



# Analyzing the Han and Song Dynasties: Confucianism Adaptation in Chinese Feudal Politics

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**Abstract.** Confucianism has always occupied an important place in the history of Chinese philosophy. Confucianism served as a crucial tool for the ruling class to reinforce social control and centralize power through ideology. Since the Han dynasty, Confucianism, chosen as the governing ideology by the ruling class, has demonstrated its ample inclusivity and adaptability, as well as its compatibility with feudal monarchical autocracy. The Han and Song dynasties represent two critical stages in the development of Confucianism, the former established Confucianism's exclusive status as the dominant ideology in ancient China, while the latter marked its revival following challenges from Buddhism and Taoism. The reasons for these developments are closely related to the specific historical contexts of those times.

**Keywords:** Imperial Confucianism, Confucian politics, Han and Song dynasties.

## 1 Introduction

Each dynasty made a unique contribution to the development of traditional Chinese culture. However, the Han and Song dynasties represented the peak of traditional Chinese intellectual philosophy. Confucianism profoundly impacted the development of philosophy during the Han and Song dynasties as it evolved as the preeminent social philosophy of the period. The 'Han-Song Controversy' has also received substantial attention from later Confucianism scholars.

The Confucian era occurred during a period of intense fragmentation in China, during which the vassal governments adopted various philosophical doctrines as their governance rules. Confucius selected several states as the soil in which to grow his Confucian philosophy. After the turmoil of the peasant uprisings at the end of the Qin Dynasty, the Central Plains as a whole were united and imperial power was preeminent, all kinds of ideas are striving to win the favor of the ruling class and become the mainstream philosophical ideas guiding the operation of society. Confucianism, one of the 'Hundred Schools of Thought', developed through continuous rejection, argument, fusion, and integration with various schools of thought, and finally chosen by the ruling class. By the time of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, Confucianism had undergone a qualitative change, it was to meet the demands of authoritarian politics, strengthening

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C. Shen et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 855,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-265-1\\_27](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-265-1_27)

authoritative notions like kingship and paternal authority, which originally emphasizes the ‘ritual and order’, rising from popular scholarship to official scholarship, from virtuous political thought of primitive Confucian to authoritative political thought, and Confucianism was deeply integrated with politics[1]. Confucianism presented a clear notion of discipline and a strong sense of ‘authoritarian politics’, presenting the earliest form of imperial Confucianism.ⓐ Imperial Confucianism did, however, evolve in a gradual and uneven manner. It took a crucial first step during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, achieved dominance and attained a certain level of maturity in practice during the Han Dynasty, and finally reached its full potential with the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty a thousand years later.

Early Song dynasty leaders continued to promote the idea of ‘unity of three religious teachings’ⓑ in order to maintain societal order and security. Especially after the unrestricted support for Buddhism and Taoism by the emperors Taizu and Taizong, Confucianism was already showing slight signs of decline at that time. Confucian intellectuals in the Song Dynasty proposed a series of movements against Buddhism and Taoism to revive Confucianism in order to uphold orthodox etiquette and ethical principles. From the perspective of Confucian academics, resistance to Buddhist and Taoist concepts was essentially an appeal for the eradication of heretical beliefs. However, this movement, which should have stayed inside intellectual circles instead of extending to include the political field or even the evolution of society as a whole, was inextricably linked to the support and acknowledgement of the governing class at that time. Confucian benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and music have their superiority in governing the nation and its people, as a result, have been re-supported by the ruling class of Song dynasty[2]. The concept of ‘Imperial Confucianism’ participated in dynastic politics of Song after being once more propagated.

Regarding ‘respecting Confucianism in the Han Dynasty’ and ‘growth of Song Confucianism’, the social contexts are clearly distinguishable. The Qin Dynasty’s ideology of governing by the law as well as the pre-Qin period’s ideological trend of a hundred competing schools of thought were both carried over to the Han Dynasty. While in the Northern Song dynasty, Chinese philosophy integrated the legacy of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The three religions’ integration during the Tang Dynasty was historically manifested, which diminish Confucianism’s ideological dominance during the Han Dynasty. Under such circumstances, what superiority of Confucianism was established as the mainstream by the political subject? How did Confucianism modify itself to adapt to political demands? The evolution of Confucianism during the critical period of the development of Confucianism as the Han and Song dynasties will be employed as an entry point to Confucianism as a means of political philosophy rather than an academic idea as I analyze and summarize these two questions in this paper.

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ⓐ Fei Zhengqing characterized ‘imperial Confucianism’ in *New History of China* as “a mixture of legalism and Confucianism”, which I interpret to mean political Confucianism fully committed to serving the emperor.

