

INTELLECTUAL TRENDS OF THE EARLY SIX DYNASTIES PERIOD

After the fall of the Han Dynasty (220 CE), the supremacy of its central ideology, state Confucianism, came into question. The period of over 350 years which followed the fall of the Han was one of political division and instability, marked by frequent wars and economic hardship. This period, known as the Six Dynasties Period (220-589 CE), is China's closest parallel to Europe's Dark Ages. For most of the period, North China was under the rule of nomadic tribes which had invaded China from the northern steppe, while South China was ruled by weak Chinese governments, staffed by an elite more interested in personal cultivation than in administration.

The structure of power during the Six Dynasties era was a product of developments during the late Han. With no single central government able to exert control over all of China, power tended to be dispersed among the great clans that had

<i>Shang</i>	c. 1700 – 1045 BCE
<i>Zhou</i>	1045 – 256 BCE
<i>Qin</i>	221 – 208 BCE
<i>Han</i>	206 BCE–220 CE
“Six Dynasties”	220 – 589 ◀
<i>Sui</i>	589 – 617
<i>Tang</i>	618 – 907
<i>“Five Dynasties”</i>	907 – 960
<i>Song</i>	960 – 1279
<i>Yuan</i>	1279 – 1368
<i>Ming</i>	1368 – 1644
<i>Qing</i>	1644 – 1911

arisen after the Wang Mang interregnum, and gained increasing power as the Han declined. The lack of central authority also made China more vulnerable to incursions by nomadic tribes from outside the Chinese state. This was particularly true in the North. Although the Xiongnu, who had so threatened the early Han, no longer existed as a tribal confederacy, there were other strong groups that flourished on the northern steppe. Ultimately, a number of kingdoms established in North China during the era of disunity were ruled by tribal invaders who

exercised relatively strong control in their regions, while dynasties of the South had Chinese rulers, whose power was limited by the competition of the great clans descended from the later Han. While this division was not absolute, it contributed to a gradual deepening of cultural differences between northern and southern Chinese.

Another factor in this division concerned the nature of intellectual traditions and state ideologies. Non-Chinese royal houses in the North, who had little understanding of the Chinese tradition, were far more subject to being influenced by non-Chinese systems of thought, particularly Buddhism, which, during the Six Dynasties period, became the most dynamic intellectual force in China. Although Buddhism was influential in both

North and South, some Northern states adopted it as official religious doctrine, while in the south, Buddhism traditions were less associated with the state, and more closely related to the intellectual interests of the elite.

Buddhism's rise did not become dramatic immediately after the fall of the Han, although the misadventures of the late Han and the aftermath of the unseemly battles between Confucians and eunuchs had seriously undermined the influence of Confucian traditions. During the early years of the Six Dynasties period, cynicism about Confucian ideas led many members of the educated class to turn increasingly to Daoist books. At the same time, the uncertainties of official life led some of the best of these men to withdraw from politics and concentrate on the cultivation of refined tastes and lofty ideas, which they shared only with like-minded circles of intimates.

These Daoistically inclined cliques produced some of the most individualistic literature ever written in China. Freed from the constraints of Confucianism and its belief in the social nature of man, these Neo-Daoists came to value spontaneity and eccentricity to a degree that Confucianism could not tolerate. Often living apart from society, these men concentrated on the skills of poetry, music, and painting, and particularly celebrated the effects of wine in enhancing positions at court cultivated a separate sphere of unrestrained aesthetic abandon.

As in the Dark Ages of Europe, during which Christianity grew to become the dominant theme of European culture, the Six Dynasties Period saw the sudden flourishing of a religious movement: Buddhism, which swept into China from India and transformed both popular and elite views of the world. From the sixth century through the eighth century, Buddhism was unquestionably the dominant philosophy and religion of China. But its popularity was initially made possible only because of the affinities which intellectually prominent Neo-Daoists felt for the new religion, which in superficial ways resembled Daoism.

Neo-Daoism was also instrumental in re-introducing the human arts into the Confucian ideal of the gentleman, or "*literatus*." When Confucianism came once again to the forefront after 589, the year in which the short-lived Sui Dynasty reunited China, it incorporated into its ideal persona much of the devotion to spontaneous poetry, painting, music--and occasionally wine--that the Neo-Daoists had stressed.

