

**THE MAKING OF A ZEN PERSONAGE:
HANSHAN 寒山 AND HOW IT IS READ**

Anu Niemi

我居山
勿人識
白雲中
常寂寂

Living on mountains,
beyond people's reach.
Amidst white clouds,
never-ending peace.¹

These were the prophetic words of Hanshan, known in the West as the Zen-lunatic, or the Enlightened Madman of Cold Mountain. Despite the several forced attempts to categorize this mysterious character of verse through translation and study, the very words above still hold true: Hanshan's seclusion is rarely disturbed even by the ones that claim scholarship over him.

Not only do we not know the exact time during which the poems were written, or the true identity of person/s behind the assumed name *Hanshan* 寒山, but we seem to be at loss even when it comes to deciding on the overall attitude and world view conveyed in the collection. Often named as inconsistent and even illogical, the Hanshan collection owes, in fact, much of its complex reputation to the persistent presupposition that all mountain poems should be read as harmonious and holy. The secular sorrows of a mountain-sage, the yearning for money and earthly pleasures, the stories from the village that read more like gossip than *gāthā* – all these are features of Hanshan that have been seen as not fitting to the Classical Chan image of a Zen poet: one with mind like an autumn moon and tongue like a sharp sword of wisdom.

¹ Hanshan n308, SBCK Songben 47b/11. All the translations in this paper are the author's unless otherwise stated.

Due to the inconsistencies in the subject matter, Western readings of the Hanshan have traditionally taken to an exclusive rather than coherent textual approach. The individual poems presenting earthly occurrences in the village and amongst the common people have been seen as providing biographical information on the pre-eremitic life of the “poet Hanshan”. The sorting of the poems into the ones written before and into the ones written after the “author’s retirement to the mountains” was first suggested in the West by Arthur Waley, the first translator of Hanshan poems into English (1954), and succeeded by Burton Watson (1962), who arranged the selection of the 100 poems accordingly. Roberta Stalberg (1977) followed Watson by introducing further sub-categories into the biographical reading, arguing that the heterogeneous subject matter be read as individual “voices” of the several authors of the poems. In Stalberg, the biographical sub-categories are determined according to the external factors influencing the poets’ voices,² whereas in Watson the biographical continuum has been manufactured upon the variables in the state of mind and mood in the poems, in order to reconstruct a three-stage mental pattern of a person gradually *leaving home* (*chu jia* 出家).³ In the later English translations of the whole corpus (Red Pine [a.k.a. Bill Porter] 1983, 307 poems; Robert G. Henricks 1990, 311 poems), the chronological arranging has been abandoned, but the way the individual poems concerning secular subject matter and sentiment are translated still has traces of the Watson tradition of exclusion. The interpretive groundwork created for the early selective translations of Hanshan by Waley, Watson, Stalberg, Wu Chi-yu (1957) and Gary Snyder (1958) still affects the way the Hanshan corpus is read today.

At this stage one needs to point out the difference between the secular subject matter concerning the life in the village, and the profane reactions of the mountain sage towards the various phenomena. It has been agreed that poems concerned with secular subject matter were written “before Hanshan’s ascent to the mountains”, whereas the profane reactions of the mountain sage still stir up differences in opinion.⁴ It has been argued that the poems describing the author as a complaining old man (already living as a hermit) should perhaps not be attributed to Hanshan at all (Watson 1962: 2). The puzzlement seems to be emerging from the common notion that one is to refrain from attributing manifestations of *duḥkha*

² The categories in Stalberg are: Poems describing a background within a farming family; poems describing a wealthy and leisured youth; poems describing frustrations in career attempts; the eremitic poems. (Stalberg 1977: 58–59.)

³ The three stages in Watson are: Poet’s Early life; the writer’s increasing disgust with the world; retirement to the Cold Mountain (Watson 1962: 12).

⁴ See e.g. Hawkes 1962: 597; Blyth 1964: 165; Blofeld 1983; Henricks 1990: 16–18 and Idema 1991: 372.

