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Barefoot Wandering: Hanshan's Spiritual Hybridity and the *Hehe* Pluralism

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of diasporic hybridity through Hanshan's (Cold Mountain) life and poetry during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Departing from traditional diaspora models of forced migration, Hanshan's voluntary exile from the Confucian-dominated capital to the spiritually diverse Tiantai Mountain reveals how internal dislocation can foster hybrid religious identities. Through a close reading of his poetry and spiritual journey, this study argues that Hanshan embodies the Chinese philosophy of *Hehe* (和合), which is a model of religious pluralism grounded in "harmony through difference." By integrating Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory and Arjun Appadurai's "diaspora landscape," the paper demonstrates how Hanshan's engagement with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism presents a dynamic framework for understanding interreligious dialog. Hanshan's hybrid spiritual identity thus offers a transhistorical lens for reimagining religious pluralism in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Keywords: diasporic hybridity; Hanshan; *Hehe* religious pluralism; interreligious dialog; third space



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1. Introduction

Expanding the traditional understanding of diaspora beyond forced migration or ethnic dispersion, scholars have increasingly explored how internal, voluntary, or spiritual forms of displacement can profoundly transform identity and subjectivity (Bhabha 1994; Said 2000; Brubaker 2005; Kato 2022). This broader perspective allows us to see figures like Hanshan as part of a spiritual diaspora. This form of diaspora is not defined by transnational exile, but by a voluntary withdrawal from conventional political, cultural, and religious frameworks.¹ In this context, diaspora signifies an existential relocation, a turn away from empire and orthodoxy toward the mountain, the margins, the unknown. Hanshan embodies a broader current within Chinese religious history, representing the hermit tradition where spiritual experimentation and integration often flourished beyond institutional boundaries. Like many Tang hermits, his hybrid spiritual identity was shaped by Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist influences, often resisting the strict boundaries of any one tradition.

Hanshan, born around the mid-8th century on the outskirts of the capital Chang'an (present-day Xianyang, Shaanxi), came from a wealthy family and received a formal Confucian education, with early aspirations for a bureaucratic career. Hanshan's setbacks in the Confucian imperial examination system, coupled with his physical appearance and the social stigma that accompanied it, contributed to his alienation from the state and its

Confucian values. As a result, his retreat into the spiritual wilderness of Tiantai Mountain was not merely an escape from personal failure but also a rejection of a society that, at the time, valued appearance and status over spiritual depth and sincerity (He 2006; Qian 1998; Xiang 2023). Personal tragedy further compounded these frustrations, as a brother squandered the family fortune, his parents passed away, and his spouse and children eventually left him. Following a major rebellion that destabilized the capital, Hanshan fled Chang'an, wandering through various parts of China and briefly holding minor official posts before resigning in disillusionment over bureaucratic corruption. In his early middle age, Hanshan settled at Tiantai Mountain, a region renowned for its religious pluralism. As a site historically associated with Buddhist sects, Daoist practices, and Confucian scholarship, Tiantai provided Hanshan with the spiritual freedom to engage with multiple traditions (Seaton 2009; He and Chen 2020, p. 61). The mountain's reputation as a center for the integration of these diverse teachings made it the ideal location for Hanshan to form his hybrid spiritual identity.²

Rather than abandoning one system for another, Hanshan moved among them. Confucian ethics, Buddhist metaphysics, and Daoist cosmology all circulate through his verse. His identity remains in tension, culminating in a poetics of creative disjunction. Hanshan's spiritual journey and writing can be best interpreted through the interlinked dynamics of diaspora, hybridity, and religious pluralism. His self-exile created the conditions for a hybrid spiritual voice, which in turn produced a pluralistic sensibility. These three elements are not sequential stages but are dynamically interrelated, each shaping and reinforcing the others. Diaspora disrupts fixed identities, hybridity represents the fluid space that follows, and pluralism is the ethical way of living within that space.

This triadic framework echoes Julius-Kei Kato's conception of the "hybrid interlocutor," a person formed by the layered entanglements of religious and cultural multiplicity (Kato 2022, p. 107). For Kato, hybridity is not simply descriptive but hermeneutical: it shapes how one thinks, prays, critiques, and relates. Such interlocutors do not merely tolerate plurality; they embody it. They speak in many voices, inhabit unresolved tensions, and find integrity not in resolution but in relational balance. Hanshan's poetic voice models this kind of "interstitial integrity," a term Kato uses to describe the ethical stance of those who dwell in-between (Kato 2016, p. 50).³ Like Kato's hybrid figures, Hanshan does not try to resolve differences; instead, he embraces them. This interplay of diaspora, hybridity, and religious pluralism allows us to interpret Hanshan not as a mere religious syncretist, but as a poetic exemplar of *Hehe* philosophy—harmony through difference. His work does not seek to flatten multiplicity into unity, nor to celebrate difference for its own sake. Instead, it suggests that spiritual insight may arise from the sustained negotiation of incompatible truths.

