

How Did Buddhism Matter in Tang Poetry?

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Abstract

Buddhism was often a theme in poetry, especially when writing to monks and on Buddhist sites; it was sometimes a deep conviction on the part of individual poets that contributed to the way they represented the world. There was a period, however, from the ninth through early eleventh century, when Chan meditation shaped how poets thought about the very way of writing poetry. The common use of the [Buddhist] “Way” or Chan in parallel with “poetry” in couplets from this period worked through the possible relations: identity, similarity, complementarity, and mutual exclusion. But the presumption was that the composition of poetry was the counterpart of Chan meditation. Such serious reflection on the relation between Chan meditation practice and poetry eventually devolved into Yan Yu’s thirteenth-century comparison of Chan sectarian doctrine with the study of poetry.

Résumé

Le bouddhisme est un thème très fréquent dans la poésie chinoise, en particulier quand le poète écrit à un moine ou au sujet d’un site bouddhique. Il constitue dans certains cas une conviction profonde qui contribue fortement à forger la représentation du monde telle que le poète l’exprime en vers. Il y eut cependant une époque, entre le IX^e et le début du XI^e siècle, où la méditation Chan a façonné la façon même dont les poètes concevaient l’écriture poétique. L’usage fréquent des termes “Voie” (bouddhique) ou Chan en parallèle avec celui de “poésie” dans les couplets de cette époque couvre la gamme de leurs relations possibles: identité, similarité, complémentarité et exclusion mutuelle. L’hypothèse commune à ces diverses options était que l’écriture poétique était l’homologue de la méditation Chan. Ces réflexions élaborées sur les rapports entre les pratiques de la méditation Chan et de la poésie ont débouché au XIII^e siècle sur la comparaison menée par Yan Yu entre la doctrine Chan et l’étude de la poésie.

Keywords

Buddhism, Tang poetry, Chan, regulated verse

There is by now a considerable scholarly literature on the topic of “Buddhism in Tang poetry”; but the relation is often precisely as described, one element “in” something larger, as if poetry were a soup and Buddhism an ingredient that gave poems a particular (vegetarian) flavor. Such a comparison is not entirely frivolous since in the Song we often find the poems of monks praised for the absence of monkish qualities, and in at least one case, for the absence of “vegetable breath,” *shuqi* 蔬氣.¹ From this point of view, Buddhism in China was just one ingredient in a complex cultural mix, one that was used in poetry in varying degrees according to the disposition of the poet or the social demands of the moment. This was indeed often the case.

However much it made the necessary accommodations with the empire and secular society, Buddhism was not simply just one social ingredient among others. Buddhism was an essentially indigestible element in the empire, proposing values that offered something the empire lacked. Buddhism was a faith whose actual claims made the empire and society irrelevant. Becoming a monk involved leaving one’s family and renouncing one’s commitment to the family, including changing one’s name. One had one’s head shaved and changed one’s dress and diet. One entered a structure of authority and a system of rules that were separate from those of the state. In every particular the monk visibly inscribed his distinction from, and rejection of, the social world of the empire. The accommodations Buddhism made with secular authority were necessarily uneasy because the Chinese imperial state was nothing if not notionally totalizing, and the Tang in particular asserted its authority over the *sangha*.

If Buddhism displayed its difference from the state and society that lodged it, poetry presented a different kind of challenge: poetry was an indiscriminate discourse that not only included Buddhism in the cultural mix but embraced its values—when circumstance demanded. There was a repertoire of situations in which one might compose poetry, and according to the situation the poet might draw on other discourses. There were ways of speaking to Buddhists, Daoists, successful officials, recent exam graduates, exam failures, recluses, and so on.

¹ E.g., Wang Shipeng 王十朋 (1112-1171) praises a monk’s poems: “Both poems are good, lacking vegetable breath” 兩篇詩好無蔬氣. *Meixi ji* 梅溪集, 1st collection (SKQS) 8.3b.

Buddhist discourse was by no means excluded from poetry: it was used when addressing monks, visiting temples, and in life situations when Buddhist values might come easily and appropriately to mind. The use of Buddhist terms does not mean that a poem is, in any sense, religious in the strict sense. In a looser sense we might classify as truly “religious,” a possible flash of faith experienced when visiting a temple on a holiday outing. The problem, of course, is to distinguish a poetic moment of faith from a fine compliment to the temple establishment, which is no easier than to distinguish a poetic expression of true love from a rhetorical exercise.

A poet like Wang Wei 王維 (701-761) returns to Buddhism with frequency and on occasions when it was not invited by the social situation. This suggests conviction that was genuinely religious. Wang Wei, however, wrote in most of the other roles and value sets we find in poetry; and the ingenious anthologist could present a Wang Wei without any hint of Buddhist interests as well as a Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) who was a devout Buddhist layman.

