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The Transgressive Deification of Wu Zetian

Honors in the Major Thesis Proposal

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Introduction: The Negotiation of Wu Zetian

At one point does a figure transcend historical tradition and begin to occupy a space as a significant cultural signifier? For Wu Zetian (624-705), the only female emperor in Chinese history in both power and title, her image and legacy finds continuous evocation in public domain, largely due to her controversial nature.[1] Amongst Chinese and Western historians alike, Wu Zetian draws considerable attention. N. Harry Rothschild's book, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Women Emperor*, unveils a comprehensive biography of Wu's life amid the backdrop of the Tang dynasty (618-907). [2] His biography, tailored to offer a balanced presentation, represents the work of generations of historians striving to uncover the reality of Wu Zetian's legacy beyond longstanding biases, as well as examine the gender politics of the Tang dynasty. Yet, while this historical endeavor has seen fruition in recent years, Wu Zetian's narrative draws larger public contention. Within contemporary scholarship, articles such as, "Did Empress Wu Zetian Really 'Defile the Imperial Palace'?" and books such as, *Empress Wu Zetian—Was She an Enlightened Ruler or a Female Disaster?* bespeak to the controversial character of her legacy.[3] In fact, a cursory glance reveals Wu Zetian's name populating western entertainment websites under headlines such as, "The 8 Most Evil and Vicious Female Rulers in History," and "China's First Empress Was as Cruel as She Was Cunning." This tendency further suggests to the permeation of well-established perspectives across cultural boundaries. Wu Zetian's name

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[1] Wu Zetian reigned in title from 690 until 705. I will choose to use Wu Zetian, as trends from 1950 until present indicate (Wu Zetian) as the primary designation employed by Chinese scholars. She is also known as Wu Zhao and Empress Wu. My choice is foremost to reflect her common designation. For a discussion of Wu Zetian's names see N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York, NY: Pearson, 2008) 1-10.

[2] Tang dynasty women held greater opportunities than their predecessors did. The popular philosophy of the time, "the empire is open to all," marks the unique civilization they presided under. With flourishing trade routes along the Silk Road and cultures intermingling as the empire united after centuries of division, the Tang dynasty focalized around pluralistic ethics and ideologies. While in China rulers may have been male at the forefront, Wu Zetian would come to be aware of female rulers in both Korea and Japan. Ibid, 11-14.

[3] Rebecca Esther Doran, "Insatiable Women and Transgressive Authority: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011), 25.

dotting headlines is not an unfamiliar trend. During the Republican era (1912-1949) journalists condemned women crossing beyond traditional spheres through sensationalizing headlines such as, "More Concupiscent than Wu Tse-ti'en."[4] Her image has witnessed employment in plays, film, television dramas, dance, fashion, consumer products, art, fiction writing, and even a role in the popular historical video game Civilization V, earning her a spot of familiarity amongst western gaming enthusiasts.[5]

Historiography – Wu Zetian and Tang Dynasty

Reflective of this popularity across an expanse of mediums, there is no shortage of scholarship on Wu Zetian. From biographical texts to works analyzing her representation in Chinese historical tradition, the literature on the specific elements surrounding her legacy are not left to want.

As mentioned earlier, Harry N. Rothschild has dedicated the majority of his scholarship to Wu Zetian. His work represents the premier facet of research on Wu in western scholarship and those studying her rely heavily upon his work. Aside from his comprehensive biography *Wu Zetian: China's Only Woman Emperor* (2008), his latest book *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (2015) places Wu Zetian within the context of the Tang dynasty and seeks to delve into the religious foundations Wu Zetian built and maintained her sovereignty upon. By drawing upon Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, Wu Zetian demonstrated political prowess, profound cultural insight, and the ability to

[4] Roxanne Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977), 137-139.
[5] Wu Zetian has also captured the attention of those that cosplay, an emerging trend where individuals at fan conventions wear elaborate costumes and often role-play as their favorite characters, historical figures, or other culturally significant interests. Within the past few years, scholarship regarding cosplay as a performance art and cultural indicator is consistently growing. See Kane Anderson, "Becoming Batman: Cosplay, Performance, and Ludic Transformation at Comic-Con" in *Play, Performance, and Identity*, eds. Matt Omasta and Drew Chappell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015) and Ashley Lotecki "Cosplay Culture: The Development of Interactive and Living Art Through Play," (master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2012).

continuously establish her authority despite changing circumstances. Rothschild centers his research on exploring how Wu Zetian, alongside the promotion of female divinities, employed symbolism, ideology, and careful rhetoric to bolster her political legitimacy. Other works by Rothschild that contribute to scholarship include his articles "Wu Zhao's Remarkable Aviary" (2005) and "Rhetoric of the Loom: Discursive Weaving Women in Chinese and Greek Traditions" (2014), as well as his comprehensive doctoral dissertation "Rhetoric, Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China" (2003). Additional significant biographical works on Wu Zetian include, C.P. Fitzgerald's *The Empress Wu* (1968) and R.W.L Guisso's *Wu Tse-T'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (1978).[6] Scholarship on Wu Zetian that is closely analogues to my own is Tin-kei Wong's masters dissertation, "On Fidelity and Historicity: A Reconsideration of the Representation of Wu Zetian in Chinese Historical Fiction" (2013), Jong Min Rhee's master's dissertation, "Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty: Becoming the Only Female Emperor in China" (2008), and Rebecca Esther Doran's excellent doctoral dissertation, "Insatiable Women and Transgressive Authority Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China" (2011).

In tandem with scholarship on Wu Zetian, the Tang dynasty enjoys substantive attention from historians. Edward H. Schafer's *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (1963) provides an examination of Tang material culture by featuring exotics imported into China and offering an overarching consideration of their impact on Tang cultural life. In a similar vein, Charles Benn's *China's Golden Age: Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty* (2002) presents an exhaustive portrait of Tang lifestyle and culture by delving into the nuanced aspects

[6] Denis Twitchett also provides an extensive chronicling of Wu Zetian's ascent to power. See Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 3 Sui and T'ang China, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 244-251.

of day-to-day life. BuYun Chen's recent article "Material Girls: Silk and Self-Fashioning in Tang China" (2017) synthesizes previous scholarship on Tang dress and offers insight into the relationship between appearance and larger societal concerns. Chen argues for the significance of the role of material culture in the formation of cultural identity and examines how trends in fashion coincide with political disorder or change. Her work moves beyond considerations of the Tang dynasty's cosmopolitan personality and produces a nuanced, as well as interdisciplinary, consideration of Tang fashion.

