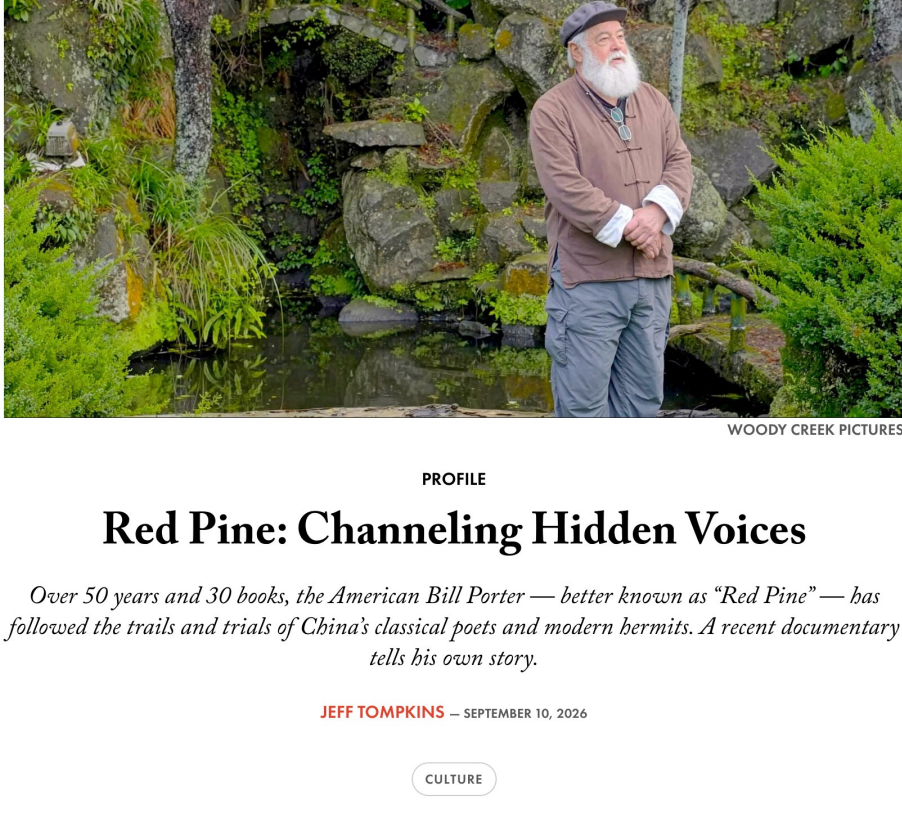




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PROFILE

Red Pine: Channeling Hidden Voices

Over 50 years and 30 books, the American Bill Porter — better known as “Red Pine” — has followed the trails and trials of China’s classical poets and modern hermits. A recent documentary tells his own story.

JEFF TOMPKINS — SEPTEMBER 10, 2026

CULTURE

“I’m not trying to become Chinese,” the American translator and travel writer Bill Porter tells me over Zoom. “I’m trying to accompany the Chinese poet.”

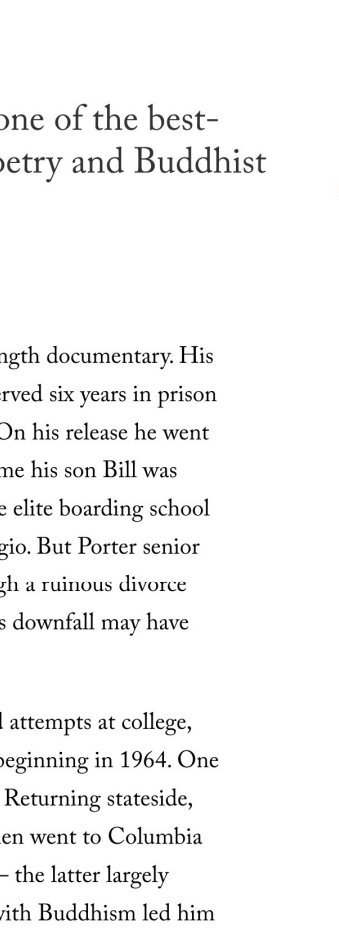
The genial, lavishly bearded man on my laptop screen, speaking from his home in Port Townsend, Washington, has published approximately three dozen books on China. Nearly 30 of those books are the translations of classical Chinese poetry and Buddhist religious texts he has released under the pen name Red Pine, while another seven volumes are the accounts of his travels in China, from the 1980s into the 2010s, that he issues under his own name. All seven of the travel books have been translated into Chinese (also as Red Pine, 赤松), earning healthy sales figures and winning him more renown there than in America, thanks in part to his fluency in Mandarin and familiarity with traditional Chinese culture.

