Tongdian

Tongdiǎn 通典

Tongdian 通典 is an encyclopedia compiled in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) by the prominent scholar-official Du You 杜佑 (735–812 CE). A survey of the social, political and cultural institutions of Chinese history, the Tongdian served as a longstanding model for the compilation of Chinese encyclopedias.

The Tongdian (Survey of Institutions) is a historical encyclopedia of two hundred chapters that was presented to the court in 801 by Du You (735–812 CE). Widely revered for his broad learning, Du was a successful official and influential figure in politics of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), serving mostly in provincial posts with occasional appointments in the central administration. Drawing upon a wide range of sources for his compilation, Du took thirty-six years to complete the Tongdian.

During this period the empire partially recovered after the disastrous An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 CE), an era of great cultural and intellectual foment. Scholars such as Du You felt that a considered analysis of the social, political, and cultural institutions of Chinese history was crucial to understanding and addressing the challenges of his era. In his writings Du You held to the traditional Confucian view that the past serves as a guide for the present. In a rather non-Confucian stance, however, Du argued that the emulation of high antiquity is insufficient and that social and political institutions need to change with the times. Only by carefully examining the evolution of human institutions in history can proper administrative practices be determined. The Tongdian reflected these concerns and was designed as a broad reference guide for the scholar-officials of the realm.

The Tongdian is composed of quotations from varied sources, arranged in topical order, and punctuated with the compiler’s own comments and observations. The materials included traced the institutions from the dawn of Chinese history up to the Tianbao reign (742–755) of the Tang dynasty, just before the An Lushan Rebellion. Du You intermittently added comments about changes made between that time and his own day. The inspiration for the Tongdian was an earlier work, the thirty-five-chapter Zhengdian (Institutions of Governance), compiled by Liu Zhi, the son of the famous Tang historian Liu Zhiji (661–721). The Zhengdian is no longer extant, although the Tongdian quoted liberally from this work. In fact, so much of this earlier text was incorporated into the Tongdian that it is frequently difficult to discern Du’s own views from those that apparently came from the Zhengdian.

Social and Political Focus

Although the Tongdian makes frequent references to Confucian moral cultivation and harmony, the focus of the text is social and political, economic, and pragmatic rather than philosophical or doctrinal. Du You did not include extended accounts of cosmology, metaphysics,
or moralistic historical judgment. The *Tongdian* presents a view of human history shaped largely by its social and political institutions. The bottom-line value in this encyclopedia is social and political order and the institutional formulations necessary to achieve it. In his opening chapter on economic matters, Du You observed that the first priority in governance is the edification of the people. That edification depends upon first making sure that the people have sufficient food and clothing.

Beyond these basic human needs, however, the *Tongdian* strongly emphasized ritual: the ceremonies and protocols of the court and society. One hundred chapters—half of the encyclopedia—are devoted to ritual prescriptions from earliest times down to the eighth century. Included here are important commentaries on early ritual texts that are no longer extant elsewhere. A large portion of the ritual section of the *Tongdian* dwells on current prescriptions. Much of this part was taken directly from the official Tang ritual code, the *Kaiyuan Li* (Rituals of the Kaiyuan Reign), compiled in 732.

### Organization

The *Tongdian* is organized by a number of chapters grouped in categories and subcategories.

- **Economics** (*Shihuo*, chapters 1–12). A broad survey of economic management issues, including land tenure and organization, population fluctuation and registration, different forms of taxation, money and coinage, canal transportation, and the government salt and iron monopolies.

- **Civil Service Selection** (*Keju*, chapters 13–18). A description of the systems of selecting officials, dynasty by dynasty, followed by summaries of the various debates on civil service selection.

- **Bureaucracy** (*Zhiguan*, chapters 19–40). A survey of the various official positions and bureaus, the changing meaning of titles in different periods, and the allocation of rank and compensation for service. This section includes both the civil and military bureaucracy and both central and provincial administrations.

- **Ritual** (*Li*, chapters 41–140). A broad summary of the ritual ceremonies and the protocol obligations of the imperial family, the court and top officials, and families throughout the empire. Prescriptions include ritual performances, clothing and ornamentation, transportation, seasonal timing of activities, and arrangements for birth, marriage, illness, death, and the veneration of ancestors.

- **Music** (*Yue*, chapters 141–147). A description of theories of music and its place in society, music offices in different dynasties, the twelve tones of music, instrument calibration, song, and ceremonial music.


- **Punishments** (*Xing*, chapters 163–170). A description of the theories of punishment and its uses and a survey of penal systems through the dynasties, followed by a summary of debates on the subject.

- **Administrative Districts** (*Zhoujun*, chapters 171–184). An overview of the administrative units of China, with a description of the evolution of each prefecture and county.

- **Border Frontiers** (*Bianfang*, chapters 185–200). A description of the tribes and kingdoms of the four directions.

### Model for Later Works

The *Tongdian* was one of the first encyclopedias of its kind and served as a model for many future compilations. A two hundred-chapter sequel to the *Tongdian*, the *Xu Tongdian*, was commissioned by Emperor Taizong (reigned 976–997) of the Song dynasty (960–1279), although that work is no longer extant. Another 150-chapter work by the same name was ordered in 1767 by the court of Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The *Tongdian* was regarded as one of the “Three Surveys” (*Santong*), the other two being Zheng Qiao’s (1104–1162) *Tongzhi* (Survey Monographs) and Ma Duanlin’s (1254–1324) *Wenxian tongkao* (Survey of the
Du You’s Preface to the Comprehensive Institutions

In his preface to the “Food and Goods” section of the Comprehensive Institutions (Tongdian), Du You explains why he believes that satisfying the people’s material needs is a prerequisite to educating them.

Although I engaged in the study of books from an early age, because I was a dullard by nature, I did not succeed in mastering the arts of number or astrological sciences, nor was I good at literary composition. Thus my Comprehensive Institutions actually amounts to no more than a compilation of various records that, if used in dealing with human affairs, might be helpful in governmental administration.

The first priority in ordering things according to the Way lies in transforming the people through education, and the basis of education lies in providing adequate clothing and food. The [Classic of] Changes [I Ching] says that what attracts people is wealth. The “Grand Model” [chapter of the Classic of Documents] lists eight administrative functions, of which the first is food and the second provision is goods. The Guanzi says: “When the storehouse is full, then people can understand rites and good manners; when there is a sufficiency of food and clothing, people can understand the difference between honor and shame.” The Master [Confucius] spoke of enriching people first and then educating them. All these saying express the same idea.

To carry out education one must first establish offices; to establish offices, one must recruit people with the requisite talents; and to recruit talent one must have an examination system, establish proper rites to rectify popular customs, and have music to harmonize people’s minds-and-hearts. These were the methods employed by the early sage kings to establish proper governance.

It is only when there has been a failure in education that one resorts to laws and punishments, to commanderies and prefectures for local administration, and to fortifying the borders against barbarians. Thus “Food and Goods” come first; official recruitment next, offices next after that; then rites, music, punishments, and local administration, with border defenses last. Anyone who reads this book should keep in mind my reasons for arranging things in this order.


Further Reading


Literary Record). In 1936 Commercial Press in Shanghai published a compilation of the “Ten Surveys” (Shitong), including the three aforementioned and seven other works that were designed in the same format.

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