Women within early and late Imperial China represent a burgeoning area of scholarship. Historians such as Robin R. Wang and Bret Hinsch, devote considerable attention to the writings and lives of Chinese women. Wang's *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture* (2003) presents a collection of writings that feature conceptions of women within China's sociopolitical climate. Hinsch's *Women in Imperial China* (2016) offers a comprehensive chapter on various elements of women's lives within the Tang dynasty, including Wu Zetian. For a look at the Tang aristocracy, Patricia Buckley Ebrey's book *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China: A Case Study of the Po-ling Ts'ui Family* (1978) formulates a theoretical analysis of aristocratic social trends. Her work extends from the Han to the Tang dynasty and provides a vital foundation in understanding the nuances of China's social structure. Jowen R. Tung's *Fables for the Patriarchs* (2000), in utilizing a wide array of primary sources such as Dunhaung contracts and inscriptions, ethical and legal codes, documents, records, and literature, constructs a rhetorically based analysis of the position of Tang dynasty women. Tung's research rests upon the premise of rejecting notions formed through nostalgia for the Tang. Instead, Tung views the Tang dynasty through considerations of subjugation and contradictions, while focusing upon patriarchal systems of oppression and women beyond the aristocratic class. Finally, Stephen

Owen in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (2010) offers an extended consideration of Tang dynasty literature within the overarching cultural schema.

Wu Zetian Background Information

As distinguished by the culmination of biographical literature on Wu Zetian's controversial legacy, a brief narrative of her reign and life will leave much to want. However, I will outline the key elements of her life largely agreed upon in scholarship, as well as those heavily disputed. Wu Zetian emerged within Chinese historical accounts as one of the consorts of Emperor Taizong (589-649) who reigned over the Tang dynasty from 626 until 649. Distinguished by the title of 'Lady of Talents' (*Cairen*) during this time, Wu Zetian did not enjoy any favorability nor did she bear any children with Taizong. When Taizong began to succumb to illness, a relationship between Wu Zetian and his youngest son Gaozong was realized.[7] Yet, despite this burgeoning relationship, Gaozong adhered to tradition following the passing of his father and thus Wu Zetian could no longer remain in the Inner Palace. Gaozong sent Wu Zetian and the other women of the imperial harem to a Buddhist convent. However, this separation was not permanent. A year later, on the anniversary of Taizong's passing, the pair met in an emotional reunion at Ganye Convent where Gaozong sought to burn incense. This meeting was not coincidental. As Rothschild eloquently describes, "Mother and son, in society's eyes, who had consummated their love in the shadows of ailing Taizong's bed of convalescence, now availed themselves of a taboo day of mourning for their husband-father to rekindle their passions." In a series of events surrounding consort rivalries, Gaozong's wife, Empress Wang, encouraged Wu and Gaozong's meetings to veer Gaozong's attention away from the then

[7] It is notable that Wu Zetian and Gaozong's relationship is considered incestuous, a relationship between mother and son, by Confucian standards. N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York, NY: Pearson, 2008), 28.

favorited Pure Consort Xiao. Gaozong and Wu's meetings eventually culminated with Wu Zetian's return into the Imperial Palace, a move which drew substantial criticism from the Confucian court. Despite Empress Wang's assurances that her elite Han lineage afforded security in her position, she would find herself demoted to commoner status in 655 following a series of scandals surrounding the death of Wu Zetian's infant daughter and the planned use of black magic. With Empress Wang's demotion, Wu Zetian then became Empress Wu. Li Hong (652-675), Wu and Gaozong's firstborn son, was thus named Crown Prince in 656.[8]

By the time Li Hong was of eight years of age, and still too young to take on the responsibilities running the state entailed, Gaozong suffered what is speculated to be a stroke. The stroke was only one element of Gaozong's fragile health that plagued him from childhood. Until Gaozong's death in 683, Wu often assisted him with administrative duties and the pair handled the political arena together. During this time, they had two more children together: Li Dan (662-716) and the Taiping Princess (665-713). While Li Hong was groomed to be heir apparent, taking on many daily governing routines, he suddenly died in 675. Eight years later, Gaozong passed as well. Following Gaozong's death, Li Xian (656-710), Wu Zetian and Gaozong's son, ruled the throne as Emperor Zhongzong for a brief two-month interim until his disposal. Wu then installed Li Dan, their youngest son on the throne as Emperor Ruizong. However, Emperor Ruizong did not hold any true political authority during his reign and eventually ceded the throne to his mother. Thus, in 690, at the age of sixty-six years old, Wu Zetian became China's only female emperor and established the Zhou dynasty. Wu's ascension to the throne marked the officialization in title of a longstanding political reality that had developed over decades. During her reign, Wu proved to be a capable leader of the state. She

[8] Ibid., 23-30, 41.

ruled until a coup by Zhongzong and his supporters in 705 and, in that same year, Wu Zetian died at the age of eighty-one.[9]

Yet, the above version of Wu Zetian's ascent to power is incomplete. What has been left out of this narrative is the multitude of finer details recorded in Chinese histories that draw suspect from modern historians, but have significantly colored Wu Zetian's longstanding legacy with cruelty, ruthlessness, and inhumanity. Foremost, the accusation that Wu Zetian smothered her infant daughter to frame and dispose of Empress Wang resounds as a display of Wu's unrestrained, immoral brutality. Following this, it is recounted that Wu Zetian accused Empress Wang and her mother of conspiring to conduct black magic, a crime categorized as one of the "ten abominations." However, the veritable nature of both events invokes doubt when examined within their societal context, didactic interests, ideological foundations, and time frames. Rothschild details that in conversations and documents surrounding Empress Wang, there is no mention of "the suffocation of the infant princess or the black magic." In examining this absence, Rothschild asserts that, "this suggests that, in the eyes of the court, Empress Wang had been cleared of both charges. It also raises the possibility that neither event ever occurred, and that both were fabricated in later histories to show posterity Wu Zhao's inhuman cruelty and ruthless scheming." Empress Wang's demotion to commoner status would later occur on the grounds that she failed to bear any children.[10]

One of the most poignant anecdotes of Wu Zetian's cruelty is oddly dubious in its reflection of traditional Chinese lore that would appeal to Confucian scholars. The event unfolds as Wu Zetian, fearing the reinstatement of the then imprisoned Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao, decides to personally subjugate her potential rivals. Wu Zetian is said to have "had each

[9] Ibid., 49-50, 68-69, 81-83, 107, 157, 199-204.
[10] Ibid., 31-35.

