

Discourses on Salt and Iron

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The Discourses on Salt and Iron is the record of a debate over the relationship of government to society that was held after the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) in response to complaints about policies initiated during Emperor Wu's reign. Those policies had greatly increased the role of government in order, among other things, to pay the costs of imperial expansion. Defending the policies was the Lord Grand Secretary; the Literati speak for the critics. We invite you to take a stand and debate these matters – but also to understand the rationales of both sides. To help with that we have included some questions you might consider when reading each of the chapters we have selected.

CHAPTER 1

1. What are the policies that are at issue?
2. Why according to the Lord Grand Secretary were these necessary?
3. What according to the Literati is the basis for economic well-being at home and peace abroad?

¹ 81 BCE

² Worthies and Literati are talents recommended to the government in the previous year.

³ Han government's attempt to equalize or balance prices by transporting and redistributing commodity surplus to parts of the empire where they are scarce.

⁴ i.e. agriculture

⁵ For instance, crafts or trading.

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The Basic Argument

- a. It was the sixth year of the *shiyuan* era¹, when an imperial edict directed the Chancellor and the Imperial secretaries to confer with the recommended Worthies and Literati², and to enquire of them as to the rankling grievances among the people.
- b. The Literati responded as follows: It is our humble opinion that the principle of ruling lies in forestalling wantonness while extending the elementals of virtue, in discouraging mercantile pursuits while inspiring benevolence and righteousness. Let lucre never be paraded before the eyes of the people; only then will enlightenment flourish and mores improve.
- c. But now with the salt, iron, and alcohol monopolies, as well as *equalizing distribution*³ established in the commanderies and feudal states, the government has entered into financial competition with the people, destroying natural simplicity and innocence, while fostering selfishness and greed. As a result, few among our people take up the foundation of livelihood⁴, while many flock to the non-essential offshoots⁵. When embellishment is overwrought, it weakens the core substance; when the branches are overgrown, then the foundation is eroded. When the non-essential offshoots are cultivated, the people become frivolous; when the foundation is developed, the people are simple and guileless. The people being simple, wealth will abound; when the people are extravagant, cold and hunger will follow. We pray that the salt, iron, and alcohol monopolies and the system of *equalizing distribution* be abolished so that the principal industries may be encouraged while secondary occupations thwarted, and agriculture broadly benefited.
- d. The Lord Grand Secretary said: When the Xiongnu rebelled against our authority and frequently raided and devastated the frontier settlements, to be constantly on the watch for

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them was a great strain upon the military of the Middle Kingdom; but without measures of precaution, these forays and depredations would never cease. The late Emperor, grieving at the long suffering of the people at the frontier who live in fear of capture by the barbarians, caused consequently forts and seried signal stations to be built, where garrisons were held ready against the nomads. When the revenue for the defence of the frontier fell short, salt, iron, and alcohol monopolies were established, and the system of *equalizing* distribution introduced, for the purpose of increasing supply and wealth, so as to furnish the frontier expenses.

- e. Now our critics here, who demand that these measures be abolished, at home would have the hoard of the treasury entirely depleted, and abroad would expose our soldiers who defend the barriers and mount the walls to all the hunger and cold of the borderland. How else do they expect to provide for them? It is not expedient to abolish these measures!
- f. The Literati: Confucius observed that “the ruler of a kingdom or the head of a house is not concerned about his people being few, but about lack of equitable treatment; nor is he concerned about poverty, but over the presence of discontentment.” Thus the Son of Heaven should not speak about *much and little*, the feudal lords should not talk about *advantage and detriment*, ministers about *gain and loss*, but they should cultivate benevolence and righteousness, to set an example to the people, and extend wide their virtuous conduct to gain the people’s confidence. Then will nearby folk lovingly flock to them and distant peoples joyfully submit to their authority. Therefore “the master conqueror does not fight; the expert warrior needs no soldiers; the truly great commander requires not to set his troops in battle array.”⁶ Good practices at temples and the court will lead to success at the front and victorious return. The king who practices benevolent administration should be matchless in the world; for him, what use is expenditure?
- g. The Lord Grand Secretary: The Xiongnu, savage and wily, boldly push through the barriers and harass the Middle Kingdom, massacring the provincial population and killing

⁶ A quotation from the Guliang commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

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the keepers of the Northern Frontier. They long deserve punishment for their unruliness and lawlessness. But His Majesty graciously took pity on the insufficiency of the multitude and did not suffer his lords and knights to be exposed in the desert plains. If there is hardly the intention of confronting the Xiongnu in the north with armours and spears, but only the desire to do away with the salt and iron monopoly and *equalizing distribution*, it would only grievously diminish our frontier supplies and impair our military plans. I cannot consider favorably a proposal so heartlessly dismissing the frontier question.

- h. The Literati: The ancients held in honor virtuous methods and discredited resort to arms. Thus Confucius said: "If distant People are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so; and when they have been so attracted, they must be made contented and tranquil?"⁷ Now these virtuous principles are discarded and reliance put on military force; troops are raised to attack the enemy and garrisons are stationed to make ready for him. It is the long drawn-out service of our troops in the field and the ceaseless transportation for the needs of the commissariat that cause our frontier soldiers to suffer from hunger and cold abroad, while the common people are burdened with labor at home. The establishment of the salt and iron monopoly and the institution of finance officials to supply the army cannot be a sustainable strategy; it is therefore desirable that they now be abolished.
- i. The Lord Grand Secretary: The ancient founders of the state made open the ways for both foundational and branch industries and facilitated equitable distribution of goods. Markets were provided to meet various demands at one place: There people of all classes and goods of all kinds could then be gathered, so that farmer, merchant, and worker could each obtain what he desired, make the exchange and return home. The *Book of Change* says, "Facilitate exchange so that the people will be unflagging in industry." Thus without artisans, the farmers will be deprived of the use of implements; without merchants, all prized commodities will

⁷From the *Analects*.

