

## ***China: Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism***

As we have seen above, the religion of the Shang people in early China was shamanistic, dependent on the ability of shamans to communicate with the world of gods. Shang China can also be characterized as a theocracy, since the ancestors of the Shang kings were believed to be deities who served the principal god, Di. When the Shang dynastic state was replaced by the Zhou people, who invaded their territory and conquered them in the mid-eleventh century B.C.E., there was a corresponding transformation of concepts that sanctioned kingship.

### **Religion and Rulership**

The Shang anthropomorphic supreme deity, Di, was gradually replaced by a far more abstract concept of Heaven, which represented an idea of order imposed on the human world through the person of the ruler, the “Son of Heaven.” In Zhou texts such as *the Book of History*, written down in the sixth century B.C.E., Heaven at times displayed an anthropomorphic quality, but this gradually disappeared and Heaven came to signify a more abstract moral order that the ruler must achieve and maintain.

The Zhou king exercised power by appointing his kin to rule over territories within the Zhou realm. The king’s relatives were conferred with titles and ranks that gave them status as an aristocracy with the right to rule in the name of the Zhou king. The relationship between this titled nobility and the Zhou king was symbolized and confirmed by the transfer of a mound of earth from the central altar of the Zhou king to altars in each of the territories. The rulers of these territories owed the king allegiance, as well as military support

if called upon to provide it. This decentralized form of government worked well for about two centuries.

By the eighth century, the authority of the Zhou king began to erode as the blood ties that had been the basis of bonds between the king and the territorial lords in his domain grew thinner with each generation. As the bonds that held Zhou society together were strained and weakened by the passing of time, military struggles broke out among the lords of the territories that made up the Zhou state. By the sixth century B.C.E., there was warfare among independent states that had formerly been part of the Zhou realm.

## Confucius

During this chaotic time, a man we know by his Latinized name, Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), was born in the small state of Lu in the modern province of Shandong in northeastern China. Confucius sought a post as adviser to rulers of states; though he was unsuccessful in this, the power of his ideas and personality eventually gained him a following of devoted disciples who later recorded his teachings in a work called the *Analects*.

Like many of his contemporaries, Confucius was greatly troubled by the disorder of his time and sought answers to the question of how to restore order to society. Confucius looked to the early days of the Zhou as a golden age; he idealized the institutions of the sage-kings of antiquity as models for his own society because he saw them as the source of political and social order in that earlier time. Confucius believed that the founders of the Zhou dynasty, who had displaced the Shang in the late eleventh century, had been ideal rulers or sage-kings and provided models to be emulated by rulers of his own time.

Confucius challenged the social order of his time by redefining the basis of elite status. He transformed the meaning of the term *junzi* (“son of a prince or ruler”) to “gentleman,” a person of exemplary conduct who can serve as a model to others. Confucius also made learning, rather than administrative or military skill, the basis of elite status and the defining characteristic of the elite; thus the scholar should be at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. The aristocratic code of ceremonial behavior, *li* (“ritual”), became in Confucius’s thinking the social forms that structured human relationships, including everything from proper etiquette to the performance of ancestral sacrifices.

## Mencius

Though dramatic social and political changes associated with the breakdown of the Zhou system of rule were already well under way during Confucius’s lifetime, warfare intensified in the generation after his death, ushering in a period known as the “Warring States” (ca. 480–250 B.C.E.). Approximately a century after Confucius’s death, the philosopher Mencius (ca. 372–289 B.C.E.)

was born into a world of even more brutality and chaos. Unlike Confucius, however, Mencius succeeded in gaining the ear of rulers, who sought his advice on how to rule their states. The collection of his writings, known as the *Mencius*, is composed of short accounts of his discussions with rulers, whom he frequently scolded for their selfish and single-minded pursuit of power and wealth.

In his conversation with King Hui of the state of Liang, for example, Mencius was asked by the king how he could benefit his state. Mencius replied, "Why must Your Majesty use the word 'benefit'? All I am concerned with are the benevolent and the right." Like his predecessor, Mencius held a highly moralistic view of politics; the concept of *yi* ("right") was central to Mencius's political ideology and meant doing what was morally right in given circumstances. For him, the ideal ruler was one who looked after the welfare of his people and ruled only so long as he kept the covenant with them to act in the best interests of society, not in the interest of increasing his own power.

### The Mandate of Heaven

Mencius expounded the theory of the Mandate of Heaven, the major contribution to political theory of the Confucian school. According to this theory, Heaven confers the right to rule on the person who is morally qualified; the sanction for rule thus depends on moral character, not on military strength or on the power of gods. The concept of the Mandate of Heaven provided the principal sanction for rule in China for more than two millennia and was used in later times, for example, to explain the Zhou conquest of the Shang, which, according to this theory, had lost its moral right to rule.

In his discussion of the Mandate of Heaven, Mencius added the corollary that the people could express the will of Heaven by rising up against an unjust ruler, unseating him, and thereby transferring the mandate to a new ruler. This doctrine, known as the "righteous uprising of the people," was later used to justify popular rebellions in imperial China when their success brought a new ruling family to the throne.

