

State Building in the Government of Tang Taizong

Lily Hwa, Associate Professor of History, University of St. Thomas

“When one uses a bronze mirror, one can adjust the clothes and cap; when one uses the ancients as a mirror, one comprehends the rise and fall [of a state], and when one uses a person as a mirror [i.e. a remonstrator], one sees one’s success and missteps. I always keep these three mirrors to prevent making mistakes....”

Tang Taizong¹

“The ruler is the boat and the people the water. Water can carry the boat and also capsize the boat”

Xun Zi ²(A Confucian master of third century BCE)

Abstract

Tang Taizong (r. 626-649) was one of China’s most admired rulers. Chinese historians of traditional and modern times praised him for exemplifying the Confucian “benevolent” rule. His reign of the Zhengguan period was noted for prosperity and fine administration. Moreover, he laid down the foundation for a strong Tang dynasty and an empire. However, the nature of his Confucian benevolent rule and the great success of his reign remain unexplored.

Tang Taizong exercised self-restraint, established a government for the well-being of the people, recruited the best civil and military officials into positions that matched their talents, demanded group wisdom in policies and encouraged remonstrance to check for his possible mistakes. He established a transparent court in which the emperor and officials were all held accountable for their actions and no abuses were tolerated.

While building a strong military force, he was reluctant to use force and used marriage alliance and diplomacy, allowing nomadic leaders to retain their power or absorb them into his administration. He was revered by the nomad as their “Heavenly Khan,” and he treated them with benevolence as his Han Chinese subjects. With relatively few efforts, he built an empire and acquired strong allegiance to him from most of the neighboring nomadic tribes and kingdoms.

Introduction

In this age of advanced technology and globalization, it is natural for people to undermine development in the past. It is also natural for people to dismiss traditions different from their own. But modern people are still heavily influenced by religions and ideologies developed thousands or hundreds of years ago, such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Many modern thinkers also often have roots of their thought in the distant past. Understanding the past is relevant and important in this modern age.

Premodern Chinese states have not been fully explored or understood in contemporary scholarship. Chinese Marxist historians used to call traditional China “a feudal society.” Many Western scholars also regard Chinese emperors as “autocrats”—unchecked by the people. Many studies of traditional Chinese government were cast in the light of the power struggle between the emperor and officials, or imperial prerogative.³ Moreover studies of premodern Chinese

¹ ZGZY 3.33

² Xun Zi is also romanized as Hsun Tzu. Burton Watson, trans., *Hsun Tzu: Basic Writings*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³ I.e. Andrew Eisenberg, “A Study in Court Factionalism: the Politics of Tang Taizong,” *Tang Studies* 20/21 (2002-2003): 39-69. ; Howard Wechsler, “Factionalism in Early Tang Government,” *Perspectives on the T’ang*, eds. Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 87-120.; Howard Wechsler,

government also often focused on: institutions, bureaucracy, rulers of non-Chinese origins and their non-Chinese heritage, rulers with artistic or Daoist insights, or on individual scholar-officials who left abundant personal writings.

However, no other premodern states or empires could rival the longevity of the premodern Chinese imperial system (or more adequately called a centralized government of an emperor and Confucian bureaucrats). The Chinese imperial government lasted more than two millennia from 221 BCE, when the first emperor established the Qin dynasty, until 1912, with occasional disorder and foreign rule. This was accomplished under constant foreign menace from strong and hostile tribes and kingdoms along its long border while governing a large population most of the time. While there were certainly variations in administrative success and failure in this long period of time, the art of governance definitely was a major strength of traditional Chinese civilization. Autocracy and a court motivated by power struggle could not preserve this system for over 2000 years. The premodern Chinese dynasties were not just states with an emperor and officials. They adopted the ideology of Confucius and his followers. With the exception of the Mongol dynasty (Yuan dynasty) and the Qin dynasty of the first emperor, premodern imperial Chinese states were Confucian states, administered by Confucian officials and an emperor under the tenet of Confucian ideas. However, the nature of the Confucian government and the application of its ideas in actual governance remain to be unexplored.

There are ample studies on Chinese thought, especially on Confucianism and Daoism. However, the focus was mostly on ethics, metaphysics, rituals, religion, social relations, and in recent years, on gender relations. Confucius and his brilliant followers, Mencius and Xunzi, while they discoursed on many different aspects of human life, were nevertheless predominantly interested in governance: trying to bring about a good government and society. The Confucian ideas were later brought into the premodern Chinese state starting from the Han dynasty, when all officials were recruited based on their learning of Confucian classics and possession of Confucian virtue. However, the way in which Confucian or other Chinese ideas were implemented into Chinese governance was perhaps accepted in the most general terms by scholars, and with great reservation by Western intellectuals.

Part of this neglect in Confucian governance, especially in the West, derived from the fact that the Confucian ideas are different from if not contrary to major Western concepts or political theories. Mencius' concept of the innately good/virtuous human nature was in direct contrast with the Christian belief of an inherited sinful origin. For example, the great Victorian missionary translator of Chinese classics James Legge bitterly criticized Mencius for his advocating of a good human nature and for believing that humans could achieve great moral perfection without reliance on the force of God.⁴ The Confucian paternalistic government of humanity (*ren*) is also in conflict with Machiavellian's tenet of *Realpolitik*, different from Montesquieu's notion of checks and balances of the government, Adam Smith's self-interest

Weicheng at the Court of T'ang T'ai tsung (New Heaven, Yale University Press, 1973), 88-95. These are just a few examples.

⁴ James Legges, *The Works of Mencius: Translated with Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* (New York: Dover Publications, INC., 1970 republication of the 1895 Clarendon Press edition of *the Chinese Classics* vol.II), 56-76; Norman Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 223.

rationalized through competition, or the modern tenet of democracy in which the individuals take initiative to pursue their own happiness and well-being with a representative government.⁵

The state-building in the government of Tang Taizong provides a good case study to understand the strength of traditional Chinese Confucian government and to draw insights for our modern world.

Tang Taizong (c 597-649) is one of the most admired and accomplished Chinese emperors. He has been revered by premodern and modern Chinese as an ideal emperor, exemplifying the Confucian rule of benevolence (*renzheng*).⁶ His reign of the Zhenguan Period (626-649)⁷ was known in Chinese history as the “Fine Governance of the Zhenguan,” characterized by prosperity, fine administration and a strong empire that extended to Central Asia and controlled the Silk Road. Tujue (Turks in Mongolia) and other nomadic tribal states in the north and western frontiers addressed him as their “Heavenly Khan.”⁸ Unlike most Chinese emperors who left few works behind, Tang Taizong wrote two important works on rulership: the prose essay, “Golden Mirror,”⁹ at the beginning of his reign and the extensive work, *Difan (Models for the Emperor)* near the end of his reign. The latter work was written to prepare his heir for rulership. Even if it was written or partially written by his officials, its contents were certainly totally approved by him. His conversations on governance with his officials were later compiled into the *Zhenguan zhengyao (Essentials of Government of the Zhenguan Period)*, which became part of imperial curriculums for all later Tang as well as subsequent Chinese emperors and rulers of Japan and Korea. It was also translated into the languages of Khitan, Jurchen, Tangut, Mongolian and Manchu.¹⁰ His government was so admired by contemporary East Asian states that in the year of 645, Japan initiated a major reform, the Taika Reform (645), which transformed Japanese political institutions and culture in emulation of Tang Taizong’s government and Tang culture.

