

HAN FEIZI

People naturally grow arrogant when loved, and become obedient only through coercion.

—Han Feizi



This decorated axe head symbolizes punishment, one of Han Feizi's “two handles” of government.

I. Life and Context

Han Feizi's life was tragic.

Born into one of the noble families of his home state of Han, Han Feizi was expected to enter into an official career. However, he had a stutter, which made public speaking difficult for him. Perhaps by way of compensation, he became one of the greatest writers of the Chinese tradition. As a young man, he went to study with Xunzi. We shall see that Xunzi's influence is evident in Han Feizi's philosophy; however, Han Feizi became one of the most incisive critics of Confucianism. Xunzi had another student around the same time, Li Si, and, according to an early Chinese historian, "Li Si himself thought that he was not the equal of Han Fei."ⁱ This feeling of intellectual inferiority would have serious consequences later.

Han Feizi believed that state of Han was in danger because its king was promoting unworthy sycophants to positions of authority. He wrote essays and memoranda to try and persuade the king to change his policies, but to no avail. However, some of Han Feizi's writings came to the attention of the ruler of the state of Qin, who was deeply impressed. As it turned out, Han Feizi's former classmate Li Si was now a high minister in Qin, and he initially encouraged the ruler to meet Han Feizi. When Han Feizi arrived as an official emissary from the state of Han, the ruler of Qin took a liking to him. In fact, the ruler admired Han Feizi so much that Li Si began to think of Han Feizi as a threat to his own position. Li Si told the ruler of Qin that Han Feizi could not be trusted and convinced him to order Han Feizi's execution. Realizing that the ruler might change his mind, Li Si made sure that Han Feizi was not allowed to plead his case, and sent him some poison, encouraging him to kill himself before he suffered the pain and humiliation of public execution. The Qin ruler did, in fact, change his mind and decide to spare Han Feizi, but by the time news of the reprieve arrived, Han Feizi was dead. Han Feizi once wrote,

The dragon is a creature that can be tamed and trained so that one can ride upon its back. But on the underside of its throat it has inverted scales one foot in diameter, and if any person brushes against them, the dragon will surely kill them. A ruler of men also has his "inverted scales," so if a persuader hopes to succeed, he must be careful to avoid brushing up against them. (335)

In the end, Han Feizi himself was skewered on the dragon's scales.

II. Critique of Confucianism

Han Feizi's view of human nature is similar to that of Xunzi, in that Han Feizi sees humans as primarily self-interested: "The natural aspirations of the people are such that

they all move toward security and benefit and avoid danger and poverty. ... Public-spirited people are few while private-minded individuals are numerous” (350). Also like Xunzi, Han Feizi argues that while humans do innately have some affection for others, it is too limited and capricious to rely upon. Love is inadequate to make others virtuous: “In the nature and dispositions of human beings nothing is more primary than the love of parents for their children. All children are loved by their parents, and yet children are not always well behaved” (341). Since even the love of parents is insufficient to produce good children, how can the love of rulers produce good ministers and subjects? Furthermore, even parental love has its limitations, as Han Feizi illustrates with a chilling example:

When it comes to their children, parents who produce boys get congratulations but those who produce girls kill them. Both came from the bodies of the parents, but the boys occasion congratulations while the girls are killed. This is due to their reckoning of benefits and calculations of profit. Thus, even parents in dealing with their children use a calculating heart. How much more so those who lack the affection of parents!ⁱⁱ

Because of the human fondness for private profit and the weakness of human affection, at any one time, “there are no more than ten officers in the whole world who are virtuous and honest” (346). How are we to deal with the fact that most people are not good by nature? Han Feizi uses a metaphor that seems borrowed from Xunzi:

If people had to wait for arrow shafts that are naturally straight, then for a hundred generations there would be no arrows. If they had to wait for wood that is naturally round, then for a thousand generations there would be no chariot wheels. If in a hundred generations there is not a single arrow shaft that is naturally straight, nor a single piece of wood that is naturally round, how is it that every generation is able to ride around in chariots and shoot down birds with arrows? It is because they use the Way of straightening and bending. (357)