beaten with 100 strokes, after which their hands and feet were severed. Both amputees were cast into a vat of fermented wine, prompting Wu Zhao to snort, 'Now you crones can get drunk to your very marrow!'" The two would succumb to their torture and die several days later. However, before her death, it is recorded that an agonized Pure Consort Xiao seethed, "Only because Little Miss Wu is an enchantress of a fox spirit have things reached this juncture! I shall be reincarnated as a cat and Little Miss Wu as a mouse, so that I can pounce on her and tear her throat out in vengeance." Yet, this brutal narrative betrays its scholastic bearings. As Rothschild asserts, "Wu Zhao's decision to sever her rivals' limbs and then cast the women into a wine vat parallels, a bit too neatly, the story of Lady Qi being turned into a 'human swine' and cast by Empress Lu into a pig pen during the Han dynasty." Conjointly, Pure Consort Xiao's choice of casting Wu Zetian as a fox spirit alludes to the well-established transgressive nature of fox spirits in Chinese tradition. Fox spirits symbolize sexually violent younger women, whose beauty enables their transgressions amongst men.[11] Qing dynasty author Li Ruzhen in his fantasy novel *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jinghua Yuan*) also features Wu Zetian as a fox spirit, portraying her as reincarnation of the evil Spirit of the Heart-Moon-Fox.[12]

In a similar vein to the suspect narratives above, the mysterious death of heir apparent Li Hong presented an opportunity for Confucian scholars to evidence that Wu Zetian had relentless imperial ambitions as a usurper.[13]

Research Timeline and Focus

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[11] N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York, NY: Pearson, 2008), 37-39.
[12] Further examples of this typecasting may be noted with Xue Sujie of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* and Pan Jinlian of *Jing Ping Mei*, two sexually deviant and violent female characters who are both reincarnated fox-spirits. For an examination of the presence of foxes in Chinese literary tradition see Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006) and Maram Epstein, "Engendering Order: Structure, Gender, and Meaning in the Qing Novel Jinghua yuan," *Chinese literature: Essays Articles, Reviews* 18 (1996): 119, 120.
[13] For further discussion regarding the historical inconsistencies surrounding Li Hong's death, see pages 23-24.

In utilizing the foundations laid by my predecessors, my research will trace Wu Zetian's ascent to what this paper will define as a state of transgressive deification. "Transgressive" as implied by the word's etymological definition of "crossing-over" and moving beyond the moral boundaries designated by popular consciousness. "Deification" to properly denote the elevation of Wu Zetian's image to signify abstract conceptions, and, in deification's generally positive connotation as a word, to delineate the ironic nature her legacy has taken beyond death. This term is of my own design and my thesis is not contingent upon its utilization. However, it will serve as a useful designation in the examination of the ascent of Wu Zetian's image to occupy a synonymic state with the entrenched and traditional tropes assigned to women in Chinese discourse that have held prominence in cultural memory. Yet this synonymic state is not as static as would be suggested.

The origin of this state resides within the efforts of the Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholars of imperial dynasties. Wu Zetian and her transient Zhou dynasty stood in diametric opposition to their values, which championed against female interference in government and affairs beyond the inner quarters. This opposition to her reign, alongside the tradition of successor dynasties writing the official historical records of their predecessors, ushered in generations of ceaseless attempts to either condemn or exalt her actions. Yet, this repeating historical negotiation of opposites, which has come to define her narrative, often originates from intentions to sway matters beyond the historiography of Wu Zetian herself. While modern scholarship endeavors to promote balanced considerations of Wu Zetian, in the political realm, Wu Zetian's narrative serves as a charged device to be exploited to suit a variety of political rhetoric and moral precedents. Alongside representations entrenched in the literary topoi[14] that

[14] For a discussion on the utilization of the word "topoi" in my thesis, see the proposal section "Theoretical Framework" on page 21.

distinguish the "bad rulers" of Chinese history, Wu Zetian's portrayals reflect the continuing typecasting of women, which have originated from distinctly male-driven fears in Chinese societal constructs. These enduring tropes characterize women in positions of authority as sexually deviant, violent toward their own children, blinded by avarice, disruptive of the natural balance, and lustful for power through violent ends, which subsequently condemns the dynasty to misfortune. Yet, these fundamental tropes, so congruent with Wu Zetian's identity due to repeated melding amid public perception, do not limit the political rhetoric to which Wu Zetian's representation may be utilized for. Through examination of Wu Zetian's negotiation in literature and historical tradition, the malleability of fundamental tropes becomes evident. The transgressive and gender driven tropes Wu Zetian would come to signify due to the efforts of Neo-Confucian scholars following her death have transcended their initial purpose. So much so that during Mao's Cultural Revolution, these transgressive qualities served as a foundation to rehabilitate her image amid a burgeoning new public consciousness. A rehabilitation that notably served political ends and originated from her image's synonymy with these tropes.

To place this evolution within a historical timeline, the precedent to employ Wu Zetian's image will be explored within frames of reference that are categorized by underlying intellectual shifts and medium. The first prominent representations of Wu Zetian following her death emerged during the Later Jin □(936-946), the Northern Song □(960–1127) and then during the Southern Song Dynasty □(1127-1279) in the form of traditional Chinese historical accounts. In these accounts, language prevails as the currency for authority, a methodization for social control, and ultimately, a dominating avenue to either propel rulers to greater status in history or to delegitimize their legacy. In these works, whether Wu Zetian was accorded historical status as an emperor or a usurper of the Tang dynasty, as well as her portrayals of

demeanor, are entrenched in a desire to convey a moralized history in accord with Confucian or Neo-Confucian philosophy. Following the Song dynasty, Wu Zetian reemerged to capture public attention during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912). Within the Ming dynasty, which witnessed the advent of vernacular literature, Wu Zetian became a prominent figure in erotic literary portrayals. Her image also found employment in works of fiction during this time on smaller scales as well. The literature of the Ming-Qing period marks Wu Zetian's ascent to a position of transgressive deification, as it was during these dynasties that her image found evocation beyond the historical realm and found purpose in a fictional setting.

Contribution to Larger Literature

To move beyond current historical studies of Wu Zetian, the premise underlying my research features Wu Zetian's life and representations in a manner unexplored holistically. While Rothschild's research focuses upon avenues of political legitimization employed by Wu Zetian and scholars debate the nuanced reality behind her demonization, or outline the precise elements of her representation in tandem with other female political authorities, I will employ a new lens for analysis. My research will frame the contextual backdrop of Wu Zetian's life, as well as her representation and repeated emergences in cultural perspective as inherently reflective of discord and periods of great societal upheaval or change. When political strife or social change dominates social consciousness, these concerns find expression in various forms. Anxieties materialize in trends in asceticism and literary expression, as will be examined in the material culture of the Tang and in the emergence of vernacular literature during the Ming-Qing period. A brief inquiry into Wu Zetian's rehabilitation as a historic figure during the Maoist years will further support the notion of her continuing connection to significant political change. In a glance toward the future, Wu Zetian's inherent association with upheaval and change will be

explored in regards to the meteoritic rise of technology, as amongst content creators her legacy provokes intrigue and reincarnation.

