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Installing an Heir: Factional Politics in the Court of Tang Taizong

Andrew Eisenberg

Introduction

Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-649) is reknowned in East Asian history as the great consolidator of the T'ang dynasty (618-906). Indeed, Taizong and the name of his long reign period, the Zhenguan 貞觀 period, became a potent symbol of imperial legitimacy and power throughout East Asia until the 20th century. To put this in context, one should remember that from the mid-220's until the founding of the Tang no previous political regime had managed to unify China for more than two generations (the exceptions being the Western Jin 晉 of 265-317 and the Sui of 605-618). Under Taizong's leadership not only was Tang power consolidated, but it was enormously expanded. First, in 630, with the destruction of the Eastern Turk confederacy and the capture of their Kaghan, Tang power became hegemonic throughout North Asia. Beginning in 645, Taizong renewed Chinese efforts to conquer the Korean kingdom of Korguryo, which occupied southern Manchuria and northern Korea. These efforts did not bear fruit, however, until the late 660's and 670's, long after Taizong's death in 649.

In the midst of these accolades, however, we need to take note of one of Taizong's great failures-his inability to fully construct and then control and manipulate rabid factionalism at his court. To modern sensibilities, perhaps a rather peculiar fault, but in the context of imperial politics this was a serious failing. There is

also a strong possibility that the onset of the 645 Korean campaign may have taken on new significance in the context of these court political errors.

This essay will also argue that Taizong's famous "feng-jian (封建)", or hereditary enfeoffment proposal was very much related to preparing the court for his later failed court factional policy. In late 627, following a proposal from a senior courtier, Xiao Yu 蕭瑀, Taizong publicly supported the idea of taking all the imperial agnates (most particularly his brothers, mature sons, and momentarily, even his most senior courtiers) and granting them hereditary rule over prefectures in various parts of the empire. This was proclaimed as an effort to strengthen the dynasty by literally following the Western Zhou enfeoffment model of antiquity and sending the designated individuals out to their fiefdoms. It was probably no accident that this "feng-jian" proposal came directly on the heels of a decision made in late 626 to retire all senior agnates of Taizong's father's generation. One of the curious things about the "feng-jian" proposal was that it was never decisively implemented. The issue was bruited about from 627 through 639, in the process the hereditary element was dropped, close court advisors were not sent out, but brothers and grown sons were, in fact, dispatched to the provinces as non-hereditary prefectural administrators with the noble rank of king.

The outcome of this policy was to strip the court of mature agnates who might possibly mount a threat to the throne. In fact, by 636 when this anti-agnate policy was implemented on an accelerated basis, Taizong immediately began moving to create the competitive factional structure at court mentioned at the beginning of the essay. His target seems to have been his brother-in-law, Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌, and a group of loyal, time-tested courtiers grouped around him. The means at hand was to take one of his mature sons, Li Tai 李泰, allegedly born of the Zhangsun Empress, and permit him to compete at court with Taizong's own designated heir (since 627), Chengqian 承乾[1]. This latter individual had the full support of the coterie of senior courtiers who were the target of Taizong's plans. The strategic goal of these inter-locking policies, the "fengjian" policy and the subse-

quent creation of court factions, was to accentuate the independent, creative power of the throne. Ironically, such a policy could only be detrimental in some manner to institutionalized administrative and political stability, one of the very qualities for which Taizong's reign is commonly lauded.

The rationale behind Taizong's strategy needs to be explicitly discussed. In the context of an imperial dynastic polity (or, in Weberian terms, a patrimonial regime), the boundaries between formal political/administrative structures and functions, the kinship prerogatives and concerns of the ruling line, imperially supported social status concerns (such as the Tang sponsored genealogies) and religious/ritual concerns are often hopelessly blurred. To use modern concepts of proper formal institutional functioning and efficiency to understand the Tang court structure would be anachronistic. To give an example from the Tang period, during the reign of Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r.713-755) Tang political institutions were very stable during the long tenure of Li Linfu 李林甫 as senior court advisor and An Lushan 安祿山 as the generalissimo in charge of northern frontier defense. Once Li Linfu died, however, and Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 a political opponent of An Lushan, was installed in Li's place, the stable Tang institutional structure came crashing down in the An Lushan rebellion of 755-763. Thus, institutional stability was not dependent on laws and administrative regulations (which the Tang had in abundance), but proper personnel placement and manipulation. Office did not make the person, rather, the person made the office. Patrimonial rulers were constrained by certain opportunity costs peculiar to their political system. In this context, what we would view as policies designed to foster long term institutional stability could only be achieved at the probable cost of creating vicious entrenched political/military interests, often in the form of satraps. Once that occurred, the ability of the throne to engage in imaginative, flexible policy making and personnel manipulation would be seriously compromised.

