

## Confucianism and Daoism: An Overview

**Confucianism** – A philosophical and religious tradition where the key to maintaining society is through traditional social relationships (between father and son, husband and wife, ruler and subject, etc.). It states that human beings are teachable and can improve both individually and through interactions with the community.

**Daoism** (sometimes spelled Taoism) – A philosophical and religious tradition that promotes harmony and unity with nature. It encourages people to live calmly and peacefully. It teaches that intervening in life's events causes conflict and destruction, so people should limit their interference and only do what is required.

Confucianism	Daoism (Taoism)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Founded by Confucius in 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.</li><li>• Main principle is <i>ren</i>, which describes that people should behave in a loving, selfless, and moral way.</li><li>• Principles of <i>li</i> and <i>yi</i> dictate actions.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ <i>Li</i> describes the actions that are right because of the needs of society.</li><li>◦ <i>Yi</i> describes the actions that are inherently right, good, and moral.</li></ul></li><li>• <i>Hsiao</i> is the principle of filial piety, which means that children should respect their parents.</li><li>• Virtue is seen as leading by the proper moral example.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Founded by Laozi in 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.</li><li>• Main principle is the <i>Dao</i>, which means "the Way." All things in the universe are connected together through the <i>Dao</i>.</li><li>• <i>Wu Wei</i> is the method of following the <i>Dao</i>. This involves living in harmony and letting things take their natural course without interference.</li><li>• Principle of <i>Yin Yang</i> states that opposites fit together and depend on each other for harmony (i.e., darkness and light, life and death).</li><li>• Virtue is seen as being true to oneself, instead of satisfying the standards set by others.</li></ul>

## **Chinese Belief Systems Readings**

### **Legalism**

Legalism is a philosophy based on the ideas of Han Fei (pronounced HAHN-FAY), a Chinese man who lived during the Zhou dynasty from around 280 to 233 BCE. Han Fei was born a prince of the royal family of the state of Han. As a young man he received an excellent education under the most important Confucian scholars of his day. Surrounded by Chinese states battling for power under the weak Zhou empire, Han Fei questioned whether following Confucian principles could solve society's problems. He did not agree with Confucian teachings that claimed proper behavior alone could create a stable and peaceful society. In a book called *Han Feizi* (pronounced HAHN-FAY-ZUH), or "Basic Writings," Han Fei instructed rulers to strengthen their state by enforcing strict laws, including severe punishments. He hoped the rulers who followed this philosophy, known as Legalism, would one day make China united and powerful again.

#### **Excerpt from *Han Feizi***

People are submissive to power, and few of them can be influenced by doctrines of righteousness.

Hence to govern the state by law is to praise the right and blame the wrong.

Han Fei believed that most people were naturally evil and selfish. According to Han Fei, the only way to achieve a strong society was to create laws with clear punishments and rewards. For example, people caught criticizing the government could immediately be punished by being sent to live in China's far northern frontier. Legalists taught that rulers should create detailed laws to train people to accept the rulers' authority automatically. Legalists also believed that to be most effective, rulers must never demonstrate or give in to feelings of affection or charity. Above all, Han Fei said, rulers should trust no one, including their own families, because "he who trusts others will be controlled by others."

Legalist philosophy was applied by rulers during the Qin (pronounced CHIN empire), which rose after the Zhou dynasty and lasted from 221 to 206 BCE. Above all else, Qin rulers wanted to build a strong central government and a well-organized society. They sought to break up family loyalty so that people were most loyal to the government. The strictest way in which Qin rulers practiced Legalism was by forbidding people from criticizing the Qin government. Any person caught doing so was severely punished. Government critics might be burned alive, boiled to death in pots, or have their hands cut off. Qin punishments became so harsh that they actually caused some people to rebel against the government. Legalism eventually failed in China because it was too strict.



## Confucianism

Confucianism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of Kong Fuzi (called Confucius by Europeans), a man who lived in China from 551 to 479 BCE. Confucius was born into a family of low-ranking nobles. After completing his education, he worked as an accountant for the ruling Zhou (pronounced JOE) dynasty. As the Zhou empire weakened and various Chinese states began battling for power, Confucius became sad. He recalled the virtues of past rulers who had maintained a peaceful and stable society. Gradually he gathered followers and taught them what he believed was the proper way to live. After his death, Confucius' followers compiled many of his sayings into a book called the *Analects*, or "Selected Sayings," which became the most important source of his teaching.

### Excerpt from *The Analects of Confucius*, c.400 BCE

Do **not** do unto others, what you **would not** want others to do to you.