The paper unfolds in five sections. Section 2 lays the conceptual foundation of hybridity and diaspora through key thinkers such as Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai. Section 3 explores how Hanshan's poetry performs pluralism, embodying *Hehe* philosophy. Section 4 examines the dialogical plurality enacted in Hanshan's relationships with Shide and Fenggan, showing how pluralism is practiced through companionship. Section 5 traces the global reception and transhistorical legacy of Hanshan's hybrid voice, emphasizing its contemporary relevance for spiritual seekers, diasporic identities, and intercultural exchange. Finally, Section 6 concludes by reflecting on *Hehe* pluralism as a lived spiritual posture.

2. Diaspora, Hybridity, and Religious Pluralism

Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory helps us understand how Hanshan's cultural identity was shaped by the intersection of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions.

Bhabha argues that identities are not fixed but emerge through negotiation in interstitial spaces where cultures intersect (Bhabha 1994, p. 132). These spaces are not merely transitional; they are generative. The “third space” becomes a site of cultural translation and innovation, where hybridity gives rise to new meanings, practices, and forms of subjectivity. For Hanshan, this was not merely a space of mixing traditions, but one where the friction between them—the failure of Confucian bureaucracy, the contemplative allure of Buddhism, the natural spontaneity of Daoism—generated a poetic subjectivity unavailable within any single orthodox framework.

Building on Bhabha’s concept of the “third space,” we can observe how Hanshan’s self-exile from Chang’an to Tiantai Mountain exemplifies this hybrid space. Hanshan’s poetry powerfully reflects this interstitial subjectivity, blending Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist elements into a singular poetic voice. Long recognized as “the source of Buddhist sects and Daoist origins” and the cradle of “the integration of the three teachings,” Tiantai represented a unique religious ecology. With institutions like Guoqing Temple serving as hubs for Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks, and Daoist practitioners alike, Tiantai nurtured a philosophical atmosphere of pluralism (Watson 1962, p. 12; Zhang 2020, p. 43). Its relative remoteness from state authority and its long tradition of asceticism and hermitage made it an ideal “third space” in Bhabha’s sense, situated neither fully inside nor outside any single religious framework, thus fostering the unique conditions for Hanshan’s spiritual recomposition. Hanshan’s identity was shaped by this pluralistic setting.

Hanshan’s hybrid spiritual identity reflects the broader Chinese tradition of religious synthesis. The Tang dynasty saw Buddhism and Daoism mutually influencing each other, while Confucianism remained central to the imperial court. Contemporary scholars, such as Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz (2013) and Hong (2011), emphasize how these three traditions were not separate and competing systems but were often seen as complementary, deeply influencing figures like Hanshan. Hanshan’s spiritual re-composition was not a simple conversion but a product of this dynamic interplay, where the boundaries between the religions were not rigid, and elements from each tradition were integrated into a more personal, eclectic spirituality. His engagement with multiple religious traditions did not amount to conversion from one to another; rather, it reflected a process of spiritual re-composition. His work exemplifies Bhabha’s notion of hybrid subjectivity, a condition that arises through paradox, border-dwelling, and the ongoing retranslation of religious languages.

While Arjun Appadurai developed the concept of the “diaspora landscape” in the context of global modernity, his model is applicable to Hanshan’s premodern setting (Appadurai 1996). Appadurai defines diaspora landscapes as dynamic networks of cultural transmission in which symbols and texts are carried across boundaries and adapted in new contexts. Hanshan’s poetry, composed in isolation but disseminated across centuries, participates in such a network. His works were not only embraced by later Chinese readers but also reached Zen Buddhist communities in Japan, where they were reinterpreted in line with Zen values of spontaneity and nonduality. His verse thus became part of a broader East Asian religious conversation, illustrating how hybrid ideas travel, evolve, and anchor new spiritual configurations.

Hanshan’s hybrid religiosity resonates with and complicates established theories of pluralism, as evidenced by diverse philosophical perspectives. John Hick, drawing on Kant’s noumenon/phenomenon distinction, proposes that diverse religious traditions are culturally shaped responses to the ultimate reality (Hick 1989). Victoria Harrison’s “internalist pluralism” stresses that religious truths are valid within the conceptual scheme of each tradition (Harrison 2006, 2012). Mickel Burley, working from Wittgensteinian philosophy, advocates a form of pluralism grounded in thick description rather than systematiza-

tion (Burley 2020). Perry Schmidt-Leukel's fractal theory emphasizes recurring patterns of insight across religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, 2024). Tyler Dalton McNabb and Erik Baldwin have explored the metaphysical viability of double religious belonging, particularly between Buddhism and Classical Theism (McNabb and Baldwin 2022). John Zhao proposes a Buddhist-inflected "two-truths pluralism" that engages Madhyamaka philosophy (Zhao 2022, 2025). Hanshan's *Hehe* model, however, differs from many of these systematic approaches. For instance, while it resonates with Perry Schmidt-Leukel's fractal theory by suggesting recurring patterns of insight across religions, Hanshan's pluralism is not a metaphysical claim about a shared source but an embodied, poetic posture that dwells in the contradictions themselves.

