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Jichan

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The Chinese monk Jichan (1852–1912) played many roles during his lifetime—for instance, becoming the administrator of important Chan temples and the teacher to future Buddhist leaders. One of his most famous students, Taixu (discussed in chapter 3), later recalled that Jichan had an exquisite ability to test the insight of students.^[1] He pressed disciples with gong’an—most often “What is your original face before parents were even born?”—and was able to guide students to profound awakening. Taixu remembered Jichan as a skillful teacher with boundless energy, who never missed a single summer or winter retreat. Students flocked to learn from him.

His accomplishments in practice and his training of disciples notwithstanding, Jichan is best known for the thousands of poems he wrote and published in his lifetime. Many of his poems point to specific Chan teachings, and some of his poems served as vehicles for instruction.^[2] Jichan’s poetry allowed him to address worldly concerns as well, such as the suffering of people during wartime. In addition, poetry was a medium for this monk to connect with secular elites. Drafting, circulating, and reciting poetry was a normal activity for the educated classes in imperial China.



Master Jichan (center) showing the severed fingers on his left hand. Tiantong Monastery, circa 1906–1909.

For Jichan himself, however, poetry sometimes was an expedient means to convey Buddhist teachings, a karmic fetter, or the locus for a spiritual struggle. He at times questioned the idea that poetry itself could be a Buddhist practice. In his poems he repeatedly says that his fondness for poetry is an obstacle to total liberation. Nonetheless, poetry was a fundamental part of Jichan's life, and his works remain a source of inspiration to Buddhists.

Jichan became known as a poet-monk, a reputation he still has today, thanks to his prolific poetic publications. However, the term *poet-monk* is often used to suggest something more romantic. Jichan was foremost an ardent practitioner. He was not even interested in poetry until he was twenty years old—very late for a Chinese poet. His poetry is grounded in the seriousness of his commitment to the Buddhist path. The most obvious manifestation of his seriousness is also the reason for his nickname, “the Eight-Fingered Ascetic.” In 1877 he sacrificed the pinkie and ring finger from his left hand in a fiery ritual in front of relics of the Buddha. Jichan was a fervent practitioner of Buddhism and simultaneously a person susceptible to poetic reverie.

Jichan's Early Life

Jichan wrote several autobiographies, which are my main source for reconstructing the following details.^[3] Jichan had a difficult youth. He was born in Hunan to a family surnamed Huang in the first year of the Xianfeng reign (1851–1861) of the Qing dynasty. This same year also witnessed the birth of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the beginning of the deadliest civil war in human history. By the Gregorian calendar, Jichan's birthday was January 23, 1852, shortly before the new lunar year. When small, he liked to accompany his mother to Buddhist rituals and events, but she was sickly and died when he was five years old (seven *sui*).^[4] He later mentioned her passing in one of his earliest poems, “On Shaving My Head, a Poem for My Little Brother” (translated below as I.2). A few years later, Jichan had barely started learning the Confucian *Analects* when his father's sudden death

threw him into the poverty of an orphan. At first Jichan lived with a poor farmer, tilling the fields, and then he performed menial tasks for local families in exchange for housing. He did not have parents to provide him food to eat. His labor provided sustenance for himself and his younger brother. Given these dire conditions, he had to discontinue his formal education. No one then could have predicted that this poor boy would become one of the best-known Buddhist poets of his era.

In his autobiographies, Jichan writes that one rainy day he was plowing a farmer's fields with a draft ox when he caught sight of white peach trees in bloom along the hedge. A gust of wind shook the flowers loose and they started to fall. He burst into tears. Shortly after that day he sought to become a Buddhist monk. He joined the novitiate, and a few months later he received the full monastic precepts, all in 1868 when he was between sixteen and seventeen years old. He was given the dharma name Jing'an (Reverential Peace) and the courtesy name of Jichan (Entrusted to Chan). It was almost a decade later that he gave himself the nickname "Eight-Fingered Ascetic" (*Bazhi toutuo*).

In 1877, Jichan arrived at the historic Ayuwang Monastery. He had already studied with several well-known teachers and had experienced an awakening confirmed by Chan master Hengzhi Wulai (1811–1875), a master known for his own meditative achievements, but Jichan had not yet completely realized his goal. Taixu would later write that Jichan was never complacent in his practice, and he was assiduous in his pursuit of wisdom and meditative concentration. Ayuwang Monastery has been in use since the third century c.e. and is famous for possessing the parietal bone of Śākyamuni Buddha, a relic said to have survived the crematory fires that consumed his body after his *parinirvāṇa*. Relics like this exude a kind of charisma. They provide a visceral connection to the Awakened One and frequently inspire acts of piety. Here, Jichan decided to make an offering of his own fingers. Jichan may have been zealous and extreme among his contemporaries, but he was not unique in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Many others had done this before him.

The practice of bodily sacrifice is partly based on a chapter of the *Lotus Su?tra*—perhaps the single most important Buddhist scripture in East Asia. The practice also finds inspiration in Jataka tales, ancient texts recounting previous lives of the Buddha, narrating the virtuous and self-sacrificial qualities he cultivated over countless lifetimes before being born as Prince Siddhārtha. Siddhārtha in his final lifetime left his stately home to pursue intense ascetic practices. All these selfless acts had to be done before he could become the Awakened One.

We can only speculate about the physical, social, and spiritual preparations Jichan undertook for the ordeal. He may have informed someone in the leadership of his plans. He likely soaked a cloth in perfumed oils and wrapped tightly the two smallest fingers on his left hand. In front of the skull bone of Śākyamuni, Jichan surely intoned prayers, inwardly clarified his intentions, and demonstrated his irreversible will to achieve liberation. He ignited the oil-soaked cloth.

For the remainder of his life, Jichan was renowned for the seriousness of his practice. He spoke plainly and forcefully. Everywhere he went, his dedication to the Buddhist path was always visibly at hand. Jichan lived during the early history of photography, and there are several known photographs of him. In some photographs, he lifts his left hand up toward the camera. In a photograph by Ernst Boerschmann, reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, Jichan holds a long rosary with prayer beads across his body. It is running through each of his hands. A viewer can see the depth of Jichan’s commitment to Buddhist practice moving through his eight fingers.

Jichan as Poet

Although Jichan gained a positive reputation through various accomplishments—for instance, serving as the principal force behind the modern reconstruction of Tiantong Monastery—already in his lifetime he was best known as a poet. He published semi-regularly in his lifetime, writing nearly two thousand poems. According to Jichan, his ability to

compose traditional Chinese poetry, a genre known for its profound difficulty, arrived suddenly one day when he was about nineteen years old.

Having missed out on an education as a child, Jichan was not initially inclined to literary or aesthetic pursuits. To the contrary, he was dubious of the ornate flourishes of literary monks. His conversion to poetry took place when he was a student at Renrui Monastery on Qishan, west of Hengyang City, Hunan. There he studied with his first great master Hengzhi Wulai. Hengzhi was also from Hunan and likewise grew up in a poor family. Jichan recalled that one other student in particular, named Jingyi Sican, enjoyed writing poetry and had a big influence on him in this regard. Jingyi was also from Hunan but had the benefit of an education as a child. Later, both Jingyi and Jichan were recognized as dharma heirs of Hengzhi Wulai, making them dharma brothers.