The most famous Neo-Daoists were the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," a group of eccentric geniuses who, in popular imagination at least, formed the most brilliant circle of literati. In the following pages we will read about three of them: Ruan Ji (210-263), Xi Kang (223-262), who was executed as a threat to public morality, and Liu

Ling (d. after 265). This short section closes with a selection of representative passages that convey the unorthodox tone of Neo-Daoist society during the period of disunity.

* * *

Ruan Ji

1. When Ruan Ji, the Commandant of Infantry, whistled, he could be heard from several hundred paces. Now at this time, a Perfected Sage had suddenly appeared in the Sumen Mountains and the woodcutters there were all recounting tales about him. Ruan Ji went to see for himself and spied the man crouched by a cliff side with his arms around his knees. Ruan Ji climbed the ridge to reach him and squatting down facing him, he began to speak with the man about matters of remotest antiquity. He touched on the mysteries of the Dao of the Yellow Emperor and the Spirit-like Farmer, and the excellence of the Three Eras, Xia, Shang, and Zhou. But when Ruan Ji asked the man for his views, the man simply raised his head high and made no reply. Ruan Ji then went on to speak of that which lies beyond human pursuits and the techniques for settling the spirit within and controlling one's vital *qi*, laying this all before the man. Yet he continued to look away with a fixed stare. Thereupon, Ruan Ji blew a long whistle towards him. After a long wait, the man laughed and said, "Do it again." Ruan Ji whistled a second time, but having now lost interest, he departed. When he had returned slightly further than halfway down the ridge, he heard from above a long drawn sound, as though a full orchestra were playing. The forests and valleys below echoed with the music. Turning back, he saw it was the man whistling.

2. When the office of the Commandant of Infantry fell vacant, several thousand measures of wine were stored in its commissary. That is how Ruan Ji came to seek appointment as Commandant of Infantry.

3. Ruan Ji's sister-in-law was once preparing to return to her parents' home, and Ruan Ji went to visit and bid her farewell. When he was attacked for this breach of rules, Ruan Ji said, "How could ritual *li* have been established for people like me?"

According to ritual texts, a man was not to have private contact with his sister-in-law.

4. The wife of Ruan Ji's neighbor was a beautiful woman. She worked at a wine shop, tending bar and selling wine. Ruan Ji and Wang Rong frequently went to her bar to drink, and after Ruan became drunk he would lie down beside her and sleep. When he first heard about it the husband was very alarmed, but after he spied on them he realized that after all there was nothing more to it.

5. During the period when Ruan Ji was observing mourning rites for his late mother, he attended a gathering in the house of the Prime Minister, Sima Zhao, and helped himself to meat and wine. Capital District Governor He Zeng, who was also present, said to Prince Wen, "My Lord, you govern the world through your filial devotion, yet Ruan Ji brazenly appears here during his period of deep mourning, drinking wine and eating meat as a banquet guest. He should be exiled from the realm to demonstrate to all what is proper."

Sima Zhao replied, "Look how Ruan Ji has grieved himself into a state of emaciation – how can you fail to feel empathy for him in his troubles? And after all, the ritual *li* do include the rule, 'When one is ill, drink wine and eat meat.'"

Meanwhile, Ruan Ji went right on gulping down meat and wine, completely at ease in mind and appearance.

6. When the emperor had the Wei court enfeoff Sima Zhao as Duke of Jin, full ceremony was employed, including the bestowal of the Nine Imperial Gifts. But Sima Zhao was adamant in refusing to accept them. All the leading figures of government, civil and military, set off for Sima Zhao's headquarters to urge him to accept. The Director of Works, Zheng Chong, sent a messenger galloping off to Ruan Ji requesting a letter supporting their request. Ruan Ji was at the home of Yuan Zhen, drunk and fast asleep after a night of carousing. Raised from his bed with the assistance of others, he began writing on a wooden tablet. Without any changes or stray blots of ink, he straightaway completed his inscription and handed it to the messenger. Contemporaries judged it an inspired work.

The next two stories deal with Ruan Ji's nephew, Ruan Xian (234-305), another of the Seven Sages.

7. All the households of the Ruan clan dwelt to the north of the main street, only Ruan Xian and his uncle Ruan Ji had homes to the south. [The Ruans had been Confucian scholars for generations, and were adept at securing prestigious posts, but the southern

Ruans esteemed Daoism and avoided responsibilities, devoting themselves to drink.] The northern Ruans were all wealthy; the southern Ruans were poor. On the seventh day of the seventh month, as was the custom at the time, the northern Ruans took their robes and hung them above their courtyards to sun – nothing but delicate silk gauze and colorful brocades. Over his courtyard, Ruan Xian set a bamboo pole on which he hung a big pair of calf-nose underpants, prompting some people to express astonishment. “I wouldn’t want to violate custom,” he replied. “I’m just doing what I can.”

