

G R E A T S I N G O V E R N A N C E

TANG TAIZONG

A Golden Age of Governance



CHANDLER
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Tang Taizong (唐太宗)

Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty (r.627–649 A.D.) is considered Imperial China's greatest statesman. He presided over a golden age of government, revitalising China's economy and reforming the bureaucracy to make it more meritocratic and productive.

The Zhenguan Zhengyao (贞观政要), a compilation of Taizong's conversations with senior advisors, has immortalised his approach to statecraft. This text became required reading for crown princes and great leaders of history, such as Kublai Khan and shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu.

At the core of Taizong's philosophy is how truly great leaders are brave enough to seek out the dissenting views of others. They look to collective wisdom to make the best decisions for their people. And they record this wisdom for the generations to come.



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The Emperor Tang Taizong, Li Shimin

Transforming an Opponent into an Advisor

It is July 626, and a heavy heat hangs over the walled city of China's ancient capital Chang'an (长安) (now Xi'an (西安), in Shaanxi Province). The twenty-seven-year-old crown prince, Li Shimin (李世民), awaits a visitor to his study. He reflects on his past, ahead of his imminent inauguration as emperor. It has been a long and bloody struggle to get here, even against his own two brothers. The older man now entering his study, Wei Zheng (魏征), was the closest advisor to Li Shimin's rival older brother, and a man famous for his strategic insights. Despite the risks, Wei Zheng does not apologize for conspiring against the crown prince; rather, he admits that his recommendation had been for Li Shimin to be assassinated. Surely, Wei Zheng is doomed? But no - instead of ordering Wei Zheng's execution, crown prince Li Shimin asks for Wei Zheng's allegiance and his advice. Wei Zheng accepts the offer, agreeing to loyally serve the new Emperor, who will take the name Tang Taizong.

This sort of unconventional decision-making was typical of Taizong during his reign. Where other leaders might have fixated on Wei Zheng's prior loyalties, Taizong instead focused on Wei Zheng's talent and clarity of thought. Rather than pursuing personal revenge, Taizong prioritised the interests of public service, and considered how Wei Zheng could serve as a skilled and experienced advisor. Spared and trusted to add value, Wei Zheng would go on to serve as Taizong's most valued advisor until his death seventeen years later.

Laying Foundations that Endured for Centuries

Taizong's father, Gaozu (高祖), had founded the Tang Dynasty (唐朝) in 618. Chang'an, home of the Imperial palace, was at the time the largest city in the world. But when Gaozu passed control over to Taizong in 627, the state of the empire was fragile. There were insecure borders and deep scars from decades of political instability and expensive wars. Taizong was inheriting a decimated economy, an inept bureaucracy and an overly complex legal system. What the new emperor needed most was wise counsellors who could present truthful advice on these important issues. Secondly, he needed a competent civil service to deliver on their recommendations. Thirdly, he wanted to record his strategies for statecraft, so that future Emperors would preserve the best of his legacy.

Taizong's Leadership Strategy

A Management Guide for Emperors

Much of what we know about Taizong's approach to governance can be found in the *Zhenguan Zhengyao* (贞观政要), also known as *The Zhenguan Executive Guide*. This classic text on the art of statecraft, organised into 40 chapters, records Taizong's many discussions with his senior advisers and ministers. It can be considered one of the world's very first books on management. The Guide was later revered and consulted, not only by subsequent emperors of the Tang dynasty, but by many non-Chinese rulers of later ages. The conversations in the Guide reveal how heavily Taizong relied on his team of advisors and how much he valued them. It highlights the great lengths to which Taizong went to foster a culture where those close to him were unafraid to speak the truth, no matter how unpleasant it might be for him to hear.



