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## Amongst White Clouds

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## Amongst White Clouds

### Abstract

This is a review of *Amongst White Clouds* (2005).

Along with the avalanche of books published about Zen Buddhism in recent years, several documentaries have emerged as well. *Amongst White Clouds*, an 86-minute visit with Chinese Buddhist hermits in the Zhongnan Mountains, is fascinating because of its subject's uniqueness and its self-effacing cinematography.

Although Chinese Buddhists have retreated into the mountains for centuries, until this film we have not been able to encounter their lives and practices directly. The filmmaker describes reading Bill Porter's *Road to Heaven*, a travelogue about Chinese hermits, and wanting to meet some of the masters. One hermit became his teacher for several years, and his time spent in the mountains enabled him to meet others, all of whom have aided him on his own Buddhist path. Hence, one reason this film stands out is that the director not only wants to document the hermits' lives but he wants to learn from them as well, and most of the film is devoted simply to listening to the hermits' pithy answers to the director's questions. From these practitioners we hear common Buddhist ideas, but wisdom gained from years of solitary meditation seems stronger and truer than countless pages of philosophical sutras (a typical Zen attitude expressed by several of the hermits). One unnamed solitary strikes a simple note echoed by many others: "why are people in this world so busy?...busy a whole life time for 'Me'...why not put all this energy to liberation?" Another exemplifies typical Zen playfulness; when

asked why he came to the mountains, he replies: “I’d like to know myself! [laughing] why did you come here?”

The film balances conversations with the hermits about their insights with scenes of daily life in the mountains and so allows the hermits to emerge as distinct personalities. We quickly learn that “hermit” can mean a lot of different things: some live alone - miles from anyone, but others live in pairs or in small communities. Consistent with the Chinese tradition as a whole, some seem to be strictly Ch’an (Zen) but many are eclectic, practicing Pure Land as well. More than one has a dog; one has two cats; one master reads newspapers; one has a talking clock 20 minutes fast. Along the way we also spend time with two nuns and finally with a hermit who is said to be “on the final leg, walking the last mile to enlightenment.” Although the filmmaker does not pursue their personal histories (and is sometimes discouraged by the practitioners), occasionally they volunteer their past (the subtitles use lower-case “i”): “i had a lot of trouble leaving home...my family wouldn’t let me; they went and found me and brought me back...but i’ve been a monk so long...they don’t care anymore.” The hermits don’t just utter wisdom but are also honest about their difficulties: “you live alone in a hut...you feel so lonely, really so very lonely but after a long time you don’t want to go down off the mountain; you feel the cities are just a lot of trouble.” Another notes one reason to become a hermit as compared to a monk is the lack of structure:

“every morning and evening i do my service...then i do some sitting meditation; in the afternoon i read a bit...i’m very free.”

Burger’s filmmaking attempts to express some essential qualities of the hermits’ lives. The pace is, not surprisingly, slow, which allows us to experience the hermits’ thoughtful conversations and deliberate actions. At least four Buddhist qualities could be discerned in the cinematography: most basically, the few cuts and lengthy takes create a meditative pace that evokes the hermits’ essential practice. Second, the occasional cuts to scenes of nature—a leaf, a bird, a mist-shrouded mountain—may remind us of Chinese Zen poems, which use similar images to convey the Zen concept of “thusness.” Another technique evocative of the tradition is the many scenes of daily tasks: one long sequence shows a hermit dipping and straining water from a well, carrying it downhill, and pouring it ladle by ladle into a large pot—a way of pointing to the “everyday Zen” attitude of many Chinese texts (“when you work, just work” a hermit reminds us). Finally, the filmmaker tries to intrude himself and his cinematography as little as possible (with the occasional lapse), a kind of filmic “no-self” (if such a thing is possible). In this way one could speak of the documentary as exemplifying a kind of Zen filmmaking.

*Among White Clouds* will serve teachers well. One might imagine an even stricter ascetic style to the cinematography and could wish for more information

about the individual hermits, the communities, and their practices (the filmmaker is hard to contact and has provided little background information) but the film's focus on the hermit experience is a valuable supplement to other Chinese Buddhist material.