

Stories about Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty and His Prime Minister, Wei Zheng

December 07, 2005 | Long Zhitai



Emperor Taizong of the Great Tang Dynasty

[PureInsight.org] Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty and his Prime Minister, Wei Zheng, were one the most famous and admirable pairs of monarch and advisors in Chinese history. Wei Zheng was known for his honest feedback and constructive criticisms of Emperor Taizong, as the readers will find in many history books. Therefore, I won't repeat them here. Instead, I will tell some of the interesting anecdotes about them.

No one would talk about Emperor Taizong and Wei Zheng without

mentioning the famous rule of Zhenguan (the era name of Emperor Taizong.) Emperor Taizong became emperor at the age of 29 and changed the era name to Zhenguan. During that time, it was said that there was no need for the people to lock their doors at night and that items left on the road remained untouched by others. The prosperity of the era and the leadership of Emperor and his renowned officials epitomize the peak of traditional leadership that future generations would strive to emulate. Emperor Taizong established a good political system where the government was divided into the ministries of legislation, administration and justice. In terms of human resources, Emperor Taizong installed a system to recruit the most virtuous and qualified government officials. He aspired to be a virtuous ruler and expected his subjects to be virtuous governmental officials. The most admirable aspect of Emperor Taizong's administration is that both the emperor and his top officials were devoted to realizing Emperor Taizong's vision of ruling the country virtuously and helped each other to attain that goal.

Emperor Taizong and his royal cabinet would discuss important issues and reach consensus first before carrying out the decisions. Therefore, when a decision was made, there was strong commitment and support from his royal cabinet and court subjects. Four years after Emperor Taizong ascended to the throne, the Tang Dynasty reached an unprecedented level of prosperity. Emperor Taizong was able to recruit a group of the most virtuous and qualified government officials because of his virtue and his trust in his subjects. Wei Zheng was probably the best in his royal cabinet. Wei Zheng served Emperor Taizong for 17 years before he passed away. According to the history books, Wei Zheng never compromised his integrity. Even when Emperor Taizong was offended by his honest feedback or criticisms, Wei Zheng did not show any fear or back off. Eventually Emperor Taizong always calmed down and listened to his comments with an open mind. Emperor Taizong chose to listen to reason and Wei Zheng chose to be honest. To this day, their interactions still serve as a model for today's politicians.

Wei Zheng did not just give his opinion on issues of government administration. He also tried to direct Emperor Taizong's private life towards the righteous direction as well. For example, Emperor Taizong was very fond of hunting. He was also very interested in playing with a type of hunting hawk. He had even established a personal pet house for his collection of hunting hawks. One day Emperor Taizong took his hunting hawks out for an excursion. When he returned, he sighed. "Why does the time seem to go much faster when I play with my hunting hawks? There is never enough time!" Apparently Emperor Taizong had already become addicted to hunting hawks.

One day Emperor Taizong obtained a baby hawk. He was very fond of the small creature and was playing with it when he suddenly spotted Wei Zheng walking towards him. He immediately hid the baby hawk in one of his sleeves and sat up straight. Unfortunately Wei Zheng had already seen that His Majesty was often wasting time playing with his pets, so he decided to give Emperor Taizong a lesson. He purposely extended the length of the conversation. When Wei Zheng finally left, Emperor Taizong immediately took the baby hawk out of his sleeve. However, it was too late. The baby hawk had already died of suffocation! After that, the Emperor never spent time playing with hunting hawks any more for the rest of his life.

One day Emperor Taizong decided to go hunting on Mount Zhong'nan. When Wei Zheng heard His Majesty's plan, he hurried to the entrance of the palace and waited for Emperor Taizong to come out. He thought he would try to persuade Emperor Taizong to cancel the time-consuming hunt. He waited for a long time, but Emperor Taizong did not come out. Finally he entered the palace and asked to see Emperor Taizong. He saw Emperor Taizong in the hunting outfit, but he did not look like he was going anywhere. Wei Zheng went up to him and asked, "I heard that Your Majesty was going to Mount Zhong'nan for hunting. Why aren't you leaving?" The Emperor answered with a smile, "I was going to, but I knew

you would come and stop me, so I have decided not to go hunting after all. You can relax now and go home!" Wei Zheng bowed to Emperor Taizong and left the palace with a big smile on his face.

