

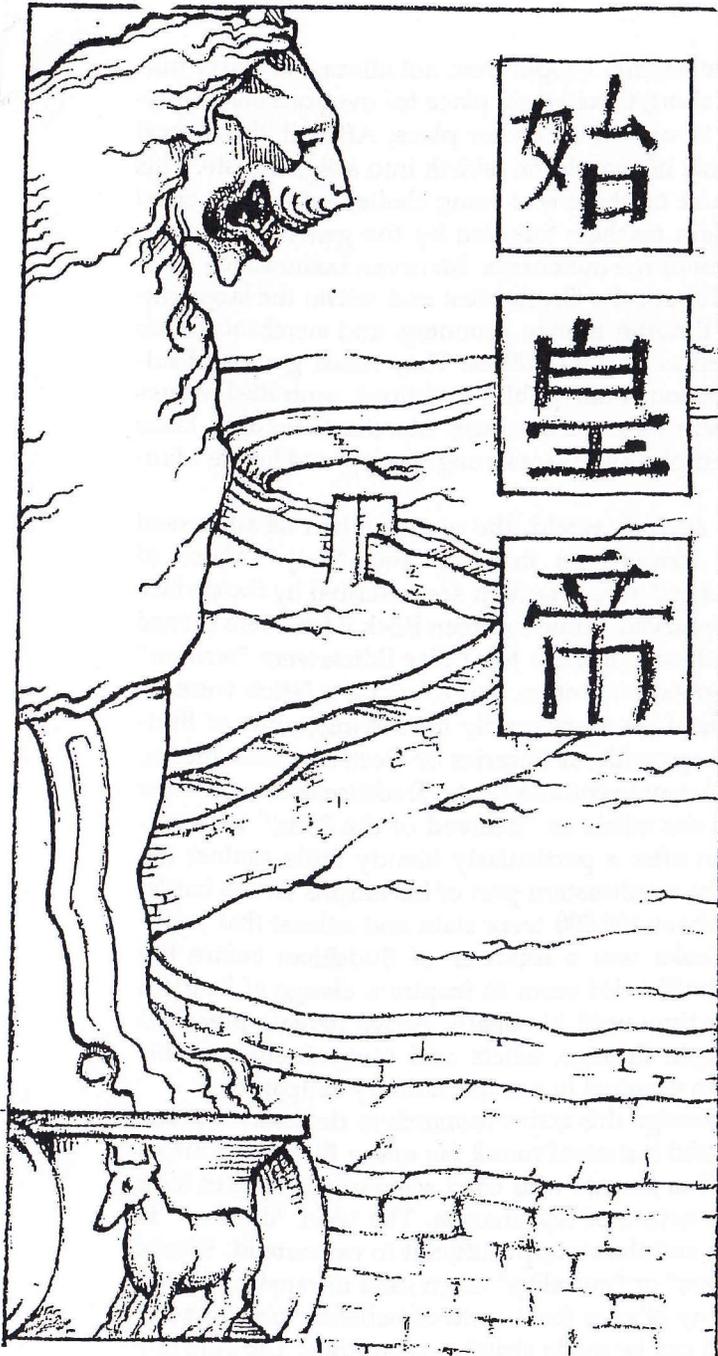
Asoka and Shi Huangdi: Honey and Vinegar

Is it better to govern people by moral persuasion or by coercion, the carrot or the stick?

We have all heard it said that honey catches more flies than vinegar. If instead of trying to catch flies, you are trying to govern a large kingdom, the question of whether to use force or gentleness, harsh laws or ethical persuasion, can be an important one.

The Buddhist emperor of India, Asoka Maurya (291–232 BC) inherited a large, diverse kingdom and attempted—with some success—to use a “law of piety” to hold it together. Asoka’s Chinese contemporary Shi Huangdi (259–210 BC), on the other hand, created a Chinese empire by consciously rejecting the moral standards for rulers prevalent in his day; he adopted the harsh practice of destroying all his enemies before they had a chance to destroy him. Both men were hard-working and self-confident. Asoka’s empire crumbled within fifty years of his death, but he was remembered fondly by historians, especially Buddhist ones. Shi Huangdi, reviled by later Confucian historians, laid the foundations of an empire that lasted under various dynasties for over 2000 years. A look at the respective careers of these men will allow us to evaluate two different methods of government and the different Asian societies that made each man’s style of rule not only possible but maybe even sensible.

