



Memorial on the Bones of the Buddha | 論佛骨表

Text Information

Author | Han Yu

Language | Chinese

Period | 9th Century

Genre | Discursive works

Source | Han Yu 韓愈, Han changli ji 韓昌黎集 (Collected Works of Han Changli), 2 vols. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, c. 1930, vol. II, 39:7:34-37.

Collection | Writing History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes; Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/memorial_bones_buddha/.

Translation and introduction by Geoff Humble.

Introduction to the Text

Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824 CE), also known as Tuizhi 退之, was a scholar, official, poet, and a highly influential literary figure during the Tang dynasty (619–907 CE) of China. He played an important role in the development of Confucian thought, especially the Confucian revival movement. This school of thought, often referred to as 'Neo-Confucianism' or *Daoxue* 道學 ('Learning of the Way'), became very influential in the centuries following Han Yu's death, its impact extending far beyond philosophical abstraction to shape literary and historical works, economic and social policy, and law during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). Han Yu's major contribution to this movement lay in providing Confucian thought with practical responses to the cultural and philosophical impacts of Buddhism and Daoism, and in popularizing a literary language, *guwen* 古文 ('the language of antiquity'), which claimed a basis in the Confucian canon of the Zhou dynasty (c.1046–256 BCE) and therefore eschewed the influence of Buddhist writings. In his most famous work, *Essentials of the Moral Way*, Han Yu proposed a political, social and economic program intended to place the Confucian classics at the center of life, with society arranged around a strong and virtuous imperial center.

The Memorial on the Bones of the Buddha is a memorial, that is, a report to the emperor. It was submitted by Han Yu to Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 806–820 CE) in 819 CE in response to Xianzong's proposal to parade Buddhist relics usually kept at the Famen Temple—more specifically, a bone from the Buddha's finger—around his territory. The tone of Han Yu's appeal is elegant but vehement, and has been celebrated as an example of prose style. His memorial contrasts the 'Chinese' teachings of the ancients, which he claims are proven to provide longevity, against the 'foreign' doctrines of a 'foreign' figure (the Buddha). He argues that the Buddha's relics can only bring impurity and instability and claims that his teachings have led to turbulent and deficient imperial governance.

One interesting aspect for modern readers is how Han Yu treats Buddhism as an instrument of rulership rather than as a faith or belief system, and seeks to demonstrate that its teachings cannot rival the ancient ways. His characterization of the Buddha as a foreigner is based on customs—clothing, food and language. The portrayal of Buddhism as a corrupting influence from the outside was quite extreme and does not seem to have been typical of the period, but it should be noted that the relic was not paraded again for more than fifty years—until 873 CE.

The tone of Han Yu's memorial was not welcomed by the emperor. While serving as Vice-President of the Board of Justice, Han Yu had previously published stark criticism of Daoism and Buddhism in his essay *Yuandao* 原道 (An Examination of the Way), with only limited impact. This time, however, his criticism of the imperial center through the condemnation of previous Buddhist dynasties infuriated the emperor. Han Yu only narrowly escaped with his life and was exiled to the southern province of Chaozhou, although on the death of Xianzong a year later he was able to return to the capital and subsequently occupied several senior roles in the civil service.



Han Yu. "Memorial on the Bones of the Buddha | 論佛骨表". Trans. Geoff Humble. *Global Medieval Sourcebook*. 2021. sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/memorial_bones_buddha/.

About this Edition

This text has been translated from the Shangwu yinshuguan edition: Han Yu 韓愈, Han changli ji 韓昌黎集 (Collected Works of Han Changli), 2 vols. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, c. 1930, vol. II, 39:7:34-37. A slightly different version of the original text is available online [here](#).

Further Reading

Chan, Wing-Tsit. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 450-51.

- *An introduction to Han Yu*.

Dalby, Michael T. 'Court Politics in Late T'ang Times.' *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589-906, Part 1*, edited by Denis Twitchett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 561-681.

- *Discusses the extent to which Han Yu influenced Emperor Wuzong's suppression of Buddhism in the 840s*.

Han Yu 韓愈. *Han changli ji* 韩昌黎集 (Collected Works of Han Changli), 2 vols, Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, c. 1930, vol. II, 39:7:34-37.

- *An edition of the text*.

Somers, Robert M. 'The End of the T'ang.' *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589-906, Part 1*, edited by Denis Twitchett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 682-789.

- *Describes the parade of the Buddha's finger bone in 873 CE*.

