

WU ZETIAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE
CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE TANG DYNASTY

By

Rui Wang

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Wu Zetian's Contribution to the Cultural Development of the Tang Dynasty

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This thesis represents cross-section of sources on a selection of major topics and issues related to Wu Zetian's policies and accomplishments in promoting the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty. Her contribution to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty can be summarized into several aspects: increased the number of hiring sources, which drew a larger talent pool of potential candidates; increased the importance of the Imperial Examination System, and made bold innovations to it; selected scholars as officials according to the effectiveness of their essays and emphasized their literary accomplishments and ability to identify, relate and solve pertinent societal issues; broke the traditionalist's hold on power and influence, and integrated people of various backgrounds and cultures; summoned scholars to compile reference book, which facilitated cultural prosperity, promoted Buddhism and other religions simultaneously. All of those bold reforms enabled a paradigm shift that fostered an economically, socially and culturally rich society to flourish and prosper.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Throughout China's feudal history, the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) is a significant historical period for its triumphant civilization. As one of the world's three Axial Ages¹, the Tang Dynasty had achieved significant contributions to the world's cultural development. The period of Wu Zetian's reign was the transitional period from the Early Tang Dynasty(618-712 AD) to the Great Tang Dynasty(713-765 AD), and the reign of this Empress was so long that it covered nearly one quarter of the duration of the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, it is important to be cognizant of the historical influence of Wu Zetian (624-705AD) had on Chinese history.

Wu Zetian is one of the historical figures who produced the greatest impact and brought about the greatest debate in the Chinese history. From a *Cairen*² of Emperor Taizong (599-649 AD) to the Empress of Emperor Gaozong (628-683 AD), this brilliant woman intervened in the political affairs of the imperial court, first in partnership with her husband Emperor Gaozong, later as defacto regent of her son, Emperor Zhongzong (656-710 AD), and finally as China's sole ruler in both face and name. As the only female emperor in the Chinese history to ascend the imperial throne, she produced great impact on the development of Chinese history. In a feudal male-dominant society, can the reign of Empress Wu be seen as a historical progress or regression back to the remote antiquity? During the process in which she captured the highest state power, she took use of this apex power and arbitrarily slaughtered

1 The three Axial Ages: with the other two being the Ancient Egypt and Ancient India of the same period.

2 *Cairen*: one of the nine concubines of the fifth rank.

many innocents. Is this merely a trivial fault among her many merits, or a huge devastation to the society? These types of controversial debates exist throughout the Chinese history.

This paper attempts to explicit, from various historical resources, Wu Zetian's great contribution to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty. Wu Zetian was born in the 7th year of the Wude Period (618-626 AD) of Gaozu(566-635 AD)'s reign, and in the 11th year of the Zhenguan Period (627-649 AD). When she was fourteen years old, she was chosen and recruited as *Cairen*, the fifth-grade concubine, by Emperor Taizong³. Many years' of life in the imperial court and the brilliant social development during the Zhenguan Period(627-649 AD) produced a far-reaching influence on her, and laid a solid foundation for her upcoming political dominance. Secondly, due to Wu Zetian's relatively high cultural taste and her passion for culture, she may not merely follow the cultural traditions from the Zhenguan Period, but contributed further innovations and developments to them. Thus it is the very first topic that enters our spectrum of discussion in this paper.

1.1 Cultural development during the Zhenguan Period

The establishment of Sui (581-618 AD) and Tang(618-907 AD) Dynasties marks the end of the over 400 years' split and turbulence, and the kingdom was unified to an unprecedented extent. In the process of establishing the Tang Dynasty, Li Shimin (Emperor Taizong, 599-649 AD) and his father (Emperor Gaozu, 566-635AD) saw

³ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 “Old Tang History” , Vol. 6, *Biography of the Queen of Heaven Zetian*則天皇后本記, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975.

with their own eyes the greatness of peasant revolt, and they had to establish trust and cooperation with people after their own dynasty is established. Li Shimin once said to his son: "Boat is compared to the ruler of a country, and water to the people; the water can carry the boat, but it can also capsize it 舟所以比人君，水所以比黎庶；水能載舟，亦能覆舟”⁴ Learning from the lessons of the previous dynasty's ruin due to political corruption and harsh treatment of people, the two emperors adopted a series of measures to alleviate social conflicts between different classes. In terms of politics, they ceased military activities and preparations and promoted cultural development, rectified the administration of officials of the imperial service, as well as expanded the imperial examination system, so that the society was stabilized within a short period of time. In terms of economy, they adopted the Equal Field System and system of levying taxes and corvée to promote the equal distribution of land, thus giving land back to peasants. They also started the construction of irrigation infrastructure, expanded farm fields and alleviated peasants' tax burdens, so that the society quickly experienced an economic boom. Especially when Li Shimin (599-649 AD) held the throne, he further promoted the policy of "ceasing military activities and preparations and promoting cultural development", and at the same time, advocated social achievements in culture and education. As a result, China's feudal age came to an unprecedented level of prosperity during the Zhenguan Period (627-649 AD). The cultural development of Zhenguan Period can be summarized in the following five aspects:

⁴ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑒, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Record 8 of the Tang Dynasty, 192.

Advocating Confucianism and embracing a pluralistic cultural development policy

Since the Han Dynasty(202 BC-220 AD), Confucian doctrine sunk into the long-standing debate between present and ancient study for the legitimacy of Confucian classics. Meanwhile, the rise of the study of theology since the end of the West Han Dynasty(202 BC-9 AD), along with the emergence of the study metaphysics in the Wei and Jin Dynasties(220-589 AD), had all greatly weakened the dominance of Confucius ideology in the Chinese society. In addition, because of the endless chaos caused by war, the Confucian doctrine became a subject carried on by generations of disciples from their teachers among the popular communities.

Since Emperor Taizong seized the throne, he realized the importance of the Confucius studies, and declared to his officials at the royal court that: "What I love most the Tao (moral law) of the ancient sages Emperors Yao, Shun, the King of Zhou Dynasty(1046-256 BC) and Confucius. In my opinion, their Tao is like the wings to birds and water to fish, they cannot live without, even for a single moment. 朕所好者，唯堯、舜、周、孔之道，以為如鳥有翼，如魚有水，失之則死，不可暫無耳"⁵. Therefore he advocated the Confucius studies throughout the whole country, which aimed at re-establishing the dominance of Confucius in the cultural communities. Firstly, during second year of the Zhenguan Period, Emperor Taizong "esteemed Duke Zhou as the ancient sage, and for the first time established

⁵ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑒, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Record 8 of the Tang Dynasty, p.515.

Confucianism as the national studies.以周公為先圣，始立孔子廟堂于國學"⁶ In the fourth year of the Zhenguan Period, he ordered various prefectures and counties to construct Confucian temples to allow local people to offer sacrifices in such temples. In the eleventh year of the Zhenguan Period, he further issued an imperial decree, stated that the whole country shall regard Confucius as "Xuan Fu宣父"⁷. In addition, a Confucian temple had been constructed in the Yanzhou Prefecture, where he designated twenty households to maintain the temple, to demonstrate his worship to the Confucius values and doctrines. Secondly, the imperial cabinet integrated aspects of Confucianism to various aspects of culture and law. While canonizing famous masters of Confucius learning and Confucius classics in the past age, Emperor Taizong also paid great attention to promote his contemporary Confucius masters. According to historical records, Emperor Taizong “set up the Hongwen Imperial College to the left of the main hall of the imperial palace, where the selected best scholars in Confucius studies taught the Confucius classics and discussed political issues.于正殿之左，置弘文學館，精選天下文儒學士，講論經義，商略政事”⁸ At the same time, he gathered Confucian scholars from all over the country, and promoted those who were proficient in more than one of the Confucian classics to high and important positions.⁹ Lastly, the literati scholars from the Imperial Academy committed to the integration of the Confucian classics and Confucian Studies.

⁶ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 “Old Tang History”, Vol. 189, *Biographies of the Confucians-I*, No.139.

⁷ Ouyang Xiu, et al. *Xin Tang Shu*新唐書, “New Tang History”, Vol.15, Record of Rites and Music-V. 禮樂志五.

⁸ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 “Old Tang History”, Vol. 189, *Biographies of the Confucians-I*.

⁹ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 “Old Tang History”, Vol. 189, *Biographies of the Confucians-I*.

Addressing the problem of the differences in "variations of many Confucian teaching 師說多門"¹⁰, Emperor Taizong(599-649 AD) had a unified *Revision and Annotation of Five Classics* compiled and published throughout the country for people to study for examinations. In addition, he also organized scholars from the Imperial Academy to compile a unified interpretation for the Five Classics, entitled *Wu Jing Ding Ben* 五經定本 "*The Official Interpretation of the Five Classic*", and ordered people in the country to study and disseminate. In short, the compilation of *The Official Interpretation of the Five Classics* marked the unification of the studies of Confucian classics of the northern and southern parts of the country, and Confucian philosophy finally had "uniformed domination定于一尊"¹¹ in the country.

Though he advocated Confucian studies and revered Confucius, Emperor Taizong also respected Buddhism and Taoism, and allowed the coexistence of various schools of thought. Although he claimed that "what I love most the Tao (moral law) of the ancient sage Emperors Yao, Shun, as well as the teachings of the King of Zhou Dynasty and Confucius 朕今之所好，惟在堯舜之道，周孔之教"¹² He praised Taoism as "the essential point of Lao-tzu's theory is pristine and void,老君垂范，義在清虛" and he recognized Lao-tzu as the "royal ancestor皇祖"¹³. Despite having the esteemed Confucian teaching as the basis for national academic curriculum, Emperor

¹⁰ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑒, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Vol. 192, Record 8 of the Tang Dynasty.

¹¹ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 189, *Biographies of the Confucians-I*.

¹² Wu Jing吳兢, *Zhenguan Zheng Yao*貞觀政要, "the Record of Zhenguan Political History", Vol.6, *Shen Suo Hao*慎所好.

¹³ Dong Gao董誥, *Quan Tang Wen*全唐文, Vol. 6, Ling Daoshi zai Seng qian Zhao令道士在僧前詔.

Taizong also tolerated the Buddhism which originated from India. When Xuanzang¹⁴ returned with huge volumes of *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* from India, Emperor Taizong came out of the imperial palace to welcome him, and the entire population of the city came out to see this grand scene. He ordered Xuanzang to translate the sutra classics that he brought back, and wrote an introduction to Xuanzang's translated sutra entitled "Sheng Jiao Xu 圣教序" "Introduction to the Sacred Teachings". Emperor Taizong's open cultural policies broke the rigidity of imperial rulers since the Han Dynasty who "venerated Confucianism as the only ideology 獨尊儒術", which facilitated in broadening people's cultural horizons, this made the cultural scene of the Zhenguan Period(627-649 AD) both dynamic and spirited.

Promoting historiography cultural classics

Compiling books can be seen as the foundation of cultural development. The initial compilation of books and historical records had always been regarded as significant to the cultural and educational promotion. After Emperor Taizong (599-649 AD) seized the throne, he attached much importance to the compilation of books and historical records, and made great achievements in this field.

First, the emperor's view on the importance of compiling books was attributed to the chaos caused by wars as at the end of the Sui Dynasty(581-618 AD), which resulted in extremely severe loss and damage of classical books. As early as the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), Emperor Gaozong Li Yuan adopted the

¹⁴ Xuanzang(602-664): a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveler, and translator that brought up the interaction between China and India in the early Tang period.

advice from important officials, paid high prices for lost old books, and organized scholars to verify and rewrite the books. After Emperor Taizong (599-649 AD) took the imperial power, he again organized scholars to revise the Five Classics, *Shi Ji* 史記 “Historical Record”, the works of the various schools of thought during the period from pre-Qin(221-207 BC) times to the early years of the Han Dynasty(202 BC-220 AD) as well as collections of poems and proses; "within a few years, the secret repository was brilliantly filled up with a complete collection of books數年之間，秘府燦然必備"¹⁵ At the same time, scholars responded to the imperial order, and actively participated in the compilation of reference books; except *Wu Jing Ding Ben* 五經定本 “*The Official Interpretation of the Five Classics*” and *Wu Jing Zheng Yi* 五經正義 “*Revision and Annotation of Five Classics*”. Examples of such reference books include *Yi Wen Lei Ju* 藝文類聚 “*Classified Excerpts from Ancient Writers*”, *Bei Tang Shu Chao* 北堂書抄 “*Excerpts from Books in the Northern Hall*”, *Qun Shu Zhi Yao* 群書治要 “*Important Experts from Many Classical Books*”, *Wen Si Bo Yao* 文思博要 “*Works of Literary Gems*”, *Tang Lü Shu Yi* 唐律疏議 “*Comments on Law of Tang Dynasty*”, etc. Such measures as protection and using of cultural classics and compilation of reference books greatly promoted the cultural development of the Zhenguan Period.

Second, the emperor placed significant importance to the compilation of historical records. In the Zhenguan Period, people were involved in large-scaled compilation and revision of the national historical records of the previous dynasties as

¹⁵ Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要 "Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty", Vol. 35.

well as of the Tang Dynasty. Of The Twenty-Four Histories, eight were compiled during the Zhenguan Period.¹⁶ Because of the proactive efforts made in the Zhenguan Period, official compilation of classical books later became the norm for cultural promotion, and compilation of histories became an established system in later dynasties.

Expanding the Imperial Examination System

The imperial examination system originated in the Han Dynasty, when it was called *Ce Shi* 策試¹⁷. It burgeoned as the "Wide Selection from all Sorts of People九流常選" in the Six Dynasties¹⁸, and in the Sui Dynasty(581-618 AD) the system was finalized as "Jinshi Degree System進士科"¹⁹. Emperor Taizong realized that "the most important point in politics is nothing more than selecting and employing competent persons, and the basis for selection shall be virtues and depths of knowledge.為政之要，惟在得人，必須以德行、學識為本"²⁰. Thus the imperial examination system was inherited and further developed in the Tang Dynasty. During the Zhenguan Period(627-649 AD), the impetus of the imperial examination system was to select various levels of government officials annually through the awarding of Ming Jing Degree and Jinshi Degree. Large amount of masters of Confucian studies

¹⁶ Namely, *The Book of Jin*晉書, *The Book of Liang*梁書, *The Book of Chen*陳書, *The Book of Northern Qi*北齊書, *The Book of Northern Zhou*北周書, *The Book of Sui*隋書, *History of Southern Dynasties*南史 and *History of Northern Dynasties*北史.

¹⁷ Wu, Zongguo吳宗國. *Tang Dai Keju Zhidu*唐代科舉制度.

¹⁸ Eastern Wu(222-280), Eastern Jin(316-420), Song of the Southern Dynasty(420-497), Qi(479-502), Liang(502-557), Chen(557-589).

¹⁹ Wu, Zongguo吳宗國. *Tang Dai Keju Zhidu*唐代科舉制度.

²⁰ Wu Jing吳兢, *Zhenguan Zhengyao*貞觀政要, "Essentials of Governance in the Zhenguan Period", Vol. 27, *Esteeming the Confucian Studies*.

were selected into to imperial court service, and the examination system reached its prosperity during this period.

Emperor Taizong (599-649 AD) also realized that without a good mastery of knowledge, officials could not be selected for important positions. As a result, the cultural and educational courses were greatly emphasized during his reign. The emperor had the Imperial Academy re-established, so as to intensify the management and supervision of the cultural and educational causes. Apart from the National Studies in the Zhenguan Period, Emperor Taizong revived studies of classical books in the year 618. Soon after, he promoted medical studies throughout the country. In 632, he established the studies of law, to train special talented people in justice. In order to demonstrate his concern to education, Emperor Taizong often went to the Imperial College to listen to the teachings of Confucian classics, "ordered *Jijiu* (principal of the imperial college), *Siye* (vice-president of the imperial college) and scholars to teach and discuss studies there. 令祭酒、司業、博士講論"²¹ For example, during the fourteenth year of the Zhenguan Period, Emperor Taizong led his imperial officials to the Imperial College to listen Kong Ying's teachings of *Xiaojing* 孝經 "Book on Filial Piety". After Kong Ying finished his lecture, Emperor Taizong ordered *Shi Dian Song* 釋奠頌 "Ode to the Teacher of Classics" to be dedicated to him, and ordered his government officials to award fine silk to the *Jijiu*, scholars and excellent students at the Imperial College. Under the careful supervision of Emperor Taizong, the cultural and educational development in the Zhenguan Period reached an

²¹ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 189, *Biographies of the Confucians-I*.

unprecedented prosperity. The historical Du You once praised the cultural scene at this period as "prosperous unmatched by any period of the near ancient times國學之盛，近古未有".²²

Ceasing military activities and preparing for cultural development

In the second year of Zhenguan Period (627-649 AD), Emperor Taizong(599-649 AD) declared that " Even though I've ascended the throne by use of force, to make peace in the country, we should advocate virtue and culture朕雖武功定天下，終當以文德綏海內"²³ He also claimed repeatedly that "when there is no warfare in the country, we should promote Confucian ritual and music, cease military activities, and prepare for and promote cultural development天下無事，方欲建禮作樂，偃武修文"²⁴ Thus ceasing military activities and promoting cultural development, the Confucian dogma and music are main features of the cultural prosperity of the Zhenguan Period. Born as a warrior, and after he became the ruler of the country, Li Shimin(Taizong, 599-649 AD) led his imperial officials to write poems and proses, which became in vogue in the society, and had a substantial impact on the later ages.

