The Imagery of Cats in the Context of "Zizhi" and the Secret Bond between Politics and Gender: The Monitoring Mechanism and Gender Metaphor in the Reign of Wu Zetian

Yunbo Hao *

School of Culture and Communication, Zhejiang Wanli University, Ningbo, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 2023010922@zwu.edu.cn

Abstract. Wu Zetian as a female dominator, the status of women had risen significantly during her reign. Not only that, her political approach is also distinctive. This study can be understood by examining the descriptions of Wu Zetian and cruel officials in books such as The Study on the Course of writing *Tang Liu Dian* as well as the viewpoints of the authors of the relevant documents, reveal that Wu Zetian made full use of the image of “the cat” to serve her politics. The cat became an important part of the symbolic system of the Wu Zhou Dynasty regime. It theory of Five Elements, *The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*, was manifested in the monitoring mechanism, the legitimacy of the regime, and the process of power domestication. The viewpoint in these books and documents can be compared or corresponded with that of Sima Guang. When Sima Guang compiled *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, influenced by his political stance and historical background, he retained the record that Wu Zetian was afraid of cats but kept cats. It also elaborates on Wu Zetian’s appointment that “Enact policies by one's own decision; perceive clearly and judge wisely”, but overall, it is an opposition to female leaders. By studying the measures taken by Wu Zetian to consolidate her rule, the wisdom of female metaphorical governance is demonstrated.

Keywords: Wu Zetian, cat, cruel officials, female, *ZIZHITONGJIAN*.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the measures implemented during the regin of Wu Zetian to consolidate the female regime. *The “Book of Rites” states*, “When welcoming the cats, it is because they prey on field mice” [1]. This sentence reflects that cats are originally animals that hunt mice and protect stored grains. However, when history entered the reign of Wu Zetian, “the cat” became a metaphorical carrier for the operation of power. There are many reasons why "cats" are regarded as political symbols. Firstly, this is because of the Five Elements Theory of the Tang Dynasty. "Wu" belongs to "Metal" and "Li" belongs to "Wood". And Metal can overcome Wood. Empress Wu needed to use more concrete symbols to reinforce this logic. In the zodiac system, the rat has an invisible connection with the element of wood. Therefore, "the cat catching the mouse" was interpreted as a metaphor for "Wu Zhou defeating Li Tang", and the cat thus became an embodiment of the symbol of "the destiny belonging to Wu". Secondly, several studies have indicated that it is related to Buddhism. *The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra* contains a common saying: "Guarding the four directions for the cat" and "A cluster of lilies at the ridge top, with slender branches and leaves, blown by the wind, it seems about to fall, but it is supported by the parrot" [2]. "Parrot" and "Wu" have the same pronunciation in Chinese. Empress Wu Zetian was regarded as the incarnation of the Buddha, it led to the statement that "the rule of the Li family was unstable and needed the support of the Wu family." No matter what the reason is, it is all for the sake of politics. In the feudal society dominated by male authority, for a woman to become the emperor, not only didi she need outstanding political abilities, but also she had to establish a political order.so “cat” became a political symbol during the reign of Wu Zetian. It demonstrates the legitimacy of the female regime. “Cat” possesses both the “gentle and charming” feminine traits and the “aggressive hunting” instinct. This precisely aligns with Wu Zetian’s characteristics as a female ruler and her governing style of “using gentleness to overcome hardness”.