Rooted in Chinese *Hehe* (和合) philosophy—literally "harmony and unite"—Hanshan's pluralism draws on a long-standing tradition of valuing coexistence across difference. The character 和 (*he*) appears prominently in Confucian texts such as the *Analects*, where Confucius states: "Harmony is the most precious," (1.12, see Lau 1979)) emphasizing social and moral balance achieved not through uniformity but through respectful differentiation. The *zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*, see Legge 1893) extends this, portraying harmony as the ideal state of moral cultivation when inner sincerity aligns with outward conduct. The character 合 (*he*), meaning "to join" or "unite," is more prominent in Daoist and Buddhist usage. While Zhuangzi does not use the phrase *Hehe*, the idea of spontaneous convergence is implied in metaphors such as the merging of self and world: "Heaven and Earth were born with me, and the ten thousand things are one with me" (Zhuangzi, ch. 2, see Watson 2013). This image of unforced union underscores the Daoist commitment to natural resonance and non-coercive integration.

In Chinese Buddhism, *Hehe* was explicitly developed as a model for doctrinal harmony and monastic unity. One of the earliest formulations appears in the six *he* conditions outlined in the Vinaya texts, which prescribe six types of harmony—body, speech, mind, view, precepts, and livelihood—as guidelines for community cohesion (Qian 2009). This practical Buddhist model of *Hehe* was later expanded doctrinally in the Tiantai school, where thinkers like Zhiyi advocated for the integration of diverse teachings and methods. Zhiyi synthesized meditative techniques and scriptural classifications into a coherent, pluralistic framework that embraced difference as pedagogically necessary and spiritually fruitful (see Ziporyn 2016, p. 128).

Thus, *Hehe* pluralism is not merely an ideal of polite coexistence, but a deep philosophical commitment to what might be called "unity without uniformity," valuing difference as a source of complementarity. This approach resonates strongly with what Zhihe Wang terms Chinese "Harmonism," a model of creative relationship between religions defined by peaceful co-existence, mutual transformation, and an undogmatic openness to change (Wang 2012). For Wang, as for Hanshan, harmony "does not signify the imposition of uniformity, but rather the emergence of concord out of the allowance of discord" (Wang 2012, p. 4). This model affirms that multiple religious paths can co-inhabit a shared ethical and metaphysical space without being subsumed under a single truth claim. In Hanshan's case, this is not a theoretical doctrine but a lived poetic expression, a practice of weaving together Confucian ethics, Buddhist wisdom, and Daoist spontaneity into a harmonious yet tension-filled spiritual vision.

This distinction prompts a deeper meta-theoretical question: should Hanshan's hybridity be understood as syncretism? On one hand, the thematic convergence of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist motifs in his work might suggest syncretism, a deliberate synthesis of traditions. On the other hand, Hanshan's poetic voice resists systematic integration. His hybridity arises from spiritual dislocation, political marginalization, and a sense of personal crisis. In this sense, Hanshan's religious vision is better understood as a form of

phenomenological pluralism, one rooted not in metaphysical harmony but in the rough terrain of lived contradiction.

What further distinguishes Hanshan's approach is his method of expression. His poetry is not only hybrid in content but also in form. It moves between registers such as philosophical, confessional, and satirical, and it collapses boundaries between sacred and profane, personal and cosmological. His critique of institutional hypocrisy is sharp, but his spiritual longing is genuine. He does not dissolve traditions into one another; he walks among them. The very instability of his religious voice becomes a resource, a space of freedom, protest, and authentic questioning. In doing so, Hanshan embodies a form of pluralism not as an ideal but as a spiritual improvisation.

Hehe pluralism, as enacted by Hanshan, offers more than a case study in Chinese religious hybridity. It presents a robust philosophical orientation, neither relativist nor essentialist. In a time of global pluralism marked by both fragmentation and interconnection, Hanshan's poetic model reminds us that religious hybridity is not merely about mixing forms, but about dwelling honestly in the tensions between them. In this light, *Hehe* is not a conclusion but an invitation: to live and think at the edges of traditions, where plurality becomes a spiritual art. The concept of *Hehe* pluralism—harmony through difference—is not just a theoretical construct for Hanshan, but a living principle that permeates his poetry.