These achievements were accomplished in a short period of time. In an astonishing four years after his ascendance, Tang Taizong turned around a war-torn economy, created a fine administration and turned foreign menace to peace and a strong empire. How did he revive the economy? How did he manage foreign threats and turn menacing nomads into loyal subjects? What kind of government did he create to attain these achievements? What is the Confucian benevolent government and how was it realized in Tang Taizong’s government? How did it contribute to his success? This paper will provide some answers to these questions.

⁵ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, eds. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Charles de Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (Birmingham: Legal Classics Library, 1984); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nation*. <http://www.econlib.org/library/smith/smWN.html>.

⁶ *JTS* 3.63; *XHS* 2. 48-49; *ZGZY* Preface 1-4. Benevolent rule is a government for the well-being of the people. It employs kindness, rather than force or harsh treatment. For more details please see the section on benevolent rule.

⁷ Since the Han Dynasty, Chinese emperors created names for their reigns. After the Sui dynasty, the emperor only employed one name for his entire reign. Tang Taizong’s reign name is Zhengguan.

⁸ *JTS* 2.:9-40; *XTS* 2.31; *Taiping yulan*, 109.6b

⁹ *QTXWB* 10.135-137 ; Wu Yun, *Tang Taizong ji* (Xian: Shanxi jemin chuban she, 1986), 121-134.

¹⁰ Denis Twitchett, “How to Be an Emperor: Tang T’ai-tsung’s Vision of His Rule,” *Asia Major* IX:1-2 (1996): 5-6.

Existing Literature on the State of Tai Taizong

While there were early narratives about him, Tang Taizong was seriously brought to the Western audience when Howard Wechsler studied Wei Zheng, Tang Taizong's most famous remonstrator.¹¹ Traditional Chinese historians praised Wei Zheng as an upright remonstrator whose relationship with Tang Taizong, a receptive emperor, was hailed as a model by traditional Chinese historians. Wechsler concluded that Tang Taizong was only receptive to Zheng's remonstrance in his early years, but not afterwards.¹² In his book on the Tang ritual of legitimization, *Offerings of Jade and Silk*, Wechsler, however, perceived a concept of "gong" (public) in Tang Taizong's reign as reflected in his mausoleum in which he granted close officials burial spots surrounding him.¹³

The eminent Sinologist Denis Twitchett meticulously translated both the "Golden Mirror" and *Difan* and provided an extensive and invaluable study on the dating and historical background of the "Golden Mirror" and the text transmission of *Difan*. While Twitchett would wait for future scholars to analyze the theory of kingship and the nature of imperial authority during the Tang,¹⁴ he nevertheless agreed with Wechsler that the ideal image of the close relationship between Tang Taizong and his ministers was only valid for the first years (perhaps first decade) of his reign.¹⁵ Tang Taizong was overbearing in ambition and power afterwards. Twitchett maintained that Tang Taizong deliberately cultivated the receptive or open style of government with his officials to win their allegiance and to legitimize his position after the Xuan Wu Gate incident on July 2, 626, when Taizong killed his two rival brothers, including the heir to the throne, and probably forced his father to abdicate.¹⁶

Twitchett also maintained that the *Zhenguan zhengyao*, which recorded the conversation between Taizong and his ministers and "showed a close relationship and mutual trust and respect between ruler and his ministers," were deliberately crafted by its compiler Wu Jing. Wu created an exemplary ruler-officials image because he lived in a time of political disarray, following half century of the authoritarian rule of Empress Wu and the ineptness of her successor.¹⁷ So this image of the ideal ruler was propaganda or the nostalgia of an official from a repressive regime. Twitchett, however, did not provide evidence or examples to support his claims of propaganda regarding conversations, stories or incidents recorded in the *Zhenguan zhengyao*. I have come across accounts in the *ZGZY* which appeared in other official Tang records and history that led me to believe the authenticity of the *ZGZY*. Moreover, Twitchett concluded that the ideas in the Golden Mirror, written in the beginning of the reign, are consistent with the ideas of *Difan*,

¹¹ Remonstrators were court officials whose duty was to check and argue against any poor or inappropriate policy or behavior of the emperor.

¹² Wechsler, *Mirror to the Son of Heaven*, 4-6, 106-154.

¹³ Howard Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the Tang Dynasty* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁴ Twitchett, "How to Be an Emperor," 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6

written near the end of Tang Taizong's reign, and "it was his set intention to rule the empire in this way."¹⁸

Andrew Eisenberg believed that Tang Taizong's father intentionally expected his sons to fight out for the succession and he also argued that Tang Taizong fostered factional strife among his own sons.¹⁹ Twitchett disagreed with both of these concepts. Moreover, Twitchett stated that no one has studied or analyzed Tang Taizong's political works, "Golden Mirror" or *Difan*. He also stated that few have studied the ideas in the *Zheng kuan zheng yao*. However, they are important in understanding the government of Tang Taizong.

When Chinese historians studied Tang Taizong, they focused on his acceptance of remonstrance, while Western scholarship relied heavily on Wei Zheng's words of remonstrance. Wei, as a remonstrator, saw himself as a relentless critique who worked to keep the emperor on constant guard. Zheng's writings, therefore, comprised only a part of Tang Taizong's rulership and governance.

Sources for This Study

While secondary sources are consulted, most of the materials for this study are from primary sources: the two Tang dynasty histories and other official histories, collections on Tang government institutions, Emperor Taizong's writings, edicts, officials' memorials to Tang Taizong and the emperor's conversations with officials (*Zhenguan zhengyao*) that cover his entire 23 years of reign. Primary sources on the Tang dynasty are all in classical Chinese. This paper is the first study of Tang Taizong's state formation, for the first time using his own words, writings, edicts in addition to other contemporary writings and records on his government.

A Brief Background and Biography

Tang Taizong (this emperor's posthumous title), or Li Shimin (his birth name), descended from a North China aristocratic family. His ancestors held offices in the Northern Dynasties during almost three centuries of North-South division (316-598), when northern China was ruled by the invading nomadic tribes. His ancestors intermarried with sinicized nomadic aristocrats. Shimin's mother Ms Dou excelled in Chinese calligraphy, and his wife Empress Zhangsun, was well versed in Chinese classics, but they were both of non-Chinese descent.²⁰ Li Shimin was the second son of Li Yuan, who served as a governor under the short Sui Dynasty (589-617) that ended the era of the North-South division and unified China. In 617, Li Yuan rebelled against the unpopular Sui emperor Yangdi. Shimin, a great cavalry fighter, strategist and commander, defeated various rivals for the throne in the next several years, and helped his father to establish the Tang dynasty. Shimin's great military achievements, however, created a fierce rivalry with his two brothers, the crown prince and a younger brother. In 626, in a bloody

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Eisenberg, "A Study in Court Factionalism," 39-69.

²⁰ *JTS* 51. 2163-2167; *ZZTJ* 194.978-980; *Taiping yulan*, 141.2a-b..

incident at Xuan-wu Gate, Shimin and his forces killed the two brothers. Two months later, his father retired and Li Shimin ascended the throne at age 29.²¹

Although he gained ascendance through the most undesirable way and was criticized by traditional Chinese historians for this,²² Tang Taizong nevertheless built what was probably China's finest government and laid down a strong foundation for the almost 300 years of the Tang dynasty (618-907). The Tang dynasty was known in Chinese history for its excellent administration, strong empire, fine poetry and a cosmopolitan culture, with Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism flourishing side by side.²³

However, when Tang Taizong ascended the throne in 626, he faced a war-torn economy resulting from a decade of internal conflicts and foreign invasions. Moreover, the new Tang dynasty was only established for nine years and mostly in wars, and the supporters of Shimin's two slain brothers were also sources of dissent in the new government.