In summary, the Zhenguan Period resulted in a profound legacy in Chinese history for cultural enrichment. It laid a foundation for the prosperity of political, economic and cultural development in the Early Tang Dynasty (618-712 AD), as well as for the overall social prosperity of the upcoming High Tang Period (713-765 AD).

²² Du You杜佑, *Tong Dian*通典, "Comprehensive Compendium", Vol.6.

²³ Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要 "Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty", Vol. 33, *Po Zhen Le*破陣樂.

²⁴ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", *Biography of Xiao Deyan*蕭德言傳.

1.2 Brief Introduction to Wu Zetian

Wu Zetian was born during the seventh year of the Wude Period (618-626 AD) of Emperor Gaozu's reign (566-635 AD), and died in the first year of the Shenlong Period (705-707 AD) of her own reign. In the eleventh year of Zhenguan Period (the year 637), when she was fourteen years old, the girl who later became Empress Wu Zetian was admitted into the imperial court and appointed as *Cairen* (the fifth rank concubine). In the 23rd year of the Zhenguan Period (649 AD), Emperor Taizong died, and Wu Cai ren became a Buddhist nun in a nunnery²⁵. After Emperor Gaozong was enthroned, he again brought Wu into the imperial court and during the fifth year of Yonghui Period (654 AD), Wu was awarded the title *Zhaoyi*, the second grade concubine in the court. In the sixth year of Yonghui Period (650-655 AD), she became the empress of Emperor Gaozong. Later, because Gaozong suffered from *Fengji* (a disease similar to high blood pressure), Empress Wu participated in decisions of the imperial politics, which was called "Dual Divine Rulers of the Royal Court二圣" by people of that time²⁶. In the first year of Hongdao Period (683 AD), Emperor Gaozong died. Emperor Zhongzong was then enthroned, and during the first year of Wenming Period (684 AD), Empress Wu dethroned Emperor Zhongzong, and enthroned Emperor Ruizong, and she herself held the court audience. During the first year of Tianshou Period (690-692 AD), Wu came to the throne herself and became Empress Zetian, and changed the title of her dynasty from Tang to "Zhou". In the first

²⁵ It is a convention in the feudal society: when the emperor passed away, all his maids shall enter the nunnery.

²⁶ Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要, Vol.3, *Emperresses*.

year of Shenlong Period of her own reign (705 AD), forced by her cabinet member Zhang Jianzhi and others who conducted a mutiny, Empress Wu Zetian passed the throne to Emperor Zhongzong, and in December of the same year she died in Shangyang Palace, at the age of eighty-two. Until her death, Wu Zetian had been at the helm of the empire for forty-five years, and ruling the empire as the Empress for fifteen years.

Wu Zetian lived during a significant time period of the Early Tang Dynasty (618-712 AD). Wu Zetian's reign took nearly half a century of the ninety years of this era. Guo Moruo²⁷ once praised her as "carrying forward the effective governance of the Zhenguan Period(627-649 AD) and preceding the upcoming Heyday of Kaiyuan Period (713-741 AD)政啓開元，治宏貞觀", meaning Empress Wu Zetian's reign bridged the two important and prosperous eras of the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, it is important to be cognizant of the contribution of Wu Zetian to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty.

It is worth mentioning that after Emperor Taizong(599-649 AD)'s death, Emperor Gaozong(628-683 AD) succeeded the throne, and Wu was no more than a queen mother. Whereas compared with Emperor Taizong, Gaozong was mediocre in promoting learning opportunities and had a cowardly disposition. Historical books mention that "in the grand cause of the Li's reign in Tang Dynasty, Emperor Gaozong was only a nominal ruler; though an offspring of great origin, he had no comparable

²⁷ Guo Moruo郭沫若(1892-1978): a famous author, poet, historian, archaeologist of contemporary China..

virtues with his father and grandfather; his unprincipled love for a woman caused the collapse of his reign, and it is his fault that all subsequent rulers had to suffer the consequences of his mediocrity 藉文鴻業，僅保余位，封岱禮天，其德不類，伏戎于寢，構堂終墜，自蘊禍胎，邦家珍瘁"²⁸ Therefore, Emperor Gaozong's role was minor during his reign, and also due to his poor health condition, all political decisions were made by his Empress Wu, which underlain the reason on that Wu Zetian was amenable to adjudicate political matters in the imperial court and then changed the title of the dynasty from Tang to Zhou, and enthroned herself as the Empress of Zhou. Thus Emperor Gaozong's reign could not constitute an independent age, though it lasted as long as thirty-four years in total. The earlier years of his reign could only be seen as the continuance of the Zhenguan Governance, and the later years of his reign could be regarded as governed by his Empress Wu. According to historical records: "after the Xianqing Period(656-661 AD), [Emperor Gaozong] suffered badly from *Fengji* disease, so that all the memorials submitted to the throne by officials were read and decided by the 'Queen of Heaven'. 自顯慶以後，（高宗）多苦風疾，百司表奏，皆委天后詳決"²⁹

Therefore, though her reign as an Empress only lasted for fifteen years, before her enthronement she had already "assisted in the national politics for several dozens of years, and her power was no less than an emperor, as a result, she was one of the Dual Divine Rulers of the Royal Court 內輔國政數十年，威勢與帝無異，當時稱

²⁸ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.4, *Biography of Emperor Gaozong*.

²⁹ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.6, *Biography of the Queen of Heaven Zetian*.

為二圣" of the country at that time.³⁰ Therefore, the imperial power was actually held by Wu Zetian for as long as half a century, and her contributions to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty discussed in this paper include what she achieved during all this half a century from when she was the queen mother.

1.3 Wu Zetian's accomplishments

The cultural taste and accomplishments of a ruler of an imperial country often determines his/her achievements during his/her reign. Wu Zetian received considerable education in her childhood, and after she was admitted to the imperial court at fourteen years old, her tastes were further polished by the royal cultural edification. Moreover, she was extremely brilliant as a consummate learner, and had quite outstanding cultural taste and accomplishments. Historical records describe her as "born with intelligence and accomplished in both literature and history素多智計，兼涉文史"³¹ Her talents can be seen as a precursor to her contributions to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty.

Wu Zetian was accomplished in poetry

Wu Zetian not only loves poetry, she could also write poetry herself. Altogether forty-six of her poems were collected in the *Complete Poems in the Tang Dynasty*. Wu Zetian's poems illustrates her proficiency in her literary arts. An example is one of her poems written in Ganye Nunnery, *Ru Yi Niang* 如意娘:

³⁰ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.6, *Biography of the Queen of Heaven Zetian*.

³¹ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.6, *Biography of the Queen of Heaven Zetian*..

With so many disheveled trains of thought, I even mistake the red
blossoms as green leaves,
I am worn out and heartbroken, all because of my sweet memory of you.
Oh how I miss you, if you do not believe in my words,
Just open the box and see the beautiful skirts stained with my tears.
看朱成碧思紛紛，憔悴支離為憶君。
不信比來長下淚，開箱驗取石榴裙。³²

In this poem written in the Ganye Nunnery, the "you" that the narrator missed so much refers to Li Zhi, Emperor Gaozong. Overflow with sorrowful feelings, this poem is quite touching. The first line of the poem had *fu*, *bi* and *xing*, the literary techniques of image metaphor and allegory. "Mistake the red blossoms as green leaves" can be understood as the speaker's absentmindedness because of her lovesickness, and it can also be understood as the narrator's sigh of the time flying, and she being worried that spring (a classical metaphor for a girl's flowery youth) would soon pass by. This verse is indicative of the narrator's sorrow by not being with her lover, and is quite touchingly expressed. The last two verses illustrate this idea succinctly, "if you don't believe what I said, just open the box and see the beautiful skirts stained with my tears." This poem expresses the author's true feelings, which makes it rather touching, so that even in the brilliant collection of the poetry of the Tang Dynasty, this one can be regarded as an excellent poem.

Another example is entitled *La Ri Xuan Zhao Xing Shang Yuan* 臘日宣詔幸上苑
“*Proclaiming Our Visit to the Imperial Gardens on the Day of the Winter Sacrifice*”,

³² Peng Dingqiu 彭定求, et al. eds, *Quan Tang Shi* 全唐詩, Vol.5-47.

written during the second year of Tianshou Period (690-692 AD), also the second year of her enthronement as the Empress of "the Great Zhou":

Tomorrow morning I'll visit the imperial garden, hastily signals to the nature
that spring come soon.

All trees and flowers shall blossom during the night, without waiting
leisurely for the morning wind.

明朝遊上苑，火急報春知。

花須連夜發，莫待曉風吹。³³

Unlike the sorrowful tone of the first poem, this one expresses the author's authoritative vigor as a ruler. As the Empress of the country, Wu Zetian informed the Mother Nature that she would go to the imperial court the next morning, and all the trees shall blossom during the night, so that the great empress may appreciate them during her visit. Even the Mother Nature shall be docile and obedient in front of the Empress. This poem has a lively and consistent tone, showing the poet's a confident and unswerving determination in ruling the country. It is widely different from the first poem *Ru Yi Niang*, written in her youth. Lu Shu, a scholar of the Qing Dynasty, fully approved Wu Zetian's poems *Ru Yi Niang* and *Proclaiming Our Visit to the Imperial Gardens on the Day of the Winter Sacrifice*, saying that "the Empress is endowed with intelligence and wisdom, and she is definitely a natural-born ruler of the country后材智英睿，帝王之器", and that the poems "show her true nature 是其本色也"³⁴.

³³ Peng Dingqiu 彭定求, et al. eds, *Quan Tang Shi* 全唐詩, Vol.5-46.

³⁴ Dong Gao 董誥, *Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen* 欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol. 97.

In summary, the themes of Wu Zetian's poems are of great variety: some pay a tribute to the imperial politics and the official rulings; some praise and honor her imperial officials; some admire the beauty of the Mother Nature and some take account of the sacrificial events. As a ruler of a feudal dynasty, Wu Zetian not only composed poetry, but also advocated the officials writing and replying in poems, and to compete with each other to discover the best poetic talents. This no doubt had a great impact on the prosperous cultural development that nobody can afford to underestimate.

Wu Zetian was accomplished in prose writing

In *Quan Tang Wen* 全唐文 “*Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty*”, there are sixty-six pieces of writing written by Wu Zetian, and in *Tang Da Zhao Ling Ji* 唐大詔令集 “*Collection of Tang Dynasty Imperial Edicts and Orders*” there are twelve extra pieces of writing by Wu. Some famous examples include the one-hundred-volume *Chui Gong Ji* 垂拱集, six-volume *Jin Lun Ji* 金輪集 and ten-volume *Chen Gui* 臣軌. Though many of these writings and books were actually written by her officials, one cannot deny Wu's great contribution to prose writing and her mastery of this art. For example, *Shengxian Taizi Bei* 升仙太子碑 “Stele in Praise of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal” is the epigraph written by Wu Zetian on the fourth of February of the second year of Shengli Period (698-700 A D), when Wu Zetian went to Songshan Mountain for the grand ceremony of the worship of heaven, and visited the newly-constructed Shengxian

Taizi Temple “Temple of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal”. This epigraph wrote about the story of Prince Jin of King Ling of Zhou ascending immortal, and on the other hand, it depicts the social realities of the Zhou Dynasty ruled by Wu Zetian. Both the "immortal world" and the social realities in this epigraph are full of praise and pride. The magnificent "immortal world" in Wu Zetian's epigraph is a reflection of the grand society under Wu's rule, and the immortal prince Qiao, the legendary figure in this writing, who is "outstanding in genius, and transcend the worldly 天資拔俗，靈骨超凡", is actually Wu's self-description. The whole writing integrates romanticism and realism together, and it is an outstanding epigraph masterpiece.

Wu Zetian was accomplished in calligraphy

Wu Zetian was accomplished in calligraphy, historical records indicate that she is especially good at *fei bai* (uneven blank spaces within each pen-stroke or in Chinese, this translates to “flying white”) and *xing shu* “running script”. She wrote the horizontal tablet in *fei bai* for the Jianfu Temple and the Chongfu Temple, and she wrote her officials' names in this style to give to them. *Fei bai* is a special calligraphic style, in which there are blank spaces within each pen-stroke, making the writing look like being written by a worn brush-pen and dried ink, so that it has a distinctive style. The five characters *Shengxian Taizi Bei* 升仙太子碑 “Stele in Praise of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal” were written in *fei bai* style. Wu Zetian was also accomplished in inscribing on a tablet. A famous Qing Dynasty(1636-1912 AD) scholar of the Qing Dynasty named Gu Yanwu had a

list of Wu's inscriptions in his book *Jin Shi Wen Zi Ji* 金石文字記 “*Account of Characters Inscribed on Metals and Stones*”. There were altogether twenty-two inscribed steles such as *Tian Hou Yu Zhi Shi Bei* 天后御製石碑 “*Imperial Stele by the Queen of Heaven*” inscribed during the second year of the Yongchun Period (682-683 AD). Other notable examples include: *Lin Zhong Kou Shou Ming* 臨終口授銘 “*Dictated Inscription at the Deathbed*” written by Wang Zhengjun during the second year of the Chuigong Period (685-688 A.D) and *Shang Qi Duwei Xiang Jing Rui Bei* 上騎都尉相景瑞碑 “*Imperial Military Officer Jing Rui Stele*”. Wu Zetian's inscriptions are highly valuable to calligraphic art. According to Vol. 89 of *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書, *Biography of Wang Fangqing* 王方慶傳, Wu Zetian once ordered Wang Fangqing, a high rank court official, to look for all the authentic works of calligraphers since Wang Xizhi³⁵, and she imitated their styles by using rubbings, as a result, she made great progress in calligraphy. Under the influence of Wu Zetian, a number of famous calligraphers emerged during her reign, which brought some new ideas and innovations to the calligraphic establishment.

Wu Zetian was accomplished in classics and histories

According to *Tong Dian* 通典 “*Comprehensive Manual*” and *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要, Wu Zetian was diligent in her studies during her childhood, and was therefore quite accomplished in classics and histories. An example was during the second year of Changshou Period (692-694 A D), Wu Zetian wrote an eight-thousand-character

³⁵ Wang Xizhi 王羲之, (303–361): a Chinese calligrapher, traditionally referred to as the Sage of Calligraphy 書聖.

book entitled *Chen Gui* 臣軌, that reference include many classics: *Shang Shu*尚書, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*春秋, the *Analects of Confucius*論語, *Lao Tzu*老子, *Chuang Tse*莊子, *Kuan Tzu*管子, *Springs and Autumns of Master Lu*呂氏春秋, *Huainan Zi*淮南子, *Shuo Yuan*說苑, *Classics of Filial Piety*孝經, *Mao Shi* 毛詩 and *Li Sao* 離騷 “On Encountering Trouble”. In one of her famous writing, *Tong Ti Zhang* 同體章 “On One Body”, there is a passage that reads: "...government officials compared to a emperor is like one's limbs compared to his head, or his ears and eyes compared to his heart. Both are interdependent to each other, and each variable relies on each other to function. Therefore, officials shall serve their ruler as sons serve their fathers. Whereas though father and son are close kin, they are not as close as officials and the emperor, who are all within one body. 夫人臣之于君也，猶四支之載元首，耳目之為心使也。相須而后成體，相得而后成用。故臣之事君，猶子之事父。父子雖至親，猶未若君臣之同體也”³⁶ The above writing emphasizes the togetherness of officials and the ruler who shall always stand together through difficult situations, this idea originates from *Kuan Tzu*³⁷. Another example is that in *On Complying with Tao*, she wrote "Tao can be as infinitely high as the sky and as immeasurably deep as the earth. It embraces everything in the world and has no definite shape; stretched, it may be as huge as the universe, and folded, it cannot even fill a grasp. Tao can be large and small, dark and bright, weak and strong, soft and firm. 夫道者，覆天載地，高不可際，深不可測。包裹萬物，察授無形，舒之覆于

³⁶ Wu Zetian 武則天, *Chen Gui* 臣軌, “Tracks of Subjects of Rulers”, *Tong Ti Zhang* 同體章.

³⁷ Guan Zhong 管仲 (725-645BC): a Chinese politician in the Spring and Autumn Period. He was appointed Prime Minister by Duke Huan of Qi in 685 BC.

六合，卷之不盈一握，小而能大，昧而能明，弱而能強，柔而能剛”³⁸ The account of "Tao" in this writing originates from the philosophic ideas of *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tse*.³⁹

To conclude, Wu Zetian has sophisticated cultural tastes and accomplishments, which is one of the important factors of her becoming a Cairen of Emperor Taizong from an ordinary girl, and then becoming the Empress of Emperor Gaozong, then the Empress of her own "Great Zhou" Dynasty. She was active on the political stage for almost half a century, which not only made significant contributions to the cultural development of Tang Dynasty, but also had far-reaching influences to the Chinese history.

