

Stories of Ancient Chinese Emperors: Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty Listened to Criticism with Modesty and Corrected Himself upon Realizing his Faults

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Li Shimin, Emperor Taizong (627 - 649 A.D.) of the Tang Dynasty was one of a few truly outstanding emperors in Chinese history. He was famous for being receptive to advice and criticism. When his officials' criticism became too harsh and painful, Emperor Taizong sometimes had difficulty maintaining self-control, and would even want to cover up the problems and refuse to listen. Despite that, after all he was a person with remarkable generosity and laudable tolerance, and he always regarded the country's interests as the most important and made corrections once he realized his own faults.

Story One:

Wang Gui (also known as Wang Shujie) of the Tang dynasty was an upright and straightforward person with a pure heart, few desires and righteous behavior. When Li Jiancheng, Li Shimin's elder brother, became the crown prince, Wang Gui was appointed as his political advisor. On July 2, 626 A.D., a Palace Coup at Xuan Wu Gate took place. Li Shimin was forced to kill Li Jiancheng and another brother in self-defense. After that, Wang Gui was exiled to the remote Jun Zhou Prefecture.

In the first year of the Zhen Guan Era (627 - 649 A.D.), Li Shimin ascended to the throne and became Emperor Taizong. He knew that Wang Gui was very talented, and therefore summoned Wang Gui back to the capital city. He pardoned Wang Gui for the attempted assassination at Xuan Wu Gate, and made him a royal advisor responsible for pointing out the emperor's mistakes.

One day when Emperor Taizong was about to appear in front of the court, he said to the officials, "If an upright emperor uses evil officials, the country won't be governed well. By the same token, if righteous officials serve an evil emperor, the country won't be governed well. Only when the emperor and the officials coexist as

harmoniously as fish and water, can true stability across the country be achieved and can the country be in good order. I am not smart, so I hope you all can correct me when I am wrong in order to put your good ideas and opinions into full use and make the country peaceful."

Upon hearing this, Wang Gui said: "I have heard that only by following the correct measurement, can a piece of wood be cut straight. An emperor can be wise only when he listens to his officials' advice. Therefore in ancient times, an emperor had to surround himself with seven frank and forthright officials. When their remonstrations were not listened to, they would continue to remonstrate with their lives. Your majesty is wise and a man of virtue. As a member of this open-minded court, I will be wholeheartedly devoted to it."

Emperor Taizong felt inspired by Wang's words. He made a rule that when all high-ranking government officials above the third grade were in court, advisors must be present to give advice. [Note: In ancient China, there was a nine-grade system for high-level government officials with the 9th grade being the lowest and the 1st grade being the highest.] Emperor Taizong indeed accepted remonstrations readily. Wang Gui routinely gave him advice and corrected his mistakes.

However, not all the remonstrations were so easy to listen to. One time, Taizong lost his temper badly and scolded Zu Xiaosun, a royal court music director, just because his way of teaching musicians in the palace did not suit Emperor Taizong's style. Wang Gui and Wen Yanbo thought it was not Zu Xiaosun's fault and therefore advised Emperor Taizong: "Zu Xiaosun is proficient at music and he also tried his best when teaching. The person you asked might have lied to your majesty. Besides, Zu Xiaosun is a refined scholar, yet your majesty neglected this and asked him to teach music to maids, and even scolded him. We are concerned that people in the country will be scared by this." Upon hearing this, Emperor Taizong became even angrier and scolded them, "You are my trusted officials and should show your loyalty and honesty. Why are you going along with a lower person and deceiving a higher person, speaking up for Zu Xiaosun?"

Wen Yanbo hurried to kneel down and apologized for being offensive, but Wang Gui refused to do so and said: "I served the former crown prince Li Jiancheng and should have been executed for my offense. Your Majesty pardoned me and placed me in an important position, asking me to serve faithfully. The words that I spoke earlier today weren't for myself. Yet to my

surprise, Your Majesty has become suspicious and blames me. It is Your Majesty who has let me down, and not the other way around." Emperor Taizong was speechless.