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be cut off. The former would lead to stoppage of grain production, the latter to exhaustion of wealth. It is clear that the salt and iron monopoly and *equalizing distribution* are really intended for the circulation of amassed wealth and the regulation of the consumption according to the urgency of the need. It is inexpedient to abolish them.

- j. The Literati: Lead the people with virtue and the people will return to honest simplicity; entice the people with gain, and they will become vicious. Vicious habits would lead them away from righteousness to follow after gain, with the result that people will swarm on the road and throng at the markets. *Laozi* states, "a poor country may appear plentiful," not because it possesses abundant wealth, but because when desires multiply, the people become reckless. Hence the true king promotes the foundation (agriculture) and discourages branch industries; he checks the people's desires through the principles of propriety and righteousness, and in this way accumulate food and wealth. In his market, merchants do not circulate useless goods, artisans do not make useless implements. Thus merchants should only serve the purpose of circulating overstock commodities, and the artisans of providing tools; they should not become the principal concern of the government.
- k. The Lord Grand Secretary: Guanzi is reported to have said: "A country may possess a wealth of fertile land and yet its people may be underfed – the reason lying in lack of an adequate supply of agricultural implements. It may possess rich natural resources in its mountains and seas and yet the people may be deficient in wealth the reason being in the insufficient number of artisans and merchants." The scarlet lacquer and pennant feathers of Long and Shu, the leather goods, bone and ivory of Jing and Yang, the cedars, lindera, and bamboo rods of Jiangnan, the fish, salt, rugs, and furs of Yan and Qi, the lustrine yarn, linen, and hemp-cloth of Yan and Yü, are all necessary commodities to maintain our lives and provide for our death. But we depend upon the merchants for their distribution and on the artisans for giving them their finished forms. This is why the Sages availed them

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of boats and bridges to negotiate and gulleys, and domesticated cattle and horses for travel over mountains and plateau. Thus by penetrating to distant lands and exploring remote places, they were able to exchange all goods to the benefit of the people. Hence His late Majesty established officers in control of iron to meet the farmer's needs and provided *equalizing distribution* to make sufficient the people's wealth. Thus, the salt and iron monopoly and the *equalizing distribution* supported by the myriad people and looked to as the source of supply, cannot conveniently be abolished.

1. The Literati: That *a country possesses a wealth of fertile land and yet its people are underfed* is due to the fact that merchants and workers have prospered unduly while the fundamental occupations have been neglected. That *a country possesses rich natural resources in its mountains and seas and yet its people lack capital* is because the people's necessities have not been attended to, while luxuries and fancy articles have multiplied. The fountain-head of a river cannot fill a leaking cup; mountains and seas cannot over-whelm streams and valleys. This is why Pan Geng practiced communal living, Shun hid away gold, and Gao Di forbade merchants and shopkeepers to be officials. Their purpose was to discourage habits of greed and fortify the spirit of extreme earnestness. Now with all the discriminations against the market people, and stoppage of the sources of profit, people still do evil. What if the ruling classes should pursue profit themselves? The *Zhuan* says, "*When the princes take delight in profit, the ministers become mean; when the ministers become mean, the minor officers become greedy; when the minor officers become greedy, the people become thieves.*" Thus to open the way for profit is to provide a ladder to popular misdemeanor.
- m. The Lord Grand Secretary: Formerly the Princes in the provinces and the demesnes sent in their respective products as tribute. The transportation was vexacious and disorganized; the goods were usually of distressingly bad quality, often failing to repay their transport costs. Therefore Transportation Officers have been provided in every province to assist in the delivery and transportation and for the

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speeding of the tribute from distant parts. So the system came to be known as *equalizing distribution*. A Receiving Bureau has been established at the capital to monopolize all the commodities, Buying when prices are low, and selling when prices are high, with the results that the Government suffers no loss and the merchants cannot speculate for profit. This is therefore known as the *balancing standard*. With the *balancing standard* people are safeguarded from unemployment; with the *equalizing distribution* people have evenly distributed labor. Both of these measures are intended to equilibrate all goods and convenience the people, and not to open the way to profit and provide a ladder to popular misdemeanor.

- n. The Literati: The Ancients in levying upon and taxing the people would look for what the latter were skilled in, and not seek for those things in which they were not adept. Thus the farmers contributed the fruits of their labor, the weaving women, their products. Now the Government leaves alone what the people have and exacts what they have not, with the result that the people sell their products at a cheap price to satisfy demands from above. Recently in some of the provinces and demesnes they ordered the people to make woven goods. The officers then caused the producers various embarrassments and bargained with them. What was collected by the officers was not only the silk from Ji and Tao, or cloth from Shu and Han, but also other goods manufactured by the people which were mischievously sold at a standard price. Thus the farmers suffer twice over while the weaving women are doubly taxed. We have not yet seen that your marketing is "equable". As to the second measure under discussion, the government officers swarm out to close the door, gain control of the market and corner all commodities. With commodities cornered, prices soar; with prices rising, the merchants make private deals by way of speculation. Thus the officers are lenient to the cunning capitalists, and the merchants store up goods and accumulate commodities waiting for a time of need. Nimble traders and unscrupulous officials buy in cheap to get high returns. We have not yet seen that your standard is "balanced." For it seems that in ancient times *equalizing distribution* was to bring

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1. What according to the Literati is the basis for economic well-being at home and peace abroad?
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about equitable division of labor and facilitate transportation of tribute; it was surely not for profit or to make trade in commodities.

