Three Paths to Order

Compare ideas that shaped life and government in East Asia

WH.2.8 "Compare and contrast the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism on East Asian civilizations."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one way each tradition sought order, then number each example 1 for Confucianism, 2 for Taoism, or 3 for Legalism. Use your marks to compare where their approaches differ.

A Dispute Over Grain

1. Imagine a dispute over grain in a Han Chinese village. A father says his son owes him respect; a neighbor wants a fair hearing. Confucian thinkers argued that social order grew from ethical behavior, education, and proper relationships, including respect for parents and rulers. A ruler should set a moral example rather than rely only on punishment. Han emperors supported study of Confucian classics to train officials, although government did not always follow Confucian ideals. Centuries later, rulers and scholars in Korea and Japan also studied these texts, shaping education, family duties, and ideas about government.

2. A Taoist response to the same village dispute might begin with a different question: are people forcing a solution that creates more trouble? Taoist writings praise living in harmony with the Dao, often translated as the Way, and value simplicity and the patterns of nature. They warn that too many rules and ambitious plans can disturb balance. Unlike Confucianism, which emphasizes duties within social roles, Taoism often questions rigid expectations. In China, Taoist ideas influenced poetry, painting, and religious practices. Some Taoist ideas also reached Korea and Japan, where people adapted them alongside local beliefs.

3. A Legalist adviser to China's first Qin emperor would favor a different tool: clear laws backed by rewards and harsh penalties. Legalist thinkers distrusted the idea that moral teaching alone could keep order. The Qin government used strict laws and centralized authority to control officials and subjects. After the Qin fell, Han rulers kept parts of its centralized system while promoting Confucian learning. All three traditions addressed how people should live, but they disagreed about the best path to order: moral example, harmony with the Dao, or enforced law. Later East Asian governments drew especially on Chinese models of Confucian education and state administration.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Confucian and Legalist thinkers differ on the best way for rulers to maintain order?

2. In the village dispute, what would a Confucian thinker consider important that a Taoist thinker might question?

3. How did Taoist influence on life in China differ from the Confucian influence on government described in the passage?

4. How did Han rulers combine approaches associated with Confucianism and the earlier Qin government?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you advise an East Asian ruler whose town floods each spring. In 80 to 110 words, propose one response inspired by each of the three traditions, compare their approaches, and explain which two you would combine.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · WH.2.8

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one way each tradition sought order, then number each example 1 for Confucianism, 2 for Taoism, or 3 for Legalism. Use your marks to compare where their approaches differ. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Confucian and Legalist thinkers differ on the best way for rulers to maintain order?	**Confucian thinkers favored moral example and education; Legalist thinkers favored clear laws enforced through rewards and penalties.**
2	In the village dispute, what would a Confucian thinker consider important that a Taoist thinker might question?	**A Confucian thinker would stress proper family roles, including respect for parents. A Taoist thinker might question rigid expectations or a forced solution that creates more trouble.**
3	How did Taoist influence on life in China differ from the Confucian influence on government described in the passage?	**Taoist ideas influenced poetry, painting, and religious practices in China. Confucian learning helped train officials and shaped ideas about government.**
4	How did Han rulers combine approaches associated with Confucianism and the earlier Qin government?	**Han rulers promoted Confucian learning while keeping parts of the Qin government's centralized system.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

To the ruler: A Confucian approach would ask respected officials to teach families how to share safe shelter and lead by serving neighbors first. A Taoist approach would study the river's usual course and avoid building where water naturally spreads. A Legalist approach would set a clear rule against blocking drainage channels and assign penalties for breaking it. Confucianism relies on example, Taoism on living with nature, and Legalism on enforceable rules. I would combine Taoist planning with Legalist protection of channels. One reduces danger by respecting the river; the other keeps agreed safeguards in place.

Accept historically grounded comparisons in students' own words. For Part 3, responses should apply all three traditions to the new problem, compare their approaches, and justify a combination of two.