

Chapter Title: Introducing Poet-Monks: History, Geography, and Sociality

Book Title: Poet-Monks

Book Subtitle: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China

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Published by: Cornell University Press, Cornell East Asia Series. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/jj.1950497.8>

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PART I

History

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Poet-Monks

History, Geography, and Sociality

Shiseng (“poet-monk”), like any word, has a history. It emerged at a specific time and place. It is the result of myriad historical, political, and cultural forces that coalesced in southeastern China in the mid-eighth century, and its meaning shifted significantly over the following two centuries. It is best not to take it as a stable, transcendent category of literary actor.¹ Rather, it was a tool used for both the marginalization and self-justification of Buddhist monastics living during the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries who took the writing of poetry very seriously. The first three chapters of this book describe exactly what happened to this term, “poet-monk,” from the Mid-Tang to the Five Dynasties period, or roughly 760–960. They focus on who was using the term, to whom the term was being applied, where the people using it were located, and what assumptions were implied by these uses of the term. They trace the changing answers to these questions over time.

In this first chapter I provide a macroscopic overview of the concept of the poet-monk, from its invention in the mid-eighth century through its peak in the tenth. I outline the historic, geographic, and social evidence for the emergence, growth, and prominence of the poet-monk as a distinct type of literary actor over the course of two centuries. Important parts of this chapter rely on digital analyses of

data distilled from historical sources. These quantitative and visual arguments, balanced by close readings of selected sources, are meant to orient the reader to the dynamic literary landscape of late medieval China and the poet-monks' place in it. Specifically, I show that the term "poet-monk" was invented in southeastern China in the 760s or 770s to describe a specific community of monks. Only later, as these monks' fame spread, did this term become more broadly applicable to any Buddhist monk who wrote *shi*-poetry. I also demonstrate that poet-monks were not isolated from mainstream literary communities but were central to networks of literary connection, especially in the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries.

This bird's-eye view of the poet-monks' place in history, geography, and sociality forces us to rethink the literary history of late medieval China. Against the traditional narrative of decline, I posit that what we see is the waxing of new aesthetic paradigms largely thanks to the works of poet-monks. They are emblems not of decline but of growth. The later poet-monks actively developed historic, geographic, social, and aesthetic trends begun by their predecessors at the height of the Tang dynasty—trends explored in subsequent chapters of this book.

History

The first surviving use of the term "poet-monk" comes from a poem written around 775 by the monk Jiaoran, on the occasion of the departure of another monk, Shaowei 少微.

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)

Jiaoran

Why are there dreams to bear witness to the mind?
 Let me explain your repeated dreams of going home.
 For words, you carry in mind the books of Qin,
 In poetry, you study the men of Chu.²
 Orchids blossom the colors upon your robes,
 Willows bend toward the spring in your hand.
 We shall surely meet again after this parting:
 My body is a floating cloud.³

證心何有夢，
 示說夢歸頻。
 文字齋秦本，
 詩騷學楚人。
 蘭開衣上色，
 柳向手中春。
 別後須相見，
 浮雲是我身。⁴

This poem offers many clues to the earliest layers of the term “poet-monk.” First, it implies that Jiaoran’s poem is a response to an unknown earlier author. This means, at the very least, that the title of this poem is not the first use of the word “poet-monk.” The original poem to which it is responding, written by a third party, must precede it. Second, the term “poet-monk” is used as an identifying label. Paired with Shaowei’s place of origin, it serves as an index for locating the monk socially and geographically. Other writings attest to the fact that Shaowei was indeed well-connected to literati circles. Records of his exchanges with nine prominent literati survive, and there is also indirect evidence of an exchange with twenty-seven prominent officials at the capital.⁵ Shaowei is not just a monk but more specifically a poet-monk, someone with the necessary learning to participate in literary exchanges, who is well-versed in the classics (line 3) and can write in the style of the *Songs of Chu* (line 4). Nonetheless, Shaowei’s status as a poet is subordinated to his status as a monk: in classical Chinese, modifier comes before modified, so *shi* (“poet”) modifies *seng* (“monk”). He is mainly a monk but one who has some training in poetry. “Poet-monk” is here a social label much like a literatus’s official title: it places the monk in elite society.

Although the earliest use of the term “poet-monk” is now lost to us, we can reasonably guess that it came not long before this poem, sometime in the 760s or 770s. Why it should emerge at this time and place is the result of multiple historical factors. By the eighth century CE, Buddhism was firmly entrenched in Chinese life. Having first come to the central plains via northwestern merchants and monks at the beginning of the common era, it had been promoted and suppressed, patronized and demonized by centuries of rulers. Buddhists of the eighth century were roughly as far separated from Buddhism’s appearance as we are from Thomas Aquinas. In the intervening seven and a half centuries, Buddhist monasteries had become part of the landscape, and monks part of the social structure. According to the official histories of the

Tang, in the years 713–755 there were about 126,100 Buddhist clergy; and in the 840s, about 360,000. This amounts to around 15–18 monks per 1,000 households for the former period and 73 per 1,000 households for the latter.⁶ By comparison, the United States reported about 429,000 clergy members in the year 2010, or fewer than 4 per 1,000 households.⁷ So, relative to its population, the High Tang had around four to five times as many Buddhist clergy as the United States of 2010 had of all clergy members, of any tradition, sect, or denomination; and the Late Tang had about eighteen times as many. Monks were abundant, far beyond anything a twenty-first-century American would be used to.

From very early on, Chinese Buddhist monks had written poetry. As mentioned in the introduction, many early medieval monks were known for their literary talent, and some, like Zhi Dun and Baoyue, became major figures in elite literary circles. Monks like Huiyuan and his disciples are often credited with helping to establish the tradition of landscape poetry.⁸ However, it was not until the latter half of the eighth century that the poet-monk emerged as a distinct literary figure. Before this period, there existed poems by monks (*sengshi* 僧詩) but never poet-monks (*shiseng*).

There are several historical causes for this emergence. Many previous scholars have drawn a neat line of connection between the rise of the “Chan” lineages in the eighth century and the emergence of poet-monks.⁹ Such scholars point out that certain versions of Chan emphasized everyday experience and the ordinary mind (*pingchang xin* 平常心) as the locus of enlightenment.¹⁰ While the emergence of Chan certainly contributed to the rise of poet-monks, it was only one factor among many. In fact, many of the early poet-monks were initially trained in Vinaya (*lü* 律), not Chan, Buddhism—a variety that was particularly amenable to the scholastic mind.¹¹ This should not be surprising: classic Vinaya rulebooks did allow for the reading and writing of poetry as a form of “external studies” (*waixue* 外學) for as many as two to four hours per day.¹² The deeply learned monk Shenqing 神清 (d. ca. 814), for example, received extensive training in Vinaya and wrote a lengthy justification of external studies in erudite prose, quoting from Confucian and Buddhist classics, in his *North Mountain Record* (*Beishan lu* 北山錄).¹³ Shenqing’s essays reveal how doctrinal tensions between Buddhist and literary pursuits—such as the injunction not to engage in “ornate speech” (*qiyu* 綺語, Skt. *sambhina-pralāpa*)—could be eased by appealing to Indic precedent and to the practicality of education in the social sphere.¹⁴ As will be noted in chapter two, many of the first generation of poet-monks, trained early

on in Vinaya and later exposed to Chan practices, drew from multiple religious traditions to justify their literary activities. There is no necessary reason why poet-monks should appear only after the development of Chan lineages.

Though developments in Buddhist doctrine and practice may have been one contributing factor, the political context of the late eighth century was another. The poet-monks emerged just as the disastrous An Lushan Rebellion of 755–763 had concluded. This was one of the most fatal conflicts in human history, sending millions to their graves and nearly toppling the world's most powerful empire.¹⁵ The chaos of the rebellion forced many Tang elites to move to the prosperous region south of the eastern end of the Yangtze River known as Jiangnan 江南. After order was restored, the Tang instituted a system of military governorships (*jiedushi* 節度使) that cycled major political figures to positions outside of the capital, leading to a general decentralization of power. The fleeing literati and the military governors, combined with eastern Jiangnan's wealth as a riverside trading center, meant that it was in place to become an alternate cultural center.¹⁶ Many of the most important literati of the Mid-Tang spent at least some time here, often rubbing shoulders with Buddhist monks.