Pages from the *Zhenguan Executive Guide*



*Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy
by Yan Liben*

Remonstrances: Speaking Truth to Power

Taizong realised early on that he needed advisors who would tell the truth. This is why he fully embraced the Confucian tradition of **remonstrances**. Core to Confucian teaching is the concept of remonstrance: the moral obligation of underlings – from children to political subjects – to provide guidance and correct wrongs committed by their superiors. In Imperial China the practice was so well-established that there was an official government position called a ‘remonstrant’. For an Emperor, remonstrances were mostly directed at their policies or actions. Yet plenty of emperors ignored remonstrances, and even punished those who delivered them. Taizong did not see remonstrances as personal attacks on his intelligence, but rather as an opportunity for improvement.

“If I want to see myself, I need a mirror,” he said. “If I want to know my faults, I need loyal ministers.”



Six Types of Good Official

- 一 *“Those who are prescient enough to tell signs of coming events and take pre-emptive actions before any trouble occurs, so as to protect the ruler.”*
- 二 *“Those who give the ruler sound advice, carry out his good policies, and correct his mistakes promptly.”*
- 三 *“Those who work hard, inspire the ruler with examples of sage kings in history, and recommend worthy men to him.”*
- 四 *“Those who are perceptive, capable of remedying the ruler’s mistakes and turning a bad thing into good account.”*
- 五 *“Those who abide by the law, do not take bribes or seek high pay, and lead a simple and frugal life.”*
- 六 *“Those who do not flatter, and dare to speak out against the ruler’s mistakes.”*

One historian estimates that as many as thirty-six remonstrants would sit in Taizong’s court meetings. Another tells of Taizong having written remonstrances posted onto his walls, so he could read those critiques that could not be delivered in person. Wei Zheng, Taizong’s closest advisor, served as Taizong’s Chief Remonstrant, and was known for offering advice so blunt that Taizong periodically vowed to fire Wei Zheng, though he never did. Taizong is quoted in the Guide as saying,

“I often sit quietly and reflect on myself. I am concerned that what I have done may ... cause public discontent. I hope to get advice and remonstrance from honest men so that I am not out of touch with the outside world.”

Importantly, Taizong not only heard these remonstrances but he also heeded them. The Guide is sprinkled with stories of Taizong changing his mind on everything - from responsibilities delegated to junior officials, to reduced punishments and prison sentences that Taizong had previously ordered. Once, after Taizong received a sharply written memorandum from a magistrate in Henan(河南), he was so



enraged that he wanted the man to stand trial for slander. Wei Zheng reminded the Emperor that sharp words are often necessary to grab a reader's attention, and suggested Taizong focus on the merit of the complaint rather than its style. Taizong listened, and rather than punish the magistrate, he rewarded him, sending him twenty rolls of silk in thanks for his frankness. Taizong passed this advice on to his son,

"If what is said is right, he [the Emperor] must not reject it even though it is offered by a low servant. On the other hand, if what is said is wrong, he must not accept it even though it is given by a high official."

Building the Right Team and Culture

Taizong's focus on the merit of the remonstrance practice would only work if the right people were up to this challenge. He wanted to ensure that he had the most trustworthy, experienced and capable advisors. Minister Wei Zheng went further to categorize how 'good' or 'bad' officials exhibited very different behaviours. It is striking how these behaviours still ring true today, especially for appraising the performance of a good official.

Six Types of Bad Official

- 一 *"Those who do not work hard but think only of power and wealth and have no principles."*
- 二 *"Those who always say yes to the ruler, try to please him by any means, and go along with him even when he is wrong."*
- 三 *"Those who are double-faced, jealous of the worthy, and use tricks to manipulate the ruler and cause him to be unfair to his officials."*
- 四 *"Those who are smart enough to conceal their own wrongdoing, are eloquent enough to win favor from others, and purposefully create confusion in court."*
- 五 *"Those who abuse their position for selfish ends and try to feather their own nests in the name of the ruler."*
- 六 *"Those who use artful talk to beguile the ruler, confuse right and wrong to mislead him, and cause him to bear a bad name."*



Reforming the Bureaucracy across China

“The key to good governance lies in having an efficient government. The quality of civil servants is more important than the quantity. If we can’t find qualified people, let there be vacancies. We can manage with fewer but more talented people.”

