

The Records of the Grand Historian – Sima Qian

1 Chunyu Yueh, a scholar of Chi said “I have yet to hear of anything able to endure that was not based
2 on ancient precedents.”

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4 The emperor ordered his ministers to debate this question.

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6 The prime minister Li Si said, “...Now Your Majesty [Shi Huangdi] has built up this great empire
7 to **endure** [survive] for generations without end. [...] In times gone by different barons [nobles]
8 fought among themselves and gathered wandering scholars. Today, however, the empire is at peace,
9 all laws and order come from one single source, the common people support themselves by farming
10 and handicrafts, while students study the laws and prohibitions.

11
12 “Now these scholars learn only from the old, not from the new, and use their learning to oppose our
13 rule and confuse the black-headed people [common people]. As prime minister, I must speak out on
14 pain of death. In former times when the world, torn by chaos and disorder, could not be united,
15 different states arose and argued from the past to condemn [express disapproval of] the present,
16 using empty rhetoric [arguments] to cover up and confuse the real issues, and employing their
17 learning to oppose what was established by authority. Now, Your Majesty has conquered the whole
18 world, distinguished between black and white.... Yet these opinionated scholars get together to
19 slander the laws and judge each new decree according to their own school of thought, opposing it
20 secretly in their hearts while discussing it openly in the streets. They brag to the **sovereign** [ruler] to
21 win fame, put forward strange arguments to gain **distinction** [importance], and incite the mob to
22 spread rumors. If this is not **prohibited** [banned], the **sovereign's** prestige will suffer and factions
23 [divisions] will be formed among his subjects. Far better put a stop to it!

24
25 “I humbly propose that all historical records but those of Qin be burned. If anyone who is not a court
26 scholar dares to keep the ancient songs, historical records or writings of the hundred schools, these
27 should be confiscated [taken and burned by the provincial governor and army commander. Those
28 who in conversation dare to quote the old songs and records should be publicly executed [Chinese
29 tradition claims that 460 rebellious Confucian scholars were buried alive in a common grave and
30 many others were stoned to death]; those who use old precedents to oppose the new order should
31 have their families wiped out; and officers who know of such cases but fail to report them should be
32 punished in the same way.

33
34 “If thirty days after the issuing of this order the owners of these books have still not them destroyed,
35 they should have their face tattooed and be condemned to hard labor at the Great Wall. The only
36 books which need not be destroyed are those dealing with medicine, divination [the practice of
37 looking into the future], and agriculture. Those who want to study the law can learn it from the
officers.”

The emperor sanctioned this proposal.

1. In lines 6-10, Li Si describes the great achievements of Shi Huangdi. According to Li Si, what are two achievements that Shi Huangdi was able reach that the leaders before him were unable to reach?

2. What does the phrase “opinionated scholar” (li. 18) mean?

3. According to lines 18-23, what are these “opinionated scholars” doing and saying in response to the reforms made by Shi Huangdi? How does Li Si feel about their actions?

4. What does Li Si suggest that Shi Huangdi do in response to these “opinionated scholars”?

5. Reread lines 25-32.

a. What is the consequence for those who “dare to quote the old songs and records?”

b. What is the consequence for those who “use old precedents [examples] to oppose the new order?”

c. What is the consequence for officers who “know of such cases but fail to report them?”

6. Which books were allowed in the Qin dynasty? Why?

7. How did Li Si’s policy increase the power of Emperor Shi Huangdi?

8. What does this document reveal about how the Qin dynasty treated its opponents?

9. To what extent might Shi Huangdi's treatment of opponents diminish his success?

10. To what extent is Sima Qian's excerpt from *The Records of the Grand Historian*, a reliable source of evidence about the actions taken by Shi Huangdi during the Qin Dynasty?

11. To what extent is Sima Qian's excerpt from *The Records of the Grand Historian*, a reliable source of evidence about the reactions of the inhabitants of China during the Qin Dynasty to Shi Huangdi's actions as a ruler??