

# The Chinese Arts of Governance in European Political Theory and Leadership Literature

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Hilde De Weerd is Professor of Chinese History at Leiden University. She obtained her Ph.D. from Harvard University, and previously taught at Oxford University and King's College London. She has published five volumes on Chinese political culture and intellectual history, focusing on the workings of late imperial Chinese institutional and bureaucratic infrastructures. She is currently working on a *longue-durée* global history of Chinese political advice literature. In 2021 she received funding from the European Research Council and the Dutch Research Council to extend earlier work on Chinese state infrastructures into a large-scale collaborative project on the social and regional histories of material infrastructures. She also co-designed digital research methods for East Asian languages (MARKUS and COMPARATIVUS).

In 1818 a Parisian publisher, Le Prieur, put out a slim volume entitled *The Evenings of a Family Father, or Family Conversations of a Father with His Children on Topics Relating to Morality and Instruction* (*Les soirées du père de famille ou Conversations familières d'un père avec ses enfants sur plusieurs sujets de morale et d'instruction*). In the “pleasant form” of some twenty evening conversations between a certain Mr. de Verneuil and a group of boys, the author aimed to use “interesting anecdotes” to stimulate curiosity, a desire for learning, and a good work ethic. On the fifth night, Mr. de Verneuil reproaches Anatole, one of the boys, for having offended an old man and beaten the dog of the house. That these actions further resulted in a shouting match with another boy who had called Anatole on this inappropriate behavior made this particular event especially worthy of discussion.

The historical example that was adduced to urge Anatole and the young reader to undergo criticism with equanimity read as follows:

*“There has always been in China a history court whose function it is to record the virtues and vices of the reigning monarch in the annals of the empire. One day, Emperor Taizong ordered this court to show him the history of his reign. ‘You know, the director told him, that we give an exact account of the virtues and vices of our rulers, and we would no longer be free to speak the truth if you were to look into our work. —What! continued the emperor, you would like to transmit to posterity the history of my life, and would you then also inform about my shortcomings and report on my faults? —It is not in my character, replied the director, nor is it conform to the dignity of my office to alter the truth: I will report everything. If you commit any injustice, I will be aggrieved, but I will not conceal anything. Such are the exactitude and strictness of my position as a historian that it is not even permitted to omit this conversation we are having.’ Taizong was of noble heart. ‘Continue, he said to the director, write, and write the truth without constraint: may my virtues and my vices contribute to the public benefit and to the instruction of my successors! Your court is free; I protect it and give permission to write my history with the greatest impartiality.”*

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The image of the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) as a caring sovereign willing to listen to advice and a universal model for rulers and peoples



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across the globe that we can find here and in other early modern and modern European literature had a long history, a history that started with Emperor Taizong himself.

**Mirrors**

Emperor Taizong (r. 626-49), whose name at birth was Li Shimin, rose to power in 626. He ascended the throne after having two of his brothers assassinated during a palace coup and after forcing his father, the founder of the Tang Dynasty, to abdicate. This episode and his background as a military aristocrat may

have raised concerns among the administrative elite and Taizong's court advisors, but soon after these inauspicious events the emperor and his advisors started to work on a new image. In poems and instructions on how to govern, Taizong had himself portrayed as an open and conscientious ruler, eager to rectify past missteps and intent on following up on his officials' concerns and admonitions. At the very beginning and at the end of his reign, he had his testament about the art of governance recorded: *The Golden Mirror* (628) was a short manifesto on how to safeguard the realm that he and his father had founded; *Model for an Emperor* (648) was a more elaborate programme of best practices compiled with the same goal in mind.

As suggested by their titles, these works formed part of a genre, often referred to as mirrors to princes or political advice literature, that saw an upsurge during the Middle Ages on a global scale. Mirrors dating to the Afro-Eurasian Middle Ages were characterized by the fact that they presented a monarch or future ruler with a model of how to act, outlining which behaviors to adopt and which to avoid. The art of governance is in this literature usually based on the theory that ruler and people are part of a unified physical body; the wellbeing of that body was, furthermore, heavily dependent on the actions of the sovereign, its head. The ruler was, in other words, a potential danger to the survival of the political community and mirrors to princes belonged to an arsenal of administrative technologies that could be employed by various parties to contain that danger.