However, sociopolitical change, specifically within the Tang and Ming-Qing period, will not be examined as a linear and all-encompassing drastic shift, but rather as a cultural process of contrary tendencies, which thus arouse the expression of anxieties in various forms.[15] Examples of this dynamic include the "dissenting voice" and "coexistence" of the *xianyuan* biographical tradition with the historically emphasized *lienü* tradition. At the forefront of the *Lienü* biographical tradition is the *Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuan*) compiled during the Han dynasty by Liu Xiang. Broadly, this compilation endeavored to promote Confucian values. However, these biographies of exemplary women also served an explicit purpose to "describe, contain, and regulate women's lives." The material and qualities stressed in these biographies evolved depending on ideological shifts. For instance, while early biographies praised "eloquence, public-mindedness, and economic ingenuity," the period of the late imperial cult of female chastity emphasized, "the strict regulation of female virtue and sexuality." Conversely, the *xianyuan* tradition, spearheaded in the 5th century by Liu Yiqing's *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu*) "featured strong-minded, self-sufficient literate women."[16] Nanxiu Qian in "*Lienü* versus *Xianyuan*: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History," details that, "late imperial versions of *xianyuan*, for example, offer a strong

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[15] Ronald Egan's monograph, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China*, captures this process of confronting contradictory social developments. Egan notes that within the Song dynasty that, "just as a new interest in manly delicacy, romantic expression, and connoisseurship was taking shape, in other quarters new demands of severe rectitude, didacticism, and moral consciousness in all of life's activities were emerging. The two developments might have exacerbated each other, as each provoked its own converse reaction." See Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 375.

[16] See, Joan Judge and Hu Ying, "Introduction" and Nanxiu Qiang, "*Lienü* versus *Xianyuan*: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History, eds.*, Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 2,3, 70.

counternarrative to that of the chastity cult that has dominated understanding of the Ming and Qing eras in modern Chinese historiography."[17] Echoing Qian's conclusions, Weijing Lu's "Faithful Maiden Biographies: A Forum for Ritual Debate, Moral Critique, and Personal Reflection," surmises that, "profound discord marked these [biographies], yielding rare insights into entrenched disagreements over the definition of female virtue and the relationship between ancient rituals and contemporary practice. These texts expose tensions in the evidential intellectual movement."[18]

The purposeful decision to employ Wu Zetian's image, which was initially negotiated in imperial biographies and then further solidified in literary evocations from the literati quarter, will be understood as motivated by the tensions and anxieties of societal dissent. It is as Stephen Greenblatt asserts in his book *Shakespearean Negotiations*, "[to comprehend the purpose of literature] we need to analyze the collective dynamic circulation of pleasures, anxieties and interests."[19] I will also argue that Wu Zetian's representations are associated with the traditional paradigms of Confucianism reflected in the dominant *lienü* tradition. However, by acknowledging dissent, the *xianyuan* tradition, and even the dynamics of the Tang dynasty beyond the aristocratic class[20], my thesis will present a more holistic understanding of the basis for Wu Zetian's transgressive deification and the motivations of authors to employ her image.

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[17] Nanxiu Qiang, "*Lienü* versus *Xianyuan*: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History, eds.,* Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 71.

[18] Weijing Lu, "Faithful Maiden Biographies: A Forum for Ritual Debate, Moral Critique, and Personal Reflection," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History, eds.,* Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 103.

[19] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 12.

[20] I will analyze the sociopolitical backdrop of the Tang dynasty through the following considerations: asceticism and the revitalization of Confucian values coinciding with anxieties of the memory of division before the Tang, steppe culture, civil service examinations, increased wealth, the legacy of aristocracy, expansive trade through the Silk road, material indulgence, the unifying force of Buddhism, jealous women, inequality as perceived by Tang women, and a legal system defined by its codified ethical ideologies.

In tandem with this overarching premise, I will guide my research with an exploration of her significance in congruence with the entrenched female-led topoi that underlie Chinese cultural perspective, which are also tied to discord, decay, and social upheaval. By examining imperial biographies and vernacular works, I will demonstrate how her transgressive deification originates from rhetorically codified texts. Wu Zetian's eventual synonymy with these topoi, attests to the fluidity of their application in Chinese thought, principally as her role as a signifier for these tropes spans the late imperial period until the present. Invoking her image means to signal to the audience a set of female-led traits. An example of this coming to fruition in a tangible manner is Wu Zetian's association with those who occupy positions deemed "unnatural," as noted by the headlines of journalism mentioned earlier. This research will serve as a case study of the influence of representation in a reality only increasing in complexity and the avenues in which civilizations can establish and transmit their cultural values. In a look toward the future, my thesis will provide a valuable historical context for studies seeking to understand the intersection between emerging new media and historical figures.[21] As the mediums for discourse increase, as content creators seek to convey their message to a broadening social consciousness, and as motives become increasingly convoluted amid a growing trend to construct contemporary evocations devoid from their historical basis and previous contextual use, studies in representation that provide traceable roots are becoming invaluable toward understanding the transmission of cultural perspectives. With these goals in mind, to trace Wu Zetian's evolution from historical figure to cultural signifier, my first chapter will be devoted to

[21] The definition of "new media" is widely debated and continuously evolving amid technological advances. Here I refer to new media in reference to the diffusion of information through the advent of the internet. Examples of wide-spread, accessible digital content includes: online newspapers, video games, social media networks, websites, and outlets for individual expression such as blogs. New media has also facilitated the spread of cross-cultural media consumption, such as websites that cater television programs to foreign audiences.

the Tang dynasty. This will provide the necessary contextual foundation for the second chapter to draw intersections between Wu Zetian's ascent and consolidation of imperial authority in relation to the Tang dynasty's sociopolitical climate. The third chapter will explore both historical accounts and Wu Zetian's advent in vernacular literature within the Ming and Qing dynasties, with attention toward the melding between political rhetoric, gender based concerns, literary topoi, and a historical figure. I will particularly examine how the novels of the Ming-Qing period, when featuring Wu Zetian, conclude with the restoration of the Confucian patriarchal order and the triumph over female-led discord. Wu Zetian's successive association with this narrative conclusion, only further signals her role as a cultural signifier of female traits that oppose traditional order. Finally, I will offer a look toward Wu Zetian's more contemporary evocations, notably from the Republican era onwards, as well as her rapidly evolving role in mass-consumed media both in China and amongst western audiences.[22] Close consideration should be afforded to this expanding subset of study, as in 2018 HBO is expected to premier a thirteen-episode drama series featuring Wu Zetian, the first of its kind tailored to introduce Wu Zetian to a global audience.