The Buddhist community at Jiangnan was already well established by the time these elites fled there. Buddhism rose to prominence in this region early on thanks to the loyal patronage of the court official Wang Dao 王導 (276–339) at Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing) in the first half of the fourth century and of local gentry at western Jiangnan in the latter half of the fourth century.¹⁷ Buddhism became popular among the elite, its proponents holding debates with those interested in arcane studies (*xuanxue*), its practitioners developing new creeds and rituals. It was during this time that the monk Huiyuan established a major Buddhist center on Mount Lu 廬山, called Donglin monastery 東林寺, where a fellowship of 123 lay and monastic practitioners met to devote themselves to meditation and veneration of Amitābha Buddha. Known as the White Lotus Society 白蓮社, it is notable for including artistic luminaries such as the painter-calligrapher Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443) and the soon-to-be famous poet Xie Lingyun, and therefore it became a touchstone for later intermixing between Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, and literati.¹⁸ Qi Ji, for example, named his poetry collection *The White Lotus Collection* (*Bailian ji* 白蓮集) after this community. The Jiangnan region proved to be one of the most innovative and resilient loci for medieval Chinese Buddhism, and it would persist as such for centuries

to come. This reached a crescendo in the Tang dynasty. According to one scholar's estimates, 22 percent of eminent monks in the first half of the Tang and 51 percent of those in the second half came from the Jiangnan region.¹⁹

Daoism too prospered there. Mount Lu, for example, received renewed Daoist attention after Emperor Xuanzong ordered a shrine built there in 731 to the Perfected Lord of Inspection 採訪真君 following a dream in which this lord promised five hundred years of prosperity to the region.²⁰ The famed Daoist poet-priest Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778), like many literati, spent his post-rebellion years in Jiangnan, even participating at one point in writing linked poetry with Yan Zhenqing and Jiaoran, despite his personal aversion to Buddhism.²¹ This confluence of religious and cultural prosperity, along with growing political decentralization, created the right conditions for the emergence of a robust poet-monk movement. In fact, we can trace the prominence of early poet-monks to their many ties to the capital-derived elites who served in the area.

The An Lushan Rebellion of the 750s and 760s also prompted a "crisis in culture," leading to renewed attention to the importance of literature (*wen*) to the health of the Tang polity.²² The elites' response to the rebellion was to invest further in literature. To be clear, the crisis was not about faith in literature's ability to save the state or in the existence of cosmological patterns (*wen*) but rather about how to restore literature's maximal efficacy.²³ In an effort to rejuvenate such culture, imperial patronage of literary activity grew in the post-rebellion period, as seen in the increased importance given to the Hanlin Academy and to the civil service examinations.²⁴ While some extremists—such as Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and other *guwen* reformers—sought to define "literature" in so narrow a way as to exclude Buddhists, most took a more moderate, inclusive position.²⁵ This general promotion of literature was another factor that created the conditions for the poet-monks' emergence during this time period.²⁶

Another major factor in the poet-monks' rise was the increasingly stringent educational requirements for monks instituted in the eighth century.²⁷ When the Tang was restored after the Zhou interregnum of 685–705, Emperor Zhongzong instituted clerical examinations for monks. These were meant to ensure that those who registered with the government as members of the Buddhist church were actually qualified as religious professionals (and to curb the power of the Buddhist clergy who had supported the now-toppled Zhou 周). In 773, under Emperor

Taizong, thought to be “the most devout of all the Tang rulers,” these tests were expanded to more closely resemble the civil examinations, requiring monks to memorize and explain in writing core Buddhist scriptures.²⁸ Such high standards led to improved monastic education in the eighth century and beyond. It was in this context that the Hongzhou lineage, with its significant reinterpretations of canonical sūtras, emerged. Some have described this as the Buddhist parallel to the Confucian “crisis in culture” following the An Lushan Rebellion: a “deep interiorization” of core teachings and texts that sought to revive their relevance to contemporary issues and central concerns.²⁹ As we will see, many of the Late Tang poet-monks had connections to the Hongzhou lineage, even if it is best not to think of them as members of a closed school. High educational standards and reinterpretations of the classics facilitated the emergence of highly literate poet-monks.

Yet another factor in the poet-monks’ rise was the dominance of a mainstream poetry aesthetic in the mid-eighth century, one that was associated with Wang Wei 王維 (700–761), a devout Buddhist himself.³⁰ This aesthetic stressed close attention to landscapes, relatively simple vocabulary, occasionally difficult syntax, and surprising insights. Its ruminative qualities were particularly amenable to the poetically inclined Buddhist monks of Jiangnan who presented themselves as experts in mental cultivation living in mountain monasteries. This aesthetic, which stressed insight over ornament and allusion, reclusion over service, and craft over novelty, created space for poets who were understood to be disengaged from political affairs in the capital.

In short, the convergence of many different changes led to the right conditions for the emergence of poet-monks in Jiangnan in the late eighth century. These were not limited to innovations in Chan Buddhism but included historical, political, geographic, institutional, and aesthetic factors as well. The migration of elite poets to the southeast in the post-rebellion period was an especially important factor. Further attention to geography will help clarify the growth of the poet-monk as a distinct literary actor beyond the first Jiangnan community.

Geography

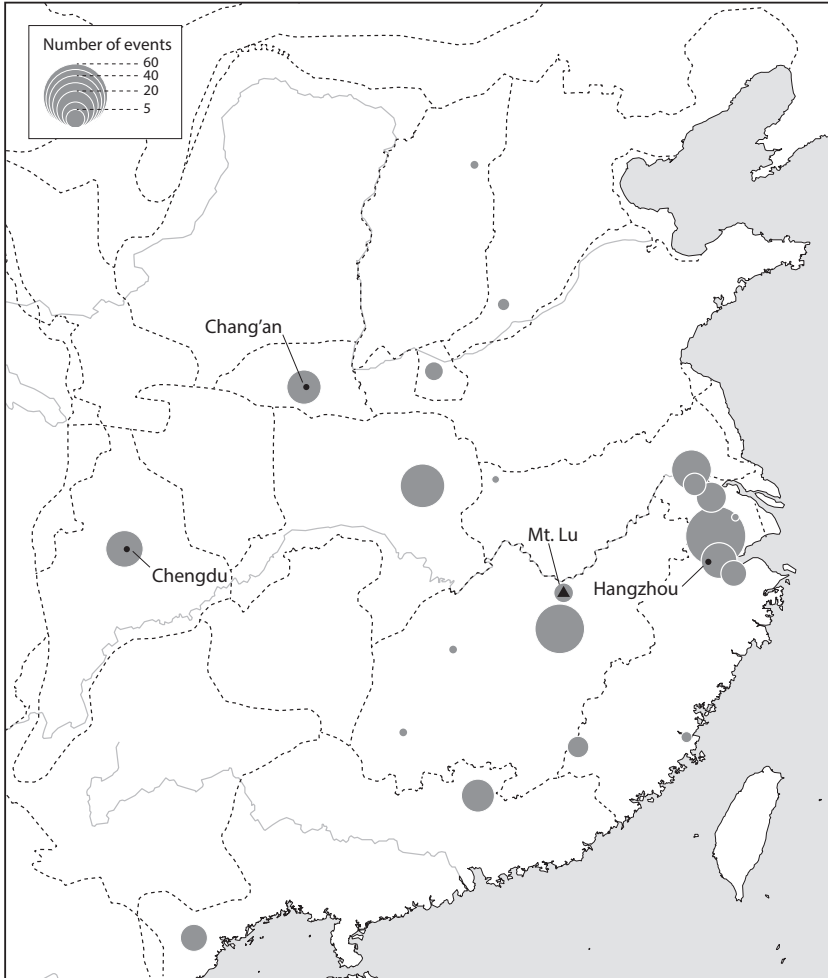
The An Lushan Rebellion marks a crucial turning point in nearly every facet of Chinese history. After the rebellion, as many elites migrated south, the center of the Tang literary world also shifted southward, and developments in the technical and literary representation of geography

led to significant changes in the collective spatial imaginary.³¹ Political historians see this as the beginning of a turn toward localization that would be fully realized in the Song dynasty, though recently excavated evidence suggests that this turn only began in earnest after the Huang Chao Rebellion of the 880s.³² Either way, it is clear that the latter half of the Tang dynasty and its aftermath marked a period of great change in cultural geography. The growth of the poet-monk phenomenon should be seen against this background.