Despite all these points of agreement, Han Feizi disagrees with his Confucian teacher Xunzi on two fundamental issues: the effectiveness of ethical education and the usefulness of tradition as a guide to the present. In his philosophy of education, Xunzi advocates “steaming and bending” (256) humans via the effects of ritual and learning so that they become ethical. Han Feizi does not deny that it is possible to transform humans in this manner, but he suggests that it is exceedingly difficult and rarely successful:

Kongzi was a great sage of the world. He traveled throughout the land within the four seas refining people’s conduct and elucidating the Way. Everyone in the land within the four seas was pleased by his benevolence and praised him for

his righteousness, but those who followed him numbered only seventy men. It seems those who value benevolence are rare while those with the ability to be righteous are difficult to find. (341)

If even Kongzi, with all his skill and Virtue, could obtain only seventy virtuous disciples, how can contemporary rulers be expected to obtain enough virtuous ministers for their state?

Didn't the sages of the past rule via Virtue and ethical transformation? Han Feizi produces three powerful arguments against using the past as a model for the present. The first two are based on skepticism about the possibility of knowing the past. Han Feizi notes that "Kongzi and Mozi both followed the Way of Yao and Shun and both claimed that they were the true transmitters of the Way of these sages, and yet the doctrines and practices that each of them accepted and rejected are not the same" (352). Furthermore, even if we were to decide, for whatever reason, to follow the Confucian or the Mohist understanding of the past,

after Kongzi and Mozi, the Confucians split into eight factions and the Mohists split into three. The doctrines and practices that each of these factions accept and reject are divergent and conflicting, and yet each faction claims that they are the true representatives of the Way of Kongzi or Mozi. Kongzi and Mozi cannot come back to life, so who will determine which of the current schools are the right ones? (351–52)

In his third argument against following tradition, Han Feizi sketches a philosophy of history according to which great cultural heroes helped the people with innovations that solved the problems they faced. For example, "the Nester" showed the people how they could evade dangerous animals by living in tree houses, and "the Kindler" showed them how to start fires using a bow drill. This sounds like a very Confucian view of history, but Han Feizi takes it in a very un-Confucian direction. He points out that times change, and even though living in tree houses and starting fires with a bow drill *were* valuable techniques in their respective eras, if anyone proposed doing such things today they would be mocked. Similarly, the gentle and benevolent Way of governing (venerated by Confucians and Mohists alike) did work very well in the era of the ancient sages. In those times, "people were few, there was an abundance of goods, and so no one quarreled. Therefore, no rich rewards were doled out, no harsh punishments were administered, and yet the people of themselves were orderly."ⁱⁱⁱ However, as "the number of people increases, goods grow scarce, and men have to struggle and slave for a meager living. Therefore they fall to quarreling."^{iv} This is the current social and economic context, and it requires a more stern approach to governing.

This being the case, if someone goes around praising the Way of Yao, Shun, Tang, Wu, and Yu in the present age, they will surely be laughed at by the new sages. For this reason, the sage does not expect to follow the ways of the ancients or model his behavior on an unchanging standard of what is acceptable. He examines the affairs of the age and then makes his preparations accordingly. (340)

Han Feizi uses a memorable anecdote to illustrate why we cannot simply repeat the methods that were successful in the past:

Among the people of Song, there was a farmer who had a stump in the middle of his field. One day, a rabbit running across the field crashed into the stump, broke its neck, and died. Seeing this, the man put aside his plow and took up watch next to the stump, hoping that he would get another rabbit in the same way. ... Now if one wants to use the government of the former kings to bring order to the people of the current age, this is all just so much stump-watching. (340)

This story survives in the modern Chinese idiom *shǒu zhū dài tù* 守株待兔, “watch a stump awaiting a rabbit,” meaning to wait for good things to fall into one’s lap.

