

## Background Information on Confucianism

**Directions:** The following information will help your group create a character collage on Confucianism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

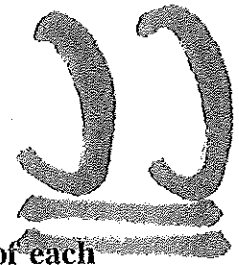
Confucianism is a belief system based on the teachings of Kong Fu Zi (called Confucius by Europeans), who lived in China from 551 to 479 B.C. Confucius lived when the Zhou empire, which had provided peace and stability for centuries, was weakening. With no central authority in control, war between provincial lords increased and poverty and crime rose. This violence and moral decay troubled Confucius. Confucius urged people to uphold the great traditions and customs of the past, so society could again be well ordered. To return to the past, he suggested a code of conduct based on strict moral ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The Confucian code of conduct stressed virtues (good actions), or *li*, such as respect, loyalty, honesty, hard work, politeness, and generosity. It also established five basic relationships that created a hierarchical (ordered) society: (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. In each relationship, individuals had responsibilities and duties toward one another. The fifth relationship was the only one in which the persons were considered equals and had equal responsibility to respect and aid each other in times of difficulty. By contrast, in the first four relationships, one person was viewed as superior and worthy of respect and obedience. In turn, this superior person was expected to set a good example of moral behavior. According to Confucius, evil rulers were responsible for evil actions of their subjects. Similarly, a father was responsible for his children's good or bad behavior.



- What problems was Confucius concerned about?
- What behaviors did the Confucian code of conduct stress?
- What were the responsibilities of individuals in each of the five basic relationships?

Because the family was the basic unit of Chinese society, Confucius emphasized family relationships. He stressed *filial piety*, or repaying the kindness of one's parents, elders, and family ancestors. A child was supposed to be absolutely loyal to and obedient and respectful of his or her parents. In return, parents were obligated to provide for the child and raise him or her with proper manners and respect for others. Younger siblings were supposed to respect and obey their older siblings; older siblings were expected to be responsible and model good behavior. In addition, a wife was supposed to love and obey her husband absolutely, and the husband, in turn, was obliged to provide for and be good to his wife. Confucianism perceived women as inferior—as a child, a girl was supposed to obey her father; as a wife, a woman was supposed to obey her husband; and when she was old and her children were grown, a mother was supposed to obey her sons.



- In your own words, what is *filial piety*?
- According to Confucius, what are the responsibilities of each family member?

Confucius believed that if everyone behaved according to *li* in their relationships, society as a whole would be peaceful and harmonious. He believed that the emperor had to provide good leadership and set an example of how to live a virtuous (morally good) and responsible life. If he was a wise and just ruler, his subjects would be obedient, and there would be harmony (peace and good will) in the government. Likewise, if children respected and obeyed their parents, wives respected their husbands, and younger siblings obeyed older siblings, family life would be peaceful. If everyone at every level in society obeyed the *li* appropriate to their situation, police, jails, and war would not be necessary because everyone would naturally do what was best for the community.

Confucian philosophy strongly influences much of Chinese society today. Most families still operate according to Confucian principles, and children are expected to be loyal and obey their parents. The elderly are treated with great reverence (honor) and respect by the young. Government is still controlled by an elite (top) few; there has never been a democracy in China. Throughout China—in government, business, and many families—society is still governed by hierarchical relationships between superiors and inferiors.



- According to Confucius, what would make society harmonious?
- How does Confucianism influence Chinese society today?