Daoists and those associated with resurgent “Confucianism” were sometimes antagonists of Buddhism. Antagonists are essentially easy to deal with; and if poetry were somehow inimical to Buddhism, it would pose no problem. There could be debates, reconciliations, contrary stands taken on principle. Likewise if poetry were simply a profession of faith in a well-turned phrase, that too would be easy—many poet-monks tried that. But poetry was neither an antagonistic faith nor a neutral medium; rather it was socially, philosophically, and religiously indiscriminate; and a commitment to poetry might present a serious problem to any person of faith, in that such a poetry naturally put the poet in situations that faith would exclude or at least find uncomfortable.

For a few centuries Buddhism did, however, succeed in profoundly influencing a large part of the community of poets, and that transformation remained a possibility in Chinese poetics ever thereafter. Buddhism’s success was not in the intellectual content of its faith, but in the very form of “faith” itself, combining exclusive commitment, discipline, and a focus of attention. Poets remained as indiscriminate as ever in the social values they celebrated; poetry itself became their faith. Throughout the eighth century poetry had been a practice that was part of a larger life whose goals were elsewhere, with poetry as, in part, one

means to those goals. From early in the ninth century we begin to find people who defined themselves and were defined by others as “poets,” *shiren* 詩人, with a discourse of absolute concentration on their art.²

One often speaks of the influence of Buddhism in the kind of Daoxue 道學 (“Neo-Confucianism”) that came into its first flowering in the second half of the eleventh century. Such influence can and has been debated, usually in terms of content. But perhaps Buddhism’s greatest influence on Daoxue was primarily in those same terms by which Buddhism influenced poetry: exclusive commitment, discipline, and focus of attention. It is then perhaps no accident that one of the most famous attacks on poetry in the Chinese tradition, attributed to Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), turns precisely on this issue. Asked if writing literature “harmed the Way,” Cheng Yi replied that it did. His argument was that literary writing required “exclusive focus of attention,” *zhuanyi* 專意, thus distracting the Daoxue student from what should be larger concerns, also demanding focused attention.³

Buddhism could be opposed on straightforward ideological grounds. Literature and poetry, however, might be acceptable to a Confucian on a purely ideological level; Cheng Yi’s objections had to be carried deeper, and Cheng Yi was smart enough to realize that the problem was the particular “exclusive focus of attention.”⁴ The argument is not as trivial as it might first appear, and it had a particular weight in the eleventh century when Cheng Yi was writing. Very much in the background of Cheng Yi’s objection were claims made about poetry in the ninth and tenth century as requiring absolute commitment of self—“being a poet” in something like the familiar European notion of the “poet,” rather than participating in the social practice we associate with the eighth century.

² I will sometimes use the term “poet” without quotation marks; when I use quotation marks, I am invoking this special ninth- and tenth-century sense of the “poet,” as opposed to those who simply wrote poetry—even a great deal of poetry.

³ Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙, *Jin si lu* 近思錄 (SKQS), 2.23a.

⁴ Precisely what Cheng Yi had in mind in opposing *wen* 文, “literature” or “literary writing,” is uncertain. He may have been thinking of the debates on “ancient prose,” *guwen* 古文, of the eleventh century. Such a focus on writing was, however, closely tied up to the history of poetics in the ninth and tenth centuries. The term he chooses, *zhuanyi*, would have been more readily associated with and accepted by a class of poets than by any *guwen* writer. It is hard to associate any of the *now* canonical eleventh-century poets with this value, but there were other poets famous in Cheng Yi’s time that would have fit his critique perfectly.

In this essay I would like to show how this notion of poetry as a commitment of one's life came to be linked to Buddhism, and especially to Chan or to the meditative practices that gave Chan its name.⁵

The figure of the obsessed poet did not begin in association with Buddhism. We find it in two poets of the Han Yu circle, Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751-814) and Li He 李賀 (790-816), particularly in the account of the latter's poetic practice described in the "Short Biography" by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (c. 813-c. 858).⁶ The hint of madness in their obsession with poetry was given a new inflection in the regulated verse of a third poet of the Han Yu circle, the former monk Wuben 無本, who, after encountering Han Yu, reverted to his secular name Jia Dao 賈島 (779-843). The circle of friends and followers that gathered around Jia Dao began a tradition of craftsmanship, especially in regulated verse in the five-syllable line, which lasted into the eleventh century—and, arguably, beyond. Although the majority of such poets were secular, this lineage also included many monks. It was in the context of this lineage that the discourse on the practice of poetry took on a new inflection, one that had unmistakable echoes of Buddhism and Chan meditation.⁷

Here was the "exclusive focus of attention" that so troubled Cheng Yi. Poetry was spoken of as a commitment that became the focus of an individual's life. We read how poets practiced and endured austerities for their art. Earlier discussions of metrical requirements were usually in terms of "faults," *bing* 病, to be avoided; increasingly poets came to describe metrical correctness in terms of "rules," *lü* 律, which was also the *vinaya*, the rules of monastic discipline. There were masters and disciples. Poets talked about a concentration on their art that was oblivious to stimuli in the outside world (poetry as *askesis*), and—though it awaited the late Northern Song—success in poetry was called "enlightenment," the ultimate formal evacuation of the religious content from religious form transferred to art. Poetry may not have been a faith in the

⁵ Here I will use the term "Chan" to refer to those practices, but not necessarily the sect, then so loosely established. It is the term the "poets" use.

