

## Buddhist Poet-Priests of the T'ang

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THE THREE-HUNDRED some poems attributed to the T'ang recluse Han-shan or the Master of Cold Mountain, many of them on Buddhist themes, have attracted considerable attention in the west in recent years, particularly through the English translations of Arthur Waley, Gary Snyder, and myself.<sup>1</sup> The unusual appeal of these poems naturally leads one to ask if there are other poets of the T'ang who treat Buddhist life and thought with similar effectiveness. The present paper is an attempt to answer that question, to say something about the relationship between religious practice and poetry-writing in T'ang Buddhist circles, and to present translations of some poems by the most important Buddhist poet-priests of the period. Except for the special case of Chia Tao, a one-time Ch'an monk, I will not here be dealing with secular poets such as Wang Wei, Liu Tsung-yüan, or Po Chü-i who are often described as "Buddhist poets" because they were followers of the religion and because their poems frequently reflect Buddhist ideas and practices.

It has so far proved impossible to date the Han-shan poems with any certainty or to determine if they are the work of a single individual or a number of persons writing over a period of years, and one therefore cannot with assurance assign the poems to any particular era of T'ang literature. The T'ang works that most closely resemble the Han-shan poems in content and style are the four-hundred some poems attributed to a figure known as Wang Fan-chih or Wang the Pure-Willed,

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of English translations of Han-shan and the extraordinary popularity of the Han-shan poems in the west, see Paul Kahn's essay, *Han-shan in English* (Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pine Press, 1989). Since the publication of this essay, yet another English translation of the Han-shan poems has appeared, Robert G. Henricks, *The Poetry of Han-shan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

whose dates are tentatively given as around 590 to 660.<sup>2</sup> Most of these poems are known only through manuscript copies recovered in the present century from the Tun-huang caves of western China. The poems, couched in a vigorous colloquial idiom, are on the whole strongly didactic or satirical in tone, ridiculing the follies of ordinary men and women and urging them to heed the message of Buddhism. But although they provide important material for the study of popular customs and religious beliefs and the spoken language of the T'ang, they are largely lacking in the warm personal approach or the deep appreciation of natural beauty and the eremitic life that give interest to so many of the Han-shan poems.

The remainder of the poets I will be discussing are known through the works preserved in the *Ch'üan T'ang shih* or Complete T'ang Poetry, the vast compendium of T'ang poetry compiled on imperial order in 1705-07, which draws on all the anthologies and collections of poetic works extant and known at that time. The *Ch'üan T'ang shih*, hereafter referred to as *CTS*, sets aside a special section for works of poets who were members of the Buddhist clergy or who, like Han-shan, espoused Buddhist beliefs, men customarily referred to by the term *shih-seng* or poet-priests.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese scholar Ichihara Kōkichi calculates that there are 115 Buddhist poet-priests represented in this section of the *CTS*, with a total of 2,913 poems.<sup>4</sup>

The *CTS* section on Buddhist poetry begins with two chapters, 806 and 807, devoted to the works of Han-shan and his two associates, Shih-te and Feng-kan, all of whose dates are unknown. It then records the works of poet-priests who lived from late Sui and early T'ang times to the end of the T'ang, with brief biographical notes preceding the

<sup>2</sup> See the entry by Charles Hartman in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), which contains information on texts and critical studies. The tentative dates are taken from *Sunflower Splendor*, Wu-chi Liu & Irving Lo, eds., (N.Y.: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1975), p. 547.

<sup>3</sup> The term *shih-seng* seems to have come into use around the 8th century, but is often used retroactively to refer to Buddhist writers of the early T'ang as well. It is also used by some writers to describe Han-shan, though we cannot tell whether the author of the Han-shan poems was a member of the Buddhist Order or not.

<sup>4</sup> Ichihara Kōkichi, "Poet-Priests in the Yangtse Delta in the Middle T'ang" in Japanese, (*Tōhō Gakuhō*, Kyoto 28 1958), pp. 219-248.

works of each poet. Almost nothing is known of many of the poets, and many are represented by no more than a handful of poems or a single poem. From the eighth century on, when it is clear that poetry-writing gained considerable vogue among members of the Buddhist clergy, the number of poets and of poems by individual writers increases greatly, with several of the later T'ang poet-priests being represented by works running into the hundreds.

Even a cursory glance will show that these poems by the T'ang poet-priests are on the whole quite different in content and outlook from those in the Han-shan collection. None of the Han-shan poems, for example, have titles, and we thus know nothing about the genesis of the poems or the audience to which they are addressed; presumably they are addressed to humankind as a whole. By contrast, almost all the poems by the poet-priests have titles, and these indicate that the great majority were prompted by some event or social occasion in the life of the writer. Many are poems of farewell, composed when seeing off a fellow monk or layman friend, or when setting out on a journey of one's own. Others were written in reply to a poem received from a friend, or to express thanks for a gift or favor. Still others describe journeys, sketch some article of daily use or natural object in the writer's immediate surroundings, lament the death of a friend, or convey the poet's thoughts as he recalls absent companions or reads over the works of a well-known writer.

From this we may see that the poet-priests are for the most part using poetry in the same ways as did secular writers of the time, and their works, except for scattered references to specifically Buddhist settings or practices or the few works that are patently doctrinal in nature, are virtually indistinguishable from the secular poetry of the period.

The Han-shan and Wang Fan-chih collections contain some works cast in *yüeh-fu* or folk song style, in which the writer adopts a persona from the popular tradition—a hard-pressed farmer, a peasant woman weaving, a soldier assigned to border duty—in order to comment upon the social and political situation of the time. Poems of a similar nature are found among the works of some of the poet-priests, and because such poems bear titles conventionally associated with the *yüeh-fu*, they can be identified at a glance.

