How Poetry Became Meditation in Late-Ninth-Century China

ABSTRACT:
In late-ninth-century China, poetry and meditation became equated—not just metaphorically, but as two equally valid means of achieving stillness and insight. This article discusses how several strands in literary and Buddhist discourses fed into an assertion about such a unity by the poet-monk Qiji 齊己 (864–937?). One strand was the aesthetic of kuyin 苦吟 (“bitter intoning”), which involved intense devotion to poetry to the point of suffering. At stake too was the poet as “fashioner”—one who helps make and shape a microcosm that mirrors the impersonal natural forces of the macrocosm. Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843) was crucial in popularizing this sense of kuyin. Concurrently, an older layer of the literary-theoretical tradition, which saw the poet’s spirit as roaming the cosmos, was also given new life in late Tang and mixed with kuyin and Buddhist meditation. This led to the assertion that poetry and meditation were two gates to the same goal, with Qiji and others turning poetry writing into the pursuit of enlightenment.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, meditation, poetry, Tang dynasty

Sometime in the early-tenth century, not long after the great Tang dynasty 唐 (618–907) collapsed and the land fell under the control of regional strongmen, a Buddhist monk named Qichan 棲蟾 wrote a poem to another monk. The first line reads: “Poetry is meditation for Confucians 詩為儒者禪.” The line makes a curious claim: the practice...
of poetry is somehow the same as the practice of meditation. That is, the two are not just analogous, but functionally the same. The main verb is not “like” (如, which would also fit the meter). It is 为, “to be,” “to act as.” It is stronger than the English copula “is”; it implies making, effecting. Poetry does what meditation does.

At the same time, poetry works in a different realm from meditation. It is “for Confucians,” those elites who participate in and transmit the classical tradition that can be traced back to the sages of high antiquity. Poetry is elite verbal art. It stems from the canonical Book of Odes (Shijing 詩經). Familiarity with its forms and means of composition was required for participation in the civil service bureaucracy. By contrast, it is implied, meditation is for Buddhist monks. It is a practice which involves not just concentration and mental training, but also visualization of supernatural beings, confession of sins, and devotion to deities. Buddhism and poetry would seem to operate in separate spheres.

And yet this claim is undermined by the very fact of its stated author and its subject matter. A Buddhist monk is praising, in verse, the literary collection of another Buddhist monk. If poetry is really something “for Confucians,” then the author and the audience are out of their element. They should be practicing real meditation rather than “meditation for Confucians.” Nevertheless, both monks write poetry, and the speaker insists that meditation and poetry somehow work in the same way.

This claim, of the homology between meditation and poetry, was made more than once in late-medieval China. The lay poet Xu Yin 徐夤 (late-ninth to early-tenth c.), wrote in a treatise on poetry: “As for poetry, it is meditation among the Confucians 夫詩者, 儒中之禪也.” In fact, this would later be repeated so often that it became a critical cliché in the late-imperial period. Yan Yu 严羽 (1180–1235), who established the later discourse, probably owed as much to neo-Confucian habits of debate as Chan philosophy, but the metaphor soon seemed inevitable. 3


Poetry and meditation could help explain each other, since both were rooted in acts of self-cultivation that reflected privileged insight into the world. Poetry and meditation were analogous ways of seeing.

But this equation between poetry and meditation was neither inevitable nor unchanging. It emerged in the second half of the Tang dynasty and transformed soon thereafter, as the result of specific developments in the history of literary and Buddhist practices. As Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) once noted, Tang and Song poets held profoundly different attitudes toward the relationship between poetry and meditation. Whereas Song poets take the relationship to be metaphorical, the Tang poets who mention the relationship “all combine into one the mind of poetry and the mind of Buddhism,” 打成一片 (4)

That is, during the Tang dynasty, the relationship between poetic and Buddhist practices was not metaphorical; it was equal. It is the purpose of the present essay to expand on Qian Zhongshu’s off-hand remark and explain exactly how several poet-monks (shiseng) of the late Tang came to assert the fundamental unity of meditation and poetry.

While there have been many surveys of the relationship between Buddhism and poetry, and many attempts to understand the “Buddhist thought” of lay Tang poets, few have traced the internal logic of

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6 See, e.g., Arai Ken 荒井健, “Shō-Tō no bungakusha to Bukkyō: Ō Botsu o chūshin to shite” 初唐の文学者と仏教, 勝而を中心にとして, in Fukunaga Mitsui 福永光司, ed., Chūgoku chūsei no
the equation between poetry and meditation. Those who have examined it in detail have usually done so from the perspective of the Song dynasty (960–1279) period,7 after Chan Buddhism had developed into a full-fledged institution and many assumptions about poetry had changed.8 Those who have focused on the Tang period tend to see it either as building toward this Song culmination,9 or as fundamentally incapable of positing a serious reflection on the relationship between Buddhism and literature.10 This essay, by contrast, takes seriously the claims of poet-monks who lived through the collapse of the Tang and

[96x311]periods because of the relative scarcity of materials in the Tang (Du, corner of the classical tradition of poetry criticism, he nevertheless favors the Song and later
takes a synchronic approach to the poetry–meditation question: drawing from nearly every
ited: Buddhism in the Life and Writings of Su Shi (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P.,


9 John Jorgensen’s unpublished dissertation, e.g., explores Tang poems and meditation texts as background for understanding debates between Song Buddhists and neo-Confucians on theories of insentience and nature (“The Sensibility of the Insensible: The Genealogy of a Ch’an Aesthetic and the Passionate Dream of Poetic Creation,” Ph.D. diss. [Australian National University, 1989]); there are also elements of this Song teleology in Hsiao Li-hua [1989]; there are also elements of this Song teleology in Hsiao Li-hua

10 Stephen Owen, for example, has repeatedly dismissed the possibility of a serious reflection on the relationship between Buddhism and poetry in the Tang even as he has recognized that Buddhist monasticism may have served as a formal model for the idea of the poet’s vocation; Owen, “How Did Buddhism Matter in Tang Poetry?” TP 103.4-5 (2018), pp. 403-5;
its aftermath. It traces how, in the late-ninth century, several strands in literary and Buddhist discourses converged to create a new understanding of poetry.

The most important of these strands was the aesthetic of kuyin (苦吟) ("bitter intoning" or "painstaking enactment of verse"). Kuyin featured an intense devotion to poetry, to the point of physical and mental suffering. The legacy of Jia Dao (賈島) (779–843) was crucial to establishing and popularizing this particular sense. At the same time, an older layer of the literary theoretical tradition, which saw the poet as one who sent his spirit to roam the cosmos, was also given new life in the late Tang as it mixed with the kuyin aesthetic and Buddhist meditation. This ultimately led to the assertion that poetry and meditation are not just analogous (as asserted in the Song), but fundamentally the same — two gates to the same goal. The poet-monk Qiji (齊己) (864–937?), the recipient of Qichan’s poem, discussed above, articulated this view most clearly, a view that had roots in one of his heroes of nearly a century earlier, namely, the ex-monk Jia Dao. By asserting this fundamental unity, Qiji and others could turn the writing of poetry into a means of understanding the fundamental nature of all reality, on par with Buddhist enlightenment.

THE PAINSTAKING COUPLET

The ninth century saw the ascent and flourishing of the tradition of Buddhist poet-monks (shiseng). This term initially referred to members of a specific community of literary-minded monks based in the Jiangnan 江南 area and centered around the monks Lingyi (727–762), Jiaoran 皎然 (720?–797?), and others. The first extant reference to a poet-monk can be found in Jiaoran’s poem, “Replying to ‘Parting with Shaowei, Poet-monk of Xiangyang’ (In the poem, I respond to the significance of the venerable monk’s dream of going home)” 酬別襄陽詩僧少微 (詩中答上人歸夢之意) (QTS 818, p. 9217, which displays text in parentheses as small-character auto-commentary). For more, see Ichihara Kôkichi 市原亨吉, “Chûtô shoki ni okeru Kôsa no shisê ni tsuite” 中唐初期における江左の詩僧について, THGH 28 (1958), pp. 219–48. For this reason, it is anachronistic to use the term “poet-monk” to refer to versifying monks of the Six Dynasties or early Tang, as in Demiéville, “Tchan et poésie”; Burton Watson, “Buddhist Poet-Priests of the T’ang,” The Eastern Buddhist 25, 2 (1992), pp. 30–58; and Bao Deyi 包得義 et al., Nanchao shiseng yanjiu 南朝詩僧研究 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2012).
oddities for combining interests in Buddhism and poetry, they became an established part of the literary scene as their fame spread beyond their homeland, to the capital, and to the rest of the Tang empire. The reasons for the ascendance of poet-monks are many. Among the most significant are the following: the migration of literati to Jiangnan following the An Lushan Rebellion of 755–763, the flourishing of Buddhism under emperors Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820) and Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 846–859), the development of Bodhidharma lineages to become the doctrinally innovative schools of Chan, and the cultural and political uncertainty created by the Huang Chao 黃巢 Rebellion (874–884) and collapse of the Tang (907). By the time that the major representatives of this poetic tradition, Guanxiu 貫休 (832–913) and Qiji, were active in the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries, the poet-monk had become a respected role in medieval Chinese literary culture, and literati and monks alike had established elaborate genealogies for them, found their precursors in the early-medieval period (220–589), and sung their praises in verse and prose.12

At the same time a new trend in poetry was emerging in the valorization of kuyin, particularly in a certain sense of that term that crystallized around Jia Dao. Abundant evidence for this trend can be found not only in poetry of the late Tang (to be discussed below) but also in poetry manuals written at this time. These manuals (shige 詩格, literally “poetry frameworks” or “poetry standards”) originated in the sixth century but reached their heyday in the tenth. They are comprised mainly of exemplary couplets classified by various poetic techniques and principles, which may or may not be accompanied by prose explanations. Many were written by poet-monks or their associates,13 and they obsess over Jia Dao.14 In the poet-monk Xuzhong’s 虛中 (late-ninth to early-tenth-century) 虚中, 虚中有詩, a chapter of his poetry manual, Shige 詩格 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), is dedicated to Jia Dao, reflecting the enduring popularity of his work.