“I love what the Chinese poets do,” Porter says, explaining his modus operandi for translating classical Chinese poetry. “That’s how I came up with the idea of dancing. It is so much like dancing.” The reference is an allusion to “Dancing with the Dead: Language, Poetry, and the Art of Translation,” his 2004 essay and artistic credo in which he declares translation “the ultimate literary art, the ultimate challenge in understanding as well as in performance.”

That essay provides the title for an absorbing new documentary about Bill Porter’s life and work, *Dancing with the Dead: Red Pine and the Art of Translation* (October 2023), directed by Ward Serrill and now available to stream online. And Porter continues to dance, having published two new translations since: *Choosing To Be Simple: Collected Poems of Tao Yuanming* (2023) and *If a Mountain Lion Could Sing: The Lyric Poems of Xin Qiji* (2025), both released by his longstanding publisher Copper Canyon Press. When we talked, Porter was also just back from Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, where he signed a contract for a book (currently in progress) about one of Sichuan’s most revered native sons, poet Su Dongpo.

Porter is a vivid raconteur with a frank, quintessentially American manner — his straightforward style, combined with his formidable facial hair and the flannel shirt he wore during our talk, initially called to mind the kind of veteran character actor who plays grizzled prospectors in old Hollywood movies. Yet as the conversation went on, the many sides of his nature became apparent: he spoke with equal candor about engaging with the words of the Buddha and grappling, in his younger days, with a mountain of credit card debt. I also noted the ease with which he dropped Chinese words and phrases, even the occasional Sanskrit term, into our talk.

Though I was nominally conducting an interview, I quickly became content just to sit and listen to a voice whom the journalist Ian Johnson describes, in *Dancing with the Dead*, as “a source of endless fascination” inside China: “a Westerner who really gets it, who really understands China, who clearly loves Chinese culture, who’s devoted his life to it.”

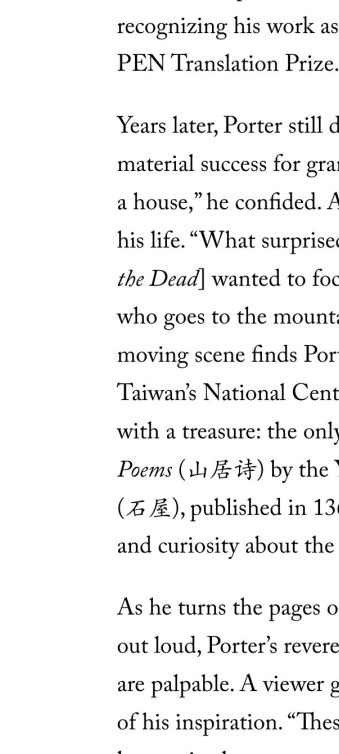
The documentary *Dancing with the Dead* is now streaming on Vimeo.

Under the pen name Red Pine, Porter has become one of the best-known American translators of classical Chinese poetry and Buddhist sutras.

Bill Porter’s life is certainly colorful enough to warrant a feature-length documentary. His father, William Arnold Porter, was a onetime bank robber who served six years in prison after being wounded in a shootout with the police in Detroit in 1926. On his release he went into the hotel business, where he managed to amass a fortune by the time his son Bill was born, in Los Angeles in 1943. Bill grew up surrounded by luxury; at the elite boarding school he attended as a child, one of his classmates was the son of Joe DiMaggio. But Porter senior was an abusive alcoholic who ultimately lost his millions, in part through a ruinous divorce settlement. (It’s tempting to speculate that growing up amid his father’s downfall may have given Bill an early grounding in Buddhist principles of detachment.)

Porter’s early years suggest a period of drift. He made a couple of failed attempts at college, followed by three years in the U.S. Army, stationed in West Germany, beginning in 1964. One commanding officer told him he was “the worst soldier he’d ever seen.” Returning stateside, Porter earned a degree in anthropology from UC Santa Barbara. He then went to Columbia University for graduate study in anthropology and Chinese language — the latter largely because it was his ticket to scholarship money. A growing fascination with Buddhism led him to drop out in 1972 and move to Taiwan, where he spent a year living in a monastery. He then relocated to a hilltop farming community overlooking Taipei, and began to eke out a living as a scriptwriter for Taiwan’s English-language radio station ICKT.

