

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-4a Legalism  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 5-4a Legalism

**Legalism** (A Chinese philosophy of government emphasizing strong authority.) was more a philosophy of government than a philosophy of private life. It was popularized during the **Era of the Warring States** (The period of Chinese history between c. 400 and 221 B.C.E.; characterized by the breakdown of the central government and feudal war.) (c. 400–221 B.C.E.), between the collapse of central Zhou dynastic authority (around 400 B.C.E.) and the rise of the Qin emperor in the 220s (see [Chapter 13](#)). The general breakdown of authority that characterized this period provided the motivation for Legalist ideas.

The Legalists believed that most people were inclined to evil selfishness and that it was the task of government to restrain them and simultaneously guide them toward a well-ordered society. This was to be accomplished through the use of a system of rewards and punishments, administered through a code of laws that were public and were to be impartially enforced for all subjects. Many aspects of legalist thought and practice were very modern and rational, but the system lacked a mechanism for restraining the actions of the ruler, and this eventually led to its eclipse by the ethical order of Confucianism. Legalist forms of administrative organization, however, persisted within the Imperial state throughout its long history.

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