13 Zhou Yukai and Hsiao Li-hua have also noted the close relationship between poet-monks, poetry manuals, and late-medieval currents in Buddhist thought (Zhou, Zhongguo Chanzong yu shige, pp. 147–54; Hsiao, “Wenzi Chan” shixue, pp. 69–97).

tenth c.) *Handmirror of Streams and Categories* 流類手鑑, Jia Dao is the most frequently quoted of any poet.\(^{15}\) Qiji, in his *Exemplary Forms of Feng and Sao Poetry* 風騷旨格, cites Jia Dao more often than anyone besides himself.\(^{16}\) In the *Essentials of the Way of the Elegantiae* 雅道機要 by Xu Yin, Jia Dao is cited third-most (8), after two other self-described *kuyin* practitioners, Qiji (14) and Zhou He 周賀 (11).\(^{17}\) Li Dong 李洞 compiled an entire manual from only Jia Dao’s couplets.\(^{18}\) Another manual, titled *Secret Meanings of the Two “Souths”* 二南密旨, was attributed to Jia Dao. Although almost certainly not written by the master himself, it was likely compiled by one of his many admirers at the start of the tenth century and attests to the high regard for his name at the time.\(^{19}\)

The central concern of the poetry manuals is the art of the individual couplet and its achievement via *kuyin*. The term first gained a technical sense in the work of Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814).\(^{20}\) To Meng, *kuyin* was the vocal recitation of one’s own verses during the process of composition and revision, a process undertaken for the sake of personal success in the imperial bureaucracy, often via the examination system 科舉. His concept of *kuyin* as the painstaking preparation for the exams, which functioned as a test of one's ability to contribute to the greater good, dominated as long as there was general faith in the examination system.

*Stirred at Night, Dispelling My Sorrow* 夜感自遣\(^{21}\)

Meng Jiao 孟郊

夜學曉未休  Studying at night, still haven’t stopped by dawn,

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\(^{15}\) Shige huikao, pp. 417–23.

\(^{16}\) Shige huikao, pp. 397–416.

\(^{17}\) Shige huikao, pp. 424–49.

\(^{18}\) This manual is listed in the Song dynasty’s imperial catalogue but no longer survives. See Toqto’a 脫脱 et al., comp., *Songshi* 宋史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977) 209, p. 5410.

\(^{19}\) Shige huikao, pp. 370–83. This is listed as *Jia Dao’s Secret Exemplars of Poetry Standards* 賈島詩格密旨 in the Song imperial catalogue in *Songshi* 209, p. 5409.


As I kuyin, the gods and ghosts worry.

How is it I can’t rest?

My mind and body are enemies.

Disgrace in death is pain for a short while;
Disgrace in life is humiliation for many years.

The pure osmanthus has no straight branches,

By the sapphire river, I think of my old travels.

The central preoccupation of this poem is personal success via the examination system: breaking off an osmanthus branch is a symbol of passing the examinations, and the fact that none of these branches is “straight” or “upright” causes the speaker much consternation (line 7). How is it, the speaker wonders, that the unworthy passed, while an upright poet like himself lingers in obscurity? Poetic composition was tested on the exams and valued by high officials. Consequently, circulating a brief scroll of one’s verse 行巻 among the capital elites was a crucial first step in establishing one’s reputation at the outset of a bureaucratic career.22 It was therefore necessary to have a perfectly polished collection to succeed in mid-Tang political and literary life. This led to an inflated rhetoric of intensity. To prove his worth, Meng Jiao describes how he never rests (line 3), and even comes to consider his tiring body the enemy of his mind (line 4). The logic is a strange reversal of the high-mindedness often found in medieval literature, in which one’s historical legacy is more important than success in this life. Instead, Meng Jiao states that success in this life matters more than one’s reputation after death, since the pain of deathbed regret is over quickly, while the suffering of lifelong humiliation lasts decades (lines 5–6).23 Examination poetry, as the hallmark of personal success, is more important than life itself.
Such stakes meant that it was necessary to constantly revise one’s poems until each line was phrased perfectly. Liu Deren (early- to mid-ninth c.), also working through the night, describes the process.

From “Events on a Summer Day” 夏日即事
到曉改詩句 Fixing lines of a poem until morning,
四鄰嫌苦吟 My neighbors dislike my kuyin.

Liu Deren sat for the examinations multiple times over a twenty-year period but extant evidence implies that he never passed. Despite his repeated failures, he felt the compulsion to keep working at it, to keep going over his writings, reading them aloud until they sounded just right. In one poem, he describes how he “cuts to the bone in search of new lines 刻骨搜新句.” Elsewhere, he is ashamed for not having achieved anything despite how weary those same bones have grown.

Presented to Vice-Director Cui on Taking the Examinations: 2 of 4 省試日上崔侍郎四首 (其二)

Liu Deren 刘得仁

如病如癡二十秋 Like being sick or stupid for twenty autumns –
求名難得又難休 Seeking a name, it’s hard to achieve one, but it’s even harder to rest.
回看骨肉須堪恥 Looking back at my flesh and bones, I should surely be ashamed:
一著麻衣便白頭 I’m cloaked in coarse-hemp robes yet my head is white.

When one’s sense of success is based on obtaining an official career after passing the examinations (politely referred to as “achieving a name 得名,” line 2), failure is devastating. Shame and poverty follow (lines 3–4). The poet, whether out of modesty or hyperbole or rhetorical norms, describes himself as a pitiable old man, ruined by his own bull-headed attempts to make a name for himself. To Liu Deren and many others in the early- and mid-ninth century, official success was a measure of self-worth. At best, failure meant remaining on the margins of elite culture; at worst, it meant an utter negation of one’s very purpose in life.

25 “Baring my Feelings, Presented to One Who Knows Me” 陳情上知己 (QT’S 544, p. 6291).
26 QT’S 545, pp. 6303–4. Vice-Director Cui: Cui Yu 崔璵 (mid-9th c., younger brother of chancellor Cui Gong 崔珙 (d. 854).
This strain of kuyin – associated with Meng Jiao and success in officialdom – continued into the tenth century, but it did not become the dominant one. Rather, it was Meng’s associate Jia Dao who became most fully identified with the kuyin aesthetic. The New Tang History’s assessment of Jia Dao, for example, refers explicitly to kuyin as part of his legacy. His very person is defined by this term, as attested by many of the poems memorializing him. In his own verse, Jia Dao, too, identified his very self with kuyin.

The Last Day of the Third Month, Sent to Judge Liu 三月晦日贈劉評事

Jia Dao 賈島

三月正當三十日
風光別我苦吟身
共君今夜不須睡
未到曉鐘猶是春

In the third month, right on the thirtieth day,
In the breeze and sunlight, you part with me, a kuyin person.
Together with you tonight, we need not sleep —
It’s still spring before the coming of the morning bell.

Here, kuyin describes Jia Dao’s very being. It is not just a stage in his life, the discomforting time between preparing for an official career and achieving it. It is his entire life. Although Jia did take the examinations (and failed) soon after laicizing in 812, he rarely used the rhetoric of kuyin to talk about a path to officialdom. Rather, he effectively separated it from the narrative of a successful career. Like earlier kuyin poets, Jia frequently complained of poverty, but the cause of his poverty was different. It was his commitment to poetry as an end in itself, not as a means to an end, that caused this suffering.

30 On the date and circumstances of Jia Dao’s laicization, see Bai Aiping 白愛平, “Jia Dao weisen ji huansu shijian didian kao” (賈島為僧及還俗時間地點考), Tangdu xuekan 唐都學刊 22.3 (2006), pp. 11–13.
31 See, e.g., “Morning Hunger” (QTS 571, p. 618); and “Singing My Feelings” (QTS 574, p. 6684).
Jia Dao fundamentally changed the meaning of *kuyin* by dissociating it from official success and tying it to the writing of poetry itself. The poverty, suffering, and failure in his life are presented not as an ironic contrast to his obsession with poetry, but as precisely the result of his commitment to poetry. This comes through in the way Jia lets his readers know that he has put an enormous amount of effort into his lines. One poem, for example, contains the following, seemingly unremarkable couplet:

> **From Jia Dao**, *賈島*, “Seeing off the Venerable Wuke” 送無可上人
>
> 獨行潭底影  Traveling alone: shadows at the bottom of a pool,
> 數息樹邊身  A few breaths: a person beside the trees.

To these lines is appended an annotation in verse supposedly written by Jia himself 自注:

> 二句三年得  These two lines were attained after three years:
> 一吟雙淚流  As soon as I intoned them, a pair of tears fell from my eyes.
> 知音如不賞  If the one who knows my tone does not appreciate them
> 归臥故山丘  I will go back to lie down in my old hills.

The claim to intensity (measured by time rather than physical breakdown) is used to prove the sincerity of the poet’s pursuit of aesthetic truth, with a recognition of his worthiness. One thinks of the stories of bodhisattvas pursuing enlightenment over countless eons of rebirth. The poet is the ascetic, willing to put aside material comforts in order to attain a long-term benefit. By reorienting the *kuyin* rhetoric of passion toward poetry itself, and away from official success, Jia Dao fundamentally wrote new ideals for the late-ninth and tenth-century poets to strive for.

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32 On the connection between suffering (*ku* 苦) and purity (*qing* 淸) in Jia Dao’s aesthetic, see Xiao Chi 蕭聰, *Fofa yu shijing 佛法與詩境* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), pp. 207–33.


34 For more on *kuyin* poetry as a return on a temporal investment, see Owen, “Spending Time On Poetry.”

35 A spurious anecdote, which nonetheless captures the deeper truth (as a myth often does), tells us how, “at the end of the year, Jia Dao would take out the poems he finished that year and make an offering of food and ale to them, saying: ‘I have strained my spirit. With these I restore it’.” The story is preserved in *Yunxian zaji 雲仙雜記*, sometimes attributed to late Tang, but likely dates to the mid-Song. See Zhou Xunchu 周勛初, ed., *Yangren yishi huibian 唐人轶事彙編* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), vol. 1, j. 20, p. 1114.
Kuyin covered a range of phenomena and approaches to poetry, and these referents shifted over the course of the late Tang and afterward. The Jia Dao strain, which separated kuyin from a bureaucratic career, became especially widespread in the late-ninth and tenth centuries, in part due to the literati’s waning faith in political stability and, hence, in officialdom and the examination system. If getting a jinshi degree was not a sure path to success, if talented poets routinely failed, and if the unworthy were promoted due to corruption and factionalism, why bother with officialdom at all? Thus, by the very end of the ninth century, the idea of poetry as an end in itself — rather than as a means to a successful career — became much more popular than it had been.

At the center of the term kuyin are two interrelated concepts: the intensity of one’s devotion to poetry, especially its details, and the resulting toll on the body of the poet. The physical pain of kuyin came from the intensity with which poets worked on their craft. Multiple poets claimed that the process of composing poems ruined their hair.

