



A jade statue produced about the tenth century C.E. depicts the sage Laozi on an ox. Legends reported that Laozi rode a blue ox from China to central Asia when spreading his teachings. Why would simple dress and transport be appropriate for Laozi?

called instead for individuals to act selflessly and live simply, unpretentiously, and in harmony with nature.

Wuwei also had implications for state and society: the less government, the better. Instead of expansive kingdoms and empires, the *Daodejing* envisioned a world of tiny, self-sufficient communities where people had no desire to conquer their neighbors or to trade with them. Indeed, even when people lived so close to the next community that they could hear the dogs barking and cocks crowing, they would be so content with their existence that they would not even have the desire to visit their neighbors!

Daoists subjected their philosophical rivals to ferocious attacks for dwelling on trivial and superficial issues instead of practicing *wuwei* and living in harmony with nature. Zhuangzi in particular possessed a caustic wit that he deployed effectively in mocking the Confucians and other philosophers for engaging in meaningless debates. Once, for example, he related a fable about a keeper of monkeys who ran low on food for his animals. He advised the monkeys that conditions forced him to cut their rations, so in the future he would bring them only three nuts in the morning and four in the afternoon. When the monkeys exploded in fury, the keeper relented and promised to bring four nuts in the morning and three in the afternoon—a proposal that the monkeys accepted with

delight. The philosophers' fierce debates, Zhuangzi implied, were just as insignificant as the uproar over the monkeys' feeding schedule.

Political Implications of Daoism By encouraging the development of a reflective and introspective consciousness, Daoism served as a counterbalance to the activism and extroversion of the Confucian tradition. Indeed, Daoism encouraged the cultivation of self-knowledge in a way that appealed strongly to Confucians as well as to Daoists. Because neither Confucianism nor Daoism was an exclusive faith that precluded observance of the other, it has been possible through the centuries for individuals to study the Confucian curriculum and take administrative posts in the government while devoting their private hours to reflection on human nature and the place of humans in the larger world—to live as Confucians by day, as it were, and Daoists by night.

Legalism

Ultimately, neither Confucian activism nor Daoist retreat was able to solve the problems that plagued China during the Period of the Warring States. Order returned to China only after the emergence of a third school of thought—that of the Legalists—which promoted a practical and ruthlessly efficient approach to statecraft. Unlike the Confucians, the Legalists did not concern themselves with ethics, morality, or propriety. Unlike the Daoists, the Legalists cared nothing about principles governing the world or the place of human beings in nature. Instead, they devoted their attention exclusively to the state, which they sought to strengthen and expand at all costs.

Shang Yang Legalist doctrine emerged from the insights of men who participated actively in Chinese political affairs during the late fourth century B.C.E. Most notable of them was **Shang Yang** (ca. 390–338 B.C.E.), who served as chief minister to the duke of the Qin state in western China. His policies survive in a work titled *The Book of Lord Shang*, which most likely includes contributions from other ministers as well as from Shang Yang himself. Though a clever and efficient administrator, Shang Yang also was despised and feared because of his power and ruthlessness. Upon the death of his patron, the duke of Qin, Shang Yang quickly fell: his enemies at court executed him, mutilated his body, and annihilated his family.

Han Feizi The most systematic of the Legalist theorists was **Han Feizi** (ca. 280–233 B.C.E.), a student of the Confucian scholar Xunzi. Han Feizi carefully reviewed Legalist ideas from political thinkers in all parts of China and synthesized them in a collection of powerful and well-argued essays on statecraft. Like Shang Yang, Han Feizi served as an advisor at the Qin court, and he too fell afoul of other ambitious men, who forced him to end his life by taking poison. The Legalist

Han Feizi (hahn fay-zī)

Sources from the Past

Laozi on Living in Harmony with Dao

Committed Daoists mostly rejected opportunities to play active roles in government. Yet like the Confucians, the Daoists held strong views on virtuous behavior, and their understanding of dao had deep political implications, as exemplified by the following excerpts from the Daodejing.

The highest goodness is like water, for water is excellent in benefitting all things, and it does not strive. It occupies the lowest place, which men abhor. And therefore it is near akin to the *dao*. . . .

In governing men and in serving heaven, there is nothing like moderation. For only by moderation can there be an early return to the normal state of humankind. This early return is the same as a great storage of virtue. With a great storage of virtue there is nothing that may not be achieved. If there is nothing that may not be achieved, then no one will know to what extent this power reaches. And if no one knows to what extent a man's power reaches, that man is fit to be the ruler of a state. Having the secret of rule, his rule shall endure. Setting the tap-root deep, and making the spreading roots firm: this is the way to ensure long life to the tree. . . .

Use uprightness in ruling a state; employ indirect methods in waging war; practice non-interference in order to win the empire. . . .

The greater the number of laws and enactments, the more thieves and robbers there will be. Therefore the Sage [Laozi] says: "So long as I do nothing, the people will work out their own reformation. So long as I love calm, the people will right themselves. If only I keep from meddling, the people will grow rich. If only I am free from desire, the people will come naturally back to simplicity. . . ."

There is nothing in the world more soft and weak than water, yet for attacking things that are hard and strong, there is nothing that surpasses it, nothing that can take its place.

The soft overcomes the hard; the weak overcomes the strong. There is no one in the world but knows this truth, and no one who can put it into practice.

For Further Reflection

- To what extent did Daoists offer useful or practical political alternatives in the Period of the Warring States?

Source: Lionel Giles, trans. *The Sayings of Lao Tzu*. London: John Murray, 1905, pp. 26, 29–30, 41, 50. (Translations slightly modified.)

state itself thus consumed the two foremost exponents of Legalist doctrine.

Legalist Doctrine Shang Yang, Han Feizi, and other Legalists reasoned that the foundations of a state's strength were agriculture and armed forces. Thus Legalists sought to channel as many individuals as possible into cultivation or military service while discouraging them from pursuing careers as merchants, entrepreneurs, scholars, educators, philosophers, poets, or artists, since those lines of work did not directly advance the interests of the state.

The Legalists expected to harness subjects' energy by means of clear and strict laws—hence the name "Legalist." Their faith in laws distinguished the Legalists clearly from the Confucians, who relied on ritual, custom, education, a sense of propriety, and the humane example of benevolent *junzi* administrators to induce individuals to behave appropriately. The Legalists believed that those influences were not powerful enough to persuade subjects to subordinate their self-interest to the needs of the state. They imposed a strict legal regimen that clearly outlined expectations and provided severe punishment, swiftly administered, for violators. They believed that if people feared to commit small crimes, they would hesitate all the more before committing great crimes.

Thus Legalists imposed harsh penalties even for minor infractions: individuals could suffer amputation of their hands or feet, for example, for disposing of ashes or trash in the street. The Legalists also established the principle of collective responsibility before the law. They expected all members of a family or community to observe the others closely, forestall any illegal activity, and report any infractions. Failing those obligations, all members of a family or community were liable to punishment along with the actual violator.

The Legalists' principles of government did not win them much popularity. Over the course of the centuries, Chinese moral and political philosophers have had little praise for the Legalists, and few have openly associated themselves with the Legalist school. Yet Legalist doctrine lent itself readily to practical application, and Legalist principles of government quickly produced remarkable results for rulers who adopted them. In fact, Legalist methods put an end to the Period of the Warring States and brought about the unification of China.

THE UNIFICATION OF CHINA

During the Period of the Warring States, rulers of several regional states adopted elements of the Legalist program. Legalist doctrines met the most enthusiastic response in the

