

Chinese Philosophies

Confucianism

Confucius lived in China during the Zhou Dynasty, when there was mass disorder and degrading moral standards. Confucius was born into a poor family but was well educated. He held many small government posts and later became a private teacher. Through his studies and his life he was appalled by what appeared to be the fracturing of Chinese society. He believed that the only cure was to stress a sense of social order and mutual respect, a philosophy that later became known as Confucianism.

Confucius began to preach his ideas and gained many followers. His words were put into the most sacred Confucian text, *The Analects*. *The Analects* taught general principles about life and living but did not give specifics. His teaching involved a lot of analysis and transmitted ideas about traditional institutions and ideas with his own moral interpretations.

The teachings and beliefs of Confucianism are based on the idea of a natural order. Confucianism teaches that there is a natural social order to society which can best be explained through the Five Relationships: ruler to the ruled, father to son, and older brother to younger brother, husband to wife and older friend to younger friend. For each relationship, there is a *li*, or ideal way of behaving. In these relationships, the second role is considered subordinate to the first. This is because the first role is the model that the second role should follow. It was taught that if everyone knew his or her place in society, then order would prevail. There are several concepts, which needed to be practiced in order to achieve an ordered society. Filial Piety is where one should respect their elders.

People should also practice *ren* (all-encompassing virtue of good conduct) with each other. This would bring society together in peace. Men should truly love others, and a man who is truly considerate can perform good duties for society.

Taoism or Daoism

The Chinese philosophy of Taoism (or Daoism) was developed in the latter part of the Zhou Dynasty, during a period of turmoil in which it was not clear that Chinese civilization would survive. It represents a naturalistic ideal of how one should live their life. The founder was Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. He was searching for a way that would avoid the constant feudal warfare and other conflicts that disrupted society during his lifetime.

The most significant writing for Taoism or Daoism is called *The Way of Virtue*. The Chinese term Tao can be translated into English, meaning "the way." Tao is the first-cause of the universe. It is a force that flows through all life. It is a philosophy, which teaches that nature has a "way" in which it moves, and that people should passively accept the "way" of nature, rather than resists it. This means that people should openly accept the natural way. An emphasis is placed on the link between people and nature. Taoism teaches that this link lessened the need for rules and order, and leads one to a better understanding of the world. Each believer's goal is to harmonize themselves with the Tao.

Taoists follow the art of "wu wei," which is to let nature take its course. For example, one should allow a river to flow towards the sea unimpeded; do not erect a dam which would interfere with its natural flow. The Yin and Yang symbol has also been used to illustrate the natural harmony that exists in the world. Everything must have an opposing force that allows the harmonious universe to exist.

Legalism

Another Chinese philosophy with many founders is Legalism. However, Han Feizi is given most credit for the legalist philosophy. This doctrine sought the interest of the ruling class rather than the interest of the common people. Legalism advocated a strong centralized government which should exercise absolute power by the threat of harsh punishments.

The legalist doctrine had a few beliefs about how to rule and life in general. Humans are inherently evil, and education can not make them better. Only punishment and reward will make them better. Another belief is that a ruler should have three things in order to govern properly: *shih*, which is

power and position, *shu*, which is methods and ruling techniques, and *fa*, which are just and fair laws. These three things will allow a ruler to rule properly.

The *Han Feizi* is considered the main text of Legalism. It is a comprehensive guide to ruling directed at kings. It consists of 55 chapters, each with its own theme. Some chapters tell the ruler what pitfalls to avoid while running a state and what punishments to instill on disloyal subjects.

...rewards should be rich and certain so that the people will be attracted by them; punishments should be severe and definite so that the people will fear them; and laws should be uniform and steadfast so that the people will be familiar with them. Consequently, the sovereign should show no wavering in bestowing rewards and grant no pardon in administering punishments, and he should add honor to rewards and disgrace to punishments--when this is done, then both the worthy and the unworthy will want to exert themselves...

Han Feizi

Fill out the chart below based on the readings on Chinese philosophies.

	Confucianism	Taoism	Legalism
Founder			
Sacred Texts			
Beliefs			

1. Which one of these philosophies do you think would be best to rule and run a country? Explain.