

The Three Chinese 'isms'

Legalism

Though they are largely considered the great Satans of Chinese history, the group of philosophers and administrators known as the **Legalists** represent a first in Chinese government: the application of a philosophical system to government. And despite their dismal failure and subsequent demonization throughout posterity, the philosophical and political innovations they practiced had a lasting effect on the nature of Chinese government.

When the Ch'in gained imperial power after decades of civil war, they adopted the ideas of the Legalists as their political theory. In practice, under legalists such as Li Ssu (d. 208 B.C.) and Chao Kao, the Legalism of the Ch'in dynasty (221-207) involved a uniform totalitarianism. People were conscripted to labor for long periods of time on state projects, such as irrigation projects or the series of defensive walls in northern China which we know as the Great Wall; all disagreement with the government was made a capital crime; all alternative ways of thinking, which the Legalists saw as encouraging the natural fractiousness of humanity, were banned. The policies eventually led to the downfall of the dynasty itself after only fourteen years in power. Local peoples began to revolt and the government did nothing about it, for local officials feared to bring these revolts to the attention of the authorities since the reports themselves might be construed as a criticism of the government and so result in their executions. The emperor's court did not discover these revolts until it was far too late, and the Ch'in and the policies they pursued were discredited for the rest of Chinese history.

But it is not so easy to dismiss Legalism as this short, anomolous, unpleasant period of totalitarianism in Chinese history, for the Legalists established ways of doing government that would profoundly influence later governments. First, they adopted Mo Tzu's ideas about utilitarianism; the only occupations that people should be engaged in should be occupations that materially benefited others, particularly agriculture. Most of the Ch'in laws were attempts to move people from useless activities, such as scholarship or philosophy, to useful ones. This utilitarianism would survive as a dynamic strain of Chinese political theory up to and including the Maoist revolution. Second, the Legalists invented what we call "rule of law," that is, the notion that the law is supreme over every individual, including individual rulers. The law should rule rather than individuals, who have authority only to administer the law. Third, the Legalists adopted Mo Tzu's ideas of uniform standardization of law and culture. In order to be effective, the law has to be uniformly applied; no one is to be punished more or less severely because of their social standing. This notion of "equality before the law" would, with some changes, remain a central concept in theories of Chinese government. In their quest for uniform standards, the Ch'in undertook a project of standardizing Chinese culture: the writing system, the monetary system, weights and measures, and the philosophical systems (which they mainly accomplished by destroying rival schools of thought). This standardization profoundly affected the coherence of Chinese culture and the centralization of government; the attempt to standardize Chinese thought would lead in the early Han dynasty (202 B.C.-9 A.D.) to the fusion of the rival schools into one system of thought, the so-called Han Synthesis.

Confucianism

Confucianism has been the chief cultural influence of China for centuries. The teachings of Confucius were never intended to be a religion. It has no revelatory sacred writings, no priesthood, no doctrine of an afterlife, and frowned on asceticism and monasticism. Later Confucius was deified and raised to the rank of Emperor and Co-assessor with the deities in Heaven and Earth. Official animal sacrifices were made at the tomb of Confucius for centuries. In 1982 Confucianism claimed 156,070,100 adherents.

The Chinese name of Confucius was Kung. His disciples called him Kung, the master (Kung Fu-tse) which western missionaries Latinized to "Confucius." He was born in 551 B. C. of an aristocratic family who had lost their wealth and position. His father, who died before Confucius was three, is said to have

been a famous warrior of gigantic size and strength who was seventy years old when Confucius was conceived. Confucius was the youngest of eleven children. He grew up in poverty but received a good education. In his teens he accepted a minor government position, married and fathered a son but the marriage ended in divorce.

In his twenties, following his mother's death, Confucius set himself up as a teacher. He taught the traditional Six Disciplines: history, poetry, government, propriety (ethics), music, and divination. Confucius became one of the great teachers of history but aspired to public office. He had supreme confidence in his ability to reorder society.

Legend has it that at the age of fifty Confucius ascended through the offices of Minister of Public Works and Minister of Justice to Prime Minister. His government was ideal. Enemies, however, conspired against him and he was forced to retire at the age of fifty-five. In reality, scholarly speculation has assumed that contemporary rulers were much too afraid of Confucius' candor and integrity to appoint him to any position involving power.

During the next twelve years Confucius wandered from place to place with a few of his disciples. He was jeered at and even placed in jail. At the age of sixty-seven a position was found for him as an advisor to the Duke of Ai. During the next years he spent his time teaching and compiling some of the classic Chinese texts. He died in 479 B. C. Confucius was not only a wise man, he was an incorruptible, human-hearted man. Although largely defeated in his purpose of reforming society, he died with courage, saying, "There is not one in the empire that will make me his master!"

