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Erik Thomas Chinese Civilization 10/24/12 Jingyu XUE Compare the attitude towards education in Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist thought There were several salient schools of philosophy that arose during early years of the development of Chinese civilization. The era was subject to not only political fragmentation and excessive warfare, but also the birth of unique intellectual foundations as well. Confucius rallied together a school of thought that underscored the utmost importance of humanism and virtue. Han Fei and the legalist movement advocated for a centralized, domineering government that subordinated all citizens to absolute obedience. Taoism insisted on a spontaneous, free-spirited, and laissez-faire approach to life. These three prominent philosophies of the time were very different. For instance, they all placed radically different values on education. In particular, Confucianism promoted intellectual pursuit for both the individual and the populace, whereas Legalism and Taoism had a diverging attitude that was strongly against education. The Confucian ideology is the only one of the aforementioned schools to place a heavy emphasis on intellectual cultivation for both personal purposes and for the sake of a virtuous government. The philosophy looks down on those with faith in intuition and natural understanding, which is a notion that is present in Taoism. They believe that genuine understanding derives primarily from studying a subject; it does not necessarily come to someone spontaneously. Confucius supposedly said, "By nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart" (Analects 17: 2, Chan 29). He outlines that men are inherently good for the most part, but interaction with the surrounding environment can significantly mold their values. The influences of external forces are not always for the better and people will often need guidance. Thus, through the practice of

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education, one can cultivate a strong sense of moral intellect and reinforce virtue. Of the possible areas of study, Confucianism places the most emphasis on morality. One of his most prominent followers, Mencius, frequently underscored the importance of education on the individual level. He stressed that human nature is extremely malleable and that if people are “comfortably lodged they will become like animals” (Book of Mencius 3A: 4, Chan 69). Mencius goes to greater lengths than most Confucians to highlight the detrimental effects of the lack of proper schooling on a person. Without teaching in the realm of ethics and morals, he believes that one will inevitably stoop to the nature of an “animal”. He saw much more idealized benefits of education than other Confucian thinkers. Xunzi, Mencius’ naturalist counterpart, argued that the intrinsic nature of humans is flawed and “goodness is the result of activity” (The Hsun Tzu part 3, Chan 128). Even though Xunzi sees humanity as inherently flawed, it is universal in the Confucian philosophy that “activity”, or education and conscience thought, brings forth the “goodness” of an individual. However, Confucius believed that “in education there should be no class distinction” (Analects 15: 38, Chan 44). A selection of individuals does not necessarily claim intellectual superiority over the rest of the populace. All people should have equal access to moral and intellectual cultivation. With this mindset, the school aims to create a virtuous society. Although he advocates for the widespread promotion of learned humanism and wisdom, he believes that it begins with the ruler. He insists that as a leader, “if you desire what is good, the people will be good. The character of a ruler is like wind and that of the people is like grass. In whatever direction the wind blows, the grass always bends” (Analects 12: 19, Chan 40). A society will garner the benefits of education

through the education of a ruler, as they will “ bend” in whatever direction the leader so chooses to “ blow”. “ Good” nature is maintained through fundamental teachings. If the ruler is “ good” and virtuous with the help of such education, the citizens will adapt and imitate. Thus, in the Confucian school of thought, education becomes an imperative as the nature of the populace essentially rests in it. Conversely, the Legalists took a radical stance against all forms of education for both the individual and the masses. Scholars were considered enemies of the state and almost all forms of literature were targeted for elimination. In their ideal society, there were no books, as only “ the laws serve as teachings” (The Han Fei Tzu, Chan 260). Their motives derived from the notion that educating the populace would consequently lead to the people speaking out against the government. Laws are the only means of subduing citizens. Han Fei believed that there was “ no room for private conceptions of right and wrong” (Ebrey 52). If the people developed their own sense of rationality, they would inevitably voice their opinion, creating weakness and disorder. It is far better for the population to be submissive in order to ensure the efficiency and prosperity of the state. The Legalists retort the Confucian idea that the education cultivates humanity and righteousness by asserting it is impossible to “ expect that every ruler must be equal to Confucius and that all people in the world are equal to his followers” (The Han Fei Tzu, Chan 258). On an individual level, human beings are selfish and shortsighted by nature. Thus, it is impossible to mend the flaws of humanity permanently through education. In their eyes, Confucius is illustrating an unrealistic utopian society. Even with education, only few will reach the enlightened state that Confucius has attained. Moreover, the wisdom of the so-called intellectuals derives from “

