ABSTRACT

In the history of China, Wu Zetian occupies a unique place. She was China’s sole female emperor, both in fact and in name. She had held the political reins of the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), one of the glorious ages of Chinese civilisation, for a remarkable period for almost half a century: first in partnership with Emperor Gaozong (628-683 AD), who was often ill and entrusted all state affairs to her and subsequently at the age of sixty-seven officially proclaimed herself “Emperor” and founded the Zhou dynasty (690-705 AD).

Wu Zetian was not only charming and beautiful, but she was also a person with great wisdom and capabilities. She was summoned to the Palace to become a concubine of Emperor Taizong (598-649 AD), who was twenty-six years older than her at the age of fourteen. After Taizong’s death, together with other concubines, she was forced to retire to a nunnery. However, about two years later, at the age of twenty-five, she was brought back to the Palace again by Emperor Gaozong (son of Emperor Taizong), who was already infatuated with her when he was a Crown Prince. Since then, she began her pursuit for power. After several years of careful scheming and plotting, the ambitious and unscrupulous Wu Zetian finally became the only female sovereign to sit upon the imperial throne of China, a world in which woman was biased upon birth.

Wu Zetian’s political and economical policies were controversial and, to the present days, historians and scholars in China continue to debate her merits. This thesis attempts to discuss her socio-economic policies, especially during her fifteen years of rule as the only female ruler
in the male-dominated Chinese history. To the present days, there is still contention over her socio-economic policies, on whether she had brought economic progress to the country or whether she had ruined the economic fruit built up by Emperor Taizong due to her extravagance. Materials used in this thesis have been drawn from original historical records and some other secondary materials so as to provide a most thorough discussion of the above topic.