Historiography – Chinese Literature, Biographies, and Dynastic History[23]

[22] More contemporary representations of Wu Zetian include multiple television series and films such as, *The Empress of China* (TV, 2014), *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (Film, 2013), *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (Film, 2010), *Wu Zetian* (TV, 1995), *Empress Wu Tse-tien* (Film, 1963), and *The Empress Wu Tse-tien* (Film, 1939).

[23] This second historiography is purposed to outline the scholarship that contextualizes the literature and biographical sources portraying Wu Zetian. The works in this section offer crucial insights into not only the biographical tradition that initially colored Wu Zetian's legacy, but also the pervading cultural anxieties, atmosphere, and ideologies that compelled authors to employ her image. My thesis will draw upon the scholarship here to inform analysis. For instance, it is problematic to assume the intentions and concerns of early Confucian scholars who penned the histories and biographies of the Tang dynasty, without recognizing their didactic purpose.

Including overlapping texts detailed in the first historiography, such as Owen, Wang, and Hinsch's books, there is rich scholarship available on the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the Chinese biographical tradition. Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott present a methodically edited collection of essays in their book *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (2003). Chapter nine features Fangqin Du and Susan Mann's essay "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China." Mann and Du traces the predominance and evolution of the chastity cult through the Ming-Qing period in relation to Confucian womanly virtue. Their work particularly investigates the transition away from idealized martyrdom propagated in Ming social consciousness to the Qing initiatives to promote widow fidelity.

Yenna Wu's *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* (1995) and Xiaofei Kang's *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (2005) offer literary insight within a broad spectrum of Chinese society. Kang's research features the exorcism and worship of fox spirits in Chinese literature, as well as connects the employment of fox spirits to the development of cultural mores. Wu's *The Chinese Virago* offers an extensive exploration of the predominance of the Chinese virago, a wife who is jealous and belligerent, in early literary and historical works. She argues that the construction of the literary theme of the Chinese virago served as a device to confirm the necessity of the patriarchal system.

As a foremost scholar on the cult of fidelity that emerged to prominent visibility during the Ming-Qing period, Beverly Bossler's research traces the evolution of the cult of fidelity in the Song, Ming, Qing, and Yuan dynasties.[24] Her work is invaluable in contextualizing the

[24] While the premium placed on chastity and marriage fidelity reached peak levels during the Ming-Qing period, its prominence and origins may be traced to the Tang dynasty. Female scholars of the Tang dynasty, Song Ruozhao and Song Ruoxin in their work *The Analects for Women* assert the significance of maintaining virtue in everyday affairs. Book twelve, "On Preserving Chastity," outlines that women who "have had their names recorded in the annals of

intersections between transforming gender relations, Neo-Confucianism, and sociopolitical shifts. Subsequently, Bossler's historical perspective often places gender relations in centrality to other aspects of life and she also examines the influence of courtesans and concubines in relation to the fidelity expected of wives. Bossler's prominent work on this subject includes, "Fantasies of Fidelity: Loyal Courtesans to Faithful Wives" (2011) and *Courtesans, Concubines and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China 1000-1400* (2013), and "Gender and Entertainment at the Song Court" (2008). One of Bossler's earlier books (1998), *Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960-1279)*, interestingly offers discussion on the "transition from the idea that status determines morality to the idea that morality determines status" that occurred across the Tang and Song dynasties.[25] The newly popularized Song notion that virtuous behavior deserved prestige and commemoration signals the developing ideological shifts linked to the intensification of the cult of fidelity.

While scholarship on the Ming-Qing period frequently addresses the prominence of gender relations to some degree, understanding the biographical tradition of Chinese writing conversely presents a broader and more convoluted undertaking. As David Nivison in "Aspects of Traditional Chinese Biography" (1962) aptly concludes, "Any historian approaching the subject of traditional Chinese biography may be confident of at least one fact: he will be overwhelmed."[26] Yet with this in mind, an array of scholars have made this facet of research their primary undertaking. Denis Twitchett in his research on the Tang dynasty, has consequently

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history and passed down to the present day," preserved their chastity and maintained purity, as well as virtuousness. The text also stresses the importance of preserving one's chastity even if their husband dies early. *The Analects for Women* is both a reflection and departure from Ban Zhao's (45-114 C.E.) *Lessons for Women*, particularly in its expansion of modeling virtue and extending female virtue to everyday behaviors, as noted above. See Robin R. Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 327-340

[25] Beverly Bossler, *Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, & the State in Sung China (960-1279)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 22.

[26] David S. Nivison, "Aspects of Traditional Chinese Biography," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 4 (1962): 457.

written various essays that offer insight on official writings and biography. Twitchett's essay "Problems of Chinese Biography" in *Confucian Personalities* (1962) notes how Western historians interpreting a Chinese biography must ask, "how much was ascribed to the life by the Chinese biographer in the search for ideal moral consistency and didactic meaning?" Similarly, his other essay, "Chinese Biographical Writing" in *Historians of China and Japan* (1961) further explores the topic in relation to individuals serving as moral exemplars and the employment of a formulaic typecasting that was easily distinguishable to readers. However, Twitchett's works predominantly examine male biographies.[27]

For a comprehensive look at the biographical tradition regarding women, Joan Judge and Hu Ying's edited collection of essays, *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (2011), offers a substantial contribution to the subject. Key essays from the text that have guided my own work include, "*Lienü* versus *Xianyuan*: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History" by Nanxiu Qian, "Faithful Maiden Biographies: A Forum for Ritual Debate, Moral Critique and Personal Reflection," by Weijing Lu, "Gender and Modern Martyrology: Qiu Jin as *Lienü*, *Lieshi* or *Nülieshi*" by Hu Ying, "Women's Epitaphs in Tang China (618-907)" by Ping Yao, and "Lovers, Talkers, Monsters, and Good women: Competing Images in Mid-Ming Epitaphs and Fiction" by Katherine Carlitz. By forging a revised understanding of Chinese women's history through acknowledgment of biographies beyond the Confucian tradition, Judge and Ying reveal how Chinese culture, "was as dynamic as it was continuous."[28]

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[27] Denis Twitchett, "Problems of Chinese Biography" in *Confucian Personalities*, eds., Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 35; Denis Twitchett in *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74-76; Denis Twitchett, "Chinese Biographical Writing," in *Historians of China and Japan*, eds., W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleybank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 95-114.