To map the collective growth of poet-monks, I have made systematic lists of where the poet-monks lived over the course of two and a half centuries (720–960). The poet-monks mapped here are the forty-eight for whom some *shi*-poetry and some biographical information survives. My data come from the chronological history of Tang literature by Fu Xuancong and his collaborators, which is based on a combination of historical records (biographies, epitaphs, lists of examination graduates, etc.) and information embedded in exchange poems (prefaces, official titles, settings).³³ Fu and his team of researchers used this information to triangulate exactly where a given poet was located at a particular time. I have used Fu's chronology to quantify the number of years poet-monks spent in different places and have visualized these on maps of the Tang empire and the polities of the tenth century.³⁴ Such visualizations highlight otherwise invisible geographic trends that, when combined with careful analysis of selected primary sources, provide a general history of poet-monks' development—a history that will unfold in greater detail in the following chapters.

Geographic data suggest that the history of late medieval poet-monks can be divided into four periods that very roughly correspond to the traditional periodization of late medieval literary history: 1) High and Mid-Tang 盛中唐, 720–810; 2) Late Tang 晚唐, 811–874; 3) End of Tang 唐末, 875–907; and 4) Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms 五代十國, 908–960.³⁵ Although the periods are similar to those of traditional literary history, the poet-monks present a narrative arc quite different from the normal story of Tang literature. Rather than a gradual decline from the glories of mid-eighth century, there is a growth that culminates in an explosion of innovation and creativity during those periods that previous scholars have assumed to be stagnant.

The first period is illustrated by map 1.1, which focuses on the early development of the poet-monk tradition, 720–810. Poet-monk activity is heavily concentrated in the eastern Jiangnan region, especially in the Suzhou-Hangzhou area. This corroborates early written accounts of the



Map 1.1. Poet-monk activity, 720–810. This map shows the total number of years spent by poet-monks at various places. Larger circles correspond to more years of poet-monk activity in a given place. For example, if Lingche spent the years 770–771 in Guiji, this is measured as two years of poet-monk activity there. If both Lingche and Huguo spent the years 770–771 in Guiji, this counts as four years of poet-monk activity there. Data for all poet-monk activity may be found in the Digital Appendix. Map of Tang dynasty circuits adapted from Harvard WorldMap. This period covers 296 events concerning twelve poet-monks. Here the poet-monks are concentrated in the southeast, around Hangzhou.

development of poet-monks, found in sources such as the *Record of Conversations* (*Yinhua lu* 因話錄) by Zhao Lin 趙璘 (j.s. 834):

There are many famous monks in Jiangnan. Since the Zhenyuan and Yuanhe eras [785–821], there have been Qingjiang and Qingzhou

[i.e., Jiaoran] in Yuezhou, and Qianjun and Qianfu in Wuzhou. They were known at the time as the “Two Qings of Guiji” and the “Two Qians of Dongyang.”³⁶

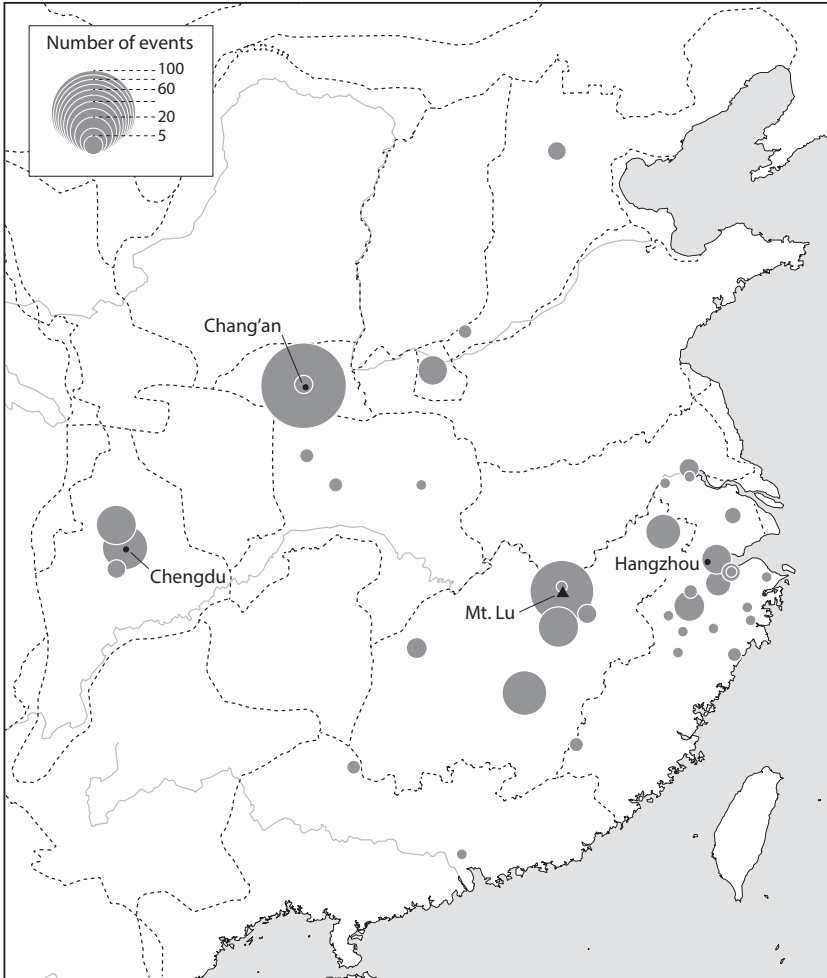
江南多名僧。貞元、元和以來，越州有清江、清晝，婺州有乾俊、乾輔，時謂之「會稽二清」，「東陽二乾」。

Jiangnan was home to the first community of poet-monks, who included Jiaoran, Lingyi 靈一 (727–766), and Lingche 靈徹 (746?–816). The poet-monks were originally a local group concentrated in the southeast. They made occasional pilgrimages to holy mountains—such as Mount Lu 廬山, located in the western end of Jiangnan—and a few journeys to the capital, but mostly they remained in a single region. We will look at them in more detail in chapter 2.

The second period, illustrated by map 1.2, covers the years 811–874. During this time, poet-monks spread throughout the empire. While there is still a great deal of activity in the poet-monks’ birthplace (Suzhou-Hangzhou), it has become far more diffuse. This is due first to the fame of the original poet-monks spreading beyond their original home, leading to opportunities for some monks to travel to the capital, and then to the term’s definition expanding to refer to other monks. Jiaoran may have been the first to achieve great fame, as the emperor dispatched an official to collect and publish his poetry in 792.³⁷ Jiaoran and his fellow poet-monk Lingyi are also noted in Li Zhao’s 李肇 (fl. 806–820) *Supplement to the History of Our State* 國史補, likely composed at the capital in the 810s or 820s.³⁸