The next day, Emperor Taizong said to Fang Xuanling, "Since ancient times, emperors have had difficulties in accepting remonstrations. King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty failed to accept loyal Boyi and Shuqi's words. King Xuan of the Zhou Dynasty was an emperor of virtue, yet he killed the innocent Shubo. I have been hoping to follow the previous saints, but regret that I can't achieve the level of the ancients. Yesterday, I scolded Wang Gui and Wen Yanbo, and I now regret it. I hope this incident won't stop you from providing upright remonstrations!"

Story Two:

When he was a prince, Emperor Taizong enjoyed hunting on horseback very much. His interest in hunting stayed high even after he became the emperor. He often led a large number of people outside the city to hunt in the wilderness. Many officials tried to use many different mild methods to persuade him to stop pursuing such a time-consuming interest. But Emperor Taizong felt that his entourage was practicing riding and archery,

and it would help to hone their battlefield skills and defend the country better. So he didn't listen.

One day, Emperor Taizong was again ready to go hunting. At the moment he was about to mount the horse, a royal court official named Sun Fujia dashed over and grabbed the horse's reins and stopped Emperor Taizong from going out of the palace. He warned Emperor Taizong seriously in a solemn manner, "The Son of Heaven [*another term for the emperor*] must be heavily guarded at all times and followed everywhere he goes. It is not for the sake of showing off, but for the sake of the country and his administration. Riding on horseback, releasing the eagle and driving the dogs to hunt are things that young, profligate, good-for-nothing sons of the wealthy do to seek pleasure. It didn't affect the general situation when you hunted occasionally as the Prince of Qin. However, being as noble as the Son of Heaven, how could you do it this often? Has your Majesty forgotten Lao Zi's warning? Lao Zi said, 'Gallop through the field and hunting would make one's heart go crazy.' Your obsession with hunting is neither beneficial to the country nor a good model for later generations, so I think Your Majesty should refrain from hunting."

Emperor Taizong did not listen to Sun Fujia's advice. While hurrying to get on horseback, he explained to Sun Fujia: "Although it is a peaceful time right now, we should not let up our military preparation. What is so bad about my going out hunting, keeping fit and practicing fighting skills? I have arranged a light entourage to accompany me so I won't bother the people. What's wrong with it? Don't say anything more!"

Sun Fujia held fast to the horse's reins and wouldn't let go. He said sternly: "If Your Majesty does not listen to my humble advice and insists on going out of the palace, just let the horse trample over my body. Even if I am stamped into pieces, I won't let go of the reins. Your Majesty, I won't allow you to leave the palace as long as I am alive!" Emperor Taizong ordered him repeatedly to release the reins and the guards also tried to persuade him to let go of them, but Sun Fujia ignored everybody and held fast onto the halter, saying angrily, "As long as I am breathing, I will not sit idly and watch Your Majesty do anything improper as the Son of Heaven!"

Emperor Taizong was greatly angered by Sun Fujia's stubbornness and shouted loudly: "I am as noble as the Son of Heaven and the Master of the land with ten thousand chariots! Can I not enjoy just a little freedom?"

Must I do everything according to your likes?" Then he ordered the soldiers to publicly decapitate Sun Fujia at Wu Gate. Several soldiers pulled Sun Fujia outside by grabbing his collar and twisting his arms. Facing death, Sun Fujia showed no fear and said loudly, "I would rather be killed for providing honest remonstrations than live to watch Your Majesty repeat his mistake and refuse to correct it!"

Seeing Sun Fujia's determination without worrying for his own life, Emperor Taizong was very touched by his fearless spirit and great loyalty. So Emperor Taizong got off the horse and said to Sun Fujia with a smile, "I was just testing your courage. You are willing to risk your life to remonstrate and have persistently demonstrated your loyalty. How can I ignore your advice and go hunting?" Emperor Taizong immediately dismissed the hunting team, praised Sun Fujia and promoted him to the rank of a 5th grade court official.