

## Gardens and Gateways: Journeys within the Vision of Han-shan

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Although rooted in the work of the T'ang poet Han-shan, this paper is ultimately about the ways in which writers and artists engage with what they experience in the world. The work of filmmaker Trin T Minh-Ha, poems by W.S. Merwin, Burtin Watson's translations, and the thoughts on the creative process of translation by Tony Barnstone and Gary Snyder have all informed my work as an artist and the images I present here.

The complexity of China has always seemed astonishing to me. In my travels there, I have contemplated how best to engage the country's vast history and rich visual texture. I have also struggled to discover common threads that connect one of the world's oldest cultures with the current, great masses of people. And how can I as the artist-traveler, the stranger or *waigouren*, mediate this unfamiliar space and interpret it creatively?

On my first trip to China, I brought along a small book of 100 poems by Han-shan from the T'ang Dynasty. These writings by the reclusive yet deeply socially aware Buddhist monk, who is thought to have lived anywhere between 627 and 750 A.D., held many of the answers I was looking for. I have returned to this volume many times.

Here translated by Burton Watson is #29

*I spur my horse past the ruined city;  
The ruined city, that wakes the traveler's thoughts:  
Ancient battlements, high and low;  
Old grave mounds, great and small.  
Where the shadow of the single tumbleweed trembles  
And the voice of the great trees clings forever,*

*I sigh over all those common bones—  
No roll of the immortals bears their names.<sup>1</sup>*

Han-shan's poem echoed as I visited famous spots such as Xi'an's terracotta warriors, the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall and most strongly when walking down an unknown street in a city or looking out a train window across fields lit with many little fires from farmers' brush piles. It was the unnamed souls of Han-shan's poems, whose presence is strong in these places, that have resonated most deeply for me. China's history in the recent centuries makes this sentiment more poignant.

The two most eventful trips to China were for the adoption of my two young daughters. My daughters' Chinese names are *Yu Yao* (beautiful jade) and *Qiu Qing* (autumn calm/clear). As they have grown, we have moved together through the complex spaces and time from the culture they were born into, to the one they currently inhabit.

I (and increasingly they) have often felt the invisible ties that connect us to each other and to China through time and space. The adoption community often refers to these connections as *the red thread*, referring to the old Chinese story of those predestined to be together.

The birth mothers of my daughters, though never to be known, are always present for me like ghosts of memories.



*Fig. 1. Mixed media painting, 11x14 inches ©Anne Beidler*

In her introduction to Karin Evans' book, *Lost Daughters of China*, Anchee Min takes on the role of stern *ayi* or auntie, telling the "raw truth" of their histories. She tells the lost daughters

that for their birth mothers, who for whatever tragic reason had to relinquish them, they will be forever “a broken arm hidden inside the sleeve.”<sup>2</sup> And when my daughters have asked, “Do you think she ever wonders about me?” I have said, “My dear, every day.”

In his poem “A Message to Po Chu-I,” recently published in *The New Yorker*, W.S. Merwin has a wrenching conversation with another T’ang poet, across the centuries. He traces the metaphorical migration of an old goose from ancient times when there was war and starvation, to the current days of global strife and ecological disaster. In each epoch the goose is given protection by the poet and we are left with the hope that some future poet will become his guardian.

“A Message to Po Chu-I” by W.S. Merwin

*In that tenth winter of your exile  
the cold never letting go of you  
and your hunger aching inside you  
day and night while you heard the voices  
out of the starving mouths around you  
old ones and infants and animals  
those curtains of bones swaying on stilts  
and you heard the faint cries of the birds  
searching in the frozen mud for something  
to swallow and you watched the migrants  
trapped in the cold the great geese growing  
weaker by the day until their wings  
could barely lift them above the ground  
so that a gang of boys could catch one  
in a net and drag him to market  
to be cooked and it was then that you  
saw him in his own exile and you  
paid for him and kept him until he  
could fly again and you let him go  
but then where could he go in the world  
of your time with its wars everywhere*

*and the soldiers hungry the fires lit  
the knives out twelve hundred years ago*

*I have been wanting to let you know  
the goose is well he is here with me  
you would recognize the old migrant  
he has been with me for a long time  
and is in no hurry to leave here  
the wars are bigger now than ever  
greed has reached numbers that you would not  
believe and I will not tell you what  
is done to geese before they kill them  
now we are melting the very poles  
of the earth but I have never known  
where he would go after he leaves me<sup>3</sup>*

The 2001 film, *The Fourth Dimension* by Trin T. Minh Ha, has influenced me through the years of developing this project. Her creation of the images within film as segments or vignettes of space, color, and form reminds me of the way an artist book can be engaged. Her notions of the images made by a visitor or guest engaged with, but ultimately separate from, a culture are beautifully explored in this particular film.

The creative form known as the *artist's book* is a format for an unusual kind of interaction between the viewer and the creative work. The world of each book is entered separately by individual viewers. Each encounter is specific. Each dialogue is unique.

My book works also allude to the notion of the carried shrine or Gau, as used in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia. The Gau box usually contains a written prayer or a sacred diagram. The prayers are usually hand inscribed or block-printed by a priest and they are always blessed before use.

