

Hanshan and Shide

*People pass by and say I've lost my mind
But the mirror shows an ordinary face
My clothes are plain but in order
They don't understand what I say
I refuse to speak their words
This is for those who come
If you understand me come to Cold Mountain*

Hanshan and Shide were two figures—poets, hermits, or perhaps anarchists—believed to have lived during China's Tang dynasty (618–907). Their words were compiled into a collection known as the Cold Mountain Poems, which has been read and re-read for over a thousand years. And yet, their names have never been counted among the canonical lineage of Chinese literary history, nor have they exerted a significant influence on classical Chinese literature.

The origins of the Cold Mountain Poems remain the subject of debate. The most widely cited account attributes the compilation to a man named Lüqiu Yin, who is said to have ordered a monk of Guoqing Temple on Mount Tiantai to assemble the verses into a single volume, to which he added a preface. However, Lüqiu Yin—who introduces himself in the preface with a long and grandiloquent list of titles—cannot be confirmed as a historical figure. Another theory credits the compilation to a man named Juelingfu, also associated with Mount Tiantai, who is said to have edited the poems into three volumes and written a separate preface in the early 9th century. Yet another version suggests the collection was assembled by the Chan monk Caoshan Benji. The exact circumstances of its compilation remain unclear. What is certain, however, is that the poems themselves survive.

When the two were together, the air seemed to ripple ever so slightly. They shared something between them, though no one could say what it was. Their voices were low—not quite eerie, but no one knew why they laughed. Their words were left on bamboo and tree trunks, on the stones, on the walls of village houses and on the plaster of old shrines. Later, someone gathered them, counted them, and called them poems.

One had a plum tree in his garden, a family, books—everything. Then one day, he walked away from it all. Sometimes he appeared at the monastery, scavenging for leftovers, then vanish into the mountains. The other was taken in by a monk, given a place at the stove, and swept the ashes. They say his name meant “the one who was picked up.” But perhaps it meant something else—The one who collects what others leave unwritten.

Thus transmitted across time, the figures of Hanshan and Shide eventually emerged as enduring subjects in the visual arts. However, during the Song dynasty (960–1279) in China, themes centered on landscapes and birds-and-flowers—highly prized for their aesthetic appeal—came to dominate the pictorial tradition, gradually pushing religious figures and subjects to the margins of artistic representation.

From these margins, the theme found its way to Japan, where it was quietly revived. Over the course of the Kamakura period, it took root, and by the Muromachi period, numerous “Hanshan and Shide” images were being created by monk-painters.

Among the most frequently cited models were works attributed to Yan Hui (unknown), a court painter active during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). In his diptych, the two figures appear with crescent-shaped eyes and mouths, disheveled hair, orderly rows of teeth, and smiles tinged with

something uncanny. This iconography was repeatedly plagiarized and reinterpreted by later generations of painters. Prominent painters such as those from the Kano school, as well as Tawaraya Sōtatsu, Ogata Kōrin, Hakuin Ekaku, Yosa Buson, and Brice Marden, all took up the theme. More recently, Tadanori Yokoo has explored and reinterpreted it through his fascination with the eccentric mid-Edo painter Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781), who also depicted the pair. In these paintings, Hanshan is often shown holding a scroll, and Shide a broom—a motif that persists throughout the centuries.

The subject also made deep inroads into literature. From Matsuo Bashō, Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Ibuse Masuji, and Okamoto Kanoko, to Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Karatani Kōjin, writers across times and cultural contexts have repeatedly returned to Hanshan and Shide, invoking their names in poems, stories, and critical texts.

All these recurring images—in both art and literature—can ultimately be traced back to Lüqiu Yin’s preface, where their story was first shaped. Yet recent scholarship suggests another possibility: that “Hanshan” and “Shide” may not have referred to individual historical figures, but names collectively adopted by a loosely affiliated group of poets and literati. Under these names, successive generations projected their own ideals, disillusionments, and beliefs. Over time, the strange figures that emerged came to embody not two eccentric individuals, but a kind of poetic fellowship—one shaped by the layering of countless anonymous voices across the centuries.