IMAGINING MATRIARCHY: “KINGDOMS OF WOMEN” IN TANG CHINA

JENNIFER W. JAY
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Traditional Chinese sources designated certain self-contained societies as “kingdoms of women” either on the grounds that no men were present in the population or that women served as heads of state. This paper seeks to identify and discuss the kingdoms of women as known in Tang China under two categories: (1) mythical kingdoms constructed by legend and imagination, and (2) historical kingdoms, located in western Tibet, Japan, and Korea, which did, in fact, interact with Tang China. In the light of current views on matriarchy, only the Chinese characterization of the Tibetan kingdom before the eighth century might be understood as pointing to a true matriarchy, in terms of female rule, matrilineal succession, and matrilocal residence. Despite the nearly contemporary reigns of China's only female “emperor,” Wu Zetian, Silla Korea's three ruling queens, and Yamato/Nara Japan's half-dozen empresses, none of these “kingdoms of women” can be understood as matriarchies, because women, in general, did not play a dominant role in the state or society.

The title of this essay generates several questions at the outset. Were the “kingdoms of women” (nüerguo 女兒國, nüwangguo 女王國, nıziguo 女子國) that were imagined in the Tang dynasty matriarchies in the same sense as were the Amazons—whose very existence has been questioned by current anthropologists?1 How were matriarchies conceived within and outside Tang boundaries in the seventh to tenth centuries? What do the kingdoms of women tell us about powerful women in the East Asian cultural zone at a time when the Tang empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705, r. 684–705), Silla Korea’s three ruling queens and Yamato/Nara Japan’s half-dozen empresses exercised at least nominal authority?2 Chinese sources designated “kingdoms of women”

1 The Greek report of the Amazons can be found in Herodotus’ Histories, written in the fifth century B.C. The Amazons (literally, “breastless”) were a non-Greek, barbarian, and war-like tribe or nation located either near the Black Sea or in Libya. Their society was believed to have been characterized by female rule, matrilineality, and matrilocality. The women mated with the neighboring Gargarean men for procreation and kept only the female offspring. The female children had their right breasts cut off and cauterized in order to use the bow more easily. See Yves Bonnefoy, Mythologies, tr. Gerald Honigsblum (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), 1:436–37. See also Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (New York: Penguin, 1955).

2 Vietnam is not included in this study because I have not found evidence of female rulers during the Tang period. In either on the grounds that no men were present in the population of these self-contained societies, or that women and their female descendants served as heads of both state and society. Our primary purpose here will be to identify and discuss these kingdoms of women, as known in Tang China, in the context of the current use of the term “matriarchy.”

I. MATRIARCHY AS A THEORY AND CONCEPT

In this essay matriarchy is defined as “that form of social organization in which descent is reckoned through the female line, where the mother is the head of the household and the children belong to the maternal clan.”3 An additional condition defining a matriarchy is that power and authority be exercised by the women in decisions concerning community and foreign relations, social standards and values, including the sexual conduct of the men.

34–42 the two Trung 蒂 sisters, who were of royal blood and superior grade to the feudal lords, obtained support to become sovereigns but they were suppressed by the Chinese, who ruled Vietnam from the first century B.C. to 939.

Idealist social evolutionists such as J. J. Bachofen, L. H. Morgan, and F. Engels argued in the nineteenth century that matriarchy advanced humanity from barbarism to a higher evolutionary stage through the “mother-right” or the mother’s bond to her child, thus predating patriarchy in the general evolution of society. After gaining support for about a century, the theory of evolutionary matriarchy lost its appeal and was no longer a serious academic topic by the 1930s. Currently anthropologists consider matriarchies such as the Amazon women to be myths; none have been substantiated by twentieth-century ethnology. They assert that such myths derived from men’s deep-rooted fear of losing power and authority in their patriarchal society. Naive travelers, amateur ethnologists, and social evolutionaries, who came from patriarchal societies, mistakenly interpreted matrilineal and matrilocal societies as matriarchies, not recognizing that despite descent and residence through the women, men still monopolized rights and power.

