

# Su Shi: The Poetry of Exile

Su Shi (苏轼; simplified 苏轼; *Sū Shì*, literary name 东坡 *dōngpō* “east slope,” 1037-1101) was a poet, calligrapher, painter and statesman during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). After criticizing some of the new government policies in his poetry, he was indicted in 1079 for treason. After the Crow Terrace Poetry Trial (乌台诗案), he was found guilty and condemned to death. The emperor commuted his sentence, and Su was exiled to Huangzhou in Hubei Province. There he converted an old army camp on the eastern slope of a mountain near the city into a farm. During his exile from 1080 to 1084, he adopted the name of his farm as his professional pseudonym, practised Buddhism and wrote poetry.

## Poetry and Politics

Su Shi was born in Meishan near Chengdu in the western regions of the Chinese Empire. He and his younger brother Su Zhe travelled to the imperial capital Kaifeng to take the civil service examinations in 1057. They both passed with distinction and came to the attention of the powerful statesman Ouyang Xiu (1007-1070), who promoted their careers. Su Shi spent time as an administrator in various regions of the empire. While in Hangzhou in the southern Yangtze delta, he was responsible for dredging the West Lake and constructing a promenade that is now known as the Su Causeway. Hangzhou would later become the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), when the northern regions seceded to form the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234).

From 1069 to 1076, the chancellor (and poet) Wang Anshi (1021-1086) brought in a series of reforms called the New Policies (熙宁 *xīnfǎ*). These were intended to improve the life of small farmers who were being bought out by large landowners, to increase taxation so that the government could maintain a professional army for defence rather than forcibly

drafting young men, and to stabilize the prices of goods like salt so that rich merchants could not monopolize the markets (Egan, 1994, pp 27-53). In a sense these government interventions were “proto-Keynesian” in nature (Zhao & Drechsler, 2018).

Although the intentions were good, the reforms were largely unsuccessful. For example, in the “Green Shoots” policy the government gave low-cost loans to small farmers to buy seeds in the spring. However, the bureaucrats administering the policy were terribly slow. The farmers had to travel to government centers for their loans and stay there for prolonged negotiations when they should have been at home planting. Wang Anshi refused to acknowledge the problems, and earned the sobriquet “his stubbornship” (Pease, 2021).

The following illustration shows the Song Dynasty at the time of these reforms.



## The Crow Terrace Poetry Trial

Su Shi criticized the new reforms in both poetry and prose. By 1079 Wang Anshi had largely retired from public life, but his supporters were incensed by the criticisms. They arranged for the Imperial Office of the Censorate, nicknamed the Crow Terrace because of the crows who nested nearby, to indict Su Shi for treason. Article 122 of the Sung Criminal Code

prohibited any “expression of critical comments directed against the emperor” (Hartman, 1990, p 18). Or in more poetic terms

### Denouncing the Imperial Chariot

The records of the trial are intriguing since much of the prosecution depended upon the interpretation of poetry that was by its very nature both allusive and metaphorical (Hartman, 1990; Wang, 2011). Su Shi provided a deposition in which he explained his own poetry. The following is the fourth of his *Mountain Village* poems:

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With walking sticks and wraps of cooked rice, they  
depart in a rush  
Turn around, with borrowed money spent, their hands  
soon empty.  
Children learn the language and ways of the big city  
For half a year they stay inside the city walls.  
(text and translation from LAC website)

And the following is Su Shi’s interpretation

My meaning here is that as soon as the common people receive the green-sprout money, they at once squander it in the cities. It also means that the country people twice yearly must pay summer and autumn taxes and several other levies, to which is now added the green-sprout and corvée assistance monies, with the result that the children from the families who work on the great estates are often in the cities, where they become disorderly and learn nothing but a city accent. (Hartman, 1990, p 23).

The trial dragged on for four months. At the end Su was found

guilty and condemned to death. However, Emperor Shenzong was counseled by the dowager Empress Cao and by Wang Anshi to commute the sentence. Su Shi was deprived of his salary and exiled to Huangzhou (黄冈, presently part of Huanggang), a small town in Hubei on the Yangtze River. (Hubei is the region north of the Dongting Lake, whereas Hunan is the area to its south.)

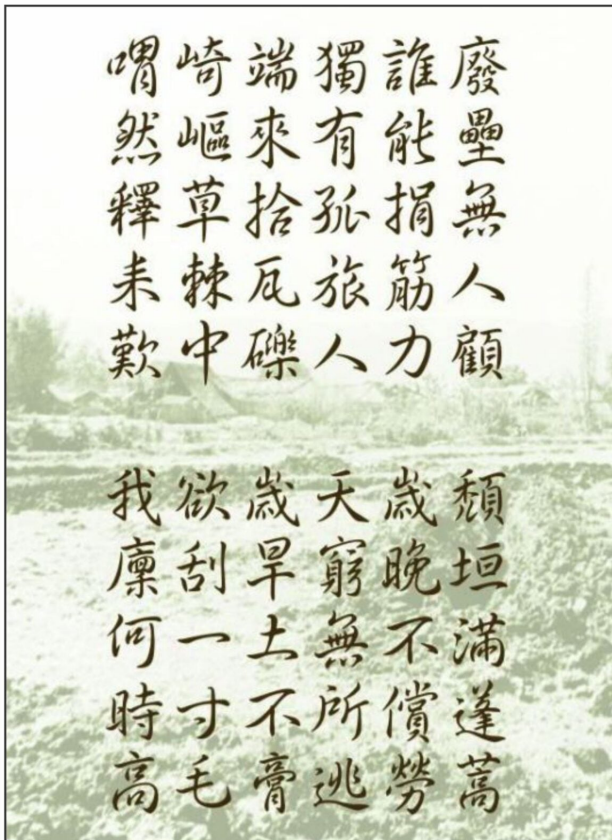
Su Shi arranged to obtain some land on the East Slope (Dongpo) of a hill near Huangzhou. There he became a farmer to provide food for his family. He changed from a formal statesman to a hard-working layman:

To state the matter simply, in Huangzhou, Su Shi became Su Dongpo, "Su of East Slope." This poetic personality, with its firm, philosophic, yet jovial poise of spirit, was created by Su Shi's major writings in Huangzhou. Reaffirmed in the poetry of his later exile to Huizhou and Hainandao, the image of Su Shi finding joy even in the worst of adversity has become part of the Chinese cultural heritage. (Fuller, 2023, p 251),

Su Tungpo now was to become a farmer by necessity and a recluse by temperament and natural inclination. What society, culture, learning, reading of history, and external duties and responsibilities do to a man is to hide his real self. Strip him of all these trappings of time and convention, and you have the real man. A Su Tungpo back among the people is like a seal in water; somehow a seal dragging its fins and tail on land is only half a seal. Su is never more likeable than when he is an independent farmer trying to make his own living. The Chinese mind usually glamorises a poet wearing a "coolie hat", putting his hands to the plough and standing against an idyllic hillside, provided he can also compose good verse and beat time to it by striking the buffalo's horn, and provided further that he occasionally, or even frequently, gets drunk and climbs the city wall to prowl in the moonlight. (Lin, 1948, p 183)

## East Slope

In 1081, Su wrote a set of eight poems about his life as a farmer. The following is the first of these with a translation by Jeffrey Yang (2008):



Nobody tends the desolate fort      Walls  
worn    plants overgrown              who  
would offer their strength for toil    when  
year's end brings no amends          Only  
a solitary wanderer            heaven infinite  
no place to flee            then arrives to glean  
the rubble                                  Drought year  
arid earth rugged            among    weeds  
thorns                    a desire to scuff      even  
a hint of growth                          Rough breath  
heavy sigh                    plow drops            What  
season                                  will my granary be full

And the following is a translation by Lin and Young (2020)

A derelict campsite  
no one tending it  
one ruined wall  
covered with wild grasses  
who'd waste his strength  
working this land  
when the results  
would never repay the labor?  
But here I am, a solitary  
disregarded traveler  
worn out under heaven  
nowhere else to turn

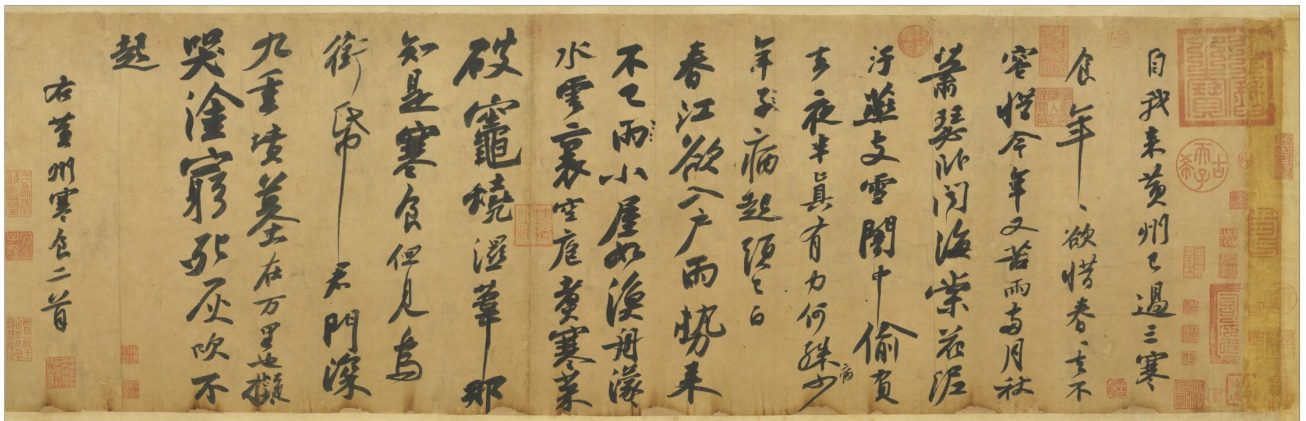
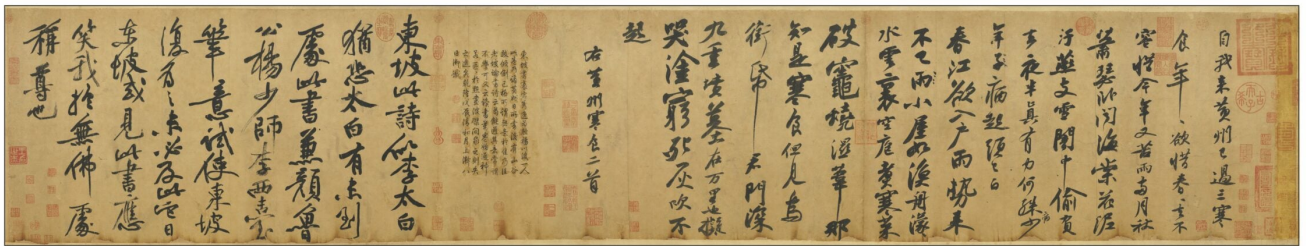
making an effort  
picking up tile shards  
in a drought year  
soil not fertile  
on this rugged patch  
thick grass, thorns and brambles  
trying to scratch each inch  
clear of brush and weeds  
I sigh and stop my plowing  
turning to ask  
when will my granary fill  
and help me feed my family?

## The Cold Food Festival

The Hanshi Observance (寒食) is a traditional festival celebrated in early April (Holzman, 1986). Legend has it that in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE a nobleman Jie Zhitui refused to come out of the forest to pay allegiance to his lord. The angry lord burned down the forest to force Jie out, but wound up burning him to death. In remorse, the lord instituted an annual period without fires as a memorial to Jie.

In 1082, Su Shi wrote two poems about the festival, describing how desolate he felt. He wrote these out in his distinctive semi-cursive (running) script in a sample of calligraphy that has been preserved, and is now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. The following illustration shows the scroll that contains the calligraphy. The top section shows the full scroll (about 200 cm long). Below that is an enlargement of the title section that was added much later with calligraphy by Emperor Gaozong of Qing (1711-1799). This reads 寒食: Reminiscences of the Academy (likely one of the halls in the Forbidden City where the emperors studied). Then there is an enlargement of the poems with two colophons. The first

colophon in small script is by the Emperor Gaozong of Qing. The second colophon in characters larger than Su's is by Su's student Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚, 1045-1105). The lowest section shows an enlargement of Su's poem. Particularly striking characters are in lines 2 (年, *nián*, year), 5 (中, *zhōng*, middle), 11 (苇, *wěi*, reed), and 13 (纸, *zhǐ*, paper, banknote) from the right. Each of these has an exaggerated descending line suggestive of rain or tears. This piece of calligraphy is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest examples of running script.



The following is the text of the first poem written from left to right

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□□□□	□□□□
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A free verse translation by Lin and Young (2020):

Ever since I came to Huangzhou we've had this festival three times. Each year I've tried to fall in love with spring it came and went and never returned my affection. This year again we're suffering rain two months more like a bleak and chilly autumn.	I lie here listening as cherry-apple blossoms fall flower petals mixed with mud scattered on soft ground. The season's disappearing secretly in the dark kidnapped by force of rain at midnight or like a young man overcome by illness who wakes, recovering, to find his hair turned white!
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## Red Cliff Rhapsodies

In the winter of 208-209 CE, the Battle of the Red Cliffs (□□) occurred on the Yangtze River to the west of Huangzhou. This naval battle, wherein the forces from the south of China led by Liu Bei and Zhou Yu defeated the numerically superior forces of Cao Cao, was one of the major events leading to the downfall of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) and the beginning of the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280 CE).

During his time in Huangzhou, Su Shi and his friends made several trips by boat to the site of the ancient battle. Modern scholarship places the location of the battle near Chibi, which was west of the location visited by Su Shi, now called the “literary” as opposed to the “historical” Red Cliffs. In 1082, Su described these trips in two prose poems (“odes” or “rhapsodies”). In the first, Su Shi and his friends drank wine, and remembered the song that Cao Cao composed on the eve of the battle:

The moon is bright, the stars are few,  
and magpies come flying south,  
three times round they circle the tree,  
where is the branch on which to roost?  
(translated by Stephen Owen, 1996, p 281)

The following illustration shows the Red Cliffs on the Yangtze River and a map of the battle in which Cao Cao was defeated. The red calligraphy on the cliffs is 赤壁 (red cliffs) written from left to right.



One of Su's companions played a melancholy tune on his flute and remembers

Once Cao Cao had smashed Jingzhou, he came down to

Jiangling, going east with the current. The prows and sterns of his galleys stretched a thousand *li*, his flags and banners blotted the very sky; he poured wine and stood over the river, hefted his spear and composed a poem—he was indeed the boldest spirit that whole age! And yet where is he now? (translation of Tian, 2018, p 305)

This led him to a meditation on the transience of life:

We go riding a boat as small as a leaf and raise gourd flasks of wine to toast one another. We are but mayflies lodging between heaven and earth, single grains adrift, far out on the dark blue sea. We grieve that our lives last only a moment, and we covet the endlessness of the great river. We would throw an arm around those immortal beings in their flight and go off to roam with them; we would embrace the bright moonlight and have it done with forever. And since I knew that we could not suddenly have these things out of the blue, I gave the lingering echoes of that desire a place in my sad melody. (Tian, p 306)

Su replies to his companion

And do you, my friend, indeed understand the water and the moonlight? As Confucius said as he stood by the river, “It passes on just like this,” and yet it has never gone away. There is in all things a fullness and a waning to nothing, just as with that other thing, the moon; and yet it has never increased and never vanished altogether. If you think of it from the point of view of changing, then heaven and earth have never been able to stay as they are, even for the blink of an eye. But if you think of it from the point of view of not changing, then neither the self nor other things ever come to an end. So then what is there to covet? (Tian pp 306-307)

The quotation from Confucius is from *Analects* IX 16 “The water flows on and on like this, never stopping day or night”

Su continues

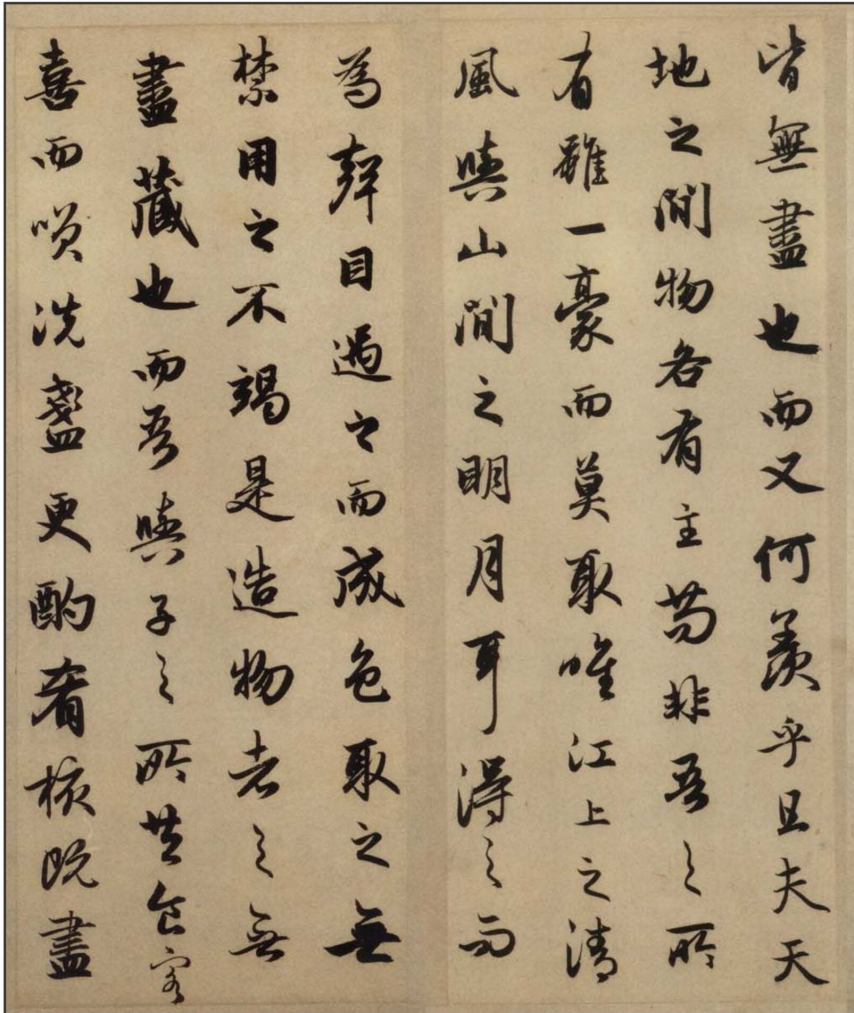
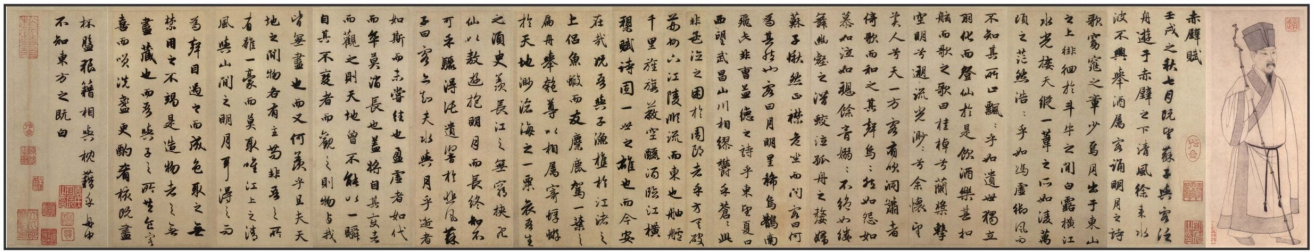
天地之間，萬物各有其主。苟非吾之所有，雖一髮不敢以自取。惟此涼風明月，舉世同之。耳聽之，則為聲；目視之，則為色。無所不有，無所不取。用之不竭，此造物者之無私也。且是物也，非止為我，亦為汝也。 (Tian p 307)

Between heaven and earth each thing has its own master. If something is not mine, then I cannot take it as mine, even if it is only a hair. There is only the cool breeze along with the bright moon among the mountains. The ears catch one of these, and it is sound; the eyes encounter the other, and it forms colors. Nothing prevents us from taking these as our own. We can do whatever we want with them, and they can never be used up. This is the inexhaustible treasure trove of the Fashioner-of-Things, and it serves the needs of both you and I alike. (Tian p 307)

This conclusion to the poem provides a moving reconciliation between transience and eternity. In the words of Zhang Longxi (2023, pp 221-222)

Through the dialogue of Master Su and the flute player and from the perspective that comprehends both mutability and constancy of all things, nature is invoked as a great healing power to cure human wounds and suffering, and relieve men from self-pity and depression.

Over two centuries later in 1301, the great Chinese calligrapher Zhao Mengfu wrote out Su Shi's Two Odes on the Red Cliff and provided a portrait of Su Shi. This original scroll was later cut up to form album leaves each 27 by 11 cm. These are now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. The following illustration shows at the top a digital recomposition of the original scroll of the first ode, and then an enlargement of the portrait and two album leaves near the end of the ode. The quotation beginning "Between heaven and earth... (天地 *qiě fū tiān*, and man heaven) begins in the right-most line of the enlarged album leaves three characters from the bottom.



Su's poem shows his ability to write fluently and clearly about issues of importance. Yang (2015, p 3) discusses this in terms of "spontaneity."

A primary Chinese term for this notion is *ziran* 自然 (literally 'self-so-ness'). *Ziran* in the premodern context could function as an adjective: 'being natural'; or adverb: 'naturally'; but not as a noun in the modern sense of 'nature', that is, our material environment. The semantic gist of 'spontaneity' is also found in terms such as *tianran* 天然 ('heavenly made so-ness'), *tianjun* 天然 ('Heaven,

the Potter'), *tiancai* 天材 ('heavenly endowed talent'), *shensi* 神思 ('divinely inspired thinking'), *wuxin* 无心 ('mindless'), *wuyi* 无意 ('without intention'), *wuwei* 无为 ('without agitation'), and so forth. Conspicuously, these are all compound words that suggest that a certain object is originated from itself (*zi*), created by a transcendental agent (*tian* or *shen*) or, in any case, simply formed without human interference (*wu*).

Su's poetry expresses the truth directly without any apparent effort on the part of the poet. The underlying pattern of the Dao makes itself manifest through the words (Bol, 1992). Fuller (2023, pp 2-4 and pp 78-118) considers the poetry in terms of 理 *lǐ* or "inherent pattern." Through Su's words one can see the underlying order of things. He quotes Su Shi's own description of his work:

My writing is like a spring of ten thousand gallons; it does not choose its path as it goes out. On level land it flows smoothly and quickly, and a thousand miles a day is not difficult. When it comes to turns and breaks over mountains and stones, it follows the object to describe the form, and it cannot be known. That which can be known is that it always travels where it ought to travel, and it always stops where it ought to stop. It is like this, and as for all else, I too cannot know. (Fuller, 2023, pp 3-4)

## A Visit to Mount Lu

Politics changed and Su Shi's formal exile in Huangzhou came to an end in 1084. By 1086 he had returned to the capital in Kaifeng. In 1084 he visited Mount Lu (庐山, *Lúshān*), a mountainous area containing multiple towering peaks just south of the Yangtze and west of Lake Poyang. It is a land of mountains, mist and mysticism. The origin of the region's name is usually related to the legendary Kuangsu who lived in a

small hut (*lú*) in the mountains before becoming a Daoist immortal (Hargett, 2004, p 10). After the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE, Mount Lou became a prominent center for Buddhism, and numerous temples were built there (Grant, 1994). One of these temples in the northwest part of the mountain is the “West Forest Temple.” One of Su Shi’s most famous poems records his visit there: *Inscription on the Wall of the West Forest Temple*. The Buddhist sense of the poem is that one cannot understand the overarching truth of life when one is lost in its details. The following is a word-by-word translation

題	西	林	壁			
tí	xī	lín	bì			
write inscribe	west	forest woods	wall cliff			
橫	看	成	嶺	側	成	峰
héng	kàn	chéng	lǐng	cè	chéng	fēng
crossways horizontal	see	become turn into	mountain range	side	become turn into	peak
遠	近	高	低	各	不	同
yuǎn	jìn	gāo	dī	gè	bù	tóng
far distant	near close	high tall	low	each every	not	same
不	識	廬	山	真	面	目
bù	shí	lú	shān	zhēn	miàn	mù
not	know recognize	Lu hut	mountain	true real	face aspect	eye eyesight
只	緣	身	在	此	山	中
zhǐ	yuán	shēn	zài	cǐ	shān	zhōng
only merely	cause edge	body oneself	exist be located	this here	mountain	middle inside

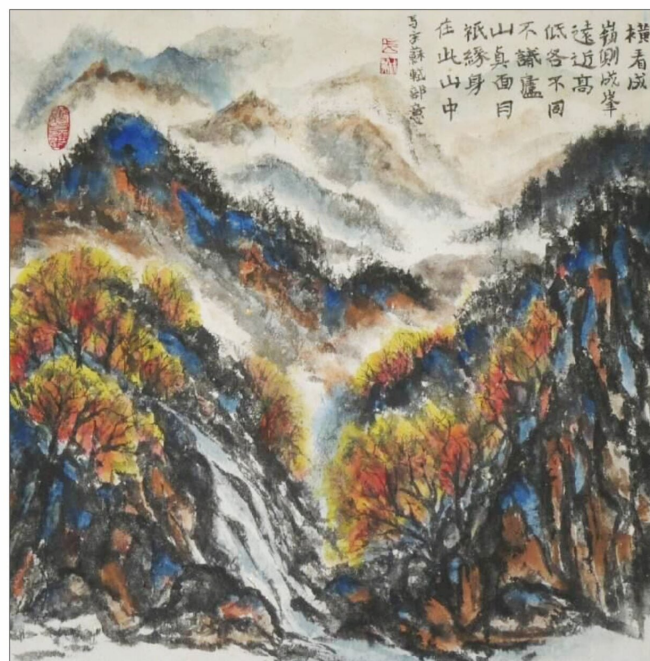
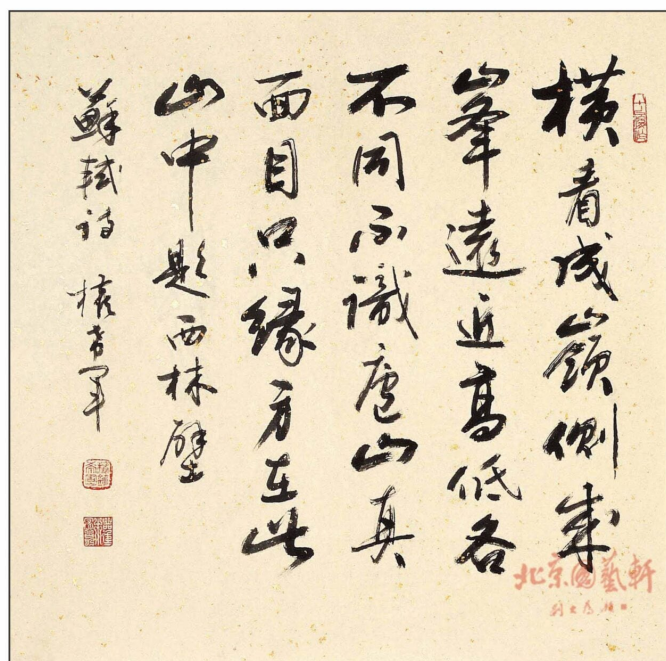
This is a translation by Burton Watson (1994, p. 108):

From the side, a whole range; from the end, a single peak;  
 far, near, high, low, no two parts alike.  
 Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu-shan?  
 Because I myself am in the mountain.

And a rhyming version by Xu Yuanchong (2005, p 397).

It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side  
Assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide  
Of Mountain Lu we cannot make out the true face  
For we are lost in the heart of the very place.

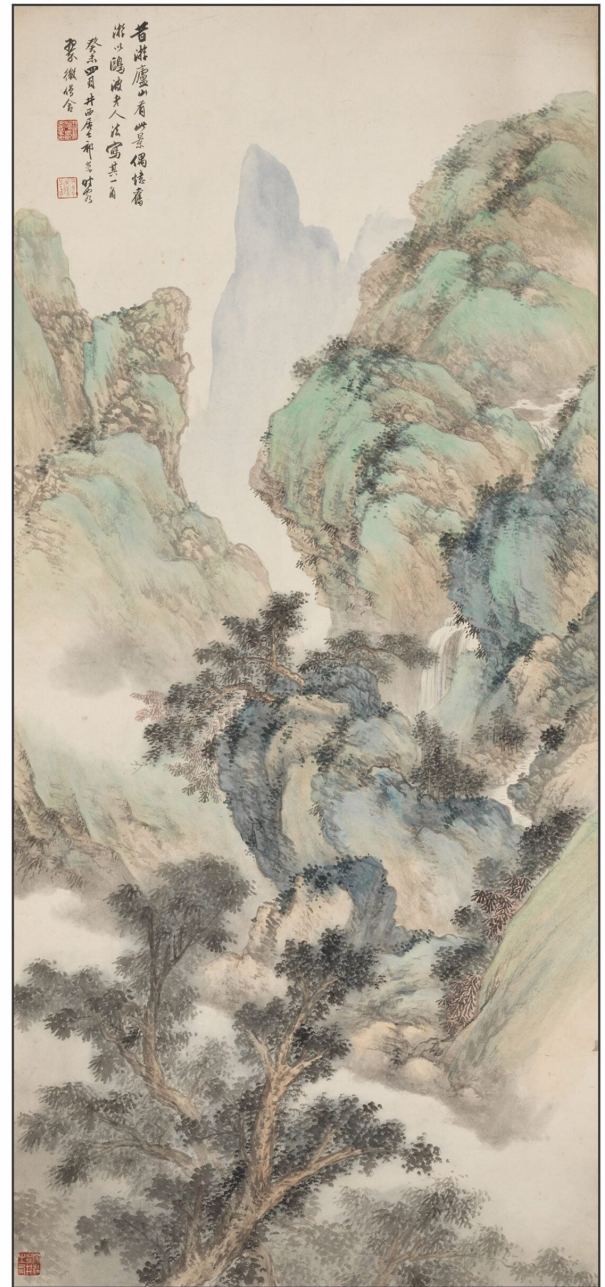
The following illustration shows on the left the poem as written out by a modern calligrapher Quan Xijun. On the right is a modern painting of Mount Lu in the autumn together with calligraphy of Su Shi's poem:



Below is a version of the poem in chaos calligraphy (2016) by Wang Dongling (1946- ) together with two photographs of the area. The calligraphy gives a true sense of the land of mists and the mountains:



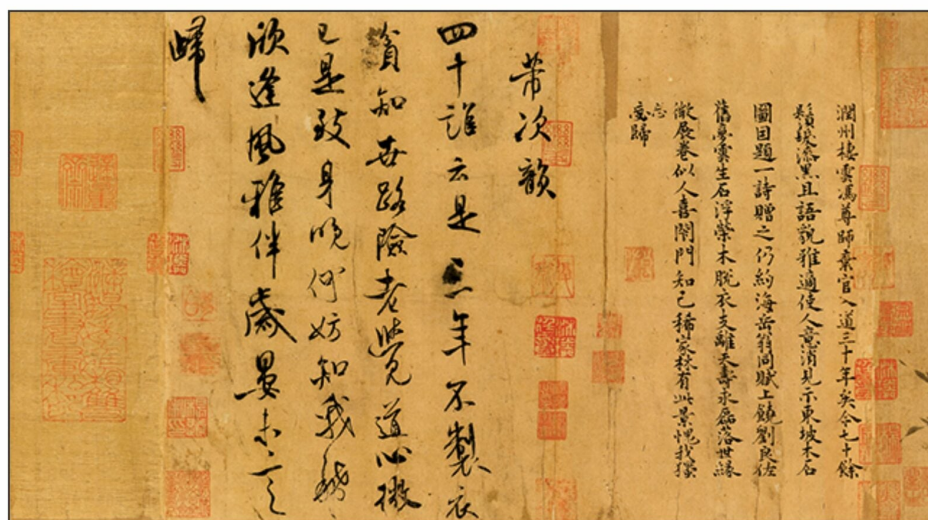
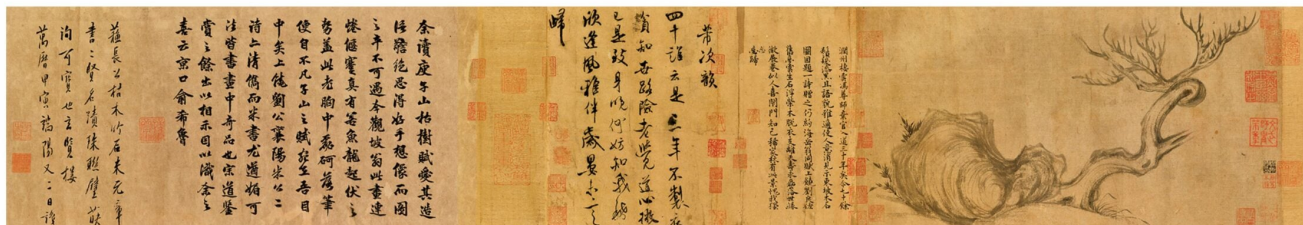
Mount Lu is the subject of many paintings. The following illustration shows on the left a painting made in 1467 by Shen Zhou (1427-1509) and on the right a modern painting by Qi Kun (1901-1944) created in 1943. These were exhibited at the National Palace Museum in Taipei in 2020.



## Bamboo, Rock and Tree

Su Shi was a talented painter as well as calligrapher. In 2018 a scroll containing his painting of *Bamboo, Rock and Tree*, long held in a private collection, was auctioned for almost 60 million dollars (Sturman, 2022). The following illustration shows the complete scroll (26 cm by 185 cm) at the top. In the middle are the first two colophons, the rightmost by Liu Liangzuo (11<sup>th</sup> Century) and the next by the poet and

calligrapher Mi Fu (1052–1107). And at the bottom is the painting with the more recent seals removed. The painting was likely created in the 1080s and the first two colophons added in the 1090s.



Liu Liangzuo describes how he was able to view the painting that was owned by Feng Qiyun. He then provides a poem (4<sup>th</sup> line

from right)

□□□□, □□□□□□  
□□□□, □□□□□

A rock born from clouds in an old dream;  
A tree sheds its robes of empty glory.  
Gnarled and knotted, heaven's gift of years is  
timeless;  
Rugged and upright, the fate of this world is fickle.  
(translation Sturman, 2022)

Mi Fu provides a much more beautiful piece of calligraphy, though his words are less poetic. His colophon begins:

□□□□, □□□□□□  
□□□□, □□□□□

Forty, who says it's so?  
Three years of no new clothing!  
Poor, I know the worldly path is precarious;  
Old, I awaken to the Dao-mind's subtlety.  
(translation Sturman, 2022)

## **Dongpo Pork**

Legend has it that Su Shi created the original recipe for East Slope Pork (□□□, *dōngpōròu*): pork belly braised with ginger and scallions in soy sauce and rice wine. The recipe is contained in a poem that has been attributed to Su Shi:

## 猪肉颂

净洗铛，少著水  
柴头罨烟焰不起  
待他自熟莫催他，  
火候足时他自美  
黄州好猪肉  
价贱如泥土  
贵者不肯吃  
贫者不解煮  
早晨起来打两碗  
饱得自家君莫管

## Ode to Pork

Clean your pot, add but a little water  
light the stove, keep the smoke at bay.  
It's done when it's done—how pointless to rush,  
with heat and time, a thing of beauty emerges.  
Huangzhou has good pork,  
and cheap as dirt  
The rich won't eat it;  
the common-folk don't know how,  
I eat two bowls for breakfast,  
and I'm satisfied, with not a care in the world.



## Epilogue

Although Su Shi returned to political favor in 1086, this was not to last. He was banished again in 1090 to the south of China, ultimately to Hainan Island. He was pardoned in 1100, but died soon thereafter in 1101.

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## Modern Chinese Calligraphy: Wang Dongling

Chinese calligraphy began over 3000 years ago. Over the years several distinct styles of writing evolved: oracle, bronze, seal, clerical, regular, semi-cursive (running) and cursive (grass). The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) overturned the respect shown to these traditional modes. However, calligraphy flourished in the format of the big-character posters (大字报, *dàzì bào*). In the years following the revolution, Chinese calligraphy became more abstract. One of the most important modern calligraphers is Wang Dongling (王冬岭). Among his many achievements is a new writing style that he calls “chaos

script” 草书 *luànshū*.

