

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS  
IN THE HISTORY OF  
**POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**Edited and Translated by**  
Hilde De Weerd, Glen Dudbridge  
and Gabe van Beijeren

# **WU JING** **THE** **ESSENTIALS OF** **GOVERNANCE**



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## *The Essentials of Governance*

In the eighth century, Wu Jing selected exchanges between Emperor Taizong and his ministers that he deemed key to good governance. This collection of dialogues has been used for the education of emperors, political elites, and general readers ever since, and is a standard reference work in East Asian political thought. Consisting of ten volumes, subdivided into forty topics, *The Essentials of Governance* addresses core themes of Chinese thinking about the politics of power, from the body politic, presenting and receiving criticism, recruitment, the education of the imperial clan, political virtues and vices, to cultural policy, agriculture, law, taxation, border policy, and how to avoid disaster and dynastic fall. Presented with introductory commentary that offers insights into its historical context and global reception, this accessible and reliable translation brings together ten scholars of Chinese intellectual history to offer a nuanced edition that preserves the organization, tone, and flow of the original.

HILDE DE WEERDT is Professor of Chinese History at Leiden University. She has authored and edited books on Chinese political culture and intellectual history including *Competition over Content: Negotiating Standards for the Civil Service Examinations in Imperial China (1127–1276)* (2007), *Information, Territory, and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (2015), *Political Communication in Chinese and European History, 800–1600* (2020), and *Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print – China, Tenth–Fourteenth Centuries* (2014).

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# CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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# *The Essentials of Governance*

WU JING

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# Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	page ix
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	x
<i>List of Dynasties</i>	xiii
Introduction: <i>The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed in Context</i> <i>Hilde De Weerdts and David McMullen</i>	xv
<i>The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed</i>	I
PREFACES	I
Presentation of <i>The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed</i> <i>Hilde De Weerdts</i>	I
Preface to <i>The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed</i> <i>Hilde De Weerdts</i>	2
VOLUME I	5
1 The Way of the Sovereign <i>Jack W. Chen</i>	7
2 The Organization of Governance <i>Jack W. Chen</i>	17
VOLUME II	33
3 Employing the Wise <i>Hilde De Weerdts</i>	35

## Contents

---

4 Seeking Criticism <i>Hilde De Weerd</i>	49
5 Accepting Criticism <i>Hilde De Weerd</i>	54
VOLUME III	65
6 Lessons from the Past for Sovereign and Officials <i>Chu Ming-kin</i>	67
7 On Selecting Officials <i>Oliver Moore</i>	72
8 On Enfeffment <i>David McMullen</i>	84
VOLUME IV	97
9 On Determining the Roles of the Crown Prince and the Princes <i>David McMullen</i>	99
10 On Respecting Tutors <i>David McMullen</i>	105
11 Instructing and Warning the Crown Prince and the Princes <i>David McMullen</i>	113
12 Reproving the Crown Prince <i>David McMullen</i>	120
VOLUME V	139
13 On Humaneness and Righteousness <i>Anthony DeBlasi</i>	141
14 On Loyalty and Righteousness <i>Anthony DeBlasi</i>	145
15 On Filial Piety and Friendship <i>Anthony DeBlasi</i>	154
16 On Impartiality <i>Anthony DeBlasi</i>	156
17 On Sincerity and Trustworthiness <i>Anthony DeBlasi</i>	162



## Contents

---

VOLUME VI	183
18 On Frugality and Moderation <i>Gabe van Beijeren</i>	185
19 On Modesty and Deference <i>Gabe van Beijeren</i>	188
20 On Being Humane and Compassionate <i>Gabe van Beijeren</i>	191
21 Caution in One's Preferences <i>Anna M. Shields</i>	193
22 Caution in Speech <i>Anna M. Shields</i>	196
23 Obstructing Slander and Sycophancy <i>Anna M. Shields</i>	199
24 On Regretting One's Faults <i>Anna M. Shields</i>	205
25 On Profligacy and Recklessness <i>Jack W. Chen</i>	208
26 On Greed and Baseness <i>Jack W. Chen</i>	216
VOLUME VII	223
27 Honoring Classicist Scholarship <i>Chu Ming-kin</i>	225
28 On Literature and History <i>Chu Ming-kin</i>	230
29 On Rites and Music <i>Chu Ming-kin</i>	234
VOLUME VIII	253
30 Dedication to Agriculture <i>Tineke D'Haeseleer</i>	255
31 On Punishment and Law <i>Tineke D'Haeseleer</i>	258
32 On Amnesties <i>Tineke D'Haeseleer</i>	270

## Contents

---

33	On Tribute Presentations <i>Oliver Moore</i>	275
34	Recognizing the Rise and Fall of Dynasties <i>Hilde De Weerd</i>	279
VOLUME IX		283
35	Debates about Punitive Expeditions <i>Tineke D'Haeseleer</i>	285
36	Debates about Pacifying the Borders <i>Tineke D'Haeseleer</i>	300
VOLUME X		309
37	On Tours <i>Oliver Moore</i>	311
38	On Hunting <i>Oliver Moore</i>	314
39	On Auspicious and Inauspicious Signs <i>Gabe van Beijeren</i>	318
40	On Remaining Vigilant until the End <i>Gabe van Beijeren</i>	325
	<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	339
	<i>Maps</i>	341
	Map of the Tang Empire in a Eurasian Context	342
	Map of the Tang Empire	343
	Map of Tang Chang'an	344
	Map of Tang Luoyang	345
	<i>Further Reading</i>	346
	<i>References</i>	348
	<i>Index</i>	354

## Maps

Map of the Tang Empire in a Eurasian Context	<i>page</i> 342
Map of the Tang Empire	343
Map of Tang Chang'an	344
Map of Tang Luoyang	345

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## Dynasties

?Xia Dynasty (?ca. 2070–?1600 BCE)\*

Shang Dynasty (ca. 1550–ca. 1100 BCE)\*

Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100–256 BCE)

Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE)

Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE)

Spring and Autumn (770–476 BCE)

Warring States (475–221 BCE)

Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE)

Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)

Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE)

Xin Dynasty (9–23)

Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220)

Wei Dynasty (220–265)

Shu Dynasty (221–263)

Wu Dynasty (222–280)

Jin Dynasty (265–420)

Western Jin (265–316)

Eastern Jin (317–420)

\* These dates are intended as a convenience to the reader and should be regarded as provisional, since no chronological reconstruction has yet achieved general acceptance.

Southern and Northern Dynasties (386–589)

Southern Dynasties

Liu Song (420–479)

Qi (479–502)

Liang (502–557)

Chen (557–589)

Later Liang (555–587)

Northern Dynasties

Northern Wei (386–534)

Eastern Wei (534–550)

Western Wei (535–556)

Northern Qi (550–577)

Northern Zhou (557–581)

Sui Dynasty (581–618)

Tang Dynasty (618–907)

Liao Dynasty (907–1125)

Song Dynasty (960–1276)

Jin Dynasty (1115–1234)

Western Xia Dynasty (1038–1227)

Yuan Dynasty (1276–1368)

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)



## Introduction: *The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed in Context*

In the early eighth century Wu Jing 吳兢 (ca. 669–749), a court official who gained a reputation mainly through his historiographical contributions, selected from records concerning the exchanges between Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and his advisors, and arranged them according to a hierarchy of topics that he deemed key to good governance. The text has since been used to educate rulers, princes, and commoners, and has become a standard reference in East Asian political thought.

Wu Jing compiled the text sometime between the 700s and 720s, and submitted the final version to the throne ca. 729.<sup>1</sup> He did so with a specific agenda in mind. The dialogues between the second Tang emperor and court officials present an idealized picture of seventh-century rule. There is some debate regarding the compiler's intentions. Wu Jing may have started it to instruct Emperor Zhongzong 中宗 (r. 705–710), who was reinstalled as emperor following the turbulent reign of his mother Emperor Wu (also known as Empress Wu 武, r. 690–705). It is, however, likely that he crafted the final text to uphold a model for Emperor

<sup>1</sup> Opinions on the exact time of compilation and publication differ somewhat, with Li Wansheng suggesting a date of compilation between 701 and 722, and Xie Baocheng proposing the later date of submission in 729. See Li Wansheng, “Si lun Zhenguan zhengyao zhi chenghu shijian” and “Zhenguan zhengyao de jinrou shijian”; Xie Baocheng, “Zhenguan zhengyao jijiao xulu” and “Guanyu rending Zhenguan zhengyao jinrou niandai de yize zhongyao cailiao,” in *Zhenguan zhengyao jijiao* (2nd rev. ed. 2012), esp. 13–28. Xie Baocheng refutes Harada Taneshige's earlier hypothesis that the work was submitted multiple times and that two editions resulted from the submissions to Emperor Zhongzong (in 709) and to Xuanzong (in 720 and 729). Harada, *Jōgan seiyō no kenkyū*, pp. 19–20, 312–332.

Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756), because he had removed ministers who had become critical of his decisions and had exhibited the same characteristics as those who had surrounded and admonished Emperor Taizong. In the memorial accompanying its submission he gave the final text the title *The Essentials of Governance from the Reign of Constancy Revealed* (*Zhen-guan zhengyao* 貞觀政要, hereafter *The Essentials of Governance*) – the reign name, Zhenguan (627–649), which we will for the most part leave untranslated like all proper names and for convenience's sake, had been chosen at the start of Emperor Taizong's reign, and expressed the ambition of the young prince and his advisors to establish a secure and lasting foundation for the newly established dynasty.<sup>2</sup>

*The Essentials of Governance* deals with core questions in a wide range of areas relevant to imperial government. Wu Jing culled the included materials from the historical records available to him. From the preface attributed to Wu Jing, it is evident that selections from the historical record of Taizong's reign were presented as established precedents (*chenggui* 成規, *qiangui* 前規) that would clearly set out “the principles of human relationships” and “the administration of military and political affairs” (p. 3). These models established by a dynastic ancestor were models of practice from which the reader or listener – in Wu Jing's time, that was in the first place the emperor – ought to select the best for emulation. Wu Jing established for these models a “broad framework,” a list of forty hierarchically organized topics. *The Essentials of Governance* was and continued to be divided into ten volumes (*juan* 卷) that are subdivided into forty topical chapters (*zhang* 章). As can be seen from the table of contents, which was presumably also included in Wu Jing's preface, these move from general concepts of monarchical governance (“the way

<sup>2</sup> We are adopting the translation proposed by Jack Wei Chen (*The Poetics of Sovereignty*, p. 2), as this translation comes closest to the reference to *The Appended Statements to The Changes* in the reign name. (See *Zhou yi* 周易, p. 166, in Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Chongke Songben Shisanjing zhushu fu jiaokanjì* 重刻宋本十三經注疏附校勘記. Taipei 台北: Yiwen yinshu guan 藝文印書館, 1955.) “Zhen” is, in a note on the relevant passage in the early Tang commentary (*Wujing zhengyi* 五經正義), explained as “constancy” (*yi zhenzheng deyi* 以真正得一); we follow this line of exegesis, interpreting “zhen” 貞 as “zheng” 正 or “chang” 常 and “guan” 觀 as “shi” 示 (to show, to reveal). We hereby depart from the translation proposed in Paul W. Kroll (“Honorable Outlook”) in “The True Dates of the Reigns,” 27. The latter is a literal translation that does not capture the reference to *The Appended Statements* by which the emperor and his advisors embarked the new reign in a cosmology of imperial rule.

For a basic introduction to Taizong's reign in English, see Wechsler, “T'ai-tsung (Reign 626–649) the Consolidator.”

of the sovereign” and “the organization of governance”); the relationship between sovereign and officials (“employing the wise,” “seeking and accepting criticism,” “lessons from the past for sovereign and officials,” “selecting officials”); the education of princes and the management of the imperial clan (from “enfeoffment” to “reproving the crown prince”); to general moral principles (from “humaneness and righteousness” to “sincerity and trustworthiness”); to political virtues and vices and the disciplining of the ruler’s body (from “frugality and moderation” to “greed and baseness”); to the application of such principles to key areas of government: cultural policy, agriculture, law, and taxation (from “classicist scholarship” to “tribute presentations”); and finally to preventing dynastic fall by exercising caution and moderation in such areas as warfare, hunting, prognostication, and expensive infrastructure (from “recognizing the rise and fall of dynasties” to “remaining vigilant to the end”). Together, these themes index core ideas in medieval Chinese thinking about the structure of the polity and the politics of power.

*The Essentials of Governance* formed part of a wide array of compilations aimed at instructing emperors and princes. In the seventh and eighth centuries Chinese emperors and their political advisors produced a handful of texts on how to be an emperor. These texts, including two texts attributed to Emperor Taizong himself (*The Golden Mirror* [*Jin jing* 金鏡] and *Model for an Emperor* [*Di fan* 帝範], both translated by Denis Twitchett and discussed below), and *The Essentials of Governance*, built on earlier Chinese texts about rulership and remonstrance, but also differed from these in their topical coverage, organization, source materials, authorship, practical orientation, and use. While drawing upon philosophical and historical traditions discussing government and power relationships in the settings of dynastic courts that reached back 1,000 years to the period of the Springs and Autumns (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States (453–221 BCE), these seventh- and eighth-century texts also shared much in common with the political advice literature or the “mirrors for princes” produced in Europe, West Asia, and South Asia. Until the rise of modern political theory, mirrors were key in the transmission of the art of governance not only in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic world, but also in East Asia. *The Essentials of Governance* is perhaps the most influential and enduring example of such a mirror tradition in East Asia. With *The Essentials of Governance* Wu Jing crafted a subgenre of political advice literature that would become standard in late imperial courts. Classified cases became the pedagogical material with which

princes and cultural elites preparing to serve the dynasty were educated and trained in governance.

Since the nineteenth century, translations into western languages of texts in Chinese political thought have focused on early canonical texts and, later, philosophical texts that most appealed to moderns interested in rational bureaucratic organization. It is in part for this reason that researchers currently working on the comparative and global history of mirrors for princes have assumed that “China did not have Mirrors for Princes as such but only commentaries on the classic works of Confucius and Mencius.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, western readers have also been introduced to the works of Lord Shang, Han Fei, Guan Zhong, Xunzi, or Wuzi, all texts dating to the centuries of interstate competition and warfare leading up to the establishment of the Qin Empire in 221 BCE that contain shorter or longer expositions on administrative organization, governance, or military affairs. In contrast to *The Essentials of Governance* and the later Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese compilations that took it as a model for compiling texts to instruct princes, these texts tended to (1) focus on the authority of a single advisor, the master or *zi* 子; (2) set out the advisor’s interaction with rulers and/or his proposals in a more or less systematic fashion; and (3) frame problems of governance within broader philosophical and universal claims about human nature, the cosmos, language, etc. Most of these texts were, moreover, not written by the author to whom they were attributed but were tradition texts that first circulated orally and were not committed to writing until decades or centuries after their formulation and by multiple hands.<sup>4</sup> They were therefore not specifically put together to educate princes and rulers in how to maintain the polity that had been entrusted to the dynastic family to which they belonged.

In his preface Wu Jing implicitly pointed to a model different from the classical or philosophical texts for training princes and rulers in the art of governance. He started the memorial in which he presented *The Essentials of Governance* to Emperor Xuanzong with the observation that:

those among the officials at court and the commoners in the provinces who discuss the governance of our dynastic state all say, “Given the sagely perspicacity of Your Majesty, if the precedents of Emperor Taizong can be followed, You will certainly achieve the mission

<sup>3</sup> Darling, “Mirrors for Princes in Europe and the Middle East,” 234.

<sup>4</sup> On the concept of tradition texts in Indian history, see Deutsch, “Knowledge and the Tradition Text in Indian Philosophy.”

of bringing about Great Peace without the need to search for the arts of [governance of] remote Antiquity” (p. 1).

*The Essentials of Governance* was thus presented by its compiler as “the past activities of Taizong” (*Taizong zhi gushi* 太宗之故事), events that through their selection as models for the successors of Taizong obtained the authority of “precedents.” These precedents were drawn from court records that had traditionally been emperor- and court-centered. Even though the historians working under Taizong and, later on, Wu Jing abided by a tradition that held that this work ought to be undertaken independently, and that the historical record could fulfill its proper function only if the errors, as well as the accomplishments, of rulers past and present were duly recorded, it is evident that Taizong attempted to interfere in the process and gloss over unflattering accounts of his rise to power (entries #202–203).

Wu Jing’s goal was obviously polemical. *The Essentials of Governance* promoted a set of political values that were never fully realized at the Zhenguan court. Its idealization of the Zhenguan reign as embodying an ideal and effective form of civil governance was not exceptional in the decades that followed the death of Emperor Taizong. More so than other histories, Wu Jing’s re-organization of first-hand historical material into cases that were arranged thematically to serve as a basis for reflection on key issues of imperial governance has been successful in shaping the image of the Zhenguan administration. There has been a long tradition in East Asia of reading *The Essentials of Governance* as a straightforward expression of Taizong’s sympathetic and constructive response to the concerns of a group of exemplary civil advisors.