3. Pluralism in Practice: Hehe as Poetic Theology

Hanshan's religious pluralism is not argued in philosophical terms—it is enacted, through poetry (Han 2020, p. 152). His poetry gives voice to hybridity not by resolving tensions between Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist worldviews, but by inhabiting them simultaneously. His Cold Mountain poems present pluralism as a mode of life, an ethical-spiritual posture cultivated through irony, solitude, and deep ecological attunement.

While identifying Hanshan primarily as a Buddhist recluse with ties to Chan, Robert Henricks notes Hanshan was “never a purist,” as his spirituality did not preclude reading Daoist books or doing “Daoist things” related to longevity, such as breathing exercises or consuming herbs (Henricks 1990, p. 11). Hanshan's ambivalence toward Daoist longevity practices, approving at times, doubting at others, serves as a hallmark of his syncretism, illustrating a willingness to engage diverse ideas without doctrinal rigidity. Henricks further observes that Confucian influences permeate Hanshan's work alongside these religious elements, particularly in literary allusions and ethical concerns. Hanshan's critiques of social hypocrisy, greed, and unjust behavior reflect Confucian ethical norms, even as they are framed through Buddhist ideas of compassion and karmic consequence. We begin with the opening poem in Rouzer's translation:

All of you who read my poems:
 You must guard the purity in your minds.
 Daily purify your stinginess and greed;
 Forthwith put right your flattering and slyness.
 You'll banish all your evil karma,
 Take Refuge, receiving your true nature.
 Today you'll obtain the Buddha's body—
 Be quick, as if this were a command!
 (HS 1, Rouzer 2016, p. 13)

The poem is overtly Buddhist: it invokes “karma,” “true nature,” and the “Buddha's body.” Yet the tone of its moral exhortation, “as if this were a command,” carries unmistakable Confucian resonance, echoing bureaucratic formality. Hanshan folds spiritual urgency into a Confucian moral idiom, transforming the Buddhist path into an ethical directive. The pluralism here is not abstract; it is tonal, syntactic, and deeply relational. The

traditions are not harmonized into doctrinal synthesis but reverberate within a common poetic voice. This is *Hehe* as poetics: compositional, polyphonic, and performative.

Hanshan's retreat to Cold Mountain has often been read through a Daoist lens, emphasizing nature, hermitage, and anti-institutionalism. And indeed, the terrain of his poetry abounds with natural imagery. Yet these images are not simply escapist; they are also spiritually diagnostic. Consider HS 2:

Mid layered cliffs I chose my home,
A path for birds—cut off from human tracks.
What is there at the edge of my garden?
White clouds embracing the hidden stones.
I have lived here several years together,
And have often seen the seasons change.
I send word to households with their bells and tripods:
No benefit indeed in your empty reputation.
(HS 2, Rouzer 2016, p. 13)

While the mountain retreat recalls Daoist detachment, Hanshan's jab at "bells and tripods," symbols of Confucian ritual prestige, demonstrates critique from within. The poet is not merely rejecting tradition; he is lamenting its degeneration. His engagement is not with "Buddhism versus Confucianism," but with ethical decay, spiritual complacency, and the yearning for authenticity. *Hehe* pluralism here entails inhabiting multiple lineages while resisting their ideological ossification. This inner tension, held between longing and critique, emerges even more poignantly in HS 49, a poem shaped by grief and impermanence:

Sitting on Cold Mountain all along,
Lingering here for thirty years.
Yesterday I visited kin and friends —
Over half have entered the Yellow Springs.
They slowly lessened like a guttering candle,
Flowed off forever like a passing stream.
This morning I faced my lonely shadow,
And my tears ran down unawares.
(HS 49, Rouzer 2016, p. 61)

Here, Buddhist insight into impermanence fuses with a deep Confucian family consciousness. The "Yellow Springs" is a classical Chinese reference to the afterlife, while the imagery of the "guttering candle" and "passing stream" powerfully evokes Buddhist transience. Crucially, Hanshan does not resolve the tension between the Buddhist ideal of detachment and the Confucian imperative of familial piety. Instead, he holds them together in a moment of pure grief. The "lonely shadow" is both a Daoist image of solitary existence and the real, emotional consequence of loss. What distinguishes the voice is its raw emotional tone; Hanshan is not delivering doctrine, he is enduring it. This is what Bhabha might call "hybrid subjectivity," a selfhood shaped not in philosophical synthesis but in the unresolved space between loss and recollection, detachment and yearning (Bhabha 1994, p. 114). In HS 22, the natural world becomes a microcosm of spiritual alignment:

There's a Master who dines on clouds;
His dwelling disdains visits from the vulgar.
Come to mention it, it's really fresh and cool;
Like autumn in the midst of summer.