CHAPTER 2

Hold Fast The Plough

- a. The Lord Grand Secretary: The true King should stopper Nature's wealth, restrict and regulate tax-barriers and markets; in his hand lies the power of adjusting the balance of trade and in his keeping is the right utilization of the seasons: for through his control of the *ratio of production* he can curb the people. In years of abundance with harvest tall, he stores and bins to provide for times of scarcity and want; in evil years of dearth he circulates moneys and goods and tempers the flow of surplus to meet the deficiency. In ancient days during the flood of Yü and the drought of Tang, when the masses of the people, at the end of their resources, were forced to borrow from one another in order to obtain the prime necessities of life, food and clothing, Yü coined money for the people out of the metal of Li Shan, and Tang out of the copper of Yan Shan, and the world praised their benevolence. Some time ago, on account of financial difficulties, our fighting forces occasionally could not get their pay. Recently due to natural calamities East of the Mountains, Qi and Zhao suffered from a major famine. It was entirely due to the stores accumulated through the system of *equalizing distribution* and the hoard in public granaries that the troops were provided for and the distressed people succored. Thus the goods of *equalizing distribution* and the capital of the Treasury are not for the purpose of exploiting the people or solely for military uses, but also for the relief of the needy and as a recourse against flood and drought.
- b. The Literati: The rulers of antiquity taxed the people but a tithe, while they kept open the ponds and weirs according to season without restrictions, so that all *the Black Haired People spread themselves in the southern fields* never neglecting their occupations. Thus *three years' farming would yield a store of one year's surplus; nine years' farming would yield a store of three years' surplus*. This is how Yü and Tang prepared against flood and drought and made the people content. But if the grass and weeds be not cleared and the field not regularly cultivated, there would be no sufficiency even though a monopoly over the wealth of the mountains and seas be

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effected and a hundred sorts of profit be developed. Hence the ancients honored manual labor and attended to the fundamental industry, so that they sowed and planted in abundance, everyone worked on the land according to season, and food clothing were always sufficient. People did not suffer even in the face of several bad years. Agriculture should be the fundamental occupation of men, clothes and food being of primary necessity to the people. With both of these attended to, the country will be rich and the people at peace. In the words of the Book of Poetry: *Those hundred houses being full, the wives and children have a feeling of repose.*

- c. The Lord Grand Security: The worthies and the sages did not found their families by means of one room, nor did they enrich the state through one way. Thus Guan Zhong won the Protectorate through the shrewd use of his power, while the Fan clan perished because of its strength and size. If one must resort to agriculture alone to make a living and found a family, then Shun would not have had to make pottery and Yi Yin would not have had to be a cook. Hence, the Empire Builder acts according to the principle: *I honor what the whole world despises and value what the whole world slights.* He would exchange the non-essential for the fundamental and secure the substantial with his own emptiness. Now the treasures of the mountains and marshes and the reserves of the *equalizing distribution* system are means of holding the balance of natural wealth and controlling the principalities. Ru Han gold and other insignificant articles of tribute are means of inveigling foreign countries and snaring the treasures of the Qiang and the Hu. Thus, a piece of Chinese plain silk can be exchanged with the Xiongnu articles worth several pieces of gold and thereby reduce the resource of our enemy. Mules, donkeys and camels enter the frontier in unbroken lines; horses, dapples and bays and prancing mounts, come into our possession. The furs of sables, marmots, foxes and badgers, colored rugs and decorated carpets fill the Imperial treasury, while jade and auspicious stones, corals and crystals, become national treasures. That is to say, foreign products keep flowing in, while our wealth is not dissipated. Novelties flowing in, the government has plenty. National wealth not being dispersed abroad, the people enjoy abundance. So the Book of Poetry describes it: *Those hundred being full, the wives and children have a feeling of repose.*
- d. The Literati: In ancient times merchants circulated goods without premeditation, artisans got their price without cheating. Therefore when the true gentleman farmed, hunted or fished he was in reality doing but one thing. Trade

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promoted dishonesty. Artisans provoke disputes. They lie in wait for their chance without a scruple. Thus avaricious men become cheats and honest men avaricious. In the olden time when Jie filled the palace halls with singing girls in embroidered clothes, Yi Yin withdrew himself and went to Bo, while the singing girls finally ruined his state. Now mules and donkeys are not as useful as cattle and horses. Sable and marmot furs, wool and felt goods do not add substance to silk. Beautiful jades and corals come mount Kun. Pearls and ivory are produced in Gui Lin. These places are more than ten thousand Li distant from Han. Calculating the labor for farming and silk raising and the costs in material and capital, it will be found that one article of foreign import costs a price one hundred Times its value, and for one handful, ten thousand weight of grain are paid. As the rulers take delight in novelties, extravagant clothing is adopted among the masses. As the rulers treasure the goods from distant lands, wealth flows outward. Therefore, a true King does not value useless things, so to set an example of thrift to his subjects; does not love exotic articles, so to enrich his country. Thus the principle of administering the people lies only in carefulness in expenditure, in honoring the primary occupation, and distribution of land according to the "well tithe".

- e. The Lord Grand Secretary: From the capital, east, west, north and south, across the mountains and rivers, and throughout the provinces and the demesnes, you will find that none of the prosperous, rich and great municipalities has not streets extending in all directions, where the merchants gather and all commodities are exposed. Thus, the Sage utilizes nature's seasons and the Wise utilizes the wealth of the land. Superior men acquire through others. The mediocre burden their own bodies. Thus Chang Jü and Jie Ni never accumulated even a hundred pieces of gold, and the followers of Zhi and Jiao never possessed the wealth of I-Tun. But the merchants of Yuan, Zhou, Qi and Lu spread all over the world. These merchants doubtless amass fortunes of ten thousands of pieces of gold by going after profit and utilizing the surplus. Why then must one encourage simple agriculture in order to enrich the country, and observe the "well-tithe" to provide for the people?

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- f. The Literati: *When the great flood threatened Heaven*, we had the achievement of Yü. When the River broke loose, we had the building of the Xüan Fang. When Zhou of Shang raged in tyranny, we had the plan at the ford of Meng. When the world is in disturbance, we have speculative fortunes. In remote antiquity when perfect order prevailed, the people were simple and held to the fundamental; peaceful and happy their wants were few. At that time, few travelers were seen on the roads and grass grew in the markets. If farmers do not work hard, there will be nothing to fill the empty stomach; if weavers do not work hard, there will be nothing to cover our bodies; and in spite of the needs of a great congregation of people, there would be no chance for a potter's family to exercise their craft. For from ancient times till now, there has never been reward without contribution or achievement without effort.