⁶ See Owen, *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2006), 159-63.

⁷ For more on this and related topics, see Thomas J. Mazanec, "The Medieval Chinese *Gāthā* and Its Relationship to Poetry," *T'oung Pao* 103 (2017): 94-154.

full sense, but for a limited period it acquired some distinctive characteristics that were reminiscent of a faith and of Chan.

In his youth Meng Jiao had been part of the poetic circle of Jiaoran 皎然 (720/730-798/804), the most prominent poet-monk of the later eighth century. Although Meng wrote one, often quoted poem later in life rejecting Confucian values in favor of Buddhism, he is strongly associated with the Confucian *fugu* 復古, “restore antiquity,” sentiment; and he was—more than most poets—truly a “Confucian” poet, albeit in a very strange way. He wrote almost exclusively in “old-style” verse, rather than the regulated verse preferred by the lineage of poets here under consideration, and there is more than a hint of madness in his work.

In conclusion to a set of poems parting from the monk Reverend Dan 淡公, he wrote:⁸

詩人苦為詩，	The poet suffers making poems,
不如脫空飛。	better to fly off into the sky.
一生空鶩氣，	A lifetime, pheasant-hen squawking in vain,
非諫復非譏。	not criticizing and not satirizing. ⁹
脫枯掛寒枝，	Fallen, withered, hanging from wintry branches, ¹⁰
棄如一唾微。	cast off, as inconsequential as a gob of spit.
一步一步乞，	At every pace taken, begging
半片半片衣。	for half a scrap and another half-scrap of clothing.
倚詩為活計，	Depending on poems for a livelihood
從古多無肥。	from time immemorial has rarely made one fat.
詩饑老不怨，	Poetry-starving, old but without resentment,
勞師淚霏霏。	troubling my master to shed a haze of tears.

One scarcely knows how to take a poem like this. From the context of other poems in the set, Meng Jiao is clearly talking about poets in general. Most likely he is talking about himself in particular, with Reverend Dan weeping for his situation at the end.

⁸⁾ 19970; QTS 379.4254. Here and elsewhere the five-digit numbers refer to the number of a poem in the *Quan Tang shi*, assigned in Hiraoka Takeo 平岡武夫, Ichihara Kokichi 市原亨吉, and Imai Kiyoshi 今井清. *Tōdai no shihen* 唐代の詩篇. Tang Civilization Reference Series 11-12 (Kyoto: Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1964-65). This is followed by the *juan* and page number in the 1960 Zhonghua shuju edition of *Quan Tang shi* (hereafter QTS).

⁹⁾ Confucian purposes in poetic composition.

¹⁰⁾ Dead leaves compared to poems?

By the end of the ninth century the context had changed. Meng Jiao had offered a new vision of “the poet” as a vocation rather than a social practice. Meng Jiao acknowledged poetry as a social practice, but that did not make a person a “poet.” As he wrote: “Bad poems always get one an office, / good poems leave one clinging in vain to the hills” 惡詩皆得官，好詩空抱山。¹¹ By the end of the ninth century the term *shiren* 詩人, “poet,” had come to be widely used—and when used by men of affairs, contemptuous, suggesting the impracticality and ineptness of “poets.” When used by those who considered themselves “poets,” it retained Meng Jiao’s sense of exclusive commitment to the art and an alienation from the political and social world; it had, however, lost the shrill intensity we find in Meng Jiao. It had become a mark of pride.

We do not know exactly when the famous poet-monk Guanxiu 貫休 (832-912) wrote “On Reading Meng Jiao’s Collected Poems” 讀孟郊集; however much had changed, he saw Meng as the ancestor of those who called themselves “poets”:¹²

東野子何之
詩人始見詩
清剝霜雪髓
吟動鬼神司
舉世言多媚
無人師此師
因知吾道後
冷淡亦如斯

Where did the master Dongye go?—¹³
one first sees the poems of a “poet.”
His purity scraped out marrow of frost and snow,
his chanting stirred the officers of the spirits and gods.
The words of everyone in his age were seductive,
and no one took this master as his master.
Thus I know that after my Way is done,
I too will be like this in cold lucidity.

The fascination with devotion to poetry, with associated notions of enduring austerities in the intensity of one’s commitment and separation from secular society, cannot be directly linked to Buddhist influence; though many elements in this cluster of themes very strongly suggest the forms of Buddhist devotion and religious commitment. Many of these same elements were present in the early ninth century, but what was missing was the discipline of a particular form of poetry to receive

¹¹ “Raving” 懊惱 (19755); QTS 375.4209.

¹² 45247; QTS 829.9343.

¹³ Dongye 東野 was Meng Jiao’s courtesy name.

that commitment: this came in the craft of regulated verse, particularly in the five-syllable line, the form that Guanxiu used to praise Meng Jiao.