As was the case in European, West and South Asian mirror traditions, *The Golden Mirror*, *Model for an Emperor* and *The Essentials of Governance from Taizong's Reign* (composed in the 720s on the basis of historical materials from Taizong's

reign) were cast in a format that facilitated the imitation of the rulership model presented. The use of dialogue, anecdotes, aphorisms, letters of protest, poems, and other "pleasant forms" infused this literature with an interactive quality. For example, *The Essentials of Governance*, which we translated in full in 2020 and which was very suitably the first East Asian governance text to be included in the well-established "blue series" (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), almost exclusively consists of interactions between Taizong and a group of his advisors. This format helped ensure that this work caught on among a very diverse public of readers and listeners. Not only emperors from the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, but also Tangut, Khitan, Jurchen, Mongol, Japanese, and Korean rulers had *The Essentials* read to them (in the latter cases from translated editions). From the tenth century onwards, the text also appeared in multiple printed editions. Episodes from it were read at the estates of Japanese shoguns, samurai, and daimyo; and dialogues and stories from it were adapted into medieval Japanese military romances so that Taizong anecdotes became part of the political language and imagination there.

In *The Golden Mirror* Taizong had proposed to take the recorded actions of earlier rulers and his advisors, that is not himself, as a mirror; such mirrors would allow the listener to evaluate present circumstances in light of the models of the past, calling into view ideals that should be followed up on and revived. However, it was the interactions of Taizong himself as they were recorded in the seventh and eighth centuries that were turned into mirrors for how to act and speak in hierarchical power relations, and that for a much broader public than he could have imagined. From the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards a civilization process took off, calling to mind the process described by Norbert Elias by which in early modern times courtly manners filtered down the social ranks of European societies. Gradually, Taizong's mirrors were read, discussed, commented upon, and adapted to various media beyond the walls of Chinese palaces and capitals.

The book that I have been writing while (virtually) associated with Eurics traces the emergence and circulation of the Taizong mirrors in a global context in the longue durée; it links shifts in the interpretation and uses of these mirrors in different places and at different times to major shifts in the conceptualization of governance from medieval Eurasia to twenty-first century East Asia. The book starts out with an interpretation of the arts of governance and places the emergence of Chinese mirror literature as a pragmatic instrument of governance at the early and mid-Tang court within a broader Eurasian history of the genre. It traces the vernacularization of the Taizong mirrors in several steps, starting with the publication of vernacular translations and annotated Chinese editions at the Yuan court. The final chapters discuss the translation of Taizong mirror literature in European languages and their use in eighteenth-century French and German political theory, the subsequent natio-

nalization of the genre (illustrated in the story above which presents Taizong as model to young patriotic citizens) in Europe and East Asia, and its transformation in leadership literature globally in recent decades. Below I briefly illustrate key moments in the eighteenth-century European adaptation of Taizong's art of governance.

### The Global Circulation of Chinese Mirrors to Princes

From the middle decades of the eighteenth century onwards Emperor Taizong was cited in French, German, English, Italian, and Dutch books and periodicals as a model. To some like the German publisher and statesman Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi (ca. 1717-1771) "Taizong I" was someone who "deserved to be upheld as an example to all monarchs across the earthly realm." In his *Comparisons of European with Asian and Other Supposedly Barbarian Governments* (*Vergleichungen der europäischen mit den asiatischen und andern vermeintlich barbarischen Regierungen*, Berlin, 1762) von Justi devoted an entire chapter to Taizong—the only monarch to be treated in this manner in this work dedicated to a systematic analysis of the essential elements of monarchies. Von Justi relied for this analysis on *Model for an Emperor* and remonstrance letters authored by Taizong's most critical advisor Wei Zheng (580–643) which had been incorporated in *The Essentials of Governance*. He analyzed the legacy of Taizong's reign in order to construct a more solid defense of absolute monarchy as the best form of government. Von Justi's theorization of absolute monarchy was not exceptional during the period we have come to call the Enlightenment; absolute monarchy was then both on the rise and under pressure. According to von Justi, who had served at the Habsburg, Danish, and Prussian courts and these days counts as one of the founders of the field of political economy, the monarchy had historically proven to be the best system to promote the wellbeing of the people. He held that the monarch's power should not and could be limited by external factors; the only way to have the monarchy serve the public good effectively (and thereby break the power of the hereditary aristocracy) was to provide the monarch with the motivational drives that would allow him (not her in von Justi's view) to moderate his actions himself.