Asoka’s empire was centered in that part of northeastern India known as Magadha, but his power spread from Kabul in the northwest as far east as modern Bangladesh and as far south as the city of Madras. This Mauryan empire provided the Indian subcontinent with greater political unity than it was to have until modern times. It was founded by Asoka’s grandfather Chandragupta (ruled



322–299 BC), aided by his hard-nosed political advisor Kautilya. Although Asoka came to the throne in 273 BC after the death of his father Bindusara, he was not formally crowned until 269. It took him that long to seize full power from his brothers. Buddhist sources claim he killed between six and ninety-nine of them, the larger number doubtless an exaggeration.

The cultural, social, and economic vitality and diversity of third-century India, when combined with the strong central government provided by the Mauryan rulers, made India one of very few strong civilizations at that time. In the West only the empires of Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great rivaled it.

Cultural diversity in India was aided by the relatively “new” religions of Buddhism and Jainism. Both rejected the strict Hindu caste system which placed humans into four principal groups: priests, warriors, tradesmen and merchants, and laborers. These religions also rejected the ritual rules and the power of the Brahmins, or Hindu priests. As noted in an earlier chapter, the Buddha (560–480 BC) accepted Hindu ideas of moral cause and effect (*karma*) and of rebirth but simplified Hinduism by arguing that suffering and pain were caused by desire which itself was caused by ignorance of spiritual truth. The Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path (right or correct views, aspirations, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation) would lead the believer beyond suffering to Enlightenment, or salvation. This was the Buddhist path of duty or piety (*dharma*). Members of the Jain faith followed the teachings of another sixth-century reformer, the Mahavira (540–468 BC). Jains preached a stricter doctrine of nonviolence to all living things than did Buddhists. They also believed that salvation could be achieved by a life of strict self-denial that would free the soul from all attachment to the physical world. After his conversion to Buddhism about ten years after his coronation, Asoka’s edicts preaching dharma to his people showed the influence of all three major Indian religious traditions.

Social and economic diversity in the Indian subcontinent in Asoka’s day was caused not only by the racial and linguistic variety that we still see in India but also by the system of castes and subcastes that existed throughout the empire. Because the caste system was an essential part of Hinduism, as the population grew, members of the caste of merchants and traders were subdivided into hundreds of subcategories, based upon place of residence, occupa-

tion, or family membership. People were not allowed to marry outside their caste. In short, there was a place for everyone and everyone was expected to stay in his or her place. After all, the reward for a good and stable life would be rebirth into a higher caste. This traditional Brahmanic teaching was being challenged in this period by Buddhist and Jain teachers but also by the growing economic and political powers of the merchants. Mauryan businessmen traded extensively with both the Greek West and within the large empire. There was a thriving money economy, and merchant guilds often assumed political responsibilities. They raised groups of soldiers for self-protection, built public buildings, controlled wages and prices, and were received at court. Merchants brought taxes and wealth to the empire and were strongly supported by the Mauryan rulers.

This then was Asoka’s world, the one to which he addressed his famous short sermons on morality and “piety.” Those of Asoka’s famous “edicts” which remain are described by the surface on which they were carved: Some fourteen Rock Edicts were carved on rocks along roadways, at least ten Pillar Edicts were “written” on tall pillars in population centers, and a few Cave Edicts were inscribed on the walls of caves, primarily for the inspiration of Buddhist monks. In an age without libraries or electronic mass media, this was an effective way to communicate. Tradition tells us that the king, referred to in the edicts as “Beloved of the Gods,” was converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody battle against the Kalinga people in the southeastern part of his empire. In this battle, fought in 262 BC, about 100,000 were slain and at least that many deported. While Asoka was a follower of Buddhism before the Kalinga war, this conflict did seem to inspire a change of heart in the king. From this time until his death, Asoka actively preached dharma to his people through edicts and tours throughout his lands; he never again engaged in a major military campaign.

