Chinese Buddhist poetry from the Song (宋; 960–1279) onward was marked by the dominance of Chan Buddhism and the participation of a newly emergent literary elite whose writings were increasingly published and preserved due to advances in printing technology. All of these factors, their individual development and occasional confluence, are the most salient traits of Chinese Buddhist literature from the Song until the literary May Fourth Movement (1919).

The special relationship between Buddhism and poetry has been a recurring subject of scholarship, mostly focused on Chan (Demiéville, 1970; Iriya, 1983; Ge, 1986; Watson, 1988), which has further yielded the study of Chan poetry and aesthetics (Pi, 1995; Zhang, 2006). The study of Buddhist poetry as literary history has focused on noteworthy Buddhist poet-monks and established poets who wrote Buddhist-themed poetry (Sun, 2006; Xiao, 2012). Buddhist poetry has also been studied for its role in generating critical discourse and influential sayings within the field of poetics, primarily articulated by literati within the “remarks on poetry” (shihua [詩話]) genre (Du, 1976; Kaji, 1979; Lynn, 1987; Zhou, 1992).

This article surveys the notable developments of Buddhist poetry since the Song, both as cultivated within monastic institutions and as circulated outside its formal confines, with a focus on the contributions of esteemed poet-monks. Chinese Buddhist discourse long distinguished between “inner learning” (neixue [內學]) and “outer learning” (waixue [外學]), and Southern Song compilers began employing “inner works” (neiji [內集]) and “outer works” (waiji [外集]) to organize the literature of monks. As a taxonomy for monkish authors, neiji are obviously Buddhistic and belong within the Buddhist canon. The category of waiji (including many bieji [別集]; “individual works”) refers to collections placed outside the Buddhist canon that were often anthologized and enjoyed wide circulation. In the following, we outline the changes that both categories of verse underwent during the Song that greatly influenced subsequent literary history.

Chan Buddhist Poetry in the Song and Its Influence

The growth and institutionalization of Chan Buddhism as the foremost Buddhist tradition of the Song, along with the invention of new forms of Chan literature, had an enormous impact on the collection and conceptualization of poetry written by Buddhist monks. The two most prominent, and closely related, Chan literary innovations, “lamp records” (denglu [燈錄]) and “recorded sayings” (yulu [語錄]), both came to maturity during the Song. While denglu are extensive genealogical histories of Chan lineages that compile exemplary writings and anecdotes from hundreds of masters, yulu collect the sermons and writings of individual abbots. Both types of literature include the poetry of Chan monks in significant quantities, which tends to increase and diversify through the Song and later dynasties. Although the verses within denglu and yulu can be classified according to various genres and subgenres, they are all broadly conceptualized as jisong (偈頌), the Chinese rendering of Sanskrit gāthā, roughly meaning Buddhist religious verse.

Chan Doctrinal Verse

The term jisong originally refers to the verse sections of Indian Buddhist sūtras. In China, the term also included newly written verses on Buddhist doctrine, and this didactic function of jisong remained prevalent within Chan literature from the Tang to Song. At the forefront of most Chan denglu is a master-by-master account of the mind-to-mind transmission from Śākyamuni Buddha to the Chinese patriarchs, where the “wordless” dharma is embodied in a series of transmission verses. The didactic efficacy of poetry is further displayed in the collection of long inscriptions (ming [銘]) and songs (ge [歌]), mostly attributed to Chan masters from the Tang. The most influential denglu, Daoyuan’s Jingde chuandeng lu (景德傳燈錄; Jingde Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp; T. 2076), collects many lengthy versifications (juan 29–30), including Xinxin ming (信心銘; Faith in
Mind) and Zhengdao ge (證道歌; Song of Enlightenment), that became fundamental expressions of Chan doctrine.

Elaborate doctrinal verses, such as Hongzhi Zhengjue’s (宏智正覺; 1091–1157) Mozhao ming (默照銘; Inscription of Silent Illumination), continued to be composed by Song dynasty masters. In addition, masters frequently wrote verses on concepts drawn from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and composed poetic series on Chan doctrinal schemes, especially Dongshan Liangjie’s (洞山良价; 807–869 CE) “five ranks” (五位 [五位]).

Besides composing verses on set topics, Chan masters employed verse in sermons to illustrate their points, often in reference to well-known Chan dialogues. Inscriptions, songs, and jisong by Tang and Song masters were anthologized in subsequent denglu and other compilations like the Song dynasty Chanmen zhuzushi jisong (禪門諸祖師偈頌; Gāthā of Chan Patriarchs and Masters; ZZ 1298; Shiina, 2003).