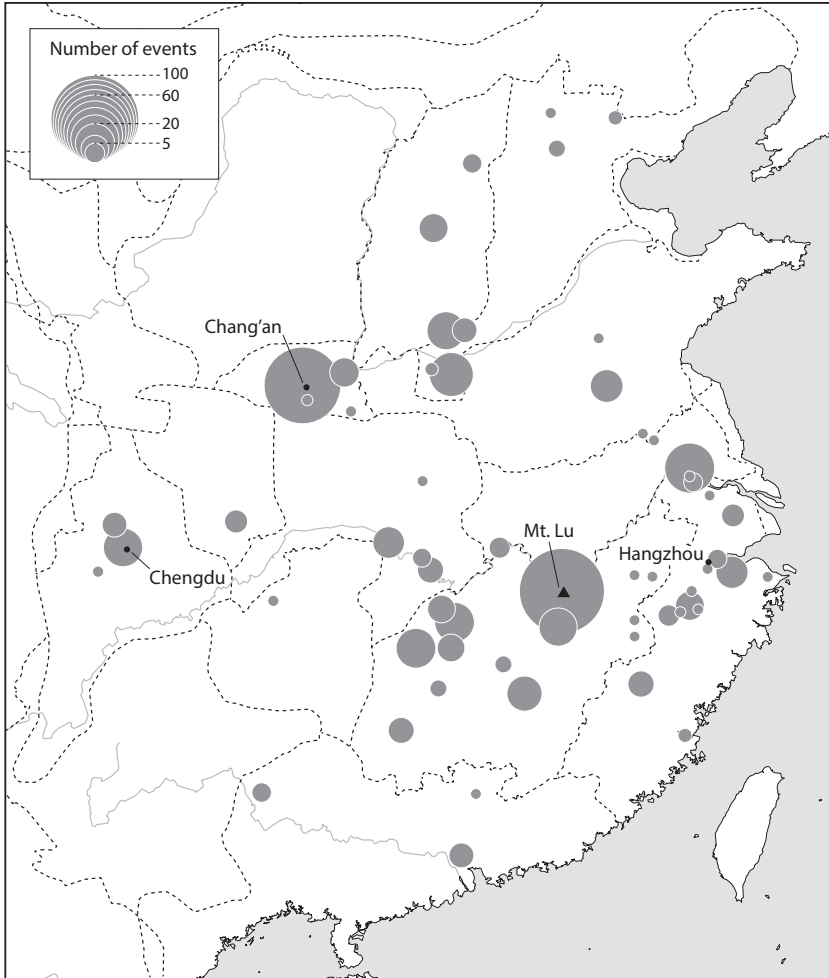
In the map and in textual records, we see that more monks spent greater amounts of time at Chang’an during this period, sponsored by wealthy patrons, including the emperor himself. The poet-monk began to achieve cultural acceptance in the middle of the ninth century and therefore can be seen in the highest echelons of literary society. Guangxuan 廣宣 (early ninth century), a southwestern monk who served three emperors at court and exchanged poems with Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), is one example of a poet-monk who achieved such recognition.³⁹ So did Zhixuan 知玄 (811–883), another southwestern monk who traveled to the capital, participated in religious debates at court, and exchanged verses with poets such as Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 813–858).⁴⁰ Buddhist monks had served at court before, but most did not write poetry that has come down to us, and none were referred to as poet-monks.⁴¹

Mount Lu, which had long been home to thriving religious communities, became a new hub for poet-monks, one that would continue to



Map 1.2. Poet-monk activity, 811–874. This period covers 378 events concerning twenty-five poet-monks. Here poet-monks are becoming more prominent in the capital region of Chang'an.

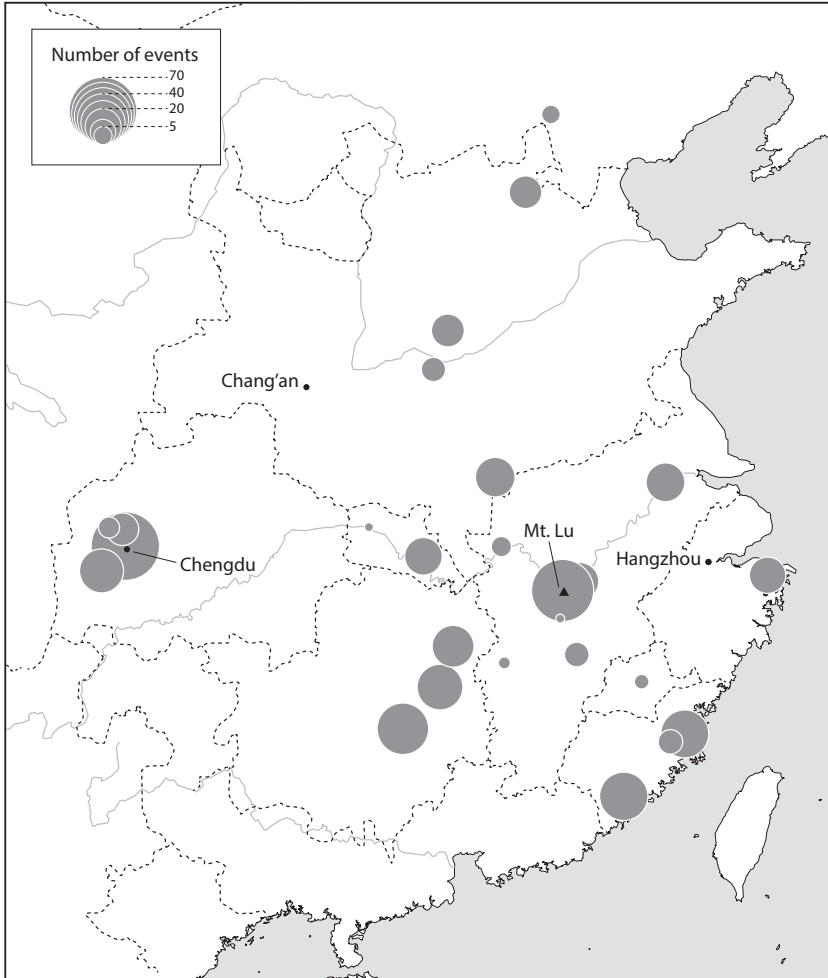
develop in the decades ahead. Hongzhou began to attract a fair share of poet-monks, having established itself as an important Buddhist town in the 780s thanks to the presence of the renowned master Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788).⁴² And from Chengdu, a secondary cultural center frequented by the powerful people at the capital, came indigenous poet-monks such as Guangxuan and Zhixuan. Despite being nearly twelve hundred miles (nineteen hundred kilometers) from the homes of the first monks who claimed this title, Chengdu had a number of men who saw themselves as working in the same poetic tradition.



Map 1.3. Poet-monk activity, 875–907. This period covers 554 events concerning twenty-six poet-monks. Here is evidence that many poet-monks fled urban centers to escape the destruction of the Huang Chao Rebellion.

During this era, poet-monks were no longer oddities but instead a part of the literary scene.

The Huang Chao Rebellion and its aftermath mark another moment of intense change, as seen in map 1.3 (875–907). Leading up to this time, Huang Chao's troops rampaged through Jiangnan and up to the capital region, leaving smoldering wreckage in their wake. They would eventually set fire to Chang'an, the cultural center of the Chinese world.⁴³ In response, poet-monks fled from urban monasteries to safer regions,



Map 1.4. Poet-monk activity, 908–960. Map of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms adapted from Harvard WorldMap. This period covers 558 events concerning twenty-four poet-monks. Here the poet-monks are stabilized in regional capitals (such as Chengdu and Hangzhou) and sacred mountains (such as Mount Lu).

such as the Buddhist monasteries located in the south and on sacred mountains like Mount Lu and Mount Heng 衡山.⁴⁴ Indeed, at this time the poet-monk Xiumu 修睦 (d. 918) became Samgha Rectifier 僧正 of Hongzhou and used his official appointment to make nearby Mount Lu into an important grounds for poet-monk activity in the waning years of the Tang. Nearly every important poet-monk of the period lived there at one point during the late ninth century.⁴⁵

Moreover, the very act of the Huang Chao Rebellion's large-scale butchery of the capital elites left a void at the Tang's cultural center. Tens of thousands of the most powerful and well-educated literati were murdered, and many of the survivors fled for the relative safety of the south.⁴⁶ Among the educated, there was widespread recognition that a fundamental shift had taken place, that the cultural sphere could no longer be conceived as a unified whole. Evidence for this shift abounds. For example, the anonymous philosophical text *Wunengzi* 無能子 (Master Incapable), which advocates for a return to quietist naturalism, presents itself as being written in direct response to the Huang Chao Rebellion.⁴⁷ Its preface implies that the only logical response to the chaos of the period is a kind of primitivism rooted in classically Daoist principles, since civilization has failed to bring anything but tragedy. Another literatus, Pei Yue 裴說 (late ninth and early tenth cent.), put his feelings into a quatrain:

Taking Backroads to My Hometown during the Chaos 亂中偷路入故鄉

Pei Yue

I look with sorrow on the villains' fires
 arising from their beacons
 And, unnoticed, find the next stop
 within my grief-stricken gaze.
 Half of our entire state has been rendered
 the ashes of a fallen state;
 And many of our cities are now as
 empty as ancient cities.