The basic starting point for the early Confucianists (Confucius and Mencius) was that human beings were fundamentally good; every human was born with *te*, or "moral virtue." The third great Confucianist of antiquity, Hsün Tzu (fl. 298-238 B.C.), believed exactly the opposite, that all human beings were born fundamentally depraved, selfish, greedy, and lustful. However, this was not an entirely dark and pessimistic view of humanity, for Hsün Tzu believed that humans could be made good through acculturation and education (which is the basic view of society in Europe and America from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries: humans are fundamentally base and vulgar but can be taught to be good and refined). His pupil, Han Fei Tzu, began from the same starting point, but determined that humans are made good by state laws. The only way to check human selfishness and depravity was to establish laws that bountifully rewarded actions that benefit others and the state and ruthlessly punish all actions that harmed others or the state. For Confucius, power was something to be wielded for the benefit of the people, but for Han Fei, the benefit of the people lay in the ruthless control of individual selfishness. Since even the emperor cannot be counted on to behave in the interests of the people, that is, since even the emperor can be selfish, it is necessary that the laws be supreme over even the emperor. Ideally, if the laws are written well enough and enforced aggressively, there is no need of individual leadership, for the laws alone are sufficient to govern a state.

Li (social propriety) is the greatest principle of living. When society lives by li it moves smoothly. Confucius saw the embodiment of this society in the idealized form of feudalistic government, illustrated by the Five Relationships: kindness in the father, filial piety in the son; gentility in the eldest brother, humility and respect in the younger; righteous behavior in the husband, obedience in the wife; humane consideration in elders, deference in juniors; benevolence in rulers, loyalty in ministers and subjects. Li may also refer to the "middle way" in all things.

Just as li is the outward expression of the superior man, jen (goodness, humaneness, love) is the inner ideal. Confucius taught that men should love one another and practice respect and courtesy. If li and jen were operative in a person, the end product would be the Confucian goal: the superior man. Confucius believed in the natural goodness or at least the natural perfectibility of man. He stressed government by virtue (Te) and the arts of peace (Wen). Since filial piety is the root of all virtue this concern for parental respect is seen in the veneration of age and ancestor worship. Confucius was a pragmatic man who thought one should respect the spirits but keep them at a distance.

Confucius regarded himself as a transmitter, not the originator, of social values and wisdom. Although Confucianism does not claim revelatory scriptures, the Five Classics and the Four Books are regarded as the touch-stone of Confucian conduct and wisdom. Mencius and Hsun Tzu were the great expositors of Confucius in the fourth and third centuries B.C. and did much to popularize and spread his teachings. During the Han Dynasty there developed a cult of Confucius himself. By the sixth century A.D. every prefecture in China had a temple to honor Confucius.

The Confucian cult was checked in 1503 when the images of Confucius were ordered removed from the temples and replaced with wooden tablets inscribed with his teachings. All titles were removed and he was spoken of simply as "Master Kung, the perfect teacher of antiquity." In 1906 there was an attempt to revive the Confucian cult but with the birth of the People's Republic of China all sacrifices to Confucius and other religious observances were officially abandoned.

Daoism

Dao, or Taoism, as it is often known in the West, is a belief system with folk religion roots in China popularized by the philosopher Laozi in the 5th century B.C.E. It has taken many forms throughout the centuries, coexisting with Confucianism and Buddhism.

A noted Chinese anthropologist has written that Chinese religion "mirrors the social landscape of its adherents. There are as many meanings as there are vantage points." The same could be said of the diverse tradition we call Taoism. Taoism was understood and practiced in many ways, each reflecting the historical, social, or personal situation of its adherents. While this diversity may confuse and perplex the outside observer, it accounts for the resilience of Taoism in China. Taoism was adaptable, evolving to fill spiritual gaps created by the vagaries of life.

Taoism can also be called "the other way." During its entire history, it has coexisted alongside the Confucian tradition, which served as the ethical and religious basis of the institutions and arrangements of the Chinese empire. Taoism, while not radically subversive, offered a range of alternatives to the Confucian way of life and point of view. These alternatives, however, were not mutually exclusive. For the vast majority of Chinese, there was no question of choosing between Confucianism and Taoism. Except for a few straightlaced Confucians and a few pious Taoists, the Chinese man or woman practiced both -- either at different phases of life or as different sides of personality and taste.

Classical Taoist philosophy, formulated by Laozi (the Old Master, 5th century B.C.E.?), the anonymous editor of the Daodejing (Classic of the Way and its Power), and Zhuangzi (3rd century B.C.E.), was a reinterpretation and development of an ancient nameless tradition of nature worship and divination. Laozi and Zhuangzi, living at a time of social disorder and great religious skepticism, developed the notion of the Dao (Tao -- way, or path) as the origin of all creation and the force -- unknowable in its essence but observable in its manifestations -- that lies behind the functionings and changes of the natural world. They saw in Dao and nature the basis of a spiritual approach to living. This, they believed, was the answer to the burning issue of the day: what is the basis of a stable, unified, and enduring social order? The order and harmony of nature, they said, was far more stable and enduring than either the power of the state or the civilized institutions constructed by human learning. Healthy human life could flourish only in accord with Dao -- nature, simplicity, a free-and-easy approach to life. The early Taoists taught the art of living and surviving by conforming with the natural way of things; they called their approach to action wuwei (literally, "no-action"), action modeled on nature. Their sages were wise, but not in the way the Confucian teacher was wise -- learned and a moral paragon. Zhuangzi's sages were often artisans -- butchers or woodcarvers. The lowly artisans understood the secret of art and the art of living. To be skillful and creative, they had to have inner spiritual concentration and put aside concern with externals, such as monetary rewards, fame, and praise. Art, like life, followed the creative path of nature, not the values of human society.