In 1869, when Jichan was seventeen years old, he arrived at Renrui Monastery. Jingyi was already an advanced senior student and was serving in the roles of *shuozuo* (head student; J. *shuso*) and *weinuo* (“rector,” or the second in charge; J. *ino*). During breaks in the formal monastic schedule, Jichan would practice extra meditation and ascetic cultivation. Jingyi by contrast used any rest time to compose poems for his own enjoyment. At that time, Jichan believed that if a person was truly dedicated to realizing liberation, they could not spend even a moment of our brief human lives on frivolous entertainment, such as poetry. He thus spoke bluntly to Jingyi, chastising him for spending so much time and effort on profane literary pursuits. According to Jichan’s first autobiography, Jingyi responded, “You spend your black-haired youth practicing so intensively, though the future in which you will realize buddhahood is immeasurably far away. As for the wisdom and samādhi of writing, I worry I won’t be able to realize it in this lifetime.” In other words, the possibility of becoming a buddha by sitting in meditation requires countless lifetimes, whereas the possibility of achieving a spiritual insight from textual study can be realized in this life. In a later autobiography, Jichan remembered Jingyi instead saying, “Your dusty head and dirty face are only suited to studying the Chan of withered trees. How could you understand what is in the heart of a person destined with karma

for both literature and Buddhism?” In other words, to shun language and insist on silent sitting (like a cold dead tree) is a deluded attitude that has not yet realized the truth of nonduality. In both versions of his story, the episode clearly encapsulated for Jichan a recurring motif in his life and a theme in his poetry: the tension between the ascetic path of Buddhist monastic training and the aesthetic life of a person endowed with a poetic sensitivity to the world. At the time of this conversation, Jichan had not yet composed a single poem.

According to Jichan’s autobiographies, his poetic career began unexpectedly several years later, in 1871, when he took a short leave from Qishan Monastery to visit a maternal uncle in Yueyang (northern Hunan). There, Jichan joined friends in climbing the famous Yueyang Tower that overlooks the eastern shore of Lake Dongting. Rebuilt many times, the impressive structure was first constructed for military use in the third century. It was made famous by poets of the Tang and Song dynasties (such as Du Fu, Li Bai, and Fan Zhongyan). Inspired by the view (and the echoes of those earlier poems), Jichan’s friends began playing a parlor game to compose their own poems. Jichan, not yet a poet, excused himself and sat quietly and meditated. After some time, he lowered his gaze and beheld the colors and shapes of the enormous body of water. All at once an entire poetic phrase appeared in his mind: “The waves of Dongting carry this solitary monk.” Despite that he had never studied poetry before, the cadence of the words formed a perfect line of verse.

Jichan soon shared his experience with a learned friend named Guo Jusun (d.u.). Guo confirmed that this was an original line of poetry and was stunned that Jichan could produce such a lovely line. This moment of poetic creativity seemed inexplicable. Guo decided this was a spiritual mystery. He told Jichan that his karma from previous lives clearly connects him to poetry. It was Guo who encouraged Jichan to cultivate his gifts. Guo taught Jichan about poetry from the anthology *Three Hundred Tang Poems*. One by one, Jichan learned each poem by heart, memorizing it after a single reading, and he quickly absorbed all three hundred poems.

Two of Jichan's earliest surviving poems were revised and completed in 1873. One poem from 1873 is called "On Shaving My Head, a Poem for My Little Brother." This poem (I.2) is autobiographic and narrates his path to becoming a monk. It is the very first poem in several publications by Jichan. The other is to his dharma brother Jingyi (I.1). The poem is about missing a close friend, and the poem wishes to close the distance that separates them. Although the poem begins very early in the morning, it is already too late; upon waking the poet-monk already feels a sense of longing. When he says that a wild goose has departed, the wild goose is a metaphor for a messenger—it is as if the mail has already gone for the day and there is no way to send a message to his friend. The poem turns its attention to the beauty of a hermetic delight. Because the poem is addressed to Jingyi, that implies, first, that Jingyi is someone who can also appreciate such small everyday joys; second, Jingyi is a person who would appreciate Jichan's keen desire to share that moment with the right friend, even if that friend is far away. The poem registers the kind of friendship that exists between poet-monks.

Jichan became obsessed with poetry. He wrote that he felt a tremendous burden if he sensed one word was not quite right, sometimes forgetting to eat or sleep while he wracked his brain. He likely felt that his word choice was too facile, or that it did not quite capture the right nuance, texture, or timbre of a scene. It is said that he once finished a poem years after he started it, when he finally found the right word. Such stories are entirely plausible, however, we should note that Jichan's life story dramatizes a romantic ideal familiar to readers of Chinese poetry. The ideal of *kuyin*, "bitter intoning" or "painstaking composition," was popular among a set of late Tang poets. It is associated with Jia Dao (779–843) in particular, who had been a Buddhist monk before returning to lay life. One can compare a *kuyin* poet to a "starving artist," one toiling to craft a perfect literary artifact to the point of physical and mental suffering.^[5] *Kuyin* was also associated with the feeling of being completely absorbed in poetic craft. Most of these themes appear in Jichan's poetry.

Though he would complete between 15 and 132 poems in any given year for the rest of his life, Jichan always considered himself poorly read. He continued to study the great Tang and Song poets, especially those whose sensibilities lent themselves to a poet-monk. As a result, his poetry is full of echoes to classics of Chinese poetry. His poems are relatively easy to read and yet are also satisfying to a well-educated reader. At the same time, however, his sudden infatuation with poetry also brought an uneasiness. Jichan could not neglect his proper duties as a monk. It seemed worrisome to be so infatuated with something aesthetic and pleasurable. He may have worried: Were his intentions in studying and composing poetry really aligned with his dedication to the Buddhist path? This was not a tension he could readily resolve—and it remained a live question that runs through many of his poems.

Even as his study of poetry began, Jichan continued his rigorous Chan training under Hengzhi Wulai. One day, he was investigating the gong'an of “What is your original face before mother and father were born?” when both inwardly and outwardly the world fell away. He was in this deep meditation for most of the day. Then he heard the sounds of a nearby brook and had an awakening. Hengzhi Wulai recognized Jichan as a dharma heir. And so, Jichan began a lifetime of balancing his Buddhist monastic occupation and his calling as a poet.



It is reasonable to suspect that the received story of Jichan's life has been subject to some embellishments. Our understanding of his experience is shaped by the ways in which Jichan chose to represent himself through self-narrative. Others reiterated and amplified the most compelling parts of his story. It is likely impossible that we will ever know what “really” happened on the day that Jichan suddenly had his first poetic insight, for example. At the same time, it is unlikely a coincidence that Jichan is said to have experienced the poetic equivalent of a sudden awakening—the ultimate ideal in a Chan master's life. His story may also remind us of the Sixth

Ancestor Huineng in the *Platform Sutra*, who was an illiterate student and had no intention becoming a poet, but thanks to his spiritual genius, he ended up composing a famous verse. To at least some extent, preexisting cultural frameworks appear to have determined the narratives that Jichan and others used to make sense of his life.