CHAPTER 3

Circulation of Goods

- a. The Lord Gran Secretary: Zhuo and Ji of Yan, Han Dan of Zhao, Wen and Zhi of Wei, Xing Yang of Han, Lin Zi of Qi, Wan Chen of Chu, Yang Zhai of Zheng, the two Zhou of San Chuan, in riches surpassing all within the seas, re famous municipalities of the world. They are so not because there has been some one who had helped them to cultivate their country side and their fields, but because they are situated on the intersecting routes of the five feudal states and sit astride the network of highways. In other words, where products abound, the people multiply; when the house is near the market the family will get rich. Getting rich depends on 'methods' and 'statistical calculation' not on hard manual labor; profits depend on 'circumstances', not on strenuous farming.
- b. The Literati: In Jing Yang, there is the fertile land of Gui Lin to the south, the facilities of the rivers and the lakes within its borders, the gold of Ling Yang to the left and the timber supply of Shu and Han to the right. Forests were cut down in order to raise grain, and brush was burnt to give room for the sowing of millet. Through clearing by fire for farming and water-weeding, arable land was extended and natural resources were abundant. Thereupon evil habits of idleness imperceptibly grew up. People wear fine clothes and eat delicate food. Even in humble cottages and straw-thatched huts, we hear ballad-singing and playing on stringed

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instruments; wanton for a day, in want for a month, caroling in the morning, mourning in the evening. Zhao and Zhong Shan border the great River; they form the connecting center of the radiating roads and are situated on the highway of the world. Merchants throng the ways. Princes meet on the streets. But the people's trend is to the non-essential pursuits. They grow luxurious, disregarding the fundamentals. The fields are not cultivated, while the men and women vie with one another in dress. Without a peck of reserve in the house, the lute thrums in the hall. This is why of the people of Chu and Zhao most are poor and few rich. On the other hand, the people in Song, Wei, Han and Liang adhere to the fundamental and till the soil. Among the common people and yeomanry every house prospers and every person is satisfied. Therefore profit comes from care for one's self, not from favorable location on the highways. Riches come from thrift and labor at the right season and not from having supervising officials throughout the year and in increasing the display in the ceremonies.

- c. The Lord Grand Secretary: According to the theory of the Five Elements, the East pertains to Wood, but at Tan Chang we have mountains containing gold and copper. The South pertains to Fire, but in Jiao Zhi we have rivers as big as the ocean. The West Pertains to Metal, but in Shu and Long we find forests of famous timber. The North pertains to Water, but in You Du we find the land of heaped up sand. This is how Heaven and Earth compensate scarcity with abundance and facilitate the circulation of all goods. Now the supply of bamboo in Wu and Yüe, and the timber in Sui and Tang is more than can be used while in Cao, Wei, Liang and Song they are forced to use coffins over again for the dead. The fish of the regions of the great River and the lakes and the globe fish of Lai Huang are too many for local consumption, while in Zou, Lu, Zhou and Han they have only vegetable fare. The wealth of nature is not deficient, and the treasures of the mountains and the seas are indeed rich, and yet the people still remain necessitous and the available wealth is not adequate. The reason is that surplus and scarcity have not been adjusted and the wealth of the world has not been circulated.
- d. The Literati: In olden times, the rafters were not carved, and the hut-thatch was left untrimmed. People wore plain clothes and ate from earthenware. They cast metal into mattocks and shaped clay into containers. Craftsmen did not fashion novel, clever articles. The world did not value things that could not be worn or eaten. Each was satisfied with his own dwelling, enjoyed his own customs, found his own food and

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implements satisfactory. Hence, things from distant lands were not exchanged and the jade of Kun Shan did not arrive. Nowadays manners have degenerated in a race of extravagance. Women go to the extreme in finery and the artisans aim at excessive cleverness. Unadorned raw materials are carved and strange objects prized. They bore into the rocks to get gold and silver. They dive into the watery deeps looking for pearls. Pitfalls are devised to trap rhinoceri and elephants. Nets are spread for the kingfisher. Barbarian products are sought out to dazzle the Middle Kingdom. The goods of Gong and Zuo are transported to the Eastern Sea at a cost of ten thousand miles. Time and labor are spent for nothing. This is why the common men and women, weary and heavy-laden, wear themselves out without getting enough to clothe and feed themselves. Hence the true King would prohibit excessive profits, and cut of unnecessary expenses. When undue gain is prohibited, people return to the fundamental. When unnecessary expenses are cut off, people have enough to spend. Hence people will not suffer from want while alive, nor from exposure of their corpses when dead.

- e. The Lord Grand Secretary: In ancient times, reasonable limits were set to the style of palaces and houses, chariots and liveries. Plain rafters and straw thatch were not a part of the system of the Ancient Emperors. The true gentleman, while checking extravagance, would disapprove of parsimoniousness because over-thriftiness tends to narrowness. When Sun-shu Ao was the prime minister of Chu and his wife did not wear silk nor his horses feed on grain, Confucius said: *One should not be too thrifty so as to be hard on one's inferiors.* This is how the poem *The Cricket* was written. Guanzi said: *If palaces and houses are not decorated, the timber supply will be over-abundant. If animals and fowls are not used in the kitchens, there will be no decrease in their numbers. Without the hankering for profit, the fundamental occupation will have no outlet. Without the embroidered ceremonial robes, the seamstresses will have no occupation.* Therefore, artisans, merchants, carpenters and mechanics are all the use of the state and to provide tools and implements. They have existed from ancient times and are not a unique feature of the present age. Xuan Gao fed cattle at Zhou. Wu Gu carried on a cart-renting business in order to enter Qin. Gong-shu Zi was an expert in the compass and square and Ou Ye in founding. Thus the saying goes: *The Various craftsmen dwell in their booths that they may their work effectively.* Farmers and merchants exchange their goods so that both the fundamental and the accessory pursuits may be benefited. People who live in the mountains and marshes, or on moors and sterile

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uplands, depend on the effective circulation of goods to satisfy their wants. Thus it would not be only those who have abundance that have a surplus and only those who have little that would starve. If everybody stays where he lives and consumes. His own food, then oranges and pumaloes would not be sold, Qu Lu salt would not appear, rugs and carpets would not be marketed and the timber of Wu and Tang would not be used.

