

EXCERPTS FROM EMPEROR TAIZONG ON EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

Introduction

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

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

From *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 112-115.
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Excerpts from Emperor Taizong on Effective Government

Establishing Relatives

The country is huge and the responsibility for it is heavy. A huge country cannot be evenly governed by the emperor alone; the responsibility is too great for one man. Thus, the emperor should enfeoff relatives to guard the outlying prefectures. Whether the country is at peace or in danger, they cooperate; whether the country is thriving or declining, they work together with one heart. Both distant and close relations are supported and employed; encroachment and rebellion are prevented.

[Translated by Chiu-yueh Lai]

Questions:

1. What solution does the emperor propose to the problem of how to govern a vast territory?
2. What criteria do you think he employed in deciding that outlying prefectures should be enfeoffed to relatives? Why relatives?
3. What are the strengths of this plan?
4. What are the weaknesses?
5. How could the weaknesses of this enfeoffment scheme be addressed while still putting the plan into practice?

Welcoming Advice

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

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

[Translated by Chiu-yueh Lai]

Questions:

1. Do you agree with Li Shimin's analysis of the emperor's predicament as described in the first sentence of this excerpt?
2. What specific institutional arrangements could the emperor set up to ensure that he received objective reports and frank advice?
3. What kind of style of rulership (or management style) does Li Shimin recommend for an emperor?
4. Is this advice concerning management style relevant today? Can you point to examples of leaders that use (or flagrantly violate) the kind of management style the emperor recommends here?

Longer Selection

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How a Ruler Should Act

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

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM EMPEROR TAIZONG ON EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

Establishing Relatives

The country is huge and responsibility for it is heavy. A huge country cannot be evenly governed by the emperor alone; the responsibility is too great for one man. Thus, the emperor should enfeoff relatives to guard the outlying prefectures. Whether the country is at peace or in danger, they cooperate; whether the country is thriving or declining, they work together with one heart. Both distant and close relations are supported and employed; encroachment and rebellion are prevented.

Formerly when the Zhou dynasty was at its height, the empire was divided among the royal clan. Nearby there was Jin and Zheng to help; far off there was Lu and Wei. In this way, the dynasty was able to survive several centuries. Toward the end of the Qin dynasty, however, the emperor rejected Chunyu's scheme [of enfeoffing relatives] and accepted Li Si's plan [to enfeoff nonrelatives]. He thus detached himself from his relatives and valued only the wise. With no relatives to rely on, the dynasty fell after two generations. Isn't this all because of the fact that if a tree has a mass of branches and leaves, it is difficult to root up, but if the limbs are disabled, the trunk has nothing to depend on? Eager to avoid Qin's errors, the Han dynasty, upon stabilizing the land within the passes, enfeoffed the closest relatives generously. Outdoing the ancient system, the largest fiefs were as big as kingdoms, and the smallest had at least several prefectures. But a branch can get so heavy that it breaks the trunk; a tail can get too big to be wagged. Thus, his throne was usurped and his dynasty was overthrown by someone of a different surname. This is a good example of the old saying that a river does not run when its source dries up and branches wither when the root of the tree decays.

Subordinates granted too much power can develop into insurmountable problems for the throne. On the other hand, subordinates granted too little power will not be strong enough to protect the throne. Thus, the best way is to enfeoff many relatives to even up their power and to have them regulate one another and share one another's ups and downs. By doing so, the throne need not suspect its subordinates and the subordinates need not worry about being wronged or injured. These are the precautions one should take in granting fiefs. Neutralizing the power of subordinates so that none of them gets to be too strong or too weak is indeed the key to securing one's throne. ...

Evaluating Officials

Differentiation of the ranks and duties of officials is a means of improving customs. A wise emperor, therefore, knows how to choose the right person for the right task. He is like a skillful carpenter who knows to use straight timber to make shafts, curved timber to make wheels, long timber to make beams, and short timber to make posts. Wood of all shapes and lengths is thus fully utilized. The emperor should make use of personnel in the same way, using the wise for their resourcefulness, the ignorant for their strength, the brave for their daring, and the timid

for their prudence. As a good carpenter does not discard any timber, so a wise emperor does not discard any gentleman. A mistake should not lead the emperor to ignore a gentleman's virtues, nor should a flaw overshadow his merits.