Although regulated verse in the five-syllable line was perhaps the most common of the forms of Tang poetry, Jia Dao made it the preferred form for the “poets.” Jia Dao became something like the patron saint of a certain kind of poetry and the devotion to the craft of poetry for the next four centuries—he had periods of lesser influence, but kept returning as one model of the true “poet.” In his work the obsession with poetic craft, *kuyin* 苦吟, “painstaking composition,” literally “bitter chanting,” became linked to regulated verse, particularly in the five-syllable line. Jia Dao was the poet who in the words of a legendary (but dubious) quatrain spent three years perfecting a single couplet and whose indecision regarding the choice between “push” and “shove” in a line of poetry became the standard term for deliberative aesthetic choice in Chinese, *tuiqiao* 推敲. In one of the apocryphal anecdotes, the poet Li Dong 李洞 (d. ca. 897) was supposed to have had a bronze statue of Jia Dao made.¹⁴ Although the *Tang zhiyan* 唐摭言 version says that he “worshipped it like a god” 事之如神,¹⁵ the association is primarily Buddhist: the *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言 version says that Li Dong “always invoked Jia Dao’s name as the Buddha” 常念賈島佛.¹⁶

Xue Neng’s 薛能 (*jinsi* 846) poem on seeing one of Jia Dao’s poems on a wall in the Jialing post station opens with lines that bear certain similarities with Guanxiu’s praise of Meng Jiao: “Master Jia’s fate can be lamented, / of people of the Tang, he alone understood poetry” 賈子命堪悲，唐人獨解詩。¹⁷ Guanxiu’s and Xue Neng’s praise distinguishes itself from the rich body of praise of poetry earlier in the Tang: it is not that the poems are praised for being great or that everyone recites them; Meng Jiao and Jia Dao are praised for understanding “poetry” in almost an abstract way, and their insight into “poetry” radically separates them from all others—in the case of Meng Jiao, from all others before; in the case of Jia Dao, from everyone else in the Tang.

¹⁴ Zhou Xunchu 周勛初, *Tangren yishi huibian* 唐人軼事彙編 (Shanghai: Shanhaiguji chubanshe, 1995), 1464-65.

¹⁵ *Tang zhiyan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 10.109.

¹⁶ *Beimeng suoyan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 7.59.

¹⁷ “Seeing Something Written Previously by Jia Dao in the Post-station in Jialing” 嘉陵驛見賈島舊題 (30900); QTS 560.6499.

Laments for Jia Dao were laments for the fate of the “poets.” The Late Tang monk Kezhi 可止, a Northeasterner like Jia himself, was typical.¹⁸

燕生松雪地 蜀死葬山根 詩僻降今古 官卑誤子孫 冢欄寒月色 人哭苦吟魂 墓雨滴碑字 年年添蘚痕	Born in Yan, land of pines and snow, dead in Shu, buried in the roots of the mountains. His obsession for poetry will last for all time, ¹⁹ the lowliness of his office failed his descendants. On the railing of his grave, the cold moonlight, people lament the ghost who took pains in composition. ²⁰ Rain on the tomb drips on the words of his stele, where from year to year the tracks of lichen spread.
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Ninth-century poets often wrote about what Kezhi called Jia Dao’s “obsession for poetry” *shipi* 詩僻. The late-ninth-century poet-monk Guiren 歸仁 offers a characteristic example in “Getting Out What Is On My Mind” 自遣:²¹

日日為詩苦 誰論春與秋 一聯如得意 萬事總忘憂 雨墮花臨砌 風吹竹近樓 不吟頭也白 任白此生頭	Every day I suffer making poems— who takes the passing seasons into account? If I feel satisfied with a single couplet, I forget all cares of life’s myriad concerns. The rain brings down the flowers overlooking the stairs, the breeze blows the bamboo being close to the tower. If I don’t chant poems, my hair still turns white, so let the hair whiten for this lifetime.
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The third couplet is a common move in ninth-century poems about poetry, offering an example of the “satisfying couplet.” In this case, the noun in the third position is both the object of the verb in the second position and the subject of the verb in the fourth position. Here, however, we see the profound difference between the earlier obsessed poets, and these “poets” of the Jia Dao lineage. Meng Jiao’s and Li He’s verses are striking, sometimes shocking; moreover, a reader would rarely fail to immediately distinguish lines by Meng Jiao from lines by Li He. The memorable couplets by the “poets” of the Jia Dao lineage sound very

¹⁸) “Lamenting Jia Dao” 哭賈島 (45012); QTS 825.9292.

¹⁹) 僻 here works like 癖.

²⁰) Here the literal sense of *kuyin* 苦吟, “chanting in bitterness,” is also implied.

²¹) 45018; QTS 825.9293.

much like standard regulated verse—the triumph is in phrasing—and they sound very much like each other. If Meng Jiao and Li He helped create a new idea of the “poet,” such a “poet” was unique. The “poets” after the first quarter of the ninth century worked largely on a single genre, with a notion of achievement in working with lines using common images and themes. In other words, individuality is submerged in realizing an idea—“poetry”—that is understood as transcending the individual.

