

Confucianism



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Many intellectual thinkers took birth in china that reformed politics, religion, and philosophy. To this day their impact can be felt in modern china.

Confucianism became the dominant school of thought during the Han dynasty, but as we know, other ideologies, such as Daoism and Legalism became prevalent as well. Each ideology consisted of its own ideas of what a political and social society should be like. They all looked to determine solutions for problems people faced in their lives daily. All three of these philosophies differed vastly from each other but at the same time, they had some similarities as well. Confucianism and Daoism particularly share several beliefs and values, namely: idealizing the society somewhere in the past and belief in reform of society through self-cultivation. Whereas legalism can said to be totally different from both these philosophies in various aspects.

Confucianism was founded by Confucius(680-740 B. C.). Confucius stated that his ideas were not completely new but only a restatement of the values from the early days of the Western Zhou. He believed that this period was, “ the lost golden age and should be recovered.”(Dr. Wright 21). The society at the time of Confucius was not operating according to his ideals, therefore there was a great need for change. This change he advocated would not be to some new ideology but rather, society would revert back to the ideals of the early Zhou society, which in his mind was perfect. He further stated that specific qualities from this period had been lost. The most essential of these qualities was the performance of rituals, which he called “ Li.” He further stated that “ Ritual must regulate all your conduct.”(Analects 1: 12)

Confucius further stated that if Li was performed correctly, its constant

practitioners would then learn to abide by the morals of society. This was attributed to the fact that just as a person performing a ritual had a certain position and role assigned to them, similarly a member of society had moral expectations and obligations. Confucius also stressed that in order for a person to completely comprehend the importance of Li, one needed to possess “Ren.” This is described as benevolence or humaneness. Confucius believed that Ren was an inward quality as opposed to something one could acquire from outside.

Taoism was found by “Laotzu” – do a basic summary of the beliefs.

Similarities between the two-

One thing that Confucianism and Taoism have in common is that both ideologies believe in reforming the society through reforming the self first. In Confucianism, one improved himself through becoming an adequate practitioner of Li, and becoming virtuous. Although Confucius stated that education played an important role in self-cultivation, it was not compulsory, as one could be considered virtuous by simply possessing nature qualities like: obedience, humility, loyalty and trustworthiness. Confucius further argued that one who possessed virtue or Ren and had practiced Li as well would be best fit to run a government as well as benefit society in general. Confucius’ belief that one must reform himself before he can change the society can be seen in the following quote from his Analects. “In serving one’s ruler one deals reverently with the tasks involved and makes the livelihood involved a secondary consideration” (Analects 15: 38).

In Taoism, the individual improved himself by comprehending the meaning of the Tao intuitively. If one could get in touch with this Tao and understand it, this would lead to a immense transformation of society and government

Another similarity between the two philosophies is that they both believed that society and government was perfect in the past and that those lost values must be brought back in order to achieve bliss. Confucius obviously believed the reign of the Western Zhou to be pretty well flawless. He sought to bring back social order and morality which had been lost after the fall of the Western Zhou. He argued that this social order and morality were achieved by the Western Zhou through understanding the importance of rituals (Dr. Wright 22-23). Much of the rituals performed during this time were borrowed from the Shang dynasty. An example of such a ritual is the usage of inscribed bones known as Oracle bones, in divination and posing questions to supernatural gods and deities. This fact is also demonstrated in the following passage from *The Analects*, “ If by keeping the old warm one can provide understanding of the new, one is fit to be a teacher” (2: 11, *Analects*) (“ what Confucius thought”) : <http://www.heptune.com/confuciu.html>) . In this passage Confucius basically states his understanding that in order to be successful in the present one must have an understanding of what other successful states had practiced in the past.

