**Life of Han Feizi**

Han Feizi, Wade-Giles romanization Han Fei-tzu (Chinese: “Master Han Fei”) (born c. 280, China—died 233 bce, China), the greatest of China’s Legalist philosophers. His essays on autocratic government so impressed King Zheng of Qin that the future emperor adopted their principles after seizing power in 221 bce. The Hanfeizi, the book named after him, comprises a synthesis of legal theories up to his time.

**Life**

Little is known of Han Feizi’s personal life. A member of the ruling family of Han, one of the weaker of the warring states that were in conflict during the 5th–3rd centuries bce, he studied under the Confucian philosopher Xunzi but deserted him to follow another school of thought more germane to the conditions accompanying the collapse of the feudal system in his time. Finding that his advice to the ruler of his native state went unheeded, he put his ideas into writing. A speech defect is also reputed to have induced his recourse to writing. King Zheng of Qin (a western state)—who became the first emperor of the Qin dynasty in 221 bce—read and admired some of his essays. When in 234 bce Zheng launched an attack on Han, the ruler of Han dispatched Han Feizi to negotiate with Qin. Zheng was delighted to receive Han Feizi and probably planned to offer him a high government post. Li Si, the chief minister of Qin and a former schoolmate of Han Feizi’s, presumably afraid that the latter might gain the king’s favour by virtue of superior erudition, had Han Feizi imprisoned on a charge of duplicity. Complying with Li Si’s order to commit suicide, he drank the poison Li Si sent him, ending his life.

**Political Thought**

To Han Feizi it was axiomatic that political institutions must change with changing historical circumstances. It is folly, he said, to cling to outmoded ways of the past, as the Confucians did. It was also axiomatic that political institutions adapt to the prevailing pattern of human behaviour, which is determined not by moral sentiments but by economic and political conditions. In a year of famine people can hardly feed their own kin, while in a year of plenty they feast casual visitors—not because they are alternately heartless and generous but “because of the difference in the amount of food to be had.” In ancient times, when goods were abundant, men made light of them, but increased population pressure on resources brought economic scarcity; consequently, “men of today quarrel and snatch.” The ruler, therefore, should not try to make men good but only to restrain them from doing evil. Nor should he try “to win the hearts of the people” because, selfish as men are, they do not know their own true interests. The people’s mind is as undependable as an infant’s.

According to the Confucians, as virtue confers on a king the right to rule, misrule voids that right. Han Feizi thought differently. Whatever the ruler’s moral qualities and however he rules, possession of authority (shi) carries with it the leverage to exact obedience. “Subject serving ruler, son serving father, and wife serving husband” together constitute “an immutable principle of the world.” Even if a lord of men is unworthy, no subject would dare to infringe his prerogative. Moreover, political duty takes precedence over other duties. A soldier, it was said, ran from battle because he thought that, if he was killed, he could no longer serve his father. Han Feizi commented: “A filial son to his father can be a traitorous subject to his ruler.”

Authority should be wielded not whimsically but through laws (fa) that the ruler promulgates and that all must obey. “The intelligent ruler makes the law select men and makes no arbitrary appointment himself; he makes the law measure merits and makes no arbitrary judgment himself.” He can reform the law, but, so long as he allows it to stand, he must observe it.

To ensure an effective bureaucracy and to protect his authority from encroachment or usurpation, the ruler must make use of shu (“administrative techniques” or “statecraft”). Rulers of the Warring States period found it advantageous to employ men skilled in government, diplomacy, and war. But how to separate solid talent from idle chatter became a serious problem. Shu was Han Feizi’s answer to the problem. After assigning posts according to individual capacities, the ruler should demand satisfactory performance of the responsibilities devolving on their posts and punish anyone who is derelict of duty or oversteps his power. The ruler may authorize an official to carry out a proposal he has submitted. He should punish him not only when the results fall short of the stated goal but also when they exceed it.

Shu is also Han Feizi’s answer to the problem of usurpation, through which more than one ruler had lost his throne. The interest of the ruler and ruled are incompatible: “Superior and inferior wage one hundred battles a day.” Therefore, it behooves the ruler to trust no one; to be suspicious of sycophants; to permit no one to gain undue power or influence; and, above all, to use wile to unearth plots against the throne.

With supreme authority secure and good order prevailing, the ruler proceeds to aggrandize his realm by means of military power. Might is the decisive factor in interstate relations. Military power is inseparable from economic strength. Farming being the only productive occupation, all other callings, especially that of the scholar, should be discouraged. Giving relief to the destitute is both unwise and unfair. To collect taxes from the rich in order to help the poor “is robbing the diligent and frugal and indulging the extravagant and lazy.”