

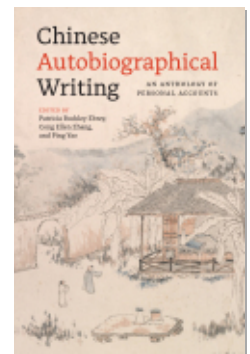


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(768–824) and Han Qi 韩琦 (1008–1075)

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## MOURNING FRIENDS AND RELATIONS

Elegies by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824)  
and Han Qi 韓琦 (1008–1075)

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*Read during mourning ceremonies, elegies addressed recently deceased friends or relatives. The examples by Han Yu and Han Qi relate intimate details about their relationships with the deceased.*

Death rituals occupied an important place in Chinese life since ancient times. As a ritual and cultural practice, mortuary and sacrificial writing gained greater importance as forms of commemoration from the Tang dynasty (618–907) onward. This was seen in the popularity of funerary biographies, dirges, elegies, and related texts. An elegy (*jiwen*) was a communication between a mourner and a deceased person and was offered to the spirit of the deceased along with food and wine. In addition to those written for relatives, Chinese scholar-officials wrote elegies for friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Elegy writing grew to be such an important obligation and symbol of a close relationship that those who were unable to attend a funeral or memorial service would compose one and have it delivered over long distances. Failure

to do so was known to have caused endless speculation regarding souring friendship or political betrayal. Elegies written by and for famous people were routinely copied, compiled in collected works, and admired for their literary and artistic quality by those who had no direct connections with either the author or the deceased. As commemorative literature, elegies are often replete with allusions to classical works and hyperbolic language. They nonetheless can tell us much about the lives of both the deceased and the mourner: writing an elegy provided the perfect opportunity for the mourners to reflect on their most precious memories of the deceased and articulate their emotional responses to their losses.

The first selection below was written by the famous Tang scholar Han Yu for his only nephew, Twelfth Brother. Orphaned as a boy, Han Yu was brought up by his brother and sister-in-law, so grew up in the same household with Twelfth Brother. Han's narrative reveals nothing of Han Yu the great writer and Confucian thinker, only a middle-aged man lamenting the passing of a junior family member and longtime companion. It should be noted that Han's demonstration of intense grief was somewhat unconventional. Even though parents and senior family members composed elegies and epitaphs for their children, rarely did they allow themselves to express their emotions at such length.

The next two selections were composed by Han Qi, one of the most influential statesmen in the Northern Song (960–1127), both for social equals. The first one, dated 1052, was addressed to Fan Zhongyan (989–1052), one of the most revered political and literary figures in Chinese history. Han and Fan shared some of the greatest moments of their lives: they were co-commanders in the Song-Xia War (1039–1042), collaborated in a short-lived yet important reform movement (the Qingli Reform, 1043–1044), and considered each other good friends. They last saw each other in 1044 but kept in touch through letters and exchanging literary compositions.

Han Qi composed the second elegy in 1071 to mourn the passing of Zhao Ziyuan (999–1071), the husband of his wife's sister. Han and Zhao had known each other since both were junior officials in the capital, and even though their careers took different paths, they stayed in touch their whole lives and exchanged many poems over the years.

## Elegy for Twelfth Brother, by Han Yu

It took me, your uncle Yu, a week after hearing of your death to gain enough control of my grief to compose this expression of my feelings. I am sending Jianzhong on the long journey to prepare the sacrificial food and drink and to report to your spirit the following.

Alas! I was orphaned when still a very small child and had little memory of my parents once I was grown. I depended completely on your parents [lit. my older brother and his wife]. When your father died in the south in the prime of life, you and I were still young. We accompanied your mother to Heyang [Henan], where she buried your father. You and I then moved to Jiangnan [lower Yangzi region].

We were miserable, lonely orphans who spent every day together. I had had three older brothers, but they had all died early, so you and I were the only descendants in our family, you in the grandchild generation, me in the son generation, each generation with a single survivor. Your mother once held you and pointed to me and said, "You two are the only ones left from two generations of the Han family." At the time you were very small, so you probably do not remember it. Although I remember what she said, at the time I did not comprehend the sadness of her statement.

I was nineteen when I went to the capital for the first time. Four years later, I returned home to see you. After another four years, I went to Heyang to visit the family graves, where I met you, there to bury your mother. Two years later, you came to see me while I was serving under Vice Director Dong in Bianzhou [Henan] and stayed for a year before leaving to get your family. But the next year, after Vice Director Dong died, I left Bianzhou, so you did not in the end return with them.

That year I was assigned to the military garrison at Xuzhou [Jiangsu]. The messenger I had sent to get you had just set off when I was reassigned, so again in the end you did not join me. I rationalized that if in fact you had joined me in the east, it would have been temporary, so if we wanted a more enduring arrangement, it would be better to go back west. I was going to set things up and get you. Alas! Who could have foretold that so soon after we separated you would die so suddenly! When we were both young, I assumed that even if we lived apart for a while, we would eventually live together permanently. On that basis I left you and traveled to the capital in my quest for a meager government salary. Had I in fact known how things would turn out,

I would not have tolerated living apart a single day, even to gain the highest post in the government.

