





In this Chinese scroll painting, scholars study the Daoist symbol for *yin* and *yang*.

# 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.



Use this illustrated map as a graphic organizer to help you remember how Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism proposed to bring peace to China.



## Mandate of Heaven

a power or law believed to be granted by a god

**feudalism** a system of government based on landowners and tenants

## 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.



King Wu was the first ruler of the Zhou dynasty. He was considered a just and able leader.



## 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.

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





## 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."

Confucius is the most famous philosopher in Chinese history. Late in life, he said that he set his heart on learning at the age of 15.







## 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.*

Under the Han dynasty, candidates for government positions had to pass a lengthy exam. Here candidates wait for the posting of their exam results.

**civil servant** a person who works for a government



## 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

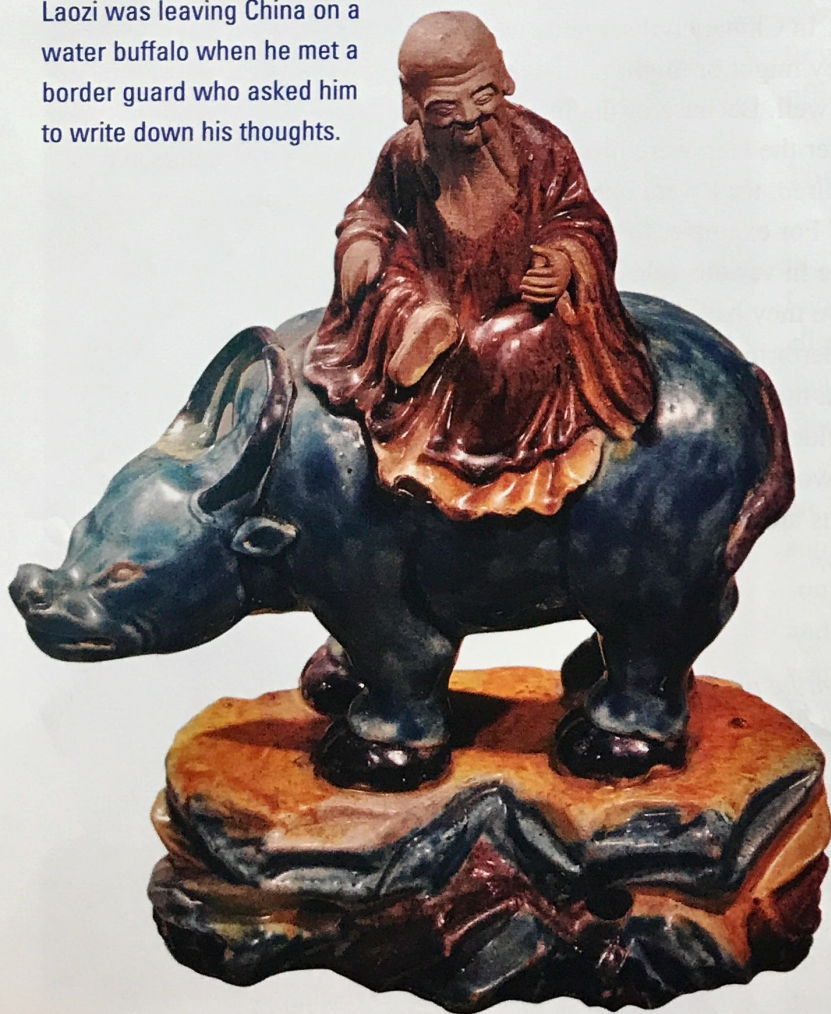
Zhou court for many years. When he was 90 years old, he tired of government work and decided to leave China. When he came to the Chinese border, a guard recognized him. The guard was upset that the great teacher's wisdom would be lost to China. He asked Laozi to record his thoughts before leaving. So 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.*

According to Chinese tradition, Laozi was leaving China on a water buffalo when he met a border guard who asked him to write down his thoughts.







## 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.

Religious Daoists believed in immortality, or eternal life. This painted scroll shows a Daoist scholar sleeping in his thatched cottage. The scholar dreams that he has gained immortality. On the left side of the painting he is shown happily floating away over a mountain.

**yin** one half of the Daoist concept of opposing forces of nature; the opposite of yang  
**yang** one half of the Daoist concept of opposing forces of nature; the opposite of yin





This illustration of the afterlife shows the type of punishment recommended by Legalists for those who disobey the laws.

## 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.

### 21.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about three Chinese philosophies, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. All three schools of thought developed in the later years of the Zhou dynasty.

For a time, feudalism helped to stabilize China under the Zhou. But during the dynasty's later years, China collapsed into disorder. Political instability led many scholars to debate the proper way to rule.

Confucius taught that peace and order depended upon proper behavior. Those in authority must lead by example. Those below them must obey. Daoists believed that people should live simply and in harmony with nature. They said the best rulers were those who ruled the least. Finally, Legalists like Hanfeizi believed that people were driven by their own self-interest. They taught that rulers could create order only through strict laws and harsh punishments.

In the next chapter, you will meet China's first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi. You'll discover how he used Legalist ideas to unite China's warring states.



This silk scroll shows women instructing other women in the teachings of Confucianism.