By this point we are getting closer to a poetics modeled on Buddhist meditation, but it is still only a suggestive analogy. The stage is set. Now we can consider the more specific ways in which this new sense of “poetry” of the Jia Dao lineage was closely tied to Buddhism and Chan.

Terms habitually placed in corresponding positions in parallel couplets are often conceptual pairs; the relationship between these terms is undetermined: they may be thought of as alike, as opposites, or as complementary. These same terms are sometimes used in parallel in single lines and sometimes compounded. In eighth- and early ninth-century poetry “poetry,” *shi* 詩, was paired with many things, perhaps the most common being “drink,” *jiu* 酒, and “name/fame,” *ming* 名. One was poetry’s convivial role; the other was poetry’s role in public life. Later in the ninth century we begin to find “poetry” often placed in parallel to a range of Buddhist terms, the most common being Dao, in a Buddhist sense, and Chan. If later Daoxue thinkers felt there was some essential opposition between “poetry” and the “Way,” it may be to this habitual pairing and opposition.

One of the earliest passages to place poetry and Buddhism together as potentially opposed (though not in parallel positions in a couplet) comes probably from the 820s or 830s, when the poet Yao He 姚合 (*jìnshi* 816) saw off the poet-monk Wuke 無可, Jia Dao’s cousin, on a trip to the frontier:²²

²²) 26345; QTS 496.5620.

出家還養母， You renounced family, but still take care of your mother,
持律復能詩。 you maintain the rules, but also are good at poetry.

The logic of parallelism is inescapable here. Being good at poetry bears the same relation to Buddhist discipline as the filial care of one's mother after having renounced one's family. The *lü* 律, the "rules," is the *vinaya*, but also poetic regulation. Wuke is represented as someone who crosses the clerical and secular, even though the fundamental distinction from the secular was supported by the *sangha*, the Buddhist clerical establishment, and largely accepted by the state. The weight of the contradiction between renouncing family and filial piety carries over to the opposition between monastic discipline and writing poetry. In another poem to Wuke, Yao He makes the potential conflict between poetry and Buddhism a choice of commitment: "Too lazy to read the sutras, trying to become a Buddha, / you want to polish poetic lines, seeking to ascend to the immortals" 懶讀經文求作佛，願攻詩句覓升仙。²³

The formal habit of thinking of "poetry" in its new, quasi-devotional sense in parallel with some term of Buddhism was more significant than any particular decision regarding what the specific relation between the two might be. The parallel placement was the constant; the specific relationship between the two was the variable. The Southern Tang poet Li Zhong 李中, writing to an abbot of the famous Donglin Temple on Mount Lu (贈東林白大師), makes it literally "outside Chan/meditation": 虎溪久駐靈蹤，禪外詩魔尚濃 "At Tiger Creek long you stayed your holy paces, / outside Chan the poetry imp is still strong."²⁴ In other words, although poetry and Chan are radically different, there is a space in the monk's life for both. The idea of a "poetry imp," *shimó* 詩魔, was a popular way to describe the compulsion to write poetry from the early ninth century on—and here, albeit playfully, it is a demon that still afflicts the good abbot when not in meditation. Later Baoxian 保暹, one of the Nine Monks 九僧, whose poetry was widely known in the early eleventh century, writes: 詩來禪外得 "When a poem comes, I get it out-

²³⁾ 26365; QTS 496.5623.

²⁴⁾ 41524; QTS 747.8509.

side of Chan.”²⁵ Both, however, seem to be remembering Qiji 齊己 writing “On Himself” 自題:²⁶

禪外求詩妙	Outside Chan I seek the marvels of poetry,
年來鬢已秋	as the years go by, my temple-locks have grown autumnal.
未嘗將一字	But never have I taken a single word
容易謁諸侯	and casually looked for patronage of great lords.
掛夢山皆遠	The mountains that catch my dreams are all far off;
題名石盡幽	the rocks where I have written my name are all hidden away.
敢言梁太子	Dare I speak of it to the Crown Prince of Liang
傍采碧雲流	who selected everywhere from the currents of sapphire cloud?

The last couplet refers to Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501-531) Prince Zhaoming 照明 of Liang selecting poets for the *Wenxuan* 文選, representing the kind of public fame that Qiji is not seeking. What is of significance here is the rejection of poetry as the means for advancement or prominence. The poet-monk produces poetry in surplus time, when not in meditation.

In “A Lesson from Chanting Poems” 喻吟 Qiji makes poetry and Chan balanced complements in a life that seeks nothing outside of them. They are the “focus” or “concentration,” *zhuan* 專, of life—precisely the term used by Cheng Yi in his objections to literature. Qiji cites Confucius in the *Analects*, offering “one phrase” to cover *Shi*, the “Poems” of the *Classic of Poetry*, and here poetry in general: “no straying.” Yet we note again that in the complementary half of his life that is invested in poetry rather than Chan, his hair grows white.²⁷

日用是何專	Everyday what do I focus on?—
吟疲即坐禪	wearry of chanting poems, I go at once into meditation (Chan).
此生還可喜	One can still take delight in this life,
餘事不相便	other matters are not comfortable for me.
頭白無邪裏	My hair grows white in “no straying,” ²⁸

²⁵ *Quan Song shi* 全宋詩, ed. Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1991-98; hereafter QSS). 125.1449. Although the topic of this essay is designated as “Tang,” there is an unbroken continuity of this tradition through the Nine Monks of the early eleventh century.

