



***The Women Who Ruled China:
Buddhism, Multiculturalism, and
Governance in the Sixth Century***

By Stephanie Balkwill

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The Women Who Ruled China: Buddhism, Multiculturalism, and Governance in the Sixth Century. By Stephanie Balkwill. University of California Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-0520401815. 272 pp. E-book available open access.



Stephanie Balkwill's first monograph, *The Women Who Ruled China*, makes a significant intervention in Chinese history, in Buddhist Studies, and, of course, in the field of global monarchy. At its core, this is a detailed biography of an understudied female monarch from the Northern Wei dynasty: the Empress Dowager Ling (d. 528), who ruled in her own right after the death of the Emperor Xuanwu (r. 499–515); who attempted to place her own granddaughter on the throne as China's first female Emperor (*di*); and who, Balkwill argues, therefore served as a precursor and possible inspiration for the better-known female Emperor Wu Zhao (r. 624–705). On this biographical basis, Balkwill makes arguments that cut across disciplinary, geographic, and temporal boundaries.

Chapter One presents vital historical and cultural context, focusing on the Empress Dowager's capital, Luoyang, and the multicultural origins of the Northern Wei dynasty. Although largely Sinicised by the time of the Empress Dowager (23), the Northern Wei traced its origins back to the ethnically and culturally distinct Taghbach people of Inner Asia. Chapter Two provides a new translation and close reading of the biography of the Empress Dowager presented in the *Book of the Wei*, the standard source for modern histories of the period. For reasons discussed further below, Balkwill largely rejects the account of the *Book of the Wei* as an accurate witness of the Empress Dowager's life and argues instead for a wider range of evidentiary sources.

The remaining chapters demonstrate the merits of such alternative sources. Chapter Three turns to the tomb biography of Empress Dowager Ling's aunt, Sengzhi, a Buddhist nun who first introduced the young Ling to the imperial court. Balkwill is able to reconstruct key elements of Sengzhi's life: from her ordination status, likely in the Dharmaguptaka lineage, and recognition as a *dharma* master or *fashi* (94–95); to her administrative and courtly positions, through which she was able to make the crucial introduction of the future Empress Dowager (102–103). Chapter Four reexamines the circumstances under which the Empress Dowager attempted to install her own granddaughter as China's first female Emperor. Balkwill argues that this was not—as the *Book of the Wei* would have it—evidence of her growing recklessness, but rather “a political act legitimised through explicitly Buddhist notions of kingship” (139). Chapter Five draws

on a wide range of sources to explore the political (and religious) turmoil of the sixth century, and to ultimately make the case that Buddhism did not provide “salvation” but rather “opportunity” (166).

This radical reinterpretation of the Empress Dowager’s life would, in its own right, constitute a valuable contribution to our knowledge of premodern China and of global practices of sovereignty. Atop biographical foundation, however, Balkwill makes two yet-more-sweeping methodological and theoretical arguments.

The first of these arguments is evidentiary. Biographies of the Empress Dowager Ling have overwhelmingly and uncritically accepted retrospective dynastic histories—primarily the *Book of the Wei*—as accurate witnesses of the Empress Dowager’s life. In Chapter Two, Balkwill demonstrates how thoroughly unsound this approach is. Dynastic histories sought to make sense of the world through an explicitly Confucian lens, and therefore to convince their leaders of the perils of female (and “foreign”) rule; these histories therefore present the Empress Dowager’s reign as a case study in such perils. This is a politically biased account, in other words, which cannot be taken as historical fact. In place of such sources, Balkwill argues convincingly for what she terms a “Buddhist feminist historiography” (8), which entails taking seriously sources like the “entombed biographies” inscribed in or near funerary sites by those who knew the deceased in their lives (see particularly 89). Balkwill stresses that such entombed biographies still do not constitute “unproblematic historical fact,” and must be read alongside other historical data to properly contextualise them (90); nonetheless, they provide valuable insights not available to historians who focus only on official dynastic histories. This argument will, I suspect, ring very true for historians of global queenship. It recalls Kathleen Nolan’s rejection, in her *Queens of Stone and Silver* (2009), of “reading women’s lives, especially powerful women’s lives, through the words of suspicious male monastics,” in favour of attending to material and aesthetic artefacts created by those women themselves. *The Women Who Ruled China* provides a powerful complementary case study, which will be useful to all of us working against androcentric biases in our sources.

Balkwill’s second argument is theoretical: she calls our attention to the applicability of contemporary gender theory to a context as apparently distant as sixth-century China. From her close reading of such a wide range of sources, and the cautious application of contemporary anthropological accounts (particularly at 118–119), she is able to identify three distinct models of valorised femininity available to the Empress Dowager, which help to explain her unprecedented model of rulership. As a Sinicised

dynasty, the Northern Wei would have been very familiar with Confucian models of femininity as properly subordinate to men (fathers, husbands, and exclusively male rulers)—the models imposed on the Empress Dowager in later sources like the *Book of the Wei*. But, as Balkwill expands on in Chapter Four, Taghbach women seem to have more frequently enjoyed political and even martial roles (exemplified by the famous Hua Mulan), and were perhaps even open to a degree of gender fluidity unlinked to reproductive roles. While the Dowager Empress was likely ethnically Han (54), she would have been familiar with these Taghbach exemplars, and—to the great chagrin of her Confucian biographers—is said to have herself been a keen archer (38). Finally, Balkwill argues that Buddhism offered yet further opportunities for women in the Northern Wei: both “...access to elite social networks to which they otherwise had no access” (80) and “...mechanisms by which women could be praised for their individual merit outside the patrilineal family” (90). Balkwill reads Buddhist texts on women’s bodies, and on the future Buddha Maitreya reborn in female form, as political texts available to the Empress Dowager—texts which she seems to have taken up. It was this intermixing of Han, Taghbach, and Buddhist cultural forms, Balkwill argues, that “rearticulated” the social position of women in the Northern Wei period and thus made possible the unprecedented positions of Ling and her granddaughter (40). Balkwill’s work is therefore a model of how we might treat the intersection of gender dynamics, religious affiliations, and political expediency in premodern contexts.

A great strength of Balkwill’s work is the sheer lucidity of her prose, which makes it easy and even enjoyable for non-specialists to follow her argument through the nuanced context of sixth-century China. *The Women Who Ruled China* would be as at home in a Sinologist’s bookshelf as it might be on the reading list of an undergraduate survey of global monarchy. California University Press has generously made this important work open access through their Luminos imprint, making it accessible to all readers. I cannot recommend enough that all those interested in royalty, gender, and religion take advantage of this accessibility.

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