

# Wang Wei: the Wheel River Poems

Wang Wei (王维; traditional 王維; pinyin, *Wáng Wéi*; 699–761) was a Chinese musician, painter, and poet during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907). He was a devout Buddhist and used the courtesy name Wang Weimojie in homage to the early Buddhist teacher and bodhisattva *Vimalakirti* (Chinese name 維摩詰 *Wéimójié*). *Vimalakirti* taught the practice of *sunyata* (Sanskrit, emptiness; Chinese 空 *Kōng xìng*), a meditative state wherein the mind is emptied of the self and becomes one with the universe. After a tumultuous life, Wang Wei retired to his villa on the Wang River about 40 km southeast of the imperial capital Chang'an (present day Xi'an). There he composed the *Wǎngchuān jí* (輞川集 The Wheel River Collection): a set of twenty quatrains describing various locations near his villa. Each quatrain was accompanied by a reply from his protégé Pei Di (裴迪; pinyin, *Péi Dí*, 714-?).

## A Poet of the High Tang

Wang Wei was born to an aristocratic family in Shanxi province in northeast China. He was a precocious child and quickly showed his talents for music and painting. By 721 he had passed his imperial exams and was appointed as Court Musician in Chang'an. Over the following years he continued with his music and painting, while serving in various official positions in the imperial court. In 755, the general *An Lushan* instigated a revolt against the emperor. Within a year the rebels advanced on Chang'an. The emperor and his court fled over the mountains to Sichuan in the West, but Wang Wei was captured and taken to the rebel capital of Luoyang some 350 km to the East. The imperial forces regrouped and defeated the rebels in 757, releasing Wang Wei. However, since Wang Wei had been forced to serve in the rebel government, he was indicted for treason. After finally being exonerated, Wang Wei retired

to his villa on the Wang River, where he wrote the poems in the *Wangchuan Ji* (Wheel River Collection). Wang Wei died in 761. Followers of *An Lushan* continued fighting against the empire until 763.

Although plagued by intense civil disorder, these times were remarkable for the glorious poetry that was written. Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770) and Wang Wei were the three greatest poets of a period that became known as the “High Tang” (Owen, 1981). Each of these poets had their own view of life:

Wang Wei became known as the Poet-Buddha, Li Bai as the Poet-Immortal, and Du Fu as the Poet-Sage, respectively symbolizing Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian approaches in their poems. Accordingly, Wang Wei was characterized as the contemplative, Li Bai as the visionary, and Du Fu as the social conscience of the age. (Cartelli, 2019).

However, Cartelli notes that these differences are far from categorical. The religious threads of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are fully intertwined both in Chinese society (Ching, 1993; Hinton, 2020) and in the poetry of these three writers.

Wang Wei’s nature poetry simply describes his experience of the world with little if any interpretation or metaphorical explanation:

Wang’s quatrains often ended in enigmatic understatement – a statement, a question, or an image that was so simple or seemed so incomplete that the reader was compelled to look beneath it for the importance. (Owen, 1981, p 38)

Owen (1981, p 45) describes Wang Wei’s state of mind as “unselfconsciousness” and relates it to the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* (emptiness). Only if the mind is emptied can one

become aware of truth. And truth perhaps differs between East and West:

in contrast to the West, in the Chinese tradition truth usually lay not behind a mask of orphic complexity but rather behind a mask of guileless simplicity. To draw on this philosophical tradition was to alter entirely the way in which poetry was read: what was said was no longer necessarily all that was meant, and the surface mood might not be the real mood. Particularly in the *Wang Stream Collection*, we find poems that are visually complete but intellectually incomplete, which tease the reader to decipher some hidden truth. (Owen, 1981, p 39)

Yip (1972, p xi) remarks

In a mode of consciousness in which there is no disturbance of intellectual impositions, no hurry-scurry to establish causal relations, each object or moment is given the fullest chance to emerge in spotlighting distinctiveness very much the way everything appears keenly fresh in the orbit of a child's vision.

## **Paintings**

Although Wang Wei was a renowned painter, none of his paintings have survived to the present day. Nevertheless, later artists made many copies and interpretations of his work. One of his most famous paintings was a scroll depicting the various locations mentioned in the *Wangchuan Ji*. This essay will include images from three such copies: one by Guo Zhongshu (929-279) now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, a copy of the Zhongshu scroll in The Freer Gallery in Washington, and a much later scroll by Wang Yuanqi, dated 1711, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. An intriguing website provides images of a scroll together with translations of the *Wangchun Ji* poems.

## Wheel River Poems

The *Wǎngchūān jí* (望川集) is a collection of poems containing 20 quatrains (四句 *juéjù*, literal meaning “cut-off lines”) by Wang Wei and 20 replies by his young protégé Pei Di. Each line is composed of 5 characters in a format is known as 五言 (*Wǔyán*). The poems describe various locations near Wang Wei’s villa on the Wang River. The name of the river (望 *Wǎng*, a different character from that in the poet’s name) specifically refers to the rim (felloes or felly) of a wagon wheel, and Hinton (2006) translates the title “Wheel-Rim River.” The river was so named

because of its small eddies and whirlpools which resembled wheels, or because of the spot at the mouth of the river where the current flowed around an island like a wheel (Wagner, 1981, p 88).

Many authors have translated Wang Wei’s contributions to the collection (e.g., Yu, 1980; Barnstone et al., 1991; Hinton, 2020), but only a few include the replies of Pei Di (Yip, 1972, Powell, 2019; Rouzer & Nugent, 2020). The general evaluation has been that Pei Di’s poems were inferior to those Wang Wei. However, Pei Di was a talented young scholar, and a close reading of the poems shows that the pairing of the poems enhances their overall effect (Warner, 2005). This essay will consider five of the poems in the collection. For consistency and because of the sensitivity and precision of the translations, the English versions will all be from *Hiding the Universe* by Wai-lim Yip (1972). The poems will be presented with Wang Wei on the left and Pei Di on the right. The translations will then be followed by the Chinese text, with Wang Wei above and Pei Di below.

### Deer Park

Empty mountain: no man is seen,  
out, cold mountain in view.  
But voices of men are heard.

Day in, day

A



at Wang Wei (1987). Chinese characters often have many meanings, and can be translated as nouns, verbs or adjectives, depending on the context. One difficulty with Wang Wei is his lack of a personal viewpoint. The ending of the first line is therefore better translated “no one is seen” rather than “I see no one.”

The presence of a deer park on Wang Wei’s estate was probably related to Buddhist teachings. Gautama gave his first sermon, wherein he delineated the four noble truths and the eightfold way, at a deer park in Sarnath in Northern India. The Chinese character 柵 *chái* now means “firewood,” although it likely once also meant a “fence,” such as that enclosing a park.

The opening word of the poem 空, *kōng* means empty or emptiness. Wang Wei is clearly alluding to the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* (Yang, 2001; Stepien, 2014).

The characters 返照 translated as “returning or reflected sunlight” might simply mean the light from the setting sun.

The complementary poem by Pei Di makes Wang Wei’s feeling of emptiness extend over time as well as space. He also comments on the difference between the human wayfarer who knows nothing of the way of the forest, and the deer who are naturally attuned to its secrets.

The following illustration of the Deer Park is from the Zhongshu scroll in Tapei:



## Lakeside Pavilion

Light barge to welcome guests.  
Freely from the lake.  
Before windows, toasting bottles of wine.  
Hibiscus blooms on all four sides.

The window is brimming with ripples.  
The moon, by itself, lingers, back and forth.  
At the gorge, bursts of monkey cries.  
Wind sends them into the room.