Dancing with the Dead imparts a scapegrace charm to this phase of Porter’s life. For several years he wooed a fellow student he had met in a Taipei classroom, Ku Lien-chang. When they finally married, after seven years of courtship, her family insisted on a proper banquet and a honeymoon trip to Japan — both sizable hurdles for Porter’s hand-to-mouth existence. He managed to finance the honeymoon by participating in a watch-smuggling scheme that entailed in-and-out visits to Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul several times a month. A few of the other smugglers ended up going to jail, but thanks to a decisive intervention by his wife, he managed to stay clear of the law.



Bill Porter with Abbot at Haiming Temple, Taiwan. (Woody Creek Pictures)

As Porter started writing, the pseudonym Red Pine came to him through chance inspiration on a Taipei street, before he learned it was the name of a legendary figure in Taoist lore. He began translating poetry to improve his Chinese, with the first of many volumes, *Cold Mountain Poems*, appearing in 1983. Later he added sacred texts to his portfolio, beginning with *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma* in 1987. And in the spring of 1989, his travels to China’s Zhongnan Mountains became the basis for his breakout 1993 travel book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. (His early years in Taiwan coincided with the later phase of the Cultural Revolution, which meant he was cut off from the mainland, wellspring of the traditions that fascinated him.)

At this time, an English-language radio station in Hong Kong commissioned a series of China travelogues from Porter: multi-part radio programs, each centered on a particular region, that were meant to uncover traces of China’s past in its present. Porter drew on those radio shows (which ultimately numbered in the hundreds) for the impressive series of travel works he has published, on regions from the Central Plains (*Yellow River Odyssey*, 2014) to Yunnan province (*South of the Clouds: Travels in Southwest China*, 2015) to the Silk Road (*The Silk Road: Taking the Bus to Pakistan*, 2016). These books’ lightly worn erudition and humor make them companionable additions to the shelf of China travel literature by Westerners, while their accounts of challenging conditions (Porter made his journeys years before the arrival of high-speed rail) give them an added patina of historical interest.

In 1993, after more than 20 years abroad, Porter returned to the United States with his wife and their two children. They settled in Port Townsend, Washington, a small seaside community Porter knew as the headquarters of Empty Bowl Press — the independent publisher that backed his earliest volumes of translations. At first the going was hard: the family subsisted on food stamps until a providential inheritance and earnings from the Chinese translations of his travel books put them on a steadier footing. Around this time the literary establishment started recognizing his work as well, with a raft of awards that include a Guggenheim fellowship and a PEN Translation Prize. Not bad for a translator who had relied on food stamps.

Years later, Porter still doesn’t seem quite ready to take his material success for granted. “I can’t believe some days that I own a house,” he confided. And now there is a documentary film about his life. “What surprised me,” Porter said, “was that [Dancing with the Dead] wanted to focus on me as a translator, not as somebody who goes to the mountains to find hermits.” One unexpectedly moving scene finds Porter visiting the Rare Books Room of Taiwan’s National Central Library. Staff there have presented him with a treasure: the only known first-edition copy of *Mountain Poems* (山居诗) by the Yuan dynasty Buddhist poet Stonehouse (石屋), published in 1368 — one of the first works to inspire Porter’s love of Chinese literature and curiosity about the hermit culture Stonehouse exemplified.



Bill Porter with Abbot at Haiming Temple, Taiwan. (Woody Creek Pictures)

As he turns the pages of the string-bound volume with gloved hands and begins translating out loud, Porter’s reverence for the text, and his excitement at encountering it in this format, are palpable. A viewer gets the impression of a translator directly communing with the source of his inspiration. “These are the poems that really made me fall in love with Chinese poetry,” he says in the accompanying voiceover. (*The Mountain Poems of Stonehouse* was Porter’s fourth published volume of translations, coming out in 1986.)

What distinguishes Porter’s translations is an effect of near transparency. In his 1994 essay “What Poetry Did in China,” the American poet Gary Snyder writes that classical Chinese poetry relies on “strategies of apparent simplicity and understatement.” Porter honors both those traits with limpid renderings that imprint concrete, sensuous imagery — features of a landscape, or a human face — on the reader’s mind while also leaving space for the underlying spiritual or philosophical resonances to show through. As Porter puts it in *Dancing with the Dead*: “When you translate poetry, of course, you don’t translate the words. You translate something behind the words.” His discreet annotations to the translations point to the presence of that “something,” giving just enough information for the reader to appreciate the poems from a deeper perspective.