It seems Jichan and those around him (such as Mr. Guo) did understand his life story in these religious terms. We should not suspect them of fabricating these events out of whole cloth, nor of exaggerating their significance. To the contrary, the hagiographic embellishments of Jichan's life are like a map that point us toward what he and his contemporaries regarded as the most salient details of a life well lived. His autobiographies help us understand what animated his poems.

Jichan's poems register the same tensions seen in his autobiographies. For example, some of his poetry refers to his untiring urge to make more poems as a spiritual hindrance. He playfully imagines a "poetry demon" is haunting him. That poetic image is first found in Tang and Song poetry. It was a creative way for monks and others to talk about their complex relationship to poetic craft. On the one hand, Jichan (like many others) recognized that it is ostensibly possible for a monk to write poetry that brings others toward the truth of the Dharma or inspired practice and contemplation. Such a solution, however, is easier said than done. Jichan was not one to write exclusively dogmatic poems. On the other hand, if poetry really had become an attachment or a fetter on his path, then Jichan ought to forsake poetry. He parted with two fingers—was letting go of poetry more difficult than that? For Jichan, the answer was yes—poetry was something that welled up within him, that was larger than himself, and that he could not stop. As a result, he often registered this tension between asceticism and aesthetics in his poetry. This is a classic theme of Chinese Buddhist poetry, too, a topic that monks turned to again and again over centuries. In this way as well, Jichan engaged the long tradition of poet-monks admirably, and he was praised by his contemporaries as one of the foremost poet-monks of his day.

The Flowering Plum Tree

Above all else, Jichan loved the flowering plum tree. He was sometimes called “the plum-blossom monk” because of his poetic obsession with the flowering plum.^[6] His first collection, published in woodblock print in 1881 with nearly three hundred poems, was entitled *Songs to Savor the Flowering Plum*. Selections are translated here. He later published a small booklet titled *Smaller Collection of White Plums* in 1904, with only eight poems. A complete translation is below. He published other times in his life as well.^[7] His plum-blossom poems are laden with allusions to earlier poets. At the same time, he added a new layer of Buddhist meaning to the long Chinese tradition of celebrating the plum-blossom tree.

The natural behavior of the Asian flowering plum tree, *Prunus mume*, has potent symbols that are associated with the virtues of a gentleman hermit—and by extension those of a Buddhist monk. The flowers of the plum burst forth before the end of wintry weather. Plum blossoms commonly display white, pink, or red petals. Its flowers are the first of the year and a harbinger of spring. Poets note that snow often falls again after the plum has bloomed, generating a unique seasonal experience of early spring’s light-colored blossoms against late winter’s snow. The trees display a delicate beauty amid inhospitable conditions. For the Buddhist monk, this flowering tree also symbolizes how hardship is not separate from the manifestation of one’s full potential—an idea that can be compared with the lotus blossom that grows in muddy water.

However, other qualities of the tree do not make it an obvious candidate to serve as the symbol for a poet. By common standards, its flowers are not bright and showy, neither are they especially fragrant. Even an old plum-blossom tree will not have grown especially tall. Its limbs and boughs tend to be thin or gnarled. When other flowers reach their full bloom, people gather for feasts and entertainment. The plum, in comparison, appears to be a relatively unassuming tree. If, on the one hand, the plum did not garner a feast, on the other hand it is these same subtler qualities—austerity and restraint—that drew the imagination of China’s scholarly class (including

erudite monks) who saw their own lives mirrored in this underappreciated flower.

The literary history of the flowering plum in China begins somewhat later than that of other flora. He Xun, a poet of the Liang dynasty (502–557), was among the first to admire the virtues of plum blossoms, tending flowering plums during a period of political turmoil. Jichan refers to He Xun in a poem translated here (II.5). In Tang dynasty poems as well, such as those by Li Bai, plum blossoms are associated with exile and displacement. Many poems also compare the delicate blossoms of the plum with the beauty of a woman—a trope that Jichan avoided reiterating himself.

Jichan’s poems most often reference the patriarch of plum-blossom poetry, Lin Bu (967–1028), who lived during the early Song dynasty. The Song dynasty is associated with the birth of a literati culture, as the new government cultivated a class of scholar-officials. Many members of the intelligentsia who sought freedom from the drudgery of bureaucratic life found inspiration in Lin Bu’s poems. The famous Song-era ink paintings of flowering plums are virtually synonymous with these literati ideals. As for Lin Bu, he spent much of his life in rustic retirement on an island called Solitary Hill (Gushan) in West Lake, part of Hangzhou city. He was a recluse who refused employment, never married, and lived a simple life. Lin Bu is often called a “hermit,” but he did not live alone in a remote mountain. He maintained regular social intercourse with nearby monks and fellow poets. The most famous of Lin Bu’s poems is probably “Small Flowering Plum in a Hillock Garden,” which praises the flowering plum as better than those flowers that cannot survive in winter. In that poem, one couplet has been most celebrated since the Song dynasty: “Sparse shadows cast oblique lines over clear shallow water; / Hidden fragrance wafts in dim moonlight.”^[8] The couplet depicts something completely ordinary (a tree’s shadow) that is too subtle for a common viewer. The branches themselves must be thin if they can cast such delicate shadows. By naming the shape of moonlight shadows, and a faint breeze wafting the blossoms’ delicate perfume, the poet asks his reader if they are also the kind of person who can

appreciate quiet beauty. Jichan referred to this couplet often in his poetry. The sharing of such a moment of appreciation was itself important to him as a poet and as a Chan teacher. In the poems below, you can see his references to Lin Bu and the inspiration Jichan drew from this poem.

Classics of Chan Buddhist literature draw an analogy between the flowering plum and awakening. The flowering plum bursts forth from the desolate landscape of winter. Jichan explored this theme in “Facing a Plum Tree and Having an Insight.” The third couplet of that poem refers to a famous Song-dynasty Chan story. The *Liandeng huiyao* (*Essential Records of the Linked Flames*) records the story as follows:

Long ago, there was an old woman who supported a hermit for twenty years. She regularly sent a girl of sixteen or seventeen by herself to offer food and wait upon him. One day she told the girl to grab him firmly, and ask, “That moment just now, how about it?” The hermit responded, “I am a withered tree atop frozen rock; three months of winter with no warmth.” The girl reported this to the old woman. The woman said, “For twenty years I’ve been giving alms to a common bloke.” She threw out the hermit and burned down the hermitage.^[9]

This story points to the nature of Chan awakening. It is not merely the rejection or negation of desires, a kind of stoicism. The monastic path to awakening does require self-restraint. However, the constant application of restraint itself is not freedom. Awakening is a kind of breakthrough. In his poem, Jichan uses a poetic metaphor to describe that kind of breakthrough. The “three months of winter with no warmth” are like the deluded world of samsara. The plum blossom is an awakening that emerges suddenly from those unlikely conditions. Jichan compared the blossoming plum to Chan awakening in other poems as well.