The other option was for the throne to create and foment factional competition at court and in key regional postings. The most potent organizing principle around

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which to build such factions, though certainly not the only one, would be to create competitors for the position of heir apparent. To an extent, the formal administrative structure, such as it was, was designed to accomodate such activities. Examples of this would be the administrative practices of rapidly rotating personnel, administrative surveillance by the imperial censorate, which reported directly to the throne, and the ad boc creation of imperial commissioners, if not entire administrative structures outside the orbit of the standard, established structures (the Six Boards of the Tang). The advantage to constructing such a political situation was that all the factional groupings would look to the throne as their sole benefactor, thus, enhancing the immediate authority of the emperor. On the debit side, there was the danger that factional leaders would break the leash of imperial manipulation. Another danger was that routine administrative functions would be impaired as factions struggled to dominate sectors of the court structure in order to support and finance their political activities.

A modern analogy to this type of highly factionalized political situation being manipulated by a central leader is Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime from 1927-1949. Most scholars agree that outside of Chiang's personal military machine, the formal political/administrative structures were of only moderate significance compared to the influence wielded by factions within the regime. Chiang not only pitted his political enemies against each other, but constantly encouraged the formation of competing cliques among his strongest supporters. Needless to say, outside of fighting Chiang's wars and funding projects he personally supported, the formal administrative structure accomplished little creative governance. Most analysts view this situation as a perversion of the functions of the modern state. Joseph Fewsmith defined this as the very essence of the facist regime[2]. In point of fact, Chiang's techniques were standard tools of political control in a patrimonial setting. The wholesale transference of such techniques to the modern state and the developing arena of modern popular politics resulted in the development of a hybrid regime that approximated the facistic state developing in Europe at the time.

There also was a "third" way-to combine both approaches by attempting to create and maintain a stable administrative structure and simultaneously encourage controlled factional competition. The competition could be controlled by forbidding the competitors from actively attempting to recruit clients outside of the imperial capital or specifically indicated cities. Competitors could not physically assault one another without permission of the throne. The key staff positions of all the competitors would be manned by personnel chosen by the throne, and these staff advisors would determine policy for the competitors. Under these conditions, for a limited period of time, an emperor could manage a moderate sized empire of minimal administrative efficiency with greatly enhanced personal political authority. These are, in fact, the circumstances under which Li Shimin (later known as Tang Taizong) came to political maturity in his rise to supreme power by 626. I have argued previously that Tang Gaozu, founder of the Tang, not only manipulated the factional competition between his sons from approximately 621-626, but also brought this competition to its logical, bloody *dénouement*. Gaozu then engaged in an orderly and gradual transfer of power to the surviving son, Taizong, by becoming a "retired emperor" in late 626 and remaining on "active stand-by" until early 629[3]. Tang Gaozu, the founder of the dynasty , was probably a charismatic political genius. The remainder of this paper will argue that Taizong unsuccessfully attempted to replicate these circumstances. Unlike his father, whose personal prestige seems to have been overwhelming, Taizong went about this process in a much more mechanistic, carefully thought out fashion. First, Taizong methodically removed entire categories of unwanted agnates from the court and then proceeded to pit his two eldest sons against each other for the position of heir apparent. This competition would split the court and thus provide the wedge needed for the throne to emerge as the uncontested political voice at court.

Removing Unwanted Agnates

Taizong's assault against his agnates dates to approximately the ninth lunar month of 626, one month after his ascension to the throne and in the immediate aftermath of an embarrassing Turk raid that reached to the north bank of the Wei River, across from the imperial capital of Changan. At this time senior agnates were targeted and they were included in a general lowering of noble ranks effective among all agnates[4]. By 627 all agnates of Taizong's father's generation were retired from active service (one, Youliang 幼良, was executed on suspicion of treason)[5]. Given the uncertain political context at the time, I have previously argued that these initial moves focused against senior agnates, in particular, were aided and abetted by the "retired emperor," Gaozu, who still resided in the imperial quarters at the center of the court until 629.

Distant agnates of Taizong's generation (second cousins and others), who were already politically active were frequently retained as administrators in the provinces. Amongst this category, however, those who were considered overly popular were retained at the court where they appear to have been kept under a loose surveillance and given nominal court duties (see the cases of Xiaogong 孝恭 and his brothers)[6]

The "Fengjian" Program

The "fengjian," or hereditary enfeoffment debate, first discussed in 627, was raised in the context of ongoing strikes against specific agnatic categories. In this particular instance, the main targets were brothers and sons of Taizong, providing a clean sweep of all remaining agnates. From 627 through 639, when the issue was finally dropped, Taizong's course of action generated almost unanimous opposition from his senior advisors. Nevertheless, the "enfeoffment" campaign

was accelerated in early 636 when, following the conclusion of his mourning responsibilities for his recently deceased father (Gaozu 高祖 died in the summer of 635), brothers and sons were dispatched en masse to their "enfeoffed" prefectural assignments[7]. By 639, when the hereditary element in the enfeoffment program was officially discarded, the provincial assignments continued to remain in force.