I will first discuss the new dynasty's economic problems and Tang Taizong's solutions, the ideas behind the Confucian benevolent state he created and the strong empire and foreign affairs he managed. But I will also explore the government Tang Taizong built because it was this fine government that created sound policies and implemented them successfully.

Economic Problems and the Solutions

When Tang Taizong ascended the throne in 626, he faced a devastating economic crisis. The Tang dynasty was based on an agrarian economy. However, more than a decade of wars among rivalry forces for the throne since the end of the Sui dynasty and frequent invasions from the powerful nomadic Tujue had seriously damaged agricultural production, depopulated certain regions and drastically reduced the productive population as people died, fled or were forced into conscription or enslaved by rebels or invaders. In the eleventh year of Zhenguan, for example, the high ranking court official Ma Zhou still maintained that the dynasty's population was well short of the heydays of the preceding Sui dynasty.²⁴ The extant census records from 609-742 indeed showed a significant lower population in the northern plain and near the capital region. Moreover, in the first couple years of Tang Taizong's reign, there was also the natural disaster of poor harvest and famine in north China.²⁵

Tang Taizong and his officials adopted the Equal Field system of the earlier Northern Wei and other northern dynasties by distributing lands to the farmers and taxing them accordingly and in kind. Males between the age of 16 to 60 were eligible to receive farmland for cultivation and returned 80% of the land after reaching age 60, when they ceased to be tax payers. They, however, kept the other 20% of the land which was used to cultivate mulberry trees or hemp to supplement the family income from grain. Although exempt from taxes, males

²¹ *JTS* 1.17; *XTS* 1-19. also Lily Hwa, "Tang Taizong," in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, eds William H McNeill et al., 2005, 1802-1804.

²² *JTS* 3.63; *XTS* 2. 48-49.

²³ Denis Twitchett and Arthur Wright, eds., *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang Dynasty*, vol. 3 pt.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 32-38.

²⁴ *THY* 83.1531; *ZGZY* 6.207-208.

²⁵ *JTS* 2.32-33; *XTS* 2.28-29.

over age 60, widows, monks, nuns and the sick or disabled could receive reduced amount of cultivated land to support themselves. Besides paying taxes in kind, all eligible males were also conscripted for a 20- day annual labor service and 10- day frontier service that could be converted to money in substitute.²⁶ The tax rate was very low: 1/40 of a farmer's annual income. Tang Taizong also exempted certain regions' taxes in time of poor harvest and established public granaries in all districts and prefects to distribute grains in times of famine.²⁷ Extensive warfare had created many vacant lands, and the early Tang kept a good census of the population so that the distribution and return of the land could be carried out smoothly.

To restore an agrarian economy, it is also important to increase the population-- the productive force. Tang Taizong took various measures to increase the population. The government ransomed back people sold into slavery or captured by the nomads, i.e., Tujue.²⁸ Tang Taizong also encouraged the timely formation of families for young men and girls. In 626, he ordered local governments to assist the marriage of unmarried males above age 20 and unwed girls above age 15 and asked wealthy clansmen or villagers to provide the needed dowry or bridal money.²⁹ He also had the government bury the dead from years of wars to put an end to turbulence and destruction and allow people get back to their lives.³⁰

To maintain low taxes and to allow people time to build prosperous and normal lives, Tang Taizong was frugal in government spending and avoided disturbing farmers' lives, especially not interrupting the farming schedule (time for plowing, seeding and harvest). In the early years, he would not build a small pavilion in the summer because it was costly, even though the humid palace affected his respiratory problems.³¹ He also avoided wars and the conscription of corvee labor.

To build a good economy and a good livelihood for the people, it was essential to stop invasions. Since the Tang dynasty defeated all rival forces and unified China in 622, the Tujue frequently invaded the Tang territory.³² The Tujue advanced near the capital when Tang Taizong's ascended the throne in 626. Taizong, a known cavalry hero who had never lost a battle, personally came to face the invading army. With strategy and conciliatory measure, the Tujue withdrew.³³ This temporary peace gave farmers time to recover. By the fourth year of Zhenguan, the official Tang dynastic histories that were compiled by serious court historians of later dynasties recorded this scene of prosperity. "The price of the grain was cheap. Cows and horses grazed freely in the field, people did not lock their outside doors, and there were few people in the jail. Merchants were no longer bothered by the bandits, the powerful families no longer dared to threaten the small people and in some regions people did not need to bring

²⁶ *Tang liudian*, 3.73-79; *Tang huiyao*, 83.1530-31; Denis Twitchett, *Financial Administration of the Tang Dynasty* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1-6, 24-31, 97-106; Chen Min-guang, *Han Tang caizheng shi lun* (Zhang sha: Yueh lu shuju, 2003), 88-95. 1-6; Ma Duanlin, *Wenxian tongkao*, 2.41-43.

²⁷ *JTS* 2.32; *QTXWB* 4.43.44.

²⁸ *JTS* 2.33-34, 3.41; *XTS* 2. 19-31; *QTX* 8.84; *Taiping yulan*, 109.6a

²⁹ *XTS* 2.27; *THY* 83.1257; *QTXWB* 4.42.

³⁰ *JTS* 2.34; *QTXWB* 4.45-46.

³¹ *QTXWB* 9.102.

³² *JTS* 1.13-16 ; *XTS* 1.19

³³ *JTS* 2.21-22, 30; *XTS* 2. 2:26-27.

provisions when traveling because they receive the hospitality of the people on the road.”³⁴ But this prosperity was attained not just on grounds of temporary peace; it was also attained following the defeat of Tujue in the fourth year of Zhenguan.³⁵

The Building of a Fine Government

Effective policies needed to be developed and executed by a fine administration. Tang Taizong used a number of measures to build a fine and effective government.

a. On the Employment of Capable Officials

Tang Taizong believed that it was most important to employ worthy officials. In *Difan (Models for the Emperor)*, he told his heir:

In the governance of a state, one must use the assistance of the loyal and virtuous. If the right persons were employed, all under the Heaven shall be ruled well... just like boats rely on the oarsmen to cross the ocean, and the wild swan relies on its feathers and wings to soar; emperors and kings rely on the assistance of grand advisors to govern. It is laborious to seek them, but once they are employed, one can be at ease....³⁶

Since he was in his late teenage years, when he raised an army to assist his father’s ambition for the throne, Tang Taizong had always humbled himself to seek the most capable civilian advisors or military men to assist him, and he had the ability to win the devotion of his defeated enemies’ gifted advisors or generals.³⁷ Some of his most trusted and influential advisors and generals were the subordinates of his former enemies. But he did not bribe them or force them to serve him. He allowed them to formally mourn their former leaders and entered into a responsible and amicable ruler-official relationship with them.³⁸

Tang Taizong adopted the civil service exam as a means to recruit officials³⁹ and was eager to seek the most capable persons. In *Difan* he told his heir:

How can the possession of pearls whose brilliance is visible twelve chariot-lengths away, or a piles of thousands of pieces of pure gold compare to the abundance of having many officials or to the great value of a single sage-worthy?⁴⁰

Tang Taizong not only sought worthy persons, but was especially gifted in employing people in positions that matched their talent and ability. As he told his heir in *Difan*:

Therefore the enlightened ruler’s employment of men is like the skilled carpenter’s cutting timber: he makes a cart’s shafts out of the straight timber and the wheel from the

³⁴ JTS 3.41; ZGZY 1.24.