Jichan’s poems also describe white flowering plum blossoms against white snow. In such an image, the flowering plum blends seamlessly with its landscape—though Jichan can still discern it. This subtle way of seeing,

written into many of his poems, is one way that Jichan infuses these plum-blossom poems with Buddhist philosophy. In his poetry, the pureness of the white blossom may symbolize the thusness of being, or buddha-nature. This thusness is universal, not exclusive to oneself, and so it is also imminent in things outside oneself. Seen from this profound perspective, the boundaries between the self and the other begin to blur—the essence of the flowering plum is no different from that of the snow. However, seen from the perspective of our ordinary experience, each separately existing thing retains its individuality—flowers and snow are distinct phenomena. In his poetry, Jichan suggests that the truth is simultaneously both (and thus neither one) of these—like a white flowering plum blossom and the snowy landscape.

Jichan's language is plain and clear and yet full of energy, which makes it fitting that he took the flowering plum as his personal emblem. Many poems show parallels between the poet and plum. In "Searching for Plum Trees after Snowfall," there is an echo between himself, leaning on a goosefoot staff, and the plum tree with its shadows reaching through the fog. It is as though the goosefoot staff is holding him up in a way that parallels how he imagines the long angular shadows of the tree are buttressing the mist. Many of this plum-blossom monk's teachings were expressed through such poetry.

Poetry and Friendship

Though Jichan's flowering-plum poems often depict the poet as a solitary explorer, he also composed numerous poems directly addressing friends and associates. Poetry was still an ordinary part of social life for educated men in early modern China. These social poems form a substantial part of traditional Chinese poetry and are not unique to Jichan. Indeed, it would have been odd if Jichan had not written poems like these.

Several of Jichan's poems are to two artistic members of a prominent Hunan family. He was friendly with Chen Sanli (1853–1937), a well-known poet who was about his same age. Chen Sanli's father was Chen Baozhen

(1831–1900), a reformist-minded official who was governor of Hunan. Jichan also corresponded with Chen Sanli's eldest son, Chen Shizeng (1876–1923), a well-known artist who was a precocious painter in his youth, later celebrated for his promotion of traditional literati styles of painting. By coincidence, Shizeng's younger brother was Chen Yinke (1890–1969), one of modern China's most famous historians.

Jichan's social relationships can be useful context for interpreting these poems. A reader can glean a lot of information by paying careful attention to the poems' long, descriptive titles. For example, a suite of three poems is entitled "Mr. Infatuated with Plum Blossoms Asked Chen Shizeng to Sketch the Likeness of White Plum Blossoms, I Added Three Poems in Acclaim" (II.2). From this title we know that Jichan's three poems were inspired by a painting done by Chen Shizeng. Plum-blossom paintings by Chen are in museums today and can be seen online. The painting, moreover, was created in response to a request by someone whose nickname was Mr. Infatuated with Plum Blossoms. That person is Li Ruiqing (1867–1920), a well-known calligrapher who would become a leader of modern fine arts education in China. The title of the poem chronicles an elite literary and artistic world, and lets the reader know the immediate audience for Jichan's poems. In another poem addressed to Chen Shizeng, "My Feelings as I Set Off from Young Master Chen" (III.3), Jichan seems to be responding to the young artist's sentimentality as they part from each other. Jichan here presents himself as an older and wiser friend who can see through such worldly feelings even though he still feels them. Jichan also wrote poems addressed to monks, recording a social web of fellow Buddhists. Those poems sometimes register his comradeship. For example, the poem addressed to Venerable Pure Karma (II.3) works the word *karma* from the monk's name into the body of the poem, rendering the poem into a unique literary gift for his friend.

Jichan wrote additional poems on paintings, such as "On a Painting of Fishing the Snowy River" (III.1). That painting was surely based on the very famous poem by Liu Zongyuan (773–819) known as "Snowy River," which includes the couplet, "The old man in solitary skiff with straw cloak,

/ is alone fishing the snowy river.” This was a common theme for traditional landscape paintings. The original theme concerns an elite bureaucrat’s desire to escape the world of administration and politics. Jichan’s poem is skillful for how it transforms that classic theme into a meditation on Buddhist philosophy. Fishes who chase the shadows of plum blossoms can never have their hunger sated. A reader may compare the poetic image with how most people, deeply deluded about the nature of samsara, will chase ephemeral solutions to our insatiable desires.

Jichan’s Death and Legacy

The final act for Jichan involved a dramatic episode that transformed how he would be remembered. In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution toppled the Qing dynasty government. After nearly three centuries of Manchu leadership over late imperial society, and after millennia of other forms of imperial governance, a vision for a new Republic of China began to take shape. On the first day of 1912, Sun Yat-sen was inaugurated as the first president of the provisional government. On March 11, a body of representatives convened in Nanjing to ratify the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China. However, power had already begun to shift from Nanjing to Beijing. The political events that unfolded in the subsequent months, years, and decades are too complex to outline here. Suffice it to say that the twilight of imperial China, a momentous event in world history, was the backdrop to the end of Jichan’s life. And his actions at this time were essential to how he would be memorialized by later Chinese Buddhists.

The fall of the imperial government meant the loss of the legal protections that had been afforded to Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns for centuries. Although the new constitution guaranteed “freedom of religion,” that often did not translate into real protection on the ground for traditional Buddhist monks and their temples. At the same time, the new regime encouraged social groups to organize in a new manner. The government did not want to interface with individual monks or temples and

instead would respond to larger civil organizations. Buddhists quickly began to organize into associations.

Numerous Buddhist associations were created, though most can be understood as big dreams with few actual members or activities. Buddhists focused on creating associations to seek legal protection for monastery assets. This focus emerged in response to one of the goals of revolutionary intellectual elites, which was to create a modernized mass education system. The fiscal realities of turn-of-the-century China were dire, and the fall of the old empire did not improve the economy. To generate the resources needed for these new schools, local officials simply took buildings, land, and property away from Buddhist temples and placed them under local government control. Such expropriation by the state was a serious threat to Buddhist monastic communities.

Some Buddhist associations were created to enact modernist agendas. One of Jichan's most reform-minded disciples, Taixu, set up an aggressively reformist "Society for the Advancement of Buddhism." As mentioned in chapter 3, Taixu and his associates used the newly available legal instruments to seize control of the famous Jinshan Monastery, with the intention of transforming its property and holdings into a modern educational facility. Soon the monks of Jinshan fought back, and the conflict came to blows. A court jailed some of the monks and ceased the operations of Taixu's revolutionary association.

Jichan co-organized what would become the first national Buddhist organization in modern China. As the abbot of Tiantong Monastery and a prominent monastery administrator, he established a provincial association. Then he worked with delegates representing seventeen province-wide Buddhist organizations. Monks representing all corners of the new nation gathered at Liuyun Temple in Shanghai. On April 1, 1912, the delegates voted to establish the General Buddhist Association of China. They passed several resolutions (including a resolution requesting the government protect monastic property). The General Buddhist Association of China elected Jichan as the national association's first president. The association

petitioned the government to ratify its charter and give it official recognition.