If you make a mistake and do not correct it, this is called a mistake.

Confucianism is a philosophy that defines proper conduct for people and governments. According to Confucius, people are naturally good and should concentrate on improving their behavior and doing what they know is right. He called this proper behavior *li* (pronounced LEE). Confucius believed that if everyone followed *li*, society would be ordered and peaceful. He taught that a harmonious society had to be built upon Five Key Relationships: (1) ruler and subject, (2) parent and child, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder sibling (brother or sister) and young sibling, and (5) friend and friend. The first four are hierarchical relationships in which one person is viewed as the superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person is expected to be benevolent and to set a good example of moral behavior. The fifth relationship is the only one in which the persons are considered equal. In addition to each person behaving properly, Confucius believed that for society to be strong, rulers must be models of virtue.

Few rulers during Confucius' time accepted his beliefs. However, long after his death, his teachings spread throughout China. Beginning with the Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, Confucianism became the official state belief system. Because of their emphasis on loyalty, Confucian teachings allowed the Han government to have a more stable leadership. Under Han emperors and later rulers, government officials were chosen based on their education in Confucian teachings and performance on examinations intended to reveal who were "worthy Confucian" individuals. Successful candidates served as officials all across China.

## Daoism (Taoism)

Daoism is a belief system based largely on the writings of a Chinese wise person, or sage, named Laozi (pronounced LAU-ZUH). Scholars know so little about Laozi's life that some people believe he is only a legendary figure. However, many scholars believe that Laozi was born in the late sixth century BCE, and kept records in the court of the Zhou empire. Laozi believed that striving for power and wealth was harmful because it was unnatural. He wrote down his ideas, which people later collected in a book called *Daodejing*, or the "The Way and Its Power."

### Excerpts from the *Daodejing*

A clever mind is not a heart.

There is more to knowing than just being correct.

The wise know their limitations; the foolish do not.

Daoism is a philosophy that teaches that people can gain peace and happiness by becoming one with the Dao, or the Way. The Dao is a universal force connected to nature that creates order for all things. Daoism teaches that people should see themselves as part of nature, and lead a balanced life in harmony with it. Laozi believed that for people to discover how to behave, they should notice how nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. Instead, nature accepts what comes its way, like a piece of grass that bends when the breeze blows. True harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called yin and yang. Laozi taught that it is impossible to have good without the bad, beauty without ugliness, or pleasure without pain. Because Daoists see good and bad as connected, they try to accept both.

Laozi taught rulers to make fewer laws. He called the way of ruling *wuwei* (pronounced WOO-WAY), or "action through nonaction." Rather than attempting to take control and guide the people, ruler should take very little action and only support the people in achieving what they naturally desire. Just as a farmer cannot force a plant to grow, Laozi thought a ruler cannot force the people to prosper.

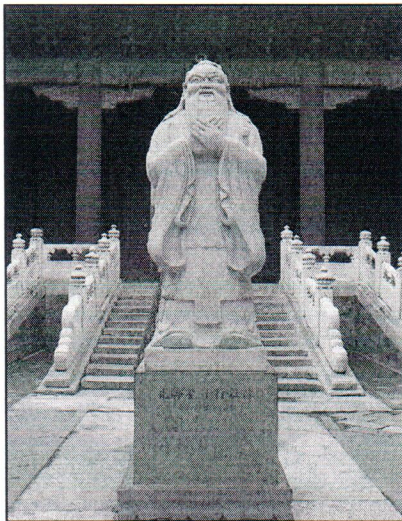
During the Han dynasty, from 206 BCE to 220 CE, Confucianism became the official state belief system. However, Han rulers also adopted some Daoist principles. For example, they made fewer laws and fought fewer wars, believing that laws and wars do not naturally strengthen society.



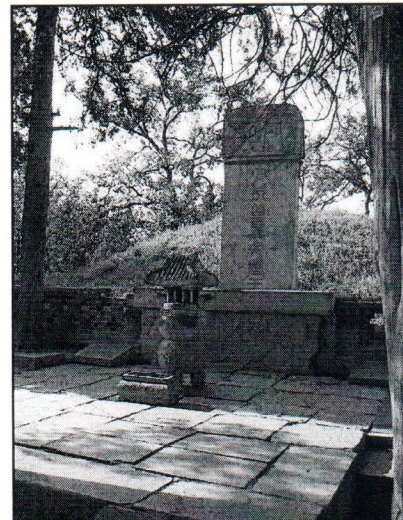
**Lesson 2*****Student Handout 2.2—Confucius (Kong Fuzi), 551-479 BCE***

Confucius was a sage, that is, a wise man. He was born in 551 BCE, during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period” because the different states were always fighting with each other. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos (disorder) and suffering among the people.

Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time, Confucius looked for ways to improve society and make it more peaceful. He believed that life would be better and safer if there was clear order, or harmony, in society. He also understood that rulers needed to govern more wisely to avoid or reduce bloodshed. Confucius believed that people should not use family connections to obtain government positions as many people did during that time. Instead, he thought that government officials should be well-educated, talented, honest, and fair. Confucius believed that government officials should live lives of virtue (be virtuous) so that the people they ruled would follow their example. Therefore, he developed a philosophy that established clear relationships between people in all aspects of their lives.



**Statue of Confucius at the  
Confucius Temple in  
Beijing China**  
Wikimedia Commons  
Photo by Miguel A. Monjas



**Tomb of Confucius in  
Qufu, China**  
Wikimedia Commons  
Photo by Ralf Müller



1. **Parents-Children.** Parents should love and care for their children. Children should respect and obey their parents. The children's respect and devotion for their parents is often called "filial piety."
2. **Ruler-Subjects.** A ruler should care for the people he governs. The people he rules (the subjects) should obey a ruler who takes care of them.
3. **Older brothers-Younger brothers.** Older brothers should care for younger brothers. Younger brothers should respect and obey older brothers.
4. **Husband-Wife.** Married people should live in harmony. A wife should obey her husband.
5. **Friend-Friend.** Friends should trust each other and treat each other well.

Do you notice a pattern? Those in power must take care of those who are weaker. Those who are weaker must respect and obey those who are in power. Those who are equal should treat each other equally. The primary and most important relationship is between parent and child. Children who understand their roles and duties to their parents will then be able to go into the world and understand their positions in society. It will be very difficult, however, for those who do not fulfill their primary duties (to their parents) to lead a successful life.

These relationships are based on traditional Chinese values, such as respect for elders (older people) and ancestor worship, which existed before the time of Confucius. This was an important reason why Chinese people were able to embrace the teachings of Confucius: they were already familiar with many of these ideas. The teachings of Confucius were rooted in things that the Chinese already believed in and practiced.

On the other hand, Confucianism also placed greater importance on learning, or scholarship. According to Confucianism, people can become government officials to help rule the land if they study hard, are just and fair, and can pass difficult exams. Under his philosophy, it is not as important which family you are born into. It is much more important how smart and just you are. Therefore, Confucianism gives everyone the opportunity to become more powerful.

The main writings of Confucius are in the *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius. In addition to his own words, the ideas of Confucianism were developed by many other people who were the disciples of Confucius. These people accepted and spread his teachings. The most famous of these was Mencius. He was born almost 100 years after Confucius died. He tried to convince rulers in China that they should accept the teachings of Confucius.

In Confucianism, memorizing the sayings of Confucius was one of the most important rituals. That way, if someone spoke the first part of a saying of Confucius, the other people in the group (Confucians) would be able to complete it. If they could not, they would not be considered to be part of that group of "well-educated" people or "leaders."



Some of the sayings of Confucius were about the five relationships, but many others were examples of the way people should behave in order to keep harmony in society. These sayings often talked about people who were superior (better than other people) or inferior (worse than other people).

Here are two examples of famous sayings of Confucius:

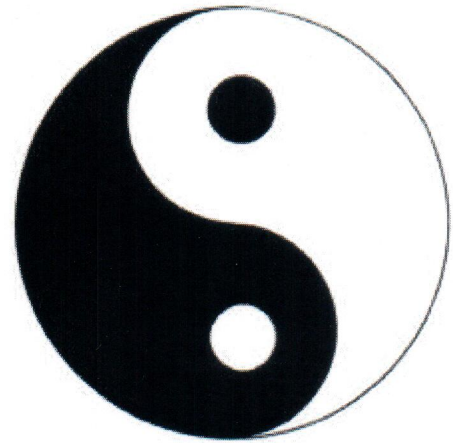
- “What is a superior person? One who acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions.”
- “Good government results when those who are near are made happy, and those who are far are attracted to it.”

## ANCIENT CHINA: TAOISM

Taoism originated in the Zhou Dynasty. The founder of the Taoism is Lao-Tzu. His philosophy was written in a book called *Tao Te Ching*. Taoism was quite popular during the Zhou Dynasty.