— Tang Taizong

Taizong cared deeply about how well the bureaucracy was functioning across the empire. He once told his ministers:

“I often lie awake at night thinking about the affairs of the state. What worries me most is whether provincial governors and county magistrates are up to their jobs. Living in the palace, I see and hear only a limited amount. I count on these officials. How well they perform their duties concerns the fate of our country.”

Those sleepless nights inspired Taizong to action in a very practical sense — he had his ministers sleep in shifts so that one would be available to him at all hours! As for Taizong’s worries about those civil servants beyond Chang’an, in the provinces, he knew he needed to make more changes.

A More Meritocratic, Decentralised and Honourable Civil Service

Taizong focused his most important reforms on how government officials were selected, trained, appraised and promoted. He began with education. Taizong had

more schools built, not only in the capital but also in the provinces and countryside. This opened the door of opportunity to those in the countryside to enter more skilled employment, including roles in government. Taizong advised that

“... talented people may live in obscurity. They may be waiting for the right opportunity; they may come from humble origins or have low status; they may be poor or holding menial jobs. You must make every effort to seek them out, for such people will make your life easier.”

Taizong next harnessed a more standardized testing system for selecting government officials. Testing of prospective civil servants had begun during the Han Dynasty (汉朝) and was developed during the Sui Dynasty (隋朝) to include more knowledge of Confucianism, the dominant state ideology. Under Taizong, becoming a civil servant now required passing two separate examinations, so that all civil servants possessed a baseline of skills. It also meant government jobs would be filled by those who were more capable, and not simply well-connected. To ensure talented civil servants didn't simply cluster around the capital, Taizong personally oversaw the promotions of provincial postings. This increased their prestige. Before Taizong, such postings had been avoided - now, they were prized.

Taizong simultaneously enacted policies to curb corruption. These included limiting terms of office, implementing policies against payments to officials' relatives and increasing the penalty for breaking these policies. Taizong reinforced this personally. He publicly shamed officials found guilty of corruption, and shunned much of the excesses of previous emperors:

“A chaotic age is marked by a ruler who is arrogant and extravagant, indulging his desires. While his dwelling and garments are richly ornamented, his people are in need of simple clothes.”



The emperor receives a candidate during the Palace Examination.



In 636, Taizong chose the site of Mount Jiuzong for his future mausoleum. He ordered images of his six favorite horses, chosen from his own past military victories, to be carved into stone. They were later placed along the east and west sides of the “spirit path”, at the North Gate exit of the tomb complex. Taizong named and composed a laudatory poem for each horse. This stone relief depicts the horse ‘Saluzi’ (飒露紫), meaning ‘Autumn Dew’ or ‘Whirlwind Victory’.

The Emperor Who Listened

Today, it is rare for those in a position of power to encourage nonconformity and frankness from their subordinates. Leaders often prefer to insulate themselves from criticism. But Taizong was different. In 643 he lamented that,

“If one uses bronze as a mirror one will be able to adjust one’s dress and hat properly. If one uses the past as a mirror, one will be able to learn the principles of the rise and fall of a dynasty. If one uses a person as a mirror, one will be able to discern one’s own achievements and mistakes. I always have these three mirrors at hand to avoid making mistakes. Now that Wei Zheng has passed away, I have lost one of my mirrors.”

By the time of his own death in 649, Taizong’s policies on land rights and taxation had helped the economy to recover, and Chinese arts and culture were flourishing. Taizong had even reopened the Silk Road, to rekindle trade between China and Central Asia. He had created the foundations for a “golden age” of Chinese civilization that allowed the Tang Dynasty to endure for another three centuries, until 907. But it was Taizong’s unique approach to wise governance - listening to criticism and being open to reform - that paved the way for his and China’s greatness.

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