Many poets, like Jia Dao, identified themselves with kuyin. Some even went so far as to proclaim that the writing of poetry was the very purpose of life. Du Xunhe (846–904), another member of the elite who failed the exams many times, portrays himself this way repeatedly. In the opening of one poem he announces: “My Way is in

36 If extant records can be trusted, Jia Dao was by far the most popular poet of the 9th–10th cc. See Thomas Mazanec, “Networks of Exchange Poetry in Late Medieval China: Notes Toward a Dynamic History of Tang Literature,” Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture 5:2 (2018), pp. 338–42.


38 On this point, see Li, Tangmo Wudai luanshi wenxue yanjiu, pp. 78–87, 100–1; and Tao Qingmei, “Tangmo shige gainian de xinbian,” Tang yanjiu 11 (2005), pp. 215–16.

39 See, e.g., Fang Gan 方干 (d. 885?), “Given to Yu Fu” (QTS 6, p. 7444); Lu Yanrang (js. 715, p. 8212); Li Pin 李頻 (late-9th c.), “Going Back after Passing the Exams” (QTS 5, p. 6819); Pei Yue 貝誻 (js. 906), “Sent to Cao Song” (QTS 7, p. 8261).

40 Ruan Yue, Shihua zonggui 詩話總龜 (SKQS edn.) 10, p. 6. Compare the similar passage in Huang Che 蒼齋 (1093–1168), Gongxi shihua 聯安詩話 (SKQS edn.) 7, p. 6.
pentameter 當道在五字.” That is, the path that he sees himself as following, the principle that structures his life, is poetry. He elaborates on this theme in a poem on *kuyin*.

**Kuyin 苦吟**

Du Xunhe 杜荀鶴 (846–904)

1. 思間何事好
2. 最好莫過詩
3. 一句我自得
4. 四四方人已知
5. 生應無假日
6. 死是不吟時
7. 始擬歸山去
8. 林泉道在茲

In this poem, the *ku* of the title clearly means “intense devotion” rather than “suffering” or “bitter.” The first couplet states explicitly that the speaker regards poetry as the “finest 好” thing in the world. Therefore, to get the most out of life, one must spend every possible moment writing (line 5). Like his contemporary Cui Tu 崔塗 (888), Du Xunhe seeks to “intone in the morning and intone at dusk 朝吟復暮吟.” Poetic practice has changed from a means to an end in itself, at least in Du’s self-presentation. Death is to be loathed not because it is an evil, but because it provides no more opportunities for creating and reciting poetry (line 6). Poetry is his very *raison d’être*. It is the meaning of his life.

**THE POET-MONKS’ EFFORT**

The poet-monks of the late Tang and Five Dynasties were as enthralled with the *kuyin* aesthetic as anyone. It is important to note that Guanxiu and Qiji were not the only poet-monks who promoted the *kuyin* aesthetic. Guiren 归仁, a relatively unknown poet-monk of the late-9th to early-10th cc., also writes in a poem: “Every day I suffer for poetry 日日為詩苦” and “If I’m satisfied with a single couplet, / I forget all my ten thousand worries 一聯如得意，萬事總忘憂” (“Diverting Myself 自遣”, in *QTS* 679, p. 9293). My focus on Guanxiu and Qiji in what follows is due to their large extant literary collections.

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41 “Thinking of My Old Residence on Mt. Jiuhua on an Autumn Day” 秋日懷九華舊居, in *QTS* 691, p. 7941.

42 *QTS* 691, pp. 7944–45.

43 From another poem titled “Kuyin 苦吟”, in *QTS* 679, p. 7771.

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to examination candidates.\textsuperscript{45} But the Jia Dao strand was more attractive, for it proffered ideals similar to Buddhist monasticism: living in poverty and austerity, toiling away at a self-cultivation practice, and sacrificing one’s body out of intense devotion to a text.\textsuperscript{46} The \textit{Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith} 大乘起信論, a text that Guanxiu studied and preached on for three years, also advocates a practice of zeal similar in kind to that expected in \textit{kuyin} discourse – a person’s resolution and effort are crucial to Buddhist soteriology, just as they are to one’s literary reputation.\textsuperscript{47} So did the \textit{Treatise on the Essentials of Guarding the Mind} 守心要論, a set of practical instructions on meditation attributed to Hongren 弘忍, in which the patriarch says:

Make effort! Make effort! Although it may seem futile now, [your present efforts] constitute the causes for your future [enlightenment]. Do not let time pass in vain while only wasting energy. The sūtra says: “[Foolish sentient beings] will reside forever in hell as if pleasantly relaxing in a garden. There are no modes of existence worse than their present state.” We sentient beings fit this description. Having no idea how horribly terrifying [this world really] is, we never have the intention of leaving! How awful!\textsuperscript{48} 努力努力。

The exertion of effort, fighting against deluded complacency, becomes here the basis of salvation. It is through striving that one achieves en-

\textsuperscript{45} See, e.g., Guanxiu’s “Seeing off a Friend to Lingwai” 送友人之嶺外 (Hu Dajun 胡大浚, ed. and annot., \textit{Guanxiu geshi xinian jianzhu 贯休歌詩繫年注} (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011) 13, pp. 627–28; \textit{QTS} 831, p. 9375); and “Seeing off Liu Ti to His Appointment at Min” 送劉逖赴閩辟 (Hu, \textit{Guanxiu geshi 12}, pp. 788–89; \textit{QTS} 831, p. 9370); Shangyan’s “Seeing off ‘Sure to Succeed’ Liu” 遠劉必先 (\textit{QTS} 848, p. 9609); and Muyou’s “A Response Matching Something Sent by a Friend” 酬和友人見寄 (\textit{QTS} 850, pp. 9624–25).


\textsuperscript{48} Chinese text is based on the critical edition compiled from seven Dunhuang manuscripts, as well as a few other sources, by John McRae in \textit{The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism} (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1986). This passage appears on the page labeled “八 (eight)” in the Chinese-text section, at back of book. The translation is ibid., pp. 126–27.
lightenment. Passion is required. Passion for poetry could bleed into the territory of religion, as in the case of the poet Li Dong worshiping a “Jia Dao Buddha.” Likewise, the attention to detail espoused in the *kuyin* aesthetic – as in its precursor Jiaoran – is reminiscent of Mazu Daoyi’s 馬祖道一 (709–788) notion of insight through attention to detail. But above all, poet-monks like Guanxiu and Qiji portray themselves as having a passion for the art itself.

Guanxiu’s writings on *kuyin* share many themes with his contemporaries’. He often describes poetic composition as *ku*: hard, bitter, painstaking. As one poem has it, “Endless is the bitterness (*ku*) of seeking lines 無端求句苦.” Elsewhere, he writes that “In writing, one should exhaust one’s energy 文章應力竭.” Discussing the experience of his poetic practice, he says, “My mind labors bitterly (*ku*), but the flavor’s not bitter 心苦味不苦,” that is, his mind works hard but he becomes so absorbed in the process of composition that it does not feel laborious to him. Poetry, rather, is his life’s work. As he directly states in the opening of another poem, “What really is my purpose? / Lau-lau – I love only intoning 我竟胡為者, 嘮嘮但愛吟.” When he discusses the physical and spiritual toll of poetic composition on the poet, as well as the importance of individual lines, he sounds like nearly any other *kuyin* poet. At times, Guanxiu explicitly posits his *kuyin* ideal as a continuation of earlier masters. In this case, he sees himself as laboring for the sake of Jia Dao and Liu Deren.

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51 “On Hearing that Supernumerary Li Pin Died” 閒李頻員外卒 (Hu, *Guanxiu geshi* 12, pp. 603–4; *QTS* 831, p. 9372). Although Guanxiu is ostensibly describing Li Pin’s practice, it is clear that they agree on this view of literature.

52 “On a Winter’s Night, Sent to Executive Assistant Lu: 2 of 2” 夜寒寄盧給事二首 (其二) (Hu, *Guanxiu geshi* 12, pp. 569–71; *QTS* 831, p. 9307).


54 See his poem “*Kuyin* 考吟” (Hu, *Guanxiu geshi* 22, pp. 968–69; *QTS* 836, p. 9423).

55 Beyond Jia Dao and Liu Deren, Guanxiu is quite taken by the idea that previous poets strained themselves with their hard (*ku*) thought. For example, he describes Miu Duyi 謬獨一, a contemporary mentioned several times by Guanxiu but not otherwise known, by saying, “His thinking is hard (*ku*) like mine 思還如我苦” (“Thinking of Miu Duyi” 考謬獨一, in Hu, *Guanxiu geshi* 14, pp. 668–69; *QTS* 832, p. 9382).
Reading the Poetry Collections of Liu Deren and Jia Dao: 2 of 2 读刘得仁賈岛集二首其二

Guanxiu 贯休

役思曾衝尹 Laboring in thought, you once bumped into the governor. ①

多言阻國親 Often you spoke of blocking closeness with the state. ②

桂枝何所直 How can one put a price to an osmanthus branch? ③

陋巷不勝貧 From lowly alleys, you never rose above poverty.

馬病難湯雪 With a sick horse, it’s hard to turn snow into boiling water. ④

門荒劣有人 When gates have been deserted, few are the people there.

伊余吟亦苦 Mine own chanting, too, is bitter:

8 爲爾一眉嚬 I knit my brows for you.

As with most poems about two people, this one begins by alternating between its two topics, with line 1 about Jia Dao and line 2 about Liu Deren. These are allusions to anecdotes about the two. In each case, the stories tell us how complete absorption in craft paradoxically leads to political power: Jia Dao once bumped into Han Yu while contemplating the best word for a line of poetry, leading to Han’s patronage of Jia; and Liu’s reclusion made him seem so authentically committed to purity that a prince once devoted enormous state resources to finding him. The middle couplets contrast this with the poverty and loneliness characteristic of the kuyin poet, pairing concrete imagery (osmanthus branch: symbol of success in the examinations. This line is meant to embody Liu Deren’s attitude toward his own craft.

① This refers to a well-known anecdote about Jia Dao, in which Jia is so absorbed in his choice of words for a couplet (whether to say “pushing” or “knocking on” a door) that he wanders oblivious through the streets of the capital and runs into the metropolitan governor Han Yu, who finally tells him to pick “knock.” For the original anecdote, see He Guangyuan 何光遠, Jianjie lu 鑒戒錄 (SKQS edn.) 8, p. 6; for a translation and discussion, see Owen, The Late Tang, pp. 97–98.

