# Feminist thinking in late seventh-century China

## A critical hermeneutics analysis of the case of Wu Zetian

Niya Peng
*National Institute of Education Sciences, Beijing, China, and*
Tianyuan Yu and Albert Mills
*Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to offer novel insights into: knowledge of proto-feminism through description and analysis of the rule of the seventh century female Emperor Wu Zetian; postcolonial theory by revealing the existence and proto-feminist activities of a non-western female leader; and the literature on gender and invisibility through a study of a leading figure that is relatively unknown to western feminists and is even, in feminist terms, something of a neglected figure.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In order to examine Wu's proto-feminist practices as recorded in historical materials, we use critical hermeneutics as a tool for textual interpretation, through the following four stages: choosing texts from historical records and writings of Wu; analyzing the historical sociocultural context; analyzing the relationship between the text and the context; and offering a conceptual framework as a richer explanation.

**Findings** – Wu's life activities demonstrate proto-feminism in late seventh century China in at least four aspects: gender equality in sexuality, in social status, in politics, and women's pursuit of power and leadership.

**Research limitations/implications** – Future research may dig into the paradox of Wu's proto-feminist practices, the relationship between organizational power and feminism/proto-feminism, and the ways in which Wu's activities differ from other powerful women across cultures, etc.

**Practical implications** – The study encourages a rethink of women and leadership style in non-western thought.

**Social implications** – The study supports Calás and Smircich's 2005 call for greater understanding of feminist thought outside of western thought and a move to transglobal feminism.

**Originality/value** – This study recovers long lost stories of women leadership that are "invisible" in many ways in the historical narratives, and contributes to postcolonial feminism by revealing the existence of indigenous proto-feminist practice in China long before western-based feminism and postcolonial feminism emerged.

**Keywords** China, seventh century, Critical hermeneutics, Feminist thought, Wu Zetian, Proto-feminism

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

The focus of our study is threefold:

(1) to provide novel insights into our knowledge of proto-feminism through description and analysis of the rule of the seventh century female Emperor Wu Zetian;

(2) to contribute to postcolonial theory by revealing the existence and proto-feminist activities of a non-western female leader; and

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(3) to add to the literature on gender and invisibility through a study of a leading figure that is relatively unknown to western feminists and is even something of a neglected figure in China.

Our main argument is that, Wu Zetian's life activities and practices as recorded in historical texts, demonstrate proto-feminism in at least four aspects: gender equality in sexuality, social status, politics, and women's pursuit of power and leadership.

Through our study of Wu Zetian we hope to contribute to: feminist histories and narratives that reveal the range of leadership characteristics performed by women over time that have hitherto been "hidden from history," or "invisible" in historical records (Rowbotham, 1974); and postcolonial feminism and organization theory (Prasad, 2012) by broadening those narratives to non-western traditions. We especially differ from previous studies of Wu Zetian in our use of critical hermeneutics to analyze and confirm proto-feminist practice in later seventh century China and, in particular, to study female leadership in (political) organization.

We begin this paper with a brief literature review on relevant feminist theories, and then introduce the methodology of critical hermeneutics. We continue to enumerate the historical texts we drew excerpts from, and then conduct the analysis of critical hermeneutics. In the conclusion we offer some implications for future research.

## Literature review

Feminist tradition is not a single tradition but multiple traditions that contain liberal feminism, women's voice/experience feminism, radical feminism, poststructural feminism, and transnational and postcolonial feminist approaches (Calás, 1992; Calás and Smircich, 1996). This paper mainly contributes to the feminist notion of "invisibility" and postcolonial feminism, arguing for the recovery of proto-feminist practice and female leadership in (political) organization from non-western sources and contexts. The literature review thus covers four relevant feminist issues: feminism in management and organization studies, postcolonial feminism, invisibility, and proto-feminism.

### *Feminism in management and organization studies*

With the development of western feminist theory following the second wave of the feminist movement of the 1960s (Rowbotham, 1999), feminism has challenged existing precepts in a number of disciplines, including management and organization studies (Mills and Tancred, 1992). By the early 1970s, the feminist tradition began to influence management and related realms (Mills and Tancred, 1992; Prasad, 2005). Gradually, from the western perspective, feminism became a global trend concerned with a range of issues including family, work, market, economy, and politics (Gill, 2006). Over the last 40 years or so, many researchers have examined various organizational and managerial topics and issues derived from the feminist viewpoint. Hence, the meaning of studying feminist theory is not merely in the theory itself (Elomaki, 2012; Shaw and Lee, 2004), but also in the relationship between feminist theory and other management and organization theories (Desivilya and Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008; Hearn and Parkin, 1983; Knights, 1997; Mills, 1988, 1995; Sievers, 1995).