(*ku* 苦 / *doufa* 豆法) to a practicing sage. A hermit lamenting loneliness has thus been regarded as a contradiction in terms. The dividing of the poetic material into biographically determined and mutually exclusive categories has given an impetus to the emergence of other, equally dualist patterns of interpretative dilemmas.

Were one to approach Hanshan's profane sentiment through an understanding of the ways and whys of a literary genre named as "lecturing lyrics", one might cease to regard the collection as inconsistent. As I see it, in order to fully appreciate the complicated contemporary ideohistoric patterns of meaning and expression, one should concentrate on reading the collection as a doctrinal whole. It should not be so much a question on the direct meaning of an individual verse per se, as on the rhetoric meaning of the collection as a whole, in a way similar to that of finger pointing at the moon. As it has originally been seen proper to maintain the collection as an integral one and to arrange the poems under a common title, what purpose would it serve to dismantle it now in order to create new, seemingly logical entities? In my opinion, the grinning Hanshan should not be taken at face value but rather as a case of educational rhetoric directed to the whole audience (hence the "voices" in the poems). Were one to read the profane reactions and sentiment simply as profane expressions, a large part of the controversy over Hanshan's character would be solved. In the preface to his translations, Watson notes the "Zen commentator's" reading of Hanshan as a "traditional bodhisattva figure", whose "professions of loneliness, doubt, and discouragement [are] not [seen] as revelations of his own feelings but as vicarious recitals of the ills of unenlightened men" (Watson 1962: 14). However, he himself chooses, as Iriya Yoshitaka before him, to approach Hanshan as "a chronicle of spiritual search" (Watson 1962: 14). In his review of Henricks' translation, W. L. Idema (1991) warns the translators against "over-interpreting": one needn't see all the subject matter inevitably connected with the writer of the poems. Idema calls attention to one poem in particular, in which Henricks (and, it must be added, all the English-language translators before him, namely Watson, Snyder and Red Pine) has preserved the traditional view of Hanshan as someone not concerned with any secular matter. The poem in question is Hanshan n187 (SBCK Songben 30a/1-3), and it is the same poem that evoked similar objections in David Hawkes, in his review of the Watson collection (Hawkes 1962: 597). The original poem reads as following:

客難寒山子
君詩無道理
吾觀平古人
貧賤不為恥

ke nan han shan zi
jun shi wu dao li
wu guan ping gu ren
pin jian bu wei chi

應之笑此言
談何踈闊矣
願君似今日
錢是急事爾

ying zhi xiao ci yan
tan he shu kuo yi
yuan jun si jin ri
qian shi ji shi er

Much depends on to whom the parts of the dialogue are attributed. Watson and Henricks assume lines 3–4 to be uttered by Hanshan, whereas Hawkes and Idema regard them to be that of his critic's. The question remains: is it possible for a recluse to stress the importance of *money*? The diverging Watson/Hawkes interpretations read as follows:

Someone criticized the Master of Cold Mountain:
"Your poems make no sense at all!"
"But from what I have read of the ancients,"
I said,
"They weren't ashamed to be poor and humble..."
He laughed at my words and answered,
"How can you talk such foolishness?"
Then go on, my friend, as you are today.
Let money be your whole life for you!
(Watson 1962: 91)

A visitor criticized Han-shan-tzu, saying, "Your poems are most unreasonable. From my reading of the ancients it is clear to me that they were not ashamed to be poor and humble, as you are."
I laughed at his words and replied, "How easy it is to *talk*! I wish you were as poor as I now am. You would soon see then what an important thing money is!" (Hawkes 1962: 597)

Reading the poem in the context of the whole collection, I quite agree with the Hawkes/Idema mode of interpretation. The unified mode through which the Hanshan poems are translated in the West has maintained notions of Hanshan as a downright predictable Zen personage, who preaches against dualist views but does not live up to his own teaching. To consider the Hanshan as an exclusive whole from which all elements improper are disregarded, is typical for the English-language translations – regardless of whether the individual poem translations appear in selections or collections. Much is probably due to the way the Chinese Chan Buddhism has traditionally been understood in the West. Here, Zen always seems to be the type of Zen which Alan W. Watts wrote about in his classic admonishing piece *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (1959).

