

Legalism and Daoism: A Comparative Analysis of Mystical Elements in Ancient Chinese Philosophies

Leni Lenong

Research Scholar at the Seoul School for the Policy Studies, Seoul

Dr. Maham Toqeer (Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor and the Research Supervisor at the Seoul School for Policy Studies, Seoul (South Korea)

Email: mahamtoqeer369@gmail.com

Publication History:

Received: May 11, 2024

Revised: May 26, 2024

Accepted: June 09, 2024

Published Online: August 01, 2024

Keywords:

Yellow Emperor,
Han Feizi,
Han China,
Political Behavior,
Pragmatism,
Wu Wei,

Research related to Academic Areas:

Chinese Studies & Chinese Religions

Acknowledgment:

This is a sole project of the **Author**.

Ethical Consideration:

This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

Legalism and Daoism represent two distinct philosophical traditions that emerged during ancient China's Warring States period, each offering unique perspectives on governance and human conduct. Legalism, epitomized by figures like Shang Yang and Han Fei, emphasizes strict adherence to laws and regulations as essential for maintaining social order and political stability. In contrast, Daoism, attributed to Laozi and Zhuangzi, advocates for natural spontaneity (wu wei) and harmony with the Dao, a cosmic principle underlying all existence. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of these philosophical systems, focusing on their mystical elements and their implications for governance and societal values. Key research questions include examining how mystical concepts such as cosmic alignment, the role of the ruler and ethical conduct are articulated within Legalist and Daoist texts and exploring their influence on later Chinese philosophical and religious thought. This study sheds light on the nuanced interplay between pragmatic governance and metaphysical speculation in ancient Chinese philosophy.

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Introduction

In the realm of ancient Chinese philosophical thought, the interplay between Legalism and Daoism stands as a testament to the multifaceted approaches to governance and metaphysics that evolved during the Warring States period. Sima Qian's categorization of Huang-Lao philosophy as a pivotal precursor to both Legalist and Daoist doctrines reflects a nuanced understanding of political and metaphysical ideologies in early Chinese history (Sima, 2023).

Sima Qian's assertion that a Yellow Emperor Daoism existed finds substantiation in artifacts such as the Mawangdui Silk Texts and textual references like those in the Han Feizi, suggesting an early conceptualization of governance intertwined with metaphysical beliefs (Sima, 2023; Hansen, 2005). These

texts, rooted in the socio-political milieu of early Han China, reveal a philosophical landscape where metaphysical inquiry intertwines with practical political strategies.

Han Fei, a prominent figure in Legalist thought, presents a distinct perspective that is more politically focused than the typical metaphysical readings associated with Laozi. His interpretations of the Daodejing reflect a pragmatic approach aimed at shaping political behavior and maintaining social order through administrative strategies (Han, 2010). This contrasts with later Daoist texts that emphasize metaphysical principles and spiritual contemplation.

Moreover, the Mawangdui Silk Texts and Guodian Chu Slips highlight the early Daoist emphasis on political governance, particularly through concepts like *wu wei*, which advocates non-action as a method of governance (Creel, 1953). This pragmatic approach to political theory underscores the Daoist interest in effective rulership and social harmony, paralleling Legalist concerns for administrative efficiency and state stability.

This paper explores the dynamic interplay between Legalist and Daoist philosophies in ancient China, examining their philosophical underpinnings and practical implications for governance. By delving into primary texts and historical contexts, it aims to illuminate how these ideologies shaped early Chinese political thought and continue to influence interpretations of classical Chinese philosophy today.

Comparative Analysis of Legalism and Daoism

Legalism and Daoism represent contrasting philosophical traditions within ancient Chinese thought, each offering unique perspectives on governance, society and spiritual understanding. Legalism, emerging during the Warring States period, advocated for strict adherence to laws and centralized authority as essential for maintaining social order and stability (Creel, 1970). Proponents like Han Feizi and Shang Yang emphasized the rational application of laws and regulations to ensure obedience and productivity among the populace. Unlike other Chinese philosophical traditions, Legalism eschewed traditional mystical elements in favor of a pragmatic approach grounded in rationalism and utilitarian principles. This pragmatic outlook viewed human nature as inherently self-interested, requiring stringent governance and clear incentives to ensure societal harmony and prosperity (Creel, 1970).

