Abstract

Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元) (773-819) was a short-lived political reformer and writer of the mid-Tang Dynasty. At the age of 33, he became the mainstay of the Yongzheng Reform (永贞革新) led by Wang Shuwen (王叔文). The collapse of the reform spelt disaster for Liu. Before the reform, he was an outstanding intellectual rapidly ascending the social and political hierarchies. When the reform failed, he was relegated to Yong Zhou (永州) and later to Liu Zhou (柳州), thus spending the last fourteen years of his life in banishment. Upon Liu's death, Han Yu (韩愈) commented that Liu was condemned and banished as a result of not taking enough care of his own interests and thinking that he could accomplish his objectives fast. This thesis, therefore, aims to do a comprehensive study of Liu's life, followed by a critical evaluation of Han Yu's comments on Liu.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter analyses Liu's family background as well as his childhood and adolescent life experiences, in relation to the formation of his mentality and aspirations. The second chapter is an account of his attempt to enter the central government by sitting for the jin-shi (进士) and bo-xue-hong-ci (博学宏词) examinations. This is followed by a description of the early years of his political career, during which he enjoyed a series of smooth and unusually fast promotions. The third chapter examines the reasons for his becoming a member of the Wang Shuwen political clique. It also looks at his role and the various policies and measures implemented in the Yongzheng Reform. The series of events leading to the collapse of the reform are then outlined. The fourth chapter focuses on Liu's frustrating life as a banished official living in the remotest areas of China. The
concluding chapter is an appraisal of the fairness of Han Yu’s comments on Liu.

This thesis has brought to light the following: Liu was an idealist who aspired to improve dramatically the condition of the state and the common people. He was, in a word, a self-styled Confucian crusader aiming at political reform. His participation in the reform was the culmination of his youthful endeavour as a public-minded intellectual. In order to give his participation in the reform an unbiased evaluation, we should take into account his personal aspirations, character and principles. Han Yu’s comments failed to accommodate these factors and therefore are considered to be rather unfair to Liu.