Though the president of the fledgling organization, Jichan temporarily returned to Mount Tiantong. At one point earlier that year, he had gone to Nanjing to visit Sun Yat-sen to discuss the importance of government protection for Buddhist temples. However, Sun soon resigned as provisional president in an agreement that ceded the office to Yuan Shikai, who held power in Beijing and was able to arrange the abdication of the child emperor Puyi (1906–1967; r. 1908–1912). In April of 1912, the center of government moved from Nanjing to Beijing. Over the next several months, the General Association's petitions and correspondence with the government would not receive a response. The national Buddhist organization would not be recognized by the government. Come the ninth month of the year, Jichan was in Shanghai again to mark the Double Yang Festival (*Chongyang jie*). There, he decided he would travel to Beijing to press the government to recognize the association and to support the needs of the country's Buddhist institutions.

Jichan traveled to Beijing with his disciple Daojie. They lodged at Fayuan Temple, one of the city's oldest and most symbolically significant Buddhist temples. After nine days, Jichan had an audience with a government minister named Du Guan. Jichan asked Du to ensure the government honor the protections to temples promised by the Provisional Constitution. Accounts of what happened next vary, but Jichan and Du had some kind of row. Some accounts record that Du at first responded to Jichan's requests with silence. Others state that it was Du who grew furious at the old monk and insulted him. Du at one point slapped Jichan on the face, according to one account. Supposedly Jichan was very angry but bit his tongue because it is not right for a monk to speak from anger. Whatever happened, Jichan returned to Fayuan Temple empty-handed. The requests of the General Buddhist Association had been rebuffed.

That night, Jichan died at Fayuan Temple, immediately after the row with Du. Speculation ran rife about the cause of Jichan's death. His disciple Daojie found his body in the morning and reported that Jichan had not been

ill. He was only sixty years old. Jichan's unusual death began to be discussed in the press. It seemed obvious to many that the government had somehow caused the death of this eminent monk. It was widely believed that Jichan acted honorably in his encounter with Du, who left him humiliated and angry. That Jichan had died at Fayuan Temple, the most symbolic Buddhist institution in Beijing, only added to the sense that the new government was not acting as a good steward of the nation's Buddhist traditions. In response, the Yuan Shikai government recognized the General Association's charter, a move that granted the organization official status, and promulgated an order against appropriating temple assets.

Many Buddhists felt that Jichan had given his life in exchange for modern Buddhist legal rights. It seems fair to say that he was remembered as a martyr for the survival of Chinese Buddhism in the modern world. Jichan's portrait and poetry were regularly reprinted in Buddhist magazines, even twenty years after his death. Although Jichan's General Association would soon be banned by Yuan's government in 1915 (and the confiscation of temple assets resumed), its influence continued to resonate over the decades. Even today, nationally minded Buddhist organizations such as the Chinese Buddhism Association based in Taipei, Taiwan, trace their own history back to this first national Buddhist association and regard Jichan as the organization's first president.

The memory of how Jichan died influenced one strain of how later Chinese readers interpreted his poetry. Although Jichan was known as a poet of the plum tree during his lifetime, since the mid-twentieth century he has been celebrated in China for his "patriotism." Taixu wrote a biography for Jichan in which he titled one section "Love of Country" (*aiguo*). Indeed, Jichan made poetic observations about life during a time of war and the disintegration of the Qing nation. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Jichan wrote poems that addressed the suffering of ordinary people during the privations of the First Sino-Japanese War. One might say that he was expressing compassion in his "patriotic" poems. Still, it is unexpected for a Buddhist monk to write poems about secular affairs, such as politics and war. A monk could attract criticism for stepping beyond religious matters.

These poems constitute a relatively small proportion of Jichan's total oeuvre and were not widely celebrated during his lifetime. Nonetheless, they have become a prominent part of his legacy in the most recent decades.

One of the most often referenced examples is a line that is often taken out of context from poems that Jichan wrote after seeing a young man named Hu return from battle with a wooden leg: "Our national humiliation not repaid, how shameful the army is held back!" A year after war broke out in 1894, a regiment of the Hunanese army was at the port city of Niuzhuang (modern Yingkou, Liaoning) facing off against the Japanese and suffered terrible losses. Very shortly after their defeat, the Qing commander Li Hongzhang in 1895 signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded extensive territories to Japan. The loss of life felt all the more senseless afterward. The poem adopts Hu's voice as a persona, and it is written in the voice of the young soldier in order to explore the suffering of ordinary men in war. The persona of the poem registers a sense of national shame because the one-sided military losses have not yet been avenged. Out of context, that line suggests that Jichan wanted the Chinese army to attack the Japanese. However, in the next line of the poem, the speaker of the poem turns around to see that all his comrades have died. Altogether the poem acknowledges the desire for revenge but shows that it will only lead to further suffering. It would not be accurate to say that the first line directly reflects Jichan's own attitude toward war (especially when read out of context). Jichan was troubled by the senselessness of such disfigurement, permanent injuries endured by ordinary men. Although I am skeptical of using the word *patriotic* to label these poems, because of their importance to one strand of modern Chinese interpretation, I have translated a representative sample for the reader (see III.4 and III.5).

The Translations

The range of Jichan's concerns can be seen in the following selection of poems. I have drawn these poems from three of his publications. The first five are from *Songs to Savor the Flowering Plum*, the aforementioned

collection of roughly three hundred poems published in 1881, when he was just twenty-nine years old. Second, I have provided a complete translation of all eight poems from the booklet *Smaller Collection of White Plums*, published in 1904 in Ningbo. Copies of this booklet were available for sale, and the carved woodblocks were kept at Tiantong Monastery and made available to anyone who wanted to print copies to distribute. Third, I selected ten poems from Jichan's *Complete Works*, also known as *Eight-Fingered Ascetic's Poetry and Other Writings*, published posthumously in 1919. Some of those poems had also been published earlier in Jichan's lifetime. After each translation I indicate the year that poem was written based on the research of the Chinese scholar Mei Ji. When I was selecting poems, I aimed to balance several aspects of Jichan's legacy. I included the verses most often cited in later Chinese literature and anthologies as well as lesser-known poems that I felt would convey the pith of Jichan's teachings.

JICHAN

I

Songs to Savor the Flowering Plum, Selected Poems (1881)

(I.1)

Thinking of Jingyi, My Chan Friend

I think of you, but cannot see you.
Morning after morning comes this fog of disappointment.
In the slanting rays of dawn the wild goose has already departed,
Gone to deliver a distant message for someone else.
At once an oriole flies
Out the valley, sings from a majestic tree.
I dawdle & pace, east & west.
Who will speak with me about hermetic delights?

(1873)

懷精一上人

思君不可見，朝朝悵煙霧。
衡陽雁已遙，遠書寄誰去。
忽見黃鳥飛，出谷鳴高樹。
躊躇東復西，幽情共誰語。

(I.2)

On Shaving My Head, a Poem for My Little Brother

The human realm is a house aflame, we cannot dwell here;
My own life is star-crossed, I have cried like the rain.
Mother died when I was only seven sui old,
And you, little brother, were still nursing.
I touched her coffin, seeking our mother, crying 'til my voice gave way.
Father and I consoled one another.
Mother was gone, but still you and I had father,
Someone we could lean on.
But one day father passed too.
Little brother, you and I clung together in this vacated world.
Our grief was boundless, our travails unrelenting.
Head in hand I beseeched the heavens, but heaven was silent.
Now, I reckon that I have you, little brother, to continue our family line,
And you agree I should learn Buddhism.
But I ask, how can one "leave home" if one has no home?
Alas, a human life is but lodging for a traveler.
I say this to my little brother, and he does not grieve.
I will practice my Dharma, he will continue our family.

