

Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism

China's 3 Ancient Philosophies



Background

The Zhou dynasty lasted from about 1045-256 B.C.E. During its later years, different leaders fought for control in China. The civil war destroyed the unity of China for a time. No one held the mandate of heaven. These troubles led Chinese thinkers to ask questions about the best way to have **peace and order in society**. Three very different answers emerged. They were the philosophies of **Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism**.

Imagine its 360 BCE. The emperor asks his advisors, “How shall I rule?”

The first advisor has learned about Confucianism. He tells the king, “Lead by example”. The second advisor has studied Taoism. He says, “If you must rule, rule as little as possible”. The third advisor has learned about Legalism. He says, “Set clear laws and harshly punish those who disobey them”.

Confucianism

Confucianism is based on the teachings of Kongfuzi, who is called Confucius by westerners. This philosophy deeply influenced Chinese government and culture.

The Founder of Confucianism

Confucius lived from 551 to 479 B.C.E. He was born in the small state of Lu in eastern China. He experienced firsthand the disorder that erupted when lords fought for power. Between 722 and 481 B.C.E. his own state was invaded many times.

Confucius deeply respected Chinese traditions such as reverence for ancestors and the honor given to scholars. He also saw that society and government had to change if there was to be peace and order. In particular, rulers needed to govern wisely. Confucius wanted to teach men of good character to work as honest and fair government officials.

The Teachings of Confucianism

The goal of Confucianism was a just and peaceful society. Confucius taught that society worked well when all people acted properly based upon their roles and their relationships with others.

According to Confucianism, there are five basic relationships:

(1) Ruler and subject, (2) husband and wife, (3) father and son, (4) older sibling and younger sibling, and (5) friend and friend.

- They are ranked in order of importance. In each of these relationships, the second person has an obligation to respect and obey the first person.

In particular, everyone must respect their elders. In return, those with authority, such as rulers, fathers, husbands, and older siblings, must set a good example. They should be kind, honest, wise and faithful. Confucius taught, “Do not do to others what you would not want done to you”.

The Influence of Confucianism

Confucius attracted many students who read his teachings. After his death, some of them collected his sayings in a book called *The Analects*. Later scholars further developed Confucianism.



Main Ideas

- Restore social order, harmony and good government to China
- Ethical systems based on relationships and personal virtue
- Emphasized family
 - Filial piety - respect for parents and elders is necessary for order
- Early Zhou Dynasty was seen as perfect society
 - Inferiors devoted to service
 - Superiors looked after dependents

The Influence of Confucianism

Confucianism influenced the Han who triumphed after the fall of the Zhou. In most cultures, government jobs were given to people related to the ruler. However, being related to someone does not guarantee they are qualified for the job. Because of the influence of Confucianism, civil servants under the Han were hired on the basis of their ability. Before being hired, they were expected to know the Chinese classics in detail. For example, they had to know the proper behavior or people in various roles, from laborers to government officials. To prove they had this knowledge, they had to take exams that the Emperor himself might grade.

The teachings of Confucius had a major influence on Chinese culture. Values such as respect for elders, proper behavior and love of scholarship became deeply woven into Chinese society. Even today, the sayings of Confucius are wise and practical.



Taoism

The second great philosophy to come out of China's time of trouble was Taoism. Like Confucianism, it tried to give answers to the problems of right living and good government.

The Founder of Taoism

According to tradition, the great sage, or wise man, of Taoism was Lao-tzu. He was said to be the author of the *Tao Te Jing* (The Classic of the Way and Its Power).

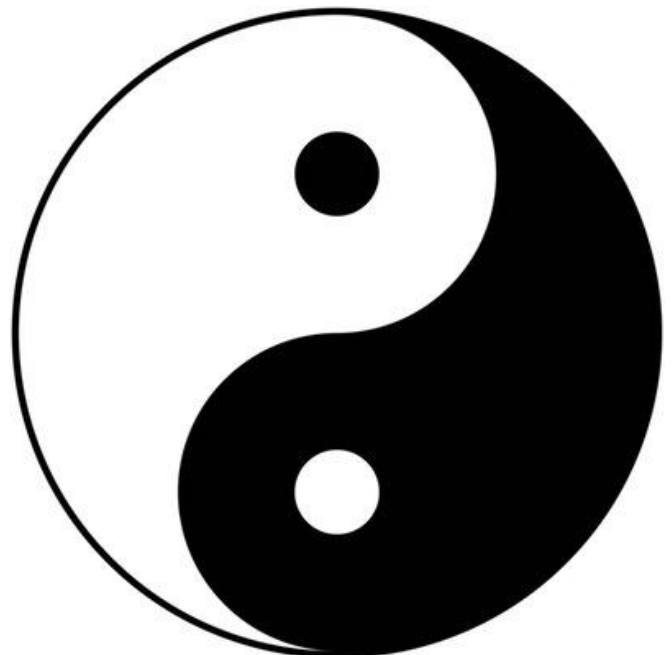
Some modern scholars believe that Lao-tzu was a real man who lived in the late 500's B.C.E. Others think he was only a legend. Scholars do agree that the *Tao Te Jing* was actually written over time by many writers.