Over time feminist theory has made important contributions to management and organization studies (Ashcraft, 2001). Such studies have enriched our understanding of such things as the gendered character of organizational structure and processes, as well as the political processes of conflict and peace that inform organizational development (Desivilya and Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008). For instance, studies employing feminist

theory have illustrated that organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), represented as gender-neutral, is in fact structurally gendered in concept and practice (Ronit and Ronit, 2005). Moreover, gender in organizational culture, organizational diversity, and organizational change were studied elaborately (Korvajarvi, 2002; Helms Mills, 2002; Rich, 1970; Thurlow *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, feminist reading, analysis and reinterpretation of these pivotal concepts are of great importance (Buzzanell, 2000). Feminist theory also problematizes and, arguably, ultimately enriches and revitalizes conceptualizations of resistance within organization studies (Robyn and Annette, 2005; Thomas and Davies, 2005). In short, feminist theory is an important aspect of managerial theories in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, its presence in management and organization studies remains contested as a legitimate aspect of the discipline (Paludi *et al.*, 2014; Phipps, 2011; Stivers, 1996). This has consequences not only for western management thought but also for the influence of such thought on countries such as China, as it embraces western management theories.

*Postcolonial feminism*

There is a tendency throughout many different academic fields to use western models of societies as a framework for the rest of the world. Postcolonial feminism is developed as a response to the fact that feminism tended to focus solely on the experiences of women in western cultures (McEwan, 2001). In her foundational essay *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty (1988) addresses this issue and asserts that western feminists write about Third World women as a composite, singular construction that is arbitrary and limiting. "In other words, it is only in so far as 'Woman/Women' and 'the East' are defined as *Others*, or as peripheral, that (western) Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center" (Mohanty, 1988).

Postcolonial feminists contend that feminism in Third World countries is not imported from the First World, but originates from internal ideologies and sociocultural factors (Jayawardena, 1986). These theorists work to incorporate the ideas of indigenous and Third World feminist thoughts and practices into mainstream western feminism, bringing the voices of Third World women to the forefront and allowing their unique feminist models to reshape the modern notion of feminism. Consequently, postcolonial feminists have significantly weakened the bounds of mainstream feminism, allowing it to apply to women in many different cultural contexts globally rather than focussing only on a middle-class, English-speaking woman in the developed world (Mills, 1998).

This paper aims to contribute to postcolonial feminism by revealing that there were proto-feminist practices that took place within particular country contexts, which have long been unnoticed in the western world. Specifically, we set out in this paper to examine the role of proto-feminist practice in late seventh century China, namely, the Tang Dynasty. We contend that there is a need for a rethink not only of management and organization studies in countries such as China, but also of feminist issues based on local traditions and thought, including indigenous proto-feminism. Here we use the notion of "indigenous" to mean not simply "home grown" but developed in a local context (e.g. China) and, as in the case of Wu, influenced by other non-western cultures (e.g. such as Indian and other Central Asian traditions of Buddhism).

*Invisibility*

The widespread invisibility of women was largely revealed in the public realm, such as workplace and government (Prasad, 2005). Feminist theory derived from opposition to

sex discrimination, first in politics, then in the workplace, and later in the realm of social relations (Calás and Smircich, 2005; Prasad, 2005; Rowbotham, 1974, 1999). In the process of challenging sex discrimination, feminists have drawn on historical narratives that reveal the depth and extent of women's participation in/contribution to social and political life (Rowbotham, 1974; Scott, 1983).

The notion of "invisibility" serves at least two meanings in the case of Wu Zetian: first, the long-time invisibility of Wu's life story to the western world; second, the invisibility of feminist narratives and theories in both traditional Chinese historiography and contemporary academic studies on Wu Zetian. We are aware of at least two important histories of Wu in English (Rothschild, 2008; Twitchett, 2003) but would note that until now these works have not been noted in feminist studies in general and particularly feminist organizational analysis.

As the legendary, only female Emperor in China who lived in the seventh century, Wu Zetian has remained unknown to the west for centuries, until during the 1950s when FitzGerald (1955) and Lin (1957) introduced her to the English-speaking world and more recently in the work of Twitchett (2003) and Rothschild (2008). Although some historians and sociologists have studied Wu Zetian this was rarely from the point of feminist/proto-feminist thinking or practice. Since late 1990s there have been a wealth of information about her in non-academic English materials, both in print and electronically (Chan, 2009). However, Wu's celebrated life and her notable contribution to proto-feminism and organizational leadership and management remain largely unexplored in the west.

As one historian put it, writings on histories are so often lopsided in terms of gender that historical annals typically present the story of "God, man, the universe, and the occasional woman" (Song, 2010). Unlike the vast majority of Chinese women who are mostly invisible in the thousands of volumes of Chinese history, Wu Zetian occupies a very prominent space as the "occasional woman." However, Wu Zetian in traditional Chinese written history is, almost without exception, constructed as the most "ruthless concubine" and "lascivious seductress" (Song, 2010). Her usurpation, extravagance, and the fact that she was a woman, earned her, with few exceptions (Rothschild, 2008), widespread condemnation by Confucian scholars. What she achieved in the public sphere in shaping the course of history (e.g. China's conquest of and ally with Korea) has always been overshadowed (FitzGerald, 1955). The fact that many respected intellectuals (e.g. Chen Zi'ang, a renowned poet of the early Tang) served at Wu's court faithfully has not been adequately acknowledged, which is a telltale sign of the selective process of historical editing (Tung, 2000). This selective process of historical editing has interpreted Wu along the Confucian patriarchal hierarchy of social order throughout the centuries (Song, 2010).