臨                    湖                    亭  
lín overlook hú lake                    tíng pavilion

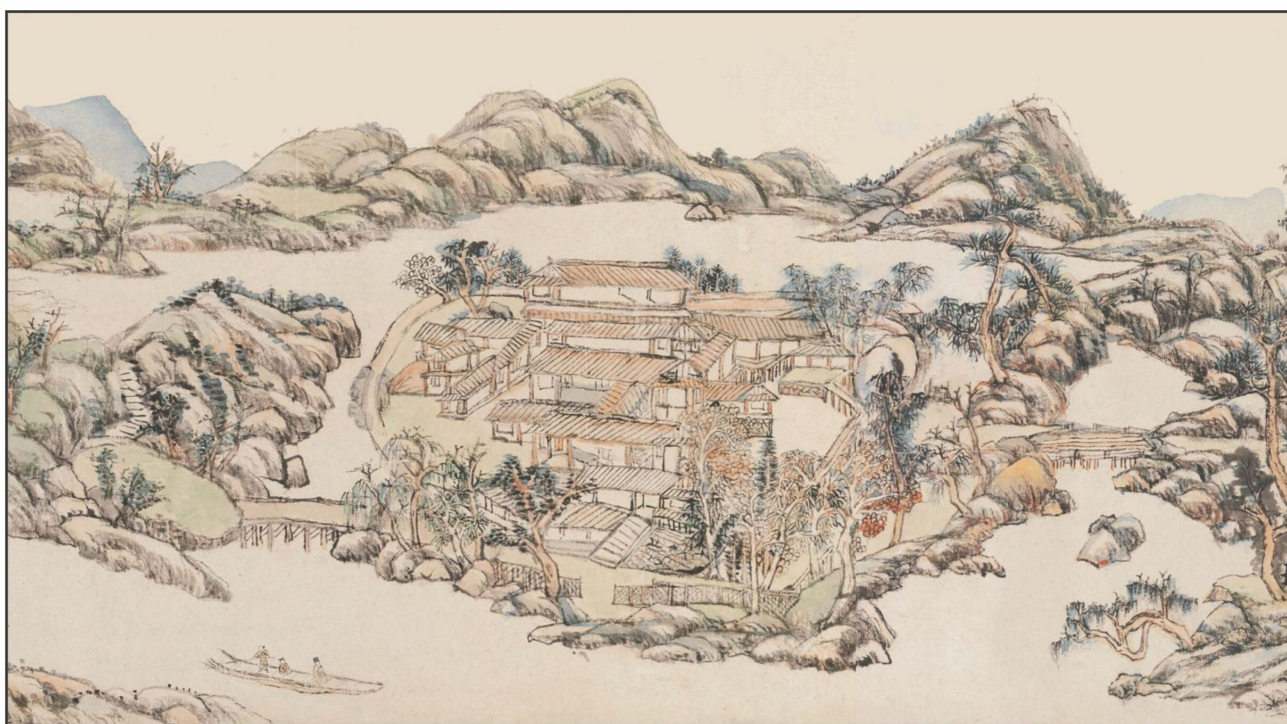
輕                    舸                    迎                    上客  
qīng light                    gě boat/barge yíng welcome shàng high/above kè guest  
悠                    悠                    湖                    上                    來  
yōu distant                    yōu distant                    hú lake                    shàng high/above                    lái come  
當                    軒                    對                    尊                    酒  
dāng face                    xuān window                    duì deal with                    zūn pot                    jiǔ wine  
四                    面                    芙蓉                    開  
sì four                    miàn face/aspect                    fúróng hibiscus                    kāi bloom/open

當                    軒                    彌                    滉                    漾  
dāng face                    xuān window                    mí fill                    huàng deep                    yàng ripple  
孤                    月                    正                    徘徊                    徊  
gū alone                    yuè moon                    zhèng up(right)                    páihuái walk back and forth  
谷                    口                    猿                    聲                    發  
gǔ gorge                    kǒu mouth                    yuán monkey                    shēng voice                    fā emit  
風                    傳                    入                    戶                    來  
fēng wind                    chuán deliver                    rù enter                    hù door                    lái come



The Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus x rosa sinensis*) is the most common variant of this showy flower. In China it often symbolizes success. The poem by Pei Di seems to occur after the party with the invited guests. The lake is now windswept, and the lonely cries of monkeys echo through the night.

The following illustration shows the lakeside pavilion in the Wang Yuanqi scroll:



## Lake Yi

Flute music rides beyond water's reach.  
lake has no limits.

Vast emptiness:

Sun at dusk: to see my lord off.  
glimmer: sky's hue merges.

Blue

On the lake, merely turning my head:  
with a long whistle:

Moor the boat

Mountain's green-curling, white clouds.  
clear winds come.

From four sides

欵                    湖  
yī Yi                hú lake

吹	簫	凌	極	浦
chuī blow/play	xiāo flute	líng cross	jí end/furthest	pǔ shore
日	暮	送	夫	君
rì sun/day	mù sunset	sòng see off	fū man	jūn lord
湖	上	一	迴	首
hú lake	shàng above	yī one/alone	huí rotate/turn	shǒu head
山	青	卷	白	雲
shān mountain	qīng blue/green	juǎn scroll/curve	bái white	yún cloud

空	闊	湖	水	廣
kōng empty	kuò wide	hú lake	shuǐ water	guǎng vast
青	熒	天	色	同
qīng blue/green	yíng shine	tiān sky/heaven	sè color	tóng same
艤	舟	一	長	嘯
yī moor (boat)	zhōu boat	yī one/alone	cháng long	xiào whistle
四	面	來	清	風
sì four	miàn face/aspect	lái come/arrive	qīng clear/pure	fēng wind

The Chinese character 青 *qīng* can describe colors ranging from light green to deep blue. Many languages do not discriminate between green and blue, and the term “grue” has been used for this range of colors (Bogushevsaya, 2015). One then takes the color from the context: in this pair of poems, one assumes that Wang Wei’s mountain is green and that Pei Di’s sky is blue. Modern Chinese has evolved the terms 藍 *lán* for blue and 綠 *lǜ* for green, but the older word is still used. In following illustration of Lake Yi from Wang Yuanqi’s scroll, the colors blue and green shade into each other. Pei Di mentions in his poem how the colors of the sky and the lake merge.



Wang Wei's poem is set in peaceful weather. By the time of Pei Di's quatrain, a blustery wind has risen. The sound of the flute has changed to the more strident whistle.

### **Bamboo Grove**

I sit alone among dark bamboos,	Have been to
the Bamboo Grove,	
Strum the lute and unloose my voice.	Daily to get
close to the Way.	
Grove so deep, no one knows.	In and out,
only mountain birds.	
The moon comes to shine upon me.	Deep solitude: no
men of the world.	

竹                      里                      館  
zhú bamboo              lǐ within              guǎn guesthouse

獨                      坐                      幽                      篁                      裏  
dú alone              zuò sit              yōu dark              huáng bamboo grove              lǐ within  
彈                      琴                      復                      長                      嘯  
tán play (music)              qín zither              fù again/return              zhǎng increase              xiào hum  
深                      林                      人                      不                      知  
shēn deep              lín forest              rén person              bù not              zhī know  
明                      月                      來                      相                      照  
míng bright              yuè moon              lái come              xiàng appear              zhào shine

來                      過                      竹                      里                      館  
lái come              guò pass by              zhú bamboo              lǐ within              guǎn guesthouse  
日                      與                      道                      相                      親  
rì day/sun              yǔ approach              dào way/path              xiàng appear              qīn close  
出                      入                      惟                      山                      鳥  
chū exit              rù enter              wéi but/only              shān mountain              niǎo bird  
幽                      深                      無                      世                      人  
yōu quiet              shēn deep              wú not (hing)              shì world              rén person

The Chinese *guqin* is a plucked seven-stringed instrument favored by Chinese scholars. The illustration below shows an example (c 1700) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The upper board of *wutong* wood represents heaven, and the bottom board of *zi* wood earth. The 13 studs (*hui*) indicate positions for fingering. The strings are made of twisted silk.

The following is a reading of the Wang Wei poem from Librivox:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ww-bamboo-grove.mp3>