In the past decade the topic has been revisited by academics and feminists. In studying minority societies such as the Naxi and Lahu, anthropologists in mainland China still cite the outdated theory of evolutionary matriarchy, treating aspects of matrilineal descent and matrifocal residence as “living fossils” of matriarchies of dominant female power. In the West, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban claims that although anthropological fieldwork has not confirmed the matriarchial thesis, the final word is still to be determined by future research on the prehistory of human society. Harvey Greisman asserts that the concept of matriarchy has resurfaced due to the allegorical and utopian potential it offers some feminist theorists in their attempt to “reclaim” history and re-make it by deconstructing patriarchy. Other feminists have rejected the possibility of matriarchy, arguing that the myth places undue emphasis on biological determinism and denies the universality of the subordination of women, thus making the dismantling of patriarchy more difficult.

II. Imagined Chinese Matriarchies Unconfirmed by Ethnography

In their categorical refutation of matriarchies as products of the imagination, current anthropologists have not considered the Chinese conceptualized kingdoms of women, known as niüerguo, nüzi guo (women’s countries), or niüwangguo (woman-ruled country). In fact, there were two categories of kingdoms of women, one with mythical and fantastic aspects, and the other with fuller documentation in the historical sources through interaction with Tang China. We discuss first the mythical kingdoms.

A kingdom of women is first mentioned in Shanhai jing 山海經, a work traditionally dated to the fourth or third century B.C.E. Despite being dismissed as unreliable by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (141–86? B.C.E.),10 information on two kingdoms of women found its way into the dynastic and institutional histories. In Shanhai jing, Nüzi guo is located “west beyond the seas” where two women lived, surrounded by water. Guo Pu's 郭璞 (276–324) annotation describes a Yellow Pond where the women bathed to get pregnant; male children would die by the age of three. Another kingdom of women is located “west of the great beyond,” but the annotation cites fisherman lore and places it in the eastern sea, being populated only by women.11 The two kingdoms of women seem identical, particularly in their non-sexual procreation and the absence of adult males.

The vagueness of the location and structure of the kingdoms of women in the Shanhai jing annotations is transmitted to the dynastic histories compiled from the

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6 Fluehr-Lobban, 347.


10 Shi ji 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 123.3179.

11 Shanhai jing jianshu, 7.304, 16.428.
third to eleventh centuries, which contain confusing and conflicting accounts of these kingdoms. Without ethnographic confirmation, the historians ignored the unreliability of the informants and the incredible, mythical nature of the kingdoms and simply repeated and embellished what had already been recorded before their time. In *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, one of the *Shanhai jing* kingdoms of women is thus identified as an island in the eastern sea where men were absent and women became pregnant through staring into a magic well. Legends, myths, and imagination constructed three kingdoms of women where snakes, monkeys, and ghosts were taken as husbands. One kingdom had a woman serving as ruler with no husband. In another kingdom, the men were said to be subordinated by women and taken as concubines in numbers ranging from one to one hundred, depending on the woman’s status.

The *Liangshu* 梁書 records that in 499 the monk Huishen 慧深 reported a kingdom of women located a thousand li east of Fusang 扶桑 (identified as Japan) where the women had beautiful white skin, and body hair reaching the ground. After becoming pregnant in the second or third month of the year by immersing themselves in water, they would give birth in the sixth or seventh month. Lacking breasts, they nursed their offspring with hair that grew from the neck. The children could walk after a hundred days and were fully grown in three or four years; they avoided people and especially men.

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14 On this *nüguo*, see Zheng Qiao 鄭樵, *Tongzhi 通志* (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1963), 194.3116; Du You 杜佑, *Tongdian 通典* (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1963), 186.994; Ma Duanlin 馬端臨, *Wenxian tongkao 文獻通考* (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1963), 326.2569. Ma Duanlin’s description of the countries of women was based on *Tongzhi* and *Tongdian* and updated from the dynastic histories. For an annotated translation, see G. Schlegel, “Problèmes géographiques: Les Peuples étrangers chez les historiens chinois, III: Nü kouo, le pays des femmes,” *Toung Pao* 3 (1892): 495–510. By the fourteenth century, these kingdoms seem all but forgotten and the earlier mythical information about them is not carried in *Songshi* 宋史 and *Yuanshi* 元史.

A brief entry in *Suishu* 隋書 locates a kingdom of women west of Fuguo 附國 in Sichuan, but the location has shifted to west of Dashi 大食 (Persia) in *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐書. The *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 account has the western kingdom of women situated on an island northwest of Fulin 拂林 (Syria, Eastern Roman Empire). The land was endowed with precious commodities and subordinated to Fulin. The women mated with men sent annually by the Fulin king for the purpose of procreation; male children were not allowed to survive.