Wu Jing started his official career six decades after Taizong’s death. He lived through four violently unstable courts in which the Zhenguan ideals receded dramatically into the farthest shadows of political life. He was both an embattled court politician and a conscientious and productive official historian. Wu Jing foregrounded the collegial style of government for which Taizong was later credited by highlighting the role of “employing the wise” and “accepting criticism” – these are the titles of Chapters 3 and 5. He also modeled himself after the advisors featured in *The Essentials of Governance* who opposed imperial excesses under Taizong and showed great courage in “braving the dragon’s scales” – a frequently recurring metaphor for speaking truth to power. These advisors had exploited the political discourse of the medieval period, a discourse that was highly calibrated in order to allow them their role as political

virtuosi<sup>5</sup> addressing a corrigible centre, whom they both extolled and criticized.

In this introduction we will first return to the seventh- and eighth-century political world that provided the context for Wu Jing's *The Essentials of Governance*. We will then briefly summarize the text to help orient the reader to this compendious work. To give the reader a sense of its broader reach and subsequent history, we also discuss how it fitted within the wider context of the political advice literature that has come to be known as "mirrors for princes," and how it has been disseminated and read across East Asia and the world through the present. The reconstruction of this later history is still sketchy and provisional, as the hold of the image of the Zhenguan ideal has been so strong in modern times as to prevent a critical engagement with its adaptations in East Asia and the commentaries on it – more than twenty of these are included in one of the first printed editions. Historians have only just begun to delve into its reception history.

## The Political World of Seventh-Century Tang China

### *Emperor Taizong*

Constructing the Zhenguan reign as an era of collegial government, shared by an emperor willing to listen with an open mind and ministers willing to speak up to protect the livelihood of commoners, was not straightforward. Taizong was a complex character who had left a rather ambivalent legacy. He took control over the court and the realm after two decades of civil war and violent political infighting in which he had played a leading role. Moreover, Taizong's advisors and, later, Wu Jing also had to come to terms with his military aristocratic background and a set of preferences that made him resemble the Eurasian military aristocrats ruling the Turkish confederacies and Central Asian states more than the civil officials speaking in *The Essentials of Governance*.

The man who became known posthumously as Taizong (Chinese emperors are referred to by their temple names upon their death) was born ca. 598; his name at birth was Li Shimin 李世民. He was the second son of Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635). His father, most likely a scion of a family

<sup>5</sup> On literati as "moral virtuosi," see Wakeman, "The Price of Autonomy," 55–70; Metzger, "The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History," 212.

with Turkish ancestry who had adopted the Li surname, was then a high-ranking general serving the Sui Dynasty (581–618).

The first emperor of the Sui Dynasty had re-unified the Chinese territories after two and a half centuries in which the north and south had been governed by separate and adversarial regimes. Emperor Wen (Yang Jian 楊堅, 541–604, r. 581–604), the first Sui emperor, laid the military, political, and administrative basis for the re-unified empire. His successor, Emperor Yang (Yang Guang 楊廣, 569–617, r. 604–617), continued his father's expansionist policies. By 609, he claimed control over a land empire greater in extent than that of the combined northern and southern dynasties who had preceded the Sui. He enacted a vast program of canal and palace construction and military adventurism that spectacularly over-reached his power and soon cost the political center all military and political control.

Li Yuan, a military aristocrat from the north-west and a relative of the Sui imperial house, managed from his power base in modern Taiyuan to re-establish a central government at Chang'an, the former Sui capital. Li Shimin was later said to have played an imaginative and crucial role in persuading his father to relinquish loyalty to the Sui and to nurture imperial ambitions. After having occupied the Sui palace buildings, Li Yuan founded his own dynasty, the Tang, in 618. He ruled from 618 to 626 and became known to history as Emperor Gaozu 高祖 after his death in 635.

Gaozu had managed the transfer of power from the defeated house of Sui to the victorious Tang with a scrupulous concern for correct procedure. Even though there are grounds for skepticism about the portrayal of such regime changes in medieval China as consensual and irenic, it appears that the Tang resumption of central dynastic authority brought few radical changes. Gaozu and, later, Taizong occupied and used the palace and administrative buildings that the Sui had built in Chang'an and in the secondary capital Luoyang. They oversaw a central government structure that was inherited with very little change. Not only did the Tang retain the main administrative agencies, the Three Departments and Six Ministries, the Censorate and the palace services, but there was also striking continuity in the personnel involved in the change-over that took place in 618, as shown in the biographical accounts included in the second volume of *The Essentials of Governance* (p. 35). Even figures in such ostensibly sensitive posts as tutors to princes – that is, men originally selected for their loyalty to the Sui as well as their learning – were retained. The early Tang, in other words, did not contemplate introduc-

ing a new political system, but it infused the Sui administrative structure that it had displaced with a fresh sense of purpose and, after some time, more resources. The government under Gaozu and Taizong had ambitions to extend control over the provinces and beyond, and thus pursued aggressive military policies and campaigns. It also made a point of mitigating the harsh laws by which the Sui had governed and replacing Sui extravagance with a sense of restraint.

Although the early Tang advisors did not dismantle the buildings into which they strode in 618, they did fault their previous occupants. Condemnation of the Sui, and particularly of Sui Emperor Yang, is a recurring theme. Emperor Taizong echoed his advisors in his outspoken condemnation of Sui Emperor Yang's excesses and thereby differentiated his regime from those of the recent past. The difference between the two houses was to be one not of institutional structure but, rather, of political spirit, namely the concern for good governance. It was by avoiding the excesses and dereliction of the Sui rather than by any drastic change of political ideas that the Tang was to achieve stability.

Apart from the civil war and the displacement of the Sui Dynasty, Taizong was also compromised by the manner in which he had assumed power. According to the canonical ideal, the succession should have passed to the eldest son of the empress. As Gaozu's second son, Taizong should not have inherited the throne. But over the years 618–626 he conducted a campaign to displace his older brother as crown prince by means of military enterprise and political maneuvering. In the notorious palace coup of 626, he murdered his older brother, Li Jiancheng 李建成 (589–626), and another sibling, Li Yuanji 李元吉 (603–626), and slaughtered their progeny. Emperor Gaozu was then forced to establish his second son Shimin as crown prince. Three months later he relinquished the throne and lived in retirement until 635.

This episode may not have seemed like a promising start, but both the newly installed emperor and his court advisors began to develop a new image for the sovereign, that of an open-minded and conscientious ruler intent on correcting past mistakes and attuned to the concerns of officials. These officials stressed the ambivalent role of the sovereign as a figure at once essential but also of grave danger to the survival of the dynastic state, responsible for everything but dependent on a wide variety of underlings and intimates, at the apex of the polity but also the central object of criticism, a figure in absolute power burdened with worries of both a private and public nature.



Apart from his role in the fall of the Sui and the struggle for succession, his military background was a third element that posed a challenge to court advisors and to later interpreters aiming to portray his reign as one of stable and collegial civil rule and cosmopolitan tolerance. His early experiences had been military. He grew up in Taiyuan, nowadays northern Shanxi, where his father held the governor generalship of Bingzhou under the Sui Dynasty. He was said to have been instructed in *The Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳) by a southern scholar, Zhang Houyin 張後胤 (572–654). Of all the texts that made up the classicist canon, *The Zuo Commentary* most valorized military campaigning, strategy, and political maneuvering. The narrative of Taizong's late teenage years and early manhood was taken up with his role as an improbably daring military strategist in support of his father's campaign for the emperorship. He maintained a lifelong interest in military campaigning and personally led a military expedition against the Korean state of Goguryeo, one of the Tang Empire's most formidable competitors, in the final years of his reign.

As his aspirations developed, starting in 621 Taizong also broadened his perspective on dynastic government. He developed an interest in learned traditions and in scholarship. He founded his own academy, drawing in scholars "from all quarters of the world," that is, both from the north and the south, which had been ruled by different dynasties for centuries prior to the Sui unification.<sup>6</sup> A number of these scholars were the voices that went on to be heard in *The Essentials of Governance*. Early in his career, therefore, Taizong recognized the importance of support from the community of civil officials and scholars who had survived the warfare at the end of the Sui. After his succession in 626, he advocated learning, promoted officials who demonstrated it, and supported and participated in cultural production.

However, a man of action, he was never likely to have become a dedicated scholar. He knew some works of history, the standard official works covering the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and the Jin (265–420) Dynasties, and he quoted from them. His scholar advisors compiled several conveniently accessible digests of classical works, probably to save him reading time. Such quotations were, moreover, in circulation in court discussions at the time.