Expansion of the Form and Function of Jisong
As the writings of Chan masters were increasingly recorded in yulu, the conceptualization of jisong expanded through the Song to include a broader range of poetic activity representative of practices within Chan monasteries. In Song yulu, jisong is no longer limited to verses that are strictly devoted to doctrinal themes but includes a great deal of social and occasional verse and reclusive poetry, along with praise poetry and new genres particular to the Chan establishment (see below). Although the yulu attributed to Tang dynasty masters rarely contain more than a handful of poems, poetry consistently appears as part of the records of Song dynasty masters and is often collected within a distinct section of jisong (for Tang and Song yulu, see T. vols. 47–48; ZZ 62–73). Jisong sections can be brief, but most yulu include between 50 and 200 verses, while there are more than 1,000 verses in master Hongzhi Zhengjue’s (宏智正覺) Hongzhi chanshi guanglu (宏智禪師廣錄; Extensive Records of Chan Master Hongzhi; T. 2001). The recurrence of particular poetic forms and themes indicates that the composition of set types of verse constituted a key activity for Chan monks (see below).

The social and occasional poetry within yulu includes parting poems (songbieshi [送別詩] or zengbieshi [贈別詩]), poems written in the reclusive mode, epistolary verse, and verses written on specific occasions within the monastery. Although this poetry exhibits similarities with Buddhist-inspired poetry written by laypersons or collected in the “outer works” of poet-monks, overall the Buddhist character of these verses is heightened. They often contain explicit Buddhist terminology or are at least coded with recurrent metaphors and images that have religious significance within the corpus of Chan literature. Secular modes, such as the parting poem, are primarily exchanged between monks and are developed into metaphorical expositions of Chan philosophy. In general, only poetry with explicit, or strongly implicit, Buddhist significance is admitted into a master’s yulu, whereas the literati-style poetry (shi [詩]) of poet-monks deals with a greater variety of nonreligious topics, including poems on history and books, on seasonal occasions, and on objects.

Due to the fact that doctrinal verses were also often exchanged among monks, there is no categorical distinction between doctrinal and social and occasional poetry within yulu. The following types of verse, however, may be collected separately from, or under subheadings within, a selection of jisong.

Praise poetry, particularly zan (讚 [曽/賛]; encomium or eulogy), formed an integral part of the ritual and social life of Chan monasteries. Zan are written in rhymed parallel couplets of irregular line length, usually as “portrait encomia” (zhensan [真讚]) inscribed on images of illustrious masters and popular Buddhist figures. These portraits were used in funerary rites and for the worship of bodhisattvas. During the Song, masters also began writing encomia for portraits of themselves (zizan [自讚]), which were disseminated to lay and monastic followers to garner patronage and as a means of fundraising (Foulk & Sharf, 1993). The practice of composing self-encomia became prevalent among literati (Xie, 2012), who also wrote encomia for Chan masters and other popular figures, especially the bodhisattva Guanyin (Skt. Avalokiteśvara). Zan are similar in form and function to funerary verses written for deceased monks (foshi [佛事]) and are similar in tenor to pagoda inscriptions (taming [塔銘]) dedicated to the lives of illustrious masters.

One of the most distinctive and ubiquitous poetic genres within yulu is songgu (頌古). Songgu are versified responses to Chan gong’an (公案; Jpn. kōan), brief anecdotes and dialogues drawn from denglu as exemplars of Chan insight. While modern scholarship has focused on the language and use of the gong’an case, the master’s poetic commentary was the literary focal point of Song dynasty collections. Some collections of songgu circulated independently, and songgu are at the core of the major gong’an collections. The best-known examples are
Buddhist Poetry in Chinese Literature since the Song

The literary history of Chinese Buddhist poetry is long, but changes during the Song dynasty had far-reaching impacts. The Tang-Song transition witnessed the ascendancy of a new and powerful class of literati who rose to positions of authority by passing through the civil-service-examination system. Together with new woodblock-printing technologies, the examination system encouraged the spread of literacy and shifted cultural trends toward literati concerns. As these demographic changes coincided with the rise of an empire-wide network of Chan temples, the sangha became more intertwined with the new literati elite. From the Song, monks’ poetry deeply reflected the interests and tastes of literati.