Where Confucianism considered the past to be perfect, Taoism also idealized the past. Taoism believed that humans had once known the Tao and had lived their lives in accordance with it. It further stated that this understanding of the Tao had been lost somewhere in history and that people’s hearts no longer felt the Tao, which gave birth to intellectual

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thought rather than intuition, causing all the disorder and the problems of society in general. This golden age was believed to be immediately following the discovery of agriculture by humans. At this time people lived in small homes, were greatly content and therefore were much detached from material things. Because simplicity and contentment filled people's hearts, they were in intuitive rather than intellectual, therefore being in touch with the Tao. Taoism then claims that all this was shattered by ambition. Ambition caused people to do unnatural things like constructing large buildings, thereby causing people to lose the Tao (Dr. Wright 28)

Both Confucians and Taoists assumed that the world should have a human ruler, and that he should live by, and promote, the ideals propounded by the thinker in question. While Zhuang Zhou may have considered government irrelevant, he did not condemn its existence. So while Taoists may have been less interested

in existing Chinese social and political institutions than Confucians, none denounced monarchy

or aristocracy, none would have understood or condoned modern ideals of egalitarianism

or radical individualism. To all of them, no one is encouraged to discover or practice any "new"

truth. Rather, one is to live the ideal life by finding and accepting one's real place within the existing

world.

Where Confucians and Taoists parted ways is that the former viewed “ the world” primarily

in terms of inherited socio-political norms, while the latter focused on humans’ continuities

With the invisible dimensions of reality that Confucians were often reluctant to discuss.

While both philosophies Confucianism and Taoism addressed questions about the inner self, Legalism was more concerned with ways to keep the ruler in power. A major difference between Legalism and the philosophies previously discussed was that Legalism sought to control human behavior through the law of the state rather than changing one’s self through discovering the Tao or by practicing Li and becoming moral. Han Fei, founder of Legalism, stated that there was no such thing as virtue or goodness, instead obedience was the most necessary quality a person had to possess (“ Legalism” , <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/china/legal.html>). This was because the Legalist’s believed that human nature was innately bad, and that humans had to put under a system of punishment and reward. This system would be a way of controlling human behavior, which was believed to be unchangeable, as they would fear punishment from the state and cherish reward (Dr Wright 34).. Legalists also differed from Confucianism and Taoism because they did not believe in a golden age, but instead believed that no such ideal or perfect society ever existed in the past and that Legalism itself was trying to achieve that for the first time. The ideal Legalist ruler was then described as one that did not need to practicing Ren

or be in touch with the Tao when dealing with society, as this would only spoil the public. Legalism was then strictly a way of governing the people so that they may conform to the laws of ruler, as this was always “right.” Therefore Legalism did not focus much on finding morality and virtue within oneself as whatever the ruler considered right was considered virtuous and moral.

Confucianism and Taoism were two philosophies that differed greatly in many regards but at the same time share many similarities. One such similarity was based on the fact that both believed that in order to bring social bliss, one had to change themselves first. Taoism looked to reform the individual by getting in touch with ones inner self, whereas Confucianism believed in learning from history and also from other virtuous beings around us as well as practice their rituals and ceremonies. Both philosophies also believed in a golden age and answer questions as to how one may revert back to it. Taoism stated that we should give up ambition and practice qualities such as non-action and simplicity of the past, and that this would lead to one getting in intuitive touch with the Tao. Confucianism on the other hand simply argued that one must practice ritualism and simply bring back values of successful states in the past. The third major school of thought in ancient china was known as Legalism. Legalism can be said to be completely different from the aforementioned ideologies. The single biggest difference was that Legalism was not much of a philosophy as it did not believe that a person could even be reformed. They held that one’s behavior could only be temporarily controlled by laws, in particular a punishment and reward system. This was based on their belief that a person is innately evil in nature.

Legalism was basically described as a technique in which would lead to conformity of the public to the ruler's law. Whether these laws were just, moral or "good", was irrelevant, as Legalists held the belief that whatever the ruler willed was justified and right. While it would be undeniable that Confucianism and Taoism vary vastly, their similar goals and beliefs have allowed them to co-exist successfully for thousands of years in many cultures of the world. In fact, many believe that without incorporating elements of both philosophies, an individual cannot be truly whole. As Taoism applies more to abiding by one's intuition, it is more personal in nature, whereas Confucianism can apply to society as a whole and used to govern a state.