Since the 1990s, the study of women's history in China has made considerable progress and a substantial number of women's history research papers and monographs emerged, as well as historical novels (Liu, 2012; Schaffer and Song, 2007; Song, 2010). Among female historic celebrities Wu Zetian has been accepted as an exemplar of women's leadership by many Mainland Chinese scholars and has even become a historiographical cottage industry in China (Chan, 2009). However, academic studies framed by feminist theories and methodologies remained quite weak. Papers in this area were very few in number, and there was no specialized publication (Liu, 2012). In this sense, our use of critical hermeneutics, that attempt to understand persons and texts in their historical context, is arguably an appropriate way to analyze Wu Zetian's leadership characteristics.

*Proto-feminism*

With the appearance of the concept of "New Feminism," western and eastern scholars became interested in the issue of whether Wu Zetian could be a representative of – or at least an early practitioner – of proto-feminism in ancient China. In the words of Bokenkamp (1998), "the answer to the question of how Wu managed to achieve power in a culture of male domination remains elusive." Wu was faced with the necessity of constructing a feminist critique of the Chinese world order (Bokenkamp, 1998). Some scholars believe that Wu did not have the motivation to promote a reform or early "feminism" (i.e. concern with women's rights *per se*), but appeared to show the characteristics of "feminist consciousness" in the process of political participation that later affected other female politicians (Chen, 1994). Chen Jo-shui, for instance, believes that some political measures proposed by a number of female politicians in early Tang are performances of "proto-feminism," and it was different from modern feminist thought. In this case "proto-feminism" suggests an inherent appeal to female interests but one more centered in a desire to fight for herself/themselves to get the same rights and opportunities with males (Chen, 1994). In other words, it is a demand for respect regardless of gender that nonetheless does not necessarily translate into a demand for women's rights *per se*.

Although there were several regent empress dowagers in Chinese history, their status was mostly bestowed posthumously through the edicts of emperors acting out of expediency. Even the most famous two female rulers, Empress Lü (241BC-180BC) of the Han Dynasty and the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) of the Qing Dynasty, did not compare to Wu Zetian. Empress Lü was greedy for power and ruled the Han for 15 years, but never ascend the throne. Empress Dowager Ci-Xi attended the business of government behind a lowered screen in the name of the Emperor's assistant. The subject of the two could be left to another paper. Wu Zetian was the only female ruler who declared herself Emperor in China, and once changed the name of country to Zhou, which means she established a new dynasty. Later, it was revived to Tang when Wu's son came to the throne. She not only gave herself the title of emperor, but also enjoyed many other prerogatives enjoyed by male emperors. This, together with other evidence, indicates that Wu Zetian was the only legitimate female emperor in Chinese history. The special identity is one of the reasons why we choose to focus on Wu.

In this paper we contend that Wu Zetian's efforts on female equality marks her out as a proto-feminist; revealing in practice a challenge to existing notions of women's capabilities and social roles of the time. In contending that Wu Zetian's rule reveals evidence of a form of proto-feminism we are not arguing that her rule necessarily gave birth to elements of proto-feminist theory or some kind of proto-feminist movement. Further research may reveal aspects of those influences/outcomes. Discussions generated from this study are intended as a guide to other researchers who may pursue the issues raised in greater depth and with more diversity in terms of proto-feminist movements or theories.

## Critical hermeneutics as an interpretive method

Hermeneutics is defined as a form of textual interpretation concerned mainly with the methodological analysis of various kinds of texts (Prasad, 2002; Prasad, 2005). It is the theory of the rules which preside over a text's interpretation (Aredal, 1986). Hermeneutics' textual preoccupations gradually led to importation into literary theory while its concern on ancient writings made it of interest to history (Bryman *et al.*, 2011; Prasad, 2005). Critical hermeneutics moves beyond simple textual analysis (e.g. attempts

to understand the construction of a text in context) to try to understand the power aspects involved (e.g. who or what is privileged and who or what is marginalized) (Aredal, 1986; Jay, 2009; Phillips and Brown, 1993; Prasad and Mir, 2002). Consequently it offers a useful methodological tool to analyze feminist or proto-feminist practice in the context of a different time.

