The Han Philosophy: A Synthesis

The Han Dynasty, dating from 206 BC to 220 AD, was one of the most successful dynasties of China, resulting in great economic, scientific and technological progress.¹ Han society was quite complex, incorporating dynamic systems of hierarchies and coming up with detailed purposes for all members of society, whether it was the common folk or the noble classes. Different Chinese schools of thought all had effects on these systems to varying degrees, leading to many practices based on the values promoted by each school. Therefore, the predominant philosophy in the Han was a synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism.

Filial piety², a Confucian concept, was one of the values emphasized in Han society. Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian scholar and official, wrote in his book, “The Responsibilities of Rulership,” that “(an enlightened ruler) establishes academics to teach filial piety...without filial and brotherly love, people lack the means to live....filiality is the root of virtue and the wellspring of instruction.”³ This quotation shows how much the Han prized filial piety among emperors and his subjects. They believed that it was completely essential to ensure a harmonious kingdom and home. Even Buddhism, a religion that was largely unsupportive of family ties and encouraged monks to abandon attachments to family for the sake of nirvana, was molded to encourage family values when it arrived in China.⁴ This concept was also

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¹ “Han Dynasty”, ancient.eu, Last modified 27 May 2013, http://www.ancient.eu/Han_Dynasty/
² Defined as reverence for superiors and elders by Confucius.
⁴ Kenneth Traylor, Chinese Filial Piety (Bloomington: Eastern Press, 1988), pages 110-112
reflected in Han family dynamics, where the children of the family were supposed to obey their parents’ will without fail, and constantly make them proud.

The strong military power of the Han was a result of a different philosophy’s influence: Legalism. Emperor Wu, who ruled during the Western Han, instituted a harsh tax policy on agriculture, raising money for the treasury. Using this treasury, he initiated many exploration projects to plan his military campaigns. Ultimately, he launched hundreds of military campaigns, and by the end of his rule, China had grown to a great size, even occupying modern-day Vietnam and Korea. ⁵ Emperor Wu also did not tolerate surrender; when one military leader surrendered when he thought all was lost, he and his whole family were sentenced to death. ⁶ The Grand Historian who defended him was sentenced to death or castration; even though being an eunuch was considered incredibly humiliating, he decided that he had to keep living, writing that “A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it.” ⁷ This source elaborates on the Legalist idea of militarism, the belief that the government should maintain an unshakable military force and use it aggressively under all circumstances. ⁸ The Legalist idea of harsh punishments is also reflected in the tale above.

The Daoist tradition of *wuwei*, or “not striving”, was also an inspiration for social values to the Han, as they incorporated it into a synthesis of Legalism and Confucianism. In the initial period of the Han, emperors and nobles came up with a “laissez-faire version of Daoism, known as Huang-Lao. ⁹ This philosophy stressed the idea of limited government intervention in citizen affairs, arguing that the government’s priority was to make the people’s lives easy.

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⁵ Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Han Dynasty”, metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hand/hd_hand/htm
⁷ De Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*
⁸ New Oxford American Dictionary, page 1462
⁹ Indiana University, “The Han Dynasty”
Laozi, the founder of Taoism, explained that “Use uprightness in ruling a State; employ stratagems in waging war; practise non-interference in order to win the Empire.” 10 This quote summarizes the teachings of Huang-Lao. Although an emperor should govern well and ensure the wellbeing of his country, he should also not interfere with the lives of his citizens. It also shows why Daoism and Legalism were compatible in this synthesis; the Han removed the Daoist qualities they found harmful (such as passivity) to better blend in with the Legalist and Confucian ideas of good government.

The philosophical synthesis reached by the Han people was one of the most significant advances of the Han Dynasty. Previous dynasties had come to a standstill because of their extreme reliance on one philosophy, which led to excessive harshness or passivity, two opposite sides of the spectrum. Using values from all schools of thought led to better philosophical solutions, which in turn led to a strong, centralized government which placed a higher emphasis on morality than its predecessors.

10 Lionel Giles, “The Sayings of Lao-Tzu”