

Bai Juyi: Pearls Falling on Jade

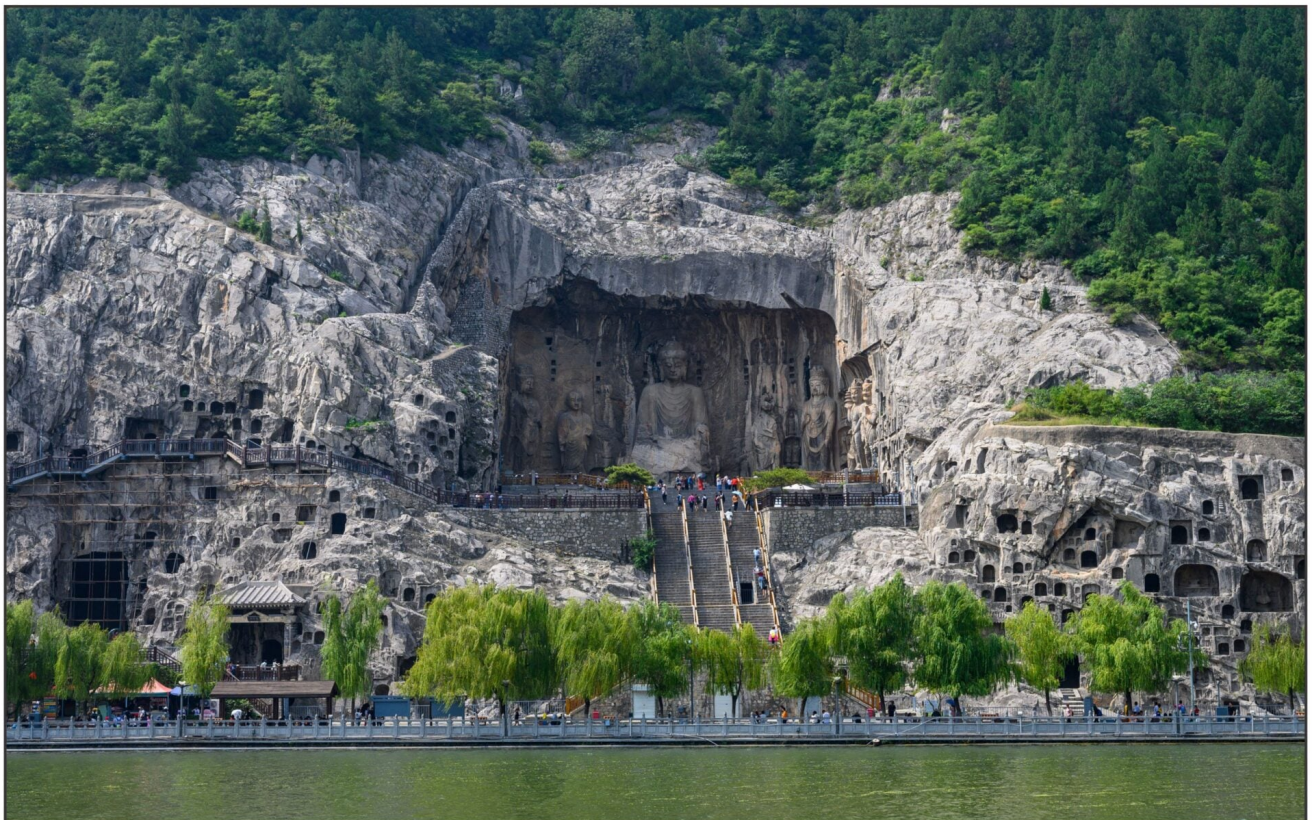
Bai Juyi (白居易, pinyin *Bǎi Jūyì*, or Po Chū-i in Wade-Gilles transliteration, 772-846 CE) was a Chinese poet. In 815, after inappropriately advising the emperor, he was exiled from the capital Chang'an to Jiujiang on the Yangtze River. One night, at a farewell party on the river for a friend, he heard 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* (乐天, 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 (白居易). 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.

