

D. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Confucians

Confucius

The impact of the thought of Confucius (Kong Fu Zi, Master Kong, 551–479 B.C.E.) and his followers on China was and is immense. From the second century B.C.E. to the twentieth century C.E., with occasional breaks and various degrees of emphasis, Confucian thought was the official ideology of the dynasties which ruled China. Consequently, all those who aspired to government office (which brought power, prestige, and profit to the officials and their families of officeholders as well as to the official himself), studied these texts to the point of memorizing each word as well as what important scholars had written about the texts. Confucius insisted that he was not an innovator and that he only passed down the teachings of the sage kings of the previous centuries. Many of Confucius's ideas were drawn from Chinese custom. These ideas include filial piety (respect and care for one's elders, including dead ancestors), emphasis on dealing with people according to their status, and respect for education (few Chinese apart from the social elite were literate). Confucius focused on hierarchical relationships between people. He described the ideal family as one where sons obeyed fathers, wives obeyed husbands, younger sons were benevolent toward sons, wives and younger sons. A man's primary loyalty was to his father. A woman was to be loyal first to her father, then to her husband, and finally, to her sons.

Confucius's ideal state was modelled on his conception of the ideal family. The ruler was to be a shining example of fatherly benevolence and the subjects were to behave as filial children.

[NOTE: Students often find it interesting to compare the teachings of Confucius, the Buddha (563–483 B.C.E.), and Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.). The three philosophical giants lived during more or less the same era.]

Mencius

Today Mencius (Meng Zi or Master Meng, 372–289 B.C.E.) is the best known of Confucius's followers. Mencius stressed benevolence and filial piety (xiao) and insisted that human nature was basically good. He sought to uphold these ideas in opposition to Daoist, Mohist, and Legalist thought which had more pessimistic views of human nature. Like Confucius, Mencius did not claim to be creating a philosophy, but he certainly expanded on Confucius's own teachings. Among the ideas he is best known for is the idea that people have a right, or even a duty, to rebel against tyrannical rulers. As might be expected, scholars who served rulers did not emphasize this idea. One ruler, Ming T'ai-zu (Ming Taizu, ruled 1368–1398 C.E.), ordered that this idea be censored out of all Mencius's writings.

While Mencius felt rulers had the responsibility to rule justly, he did not feel everyone had an equal capacity for such responsibility. He was very much an elitist who argued that superior men (defined in terms of education and moral cultivation, in other words, people such as himself) should govern and the masses of inferior people should be obedient and diligent.

Xun Zi

Unlike Mencius, Xun Zi (Hsun Tzu or Master Xun, 298–235 B.C.E.) believed that human nature was basically evil. Xun Zi and his students put together a thorough and systematic outline of his ideas, the Xun Zi. Xun Zi felt that while humans might start out greedy and otherwise bad, they could be made good by behaving according to certain standards and through devoted study. He stressed the importance of rituals and education. Like Confucius and Mencius, Xun Zi believed that the sage kings of antiquity provided models of perfection that contemporary people should seek to follow.

Mohism

Mo Zi

Mo Zi (Mo Tzu or Master Mo, 470–391 B.C.E.) lived during the century between Confucius and Mencius. He studied with and then broke with followers of Confucius. Unlike Confucius and Mencius, Mo Zi was born into a poor commoner family. He and his followers were much more active than the Confucians in organizing communities to implement their ideas. They emphasized discipline and authority as the answer to the chaos of the era.

Mo Zi's central belief was that partiality and competition led to scheming and strife within states and war between states. He advocated a doctrine of universal love and cooperation to remedy this wrong. Some scholars believe this emphasis on "brotherly working together" stemmed from the Mohists' experience in small military units. Unlike the Confucians, who felt a son's primary loyalty must be to his own father, the Mohists felt this partiality made one willing to hurt others to benefit one's own family. They wanted sons and daughters to treat all their elders as they would their own fathers and mothers. If a ruler cared for the people of other states as he did his own, then he would not wage war.