② This line refers to an anecdote related to Liu Deren, in which Liu, despondent after failing the examinations for twenty years, decided to hide away in the mountains. When word got out, an imperial scion sent a thousand chariots to find him, but none was successful. See Fu, Tang caizi zhuan jiaojian, vol. 5, j. 6, pp. 184–85.

③ Osmanthus branch: symbol of success in the examinations. This line is meant to embody Liu Deren’s attitude toward his own craft.

④ This line refers to Liu Deren’s difficulty in finding a government job due to his lack of connections with the imperial court. “Turning snow into boiling water” had been a metaphor for the difficulty of overcoming obstacles since at least the 4th c. See, e.g., Fan Ye 范曄, comp., Hou Han shu 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965) 711, pp. 2302–3: “Dissolving strongholds is harder than turning snow into boiling water.”
How Poetry Became Meditation

branch, boiling water on snow) with more general abstractions (poverty, “few are the people”). The final couplet shifts its linguistic approach, using first- and second-person pronouns instead of implying them. In doing so, the speaker is stating his connection to the poets as directly as possible. Guanxiu can best honor their legacies by getting down to work and writing with the same dedication to craft.

Against the increasingly common kuyin ideal at the turn of the tenth century, Qiji wrote his own response poem on “Cherishing Intoning.” While Qiji himself was as committed as anyone to the kuyin aesthetic, one can imagine that he wrote this poem in order to rethink the dying metaphor, or perhaps to put a little non-dualism into practice.

Cherishing Intoning 愛吟

Qiji 齊己

正堪凝思掩禪扃 Will I truly be able to fix my thoughts and shut the gate to meditation?

又被詩魔惱竺卿 This Indic adherent is once again vexed by the poetry demon.62

偶憑窗扉從落照 Leaning for a moment against the shutters, I follow the falling light;

不眠風雪到殘更 Unable to sleep, gusts of snow continue until the last watch.

皎然未必迷前習 Jiaoran need not have been deluded by his earlier tendencies;

支遁寧非悟後生 Zhi Dun would’ve been better off had he not been aware of his future lives.

傳寫會逢精鑒者 Their writings, passed down, have met an essential mirror 63

8 也應知是詠閒情 Who ought to understand this feeling of idle singing.

Poetry here is seen not as an investment, a craft which requires ultimate devotion, but rather as a distraction. It is an outside force, made manifest as the “poetry demon 詩魔” – a metaphor comparing the desire to write poetry to the demon Māra who attempted to break Śākyamuni’s concentration under the Bodhi tree, a metaphor which

62 “Indic adherent” refers to a Buddhist monk.
63 “Essential mirror” refers to one with great discernment. In this case, Qiji is referring to himself as one who understands Jiaoran and Zhi Dun.
first gained currency in the middle years of Tang. The use of “poetry 
demon” is precise here. Qiji’s desire to write poetry interrupts his at-
ttempts at meditation; thus, Māra succeeds here where he failed with the 
Buddha. The poet’s gaze traces the last lights of dusk as they reach out 
from the horizon, his mind is filled with thoughts of past poet-monks, 
keeping him from sleep. He cannot focus. The poem is not his life’s 
purpose, but the distraction from the tasks of his everyday life – medi-
tating, sleeping. This everyday life is described as one of “idleness 閑,” 
that is, not engaged in the business of serving the state. In doing so, 
Qiji adopts the terms of mainstream political discourse, not the terms 
of the poetic outsider. He is just a lazy writer after all.

But the consequence of this rhetorical move is that Qiji thereby 
justifies his own idleness. He is unproductive in his normal affairs not 
because he is simply lazy, but because he has been attacked by an 
outside force. His desire to write poetry is not self-motivated love of 
fame; it is the result of a haunting. He cannot control it. This portrayal 
of poetry reflects the fine art of the couplet found in kuyin discourse, 
wherein lines are things that are “sought 求” and “attained 得”: poetry 
is external, and the poet, whether “affectionate 愛” or “painsstaking 苦” 
in his pursuit of it, is at the mercy of larger forces.

Nevertheless, when Qiji writes about the composition of poetry, 
he normally adopts the common terms of post-Huang Chao poetics and 
stresses the kind of craftsmanship and intensity associated with kuyin. 
In a eulogistic poem written upon Guanxiu’s death, he praises the older 
monk for precisely this quality.

From Qiji, “Hearing that Guanxiu Parted from This World” 闻貫休 
下世 65

吾師詩匠者 My master is a craftsman of poetry,
真個碧雲流 Who truly flows like a cloud in the sapphire.

The term used here for craftsman, jiang 匠, literally means “carpenter” 
and implies that the poet brings to language the same kind of attention 
to shaping linguistic details as a carpenter does to wood. Writing is a 
specific kind of labor, the kind of painstaking crafting and polishing 
performed by an artisan. Elsewhere, Qiji stresses the intense devotion 
and physical breakdown of the kuyin ideal.

64 The earliest uses of the term “poetry demon” are by Liu Yuxi (772–842) and Bai Juyi 
(772–846). On the trope of the “poetry demon” more generally, see Protass, “Buddhist Monks 
65 Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 2, pp. 94–96; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 2, pp. 102–3; QTS 839, pp. 
9464–65.
Sending Thoughts of Sengda, the Old Meditator of Jiangxi 寄懷江西僧達

Qiji 齊己

長憶舊山日
與君同聚沙
未能精貝葉
便學詠楊花
苦甚傷心骨
清還切齒牙
何妨繼餘習
前世是詩家

Often I recall those days on our old mountain,
When we made sand stupas together.
Having not yet comprehended patra-leaves,
You learned to sing of willow down.
You toiled (ku) until your mind and bones ached
For purity that chatters teeth.
What’s stopping you from continuing this habit?
You were of the poets in a previous era.

Poetry composition is not just a physically and mentally exhausting activity (line 5), but also a commitment over multiple lifetimes. As the final couplet implies, Sengda has made a habit of it in his previous incarnations and shows no sign of stopping now. The poet is like a bodhisattva, spending multiple lifetimes, perhaps entire kalpas, preparing for his goal. Instead of enlightenment, the result is verse so pure that it “chatters teeth” (line 6) – a playful reversal of usual tropes having to do with kuyin’s physical consequences. Instead of the poem affecting the poet’s body, it brings about a reaction in the reader’s body. Though the reference to previous lifetimes is certainly playful, the very possibility of its deployment reveals that poetry required the same level of effort and commitment as the monastic life.

The poet-monks Guanxiu and Qiji frequently drew on kuyin discourse, finding in it a match for many aspects of monastic ideals. The glorification of poverty and physical suffering was just the most conspicuous of these. As we have also seen, kuyin implies a direct correlation between energy invested and quality of poem produced. This kind of correlation is similar to the law of cause and effect (“karma”) so prominent in Buddhism, in which deeds of compassion and devotion lead to merit, while wicked deeds lead to rebirth in evil realms. By this logic, the mental and physical energy invested in poetry can be un-

66 Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 2, pp. 113–14; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 2, pp. 122–23; QTS 839, pp. 9469–70.
67 “Made sand stupas” (literally “gather sand”) is short for 聚沙成塔, “gather sand to make stupas.” This refers to a children’s game (similar to modern children’s sandcastle building) which produces merit for them. The locus classicus is the second chapter of the Lotus Sūtra 妙法蓮華經 (T no. 262, vol. 9, p. 8c; trans. Leon Hurvitz, Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (the Lotus Sūtra), rev. edn. [New York: Columbia U.P., 2009]), pp. 38–39).
68 “Patra-leaves” were the material on which South Asian texts were commonly written. Here it refers to Buddhist scriptures.
derstood as a meritorious act within a different discursive system. One venerates kuyin masters like Jia Dao instead of Buddhas. One intones poems instead of scriptures or spells. The structures of the actions are the same; only the content is different. Both systems require complete devotion to their practice.

**THE STILL POET**

The attention to detail and intense devotion to poetry which coalesced in kuyin is also related to an ideal of absorption: a person can fully devote himself to a singular goal if he is also able to block out extraneous thoughts or sensory input. This involves a kind of mental strength beyond the abilities of most humans. Poets must have an extraordinary capacity for concentration and visualization if they are to take part in the process of fashioning 道化, of shaping and re-creating the patterns of the cosmos in their literary works. Though this idea of a poet’s concentration had deep roots in the classical literary tradition, its fullest flowering came when it cross-pollinated with the practices of Buddhist meditation.

The classical precedent for the poetic ideal of absorption was Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261–303) “Fu on Literature” (“Wen fu” 文賦). This text, anthologized in the supremely influential Wenxuan 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature), would have been well known to any Tang poet. Lu Ji describes how the poet takes a visionary journey in preparation for the act of composition.

*Its beginning*

In the beginning, [the poet] both
- **收視反聽** Withdraws sight, suspends hearing,
- **耽思傍訊** And deeply contemplates, seeks broadly,
- **精騖八極** Letting his spirit race to the eight limits,
- **心遊萬仞** Letting his mind roam ten thousand spans.

*Its end*

Then, at the end,
- **情曈曨而彌鮮** His feelings first glimmering, become ever brighter,
- **物昭晣而互進** And things, clear and resplendent, reveal one another.

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69 Qiji, for example, praised Guanxiu’s work by comparing it to the Wenxuan: “He strove for equality with the Crown Prince of Liang, / To be esteemed like [those poets of] the Wenxuan tower” 獨得梁太子, 著文選樓 (Qiji, “Hearing that Guanxiu Parted from this World” 閱貫休下世, in Wang, *Qiji shi ji jiaozhu* 2, pp. 94–96; Pan, *Qiji shi zhu* 2, pp. 102–3; *QTS* 839, pp. 9464–65). “Crown Prince of Liang” refers to Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), compiler of the Wenxuan.

70 Xiao Tong 蕭統, comp., *Wenxuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986) 17, p. 763; translation adapted from David R. Knechtges, trans. and annot., *Wen Xuan, or, Selec-
The “Fu on Literature,” one of the great achievements of literary criticism in the mainstream tradition, here echoes parts of the Songs of Chu, in which the speaker describes a spiritual journey to parts of the known world and beyond. He turns off his mundane senses to let his mind roam, revealing internal and external realities in ever brighter relief, at which point he can channel them into the linguistic medium of a poem.

