

13 Han Yu: *Critique of Buddhism* (819 CE)

Introduced and translated by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), the influence of Buddhism reached its zenith. The number of Buddhist monks, nuns, and monasteries was immeasurable, with many monasteries being affluent and possessing vast land holdings, due to the donations of laypeople and the patronage of the powerful. Buddhism dominated the religious life of the population, and many emperors supported it, in some cases alongside Daoism. The significant influence of both religions in the state and society went against the Confucian understanding of political and social order, however. Against this backdrop, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), a high-ranking official and prominent literary figure, composed a memorial to the throne – that is, an official communication to the emperor – in 819, sharply criticizing Emperor Xuanzong's 憲宗 (r. 805–820) support for Buddhism. The text gained fame, and was later widely quoted, as it is considered the beginning of the Confucian reaction to the dominance of Buddhism, which was consummated during the Song dynasty (960–1278), with the rise of the neo-Confucian movement.

For Han Yu, this memorial to the throne initially had severe consequences. The emperor was furious at the criticism, and imposed the death penalty. Due to the intercession of senior officials, the sentence was commuted, and Han Yu was demoted and banished to an official post in a distant prefecture in the south. However, following the emperor's death a year later, he was able to return to the capital, Chang'an, where he was again appointed to high-ranking positions.

The memorial is recorded in various sources. The translation presented here is based on the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*Old History of the Tang Dynasty*), which starts by describing the events that provoked Han Yu's criticism: a grand Buddhist festival where a relic, purportedly a finger bone of the Buddha, was venerated, leading to outbreaks of religious fanaticism. However, the primary reason for the critique was that the emperor himself observed this religious fervour, and directed the Buddha's bone to be brought into the imperial palace. Han Yu seized this opportunity to elucidate the detrimental influence of Buddhism on the state, through historical examples, and to expose the belief that worshipping the Buddha could bring happiness as a delusion. While in this text Han Yu undergirds his critique of Buddhism with the argument that it is a foreign doctrine, he similarly opposed Daoism in other writings. Thus, he espoused a radically Confucian position, viewing both religions as threats to the state's order.

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Bibliographical Information

Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書 [Old History of the Tang Dynasty], *juan* 160. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; Vol. 13, 4198–200.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

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In the Famen Monastery of Fengxiang, there was the Pagoda of the True Body for the Protection of the State. In the pagoda, a finger bone of Buddha Śākyamuni was preserved, along with scriptures for the transmission of the Dharma. It was opened once every thirty years, and it was believed that when it was opened, the harvests would be fruitful, and people would live in abundance. In the first month of the fourteenth year [of the Yuanhe era] (819 CE), the emperor decreed that the imperial commissioner Du Yingji, escorted by thirty palace servants carrying incense and flowers, should proceed to the Lin'gao Station [in Chang'an] to receive the Buddha's bone. From the Guangshun Gate, it was brought into the imperial palace, and it stayed three days in the Forbidden City. Afterwards, it was escorted through all the monasteries. Aristocrats, scholars, and ordinary people rushed to make donations, fearing to be left behind. Everyone forgot their work, and squandered their wealth; they branded their skulls, or burned their arms as offerings. Han Yu, who was not a friend of Buddhism, submitted a memorial to the throne, criticising this:

I respectfully hold the view that Buddhism is a doctrine of barbarians. Since the Later Han period, it has spread in China, but in ancient times, it did not exist [here]. In ancient times, Huangdi sat on the throne for a hundred years, and lived to be 110. Shaohao was on the throne for eighty years, and lived to be a hundred. Zhuanxu was on the throne for seventy years, and lived to be ninety-eight. [. . . p. 4198/4199] In those times, the empire had great peace (*taiping* 太平), and the people lived happily, [enjoying] a long life. It was like that when there was no Buddhism in China. Even afterwards, Emperor Tang of the Yin dynasty lived to be a hundred. [. . .] Because Buddhism had not yet come to China in those times, it is not true that a long life is attained through the worship of the Buddha.

When Buddhism first appeared during the reign of Emperor Mingdi (r. 57–75 CE) of the Han dynasty, Emperor Mingdi was on the throne for only eighteen years. After that, one rebellion followed another, and happy times did not last long. During the Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, and Northern Wei dynasties, the worship of the Buddha became increasingly popular, and the reigns were particularly short. Only Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549) was on the throne for forty-eight years. People everywhere sacrificed their lives for the Buddha; no animal sacrifices were made at the imperial ancestral temple, and only one vegetarian meal was consumed daily. After that came

the rebellion of Hou Jing,¹ resulting in starvation in the palace, and the continued decline of the empire. The worship of the Buddha, hoping to attain happiness, turned into suffering misfortune. Considering these events, it is evident that the Buddha is unworthy of trust.