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### Quotes from the Teachings of Confucius

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**Quote 1:** *“Be respectful at home, serious at work, faithful in human relations. Even if you go to uncivilized areas, these virtues [good qualities] are not to be abandoned.”*

**Quote 2:** *“Seeing that our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our parents, we should not allow it to be injured in any way. This is the beginning of filial respect [repaying a parent’s kindness]. We develop our own character and practice the way so as to perpetuate our name for future generations, and to bring honor to our parents.”*

**Quote 3:** *“Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety [li], and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right.”*



## Background Information on Daoism

**Directions:** The following information will help your group create a character collage on Daoism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Daoism (pronounced *DOW-ism*) is a belief system based largely on the *Daodejing*, or “The Way and Its Power,” a sacred text that many believe was written by Laozi (pronounced *LAU-zzz*), a legendary sage (wise person). Laozi, whose Chinese name translates to “wise, old master,” is believed to have lived from 606 to 530 B.C. and to have been the first Daoist philosopher. Laozi lived during troubled times in China. The Zhou empire was weakening and could not assure security for the Chinese people. Laozi concluded that people should be able to find happiness and peace within themselves, rather than depending on success and wealth. He wrote the *Daodejing* to guide people on how to live and find happiness.

Laozi thought the goal of life was to achieve oneness with the Dao (the Way), a universal force connected to nature that cannot be defined, only experienced and felt. Daoism teaches that humans should see themselves as part of nature. The only true rules and laws, according to Laozi, are the rules and laws of nature, or Dao. To discover how to behave, Daoists believe people should observe nature and try to live in harmony with it. To discover how nature acts, Laozi, sit by a river, feel a breeze, and observe a drifting cloud. In doing so, one notices that nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. The river, the breeze, and the stream move without effort because they follow the Dao, the way of nature that guides all things. Similarly, a simple creature like a squirrel is naturally wise because it does not argue or strive for personal glory. The squirrel simply follows the Dao of its nature.

Likewise, Laozi felt that the small agricultural villages in which most Chinese lived were ideal communities. These villages had little government or formal education systems, and villagers lived in harmony with the agricultural cycles on which their lives depended. He believed that these communities would remain happy and prosperous if left to themselves, rather than controlled by intellectuals and government officials.



- How did Laozi believe that people should find happiness?
- What is the Dao?
- According to Daoists, how should people discover how to behave?
- Why did Laozi feel small agricultural villages were ideal communities?

According to Laozi, to achieve oneness with the Dao, individuals should contemplate (think about) nature and lead a balanced life in tune with nature. Daoism teaches that harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called *yin and yang*. A classic Daoist metaphor is a simple bowl: the yang is the clay that makes up the bowl, but the bowl’s true usefulness lies in the yin, the empty space, the nothing at its center. 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, neither bragging about good fortune nor complaining about bad fortune. All things that occur are accepted as part of the balance of yin and yang.



- What are yin and yang?
- Why do Daoists accept all things that occur?

Laozi was opposed to organized government, but he knew that lords and emperors would not disappear and leave people to govern themselves. Rather, he believed that the Dao contained rules by which rulers should govern. The most important principle of Daoism for the ruler to follow was what Laozi called *wuwei* (pronounced *woo-way*), which translates as “action through non-action.” 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. A plant grows best on its own, and excessive prodding from the farmer only hurts it. Likewise, people already know how to live, and a ruler who makes too many laws will only interfere and cause problems. Daoists believe the principle of *wuwei* can be applied to all areas of life.

Since Laozi’s time, Daoist philosophy has been an important influence on Chinese culture, and it continues to be. Chinese people have survived difficult periods in recent Chinese history by practicing *wuwei*, not trying to take control of the situation, but rather waiting for the situation to pass. One can also see Daoist influence in how nature is portrayed in Chinese landscape paintings, which show serene mountains (yin) contrasted with violent storms (yang). The paintings often include humans, but always as small beings living in harmony with a natural world, which is depicted as larger and more powerful.



- How did Laozi believe a ruler should rule?
- What is *wuwei*? How does it relate to Daoism?
- How does Daoism influence Chinese society today?

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### Quotes from the Teachings of Laozi

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**Quote 1:** *“Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way.”*

**Quote 2:** *“The more laws and edicts are imposed, the more thieves and bandits there will be.”*

**Quote 3:** *“Of the best rulers the people only know that they exist; the next best they love and praise; the next they fear; and the next they revile. When the best rulers have done their task, the people all remark, ‘We have done it ourselves!’ ”*

## 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.



- 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."



- 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.



- In what ways were legalist ideas applied by Qin rulers?