Lao-Tzu and Taoists believe that people should be one with nature. Taoists believe that all living things have a force that moves through them and that everything is connected. Taoists do not believe in societal rules and government.

One well-known concept from Taoism is the concept of Yin and Yang. The Yin and Yang are balancing forces of nature. The Yin and Yang oppose each other such as hot and cold and dark and light. These two opposing forces are always equal and balanced.



### **Sayings from Lao-Tzu**

- The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
- Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know.
- When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.
- Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.



## ANCIENT CHINA: CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is a philosophy/religion that emerged from the philosophical beliefs of Confucius. Confucius came up with ways that people should live. His follower wrote down his teachings.

At the center of Confucianism is that people should treat each other with respect, politeness, and fairness. Honor and morality are the two main qualities in Confucianism. Confucianism highly values the family and the honor of relatives. Also, unlike Taoists, Confucianists believe in a strong organized government.



### Sayings from Confucius

- It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop.
- Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in getting up every time we do.
- When anger rises, think of the consequences.
- Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it.



## ANCIENT CHINA: BUDDHISM

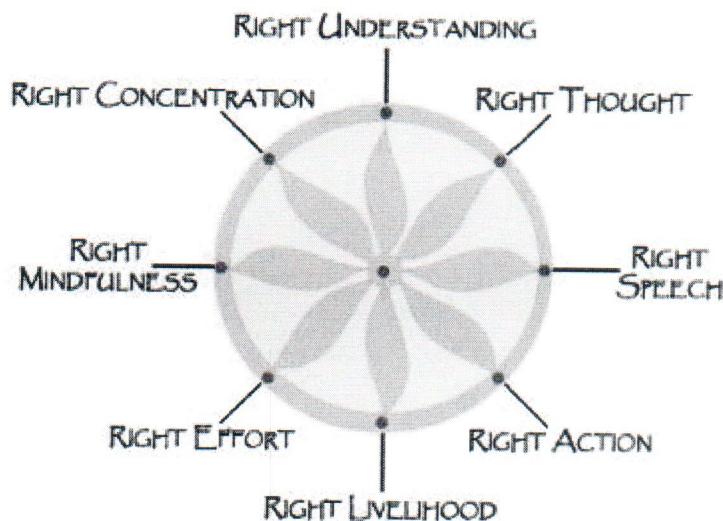
Buddhism was another philosophy in Ancient China and was based on the teachings of Buddha. In Buddhism Buddha, born Siddhartha Gautama, is the enlightened one. Buddhism spread into China during the Han dynasty under the rule of Emperor Ming. Emperor Ming learned of Buddha's teachings through a dream. After his dream, he sent a representative to India to learn more about Buddhist teachings. The scriptures were sent to China on the back of white horses.

Buddhism emphasizes an ever-changing world. In Buddhism, there are many worldly troubles and through living a life of moderation, humans are able to overcome these troubles.

Buddha's teachings are summarized in the 4 noble truths.

1. Suffering is common
2. Cause of Suffering is due to ignorance and greed
3. End of Suffering is by cutting off the greed and ignorance
4. Path to end suffering is by following the eightfold path

The eightfold path consists of:



### Sayings from Buddha

- All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything.
- What we think, we become.
- The only real failure in life is not to be true to the best one knows.



## Lesson 2

### *Student Handout 2.3—Laozi (Lao Tzu), Fourth Century BCE (?)*

We do not know if Laozi was a real person or not. The name in Chinese means “Old Philosopher” or “Old Master.” This name may actually have represented several different writers who contributed to the *Daodejing*, or *The Way and Integrity Classic*, which was the earliest set of teachings associated with Daoism. This person or persons lived during a period when China was divided into many small states, each with its own lord. This time is known as the “Warring States Period,” because the different states were always fighting, or warring, with each other and their lords. There were many attempts to overthrow the lords because they were often cruel to the people they ruled. It was a period of great chaos and suffering among the people.

Like other people during this difficult and dangerous time, Laozi looked for ways to improve society and help comfort people. According to legend, he wanted to leave the problems in China in order to live out the end of his life in peace and quiet in Central Asia (west of China). A border guard asked him to write down his teachings before leaving China, and so Laozi composed the *Daodejing*, which lays out the main ideas of what later became known as Daoism.

According to Daoism, people have problems because they do not understand the natural world they live in and how it behaves. Therefore, the basic goal of Daoism is for people to understand the Dao (the way) of nature and behave according to it. Those who follow the Dao achieve mental clarity, power, and “inner peace.”

