



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cultural Memory of Early Tang China in the *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要 (Essentials for bringing about order from assembled texts)

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The *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要 (Essentials for bringing about order from assembled texts) is a compilation of statecraft writings that was imperially commissioned by and for the Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649) near the inception of his Zhenguan 貞觀 reign (r. 624–649). It is one of the earliest extant anthologies in China designed to educate a ruler in cultivating an ethical character and governing the state. As its title suggests, the *Essentials* articulates a distinctive political philosophy through its collection of excerpts drawn from canonical, historical, and masters writings, and from their commentaries. Although this period of Chinese history has attracted scholarly attention in the fields of politics, history, and culture, the *Essentials* seems to have largely eluded Occidental researchers and there is to date no complete translation into any European language. This article explores the *Essentials*' corpus of excerpted materials through the lens of cultural memory, as theorised by Jan and Aleida Assmann since the late 1980's. In particular, the circumstances surrounding the production of the *Essentials* are analysed through the institutional communication, reconstruction of cultural knowledge, and binding nature elements of cultural memory theory. The findings shed light on both the *Essentials* as a cultural memory text of the Zhenguan era and the nature of political discourse during that period of early Tang China.

唐太宗於貞觀初期下令編纂的資政典籍《群書治要》，是君王乃至輔臣和各級官吏修身、治國、平天下的教科書，是中國現存最早的匡政著作之一。正如書名所示，《群書治要》通過摘選經典、史書、諸子百家以及相關注疏的治國理政精華，來闡述獨特的政治哲學。初唐時期的政治、歷史和文化，受到學者的廣泛關注，但《群書治要》在西方的研究中似乎鮮有涉及，至今尚未有完整的外文譯本。本文通過揚·阿斯曼（Jan Assmann）和阿萊達·阿斯曼（Aleida Assmann）自 1980 年代以來提出的文化記憶理論，分析《群書治要》輯錄的內容。文章以文化記憶理論中的三大要素：機構化的關聯、文化的重構性及集體認同的凝聚性為切入點，對《群書治要》的成書歷史背景進行深入的解讀。研究不僅闡明《群書治要》作為貞觀時期文化記憶文本的特點，同時也揭示初唐時期政治語境的本質。

**Keywords:** Cultural memory theory, *Qunshu zhiyao*, Taizong, Zhenguan, Tang dynasty

**關鍵詞：** 文化記憶理論，群書治要，唐太宗，貞觀之治，唐朝

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## Introduction

A compilation of statecraft writings entitled *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要 (Essentials for bringing about order from assembled texts)<sup>1</sup> was imperially commissioned by and for the Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649) near the inception of his Zhenguan 貞觀 reign (r. 624–649).<sup>2</sup> Completed in 631, the *Essentials for Bringing about Order from Assembled Texts* (the ‘*Essentials*’) is one of the earliest extant Chinese anthologies designed to educate a ruler in cultivating an ethical character and governing the state. As its title suggests, the *Essentials* articulates a political philosophy through its collection of essential readings from sixty-eight sources, including canonical, historical, and masters’ works.<sup>3</sup> Compiled within a broader enterprise of consolidating the fledgling Tang empire, legitimating its succession, and asserting its cultural authority, the *Essentials* presents a unique window into the political thought and practice of early Tang China. Although this period has been the subject of scholarly endeavours in fields such as politics, history, and culture, the *Essentials* seems to have largely eluded researchers, particularly in the Occident.<sup>4</sup> Other titles of political advice literature concerning the Zhenguan reign-period have been translated into non-Chinese languages, but there is to date no complete translation in any European language.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the *Essentials* is characterised by an in-built temporal dynamism. It was composed for the contemporary needs of Taizong, and it invokes the past by drawing upon pre-existing writings, but always with a view to the future of the Tang ruling house and even the re-use of the text itself by posterity. As such, this article will use cultural memory theory to shed light on how its corpus of knowledge came about and on the nature of political discourse during the Zhenguan era. After outlining the concept of cultural memory as theorised by the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his

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<sup>1</sup> The *Essentials* is also referred to as ‘*Qunshu zhengyao* 群書政要’ (Essentials for governance from assembled texts) and ‘*Qunshu liyao* 群書理要’ (Essentials for regulation from assembled texts) in the *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Essential records of the Tang dynasty) and the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Old history of the Tang dynasty), respectively. The Chinese character *zhi* 治 in each case was substituted by *zheng* 政 (governance) and *li* 理 (regulation) to avoid the taboo of using the name of the third ruler of the Tang dynasty - Li Zhi 李治 (628–683), who is posthumously honoured as Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–683). (*Tang huiyao*, 606.481; *Jiu Tang shu*, 269.343) I am greatly indebted to Professor Hilde De Weerd for the English translation of *Qunshu zhiyao* as ‘*Essentials for Bringing about Order from Assembled Texts*’ and kind advice in preparing my research for publication.

<sup>2</sup> Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty will hereafter be variously referred to as ‘Emperor Taizong’, ‘Taizong’, the ‘Zhenguan ruler’, or the ‘second Tang emperor’.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘masters’ refers to a corpus of literature (*zishu* 子書) traditionally attributed to master figures from the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE), which by the early Tang dynasty (618–907) also included strategist writings. (Denecke 2010, 3; Wilkinson 2022, 1852)

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-seven of those sources have annotations excerpted from their commentaries. Some editions of the *Essentials* show a total of sixty-five or sixty-six sources instead of sixty-eight. The sixty-eight sources may be counted as sixty-six when three of the sources - *Wei zhi* 魏志 (Records of Wei), *Shu zhi* 蜀志 (Records of Shu), and *Wu zhi* 吳志 (Records of Wu), are collectively referred to as ‘*Sanguo zhi* 三國志’ (Records of the three kingdoms). The sixty-six sources may be shown as ‘sixty-five’ because the title of the *Shiwu lun* 時務論 (Discourse on contemporary affairs) was omitted in the edition produced during Japan’s Genna 元和 era (1615–1624) and two editions derived from it in 1787 and 1791. Although the title of the *Discourse on Contemporary Affairs* was absent, its excerpts are located after the contents of the preceding source - the *Ti lun* 體論 (Structural discourses), and subsumed under that title.

<sup>5</sup> Fan Wang’s “Reading for Rule: Emperor Taizong of Tang and *Qunshu zhiyao*” in the *Edinburgh History of Reading: Early Readers*, and my “A Cultural Memory Study of Early Tang Political Thought in the *Essentials for Bringing about Order from Assembled Texts* (*Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要)” appear to be the first book chapter and PhD dissertation about the *Essentials* in the English language, respectively. (Wang 2020, 31–53; Ngo 2022)

<sup>6</sup> For example, the titles *Jin jing* 金鏡 (Golden mirror), *Di fan* 帝範 (Model for an emperor), and *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要 (Essentials of governance from the Zhenguan reign) have been identified as forming part of the tradition of political advice literature known as ‘mirrors for princes’ (De Weerd 2022), and translated into English as exemplified by Lewis 1962, Twitchett 1996, and De Weerd *et al.* 2020.

wife Aleida Assmann, a professor of English and literary studies,<sup>7</sup> I apply some elements of cultural memory theory to explore how the *Essentials* forms a part of Zhenguan cultural memory, and consider what it means for the nature of political discourse during that early period of Tang China.