ⓑ unity of three religious teachings: parallelism between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

## 2 Internal Adaptation<sup>®</sup> of Han Confucianism

The unification of Han dynasty was founded after the separation of the Qin. The monarchs in charge sought to establish a long-lasting dynasty and desired to devise solutions to consolidate autocracy in order to strengthen and stabilize centralized monarchy after learning the lessons from former dynasties' demise. The harsh legalist philosophy of authorities was clarified to the early Western Han Dynasty's rulers in the lesson of the fall of the Qin dynasty in the second emperor, which demonstrated that it was unsuitable as the dominant ideology to govern a unified and geographically vast nation as it could easily develop into tyranny and lead to the downfall of the state. Despite the fact that Taoism theories benefited the nation at first, lessening the harm caused to its citizens by the Qin dynasty's harsh politics and by conflict, prosperity brought with it new issues. Initially, a harmonious and prosperous society permitted a rapid expansion of the population and the establishment of two wealthy classes (wealthy merchants and landowners). In associated with the population growth, their ability to regulate the price of agricultural products and their capacity to offer loans at high-interest rates led to the sale or abandonment of much of the land owned by peasants. The Taoist 'non-aggressive' guidelines of 'action without intention',<sup>[3]</sup> which had previously been beneficial, could no longer be efficiently adjusted to fulfil the requirements of the huge united politics of feudal society. By the reign of Emperor Wu, the country had effectively resumed production, and the people were living in peace. The political objective at the time was to strengthen highly centralized sovereignty, and thus one required a solid support in the political guiding ideology. In response to Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty's ambition for centralized authority, one of the most influential Confucians of the period, Dong Zhongshu, proposed 'Dismiss a hundred schools, revere only the Confucian'. The single reverence for the Confucian in this case went beyond merely adhering to the Confucian philosophy of government, rather, it blended the most effective ideas from numerous schools of thought with the intention of ensuring Confucianism's dominance. It modified and shifted on the classic Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius to establish an ideology that satisfied the political objectives of the state. *Hanshu·Yiwen Zhi* notes, "Since Emperor Wu established a doctor of the Five Classics, opened disciples, established a testing procedure, and supported them with official positions. The desire for fame and wealth is the reason why there are up to 1,000 masters talking about Classics."<sup>[4]</sup> It is evident that Han Confucianism's goal is to closely align with the politics of the day and emphasize realpolitik more than to pursue the Dao. For instance, prominent Confucian classics such as *Xiao Dai Li Ji* and *Da Dai Li Ji*, which were published during the Western Han dynasty, exhibit a strong authoritarian political character. It can be regarded as a reflection of the Confucianism of the Han dynasty's trends. The conceptual inclinations of the Confucian texts of the Han dynasty have signifi-

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<sup>®</sup> The interpretations of Confucianism in the Han and Song dynasties are distinct from the conventional Confucianism construed by Confucius, that is, the so-called "internal adaptation" in the Han and Song dynasties, to explain the corresponding adjustment and reinterpretation of philosophical ideas caused by the different political needs of different periods.

cantly altered when compared to the pre-Qin classics, and the Confucian treatises transformed by Han Confucian scholars clarify the notion of outline and discipline, with a strong tendency towards authoritarian politics in the Han dynasty. Contrarily, Pre-Qin Confucianism advocated focusing on cultivating the spirit and focusing on the people, as well as reciprocal responsibilities between monarchs and ministers. The Han dynasty's Confucian perspective of politics, which disregarded the virtues of mutual trust, required the devotion owned by subjects to their rulers instead. Confucianism became the authoritarian political theory of the monarch's monopoly during the two millennia of imperial rule, as a result of this adaptation to the politics of the time. Moreover, the choice of civil officials also became crucial once Emperor Wu totally recaptured all the vassal fiefs and established a strong bureaucratic administrative system. This was crucial for the political implementation of the Emperor Wu since one bureaucracy that was fiercely devoted to an emperor was essential to establish a strong government. Taoist theology, for example, could not serve as a valid ideology or furnish a moral foundation for cooperation between rulers and elites.[5] With its governing ideology and second interpretation of the Confucian classics by Confucians of the Han dynasty, imperial Confucianism not only provided a methodical foundation for the Han emperor's consolidation of power, but the idea of positive to go into the society was also applicable to the course of action of officials.