Chapter 2- Wu Zetian's Contribution to the Cultural Development of the Tang Dynasty

During the greater than ninety year reign of the early Tang period, Wu Zetian's rule lasted nearly half a century, and made great contributions to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty. On the one hand, these contributions can be seen as needed for her political ruling: in order to seize the highest power of the feudal country and uproot the old powers, she advocated social reform and thus brought about new cultural prosperity. On the other hand, all these reforms originated from her own love for culture, which affected and even advanced the change of social

³⁸ Wu Zetian武則天, *Chen Gui* 臣軌, "Tracks of Subjects of Rulers", *Shou Dao Zhang*授道章.

³⁹ Lao Tzu 老子 (462-302BC) and Chuang Tse莊子 (369-286BC) : both influential Chinese philosophers and central figures in Taoism who lived during Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period.

atmosphere of that era, helping to bring about the cultural prosperity in the society.

In discussing Wu Zetian's contribution to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty, this paper only focuses on her policies to encourage cultural development and the cultivating effects of her actions on the cultural development during her reign. It was once and again attested by historians that the national power was increasingly stronger during Wu Zetian's reign.

2.1 Selecting the competent through various sources

Wu Zetian is one of the few rulers in the Chinese history that could select and use competent officials through various channels. Although in order to root out the dissidents, she framed and killed many officials from other parties, and put merciless officials in important positions who abused and killed many innocent people. Her policy to "select and use competent officials through various channels" was always praised by people of later ages. Sima Guang(1019-1086)⁴⁰ recounted some of the events during this era: "Though the Queen Mother brought over too many people with official titles in her imperial court, for those who were not competent, she either dismissed them from office or punished them or even put them to death. Ruling the country with punishment and reward with both hands, she made political decisions on her own, perceptive and good at judging judiciously, and enabled competition amongst talented people of that time.太后雖濫以祿位收天下人心，然不稱職者，尋亦黜之，或加刑誅。挾刑賞之柄以駕御天下，政由己出，明查善段，故當時英賢

⁴⁰ Sima Guang司馬光:A Chinese historian, scholar, and high chancellor of the Song Dynasty.

亦竟為之用"⁴¹

In the ancient China, to select and use competent officials is the highest ruler's gesture in good governance of the country, so that they must select noble-minded and competent people and put them in important positions. All competent rulers throughout ancient China's history had a proficient understanding that hiring competent officials was the key to successful governance. Wu Zetian was no exception. The so-called "through various channels" means Wu Zetian dared to break the boundary determined by family status, and made competence as her only criterion. This alone can be seen as Wu Zetian's contribution to the society, which necessarily brought about social transformation and promoted cultural prosperity of that age.

Wu's admiration for the competent

Wu Zetian's love for culture is reflected by her admiration for competent people and this admiration in turn resulted in relatively lenient cultural atmosphere at that time. Even for those who were critical of her, the Empress celebrated their talents and learning. The most typical example of this is that upon reading Luo Binwang(619-687)'s writing entitled *Tao Wu Xi* 討武檄 "*An Essay to Denounce Wu*" addressed to Xu Jingye(?-648, a rebellious leader against Wu), which scolded Wu severely and listed Wu's criminal charges and scandals in her private life and scolded her severely. Wu Zetian was impressed by its great momentum and literary talent, so that she said to her officials:"this is the fault of the Zai Xiang (prime minister), how can he lets such a

⁴¹ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑑, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Vol. 205, Yuelu Book Corporation, P. 689.

talented writer drift away, when we could have him work in a government office? 此宰相之過也，人有如此才而使之流落不偶乎？”⁴² Soon after she sent people to collect Luo Binwang's lost and scattered manuscripts and to compile them in one volume. According to *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書, Luo Binwang's "writings were mostly lost and scattered everywhere, Wu Zetian always spoke highly of his writings, and sent people to find them; a person of Yanzhou named Xi Yunqing collected them and compiled into ten volumes, which were quite popular in this era 文多散失，則天素重其文，遣使求之，有兗州人鄒雲卿集成十卷，盛傳于世”⁴³ In a feudal society, this unconventional act of Wu Zetian is very noble.

Because of Wu's admiration for competent persons, she was rather tolerant of the intellectuals. There were not much cultural taboos and people enjoyed more freedom of thought and expression. During this time, the literary community changed its decadent style of the past times, a large number of writings reflected the social realities and discussed the current politics, showing a lively cultural vision of that time. Take Chen Zi'ang(661-702, a poet of the Tang Dynasty) as an example, he advocated reformation of poetry and was awarded the Jinshi Degree at 24 years old. Being appreciated by Wu Zetian, he was promoted to Lintai Zhengzi 麟臺正字, and later to You Shi Yi 右拾遺. Chen composed many poems entitled *Gan Yu*, depicting the suffering of ordinary people and daringly scolded Wu's political rule. The nineteenth *Gan Yu* 感遇 poem made a direct attack to Wu's decisions in investing

⁴² Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑒, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976, p.6424.

⁴³ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書, “Old Tang History”, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975, p.5007.

much money in constructing temples and statues of Buddha, and scolding her for not "being concerned and helping the ordinary people 憂濟元元". Another example is the twenty-ninth of his *Gan Yu* poem, which bluntly criticized Wu's unjust war against Sheng Qiang (a minority group in the northwest) was fraught with great sufferings to the soldiers and people. As a result of Wu's policies that foster freedom of expression and thought, poetry during this era flourished.

Wu's respects for the worthy

Wu Zetian was open-minded to select and to employ the worthy people. A persuasive example was her trust and respect for her prime minister, Di Renjie(630-700). According to *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑒:

太后信重內史梁文惠公狄仁杰，群臣莫及。常謂之國老而不名。仁杰好面引廷爭，太后每曲意從之。嘗從太后遊幸，遇風吹仁杰巾墜，而馬驚不能止，太后命太子追執鞚而系之……入見，常止其拜，曰“每見公拜，朕亦身痛。”乃免其宿值，戒其同僚曰：“自非軍國大事，勿以煩公。”辛丑，薨，太后泣曰：“朝堂空矣！”自是朝廷有大事，眾或不能決，太后輒嘆曰：“天奪吾國老何太早邪？”

“The Queen Mother trusted and respected her palace secretary, Lord Di Renjie, more than anyone else in the imperial court. She always called him Lord of the State and not by his name. Renjie was keen to argue about issues to the Queen Mother's face, and she often tolerated this and respected Renjie's opinion. Once when he visited some place of sight with the Queen Mother, a strong wind blew Renjie's scarf away, and since the horse was frightened and could not stop, the Queen Mother ordered the Prince to catch up with the horse, grasp the halter and tie the scarf for Renjie. ... When he presented himself in front of her, the Queen

Mother had often stopped his kowtow, and said that ‘every time the Lord kowtow in front of me, I myself feel pain in my body for him.’ Therefore she spared him of his formal tasks, and cautioned his fellow-officials that: ‘unless there are significant events in military or state affairs, don't go to bother the Lord.’ In the year of Xinchou(700 A.D.), Renjie passed away, and the Queen Mother cried that "the imperial court is now empty!’ Subsequently when there were important events in the imperial court and the officials could not make a definite decision, the Queen Mother would sigh that ‘how hastily the Heaven deprive me of my Lord of the State!’”⁴⁴

Wu Zetian selected many worthy people during her reign, some of which were still in important positions during the Kaiyuan Period(713-741A.D.) of Emperor Xuanzong's reign, including such well-known ministers as Yao Chong, Song Jing and Zhang Jiuling, etc.

Sources for the talents

Wu Zetian was among the few throughout the Chinese history who was able to encourage a paradigm shift, by making a breakthrough in the hiring process of government officials. She was not content with the conventional methods of the existing imperial examination system, and made bold reforms to the system, initiated the "royal palace examination 殿試" and "military candidacy in provincial examinations 武舉" that provided opportunities for mid- and lower-class intellectuals and commoners.

⁴⁴ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑒, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Vol.27.

Wu's resourcefulness in recruiting talent through various methods demonstrated her open-mindedness as a visionary ruler. An example of some measures adopted by Wu Zetian included allowing the civil and military officials as well as ordinary people to recommend themselves to various government positions. In the first year of Chuigong Period (685-688A.D.) of her reign, Wu Zetian made an announcement that permitted "civil and military officials above the ninth rank inside and outside the imperial court as well as civilians to recommend themselves as competent for the imperial court service 内外文武九品以上及百姓咸令自舉".⁴⁵ That is to say, no matter they were officials or ordinary people, as long as "their knowledge of the classics may help manage the state, or their military aptitude may help make the border area peaceful, those who can become the pillar of the state shall be put in important positions, and such talents, no matter whether they are born in distinguished or ordinary families, shall recommend their names to me 其文可以經邦國，武可以定邊疆，蘊棟梁之宏才，堪將相之重任，無隔士庶，具以名聞"⁴⁶. A second example of her hiring practices included establishing an office named "*Cun Fu Shi* 存撫使", whose mandate was to seek civilian talent and recommend them to the Empress. In the first year of Tianshou Period (September 690 - March 692), Wu Zetian "ordered Shi Wuzi and other nine people to search through ten sources throughout the country for talented people 命史務滋等十人存撫諸道".⁴⁷ And after they found such people,

⁴⁵ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Vol. 203.

⁴⁶ Dong Gao 董誥, Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen 欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983, p.986.

⁴⁷ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance". Vol. 204.

they shall recommend them to the imperial court. The final example was to adopt the official probation system. For the "self-recommended" individuals or those recommended by the office of *Cun Fu Shi*, Wu Zetian would appoint them as officials under her rule and their tenure is dependent on their performance. According to Vol. 205 of *Zizhi Tongjian*, in the first year of Changshou(692-694 A.D.), "in January of the traditional Chinese calendar of Dingmao Year, during the spring, the Queen Mother was presented those recommended by the office of *Cun Wu Shi*; she did not ask whether they were competent, but appointed them all to her offices, some were appointed to positions as senior as Fengge Sheren(a mid-senior level official at the legislative bureau of government) and the supervising secretary, some of lower level were appointed as ministry councilor, attendant secretary, censor, register, editor of imperial books, etc. This was the very start of the first official probation system春，一月，丁卯，太后引見存撫史所舉人，無問愚賢，悉加擢用，高者試鳳閣舍人，給事中，次試員外郎、侍御史、補闕、拾遺、校書郎。試官自此始"⁴⁸.

As a visionary leader, Wu Zetian's insight, courage, perseverance and foresight helped mold one of the most progressive policies throughout Chinese history to ameliorate the lives of Chinese people by providing equal opportunities for advancement, and were the impetus for profound social change. In the highly hierarchical feudal society where family status dominated, it needed boldness of vision, great courage and insight to practice this. These fully demonstrated Wu's eager crave for talents and determination for reforms.

⁴⁸ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑑, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976, p.6477.

Nevertheless, Wu Zetian's measures to select worthy and talented people through various sources also brought about corruption in her imperial court service. The adoption of the official probation system caused a huge bureaucracy to the dismay of many people and aggravated people's burden. According to historical records, the expanded bureaucratic regime was described as: "Vehicles of *Bu Ques*(imperial registers), ladlers of *Shi Yis*(an official rank similar to *Bu Que*), a rake may hold up several *Shi Yu Shis*(imperial censors), and so many *Jiao Shu Langs* (editors of imperial books) lined there, like a pile of bowls補闕連車載，拾遺憑斗量，權推侍御史，碗脫校書郎". Shen Quanjiao, a *Juren*⁴⁹, added another two lines to this doggerel: "Blunderer *Cun Fu Shi*, grinning Empress糊心存撫史，瞇目聖神皇," (meaning *Cun Fu Shis* were irresponsible, and the noble Empress was stupidly joyful), which was regarded as a slander to the imperial politics and an irony to the Empress. Yet when some of her imperial subjects were going to flog this *Juren* with stick, Wu Zetian smiled and said: "as long as you people are not abusing the power to recommend the wrong people, what is there to fear about what others say?但使卿輩不濫，何恤人言" She had her officials release the writer.⁵⁰ As demonstrated, Wu Zetian was ruler that possessed integrity, and her intentions were to select truly competent people.

Wu Zetian selected the worthy and the competent through various sources, and their roles in society were dependent on their abilities. Depending on the severity of the incompetence of the official, she might remove him or even sentence him to death.

⁴⁹ *Juren*: a provincial graduate in the imperial examinations.

⁵⁰ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑑, "Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance", Vol. 205, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976, p. 6477.

Lu Zhi(754-805, an official of Tang Dynasty), in commenting on this practice of Wu Zetian, said: "The system was very strict, so that the change of officials was extremely swift: those who were not fit for their positions were quickly removed, and those who were competent were immediately promoted to higher positions; this is the so-called 'ability to appreciate a person's character and ability' 課責既嚴，進退皆速，不肖者旋黜，才能者聚升，是以當代謂知人之明."⁵¹ This comments reflects Wu Zetian's good mastery of the art to select and use competent officials.

2.2 Bold innovations of the Imperial Examination System

The imperial examination system before Wu Zetian's time was mainly consisted of Jinshi Degree and Ming Jing Degree. Topics in the examinations focused mostly on Confucian classics. Since the examinations were conducted periodically, it was called *Chang Ke* 常科 "Normal Qualifying Examinations". After Wu Zetian seized the royal throne, she was no longer content with the method of selecting officials through *Chang Ke*, therefore, she made bold innovations to the imperial examination system.

Elevating the status of the examination for the Jinshi degree

The imperial examinations before Wu Zetian's time, though with multiplicity of items, were mainly consisted of the examinations for candidates of Ming Jing Degree and Jinshi Degree. According to Vol. 44, *Records of Selecting Officials*, of *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書 "History of the Late Tang Dynasty", the main formats of the examinations for candidates of Ming Jing Degree required the examinees to read

⁵¹ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 139, *Biography of Lu Zhi*.

fluently and to recite the Confucian classics, thus the major objective of the examinations was to test people's proficiency in the classics. Though there were some requirements in writing political essays, the essay topics did not reflect the social reality, nor did they reflect the examinees' strength in literary arts, and were inadequate in covering the Confucian classics. After Wu Zetian seized the royal throne, she prioritized the examinations, and elevated the status of the examinations for the Jinshi Degree, increasing the standards and expanding the scope of the examinations. The imperial edict of August of the second year of Yonglong Period(680-681A.D.) stated: "from now on, after being checked on virtues, examinees shall be tested on the Confucian classics; those who pass six out of ten topics shall pass and continue to write two essays on general topics, and after the examiners ensured that they have sufficient literary knowledge, they shall write examinations on topics of political essays自今以後，考功試人，明經試帖，取十帖得六以上者，進士試雜文兩首，識文律者然後并令試策⁵²". This means that the original examinations for the Jinshi Degree were now divided into three parts, namely "Confucian classics, literary essays and political essays", of which "literary essays" and "political essays" emphasized the examinees' literary talents and general knowledge, which was the origin of the maxim "selecting scholars as officials according to their essays"⁵³.

Wu Zetian's gesture in elevating the status of the examinations for the

⁵² Ouyang Xiu歐陽修, et al. *Xin Tang Shu*新唐書, "New Tang History", Vol.44, *Xuanju Zhi*, "Record of Imperial Examinations".

⁵³ Chen Fei陳飛, *Tang Dai Shi Ce Kao Shu*唐代試策考述, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2002.

Jinshi Degree, as well as putting more emphasis to the literary essays on such examinations, had a profound impact culturally and socially on Chinese history. Firstly, by changing the existing examination mechanism to address current societal needs, it becomes a tool that facilitates choosing suitable people for governance. Secondly, by changing the existing selection process to a meritocracy provided people of all backgrounds equal opportunities to enter the imperial court service with their true knowledge and talents, not just through parroting Confucian classics. The new policy was warmly welcomed in the society and promoted the cultural prosperity of that time.

Formulating the "Royal Palace Examination"

The "royal palace examination 殿試" was also called "Zhi Ke 制科", which is different from Chang Ke ,“regular examinations”. It was an examination hosted by the Empress "herself to test people over the country with virtues, competence and literary talents 自詔四方德行、才能、文學之士"⁵⁴. According to *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要, "in the second month of the traditional Chinese calendar of the first year of Zaichu Period(689-690) , the Queen Mother Wu began her oral examination of the examinees in her palace in Luoyang, and the whole process lasted for several days. The royal palace examination was now commenced 武太后載初元年二月，策問貢人于洛城殿，數日方了。殿前試人自此始"⁵⁵ After Wu Zetian seized the royal throne and announced herself as the Empress of the Country, she was no longer content with the

⁵⁴ Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, et al. *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書, "New Tang History", Vol. 44.

⁵⁵ Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要 "Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty", Vol. 76.

method of selecting officials through Chang Ke. She initiated the "royal palace examinations", holding oral examinations in the palace on political decisions, selecting scholars as officials according to their literary talents, breaking the traditional rules and practices and using those who were excellent in such examinations. This "royal palace examination" was inherited by later dynasties through over a thousand years in Chinese feudal society.