## Cultural memory

The concept of ‘cultural memory’ was introduced by Jan Assmann *circa* 1989 as a body of knowledge that enables a society of a particular time and place to construct a view or an understanding of the past and thereby define their collective identity. (Assmann 1988, 9–19; Assmann 1995, 125–133) He argues that every culture connects its individual members to the experience of a shared meaningful world through common norms and stories. (Harth 2008, 86) J. Assmann identifies the following characteristics of cultural memory: (i) ‘[t]he concretion of identity or the relation to the group’; (ii) the ‘capacity to reconstruct’; (iii) ‘[t]he objectivation or crystallization of communicated meaning and collectively shared knowledge’; (iv) ‘the institutional buttressing of communication’ and ‘the specialization of the bearers of cultural memory’; (v) ‘a clear system of values and differentiations in importance which structure the cultural supply of knowledge and the symbols’, and (vi) three types of ‘reflexivity’: practice-reflexivity in interpreting common practice through proverbs, maxims, and rituals; self-reflexivity in drawing on itself to explain, distinguish, re-interpret, criticise, or otherwise operate in a social context; and its reflecting the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system. (Assmann 1988, 13–15; Assmann 1995, 130–132)

Reading these characteristics together with later literature by Jan and Aleida Assmann, this article understands ‘cultural memory’ as knowledge that is objectified and stored in symbolic forms that may be transmitted from one generation to another. (J. Assmann 2008, 110–111) Such knowledge is ‘cultural’ as it pertains to the norms, values, and concerns that define the society at a particular moment in time. The knowledge is ‘memory’ in the sense of being information that has been re-membered from the remote or recent past by assembling available data in the present. And the knowledge is binding through the provision of normative guidance that enables the members of a society to learn its cultural values, share common points of view, and subscribe to its collective identity. The idea is that consciousness of social belonging depends on shared language, knowledge, and memory, and the communication of such common meaning, as in the form of a shared history, gives rise to a sense of community. (Harth 2008, 86; J. Assmann 2011, 113–114, 119–120) As cultural memory is characterised by institutional communication, and cultivated by specialist carriers of memory, who selectively reclaim knowledge of the past from which the society derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity, I will operationalise the elements of institutional communication, reconstruction of cultural knowledge, and binding nature in considering why the *Essentials* was commissioned, who was involved, how it was received by its principal reader, and how it took its shape.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An overview of the Assmanns’ concept of cultural memory is found in Kern 2022, 133–139.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of ‘cultural memory’ offers a theoretical approach that illuminates a specific set of characteristics in social practices of appropriating the past for the normative orientation and collective self-image of a community at a particular time. (J. Assmann 2011, 37–38; A. Assmann 2011, 73; Kern 2022, 132) The concept itself is not culturally specific, and it has been applied to the study of classical

It is pertinent to note that the traditional historiography proffers an incomplete and skewed account of Emperor Taizong and his government. The historical record is incomplete because Taizong spent most of his time among the secluded palace community, where it is likely that he received advice, discussed policy matters, and took some decisions in the absence of his officials and the court recorders. (McMullen 2013, 300–301, 304–307, 337) The received sources present a skewed account for the following reasons. First, Chinese history is traditionally written with a moral-didactic purpose and biographical details tend to depict individuals as stereotypes of relevant roles, focussing only on those particulars that accord with an exemplary or minatory account of their persona. (Wright 1976, 22) Second, the records were written by officials who upheld a court-centred rulership model and were interested in idealising Taizong’s reign accordingly, not least to advance their influence over their emperor, his succession, and the palace community. (McMullen 2013, 301–304, 311, 340) Third, the Zhenguan ruler constructed an exemplary reputation based on moral ideals of sagely rulership through his political and literary writings. (Chen 2010, *passim*) Fourth, Taizong may have directly influenced certain contemporary records, as exemplified by his directions on the historiography of the Xuanwu Gate Incident that secured his rise to power. (Chen 2010, 26–30; Wechsler 1974, 22–26; Wechsler 2008, 189) Indeed, Denis Twitchett writes that the Zhenguan reign ‘gradually acquired a popular image that bore only an indirect relationship with the actual historical events.’ (Twitchett 1996, 4) Considering the above limitations, I have cautiously included a combination of contemporaneous and later sources, including the Zhenguan ruler’s prose writing on statecraft and Wei Zheng’s 魏徵 (580–643) remonstrations. From what can be known about the Zhenguan court, this article is interested in whether and to what extent the *Essentials* may form a part of Zhenguan cultural memory, and if so, its significance for contemporary political thought.

### 1. Institutional communication

Cultural memory enables a society to develop its identity by constructing a narrative picture of the past. This picture of the past involves an objectivation of shared meaning and knowledge, the communication of which is institutionally sponsored or supported, and the cultivation of which presupposes expertise on the part of its transmitters. (Assmann 1988, 13–14; Assmann 1995, 130–131) I argue that such characteristics of institutional communication are identifiable in the *Essentials* as a text compiled under imperial auspices by specialists, and then approved and disseminated by the sovereign himself.

I begin by examining key factors that led to the imperial commissioning of what became the *Essentials*. Compiling such an anthology served to demonstrate the state’s cultural authority and political legitimacy at a time when the new Tang empire was being consolidated. First, the *Essentials* underscored the cultural power of the Zhenguan rulership by curating its literary heritage. Over eighty per cent of the imperial library collection had been lost due to political turbulence at the end of the Sui dynasty (581–618) and a disastrous accident during transportation from its former capital of Luoyang.

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Chinese texts, e.g. Qin 2013, Swartz 2018, and Kern 2022. However, the concept of cultural memory has its limitations that derive from its nature as an ongoing, ever-evolving process subject to forgetting, erasure, and remembrance. (A. Assmann 2008, 100–103; J. Assmann 2011, 72)

(Wechsler 2008, 216–217) As much as the library collection had to be rebuilt during the early Tang, its texts and records also needed to be re-organised. Such re-collecting and re-ordering of knowledge are seen in the assembly of selected sources within the *Essentials* for Taizong, who represented the intellectual culture of the Tang polity and its elite. (Twitchett 1996, 1) Although it was one of many texts being produced at the time, the *Essentials* through its own distinctive configuration (discussed in Section 2 ‘Reconstruction of cultural knowledge’) helped to define the literary sense of Zhenguan culture.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the *Essentials* commission contributed to the legitimation of the Tang ruling house and the succession of its second emperor. Compiling a new statecraft reference provided an opportunity to re-articulate the imperial vision for the new Tang era. The *Essentials* supported the Zhenguan rulership by complementing Taizong’s manifesto, informing him of the discourse on Confucian governing, and signalling the civil nature of his political orientation. Presented with competing ideas for governmental administration in or around 626, Emperor Taizong chose to implement a Confucian model of government that was advocated by the Grand Master of Remonstrance and Right Assistant in the Department of State Affairs Wei Zheng over alternatives such as the legalist approach proposed by the Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs Feng Deyi 封德彝 (568–627). (Xie 2003, 36–37, 290; *Jiu Tang shu*, 269.672; *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (New history of the Tang dynasty), 274.244; *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive mirror in aid of governance), 308.321; *Wei Zheng gongjianlu* 魏鄭公諫錄 (Record of the remonstrations by Lord Wei Zheng), 446.180–181, 199; *Tang huiyao*, 607.423; *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (Outstanding models from the storehouse of literature), 904.399) Taizong’s promulgation of the *Jinjing* 金鏡 (Golden mirror) *circa* 628 accordingly reflected Confucian ideas of good governance. It sets out the role of an ideal sovereign and his relationships with subjects and subordinates based on historical precedents, and emphasises the need for the ruler to temper military prowess with civil virtue, to heed the counsel of advisers, to engage in self-reflection and exercise self-restraint. (*Cefu yuangui*, 902.638; *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Finest flowers in the garden of literature), 1336.367–370; Twitchett 1996, 18–33) It is perhaps no coincidence that Wei Zheng, who figured in the Zhenguan ruler’s decision to adopt a Confucian administration, also became chief editor of the *Essentials*, a text advocating such government. Recruitment of Wei Zheng to high office in the Zhenguan administration from the ranks of the former crown prince Li Jiancheng 李建成 (589–626), who was Taizong’s brother and rival for the throne, converted Wei Zheng, who had been a staunch opponent, (*Zhenguan zhengyao*, 407.370) into a critical ally, and further points to the consolidation of Tang authority.<sup>10</sup> It seems, however, that the newly enthroned Taizong, who had been preoccupied with military affairs since his teenage years, was relatively unversed in the scholarship

