



Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits

By Bill Porter

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In 1989, Bill Porter, having spent much of his life studying and translating Chinese religious and philosophical texts, began to wonder if the Buddhist hermit tradition still existed in China. At the time, it was believed that the Cultural Revolution had dealt a lethal blow to all religions in China, destroying countless temples and shrines, and forcibly returning thousands of monks and nuns to a lay life.

But when Porter travels to the Chungnan mountains — the historical refuge of ancient hermits — he discovers that the hermit tradition is very much alive, as dozens of monks and nuns continue to lead solitary lives in quiet contemplation of their faith deep in the mountains.

Part travelogue, part history, part sociology, and part religious study, this record of extraordinary journeys to an unknown China sheds light on a phenomenon unparalleled in the West. Porter's discovery is more than a revelation, and uncovers the glimmer of hope for the future of religion in China.

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Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits By Bill Porter Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #235875 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Counterpoint
- Published on: 2009-09-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 6.00" w x .75" l, .75 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 220 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

From 1966 to 1976 the malevolent rage of the Chinese Cultural Revolution struck a devastating blow to all religions in China, destroying countless temples and shrines that had stood for centuries and forcibly returning thousands of monks and nuns to lay life. Bill Porter had been told that the venerable hermetic tradition in China had also succumbed, but he went looking anyway. What he found, Taoist and Buddhist monks and nuns living in huts and caves deep in the mountains of central China, is more than a revelation, it is a glimmer of hope for the future of religion in China.

From Publishers Weekly

Porter, a Hong Kong-based writer whose previous books were published under the pen name Red Pine (*The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*), lived in a Taiwanese monastery for three years in the 1970s and later translated works of some Chinese hermits long admired for their virtue. When travel to China opened up in the late 1980s, Porter began to search for hermits who might have survived under years of communism. His story is unusual, but his "encounters"--actually, brief interviews--produce not subtle observations but statements of gnomic profundity: ". . . the Tao is empty. It can't be explained." Still, Porter showed undeniable bravery as he trekked through the Chungnan Mountains in central China to interview more than 20 male and female hermits. Some hermits are circumspect about politics, having suffered under the Cultural Revolution, while others, like an 85-year-old monk who had lived in a cave for 50 years, are oblivious to the political changes. Porter's historical and literary reflections show sensitivity to his subject, but this book seems aimed only at those interested in such spiritual quests. Some of the photographs are starkly spectacular.

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From Library Journal

In this first-person narrative, the author relates his journey to seek out the religious hermits of China, who left civilization and chose to live alone as monks in the mountains of China, quietly practicing their Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian faith. Sprinkled with Eastern religious philosophy, Chinese current affairs, and personal observations, this travel book reveals a secluded world very few people believed survived the purges of the Chinese Communists. The author wisely includes transcripts from conversations with many of the hermits, both men and women, and through their words the reader comes away with a better understanding of their lives and their reasons for deciding to live their harsh existence. This is not intended to be a scholarly study but an invitation to the public to discover this relatively unknown aspect of Chinese religious culture. Recommended for public libraries.

- *Glenn Masuchika, Chaminade Univ. Lib., Honolulu*

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