Secluded creeks flow trickling on,
 Winds howl in the lofty pines.
 I'll sit half a day in the midst of this,
 And forget the grief of a lifetime.
 (HS 22, Rouzer 2016, p. 33)

The “Master” evokes the Daoist sage, but his air of detachment is tempered by the Buddhist line: “forget the grief of a lifetime.” In *Hehe* fashion, spiritual insight does not overcome suffering but holds it gently. The scene’s freshness, “like autumn in the midst of summer,” epitomizes paradoxical clarity, what the Tiantai tradition called “mutual containment,” a principle that allows opposites to co-arise without dissolving their difference. The poem becomes not a sermon, but a sonic environment where traditions resonate like the howling pines. Continuing this hybrid topography of voice and vision, we turn to HS 29, where Hanshan satirizes both moral collapse and ritual pomposity:

Always we encounter the Six Extremities;
 Vain to debate about the Nine Worries.
 Men of parts are cast to the weedy marsh,
 And even those without talent shut their rustic gates.
 The sun rises here, yet the cliffs are still dark;
 Mist fades away, though the valley is gloomy.
 Here the sons of good families
 Must each of them go without trousers.
 (HS 29, Rouzer 2016, p. 41)

Here, Hanshan performs a masterful *Hehe* critique. The lament that “Men of parts are cast to the weedy marsh” is a deeply Confucian grievance, echoing a scholar-official’s frustration with a corrupt state that fails to recognize true worth. Yet, this is set against the gloomy, mist-filled landscape of a Daoist hermit, a place of detachment from the very worldly concerns the poem decries. The final, brilliant image of “sons of good families” without trousers delivers a Chan Buddhist-style satirical punch. It simultaneously mocks the empty status of the Confucian elite and the hollow affectation of wealthy men “playing” at being poor hermits. Hanshan’s critique is not a philosophical treatise but a lived, poetic performance, demonstrating that true spiritual insight sees through all forms of pretense, whether societal or religious. This sharp eye for religious hypocrisy resurfaces in HS 63, where Hanshan’s skepticism toward institutional religion becomes acerbic:

Burning incense to request the Buddha’s strength,
 Doing obeisance in seeking aid from monks:
 That’s a mosquito biting into an iron ox—
 No place for him to sink his teeth!
 (HS 63, Rouzer 2016, p. 73)

Here, Buddhist ritual is not condemned wholesale, but its mechanical performance is dismissed as absurd. The mosquito biting an iron ox evokes futility while also parodying the seeker’s misplaced devotion. This does not signal religious cynicism; rather, it expresses a critique rooted in deeper spiritual demands. Hanshan is asking: what does true refuge look like? Not incense and obeisance, but perhaps something like the clarity of “white clouds embracing hidden stones” (HS 2). He upholds Buddhism, but he does so in the mode of *Hehe*, never dogmatic and always interrogative.

Hanshan’s poetic identity remains remarkably elastic. His work is “like Confucian yet not Confucian, not Confucian yet also Confucian; like Daoist and Buddhist, yet neither;

like Buddhist yet not Buddhist, not Buddhist yet also Buddhist; like layperson yet not layperson, not layperson yet also layperson” (Qian 2009, p. 131). This ambiguity is not a failure of identity but its very mode of expression. Across these poems, Hanshan returns again and again to nature not as scenery but as scripture. Mountains, birds, wind, and seasons are not just metaphors, but spaces of encounter between the traditions. Just as Cold Mountain is geologically liminal, situated beyond the urban and between the cultivated and the wild, Hanshan’s voice is poetically interstitial. Cold Mountain is not just where he lives; it is what he becomes.

Hanshan embodies a layered identity, where multiple spiritual paths are both present and indistinct, never fully settled. Bhabha writes that hybridity “problematizes the boundaries of identity and meaning” (Bhabha 1994, p. 113). Hanshan’s poetic pluralism is not a theoretical claim. It is a mode of survival. His hybridity is not cultivated for intellectual virtue; it is lived, because no single tradition could bear the weight of suffering, impermanence, or longing alone. His retreat becomes a kind of spiritual practice—a refusal to settle for shallow harmonies and a determination to remain poetically faithful to conflict, absurdity, and hope.