[28] Joan Judge and Hu Ying, "Introduction" in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History,* eds., Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 2-3.

Finally, Martin W. Huang's *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (2001) explores the advent of fictional works (*xiaoshuo*) in relation to the anxieties of the literati whose recorded complaints and letters, "point to a widespread anxiety as well as a deep sense of loss of control." Huang connects female chastity to Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) doctrine and traces the origins of subversive texts to the "unique narrative capacity and representational power" fiction offers. Late Ming literati engaged in unprecedented and intimate discussion regarding desire, thus fictional texts allowed literati to, "explore in depth complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions associated with desire in contemporary discourse"[29] Huang's argument represents a departure from the scholarly view that the late Ming wholly represented a "liberation of desire," as he concludes that, "if there was indeed such a liberation, [it] was almost always accompanied by a profound anxiety over the different ramifications of desire."[30]

The texts outlined above encompass the complexities and dynamic nature of the Ming-Qing period, as well as the negotiation of gender relations in opposing Chinese ideological spectrums. This scholarship provides a foundation for interpreting the period's vernacular literature featuring Wu Zetian in a manner often unexplored and underacknowledged. Charles Stone's *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica* offers a translation and critical commentary on the Ming dynasty work, *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (*Ruyijun zhuan*), known for its setting of historical fiction and blatant eroticism. However, his interpretation and analysis afford predominance to possible ideological rivalries and the text's literary technique of erotic realism. Stone's examination of *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* when paired with contemporary

[29] Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9, 21.
[30] Ibid, 6-7.

scholarship that delineates gender's centrality in Chinese life and examines the Ming-Qing period, emerges as a new avenue to consider Wu Zetian's representations.

Similarly, Junjie Luo's "When the Exotic Met the Erotic: The Representation of the Foreign in *Ruyijun zhuan* and *'Jinhailing zongyu wangshen'*" provides a new strategy for examining *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* by placing focus on the presence of foreign entities. Luo argues that, "One strategy adopted by the authors of Ming erotic stories is to associate sexual expressions that challenge the existing social order with portrayals of the foreign."[31] By employing a foreign setting, Ming authors "exoticized the erotic in order to exclude unsettling elements of sexual desire from China." Despite sexual desire posing challenges to Confucian ethics, *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* concludes with Xue Aocao restoring the patriarchal order.[32] Yet, Luo's argument is wholly centralized on the incorporation of foreign elements and does not include any examination of the employment of Wu Zetian's image.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical schemas of my research primarily offer insight into the significance of topoi in cultural perspective and platforms for analysis regarding the relationship between audience and creators. The word topoi is used to express "common topics that both articulate and define public and social consciousness." George Q. Xu's essay "The Role of Rhetorical Topoi in Constructing the Social Fabric of Contemporary China" argues that the patterns, origination, and deployment of rhetorical topoi, "are an essential part of the language used in that society and culture," and are "reflective of the culture's dominant ideology."[33] Works that will guide my

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[31] Junjie Luo, "When the Exotic Met the Erotic: The Representation of the Foreign in Ruyijun zhuan and 'Jinhailing zongyu wangshen,'" *Frontiers Of Literary Studies In China* 8, no. 2 (June 2014): 279.
[32] Ibid, 277, 297.
[33] George Q. Xu, "The Role of Rhetorical Topoi in Constructing the Social Fabric of Contemporary China," in *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*, eds. Randy Kluver and John H. Powers, (Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999).

research in relation to content creators and audiences include, Hayden White's *The Content of the Form* and Umberto Eco's *The Limits of Interpretation*. White argues that narrativity in both factual and fictional story-telling is "intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality." White's analysis of the narrativization of historical discourses offers a lens to consider vernacular works as well. When authors encode their narratives with topoi that have been cultivated in the given culture, readers are prompted to recognize "the form of the narrative" and the "meaning produced by the discourse."[34] From Eco's work, I will be primarily drawing upon his discussion regarding what constitutes a model reader in relation to the intentions of the author.[35] These works will provide a fundamental lens in examining the didactic purpose of both Chinese biography and the intent of authors who include topoi associated with transgressive women when constructing representations of Wu Zetian.

Sources and Limitations

The scholarship I will be utilizing in my thesis will draw upon a synthesis of emerging secondary scholarship and primary sources that encompass an array of materials from Mid to Late Imperial China, such as poems, biographies, vernacular literature, records, and material culture. However, it should be explicitly stated that due to language restrictions the translations of literature and material culture I am utilizing will be borrowed from scholars in the field. The primary sources employed in my work may be defined within two interrelated purposes: the representations of Wu Zetian and the sources that furnish understanding of the sociopolitical environment and thus contextualize these representations. As core secondary scholarship for contextualization in my thesis is prominent in the historiographies and discussion above, and will

[34] Hayden V. White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Repetition* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 14, 43.
[35] See Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 55.

be further mapped in the bibliography, I would like center my focus here on the primary sources with direct representations of Wu Zetian.

The primary works I will examine from the Later Jin until the Southern Song are the *Old Tang History* (*Jiu Tang Shu*), *New Tang History* (*Xin Tang Shu*), *Comprehensive Mirror as an Aide to Governance* (*Zizhi Tongjian*), and the *Outline and Digest of the General Mirror* (*Zizhi Tongjian Gangmu*.)[36] The *Old Tang History* was compiled during the Later Jin from 940 until 945, covers the period of 618-906, and is credited to Liu Xu (887-946) as the sole author. However, it is notable that the *Old Tang History* had several contributors and Liu Xu oversaw the project as its third supervisor. The other supervisors were Zhao Ying and Sang Weihan. Those who supervised the project also likely changed contributors at their discretion. The *Old Tang History* presents the most outright critical concluding thoughts regarding Wu Zetian. The *New Tang History*, compiled from 1043-60 by Confucian scholars Ouyang Xiu (1007-72) and Song Qi (998-1061) during the Northern Song dynasty, continues the negative portrayals of Wu Zetian, as well as toward women in relation to governmental decay.[37] Neo-Confucian scholar Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance*, that was compiled in 1084 and covers the years 403 until 959, follows in suit with the *New Tang History* but affords greater neutrality in relation to certain controversial events. Finally, Zhu Xi's *Outline and Digest of the General Mirror*, written in 1172, is also composed with similar sentiments to its forbearers. In

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[36] Translations borrowed from Jong Min Rhee, "Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty: Becoming the Only Female Emperor in China," (master's thesis, University of Southern California, 2008) and Harry Rothschild, "Rhetoric Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, China's Only Woman Emperor," (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2003).

