

**SELECTION FROM THE BOOK OF LORD SHANG:  
“MAKING ORDERS STRICT”**

**Introduction**

Lord Shang (d. 338 BCE, also known as Gongsun Yang or Shang Yang) was prime minister of the state of Qin in the middle of the fourth century BCE — when Qin was simply one of the many states of the weak and fragmented feudal kingdom of Zhou. Lord Shang was from the neighboring state of Wei. Hearing that Duke Xiao of Qin was seeking men of worth to help strengthen his state, he left Wei in 361 BCE to find his fortune in Qin. As an advisor to Duke Xiao, Lord Shang recommended revising the laws. When some of the Duke’s other advisors expressed reservations, Lord Shang is said to have responded: “Wise men make laws; stupid men are constrained by them.” His reforms, initiated in 359 BCE, remade Qin and contributed substantially to its strength. Lord Shang’s reforms built on previously existing Qin laws. His reforms are distinguished by their thoroughness and focus. His goals were to guarantee the disciplined, efficient use of the state’s resources and to concentrate the people’s energies on two tasks: agriculture and warfare. To achieve these ends, he drafted and promulgated written laws prescribing rewards and punishments for desirable and undesirable behavior. The selection below, from the *Book of Lord Shang (Shangjun shu)* indicates some of the thinking that lay at the basis of Lord Shang’s policies.

**Selected Document Excerpt with Questions**

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 197. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Selection from the Book of Lord Shang:  
“Making Orders Strict”*

The six parasites are: rites and music, odes and history, cultivation and goodness, filial devotion and brotherly love, sincerity and trustworthiness, uprightness and integrity, humaneness and rightness, criticism of the army and being ashamed of fighting.<sup>1</sup> ...

In applying punishments, light offenses should be punished heavily; if light offenses do not appear, heavy offenses will not come. This is said to be abolishing penalties by means of penalties, and if penalties are abolished, affairs will succeed. If crimes are serious and penalties light, penalties will appear and trouble will arise. This is said to be bringing about penalties by means of penalties, and such a state will surely be dismembered.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is obviously a textual problem here: the “six parasites” actually involves sixteen items. Despite the problem of numbering, the list is significant and suggestive.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on  
*SELECTION FROM THE BOOK OF LORD SHANG: "MAKING ORDERS STRICT"***

The sage ruler understands what is essential in affairs and so, in the governing of the people, there is that which is most essential. Therefore in administering rewards and punishments he relies on uniformity. Humaneness is extending the heart. The sage ruler, by his governing of men, is certain to win their hearts; consequently he is able to exert strength. Strength produces force; force produces prestige; prestige produces virtue. Virtue has its origin in strength. The sage ruler alone possesses it, and therefore he is able to transmit humaneness and rightness to all-under-Heaven. ...

**Questions:**

1. How does Lord Shang's attitude compare to that of a Confucius or Mencius?
2. Does Lord Shang have anything in common with the Confucian philosophers?
3. What does Lord Shang believe to be the best way of governing a state and its people?
4. What does Lord Shang mean by "abolishing penalties by means of penalties?"
5. What assumptions does Lord Shang make about human nature?
6. Are Lord Shang's ideas about rulership reasonable and practical?