Lǐ Sz̄ (c0260-0208)

Against Feudalism (SJ 6)
(0221)

From the first moment of conquest, two years earlier, in the aftermath of the Chín military victory, there arose the question: how to secure the victory and make it permanent? Some, accustomed to the feudal or indirect sovereignty system, wanted to enfief the ruler's sons. But Lǐ Sz̄, the mastermind of the new order, thought otherwise. Sovereignty is not to be divided. Here is how the debate went, according to the Chín chapter of the Shř Jì, a history of China down to the reign of Emperor Wǔ of Hàn, compiled by the Grand Astrologer Sz̄mǎ Tán, whose job was to record omens and their meaning. This gave him access to the Hàn archives, from which he drew much of his material. We may take this account as a plausible summary of the actual debate.

Prime Minister Wǎn and the others said "Now, at last, the lords have been overthrown, but the lands of Yēn, Chí, and Jīng are far away; the only way to fill the void will be to set up Kings over them. We beg that the Emperor's sons may be so established, if His Highness will but agree." The First Emperor referred this advice to his ministers, and his ministers all considered it appropriate. But the Marshal Lǐ Sz̄ advised "The sons and younger brothers enfiefed by the Jōu Kings Wv́n and Wǔ were very numerous, and afterward they became estranged, attacking one another like enemies. The lords even invaded each other's territories and put each other to death, and the Jōu rulers could neither restrain nor prevent them. Now, all within the Seas is subject to His Highness' divine and undivided rule. Let it all be made administrative regions and districts, and let all the leaders and those of merit be richly rewarded from public funds: this will be an adequate and easily enacted plan. Let the lands under heaven harbor no divergent views: this is the only method by which peace may be secured. To set up lords would not be appropriate."

The First Emperor said "That the lands under Heaven have suffered the hardships of unremitting war is precisely because they had lords and kings. Thanks to the might of my ancestral house, the lands under Heaven are at last under control. If we should now once again set up separate states, it would be planting weapons of war; and if we should then seek peace for them, how could it but be difficult to accomplish? The Marshal's advice is correct."

皇帝立國維初在昔嗣世稱王討伐亂
逆威動四極武義直方戎臣奉詔經時
不久滅六暴強廿有六年上薦高號孝
道顯明既獻泰成乃降專惠親巡遠方
登于繹山群臣從者咸思攸長追念亂
世分土建邦以開爭理功戰日作流血
於野自泰古始世無萬數陀及五帝莫
能禁止乃今皇帝壹家天下兵不復起
災害滅除黔首康定利澤長久群臣誦

The First Emperor (0246-0210)

Inscription on Mount Yí
(0219)

The First Emperor began well enough, if not without a trace of superstition. He visited the mountains at the corners of his domain, and sacrificed to the spirits, for protection against enemies in all directions. Hie generals, in more realistic fashion, built military-grade roads far out into the steppe, and pushed back the mounted archers of the threatening Syūng-nú (debate still rages about whether these were the Huns of later history). For a while, all seemed secure.

In this inscription, written in the second year of his reign as Emperor (but his twenty-sixth as King of Chín, the number used here), some staff writer sought to explain, and justify, the conquest. The justification is the usual: other states were evil, and it was a virtue to destroy them. Here is how the Emperor himself figures, as a hero in the first half of his own inscription.

Long ago, in days of old,
He came unto the Royal Throne.
He smote the fractious and perverse.
His awe was felt on every hand.
Warlike and just, upright and firm.
His orders the generals received,
And in no very lengthy time,
They had destroyed the Cruel Six.
In his six-and-twentieth year,
He offering makes to Those Above,
Resplendent in filiality.
And as he offers up his deed,
So there descends a special grace.
He tours in person the distant lands;
Mount Yí he doth now ascend,
His ministers and retinue
All thinking how to make it long.

Lǐ Sz̄ (c0260-0208)

Suppressing Confucian Texts (SJ 6)
(0213)

There remained the task of cultural unification. Lǐ Sz̄'s solution was to unify laws and values. For this, the ancient precedents enshrined in the Shr̄ and Shū, texts prized by the Confucians, stood in the way. Lǐ Sz̄ proposed to ban those texts. Sz̄mǎ Tán included Lǐ Sz̄'s memorial in SJ 87, his biography. Later, his son, the Confucian-educated Sz̄mǎ Chyēn, hating Lǐ Sz̄ as only an orthodox Confucian can, added sensational details to that memorial (replacing a much milder paragraph), and inserted it into SJ 6. This version has naturally been embraced by posterity. Here it is, with Chyēn's replacement paragraph emphasized.

Of old, the world was in disorder and no one was able to unify it, hence the several lords arose. In their words they all elevated the past to the detriment of the present, and elaborated empty words to the confusion of the truth. All valued what they had privately studied, in opposition to what their superiors had firmly established. Now, His Majesty possesses all the world; he has separated white from black, and obtained sole authority, yet private students join together in opposing Legalist doctrine: I have heard that when an order is handed down, they discuss it in terms of their private views. At home, their hearts are opposed; in public, they argue on the byways. They gain fame by opposing the ruler, achieve prominence with eccentric opinions, and foster sedition by leading the multitude astray. If this is not prohibited, the ruler's power will decline above and factions will form below. The best course will be to prohibit it.

Your subject requests **that the archive officials should burn everything but the records of Chín, and, save for those in the possession of the court erudites, whoever in the world dares to keep the Shr̄ and Shū, or the writings of the Hundred Schools, should gather them together for the officers to burn. Those who dare to discuss the Shr̄ and Shū among themselves should be executed and their bodies publicly exposed; those who use the past to criticize the present should be executed together with their families. Any officials who know of violations but do not bring them forward shall be judged equally guilty** If within thirty days of this directive being promulgated they have not disposed of them, they are to be branded and sent to labor on the walls. Writings not to be disposed of are those concerning medicine, divination, or agriculture: any who wish to study these subjects may take the officials as their teachers.

*Shr Ji+ (c0100)

The End of Lǐ Sz̄ (SJ 87)
(0208)

The First Emperor died while visiting one of the sacred mountains. Those with him hurried secretly back to the capital, deposed the designated heir, and put another son on the throne as Second Emperor. They proceeded to eliminate key figures in the First Emperor's government, including the generals who had gained and kept possession of the northern steppe territory. Among the victims was the Emperor's chief of doctrine, Lǐ Sz̄. He is arrested, accused of crime, tortured until he confesses, and sentenced to death. To readers above the spear and shield level, this implies the larger clash of court factions, with the Empire in the balance.

Then, like a flash of poetry across the scene, comes this tiny moment.

In the Second Emperor's second year, seventh month, Sz̄ was sentenced to the Five Punishments, and sent to be cut in two at the waist in the Syén-yáng marketplace. Sz̄ came out of prison with his second son, who had been condemned along with him. He turned to his son and said, "If I wanted to go out the Shàng-tsàı gate once more, with you and the yellow dog, to hunt rabbits, how could I manage it?

And father and son wept together. Lǐ Sz̄'s clan was extinguished unto the third degree of relationship.