Tang Taizong (r. 626–649) is renowned in East Asian history as the great consolidator of the dynasty. Taizong and the title of his long reign period, the Zhen’guan period, became a potent symbol of imperial legitimacy and power throughout East Asia until the 20th century. To put this into context, one must remember that from the mid-220’s AD until the founding of the Tang no previous political regime had been able to unify China for more than two generations; the latter two cases being the Western Jin (265–317), and the Sui dynasty (581–618). Under Taizong’s leadership not only was Tang power consolidated, but it was enormously expanded. First, in 630 the first Eastern Turk confederacy was destroyed and its kaghan was captured resulting in hegemonic Tang power extending into North Asia. In 640 Gaochang was conquered putting the Tang in a position capable of dominating the Silk Road routes of Eastern Central Asia. Beginning in 645 Taizong renewed Chinese efforts to conquer the kingdom of Korguryo, which controlled southern Manchuria and northern Korea. This effort did not bear fruit, however, until the late 660’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 significant failures—his inability to fully construct and control rabid factionalism at his court. To modern sensibilities, this may seem a rather peculiar fault, or indeed, no fault at all, but in the context of pre-modern imperial politics this was a serious failing. There is also a strong possibility that the onset of the 645 Korean campaign (focused on the east bank of the Liao River) may have taken on new significance at the time in the context of these political errors committed by Taizong at his court.

This chapter will open with a discussion of Taizong’s famous fengjian, or hereditary enfeoffment proposal, which served to lay the foundations for the later wider factionalization of his court. This enfeoffment policy began shortly after Taizong derogated the status of his agnates in 626 as discussed in the previous chapter. In late 627, following a proposal from a senior courtier, Xiao Yu, Taizong publicly supported the
idea of taking all the imperial agnates, most particularly his brothers, mature sons, and briefly even senior non-agnatic 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 archaic Western Zhou enfeoffment model of antiquity and sending the designated individuals out to their fiefdoms. One of the curious aspects of the fengjian proposal was that it was never decisively implemented. The issue was bruited about from 627 through 639, and in the process the hereditary element was dropped, senior non-agnatic courtiers were never sent out to the provinces, but brothers and most mature sons were dispatched to the provinces as non-hereditary prefectual administrators with the noble rank of prince (wang 王).

The result 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 this chapter. With regard to this latter activity, Taizong’s 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 Wuji. Taizong’s means at hand was to take one of his mature sons, Li Tai 李泰, allegedly born of the main consort, the Zhangsun Empress, and permit him to compete at court with Chengqian 承乾, Taizong’s duly designated heir apparent whose status was publicly proclaimed in 627.¹ Chengqian long had the full support of the senior courtiers who became the target of Taizong’s factionalization activities, as indeed it was their duty to support the duly proclaimed heir to the throne. The strategic goal of these inter-locking policies, that is the fengjian policy and the subsequent court factionalization policy was to accentuate the independent, creative power of the throne. Ironically, such a policy could only be detrimental in some manner to institutionalized court administrative and political stability—which is one of the very qualities for which Taizong’s reign is commonly lauded.

¹ There are strong grounds for suspecting that Tai may have been as old or slightly older than Chengqian. See the discussion in the Cambridge History of China, 236. The fact that Tai never received any support from his putative maternal uncle, Zhangsun Wuji, also supports the contention that the Zhangsun Empress was not his biological mother.