This research is of great significance for studying metaphorical governance. This article mainly unfolds from three aspects. Firstly, it presents the "monitoring mechanism" during the reign of Wu Zetian, which exerted a comprehensive control over politics and society. Secondly, this article will discuss the relationship between the political symbol of "cat" and the legitimacy of female governance, and reveal how the "female cat" image can break through the constraints of traditional inheritance system. Finally, this study discusses Wu Zetian's soft suppression of the ruled population in terms of public opinion, thereby demonstrating the comprehensive control exercised by the rulers of the Wu Zhou period over officials and the common people in both material and spiritual aspects. By applying the literature analysis method and conducting searches and readings of relevant materials and documents, The advantage of this method lies in its ability to conduct a thorough analysis of the control that the cruel officials exercised over the officials during the reign of Wu Zetian, as well as the efforts made by Wu Zetian to establish political legitimacy and the manifestation of the court's cat-training system. Through the study of these three aspects, let's see how "cats" manifest themselves in politics. At the same time, analyzing Sima Guang's description of Wu Zetian in "Zizhi Tongjian" and comparing the differences between it and the original text will be beneficial for the progress of the research. The ultimate research objective of this study is to explore, from the perspective of "Zizhi", the existence of a hidden connection between cats and politics during the Wu Zhou period, which ran through the entire process of power operation. From the "detective cat" title in the despotic governance system to the domestication system of cats in the imperial court, the biological characteristics of "cats" were systematically transformed into political language, and then manifested in the power struggles of the feudal society, taking the form of well-known animal fables.

2. Literature Review

Sun Yinggang and Zhu Xiaoxiao, in their research, took the "Great Cloud Canon Commentary" as the research object and explored it from three aspects: Breaking the conventional perception, it is pointed out that Wu Zetian regarded "cats" as a political symbol and compared herself to the guardian of the world for the Tang Dynasty. Based on the records in the book, explain the issues related to "Empress Wu's female body", and also explore the issue of Wu Zhou's governance and prosperity [2]. This document reflects Wu Zetian's political propaganda, breaks the one-sidedness of the Confucian historical perspective, and provides evidence for "the cat" as a symbol of Wu Zhou's politics. This paper uses the Buddhist concept of reincarnation to provide ideas for integrating the cat imagery into politics.

In his research, Han Sheng focused on the bureaucratic class and the imperial examination system. The bureaucratic class presented a "two-line, three-level" structure. In terms of the imperial examination system, it hindered the upward mobility of people from humble backgrounds [3]. This document provides a framework for the part of this study that examines the imperial cat-keeping system and its political influence. The "revenge" of the tyrannical officials against the imperial power reveals the essence of "eliminating the wild nature of the eunuchs" - it is to prevent the tool from turning against its user. This demonstrates the necessity for the rulers to tame the cruel officials, and also provides a perspective for this study - that the cruel officials are not merely a single monitoring tool.

Xu Shu evaluated the book "Studies on Wu Zetian" in her research. He examined the value of this book in the field of research on Wu Zetian, and pointed out that there is a "triumvirate" phenomenon in this field, namely traditional historiography, new historiography, and public historiography. At the same time, directly address three traditional historical controversies: "The Death of the Young Princess", "The Death of Shangguan Yi", and "The personal morality of Wu Zetian and the power during the High Tang period" [4]. Compare the traditional historical research with the "Zizhi" perspective provided in this study to offer a comparative idea.

Jiao Jianhui focused his research on the "Yedi Dao" statues in the Longmen Grottoes, exploring the connection between Buddhism and the integration with Chinese traditions [5]. Empress Wu Zetian relied on Buddhist theories to break free from the constraints of her female status and used auspicious signs to deepen political public opinion among the common people's beliefs. At the same time, the book provides a basis for the legitimacy of the regime. This viewpoint can further supplement the Buddhist basis for the "legitimacy construction of female regimes" in this study. It was also pointed out that Wu Zetian's use of Buddhism to establish her legitimacy can indirectly reveal the one-sidedness of Sima Guang's narrative perspective.

Dong Chunlin focused his research on *"The Chronicles of Court and Commoners"*. He examined it from four aspects: the controversy and positioning of the historical value, the narrative logic of Zhang Zuo's "cause-and-effect retribution", the "moderate praise and criticism" judgment, and its influence and significance [6]. This document differs from books such as *ZIZHITONGJIAN* and *The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*. It enriches the research materials and provides new ideas for research and thinking. The records of cruel officials can also be cross-referenced with the relevant records in *ZIZHITONGJIAN*. At the same time, balanced and appropriate evaluations can also demonstrate the limitations of the Confucian ethical perspective that "men are superior to women".