<sup>9</sup> Whereas other political advice texts produced for Taizong and his princes presented accounts of historical past rulers and princes (e.g. the *Diwang lie lun* 帝王略論 (Concise discourse on emperors and kings) and the *Zi gu zhuhouwang shan’e lu* 自古諸侯王善惡錄 (Record of the merits and demerits of princes since ancient times), the *Essentials* offers broader coverage of statecraft concerns, practices, and exemplars. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.22–24 (Wei Zheng’s preface)) Writing about the general concept of anthology, Seth Lerer considers that ‘The mark of any culture’s literary sense of self lies in the way in which it makes anthologies.’ (Lerer 2003, 1263)

<sup>10</sup> That Taizong was motivated to mollify opposing parties in consolidating the new Tang dynasty finds support in the fact that Wei Zheng’s advice was accepted more in the early period of the Zhenguan reign than the later years, as complained about in Wei Zheng’s remonstrations dated to 637 and 641 (*Zhenguan zhengyao* 407.350–354; *Cefu yuangui* 903.832, 907.599–605; *Jiu Tang shu* 269.668–669; *Wenyuan yinghua* 1339.572–573).

traditionally thought to prepare rulers for statecraft. (Fitzgerald 1933, 125–126) Taizong is recorded to have said:

When [We] were young and fond of archery, [We] obtained ten excellent bows, and thought none could be better. Recently [We] showed them to a bow-maker, who said; ‘All are of poor quality.’ When [We] asked the reason, he replied: ‘The hearts of the wood are not straight, so their arteries and veins are all bad. Although the bows are strong, when you shoot the arrows they will not fly true.’ We began to realize that [We] were not yet good at discriminating. We pacified the empire with bows and arrows, but [Our] understanding even of these was still insufficient. How much the less can [We] know everything concerning the affairs of the empire! (Wechsler 2008, 190)

朕少好弓矢，得良弓十數，自謂無以加。近以示弓工，乃曰「皆非良材」。朕問其故，工曰：「木心不直，則脈理皆邪，弓雖勁而發矢不直。」朕始寤曩者辨之未精也。朕以弓矢定四方，識之猶未能盡，況天下之務，其能遍知乎！(Zizhi tongjian, 308.293)

Having committed to a Confucian government but lacking in the know-how for such governance, there was a plausible need for the Zhenguan ruler to learn on the job by becoming familiar with the art of governing in the most efficient manner. Taizong himself was of the view that the historical past served as a mirror for understanding dynastic rise and fall, (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.675) and he expressed a clear preference for learning from the experience of former rulers to secure the longevity of the Tang ruling house. (*Xin Tang shu*, 276.11; *Tang huiyao*, 606.481; *Tang xinyu* 唐新語 (New anecdotes from the Tang dynasty), 1035.363) Scholars have observed in Taizong ‘a ruler conscious of, if not obsessed by, the glories of the Han Empire, and a man who realized that one of the surest ways to validate the T’ang ... after so long a period of disunion was to replicate Han achievements.’ (Guisso 1978, 109) That a Confucian administration was chosen by the Zhenguan ruler and foregrounded by his *Essentials* would support Arthur F. Wright’s suggestion that Taizong sought to emulate Emperor Wu of Han (r. 140–87 BCE) (Wright 1973, 250–251), who is known for making texts associated with Confucian scholarship part of state-sponsored learning.<sup>11</sup> Such interest in the educative function of historical experience is corroborated by Zhao Keyao 趙克堯 and Xu Daoxun’s 許道勛 observations that the official histories completed during Taizong’s reign took Emperor Wen’s (r. 180–157 BCE) rulership during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) as an instructive model, and the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Sui regimes as cautionary warnings, and generally examined the reasons for dynastic success and failure. (Zhao and Xu 1995, 303) Indeed, the Zhenguan ruler and his court were acutely aware of the Qin and Sui dynasties not having lasted beyond their respective second generations. (Zhao and Xu 1995, 318–320) Accounts of Taizong’s enquiring into the contemporary records concerning his

<sup>11</sup> It is not possible to know the total content excerpted by the *Essentials* on the Han emperors from the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the [former] Han dynasty) and the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (History of the latter Han dynasty) (collectively, the ‘Han histories’) due to the loss of scroll 13, which would have contained passages from the basic annals of the early Han emperors. However, the fact that the *Essentials* devotes twelve out of its twenty scrolls of historical writings to excerpts from the Han histories seems indicative of the extent to which the Han imperium served as a model for the Zhenguan court.

reign (*Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要 (Essentials of governance from the Zhenguan reign), 407.498–499) show a sensitivity to historical scrutiny not least in respect of its militant beginnings. The Zhenguan ruler became crown prince with charge of all governmental and military affairs within days of murdering his two brothers in a palace coup in 626 and ascended the throne when his father abdicated two months later. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 268.50; *Zizhi tongjian*, 308.277–279, 282) As the final ceremonies confirming Taizong’s emperorship did not take place until late 628 (Twitchett 1996, 14), commissioning the *Essentials* served to display Taizong’s patronage of cultural heritage and his turn from the militaristic force by which he rose to power towards civil statecraft in the orthodox Confucian tradition. The imperial order for the work that produced the *Essentials* was therefore motivated by factors ranging from the public assertion of cultural authority and demonstration of legitimate succession to the private desire to learn the political discourse for administering Confucian government and glean lessons from historical precedents.

Who was responsible for inscribing the cultural memory in the *Essentials*? J. Assmann observes that the imperial culture in which the centre dominates the periphery is always borne by an elite minority that symbolises the social identity of the whole. (J. Assmann 2011, 130) As such, Emperor Taizong and his court officials count as members of the elite responsible for the cultural memory embodied by the *Essentials*.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the editors arguably qualify as ‘specialists’ in curating its cultural memory by possessing relevant knowledge and skills, understanding the needs and aspirations of their ruler, and enjoying his trust and confidence to undertake and deliver on the commission. The editorial team was led by Wei Zheng, who was widely read in various intellectual traditions. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.664) Having served as an assistant in the Palace Library during the reign of Taizong’s father Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–626), and then as Director of the Palace Library throughout the *Essentials* project, (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.665–666; *Xin Tang shu*, 274.242–243; *Zhenguan zhengyao*, 407.370; Wechsler 1974, 59–60), it is plausible that Wei Zheng was familiar with all that the library had for the making of the *Essentials*. Known for offering frank and fearless advice, Wei Zheng served Taizong in offices of considerable responsibility throughout his seventeen years of service.<sup>13</sup> So vital was he to the Zhenguan government that all his applications to retire were declined, and he remained in office until his death at the age of sixty-three. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.674) Howard J. Wechsler notes that, ‘Wei [Zheng], who served at [Taizong’s] side for seventeen of his twenty-three years on the throne, is widely viewed as having been a prime motive force behind the success of the [Zhenguan] period.’ (Wechsler 1974, 1–2) His approach to learning from the historical past must have resonated with Taizong, as Wei Zheng was entrusted with oversight of no less than five official histories written between the years

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<sup>12</sup> By virtue of being the sovereign, Taizong represented the intellectual culture of the Tang polity and its ruling elite. (Twitchett 1996, 1). As the *Essentials* was compiled by court officials with his approval, it may be taken to represent the shared views of the Zhenguan court on statecraft generally. Admittedly, the court officials were but one group that sought to influence the emperor’s policy decisions, as Taizong “spent most of his waking hours” with the palace community, which included his immediate family, women, eunuchs, entertainers, religious figures, and technical experts. (McMullen 2013, 300) Although Taizong took decisions that were not necessarily discussed with his court officials and he was advised by others, I look to the court officials as those who were formally and directly charged with assisting Taizong’s administration of government.

