

Life and Society in Traditional China

Chinese Philosophy: Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism

The philosophies of Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism originated between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C. during a period of civil war and great unrest. It was also a time in which the old ideas and values seemed to have lost their importance, and new ones had not yet taken their place. The people of China had two basic needs: to end the bloody wars between the states and to set up a new social order. Confucianism and Daoism are considered philosophies and not religions because they were not concerned with God or life after death. They were mainly concerned with ways of improving society and achieving a better life on earth.

From the 5th century to the 2nd century B.C., these two philosophies as well as a number of others competed with each other. About 100 B.C., Confucianism was adopted by the government as the official philosophy. For the next 2,000 years, that is, until the 20th century, Chinese life and society were based on the ideas of Confucianism.

Confucianism

Confucius, the Latinized form of the name of Kung Fu-tzu, was born in 551 B.C. and died in 479 B.C. The philosophy that is known as Confucianism comes mainly from the speeches and writings of Confucius. Disciples (followers) of Confucius, such as Mencius, made important contributions to Confucianism as well. The ideas of Confucianism are found in nine works: the "Four Books" and the "Five Classics."

Confucianism is an ethical system rather than a religion. (Ethics deals with human behavior and conduct.) Confucius was mainly concerned with how human beings behaved toward each other and paid little attention to such matters as sin, salvation, and the soul. He developed a system of government, society, and justice which we call Confucianism.

Confucius believed that people, because of their nature, desire to live in the company of other people, that is, in society. It is only in society that people reach their fullest development. Therefore, it is important for people to know how to behave in society, that is, in their relations with other people.

According to Confucius, each person had a specific place in society and certain duties to fulfill. Confucius hoped that if people knew what was expected of them they would behave correctly. Therefore, he set up five principal relationships in which most people are involved. These relationships were (1) ruler and subject; (2) father and son; (3) elder brother and younger brother; (4) husband and wife; and (5) friend and friend. All, except the last, involve the authority of one person over another.

Power and the right to rule belong to superiors over subordinates; that is, to older people over younger people, to men over women. Each person has to give obedience and respect to "superiors"; the subject to his ruler, the wife to her husband, the son to his parents, and the younger brother to the older brother. The "superior," however, owes loving responsibility to the inferior.

The Five Basic Relationships

The Family and the State

Confucius placed great importance on the family. Family life was seen as a training ground for life in society. It is at home in the family that the child learns to deal with problems that he or she will face later in the world. The family is responsible for educating the child to be a good member of society. Confucius emphasized the importance of education, the aim of which is to turn people into good family members, responsible members of society, and good subjects of the emperor.

The state (government) was regarded as an extension of the family in many ways. The emperor and his officials were referred to as the parents of the people. Subjects owed the same loyalty to their rulers that they owed to the senior members of their family.

However, the emperor had duties to fulfill as well. Confucius believed that for society to be well ordered and for people to live in peace and prosper, it was necessary to have a good government and a virtuous ruler. It was the duty of the emperor and his officials to set a good example for the people. The good example of the ruler would transform the people and make them better. Confucius believed that only the wisest and most humane men should rule. He further believed that if the emperor was not morally perfect, heaven would cause the world to suffer.

The emperor also had to maintain the proper relationship between himself and heaven. Heaven was regarded as the governing authority of the universe and the final judge of right and wrong. The Chinese believed that a dynasty ruled as long as it held the "Mandate of Heaven," that is, the right to rule. The people felt they had the right to say whether or not the ruler had the Mandate. When the Emperor did not see to it that there was water for irrigation, that canal barges could transport rice, that rivers did not flood, and that roads were safe for traveling, the people suffered. When the people suffered, they were sure that Heaven had taken away its protection of the Emperor, so they rebelled. When the rebellion was successful, the Mandate of Heaven was given to the leader of the rebellion. He became the emperor of a new dynasty.

The Importance of Confucianism

For 2,000 years Confucianism was the official philosophy of China. The only way a person could achieve an important position in the government or in society was by having a good knowledge of Confucianism. To become a government official it was necessary to pass a difficult civil service examination based on the ideas of Confucius. Since it was Confucianism that kept the leaders in power, they were opposed to any changes.

The Confucianists believed that they were the only civilized community in the world and they looked down on the beliefs and cultures of other people. This attitude made the Chinese unwilling to change their way of life when they were first exposed to Western culture. This unwillingness to adopt Western ideas and techniques in the late 19th and early 20th centuries proved to be disastrous for the Chinese.

Confucius himself was not very interested in the ideas of a God, an after life, heaven, and other ideas that we associate with religion. However, when Confucianism became the official philosophy of China, religious functions were incorporated into it. Confucius, together with his ancestors and famous followers, became objects of worship. Confucian temples were built all over China and sacrifices and rituals were performed.

Legalism

Legalism is a philosophy that became important during the period of civil war in China (the period of warring states from 475–221 B.C.). Legalist philosophers served as advisers to the leaders of the warring states. In 221 B.C., Qin (Ch'in), the most powerful of the warring

states, conquered the others and unified China. This required harsh methods and absolute control by a single leader. The first Qin emperor, Shi Huangdi, used the idea of legalism to achieve this control and to unite China. Legalist ideas formed the basis of the Qin dynasty, which ruled China from 221–206 B.C.