²⁶ 46225; QTS 843.9530.

²⁷ 46199; QTS 843.9525.

²⁸ “No straying” is the one phrase that Confucius said was the essence of the “poems” of the *Classic of Poetry*, in this case extended to poetry in general.

魂清有象先
江花與芳草
莫染我情田

my soul is purified prior to "existence of image."
Let the River's flowers and the fragrant plants
not infect the seat of my passions.

In this case poetry and Chan are distinct, but together they are a closed system, their complementary absorptions serving as a prophylactic that keeps him from being infected by the world of the senses. Here and elsewhere he can poetically invoke "the River's flowers and the fragrant plants," but poetically, as we will see below in another poem by Qiji, they are "like ice" 似冰. As a contemplative practice in its own right, poetry is no longer promiscuous: the poem's content is subordinate to the aesthetic discipline.

Poetry and Chan or the Buddhist "Way" are somehow "parallel"—though that leaves open the specific relation between the two. Particularly interesting is when the terms are compounded as *shichan* 詩禪. The *Hanyu dacidian* gives the thirteenth-century writer Zhou Mi as the first person to use the compound *shichan*; but in fact it occurs much earlier, in the Tang and in the monk Wenzhao 文兆, one of the famous "Nine Monks." Writing to the monk Xingzhao (寄行肇上人) he begins: "We are alike in our esteem for *shichan*" 詩禪同所尚.²⁹ The problem is that we have no idea what *shichan* is. It might mean that they both admire "poetry and Chan" or that they admire "poetic Chan"—and if the latter, we don't know if this refers to a kind of poetry or a kind of Chan.

Parsing the relation between faith and poetry, we find that poetry not only can be the complement of Chan, but may sometimes supplant Chan, as when Xizhou 希晝, one of the Nine Monks, writes to a monk named Huaigu (寄懷古): "Far away, I know that the visitor in the grove, / takes pains in composing poems, forgetting his night meditation [chan]" 遙知林下客，吟苦夜禪忘.³⁰ The forgetfulness of all external things achieved through Chan is here achieved through poetry, and Chan itself is forgotten. We have the same sentiment in Qiji's "In the Mountains, Sent to Abbot Ningmi" 山中寄凝密大師兄弟: "Sometimes inspiration comes and I seek lines, / I have no heart to go off and enter meditation [chan] right away" 時有興來還覓句，已無心去即安禪.³¹

²⁹) QSS 125.1450.

³⁰) QSS 125.1442.

³¹) 46258; QTS 844.9537.

Both cases implicitly interpret *shi/chan* as “poetry and/or Chan”; that is, poetry and Chan are two different things. However, the possibility remains that *shichan* is “poetic Chan,” conducting one’s religious life in a different, perhaps improbable venue. Guanxiu, Qiji’s contemporary, writes to the poet-monk Qiyi: “When you get a line, you first present it to the Buddha, / no one understands this kind of mind” 得句先呈佛，無人知此心 (“Two Poems Thinking of Qiyi of Wuchang” 懷武昌棲一二首).³² The phrase “getting a line,” *deju* 得句, strongly suggests nothing devotional, but rather a beautifully phrased descriptive line or couplet for a regulated verse (as Guanxiu also says: “your lines are always those never said before” 句須人未道).³³ Whatever this craft is, it can become a devotional offering. The poem is the fruit of a practice that may be a peculiar medium of Chan, which can be returned to the Buddha. Rather than being the obsession that leads to neglect of the monk’s devotions, in the words of Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (834/840-883): “The monk’s chanting [poems] does not abandon Chan” 僧吟不廢禪 (“Early Winter in the Compound of Reverend Zhang” 初冬章上人院).³⁴

Poetry and Chan are perhaps not quite the same, but clearly the poet-monks did not feel that there was a serious conflict between the two; there is nothing like the hostility we find in Confucian Daoxue. The poet-monks tried to define the relationship, one of the most interesting solutions appearing in Qiji’s “Urging a Poet-Monk” 勉詩僧, where difference and sameness are played off in an interesting way: “The nature of the Way should be like water, / the sentiments in a poem should resemble ice” 道性宜如水，詩情合似冰.³⁵ This is a particularly “nice” comparison, because poetry’s frame of reference is *qing* 情, sentiments or passions—but turned to icy indifference. The water and ice figures are both contrastive yet asserting an identity underneath. Then is poetry Chan’s water turned to ice in dealing with the passions? “Ice (/icy)” is the term commonly used in the ninth and tenth century to describe lines and couplets in this kind of poetry; it is linked with suffering in Meng Jiao and Jia Dao, and is often carried back to a famous figure of the

³²) 45294; QTS 830.9352.