Lu Ji’s fu had a deep impact on literary theory and practice for centuries. One popular poetry manual of the Tang dynasty, attributed to Wang Changling 王昌齡 (d. 756?), describes the process of composition in terms of a similar spirit journey, though giving the poet’s mind a more active role:

When mentally preparing to compose a poem, you must fix your mind, and your eyes will touch their objects. When you use your mind to touch them, you will deeply pierce their world. It is like climbing the summit of a high mountain: when you look down on the ten thousand things, it is like they are in the palm of your hand. When you see images in this way, you will see them clearly in your mind, and thus can they be put to use.

Before anything else can happen, the mind must reach the same state of concentration as described in Lu Ji’s fu. Once it is settled and focused, it can be used to pierce objects in a way that sight alone cannot. That is, the mind does not just see phenomena, it sees through them to get to their cosmic significance as images. The poet can then recall these images and arrange them into the world of a poem. But this only comes through mental absorption of the kind that “tires your mind...”

71 Its impact can be felt perhaps most acutely on the “Daimonic imagination” (shensi 神思) chapter of Wenxin diaolong, which also points out the necessity of mental stillness, the spirit journey of the imagination, the arrangement of mental objects, and the difficulty in putting all of this into poetry. See Ronald Egan, “Poet, Mind, and World: A Reconsideration of the ‘Shensi’ Chapter of Wenxin diaolong,” in Zong-qi Cai, ed., A Chinese Literary Mind: Culture, Creativity, and Rhetoric in Wenxin diaolong (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000), pp. 101–26.

and exhausts your intelligence, [wherein] you must forget your person
苦心竭智, 必須忘身,” as the author writes in the passage just preceding
this one.23 The mind, through the kind of toil in which one lets go his
very self, can be trained to take hold of the images of the cosmos and
recreate them in a poem.

As early as the late-eighth century, Tang poets began to make ex-

cplicit analogies between the kind of concentration espoused in poetic
theory and the increasingly popular Buddhist practices of meditation.

From Yang Juyuan 楊巨源 (b. 755), “Given to My Cousin Maoqing”
贈從弟茂卿 74
扣寂由來在淵思 “Knocking on stillness” comes out of distant
contemplation,
搜奇本自通禪智 Finding the marvelous originates in compre-
hending meditative wisdom.

The first line of Yang’s couplet synthesizes two sections of the “Fu
on Literature.” The sort of spirit journey we examined earlier is said to be the
basis of another one of the poet’s activities described in Lu Ji’s fu: “[The
poet] tests the void and non-existence to demand of it existence, / Knocks
upon stillness and silence, seeking a tone 跪虛無以責有,叩寂寞而求音.”75
That is, the act of poetic creation, which seems to emerge out of noth-
ing, is in fact the product of a spirit journey. The second line of Yang’s
couplet draws on the jargon of Buddhism in order to come at the same
point from a slightly different angle. Intense mental concentration, di-
vorced from sensory input, is what leads to new insight.

Later writers made this same point, that poetry requires the same
kind of concentration as Buddhist meditation, using the language of
kuyin:

From Yao He 姚合 (775?–855?), “Sent to Jia Dao” 寄賈島 76
狂發吟如哭 When madness erupts, you chant (yin) as if weeping,
愁來坐似禪 When sorrow comes, you sit as in meditation.

Pei Yue 裴說 [fragmentary couplet 殘句] 77
苦吟僧入定 Kuyin: a monk entering concentration,
得句將成功 Attaining a couplet: about to achieve success.

23 Shige huikao, p. 162; Kükai, Wenjing mifulun 3, p. 1309; cf. Bodman, “Poetics and Pros-
ody,” p. 371.
24 QTS 333, p. 3717.
25 Wenxuan 17, p. 765. For other translations, with commentary, see Stephen Owen, Read-
118–19; and Knechtges, Wen Xuan, or, Selections of Refined Literature, vol. 3, p. 217.
26 QTS 497, p. 5634.
27 QTS 720, p. 8269. The earliest extant source for this couplet is the 12th-c. Tangshi jishi
Pei Yue’s lines are the more explicit of the two, making a direct analogy between meditation and *kuyin* across the caesura, but Yao He’s are the more interesting. Not only do Yao’s lines come from a poem addressed to the *kuyin* paragon Jia Dao himself, but they reconcile what seem to be two opposing qualities. “Madness” (*kuang* 狂), an intense mania associated with wild calligraphers who give free reign to their imaginations, makes way for the stillness of “meditation” (*chan* 禪), a transliteration of the Sanskrit *dhyāna* and meaning “concentration.”

First, the intense emotion of madness overwhelms the poet, which he must let out in weeping or poetry or some combination of the two. This experience, subjective and isolating, then brings the poet to a state of sorrow, a calm in which he can enter meditation (presumably to send his thoughts forth to gather more prompts for artistic creation). Poetry can prepare one for meditation, just as meditation can prepare one for poetry.

Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), an exiled literatus who wrote the first history of poet-monks in the early-ninth century, was perhaps the first to explicitly theorize the connection between meditation and poetic concentration. On the whole, he seems to have held ambivalent attitudes toward Buddhists’ attempts at writing high literature — his preface to Lingche’s 靈澈 collection praised its subject precisely for transcending the category of “poet-monk.” However, in the preface to a parting poem given to the monk Hongju 鴻舉, Liu suggests the possibility that a Buddhist monk with literary inclinations may be capable of writing superior verse.

When one is able to be free of desire, the ground of his heart is empty; when it’s empty, the ten thousand images can enter; once they’ve entered, they must come out, and so they take shape in phrases. For one’s phrases to be marvelous and deep, they must adhere to tonal meter. Thus, from the recent past on down, Buddhists who are known throughout the world for poetry have come one after another. Attaining the poem-world in concentration, it is naturally pure; through their insight, they dispel [the images they have accessed] in language. In this way, their works are refined...
and striking. 能離欲, 則方寸地虛, 虚而萬象入, 入必有所泄, 乃形乎詞. "此妙而深者, 必依於聲律, 故自近古而降, 釋子以詩聞於世者相踵焉. 因定而得境, 故翛然以清; 由慧而遣辭, 故粹然以麗."

Liu Yuxi blends together the classical expressive theory of the "Great Preface" to the Book of Odes with the idea of the poet as fashioner and with Buddhist concepts of quietude and emptiness. The classical discourse maintains that things stirred inside a person must be let out one way or another, whether through sigh, song, or dance. But instead of saying that those things inside are emotions stirred by events in the world, Liu Yuxi asserts that they are the very images of the ten thousand things that make up reality, and that they will only enter into a mind that is completely still and empty. That is, the poet is no longer a passive recipient of events who responds spontaneously with an accurate, authentic reaction to the world. Instead, he is someone who must first cultivate his mind in order to prepare it for the arrival of the images. Not everyone is capable of being a poet. It is the province of those with a superior control of their mind. For this reason, Buddhists have a potentially privileged relationship to poetry. They are experts in the mind, having honed it over many years of practice, cleansing it of desire's interference. In this way, the world of their poems and the mediating perception (jing 境 refers to both) are also pure. Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (d. 968) once praised Guanxiu for precisely this quality: "His perceptual awareness (jingyi) was outstanding and unique, impossible to match 境意卓異, 殆難儔敵." Monks' ability to concentrate 定, to settle their minds, can be applied directly to poetry. There is no noise distorting the images as they enter the monks' minds, nor as they come out in words. Therefore, the monks' works are "refined and striking." In modern parlance, we might say that Buddhist monks have a transferrable skill set. A calm mind, imbued with the images of the ten thousand things that constitute the entire world, is precisely what is required of poets. They are, after all, fashioners of worlds.


81 "Preface to the White Lotus Collection" 白蓮集序 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu, p. 619; Pan, Qiji shi zhu, pp. 598–99; QTW 900, pp. 9390–91).
THE TWO GATES

The homology of poetic concentration and Buddhist meditation, suggested by Liu Yuxi and others, came to its fullest expression in the work of Qiji.\(^{83}\) Being a native of the Chu region, Qiji was familiar with monks of the Chan Wei-Yang lineage and exchanged poems with them.\(^{84}\) The Wei-Yang lineage was particularly noted for its emphasis on the mutually complementary nature of religious practice, ordinary life, and sudden enlightenment, and especially how the forms of the physical world can shed light on the mind \(\text{即色明心}\).\(^{85}\) The Buddhist communities at Hongzhou, where Qiji, Guanxiu, and other poet-monks lived for many years, similarly stressed “non-cultivation,” which was in essence the possibility of turning any everyday action into meditation.\(^{86}\)

Texts associated with the Hongzhou communities often framed this in terms of meditating in any of the “four postures 四威儀,” in which all monastic activity was performed.\(^{87}\) As one sermon attributed to Hongzhou patriarch Mazu Daoyi put it:

\(^{82}\) Others have recognized the close relationship between poetry and meditation in Qiji’s poetry. See, e.g., Hsiao Li-hua 蕭麗華, “Wan-Tang shiseng Qiji de shichan shijie” 萬唐詩僧齊己的詩禪世界, Foxue yanjiu 佛學研究 2 (1997), pp. 157–78; Jiang Yin 蒋寅, “Yi chan yu shi: yi chan yu shi de luoji yiju” 以禪喻詩, 以禪喻詩的邏輯依據, in Guidian shixue de xiandai quanshi 古典詩學的現代詮釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), p. 59; Owen, “How Did Buddhism Matter”; and Protass, “Buddhist Monks and Chinese Poetry,” pp. 86, 99–102. My readings of Qiji differ from those of Jiang Yin and Stephen Owen in that I also differ from Jason Protass, who reads Qiji’s verse as being evidence of a fundamental difference between poetry and monastic ideals, and from Hsiao Li-hua, who sees contradictions in Qiji’s view of the relationship between poetry and meditation.

\(^{83}\) See, e.g., “Leaving an Inscription at the Pagoda of the Master of Mt. Yang” 寄仰山光味長者 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 齊己與潙仰宗, 1997, pp. 17–19; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 齊己集, pp. 20–21; QTS 838, p. 9445), “Sent to Elder Guanwei of Mt. Yang” 寄仰山光味長者 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu, pp. 236–37; Pan, Qiji shi zhu, pp. 244–45; QTS 815, p. 9564), and “Sent to the Monk of Bright Moon Mountain” 寄明月山僧, which may refer to Mingyue Daochong 明月道崇, a disciple of Wei-Yang patriarch Huiji 富士 (814–890) (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu, pp. 108–9; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 2, pp. 117; QTS 839, p. 9468).