(1873)

祝髮示弟

人間火宅不可住，我生不辰淚如雨。
母死我方年七歲，我弟當時猶哺乳。
撫棺尋母哭失聲，我父以言相慰撫。
道母已逝猶有父，有父自能為汝怙。
那堪一旦父亦逝，惟弟與我共荒宇。
悠悠悲恨久難伸，搔首問天天不語。
竊思有弟繼宗支，我學浮屠弟其許。
豈為無家乃出家，嘆息人生如寄旅。
此情告弟弟勿悲，我行我法弟繩武。

(I.3)

*Searching for the Early Flowering Plums on Solitary Hill,
West Lake*

Though a chrysanthemum may brave frost,
Only the plum blossom will burst through snow.
If one goes alone to Solitary Hill,
One may chance upon flowers in bloom.
Although the delicate fragrance has not yet peaked,
Those powder-dabbed butterflies have clustered.
I was about to step closer and write a poem for you,
Catching the wind, I wince at the limits of my talent.

(1876)

孤山尋早梅

傲霜猶有菊，破雪豈無梅？
獨人孤山去，才逢數朶開。
清香還未足，粉蝶已成堆。
欲步已公作，臨風愧少才。

(I.4)

On Owing the Plum Blossom a Poetry Debt

Snow falling, I falter, my dull lines embarrass me.
I remember the words of old Su Dongpo, and crack a smile.
Though breeze and moonlight inspire me, my coffers are empty.
I still owe the plum blossom a poetry debt.

(1876)

欠梅花詩債

雪下推敲愧少才，
坡公為我笑顏開。
正愁風月無錢買，
又欠梅花詩債回。

(I.5)

*One of Three Verses I Added to My Painting of a
Wandering Monk Toiling at Poetry*

A young man and a white-haired elder, humble ascetics,
Whistling at the moon, singing with the wind, feeling inspired again.
I reckon the plum blossoms laugh at me
Because I cannot fight off a single poetry demon!

(1880)

自題擊鉢苦吟圖三首

青年白髮小頭陀，
嘯月吟風寄興多。
料得梅花應笑我，
不能降服一詩魔。

II

Smaller Collection of White Plums, a Complete Translation (1904)

(II.1)

White Plum

Cut off from all worldly concerns,
Where even Cold Mountain would find delight,
Dusk, a lone tendril of fog dims,
The new moon's glow is faint.
Space itself holds no shadows.
The perfume of the plum seems to carry feelings.
My simple heart is well at ease here,
And for a moment my whole being finds comfort.

(1897)

白梅

了與人境絕，寒山也自榮。
孤煙淡將夕，微月照還明。
空際若無影，香中如有情。
素心正宜此，聊用慰平生。

(II.2)

*Mr. Infatuated with Plum Blossoms Asked Chen Shizeng to Sketch the
Likeness of White Plum Blossoms, I Added Three Poems in Acclaim*

Once I awaken from my dream of floral reverie,
What remains is this tranquil life.
Almost no trace of snow in my mind,
It seems there is no spring beyond these blossoms.
Cold, I enter a lonely meditative vision,
Pure, like one leaving the world behind.
Returning from where waters and mists meet,
I nurture these truths in solitude.

And I appreciate the weight of truth,
Solitary fragrance that carries only itself.
Unassuming in this frozen place,
A lofty branch stands above the rest.
Its blossoms can dispel all worldly dust
With the wonder of their pure color.
They smile knowingly at pines and cypress,
Those present, who do not wither.

Cold and snow suddenly stop,
And still no worldly dust arises.
By chance, across the brook
I spy a glimmer at the edge of the bamboo grove.
Blossoms, cold and capable of such clarity:
Perfume abundant and yet immaculate.
Who can explain the logic of their purity?
Plum blossoms echo this monk's sensibility.

(1898)

Translator's Notes: Mr. Infatuated with Plum Blossoms was a nickname for Li Ruiqing (1867–1920), a well-known calligrapher,

painter, and modern educator. Chen Shizeng is a renowned painter and the recipient of another poem below. He was also the son of Jichan's close friend Chen Sanli, who also received a poem, translated below.

梅痴子乞陳師曾為白梅寫影，屬讚三首

一覺繁華夢，惟留澹泊身。
意中微有雪，花外欲無春。
冷入孤禪境，清如遺世人。
卻從烟水際，獨自養其真。

而我賞真趣，孤芳只自持。
淡然于冷處，卓爾見高枝。
能使諸塵淨，都緣一白奇。
含情笑松柏，但保後凋姿。

寒雪一以霽，浮塵了不生。
偶從溪上過，忽見竹邊明。
花冷方能潔，香多不損清。
誰堪宣淨理，應感道人情。

(II.3)

On the White Plum Tree, for the Venerable Pure Karma

Secluded gully, a ground free of searching thoughts,

High and frozen, this is our home.

I labor toward the poetic words, and only then see the tree's bones;

Bosom cold, I almost resent these blossoms.

Karmic traces permeate its delicate undertaking:

So fine a fragrance—no use for bluster.

Once again I give proper respect to the great hermit Lin Bu

Shaken from seclusion to sing of the plum's "oblique lines."

(1898)

為淨業上人題白梅樹

絕壑無尋處，高寒是我家。

苦吟方見骨，冷抱尚嫌花。

白業宜薰習，清芬底用誇。

卻憐林處士，只解詠橫斜。

(II.4)

*Mr. Infatuated with Plum Blossoms Illustrated a Plum for Venerable
Huoran, Added Five of My White Plum Poems, but There Was Still
Room on the Page, so I Wrote This New Poem*

Though some look toward spring as to a heaving sea,
I am fond of mountain denizens, their silent stillness,
Those lightly resting against solitary mounds,
Who from their tallest branches cast winter into flowers.
Yes, from the beginning there is no form,
But where is it that these “oblique lines” take shape?
If we don’t recognize the spring wind’s intentions,
We chase spring down paths that turn and zag.

(1898)

梅痴子為豁然道人寫梅，錄余《白梅詩》五首於其上，因有餘紙，復作此詩

人間春似海，寂寞愛山家。
孤嶼淡相倚，高枝寒更花。
本來無色相，何處著橫斜？
不識東風意，尋春路轉差。

(II.5)

Facing a Plum Tree and Recalling the Honorable Chen

Upstream the western river has begun to thaw,
Outside eastern hall buds sprout again.
Blossoms are friends to what is born from solitary Chan,
Roots come to life from the frozen earth.
Wind and frost take pity on the kalpas gone by;
Heaven and earth favor the solitary and pure.
I accidentally entered Master He's song,
Speechless, I didn't realize I'd started crying.