Dong Chunlin and Tang Lijun focused in their research on how moralists portrayed Wu Zetian as a figure who was "deviant from tradition" [7]. The moralists initially regarded Wu Zetian's assumption of the throne as a "very extraordinary event". then used the principles of *the Spring and Autumn Annals* to deny the legitimacy of the Wu Zhou regime, and finally labeled her as "an untrustworthy person". The viewpoints of the moralists in this document are in line with the "Zizhi" perspective. The essence of "extraordinary changes" and "A hen does not crow at dawn" is the same - both are judged based on gender.

Chen Weitao, in his research, focused on the aesthetic imagery of the Tang and Song dynasties as the core, and subsequently elaborated on it from the perspectives of poetry and prose, painting, and tombs [8]. This document demonstrates that cats in the Tang Dynasty had become an integral part of daily life and were influenced by Buddhism, with a high acceptance rate. It provides the basis for this study to explain the rationality of Wu Zetian's choice of cats as a political symbol.

Ji Min and Nie Dongsu, in their research, adopted a gender culture perspective to present the power struggles of Wu Zetian, the sole female emperor. Through symbols, time and institutional naming, as well as the Xianbei culture, they aimed to downplay the controversy surrounding female rulership [9]. This article also explains Wu Zetian from the perspective of gender. The literature examines the acceptance of the "cat image" through the lens of Xianbei culture, which contrasts with the content of this study's *ZIZHITONGJIAN*. This highlights its one-sidedness. The “Virgin Mary” image and the “Heaven-Building” power structure serve as a metaphor for women's governance, providing a way of thinking for the “gentle yet firm” approach to governing.

Ma Xuesong and Feng Yuan conducted their research from three aspects: logic, core elements, and national strength [10]. The section on national strength in this article provides a framework for this research. It is proposed that Wu Zetian consolidated her rule through methods such as the integration of the three religions. And in this study, “Guarding the four directions for the cat” is also a concrete manifestation of the infiltration of religion into the folk. This provides a solid basis for this study regarding the methods of maintaining political rule, and it is even more persuasive.

Xie Yifeng focused his research on the influence of Buddhism on the political axis of the capital city during the period from 220 to 907 [11]. During the reign of Wu Zetian, the typical layout pattern of placing buildings along the axis close to the palace was replaced by an atypical one. Establish Buddhism as the "state religion" and construct the construction of a series of imperial ritual buildings with Buddhist elements, etc., integrating female rulers, Buddhist Cakravartin-raja, and Maitreya Buddha. The literature demonstrates the role of religion in politics. Buddhist architecture and cats as symbols all serve the regime. Corresponding to the theme of "Metaphorical Governance" in this study, these measures provided guidance for the research. However, none of

them were reflected in the *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, and this also demonstrates the one-sidedness of the Confucian narrative.

3. The Animal Metaphor in the Monitoring Mechanism

The “monitoring mechanism” has a corresponding relationship with the characteristics of cats. Empress Wu Zetian established a secret investigation and public whistleblowing political supervision system to strengthen imperial power and prevent internal opposition. This monitoring system was closely linked and ingeniously metaphorically related to the image of the "cat" created at that time, which was mysterious, fierce, gentle yet harmful to others.

The “secret investigation and sudden attack” model formed by the “cruel officials” group is in contrast to the “silent observation and ambush hunting” approach of cats, creating a mirror image of each other. In traditional Chinese imagery, “eagle” represents bravery, “dog” represents loyalty, and “bird” represents freedom. However, later scholars chose the “cat” as the informer, and there was indeed a reason for this choice.