\(^{84}\) Among records about Huiji in the Jingde Lamp-Transmission Records, one monk describes how he and the master were “discussing the Way, how form (Skt. \(\text{rūpa}\)) can illuminate the mind and how connections to phenomena can reveal the truth (即色明心, 附物顯理)” (T no. 2076, vol. 51, p. 2848b–c). On these teachings of the Wei-Yang lineage, see Yin Chubin 尹楚彬, “Hu-Xiang shiseng Qiji yu Wei-Yangzong” 胡希詩僧齊己與潙仰宗, Hunan daxue xuebao 北京大學學報 (社會科學版) 15,4 (2001), pp. 24–25; Liu Luming 劉燁, “Wei-Yangzong Chanfa gangzong chutan” 潙仰宗法綱宗初探, Foxue yanjiu 佛學研究 (2010), pp. 267–68; and Wu Xianlin 吳賢林, “Wei-Yangzong de Chanxue xianshang” 潙仰宗的禪學思想, Shijie zongjiao yanjiu 社會宗教研究 3 (2014), pp. 53–57.


\(^{86}\) A precedent for this idea can be found in the Treatise on Perfect Illumination (Yuanming lun 圓明論), which advocates an ideal of permanently residing in meditation and wisdom, “never quitting during walking, standing, sitting, or lying down 行住坐臥, 無有罷息” (see p. “二十八 [twenty-eight]”, in the Chinese-text section of McRae’s book); see trans. by McRae, The Northern School, p. 212.
All dharmas are Buddha-dharma, and all dharmas are liberation. Liberation is thusness, and all dharmas never leave thusness. Walking, standing, sitting, and lying— all these are inconceivable functions, which do not wait for a timely season.87 一切法皆是佛法，諸法即解脫，解脫者即真如，諸法不出於如，行住坐臥，悉是不思議用，不待時節.

Given the fact that the ultimate and the mundane are perfectly interfused, completely dependent on one another, one need not sit in silence to meditate. Activity in any posture can give one access to the “inconceivable,” that is, enlightenment which is beyond thought. The doctrine of the inseparability of principle and phenomena gave rise to the practice of non-meditation as meditation, something that came to be seen as a hallmark of the Hongzhou communities. Such doctrines left much room for an advanced practitioner to engage with the arts, and would have been convenient justification for a poet-monk.

Often, Qiji discusses poetry and meditation as the two distinct but complementary activities on which he spends most of his time. He opens several poems with lines like, “Outside of meditation, I seek poetry’s wonders 禪外求詩妙,”88 and “Outside of monasticism, the pleasure of idle chanting is purest 僧外閑吟樂最清.”89 In these lines, his Buddhist practice is portrayed as primary, his poetic practice secondary. Other times he reverses the terms. Another poem opens, “When I’ve no taste for chanting poems, I take up sūtras 無味吟詩即把經.”90 In exchanges with other poet-monks, he describes their activities in a similar manner: “In addition to the work of sūtras and ństrás, you also take on the task of poetry 經論功餘更業詩,”91 he writes of the otherwise unknown Huixian 惠暹. In a quatrain to a certain “Venerable Guang,” he echoes the kuyin language of Pei Yue.

88 “On Myself” 自題 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 6, pp. 318–19; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 6, p. 329; QTS 843, p. 9530).
89 “Sent to My Brother Liao Kuangtu” 寄廖匡圖兄弟 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 10, pp. 599–600; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 10, pp. 583–84; QTS 847, p. 9596).
90 “Written by Chance at the Isles of Jing” 荊渚偶作 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 9, p. 479; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 9, pp. 460–61; QTS 845, p. 9568).
91 “Given unto the Venerable Huixian” 贽惠暹上人 (Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 7, p. 397; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 7, pp. 395–96; QTS 844, p. 9548).

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Replying to the Venerable Guang 酋光上人 92

Qiji 齊己

禪言難後到詩言 After the difficulties of meditation discourse, you come to poetic discourse.

2 坐石心同立月魂 Sitting on stones, your mind is the same as the waxing moon's soul.

應記前秋會吟處 Recall how last autumn, when we met to intone,

4 五更猶在老松根 We were still out at the fifth watch, by the roots of the old pines.

Qiji posits a sequential relationship between religious and literary activities and makes poetry the second stage – perhaps implying temporal sequence, and perhaps implying that it is the more advanced of the two (line 1). In the second line, the Venerable Guang sits on stones, his mind pure and clear like the moon that shines overhead. This image of his physical and mental stillness could describe either seated meditation or poetry composition. The point is moot, because the two look the same. The very ambiguity of the line, as it provides a bridge to a description of poetic composition through the night, underscores a connection between these practices. Though still distinct, poetry and meditation require their practitioners’ bodies to adopt similar poses. They share a repertoire.

When explaining his own approach to the composition of poetry, Qiji ties together many of the strands already mentioned. The complementary nature of poetry and meditation, the obsession with formal perfection, and the physical toll of kuyin-style devotion to the craft of verse are all mentioned and exemplified in one of his more self-conscious poems:

Explaining Intoning 喻吟 93

Qiji 齊己

日用是何專 What do I focus on day to day?

吟疲即坐禪 When tired from intoning I sit in meditation.

此生還可喜 Though this life is enjoyable,

4 餘事不相便 Everything else is not related to [this enjoyment].

92 Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 10, p. 597; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 10, pp. 579–80; QTS 847, p. 959b.

93 Wang, Qiji shiji jiaozhu 6, pp. 300–1; Pan, Qiji shi zhu 6, pp. 311–12; QTS 843, p. 9525; cf. Owen, “How Did Buddhism Matter,” pp. 399–400.
Qiji portrays poetry as his primary vocation and meditation as a welcome respite from it (line 2). These two activities constitute the majority of his daily life (line 1), taking pleasure in them and little else (lines 3–4). Poetry is labor, and his hard work pays off. He achieves two of the ideals described earlier: poetic perfection on par with the *Odes* (line 5) and an emphasis on the real images of the cosmos (line 6). The latter, moreover, is only possible because his spirit has attained purity and thus become capable of going on the kind of spiritual journey described by Lu Ji’s “*Fu on Literature.*” The poem concludes by explicitly relating his poetic and religious practices. Contrary to what one may assume, the sensuous “riverside flowers” and “fragrant grasses” often depicted in poetry do not harm his unattached mind (lines 7–8). Qiji may be subtly depicting himself as having achieved an advanced level of detachment, in which the practitioner is permitted to enjoy one’s sensory experience. That is to say, poetic and religious practice are not oppositional. In fact, it is precisely because of Qiji’s advanced meditative practice that he may be so bold in his literary works.

In poems written to his literary hero Zheng Gu, Qiji further develops this relationship between poetry and meditation. One quatrain...
puts the two practices in parallel with each other, implying their fundamental unity:

\[\text{Sent to Director Zheng Gu 寄鄭谷郎中}^{98}\]

\[Qiji 齊己\]

\[
\begin{align*}
1 \quad \text{人間近遇風騷匠} & \quad \text{I have recently come across a craftsman of poetry in the human realm,} \\
2 \quad \text{鳥外曾逢心印師} & \quad \text{And I once met a mind-stamped master beyond the birds,}^{99} \\
3 \quad \text{除此二門無別妙} & \quad \text{There is nothing so singularly marvelous besides these two gates —} \\
4 \quad \text{水邊松下獨尋思} & \quad \text{Beneath a riverside pine, I trace my thoughts alone.}
\end{align*}
\]

Poetry and Buddhism are “two gates” (line 3), that is, two approaches to the same end goal. In Buddhist writings, this phrase is often used to describe two seemingly contradictory approaches that are fundamentally interrelated and conditioned upon each other, such as the Lesser 小乘 and Greater Vehicles 大乘, or arising-and-ceasing 生滅 and true thusness 真如.\textsuperscript{100} Qiji, in his own poetry manual, describes poetry’s forty gates, which are various moods, attitudes, and realms — such as “satisfaction 得意” (no. 7), “turning one’s back on the times 背時” (no. 8), “divinity 神仙” (no. 30), and “purity 清潔” (no. 40)\textsuperscript{101} — through which the poet must enter in order to attain his couplets. They are all distinct approaches which lead to the same goal — a well-wrought poem. The gate metaphor, to Qiji, is pluralist. It stresses that there can be multiple ways to enter into something. In the quatrain to Zheng Gu, poetic composition and Buddhist meditation are two such gates. In the first couplet, they are embodied by the two guides mentioned in the first couplet, Zheng Gu (line 1) and an unspecified “mind-stamped master.”

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\textsuperscript{98} Wang, \textit{Qiji shiji jiaozhu} 10, p. 582; Pan, \textit{Qiji shi zhu} 30, p. 563; \textit{QTS} 847, p. 9592.

\textsuperscript{99} “Mind-stamped master”; in Chan, a person who has received the true transmission of the dharma is said to have been “stamped with the mind of the Buddha 佛心印.” “Beyond the birds” means “high up in the sky.” It is possible that this refers to Yangshan Huiji 仰山慧寂 (807–883), who was very influential in the western Jiangnan region where Qiji grew up and whose life overlapped with Qiji’s by about 20 years.

\textsuperscript{100} On the latter, see trans. Paramàrtha 真諦 (499–569), trans., \textit{Awakening of Mahâyâna Faith 大乘起信論}, in \textit{T} no. 1066, vol. 32, p. 576a.

\textsuperscript{101} Shige huikao, pp. 407–14.
ter" who is part of an orthodox lineage (line 2). Qiji positions himself as one who, having gone through both gates, finds himself at the same realm on the other side, where he sits in absorption, no longer with any teacher, following his thoughts as they go by (line 4). That is, poetry and meditation are two ways in to the same thing – stillness. Both gates lead to heightened mental concentration.  

Qiji expands on this idea of mental concentration in another poem to Zheng Gu. Here he draws on the discourse of kuyin to invert the normal way it conceives of absorption. Instead of being a means to achieve two different ends (religious insight and poetic creation), absorption becomes an end in itself, something attainable through either literary or religious training.

**Sent to Director Zheng Gu 寄鄭谷郎中**

Qiji 齊己

詩心何以傳 How could your poetry mind be passed on?
所證自同禪 You’ve proven that it’s the same as meditation.
覓句如探虎 Seeking a couplet is like searching for a tiger;
神清太古在 Your spirit is pure, antiquity resides therein;
字好雅風全 Your words lovely, filled with the Elegantiae and Airs.
曾沐星郎許 You were once praised as a purified starry gentleman,

8 終慚是斐然 But were embarrassed that this was too ostentatious.