Emperor Taizong was a very ambitious and diligent ruler. He often invited Wei Zheng to his chamber to discuss important issues in person. Wei Zheng was a very wise man with a lot of insight. Emperor Taizong was an open-minded person, but it was still not easy to listen to harsh remarks from Wei Zheng at times. One day when Emperor Taizong returned from a cabinet meeting in the palace hall, he looked furious and angrily told Empress Changsun, "Sooner or later I will kill that country bumpkin!" The Empress asked apprehensively, "Who are you talking about, Your Majesty?" "Wei Zheng! He always contradicts me and embarrasses me in front of everyone!" After hearing Emperor Taizong's comment, Empress Changsun left the room. When she returned, she was dressed in formal dress. She congratulated Emperor Taizong and explained, "A subject is willing to present his honest opinion only when the emperor is wise and open-minded. I would like to congratulate Your Majesty for having a cabinet member who is not afraid to contradict you because it is a proof of Your Majesty's open-mindedness!" After hearing the Empress's words, Emperor Taizong calmed down gradually. He began to recall Wei Zhong's integrity and moral character, and his heart was filled with respect for him. Emperor Taizong once commented, "A lot of people think Wei Zheng is a direct and tactless man, but I think those are his very charms."

Wei Zheng was a very stern man and did not like to joke. As a result, Emperor Taizong enjoyed teasing him. Emperor Taizong heard that Wei Zheng was partial to pickled celery in vinegar. He decided to tease him about it. He invited Wei Zheng to a banquet and included pickled celery in vinegar as one of the dishes. Indeed the rumor was true. Wei Zheng's eyes sparkled when he saw the pickled celery and finished it right away. Emperor Taizong grinned and said to him, "You once told me you don't have any attachments. Now I have found your attachment to pickled celery

in vinegar!" Wei Zheng said, "If Your Majesty does not have a bigger ambition than exploring trivial matters about your subjects, I have no choice but to develop an attachment to pickled celery for your satisfaction." Wei Zheng answered in a very respectful and humble manner, but he implied that he had much greater expectations of Emperor Taizong. After hearing that, Emperor Taizong was silent for a long time and repeatedly looked up to the sky and sighed. It was because he had heard great expectations in Wei Zheng's words and was very touched by Wei Zheng's true loyalty and dedication to the country.

Wei Zheng made great contributions to the rule of Zhenguan because of his uncompromising integrity, courage, vision and wisdom. When Wei Zheng passed away, Emperor Taizong attended his funeral and burst into tears. He stopped the daily cabinet meeting for five days to mourn the loss of Wei Zheng. Later when he resumed the daily meeting at the royal hall, he said to the entire court of subjects, "Put a slab of copper as a mirror in front of me, and I can straighten out my robe. Put history as a mirror in front of me, and I can identify the alarming signs of rise and fall of a society. Have a man as a mirror who reflects my flaws, and I can rectify my mistakes. I constantly keep these three mirrors to prevent me from making mistakes. Now that Wei Zheng has passed away, I have lost a mirror!"

Virtuous and wise subjects abounded during the rule of Zhenguan, especially ministers. Emperor Taizong had a very strong group of ministers. Nearly all of them are very famous ministers in the Chinese history. Among all the ministers in the Tang Dynasty, Wei Zheng has always been revered as the best minister of the Chinese history. It seems that the gods arranged for the best talents to serve Emperor Taizong. It was the cohesive efforts of Emperor Taizong and his virtuous and talented royal cabinet that created the best rule in Chinese history -- the rule of Zhenguan.

First published in English at