

INTELLECTUAL TRENDS OF THE EARLY SIX DYNASTIES PERIOD

After the fall of the Han Dynasty (220 A.D.), 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 A.D.), 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>	<i>c. 1700 – 1045 B.C.</i>
<i>Zhou</i>	<i>1045 – 256 B.C.</i>
<i>Qin</i>	<i>221 – 208 B.C.</i>
<i>Han</i>	<i>206 B.C. – A.D. 220</i>
“Six Dynasties”	220 – 589
<i>Sui</i>	<i>589 – 617</i>
<i>Tang</i>	<i>618 – 907</i>
<i>“Five Dynasties”</i>	<i>907 – 960</i>
<i>Song</i>	<i>960 – 1279</i>
<i>Yuan</i>	<i>1279 – 1368</i>
<i>Ming</i>	<i>1368 – 1644</i>
<i>Qing</i>	<i>1644 – 1911</i>

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.

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Ruan Ji

1. When Ruan Ji whistled, he could be heard several hundred paces away. Once, in the Su-men Mountains there appeared from nowhere a true sage about whom the woodcutters were all relaying tales. Ruan Ji went to see for himself and spied the man squatting with clasped knees by the edge of a cliff. Ruan Ji climbed the ridge to approach him and squatted opposite. He then recounted briefly matters from antiquity to the present. . . . But when Ruan Ji asked the man his opinion of these, the man remained aloof and offered no reply. Ruan Ji then went on to expound upon that which lies beyond the realm of human activity and the techniques for resting the spirit and directing the vital force. Yet when Ruan Ji looked to the man, he remained exactly as before, staring fixedly without turning. Thereupon, Ruan Ji turned towards him and made a loud whistling sound. After a long time, the man laughed and said, "Do it again." Ruan Ji whistled a second time, but his interest in the man was now at an end, and he withdrew. He had returned about halfway down the ridge when he heard from above a shrillness like an orchestra of many instruments; the forests and valleys below echoed with the sound. Turning back, he saw it was the whistling of the man he had visited.

2. While Ruan Ji was in mourning for his mother, he was once present at a party in the house of Prince Wen of Chin, where he was helping himself to meat and wine. The commandant of the capital province, He Zeng, who was also present, said to Prince Wen, "Your Excellency rules the land with filial devotion, yet Ruan Ji, during an important period of mourning, has appeared openly among your lordship's guests, drinking wine and eating meat. You should banish him beyond the sea to set right the teachings on public morality."

Prince Wen replied, “Here is Ruan Ji, emaciated and depressed like this, yet you’re unable to grieve with him. How can this be? Why, must not the ancient precept: ‘When one is ill, drink wine and eat meat’ surely be in accord with mourning rites?”

Ruan Ji continued drinking and devouring his food without interruption, his spirit and expression completely self-possessed.

3. Ruan Ji’s sister-in-law was once returning to her parents’ home, and Ruan Ji went to see her to say goodbye. When someone chided him for this as a breach of rules, Ruan Ji replied, “Were the rites established for people like me?”

4. The wife of Ruan Ji’s neighbor was very pretty. She worked as a barmaid, tending vats and selling wine. Ruan Ji and Wang Rong frequently drank at her place, and after Ruan became drunk, he would sleep by this woman’s side. The husband was at first extraordinarily suspicious, but after careful investigation he ceased after awhile to think anything amiss.

5. There was a vacancy in the office of the commandant of infantry, in the commissary of which were stored several thousand measures of wine. It was for this reason that Ruan Ji requested to become commandant of infantry.

6. When the Wei court enfeoffed Sima Zhao as Duke of Jin in 264, they did so with full ceremony, including the formality of the Nine Bestowals. Yet Sima Zhao adamantly declined, and would not accept them. Dukes, nobles, generals, and commanders set off for his headquarters to urge him to accept. The Director of Works, Zheng Chong, dispatched a messenger posthaste to Ruan Ji, requesting that he write an appropriate document. Ruan Ji was at the home of Yuan Zhen at the time. He had been drunk since the day before, and had to be supported to get up. Writing directly on a wooden slip, without any blots or corrections, he composed his inscription and handed it to the messenger. His contemporaries considered 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 Ruans of the former generation had been Confucian scholars, accustomed to occupying posts. It was only the single household of Ruan Ji and his nephew Ruan Xian which favored Daoism and repudiated official life, loved wine and was

impoverished. According to ancient custom, on the seventh day of the seventh month there was a law that every household should sun its clothing. In the courtyards of the wealthy Ruans there was a dazzling display of colored and plain brocades. Ruan Xian, who at the time was a young lad with his hair in tufts, set up a long bamboo pole and hung out a pair of calf-nosed underpants.

8. The Ruans were all great drinkers. When Ruan Xian arrived at the home of any of the clan for a gathering, they no longer used ordinary wine cups. Instead, they would use a large earthenware vat filled with wine, and sit facing one another all around it, taking long drafts. One time a herd of pigs came to drink and went directly up to the vat, whereupon pigs and men proceeded to drink together.

