

**EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE MIRROR  
IN AID OF GOVERNANCE**  
By Sima Guang

**Introduction**

The writing of history became an important literary form in the Han dynasty. Continued on a regular basis from then on, the art of history saw particularly significant development in the Tang and Northern Song periods with the work of historians such as Liu Zhiji (661-721), Du You (735-812), and Ouyang Xiu (1007-1070). However, the outstanding achievement of this period is that of Sima Guang (1019-1086). Sima, who served as a high-ranking official in the imperial government, was also an historian. His greatest work is a chronological account of all Chinese history prior to the Song in 294 chapters, entitled *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 656-658. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Excerpts from Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*  
By Sima Guang

The year 642, summer, fourth month. The Emperor Taizong spoke to the Imperial Censor Chu Suiliang saying, "Since you, Sir, are in charge of the *Diaries of Action and Repose*, may I see what you have written?" Suiliang replied, "The historiographers record the words and deeds of the ruler of men, noting all that is good and bad, in hopes that the ruler will not dare to do evil. But it is unheard of that the ruler himself should see what is written." The emperor said, "If I do something that is not good, do you then record it also?" Suiliang replied, "My office is to wield the brush. How could I dare not to record it?" The Gentleman of the Yellow Gate Liu Ji added, "Even if Suiliang failed to record it, everyone else in the empire would" — to which the emperor replied, "True."

**Questions:**

1. What function does the author see for history?
2. How does the author's understanding of history (that is, the art of writing history), as conveyed in this paragraph, compare to your own?
3. What can you conclude about the power of emperors from this short description of a conversation between a Tang emperor and two of his officials?

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE MIRROR IN AID OF GOVERNANCE, BY SIMA GUANG**

**Longer Selection**

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 656-658. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Excerpts from Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*  
**By Sima Guang**

*From the Latter Han dynasty it had become the practice to have official historiographers at court taking notes on the emperor's words and actions as he attended to state business. These matters were then written up and preserved in the archives as the Diaries of Action and Repose (Qijuzhu) to provide source material for later historians. Meanwhile, they impressed on the emperor that everything he said or did would be recorded for posterity. During the Tang it was still the practice to keep the records out of the reach of the imperial glance in order to assure objectivity. This was no longer the case in the Song, but memorialists continued to appeal to emperors to act in a manner that would ensure their posthumous reputation.*

The year 642, summer, fourth month. The Emperor Taizong spoke to the Imperial Censor Chu Suiliang saying, "Since you, Sir, are in charge of the *Diaries of Action and Repose*, may I see what you have written?" Suiliang replied, "The historiographers record the words and deeds of the ruler of men, noting all that is good and bad, in hopes that the ruler will not dare to do evil. But it is unheard of that the ruler himself should see what is written." The emperor said, "If I do something that is not good, do you then record it also?" Suiliang replied, "My office is to wield the brush. How could I dare not to record it?" The Gentleman of the Yellow Gate Liu Ji added, "Even if Suiliang failed to record it, everyone else in the empire would" — to which the emperor replied, "True."

*Sima Guang's history was centered on emperors, and emperors needed to hear the truth about themselves face-to-face as well as having it recorded for posterity. The emperor in the following anecdote is Taizong, the de facto founder and second emperor of the Tang. Sima Guang's comment is clearly addressed to his own emperor.*

The emperor, troubled that many officials were taking bribes, secretly ordered his attendants to test some of them with bribes. When a registrar in the Board of Punishments took a roll of silk and the emperor wanted to have him executed, Minister of the Treasury Bei Zhu remonstrated, "An official taking a bribe should be punished by death, but Your Majesty entrapped this man by sending someone to give it to him. This, I fear, is not 'leading the people by virtue and restraining them by the rules of decorum.'<sup>1</sup> Delighted, the emperor summoned all officials above the fifth rank and told them, "Bei Zhu was able to contest this case forcefully at court and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Analects* 2:3.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE MIRROR IN AID OF GOVERNANCE, BY SIMA GUANG**

did not pretend acquiescence. If every matter is handled this way, what cause will there be to worry about misgovernment?"

Your official Guang comments, The ancients had a saying that if the ruler is enlightened, the ministers will be honest. That Bei Zhu was given to flattery under the Sui dynasty but to loyalty under the Tang was not because his personality changed: a ruler who resents hearing of his faults turns loyalty into flattery, but one who is pleased by straight talk turns flattery into loyalty. Thus we know that the ruler is the gnomon [or post for measuring the height of the sun], the minister the shadow. When the gnomon moves, the shadow follows.

*Sima Guang has been much criticized for his defense of the "hegemons" (ba), leaders who during the Eastern Zhou were able to prevail for a time but none of whom succeeded in unifying China. Mencius had charged that these rulers, in contrast to genuine worthies, only pretended to virtue [7A:30] but Sima holds that they met the needs of their time. This, however, does not make him a historical relativist, for he stresses that there is only one Way.*

*Sima dates the following exchange, which he recapitulates as a basis for his own comment on the subject of the king and the hegemon, to 53 BCE during the Former Han dynasty. The speakers are the heir apparent and future emperor Yuan (r. 49-33 BCE) and his father, the reigning emperor, Xuan (r. 74-49 BCE). The heir apparent appeals to his father to employ more Confucian scholars and fewer Legalists in his government.*

The heir apparent was soft and humane. He liked scholars but observed that many legal officials employed by the emperor used punishments in order to control subordinates. Once at a banquet he let himself go and said, "Your Majesty relies too heavily on punishments. It would be appropriate to employ scholars." The emperor changed expression. "The House of Han has its own system based on mixing the way of the hegemon and that of the king. How could we possibly rely solely on moral instruction and employ Zhou governance? Moreover, ordinary scholars do not understand the needs of the day but like to affirm antiquity and deny the present, causing men to confuse name and reality so that they don't know what to hold on to. How can they be entrusted with the state?"

Your official Guang comments, There are not different ways for king and hegemon. Of old when the Three Dynasties flourished and "rites, music, and punitive expeditions proceeded from the Son of Heaven"<sup>2</sup> [the ruler] was called "king." When the Son of Heaven became weak and was unable to control the lords, there appeared among them those who could lead allied states to punish false states, thereby honoring the royal house: these were called hegemons. Their conduct in both cases was based on humaneness and founded on rightness. They entrusted the worthy and employed the capable, rewarded the good and punished the evil, prohibited cruelty and executed the rebellious. Therefore, they differ in the honor or pettiness of their status, in the depth or shallowness of their virtue, in the greatness or insignificance of their

---

<sup>2</sup> *Analects* 16:2.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
EXCERPTS FROM COMPREHENSIVE MIRROR IN AID OF GOVERNANCE, BY SIMA GUANG**

achievements, in the breadth or narrowness of their governmental orders, but they do not contradict each other like white and black or sweet and bitter.

The reason why the Han could not return to the government of the Three Dynasties was because the rulers did not do it and not because the way of the former kings could not again be carried out in later ages. Among scholars there are superior and petty men. Ordinary scholars truly are not qualified to participate in government. But why could they not have sought for genuine scholars and employed them? Ji, Xie, Gao Yao, Boyi, Yi Yin,<sup>3</sup> the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius were all great scholars. Had the Han employed men such as these, the glory of its accomplishments would not have been as limited as it was.

---

<sup>3</sup> All exemplary and semi-legendary ministers.