

Han Yu's Anti-Buddhist Polemic (819 CE)

By some accounts, the revival of Confucianism during the Song dynasty began over a century and a half earlier with the writings of Han Yu (768–824), a scholar, poet, and government official, who took it upon himself to advocate for the restoration of the Confucian social and political order as the foundation of the state and the family. One of his most famous writings is a memorial (here, in the sense of a petition to or remonstrance with the government) regarding Emperor Xianzong's (r. 806–820) patronage of a Buddhist relic, a finger bone of the Buddha, which he had ordered be paraded through the capital and brought into the imperial palace.

Writing to the emperor in 819, Han Yu sets out the standard nativist critique of Buddhism: that it is an alien tradition that does not honor the ways of the former kings; that it weakens the authority and even the longevity of the state; that it removes people from the tax rolls and the obligations of labor; that its devotees mutilate themselves to demonstrate their religious piety . . . in short, that it is an offense against decency, morality, and Chinese values. However politically motivated, Han writes, the emperor's patronage of the relic weakens his authority and exposes him to ridicule.

Han Yu narrowly escaped execution and was exiled to the south of China for his remarks.

Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha

Your servant [*the author of this essay*] submits that Buddhism is no more than a barbarian cult that filtered into China beginning in the Later Han . . . In ancient times there was no such thing. In those times the empire was at peace, and the people, contented and happy, lived out their full complement of years. Buddhism had still not reached China, so this could not have been the result of serving the Buddha.

Buddhism first appeared in the time of the Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty, and Emperor Ming was a scant eighteen years on the throne. Afterwards followed a succession of disorders and revolutions, when dynasties did not long endure. From the time of the dynasties Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, and Wei, as they grew more zealous in the service of the Buddha, the reigns of kings became shorter. There was only the Emperor Wu of the Liang who was on the throne for forty-eight years. During his reign he thrice abandoned the world and dedicated himself to the service of the Buddha. He refused to use animals in the sacrifices in his own ancestral temple. His single meal a day was limited to fruits and vegetables. In the end he was driven out and died of hunger. His dynasty likewise came to an untimely end. In serving the Buddha he was seeking good fortune, but the disaster that overtook him was only the greater. Viewed in the light of this, it is obvious that the Buddha is not worth serving.

When Gaozu [*the first Tang emperor, r. 618–626*] first succeeded to the throne of the Sui [*dynasty, 581–618*], he planned to do away with Buddhism, but his ministers and advisors were short-sighted men incapable of any real understanding of the Way of the Former Kings or of what is fitting for past and present; they were unable to apply the emperor's ideas so as to remedy this evil, and the matter subsequently came to naught – many are the times your servant has regretted it!

I venture to consider that Your Imperial Majesty, shrewd and wise in peace and war, with divine wisdom and heroic courage, is without an equal through the centuries. When first you came to the throne, you would not permit laypeople to become monks or nuns or Daoist priests, nor would you allow the founding of temples or cloisters. It constantly struck me that the intention of Gaozu was to be fulfilled by

Your Majesty. Now even though it has not been possible to put it into effect immediately, it is surely not right to remove all restrictions and turn around and actively encourage them.

Now I hear that by Your Majesty's command a troupe of monks went to Fengxiang to get the Buddha-bone, and that you viewed it from a tower as it was carried into the Imperial Palace; also that you have ordered that it be received and honored in all the temples in turn!

Although your servant is stupid, he cannot help knowing that Your Majesty is not misled by this Buddha and that you do not perform these devotions to pray for good luck. But simply because the harvest has been good and the people are happy, you are complying with the general desire by putting on for the citizens of the capital this extraordinary spectacle, which is nothing more than a sort of theatrical amusement. How could a sublime intelligence like yours consent to believe in this sort of thing?

But the people are stupid and ignorant; they are easily deceived and with difficulty enlightened. If they see Your Majesty behaving in this fashion, they are going to think you serve the Buddha in all sincerity. All will say, "The Emperor is wisest of all, and yet he is a sincere believer. What are we common people that we still should grudge our lives?" Burning heads and searing fingers by the tens and hundreds, throwing away their clothes and scattering their money, from morning to night emulating one another and fearing only to be last, old and young rush about, abandoning their work and place; and if restrictions are not immediately imposed, they will increasingly make the rounds of temples, and some will inevitably cut off their arms and slice their flesh in the way of offerings. To thus violate decency and draw the ridicule of the whole world is no light matter.

Now the Buddha was of barbarian origin. His language differed from Chinese speech; his clothes were of a different cut; his mouth did not pronounce the prescribed words of the Former Kings; his body was not clad in the garments prescribed by the Former Kings. He did not recognize the relationship between prince and subject nor the sentiments of father and son. Let us suppose him to be living today, and that he come to court at the capital as an emissary of his country. Your Majesty would receive him courteously. But only one interview in the audience chamber, one banquet in his honor, one gift of clothing, and he would be escorted under guard to the border that he might not mislead the masses.

How much the less, now that he has long been dead, is it fitting that his decayed and rotten bone, his ill-omened and filthy remains, should be allowed to enter in the forbidden precincts of the Palace? Confucius said, "Respect the spirits, but keep them at a distance." The feudal lords of ancient times, when they went to pay a visit of condolence in their states, made it their practice to have exorcists go before with rush-brooms and peachwood branches to dispel unlucky influences. Only after such precautions did they make their visit of condolence. Now without reason you have taken up an unclean thing and examined it in person when no exorcist had gone before, when neither rush-broom nor peachwood branch had been employed. But your ministers did not speak of the wrong nor did the censors call attention to the impropriety; I am in truth ashamed of them.

I pray that Your Majesty will turn this bone over to the officials that it may be cast into water or fire, cutting off for all time the root and so dispelling the suspicions of the empire and preventing the befuddlement of later generations. Thereby men may know in what manner a great sage acts, who a million times surpasses ordinary men. Could this be anything but ground for prosperity? Could it be anything but a cause for rejoicing?

If the Buddha has supernatural power and can wreak harm and evil, may any blame or retribution fittingly fall on my person. Heaven be my witness: I will not regret it. Unbearably disturbed and with the utmost sincerity I respectfully present my petition that these things may be known.

Your servant in reverence and awe.

Translated by Edwin O. Reischauer