Old stories of Lao-tzu's life tell how he came to write the *Tao Te Jing*. These stories say that Lao-tzu **worked as an advisor** to the Zhou court for many years. Then he was 90 years old, he tired of government work and decided to leave China. When he came to the Chinese border, a guard recognized him. The guard was upset that the great teacher's wisdom would be lost of China. He asked Lao-tzu to record his thoughts before leaving. So Lao-tzu sat down and wrote a small manuscript of only 5,000 characters, the *Tao Te Jing*. The *Tao Te Jing* preached a return to a simple and natural way of living. For example one passage says:

*If you do not want your house to be attacked by robbers,
Do not fill it with gold and jade.
Wealth, rank and arrogance add up to ruin,
As surely as two and two are four.*

The Teachings of Taoism

Taoism was based on the ancient Chinese idea of the Tao, or "the Way". Dao was the force that gave order to the natural universe. Taoism taught that people gained happiness and peace by living in harmony, or agreement, with the way of nature.



To the Taoists, nature is full of opposites, like life and death or light and darkness. True harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called *yin* and *yang*. Yin means “shadowed” and yang means “sunlit”. In the same way, human life is a whole made up of opposites. It is impossible to have good without bad, beauty without ugliness, or pleasure without pain.

The Taoists taught that people followed the way of nature by living simple lives of quiet meditation. Notice, they said, how nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. Similarly, people should avoid feeling self-important or striving for possessions or honors. Instead, they should accept whatever comes, like a blade of grass that bends when the breeze blows.

The Taoists believed that everyone must discover the Tao for themselves. Too many laws and social rules only got in the way of living naturally and following the Tao. Therefore, the best rulers were those who ruled the least. The Tao Te Jing says, “Governing a large country is like frying a small fish. You spoil it with too much poking”. It also tells rulers, “Be weak. Let things alone”

The Influence of Taoism

Taoism encouraged rulers to rule less harshly. But Taoism’s more important influence was on Chinese thought, writing and art. In time, Taoism developed into a popular religion.

Legalism

The third major philosophy that came out of China's time of troubles was Legalism. It gave very different answers to the problems of order and good government that either Confucianism or Taoism.

The Founder of Legalism

Legalism was based on the teachings of *Han-fei-tzu*. Han-fei-tzu lived from 2800-233 B.C.E. He was a prince of the royal family of the state of Han. Han-fei-tzu lived to see the end of the Warring States period and of the Zhou dynasty.

Like Confucius, Han-fei-tzu was very concerned with creating peace and order in society. But he did not think the Confucius teachings about proper behavior were the answer. Many of his ideas survive today in a book named after him, *Hanfeizi*.

The Teachings of Legalism

Legalism was based on the idea that **most people are naturally selfish**. Left to themselves, Legalists said, people always pursue their own self-interest. They could not be relied upon to have a good influence on one another. Therefore, it was not enough for rulers to set a good example. Instead, they should establish strict laws and enforce them with rewards for good behavior and harsh punishments for bad behavior. Civil servants should be watched carefully and punished for doing a poor job. People caught criticizing the government should be banished to China's far northern frontier.

In Han-fei-tzu's time, rulers were frequently overthrown. To solve this problem, Han-fei-tzu said that rulers must have absolute power backed up by military might. Rulers should trust no one, not even their own families. Han-fei-tzu wrote, "He who trusts will be controlled by others".

The Influence of Legalism

Legalist philosophy had an almost immediate influence on government in China. At the end of the warring States period, the Qin dynasty seized control of China. Qin rulers read and admired Han-fei-tzu's writings. They wanted to build a strong central government and a well-organized society. To achieve these goals, they adopted strict Legalist ideas. People were forbidden to criticize the government. Anyone caught doing so was severely punished. Many people were put to death for disloyalty and other crimes.