The focus of the imagery for these mixed-media works is based in color and images from my own photographs, including photographs of Chinese and Korean gardens, temples, gateways, and street scenes. My photographs have been digitally printed



Fig 2. Detail of mixed media book installation, 30x40 inches ©Anne Beidler

onto organza or silk and layered onto the canvas surface. Found materials include Chinese *joss* paper that is used to honor ancestors. Small tin niches (small places of worship) seem to echo temple entryways and become a kind of gateway. Applied media include ink, paint, wax, sewn pieces, and collage.

I have experimented with an overlay of printed images and drawn images. I am also very interested in how printmaking media may begin to come together with painting. These pieces are often created on deep canvases which give a sense of levels and three-dimensional *spaces*. They can be placed on deep railings along the gallery wall and thus viewed in sequence.

Each image becomes a *gateway* the same way garden or temple gateways invites exploration. The works are meant to evoke an ancient place

often visited and long remembered.



Fig 3. Print, 9x12 inches ©Anne Beidler



Fig 4. Mixed media painting, 11x14 inches ©Anne Beidler

Ancient images of the Buddha and the female bodhisattva, Guan Yin, who gives solace to the hurt and provides the blessing of children, evoke a place of contemplation. My young daughter's face is overlapped with that of Guan Yin and in the background

are the images of other bodhisattvas or perhaps ancestors. The lone woman with her back to the viewer evokes once more the unnamed souls of Han-shan's poems.

Recently, I have drawn inspiration from the writings by translators of Chinese poetry. Their ideas have helped me understand more about my role and the validity of interpreting experiences with China. Both Gary Snyder and Tony Barnstone speak of translation as a creative act in itself.

Barnstone says in his essay from *The Symposium on Translating Asian Poetry of 1999*, "Translators bring their linguistic patterns, cultural predispositions, and aesthetic biases to the creative act, not merely holding up a mirror to something old, but giving the text original new life in a strange environment."<sup>4</sup>

Snyder writes in his reflections on translating Han-shan, "A truly apt translation of a poem may require much effort of imagination, almost as great as the making of the original. The translator who wishes to enter the creative territory must make an intellectual and imaginative jump into the mind and world of the poet, and no dictionary will make it easier."<sup>5</sup>

About her film, *Shoot for the Contents from 1991*, Trin T. Min-Ha says, "The image is mediated by the translator—a literal translator during the interview with the Chinese filmmaker, but also other translators heard or seen through the voices of the narrators and of myself as writer, editor, and photographer of images of China. The fact that both makers and viewers depend here on translation in order to have an *entry* into the culture was clearly brought out in the sound-image. On one level, this interdependence made visible and audible may appear artificial, but on the level of its function within the process of producing meaning and images, it is totally natural."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps this is true for the artist as well, as one tries to capture experience that is one's own, but also belongs to others. Snyder goes on to say that "Han-shan was not exactly a nature poet. He was a person who left behind his old self to walk in the world of no obstruction, which is in the practice of Zen, just this very world. And that the recurrent image of Cold Mountain and its roughness is the narrow gate through which Han-shan tried to

force his perception of a *whole* world and this helps explain his poetry's calm intensity."<sup>7</sup>

Here Snyder translates Han-shan:

*In a tangle of cliffs I choose a place—  
Bird-paths, but no trails for men.  
What's that beyond the yard?  
White clouds clinging to vague rocks.  
Now I have lived here- how many years-  
Again and again, spring and winter pass.  
Go tell families with silverware and cars  
"What's the use of all the noise and money?"<sup>8</sup>*

Let me conclude with two more poems by Han-Shan, which allude to memory and representation. Again, with translation by Burton Watson.

#4  
*Above the blossoms sing the orioles:  
Kuan kuan, their clear tones.  
The girl with a face like jade  
Strums to them on her lute.  
Never does she tire of playing—  
Youth is the time for tender thoughts.  
When flowers scatter and the birds fly off  
Her tears will fall in the spring wind.<sup>9</sup>*

#97  
*My mind is like the autumn moon  
Shining clean and clear in the green pool.  
No, that's not a good comparison.  
Tell me, how shall I explain?<sup>10</sup>*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Han-Shan, *Cold Mountain 100 Poems by the T'ang poet*, Burton Watson, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Karin Evans, *The Lost Daughters of China*, (New York: Jeremy B. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), XI.

- <sup>3</sup>W.S. Merwin, "A Message to Po Chu-I," *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2010, [http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/poetry/2010/03/08/100308po\\_poem\\_merwin](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/poetry/2010/03/08/100308po_poem_merwin) (accessed March 2010) © by W.S. Merwin, used with permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.
- <sup>4</sup>Tony Barnstone, "How I Strayed into Asian Poetry" *Manoa*, vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 1999), 66.
- <sup>5</sup>Gary Snyder "Reflections on My Translations of the Tang Poet Han-shan" *Manoa*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 137-139.
- <sup>6</sup>Trin T. Min-Ha, "When the Eye Frames Red," interview with Akira Mizuta Lippit, <http://www.trinhminh-ha.com/> ( accessed February, 2010).
- <sup>7</sup>Snyder, "Reflections on My Translations of the Tang Poet Han-shan," 138.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid., 138-139.
- <sup>9</sup>Han-shan, *Cold Mountain*, 22.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid., 115.

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