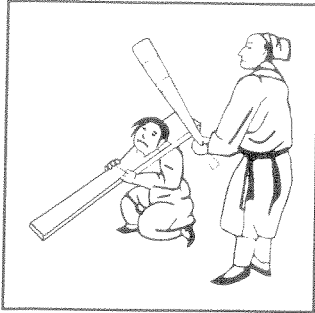


Background Information on Legalism



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?