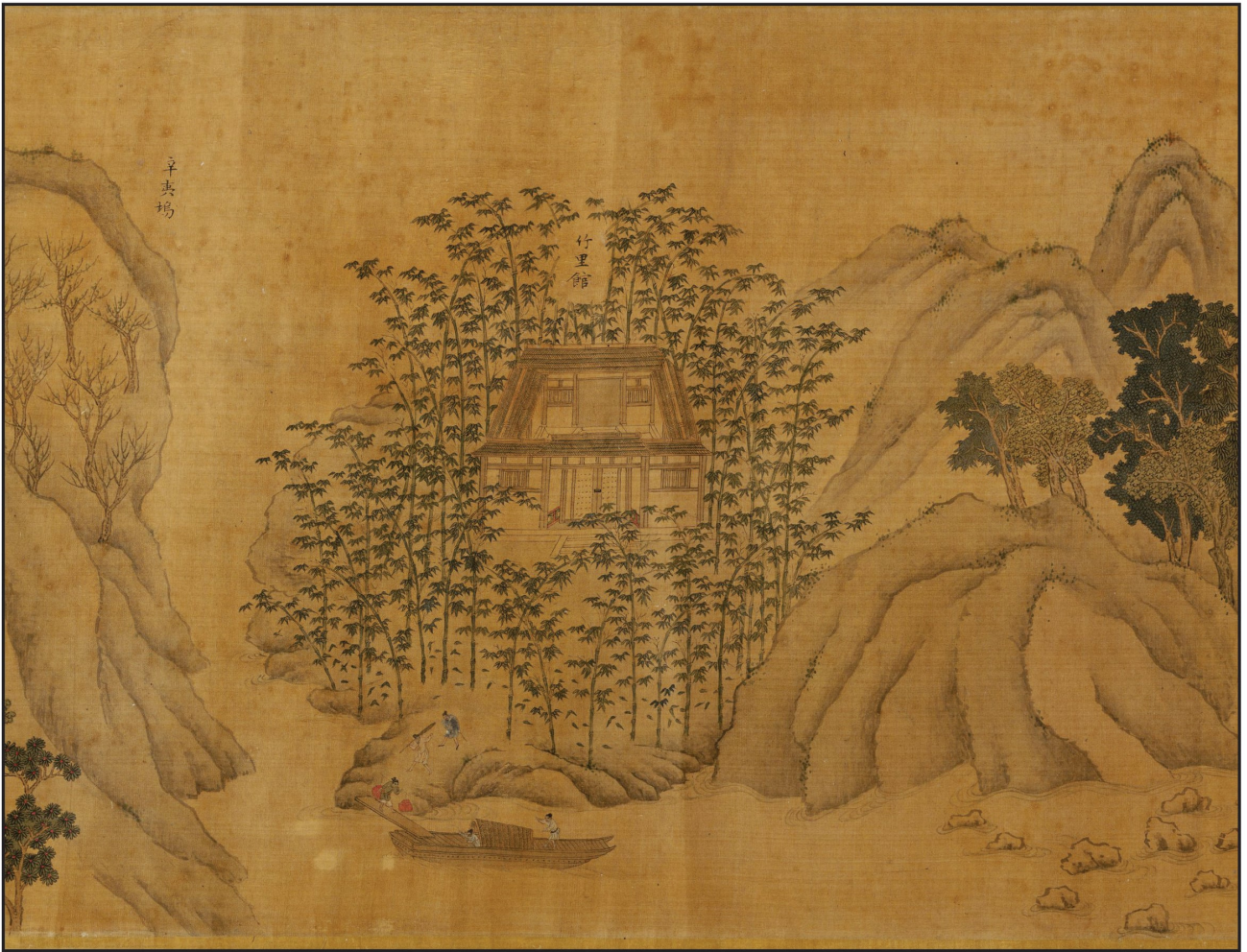
Yu (1980, p 191) points out that the *xiào* referred to in the second line was

a combination of Taoist breathing techniques and whistling

which was said to express feelings and was associated with harmonizing with nature and achieving immortality; the word has also been translated as “humming,” “singing,” and “crooning.” The tradition of the Xiao began during the Jin dynasty and has always been linked with Taoism. Its most famous practitioner was Sun Deng, a friend of the poet Ruan Jiu whose Xiao was said to sound like a phoenix.

The ideas of solitude and emptiness in the Wang Wei quatrain are extended in Pei Di’s reply. He talks specifically about the *Dao* (道) commonly translated as “The Way” – the underlying principle of the universe considered in Taoism. The character 无 *wu*, a negative term (“not” or “no”), is used in Taoism and Chan Buddhism to denote “nonbeing” or “absence” (Hinton, 2020, pp 49-55). Thus, the ending of Pei Di’s poem might be describing the state of mind wherein the world and its people have become nothing.

The following illustration shows the lodge in the bamboo grove as represented in the Freer gallery scroll:



Poetry, calligraphy and painting – the “three perfections” – are often combined in Chinese art (Sullivan 1974). The following illustration shows Wang Wei’s poem about the Bamboo Grove as written by different calligraphers. On the right is regular script from Yip’s *Hiding the Universe*: this presents the quatrains of both Wang Wei and Pei Di. The other examples show only Wang Wei’s contribution. From right to left: calligraphy from the *Wangchuan Ji* scroll of Guo Zhongshu; from the scroll of Wang Yuanqi; modern cursive calligraphy by the Japanese artist Nakamura Furetsu from around 1915.

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏  
彈琴復長嘯  
深林人不知  
明月來相照

同詠

裴迪

來過竹里館  
日與道相親  
出入惟山鳥  
幽深無世人

獨坐幽篁裏  
彈琴復長嘯  
深林人不知  
明月來相照

竹里館

獨坐幽篁裏  
彈琴復長嘯  
深林人不知  
明月來相照

獨坐幽篁裏  
彈琴復長嘯  
深林人不知  
明月來相照

不抄書

## Pepper Orchard

Cassia wine to welcome the Lord's child.  
Sweet pollia to give to the Beauty.  
Nectar of pepper for libation at a jewelled mat.  
About to descend, Lord of Clouds.

Scarlet thorns catch one's clothes.  
Sweet scent stays with transient guests.  
Happily, they are good for spice-cooking.  
Please bend down and pick a few.

椒 園  
jiāo pepper yuán orchard

桂 尊 迎 帝 子  
guì cassia zūn pot/cup yíng welcome dì lord/god zǐ child  
杜 若 贈 佳 人  
dù pollia ruò pollia zèng present jiā beautiful rén person  
椒 漿 尊 瑤 席  
jiāo pepper jiāng juice zūn pot/cup yáo jade xí seat  
欲 下 雲 中 君  
yù desire xià descend yún cloud zhōng center jūn lord

丹 刺 胃 人 衣  
dān red cì thorn juàn tangle rén person yī clothes  
芳 香 留 過 客  
fāng fragrant xiāng fragrant liú remain guò pass kè visitor  
幸 堪 調 鼎 用  
xìng lucky kān be able to tiáo cook/mix dǐng cauldron yòng use/eat  
願 君 垂 採 摘  
yuàn desire jūn lord chuí bend cǎi pick zhāi select

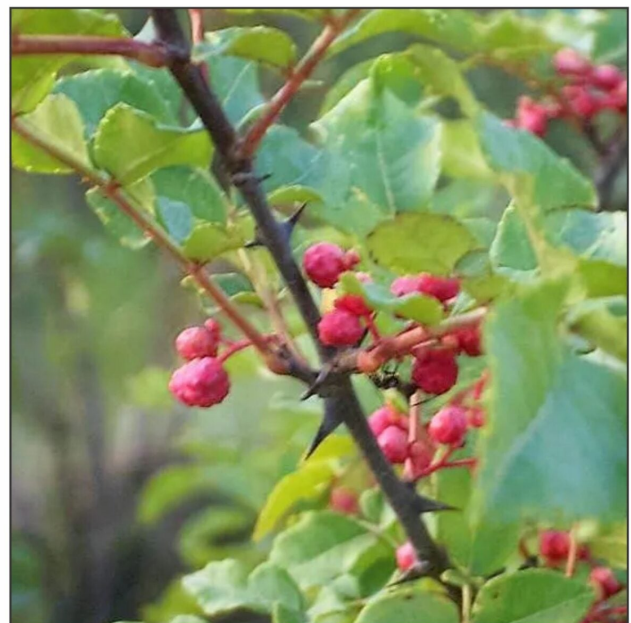
Wang Wei's quatrain alludes to some ancient Chinese songs used to invoke the appearance of the Gods. Several of these songs were included in the *Juejie* ("Nine Songs") which were anthologized in the collection called *Chuci* ("Songs of the South," or "Songs of Chu"). The following is from the first of these songs (as translated by Hawkes and Liu, 1959, p 36):

*Song to the Great Lord of the Eastern World*

On a lucky day with an auspicious name.  
Reverently we come to delight the Lord on High  
We grasp the long sword's haft of jade.  
And our girdle pendants clash and chime  
Jade weights fasten the god's jewelled mat.

Now take the rich and fragrant flower offerings  
The meats cooked in melilotus, served on orchid  
mats,  
And libations of cinnamon wine and pepper sauces!  
Flourish the drumsticks and beat all the drums!

Many different plants are used as gifts and food for the Gods. *Cinnamomum cassia* is Chinese cinnamon, the bark of which is used as a spice. *Pollia japonica* is a Chinese flowering plant that gives a strikingly beautiful (but inedible) iridescent purple fruit. Sichuan peppers are used to add spice to Chinese dishes. *Melilotus* or sweet clover is a herb with an aroma like vanilla. The following illustration shows *Pollia* fruit on the left and Sichuan peppers on the right.