³³) 45474; QTS 832.9385.

³⁴) 33606; QTS 612.7060.

³⁵) 45956; QTS 840.9478.

heart's purity as "ice in a jade pot" 玉壺冰, once a topic for examination verse.

If the poet-monks are negotiating the relationship between their obsession with poetry and their religious calling, poetry as a counterpart of Chan joins them with secular poets like Zheng Gu 鄭谷 (849-911). In "Sent to Director Zheng Gu" 寄鄭谷郎中 Qiji writes:³⁶

詩心何以傳	How can one explain the poetic mind?—
所證自同禪	what I offer as proof is that it is the same as Chan.
覓句如探虎	One seeks out lines like going after the tiger;
逢知似得仙	meeting one who understands is like finding an immortal.

Zheng Gu, the secular poet, clearly shares the "poetic mind" with Qiji, as well as mutual understanding. Since this is "the same as Chan," the poet-monk does not leave his religious vocation by his passion for poetry; at the same time, the secular poet is brought into the realm of Chan without knowing it. Lines of poetry become the famous tiger, seeking which is a figure for peril; they are sought and "gotten," *de* 得. In this image of poetry as Chan devotion and absorption, the poet-monk is not compromised by poetry's promiscuity; rather the secular poet finds himself in Chan without knowing it. The distinction is not so clear as the poet-monk Shangyan 尚顏 suggested: "Poetry is the Chan of Confucians" 詩為儒者禪.³⁷ As we have seen, poetry could be the Chan of Buddhists as well. Nevertheless, Shangyan recognized the way in which poetry, essentially secular, somehow crossed over into the discipline of Chan.

If such a notion of poetry is the form of religious devotion without the explicit content of faith, this particular form implicates the practitioner in the faith without knowing it. One may contrast this with more mechanical religious forms, such as mantras and prayers, which one can efficaciously recite without inner conviction; this form, however, demonstrates the absorption of faith without articulating that faith, especially in Chan where faith is inseparable from practice and process.

³⁶⁾ 45959; QTS 840.9478.

³⁷⁾ 46605; QTS 848.9602.

The identification between poetry and Chan remained, however, an uneasy one. The ambivalence is wonderfully expressed in a variant in the first line of Qiji's "Meeting a Poet-Monk" 逢詩僧:³⁸

禪玄無可 (並/示)	No one can () the mysteries of Chan,
詩妙有何評	what evaluative comment is there for poetry's subtlety?
五七字中苦	The suffering of five or seven syllables
百千年後清	is pure after a hundred or a thousand years.
難求方至理	Only in the difficulty of finding it do we have the ultimate principle,
不朽始為名	only after it does not decay does one make a name.
珍重重相見	I pray that we will meet again,
忘機話此情	and forgetting all motives, we can talk about this sentiment.

All manner of contradictions run through this poem, but the opening variant speaks to our issue. One version reads *bing* 並: "Nothing can stand beside the mysteries of Chan." Another version reads *shi* 示: "The mysteries of Chan cannot be shown." If we read the former, the Chan is set apart, with nothing like it—not even poetry. That reading, however, does not connect with the second line and the rest of the poem. If we take the latter reading, neither the mysteries of poetry nor of Chan can be explained, which, as in other Qiji poems, puts Chan and poetry on the same footing, as counterparts. The rest of the poem talks about poetry, which, in addition to consistency in reading the first line, makes the latter reading better. The text that read *bing* offered an ideological statement—in its small way, like Daoxue, to suppress the claim of poetry to be the parallel and counterpart of Chan.

Our evidence comes entirely from poems, mostly from short passages. We find nothing about this in literary theory nor, to my knowledge, in contemporary Buddhist writing. Those other forms are more serious, and the writer would have to stand by what he said. As poetry is indiscriminate in the roles and values it invites, it is also a means to play with ideas. A more "serious" reflection on Chan and poetry came later in the Song.

The most famous moment in the association between poetry and Chan was Yan Yu's 嚴羽 *Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話, written in the

³⁸⁾ 46101; QTS 842.9507.

thirteenth century, where an entire poetics was constructed around Chan models and Chan catch-phrases. The *Canglang shihua* was immensely influential and was repeatedly copied, with and without acknowledgement, into works of popular poetics that became the basis of *shixue* 詩學, the study of poetry, in the Yuan and Ming. We might add here that Yan Yu's version of Chan was very different from these earlier versions I have been speaking of: it is orthodox authority, enlightenment by controlled discipline.

Unlike the old poetic question of the ninth and tenth centuries, the formulation in Yan Yu had become a metaphor: the “study of [composing] poetry,” *shixue* 詩學, is *like* Chan. No longer is there the possibility that on some level poetic composition and Chan might be the same. If the study of poetry is somehow “like Chan,” then poetry and Chan are fundamentally distinct, and the real issue is how to write poetry. This was not an issue for the “poets” of the ninth and tenth centuries.