8. The Ruans were all great drinkers, but when Ruan Xian joined a clan gathering, they put away the everyday wine cups and seated themselves round a great terra cotta vat from which they gulped down big drafts. Once a herd of pigs got in and went straight up to the vat, whereupon the men simply drank from the vat with the pigs.

Xi Kang

9. Zhong Hui was a man of keen intelligence and ability. Not being previously acquainted with Xi Kang, he assembled some of the most worthy and outstanding men of the time and went with them to pay Xi Kang a visit. Xi Kang was at that moment engaged in forging a metal object beneath a tree with Xiang Xiu (a famous commentator on the *Zhuangzi*), who was assisting him at the bellows. Xi Kang went right on pounding his hammer as if nobody had come, letting the time pass by without exchanging a single word until Zhong Hui rose to go. “What had you heard that made you come?” said Xi Kang. “What have you seen that makes you go?” “I came after hearing what I’d heard,” Zhong Hui replied. “I go after seeing what I’ve seen.”

Zhong Hui was well connected, and Xi Kang was ill advised to be witty at his expense. When Xi Kang ultimately was put to death, it was Zhong Hui who successfully urged his execution.

10. As Xi Kang was taken towards the Eastern Marketplace for execution, his spirit and bearing were unchanged. Reaching for his zither he began to play “The Melody of Guangling.” When the song was ended, he said, “Yuan Zhun once asked to learn this piece from me, but I was unwilling to give it to him and I never relented. And now indeed the ‘Melody of Guangling’ shall be no more.”

Liu Ling

11. Liu Ling was about five feet tall and very crude in appearance. Dissolute and reckless, he viewed the universe as inconsequential and all things as of equal value. He was a man of few words and did not make friends easily, but when he met Ruan Ji and Xi Kang he felt the joy of grasping like-minded spirits, and he entered the grove with them hand in hand. From the start having had no concern about the wealth of his household, he used to ride in a deer drawn cart, hoisting a pot of wine, with a servant following behind him shouldering a spade. "If I should die," he ordered him, "bury me on the spot."

12. Liu Ling never put his mind into written composition. By the end of his era, the only surviving work bearing his name was his "Hymn to the Virtue of Wine."

13. Hungover with a powerful thirst, Liu Ling asked his wife to bring him some wine. But his wife poured out all his wine and smashed the wine vessels. Then she pleaded with him, tears streaming down. "Your drinking has gone too far! This is no way to preserve your life. You have to cut it off!" Ling said, "You are perfectly right, but I can't quit by myself. I need to offer a prayer and take a sacred oath to quit before the spirits. Please prepare offerings of wine and meat right away." "I shall do exactly as you say," said his wife. She set out wine and meat before the spirit tablets and asked Ling to proceed with his prayer and oath. Ling knelt down and prayed:

"Heaven gave to Liu Ling life
And made him famed for wine.
Gulping a gallon, for hangover's grief
Five pints will make him fine.
As for the talking of his wife,
Be sure to pay no mind!"

Then he drained the wine and ate the meat, and in no time he was drunk again.

14. Often when Liu Ling drank without restraint he would behave with wanton freedom, sometimes stripping off his clothes and sitting naked in his room. Once, when some visitors encountered him in this state they rebuked him. "I take Heaven and Earth for my pillars and roof," he replied, "and the rooms of my house are my jacket and pants. What are you gentlemen doing in my pants?"

Additional selections from Six Dynasties Neo-Daoism

Rejection of authority of history and political order:

15. When the heavens and earth first separated and the things of the world were first born . . . there were no rulers and affairs were well settled, there were no officials and everything was in order. People took good care of themselves and nourished their natural qualities, never violating the proper norms. . . . Once rulers were set upon thrones, cruelty arose; once officials were set in their positions, banditry was born. They sat fashioning the *li* and the law codes, and tying the people in bonds. (Ruan Ji)

Rejection of Han traditions of scholarship:

16. The pivot of the Six Classics is repression, whereas human nature experiences joy in free and easy action. Repression goes against man's inclinations; he attains to naturalness by following his desires. Thus of course attaining a state of naturalness cannot come from the Six Classics. To fully realize human nature we have no need of rituals and codes that violate our basic dispositions. (Xi Kang)

Rejection of "family" values and the Five Relationships:

17. Why should there exist any loving attachment between father and son? The real root of the relationship was simply an eruption of the father's lust. And what exactly is the relationship between a mother and son? A son in his mother's womb is no different from a thing in a jug – once it's out of the jug, the thing is completely separate.

