

Chan Poems

These poems are selections from the manuscript of a book of Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhist poetry translated by Mary M.Y. Fung and David Lunde. The book is titled *A Full Load of Moonlight*, which is a line from Decheng's poem "Gatha by the Boatman Monk" included below. The collection, and this group, includes poems by both Monastics and Lay Poets. I have chosen poems I like very much and which are readily accessible to non-Buddhist readers.

D. L.

Lingyi (727-762)

Poem Inscribed in a Monks' Lodge on Leaving Yifeng Monastery

The lotus in the pond can't choose when to open;
mountain streams ebb and flow by chance.
If I am supposed to determine my own comings and goings,
can I return when it's not returning time?

Jiaoran (730-799)

Clouds Above the Brook

Is there no end to your idea of stretching and rolling?
You hover over the brook and envelop the sky.
You have a form, but no material burden;
leaving no trace, you vanish with the wind.
Don't blame me for always chasing after you—
for you are free and easy as I am.

Lingche (746-816)

At Dong Lin Monastery: in Answer to Governor Wei Dan

In old age my mind is not bothered by worldly affairs.
A hempen robe and sitting mat will do for me.
Everyone I meet praises retirement from office,
but do you see any of them down here in the woods?

Decheng (?-860)

Gatha by the Boatman Monk

A thousand-foot fishing line hangs straight down.
One wave moves, ten thousand follow.
The night is still, the water cold, the bait untouched.
The empty boat carries home a full load of moonlight.

Danjiao (9th C.)

On a Portrait of Myself

I expected my image to take form,
but its appearance saddens me.
I'm already a dream inside a dream,
when I meet this body outside my body.
A flower in water has taken on illusive substance,
and ink has colored empty dust.
It's laughable that you and I are both humans
whose karma has not yet been fulfilled.

Guanxiu (832-912)

Living on the Mountain: No. 19 of 24 Poems

Morning dew on red orchids: beds of jade.
Idly I saunter in monk's sandals west of the peak.
If one's mind is as pure as the lotus,
why must the body be like a dead tree?
From the ancient moat, a faint scent of old redwood;
white apes cry from the peak still half covered with snow.
Although this isn't the idyllic Peach Blossom Cave,
when spring comes peach blossoms fill the brook.

Qiji (864-937)

White Hair

Do not dye or pluck it—
let it cover your head.
Although there's no remedy for its turning white,
black can withstand autumn no better.
Pillowed on it, one quietly listens to cicadas;
letting it down, idly one watches the flowing stream.
Growing old is unavoidable in this floating life,
but most people grieve because of you, white hair.

Yanshou (904-975)

The Mind

The mind should be as still as cold ashes,
scheming put aside, recommendations for office declined.
The fragrant orchid is plucked for its scent;

sturdy wood is cut when tall and straight.
Cold slows the red flowering of branches;
when sun warms the water, greenery bursts forth.
Cheek in palm, I sit alone under my sutra window:
a roaming cloud wanders into view.

Huaishen (1077-1132)

For Chan Master Tan

Amid a cluster of thatched huts by the sea's gate,
living close to clouds and water, I take things as they come.
Too lazy to raise fleet-footed horses like Monk Zhidun,¹
but loving a delicate fragrance, I cultivate Master Huiyuan's lotus.²²
Those who covet a thousand bushels of official salary
will never know the joy of a nap in the woods.
On the day you keep your promise to visit me,
just for you, I'll put three thousand worlds into a mustard seed.

LAY POETS

Wang Wei (701-761)

Bird-Cry Ravine

Mind at ease as osmanthus blossoms fall;
the night is still, the spring mountain empty.
Mountain birds, startled by moonrise,
cry now and then in the spring ravine.

Bai Juyi (772-846)

Idle Chant

Ever since I painstakingly studied Buddhist dharma,
all of my mental attachments have been destroyed.
Only the Mara of Poetry cannot yet be subdued:
exquisite scenery always invokes an idle chant.

¹ Monk Zhidun (314-366) of the East Jin Dynasty, was well-known for his discourses on metaphysics. Once, when he was offered a gift of horses, he kept them.

²² Master Huiyuan (334-416), a monk of the East Jin Dynasty, promulgated Pure Land Buddhism. He and his followers formed the Lotus Society, so-called because there was a lotus pond in their compound.

Su Shi (1036-1101)

Poem on the Lute

If you say the music comes from the lute,
why doesn't it play when it's put in its case?
If you say the music comes from the fingers,
why don't you listen to the finger tips? ³

Fan Chengda (1126-1193)

Waking Up

In silliness, I play with the world like a child,
steadfastly letting people laugh at my folly.
In leisure I keep busy, on a fine day I dry herbs in the sun;
silence drives my scheming mind to compete in chess at night.
I cannot find good poetry to match my mood,
but seasonal plum blossoms display beautiful sprigs.
Waking from deep slumber, what do I lack?
The blanket is warm and soft, and rice caresses the spoon.

Gao Qi (1336-1374)

Miscellaneous Poems on the Countryside (one of four)

The country landscape spreads out endlessly.
Opening the door I find the pond full of leaves.
The monk comes, his clogs bringing rain.
The fisherman lies in his frost-covered boat.
In quietude I compile a genealogy of flowers
and leisurely record recipes for making wine.
The ambitions I've harbored all my life
at this moment are totally forgotten.

³ This poem expounds the following passage in *Surangamasutra*, "Take for instance, the lutes, the *konghou* and the *pipa*, although they may give out wonderful sounds, yet without wonderful fingers, they cannot in the end make music. You and all living beings are also like this."