<sup>13</sup> His roles included: Grand Master of Remonstrance and Right Assistant in the Department of State Affairs from 626, Director of the Palace Library with the title Participant in Deliberations about Court Policy from 629, Director of the Chancellery from *circa* 633, and Grand Preceptor to the Heir Apparent from 643. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.665–667, 673–675; *Zhenguan zhengyao*, 407.370–371; Wechsler 1974, 4, 24, 107–115, 140, 155)

635 and 642.<sup>14</sup> According to Hung Kuan-Chih 洪觀智, Wei Zheng's input embodied the Zhenguan spirit of learning from history by connecting historical circumstances to contemporary application. In distilling the lessons to be learned, the role models to be emulated, and the principles for success or causes of failure, his historical writings provided practical inspiration with specific guidance. (Hung 2016, 25)

The *Essentials* was also edited by Xiao Deyan 蕭德言 (558–654), Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638), and Chu Liang 褚亮 (560–647). Qualified academicians since the inception of the Zhenguan reign, they numbered among the academic elite of the Hongwen guan 弘文館 (Institute for the advancement of literature). Xiao Deyan's biography in the *Old History of the Tang Dynasty* records that he was well versed in the Confucian canon and historical works, with particular mastery of the *Zuo Tradition*. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 271.539) Xiao Deyan was so esteemed that Taizong compared him to Confucian exemplars - Taizong praised him for having an ethical character on a par with Yan Hui 顏回 (521–481 BCE) and Min Ziqian 閔子騫 (536–487 BCE), erudition that surpassed Zi You 子遊 (506–443 BCE) and Zi Xia 子夏 (507–400 BCE), and for being as instrumental to the revival of Confucian learning as Fu Sheng 伏生 (268–178 BCE) and Yang Zhen 楊震 (59–124). (*Jiu Tang shu*, 271.539) Besides being the Vice Director of the Palace Library, Xiao Deyan was entrusted with educating the crown prince, and for drafting, *inter alia*, the comprehensive gazetteer of the empire *Kuodi zhi* 括地志 (Records of extended territory). (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.697, 271.539; *Tang huiyao*, 606.41)

Chu Liang and Yu Shinan were known for their flair for writing. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.677, 685) Chu Liang served Taizong as an academician and senior recorder, and often advised on military campaigns. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.688) Taizong would study canonical and historical writings with Yu Shinan, consult him on state matters, (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.688) and considered him a 'walking library'. (Sheng *et al.* 1986, 47–48) It seems that Taizong appreciated Yu Shinan for remonstrating using examples of past rulers,<sup>15</sup> and extolled his distinctions in the areas of moral virtue, scholarship, dedication, writings, and calligraphy. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.677, 680) Indeed, the Zhenguan ruler once commented that governing the empire would not be a problem if all his ministers could be like Yu Shinan. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.678; *Zhenguan zhengyao*, 407.376) That Yu Shinan succeeded Wei Zheng as Director of the Palace Library in 633 shows that he was not inferior to his predecessor in bibliographical and textual matters of state. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.677) The words below attributed to Emperor Taizong in the third year of the Zhenguan reign-period (629) reflect his close working relationship with Wei Zheng and Yu Shinan, and their support of him:

In recent years, when We have held court to oversee affairs or taking Our leisure and enjoyment within the parks and orchards, We have always summoned Wei Zheng and Yu Shinan to attend and accompany Us. Sometimes We have planned and discussed the business of governance

<sup>14</sup> Those works included *Liang shu* 梁書 (History of the Liang dynasty (502–557)), *Chen shu* 陳書 (History of the Chen dynasty (557–589)), *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (History of the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577)), *Bei Zhou shu* 北周書 (History of the Northern Zhou dynasty (557–581)), and *Sui shu* 隋書 (History of the Sui dynasty (581–618)). (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.667)

<sup>15</sup> Such remonstrances are seen in the *Essentials*' inclusion of positive and negative exemplars of rulers as well as subordinates for Taizong's edification, as stated in Wei Zheng's preface. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.23 (Wei Zheng's preface); see also Poon 2015, 319)



together, or discoursed on scriptures and canonical texts. The enlightening things We have often heard have not only brought benefit to Oneself, but one could say that this was the Way to lasting peace for the [dynasty's] state altars. (Chen 2020, 31)

朕比歲臨朝視事，及園苑閒遊賞，皆召魏徵、虞世南侍從，或與謀議政事、講論經典，既常聞啓沃，非直於身有益，在於社稷亦可謂久安之道。(Xie 2003, 51)

Working individually or with others, Wei Zheng and Yu Shinan were responsible for penning three of the five works of political advice literature produced during the Zhenguan years, namely, the *Diwang lüe lun* 帝王略論 (*Concise discourse on emperors and kings*), the *Essentials*, and the *Zi gu zhuhouwang shan'e lu* 自古諸侯王善惡錄 (*Record of the merits and demerits of princes since ancient times*), in order of completion. (*Jiu Tang shu*, 269.322, 326, 343) It is likely that Yu Shinan's research on past rulership for the *Concise Discourse on Emperors and Kings* (Nienhauser Jr. and Naparstek 2022, 439–440), which was finished *circa* 627, would have benefited the *Essentials* project, which was completed later, in 631.

Drawing on their scholarly backgrounds, all four editors occupied senior roles within the Zhenguan court. Serving Emperor Taizong in positions of confidence and responsibility enabled their work on the *Essentials* to be informed by an intimate knowledge of their main reader. This would include understanding his need to become familiar with the discourse on kingship and historical precedents, his preferences for making the past useful to the study and practice of government, and his mission and vision for the Zhenguan rulership. Hence, it could be said that expertise in the cultural knowledge and familiarity with Taizong qualified Wei Zheng, Xiao Deyan, Yu Shinan, and Chu Liang as specialists in mediating the relationship between the past and the Zhenguan rulership through the *Essentials*.

That the editors' completed work met with Emperor Taizong's approval confirms the *Essentials* as an institutionally buttressed communication. The extant literature records that Taizong was delighted with the *Essentials* from the outset. In the same month that the *Essentials* was presented in 631, Taizong personally wrote to Wei Zheng:

Reading what has been recorded, [We are] impressed by its comprehensiveness and conciseness. [We have] discovered matters that were hitherto unknown and unheard of. It enables us to bring about order [by] studying antiquity and oversee matters without doubt. Are not such accomplishments great indeed! [Wei] Zheng *et al.* are to be given a thousand bolts of plain silk and five hundred lengths of coloured silk. The crown prince and other princes are to be given one [copy] each.

覽所撰書，博而且要，見所未見，聞所未聞。使朕致治稽古，臨事不惑，其為勞也，不亦大哉！賜徵等絹千匹，綵物五百段。太子諸王，各賜一本。(Tang xinyu, 1035.363; Tang huiyao, 606.481; Wu and Ji 2004, 297)

Such a positive reception by Taizong is attested by the *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature* encyclopedia of political essays, autobiography, memorials, and decrees, completed by Wang Qinruo 王欽若 (962–1025) *et al.* in 1013, the *New History of the Tang Dynasty*, and the *Yu hai* 玉海 (Ocean of jades) encyclopedia compiled by Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296) in c. 1255. The *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature* includes two virtually identical entries as follows. Although the second instance includes the characters bracketed below, there is no material difference.

Taizong expressed praise after perusing it, ordered a copy to be circulated to each of the crown prince and the other princes, and for Wei [Zheng] to be gifted two hundred bolts of silk.

太宗覽之稱善，勅（勅）皇（太）子諸王各傳一本，賜徵帛二百疋。（*Cefu yuangui*, 912.545, 619)

A version of Taizong's response in the *New History of the Tang Dynasty* is consistent with his handwritten reply to Wei Zheng above:

The emperor [Taizong] was delighted by the text's comprehensiveness and conciseness. He said [addressing the editors of the *Essentials*], 'Your efforts enable us to study antiquity and oversee matters without doubt!' Especially opulent gifts were conferred.