Pei Di's poem describes the pepper trees in the orchard without making any allusions to the invocation of the Gods. The thorns on the pepper tree are very prominent.

The following illustration shows a *zun* and a *ding*, ceremonial bronze vessels from the Shang dynasty (second millennium BCE). The *zun* is from the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the *ding* from the Shanghai Museum:



The following illustration shows (on the left) the Pepper Tree Orchard from the scroll in the Freer Gallery. The neighbouring orchard (on the right) contains Lacquer Trees (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), the sap of which is used in the production of lacquer. These trees are the subject of another pair of quatrains in the *Wangchuan Ji*.



## Illusion and Reality

Ferguson (1927, pp 73-74) suggested that the Wangchuan estate described in the poems and depicted on the scroll was more imaginary than real:

The poem and the picture both represent Wang Ch'uan as a place of splendor and magnificence, but this was the product solely of poetical license ... Wang Wei could only have had a very humble cottage in this secluded spot. If it had been otherwise he would have attracted the attention of the rapacious myrmidons of the court, and the place would have been confiscated ... Wang Wei's imagination ... clothed a barren hillside with beautiful rare trees, with spacious courtyards, with a broad stream upon which boats plied and on whose bank stood a pretty fishing pavilion, with a deer park, with storks and birds—all of the delights of eye and ear were brought together in this one lovely spot by the fancy of a brilliant genius. Life had been hard and severe for him, but his spirit was untamed. It reveled in all of the sensuous delights which it could spiritualize, even though it had spurned them when they were thrust upon it.

However, Ferguson probably exaggerated the simplicity of Wang Wei's country home. Wagner (1981) claimed that it was far more than a "humble cottage"

The villa had previously belonged to the Early T'ang poet Sung Chih-wen (ca. 663-712), but was apparently unoccupied for about thirty years between owners. When Wang Wei acquired the estate he had it repaired, and he may have personally supervised the design and reconstruction of its various houses, pavilions, gardens, and parks. Paintings and poems depict the estate as a large piece of property with elaborate residential buildings and landscape architecture: it was by no means a simple rustic hut hidden in the woods.

Nevertheless, the scenes that Wang Wei and Pei Di described in the poems owe as much to poetic imagination as to reality. In this regard, we must wonder how the poems relate to Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of the perceived world is that it is illusion (*maya*). What then is the imagined world? Does the imagination exaggerate our illusions, or does it provide insight into what might be the true reality beneath them? Wagner (1981, p 140) remarks:

Wang Wei aspires to transcendence of the particular, and of the visual physical world, at the same time that he is attached to the sensual delights which he so sensitively perceives in that world. Through visual imagery he achieves metaphoric representation of that realm which cannot be seen, a realm which transcends the material world, the perceiving senses, the definitions of language, and the discerning consciousness. Wang Wei's vision, then, moves through the world of concrete natural objects to attain a glimpse of "distant emptiness."

## **Epilogue**

We can conclude this brief discussion of Wang Wei's poetry

with another poem wherein he describes a trip to the *Zhongnan* (“far south”) Mountain near his Wangchuan Villa (translation by Rouzer, 2020, Volume I, p. 79):

終南別業      My villa at Mt. Zhongnan

中歲頗好道      In middle age I grow rather fond of the Way;

晚家南山陲      My late home is in a corner of Mt. Zhongnan.

興來每獨往      When the mood comes, I always go out alone;

勝事空自知      I myself know, emptily, of these splendid things.

行到水窮處      I walk to where the waters begin,

坐看雲起時      I sit and watch when the clouds arise.

偶然值林叟      By chance I meet an old man of the woods;

談笑無還期      We chat and laugh, no time we have to go home.

The Cleveland Museum of Art possesses a beautiful fan created in about 1256. On one side is calligraphy by Emperor Lizong (1205-1264) presenting the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> lines of Wang Wei’s poem. On the other side is a painting by Ma Lin (~1180-1260) showing *A Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*. The illustration at the beginning of this essay is a high-contrast rendition of the Ma Lin painting.



Stephen Owen relates the description of the rising clouds to another Wang Wei poem (*Floating on the Han River*) which contains the lines

江流天地外	The river flows out beyond Heaven and Earth
山色有无中	The mountain's color between Being and Nonbeing

what this describes is a mountain in a mist in that peculiar way in which you can just barely see a color space in the mist, and you think there's a mountain there, but in the Buddhist sense of the illusions of the world, you have this huge thing, this mountain and all of a sudden, its presence, its very existence, sort of half fades in and out. It's between being there and not being there.

The lines describe the ideas of yǒu (有, being/possession/existence) and wú (无, simplified 无, nonbeing, nothingness). A central idea in Chan Buddhism is *sunyata*: the meditative practice of emptying oneself of being to become one with the universe.

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# Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

## Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

Du Fu (712-770 CE) was a poet during a time of great political upheaval in China. He was born near Luoyang and spent much of his young adulthood in the Yanzhou region, finally settling down to a minor official position in Chang'an, the imperial capital. In 755 CE, An Lushan, a disgruntled general, led a rebellion against the Tang dynasty. The emperor was forced to flee Chang'an (modern Xian), and chaos reigned for the next eight years. For more than a year Du Fu was held captive in Chang'an by the rebels. After escaping, he made his way south, living for a time in a thatched cottage in Chengdu, and later at various places along the Yangtze River. His poetry is characterized by an intense love of nature, by elements of Chan Buddhism, and by a deep compassion for all those caught up in the turmoil of history. This is a longer post than usual. I have become fascinated by Du Fu.

## Failing the Examinations

Du Fu (Tu Fu in the Wades Gilles transliteration system, the family name likely deriving from the name of a pear tree) was born in 712 CE near Luoyang, the eastern capital of the Tang Dynasty (Hung, 1952; Owen, 1981). The following map (adapted from Young, 2008, and Collet and Cheng, 2014) shows places of importance in his life:



Du Fu's father was a minor official. His mother appears to have died during his childhood, and Du Fu was raised by his stepmother and an aunt. Du Fu studied hard, but in 735 CE he failed the *jenshi* (advanced scholar) examinations. No one knows why: politics and spite may have played their part. He spent the next few years with his father who was then stationed in Yanzhou,

Du Fu met Li Bai (700-762 CE) in 744 CE. Despite the difference in their ages, the two poets became fast friends. However, they were only able to meet occasionally, their lives being separated by politics and war.

Du Fu attempted the *jenshi* examinations again in 746, and was again rejected. Nevertheless, he was able to obtain a minor position in the imperial civil service in Chang'an. This allowed him to marry and raise a small family.

## Taishan



We can begin our examination of Du Fu's poetry with one of the early poems written during his time in Yanzhou: *Gazing on the Peak* (737 CE). The peak is *Taishan* (exalted mountain), located

in Northeastern China. Taishan is one of the Five Great Mountains (*Wuyue*) of ancient China. Today one can reach the summit by climbing up some 7000 steps (see illustration on the right), but in Du Fu's time the climb would have been more difficult. The following is the poem in printed Chinese characters (*Hànzì*) and in Pinyin transliteration:

望嶽

wàng yuè

岱宗夫如何，  
齊魯青未了。  
造化鍾神秀，  
陰陽割昏曉。  
盪胸生曾雲，  
決眚入歸鳥。  
會當凌絕頂，  
一覽眾山小。

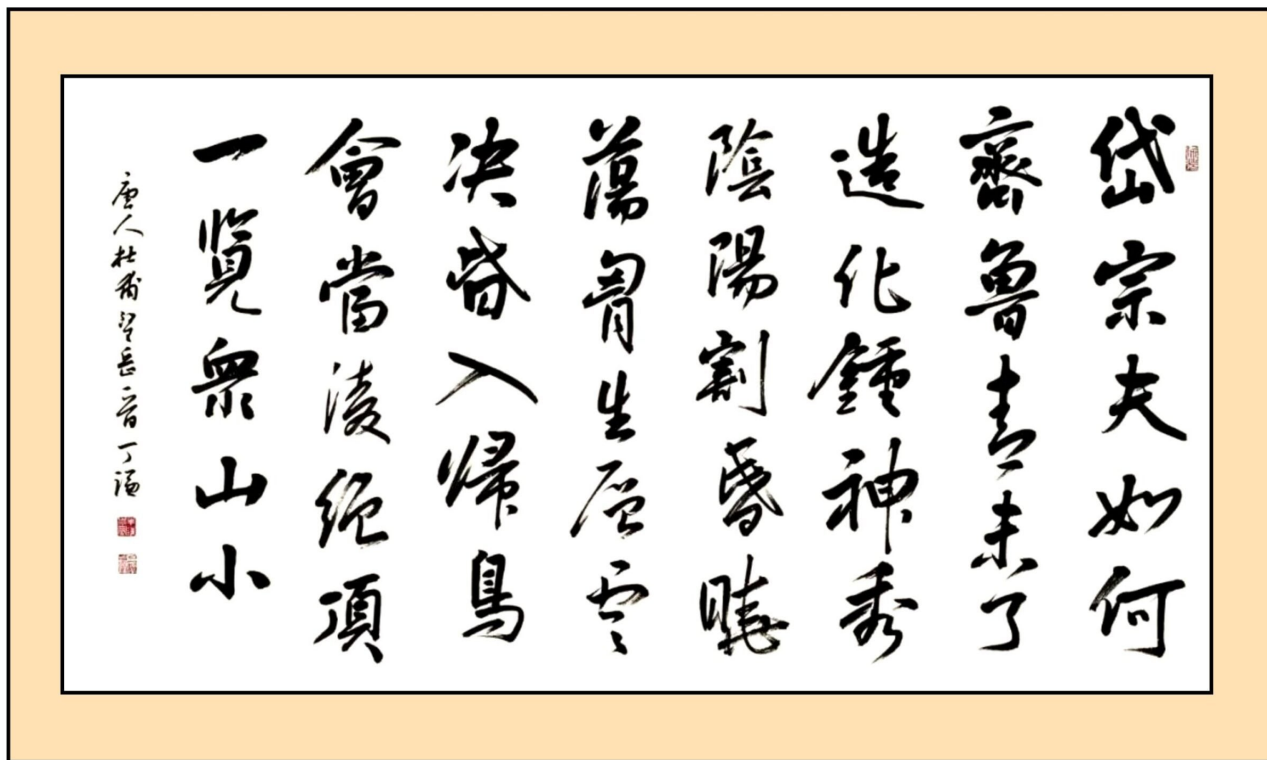
dài zōng fū rú hé  
qí lǚ qīng wèi liǎo  
zào huà zhōng shén xiù  
yīn yáng gē hūn xiǎo  
dàng xiōng shēng céng yún  
jué zì rù guī niǎo  
huì dāng líng jué dǐng  
yī lǎn zhòng shān xiǎo

The poem is in the *lǜshī* (regulated verse) form which requires eight lines (four couplets), with each line containing the same number of characters: 5- or 7-character *lǜshī* are the most common. Each line is separated into phrases, with a 5-character line composed of an initial 2-character phrase and a final 3-character phrase. The last words of each couplet rhyme. Rhyme in Chinese is based on the vowel sound. Within the lines there were complex rules for the tonality of the sounds (Zong Qi Cai, 2008, Chapter 8; Wai-lim Yip, 1997, pp 171-221). These rules do not always carry over to the way the characters are pronounced in modern Chinese. The following is a reading of the poem in Mandarin (from Librivox).

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/wang-yue-from-librivox.mp3>

Chinese poetry is directed at both the ear and the eye, and

fine calligraphy enhances the appreciations of a poem. Ding Qian has written out Du Fu's *Wàng yuè* in beautiful cursive script (going from top down and from left to right):



The following is a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hinton, 2019, p 2):

gaze/ behold	mountain			
<i>Daizong</i> (ancient name for Taishan)				then
like	what			
<i>Qi</i>	<i>Lu</i> (regions near Taishan)			green/blue
never	end			
create	change	concentrate	divine	beauty
<i>Yin</i>	<i>Yang</i> (Taoist concepts of dark and light)			
cleave	dusk	dawn		
heave	chest	birth	layer	cloud
burst	eye	enter	return	bird
soon	when	reach	extreme	summit
one	glance	all	mountain	small.

And this is the English translation of Stephen Owen (2008, poem 1.2):

### Gazing on the Peak

And what then is Daizong like? –  
over Qi and Lu, green unending.  
Creation compacted spirit splendors here,  
Dark and Light, riving dusk and dawn.  
Exhilarating the breast, it produces layers of cloud;  
splitting eye-pupils, it has homing birds entering.  
Someday may I climb up to its highest summit,  
with one sweeping view see how small all other  
mountains are



The interpretation of the poem requires some knowledge of its allusions. In the fourth line, Du Fu is referring to the *taijitu* symbol of Taoism (illustrated on the right) that contrasts the principles of *yin* (dark, female, moon) and *yang* (light, male, sun). Du Fu proposes that Taishan divides the world into two ways of looking. Some have suggested that the *taijitu* symbol originally represented the dark (north) side and the light (south) side of a mountain, and this idea fits easily with the poem.

All translators have had difficulty with the third couplet (reviewed by Hsieh, 1994). My feeling is that Du Fu is noticing layers of clouds at the mountain's upper reaches –

the chest if one considers the mountain like a human body – and birds swooping around the peaks – where the eye sockets of the body would be. However, it is also possible that Du Fu is breathing heavily from the climb and that his eyes are surprised by the birds. Perhaps both meanings are valid, with Du Fu and the mountain becoming one. Du Fu may have been experiencing the meditative state of Chan Buddhism, with a mind was “wide-open and interfused with this mountain landscape, no distinction between subjective and objective” (Hinton, 2019, p 6). One might also consider Du Fu’s mental state: at the time he wrote this poem he had just failed the *jenshi* exams. This might have caused some breast-beating and tears, as well as his final resolve to climb the mountain and see how small all his problems actually were.

The last couplet refers to Mencius’ description of the visit of Confucius to Taishan (Mengzi VIIA:24):

He ascended the Tai Mountain, and all beneath the heavens appeared to him small. So he who has contemplated the sea, finds it difficult to think anything of other waters, and he who has wandered in the gate of the sage, finds it difficult to think anything of the words of others.

### **Zhang’s Hermitage**

During his time in Yanzhou Du Fu visited a hermit named Zhang near the Stonegate Mountain, one of the lesser peaks near Taishan. Zhang was likely a follower of the new Chan Buddhism, which promoted meditation as a means to empty the mind of suffering and allow the universal life force to permeate one’s being. Buddhism first came to China during the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE). Since many of the concepts of Buddhism were similar to those of Taoism, the new religion spread quickly (Hinton, 2020). A type of Buddhism that stressed the role of meditation began to develop in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE, and called itself *chan*, a Chinese transcription of the Sanskrit *dhyana* (meditation). In later years this would lead to the Zen

Buddhism of Japan. There are many allusions to Buddhism and especially to Chan ideas in Du Fu's poetry (Rouzer, 2020; Zhang, 2018)

Du Fu reportedly wrote the following poem on one of the walls of Zhang's hermitage. The poem is a seven-character *lǚshī*. The following is the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 1.4) and in pinyin:

題張氏隱居

tí zhāng shì yǐn jū

春山無伴獨相求

chūn shān wú bàn dú xiāng qiú

伐木丁丁山更幽。

fá mù dīng dīng shān gēng yōu

澗道餘寒歷冰雪，

jiàn dào yú hán lì bīng xuě

石門斜日到林丘。

shí mén xié rì dào lín qiū

不貪夜識金銀氣，

bù tān yè shí jīn yín qì

遠害朝看麋鹿遊。

yuǎn hài zhāo kàn mí lù yóu

乘興杳然迷出處，

chéng xìng yǎo rán mí chū chǔ

對君疑是泛虛舟。

duì jūn yí shì fàn xū zhōu

The following is a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hinton, 2019, p 22):

inscribe	Zhang	family	recluse	
house				
spring	mountain	absence	friend	alone
you	search			
chop	tree	crack	crack	mountain
mystery				again
creek	pathway	remnant	cold	pass
ice	snow			
stone	gate	slant	sun	reach
place				forest
no	desire	night	know	gold
				silver

breath/spirit

far        injure        morning        see        deer        deer

wander

ride        burgeon        dark        thus        confuse        leave

place

facing        you        suspect        this        drift        empty

boat.

And this is a translation by Kenneth Rexroth (1956):

Written on the Wall at Chang's Hermitage

It is Spring in the mountains.

I come alone seeking you.

The sound of chopping wood echos

Between the silent peaks.

The streams are still icy.

There is snow on the trail.

At sunset I reach your grove

In the stony mountain pass.

You want nothing, although at night

You can see the aura of gold

And silver ore all around you.

You have learned to be gentle

As the mountain deer you have tamed.

