

The Philosophers of the Warring States From: The Khan Academy

Overview

- Three competing belief systems (Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism) came to prominence during the Warring States period of Chinese history.
- Confucianism is an ethic of moral uprightness, social order, and filial responsibility.
- Daoism was a philosophy of universal harmony that urged its practitioners not to get too involved in worldly affairs.
- Legalism is a theory of autocratic, centralized rule and harsh penalties.
- These three philosophies influenced early Chinese empires; some even became official state ideologies.

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.

Three Chinese Philosophies: Perspectives from Han Fei, Lao Zi, and Confucius

Analects (Lun Yu) – Sayings attributed to Confucius, c. 471 BCE

1:2 Master You [You Ruo] said, “Among those who are filial toward their parents and fraternal toward their brothers, those who are inclined to offend against their superiors are few indeed. Among those who are disinclined to offend against their superiors, there have never been any who are yet inclined to create disorder. The noble person concerns himself with the root; when the root is established, the Way is born. Being filial and fraternal — is this not the root of humaneness?”

2:3 The Master said, “Lead them by means of regulations and keep order among them through punishments, and the people will evade them and will lack any sense of shame. Lead them through moral force (de) and keep order among them through rites (li), and they will have a sense of shame and will also correct themselves.”

4:5 The Master said, “Wealth and honor are what people desire, but one should not abide in them if it cannot be done in accordance with the Way. Poverty and lowliness are what people dislike, but one should not avoid them if it cannot be done in accordance with the Way. If the noble person rejects humaneness, how can he fulfill that name? The noble person does not abandon humaneness for so much as the space of a meal. Even when hard-pressed he is bound to it, bound to it even in time of danger.”

4:16 The Master said, “The noble person is concerned with rightness; the small person is concerned with profit.”

6:28 Zigong said, “What would you say of someone who broadly benefited the people and was able to help everyone? Could he be called humane?” The Master said, “How would this be a matter of humaneness? Surely he would have to be a sage? Even Yao and Shun were concerned about such things. As for humaneness — you want to establish yourself; then help others to establish themselves. You want to develop yourself; then help others to develop themselves. Being able to recognize oneself in others, one is on the way to being humane.”

12:2 Zhonggong [Ran Yong] asked about humaneness. The Master said, “When going abroad, treat everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; when employing the people, do so as if assisting in a great sacrifice. What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others. There should be no resentment in the state, and no resentment in the family.” Zhonggong said, “Though unintelligent, Yong requests leave to put these words into practice.”

The Master said, The gentleman calls attention to the good points in others; he does not call attention to their defects. The small man does the reverse of this.

The Master said, The true gentleman is conciliatory but not accommodating, common people are accommodating but not conciliatory.

...

The Master said, The gentleman is dignified, but never haughty; common people are haughty, but never dignified.

The Master said, It is possible to be a true gentleman and lack Goodness, but there had never yet existed a Good man who was not a gentleman.

When Master said, He who holds no rank in a state does not discuss its policies, Master Zeng said, “A true gentleman, even in his thoughts, never departs from what is suitable to his rank.”

The Master said, A gentleman is ashamed to let his words outrun his deeds....

The Master said, A gentleman is distressed by his own lack of capacity; he is never distressed at the failure of others to recognize his merits.



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.

Three Chinese Philosophies: Perspectives from Han Fei, Lao Zi, and Confucius

Han Feizi – Han Fei, c. 250 BCE

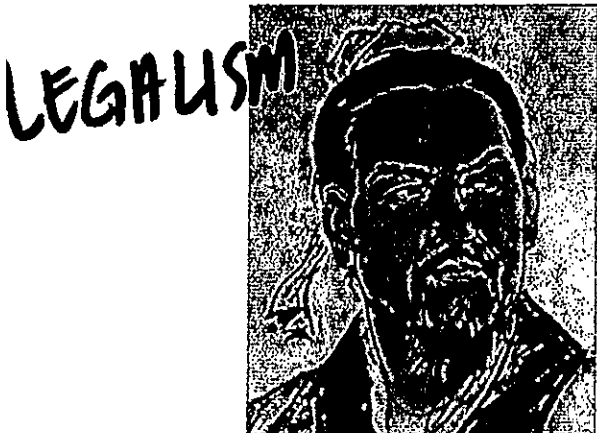
If orders are made [short], laws never deviate; if laws are [equal], there will be no [corruption] among the officials. Once the law is fixed, nobody can damage it by means of virtuous words. If men of merit are appointed to office, the people will have little to [complain about]; if men of virtue are appointed to office the people will have much to [rejoice] about. The enforcement of laws depends upon the method of judicial administration. Who administers judicial affairs with ease . . . attains supremacy... Whoever procrastinates in creating order, will see his state [torn apart]. Govern by penalties; wage war by rewards; and enlarge the bounties so as to put the principles of statecraft into practice. If so, there will be no wicked people in the state nor there wicked trade at the market.

...

If penalties are heavy and rewards are few, it means that the superior loves the people, wherefore the people will die for rewards. If rewards are many and penalties are light, it means that the superior does not love the people, wherefore the people will never die for rewards.

If heavy penalties are clear and if the people are always well disciplined and then in men are engaged in case of emergency, the superior will have all the advantage.

In inflicting penalties light offences should be punished severely; if light offences do not appear heavy offences will not come. This is said to abolish penalties by means of penalties. And the state will certainly become strong. If crimes are serious but penalties are light, light penalties breed further troubles. This is said to create penalties through penalties, and such a state will infallibly be dismembered.



Dao De Jing – Laozi, c. 400 BCE, transl. by S. Mitchell

Chapter 2

When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly.

When people see some things as good, other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other.

Difficult and easy support each other.

Long and short define each other.

High and low depend on each other.

Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the Master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything.

Things arise and she lets them come; things disappear and she lets them go.

She has but doesn't possess, acts but doesn't expect.

When her work is done, she forgets it.

That is why it lasts forever.

Chapter 3

If you overesteem great men, people become powerless.

If you overvalue possessions, people begin to steal.

The Master leads

by emptying people's minds

and filling their cores,

by weakening their ambition

and toughening their resolve.

He helps people lose everything

they know, everything they desire,

and creates confusion

in those who think that they know.

Practice not-doing,

and everything will fall into place.

