

Book Review

Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China

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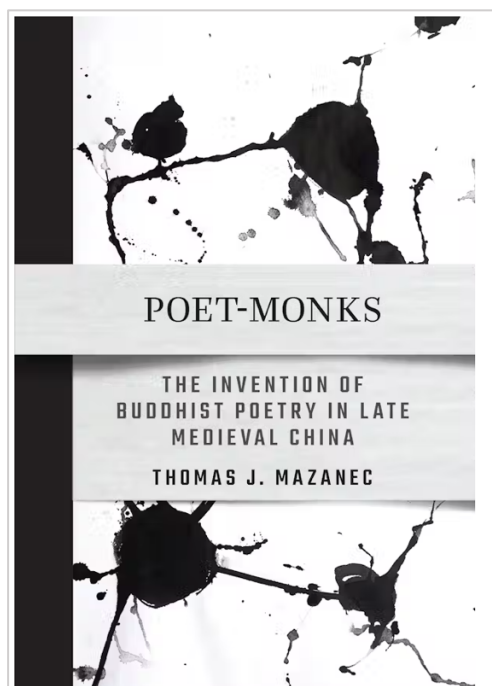
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Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China

By Thomas J. Mazanec

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Abstract

This book examines how poet monks tried to unify Buddhist and literary practice in the late Tang dynasty (860–960 CE), contradicting a general view of the time as one of artistic decadence. Yet Buddhism was seen by critics of this era as out of place in the literary domain.

Poetry by monks expressing religious sentiments was derided by numerous contemporary readers as being a potential distraction from pious observance.

Extending this disdain, posterity in the form of anthologies and textbooks of classical Chinese poetry have tended to neglect poems by Buddhist monks, while general histories of Tang poetry likewise largely overlook them. Yet Guanxiu and a contemporary writer, Qiji deserve attention today for their prolific efforts to unify their experiences with life and religious faith.

For many generations, the literary flourishes of Qiji and Guanxiu made their fellow Buddhists suspicious of their preoccupation with literature.

At the same time, Chinese literati did not find the effusions of the poet monks to their taste. Indeed, the Classical Prose Movement (*gǔwén yùndòng*) of the late Tang dynasty and the Song dynasty advocated clarity and precision rather than the florid parallel prose style that had been popular since the Han dynasty.

In this context, poetry readers found justification for rejecting the poet monks for using unrefined language in verse as well as an old-fashioned style.

Guanxiu, Qiji, and other poets failed to dissolve the opposition between literary and Buddhist practice in their works in past centuries, but they are nevertheless worth reading today for the light they shed on poetics and worship in a Buddhist context.

Keywords: poet monks, Buddhism, literature, late Tang dynasty

This lucidly argued new book examines how paradoxically, poet monks tried to unify Buddhist and literary practice in the late Tang dynasty (860–960 CE), contradicting a general view of the time as one of artistic decadence.

To understand their attempt, Assistant Professor Thomas J. Mazanec, who teaches Premodern Chinese and Comparative Literature at the University of California Santa Barbara, maintains a strict focus on the twin themes of Buddhism and poetry. Yet one of the protagonists, Guanxiu (832-912), is also celebrated as a painter and calligrapher of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.

Part of the enigma is that in East Asia, as elsewhere, poets are often seen as a counter-culture class not always noted for admirable behavior.

Perhaps for this reason, Assistant Professor Mazanec notes that critics of this era saw the literary domain as no place for Buddhism to be expressed.

Poetry by monks inspired by religious sentiments was described by numerous contemporary readers as being marred by the “stench of vegetables and bamboo shoots” and even less enticing odors.¹ Too many home-centered, folksy virtues were seen as contrary to artistic ambitions.

Extending this disdain, posterity in the form of anthologies and textbooks of classical Chinese poetry have tended to neglect poems by Buddhist monks, while general histories of Tang poetry likewise largely overlook them.