帝愛其書博而要，曰：「使我稽古臨事不惑者，公等力也！」賚賜尤渥。（*Xin Tang shu*, 276.11)

Any doubt that the 'text' in this passage refers to the *Essentials* is quelled by the same quote appearing in an entry for the *Essentials* marked 'Tang *Qunshu zhiyao* 唐群書治要' (*Qunshu zhiyao* of the Tang dynasty) within the *Ocean of Jades*. (*Yu hai* 玉海, 944.449) It is likely that some references to the *Essentials* in the historical records are based on descriptions of the anthology in earlier writings rather than first-hand knowledge. However, the above passages share the same gist and present a relatively consistent narrative – that Taizong favoured the comprehensive coverage and concise expression of the *Essentials*, found it helpful for understanding the past and overseeing matters with confidence, generously rewarded the editors, and considered it useful enough for the princes to have a copy each. The Zhenguan ruler's regard for the value of the *Essentials* may also be discerned by comparing his response to the *Wujing dingben* 五經定本 (Standard editions of the Five Classics), a compilation of classicist scholarship commissioned and completed around the same time as the *Essentials*. Work on the *Standard Editions of the Five Classics* commenced in 630 and was finished to Taizong's approval in 633. However, the section on 'awards of appreciation' (*shangci* 賞賜) in the *Yuding yuanjian leihan* 禦定淵鑑類函 (Imperially-commissioned categorised writings in the library of deep insight, 1702), cites from the *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature* that Taizong awarded 'fifty bolts of silk' (*cibo wushi pi* 賜帛五十匹) for the *Standard Editions of the Five Classics* and 'two hundred bolts of silk' (*cibo erbai pi* 賜帛二百匹) for the *Essentials*. (*Yuding yuanjian leihan*, 985.786) While the types and quantities of silk bestowed for the *Essentials* may vary between records from different

sources,<sup>16</sup> it seems significant that the one source records considerably more silk awarded for the *Essentials* than another compilation for statecraft education, which may well indicate a higher level of imperial approval.

Aside from Emperor Taizong's initial response to the *Essentials*, the historical record suggests that it became a reference text that he consulted. I have not found any direct evidence of how the *Essentials* was read by Taizong (or read to him<sup>17</sup>), his princes, or the courtiers who had access to the manuscript copies. However, there is a remarkable consistency across three sources - the *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Writings*, the *Ye hou jiazhuan* 鄴侯家傳 (*Family account of the Lord of Ye*), and the *Lidai mingchen zouyi* 歷代名臣奏議 (*Memorials of leading officials of each period*), as three officials of later Tang courts, namely, Yang Xiangru 楊相如 (fl. c. 713), Li Mi 李密 (722–789), and Li Jiang 李絳 (764–830), each commends the *Essentials* as a statecraft reference commissioned for the Zhenguan ruler.<sup>18</sup> Such accounts imply that the *Essentials* had been used by Taizong, and that it had proven sufficiently useful to merit presentation to the later Tang emperors. Fan Wang also observes Taizong to be an avid reader of the *Essentials*.<sup>19</sup> That the above sources are later or fall within the category of bureaucratic responses to the submission of a text to court, does to some extent limit how much they may reliably illuminate the Zhenguan ruler's engagement with the *Essentials*. In the absence of specific evidence of usage, the impression of Taizong consulting the *Essentials* remains sketchy but the possibility of the text being used by him, his princes, and courtiers, cannot be ruled out. Overall, as a work of imperial commission, compiled by officials with relevant knowledge and expertise, highly approved and likely consulted by the emperor himself, if not also by other members of his court, the *Essentials* exhibits the characteristics of an institutionally-sponsored communication crafted by professional historians as curators of the memory of the past.

## 2. Reconstruction of cultural knowledge

According to Jan Assmann, the past does not just emerge of its own accord but is derived from a cultural process of construction and representation that is always guided by contemporary concerns. (J. Assmann 2011, 71–72) Likewise, the historical consciousness associated with cultural memory must be 'remembered' by the ruling elite retrieving, reinterpreting, and rearticulating what they consider worth remembering for their society. (J. Assmann 2011, 130) Aleida Assmann writes, '[G]roups indeed define themselves by agreeing upon what they hold to be important, to which story they accord

<sup>16</sup> The 'two hundred bolts of silk' for the *Essentials* in the *Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature* differs from 'a thousand bolts of plain-weave silk and five hundred lengths of coloured silk' specified in the *Collation and Annotation of the Complete Works of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty* and the *New Anecdotes from the Tang Dynasty*. (Wu and Ji 2004, 297; *Tang xinyu*, 1035.363)

<sup>17</sup> Sometime during the second year of his reign (627) Taizong said, "I cannot hold book scrolls myself, and so have others read them and I listen to them." (*Zhenguan zhengyao*, 407.486; McMullen 2013, 308)

<sup>18</sup> In a memorial to Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756) during 712 to 713, the commandant Yang Xiangru recommended study of the *Essentials* to understand the governing principles and learn from sagely sovereigns and faithful subordinates. In or around 780, the official Li Mi presented the *Essentials* to Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 779–805) to learn the essential governing principles. In a memorial accompanying the *Essentials* presented to Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820) in the early ninth century, the Hanlin academician Li Jiang wrote that Taizong constantly studied and reflected on the *Essentials*, and kept it beside his seat. (*Cefu yuangui*, 911.275; *Yu hai*, 944.449–450; *Lidai mingchen zouyi* 歷代名臣奏議 (Memorials of leading officials of each period), 438.518–519)

<sup>19</sup> Wu and Ji 1986, 285, cited by Wang 2020, 37. I was unable to locate this reference.

eminence, which anxieties and values they share.’ (A. Assmann 2008, 52) Such elements of selection and re-presentation in the making of cultural memory are manifest in the format, organisation, and composition of the *Essentials*.

A selection process is implicit in the title and form of the *Essentials*. Its appellation ‘*Essentials ... from Assembled Texts*’ and anthology format point to the text being the outcomes of various choices. Such choices would include selecting which of the ‘assembled texts’ to include from the extensive palace library,<sup>20</sup> which parts to excerpt from, and how much of those parts to extract for text and annotations. This style of compilation bears some resemblance to the nature of epitomes (*shuchao* 書抄), which are texts comprised of excerpts that have been copied from one work or one type of work.<sup>21</sup> Excerpting a passage was one method of deriving the essence from the relevant work(s).<sup>22</sup> A compilation of excerpted materials is often denoted by the character ‘*yao* 要’, as seen in the title of the *Essentials* and epitomes such as the two *Bingfa jiejiao* 兵法接要 (Collected essentials of military principles) by Sun Wu 孫武 (fl. c. 500 BCE) and Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220 BCE), respectively.<sup>23</sup> Considering that the existing statecraft references were voluminous, as exemplified by the *Huanglan* 皇覽 (Imperial conspectus) (approx. 680 scrolls)<sup>24</sup> and the *Hualin bianlüe* 華林遍略 (Comprehensive digest of the Institute of the Floral Grove) (approx. 600 to 700 scrolls),<sup>25</sup> it is not surprising that the inexperienced Taizong confronted a literary challenge, which gave rise to the commission’s terms of reference. As Wei Zheng’s preface to the *Essentials* states:

[Your Majesty] finds [the writings of] the six classics bewildering and [the writings of] the hundred masters disparate. Exhaustive analysis of principles and natures is fatiguing yet futile. Extensive reading without perspective broadens [one’s] knowledge without grasp of the essentials. Your servants have therefore been ordered to select from divers texts, excise the irregular and irrelevant, and illuminate the exemplary standards.

