

"If its Source is Pure, the Water Will be Clean" - Ruling the Country by Earning the Trust and Confidence of the People

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In the early years of the Zhenguan period (AD 627-647) in the Tang Dynasty, someone submitted an appeal to request the emperor to eliminate obsequious courtiers. The Taizong Emperor's response to this was, "I consider the officials I have assigned to be able and virtuous courtiers. How can you tell which courtiers are obsequious?" The person who submitted the appeal said, "I, your Majesty's subject, cannot tell who is an obsequious courtier because I'm living among ordinary people. Your Majesty, please test the courtiers by pretending that you are angry. Anyone who is not intimidated by your thundering anger and who still holds his ground is a man of uprightness. Anyone who plays along with or flatters you is an obsequious courtier."

The Taizong Emperor said to Feng Deyi, "Whether the running water is clean or filthy is determined by the source of the water. The ruler is the source of the government and people are like the water. If the ruler is deceptive while asking his subjects to be fair and upright, it is like expecting the water to be clean while the source is filthy. This does not make sense. I often think that the Weiwu Emperor is a deceitful man and I deeply despise the way he conducts himself. How could he set a good example with that kind of behavior?" The Taizong Emperor said to the person who submitted the appeal, "I would like to rule the country by earning people's great trust and confidence. I don't want to

encourage people by deception. Although your suggestion is good, still, I cannot take your advice."

In the 17th year of the Zhenguan period, the Taizong Emperor said to his attendant courtier, "Suppose I had no alternative but to give up one of the two, food or the confidence of the people, I would give up food and keep the confidence of the people. Confucius said, 'A people without confidence in its rulers will not stand.' In days gone by, Xiang Yu controlled the whole nation. If he had promoted benevolence and trust, who could have taken his power away?" His courtier replied, "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and honesty or trust are the Five Common Ethics, and each is indispensable. You'll be greatly benefited if you try your best to follow these. The Zhou Emperor of the Yin Dynasty often despised and ridiculed the Five Common Ethics. As a result he lost his country to the Wu Emperor. Xiang Yu lost his country to the Gaozu Emperor of the Han Dynasty because he lacked honesty. It is indeed just like what your Majesty has stated."

Adapted from "*Important Politics from the Zhenguan Period*"

CATEGORY: Traditional Culture