

Philosophical Foundations of Classical China

Qin Dynasty- Short-Lived Legalism

Characters – Narrator, Qin Emperor Shi Huangdi, 2 Civil Servants, 2 Confucian Scholars

NARRATOR: In 221 BCE, one power rose up and dominated all the Warring States, become the rulers of China. That power was the **Qin** [Chin] Dynasty, and its ruler was **Shi Huangdi** [Shihr Hwong-Dee] became the first Emperor of China. He ruled according to the philosophy of **Legalism**, which taught that order could only be restored by a powerful government with strict laws and harsh punishments.

(Shi Huangdi stands center-stage, tapping his foot and looking impatient, Civil servants walk in from stage right)

SHI HUANGDI: There you are! Where have you been?! What kind of bureaucrats are you that you can't be here when you are needed by the emperor of China?!

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Are we late, your Majesty?

CIVIL SERVANT 1: You asked us to meet here at noon. Is it not noon now?

SHI HUANGDI: Well... next time, be here early!

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Yes your majesty!

CIVIL SERVANT 2: A thousand apologies your majesty

SHI HUANGDI: Never mind that. What matters are there that I must deal with today?

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Sir, reports have come in that nomads are raiding in the north again.

CIVIL SERVANT 2: They come in quickly on their horses shooting arrows like PEW PEW PEW!

SHI HUANGDI: Alright enough of this! I've had it with these barbarians. Those tiny walls built here and there by the Zhou dynasty can't get the job done. I order the building of a Great Wall that will stretch across the entire northern border of China and keep out those nomads once and for all! Assemble the peasant farmers and put them to work immediately.

CIVIL SERVANT 2: A wonderful idea sir! So how much will they be paid for their labor?

SHI HUANGDI: Pay? HAH! They don't need to be paid! The people will build the wall out of love for China and for their great emperor.

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Your majesty, certainly you are a great emperor, but I do not think the people will work for that reason alone. After all, they must feed their families.

SHI HUANGDI: Nonsense! If they won't work for love of country, tell them that any man who refuses to work on my Great Wall will be put to death!

CIVIL SERVANT 2: That ought to do it...

SHI HUANGDI: What else is there.

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Well, you asked us to remind you to deal with the nobles?

SHI HUANGDI: Ah yes! Those pesky nobles, those lords of local lands, they think they are so powerful, they dare to challenge me?! I decree that from this day forward, all the nobles must leave their lands and come to live here at the capital where I can keep an eye on them. I'll have no funny business on my watch!

CIVIL SERVANT 2: But sir, who will run the different territories of China if the nobles are no longer lords of their lands?

SHI HUANGDI: I will choose my own governors to run each territory, and they will answer to me.

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Brilliant your majesty! So we must strengthen the trunk by weakening the branches?

SHI HUANGDI: What the heck does that mean?

CIVIL SERVANT 1: What I meant was, we make the central government stronger by getting rid of other competing powers.

SHI HUANGDI: Oh that's good, I like that! Write that down, and say that I came up with it! (**Civil Servant writes it down**) Anything else?

CIVIL SERVANT 2: All that is left is to deal with the Confucian scholars.

SHI HUANGDI: Ugh I HATE Confucianism! What a STUPID philosophy. Those Confucian scholars love to criticize me. They say that rulers should be virtuous and respectful and provide a good example. But my philosophy of Legalism is much better! Legalists understand that rulers should be strong and govern through force because people are naturally bad and must be kept in line. If they step out of line... BAM! Harsh punishments are what they get. How else could I have turned China into a true empire and centralized power.

CIVIL SERVANT 1: So how should we silence the Confucian scholars?

SHI HUANGDI: I have confiscated all of their useless books. I order you to throw them into the fire so no one can read them and get any funny ideas. (**Civil Servants throw books into the fire**) And you know? While you're at it, throw the Confucian scholars in their too. Who needs them?! (**Civil Servants grab Confucian scholars from offstage left and throw them into the fire, Confucian scholars cry out in pain as they burn**). BAM! Hashtag Legalism!

CIVIL SERVANT 1: (**to Civil Servant 2**) There goes the Mandate of Heaven.

SHI HUANGDI: What was that?

CIVIL SERVANT 1: Huh? What? Nothing.

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Han Dynasty- How to Succeed in Bureaucracy by Really Trying
Characters – Narrator, Zhang Wei, Li Qiang, Han Emperor Wudi, 2 Confucian Scholars

NARRATOR: Soon after Shi Huangdi's death, the Qin dynasty collapsed and China fell into civil war. But out of the chaos emerged a new ruling family, the Han Dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, about 400 years. They set the example for the rest of the dynasties to come.

(Zhang Wei and Li Qiang are sitting in desks next to each other, finishing their exams. Narrator walks by and collects their tests.)

ZHANG WEI: Phew! That was some exam!

LI QIANG: I know man, I had to guess on a lot of those.

ZHANG WEI: I was up all night studying. How about you? Did you study a lot?

LI QIANG: Um, you know, I studied. So your trying to get a Civil Service job, a job working for the government? What kind of work are you hoping to do?

ZHANG WEI: Well, I've been hearing great things about the trade networks of the Silk Road, and I'd love to get involved monitoring trade for the government. Our silk merchants are doing great business ever since the Han Emperor Wudi expanded the trade routes. Apparently we're even doing business with a place called Rome.

LI QIANG: Never heard of it. That's cool, but I really want to get a government job where I can work on keeping China safe from those annoying nomads in the north. So far they've just been paying them off to keep them from invading us, but I heard they're about to start fighting, and that sounds super awesome.

ZHANG WEI: Cool story bro. So how do you think you did on the test? Do you think you'll get a job?

LI QIANG: Oh, I'm not worried at all. See, I have an inside connection. My uncle works for the government, and he said he's going to talk to some of his friends to get me a good position. Honestly I guessed on most of that Civil Service Exam.

ZHANG WEI: Oh man, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your uncle wont be able to help you.

LI QIANG: What are you talking about?

ZHANG WEI: See, ever since the Han Dynasty took over, they've gotten rid of Legalism and adopted Confucianism as the philosophy for the government. ***(Stage left, Wudi and Confucian scholars greet and shake hands)*** See, Emperor Wudi goes to the Confucian scholars for advice, and they told him that, if he wants to have a strong and effective government...

CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 1: (to Wudi) ...you must make sure everyone who works in the government gets a job because they are educated and qualified for their positions, not just because they know someone.

CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 2: (to Wudi) So anyone who applies to work in the Civil Service, they should take a Civil Service Exam to test their knowledge of lots of things, especially Confucian ideas!

CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 1: (to Wudi) Then you can be sure that you have the best people in government!

(Wudi and Scholars walk off stage left happy and shaking hands)

ZHANG WEI: So you see, that's the way they do things now. If you want the job, you have to be qualified. It's called a meritocracy, meaning people get ahead and move up based on merit, or how good they are, how much they deserve it.

LI QIANG: Man, this stinks. I liked things better when they were corrupt. Hey, if I pay you, will you retake the test for me?

(Zhang Wei puts his palm to his face in frustration)