

# *Excerpts from Emperor Taizong on Effective Government*

## **Introduction**

Li Shimin reigned as Taizong, second emperor of the Tang dynasty (618-907), from 626 until his death in 649. An energetic ruler, Tang Taizong had played a major part in the military campaigns that brought his father (Li Yuan, Tang Gaozu, r. 618-626) to the throne as the first emperor of the Tang dynasty. Having eliminated his two competitors for the throne (his brothers Li Jiancheng and Li Yuanji) in an ambush at the capital city's Xuanwu Gate in 624, Li Shimin forced his father into retirement in 626 to take the throne for himself. As the second emperor of the Tang dynasty, Li Shimin gave shape to the administrative structure of the empire. The text recommended below was written in 648, near the end of his reign, and was meant to serve as advice to his heirs.

## **Welcoming Advice**

The emperor, living in the palace, is blocked from direct access to information. For fear that faults might be left untold or defects unattended, he must set up various devices to elicit loyal suggestions and listen attentively to sincere advice. ...

A foolish emperor, by comparison, rebuffs remonstrations and punishes the critics. As a result, high officials do not give advice lest they lose their salary and low officials do not make any comment lest they lose their lives.

## **How a Ruler Should Act**

A country cannot be a country without people and a ruler cannot be a ruler without a country. When the ruler looks as lofty and firm as a mountain peak and as pure, bright, and illuminating as the sun and the moon, the people will admire and respect him. He must broaden his will so as to be able to embrace both Heaven and earth and must regulate his heart so as to be able to make just decisions. He cannot expand his territory without majesty and virtue; he cannot soothe and protect his people without compassion and kindness. He comforts his relations with benevolence, treats his officials with courtesy, honors his ancestors with filial respect, and receives his subordinates with thoughtfulness. Having disciplined himself, he practices virtue and righteousness diligently. This is how a ruler should act.

## **Evaluating Officials**

Differentiation of the ranks and duties of officials is a means of improving customs. A wise emperor, therefore, knows how to choose the right person for the right task. He is like a skillful carpenter who knows to use straight timber to make shafts, curved timber to make wheels, long timber to make beams, and short timber to make posts. Wood of all shapes and lengths is thus fully utilized. The emperor should make use of personnel in the same way, using the wise for their resourcefulness, the ignorant for their strength, the brave for their daring, and the timid for their prudence. As a good carpenter does not discard any timber, so a wise emperor does not discard any gentleman. A mistake should not lead the emperor to ignore a gentleman's virtues, nor should a flaw overshadow his merits.

Government affairs should be departmentalized to make the best use of officials' abilities. A tripod large enough for an ox should not be used to cook a chicken, nor should a raccoon good only at catching rats be ordered to fight against huge beasts. ... Those with low intelligence or

capability should not be entrusted with heavy tasks or responsibilities. If the right person is given the right task or responsibility, the empire can be governed with ease. This is the proper way of utilizing people. Whether the emperor gets hold of the right person for the right task determines whether his empire will be well governed. ...

### **Esteeming Culture**

Music should be played when a victory is gained; ritual should be established when the country is at peace. The ritual and music to be promulgated are rooted in Confucianism. Nothing is better than literature to spread manners and guide customs; nothing is better than schooling to propagate regulations and educate people. The Way is spread through culture; fame is gained through learning. Without visiting a deep ravine, one cannot understand how deep the earth is; without learning the arts, one cannot realize the source of wisdom. Just as the bamboos of the state of Wu cannot be made into arrows without feathers, so a clever man will not achieve any success without accumulating learning. Therefore, study halls and ritual halls should be built, books of various schools of thought should be widely read, and the six arts [propriety, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics] should be carefully studied. ...

Literary arts and military arts should be employed by the state alternately. When the world is in an uproar and a battle will determine the fate of the country, military arts should be highlighted and schools given low priority. Reserve the two when the country is peaceful and prosperous; then slight the military and give weight to the classics. Neither military nor culture can the country do without; which to emphasize depends on circumstances. Neither soldiers nor scholars can be dispensed with.

*[Translated by Chiu-yueh Lai]*

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