- f. The Literati: Mencius says that *if the seasons of husbandry are not disturbed there will be more grain than can be eaten. If silk Worms and hemp are raised according to the seasons, cloth and silk will be more than what is required for wear. If the axes and bills enter the forest according to season, the timber supply will be more than the demand. Hunting and fishing according to season, fish and game will be more than can be eaten.* If you do not do all these things according to the seasons, and on the other hand, you decorate the palaces and dwelling houses and raise terraces and arbors higher and higher, and if carpenters and mechanics carve the large into the small, the round into the square, so as to represent clouds and mists above and mountains and forests below, then there will not be enough timber for use. If the men folk abandon the fundamental in favor of the non-essential, carving and engraving in imitation of the forms of animals, exhausting the possibilities of manipulation of materials, then there will not be enough silk and cloth for wear. If the cooks boil and slaughter the immature, fry and roast and mix and blend, exhausting all the varieties of the Five Flavors, then there will not be enough fish and meat for food. At present while there is no question of suffering from fowls and animals not declining in number, and of the timber supply being more than can be consumed, the trouble is that we are extravagant without limit; and while we do not suffer from the lack of rugs, carpets, oranges and pomelos, the trouble is that we have a no hovels and husks and chaff.

CHAPTER 16

1. Why are there troops on the border according to the Lord Grand Secretary?
2. How should the government approach foreign relations according to the Literati?

CHAPTER 16

Territorial Expansion

- a. The Lord Grand Secretary: The Prince is all embracing and all sheltering. There is no place for favoritism in his universal love for all; he confers no extraordinary bounties on those near him, nor does he forget to spread broad his favors to those far away. Now we are all equally his subjects, and all are equally his ministers. Yet there is still no equality in security of life, and no even division of labor. Should there then be not any adjustment? You seem to be merely captious, when you only take into account the remote, never thinking of the near. The frontier people on the fringes of the Empire, living in a land of bitter cold, ever facing the menace of the powerful barbarians, constantly risk their lives at the first flash of the beacon fires. Therefore, that the Central Domain is able to live in peace, while the frontiersmen are fighting a hundred battles, is all due to the protecting screen of the border commanderies. Says the *Odes* in criticism of inequality: *This is all the sovereign's business, and I alone am made to toil in it.* Therefore the sagacious Emperor in his care of the Four Corners of the earth, alone exerted himself in raising armies to drive back the barbarians, north and south. Enemies were now kept at a distance and calamities were averted. The surplus of the Middle Kingdom, fertile and rich, was distributed to meet the need of the frontier regions. As the frontier regions are strengthened, the Central Domain will enjoy peace. With a Peaceful country, there will be no untoward events. What else would you want, and why not keep silent?
- b. The Literati: In ancient times, the Son of Heaven stood at the center of the world. His domain comprised a perimeter of not more than a thousand *li*. People supported their respective rulers, and the feudal prices protected their respective territories. Hence the people enjoyed equality and harmony, and the duties involved in forced labor were not strenuous. Now we have pushed back the Hu and the Yüe several thousand *li*. The routes have been circuitous and lengthy. The troops are worn out. Hence the people of the frontier are brought face to face with suicide, and China suffers from death and ruin. This is why the people clamor and will not be silent. The principle of administration lies in proceeding from the center to the periphery, beginning from the near. Only

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after those near at hand have attached themselves submissively to the government, steps may then be taken to rally the distant. After the people within are contented, then care will be taken of those afar. Hence when the ministers proposed to colonize Lun Tai, the Enlightened Monarch did not give his assent, thinking that his proper calling was to remedy the immediate problems of the moment. Thus he issued an edict to the effect that the problem of the present was to interdict harsh and cruel treatment of the people, to put a stop to arbitrary levies, and to concentrate upon the fundamental industry of agriculture. The ministers ought, therefore, to follow the wish of the Emperor by reducing and removing the incompetent to help the people in their extremity. Now that the Empire within is in decline, yet they show no anxiety, but busily engage themselves rather in the frontier questions, Is it not probably true that there are vast areas lying uncultivated, much sowing without harrowing, and much labor without fruit? Well may the *Odes* say: *Do not try to cultivate fields too large; the weeds will only grow luxuriantly.*

- c. The Lord Grand Secretary: It was not out of sheer delight in war that Tang and Wu resorted to arms. Nor was it due to lust of conquest that King Xüan of Zhou extended his territory a thousand *li*. Their purpose was to uproot foreign foes and internal rebels and thus to tranquilize the people. For a wise man will not undertake a purposeless expedition and a sage King will not covet a useless land. The late Emperor raised armies in the spirit of Tang and Wu and settled the distress of the Three Frontiers. Then he turned in one direction to subdue the enemy. As the Xiongnu fled, he constructed defenses along the rivers and the mountains. Hence he turned away from the barren wastes of sand, rock and alkali, ceded the district of Dou-pi, and the territory of Zao-yang to the Hu tribes. He dispensed with the garrison at the bend of the Great Wall, occupied the strategic positions on the Yellow River, and limited himself to guarding the important points in order to lighten garrison duty and yet render adequate protection to the people. From this it can be seen that the Sage Ruler's aim is not to aggrandize the Empire through burdening the people.
- d. The Literati: The Qin dynasty assuredly went to extremes in waging wars. Meng Tian certainly extended the boundary to a great distance. Now, we have far overreached the barrier step up by Meng Tian, and have established administrative area in the land of the raiding nomads. As the land extends to greater distance, people suffer from a greater burden. To the west of the Shuo-fang, and to the north of Chang-an, the