(1899)

Translator's Notes: "Administrator Chen" is Chen Sanli (1853–1937), the well-known poet from Hunan. His father was Chen Baozhen (1831–1900), reformist governor of Hunan. "Western river" is likely a reference to Jichan and Chen's Hunanese home along the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. "Eastern hall" is metonymy for an official's residence. "Master He" is He Xun, a poet of the Liang dynasty (502–557), well-known among Chinese poets for being among the first to admire the qualities of plum blossoms. Jichan also likely had in mind a couplet by Du Fu about He Xun, which similarly describes plums by an official's residence: "Outside eastern hall the officials' plums stirred poetic inspirations, / just as for He Xun at Yangzhou."

對梅懷陳考功

西江初解凍，東閣又敷榮。
花伴孤禪發，根從死地生。
風霜憐往劫，天地惜孤清。
誤入何郎詠，無言淚暗傾。

(II.6)

Facing a Plum Tree, Waking Up

Sundown, the sky clear after snowfall,
I face the wooded park in silence, my robes solemn.
The stream still, I compare myself to my reflection,
Looks like he is the one listening to the snow singing!
For winter's three months I've been without warmth,
At once I understand, I see this heart of spring.
Silence, silence—I yearn for someone to tell—
Wisps of cloud dot the distant hills.

(1899)

對梅有悟

林園澄夕霽，靜對穆余襟。
自寫清溪影，如聞白雪吟。
三冬無暖氣，一悟見春心。
寂寂欲誰語，微雲淡遠岑。

(II.7)

Facing a Plum Tree beneath the Moon

Such lofty cold does not suit people well.

This austere bearing seems to forsake companions.

A waning moon is above the four mountains,

It is spring by the small bridge of a lonesome station.

One moment, I turn to face flurries like snow,

But their pure aroma is not of this dusty world.

The immortal Lin Bu recognized them from their shadows.

Who else can discern their truth?

(1903)

月下對梅

高冷不宜人，蕭然自絕鄰。
四山殘月夜，孤驛小橋春。
暫對翻疑雪，清香不是塵。
逋仙猶認影，誰復識其真？

(II.8)

Searching for Plum Trees after Snowfall

The sky is suddenly clear, heaps of snow are everywhere.

I grab my goosefoot staff and set off searching.

In cold repose the blossoms sprout from ancient cliffs,

In their quiet awakening a delicate aroma rises.

The fog stands, held by thin boughs' shadows;

Moonlight backs the blossoms' fine glow.

Is there a person who can match such solitary purity?

A single smile just so and filled with feeling.

(1903)

雪後尋梅

積雪浩初晴，探尋策杖行。
寒依古岸發，靜覺暗香生。
瘦影扶煙立，清光背月明。
無人契孤潔，一笑自含情。

III

Poems from the Posthumous Complete Works (1919)

(III.1)

On a Painting of Fishing the Snowy River

He dangles his hook east from the plank bridge,
Snow presses cold into his straw cloak.
Below the frozen river's unmoving surface,
Fishes chew at the shadows of plum blossoms.

(1884)

題寒江釣雪圖

垂釣板橋東，
雪壓蓑衣冷。
江寒水不流，
魚嚼梅花影。

(III.2)

Chastising Myself

I turn ten years into a single poem,
Use five characters to grasp the Great Wall.
Like this my thoughts churn—why does my mind toil so?
Then quietly I sing a poem—tears begin to flow
And in that moment I fret I've abandoned my Buddhist training,
Though perhaps I have not falsely earned my reputation:
With our Dharma I see the delusions of poetry.
That I can say this does not deserve praise.

(1897)

自為懺悔

十年成一律，五字得長城。
轉念心何苦？微吟淚即傾。
且愁荒道業，未必博虛名。
我法看詩妄，能傳不足榮。

(III.3)

My Feelings as I Set Off from Young Master Chen

No use in breaking a willow branch in two
As the eastward wind sends me hiking.
Leave-taking sentiments are as intoxicating as sweet herbs;
Spring dreams as ephemeral as falling blossoms.
I have not yet realized the fruit of the Three Vehicles,
And merely work the realm of five-character poetic lines.
Could I one day deserve a legendary Lotus Society biography?
Sadly I am merely known as a poet.

(1898)

Translator's Notes: The young man addressed here is Chen Shizeng, a well-known artist. Jichan calls him "young master" (*gongsun*) because Shizeng was the eldest son of a prominent family. His grandfather was Chen Baozhen, the governor of Hunan. A Lotus Society biography would be written for a monk who devoted himself to leading a group of lay practitioners.

別陳公孫自述所懷

不用折楊柳，東風送我行。
離情芳草醉，春夢落花輕。
未證三乘果，聊攻五字城。
他時蓮社傳，恥獨以詩名。

(III.4)

Tune of the Enlistees (One of Three)

Thirteen enlistees guard the frontier,

As five thousand cavalry flash by in an endless chain.

One battle at the Great Wall, the whole regiment gone.

How can we expect their portraits to hang in Frozen Cloud Pavilion?

(1898)

Translator's Notes: The poem is from the perspective of the thirteen enlistees guarding a military outpost who watched five thousand countrymen go to battle and not return. Frozen Cloud Pavilion was where Tang emperors hung portraits of those ministers whose exemplary service was to be honored. The poem implies that the Qing government is unlikely to honor the numerous ordinary people who died in war.

從軍曲

十三從軍便守邊，
五千鐵騎常相連。
長城一戰陣亡盡，
我心何望圖凌煙。

(III.5)

*Writing about the Young Student Hu following the Defense of Niuzhuang
(Third of Five)*

A sheet of paper, the treaty, lands on shore.

But our national humiliation not repaid, how shameful that the army is held
back!

When I turn around, all are dead. Where have they gone?

Makeshift graves everywhere I look, where their tents once stood.

(1898)

書胡志學守戎牛莊戰事後

一紙官書到海濱，
國仇未報恥休兵！
回看部卒今何在？
滿目新墳是舊營。

(III.6)

*First of Two Poems Written to Match the Rhymes of a Poem Written by the
Talented Lu Yinqiu*

We are doddering and yet still seek to become one-word poetic masters;
Dare we name the successes and failures known deep in our own hearts?
I do not desire to become a buddha, nor attain rebirth in some heaven.
I pray only that good poetry will exist among men.

(1903)

Translator's Notes: "One-word poetic master" refers to a deeply talented poet, one who can transform another poet's mediocre verse into a great poem by replacing one word with the perfect alternative.

次韻酬盧吟秋茂才二首之一

老去猶求一字師，
敢云得失寸心知？
不貪成佛生天果，
但願人間有好詩。

(III.7)

Unsleeping

When the Chan temple bells and Sanskrit intoning have ceased,
Unsleeping I hear a gibbon's song.
In my old age, wild inspiration grows harder to dispel;
In my sickness, the poetry demon trespasses upon me ever more.
I move my bedding into moonlight
And search for poetic lines as if they are gold.
I've long known the emptiness of frivolous fame,
Nevertheless, this is the mind I have in the night.

