangguan Yi, she gained the status of "Emperor as The Heavenly Ruler and Empress as the Heavenly Empress", and her power expanded dramatically, the implicit resistance of the courtiers loyal to Li Tang family was still a force to be reckoned with. As the politics of the Zhenguan era had not yet passed, they resisted Wu Zetian's usurpation of power by dealing with Xu Jingzong's posthumous name, recompiling the state history, and restoring the honor of Zhangsun Wuji, and tried to prevent Wu Zetian's power from expanding further through the implementation of the system of the crown prince's supervision of the state[6]. In response to the resistance of the old ministers, Wu Zetian continued to seek political reforms, and after the death of Emperor Gaozong, there was an edict designated "need to consult Wu Zetian's opinion in making decisions on matters of national importance that could not be decided at the same time". With this edict, she stepped up the pace of her reforms, one of which was the creation of new characters. Dong Zuobin analyzed and concluded that Wu Zetian was shrewd, resourceful, and skilled in the use of power tactics when it came to the issue of word reform in his *Reforms of Some Specific Scripts under the Empress Wu (684-704 A. D.)*[7]. From the perspective of religious superstition, she regarded the Jade Rabbit and the Golden Crow as entities in the sun and the moon, recreating the characters "sun" and "moon"[7]. With the aim of bolstering her personal authority, she believed that her divine power radiated over the entire empire. As a symbol of this, she created the new character "zhao (曺)", which she adopted as her own name. Longing for her rule to endure for generations, she fashioned the character "year". Asserting herself as the rightful and orthodox ruler, she combined the word "long" with the newly created character "upright", giving rise to the character "saint", signifying a ruler who is enduring and orthodox. However, fearing disloyalty from her subjects, she also created the character "minister". From the perspective of securing her rule, she altered the character for

"monarch" to one conveying the meaning of "good luck to the empire" and so forth. Drawing inspiration from the writing style of ancient lesser seal characters, she also modified characters representing heaven, earth, upright, and country to convey her intention to return to an ancient aesthetic[7]. It is evident that the newly created characters consistently carry connotations of praise and loyalty towards Wu Zetian, along with reverence for the supremacy of imperial power. The design skillfully transforms the connection between Wu Zetian's status and that of the emperor from a previously concealed state into a more evident and public form. In this manner, Wu Zetian adeptly employed textual reform as a tool to further consolidate and enhance her position in the political power structure, laying a robust foundation for her subsequent acquisition and consolidation of political power.

In terms of the motivating principle behind the creation of the WuZhou New Characters, Wu Zetian skillfully combined this initiative with her personal political status and imbued it with religious, mythological overtones. With the wide dissemination of the *Great Cloud Sutra* and its commentary throughout the empire, Wu Zetian skillfully utilized these documents to enhance the cult of her person, thus continuously reinforcing her authority and sanctity in textual communication. This strategy not only yielded more significant results within the imperial court but also had a far-reaching impact on civil society. In this way, Wu Zetian skillfully rationalized her rule, paved the way for her ascension to the throne as emperor as a woman, and effectively dissipated potential social resistance to women holding supreme power. However, the formulation and promotion of the new characters were, after all, closely tied to Wu Zetian's imperial power, and their existence and popularity were based on her strong political influence as the supreme ruler. This dependence meant that once Wu Zetian's political status changed, the influence and popularity of the new characters would change as well. In fact, with Wu Zetian's death, the influence of the political group she represented began to wane, and the use and popularity of the new characters gradually declined, eventually fading out in the course of history.

### 3. The Decline of the Influence of New Characters and Its Analysis

In the first year of the Shenlong era (705), with the death of Wu Zetian, the political system she had established began to crumble. At the same time, the WuZhou New Characters she had created, a system of character that had once been mandatorily promoted, began to lose its original political and social support and gradually disappeared from official documents and everyday communication. The popularity and use of these new characters gradually declined with the decay of Wu Zetian's political influence and eventually faded into oblivion. This process was not only the result of political changes but also due to the characteristics of the WuZhou New Characters themselves.