Porter’s renditions of Buddhist sacred texts — including *The Diamond Sutra* (2002) and *The Heart Sutra* (2005) among others — are every bit as important to him as his poetry translations. “The Dharma and poetry,” he declares in *Dancing with the Dead*, have been “the polestars of my creative life.” Yet, he told me, they require a different approach: “The spiritual texts are slow. There’s not a lot of movement in a Buddhist sutra, as there is in poetry.” He continued:

“You have to question everything. You’re looking for a language that has the same impact as the Buddha had in his language. ... You don’t see a lot of scholastics coming up with language, putting words in the Buddha’s mouth, that are going to inspire anybody. These are inspiring texts. So my job is to come up with something that’s clear and not laden with technical terms. This is the Buddha talking.”

When you translate poetry, you don’t translate the words. You translate something behind the words.

— Bill Porter

Red Pine and Tao Yuanming (陶渊明), the 4th century poet and self-exiled official whom he translates in *Choosing To Be Simple*, are an especially apt match. Tao’s straightforward language makes him a good fit for Porter’s plainspoken style, while his near-reclusive existence dovetails with Porter’s longstanding interest in the Chinese hermit tradition.

Tao Yuanming’s stature in the Chinese literary tradition derives from both his verses and from the ideals his life embodied. After several short-lived stints in government service, he renounced public office in favor of a hardscrabble existence as an impoverished farmer. His poetry can be read as an autobiographical paean to the modest joys of the simple life: cultivating the land, reading and writing, entertaining occasional visitors, and (not least of all) enjoying wine as a means to heightened consciousness.

In the first of the “Palbearer Songs” he wrote toward the end of his life — effectively an elegy for himself — Tao famously announced (in Porter’s translation):

I only regret while I was alive 但恨在世时
I didn’t get more wine 饮酒不得时

In his 2016 travel book *Finding Them Gone*, Porter writes of Tao Yuanming: “I wish I could have been his neighbor.” I asked him to elaborate, and he responded matter-of-factly, “Well, I like to drink, too.”

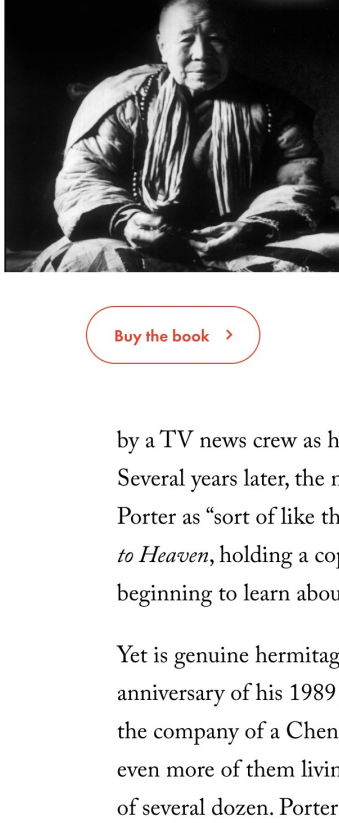
Taken cumulatively, Tao’s poems are a major statement of Taoist and Confucian principles even as they acknowledge the hardships imposed by adhering to those principles. Porter described his attraction to Tao’s work after first encountering it in a Taiwanese bookstore in 1972:

“I’ve always wanted to translate him. But I never could, because he’s so hard. His line is so dense. Tao Yuanming sort of initiated and mastered the five-syllable line. Basically, you’ve got five words, five syllables in a line. A lot’s going on, and Chinese characters are so ambiguous as to their grammatical status, whether two of those characters go together, or whether they’re separate ideas. ... They’re simple yet profound.”

I asked whether he sees any affinity between Tao Yuanming’s celebrated renunciations of society and China’s present-day “lying flat” movement, in which young Chinese turn their backs on a relentlessly careerist culture. “No, not at all,” Porter replied. “Tao Yuanming’s poems are full of suffering as a result of his choice. He had to beg for food on several occasions. He had made a commitment to a way of life that involved *not* lying flat but grabbing his hoe and going out and working the fields. It was a rough go.”

“Of course, the people who are ‘lying flat’ are college educated,” he continued. “Sooner or later, they’re going to have to get up. ... It’s not really a philosophical choice they’re making. It’s just an expression of dissatisfaction with what Chinese society and the Chinese economy have created.”

Porter had long been curious about China’s tradition of hermits, the men and women who heeded a spiritual call and abandoned ordinary life in favor of a semi-reclusive existence in remote rural areas. In the spring of 1989, he and the photographer Steven R. Johnson spent several weeks trekking through the Zhongnan Mountains, south of Xi’an, historically a center of eremitic practice. There they encountered a surprising number of Taoist practitioners (along with a few Buddhists) who still abided by the old austerities.



