

A Few Notes on Han Shan

The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain
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Hanshan, or Cold Mountain, named himself for the wilderness where he found seclusion. A Chinese scholar of the Tang dynasty, apparently fluent in Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, he is supposed to have written his poetry on the mountain, using its cliff faces for paper. By his own witness, he was almost totally unrecognized in his day both as poet and sage. But in time his poems became considered some of the greatest of that golden age. Meanwhile, his public persona grew larger than life and some conflated him with the mystic of legend, Manjusri.

Jack Kerouac dedicated his book, *The Dharma Bums*, to Hanshan. He was a wild man full of conviction in his path, who also departed from fixed models of piety. Here Han Shan seems to embrace the Buddhist claim that the source of enlightenment operates through him at all times, though perhaps unrecognizably. For a man who is not sure whether he has a self or not, his work reveals a strong and complex personality. Here are two of the last poems in his collection.

307

whoever has Cold Mountain's poems
is better off than reading sutras
paste them up on your screen
and read them from time to time

300

on Cold Mountain Road
no one arrives
whoever can walk it
deserves the Ten Names
cicadas are singing
no crows screeching
yellow leaves falling
white clouds sweeping
rocks piled up
mountains turned in

I live here alone
I'm called the Guide
look around
what are my signs

Places like Cold Mountain serve China's religious pilgrims, monks, hermits, as well as "mountain men." That was true in the Tang dynasty as well as now. "Sacred" hills and mountains like these would have hermitages, shrines, and visitors sometimes on a regular basis. Poetry posted all over Cold Mountain, much of it making prominent and celebratory mention of its unique geographical features, is almost like messages put on Facebook to members of a common cause. The reader is united in a common bond with Han Shan by virtue of place. These are poems which comforted the mountain men and religious hermits who live at Cold Mountain throughout the centuries. Hanshan shows a pride toward those who live more materialistic lives or enjoy a career in the privileged class of officials. Yet the sage does not uphold a rigorous standards to his fellow seekers. The hermetic life on Cold Mountain is portrayed as harsh enough and is characterized as a kind of "master" in itself. Hanshan's personal troubles of the heart are embraced as noble, as for example, mourning, doubt, and privation. Because the poems sometimes seem designed to comfort the religious of the mountain, themes like stoic confidence in the face of being a neglected sage seem like they may be the invention of later writers who added to the Hanshan canon. I have copied below some of the poems of Hanshan which I thought were most interesting.

16

people ask the way to Cold Mountain
roads don't reach Cold Mountain
summer the ice never melts
sunup the fog is thick
how did someone like me arrive
our minds aren't the same
if they were
you could get there then

32

climbing Cold Mountain Road
Cold Mountain Road doesn't end
the streams are long and piled with rocks
the gorges wide and choked with grass

the moss is slick without any rain
the pines sing without the wind
who can get past the tangles of the world
and sit with me in the clouds

40

an old lady to the east
got rich a few years ago
before poorer than me
she laughs that I'm broke
she laughs that I'm behind
I laugh that she's ahead
we laugh like we won't stop
from the east and from the west

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live without communication
die neither kind nor right
with words there're leaves and branches
with thoughts there's treachery
whoever clears a small path
creates thereby great deceit
claiming to build a cloud ladder
he whittles it into brambles

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I see a man fooling someone
running off with a basket of water
getting it home in one breath
with nothing left inside
and I see someone being fooled
just like a leek in the garden

everyday cut by a knife
but left with what it was born

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is there a self or not
is this me or not
this is what I ponder
still seated against the cliff
while between my feet green grass grows
and on my head red dust settles
I've even seen members of the laity
leave fruit and wine by the bier

What one man may call "Nirvana," is according to the Bible (while identical experientially: an experience of complete rapturous absorption in the source of life, an experience of blissful love of that One,) must be an encounter with the God who created us. This is because we can never become the Divine Creator who has always been and is All-Mighty - He will not give His glory to another. While a Buddhist may doubt if he truly has a personal identity, it is this very personal identity which God has endowed a person with in order to love and be loved and make real, finite, historical and biographical decisions. Likewise, God has a very real personal self and is not merely an abstract force. Love is a person capable of expressing Himself perfectly in a specific life. In Heaven, His judgments can be examined for their value, and they can be on Earth likewise through the Bible, especially through the Gospels. A strange thought, but one that may have some support from orthodox Eastern thought: Could even an experience of the ultimate Heaven, as enlightenment, if only momentary, in the end count for nothing, or relatively little? Perhaps the actual presence of God the personality is what makes existence worthwhile. What is love worth if there is no one there to love? If you are in love but your lover has forever disappeared would the love sustain joy?