[37] Rhee, 11; Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 495. It has been noted that *The New Tang History* presents additional biographies that feature women "who either maim or kill themselves in frightening and demeaning ways." The inclusion of these four new biographies, that did not appear in *The Old Tang History*, indicates the presence of Confucian moral agendas in these historical writings. See Richard L. Davis "Chaste and Filial Women in Chinese Historical Writings of the Eleventh Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 2 (2001): 205.

appendix 1, I have included the passages of concluding remarks from the *Old Tang History* and the *New Tang History*, as translated by Rothschild in his dissertation "Rhetoric, Ritual, and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, Woman Emperor of China." The judgements delivered in these passages do not wildly differ in their conclusions. As side-by-side comparison reveals, each commentary flirts with begrudgingly with affording legitimacy to her reign, but ultimately neither fully recognize the legitimacy of her Zhou dynasty or her time as emperor. By the Southern Song dynasty, in a trend toward including increasingly negative elements, Neo-Confucian historians such as Zhu Xi and Yuan Shu considered Wu Zetian's Zhou dynasty as illegitimate and fully cast her as a usurper.[38] Aside from concluding remarks and determinations of political legitimacy, I will also analyze the nuanced and evolving depictions of Wu Zetian in these histories. I will give focus to the contended events of her legacy, such as the death of Empress Wang and Pure Consort Xiao, the demotion of Empress Wang, the death of Li Hong, Gaozong's personality and weak health in relation to Wu Zetian obtaining power, and the events surrounding the death of Wu Zetian's infant daughter. To provide an example of the evolving rhetorical presentation of controversial events, I have provided three passages regarding the death of Li Hong in appendix 2.[39] The *Old Tang History* believes that Li Hong died of natural causes, while The *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* reflects careful deliberation and inconclusiveness regarding his death. This line of thinking reflects the possibility that Li Hong inherited his fathers afflicted disposition. Conversely, the *New Tang History* treats Li Hong's death as a case of murder, in which Wu Zetian poisoned her son to protect her stakes in imperial power.

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[38] Harry Rothschild, "Rhetoric Ritual and Support Constituencies in the Political Authority of Wu Zhao, China's Only Woman Emperor," (PhD diss., Brown University, 2003) 16-24. Translations and passages provided in appendix may be located in these pages.

[39] For the translations found in appendix 2, see Rhee, 36-40.

Primary sources depicting evocations of Wu Zetian from the Ming-Qing period will be *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (*Ruyijun Zhuan*), Li Ruzhen's *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jinghua Yuan*), Cao Xueqin's *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Feng Menglong's *The Quelling of Demons*, and Fang Ruhao's *Later Tales of the True Way*. The representations of Wu Zetian in Ming dynasty novel *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* and the Qing dynasty novel *Flowers in the Mirror* will be explored in-depth, as they stand as the two most prominent evocations during this period. However, while Wu Zetian is not a prominent figure in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Quelling of Demons*, and *Later Tales of the True Way*, these works reflect her bearing as a culturally charged signifier of female-led topoi and will be examined as well. For instance, in *The Quelling of Demons* (1620) penned by Feng Menglong, Wu Zetian is mentioned in contextual passing as having been an incarnation of a demon spirit who seeks the destruction of harmony. However, in Menglong's novel, the demon spirit is now incarnated as Wang Ze, who is leading a revolt.[40] In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the lead character's niece-in-law, Qing Keqing, collects items from infamous women, who are notorious for their association with discord and upsetting balance through sexual transgressions. One of the items Keqing displays is a mirror that once belonged to Wu Zetian. The principal character of the novel, Jia Baoyu, at one point becomes disoriented from looking into the mirror and is described as being affected by the lingering excess sexuality of Wu Zetian.[41] While mentions of Wu Zetian in these novels are brief, they demonstrate the highly-charged nature of her image at this point. This is particularly

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[40] Daria Berg, "Traditional Vernacular Novels: Some Lesser Known Works," in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 661.
[41] Louise P. Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 83-86; Cao Xueqin, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. H. Bencraft Joly (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 70. (I am currently waiting to receive the penguin classics book, as I would like to use their translation.)

true when considering the relationship between authors and readers, as these novels incorporated elements popular consciousness that would be recognizable to a reader.

Conclusion

Overall, my thesis concerns two interrelated claims. Broadly, my research is a case study of a historical figure's evolving representation, and subsequent legacy, in historical and literary sources. My analysis will give preference to considering the anxieties of Confucian scholars as the foremost motivating factor in employing Wu Zetian's image in the service of the ideology. Specifically, my thesis will trace how Wu Zetian's legacy became a culturally, and eventually cross-culturally, entrenched representation associated with transgressive qualities attributed to female authority. My thesis aims to understand the new life Wu Zetian's image has taken beyond her death. By this I refer to the systematic vilification of women in positions of power through the repetition of rhetorically based topoi and how, at the forefront of this phenomenon, Wu Zetian became the poster-child for female-led transgression.

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Appendix 1- Concluding Remarks on Wu Zetian

Liu Xu, *The Old Tang History*

When one governs in a time of chaos, the preservation or ruin of a dynasty hangs in the balance. If a Jie or a Chou sits at the apex of power, even ten Yaos could not regulate the empire. Whereas if a Yao or Shun were at the apex of power, even ten Jies could not foment turmoil. Even when cowards and women avail themselves of the times to gain influence, they still, with

their reckless and indecorous ruling conduct, determine and govern the fate of the common people. Observe, for instance, the years in which Wu issued edicts. Men of superior talent were joined in distress, dragged unwillingly into the perils of her court. None but felt great apprehension for his family. And in the end, they could not reciprocate the kindnesses of the former emperor [Gaozong] or protect the imperial sons [Zhongzong and Ruizong] For a time, the innocent were ensnared, and those who stuck their necks out were executed. All earth and Heaven were a cage—where was there a safe haven? How tragic! From antiquity, such suffocating slander is called poison. Generations have echoed grievances against the cruelty of the human swine." Empress Wu's conspiracy to seize the position of Gaozong's legitimate wife by choking the breath from her own son, a swaddling infant; her mincing and pickling of enemies, grinding their bones into pepper dust—who would not claim this is extreme? This is the disposition of a licentious and jealous woman! Nonetheless, among the preponderance of heedless counsel and factions arose men of ritual propriety. Though in the beginning the hen crowed to welcome the dawn, in the end, she restored the throne to her son, the enlightened ruler. Her lofty speech defended Wei Yuanzhong from punishment. Her kind words assuaged Di Renjie's heart. She respected the paragons of the time and suppressed court favorites. She heeded the words of the loyal and eradicated the harsh officials. How splendid! How splendid!

