

Monk Turned Muse

For Gary Geddes, a beautiful thought leads to a secret Kingdom

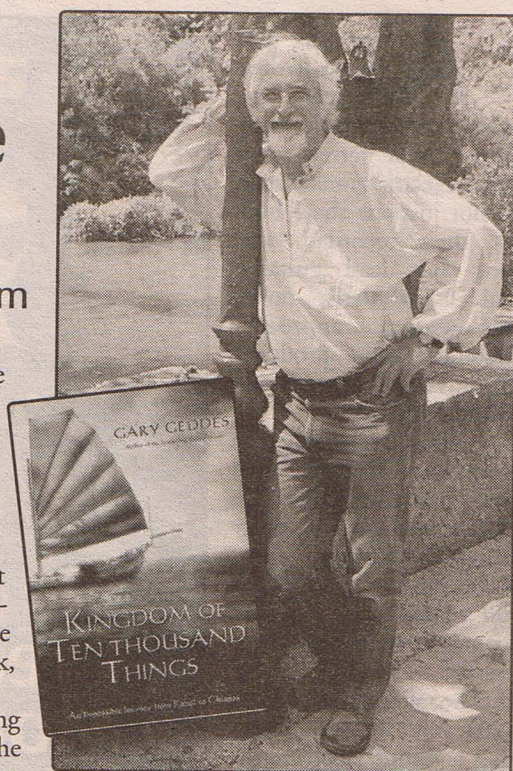
The further one goes, the less one knows.”

This Daoist mantra suggests enlightenment can be reached without looking any further than within yourself. The more you wander, the further you stray from true knowledge of the world. It's a good thing Gary Geddes wasn't familiar with this theory before he boarded his plane to Pakistan, or we would have never been blessed with his latest book, *Kingdom of Ten Thousand Things*.

Thirty-one years ago, Geddes was putting together an anthology of writings from the Canadian northwest (*Skookum Wawa*) when he came across a reference to Huishen, a fourth-century Afghan monk who allegedly traveled to the Americas. He was fascinated by the idea of such early contact between Asia and North America. The idea stayed with him over the years until finally, in 2001, Geddes decided to follow Huishen's path and see what he could discover about the monk and his journey. "It was like a little bit of grit in the oyster," Geddes explains. "I can't say that it produced a pearl, but it produced a very strange book."

Kingdom is strange indeed—a mosaic of history, archaeology, anthropology, mythology, politics, literature and culture. Geddes follows Huishen from Afghanistan, where the monk fled religious persecution, through Pakistan, China, across the Pacific Ocean, down into Mexico, Guatemala, and back up to the Queen Charlotte Islands. Geddes leaves him there, for Huishen is said to have returned to China 41 years after his departure. (Like Geddes, it seems Huishen hadn't heard of the Daoist ideal either.)

Unlike the monk, whose stories were only recorded 100 years after his death, Geddes took diligent notes throughout his trip and turned them into a 328-page travel-adventure novel. As Geddes explains, the hardest part was bringing some credibility to the idea that a fourth-century monk could have made



it across the Pacific Ocean. "Archeologists don't want to admit that anyone was here before Columbus. I was trying to come up with evidence for myself and for the reader that would suggest the Huishen story wasn't so cockeyed after all."

Fortunately for him, recent discoveries suggest contact between Asia and the Americas may have started as far back as 8,000 years ago. "My monk is only 1,500 years old," Geddes chuckles. "He's a Johnny-come-lately."

When Geddes set out on his cross-continental trek he thought he would be writing a more whimsical story: the punster poet and his quest for a wandering monk. And while there's no humor lost in the telling of his tale, it turned out to be a much more thoughtful look at the politics and culture of the countries he visits . . . as well as a pretty convincing argument for pre-Columbian Asian contact.

Geddes hopes the story of Huishen inspires readers to consider the possibility of ancient links between continents and what they really mean about our true ancestry. "For me, it was one of the things that kept me going," Geddes smiles. "Just the sheer wonder of this inter-connectedness of all people. It's a beautiful thought."

—Sarah Gignac

Gary Geddes
7 pm Tuesday, March 29
Bolen Books, Hillside Centre
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