If humans are not innately virtuous and it is impractical to ethically transform them, how can human society and government be successful? Han Feizi’s answer is that rulers must structure government such that it is in the interest of ministers and citizens to act for the public good, not only their private good. They can do this through five techniques: the power of position, administrative methods, law, the “two handles” of government, and “the Way of the ruler.”

III. The Five Elements of Han Feizi’s Theory of Government

1. The Power of Position

What we render “power of position” (*shì* 勢) is a term that also occurs in military texts, where it refers to, for example, the strategic advantage that one army has over another by occupying the high ground.^V Even if one army is somewhat smaller than another, the former will have the advantage if it fires its arrows from the high ground while its infantry and chariots advance downhill, in contrast to its opponent, which must run soldiers and vehicles uphill and shoot arrows upward. Han Feizi attributes to an earlier philosopher, Shenzi (Shen Dao), the application of the power of position to the social

realm, where it refers to “the differences in power and status set up by human beings” (329).

This is a phenomenon that is simultaneously familiar yet mysterious. Suppose you are in a large lecture class. You raise your hand when you have a question and wait for the professor to call on you. If the professor says, “I don’t have time for questions right now because there is some material I have to get through,” you drop your hand. Why don’t you just yell your question as soon as it pops into your head? And why do you put your hand down when the professor tells you that she doesn’t have time for questions? You raise your hand but then put it down at her request because she’s the professor. At one level, this is completely unremarkable; you don’t think twice about it, but at another level it is miraculous. How is your professor invested with this power over you (and your arm)? Your professor has talents and skills (presumably), but this won’t really explain the phenomenon. After all, you don’t raise your hand when you have a question at a dinner party, even if you are chatting with someone who is very accomplished. Perhaps we should say that the college gives the professor that power over you because you are a student. Yes, but is it any less mysterious what the college is or how it makes you do things? Han Feizi uses the term “power of position” to refer to this phenomenon by which some people can enforce their will on others because of the social role they occupy. It seems that the metaphysics of the power of position is mysterious (e.g., What kind of thing is it? How does it fit in among the other things that exist?) but the phenomenon (its appearance to us) is familiar to the point of being banal, and this phenomenon is one of the keys to social organization.

Han Feizi makes clear that the power of position is independent of the transformative effects of Virtue. Kongzi claimed that the “Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend” (*Analects* 12.19). Consequently, subjects will obey a ruler with Virtue as naturally as the polestar “receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars” that revolve around it (*Analects* 2.1). Han Feizi replies that

If Yao and Shun had relinquished the power of their positions as rulers and abandoned the law, and instead went from door to door persuading and debating with people, without any power to encourage them with veneration and rewards or coerce them with punishments and penalties, they would not have been able to bring order to even a few households. (*Han Feizi* 8; *Readings*, p. 331)

Although the power of position is metaphysically mysterious, it is clear that it does not appear out of nothing or simply because a few people will it. Your family can pronounce you king of the United States, but don’t expect anyone to bow down to you. The genuine power of position can also be lost. The reigning monarch of the United Kingdom has many perks, but beheading his ex-wives is no longer among them. Han

Feizi did not provide an account of how the power of position is obtained in the first place, but he had much to say about how it could be lost or maintained.

Fact: The word for “contradiction” in modern Chinese is máo dùn 矛盾, which literally means “spear-shield.” It is derived from a story that Han Feizi tells about a merchant who claimed that his shields were so strong that nothing could pierce them and his spears were so sharp that they could pierce anything. When someone asked what would happen if one of his spears were used against one of his shields, the merchant was speechless.

2. Administrative Methods

Many Chinese philosophers seem to be in a contest to see who can give their philosophy the most ancient pedigree: Kongzi praised the founders of the Zhou dynasty; the Mohists praised predynastic sage-kings like Yao, Shun, and Yu; then Yang Zhu said that the even earlier Emperor Shen Nong had it right. So it is a refreshing twist when Han Feizi attributes two of his key concepts to figures who lived within a couple centuries of him: Shen Buhai developed administrative methods (*shù* 術) and Gongsun Yang emphasized the importance of laws (*fǎ* 法).