First, the relevant account is provided from Wang Zhongluo’s “*History of Sui, Tang, and the Five Dynasties*”:

Zhou Xing once said, “The ancient experts at catching thieves did not kill the leaders but made the criminals surrender and disperse on their own. Today’s informants do not investigate the main perpetrators but keep spreading the story endlessly”. His followers were stationed in various prefectures and counties, specifically looking for officials' mistakes. Even the slightest faults would be reported immediately [12].

The following is the relevant record from Lu Siumian's “*History of Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties*”:

The subsequent punishments actually began during the dethronement of Emperor Zhongzong... As Su Jingde rebelled, the situation became even more serious. Therefore, an anonymous submission box was set up in the imperial court to receive confidential reports. There were informants, and they were all given official escorts. The prefectures and counties escorted them to the capital, and they were housed in the official guesthouses. Those who were satisfactory were awarded titles and rewards to encourage them. Cruel officials then took advantage of the situation to rise up. Later cruel officials are mentioned in *the Old Annals* under the Biographies section. There are a total of eleven such individuals, namely Li Junchen, Zhou Xing, Fu Youyi, etc. This merely refers to those who were later recorded in history. It does not imply that they were the most cruel among all [13].

The two scholars described in the book that Wu Zetian established a surveillance system centered around cruel officials. It reflects the “secrecy” and “severity” of the tyrannical officials’ supervision. By means such as surveillance through copper boxes, officials are kept in a state of constant mental tension, highlighting the combination of psychological tactics and dynamic monitoring.

Active at night and vigilant during the day, it waits for an opportunity to attack. This sentence not only describes the hunting habits of cats, but also vividly demonstrates the complete and standardized intelligence-gathering process of an informer. “Active at night” can be understood in terms of time. During the reign of Wu Zetian, "nighttime informants" became a common occurrence. Since the night is the period when private communication is at its most relaxed, informants often gather information at night or place letters in the copper ballot box at night to avoid being detected. This is similar to how cats choose to be active at night to reduce the risk of being caught in hunting. "Daytime investigation" refers to the process of submitting the evidence of an official's crimes during the day. In *ZIZHITONGJIAN - Records of the Tang Dynasty, Volume 19, it states*, “All the circumstances and arrangements were detailed and well-structured, with every aspect having its own sub-issues” [14]. This statement can demonstrate the “legitimacy” of the action, fulfilling the requirements of “a complete chain of evidence” and “ample evidence”. Not only that, but the cruel officials and the cats also launched their attacks on the prey in exactly the same way: “Taking

advantage of opportunities to attack" refers to the cruel officials who, like cats, observe the habits of the mice, and closely monitor the words and deeds of the officials over a long period of time. When improper behavior is detected, they carry out a "sudden attack" to directly arrest, interrogate and convict the officials, which is like a cat catching a mouse - fast, accurate and ruthless. *ZIZHITONGJIAN* records "First, forge a letter of apology from Ren Ji and others, and have it signed" [14]. This is sufficient evidence to show that when Di Rengui was imprisoned, Li Junchen forced him to confess and did not give him any opportunity to defend himself. The existence of these cruel officials is not to supervise the operation of power or enforce justice, but to create terror. By means of torture and intimidation, the resistance of the officials was crushed, and the opponents were deterred from taking action, achieving the goal of "maintaining power through fear".

It is recorded in *ZIZHITONGJIAN* that Duchess Xiao cursed, "I wish I was born as a cat and A Wu as a rat. May they always strangle each other's throats!" [14]. From then on, no cats were kept in the palace. Sima Guang believed that this was the reason why Wu Zetian disliked cats, but it was not related to her aim of consolidating her political position at that time. This also demonstrates the limitations of narrative within the "Zizhi" perspective. The purpose of Sima Guang was "to draw lessons from past events and apply them to governance." Influenced by Confucian culture, he merely regarded the "ban on cats" as a personal decision. Instead, he paid more attention to the warning of Wu Zetian's appointment of cruel officials to hold power, emphasizing the mistakes and shortcomings of Wu Zetian's reign.