Chinese history and administrative literature offered several means to this end. The awe in which the monarch was held as pater familias exerted pressure on him to act according to the expectations of natural law. The letters of remonstrance submitted by officials or commoners and (as the example quoted in the introduction demonstrated) Chinese historiography were institutions and practices that similarly

provided the motivational pressures to Chinese monarchs to voluntarily limit their own power. Taizong and Wei Zheng became the preferred examples of the political theory of monarchy that von Justi developed on the basis of a comparative analysis of materials that he had collected from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel reports, country descriptions, and universal histories. One could read his *Vergleichungen* as a late medieval mirror, written at a time when modern political theory began to separate monarch and state, but the comparative and synthetic methodology suggest that his adaptation of Taizong's mirrors was closer to the political culture of his eighteenth-century contemporaries. The *Vergleichungen* offered a systematic overview of the complete machinery of monarchy based on a clear distinction between monarch and state.

Von Justi was just one among many eighteenth-century authors and politicians who addressed broader social and political questions by analyzing Chinese history and contemporary Qing China as part of a universal archive of human experience. A particularly influential source for their materials was Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's *The General History of China, Containing a Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea and Thibet* (*Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, Paris, 1735) a bestseller that appeared in many editions and translations throughout the eighteenth century. In the second volume of the original edition of this four-volume encyclopedic overview of China, Du Halde included translations of Chinese administrative documents, over 300 pages in total, and covering Chinese history through the seventeenth century. The selection of administrative documents included *The Golden Mirror*, prefatory material to *Model for an Emperor*, and remonstrance letters by Wei Zheng that feature in *The Essentials of Governance*. Von Justi's adaptation of these materials was but one example of the varied ways in which the political advice literature on Taizong's court resonated with European readers and were used for both radical and more conservative causes, in books, pamphlets, and graphic materials.

In my work I aim to explain how a model was understood in eighteenth-century Europe and how encompassing and more fragmented models of governance were created out of the Taizong materials. Some, like Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), a well-known figure in the history of German literature and recently also acknowledged as the first to imagine "World Literature" (Weltliteratur), extended von Justi's approach into a historical utopian novel, *Der goldne Spiegel* (1772 and, revised edition, 1794), so entitled after Taizong's *Golden Mirror*. Others, like the successful



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engraver Isidore Stanislas Helman (1743—ca. 1809), adapted the media in which mirror literature had been shared in East Asia to produce an illustrated mirror for French court patrons as well as broader audiences. German and French authors extracted similar themes from Taizong’s art of governance (soliciting and accepting criticism; meritocratic personnel recruitment; justice; the promotion of education and general welfare), but differed in their application of a broader model to contemporary problems.

This story continued, with a few twists and turns, into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The frameworks of monarchical reform within which Taizong’s art of governance had been imagined in the eighteenth century then make a place for that of the modern nation-state within which leaders of all sorts appropriate mirrors to princes as indigenous leadership literature. In *Les soirées du père de famille*, its Dutch translation, or in republican Chinese epics of Taizong, the second Tang emperor was portrayed as a model for the new male patriotic youth. And in more recent years East Asian governments and business leaders have promoted *The Essentials of Governance* as “the ancient model of the China Dream” and a guide for chief executive officers (CEOs).

The key point here is evidently not to jump on the bandwagon of modern government and business elites seeking to distill an enduring cultural tradition from the Taizong political advice literature for nationalist purposes or to cement broader regional and global communities of belonging from them. Rather, a *longue-durée* history of its creation and adaptations shows that at any point of its history Taizong’s mirror literature needs to be understood within a global perspective. Such a global history does not necessarily cover the geographic extent of the world,

but it incorporates into its account the movements and adaptations of concepts and practices across national and continental boundaries. Within the scope of the last three centuries briefly covered here, this means understanding how translations of Chinese governance texts became the object of French and German adaptations in political theory, state fiction, visual representations of good governance, and rules of etiquette. It is, for partially justifiable reasons, commonplace to represent such representations of Chinese governance as overdetermined by European concerns and the mere object of European fantasies, but such critiques tend to miss and underestimate the real cultural challenges and effect of the alternative governance models that were sought in but also made available through direct translations of a wide range of Chinese political and administrative literature. Furthermore, writing the processes of translation and adaptation sketched here into a global history also means recognizing the significance of the genre of political advice literature as a vehicle through which administrative principles and techniques have been exchanged since medieval times across Afro-Eurasia.

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