The *Xin Tangshu* account of this western kingdom of women is almost a verbatim copy of the version in *Da Tang xiuy ji* 大唐西域記, authored by the notable monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (603–68), who traveled through India and central Asia from 629 to 645. Without visiting this kingdom, but citing local legends and Buddhist lore, he recorded another version that was ignored by the dynastic histories, most likely due to its fantastic aspects. In south India a bride was abducted by a lion with whom she conceived twins (a boy and a girl) in human form. Later the boy slew his lion-father and sailed off to find an island kingdom called Shiziguo 獅(師)子國 (Kingdom of the Lion’s Son, Sinhala, modern Sri Lanka). The girl landed on an island west of Persia, had sexual intercourse with demons there, and gave birth to female children in the kingdom that was called Xi da nüguo (西大女國).

Citing Buddhist lore, Xuanzang wrote that later the Sinhala kingdom barely escaped the havoc wreaked by five hundred female raksasi (demons) led by a queen. They changed themselves into beautiful women to seduce shipwrecked merchants and sailors. When tired of the men’s sexual services, the women imprisoned them to be devoured while they lured other captives to the island. This account was too incredible for the *Tangshu* compilers, who did not include either the human-lion or the human-demon tales.

In the twelfth century, Zhou Qufei 周去非, author of a travelogue upon which Zhao Rugua 趙汝适 based his own work half a century later, transferred the mythical
kingdoms to an island in the south seas, perhaps the Sunda straits in southeast Asia. 19 We are told that every few years a flood would produce foot-long lotus seeds and two-foot long peach-pits which the exclusively female population presented to their woman ruler. The women achieved pregnancy by exposing themselves naked to the south wind, giving birth to girls only. Shipwrecked men taken on shore by the women would die within several days, as related by an informant who claimed to have escaped from the island. Zhao Rugua’s tale is followed by an abridged account of the western kingdom of Tibet, which we will discuss later. 20

The above kingdoms of women, although appearing in the dynastic histories, are clearly fantastic. They fall into the category of imagined matriarchies, like the mythical Amazon women. These fictional constructions re-emerge in the kingdoms of women that are portrayed in the late sixteenth-century novels Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義 and Xiyou ji 西遊記, and in the early nineteenth-century Jinghua yuan 鏡花緣. 21 Certain aspects of the novels, such as pregnancy by drinking water from a pond (Xiyou ji), the existence of countries of females only (Xiyou ji, Sanbao Taijian), or where women and men have a total role reversal (Jinghua yuan), are too fantastic to be believed. In these kingdoms, men are dominated by the women who indeed monopolize power, set social standards, and use the men as sexual objects. But in Xiyou ji, even as the head of state in Xiliang nüguo 西涼女國, the queen cannot convince the pilgrim monk to be her husband and accept her offer to relinquish the kingdom to him. 22 In Sanbao Taijian, the woman ruler fails to seduce the eunuch Zheng He 鄭和 for reasons too obvious. 23 In Jinghua yuan, a male traveler is forced to have his feet bound and body prepared for a sexual tryst with a woman ruler, but in the end his impotence saves his honor. 24

III. MATRARCHIES, MATRILINEALITY, MATRIFOCALITY IN A TIBETAN KINGDOM OF WOMEN

Above we have noted an assortment of legendary kingdoms of women that, in Tang times, appear in the dynastic and institutional histories, but which are imaginary constructs. In the following, we examine several “kingdoms of women” that actually established tributary relations with Tang China in various degrees. Little information is available on Nüwanguo, located in northern Thailand, and ruled by a woman who had repelled an invasion by the Nanzhao 南詔 state. 25 Also mentioned only vaguely is Yida 毅怛, a warlike Indo-Scythian tribe in central Asia that sent a tribute mission to the Chinese court around 610. This was a polyandrous society where wives could have more than one husband, all of whom were brothers; the number of husbands was shown by the number of horns on the women’s hats. 26

Relatively better documented is the “kingdom of women” in Tibet. The Tibetan tribe of Sufalana'ajujuluo 蘇伐刺塞瞿母呂, with an imperial surname of Supi 苏思, was located at the western edges of Tibet and designated by Tang chroniclers as Nüguo 女國 or Dong nüguo 東女國. 27 The size of the kingdom was said to be