There are some works connecting the hermeneutics method and feminist contents, that are also combined with study of ancient writings (see, e.g. the work of Lenz *et al.*, 1980 on Shakespeare). Additionally, historical interpretations and criticisms from a feminist perspective have explored proto-feminist thought from the middle ages onwards, including analyses of the the works of pioneers like Wollstonecraft and Woolf (Plain and Sellers, 2007). In the latter regard this was intended to rescue Woolf for feminist politics (Moi, 1985). Other feminist hermeneutic analyses have involved interpretations through such things as feminist poetics, women's novels and fictions, and some other literatures (Showalter, 1985). For example, through a study of the lives and works of some feminist critics and their complex relations with both masculine and feminine literary culture, Betsy Erkkila (1992) "seeks simultaneously to engage and to explore feminist theory and practice as a field of cultural struggle." This study attempted to "historicize" our understanding of paticular women poets and particular (re) constructions of the "female poetic tradition" by focussing on the historical struggles and differences not only within women writers but also among feminist themselves.

According to Prasad (2005), empirical research done from a critical hermeneutics tradition is premised upon four central concepts:

(1) hermeneutics circle;

(2) layers of texts;

(3) relating to texts; and

(4) questions of author intentionality.

Taken as a whole, these four precepts of the methodological approach make critical hermeneutics a helpful device for understanding the latent meaning of texts.

Similarly, it has been suggested that the performance of critical hermentutics research involves four stages (Prasad and Mir, 2002). It starts with a choice of text(s). In this paper, all the texts about Wu Zetian come from historical records on China (Liu, 945/1975; Si-Ma, 1084/2001; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003; Wang, 961), or writings of Wu Zetian herself (Wu, 685a, b). The second stage is to analyze the historical sociocultural context in which the texts were produced (namely China in the seventh century). The third, to analyze the relationship between the text and the context in which the text was produced. In this stage, a critical interpretation is reached, and the hermeneutics circle is closed. Finally, a conceptual framework is offered to provide a richer explanation for the specific relationship between text and context. In our study, we draw on proto-feminist practice to explain the specific discourses and actions in that imperial society context.

## Historical texts

The historical materials we studied were:

(1) Historical records. The following four pieces of historical works are the main sources from which we excerpted narratives about Wu Zetian: "Tang Huiyao (compendium of government and social institutions of Tang Dynasty)" (Wang,

961), written by Wang Pu in China's Bei-Song Dynasty – consisting of 100 volumes in total; "Jiu Tang Shu (Old Records of Tang Dynasty)" – this 200 volume work is the earliest systematic historical collection about Tang and was written and edited by nine historians led by Liu Xu (see Liu, 945/1975) over a four-year period; "Xin Tang Shu (New Records of Tang Dynasty)"(Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003) – 220 volumes in total, edited by Ou-Yang Xiu and Song Qi, respectively, a historian-poet and writer in China's Song Dynasty; and "Zi Zhi Tong Jian (History as a Mirror)" (Si-Ma, 1084/2001) – 294 volumes in total (among which 81 volumes were on Tang Dynasty), edited over a period of 19 years by Si-Ma Guang, a notable historian in Song Dynasty. All these historical works include numerous references to Wu Zetian and her life activities.

(2) Selected writings of Wu Zetian (Wu, 685a, b). The following two writings are rich repository for her leadership and management strategies: "Chen Gui (Regulations for Ministers)," edited by Wu Zetian, in order to keep the ministers' behaviors "on the right track"; and "Qiu Xian Zhi" (Edicts for Seeking the Talent), ordered by Wu Zetian in 685, after suppressing the revolt of Xu Jingye. There were also some other writings written or edited by her, which provide supplementary context.

## Analyzing texts through critical hermeneutics

Our analysis follows the four-stage process that was described in the methodology part (Prasad and Mir, 2002). We begin with choice of texts and related references as interpretive starting point. Then we move to context illustration, followed by interpretations that manifest how to close the hermeneutics circle.

### *Choosing the text*

The following six textual excerpts are all from the materials mentioned above. The original texts are in Chinese, and the following texts are translated from Chinese by the paper's lead author. These six textual excerpts were chosen because we consider them as best reflecting the nature and characteristics of Wu's practices from the perspective of proto-feminism. The original texts from multiple sources are summarized into condensed excerpts, and no evidence in the original texts was found by the authors to be contradictory to these excerpts. A summary of these textual excerpts based on the chronology of Wu Zetian's activities is provided in Table I.

| No. | Activities | Year (AD) | Wu's age | Sources |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sexual relations concubine of Emperor Taizong | 637 | 14 | Liu (945/1975), Song and Ou-Yang (1060/2003) |
| | Empress of Gaozong | 655 | 32 | Liu (945/1975), Song and Ou-Yang (1060/2003) |
| | Male concubines | 685 | 62 | Liu (945/1975), Si-Ma (1084/2001) |
| 2 | Meeting arrangements | 655 | 32 | Liu (945/1975), Song and Ou-Yang (1060/2003) |
| 3 | Women officials | 662 | 39 | Liu (945/1975), Song and Ou-Yang (1060/2003) |
| 4 | Law on mourning | 674 | 51 | Wang (961) |
| 5 | Discourses on management | 685 | 62 | Wu (685a, b), Wang (961) |
| 6 | Name change | 689 | 66 | Si-Ma (1084/2001) |

