

Though a skilled carpenter is capable of judging a straight line with his eye alone, he will always take his measurements with a rule; though a man of superior wisdom is capable of handling affairs by native wit alone, he will always look to the laws of the former kings for guidance. Stretch the plumb line, and crooked wood can be planed straight; apply the level, and bumps and hollows can be shaved away; balance the scales, and heavy and light can be adjusted; get out the measuring jars, and discrepancies of quantity can be corrected. In the same way one should use laws to govern the state, disposing of all matters on their basis alone.

The law no more makes exceptions for men of high station than the plumb line bends to accommodate a crooked place in the wood. What the law has decreed the wise man cannot dispute nor the brave man venture to contest. When faults are to be punished, the highest minister cannot escape; when good is to be rewarded, the lowest peasant must not be passed over. Hence, for correcting the faults of superiors, chastising the misdeeds of subordinates, restoring order, exposing error, checking excess, remedying evil, and unifying the standards of the people, nothing can compare to law. For putting fear into the officials, awing the people, wiping out wantonness and sloth, and preventing lies and deception, nothing can compare to penalties. If penalties are heavy, men dare not use high position to abuse the humble; if laws are clearly defined, superiors will be honored and their rights will not be invaded. If they are honored and their rights are inviolable, then the ruler will be strong and will hold fast to what is essential. Hence the former kings held laws in high esteem and handed them down to posterity. Were the ruler of men to discard law and follow his private whim, then all distinction between high and low would cease to exist.



THE TWO HANDLES

(Section 7)

The enlightened ruler controls his ministers by means of two handles alone. The two handles are punishment and favor. What do I mean by punishment and favor? To inflict mutilation and death on men is called punishment; to bestow honor and reward is called favor. Those who act as ministers fear the penalties and hope to profit by the rewards. Hence, if the ruler wields his punishments and favors, the ministers will fear his sternness and flock to receive his benefits. But the evil ministers of the age are different. They cajole the ruler into letting them inflict punishment themselves on men they hate and bestow rewards on men they like. Now if the ruler of men does not insist upon reserving to himself the right to dispense profit in the form of rewards and show his sternness in punishments, but instead hands them out on the advice of his ministers, then the people of the state will all fear the ministers and hold the ruler in contempt, will flock to the ministers and desert the ruler. This is the danger that arises when the ruler loses control of punishments and favors.

The tiger is able to overpower the dog because of his claws and teeth, but if he discards his claws and teeth and lets the dog

use them, then on the contrary he will be overpowered by the dog. In the same way the ruler of men uses punishments and favors to control his ministers, but if he discards his punishments and favors and lets his ministers employ them, then on the contrary he will find himself in the control of his ministers.

Tian Chang petitioned the ruler for various titles and stipends, which he then dispensed to the other ministers, and used an extra large measure in doling out grain to the common people. In this way the ruler, Duke Jian, lost the exclusive right to dispense favors, and it passed into Tian Chang's hands instead. That was how Duke Jian came to be assassinated.¹

Zihan said to the ruler of Song, "Since the people all delight in rewards and gifts, you should bestow them yourself; but since they hate punishments and death sentences, I beg to be allowed to dispense these for you." Thereupon the ruler of Song gave up the exclusive right to hand out penalties and it passed into the hands of Zihan. That was how the ruler of Song came to be intimidated.²

Tian Chang got to bestow favors as he pleased, and Duke Jian was assassinated; Zihan got to hand out punishments as he pleased, and the ruler of Song was intimidated. Hence, if the ministers of the present age are permitted to share in the right to hand out punishments and favors, the rulers of the time will put themselves in greater peril than Duke Jian and the lord of Song. Invariably when rulers are intimidated, assassinated, obstructed, or forced into the shade, it has always come about because they re-

¹In 481 B.C., Tian Chang, a high minister of Qi, assassinated the ruler of Qi, Duke Jian. Earlier, Tian Chang was said to have won the support of the people by using a larger-than-standard measure in doling out grain to the people, but the standard measure when collecting taxes in grain. See *Zuozhuan*, Duke Zhao, 3d yr.

²The incident to which Han Feizi is referring here is otherwise unknown.

linquished the rights to administer punishment and favor to their ministers, and thus brought about their own peril and downfall.

