CHAPTER 7  Primary Source: Legalists Advise the Qin Emperor

The Chinese philosophy called Legalism taught that to build a strong state, a ruler must have absolute power over his subjects (textbook page 141). In the third century B.C. the Chinese thinkers Hanfeizi (HAHN FAY-ZU) and Li Si (LEE SEE) wrote many works about Legalist philosophy. Li Si went on to put Legalist ideas into practice when he became chief adviser to Shihuangdi, the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (textbook pages 141–142). Read the excerpts below from the writings of both Hanfeizi and Li Si. On a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

**Hanfeizi**

When the wise man rules the state, he does not count on people to do good on their own, but uses such methods as will keep them from doing any evil. If he counts on people behaving themselves without strict rules, there will not be more than ten such people in the whole country. But if he uses such methods as will keep them from doing evil, then the entire state can be brought up to an acceptable level of behavior.

If one should have to depend on finding arrows which are naturally straight, there would be no arrows in a hundred generations. If one could make wheels only from pieces of wood which are naturally circles, there would be no wheels in a thousand generations. Although in a hundred generations there is neither wood that is naturally straight for arrows nor wood that comes naturally in circles for wheels, people in every generation still have wheels for their carts and shoot arrows at birds. Why is that? It is because the tools for straightening and bending wood are used. Though without the use of such tools there might happen to be a naturally straight arrow or a naturally round wheel, the skilled carpenter will not value that object, because many more arrows and wheels must still be shaped out of imperfect pieces of wood. Similarly, though there might happen to be an individual who is naturally good, the intelligent ruler will not prize him but will follow a course that will make certain the majority do not do evil.

**Li Si**

The fact that intelligent rulers were able for a long time to hold high position and great power is due only to their ability always to apply severe punishments. It was for this reason that none in the empire dared to be rebellious. If a ruler does not take care to prevent rebellion, but instead acts like the loving mother who spoils her children, indeed he has not understood the principles of the wise men who came before him. When a ruler fails to practice the advice for governing the state left by the sages, what else does he do except make himself the slave of the empire? Is this not a pity?


**Comprehension**

1. (a) Why, according to Hanfeizi, should the wise ruler not count on people doing good on their own?  (b) What should the wise ruler do instead of relying on people to behave well?  
2. (a) What do the naturally straight arrows and the naturally circular pieces of wood in Hanfeizi's statement represent?  (b) What do the tools for straightening and bending represent?  
3. (a) What, according to Li Si, made it possible for wise rulers to stay in power?  (b) What stopped subjects from rebelling?  
4. To what did Li Si compare the ruler who is too easygoing?  

**Critical Thinking**

5. Comparing historical sources. In what ways is the advice given to the emperor by both Legalist thinkers similar?  
6. Analyzing evidence. What actions of the Qin ruler Shihuangdi discussed in your book (textbook pages 141–142) suggest that he took the advice of the Legalists?