Han Feizi explains that Shen Buhai, a minister to Marquis Zhao of the state of Han, developed a technique for dealing with government officials:

Using administrative methods means to assign offices based on a person’s qualifications, to heed the objectives named in a minister’s proposal and then hold them accountable for the actual results, to manipulate the handles of life and death, and to test the abilities of the assembled ministers. (336)

Because Han Feizi saw sycophancy and favoritism as severe problems in the government of Han, it is not surprising that his philosophy of government emphasizes a meritocratic system of appointing people to government offices: “those who make genuine achievements must always be rewarded, even if they are distant and lowly, while those who make genuine errors must always be punished, even if they are close and cherished” (317).

Once the ruler has appointed someone to government office, the ruler must ensure that there is “correspondence between form and name” (324). The term rendered “name” (*míng* 名) can have various senses in early Chinese thought, but Han Feizi uses it to refer to either the appointed *duties* that go with a particular office, or a *proposal* for a government policy suggested by an official. “Form” (*xíng* 形) is (like “power of position”) a term whose use may have originated in military texts, where it can refer to the “formation” of units on the battlefield.^{vi} In the thought of Han Feizi, “form” is either

the *actions* that a minister undertakes, or the *achievements* that result from his actions. Han Feizi explains that the ruler enforces correspondence between these two pairs

to see how what is said differs from what is done. When those who serve as ministers lay out proposals, the ruler assigns them tasks based on their proposals, and then uses their tasks to hold them accountable for their achievements. If the achievements accord with the task and the task accords with the proposal, then the minister is rewarded. If the achievements do not accord with the task or the task does not accord with the proposal, then the minister is penalized. (324)

The importance of ensuring that officials actually achieve what they are responsible for and what they propose is obvious (“name” cannot exceed “form”). Consequently, “[i]f someone’s proposals are not matched by actual achievements, he should be faulted” (325). However, Han Feizi also stresses that it is dangerous if officials are allowed to achieve *more* than what they are responsible for or propose (“form” cannot exceed “name”). Han Feizi illustrates this point with another of his memorable anecdotes:

Marquis Zhao of Han once became drunk and fell asleep. The Steward of Caps, seeing that his ruler was cold, placed the Marquis’ cloak over him. When Marquis Zhao awoke he was pleased by this, and asked his attendants, “Who covered me with my cloak?” His attendants replied, “It was the Steward of Caps.” Consequently, the ruler punished both the Steward of Caps and the Steward of Cloaks. He punished the Steward of Cloaks because he felt the man had failed to fulfill his appointed task, and he punished the Steward of Caps because he felt the man had overstepped the bounds of his position. It was not that the Marquis did not dislike the cold, but rather that he felt that the harm that comes from ministers encroaching on each other’s office is even greater than the harm that comes from being cold. (325)

The danger is that officials allowed to exceed their appointed assignments will be able to accumulate power and “form cliques and factions to assist each other” (325) in pursuing their private benefit, until eventually they threaten the authority of the ruler. Without a strong ruler, the state will be reduced to chaos. Consequently, “[i]f someone oversteps the boundaries of his office, he should die” (325).

What we find encapsulated in a handful of phrases by Han Feizi is the basic theory of one of the most momentous and crucial inventions of the human species: bureaucracy. Whether in China or the West, most people love to hate bureaucracy, and to many, to be called a “bureaucrat” is almost an insult. However, bureaucracy is necessary for all large-scale human institutions, and when it functions even moderately well it is tremendously effective in achieving organizational goals that would otherwise be

impossible. Of course, bureaucrats who overstep the bounds of their office aren't punished with death nowadays, but the dangers facing society today are not as dire as they were in Han Feizi's era.

