SYNOPSIS

Liu Zong Yuan (柳宗元) (A.D. 773 to 819) was a short lived prosor whose life was full of frustration. At the age of 33, he was first relegated to a remote area named Yong Zhou (永州) as a redundant officer. He spent 10 years in Yong Zhou where most of his literary works were written. Later, he was once again relegated, this time to an even remoter area Liu Zhou (柳州) when he was 43. He spent his last four years in Liu Zhou and died at 47.

This thesis consists of 11 Chapters. The First Chapter is an introduction while the Eleventh Chapter a conclusion. The Second Chapter analyses the historical and family background of Liu Zong Yuan. The Third Chapter discusses his political thought, highlighting his "care for the poor" ideals and his prosposition of meritocracy. The Fourth Chapter comments on his philosophical thought. It explains that Liu Zong Yuan was basically a materialistic philosopher, though he did not oppose Buddhism strongly. The Fifth Chapter touches on Liu Zong Yuan's literary thought. It deduces that his literary thought was actually an indirect reflection of his political thinking. Chapter Six to Chapter Nine discuss Liu Zong Yuan's works such as his allegory, biography, travel notes, commentaries and essays. These four chapters examine thoroughly Liu Zong Yuan's outstanding artistic style and his unique and profound views on current affairs of his times in the abovementioned literary forms. The Tenth Chapter is a comparative study on famous Chinese authors' comments on Liu Zong Yuan's works. It points out that those authors had a bias against Liu Zong Yuan, particularly in his philosophical and political thoughts.

There are several findings which worth mentioning here.

Firstly, one could deduce that though Liu Zong Yuan was born to a fairly rich family, due to his extraordinary childhood life experience, his ideals of "care for the poor" was fundamentally formed then. His political thought was very much influenced by his teacher Lu Zhi (陆贽). Moreover, by looking into his family life, one could conclude that Liu Zong Yuan basically led a very lonely life, particularly in Yong Zhou where his mother had passed away. The sadness and loneliness of his life in Yong Zhou had, to a great extent, beautified the mountains and rivers in his mind and the style he wrote his travelling notes. Therefore, one can easily find that dreariness and cheerlessness are the main features of his literary works, particularly in his travel notes.
Secondly, scholars used to criticise Liu Zong Yuan's attitude towards Buddhism. They generally believed that Liu Zong Yuan was indulged in Buddhism. This thesis proves that is not the case. In fact, Liu Zong Yuan always kept a sober-minded attitude toward Buddhism. When he was in Liu Zhou, he even mentioned in one of his articles that Buddhism could help him to manage the people both in cultural and educational field. This discovery is important, as it can explain logically why Liu Zong Yuan was basically a materialistic philosopher while at the same time he did not oppose Buddhism strongly.

Thirdly, this thesis proves that Liu Zong Yuan was a more open-minded thinker, the real meaning of his proposition of "essay should explain the doctrine" was in fact broadly referring to the reflection of people's life, and not confined to the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius. Because of this, Liu Zong Yuan's attitude toward literature was different from Han Yu who was another great prosier in his times. And because of his flexibility in doctrine, his achievements in various forms were even greater than Han Yu.

Fourthly, this thesis illustrates that Liu Zong Yuan was not only an inheritor of the past, but also a pioneer in both allegory and travel note writing in the history of Chinese literature. He was the most important allegorist after Tao Yuan Ming (陶渊明) as he was the first author in the history of Chinese literature who had developed allegory as an independent literary form. Liu Zong Yuan's travel notes were even more notable than his allegory. He inherited the traditional skill of depicting mountains and rivers from the "Six Dynasty" (六朝) literary works, particularly Li Dao Yuan's (郦道元) "Notes on Rivers" (水经注). On top of this, he instilled his feelings and emotion into his travel notes, which made these notes very readable and outstanding. His immortal essay, "the Eight Notes on Yong Zhou" (永州八记) was a master piece in this literary form.

Fifthly, the thesis deduces that Liu Zong Yuan's commentaries and essays are part of his literary works which not only can not be ignored, but should be researched thoroughly. It concludes that by reading through these essays, one could have a clearer picture of Liu Zong Yuan's spiritual world and appreciate how skillful Liu Zong Yuan's artistry was.

Lastly, it is the writer's view that the yardstick to judge Liu Zong Yuan's literary works is the objective literary criticism standard, and not the prejudicial viewpoint of stressing the past and not the present as adopted by the authors of post Song Dynasty, or the viewpoint of whether the essays explain the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius as adopted by the authors of Song Dynasty. In order to give Liu Zong Yuan's works a just review. One should evaluate Liu Zong Yuan's works based on the historical background and literary tendency of his times.