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19 See Zhou Qufei, Lingwai daidai 嶺外代答 (Siku quanshu), 3.6a/b, and Zhao Rugua, Zhufan zhi 諸蕃志 (Siku quanshu), 1.40a. For a translation of Zhufan zhi, see Hirth and Rockhill, 37, 151–52.
20 Zhao Rugua, 1.40a/b.
22 Xiyou ji, chapters 54–55.
23 Sanbao Taijian, chapters 46–48.
a distance of nine days’ journey from east to west, and twenty days’ journey from north to south, embracing eighty towns and a population of 40,000 people, a quarter of whom were soldiers.

This state, according to these Chinese sources, was an autocracy operating with a bureaucracy, and society was stratified, with the women playing a dominant political and social role. For generations women rulers had occupied the throne, ruling directly through court audiences held every five days. The ruler’s husband or husbands had no political responsibilities, but the heir-apparent and senior minister, both women, assisted her. Women officials administered from within the court, but men outside the court executed their orders. If the ruler died without a daughter to replace her, large sums of gold facilitated the search for two successors from among her maternal clan. Of these, one became the new ruler and the other her deputy or heir-apparent. The ruler had several hundreds of female servants, and when she died, dozens of people were sacrificed.

This kingdom can be said to be matriarchal by virtue of the fact that women held the dominant power even in ordinary families. Men were engaged only in war and agriculture. They outnumbered the women by a ratio of five to three, and even among commoners each woman had several husbands. Women dignitaries had male servants, while men were not allowed to keep female servants. Children inherited the mother’s surname. Both men and women painted their faces, but men wore their hair loose while the women braided theirs or tied it up. In addition to practicing human sacrifice, the people worshipped deities such as the tree-god and practiced haruspicy to look for signs of prosperity or disaster in the next year. They lived in dwellings of several stories; the ruler’s residence had nine stories while those of commoners had six. The climate was cold and the year began with the eleventh month. The source of subsistence was hunting, supplemented by exporting gold, horses, and salt to India and the Eastern Roman Empire.

This kingdom is said to have sent a number of tribute missions to China between 587 and 742, including trips in 686 and 693 when Wu Zetian ruled China, and held an audience with the envoys. We are given no details about the process and impact of the matriarchy’s disintegration but are told that, sometime after 742, the kingdom began to be ruled by men. Trying to cope with a shrinking kingdom that was threatened by internal disorder, the king arrived at the Tang court in 794 seeking vassal status. Because he also turned to the Turfan state for recognition, he earned the derogatory reputation of the “two-faced Tibetan.”

Before its putative transformation into a state governed by men in the middle of the eighth century, this “kingdom of women,” more than any other then (or perhaps presently) known resembles a true matriarchy, in terms of matrilineality in surname and succession, matrifocal authority, and presumably matrilocality residence in a polyandrous society. Female dominance in the political unit and society cut across class lines from the woman ruler to the commoners.

IV. Women Tennen (Emperors) in Ancient Japan

In accordance with earlier traditions, Tang China gave the generic name of núguo or núwangguo to kingdoms that had a woman on the throne, when self-designations were not yet used. Aware that Japan had a history of female rulers, Tang China referred to Japan by two names, Nüwangguo and, more often, the derogatory name Woguo 倭國 (kingdom of dwarfs). The self-designation Japan 日本 was not used until after the eighth century, when Japanese national histories began to be written.

The Chinese dynastic history compiled in 297 documented Japan as Yamatai 邪馬台 (Yamato), existing as a loose confederacy of over a hundred communities, of which thirty had tributary relations with China. Some had kings while others had queens as sovereigns.

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197.5277–79; XTS, 221A.6218–20; Tongzhi, 196.3155; Wenxian tongkao, 326.2569. I generally follow Tongdian in the information before 587 and XTS for events after 587.

28 Tongdian, 193.1043; Tongzhi, 196.3155. SS, JTS, XTS, and Wenxian tongkao leave out the passage about daughters succeeding. JTS and XTS also add a confusing passage about guisi fujī 妃死婦離, perhaps a reference to succession of a niece through the father’s sister or from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, both reflecting patrilineal descent. This information contradicts the earlier statement about succession through the woman ruler’s maternal clan. These four sources do not mention the practice of polyandry even among ordinary women.