Since most of the poet-priests whose works are extant lived in late T'ang times, when the nation was racked by widespread banditry and

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

unrest and the dynasty was verging on final collapse (an event that occurred in 907), it may well be that such poems were written in order to voice criticisms of the government and express sincere concern for the sufferings of the common people. But, though these *yüeh-fu* may in fact contain covert references to contemporary events or personages, they appear, to my eye at least, to be wholly conventional in nature. One should keep in mind that in many eras of Chinese history, such as the late Six Dynasties, Sui, and early T'ang, for example, countless *yüeh-fu* poems of this type were written simply as a form of literary exercise. It is not always possible to say, therefore, to which category, literary exercise or sincere social protest, the *yüeh-fu* of the T'ang poet-priests belong, though one should perhaps give their authors the benefit of the doubt and read their compositions as belonging to the latter.<sup>5</sup>

So far as can be determined, all the major T'ang poet-priests were followers of Ch'an or Zen teachings and practice. Though the Chinese Buddhist world as a whole was not characterized by strict sectarian divisions, it appears that by this time the older schools of Buddhism were in definite decline, and that only the Ch'an teachings continued to thrive and attract widespread attention. It is clear from the poems themselves that not only the poet-priests but many of the secular officials with whom they associated were deeply involved in Ch'an study and practice.

Surveying Chinese Buddhist poetry as a whole, the Japanese scholar Kaji Tetsujō, in his *Chūgoku bukkyō bungaku kenkyū* (Kyoto: Dōbōsha, 1979), pp. 59-60, analyzes the themes of Buddhist poetry into the following eight categories:

1. Doctrine (causation, nature of the emotions, etc.)
2. Enlightenment (proof of, outlook afforded by, etc.)
3. Serenity (absence of desire, contentment in poverty, compassion)

<sup>5</sup> A Chinese scholar writing recently, Hsü T'ing-yün, in an article entitled *T'ang Wu-tai shih-seng chi ch'i shih-ko* in *T'ang-tai wen-hsüeh yen-chiu*, vol. 1 (Shan-hsi Jen-min Ch'u-pan-she, 1988), pp. 176-193, cites such poems as evidence that the poet-priests were deeply troubled by the social injustices of the time and wrote their poems in a spirit of outrage and protest. Of course, for scholars under the present regime in China, professing to discern social significance in a work of literature is a way of imbuing it with worth and standing it might otherwise not be accorded.

4. Religious life (withdrawal, austerities, observance of precepts)
5. Quietude (removal from worldly affairs, secluded mountain life)
6. Expressions of Faith (ceremonies, making of images, sutra copying, repentance, meditation practices)
7. Relations with Fellow Buddhists (with monks or secular poets)
8. Pastimes (visits to religious sites, calligraphy, painting, poetry exchanges)

Obviously many of these categories overlap, and a single poem may often encompass several different themes.

In the works of the T'ang poet-priests I will be considering, we may find representatives of all eight types of themes. But as I have stressed earlier, works of an openly doctrinal nature, which expound religious concepts or employ technical Buddhist terminology, are extremely rare. The vast majority of the poems would belong largely or wholly to the latter six categories of the list, with many representing a combination of several themes.

This is not to say, of course, that religious concepts do not underlie the surface meaning of some of the poems. Let us look for a moment at a poem entitled "Searching for Spring" by an anonymous Buddhist nun of the T'ang which is often cited in discussions of T'ang Buddhist poetry. It reads:

A whole day I looked for spring, no spring in sight,  
straw sandals tramping everywhere through mountaintop  
cloud.

Back home, I laughingly picked some plum blossoms, smelled  
them:  
spring in this very branch, all of it right here!<sup>6</sup>

The poem, as has long been recognized, is a simple allegory: the wearisome journey over mountains and the smelling of the plum blossoms are purely symbolic images, standing for the futility of searching for enlightenment outside oneself, and for the Buddha nature inherent within.

No such clear-cut allegory is to be found, however, in the works of the poet-priests I am discussing here, at least as I read them. The im-

<sup>6</sup> The poem is recorded in a Sung collection of remarks on poetry, the *Ho-lin yu-lü*, ch. 6.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

ages in their poems function first of all as actual objects in the world of the poem. Naturally, since they have entered the poem not haphazardly but through the conscious choice of the poet, they are most likely intended also to add some symbolic resonance to the poem or to suggest ideas or emotions present in the poet's mind as he composes. In the end it is probably up to the reader to decide what proportion of any particular images seems "real" and what proportion "symbolic."

In poems addressed by the poet-priests to government officials or other secular associates, the religious element, either in thought or imagery, is seldom of great importance. Such poems are usually intended merely to comment on some change or advancement in the person's official career, to congratulate a young man who has passed the civil service examinations or console one who has failed. It is in poems addressed to fellow clergymen—usually Buddhist priests but sometimes Taoist priests or recluses of unknown affiliation—that overtly religious diction and imagery become prominent. Many such poems describe in laudatory terms the austere surroundings and pure mode of living that characterize the person to whom the poem is addressed, while others, poems of parting, conjure up the sights the recipient will encounter on his journey to famous religious spots. Since most of the temples where the priests resided or visited were situated in mountain areas, the scenery customarily depicted is that of remote forests and rocky heights, streams and fountains, the type of landscape evoked so memorably in the more personal poems of Han-shan.

Because of their similarity of theme, certain images of Buddhist life and practice recur again and again in such poems: temples (*ssu*) and shrines (*k'an*), sutras (*ching*) and incense (*hsiang*), temple bells (*chung*) and chiming stones (*ch'ing*), water bottles (*p'ing*) and pewter-ringed walking staffs (*hsi*), the last two items being indispensable parts of the paraphernalia carried by monks on their pilgrimages around the empire. There are frequent allusions to meditation (*ch'an* or *an-ch'an*) and to sutra reading or recitation, or to the patriarchs of the Ch'an sect or other venerable figures of the Chinese Buddhist tradition such as the Six Dynasties monks Chih-tun and Hui-yüan. But aside from passing references to the concept of emptiness (*k'ung*) or nondualism, there is little overt allusion to Buddhist beliefs or display of doctrinal terminology. Since these are poems written by monks for monks, their authors understandably refrain from the kind of open sermonizing

that characterizes many of the Wang Fan-chih and Han-shan poems, which were presumably directed to a lay audience.<sup>7</sup>