Strong, John S. *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press, 2004.

- *A discussion of the relic of the Buddha's finger, and of relic worship in the Tang dynasty, p. 186, including n.22*.

Weinstein, Stanley. *Buddhism Under the T'ang*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

- *Discusses the controversy over Han Yu's critical memorial, pp. 102-3*.



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臣某言：伏以佛者，夷狄之一法耳。自後漢時流入中國，上古未嘗有也。昔者黃帝在位百年，年百一十歲；少昊在位八十年，年百歲；顓頊在位七十九年，年九十八歲；帝嚳在位七十年，年百五歲；帝堯在位九十八年，年百一十八歲；帝舜及禹，年皆百歲。此時天下太平，百姓安樂壽考，然而中國未有佛也。其後殷湯亦年百歲，湯孫太戊在位七十五年，武丁在位五十九年，書史不言其年壽所極，推其年數，蓋亦俱不減百歲；周文王年九十七歲，武王年九十三歲，穆王在位百年；此時佛法亦未入中國，非因事佛而致然也。

漢明帝時始有佛法，明帝在位纔十八年耳。其後亂亡相繼，運祚不長。宋、齊、梁、陳、元魏已下，事佛漸謹，年代尤促。惟梁武帝在位四十八年，前後三度捨身施佛，宗廟之祭不用牲牢，晝日一食止於菜果，其後竟為侯景所逼，餓死臺城，國亦尋滅。事佛求福，乃更得禍。由此觀之，佛不足事，亦可知矣。

高祖始受隋禪，則議除之。當時群臣材識不遠，不能深知先王之道，古今之宜，推闡聖明，以救斯弊，其事遂止。臣常恨焉。伏惟睿聖文武皇帝陛下，神聖英武，數千百年已來，未有倫比。即位之初，即不許度人為僧、尼、道士，又不許創立寺觀。臣常以為高祖之志，必行於陛下之手；今縱未能即行，豈可恣之轉令盛也！

Your humble servant submits: this practice of bowing to the Buddha is merely a philosophy of the Yi and the Di [i.e., people beyond the civilized realm]. Flowing into China during the Later Han, it had not been present in ancient times. Of the ancients, Huangdi 黃帝 was on the throne for a century, and lived to be 110¹; Shao Hao 少昊 ruled for 80 years, dying at 100²; Zhuan Xu 顓頊 kept his throne for 79 years, living to be 98³; Di Ku 帝嚳 ruled for 70 years and lived to 105⁴; Di Yao 帝堯 had 98 years on the throne and lived to be 118⁵; Emperors Shun 舜 and Yu 禹 both lived to be 100⁶. At that time the world was peaceful and happy, the common people living long and joyful lives, but China did not yet have Buddhism. After this, Tang 湯 of Yin 殷 lived to 100 too, Tang's grandson Tai Wu 太戊 was on the throne for 75 years, Wu Ding 武丁 was on the throne 59 years, and although the books of history do not give his final age, if one had to guess it would most likely not fall short of a century⁷. King Wen of Zhou 周文王 lived to be 97, King Wu 武王 lived to 93, King Mu 穆王 ruled for 100 years⁸: at this time too Buddhism had not yet arrived in China, and this [longevity] was not a result of serving the Buddha.

Buddhism began to arrive in China at the time of Emperor Ming 明 of the Han, and Mingdi was only on the throne for 18 years⁹. Afterwards chaos and the fall [of dynasties] followed in quick succession, and no dynasty was fated to last. Under the Song 宋, the Qi 齊, the Liang 梁, the Chen 陳, the Yuan Wei 元魏 and their successors, the Buddha was served ever more sincerely, and the [lifespan of their] dynasties became [ever more] especially brief¹⁰. Only Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝¹¹ retained his throne for 48 years; he tried to offer himself to the Buddha three times in all. He gave offerings at the Imperial Ancestral Temple, but without sacrificing livestock; he dined only once a day, consuming merely fruit and vegetables. Eventually he was forced out by rebellion and starved at Taicheng 臺城, and soon the dynasty was destroyed too. Serving the Buddha to seek happiness thus brings only calamity. From this one sees that Buddha is not worth serving—this can be quite clearly understood.