## A Calligrapher's Life

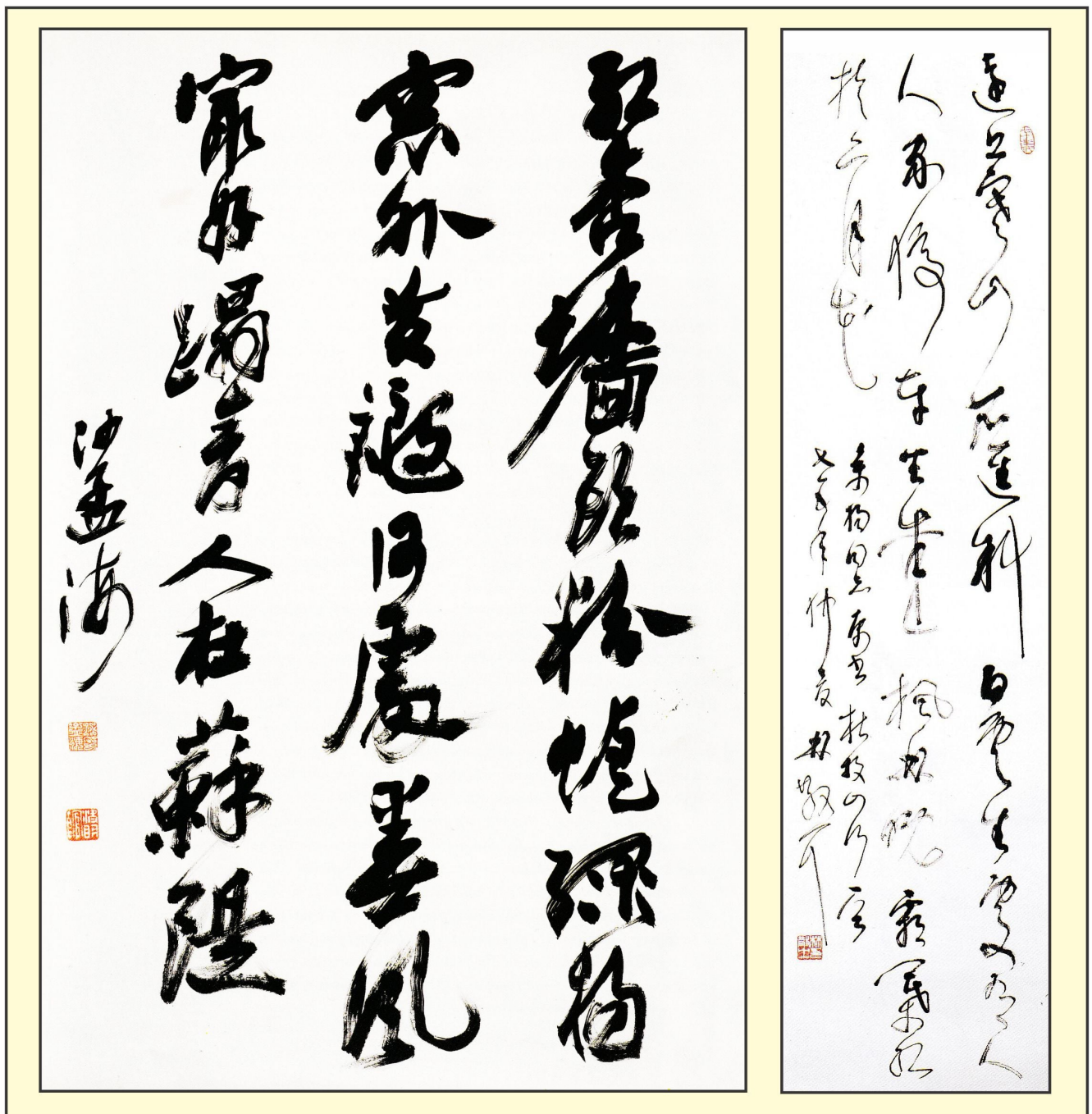
Wang Dongling was born in 1946 in Rudong about 175 km north of Shanghai. He studied fine arts in Nanjing, graduating in 1966 in time for the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. He was able to survive through this upheaval by creating big-character posters, an experience which gave him a fearful sense of freedom. He was intrigued by the traditional calligraphy that was being trashed by the revolutionaries, and in 1968 began to study with Lin Zanshi (1898-1989) in Wujiang just east of Shanghai (Barrass, 2002, p 164). This grand old calligrapher, a master of the cursive script, was known for his “iron line.” Lin survived the purges by providing calligraphy for the propaganda of the party and the poetry of Mao Zedong. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Wang enrolled in the Zhejiang Academy of Art (now the National Academy of Art) in Hangzhou, where he studied with Lu Weizhao (1899-1980) and Sha Menghai (1900-1992). After graduating from the academy, he spent some time as a visiting fellow at the University of Minnesota and at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the United States. He is presently a Professor of Calligraphy at the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

## Influences

The following illustration shows calligraphy by two of his teachers: Lin Zanshi on the right and Sha Menghai on the left. Lin Zanshi wrote out the poem *Going up the Hill* by the Tang poet Du Mu (803–852) in 1975 using his iron line. The poem reads (Barrass, 2002, p 142)

A slanting stony path rises far up the chilly hill  
To where men live amidst the fleecy clouds  
I stop my carriage to admire the maple grove at dusk,  
Where frozen leaves are redder than the flowers of early

spring.



In the 1980s, Sha Menghai wrote a poem about the view from his office in the Academy of Art (Barrass, 2002, p 138)

Red apricot blossom and pink butterflies can be seen over  
the wall  
While outside the window there are green willows and yellow  
orioles  
To best enjoy the spring breezes, join those who walk along

Su Dongpo's causeway across the West Lake.

### East-West Interactions

Wang was also influenced by Western abstract art. He developed a highly fluid calligraphy and combined that with the freedom of Western abstraction. The following is a work called 史迹 (*shǐ jì*, History and Memory, 68 cm square) from 1990 (Hertel, 2016):



The black calligraphy provides a basic structure for the

abstract ecstasy of the colors. Though very freely written, the calligraphy still has definite meaning.

Wang also promoted direct contact between Chinese calligraphy and Western culture (Hertel, 2016). The following illustration shows Chinese calligraphy on a Western background (1999). Wang has written the character for passion/feeling (情 *gǎn*) on a two-page spread from a German arts magazine and then repeated the calligraphy on an identical spread.

He then placed the two sheets side by side, but with the left-hand one turned upside down. His intention was to illustrate how 'feeling' becomes 'passion' when, for example, one is 'head-over-heels' in love. (Barrass, 2002, p 168).



The following illustration shows another example of the interaction between East and West. In 2012, Wang wrote out the Heart Sutra on a magazine illustration (25 by 20 cm) of one of

Edward Weston's 1936 nude photographs of Charis Weston in the Oceano dunes (Iezzi, 2016). The juxtaposition is intriguing. The nude body was not a subject for Chinese artists. The main message of the Heart Sutra is that everything is "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). Nothing that we perceive is real.



### Large-Character Calligraphy

Wang was very adept at making large-character calligraphic works (大字, *dàzì shū*). Unlike previous artists, he allowed the characters to overlap and to extend beyond the borders of the paper, and he let the ink to spread freely. The following illustration shows two large-character works (about 178 cm high) about flowers dancing from his 2013 exhibition.



Flowers' Dance

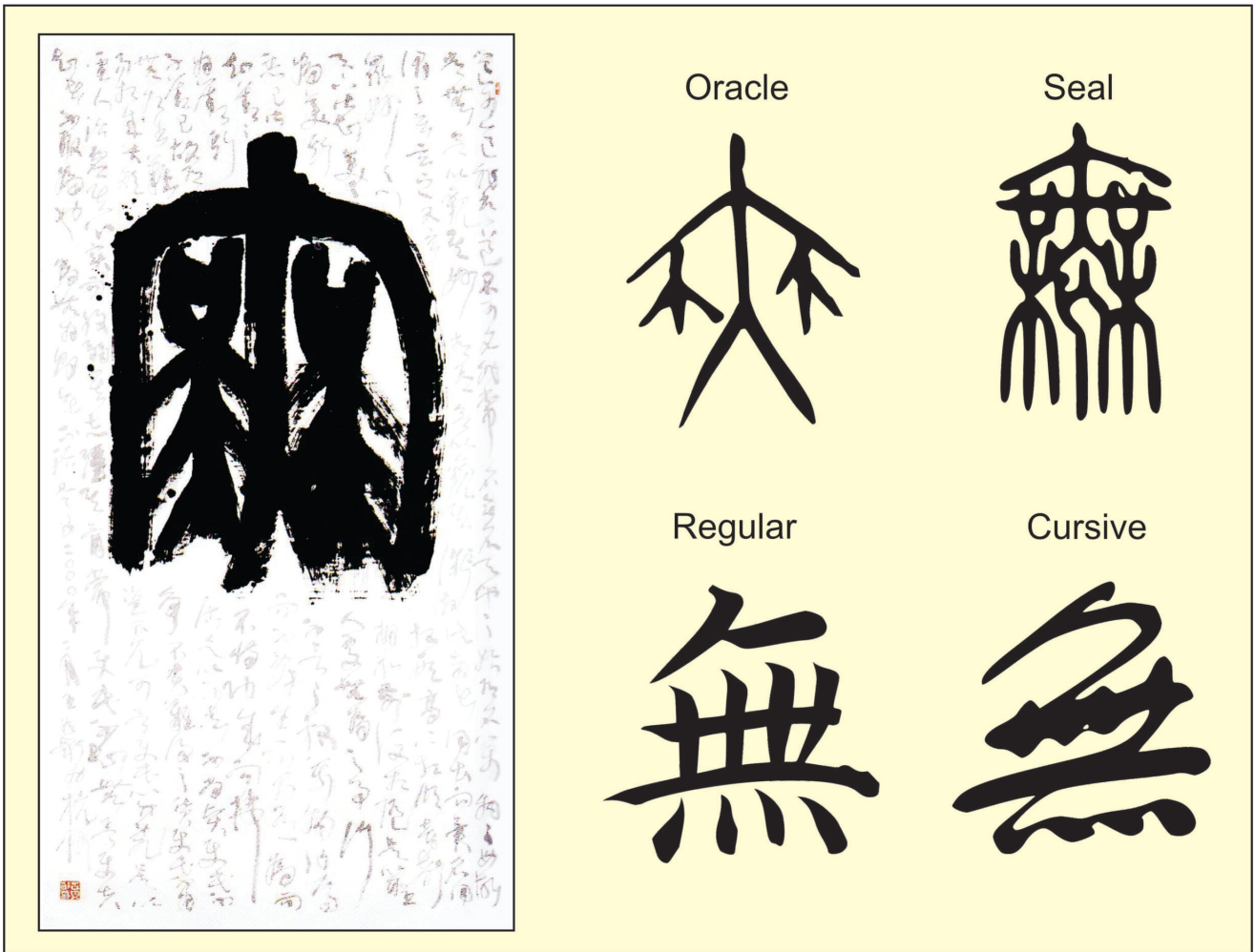
花飞



Dancing Flowers

飞花

The following illustration shows on the left a large work (272 by 142 cm) entitled *The Void*, about the nature of the Dao created by Wang in 2000 (Barrass, 2002, p 170). The background contains calligraphy of the first two chapters of the *Daodejing*, written in a style similar to the “iron line” of his teacher Lin Zanshi. In the center is the character that represents absence or nothingness (无, simplified 无, wú) written in a script based on the oracle script. The right section of the illustration shows the evolution of the character from ancient times.



The following is the Chinese text of the beginning of the first chapter of the *Daodejing* (Wikibooks) with a recent English translation by Fischer (2023). The character 无 begins the second line:

无欲则刚  
无为之事

The way that can be (fully) conveyed is not the abiding Way; a name that can be (fully) descriptive is not an abiding name.

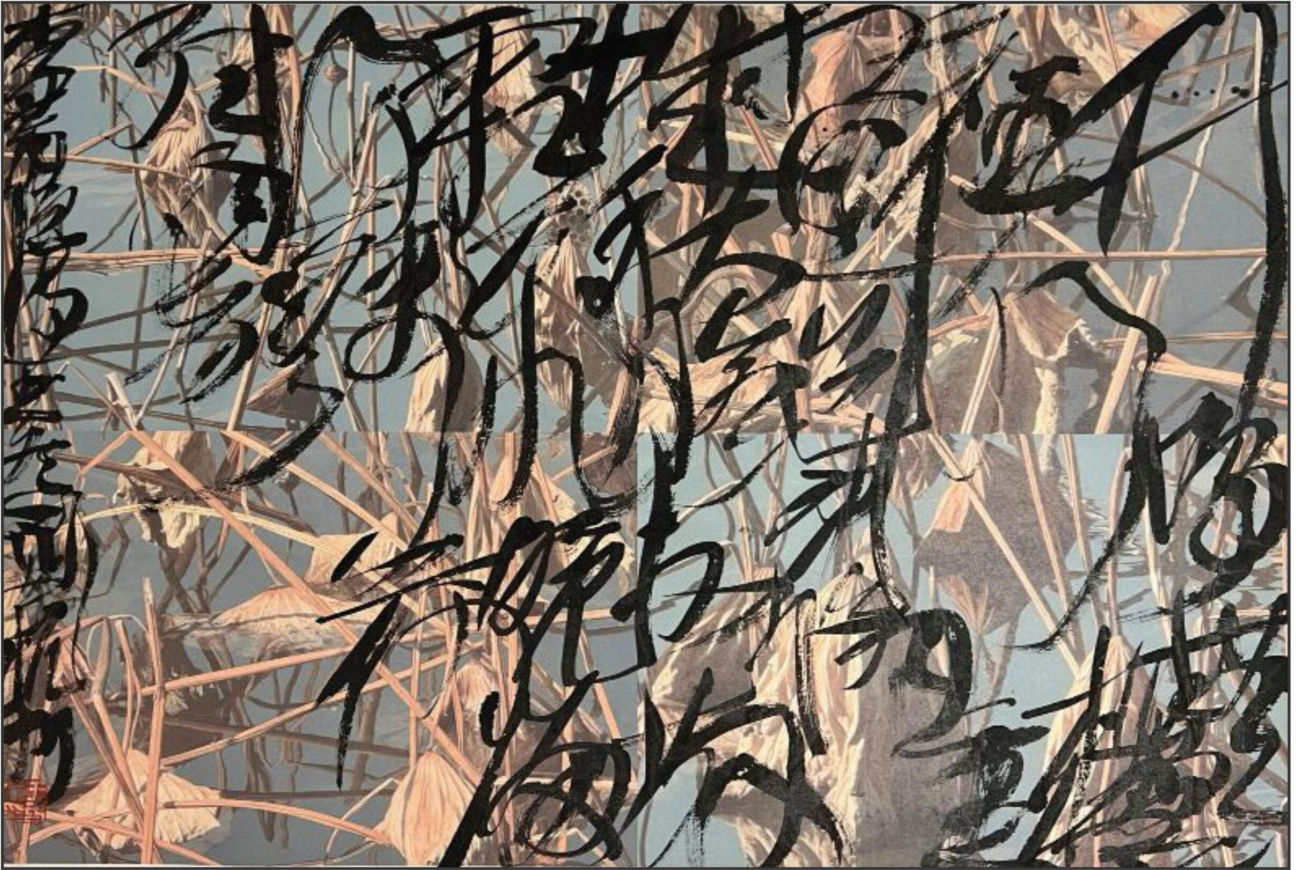
“Formlessness” is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “form” is the name of the mother of the myriad things.

## Photographic Experiments

Using photosensitive paper and calligraphy written upon transparencies, Wang (2013) was able to create impressive white on black creations. The following is a gelatin silver print (51 x 61 cm) of *Love Cloud* (☁)

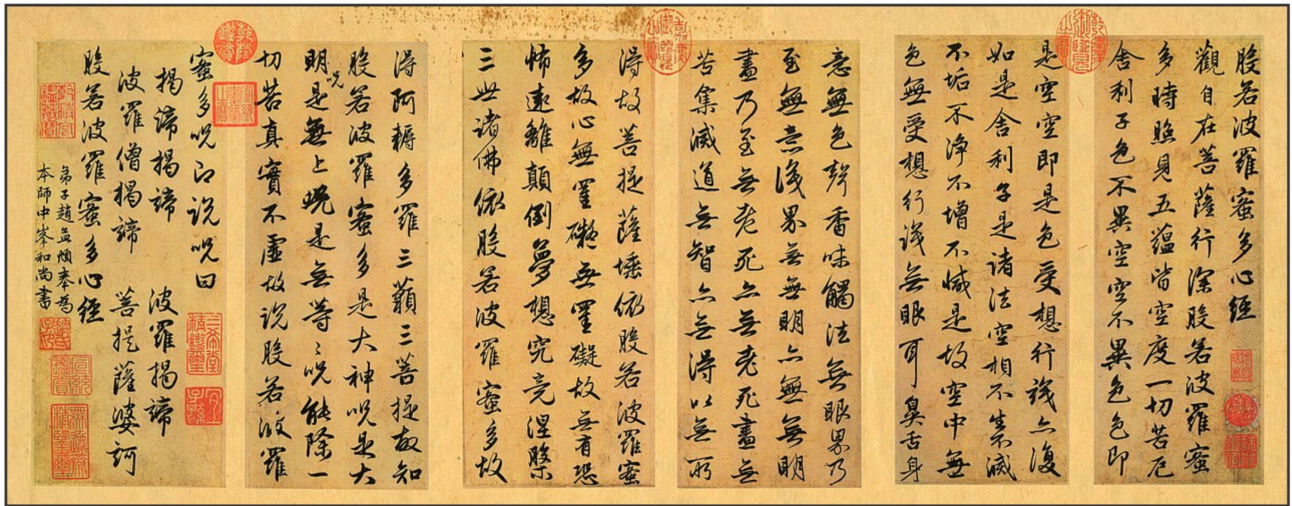


The following is calligraphy on a photographic print (51 by 69 cm) composed of four separate views of a lotus pond (Wang Dongling, 2023): *Li Shangyin – Newly Washed After the Rains, the Bamboo Dock is Transformed* (☁ – ☁☁☁☁☁☁, Zhú wù wú chén shuǐ kǎn qīng)



## Chaos Script

Over recent years Wang has developed a fluid cursive script called chaos script (乱书 *luànshū*) that breaks all the rules of traditional calligraphy (Festi & Hou, 2023). In cursive script the characters may run into each other vertically. In chaos script the characters overlap both vertically and horizontally, and can extend beyond the edges of the paper. The calligraphy is created with a long-handled brush writing on paper laid out on the ground. The resultant work shows a slow alternation of dark and light as the ink intermittently dries in the brush and must be replenished. The following illustrations show the Heart Sutra as written in regular script by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322 CE) and in chaos script in 2016 by Wang Dongling (Ferrell et al, 2026, p 126).



The following are comments by Wang on chaos script (Wang Dongling, 2016):

Chaos Script came about gradually, over a long process of creative practice. In Chaos Script, the strokes of cursive script overlap and interweave, creating what appears to be unreadable abstract images. But the execution of Chaos Script in fact still adheres to the rules of traditional calligraphy. It is not haphazard—it appears chaotic but is actually not so. I settled on the name of Chaos Script after some deliberation. Luan evokes disorder and mess, but it also implies *zhi* (“control,” “govern”)—after chaos comes control. In poetry, there is a famous line [by Bai Juyi (772-846)]: “Riotous blossoms [*luanhua*] gradually enchant the travelers’ vision.” Chaos has a feeling of nature.

Chaos calligraphy is as much related to painting as to writing. In an essay in the catalogue of Wang's 2016 exhibition, Britta Erickson remarks

The closest comparison to Wang's long cascades of intertwined lines that comes to mind are the vines painted by Wu Changshi 吴昌硕 (1844-1927), Professor Wang's teacher's teacher. One of the greatest calligraphers of the twentieth century, Wu Changshi employed calligraphic scripts in rendering natural forms. His loose, twisting renderings of vines brought together the artist's understanding of nature, and of calligraphy, and he would allow the vines to be cropped by the paper's edge, so that the viewer would then consider the wide spaces into which those vines stretched, beyond the frame of the painting. Wang Dongling's Chaos Script similarly engages the mind to extrapolate beyond the paper's edge to consider the breadth of the world into which his writing expands. The expanse can feel infinite.

The following illustration shows the transition from Wu Changshi on the left through Wang's teacher Lu Weizhao (1899-1980) to Wang's chaos script on the right.

Wu's painting represents *Wisteria*. The inscription reads

The branches are messy and overflowing, [but] please do not chop off the vines!

The painting by Lu Weizhao depicts *Bamboo and Rock* (1962).

Wang's example of chaos script is his 2019 calligraphy of the famous poem *Quiet Night Thoughts* by the Tang poet Li Bai (701-762):

静夜思	<i>Chuáng qián míngyuè guāng</i>
疑是地上霜	<i>Yí shì dìshang shuāng</i>
举头望明月	<i>Jǔtóu wàng míngyuè</i>
低头思故乡	<i>Dītóu sī gùxiāng</i>

A pool of moonlight on my bed this late hour  
like a blanket of frost on the world.  
I lift my eyes to a bright mountain moon.  
Resigned, remembering my home, I bow.  
(translation Sam Hamill, 2013, p 94).



## Calligraphy as Performance

Chaos script lends itself easily to performance. It is an art based on action. The following are comments by Gao Shiming (2023):

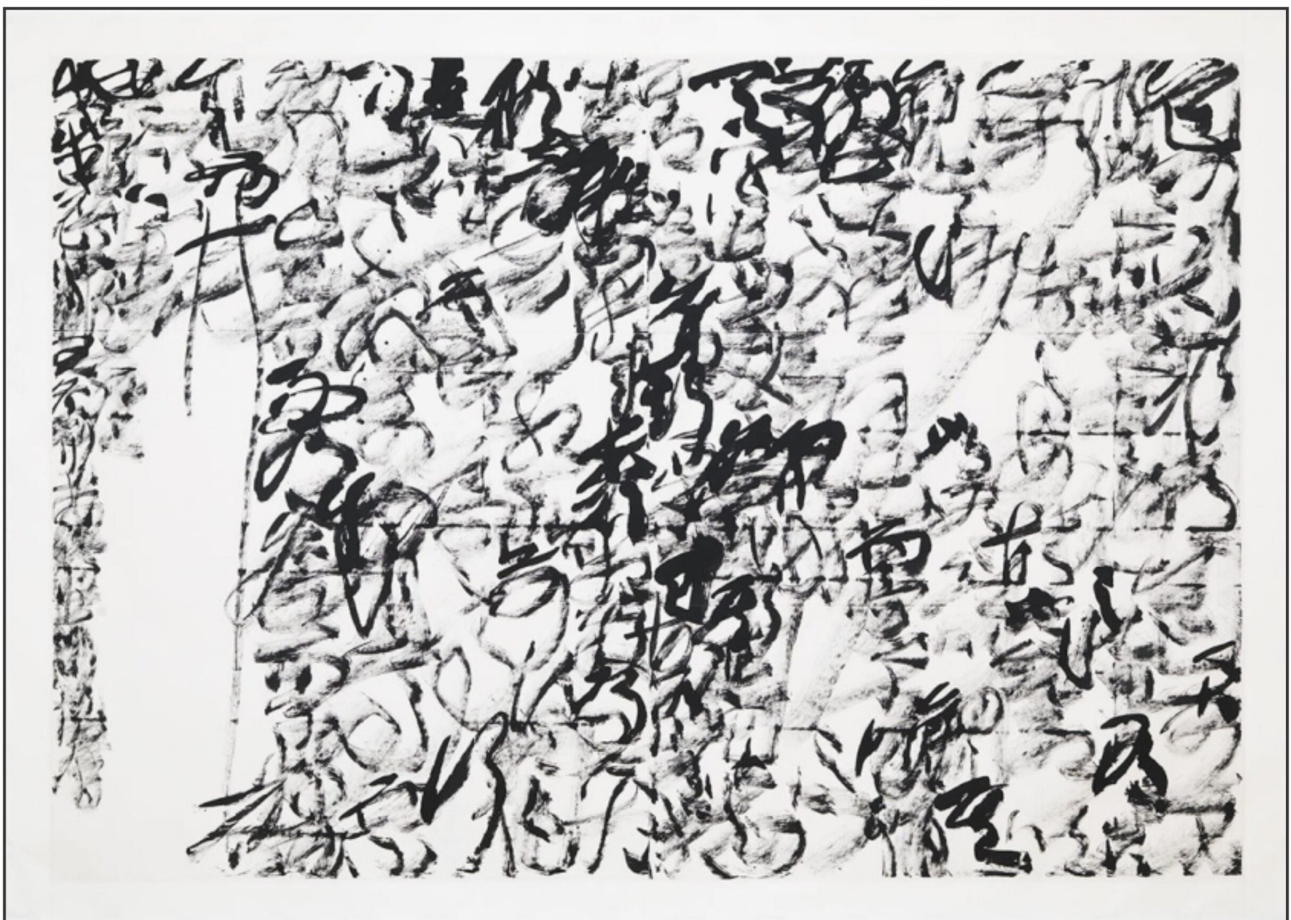
Writing becomes simple ink, markings, and traces, and the physicality and emotional tenor of the writing becomes the centre of everything. Wang's chaos script crystallises action. When that action stops, the state and meaning of

that movement linger. This state of action is a dance that arises when the mood strikes. The impulse to write chaos stems from writing in an uninhibited state of disorientation and overwhelm. In the state of writing generated by the dialectic between chaos and order, a calligrapher loses himself yet finds contentment.

The following shows a video of Wang Dongling writing out the first two chapters of the *Daodejing* in chaos script at the Asia Society Museum in New York in 2018.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Wang-Dongling-Demonstrates-His-Dynamic-Calligraphy-Style-at-Asia-Society-New-York.mp4>

And the following illustrations shows the calligraphy in its final form:



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# Bright is the Ring of Words: English Art Song

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, composers began to set poems to music. In these “art songs” or *Lieder*, the piano accompaniment accentuated the emotions and complemented the meaning of the poem. Although Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte* (1816) was the first cycle of art songs, Schubert was the composer who definitively established the genre. He was followed by Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, and Mahler. In the British Isles, a golden age of art song occurred in the first 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Young composers, many trained in the German tradition, set to music both the lines they had learned in school and the poems of their contemporaries. The illustration is a wood cut from 1903 by Wassily Kandinsky.

## Songs

Art songs (*Kunstlieder* in German) are often distinguished from folk songs (*Volkslieder*): art songs are musical settings for poetry that has been published in print, whereas the words and melodies for folk songs are handed down orally. However, some poets wrote ballads in the style of traditional folk songs, and some folk songs can be poetically complex. Art songs are also differentiated from popular songs by being “through-composed” (*durchkomponiert*) so that the melody varies with the meaning of the words, whereas popular songs typically use a simple repetitive rhythm. The accompaniment is typically more complex in art songs than in popular songs, often running in counterpoint to the voice. The words to art songs are created

prior to the music, whereas words and music for popular songs are usually created simultaneously. Modern art songs are typically written for a solo voice with piano. However, in the Renaissance, similar songs (*ayres*) were written for lute accompaniment. Some composers, such as Mahler and Vaughan-Williams, arranged their original piano setting for full orchestra. All distinctions tend to be fuzzy, and no one type of song is necessarily better than another. As stated in the Oxford Dictionary of Music (Kennedy et al., 2012) in the entry for “song”

Brave the man or woman who will make a didactic value-judgement between *Dives and Lazarus*, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* and *Smoke gets in your eyes*.

## Poetry and Music

Human speech has its own rhythm – prosody – and this can be heightened or regularized in poetry (Menninghaus et al. 2018). This is what makes poetry more appealing when recited out loud than when read silently. Listening to art song adds another dimension to the perceptual experience: one must attend both to the words and to the music (Campbell, 2023). Since it can be difficult to adjust the melody of the music to the rhythm of the poetry, some poets would prefer their poems not be set to music. Whitner (1957) quotes Victor Hugo who wrote on a manuscript of his verse, “Commit no nuisance along these poems by setting them to music.” Nevertheless, in the better art songs, the music heightens the emotions of the words and makes their meaning more vivid and memorable.

The history of English Song (e.g., Kimball, 2005) suggests two Golden Ages. During the first (1580-1630) poems were set to music, with the lute being the typical accompaniment. In the second (the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), the songs were accompanied by piano. The following sections consider nine English art songs composed during first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>

Century. Each is presented as text, as recitation, and as song, with some also presented as music alone.

### **Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal**

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;  
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;  
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:  
The firefly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,  
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,  
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves  
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,  
And slips into the bosom of the lake:  
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip  
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

This poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was extracted from his long narrative poem *The Princess* (1847), wherein Princess Ida forswears the world of men and establishes a university for women. The story was likely derived from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and was itself adapted by Gilbert and Sullivan into the operetta *Princess Ida*. The 14-line unrhymed poem is spoken by the Princess as she cares for the wounded Prince in Canto VII of the poem. As she invokes the sunset, she realizes that she feels more deeply for him than she had thought. The reference to Danaë, the beautiful young woman who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of golden rain, accentuates the underlying erotic feelings in the lines.

The following illustration shows Gustav Klimt's *Danaë* (1907):



The following is a recitation of the poem by Simon Russell Beale

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson\\_petal\\_beale.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson_petal_beale.mp3)

Roger Quilter (1877-1953) set the poem to music in 1902. The following is a performance by baritone Benjamin Luxon accompanied by David Willison on piano.

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/quilter\\_crimson\\_petal\\_luxon.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/quilter_crimson_petal_luxon.mp3)

And the following is a transcription of Quilter's song-setting by Steven Hough.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson-petal-hough.mp3>

### **Aedh wishes for the cloths of heaven**

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) published this poem in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The speaker is Yeats using the persona of *Aedh* (a name that means "fire" in Irish), a lovelorn, visionary poet. The poem, clearly related to Yeats's unrequited love for Maud Gonne, is recited by Greg Wise:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/yeats\\_cloths\\_wise.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/yeats_cloths_wise.mp3)

Thomas Dunhill (1877-1946) published a cycle of songs from Yeats' *The Wind among the Reeds* in 1904, later revising them for orchestral accompaniment in 1912. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/dunhill\\_cloths\\_bostridge.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/dunhill_cloths_bostridge.mp3)

The following is the poem in calligraphy as published by the Cuala Press, established in 1908 by Elizabeth Yeats, the poet's brother.

**H**AD I THE HEAVEN'S  
EMBROIDERED CLOTHS,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet :  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams—  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats.

### Bright is the Ring of Words

Bright is the ring of words  
When the right man rings them,  
Fair the fall of songs  
When the singer sings them.

Still they are carolled and said —  
On wings they are carried —  
After the singer is dead  
And the maker buried.

Low as the singer lies

In the field of heather,  
Songs of his fashion bring  
The swains together.

And when the west is red  
With the sunset embers,  
The lover lingers and sings  
And the maid remembers.

The poem comes from *Songs of Travel* (1896) by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). *Faute de mieux* the following is my recitation of the poem:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Stevenson-Bright-tp.mp3>

Stevenson considered the poems as “songs,” and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) set the words to music in 1904 as part of *The Vagabond and Other Songs*. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcom Martineau on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/vaughan\\_williams\\_bright\\_terfel.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/vaughan_williams_bright_terfel.mp3)

The score at the song’s end illustrates the complexity of the accompaniment:

[Moderato risoluto]

*pp* molto più lento

The lo - ver lin - gers and sings And the maid re - mem - bers.

*ben marcato*

*colla voce*

*p*

*pp* molto più lento

rall.

## Down by the Salley Gardens

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;  
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-  
white feet.

She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on  
the tree;

But I, being young and foolish, with her would not  
agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,  
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white  
hand.

She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on  
the weirs;

But I was young and foolish, and now am full of  
tears.

William Butler Yeats published this poem in 1889. He extrapolated it from a few lines of an old song sung by a peasant woman in County Sligo. The word "salley" is a variant of a "sallow," which is another word for the willow tree (Latin *Salix*). These trees were cultivated to provide materials for baskets, fences and roofs. A weir is a low dam of rocks or wood built across a river to raise the level of the upstream water. Settling and other irregularities can cause portions of the weir to rise above the water level, and become covered in grass. The grass on the weirs thus suggests an islet of rest in the turbulent waters flowing around it. The following is a recitation of the poem by Jim Norton:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Jim-Norton.mp3>

Herbert Hughes (1882-1937), an Irish composer, set the poem in 1909 to the tune of a traditional Irish air called *The Maids of Moune Shore*. The following is a classical performance of this setting by the contralto Kathleen Ferrier with Phyllis

Spurr on piano:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Ferrier-Salley-Gardens.mp3>

And another by countertenor Daniel Taylor accompanied by Sylvain Bergeron on lute. This performance gives the impression of a Renaissance Ayre.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Taylor-Salley-Gardens.mp3>

The following is a performance of the Hughes tune adapted for cello (Gerald Peregrine) and violin (Lynda O'Connor):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Violin-Cello.mp3>



**Loveliest of Trees the Cherry Now**

Loveliest of trees the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now of my three score years and ten,  
twenty will not come again.  
And take from seventy years a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom,  
Fifty Springs is little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

This poem, published by A. E. Housman (1859-1936) in his *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), has been widely anthologized and set to music numerous times. The following is a recitation by Emma Fielding:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/housman\\_loveliest\\_fielding.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/housman_loveliest_fielding.mp3)

George Butterworth (1895-1916) was the first composer to set the poem to music in 1912. The following is a performance by Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/butterworth\\_cherry\\_luxon.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/butterworth_cherry_luxon.mp3)

### **Sonnet 18**

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And Summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:  
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

All the art songs considered so far used poems published in the years just before the composers set the music. The composers also used earlier poems – particularly those from the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) published his sonnets in 1609. The following is a recitation of his 18<sup>th</sup> Sonnet by Hugh Grant:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/shakespeare\\_sonnet18\\_grant.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/shakespeare_sonnet18_grant.mp3)

Frederick Septimus Kelly (1881-1916) was born in Australia and educated in England. As well as studying music, he was a gold medalist in rowing at the 1908 Olympics. His setting for Shakespeare's sonnet was published in 1912. According to Banfield (1885, p 141),

The treatment of the opening line, the searching for a comparison, is particularly happy: the intermediate dominant of the relative minor leads in as if with a gradual concentration of the mind.

[Allegretto]

Shall I com - pare thee — to a sum - mer's day? Thou art more etc.

Ped. \* etc.

The following is a performance by baritone Stephen Varcoe with Clifford Benson on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/kelly\\_shakespeare\\_varcoe.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/kelly_shakespeare_varcoe.mp3)

### **To Gratiana Dancing and Singing**

See! with what constant motion  
Even and glorious, as the sun,  
Gratiana steers that noble frame,  
Soft as her breast, sweet as her voice,  
That gave each winding law and poise,  
And swifter than the wings of Fame.

She beat the happy pavement  
By such a star-made firmament,  
Which now no more the roof envies;  
But swells up high with Atlas ev'n,  
Bearing the brighter, nobler Heav'n,  
And in her, all the Dieties.

Each step trod out a lovers thought  
And the ambitious hopes he brought,  
Chain'd to her brave feet with such arts,  
Such sweet command and gentle awe,  
As when she ceas'd, we sighing saw  
The floor lay pav'd with broken hearts.

So did she move: so did she sing:  
Like the harmonious spheres that bring  
Unto their rounds their music's aid;  
Which she performed such a way,  
As all th' enamour'd world will say:  
The Graces danced, and Apollo play'd.

Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) was a Cavalier Poet who fought on

the side of Charles I during the English Civil War (1642–1651). Most of his poems, many dedicated to various idealized mistresses such as Althea, Lucasta, and Gratiana (Cousins, 1988), were collected and published posthumously. The following is a reading of the poem by *Cavaet* from Librivox.

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gratiana\\_lovelace\\_caveat.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gratiana_lovelace_caveat.mp3)

William Denis Browne (1888–1915), an English composer, set Lovelace's poem (omitting the second verse) to music in 1913. He based his melody on an *Allmayne* (a dance form originating in Germany, also called *Allemande*) from the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century *Virginal Book* of Elizabeth Rogers. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/denis\\_browne\\_gratiana\\_bostridge.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/denis_browne_gratiana_bostridge.mp3)

## **Sea-Fever**

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,  
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,  
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;  
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,  
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,  
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like  
a whetted knife;  
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover  
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's  
over.

John Masefield (1878-1967) joined HMS Conway, a naval training ship in 1891 and spent much of his life in the 1890s at sea. This poem comes from his first book, *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902). The poems from this first volume were published together with later poems in 1916 as *Salt-Water Poems and Ballads*, which was profusely illustrated by Charles Pears (1873-1958). This is Pears's depiction of the first two lines of *Sea-Fever*:



The following is a recitation of the poem by Terence Stamp:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/sea\\_fever\\_stamp.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/sea_fever_stamp.mp3)

John Nicholson Ireland (1879-1962) set Masefield's poem to music in 1913. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcolm Martineau on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ireland\\_sea\\_fever\\_terfel.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ireland_sea_fever_terfel.mp3)

### **Epitaph**

Here lies a most beautiful lady,  
Light of step and heart was she:  
I think she was the most beautiful lady  
That ever was in the West Country.

But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;  
However rare, rare it be;  
And when I crumble who shall remember  
This lady of the West Country?

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) published this brief but powerful poem in *The Listeners and Other Poems* (1912). In 1934 he made a recording of this and other poems. The following represents my best effort to decrease the high levels of noise:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/de-la-mare-epitaph.mp3>

Arthur L Wood provides a much clearer recitation:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Epitaph-Arthur-L-Wood.mp3>

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), an English poet and composer, set the

poem to music in 1920. The following is a performance by the baritone Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gurney\\_epitaph\\_luxon.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gurney_epitaph_luxon.mp3)

## Lament

Many of the composers active during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century died in World War I. William Denis Browne died at Gallipoli in 1915. William Septimus Kelly and George Butterworth both died in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Ivor Gurney was irrevocably affected by his injuries during the war, and spent much of his time afterwards in psychiatric hospitals. Two weeks before he died at the Battle of the Somme, Kelly began writing a *Lament*. His original piano score was recently adapted for orchestra by Christopher Latham. The following is an arrangement for violin and piano with Latham playing the violin and Tamara Anna Cislowska playing the piano:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Somme-Lament-Violin-Piano.mp3>

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## **Caravaggio: The Contarelli Chapel**

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) was born in small community called Caravaggio just east of Milan. He first became recognized as a painter of genius in 1602 when he completed a set of three paintings on the life of Saint Matthew for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. Caravaggio had a ferocious temper and in 1606 he killed a man in a brawl and was banished from Rome. After a period of exile in Malta, Sicily and Naples, he negotiated a pardon. However, in Naples in 1609 he was

violently assaulted by his enemies. He died in Porte Ercole as he tried to return to Rome. The portrait by Ottavio Leoni derives from the time when Caravaggio was in Rome at the height of his powers, though it was likely completed later.

## Matteo Contarelli

The story begins with Matthieu Cointerel (1519-1585) a French Cardinal who provided support for the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, France's national church in Rome:



Though construction had started in 1518, all building had been halted during the sack of Rome by mutinous German troops in 1527. The church exterior was not completed until 1589, two years after the death of its benefactor Cointreau. The austere Renaissance façade now contains statues (by Pierre de l'Estache, 18<sup>th</sup> Century) of the important saints and kings that came from France: Charlemagne and Saint Louis (lower level), Saint Clothilde and Saint Jeanne de Valois (upper level). The interior decoration, much of which was completed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, is far more extravagant than the exterior, tending to Rococo rather than Renaissance. The ceiling has a large fresco showing the apotheosis of Saint Louis by Charles-Joseph

Natoire (18<sup>th</sup> Century).

## **Saint Matthew**

As well as supporting the building, Matteo Contarelli (as he was known in Italy) also provided an endowment for one of the side chapels to be dedicated to his namesake Saint Matthew. Matthew is traditionally considered to be the author of the *Gospel of Matthew* although it is likely that this gospel was written by another person, perhaps a colleague or follower of the Saint (see discussion by Allison, 2004, pp 7-72).

The calling of Matthew (also known a Levi or Alpheus) to be a disciple is mentioned briefly in the three synoptic gospels, though only in the *Gospel of Matthew* (9: 9-13) is he named Matthew:

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?

