

Han Yü Biography

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Biography

The Chinese writer Han Yü (768-824) is ranked high as a poet but, more importantly, is revered as a master of prose writing. His writing is characterized by a devotion to classicism both in form and in content.

With the early death of his parents, Han Yü grew up in difficult family circumstances, which, however, only spurred him to greater efforts in mastering the Confucian classics. Eventually he passed the civil service examination, but his advancement on the ladder of officialdom was interrupted by repeated banishment to posts of magistracy in one outlying region or another. His forthright opinions expressed in forceful language won him mostly fear and hatred. In 819 he presented a famed memorial against the royal reception of the relic of Buddha's finger bone, in which he condemned Buddhism in general and recommended the destruction of the "filthy object" by water and fire. The ensuing banishment was actually a merciful substitute for the capital punishment ordered by the infuriated emperor.

It was Han Yü's lifelong conviction that the restoration of the supremacy of Confucianism, with the corresponding suppression of Buddhism and Taoism, was the road to bringing forth order out of chaos in the land. His essays "On Man," "On the Tao," "On Human Nature," and on similar topics are considered harbingers of the Neo-Confucian movement in Chinese philosophy which flourished in the 11th century.

An administrator, military strategist, social reformer, and philanthropist, Han Yü is most of all remembered as a man of letters. More than anyone else, he was responsible for breaking the hold of the highly stilted and extravagant style of writing which was popular at the time. He attributed his own success as a classical literary stylist to his absorption in the Confucian classics, both in their teaching and in their expression.

Han Yü's collected works contain some 300 poems and an even larger number of letters and essays. Few are the Chinese who have completed their education without having learned a number of Han Yü's essays by heart, and many have been inspired by his example not only to say things clearly and elegantly but also to be fearless to say what is on one's mind. Han Yü was accorded the posthumous title of Master of Literature. In 1084 his tablet was placed in the Confucian Temple.