But before we consign this active monarch to the realm of pious legend as a remorseful but royal monk (as many Buddhist sources do) or write him off as a cynic who used religion, we need to look more closely at the nature of his dharma. The word “dharma” is difficult to translate and the concept difficult to understand. Words such as “piety,” “duty,” or “morality,” often used to translate “dharma,” suggest to many of us a fixed code of beliefs or practices for which an individual can be made strictly accountable. The Sanskrit

word "dharma" refers to the duties demanded by one's station in life. While these vary for each caste, dharma requires all persons to treat others, especially family, with love and respect, to avoid those things which all men and women generally regard as evil, such as anger, cruelty, envy, pride, and the like, and to seek out that which is good: love, truth, and beauty. It is important to understand that Asoka's concept of dharma was not specifically Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain. For a Hindu, especially one in the priestly caste, following dharma would require the performance of certain rituals; for many Buddhists it involved certain monastic obligations. Beyond encouraging general ethical behavior (the king "desires security, self-control, impartiality, and cheerfulness for all living creatures"), Asoka's injunctions to his people were vague and ecumenical, showing the influence of all major Indian traditions. "Dharma is good," he wrote in Pillar Edict II, "but what does Dharma consist of? It consists of a few sins and many good deeds, of kindness, liberality, truthfulness, and purity." Who could argue with the wisdom of this? These words might help a Hindu be a better Hindu or a Buddhist be a more devout follower of the Noble Eightfold Path. And that, in the words of Rock Edict XII, is what the king wanted: "the promotion of each man's particular faith and the glorification of Dharma."¹

King Asoka wished his subjects to be moral, but he allowed each to define the details of his or her own morality. After the midpoint of his reign, he did seem to believe genuinely that "all men are my children" and as such are capable of being trained and persuaded to live a good life. This required hard work, and Asoka set an example. He was a "morning person," rising early and engaging in prayers and meetings with the household staff before dealing with broader financial and military affairs. Breakfast at nine was followed by meetings with his council of ministers and reports from his agents. Some agents were dharma-mahamatas, or "morality ministers," who worked to see that the poor were not mistreated and that the affairs of the various religious communities were handled correctly. Asoka also built "rest stops" for weary travelers, dug wells, and kept roads in repair.

But if Asoka wished his people to be moral and reasonably comfortable, he also wanted them to continue paying taxes. He may have been a missionary, but he was not naive. In one edict, the "Beloved of the Gods" invited even those "forest people" in the re-

mote sections of his domains "to adopt this way of life and this ideal." He reminded them, however, "that he exercises the power to punish, despite his repentance, in order to induce them to desist from their crimes."² Asoka's Buddhist and Jain-inspired dislike of violence never resulted in a lifting of the death penalty. His attempt to create a "national" or "imperial" morality, while a product of genuine conviction, was also a shrewd way for the monarch to centralize imperial authority in a large, culturally diverse empire. Religious toleration can be virtuous; it can also be good politics when one's empire contains dozens of different and competing sects. Kautilya, the hard-headed political realist who had helped Chandragupta create the Mauryan empire, would have found much to commend in Asoka's policy. Even the strong Buddhist flavor of Asoka's dharma was attractive to the commercial classes, who desired a moral alternative to Hindu caste restrictions. Asoka's emphasis on nonviolence appealed to the Jains, while his acceptance (though not necessarily encouragement) of caste practices avoided giving offense to the Hindus. In promoting this broad but still very Indian ethical code, Asoka, in the words of one scholar, "was attempting to reform the narrow attitude of religious teaching to protect the weak against the strong, and to promote throughout the empire a consciousness of social behavior so broad in its scope that no cultural group could object to it."³

Protecting the weak against the strong was the least of the worries of King Zheng of Qin [the dynasty is pronounced "chin" and Shi Huangdi was a title meaning First Emperor], the man who created a Chinese empire out of seven warring states in 221 BC. Despite his great achievement, King Zheng remains an awesome, controversial, and somewhat mysterious figure. A classic history of his reign by Sima Qian, who wrote at the beginning of the first century BC, describes this king of Qin as having "a waspish nose, eyes like slits, a chicken breast, and a voice like a jackal. He is merciless, with the heart of a tiger or wolf."⁴ The Sovereign Emperor was clearly a man to be reckoned with. Both friend and foe found him formidable—and that was the way he liked it.

After coming to the throne of Qin in 246 at the age of thirteen, it took King Zheng twenty-five years to conquer the other six kingdoms in the Yellow River valley and to unify China. King Zheng (now Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor) ruled over the now-unified Chinese empire for only eleven years until his death in 210 BC, but

his impact was so profound that some still argue about the wisdom of his policies and the nature of his contribution to Chinese history. Chinese folk tales lament the suffering caused by the building of the Great Wall and other imperial projects. It is understandable that a man strong enough to create an empire out of the feudal disorder that had plagued China for centuries might make a few enemies in the process. Yet this man can also be considered the father of his country. He laid the foundations for the later accomplishments of the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD). Nonetheless, Shi Huangdi is almost universally condemned by Chinese historians. This animosity stems in part from the fact that they were Confucians and he was not. That he executed 460 Confucian scholars and sent others into exile after ordering all their texts burned may have also contributed to their dislike.