Mohists emphasized the practical and detested waste. They abhorred war as the most wasteful of enterprises and struggled against large aggressive states by becoming specialists in military defense. They aided smaller states in developing military defenses. Because of this emphasis on the useful, they found elaborate ritual and music wasteful and instead studied mathematics and engineering.

The Daoists

Lao Zi

Little is really known about Lao Zi (the Old Master). Tradition has it that he was born in 604 B.C.E. and lived for nearly two centuries. Supposedly, when he was 160 years old, he grew weary of squabbles within what is now China and headed West. When he reached the last Chinese outpost, it is said, the commander of the post asked him to write down what he knew of the Dao (the Tao or the Way). The Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching or the classic of the Way and of Virtue) is also known as the Lao Zi. Many scholars doubt that there ever was a single man called Lao Zi. Even if there was, however, that sixth century B.C.E. individual could not have written the Dao De Jing, since it contains ideas and attacks ideas which did not appear until about the third century B.C.E.

The Dao De Jing stresses that ambition and greed are the sources of human grief. It advocates rule by an enlightened and ruthless sage and promotes simplicity in life. For those who wrote the Dao De Jing, scholarly discussion is part of the problem of the age, not a potential solution.

Zhuang Zi

The book *Zhuang Zi*, like that of other philosophers, is probably only partly the work of the single individual it is named after. And almost nothing is known of that individual, Zhuang Zi (Chuang Tze or Master Zhuang, 369-286 B.C.E.). He and Mencius lived at the same time, but lived different lives and espoused different philosophies. While Mencius lived the good life, Zhuang Zi spent most of his life as a recluse. While Mencius insisted that Heaven had mandated and the sage kings of antiquity had practiced standards of appropriate behavior, Zhuang Zi advocated complete individualism. Very much an opponent of Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism, Zhuang Zi felt that all government laws and regulations and social ideas of morality were oppressive. The Dao (the Tao or the Way) was always correct, but human creations could never be absolutely or universally true. He felt human creations were all related to specific circumstances and therefore subject to change. What was seen as good by one person, therefore could be seen as evil by another.

Unlike the Dao De Jing which calls for the elimination of competing philosophies, Zhuang Zi called for complete tolerance of individual differences. Both, however, insisted that there is a Dao, a supreme Way which cannot be described, but which should be followed.

The Legalists

Shang Yang

Shang Yang (d. 338 B.C.E.) served as chief minister to the ruler of the western state of Qin (Ch'in). Shang Yang felt that the disorder in China stemmed from weak rulers who failed to lay out and enforce clear laws. Laws should be used to force people to concentrate on farming, which would enable the state to become rich and militarily strong. The laws should be clear and people should be made aware of the laws. Enforcement of laws should be consistent and offenders should be punished harshly.

During his time in office, order was established within Qin and the state became militarily powerful. Shang Yang's determination to enforce the law consistently, however, led to his downfall. He punished a prince who had broken the law. This prince later became king of Qin and had Shang Yang brutally executed. (He was pulled apart by four sets of horses charging in four directions.) The new king maintained the Legalist policies, however, and the Qin state eventually defeated all of its rivals and unified China.

Han Fei Zi

Han Fei Zi (Han Fei Tzu or Master Han Fei, 280-233 B.C.E.) was as important a Legalist thinker as Shang Yang. Han Fei Zi was a member of the ruling family of the Han state. He systematically outlined the principles upon which rulers should govern. Han Fei Zi believed that times change and new situations require new policies. He did not think the methods of China's sage kings were appropriate for China's current problems. He felt that population growth led to a scarcity of resources and this scarcity resulted in conflict between families and states. Within a state, rich families fought with each other to avoid taxes and to control large amount of land and laborers. This competition meant that the state could not collect taxes and was therefore not able to protect itself from other states. For a state to survive and become strong, Han Fei Zi felt its ruler must choose officials on the basis of their performance in office and not their wealth and social status. The officials must suggest appropriate laws, publicize these laws, and carry them out completely. According to Han Fei Zi, the two great motivators of people were fear and greed. Therefore, he advocated that rulers control people through a system of punishments and rewards. Han Fei Zi wanted to force people to do what the state wanted, not what their families wanted. In this way, chaos would be halted and order would be restored.