The way back forgotten, hidden

Away, I become like you,

An empty boat, floating, adrift.

Notable in the poem is the idea of *wú* (third character) which can be translated as "absence, nothing, not" (Hinton, 2019, p 24) This is an essential concept of Chan Buddhism – the emptying of the mind so that it can become a receptacle for true awareness. The third and fourth characters of the first line might be simply translated as "alone (without a friend)," but one might also venture "with absence as a companion" or "with an empty mind." This fits with the image of the empty boat at the end of the poem.

Zheng Qian, a drinking companion of Li Bai and Du Fu, suggested the idea of combining poetry, painting and calligraphy. The Emperor was impressed and called the combination *sānjué* (three perfections) (Sullivan, 1974). Li Bai and Du Fu likely tried their hand at painting and calligraphy but no versions of their *sānjué* efforts have survived. The Ming painter and calligrapher Wang Shimin (1592–1680 CE) illustrated the second couplet of Du Fu's poem from Zhang's hermitage in his album *Du Fu's Poetic Thoughts* now at the Palace Museum in Beijing.



澗道餘寒歷冰雲  
石門斜日到林北

乙巳臘月寫

少陵詩意十

二幀似

旭成賢甥時年

七十有四時敘



## The An Lushan Rebellion

Toward the end 755 CE, An Lushan, a general on the northern frontier rebelled against the empire and captured the garrison town of Fanyang (or Jicheng) located in what is now part of Beijing. Within a month the rebels captured Luoyang. The emperor and much of his court fled Chang'an, travelling through the Qinling Mountains to find sanctuary in the province of Shu. The city of Chang'an fell to the rebels in the middle of 756 CE.

Below is shown a painting of *Emperor Ming-Huang's Flight to Shu*. Though attributed to the Tang painter Li Zhaodao (675-758 CE), this was actually painted in his style several hundred years later during the Song Dynasty. Shu is the ancient name for what is now known as Sichuan province. This masterpiece of early Chinese painting is now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. Two enlargements are included: the emperor with his red coat is shown at the lower right; at the lower left advance members of his entourage begin climbing the mountain paths.



The rebellion lasted for eight long years. The northern part of the country was devastated. Death from either war or famine was widespread. Censuses before and after the rebellion suggested a death toll of some 36 million people, making it one of the worst catastrophes in human history. However, most scholars now doubt these numbers and consider the death toll as closer to 13 million. Nevertheless, it was a murderous time.

## Moonlit Night

At the beginning of the rebellion, Du Fu managed to get his family to safety in the northern town of Fuzhou, but he was himself held captive in Chang'an. Fortunately, he was not considered important enough to be executed, and he finally managed to escape in 757 CE. The following shows a poem from 756 CE in characters (Owen, 2008, poem 4.18), pinyin transcription, and character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008):

月夜	yuè yè	moon night
今夜鄜州月，	jīn yè fū zhōu yuè	this night Fu Zhou moon
閨中只獨看。	guī zhōng zhǐ dú kān	woman's room only alone watch
遙憐小兒女，	yáo lián xiǎo ér nǚ	far pity little boy girl
未解憶長安。	wèi jiě yì cháng ān	not understand remember Chang'an
香霧雲鬟濕，	xiāng wù yún huán shī	fragrant mist cloud hair wet
清輝玉臂寒。	qīng huī yù bì hán	clear brightness jade arm cold
何時倚虛幌，	hé shí yǐ xū huǎng	what time lean empty curtain
雙照淚痕乾。	shuāng zhào lèi hén gān	pair shine tears trace dry

The following is a reading of the poem from Librivox:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/yue-y-e-from-librivox.mp3>

Vikam Seth (1997) translated the poem keeping the Chinese rhyme scheme: the last character rhymes for all four couplets:

### Moonlit Night

In Fuzhou, far away, my wife is watching  
The moon alone tonight, and my thoughts fill  
With sadness for my children, who can't think  
Of me here in Changan; they're too young still.

Her cloud-soft hair is moist with fragrant mist.  
In the clear light her white arms sense the chill.  
When will we feel the moonlight dry our tears,  
Leaning together on our window-sill?

Alec Roth wrote a suite of songs based on Vikam Seth's translations of Du Fu. The following is his setting for Moonlit Night with tenor Mark Padmore:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/06-Songs-In-Time-of-War\\_-Moonlit-Nig.mp3](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/06-Songs-In-Time-of-War_-Moonlit-Nig.mp3)

David Young (2008) provides a free-verse translation:

Tonight  
in this same moonlight  
my wife is alone at her window  
in Fuzhou  
I can hardly bear  
to think of my children  
too young to understand  
why I can't come to them  
her hair  
must be damp from the mist  
her arms  
cold jade in the moonlight  
when will we stand together  
by those slack curtains  
while the moonlight dries  
the tear-streaks on our faces?

The poem may have been written or at least conceived during the celebration of the full moon in the autumn. Families customarily viewed the moon together and Du Fu imagines his wife viewing the moon alone. The mention of the wife's chamber in the second line may refer to either her actual bedroom or metonymically to herself as the inmost room in Du Fu's heart (Hawkes, 1967). David Young (2008) remarks that this may be

“the first Chinese poem to address romantic sentiments to a wife,” instead of a colleague or a courtesan.

David Hawkes (1967) notes the parallelism of the third couplet:

‘fragrant mist’ parallels ‘clear light,’ ‘cloud hair’ parallels ‘jade arms,’ and ‘wet’ parallels ‘cold’

## Spring View

*Spring View* (or *Spring Landscape*), the most famous poem written by Du Fu in Chang’an during the rebellion, tells how nature persists despite the ravages of effects of war and time. Subjective emotions and objective reality become one. The character *wàng* (view, landscape) can mean both the act of perceiving or what is actually perceived. In addition, it can sometimes mean the present scene or what is to be expected in the future (much like the English word “prospect”). The illustration below shows the text in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 4.25), in pinyin and in a character-by-character translation (adapted from Hawkes, 1967, Alexander, 2008, and Zong-Qi Cai, 2008):

春望	chūn wàng	spring view
國破山河在，	guó pò shān hé zài	country broken mountain river remain
城春草木深。	chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn	city spring grass trees deep
感時花濺淚，	gǎn shí huā jiàn lèi	feel moment flower splash tear
恨別鳥驚心。	hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn	regret/hate parting bird startle heart
烽火連三月，	fēng huǒ lián sān yuè	beacon fires join three months
家書抵萬金。	jiā shū dǐ wàn jīn	family letters worth ten-thousand gold
白頭搔更短，	bái tóu sāo gèng duǎn	white head scratch become thin
渾欲不勝簪	hún yù bù shēng zān	simply about not bear hairpin

The following is a reading of the poem from the website

associated with *How to Read Chinese Poetry* (ZongQi-Cai, 2008, poem 8.1):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/c8.1-spring-scene.mp3>

The next illustration shows the poem as written by three calligraphers. All versions read from top down and from right to left. On the left is standard script by Anita Wang; on the right the calligraphy by Lii Shih Lou is gently cursive. At the bottom the calligraphy by an anonymous calligrapher is unrestrained: it accentuates the root of the growing grass (8<sup>th</sup> character) and the radicals that compose the character for regret/hate (16<sup>th</sup> character) fly apart.

國破山河在城春草木深感時花濺淚  
恨別鳥驚心烽火連三月家書抵萬金  
白頭搔更短渾欲不勝簪

乙酉春尾 姜禮緒書於亞城

國破山河在城春草木深感時花濺淚  
恨別鳥驚心烽火連三月家書抵萬金  
白頭搔更短渾欲不勝簪

杜甫春望辛丑臘月五心緒



國破山河在  
城春草木深  
感時花濺淚  
恨別鳥驚心  
烽火連三月  
家書抵萬金  
白頭搔更短  
渾欲不勝簪

杜甫春望  
歲在辛丑  
姜禮緒書

The following are two translations, the first by David Hinton, which uses an English line of a constant length to approximate the Chinese 5-character line (2020a):

The country in ruins, rivers and mountains  
continue. The city grows lush with spring.

Blossoms scatter tears for us, and all these  
separations in a bird's cry startle the heart.

Beacon-fires three months ablaze: by now  
a mere letter's worth ten thousand in gold,

and worry's thinned my hair to such white  
confusion I can't even keep this hairpin in.

A second translation, with preservation of the rhyme scheme and phrasal structure, is by Keith Holyoak (2015)

The state is in ruin;  
yet mountains and rivers endure.  
In city gardens  
weeds run riot this spring.