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outlay for the organization of new commandaries, and the express of the outposts are beyond calculation. It is not only this. When Si-ma [Xiang-ru] and Tang Meng bored through a road to the south-western tribes, Ba and Shu began to be oppressed by the Qiong and the Zuo. "Across the seas" dispatched expeditions against the southern barbarians; "High-decked ship" attacked the eastern Yue; but Jing and Chu were then overwhelmed by the Ou-luo tribes. After the "General of the left wing" attacked Korea and opened up the land of Lin Tun, Yan and Qi came to grief at the hands of the Hui and Mo tribes. Zhang Qian penetrated to strange and distant lands, but brought in only useless exotics. Thus the reserve of the treasuries flow to foreign countries, and the vast outflow is incomparable with [the economies effected on] the cost of Dou-pi, and the labor for Zao-yang [which had been saved]. From this it is seen that the whole affair is not due to the solicitude of the Emperor, but the mistaken calculation for the government of busy-body officials.

- e. The Lord Grand Security: he who possesses the wisdom of Guan Zhong would not take up the offices of an underling. He who possesses the acumen of Tao Zhu, would not remain in poverty. The Literati are capable of speech, but incapable in action. They occupy a low position, and yet blame their superiors. They remain poor, while criticizing the rich. They make extravagant speeches, without following them up. They are high sounding, but their conduct is low. They criticize, praise, and discuss, in order to gain a name and the favor of the time. Those who earn salaries of not more than a handful, are not qualified to talk about government. Those who at home possess less than a load or *shi* [of gain] are not qualified to plan things. All the scholars are poor and weak, unequipped with necessary clothes and hats. What do they know about the affairs of the state or business of the officials? What [do they know about] Dou-pi and Zao-yang?
- f. The Literati: A humble station does not circumscribe wisdom. Poverty does not impair one's conduct. Yan Yüan was frequently down to a bare cupboard, but he cannot be said to have been unworthy. Confucius, though not looking the part, cannot be denied as a sage. If 'one must recommend a man according to his appearance and promote a student according to his métier, then Tai Gong would have wielded his butcher's knife throughout his life and Ning Qi would never have ceased to tend his cattle. The ancient gentleman maintained his principles in establishing a name, and cultivated his personality while waiting his opportunity. Even poverty would not make him change his principles, nor would he alter his objective because of low position. He

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would abide in benevolence and act according to duty. He was even fastidious in the presence of money. Discerning profit he turned his regard to duty. To acquire riches in an improper way and high position without justification- this the benevolent would not do. Hence Zeng Shen and Min Zi would not exchange their benevolence for the wealth of Jin and Chu, and Bo Yi would not sell his character for the rank of a prince. With such as they, Duke Jing of Qi with all his thousand four-in-hands could not compute in fame. Confucius said: *What a man of worth was Hui! A single bamboo bowl of millet; a single ladle of cabbage soup; living in a mean alley! Other could not have borne his distress, but Hui never abated his cheerfulness.* Therefore only the benevolent knows how to live in straits, enjoying his poverty; while the mean man become oppressive when rich, and shifty when poor. Yang Zi said: *He who seeks to be rich will not be benevolent. He who wishes to be benevolent will not be rich.* If gain is preferred to honor, and all try to acquire and to rob with an insatiable appetite, then the ministers will accumulate millions of wealth, the high officials gold in thousands of pieces, and the smaller officers their hundreds. With this self-enrichment and the accumulation of concentrated wealth, the common people will be left in cold and misery, wandering along the roads. How could the Scholars alone keep up a complete outfit of caps and clothing?

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The Poor and the Rich

- a. The Lord Grand Secretary: For more than sixty years have I been the recipient of Imperial emolument and favor since the time when, at the age of thirteen, I first tied my hair and girded myself with the sash, and had the fortune of becoming an Imperial chamber page, serving in the Emperor's retinue until I rose to the rank of minister. In regulating the expenses for cars, horses, and robes and the expenditure of my family, servants and clients, I balance the debit and credit side of my budget and live a life of strict economy. I keep account of each and everyone of my salaries, appointments, and gifts. My wealth has accrued gradually until I have become rich and acquired an estate. Thus do the worthy maintain their holdings through a uniform system of subdivision, and the wise keep an account of their wealth by systematic distribution. Now, when Bai Gui made use of goods neglected by others and Zi Gong three times acquired a capital of a thousand gold pieces,

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were they necessarily forced to draw upon the resources of other? No, they simply manipulated it with the squared inch, manoeuvred it with surplus and deficit, and gathered it in between high and low prices.

- b. The Literati: In ancient times, no man pursued two occupations at the same time, and trading profits and official salary could not be combined. For only then would there be no disparity between occupations, for only then would there be no tipping of the balance of wealth. Had you borne your high rank and appointments with humility and courtesy, you would have all the fame you could desire; but as you seek profit by taking advantage of your power and stations, your income reaches levels incomputable. Indeed with him who feeds on the Nation's lakes and pools and controls the mountains and seas, shepherds and woodcutters are unable to compete for benefit, and merchants and peddlers, for gain. Zi Gong secured wealth in the capacity of a common citizen; yet Confucius disapproved of him. How much more would he frown on him who does it through his position and rank! In fact, in ancient times ministers were thoughtful of benevolence and duty in fulfilling their office, and never considered using the advantages of their power to satisfy their private interests.
- c. The Lord Grand Security: It is only when mountain and hillside have abundance that the people can enjoy plenty, and only when the seas and rivers have their riches that the masses can satisfy their wants. An ordinary scoop can not irrigate terraced fields, nor can timber from hillocks and downs be used for the construction of place halls, for the small can not encompass the big nor can it be of assistance to the plentiful. We know of no case when one unable to provide for himself was yet able to provide for others; when one unable to regulate himself was yet able to regulate others. Thus he can do most for others who has proved his ability in working for himself; and he best regulate others who has proved his worth in regulating himself. But you Scholars who have never been able to regulate your own homes, how can you hope to be able to regulate affairs beyond your ken?