Government affairs should be departmentalized to make the best use of officials' abilities. A tripod large enough for an ox should not be used to cook a chicken, nor should a raccoon good only at catching rats be ordered to fight against huge beasts. ... Those with low intelligence or capability should not be entrusted with heavy tasks or responsibilities. If the right person is given the right task or responsibility, the empire can be governed with ease. This is the proper way of utilizing people. Whether the emperor gets hold of the right person for the right task determines whether his empire will be well governed. ...

Welcoming Advice

The emperor, living in the palace, is blocked from direct access to information. For fear that faults might be left untold or defects unattended, he must set up various devices to elicit loyal suggestions and listen attentively to sincere advice. If what is said is right, he must not reject it even though it is offered by a low servant. On the other hand, if what is said is wrong, he must not accept it even though it is given by a high official. He should not find fault with the rhetoric of a comment that makes sense, nor cavil at the wording of a suggestions worth adopting. ... If he acts these ways, the loyal will be devoted and the wise will fully employ their resourcefulness. Government officials will not keep any secrets from the emperor and the emperor, through his close ties to them, can thus gain access to the world.

A foolish emperor, in comparison, rebuffs remonstrations and punishes the critics. As a result, high officials do not give any advice lest they lose their salary and low officials do not make any comment lest they lose their lives. Being extremely tyrannical and dissipated, he blocks himself from any access to information. He considers himself more virtuous than the Three Lords and more talented than the Five Emperors. This eventually brings him and his empire to destruction. How sad it is! This is the evil consequence of rejecting remonstrations.

Discouraging Slander

Slanderers and flatterers are as harmful to the country as grubs to seedlings. They devote all their time to getting ahead. At court they compete for power and out of court they compete for profit. They fawn to prevent the loyal and the worthy from outranking them; they cheat out of fear that others will acquire riches and honor before them. Acting in collusion and copying each other, they succeed all too often. They get close to their superiors by using fine words and pleasant manners; they please the emperor by anticipating and attending to his wishes. ...

Advice that grates is difficult to take, but words that fall in with one's wishes are easy for one to follow. This is because while the former is like good medicine that tastes bitter, the latter is like poisoned wine that tastes sweet. A wise emperor accepts bitter criticisms that benefit his conduct; a foolish emperor takes sweet flattery that leads him to destruction. Beware!

Avoiding Extravagance

The ruler cultivates his character through frugality and peacefulness. Restraining himself, he will not tire his people or disturb his subordinates. Thus, his people will not complain and his rule will not go off course. If the emperor indulges himself in curiosities, women, music, hunting, or travel, agriculture will be disturbed and labor service will have to be increased, leading to the exhaustion of the people and the neglect of farming. If the emperor indulges himself in magnificent dwelling, precious jewelry, or fine clothes, taxes will have to be increased, leading the people to flee and the country to be impoverished. A chaotic age is marked by a ruler who is arrogant and extravagant, indulging his desires. While his dwelling and garments are richly ornamented, his people are in need of simple clothes; while his dogs and horses are tired of grain, his people do not have enough husks and chaff. As a result, both the gods and the people become resentful, and the ruler and the ruled become estranged. The dynasty is overthrown before the emperor has satisfied his wishes. Such is the fearsome cost of being arrogant and extravagant.

Maintaining Military Forces

Weapons and armor are a country's tools of violence. A warlike country, however huge and safe it may be, will end up declining and endangering its populace. Military force cannot be entirely eliminated nor used all the time. Teach people military arts when they are free from farming in order to equip them with a sense of military decorum and morale. Remember how Gou Jian, who paid respect to the fighting spirit of frogs, was able to achieve his supremacy, but Xu Yan, who disregarded military forces, lost his state. Why? Because Gou's troops were inspired and Xu was unprepared. Confucius said, "Not teaching people how to fight is the same as discarding them." Hence military might serves to benefit the realm. This is the gist of the art of war.

Esteeming Culture

Music should be played when a victory is gained; ritual should be established when the country is at peace. The ritual and music to be promulgated are rooted in Confucianism. Nothing is better than literature to spread manners and guide customs; nothing is better than schooling to propagate regulations and educate people. The Way is spread through culture;

fame is gained through learning. Without visiting a deep ravine, one cannot understand how deep the earth is; without learning the arts, one cannot realize the source of wisdom. Just as the bamboos of the state of Wu cannot be made into arrows without feathers, so a clever man will not achieve any success without accumulating learning. Therefore, study halls and ritual halls should be built, books of various schools of thought should be widely read, and the six arts [propriety, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics] should be carefully studied. ...

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

[Translated by Chiu-yueh Lai]