

HAN FEI TZU

In the turbulent period in Chinese history known as the Era of Warring States, the Han kingdom, both smaller and poorer than its chief rivals, struggled for survival. At the end of this chaotic era, one of the Han princes, Han Fei Tzu, wrote a series of memorials, advising the Han king about how to check the state's decline. Although the Han king refused to acknowledge the wisdom of Han Fei Tzu's counsel, a neighboring ruler did, and he attempted to secure the prince's services. Unfortunately for Han Fei Tzu this led to charges of disloyalty and ultimately to his execution in 233 B.C.E.

Han Fei Tzu's *Memorials* have remained one of the classics of ancient Chinese law and statecraft. In contrast to the more philosophical approaches to the problems of government, common to Buddhist and Confucian writers, Han Fei Tzu analyzes the problems of government in a practical and realistic manner. What follows is his discussion of how ruler and subjects alike could detect the warning signs of imminent disaster, what he called the "Portents of Ruin."

1. As a rule, if the state of the lord of men is small but the fiefs of private families are big, or if the ruler's sceptre is insignificant but the ministers are powerful, then ruin is possible.

2. If the ruler neglects laws and prohibitions, indulges in plans and ideas, disregards the defence works within the boundaries and relies on foreign friendship and support, then ruin is possible.

3. If all officials indulge in studies, sons of the family are fond of debate, peddlars and shopkeepers hide money in foreign countries, and poor people suffer miseries at home, then ruin is possible.

4. If the ruler is fond of palatial decorations, raised kiosks, and embanked pools, is immersed in pleasures of having chariots, clothes, and curios, and thereby tires out the hundred surnames and exhausts public wealth, then ruin is possible.

5. If the ruler believes in date-selecting, worships devils and deities, believes in divination and lot-casting, and likes fetes and celebrations, then ruin is possible.

6. If the ruler takes advice only from ministers of high rank, refrains from comparing different opinions and testifying to the truth, and uses only one man as a channel of information, then ruin is possible.