The language of Buddhist practice pervades these lines, even as it draws on classical discourse. Zheng Gu’s poetry is imbued with “antiquity 太古” and the moral purity of the *Book of Odes* (lines 5–6). But Zheng Gu also has a “poetry mind 詩心” that can be “passed on 傳” to his followers, just like the mind of a Chan patriarch (line 1). This implies not only a sense of lineage, but also a sense that poetry is itself a practice implying a certain view of reality, like meditation, that leads to higher insights. One can cultivate one’s inherent poetry mind, just as one can cultivate one’s Buddha mind 佛心. It is on this basis that Qiji gives Zheng Gu the highest possible compliment he can think of:

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102 For more on the Buddhist origins of the term “gate” in this sense and its influence on late-medieval poetic theory, see Zhang, *Chan yu shixue*, pp. 11–15; and Wang, *Wan Tang Wu-dai shiseng qunti yanjiu*, pp. 363–64.


104 “Starry gentleman” is a nickname for those who held high office.
he has proven the deep homology between poetry and meditation (line 2). Their fundamental root is not only theoretical, but something that Qiji has witnessed in the work of Zheng Gu. He has shown that someone with a deeply cultivated poetry-mind can reach the same insights as one who has cultivated the Buddha-mind. As in the quatrain written to Zheng Gu, Qiji again asserts that poetry and meditation are two “gates” to the same goal.

The second couplet then follows logically from the first. It explains how it is possible that poetry and meditation ascertain the same thing. The enormous effort a poet like Zheng Gu must make to achieve a perfectly wrought couplet is precisely the same effort needed to reach insight through religious practice. Qiji clearly thought it a good couplet, as he included it in his own poetics treatise to illustrate “Hardship” 艱難, one of poetry’s “Twenty Models 二十式.” The third line, moreover, draws on one of the theoretical precursors to kuyin, a passage from Jiaoran’s Models of Poetry (Shishi 詩式):

It is also said: “Hard (ku) thought is not necessary. When one thinks hard, he loses the substance of spontaneity.” This too is wrong. If one won’t enter a tiger’s lair, how can one catch a tiger? When obtaining the poem-world, striking couplets only begin to reveal themselves when one goes to the utmost difficulty, the utmost danger. After composing a piece, observe its appearance: if it seems easy, attained without thought, this is the work of a superior hand. 

Lines that appear effortless or spontaneous are never what they seem. That is the illusion of a master poet. As Borges once said, “Perfect things in poetry do not seem strange; they seem inevitable.” Underlying this breezy surface is the solid foundation of hard work. Poetry, like meditation, requires that one braves the rocky terrain of the human mind. Only through years of training, of concentration, of labor, can one attain the sort of perceptual awareness that is the fruit of both poetic and religious practice.

105 Shige huikao, p. 405.
106 Jiaoran 皎然, “Obtaining the Poem-World” 取境, in Li Zhuangying 李壯鷹, annot., Shishi jiaozhu 詩式校注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2003) 1, pp. 39–41. This passage also made a deep impression on Guanxiu, who alluded to it when he praised a fellow poet-monk with the line, “You once ran into a tiger while seeking lines 見君曾衝虎” (Hu, Guanxiu geshi 13, pp. 615–17; QTS 831, p. 9373).
Qiji elaborated this equation between poetry and meditation not only in poems written to Zheng Gu. If that were the case, one may think that he is simply adopting the terms of his interlocutor for the sake of instruction, a form of *upaya*. Instead, even in poems describing his own meditation practice, he makes the same claim:

*Sitting in Stillness* 靜坐

Qiji 齊己

坐臥與行住 Sitting, lying, walking, and standing
入禪還出吟 I enter meditation, still intoning.
也應長日月 Over long days and months, this will
4 消得個身心 Wear down my body and mind.
默論相如少 Few things resemble silent communication;109
黃梅付囑深 Huangmei’s address was profound.110
門前古松徑 On the path of old pines before my gate,
8 習起步清陰 Sometimes I get up to walk in the cool shade.

The boldest claim here is the opening: poetry and meditation may be performed simultaneously. That is, the “non-cultivation” advocated in several late-medieval Buddhist communities is limited not only to the four postures of sitting, lying, walking, and standing, but extends even to the composition of poetry itself. Qiji then proceeds using the same logic as the previous poem, drawing on the rhetoric of *kuyin*. The activity he is describing—whether that is taken to be meditation, poetry composition, or a hybrid of the two—takes a physical toll on his body.

The third couplet then draws on the technical language of late-medieval Buddhism to emphasize the complementarity of language and


110 “Huangmei”: the alternative name for Hongren 弘忍 (601–674), based on one of his places of residence, Mt. Huangmei 黃眉山. He is the putative Fifth Patriarch of Chan. His “address” refers to his teachings, most likely his advocacy of silent meditation as seen in the *Treatise on the Essentials of Cultivating the Mind* 修心要論 attributed to him [McRae, *The Northern School*, p. 127] and in his biography in the *Record of the Dharma Transmission of the True Lineage* 法正宗記, comp. Qisong 謹嵩 (1007–1072), *T* no. 2078, vol. 51, p. 746c.
silence. In line 5, the rare teachings of a master are transferred to a disciple without using words — thus using silence to convey something normally understood through language. In line 6, the patriarch Hongren (here called Huangmei) wrote treatises on quiet meditation — thus using language to convey something normally understood through silence. The poem then concludes with the speaker rising from his meditation to stroll through a path of old pines and, presumably, write a poem about them. That is, taking his own equation of meditation and poetry writing seriously, the speaker goes out to put it into practice.

Elsewhere, Qiji uses the dialectical tension of parallelism to assert a fundamental identity between poetic and meditative practice, drawing again on the language of hardship.

Meeting a Poet-Monk 逢詩僧

Qiji 齊己

禪玄無可並

Meditation’s mysteries — they cannot be equaled, 112

詩妙有何評

Poetry’s marvels — how can they be critiqued?

五七字中苦

You suffer in five or seven characters,

4百千年後清

Then are purified after hundreds or thousands of years.

難求方至理

Though hard to find, you arrive at principle,

不朽始為名

When you “do not wither,” you’ll make a name. 113

珍重重相見

We cherish and value seeing each other often,

8忘機話此情

Forgetting plans and talking of these things. 114

In each of the first three couplets, Qiji focuses on meditation in the first line and poetry in the second. The opening presents us with a paradox: things that cannot be “equaled” or “critiqued” are beyond human comprehension, yet they are precisely the poet-monk’s area of


112 Some editions give shi 示 (“shown”) for bing 并 (“equaled”). I follow Wang Xiulin and Pan Dingwu in reading this “bing,” based on a majority of authoritative editions.

113 “Do not wither” is a circumlocution for “establishing oneself through words 立言.” See Zuozhuan 左傳, in Chongkan Songben Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji 重刊宋本十三經注疏校勘記 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1965), Duke Xiang, year 20: “The most exalted is to establish oneself through virtue; then, it is to establish oneself through deeds; then it is to establish oneself through words; not abandoning [the task] even after a long while: this is called ‘not withering’ 大上有立德,其次有立功,其次有立言,雖久不廢,此謂之不朽.”

114 “These things” is an idiomatic translation of 此情, which more literally means “the circumstances we are in and the inner mental and emotional responses to them.” I take cizheng to refer to all subjective and objective experience shared by Qiji and his interlocutor, for which the first six lines of the poem are metonymy.
expertise. The word used at the end of line 1 for “equaled 並” more literally means “place side by side, in parallel with,” so Qiji is saying that nothing can be put in parallel with the fruits of meditation. And yet he spends the rest of the poem doing just that: he matches poetry and meditation in parallel couplets. Thus the paradox at the heart of the poem: Qiji does what he claims cannot be done.115

The middle couplets present the path that the poet-monk must tread in similar terms. The goals, given in lines 5–6, are different: in poetry, one seeks to establish a reputation; in meditation, one strives for ultimate truth. Yet both promise a kind of transcendence beyond normal human life. A poet’s words live on after death, and insight into Buddhist reality leads to the attainment of nirvana. Both require long journeys of intense striving (lines 3–4), be it in the crafting of pentametric and heptametric lines or the countless rebirths on the bodhisattva path. Qiji stresses their similarity through a playful switch of words. “Suffering 苦” (line 3) can be understood as a technical Buddhist term (dukhka) for the misery of life in saṃsāra, the First Noble Truth, but here it is used to describe poetic practice, drawing on the rhetoric of kuyin. “Purified 清” (line 4), on the other hand, is frequently used to describe austere, dignified descriptions of landscapes in poetry, but here it is used to describe the fruits of Buddhist—not poetic—practice. In this way, Qiji writes an underlying unity of literary and meditative practices into his poem, even as he denies its possibility in the first two lines. This is what poet-monks do, according to Qiji: live in the tension between the two truths of mundane and ultimate reality, use words to point to practice, practice to broach transcendent principle. The poet-monk whom he meets understands this as well, and the two become so absorbed in the conversation that they lose track of their plans (line 8).

This idea of the poet-monk as the one who understands and performs the underlying unity between poetry and meditation reaches its apex in a poem about Qiji, the one which began this article. The audacious opening unfolds into an embodiment of its claim.

Reading the Venerable Qiji’s Collection 譽齊己上人集116

Qichan 栖蟾

詩為儒者禪 [Your] poems are meditation for Confucians,
此格的惟仙 Their form is truly transcendent.

115 If we follow the earliest edition, Tangseng hongxiu ji (see fn. 1, above), in reading shi, not bing, in line 1, we come out with essentially the same paradox: poetry is used to “show” the same marvels as meditation, despite the first line’s claim.

The opening line states that poetry and meditation are fully identical at their roots: the only difference is that one is primarily the task of a Confucian scholar, the other the task of a Buddhist monk. And a poet-monk is someone who translates one into the other. The practices of meditation and of writing poetry are basically the same, even if their outward manifestations are different. Both poetry and meditation involve a heightened sense of perception, a knack for ordering thoughts and objects, countless hours of hard striving toward a suddenly realized goal, and a final achievement of supramundane insight. This sense of identity is reinforced by lines 3–4, which praise Qiji’s work as being modern epigones of the most ancient, most orthodox 古雅 poetry. The Hymns of Zhou are the oldest layer of the Book of Odes, and the zither of Shun is the instrument that the most righteous sage-king created to accompany his singing of the southern airs. Qiji’s work is poetry personified.