When [Tang] Gaozu 高祖¹² first received the abdication of the Sui 隋, he consulted on whether to get rid of it [i.e., Buddhism]¹³. At that time the ability and intelligence of his ministers was not sufficiently farsighted in nature; they could neither fathom the ways of the former kings, nor grasp the ideals passed from ancient times, nor understand the wisdom of the sage [emperor] in wishing to save the state from harm, and his plans were thus halted. Your servant has often regretted this. Your servant has humbly thought that the farsighted sage Majesty, the Wenwu 文武 Emperor¹⁴, perfect in holiness and valour, ruling for hundreds and thousands of years to come and quite without peer, on ascending the throne, immediately prevent people from becoming monks, nuns, and Daoist priests, also halting the establishment of further monasteries and [Daoist] temples. Your servant has always believed that Gaozu's will must surely be carried out by Your Majesty's hand; even if this cannot be put into practice all at once, how can this [Buddhism] be allowed to flourish [against his will]?



今聞陛下令群僧迎佛骨於鳳翔，禦樓以觀，昇入大內；又令諸寺遞迎供養。臣雖至愚，必知陛下不惑於佛，作此崇奉，以祈福祥也。直以年豐人樂，徇人之心，為京都士庶設詭異之觀、戲翫之具耳，安有聖明若此，而肯信此等事哉！

然百姓愚冥，易惑難曉，苟見陛下如此，將謂真心事佛，皆云：「天子大聖，猶一心敬信，百姓何人，豈合更惜身命？」焚頂燒指，百十為群，解衣散錢，自朝至暮，轉相倣效，惟恐後時，老少奔波，棄其業次。若不即加禁遏，更曆諸寺，必有斷臂臠身以為供養者。傷風敗俗，傳笑四方，非細事也。

夫佛本夷狄之人，與中國言語不通，衣服殊製，口不言先王之法言，身不服先王之法服，不知君臣之義、父子之情。假如其身至今尚在，奉其國命，來朝京師，陛下容而接之，不過宣政一見，禮賓一設，賜衣一襲，衛而出之於境，不令惑眾也；況其身死已久，枯朽之骨，凶穢之餘，豈宜令入宮禁？孔子曰：「敬鬼神而遠之。」古之諸侯行弔於其國，尚令巫祝先以桃荔祓除不祥，然後進弔。今無故取朽穢之物，親臨觀之，巫祝不先，桃荔不用，群臣不言其非，御史不舉其失，臣實恥之！

乞以此骨付之有司，投諸水火，永絕根本，斷天下之疑，絕後代之惑，使天下之人，知大聖人之所作為，出於尋常萬萬也，豈不盛哉！豈不快哉！佛如有靈，能作禍祟，凡有殃咎，宜加臣身，上天鑒臨，臣不怨悔。無任感激懇惓之至，謹奉表以聞。臣某誠惶誠恐。

Now one hears Your Majesty has decreed that groups of monks will welcome the Buddha's bones to Fengxiang 鳳翔, provide a building for viewing [them], and carry them into the Imperial Palace; also that all temples will receive the relics in turn to make offerings [to them]. Although your servant is extremely stupid, he of course realizes that Your Majesty does not have blind faith in this Buddha, and is taking part in this worship to seek blessings and good fortune. Purely in order to have plentiful harvests and happy people, [Your Majesty] has heeded the suggestions [lit., pursued the hearts] of the common folk, building strange temples as toys for them to play with. Since your Majesty is of august wisdom, surely you do not actually have belief in this [the Buddhist belief].

The common people are, however, stupid, easily taken in and difficult to enlighten; if Your Majesty is seen in this way, sincerely serving the Buddha, all will say, "Even the great sage Son of Heaven faithfully offers his whole heart; what kind of people are the commoners? How can we hesitate to offer even more?" [Those] "burning the scalp and singeing the fingers"¹⁵ would become ever more numerous; discarding clothes and abandoning property, from dawn to dusk they would copy one another, each one afraid to fall behind the times, old and young alike rushing about and abandoning their occupations. If this is not urgently prohibited, all our temples will be altered, and [people will] slice up their own arms to make bodily offerings¹⁶. Customs will be harmed and conventions degraded, ridicule will spread throughout the world - this is no trifling matter.