Last year, when Meng Dongye was heading your way, I wrote a letter to you: "I am not yet forty, and yet my vision is dimming, my hair turning gray, and my teeth getting loose. Considering that the men in my father's generation and my own generation had seemed so strong and healthy yet died young, I wonder how a weakling like me can survive much longer. With me unable to leave and you unwilling to come, I worry that any day now I could die and you would be burdened with limitless pain." Who would have thought that the younger and healthier of us would die and the older and sicker one would live on?

Alas! Can this really be true, or is it a dream? The report cannot be true, can it? How can I believe that my elder brother, who was so virtuous, would have his hair pass away so young? Or that you could be so brilliant but reap none of the rewards you deserved? It is unbelievable that the young and strong would die young and the old and decrepit would survive—it must be a dream, or the report must be wrong. Dongye's letter, Genglan's report, why are they here by my side?

Alas! It seems to be true—my elder brother was so virtuous, and yet his hair died young; you who were so brilliant and able to raise our family got none of what you deserved. This is what is meant by the saying that Heaven is truly unfathomable, the spirits impossible to understand. Or the saying that we cannot use reason to predict who will have a long life. From this year on, my silvery hair will turn whiter and my loose teeth fall out, my body will grow more feeble and my mental acuity decline. How long will it be before I follow you in death? If the dead are conscious, our separation will not last much longer. If they are not conscious, my sorrow will not last that much longer before I am without sorrow forever.

Your son is just ten and my son only five. If a strong young man like you failed to survive, is there hope that these children will achieve adulthood? Alas! Such sorrow!

Last year you wrote in a letter, "I have come down with beriberi, and often it is quite bad." I responded, "This is a disease that Jiangnan people often get." I did not get alarmed. Alas! Was this in the end what cut your life short? Or was another disease the cause? Your letter was dated the seventeenth of the sixth month. Dongye said you died on the second day of the sixth month, and Genglan's report did not mention the date. Probably Dongye's messenger

did not think to ask your family members about the date, and Genglan did not realize that he should mention the date. When Dongye wrote to me, he must have asked the messenger, who made up something. What is the truth?

I am now sending Jianzhong to make the sacrificial offerings to you and offer my condolences to your orphans and the nursemaid. If they have enough food to remain there until the burial, then he will wait for them, then bring them here. If they do not have enough to get by until the funeral, he is to bring them here right away and leave the funeral arrangements in the hands of the servants. If I am able to arrange it, I will later move your grave to the family cemetery. Only once that is done will I feel I have done my part.

Alas! I do not know when you fell ill or on which day you died. While you were alive, I was not able to support you so we could live together, and with your death, I am unable to put my hands on you to exhaust my sorrow. I will not be supervising the encoffining or attending the burial. It must be my disregard of the spirits that brought on your early death. Neither filial nor loving, I have been unable either to support you in life or to take care of you in death. One of us is on the edge of Heaven, the other the margins of the earth. While you were alive, your shadow did not cross my body, with death your soul will not visit me in my dreams. It is all my fault! No one else is to blame! How vast is the blue Heaven! From this day forth, I will detach myself from the world of men. I will look for a few hundred *mu* of land at the confluence of the Yi and Ying Rivers to spend my remaining years. I will teach your son and mine and hope they grow to adulthood. I will provide for our daughters till they marry. I will make this my prime purpose in life.

Alas! I am out of words, but my emotions will never cease. Are you aware of this? Alas, the grief! I make this offering.

SOURCE: Han Yu, *Han Yu wenji huijiao jianzhu* 韓愈文集彙校箋注, ed. and annot. Liu Zhenlun 劉真倫 and Yue Zhen 岳珍 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2010), 1:13.1469–71.

### Elegy for Mr. Fan Zhongyan, the Cultured and Upright, by Han Qi

On this unspecified day, I have prepared clear wine and delicious food to sacrifice to the spirit of Mr. Fan, the academician.

Alas, the grief! Heaven definitely created you for the sake of the Song. It

meant for you to assist his majesty in the manner of Yao and Shun, which you performed selflessly and loyally. You strove to reform popular customs to match the era of the Zhou kings Cheng and Kang, and you thought long and hard about how to treat the people with benevolence. You were promoted to the top ranks, so no one can say you were not recognized. On behalf of the court, you pacified the frontiers, so no one can say that you were not given important responsibilities. Then why did your goal of achieving peace and harmony fail, making your grand vision just a dream? This is what vexed you and pained everyone else in the world as well. How could my grief come only from losing a lifelong friend? The news of your death made me wail bitterly. Alas, the grief!