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Porter recounted that experience in *Road to Heaven*, in which he writes: “Detached from values imposed by whim or custom, hermits have remained an integral part of Chinese society because of their commitment to their culture’s own most ancient values. If not known else, they represent its mythic past.” The first and best-known of Porter’s travel series, the book gracefully synthesizes shelves’ worth of scholarly lore while keeping the focus on a remarkable group of people dedicated to “the same unchanging goal: to follow the Tao.” (Porter avoids overt political commentary, but the book is clear about the ravages that the Red Guards inflicted during the Cultural Revolution on the hermits, their places of worship, and the traditions they embodied.)

A Chinese translation of *Road to Heaven* arrived in 2001, and its reissue in 2009 became an unexpected best seller, propelling Porter to an improbable level of public recognition inside China. Ian Johnson’s *New York Review of Books* profile of Porter in 2012 captures an author in the full flush of literary celebrity, shadowed by a TV news crew as he signs autographs for an admiring crowd at Beijing’s largest bookstore. Several years later, the male lead in the popular TV show *Qide to Joy* (欢乐颂), characterized by Porter as “sort of like the Chinese version of *Sex and the City*,” urged his girlfriend to read *Road to Heaven*, handing a copy of it in front of the camera. “Clearly more and more foreigners are beginning to learn about Chinese culture,” the character notes approvingly.

Yet is genuine hermitage still possible, a generation later? In 2013, ahead of the 25th anniversary of his 1989 journey, Porter made a follow-up visit to the Zhongnan Mountains in the company of a Chengdu-based film crew. Instead of finding fewer hermits, they came across even more of them living in the same territory Porter had covered — several hundred instead of several dozen. Porter explained the difference as one of kind, not just degree:

“Before, the typical hermit was what I would call a spiritual devotee. Now they’re professionals. Beijing University graduate school dropouts. No one was educated when I was interviewing anybody. If they had gone to high school, well, that would have been something. And now everybody in the mountains is educated. You’re getting people dropping out in their forties and fifties, too.”

He described the appeal of such an arduous lifestyle: “The hermits I’ve met in China are among the happiest people I’ve ever met. The reason being that they’ve given up so much — because what makes us unhappy are the things we’re attached to. And these people have let a lot of that go.”

I asked if the Chinese eremitic tradition, and Tao Yuanming’s poetry, holds lessons for those in the 21st century United States as much as in the 4th century China:

“I’d say so. I mean, we have to take things just to manage our attachments. Once you get attached to a bunch of stuff, you’re going to have issues. Because things break, things are taken away from you, and of course, you have issues with other humans who are fighting over the same things. So yeah, it would be better to have less than more.”

Something has rubbed off from Porter’s time among the hermits, and from his lifelong commitment to Zen study and practice. Throughout *Dancing with the Dead*, and even over Zoom, he exudes an unassuming charisma: the rare equanimity of someone who has gone his own way.

I asked Ward Serrill, the documentary’s director, to corroborate this impression. He replied via email:

“I spent four years off and on with Bill in the making of this film. I saw him in the good times and bad and what I most marvel at is the steadiness of his innate good cheer and enthusiasm for life in all circumstances. Even at eighty, there is a fire that burns in his eyes, a fire of passion of a lifetime devoted to the Dharma. He won’t talk about Zen or even ‘spiritual’ things, waving them off as just more words about something that can’t be named. He lives the Unnamed Way.”

Now in his eighties, Porter plans to continue traveling, writing and translating for the foreseeable future. In our Zoom talk he was still jet-lagged from his most recent visit to China — but made it clear he expected his work to take him back there again a few weeks later. “Four, five, or six years ago,” he told me, “I was thinking, ‘Maybe I’ll just garden.’ But my wife has taken over the garden, and it’s her garden. And I can’t take over the kitchen either, so there’s not much left other than to just—”

Porter’s voice trailed off thoughtfully. I considered mentioning my favorite line in all of his translations, from the Bloodstream Sermon of Bodhidharma: “A understanding is in misdirection.” But I remembered how much of Red Pine’s art lies in what is left unsaid, and we ended our conversation there. ■

Header: Bill Porter at Bamboo Lake, Taiwan, reciting a poem by Tao Yuanming. (Woody Creek Pictures)

Dancing with the Dead: Red Pine and the Art of Translation, dir. Ward Serrill (October 2023), is available to stream now.



Jeff Tompkins is a writer based in New York. He has contributed articles and reviews to *Chin An Asian Literary Journal*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and *IMPROVISE Magazine*, among others. Tompkins is currently the communications coordinator for the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University.