³⁵ JTS 3.39; XTS 2.31; ZGZY 1.24.

³⁶ *Difan* 3.12b-13a.

³⁷ JTS 2.22-25; XTS 2.24.

³⁸ JTS 2. 24-25; XTS 2. 24; ZGZY 5.150-151, 153.

³⁹ *Tang zhiyan*, 15.159. Tang Taizong was very pleased with the exam to recruit the most talented officials.

⁴⁰ Twitchett, “How to Be an Emperor,” 66.

curved pieces; he uses the long timbers for rafters and ridgepoles and the short pieces for roof brackets and eaves-rafters. Without question, whether it is straight or curved, long or short, every piece of timber has some use to which it can be deployed. The enlightened ruler's employment of men is also like this. From the wise he takes their counsel; from the foolish he takes their strength; from the valiant he takes their awesome majesty; from the cowardly he takes their prudence⁴¹

Tang Taizong, however, was quick to punish abusive officials, and he would not appoint flatterers and sycophants whom he considered liable to cause the fall of a dynasty.⁴² He especially warned his heir to expel these people because "with an insinuating appearance and fine words, they gain themselves intimacy with the ruler. They anticipate (the ruler's) will and accept his instructions in order to gratify their prince....if the ignorant ruler follows the suggestions of sycophants, his life will be brought to destruction, even though (the poison) is sweet to the taste."⁴³

However, he conceded that it was difficult to detect these people; "now the appearance of (these) men is the same as the eyelashes; although they are so close to the eyes, one cannot see them for oneself. How much more is the case, when right and wrong reside in formless shapes; how can one perceive them for oneself?"⁴⁴

The Tang dynasty also had censors who belonged to an independent department, the Censorate. Censors of various ranks checked for abuses or malfeasance of officials in the central or local government each year.⁴⁵ The position of censors was established in the Qin dynasty and the Han dynasty, but they were entrusted to forcefully carry out their work in the Tang dynasty and thereafter.⁴⁶

Tang Taizong still wanted to make sure he employed the right people to govern. He considered local prefects most important for good governance because they directly governed the people. In the beginning of his reign, Tang Taizong wrote down the names and listed the works of all his provincial prefects in the screen of his bedchamber, so he knew if he had chosen the right person for the position.⁴⁷ He even sent people to bribe local prefects or officials to test their characters. He soon abandoned the practice after complaints from top officials for setting up traps.⁴⁸ Because of his keen observation, Tang Taizong was familiar with the ability of his top officials. He once told officials in detail their strength and weakness.⁴⁹ His continuous seeking of capable officials and the ability to employ them in positions suitable for their talent was a great strength of his administration.

⁴¹ Ibid., 66-67

⁴² Ibid., 72

⁴³ Ibid., 74-75

⁴⁴ Ibid., 75

⁴⁵ *JTS* 44.1861-1863; *XTS* 48 1235-124. *Tang liudian* 13. 377-388.

⁴⁶ Charles Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China* (Standard University Press, 1966), 1-25.

⁴⁷ *ZGZY* 3. 89, 90-91.

⁴⁸ *ZZTJ* 192.830; *Tang yulin*, 1.13.

⁴⁹ *ZGZY* 3. 35, 40, 43, 45.

b. Share Rule with Officials

Besides seeking the most capable persons from all sources as his officials, Tang Taizong also shared rule with his chief ministers, encouraged the submission of ideas and remonstrance against inappropriate policies. He also demanded group wisdom in policy deliberation and decision making.

Tang Taizong perceived the *tienxia* (all under the Heaven, the dynasty or empire) couldn't be governed by the emperor alone; he should rule with the joined efforts of his officials. In 629, when Xiao Yu praised Wendi of the preceding Sui dynasty for his diligence in governance, Tang Taizong disagreed and criticized Sui Wendi for not trusting officials and making personal decisions on every government matter. He concluded that Sui Wendi labored himself, but did not produce all good results. Tang Taizong asked, "how could an emperor with ten thousand things in a day and rely only on his own decisions?"⁵⁰

Throughout his reign, Tang Taizong repeatedly stated that he couldn't rule alone, but needed the assistance of officials.⁵¹ Even near the end of his reign, he still credited his achievement to the joined effort of his able officials: "How could I alone attain all these achievements in the past twenty and more years? With the blessing of Heaven and Earth and the good fortune of the state that able gentlemen assisted me; civilian men contributed their talents and wisdom and military personnel established distinction with their military strength."⁵²

But Tang Taizong also relied on group wisdom and group decisions. His government employed multiple chief ministers. Tang central government had three major departments to work on the deliberation of decisions. The Department of Imperial Secretariat drew edicts, the Department of Chancellery reviewed them and could reject the edict, and the Department of State executed the approved edicts. To save time, Taizong ordered that the head and deputy of these three departments meet in the Council of State to discuss policy. Other officials with an added title could also participate in the meeting. All the participants were chief ministers, and each took a turn to record the decision. An edict was then co-signed by the chief minister and the emperor for implementation.⁵³ The policy was then carried out in well-established and efficient branches of central and local government.⁵⁴

Despite these various careful procedures on policy deliberation, Taizong, however, still wished that decisions and policies had been further scrutinized, so he encouraged remonstrance.

⁵⁰ ZGZY 1.15; QTWXB 9.103.

⁵¹ QTWXB 9.101.

⁵² QTWXB 10.127.

⁵³ XTS 46.1181-1183; Wu Zongguo, *Zheng Tang zheng zhi zhidu yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shanhai cishu chuban she, 2003), 8, 26-27, 32-36. Wu Zongguo ed., *Zhongguo gudai guanliao zhidu yanjiu* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chuban, 2004), 133-221

⁵⁴ For the structure and functions of the local and central government of the Tang dynasty, please see *Tang liudian*.

c. Encouraging and Accepting Remonstrance

Tang Taizong is remembered in history especially for his encouragement, tolerance and acceptance of remonstrance, and he complained when officials did not remonstrate against him⁵⁵.

The practice of official remonstrance against the policy or conduct of the ruler had existed since the Qin and Han dynasties.⁵⁶ Together with the censors, who investigated official malfeasance, remonstrators were part of the internal checks and balances of pre-modern Chinese bureaucracy. Although remonstrators did not have the authority to force the emperors to accept their views, they had moral power. Remonstrators, like censors, were usually officials of high integrity. The emperors could and sometimes did punish a remonstrator, but it did not earn the emperor a good reputation in his own time and in history if he arbitrarily punished remonstrators who voiced sound advice. Remonstrance, however, remained dangerous work for officials because few people would like to hear disagreement or criticisms, especially people in power, and particularly an all-powerful emperor.

The Tang dynasty established several remonstrators with different official ranks, and they belonged to the Department of Chancellery, but sometimes the Department of Imperial Secretariat also had remonstrators. During the Tang dynasty, remonstrators, like the censors, were considered the officials of the “pure and essential” (qin yao) who eventually faced the prospect of becoming chief ministers.⁵⁷ Unlike other emperors, Tang Taizong tolerated and actively sought remonstrance not just from remonstrators, but all high officials, and complained when they were mute.