**Table I.** A summary table of textual excerpts based on chronology of Wu's activities

*Excerpt 1 "sexual relations"*

Wu Zetian became a concubine of Emperor Taizong of Tang in 637 at the age of 14. After his death in 649, she was sent to the Ganye Temple and became a Buddhist nun. Then she was brought back to the palace and was given the title Zhaoyi (Second-A rank imperial consort) of Gaozong (son of Taizong) in 654. Subsequently, she was made empress of Gaozong in 655. Wu herself went on to have several male concubines during her later years since around 685 (Liu, 945/1975; Si-Ma, 1084/2001; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003; Wu, 685b). As the "Empress Dowager Wu ordered her courtiers to select handsome young men to be her concubines. A remonstrating official Zhu Jingze advised: 'I heard that one should not pursue pleasure to its extreme […] […] Your Majesty already have several concubines including Xue Huaiyi, Zhang Yizhi and Zhang Changzong, and that should suffice' " (Liu, 945/1975; Si-Ma, 1084/2001; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003; Wu, 685b).

*Excerpt 2 "meeting arrangements"*

(In 655 A.D.), Wu was newly crowned empress. The ministers and noblewomen had an audience with the Empress. […] […] According to the rites of Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), male officials were to be given audience with the emperor; female officials, with the empress. But it was not until Zetian became the empress, when this ritual was firstly acted (Wang, 961, Vol. 26).

*Excerpt 3 "women officials"*

[…] […] (Shang-Guan Wan'er) was smart and literary. At age fourteen she was called in by Empress Wu and ordered to write some essay. She finished writing it magnificently at once. Then she was put in charge of drawing up decrees and did well in it. Once she committed a capital offense for disobeying (the Empress') order. But Empress Wu valued Shang-Guan's skills so much that she merely punished Shang-Guan by tattooing her face instead of killing her. Moreover, (Empress Wu) allowed Shang-Guan to take charge of all memorials to the throne and to participate in all kinds of political affairs.(Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003, Vol. 89).

*Excerpt 4, "law on mourning"*

In 674 Wu Zetian made it a universal law that a dead mother should be mourned by her offspring in the same way that they do for a deceased father. Wu stated: A mother is great because she contributes [to social life] by giving birth to and raising children. No mother, no children. If we do not treat mother the same as father, we are not good children, and are even worse than animals who know how to thank their mothers (Wang, 961).

*Excerpt 5 "discourses on management and leadership"*

A big building is made of thousands of timbers. Although each timber is different in length, shape and usage, the building will not be completed until all the timbers are put together. The same rule applies to managing a country." (Wu, 685a, b) A good King depends on the good General. "The nation is immense and the livelihood issues are numerous. There is no single king who has the ability to manage them all. (The king) has to lean upon good ministers for aid." (Wu, 685a, c) "Someone who has the ability to manage a state or is extremely robust to safeguard the frontier can be appointed as an official, no matter how ordinary his family background is (Wu, 685b).

*Excerpt 6 "name change"*

Zong Qinke transformed some characters including "tian"(heaven) and "di"(earth), etc. into twelve new characters, and presented them to Empress Dowager Wu. (In 689) the characters were in effect. The Empress Dowager Wu chose "Zhao" as her name. Qinke was Empress Dowager Wu's distant nephew(Si-Ma, 1084/2001, Vol. 204).

*Laying out the context*

First, let us briefly introduce Wu Zetian's lifetime. Wu Zetian is the only female Emperor in Chinese history. She entered the Tang Palace as a Cairen (the fifth rank of concubine) when she was 14 and became a concubine of Emperor Taizong of Tang. Six years after Emperor Taizong's death, she was made empress of Gaozong (son of Taizong) in 655 (Liu, 945/1975; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003).

After Emperor Gaozong died in 683, Empress Wu became the empress dowager and proceeded to depose a third son, Emperor Zhongzong, for displaying independence. She then had her youngest son Ruizong made emperor, but she was ruler not only in substance but in appearance as well, as she presided over imperial gatherings and prevented Emperor Ruizong from taking an active role in governance. In 690, she had Emperor Ruizong yield the throne to her and established the Zhou Dynasty. In 705, she was overthrown in a coup, and Emperor Zhongzong returned to the throne. She continued to carry the title of "emperor" until her death later that year (Liu, 945/1975; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003).

As the Empress of Emperor Gaozong, Wu had held the highest dominant power until she quit the throne. During the 50 years under her governance, the state won many battles against other countries, consolidated and expanded its territory, and prospered more than ever before in agriculture and economy (Liu, 945/1975; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003).

In short, Wu married two emperors, gave birth to two emperors, and she herself became an emperor that was considered to be legendary.

Second, in terms of context, we turn to the social background of the Tang Dynasty. China of the time was a patriarchal society with men and women having different social status. Women were bound by the "Three Obedience" – one, that woman should obey her father before marriage; two, her husband when married; and three, her sons in widowhood. Women were not allowed to talk with men in public (Wang, 961).