A great part of the reluctance to regard the Hanshan corpus as a doctrinal whole could be seen as deriving from the Classical Chan propagation of Hanshan as a Zen Buddhist personage. In the English-language translations, the Buddhist elements of Hanshan have invariably been read through the Classical Chan notion of Universal Zen. The root for interpreting Hanshan as Zen Buddhist comes as far

back as the 9th century, the second edition of the Hanshanshi being compiled, together with a commentary, by one of the two founders of the Caodong 曹洞 (Soto) school of Chan: Caoshan Benji 曹山本寂 (840–901). According to the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (T50n2061_p0786b08-c01) the work carried the title “On Hanshan Poetry” (*Dui Hanshanzi shi* 對寒山子詩). As the commentary is no longer extant, we can but make wild guesses on the way a founder of a Chan Buddhist school might have interpreted Hanshan poetry.

However, one must bear in mind that most of the Hanshan poems seem to have been written more than two centuries before they were first annotated. In his paper “Linguistic evidence for the date of Han-shan”, Edwin Pulleyblank argued, through a study on the rhymes in the collection, that as many as three-fourths of the poems were actually written as early as late Sui – early Tang period (Pulleyblank 1978: 165). This dates most of the poems to the early 7th century, to a period of time when the Chan texts still contained “a wide variety of doctrinal formulations, practical exhortations, and ritual procedures” (McRae 1987: 229). It hasn’t been until recently that the ideological diversity of Chinese Chan Buddhism has been properly acknowledged. Thanks to the life-long work on the Dunhuang documents by such eminent scholars as Hu Shi, Ui Hakuju, Yanagida Seizan and Philip Yampolsky, and the current study conducted by the many scholars world-wide, such as John McRae, Whalen Lai, Robert Gimello, Bernard Faure (just to name a few), many crucial features on the early history of Chinese Chan have been found to contradict the assumptions that previously prevailed. Due to the nearly one hundred years of intensive scholarly effort we are now able to reconstruct quite firmly the historical context surrounding the development of Early Chan Buddhist schools. (see e.g. McRae 1995)

Approaches made to the Dunhuang material from a slightly different angle have resulted in groundbreaking developments in the area of historical linguistics as well. Not all literature written in Classical Chinese language, it has been argued by such highly recognized scholars as Hu Shi, Iriya Yoshitaka and Victor H. Mair, should be interpreted under the terms of Classical Chinese grammar and lexicon: the use of vernacular expressions within a Classical Chinese frame is described as typical of early Chinese Buddhist rhetoric. In his “Script and word in medieval vernacular Sinitic”, Mair comments on the Henricks reading of the Hanshanshi, arguing that the translations lack in their ability to recognize the “high proportion of colloquial and vernacular elements in the language used to write them” (Mair 1992: 269). Mair sees the Hanshan poems as a treasure trove for the “preservation of vernacular elements of normative spoken Sinitic from the T’ang period” (Mair 1992: 273), making the corpus an interesting read for any linguistically oriented scholar, and a difficult task for anyone attempting to render the poems into another language.

As the ideological and linguistic context of one period in history changes, so should the interpreting of contemporary ideological literature change. The traditional Western translations of Early Chan literature form a small but influential canon of texts that are not loyal to the heterogeneous nature of contemporary ideology and language use. It is a well-known fact that the translators hold much power in their hands: had there not been Daoist inclinations involved in the early process of translating Buddhist sūtras into Chinese, we might not have a thing called Zen today. Recent efforts in the field of translation study⁵ have been making this use of power more visible, by acknowledging the “fundamentally hermetic nature of translation” (Fowler 1992: 20). In his article on the canonized world of modern Japanese fiction translations, Edward Fowler (1992: 1–44) criticizes the “trivializing of translation process” by the academic world of Oriental Studies, and demands the “exposure of the interpretive framework”, in order to reach a true understanding of the complex patterns behind the translated literature we all too often consult as original.