This comment is attributed to Kong Rong, who actually lived just prior to the transition from the Han to the Six Dynasties period. Kong was a descendant of Confucius, and this suggests how dramatic the reaction to state ideology was as the Han order unraveled. But the late Han state did resist this trend, and Kong's comment was recorded in an indictment that led to his execution.

Valuation of uniqueness in individuals:

18. In all their conduct, though they may differ in particulars, true gentlemen are alike in always acting in accord with their natures, each cleaving to that which is most natural to him. . . . When people form a relationship between one another, what each prizes is understanding the innate nature of the other, and aiding him in accord with it. . . . In such relationships people support one another from first to last; they truly know one another. When you see a straight piece of wood, you don't try to make it into a wheel.

19. As with all things, everyone possesses a form; everyone's form possesses a spirit-like essence. Only when we are able to fully grasp someone's spirit essence can we exhaustively understand his nature.

General loosening of social custom among the elite:

20. Since the last days of the Han Dynasty . . . people have taken to appearing with hair all ungroomed, sashless gowns loosely dangling. Some mingle wearing only underclothing, other sit naked with their legs crossed. . . . They no longer bother to bid one another goodbye when they part or to inquire their good health when they meet. Guests walk in and shout for the servants, hosts call their dogs while looking at their guests. If someone doesn't behave this way people say he can't be an intimate friend and they break off with him, dropping him from their circle. When friends gather they slouch like wolves and drink like cattle, jostling as they grab for food and wine.

Valuation of intimacy:

21. Wang Rong's wife always addressed him with the familiar pronoun "you." Wang Rong said to her, "The codes of ritual *li* say that it is a sign of disrespect for a wife to address her husband as 'you' – don't do it again!" His wife replied, "It's you I am close to and you whom I love, and that's why it's 'you' that I say. If I should not address you by calling you 'you,' who should?" After that he allowed her to do it.

22. In his prose poem "Nearby Wanderings," Shu Xi described utopia in these terms:

There lies a land the world forgot,
The people in their fields,
Each happy with his five-*mu* plot,
Hearts broader than the world. . . .
There women call their husbands 'you'
And sons call fathers by their names.

The art of a Neo-Daoist painter:

23. When Gu Kaizhi painted a person's portrait, he might not dot the pupils of the eyes for several years. When someone asked him why, he said, "Beauty or ugliness of body has nothing to do with a subject's subtle essence. Conveying the spirit and realizing a true image lies precisely in painting these dots."

Sources

Most of the passages in this reading are found in *Shishuo xinyu* (New accounts of tales of the world), a fifth century collection of anecdotes. Others come from dynastic histories or literary collections.

1. *Shishuo xinyu* 18.1; **2.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.5; **3.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.7; **4.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.8; **5.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.2; **6.** *Shishuo xinyu* 4.67; **7.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.10 & Dai Kui, *Zhulin qixian lun* (Essay on the seven sages of the bamboo grove); **8.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.12; **9.** *Shishuo xinyu* 24.3; **10.** *Shishuo xinyu* 6.2; **11.** *Jin shu* (History of the Jin) 49.1376; **12.** Dai Kui, *Zhulin qixian lun*; **13.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.3; **14.** *Shishuo xinyu* 23.6; **15.** Ruan Ji, “Daren xiansheng zhuan” (Biography of Mr. Greatman); **16.** Xi Kang, “Nan Zhang Liaoshu ziran haoxue lun” (Questioning Zhang Liaoshu’s essay on the natural love of learning); **17.** *Hou Han shu* (History of the Later Han) 8.2278; **18.** Xi Kang, “Yu Shan Juyuan juejiao shu” (Letter breaking off with Shan Tao); **19.** Liu Shao, *Renwu zhi* (Notes on personality); **20.** Ge Hong, *Bao Puzi* (Master Embracing-Simplicity) 25.27-8; **21.** *Shishuo xinyu* 35.6 ; **22.** Shu Xi, “Jinyou fu” (Nearby wanderings); **23.** *Shishuo xinyu* 21.13.