The Legalist philosophers believed that government and laws had to be based on the realities of human behavior. They believed that people by nature were selfish and not good. Therefore, to maintain order in society, people had to have a strong ruler who governed by harsh laws and threats of punishment. The Legalists believed in strong government control and absolute obedience to authority on the part of the people. They rejected the Confucian ideas that a ruler could influence people by his virtuous conduct and good example. They believed that only harsh laws, punishments, and rewards would insure order, not good examples.

The Qin emperors feared that the other philosophies might undermine their power. Therefore, they outlawed Confucianism and all philosophies other than Legalism. The emperor ordered that the books of other philosophies be burned and their scholars buried alive.

The harsh rule of the Qin dynasty led to its overthrow in 206 B.C. The Legalist philosophy was discredited. The new dynasty, the Han, returned to Confucianism and made it the official philosophy of China. However, some of the ideas of the Legalists became rooted in China and have influenced the action of Chinese governments ever since.

Daoism

The philosophy of Daoism (Taoism) takes its name from the Chinese word *Dao* (Tao), meaning "The Way." The three principal teachers of this philosophy were Lao Tzu, Tang Chu, and Chuang Tzu. According to tradition, Lao Tzu (meaning "Old Master") was the founder of Daoism, but modern scholars have questioned his existence.

The philosophy of Daoism stated that people should live naturally. People are happiest when they live according to their own nature. However, society does not permit people to live naturally. Society forces human beings to live according to rules which are not natural. This results in suffering and problems. To escape from this unhappiness, people must free themselves from all the rules that are forced upon them by society. They must find the Dao, or "Way" of the universe.

It is very difficult to say what Dao is. The early Daoists never defined it because they believed that language could not give its exact meaning. "Those who know the Dao do not speak of it; those who speak of it do not know it." The Dao is the unseen power beneath all the life and movement in nature. The Dao is present everywhere in all things. It has no beginning or end. The Dao is the force that gives life and a particular nature to all things. It is the nature of a fish that it cannot live out of water. It is the nature of man that he must breathe air. It is because of Dao that this is so. To act contrary to the Dao or nature, for example, to deprive a fish of water or a man of air, can only be harmful.

The Daoists spoke of a golden age in the past when people lived naturally. They wore the clothes they had woven and ate the food they had grown. All the creatures of sky and earth lived together in peace and harmony. People were not restrained by rules or codes of behavior. They lived and acted spontaneously. But as civilization advanced, this situation changed. People stopped acting naturally. The Daoists believed that society corrupted people and separated them from their true nature. To live in society and obey its rules of

behavior is contrary to human nature and harmful. People can be truly happy only when they are able to express themselves freely.

Since the Dao exists in everything, Daoists feel that they possess all things. They do not fear or desire anything. Because of their union with the Dao, everything is part of them and they are part of everything. Daoists have no fear of death. To them, death is merely a change of form and has no significance. Being at one with the Dao puts one in complete control of all the things of the universe. Daoists, therefore, feel that they are masters of the world.

In later years, Daoism came to be associated with spirits which the Chinese would turn to in times of need. Daoists were called upon to select lucky days for weddings and funerals, to choose sites for housing, and to do other things of this nature.

Daoism had a great influence on the Chinese people and their culture. This can be seen in Chinese literature and painting. Because of its ideas about nature and the universe, Daoism has fascinated scholars for more than 2,000 years.

Social Classes in Traditional China: The Gentry and the Peasants

The Gentry

The gentry and the peasants were the two main classes of traditional Chinese society. The gentry were at the top of Chinese society. They were the landowners who possessed vast landed estates and the officials who administered the government of China. The gentry were a leisure class who looked down on any kind of physical work. Because of their wealth and comfort they had time to engage in social activities and political affairs. They devoted a great deal of time to cultural activities such as poetry, painting, writing, and the art of calligraphy or brush-writing.

The gentry received most of their income from the land that they owned and rented out to tenants from whom they collected rent. The gentry did not cultivate or live on their land. Instead, they lived mainly in the towns, which were the political and cultural centers. With the money from the rents they collected they were able to buy luxuries such as paintings, musical instruments, jewelry, clothing of fine silk, and different art objects. The towns provided them with amusements and entertainment such as teahouses, restaurants, and theaters.

Gentry families often added to their incomes by opening shops, usually pawn shops and rice shops. Since the Chinese people frequently lived through periods of economic crisis and needed ready cash, the pawnshops served as banks and lending agencies. The gentry kept the interest rates high. The rice shops also brought the gentry high profits. They would buy the rice immediately after the harvest when it was cheap and store it until it was in short supply. Then they sold it at a high price or made loans at high interest rates.

Those gentry families who stayed in the countryside and lived solely off their land soon became quite poor. In each generation, the family property was divided among all the sons, and after a few generations, instead of one large landowning family there were many small landowners.