Furthermore, the very structure of the poem demonstrates the “perceptual awareness 境意” (a concept discussed, above, toward the end of the section “The Still Poet”) that is cultivated in meditation, the powers of observation for which Sun Guangxian praised Guanxiu in the preface to Qiji’s works. It proceeds through the six sense-fields (Ch. liujing 六境; Skt. sad vişayāḥ) systematically. The six fields are sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought. After line 1 states the process of meditation, line 2 begins with shape or form 色 (the field of sight), focusing on the poem’s “structure” or “grid 格.” Lines 3–4 attend to hearing 声, comparing Qiji’s works to exemplary classics of music. Line 5 proceeds to touch 触, as some of Qiji’s best lines are said to have the coldness of ice, while still linking back to the sound emphasized in the previous couplet. Line 6 stresses smell 香 and taste 味, alluding to a poem which seems to exude the sweet smell and taste of the plums it describes: we must remember that “fragrant 香” was applied as often to delicious food

117 Lines 5 and 6 refer to Qiji’s two most famous poems, “Listening to a Wellspring” 聽泉 and “Early Plums” 早梅. They have received much critical attention over the centuries and were called “the most pre-eminent poems on objects” 詠物之矯矯 (Zhou Ting 周珽, Tanshi xuanmai huitong pinglin 唐詩選脈會通評林, quoted in Chen Bohai 陳伯海, ed., Tanshi hui- ping 唐詩匯評 [Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995] vol. 3, p. 3120).
as it was to pleasing fragrances. Line 7 concludes with thought 法, the sensory field which integrates the other five, corresponding to the mind. Together, these six senses make up the totality of human experience. In this way, the poem mirrors some of the practices described in earlier meditation manuals translated from Indic languages, those which formed the basis for later practices.\(^{118}\) The Śūramgama sūtra (which the pioneering poet-monk Guanxiu referred to as the “marrow of meditation 禪髓”) proceeds through the six sense-faculties in the same way.\(^{119}\) As Qichan methodically proceeds in his own poem through all six senses in the course of meditation, he enacts the claim of line 1, that “poetry is meditation for Confucians.”

Qiji in these works brings to its fullest expression the assertion of a deep homology of religious and poetic practice. If one takes for granted the interfusion of ultimate and mundane reality, if one believes that enlightenment is the realization of this interfusion, and if one assumes that one may therefore practice meditation in the midst of any other activity, then Qiji’s assertion makes perfect sense. It is a small step to go from saying, “wearing clothes, eating food, talking and responding, making use of the six senses – all these activities are dharma-nature 着衣喫飯, 言談祗對, 六根運用, 一切施為, 盡是法性,” to saying that poetry may serve a soteriological purpose.\(^{120}\) Qiji is merely bringing well-established practices into his own favored realm of activity – the writing of poetry. But this is not just a casual act of mindfulness; it is an act of asceticism. Both poetry and meditation require an intense concentration which may lead to physical suffering, but the fruit of both is a profound, salvific insight into the very nature of reality. From this

\(^{118}\) The Dharmatara-dhyāna sūtra 憲童多羅禪經, for example, proceeds through the six senses, likening each to an animal which must be leashed (\(Tn.\) no. 618, vol. 15, p. 322c, trans. Buddhabhodra 佛陀跋陀羅 at Mt. Lu in early-5th c.). The Candraprabha-samādhi sūtra 月光三昧經 takes a different approach, systematically deconstructing the six organs 根, their corresponding senses 情, and consciousness 識 of them for 105 lines (\(Tn.\) no. 641, vol. 15, pp. 624c–25c, trans. Xiangong 先公 mid-5th c.). Interestingly, the order of the senses given by this text (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought) is very close to that presented by Qichan in the poem (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, and thought).

\(^{119}\) \(Tn.\) no. 945, vol. 19 pp. 114c–15c, trans. attributed to Pramiti 普刺蜜帝 in 705. It is now commonly accepted that the Śūramgama sūtra was produced in 8th-c. China (see Benn, “Another Look at the Pseudo-Śūramgama sūtra”). Although this text only became widely influential on literati culture in the Northern Song, it was in fact explicitly recommended to the literatus Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (836–910) by Guanxiu, for which see “Matching ‘Lying at Ease,’ Shown to Me by Minister Wei” 和韋相公見示閑臥 (Hu, Guanxiu geshi 2, p. 12, pp. 606–11; QTS 831, pp. 9372–73).

\(^{120}\) These words are attributed to Mazu Daoyi in 1036; see Li Zunxu 李遵勗, comp., Tiansheng guangdenglu 天聖廣燈錄, in Nishi, Shinsan dai Nihon zoku zōkyō no. 1553, vol. 78, p. 4494; trans. Jia, The Hongzhou School, p. 76.
how poetry became meditation

perspective, the very term “religious poetry” is redundant, for religion and poetry are different paths to the same goal.

CONCLUSION

The homology between meditation and poetry came to its fullest expression in the work of a tenth-century poet-monk (Qiji) after it had been hinted at for much of the ninth century. The insight that these two practices are the same is the culmination of multiple arcs in the history of Chinese poetics. On the one hand, the classical tradition, from Lu Ji’s “Fu on Literature” on down, stressed the importance of the poet’s concentration and mental focus in the process of composition. On the other hand, the kuyin aesthetic, especially as it came to represent an ideal of pure poetry with Jia Dao, emphasized the importance of effort and intense devotion to the detail of couplet craftsmanship. When these two strands came together in the late-ninth century, and poet-monks who had spent much of their lives devoted to meditation practices encountered them, the match was obvious. Poetry and meditation became two gates which led to a greater perceptual awareness. And precisely this, the awareness of phenomena and their deeper significance as images, is the trigger which may lead one to a sudden insight into the emptiness of all things, otherwise known as enlightenment.

This is an understanding of poetry radically different from that usually stated by scholars (and poets) of Tang China. To Qiji and other poet-monks, poetry is a verbal art, certainly, as well as a linguistic exercise – a social practice, an expression of one’s mind, and all the other functions we normally attribute to poetry. But it is not only that. It is also a religiously significant practice. Moreover, Qiji avoids putting poetry and religion in a hierarchical relationship, in which one is subordinate to the other. While religious goals are seen as primary, both meditation and writing are seen as legitimate ways – gates – to that goal. One may even suppose that, since poets cultivate their practice without knowledge of their religious goals, they may be considered better Buddhists. A poet cannot become attached to the idea of enlightenment if he is unaware that he is pursuing it. Poetry is meditation, and meditation poetry.

This idea of poetry’s and meditation’s fundamental unity would not last. The poet-monks who championed this claim – and had the most at stake in it – soon fell out of favor. The “nine monks” (jiuseng 九僧) of the late-tenth century, though well known in their day, were not as stylistically bold as Guanxiu or Qiji. Literary tastes of the early-elev-
enth century shifted away from kuyin. Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), Su Shi (1037–1101), and other poetic innovators of the Northern Song period saw kuyin—which they referred to as the “Late Tang style” (“Wan Tang ti 晚唐體”)—as nothing more than frivolity. They also dismissed the ex-monk Jia Dao and his poet-monk followers for the religious flavor of their verse, saying that it had an “air of vegetables and bamboo shoots 蔬筍氣,” even though some of these later critics used Buddhist terminology in their own discussions of poetry.

On the Buddhist side, the institutionalization of Chan beginning in the middle of the tenth century meant more codified rules, formal structures, and competing schools. With this came a deeper suspicion of belles-lettres, even as more monks wrote and preached on didactic verse (which their students wrote down in the rising genre of “recorded sayings,” or yulu 言錄). Several Buddhist sources single out Guanxiu and Qiji in particular for criticism, implying that their pursuit of poetic excellence lured them away from a true understanding of the Dharma. The poet-monks were condemned by poets and monks alike. In the process, their equation of poetry and meditation devolved first into metaphor, then into cliché. Despite the popularity of Chan Buddhism among Song literati and the use of verse by Chan monks, poetry and meditation operated in separate spheres. It is not even clear that Juefan Huihong (1071–1128) and others who used the phrase “lettered Chan 文字禪” sought the fundamental unity of poetry and meditation.


122 See, e.g., Chen Shidao’s 陳師道 (1053–1102) “Epistle on the Occasion of Seeing off Canliao 陳師道, in Houshan ji 後山集 [SKQS edn.].


124 According to Zhou Yukai, the poetry–Chan analogy was used in four ways during the Song: 1. “using Chan to classify poetry 以禪品詩”; 2. “using Chan to produce poetry 以禪擬詩”; 3. “using Chan to deliberate on poetry 以禪參詩”; and 4. “using Chan to discourse on poetry 以禪論詩” (Zhou, Zhongguo chanzong yu shige 中國禪宗與詩歌, pp. 270–96).
and Buddhist practice. The idea that poetic practice could serve as a form of Buddhist practice would not be find clear articulation again until Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634–1711), under very different circumstances, declared that “poetry and Chan are identical 詩禪一致.” Even there, Wang justified his statement in a very different manner from the poet-monks, describing poetic enlightenment in terms of individual intuition and spontaneity. He did not describe it as primarily the result of hard work and stillness.

Nevertheless, Qiji’s articulation of the identity between poetry and meditation is the beginning of this tradition: in his works we find the first clear statements about poetry and Buddhism as two gates. For that, Qiji should be recognized as a pioneer in the history of Chinese poetics. But, just as important, his view amounted to a culmination. Building on other poet-monks such as Guanxiu and Jiaoran, he wove together several threads from the discourses of poetry and Buddhism – Lu Ji’s spirit journey, Jia Dao’s kuyin, and Hongzhou monks’ non-meditation as meditation – to create a new idea of Buddhist poetry. The equation of poetry with meditation did not appear out of nowhere, but emerged out of a poet-monk tradition that flourished beginning in the late-ninth century. Literary, religious, social, and political developments aligned to create the right conditions. Under these peculiar circumstances, Qiji claimed that poetry could serve as meditation not only for Confucians, but even for Buddhist monks.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

QTS Quan Tang shi 全唐詩
Shige huikao 张伯偉, Quan Tang Wudai shige huikao 全唐五代詩格彙考

127 Kaji, Zōhō Chūgoku Bukkyō bungaku kenkyū, pp. 261–78; Protass, “Buddhist Monks and Chinese Poetry,” p. 58. For more on Wang Shizhen’s poetics, see Lynn, “Orthodoxy and Enlightenment.”