

Legalism



Qin Shihuangdi, first emperor and unifier of China, used Legalist methods in his conquest of the entire Chinese nation.

1. uniform application of the law for all (as opposed to more lenient sentences for upper classes)
 2. purpose of courts is to decide the crime—the law proscribes the punishment for all crimes
 3. standardization of weights and measures, currency, language
 4. suppression of aristocratic classes (unless they provided military leadership)
- Not a religion or even philosophy, so much as an approach to government
 - Reflected the interests of the king

Legalism was based on three tenets:

1. Law (*fa*)—a publicly known law that would be equally applied to all. Punishments would be predetermined for all crimes.
2. methods or tactics (*shu*)—the wise ruler would attempt to hide his true motives, so the people (and even officials) would have no recourse but to simply follow instructions and rules.
3. position of power (*shi*)

The two most famous legalists were Shang Yang (a prime minister of Qin, who died in 338 BC) and Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 BC), who wrote Legalist texts but never got to become prime minister.

The state of Qin grew strong in the 300s BC under Shang, and continued to grow in power in the 200s BC, utilizing Legalist principles in its conquest of the entire nation of China; but others rebelled against their harsh tactics and methods. The Ch'in dynasty crumbled after only 15 years of ruling China.

If Legalist emperors had a saying, it would be “It is better to be feared than to be loved.”