ABSTRACT

Not only Mei Cheng’s *Seven Stimuli* is one of the earliest Han *fu*, the work also established a new genre known as the “Sevens”. Literati in the later dynasties wrote similar works with the style and themes changing subtly and representing the author’s plight or the chaotic times that he lived in. Hence, this thesis seeks to study the evolution of the *Sevens* spanning the Han Dynasty to the Six Dynasties (206 B.C.E – 589 C.E.). Sadly to say, of the forty-odd works composed during this period, not many works are intact. Most are now either records in the historical bibliography or parts lost due to the fact that these works are composed almost two millennia ago. Hence, the intact works will be the main objects of study while the remaining works serve as a guide.

An overview of the *Sevens* in this near eight hundred years’ period will be given. The *Sevens* was recognized as a literary genre only in the Jin Dynasty (265 C.E. – 420 C.E.) and established its status in the compilation of *Zhao Ming Wen Xuan* (昭明文選) during the Southern Liang Dynasty (502 C.E. – 557 C.E.). The definition of *Sevens* can be defined properly with the study of the first work – the *Seven Stimuli*. An understanding of the traditions it had set in place will allow us to appreciate the genre’s later developments.

The genre is well identified by the seven topics raised in each work. As time goes by, an evolution of the genre existed as literary trends and
social influences continue to affect the composition of the work.
Moreover, the themes discussed had moved away from Mei Cheng's.
What was originally a persuasion to the aristocracy to avoid indulgence in merrymaking had become a vehicle for authors to vent frustration from disappointing official careers. Some works became eulogies of the Emperor and of his enlightened rule, others hinted reclusion to avoid the chaos. Most though, wished nothing more to be like the characters depicted in the works to have a chance to serve the Emperor.

Not only the themes will be discussed in this thesis, a critique of the genre during this period will be presented. It is hoped that this thesis will provide new insights into the understanding of the Sevens as a genre in this period.