The publicly stated goal of the enfeoffment policy was to engage the active loyalty and services of all imperial agnates in the preservation and improvement of the dynasty. Explicit reference was made to the Western Zhou precedent, thus, endowing this project with a sheen of ritual purity, if not a sort of religious fundamentalism. The publicly stated objections, expressed in formal memorials to the throne from Taizong's closest advisors, were that this approach was impractical, anachronistic, and an invitation to rampant nepotism and even warlordism[8]. To a modern reader, the objections are substantive, incisive, and notably lacking in excessive appeals to Confucian/ritualistic concepts and symbols (in part, Taizong had cleverly pre-empted this ground).

In the view of this paper, the entire court debate, from beginning to end, was simply a display of political theater, the actual political goal being to ensure that the throne and the imperial succession would not be subject to later possible interference from agnates. Despite Taizong's references to the ancient Western Zhou tradition and the glorious role the dispersed agnates would play in safeguarding the dynasty, all the participants at the time fully understood that this was propagandistic bombast. The true nature of the tactic, as well as its goal were obvious—those agnates dispersed to the provinces would exercise little real power[9]. They were, in fact, placed under tight surveillance. The *Zizhi Tongjian* (196: 6186) notes regarding the senior staff officers assigned to these enfeoffed agnates that, "The Emperor selected stern, upright retainers as advisors to all the kings [the noble rank granted these agnates prior to leaving the capital], they served as leading staff officers, if the kings committed transgressions they were to be reported [to the throne]." Based on specific cases, these staff officers were also expected to di-

rectly remonstrate with an offending agnate in an effort to have the person alter his behavior.

The biography of Taizong's son Li You 李祐 (who later rose in rebellion against his father) reveals the extensive powers available to these leading staff officers[10]. Li You's commanding staff officer was authorized to control access to Li You's person, to set restrictions on his movements and to arbitrarily remove what the officer considered to be excessive personal belongings (in this instance, hunting falcons and dogs). This officer, Quan Wanji 權萬紀, also travelled to the court to directly report to the throne on his charge. In 643, Li You became so concerned about his position that he had Quan assassinated and allegedly dismembered[11]. The action of assassinating this staff officer was what forced Li You into revolt against his father. The revolt was rapidly crushed and Li You was executed.

A similar, but less deadly situation occurred with regard to the leading staff officer of Taizong's second cousin, Xiao Gui 蕭瓌, who was the younger brother of the previously mentioned Xiao Gong 蕭恭. While serving as a governor-general, du-du 都督, in the Middle Yangzi region, Gui flogged his leading staff officer without authorization. Gui charged that this officer was arrogant and unilaterally managed administrative affairs. Gui was removed from office and presumably recalled to the capital[12]. There appears to have been a strong tendency to appoint leading staff officers from among former personnel of the imperial censorate or from close associates of the throne. Quan Wanji, who was killed by You was one such person who had earlier served in the imperial censorate. Likewise, the officer flogged by Gui, and also the officer that served on the staff of another of Gui's brothers had both served in the censorate[13].

Perhaps the actions of Taizong's brother, Yuangui 元軌, is most expressive of the character of these "enfeoffments." In his biography, Yuangui is lauded as being a man of multiple talents. As a prefect on the North China Plain (Xuzhou cishi 徐州刺史) he was praised as a cautious, unsullied individual. According to the text, Yuangui secluded himself in his quarters, read books, and let his staff

officers handle routine affairs. This seems to be a polite way of saying that he did nothing that would incur political entanglements and so he kept out of trouble[14].

Regardless of the high principles enunciated in the course of the court debate, these provincial enfeoffments were designed to disperse the targeted agnates, keep them under strict surveillance and grant them as little real power as possible. This is a well known means of controlling agnates, and does not seem very different from the techniques used by the Cao Wei 曹魏 regime during the Period of Disunion. Taizong's approach was simply endowed with a glossy ritualistic finish. Between 631 through 637 approximately thirteen agnates, mostly bothers and sons, were sent out to the provinces.

There may also have been an underlying punitive aspect to these provincial assignments. Taizong's eighth youngest brother, Yuanheng 元亨 (non-uterine) was borne of the Yin-de concubine 尹德妃. This brother was the first to be sent out, in 628, as prefect of Jinzhou 金州 on the Han River, which is a relatively isolated posting. The young boy would die there in 632[15]. All the other brothers would be sent out between 631 through 636. In the biography of the doomed Li Jiancheng 李建成, Taizong's eldest brother whom he killed in 626 in order to claim the position of heir apparent, the Yin-de concubine and her family are specifically mentioned as political oppponents of Li Shimin (the future Taizong) prior to the successful coup of 626[16].

Enforcement of this system of provincial exile may have been somewhat flexible. According to the *Xin Tangshu* (80: 3572), Taizong's son You 祐 (who would later revolt) left for his Shandong prefecture (Qizhou 齊州) in 637. He returned to court on legitimate business in 638, and remained in Chang'an due to illness until 641, at which time he returned to his provincial posting where he eventually revolted in 643. Thus, it is possible that at any given time provincially assigned agnates could be found in the capital for a variety of different reasons.

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