These dark times  
move flowers to sprinkle tears;  
the separations  
send startled birds on the wing.

For three months now  
the beacon fires have burned;  
a letter from home  
would mean more than anything.

I've pulled out  
so many of my white hairs  
too few are left  
to hold my hatpin in!

The second couplet has been interpreted in different ways.

Most translations (including the two just quoted) consider it as representing nature's lament for the evil times. For example, Hawkes (1967) suggests that "nature is grieving in sympathy with the beholder at the ills which beset him." However, Michael Yang (2016) proposes that "In times of adversity, nature may simply be downright uncaring and unfriendly, thereby adding to the woes of mankind." He translates the couplet

Mourning the times, I weep at the sight of flowers;  
Hating separation, I find the sound of birds  
startling.

The last two lines of the poem refer the hair-style of the Tang Dynasty: men wore their hair in a topknot, and their hats were "anchored to their heads with a large hatpin which passed through the topknot of hair" (Hawkes, 1967). Most interpreters have been struck by the difference between the solemn anguish of the poem's first six lines, and the self-mockery of the final couplet (Hawkes, 1967, p 46; Chou, 1995, p 115). This juxtaposition of the tragic and the pitiable accentuates the poet's bewilderment.

### **The Thatched Cottage**

Disillusioned by the war and by the politics of vengeance that followed, Du Fu and his family retired to a thatched cottage in Chengdu, where he lived from 759-765. A replica of this cottage has been built there in a park celebrating both Du Fu and Chinese Poetry:





Many of the poems that Du Fu wrote in Chengdu celebrated the simple joys of nature. He often used isolated quatrains to find parallels between his emotions and the world around him. This brief form called *juéjù* (curtailed lines) was widely used by his colleagues Li Bai (701–762) and Wang Wei (699–759). The form consists of two couplets juxtaposed in meaning and rhyming across their last character (Wong, 1970; Zong-Qi Cai, 2008, Chapter 10). The following poem (Owen, 2008, poem 9.63) describing willow-catkins (illustrated on the right) and sleeping ducks gives a deep feeling of peace. These are the Chinese characters and pinyin transcription followed by the character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008):

糝徑楊花鋪白氈，  
點溪荷葉疊青錢。  
筍根雉子無人見，  
沙上鳧雛傍母眠。

sǎn jìng yáng huā pū bái zhān  
diǎn xī hé yè dié qīng qián  
sǔn gēn zhì zǐ wú rén jiàn  
shā shàng fú chú bàng mǔ mián




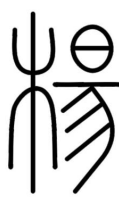






grain	path	poplar/willow	blossom	pave		
white	carpet					
little	stream	lotus	leaves	pile	green	
money						
bamboo	shoot	root	sprout	no	person	see
sand	on	duckling	beside	mother	sleep	

The following translation is by Burton Watson (2002):

Willow fluff along the path spreads a white carpet;  
lotus leaves dot the stream, plating it with green  
coins.

By bamboo roots, tender shoots where no one sees them;  
on the sand, baby ducks asleep beside their mother.

Shui Chien-Tung provided the following calligraphy for the poem (Cooper, 1973). He used aspects of the ancient scripts (circles, curves and dots) in some of the characters to give a sense of simplicity and timelessness. The illustration shows the calligraphy of the poem on the left and the evolution of the characters *yáng* (willow, poplar) and *fú* (duck) on the right.

<p>            疊青錢筍根稚子無人見沙上          糝徑花鋪白氈點溪荷葉       </p>	<p>         yáng          (willow)       </p> <p>        </p>	<p>         fú          (duck)       </p> <p>        </p>
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Another quatrain from Chengdu describes a night scene on the river. The following shows the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 13.61), in pinyin, and in a character-by-character translation (mine):

江動月移石，	jiāng dòng yuè yí shí	river move moon change rock
溪虛雲傍花。	xī xū yún bàng huā	stream empty cloud beside flower
鳥棲知故道，	niǎo qī zhī gù dào	bird perch understand old Dao
帆過宿誰家。	fān guò sù shuí jiā	sail pass stay(lodge) who home

This is the translation by J. P. Seaton (Seaton & Cryer,

1987):

The River moves, moon travels rock,  
Streams unreal, clouds there among the flowers.  
The bird perches, knows the ancient Tao  
Sails go: They can't know where.

As the river flows by, the moon's reflection slowly travels across the rocks near the shore. The water reflects the clouds between the lilies. A bird on a branch understands the nature of the universe. A boat passes, going home we know not where.

The poem conveys a sense of the complexity of the world where reflections and reality intermingle, a desire to understand the meaning of our life, and a fear that time is passing and we do not know where it will take us. All this in twenty characters. Such concision is extremely difficult in English. An attempt:

River and rocks reflect the moon  
and clouds amid the lilies  
resting birds understand the way  
sails pass seeking home somewhere.

The following shows a painting by Huang Yon-hou to illustrate the poem. This was used as the frontispiece (and cover) of the book *Bright Moon, Perching Bird* (Seaton & Cryer, 1987). On the right is calligraphy of the poem by Mo Ji-yu.



江動月移石溪虛雲傍花鳥棲知  
 故道帆過宿誰家  
 桂林 同源書

### Above the Gorges

In 765 CE Du Fu and his family left Chengdu and travelled eastward on the Yangtze River. The region of Luoyang had been recently recovered by imperial forces and Du Fu was perhaps trying to return home (Hung, 1952). He stayed for a while in Kuizhou (present day Baidicheng) at the beginning of the Three Gorges (*Qutang, Wu and Xiing*).

While there Du Fu wrote a series of meditations called *Autumn Thoughts* (or more literally *Stirred by Autumn*). This is the second of these poems in Chinese characters and in pinyin:

夔府孤城落日斜，  
每依北斗望京華。  
聽猿實下三聲淚，  
奉使虛隨八月槎。  
畫省香爐違伏枕，  
山樓粉堞隱悲笳。  
請看石上藤蘿月，  
已映洲前蘆荻花。

kuí fǔ gū chéng luò rì xié  
měi yī běi dòu wàng jīng huá  
tīng yuán shí xià sān shēng lèi  
fèng shǐ xū suí bā yuè chá  
huà shěng xiāng lú wéi fú zhěn  
shān lóu fěn dié yǐn bēi jiā  
qǐng kàn shí shàng téng luó yuè  
yǐ yìng zhōu qián lú dí huā

A character-by-character translation (Alexander, 2008) is:

Kui prefecture lonely wall set sun slant  
Every rely north dipper gaze capital city  
Hear ape real fall three sound tear  
Sent mission vain follow eight month raft  
Picture ministry incense stove apart hidden pillow  
Mountain tower white battlements hide sad reed-  
whistle  
Ask look stone on [Chinese wisteria] moon  
Already reflect islet before rushes reeds flowers

The following is Stephen Owen's translation (Owen, 2008 poem 17.27):

On Kuizhou's lonely walls setting sunlight slants,  
then always I trust the North Dipper to lead my gaze to  
the capital.  
Listening to gibbons I really shed tears at their third  
cry,  
accepting my mission I pointlessly follow the eighth-  
month raft.  
The censer in the ministry with portraits eludes the  
pillow where I lie,  
ill towers' white-plastered battlements hide the sad reed  
pipes.

Just look there at the moon, in wisteria on the rock,  
it has already cast its light by sandbars on flowers of  
the reeds.

The poem is striking in the difference between the first three couplets and the last. At the beginning of the poem Du Fu is feeling regret that he is not in Chang'an which is located due north of Kuizhou (in the direction of the Big Dipper which points to the North Star). Owen notes that "There was an old rhyme that a traveler in the gorges would shed tears when the gibbons cried out three times." The eighth month raft may refer to another old story about a vessel that came every eight months and took a man up to the Milky Way. Owen commented on the third couplet that "The "muralled ministry" is where were located the commemorative portraits of officers, civil and military, who had done exceptional service to the dynasty." Incense was burned when petitions were presented. The final couplet disregards all the preceding nostalgia and simply appreciates the beauty of the moment.

The Ming painter Wang Shimin illustrated this final couplet in one of the leaves from his album Du Fu's Poetic Thoughts.

