

Classical China and the Search for Order: Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism

Historical Context: In the 5th century BCE, an era known as the **Warring States Period** began. This was a period of intense warfare between rival states competing against one another for control of China. The constant conflict created a strong need for new innovative political and social models to solve the crisis affecting China. As a result, the Warring States Period was also an intellectual golden age that led to the development of many new philosophies known as the **Hundred Schools of Thought**. The most influential of these philosophies were **Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism**. Although these philosophies originated around the same time, they came up with very different ideas for what China needed to do to fix its society.

Focus Question: What did ancient Chinese philosophers think was the ideal form of government?

Directions: In your own words, describe three features of the ideal government according to the corresponding document. Make a hypothesis as to whether the source is from a Confucian, Daoist, or Legalist Perspective.

Document A

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document B

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document C

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document D

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document E

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document F

1.

2.

3.

Source Hypothesis:

Source:

Document A (Modified)

The Duke Ai asked the Master, "What should be done to secure the submission of the people?"

The Master replied, "Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit,"

Ji Kang asked how to cause the people to respect their ruler. The Master said, "Let him rule over them with seriousness; - then they will respect him. Let him be final and kind to all; - then they will be faithful to him.

Ji Kang asked the Master about the government. The Master replied, "To govern means to rectify. If you lead the people with correctness, who will dare to not act correct?"

The Master said, "If good men were to govern a country for a hundred years, they would be able to transform the violently bad, and dispense with capital punishments."

Document B (Modified)

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves. Not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves. Not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder...

When there is this abstinence from action, good order is universal...

Use fairness in governing the state. Use surprise tactics in war. Be unconcerned and you will have the world.

How do I know it is like this? Because: the more regulations there are, the poorer people become. The more people own weapons, the greater disorder there is in the country and clans. The more clever the people are, the more extraordinary actions they take. The more picky the laws are, the more thieves and gangsters there are.

Therefore the sages say: "I do not force my way, and the people transform themselves. I enjoy my serenity, and the people correct themselves. I do not interfere, and the people enrich themselves. I have no desires, and the people keep their simple ways."

When the government is laid back, the people are relaxed. When the government is nitpicking, the people have anxiety.

Document C (Modified)

Chien Wu went to see Chief Yu. Chief Yu said, “What was Chung Shih telling you the other day?” Chien Wu said, “He told me that the ruler of men should devise his own principles, standards, ceremonies, and regulation, and then there will be no one who will fail to obey him and be transformed by them.” Chief Yu said, “This is bogus virtue! To try to govern the world like this is like trying to walk the ocean, to drill through a river, or to make a mosquito shoulder a mountain! When the sage governs, does he govern what is on the outside? He makes sure of himself first, and then acts. He makes absolutely certain that things can do what they are supposed to do, that is all. The bird flies high in the sky where it can escape the danger of stringed arrows. The field mouse burrows deep down under the scared hill where it won’t have to worry about men digging and smoking it out. Have you got less sense than these two little creatures?”

Yang Tzu-chu said, “May I venture to ask about the government of the enlightened king?” Lao Tan said, “The government of the enlightened king? His achievements blanket the world but appear not to be his own doing. His transforming influence touches the ten thousand things but the people do not depend on him. With him there is no promotion or praise – he lets everything find its own enjoyment. He takes his stand on what cannot be understood and wanders where there is nothing at all.”

Document D (Modified)

There was a farmer of Song who tilled the land, and in his field was a stump. One day a rabbit, racing across the field, bumped into the stump, broke its neck, and died. Thereupon the farmer laid aside his plow and took up watch beside the stump, hoping that he would get another rabbit in the same way. But he got no more rabbits, and instead became the laughingstock of Song. Those who think they can take the ways of the ancient kings and use them to govern the people of today all belong in the category of stump-watchers!

Humaneness may make one shed tears and be reluctant to apply penalties, but law makes it clear that such penalties must be applied. The ancient kings allowed law to be supreme and did not give in to their tearful longings. Hence it is obvious that humaneness cannot be used to achieve order in the state. ...

Hardly ten men of true integrity and good faith can be found today, and yet the offices of the state number in the hundreds. If they must be filled by men of integrity and good faith, then there will never be enough men to go around; and if the offices are left unfilled, then those whose business it is to govern will dwindle in numbers while disorderly men increase. Therefore the way of the enlightened ruler is to unify the laws instead of seeking for wise men, to lay down firm policies instead of longing for men of good faith. Hence his laws never fail him, and there is no felony or deceit among his officials. ...

Document E (Modified)

The scholar answered King Hui, “Even with a territory if a hundred li, it is possible to become the true king of the empire. If your majesty can practice a humane government to the people, reduce punishments and fines, lower taxes, make it possible for the fields to be plowed deep and the weeding well done, men may cultivate their filial piety, brotherly respect, loyalty, and faithfulness.”

The scholar said...”Let mulberry trees be planted about the homesteads with their five mou, and men of fifty will be able to be clothed in silk. Let there be timely care for fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, and men of seventy will have meat to eat. Let there be timely cultivation of the farm with its hundred mou, and the family of eight mouths will suffer no hunger. Let serious attention be paid to education in school, and the gray-haired men will not carry burdens on the road. There has never been a case when men of seventy had silk to wear and meat to eat, when the common people were neither hungry nor cold, and yet the ruler did not become true kind of the empire....

The scholar said to King Hsuan... “When all your immediate ministers say that a man should be executed, do not listen to them. When all your great officers say so, do not listen to them. When all your people say so, look into the case, and if you find that person should be executed, then execute him. It is therefore said that the people execute him. Only in this way can a ruler become parent of the people.”

Document F (Modified)

No country is permanently strong. Nor is any country permanently weak. If conformers to law are strong, the country is strong; if conformers to law are weak, the country is weak....

Any ruler able to expel private crookedness and uphold public law finds the people safe and the state in order; and any ruler able to expunge private action and act on public law, finds his army strong and his enemy weak. So, find out men following the discipline of laws and regulations, and place them above the body of officials. Then the sovereign cannot be deceived by anybody with fraud and falsehood....

Therefore, the intelligent sovereign makes the law select men and makes no arbitrary promotion himself. He makes the law measure merits and makes no arbitrary regulation himself. In consequence, able men cannot be obscured, bad characters cannot be disguised; falsely praised fellows cannot be advanced, wrongly defamed people cannot be degraded.

To govern the state by law is to praise the right and blame the wrong.

The law does not fawn on the noble.... Whatever the law applies to, the wise cannot reject nor can the brave defy. Punishment for fault never skips ministers; reward for good never misses commoners. Therefore, to correct the faults of the high, to rebuke the vices of the low, to suppress disorders, to decide against mistakes, to subdue the arrogant, to straighten the crooked, and to unify the folkways of the masses, nothing could match the law. To warn the officials and overawe the people, to rebuke obscenity and danger, and to forbid falsehood and deceit, nothing could match penalty. If penalty is severe, the noble cannot discriminate against the humble. If law is definite, the superiors are esteemed and not violated. If the superiors are not violated, the sovereign will become strong and able to maintain the proper course of government. Such was the reason why the early kings esteemed Legalism and handed it down to posterity. Should the lord of men discard law and practice selfishness, high and low would have no distinction.