<sup>6</sup> McMullen, "The Big Cats Will Play," 308; *THY* 64.1114, 1117.

Taizong was undoubtedly a powerful and charismatic figure. He dominates the official record of the first two Tang reigns to a quite remarkable degree. The tradition of medieval Chinese history writing required that he should do precisely this, and he was eager to contribute to it. The Tang Dynasty was welcomed as ordained by destiny, and Taizong's own claim to the emperorship was acclaimed as fully justified and designed by fate.

*The Voices in The Essentials of Governance*

Emperor Taizong played a central part in the precedents selected by Wu Jing, but the selected cases were also intended to highlight the critical role of a particular group of advisors. These advisors were men who had survived the warfare and violence of the closing years of the Sui and who were now close to the source of political power. In Taizong they identified a man of authority, courage, and intelligence with whom they could cooperate as they tried to build on the Sui project of unification. They were members of a highly centralized political community, at least compared with the intellectual community of late imperial times, that is, from the Song Dynasty (960–1276) onwards. The southern scholars who made the journey on foot from south of the Yangzi River in their eagerness to join Li Shimin's court in Chang'an represented the centralized and relatively small intellectual world of the early seventh century. The late imperial tradition of statecraft writing, on the other hand, became more decentralized, and the political discourse of late imperial times was addressed to a community of scholars dispersed throughout the provinces.

The image of the Zhenguan reign in later times was that at no other point in Chinese history were so many civil ministers able to express critical views in such detail and with such openness directly to the sovereign himself. It is, however, easy for the reader of *The Essentials of Governance* to develop a misguided view of how close advisors were to Taizong. These advisors in effect deliberately foreshortened the distances, both social and physical, involved in entering his company. The "sovereign–official" relationship, one of Wu Jing's central themes, was one of the five cardinal relationships of traditional Chinese statecraft, a tradition well over a millennium old by the seventh century. This relationship was ideally characterized by reciprocal feelings of loyalty from the official towards the sovereign, and trust and respect from the sovereign towards the official. As a result, an ideal of close proximity to the sovereign is consistently foregrounded. In reality, the emperor lived in a very large

and heavily guarded palace complex, populated mainly by a large community of palace women, eunuchs, and religious and technical experts drafted in at the emperor's request to provide specialist services for his exclusive benefit and that of his palace community. This palace complex provided a highly structured society, part playground, part captive community, part assembly of experts, that effectively locked out the highest officials in office in the general administration, admitting them only under restricted terms. As the famous poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) was to observe a century later, the activities within the palace “are little known by those beyond it.”<sup>7</sup>

Official sources for Taizong's reign, intent on idealizing the emperor and portraying him as much as possible as following bureaucratic advice, have downplayed this difference. One of the reasons for their doing so derives from deep-seated reservations about the palace style of life, and from their wish to differentiate Taizong's court from those of the preceding century. Taizong's court was no dramatic exception to the medieval courts of East Asia. Its climate was one of luxury, license, and expenditure. Taizong often acknowledged his advisors' requests for restraint but ignored them in practice. This indicates that the conflict of values between the inner court and the voices from the civil bureaucracy raised in *The Essentials of Governance* was one of the mainsprings of Wu Jing's compilation.

Taizong's civil officials gained access to the emperor's company in the vast palace precincts only by passing through a guardpost and proceeding on foot some distance to a formal audience hall. In principle the emperor encountered his high-ranking civil officials daily in a formal ceremony. This was the daily court assembly, held at the Liangyi Hall, which theoretically required the presence of officials of the fifth rank and above, as well as the most senior court officials, including ministers and censors. Current affairs could be openly discussed at these assemblies. There are some well-known instances of heated debates at such assemblies regarding, for example, the settlement of the Eastern Turks whom Taizong's armies had defeated around 630. Due to the larger numbers of participants, and the more formal and ceremonial atmosphere of the daily court assembly, policy discussions with civil officials usually took place in the more informal meetings that followed the court assembly. These smaller meetings took place in the more relaxed surroundings of

<sup>7</sup> Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, vol. IV, pp. 376–377.

a different hall and fell into two types: the more regular meetings for a group of officials of rank three and above, including senior secretariat and chancellery staff, but also the remonstrance officials and historians featured in *The Essentials of Governance*; and the private variety, in which the emperor invited or permitted select officials to stay behind after the guards monitoring the meetings had been dismissed. These smaller and private meetings with the emperor were important sites in the decision-making process and provided the main avenue for court advisors to shape imperial policy.<sup>8</sup> From *The Essentials of Governance* it may be inferred that Taizong's remarks on statecraft addressed to his officials collectively were concentrated in the early part of his reign and fell off dramatically in its later years.<sup>9</sup>

The civil advisors whose voices are heard in *The Essentials of Governance* number around forty. They fall into two groups: there were very high-ranking officials in the general service, who had access to the emperor by virtue of their long service and seniority. By the early eighth century, these men had attained iconic status in the lore of the Tang foundation. Wu Jing gave eight of them, including Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), brief and laudatory biographical accounts in the second volume of *The Essentials of Governance* (p. 35). Wei Zheng had been singled out as the most outstanding among Taizong's court advisors, and Wu Jing accorded him a prominent role. He had served at the courts of both Gaozu and Taizong, and gained a reputation for being the most outspoken among those seeking to delimit imperial power and restrain Taizong's policy inclinations, court expenditure, and personal proclivities. His memorials and speeches remonstrating with the emperor were excerpted throughout *The Essentials of Governance*.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from Wei Zheng, whose reputation for outspokenness lasted through the centuries, there were other officials who held middle-ranking posts that carried the function of giving advice and criticism. Some had been hand-picked by Taizong even before his accession, when, following a precedent established by the southern courts, he had founded his own academy. These more junior voices are occasionally heard in the

<sup>8</sup> Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia*, pp. 204–6; Matsumoto, *Tō ōchō no kyūjō to gozen kaigi*, part I, chs. 2 and 4; Wechsler, *Mirror to the Son of Heaven*, pp. 95–98.

<sup>9</sup> McMullen, “The Big Cats Will Play,” 305–309.

<sup>10</sup> Wechsler, *Mirror to the Son of Heaven*, p. 198. Wei Zheng's memorials had also been gathered into separately circulating collections soon after his death, such as *The Recorded Remonstrances of Duke Wei of Zheng* (Wang Fangqing 王方慶, comp., *Wei Zhenggong jian lu* 魏鄭公諫錄).

text, and it was specifically recorded that some of them entered his presence only in great trepidation (entry #33).<sup>11</sup>

*Other Powerful Actors*

The scholars who attended the emperor in his formal entourage represent only one group in the early seventh-century polity. They were by far the most articulate of the groups that competed for the emperor's attention. They had a monopoly on the learned tradition, a tradition that was integral to the statecraft ideals presented in *The Essentials of Governance*. Other groups, for example military strategists, architects and builders, the men who operated the palace services, and religious experts, may have raised their voices to the emperor, but they spoke from outside the inner circle of scholar-advisors who compiled the official record. Their contentions were no match for the rhetoric and erudition that Taizong's civil advisors commanded. Even though Taizong may often have preferred the advice of these other groups, their voices have largely been lost. We discuss them briefly here because they were the forces that court advisors had to contend with, and their presence also appears in between the lines of the precedents collected in *The Essentials of Governance* with some regularity.

First among the main groups who competed with the advisors from the civil bureaucracy for the attention and political support of the emperor were the members of the imperial family, especially his uncles and his fourteen sons. Taizong counted these as "approaching forty in number" in 642 (entry #91).<sup>12</sup> The centrality of the imperial clan to the polity is underlined by the fact that it was administered and documented by a separate agency, the Court of the Imperial Family. This office traced and updated the imperial genealogy and documented the proliferation of the imperial clan through a system of "houses," the descendants of the emperors' brothers and sons. By virtue of their position, wealth, and highly privileged lifestyle, the imperial clan formed a virtually separate estate in the seventh-century polity. We read in *The Essentials of Governance* that Taizong's civil advisors considered them a challenge (entries #88–92), and that already by the end of the Zhenguan era they caused serious problems at the apex of the polity (see also the next section, "The Contents of *The Essentials of Governance*").

<sup>11</sup> McMullen, "Traditions of Political Dissent in Tang China," 19.

<sup>12</sup> McMullen, "The Big Cats Will Play," 331; Wright, "T'ang T'ai-tsung: The Man and the Persona," 26.