Poet-monks (shiseng [詩僧]) occupy a curious place between the religious and literary traditions. At times, they have been criticized for being too Buddhist (not enough like literati) or not Buddhist enough (too much like literati), and the tension between commitments to serving religious office and to practicing poetic arts is a recurring theme in Buddhist poetry starting from the Tang (Watson, 1992). Although the term “poet-monk” was not an official title and did not belong to a single Buddhist tradition, by the Southern Song, poet-monks increasingly were associated with Chan lineages, and this did not change until the late Ming. Song critics alleged that the forerunners of this practice were the mid-Tang monk Jiaoran (皎然; 720–c. 795 CE) and late-Tang monks Guanxu (貫休; 832–912 CE) and Qiji (齊己; 863–937 CE). At times, they have been criticized for being too Buddhist (not enough like literati) or not Buddhist enough (too much like literati), and the tension between commitments to serving religious office and to practicing poetic arts is a recurring theme in Buddhist poetry starting from the Tang (Watson, 1992). Although the term “poet-monk” was not an official title and did not belong to a single Buddhist tradition, by the Southern Song, poet-monks increasingly were associated with Chan lineages, and this did not change until the late Ming. Song critics alleged that the forerunners of this practice were the mid-Tang monk Jiaoran (皎然; 720–c. 795 CE) and late-Tang monks Guanxu (貫休; 832–912 CE) and Qiji (齊己; 863–937 CE). Down to today, the term “poet-monk” itself has come into and out of fashion, and at times it was employed derogatively. Poet-monks never emerged as a formal organization, institution or lineage.
but local literary traditions occasionally took root. Nonetheless, the works of poet-monks and other literary monks occupy a conspicuous place in Chinese Buddhist literature.

The rise of literati to powerful positions in Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) society led to sweeping new literary styles. The “ancient prose” (guwen [古文]) movement emphasized clarity and precision in prose and had unexpected impacts on poetry as well. Shi poetry of the Song dynasty is known for its narrative and descriptive manner, philosophical intellection, interest in the ordinary events of everyday life, and strong social concerns. Compared with the so-called Late Tang style, mid-Northern Song poets after the guwen movement emphasized refined plainness (pingdan [平淡]; “even and bland”), an ideal first formulated by Mei Yaochen (梅堯臣; 1002–1060).

The poetry of Song dynasty monks reflected general literary trends. A group posthumously known as the “nine monks” (jiuseng; 九僧), for instance, lived and wrote before the Song guwen movement had come to the fore, and their poems were soon out of fashion. In contrast, most eminent monks of the Northern Song engaged the new poetic tradition. The poet-monk Daoqian (道簡; 1043–1122?) corresponded with leading literary figures, especially Su Shi, and his Canliao zi shiji (參寥子詩集; The Collected Poems of Master Canlia) embodied the aesthetics of pingdan (Kong, 2011). The eloquent intellectual Mingjiao Qisong (明教契嵩; 1007–1072), though best known for his essays, was beloved by contemporaries for the fashionable poems contained within the Tanjin wenji (鐵津文集; Collected Works of [the Monk from] Tanjin; T. 215; SBCK 400–406). The works of Juefan Huihong (覺範惠洪; 1071–1128) are a touchstone in the evolution of the relationship between Buddhist poetry and practice. His prose about poetry, both in his literary collection Shimen Wenzi Chan (石門文字禪; The Lettered Chan of Shimen; SBCK 1015–1022; see also Kakumon, 2012) and his shihua work Lengzhai yehua (冷齋夜話; Evening Remarks from Cold Studio; included in the Xijianben Songren shihua sizhong [稀見本宋人詩話四種; Four Rare Editions of Song-Era Shihsua]), was, perhaps, more influential than his poetry itself (Kakumon, 2012). Unlike most monks, Juefan Huihong dabbled in the newly popular and flamboyant song-lyric (ci [詞]) mode, albeit in a subdued and often explicitly Buddhist fashion. Juefan Huihong is associated most closely with the term “lettered Chan” (wenzi chan [文字禪]), and there is lively debate concerning its definition and significance (Gimello, 1992; Zhou, 1998; Keyworth, 2001; Xiao, 2012).

From the Song onward, scholar-officials involved themselves in the religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism even as they upheld Confucian norms and fealty to the imperial court. Many literati participated in religious rites in their official capacity for the benefit of local municipalities as well as learning to meditate, studying gong’an, and reading scriptures. Laypersons, like Su Shi, not only wrote poetry in Buddhist genres but also appropriated Buddhist themes for exploration in contemplative poetry (Egan, 1994; Grant, 1994a). Su Shi, together with Huang Tingjian, borrowed Buddhist concepts like “the samādhi of play” (youxi sanmei [遊戲三昧]) and reinterpreted them to describe the creative arts (Zhou, 1998; Egan, 2010). The Ming-era collection Dongpo Chan xia ji (東坡禪喜; Su Dongpo’s Felicities of Chan) placed Su Shi’s Buddhist works back in popular circulation.