unfathomable doctrines that are difficult even for men of highest intelligence to understand" (The Han Fei Tzu, Chan 259). Han Fei asks, if such "wisdom" is "difficult" for men of a higher intellectual order to understand, how is it logical that the uneducated masses will be able to decipher and apply the lessons? It will be a wasted effort to try to correct the community through "doctrines". The Legalists firmly believe that only a strong obedience to law can correct the behavior of society. Education only leads to a deviance from an orderly government. Furthermore, the school of thought argues, "when urgent matters have not been accomplished, efforts should not be directed towards things that can wait" (The Han Fei Tzu, Chan 259). When the agriculture, shelter, and safety of the people have not been attended to, there is absolutely no point in educating. The energy should be directed towards satisfying the inherent needs of the populace above all else. Basic needs must be attended to before teaching can occur. Confucianism disagrees with the legalists on almost all fronts when it comes to education. The Legalists share the same anti-education sentiments as the Taoists do, but for different reasons. The Taoist movement was also highly against intellectual development, as they believe it interfered with genuinely experiencing life. They perceived knowledge through experience as much more valuable than something that can be extracted from a lecture or a book. As the Tao Te Ching outlines, "the wise are not learned, and the learned are not wise" (Tao-Te Ching 20, Chan 149). The "learned" refer to the educated who essentially take abstract ideas and divide them up, ultimately becoming even more confused and disorganized than they were previously. The "wise" become so through experiencing life untarnished by such outside influence. The mystical poet Han-Shan compared an intellectual

and his knowledge to "the words of a blind man describing the sun" (Han-Shan, Red Pine poem 283). He accentuates that artificial intelligence gained through books does not align with people's experience with the world. Learned knowledge hinders a greater understanding and perception of our surroundings. As the Taoist writer Chuang-tse worded it, a scholar "is restricted by his own learning" (Chuang-tse, 24). A general concept of Taoism is that scholarly intellect only leaves one with a finite sense of understanding. They reach a wall in which analysis is of no further help and the deeper and broader matters of life are not attainable. In a sense, this philosophy is similar to that of the Legalists. They both believe that education hinders the populace, but in different manners. The Legalists believe it interferes with the order of the government and well being of the general population, whereas the Taoists see it as inhibiting understanding on a more individual level. However, in terms of governance from a Taoist perspective, Lao Tzu preaches to "administer the empire by engaging in no activity" (Tao-Te Ching 57, Chan 166). With respect to education, he is simply saying not to enforce it on the population. They will become prosperous in their own right. Things will appear less disoriented, vicious, and confusing with a laissez-faire style of government that does not force education upon the people. Again, this school of thought is in stark contrast with that of Confucianism. The Taoists are parallel with the Legalists with respect to education, there is just differing motivation behind their rationale. All three schools, Confucianism, Legalism, and Taoism, all possess unique perspectives on the relevance of education on both the individual and government level. Perhaps Confucius starkly contrasts with the other two the greatest, as he is the only one to adamantly support teaching. Confucianism

firmly believes that education cultivates morality and virtue on the individual level. Also, if an individual (the leader) is humane and virtuous, it will trickle down to the rest of the population and they will follow suit. Thus, education is of the utmost importance, as it is the primary tool used to guide humanity. Both the Legalists and the Taoists are resolutely apposed to education, but with unique motives. Han Fei and his followers believe that learning disrupts the order of society, and thus affecting the welfare of the individual. Taoism argues that learning hinders the individual's experience of life and ultimately inhibits one from a greater understanding. Therefore, the government should not be involved with educating the general population either, otherwise it will breed mass disorientation and confusion. Education was a controversial issue in the intellectual foundations of Chinese civilization, as all three primary schools of thought had contrasting opinions on it with regards to its affect on the welfare of people.