以為六籍紛綸，百家踳駁。窮理盡性，則勞而少功；周覽汎觀，則博而寡要。故爰命臣等，採摭群書，翦截淫放，光昭訓典。(《*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.22–23 (Wei Zheng’s preface))

<sup>20</sup> The ‘*Jingji zhi* 經籍志’ (monograph on classics and literature) in the *History of the Sui Dynasty* records that the palace library at the time had some 14,466 texts and 89,666 scrolls across its four bibliographic classifications. (*Sui shu*, 264.586)

<sup>21</sup> The *Essentials* is listed among the historical epitomes (*shichao* 史抄) in *Chinese History: A New Manual*. (Tian 2017, 143; Wilkinson 2022, 1178)

<sup>22</sup> In the preface to a catalogue of ‘excerpted sutras’ (*chaojing lu* 抄經錄), the Liang dynasty monk Sengyou 僧祐 wrote: ‘抄經者蓋撮舉義要也’ To epitomise a sutra is to bring out the essence of its content.’ (Cited in Tian 2007, 82)

<sup>23</sup> Cao Cao’s *Bingfa jiejiao* 兵法接要 (Collected essentials of military principles) (three scrolls) and Sun Wu’s *Bingfa jiejiao* 兵法接要 (Collected essentials of military principles) (seven scrolls) are listed in the *History of the Sui Dynasty’s* Monograph on Classics and Literature, and the *New History of the Tang Dynasty’s* Monograph on Literature. (*Sui shu*, 264.633; *Xin Tang shu*, 273.95)

<sup>24</sup> Regarded as China’s earliest compendium for an imperial reader, the *Imperial Conspectus* was compiled by Wang Xiang 王象 (d. c. 223) et al. during 220–222 under the auspices of Cao Pi 曹丕 (r. 220–226), Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty (220–265), and comprises classified extracts from the Five Classics and other works. (Tian 2017, 134; Knechtges and Chang 2010, 400; Knechtges and Chang 2014, 1251)

<sup>25</sup> *The Comprehensive Digest of the Institute of the Floral Grove* was completed in 523 by Xu Mian 徐勉 (466–535) et al. for Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty. Its size has been variously reported to be 600 scrolls, 620 scrolls and 700 scrolls in historical writings. (Knechtges and Chang 2014, 1707)

That the relevant sources were distilled to fifty scrolls of canonical, historical, and masters writings (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.22-23 (Wei Zheng’s preface)) throws into relief the extent of selection in producing the anthology. Accordingly, McMullen describes the *Essentials* as ‘the seventh-century equivalent of a sizeable encyclopedia of political wisdom, intended to save the emperor reading time. It offered an efficient route to minimum learning, and that was what Taizong ... needed.’ (McMullen 2013, 312)

Past knowledge and learning are recast through the arrangement and style of the *Essentials*. Beyond sourcing the text and annotations, the editors re-presented their selections within the context of a new anthology. Instead of organising the contents by topic like a typical *leishu* 類書 (categorised writings), the structure of the *Essentials* follows the order of the fourfold bibliographical classification of classics, histories, masters, and literary writings, formalised by Wei Zheng’s ‘Jingji zhi 經籍志’ (monograph on classics and literature) in the *Sui shu* 隋書 (History of the Sui dynasty),<sup>26</sup> with the excerpts grouped by source and positioned in the order they appeared within their sources. Table 1 sets out the contents of the *Essentials* based on the edition that was first published in 1787, and reprinted in 1926 as part of the *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 (Four branches of literature collection).

Scroll (*non-extant)	Contents	Annotated (●)
1	<i>Wei Zheng xu</i> 魏徵序 (Wei Zheng’s preface)	
	<i>Zhouyi</i> 周易 (Changes)	●
2	<i>Shangshu</i> 尚書 (Venerable documents)	●
3	<i>Maoshi</i> 毛詩 (Mao tradition of commentary on the <i>Odes</i> )	●
4*	<i>Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan</i> 春秋左氏傳 (Zuo tradition of commentary on the <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i> (‘Zuo Tradition’)) Part 1	●
5-6	<i>Zuo Tradition</i> Parts 2-3	●
7	<i>Liji</i> 禮記 (Records on ritual)	●
8	<i>Zhouli</i> 周禮 (Rites of Zhou)	●
	<i>Zhoushu</i> 周書 (History of the Zhou dynasty)	●
	<i>Chunqiu waizhuan guoyu</i> 春秋外傳國語 (Unofficial commentary on the <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i> - Discourses of the states (‘Discourses of the States’))	●
	<i>Hanshi waizhuan</i> 韓詩外傳 (Exoteric commentary on the <i>Odes</i> by Han Ying)	
9	<i>Xiaojing</i> 孝經 (Classic of family reverence)	●
	<i>Lunyu</i> 論語 (Analects)	●
10	<i>Kongzi jiyu</i> 孔子家語 (School sayings of Confucius)	
11-12	<i>Shiji</i> 史記 (Records of the historian) Parts 1-2	●
	<i>Wu Yue chunqiu</i> 吳越春秋 (Spring and Autumn annals of [the states of] Wu and Yue)	
13*, 14-19, 20*	<i>Hanshu</i> 漢書 (History of the [former] Han dynasty) Parts 1-8	●

<sup>26</sup> The fourfold classification had been in use during the Eastern Jin (317-420). (Elman 2010, 372)

Scroll (* non-extant)	Contents	Annotated (●)
21-24	<i>Hou Hanshu</i> 後漢書 (History of the latter Han dynasty) Parts 1-4	
25-26	<i>Weizhi</i> 魏志 (Records of Wei) Parts 1-2	●
	<i>Shuzhi</i> 蜀志 (Records of Shu)	●
27-28	<i>Wuzhi</i> 吳志 (Records of Wu) Parts 1-2	●
29-30	<i>Jinshu</i> 晉書 (History of the Jin dynasty) Parts 1-2	●
31	<i>Liutao</i> 六韜 (Six quivers)	
	<i>Yinmo</i> 陰謀 (Secret strategies)	
	<i>Yuzi</i> 鬻子 (Master Yu (Yu Xiong))	
32	<i>Guanzi</i> 管子 (Master Guan)	
33	<i>Yanzi</i> 晏子 (Master Yan)	
	<i>Sima fa</i> 司馬法 (Methods of Sima)	●
	<i>Sunzi bingfa</i> 孫子兵法 (Art of war)	●
34	<i>Laozi</i> 老子 (Old master (Lao Dan))	●
	<i>He guanzi</i> 鶡冠子 (Pheasant Cap Master)	
	<i>Liezi</i> 列子 (Master Lie (Lie Yukou))	●
	<i>Mozi</i> 墨子 (Master Mo)	
35	<i>Wenzi</i> 文子 (Master Wen)	
	<i>Zengzi</i> 曾子 (Master Zeng)	
36	<i>Wuzi</i> 吳子 (Master Wu (Wu Qi))	
	<i>Shangjun shu</i> 商君書 (Book of Lord Shang)	
	<i>Shizi</i> 屍子 (Master Shi)	
	<i>Shenzi</i> 申子 (Master Shen)	
37	<i>Mengzi</i> 孟子 (Mencius)	●
	<i>Shenzi</i> 慎子 (Master Shen (Shen Dao))	●
	<i>Yin wenzi</i> 尹文子 (Master Yin Wen)	
	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 莊子 (Master Zhuang)	●
	<i>Wei Liaozhi</i> 尉繚子 (Master Wei Liao)	
38	<i>Sun Qingzi</i> 孫卿子 (Master Xun)	
39	<i>Lüshi chunqiu</i> 呂氏春秋 (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn annals)	●
40	<i>Hanzi</i> 韓子 (Master Han (Han Fei))	
	<i>Sanlue</i> 三略 (Three strategies)	●
	<i>Xinyu</i> 新語 (New analects)	
	<i>Jiazi</i> 賈子 (Master Jia)	
41	<i>Huainan zi</i> 淮南子 (Master Huainan)	
42	<i>Yantie lun</i> 鹽鐵論 (Discourses on salt and iron)	
	<i>Xinxu</i> 新序 (New order)	
43	<i>Shuoyuan</i> 說苑 (Garden of persuasions)	
44	<i>Huanzi xinlun</i> 桓子新論 (New discourses of Master Huan)	
	<i>Qianfu lun</i> 潛夫論 (Discourses of a recluse)	
45	<i>Zhenglun</i> 政論 (Discourses on government)	

Scroll (*non-extant)	Contents	Annotated (●)
	<i>Zhong Zhangzi changyan</i> 仲長子昌言 (Admirable words of Zhong Zhangzi)	
46	<i>Shenjian</i> 申鑒 (Extended reflections)	
	<i>Zhonglun</i> 中論 (Balanced discourses)	
	<i>Dianlun</i> 典論 (Authoritative discourses)	
47	<i>Liu Yi zhenglun</i> 劉廙政論 (Political discourse of Liu Yi)	●
	<i>Jiangzi wanji lun</i> 蔣子萬機論 (Master Jiang’s discourse on myriad subtleties)	
	<i>Zhengyao lun</i> 政要論 (Discourse on the essentials of governing)	
48	<i>Tilun</i> 體論 (Structural discourses)	
	<i>Shiwu lun</i> 時務論 (Discourse on contemporary affairs)	
	<i>Dianyu</i> 典語 (Normative discourses)	
49	<i>Fuzi</i> 傅子 (Master Fu)	
50	<i>Yuanzi zhengshu</i> 袁子正書 (Political writings of Master Yuan)	
	<i>Bao puzi</i> 抱樸子 (Master who embraces simplicity)	