If the ruler of men wishes to put an end to evil-doing, then he must be careful to match up names and results, that is to say, words and deeds.³ The ministers come forward to present their proposals, the ruler assigns them tasks on the basis of their words, and then concentrates on demanding the accomplishment of the task. If the accomplishment fits the task, and the task fits the words, then he bestows reward; but if they do not match, he doles out punishment. Hence, if one of the ministers comes forward with big words but produces only small accomplishments, the ruler punishes him, not because the accomplishments are small, but because they do not match the name that was given to the undertaking. Likewise, if one of the ministers comes forward with small words but produces great accomplishments, he too is punished, not because the ruler is displeased at great accomplishments, but because he considers the discrepancy in the name given to the undertaking to be a fault too serious to be outweighed by great accomplishments.

Once in the past Marquis Zhao of Han got drunk and fell asleep. The keeper of the royal hat, seeing that the marquis was cold, laid a robe over him. When the marquis awoke, he was pleased and asked his attendants, "Who covered me with a robe?" "The keeper of the hat," they replied. The marquis thereupon punished both the keeper of the royal hat and the keeper of the royal robe. He punished the keeper of the robe for failing to do his duty, and the keeper of the hat for overstepping his office. It was not that he did not dislike the cold, but he considered the trespass of one official upon the duties of another to be a greater danger than cold.

³Reading *yu* instead of *yi*.

Hence an enlightened ruler, in handling his ministers, does not permit them to gain merit by overstepping their offices, or to speak words that do not tally with their actions. Those who overstep their offices are condemned to die; those whose words and actions do not tally are punished. If the ministers are made to stick to their proper duties and speak only what is just, then they will be unable to band together in cliques to work for each other's benefit.

The ruler of men has two worries: if he employs only worthy men, then his ministers will use the appeal to worthiness as a means to intimidate him; on the other hand, if he promotes men in an arbitrary manner, then state affairs will be bungled and will never reach a successful conclusion. Hence, if the ruler shows a fondness for worth, his ministers will all strive to put a pleasing façade on their actions in order to satisfy his desires. In such a case, they will never show their true colors, and if they never show their true colors, then the ruler will have no way to distinguish the able from the worthless. Because the king of Yue admired valor, many of his subjects defied death; because King Ling of Chu liked slim waists, his state was full of half-starved people on diets. Because Duke Huan of Qi was jealous and loved his ladies in waiting, Shudiao castrated himself in order to be put in charge of the harem; because the duke was fond of unusual food, Yiya steamed his son's head and offered it to the duke. Because Zikuai of Yan admired worthy men, Zizhi insisted that he would not accept the throne even if it were offered to him.⁴

⁴In his later years Duke Huan (r. 685–643 B.C.) of Qi relied heavily upon Shudiao and Yiya, two evil ministers who were said to have ingratiated themselves with the duke in the unpleasant manner mentioned. As a result, when the duke died, the court was torn by party strife. (See below, p. 66–67.) In 316 B.C. King Kuai of Yan, hoping to imitate the sages of antiquity who were said to have offered their thrones to worthy men, offered his own throne to his minister Zizhi. Contrary to the king's expectation, Zizhi accepted it, became ruler, and brought the state close to ruin.

Thus, if the ruler reveals what he dislikes, his ministers will be careful to disguise their motives; if he shows what he likes, his ministers will feign abilities they do not have. In short, if he lets his desires be known, he gives his ministers a clue as to what attitude they had best assume.

Hence Zizhi, by playing the part of a worthy, was able to snatch power from his sovereign; Shudiao and Yiya, by catering to the ruler's desires, were able to invade his authority. As a result, Zikuai died in the chaos that ensued, and Duke Huan was left unburied for so long that maggots came crawling out the door of his death chamber.

What caused this? It is an example of the calamity that comes when the ruler reveals his feelings to his ministers. As far as the feelings of the ministers go, they do not necessarily love their ruler; they serve him only in the hope of substantial gain. Now if the ruler of men does not hide his feelings and conceal his motives, but instead gives his ministers a foothold by which they may invade his rights, then they will have no difficulty in doing what Zizhi and Tian Chang did. Hence it is said: Do away with likes, do away with hates, and the ministers will show their true colors. And when the ministers have shown their true colors, the ruler of men will never be deceived.⁵

⁵Reading *ren* instead of *da*.