According to Vol. 44 of *Xuan Ju Zhi* 選舉制 and *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書: In the royal palace examinations, "the topics were improvised by the Empress herself 其為名目，隨其人主臨時所欲" meaning that the theme and content of such oral examinations were chosen randomly by the ruler according to her own needs. The "improvised" topics address current societal needs, and therefore the examination is an effective gauge on potential recruits. An incentive for recruits to write the Zhi Ke versus the Chang Ke examination includes circumventing the Li Bu (Ministry of Official Personal Affairs in feudal China). That is to say, those who pass the Zhi Ke could become officials without prior approval of Li Bu. Besides, current officials that pass this examination could be promoted to higher official ranks. This innovative form of imperial examination was especially warmly welcomed in the society because it was more like a crosscut to the higher imperial court service. According to Vol. 8 of *Da Tang Xin Yu* (New Account of the Great Tang Dynasty) by Liu Su, "At first when Zetian made innovations to the imperial examination system, she searched throughout the country for competent people, and nearly ten thousand people all over the country via each other to come for the examinations 則天初革命，大搜遺逸，四

方之士應制者向萬人”⁵⁶. The scope of imperial examination of the Tang Dynasty was largely expanded. The prosperity of the examination in turn encouraged the enterprise of people from all backgrounds, and thus brought about social and cultural prosperity.

Introducing "Military Candidacy in Provincial Examinations"

Before Wu Zetian, only intellectuals could participate in the imperial examinations, while military talents had no way to be awarded the Jinshi Degree, and could not become officials through this source. In the first month of the second year of Chang'an Period (701-704 AD), Wu Zetian invented military candidacy in provincial examinations, which was specially designed for selecting military talents.

⁵⁷ The items for the examination included Ma She (shooting [an arrow] while riding a horse), Bu She (shooting while walking), Ping She (shooting), Tong She (shooting through a hole), Ma Qiang (playing with spear while riding a horse), Qiao Guan (weight lifting), Fu Zhong (weight bearing) and stature, etc..⁵⁸ The "military candidacy in provincial examination" opened up a source for people with military talents to be awarded the Jinshi Degree, thus further expanded the scope of the imperial examination system, and greatly excited people of various talents to participate in the imperial examinations.

Adopting "Hu Ming Kao" in the Imperial Examination System

⁵⁶ Liu Su劉肅, *Da Tang Xin Yu* 大唐新語, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004, p.127.

⁵⁷ Wu, Zongguo吳宗國. *Tang Dai Keju Zhidu*唐代科舉制度. Shenyang: Liaoning University Press, 1997.

⁵⁸ Wu, Zongguo吳宗國. *Tang Dai Keju Zhidu*唐代科舉制度. Shenyang:Liaoning University Press, 1997.

Wu Zetian invented the practice of "Hu Ming Kao" 糊名考, meaning during the examinations and review of papers, the names of the examinees would be covered with glue, which made the examinations and papers appear anonymous, resulting in a fair practice to assess the examinations, and to prevent fraudulent practices. According to *Tong Dian* 通典 "Comprehensive Manual", "Seeing that many officials selected by Li Bu were not truly worthy or competent, the Queen Mother Wu ordered that examinees cover their names on the examination papers, and the final choice shall be determined anonymously. This was the origin of the practice of Hu Ming (covering the examinees' names) 武太后又以吏部選人多不實，乃令試日自糊其名，暗考以定。糊名自此始也"⁵⁹.

The practice of "Hu Ming Kao" not only promoted fairness in the imperial examinations, but also helped create a more culture-friendly atmosphere in the society.

An example to illustrate the great effects of the reformed imperial examinations was that Xue Yuanchao, a famous prime minister during that era once said: "I am not endowed with outstanding talents, but still enjoyed riches and honor in my life. Nevertheless, I still have three regrets: one is that I have not participated in the examinations for the Jinshi Degree; the second is that I did not marry my son to girl of the royal family; and the third, I did compile a record of the national histories 吾不才，富貴過分，然平生有三恨，始不以進士耀第，不得娶王姓女，不得修國史."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Du You 杜佑, *Tong Dian* 通典, "Comprehensive Compendium", Vol.15.

⁶⁰ Liu Su 劉餗, *Sui Tang Jia Hua* 隋唐嘉話, Vol. 5, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1979.

Although Xue Yuanchao was a prime minister, neither his power nor his position could be elevated higher, yet he still regretted that he could not bring honor to his ancestors by participating in the imperial examinations for the Jinshi Degree. This example demonstrated the importance of participating in the reformed imperial examination through the Jinshi degree at that era.

Yet as explained before, it was the common intellectuals who were most encouraged and excited because they could be put to important positions through the imperial examination regardless what families they were born of or whether they were rich or poor, even the most important officials in the imperial court could "be born in poor families, and still take on ministerial responsibilities咸能起自布衣，蔚為卿相"⁶¹, "wearing court dresses with a simple move, and becoming important officials in a short while拾青紫于俯仰，取公卿于朝夕"⁶² For example, the famous poet Chen Zi'ang was awarded the Jinshi Degree at 24 years old, appreciated by Wu Zetian, he was promoted to Lintai Zhengzi(a mid-rank editor of imperial books), and later to You Shi Yi(a mid-rank imperial register); in one of his *Gan Yu* 感遇 poems he wrote such lines to express his wishes to dedicate himself to the service of the imperial court " My only desire is to reciprocate the court's appreciation of my talents, and to build up a powerful establishment with the sword in my hand感時報國恩，拔劍起蒿萊".

⁶¹ Dong Gao 董誥, *Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen* 欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol. 166. *Introduction to the Collection of Nanyangong's Writings* 南陽公集序.

⁶² Dong Gao 董誥, *Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen* 欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol. 179, Shang Jiang Zhou Sangguan Sima Shu, 上絳州上官司馬書.

Another example is the lines in Lu Zhaolin's *Jie Ke Shao Nian Chang Xing* 結客少年場行: "Without an important official title, who could make such great contributions(to the court)不受千金爵，誰論萬里功", and Luo Bin Wang's lines from *Cong Jun Zhong Xing Lu Nan* 從軍中行路難 "A Hard Journey during the Military March": "Once known by the ruler, who would fear fighting in the frontier(with the enemy)?但令一被君王知，誰憚三邊征戰苦". All of these examples appreciated the awarding of the imperial examinations and praised the official hiring system adopted by Wu Zetian in her reign. People were obviously inspired by Wu's progressive political vision, and excited with the desire to make great achievements and contributions for the country. This kind of enthusiasm was also expressed by an aspiring cultural spirit, creating an atmosphere and trend of cultural prosperity in the Great Tang Dynasty.

Apart from bringing about cultural prosperity, Wu Zetian's reformation of the imperial examination system also developed a substantial pool of intellectual and military talents. According to Vol. 29, *Xuan Ju Kao* 選舉考 "On Selecting Scholars" of *Wen Xian Tong Kao* 文獻通考 "Comprehensive Studies in Ancient Classics", quoting *A Comprehensive Summary of the Best Scholars in the Tang Dynasty* 唐登科記總目, during the thirty-eight years through Wude Period (618-626 A. D.) of Gaozu(566-635 A.D.) to Yonghui Period(650-655A.D.) of Emperor Gaozong(628-683 A.D.)'s reign, there were 314 scholars that were awarded the Jinshi Degree, or on average, 8.5 per year. During the 50 years through Xianqing Period (656-661 AD) to Chang'an Period (701-704 AD) of Empress Wu Zetian's reign, there were 1040 scholars that were awarded the Jinshi Degree, or on average, 20.8 per year. Examples

of successful graduates of the imperial examinations include important government officials appointed by Wu Zetian as Lou Shide, Li Zhaode, Wei Yuanzhong, Du Xingjian, Di Renjie, Zhang Jianzhi, Yao Chong⁶³. Some of the successful graduates made great contributions to the prosperity of the Great Tang Empire. Therefore, Chen Yinke(1890-1969)⁶⁴ once said that "although Jinshi degree was originated in the Sui Dynasty, it was later in Emperor Gaozong's age, namely Wu Zhao's dictatorship, that it was first paid special attention to, and became the only fair method that ordinary people may become an official"⁶⁵.

2.3 Selection of officials and the age of prospering literary arts

The philosophy of emphasizing education and culture can be traced back to Emperor Taizong's reign. Since Li's Tang Dynasty seized the royal throne by force, rulers of the early Tang Dynasty and the earlier part of Zhenguan Period(627-649 A.D.) paid much attention to military affairs. After seizing the throne by use of force with swords and steeds, Emperor Taizong realized the importance of education and culture to rule the country, and began ceasing military activities and commenced promoting cultural development. Different from the policies taken by Emperor Taizong, Wu Zetian paid more attention to selecting officials by reviewing their essays, and she put those with literary talents in especially important positions.

⁶³ Wu, Zongguo 吳宗國. *Tang Dai Keju Zhidu* 唐代科舉制度. Shenyang: Liaoning University Press, 1997.

⁶⁴ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪(1890-1969): a famous historian, classical literature researcher and linguist of contemporary China.

⁶⁵ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Tang Di Zhengzhi Shi Shu Lun Gao* 唐代政治史述論稿, "A Draft of Political History of the Tang Dynasty", Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1997, p.21.

The "royal palace examination" initiated by Wu Zetian paid special attention to literary rhetoric, giving prominence to outstanding literary talents, calling for elegant diction and grand rhetoric. According to Vol. 76 of *Tang Hui Yao*, the reviewing of the imperial examinations from the Xianqing Period (656-661AD) through to the Yonglong Period (680-681 AD) emphasized the examinees' virtues and the writing regulations they applied in their articles, but from the Chuigong Period (685-688 AD) to the Chang'an Period (701-704 AD), the examiners would select those with graceful and eloquent diction. This was the guideline adopted by Wu Zetian to select scholars as officials according to their essays⁶⁶.

Wu Zetian developed this policy for two reasons: First, she "was quite proficient in literature and history, and had talents in several art aspects頗涉文史，好雕蟲之藝"⁶⁷, her passion for literature influenced her to demand excellence in literary arts from. Second, to overthrow the current aristocrats, and more importantly, to give equal opportunities to all people with literary talents. Chen Yinke(1890-1969), a famous historian, once made such comments as:" it was Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu's invention to put rhetoric as the main part of the examinations for the Jinshi Degree; before that, since the North Dynasty(386-581) focused on the Confucian classics in the examinations for the Ming Jing Degree. The difference between the two was the reflection of the difference in the regard for family status. Therefore, during the Tang Dynasty after Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu's reign, both the imperial court and society paid more attention to the Jinshi Degree and less

⁶⁶ Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要 "Institutional History of the Tang Dynasty", Vol.76.

⁶⁷ Du You 杜佑, *Tong Dian* 通典, "Comprehensive Compendium", Vol. 15, *Xuan Ju*-III選舉三.

to the Ming Jing Degree, we may tell that the inversion of importance as for these two degrees reflect the changes of different social classes during these three hundred years"⁶⁸.

Wu Zetian completed such a great transformation, making the society transform from a Confucian-oriented to a literature-oriented society, which certainly influenced the culture in her age. "Since the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, numerous gifted scholars, such as Cui Rong, Li Qiao, Song Zhiwen, Shen Quanki, Fu Jianmo, Xu Yanbo, Du Shenyang and Chen Zi'ang, etc, all matching each other in their literary talents, and writing and replying in poems with one another. 有唐以來，無數才子，至於崔融、李嶠、宋之問、沈佺期、富嘉謨、徐彥伯、杜審言、陳子昂者，與公連飛并驅，更唱迭和。"⁶⁹ The unprecedented prosperity of literature established during the Tang Dynasty can be attributed to this policy.

Wu Zetian once had people compile books as an excuse to recruit many people of literary talents into her imperial court. Of those recruits, the so-called "Scholars of the Northern Gate北門學士" were especially prominent for their dual identity as litterateurs and politicians. According to *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書 "History of the Later Tang Dynasty": "The Queen of Heaven recruited numerous people from the literary groups..., and ordered them to compile over a thousand volumes of books such as *Lie Nü Zhuan*, *Chen Gui*, *Bai Liao Xin Jie* and *Yue Shu*. Wu sometimes secretly ordered

⁶⁸ Chen Yinke陳寅恪, *Sui Tang Zhidu Yuanyuan Lue Lun Gao*隋唐制度淵源略論稿, "A Brief Study of the Origins of the Political Systems in the Sui and Tang Dynasties", Hebei: Hebei Education Publishing House, 2002, p. 241.

⁶⁹ Dong Gao董誥, Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol.294, *Lun Jian Shu*, 論薦書 "On Recommendation of Talents".

them to participate in the discussions in the imperial court, which split some responsibilities of the prime ministers, and people of that time called them "Scholars of the Northern Gate (of the royal palace) 天后多引文學之士……使之撰《烈女傳》、《臣軌》、《百僚新戒》、《樂書》，幾千餘卷。朝廷奏議及百司表疏，時密令參決，以分宰相之權，時人謂之北門學士”。⁷⁰ Consequently, the position of Confucian scholars were further lowered. For example, on such a Confucian issue of establishing *Ming Tang* “Hall of Enlightenment”, the Queen Mother "discussed the issues with the Scholars of the Northern Gate alone, and did not ask the opinions of the Confucian scholars獨與北門學士議其制，不問諸儒”⁷¹. During Emperor Taizong (599-649) and Gaozong (628-683)’s reign, Confucian scholars were active in most political discussions. Yet Wu Zetian held special regard and preference for literary people, many gifted people of literary talents from all over the country were promoted to important positions and participated in the imperial political decision-making process. From Empress Wu to Emperor Zhongzong (656-710), many of the ministry councilors that were appointed as examiners of the imperial examinations were great talented poets, such as: Li Jiongxiu, Zhang Shuo, Shen Quanyi, Cui Shi, Ma Huaisu, Song Zhiwen and Chen Zi'ang, etc. This had a positive impact on the cultural development of this era.

Wu Zetian’s policies had an immense impact on the literary arts during this era, which facilitated the development of social and cultural prosperity. Du

⁷⁰ Ouyang Xiu歐陽修, et al. *Xin Tang Shu*新唐書, “New Tang History”, Vol. 201. *Wenyi Shang*.

⁷¹ Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑑, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976. Vol 204. p.676.

You⁷² commented on this in *Comprehensive Manual*: "After the Yongchun Period(682-683), the Queen Mother seized the royal throne and ruled the country for over 20 years. Both officials and ordinary people in the country were good at writing literary articles during her reign. As time passed by, this had become the social norm of the country及永淳之后，太后君臨天下二十餘年，當時公卿百姓，無不以文章達。因循日久，浸以成風。"⁷³

Through the efforts of the "Four celebrities"⁷⁴, the literary circle of the early Tang Dynasty had begun to gradually shake off the decadent style of earlier ages, but it still followed the flamboyant literary style of the Six Dynasties(317-589), "taking complexity and tenderness as its basic principle."⁷⁵ In the later period of the early Tang Dynasty, the poetic style changed dramatically. Wu Zetian's enthusiasm towards literature inspired the literati's enthusiasm to explore new poetic and literary styles. Chen Zi'ang(661-702), a famous poet of this time, and other literati with the similar zest for creativity not only advocated innovations in poetic styles, but also exhibited realism with most of their poems and proses, and thus the literary circle began to prosper⁷⁶. During Wu Zetian's reign, numerous new literary styles and groups began to emerge,⁷⁷ as well as some representative new literary styles.⁷⁸ *Jiu Tang Shu* •

⁷² Du You杜佑(735-812): A famous historian and politician of Tang Dynasty.

⁷³ Du You杜佑, *Tong Dian*通典Comprehensive Compendium, Vol. 6.

⁷⁴ Namely, Lu Zhaolin盧照鄰(632-695), Luo Binwang駱賓王(640-684), Yang Jiong楊炯(650-692), Wang Bo王勃(650-676).Source from:Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", *Biography of Yang Jiong*楊炯傳.

⁷⁵ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", *Biography of Shangguan Yi*上官儀傳.

⁷⁶ Hu, Kexian胡可先. Lun Wu Zetian Shiqi de Wenxue Huanjing論武則天時期的文學環境.

⁷⁷ such as "Scholars of the Northern Gate", "Group of Court Poets", "Four Literary Friends" and "Ten Literary Friends in the Remote", etc.,

Introduction to the Literary Circle praised that "The atmosphere of emphasizing literature and culture continued through to the third generation of the Tang Dynasty. During Emperor Gaozong and the Queen of Heaven Wu's reign, it was especially emphasized and developed by the imperial court. The Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu themselves wrote poems and proses, and their imperial officials echoed with their own poems and proses, and thus the cultural atmosphere during this era was quite prosperous, and the tradition still continues to today 貞觀之風，同乎三代，高宗天后，尤重詳延，天子賦橫汾之詩，臣下繼柏梁之奏，巍巍濟濟，輝燦古今⁷⁹" This is indicative of the prosperous cultural development during Wu Zetian's reign.

