SYNOPSIS

The Tang period, especially its first two hundred years, the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., was one of the greatest ages of Chinese civilization, a period in which poetry, literature and the arts attained a new maturity and were inspired by fresh, vigorous influences. Wu Zetian (624 - 705 A.D.), whose life time covered the greater part of the 7th century, was a great personality who reigned in China in that early Tang period as the Empress Wu. She was not only beautiful and charming, but also talented and learned. She was indeed a remarkable woman politician with great capabilities and wisdom. Her life and reign was a significant and formative period in which the newly reunited central empire of the Tang Dynasty was consolidated, it was also a unique episode in Chinese history, since she was the sole example of a woman attaining supreme power both in fact and in name, the only female sovereign to sit upon the imperial throne of China.

Wu Zetian was only fourteen years old when she was summoned to the Palace to become a concubine of the forty years old Emperor Tang Taizong (598 -649 A.D.) of the Tang Dynasty. At Taizong’s death, she was forced to become a nun at the age of twenty-six. But one year and nine months later, she left the temple and nunhood and was brought back to the Palace again to become the imperial concubine of the new Emperor Gaozong (628 - 683 A.D.), the son of Emperor Tang Taizong. Since then, she embarked upon her life-time political career. After several years of plotting and scheming, she finally ascended the throne and became the one and only Empress in the Chinese history to rule the country.

However, in the patriarchal society at that time in China, it was both impossible and a violation of social convention for a woman to ascend the throne. But Empress Wu stood out from the rest of her gender one thousand three hundred years ago. Not only did she hold the political reigns of the Tang Dynasty for a remarkable period of fifty years, she also
had numerous accomplishments which paved the way for the succeeding Emperor. On the other hand, she had to rely on terrorism which had given rise to much controversy to eliminate bureaucratic opposition to her rule and to uphold her supreme power. Secret agents and spies were sent to penetrate all levels of society, and every individual was subject to close scrutiny. Many conventional historians and Confucian scholars have thus been reluctant to acknowledge her significant contribution to the nation building of the early Tang period. To date, scholars in China and Western countries have continued to debate on her merits.

It was sixty-seven years since Tang Taizong selected Wu Zetian to enter the Palace as a concubine. At that time, when the Tang dynasty was still in its first generation, there had seem no certainty that the unity of the empire, so recently restored, would survive the death of the great Taizong. However, at the beginning of the next century, after more than fifty years of the rule of Wu Zetian, China was stronger, more united and richer than ever before in her history. The reign of her grandson, Tang Xuanzong, is the famous age of the poets and artists, the real golden age of Chinese history. It was built upon the foundation of Wu Zetian's century, upon her peace and upon her genius which had carried on the tradition of the great Taizong. Without Wu Zetian there would have been no long enduring Tang Dynasty, and perhaps no lasting unity of China. Wu Zetian had use the imperial family for her own ambitious, she had usurped the throne, and changed the name of the dynasty, but she had none the less saved it and China from another century of civil war and confusion.

No woman ever again occupied her place though many aspired to it. The imitators of Wu Zetian were one and all much her inferior in talent. Even her daughter, Princess Tai Ping, who most closely resembled her, lacked her expert and intuitive ability to foresee and twist events to her purpose. Nor is there any real evidence that in addition to the ambition to follow in the footsteps of Wu Zetian, any of them also possessed the skill and capacity which she had acquired in the art of government.
This thesis is an in-depth study of Wu Zetian, based largely upon the original historical records preserved in the Chinese dynastic histories and some other secondary materials. It examines the time when Wu Zetian lived and the living experiences of her childhood, in relation to the development of her personality. It also analyses Wu Zetian's political life, her contributions and political errors committed to the development of the society and country as well as her military successes and foreign policies. The thesis also aims to give an appraisal on Wu Zetian in various aspects of her life and to ascertain her position in the history of China from a non-conventional point of view. It is important to mention that while historical records and materials used in this thesis supply the fact, the author has not always drawn to the same conclusions as the Confucian scholars of a long-passed age, who wrote those records.