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Fortunes Originate from the Opinions of Others

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Chapter 1: The Introduction

Governance during the Zhenguan Reign was a rare period of prosperity and peace in ancient China, and the greatest reason for its prosperity is, I think, in Emperor Taizong of Tang's ruling philosophy of being good and good at receiving advice. Because Emperor Taizong of Tang grew up in the Sui and Tang dynasties, he witnessed in person the painful lesson of the demise of Emperor Suiyang of Sui, because of his addiction to pleasure. Therefore, when Tang Taizong became emperor, he summed up the core reasons for the demise of the Sui Dynasty:

It was because Emperor Yang of Sui did not blame his failure on the reason that he had no loyal ministers to advise him and he was unaware of his mistakes that he eventually failed. If the emperor has done something wrong and the ministers have not advised him in time, they are all flattering him and all things are said to be good. Then the emperor will become a faint-hearted ruler and his ministers will become flattering, and the day of the country's downfall will come soon.¹

Emperor Taizong of Tang saw the reasons for the fall of the Sui dynasty and concluded that if the emperor was wise, the country was prosperous. Only if the emperor adopted the suggestions and the ministers actively suggested. If the leader and his subordinates did not have any problems, and if the top and the bottom were of one mind, the country would flourish. Therefore, when Emperor Taizong of Tang was running the country, he often encouraged his ministers to write to him to advise him. Although sometimes the minister's advice was wrong, he would accept it with an open mind. He was particularly afraid that when he became angry, the ministers would not dare to make suggestions again. His humble and prudent attitude in accepting advice is still worth being emulated by the people today.

This essay takes the theme of 'a leader who brings greatness to his nation

¹ 許道勛 [Xu Daoxun], 陳滿銘 [Chen Manming], 新譯貞觀政要 [Xinyi Zhenguan Zhengyao] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2014), p. 85.

welcomes criticism directed at him. A leader who brings chaos to his nation prefers praise that glorifies his name.² from the *Qunshu Zhizhiyao* 360, and also uses examples from the *Zhenguan zhengzhi* and the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* in which Emperor Taizong of Tang heeded the advice of others. When I saw the example of Emperor Taizong of Tang, I reflected on what I had done that was not particularly good. I reflected on that I sometimes failed to listen to the advice of others and acted arbitrarily in dealing with class matters, without understanding the feelings of others.

This article starts with the example of Emperor Taizong of Tang's admonition; followed by my own reflections and insights from my own experiences; and finally, with my own summaries, thus, I can avoid being stubborn in my future life.

Chapter 2: The Character of Emperor Tang Taizong in Handling Administrative Affairs

The following two outstanding and excellent characters in the handling of political affairs can be seen in the dealings of Emperor Taizong of Tang with his ministers : 1 、 Drinking water and thinking of its source; 2 、 readily following good advice. Drinking water and thinking of its source, meant that Emperor Taizong of Tang knew that the people were the most important foundation of the country. And readily following good advice, meant that he accepted his mistakes and would change them. These two qualities formed the basis of his clear-headed approach to politics.

2.1 Drinking water and thinking of its source

Emperor Taizong of Tang knew very well that the root cause of the country's prosperity lay not in the emperor but in the people. So when he first became emperor, he said to his ministers,

The emperor depends on the state, and the state depends on the people. If the people are exploited to feed the ruler, It is like cutting one's own flesh to fill

²The Governing Principles of Ancient China —Based on 360 passages excerpted from the original compilation of *Qunshu Zhiyao*, 2nd edn ((M) Bhd: Chung Hua Cultural Education Centre), p. 55.

one's stomach; when he has had enough, he dies; when emperor is full, his country dies out. Therefore, the trouble of a ruler does not come from his enemies, but from himself.³

Most of the popular revolutions in Chinese history were caused by the emperor's desire for pleasure, which made lives difficult for the people and led them to risk rebellion. However, Emperor Taizong of Tang understood that although a boat could sail on water, it could also sink to the bottom of the sea. During his reign, he would always exempt the people from taxes whenever there was a drought. For example, in the second year of Zhenguan.

A drought has struck Shanxi and the people have no food to eat. They sold their children in exchange for clothes and food. In the twenty-third year of Zhenguan's reign, Emperor Taizong of Tang ordered the government to pay for the return of these children to their parents. In the twenty-fourth year of Zhenguan, there was a drought and a plague of locusts. Emperor Taizong of Tang ordered an amnesty for the whole world. His imperial edict said, 'If I could have a good harvest and peace in the country today, I would be willing to be punished by natural disasters.'⁴

In his life, Emperor Taizong of Tang thought of the people at every turn. Even in the case of natural disasters, he was willing to bear them for the people. This kind of compassion was particularly touching.