The Jurchen invasions and calamitous siege of the Northern Song capital at Kaifeng in 1127 led to the establishment of a new capital at Lin’an (present-day Hangzhou) and the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). The period is characterized by an “inward turn” toward local power and activity and away from the centralized authority of the imperial court. Though poetry of the Southern Song is often described in terms of the development of Daoxue (道學, “Neo-Confucianism”), this overlooks the central role of Buddhist poetry. Surviving sources suggest that monks engaged in literary arts more than ever, and the period witnessed a profusion of “literary monks” (wenxue seng [文學僧]; Huang, 2010; 2014). Anthologies of Buddhist poetry from the Southern Song also circulated widely, including the Song gaoseng shixuan (宋高僧詩選; Selected Poems of Eminent Monks of the Song; CMYSXB 1; XXSKQS 1621) and Jianghu fengyue ji (江湖風月集; A Collection of Wind and Moon from Rivers and Lakes; ZT 11). Yanagida Seizan and Nishitani Keiji (1974) and Shiina Kōyū (1993) provide essential reference works for additional information on the editions and publication history of Song and Yuan sources.

The long, bloody fall of the Southern Song to Mongol forces and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) cast a pallor over all society, and the poetry of Chinese elites responded to their sudden exclusion from governance under an alien dynasty. Many literati turned away from civil service and toward education, local networks, and religions,
including Buddhism and its literary proclivities. The Jin dynasty poet Yuan Haowen (元好問; 1190–1257) was influential for both his own borrowing of Chan terms and his serving as a conduit for updating Su Shi’s legacy in the Yuan. Khitan statesman Yelü Chuci (耶律楚材; 1190–1244) distinguished himself in service to the early Mongol Empire. Though immortalized as a Confucian statesman, his collected poems in Zhanran jushi wenji (湛然居士文集; Collected Writings of the Layman Zhanran) include zan and jison and touch on many Buddhist themes.

Though doctrinal schools of Buddhism flourished in northern China during the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, there are relatively few extant literary works to speak of. It was Chan Buddhism that flourished in China’s southerly regions that continued to develop Buddhist poetry.Perhaps no monk from the Yuan accomplished more than the eminent Zhongfeng Mingben (中峯明本; 1263–1323), who lived in southern China. Among his many cultural achievements is his poetry on themes ranging across Chan and Pure Land, including one hundred poems “imitating Cold Mountain” (ni Hanshan [擬寒山]) and a highly regarded poetic cycle on the plum blossom (Heller, 2014). One of the most beloved poet-monks of the Yuan is the Chan master Shiwu Qinggong (石屋清珙; 1272–1352), who wrote hundreds of “living-in-the-mountains” (shanju [山居]) poems (Red Pine, 1999).

The poetry of the early Ming, characterized by unadorned simplicity, was in many ways an appropriation of Yuan period aesthetics, and it is the late Ming that is regarded as the seat of the dynasty’s most significant and long-lasting intellectual and literary developments. Likewise, though monastic Buddhism was a ubiquitous presence throughout the entire Ming dynasty, the late Ming witnessed a profusion of Buddhist literature, especially during the Buddhist revival of the Wanli reign (1573–1620). The “four great monks” at the fore of this Buddhist revival – Yunqi Zuhong, Hanshan Deqing (憨山德清; 1546–1623), Zibo Zhenke (震澤真可; 1543–1603), and Ouyi Zhixu (蕅益智旭; 1599–1655) – were also significant literary figures, whose poetry has been canonized in their respective collected works. The poetry of earlier monks circulated anew with the reprinting of individual collections and the production of new anthologies like the comprehensive Gujin Chanzao ji (古今禪藻集; Collection of Chan Duckweed Past and Present; SKQS 1416). New Buddhist poetry in this period was voluminous, and many literary monks rose to prominence. Qian Qianyi (錢謙益; 1552–1664) included about one hundred eminent monks from the era in his period anthology Liefchao shiji (列朝詩集; Poems from Successive Dynasties), and there are well over two hundred individual literary collections from monks from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (Huang, 2011). Noteworthy among them is Xuelang Hong’en (雪浪洪恩; 1545–1608), best known as the patriarch of the late Ming revival of Huayan-Yogācāra, whose poetry is found in the Xuelang ji (雪浪集; Collection of Xuelang; SKQSCC 190) and the Xuelang xuji (雪浪續集; Further Collection of Xuelang; CMYSXB 2; Liao, 2008). Although many works of poetry can be found in the Jiajing and Qianlong editions of the Buddhist canon, the works of other celebrated poet-monks, like Huishan Jiexian (晦山戒顯; 1610–1672), only survive in rare manuscripts. Some of these are now available in modern annotated editions, such as the poetry of Cangxue Duche (蒼雪讀禪; 1588–1656; Sun, 2004; Liao, 2014).

