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Chinese Cultural Studies:

Han Yu

Memorial on Buddhism (819 CE)

from Edwin O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China*, (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), pp. 221-24 repr. in Alfred J. Andrea and James H.

Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, Vol 1, 2d. ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), pp. 187-190

[Andrea Introduction] Chinese Buddhism reached its high point of popularity and influence during the initial stages of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907), an age of renewed imperial unity and prosperity. Buddhist monasteries and sects proliferated, and the early Tang imperial court often patronized Buddhism in one form or another. However, because so many aspects of Buddhism were at variance with the traditional culture of China, especially Confucian values, conflict was inevitable.

One of the leaders in the Confucian counterattack on Buddhism was the classical prose stylist and poet Han Yu (768–824 CE), who in 819 CE composed a vitriolic polemic attacking Buddhism. The emperor was so enraged that he initially wanted to execute the author, but eventually he contented himself with banishing this impudent civil servant to a frontier outpost.

Later Confucians considered Han Yu a pioneer of a Confucian intellectual revival that culminated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, a movement that wedded metaphysical speculation (concern with matters that transcend the senses) to traditional Confucian practicality. In so doing, the Neo-Confucians offered a metaphysical alternative to the otherworldliness of Daoism and Buddhism and undercut them severely. More immediately, Han Yu's essay foreshadowed by only a generation a nativist against "foreign" religions.

A champion of rationalism, Han Yu wished to suppress Daoism as well as Buddhism, yet ironically it was due to Daoist influence that

Emperor Wuzong initiated a policy of state suppression of a number of foreign religious establishments between 841 and 845. Buddhist monasteries were hard hit by these events, and Chinese Buddhism consequently suffered a major reversal of fortune. Buddhism still remained

strong at the popular level, where it increasingly merged with folk magic and other forms of religious Daoism, but from the mid-ninth century on it declined rapidly as a powerful rival to Confucianism for allegiance of China's ruling class.

Han Yu's Memorial to Buddhism, which he composed in protest over the Emperor's devotion to a relic of the Buddha's finger bone, reveals why so many Chinese ultimately found Buddhism unacceptable.

Your servant submits that Buddhism is but one of the practices of barbarians which has filtered into China since 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.... The Buddhist doctrine had still not reached China, so this could not have been the result of serving the Buddha.

The Buddhist doctrine first appeared in the time of the Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty, and the 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. First and last, 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 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 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 laymen 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 nor 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 just 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. Thus to 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 ghosts and spirits, but keep away from them.' 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 aces 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 is truly alarmed, truly afraid.

Questions FOR ANALYSIS

- 1.How does Han Yu imply that those emperors who have espoused Buddhism have lost the Mandate of Heaven?
- 2.How does he imply that this religion is not Chinese?
- 3.What aspect of Buddhism most repels Han Yu?
- 4.In Han Yu's mind, what are the social and political dangers of Buddhism?
- 5.Keeping in mind the Chinese cult of ancestors, why would a Confucian find the practice of venerating the Buddha's finger bone especially disgusting?