Tang Taizong often reminded the high officials that it was to their own advantage to correct the emperor’s mistakes, so they could also preserve their official career in the dynasty. In the beginning of Zhenguan, Tang Taizong told attending officials:

A person uses a bright mirror to see himself and a ruler relies on loyal officials to see his mistakes. If a ruler is proud of his own ability and the officials do not correct and assist him, it is difficult to avoid danger and destruction. If a ruler lost his state, the officials also could not preserve their families. Yangdi of the Sui dynasty was tyrannical. His officials were silent and he never heard his fault and his dynasty was destroyed. [His officials], like Lu Shiji, were also executed. This is only a recent example. Whenever you see things not beneficial to the people, you should present strong remonstrance to me.⁵⁸

Tang Taizong had a majestic and sober appearance. When officials saw him, they were fearful and often could not act normally. The emperor knew this, so whenever officials presented opinions, he listened with kind countenance, so he could hear remonstrance and know the strength and weakness of his policies.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *QTXWB* 9.101; *ZGZY* 1.10, 14-15, 16-17,23, 2.46-48, 53, 63, 3.77, 10.282; *Taiping yulan*, 205.1a.

⁵⁶ *JTS* 43.1844; *Tongdian*, 1a, 11b-2b; *Tang liudian*, 8.246-248

⁵⁷ *JTS* 43.1844-45; *XTS* 47. 1205-127; *Tongdian*, 21. 18a-19b.

⁵⁸ *ZGZY* 2.46.

⁵⁹ *ZGZY* 2.46, 4.52; *ZZTJ* 192.6040.

Hearing remonstrance was not always easy for Tang Taizong. He often received remonstrance that argued not only regarding his policies but also his personal affairs. Some of them affected his personal comfort, his family and his pride and were not always easy for him to take, although he usually accepted the remonstrance and often rewarded the presenters with bolts of silk.⁶⁰

Tang Taizong's most candid and persistent critic was Wei Zheng,⁶¹ who not only remonstrated the emperor's orders and personal affairs, but also frequently presented lengthy discussions on state policies. The emperor accepted most of Wei Zheng's remonstrance even when they were against matters dear to his heart, such as reducing the dowry of his most favorite daughter and tearing down the memorial gate of his beloved wife because he did not construct one for his father.⁶² At one time, the emperor was very angry, and he stormed back to the palace, telling his empress that he would kill this farmer Wei Zheng because he humiliated him in front of all the officials. Empress Zhangsun then wore formal court attire to congratulate the emperor, because only an enlightened ruler would have had such an upright official. She turned the emperor's anger to joy.⁶³

Tang Taizong called Wei Zheng a mirror that allowed him to see his mistakes. He kept Wei Zheng at his side to frequently remonstrate against him. In the eighth year of Zhenguan, when prominent general and chief minister Li Jing suggested sending Wei Zheng to a mission to the provinces, Tang Taizong angrily replied that he needed Wei Zheng at the court to remonstrate him. He then dispatched Li Jing to this provincial mission.⁶⁴

In the seventeenth year of Zhenguan, when Wei Zheng was ill and stayed in his home, Tang Taizong sent him medicine and sent many envoys to visit him, and he even had one imperial envoy stay in Zheng's dwelling to report any change of Zheng's condition. Tang Taizong sent Wei Zheng this letter:

How is your illness, did you get any better? You have been ill for a long time. Your face and words are distant. Now I know how difficult it is to manage the state and the family. Lately I have been trying to do it myself and it was quite laborious and exhausting. Now I know the truth of the saying that it is effortless to employ people and laborious to do it oneself. You can understand that I am thinking of you. A letter cannot express all my thought, so I just sent a few words.⁶⁵

Before the death of Wei Zheng, Tang Taizong brought the crown prince and princess Hengshan to Wei Zheng's home to visit him in person, and told him that he would marry princess Hengshan to his son.⁶⁶ After the death of Wei Zheng, Tang Taizong sadly commented:

⁶⁰ ZGZY 2.50, 52, 57.

⁶¹ For more information on Wei Zheng's life, please see Wechsler, *Mirror to the Son of Heaven: Wei-cheng at the Court of Tang Taizong* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁶² JTS 51.2165-66; ZJTJ 194.980-981.

⁶³ ZJTJ 194.6095-6096.

⁶⁴ ZGZY 5.155-156.

⁶⁵ QTWXB 9.91.

⁶⁶ ZJTJ 196.6183-84.

When one uses a bronze mirror, one can adjust clothes and cap; when one uses the ancients as a mirror, one knows the reasons behind the rise and fall [of a state], and when one uses a person as a mirror, one can see one's success and missteps. I always keep these three mirrors to prevent making mistakes. Now that Wei Zheng has died, I lost one mirror.⁶⁷

It will be a mistake to think that Tang Taizong accepted all remonstrance and rewarded all who spoke against him. He actually punished officials whose words he regarded as irrelevant, bad, or self-motivated.⁶⁸ Another important aspect of remonstrance at the court of Tang Taizong has also been largely overlooked. All the arguments by traditional and modern historians on Tang Taizong focus on his encouragement and acceptance of remonstrance. Actually, he also asked his officials to be accountable for their conduct and policies and accept criticism. In the first year of Zhenguan, he ordered remonstrators to attend the chief minister's meeting on policy discussions, so they could remonstrate during the formation of policies rather than arguing against a decision.⁶⁹ In the fifth year of Zhenguan, he also told his high officials that besides remonstrating against the emperor, they themselves should also be humbly accepting remonstrance and said, "if you cannot accept remonstrance, how can you remonstrate other people?"⁷⁰ Therefore, this author argues that behind the brilliant rule of the Zhenguan government, there was a transparent court. In this court, emperor and officials were all subjected to criticism for all their behavior and policies in order to attain good governance and preserve the good achievement throughout the reign. Consequently, Tang Taizong and his officials also all followed the established laws, and no imperial kin or powerful officials dared to abuse their position.

d. The Self-Restrained Emperor

Tang Taizong consciously and constantly restrained his own wishes and desired to set up a good example for his officials. As he instructed his heir in *Difan*:

If the prince does not restrain himself, and yet tries to prohibit the people from doing wrong, it will be like being incensed about the burning of a fire and adding more firewood in the hope of stopping it blazing, or like being angry that a pool is muddy and stirring it up into waves in the hope that this will make it flow clear. It is simply impossible to accomplish. It is much better first to correct yourself. Then the people will be transformed without your uttering a word."⁷¹

As mentioned earlier, Tang Taizaong believed that a ruler's practice of frugality, especially in restraining sensual pleasure, palace construction, treasure gathering, and excessive traveling were crucial to people's livelihood because reduced imperial expenses would lighten the taxes or corvee levies on people and avoid interrupting the farming schedule.⁷² Tang Taizong took special efforts, especially in his early years, to restrict spending on himself, even at the

⁶⁷ *QTXWB* 113.

⁶⁸ *ZGZY* 2.6, 14, 5.155-156, 6.212; *Tang yulin*, 1.10.

⁶⁹ *ZGZY* 4.49-50.

⁷⁰ *ZGZY* 4.49-50.

⁷¹ Twitchett, "How to Be an Emperor," 85.