Secondly, the large community of palace ladies populated the precincts in which the emperor lived and his children grew up. Rarely did their interests coincide with the civil advisors from the outer bureaucracy, but the influence of the empress, concubines, princesses, and female palace attendants on the daily life of the imperial family was pervasive. Taizong's civil advisors raised concerns about this state of affairs, pointing out that the crown prince and the princes "grew up at the hands of women" (entry #98). Taizong once conceded that the murderous succession during the Sui was due to it, while apparently making only token attempts to redress the situation. That female members of the imperial family could also play an advisory role in court politics reinforcing the recommendations of civil officials is also occasionally highlighted, as in the episodes featuring the empress lauding Wei Zheng's request that the sister of Taizong not be treated with less decorum than his daughter, restraining Taizong's anger, and cautioning against Buddhist and Daoist rituals (entries #44, #138, #235). Here Wu Jing may have been prescribing what their proper roles should have been.

Religious figures also claimed Taizong's attention, but probably due to the classicist bias of the compiler, there is little or no coverage of Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, and other religious experts in *The Essentials of Governance*. Buddhism, which had had spectacular influence in the courts of the late southern dynasties, is barely mentioned, and then only, along with Daoism, in a critical vein. Other sources indicate, however, that Taizong honored Buddhism, that he respected the piety of his female relatives, and that he arranged services for the souls of soldiers killed in the campaigns for the dynasty's foundation.<sup>13</sup>

The roughly 280 entries in *The Essentials of Governance* are largely structured by a narrative framing device suggesting the formality of Taizong's exchanges with his advisors. The exchange is dated at the start of each entry, and the names and titles of the interlocutors are provided. Such exchanges differed from the much less structured interactions between the emperor and his entourage, including palace ladies, entertainers, imperial family members, and technical and religious experts. Similarly, Taizong's high-ranking civil advisors were not automatically invited to the many feasts and entertainments that punctuated life for the emperor and the imperial family in the inner palace. It is highly probable that the emperor took a good proportion of his decisions, for example his

<sup>13</sup> Wright, "T'ang T'ai-tsung and Buddhism," esp. 247–248.

lavish building program, military plans, or the distribution of largesse, sometimes on a grand scale, with favorites and family members, and not with his civil advisors present. Many of these decisions and the interactions behind them were beyond the reach of historians. Opposition to them formed the subtext of civil advisors' attempts to shape the education of reigning and future rulers.

### The Contents of *The Essentials of Governance*

*The Essentials of Governance* may be thought of as a treatise recommending or formulating jointly with Taizong a series of priorities. These arose from the political context of the palace and had also been established in statecraft discourse over the preceding centuries. They were given a new edge and a new lucidity by the experience and the aspirations of the Zhenguan generation of scholars and by Wu Jing's re-presentation of their dialogues with Emperor Taizong. Here we offer an introduction to these concerns, largely following the order in which they are listed in *The Essentials of Governance*.

Before doing so, we draw attention to two important features of *The Essentials of Governance*. First, the content of each section is not discrete. Some concerns are so important that they pervade the whole work. Running through almost all the representations that the scholars make is an insistent emphasis on the ideal of ready access to the emperor. Wu Jing gave this concern specific treatment in separate sections on remonstrance, but the issue of access to the emperor forms a leitmotif that pervades the entire compendium. It recurs in the opening passages concerned with the mutual dependence of sovereign and officials. It is reiterated at the close of the work, in which both Taizong and his advisors look forward to the future and concede what was *lèse-majesté*, namely, that the emperor would not live forever. The concept of fairness or impartiality, the subject of Chapter 16, is another example of a recurrent theme in the work. A third example of a significant motif that pervades the text is the well-being and stability of the common people. Taizong consistently gives this theme priority. In "Dedication to Agriculture" (entry #218), for example, he impulsively swallows some locusts when faced with famine in the capital region, aiming to transfer "the disaster to Our own body." But this concern for the common people, it hardly needs saying, did not prevent him from employing 1 million corvée laborers on a palace that he then dismantled in a rage, presenting teams of slave girls to his favored

relatives, or taking very large armies on reckless campaigns in the Korean peninsula.

Second, the language of *The Essentials of Governance* also needs some comment. Some pieces, such as “Rhapsody in Praise of the Way” (entry #105), are composed in a dense and erudite style that is intended precisely to display erudition, aesthetic sense, and verbal dexterity. These self-conscious compositions may appear strangely out of key with their immediate context, or indeed with the general tenor of *The Essentials of Governance*. They were, however, considered virtuoso literary models, both when they were composed and by eighth-century readers of the text. Even Xuanzong himself, to whom Wu Jing addressed his compendium, is known to have admired this sort of composition. The dialogues, by contrast, tend to be in concise and relatively straightforward literary Chinese. Taizong himself was a soldier by upbringing and inclination, and many of the metaphors he used in conversation reflect his practical love of archery, his connoisseurship of the wood needed for bows, and his horsemanship. He prided himself on knowing the processes that the common people employed to produce food and care for horses. The elegant cadences in which these statements are recorded are thus not likely to directly reflect his original speech. His contemporaries would have been aware of this. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721), a longterm colleague of Wu Jing, pointed out in his grand survey of Chinese historical writing that direct speech in historical records was often not faithful to the language spoken by the protagonists, a problem he thought historians should address.<sup>14</sup> An additional consideration for modern readers is that much of the raw material from which Wu Jing drew had been recorded by different hands, the court historians attendant on the emperor who noted down his daily activities.

The first chapter of *The Essentials of Governance*, “The Way of the Sovereign,” comprises a series of exchanges on the issue of founding a dynasty and ensuring its continuity. The second chapter, “The Organization of Governance,” summarizes through the medium of dialogue with advisors some of the basic principles by which the emperor at the apex of the state should abide. Literally “The Body of Governance,” the metaphor of the polity as a human body, with the emperor at its head, and the officials as eyes and ears, or equally often as legs and arms, emphasizes

<sup>14</sup> Pulleyblank, “Chinese Historical Criticism,” 146–147. For a recent discussion and comprehensive translation of this work, see Chaussende, *Traité de l'historien parfait*.



the emperor's dependence on his advisors. The health of the body that constitutes the polity needs constant vigilance.<sup>15</sup>

These two preliminary chapters close with a paragraph that extols Taizong's achievement in bringing peace and prosperity across the Chinese territories (entry #24). This passage, which only occurs in *The Essentials of Governance*, claims that by 629 harvests were plentiful and the population had of their own volition returned to their native places.<sup>16</sup> This was because the emperor had won their hearts and had accepted a stream of remonstrance, had committed himself to learning, searched relentlessly for officials, and made judicious appointments. Taizong had won over his opponents.

The age judged him as capable of making decisions in great matters and embodying the substance of imperial rule. However, he deeply abhorred greed and corruption among the officials, and no mercy was shown to any who bent the law in return for bribes. All unranked officials in the capital city who broke the law by taking bribes had to be formally reported to the throne, and depending on the offense they had committed, dealt with according to strict laws. Because of this, the officials and officers were mostly blameless and dedicated. He controlled and managed the households of the imperial princes and princesses in such a way that the inner circle of domineering and devious great families all feared his majesty and withdrew from the scene. None of them dared to persecute the common people. When merchants traveled and lodged in the countryside, there were no longer any brigands or bandits, and the jails were perpetually empty.

This portrayal of an ideal polity and a contented people, coming near the start of the compendium, provides the basis justifying not only Taizong's advisors' fulsome flattery of the emperor, but also their discussions of the values and issues from which Wu Jing drew for *The Essentials of Governance*.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the body metaphor in *The Essentials of Governance* and earlier Chinese political discourse, see De Weerd, "Considering Citizenship in Imperial Chinese History."

<sup>16</sup> The population had been estimated at about 9 million households, or 50 million persons, in a census of 609. It was probably a similar figure in 742, when a census again returned figures that survive. In the Zhenguan period the process of registration after the disruption of the second and third decades of the seventh century was in progress, and the registered population by the end of Taizong's reign was certainly considerably lower, perhaps as low as 17 million. Wechsler, "T'ai-tsung (Reign 626–669) the Consolidator," 208–209.

The next chapter, “Employing the Wise,” provides biographical accounts of eight of the most prominent of Taizong’s senior advisors, the advice of six of whom is prominent throughout the book. These men all had exceptionally close relations with Taizong. Despite the earlier roles of several in the shifting and violent alliances preceding the Tang foundation, Taizong recruited them and kept them close to himself. Taizong especially commended their role in remonstrating with him. Here special importance was accorded to Wei Zheng, whose entry in this chapter, and whose role throughout *The Essentials of Governance*, is most conspicuous. Two of the men whom Wu Jing selected were exceptions, in that they were successful generals who led Tang armies to crucial victories against the Turks. Li Ji (594–669) was granted membership of the imperial clan, and Li Jing (571–649) too was given exceptional honors. Wu Jing, in selecting them, may have been suggesting to Xuanzong that a wise emperor should have a balanced team of senior officials, civil and military, of proven loyalty. In fact these two highly successful and loyal generals, as *The Essentials of Governance* portrays them, contributed almost nothing to the debates about civil administration that form the greater part of the compendium. *The Essentials of Governance* remains cautious about military adventurism.