2.2 Readily following good advice

It was because Emperor Taizong of Tang knew how to govern the world. He must first cultivate his own body and mind and overcome his own habits. Therefore, as soon as he became an emperor, he told his ministers, 'if the emperor wanted peace in the world, he must first cultivate his body and mind. In history, there has never been a case where a wise leader has been followed by a rebellious people'.⁵ That is why he always encouraged his ministers to give him advice in his dealings with government, so that he could avoid unexpected mistakes.

Usually, when people are angry, it is very difficult for them to listen to other

³ 司马光 [Si Maguang], 胡三省 [Hu Sansheng], 資治通鑑 [Zizhi Tongjian] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), p. 6026.

⁴ 司马光 [Si Maguang], 胡三省 [Hu Sansheng], 資治通鑑 [Zizhi Tongjian] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), p. 6049.

⁵ 許道勛 [Xu Daoxun], 陳滿銘 [Chen Manming], 新譯貞觀政要 [Xinyi Zhenguan Zhengyao] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2014), p. 5.

people's opinions. However, the most valuable thing about Emperor Tang Taizong was his attitude of accepting advice from others. I have divided his attitude in accepting advice into three levels: 1. Liren 力忍; 2. Xiren 喜忍; 3. Ciren 慈忍.

Liren 力忍 means trying not to get angry.

Xiren 喜忍 means to accept advice with joy when it is given to me.

Ciren 慈忍 means to be able to understand the thoughts of the person making the suggestion and to accept them with pleasure.

2.2.1 Liren 力忍

It is easy to get angry when someone criticized you directly face to face. This is the most important test of the emperor's cultivation.

When a minister deceived Emperor Taizong of Tang, he wanted to sentence him to death. But at this time Daizhou advised him, saying, 'This crime should be punishable by exile according to the law.' Tang Taizong was angry and said, 'Do you want to obey the law and make me lose my credibility?' Daizhou replied, 'Your orders depend on your mood, but your obedience to the law is the only true credit to the world' The Emperor said, 'What do I have to be worried about, if you can enforce the law with justice?' Daizhou often advised Tang Taizong when he was angry, but Tang Taizong heeded his advice. Thus, there were no injustices in the world at that time.⁶

Here we can see that although Tang Taizong was very angry, he still forced himself not to get angry after hearing Daizhou's advice. In the end, it is particularly valuable that he convicted the prisoner according to the law, without relying on his own emotions.

2.2.2 Xiren 喜忍

Xiren 喜忍 is the emperor's desire to correct his mistakes and to receive advice from others with openness.

When Emperor Taizong of the Tang was conducting his affairs with a solemn expression, his ministers were usually very nervous when they saw him. He knew this, whenever he saw someone coming to talk to him about something, he would change his expression to one of ease. He fairly wanted to know his

⁶司马光 [Si Maguang], 胡三省 [Hu Sansheng], 资治通鉴 [Zizhi Tongjian] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), pp. 6031-6032.

own shortcoming.⁷

Here it is clear that Emperor Tang Taizong was eager to correct his shortcomings. He even changed his expressions and attitudes when listening to his ministers in order to make it easier for them to give their advice. This quality of his willingness to listen to others was a positive way for the state to reflect on its own problems and to avoid many bad things before they occur.

2.2.3 Ciren 慈忍

Ciren 慈忍 is the ability to understand the thoughts of others and to always consider things from their perspective. The emperor is sensitive to the thoughts of his ministers and does not care much about their advice, even if it is not very sensible.

Emperor Taizong of Tang said to his courtiers, ‘Every time I sit in meditation, I reflect on the fact that I am afraid of not fulfilling my duty as emperor and being hated by the people.....Every time the ministers reported something to me, they was so afraid that their words were illogical. If I were angry, they would not dare to give me advice. So whenever a person advises me, although I am sometimes unhappy to hear their words, I do not consider them disrespectful and will not punish them. If I scolded them out of anger, they would not dare to give me advice again!’⁸

Here we can see that Emperor Taizong of Tang could feel the difficulty of the ministers giving advice to himself. Although their words sometimes upset Taizong, when he thought of their difficulties, he was very compassionate and did not reprimand them.

From these three types of Ren 忍, we can see the three attitudes of Emperor Taizong of Tang in accepting admonition. At first, he forced himself to accept the advice, then he accepted it with joy, and finally he accepted it with compassion. Whenever he had a problem, his ministers would remind him. Thus he rarely made mistakes in politics. He ruled for 22 years and the people lived happily. Other countries sent their ambassadors to pay homage to him and pay tribute to him, calling him ‘Tian Ke han 天可汗’. He really deserved such praise.

⁷司马光 [Si Maguang], 胡三省 [Hu Sansheng], 資治通鑑 [Zizhi Tongjian] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), p. 6040.