⁷² *ZGZY* 1.1

expense of his own health. As mentioned earlier, in the second year of Zhenguan, he refused officials' request to construct a pavilion to escape the summer heat and explained the reason:

I have respiratory problems, and it is not suitable to live in a low and humid place (his current palace). However, if I grant your request [to build a high pavilion], it will cost a substantial amount of money. In the past when Wendi of the Han dynasty wanted to build a terrace, he dropped the plan because he worried that the cost was equivalent to ten family's fortunes. My virtue can not be compared with that of Han Wendi, but the cost of a pavilion exceeds [that of a terrace]. To build a Pavilion is not the way of being the parent of the people.⁷³

In his prose "the Golden Mirror," he revealed the dilemma of self-restraint, "A ruler who worries about the state restrains his own wishes and desire to make all the people happy. This is the ruler whose people rejoice. This is not an easy thing for a ruler (i.e., even common people want to fulfill their wishes and desires)."⁷⁴

A Benevolent Government

Tang Taizong's reign was hailed by Chinese historians as exemplifying the Confucian benevolent government. Taizong himself also credited his success to the practice of the Confucian benevolent rule, and he talked about this from the beginning until the end of his reign. He praised the legendary sage kings Yao and Xun for their governance with benevolence and declared, "I only love the way of Yao and Xun and the teaching of Duke of Zhou and Confucius. To me they are like the wings to the birds or water to the fish: they can not be dispensable for a moment."⁷⁵

Later in his reign, Tang Taizong credited his success to the practice of benevolence and singled out Wei Zheng for promoting it.

At the beginning of the Zhenguan, people had different views on governance and said that this was not a time to practice the kingly way of benevolence. Only Wei Zheng persuaded me to practice it. I followed his words and in a few years attained great peace in all Chinese domains. Foreign tribes were also submissive. Since the ancient times, the Tujue have been a fierce enemy of China. Now their chieftains carried swords to be my guards and the tribesmen adopted our cultural practices. It was the efforts of Wei Zheng that made me attain these achievements.⁷⁶

How did Tang Taizong actually apply the Confucian benevolent rule in government?

Tang Taizong considered good government to be rooted in providing the people with a good livelihood. Therefore, it was important not to interfere with their farming schedule (the specific times for plowing, seeding and harvest), or to levy heavy taxes. To attain this flexibility,

⁷³ *QTXB* 9.102.

⁷⁴ *QTXB* 21.195.

⁷⁵ *ZGZY* 21.195.

⁷⁶ *ZGZY* 2. 18-19; *Tang yulin*, also verified this account as it recorded a debate between Wei Zheng and other officials on the application of a benevolent rule in the beginning of the Zhenguan period. *Tang yulin*, 1-11-12.

the ruler needed to be frugal and to restrain from indulging in luxurious habits, palace constructions or the launching of wars. In the second year of Zhenquan, Tang Taizong told the attending officials:

One should focus on the fundamentals. People are the base of the state, and food and clothing are the essentials for people. To provide sufficient food and clothing for the people, it is important not to interrupt the farming schedule. This can be achieved by the frugality and tranquility of the emperor. If there is constant warfare and continuous construction, it is impossible not to deprive people of their necessary schedule of farming.”⁷⁷

Tang Taizong collected light taxes and adopted measures to improve people’s livelihood and restore order and peace. Tang Taizong also promoted the Confucian virtues of filial piety, fraternity and frugality among his people.⁷⁸

Benevolence, in short is a rule of humanity, loving and nurturing the people. Taizong also reformed penal codes to reduce cruel punishment and exercised caution and leniency regarding the death penalty. The Tang Penal code became the foundation for the penal laws of later dynasties.⁷⁹ Tang Taizong ordered first three, then five reviews for a death penalty and refrained from meat and wine and ordered no music in the palace on the date of an execution.⁸⁰

Tang Taizong’s practices were in accordance with ideas in the Confucian classics, especially the Mencius.⁸¹ However, Tang Taizong didn’t receive inspiration solely from Confucian ideas. He honored Laozi as his ancestor and renovated the temple of Laozi.⁸² He openly praised the rule of *wuwei*. In many of his conversations with officials, he used Daoist terms, such as *qinjing* (purity and tranquility). For example, in the ninth year of Zhenguan, Tang Taizong told officials that Sui Yangdi’s excessive levies, luxuries and wars contributed to the downfall of the Sui dynasty. Therefore, “days and nights I earnestly pursue purity and tranquility [*qinjing*], so all under the Heaven will be peaceful and quiet. There is no corvee labor (for construction work), the harvest is abundant and people are peaceful and joyful.”⁸³ Even the word “frugality” is not just a Confucian word, but is a central theme in Daoism.⁸⁴ The emperor that Tang Taizong admired the most, Wendi of the Han dynasty, for example, was known in history for practicing the Huang-lao idea of *wuwei*.⁸⁵ Moreover, the advisor Taizong praised most for advising him, Wei Zheng, was once a Daoist who wrote a commentary on Laozi.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ ZGZY 2.22, 30.237-238.

⁷⁸ QTWXB 6.58, 7.69

⁷⁹ QTWXB 9.94, 5.48.

⁸⁰ JTS 2.40-41; XTS 2.33; QTWXB 9.94; ZGZY 8.244.

⁸¹ Please see *Mencius*. Translated by James Legge, 129-136.

⁸² JTS 3.48.

⁸³ ZGZY 2.22.

⁸⁴ Please see Daodejing; Lily Hwa, “The Influence of the Tao-te-ching on Emperor T’ang T’ai-tsung (r. 626-49): A Reexamination of His Enlightened Reign,” paper presented at the American Historical Association 110 annual Meeting, 1996.

⁸⁵ Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy, eds., *Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 982-988; ZJTJ 15.491-497.

⁸⁶ Wei Cheng. *Lao zi in chun shu chih yao*, 1-32.

Despite their notable public differences, there are many similarities between Confucianism and Daoism, especially in aspects of governance. They both favored benevolent rule with little disruption of people from heavy taxation, corvee labor and warfare.⁸⁷ As this author argued in 1996 that Daoist ideas besides providing a much needed rest following periods of wars, can contribute to the success of the most active ruler, like Tang Taizong.⁸⁸

Foreign Affairs

In the third month of the fourth year of Zhenguan, Tang Taizong's general Li Jing defeated and captured the leader of Tujue, the most formidable threat of the Tang dynasty. One month later, nomadic tribes and kingdoms in the north and northwest offered Tang Taizong the title "Heavenly Khan" and accepted him as their supreme leader.⁸⁹ Tujue was in modern day Mongolia, and in the sixth century had built a large empire all the way to the Black Sea.⁹⁰ In the late sixth century, Tujue split into two groups, the Eastern Tujue and the Western Tujue, but they were still very powerful, especially the Eastern Tujue who resided just north of China. Almost all the contenders for the throne at the end of the Sui dynasty, including Taizong's father, sought the Eastern Tujue's assistance and subjugated themselves to the Eastern Tujue.⁹¹ After the Tang successfully defeated all rival forces and unified the empire in 621, the Eastern Tujue frequently invaded and was the dynasty's most serious threat.⁹²

How did Tang Taizong completely defeat the Eastern Tujue, dissolve their empire, and become the "Heavenly Khan" of many other nomadic tribal kingdoms in such a short period of time? How did he maintain general peace? There were few cases of brief resistance in his 23 years' reign. In the eighth and 15th year of Zhenguan, Taizong's generals also defeated two other strong and often hostile nomadic kingdoms, Tuyuhun (in the region around Koko Nor) and Xueyangtuo (Syr Tardush) respectively.⁹³ Otherwise, Tang Taizong had built a strong empire with relative ease.