For the general reader, the most interesting works of these T'ang poet-priests are probably not the socially-inspired poems described above, but the rarer items in which the writer depicts his own daily activities or reflects on the deeper meaning of life, often under suggestive titles such as "Random Thoughts," "Speaking My Mind," or "Self-Consolation." It is poems of this type, often openly philosophical in nature, that come closest to giving expression to a specifically Buddhist outlook or creed. Some are somber meditations on the brevity of life, the futility of the scramble for fame and material gain, or the impermanence of all things. But more often the writer dwells on his own indifference to life's vagaries, his determination to look upon all with equanimity. There is little of the impassioned loneliness or melancholy that we find on occasion in the Han-shan poems, or indeed of any expression of intense emotion at all. Already in these works the calm, cool air of emotional detachment that becomes so marked in later Chinese and Japanese Ch'an and Zen poetry is beginning to take shape. From the point of view of the Buddhist doctrine of nonduality, of course, such an attitude of aloofness is understandable, perhaps even commendable, but from a literary standpoint it almost invariably limits the interest and effectiveness of the poetry.

Coupled with this note of detachment there is sometimes a suggestion that the writer inhabits a realm far removed from that of ordinary human beings, one which they could not even begin to comprehend.<sup>8</sup> Personally I find this tone of moral and spiritual elitism somewhat repellent, particularly in works by writers who are supposed to be

<sup>7</sup> In this respect they also form an interesting contrast with the poems written to members of the Buddhist clergy by Wang Wei, a renowned poet and government official who was a pious Buddhist. Wang Wei was unquestionably sincere in his religious beliefs, but in such poems he seems so intent upon displaying his command of doctrinal terminology and demonstrating that he is "in the know" that the effect is almost one of insincerity.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the 16th in the series of 24 poems by Kuan-hsiu (832-912) entitled "Living in the Mountains," (CTS 837), which ends:

Probably no one understands my intentions,  
not worldly, not saintly, an awakening all my own.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

imbued with the ideal of Buddhist compassion. But we must remember that it is very old in Chinese literature, especially in literature associated with the eremitic tradition, and indeed far predates the introduction of Buddhism to China, originating ultimately in the works of the exiled poet-statesman Ch'ü Yüan of the third century BCE.

Turning now to individual poets, we note that there are three whose works are extensive enough to give us some idea of their respective lives and personalities. These are Chiao-jan (730-799),<sup>9</sup> whose seven *chüan* of poetry occupy chapters 815 through 821 of the *CTS*; and two Late T'ang poets, Kuan-hsiu (832-912), whose works total twelve *chüan* (*CTS* 826 through 837), and Ch'i-chi (861-940?), with ten *chüan* (*CTS* 838-847). All three have brief entries in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* which may be consulted for biographical date and information on texts and critical studies.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these three major poets, there are several lesser figures whose works run to one *chüan* or more in the *CTS*. These include Wu-k'o of the Middle T'ang, a cousin of the poet Chia Tao (*CTS* 813-814), another Middle T'ang writer Kuang-hsüan (*CTS* 822), and the Late T'ang writers Ch'ing-chiang (*CTS* 812) and Tzu-lan (*CTS* 824). One other important poet of the period, Chia Tao (779-843), might well be included in the list, and in fact is represented in my selected translations. Though Chia Tao is customarily treated as a secular writer, he spent much of his early life as a Ch'an monk. Only later, around 810, when he came under the influence of Han Yü, did he leave the Buddhist Order in hopes of entering government service. Many of Chia Tao's poems are addressed to members of the clergy or are on Buddhist themes, and in one anthology of T'ang poet-priests, the *T'ang-seng hung-hsiu chi* compiled by Li Kung of the Sung dynasty, a number of his works are in fact included under his religious name Wu-pen.

The works of all these various poets strike me as very similar in form and content and I will therefore not attempt to distinguish individual characteristics. In terms of form, their poetry is indistinguishable from

<sup>9</sup> Dates for these poets are taken from the chronology in Ogawa Tamaki, ed., *Tōdai no shijin: sono denki* (Tokyo: Daishūkan shoten. 1975), pp. 682-713.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to being included in *CTS*, the works of these three have been handed down separately, in the *Shu-shan chi* of Chiao-jan, the *Ch'an-yüeh chi* of Kuan-hsiu, and the *Pai-lien chi* of Ch'i-chi.

that of their contemporaries in secular life. Since, as already mentioned, some of them wrote in *yüeh-fu* style, they employ the irregular meters typical of some kinds of *yüeh-fu* or song style poems. Some wrote works in 4-character form, usually highly formal pieces couched in archaic language and extolling the ruler. The great majority of their works, however, employ a 5-character or 7-character line, as does T'ang *shih* poetry as a whole. Some of these are in *ku-shih* or old style form, which does not observe the rules of tonal parallelism and is not limited in number of lines. But most are in the *chin-t'i* or modern style forms, which do observe those rules, either the 8-line *lü-shih* or regulated verse form, or the 4-line *chüeh-chü* form. As is true of late T'ang poetry in general, the single most popular form is the 5-character regulated verse, and it is in this form that most of the examples translated below are cast.

As already mentioned, it is obvious from their poems that the poet-priests of the Middle and Late T'ang periods had extensive relations with the secular figures of the time, mainly government officials, and that they enjoyed moral and material support from these officials. Such contacts were no doubt made easier by the fact that the priests were able to engage in the kind of exchanges of poetry that characterized upper class social relations in the T'ang secular world. A poem by the poet-priest Wu-k'o (CTS 813), for example, depicts a typical gathering of religious and secular personages. Entitled "On a Winter Evening We Congregate at the Home of Imperial Censor Yao to Send Off Reverend Yüan-hsü on His Return to the Southern Mountains," it describes how "Ch'an guests" and "poetry masters" have come together to assign topics for poems and exchange critical comments as they compose their farewell verses for the monk returning to the Southern Mountains south of Ch'ang-an.

In order to facilitate such social relations, the priests no doubt worked to perfect their poetic skills, and to that end cultivated the friendship and guidance of literary figures of the time. Chiao-jan's association with the poet-official Wei Ying-wu, and Ch'i-chi's lifelong friendship with the poet-official Cheng Ku, are well-known examples of such literary friendships.