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- d. The Literati: One has to make use of carts in travelling over great distance, and to depend on ship in crossing river or seas. A worthy scholar has also to rely on capital and avail himself of material in order to reach achievement and make name for himself. Gong-shu Zi was able to construct great places and towers with the timber supplied by his royal patron, but unable to build for himself even a small house or a tiny hut, his own timber being insufficient. Ou Ye could cast whole cauldrons and huge bell out of the copper and iron supplied by his prince, yet could never make for himself even a single tripod-kettle or a wash-basin, as he possessed not the necessary material. A true gentleman may base himself on the legitimate sovereign authority of the Ruler of Men, in order to harmonize the interests of the people and bring prosperity to the masses, but can not enrich his own family, for his position is not conducive to such an end. Thus when Shun was farming at Li Shan, his bounties did not extend to cover all the villages of the province; when Tai Gong was a butcher at Chao Ge, his profits did not benefit his wife and children. But when they finally found official employment, their munificence flowed to the brim the Four Seas. Shun, therefore, was obliged to rely on Yao, and Tai Gong depended upon Zhou. A true gentleman can only cultivate his person so that, relying on right conduct, he will be able to increase his own capital.
- e. The Lord Grand Secretary: *Dao* hung its law in the heavens and spread its product on the face of the earth for the wise to increase their substance therewith, while the stupid remain in distress. It was thus that Zi Gong became famous among the feudal nobles for his display of accumulated for his abounding riches. The rich sought their friendship; the poor looked to them for support. Thus all, from the ruler above to the simple-dressed commoner below, venerated them for their virtue and praised them for their altruism. At the same time, Yüan Xian and Kong Ji suffered all their lives from hunger and cold, and Yan Hui lived in chronic want in a beggars' alley. In those moments when pursued by poverty, they found shelter in caves and covered their bodies with

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ragged hemp-wadded clothes, even if they wished to place their reliance on wealth, resorting to crime and deceit, they would not be equal to it.

- f. The Literati: *If wealth were a thing one could (count on) finding, said Confucius, even though it meant may becoming a whip-holding groom, I would do it. As one can not (count on) finding it, I will follow the quests that I love better.* The true gentleman seeks duty, not wealth at any price. Hence the criticism pronounced on Zi Gong for not being content with his lot and increasing his goods. A true gentleman would attain wealth and rank when the times favor him; otherwise he would retire, and enjoy the way of virtue, and never seeks to burden himself with questions of profit. Thus he never turns his back on duty or is recklessly grasping; he would rather live an inconspicuous life and cultivate his principles lets he injure his conduct. He therefore never ruins hi reputation in pursuit of position. Though *to him be added the families of Han and Wei*, he would not remain with them should it be contrary to his objective. Wealth and rank add not to his honor, slander and defamation do him no harm. Therefore the shabby hemp-quilted robe of Yüan Xian was more illustrious than all the fox and raccoon furs of Qi-sun; the meager fish fare of Zhao Xüan-meng far more delicious than all the viand of Zhi Bo; and Zi Si's silver pendant more beautiful than the *Chui Ji* gem of Duke of Yü. Marquis Wen of Wei bowed to the front bar of his carriage while driving past Duan Gan-mu's residence, not because the latter possessed any temporal influence; and Duke Wen of Jin alighted from his chariot and ran out to meet Han Qing, not because the latter was a great capitalist. They did so because the two scholars' were rich in benevolence and complete in their virtue. Therefore, why must honors be given to wealth, when they are really due to benevolence and righteousness?

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Villifying the Learned

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- a. The Lord Grand Secretary: It is not the nature of a scholar to nurse crookedness while speaking straight and true, to rely upon himself as if desiring while actually not following in conduct. Li Si and Bao Qiu-zi according to tradition, both sat at the feet of Xūn Qīng. Their training completed, Li Si entered the service of Qin where he subsequently rose to the rank of one of the Three Highest Ministers, and possessed of the power of a lord of ten thousand chariots he held sway over the realm within the Seas, in achievement equal to Yi Yin and Lü Wang, in fame loftier than Mount Tai. But Bao Qiu-zi never got beyond the *Oeil-de-boeuf* of a thatched hovel, his fate comparable to that of frog which, though multisonous indeed during a flood year, are but destined to perish sooner or later in some drain or ditch. Now, lovers of disputation, without proper means to support yourselves at home and with no great reputation abroad, poor and inconspicuous that you are, even though you can talk on proper conduct, neither is your weight every great.
- b. The Literati: When Li Si became chancellor of Qin, Shi-huang appointed him to an office, which was higher than that of any other person or minister. Yet Xūn Qīng did not take office under him, prescient that he would fall into unfathomable disasters. Bao Qiu-zi, who lived on wild kraut growing among the hemp, and cultivated the Way of virtue beneath a plain white-washed roof, was happy in his aspirations, more contented than were living in a spacious mansion with meat as his fare. Though never enjoying resplendent station, he was yet free from all pretty anxiety. Now Duke Xian of Jin's *chui ji* gem was beautiful beyond dispute; but Gong Zhi-qi, seeing it, groaned, knowing well that it was part of Xūn Xi's plot against his country. Zhi Bo possessing all the wealth of the Three Jin States was certainly at the height of his power; yet hardly did he suspect that Xiang Zi planned to entrap him. The fox and raccoon furs of Ji Sun were undoubtedly magnificent; yet never did he suspect that the prince of Lu considered him as a menace to his state. Thus did Xian of Jin hook Yü and Guo by means of the precious horses, and through the city did Xiang Zi inveigle Zhi Bo with the result