3. Laws

Administrative technique is a tool limited to the management of government officials. In contrast, laws apply to everyone, from the highest ministers, to the relatives and favorites of the king, to the lowliest peasant. Han Feizi attributes the emphasis upon laws to Gongsun Yang (also called Lord Shang), a minister to the ruler of the state of Qin:

Government through law exists when the ruler's edicts and decrees are promulgated among the various departments and bureaus, when the certitude of punishments and penalties is understood in the hearts of the people, when rewards are given to those who respect the law, and when penalties are imposed on those who violate the ruler's decrees. (336)

Han Feizi particularly emphasizes three aspects of the law. First, the laws must be easy to understand: "if when making laws for the masses, you use language that even the wisest people find difficult to understand, then no one will comprehend or follow your laws" (345). Second, the laws must be consistent. Han Feizi points out that, because the laws of his own state are an inconsistent amalgam of older and more recent laws,

if there was something beneficial [to themselves] in the old laws and the former decrees the ministers would follow these, but if there was something beneficial in the new laws and the later decrees they would follow those. Since the old and the new laws were mutually contradicting, and the former and later decrees were mutually conflicting ... the corrupt ministers still had the means to deceive [their ruler] with their words. (337)

Third, the laws must be backed up with substantial rewards for obedience and heavy punishments for violation.

4. The Two Handles of Government

Han Feizi refers to rewards and punishments as the "two handles" of government (323) and stresses that it is crucial for a ruler to "take hold of the handles of punishment and reward and maintain firm control of them" himself (315). To illustrate this point, Han Feizi tells the story of the Lord of Song, whose minister Zi Han made the following,

seemingly helpful, proposal: “Veneration, rewards, boons, and gifts—these are things that the people all enjoy. Let you, my Lord, take care of these things yourself. Death, mutilation, punishments, and penalties—these are things that the people all hate. Let me, your servant, take care of these” (324). The Lord of Song agreed, and as a result Zi Han was able to usurp all authority in the state, because people realized that *he* was the one who chose whom to punish and the severity of the punishment. Han Feizi believed that the ruler must not only control these handles but also endow them with sufficient weight to have an effect: “when handing out rewards, it is best to make them substantial and dependable, so that the people will prize them; when assigning penalties, it is best to make them heavy and inescapable, so that the people will fear them” (343).

Han Feizi acknowledges that even if one puts into effect all of the practices that he recommends, a sufficiently bad ruler will produce chaos: “if a Jie or Tyrant Zhou is born into a superior position, then even if there are ten Yaos or ten Shuns they cannot bring about good order” (330). However, Han Feizi claims that his system of government accommodates the fact that most rulers are neither exceptionally good nor exceptionally bad, but simply mediocre:

even if a Yao, Shun, Jie, or Tyrant Zhou only emerged once in every thousand generations, it would still seem like they were born bumping shoulders and treading on each other’s heels. But those who actually govern each age are typically somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. ... If they hold to the law and depend on the power of their position, there will be order; but if they abandon the power of their position and turn their backs on the law, there will be disorder. (*Han Feizi* 8; *Readings*, 330–31)

Once instituted, a well-structured government will tend to be self-sustaining, assuming only minimal competence in its rulers. Nonetheless, there is a subtle “Way of the ruler,” which lies beyond laws, administrative methods, and the other more obvious and almost mechanical techniques of government.

5. The Way of the Ruler

The Way of the ruler is described in language very reminiscent of the *Daodejing*. In fact, Han Feizi wrote the first commentary on this classic. However, he uses the concepts of the *Daodejing* in ways that may seem surprising to us.¹ For example, the ruler should be “empty and still.” This is not a spiritual discipline to achieve Virtue; it is a tactic. To be “empty” is for a ruler to “never reveal what he desires. For if he reveals what he desires, the ministers will cut and polish themselves accordingly” (314). To be “still,” a “ruler should never reveal what he intends. For if he reveals what he intends, the ministers will try to make themselves look distinctive” (314). In

other words, if ministers fully understand the desires and intentions of their ruler, they can take advantage of this knowledge to manipulate the ruler for their own interest. As Han Feizi explains when giving advice about the other side of this equation, ministers addressing rulers: “the true difficulty of persuasion lies in knowing what is in the heart of the person being persuaded, so that I can use my persuasion to match it” (332).