愁看賊火起諸烽，
 偷得餘程悵望中。
 一國半爲亡國燼，
 數城俱作古城空。⁴⁸

As the chaos of the Huang Chao Rebellion raged on, Pei Yue saw civilization crumbling before his very eyes, manifested at the levels of state and city. Wei Zhuang, writing about the ruination visited upon Jiangnan in the 880s, described the fracturing thus: "Having a land, having a family—both are dreams, / And those who were dragons, who were tigers have become nothing" 有國有家皆是夢，爲龍爲虎亦成空。⁴⁹ Sikong Tu made the universal personal, writing of the fallen world's effect on his own life in one of his counterintuitive or "mad" quatrains.

Mad Inscriptions: 2 of 2 狂題二首（其二）

Sikong Tu

Know that it's hard to preserve one's life
 in an era of chaos;
 Delight not at heaven's sunlight
 and the chrysanthemums' bloom.
 I've always been itinerant
 in this life, long or short—
 The yellow flowers help
 to speed the whitening of my head.

須知世亂身難保，
 莫喜天晴菊併開。
 長短此身長是客，
 黃花更助白頭催。⁵⁰

In the midst of troubled times, the speaker can take no delight in the joys of nature, for its very exuberance seems to mock him. The chrysanthemums, normally thought to extend one's life, ironically bring on signs of aging in the speaker. Further examples of such laments could be produced ad infinitum.⁵¹ To the educated Chinese of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the idea of a unified world was no longer tenable.

But this destruction also presented a rare opportunity for cultural reinvention. As civilization was threatened, it became plastic, moldable. A space opened up for relatively minor or marginalized figures—such as poet-monks—to grow and attempt to reshape literature in their own image. And they seized this opportunity. Even though the poet-monks had become familiar figures in literary society by the mid-ninth century, it was not until this period of instability that we really see rapid growth in their numbers—of the 184 poets in *Quan Tang shi* who were active during this period, 23 (13 percent) were Buddhist monks, compared to the Tang up to 880, in which 40 of about 2,400 active poets were monks (>2 percent).⁵² This may be due to their relative move upward when the top rung of the ladder (i.e., the capital elite) was lopped off. Although the elites may not simply have been physically eliminated, the destruction of the capital and the displacement of tens of thousands of the most powerful people would certainly have shaken the foundations of elite culture.⁵³ This, combined with the existence of a strong poet-monk figurehead like Guanxiu, may have been enough to encourage rapid growth among poet-monks.

In the fourth period (map 1.4), which corresponds to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms following the End of Tang (907–960), the poet-monks resettled in the newly stabilized regional kingdoms that had emerged. Traditional historiography sees this period as one of transition and chaos, but it did not always appear so to the people who lived through it. The people of the first half of the tenth century did not know that there would be a series of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms that would end with the establishment of the Song in 960 and its consolidation of power in 974. In fact, many of the literary elites (both religious and nonreligious) had great hopes for the regional rulers, that they might enact a cultural renaissance that would reunite the fractured empire.⁵⁴

One example of this was the kingdom of Shu 蜀 in the first few decades of the tenth century. Its founder Wang Jian 王建 (847–918) has been judged unfavorably by history. He was, after all, illiterate and left his kingdom to an incompetent son. But he succeeded in attracting many of the most important poets, Buddhists, and Daoists to his court as he began to break away from the Tang. Wei Zhuang, Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933), and Guanxiu all threw their lots in with Wang Jian and were handsomely rewarded for it.⁵⁵ The other prolific poet-monk of the tenth century, Qiji, also set out to go to Shu to meet Guanxiu and his disciple Tanyu but was waylaid by the ruler of Jingnan 荆南, who forced the monk to become Saṃgha Rectifier of his newly established kingdom—an appointment that Qiji occasionally spoke of as imprisonment.⁵⁶ All of these men bet their lives on the belief that Shu was poised to become the next Chang'an, the hub of civilization as they knew it. Although Shu's plans began to fall apart in the 920s, these poets were not entirely wrong: Chengdu contained the most advanced printing technology and would soon produce the literary collection that would elevate the burgeoning genre of *ci* (song lyric) poetry—the *Collection among the Flowers* (*Huajian ji* 花間集).⁵⁷ In similar ways, other poet-monks saw the kingdoms of Jingnan, Chu 楚, Min 閩, and the Southern Tang 南唐 as the bastions of civilization after the fall of the Tang. Many of these new kings were aspiring emperors, competing to produce the next world-conquering empire.⁵⁸ One of the ways to strengthen a claim to legitimacy was to draw in leading poets, artists, and religious leaders through promises of patronage. These rulers drew on prominent Buddhists' cultural capital in different ways. Chengdu and Hangzhou attracted highly regarded monks displaced from the capital, while the smaller southern cities—such as Hongzhou and Fuzhou—promoted

locally renowned clerics in an attempt to match these efforts.⁵⁹ Thus, many of the poet-monks were drawn to these regional kingdoms.

The other trend during this period was for poet-monks to relocate to religious centers—such as Mount Lu, Mount Heng, and Hongzhou—where they could keep the ruling powers at arm's length. As we have seen, this trend had already emerged in the mid-ninth century and gained traction during the fall of the Tang. Though such sites often relied on the patronage of political rulers for support, they also provided an alternative power structure that was based on religious merit. Remote from urban centers and relatively inaccessible due to their elevation, such mountains were spared much of the violence of the Huang Chao Rebellion and its aftermath. Buddhist monasteries in these areas made a concerted effort in the ninth and tenth centuries to establish strong relationships with local rulers and patrons.⁶⁰ Such relationships benefited both parties: the monasteries would receive financial and political support from their patrons, while the patrons would accrue merit and legitimacy by sponsoring Buddhist activities. Thus, places like Mount Lu, Mount Heng, and Hongzhou served as alternative hubs for poet-monks after the collapse of the Tang.

So the big picture that emerges from looking at the geographical distribution of poet-monks from 720 to 960 is a development in four stages: 1) birth in Jiangnan, 720–810; 2) spread to the capital, 811–874; 3) growth and dispersal across the empire, 875–907; and 4) consolidation in new cultural centers, 907–960. These four stages correlate closely with some of the large-scale historical developments we know about late medieval China. 1) The poet-monks emerged out of an area that was rich in both Buddhist and literary culture just as power began to decentralize because of political changes following the An Lushan Rebellion. 2) Poet-monks gained recognition across the empire and began to drift to the capital as peace was restored and elites returned to their home region. With the notable exception of Wuzong in 840–845, the emperors and nobles of this period were generous patrons of Buddhism, attracting poet-monks to the capital. 3) The Huang Chao Rebellion caused thousands to flee urban centers and left a void at the cultural center, creating the space for poet-monks to develop further and gain traction in literary society. 4) As some regional rulers attempted to establish their own universal dynasties (or at least fully autonomous kingdoms), they attracted numerous monks and literati in an effort to assert their own religious and cultural legitimacy. Some poet-monks were wooed by these promises of lavish donations, while others retreated to sacred mountains such as

Mount Lu and Mount Heng. These four stages ought to be understood not as distinct periods but as general trends that waxed and waned, overlapping with one another. Geographical analysis of poet-monks' movements provides a rough outline of their historical development, one that can be supplemented with a large-scale analysis of their exchange poetry.