2.4 Striking the clan families and fusing different cultures

During Wu Zetian's reign, she excessively killed many people of the bureaucratic class, including those of the royal families. If this is merely regarded as one of Wu's measures to seize the very apex of political power, and to establish her own Zhou Dynasty, we hardly see her contributions to the cultural development, or we could even make opposite conclusions. Yet if we take this as her measure to strike the families of power and influence, as well as to facilitate the fusing of cultures of various nationalities, we conclude that this not only strengthened her own rule, but

⁷⁸ Examples include "Wang, Yang, Lu and Luo's Style" mentioned in Yan Yu's *Cang Lang Discourse on Poetry*, "Shi Yi Chen's Style", "Shen and Song's Style" and "Wu and Fu's Style" and the "New Chanting Style" praised in books of the Tang Dynasty, the Style of great writers Yan and Xu and "Historical and Biographical Style", etc.

⁷⁹ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History History", Shanghai:Shanghai Guji, 1986, p.599.

also contributed significantly to the political, economic and cultural prosperity of the Great Tang Empire.

Suppressing the power of influential clan families

Since the Tang Dynasty was established and set up Chang'an⁸⁰ as its capital in 618, the pillar of its political power had been the Guanlong Group. Emperor Gaozu (566-635 AD) laid particular stress on using people of the Guanlong Group as his imperial officials. During Emperor Taizong(599-649 AD)'s reign, although the situation had changed a little, most important officials both inside and outside the imperial court were still from families of several generations of officials in the Guanzhong Area⁸¹. For example, of the "Eighteen Scholars十八學士"⁸² of the Qin Prefecture, quite a few were from the Guanlong Group, such as Du Ruhui, Li Xuantong, Yu Zhining, Su Shichang, Xue Yuanjing, Xue Shou and Yan Xiangshi. The officials appointed by Emperor Taizong as permanent officials, namely Zhangsun Wuji, Du Yan, Du Ruhui, Li Jing, Hou Junji and Yang Shidao, were all from the Guanzhong Area.

The system of hereditary official titles and the political monopoly by the Guanlong Group not only severely impeded the cultural development in the early Tang Dynasty, but restricted the opening and progress of politics, therefore constituted

⁸⁰ Chang'an: now Xi'an city of Shaanxi Province.

⁸¹ Guanzhong: central area of China including most parts of Shaanxi and Henan provinces.

⁸² The eighteen scholars selected by the Emperor Taizong(599-649AD), namely Chu Liang, Du Ruhui, Fang Xuanling,, Yu Zhining,, Su Shichang, Yao Silian, Xue Shou, Lu Deming, Kong Yingda, Li Xuandao, Li Shousu, Yu Shinan, Cai Yungong, Yan Xiangshi, Xu Jingzong, Xue Yuanjing, Gai Wenda, Su Xu. Source from: Ouyang Xiu歐陽修,et al. *Xin Tang Shu*新唐書, "New Tang History", Biography of Chu Liang.

a threat to Wu Zetian's enthroning. Since Wu Zetian was born of a lower-ranked family in Shandong, when Emperor Gaozong planned to establish her as the Empress, it was strongly objected by the Guanlong Group. Without the support from the Shandong Group, Wu would never seize the royal throne and ruled the country for half a century. Therefore, the historic dispute“ was actually the key to the victory of the Shandong Group over the Guanlong Group in political and social aspects.”⁸³

Wu Zetian was seemingly not frightened by these objections, but roused to make revolutions to fight against them. She was by no means soft-hearted in eradicating the influential families and the Guanlong Group, and thus gained the arrant fame of using merciless officials, involving many innocent people in severe criminal punishment, and jeopardizing loyal officials by cruel means. On the other hand, however, Wu Zetian had her own way of making fair judgment, drawing on other's wise opinions and respecting and authorizing worthy officials. Her policies of selecting talented people, which was discussed in 2.1 of this paper, contributed significantly to the social prosperity. In commenting on the drastic social changes of this period, Chen Yinke said: "As for Wu Zhao, since she was not born of a family of the Guanlong Group (which were thriving since the Western Wei Dynasty), she definitely wished to destroy the forces in the Tang Dynasty, and therefore she began taking actions to destroy this Group of long traditions; respecting Jinshi, paying more attention to the rhetoric in the imperial examinations, breaking the established rules of selecting and using competent officials, as well as gradually abolishing the system of using military

⁸³ Chen Yinke陳寅恪, *Ji Dang Dai zhi Li Wu Wei Yang Hunyin Jituan*, 記唐代之李武韋楊婚姻集團, “On the Alliance through Marriage between Li, Wu, Wei and Yang of the Tang Dynasty”.

army in the mansions of officials can all be seen as her measures in this regard. From the Western Wei Dynasty through to Wu Zetian's reign, for all these one hundred and fifty years, the Guanlong Group itself had declined and been corrupted, together with Wu's further actions in destroying it, the Group was finally falling into pieces and cannot be redeemed."⁸⁴

Moving the capital to Luoyang

In order to give a fatal blow to the Guanlong Group, Wu Zetian took another important measure: moving the capital to Luoyang and thus moving the political center of the country to further east. According to historical records, in September of the Guangzhai Period (September-December, 684 AD), Wu Zetian changed the name of Luoyang from Dongdu, “the East Capital”, to Shendu, “the Divine Capital”. She further approved Wu Chengsi⁸⁵'s petition to retrospectively name Wu's ancestors as aristocratic families. During the last year of the Chuigong Period (684-688 AD), Wu Zetian sent a monk named Huaiyi as her missionary, destroyed the Qianyuan Palace and build Ming Tang Hall. In April of the same year, Wu Chengsi ordered Tong Tai to present a faked white stone inscribed "The Divine Mother Descends, the Empress Brings Prosper Forever 圣母臨人，永昌帝業" to Wu Zetian. In May, Wu Zetian was presented the "Precious Chart 寶圖", held a grand ceremony in the South Suburb of the capital to thank the Heaven for its favor, came to the Ming Tang Hall, and ordered

⁸⁴ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Tang Dai Zhengzhi Shi Shu Lun Gao* 唐代政治史述論稿, “A Draft of Political History of the Tang Dynasty”.

⁸⁵ Wu Chengsi (?-698AD): a nephew of Wu Zetian and an imperial prince during her Zhou Dynasty.

the governors of each province and prefecture as well as the imperial clansman and relatives of the royal families to come to Shendu(Luoyang) ten days before paying homage to the Heaven at the side of the Luo River. In July, she renamed "Precious Chart" "the Grand Chart of Authorization by the Heaven大授神圖", named Luo River as the River of Xian Sheng (the river where divinities appear), and built up a temple for it, to promote its status. In the first month of the first year of the Yongchang Period (January-November, 689 AD), Wu Zetian paid an imperial visit to the Ming Tang Hall and announced an imperial amnesty to all over the country. During the next January, she again visited the Ming Tang Hall, announced the month as the first month of her Zhou Dynasty(690-705 AD), and named herself as "Zhao 曌". In July, she issued *Mahamegha Sutra* "the Great Cloud Sutra". In September, she made revolutions to the Tang Dynasty, changed the title of the dynasty from Tang to Zhou, named the period of her first reign as Tianshou(690-692 AD), and established the Seven Temples of the Wu's Family. In the next July (in 691 AD), she moved ten thousands households from nine prefectures to Luoyang, and accomplished the formal change of capital to Luoyang.⁸⁶

The special political and geographical situations in Luoyang helped Wu Zetian shake off the center of power of the Guanlong Group. It is considered a milestone in her progress of successful revolution to the Tang Dynasty. Once became the political center of Wu Zetian's Zhou Dynasty, Luoyang soon became the center of thriving

⁸⁶ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 6, Biography of Empress Zetian 則天皇后.

economy, assembling of talented people and prosperous culture. Wu Zetian's actions in moving the capital and changing the dynasty had remarkable effects on the society. The move lashed the old tradition and inspired new ideologies. After moving the capital to Luoyang, talented people from all over the country gradually gathered there, and the city witnessed a specially thriving and prosperous age. A lot of famous large literary groups emerged, such as "Group of Zhuying"⁸⁷ and "Four Literary Friends"⁸⁸. This historical move further facilitated the social prosperity.

Changing the *Records of Clans* into the *Records of Family Names*

Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD), the ruling of aristocratic clans left the whole society a tendency of paying great attention to family background. In the early years of the Tang Dynasty, the Guanzhong official-oriented policy adopted by Yuwen Tai⁸⁹ of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581 AD) was heritaged, and the clan hereditary system still dominated in the society. "During the Zhenguan Period, Emperor Taizong ordered scholars to compile a one-hundred-volume records of clans, in order to discriminate people of clan families and families of commoners貞觀中，太宗命學者撰氏族百卷，以甄別士庶."⁹⁰ Since the original idea of the compilation of *the Records of Clans* was to document the

⁸⁷ Group of Zhuying: The forty-seven literatis that was commissioned by Wu Zetian to compile a work known as *Sanjiao Zhuying* 三教珠英, "Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions" which a compilation of various poetry about Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

⁸⁸ Four Literary Friends: Four famous poets of Tang, namely, Du Shenyang(645?-708), Su Weidao(648-705), Li Qiao(645-714), Cuirong(653-706).

⁸⁹ Yuwen Tai (507-556), formally Duke Wen of Anding 安定文公, later further posthumously honored by Northern Zhou(557-581), was the paramount general of the Western Wei(535-557).

⁹⁰ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", *Biography of Liu Chong*柳沖傳.

families with great contributions, Emperor Taizong commissioned the compilers to establish as the standard the ranking of official titles, whereas the records still ranked the names according to the social status of each clan family, and became a practical standard for people to establish their own position in the social hierarchic ranks. After seizing the royal throne, Wu Zetian took the advice from Xu Jingzong⁹¹ to revise the *Records of Clans* into the *Records of Family Names*, aiming to lower the positions of clan families. She ordered that all officials above the fifth rank of the imperial official system, no matter how low their social status had been before, shall be listed in the *Records of Family Names*, and officials with ranks lower than the fifth, even if they were of the clan families, shall not be listed in the new *Records*. This action strongly struck the power of clan families, and protected the interest of the newly-promoted families. It was no doubt a social progress at that time because it encouraged the enterprise of ordinary people, greatly facilitating cultural development and prosperity.⁹²

Another credit of Wu Zetian's policy of striking the clan families was to promoting the integrity of local cultures. Because of the long-standing wars and separatist regimes before Tang, the cultures in different geographic areas gradually established local and racial features, and the practices of ruling of clan families and the hereditary ranks adopted in early Tang furthered these disseverments, and severely

⁹¹ Xu Jingzong (許敬宗) (592-672), formally Duke Gong of Gaoyang (高陽恭公), a chancellor of Wu Zetian, was exceedingly powerful during most of Emperor Gaozong's and Wu's reign.

⁹² Cui Ruide 崔瑞德, *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang Dynasties* 劍橋中國隋唐史, Beijing: China Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House, 1990, p.263.

impeded the fusing and development of local cultures. The local cultures can be roughly classified as Culture of Han Nationality and Culture of Minorities, or Southern Culture and Northern Culture. The Northern Culture and the Culture of Minorities refer to the inherent culture of the northern minorities as well as some elements from the Han culture; the Southern Culture and the Culture of the Han Nationality refer to the inherent traditional culture of the Han Nationality of the Central Plain Area. If further fractionize, there were so-called Guanlong Culture, tyrannical-oriented culture of Hebei and Shandong areas, folk culture of various localities of the Central Plain Area, clan family-oriented culture of the Shandong area and the culture of the Southern Dynasty, etc. The integration of so many different cultures was the cruces of the shaping of a united culture as well as the achieving lasting stability and durable peace of the united country. Wu Zetian's measures to strike the clan families and the hereditary systems broke up cultural barriers in a certain way and thus promoted the integration of all local cultures.

In summary, after seizing the royal throne, Wu Zetian took a series of measures as striking the clan families, moving the political center of the country to Luoyang, reforming the imperial examination system and selecting officials through various sources, to reinforce her apex power, and in fact, helped form a harmonious cultural environment of the united Tang Dynasty.

2.5 Compilation of reference books

In order to show the great collection of cultural relics of the "Dynasty of Heaven",

Wu Zetian carried forward the tradition from the Zhenguan Period, making efforts to promote culture in the whole society, and the compilation of reference books can be seen as an important measure in this regard. The original purpose of compiling reference books was to provide adequate material and references for poetry and prose writing, whereas this grand cause developed in its own, and its scale became larger and larger, showing an obvious significance in cultural fusion.

During Wu Zetian's reign, not only the number of literary people in the imperial court was larger, but the quality of these literary people was unprecedentedly superb. Soon after Wu seized the royal throne, she "recruited a number of people from the literary circle, such as *Zhu Zuo Lang Yuan Wanqing* and *Zuo Shi Liu Weizhi*... ordering them to compile over a thousand volumes of books多引文學之士著作郎元萬頃、左史劉瑋之等。”⁹³ Later she appointed a large batch of scholars of the royal court to compile *San Jiao Zhu Ying*三教珠英 “Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions”⁹⁴. The compilation of *San Jiao Zhu Yin* started in the second year of the Shengli Period (698-700 AD); according to Vol. 36 of *Tang Hui Yao*唐要會, Wu Zetian was not satisfied with the two books *Anthologies for the Emperor*御覽 and *Wensi Boyao* 文思博要 compiled during the Northern Qi Dynasty(550-577 AD) and the Zhenguan Period(627-649 AD). She believed that the contents of the two were not

⁹³ such as *Biography of Women in Ancient China*, *Ju Gui*, *Bai Liao Xin Jie* and *Yue Shu*, etc. Source from: Sima Guang司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian*資治通鑑, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976, Vol. 202, p.649.

⁹⁴ *San Jiao Zhu Ying*三教珠英 “Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions” : a compilation of various poetry about Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

comprehensive and exhaustive, so she ordered Zhang Changzong⁹⁵ to recruit twenty-six scholars⁹⁶ to compile a new comprehensive reference book, adding new contents from Buddhism and Taoism. The completed book contains 1300 volumes.

Besides *San Jiao Zhu Ying* 三教珠英, reference books compiled during this time included *Wenguan Cilin* 文館詞林, compiled in the second year of the Xianqing Period (656-661 AD) by Xu Jingzong⁹⁷, 1000 volumes; *Notes to Wen Xuan* 文選注, compiled in the third year (657AD) of the Xianqing Period (655-661 AD) by Li Shan⁹⁸, 60 volumes; *Lei Bi* 累璧 compiled in the first year of the Longshuo Period (661-663 AD) by Xu Jingzong, 630 volumes; *Yaoshan Yucai* 瑶山玉彩 compiled by Li Hong in the third year of the Longshuo Period, 500 volumes; *Fanglin Yaolan* 芳林要覽 compiled by Xu Jingzong, et al., 300 volumes; *Biyu Fanglin* 碧玉芳林 compiled by Meng Lizhen, 450 volumes, and *Yuzao Qionglin* 玉藻琤林, 100 volumes.

Compilation of reference books had been popular all through the nearly 100 years of the early Tang Dynasty, whereas the reference books compiled during Wu Zetian's reign was different from those compiled earlier in that its main feature was the transformation from Confucian-oriented to literature-oriented trend. The reference books compiled in the first stage, such as *Excerpts from Books in the Northern Hall* 北堂書鈔, *Classified Excerpts from Ancient Writers* 藝文類聚, etc., were essentially the

⁹⁵ Zhang Changzong (?-705): formally the Duke of Ye (鄴公), was an official of Wu Zetian's Zhou Dynasty who was very powerful late in her reign.

⁹⁶ Scholars included Li Qiao, Yan Chaoyin, Xu Yanbo, Xue Yao, Yuan Banqian, Wei Zhigu, Yu Jizi, Wang Wujing, Shen Quanqi, Liu Zhiji and Song Zhiwen.

⁹⁷ Xu Jingzong (592-672): formally Duke Gong of Gaoyang (高陽恭公), was a senior chancellor during most of Emperor Gaozong's reign.

⁹⁸ Li Shan (630-689): a famous literati.

outline of various classes historical and literary facts, and they are basically academic reference books. Whereas in the later stage, especially those reference books emerged after the Longshuo Period, such as *Lei Bi* 累璧, *Yaoshan Yucan* 瑶山玉彩 and *Fanglin Yaolan* 芳林要覽, were more like sentimental descriptive compositions. Among them, *Yaoshan Yucan* 瑶山玉彩, in particular, took as its compiling style "widely collecting the literary writing of both the ancient and the contemporary times, and extracting its elegant and superb expressions".⁹⁹ Such reference books were actually more like the creations of literary people, which is closely related to Wu Zetian's emphasis on literary expressions and poetry and prose writing during her reign, and it was also largely attributed to the cultural prosperity of that time.

Generally speaking, during Wu Zetian's reign, the whole society witnessed an all-around cultural prosperity, evident in many cultural genres including poetry and prose, historical studies, painting, sculpture, music and dancing.