Tang Taizong used different approaches to deal with different situations. Tujue (actually Eastern Tujue, also called Northern Tujue) was his most serious threat. But in his early reign, he adopted a conciliatory measure because he could not engage in war with them. In the first three years of his reign, he rebuilt the economy and also personally trained his troops. Tang Taizong was a superior cavalry fighter who excelled in defeating large enemy troops with small bands of cavalry.⁹⁴ Two months after his ascendance in 625, to the astonishment of his court officials, Tang Taizong gathered several hundred of his cavalry troops and their leaders in front of his palace courtyard and taught them shooting skills every day, rewarding those with good skills with gold and bolts of clothing. He told them:

⁸⁷ See *Mencius* and *Daodejing*

⁸⁸ Lily Hwa, "The Influence of Tao te-ching on T'ang Tai-tsung" paper presented at the American Historical Association, 1996.

⁸⁹ *JTS* 3.39-40; *XTS* 2.31. *CFYG* 170.2052.

⁹⁰ *JTS* 194.5153-5156; *XTS* 215. 6023-6028, 628-630.

⁹¹ *ZGZY* 2.37-38; *THY* 94.1687-1695; Lu Simien, *SuiTang wudai shi [A History of the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties]* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1. 76.

⁹² *JTS* 1.11-16, 2.30; *XTS* 1.15-19.

⁹³ *JTS* 3.39-61; *XTS* 2.31-47; *THY* 96.1726-1729.

⁹⁴ *JTS* 2.21-22.

...the rulers from the Han and Jin to the Sui dynasties did not have soldiers to frequently practice military skills. Therefore, when Tujue invaded, they could not resist, and the people suffered in the hands of Tujue.⁹⁵ I will not labor you to build pavilions and ponds, and will allow farmers to enjoy a leisure and happy life. Soldiers only learn shooting and riding, so when you are at wars, you will have no rivals.⁹⁶

In 629-630, he employed a capable general Li Jing to defeat Eastern Tujue.⁹⁷ This great success was also attained at a time when the Tujue was weakened by internal dissent and discontent from subordinated tribes.⁹⁸

Although Tang Taizong had built a strong military force, he was hesitant to use that force and only used it when there was no other choice—Eastern Tujue, for example, frequently invaded the Tang dynasty and were right above its northern border, so the war was necessary. In other situations, he preferred strategies of alliance and diplomacy, such as marrying Tang princesses to the leaders of foreign kingdoms.⁹⁹ Therefore in 641, he married Princess Wen-cheng to the leader of Tufan (Tibet), secured peace, and fended off its invasion for most of the Tang dynasty.¹⁰⁰ This marriage was most successful politically. Princess Wen-cheng was a devoted Buddhist and brought Buddhism and sericulture to Tibet. The Tibetans liked her and built a temple to honor her, and there was no invasion when she was alive. Another nomadic group, the Xueyantuo, invaded the Tang border during the time of Tang Taizong's father and were also at war with his troops. After consulting with his top officials, he promised to marry Princess Xinxing to its leader to forge a good relationship and secure the border. Tang Taizong reasoned that Xueyantuo women were politically powerful. When the Tang princess bore a son to their leader, the son would be his nephew and would not invade the Tang land. Therefore, he would at least have 30 years of peace.¹⁰¹ Tang Taizong also avoided wars when they were costly and did not benefit the dynasty. So he turned down a few requests for wars and even refused to accept the submission of some tribal leaders in the south because he did not want to engage in costly and non-essential conflicts with their rivals.¹⁰²

His only failure in foreign policy was his unsuccessful attacks on the North Korean state of Koguryo in 645 and 647 when an internal coup replaced the Koguryo ruler. The new ruler suppressed his officials and also attacked its neighbor state, Silla which had a strong relationship with Tang.¹⁰³ Tang Taizong later regretted the war, saying that if Wei Zheng was alive, he would

⁹⁵ After the defeat of Eastern Tujue, Tang Taizong secured the release of over 80,000 Han Chinese from Tujue. Please see *JTS* 3.41; *XTS* 2.32.

⁹⁶ *JTS* 2.30-31. Lu Simien, *SuiTang Wudai shi*, vol. 1, 88-91.

⁹⁷ *ZGZY* 2.37-38.

⁹⁸ Chen Yinko, *Chen Yin-ko xiansheng quanji*, 2 vols (Taipei: Jiu si chuban she, 1977), 274-278.

⁹⁹ Wang Shouan, "Tangdai di heqing zhengce" *Tangdai yanjiu luncong*, v.4 (Taipei: Xin wenxue xhuban she, 1992), 141-175.

¹⁰⁰ *JTS* 3.52; 196.5219-5224; *THY* 97.1730-1731.

¹⁰¹ *JTS* 3.52; *ZGZY* 9.262-263; *THY* 96.1726. The marriage however, did not happen because Xueyantuo's chief did not come to meet with Tang Taizong. Tang Taizong, nevertheless, married another princess to the chief of another nomadic kingdom, the Tu kuyun.

¹⁰² *JTS* 3.52; *ZGZY* 9.261-263; *THY* 97.1729-1731.

¹⁰³ *THY* 95.1704-1709.

never have allowed him to launch it.¹⁰⁴ Some scholars maintained that Silla that joined the campaign had persuaded Tang Taizong to act.¹⁰⁵ The Korean campaigns were, however, still relatively small in scale and did not create serious problems for Tang Taizong.

Besides fostering good relationships and being cautious in the use of force, Tang Taizong's lenient and kind treatment of the subordinated nomadic leaders and their subjects was crucial to the success of his empire that attracted allegiance rather than resistance. Tang Taizong usually appointed the submitted nomadic leaders head of their state or their son as the leader if the father fought the Tang dynasty. Tang Taizong granted them hereditary succession with little interference in their internal affairs, although they were brought under the umbrella of the Tang empire and with the establishment of special Tang administrative units.¹⁰⁶ Even after the leader of his fierce enemy, Jieli Khan of the Tujue, was captured and brought to the Tang capital Zhangan, Jieli was not placed in confinement, but received a Tang official title, although he did not have a desirable life like he used to.¹⁰⁷ Tang Taizong actually appointed more than 100 Tujue and other nomadic generals as Tang generals with higher ranks—five and above in a nine rank official system and nomadic generals constituted a sizable number of his court officials.¹⁰⁸ The appointment of these nomadic generals cemented the loyalty of various nomadic tribes and kingdoms and provided him with a formidable fighting force against other hostile nomadic tribes and kingdoms. But it was his genuine acceptance and appreciation of their talents that won their allegiance to him.¹⁰⁹

In 630, after defeating Eastern Tujue, Tang Taizong, despite the opposition from some officials, allowed the Tujue tribesmen to settle in China, with about 10,000 Tujue families in the capital city of Zhangan.¹¹⁰ Later, in 639, after an assassination attempt by a disgruntled Tujue royal general, Tang Taizong transferred them back to their previous homeland. However, many of them preferred to stay in an agrarian society and the cosmopolitan capital city of Zhangan. Moreover, they were also attacked by the fierce neighbor Xueyantuo, so they soon moved back to Tang districts.¹¹¹ Tang Taizong also ransomed back nomads' captured clansmen from other nomads, like he did for his Han Chinese subjects.¹¹²

Tang Taizong's all embracing attitude toward and treatment of his nomadic subjects derived in part from his partial nomadic background, but it was also from his personal attribution. Since fighting to establish the Tang dynasty in his late teenage years, Tang Taizong had been persistent in accepting and employing capable officials of various backgrounds, even

¹⁰⁴ *ZZTJ* 198.6230; *Tang yulin*, 1.12.