The priests, who were of course highly conscious of the Chinese poetic tradition, frequently allude to famous poets of the past and present. Of pre-T'ang figures, the most often and admiringly cited are

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

T'ao Yüan-ming and Hsieh Ling-yün, the latter in particular because he was a dedicated Buddhist. Li Po and Wang Wei of the T'ang are often mentioned with approbation, the latter for his painting as well as for his poetry, as are Po Chü-i, Meng Chiao, and Chia Tao, the last, as noted earlier, having had especially close ties with Buddhist clerical circles. But the poet spoken of with profoundest reverence, in comments on his collected works, descriptions of visits to his grave, or general reflections on his awesome genius, is Tu Fu, who already by this time was rapidly being elevated to the position of undisputed prince of the poetic realm.

Poetry composition is one of the most frequent themes in the works of the poet-priests. Since many of their poems were written at social gatherings where poetry was composed, or were composed as replies to poems sent them by their contemporaries, this preoccupation with the subject of poetry-writing is hardly surprising. The priests make repeated allusion to "poetic thoughts" or "poetic emotions," picture themselves as searching avidly for novel or arresting lines, or stress the degree of *k'u*, "effort" or "struggle" that inevitably goes into the process of composition.<sup>11</sup> This attitude is in full accord with the ideas on poetic art that prevailed at the time. The earliest of the three major poet-priests mentioned above, Chiao-jan, for example, wrote several critical works on poetic theory in which he emphasized the need to engage in *k'u-ssu*, hard or bitter cogitation, in order to fashion poetry of genuine worth. He stressed, however, that such struggles and pains should not be evident in the final product, which on the contrary should convey a feeling of complete naturalness and ease.<sup>12</sup>

Chinese Buddhist priests had written poetry, usually of a doctrinal nature, from the early years of Buddhism's introduction to China, and the T'ang poet-priests not surprisingly make frequent reference to one such early poet, the monk Chih-tun (314-366), a number of whose

<sup>11</sup> Kuan-hsiu, in a poem entitled "Poetry" (CTS 833), for example:

Sometimes you search everywhere but cannot find it;  
other times it just seems to come of itself.

<sup>12</sup> On Chiao-jan's poetry and poetic theory, see Thomas P. Nielson, *The T'ang Poet-Monk Chiao-jan* (Occasional Paper No. 3, Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, 1972), particularly pp. 21-24.

poems have been handed down. But the precepts laid down by the Hinayana or Lesser Vehicle branch of Buddhism specifically forbade monks to engage in literary activities, and though Chinese Buddhists in most cases were affiliated with the Mahayana or Greater Vehicle branch of the religion, they customarily observed the Hinayana precepts and clearly at times felt extremely uneasy spending time in the writing of poetry, particularly if it was not directly connected with the propagation and practice of their religion.

One monk who was deeply troubled by this matter was Chiao-jan. According to the biography of him by Tsan-ning in the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, ch. 29, in his middle years, after he had written a great deal of poetry and several critical works, he decided to give up all such activities, "believing that they were not proper for a practitioner of Ch'an," and he accordingly ordered his disciples to take away all his manuscripts and writing materials. Only some years later, when he met and talked with a high government official named Li Hung, did he allow himself to be persuaded that these scruples were based on "the mistaken views of the Lesser Vehicle," after which he resumed his literary endeavors.<sup>13</sup>

Even if the T'ang poet-priests themselves did not see their literary activities as conflicting with their religious calling, there was widespread feeling among some sectors of the populace that poet-priests such as Chiao-jan and his contemporaries Kuang-hsüan, Hu-kuo, and others were mingling too freely in secular society, meddling too much in the political scene, and moreover were deliberately utilizing their literary talents as a means of gaining access to official circles. The famous poet-official Po Chü-i (772-846), himself a pious Buddhist, mentions a poet-priest named Tao-tsung who was the object of such accusations. When Po met the priest and examined his works, however, he concluded that the charges were unjust, and that Tao-tsung was merely using poetry as a means of inducing persons in high position to take an interest in Buddhism. As Po himself put it, "To begin with he attracts them by poetry, afterwards he draws them on to the wisdom of the Buddha."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See his biography in Ogawa, *op. cit.*, pp. 625-635, and the English translation in Nielson, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-62.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 171.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

Unfortunately, none of the poems of Tao-tsung survive, so we cannot say just how he accomplished this, or whether his poetry differed from that of the other poet-priests of the period.

Po Chü-i himself, though only a *chü-shih* or lay believer and not an ordained member of the clergy, was at times deeply disturbed by the thought that his lifelong devotion to the writing of poetry might be impeding his efforts to be a good Buddhist. Thus in a poem entitled "Idle Droning," written in 817 when he was living in exile and devoting much time to Buddhist practice, he states:

Since earnestly studying the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness,  
I've learned to still all the common states of mind.  
Only the devil of poetry I have yet to conquer—  
let me come on a bit of scenery and I start my idle droning.<sup>15</sup>

Buddhism speaks of various *ma* or "devils" who maliciously strive to prevent a person from gaining spiritual enlightenment. Po appears to have invented the term *shih-ma* or "poetry devil" to describe the particular kind of obstacle that he believed was hampering his own progress.

In another poem written much later, "Sent to be inscribed at my thatch hut on Mount Lu and to be presented to the monks of the two Lin temples," he refers again to his addiction to poetry composition, as well as to another weakness that was a frequent source of bedevilment:

Gradually I've conquered the wine devil, no more getting  
hopelessly drunk,  
though I go on making mouth karma, not having ceased to  
write poems.