Sociality

It is tempting to think of Buddhist monastics as somehow separate from the rest of society.⁶¹ By its very nature, monasticism claims to cut itself off from the dusty world of mundane life, and Chinese Buddhists were no exception in some of their rhetorical claims. Despite these ideals, Buddhists were never truly separate from the realm of everyday life. Buddhist temples and monasteries required the patronage of wealthy, powerful donors to survive and in turn offered to create and accumulate good merit on behalf of the state or other patrons. Monks from elite families often continued to be considered part of the family.⁶² Buddhism was as much a means by which to engage the world as a means by which to escape it.

One way to calculate the extent to which Buddhist monks were involved in the literary world is to look at their connections in exchange poetry. By "exchange poetry," I mean any poem that is explicitly addressed to another person. These may be written on actual social occasions such as meetings, feasts, or partings. They may be written at a distance and sent to their addressee along with a letter. Each of these establishes a literary connection. In all of what follows, I do not suppose that exchange poetry correlates precisely with actual social connections. Rather, I take exchange poetry to represent imagined connections—a collective dream of literary relations that serves as an index of how poets sought to position themselves in the literary world.

Table 1.1 lists the forty poets from the period of 830–960 with at least sixty exchange poems to their name and calculates the percentage targeted to Buddhist monks. The first thing to notice is that no poet addressed a majority of his works to members of the clergy. Even the most prolific and well-known poet-monks—Qiji, Guanxiu, and Wuke 無可 (early ninth century)—wrote large numbers of poems to laypersons, most of whom were literati of one sort or another. This is remarkable, considering the situation in later times. The Song poet-monk Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091–1157), for example, sent 80 percent of his exchange poems to other monks.⁶³ This is about double the rate of the

poet at the top of the Late Tang list, Qiji (see table 1.1). The reason for the relatively large number of poems addressed to literati in the Late Tang is related to poetry's social function. Exchange poetry was put to a variety of purposes other than the merely aesthetic: it could be used for flattering superiors, flaunting one's education, or establishing a connection with a literary hero as easily as for thanking a friend.⁶⁴ By the mid-ninth century, poet-monks were closely integrated into mainstream literary culture. In the Song, by contrast, the writing of social *shi*-poetry had become routinized in monastic institutions, leading to far more exchanges exclusively between monks.⁶⁵

Table 1.1 Number of exchange poems addressed to clergy, ranked by percentage.

RANK	POET		EXCHANGES	BUDDHIST MONKS	PCT.
1	Qiji	齊己	505	192	38%
2	Li Dong	李洞	126	41	33%
3	Zhou He	周賀	78	24	31%
4	Zhang Qiao	張喬	86	26	30%
5	Cao Song	曹松	69	19	28%
6	Guanxiu	貫休	410	112	27%
7	Wu Rong	吳融	77	21	27%
8	Jia Dao	賈島	320	74	23%
9	Li Xianyong	李咸用	109	25	23%
10	Wuke	無可	87	16	18%
11	Xue Neng	薛能	98	17	17%
12	Zheng Gu	鄭谷	142	22	15%
13	Zhang Hu	張祜	194	30	15%
14	Liu Deren	劉得仁	104	16	15%
15	Yao He	姚合	330	50	15%
16	Ma Dai	馬戴	106	16	15%
17	Bao Rong	鮑溶	101	15	15%
18	Xiang Si	項斯	61	9	15%
19	Zhu Qingyu	朱慶餘	131	19	15%
20	Li Zhong	李中	179	24	13%
21	Du Xunhe	杜荀鶴	214	28	13%
22	Shi Jianwu	施肩吾	77	10	13%
23	Fang Gan	方干	246	31	13%
24	Zhang Pin	張翮	61	7	11%
25	Xu Hun	許渾	715	80	11%
26	Xu Tang	許棠	78	7	9%
27	Zhao Gu	趙嘏	169	14	8%
28	Han Wo	韓偓	90	7	8%
29	Li Pin	李頻	145	11	8%
30	Xu Yin	徐夔	69	5	7%

(continued)

Table 1.1 (continued)

RANK	POET		EXCHANGES	BUDDHIST MONKS	PCT.
31	Wei Zhuang	韋莊	111	8	7%
32	Huang Tao	黃滔	130	8	6%
33	Wen Tingyun	溫庭筠	133	8	6%
34	Pi Rixiu	皮日休	264	13	5%
35	Lu Guimeng	陸龜蒙	256	10	4%
36	Du Mu	杜牧	194	7	4%
37	Li Shangyin	李商隱	203	7	3%
38	Xu Xuan	徐鉉	220	6	3%
39	Luo Yin	羅隱	227	6	3%
40	Li Qunyu	李群玉	123	3	2%

Note: Includes poets with at least sixty exchange poems to their name. Poet-monks are in **boldface**.

Nevertheless, the monks Qiji, Guanxiu, and Wuke occupy the first, sixth, and tenth positions on this list. They were more likely to have written a poem addressed to another monk than most other major poets of their day. Two of the other poets who rank high on the list, Zhou He 周賀 (mid-ninth cent., third) and Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843, eighth), spent large portions of their lives as monks. Li Dong (second) grew up poor and spent the majority of his life living in reclusion near Buddhist monasteries. Despite their pragmatic connections to the world of officialdom, poet-monks such as Qiji, Guanxiu, and Wuke, as well as ex-monks such as Zhou He and Jia Dao, maintained close ties to the Buddhist community and represented those ties in their literary works. Non-monastic poets were expected to represent their connections to Buddhists in their works, too. In my database, 1,457 of the 10,869 poetic exchanges from this period are addressed to monks (13.4%). This overall percentage is roughly the same as the average in any given writer's corpus of exchanges: the median and mean of the numbers listed in table 1.1 are both about 14%. Even those literati who showed no particular affection for Buddhist teachings have some poems addressed to monks. The standard set of poetic topics in the Tang included poems written to Buddhists, at Buddhist sites, and on Buddhist themes. The very minimum an educated person could do was write a few poems to local monks when visiting a monastery in a new town or a mountain retreat.⁶⁶

We can go further and look at these connections more systematically, as a network. To this end, I have created a database of 10,869 poems exchanged between 2,413 individuals during 830–960.⁶⁷ When we visualize this data as a network graph, people appear as dots (“nodes”) and the poems connecting them as lines (“edges”). Greater quantities of

poems exchanged bring individuals closer together in the graph. The overall shape of the network gives us an intuitive sense of the centrality of Buddhist poet-monks in the literary world of the ninth and tenth centuries (see figures 1.1 and 1.2).

The amount of black in the graph suggests the relative centrality of Buddhist monks to the network. The two large, black nodes at the top