The surveillance system during the Wu Zhou period was established by Wu Zetian to eliminate rivals and consolidate her rule. It was a comprehensive mechanism that combined official supervision with the intimidation tactics of harsh officials, and it had a significant control over officials and society. In a short period of time, it significantly strengthened the autocratic monarchy and centralization of power. At the same time, it also demonstrated Wu Zetian's political tactics as a female ruler in breaking through traditional gender power structures.

4. Cats and the Legitimacy of Female Politics

The changing image of cats became a manifestation of the legitimacy of female governance during the reign of Wu Zetian. *The "Book of Rites" states*, "When welcoming the cats, it is because they prey on field mice" [1], It is believed that cats are animals that protect grain stores. However, during the reign of Wu Zetian, the "black cat holding the calendar" was regarded as a sign of the change of dynasty. "calendar" refers to the fact that it is recognized by Heaven as conforming to the order of time for governance, and it is the core symbol of the legitimacy of the regime. And in the Tang Dynasty, "black cat" specifically referred to female black cats. The change in the image of these cats overturned the traditional male-dominated perception, transforming the female cats into symbols of destiny. The narrative of " black cat holding the calendar " is different from the unusual celestial phenomena that were commonly described in history, such as "the emperor's birth being influenced by divine intervention from heaven". Instead, it is the active "navigating through the heavens" of a female black cat. It endowed female rulers with the subjective initiative to actively accept the mandate of heaven, rather than the passive acceptance of male rulers. At the same time, this narrative also concretizes the concept of "receiving the will of heaven" into the story of "animals passing on the calendar", making it easier for the common people to understand and accept. In addition to the auspicious symbol of "the mysterious cat holding the calendar", *"The Departed Cat Guards the Four Quarters for You" — Wu Zetian in Yishu (Commentary) on the Great Cloud Scripture and the Divine Emperor's Mandate* also provided an explanation in the *The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra* regarding how it was interpreted that Wu Zetian was a female figure, "The main themes are as follows: On the one hand, it argues the rationality of its claim to rule the world through women by drawing on traditional Yin-Yang and divination thought. On the other hand, it uses the Buddhist theory of reincarnation and transmigration to inform the public that Wu Zetian was not truly a woman; her female form was merely a convenient disguise" [2]. By applying

the Buddhist theory of reincarnation and transmigration, it is emphasized that Wu Zetian was not a typical female figure, but a Bodhisattva, using her female form to educate and enlighten all beings. This also demonstrates that Wu Zetian not only explained it from the perspective of "Heaven", but also used Buddhist scriptures to explain the legitimacy of the female regime, making it understandable to the common people at the level of knowledge.

Sima Guang was during the period of the revival of Confucian ethics in the Northern Song Dynasty. During this period, the traditional Confucian ethical norms of "men being superior to women" were adhered to. Therefore, in *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, he concealed the " black cat holding the calendar " theory and included *The Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra written* by Luo Binwang, using the works of Luo Binwang to express dissatisfaction with Wu Zetian's act of establishing the empire as a woman. He quoted the famous saying from *The Book of Documents: Mushi* : "A hensheep does not dawn, the dawn of a hensheep is the beginning of chaos for the family." from his book. [15] Sima Guang compared " black cat holding the calendar " to "the hens crowing at dawn", and believed that "men are the yang, women are the yin" and "men govern the outside, women govern the inside" are "the laws governing the operation of the universe". Even though Wu Zetian was believed to have the " black cat holding the calendar " as her destiny, she still transcended the ethical norms and disrupted the gender order. Her legitimacy is invalid, and her governance has been labeled as "chaotic governance". Although Sima Guang did not agree with Wu Zetian's assumption of the throne in *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, However, he stated that "Empress Wu Zetian wielded the power of rewards and punishments to rule the country, making all decisions based on her own will. She was discerning and decisive, and thus even the virtuous and talented individuals of that time were willing to serve her." He affirmed this political tactic of Empress Wu Zetian. Sima Guang had both positive and negative views of Wu Zetian. Overall, from the perspective of the goal of *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, Sima Guang did not approve of Wu Zetian's assumption of the throne. He believed that "ethical legitimacy" was more important than "the symbol of destiny".

