China

Edward A. Burger, Director.
The Mountain Path

2021. 93 minutes, color. $5.00 USD rental, $15.00 USD purchase. One Mind Productions. https://www.onemindproductions.com/themountainpath/

In the documentary *The Mountain Path*, director Edward A. Burger takes us along on his journey deep into the Zhongnan Mountains in China's Shaanxi province to find modern-day Buddhist hermits. Although the film is framed around his own search for guidance in the Dharma, the hermits take center stage, and he presents their narratives and teachings with minimal commentary. The result is a rich visual ethnography of a form of religious practice that many may have thought lost to China's tumultuous twentieth century or the more general advance of modernity.

The film opens with a shot of the mountains, highlighting a green landscape shrouded in mist before cutting to a monk working in a garden. This monk, we soon learn, is Burger's teacher, whom he calls *Shīfu*, a term of respect for Buddhist monks and nuns that can also be translated as "Master." The film sets the tone by beginning with one of his lessons: "Buddhist practice must begin with your actions. But the purpose of practice is to transform your mind. Change your consciousness. Change your way of seeing." Burger then tells us the story of how he, a young American, came to study Buddhism with a Chinese mountain hermit over twenty years ago. Narrated to a background of first urban then increasingly rural travel scenes, he talks about how reading Bill Porter's book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (1993) inspired him to travel to China and seek out hermits himself. Once in China, he asked the monks and nuns he encountered whether they knew any hermits, before finally receiving directions to a hermitage in the Zhongnan Mountains where he met his teacher.

Although we learn the most about Burger's teacher, the film introduces us to other hermits on the mountain as well. They encounter one on a trail when they become lost, and he becomes their trail guide, directing them first to two ascetics in the valley who are building their huts. Later, he takes them to visit a Cantonese nun who established herself in a part of the mountains others thought was too bare and difficult, as well as an advanced practitioner whom Burger describes as "a hermit among hermits." Burger also travels to another part of the Zhongnan Mountains to visit an old master living in a remote hermitage with his disciples. In all these cases, scenes from their daily lives are interwoven with their teachings. We watch them source water from streams, add firewood to stoves, tend gardens and gather wild plants for food, cook meals, and meditate. The difficulties of such a life are not glossed over, but the hermits emphasize that living as a hermit in the Zhongnan Mountains is a good way to make progress in their Buddhist practice, helping them to, in *Shīfu*'s words, "cultivate stillness."

The film does a nice job challenging some of the stereotypes viewers may hold about hermits. For one, they are not all male; nuns can be hermits too. Another thing that the film makes clear is that although these individuals are hermits, they are not completely isolated; rather, they remain embedded in communities, be it monastic communities, local lay communities, or the community of fellow hermits. Early in the film, Burger's teacher makes clear that living in the mountains requires a foundation of training in monastic communities, saying

> If you can live in a big monastery and stay in the meditation hall for three, maybe five years, with that foundation there, you can live in the mountains. But you have to know how to practice. If you don't understand the methods of practice, in the mountains you'll go astray. And that's nothing but torture.

He makes the point that staying in the mountains is not a lifelong commitment for most of these hermits but is rather a stage of their practice that may last a period of five to ten years before they, presumably, return to their monastic communities. They also have interactions with local lay practitioners, who visit for teachings or to bring offerings, and they call upon and assist each other.

From a scholarly perspective, it would have been helpful to have a bit more concrete information about the timeframe of the filming. Burger tells us that he has been studying with his teacher for over twenty years, and we see a 2003–04 calendar behind *Shīfu* in one scene, but beyond that the film does not make clear whether all this footage was shot in

the early 2000s or over the intervening twenty years. If the footage is, in fact, all from the early 2000s, that naturally opens the question of if and how the hermit experience has changed since then, especially given the growth of both religion and domestic tourism as China's economy has continued to develop. The lack of Daoist hermits in the film is also noticeable, particularly given the Zhongnan Mountains' reputation as a refuge for both Buddhist and Daoist hermits, although the focus on Buddhists allows a depth that a more comprehensive film might struggle to achieve.

In short, this film provides rare insight into an understudied dimension of Chinese religious life, and it will be appreciated by scholars of Buddhism, religious studies, Chinese religions, and contemporary Chinese society, along with Buddhist practitioners. Although it does not provide a general introduction to Buddhism, it would be well suited to screenings in advanced undergraduate classes on these topics.

References

Porter, Bill. 1993. *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. Berkeley: Counterpoint

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