So central did Wu Jing consider the activity of remonstrating with the sovereign that he placed three chapters on this topic near the beginning of *The Essentials of Governance*: “Seeking Criticism” (Chapter 4); “Accepting Criticism” (Chapter 5); and “Lessons from the Past for Sovereign and Officials” (Chapter 6). (“Direct Statements and Remonstrance,” a supplement to Chapter 5, is not included in this translation.) This order of entries indicates that, for an official like Wu Jing, the monitoring role of officialdom was of the highest priority to ruler and state, more important even than the imperial family, which had been placed second, before officialdom and remonstrance, in *Model for an Emperor*.

That civil officials should have access to the emperor was not something that the Tang political world could readily take for granted in practice. Wu Jing clearly believed in its great importance and continued relevance in his own day.<sup>17</sup> He had himself submitted several memorials on this topic, including a general memorial on remonstrance to Emperor Xuanzong in 717, twelve years before he completed *The Essentials*

<sup>17</sup> On the early history of remonstrance, see Chang, “Three Rhetorical Modes in Pre-Qin Court Remonstrances.”

of *Governance*, when he held the office of remonstrating official.<sup>18</sup> In this submission, he listed ten advisors of the Zhenguan court who had remonstrated with Taizong. His own emperor, Xuanzong, Wu Jing argued, was now failing to meet this standard. Xuanzong had rewarded remonstrators without heeding their messages and had allowed remonstrators who offended him to be banished or killed. Remonstrations were thus a highly fraught and long-standing issue when Wu Jing compiled *The Essentials of Governance*. Remonstrators sometimes ran great risks. Their fate depended perilously on the mood of the sovereign at the time they came before him. As a ninth-century commentator wrote: “Many are the men of ability whom the holders of the levers of life and death have, through a single [fit of] temper, killed.”<sup>19</sup> Taizong was no exception. Remonstrators entered his presence only in great trepidation. He had murdered political rivals with little compunction. One or two cases in which his temper was out of control, or in which he executed opponents, are recorded in *The Essentials of Governance* (entries #52, #167, #224).

Nevertheless, by the early seventh century the role of guardian and critic had long been institutionalized. Protest was, moreover, not seen as limited to those with monitory posts. Any official had in theory access to the emperor. It was possible also to submit “sealed items” (*fengshi* 封事) in writing, and this, as *The Essentials of Governance* indicates, was a method much used under Taizong (e.g. entries #28, #45, #66, #135, #166, #274). The idea that the sovereign should pay attention to the response of “grass-cutters and firewood gatherers,” a trope for the common people, originated in canonical texts and was regularly raised in the court discourse of the Zhenguan period; in *The Essentials of Governance* both Taizong and his advisors are portrayed as promoting it. Provision was made for members of the common people to declaim grievances from specially demarcated spots outside the palace precincts.<sup>20</sup>

The emperor frequently rewarded with material gifts those who offered admonition, even when he did not accept their remonstrations. *The Essentials of Governance* thus often records that he thought such submissions “excellent.” It also mentions several rejections of advice (entries #261, #262, #263) and records that, for example, “although he did not

<sup>18</sup> Xie Baocheng, “Zhenguan zhengyao jijiao xulu”; *THY* 27.521, 62.1076–77; Wang Qinruo, *Cefu yuangui* 545.13b–15b, 546.4a–4b, 630.4b–5b; *XTS* 132.4526–28; *ZZTJ* 212.6769; Li Fang, *Wenyuan yinghua*, 620.2b–3b.

<sup>19</sup> Liu Yuxi and Bian Xiaoyuan, *Liu Yuxi ji*, “Hua Tuo Lun,” 5.67.

<sup>20</sup> Xiong, *Sui Tang Chang'an*, p. 59.

accept [Fang Xuanling's] remonstrance, in the end his was a sound policy statement" (entry #259); "Taizong did not accept his admonition, but those with foresight thought he was right" (entry #256). This was especially true of warnings against military campaigning.

Wu Jing valued the Zhenguan court's memorials of admonition so highly that he included more than two dozen in *The Essentials of Governance*. These are typically narrated as the initiative of a single official. Towards the close, two monitory memorials deserve special mention, because they impart a climax to the message that *The Essentials of Governance* was intended overall to deliver: Fang Xuanling's impassioned death-bed submission emphasizing to Taizong the danger of attempting again to subjugate the Korean peninsula (entry #259), and Wei Zheng's more general warning that the emperor had strayed from the noble ideals of openness he had formulated at the start of his reign (entry #279).

The emphasis on careful selection in the section that follows, "Selecting Officials," may be understood as a plea to recruit, appoint, and promote men of a kind with those who speak out in *The Essentials of Governance* and is thus implicitly a form of self-recommendation on the part of the civil bureaucracy. Taizong is here quoted as saying, "The ancients likewise drew a comparison between an officialdom that does not enroll the talented and drawing a cake on the ground: it cannot be eaten" (entry #75), an image that equates with the "pie in the sky" of modern English usage. Every age had its good men, the emperor argued, and he urged his advisors to prioritize the identification of such persons over the trivia of bureaucratic process. He further articulated that it was wrong to integrate skilled musicians and others, essentially figures who had become favorites in the palace community, into the regular official hierarchy.

The succession was, for Taizong, as in court settings throughout history,<sup>21</sup> an urgent issue, and it remained so for his successors. The succession and the management of the imperial clan formed the subject matter of the cluster of the five chapters that follow. The Tang was a patrimonial state, not in the sense that the empire was the emperor's property to do with as he pleased, but rather in the sense that Heaven had granted the Li imperial family the mandate to rule in principle for "one hundred generations" or indefinitely.<sup>22</sup> The line should ideally be passed down through the eldest son of the empress. In the first century of the Tang, emperors had been far from able to implement this principle. Instead,

<sup>21</sup> Duindam, *Dynasties*, ch. 2.      <sup>22</sup> Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, pp. 27–29.

the court had become the scene of a long sequence of murders, sadistic punishments, and subversion from Taizong's reign until Wu Jing's compilation of *The Essentials of Governance*. A recurring episode in it concerns the gradual fall from favor of Li Chengqian 李承乾 (d. 645), Taizong's first choice as crown prince. His eventual deposition has its comic aspects – as the accusations of an interest in drumming, Turkish music, catamites, and profligate building within the palace complex attest – but to the court of the early 640s this was a matter of crucial concern. Despite attempts to reprove him, neither Taizong nor the senior scholars appointed to instruct him had any impact on his behavior. Wu Jing helped ensure, however, that the voices raised in protest were recorded for posterity. These included, for example, the highly crafted prose poem by the Right Mentor of the Household of the Crown Prince (entry #105) addressed to Li Chengqian.

The succession issue crystalized around the other closely related and long-established issue of statecraft, namely, whether the empire beyond the capital should be governed by members of the imperial clan enfeoffed in high positions throughout the provinces, or whether the administration of the provinces should be entrusted to selected officials of aristocratic background, or proven ability, or both, from the general administration who held their tenures short term. The Tang Dynasty marked a turning-point in the history of the relative status of the imperial family and the evermore ambitious civil bureaucracy. Until the early Tang the clan members of successive dynastic houses had enjoyed dominant political and military roles. Before the re-unification under the Sui in the 580s, the Jin 晉 (265–316) had been the last dynastic house that had controlled a substantial part of the Chinese territories in the north as well as the south, and Taizong had a special interest in its history. The Jin Dynasty had enfeoffed members of the imperial clan; the results had been disastrous, with the princes rebelling and threatening central authority. Taizong's father and the first Tang emperor, Gaozu, had similarly intended to perpetuate the power of his own clan. He had deployed imperial clansmen, young and old, closely or more distantly related to himself, throughout his administration. Taizong, perhaps already prompted by his advisors, departed from his father's policy. The relevant observations in *The Essentials of Governance* illustrated a basic dilemma for Tang emperors. Deploying kin in the provinces, it was argued, increased the imperial clan's chances of survival if the political center was under threat. At the same time, the performance of princes in the provinces had proved disastrous.