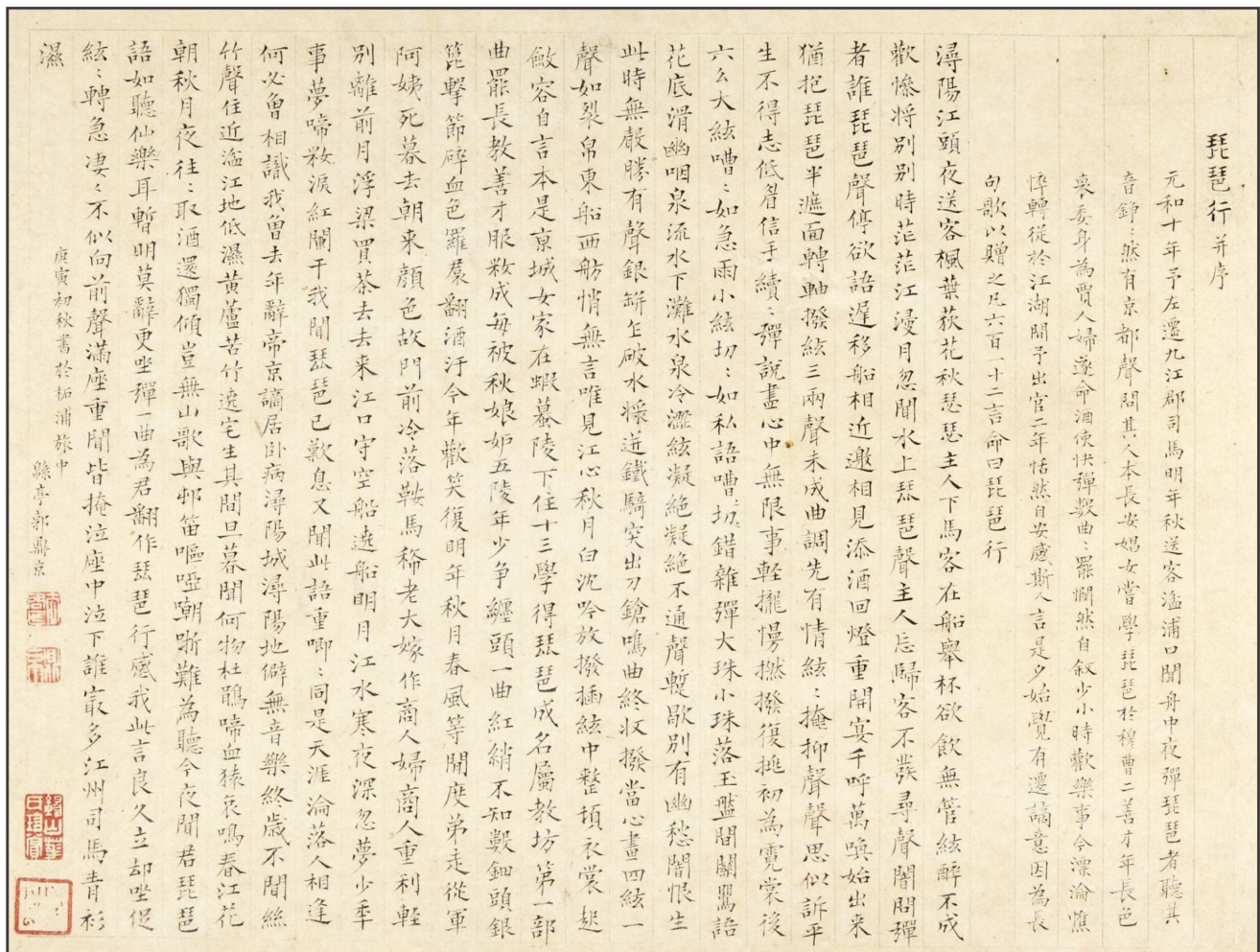
The following illustration shows in the upper left a statue of Bai Juyi at the Pipa Pavilion in Jiujiang, in the upper right a posthumous portrait of the poet by Chen Hongshou, a 17th Century painter, and at the bottom a view of the Longmen caves.



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 (17th 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:

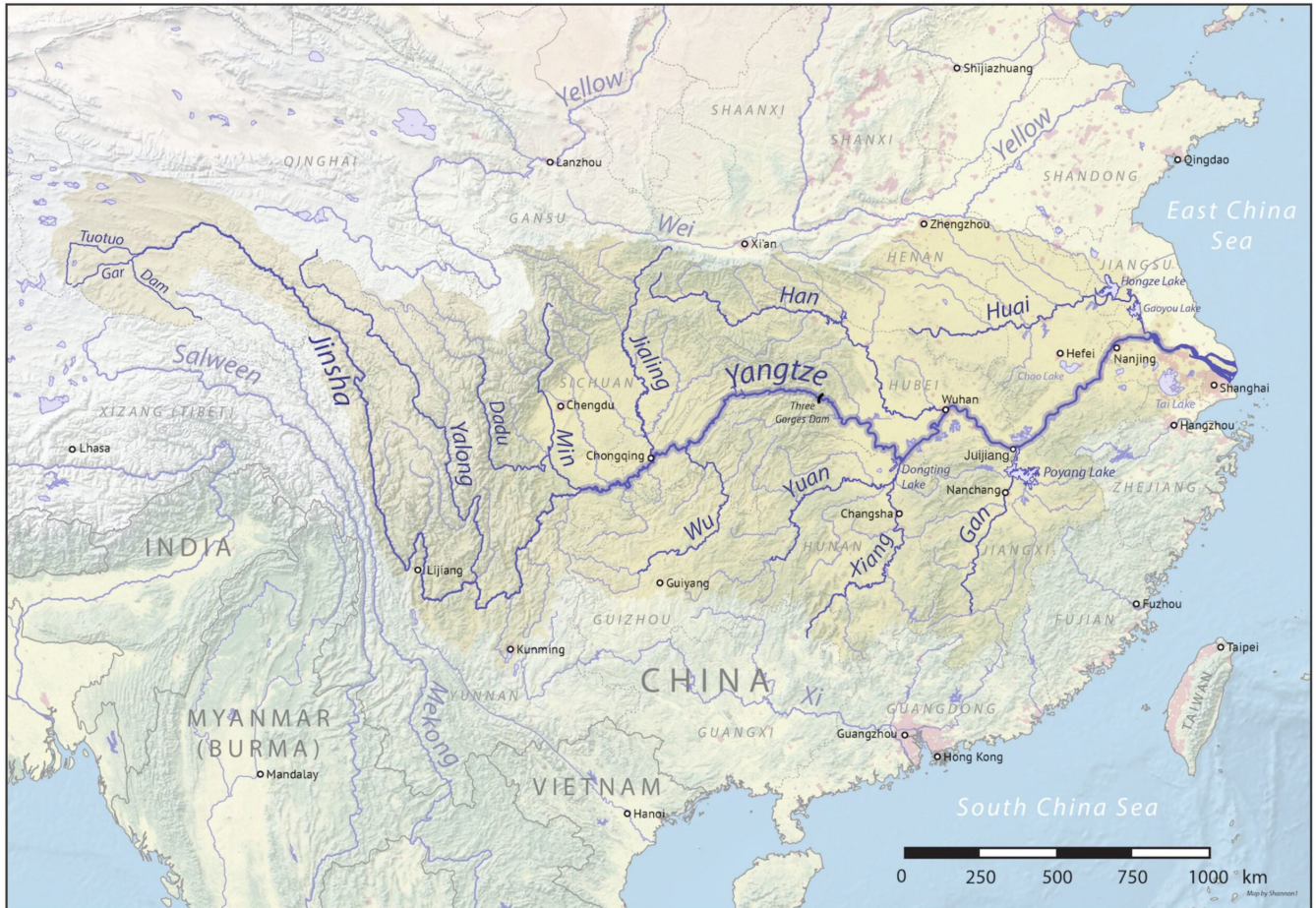
同	是	天	涯	淪	落	人
<i>tóng</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>tiān</i>	<i>yá</i>	<i>lún</i>	<i>luò</i>	<i>rén</i>
same	exist correct	sky heaven	border shore	perish fall	missing decline	person