29 JTS, 197.5277–79; XTS, 221A.6218–20; Wenxian tongkao, 326.2569.

30 Tang writers considered women rulers unusual enough to dwell particularly on incidents where a woman was on the throne. See for example, JTS, 198.5312, for the enthronement of the daughter of an assassinated king.

31 The Chinese were the first to write about Japan before Japanese historians presented two national histories, Kojiki 古事記 in 712, and Nihongi 日本記 in 720. Nüwangguo is used interchangeably with Woguo in Sanguo zhi and Hou Hanshu, but not in Suishu, Jiu Tangshu and Xin Tangshu.

the late second century the region was plagued by internal chaos until the unmarried shamaness Himiko 卑彌呼 was enthroned as ruler. Some historians equate Himiko with the mythical Jingū 神功, who appears in the Japanese national histories as a warrior-woman wearing men's clothes and delaying childbirth to win a battle against the Korean kingdoms in the third century.33 Himiko was reportedly guarded by a hundred men and attended by a thousand women and one solitary man. Apart from looking after the empress's food, the man was responsible for translation or communication, indicating the monopoly that men held in learning Japan's first written language, which was Chinese.34 We are told that the empress's brother assisted in the reign. Later a man succeeded her, but chaos ensued until a thirteen-year-old girl from Himiko's lineage was enthroned.

It seems that already during Himiko's time both matriarchal and patriarchal elements coexisted. The Chinese dynastic histories from the third to the eleventh centuries describe the land as having more women than men, with prominent men marrying four or five wives and commoners two or three. The society was thus polygamous, with men having more than one wife but the wife apparently having only one husband. When a man committed a minor crime, his wives and children were confiscated, indicating subordination of women. Matrilocality was practiced, as seen in the statement that fathers, mothers, and brothers (presumably from different mothers) had separate residences. It seems that a certain equality of the sexes was present during assemblies.

In spite of tributary relations with Japan as early as the first century, China had little knowledge of the history of the region. Of the six women rulers from 590 to 770, Chinese writers up to the eleventh century recorded only two (Suiko 推古 and Kōken/Shōtoku 孝謙 / 程德), in addition to the mythical Jingū in the third century. Errors abound in the accounts of the imperial succession and are only partially corrected in Songshi 宋史, written in the fourteenth-century.35 Fortunately, the inadequacies of the Chinese accounts can be addressed from Japanese sources.

Half of the Japanese rulers from 590 to 770 were women, most of whose reigns went beyond being simple caretaker governments.36 The lack of primogeniture and the power of the regent families made succession insecure, but one certainty was that all Japanese empresses were princesses of the imperial line.37 The six women (two of whom had two reigns each) were Suiko (r. 590–629), Kōgyoku/Saimei 皇極 / 齊明 (r. 642–45; r. 655–61), Jito 帝統 (r. 686–97), Genmei 元明 (r. 707–15); Genshō 元正 (r. 715–24), and Kōken/Shōtoku (r. 749–58; r. 764–70). All were princesses of the unbroken imperial line and all but Genshō had fathers who had been emperors (Genshō's mother was Genmei and her father was heir-apparent when he died). The first four, Suiko, Kōgyoku/Saimei, Jito, and Genmei, had husbands who had been emperors.

The practice of endogamous marriages within the imperial line had allowed marriage between half-siblings, aunts and nephews, and uncles and nieces in the patrilineal network. For example, Suiko married her half-brother who, like her full brother and another half-brother, had been emperors before her own enthronement. Jito married her paternal uncle, as did her paternal full sister and two half-sisters; another paternal half-sister (Genmei) married Jito's only son and gave birth to Genshō.38 Thus Jito's half-sister (Genmei) was also Jito's daughter-in-law, and her niece (Genshō) was also her granddaughter.39 All three women—Jito, Genmei, Genshō—ruled in the years from 686 to 724.

