

**MEMORIAL ON ANNEXATION OF FEUDAL STATES  
AND MEMORIAL ON THE BURNING OF BOOKS**  
By Li Si (as recorded by Sima Qian)

**Introduction**

Li Si (d. 208 BCE) was, along with the Legalist philosopher Han Fei (d. 233 BCE), a student of Xunzi (c. 310-c. 219 BCE) and an official for the kingdom of Qin. When Qin conquered the remaining feudal states of the Zhou dynasty and built a new, centralized empire, Li Si was prime minister to the first emperor, Qin Shihuang. As prime minister, Li Si had the opportunity to bring Legalist political philosophy to bear on the task of uniting and ruling the patchwork of now-conquered feudal states of the former Zhou kingdom. The memorials below are two examples of the policies that Li Si successfully urged Qin Shihuang to follow. The memorials, in the form that we have them, are recorded by the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian (145?-86? BCE). They may, therefore, reflect Han bias in either the choice made or the accuracy of the record. However, we have no alternative sources from which to compare the record and investigate the nature and extent of whatever bias may be present. These documents must, then, stand as some of the best records we have as to the policies pursued by the Qin ruler in imposing unification on the fragmented Zhou polity.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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***From the Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States***

... Now, with the might of Qin and the virtues of Your Highness, at one stroke, like sweeping off the dust from a kitchen stove, the feudal lords can be annihilated, imperial rule can be established, and unification of the world can be brought about. This is the one moment in ten thousand ages. If Your Highness allows it to slip away and does not press the advantage in haste, the feudal lords will revive their strength and organize themselves into an anti-Qin alliance. Then no one, even though he possess the virtues of the Yellow Emperor, would be able to annex their territories.

***From the Memorial on the Burning of Books***

... But at present Your Majesty possesses a unified empire, has regulated the distinctions of black and white, and has firmly established for yourself a position of sole supremacy. And yet

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these independent schools, joining with each other, criticize the codes of laws and instructions. Hearing of the promulgation of a decree, they criticize it, each from the standpoint of his own school. ...

Your servant suggests that all books in the imperial archives, save the memoirs of Qin, be burned. All persons in the empire, except members of the Academy of Learned Scholars, in possession of the *Classic of Odes*, the *Classic of Documents*, and discourses of the hundred philosophers should take them to the local governors and have them indiscriminately burned. Those who dare to talk to each other about the *Odes* and *Documents* should be executed and their bodies exposed in the marketplace. Anyone referring to the past to criticize the present should, together with all members of his family, be put to death.

**Questions:**

1. What common themes do you see in the two memorials?
2. How do the policies proposed by Li Si contrast with the way in which a Confucian official might advise his ruler under similar circumstances?
3. In what respects do the policies recommended by Li Si owe their ideas to Legalist philosophy?
4. What arguments might you pose against these policies?
5. What arguments might you pose in favor of these policies?
6. Why is Li Si concerned about the control of history?
7. Do Li Si's concerns about history have any relevance for contemporary American or European politics?

**Longer Selection**

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***Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States***

*The foregoing view of the First Emperor and Li Si is reflected in the following memorials as recorded by Sima Qian, the foremost historian of early China. That Sima Qian's record represents a Han view of the Qin past is significant.*

He who waits on others misses his opportunities, while a man aiming at great achievements takes advantage of a critical juncture and relentlessly follows it through. Why is it that during all the years that Duke Mu of Qin (659-621 BCE) was overlord (*ba*) among the feudal princes, he did not try to annex the Six States to the east? It was because the feudal lords were still

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numerous and the power of the imperial Zhou had not yet decayed. Hence, as the Five Overlords succeeded one another, each in turn upheld the House of Zhou. But since the time of Duke Xiao of Qin (361-338 BCE) the House of Zhou has been declining, the feudal states have been annexing one another, and east of the pass there remain only Six States.

Through military victories, the state of Qin has, in the time of the last six kings, brought the feudal lords into submission. And by now the feudal states yield obeisance to Qin as if they were its commanderies and prefectures. Now, with the might of Qin and the virtues of Your Highness, at one stroke, like sweeping off the dust from a kitchen stove, the feudal lords can be annihilated, imperial rule can be established, and unification of the world can be brought about. This is the one moment in ten thousand ages. If Your Highness allows it to slip away and does not press the advantage in haste, the feudal lords will revive their strength and organize themselves into an anti-Qin alliance. Then no one, even though he possess the virtues of the Yellow Emperor, would be able to annex their territories.

***Memorial on the Burning of Books***

*Among the most infamous acts of the First Exalted Emperor of the Qin were the “burning of books,” ordered in 213 BCE, and the “execution of scholars,” ordered in 212. The first was an effort to achieve thought control through destroying all literature except the Classic of Changes, the royal archives of the Qin house, and books on technical subjects, such as medicine, agriculture, and forestry. The measure was aimed particularly at the Classic of Documents and the Classic of Odes. The execution of some 460 scholars in the following year was an attempt to eliminate opposition to the emperor by ruthlessly destroying all potentially “subversive” elements in his entourage. The two measures taken together suggest something of the habit of mind of the First Emperor, as he was influenced by advisers like Li Si, but, again, it is significant that the following document comes down to us from the ensuing Han period.*

In earlier times the empire disintegrated and fell into disorder, and no one was capable of unifying it. Thereupon the various feudal lords rose to power. In their discourses they all praised the past in order to disparage the present and embellished empty words to confuse the truth. Everyone cherished his own favorite school of learning and criticized what had been instituted by the authorities. But at present Your Majesty possesses a unified empire, has regulated the distinctions of black and white, and has firmly established for yourself a position of sole supremacy. And yet these independent schools, joining with each other, criticize the codes of laws and instructions. Hearing of the promulgation of a decree, they criticize it, each from the standpoint of his own school. At home they disapprove of it in their hearts; going out they criticize it in the thoroughfare. They seek a reputation by discrediting their sovereign; they appear superior by expressing contrary views, and they lead the lowly multitude in the spreading of slander. If such license is not prohibited, the sovereign power will decline above and partisan factions will form below. It would be well to prohibit this.

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