

Yen Ch'u insults a king and turns his back on courtly life

King Hsuan of Ch'i (319-301 BCE) gave Yen Ch'u audience and said, 'Come forward, Ch'u.'

'Come forward, your majesty', replied Ch'u, and the king was displeased.

'His majesty is a ruler of men and you are but a minister', cried the king's attendants. 'Is it permissible for you to say, "Come forward your majesty" when the king summons you?'

'If I were to go to him on order it would be from fear of his power,' replied Ch'u, 'but if he were to come to me he would be seeking a man of honor. To cause a king to seek men of honor is better for him than to make a man of honor fear the king's power.'

'Is a king not more honored than a *shih*?' cried the king, coloring in indignation.

'A *shih* is honored, a king is not', replied Yen Ch'u. "

"Is this a persuasion?'

'It is. Of old when Ch'in was attacking Ch'i the order was given that anyone caught foraging within fifty paces of Liu-hsia Chi's tomb in Lu be executed summarily. He later gave the order that anyone who secured the head of the king of Ch'i would be given a fief of ten thousand families and a gift of one thousand in gold. From this it is apparent that the head of a king is not worth as much as the tomb of a man of honor.' The king was silent and unhappy.

'Come, Ch'u, come!' cried the king's attendants. 'Our king commands a country of a thousand chariots, has cast bells weighing a thousand stone and bell-racks weighing ten thousand stone. Men of honor throughout the empire come to live with him and serve him, learned debaters present themselves and speak with him, men from everywhere feel constrained to do him honor. He lacks for nothing and all his people are devoted to him.

'But even the highest placed *shih* is only a commoner and a man of the ranks, while the lowest among them are lucky to be gatemen in some rustic village² - such is the mean position of the *shih*.'

'Not so', replied Yen Ch'u. 'I have heard that in the time of Yu the Great there were ten thousand states. Why? Because they had great virtue and held the power of the *shih* in respect. It was for this reason that Shun, who came from the farm, left the hinterlands and became the Son of Heaven.

'By the time of T'ang the Feudal Lords amounted to three thousand and in the present age there are only twenty-four who sit facing south calling themselves "the lonely one".³ Did this decrease not come about because some states' policies were sound and some not? Gradually the latter were exterminated. And when one's clan is exterminated can one hope to become even gateman of a hamlet?

'Does not the *Yi-ching*⁴ say: "Who sits in the high place and is content with the title instead of the reality of his position will become arrogant and profligate. On the heels of arrogance, contempt, and dissipation follows calamity."

'This is why it is said, "Who loves the name but not the task will lose his state; who, without virtue, hopes for luck is profligate; for those who, meritless, still draw their pay, calamities await." It is also said, "Boasted merit is least likely to succeed; wishes alone bring one nothing." These sayings all refer to the taking of pleasure in name and ornament while lacking the reality and substance.

'This is why Yao had his "nine aides", Shun his "seven companions", Yu his "five assistants" and T'ang his "three ministers". From ancient times until now no one has become famous throughout the empire without having accomplished something, and this is why no ruler has ever hesitated to question widely or been ashamed to learn from those under him. For this reason those who achieved true virtue and left the greatest name behind were Yao, Shun, Yu, T'ang and King Wen of Chou. Therefore it is said,

¹ Lin Yun-ming (T. Hsi-chung) comments: 'If a king seeks *shih* ('man of honor') he is fulfilling his function; if a *shih* toadies to power he has lost his function.'

² The attendants are deliberately using *shih* in one of its meanings already archaic in Confucius' time - i.e., 'soldier'.

³ In Ancient China rulers used this expression as a sort of royal 'we'

⁴ The present-day text of *Yi-ching* does not in fact contain this quotation.

"Formlessness is the master of form just as disturbance arises from lack of disturbance." But "seeing the source and knowing the course" what ill fortune could befall these greatest of sages who knew how to emulate others'?

Lao-tzu said, "Even the most honored has his humble roots, just as that which is high has its base on the low." It is for this reason that nobility and kings speak of themselves as "the orphan", "the lonely one" "the unworthy". Are they not then showing their "humble roots"? Men orphaned and the alone are among the lowest; and do not nobles and kings by using such terms wish to number themselves among the lowliest so that they may honor *shih*?

Yao bequeathed his throne to Shun, Shun passed his on to Yu, King Ch'eng of Chou used Tan, Duke of Chou, and yet subsequent generations have all spoken of them as enlightened rulers because they knew how to honor men of honor."

'Alas,' said King Hsuan, 'can a superior man ever be treated with contempt? I have done little save cause myself trouble. But this day I have heard how a superior man speaks and how; a petty man acts and hope to become your disciple, sir. If you consent, Master Yen, to be my companion, you shall dine on meat and travel by coach, and your wife shall wear only the finest garments.'

Yen Ch'u took his leave, however, saying, 'Jade is found in the mountains and only when worked does it flaw. The final product is still valuable but its pristine wholeness is lost. A *shih* comes from a simpler life, and if he is chosen and accepts emolument, though he is not dishonored, he loses some unity of spirit and person. I prefer to return to my old ways; for to eat only when hungry is better than dining on meat, to walk in peace is better than riding in a state carriage, and to live without guilt is better than being honored. I want only the purity of seclusion for my happiness. Your majesty would limit what I say, whilst I would rather always speak directly and honestly and without constraint. In any case, the most important things have already been said. I request your permission to retire and go in peace to my native village and home.'

And with that Yen Ch'u saluted the king and left.

[Yen Ch'u understood contentment. He returned to simplicity and avoided dishonor all the rest of his days.]

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