Han Feizi also invokes the Daoist term “nonaction,” but as a conscious technique by which a ruler makes the best use of his ministers:

He makes it so that the worthy refine their natural talents, while he makes use of those talents and employs them. Thus, he is never lacking in ability. He makes it so that when there are achievements he gets the credit for their worthiness, and when there are errors the ministers take the blame. Thus, he is never lacking in reputation. ... The ministers perform the work, and the ruler enjoys the final achievement. (*Han Feizi* 5; *Readings*, 315)

Thus, “When an enlightened ruler practices nonaction above, the assembled ministers will be anxious and fearful below” (315). According to the *Daodejing*, the best ruler transforms people without manipulation, through the gentle power of selfless Virtue. But Han Feizi reads the *Daodejing* through his underlying assumption that humans are overwhelmingly self-interested. The wise ruler understands that humans are self-centered, so he never lets down his guard: “See others but do not allow yourself to be seen; hear others but do not allow yourself to be heard; know others but do not allow yourself to be known” (315).

IV. The Question of Amoralism

One of the major issues that divides interpreters of Han Feizi is whether it is accurate to describe his philosophy of power as “amoral.” In other words, does Han Feizi teach how to accumulate power without regard for the goals or purposes to which that power is put? One of the considerations favoring an amoral reading is that, as we have seen, Han Feizi’s philosophy does not rely upon the Virtue of rulers or ministers, nor does it deem effective the cultivation of human compassion and integrity. One can also note that Han Feizi gives advice both to rulers who want to avoid being manipulated by their ministers and to officials who want to manipulate their rulers.²

However, I would argue that there *is* an ethical vision in Han Feizi’s work, albeit of a very narrow kind. Han Feizi stresses that

When the sage brings order to the people, he measures by the most basic; he does not indulge their desires, he simply looks ahead for what will benefit the

people. Therefore when he imposes punishments on them, it is not out of hatred of the people, it is basic to his concern for them.^{vii}

Fundamental to Han Feizi's thought is the distinction between private interests (those of an individual, his family, his clique) and public interests (that of the state). The two kinds of interest are innately opposed.³ Left to their own devices, humans will naturally serve their private interests:

They will deliberate a hundred times about the welfare of their private households, but never once make plans for their ruler's state. ... [T]he noble houses work to make each other flourish and do not strive to enrich the state; the great ministers work to make each other respected and do not strive to bring respect to the ruler; and the minor ministers look for promotions and stipends by cultivating advantageous relationships and do not attend to the duties of their office. (*Han Feizi* 6; *Readings*, 319)

Thus, Han Feizi advocates a system of government in which—due to the power of the ruler's position, laws, bureaucratic techniques, rewards, and punishments—no one can achieve their private interests without acting in the public interest: “When a sage governs a state, he does not wait for people to be good in deference to him. Instead, he creates a situation in which people find it impossible to do wrong” (357).

What *is* the public interest? Han Feizi explains, “if a ruler can get rid of private crookedness and promote the public law, his people will become secure and his state will become well ordered” (318). Recall that Han Feizi lived during what is perhaps the low point of the Warring States Period, one of the worst times of chaos and conflict in world history. Han Feizi recognized something that many of us tend to forget: it is not an insignificant achievement of a government if it keeps its people well fed and secure from criminals, foreign invaders, and corrupt officials. Han Feizi believed that the only way for a society to achieve this goal was to have a strong ruler who used the “power of his position,” prevented his officials from usurping his authority with “administrative methods,” kept his people in line with “laws,” and wielded the “two handles” of rewards and punishments firmly, but not arbitrarily. If the ruler was too feckless and foolish to do this, it was up to the most able of the ministers to find a way to persuade the ruler to do what was most expedient. Most people in the Warring States Period (perhaps most people in world history) would gladly have traded their social context for the sort of society Han Feizi's political philosophy was designed to achieve.^{viii}