Table 1. Contents of the *Essentials*

Novel meaning is made from the way that the text is manipulated.<sup>27</sup> The text is decontextualised by removal from its original source, juxtaposition with different texts from the same source, along with proximity to other writings, and combination with different versions of, or allusions to, the same or similar ideas and narratives. The passages often become abridged by virtue of being excerpted, and some annotations involve selections from more than one commentary. (Guan 2018, 9–11) As for the style of written expression, the editors adopted a concise approach with the contents purporting to be self-contained extracts, gleaned the gist from each source for a complete understanding without extraneous details.<sup>28</sup>

That the *Essentials* derives new meaning from inherited writings is also evident in its presentation of a Confucian-oriented discourse and incorporation of historical material. The Confucian orientation is exemplified by its selection of classics and masters writings. The *Essentials* opens with passages from the Five Classics, which were considered essential to Confucian learning because some of those texts were used for instruction by Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his followers, and early traditions ascribe to Confucius the tasks of compiling, editing, and composing parts of them. (Nylan 2001, 5, 8, 10, 16, 33–39) Those excerpts are followed by others from the *Rites of Zhou*, the *History of the Zhou Dynasty*, the *Discourses of the States*, and the *Exoteric Commentary on the Odes by Han Ying*, which are traditionally associated with the Five Classics. Then there are excerpts from the *Classic of Family Reverence*, the *Analects*, and the *School Sayings of Confucius*, which have been regarded as records

<sup>27</sup> For example, the *Essentials* includes from the *Mencius* the concept of benevolence and compassion in the ruler and the concern to maintain the loyalty of the people, but omits the Mencian ideas of human goodness being innate and the ruler being sanctioned by heaven and the people. (McMullen 2013, 312)

<sup>28</sup> Wei Zheng’s preface explains that the *Essentials* breaks from the artistic expression that had characterised pre-Tang writings, by adopting a style that is functional rather than flowery and focused on conveying the essentials rather than conjuring the encyclopedic. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.22, 24 (Wei Zheng’s preface))

of the teachings of Confucius himself. Seventeen of the forty-eight masters compiled within the *Essentials* are categorised among the Confucian writings by the Monograph on Classics and Literature in the *History of the Sui Dynasty*.<sup>29</sup> Fan Wang points out, ‘While the excerpts are selected from a wide range of sources representing different intellectual and ideological orientations, they are shaped in ways that repeat and reinforce the same essentially Confucian messages.’ (Wang 2020, 34) The *Essentials*’ selections from the six strategist works are a case in point - the *Six Quivers*, the *Art of War*, the *Methods of Sima*, the *Secret Strategies*, the *Three Strategies*, and *Master Wu* (the ‘strategists’) unequivocally identify the prevention of warfare as the best military strategy. First, their tactical and combative elements are all but absent. There is no mention of battle at all in the extracts from the *Secret Strategies*, (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:801–803) and much of the strategists concerning martial strategy formulation and implementation are excluded. For example, the *Essentials* omits six chapters from the *Art of War*, including those entitled ‘*Zuozhan* 作戰’ (Waging war), ‘*Junzheng* 軍爭’ (Manoeuvring armies), and ‘*Jiudi* 九地’ (Nine terrains), the chapters ‘*Ding jue* 定爵’ (Defining rank) and ‘*Yanwei* 嚴位’ (Strictness in rank) from the *Methods of Sima*, and ‘*Liaodi* 料敵’ (Estimating the enemy) and ‘*Yingbian* 應變’ (Sudden emergency) in *Master Wu*. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:856–861; 7:924–927)

Second, the strategists in the *Essentials* actively discourage military intervention. The *Art of War*’s opening passage attributes the ultimate excellence to subduing the enemy without any fighting, and the details of besieging walled cities are redacted.

Master Sun said, ‘... winning every battle is not the highest attainment. The highest attainment is to subdue the enemy without fighting. The enemy voluntarily surrenders without fighting. .... So it is that the one who handles troops well is he who causes other people’s troops to surrender, but without fighting. He captures a stronghold, but without attacking it, and he takes other countries, but without a long campaign. He will always keep his resources intact while contending for the Empire, and his soldiers’ weapons will not be damaged. Thus, his [triumph] will be complete.’<sup>30</sup>

孫子曰：「..... 百戰百勝，非善之善者也。不戰而屈人之兵，善之善者也。未戰而敵自屈服也。..... 故善用兵者，屈人之兵而非戰也。拔人之城而非攻也。毀人之國而不久也。必以全爭於天下，故兵不鈍而利可全也。」 (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:859)

The ideal of conquering without armed confrontation is conveyed through the main text - ‘The highest attainment is to subdue the enemy without fighting’ (*buzhan er quren zhi bing* 不戰而屈人之兵) - and its annotation about voluntary surrender by the opponent. Teaching that strongholds, countries, and even the empire can be won over without expending military efforts or resources, the *Essentials* unmistakably disincentivises military recourse while detailing the potentials of conflict-free strategies.

<sup>29</sup> The remaining thirty-one sources include nine syncretist works (*zajia* 雜家), eight legalist works (*fajia* 法家), six Daoist works (*daojia* 道家), six strategist works (*bingjia* 兵家), one logician work (*mingjia* 名家), and one Mohist work (*mojia* 墨家), as categorised by the same Monograph on Classics and Literature. (*Sui shu*, 264.626–635)

<sup>30</sup> This translation of the text is adapted from Sadler 2009, 97, with the *Qunshu zhiyao*’s annotation translated by me.



Third, the *Essentials* substantiates its non-martial principles by reference to conventional authority and practice of the sages. Excerpts from the *Methods of Sima* associate the absence of war and strife with the best rulership since ancient times – ‘*shengde zhi zhi* 聖德之治’ (the good governance of [rulers with] sagely virtue). (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:857; Sadler 2009, 132–133) Similarly, ‘*shengwang zhi yong bing ye fei haoleshi* 聖王之用兵也 非好樂之’ (The [sagely] king does not take any pleasure in using the army) is extracted from the *Three Strategies*. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 8:1053; Sawyer and Sawyer 1993, 305) Military engagement is de-emphasised as state security is attributed to domestic factors. The *Six Quivers* records that national stability and imperial government are brought about by the ruler’s perfection of moral cultivation. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:781) Accordingly, the visionary Jiang Shang 姜尚 (fl. 1056 BCE) advises King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (r. 1099/56–1050 BCE) to win over the empire by cultivating his virtue, heeding the advice of worthy officials, and extending benevolence to the people. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 6:783) In this dialogue excerpted from *Master Wu*, the question about martial formations and strategies is answered in distinctly non-martial terms with reference to matters beyond the battlefield.

Marquis Wu inquired, ‘I would like to hear about the Way [Tao] for making battle formations invariably stable, defenses inevitably solid, and victory in battle certain.’