(1904)

不寐

禪房鐘梵歇，不寐聽猿吟。
幽興老難遣，詩魔病益侵。
移床就明月，得句抵黃金。
早識浮名妄，其如此夜心。

(III.8)

Admonishment to the World, First of Two Poems

Listen, the entire world can be hidden in a single grain.

A cosmic Buddha's life is *immeasurable* and yet we speak of *three* bodies.

A flower was lifted and Mahākāśyapa delicately smiled.

With his mouth closed, Vimalakīrti spoke with silence.

Few can be called away from the clatter of beauty and sweet voices.

Even the rich and powerful have honeyed dreams only if they are asleep.

What a pity! Everywhere I see the ignorant acting like children;

While the six thieves, entering one home after the next, are welcomed like
sons.

警世

世界都藏一粟庵，佛身無量且言三。
拈花迦葉微含笑，杜口維摩默不談。
聲色叢中呼不醒，公侯枕上夢方酣。
可憐滿眼痴兒女，六賊家家認作男。

(1908)

Translator's Notes: The final line expands on images from the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. "The six thieves" refers to unwholesome perceptions through our six senses—the five bodily senses plus the mind. The senses are imagined as gates and windows through which perceptions pass. The ordinary manner of relating to our perceptions tends to lead to desire and unwholesome behavior, and turns perceptions into thieves that rob us of our connection to buddha-nature.

(III.9)

Thoughts about the Way

Stones turn to powder, pines wither away—don't bother to ask when;
Dragon asleep, tiger at rest—each so peaceful.
You ought to know a person of stillness has a heart coursing with marvels;
And do not think I, a mountain monk, am so strange, my words full of
contradiction.

The great earth could sink into the sea—still we'd have delusion.
The open sky could crumble—that would not yet be Chan.
If you wish to practice the dharma of awakening in this lifetime,
Step forward from the top of that hundred-foot pole.

(1909)

論道

石爛松枯懶問年，龍眠虎臥各安然，
固知靜者心多妙，莫怪山僧語太顛。
大地平沈猶是妄，虛空粉碎未為禪，
欲參最上真乘法，百尺竿頭進步前。

(III.10)

Dreaming of Lake Dongting

Last night's dream decants Dongting Lake,
 Pours the green of Mount Jun into a bottle,
 Tips it to stew the full moon,
 Swirls around to bathe a cluster of stars.
 A crane comes to take the precepts,
 A group of dragons arrives to hear a sutra.
 Is there someone who can play a flute
 To wake me from beneath the pines?

(1909)

夢洞庭

昨夢汲洞庭，
 君山青入瓶。
 倒之煮團月，
 還以浴繁星。
 一鶴從受戒，
 群龍來聽經。
 何人忽吹笛，
 呼我松間醒。

Further Reading

- Bingenheimer, Marcus, and Ting Shen. "The Portrayal of Women in the Poetry of Jing'an Eight-Fingers." *Studies in Chinese Religions* 6, no. 2 (2020): 119–40.
- Egan, Ronald. "Shi Poetry: Ancient and Recent Styles (The Five Dynasties and the Song Dynasty)." In *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, edited by Zong-qi Cai, 308–26. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Goossaert, Vincent. "Republican Church Engineering: The National Religious Associations in 1912 China." In *Chinese Religiosities*, edited Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 209–32. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Lai, Rongdao. "Praying for the Republic: Buddhist Education, Student-Monks, and Citizenship in Modern China (1911–1949)." PhD diss., McGill University, 2014.
- Mazanec, Thomas. *Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024.
- Protass, Jason. *The Poetry Demon*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021.



Chapter Eight: The Plum Blossom Monk—Jichan

1. The poems here were greatly benefited by discussions of them with Genine Lentine. The author also thanks Matt Zepelin at Shambhala for his excellent suggestions and feedback.

Taixu composed the biography in 1914, entitled *Zhongxing Fojiao Jichan An hesheng zhuan*, published in *Haichaoyin* 2, no. 4 (1921).

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 1](#)

2. A concerted effort to interpret Chan principles in Jichan's poetry is given in Ma Tianxiang , *Ershi shiji Zhongguo Foxue wenti* 20 , 2nd rev. ed. (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2007), 38–61. See also work by Huang Ching-chia, cited below.

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 2](#)

3. This section relies on the autonarratives given by Jichan in his 1888 piece *Shiji zishu* , which was published together with an edition of his collected poems to date; and in his 1909 piece *Lengxiangta zixu ming* , which Jichan wrote specifically to be inscribed near his own funerary pagoda at Mount Tiantong, where it can still be seen today.

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 3](#)

4. The year of Jichan's birth has generated confusion because of differences between the traditional lunar and Gregorian calendar systems. He was born in the first year of the Xianfeng reign (which mostly corresponds to 1851). However, Jichan was born in the twelfth month of that lunar year, so it was 1852 when he was born. On top of this, Chinese scholarship calculates the timeline of his career using traditional Chinese sui, which are ordinal numbers: a person in their seventh sui is about six years old. Western scholars normally convert

from traditional Chinese sui by subtracting one (e.g., seven sui is six years old). In the traditional Chinese counting method, people gained one sui at the lunar new year (not on their individual birthday). Jichan's case is confounding because he was born in the twelfth month of the lunar year. Like all people, he was one sui at the time of birth. When a new lunar year began a few weeks later, he turned two sui (he entered his second year), at which time he was only one month old. Therefore, Jichan's age in years is often two less than his traditional age in sui. In general, I follow the chronology given by Mei Ji in the appendix of *Bazhi tousuo shiwen ji* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1984).

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 4](#)

5. Thomas Mazanec, *Poet-Monks: The Invention of Buddhist Poetry in Late Medieval China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024), 83.

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 5](#)

6. My work in this section on plum blossoms is indebted to Huang Ching-chia 黃清家, *Shichan, Kuangchan, Nüchan: Zhongguo Chanzong wenxue yu wenhua tanlun* 詩谿、匡谿、蕪谿: 中國詩宗文學與文化論 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 2011).

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 6](#)

7. He also published a collected works in 1888 or so, and his complete works were published posthumously. In addition, he coauthored *Yueyou changhe ji* 岳游長河集, published in 1888, about a visit to Mount Heng 衡 of Hunan. It includes thirteen of his poems, and thirteen poems by Wu Jiaduan 吳加端, as well as finely produced illustrations of Mount Heng. A copy is available in Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo.

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 7](#)

8. This translation was modified from that of Ronald Egan found in his full translation and analysis of Lin Bu's poem, given in Ronald Egan, "Shi Poetry: Ancient and Recent Styles (The Five Dynasties and the

Song Dynasty),” in *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 8](#)

9. Translation based on *Liandeng huiyao*, in *Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō*, vol. 79, p. 259, a7–10.

[BACK TO NOTE REFERENCE 9](#)



新枝珠爛漫老幹在風塵
一幅種界參多正畫圖普

癸酉年夏月
畫人



Cover art: *Blossoming Plum*, ca. 1915, Li Ruiqing (Chinese, 1867–1920), hanging scroll; ink and color on paper, 70 1/2 x 18 7/8 in. (179.1 x 47.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, in memory of La Ferne Hatfield Ellsworth, 1986 (1986.267.98). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.