Throughout Chinese history, people weary of social activism and aware of the fragility of human achievements would retire from the world and turn to nature. They might retreat to a countryside or mountain setting to commune with natural beauty. They would compose or recite poetry about nature, or paint a picture of the scene, attempting to capture the creative forces at the center of nature's vitality. They might share their outing with friends or more rarely -- a spouse, drinking a bit of wine, and enjoying the autumn leaves or the moon.

Chinese utopian writings also often bore a Taoist stamp. Tao Qian's (T'ao Ch'ien, 372?-427? C.E.) famous "Peach Blossom Spring" told the story of a fisherman who discovered by chance an idyllic community of Chinese who centuries earlier had fled a war-torn land, and had since lived in perfect simplicity, harmony, and peace, obviously unaware of the turmoil of history beyond their grove. Although these utopians urged him to stay, the fisherman left to share his discovery with friends and a local official. He could never find his way back. He did not understand that this ideal world was to be found not by following an external path, but a spiritual path; it was a state of mind, an attitude, that comprised the utopia.

If Taoist ideas and images inspired in the Chinese a love of nature and an occasional retreat to it from the cares of the world to rest and heal, it also inspired an intense affirmation of life: physical life -- health, well-being, vitality, longevity, and even immortality. Laozi and Zhuangzi had reinterpreted the ancient nature worship and esoteric arts, but they crept back into the tradition as ways of using knowledge of the Dao to enhance and prolong life. Some Taoists searched for "isles of the immortals," or for herbs or chemical compounds that could ensure immortality. More often, Taoists were interested in health and vitality; they experimented with herbal medicine and pharmacology, greatly advancing these arts; they developed principles of macrobiotic cooking and other healthy diets; they developed systems of gymnastics and massage to keep the body strong and youthful. Taoists were supporters both of magic and of proto-science; they were the element of Chinese culture most interested in the study of and experiments with nature.

Some Taoists believed that spirits pervaded nature (both the natural world and the internal world within the human body). Theologically, these myriad spirits were simply many manifestations of the one Dao, which could not be represented as an image or a particular thing. As the Taoist pantheon developed, it came to mirror the imperial bureaucracy in heaven and hell. The head of the heavenly bureaucracy was the jade Emperor, who governed spirits assigned to oversee the workings of the natural world and the administration of moral justice. The gods in heaven acted like and were treated like the officials in the world of men; worshipping the gods was a kind of rehearsal of attitudes toward secular authorities. On the other hand, the demons and ghosts of hell acted like and were treated like the bullies, outlaws, and threatening strangers in the real world; they were bribed by the people and were ritually arrested by the martial forces of the spirit officials. The common people, who after all had little influence with their earthly rulers, sought by worshipping spirits to keep troubles at bay and ensure the blessings of health, wealth, and longevity.

The initiated Taoist priest saw the many gods as manifestations of the one Dao. He had been ritually trained to know the names, ranks, and powers of important spirits, and to ritually direct them through meditation and visualization. In his meditations, he harmonized and reunited them into their unity with the one Dao. However, only the educated believers knew anything of the complex theological system of the priest. Thus communal rituals had two levels: (a) a priestly level, which was guided by the priest's meditation and observed by major patrons, who were educated laymen; and (b) a public and dramatic ritual, usually performed by lower ranked Taoist assistants, which was theatrical in form. It conveyed the meaning through visible actions such as climbing sword ladders, or lighting and floating lanterns. The same ritual had a subtle metaphysical-mystical structure for the theologians, and a visible dramatic structure for the lay audience.

Taoism was also an important motif in fiction, theater, and folk tales. Local eccentrics who did not care for wealth and position were often seen as "Taoist" because they spurned Confucian values and rewards. In fiction Taoists were often eccentrics; they also had magical or prophetic powers, which symbolized their spiritual attainment. They healed, restored youth and vitality, predicted the future, or read men's souls.

They were also depicted as the stewards of a system of moral retribution; the Taoist gods in heaven and hell exacted strict punishments for wrongdoing, and would let no sinner off the hook. On the one hand, then, they were non-conformists who embodied different values and life styles; on the other, their strict moral retribution reinforced the values of the society. Taoism was "the other way," but it did not threaten the moral consensus. It was, perhaps, a kind of safety valve to escape the pressures of society, or at least a complementary channel for alternative views and values.

Chinese communists see Taoism as fatalistic and passive, a detriment to socialist reconstruction. The People's Republic has kept alive some practical arts, such as the use of traditional herbal medicines, which have longstanding links with Taoism. In a larger sense, since Taoism functioned in imperial China as a retreat and withdrawal from the struggles of the political arena, one might say that in a very general way the current relaxation of political pressure in reaction against the excesses of the Gang of Four represents a Taoistic phase of Chinese Maoism.