Po in fact never did stop writing poems, (nor did he give up drinking until very late in life). But in his old age, when he presented copies of

<sup>15</sup> This and the quotation below are taken from my article "Buddhism in the Poetry of Po Chü-i," *The Eastern Buddhist* XXI/1 (1988), pp. 1-22. At the time I wrote my article, I was unaware that Kenneth K. S. Ch'en had written extensively on the same subject in his *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 184-239. I take this opportunity to call the reader's attention to Professor Ch'en's treatment of the subject.

his poetry and prose writings to the libraries of several Buddhist temples for safekeeping, he attempted to resolve the conflict between religion and literature by accompanying the presentation with a dedication in which he expressed hope that "these worldly literary labors of my present existence, these transgressions of wild words and fancy phrases, may be transformed into causes that will bring praise to the Buddha's doctrines in age after age to come, into forces that will turn the Wheel of the Law."<sup>16</sup>

This step may have helped to ease Po's conscience, and in fact is often cited by later writers when they discuss the possibility of conflict between the religious and literary callings. But it hardly seems to have resolved the matter for members of the ordained clergy, and the question remained very much in the air, as we shall see. In reading the works of the T'ang poet-priests, I have accordingly paid particular attention to their remarks on poetry-writing in an effort to determine how they viewed the problem.

Since Chiao-jan at one point in his life went so far as to renounce his literary activities entirely, it is not surprising that he should have left us what is perhaps the clearest statement on the subject. In a poem entitled "Replying to a Poem Received from Censor Ts'ui" (CTS 815), he says:

Hiding in the marketplace—what hindrance to the Way?  
 Living the Ch'an life, no need to give up poetry.  
 In making these pronouncements to you  
 I dispel forever the doubts raised by the Lesser Vehicle.

In some texts, these four lines constitute the entire poem; in others they are the closing lines of an eight-line poem. In either case, the thought is the same. Chiao-jan is declaring that a follower of the Ch'an Way need not remove himself from ordinary society, (i.e., may "hide in the marketplace" just as effectively as in some remote mountain setting), and likewise need not renounce the writing of poetry, though adherents of Lesser Vehicle Buddhism insist otherwise. The fact that Chiao-jan felt compelled to make such a pronouncement, however, suggests that there were many who held the opposite view.

<sup>16</sup> See my article "Zen Poetry" in Kenneth Kraft, ed., *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), pp. 105-124.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

Kuan-hsiu, though he talks a great deal about poetry and poetry-writing, alludes only indirectly to the question of whether it is a proper pursuit for members of the Buddhist Order. In the fifth of a series of twelve poems "Written When Living in Idleness in T'ung-chiang" (CTS 830), he remarks:

Poetry-polishing crystallizes into lines,  
most of them discourses on the Great Way.

which suggests that he views his poetry as essentially religious in its aim and content. His extant works, however, as I have suggested already, are very seldom overtly didactic or doctrinal in nature, and he must therefore be referring either to works not included in the collection we have now, or to some less than obvious meaning that underlies the surface.

In another poem extolling a famous calligrapher of the period, "Song on the Grass Script Calligraphy of Master Pien-kuang," (CTS 837), he declares:

Monks love poetry but set restraints on themselves;  
monks love painting, but there again they're cramped.

Since Kuan-hsiu himself was renowned both as a poet and a painter, one wishes he had elaborated on just why and in what manner the poetry and painting of monks are restrained and cramped, but the remainder of the poem is given over to praises of Pien-kuang's calligraphy.

Of the three major poet-priests I have been treating, the last, Ch'i-chi, who lived well beyond the expiration of the T'ang dynasty, speaks most frequently about poetry and its relationship to Ch'an, suggesting that these were becoming increasingly important topics of discussion at the time.<sup>17</sup>

Borrowing Po Chü-i's conceit of the poetry devil, he first of all applies it to his own situation. One example may be seen in the poem translated on page 31 below. Elsewhere, in a poem entitled "Self-

<sup>17</sup> Earlier, Chiao-jan had begun a poem entitled "Reply to District Magistrate Chang" (CTS 819) by saying: "I love how your poetic thoughts move my Ch'an mind," but as he does not elaborate on the statement, it is impossible to guess just what he means by this.

WATSON

Encouragement" (CTS 838), he says, "It's my lot to be in the service of the poetry devil," and another poem, "Quiet Sitting" (CTS 840), he states:

What profit, these struggles with the poetry devil?  
What's needed is the stillness of Ch'an.

In this last quotation, we see him placing poetry-writing and Ch'an meditation practice side by side, a pairing that occurs in several other places in his work. Thus, in a poem entitled "Meeting a Poet-Priest" (CTS 842), he says:

The mystery of Ch'an cannot be put in words;  
the subtleties of poetry—how can they be assessed?  
Struggles that take place among five and seven characters  
a hundred, a thousand years later, will still be fresh!

A poem entitled "Explaining Poetry-Writing" (CTS 843) begins:

What activities monopolize my day?  
When I tire of poetry-writing, I sit doing Ch'an.

And in another poem on the same subject, "Enamored of Poetry-Writing," (CTS 844), he states:

The better to concentrate my thoughts, I close my Ch'an  
door;  
once more because of the poetry devil I vex Mr. Buddha.

The tone of these last lines is of course facetious, as we can see by the use of the colloquial expression *chu-ch'ing* ("Sir India") for the Buddha, but if I have understood them correctly, Ch'i-chi is hinting that the Buddha would be anything but pleased at his spending so much time writing poetry.

In other poems Ch'i-chi couples Ch'an and poetry in lines describing not himself but the persons to whom the works are addressed. In "Replying to Scholar Yang of Shu" (CTS 844), for example, he says:

You have followed the Ch'an patriarchs in investigating the  
True Nature;  
you've ventured to face the poetry experts and won an ex-  
cellent name.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

And in a poem "Sent to the Great Teacher Kuang-chi of the State of Shu" (CTS 846), he writes:

Your Ch'an mind has wholly entered the Void that is without  
trace;  
your poetry lines quietly search out the stillness that has no  
sound.

In utterances such as these, Ch'i-chi seems to be suggesting not only that Ch'an practice and poetry-writing number among the most important activities of persons like himself, but that the two are somehow intimately related. In the end, however, he appears reluctant to state exactly what the relationship is. Only in one couplet does he hint that the aims of Buddhism and poetry are perhaps identical, in a poem entitled "Encouraging a Poet-Priest" (CTS 840), where he states:

The Way in its nature is like water;  
the sentiments of poetry resemble ice.