But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Although this is the only mention of the saint in the Bible, many legends grew up over the years about his exploits after

the life of Jesus. These stories were compiled in Volume 5 of *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine (1275). According to legend, Saint Matthew spread the gospel to the land of Ethiopia. While there he came upon two sorcerers who were using dragons to torment the people. By making the sign of the cross, Matthew tamed the dragons and defeated the sorcerers. He also raised from the dead the daughter (or son) of King Egippus. In return for this miracle, the king's daughter Ephigenia became a nun. After Egippus died, his successor Hirtacus lusted after Ephigenia. Matthew refused to release her from her vows of chastity, and the infuriated king arranged for Matthew to be murdered.

In 1868, Andrea Orcagna (1308-1368) constructed a pilaster for the Church of the Orsanmichele in Florence with scenes from the life of Saint Matthew: on the left are the calling to discipleship, and the taming of the dragons; on the right are the raising of the king's daughter and the martyrdom of the saint; in the center is the writing of the gospel.



In 1587, the executors of Contarelli's will commissioned

Giuseppi Cesari, Cavalier d'Arpino (1568-1640), to provide frescos for the walls and ceiling of the chapel. He painted the barrel vault of the chapel with a fresco showing Matthew raising the king's daughter from her death bed. On the sides of the vault were two paintings showing anonymous prophets in the style of Michelangelo but without his genius:



### **Matthew and the Angel**

Cesari completed the ceiling in 1593. Financial difficulties delayed his payment, and the Cavalier went on to other projects. In 1587, the executor had also commissioned a sculpture depicting the inspiration of Saint Matthew from Jacques Cobaert (1535–1615) for the altar. However, he experienced great difficulty finishing the sculpture (Hess, 1951). The figure of Matthew alone was finished in 1602, but the priests deemed it incomplete and refused to take it. After Cobaert's death, Pompeo Ferrucci provided the angel to go with Matthew, and the strangely disjointed sculpture now resides in the Church of the Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini:



In 1599, the financing of the Contarelli Chapel was taken over by the *Fabbrica* (works office) of Saint Peter's (Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 192). Cesari was offered a contract to complete the chapel, but by then he was too busy. The contract was therefore given to Caravaggio, a protégé of the Cardinal del

Monte. He agreed to complete the side panels by 1600. But he would paint using oil on canvas rather than in situ frescos. Caravaggio did not make preparatory drawings, but painted directly onto the canvas using models posed under carefully controlled lighting. He painted rapidly using a severe chiaroscuro style that came to be known as "tenebrism."

### **The Calling of Saint Matthew**

The first painting Caravaggio completed was *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1600):



Caravaggio has transposed the event to his own time and place.

On the left two people enter a darkened office. One of them has a faint halo: this is Jesus. In front of him, standing between the viewer and the savior is Saint Peter in a dull yellow cloak. From what may be an open window bright light streams diagonally into the office illuminating the faces of a group of five people at a table. There is some ambiguity about who is who (Dubouclez, 2024): I shall follow the interpretation of Graham-Dixon (2010, pp 194-197). The central person with a distinguished beard and a luxurious red and yellow doublet is Matthew Levi, a prosperous tax collector. Counting the money on the table is a rueful taxpayer. Looking over his shoulder through spectacles is an elderly man who appears to be checking the calculations. At Matthew's left shoulder is a young page with a feathered cap and a golden doublet. At the corner of the table with his back to the viewer, dressed elegantly in black and white and wearing a sword, is Matthew's bodyguard (or *bravo*). There is a space at the table: the viewer can imagine himself or herself sitting there.

The group at the table is reminiscent of an earlier painting of Caravaggio: *The Cardsharps* (1597). Paying taxes always seems like being cheated. Both paintings display Caravaggio's mastery of the feathers and fashions of the day.



The difference is the right hand of Jesus. Jesus points to Matthew and says simply, "Follow me." In the shadows, he holds out his left hand as though beckoning the viewer to join him as well. After his Matthew paintings, Caravaggio seldom returned to the genre subjects of his youth. It was as if he also felt called to a more meaningful life.

If one look carefully at the feet in the shadows on the lower right, we can see that Jesus is turning to leave the office of the tax-collector (Puttfarken, 1998, p 170). He already knows that Matthew will come after him. Matthew appears uncertain about what to do. But if we look at his legs beneath the table, we note that he is already turning toward Jesus:

Matthew, in his wine-dark velvet hat, points to his own chest as if to say "Who, me?," but underneath the table where they sit his legs have already answered the call long before the message has reached his brain. We can see Matthew's legs because Caravaggio has omitted one leg of the table. In the real world, it would crash to the ground. In the world Caravaggio has created, we barely notice: we are too absorbed in the dilemma of an ordinary man whose mind lags behind his heart. (Rowland, 2024, pp 3-4)

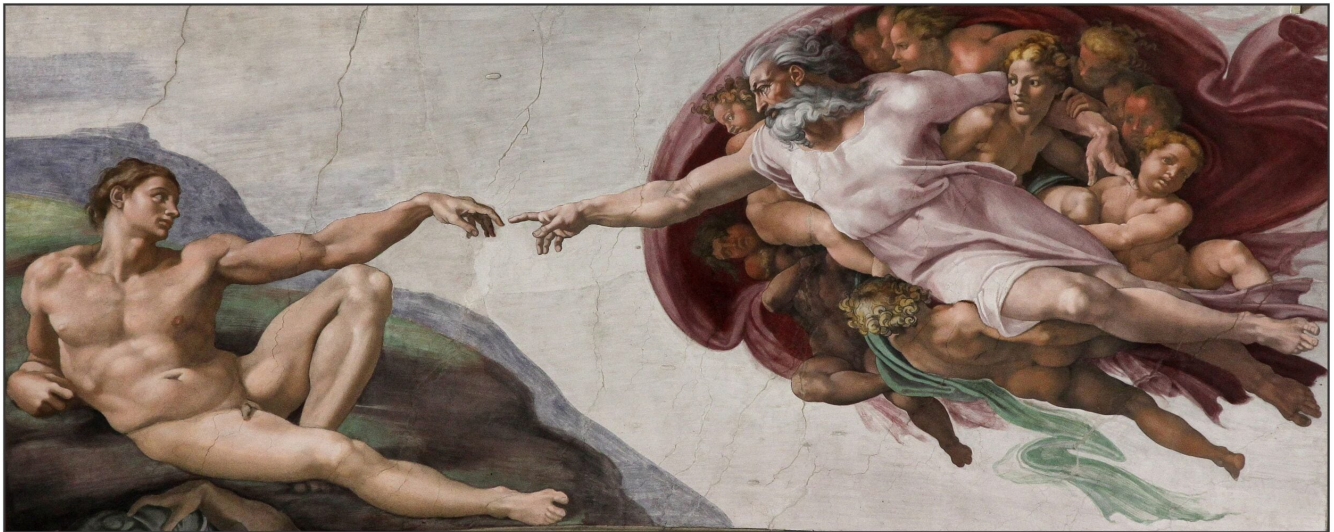
The following illustration shows on the left the legs of Matthew (and the absent table leg), on the upper right the hands of Jesus and on the lower right the feet of Peter and Jesus:



Jesus' right hand is copied from Michelangelo:

The shrouded gesture of Christ, the most noteworthy single motif in Caravaggio's picture, is a studied quotation from Michelangelo's most famous image, the *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine ceiling. Christ's oddly limp right hand, seen as if stopped by the camera, mirrors that of Michelangelo's inert Adam, who is about to be invested with life by God. Christ is the New Adam, and "as in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life" (I Corinthians 15:22). Caravaggio was no Michelangelo, yet we may see here a kind of identification, perhaps the first that Michelangelo Merisi made with his great predecessor and namesake. (Hibberd, 1983, pp 97-99).

The following illustration shows Michelangelo's 1511 painting with an expanded view of the hands of God and Adam, and Caravaggio's hand of Jesus, the mirror image of the hand of Adam:



## **The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew**

The contract for the painting was very specific:

a long wide space in the form of a temple, with an altar raised up on the top of three, four, or five steps: where St Matthew dressed in vestments to celebrate the mass is killed by the hands of soldiers and it might be more artistic to show the moment of being killed, where he is wounded and already fallen, or falling but not yet dead, while in the temple there are many men, women, young and old people, and children, mostly in different attitudes of prayer, and dressed according to their station and nobility, and benches, carpets, and other furnishings, most of them terrified by the event, others appalled, and still others filled with compassion (quoted in Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 194)

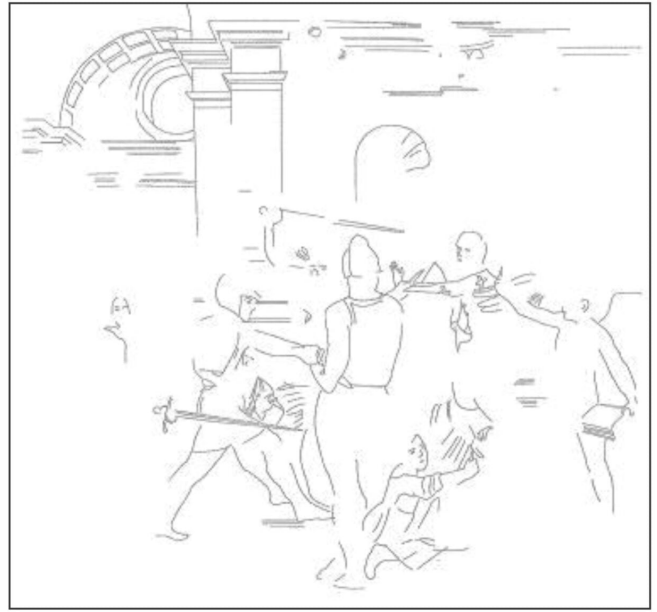
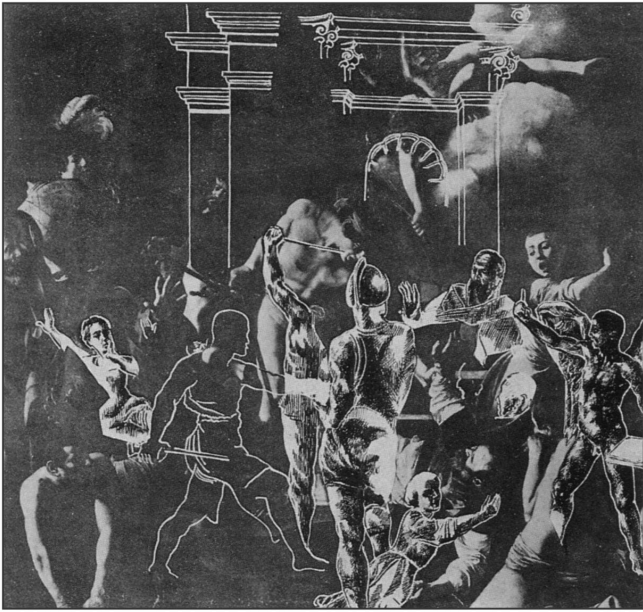
Caravaggio had no previous experience with painting more than three or four people together. He experienced great difficulty with the *Martyrdom*. Radiographic studies revealed pentimenti with a design completely different from the final painting. It is likely that Caravaggio had begun *The Martyrdom* before *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, given up and then returned to it after the latter was completed.

In his original effort, Caravaggio took pains to depict the altar and the temple, and outlined three assassins. The focus of the picture was a helmeted assassin with his back to the viewer. Saint Matthew is shown falling under the blows of his executioners. Caravaggio realized that this design was not working. Saint Matthew's death was not at the center; everything was far too crowded; the central assassin was faceless.

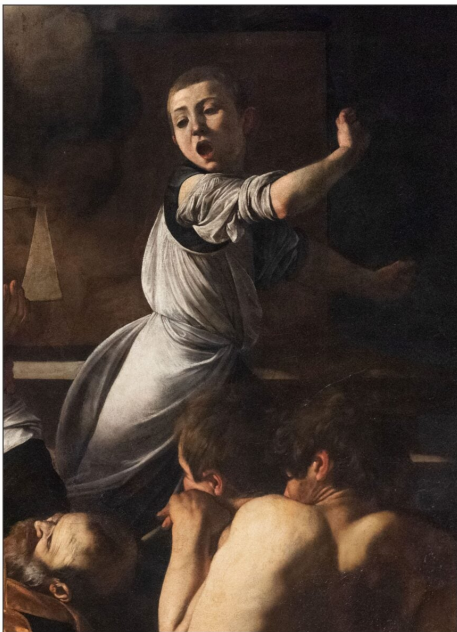
He decided to start over. He opened up the center of the painting to show the dying Saint Matthew who has fallen to the ground. Members of the congregation turn away from the horror of his murder. Some are without clothes – probably about to be baptized. The artist himself is portrayed in the background watching the martyrdom with a combination of terror and pity. An angel reaches out to the saint to give him a palm branch, symbol of salvation and eternal life. There is now only one assassin and he faces the viewer. He is almost naked. He exudes rage.



The following illustration shows the pentimenti of the earlier versions of the painting (Camiz, 1990; Olson, 2002; Vodret-Adamo, 2011, p 73). There were several aborted attempts to portray the architecture of the temple. Caravaggio soon realized that he was not interested in architecture: most of his later paintings use a background of either dark shadows or bare walls.



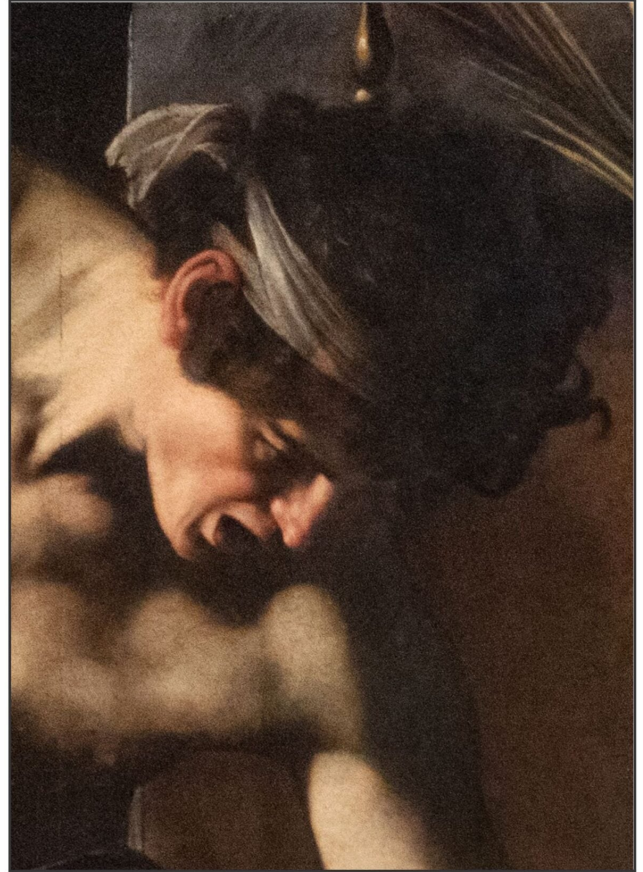
The figure on the right of the altar boy recoiling from the murder of the saint derives from Titian's 1529 painting of *The Assassination of Saint Peter of Verona*, which Caravaggio has likely seen in the form of a 1560 etching by Martino Rota:



The imposing body of the assassin is reminiscent of Michelangelo's Adam in *The Creation of Adam* (1511) in the Sistine Chapel (Clayton website).



The head of Caravaggio and the head of the assassin look down in parallel on the dying saint, one in the shadows with pity and one in the light with anger:



## **The Inspiration of Saint Matthew**

In 1602, after Contarelli's executors had refused Cobaert's incomplete sculpture of *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, they asked Caravaggio to produce a painted version for the altar (Graham-Dixon, 2010, pp 234-237). Caravaggio's first version of *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* portrayed the saint as an old man who appears not to comprehend what is going on as a youthful angel guides his hand. The writing on the tablet shows the Hebrew version of the opening two verses of Matthew's gospel (Lavin, 1974).

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham begat ...

Lavin (p 64) notes that this represents the transition between Old and New Testaments:

The lineage of salvation has been announced, the founding father has been named and his seed is being sown. The light of a new age has dawned.

The Hebrew gospel is an intriguing idea. Saint Matthew was certainly Jewish and, if he was the author of the gospel that bears his name, he would probably have written it in Hebrew. However, as far as we know, the original version was in Greek, perhaps compiled by a follower of Matthew rather than by Matthew himself.

The following shows a black-and-white photograph of the painting, which was destroyed by fire in Berlin in 1945, together with an enlargement of the saint's writing and the Hebrew text (from Lavin, 1974).



ספר תולדות ישוע המשיח  
בן דוד בן אברהם:  
אברהם הול

Jesus chose his disciples from ordinary people and Caravaggio wanted to show Matthew as a “simple man stunned by the directness of his revelation” (Graham Dixon, 2010, p 236):

Perhaps the most touching aspect of the painting is the intimacy of the relationship between the stooped saint and the tender young angel, whose wings enfold the whole scene in a hushed embrace. The angel is God's messenger but also the embodiment of Christian love – a love so generous that it encompasses even those as ragged and gnarled as the cross-legged, doltish St Matthew.

The most striking aspect of Caravaggio's Matthew is his humility. Thomas (1985) quotes from a description of Matthew by Lazius (1555):

Even though he was most learned, yet he was not at all exalted, but in accord with the meaning of his name, truly strove to present himself as humble and lowly. He would always remark that, "to whatever degree you are great, so much more be you humble in all things." And this to the wise man: "disgrace follows the proud, but exaltation follows the humble" . . . as a pauper himself he followed Christ the pauper.

The name Matthew in Hebrew means "gift of God" (*Matityahu*). The gospel was not created by him but given from God.

However, the priests were dismayed by the portrayal of Matthew as a holy fool rather than an inspired saint, and refused the painting. One of Caravaggio's patrons was happy to take the rejected canvas. He was also able to convince the priests as San Luigi dei Francesi to allow Caravaggio to create another version. In the second version, the saint was far more distinguished, albeit still barefoot:

Matthew the shockingly illiterate peasant has suddenly been turned into Matthew the dignified, grey-haired sage. This scholar-saint kneels at his desk, quill pen at the ready. He is draped in red robes and has been equipped with an expression of dignified attentiveness. Rather than guiding his uncertain hand, the angel now counts off the verses as

he dictates them. The pages of the book are no longer visible, but since the angel has got to the index finger of his left hand – number two, in the gestural rhetoric of the time, since Italians counted the number one with their thumbs –it seems that he has once more got to the start of the second verse, and Abraham's begetting of Christ's lineage. (Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 237).

Lavin (1974) compares Caravaggio's two versions:

In the first version the divine word was conveyed mechanically through a laborious and earthbound process of physical instruction to a humble proletarian whose chief virtue lay in his knowledge of his own ignorance. In the second version it is conveyed miraculously to a stunned intellectual through a heaven-sent process of strictly rational analysis and exposition. Again, the key to the irony lies in the divine mystery itself, which brings truth to him who is wise, be he ignorant or learned.



The background is almost completely dark. The figures spiral around each other: divine forces binding the saint to the angel. The saint's robe is pulled down by gravity; the angel's robe billows upward toward heaven.

The table at which Matthew is writing is askew, and the bench upon which he kneels threatens to tumble out of the picture frame. This feeling of imminent upset fits with the revolutionary message of the gospel.

Lavin (1974) points out how Caravaggio was indebted to Tintoretto's *The Virgin Appearing to Saint Jerome* (1583) which Caravaggio has probably seen in a 1588 etching by Agostino Carracci. And Caravaggio's painting in its turn inspired Guido Reni's 1635 depiction of Saint Jerome. The illustration shows the earlier etching on the left and later painting on the right:



However, no one – before or after – could ever rival Caravaggio's airborne angels. Young and sensuous. they float lightly in the clouds as erotic representatives of the divine. The following illustration compares the angels in the *Inspiration* and the in the *Martyrdom*.



## Farewell

Caravaggio's paintings for the Contarelli Chapel made him famous. They also represented a turning point in his choice of subject matter. From then on, he concentrated on religious themes. It was almost as though, like Matthew, he had been called to greater things. To see the chapel and the paintings is a deeply moving experience. But hard to describe, just as the chapel is notoriously difficult to photograph. We say farewell with a photograph by Robert Wash.



And the ending to a poem about *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Karen Fish (2021, p 29)

Only a few ways to describe what actually  
happened—Matthew  
touches his chest, indicating a confusion  
with this unlikely enlistment.

His companions slouch, dumbfounded amid  
the flush and feathers and swords.  
There is the humble disbelief  
all who are chosen share—that moment  
when the world seems just a pile of hammers,  
hatchets, buckets of coins—one  
thinks plainly *how unlikely*,  
absolved from all that is ordinary.

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# Bai Juyi: Pearls Falling on Jade

Bai Juyi (白居易, pinyin *Bǎi Jūyì*, or Po Chü-i in Wade-Gilles transliteration, 772-846 CE) was a Chinese poet. In 815, after inappropriately advising the emperor, he was exiled from the capital Chang'an to Jiujiang on the Yangtze River. One night, at a farewell party on the river for a friend, he heard a musician playing the pipa. Entranced by her music, he found out that she had once been a sought-after courtesan in the capital. After her beauty had faded away, she had retired to the provinces, where she played her music and lamented her lost youth. Moved by her plight, Bai Juyi composed his *Pipa Xing* (琵琶行, "Ballad of the Pipa"). The illustration shows a drawing of the poet and the pipa player from a scroll by Guo Xu (1456–1532).

## Life of the Poet

Bai Juyi was born in Northern China and came to the capital Chang'an to pass his examinations for the civil service in

800. There he became close friends with the novelist and poet Yuan Zhen (779-831) (Tan, 2025). He soon became a prolific and popular poet, with the courtesy name *Lètiān* (樂天, happiness of heaven: optimism) (Waley, 1949). Bai Juyi and his predecessors, Li Bai, Wang Wei and Du Fu, are considered the four great poets of the Tang Dynasty (Geng, 2021). He became renowned in Japan where he was known as *Haku Rakuten* from the Japanese transliteration of his courtesy name (白楽天). In 815, the prime minister Wu Yuanheng was brutally assassinated because he would not agree to the demands of some rebellious warlords. Bai Juyi wrote a memorial calling upon the emperor to seek out and punish the assassins. However, the politics were complicated. Bai Juyi was considered presumptuous – it was not for him, a tutor in the imperial household, to advise the emperor. He was exiled and demoted to a minor position (“master of the horse”, essentially an adjutant) in Jiujiang, then known as Jiangzhou (Waley, 1949, pp 101-104). While there, he heard the playing of a pipa near the river and wrote his famous poem *The Ballad of the Pipa*. Bai Juyi was allowed to return to Chang’an in 819. He then served for periods of time as governor of Hangzhou and governor of Suzhou. Bai Juyi was a devoted Chan Buddhist and when he grew old, he retired to a Buddhist monastery near the Longmen caves famous for their colossal statues of Buddha (carved in 672 and 676). At the monastery he was able to compile a full collection of his poems before his death.

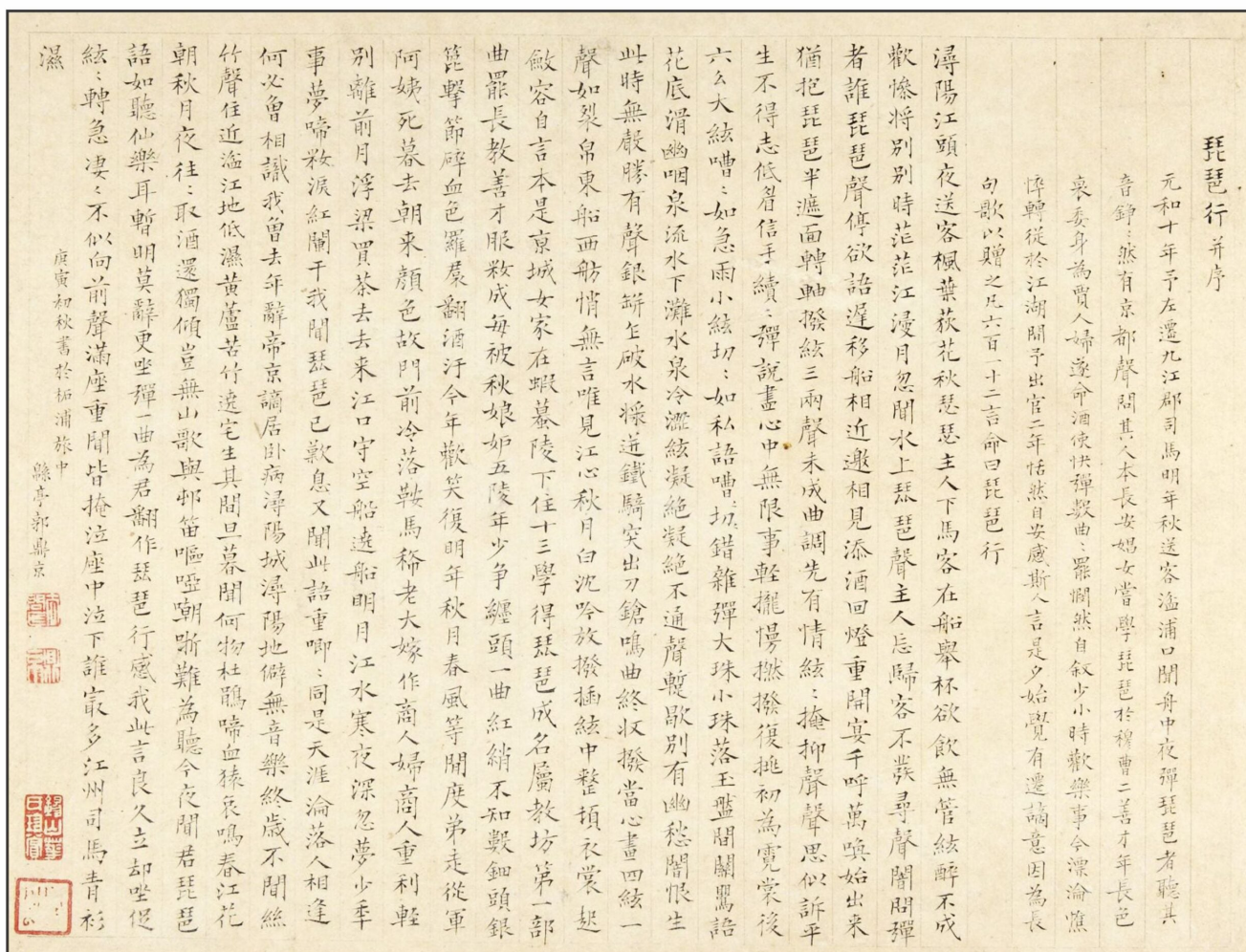
The following illustration shows in the upper left a statue of Bai Juyi at the Pipa Pavilion in Jiujiang, in the upper right a posthumous portrait of the poet by Chen Hongshou, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century painter, and at the bottom a view of the Longmen caves.



## Translating the Ballad of the Pipa

The poem is written in rhyming couplets with 88 lines each of

7 characters for a total 616 characters. It is preceded by a preface of 138 characters. The following is the poem in elegant regular-script calligraphy by Guo Dingjing (17<sup>th</sup> Century CE), now in the Princeton University Art Museum:



The Chinese text of the poem is readily available, as is an early English translation by Witter Bynner in his book *The Jade Mountain* (1929). Several other English translations have been published: Fuller, 2018, pp 283-289; Giles, 1888, pp 157-160; Harris, 2009, pp 21-26; Watson, 1984, pp 249-252; Xu et al, 1987, pp 292-296; Xu, 1994, pp 18-121; Yip, 2004, pp 288-297. Other translations are available on the internet: Phil Multic and Gan Siowck Lee.

The poem is difficult to translate since its sound patterns are as important as its meaning (Peng, 2023; Yu & Chang,

2024). This post will provide some sense of the Chinese sound patterns of Bai Juyi's poem with recitations by Pu Cunxin and accompanying pipa by Wu Yuxia, taken from a production by China Global Television Network. After Giles' s initial prose version, most English translations have use blank verse and made some attempt to imitate the sounds of the original. The translation of Xu Yuanzhong (1987, 1994) uses rhyming hexameter couplets. The translations in red accompanying the character-by-character transcriptions in this post are mine; they are heavily indebted to the other available translations.

## The Setting

Bai Juyi provides his poem with a preface that sets the time and the place. During his banishment to Jiujiang, while saying farewell to a visitor one evening on the banks of the Yangtze, he hears the music of a pipa. He finds out that the player had once been a famous musician and courtesan at the court in Chang'an. However, as she had grown old, her beauty had faded, and she had retired unhappily to the provinces. Bai Juyi is struck by the similarity of his fate to hers, and mourns their mutual fall from grace:

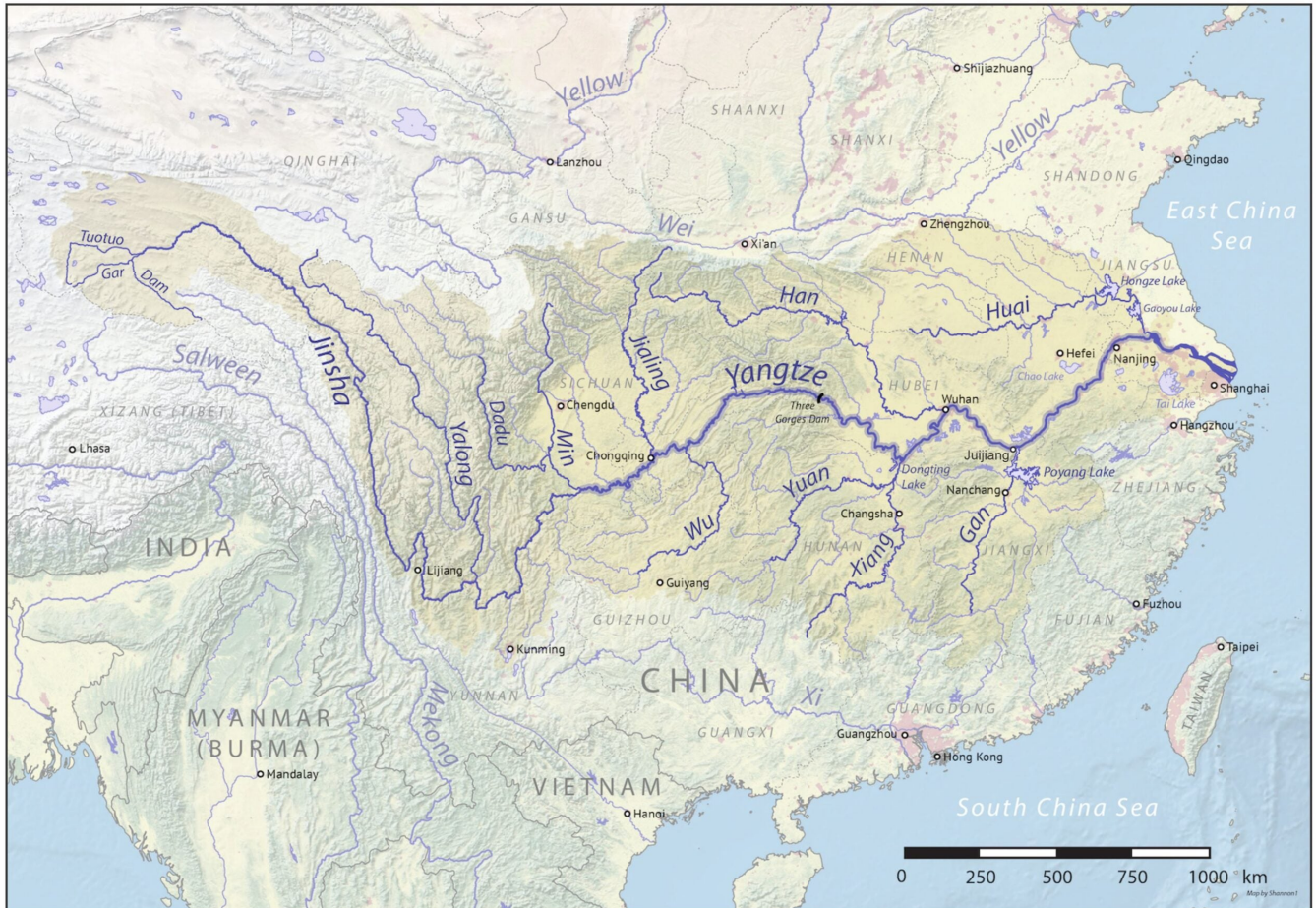
同	是	天	涯	淪	落	人
<i>tóng</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>yá</i>	<i>lún</i>	<i>luò</i>	<i>rén</i>
same	exist correct	sky heaven	border shore	perish fall	missing decline	person

**We are both lost at the edge of the world**

Moved by her story, he writes a long poem about the pipa player on the river far from Chang'an

Jiujiang, which had once been known as Jiangzhou, is a city on the Yangtze River. The region of the river near Jiujiang was sometimes known as the Xunyang River. The Yangtze River, the

third longest river in the world, is about 1.5 km wide at Jiujiang. Lake Pongyi, which was once called Pengli Lake, the largest freshwater lake in China, drains into the Yangtze at the eastern edge of the city:



Bai Juyi is throwing a farewell party for his departing friend on a small pleasure boat on the river. As shown in the following illustration from Hangzhou in eastern China, these small rowboats still provide spaces for celebrations on the waters. In Jiujiang it is autumn: the maple leaves have turned scarlet, and the plumes of the silver grass have reached their peak.



The following illustration shows a scroll with calligraphy of *Pipa Xing* by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) at the National Palace Museum, Taipei. At the top is the painting at the beginning of the scroll. In the middle is an enlargement of the boat with the poet and his guest listening to the pipa player. At the bottom is the beginning of the calligraphy in semi-cursive (or running) script. The first line (on the left) has the title:



琵琶行  
 浔陽江頭相送客，楓葉  
 荻花秋瑟瑟。主人下馬  
 客在船，舉酒欲飲無管  
 絃。醉不成飲慘將別，明  
 月，江浦自白。洲上雙  
 鷺聲，主人忘歸忘汝容。  
 五嶽夜行，胡調弄者誰  
 得，皇聲。名伶逐物，紅白  
 迹。邀相見，添酒四樽，重  
 開。漁子呼萬，淚如出來，於  
 於琵琶半遮面。轉軸撥  
 絃三兩聲，未成曲調先有  
 絃。掩抑聲，思以訴平生  
 不得志，低眉信手續，彈

Beginning of the Ballad

The initial lines of the ballad describe the autumn leaves and the silver grass. The farewell party begins but there is no music:

潯	陽	江	頭	夜	送	客
<i>Xúnyáng</i>		<i>jiāng</i>	<i>tóu</i>	<i>yè</i>	<i>sòng</i>	<i>kè</i>
Name of Yangtze River near Jiujiang		river	head (bank)	night	deliver see off	traveler visitor

楓	葉	荻	花	秋	索	索
<i>fēng</i>	<i>yè</i>	<i>dí</i>	<i>huā</i>	<i>qiū</i>	<i>suǒ</i>	<i>suǒ</i>
maple	leaf	reed silvergrass	flower	autumn	ask rustle	ask

主	人	下	馬	客	在	船
<i>zhǔ</i>	<i>rén</i>	<i>xià</i>	<i>mǎ</i>	<i>kè</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>chuán</i>
host	person	down	horse	traveler guest	at in	boat

舉	酒	欲	飲	無	管	絃
<i>jǔ</i>	<i>jiǔ</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐn</i>	<i>wú</i>	<i>guǎn</i>	<i>xián</i>
lift raise	wine	want desire	drink	no nothing	pipe flute	string chord

One night on the bank of the Xunyang River I bade farewell to a visitor  
 As autumn winds rustled through maple leaves and silver grass.  
 Host and guest had alighted from our horses and settled onto the boat.  
 But as we raised our wine-cups, we missed the music of flutes and strings.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/beginning-of-pipa-ballad.mp3>

The opening scene of the poem was portrayed in a silk-painting (34 x 41 cm) in an album by Qiu Ying (1494-1552) now at the Palace Museum in Beijing:



## The Pipa

As the party laments the absence of music, the sound of a pipa is heard across the water from another boat. The partygoers are completely entranced. They call out and ask the musician to play for them. She agrees but holds the pipa up to hide her face.

The pipa is a Chinese plucked string instrument very similar to the European lute (Wong, 2011). Both instruments have their origin in the Middle East. The pipa came to China via the Silk Roads during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The instrument typically has 4 strings though some old pipas have 5. Though early pitas have as few as 4 frets, modern pitas can have up to 30. Though occasionally round, the body of the pipa is usually pear-shaped. Traditionally the pipa was played for small intimate groups, but in modern times electronic amplification has allowed pipa virtuosos to play for larger audiences. The following illustration shows some ancient pitas and a photograph of Liu Dehai (1937-2020), one the greatest pipa players of recent times.



The following is a performance of “Xunyang Moonlit Night” (悬阳月夜, *Xúnyáng yuè yè*) by Liu Dehai.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Pipa-Moon-over-Xunyang-at-Night-x-.mp3>

### **The Music**

The poem then provides a bravura description of the music of the pipa:

大	絃	嘈	嘈	如	急	雨
<i>dà</i>	<i>xián</i>	<i>cáo</i>	<i>cáo</i>	<i>rú</i>	<i>kè</i>	<i>yǔ</i>
big large	chord string	noise tumult	noise tumult	like as	urgent impatient	rain
小	絃	切	切	如	私	語
<i>xiǎo</i>	<i>xián</i>	<i>qiè</i>	<i>qiè</i>	<i>rú</i>	<i>sī</i>	<i>yǔ</i>
small tiny	string	cut slice	cut slice	like as	secret private	speech language
嘈	嘈	切	切	錯	雜	彈
<i>cáo</i>	<i>cáo</i>	<i>qiè</i>	<i>qiè</i>	<i>cuò</i>	<i>zá</i>	<i>dàn</i>
				complex intricate	mix	play pluck
大	珠	小	珠	落	玉	盤
<i>dà</i>	<i>zhū</i>	<i>xiǎo</i>	<i>zhū</i>	<i>luò</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>pán</i>
big large	pearl	small tiny	pearl	fall drop	jade	plate tray

The low strings drummed like driven rain  
The high strings chimed like quiet whispers  
Drumming and chiming intermingled  
Large pearls and small pearls falling on jade.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/pipa-music-1.mp3>

These are some of the most famous lines of poetry in China.

They have been variously translated. The following version by Xu Yuan-Zhong (1984; 1987) uses the same rhyme scheme as the Chinese poem:

The thick strings loudly thrummed like the pattering  
rain  
The fine strings softly tinkled in murmuring strain.  
When mingling loud and soft notes were together played,  
'Twas like large and small pearls dropping on plate of  
jade.