Of the six women, three had one marriage, Kōgyoku/ Saimei had two, and Genshō and Kōken/Shōtoku did

35 Songshi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 491.14130.
not marry and had no offspring. By the eighth century, Confucian influence from Korea and China might have put a stop to such close marriages within the paternal clan, thus accounting for the unmarried status of Gen-šō and Kōken/Shōtoku. Although unmarried and having taken Buddhist vows, Kōken/Shōtoku had a lover, a monk by the name of Dōkyō 道鏡 (d. 772), who caused a succession crisis just before her death in 770. She had promoted Dōkyō to the highest ministerial position but his ambitions to succeed her eventually failed—the primary reason, as announced by the oracle of the Hachiman kami 八幡神, being that he was not of imperial descent. While Chinese sources condemned the imperial ambitions of women as unnatural calamities, a thirteenth-century Japanese historian considered women rulers legitimate because both men and women came into the world the same way—through women’s wombs. But the approval came with an attached comment, perhaps a warning, that in the future women rulers would not be acceptable; the kami had decided that there should be henceforth no more women rulers.

Determining where loyalties were directed could be difficult with regard to Japanese cross-generational and endogamous imperial marriages. Society in the Heian period was matriarchal with both patrilineal and matrilineal descent, but paternal heredity governed succession and surname transmission. Matrilocality was likely practiced in the late Yamato and Nara periods, when husbands and wives set up different residences, with siblings residing with the mother. Half-siblings who had the same father could marry, but those with the same mother and who were raised together would be loyal to each other but could not marry. Indeed we observe an example of the complete lack of loyalty among half-siblings of the same father, when Jito, considered a good empress, successfully assisted her uncle/husband Temmu 天武 (673–85) in overthrowing his nephew—actually her own half-brother by a different mother—in 673.

We thus observe that a daughter of a Japanese emperor could rule only if she married another potential emperor (son or brother of an emperor); otherwise she must remain unmarried so that she not have heirs from outside the imperial lineage who might claim succession through her. But sons of emperors could be enthroned if they married outside the imperial line, and their sons could also succeed to the throne. This practice shows that patrilineal descent was more important in succession rights. Despite the remarkable number of woman rulers, Japanese society with its bilineal descent was not matriarchal. The men—regents, or uncles and nephews of the women emperors—still wielded political and social power. Male relatives from the regent families (Soga and Fujiwara) held the monopoly on official writing and were instrumental in importing Buddhism and Confucianism from Korea and China, thereby determining political and social standards. A case in point is the overshadowing of Suiko by her minister Prince Shōtoku 聖徳, who brought in the “Seventeen injunctions” that formulated the structure of the Japanese state. Prince Shōtoku was Suiko’s paternal nephew and maternal relative, since the mothers of both Suiko and Prince Shōtoku were from the powerful Soga family.

V. WOMEN RULERS IN SILLA KOREA

Of the regions discussed in this paper, Korea had the closest contact with Tang China and was considered the most sinicized and civilized, even though Chinese sources still lumped the Korean kingdoms with Japan as eastern barbarians. Through the first to the seventh centuries, Korea’s tribal states became organized into three contending states—Paekche, Koguryŏ, and Silla. Silla achieved unification in 668 with the military assistance of Tang China. Towards the end of the conflicts in the seventh century, it appears that all three Korean kingdoms were primarily patriarchal.

Relatively little ethnographic information relating to matriarchy in Korea is provided by the Chinese sources, but we do know that some matrilineal and matrilocal traditions persisted. In the early Koguryŏ kingdom, marriages were conducted at the woman’s natal home, where the woman and her children resided. But when the sons reached adulthood, they took up residence with the father. Endogamous marriage among the aristoc-
racy and levirate among the royalty (where the brother of a deceased marries the widow) seemed to have become much less common under the influence of Confucian morality. In Silla also the adoption of the Chinese patrilineal kinship system was not yet complete, as indicated by men being permitted to marry from within the paternal line—brother’s daughters, father’s sister, mother’s sister, and paternal cousins.48 Such marriages within the patrilineal line were considered incestuous by Chinese standards; later, they would be strictly forbidden in Korean society.

Silla women seemed to have had a relatively important social position, attributed to a residual trait of tribal society.49 Compared to Japan, Korea was more patriarchal in kinship and power structure, and like China, there were a number of empress dowagers who acted as regents for husbands and minor sons, but they had to rule from within, or “behind the curtain.” In Korean history there were three ruling queens, all from the Silla kingdom and none with children claiming succession through them. These women rulers belonged to the imperial hallowed-bone rank and became rulers only when the direct male line was exhausted. But some male opponents did use the excuse of gender anomaly to raise a rebellion against women rulers in 647. The earliest history of Korea, written in the twelfth century, was also critical of women on the throne, observing that it was fortunate indeed that Silla itself did not perish when the country was ruled by the sex that should not have left the inner quarters.50

The first two women monarchs of Silla showed remarkable strength while coping with a formidable problem—a kingdom threatened by the alliance of Paekche and Koguryó. Sŏndŏk 善德 (r. 632–47) became ruler when her father died without a son to inherit the throne.51 She was succeeded by her female cousin, Chindŏk 真德 (r. 647–54), daughter of her paternal uncle.