The roots of this conflict go back several centuries and require some understanding of Confucian philosophy. Confucius (551–479 BC), a great master of ethical philosophy, emphasized a moral code based on *li* (propriety) and *jen* (humanity). By observing proper rituals and showing respect for parents and ancestors, one demonstrated self-control and self-respect. Confucius believed in authority but he stressed the importance of virtuous behavior on the part of the ruler. If a leader practiced charity and good faith in dealing with his subjects, his kingdom would be well-governed. If all officials from the ruler to the local magistrate acted in accordance with the virtues of *li* and *jen*, the result would be order and obedience in the land. A later thinker, Mo Tzu (479–381 BC), went even further and argued that rulers should feed and clothe their people, avoid war altogether, and trust in the natural goodness of men to follow “the path of righteousness.”

Education, especially one which stressed the values of the past and loyalty to the family, was important to these men. Scholarship was a path to virtue. Though this view of politics and morality would have been congenial to Asoka, it was alien to the rulers of the state of Qin, a “barbarian” frontier land. Barbarian or not, however, the rulers of Qin during the fourth century were quicker than their more civilized Chinese neighbors to end feudalism and create a strong central government, backed by a system of taxation and a powerful army. Without the family and feudal outbursts that kept other states in a condition of near-constant civil war, the Qin rulers were able to defeat the armies of the states of Han, Zhao, Wei, Yan,

and Qi during the late fourth and early third centuries. By the time King Zheng became leader of Qin in 246 BC, his state was already the most powerful in the Yellow River valley. It had not reached this point by following Confucian virtues of moderation and kindness, but by following the teachings of the very different philosophy of Legalism.

The Legalists, following the ideas advanced by Han Feizi, were represented at the Qin court by Li Si, chief advisor to King Zheng and a guiding force behind many of his policies. They believed that harsh laws, speedily enforced, were more useful than moral example in securing obedience from subjects. They also suggested that troops were more effective than tedious Confucian rituals and etiquette. “Talent and wisdom,” wrote Han Feizi, “are not sufficient to subdue the masses, but power and position are able to subject even men of talent.” Legalists advocated what we would today call a strong, secular, amoral state. You can win by doing those things that your enemies would be ashamed to do, one Legalist text advised. Legalist philosophy and Qin ambition were made for each other. Li Si got a job and a chance to be a powerful man. The Qin ruler found someone who would tell him that killing several hundred soldiers after they surrendered was not really all that bad. Li Si advised his king to bribe the feudal lords of other states; “as for those who were unwilling, they were to be stabbed with sharp swords” and the army sent to finish the job.⁵

Despite (or perhaps because of) his Legalist disdain for morality, Shi Huangdi’s specific and lasting achievements were impressive. He turned China from a patchwork of squabbling kingdoms into a state governed from a central capital at Xianyang. When King Zheng conquered a state, he sent the ruling family and others who might challenge his power to his capital—and sold their land. He also organized his realm into provinces and prefectures or counties. The former were originally military districts while the latter were administrative ones and used for purposes of tax collection. Eventually civil and military leaders were placed in each province. Since these officials were not members of the emperor’s family or of high noble rank (as they might have been under the old system), there was less chance they would try to challenge the emperor. Besides, placing a number of major officials in each of his thirty-six provinces almost guaranteed that they would quarrel with each other; this left final authority in the hands of the emperor.

Shi Huangdi's efforts to centralize took other forms as well. He standardized weights and measures, the characters used to write the Chinese language (to allow officials to communicate with those who spoke dialects), and even the length of cart axles so that all carts could use the same ruts or tracks. The First Emperor also created the first civil service and paid officials in coin, not in land, out of the taxes they helped collect. There were no private armies during Shi Huangdi's reign, and the laws of the land were public, if very harsh. Finally, the new emperor built many roads, several hundred new palaces, and elaborate defensive fortifications in the north known as the Great Wall.