Daoism, in contrast, originated concurrently with Legalism and offered a starkly different worldview centered around the concept of *Dao*, or the Way. Rooted in texts like the *Tao Te Ching* attributed to Laozi and the *Zhuangzi*, Daoism espoused principles of natural spontaneity, non-action (*wu wei*) and harmonious alignment with the natural order of the universe (Ames & Hall, 2003). Daoist thought emphasized transcending mundane concerns through spiritual cultivation, seeking harmony with the *Dao* as a mystical force governing existence. This mystical orientation manifested in Daoist practices such as meditation, alchemy and inner cultivation aimed at achieving spiritual transcendence and immortality (Ames & Hall, 2003). These practices underscored Daoism's holistic approach to life, advocating for a balance between human actions and the cosmic order, distinct from Legalism's pragmatic focus on governance and societal control.

Comparing Legalism and Daoism reveals profound conceptual differences in their approach to governance, societal impact and philosophical underpinnings. Legalism's rationalistic foundation prioritized centralized authority and strict adherence to laws as mechanisms for social stability and political control (Creel, 1970). It viewed governance as a calculated endeavor aimed at optimizing human

behavior through incentives and deterrents, thereby ensuring order and productivity within the state. In contrast, Daoism's mystical elements centered on cultivating inner harmony and aligning with the natural rhythms of existence (Ames & Hall, 2003). Daoist philosophy encouraged a passive approach to governance (wu wei), advocating for leaders to act spontaneously in accordance with the Dao rather than impose rigid rules or regulations on society.

The impact of Legalism and Daoism on Chinese society differed significantly. Legalism's emphasis on governance and law contributed to social stability and political control, influencing administrative practices and legal systems throughout Chinese history (Creel, 1970). Its focus on meritocracy and reward-based incentives shaped bureaucratic structures and governance models in imperial China. In contrast, Daoism's mystical orientation permeated cultural expressions such as art, poetry, medicine and martial arts (Ames & Hall, 2003). It fostered alternative perspectives on leadership and governance, advocating for a harmonious balance between human endeavors and natural forces. Daoism's influence extended beyond political realms to encompass spiritual and cultural dimensions, enriching Chinese society with its emphasis on personal cultivation and spiritual transcendence.

Philosophically, Legalism and Daoism represent contrasting responses to the complexities of human nature and societal organization. Legalism's rationalistic approach aligned human behavior with external laws and regulations, emphasizing control and order as essential for societal progress (Creel, 1970). In contrast, Daoism's mystical orientation sought harmony with the ineffable Dao, advocating for a more intuitive and holistic understanding of existence (Ames & Hall, 2003). While Legalism focused on practical governance and societal control, Daoism offered a spiritual alternative that valued spontaneity, natural harmony and inner cultivation as pathways to personal fulfilment and societal harmony.

The comparative analysis of Legalism and Daoism underscores their distinct contributions to Chinese philosophy and governance. Legalism's pragmatic emphasis on governance and societal order contrasted with Daoism's mystical orientation towards spiritual transcendence and harmony with the natural world (Creel, 1970; Ames & Hall, 2003). Understanding their mystical elements provides a deeper appreciation of how these philosophical traditions have shaped Chinese thought and culture, offering valuable insights into the complexities of human nature, governance and spiritual fulfilment.

Socio-Religious Space of Legalism and Daoism in Modern Chinese Philosophies

In the landscape of modern Chinese philosophy, Legalism and Daoism represent foundational traditions that continue to influence socio-religious thought and practices. Each tradition offers unique perspectives on governance, society and spiritual life, shaping contemporary discourse on ethics, politics and cultural identity.

- **Legalism in Modern Chinese Philosophy**

Legalism, originating during China's Warring States period, remains influential in modern Chinese thought primarily through its emphasis on governance and political pragmatism. Historically championed by thinkers such as Han Feizi and Shang Yang, Legalism advocates for strict adherence to laws and regulations as essential tools for maintaining social order and political stability (Creel, 1970). This pragmatic approach views human nature as inherently self-interested and requires strong centralized authority to enforce laws effectively.

In contemporary Chinese philosophy, Legalist principles resonate in discussions on administrative efficiency, meritocracy and statecraft. Scholars argue that elements of Legalist thought can be

found in China's modern governance structures, emphasizing rationalistic policies aimed at economic development and social control (Creel, 1970). The legacy of Legalism continues to influence debates on authoritarianism versus liberalism in China's political landscape, reflecting its enduring relevance in shaping state policies and societal norms.