4. Laughter on the Mountain Path and Dialogs in Plural Voice

The Cold Mountain legacy is not just a voice, but a conversation: a network of laughter, teasing, critique, and cohabitation. In both literary and legendary records, Hanshan, Shide, and Fenggan form a triptych of pluralist spiritual personas, each embodying a different aspect of Cold Mountain’s ethos. Together, they personify a lived *Hehe* pluralism, one that is not abstract or doctrinal, but dialogical, performative, and sustained through gestures and words. In contrast to the image of the hermit completely detached from the world, Hanshan’s poetic and cultural legacy is marked by companionship. Shide, often described as a kitchen worker or janitor at Guoqing Monastery, is depicted as Hanshan’s spiritual brother or alter ego. Fenggan, a Buddhist monk who discovered and sheltered them, provides the institutional and meditative balance to their wild laughter and riddle-like verses. In this triad, Hanshan offers insight, Shide levity, and Fenggan quietude.

In many temple murals and East Asian artistic traditions, Hanshan and Shide are depicted not debating doctrine, but sharing a scroll, laughing, or gesturing toward the mountain. The scroll between them, sometimes interpreted as a sutra and sometimes as a poetic manuscript, symbolizes shared engagement in wisdom. Yet the laughter, the pointing, and the ease of bodily movement all suggest that this wisdom emerges not from fixed truths, but from encounter and from responsive being-with. The lore surrounding Hanshan and Shide includes one of the most enduring and widely quoted exchanges in East Asian religious literature. The story presents Hanshan seeking advice on how to respond to the miseries of social life—slander, humiliation, deceit:

Hanshan asked Shide: “If people slander me, deceive me, humiliate me, laugh at me, slight me, despise me, hate me, or lie to me—what should I do?”

Shide replied: “Just endure them, yield to them, let them be, avoid them, be patient, respect them, ignore them—and after a few years, just watch them.”⁴

The iconic dialog between Hanshan and Shide, often reduced to a pithy exchange about enduring mistreatment, gains profound depth when viewed through the lens of Chan’s *renru* (patience/forbearance) thought. Mou argues that this dialog encapsulates a sophisticated tradition of forbearance, forged through the synthesis of Indian Buddhist *ksānti* (patience), Confucian virtues of restraint, and Daoist ideals of yielding. Shide’s advice is a masterclass in this synthesis. To “endure them,” “be patient,” and “ignore them” reflects the Buddhist virtue of *ksānti*. To “yield to them” and “avoid them” embodies the

Daoist strategy of non-contention. Finally, the injunction to “respect them” preserves a core Confucian principle of maintaining social propriety and inner composure, even when faced with impropriety. Thus, *renru* here is not passive resignation but an active practice of harmony-through-difference. The pluralism is not theoretical but eminently practical, forged in the crucible of social friction.

This seemingly simple advice represents not naive resignation, but a distillation of spiritual poise drawn from multiple traditions. The real power lies not just in the content of Shide’s advice, but in the very fact that Hanshan asks the question. His vulnerability, and Shide’s calm response, represent a model of dialogical transformation: a conversation that metabolizes pain into wisdom through friendship, not doctrine.

It is in this interplay that *Hehe* comes alive, not as compromise but as co-articulation. The Cold Mountain path is not made in solitude but carved out through these plural voices, each responding to the other across poetic form, lived companionship, and hagiographic myth. The appeal of the Cold Mountain trio transcended their Tang-era lives, assuming those lives were ever entirely historical, and entered a long arc of religious and artistic reception. Over the centuries, Hanshan and Shide especially came to symbolize a kind of joyful, ungovernable wisdom. By the Song dynasty, they were frequently featured in Chan (Zen) temple art, often portrayed mid-laughter, brandishing scrolls or pointing playfully at one another. Their laughter, disheveled robes, and rustic setting marked them as spiritual outsiders, yet they were revered for their inner clarity.

In Japan, Hanshan (Kanzan) and Shide (Jittoku) became popular among Zen monks and literati, particularly during the Edo period. Calligraphers like Yosa Buson and painters like Soga Shōhaku produced striking images of the duo as part of Zen visual culture. Their appeal lay not in systematic philosophy but in the playful paradoxes they embodied: disciplined yet irreverent, simple yet wise, marginal yet immortalized.

This popular embrace eventually entered the orbit of state religion. During the Qing dynasty, the emperor Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735) canonized Hanshan and Shide as the *Hehe Erxian*, or “Two Immortals of Harmony” (Yang and Wang 2020, p. 28). In this role, they became not just cultural heroes but patron deities of marriage harmony, business partnership, and household peace. Their iconography changed. Smiles became more serene than subversive, and their hands came to hold lotus flowers, treasure boxes, or symbols of union. The marginal wildness of Cold Mountain was domesticated and repurposed for Confucian social order.

Hanshan’s companionship with Shide and Fenggan extends this fluidity into relationship. It offers a model of *Hehe* pluralism that is not a theory of sameness but a practice of cohabitation. In this vision, pluralism is not argued but lived. It is expressed through laughter, resilience, and poetic resonance. Peniel Rajkumar’s analysis of Dalit dissent as a spectrum of plural, context-dependent modes (survival, sub-alteration, subversion) resonates with the ways Hanshan and his companions resist rigid spiritual and social norms not through a single, unified stance, but through dynamic, even contradictory interactions (Rajkumar 2010, p. 53).