Additionally, it was said that "man is noble while woman is humble" (Wang, 1929). Thus, the father and the mother were treated differently both when alive and after death in a family. For example, the mourning rules instructed that a dead father would be mourned by his offspring for three years, while a dead mother would be mourned by her offspring for only one year if the father were still alive (Wang, 961).

In China's patriarchal society, "A women without talent is thought to be virtuous." Women could not talk about the politics, nor discuss issues with men. In ancient China, the relationship of couples in the Confucian ethical code is that the "wife serves the husband and the husband dominates the wife" (Wang, 1929). In patriarchal China, women's participation in politics was not viewed as normal but, rather, equated with the metaphor of the crowing of the hen: "The hen does not announce the morning. The crowing of a hen in the morning indicates the subversion of the family" (Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003).

The era of Wu Zetian was patriarchal in which there existed gender discrimination in every aspect of society. However, the Tang Dynasty was a relatively open-minded period compared with former dynasties. One of the manifestations was the sexually explicit dress of women in the Tang Dynasty. Another example was that Tang law protected women's rights to dissolve their marriage. During the Tang Dynasty, it was relatively common for women to divorce or remarry, unlike the preceding dynasties

(Chan, 2009). This less rigid societal environment made it possible for Wu Zetian to be the first female Emperor in China's history. In the process she was able to influence the period in regard to women's rights.

*Closing the hermeneutics circle*

In the seventh century, there was not a systematic theory of gender discrimination, feminism or otherwise. And China, of course, was no exception in this regard. From this perspective, Wu Zetian could be viewed as a proto-feminist pioneer who combated gender discrimination and pursued sex equality with her personal practices.

Our following analysis of the texts about Wu Zetian indicates at least four aspects of proto-feminist practices: gender equality in sexuality, in social status, in politics, and women's pursuit of power and leadership.

*Gender equality in sexuality*. Through Excerpt 1 "sexual relations," we can learn that many actions of Wu disagreed with patriarchal ethics. For example, after Taizong's death, she was expected to remain widowed and not to remarry, but she remarried Gaozong (Taizong's son) not very long after. Many behaviors of Wu reflected her requests of equality, including in regard to sex and sexuality. To begin with, Wu married two Emperors who were father and son. This was very adventurous. She followed her feelings and strived to seize control of sexual relations totally regardless of the dogmas of the time.

In addition, Wu had several male concubines, which showed her pursuit of the same rights and expectations of private life as the former male Emperors: in ancient China, for a male Emperor to have several concubines was considered normal. Thus, after becoming the female Emperor, Wu pursued power not only in politics but also in sex. Her action of recruiting male concubines was opposed by some officers and, for the most part, the common people at that time. In patriarchal Chinese society, a woman could not have multiple lovers: publically the "husband was considered leader of his wife." Regardless Wu proposed at several turns that women should be the same as men in many aspects. She used her actions to prove that what can be done by men can also be done by women.

*Gender equality in social status*. According to Excerpt 2 "meeting arrangements," Wu Zetian arranged for "women to enter into the meeting room" to join in the religious and political activities. We can see that Wu challenged the inequities of gender by encouraging women to talk and discuss with men in public. Facilitating the ability of women to talk equally with men and to express their own opinions may, arguably have increased women's consciousness and social status to some extent.

Excerpt 4; The "law on mourning" might be interpreted, contrary to the inequality of gender, that the father and mother should not be treated differently. Wu Zetian claimed to treat father and mother in the same way, which opposed the doctrine of "men surpass women" and the "husband is the criterion of the wife" (The Analects of Confucius). There was a book named Li Ji (Records of Rites), which was completed during the Xi Han Dynasty (202 BC-9 AD). It recorded and explained many etiquettes from the former Qin Dynasty (twenty-first century BC-221 BC). It said "There are not two suns in the sky, nor two kings in the land, nor two rulers in the state, nor two equally honorable in a family. All situations are governed with one authority. Therefore, while the father is alive, the mourning for the mother is observed for one year which shows the father's unique honorable status. When the most honorable person is alive, the son does not dare to express his private feelings of respect for the

mother." "Not only the father is the most honorable person for a son, but also a wife considers her husband the most honorable one." The social was regulated by the order of men's superiority over women and a husband's superiority over the wife.

Wu Zetian made it a universal law, to be obeyed by everyone, that a deceased mother should be mourned by her offspring in the same way as for a deceased father. She was trying to overthrow the absolute principle of a wife's subservience to her husband (Chen, 1994). The reformation by Wu of the mourning system had great significance and was a big challenge to patriarchy (Li, 2004). The series of measures and policies of Wu Zetian effectively enhanced women's social status during the Tang Dynasty. In the family life, women were not merely the accessories of men anymore; instead women improved their ability to live as independent persons.

*Gender equality in politics*. The proposals in Excerpt 2 "meeting arrangements" can also be interpreted as Wu's wish for women to enter the field of politics. The actions of Wu have contributed to allowing more and more women to go from the quiet boudoir to a place in the broader community; decreasing (although not eradicating) gender inequality in politics.