Yet Guanxiu and a contemporary writer, Qiji (863 - 937), were highly prolific. Author of over 850 surviving poems, Qiji is outdone only by Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770), Bai Juyi (772-846), and Yuan Zhen (779-831) among Tang dynasty poets.

To bolster Assistant Professor Mazanec’s numeric argument, it would have been gratifying for the reader to experience a real sense of outstanding and highly individual poetic talent in the poems by Guanxiu and Qiji that are cited here.

Unfortunately, one of the few weaknesses of this otherwise admirably informative book is that the poetry translations offered lack a lyrical lilt which translators such as Arthur Waley and David Hinton achieved in their versions of Chinese poetry.²

¹ Mazanec, T. J. (2024). *Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China*. Cornell University Press.

² See *Ibid.*, 2-3: Qiji’s “Stirred by a Whim in Mid-Spring,” ending with the lines “The Way (in tune with Heaven’s workings)/can be glimpsed while sitting./So it should be the Right Man who/ upholds creation,/Driving all the hidden subtleties/into his forge.” For more alluring prosody, see Waley, A. (1919). *More Translations from the Chinese*. Alfred A. Knopf. Also see Hinton, D. (2008) ed. and tr. *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

This flaw aside, **Poet-Monks** convincingly argues that despite the assertions by generations of disdainful critics, Buddhist poetry is not marginal to Chinese literary history. This conclusion tends to invalidate longstanding viewpoints that the end of the Tang and Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms were respective low points for Chinese poetry.

In the twelfth century, two Chinese critics decreed that Late Tang poetry was “weightless, frivolous” and “makes one want to burn his writing brush.”³ Yet the existence of earnest Buddhist ideals conveyed in poetry clearly contradicts this critical perspective.

Intriguingly, the poet monks of this time remained integrated in society and wrote about themes that also preoccupied secular authors. So no poet monk analyzed by Assistant Professor Mazanec addressed a majority of poems to fellow monks. Instead, the verse contained messages and dedications to literati and other members of the community outside monasteries.

By contrast, in the Song dynasty just a few centuries later, poet monks most often sent their poetic inspirations to fellow monks. This implies that the creations of poet monks eventually became rarified and more remote from experience shared by more worldly readers.

Structurally, **Poet-Monks** is divided into two sections: “History” and “Poetics.”

The first examines the identity of poet-monk in the late medieval literary world, while the second evokes the notion of Buddhist poetry as expressed by poet-monks.

Chapter 1 presents an account of how the poet-monk tradition developed. The term first appeared in the eighth century, and by the tenth century, it was well established. Seeing poet-monks in historic, geographic, and social contexts helps to concretize their identity.

Chapter 2 examines how the term poet-monk was invented in the second half of the eighth century as a somewhat derogatory allusion. Critics of the day saw these literary aspirants as unacceptably abstruse. Even fellow monastics feared that too much time spent with poetry might distract them from the more humble or pious monastery tasks. In the early ninth century, the mid-Tang Scholar-Monk Shengqing had pointed out in *North Mountain Record* that poet-monks risked turning into “madmen” attached to “sensual pleasure.”⁴

Chapter 3 notes how by the turn of the tenth century, poet-monks reclaimed their identity to argue for the close identification of poetry and pious observance.

³ *Ibid.*, 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, 216. Also see Kwok-yiu, W., & 王國堯. (2015). THE MID-TANG SCHOLAR-MONK SHENQING AND HIS “BEISHAN LU.” *Monumenta Serica*, 63(1), 32–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26159116>

The second half of the book discusses how the poet-monks inserted Buddhist practice into their literary output.

Chapter 4 observes that poet-monks often used the poetic device of verbal repetition, such as reiterating a single character three times consecutively. This corresponded with Buddhist logic, which also employed this type of atypical phrasing.

Chapter 5 gives examples of ritual recitation of spells and incantations in monks' poetry as part of a new poetic vision.