- **Daoism in Modern Chinese Philosophy**

Contrasting with Legalism's pragmatic outlook, Daoism offers a mystical and philosophical perspective rooted in the concept of Dao, or the Way. Daoist thought, as articulated in texts like the Tao Te Ching and the Zhuangzi, emphasizes harmony with the natural order, spontaneity (*wu wei*) and the cultivation of inner virtue (Ames & Hall, 2003). In modern Chinese philosophy, Daoism's influence extends beyond metaphysical speculation to encompass cultural practices, artistic expressions and ethical teachings.

Daoism's socio-religious space in contemporary China is marked by its impact on holistic health practices, environmental ethics and cultural revival movements. Practices such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong and traditional Chinese medicine derive from Daoist principles of aligning with natural rhythms and cultivating life energy (Ames & Hall, 2003). Moreover, Daoist ideals of humility, non-contention and ecological harmony resonate with efforts to promote sustainable development and environmental stewardship in China today.

The socio-religious space of Legalism and Daoism in modern Chinese philosophies highlights contrasting approaches to governance, spirituality and societal values. Legalism's focus on centralized authority and legalism contrasts sharply with Daoism's emphasis on spontaneity, harmony and spiritual cultivation (Creel, 1970; Ames & Hall, 2003). While Legalism informs statecraft and policy-making, Daoism influences cultural practices, ethical frameworks and personal well-being.

Contemporary Chinese intellectuals and policymakers navigate these philosophical traditions to address complex socio-political challenges while preserving cultural heritage and promoting national identity. Legalism's rationalistic framework provides strategies for governance and economic development, reflecting China's rise as a global power. Conversely, Daoism's emphasis on harmony and naturalism inspires movements towards sustainable living, ecological awareness and cultural revival (Ames & Hall, 2003).

Hence, the socio-religious space of Legalism and Daoism in modern Chinese philosophies illustrates their enduring impact on governance, cultural identity and ethical discourse. Legalism's pragmatic approach informs state policies and administrative practices, while Daoism's mystical teachings inspire cultural practices, environmental ethics and spiritual well-being (Creel, 1970; Ames & Hall, 2003). Understanding these philosophical traditions provides insights into contemporary Chinese thought and society, highlighting the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping China's philosophical landscape.

Mystical Concepts in Legalist and Daoist Texts: A Comprehensive Analysis

Legalism and Daoism, two prominent philosophical traditions in ancient China, present contrasting views on governance, ethics and cosmic alignment, each rooted in distinct metaphysical and ethical frameworks. This analysis examines how mystical concepts such as cosmic alignment, the role of the ruler and ethical conduct are articulated within Legalist and Daoist texts, shedding light on their philosophical underpinnings and contemporary relevance.

- **Cosmic Alignment in Legalist Texts**

Legalist philosophy, exemplified in works by Han Feizi and Shang Yang, emphasizes pragmatic governance and social control through rigorous laws and centralized authority (Creel, 1970). While not traditionally associated with mystical or cosmic principles, Legalist texts underscore the importance of aligning human behavior with state-enforced laws to achieve social order and political stability. The concept of cosmic alignment in Legalism is thus interpreted through the lens of human laws and regulations that dictate harmony and order within society.

- **The Role of the Ruler in Legalist Thought**

Central to Legalist thought is the role of the ruler as a pragmatic leader responsible for enforcing laws and maintaining social hierarchy. Legalist texts advocate for a strong, authoritative ruler who embodies discipline and impartiality to ensure obedience and loyalty among subjects (Creel, 1970). This perspective on rulership contrasts with Daoism's view of leadership, emphasizing control through institutional mechanisms rather than cosmic alignment or spiritual harmony.

- **Ethical Conduct in Legalism**

Legalist texts prescribe ethical conduct primarily in terms of adherence to laws and regulations that promote social harmony and political stability. Ethical behavior, from a Legalist perspective, involves obedience to authority and adherence to established norms rather than personal virtue or spiritual alignment with cosmic forces (Creel, 1970). This pragmatic approach to ethics reflects Legalism's emphasis on practical governance and societal control rather than mystical or metaphysical considerations.