Our interpretation of the proto-feminist influence of Wu is strengthened when we look at excerpt 3 "women officials." Wu Zetian encouraged women to be Officials. In 662, when Wu was still the Empress of Emperor Gaozong, she changed the titles (and standings) of concubines. Under her advice, the titles of all ranks of concubines were changed to make them Officials in the imperial court. In the process the concubines took on substantive post in politics; they were not simply the sexual servants of the Emperor anymore. This change in title and status signaled that females as well as males could serve and exercise substantive duties in the imperial court, assisting the Emperor in the governance of political affairs of the country. Following Wu's edict women not only had the ability but also the power to participate in national political affairs.

Wu appointed some women as her assistants, and they were well known in Chinese history. One of the most famous female Officials was Shang-Guan Wan'er who had been Wu's assistant and personal secretary for 30 years. What's more, another female politician was deeply influenced by, what we might call, Wu Zetian's proto-feminist practice, namely, Princess Taiping (approximately 665-713) who was the only daughter of Wu Zetian. She, like her mother, was ambitious, longing for power, even peremptory in her striving for power. She was a celebrated politician with a great deal of power, and became "the princess who nearly possessed the world." Princess Taiping once wanted to be the second female Emperor, but failed, and was killed by Emperor Xuanzong, her nephew and political rival (Liu, 945/1975; Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003).

*Women's pursuit of power and leadership*. The first four textual excerpts indicate Wu Zetian's pursuit of gender equality through innovations and relevant measures, and the last two excerpts can be seen as her own pursuit of power through her skills and actions.

Wu showed proto-feminism indirectly by her management and leadership that can be seen in Excerpt 5 "discourses on management and leadership." Wu was arguably a good leader in many ways. There are several examples to be found.

First, Wu – who wrote on the "Chen Gui (Regulations for Ministers)" – attached importance to skilled persons. In Excerpt 5 "discourse on management and leadership" she stated (in the section on "Integrity") that, "A big building that is made of thousands of timbers will not be completed until all the timbers are done, which is similar with managing a country." Here she emphasized importance of the cooperation of individuals

and organization in management. Wu also stated (in the section on "The Good General") that "A good King depends on the good General"; further demonstrating her opinion about skill. Second, Wu employed skilled people according to their capabilities, no matter the background, which can be seen through Excerpt 5 (c) "Someone who has the ability to manage a state or is extremely robust to safeguard the frontier can be appointed official, no matter how ordinary his family background is." Wu was also broad-minded in paying attention to the whole situation, and excluded personal grudges. Once a person wrote an eloquent article to criticize her, she was not angry nor did she punish the person, but instead praised his literary talent.

At the same time, Wu Zetian had other leadership skills that cannot be ignored. For example, she developed the institution of Ke-Ju, a system of selecting qualified people through a series of exams rather than according to personal preference. In 690, Wu set up the exam system of Dian-Shi and it was the highest level of Ke-Ju. Dian-Shi was the exam held in the main hall of the imperial palace (Dian means the main hall of imperial palace, Shi means exams or tests). And the emperor herself presided over it (Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003). The system of Ke-Ju was mainly aimed at selecting civil officials by testing their knowledge of various schools of classical literary training and familiarity. It was also called Wen-Ju (Wen means culture, Ju means elect). Based on these exams, Wu also established Wu-Ju (Wu means military, Ju means elect) in 702 for the selection for military officials (Song and Ou-Yang, 1060/2003). Wu also sent messengers to look for skill in nearly every part of China. It can be argued that Wu's pursuit of skill might arise from her desire for power or with other political concerns as well. Nonetheless, her motivating and recruiting skilled persons from all walks of life regardless of their family backgrounds was undoubtedly an innovative action in that feudal hierarchical society, and had a positive impact on the prosperity of Tang Dynasty under her governing. Under Wu's leadership, Tang China made great improvements in politics, economy, agriculture, culture, and comprehensive national strength. All of Wu's political achievements demonstrated that a woman could be a good organizer, governor, and leader.

Excerpt 6: the "name change" showed Wu Zetian's wish to express herself in masculine terms; a milestone in her long pursuit of power and leadership. In the process she had her given name changed from Mei, which stressed feminine beauty, to Zhao (in Chinese characters, Zhao consists of three characters that refer to the sun, the moon, and the sky), which emphasized that she was as important as the sun and the moon in the sky to her people. And this Chinese character Zhao was original created by her for her new name because no one existing character could satisfy her. Her actions showed her ambition to pursue and even surpass the power formerly held by male Emperors.

Wu Zetian pursued power in a male dominated realm, which demanded the most profound challenges to the notion that women were some kind of a weaker sex and were in need of patriarchal control. Thus, Wu's desire and pursuit of power were inevitably at the time challenges to patriarchal systems of thought and behavior. Arguably, her actions raised profound questions about women's abilities and for a time instituted a regime at the center of which was a "strong" woman; a regime at the heart of which was a kind of proto-feminist performance, i.e., she performed proto-feminist practices.