Chapter 6 recounts how Qiji first claimed a basic unification between poetry and meditation. Citing the Buddhist way of seeking liberation by contemplating the everyday world, Qiji concluded that poetry and meditation were two approaches to the same ideal.

The book's conclusion elucidates why, as the author puts it, "most Buddhist readers found [verse by the poet monks] too literary, and most literary readers found them too Buddhist."⁵

This negative perspective categorized them undeservedly as minor versifiers. Nevertheless, the sober, exalted corpus of their writings can still enlighten today's researchers in terms of the earnest potential symbiosis of religion and literature.

To be sure, there were a few exceptional poet monks who fulfilled the stereotypical wild poet's penchants for wine, among other vices. One example, Kepeng, was a tenth century monk of the Sichuan area who was a typical incarnation of the poet as inebriated wastrel.⁶

Known as "drunken shavepate," Kepeng, a younger contemporary of Guanxiu, scribbled countless poems just to pay for the liquor which he consumed.

Although clearly exceptional among the more obedient, conventional poet monks of his generation, Kepeng proved that even negative societal expectations of poets could be fulfilled by authors who chose to spend their lives in monastic activities.

In 1103, *The Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries*, compiled by Changlu, further warned that poetry could lure its practitioners away from monastic purity and single-minded focus.⁷

⁵ Ibid, 214-215.

⁶ See Protass, J. (2021). The Flavors of Monks' Poetry: On a Witty Disparagement and Its Influences. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 141(1), 125-150.

⁷ See Foulk, T. G. (2004). Chanyuan qinggui and Other 'Rules of Purity' in Chinese Buddhism. In S. Heine & D. S. Wright (Eds.), *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts* (pp. 275-312). Oxford University Press.

The strictures assembled by Changlu noted with some disdain: “Guanxiu and Qiji were called nothing more than poet-monks... But is this the real meaning of renunciation?”⁸

Another contemporary, the eminent Chan monk Foyin Liaoyuan (1032–1098) stated his reservations in a poem in which sincere didacticism outweighs lyric inspiration:⁹

*When beginning your Buddhist studies, you're weak
and need to hold fast:*

*Be fond of Chan and don't study Confucianism. I have only seen enlightened
minds perfect the Buddha's way; I've never heard that itinerants should read
the Odes and Documents. If you teach that Confucius transcended life and
death, How can you proclaim that Gautama is a great man? Though Qiji and
Guanxiu's reputations shook the land, Who would place them in a chart of
patriarchs?*

This overt conflict between Buddhism and what was considered secular Confucianism lessened over the years. But for a time, the literary flourishes of Qiji and Guanxiu made their fellow Buddhists suspicious of their preoccupation with literature.

At the same time, Chinese literati did not find the effusions of the poet monks to their taste. Indeed, the Classical Prose Movement (*gǔwén yùndòng*) of the late Tang dynasty and the Song dynasty advocated clarity and precision rather than the florid parallel prose style that had been popular since the Han dynasty.

The aim of the *guwen* stylists was to follow the spirit of pre-Han prose rather than to imitate it directly. They used elements of colloquial language to make their writings more direct. The movement also had political and religious aspects, as Confucian scholars tried to combat the influence of Taoism and Buddhism on the emperors.¹⁰

In this context, poetry readers found ample justification for rejecting the poet monks for using unrefined language in verse as well as an old-fashioned style.

If Guanxiu, Qiji, and other poets failed to dissolve the opposition between literary and Buddhist practice in their works, it is helpful that today, this erudite new study is available to motivate readers to make their own attempts to integrate poetry and Buddhism.

⁸ Mazanec, T.J. (2024), *op. cit.* 216.

⁹ *Ibid.* 218.

¹⁰ See Chen, Yu-shih (1988). *Images and Ideas in Chinese Classical Prose: Studies of Four Masters*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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