### 3 Political Revision of Han Confucianism

Dong Zhongshu blended the notions of the Yin-Yang School in regard to stabilizing the monarchy, and the theme of the Interaction of Heaven and Man was advanced. The feudal monarchy gained mystique thanks to the idea of a divine right of kings, which also enhanced the monarch's position, in this way, the emperor's authority received the natural legitimacy of God. According to Confucianism, man is a natural being that has been put in order by the Heaven and the Heaven is a natural rule. Confucius, however, did not personalize or deify heaven, and his concept of respecting the order of heaven was to instil in people a respect for natural principles. The theory of Han Confucianism of the Interaction of Heaven and Man, as refined by Dong, put forth the notion reinterpreted that the emperor was actually the Son of Heaven, the only person who could interact with Heaven and carry out God's wishes was the Son of Heaven. Deifying the emperor's power permitted for highly centralized.[6]

Han Confucianism applied the idea of Legalism into the creation of legal regulations. Confucianism, which is more lenient and popular with the populace than Legalism, prefers to employ teaching to purify folk customs, with punishment serving as a supplemental measure.④ Han Confucianism proposed the rule of law that virtue dominates punishment and supplements punishment, and ritual and law are employed in conjunction, which means, combining the teaching of the ritual in Confucianism with the application of the law in Legalism, crimes are prevented by the rituals and punished by

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④ *Luxuriant Dew on Spring and Autumn* states, "education is the foundation of governing the country, and criminal politics is the supplementation of governing the country."

the laws, respectively. It emphasizes morality, places a premium on patriarchal principles, and takes into account all available options for ceremonies and punishment in order to efficiently control the nation. It is claimed in the *White Tiger Treatise on Virtue*[7] that “Assisting in governance according to the will of Heaven is in accordance with the natural order. Thus, bestowing honors and rewards demonstrates encouragement, while setting up punishments clarifies that there are consequences to be feared.” This demonstrates that the governing class embraced the concept of the synthesis of Confucianism and Legalism. In Chinese history, state power occupied the upper echelons, while social power was at the grassroots level. State power could never fully penetrate the grassroots. Conversely, the maintenance of state power depended on the participation of grassroots members. This relationship between the state and society is precisely an essential condition for the development of China’s governance model that combines ritual and law.

Confucianism in the Han Dynasty altered the idea of classic Confucianism in terms of the framework of social relations. Confucian political theory has traditionally placed a significant emphasis on people-oriented thinking. The statement “the people are the most important, the country is second, and the monarch is the least” was advanced by Mencius.[8] Confucian intellectuals frequently endorse the idea that the one who wins the common people’s hearts wins the world. In his practice of Confucianism, Dong Zhongshu took the initiative to adjust the ‘people-oriented concept’ of conventional Confucianism into ‘king-based thought’ and proposed the idea of “The subjects must absolutely obey the ruler, and the emperor must absolutely obey the will of Heaven.”,[9] “The emperor must absolutely obey the will of Heaven” involves using the concept of Heaven to check autocratic power, based on the premise of cooperation between the subjects and the autocratic authority. Additionally, Dong completed the construction of the Three Principles, which clarified the hierarchical relationships of the ruler commanding the ministers, the father commanding the offspring, and the husband commanding the wife. The aim was to shift the fundamental governing ideology from prioritizing kinship-first to prioritizing authority-first. The purpose was to adapt to the fundamental social structure changes from kinship to territory and from the enfeoffment system to the prefecture-county system, ultimately achieving the goal of strengthening centralization.

#### **4 Internal Adaptation of Song Confucianism**

The reasons for the revival of Confucianism in the Song dynasty, as seen from the perspective of Song Confucianism itself, lie broadly in its own compatibility for the need of the Song royal family to construct a centralized authority and solidify its rule. In the early years of the Song dynasty, Emperor Taizu promoted a parallel ideological policy of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in an effort to maintain a stable social order. However, this approach did not yield significant results and instead led to various social issues due to the rapid growth of Buddhism and Taoism. During his reign, Emperor Taizu adopted policies to protect and strengthen control over Buddhism, ac-

tively promoting the translation of Buddhist scriptures, establishing translation academies, and increasing the number of monks, which resulted in an overabundance of Buddhist monks towards Taizu's later years.[10] During the reign of Emperor Taizong, support for Taoism fostered the development of Taoist culture. Throughout this period, the state extensively built Taoist temples and collected Taoist classics. The power of Buddhism and Taoism peaked during Emperor Zhenzong (the third emperor in Song) era. By 1021, the number of monks and nuns in the Song Dynasty had approximately reached 460,000, and there were over 20,000 Taoists, both of which were record highs in the Song era.[11] Both the nobility and commoners became deeply entrenched in the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism, which ran contrary to the initial intentions of the rulers. In light of this circumstance, the ideological influence of Buddhism and Laojiao has already somewhat threatened the stability of the imperial court and social order. Additionally, the development of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty was closely related to the sharp social contradictions of the time. In response to severe class conflicts, the rulers of the Northern Song Dynasty sought to strengthen their rule by providing the entire bureaucratic class with generous material benefits and implementing a policy of "non-suppression of land annexation". As a result, number of the land was owned by bureaucratic landlords, while military expenses, taxes, and corvée labor were borne by the peasants, who suffered greatly and continually rebelled.[12] These sharp and complex social contradictions forced the ruling class to realize the necessity to construct a set of ideologies more suited for the centralization of monarchy to prevent peasant uprisings and consolidate the ruling order in general.