治亂時也、存亡勢也. 使桀紂在上, 雖十堯不能治; 使堯舜在上, 雖十桀不能亂.
使懦夫女子乘時得勢, 亦足坐制群生之命, 肆行不義之威. 觀夫武氏稱制之年,
英才接軫, 靡不痛心於家宗, 扼腕於朝危, 竟不能報先帝之恩, 衛吾君之子.
俄至無辜被陷, 引頸就誅, 天地為籠, 去將安所? 悲夫! 昔掩鼻之讒古稱其毒;
人彘之酷世以為冤.
武后奪嫡之謀也, 振喉絕襁褓之兒, 葅醢碎椒塗之骨, 其不道也甚矣,
亦姦人妒婦之恆態也. 然猶泛延讒議, 時禮正人, 初雖牝雞司晨, 終能復子明辟,
飛語辯元忠之罪, 善言慰仁傑之心, 尊時憲而抑幸臣, 聽忠言而誅酷吏. 有旨哉!
有旨哉![12]

Ouyang Xiu, *The New Tang History*

In antiquity, when Confucius wrote the Spring and Autumn Annals, treacherous ministers and rebellious sons quaked. Yet he neither dismissed nor deleted regicides and usurpers from his records. How is it that these rebels can be countenanced? Alas, when there is no greater crime, how can the truth be submerged and the heinous deeds of these men not be brought to light? From the time of Sima Qian and Ban Gu, all historians have included an annals for Empress Lu. Though Empress Lu never usurped the Han dynasty, she illicitly seized the reins of court and country. Consequently, no chronicler has dared expunge this historical fact Alas, how is this the intent of the Sage? Yet Lu's inclusion tallies perfectly with the precedent set in the Spring and Autumn Annals The Old Tang History also follows this precedent and gives Empress Wu a basic annals, and now her place can not be altered. Auspicious and inauspicious influences still impact men. Yet though the good are frequently favored with good fortune, there are still those who encounter an inauspicious fate. Likewise, evil-doers are not predestined to meet with inauspicious influences. There are those who avoid them by a stroke of good luck. In the ruminations of the petty man,

therefore, the way of Heaven is difficult to discern. The virtuous are not necessarily blessed with good fortune nor are the wicked doomed to meet with calamity. Despite Empress Wu's iniquity, she did not meet with great disaster. Thus she might be called one of these "lucky avoiders."

Some say that in causing havoc during the Tang, Wu and Wei followed the same track, the only difference being that Wu withstood the test of time while Wei was promptly destroyed. Why is this? This commentator thinks they are not the same. From the time of Gaozong, Empress Wu arrogated the blessings and prestige of the Son of Heaven. Abusing power, she issued edicts to everywhere bounded by the Four Seas. Although she expelled the legitimate emperor and changed the dynastic name, still she alone issued rewards and punishments and did not surreptitiously delegate authority to ministers, allowing them to usurp power from above and govern from beneath. Therefore in her later years, though there was a crisis, she did not perish. Empress Wei took advantage of her husband [Zhongzong] Her lasciviousness brought the court to the boiling point. Recklessly and illicitly, she issued enfeoffment rights. Political authority came from many different sources. Even though she poisoned and killed the Emperor and assisted Ruizong in ruling, power was not in her hands, and she never even knew it. The lands of her kinsmen were distant and the hearts of the common people stiffened in opposition. When Xuanzong availed himself of these circumstances to exhort the brave and worthy, he was able to seize his legacy and avoid disturbing his clan ancestors He grasped authority and drew the affair to a close. Nonetheless, these two empresses bequeathed a cautionary lesson to subsequent kings. Heed it well!

昔者孔子作春秋而亂臣賊子懼, 其於弒君篡國之主, 皆不誅絕之, 豈以其盜而有之者, 莫大之罪也, 不沒其實, 所以著其大惡而不隱歟? 自司馬遷班固皆作高后紀, 呂氏雖非篡漢, 而盜執其國政, 遂不敢沒其實, 豈其得聖人之意歟? 抑亦偶合於春秋之法也. 唐之舊史因之, 列武后于本紀, 蓋其所從來遠矣.
夫吉凶之於人, 猶影響也, 而為善者吉常多, 其不幸而罹於凶者有矣; 為惡者未始不及於凶, 其幸而免者亦時有焉. 而小人之慮, 遂以為天道難知, 為善未必福, 而為惡未必禍也. 武后之惡, 不及於大戮, 所為幸免者也.[13]

或稱武, 韋亂唐同一轍, 武持久, 韋亟滅. 何哉? 議者謂否. 武后自高宗時挾天子威福, 脅制四海, 雖逐嗣帝, 改國號, 然賞罰己出, 不假借群臣, 僭於上而治於下, 故能終天年, 阽亂而不亡. 韋氏乘夫, 淫烝於朝, 斜封四出, 政放不一, 既鴆殺帝, 引睿宗輔政, 權去手不自知, 戚地已疏, 人心相挺, 玄宗藉其事以撼豪英, 故取若掇遺, 不旋踵宗族夷丹, 勢奪而事淺也. 然二后遺後王戒, 顧不厚哉![14]

Appendix 2 – The Death of Li Hong

Old Tang History

In 671…the Crown Prince had many illnesses…

四月… 己亥, 天后殺皇太子

In the summer, fourth month, the day Jihai, the Crown Prince, Hong, died at Qiyun Pavillion in Hebi Palace.

夏四月…己亥， 皇太子弘薨于合璧宮之綺雲殿

New Tang History

Fourth month… the day Jihai, the Heavenly Empress killed the Crown Prince.

四月… 己亥, 天后殺皇太子

…Empress [Wu] was about to attain her intention, but Hong [the Crown Prince] gave opposing requests against the empress to the emperor several times. In 675, [Hong] followed [the emperor] to Hebi Palace, and was killed by poison. He was twenty-four years old.

… 后將騁志, 弘奏請數怫旨. 上元二年, 從幸合璧宮, 遇酖薨, 年二十四…

…Empress [Wu] got angry, and poisoned Hong [the Crown Prince]

…后怒, 酖殺弘

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… on the day Jihai, the crown prince died at Hebi Palace. People that lived in that period suspected that the Heavenly Empress had poisoned him.

… 己亥, 太子薨于合璧宮, 時人以爲天后酖之也

Research into Variances (Kao yi) says that in Hong's death, the circumstances are inconclusive…

考異曰… 按弘之死, 其事難明…