### Xunzi

Xunzi (312–235 B.C.), the third major figure in the Confucian school, differed from Mencius in a number of important ways. For example, whereas Mencius stated that human nature was originally good, Xunzi believed that human nature was bad and must be guided by education to ensure social order. All Confucian thinkers, including Xunzi, believed in the necessity of a social hierarchy determined by one's demonstrated ability or merit, not birth.

For Xunzi a hierarchical social order was essential to the inequitable allocation of limited resources among a growing population with increasing

demands and limitless desires. The more pragmatic and practical aspects of Xunzi's views, as well as his relatively pessimistic view of human nature, were much influenced by the intensification of warfare and the increasing concentration of power in the hands of a few states during his lifetime.

## Legalism

An alternative to Confucian ideas that rose in the ferment of the Warring States period, Legalism (stressing law) presented a profoundly practical and utilitarian set of ideas designed to ensure the unchallenged power of the state and the ruler. Like Confucian thinkers, those associated with Legalism were also searching for solutions to disorder of the times, but their answers were profoundly different.

One of the early Legalist thinkers was Shang Yang (fl. ca. 356–338 B.C.E.), whose views were articulated in the *Book of Lord Shang*, a manual on how to administer a state, and who served as adviser to the ruler of the Qin state in northwestern China. Shang Yang was concerned with how to maintain the ruler's power and authority in a setting of competing states. According to the *Book of Lord Shang*, the primary functions of the state are agriculture and war, emphasizing the necessity of both an economic base and the maintenance and extension of the power of the state through military means.

The Confucian thinker Xunzi was the teacher of Han Feizi (d. 233 B.C.E.), the principal philosopher of the Legalist school. In accord with his teacher's view that human nature was bad, Han Feizi argued that it was necessary to control people by the use of "strict laws and harsh punishments" and thus to manipulate individual self-interest to serve state power.

## Daoism

In contrast to Confucian concerns with human nature and social order, and Legalist concerns with the state and political order, Daoist thinkers of the Warring States period argued that people should aspire to live in harmony with nature and take nature as the model for human behavior. The term *dao* ("path") was also used by Confucian thinkers to refer to the "path of humanity," meaning ethical social behavior. In Daoism, the path is one of nature, in distinction to human society and culture.

The two classic texts of early Daoism are the *Daodejing* ("The Classic of the Way and Its Power"), compiled in the third century, and the *Zhuangzi* ("Master Zhuang"), the writings of the philosopher Zhuang Zhou (369–286 B.C.E.). Both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* emphasize the relativity of intellectual categories, such as big and small or beautiful and ugly, and the concept of transformation as a fundamental cosmic principle. Human life and death are placed into the context of the creative transformations of nature, where death is part of a natural process that begins with birth and at death

returns to a new beginning. As Zhuangzi put it, “How do I know that enjoying life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death we are not like people who got lost in early childhood and do not know the way home?”

### Mysticism and Language

Both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi also emphasize mystical approaches to knowledge of the cosmos and the human condition. Mysticism is a way of knowing ultimate truth through direct apprehension rather than through rational intellectual processes. The opening lines of the Daodejing, “The Way that can be spoken is not the eternal Way,” suggest the critique of language that runs throughout much of the work. Language, it says, is a trap that inhibits understanding rather than enabling it. Paradoxes are used in the Daodejing to jolt the reader out of normal intellectual patterns into a new way of apprehending the cosmos.

Although attributed to the pseudohistorical Laozi (literally, “old master”), the Daodejing seems to have been compiled by different people at different times because of inconsistencies in both the text itself and the ideas it contains. A poetic work concerned with the cosmic rather than with the secular and mundane, the Daodejing does not ignore politics. Some even consider it primarily a political text. One of the central concepts articulated in this work is that of wuwei (“nonaction”), used to describe the nature of the ideal ruler: “In doing nothing, everything is done.” The meaning here is that the ideal ruler does not do anything that is contrary to cosmic patterns of harmony.

### The Era of the “Hundred Schools of Thought”

The ideas that are labeled “Confucian,” “Legalist,” and “Daoist” took root in a common cultural background known as the era of the “Hundred Schools of Thought” in the sixth through third centuries B.C.E. This was a period of great intellectual ferment, as old social and political structures were crumbling. As people began to question the received tradition, new concepts were generated in a flood of “schools of thought” related to power struggles among the states that controlled parts of what would later be known as China.

Although we know relatively little about the popular beliefs of the time, from later evidence it is possible to speculate that there were probably numerous localized cults to deities of nature, as well as deified figures from both the human and animal worlds, including mythological people and creatures. One glimpse of this world comes from a passage in the writings of the philosopher Xunzi: “Why does it rain after a prayer for rain? I say, for no reason. It is the same as raining when you had not prayed.” Though Xunzi rejected belief in rain deities, this passage suggests that it must have been a common practice for people to pray to such deities of nature.