It is difficult to describe the Dao in words. In fact, when we put things from nature into words, we remove ourselves from the experience of reality, according to Daoism. Therefore, Daoists (people who practice Daoism) say that instead of using words, the best way to experience nature is by observing it and being in tune with it. For example, when we watch waves at the beach, we do not judge waves and say, “This one is right and beautiful” or “That one is wrong and ugly.” Nature is just what it is; it does not make mistakes. There is no “good” or “bad” in nature. These are ideas that people made up to describe how things affect them.

Therefore, it is easier to explain Daoism with the yin yang symbol. Many people (especially in Western countries) tend to separate ideas in nature into opposites like good and evil, black and white, or life and death. Daoists see nature as being whole (the complete outside circle in the yin yang symbol), and everything inside of it as being connected and as part of the whole. The “yin” is represented by the black in this symbol. It also represents water, the soft, and feminine qualities. The “yang” is represented by the white in the symbol. It also represents fire, the sun, and heaven, as well as the dynamic, hard, and masculine qualities. Nature is always moving and flowing, and the yin and yang work together. For example, black and white are only seen in relation to the other, part of each other, and flowing into each other.







**The yin yang symbol is seen everywhere in a Daoist monastery near Chongqing, China, even in the soup!**

Photo by J. Rothblatt



**Statues of gods in a Daoist monastery near Chongqing, China**

Photo by J. Rothblatt

The Daoist belief system was accepted in China in part because it reflected earlier philosophies and legends. For example, according to a very famous legend in China, one of the mythical founders of China faced a problem about how to deal with a huge dam that was leaking. Rather than trying to block it, he formed channels to “naturally” drain the water away, thus creating China’s landscape.

Aside from Laozi’s writings in the *Daodejing*, the philosophy of Daoism is based on the ideas of other people who accepted and spread the teachings of Daoism. The most famous of these was Zhuangzi (or Master Zhuang), who was born perhaps 100 years after Laozi died and who wrote *Zhuangzi*.

In Daoism, meditation and tuning into nature are the most important rituals. Daoists also memorize the main writings of Daoism, especially the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. That way, if someone begins speaking the first part of a saying from one of these books, the other people in the group (Daoists) are able to complete it. If they cannot, they are not considered to be part of that group of Daoists.

Examples of two famous Daoist sayings:

- “Who can make the muddy water clear? Let it be still and it will gradually become clear.”
- “That which goes against the Dao will come to an early end.”



# Three Chinese Philosophies

## 21.1 Introduction

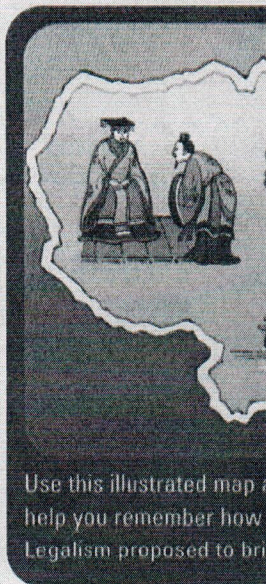
In the last chapter, you read about one of China's earliest dynasties the Shang dynasty. In this chapter, you will learn about China's next line of rulers, the **Zhou dynasty**. Then you'll explore three Chinese **philosophies** that arose during the time of the Zhou.

The Zhou dynasty lasted from about 1045 to 256 B.C.E. During its later years, different leaders fought for control in China. The country was thrown into disorder. 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**, **Daoism** (also spelled Taoism), and **Legalism**.

The following scene illustrates the differences between these schools of thought. Imagine that it is 360 B.C.E. The ruler of a small kingdom has sent three advisors to learn about the three philosophies. Upon their return, he asks them, "What shall I do to rule well?"

The first advisor has learned about Confucianism. He tells the king, "Lead by example." The second advisor has studied Daoism. 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."

In this chapter, you will learn why the advisors gave such different answers. You'll explore Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism and how each philosophy influenced China.



## 21.2 The Zhou Dynasty

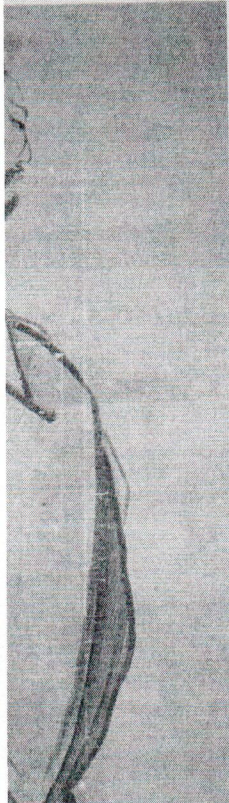
Around 1045 B.C.E., the Zhou, a group of people in northwestern China moved into the central plains. They rebelled and established a new dynasty. For several centuries, the Zhou ruled over a group of states in China. But in the later years of the dynasty, wars between states plunged China into disorder.

