On the glorious reign of T'ai Tsung (627-649) of T'ang Dynasty

Li Shih-Min (李世民) became the second emperor of the T'ang (唐) dynasty in 627, two months after the events at the Hsuan Wu gate (玄武門之變) when his two rival brothers were eliminated. He ruled China for twenty-three years until 649. It was during his reign that China had reached its first glorious height in T'ang dynasty. His reign (627-649) was popularly known as Chen-kuan rule (貞觀之治) in the Chinese history.

There are certain political phenomena which underlie the success of the rule of any dynasty. The achievements under the reign of Li Shih-Min who was posthumously known as T'ang T'ai Tsung (唐太宗 the Grand Ancestor), were no exception. Therefore, there is value for making an extensive research of the Chen-Kuan rule. It is worth spending the efforts in collating and analysing the facts and circumstances that could throw some light on how and why the reformative measures adopted by Li Shih-Min could be carried out successfully. The purpose of this Academic Exercise is just to do this.

The historical background of the Chen-kuan rule may be viewed from three angles. In the first place, the people were tired and disillusioned with the wars and oppressive rule after the end of Sui (隋) dynasty. They were anxious for peaceful life. Thus they would give their support and
co-operation to any ruler who could improve their living. This was very favourable to Tai Tsung at that time. Secondly, Li Shih-Min realised the tragic example of the Sui dynasty which was oppressive and tyrannical in its rule. He would therefore avoid taking any measure that would cause hardship and poverty to the people. Thirdly, most of the political and social systems were inherited from his predecessor and, to a very large extent, the Sui dynasty, although there was refinement and improvement in their structure and in the definition of their functions.

In the central government aspects, Tai Tsung adopted the "san-sheng" system (三省制), consisting of the Imperial Chancellery (門下省), the Imperial Secretariat (中書省), and the Secretariat of State Affairs (尚書省). For the structure of local government, the country had been divided into ten "tao" (道) which was subdivided into "chou" (州) and then into "hsien" (縣), and so on. In the military field, "fu-ping" system (府兵制) was enforced and integrated with the equal field system (均田制). In the respect of land economy, the equal field system inherited from the Sui dynasty was to be further elaborated. Taxes were paid under the "t'su-yung-tiao" system (租庸調). In the matter of law and order, the harsh Sui laws gave way to the gentler and more moderate regulations which had been divided into four categories: "lu" (律), "ling" (令), "ko" (科), and "shih" (式). Li Shih-Min continued the civil service examination system known as the "k'o chu" system (科举制度) as the basis
for choosing his officers. He established new schools and strengthened the old ones, keeping the Confucian plan of education. On foreign relations, he had subjugated the Turks and himself took the title of Heavenly Khan (天可汗). Suzerainty of China was extended with the conquest of hostile neighbouring states.

The unparalleled and glorious rule of Tai Tsung could be attributed to the combination of the following factors:

1) The rare quality possessed by Li Shih-Min as a capable general in the battlefields and a strategist in the council chamber. He could choose and use the right persons for the right jobs. He listened to all points of view and never imposed his will arbitrarily upon his ministers. He loved his people and always bore their interest in mind whenever new measures were to be introduced and implemented.

2) He had around him many abled ministers like Chang-Sun Wo Chi (長孫無忌), Wei Cheng (魏征), Fang Hsuan Ling (房玄齡), Hsiao Yu (蕭瑀), who were honest, loyal, outspoken and dedicated and gave many valuable advices.

3) The political atmosphere then was conducive to the Chen-kuan rule. This was largely due to the facts that Li Shih-Min dealt with his ministers in a proper way. Reward was given for pointing out the faults of his administration, including that of the emperor and
ministers. Suggestions for improvement were received with pleasure and implemented where necessary.

As a result of the Chen-kuan rule, the life of the people had been improved considerably. There was also close cultural contacts between China and foreign countries. The impact of Li Shih-min's reign on the future dynasties was that some of his systems had been followed and implemented continuously.

This Academic Exercise consists of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the historical background to the Chen-kuan rule. The second chapter covers the measures implemented by Li Shih-Min. Chapter three analyses the factors that were responsible for the success of his achievements. Chapter four examines the impact of the Chen-kuan rule. The last chapter concludes with my brief comments as well as that of the other writers on the achievements of the Chen-kuan rule and Tai Tsung himself.

Finally, I wish to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Tan Eng Chaw for his guidance and assistance during my work.