Affected by the changes of the times, Wu Zetian transformed the cat imagery and portrayed herself as an assistant and helper to the Tang Dynasty. She also attributed divine will to her regime, thereby legitimizing her rule and strengthening the public's political recognition of her regime. However, the Song Dynasty was not accepted by Sima Guang, who was deeply influenced by Confucianism.

5. The System of Keeping Cats in the Court and Its Political Educational Function

During the Wu Zhou period, the cat-keeping system in the court concealed the rulers' attempt to tame the officials. Cats are usually regarded as the "cat spirits" or creatures that are difficult to tame. And Wu Zetian established a "cat farm" within the Director of the Secretariat (Shao Fu Jian) to tame the wild nature of cats. This was actually a metaphor for political control.

Tang Liu Dian records that the "Cat Farm" was established under the Director of the Secretariat (Shao Fu Jian) of Tang Liu Dian, the Cat Farm is equipped with "two professional cat keepers and over thirty cats under their control" [16]. The process of selecting and raising cats is complete and systematic, presenting a kind of professional management, just like the standardized control over officials. The Cat Farm classified the types of cats, including imperial cats for the court and intelligent cats for government offices. This can be regarded as a functional division of officials during the reign of Wu Zetian, combining the functions of cats with the political functions of the officials.

The traditional image of cats as "unmanageable" corresponds to the trait of political opponents who "refused to submit to the Wu Zhou regime". The Cat Farm is specifically responsible for "selecting cats, training cats and castrating cats". And "castrating cats" means that all cats entering the imperial court must be castrated. The aim is to "eliminate the wildness and maintain the peace of the inner sanctum." From the biological perspective of cats alone, eliminating their wild nature

and transforming cats from potential threats into controllable pets, this also reflects Wu Zetian's process of domesticating the power of officials. Empress Wu Zetian suppressed the Li Tang nobility and prominent families through ruthless officials, thereby depriving them of their political power. For ordinary officials, the copper ballot box is used to monitor their words and deeds. These measures are like "castrating a cat", eliminating the most crucial "core" and thereby eradicating their wild nature. This measure ostensibly achieved the goal of "domestic peace", but in reality, it brought about peace in the court and eliminated all forces that threatened the Wu Zhou regime.

These cats can be regarded not only as political rivals, but also as cruel officials like Lai Junchen and Zhou Xing, and their existence is also for the sake of "peace and stability". Although they launched attacks against the Li Tang royal family and officials who were dissatisfied with Wu Zetian during the early period of her reign, their channels for reporting information, judicial powers, etc. were all granted by Wu Zetian and were always subordinate to her authority. However, when the actions of the cruel officials aroused dissatisfaction among the rulers and members of the imperial court, and even posed a threat to the rulers' imperial power, the rulers would punish them. It is recorded in *ZIZHITONGJIAN* that "Junchen gathered unruly individuals and falsely accused the innocent. He bribed generously and the number of his bribes was immense. The souls of the victims blocked the roads. He was a traitor to the country and it was not worth lamenting." [14]. This description indicates that the cruel officials were executed by Wu Zetian on the charge of "tyranny", and the reason for their execution was that they posed a threat to the imperial power. In "The Bureaucratic Class and the Imperial Examination System during the Reign of Wu Zetian", the nature of the harsh officials is analyzed: The "rebellious official clique" should not be simply dealt with as an extension of the imperial power. When the process of informing and purging was fully underway, the vast number of cases was beyond the control of the monarch…Their directionality transformed into a powerful whip and a spiritual conductor's baton, compelling and dictating the ideological concepts, governance behaviors and value orientations of the bureaucratic ranks. This, in turn, deeply influenced the masses with low educational levels, shaping the prevailing social atmosphere throughout the world [3]. In this situation, the desires of the cruel officials grew stronger and stronger. They prioritized their own interests and shaped society according to their own ideas. However, in such circumstances, it was inevitable that it would conflict with the rule of the monarch. The rulers' utilization and punishment of harsh officials also demonstrate the "cat rejection effect", Empress Wu Zetian began by heavily employing cruel officials and even went so far as to overlook the legal boundaries and tacitly allow them to eliminate those who posed a threat. This kind of "power handover" made the cruel officials believe that they had become the "confidants" of the monarch. This led to the execution of officials like Ju Junchen, serving as a warning to the cruel officials' group. This prevented them from abusing their power any longer. They could only act according to Wu Zetian's demands, which was more in line with the interests of the ruling class. Therefore, whether it was political rivals or cruel officials, their subjugation followed the logic of "subjugation leads to survival". Only through subjugation could the regime be consolidated. If they "did not obey", they would be executed.