### The Early Years: Stability and Feudalism

After overthrowing the Shang, the Zhou established their rule over China. To justify their conquest, they claimed they had been given the **Mandate of Heaven**, a divine right to rule China.

According to this belief, Heaven was a power that controlled human destiny. The king was the son of Heaven. As long as the king governed his people well, Heaven gave him the right to rule. If the king did not govern well, Heaven would send signs of its displeasure, such as earthquakes and floods. When the king lost the support of Heaven, others had the right to overthrow him.

The Zhou increased the stability of their rule through a system of relationships called **feudalism**. Under feudalism, the king owned all the land. But he gave large pieces of the land to loyal supporters, called **lords**. In exchange, lords sent soldiers to fight if the king was attacked. The lords were rulers of their own lands, or states. They had absolute power over the peasant farmers who worked the land. Peasants had the lord's protection, but in return they gave a portion of their crops to the lord.



The Zhou Empire, About 800 B.C.E.



### The Later Years: Conflict and Creative Thought

Feudalism worked for a time to keep China stable. But by the 700s B.C.E., the system was starting to break down. The lords of individual states became more powerful and ambitious. Eventually, the power of some lords rivaled that of the king.

Between about 770 and 453 B.C.E., a number of small states often quarreled with one another. They eventually grouped into six or seven larger states that warred for power. These wars brought some 250 years of disorder to China. This time is often called the Warring States period.

So much instability led the Chinese to ask important questions about human nature and the best way for rulers to govern. Ambitious rulers hired scholars to advise them on how to create order and increase their power.

So many ideas were offered that the Chinese later called them the "Hundred Schools of Thought." The three most influential schools of thought that emerged were Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. Each of these philosophies had a major influence on Chinese culture. Let's take a closer look at their origins, teachings, and influence, beginning with Confucianism.



## 21.3 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. But 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: ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son, older sibling and younger sibling, and friend and friend. All people must respect and obey those above them. In particular, they 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 spread his teachings. After his death, some of them collected his sayings in a book called *The Analects*. Later scholars further developed Confucianism.

Confucianism had a very practical effect on government under a later dynasty, the Han dynasty. People who do the work of government are called **civil servants**. In China, civil servants were traditionally the sons of nobles. They might or might not have the ability and wisdom to do their jobs well. 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 for 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. Here are two examples from the *Analects*:

*Confucius said to his follower:*

*The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices.*

*Confucius said to his student:*

*Shall I teach you what knowledge is?*

*When you know a thing, say that you know it;*

*when you do not know a thing,*

*admit that you do not know it.*

*That is knowledge.*



## 21.4 Daoism

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

### The Founder of Daoism

According to tradition, the great sage, or wise man, of Daoism was Laozi (also spelled Lao-tzu). He was said to be the author of the *Dao De Jing* (The Classic of the Way and Its Power).

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

Old stories of Laozi's life tell how he came to write the *Dao De Jing*. These stories say that Laozi worked as an advisor to the

Zhou court for many years. When 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 to China. He asked Laozi to record his thoughts before leaving. So Laozi sat down and wrote a small manuscript of only 5,000 characters, the *Dao De Jing*.

The *Dao De 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 molested 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 Daoism

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

To the Daoists, 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 "shaded," 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 Daoists 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 Daoists believed that everyone must discover the Dao for themselves. Too many laws and social rules only got in the way of living naturally and following the Dao. Therefore, the best rulers were those who ruled the least. The *Dao De 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 Daoism

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



## 21.5 Legalism

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

### The Founder of Legalism

Legalism was based on the teachings of Hanfeizi (also spelled Han-fei-tzu). Hanfeizi lived from 280 to 233 B.C.E. He was a prince of the royal family of the state of Han. Hanfeizi lived to see the end of the Warring States period and of the Zhou dynasty.

Like Confucius, Hanfeizi was very concerned with creating peace and order in society. But he did not think the Confucian 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 Hanfeizi's time, rulers were frequently overthrown. To solve this problem, Hanfeizi said that rulers must have absolute power backed up by military might. Rulers should trust no one, not even their own families. Hanfeizi 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 Hanfeizi'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. You'll learn more about Legalism under the Qin in the next chapter.