## 5 Political Revision of Song Confucianism

Song Confucians advocated for the restoration of patriarchal manners as a means of constructing the complete national order. Song Confucianism inherited the traditional Confucian concept of 'patrilineal' clan relationships, reflecting the idea of 'putting the ruler first' through familial relationships. Song Neo-Confucian scholars cleverly integrated the distinct concepts of *li* (law) and *ren* (benevolence) from Confucian and Mencius theories, merging the legitimacy of feudal rule with the realization of personal moral ideals, thereby satisfying the political requirements of the feudal rulers. They affirmed that all things in the world are in a law. Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi regarded 'li' as the supreme principle of the world, and as the embodiment of feudal ethical norms. And *Yi Jing* states, "there is heaven and earth and then there are all things, there are all things and then there are man and woman and then there are husband and wife and then there are father and son and then there are ruler and subject and then there are up and down and then there is a measure of propriety and right.",[13] the implication is that relationships between 'ruler and subject', 'father and son', 'spouse and wife', 'superior and inferior', etc., are not the result of social development but rather are simply an expression of the ethics of the order in physical form. According to this principle, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi evidenced the rationality of the feudal monarchy, saying, "The ruler, the minister, the father and the son, the world is the reason, and there is no escape between heaven and earth." [14] They also clarified the rationality of all feudal

ethical and moral norms, Cheng Yi said, “The righteousness of yin and yang, the order of male and female elders and children, the great path of heaven and earth are also ..... male over female, is the norm of reason.”[15] A code of indoctrination that complied with the demands of feudal society and provided a foundation for all social interactions from the top to bottom emerged from Confucianism’s ethical worldview during the Song dynasty. Additionally, Song Confucianism stress on the monarch’s supremacy. The Song Confucians similarly emphasized the divine overtones of the emperor as the “Son of Heaven”, the go-between between God and the people, in their view of monarchical authority. Heaven, which was seen as an ethical concept, or a personified god who gave the emperor the right to reign. However, a dynasty’s fate was determined by humans, and the most significant of these was the emperor, who held the role to rule the nation and making the decisions.

Song Confucian political philosophy has a high degree of appropriateness for directing the behaviors of the bureaucratic class. The Confucian conception of initiation suggests a strong connection between the ruling bureaucracy and the dominant intellectuals.[16] Confucianism, which had its basis in the classics, established an ethic centred on gentleness, righteousness, propriety, filial piety, and faithfulness that were considered as a conduct for the guided elite classes.[17] Furthermore, after the foundation of the dynasty, the Emperor Taizu could not rely on people from noble lineage, based on birth and wealth, to fill his posts. Instead, Taizu desired a loyal and skilled civil service to staff his entire bureaucracy to strengthen the bonds between the court and the populace. Reinforcing and concentrating authority in imperial hands was one of the main tenets of Confucian leadership. The dynastic interests were the only ones the bureaucracy was intended to serve. The officials who answered to the emperor were chosen directly by himself. The distinctive Confucian system of selecting the elite and its application to the literati class served to offset the necessity for political talent in the Song royal court.

## 6 Conclusion

According to the available literature, the study of Confucianism in the Han and Song Dynasties primarily focuses on the textual and theoretical analysis of Confucianism’s role as a high form of scholarship in ancient China. However, Confucianism must have its own distinctive advantages in dealing with the political system given that it is the most well-known school of ancient Chinese philosophy. As a result, when studying Confucianism, it is critical to consider the needs of the current social context in addition to summarizing the rich theoretical perspectives. The analysis from this essay makes a few contributions to the study of political Confucianism. Combining Han and Song dynasties to analyze Confucianism’s exceptional capacity for internal adjustment in adapting to political requirements is concentrated into providing a potent theoretical foundation for the centralization of monarchy in the feudal period. Explaining the monarchy’s uniqueness, which was bestowed by god, and upholding its social nature allowed it to maintain its social control over society through moral etiquette. However, several limitations of this phonetic rhetoric study need to be acknowledged. I did not

deliberate on the political influence of Confucianism from the perspective of the attitudes of feudal court officials toward Confucianism, while, only considering the internal political adaptability of Confucianism and how Confucians modified the theory of Confucian politics. Additionally, it only provides a brief comparative examination of basic overviews combining other philosophies that also have played the role of political ideology with Confucianism, which in a sense restricts the manifestation of Confucianism's political talent. For future research on Confucian politics, a more comprehensive perspective and potent comparative study can be recruited to facilitate a more compelling justification of the research.

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