Known for her governing skills, Sŏndŏk was credited with some powers of predicting the future.52 In 643 when Paekche and Koguryó formed an alliance to eradicate Silla, Sŏndŏk requested and accepted Tang military assistance, but successfully thwarted the proposal of probably the strongest Tang emperor—Taizong (r. 626–49)—to allow his relatives to rule Korea until peace was restored. His reasoning was that the other two Korean kingdoms preyed on Silla because they took advantage of the fact that the ruler was a woman.53 During her short reign Sŏndŏk suppressed a devastating rebellion, sent educational missions to Tang China, and patronized Buddhist temples.

Under Sŏndŏk’s successor, Chindŏk, Silla continued to be embroiled in conflict with Koguryó and Paekche. While adopting Tang customs at court and sending frequent missions to Tang China, Chindŏk played a dominant role in appointing talented men such as the son of her female paternal cousin, Kim Chunch’u 金春秋, who succeeded her as King Muyŏl 武烈 (r. 654–61). King Muyŏl was actually the son of Sŏndŏk’s sister, who had married a paternal second cousin, whose father had also been the king of Silla. During this critical period of civil war, Silla emerged the victor, conquering Koguryó and Paekche with Tang help and then repelling Tang designs on the kingdom. The competent rule of both Sŏndŏk and Chindŏk contributed substantially to Silla’s eventual unification of the Korean peninsula.

Two and a half centuries later Chinsŏng 真聖 (r. 887–97) became the third female ruler of Silla when her half-brother died without an heir.54 By that time Silla was in decline and despite Chinsŏng’s efforts at controlling a chaotic situation, the economy collapsed, peasant rebellions spread, and the tax base diminished as refugees fled the disorder. The state was further threatened by the proliferation of local warlords. Korean historians blamed the disaster and the eventual fall of the dynasty on Chinsŏng’s bad government and alleged promiscuity. Like Japan’s Kōken/Shōtoku and Tang China’s Wu Zetian, Chinsŏng gave undeserved high positions to her lovers, including handsome young men. Chinsŏng was replaced by an imperial male, her full brother’s son by a secondary wife, but the fragile kingdom soon crumbled.

VI. CONSTRUCTING A “KINGDOM OF WOMEN” IN TANG CHINA

Much has been written about the unique position of Wu Zetian as the only ruling woman in Chinese history and the only woman to found a dynasty, the Zhou 周 (690–705).55 Nevertheless, after her death in 705, her

48 XTS, 220.6206.
50 Samguk sagi 三國史記 (Tokyo, 1928), 5.4–5.5.
51 Ibid., 5.1–7.
53 XTS, 220.6296.
54 Samguk sagi, 11.8–10.
55 On Wu Zetian’s legitimation, see, among many works, Antonino Forte, Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976); Richard W. Guisso, Empress Wu Tse-č’ien and the
daughter-in-law, Empress Wei 韋后,\textsuperscript{56} was unable to have her own daughter, Princess Anle 安樂, an emperor's daughter, appointed heir-apparent.\textsuperscript{57} When her husband died in 710, Empress Wei engineered a coup d'etat, hoping to rule after him. The plan backfired and she and her daughter Anle were executed. Their heads were hung in the market as a harsh memorial of their imperial ambitions. Wu Zetian's favorite daughter, Princess Taiping 太平, succeeded no better in her attempt to follow her mother's footsteps; she committed suicide in 713 on the orders of her paternal nephew, Xuanzong (r. 712–56).\textsuperscript{58}

Curiously, current scholarship has not pointed out that these powerful Tang women were approximately contemporary with other women rulers, such as Suiko, Kōgyoku/Saimei, Jito, Sōndōk, and Chindōk. Through tribute missions and envoys, Tang women were perhaps aware of some of these women rulers, who succeeded to the throne by virtue of their imperial blood. Princesses Taiping and Anle might have heard enviously of the Japanese and Korean princesses who legitimately became rulers. As princesses of the imperial line and daughters of emperors in an institutionalized patriarchy such as China, they did not get far in their bid for the positions of heir-apparent or emperor. Although women kept their father's surnames for the duration of their life, emperors' daughters and their offspring were constrained from succession by China's patrilineal descent system and patriarchal state.

