# Background Information on Confucianism

*Confucius*

Confucianism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of Kong Fuzi (called Confucius by Europeans), a man who lived in China from 551 to 479 B.C.E. Confucius was born into a family of low-ranking nobles. After completing his education, he worked as an accountant for the ruling Zhou (pronounced JOE) dynasty. As the Zhou empire weakened and various Chinese states began battling for power, Confucius became sad. He recalled the virtues of past rulers who had maintained a peaceful and stable society. Gradually he gathered followers and taught them what he believed was the proper way to live. After his death, Confucius's followers compiled many of his sayings into a book called *Analects,* or "Selected Sayings," which became the most important source of his teachings.

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **Who was Confucius?**
- **What conditions in ancient China made Confucius sad?**

Confucianism is a philosophy that defines proper conduct for people and governments. According to Confucius, people are naturally good and should concentrate on improving their behavior and doing what they know is right. He called this proper behavior *li* (pronounced LEE). Confucius believed that if everyone followed li, society would be ordered and peaceful. He taught that a harmonious society had to be built upon Five Key Relationships: (1) ruler and subject, (2) parent and child, (3) husband and wife, (4) elder sibling (brother or sister) and younger sibling, and (5) friend and friend. The first four are hierarchical relationships in which one person is viewed as the superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person is expected to be benevolent and to set a good example of moral behavior. The fifth relationship is the only one in which the persons are considered equal. In addition to each person behaving properly, Confucious believed that for society to be strong, rulers must be models of virtue.

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **What is *li*?**
- **What were the responsibilities of individuals in each of the five basic relationships?**

Few rulers during Confucius's time accepted his ideas. However, long after his death, his teachings spread throughout China. Beginning with the Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 B.C.E to 220 C.E., Confucianism became the official state belief system. Because of their emphasis on loyalty, Confucian teachings allowed the Han government to have a more stable leadership. Under Han emperors and later rulers, government officials were chosen based on their education in Confucian teachings and performance on examinations intended to reveal who were "worthy Confucian" individuals. Successful candidates served as officials all across China.

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **During which dynasty did Confucian ideas become widely accepted in China?**
- **What did candidates have to show they knew to be chosen as government officials?**

# Background Information on Daoism

Daoism is a belief system based largely on the writings of a Chinese wise person, or *sage,* named Laozi (pronounced LAU-ZUH). Scholars know so little about Laozi's life that some people believe he is only a legendary figure. However, many scholars believe that Laozi was born in the late sixth century B.C.E., and kept records in the court of the Zhou (pronounced JOE) empire. Laozi believed that striving for power and wealth was harmful because it was unnatural. He wrote down his ideas, which people later collected in a book called *Daodejing,* or "The Way and Its Power."

*Laozi*

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **Who was Laozi?**
- **According to Laozi, why should people not strive for power and wealth?**

Daoism is a philosophy that teaches that people can gain peace and happiness by becoming one with the Dao, or the Way. The Dao is a universal force connected to nature that creates order for all things. Daoism teaches that people should see themselves as part of nature, and lead a balanced life in harmony with it. Laozi believed that for people to discover how to behave, they should notice how nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. Instead, nature accepts what comes its way, like a piece of grass that bends when the breeze blows. True harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called yin and yang. Laozi taught that it is impossible to have good without bad, beauty without ugliness, or pleasure without pain. Because Daoists see good and bad as connected, they try to accept both.

Laozi taught rulers to make fewer laws. He called the way of ruling *wuwei* (pronounced WOO-WAY), or "action through nonaction." Rather than attempting to take control and guide the people, a ruler should take very little action and only support the people in achieving what they naturally desire. Just as a farmer cannot force a plant to grow, Laozi thought that a ruler cannot force the people to prosper.

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **What is the Dao?**
- **According to Daoists, how can people gain peace and happiness?**
- **Why do Daoists try to accept all things that occur?**
- **How did Laozi believe rulers should govern?**

During the Han dynasty, from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., Confucianism became the official state belief system. However, Han rulers also adopted some Daoist principles. For example, they made fewer laws and fought fewer wars, believing that laws and wars do not naturally strengthen society. One emperor followed Daoist advice and eliminated a heavy land tax on poor farmers. For a time, this policy helped ease the hunger of poor people.

**Stop Here & Discuss**
- **In what ways did Han laws reflect Daoism?**

# Background Information on Legalism



*Punishment ordered by followers of Han Fei*

Legalism is a philosophy based on the ideas of Han Fei (pronounced HAHN-FAY), a Chinese man who lived during the Zhou (pronounced JOE) dynasty around 280 to 233 B.C.E. Han Fei was born a prince of the royal family of the state of Han. As a young man he received an excellent education under the most important Confucian scholars of his day. Surrounded by Chinese states battling for power under the weak Zhou empire, Han Fei questioned whether following Confucian principles could solve society's problems. He did not agree with Confucian teachings that claimed proper behavior alone could create a stable and peaceful society. In a book called *Han Feizi* (pronounced HAN-FAY-ZUH), or "Basic Writings," Han Fei instructed rulers to strengthen their state by enforcing strict laws, including severe punishments. He hoped the rulers who followed this philosophy, known as Legalism, would one day make China united and powerful again.

**Stop Here & Discuss**  ☞
- **Who was Han Fei?**
- **Why did Han Fei write *Basic Writings*?**

Han Fei believed that most people were naturally evil and selfish. According to Han Fei, the only way to achieve a strong society was to create laws with clear punishments and rewards. For example, people caught criticizing the government could immediately be punished by being sent to live in China's far northern frontier. Legalists taught that rulers should create detailed laws to train people to accept the rulers' authority automatically. Legalists also believed that to be most effective, rulers must never demonstrate or give in to feelings of affection or charity. Above all, Han Fei said, rulers should trust no one, including their own families, because "he who trusts others will be controlled by others."

**Stop Here & Discuss**  ☞
- **According to Han Fei, what was the best way to create a strong society?**
- **How did Han Fei believe a ruler should govern?**

Legalist philosophy was applied by rulers during the Qin (pronounced CHIN) empire, which rose after the Zhou dynasty and lasted from 221 to 206 B.C.E. Above all else, Qin rulers wanted to build a strong central government and a well-organized society. They sought to break up family loyalty so that people were most loyal to the government. The strictest way in which Qin rulers practiced Legalism was by forbidding, or *prohibiting,* people from criticizing the Qin government. Any person caught doing so was severely punished. Government critics might be burned alive, boiled to death in pots, or have their hands cut off. Qin punishments became so harsh that they actually caused some people to rebel against the government. Legalism eventually failed in China because it was too strict.

**Stop Here & Discuss**  ☞
- **In what ways were legalist ideas applied by Qin rulers?**