5. Global Resonance and Philosophical Afterlife

Although Hanshan’s poetic world was rooted in Tang dynasty China, his spiritual resonance has proven far more expansive. His poems have traveled across regions, epochs, and disciplines, surfacing in contexts marked by religious seeking, cultural hybridity, and existential fracture (Henricks 1990; Pine 2000; Rouzer 2017; Xiang 2023). From Zen temples in medieval Japan to the Beat cafés of San Francisco, Hanshan’s barefoot voice has become a symbol of spiritual nonconformity and intercultural vibrancy. The reception of his work

outside of China offers not only evidence of his enduring relevance but also a compelling case for the transcultural and transhistorical force of diasporic hybridity.

Hanshan's poetry was notably embraced by Zen Buddhists in Japan, particularly within the Gozan literary tradition during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. Monks like Gidō Shūshin and Zekkai Chūshin drew inspiration from Hanshan's stylistic frankness and spiritual detachment. His colloquial tone, irreverence toward formality, and hybrid invocation of Daoist and Buddhist themes aligned with Zen's own suspicion of scholasticism and ritual excess. These Zen literati saw in Hanshan not just a Chinese poet, but a kindred spiritual figure whose refusal to be captured by doctrine mirrored their own values. His poems became vehicles for both esthetic cultivation and religious reflection. They were copied, commented on, and even re-enacted, serving as both devotional texts and literary exemplars of unbounded insight. This reception underscores that Hanshan's hybridity was not provincial but deeply portable. It traveled not by force, but by resonance.

In the twentieth century, Hanshan experienced another form of diasporic afterlife through the American Beat Generation. Most famously, Gary Snyder's 1958 translations presented Hanshan as a mountain mystic and anti-establishment sage, a figure of rebellion against institutional religion and social norms. Snyder emphasized the earthy directness of Hanshan's poems, their irreverent voice, and their spiritual immediacy (Snyder 1958). For the Beats, Cold Mountain was not merely a place. It became a stance—wandering, ironic, humble, and open to the void (Tan 2009; Zhong 2008; Rouzer 2016). Jack Kerouac famously dubbed Hanshan the “original hipster Buddhist” (Kerouac 1958, p. 244). In doing so, he recognized in Hanshan a template for modern seekers: those estranged from formal religion yet spiritually restless, those who searched for enlightenment not through creeds but through solitude, irony, and friendship. This appropriation, though stylized, speaks to the enduring diasporic charisma of Hanshan's figure. His work offered a spiritual refuge for those displaced from traditional authority, and a poetic language for reconfiguring identity at the edge of systems.

Hanshan's spiritual and poetic life, shaped by marginality, wandering, and resistance to categorization, offers a profound model for hybrid religious existence. His refusal to identify fully with any one system, whether Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist, was not an act of confusion or cynicism. It was a form of spiritual fidelity to paradox and authentic self-exploration (Qian 2009, p. 219). His voice is never abstractly pluralist. It is lived, embodied, ironic, and often painfully honest. This has direct implications for how we think about diasporic hybridity today, especially under conditions of religious pluralism, migration, and systemic asymmetry. Individuals who move—whether across borders, identities, or traditions—often encounter not only external pressures but internal dissonance. What does it mean to be shaped by worlds that do not fully recognize each other? How does one craft a coherent spiritual path from fragmentary, conflicting legacies? Hanshan offers not a solution but a form of spiritual posture, what we might call existential resonance. Rather than forcing resolution or claiming neutral ground, he inhabits the fissures. His *Hehe* pluralism is not merely about “harmony” in the sense of peaceful coexistence. It is a relational discipline rooted in tension, dialog, and improvisation. It is a way of being that treats contradiction not as failure, but as spiritual texture.

In today's context of forced migrations, spiritual exile, and religious fragmentation, the questions Hanshan wrestled with remain urgent. The figure of the hybrid, someone who belongs to many worlds but is not fully claimed by any of them, is no longer exceptional. This identity has increasingly become the norm in global cities, diasporic enclaves, and digital communities. For such individuals and communities, *Hehe* pluralism provides not a program but a path. It offers a way to think, live, and relate through difference without erasing it. One can see echoes of Hanshan's posture in contemporary spiritual fig-

ures: refugee poets who speak multiple religious idioms, borderland monks who draw on diverse contemplative lineages, and urban mystics who reject institutional religion while remaining deeply committed to spiritual depth. These are not anomalies. They are contemporary manifestations of hybrid religiosity. Like Hanshan, they inhabit contradiction with grace, critique orthodoxy with humor, and cultivate spiritual pluralism not as ideology, but as friendship, irony, and poetic survival.

