Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty was a benevolent ruler who created perhaps the greatest administration in Chinese history. He encouraged people to criticize his policies; he created a bureaucracy based on merit; and in foreign affairs he built alliances and won allegiance by fair treatment.

Emperor Taizong (reigned 626–649 CE) of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), who is hailed in Chinese history as exemplifying the ideal Confucian rule of benevolence and righteousness, established a cosmopolitan empire and facilitated the spread of culture and trade in eastern, central, and southwestern Asia and beyond. The fine administration and prosperity of his reign lay the foundation of a strong Tang dynasty; his empire extended to the steppes, and he controlled the Silk Roads in central Asia.

Overview

During Taizong’s reign Chinese government, laws, and culture (including Confucianism, poetry, and architecture) spread to other East Asian states and were incorporated into the local culture. Japan’s Taika Reforms (from 645 CE), in which the Japanese court adopted a Chinese-style centralized government, system of taxation, and law code, is one example. Unlike rulers of later dynasties, Taizong also embraced cultural diversity. While adopting Confucianism as state guideline, he also supported the translation of Buddhist sutras (Buddhist sacred texts) into Chinese, honored the ancient philosopher Laozi and Daoism, and built a Nestorian Christian church along with Zoroastrian temples in the capital city, Chang’an. Magnificent in appearance and culture, Chang’an attracted foreign envoys, traders, and clerics who traveled there by the Silk Roads and by sea. People from all over Asia and even Africa, including the Turks, Persians, Arabs, Japanese, and Koreans, lived among the Chinese in Chang’an and in southern port cities. Their food, clothing, arts, and the religion of Buddhism became part of the Tang culture, while Chinese technology, silk, and other goods spread to the other lands.

Life

Tang Taizong (actually the emperor’s reign title; his birth name was Li Shimin) came from an aristocratic family from northern China. His mother and his wife were both of non-Chinese descent, but they were known for Confucian propriety and were skilled in Chinese literature or calligraphy. Li Shimin was the second son of Li Yuan, a provincial governor under the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE). In 617 Li Yuan rebelled against the unpopular Sui emperor Yangdi. Modern historians question the traditional account of Shimin’s pivotal role leading to the uprising, but all agree that in the next four years Shimin defeated various contenders for the throne. At age twenty-four he secured the empire for his father, who established the Tang dynasty.
Li Shimin excelled in cavalry and was an excellent strategist and commander. His exceptional achievements, however, led to fierce rivalry with his elder brother, who was the crown prince, and with his younger brother. In 626 Li Shimin triumphed over both brothers, who were killed, and ascended the throne at the age of twenty-nine when Li Yuan retired.

Domestic Affairs

Taizong created perhaps the finest administration in Chinese history. To rejuvenate a land devastated by wars, he adopted a benevolent rule. He distributed land to farmers and collected taxes accordingly (approximately one-fortieth of income) in kind. He was frugal in his expenditures and adopted a conciliatory foreign policy in his early reign to avoid wars.

He also established a bureaucracy based on merit, responsible officials, and thoughtful policy (state policies were prepared and reviewed by different offices before implementation). He discussed policy with chief ministers, appointed officials and generals based on their ability, regardless of class, ethnicity, or personal connections, and held civil service exams with questions based on the Confucian classics. Many of his most accomplished and devoted officials and generals had been on the staff of his former enemies or rivals. Independent examiners regularly reviewed officials; the emperor tolerated no abuses, even from his own kinsmen. He also encouraged criticism of any of his policies or behavior that people judged inappropriate. His most outspoken critic was Wei Zheng (580–643 CE), who had once served one of the emperor’s brothers. It was not always easy for a monarch to hear frank criticism, but the emperor restrained himself and rewarded his critics when their arguments were reasonable. He kept Wei Zheng at his side and referred to him as his mirror that allowed him to see his mistakes. In fact, he credited Wei Zheng and other officials for making him a fine ruler. Tang Taizong also asked his chief ministers to receive remonstrance. The emperor told them: “If you cannot accept remonstrance yourself, how can you remonstrate against others?” Throughout his reign the emperor and his officials remained vigilant, consciously preserving good rule and bequeathing it to their descendants.

Taizong also ordered the revision of the penal code; the revised code reduced cruel punishments and became the foundation for later Chinese penal codes.

Foreign Affairs

In foreign affairs Taizong preferred forming alliances and winning allegiance through the appeal of fair and kind treatment. The appeal of fair and kind treatment.

The Palace Museum, Beijing.

Detail of the painting Emperor Taizong Receiving Tibetan Envoy by Yan Liben. Ink and color on silk. In foreign affairs Taizong preferred forming alliances and winning allegiance through the appeal of fair and kind treatment. THE PALACE MUSEUM, BEIJING.
intervened in their affairs. He allowed migration and in some instances ransomed back nomads’ clansmen who were seized by their enemies.

**Arts and Culture**

Taizong loved fine horses, but he was also well versed in poetry and was an accomplished calligrapher. He ordered the compilation of the five Confucian classics, as well as a commentary on them, and these became the standard texts for later dynasties. He wrote a preface for Xuanzang’s monumental translation of hundreds of Buddhist sutras; he also wrote three commentaries in the official history of the previous dynasties. He revered Daoism and claimed its founder, Laozi, whose family name was “Li,” as his royal ancestor.

**Legacy**

When Taizong died in 649, he was buried in Zhaoling on a mountain that eventually was the site of more than 160 tombs. Some of these were the resting places of imperial relatives, but most of the tombs housed meritorious officials, including more than a dozen nomadic generals: Taizong had granted meritorious ministers the right to be buried in his mausoleum complex and included them in his extended political family.

Tang Taizong and his officials created a political legend in Chinese history. His recorded discussions with officials, the Zhenguan zhengyao (Essentials of Government of the Zhenguan Period), became part of the imperial curriculum for later Tang and all subsequent Chinese emperors, as well as for the rulers of Japan and Korea. It influenced even the non-Chinese Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol peoples. Taizong’s theory and practice of rulership have a unique place in world history.

*Further Reading*


Guang Si-ma. (1972). *Qi-zhi tong-jian* [Comprehensive mirror for aid in government]. Taipei, Taiwan: Shijie Shuju. (Original work compiled 1084)


Lily HWA