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8-8 Global

The Han dynasty of China, which lasted from 206 BCE to 220 AD, followed Confucianism as the official belief system of the state, but incorporated some Legalist and Daoist values into its ideology in order to establish a more practical way of life. Confucianism served as a basis for government and family life, which meant that Confucianism had the greatest impact on the Han people. Legalist ideas were demonstrated through the upkeep of a strong army, and the enforcement of the idea of an all-powerful ruler. Daoist ideas enabled the Han people to get a break from their responsibilities, and relax in the more laid-back environment of meditation and appreciation of nature. The compilation of certain features from these philosophies made for a more practical lifestyle which followed the key principles outlined by the government. The Han dynasty used Confucian ideas as a model for their everyday life and government, but also included aspects of Legalism and Daoism in order to better suit the people’s lives and values.

The Han dynasty followed Confucianism as the official belief system of the state, incorporating Confucius ideas into their government and family setup. Han rulers stressed the idea of filial piety, as they believed that the citizens’ respect for their parents would translate into respect for their rulers.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a well-known conversation between Confucius and one of his students, he explains: “if one serves one’s prince with the filiality one shows to one’s father, it becomes the virtue of fidelity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This tells us that one of the most important duties of a child is to obey his father, as this respect will translate into obedience towards his ruler. Another aspect of Confucian values which Han rulers emphasized was that a proper family strove for harmony rather than justice.[[3]](#footnote-3) Their reasoning for instilling this into the minds of their people from an early age was that if their people grew accustomed to making sacrifices for their family, and eventually, the state, then there would be fewer rebellions. Han rulers also relied on well-educated scholars to run their bureaucratic government, an idea which had originally been Confucius’s. These scholar-officials were expected to be well-dignified, and possess a thorough knowledge of history, poetry, and Confucian teachings.[[4]](#footnote-4) The people of the Han dynasty practiced the ideas of Confucianism, which were most prevalent in their family structure and the presence of well-educated officials.

Although the Han dynasty dispelled Legalist views on the proper way a government should be run, they maintained a strong army, and enforced the idea that the ruler was all-powerful, and superior to all. Emperor Wudi followed a policy of expansionism, and fought many battles to expand China’s borders.[[5]](#footnote-5) This demonstrated the lasting effect of Legalism in the area, as Wudi was still aiming to gain more and more power by taking over the weaker states around him, using the strength provided by his powerful military. Emperor Wudi also made sure to establish firm control over both the country, and the ministers who had any significant power. He demanded that his ministers report directly to him, eliminating any chance for them to gain power and influence without his knowing it.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Han government made sure the people understood the superiority of the ruler, so that they would never even dare attempt to undermine the emperor’s authority. A Han government official once wrote that “he who rules the people is the foundation of the state.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The Han government understood the importance of a superior ruler with control over a powerful military, but used Daoist and Confucian ideas to contrast the cruelty of some of the other laws, such as unforgiving punishments. These punishments had caused the people to rebel in the Qin dynasty[[8]](#footnote-8), and so putting them into practice would have contradicted their efforts to build up the ruler, therefore having a negative rather than positive effect on the people’s loyalty. The Han dynasty eased the harsher Legalist policies, but kept intact a strong army and the ruler’s unquestionable control over the state.

Under the reign of the Confucian Han dynasty there were many responsibilities and duties, and so Daoism provided an escape from these pressures. Although Emperor Wudi officially replaced Daoism as the official belief system with Confucianism soon after he came to power, the court officials still “sought longevity”.[[9]](#footnote-9) This was because, although they supported the Confucian emperor, they still refused to forgo certain Daoist rituals which were believed to prolong one’s life. Wu himself continued to engage in many Daoist practices, such as the use of alchemy, climbing the sacred Taishan mountain, and presenting offerings to heaven.[[10]](#footnote-10) In a discussion between Emperor Wen and his ministers, Emperor Wen proposed, “Have we… neglected the gods that they do not accept our offerings?”[[11]](#footnote-11) He wondered if the famine had been due to their failure to properly show their respect to heaven through offerings, which was a primarily Daoist custom. The people also followed some of these practices, as they had become part of the ritual of their daily lives, kept alive from generation to generation. Daoist beliefs also stated that one should follow the Way, which encouraged Daoists to take the lower path, and bow down to your superiors.[[12]](#footnote-12) So, Daoism emphasized the rigid Confucian hierarchy, but served as a break from its strict regulations.

In order to better suit the lives of their people, the Han utilised a synthesis of Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism. Confucian ideals modeled the way the government and each family unit should be run, thus having the largest impact on the people’s everyday lives. Legalist values were upheld through the control of a strong military, and the emphasis on an all-powerful ruler. Daoist rituals and traditions were kept alive because of their practicality, but also as a way for the Han people to get away from the obligations and discipline expected of them in day-to-day life. The Han dynasty incorporated Confucian ideas into the structure of their everyday life and government, but also included characteristics of Legalism and Daoism in order to better suit their lives and values.

1. Jean Elliott Johnson and Donald James Johnson, "Establishing A Synthesis In The Age Of Empires," in *World History: From the Beginning to 500 C.E.* (n.p.: Markus Wiener, 2009), 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, "Selections from The Classic of Filiality (Xiaojing)," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1:[Page #], accessed November 18, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/classic\_of\_filiality.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Confucianism," TotallyHistory, last modified April 30, 2012, accessed November 18, 2014, http://totallyhistory.com/confucianism-during-the-han-dynasty/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler, "The Han Dynasty Strengthens China," in *World History* (n.p.: Pearson Education, 2009), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson and Johnson, "Establishing A Synthesis In The Age Of Empires," in *World History: From the Beginning*, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dong Zhongshu, "From Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals: “The Responsibilities of Rulership”," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, by Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1:[Page #], accessed November 18, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/dongzhongshu\_rulership.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, "Selections from The Classic of Filiality (Xiaojing)," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1:[Page #], accessed November 18, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/classic\_of\_filiality.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "Daoism (Taoism)," Ancient World History, last modified April 2012, accessed November 18, 2014, http://earlyworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/04/daoism-taoism.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Emperor Wen, "Edict of Emperor Wen on the Primacy of Agriculture," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, by Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1:[Page #], accessed November 18, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/emperor\_wen\_agriculture.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Myron L. Cohen and Stephen F. Teiser, "Defining Daoism: A Complex History," Asia for Educators, last modified 2007, accessed November 18, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/ort/daoism.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)