

The Legalist Ruler: From Han Feizi

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 cajole¹ 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

SOURCE: *Han Fei Tzu, "The Two Handles."* From Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu. Burton Watson, trans., p. 30. Columbia University Press,

1. According to the document, how does Han Feizi say a leader should rule his people?

2. According to the document, who should control punishments and favors? Why?