⁸許道勛 [Xu Daoxun], 陳滿銘 [Chen Manming], 新譯貞觀政要 [Xinyi Zhenguan Zhengyao] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2014), p. 92.

Chapter 3: A Combination of Practical Feelings

This time, when I read this sentence in the *Qunshu Zhizhiyao* 360,

A leader who brings greatness to his nation welcomes criticism directed at him. A leader who brings chaos to his nation prefers praise that glorifies his name. I am very impressed by this saying. For the former, good fortune will follow him because he will make fewer mistakes over time. But for the latter, misfortune will beset him as he sinks deeper into the false acclaim that is detrimental to his virtues.⁹

I am very impressed by this saying. I think that leaders and superiors should always be cautious and aware of their own inadequacies. It is only when leaders and their subordinates can exchange views with each other that they can be united in dealing with matters. This was the case with Emperor Taizong of Tang, who often encouraged his ministers to advise him when he initially became emperor. Because he never slackened off in his 22 years of rule, he was able to create a great generation of prosperity. When I read this history, I was always impressed by the wisdom of Emperor Taizong of Tang who treated his people as if they were hurt. I think that if a leader always asks his subordinates about their shortcomings and corrects them. The first advantage is that he will always be clear in his own affairs, so that his virtues will improve and his faults will be lessened; secondly, for his team, his subordinates will be able to communicate with each other, thus enabling them to give feedback in time when problems arise, and his subordinates will not be discontented.

After reading this history, I was reminded of the situation in my class. There were four of us in the class, and I was the oldest student in the class, and I was also the class monitor. Sometimes when I was dealing with things, I felt that my three classmates did not dare to give me any advice, and even when I asked them, they would only reply by saying things like ‘fine’ or ‘good’. I have always been a bit worried, not knowing how to adjust it.

But this time, when I read the book, I noticed the appearance and expression of

⁹*The Governing Principles of Ancient China —Based on 360 passages excerpted from the original compilation of Qunshu Zhiyao*, 2nd edn ((M) Bhd: Chung Hua Cultural Education Centre), p. 55.

Emperor Taizong of Tang as he adjusted himself to listen to political affairs. The story of how he wanted his ministers to be bold enough to speak out. I felt that I understood why other students were afraid to give me advice. First of all, I think that in my daily life, when I interacted with my classmates, I was too serious in my expressions and lacked affability with them. Sometimes, when I enter the classroom for a daily chat, the atmosphere that used to be relaxed and pleasant becomes a bit tense. Our school's ethos is 'always think of others, always welcome them with a smile', and we recognise that we should adjust our expressions when dealing with issues, rather than making them look scared.

Recently, I have been paying attention to my expressions. When I meet people, I will pay attention to whether I am smiling or not. I feel that my relationship with my three classmates has been closed a lot over this period of time.

Some time ago, WenHui and I have been studying the format of English essays at the College. We planned to study it clearly before teaching it to other students. The reason for this arrangement was that I was afraid that if we discussed it together, it would occupy our own time we should have spent on study, thus I decided to do it without asking other students for their opinions. Later, during a chat with XinYu, she gave me a suggestion that helped me a lot, 'You and WenHui usually tell us after you have made a decision, so it seems like we are the followers and you are the decision makers..... If it was a matter of essay format, I think it would be interesting for the four of us to discuss and study it together, would not it?' After listening to her words, I realised that it seemed like I had made a subjective decision without consulting everyone else. But at the same time, I am glad that XinYing made this suggestion to me. I always believe that if we have a sincere relationship with each other, and we give advice to each other with a sincere heart to help others, we can definitely sense each other's sincerity. Therefore, I feel that when we speak openly and honestly about each other's suggestions, and there would be no unpleasantness between us, and the problems are found and corrected in time, it is the beginning start of a class's progress. I am very grateful to XinYu for her advice to me, which has helped me to discover my problem of being subjective and my own shortcomings.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The Book of Songs says, ‘Ancient saying is good: “Consult cutters of wood!”’

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To advise is a clear mirror for the leader to check himself; to accept advice is a good medicine for the king to change his ways. Therefore, the key to the rise and fall of a country or a group is for the ruler to correct his own self first. The Emperor Taizong of Tang was able to correct his habits by taking people as his mirror and accepting admonition. This attitude to government is still worth being emulated and learning in our modern times. However, I have reflected that admonition must begin with someone advising you. However, the advice that makes people feel free to do so must come from one’s expression and attitude. So I think that if I want to hear other people’s opinions, I should pay attention my daily life. Only by doing so will someone dare to give me advice, and thus I will be able to avoid many mistakes in my future life.

¹⁰許淵沖 [Xu Yuanchong] 詩經：漢英對照 [*Shijing: Hanyingduizhao*] (Beijing: Zhongguo duiwai fanyi chuban youxian gongsi, 2009), p. 350.

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