¹⁰⁵ Wang Xiaofu, ed., *Sheng tang shidai yu dongbeiyu zhengju* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2003), 5-9, 54-78.

¹⁰⁶ *JTS* 2.37, 39-40, 3. 44-45; *XTS* 2.31, 33; *QTXWB* 4.37; *Tang da zhaoling ji*, 695-698.

¹⁰⁷ *JTS* 1.17-18.

¹⁰⁸ *ZGZY* 9.275; Zhang Guogang, *Taidai fanzhen yanjiu* [A Study of the nomadic commentaries during the Tang dynasty] (Beijing: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1987), 35-96.; Zhang Xun, *Tangdai fanjian yanjiu* [A Study of the nomadic generals of the Tang dynasty] (Taibei: Lienjing chubanshe, 1986), 1-105, 229-247, 342-373.

¹⁰⁹ When Tang Taizong died, his nomadic tribesmen were deeply grieved. Some nomad generals proposed to kill themselves to follow Tang Taizong to death. The new emperor forbade it. See *ZZTJ* 192.825.

¹¹⁰ *ZGZY* 9.274-275.

¹¹¹ *JTS* 3.50; *ZGZY* 9.273-277.

¹¹² *ZGZY* 36.273-276; *QTXWB* 5.50.

those from his formal enemies. His open attitude was also a product of his time. In the preceding three centuries of North and South Division and the Sui Dynasty, the Han Chinese and the nomads lived side by side in North China, intermarried, and had fostered a cosmopolitan culture and attitude that continued into the Tang Dynasty. The Tang capital city Zhangan, for example, was cosmopolitan, with a special Western market that sold nomadic and foreign goods. Nomadic customs, music, entertainment, sports such as polo, and attire were popular in the Tang dynasty. Zhangan and some commercial port cities had Nestorian, Manichaeian and Zoroastrian temples, along with many Buddhist temples.¹¹³ Taizong's first heir, Jianzhen, loved the Tujue customs and often lived in the camps like a nomad.¹¹⁴ Tang Taizong built an open and a trustful relationship with the nomadic tribesmen. The sons of chieftains often served as his personal guards and carried weapons around him.¹¹⁵ As Tang Taizong stated later, he was parenting both Chinese and nomadic subjects, applying Confucian benevolent rule to all under the heaven-- the real meaning of the Chinese concept of an universal kingship and a paternalistic government.

Tang Taizong, although a great cavalry soldier and commander, was devoted to the study and learning of Chinese classics and history after defeating his father's rivals in 620, and after himself ascending the throne in 626.¹¹⁶ He often discussed with his officials the successes and failures of previous rulers and dynasties and assessed his own government. At the end of his reign, in one such discussion, Tang Taizong listed these five reasons for his great success:

I was able to attain these achievements because of five things. Since ancient time, kings and emperors often resented people who were better than they were. When I saw people with good things, I rejoiced it as if they were my own achievement; people cannot be competent in all areas, I often disregarded their weakness and employed them based on their strength. When rulers advanced the worthy, they often excessively valued them as if wishing to embrace them, but when they dispelled the unworthy, they acted as if they would like to push those people to the ditch. I respected the worthy and took pity on the unworthy, so they all had their proper places to settle. Rulers often hate those who are upright and candid. They openly or indirectly killed these men. This happened in every dynasty. Since I ascended the throne, the upright and straight forward officials stand shoulder to shoulder in my court. I have not dismissed a single one of them. Since ancient times, rulers valued people in the middle kingdom and only lightly consider the nomads, *yi* and *di*. I alone love all of them the same, so the people from the tribes and the nomads look to me as their parent. These are the five things that enable me to have today's achievements.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Xu Lienda, *Tang zhao wenhua shi* (Shanghai: fudan Daxue chuban she, 2004), 3-9, 13, 15; Victor Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang'an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 170, 181-183; Edward Schafer, *the Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 7-39; Charles Benn, *Daily Life in Traditional China: the Tang Dynasty* (Greenwood Press, 2001), 40-41-55.

¹¹⁴ Benn, *Daily Life*, 41.

¹¹⁵ *ZZTJ* 198.6247; *ZGZY* 2.18-19.

¹¹⁶ *JTS* 2.28, 3.40; *ZGZY* 7.215.

¹¹⁷ *ZZTJ* 198.6247.

Conclusion

Tang Taizong turned around a war-torn economy by adopting the Confucian benevolent rule, providing people with a good livelihood by providing a good administration, light taxes and lean government expenses to lighten the burden of the people. He sought out and employed capable officials in positions suitable for their talents, required group wisdom on major decisions, and established a transparent court in which both emperor and officials were held accountable for their policy and behavior. He consciously provided a good example of self-restraint to his officials.

This fine government was established on the basis of both merits and virtue, with caring treatment extended to the nomads. While Tang Taizong had built a strong military force, he was reluctant to use force, and he built an empire that both benefited the nomads and respected their traditional power structure. This attitude and policy created allegiance and a natural adoption of Tang culture, such as the case of Japan's Takai Reform.

During the Zhengguan period, there was no sharp distinction between the rich and the poor. All the people, including the emperor and officials, were encouraged to be frugal; the price of grain was low and life was good, but not luxurious.¹¹⁸ Tang Taizong and his officials, especially Wei Zheng, fully understood that it was not easy to govern a state, so they constantly kept themselves in vigilance for possible errors or missteps. Two phrases were often used by Wei Zheng and accepted full-heartedly by Tang Taizong: *Juan siwei* (in peace remember the possibility of danger) and *Shenzhong* (remain as careful at the end as at the beginning). It was this self-restraint and diligence that preserved the fine administration of Tang Taizong and laid down the foundation for the strong Tang Dynasty.

I am indebted to Howard Wechsler, who brought about my interest in Tang Taizong. I am also grateful for the works of Denis Twitchett who meticulously studied the textual transmission and translation of *Difan* and promoted the study of Tang history. I must admit that I, like Twitchett, initially also thought accounts of Tang Taizong were too good to be true. But my research on late Tang kept on referring to the fine practices during the reign of Tang Taizong. When I started to research contemporary government sources and the writings and edicts of Tang Taizong, I realized the extraordinary achievements of Tang Taizong and his officials. This research, which stretched over a decade, also led me to better understand the Confucian idea of benevolent rule and how it was carried out in premodern China.

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Abbreviations

- CFYG* *Cefu yuangui*, compiled 1005-13 by Wang Qinruo et al.
JTS *Jiu Tangshu*, compiled 940-45 by Liu Xu et al.
QTS *Quan Tangshi*, compiled 1707 by Tsao Yin et al.
QTW *Quan Tangwen*, compiled 1814 by Dong Gao et al.

¹¹⁸ ZGZY 8.238.

- THY *Tang huiyao*, compiled 961 by Wang Pu.
 XTS *Xin Tangshu*, compiled 1043-60 by Ouyang Xiu et al.
 ZGZY *Zhengguan zhiyao*, compiled ca. 707-09 by Wu Jing.
 ZTJ *Zizhi tongjian*, compiled 1084 by Sima Guang.
 DF *Difan*, by Tang Taizong in 647-648.

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