*A conceptual bridge of proto-feminist practice*

Our research was an attempt to understand Wu Zetian's proto-feminist practices in the context of seventh century China. However, we do not claim to have developed a feminist history of Wu or her times. Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper and

our particular abilities to make sense of the relationship between history and the past (Munslow, 2012). Our primary task was to provide a feel for the mentalities of Wu and her time to encourage further feminist research into non-western female leadership. According to the analysis above, with the development of social and political life in seventh century China, there were a number of female advances under the leadership of Wu.

On the one hand, the objective environment was relatively tolerant for females. The Tang Dynasty was a comparatively open-minded and liberated time in Chinese history during the imperial era. Because the social environment was relatively open, it was arguably feasible for Wu to implement some measures to improve women's status and fight for gender equality in many aspects.

On the other hand, Wu herself had skills and ambitions to be a leader, which was the premise of her being able to put forward some proto-feminist practices. Meanwhile, she had the chance to get involved with politics because of gaining Emperor Gaozong's affection and trust. Specifically, Wu was said to be "proficient with culture and history, intelligent and wit"(Liu, 945/1975). She had keen cultural awareness and political skill, as well as being decisive and brave which were prerequisite characteristics of being an Emperor. She was intimate with Emperor Gaozong who believed in her and let her take part in political affairs under the circumstances of his illness. The experiences of dealing with political affairs made her familiar with most of the Ministers and gained their support. All these conditions made it possible for Wu Zetian to propose some form of actions that benefitted women as well as fulfilled her own pursuit of power.

Our analysis of the texts about Wu Zetian and the limited cases we have brought forward, construct a conceptual framework of proto-feminist practices with four aspects, specifically, gender equality in sexuality, in social status, in politics, and women's pursuit of power and leadership. The essence of proto-feminism, we contend, is gender equality, which was reflected through Wu Zetian's practices to a certain extent. This framework helps to enrich our understanding of indigenous proto-feminist practices under the context of a non-western country in the seventh century.

## Conclusion and implications for future research

This study of Wu Zetian provides us with a perspective about proto-feminist practices in Chinese history. As a female Emperor in seventh century China, as well as the only one in Chinese history, Wu Zetian proposed many proto-feminist suggestions and reformations, which led to some important changes (some might argue, improvements) in the status of women in the social, political, and family areas of life. In fact, Wu's proto-feminist practices changed for a time the character of gender relations at a certain level of Chinese society and opened up the idea of women's power as being the same as men in certain respects.

However, our study and conclusion are not without limitations. For example, as far as we are concerned, the proto-feminist practices of Wu Zetian were paradoxical. On the one hand, she pursued gender equality through improving women's status in social, politics, and sexuality. On the other hand, in her use of power she learned from and imitated men, adapting to a male model of leadership. It was thus, in some regards, a limited form of proto-feminist practice but nonetheless long in advance of noted feminist struggles in western societies. In today's language and experience Wu's proto-feminism might arguably be seen as an early form of a woman-in-management approach to leadership – with women gaining measures of equity through adapting to male dominated power structures and systems. Nonetheless, within the context of the

times in which Wu lived, her actions were radically different from the values and practices into which she was born. As (Tung, 2000) put it, "the symbolic meaning of a woman emperor and its psychological effect on women were significant. Wu's limited efforts at uplifting women's status […] is emblematic, leaving a permanent imprint in history."

Although the story of Wu Zetian is a limited case it allows us: to recover long lost stories of women leadership that are invisible in many ways in the historical narratives; and to reveal the existence of proto-feminist practice in the so-called Orient long before western-based feminism took center stage and long before globalization and postcolonial critiques of western feminism emerged (Calás and Smircich, 2005).

There are some implications for future research:

First, are the proto-feminist practices of Wu Zetian paradoxical? On the one hand, she pursued gender equality through improving women's status in social life, politics, and sexuality; on the other hand, she learned and imitated from men to show women's power. Second, to what extent is it possible to take the idea of feminism out of context – transposing a modern concept on a very different context than that in which the term arose? Third, we need to rethink the relationship between organizational power and feminism/proto-feminism. Wu used her power to change some of the meanings and understandings of women and men of the time but in doing so she resorted to existing forms of power that convey dominance and the ability to punish/reward in the hands of few. Finally, the dynamics of Wu's life events obviously resonate with practices of other women in power throughout history worldwide, who are seen to engage in not only the transgression of the traditional boundaries but also the subversion of power relations by asserting their sexual privileges. Therefore a comparative study of the ways in which Wu Zietan resonates with/differs from other powerful women in history may well enhance our understanding of proto-feminist practices across cultures.

Nonetheless, our purpose has been to provide a narrative based in a time and place outside the modern western world to challenge our understandings of women, leadership, power, and histories that continue to focus on the men's role. As Smith (1992) states, "the practice of history writing is deeply gendered and the inclusion of women both as subjects and as historians will change the way in which history is conceived."

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**Corresponding author**
Professor Albert Mills can be contacted at: albert.mills@smu.ca