Wu Qi replied, ‘If you are able to have the worthy hold high positions and the unworthy occupy low positions, then your battle formations will already be stable. If the people are settled in their farming and homes and [are] attached to their local authorities, then your defenses will already be solid. When the hundred surnames all acclaim my lord and condemn neighbouring states, then in battle you will already be victorious.’ (Sawyer and Sawyer 1993, 209)

武侯曰：「願聞陣必定，戰必勝，守必固之道。」對曰：「君使賢者居上，不肖處下，則陣已定矣。民安其田宅，親其有司，則守已固矣。百姓皆是君而非鄰國，則戰已勝矣。」 (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 7:925)

Not only are non-Confucian sources excerpted in ways that complement Confucian beliefs or address Confucian concerns, but a much higher proportion is excerpted from Confucian sources than others:

Of the twenty fascicles and more than 100,000 words of *Han Feizi*, only eighteen passages totalling around 2,600 words are included in the *Qunshu zhiyao*. In contrast, 124 passages totalling more than 3,800 words are excerpted from the *Analects*, a primary Confucian classic that contains fewer than 16,000 words altogether. (Wang 2020, 34)

Wang’s findings are consonant with Chou Shaowen’s conclusion that some three-fifths of the *Essentials’* contents directly relate to the Confucian tradition based on a quantitative analysis of how much is compiled from each source and their relative proportions within each bibliographical classification. (Chou 2007, 54)

The *Essentials'* excerpts from historical writings are sourced from only eight texts but account for nearly half of its fifty scrolls. No less than twenty scrolls are devoted to content from the standard histories, including the *Records of the Historian*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue*, the *Han Histories*, the *Records of Wei*, the *Records of Shu*, the *Records of Wu*, and the *History of the Jin Dynasty*. The footprint of historical material is extended by including excerpts from the *Venerable Documents*, which contains records from China's antiquity, the *Zuo Tradition of Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* - China's earliest narrative history -, and the *Discourses of the States*.<sup>31</sup> Hung argues that the *Essentials'* excerpts from the masters resemble historical writings in the way they are arranged and what they record. (Hung 2016, 54-56) The masters are ordered not by intellectual tradition but by the lifetimes of their attributed authors that roughly correlate with the timeframes of their contents. The masters excerpts are often centred on the words and deeds of particular individuals, not unlike the biographical entries in traditional Chinese historiography. For example, the *Essentials'* passages from the *Six Quivers*, the *Secret Strategies*, and *Master Yan*, consist almost entirely of questions and answers between the relevant ruler - King Wen of Zhou, King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (r. 1049/45-1043 BCE) or Duke Jing of Qi 齊景公 (r. 547-400 BCE) - and their adviser - Jiang Shang or Yan Ying 晏嬰 (d. 500 BCE), respectively. With minimum background detail as to where and when the dialogues took place, the excerpts focus attention on what Jiang Shang and Yan Ying said by way of political advice or tactical instructions. (Hung 2016, 55) Excerpts from other sources, like the *New Order* and the *Garden of Persuasions*, mainly record historical narratives and read more like the accounts of people and events in the historical texts than discursive masters writings. (Hung 2016, 55-56)

Fresh meaning in cultural memory is thus seen to be derived from existing knowledge through the choice of texts from various sources and their reconfiguration within an anthology that is shaped by Confucian ideas about governance and an historiographical approach. Such selection and representation in the *Essentials'* form, structure, and contents corroborate its claim to be a text of Zhenguan cultural memory.

### 3. Binding nature

The knowledge preserved in cultural memory is binding in terms of prescribing normative guidance (its normative function) and espousing the shared values that define the collective identity of a group through the way they see themselves and how they wish others to know them (its formative function). (Assmann 1995, 121-123) As space does not allow a detailed consideration of the *Essentials'* excerpts and how they work together here, I will focus on the anthological form of the text. The concept of an anthology itself serves dual functions of managing textual information and conveying an argument about the larger corpus of the literary tradition through the way its contents have been chosen and compiled from the universe of available documents. (Chen 2021, 201-202; Tian 2021, 215) It will be

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<sup>31</sup> The latter two were classified among the historical writings of the Spring and Autumn period (722-476 BCE) in the Monograph of Arts and Literature in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, with the *Discourses of the States* categorised in the historical section of the Monograph on Classics and Literature of the *History of the Sui Dynasty*. (*Han shu*, 249.804-805; *Sui shu*, 264.608)

seen that the normative and formative elements of cultural memory are manifest in the anthological work of the *Essentials*.

The normative function of cultural memory alerts us to the educative nature of the *Essentials*.

This is corroborated by its imperial commission being born of the need to make what was considered by the editors to be relevant from the extensive imperial library accessible for Taizong to study effectively and efficiently. Sourcing images, concepts, principles, narratives, precedents, and commentary from poetry and prose about the past, the anthology purports to offer a broad base of learning to inform and support his life and work as a sovereign.<sup>32</sup> Not only did the statecraft knowledge have to be useful but it also had to be organised and presented in a way that facilitated that use. The excerpts in the *Essentials* assisted learning by reducing the material into smaller segments that were specifically applicable and presumably easier to recall. That its text was not authored afresh but excerpted from existing literature, and classified according to source rather than theme, also enabled the *Essentials* to serve as a repertory of quotations and allusions for developing cultural literacy and competence in court communications.<sup>33</sup>

The formative function of cultural memory sheds light on how the *Essentials* shapes the collective identity and profile of the Zhenguan ruling elite through what they hold to be important. Indeed, Jan Assmann states that ‘Any selective acceptance of a tradition, that is any act of reception, also entails recognition of a specific set of values.’ (J. Assmann 2011, 102) With the excerpts in the *Essentials* forming a recension of their respective sources, it could be said that the anthology exemplifies a reception and recognition of values to which Taizong and his court subscribed. The argument conveyed by an anthology is twofold: that its selections are important, and that this importance is uniquely derived from the assemblage of those selections that it comprises. (Tian 2021, 203) While the *Essentials* constitutes a collection of sources, the editors’ choice of an original title accentuates their compendium’s being a source in itself, and the word ‘essentials’ in the title signals that its selected contents are centrally important and requisite readings. The collective coherence of the *Essentials* puts forward an argument about what matters in the cultural tradition, as dictated by the editors given the needs and objectives of their principal reader. As Christopher M. B. Nugent writes, ‘Any effort to gather and categorize information will inevitably reflect the ambitions and concerns of the powers that sponsor and authorize it.’ (Nugent 2021, 293) As discussed above, the *Essentials* articulates its ideology by de-contextualising its sources, compiling their excerpts, and re-organising them to articulate the concepts and convictions about the Confucian model of bringing about order, as envisaged by the Zhenguan ruler and his officials. While the excerpts are no longer necessarily representative of their sources, they mediate the reader’s experience of the literary inheritance concerning emperors through the *Essentials’* own comprehensive and structured arrangement of knowledge. By identifying with selected

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<sup>32</sup> Wei Zheng’s preface explains that because Taizong is concerned about the work of statecraft and developing long-term strategy, the *Essentials* includes a broad range of writings for complete coverage of governance and its organisation, facilitates efficient learning from sagely rulers, and does not overlook even the smallest positive example to illuminate imperial perfection. (*Qunshu zhiyao*, 1.22 (Wei Zheng’s preface)).

<sup>33</sup> Analysing the *Essentials’* excerpts from the *Mao Tradition of Commentary on the Odes* and the *Exoteric Commentary on the Odes by Han Ying*, Fan Wang argues that the *Essentials* trained Taizong to identify allusions to poetry and decipher intentions in poetic quotations, and served as a repository of quotations for communications with the educated elites. (Wang 2020, 38)

parts of certain texts in the *Essentials* for the purposes of realising their political objectives, Taizong and his editors endowed the Zhenguan ruling elite in public discourse with the cachet of conventional wisdom.

## Conclusion

The theoretical framework of cultural memory undergirds an understanding of the *Essentials* that takes account of its historical and political context. Crafted by Zhenguan officials from extant knowledge and consulted by their ruler as principal reader, the *Essentials* constitutes an institutional communication. With the meaning of the *Essentials* being shaped by contemporary purposes and articulated through the selection and arrangement of excerpted texts, the book is no less than a work of cultural reconstruction. By offering normative guidance for imperial governance and providing a shared basis for communal action, the *Essentials* reinforces the Zhenguan collective identity through its compilation of selected writings. The form and formulation of the *Essentials*, as an imperial commission to inform Taizong on rulership, therefore demonstrates that the political philosophy of the Zhenguan era was rooted in past knowledge while remaining true to present concerns, not least through its anthological functions of managing information and communicating about the wider corpus of texts.

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