Buddhist poetry from the Ming-Qing transition is often interpreted in light of the Ming loyalists. Dis-satisfactions with Manchu rule of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) were lodged in poetry and postures of eremitism as forms of protest. Hanxue Fazang (漢月法藏; 1573–1635) was a celebrated poet-monk whose lineage became a bastion of Ming loyalist sentiment and attracted many literati followers. Many Ming loyalists took up robes as refuge, a phenomenon known as “escaping into Chan” (tao chan [逃禪]; Wu, 2008). The erstwhile Ming official Jin Bao (金堡; dharma name Dangui Jinshi [澹歸今釋]; 1614–1680) was one of several officials who took the tonsure under the literary Caodong monk Tianran Hanshi (天然漢示; 1608–1685). While in the monastery, Jin Bao wrote poetry so nostalgic for the lost Ming dynasty that one hundred years later it was banned by the Qing government. On the other hand, Muchen Daomin (木陳道忞; 1596–1674) shifted away from Ming loyalist sentiments after traveling north to meet the young Qing emperor Shunzhi (順治; r. 1644–1661). Poems from his meeting with the emperor and his time in the capital are recorded in the Beiyouji (北遊集; A Record of Travels to the North; J Bi80; Liao, 2008).

The Ming and Qing witnessed a remarkable rise in the writings and publications of gentry women, who were often attracted to the universalistic aspects of Buddhism in contrast to the restricted gender roles prescribed by the prevailing Neo-Confucian...
ideology. Along with writing verses on popular topics such as Pure Land devotion or the practice of embroidering images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, a number of laywomen produced entire poetry collections with strong Buddhist inclinations, which have been the subject of recent studies (Grant, 1994b; 1999; Fong, 2007; see also the Ming Qing Women’s Writings website). Although Buddhist nuns since the Song had long composed poetry that was collected in yulu and anthologized in other Chan literary collections, the quantity of verses and other writings preserved is minimal before the flourishing print culture of the Ming and Qing. The best source for the poetry of Buddhist nuns since the Tang is Xiu biquani zhujuan (續比丘尼傳: Further Biographies of Nuns), whose poetic contents, along with poetry included in the handful of extant yulu and anthologized in other Chan literary collections, the quantity of verses and other writings preserved is minimal before the flourishing print culture of the Ming and Qing. The best source for the poetry of Buddhist nuns since the Tang is Xiu biquani zhujuan (續比丘尼傳: Further Biographies of Nuns), whose poetic contents, along with poetry included in the handful of extant yulu of Ming-Qing Buddhist nuns, have been translated and studied by B. Grant (2001; 2003).

As the Qing imperium disintegrated, many public intellectuals turned to Buddhism for inspiration. The Buddhist renaissance of the late Qing and early Republic of China period was one of debate, disenchantment, and sweeping reforms. The celebrated ascetic monk and politically active institutional reformer Jing’an (敬安; 1851–1912; also known as Bazhi Toutuo [八指頭陀]) engaged deeply with the classical poetic tradition but in an iconoclastic style. Some of his poems directly respond to the violence and imperialism of the 19th century. Like many before him, he also used poetry to correspond with learned men and in more meditative moments addressed new philosophical and practical concerns (Huang, 2011).

The changes wrought upon literature by the end of imperial China and the rise of modern China are hard to overstate. In spite of assertions to the contrary, Buddhist ideas have remained a powerful force in modern creative arts and literature, especially novels and plays. Zhou Mengdie (周夢蝶; 1921–2014), born on the heels of the May Fourth Movement, may be the best-known modern Buddhist poet. Zhou Mengdie wrote idiosyncratic free verse full of allusions to traditional as well as world literatures (Zeng, 2005). Although the future of Chinese Buddhist poetry remains to be seen, interest in the Chinese Buddhist poetic tradition in both the Chinese- and English-speaking worlds remains strong as seen within numerous scholarly investigations, anthologies (Chen et al., 1982; Zhu & Chen, 2012), and recent translations (Red Pine et al., 1998; Egan, 2010).

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