This Buddha was originally a foreigner, unfamiliar with the language of China, with a different system of dress, a mouth unable to speak the ceremonial words of the former kings, a body unable to wear their ceremonial robes; [he would] not have understood the filial righteousness of lord and subject, the filial affection of father and son. [Even] supposing he was still alive today, and accepting an order from his country had come to the court, Your Majesty would tolerate and accept him, showing him policy and ceremony, granting him a robe and escorting him safely to the border; [but he would] not be allowed to delude the masses. Much less so now that he is long since dead - how can the order be given for these withered bones and inauspicious remains to be introduced into the confines of the palace? Confucius said, "Respect spirits but keep them at a distance." The ancient lords, if bringing a corpse back to their country, would first have a shaman use a peachwood broom to expel inauspicious [presences], only then bringing in the body. Now, for no good reason, [Your Majesty is] taking this filthy thing, looking at it in person, without the preparation of a shaman, without using the peachwood, without the other ministers advising against it, without the censor highlighting the error; your servant is truly ashamed to see this [come to pass]!

[Your servant] begs that these bones be turned over to a suitable office, all washed and burned away and eternally destroyed, in order to remove doubt from the world, resolve the misgivings of later generations, and to make the people understand that the actions of the great sage [emperor] are utterly beyond the ordinary. Would this not be mighty? Would this not be decisive? If this Buddha has power, and can call down disastrous punishment, this ought to be placed on my person; if a heavenly warning must be faced, your servant will not complain. This memorial is solemnly presented for inspection with the utmost sincerity and gratitude. Your servant in reverence and in awe.



Critical Notes

- 1 Huangdi 黃帝, the mythical 'Yellow Emperor,' was traditionally regarded as having ruled c. 2698–2598 BCE, and popularly regarded as one of the 'Five Emperors,' sage rulers and common ancestors of the Han Chinese.
- 2 Shao Hao 少昊, traditionally regarded as having ruled around 2598–2525 BCE, and according to some accounts the son of the Yellow Emperor, is also included as one of the 'Five Emperors' in some accounts.
- 3 Zhuan Xu 颛頊, also known as Gaoyang 高陽, is traditionally regarded as being the grandson of the Yellow Emperor, and regarded as another of the Five Emperors.
- 4 Di Ku 帝嚙, or Emperor Ku, traditionally regarded as the grandson of Shao Hao, and another of the Five Emperors, ruling at some point in the 25th century BCE.
- 5 Di Yao 帝堯, or Emperor Yao, traditionally regarded as the second son of Di Ku and one of the Five Emperors, reigning across the 24th and 23rd centuries BCE.
- 6 Shun 舜 is sometimes counted as one of the Five Emperors, and reportedly gave up his throne, at the age of 100, to Yu 禹, the founder of the Xia 夏 dynasty, traditionally dated to 2207–1766 BCE.
- 7 Tang 湯, Taiwu 太戊 (or Dawu 大戊) and Wuding 武丁 are all regarded as emperors of the Yin 殷, or Shang 商, dynasty, traditionally dated as 1766 to 1122 BCE.
- 8 King Wen 文王 was active under the last years of the Shang, while his son King Wu 武王 established the Zhou 周 dynasty, ruling during the 11th century BCE, and King Mu 穆王, also of the Zhou 周, ruled during the 10th century BCE.
- 9 Emperor Ming 明 of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), r. 57–75 CE.
- 10 The [Liu] Song 宋 (420–479), the Qi 齊 (479–502), the Liang 梁 (550–557) and the Chen 陳 (557–589) were southern dynasties that arose in the southeast of China. The Yuan Wei 元魏, also known as the Northern Wei 北魏, ruled northern parts of China from 386 to 534 CE.
- 11 Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝, r. 502–549.
- 12 The short-lived Sui dynasty, 581–618 CE, unified the territories of the Southern and Northern Dynasties.
- 13 This refers to Tang Gaozu's 'Edict to Purge Buddhism and Daoism,' promulgated in 626, and aimed particularly to curtail the power of Buddhism, though prompted by conflict between the two sects. The measure was abandoned on Gaozu's abdication and the subsequent succession of Taizong (Emperor Taizong of Tang, 598–649 CE, r. 626–649). Gaozu nonetheless provided considerable patronage to both Daoist and Buddhist foundations in Chang'an and elsewhere. See Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, pp. 8-9; Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang'an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 258-59.
- 14 The Wenwu 文武 Emperor here is Taizong.
- 15 This refers to the various practices of autocremation apparently once common among Chinese Buddhists but later largely limited to moxibustion on the scalp and forearm at the ordination of monks and nuns—on these practices see James A. Benn (1998), "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 37: 295–322.
- 16 On self-mutilation in this context, see John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp. 48–49.