In this poem, he is encouraging the addressee to continue his poetry-writing, urging him to be like the monks and laymen whom the famous Buddhist prelate Hui-yüan (334-417) gathered together to form the White Lotus Society, a devotional group whose members, as Ch'i-chi says in the poem, "sat around the incense lamp composing hymns." And in the lines quoted above, he seems to be suggesting that poetry is a natural and laudable outcome or crystallization of the truths of Buddhism.

In Sung times, as is well known, writers commenting on the relationship between Ch'an and poetry would be much more explicit than this, openly likening poetic inspiration and insight to Buddhist enlightenment and eventually declaring that poetry and Ch'an at heart are one. But it would seem that Ch'i-chi and his fellow poet-priests of Late T'ang times were only beginning to move tentatively in the direction of that view.

It would no doubt be helpful to the reader at this point if I gave an overall critical evaluation of the poets I have been discussing. But such an evaluation is not at all easy to arrive at. During the T'ang period, their works seem to have enjoyed considerable popularity and to have exerted a strong influence over the development of Chinese Buddhist poetry as a whole. Their contemporaries, who were also in many cases

their friends and associates, not surprisingly shower praise on them. Thus, for example, the poet Wu Jung, in his preface to the *Hsi-yüeh chi*, an early collection of Kuan-hsiu's poems, states that the purpose of poetry is to single out good by praising and glorifying it and to single out evil by satirizing and condemning it. Poetry that fails to do these two things, no matter how beautiful it may be, is as lifeless as a wooden doll. He then proceeds to praise Kuan-hsiu for writing in just such a didactic vein, producing works that are "outstanding in principle and creative in their newness of ideas."<sup>18</sup>

By Sung times, however, with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, the general attitude toward Buddhism and Buddhist culture seems to have grown more critical. Iriya Yoshitaka, in his article "Chinese Poetry and Zen," quotes the opinion of a Sung writer named Yeh Meng-te (1077-1148), who speaks very disparagingly of the works of the T'ang poet-priests, dismissing the verse of Kuan-hsiu and Ch'i-chi as "not worth mentioning." He rates Chiao-jan as the most distinguished of the group, but even then finds "nothing conspicuously outstanding" about Chiao-jan's poetry.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps because of Confucian bias, or perhaps merely because of the innate blandness of so much of their poetry, the T'ang poet-priests have not fared well in the standard anthologies of T'ang poetry. The *San-t'i-shih*, a Sung period anthology of T'ang poems in *lü-shih* and *chüeh-chü* form which on the whole favors the Middle and Late T'ang style, nevertheless contains only two poems by Chiao-jan and one each by Fa-chen, Ling-ch'i, Ch'u-mo, Ling-i, Kuan-hsiu, Hsü-chung, and Hsi-ch'an, a total of not more than nine poems by poet-priests in an anthology containing 493 poems. Representation is even poorer in the famous Ming anthology *T'ang-shih-hsüan*, which includes among its 465 poems only one poem each by Ch'u-mo, Chiao-jan, and Ling-i. And in the Ch'ing anthology *T'ang-shih san-pai-shou* or Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang, which has been so influential in acquainting western readers with T'ang poetry, the representation dwindles to a single poem by Chiao-jan. It is little wonder, therefore, that the works

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Kobayashi Taichirō, *Zengetsu daishi no shōgai to geijutsu* (Tokyo: Tankōsha, 1974), p. 233.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by Norman Waddell in *The Eastern Buddhist* VI/1 (May 1973), pp. 54-67.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

of the poet-priests have for so long been neglected in discussions and studies of T'ang poetry, whether such neglect is justified or not.

I hope that the following selection of 30 poems by the poet-priests will give some idea of the style and content of their work. I have chosen poems that seem to typify the lives and activities of the poet-priests as a whole, as well as works that exemplify Ch'an doctrine or treat the theme of poetry and poetry-writing. Few annotations or studies of these poets have so far appeared, and my translations are tentative in many places.

Chiao-jan (730-799)

I passed the River Isle of the Immortal, at the foot of Mount Shen, the place where Shen Yi (or Shen Hsi), a man of long ago, in broad daylight ascended to the sky.

(5-character regulated verse; *CTS* 817)

His days and months in the human realm were brief—  
when did he manage to become an immortal?  
An old mountain, spring already over;  
the isle remaining, the event an empty tale:  
I see no ascent by cloud conveyance,  
merely look down at the fountain where he washed his herbs.  
Today as ever its waters pour on,  
but they only make us hateful of the flowing years.

Chiao-jan

Once More Seeing Off Attendant Censor Huang-fu Tseng

(lines of mixed length; *CTS* 818)

One who's starting for home alone,  
day giving way to dusk,  
lone sail backed by a lone river islet,  
distant water stretching to distant trees.  
Hard to get into a parting frame of mind,  
though the road of parting is plain to see.

WATSON

Chiao-jan

On the Abandoned Temple at Yü-pu River

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 820. Yü-pu River is in northern Chekiang.)

Paradise after the rebellion swept over it,  
this realm of Truth heaped in dirt and litter!  
A waning moon appears in the autumn water,  
sad winds stir from the old terrace.  
The people who lived here are all gone now,  
though roosting doves quietly return to their haunts.  
Unless one can grasp the principle of no-birth,  
he must endure these poems on the seven sorrows.\*

- \* "Seven Sorrows" is the title of a type of poem popular in Wei and Chin times that dealt with the pain of separation and death. The "principle of no-birth" is the Buddhist concept of nondualism, which teaches one to transcend the distinctions of joy and sorrow.

Chiao-jan

Valley Clouds

(5-ch. old style; *CTS* 820)

Coiling and uncoiling, when will you have done,  
hovering over the valley stream, girdling the sky?  
You've a form, yet are untroubled by matter;  
leaving no trace, you vanish on the wind.  
Don't be surprised if I keep tagging after—  
aimless and free, you and I are one.

Chiao-jan

Five Poems I Came On by Chance

(5-ch. old style; the third in the series; *CTS* 820)

Hide your mind, don't hide your traces;  
myself, I'd rather live with people around.  
Lacking trees, I dig up spring trees and move them;

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

no mountains? I'll look at painted mountains.  
Living amid hubbub I've never gone wrong—  
that's where you find true meaning.