Witter Bynner (1929) uses blank verse in his translation:

The large strings hummed like rain,  
The small strings whispered like a secret,  
Hummed, whispered—and then were intermingled  
Like a pouring of large and small pearls into a plate  
of jade.

And the following translation is by Isabel Wong (2011), a musician rather than a poet:

The lowest string hummed like pouring rain;  
The higher strings whispered as lover's pillow talk.  
Humming and whispering intermingled  
I, like the sound of big and small pearls gradually  
falling into a jade plate.

The architects of the Oriental Pearl Tower (1994) in Shanghai based their design on Bai Juyi's image of pearls falling onto jade:



Following the music of the pearls, the pipa provides the quiet song of an oriole, and then like a freezing brook the music slows to a stop:

間	關	鶯	語	花	底	滑
<i>jiān</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>yīng</i>	<i>yǔ</i>	<i>huā</i>	<i>dǐ</i>	<i>huá</i>
among between	close barrier	warbler oriole	speech language	flower blossom	background bottom	slip slide

幽	咽	泉	流	冰	下	難
<i>yōu</i>	<i>yàn</i>	<i>quán</i>	<i>liú</i>	<i>bīng</i>	<i>xià</i>	<i>nán</i>
hidden secluded	throat pass	spring fountain	flow stream	ice	below down	problem difficulty

冰	泉	冷	澀	絃	疑	絕
<i>bīng</i>	<i>quán</i>	<i>lěng</i>	<i>sè</i>	<i>xián</i>	<i>yí</i>	<i>jué</i>
ice	spring fountain	cold frosty	rough	string chord	suspect appear	despair cut off

疑	絕	不	通	聲	暫	歇
<i>yí</i>	<i>jué</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>tōng</i>	<i>sheng</i>	<i>zàn</i>	<i>xiē</i>
suspect appear	despair cut off	no(t)	pass open	voice sound	temporary	stop rest

The song of an oriole flowed out from under the blossoms  
 But the babble of a spring slowed as it turned to ice.  
 And like the freezing spring the notes faded away:  
 Unable to continue the music paused.

After a brief pause the pipa plays a wild crescendo that sounds like the charge of armored warriors, and then suddenly the player stops.

銀	瓶	乍	破	水	漿	迸
<i>yín</i>	<i>píng</i>	<i>zhà</i>	<i>pò</i>	<i>shuǐ</i>	<i>jiāng</i>	<i>bèng</i>
silver	vase bottle	sudden first	break	water river	broth	burst spurt

鐵	騎	突	出	刀	槍	鳴
<i>tiě</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>tū</i>	<i>chū</i>	<i>dāo</i>	<i>qiāng</i>	<i>míng</i>
iron weapon	horse(man) rider	sudden	out arise	knife	spear gun	cry out toll

曲	終	收	撥	當	心	畫
<i>qū</i>	<i>zhōng</i>	<i>shōu</i>	<i>bō</i>	<i>dāng</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>huà</i>
song melody	end finish	accept receive	poke stir	bell sound	heart center	paint draw

四	絃	一	聲	如	裂	帛
<i>sì</i>	<i>xián</i>	<i>yī</i>	<i>shēng</i>	<i>rú</i>	<i>liè</i>	<i>bó</i>
four	string chord	one	sound tone	as like	rend split	silk

Suddenly like a vase shattering the music releases  
 Clanging ironclad warriors and clashing swords and spears.  
 As the music ends, the plectrum strikes the pipa's heart:  
 Four strings in one sound like tearing silk

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/pipa-music-3.mp3>

### **The Life of the Pipa Player**

During the ensuing silence, the pipa player tells her story. She was once a highly acclaimed musician in Chang'an. Her beauty and her talent were the toast of the court.

一	曲	紅	綃	不	知	數
<i>yī</i>	<i>qū</i>	<i>hóng</i>	<i>xiāo</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>shù</i>
one single	song tune	red	silk	no(t)	know countless	number

鈿	頭	雲	篦	擊	節	碎
<i>diàn</i>	<i>tóu</i>	<i>yún</i>	<i>bì</i>	<i>jī</i>	<i>jié</i>	<i>suì</i>
inlaid filigree	head hair	cloud	comb	strike beat	holiday rhythm	break shatter

血	色	羅	裙	翻	酒	污
<i>xuè</i>	<i>sè</i>	<i>luó</i>	<i>qún</i>	<i>fān</i>	<i>jiǔ</i>	<i>wū</i>
blood red	color look	silk net	skirt	(over)turn tumble	wine spirits	smear stain

今	年	歡	笑	復	明	年
<i>jīn</i>	<i>nián</i>	<i>huān</i>	<i>xiào</i>	<i>fù</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>nián</i>
today now	(new)year age	joy pleasure	laughter	again repeat	bright next	(new)year age

For a single song I received countless bolts of scarlet silk,  
Combs inlaid with silver for playing out the changing rhythms  
My skirts of blood-red silk were stained with spilled wine  
Joy and laughter continued from one year into the next.

This description of the life of a successful musician and courtesan in Chang'an has been translated in many ways. One version is especially vivid. In 1917, Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

published *Three Cantos* in *Poetry Magazine*, and again in the American edition of his book *Lustra*. This was the beginning of a set of *Cantos* that ultimately numbered 109. These initial three cantos – often called the Ur-Cantos – were extensively revised when Pound published *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925. Much of the original Canto II is no longer evident in the new sequence. The general theme of Ur-Canto II was the “poetics of loss” (Carr, 2018). Pound describes the ruins of the ducal palace in Mantua, and mourns the loss of most of the music of the troubadours. And then he provides a brief description of the setting of Bai Juyi’s poem and the words of pipa player:

Yin-yo laps in the reeds, my guest departs,  
The maple leaves blot up their shadows,  
The sky is full of autumn,  
We drink our parting in saki.  
Out of the night comes troubling lute music,  
And we cry out, asking the singer’s name,  
And get this answer:

“Many a one  
Brought me rich presents; my hair was full of jade,  
And my slashed skirts, drenched in expensive dyes,  
Were dipped in crimson, sprinkled with rare wines.  
I was well taught my arts at Ga-ma-rio,  
And then one year I faded out and married.”  
The lute-bowl hid her face.

We heard her weeping.

It was not until much later that Pound’s allusion to Bai Juyi was recognized (e.g. in Weinberger, 2007, p 128; discussed on the Pound Cantos Project website)

Pound had no knowledge of the Chinese language. In his book *Cathay* (1915), he “translated” a set of 15 Chinese poems based on the notes of Ernest Fenollosa who had studied Chinese poetry with the Japanese professors Mori and Ariga. Despite his lack of training in Chinese, Pound intuitively grasped the essence of the poems (see discussion by Yip, 1969). The brief

excerpt from Ur-Canto II is typical of his translations. The meaning is clear though the words are not the same as in the original.

In Pound's poem, *Yin-yo* is the Japanese transliteration of Chinese characters for the Xunyang River (Romaji, *Jinyō-kō*), and *Gamaryo* is the Japanese version of 鵝山, which literally translated is "Toad Hill" (Fuller, 2017, p 286). This is the region in Chang'an city near the burial site of the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE). In Bai Juyi's poem, the pipa player says that this is where she grew up (and learned how to play the pipa).

To return to the poem: The pipa player's high life did not last forever. Her brother went off to the army, her mother died, her looks faded, and she was no longer as sought after as before. She married a tea-merchant and came to live in Jiangzhou. Her husband is usually away on business. Alone on her boat she plays the pipa and remembers happier days.

Listening to her story Bai Juyi feels an intense sympathy: he too has fallen from grace and now lives alone far away from the capital. The musician plays a final intense song:

淒	淒	不	似	向	前	聲
<i>qī</i>	<i>qī</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>sì</i>	<i>xiàng</i>	<i>qián</i>	<i>shēng</i>
sadness		no(t)	like	to(ward)	former	sound
sorrow			resemble		past	tone

滿	座	重	聞	皆	掩	泣
<i>mǎn</i>	<i>zuò</i>	<i>zhòng</i>	<i>wén</i>	<i>jiē</i>	<i>yǎn</i>	<i>qì</i>
full	seat	repeat	smell	all	close	weep
packed	base	then	hear	every	shut	tear

就	中	泣	下	誰	最	多
<i>jiù</i>	<i>zhōng</i>	<i>qì</i>	<i>xià</i>	<i>shuí</i>	<i>zuì</i>	<i>duō</i>
At once	middle	weep	down	who	most	many
with regard	among	tear	below			

江	州	司	馬	青	衫	濕
<i>jiāng</i>	<i>zhōu</i>	<i>sī</i>	<i>mǎ</i>	<i>qīng</i>	<i>shān</i>	<i>shī</i>
river	province	manage	horse	blue	gown	wet
	Jiangzhou	adjutant		green	shirt	moist

Its deep sadness was unlike any previous tune  
 All who heard closed their eyes and wept  
 Among them the one who cried the most  
 Was the Jiangzhou adjutant: his blue gown wet with tears

We do not know the music that Bai Juyi found so moving. The following is a piece entitled *Night Thoughts* composed and played by Wu Man (1963- ), who studied with Liu Dehai.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Wu-Man-performs-Night-Thoughts-x.mp3>

Wu Man's composition derives from a famous poem by Li Bai, who spent much of his later life in exile from the capital. The following translation is by Xu Yuan-Zhong (1984, p 125).

□□□

### **A Tranquil Night**

□□□□□

Before my bed a pool of light

□□□□□

Is it hoarfrost upon the ground

□□□□□

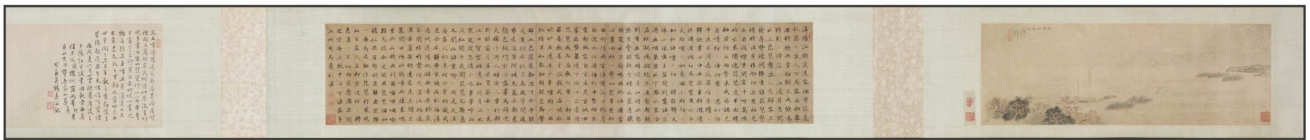
Eyes raised I see the moon so bright

□□□□□

Head bent in homesickness I'm drowned

### **The Life of the Poem**

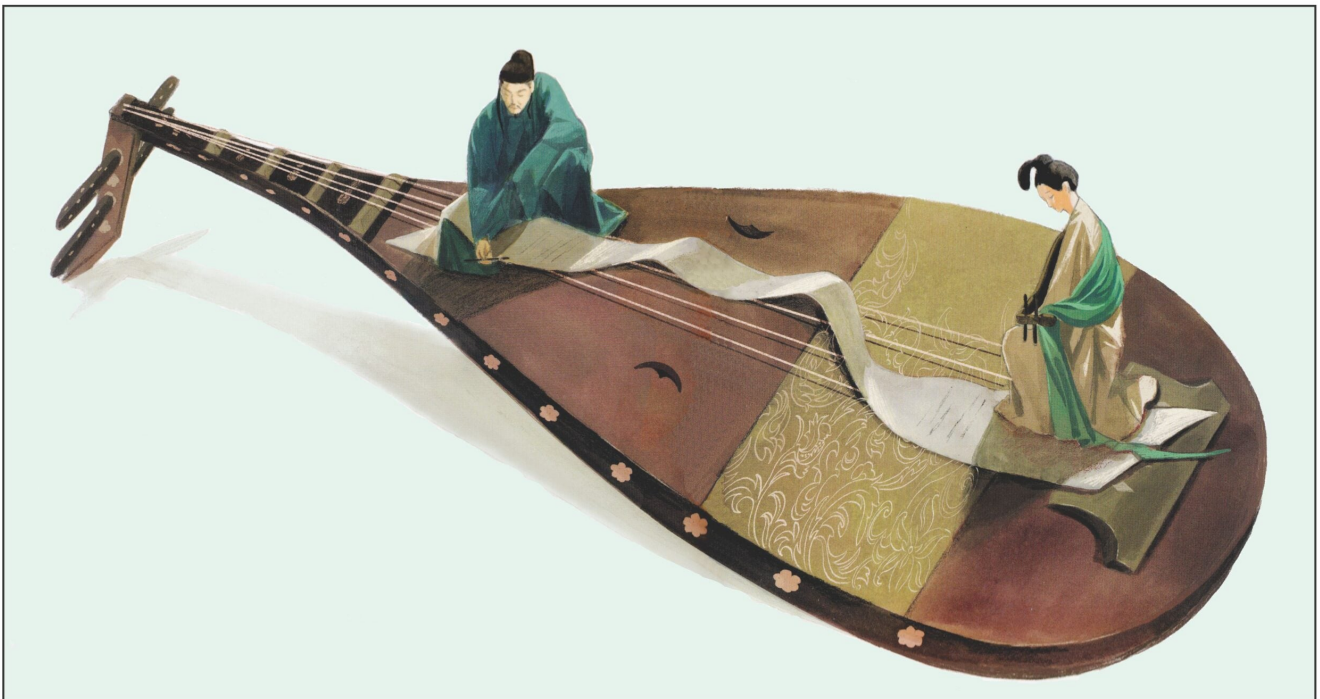
Bai Juyi's poem was popular among calligraphers and artists. The following is a scroll by Wen Boren (1502-1575) now in the Cleveland Museum.



And the next illustration is a painting by Lu Zhi (1495-1576), from a calligraphy scroll now in the National Museum of Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution. The boats near the lower shore are as lost as the poet and the pipa player:



And the following is an illustration by Hua Zhangyi from a retelling of Bai Juyi's poem (Liu Yang, & Hua Zhangyi, 2024) for children: the poet dedicates his poem to the pipa player.



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# **Silk Roads: Paths for the Faithful**

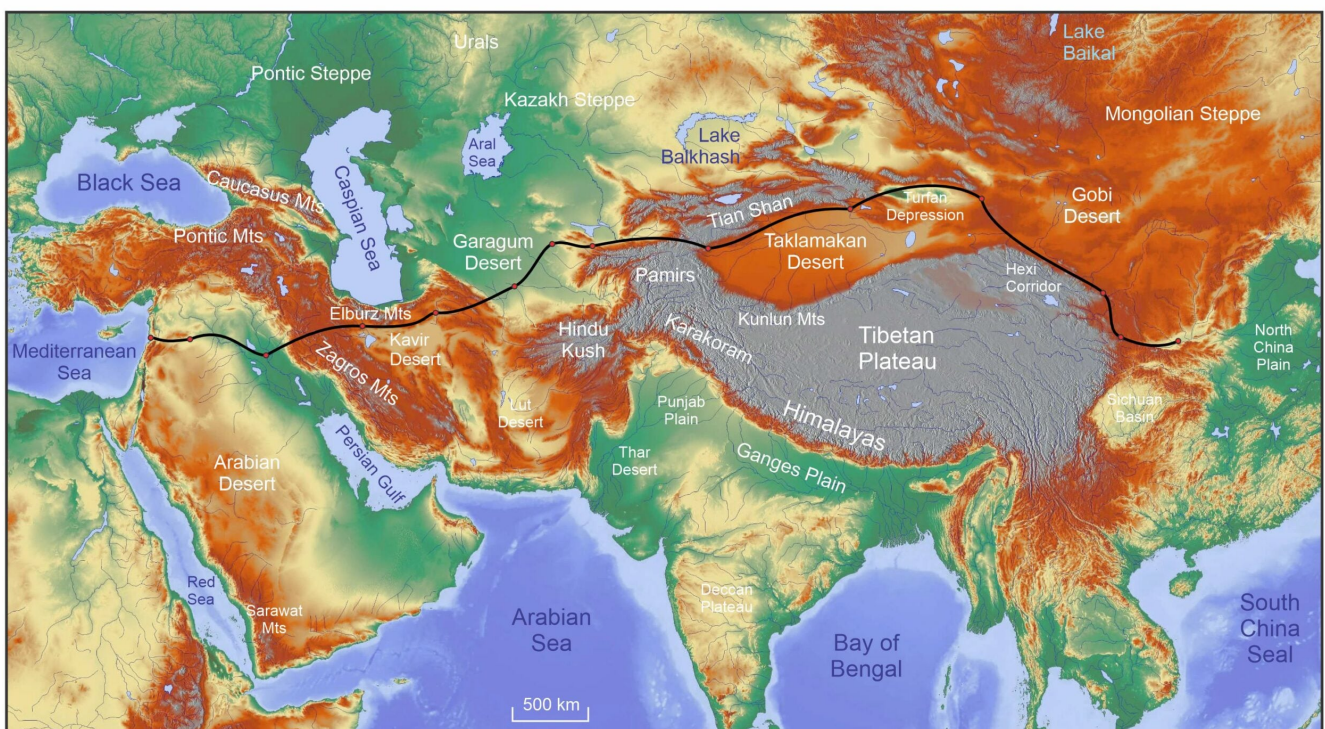
The Silk Roads were overland routes connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea, which allowed the trading of silk, paper, gold, jewels, horses, and other goods. These began during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE at the time of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Dynasty in the East. The Silk Roads remained active until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE, when they were largely replaced by maritime trading routes. At present they are mainly used for archeological research and tourism. The illustration shows a modern camel caravan in the desert near Dunhuang. As well as trade goods, the Silk Roads facilitated the movement of religious ideas. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam followed the Silk Roads into China. Mithraism, Manichaeism and Islam spread into Europe.

## **Central Asia**

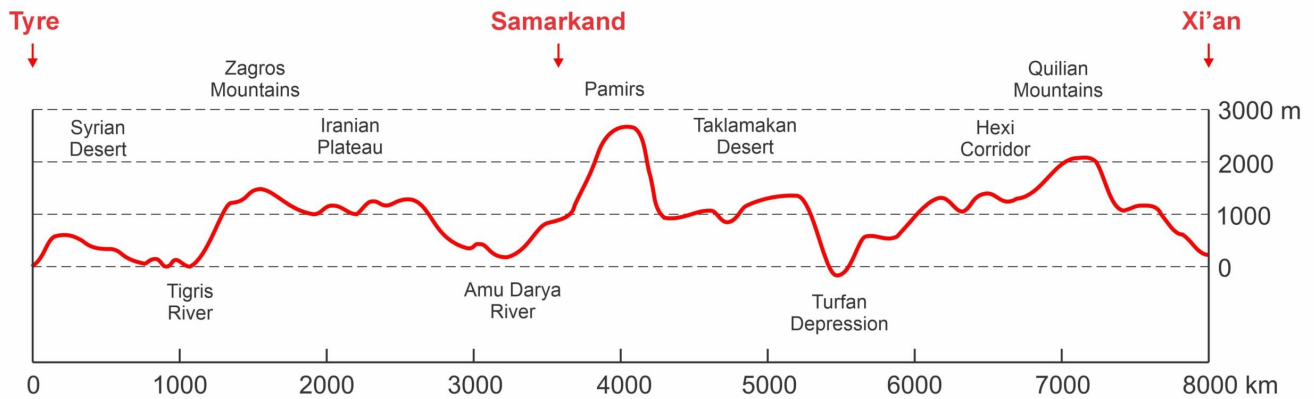
A map of the present political boundaries in central Asia will allow us to get our bearings:



The following map shows the topography of the region and traces one of the many possible Silk Roads from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Tyre on the Mediterranean.



The following diagram, modified from Wood (2002), shows the changes in altitude (in meters above sea level) over the journey. It also notes the main mountains that are traversed, the deserts that are crossed and the main rivers on the way.

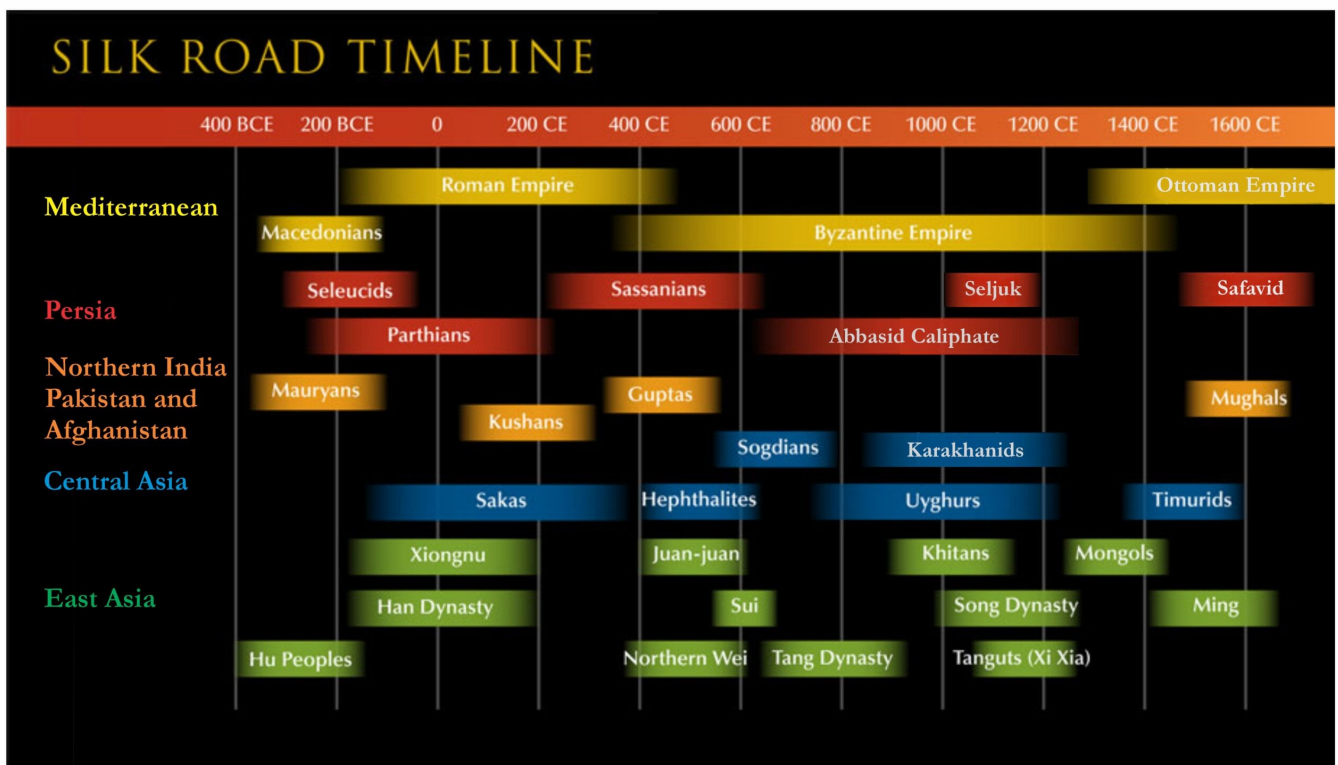


The Silk Roads spanned some 8000 km and were active for about 1700 years. They are described in multiple recent books (Frankopan, 2016; Hansen, 2017; Millward, 2013, Torr, 2018, Whitfield, 2024; Wood 2002). A striking TV series from Japan can be downloaded from archive.org. The following two maps by Simeon Natchev show the Silk Roads at two different points in time: the first map when trade began between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, and the second map when the Silk Roads were at their height during the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE with the Tang Dynasty in China and the Abbasid Caliphate in the West. The first map also shows the maritime routes connecting China, India and Europe, and the monsoon winds that facilitate them. These sea connections are sometimes considered the “Golden Road” (Dalrymple, 2025, pp 4-5).



using the maritime routes. Vasco da Gama made his first voyage from Portugal to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. The overland Silk Roads soon became used only for local trade, and desert sands reclaimed many of the ancient trading posts (Beckwith, 2009, pp 232-262; Torr, 2018, pp 105-126).

Many different empires established themselves for periods of time in central Asia (Beckwith, 2009). The following diagram, modified from Waugh (2009), shows some of the most important. Though having its capital in the east, the Mongol Empire (1206-1368 CE) extended all the way to Europe.



## The Library at Dunhuang

Since it will play a role in much of what will be said about the movement of religions along the Silk Roads, we shall briefly mention the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (洞, dūn, tumulus/mound + 黄, huáng, shining/brilliant). Dunhuang, located on an oasis containing Crescent Lake and is surrounded by sand dunes, was an important stop on the Silk Road from the time of

its beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (Hansen, 2017, pp 288-335). Nearby is the Jade Gate – an opening in the Great Wall of China that allows entrance to the Hexi Corridor connecting the cities of Chang'an and Luoyang to the deserts of Xinjiang in Western China.

Buddhist monks first arrived in Dunhuang in the early centuries of the common era. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE, they began carving caves into of the sandstone cliffs 25 km southeast of the city. These Mogao Caves – “Caves of a Thousand Buddhas” – are a system of about 500 separate temples decorated with wall paintings and sculptures and connected by intricate stairs and platforms. By the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the monk Hong Bian had made the Three Realms Monastery near the caves into an important center of learning. When he died, his statue was placed in Cave 17. On the wall behind him were painted two banyan trees with a water bottle and a cloth bag hanging on the branches. Under one tree an acolyte holds a fan; under the other, a disciple holds the monk's staff.

In 1002 CE the Karakhanids spread into the Taklamakan Desert and destroyed the Buddhist City of Khotan (Sinor, 1990). Though they had once followed both Buddhism and Christianity, the Karakhanids had converted to Islam in 934 CE and considered all other faiths as infidels. Fearful that Dunhuang might also be destroyed, the monks put all their treasured manuscripts and paintings in Cave 17 with the statue of Hong Bian, and sealed the cave off from the outside world (Rong, 1999).

In 1900, while sweeping sand from the temple floor of Cave 17, a Daoist monk, a custodian for the caves, realized that the rear wall was false and discovered that the sealed-off chamber contained piles of ancient manuscripts. In sum there were about 50,000 manuscripts and other objects in the cave, which became known as the “Library Cave.” In 1907 the newly discovered treasure trove was examined by the explorer Aurel

Stein, who purchased many of the manuscripts for the British Museum (Morgan & Walters, 2012). Paul Pelliot visited in 1908 and bought a set of manuscripts for the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

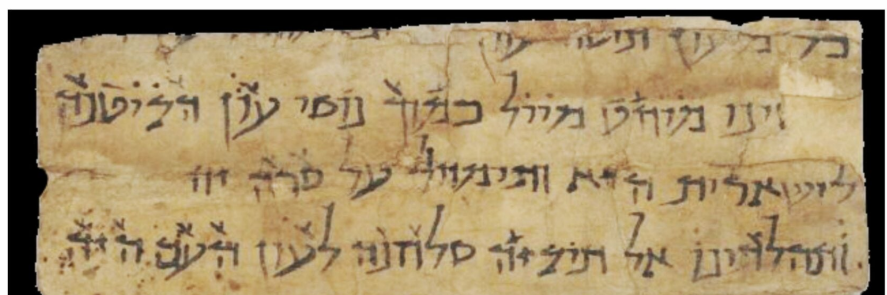
The following illustration shows on the left the entrance to the Mogao Caves. Most of the building is from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. On the upper right is the statue of Hong Bian in the Library Cave. On the lower right is an impression of what the cave must have looked like in 1900.



Most of the manuscripts found at Mogao concerned Buddhism and were written in Chinese. However, some of the manuscripts related to other religions such as Manichaeism, Christianity, Judaism and Daoism. Many ancient languages other than Chinese were also represented: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Sogdian, Hebrew, and Old Uyghur.

## **Judaism**

One of the manuscripts from the Library Cave is a Hebrew prayer for forgiveness (*selihah*). At one time it was folded up, perhaps so that it could be carried easily in a small container as an amulet to ward off evil. The text does not directly quote scripture but is very biblical in its wording. The following illustration shows the complete manuscript on the upper left. The photograph has been lightened to facilitate reading. On the upper right is an enlargement of the first 4 lines together with a transcription (Koller, 2024). The English translation of these 4 lines is below together with a quotation form the book of Numbers showing a similar style.



כל מיעון תיסר עון  
 [נק]ינו מיחט מײל כמוד גוסי עון הבײטנה  
 לישארית הזא ותימחל על סנה זה ]  
 ותהלתינו אל תיבזה סלחנה לעון העם הזה

every abode(?). Remove iniquity  
 we are clean of sin! Who is a God like you, who bears iniquity? Look please  
 at this remnant, and pardon for ... this defection  
 Do not spurn our praise. Forgive please, the iniquity of this people

**Compare: Numbers 14:19**

Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people  
 according unto the greatness of thy mercy

The manuscript is dated to around 800 CE. This and a few other Hebrew manuscripts from other stations on the Silk Road

suggest that Jewish merchants were involved in the trade between China and the West. There may therefore have been Jews in China during the Tang dynasty or even earlier. A group of Jews in Kaifeng in central China petitioned the emperor to build a synagogue in 1163 CE (Berg, 2024). Their ancestors may have originally travelled to China over the Silk Roads. Their descendants still live today in China.

## **Zoroastrians**

The religion of Zoroastrianism was established toward the end of the second Millennium BCE, and became the state religion of the main Persian Empires: the Achaemenid (559-331 BCE), Parthian (559 BCE – 331 BCE) and Sasanian (224–651 CE). Zoroastrian priests were generally called *magi*.

### **(i) Biblical Magi**

The Gospel of Matthew relates how three *magi* (translated as “wise men”) came from the East to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

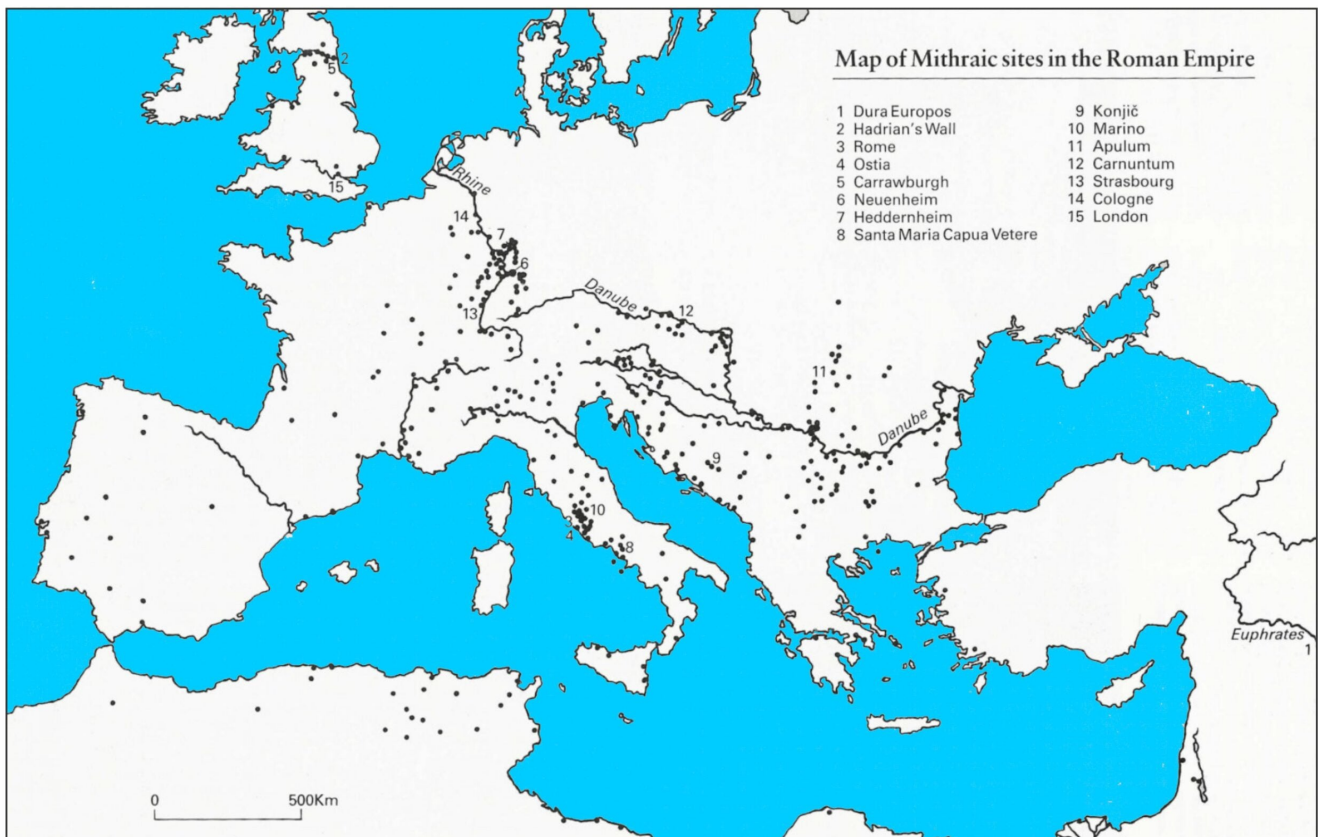
Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (*Matthew 2: 1-2*)

These wise men may have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. If so, they would have travelled along the Silk Roads. The illustration below shows a mosaic representation of the magi from the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuove in Ravenna (565 CE). The magi are shown in typical Persian clothing: flowing capes and Phrygian caps.



## (ii) Mithraism

Mithraism was a Roman Mystery Cult focused on the God Mithras, one of the many Gods (*yazata*) worshipped in Zoroastrianism. The cult involved secret meetings in underground temples called Mithraea, archeological evidence for which has been found throughout the Roman Empire:



Mithraism was active from about 50 CE to about 300 CE. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE Christianity was mandated as the sole state religion in the Roman Empire (Edict of Thessalonica, 380 CE). Thereafter Mithraism essentially vanished.

The Mithraeum was set up for a communal feast for the initiates, who were almost always men and mainly soldiers. One essential part of the temple was a fresco or sculpture of Mithras slaying a bull – the “tauroctony.” No one really understands what this sacrifice means. It might have something to do with redemption and salvation, much like the crucifix in a Christian church.

The iconography was stable across its many different locations. In the center, the God Mithras slays the bull. Above are representations of the sun and the moon, and below the bull is attacked by a crab, a snake and a dog. The following illustration shows a tauroctony from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE unearthed from the Villa Borghese in Rome:



The cult was originally believed to have been imported into the Roman Empire by soldiers who had fought in the Parthian wars, a series of conflicts occurring from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and who had thereby been exposed to the Gods of Zoroastrianism. However, there are relatively few Mithraea in the Eastern reaches of the Empire. And there is no evidence that the worship of Mithra in Persia involved any of the apparent rituals that occurred in the Roman Mithraea. Some have therefore suggested that the cult was a Roman invention (e.g. Stoll, 2022). Indeed, some of the earliest Mithraea are concentrated near the city of Rome (Chalupa, 2016), Nevertheless, the cult was devoted to one of the Zoroastrian gods, and most of the early descriptions of the cult acknowledged its Persian origins (Boyce et al, 1991, pp 468-490).

One possibility is that Roman Mithraism allowed its cult members to embrace an “otherness” and make themselves distinct from their fellows:

the imagery of Mithras dressed in the Persian garment and soft shoes with Phrygian cap on top of his curly hair alluded to the Greek topoi of Persians who were Rome's 'exotic other' and 'fiercest foe'. Such an iconography enabled the Roman Mithraists to depict their god as a foreign deity and to identify themselves as those Roman elites who had the knowledge of worshipping the foreign god. The Oriental imagery of Mithras created a boundary for Mithraic brotherhood and distinguished the cultic community from other forms of religiosity and religious groups in the wider cultural and religious boundaries of Rome. Whatever its origin, the Roman mystery cult of Mithras strongly relied on Roman attitudes and romantic visions of Persia and the Parthians in particular. (Mahzjoo, 2024).

### **(iii) Sogdians**

At the time when trading was at its height, the main middlemen on the Silk Roads were Sogdian merchants (Pin Lyu, 2024). Sogdia was the name for the area of land between the Amu Darya (or Oxus) and the Sri Darya Rivers. Its capital was Samarkand. The following map shows the location of Sogdia in Central Asia. The black lines show several of the Silk Roads:

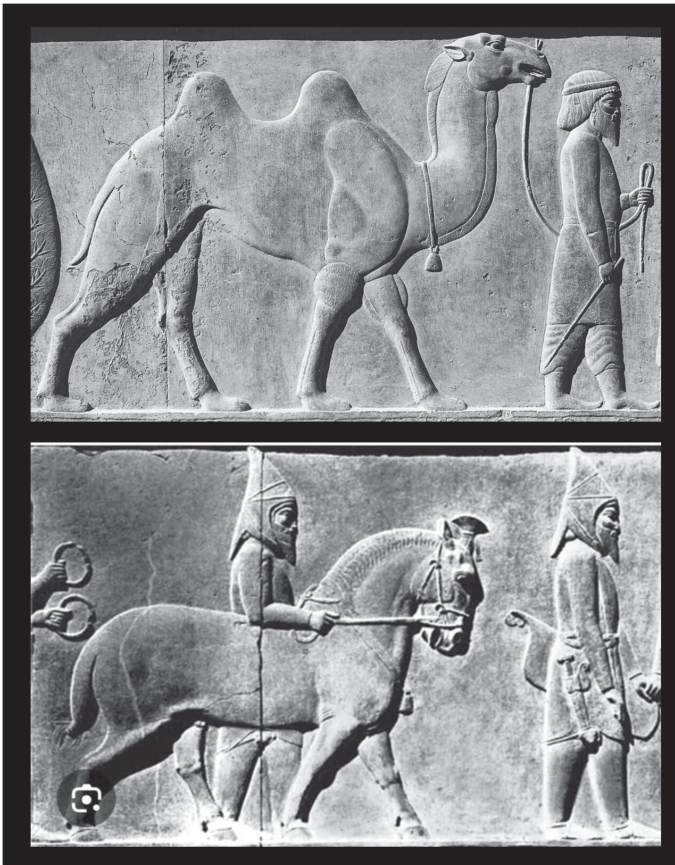


The Sogdians were descendants of the ancient Scythians. At the time of the Achaemenid Empire, when they were known as Saka, they paid tribute to the Persian Emperor in the form of camels and horses.

During the time of the Sasanian Empire, Sogdia was at the eastern limits of the empire and practiced Zoroastrianism (Grenet, 2015). When the empire was invaded by the Muslims, these frontier regions were able to maintain their religious practices for several centuries.

During the Abbasid Caliphate the Sogdians traded extensively with the Chinese and established large merchant colonies in cities of northern China.

