

Confucianism

Towards the end of the Zhou Dynasty, as feudal lords fought over land, there was a scholar and government minister by the name of **Kong Fuzi**—later latinized as **Confucius** by sixteenth-century Jesuits. Confucius gained students and followers as he taught the classics: the ancient Zhou-era *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Odes*, and *The Book of Changes*."

Confucius was concerned generally about the class of leaders and their ethical and intellectual cultivation. As a low aristocrat himself, Confucius also wanted to rethink notions of status, class, and hierarchy in society.

The texts that Confucius taught were already ancient in Confucius' time. The respect that Confucius gave to them is perfectly in-line with his philosophy of **filial piety**—respect for your parents or elders. In this way, **Confucianism** is a philosophy of respect for the past and its traditions. Many of the ideas attributed to Confucius had likely already been in circulation in Chinese society for many years.

While little of Confucius's original thoughts survives, *The Analects of Confucius*—which means "the collected sayings of Confucius"—was composed by his students and followers based on conversations they had with him.

In the *Analects*, we get a sense of what proper social behavior, including filial piety, looked like to Confucius. Here's a snippet from Book One of the *Analects*:

The Master said: When the father is alive, observe the son's intent. When the father dies, observe the son's conduct. One who does not alter his late father's [way] for three years may be called filial.

Confucius urged ethical and upright behavior, framing responsible government as a moral duty similar to parenthood. He believed providing a good example of moral conduct to the people would spur them to act within the confines of the law:

The Master said: Guide them with policies and align them with punishments and the people will evade them and have no shame. Guide them with virtue and align them with *li* [ritualized etiquette and ceremonies] and the people will have a sense of shame and fulfill their roles.

Confucianism emphasized the idea that people could be made to be good if they followed moral instruction and performed rituals that venerated the gods and honored the ancestral dead. In a time of social upheaval and war, the Confucianists believed only careful maintenance of the old traditions could uphold societal unity.

Many Chinese rulers drew upon Confucian principles. For example, Emperor Wu of Han promoted hierarchical social structures based on Confucian principles, which he believed would bring about greater social harmony throughout Chinese society.

Legalism

During the **Warring States Period** of Chinese history, from 475 to 221 BCE, what we now think of today as China was divided into seven competing nations. The fiefs that had grown in importance during the end of the Zhou Dynasty had now become states of their own.

One of those seven states was the state of Qin, whose young ruler, King Zheng, would later become Qin Shi Huangdi, the first ruler of the Qin Dynasty, in 221 BCE. The Qin Dynasty is often credited as the first dynasty to unify China. But let's rewind the tape to about a century and a half earlier to understand a key influence on the Qin Dynasty: Legalism.

Legalism promotes the notion of strict law and order and harsh, collective punishments, ideas that influenced Qin Shi Huangdi's despotism and centralized rule. If we want to understand Legalism, we have to go back to **Shang Yang**, a reformist statesman from the state of Qin. Lord Shang's understanding of humanity was profoundly different from that of Confucius.

Lord Shang was born in 390 BCE, 169 years prior to the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi. In *The Book of Lord Shang*, Shang Yang recommended harsh punishments for light offenses; he reasoned that if petty crimes were met with heavy punishments, more serious crimes would be deterred.

Under Shang's regime, the people of the state of Qin had severely constrained lives: peasants could not leave their villages without travel permits; farmers who did not meet growing quotas were forced into slave labor, and minor crimes were punished with severity.

The state of Qin diminished the strength of its aristocracy and consolidated power and land under one royal family. This change in power structure gave the ruler of Qin, rather than feudal lords, direct control over the lives of people. Trade with other states was discouraged, and peasant activity was focused, by law, on military service or agriculture.

The decreased power of local nobles led to the establishment of an administrative system that answered directly to the head of Qin. The administrators, or **bureaucrats**, in this system were responsible for translating the ruler's will into action.

Now, let's fast forward to King Zheng's time. An intense focus on conscripting troops and increasing agricultural production had turned the state of Qin into a military powerhouse by the third century BCE. The young King Zheng began a nine-year campaign to conquer his neighbors. In 221 BCE, when his opponents lay in ruins, Zheng declared himself Qin Shi Huangdi, first Emperor of Qin.

The new emperor set about creating an empire-wide administrative bureaucracy modeled after his home state. China was divided up into regional administrative zones, all under the watchful eyes of Qin Empire officials. Under Qin Shi Huangdi, common people were conscripted into forced labor and punished or disfigured for petty infractions.

Daoism

Confucianism and Legalism both required strict adherence to principles, whether they were enforcement-based Legalist ones or shame-based Confucian ones. **Daoism**, in contrast, recognizes no law but the **Dao**, or the Way.

What is the Dao? It's a little difficult to say, but we'll let the *Dao De Jing*, a Daoist text ascribed to the legendary sixth century BCE sage **Laozi**, explain:

The one who knows [the Dao] does not speak; the one who speaks does not know. The wise man shuts his mouth and closes his gates.

In this way, the Dao was often described as resistant to description or definition: a nameless, shapeless, but also a creative force in the universe. This may seem like a contradiction, but it makes sense when you consider the fact that Daoism is a kind of anti-activism; it asserts that the best life is one of willful ignorance, seeking no knowledge and avoiding involvement in politics or public life.

Daoists were not convinced that governments could create social order and harmony. Instead, they focused their attention on individual human behavior and the ways it might be modified to be in harmony with the Dao.

The Dao is meant to represent the natural order of the universe, and Daoism stipulates that human beings are the only species that disobeys the Dao. Rather than seek to elevate oneself through words and deeds, Daoists cultivated a practice of **wu wei**, or *inaction*, giving in to thoughtless, effortless, and natural action.

The Dao is not a goal to actively seek, but rather a state to be approached through not approaching it. Daoists believed that rather than involve yourself with affairs of state, it is better to keep to your own doings and live simply. Silence is valued above words; inaction and stoicism are valued above action and outrage.

Daoists believed that if all people ceased striving for glory, riches, and attainment, there would be no war, no envy, and lessened suffering. Daoism influenced many elements of later Chinese philosophy, especially Chinese Buddhism.

Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism all each played a role during the Warring States Period. These three philosophies influenced the styles of Chinese governance throughout the Qin ascendancy, the Han dynasty, and beyond, becoming more or less influential depending on which dynasty was in power. They also heavily influenced social structures.

Questions:

- 1. What role does shame, as Confucius terms it, play in motivating behavior? What does it have to do with running a city, or a country?**
- 2. How is Legalism different from Confucianism? What different effects do you think Legalism might have had on government and social structures?**
- 3. What role did Legalism play in the development of an imperial state? How does Legalism compare to other systems of laws, rules, and punishments that you've learned about in world history?**
- 4. What does *wu wei* suggest to you? How do you think Daoism affected Chinese society and government *differently* from Confucianism and Legalism?**