Since Wu Zetian loved poetry and prosed, she not only wrote poetry herself, but also advocated her officials to write and reply in poems with her and compete with each other. She claimed that the gathering in the imperial court shall not be without poetry, which greatly facilitated the prosperity of poetry creation during that time. Historical books recorded the artistic event when Wu Zetian paid imperial visit to Luoyang and wrote poetry at the riverside of Wentang of Ru Prefecture¹⁰⁰. With the support of Wu Zetian, Chen Zi'ang advocated a literary reform, to urge the

⁹⁹ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 86, *Biography of Liu Chong* 柳沖傳.

¹⁰⁰ Now in Henan province of China.

contemporary literary works to shake off the gorgeous and decadent style that were heritaged Qi(479-502 AD) and Liang(502-557 AD) Dynasties. Therefore, during Wu Zetian's reign, there emerged a large number of freshly composed poetry and energetically written proses emerged, with various kinds of new literary genres came into people's vision, and the whole literary circle enjoyed a vigorous and lively atmosphere.

Wu Zetian attached great importance to the compilation of academic books. She established new historiographers' institute, revised and compiled historical classics, commissioned experts to compile national histories. She created a new system in recording histories, requiring the prime minister of the imperial court to compile a monthly *Record of Updated Current Politics* 時政記. As a result, large number of new books emerged during this era. Remarkable examples include: the first Chinese work about historiography , *Shi Tong* 史通 “Comprehensive History”, compiled by Liu Zhiji¹⁰¹, the world's first pharmacopoeia, *Xinxiu Bencao* 新修本草 “Newly Revised Compendium of Materia Medica”, the world's first encyclopedia *Wenguan Cilin* 文館詞林, and the world's first reference books on religion *San Jiao Zhu Ying* 三教珠英 “Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions”. All these books greatly enriched China's treasured collection of history and culture.

Wu Zetian's love for calligraphy also promoted the development of China's calligraphic art. A large number of Wu Zetian's own inscriptions were found in Luoyang, Songshan Mountain and Xi'an of Shaanxi Province such as *Inscription of*

¹⁰¹ Liu Zhiji 劉知幾(661–721): a Chinese historian and author of the Tang Dynasty.

Poetry Engraved by the Queen of Heaven of the Great Tang 大唐天后御制詩書碑, *Inscription to Pay the Tribute to Heaven Engraved by the Queen of Heaven of the Great Tang* 大唐天后御制愿文碑, *Inscription of the Account of the Establishment of Altar of Sacrifice of the Zhou Dynasty* 大周封祀坛碑, *Shengxian Taizi Bei* 升仙太子碑 “Stele in Praise of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal” and *Inscription of the Introduction to the Poems on the Imperial Banquet at Liubei Pavilion* 流杯亭侍宴詩序碑., These inscriptions show distinct style and elegant achievements in art. Wu Zetian also coined many new characters, of which the capitalized form of Arabic numbers in Chinese characters is in use in China.

The open cultural policy adopted by Wu Zetian also attracted the import of foreign cultures. The introduction of the Indian Buddhism and the large-scaled Buddhism arts in various areas brought about a significant progress in China's various cultural elements such as architecture, fine arts, sculpture and painting. The facial expressions of the new stone Buddha figures in Dunhuang¹⁰², Longmen¹⁰³ were no longer stateliness and frightening as those of the past, but became affable and lively. Legends say that the image of the Bodhisattva in Longmen of Luoyang, with plump stature and smooth skin, and exposing its neck and shoulders, was created based on the actual image of Wu Zetian.

The fusion of various nationalities during Wu Zetian's reign also helped the integrity of various cultures. For example, the dancing and music of minorities added

¹⁰² Now a city in Jiuquan, Gansu province.

¹⁰³ A collection of Buddhist cave art in Luoyang, Hennan province.

exotic and splendid elements to that of the Han Nationality. The integration brought great vigor to the culture of the Tang Dynasty during Wu Zetian's reign, and laid a solid foundation for the further cultural prosperity of High Tang Period.

2.6 Promoting Buddhism and developing the three religions simultaneously

During Wu Zetian's reign, the foreign religion of Buddhism experienced an unprecedented prosperity, while the China's indigenous religion, Taoism, was also significantly promoted and advocated. Wu Zetian did not give up the dominance of the deep-rooted Chinese orthodoxy, Confucianism. The policy of developing the three religions simultaneously adopted by Wu Zetian resulted in a flourishing cultural and ideological development during her reign.

The rising of Buddhism culture

China's Buddhism went to its peak during Wu Zetian's reign. There are roughly three reasons for Wu Zetian's advocating of Buddhism: firstly, it was her gesture of denial of Li's Tang Dynasty. All the three emperors¹⁰⁴ in the early Tang Dynasty before Wu Zetian advocated Taoism because of Li Dan¹⁰⁵, the founder of Taoism, in order to raise the "Li" family status so as to reinforce the ruling of Li's Tang Dynasty. Emperor Taizong retrospectively esteemed Lao-tzu as the royal ancestor, and praised Taoism as pristine and void. Wu Zetian was obviously aware of the relationship between Taoism and Li's Tang Dynasty. In the transformation from Li Tang to her Wu Zhou, she intended to act in a diametrically opposite way. In the religious policy, in

¹⁰⁴ Emperor Gaozu, Emperor(566-635), Emperor Taizong(599-649), and Emperor Gaozong(628-683).

¹⁰⁵ Known as Lao-tzu, he is also revered as a god in religious form of Taoism.

particular, she must convert the policy of giving priority to Taoism over Buddhism adopted by Li's Tang Dynasty into her own policy of giving priority to Buddhism over Taoism. Secondly, it was her reward for the Buddhists' indispensable contributions in her enthroning. In the traditional Chinese orthodoxy, women were supposed to be sedentary and obedient. Wu Zetian's enthronement was definitely subversion and was virtually impossible without the support from a religion. With the help of some monks, Wu Zetian twisted the foreign religion to her own ends, using it to challenge China's orthodoxy in the state religion, Confucianism, and local tradition, Taoism. During the first year of Tianshou Period (690-692 AD), ten Buddhist monks, led by Xue Huaiyi¹⁰⁶, faked *Mahamegha Sutra* 大雲經, "the Great Cloud Sutra", and presented it to Wu Zetian. They advocated that Wu Zetian was the reincarnation of Buddha named Maitreya, and vigorously exaggerated the romance that it was with gods' authorization that Wu would become the Empress of her own Dynasty.¹⁰⁷ Wu Zetian released the *Mahamegha Sutra* all over the country, ordered each Buddhist temple to store one copy, and commissioned accomplished monks to lecture on it.¹⁰⁸ The public voice spread by the Buddhists obviously helped Wu Zetian ascended the throne in 690.¹⁰⁹ Lastly, Wu Zetian herself was a follower of Buddhism. In the Introduction to the *Sutra of Cosmic Play* 方廣大莊嚴經, she claimed that "I loved Buddha from my childhood and set my heart in the Faramita朕愛自幼齡，歸心彼岸". And in the

¹⁰⁶ Xue Huaiyi (?-694), a famous monk during Wu Zetian's reign.

¹⁰⁷ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 6, *Biography of Empress Zetian* 則天皇后.

¹⁰⁸ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", *Biography of Xue Huaiyi*薛懷義.

¹⁰⁹ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 6, *Biography of Empress Zetian* 則天皇后.

Introduction to *Sanzang Shengjiao* 三藏圣教序, "the Divine Teachings of Sanzang", she wrote that "I respected Buddhism since my childhood, and always wish to convert to it朕幼崇釋教，夙慕歸依". With the experience of being a nun in the Ganye Nunnery after the death of Emperor Taizong in 649, Wu Zetian had a kind of predestined relationship with Buddhism.

Because of her political needs as well as her personal belief, Wu Zetian greatly advocated Buddhism after seizing the royal throne. During her reign, a large number of Buddhist events were carried out, and people's worship for the Buddhism was unprecedented by any other ages of the past. Only seven months after she ascended the throne, she made an explicit announcement: "The Buddhism shall be given priority over the Taoism, and Buddhist monks and nuns shall be higher in rank than Taoist and Taoist nuns釋教在道法之上，僧尼處道士女冠之前"¹¹⁰ Wu Zetian's series actions in favoring Buddhism greatly promoted the development of Buddhist culture. The advocating of Buddhism during Wu Zetian's reign can be classified into the following three aspects:

① Organizing large-scaled translation of sutras

Wu Zetian built up many special halls for Buddhism Sutras translation. According to *Biographies of Accomplished Monks of the Tang Dynasty* 唐高僧傳 and *The Account of Visiting to the Dual Capitals* 兩京城坊考, major sutra translation halls include the Da Bian Kong Temple, Fo Shou Ji Temple, Da Fu Xian Temple, San

¹¹⁰ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 6, *Biography of Empress Zetian* 則天皇后.

Yang Palace, Xi Tai Yuan Temple, Guang Fu Temple, Xi Ming Temple and Qing Chan Temple, of which four were in Chang'an and four were in Luoyang. The accomplished monks who participated in the translation of sutras include Divakara, Devaprajna, Ratnacinta, Hwei-chih, Bodhiruchi, Siksaananda, I-Ching and Fa-tsang, of which I-Ching and Fa-tsang were Chinese monks, and most of the other monks were from India or the Western Regions. Wu Zetian paid special attention to the translation of *Avatamsaka Sutra* 華嚴經, which was one of the major classics of the Avatamsaka School of Buddhism in the Sui(581-618 AD) and Tang(618-907 AD) Dynasties, though translation of this sutra started in Jin Dynasty(266-420 AD), till the time of Wu Zetian's reign, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* translated appeared neither complete nor comprehensive. In the first year of the Changshou Period (in 692 AD), the Weiwu Jun (Army of Bravery and Courage) won a great victory in Tubo¹¹¹, reoccupied the four townships in the Western Regions. Wu Zetian sent her envoys to Udyana, presented a Sanskrit version of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and asked Siksaananda, an accomplished monk in Udyana to lead the translation work of this sutra in the Capital. In March of the Zhengsheng Period (January- September, 695 AD), Wu Zetian paid a imperial visit to the Da Bian Kong Temple, symbolically gave the final touch to the would-be-finished translation to show her attention and care to the work. During the second year of the Shengli Period (698-700 AD), all the translation work was finished. Wu Zetian wrote the "*Introduction to the New Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra of Cosmic Play Accomplished in the Great Zhou Dynasty*大周新譯大方廣佛華嚴經",

¹¹¹ Tibet today.

speaking quite highly of the translation project. In the same year, Fa-tsang¹¹² was commissioned to lecture on the newly-translated *Avatamsaka Sutra* in Fo Shou Ji Temple of Luoyang. The lectures turned out to be a huge success, and Wu Zetian awarded him the title of the "No. 1 Sage Master of the Sutra of Bodhisattva". Because of Wu Zetian's great emphasis on the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and her significant support to the Avatamsaka School of Buddhism, the latter gradually became one of the major schools in the Buddhism of the Tang Dynasty. I-Ching, another accomplished monk of the same era, also made great contributions to the translation of Buddhist sutras. From the Jiushi Period until the Jingyun Period (700-710 AD), I-Ching successively translated two hundred and thirty volumes of Buddhist sutras, and wrote *The Account of Consulting Accomplished Monks in the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty* 大唐西域求法高僧傳, and *A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea* 南海寄歸傳.¹¹³ Other remarkable translation works accomplished during this era include: *La~nkaavatara-sutra* 大乘入楞伽經, *Lotus Sutra of the Appearance of Buddha* 大乘顯識經, and *Pabcaskandhaka-prakarana* 大乘五蘊論 led by Ri Zhao in Eastern and Western Tai Yuan Temple and Guang Fu Temple in the Western Capital. The translation of *Dasabhumika-Sutra* 大寶積經, which was not finished by Xuanzang during his lifetime, was also completed during Wu's reign. From a historical perspective, the sutra translation work sponsored by Wu Zetian

¹¹² Fa-tsang 法藏(643–712): the third of the five patriarchs of the Huayan school. He was famed for his empirical demonstrations in the court of Wu Zetian.

¹¹³ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書, "Old Tang History", Biography of I-Ching 義淨傳.

during her reign was not only the continuation of that of the previous dynasties, but also represented a new era which features in the scale of the translation halls, the number of people participating, the scale of the activities and the quantities of the translated works.

② Showing respects to accomplished monks

Wu Zetian respected the Buddhism and showed courtesy to many well-known accomplished monks, which further raised the status of Buddhism, thus advanced the development of the Buddhist culture. I-Ching(635-713 AD), an accomplished monk, went to India to study Buddhism in the second year of the Xianheng Period(670-674 AD) of Gaozong's reign. He departed alone by sea, journeyed 30 countries for over 20 years, and when he finally returned to Luoyang in May of the Zhengsheng Period (695 AD), Wu Zetian welcomed him on the East Gate of Luoyang with a splendid ceremony. Bodhiruchi, another accomplished monk from the South India, were invited by a special envoy sent by Emperor Gaozong during the second year of Yongchun Period (682-683 AD), to settle in the Da Fu Xian Temple of Luoyang to translate sutras. Other foreign accomplished monks as Divakara from India and Devaprajna from Udyana were all favorably treated. Shen-hsiu(606-706 AD), known as the Founder of the Northern School of Zen, preached kensho, meaning gradual enlightenment of Zen, while Hui-Neng(638-713 AD), known as the Founder of the Southern School of Zen, preached satori, meaning sudden enlightenment of Zen. They were both accomplished disciples of the fifth Zen Patriarch, Hung-jen(601-674 AD), and were greatly admired and respected by Wu Zetian as great masters of Zen.

Wu Zetian invited Shen-hsiu to the capital from Dang Yang Mountain¹¹⁴, ordered people to carry him on a sedan chair, and she herself worshipped him on bended knees, and established a temple in his name to the honor of his accomplishments¹¹⁵.

③ Carrying out a large number of Buddhist promotion events

According to *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書, "History of the Later Tang Dynasty", during Wu Zetian's reign, she invested a lot to "cast figures of Buddha, build temples and pagodas, with such projects going endless year after year鑄浮屠，立廟塔，役無虛歲"¹¹⁶, and the Buddhist activities in the imperial court was quite frequent and blooming. Di Renjie(630-700 AD), the prime minister of Wu, once criticized this trend in his memorial to the throne saying that "the Buddhist temples of today was paid more attention to than the royal palace, with the architecture and paintings extremely luxury and extravagant. All kinds of precious stones are used to decorate them and all kinds of beautiful materials are exhausted to show their magnificence今之伽藍，制過宮闕，窮奢極壯，畫繪盡工。寶珠殫于綴飾，瑰材竭于輪奐."¹¹⁷ The General Official Zhang Tinggui depicted this situation as such: "all financial and labor resources are poured; all the woods of mountains throughout the country are used to build pagodas, and all gold from smelting workshops are used to make figures of Buddha傾四海之財，殫萬人之力，窮山之木為塔，極冶之金為像", and "the country is exhausted and people are all worn out天下虛竭，海內勞弊"¹¹⁸. The event to meet

¹¹⁴ Now in Hubei province.

¹¹⁵ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 6, *Biography of Shen Xiu* 神秀傳.

¹¹⁶ Ouyang Xiu歐陽修, et al. *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書, "New Tang History", Vol. 152.

¹¹⁷ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.89, *Biography of Di Renjie* 狄仁杰傳.

¹¹⁸ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol.101, *Biography of Zhang Tinggui* 張廷珪傳.

Buddha's bone in Famen Temple¹¹⁹ had become a national Buddhist event during Wu Zetian's reign. Famen Temple was attached great importance because it stored the relics of Buddha, and during Wu Zetian's reign, the events to meet Buddha's bone were held twice in Famen Temple; the first lasted from the fourth year of Xianqing Period to the second year of Longshuo, and it was petitioned by monks Zhizong and Hongjing in the temple, holding the relics of Buddha through Chang'an to the royal palace in Luoyang for sustentation. And the second one was held in December of the fourth year of the Chang'an Period, when Fa-tsang, Wen Gang and other monks went to Famen Temple to preach for seven days and then asked to respectfully hold the relics of Buddha outside the Temple, holding it through Chang'an to the royal palace in Luoyang for sustentation. The event was quite influential at the time, shocking people inside and outside the imperial court. The emperor is burn joss sticks, and thousands of officials are making courtesy calls to the Buddha, from this we can see how grand the event and how wasteful the whole process was.

The Buddhist events during Wu Zetian's reign had profound influence in the society of this era. In the political aspect, Buddhism gradually infiltrated into the upper-class political life, so that Buddhism was more and more closely related with the country's politics. In the ideological aspect, Buddhism gradually infiltrated into people's everyday life, so that people's way of thinking and lifestyle changed with it. In the theoretical aspect, the wide spread of Buddhist theories had a profound impact on the Confucianism of later ages. Wu Zetian's policy of investing so much in

¹¹⁹ Now in Fufeng, Shaanxi province.