Chia Tao (779–843)

Jokingly Sent to a Friend

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 571)

If I go a day without writing a poem  
the fountains of my mind become a dried-up well.  
So, brush and inkstone for a pulley,  
mumbling and intoning as my well rope,  
each morning I redouble my dipping and hauling,  
and invariably bring up something clean and cool.  
Then I write it out and send it to a like-minded friend,  
but what bitter struggles go into every word!

Chia Tao

Seeing the Monk Ch'u Off on His Return to Japan

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 573. The character Ch'u is presumably an abbreviation for some Japanese surname, though what name is uncertain.)

Spread sails wait in the autumn river;  
from here you go off into boundless distance.  
How many years since you left the eastern ocean,  
today to start home from China's middle land?  
Those shores still far off, your hair turned white,  
but at waves' end, the blue hills will emerge.  
From opposite sides of the water we'll think of one another,  
no letters—but we'll be spared that much bother!

WATSON

Chia Tao

Early Start

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 574)

Up early, I start on my way  
before nearby chickens have even begun to crow.  
By lamplight I take leave of my host,  
then my skinny horse moves off into darkness.  
Treading stones, I find the new frost slippery;  
winding among trees, I startle roosting birds.  
Only after bells from distant hills have sounded  
do dawn colors little by little start to show.

Chia Tao

Hearing Cicadas, Moved to Thoughts

(7-ch. *chüeh-chü*; *CTS* 574. The first cries of the cicadas remind the poet of the approach of autumn sadness.)

New cicadas suddenly sounding in the topmost branches—  
I stand and listen, unconscious of the passing time.  
Just then a friend comes to say goodbye:  
with one mind I now confront two kinds of sorrow.

Wu-k'o

To Give to a Poet-Priest

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 813)

Cold hills front the irrigation pond,  
shadows of bamboo foliage steal into the hall.  
Washing herbs, you discover ice forming along the bank,  
open the door and moonlight floods the bed.  
Sick a good deal, old as well,  
tired of your pillow, the night so long,  
you come to pay us a visit,  
present your poem, asking if we think it'll do.

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

Wu-k'o

### Autumn, Sent to My Cousin Chia Tao

(5-ch. regulated verse; CTS 813. West Forest Temple (Hsi-lin-ssu) is on Mt. Lu in Kiangsu; Ching-i is Tan-yang in the same province.)

Hidden crickets shrill in the evening light;  
I sit in West Forest Temple, silently remembering,  
listen to the rain till the cold dawn breaks,  
open the door to find the ground deep in fallen leaves.  
Long ago, when I was sick at Ching-i,  
we decided to make a trip to Lake Tung-t'ing together.  
But all because of *your* affairs  
even now we go on putting it off!

Ch'ang-ta

### Living in the Mountains, Eight Poems

(5-ch. regulated verse, the fourth poem in the series; CTS 823)

The Patriarch's true intent in coming from the west  
lay simply in things we see and hear:<sup>1</sup>  
wild geese in the cold—a single sound passing over,  
sparse woods all but bare of leaves.  
Mind untroubled, I love the streams and rocks;  
body old, I'm wary of frost and drafts.  
To those probing the Mystery I have this to say:  
on mountain after mountain, the same color moonlight!<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Patriarch is the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who introduced Ch'an or Zen to China. His true aim in coming from India to China is a much-debated topic in Ch'an thought.

<sup>2</sup> The Mystery is the state of Buddhist enlightenment.

WATSON

Tan-chiao

Written after Illness

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 823)

I've yet to find a way to forget the body,  
this body never safe from harm!  
Ailing innards—you can wash them clean,  
but skinny bones—how to fend off the cold?  
My medicine is to lessen lures to mind and emotion.  
Sutras? I haven't the strength to read them.  
Under a faraway wisp of cloud  
alone I face the last of the evening sun.

Tan-chiao

The Portrait\*

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 823)

In the painted shapes I hoped to see myself,  
but seeing myself only vexes my spirit.  
What is this but a dream within a dream?  
Confronting me, a body outside the body!  
Water flecks congeal into a phantom form,  
ink tints color the empty dust.  
Fit to be laughed at, you and I,  
two who have yet to reach enlightenment!

\* This is the earliest example I know of what became a very popular type of poem in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist circles: a usually humorous and gently mocking meditation on a painting of the writer.

Kuan-hsiu (832-912)

Journey in Spring Hills

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 829)

Layer on folded layer, old in color,  
misty rain, season when blossoms shower down:

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

handsome peaks—only afraid I'll run out of them;  
rippling stream—its chatter goes along with me.  
Black earth, red millet growing out of it;  
yellow monkeys leading their white offspring—  
they put me in mind of the moon over Stone Bridge  
where I've promised to meet my friend.\*

\* Stone Bridge is a famous natural feature on T'ien-t'ai, a range of mountains in Chekiang noted for its Buddhist and Taoist temples.

Kuan-hsiu

The Beggar Monk

(5-ch. regulated verse; CTS 833)

Clasping his bowl, face lean with honest poverty,  
under chill skies slowly he goes out of the temple.  
Vermilion gates of mansions line the main road:  
in wind and snow many hours he stands there,  
mind like the moon, forever serene;  
worldly events thick as hemp—he knows nothing of them.  
You people passing by, never despise him—  
ancient Buddhas all did the same!

Kuan-hsiu

Late Autumn, Sent to I-kung in Wu-ch'ang

(7-ch. *chüeh-chü*; CTS 835. I-kung or Mr. Yi is probably an abbreviation for some monk's name.)

They tell me you're staying in Wu-ch'ang on the Yangtze,  
where acacias wither and cedars turn brown in these wartime  
winds.  
But I know your weakness for poetry won't be so easily cured  
when frost dampens the reed flowers under an autumn moon!

WATSON

Kuan-hsiu

Struggling with a Poem

(7-ch. *chüeh-chü*; CTS 836)

River of Heaven fading, stars scarce, a lone snowy moon;  
clear breath from pine boughs sinks into my skin.  
I know now that good lines are rarer than gold or jewels:  
mind strained to the limit, spirit laboring, all to no avail!