The political world into which Taizong entered was dominated by the palace community and by princely households. The scale of these households was considerable: the successful relatives of the Tang founder headed households that far exceeded in wealth and ritual status those of the regular members of the civil administration.<sup>23</sup> Senior civil officials in the general administration, the men whose voices were raised in *The Essentials of Governance*, were pivotal in the government of the new empire, but their rank and status did not match their political importance. When Taizong opened this issue up as a topic for discussion at court (Chapter 8), he learned about senior civil officials' objections to the extravagance and arrogance of princes as holders of high provincial office. He attempted to reduce their status, including that of the crown prince, in relation to senior members of the civil bureaucracy (Chapters 9–12), and so mediated between advocates of princely enfeeblement and those who argued for putting the administration of the provinces in the hands of civil officials.

In the debate on this issue, advisors to Taizong advocated the interest of the bureaucracy over those of the imperial clan. They emphasized the priority of the general interest, represented by the bureaucracy, over the private concerns of the emperor, represented by the imperial clan. Other sources show that officials also advocated princely enfeeblement or a mixed system. In the end, Taizong compromised. He appointed some of his sons to prefectural posts, with mixed results.<sup>24</sup> Some behaved disastrously as administrators, and others threatened disloyalty to the political center. Taizong's successor, Gaozong, retained this mixed system. During and after the reign of Emperor Wu (Gaozong's empress), the relative power of the civil administration increased: Xuanzong succeeded to the throne only with the help of civil officials. Nevertheless, even during his reign the idea of enfeebling imperial sons was kept alive. It remained so in the centuries that followed the first presentation of *The Essentials of Governance*.

The five chapters that follow (Chapters 13–17) concern core values in Chinese ethical and statecraft thinking: humaneness, loyalty, filial piety, sincerity, and impartiality. The emperor's practice of these was in medieval Chinese political discourse considered instrumental in bringing about social order, just as the sovereign's observance of moderation, justice, and other moral qualities was central to medieval European political

<sup>23</sup> McMullen, "The Big Cats Will Play," 330–331.

<sup>24</sup> McMullen, "The Emperor, the Princes, and the Prefectures," 63–64.

advice literature and early modern virtue politics. The emphasis on impartiality stands out in *The Essentials of Governance* and in statecraft writing throughout the Tang Dynasty. The antithesis to this virtue was selfishness, self-interest, bias, and cliquishness. Impartiality (*gong* 公) was associated with what was official, what pertained to the state (*guan* 官) (just as the English word ‘public’ does nowadays), while its antonym, partiality (*si* 私), was close to the domestic sphere and what pertained to the family (*jia* 家). Civil officials whose voices are heard in *The Essentials of Governance* insisted that Taizong should not allow private relationships to affect his judgment in making appointments or conferring rewards. At the same time, Taizong believed that the principle of avoidance, that, for example, prohibited recommending a relative, should be set aside when those under consideration were truly able. Instances of groups protesting that the emperor had not given them due recognition, and the response that fairness and impartiality should decide the matter, confirm the reading of *The Essentials of Governance* as a polemical work designed to uphold the power and influence of the civil administrators in the face of competing interests.

The need for emperors to exercise restraint over expenditure and humility and moderation in their conduct was a standard issue in the statecraft discourse of the medieval period, and is the focus of the subsequent nine chapters. This concern manifested itself in admonitions against extravagance in areas ranging from palace construction to the sponsorship of Buddhism and Daoism. It recurs throughout *The Essentials of Governance*, and especially in the final volume’s chapters on imperial expeditions and hunting (Chapters 37–38). This emphasis on moderation fit with a view of the polity as a human body headed by a sovereign whose desires and actions could inflict serious harm on the entire body’s health and should therefore be carefully and continually monitored.

Taizong’s patronage of the learned tradition represents the success of his advisors in securing his endorsement for some of their key concerns. The chapters “Honoring Classicist Scholarship,” “On Literature and History,” and “On Rites and Music” (Chapters 27–29) account for this success. In 628, the emperor, a soldier by origin and by early experience, candidly acknowledged that, though he had come to the learned tradition only late, he respected learning and the ability to write well (entry #172). Over the decades that followed, he authorized scholarly compilations in each of the main subfields of traditional scholarship. Early in his reign he gave priority to the compilation of the histories of the dynasties that had

reigned between the fall of the Han Dynasty and the foundation of the Tang, and to the ongoing recording of his own reign. The medieval Chinese state attached great importance to a correctly performed schedule of state observances, a great number of which were to be conducted by the emperor himself. The ritual officials of the early Tang were commissioned to rewrite the Sui Dynasty ritual code. This was completed and finally approved in 637. Though it is not extant, its successor version, the ritual code of the reign of Kaiyuan, approved in 732, survives in full. “On Rites and Music” illustrates how questions of precedence in the Zhen-guan court, and questions of mourning and of observing taboos in the writing of names, could provoke strong reactions in the upper strata of Tang society. The encouragement of agriculture (Chapter 30) follows on from the prior discussion of ritual and moderation, and underscores both the importance of the emperor’s role in ritual performance and the need to keep expenditure on ceremonies low so as to reduce the burden on the farming population.<sup>25</sup>

Statecraft traditions since the Qin Dynasty reserved a special place for the criminal code. Tradition required that the new dynasty compile its own code. Questions regarding jurisprudence and the implementation of legal regulations are taken up in “On Punishment and Law” and “On Amnesties” (Chapters 31–32). Here the focus is on the criminal code and control over officialdom and the population. Taizong is portrayed as advocating lenient penal laws. He contrasted the Tang penal code with that of the Sui, which he considered very severe. *The Essentials of Governance* confirms that a theme in remonstrance during the seventh and eighth centuries was that the emperor should, in punishing malefactors, always follow the prescriptions of the criminal code. He should not allow a fit of anger to let him use the death penalty when the code did not prescribe it. Taizong is also seen to advocate procedural caution over the death penalty.

Whereas the previous chapters predominantly use examples drawn from within the Tang domestic sphere to discuss the application of core values to such areas of government as agriculture and legal administration, Chapter 33, “On Tribute Presentations,” includes a series of exchanges on how to handle missions from abroad. Here too the emphasis

<sup>25</sup> On the institutional apparatus and the process of compiling the historical record in Tang times, see Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T’ang*. On Tang compilation projects, see McMullen, *State and Scholars in T’ang China*. On state ritual, see Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk*.



is on moderation and caution; the tone of caution in this section and the following one on learning about how Chinese and foreign dynasties and rulers fell (Chapter 34) foreshadows the overall tenor of the passages selected in the later chapters on military campaigning (Chapters 35–36).

Taizong's military heritage and early campaign experience gave him a lifelong interest in campaigning and in aggressive military policies. The middle-aged man who in 640 slipped away from his entourage to do close combat with wild animals, returning only after dark, relished physical danger and combat (entry #269). His ambition to surpass Emperor Yang as emperor of a re-unified empire gave edge to this commitment to the military. His interest in expansion to the north-west and on the Korean peninsula deeply worried civil scholars. These were the issues over which his decisions differed most sharply with the views represented by his advisors in *The Essentials of Governance*. Early in his reign, senior officials like Xiao Yu (575–648) and Feng Deyi (568–627) counseled caution in dealing with the Turks. Wei Zheng, too, consistently argued for caution. In the first phase of his reign Taizong responded to instability on both the northern and the southern frontiers with pragmatic policies. Up to 643, Wu Jing's selection of memorials of advice on initiating campaigns shows the officials Fang Xuanling (578–648) and Chu Suiliang (596–658) advocating cautious and pragmatic policies, and winning Taizong's approval. They honed their recommendations of an anti-militaristic outlook and a radical separation between Chinese and non-Chinese by drawing extensively from the Han experience of the northern frontiers. Yu Zhining (588–665), in 641, condemning Taizong's first crown prince for his obsession with Turkish culture, said that the Turks "have human faces but the hearts of animals." "One cannot expect them to abide by propriety and righteousness, and one cannot treat them with humaneness and trust" (entry #109). Another advisor, Du Chuke, in 640, used the same vocabulary (entry #262). Wu Jing recorded that "Taizong did not accept his advice." That Taizong was recognized as Heavenly Khan of the Turks, a title that perhaps symbolizes his own search for stability on the northern frontiers, was never so much as mentioned in *The Essentials of Governance*.

