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COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



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人类命运共同体研究院



## Philosophical Concept in Ancient China



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Over the years, the concept of "li" (理), a foundational principle in Chinese philosophy, has been crucial in influencing intellectual and cultural debate. This is a complex idea that includes ideas like cosmic order, principles, reason, and patterns. We shall examine the nature of li, its historical origins, and its impact on different schools of thought in ancient China in this succinct analysis.

### Origins and Development of Li

Shang Dynasty (c. 16th–11th century BCE) is when the term "li" first appeared and was used to refer to social rules and rituals. Confucius (協卅) and his disciples developed the idea of li during the Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century–256 BCE) by combining moral principles and ethical actions. The Confucian school highlighted that li represented values such as justice (yi) and compassion (ren).

In contrast, Laozi's (老子) Taoist teachings presented li as something more abstract, focusing on natural laws and spontaneous actions rather than human-made rules or



rituals. Similarly, Mohism (摩訶教) introduced a utilitarian perspective, viewing li as a means to achieve harmony among individuals and society at large.

Xunzi (荀子) expanded on the Confucian understanding of li during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), contending that it stood for universal principles controlling morality, politics, and nature. Wang Chong (王充) put up a critical argument in the meanwhile, doubting that li could genuinely exist apart from human perception and experience.

### Important Characteristics of Li

Fundamentally, li refers to the fundamental structure or pattern that is present in events and that can direct human behaviour. It provides a framework for comprehending reality and striking a balance in one's interpersonal and social relationships, acting as a link between the real world and the world of ideas.

Confucian scholars often associated li with propriety (yili 禮理), suggesting that adherence to established customs and conventions would lead to harmonious relationships and well-



ordered societies. However, some thinkers, such as Mozi, argued that li must serve practical purposes and promote utility above tradition.



Conversely, Taoists saw li as a component of the natural order and advised individuals to embrace simplicity and follow their intuition rather than depending only on strict moral guidelines. They held that li did not need to be purposefully imposed by people, but rather developed organically as a result of the interaction of yin and yang energies.

### **Importance of Li in the Present**

Even if the meaning of li has changed throughout time, its fundamental significance in Chinese history and culture has not changed. Its impact is not limited to classical philosophy; it also permeates contemporary disciplines like physics, law, ethics, and aesthetics. For example, modern scientists compare li to scientific theories, while legal experts explain how li connects to jurisprudential ideas.

Furthermore, li continues to influence East Asian views on diplomacy, government, and international affairs while providing insights into the region's distinct approach to conflict resolution and problem-solving. We can learn a lot about the intricacies of traditional Chinese philosophy and its continuing relevance in the modern era by delving into the subtleties of li.



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