- **Cosmic Alignment in Daoist Texts**

Daoist philosophy, as articulated in the Tao Te Ching and the Zhuangzi, centers on the concept of Dao, or the Way, which encompasses cosmic alignment and natural harmony (Ames & Hall, 2003). Daoist texts describe cosmic alignment as the spontaneous unfolding of natural processes and emphasize the importance of aligning human behavior with the rhythm of the cosmos to achieve harmony and balance. This mystical concept informs Daoist teachings on governance, ethics and personal cultivation.

- **The Role of the Ruler in Daoist Thought**

In contrast to Legalism, Daoist texts portray the ideal ruler as one who governs with humility, spontaneity (*wu wei*) and non-interference in natural processes (Ames & Hall, 2003). Daoist rulership emphasizes harmony with cosmic forces and advocates for a decentralized, non-coercive approach to governance that allows natural order to prevail. The role of the ruler in Daoist thought thus embodies qualities of restraint, wisdom and alignment with cosmic principles rather than authoritative control.

- **Ethical Conduct in Daoism**

Ethical conduct in Daoist philosophy centers on cultivating inner virtue, embracing simplicity and aligning with the natural order of the universe (Ames & Hall, 2003). Daoist ethics emphasize compassion, non-contention and spontaneity in actions, reflecting a deeper alignment with cosmic harmony and spiritual principles rather than adherence to external laws or social norms. This ethical framework promotes personal transformation and societal harmony through alignment with Daoist cosmology.

Thus, Legalist and Daoist texts offer distinct perspectives on mystical concepts such as cosmic alignment, the role of the ruler and ethical conduct within ancient Chinese philosophy. Legalism focuses on pragmatic

governance and social control through centralized authority and legalism, whereas Daoism emphasizes spiritual alignment with cosmic forces, natural harmony and ethical cultivation. Understanding these mystical concepts in their respective philosophical contexts provides insights into the enduring influence of Legalist and Daoist thought on governance, ethics and cosmic alignment in contemporary discourse.

The Fa School and its Relationship with Legalism and Daoism

The Fa School, also known as Fajia (emerged as a significant philosophical and political thought tradition in ancient China, alongside Legalism (Fajia is sometimes used interchangeably with Legalism) and Daoism. Here's an analysis of the Fa School and its relationship with Legalism and Daoism based on the provided text and historical context;

The Fa School, or Legalism, is characterized by its emphasis on strict adherence to laws and regulations as a means of governing society effectively. It advocates for centralized authority, rigorous penal codes and a meritocratic system of governance based on performance rather than hereditary privilege (Sima Qian, 2nd century BCE).

The Fa School is closely associated with Legalism due to its shared focus on governance through strict laws and regulations. Legalism, as a broader term, encompasses the Fa School's philosophy of imposing clear rules to maintain social order and achieve political stability. Figures like Shang Yang and Han Fei are key proponents of Legalism who contributed significantly to its development during the Warring States period and later Han dynasty (Sima Qian, 2nd century BCE).

In contrast to Daoism, which emphasizes harmony with natural principles and spontaneity (wu wei), the Fa School focuses on hierarchical order and the effective exercise of authority. Daoism criticizes the Fa School's strictness and lack of flexibility, advocating for a more organic approach to governance and ethical conduct aligned with the Dao (Ames & Hall, 2003).

During the Han dynasty, Emperor Wu (141-87 BCE) promoted Confucianism while suppressing other philosophical schools, including the Fa School and Daoism. This period saw a shift towards a Confucian-Legalist state, integrating Confucian ethical principles with Legalist governance techniques (Dingxin Zhao, modern era).

The Fa School, or Legalism, represents a significant philosophical tradition in ancient China, advocating for strict legal codes and centralized authority to maintain social order and political stability. Its relationship with Daoism underscores contrasting views on governance and ethics, reflecting broader debates within Chinese philosophy about the nature of authority and the role of law in society.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Fa School, or Legalism, within the broader context of ancient Chinese philosophy reveals its significant role in advocating for strict legal codes and centralized governance aimed at social order and political stability. Emerging during the Warring States period and influencing the Han dynasty, Legalism's emphasis on meritocracy and the effective exercise of authority contrasts sharply with Daoism's advocacy for spontaneity and harmony with natural principles. Despite historical suppression and assimilation efforts, Legalism's impact endured, contributing to ongoing debates about governance and ethical conduct in Chinese political thought. The Fa School's legacy underscores enduring questions

about the balance between rule-based governance and ethical leadership in shaping societies across different epochs.

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