In order to read the Hanshan poems in just accordance with the new ideohistoric and linguistic research one should regard the main part of the collection as a product of the Early Chan Buddhist school of thought and translate the lyrics accordingly.

THE TWO “ZEN-POEMS” BY HANSHAN

Next I will draw your attention to the two Hanshan poems in which the character *chan* 禪 appears, and to the way they have traditionally been translated. Both of the poems: n280 (SBCK Songben 44a/5–7) and n287 (SBCK Songben 45a/4–6) fall in the category Pulleyblank names as “Hanshan I”, i.e. those written during the late Sui – early Tang period. In the Hanshanshi there is a total of three occurrences of the character *chan*, out of which one appears in a poem most likely written during the late Tang era.⁶ While reading Hanshan poetry that has been written during the Early Chan Buddhist era one needs to bear in mind that the thing we refer to nowadays as the Zen School had not yet been formed. As Philip Yampolsky (1983: 3) has noted, it was not until the late 8th century that the concept *chan zong* was adhered to refer to “Chan sect”.

In the poems n280 and n287 much of the translation depends on the way one interprets the word *chan*, i.e. what status it is given. Poem n280 is one of the most

⁵ See e.g. Hermans 1985; Bassnett & Lefevere 1990; Venuti 1998.

⁶ Poem n195 (SBCK Songben 31a/5–8). In this late-Tang poem, the character *chan*, together with the character *lin* 林 forms one word, denoting (Chan) Buddhist monastery: *chan lin* 禪林. (See e.g. Soothill & Hedous 1934: 460; Ding 1995: 2777; Xiang 2000: 507.)

ambiguous pieces in the collection, and it is in the translational choices made for the first four stanzas that determine the fluency and accuracy of the rest of the poem. Red Pine's translation of the poem could be seen as a good example of the earlier interpretations that have been conducted via stereotyped presuppositions of "Hanshan and his Zen". Both the atmosphere in the collection as an *doctrinal whole* and the historical facts of the development of Chan schools in general, and the certain linguistic features of the first two stanzas in particular, disagree strongly with Red Pine's translation's oddly accepting attitude towards the "guest talking Zen".

I've always loved the friends of the Way
 always held them dear
 meeting with a stranger with silent springs
 greeting a guest talking zen
 talking about mysteries on a moonlit night
 searching for truth until dawn
 when the tracks of our inventions disappear
 and we see who we really are

(Red Pine 1983, n279)

本志幕道倫
 道倫常獲親
 時逢杜源客
 每接話禪賓
 談玄月明夜
 探理日臨晨
 萬機俱泯跡
 方識本來人

ben zhi mu dao lun
dao lun chang huo qin
shi feng du yuan ke
mei jie hua chan bin
tan xuan yue ming ye
tan li ri lin chen
wan ji ju min ji
fang shi ben lai ren

As stated earlier, this poem was most likely written during the 7th century. This means some caution on the use of the concept "Zen" could be advisable, as the use of the word "Zen" would associate the whole poem with the powerful notion of universal export-Zen that has its roots in the highly developed Chan philosophy of the 9th century Linchi and Caodong schools. Daring to doubt that Hanshan ever witnessed any universal "Zen", I suggest the *hua chan* to be interpreted simply as "dhyāna masters" i.e. masters preaching the practical aspect of the Teaching: *chanshi* 禪師, in comparison to masters concentrating on the philosophical aspect: *fashi* 法師. The "talking [of] Zen" is a typical feature of Classical Chan, and as such has no place in the translations of the literary works of the Early Chan of the 7th century. If one wishes to retain the element of "talk" in the stanza, one might want to regard it as an anti-dualistic statement so often seen in the Hanshan poems: the contradictory image of arguing, philosophizing: *hua* 話 on the speechless, silent praxis: *chan* 禪. This poem, as I see it, strongly preaches against clinging to thought and expression: in the context of the collection as a whole Hanshan repeatedly pre-