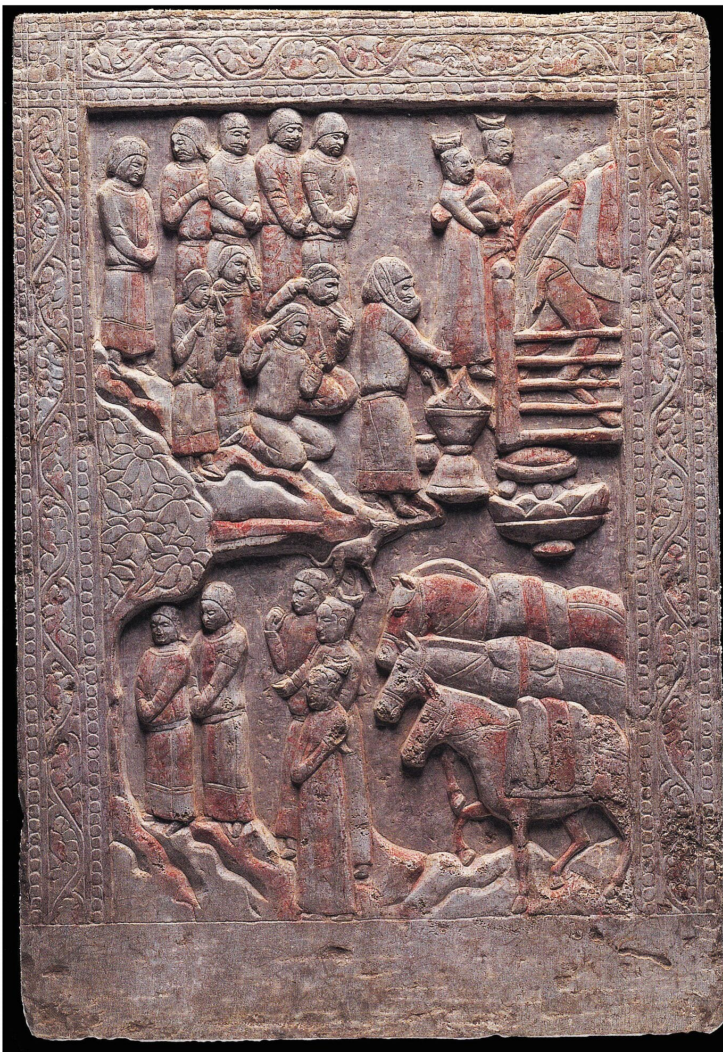
The following illustration shows on the left two bas-relief representations of Saka bringing camels and horses to the Emperor at Persepolis (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). On the right is a Tang dynasty porcelain statuette showing a group of Sogdian musicians on a camel. This was found in Xi'an and dates to 723 CE.



Zoroastrian funerary practices mandated that the corpse should not be allowed to pollute either the air or the land. Neither cremation nor burial was possible. Zoroastrians typically laid the corpse out on a stone bed and allowed vultures to strip the flesh from the bones. In China, Zoroastrians compromised by constructing closed tombs within which the deceased was laid out on a funerary couch and allowed to decay above ground. If the deceased was a rich merchant, this funerary bed could be quite ornate. The following illustration shows on the left a carving from a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Zoroastrian funerary couch in Northern China, now in the Miho Museum in Japan. The upper half of the carving shows a Zoroastrian priest caring for the sacred fire during the funeral service for the deceased. He is recognized by the face mask that prevents him from contaminating the fire with his mortal breath. The mourners are behind the priest. A camel is recognized to the right of the sacred fire, and several pack horses are seen below. The upper right of the illustration shows how the complete

funerary couch was set up.

The lower right shows a small ceramic statuette of a Zoroastrian priest with a face mask. Although he is sometimes considered a camel driver, he is more likely a priest tending to the sacred fire. The face mask is just too typical. The statuette was found in northern China and dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE.



## **Buddhism**

Gautama Buddha lived in the northeastern region of India in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. After his death his followers taught the new dharma throughout the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan

Empire (320 BCE–185 BCE) expanded to incorporate Greco-Persian lands in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ashoka (304–232 BCE), the third Mauryan Emperor, promoted Buddhist thought throughout his domain.

### **(i) Gandhara**

Few representations of the Buddha occur from the first centuries of the new religion. Since the teaching proclaimed that the everyday world was transient and misleading, artistic representations may have been considered unworthy. This changed when the faithful encountered artists of the Greco-Persian world in a region of northwest India called Gandhara. Realistic sculptures of the Buddha and his disciples proliferated. The following illustrations shows sculpture of the Buddha made in the Gandhara from the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE:



### **(ii) Colossal Buddhas**

As their religion spread along the Silk Roads, Buddhist monks

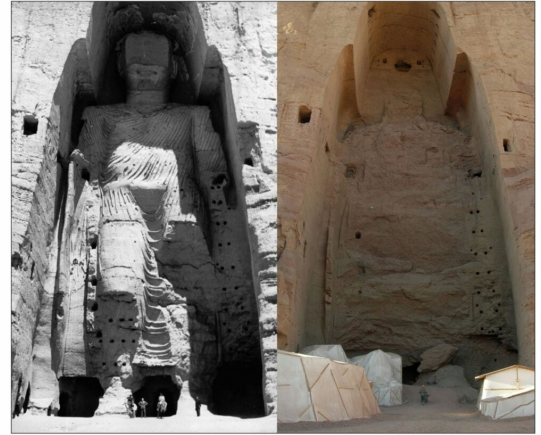
began to carve statues of the Buddha out of the sandstone cliffs along the route. Some of these assumed colossal sizes (Wong, 2019). The earliest large Buddhas, up to 15 m tall, were carved at the Yungang Grottoes near Datong in Northern China beginning in 465 CE. Colossal seated Buddhas, 33 and 23 m tall, were carved in the Mogao caves near Dunhuang in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE.

And around 600 CE, in Bamiyan, located in present-day Afghanistan, 130 km northwest of Kabul, two huge standing Buddhas were carved, one 38 m and the other 55 m tall. Since details such as the folds in the robe and the facial features could not be carved in the sandstone, these were added to the rough-hewn statues using stucco. The arms were constructed using stucco on wooden armatures. Over the years much of the stucco work eroded away leaving the large ungainly limestone forms.

The people in the area when the statues were carved were Hephthalites. These people followed several different religions (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism) and tolerated the work of the Buddhist monks.

In 2001 the Taliban enforced a Muslim edict forbidding artistic representations of human beings. The two Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.

The following illustration shows at the top a panorama of the Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley before their destruction. The lower left of the illustration shows a close-up of the larger of the two Buddhas. The lower right compares before and after its destruction.



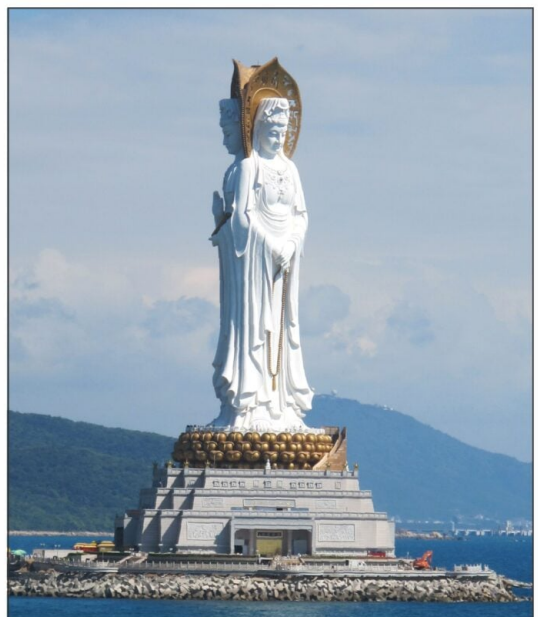
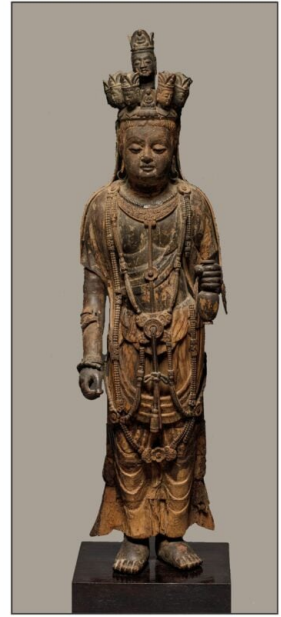
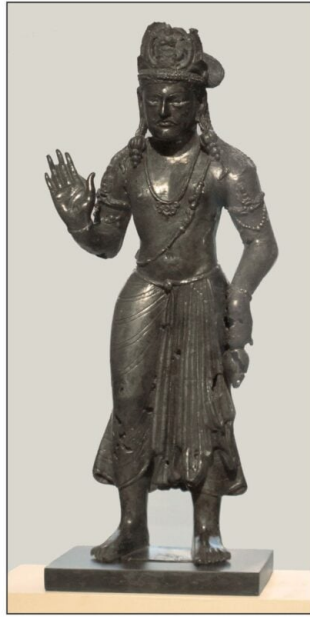
### (iii) Avalokitesvara

Avalokitesvara was the bodhisattva of compassion. His name in Sanskrit means “he who looks down,” i.e. he who considers the concerns of the faithful. As Avalokitesvara travelled along the Silk Roads to China he slowly changed gender from male to female (Stein, 1986; Suebsantiwongse, 2025; Yu, 2001). In China she became known as *Guānshìyīn*, (觀世音, look/observe+people/world +sound/voice: “the one who perceives the cries of the world”) or Guanyin. As the deity moved to Japan, she became known as Kannon, and veered back toward masculinity.

Avalokitesvara characteristically holds a lotus flower and sometimes prayer bead. Sometimes he or she has multiple heads which make her vision and hearing more acute. Occasionally the deity has multiple arms the better to aid those in need. As Guanyin, she often carries a vase of pure water to relieve suffering.

The following illustration shows the transformation of Avalokitesvara. In order from left to right and then from up to down:

1. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE
2. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE
3. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Northern China, 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE
4. Wood, Avalokitesvara with multiple heads, Northern China 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
5. Wood, Avalokitesvara "seated at royal ease," China, 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
6. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Nepal, 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE
7. Gilded Wood, Kannon, Japan 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
8. Porcelain, Guanyin, China 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE
9. Jade, Guanyin, China, 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE
10. Titanium callosal statue (78 m) Nanshan Guanyin, Hainan Island, 21<sup>st</sup> Century CE



#### **(iv) The Diamond Sutra**

As Buddhism travelled along the Silk Roads to China, the sacred texts began to be translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. One of the most important translators was Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) who was born in Kuqa on the northern edge of the Taklamakan desert. His father was a Buddhist monk from Kashmir. Around 400 CE Kumarajiva travelled to Chang'an where he wrote most of his translations of the Buddhist literature.

The original Diamond Sutra was likely composed shortly after the time of Gautama Buddha's life in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. However, it was not formally written down in Sanskrit until the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE. The sutra narrates a dialogue between the Buddha and his elderly disciple Subhūti about the nature of reality and how to attain the wisdom that would release one from suffering. The world is transient and illusory; one must release oneself from any attachments; one must seek emptiness. The following is from Red Pine's introduction to his translation of the sutra (2001):

following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own, and every-thing is therefore empty, and this emptiness is the true nature of reality. Later, when the Buddha began teaching people to view emptiness itself as empty and to put the emptiness of emptiness to work in the liberation of all beings, few disciples grasped this new teaching, which he called the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom beyond wisdom.

One of the most important discoveries in the Mogao Caves near

Dunhuang was a woodblock-printed copy of Kumarajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra. The pages were printed by Wang Jie in 868 CE, probably in Sichuan, and then pasted together to form a scroll about 5 m long. The colophon gives the date and notes that the sutra was being made freely available to all who wished to read. This is the oldest printed book of which we have a copy.

The frontispiece of the scroll shows a woodblock drawing of the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas, and supernatural guardians. In the lower left is the disciple Subhūti. The following illustration shows this print together with details of the Buddha and his disciple redrawn by Zhao Ming An.



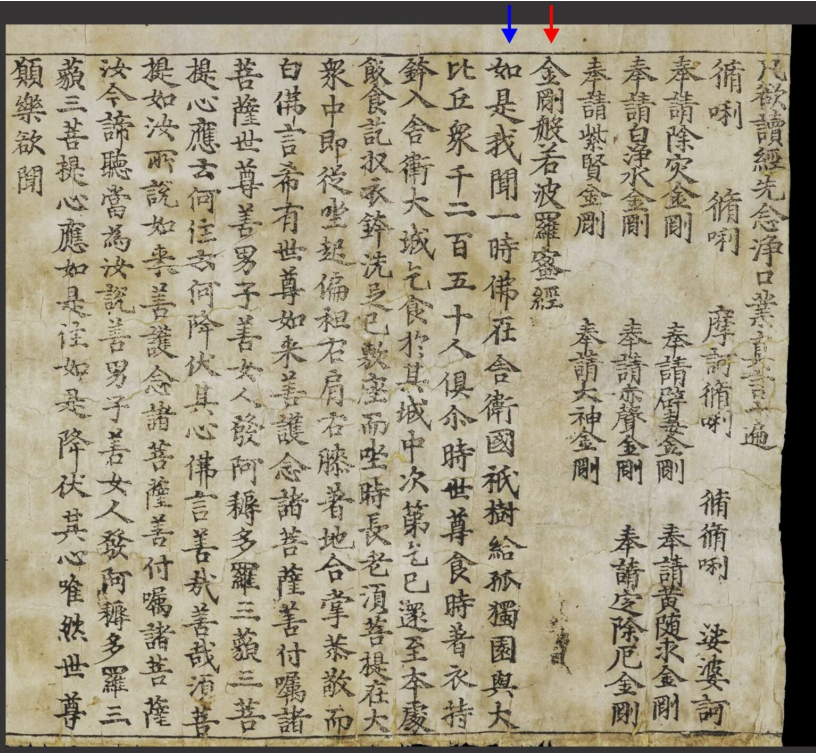
The following illustration shows the first page of text in the scroll along with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first few words of the sutra:

→ 金	剛	般若	波羅蜜	經
jīn	gāng	bōrě	bōluómì	jīng
precious	strong	prajna	paramita	sacred text
diamond	wisdom	perfection		sutra
Diamond Sutra of Perfect Wisdom				

→ 如	是	我	聞。	
rú	shì	wǒ	wén	
as	true	I	hear	
thus		we	listen	
一	時	佛	在	舍
yī	shí	fó	zài	shè
one	time	Buddha	be at	house
once			hotel	
衛	國	獨	園。	
wèi	guó	dú	yuán	
protect	country	alone	garden	park

Thus I have heard. Once, the Buddha was staying in the Anathapindada's Park



And the following illustration shows the last page of the scroll which includes the famous verse that the Buddha uses to describe the transience of the world. On the left, a character-by-character translation is followed by the English version of Red Pine, based on both the Sanskrit and the Chinese versions of the sutra (2001):

一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。
yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ
everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma
如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影
rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng
as dream illusion bubble shadow like phantom	as dream illusion bubble shadow like phantom	as dream illusion bubble shadow like phantom	as dream illusion bubble shadow like phantom	as dream illusion bubble shadow like phantom
如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。
rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn
as dew also as lightning like mist like	as dew also as lightning like mist like	as dew also as lightning like mist like	as dew also as lightning like mist like	as dew also as lightning like mist like
應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀
yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān
answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see observe	answer create as right see observe	answer create as right see observe	answer create as right see observe

As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space  
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble  
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning  
view all created things like this.

## Christianity

During the first 4 centuries of Christianity, the nature of Jesus as both God and Man was extensively discussed. One position was that Jesus was of two distinct natures – *dyophysite*; another was that his two aspects were conjoined as one – *miophysite*; and yet another was that his Jesus became fully divine – *monophysite*. Though these old distinctions are almost impossible to understand in modern times, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE they were matters of life and death. The Church of the East (also known as the Assyrian Church) distinguished itself as *miophysite*, and became separate from the *dyophysite* Byzantine and Roman Churches in 451CE. These latter churches condemned as heretical the *monophysite* teachings of Nestorius, a theologian in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. The Church of the East is often known as the “Nestorian Church,” although its views on

the nature of Jesus actually differed from those of Nestorius (Brock, 1996). Although the Church of the East remained separate from the Western Churches for many centuries, it has now established communal relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

### **(i) The Dunhuang Gloria**

Among the manuscripts found in the Mogao caves was a Chinese Christian Hymn loosely based on the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest), also known as the Greater Doxology (words of praise), especially the version used in the Church of the East. The manuscript was probably written about 800 CE and provides clear evidence that missionaries of the Church of the East had travelled on the Silk Roads to China and were actively proselytizing there centuries before the Jesuits first arrived in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Moule, 1930, Teng Li, 2024).

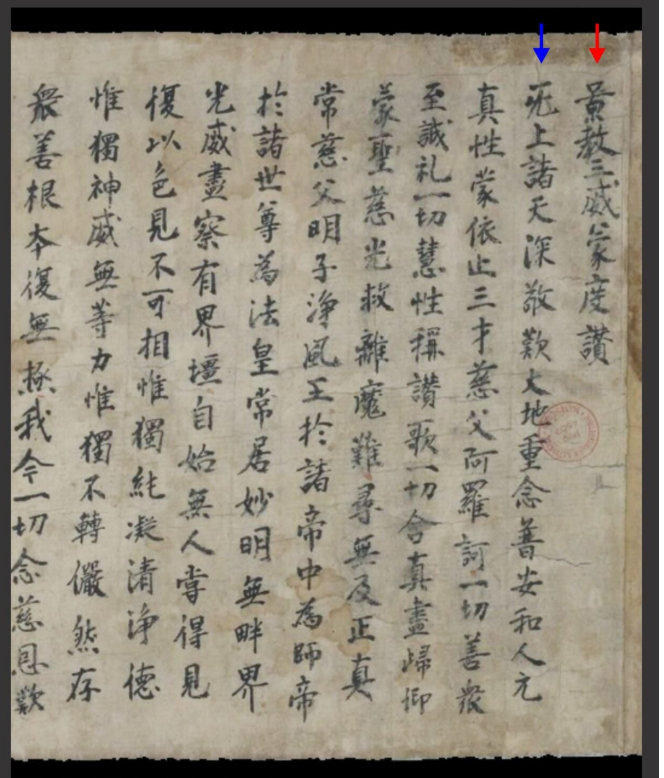
The hymn has 11 verses each containing 4 lines of length 7 syllables, in keeping with Chinese poetic practice. The following illustration shows the beginning of the hymn together with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first line.

→	景	教	三	威
	jǐng	jiào	sān	wēi
	bright brilliant	teaching	three	power majesty
	蒙	度	讚	
	méng	dù	zàn	
	receive	save	praise	

The Brilliant Teaching of the Three Majesties for Obtaining Salvation.

→	無(无)	上	諸(诸)	天	深	敬	歎
	wú	shàng	zhū	tiān	shēn	jìng	tàn
	if not without	above high	every all	sky heaven	deep very	respect honor	praise

If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore



The following is a translation of the first three verses of the hymn (Moule, 1930, p 53; Henson, 2017, p 329)

If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore,  
 If the great earth earnestly ponders on general peace  
 and harmony,  
 If man's first true nature receives confidence and  
 rest,  
 It is due to Alohê the merciful Father of the universe.

All the congregation of the good worship with complete  
 sincerity;  
 All enlightened natures praise and sing;  
 All who have souls trust and look up to the utmost;  
 Receiving holy merciful light to save from the devil.

Hard to find, impossible to reach, upright, true,  
 eternal,  
 Merciful Father, shining Son, holy Spirit, King,  
 Among all rulers you are Master Ruler,  
 Among all the world-honoured you are spiritual Monarch

“Alohê” is a Chinese transcription of the Syriac name for God.

### (ii) The *Jingjiao* Stele

In 781 CE a monument dedicated to the Christian faith (景教, *jingjiao*, luminous religion) was erected in Chang’an (Keevak, 2008; McGrath, 2021). The limestone stele is almost 3 m high. At the top is a cross and a nine-character title. The following illustration shows the stele *in situ* (before it was moved to a museum), an enlargement of the title, and a character-by-character translation.



大	秦	景	教	流	行
dà	qín	Jǐng	jiào	liú	xíng
large	state	bright	teaching	spread	travel
	Roman Empire		Christianity		
中	国	碑			
zhōng	guó	bēi			
middle	kingdom	monument			
	China				

Monument to the Propagation of the Luminous Religion of Rome in China

The stele summarizes the beliefs of the Christian Church in an inscription of about 1900 characters. This mentions that the Christian church was first established in China in 635 CE through the efforts of the monk Alopen. At the bottom of the stele is a much shorter inscription in Syriac.

After the end of the Tang dynasty 907 CE, Christianity almost disappeared (Teng Li, 2024). The *Jingjiao* Stele was buried, either for protection by the monks or as an act of desecration by those who reviled the foreign religion. It was unearthed during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Nevertheless, the Church of the East continued to send missionaries along the Silk Roads and several centuries later, Christian Churches were built throughout the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368) were tolerant of the different religions. The foreign religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism contributed as much to society as the homegrown Daoism and Confucianism.

## **Manichaeism**

Mani (216-274 CE) was a Persian prophet who conceived the world as divided between the light and the dark. He taught that the human soul was imprisoned by birth into the material world, and that the suffering that this entailed would only cease at death, which released the soul from the body. If one died free from sin, one's soul would return to the realm of light. The dualistic religion that he founded – Manichaeism – flourished in the centuries after his death, spreading all the way to Spain in the west and China in the East.

### **(i) Spread to Europe**

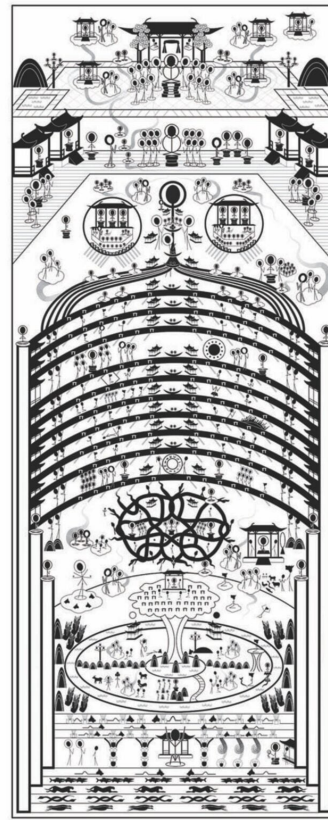
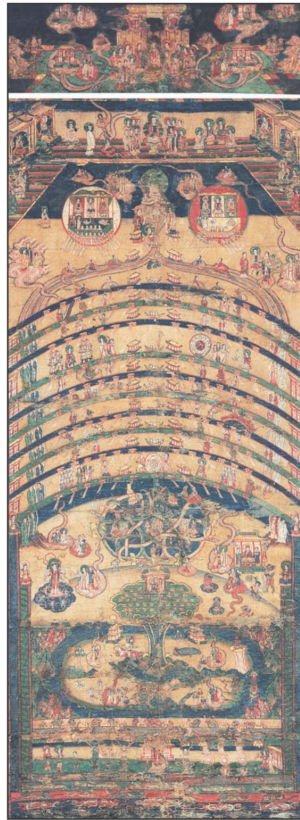
In Europe, Manichaeism declined after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. However, some isolated groups, such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Southeast France, continued to follow Mani's teachings:



## (ii) Spread to China

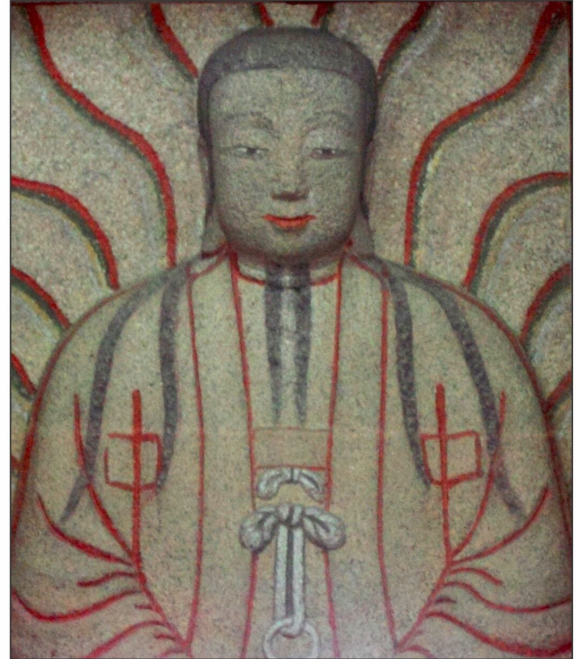
Manichaeism spread along the Silk Roads into China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). During the Uyghur Kahnate (744–840 CE) in what is now Northern China and Mongolia, Manichaeism was acknowledged as the state religion (Mackerras, 1990).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), a large silk painting (158 by 60 centimetres) was made to illustrate the Manichaean cosmology. This showed the realm of light at the top. In the center was a representation of the judgment that occurs at death: the decision whether the soul is released into the realm of light or sent back to the hell on earth. The following illustration shows the painting with some explanatory analysis (Gulaczi, 2015, pp 247-258), and enlargements showing a portrait of Mani (from the left side of the New Aeon level) and details of the tangled judgement process:



Realm of Light  
 New Aeon  
 Liberation of Light  
 Ten Firmaments of the Sky  
 Atmosphere (Judgement, Transmigration)  
 Earth

In Cao'an a small town on the west coast of China, a small temple built in 1339 CE was dedicated to Mani, the "Buddha of Light" (Lieu, 1998, pp 188-193). Over the years the temple became used for Buddhist practices. The following illustration shows the bas-relief portrait of Mani over the altar and the inscribed stone in the grounds of the temple.



The inscription reads

Purity (清淨, *qīngjìng*), Light (光明, *guāngmíng*),

Power (大力, *dàlì*), Wisdom (智慧, *zhìhuì*)

Supreme (無上, *wúshàng*), Ultimate Truth (至真, *zhìzhēn*)

Mani (摩尼, *móní*), the Buddha of Light (摩尼佛, *guāngfú*)

The first four are the attributes of the Manichaean Heavenly Father. Mani considered himself as a prophet in the line of Zoroaster, Buddha and Christ. As such he could be conceived as one of the manifestations of the divine – the Buddha of Light.

## Islam

After its founding in Arabia in 622 CE, Islam quickly spread to adjacent regions. By the time of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), the community of the faithful (*Ummah*) extended all the way from Spain to the borders of China:



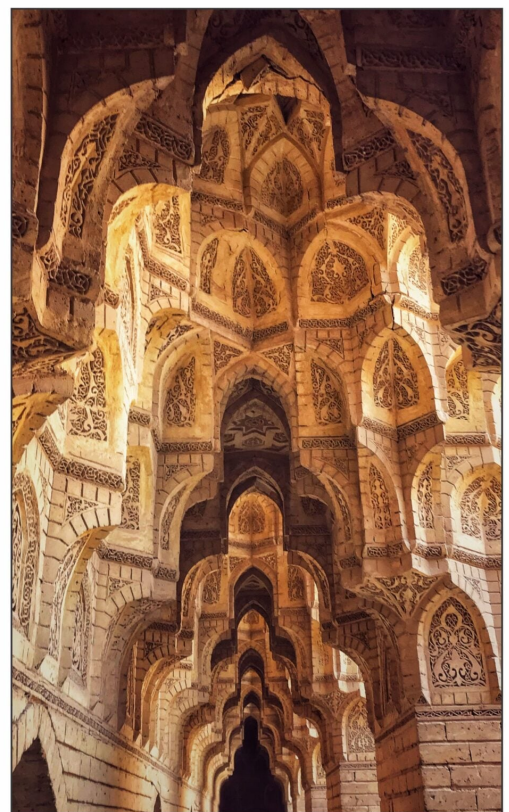
## (i) Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate with its capital in Baghdad oversaw a period of great prosperity and learning, that later became known as the Islamic Golden Age. At a time when Europe was going through the Dark Ages, Baghdad was a place where scholars studied and preserved the literature of the past and contributed to our knowledge such new ideas as algebra and trigonometry. Islamic physicians distinguished different diseases, and Islamic physicists mapped the heavens. Abbasid architecture developed gorgeous arches and domes, stucco decoration with arabesque patterns, and walls covered with multicolored tiling.

The Abbasids made great use of the newly discovered paper (Schatzmler, 2018). The technology of papermaking originated in China around the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE and was brought to the Middle East through the Silk Roads. The first paper mill in Baghdad was built in 795 CE. Paper made it easy to provide inexpensive books for scholars to study. Knowledge became no

longer limited to the elites.

The following illustration shows on the left a painting of a scholars in a library during the Abbasid Caliphate taken from a 13<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript. This may represent the House of Wisdom, also known as the Grand Library of Baghdad, which was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE. On the right is a photograph of a honeycomb archway (*muquarnas*) from the Abbasid Palace in Baghdad built in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

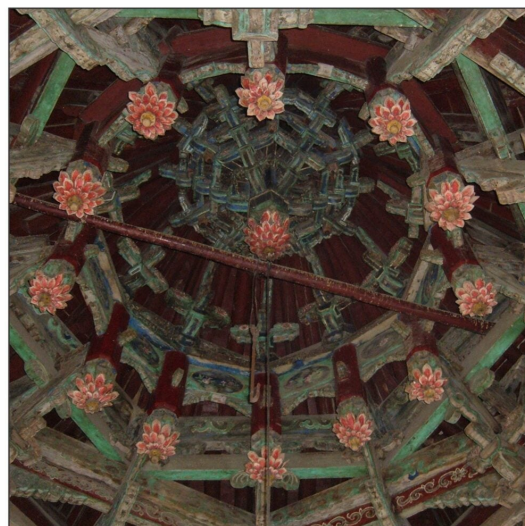
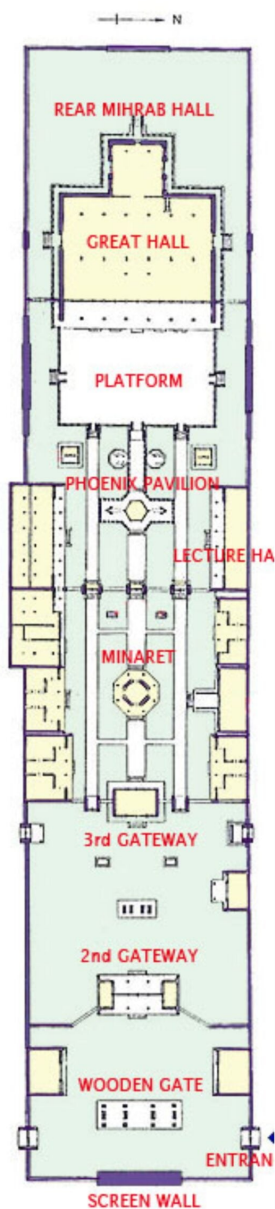


## (ii) The Great Mosque in Xi'an

Islamic merchants came to China along the Silk Roads. By the 8<sup>th</sup> Century the Muslim population of Chang'an (Xi'an) was sufficient to warrant the building of a mosque in the form of a temple. The Great Mosque of Xi'an (清真寺, *Xī'ān Dà Qīngzhēnsì*) was first constructed in 742 CE, and rebuilt in its present form in 1384. Islam was referred to as 清真 (Qīngzhēnjiào: pure and true religion), and a mosque is

generally referred to as 清真寺 (*Qīngzhēnsì*: pure and true temple).

The following illustration shows a plan of the mosque together with photographs of the Phoenix Pavillion (凤亭, *fèng tíng*), the “Examining the heart tower” (省心楼, *shěng xīn lóu*) which probably served as a minaret, and the ceiling of the Phoenix Pavilion:



## Epilogue

For many centuries the Silk Roads were a conduit for goods to

travel between East and West. The East produced silk, paper, tea, and porcelain. The West gave gold, silver, glass, cotton, and leather. The regions along the Silk Roads provided horses, camels, rugs, lapis lazuli and jade.

As well the Silk Roads allowed different religions to travel to distant countries. Buddhism came to China. Islam spread to both the East and the West. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also journeyed with the caravans. Travellers on the Silk Roads were missionaries as well as merchants (Foltz, 2010).

Some feeling for the people of the Silk Roads can be found in the poem *The Golden Road to Samarkand* by James Elroy Flecker (1814-1915), a British poet who briefly worked in the consular services in the Middle East before dying at a young age of tuberculosis. The conclusion to his play *Hassan*, published posthumously in 1922, is a conversation among the members of a caravan about to leave Baghdad for Samarkand:

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go  
Always a little further: it may be  
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow  
Across that angry or that glimmering sea.

White on a throne or guarded in a cave  
There lives a prophet who can understand  
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,  
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand

...

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,  
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,  
And softly through the silence beat the bells  
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

We travel not for trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:

For lust of knowing what should not be known,  
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The following is a reading of these verses by Roger Helmer

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Flecker-Golden-Road-Helmer.mp3>

And the musical introduction to the Japanese TV series on The Silk Roads by Kitaro:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Kitaro-Silk-Road-Theme.mp3>

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# Antonello da Messina: Sicilian Master

Antonello da Messina (~1430-1479) was born in Messina, Sicily. While studying in Naples, he became aware of a technique of painting using oil-based pigments that had originated in the Netherlands with Jan van Eyck (~1390-1441) and his followers. Antonello soon became a master of this new method. He was an expert portraitist able to capture his sitters' distinct identities and depths of feeling. The illustration shows a painting from 1473, that was once thought to be a self-portrait, but there is no real evidence for this. Although many of Antonello's works have been lost, three absolute masterpieces have survived: *Saint Jerome in his Study*, *The Virgin Annunciate*, both dated to around 1474, and *Saint Sebastien* from about 1478.

## Learning How to Paint with Oils

In his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), Giorgio Vasari considered Antonello da Messina as pivotal in the transition between tempera and oil painting in Italy. The use of linseed oil in painting began in northern Europe, most particularly in Flanders. First used for painting wood carvings, by around 1400 oil-based pigments were being used for panel paintings. Jan van Eyck is often considered the pioneer of this new technique (Ferrari, 2013). Oil-paints dried more slowly than tempera and were more easily mixed. These advantages led to more exact representations of color and texture. The oil medium allowed for "pictorial second thoughts, enabling the picture to be modified as work on it progressed" (Pope-Hennessy, 1966, p 60). Furthermore, the surface of oil paintings is glossy rather than matte: oil

paintings appear to glow with internal light.

Antonello first became aware of some of these new paintings when he was apprenticed to Niccolo Colantonio in Naples in the mid to later 1440s. Alfonso the Magnanimous (1396-1458), king of Aragon, Sicily and Naples, possessed the beautiful *Lomellini Triptych* by Jan van Eyck that is now long lost (Borchert, 2019). This was described by Bartholomeo Facio in 1456:

His is a remarkable picture in the most private apartments of King Alfonso, in which there is a Virgin Mary notably for its grace and modesty, with an Angel Gabriel, of exceptional beauty and with hair surpassing reality, announcing that the Son of God will be born of her; and a John the Baptist that declares the wonderful sanctity and austerity of his life, and Jerome like a living being in a library done with rare art (quoted by Borchert, 2019, p 36).

The lost triptych was likely a small devotional painting like van Eyck's 1437 *Dresden Triptych* (below). Only 33 cm high, this triptych could be folded up and carried by a travelling merchant for use as a portable altar during daily prayer. The Lomellini triptych was probably of similar size but with an annunciation at the center and Saints Jerome and John in the wings.



Antonello was clearly impressed by this and other Flemish paintings in Alfonso's collection. Vasari claimed that he therefore travelled to Flanders to study with Jan van Eyck:

Having arrived in Bruges, he became very intimate with the said Johann, making him presents of many drawings in the Italian manner and other things, insomuch that the latter, moved by this and by the respect shown by Antonello, and being now old, was content that he should see his method of coloring in oil; wherefore Antonello did not depart from that place until he had gained a thorough knowledge of that way of coloring, which he desired so greatly to know. And no long time after, Johann having died, Antonello returned from Flanders in order to revisit his native country and to communicate to all Italy a secret so useful, beautiful, and advantageous.

Unfortunately, this would have been impossible. Jan van Eyck died in 1441, when Antonello was only 11 years old. However, nothing is known about Antonello in the 1450s. He might therefore have travelled to Bruges during this time and studied with some of van Eyck's followers (Wright, 1980). As well as learning about oil-painting from the Flemish artists, Antonello may have taught them, in exchange, some of the new Italian insights into perspective (Edgerton, 1975).

Another possibility is that Antonello interacted with Petrus Christus (1410-1476), one of van Eyck's most prominent disciples, in Italy rather than Flanders. There is some evidence that the two painters may have been present at the same time in Milan at the court of Francesco Sforza (Ainsworth & Martens, 1994, p 61).

Antonello returned home to Sicily in 1460, and worked there for several years but nothing is really known about his whereabouts in the late 1460s. Perhaps he travelled at that time to Bruges and interacted there with Petrus and other painters, such as Hans Memling (1430-1494). There are striking similarities between Petrus' *Portrait of a Man* (1465?) on the left side of the following illustration and Antonello's later portrait from 1473.



The following illustration shows Antonello's *Salvator Mundi* from 1465 on the left and a similar painting by Hans Memling from 1475. It appears too close a likeness not to have been the result of personal interaction between the artists.



Compared to the paintings of the Flemish painters, Antonello's are more natural, more distinctive and more emotional. They express themselves. We sense a real person rather than an image.

Antonello stayed in Venice for a brief period beginning in late 1475. While there, he interacted with Venetian artists such as Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) and Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506). An apocryphal story tells how Bellini posed as a nobleman and had his portrait painted by Antonio so that he could observe the technique of oil painting (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 29).

An important development that occurred in Venice in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century was oil-painting on canvas rather than wood. Sail-canvas was in ready supply in this maritime city. Canvas did not crack or warp like wood, and its light weight allowed for much larger paintings. Though Antonello did not paint on canvas, Bellini painted some of his late paintings on canvas,

and oil on canvas became the usual technique for the next generation of Venetian painters such as Giorgione (1470-1510), and Titian (1488-1576).

In 1476, Antonello was offered a position on the Sforza court in Milan, but he declined and returned to Messina. He died there in 1479, having provided a dowry for his daughter and placed his son Jacobello in charge of his studio. Jacobello's only surviving painting is signed *Jacobus Antonelli, filius non humani pictoris* (son of a painter who was more than human) (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 39).

Over the years, many of Antonello's works vanished. Some were destroyed in the earthquakes to Messina was prone. Others were lost in the bombing of World War II. Many of his paintings were small and easily lost. Only about 40 paintings remain.