Xi Kang

9. Zhong Hui was well equipped with ability and reasoning powers, but he had not been previously acquainted with Xi Kang. He went to visit him in the company of other worthy and outstanding gentlemen of the time. Xi Kang was at that moment engaged in forging metal beneath a tree with Xiang Xiu (a famous commentator on the *Zhuangzi*), who was assisting him at the bellows. Xi Kang continued to pound with the hammer without interruption, as if nobody else were present. After some time passed without the exchange of a single word, Zhong Hui rose to go. Xi Kang said, “What had you heard that made you come? What have you seen that makes you now leave?” Zhong Hui replied, “I came after hearing what I heard. I leave 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. On the eve of Xi Kang’s execution in the Eastern Marketplace of Luoyang, his spirit and manner showed no change. Taking out his seven stringed zither, he plucked the strings and played the “Melody of Guangling.” When the song was ended, he said, “Yuan Zhun once asked to learn this melody, but I remained firm in my stubbornness and never gave it to him. From now on, the ‘Melody of Guangling’ is no more!”

Liu Ling

11. Liu Ling was reckless and dissolute, and considered the universe too confining. He used to ride in a deer drawn cart, carrying a pot of wine. A servant followed behind with a spade on his shoulder, in order to bury him on the spot should he die.

12. Liu Ling never committed his thoughts to written form, and ended his days having composed only one piece: "Hymn to the Virtue of Wine."

13. Liu Ling was once suffering from a hangover. Being extremely thirsty, he asked his wife for some wine. His wife, who had poured out all the wine and smashed the vessels, pleaded with tears in her eyes, saying, "You drink far too much. It is no way to preserve your life. You must stop!" Ling said, "A very good idea! But I am unable to stop by myself. It can only be done if I pray to the ghosts and spirits and take an oath to quit. So get the wine and meat ready for the sacrifice." "As you wish," said his wife, and she set out the wine and meat before the spirits. Ling knelt down and prayed:

"Heaven begot Liu Ling
And took 'wine' for his name.
He downs a gallon at one gulp,
Five dipperfuls ease the hangover.
As for his wife's complaint,
Take care not to listen!"

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

14. On many occasions, Liu Ling, under the influence of wine, would be completely free and uninhibited, sometimes taking off his clothes and sitting naked in his room. Once, when some visitors entered and saw him so, they rebuked him for it. Ling replied, "I take Heaven and Earth for my pillars and roof, and the rooms of my house are my pants and coat. What are you gentlemen doing in my pants?"

Additional selections from Six Dynasties Neo-Daoism

Rejection of authority of history and political order:

15. [In the beginning] there were no rulers and everything was in order; there were no officials and every matter went well. . . . Once rulers were instituted, oppression arose; once officials were appointed, robbery began. Detached and apart, they instituted the rites and the laws by which to impose bonds on the common people. . . . (Ruan Ji)

Rejection of Han traditions of scholarship:

16. The emphasis of the Six Classics is placed mainly on repression, whereas human nature experiences joy in following the desires. Repression goes against a person's inclinations; he attains to naturalness by following his desires. . . . Preservation of man's nature does not need a base in rituals and laws which run counter to his feelings. (Xi Kang)

Rejection of "family" values and the Five Relationships:

17. Why should there exist a special kind of affinity between father and son? Originally the father merely intended to satisfy his desire. 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 bottle. Once the thing comes out of the bottle, the two become separate and no longer related.

Valuation of uniqueness in individuals:

18. The gentleman acts in accordance with his nature . . . what is esteemed in human relationships is the estimate of another's inborn nature, and helping him realize it. When you see a straight piece of wood, you do not want to make it into a wheel.

19. Every person has a body; every person has a spirit. Our study of a person will be exhaustive only when we are able to understand his spirit.

General loosening of social custom among the elite:

20. People no longer bother to exchange greetings when they see each other. A guest may come to the house and hail the servants; a host may look at his guest while calling his dog. If a person fails to act in such a manner, he is considered to have failed to establish intimacy with others. As a result he is rejected by his own circle.

Valuation of intimacy:

21. Wang Rong's wife always addressed Rong with the familiar pronoun "you." Rong said to her, "According to ritual etiquette, for a wife to address her husband as you do is disrespectful. Do not speak to me that way again." His wife replied, "But I love and am intimate with you; that's why I address you as I do. If I didn't address you this way, who else could I speak to this way?" After that Rong put up with it.

22. Shu Xi wrote an essay on utopia, in which he described it as a place where all wives address their husband as "you"; all sons call their fathers by their first names.

The art of a Neo-Daoist painter:

23. Gu Kaizhi (341-402) would sometimes paint a portrait and not dot the pupils of the eyes for several years. When someone asked him about this, he replied, "Basically, the beauty or ugliness of the body bears no relationship to the most subtle arts of painting. What conveys the spirit and portrays the likeness lies precisely in these dots!"