The cat-rearing system and cat-training practices in the court of Wu Zetian were political tactics that revealed the bigger picture through small details. From "the cat's return to its wild nature" to the "reduction of officials' power", to the cat's survival logic and the officials' fate logic, each aspect implicitly contains thoughts on political domestication. This use of animals to symbolize national affairs was Wu Zetian's wisdom as a female ruler, and it is also a classic example of "metaphorical governance" in the ancient Chinese system of power operation.

6. Conclusion

Studies have shown that during the reign of Wu Zetian, the concept of cats was incorporated into political operations, becoming a political symbol that ran through the monitoring mechanism, the construction of political legitimacy, and political domestication. This narrative exhibits a complex

feature characterized by a core of symbolic metaphor and tension arising from gender breakthrough. On the one hand, politics is made concrete through the "cat", and the detective logic of the tyrannical officials is linked to the biological characteristics of the cat. On the other hand, " black cat holding the calendar " breaks away from the traditional male-dominated "divine mandate perception" model. It endowed female rulers with the initiative to assume the mandate of heaven, becoming the auspicious basis for the transformation of dynasties during the Wu Zhou period. And this image was criticized as "a hen leading the roosting chickens" within the framework of Sima Guang's "Zizhi Tongjian", yet it demonstrated a challenge to the gender power order. Not only that, the cat-keeping system in the imperial court during the reign of Wu Zetian also contained an implicit metaphor of political control. The specialized management of the "Cat Farm" corresponds to the standardized control over officials. "Removing the wildness from the castrated cat" symbolizes the deprivation of power from political rivals and officials. Tyrants and political opponents are all like tame cats. This was established to consolidate power. Eventually, due to its "wild" nature, it was eliminated and the goal of "peace in the court" was achieved.

In Chinese traditional culture, "metaphor" has become an extremely important technique. Certain animals or plants have acquired special meanings, and cats have been endowed with a mysterious aura that connects to the spiritual world of ghosts and gods. They are also regarded as symbols of "evil". However, during the reign of Wu Zetian, cats were not only a symbol of monitoring power and a carrier of the legitimacy of the regime, but also a metaphor for political domestication. The multiple application of its imagery not only showcases the ancient wisdom of "using metaphor to govern the country", but also reflects the breakthrough and controversy of female governance within the traditional ethical framework, becoming an important window for understanding the political operation of the Wu Zhou period and the tension of gender power. This research provides a great deal of valuable reference significance for future studies in this field. However, the current research has not compared it with other periods when politics was dominated by women. Future research can compare the political operation systems during the periods when women held political positions, such as during the reign of Empress Lu of the Han Dynasty and Empress Feng of the Northern Wei Dynasty, and analyze the common logical patterns and different strategic approaches employed by female political participants in "metaphorical governance" under different historical contexts.

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