Buddhist events caused great burden for ordinary people and the social and economic development of the time, but the frequent and grand Buddhist cultural events further promoted the cultural development of the country, and as a culture from outside the border, it no doubt was a result as well as evidence of the prosperous exchanging of international cultures. During Wu Zetian's reign, Buddhism became a national religious culture, and it reached its peak in China during this era. During this period many foreign monks came to Great Tang Empire; except India and the Ancient Western Regions, many students from Japan and Korea also came to study here, and helped develop Buddhism in their own country after finishing their study in the Great Tang Empire. Such frequent cultural exchange was a piece of evidence of the strong political and economic development of the Tang Empire, and also the demonstration of its advanced cultural, thus the bright spot of the Great Tang Culture, strengthening the cohesion of people of various nationalities.

The promotion of Taoism culture

Although some scholars (e.g. T.H.Barrett,) argue that Gaozong, the husband, and Wu Zetian, the wife, advanced the interests of Taoism and Buddhism respectively, there is abundant evidence showing that Wu Zetian by no means derogated the Taoism, she instead attached equal importance to this religion.

① Wu Zetian was a pious believer of the Taoism.

As a domestic religion of China, Taoism had its inrooted national and cultural basis in China. In establishing the Tang Dynasty, the Lis greatly respected Taoism and

recognized Lao-tzu as the royal ancestor. Grown up in such a cultural environment, Wu Zetian was inevitably influenced by the Taoism. When Wu Zetian's mother, Madam Rongguo, "Glory of the State", died in 671, Wu changed the name of "Zhengfang Mansion" into "Taiping Taoist Temple", "in order for Madam Rongguo to enjoy welfare in the ghostdom以幸冥福".¹²⁰ Wu Zetian's mother was a pious believer of Buddhism, whereas Wu Zetian applied Taoism ritual to protect the ghostdom. She further requested her only daughter should be made a Taoist nun as an act of merit designed to bring repose to the soul of the grandmother. No less than 12 other princesses are recorded as having followed the precedent and entered Taoist nuns during the next two centuries, and this seemed to have become the imperial family cult during the Tang Dynasty.

In 674, Wu Zetian ordered that the study of *Dao De Jing*道德經¹²¹ be encouraged. By 678 it became a compulsory text in the examination system. In 675 some further measures had also been taken to promote the study of *Chuang Tse*莊子¹²².

In 675, when Emperor Xiaojing, Li Hong(652-675 AD) died, Wu Zetian caused to transcribe 36 titles of *All Taoist Scriptures*一切道經, altogether 70,000 volumes, and wrote introduction for it, to pursue welfare for her son. Tang Yongtong (1893-1964), a contemporary scholar of the Tang Dynasty, by his research on the

¹²⁰ Ouyang Xiu歐陽修, et al. *Xin Tang Shu*新唐書, "New Tang History", Vol. 83, *Biography of Princess Taiping*太平公主傳.

¹²¹ *Dao De Jing*: originally known as *Lao-tzu*, and was written around the 6th century BC by the Taoist sage Lao-tzu. It is fundamental to the Taoist school of Chinese philosophy.

¹²² *Chuang Tse*: The Taoist classic text, and was named after its purported author.

Taoist historical material found in Dunhuang, *Jin Shi Cui Bian* 金石萃編, as well as *History of the Later Tang Dynasty* and *History of the Early Tang Dynasty*, confirmed that the Introduction to *All Taoist Scriptures* was written by Wu Zetian herself. This action of Wu Zetian started the practice of the compilation of Taoist scriptures. According to Vol. 50, *Za Ji* 雜記, “Miscellaneous Account”, of *Tang Hui Yao* 唐會要, Wu Zetian built Shangxian Taoist Temple and Tianzun Palace in the Qian Tomb, and built Songyang Taoist Temple, to pray for ghostly welfare for her son. Her poem series entitled *Tang Xiang Hao Tian Le* 唐享昊天樂, “the Great Tang Empire Enjoys the Blessings of the God of Haotian”, depicted the event of her praying the god of Haotian in the southern suburb of Luoyang, and worshipping the Taoist immortal god of Haotian. The poems were permeated with strong sense of Taoism.

② Wu Zetian was closely affiliated with a number of Taoists

In 676, 679 and in 680, both the emperor and the empress paid imperial visits to Song Shan, where Pan Shizheng (584-682 AD), the spiritual heir of the late famous Taoist Wan Yuanzhi (528-635 AD) was. In the first year of Chuigong (685-688 AD), Wu Zetian invited and met Wang Zhaoye, the 70 years old son of the late Wang Yuanzhi. The meetings resulted in a posthumous honour for the late father as “*Jin Zi Guang Lu Tai Fu* 金紫光祿大夫”, later she changed his title of “*Lord Shengzhen* 升真先生” given by Emperor Gaozong to “*Lord Shengxuan* 升玄先生”.¹²³ As for the Taoist Sima Chengzhen (647-735 AD), Pan Shizheng’s leading disciple, after hearing about

¹²³ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 舊唐書 “Old Tang History”, Vol. 191, *Biography of Wang Yuanzhi* 王知遠傳.

his reputation, Wu Zetian summoned him to the capital, wrote an imperial edict herself in praise of him, and when the latter was going to depart for the Taoist temple in the mountain, Wu Zetian ordered an imperial official treat him cordially in the east of the Luo Bridge.¹²⁴ Wu Zetian also summoned the Taoist Shang Xianpu(?-702 AD) and promoted him to the official of Tai Shi Ling. Seeing that the area under *Tai Shi Ling*'s jurisdiction, *Tai Shi Ju*, shall be subject to the supervision of the Ministry of the Imperial Secretary, Shang did not want to be subject to the supervision of any bureaucratic officials, thus refused to accept the title. Wu Zetian then changed the jurisdiction of *Tai Shi Ju* into *Hun Yi Jian*, not subject to the supervision of the Ministry of the Imperial Secretary, and entitled Xianpu as *Hun Yi Jian*, just to satisfied him. During the second year of the Chang'an Period (701-704 AD), in order for Shang Xianpu to avoid the disaster of mutual control of the Five Elements, Wu Zetian changed his official title into *Shui Heng Du Wei* (*Shui* meaning "water")¹²⁵, saying that "so that you are free of any worry now." When Shang died in Autumn of the same year, Wu Zetian was quite grieved.¹²⁶ In February of the second year of the Shengli Period (699-700 AD), Wu Zetian visited Songshan, and wrote an inscription in the honor of the Shengxian Taizi Temple, "Temple of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal". After paying an imperial visit with reverence to the Shengxian Taizi Temple and worshipping the figure of the Prince Jin, Wu Zetian

¹²⁴ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 191, *Biography of Sima Chengzhen*司馬承禎傳.

¹²⁵ according to the Taoist theory, water may generate gold, so the new title is quite auspicious.

¹²⁶ Liu Xu劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu*舊唐書 "Old Tang History", Vol. 191, *Biography of Shang Xianpu*尚獻甫傳.

wrote a long article *Shengxian Taizi Bei Bin Xu* 升仙太子碑, “Introduction to the Stele in Praise of the Prince who Ascended into Heaven to become an immortal”, and affixed “Imperial Book Made by the Heaven-Enthroned Jin Lun Sheng Shen Empress 大周天冊金輪聖神皇帝御制御書” to it. The 2000-character inscription is at great length and forthright in vigor, providing a clear account of the author's yearning towards the world of immortal. The temple was destroyed with ages, whereas the inscription is well kept until today.

③ Wu Zetian use Taoism to justify her enthronement

Traditionally, all the major objects of Buddhist worship were unquestionably male figures. The only one religious tradition in China that assigned some value to the female sex was Taoism. It had absorbed cults of such goddesses as Xiwang Mu, the Queen Mother of the west, and the mother of Lao-tzu, who was no more nonentity like the mother of Confucius, but a “Myserious and Marvellous Jade Lady 玄妙玉女”. Wu Zetian, of course, was interested in this aspect of Taoism. In her earlier days of the imperial service, “the Queen of Heaven presented a memorial, saying that the sage and wise ruling of the Emperor shall originate from the royal ancestor Lao-tzu, and therefore, all people under the princes and dukes shall study the classic *Lao Tzu* 天后上表，以為國家聖緒，出自玄元皇帝，請令王公以下皆習《老子》”.¹²⁷ In 683, imperially sponsored sacrifices on Song Shan¹²⁸ were divided equally between male

¹²⁷ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976. Vol. 202, p.648.

¹²⁸ Song Shan: Mountain Song, located in Henan province, and is one of the Taoist Five Sacred Mountains.

and female deities, with the latter including both the Queen Mother and the mother of Xia Houqi, the early Xia ruler. Once Gaozong had died, the goddesses gained even higher positions. In 684, Wu Zetian declared that the mother of Lao-tzu should not be left without an honorific title and she should be known as Xian Tian Taihou 先天太后, “Empress Before Ages” and her statues should be placed in temples to Lao-tzu.

In April of the fourth year of the Chuigong Period (685-688 AD), a man presented an auspicious stone to Wu Zetian, which had the inscription of "The Divine Mother Descends, Therefore The Empress Causes Prosper Forever 圣母臨人，永昌帝業" on it, implying that Wu Zetian was the Divine Mother, and she may bring everlasting prosperity to the country. Wu Zetian was pleased and named the stone "Precious Chart 寶圖", She went to the South Suburb of Luoyang to worship the Heaven, and ordered all governors of each province and prefecture as well as the imperial clansman and relatives of the royal families to gather in Luoyang ten days before paying homage to the Heaven at the side of the Luo River. On the day Wu Zetian worshipped the Luo River and receive the "Chart", she entitled herself "Sheng Mu Shen Huang 圣母神皇", “Divine Mother and Heavenly Empress”, and changed the name of the "Precious Chart" into "Heaven Awarded Divine Chart 天授聖圖", and Luo River as Yongchang, “prosper forever”. She even ordered to established a county named Yongchang at the side of the spring from where the Precious Chart originated. Since Songshan Mountain is to the immediate south of Luo River, she further entitled the Songshan Mountain as the Divine Mountain. By the end of this year, Wu Zetian paid a formal visit the side of Luo River and received the Chart with reverence. She

built a high imperial altar at the north of the Luo River for ceremonies. These series of events were actually Wu Zetian's propaganda of the justification of her seizing the royal throne, and all these events were conducted with Taoist rituals. The titles applied in these rituals as "Divine Mother 圣母", "the nimbed and auspicious Middle Mountain (Songshan Mountain) 中岳靈瑞" were all terms originated from Taoist classics. In 674, new titles of Tian Huang 天皇, "heavenly emperor", and Tian Hou 天后, "heavenly empress", were assumed by the emperor and empress. Tian Huang was first and most numinous of the a serious of primeval rulers at the dawn of Chinese history in early Taoist texts, such as *San Huang Wen* 三皇文, while Tian Hou, although a new term, was also emanated from Taoist circles. In 688, the empress finally assumed the title of Sage Mother, Sovereign Divine. This term had already been in use to refer to the mother of Lao-tzu in earlier ages.

Developing the three religions simultaneously

Wu Zetian issued *the Act to Prohibit Buddhist Monks and Taoists Disgracing Each Other* 禁僧道毀謗制¹²⁹ and *the Edict to Give the Same Imperial Regard to Monks and Taoists* 僧道并重敕. In *the Act to Prohibit Buddhist Monks and Taoists Disgracing Each Other*, Wu Zetian advocated that the Buddhism and the Taoism are both religions to advocate benignity, and there are no disparate theories between the two. She warned that if anyone make any division between the two, harbor hatred to or disgrace with each other, he shall be beaten with wand and then

¹²⁹ Dong Gao 董誥, *Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen* 欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol.95.

ordered to secularize.¹³⁰ In *the Edict to Give the Same Imperial Regard to Monks and Taoists* Wu Zetian declared again that since the Buddhism and Taoism share the same origin, they should be paid equal attention to. Buddhist monks who don't worship Tianzun in Taoist temples, and Taoists practitioners who don't worship Buddha in Buddhist temples, shall be ordered to secularize and further punished for violation of the imperial order.

Wu Zetian was also aware that Confucianism was the basic ideology on which she may set her feudal ruling of the country, and only those imperial officials who were educated by the Confucian doctrines may help her effectively rule the country. Filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and righteousness are all paramount Confucian virtues that were deeply rooted in the feudal China's society and still dominated the ideological field during Wu Zetian's reign. Wu Zetian compiled a book, *Chen Gui* 臣軌, "Tracks of Subjects of Rulers", was to educate the imperial officials with Confucian doctrines. She advocated in the book that all officials shall "exert the virtues and practice what you preach, and well serve the imperial causes and set yourselves as examples for others發揮德行，熔范身心。為事上之規模，作臣下之準繩"¹³¹ The bibliographies of *Chen Gui* include such Confucius classics as *Shang Shu*¹³², the *Spring and Autumn Annals*¹³³, the *Analects*¹³⁴, *Lao Tzu*, *Chuang Tse*,

¹³⁰ Dong Gao董誥, Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol.95.

¹³¹ Dong Gao董誥, Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen欽定全唐文, "Anthologies of Prose of the Tang Dynasty Compiled by Imperial Order", Vol. 95.

¹³² Sang Shu尚書: *The Classic of History*, is a compilation of documentary records related to events in ancient history of China. The book consists of 58 chapters (including eight subsections), of which 33 are generally considered authentic works of the 6th century BC.

*Classics of Filial Piety*¹³⁵, and *Li Sao*¹³⁶, etc. In January of the second year of the Changshou Period (692-694 AD), Wu Zetian ordered all *Juren*'s in the country to "stop studying *Lao Tzu* and start studies on *Chen Gui* created by the Queen Mother 停習《老子》，更習太后所造《臣軌》"¹³⁷, and further listed *Chen Gui* as a mandatory reference book for imperial examinations. During Wu Zetian's reign, positions of the imperial court service were largely dominated by civil and military Confucian officials.¹³⁸ So that we may conclude that Wu Zetian did not weaken Confucianism during her reign, and she still allowed it to be dominant in the ideological field of the country.

In summary, during Wu Zetian's reign, China witnessed a simultaneous prosperity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, due to the enthusiastic sponsorship from the sovereign, which was indicative with the compilation of *San Jiao Zhu Ying* 三教珠英 “*Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions*” . The book project started with an imperial edict in second year of the Shengli Period (698-700 AD), to collect the essential doctrines of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In accomplishing this

¹³³ The *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋 is the official chronicle of the State of Lu covering the period from 722 to 481 BC. It is the earliest surviving Chinese historical text to be arranged on annalistic principles.

¹³⁴ The *Analects* 論語 are a record of the words and acts of the philosopher Confucius and his disciples, as well as the discussions they held. Written during the Spring and Autumn Period through the Warring States Period (479 - 221 BC).

¹³⁵ *Xiao Jing* or *Classic of Filial Piety* 孝經: a Confucian classic treatise giving advice on filial piety; It is probably dates to about 400 BC.

¹³⁶ *Li Sao* 離騷: a Chinese poem dating from the Warring States Period, written by Qu Yuan (340 BC - 278 BC) of the Kingdom of Chu.

¹³⁷ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, “Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance”, Vol.205.

¹³⁸ For example, Liu Rengui(602-685), Pei Yan(?-684), Li Zhaode(?-697), Di Renjie(630-700), Zhu Jingze(635-709), Yao Chong(650-721) and Song Jing(663-737), etc.

book project, Wu summoned dozens of scholars¹³⁹, and appointed Zhang Yizhi¹⁴⁰ as the supervisor, altogether twenty-six compilers participated in this book project of 1300 volumes. The compilation of *San Jiao Zhu Ying* 三教珠英, “*Essence of Pearls from the Three Religions*”, tokens Wu Zetian's determination to a simultaneous development of the three religions, and her policies and actions greatly widened people's ideological horizon, and help created a prosperity of diversity. The contradictions and conflicts, as well as exclusion and fusion among the three religions had no doubt created a more active ideological and cultural environment. This energetic environment not only facilitated the significant cultural development of this era, but laid a solid foundation for the cultural prosperity of the later ages as High Tang Period(713-765 AD). The significant influences of all the three religions are notably trackable in literary works of this era and later ages. Chen Zi'ang's poems, as an example, sigh over the uncertainty of life on the one hand, and praise the life in seclusion and the immortal world on the other, a perfect combination of the Buddhism and Taoist ideas. Wang Wei(701-761 AD), sometimes titled the *Poet Buddha*, was well known for blending the Zen doctrine and sentiments in his poems. Almost all masters of poems and proses in the High Tang Period were strongly influenced by three religious cultures, and the integrity of the three religions has been the mainstream of Chinese culture throughout the China's feudal history ever since Wu Zetian's reign.

¹³⁹ Famous scholars include: Li Qiao 李嶠(645-713), Xu Yanbo 徐彦伯(?-714), Xue Yao 薛曜, Wei Zhigu 魏知古(647-715), Yu Jizi 于季子, Wang Wujing, Shen Quanqi 沈佺期(650-729), Liu Zhiji 劉知幾(661-672) and Song Zhiwen 宋知問(656-712), etc.