sents himself as anything else but a great fan of all-night talks and mysteries! The way the first two stanzas are handled sets the tone for the whole poem. I see Red Pine's interpretation of *dao lun* 道倫 in the first and second stanza as "friends of the Way" odd and linguistically inadequate. When one compares it with his translation of the seventh stanza of the Hanshan poem n259 (SBCK Songben 40b/9–11): *yu ru mu dao zhe* 語汝幕道者 as "I advise you lovers of the Way" (Red Pine 1983, n257), one wonders why it would suddenly take the combination of three characters: *mu dao zhe* 幕道者 to reach to the similar expression: "lovers of the Way". *Dao zhe* 道者 undoubtedly refers to the Teaching, the Way, with *mu* 幕 functioning as its modifier, whereas in n280 (Red Pine 1983, n279) *dao lun* 道倫 alone is translated as "friends of the Way" (as it is repeated without the *mu* 幕 in the beginning of the second stanza). The character *lun* 倫 possesses indeed a large variation of meaning, but in this specific context and grammatical setting the only reasonable one I see would be that of "order (of *dao* 道)", resulting in the two characters *dao lun* 道倫 to be read as one word: the Teaching (of the Buddha), not much differently as the *dao zhe* 道者 in n259. In Xiang (2000: 736) *dao lun* is seen as to refer to Buddhist clergy. However, to read the poem as a celebration of monastic practice would seem paradoxical in relation to the many poems in Hanshan that ridicule ordained monastic life and the "stiff-sitting monks".

In yet another Hanshan poem, n229 (SBCK Songben 35b/9–11) which, according to Pulleyblank, represents the later 8th–9th-century harvest of the poems, we see that an identical stanza has been used: whereas in n280 it was functioning as an opening-line, *ben zhi mu dao lun* 本志幕道倫 here ends the poem. From the way the stanza reacts here to its predecessor in the scope of the notably clearer grammatic parallelism than the one we find in n280, we may conclude that *mu* 幕 functions as an independent predicate in both cases. The fact that in Hanshan one rarely finds identical patterns that are not of religious parlance would suggest *ben zhi mu dao lun* 本志幕道倫 to have had particular significance as a fixed idiom in the Buddhist lexicon of the 7th century. In Xiang (2000: 584) the word *benzhi* 本志 is given the meaning of *suyuan* 宿願: long-cherished wish; this, however, doesn't determine the way the stanza is voiced: whether it is presented in a passive or active voice. And whether the whole poem should be read as admonitory or as encouraging. With the interpreting of *ben zhi* 本志 as "I've always", the Red Pine translation of the second stanza as "always held them [friends of the Way] dear" coarsely accuses Hanshan of idolizing "mystery talk" to the extent of even identifying himself with all sorts of "lovers of the Way".

I would thus suggest the lines to be read in a way that the author understands how natural it is for people to cling to teachers and kindred spirits and all-night religious talks, but the author also understands that it is not until the riddance of all thoughts and new ideas that enlightenment is attained. Hanshan here makes

clear once again the division between “the finger and the moon”, i.e. the Teaching and the Realization. I suggest the poem to be read as a general account on the difficulty of finding the right path, rather than a personal recounting on the pleasures of the search.

Original Mind appreciates the Teaching,
 the teaching invariably attracts followers.
 Occasionally one meets lay-followers
 clinging to each meditation-master.
 [They'll be] talking mysteries on a moonlit night,
 reaching for truth until dawn.
 [But] it's not until all our ideas are gone
 that we see to the Original Man.

