Abstract

The Zhenguan court (626-649 AD) of the Tang Dynasty was often hailed by historians as one of the greatest periods of the Chinese civilization. It was a period during which the fabric of the newly founded dynasty was consolidated, laying down the foundation of a strong and prosperous Tang empire for the next hundred years. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that much of the successes achieved at the Zhenguan court bear the imprint of Wei Zheng (580-643 A.D.), prime minister to Emperor Taizong.

Wei Zheng was the man who kept a constant vigilant watch over Taizong and his governance to ensure longevity of the young empire and would not hesitate to speak up against any flaw in his policies, even to the extent of incurring the wrath of Tang Taizong, earning him the repute as the Mirror to the Son of Heaven.

Being a scholar whose sole ambition was to serve a wise ruler, Wei Zheng cloaked the robe of Taoist priest for a brief period of time to escape the ravages of the countrywide rebellion that sought to overthrow the Sui government and to await the true ruler he can serve. He switched several camps in the process before he eventually landed up with the Tang camp. However, the upheavals in his political life did not end there. Shortly after his arrival, he was quickly drawn into a power struggle between his master Li Jiancheng, the crown prince and his younger brother Shimin, which eventually culminated into the Xuan Wu Gate Incident in 626 A.D. Although Shimin emerged as the victor of the coup, Wei Zheng was spared and hired by him as a censor instead.
The rise of Wei Zheng was remarkable. Firstly, he rose rapidly through the rank and files through his bold remonstrations with the emperor to become one of his most trusted aides. Secondly, his seventeen year political career which covered a greater part of Zhenguan court saw him exercising a great deal of influence over many of the policies implemented by Taizong. Without Wei Zheng, there would not be the continuing success of the dynasty under Taizong, whose performance deteriorated in the second half of his rule.

This thesis is an in-depth study of Wei Zheng. It examines his stint with the regional warlords, his political career with Jiancheng, especially his role in Xu Wu Gate Incident. It also analyses his political thoughts and his contributions to the Zhenguan court. Last but not least, his art of remonstrations, which made him as one of the most successful remonstrators in the history of China. Materials used in this thesis were drawn from original historical records and other secondary sources to provide a most thorough appraisal of the politician.