### **Renaissance Portraits**

During the later Middle Ages, the rich and the powerful wished to gain some hold on immortality by having their portraits painted. Initially this was done by giving an altarpiece to a church and having themselves included in the painting as the donors. Over time, painters began to provide portraits independently of the church. Jan van Eyck was again one of the most prominent of the early portraitists. The following illustration shows two of his portraits, both from around 1433. The sitter on the left is holding a ring. This could indicate that the sitter is a goldsmith, that he has just become engaged to be married, or that he has assumed a position of authority requiring the use of a signet ring. On the left the sitter is wearing a striking blue chaperon, and on the right a marvelous red turban. The latter may be a self portrait.



Antonello learned from the Flemish painters, and became the “first Italian painter for whom the independent portrait was an art form in its own right” (Pope-Hennessy, 1966, p 60). He became particularly adept at presenting the individuality of the eyes. In this he was a believer in Saint Jerome:

*Speculum mentis est facies, et taciti oculi cordis fatentur arcana.*

The face is the mirror of the mind and, without speaking, confesses the secrets of the heart.

The following illustration shows four of his portraits. The upper left is from the late 1460s and the others from the early 1470s. One of Antonello’s characteristic effects was to add his signature in a *cartellino* on a ledge at the bottom of the image (the two lower portraits). This *trompe l’oeil* representation of a folded piece of paper perhaps guarantees the veracity of the portrait: if the artist can represent a

scrap of paper that well, then he must have captured the likeness exactly. The typical message on the *cartellino* read “Antonello messianus me pinxit” together with a date (Renzo Villa in Cardona & Villa, 2019, pp 81-107)



We consider ourselves able to read both character and emotion in the human face. For example, in the preceding portraits we might find mockery/amusement, diffidence/cunning, disdain/skepticism, and truculence/stubbornness. Indeed, the last portrait is often known as *Il Condottiero*, the name for an Italian mercenary leader.

The following is an evaluation of the portrait at the lower left by Nicola Gardini, an Italian novelist (in Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 289):

*The face is the theatre.* And it is doubly so. On the one hand, it provides a stage where events or a story, no matter how slight, can unfold: the eyebrows arch, the eyelids are lowered, a rebellious tuft of eyebrow hairs stands up, a wart is displayed in the centre of his forehead, which creases into furrows that extend down to the side. There is no fixity: that face reveals an expression, a current frame of mind or psychological circumstance. On the other hand, the mask, the moral core of the expression, the underlying truth behind events elevating the circumstance to a natural truth. This is where the man reveals himself, both as he is and as he appears with all his distinctive features: the smugness, the miserly smile (Antonello has managed to make his eyebrows smile far more than his mouth), a sense of condescension and satisfaction, his robustness, that air of good health, cleanliness, prosperity ... Clearly pleased with himself and full of self-worth, this man certainly knows a thing or two. And he keeps as far away as he can from death.

However, we should be careful. Though we can recognize the most striking of human emotions, we often miss subtle changes. And we are more often wrong than right about the underlying character.

The portrait in the upper left is particularly appealing.

Though it has been considered the portrait of a sailor or a pirate, it is almost certainly a portrait of a Sicilian aristocrat, willing to have his representation immortalized by the talented artist. He is not dressed in a modern maritime uniform but wearing a Sicilian woolen cape or *cappuloro* (Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 32). The Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciasia notes that we recognize the face but really do not know the person behind it:

Who does the unknown man resemble? A mafioso from the countryside or one from the best neighborhoods, the member of parliament who sits on the right, or on the left, the peasant or the lawyer? He looks like the writer of these notes (it's been said), and he certainly looks like Antonello. And just try to pin down the social status and the individual human nature of this personage. Impossible. Is he a noble or a plebeian? A notary or a farmer? A gentleman or a lout? A painter, a poet, an assassin? "He resembles." There you have it. (translated and quoted by Ingrid Rowland, 2024, pp 21-22)

Antonello's portraits are easily approachable. They all make clear eye contact:

Antonello is also sensitive to the humanity of the viewer, who is given consistent points of entry into the work. These entry points are established not only with eye contact, but with the parapet, which gives a clear boundary between observer and observed, and the *cartellino*, which looks as if one has just unfolded it. (House, 2025, p 41)

When Antonello was in Venice in 1475-6, he was able to show the Venetian painters the techniques of oil-based portraits. The following are two portraits by Giovanni Bellini. The *Portrait of a Young Man* on the left dates to around the time of Antonello's visit. It is clearly similar to Antonello's paintings. The *Portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan* is from 1501. Antonello's technique has been supplemented by the amazing

color sense that characterizes Venetian painting. Interestingly, Bellini has added to his masterpiece a painted *cartellino* in the style of Antonello:



### ***Ecco Homo***

Antonello used the abilities he had developed in portraiture to create representations of the face of Christ that are utterly convincing in their humanity and depth of feeling. One of his favorite themes was that of *Ecco Homo* (Behold the man) as described in the Gospel of John:

Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.

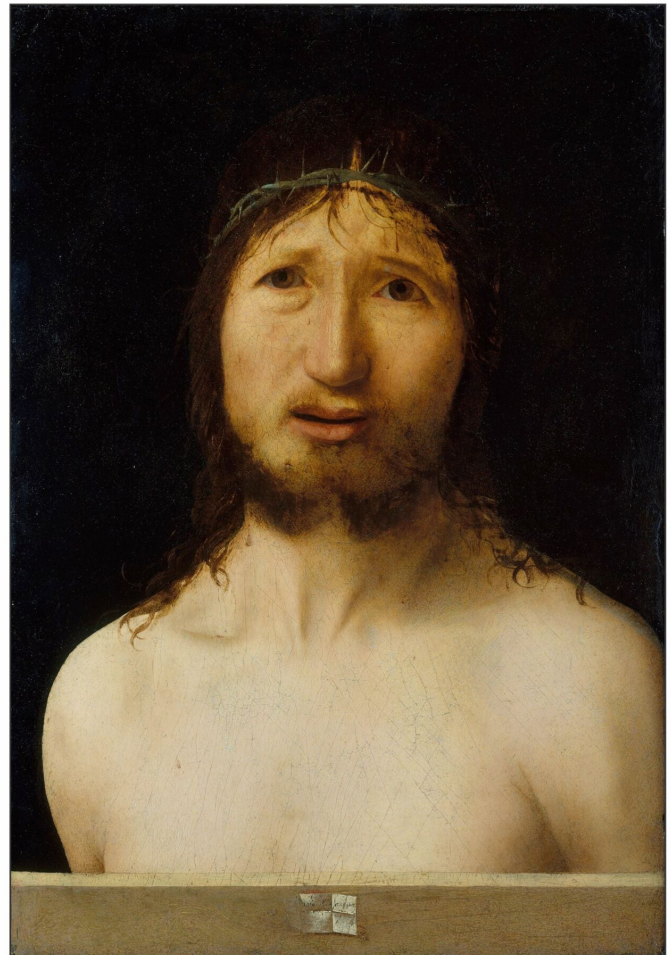
And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe,

And said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote him with their hands.

Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.

Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!  
(*John 19 1-5*)

The following illustration shows two of Antonello's paintings of *Ecco Homo*, the left from 1476 and the right from 1470.



**Saint Sebastian**

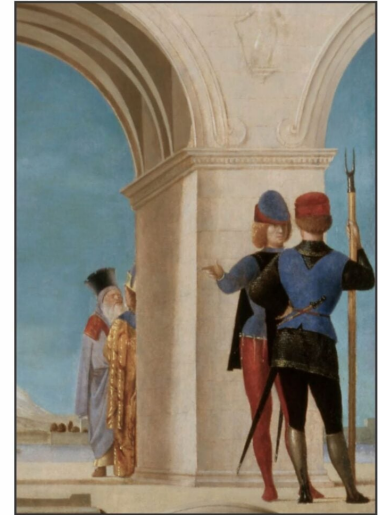
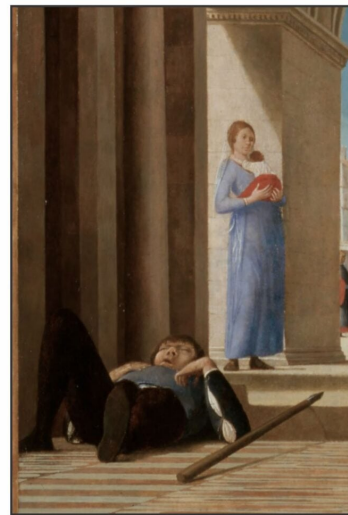
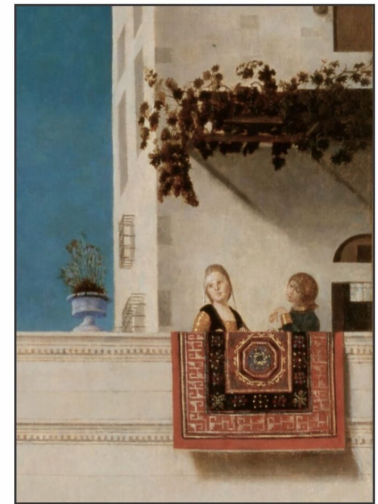
Saint Sebastian was a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Roman Christian martyred during the Diocletian Persecutions. Initially, he was shot with arrows, but this miraculously did not kill him, and he was nursed back to health by Saint Irene. Later, he was clubbed to death and thrown into the *Cloaca Maxima* – Rome's main sewer. During the Middle Ages, Saint Sebastian was invoked as a defender against the plague. If he could survive being shot with arrows, surely he could help those who were afflicted by the disease. Depictions of Saint Sebastian allowed painters to portray the nude male body. Antonello's depiction is probably the most sensuous of the early representations of the saint. In recent years, the saint has become a gay icon and the patron of the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer communities.

Antonello's *Saint Sebastian* was painted in the mid 1470s for the altar of the Church of San Guliano in Venice at the height of one of the plague epidemics to which Venice was so susceptible (Humphrey, 1993, pp 195-229). The altarpiece also contained a representation of Saint Christopher, probably painted by Antonello's son, and a carved sculpture of Saint Rocco, another saint who offered protection from the plague. The latter was also the patron of the Scuola di San Rocco which was established in 1478. The altarpiece did not last long: the statue and the painting of Saint Christopher have been lost, and Antonello's painting is now in Dresden.

Antonello's painting owed much to an earlier altar triptych of Saint Sebastian (1470). However, Antonello's saint is much more convincing than Bellini's flatly outlined figure.

The Saint stands in a serenely ordered space that recalls the paintings of Piero della Francesca, who wrote a treatise *De prospectiva pingendi* (On the Perspective of Painting) in the mid 1470s. Perhaps Antonello visited him in Urbino during his travels (Campbell, 2021). House (2025, p 131) quotes Roberto Longhi as claiming that Antonello assimilated Piero's

teachings and brought them to Venice.



On the left a guard sleeps in a marvel of foreshortening. Elsewhere the people of the city converse, and go about their appointed ways. Though the saint is being martyred, everything is as it should be according to divine perspective.

## Saint Jerome

Jerome (342-420) CE) was a Christian saint who in his youth spent a prolonged period of ascetic penance in the deserts of Syria. Legend has it that during this time he removed a thorn from the paw of a lion, and that the lion then became his lifelong companion. After his sojourn in the desert, he came

to Rome where he translated the Bible into Latin, and made extensive commentaries on scripture. His version of the Bible – the Vulgate (from *versio vulgata*, the commonly used version) – remains the official Latin version of the Bible in the Catholic Church. Jerome became the patron saint of translators, librarians, and students.

Jerome became a popular subject in the paintings of the early Renaissance. The following illustration shows on the left a painting of Saint Jerome by Jan van Eyck that was likely finished by Petrus Christus in 1442, and on the right a 1444 painting by Niccolo Colantonio, with whom Antonello was apprenticed in Naples.



The late Middle Ages ushered in the “Humanities” as a field of study. Initially, this concerned the language, history and philosophy of the Greek, Roman and Hebrew civilizations. The goal of these studies was to facilitate a deeper interpretation of Biblical texts. Study of the humanities (*humanitas*) was thus considered a handmaiden to the study of divinity (*divinitas*). Saint Jerome with his immense knowledge of the ancient languages came to personify this new field of

study. Over the years the Humanities expanded to include study of all texts. The Humanities then became was distinguished from both Theology – the study of sacred rather than secular scriptures –and the Sciences – the study of observed data.

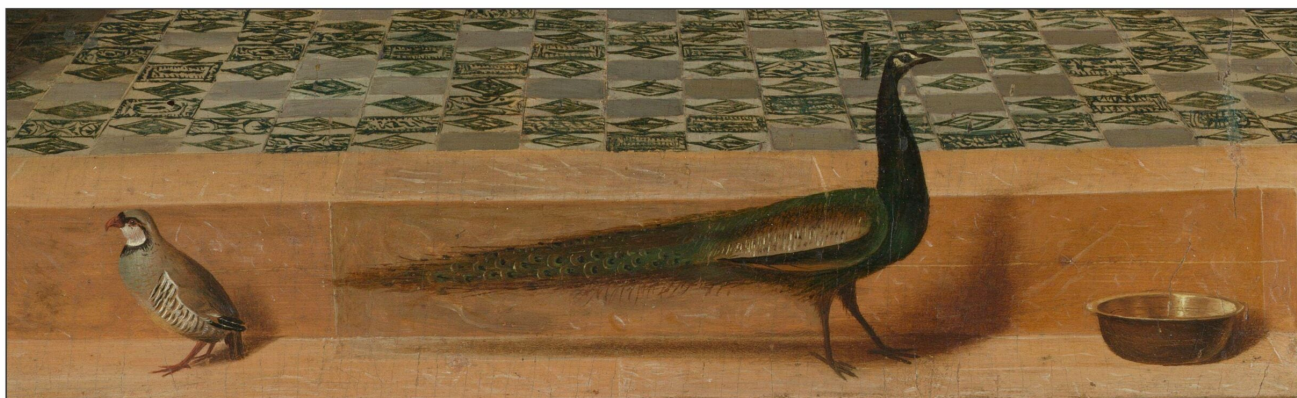
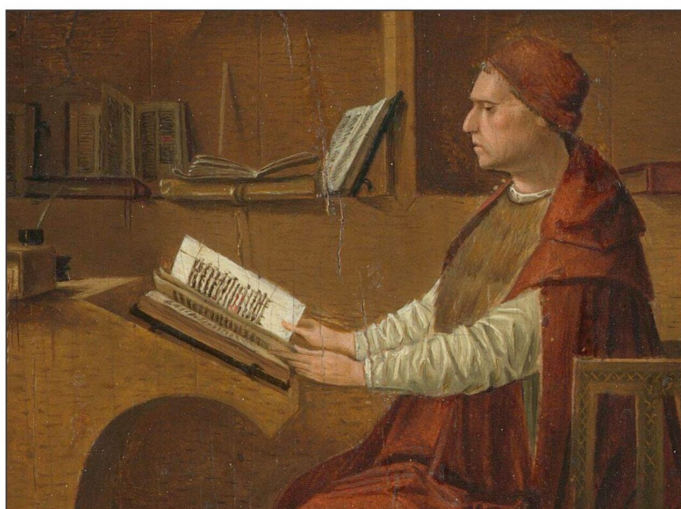
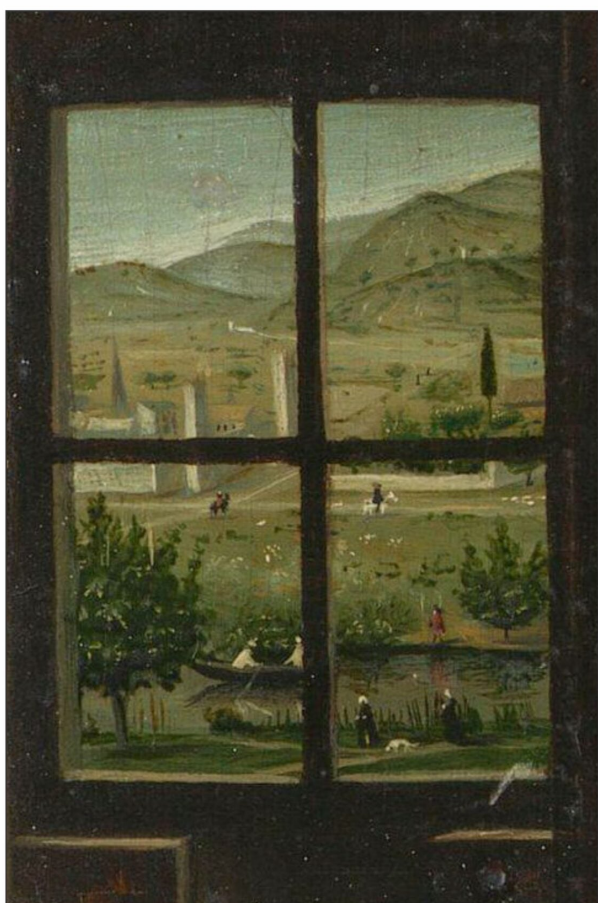
Antonello painted his *Saint Jerome in his Study* in 1474. The painting is not large (46 by 36 cm) but it is intricately detailed (Jolly, 1983):



The painting shows Jerome reading in his study, as revealed through a monastery doorway. In the foreground the partridge, peacock, and water-bowl symbolize worldliness, immortality and ascetic purity. His lion can be seen in the shadows to the

right of the study. A peaceful countryside rests beyond the monastic windows:

The following illustration shows some of the details in the painting. The landscape seen through the window on the left contains people walking with a dog, rowing a boat, and riding a horse – all going about their normal lives independently of the saint in his isolated study.



The Italian writer Elizabetta Rasy (In Cardona & Villa, 2019, p 78) comments on the figure of the saint

Unlike Jan van Eyck's Saint Jerome blissfully reading with his cheek resting on his hand, Antonello's saint is not particularly relaxed nor is he sitting properly. In fact, he seems to be almost on the edge of his seat, stretching his arms out towards the book rest like someone carrying out an action or making an effort. Reading may not always be an effort, but it is certainly an action. It is this very tension that gives rise to the power of a figure who does not appear conventionally devotional or indeed anything like the kind old monk depicted by Colantonio, Antonello's master.

She further comments on the painting's tension between reality and imagination (in Cardona & Frederico Villa, 2019, p79):

Yet the entire space of the work suggests something else. Let's take look at the lion. Instead of holding his paw out for the saint to remove the famous thorn or sitting crouched at his feet, he is roaming aimlessly in the corridor, nothing like a lion, not even the lion in the legend, but more like those animals appearing in dreams, in places and in ways they shouldn't, like incongruous presences. That lion standing in the shade, a forest but of an elegant marble corridor, is an apparition that shifts the entire scene into the realm of dreams. Over on the other side is a paper label attached to the wooden wall of Jerome's cell, in plain sight. Is it the artist's signature? A message for the observer? No, it is impossible to read those words, they are just a series of illegible scribbles that do not belong to any human alphabet. Have you ever tried to read something in your dreams? It's impossible. Those forever unknowable words are written in the language of the most secret nocturnal images. This is the time-less stance of Antonello's Saint Jerome in the study: every element in this setting, saint included, is here, now, near, tangible and shamelessly real. Yet every element in the entire conspicuously asymmetrical space of

the picture is mysterious and represents a distant Beyond that enchants us and draws us out.

## **Virgin Annunciate**

During the Middle Ages in Europe the veneration of the Virgin Mary underwent an extraordinary growth. This was partly related to the writings of Bernard de Clairvaux, who experienced visions of the Virgin, and who founded the Cistercian Order, and partly the need for solace during the terrible years of the Black Death. If the plague had been sent by a God of Justice and Judgment, the people could not really appeal to him for relief. So they asked the Virgin Mary to intercede, the divine feminine being far more compassionate than the male. Many of the great cathedrals were named after Notre Dame or Santa Maria. The virgin appeared to her followers, and, at the sites of these visions, shrines were established to attract pilgrims. Walsingham in Norfolk, England is one of the earliest Marian shrines

Artists celebrated the many different aspects of Mary's life from the Annunciation to the Assumption (Verdon, 2005). One of the most popular subjects was the Annunciation as described in the Gospel of Luke (1:26-31):

...the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

The paintings typically showed Gabriel interrupting Mary as she read from the scriptures. The angel is usually on the left and in profile; the virgin on the right and turned toward the viewer. The following illustration shows the 1333 *Annunciation Altarpiece* of Simoni Martin and Lippo Lemmi now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The words of the angel float across the gold background through the olive branch of divine peace and the lily of virgin purity:

*Ave [Maria] gratia plena dominus tecum*

Hail [Mary] full of grace, the lord is with you.



Sometimes the annunciation was painted on two panels and that representing Mary was called the *Vergine Annunziata* (Virgin Annunciate). Antonello da Messina was the first painter to represent the *Virgin Annunciate* alone.



His 1476 painting shows the virgin in a simple blue shawl. The background is dark rather than gold. Mary looks down and to

the left at a kneeling Gabriel who is not represented, and perhaps not clearly visible in the real world. Her expression is as enigmatic as that of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (1506). Mary's right hand is lifted partly in surprise, partly in reluctance. Her right hand gathers her shawl close.

The painting represents the miraculous moment of the incarnation, of the divine becoming human. The following are comments by Klaus Krüger (2015):

The image presents the Virgin in a tranquil, clearly structured composition. The strict symmetry and frontality are reminiscent of an icon. Only the implied movement of the right hand, which reaches forward into the pictorial space, and the direction of the Virgin's gaze, which almost imperceptibly follows the turning of her body, subtly indicate that a scenic incident, namely the Annunciation, is taking place. Antonello radically reduces the event of the Annunciation by depicting only the very moment in which the Virgin receives the Word of God, and with it the divine fruit of her womb. The actual descent of the divine Logos remains imperceptible to the eyes. It can only be inferred from Mary's reaction and from the reflection of the light that shines on her from above, and which appears to radiate all the more intensely against the dark background. The actual subject of the image is thus the paradoxical manifestation of the invisible in the visible, of light amidst darkness, of the Word in the flesh, in sum: of the divine in the temporal.

## **Humanism**

As the Middle Ages developed into the Renaissance, the study of the Humanities, which initially were concerned with the languages in which the scriptures were written, broadened to include philosophy, ethics and history. Scholars became more familiar with the ancient texts, and took to heart the

statement of Protagoras (490-420 BCE) that "Man is the measure of all things." They found that they could order their lives through the exercise of human reason as well as or instead of through faith in divine instruction. The Humanities thus gave birth to the philosophy of Humanism (Davies, 2001, pp 125-135).

Renaissance Humanism was facilitated by several developments. Beginning in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the printing press gave people ready access to books and ideas. No longer were thoughts locked up in the libraries of the church. The new sciences provided ways to look at the world in relation to human beings rather than as divinely determined. And painting became more realistic, the spaces more three-dimensional, and the faces more human.

Antonello da Messina infused his paintings with this new humanism. His portraits show real people who run the gamut of human emotions. His depictions of Christ show a man of sorrow rather than a suffering God. His saints live out their lives in a world that is seen from a human rather than a divine perspective. His Virgin Mary is a wonderfully realized young woman rather than a pious saint.

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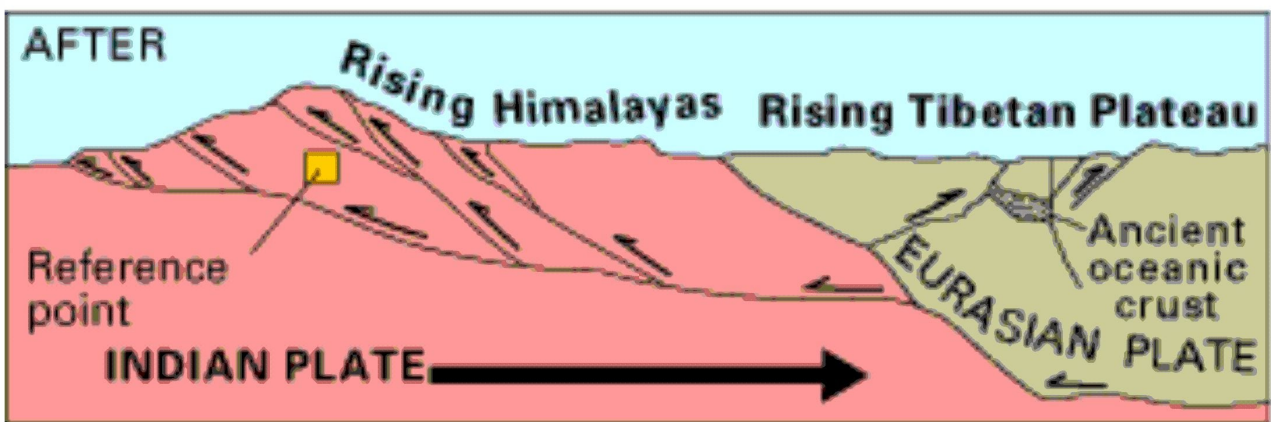
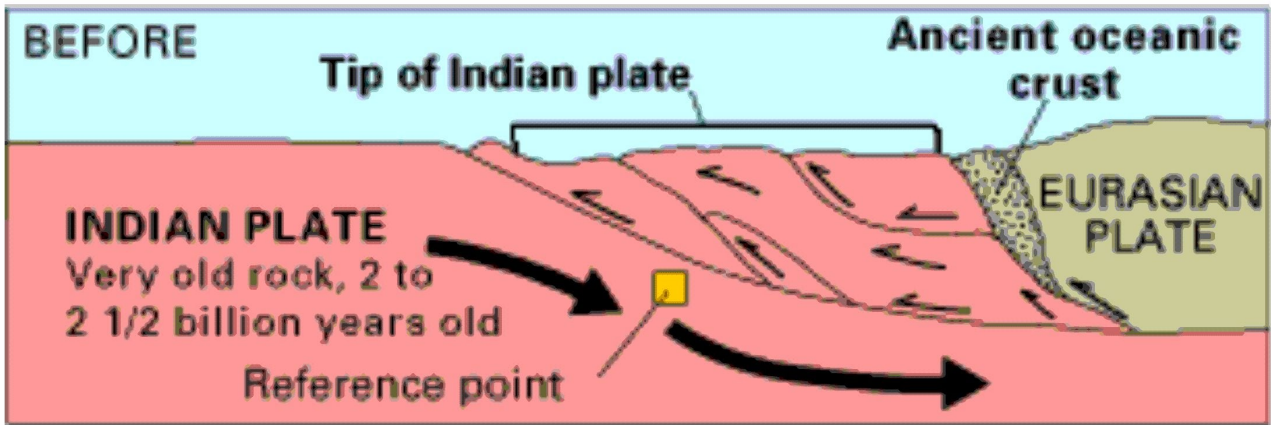
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## **Shambhala: Mountain Sanctuary**

Shambhala is a mythical kingdom described in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as a place of sanctuary. Paintings show the kingdom isolated from the rest of the world by a ring of mountains. At the center of the kingdom is the capital Kalapa, itself surrounded by another ring of mountains. The palace of the king has roofs of solid gold and is adorned with pearls and other jewels. Outside the capital, rivers divide the kingdom into eight regions arranged like the petals of a lotus flower. Each of these regions contains 12 principalities, so that 96 princes pay allegiance to the king of Shambhala. The illustration shows a Tibetan painting of Shambhala from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Musée Guimet. Many travellers have tried unsuccessfully to find Shambhala. It remains a spiritual rather than physical place.

### **The Geological Upheaval**

About 40 million years ago the northward-moving Indian tectonic plate collided with the Eurasian plate. The edge of the Indian plate was buckled and forced upward to form the Himalaya mountains. As the Indian plate moved under the Eurasian plate its surface rose to form Tibetan plateau.

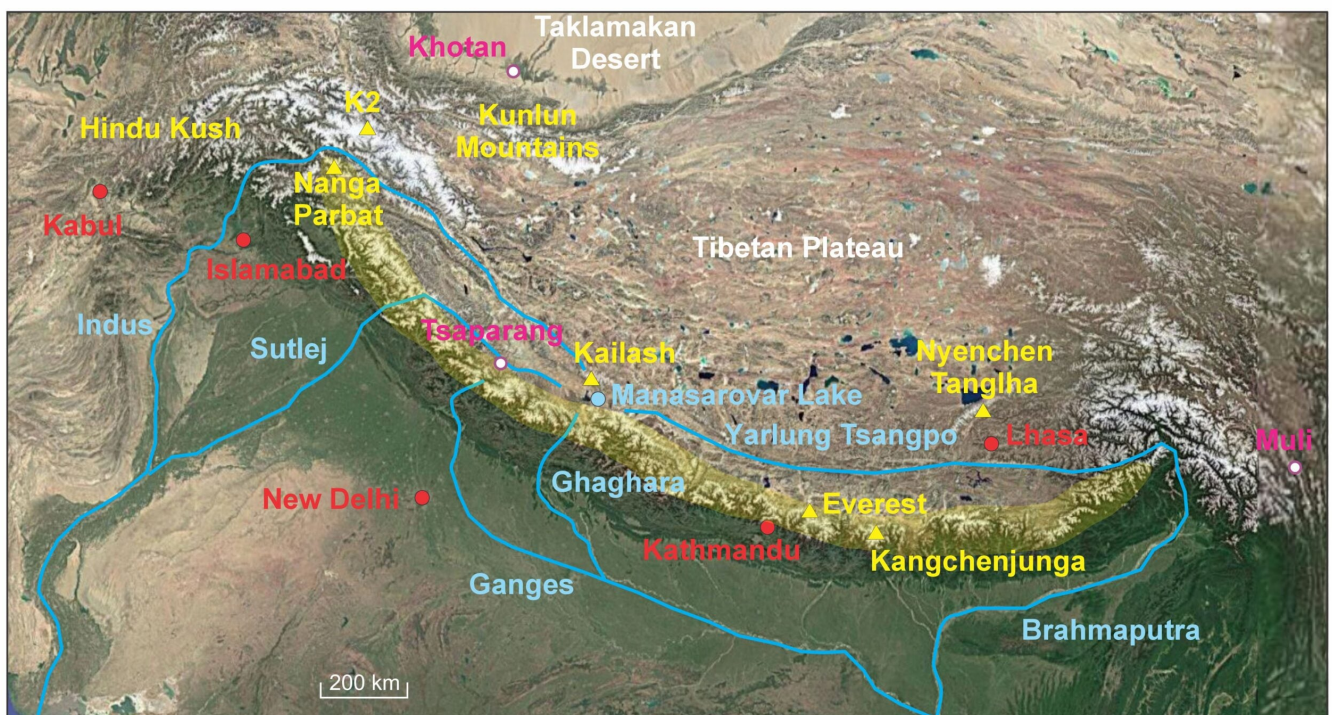


The Himalayas, stretching in a crescent from the Indus River in the west to the Brahmaputra River in the east (shaded light yellow in the following map) are the highest mountains in the world. They contain Mount Everest and nine other peaks greater than 8000 meters above sea level. The only other mountains with such height are the Karakorams with K2 as their highest peak. The Tibetan Plateau, a vast elevated region north of the Himalayas has an average height of about 4500 meters above sea level, and is often known as the “roof of the world.”

Lake Manasarovar in the southwest part of the plateau is the world’s highest freshwater lake. Its name – “lake of consciousness” – comes from the Hindu myth that it was created out of the mind of Brahma. Just north of the lake is the isolated Mount Kailash (“crystal”), which may be the Mount Meru (“wonderful”) of Hindu mythology. Meru is described as

the central axis of the world, and the abode of Shiva and his consort Parvati.

Glaciers in the Himalayas are the source of many of Asia's largest rivers. The region near Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash provides sources for the Indus, Sutlej, Ghaghara (which is a tributary of the Ganges) and the Yarlung Tsangpo (which becomes the Brahmaputra) Rivers. The Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Salween and Irrawaddy Rivers drain from the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau (not shown on the map).



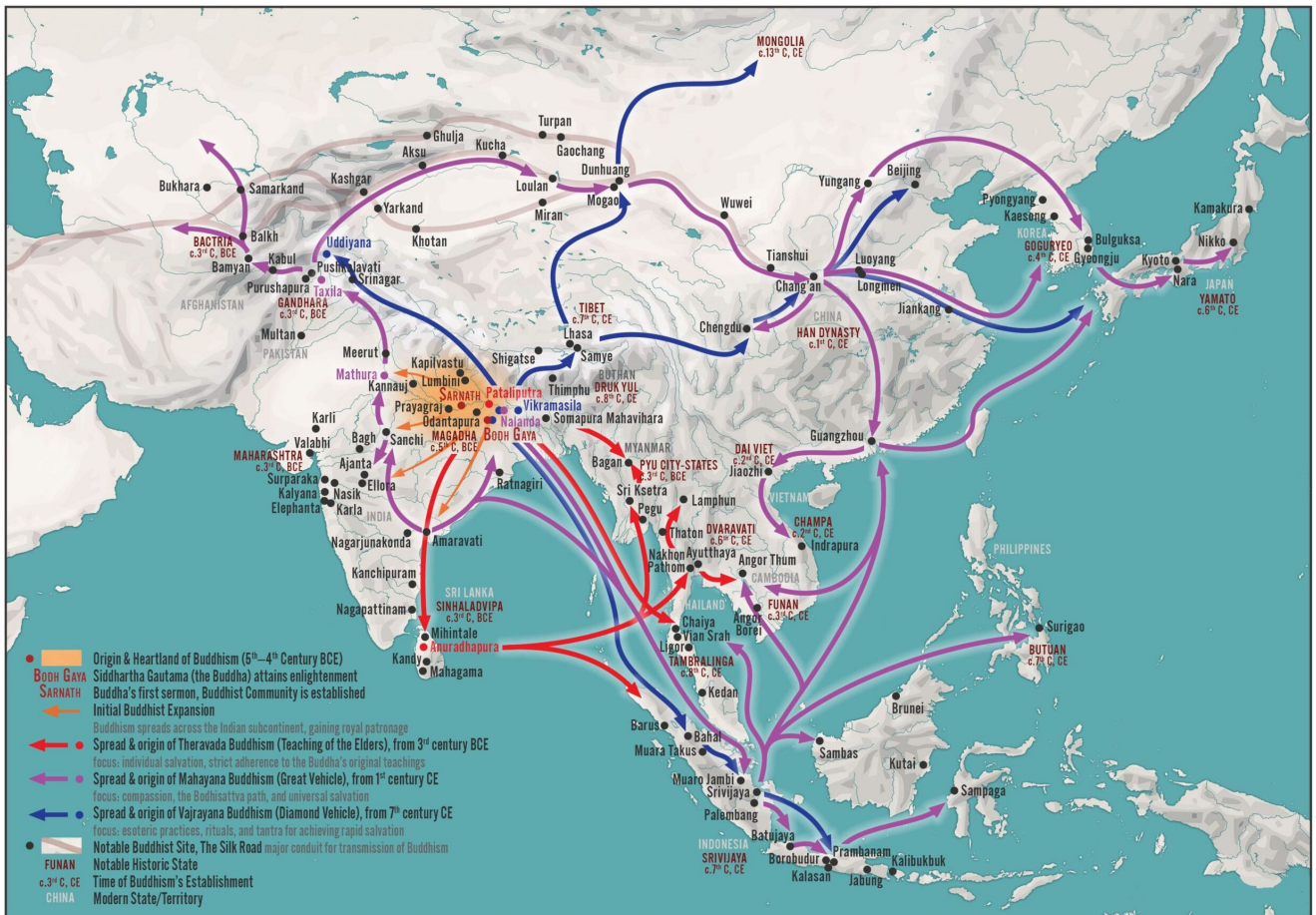
## Colliding Religions

The main ancient religions of the Indian peninsula are Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Hinduism began in the valley of the Indus River around 3000 BCE and became codified in the *Vedas* written between 1500 and 500 BCE. The main tenet of Hinduism is the concept of *dharma*, a principle that both drives the universe and ordains what is right and wrong. Individuals experience a continual process of life, death and rebirth, known as *samsara*. *Karma* ensures that all actions have their just and necessary outcome, although this might not

happen within one lifetime but in a later reincarnation. There is no single divinity but a multitude of forces that each play their part in the unfolding of the universe. The universe goes through long cycles of creation, preservation, decline and destruction.

Jainism developed from 800 to 500 BCE as an offshoot of Hinduism. It denied the gods – atheism – rejected violence of any kind – *ahimsa* – and declined worldly pleasures – ascetism. This was (and is) a religion for the few rather than for the masses.

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama who lived in northeast India around 500 BCE. He renounced his royal upbringing, and through meditation and ascetism attained release from *samsara* and union with the cosmos in a state of *anatta* (non-self). He then taught his disciples the basic principles whereby they could do the same. Suffering is caused by desire for worldly things; one can escape from suffering by rejecting desire and following the “eightfold path.” Many were attracted to this new religion and by the time of the Emperor Ashoka (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE), it had spread throughout the Indian peninsula, crossed the sea to Sri Lanka and travelled east to what is now Afghanistan. Travelling along the Silk Road, Buddhism reached China by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, from where it later expanded into Korea and Japan. Buddhists from both India and Sri Lanka spread their religion to southeast Asia by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE and thence to Indonesia and the Philippines. The following map is from the World History website



Islam was founded in 622 CE in Arabia and soon began to expand rapidly. The first incursions into the region of the Indus valley occurred in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Multiple invasions followed. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the northern part of India was under the rule of the Mughal Empire. The court of Akbar the Great (1542-1605 CE) attracted scholars and artists. The following paintings show on the left Akbar receiving the *Akbarnama* (a history of his reign), and on the right Akbar discussing religion with Hindu scholars and two Portuguese missionaries. Both paintings were part of the *Akbarnama* (1605).



Notable in the above illustration is the absence of any Buddhists. By the time of Akbar Buddhism had essentially vanished from India. The Muslim invaders had destroyed Buddhist monasteries and slaughtered the monks. The holy sites in northern India – Sarnath and Bodh Gaya – had fallen into ruins. Most Buddhist temples had become places of Hindu worship. Remnants of Buddhist culture survived in the south, and many monks retreated to mountain sanctuaries in the far northern India and Tibet. Many scholars have tried to explain why Hinduism survived the Muslim onslaught but not Buddhism (e.g., Hazra, 1995; Sarao, 2012). Probably the most important difference was that Hinduism was a religion for the masses and Buddhism a religion for monks. Hinduism provided festivals and celebrations whereas Buddhism offered only suffering and

ascetism. Another reason was that Hinduism was pluralistic in its belief. Hinduism worshipped many different gods in many different ways, whereas Buddhism tended toward rigid doctrines. Perhaps laxness in the monastic orders also contributed to their downfall: why should the people support the debauchery of monks.