Kuan-hsiu

Admiring the Old Man Who Lives Nearby

(7-ch. regulated verse; CTS 836)

Always I think of the old man of east valley, eyebrows sandy,  
no understanding of "right" or "wrong," ruddy-cheeked.  
His well sweep hits the water with a plop-plop sound;  
his purple taro, white scallions fatten in fine rain.  
Gulls and ducks wander quietly through thick bamboo,  
and so many grandchildren among the beautiful flowers!  
A thousand gates, ten thousand houses, all with horse and  
carriage—  
who among them loves the ancient ways as this man does?

Kuan-hsiu

Twenty-Four Poems on Living in the Mountains

(7-ch. regulated verse, the eighth poem in the series; CTS 837)

Thought by thought, no thought fixed on the Ineffable;  
stone cell, sheer rocks, hair hanging down:  
nursing bamboo, I don't pull out shoots that come up in the  
path;  
cherishing pines, I leave branches even when they block  
people's way.  
I burn incense, open the scrolls—sunrise on the steps;  
rolling up blinds, I still my mind—the moon in the pond.

BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

Many of my old friends have heads completely white,  
and I myself don't know today where I'll be going.

Ch'i-chi (861-940?)

Not Sleeping

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 838)

Long night, no inclination to sleep,  
empty hall, doors opening and shutting:  
deliberately I move out of the glow of the lamp,  
wait where I'll catch the moonlight when it comes.  
Falling leaves suspended, caught in a bird's nest,  
streams of fireflies circling round me—  
at dawn I dust off the sutra stand,  
sandalwood ash from one stick of incense.

Ch'i-chi

Delighted that the Monk Ch'ien-chou Has Come a Long Way to Visit  
Me

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 839)

He and I both nearing seventy,  
what does it mean to meet like this?  
The era of a sage king has yet to arrive,  
but partings and rebellion—we have plenty of that!  
Though the gate to detachment is hard to attain,  
days of leisure pass quickly.  
For the rest of our lives, aside from writing letters,  
we'll just be at the beck of the poetry devil.

WATSON

Ch'i-chi

Little Pines

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 840)

Poking up from the ground barely above my knees,  
already there's holiness in their coiled roots.  
Though harsh frost has whitened the hundred grasses,  
deep in the courtyard, one grove of green!  
In the late night they rustle mournfully,  
crickets calling from the empty stairs.  
A thousand years from now, who will stroll among them,  
fashioning poems on their ancient dragon shapes?

Ch'i-chi

Sent to a Poetry Friend

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 838. The term *k'u-hsin*, "laboring mind," refers in particular to the difficult process of poetry composition.)

Ten thousand things in heaven and earth—  
all should be fodder for the laboring mind.  
Though others would like to understand,  
this Way of Poetry is profound indeed!  
Returning to simplicity, you ignore current happenings,  
shut your gate, getting through the year-end.  
I thought of you these past fall evenings,  
both of us facing the cold lamp, composing.

Ch'i-chi

Thinking of a Monk of Flower Summit on Mt. T'ien-t'ai

(5-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 842. Flower Summit is the highest peak in the T'ien-t'ai mountains, a range overlooking the ocean in Chekiang that is noted for its Buddhist and Taoist temples. Stone Bridge, with its waterfall, is a natural feature of the mountains, often mentioned in poetry. Kuo-ch'ing-ssu at the foot of the range is the main Buddhist temple in the area. The Wise One (Chih-che) is the famous Buddhist monk philosopher Chih-i (538-597), founder of the T'ien-t'ai school of Buddhism.)

## BUDDHIST POET-PRIESTS OF THE T'ANG

Flower Summit precipitous, overlooking the sea,  
Stone Bridge wrapped in crimson sunset—  
once I went from Kuo-ch'ing Temple,  
climbed up to gaze at moon-bright tides.  
Kindly birds drew close to my incense flame,  
the wild fountain leaping into empty air.  
I wish I could go again, make the Wise One my teacher,  
but my head is white and the road so very long!

Ch'i-chi

After the Rebellion, Visiting West Mountain Temple

(7-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 845)

Pines charred, temple wrecked, all from the fighting;  
valleys transformed, ridges shifting—unbelievable events!\*

Among clouds for the first time I meet the new head priest,  
on the stone face spy inscriptions from earlier visits.  
Idly I sit peering at a ruined pond where lotus bloomed,  
pick my way over broken tiles of a once neatly-patterned  
walk.

I hope to join these fine monks in mending religious ties;  
I for one have no plans to abandon the road I'm on.

\* Metaphors for the violent political upheavals of the time.

Ch'i-chi

Speaking My Mind

(7-ch. regulated verse; *CTS* 845)

Poetry sickness makes the old age sickness even worse;  
with the best physician I'd still pay out huge sums in vain.  
In life's remnant, why must I give it up for nothing?  
Before I die, what harm if I amuse myself writing poems?  
Flowing waters never return—save your sighs;  
white clouds leave no trail—don't try to chase them!

WATSON

An idle man knows where to while away idleness:  
yellow leaves, fresh breeze, a groveful of cicadas.

Ch'i-chi

Song of the Spring Wind

(5-ch. *chüeh-chü*; CTS 847)

What does the spring wind have in mind,  
coming day and night to these groves and gardens?  
He never asks who owns the peaches and damsons,  
but blows away their crimson without a word.

Ch'i-chi

Admonishing a Younger Teacher

(7-ch. *chüeh-chü*; CTS 847)

You decline to write poetry, won't listen to sutras,  
too lazy to visit the other mountain peaks of the Ch'an sect—  
Another year, when your head is white and they question  
you,  
what stories will you have to tell your students?

Ch'i-chi

Written on a Summer Day in the City, Two Poems

(7-ch. *chüeh-chü*, the first of the two poems; CTS 847)

Monk neighbors on three sides, a wall on the fourth,  
no passageway for the wind to blow me a breath of cool—  
Another year if I should leave here, where would I go?  
To a stone cell among blue cliffs and red sunset skies.