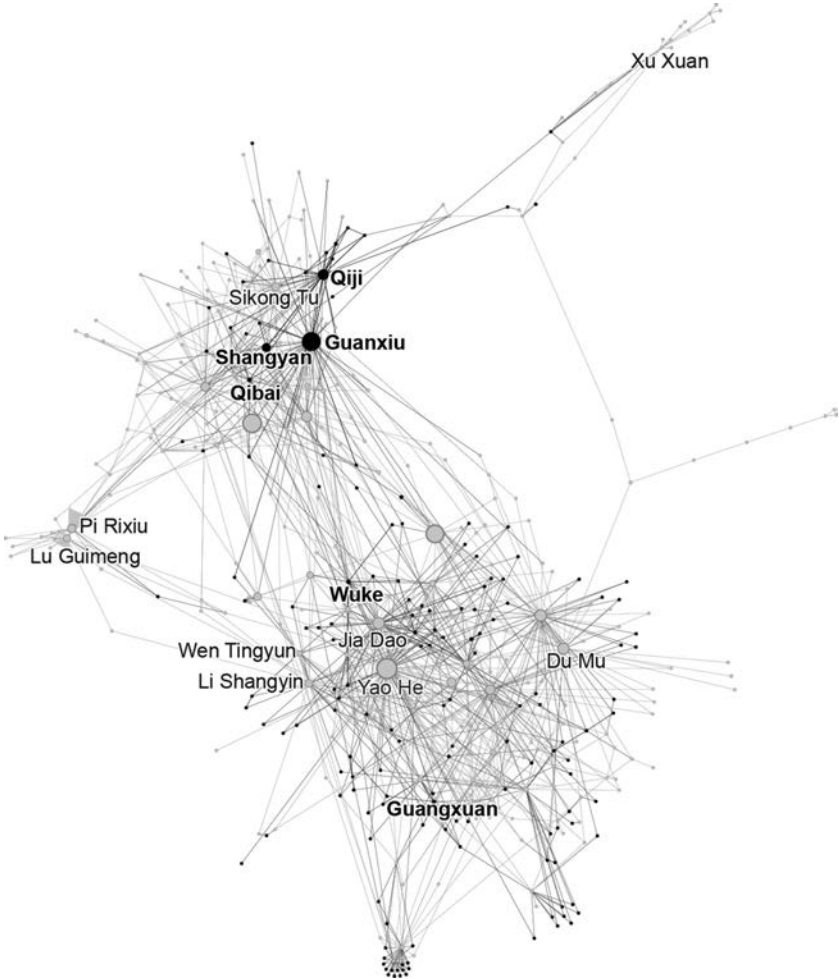


Figure 1.1 Network graph of poems exchanged between contemporaries in the late medieval period. Buddhist monks are shaded black. Nodes have been filtered by degree (≥ 2) and sized according to betweenness centrality (on which see below). Several small clusters of fewer than five actors, disconnected from the central hub, have been removed. Produced in Gephi version 0.9.6, using the ForceAtlas2 attraction-repulsion layout. For the full graph and related data, see “1–2 Network Data, Graphs” in the Digital Appendix.

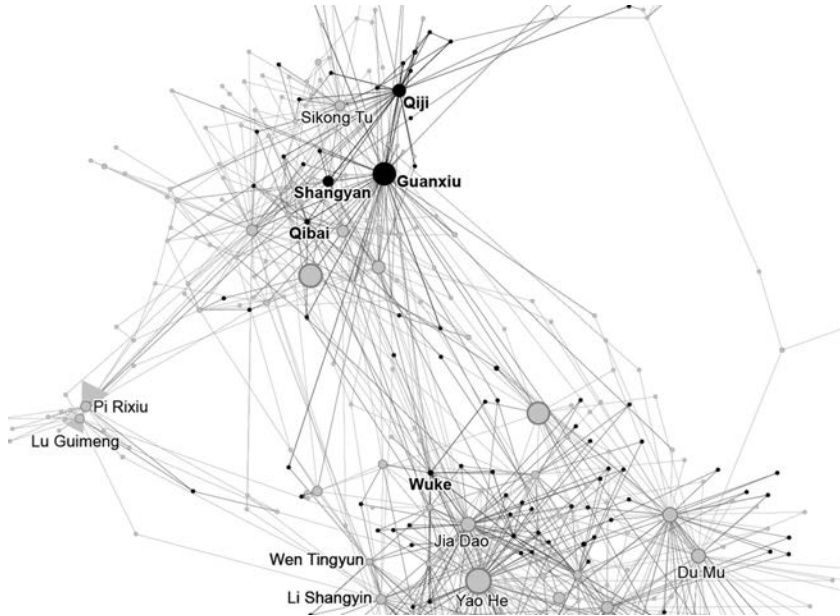


Figure 1.2 Detail of the network graph in Figure 1.1. Note the centrality of Buddhist monks (shaded black).

of the main cluster are Guanxiu and Qiji. Near them is the court monk Qibai 棲白, and on the bottom are Wuke and erstwhile monk Zhou He.

Visualizations, while intuitive, are not very precise. To better understand Buddhist monks' importance to the network, we must analyze the data with algorithms developed by network scientists. The most important metric for our purposes—the place of monks in the network—is centrality. Measures of centrality attempt to answer questions about which node is the most important in the network. There are many different ways of doing this, but the one best suited to the exchange poetry data set is betweenness. This metric answers the question “If one randomly selects two nodes in a network, what is the likelihood that a third node will lie on the shortest path between them?” This would give us the betweenness ranking of the third node. Betweenness centrality identifies actors who have the most connections, often in the most complex portions of the network. To put it simply, if there is evidence that a poet is connected to many other actors who are also well-connected, then that poet must be integral to the network.⁶⁸ Recent research has shown that, even if there are significant gaps in our historical records (up to 60 percent of data missing),

most centrality metrics will remain accurate.⁶⁹ Doing the calculations on the network of late medieval exchange poetry (table 1.2) reveals that Buddhist monks are three of the sixteen most “between” poets, and five of the top thirty-five.⁷⁰ This is significant, since this is around 1.4–2x higher than the statistical average would predict.⁷¹

The high ranks of Qiji and Guanxiu should come as no surprise. They were widely regarded in their own time as among the greatest poets of the era. They also have some of the largest surviving collections of any Tang poets. But the appearance of Shangyan 尚顏 (830?–930?), in sixteenth place, is unexpected. Only thirty-four of his poems survive,

Table 1.2 Betweenness centrality rankings of major late medieval poets.

RANK	POET	BETWEENNESS CENTRALITY
1	Yao He 姚合	3,467
2	Wu Rong 吳融	2,999
3	Li Qunyu 李群玉	2,806
4	Guanxiu 貫休	2,543
5	Fang Gan 方干	2,384
6	Xu Hun 許渾	1,819
7	Du Mu 杜牧	1,694
8	Li Pin 李頻	1,363
9	Zhang Hu 張祜	1,241
10	Yin Yaofan 殷堯藩	1,234
11	Luo Yin 羅隱	1,224
12	Qiji 齊己	1,206
13	Jia Dao 賈島	1,182
14	Zheng Gu 鄭谷	115
15	Lu Guimeng 陸龜蒙	105
16	Shangyan 尚顏	103
17	Duan Chengshi 段成式	100
18	Li Shangyin 李商隱	90
19	Pi Rixiu 皮日休	88
27	Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠	42
31	Qibai 棲白	37
32	Han Wo 韓偓	34
33	Li Deyu 李德裕	32
34	Wuke 無可	31

Note: The top nineteen plus several other well-known poets have been included, and Buddhist monks have been bolded. Betweenness centrality figures (normally somewhere between 0 and 1) have been multiplied by 10,000 to make the numbers more legible. For all betweenness centrality rankings, see “1–3 Betweenness Centrality” in the Digital Appendix.

compared to about eight hundred in Qiji's collected works. His fourteen extant exchanges put him far down on our list in terms of quantity, sixty-second overall. By contrast, the other poets with high betweenness centrality have many more exchanges, ranking high on the list in terms of overall quantity of exchanges: Yao He 姚合 (775?-855?, sixth), Wu Rong (thirty-fifth), Li Qunyu 李群玉 (808?-862, seventeenth), and Guanxiu (fourth). Shangyan appears central in the network because his fourteen surviving exchange poems connect him with some of the most important figures of his day, such as Qiji, Zheng Gu, Wu Rong, Fang Gan, and Lu Guimeng, all of whom were themselves well-connected. He also lived nearly to the age of one hundred, so his connections span several generations of poets.

