

三十二

Once again there were pictures
emblazoned on sails
not Han Zi, not words
more like fish without scales
swimming into the night
through menacing clouds
the mountains were yellow
there were no more crowds



Chapter 32 – Cold Mountain (寒山 Hán Shān)

“White clouds gather and billow
Thin grass does for a mattress
The blue sky makes a good quilt
Happy with a stone under head
Let heaven and earth go about their changes.”

Snyder, Gary. Riprap: And Cold Mountain Poems. Grey Fox Press, 1982.

One of my all-time favorite poets is thought to have lived more than 1000 years ago in Tang Dynasty China. No one knows what Han Shan’s real name was nor where he was from, but the cave called Cold Mountain, where he is said to have lived, is in the province of Zhejiang, about a day’s foot journey from the sacred range of mountains called 天台 Tiāntái.

One commonly held story is that an official by the name of Lu Jiuyin (閻丘胤 Lú Qiūyìn) went to Mount Tiantai in order to meet Han Shan. He was told that there were actually two Bodhisattvas living there, Hán Shān (寒山) and Shí Dé (拾得 .) Asked how he might know them, he was told, “If you see them, you won’t recognize them; if you recognize them, you won’t see them.” He didn’t see them, but they saw him. And when they did, they laughed out loud and ran away, obviously having no desire to meet him.

When I first read Gary Snyder’s translation of 24 of Han Shan’s 300 poems, the translations and interpretations by the young, 24 year old budding poet, of the words and antics of Han Shan, spoke to me, and now, nearly 50 years later, I still hear them.

Patrick Murphy noted in his preface of Snyder’s book, Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems: “These poems are something more than translations precisely because Snyder renders them as a melding of Han Shan’s Chinese Ch’an Buddhist mountain spirit trickster mentality and Snyder’s own mountain wilderness meditation and labor activities.”

It was partly the sacrilege of Han Shan’s poetry that appealed to me. I loved that I never knew whether Han Shan and Shi De were Zen (Ch’an) Buddhists or Daoists or neither or both. Neither did religion own them, nor did they necessarily embrace a religion. They worked hard at menial tasks and were true to their own natures. They knew then that the answers were not to be found in the gadgets and the glitz and the glamour that defined success in the eyes of so many. In later years, in the West, they may have been the “boomers” who worked the buck rakes and beaver slides on the large cattle ranches in Montana, or the “old uncles” in

American Chinatowns sipping Po-lay and reading the China Times, after the Chinese Exclusion Act insured that they would remain bachelors even after the act was repealed in 1943. Even today, these old people might be homeless street sleepers in any large metropolitan area in the world. These men and women lived and live largely solitary lives where they had/have a fair amount of down time to contemplate the secrets of the universe. If you see them, you won't recognize them; if you recognize them, you won't see them.



寒山拾得像石刻 / [唐仁齋所作]

The stone-rubbing of Hanshan and Shi De is from an engraved stone stele in the Hanshan Temple in Suzhou.

Carved by 唐仁齋 Tang Renzhai some time in the years 1875-1908.