The section "Debates about Punitive Expeditions" (Chapter 35) ends with two long memorials delivered in the penultimate year of the emperor's reign. Wu Jing selected them surely not only for their eloquence in pleading with Taizong, but also for features that gave them special poignance. In 648, Taizong had again decided on an invasion of

the Korean peninsula. Fang Xuanling was on his death-bed, yet summoned the energy to submit a memorial strongly disapproving of aggressive warfare. Perhaps even more remarkable was a submission of the same year from a high-ranking consort named Xu. This remarkable document contained a concise survey of the problems the empire was facing in the year 648. No outcome is recorded other than that Taizong “considered her words excellent and bestowed great favors on her in particular” (entry #260).

The final chapters continue on the topic of the danger posed by other kinds of adventurism. Imperial tours and hunting expeditions (Chapters 37–38) impose burdens on the population and also put the life of the sovereign at risk. The final two chapters underscore once more the value of self-cultivation and self-scrutiny in securing stable government. Anomalies should not preoccupy the emperor’s concerns, as they can mislead. Rather, virtue and the well-being of the population are the best guarantors of stability. The final chapter captures a key point in the reiterative remonstrations offered by Taizong’s counselors over the two decades of the Zhenguan reign: the constant need for vigilance and moderation, especially in times of ease and calm. Finally, in a rare instance of an emperor acknowledging his mortality, Taizong is made to hope that future generations reading the history of his reign will concede that he had achieved much. Fang Xuanling praises his early military career and military achievement as unprecedented, and also his later commitment to learning. Wei Zheng concedes that an emperor will know “feelings of addiction, craving, happiness, and anger,” but that Taizong has exceeded the norm, and, if he can “exercise self-control in order to maintain the excellent virtue of holding on until the end,” “all future generations will rely on this” (entry #281).

## Mirrors and Political Thought

*The Essentials of Governance* exemplifies a broader interest in the first century of Tang rule in selecting exemplary cases drawn from the records of antiquity and earlier dynasties, as well as the dynastic record as a “mirror” that the sovereign and his successors could use to assess how their behavior and performance measured up to the models of the past. In *The Golden Mirror* Taizong and those associated with the academy he had founded at his princely headquarters, and who joined his court after the palace coup of 626, had already formulated the ideals of good governance

that should guide not only his reign, but also that of his successors. The key concern of his court, as well as the objective of *The Mirror* (written at the start of his reign, ca. 628), is set out at the beginning: "Now every ruler who has occupied the throne has desired to enjoy his position of esteem as [the ruler of a state of] ten thousand chariots forever, and to bequeath it to a posterity of a hundred [successive] rulers."<sup>26</sup> The continuation of dynastic rule over a great and powerful state, what we could call an empire, was the central concern, and the way to achieve it was presented as an art of rulership consisting of a set of prescribed behaviors and a related set of practices to avoid. *The Golden Mirror* was a brief manifesto outlining, in order of sequence, the importance of selecting wise advisors and accepting their critical advice; tempering violence with humaneness; engaging in self-examination; and observing the signs of misrule, and restraining the desires and ambitions of the ruler.

In *Model for an Emperor*, compiled near the end of Taizong's reign, ca. 648, the program of recommended practices is set out more explicitly, and it is likely that this program (or the political culture at Taizong's court that it drew upon) shaped the framework that Wu Jing adopted in *The Essentials of Governance*. The arrangement and coherence of the concepts and headings central to *The Essentials of Governance* are explained more expressly in this work. *Model for an Emperor* was explicitly presented to Taizong's designated crown prince as a "mirror," but, as opposed to *The Essentials of Governance* and works modeled after it in later imperial Chinese history, the emperor, or his ghost writer(s), added that the crown prince was not to "take me as the mirror of the past for your own conduct."<sup>27</sup> It used case material drawn from the classics and all prior history to illustrate its twelve principles of rulership. Taizong justified this choice by admitting that, despite his considerable achievements, he regretted his many failings and urged his son to only imitate rulers of the greatest virtue.

Prior to the compilation of *Model for an Emperor* and *The Essentials of Governance* historians had already selected episodes related in court archives to use them as "a mirror for future generations" (p. 2). We find references to the compilation of "precedents" (*gushi*) of select rulers in the dynastic histories of the Han period, and about two dozen such works were included in the bibliography of *The Sui Dynastic History*, which was compiled at Taizong's court under the supervision of Wei Zheng

<sup>26</sup> Twitchett, "How to Be an Emperor," 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 90.

and completed ca. 656.<sup>28</sup> In addition to collections of anecdotes about individual emperors, there were also historical surveys of past rulers in which their character and actions were briefly discussed and evaluated. For example, at the beginning of Taizong's rule, ca. 627, Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638), a prominent tutor and advisor to Taizong featured in *The Essentials of Governance*, had compiled a work titled *Brief Discussions of Former Rulers* (*Dimang lüe lun* 帝王略論), in which he introduced emperors and kings (the different kinds of ruler that had ruled different kinds of polity in Chinese history) as “models” that the young emperor could emulate and learn from. From remaining fragments cited in later Chinese and Japanese works, it is clear that the text was arranged in a question–answer format in which a young aristocrat asks, and is instructed by, his teacher about rulers throughout time. None of these earlier compilations of precedents of rulership were, however, elevated to the status of “Essentials of Governance,” and, as we shall see further below in its reception history, none attained the status and influence of *The Essentials of Governance* – indeed, most were lost.

It is evident that there are differences in authorship, format, occasion of presentation, and source materials between the above-mentioned texts, but there were also significant commonalities: all these texts dealt specifically with the question of how to be and act as an emperor, and were in the first instance addressed to emperors and princes. They were used to instruct rulers, and some of them were grouped together as reading material in the “classics mat lectures” (*jingyan* 經筵) of different polities after the Tang (see the next section on the dissemination of *The Essentials of Governance*). We can thus conclude that a genre of “mirror for a prince” took shape during the seventh and eighth centuries that was distinct from the classical and philosophical texts more commonly associated with Chinese political thought in the modern imagination.

The mirror metaphor had a range of referents in these texts. Remote history and an idealized antiquity, recent history, the frank advice of officials and remonstrance, particular advisors like Wei Zheng, and the political advice texts themselves were referred to as “mirrors” (*jing* 鏡, *jian* 鑒). These various usages shared common ground: the cases selected from remote and recent history, critical advice and diehard remonstrators, and the texts that brought the cases together with the education of the ruler as their core objective all served as mirrors in which the prince

<sup>28</sup> Wei Zheng, comp., *Sui shu* 33.966–967.

was to reflect “the body of the sovereign.” As Denis Twitchett and others have noted before, the concept of the mirror applied to prior experience, and serving as “a referent for one’s own behavior,” already occurs in the classical corpus dating to the first millennium BCE.<sup>29</sup> In this early usage and in the early Tang political advice literature, the past and the words and behaviors of others served as a mirror in which the ruler could see himself in his current state and simultaneously what he ought to do and become in order to practice the Way of the Ruler and bring about order. The mirror therefore “lets the Way shine forth” (*ming dao* 明道); it is here not represented as a means to let the ruler’s inherent natural virtue illuminate the patterns of coherence present in all things but obscured by human desire and habit (as it would be in later Neo-Confucian texts).<sup>30</sup>

The features of the political advice literature of Taizong’s court are also similar to those of the broad range of European texts that have become known in modern times under the genre *speculum principis/regis* (mirror for the prince/king).<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the East Asian political advice literature, there has been a substantial body of literature on the medieval European, Arabic, and Persian mirrors for princes consisting of translations, scholarship on individual works, and broader surveys. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, the pre-Machiavellian medieval mirror literature is generally not accorded much space in the history of political ideas. As manuals focused on “the arts of governance” (*regimen*), they did not fit well in the modern concept of “government” as the science of the state, a science no longer substantially concerned with the ruler as the embodiment of the people.<sup>32</sup> Medieval European and West Asian “mirrors” were first produced in significant numbers between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, but had already appeared in the period between the late sixth through ninth centuries, drawing upon classical texts.<sup>33</sup> They were cast in a broad range of formats: quotations, maxims, anecdotes, epistles, fictional conversations, encyclopedic collections. On the basis of these heterogeneous materials they instructed the aspiring

<sup>29</sup> Twitchett, “How to Be an Emperor,” 8, note 5.

<sup>30</sup> Munro, *Images of Human Nature*, ch. 3.

<sup>31</sup> An important early study is Wilhelm Berges, *Die Fürstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters* (1938). For a critique of the modern focus on “mirrors for princes” and a broader investigation of the “mirror” as a metaphor as it occurs in antique and medieval literature, see Jónsson, *Le Miroir*.

<sup>32</sup> Senellart, *Les Arts de gouverner*, p. 45, and *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> Blaydes et al., “Mirrors for Princes and Sultans”; Senellart, *Les Arts de gouverner*, pp. 45–59.