Moreover, Hanshan's reception itself demonstrates the porosity of religious and cultural boundaries. That a Tang hermit's verses could shape Japanese Zen liturgy and then resurface as mantras for twentieth-century American counterculture reveals a remarkable transhistorical elasticity. More than influence, this trajectory invites us to recognize *Hehe* pluralism as a globally relevant modality. It is an esthetic, ethical, and philosophical resource for our pluralistic age. This hybridity and pluralism is not merely a historical or individual phenomenon; it profoundly resonates within contemporary Chinese society. Indeed, the concept of multiple religious belonging is so prevalent that accurately calculating the number of Buddhist or Daoist adherents remains exceptionally challenging. This lived reality is further exemplified in communal temples, where it is common to see Buddhist and Daoist statues respectfully placed and worshiped together, reflecting a deeply inherited tradition of *Hehe*. Ultimately, Hanshan does not present a doctrine of pluralism. He offers a spiritual poetics of difference. His refusal to settle, his companionship with Shide, and his withdrawal from the center and from orthodoxy are not eccentricities. They are acts of resistance and creation. They show how hybridity can be lived without apology, how exile can become a form of grounding, and how pluralism can be practiced as care, attention, and ironic joy.

6. Conclusions: Walking with Bare Feet, Dwelling in Difference

Hanshan's wandering spiritual journey and his poetic synthesis of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism provide a model of *Hehe* pluralism that transcends doctrinal boundaries, offering a profound lens for understanding spiritual hybridity. It is not a doctrine of sameness or an abstract synthesis. Rather, it is a way of living in tension, dwelling in paradox, and cultivating resonance across irreducible differences. In contrast to prevailing models in the philosophy of religion, *Hehe* pluralism emerges from Hanshan's lived condition of displacement and poetic improvisation. It is forged not in monasteries or courts, but in hermit cave, in laughter shared with companions, and in verses scratched on rocks. But what value does this model—rooted in paradox and “the rough terrain of lived contradiction”—hold for philosophers of religion who care about consistent metaphysics? The answer is that Hanshan's approach serves as a vital phenomenological corrective. His work provides the raw, lived data of spiritual hybridity that any robust metaphysical system of religion must ultimately be able to explain. His poetry is not a competing system, but a primary testament to the “sustained negotiation of incompatible truths” that characterizes much of authentic spiritual life. Furthermore, Hanshan's *Hehe* pluralism demonstrates that a coherent and effective spiritual path does not always require systematically coherent metaphysics. His model works not because it resolves contradictions, but because it offers a spiritual posture for dwelling within them creatively. For the metaphysician, Hanshan thus poses a crucial question: does a given system serve the lived needs of individuals navigating multiple worlds, or does it merely satisfy a demand for abstract consistency? In this way, Hanshan's barefoot journey invites the systematic thinker to test their theories against the rich, paradoxical landscape of human experience. The *Cold Mountain* poems do not argue for pluralism; they perform it. This lived hybridity reflects the deeper contours of diasporic identity—not only geographic or ethnic, but existential. To walk with Hanshan is to accept paradox, to seek truth across boundaries, and to em-

brace poetry as a spiritual discipline. In this, he offers not answers but a stance: barefoot, laughing, and open to the world's wild plurality.

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Notes

- ¹ The details of Hanshan's life are drawn from later biographical traditions and temple records. This narrative is presented here not as a fixed historical account, but as a meaningful orientation for understanding his spiritual trajectory.
- ² Mountains, especially sacred sites like Tiantai and Zhongnan, have historically served as pivotal spaces for the development of Chinese religions. These landscapes offered not only seclusion and refuge but also fertile ground for philosophical encounter and doctrinal integration. As physical and symbolic thresholds, mountains enabled figures from different traditions such as Confucian scholars, Daoist recluses, and Buddhist monks to engage in dialogue, tension, and mutual influence. It is often in such settings that new religious schools, syncretic practices, and hybrid identities emerged. Tiantai Mountain in particular played a foundational role in shaping Chinese Buddhist thought and fostering cross-traditional engagement. This makes it a key site for understanding the lived dynamics of religious pluralism in China (see Pine 2009; Jülch 2022).
- ³ Kato draws the term from Rita Nakashima Brock's (1998) work on Asian American theology.
- ⁴ Ch. 寒山問拾得曰：“世間有人謗我，欺我，辱我，笑我，輕我，賤我，惡我，騙我，如何處治乎？”拾得曰：“只是忍他，讓他，由他，避他，耐他，敬他，不要理他，再待幾年你且看他。”

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