Ever since Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 in his *Tanyi lu* 談藝錄 observed that the relation between poetry and Chan was already a common topic in the Song long before Yan Yu, a considerable body of scholarship has been devoted to demonstrating Qian's observation in Northern Song texts. The connection is, indeed, hard to miss when one of the most famous “clerical literati,” Hui Hong 惠洪 (1071-1128) entitled his large collection *Stonegate's Textual Chan* 石門文字禪. While this scholarship occasionally reaches back into the Late Tang, scholars of the Song tend to read only the Song; and no one, to my knowledge, has traced the roots of the association in the new idea of the “poet” from the turn of the ninth century, how it became a commonplace poetic trope in the ninth and tenth century, and how this literary association both continued and was theorized in the eleventh and twelfth century.

For the “poets” of the ninth and tenth centuries, poetry was in some ways the double of Chan—indeed, devotion to poetry might actually *be* devotion to Chan, religion through an unexpected channel. In Chan the Buddha nature is everywhere, in unexpected places, even in feces and urine; who is to say that the devotion of the “poets” to finding the perfect phrase—apparently frivolous and scorned by the practical managers of empire—might not be itself a discipline of enlightenment? To the believer who expects a particular kind of content—Buddhist “themes”—such a claim can be troubling. I don't pretend to fully understand Chan,

but the claim of the poet-monks—that the religion *is* not in its themes but in the wholehearted absorption in certain forms of thought and attention—is not entirely absurd. It can be questioned, but it is not absurd.

The lines of the poet are always “cold,” and that coldness is a reflective distance from the immediacy of experience that had earlier been the promise of poetry. The poet may write of the sensuous world and the passions, *qing* 情, but in Qiji’s wonderful line: 詩情合似冰 “the sentiments (/passions) in poetry should resemble ice.” In other words, one can lament one’s white hair without white hair, as if one cared; but the “poetry” is precisely the process of art that takes those sentiments/feelings/passions and turns them into ice.

If we return to the question with which we began this essay—“how did Buddhism matter?”—there are many possible answers. One obvious answer is in Buddhist themes and a “Buddhist turn of mind,” which may best describe Wang Wei. But this possibility did not touch the art of poetry itself. Another, more interesting answer would be in the attempt to explain or teach the faith to others. We have this in a simple didactic way in part of the Wang Fanzhi 王梵志 corpus, and in a more profound way in the best of the Hanshan 寒山 corpus. Here I would offer a third possibility. The root meaning of “religion” is something like discipline, of which one variation is the negation of the social self and absorption of self into a discipline that claims one’s being. For a period Chinese poetry made such a claim of absorption of the poet in art, which blurred the boundaries between it and religion. It remained thematically and socially indiscriminate, but everyone recognized that the “poetry” of this sort had very little to do with the social situation or the values expressed. The parting poem in this mode was no longer the attachment that binds humans to the Sea of Suffering, but a form in which the discipline of the art renders the content irrelevant.

Poetic passages about poetic composition are everywhere in the period I have been discussing, from the ninth to the beginning of the eleventh century. This notion of poetry survived and resurfaced in various forms throughout later Chinese poetry; but as we come to the second

quarter of the eleventh century this phase was waning; in his *Remarks on Poetry* (*Shihua* 詩話), Ouyang Xiu talks about the popularity of the Nine Monks 九僧:

The Buddhist monks who were famous for poetry in the present dynasty were nine; thus the collection of their works was called “The Poems of the Nine Monks.” It is no longer in circulation. When I was young, I heard people praising them highly. One was named Huichong, but I’ve forgotten the names of the other eight.³⁹
國朝浮圖以詩名於世者九人；故時有集號九僧詩。今不復傳矣。余少時，聞人多稱之。其一曰惠崇。餘八人者，忘其名字也。

Ouyang Xiu goes on to quote some couplets that he does remember, but he can’t remember the names of their authors. This is a fine moment. Ouyang Xiu represents, above all, a resurgence of the idea of poetry as the representation of personality in a social and political context. Poetry is precisely a way to inscribe one’s “name.” The very names of the Nine Monks may be forgotten—but they were not writing for a “name.” As Qiji said, the lines themselves may last into the future, but that is something different—even Ouyang Xiu remembers lines. The lines represent a hard-won vision—the monk’s name who wrote the lines matters less. Ouyang Xiu concludes: “Most of their best lines were of this sort. Their collected works have been lost, and people nowadays don’t even know that there were any ‘Nine Monks.’ This is very sad” 其佳句多類此。其集已亡，今人多不知有所謂九僧者矣。是可歎也。 In a poetic tradition which, by and large, remembered a poet as a social and political creature, such a negation of the public self in pursuit of the art may have doomed these poets to being forgotten; but from the point of view of those poet-monks, the lines matter as their names do not. This is a notion of poetry in which Buddhism mattered—though the Chinese literary tradition had difficulty accepting that possibility.

³⁹ Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Liuyi shihua* 六一詩話 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1962). 8.