The other Hanshan poem containing the character *chan* 禪 is poem n287 (SBCK Songben 45a/4–6):

From a lofty summit
 the panorama extends forever
 I sit alone unknown
 the lone moon lights Cold Springs
 the moon isn't in the Springs
 the moon is in the sky
 I sing this solitary song
 but the song isn't zen
 (Red Pine 1983, n282)

高高峰頂上
 四顧極無邊
 獨坐無人知
 孤月照寒泉
 泉中且無月
 月自在青天
 吟此一曲歌
 歌終不是禪

gao gao feng ding shang
si gu ji wu bian
du zuo wu ren zhi
gu yue zhao han quan
quan zhong qie wu yue
yue zi zai qing tian
yin ci yi qu ge
ge zhong bu shi chan

Here too, the character *chan* in the last stanza has been translated with the term “Zen”: Watson n62: “In the song there is no Zen”; Red Pine n282: “but the song isn't zen”; Iriya 1973: 63: “What is in it is not zen”; Henricks n285: “What's in this song is not Zen”; James Kirkup 1980: 19: “But after all this poem is not zen.” This poem is interestingly amongst the ones written during the 7th century. Hanshan seems here to be more close to the style and manner of Classical Chan's literary works than anywhere else in the poems. The context in which the character *chan* 禪 appears here would seem to offer grounds for claiming a closer association with the Chan school of thought, and not only with the general practice of meditation, to the extent of even translating the term as “Zen”. However, the separating of external

teaching from the inner realization has long been present in Chinese thought. Whalen Lai (1987: 170–171) associates the sayings attributed to Dao Sheng (360–434) in *Gao seng chuan* 高僧傳 (T50n2059_00366c14–17) with the paragraphs from Zhuangzi interpreted by Wang Bi. As Lai notes, the “standard Buddhist hermeneutical principle” of relying “on the meaning, not the words” can be seen in Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* (Lai 1987: 171; T14n0475_p0556c09–10).

The same, of course, applies to the Chinese translation of the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, in which we can perhaps witness one of the earliest examples of the “finger pointing to the moon not being the moon”, a metaphor often used in later Zen literature. This particular saying written in a *gāthā* form is to be found in all of the three different Chinese translations of the *sūtra*: *As the foolish look at the finger pointing at the moon and not at the moon, those hearing just the words don’t get my point*. The interesting variation taking place is that of the “letter”. In the Guṇabhadra (T16n0670_p0510c18) (443 AD) and Bodhiruci (T16n0671_p0577a21) (513 AD) versions it is denoted with *mingzi* 名字 whereas in the Śīkṣānanda version (T16n0672_p0620a16) (700–704) it has been replaced by *wenzi* 文字.

如遇見指月	<i>ru yu jian zhi yue,</i>
觀指不觀月	<i>guan zhi bu guan yue.</i>
計著名字/文字者	<i>ji zhu ming zi / wen zi zhe</i>
不見我真實	<i>bu jian wo zhen shi</i>

Here can be noted the lexical development towards the Zen maxim of later times: *bu li wenzi* 不立文字: Don’t rely on words! As I see it, in Hanshan poem n287, the concept of “words/letters” has been denoted with the character *ge* 歌 (“song”), and the concept of “Truth” with the character *chan* 禪. This is not the only Hanshan poem in which the finger-moon theme is present: in no. 279 (SBCK Songben 44a/3–4) one “by finger-point sees the moon / the moon [that] is the key to mind”: *yin zhi jian qi yue / yue shi xin shuyao* 因指見其月 / 月是心樞要. Throughout the Hanshan collection, similar expressions in their various forms can be found.

That a metaphor was later adopted to propagate Classical Chan thought should not necessarily mean that its early forms should be translated according to the concepts of later times. How, then, is one to interpret terminology that clearly hints to its future field of association, without being there just yet? Were one to translate the term *chan* neutrally as “meditation” or even as “contemplation”, much of its appeal and essential meaning would be lost. One way could be to address the problem not on the level of a single lexeme but on the level of over-all semantics. Given that the reflection of the moon in the river equals the lyrics of a song in their vain attempts to reach the unreachable and name the un-nameable, and bearing in mind that the moon symbolizes the “key to the mind”, the term *chan* 禪 could be trans-

literated according to meaning, not words. I thus suggest the translation of the Hanshan poem n287 to read as follows:

Far upon the mountain tops,
no end to the scene.
Sitting alone where no-one knows,
moon reflects to the cold spring.
The moon is not in the spring,
the moon is in the sky.
In the song I sing,
is not that which I sing.⁷

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