## **The Wheel of Time**

Buddhism initially reached Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. With the Muslim invasions of India from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries many more Buddhists fled to safety in the northern mountains. They assimilated some of the religious traditions indigenous to Tibet and many of the ideas of Hinduism. The resultant doctrines became the basis of the *Vajrayana* ("diamond vehicle") branch of Buddhism, different from the *Mahayana* ("great vehicle") branch of Buddhism which spread into China and the *Theravada* ("doctrine of the elders") branch which spread to Sri Lanka and southeast Asia.

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings were recorded in the *Kalachakra* ("Wheel of Time") *Tantra* ("weaving/teaching"), which likely originated in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Its contents are only known through later commentaries such as the *Paramadibuddha* ("Supreme First Buddha") and the *Vimalaprabha* ("radiance of purity"). According to the former, the Kalachakra teachings were first given by the Gautama Buddha to Suchandra the king of Shambhala who had come to seek instruction from the enlightened one. (Newman, 1985).

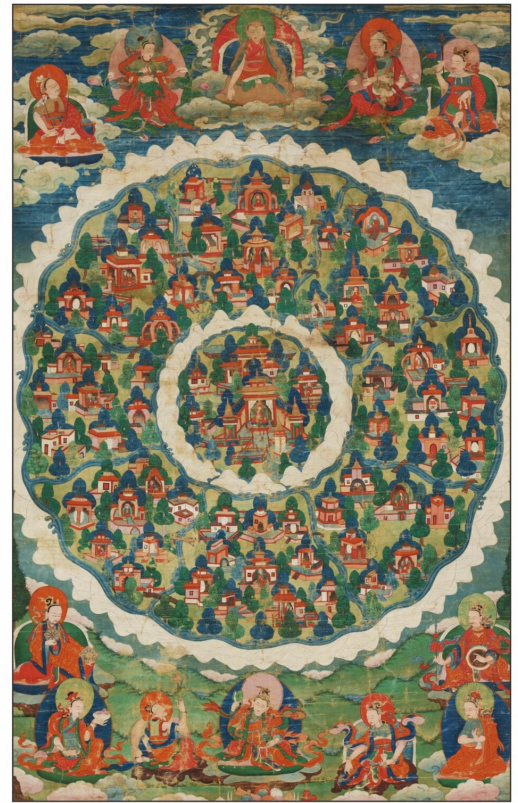
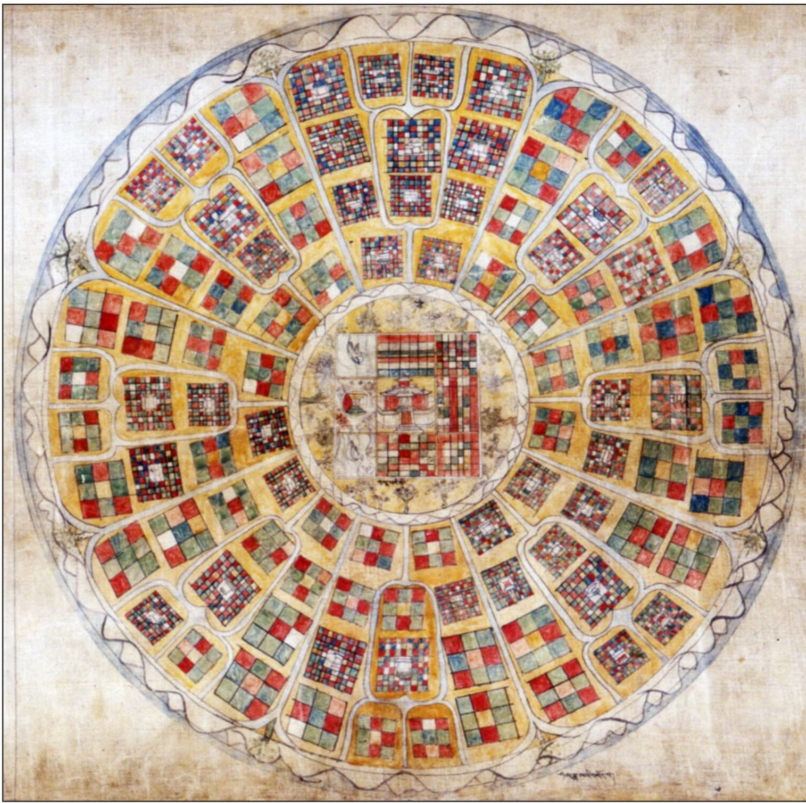
Shambhala is described as a country north of the Himalayas:

Shambhala is shaped like a giant lotus having eight petals. The outer perimeter of the entire lotus is formed by a circle of great snow mountains, as is the perimeter of the pericarp that makes up the central third of the country.

The interstices of the lotus petals are formed by rivers and snow mountains, and the entire land is covered with beautiful lakes, ponds, meadows, forests, and groves.

The central pericarp of Shambhala is elevated a bit above the surrounding lotus petals, and on it stands the capital of Shambhala, Kalapa. Kalapa is twelve leagues in breadth, and its palaces are made of gold, silver, turquoise, coral, pearl, emerald, moon-crystal, and other precious stones. Kalapa blazes with such a luster that the full moon is a mere pale disc overhead. The light given off by the mirrors on the outside of the palaces is so bright that night cannot be distinguished from day. The thrones inside the palaces are made from the finest beaten gold, and from the gold of the Jambu River. In front of the thrones are crystal looking-glasses that allow one to see far into the distance. On the ceilings are special circular crystal skylights that allow one to observe the palaces, gods, and parks of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the rotating celestial spheres, and even the zodiac, all as though they were right in front of one. Surrounding the thrones in the palaces are lattice-work screens made of sandalwood that exude fragrances that scent the air for miles. The couches and cushions are all made of the finest, most precious fabrics. (Newman, 1985, pp 54-55).

The following illustration shows two representations of Shambhala. That on the left is from a 16<sup>th</sup> Century scroll in the Rubin Museum and that on the right is a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century painting. Both owe their form to the Tibetan mandalas used to demonstrate the workings of the cosmos.



Shambhala was actually first mentioned in Hindu scriptures as the place where Kalki, the next avatar of Vishnu will be born. These scriptures prophecy that when the people of the world degenerate into greed, malice and immorality, Kalki will lead an army of the righteous to defeat the barbarians and establish “a new golden age of righteousness, prosperity and social order” (Newman, 1995). Buddhists also had proposed that a new Buddha, named *Maitreya* (“compassionate”) would be born in the future to restore peace to a troubled world. Tibetan Buddhism fused the ideas of Kalki and Maitreya to provide a prophecy that could comfort the people in the days when the Muslim invasions were destroying their way of life. (Newman, 1995; Belka, 2006):

The Wheel of Time Tantra borrowed the Hindu myth of Kalki and adapted it to current religious and political conditions. The Buddhist refashioning of the prophetic myth says the Buddha taught the Wheel of Time Tantra to Sucandra, the bodhisattva emperor of the vast Central Asian empire of Shambhala. The eighth Successor to the throne of

Sambhala, Yasas, unified all of the brahman families of Sambhala within a single Buddhist Adamantine Vehicle clan. For this he was given title Kalkin, which in the Buddhist myth means "chieftain." To this day the Kalkins of Sambhala reign in their Central Asian paradise on earth, preserving the Wheel of Time teachings from the forces of barbarism without. At the end of the current age of degeneration, when the barbarian Muslims have overrun the earth outside of Sambhala, the last Kalkin, Cakrin, will assemble a great army headed by the kings of Sambhala and the Hindu gods. Kalkin Cakrin and his army—elephants, chariots, cavalry, and infantry—will come out from Sambhala to eradicate the forces of Islam. After the great Armageddon, when the barbarian horde has been obliterated, Cakrin will return to Sambhala to initiate a new age of perfection, Buddhism will flourish, people will live long, happy lives, and righteousness will reign supreme. (Newman, 1995).

At the beginning of Cakrin's reign a wheel of iron will fall from the sky (Bernbaum, 1980, p 238). He is therefore also known as Rudra Cakrin ("wrathful one with the wheel"). The following 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tibetan painting now in the Musée Guimet shows Cakrin leading the forces of Shambhala out to overcome the barbarians:



## European Explorations of Central Asia

In 1603 the Portuguese Jesuit missionary Bento de Goes travelled north from the court of Akbar the Great to Kabul and then traversed the Hindu Kush mountains with a caravan travelling on the legendary Silk Road, finally reaching China in 1605, the first European to travel the route since Marco Polo (Wessels, 1924; MacGregor, 1970).

The first Europeans to travel north through the Himalayas to Tibet were the Jesuit missionaries Antonio de Andrade and Manuel Marques (Pereira, 1921; Wessels, 1924; MacGregor, 1970). In 1624 they travelled north from Delhi, following the Ganges River towards its source in the Himalayas. They passed through the Mana Pass, one of the highest mountain-passes in the world (5632 meters), and finally reached Tsaparang, the capital of the Buddhist Kingdom of Guge in southwestern Tibet.

The kingdom had been founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. The capital was built on prominent pyramid-shaped rock near the origins of the Sutlej River. De Andrade described the surrounding land as fertile with multiple irrigation channels. The king of Guge

allowed the Jesuits to build a small Christian chapel there. However, in 1630 the kingdom of Ladakh just to the west of Guge invaded and laid the country to waste. Today, Tsaparang remains as a striking ruin in a bleak and deserted land. Wood (2005) has suggested that this ancient Buddhist mountain refuge led to the Tibetan myth of Shambhala and the modern idea of Shangri La.



In 1661 the Austrian Jesuit Johann Grueber and his companion the Belgian Albert d'Orville travelled from northwest China into Tibet, crossing the Tangla Mountain range to visit Lhasa. They were the first Europeans to meet with the *Dalai Lama* ("ocean master"), Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, the fifth in his lineage. At the time of their visit he was supervising the construction of Potala Palace, the official residence of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 until 1959. Grueber and d'Orville then travelled south, traversed the Himalayas to arrive in Kathmandu. After exchanging gifts with the King of Nepal, they descended into India.

The following illustration shows on the left the Potala

palace, and a photograph of the Dalai Lama's quarters by Luca Galuzzi. The Dalai Lama, who has not been there since 1959, is represented by his robes. On the right is an 18<sup>th</sup> Century portrait of the Dalai Lama surrounded by episodes from his life running counterclockwise from his incarnation at the upper left. Each Dalai lama is considered a manifestation of the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara ("god who looks down") The construction of the Potala monastery is depicted in the lower left. The Dalai Lama holds in his right hand a sceptre (*vajra*, thunderbolt/diamond) and in his left a bell (*ghanta*), the two essential symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. In a lotus flower over his right shoulder is a representation of *Padmasambhava* (born from the lotus), the legendary founder of Tibetan Buddhism). In another flower over his left shoulder is Thangtong Gyalpo, a great Buddhist leader, who in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century had built iron suspension bridges to facilitate travel in Tibet.



In 1712 an Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri came to stay in Tibet (MacGregor, 1970). He travelled north through Kashmir crossing the western Himalayas through the Fotu La pass and then making the arduous journey across the Tibetan Plateau to Lhasa. He spent many years in Tibet, studying the language and customs of the Tibetans. He was the first European to engage with the ideas of Buddhism. He debated with Buddhist scholars in their own language, becoming sufficiently adept that he could present his ideas in poetic form (Lopez et al, 2017). He tried without success to disprove their concept of reincarnation (*samsara*, wandering) and their desire for meditative release (*nirvana*, extinguishment/*sunyata*, emptiness).

It is fascinating to read his work (Lopez et al, 2017;

Desideri, 2005). He understood the Buddhist concepts of *samsara* and *nirvana*, but he found them illogical because they did not fit with his Christian beliefs: since death must lead to either salvation or damnation, how could it possibly lead to reincarnation. He described the ultimate state of mind – *nirvana* – that the Buddha (“Legislator”) proposed as an escape from suffering. However, this had no attraction for him since it did not provide any greater knowledge of the God who created the universe:

In the fifth stage of supreme attainment the soul, having passed through the different stages, and being delivered from successive transmigration and purged of all those deeds which are the origin and cause of the troubles of existence, and having discarded the passions which are the cause of such deeds, and thus having destroyed their root, finally approaches this, the last stage. Thus their infernal Legislator, under the pretence of searching for the root, extirpates from the hearts of his followers the real and primary root of all things—the knowledge of God. (Desideri, 2005, p 248)

Desideri failed to consider why a Buddhist should aspire to know a Creator God since they believed the universe had existed forever.

Ippolito Desideri was the first European to visit Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash. The center of a world which has existed forever without need for any Creator:



Many explorers followed these early Jesuits into Tibet. Much more was learned about the land and the people. Intrigued by the idea of Shambhala the Russian artist and theosophist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) travelled through Central Asia and Tibet from 1925 to 1929 (Andreev, 2014; Roerich, 1930). A later expedition in 1934-5 sought Shambhala further north in Mongolia and northern China (Boyd, 2012). The theosophists claimed to have discovered the secrets of the “Masters,” an esoteric group of spiritual adepts centered in Tibet. However, there were no masters and their ideas were simply distortions of ancient Buddhist and Hindu religious thought.

Nevertheless, Roerich was a talented artist who left us with many striking paintings of the Himalayas and Tibet. The following illustrations show paintings of *Tibet* (1933), *The Mount of Five Treasures* (1933) also known as *Kangchenjunga*, and *The Song of Shambhala* (1943). The third painting shows Shambhala in the distance: a circle of mountains lit by alpenglow.





## Lost Horizon

In 1933 James Hilton, fascinated by recent accounts of travels in Tibet, wrote the novel *Lost Horizon*. This tells the story of the British diplomat Hugh Conway, who in 1931 supervises the evacuation of some European citizens from Baskul (likely Kabul, Afghanistan) on a plane that is bound for Peshawar (then part of the British Raj, now located in Pakistan to the west of Islamabad). However, the plane is hijacked and flies over the Himalaya mountains – Conway recognizes the Nanga Parbat and K2 mountains – to crash-land among what appear to be the Kun Lun mountains. The pilot dies in the crash, but the passengers survive and are taken by a monk to a valley named Shangri La. The following is the description of their arrival

To Conway, seeing it first, it might have been a vision fluttering out of that solitary rhythm in which lack of oxygen had encompassed all his faculties. It was, indeed, a strange and almost incredible sight. A group of coloured pavilions clung to the mountainside with none of the grim

deliberation of a Rhineland castle, but rather with the chance delicacy of flower-petals impaled upon a crag. It was superb and exquisite. An austere emotion carried the eye upward from milk-blue roofs to the grey rock bastion above, tremendous as the Wetterhorn above Grindelwald. Beyond that, in a dazzling pyramid, soared the snow-slopes of Karakal. It might well be, Conway thought, the most terrifying mountain-scape in the world, and he imagined the immense stress of snow and glacier against which the rock functioned as a gigantic retaining wall. Some day, perhaps, the whole mountain would split, and a half of Karakal's icy splendour come toppling into the valley. He wondered if the slightness of the risk combined with its fearfulness might even be found agreeably stimulating.

Hardly less an enticement was the downward prospect, for the mountain wall continued to drop, nearly perpendicularly, into a cleft that could only have been the result of some cataclysm in the far past. The floor of the valley, hazily distant, welcomed the eye with greenness; sheltered from winds, and surveyed rather than dominated by the lamasery, it looked to Conway a delightfully favoured place, though if it were inhabited its community must be completely isolated by the lofty and sheerly unscalable ranges on the farther side (pp 74-75).

The following is from Orson Welles' 1939 adaptation of the book for the Campbell Playhouse. The text has been abridged but the sense of wonder remains.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/arrival-in-shangri-la.mp3>

Conway discovers that the people of Shangri La grow old only very slowly. After spending some time exploring the monastery and the surrounding valley, Conway is given an audience with the High Lama, who is apparently a Catholic monk from Luxembourg who arrived in Shangri La in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and is

now about 250 years old. The lama is dying and wishes to place in Conway's hands "the heritage and destiny of Shangri La:"

>My friend it is not an arduous task that I bequeath, for our order knows only silken bonds. To be gentle and patient, to care for the riches of the mind, to preside in wisdom and secrecy while the storm rages without. (p 223)

The lama describes the present state of world affairs and the coming storm that will be worse than the Dark Ages in Europe:

For those Dark Ages were not really so very dark—they were full of flickering lanterns, and even if the light had gone out of Europe altogether, there were other rays, literally from China to Peru, at which it could have been rekindled. But the Dark Ages that are to come will cover the whole world in a single pall; there will be neither escape nor sanctuary, save such as are too secret to be found or too humble to be noticed. And Shangri-La may hope to be both of these. (p 224)

The lama predicts that Conway and Shangri La will survive the storm:

I believe that you will live through the storm. And after, through the long age of desolation, you may still live, growing older and wiser and more patient. You will conserve the fragrance of our history and add to it the touch of your own mind. You will welcome the stranger, and teach him the rule of age and wisdom; and one of these strangers, it may be, will succeed you when you are yourself very old. Beyond that, my vision weakens, but I see, at a great distance, a new world stirring in the ruins, stirring clumsily but in hopefulness, seeking its lost and legendary treasures. And they will all be here, my son, hidden behind the mountains in the valley of Blue Moon, preserved as by miracle for a new Renaissance. (p 224-5)

As he ends his speech, the lama dies. Orson Welles'

abbreviated version of the lama's speech conveys its essence:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/lama-speech-from-orson-welles.mp3>

A young member of the group that came from Baskul decides to escape Shangri La together with one of the young female postulants at the monastery. Conway warns that the young woman is much older than she appears and that she will become old if taken away from Shangri La. Nevertheless, Conway agrees to help them, and the story ends. In an epilogue, we learn that only Conway and an extremely Chinese woman arrive in Chongqing in western China. Initially amnesic, Conway later attempts to return to Shangri La. The last that anyone has heard is that he was travelling north from Thailand into the mountains.

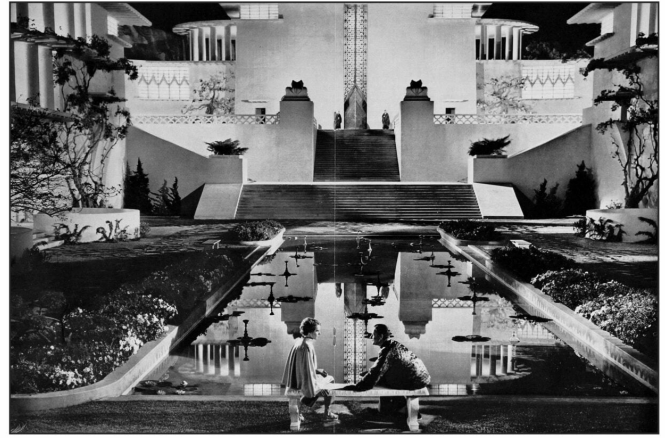
The book became immensely popular. The world at that time was descending into madness and violence, and the book offered the comforting idea that what was good would nevertheless be preserved. The narrative sections of the book were exciting, but the description of Shangri La was, like all utopias, relatively boring. One interesting aspect of Shangri La is that it appeared much more European than Asian. The East simply provided a place of sanctuary for what was the best of European thought and art. Clear evidence of racism occurs as in the High Lama's account of who should be accepted as a citizen of Shangri La (Goswami, 2023):

... our last visitor, a Japanese, arrived in 1912, and was not, to be candid, a very valuable acquisition. You see, my dear Conway, we are not quacks or charlatans; we do not and cannot guarantee success; some of our visitors derive no benefit at all from their stay here; others merely live to what might be called a normally advanced age and then die from some trifling ailment. In general we have found that Tibetans, owing to their being inured to both the altitude and other conditions, are much less sensitive than outside races; they are charming people, and we have admitted many

of them, but I doubt if more than a few will pass their hundredth year. The Chinese are a little better, but even among them we have a high percentage of failures. Our best subjects, undoubtedly, are the Nordic and Latin races of Europe, perhaps the Americans would be equally adaptable ...  
(p 170)

Hilton was ambiguous about where Shangri La was located. Conway's plane crash-landed in the Kun Lun mountains. The ancient Buddhist kingdom of Khotan was located just north of these mountains but this had been in ruins for over a thousand years. After leaving Shangri La Conway arrived in Western China, and at the end of the book he was seeking to return to Shangri La by travelling north from Thailand. These statements suggest that Shangri La was perhaps located in the mountains of Western China, perhaps near Muli, a region that had been recently visited by the American botanist and explorer Joseph Rock, and described in an article for National Geographic (Rock, 1925, Clark et al, 2019)

In 1937, Frank Capra directed a movie of *Lost Horizon* starring Ronald Colman as the diplomat, now named Robert Conway. The following stills from the movie, show the plane crash, the lamasery, the High Lama and Conway's journey back to Shangri La:



Like the book, the movie is more exciting in the narratives of the arrival in and departure from Shangri La than in the time spent in the Himalayan utopia. Though Sam Jaffe's portrayal of the High Lama is memorable, the monastery in the film is much more like the mansion of a Hollywood mogul than any Tibetan lamasery.

### **Political Upheavals**

In 1720 China expelled the Mongols from Tibet which then became a part of the Chinese Empire. In 1911 the Qing dynasty was overthrown and China became a republic. Over the ensuing years political instability in China allowed Tibet to become *de facto* independent. Isolated from the world, it maintained a feudal system of government. Though monks and aristocrats lived pampered lives, the people suffered like the serfs of medieval Europe.

In 1950 the newly founded People's Republic of China sent the People's Liberation Army to annex Tibet. According to the Chinese this was the "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet;" for the Tibetans it was the "Chinese Invasion of Tibet." At that time the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso was only 15 years old. He and his regents agreed to a new People's Government of Tibet.

In the spring of 1959, fears that the Chinese government was going to arrest the Dalai Lama led to escalating protests and demands for Tibetan independence. The People's Liberation Army quickly put down the uprising. The Dalai Lama fled to India where he now leads the Government of Tibet in Exile in Dharamshala. Over a thousand years after his forefathers had fled from India and found refuge in Tibet, he had returned.

In May 1966 China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began, and in September the Red Guards arrived in Tibet. Monasteries were looted and Tibetan leaders were subjected to public humiliation in "struggle sessions." It was only through the intervention of Zhou Enlai, that the Potala Palace was spared from the widespread destruction. The following photographs (Woeser, 2020) show the destruction at the Jokhang Temple on the upper right, a closeup of two red guards surveying the damage from the second storey of the temple on the upper left, and the struggle session of a previous mayor of Lhasa below



## Tourism

In 2001, the Chinese government renamed Zhongdian, a small city in northwestern Yunnan province, “Shangri La” after the fictional land described in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* (Kolas, 2008; Padget, 2023). Much of the population of the surrounding area is Tibetan. The government has rebuilt

several nearby Buddhist monasteries. To the north is Khawa Karpo a sacred mountain. The following illustrations below show the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery the Muli Temple, and the east face of Khawa Karpo.





In the past, believers went on pilgrimages to sacred places; in the present, tourists search for epiphany in foreign lands. Tourists may seek out the truth, but they can be easily attracted to inventions: the tomb of Hamlet in Helsingor, the balcony of Juliet in Verona, and the land of Shangri La in China. Even sacred sites are sometimes more fictional than real. Tourism is not wrong: it supports the local populace, and it increases our understanding of other people. One must just be careful to determine what is meaningful and what is not.

### **Shambhala and Shangri La**

In Tibetan Buddhism Shambhala was conceived as a place of refuge from a world full of violence at the time of the Islamic invasion of India. One day the forces of truth would

come out to overcome the barbarian hordes and re-establish teachings of the *dharma*. The prophecy need not be interpreted literally:

The real war is the struggle between the forces of enlightenment and ignorance that characterizes the path of the yogin, the tantric practitioner. When the yogin achieves adamantine gnosis, the transformative wisdom that is the goal of the of Wheel of Time path, he or she overcomes the inner barbarism that creates the evils of existence. In this esoteric, allegorical interpretation of the myth, the war between Kalkin and Islam symbolizes the radical illumination of the yogin in which correct understanding of reality dispels the darkness of ignorance. (Newman, 1995).

Shangri La was a modern fiction, also invented at a time when the world seemed to be heading into catastrophe. It shares many of the features of Shambhala. Many people have been fascinated by Shangri La. Some have sought to find it, but none have been successful:

Ultimately, Shangri-La can be understood as a Western dream of an Eastern myth – it captures a yearning for simpler times, everlasting peace, sanctuary, and abundance protected from a violent and volatile world. But this paradise must remain elusive, for seeking it misunderstands and spurns Hilton's fantasy. Like the most apt utopia, it is literally "nowhere" (Padget, 2023).

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# T. S. Eliot: The Cocktail Party

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote *The Cocktail Party* in 1948. The play begins with people making foolish conversation at a cocktail party but soon proceeds to a discussion of what it means to be married to another person, and what is required to become a saint. It was initially performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949 with Alec Guinness as the Unidentified Guest and Irene Worth as Celia, the prospective saint, and then moved to Broadway in 1950, where it received a Tony Award for Best Play. Critical reviews were mixed, but audiences were more enthusiastic. The play was revived briefly in 1968 with Guinness as both director and actor.

## **Synopsis**

The play opens on the remnants of a cocktail party. The hostess Lavinia Chamberlayne had been called away, and her husband Edward had tried to cancel the party, but had been unable to contact some of the invitees: two elderly guests Julia and Alex, two youngsters, Celia and Peter, and one unidentified guest not known to the others, who enjoys his gin and water and listens bemused to the cocktail chatter. The party soon breaks up, but Edward asks the unidentified guest to stay behind because he needs someone to talk to. He confesses that Lavinia has left him. After some discussion he realizes that, although he has toyed with the idea of freedom, he wants her to return. The unidentified guest promises to bring Lavinia back the next day and leaves, singing a verse from the Irish song *One-Eyed Riley*:

Unidentified Guest: *As I was drinkin' gin and water,  
And me bein' the One-Eyed Riley,  
Who came in but the landlord's daughter  
And she took my heart entirely.*

You will keep our appointment?

Edward: I shall keep it.

Unidentified Guest: *Tooryooly toory-iley,*

## *What's the matter with One-Eyed Riley*

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/one-eyed-riley.mp3>

This and subsequent audio clips are from the Decca recording of the play. Some sections of the play were omitted for the recording which was limited to the length of two LPs.

Other guests return with various excuses, but mainly because they wish to talk to Edward. Peter wants his advice about Celia, with whom he has become enamoured though she does not return his feelings. Edward suggests that Peter accept the fact that that romance is not going anywhere, and that Peter should go to California to pursue his dreams of working in film. After Peter leaves, Celia returns to talk to Edward, and we realize that she and Edward have been having an affair. However, now that Lavinia has apparently left Edward and made him available, Celia realizes that she does not wish to continue their relationship.

The next afternoon everyone returns to the Chamberlayne's. Lavinia is brought back to Edward as promised by the unidentified guest. The other guests have been summoned by telegram. Peter has decided to leave to work in films in California. Celia says goodbye to Peter and to the Chamberlaynes, Lavinia and Edward are left alone to discuss their relationship. Lavinia suggests that her husband should see a psychiatrist.

The play then skips to several weeks later at the consulting offices of the unidentified guest, who it turns out is the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. We find out that Julia and Alex have worked with Sir Henry to get Edward, Lavinia, and Celia to come to his office. Initially Sir Henry talks with Edward alone and then Lavinia is brought in. Lavinia and Edward discuss their relationship. Lavinia knew about Edward's affair, but Edward had not realized that Lavinia had at the

same time been infatuated with young Peter. Both now have no one to love but themselves, and they decide to return home together.

Celia then comes in to consult with Sir Henry. She explains that she has begun to feel "an awareness of solitude," a separation from a world with which she has become disillusioned. Furthermore, she has experienced a "sense of sin" that does not seem to have much to do with morality. Rather it appears to be a feeling that he is not doing what she was meant to do. She needs something to devote herself to. Sir Henry agrees to help her find her calling. After Celia leaves, Julia and Alex return and the three toast together, first to Lavinia and Edward with the "words for the building of the hearth," and then to Celia with the "words for those who go upon a journey."

The Guardians mention Peter as also needing their help. Perhaps he might represent a separate road to salvation – that of the artist.

The final act of the play occurs two years later just before another cocktail party at the Chamberlaynes. The same people are there as in the first act. We learn that Lavinia and Edward remain together, and that Peter has become successful in films. Alex reports that Celia had joined an austere Christian nursing order and had gone to Kinkanja to care for patients dying from a pestilence. Agitators had convinced the natives that they could only stop the pestilence by slaughtering the Christians. During the subsequent insurrection, Celia had been crucified on an anthill. Lavinia asks Sir Henry why he appears unconcerned about this, and he confesses that when he first met Celia he had a premonition of her violent death, He had not known exactly how this would occur, but he had acquiesced to Celia's decision and prepared her for her destiny.

Julia, Alex and Sir Henry leave to attend another party. The

other guests remain as the Chamberlayne's cocktail party begins.

The following illustration shows a 1948 photograph of Eliot by Walter Stoneman on the left and photographs of Alec Guinness and Irene Worth from the original New York production on the right.



### **Sources for the Play**

In his 1951 essay on *Poetry and Drama*, Eliot noted that he had used Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) "as a point of departure" for *The Cocktail Party*. In Euripides, in gratitude for the

hospitality shown to him, Apollo had granted king Admetus the privilege of living past the time the Fates had decreed for his death. The only problem was that someone else had to die in his place. Admetus' devoted wife Alcestis agrees to take his place. Apollo tries to get Thanatos, the God of Death, not to take Alcestis, but Death is implacable. Apollo then asks Heracles to wrestle with Death and brings Alcestis back to Admetus. Eliot clearly takes from Euripides the story of Edward and Lavinia's relationship. And we must presume that the unidentified guest in the first act is Heracles, a hero who liked to drink and to sing.

As the play progresses, the ideas of Heraclitus (c 500 BCE) come to the fore (Jones, 1960, p 132; Lesher, 2013). Just before he returns Lavinia to Edward, the unidentified guest points out that everything and everyone changes – you cannot step twice into the same river.

Ah, but we die to each other daily.  
What we know of other people  
Is only our memory of the moments  
During which we knew them. And they have changed since  
then.  
To pretend that they and we are the same  
Is a useful and convenient social convention  
Which must sometimes be broken. We must also remember  
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.

In his play Eliot grafts onto these Classical ideas the Christian narrative of Celia's martyrdom. In this, Sir Henry takes the role of a Priest, who stands in place of God, rather than that of a Hero, who acts for the Gods. Celia confesses to him that she has felt a "sense of sin" – something that is completely Christian, and incompatible with Classical ideas. Sir Henry informs Celia of her options and the dangers she might face, before allowing her to choose her vocation. His

ability to foresee Celia's death is similar to the doctrine

of free will, in which God can see what will happen, but where the choice is still up to the individual (Rexine, 1965, p 25)

Eliot may have also used several modern sources for the ideas he considered in *The Cocktail Party*. Two recent productions had used a supernatural being to alter the course of human events. In Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's guardian angel Clarence Odbody talks him out of suicide and convinces him to return to his family (Llorens-Cubedo, 2022). In Eliot's play the supernatural intervention is more austere, and the outcome ultimately tragic, despite the play being called a comedy. In J. B. Priestley's 1947 play *The Inspector Calls*, a police inspector interrupts a family dinner party and points out to those present how their actions had led to the death of a young woman. As the play ends, the inspector vanishes: he was simply a voice asking for justice. Priestley calls out the entitled; Eliot reconciles them to their fate. Alec Guinness had acted as one of the family in the first production of Priestley's play. In J.-P. Sartre's play *Huis Clos* ("No Exit," performed in 1944, published in 1947) one of the main characters exclaims *L'enfer, c'est les autres* ("Hell is other people"). In *The Cocktail Party* Eliot has Edward rebut this claim:

There was a door  
And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle.  
Why could I not walk out of my prison?  
What is hell? Hell is oneself,  
Hell is alone, the other figures in it  
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from  
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

Edward's description of his state of mind fits more easily with the existentialist idea that we alone are responsible for our actions. As Sartre said in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* ("Existentialism is a Humanism," 1946), we are "condemned to be free"

## **The Path to Sainthood**

In the second act of the play, Sir Henry, with the assistance of Julia and Alex, reconciles Lavinia and Edward to their life together, and sets Celia on her path to sainthood. Carol Smith (1967, pp 157-158) points out that there are two ways to salvation in Christianity:

In the history of Christian mysticism from the time of the writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, there have traditionally been two paths by which the soul could come to God—the Negative Way and the Affirmative Way. Followers of the Negative Way believe that God may be reached by detaching the soul from the love of all things that are not God, or, in the terms Eliot most frequently chose to use, by following the council of St. John of the Cross to divest oneself of the love of created beings. The Way of Affirmation, on the other hand, consists of the recognition that because the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent, everything in the created world is an imperfect image of Him. Thus, all created things are to be accepted in love as images of the Divine. The Way of Affirmation, while less rigorous, has its own implicit difficulties, for the price of loving created beings ultimately involves suffering and loss.

Sir Henry brings Lavinia and Edward together and points out to them that they both had felt a lack of love in their marriage, both had sought out relationships with others, and both had realized that these relationships had no hope of success. They must become reconciled to their own limitations; they must relearn how to live lovingly with each other. Theirs is the Affirmative Way.

Celia presents a completely different problem for Sir Henry. She has two symptoms. The first is “an awareness of solitude:”

I don't mean simply  
That there's been a crash: though indeed there has  
been.  
It isn't simply the end of an illusion  
In the ordinary way, or being ditched.  
Of course that's something that's always happening  
To all sorts of people, and they get over it  
More or less, or at least they carry on.  
No. I mean that what has happened has made me aware  
That I've always been alone. That one always is alone.  
Not simply the ending of one relationship,  
Not even simply finding that it never existed—  
But a revelation about my relationship  
With *everybody*. Do you know —  
It no longer seems worth while to *speak* to anyone!

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/celia-alone.mp3>

The second is “a sense of sin”

It's not the feeling of anything I've ever *done*,  
Which I might get away from, or of anything in me  
I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure  
Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;  
And I feel I must . . . *atone*—is that the word?

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/celia-atone.mp3>

Sir Henry informs her that she can return to normal life

The condition is  
curable.  
But the form of treatment must be your own choice:  
I cannot choose for you. If that is what you wish,  
I can reconcile you to the human condition,  
The condition to which some who have gone as far as you  
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember

The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,  
Maintain themselves by the common routine,  
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,  
Become tolerant of themselves and others,  
Giving and taking, in the usual actions  
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;  
Are contented with the morning that separates  
And with the evening that brings together  
For casual talk before the fire  
Two people who know they do not understand each other,  
Breeding children whom they do not understand  
And who will never understand them.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/condition-is-curable.mp3>

Or

There is another way, if you have the courage.  
The first I could describe in familiar terms  
Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it,  
Illustrated, more or less, in lives of those about us.  
The second is unknown, and so requires faith—  
The kind of faith that issues from despair.  
The destination cannot be described;  
You will know very little until you get there;  
You will journey blind. But the way leads towards  
possession  
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/another-way.mp3>

Celia chooses the second option – the negative way to salvation – and Sir Henry makes the necessary arrangements.

**The Guardians**

In *The Cocktail Party* the characters of Julia, Alex, and Sir Henry bring about the most important elements of the plot. The word “guardian” comes up initially when Edward is describing to Celia how some force within him – his “tougher self” – prevents him from changing the course of his life. Later in their conversation Celia wonders whether Julia might be serving as her guardian. At the end of the play’s second scene, Edward and Celia make a toast to the “Guardians.” We are never sure of their roles. They might be angels or magi: spiritual advisers who intervene in a person’s life to make sure that some transcendent goal is attained (Hammerschmidt, 1981). Though they appear to serve some greater good, we are not completely sure that they are not demonic. For want of any clear name, they have come to be known as the “Guardians.”

The fact that Sir Henry sings a song about “One-Eyed Riley” raises the idea that “In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king” (Jones, 1960, p 151). This old proverb was collected by Erasmus in his *Adagia* (1500) – *in regione caecorum rex est luscus* – but its origins go back at least as far as the *Genesis Rabbah* (~500 CE). The following illustration (I believe from the 1968 revival at the Chichester Festival) emphasizes this aspect of the guardians: Sir Henry has a monocle, and one of Julia’s eyes is patched. The Guardians are offering a libation to the success of their charges:

Alex: The words for the building of the hearth.

Sir Henry: Let them build the hearth  
Under the protection of the stars.

Alex: Let them place a chair each side of it.

Julia: May the holy ones watch over the roof,  
May the Moon herself influence the bed.

Alex: The words for those who go upon a journey.

Sir Henry: Protector of travellers

Bless the road.

Alex: Watch over her in the desert.

Watch over her in the mountain.

Watch over her in the labyrinth.

Watch over her by the quicksand.