*The Royal Decree on Changing the Name of the Year to Zaichu* mentions that "the new characters retained the characteristics of the ancient forms and were innovative", which suggests that these new characters both borrowed from ancient scripts and attempted to innovate in their form. However, such innovations were not entirely in line with the natural trend of Chinese character development. Compared with the characters people used before that had developed normally up to the Tang Dynasty, the new characters of the WuZhou period are more complex and complicated in their shapes and strokes. For example, the new characters of "sky", "award", "beginning", "king", and "carry", all show a distinctive style of the lesser seal character, Chinese bronze inscriptions, or even more ancient strokes[8]; the analysis of the characters "sun" and "moon" shows the influence of Wu Zetian's personal preferences, especially the addition of the "○" character, which destroys the traditional structure and habits of Chinese character writing structure and conventions. The newly created characters deliberately sought complexity, eschewing the straight lines that characterized the writing of the time in favor of the curvilinear styles favored by the ancient scripts. This attempt to shift from the traditional square structure to a circular design created significant visual conflicts and usage difficulties. The lack of a natural historical evolution of the new characters, which were highly

complex and significantly different from the traditional forms, made it a great challenge for the public to understand and apply these characters[9].

In addition, Wu Zetian also widely used the synonym method when creating characters. For instance, characters like "evidence", "people", "holy", and "granting" were meticulously crafted. The construction of these characters is more intricate compared to traditional ideographs like those representing "shoot", "pick", and "safe". However, in the overall development of Chinese characters, the role of the ideographic synthesis method has gradually diminished. Meanwhile, the morpho-syntactic synthesis method has become the dominant structure due to its convenience and systematicity in character creation, now occupying an overwhelmingly dominant position[10]. Through the study of *Shuowen Jiezi (Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters)* written by Xu Shen during the Eastern Han Dynasty, it can be observed that the proportion of characters with form-sounding elements in it has exceeded 80% [11], indicating that the new characters created by Wu Zetian were in fact contrary to the historical trend. This not only raised the learning costs for the people but also added to their daily burdens. Consequently, with the decline of the WuZhou regime, these new characters gradually faded from the historical stage, marking a special yet short-lived chapter in history.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has come up with a series of important findings through an in-depth exploration of WuZhou New Characters. First, the WuZhou New Characters are not only a superficial cultural change but also a deep reflection of the political power of Wu Zetian's period. After Wu Zetian became the emperor, she consolidated her political position, promoted changes in social concepts through script reforms and left far-reaching impacts on the transmission of civilization. This study reveals the close connection between WuZhou New Characters and Wu Zetian's personal political motives. The creation of the WuZhou New Characters is closely related to Wu Zetian's power and strategy and the way she portrayed herself to government officials as well as to the public. Since the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty, Wu Zetian has been eradicating dissenters through various means at both the political and religious levels. After the death of Emperor Gaozong, the WuZhou New Characters, which combined political and religious features, became one of the most important means of establishing authority, demonstrating power, and influencing the perception of the society after her ascension to the throne, and it provided strong cultural support for the realization of her political goals.

In addition, by analyzing the structure of the WuZhou New Characters, the concept of their creation, as well as their acceptance and evolution in society, this study reveals the social reasons for the decline of the WuZhou New Characters after Wu Zetian's death, i.e., the highly complex WuZhou New Characters, which violated the law of character creation at that time, created a huge burden for the people, and eventually had to be discarded and forgotten by the people.

The main contribution of this study is to analyze in depth the complexity of the creation of the WuZhou New Characters and to reveal the political considerations and cultural factors behind the new characters reform. Through the study of WuZhou New Characters, this study provides a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the role of ancient script reforms at the political and cultural levels. It sheds positive light on deepening the knowledge of ancient Chinese political culture, the development of Chinese characters, and the role of rulers in cultural transmission.

However, this study also has some limitations. First, this study focuses on the WuZhou New Characters and fails to cover the broader phenomenon of script reform. Second, the examination of the specific application and acceptance of the new characters in society is still insufficient, and this study fails to dig deeper into this aspect of information. Finally, there is still room for further deepening this study's exploration of the impact of script reform on social structure and language transmission.

Based on the limitations of this study, future research can expand the scope of the study and dig deeper into the cases of script reform in other historical periods. At the same time, investigations on the practical application and acceptance of script reform in modern society can be strengthened with a view to understanding the social impact of script reform more comprehensively. In addition, the complex relationship between script reforms and political power and social perceptions can be further revealed by comparing script reforms under different rulers. These efforts will help provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the study of ancient script reform.

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