When Emperor Gaozu of the Tang dynasty (r. 618–626) took over the throne from the Sui dynasty, he initially considered abandoning the patronage of Buddhism. However, at that time, the officials' understanding was limited. They could not comprehend the ways of the rulers of antiquity, and the appropriate past and present policies to understand the wisdom [of the emperor], and thereby free the empire from harm. The proposal was not pursued further, a decision your servant profoundly regrets.

I prostrate myself before Your Majesty, before your sublime wisdom and heroism in battle, unparalleled throughout eternity. At the beginning of your reign, ordaining Buddhist monks and nuns or Daoist priests was not allowed, nor was the construction of new Buddhist or Daoist monasteries permitted. At that time, your servant believed that the will of Emperor Gaozu would be fulfilled through Your Majesty's hand. Even if his will cannot be fulfilled now, how is it possible to ignore it and, on the contrary, order the promotion of Buddhism!

Now your servant has heard that Your Majesty has commanded the monks to welcome the Buddha's bone in Fengxiang, that the emperor himself will climb a tower to see it carried into the palace, and that the order has been given for the bone to be received by all monasteries such that offerings can be made to it. Although your servant is extremely foolish, I am sure Your Majesty is not confused by [belief in] the Buddha so as to honour him for good fortune and blessings. Just because the year was productive, and people are happy, you comply with the people's good mood, by letting officials and the common people in the capital watch this strange spectacle and entertaining bustle. How could your sublime wisdom actually believe in such things! But people are ignorant and unenlightened; they are easily confused and understand with difficulty. When they see Your Majesty behaving this way, they will say that you wholeheartedly believe in the Buddha. Everyone will say, "The emperor is a great sage; he is unanimous with us in worshipping and believing in the Buddha. We, being common people, are of low rank; how should we, in the face of the Buddha, cling to our bodies and our lives?" [p. 4199/4200] Therefore, they brand their skulls, and burn their fingers. In groups of hundreds, they take off their regular clothes, and waste money as donations. This goes on from morning to evening. They imitate each other, and everyone hurries not to be late. Old and young crowd together, and neglect their livelihoods. If this is not more strongly prohibited and prevented, and [the Buddha's bone] continues to be led through all the monasteries, people will cut off their arms and pieces of flesh from their bodies as offerings. Thus, our customs will be corrupted, and become a mockery throughout the world. This is not a trivial matter.

I HS: Hou Jing 侯景 (d. 552), a notorious warlord who rebelled against the Liang dynasty.

The Buddha was fundamentally an uncivilised foreigner who did not master the Chinese language, and whose clothes were of a different cut. In his speech, he did not speak of the laws of our former rulers, and in his behaviour, he did not conform to them either. He knew nothing of righteousness in the relationship between ruler and subject, and the love between fathers and children. If he were still alive, and came on behalf of his country to the imperial palace in the capital, Your Majesty would allow him to be received, but only to meet him once in the Xuanzheng Hall, exchange pleasantries, present him with a set of clothes, and then have him escorted to the border. But surely, you would not order him to spread erroneous teachings among the people. How can it be appropriate that now that he is long dead, his rotten bone, the remnant of dreadful filth, is brought into the Forbidden City? Confucius says, "Honour the spirits, but keep them at a distance." In ancient times, therefore, when there was a death, the princes ordered that exorcists first eliminate the ominous influence [of the deceased] with a broom made of peach branches, and only then did they go for a condolence visit. But today, rotted dirt is received without reason and personally watched, exorcists do not come to eliminate first the ominous influence with a peach broom, officials say nothing about this mistake, and censors do not object — your servant truly considers this a shame. I request that this bone be thrown into water or fire to eradicate it forever, thus ending uncertainties in the empire, and preventing the misguidance of future generations. All in the empire should know that the behaviour of the great, wise ruler has deviated a thousand times from the customary. Wouldn't that be great! Wouldn't that be delightful! If the Buddha has supernatural abilities and can bring great calamity, let all misfortune fall on your servant. Heaven above will witness that your servant will not complain or regret anything.