

The *Gāthā* in Medieval China, or, Are You *Shī*?  
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Stanford-Berkeley Graduate Student Conference  
on Pre-modern Chinese Humanities  
April 11, 2014

Abstract:

In medieval China, the *gāthā* falls directly on this fault line between poetry and non-poetry. Known in Chinese as *jì* 偈, *jìsòng* 偈頌, or *qiétuó* 伽陀 (and other variations), this term came to signify many things over the course of 800 years, from the first translations of Buddhist scriptures in the late second century to the end of the medieval period in the mid-tenth century. At its most basic level, *gāthā* means “Buddhist verse” in China. But the problem is thornier than this glib definition lets on. Though *gāthā* originally signified something contained in translated scriptures, it soon took on a life of its own, and, I shall argue, the more closely it came to resemble poetry, the more it became a term of disparagement. By the late Táng 唐 (618-907) and Five Dynasties 五代 (907-960) period, we find poet-monks distancing themselves from this term. It is the purpose of this paper to chart the shifting definitions of the term *gāthā* and to ask who is using this label and why. That is, what is at stake when a literatus, monk, or translator calls something a *gāthā* rather than a *shī*? This will then lead to another set of question: is there such a thing as “Buddhist poetry” in medieval China? Would such a question have made sense to people living at that time? In order to answer these questions, I will look at different texts called *gāthās* over an 800-year period, beginning with the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, continuing to collections of *gāthās* in the Six Dynasties 六朝 (220-589 CE) period, to vernacular Buddhist verse in the Suí 隋 (589-607) and early Táng, and concluding with the practices of literati and monks in the late 9th and early 10th century. I will argue that *gāthā* gradually became a contested term, eventually exiled from the realm of poetry.