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8.8 After the Qin: the Han dynasty

Some refer to the period after the Qin as China's Dark Ages, but many scholars prefer not to characterize the period in this way. However, the kind of intellectual work that went on during this period was indeed different in character to the work that went on during the 100 schools period.

The Qin was a **repressive dynasty**, which lasted for only one and a bit generations of emperors, then it collapsed. After the sudden collapse and the subsequent founding of the Han dynasty, there was a focus on **how to maintain government stability** so that there would be no repeat of the calamitous Qin.

Eventually, a kind of compromise was reached: combine **Confucian orthodoxy with Legalist institutional structures**. The officials, governed by the 禮 **lǐ,** apply 法 **fǎ** to the ordinary people (following Xunzi). This system, this blended social 道 **dào**, continued to survive right up until the modern period, the 20th century.

The nature of intellectual activity during the Han

This official Confucian orthodoxy, regretted burning the classical texts. Scholarship revived, but the the Han schools ceased being creative and focused on recovery, re-learning past ideas and materials and incorporating them into their Confucian framework. This began a period of intense collection (and more than occasional forgery) of ancient materials. The paradigm of intellectual activity was finding and copying texts, rehashing turns of phrase, combining passages. But it lacked the vibrant debate about fundamental issues that characterized the Classical period.

So Chinese historians make a distinction between

> the period of the 子 **zi** (masters), when the masters were constructing their theories
>
> and
>
> the period of the 經 **jīng** (classics), when scholars recovered and relearned those classic texts.

So from a philosophical point of view, the Han may looks like a dark age with less skepticism and creativity, but from a historian's point of view, particularly a textual scholar's point of view, this is an incredibly vibrant period with a lot of intellectual activity – only with a change in the intellectual style. For most of the rest of Chinese history, **the focus on learning from the past remained a central theme**. Recovering the teachings in those old books, sorting them out, and detecting which ones are real and which forgeries, as you have seen, is still what **we're doing today**.

There were two major breaks in this pattern. One was the arrival of Buddhism, which infused a huge level of excitement in the intellectual world of post-Han China, and after a long period of Buddhist dominance of thought, another period of re-constructing Confucian ideas, again blending them with those of the foreign invader. Of course the third break was the modern period and a second invasion of a foreign though system —Western, Christian and Marxist thought.

There are several courses worth of material in each of these periods. In the next segment we will only briefly characterize the two periods that shaped Medieval China.