Shi Huangdi's building projects, however, illustrate his extravagance. His Great Wall, which connected and strengthened existing fortifications, was needed to protect China from the nomadic tribes of Turks and Mongols who periodically attacked and devastated Chinese cities. Whether China needed a wall 1400 miles long, with thousands of watchtowers, is debatable. The nearly one million men who labored and died building it over twelve years would probably disagree. Nearly as many men, 700,000, spent thirty years building an elaborate tomb for the emperor at Mount Li, near Xi'an and the Yellow River. Part of the tomb consisted of a three-acre flat-roofed underground vault containing life-sized, individualized statues of an army of 8000 men and horses, including full-scale bronze chariots and charioteers, and images of all members of the emperor's family and household staff. While Shi Huangdi was not the first to construct an elaborate grave site (earlier Shang dynasty rulers buried real people instead of statues), the magnitude of Shi Huangdi's effort helps us understand why some called him a megalomaniac.⁶

He also built 270 palaces near his capital, some of them replicas of those of his conquered enemies. These were justified for security reasons since they allowed him to sleep in a different place every night. One precise and telling example of the emperor's arrogance is found in Sima Qian's history. On one occasion a "great gale" prevented the ruler's ship from crossing the Yangtze River near the temple of Mount Xiang. In order to punish the local goddess, the Princess of the River Xiang, "the emperor in his rage made 3000 convicts cut down all the trees on Mount Xiang, leaving the mountain bare."⁷ Clearly, this man took himself very seriously. He believed himself to be the first of a line of 10,000 emperors. Shi

Huangdi's inscriptions did not urge men to live morally; they bragged that "his influence knows no end, his will is obeyed and his orders will remain through eternity."⁸

Of course, Shi Huangdi's enemies and their ideas did outlive him. By the end of the Qin dynasty in 206 BC, the philosophy of Legalism was thoroughly discredited by the excesses of Shi Huangdi and his son. Both Han Feizi and Li Si died violent deaths. It was fitting that the first of the rebellions that broke out after Shi Huangdi's death was led by two farmers who were late in reporting for forced labor on one of the imperial projects. Since the penalty for being late was immediate execution, they decided their chances of survival would be better if they started a revolt. It was the first of many that led to the collapse of the Qin empire. Had the law been less stringent, this revolt may not have started.

This point was quickly made by Confucian historians, beginning with the famous essay on "The Faults of Qin," written by the Han dynasty poet and statesman Jia Yi (201-169 BC). He remarked on the military skill of Qin generals but then asked why such a feared dynasty could be overthrown with such relative ease. Jia's answer has echoed through twenty centuries of Chinese history: "Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has won are not the same."⁹ The general verdict was that Shi Huangdi and his dynasty got what they deserved. We might note in passing that perhaps the Confucian historians were a bit insincere and self-righteous, since none of them regretted Chinese unification but only the methods that had been used to achieve it.

Perhaps the moral of this story, if there is one, is that both honey and vinegar are necessary. One historian of China has written that although "force can never give a permanent unity. . . its use may be necessary to establish this unity in the beginning." The accomplishments of the Han period would have been impossible without the achievements of the preceding Qin empire.¹⁰ The Buddhist Asoka was both realistic and pious. He received better treatment from historians than did Shi Huangdi, but his empire survived him by only a few decades. At least Asoka did understand that force had its place but that some things simply cannot be forced. In one of his edicts he noted that "people can be induced to advance in dharma by only two means, by moral prescriptions and by meditation." He confessed that morals were "of little conse-

quence but meditation was of great importance. . . . it is by meditation that people have progressed in Dharma most."¹¹

Notes

1. *The Edicts of Asoka*, edited and trans. by N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 41, 52.
2. *Ibid.*, 28-29.
3. Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 181.
4. Li Yu-ning, editor, *The First Emperor of China* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975), 264.
5. Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier: A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Si, 280-208 BC* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967), 189, 14-15. [The name of the Qin dynasty and state is spelled Ch'in in all but the most recently published works.]
6. Audrey Topping, "China's Incredible Find," *National Geographic* (April 1978), 440-459; Audrey Topping, "Clay Soldiers: The Army of Emperor Chin," *Horizon* (January 1977), 2, 4-13.
7. Li Yu-ning, editor, *The First Emperor of China*, 275.
8. *Ibid.*, 271-272.
9. *Ibid.*, 281-282.
10. Bodde, *China's First Unifier*, 236-237.
11. *Edicts of Asoka*, 40.

Further Reading

- Edicts of Asoka*. Edited and trans. by N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). Sample Asoka's ideas directly.
- GOKHALE, B. K. *Asoka Maurya* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966). Best short biography of Asoka.
- TOPPING, AUDREY. "China's Incredible Find," *National Geographic Magazine* (April 1978), 440-459. The title is not an exaggeration; see for yourself.
- WALEY, ARTHUR. *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931). See the chapter on "The Realists" for a good description of Legalism.