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

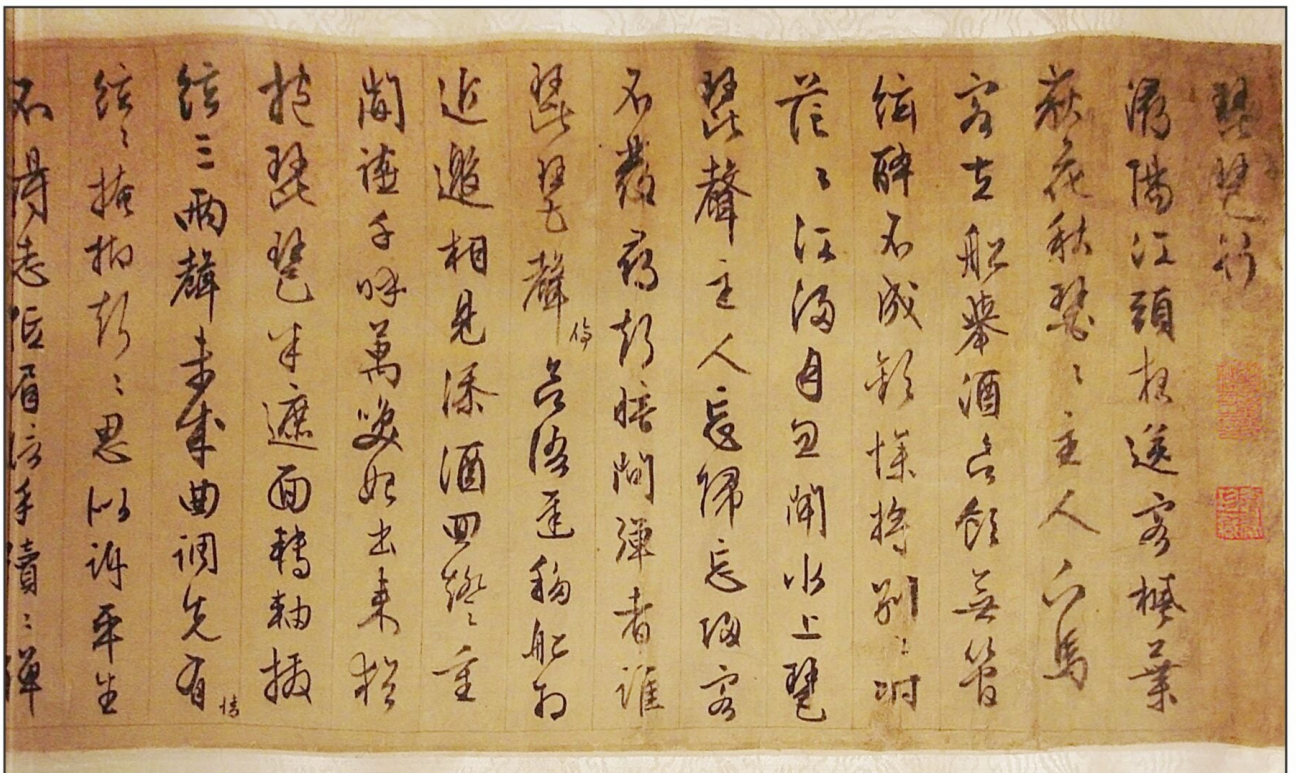
third longest river in the world, is about 1.5 km wide at Jiujiang. Lake Pongyi, which was once called Pengli Lake, the largest freshwater lake in China, drains into the Yangtze at the eastern edge of the city:



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:



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>shēng</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.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/pipa-music-2.mp3>

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>sheng</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).

靜夜思

A Tranquil Night

窗前明月光

Before my bed a pool of light

疑是地上霜

Is it hoarfrost upon the ground

舉頭望明月

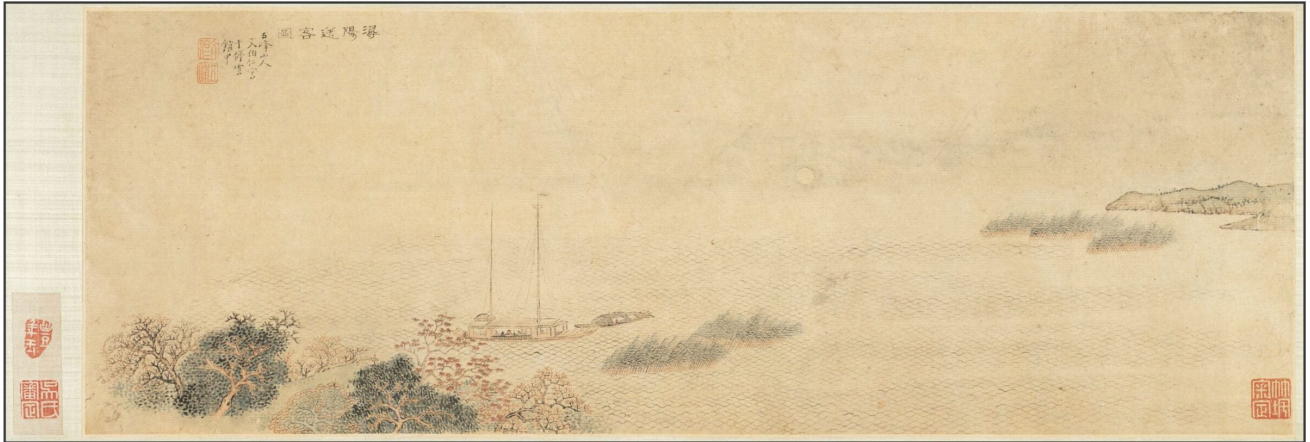
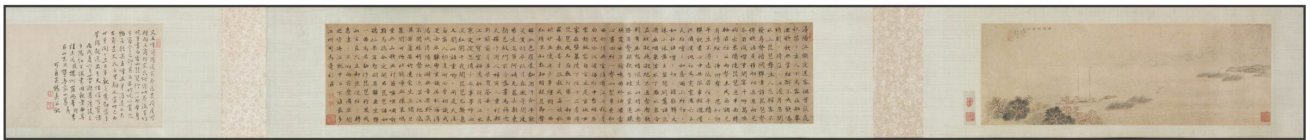
Eyes raised I see the moon so bright

低頭思故鄉

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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