I had not had much contact with you when I first entered officialdom, yet we shared similar goals and principles. When I was appointed to lead the troops on the western borders, I finally got to work with you. United in our determination, we pledged to eliminate our enemies. Our bond was built upon our devotion to the dynasty. We were as close as brothers. Drawing on our loyalty and trustworthiness, we overcame innumerable difficulties and dangerous situations. I admired you but knew I would never match you, just as a nag looks up to a racehorse, and ten nags together would not be able to catch up with one racehorse. How could I dare to ride side by side with you? Yet people did not recognize this and referred to us as Han-Fan. In my heart, I knew I was not your match and felt greatly mortified. Largely due to you, we eventually conquered the barbarians.

After the rebellious Tanguts surrendered, we returned to the court together. You and I were both put in key positions to take charge of important matters. We took opposing stands on key issues concerning the dynasty's long-term fortunes, then reconciled as if nothing had happened. We were accused of forming factions, a dubious charge. In the end, our vision did not conform with the times, and people labeled you foolish and me ignorant. One after another, we were demoted to local positions. Slander made our lives harder. Grateful that you understood me, I remained your steadfast friend. Alas, the grief!

Dingzhou [Hebei], where I was posted, and Qingzhou [Shandong], where you held office, were not far apart. After you left the capital, you wrote regularly and we became even closer friends. Your letters were written in neat, small characters; the beautiful words and perfect calligraphy filled the sheets. You said that you were fit and healthy and sent me your regards. I assumed that you were doing fine and taking care of yourself.

Then suddenly you wrote that you were ill and asked for a doctor. Shocked, I immediately sent a messenger and waited to hear from you. At the time, you happened to have been reassigned to Yingzhou [Anhui] and traveled there by sedan chair. You even took the trouble of writing a few words to me. Thinking that you had somewhat recovered, I felt relieved. I was preparing a letter and medicine to send you when I heard from Cai Yuangui that you had passed away. Reading Yuangui's letter left me stunned. In shock, I couldn't breathe or taste my food.

Your way of serving the throne was consistent throughout. Life is bound to end—even the sages could not escape this. How unfortunate that at a time when the country needs wise and virtuous men, Heaven is so inhumane that it deprives us of one! Alas, the grief!

Throughout your life, you followed the model of Kui and Xie [who assisted the ancient sage king Shun]. Your outstanding writing and policies as well as your unparalleled loyalty and principles will be forever remembered. They match those of the ancients and will be examples for future sages. Your exceptional character and achievements will be recorded in the history books and widely recognized for tens of thousands of generations. In this sense, should your passing be counted as premature death or as long life? I trust the wise will be able to judge. How could I fully recount your lifelong accomplishments in one elegiac essay! What I can do is to think back on your life and mourn in silence. As long as I live, my grief will persist. Are you conscious of this?

SOURCE: Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 et al., eds., *Quan Song wen* 全宋文 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chuban Youxian Gongsi, Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, Anhui Chuban Jituan, Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2006), 40:860.133–34.

## Elegy for the Retired Academician

Mr. Zhao Ziyuan, by Han Qi

On a certain day in the eighth month of the fourth year of the Xining reign period [1071], I am sending my attendant Zhang Shichang to offer clear wine and delicious food to the spirit of the academician Zhao Ziyuan:

Alas! We were such intimate, like-minded friends. In terms of our relationship, we were both sons-in-law of the Cui family. In the early Mingdao reign period [1032–1033], we both served in the Hanlin Academy. Promoted at the same time, we became even closer. When on duty, we stayed at the same



dormitory; when apart, we thought alike. We were like two fast horses riding on flat terrain, wanting to race for a thousand *li* and arrive at the destination at the same time. How would we know that, in the middle of our journey, our courses would diverge?

You were content with your lot in life so never haggled over it, but I was disappointed that your talent was not fully utilized. You served in multiple local offices as a conventional official. In old age, you sought a position in the censorate, then retired shortly afterward. In the capital, Luoyang, you built a house where you planned to enjoy a leisurely life and attain your lofty goals. Who would have thought that the quiet life would damage your body? From far away, you sent a messenger to inform me of your illness. Shocked, I sent a doctor out of concern. No sooner had the doctor arrived than you passed away. Alas, the grief!

You lived to over seventy, which is more than a long life. Your sons are doing exceptionally well in their government careers. Entering officialdom, you achieved a good reputation; retiring, you cut off worldly burdens. Nothing in your life caused any regret. What has saddened me is that our relationship was so profound and intimate, yet I will never see your face or hear your voice again, nor will I ever receive another letter from you. I am not at your funeral to offer this in person. Hollering into the wind, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I am sending a messenger to deliver this meager offering. If somehow you receive it, come to meet me in a dream. Please enjoy my offerings.

SOURCE: Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 et al., eds., *Quan Song wen* 全宋文 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chuban Youxian Gongsì, Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, Anhui Chuban Jituan, Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2006), 40:860.143–44.

### Further Reading

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