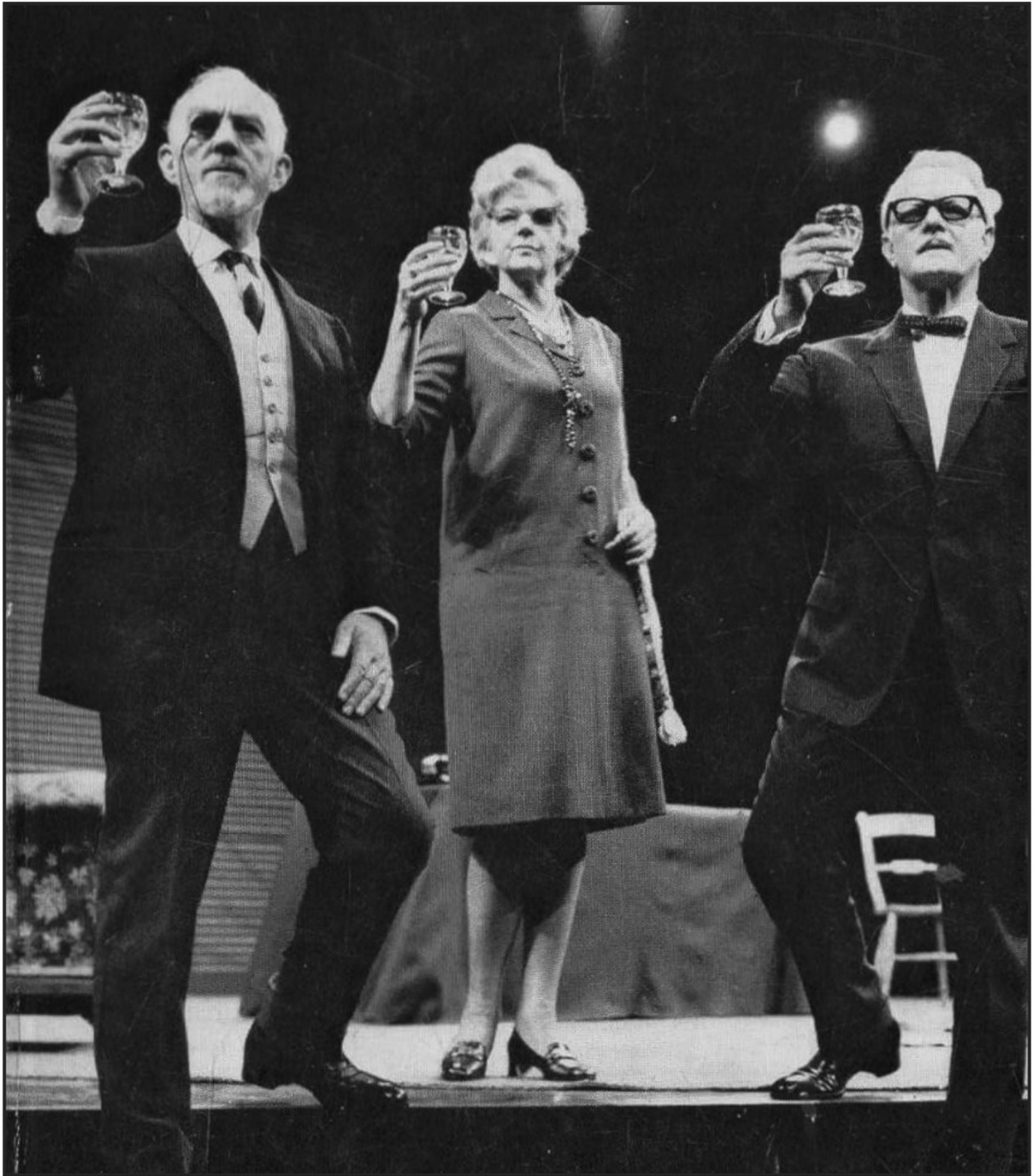
Julia: Protect her from the Voices

Protect her from the Visions

Protect her in the tumult

Protect her in the silence.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/libation.mp3>



### **A Meaningless Martyrdom**

In the short final act of the play, we learn that Celia had joined an austere nursing order and had travelled to Kinkanja to care for dying patients. The natives had somehow come to believe that she was the cause rather than the cure for the pestilence. Celia had then been crucified on an anthill. Her death appears as meaningless as it was horrible:

And just for a handful of plague-stricken natives  
Who would have died anyway

Sir Henry appears undisturbed by her death. When challenged by Lavinia he remarks

When I first met Miss Coplestone, in this room,  
I saw the image, standing behind her chair,  
Of a Celia Coplestone whose face showed the  
astonishment  
Of the first five minutes after a violent death.  
If this strains your credulity, Mrs. Chamberlayne,  
I ask you only to entertain the suggestion  
That a sudden intuition, in certain minds,  
May tend to express itself at once in a picture.  
That happens to me, sometimes. So it was obvious  
That here was a woman under sentence of death.  
That was her destiny. The only question  
Then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know;  
Because it was for her to choose the way of life  
To lead to death, and, without knowing the end  
Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she  
chose.  
I did not know that she would die in this way;  
*She* did not know. So all that I could do  
Was to direct her in the way of preparation.  
That way, which she accepted, led to this death.  
And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?

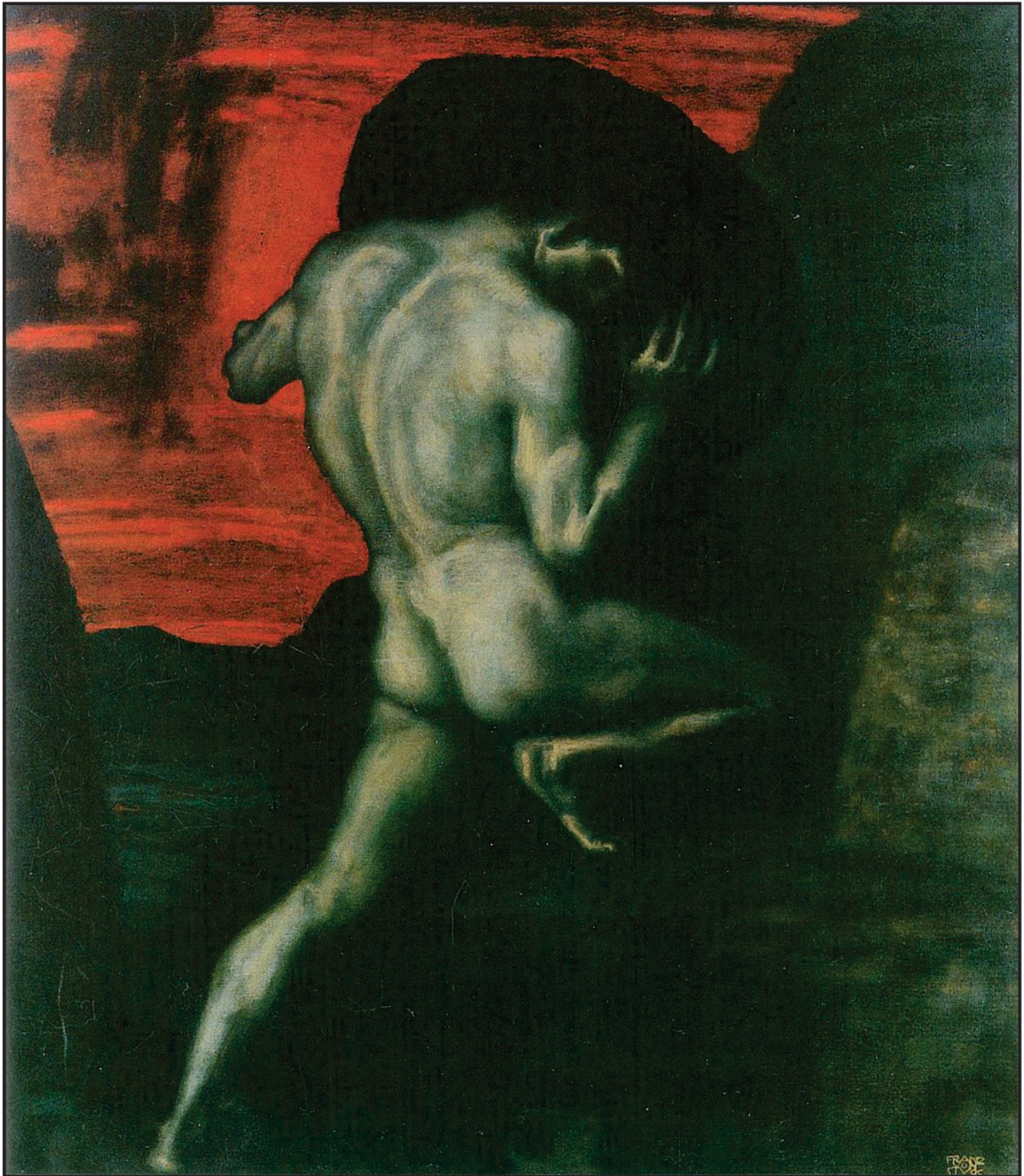
The story of Celia's death borders on the absurd. The idea that human life is essentially absurd had just been introduced by Albert Camus in his 1942 book *Le mythe de Sisyphe* ("The Myth of Sisyphus"). The main idea is that human life is much like that of Sisyphus, who tried to stop death and make man immortal. His punishment was to roll an immense boulder up to the top of a hill. Just before it reaches the summit, the boulder rolls back down into the valley and Sisyphus must begin his task again. This he must do for all eternity. At the

end of his essay Camus remarks that

Je laisse Sisyphe au bas de, la montagne! On retrouve toujours son fardeau. Mais Sisyphe enseigne la fidélité supérieure qui nie les dieux et soulève les rochers. Lui aussi juge que tout est bien. Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile. Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.

[I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy].

The following illustration shows a 1920 painting of Sisyphus by the German painter Franz von Stuck:



In the late 1940s and the 1950s plays like Genet's *The Maids* (1947), Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1950) ushered in the theatre of the absurd, wherein human beings learned to survive in a world without meaning. Eliot's play is a harbinger of this type of drama: Celia's fate is absurd – her death served no useful purpose.

## The Magus Zoroaster

Sir Henry tries to explain his lack of concern about Celia's death by quoting from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). The lines are spoken by Mother Earth who encourages Prometheus to tell his story but to be aware that there are two worlds – one in which we live, and one which contains our unfulfilled dreams and ideas

*Ere Babylon was dust  
The magus Zoroaster, my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.  
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.  
For know there are two worlds of life and death:  
One that which thou beholdest; but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more!*

The next lines (unquoted by Sir Henry) are

Dreams and the light imaginings of men,  
And all that faith creates or love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.

Zoroaster was a mythical Persian religious leader (magus) who may have lived around 1000 BCE. The story of the meeting with his double marks a time when he realized that he had to live up to what he was meant to be (Ranald & Ranald, 1961).

The story of Zoroaster and his image of what he was meant to be was depicted by the Mexican surrealist painter Leonora Carrington in 1960: The following illustration shows her painting. The two enlargements on the right show the supernatural powers (bull and lion), and the mirror writing on the ground that quotes from Shelley. The latter has been lightened and mirror-inverted to make the text legible. The

conflict between goodness and evil appear to be represented by the bird and snake at the feet of Zoroaster.



## The Problems of Sainthood

As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century came to an end, the idea of the saint devoting himself or herself to the poor and dying became a little tarnished. Probably the most famous of the modern saints was Mother Teresa (1910-1997), who devoted her life to the poor of Calcutta.

The journalist Christopher Hitchens criticized her contributions in a TV program entitled *Mother Teresa: Hell's Angel* (1994). The following are two excerpts:

Mother Teresa's cult of death and suffering depends for its effect on the most vulnerable and helpless: abandoned babies, say, or the terminally ill, who supply the occasion for charity and the raw material for compassion. (near minute 6).

The Teresa cult is now a missionary multinational with an annual turnover over tens of millions. If concentrated in Calcutta, that would certainly support a large hospital and perhaps even make a noticeable difference. But Mother Teresa has chosen instead to spread her franchise very thinly. To her the convent and the catechism matter more than the clinics. (near minute 28)

This was followed by a book and articles (Hitchens, 1995; 2003). Hitchens was also dismayed that Teresa and the Catholic Church continued to reject birth control – something that would have been far more effective in reducing the number of abandoned babies that Teresa cared for. Despite Hitchens' comments, the Catholic Church rapidly advanced Mother Teresa to sainthood: she was beatified in 2003 and canonized in 2016.

Hitchens' critiques have been supported by others (Larivée et al, 2013; Bandyopadhyay, 2018). Perhaps the most significant defect in her mission in Calcutta was that she did not provide even the rudiments of modern medical care. Compassion is essential to medicine, but dying patients should not be denied the benefit of pharmacological pain relief. Mother Teresa also seemed to represent an obsolete approach to rectifying the ills of poverty. Some adjustment of the world's inequalities would be of far more benefit than simply treating the poor with compassion. Giving charity to those whom we exploit does not remove the stain of the exploitation.

The following illustration shows saint and critic:



## Personal Epilogue

Jones (1960, p 123) quoted from a 1945 interview of T. S. Eliot by J. P. Hogan

When, in an interview, Eliot was asked, 'How would you, out of the bitter experience of the present time, wish mankind to develop?' he answered:

'I should speak of a greater spiritual consciousness, which is not asking that everybody should rise to the same conscious level, but that everybody should have some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those more exceptional people who can proceed further in spiritual knowledge than most of us can.'

I remember being quite taken by Celia when I first read the play as a young man. I had developed some modicum of spiritual consciousness and feelings similar to those reported by Celia

– an awareness of solitude and a sense of sin. I wondered whether I might meet someone like Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly who would show me what I should do with my life. I never saw a production of the play, and I never met anyone that might have been my Guardian. And although when I first read of Celia's death it seemed noble and right, I now feel it was foolish and mistaken.

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# Laozi: the Nature of the Dao

Laozi (老子, *lǎozǐ*, “the old master”) was a legendary character from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE who put together a collection of philosophical and ethical sayings that has come to be known as the *Dàodéjing* (道德經 simplified: 道德经; or *Tao Te Ching* in the Wade-Giles romanization, “The Book of the Way and of Virtue”) or *Laozi* after the name of the author. The illustration shows a depiction of Laozi from a scroll by Sheng Mao. Following the discovery of early versions of the text written on silk and bamboo slips dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (Chan, 2016, 2025), several new translations and annotated editions have been published. This essay presents a close reading of the first chapter.

## The First Chapter

The following is the Chinese text of the first chapter (which can be followed at the websites of the Chinese Text Project or Wikibooks) and a recent English translation by Fischer (2023).

道可道也，非恒道也。  
名可名也，非恒名也。  
無名，萬物之始。  
有名，萬物之母。  
無有，天地之始。  
有名，萬物之母。

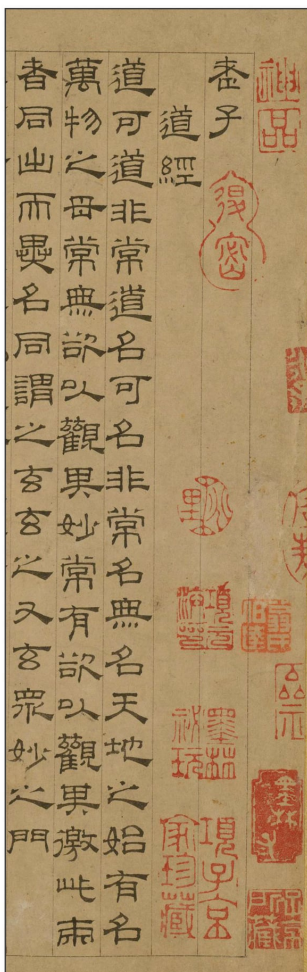
The way that can be (fully) conveyed is not the abiding Way; a name that can be (fully) descriptive is not an abiding name.

“Formlessness” is the name of the beginning of Heaven and Earth; “form” is the name of the mother of the myriad things.

Thus, if you abide in formlessness, you may thereby observe its wonders; and if you abide in form, you may thereby observe its manifestations.

These two appear together but have different names. This togetherness, we call it “mysterious” mystery and more mystery: the gateway to many wonders.

The following illustration shows on the left the first chapter in clerical script from a scroll by Sheng Mao (生毛, fl. 14<sup>th</sup> Century) in the Palace Museum in Beijing, and on the right in regular script from a scroll by Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫, 1254–1322). The latter includes a portrait of Laozi as a benevolent old gentleman.



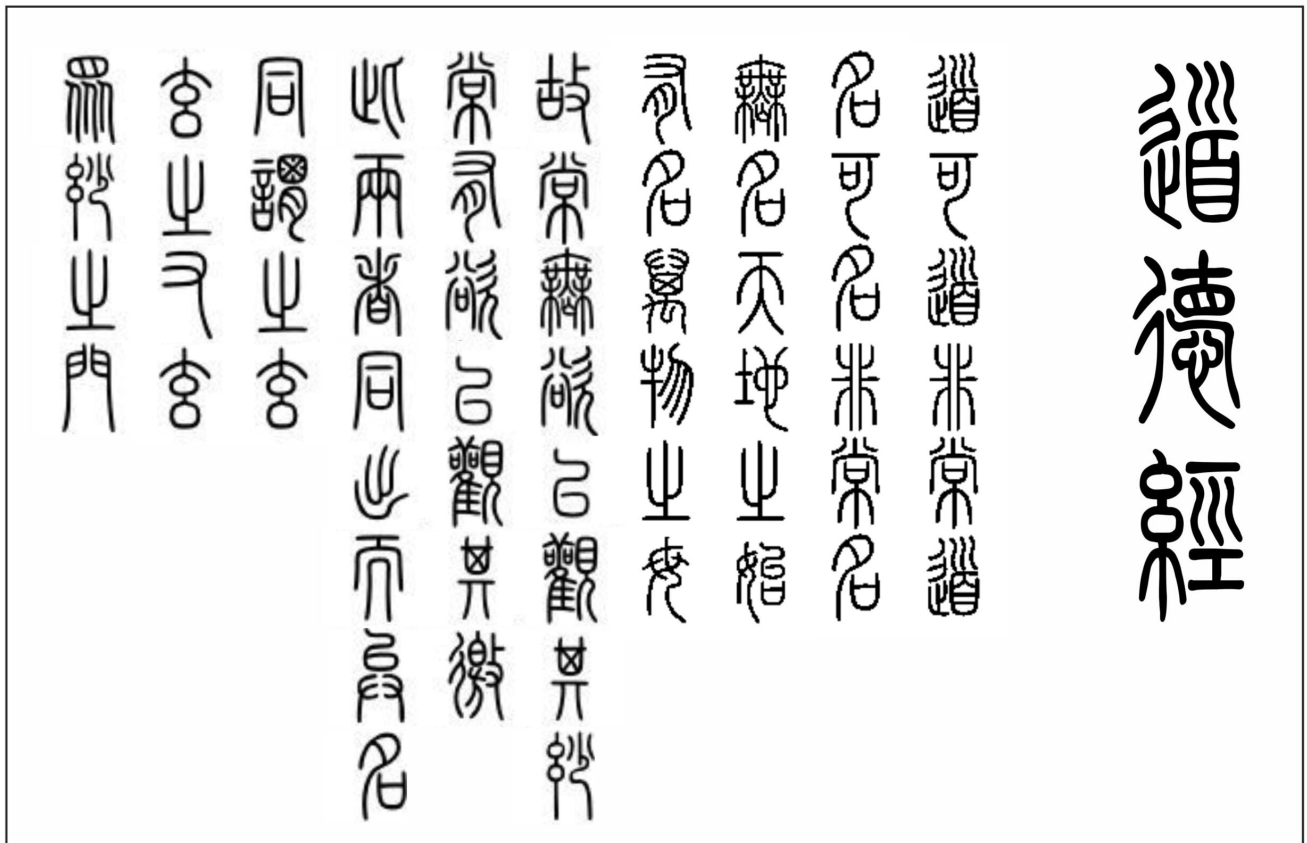
The following is a recitation of the first chapter from the

dao-de-jing website, and the text in pinyin romanization:

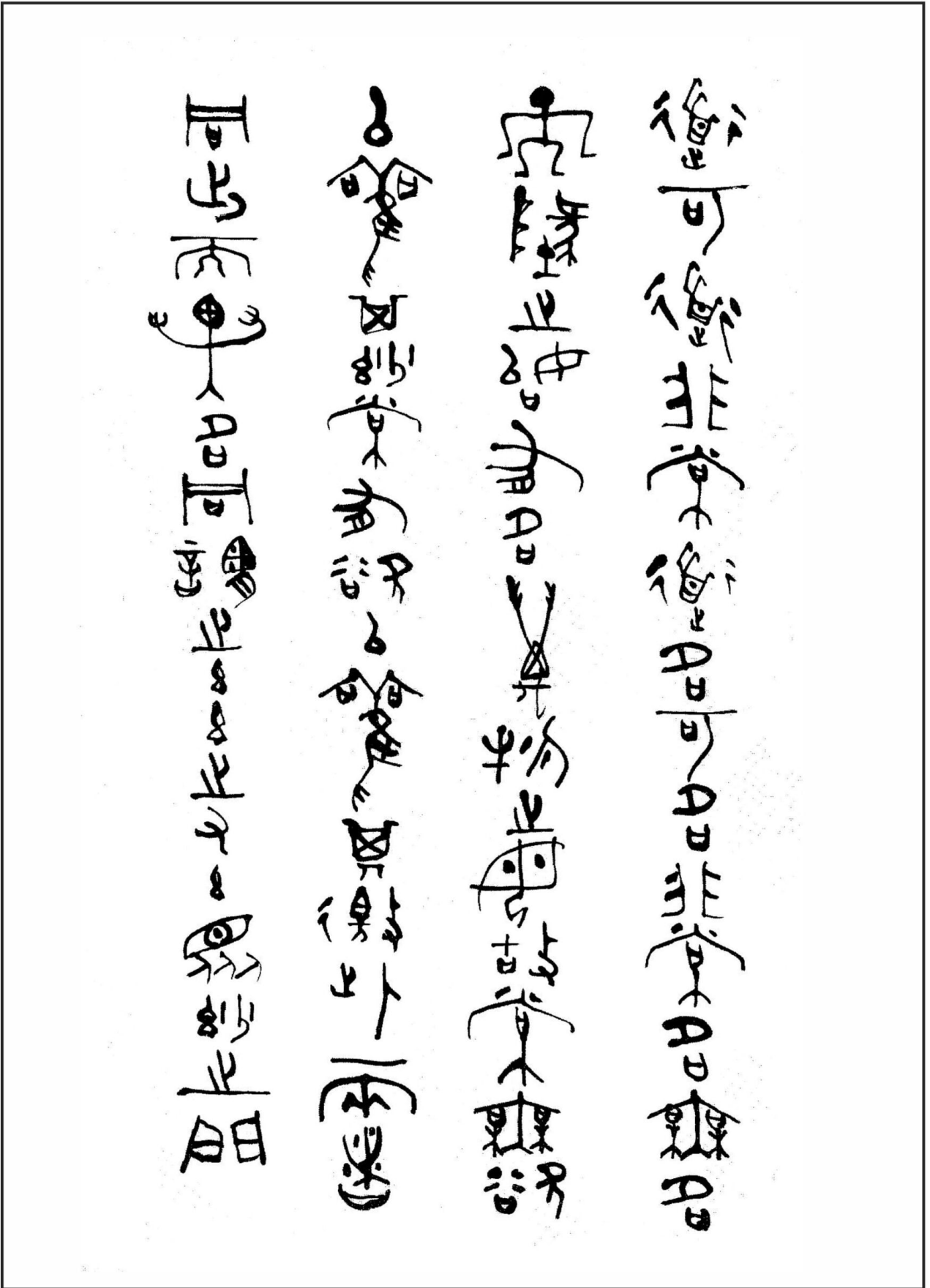
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/chapter-1-audio.mp3>

dào kě dào fēi cháng dào  
míng kě míng fēi cháng míng  
wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ  
yǒu míng wàn wù zhī mǔ  
gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào  
cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiào  
cǐ liǎng zhě tóng chū ér yì míng  
tóng wèi zhī xuán xuán zhī yòu xuán  
zhòng miào zhī mén

The original book of sayings was likely handed down orally. The earliest extant versions were written in clerical script. However, it is possible that there might have been versions of the book written in the Small Seal script, such as imagined in the following illustration:



Or even versions written in the earlier Great Seal or Bronze script, which was used at the time that the book was supposedly created. The illustration on the right shows a Great Seal version of Chapter 1 as imagined by Wilson (2010):



This essay will concern itself with the first chapter (or

verse) of Laozi's book. Red Pine quotes De Qing (1546-1623), a Buddhist commentator, on this chapter:

Laozi's philosophy is all here. The remaining 5000 words only expand on this first verse.

## The Ineffable Dao

The first section of the chapter concerns the difficulty in expressing the nature of Dao:

道	可	道	非	恆	道
<i>dào</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>dào</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>dào</i>
way, path road speak doctrine	can may	speak	not	constant enduring (常, <i>cháng</i> eternal)	way

名	可	名	非	恆	名
<i>míng</i>	<i>kě</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>fēi</i>	<i>héng</i>	<i>míng</i>
name describe	can	name	not	constant eternal	name

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

Much of Daoist philosophy is related to the opposing concepts of *Yīn* (阴 simplified 阴 lunar, feminine, passive, cool) and *Yáng* (阳 simplified 阳 solar, masculine, active, warm). The prototypical examples of Yin and Yan are the shady north side of a hill and its sunny south side. Yin and Yang are the two opposite but interacting forces that underly the harmony of the



universe. They can be represented by the *tàijítú* (太极图, utmost extreme symbol), one version of which is shown on the right. The small contrasting circles within in each half show how the opposites are complementary rather than antagonistic.

The first two lines of the *Daodejing* provides two parallel statements on the *Dao* and on its name. These lines thus concern the actual *Dao* and its abstract name, both of which cannot be fully understood by finite beings. Actual and abstract can be considered as one of the dualities composing Yin and Yang.

The first line uses the character 道 *dao* in three ways: first as a noun describing a way or path, second as a verb in the sense of speaking (telling how to follow a path), and third to express the concept of an eternal *Dao* underlying all things. The second line acts in the same way for the character 名 (name). All languages can use the same word as noun and verb, e.g. “change” in English, but this is more common in Chinese.

In later versions of the *Daodejing* the character 恒 (constant) was replaced by 恒 (with a similar meaning), probably because the former was the name of the fifth emperor of the Han dynasty, Lui Heng (203-157 BCE), and therefore a taboo word.

The *Dao* is eternal or everlasting. However,

While everlasting seems apt, describing the Dao as unchanging does not fit. This is because Laozi's Dao serves as the substance of the cosmos and fundamental source and basis of the things of the world. It is eternally transforming and dynamic. (Chen et al., 2020, p 47)

The following is a description of the *Dao* by *Zhuangzi* (莊子, Master Zhuang, Chuang-tzu in the Wade-Giles romanization) a Daoist philosopher who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE (Palmer et al. 1996, pp 50-51):

The great Tao has both reality and expression,  
but it does nothing and has no form.  
It can be passed on, but not received.  
It can be obtained, but not seen.  
It is rooted in its own self,  
existing before Heaven and Earth were born, indeed for  
eternity.  
It gives divinity to the spirits and to the gods.  
It brought to life Heaven and Earth.  
It was before the primal air, yet it cannot be called  
lofty;  
it was below all space and direction, yet it cannot be  
called deep.  
It comes before either Heaven or Earth, yet it cannot be  
called old.

Alan Watts (1975, pp 41-42) commented on the difficulty in describing the *Dao*:

Thus the Tao is the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature, and I call it the Watercourse Way because both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu use the flow of water as its principal metaphor. But it is of the essence of their philosophy that the Tao cannot be defined in words and is not an idea or concept. As Chuang-tzu says, "It may be attained but not seen," or, in other words, felt but not conceived, intuited but not categorized, divined but not

explained. In a similar way, air and water cannot be cut or clutched, and their flow ceases when they are enclosed. There is no way of putting a stream in a bucket or the wind in a bag. Verbal description and definition may be compared to the latitudinal and longitudinal nets which we visualize upon the earth and the heavens to define and enclose the positions of mountains and lakes, planets and stars. But earth and heaven are not cut by these imaginary strings. As Wittgenstein [*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922] said, "Laws, like the law of causation, etc., treat of the network and not of what the network describes."

Chapter 32 of the *Daodejing* ends with the statement (translated by Pepper and Wang, 2021):

Dao in this world is like a stream in the valley  
Flowing into a river,  
into the sea

## **Being and Nothingness**

The second part of the first chapter presents a brief cosmogony

無(无)	名	天	地	之	始
<i>wú</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>dì</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>shǐ</i>
not nothing nonbeing without empty	name	heaven sky	earth ground	of (genitive marker)	begin start

有	名	萬(万)	物	之	母
<i>yǒu</i>	<i>míng</i>	<i>wàn</i>	<i>wù</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mǔ</i>
have possess exist being	name	myriad 10000	thing object matter	of	mother

These lines have been interpreted in two distinct ways. The first

reads *wu* 无 [non-presence, lacking, non-being] and *you* 有 [presence, having, being] as the subjects of statements, and name (名) as part of the predicate. The alternative reading takes *wuming* 无名 [without name, nameless] and *youming* 有名 [having name] as the subjects of the statements (Chen et al. 2020, pp 48-49).

Thus we could have

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth  
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

or

Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth  
Named is the mother of all things.

Since Yin and Yang is basic to Laozi's thinking, I have opted to use the first reading which stresses the dichotomy of being

and non-being. Similar ideas are stated in Chapter 40 of the Daodejing:

□□□□□□□□□□

All the things in the world are generated from *you* □,  
*you* □ is generated from *wu* □

There is a difference between □□ (heaven and earth), which encompasses the whole cosmos, and □□ (myriad things), which refers to the many different things within it. However, this distinction may not be necessary since some early sources used □□ in both lines. (Huang, 2024, p 14)

The dichotomy between *you* and *wu* (Hall & Ames, 1998) reflects a foundational issue in philosophy: the nature of Being. This goes back to some of the very earliest records of human thought. The creation hymn of the Hindu RgVeda (composed around 2000 BCE) states that at the beginning of time there was neither existence nor non-existence. The ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) worried about “What is and what is not.” Shakespeare’s Hamlet considered “To be, or not to be, that is the question” and Jean-Paul Sartre compared *L’être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness).

The following is a comment by *Zhuangzi* (Palmer et al. 1996, p 15) on the origins of the universe:

There is the beginning; there is not as yet any beginning of the beginning; there is not as yet a beginning not to be a beginning of the beginning. There is what is, and there is what is not, and it is not easy to say whether what is not, is not; or whether what is, is.

## **The Mother of All Things**

The fourth line of the first chapter proposes a feminine

origin (道, mother) for all things. This idea is repeated in Chapter 6 which describes 玄牝 (xuán pìn, the mysterious female):

谷神不死  
是謂玄牝  
玄牝之門  
是謂天地之根

The spirit of the valley does not die; it has been called the mysterious female

The gate of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.

It is continuous and uninterrupted; its functioning is inexhaustible.

(my translation)

Chapter 25 mentions the 天母 (tiān xià mǔ, the mother of all under heaven):

有物混成  
先天地生  
寂兮寥兮  
獨立而不改

Which has been translated (Wu, 2016, p 57)

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, born before Heaven and Earth,

Soundless and formless, independent and unchanging.

Revolving endlessly, it may be thought of as the Mother of all under Heaven.

I do not know its name; so I just call it *Dao*, and arbitrarily name it Great

Anderson (2021) has noted how the *Daodejing* fully recognizes the female nature of the *Dao*. Most of the world's religions are androcentric: they ignore the divine feminine. At its beginning Daoism understood that the world is based on interacting male and female forces. And that creation comes

from the female.

## From One to Many

The first chapter distinguishes between being and nothingness (*yǒu* 有 and *wu* 无). The 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter recounts the actual process of creation (translation by Wu, 2016):

道生一，  
一生二，  
二生三，  
三生万物。

*Dao* gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two;  
Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to Ten Thousand things.  
All things have Yin on their back and Yang in their embrace;  
The *Qi* of the two converge and become harmony.

The idea of *Yin* on their back and *Yang* in their embrace refers to how we prefer to sit facing the sun with the shadow at our back.

The basic cosmogeny is that the primordial energy of the universe – *qì* (气) – becomes differentiated into two opposing forces of *yin* and *yang*. These then interact to produce the myriad things of the world that exist in harmony *hé* (和).

The one-two-three progression probably just represents the evolution of the many things in the universe. However, Fischer (2023) also considers the possibility

that the “one, two, three” refer to physical energies (一), Yin-Yang, and harmonized physical energies (二). That is: one, a semblance of a form emerges from formless-ness; two, the physical energy that constitutes that semblance is

influenced by the Yin and Yang states that characterize all physical energies; three, once the semblance has morphed, chrysalis-like, into its final “harmonious” form, it has become a stable entity.

## Mystery and Manifestation

The third section of the first chapter has led to several different translations.

故	常	無(无)	欲	以	觀(观)	其	妙
<i>gù</i>	<i>cháng</i>	<i>wú</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>miào</i>
reason cause old	eternal normal usual	without not nothing empty	desire wish want	by in order to	observe see	its	mystery wonder

常	有	欲	以	觀(观)	其	徼
<i>cháng</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>yù</i>	<i>yǐ</i>	<i>guān</i>	<i>qí</i>	<i>jiào</i>
eternal normal usual	have possess exist being	desire wish want	by in order to	observe	its	border edge

Some editions (e.g. Huang, 2024) substitute 眇 (*miǎo*, tiny, minute) for 妙 and 徼 (*jiào*, pursue) for 妙. This leads to the idea of the development from minute origins toward the mature things of the present.

Another difficult is whether the character 欲 acts as a noun meaning “desire” or as an adverb casting the following parts of the sentences in the subjunctive as “may observe.” This would make 欲 and 觀 the subjects of the sentences rather than

modifiers of 无. The Fischer translation quoted at the beginning of this essay follows this approach, as do the versions of Yu (2003), Chen et al. (2020) and Wu (2016).

Translators have more commonly considered that these two sentences compare what happens with or without desire (e.g., Addiss & Lombardo;1993; Leguin & Seaton, 1998; Lin, 2020; Liu, 2024; Loy, 1985; Red Pine, 2004; Wilson 2012). This approach fits with the Buddhist idea that one can find release from suffering by relinquishing desire. As pointed out by Watts (1975, p 96), however, the idea that virtue comes from an absence of desire is paradoxical:

Trying to get rid of desire is, surely, desiring not to desire.

If we follow this approach to the translation, we find that Laozi makes no moral judgement about desire: he just points out the differences between having it or not. Both are possible and both serve a purpose. Relinquishing desire can allow the mind a mystical vision of the origin of everything. Exercising desire allows us to understand the nature of the things of the world:

Free from desire, you can realize the mystery;  
Following desire, you can see the manifestations.

However, if the chapter is to be consistent, it is probably best to keep to the duality of *wu* 无(无) and *you* 有:

**Therefore in nothingness you may see the mystery;  
In being you may see the manifestations.**

Nevertheless, the different translations are not that distinct. A person can see the mystery by attuning his or her mind to nothingness. One way of doing this might be to relinquish desire.

## Yin and Yang

The fourth section of the chapter tells us these two states are just different aspects of the universe, part of the union of interacting opposites that makes up the concept of Yin-Yang:

此	兩	者	同	出	而	異(异)	名
<i>cǐ</i>	<i>liǎng</i>	<i>zhě</i>	<i>tóng</i>	<i>chū</i>	<i>ér</i>	<i>yì</i>	<i>míng</i>
this	two	this	same	exit	yet	different	name
these	different	(referring to things)	identical together	out	but	separate	describe

同	謂(谓)	之	玄	玄	之	又	玄
<i>tóng</i>	<i>wèi</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
same	say	of	mystery	mystery	of	again	mystery
identical together	tell name		black deep			also	

Whether these lines refer to (☐) the concepts of being and nothingness or to the states of desire and non-desire depends on how the previous lines were translated. I have opted for the former.

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea  
This is the mystery of mysteries**

## The Gateway

The final section of the chapter proclaims the mystery of the *Dao*:

玄	之	又	玄
<i>xuán</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>yòu</i>	<i>xuán</i>
mystery dark	of	again	mystery dark

眾(众)	妙	之	門(門)
<i>zhòng</i>	<i>miào</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>mén</i>
many multitude	mystery wonder marvel	of	gate door entrance

*Laozi* uses two words for mystery:

□ (*xuán*) is *dark, mysterious, unseen, withdrawn, deep*. But  
 □ (*miào*) is lighter, a wonderful mystery. (Pepper & Wang,  
 2021, p 17)

We can stress the “darkness,” as in Denecke (2010, p 223)

Where the dark is darker than darkness, that’s the Gateway  
 of Subtleties.

Or simply stay with “mystery”

**Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders**

## **Relations to Western Pantheism**

The concept of the Dao has many similarities to Western  
 pantheism, particularly to that proposed by Spinoza (Stamatov,  
 2019, 2025). Fu (1973, p 390) remarks

Both philosophers think that the ultimate way of freeing  
 oneself from human bondage and attaining total emancipation is  
 to have an ontological insight (Lao Tzu) into or intellectual

intuition (Spinoza) of the as-it-is-ness of the world and man.

One significant difference is that Spinoza clearly names the principle underlying the universe as God.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was particularly intrigued by the writings of the Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (1610-1689), a Dominican friar who had spent many years in China and had described the principles of Daoism for Western readers (Murray, 2020). Coleridge and his close colleague William Wordsworth (1770-1850) were responsible for initiating the movement of Romanticism in English literature Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* describes a romantic pantheism that is very similar to the Dao of Laozi:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

## **Envoi**

We can conclude by putting together the complete chapter:

**The way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.**

**Nothingness is the name for the origin of heaven and earth  
Being is the name for the mother of all things.**

**Therefore through nothingness you can see the mystery;  
Through being you can see the manifestations.**

**These two are but different aspects of the same idea  
This is the mystery of mysteries**

**Mystery of mystery: the gateway to many wonders.**

The character is our introduction to the *Dao*. The character 道 is composed of two radicals. In the upper right is a representation of the head 首 (*shǒu*), and in the left and below is a radical denoting walking 辵 (*chuò*). The combination perhaps represents “to go ahead.” As such it depicts the principle that underlies the universe: the way things should and do turn out.

The *Dao* has several meanings:

In some places the character “*dao* 道” refers to a metaphysical entity understood as ultimate true existence. In other places, it seems to refer to a type of rule or principle, often reflected in natural laws or patterns. In yet other locations, *dao* refers to standards, norms or exemplary models for human life. (Chen et al, 2020, p 2),

Fu (1973) describes six dimensions of the *Dao*:

- (i) reality – a metaphysical symbol of things as they are
- (ii) origin – the source of all there is
- (iii) principle – that whereby all things become what they are
- (iv) function – the laws governing the processes of change
- (v) virtue – that which completes the being of each and every individual
- (vi) technique – the way in which people are governed

The *Dao* in metaphysical terms should be considered in relation to time. As time passes, things change. Our science indicates that such changes are not random but follow general rules. Most people also believe that these changes ultimately progress toward something: that the universe has some purpose and is in the process of becoming better. The *Dao* instantiates

these two ideas. It is the overall principle leading the universe toward harmony. Human beings can live their lives best by attuning themselves to this movement.

The final illustration shows on the right □written in an ecstatic cursive script by Al Chung-liang Huang for Alan Watt's book on *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975). The fluidity of the calligraphy fits with the idea of water finding its way. On the left is shown the first chapter of the *Daodejing* as created by Lee Chi-Chang for the same book:

道可道非常道 名可名非常名  
無名天地之始有名萬物之母故  
常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀其  
微此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄  
玄之又玄衆妙之門



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