Chinese empresses and empress dowagers could become regents for sick husbands or minor kings and rule “behind the curtain,” but to become a ruler was next to impossible. Wu Zetian and Empress Wei were wives of emperors and did not come from the imperial line, because Chinese kinship restrictions forbad marrying within the paternal family. Wu Zetian's elaborate legitimation process relied on support from Buddhist authorities, imperial rituals, and the declaration of a new dynasty. Intimidated by Wu Zetian's harsh methods that apparently included killing her own children, imperial princes and princesses soon petitioned to change their paternal surname of Li 李 to hers, Wu 武. But the Zhou dynasty was short-lived and after its demise the imperial line of Li, including the descendants of Wu Zetian's husband and sons, ruled for another two centuries. As the woman ruler of a new dynasty, it could be said that she constructed a nüwangguo, or kingdom officially ruled by a woman, within a heavily institutionalized patriarchy. However, traditional Chinese historians have condemned her short rule as an anomaly, a gender reversal and a violation of nature comparable to having hens instead of roosters crowing at dawn.\textsuperscript{59}

An obvious question is: why did the powerful Tang women not justify their claim to rule by reference to the Tibetan, Korean, and Japan cases? The answer might be just as obvious, too: it was unthinkable to emulate civilizations regarded as inferior and culturally indebted to the Chinese world. In this respect, it is worth noting that Japan's empress Kōken/Shōtoku in fact emulated Wu Zetian, including adopting four-character (instead of the usual two-character) reign-titles.\textsuperscript{60}

Wu Zetian was unique in politics and history as a woman ruler but she was neither a matriarch nor the head of a matriarchy. The society remained patrilocality and patrilocal, despite the institution of some policies that elevated the position of women, such as a lengthened mourning period for deceased mothers. Her is a case in point that simply having a woman on the throne does not signify female dominance, matrilineal descent, or residence with the mother's maternal clan. Wu Zetian became “emperor” but the continuation of a female line through her daughters seems never to have been an issue, as she was primarily concerned about whether or not to pass the throne to paternal cousins and nephews on her father's side. The power or dominance of the patriarchy was thus never seriously challenged by Wu Zetian's construction of her kingdom of Zhou.

In summary, we recall the claim that true matriarchy, in terms of the coexistence of actual female dominance, matrilineal descent, and matrilocality, has not existed in any society that can be confirmed by anthropological research. Of the kingdoms of women we have examined here, only the putative Tibetan kingdom seems to have been, in that sense, a true matriarchy, but anthropologists certainly cannot report on a community that

\textsuperscript{56} On Empress Wei, see JTS, 7.152; 51.2171–74; XTS, 76.3486–87.
\textsuperscript{57} On Princess Anle, see JTS, 51.2174; XTS, 83.3654–55.
\textsuperscript{58} On Princess Taiping, see JTS, 7.161; XTS, 83.3650–53.
\textsuperscript{59} Wu Zetian's tomb (Qianling 乾陵), shared with Gaozong 高宗 and located outside Xi'an, was petitioned for excavation in March 1995.
\textsuperscript{60} On comparing Wu with Kōken, see Brown, Ancient Japan, 46.
may have existed some thirteen centuries ago! Chinese writers mistook a woman ruler as indicative of a kingdom where women's power dominated over males, but Wu Zetian's own Zhou dynasty shows that in China the patriarchy remained unaffected. It seems ironic that matriarchies were imagined or fantasized by men living in patriarchies—not by women. This is certainly the case with the authors—exclusively male—who wrote the histories of, or imagined “kingdoms of women.” Talented, educated women such as Ban Zhao 班昭 of the Han dynasty and Song Ruoxin 宋若莘 of the Tang were preoccupied with composing precepts for women that reinforced their submissive role in the Confucian patriarchy. Neither they, nor women of the Song or as late as the seventeenth century, were at all interested in imagining kingdoms of women within or beyond their world.61