V. Historical Significance

One translator of the eponymous *Han Feizi* neatly summed up its ambivalent later reception: “Generations of Chinese scholars have professed to be shocked by its contents ... and have taken up their brushes to denounce it. But there has never been an age when the book was unread.”^{ix} Han Feizi will always be read because of the elegance of his writing and his unforgettable anecdotes, but there are deeper reasons for his continuing appeal. Power is an inescapable aspect of all human society. Furthermore, whether we are in imperial China or the contemporary United States, all large-scale organizations ultimately have to be bureaucratic. Consequently, from intra-office politics to international relations, we ignore at our peril Han Feizi’s lessons on law, administrative methods, and the more subtle strategies of power.

Today, it is often said that Han Feizi seems the most modern of the ancient Chinese philosophers. In terms of content, his frank discussions of the importance of political power are reminiscent of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), whose book *The Prince* is a major influence on modern political theory. Han Feizi’s views also have intriguing similarities with more recent philosophers. For example, the power of position can be thought of as a manifestation of what French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) referred to as “surveillance.”

Han Feizi seems modern in his philosophical methodology as well. Rather than claiming to be following some ideal sage or practices of the past, Han Feizi synthesizes the work of earlier philosophers. To be sure, all the philosophers we have studied in this book were influenced by their predecessors, and Han Feizi’s teacher Xunzi had presented Confucianism as the most comprehensive of the various Ways advocated during his era, but even Xunzi did not acknowledge that his formulation of Confucianism is itself a synthesis of these other positions. Han Feizi is distinctive for his conscious and explicit synthesis of earlier thinkers and in his willingness to criticize even the thinkers whom he most admires.

When he drank poison in the dark dungeon of the state of Qin, Han Feizi must have felt hopeless. His home state, with its foolish king, would obviously soon be conquered. He must have expected that his own writings, too, would be consigned to the dustbin of history. Little could he have imagined that he would be read attentively by intellectuals and government officials in every Chinese dynasty for thousands of years, that expressions from his writings would become part of Chinese language, and that even “barbarians” like professors from the other side of “the four seas” would study and teach his works.

But whatever happened to Li Si, who envied and feared his classmate’s abilities so much that he engineered his death? Read the next chapter to find out.

Review Questions

1. What personal difficulty made it hard for Han Feizi to achieve success in the public career his noble family expected him to follow?

2. What story is the origin of the contemporary Chinese idiom, “to watch a stump waiting for a rabbit”? What point does Han Feizi use this story to illustrate? What is the contemporary meaning of this idiom?
3. What is one important respect in which Han Feizi agrees with his teacher Xunzi and one major point on which he disagrees with him?
4. What are Han Feizi’s three arguments against following tradition?
5. What is the “power of position”? In what respect is it very familiar, and in what respect is it mysterious?
6. What are the roles of “name” and “form” in administrative methods?
7. What are the “two handles” of government? Why does Han Feizi believe that it is crucial for the ruler to control them himself?
8. According to Han Feizi, what does it mean for a ruler to be “empty and still”? Why is this important for a ruler?
9. What is the meaning, for Han Feizi, of “nonaction”? What benefits does a ruler obtain through it?
10. How could we see Han Feizi’s emphasis on power as being not amoral but as reflecting certain ethical values?
11. Name at least one Western thinker to whom Han Feizi could be compared.

1. Of course, it is possible that Han Feizi’s interpretation is more accurate than the one I presented in Chapter 8.

2. See, respectively, “The Way of the Ruler” (314–17) and “The Difficulties of Persuasion” (332–35).

3. Han Feizi suggests that this is built into the very structure of the characters, where “public,” *gōng* 公, is formed from the characters for “separation,” *bā* 八, and “private,” *sī* 私. Han Feizi’s etymology, which may not be accurate, is based on the ancient form of the character for “private”; the modern form is 私. In addition, the character he identifies as meaning “separation” is now used exclusively as a “phonetic loan” (see Appendix B) for the word “eight.”