The geographic spread of poet-monks that we saw in the maps above is directly related to their literary connections. Early writings about the first generation of poet-monks in the late-eighth century (not represented in the network graphs) attest to the importance of networks to their ascendancy. Jiaoran, Lingyi, and Lingche were well-known to such eminent literati as Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737-792?), Qian Qi 錢起 (710?-782?), Dugu Ji 獨孤及 (725-777), Quan Deyu 權德輿 (758-815), Gu Kuang, and the Huangfu 皇甫 brothers, Ran 冉 (717?-770?) and Zeng 曾 (d. 785), among many others. Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842), in his 833 preface to Lingche's collected poetry, summarized the monk's ascent in the literary world in precisely these terms:

He studied how to write poetry under Yan Wei (*j.s.* 757) when the latter came to Yue, and he gradually earned a reputation. When Yan Wei passed away, he went to Wuxing and traveled with the elder poet-monk Jiaoran and discussed the arts with him a great deal. Jiaoran wrote a letter of recommendation for him to the poet Gentleman Attendant Bao Ji (d. 792), who was very pleased to receive him. He also wrote a letter to Gentleman Attendant Li Shu (d. 834). At this time, everyone said that Bao Ji and Li Shu were the great literary stylists. Consequently, the Venerable Lingche's reputation was bolstered by these three gentlemen, like a cloud grabbing hold of the winds, his branch and leaves lush and flourishing.⁷²

從越客嚴維學為詩，遂籍籍有聞。維卒，乃抵吳興，與長老詩僧皎然遊，講藝益至。皎然以書薦於詞人包侍郎侷，包得之大喜。又以書致於李侍郎紆。是時以文章風韻主盟於世者曰包、李。以是上人之名由三公而揚，如雲得風，柯葉張王。

Similarly, later poet-monks used their connections to move beyond their home region and into the upper echelons of the literary world. Qibai appears well-connected in the network data. This is due to his long life lived between the southeast (home to the major poet-monks) and Chang'an (the cultural and political center of the empire until its destruction in 885). Based at Jianfu monastery 薦福寺 in the capital, he served as an “inner offerer” (*neigongfeng* 內供奉)—a kind of court ritual specialist—for Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 846–859).⁷³ One of his exchange poems is addressed to Wuzhen 悟真, a monk who arrived in 850 as part of a mission from the Return to Allegiance Army (Guiyijun 歸義軍) in the far west, which had recently gained independence from the Tibetan empire. This poem survives in two manuscripts unearthed from the cache at Dunhuang in the early twentieth century (see figure 1.3).⁷⁴ All throughout the poem, Qibai describes Wuzhen as being between things.

Respectfully Given to Dharma Master Zhen of Hexi 奉贈河西真法師

Qibai

I know that you, master, have come
 from far-away Dunhuang,
 You've perfected the skills and practices
 of both Buddhists and Confucians.
 You look like Falan,
 hurrying to the capital,⁷⁵
 And you discussed Bowang,
 presenting a new map.⁷⁶
 I've heard that at the Pass and in Long
 it's always spring,⁷⁷
 And it's said that by the Yellow and Huang rivers
 the flora never withers.⁷⁸
 How much land separates
 your prefecture from India?
 Can you see the Himālayas
 as you look to the west?

知師遠自燉煌至，
 藝行兼通釋與儒。
 還似法蘭趨上國，
 仍論博望獻新圖。

已聞關隴春長在，
更說河湟草不枯。
郡去五天多少地，
西瞻得見雪山無。⁷⁹

Qibai's poem emphasizes Wuzhen as a traveler across geographical and social boundaries. He is from a faraway land (lines 1, 7) about which Qibai seems to have only secondhand information: the weather is always warm, and the vegetation never fades (lines 5–6). Both of these, as anyone who has traveled to Gansu can attest, are not entirely accurate. Wuzhen is compared to a foreign missionary to China and to a Chinese emissary to the Xiongnu (lines 3–4): he is both Chinese and Central Asian. He is said to be skilled in the practices of both Buddhism and Confucian classicism (line 2). Qibai concludes by imagining Wuzhen peering out over the Himālayas, past China, and to the birthplace of Buddhism in Lumbini (line 8). Qibai's sense of geography may be shaky (the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau separates the Himālayas from Dunhuang by over six hundred miles), but his poem on Wuzhen as a boundary-crosser was well-received. Wuzhen and his disciples preserved Qibai's poem and copied it onto multiple manuscripts. Here Qibai, poet-monk of the capital and ritual specialist at Xuanzong's court, acts as the eminent writer lending some of his cultural capital to a lesser-known figure.

During the third period of the poet-monks' history (875–907), social and geographic mobility was crucial to an individual's survival. Guanxiu, whose life straddles the third and fourth periods, is a case in point. His fame as a poet became widespread only when he won a poetry contest at the age of twenty-six, on the occasion of a Daoist priest's parting:

The venerable monk's name as a poet made no waves at first. Then, talented men of Southern Chu [Hongzhou] competed to bid farewell to Master Xuanyuan Ji on his way to Mount Luofu with their poetry. The total came to more than a hundred pieces. When Guanxiu recited his piece, everyone else stopped writing.

初，上人詩名未振，時南楚才人競以詩送軒轅先生歸羅浮山，計百余首矣，上人因吟一章，群公於是息筆。⁸⁰

Later, Guanxiu used poetry to ingratiate himself with rising political leaders like Qian Liu 錢鏐 (852–932) and Wang Jian as well as with acclaimed poets like Wei Zhuang and Luo Yin. As political stability crumbled in the last years of the Tang and regional rulers began to

感 聖皇之化有燦煌有英師堪真上人
 朝日成四韻 報聖寺 賜紫僧友初
 名出燦煌別外登日月宮燦煌消在寒邊草覆春
 靈舞 千年 聖事老萬里同禱永持獻 孤
 四歲心 五言四韻奉贈河海大德
 報聖寺 四律奉次 大奉
 嵩山門空洋 敷行全解投 天不日不禪 亦錫
 登雲路樞不拂天 燦煌喜同清淨教身我長年
 奉帽冠真法師
 京華為福寺 內性奉天範物白上
 知即來自燦煌至敷行 京通輝尚儒里似
 真師論博望殿 新園已開離春長春屋 設
 涅草木板 則去五天多少 批愈勝得見雪山
 之帽河海 悟真法師
 四律奉之三章 應制大德有年
 沙散 嵩座清 天報入帝京 詞筆推樞 論
 評 許繼梅 幸喜輿坤 泰折近 日月明 翠柳 蘇連 仰
 平 門 早年

Figure 1.3 P. 3886, verso. Contains exchange poetry between the western monk Wuzhen and the capital-based monk Qibai during the mid-ninth century. A note on the recto side dates the manuscript to 960. Having been copied a century after the initial exchange, this suggests that these poems were cherished by Wuzhen's local community and passed on multiple times.

assert their independence from the central court, poets and monks alike traveled throughout the ruins of the empire to find safety. By roaming widely and exchanging poems with powerful elites, Guanxiu and other poet-monks were able to become some of the most prominent poets of their generation. They were especially well-connected, serving as the brokers that tied disparate groups of poets and monks together.

Poet-monks were not inward-looking, hermetic bonzes but central actors in literary society.⁸¹ In demonstrating this, my network analysis of exchange poems shows that the poet-monks, especially those who lived around the fall of the Tang, should not be regarded as minor actors in literary history. They are an integral part of it.⁸² Any history of medieval Chinese literature that minimizes their role risks overlooking major developments in the poetic tradition. In the late ninth century, as the Huang Chao Rebellion plunged the world into chaos, Buddhist monks' mobility became an asset. Their itinerant lifestyle prepared them to travel to the regional cultural centers that sought to establish new polities. Through their travels, they were able to bridge disparate communities and thereby became some of the most well-connected poets of their day.

In the latter half of the Tang dynasty, poet-monks constituted a thriving literary tradition that only continued to grow as the dynasty fell apart and disunity took over. They emerged as the result not only of changes in Buddhist doctrine but also of changes in politics, education, aesthetics, and human geography. Large-scale geographic and social data suggest that the poet-monks developed in four distinct stages: 1) birth in Jiangnan, 720–810; 2) spread to the capital, 811–874; 3) growth and dispersal across the empire, 875–907; and 4) consolidation in new cultural centers, 908–960. Throughout this process of development, poet-monks became more and more integral to literary networks as their mobility ensured that they would serve as hubs between different groups. A close examination of textual sources, as we saw briefly in this chapter and will explore in greater detail in the next two, confirms this macroscopic analysis. Over the course of these two centuries, the poet-monks' place in the literary world fundamentally changed.

Recognizing the centrality of poet-monks to this world should make us reexamine literary history. The end of the Tang and its subsequent period of division is not to be defined by its decadence and ossified, backward gaze. Rather, as this macroscopic picture suggests, and as we

will see in detail in subsequent chapters, it is a period of growth, of revival. We will see how, at the turn of the tenth century, the tradition of poet-monks was reaching its apex, developing ideas, attitudes, discourses, and poetic techniques that began with their predecessors in the late eighth century. They are the culmination of a tradition, not its epigones.