¹⁴⁰ Zhang Yizhi 張易之(?-705): one of the most favorable officials during Wu Zetian's reign.

Chapter 3- Researches and Historians' Comments on Wu Zetian

As the only woman to become emperor in China's five-thousand-year history, Wu Zetian is definitely a singular and striking historical figure who brought about greatest debate in the Chinese history. From a daughter of a lumber merchant to a Cairen to Emperor Taizong, then to the Empress of Emperor Gaozong, this woman gradually participated in the political practices of the imperial court, and finally risked everyone's condemnation to ascend the imperial throne, making significant impact on the Chinese history. Though her legendary experience were heavily recorded in the Chinese histories, throughout over a thousand years, there has been much controversy about her, some deprecate her while others speak highly of her, still others compromise the two extreme views on her. Opinions vary, and it is hard to decide which is right. Not only in ancient China, even in today's China, there are still much controversy and disputes about Wu Zetian.

In ancient China, Wu Zetian's series of actions of enthronement and her ruling have seemingly drawn a general hatred from historical commentators, and were mostly called "Queen Wu's Rebel" or "Disaster Caused by Wu and Wei". Though Wu had indeed abused cruel punishments, killed many innocent people, and lived luxuriously and extravagantly during her reign, the main reason for the depreciations lies in that the male-dominated feudal China, neither any woman before her nor any woman since has occupied this position at the very apex of political power. Standard histories often present her as an illegitimate, ruthless usurper. Wu Zetian's legendary experience, as well as her profound influences on the Chinese history, makes it

difficult to give a definite comment on her. However, through the controversy and disputes of over a thousand years, especially of the latest one hundred years, the Empress Wu Zetian and her brilliant achievements and contributions to Chinese history have been more and more acknowledged.

Large-scaled researches and discussions on Wu Zetian in contemporary China started during the May Fourth Movement at the beginning of the last century, when some advanced Chinese intellectuals presented her as an icon of feminist revolution, and published such books as *Chinese Feminist Wu Zetian*, *Great Revolutionary Politician Wu Zetian* and *New Discussions on Wu Zetian*, etc, opening a new chapter of the discussion of Wu Zetian.

During almost 100 years since that, discussions on Wu Zetian have never stopped. Especially after the P. R. China was founded in 1949, the Chinese historical researches have been bustling with various activities. Wu Zetian's revolutionary actions against the old order, regardless of her methods or motivations, led to her rehabilitation among Communist thinkers. She was considered as an representative of women's liberation and was highly praised for her refusal to yield to the ruling class and her promotion of egalitarian examinations. For example, in 1955, in *An Concise Outline of the History of Sui, Tang and the Five Dynasties* was published by New Knowledge Publishing House, the author Yang Zhijiu believed that Wu Zetian's major contribution was that she destroy the dominant political power held by the Guanlong Aristocratic Group. In 1958, Wu Feng pointed out in his *Chinese history: Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties* that Wu Zetian promoted the centralization of power in the feudal

country, and her major policies all functioned positively to the society of her time. In 1959, after watching the Shaoxing opera entitled *Empress Zetian*, historians including Jian Bozan, Wu Han, Lü Zhenyu, Tian Han and Shang Zhui held speeches respectively on Wu Zetian, and they all share the same opinion that during the 50 years of Wu Zetian's reign, she had made quite positive achievements, reinforced the prosperity created by Emperor Taizong during the Zhenguan Period, and laid a solid foundation in material resources for the economic, political and cultural prosperity of the Tang Dynasty.

At the same time, however, these praises also provoked a backlash from some other scholars. Lü Simian, the author of the *Histories of Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties* published by China Book Corporation, claimed that Wu Zetian was no more than a tyrant, she not only abused cruel punishment and the power to kill numerous innocent people, busied at unnecessary constructions and lived an extravagant and corrupted life, but also defended the border in the unrighteous way and used the wrong people in important positions, and thus had a bad influence to the later ages. In his *History of Sui and Tang Dynasties*, Cen Zhongmian believes that Wu Zetian was jealous and suspicious evil figure who had a very cruel temperament. After making a comprehensive survey of the twenty-one years of her reign, the author concluded that there was virtually no political achievement during Wu's reign.

It worth a mention that in May 1960, Guo Moruo, an authoritative Marxist historian in contemporary China, published a four-act play entitled *Wu Zetian* in the magazine *People's Literature*, which, in the form of dramatic art, presented Wu Zetian

as a revolutionary, a heroine of class struggle leading disgruntled masses against an entrenched aristocracy. The play soon received quite strong response in the society, and it brought about even hotter discussions on the merits and faults of Wu Zetian. An article *On the Issue of How to Comment on Wu Zetian* published by Miu Fu in the *Guangming Daily*, claiming that during Wu Zetian's reign, the society basically followed the trend of economic development of the Zhenguan Period, the population and household grew, and Wu rewarded people of talents and promoted them to important position, all these laid a solid foundation for the Heyday of Kaiyuan Period, and shall be given positive comments. While Wu Zetian did abuse cruel punishments and killed many innocent people, destroying the Great Wall of her own soil and defending the border in an incorrect manner, putting heavy burden of tax on ordinary people so that the latter lived a poor life, and piously believing Buddhism; her dismerits are also quite obvious. The article *Several Issues on the Comments of Wu Zetian* published on the *Guangming Daily* by Ruo Si claimed that, the political route taken by Wu Zetian did not alleviate the conflicts between the ruler and ordinary people; Wu Zetian's selection and use of talented people through various channels can be seen as a social progress, whereas it is only one side of the story, on the other side, she still had quite a number of malpractices in her personnel policy, an example of this being merciless politics, causing flooding of miscarriages of justice during her reign. The book *An Concise Outline of the History of Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties* compiled by Han Guopan used some length specially for the discussion of Wu Zetian, arguing that some reforms carried out by Wu Zetian conformed with the objective

route of social development of that time. Therefore during Wu Zetian's reign, the social economy and culture was still developing on its own course.

With China's "Cultural Revolution" breaking out in 1966, due to the influence of the extremely leftist political guidelines and the "hint obliquely at historiography", the historiographic researches on of this time Wu Zetian became the instrument serving the realistic politics. *A Worthy Woman Politician Wu Zetian* published by Liang Xiao had negative influence to the society of that time.

And after China entered into the new age of opening up and reformation, China's historiographic circle has brought order out of chaos, and accordingly, the researches on Wu Zetian comes to a stage featured with sound argument and objective observation. At the same time, seeing that Wu Zetian had quite an important position in the Chinese History as well as the wide difference between various schools on the comments of Wu Zetian, China Institute of Tang History organized seminars series on Wu Zetian, holding six national conferences in China, greatly advanced China's historiographic research on Wu Zetian.

In 1985, the First National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Xianyang, Shaanxi Province. Over 50 representatives from institutes of high learning, scientific and research institutes as well as the museums and cultural relic collection and research system of a dozen of provinces and regions attended the symposium, with altogether 28 articles collected during the symposium. Focusing on the comments on Wu Zetian's merits and faults, the symposium stressed the social and historical

conditions under which Wu Zetian may held the royal throne, as well as the political, economic, military and especially cultural issues during Wu Zetian's reign. Wu Feng and Niu Zhigong held that, we must pay attention to the trait of "opening" of the Tang Dynasty, and that the social position of women in the Tang Dynasty was relatively higher and there was less bondage over them, so that Wu Zetian's enthronement was not risking everyone's condemnation at that time. After the completion of the symposium, a treatise entitled *Wu Zetian and the Qian Mausoleum* was edited and published by San Qin Publishing House.

In 1986, the Second National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, with altogether 25 articles on Wu Zetian collected during the symposium. In the article *Several Issues Worth Paying Attention to in the Research on Wu Zetian*, Liu Xiwei took the comparative approach of historical research, claiming that compared with all middle-aged empresses in the world, Wu Zetian shall be among the best. She had outstanding strategies, courage and static in using power, making the most profound influence on later ages, and shall be regarded as a successful empress. Meanwhile, Sun Bingyuan argued in his *On Wu Zetian's Policy of Killing* that the policy of killing was the most important instrument used by Wu Zetian to seize the royal throne, supervise the imperial officials and reinforce her rule, and this policy lasted a long time, involved many people, and had very negative influence on the society. In the same year, San Qin Publishing House published *Biography of Wu Zetian* written by Hu Ji, and Liaoning People's Publishing House published *Empress Wu Zetian* and *Biography of Wu Zetian* written respectively by Wu Feng and

Chang Wansheng, all made positive comments from the overall perspective on Wu Zetian. At the end of the book *Empress Wu Zetian* the author stated: "The fifty years during the Empress's reign was a relatively prosperous time throughout the Chinese history, with a relatively stable society, an obviously growing population, an ever developing economy and a brilliant culture. And the relationship between different nationalities during this time was quite normal, the country united, and the border basically peaceful. It followed the tradition of the reign of Zhenguan, bridged it with the Heyday of Kaiyuan Period, the national power was not declining, and people lived a stable life.¹⁴¹"

In 1987, the Third National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Luoyang, with over 20 articles collected during the symposium, touching on various topics including the politics, economy, culture and social life during Wu Zetian's reign, as well as the comments on Wu Zetian. In the article entitled "Wu Zetian's Family and Her Education", the author Yang Jianhong pointed out that one of the main reasons why Wu Zetian was knowledgeable and with great talents was that she had received very good education from her family. And in *The Success and Failures of Wu Zetian's Personnel Policy*, Bai Xianzhang argued that the success and failures of Wu Zetian's personnel policy in the imperial court can be seen as the objective reasons for her seizing and giving up the royal throne in different stages of her political life. In summarizing the fruits of this symposium, San Qin Publishing House published *Wu Zetian and Luoyang* immediately after the symposium.

¹⁴¹ Wu Feng 吳楓 and Chang Wansheng 常萬生, *Nü Huang Wu Zetian* 女皇武則天. Shenyang: Liaoning Jiaoyu, 1986: 290.

In 1988 the Fourth National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Taiyuan of Shanxi Province, with 38 articles collected during the symposium, touching on quite a wide range of topics, including those that were not or very rarely discussed in the past. In the article *On Wu Zetian's Twelve Advice on Ruling the Country*, the author Wu Zongguo held the opinion that the "Twelve Advice on Ruling the Country" suggested by Wu Zetian showed her deep understanding of the social reality and her outstanding political talents. And in *The Reasons of the Rapid Development of Social Economy during Wu Zetian's Reign*, the author Yan Shoucheng pointed out that the reasons why the social economy could develop rapidly during Wu Zetian's reign can be summarized into three: firstly, in politics, Wu Zetian struck the clan families, greatly promoted landlords of ordinary family origins, which brought about the changes in relation of production as well as the modes of operations of economic units. Secondly, in the economic aspect, Wu Zetian took the policy of ruling by doing nothing, creating favorable conditions and environment for the development of social economy, and thirdly, Wu Zetian adopted the guideline of attaching equal importance to agriculture and commerce. In *Wu Zetian and Buddhism*, the author Li Bingcheng introduced the prosperity of Buddhism brought about by Wu Zetian with comprehensive and accurate historical resources. Most scholars gave positive comments on Wu Zetian's contributions from various perspectives, while some (e.g. Zhang Yi, Song Dachuan) still held totally negative opinions on Wu Zetian. In the article *On the Tyranny of Wu's Zhou Dynasty*, they argued: "The political, economic, military and social atmosphere during Wu Zetian's reign showed an overall regression. Wu Zetian is nothing more

than a tyrant."¹⁴²

In 1994, the Fifth National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Qian Mausoleum Museum of Shaanxi Province, with 34 articles submitted by attendants of the symposium. The symposium summarized the research on Wu Zetian for the past years, and continued its discussions on various topics on Wu Zetian. In 1996 the Sixth National Symposium on Wu Zetian was held in Yanshi of Henan Province, over 40 articles were submitted by both domestic and foreign scholars during the symposium, and the discussions centered around the focuses, difficulties in the historiographic comments on Wu Zetian as well as some important issues of the society during Wu's Zhou Dynasty.

Meanwhile, the researches on Wu Zetian in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas areas were also fruitful. In 1956, *Empress Wu Zetian* compiled by C. P. Fitzgerald was published in the United Kingdom. Lin Yutang's *Lady Wu: A True Story* was published in London in 1957. In 1958, *Empress Wu Zetian* compiled by Xu Su was published by the China Book Corporation Hong Kong. And in 1963, *Wu Zetian* compiled by Li Tang was published by the Hongwen Book Corporation Hong Kong. Among these works, some gave scalding critiques, while others offer generous compliments. For example, Lin Yutang ranks Wu Zetian as the fourth greatest domestic murderer in human history, behind only Stalin, Mao Zedong and Genghis Khan¹⁴³. Alternatively, C.P Fitzgerald's biography concludes that Wu left China "stronger, more united and

¹⁴² Wang Shuanghuai 王雙懷, *Ben Shiji Yilai de Wu Zetian Yanjiu* 本世紀以來的武則天研究.

¹⁴³ Lin Yutang, *Lady Wu: A True Story*, London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1957, ix.

richer than ever before in her history”¹⁴⁴ Western historians generally have been more generous and sympathetic in their interpretations, determining that while Wu Zetian may have been ruthless and manipulative, she was a great leader and a capable administrator, and contributed significantly to the later ages.

Chen Yinke defined a series of topics of Wu Zetian during the 1930's and 1940's. These topics including Wu's influence of Buddhism, the diversity of the epoch, the emergence of the examination system and its relation to social mobility, etc., are still the central issues of scholarship of Wu Zetian and early Tang period. Chen Yike saw Wu Zetian's era as a pivotal point in China's history in which many sweeping changes took place.¹⁴⁵ Chen Yinke's study and judgment paved the way for Wu Zetian's historical reassessment.

In 1968, *Empress Zetian* compiled by Jun Toyama was published by Chuo Koronsha in Tokyo, Japan. In 1978, *Wu Zetian* compiled by Gracer was published in Washington D. C., and another book entitled *Wu Zetian* compiled by a Japanese scholar was published by Private Bureau of Block-Printed Edition. In 1981, Taiwan Lianming Culture Co. Ltd. published *Flattery Enticing the Ruler, Psychological Analysis of Wu Zetian* compiled by Lei Jiaji. In 1985, Hong Kong Bo Yi Publishing Co. Ltd. published *Biographical Records of Wu Zetian* compiled by Bang Shusheng. And in 1986, Shueisha in Japan published *Empress Zetian* compiled by Japanese Scholar Sawada. Most of these scholarly works described Wu Zetian's political merits

¹⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Empress Wu*, Melbourne: Cheshire Books, 1955:197.

¹⁴⁵ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Chen Yinke Xiansheng Quanjil* 陳寅恪先生全集, Taipei, 1971.

and faults as well as her personal life, some of which questioning the records of some historical classics, and even criticized people's bias against Wu Zetian, arguing that Wu Zetian was an unprecedented and unmatched figure of great achievements throughout the Chinese history, and that Wu's reign functioned as a bridge between the early and the high Tang Dynasty. Lei Jiaji's *Flattery Enticing the Ruler, Psychological Analysis of Wu Zetian* argues that Wu Zetian was very self-centered and confident, and she had a very strong sense of possession, as well as the psychology against the society and tradition, she advocated self apotheosis, seized the royal throne and ruled the country with cruelty; in a word, she is a woman with imbalanced personality. This makes it impossible for her to be a first-class ruler of the Chinese history; on the contrary, it makes it easy for her to become a tyrant, a dictator who destroyed the institutions of the country.

Rather than focus on broad topics and general comments on Wu Zetian, recent scholars have more concentrated on specific aspects of her reign. For example, to analyze the underlying reasons behind Wu Zetian's enghronement, Niu Zhigong believed that she benefitted greatly from the openness of early Tang society. Gao Shiyu and some other scholars emphasized on the relative higher social status of women and less restrictive social environment. Ma Zhiqiang argues around the ideological coalescence of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Richard Guisso suggests that by continuing Tang sacrifices and allowing the Tang heirs to live, Wu Zetian gained imperial legitimacy for her new dynasty and widespread compliance for her regime.

Researches and discussions in terms of social, political, economic, cultural, and even personal aspects around Wu Zetian, like the above example, have all been amply excavated. Wang Shuanghuai of Shaanxi Normal University made a summary of *Researches on Wu Zetian since the Beginning of the 20th Century*, and stated that both domestic and foreign scholars had published nearly 400 articles and nearly 20 books on Wu Zetian. Roughly one-fourth of all were published before the mid-1960s. The number grew rapidly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, taking roughly half of all. Long or short, all these 400 publications have made contributions to the reassessment of the female emperor Wu Zetian.

Limited within the established range of research, this paper mainly focused on Wu Zetian's contribution to the cultural development of the Tang Dynasty, and is clearly not intended to be an exhaustive catalogue of the contributions that Wu Zetian made to the cultural development. It is a representative cross-section of sources on a selection of major topics and issues related to Wu Zetian's policies and accomplishments. Further researches delving into minutiae, exploring many of the elements, large and small, that constitute her influences and contributions to the cultural development will never come to an end.

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