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that the latter fell into the hands of Zhao, and Yü and Guo were both annexed by Jin. Thinking only of what they were about to obtain, regardless of consequence, Zhi Bo and the two states only coveted territory or valued prized mounts. As Confucius said: *Who heeds not the future will find sorrow at hand.* But our present-day authorities see only gain, never providing against possible loss; and only covet prizes, never considering possible disgrace, always willing to exchange their lives for profit and to die for money. They enjoy the privileges of wealth and rank without ever possessing the virtues of altruism and right conduct; indeed they are as one who step upon a trap relay to be sprung, or one who is dining under a portcullis! Thus it was that Li Si suffered the five penalties: *There was a bird in a southern clime called Wan-chu. He would eat nothing but the bamboo core, drink nothing but the water of the clearest spring. As he flew over Mount Tai, the Kite of Tai Shan, who was just picking up a decayed rat, looked up and saw Wan-chu. "Shoo!" cried Kite. Now, with all your wealth and rank, Lord High Minister, it pleases you to scoff at us Confucian scholars, as you do so frequently. Is not your conduct similar to that of the Kite of Tai Shan "shooing" at the Wan-chu!*

- c. The Lord Grand Secretary: 'Tis Learning's part to curb crude speech, and Courtesy's function to veneer rustic manners. Thus Learning should prop Virtue, Courtesy should civilize Crudeness. Our minds should weigh words before speaking; action after thought gives pleasure. Lips should not open to let forth bad language, and one should comply with good manners, endeavoring to walk with dignity along the path of decorum. Behave therefore in accordance with property, and let your utterance be in accordance with the rules of courtesy. It is only thus that you may speak all day without being malapert, and act all your days without setting a bad example. Now, the Ruler of Men, in order to govern the people, has provided offices and established courts, and has distributed ranks and assigned salaries to honor the worthies—and you speak here of portcullis and decayed rats! Fire! To be so coarse in speech and so pervert to schooling!

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- d. The Literati: The Sage Ruler provides offices for carrying out necessary functions; it is for the able to occupy them. He distributes salaries for the sustenance of worthies; it is for the capable to receive them. For the just and honorable, no honor should be too high and no emolument too great. Thus Shun received the Empire from Yao, and Tai Gong could not buy occupy the post of one of the Three Highest Ministers with the Zhou. If one be unfit for any position, even the giving of but a basket of rice and a plate of soup, would be like giving alms. Therefore, those whose station was high and yet their virtue thin, whose responsibility was heavy but strength small, were few, for they were not equal to it. The Kite of Tai Shan picked up but a decayed rat in some remote marsh or obscure valley; he never intended to do harm to anyone. But you, our present officiators, you rob the Ruler's treasury and feed upon it in the very face of the punitive laws, unaware that their mechanism may be set into motion! And with all that, you "shoo" at people! In villainy indeed you can hardly be compared to the Kite of Tai Shan!
- e. The Lord Grand Secretary: Said Magister Si-ma: *Hustling and bustling, after gain the world is rushing; Maids of Zhao not particular as to beauty or homeliness; matrons of Zheng indiscriminating between foreigner and countryman; merchants willing to face dishonor and disgrace, soldiers not willing to serve to the death; officers, indifferent to relatives, in serving their Prince willing to face any risk at his expense; everyone and all working but for profit and salary. The Confucianists and the Mohists, with greedy hearts but dignified mien, roam back and forth with their sophists' arguments. Their perching here and perching there can also be explained by their appetite not being satisfied. For the scholar's want is also honor and fame; wealth and rank, the object of his expectations. When Li Si was studying at the door of Xün Qing, he rode side by side with ne'er-do-wells. Then, when he raised his wings in high flight surging forth like a dragon, breaking into gallop like a charger, "passing by nine and overtaking two," soaring to a height of ten thousand cubits, the wild swan and the fleet courser could hardly keep pace with him, to say nothing of lame ewes and finches and sparrows! Seated in the seat of*

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power over all the Empire, driving the masses of the world before him, he enjoyed a retinue of a hundred chariots and an income of ten thousand measures, while your doctrinaire Confucianists can not have even a full suit of cotton clothes nor enough husks to fill their stomachs. Not that they find bean and legume tasty and hold spacious mansions in low esteem, but they can never obtain the latter for themselves. Even though they would like to “shoo” at others, how can they do so?

- f. The Literati: The Gentleman esteems virtue, the mean man dotes on land; the worthy scholar suffers martyrdom for his good name, the miser dies for gain. Li Si, coveting desirable objects, came to a hateful end, while Sun-shu Ao, foreseeing early possible troubles, three times resigned from his Chancellorship and had no occasion for regret. Not that he found pleasure in stations low and mean, and dislikes generous salaries, but he considered the distant future and took care to avoid all harm. The ox, reserved for the suburban sacrifice, is fed and taken care of throughout a whole year, before being bedecked in rich embroidery and led into the temple hall. Then does the Great Sacrificer seize his belled sword, about to part open its hair. At that moment, even if it wanted to be up a steep hillside under a heavy load, it cannot get its wish. When Shang Yang was hard pressed at Peng Chi and Wu Qi cowered behind his prince's body, they undoubtedly wished they were in coarse clothes living in some wretched straw hut. When Li Si was Qin's Chancellor, seated in the seat of power over the whole Empire, a realm of ten thousand chariots would seem small to his ambition; but when locked in prison and finally when being torn apart by chariots in market place of Yun-yang, he also undoubtedly wished he were carrying wood to Dong-men or walking through the crooked short-cuts of Shang-cai but he could never get his wish. Su Qin and Wu Qi killed themselves by their power and position; Shang Yang and Li Si brought themselves to destruction by their prestige and honor; all of them came to their end through their greed and vanity. All the hundred chariots of their escort could not have carried away their load of grief!