請看石上藤蘿月  
已映洲前蘆荻花



Later in Kuizhou, Du Fu entertained a librarian named Li who was returning north to take up an appointment in Chang'an. The following is the beginning of a poem (Owen, 2008, poem 19.34) describing Li's departure in Chinese characters and in pinyin:

青簾白舫益州來，	qīng lián bái fǎng yì zhōu lái
巫峽秋濤天地回。	wū xiá qiū tāo tiān dì huí
石出倒聽楓葉下，	shí chū dǎo tīng fēng yè xià
櫓搖背指菊花開。	lǔ yáo bèi zhǐ jú huā kāi

A character-by-character translation is:

blue/green	curtain	white	boat/raft	Yizhou
arrive				
Wu	gorge	autumn	waves	heaven/sky
earth/ground	turn (around)			
stone/rock	leave/exit	fall	listen	maple
leaf	down			
scull/oar	swing	carry	point	chrysanthemum
flower	open/blume			

The following is Stephen Owen's translation:

When the white barge with green curtains came from Yizhou,  
with autumn billows in the Wu Gorges, heaven and earth were  
turning.

Where rocks came out, from below you listened to the leaves  
of maples falling,  
as the sweep moved back and forth you pointed behind to  
chrysanthemums in bloom.

The Ming painter Wang Shimin illustrated the second couplet in one of the leaves from his album Du Fu's Poetic Thoughts. The painting shows the bright red leaves of the maples. In front of the riverside house one can see the multicolored chrysanthemums that Li is pointing to. Harmony exists between

the wild and the cultivated.

石出倒聽楓葉下  
檣搖背指菊苔開



## On the River

After his sojourn in Kuizhou, Du Fu and his family continued their journey down the Yangtze River. However, the poet was ill and was unable to make it beyond Tanzhou (now Changsha) where he died in 770 CE. No one knows where he is buried. In the 1960's radical students dug up a grave purported to be his to "eliminate the remaining poison of feudalism," but found the grave empty.

One of Du Fu's last poems was *Night Thoughts While Travelling*. The following is the poem in Chinese characters (Owen, 2008, poem 14.63) and in pinyin (Alexander, 2008):

旅夜書懷	lǚ yè shū huái	journey night write think
細草微風岸，	xì cǎo wēi fēng àn	gently grass soft wind shore
危檣獨夜舟。	wēi qiáng dú yè zhōu	tall mast alone night boat
星垂平野闊，	xīng chuí píng yě kuò	star fall flat fields broad
月湧大江流。	yuè yǒng dà jiāng liú	moon rises great river flows
名豈文章著，	míng qǐ wén zhāng zhù	name not literary works mark
官應老病休。	guān yìng lǎo bìng xiū	official should old sick stop
飄零何所似，	piāo piāo hé suǒ sì	flutter flutter what place seem
天地一沙鷗。	tiān dì yī shā ōu	heaven earth one sand gull

The following is a reading of the poem from Librivox:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/night-thoughts-from-librivox.mp3>

Holyoak (2015) provides a rhymed translation:

The fine grass  
by the riverbank stirs in the breeze;  
the tall mast  
in the night is a lonely sliver.

Stars hang  
all across the vast plain;  
the moon bobs  
in the flow of the great river.

My poetry  
has not made a name for me;  
now age and sickness  
have cost me the post I was given.

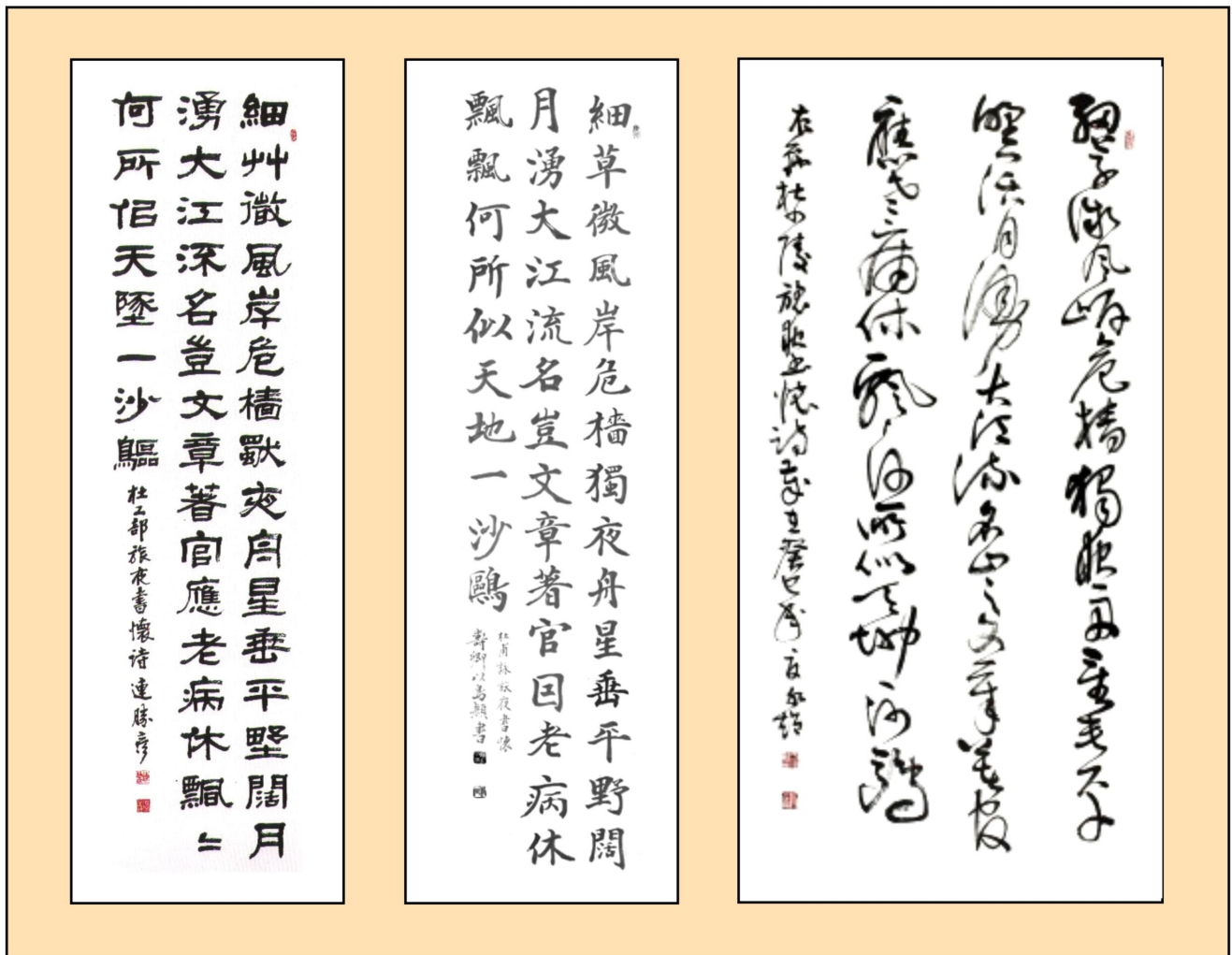
Drifting, drifting,  
what do I resemble?  
A lone gull  
lost between earth and heaven.

Kenneth Rexroth (1956) translates the poem in free verse:

#### Night Thoughts While Travelling

A light breeze rustles the reeds  
Along the river banks. The  
Mast of my lonely boat soars  
Into the night. Stars blossom  
Over the vast desert of  
Waters. Moonlight flows on the  
Surging river. My poems have  
Made me famous but I grow  
Old, ill and tired, blown hither  
And yon; I am like a gull  
Lost between heaven and earth.

The following shows the poem in calligraphy with three styles. On the left the poem is written in clerical script, in the center in regular script and on the right is unrestrained cursive script. All examples were taken from Chinese sites selling calligraphy.



## Changing Times

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) the role of literature, and poetry in particular, in society changed dramatically (Owen, 2011):

In the 650s, literature was centered almost entirely in the imperial court; by the end of the era literature had become the possession of an educated elite, who might serve in government, but whose cultural life was primarily outside the court.

During Du Fu's lifetime, poetry became no longer a part of the ancient traditions; rather it began to be concerned with the present and with the personal. Lucas Bender (2021) describes the traditional role of poetry in a society following the

precepts of Confucianism:

Most people ... would be incapable on their own of adequately conceptualizing the world or perfectly responding to its contingency, and therefore needed to rely on the models left by sages and worthies. Many of these models were embodied in texts, including literary texts, which could thus offer an arena for ethical activity. Poetry, for example, was understood to offer models of cognition, feeling, and commitment that would ineluctably shape readers' understanding of and responses to their own circumstances. One way of being a good person, therefore, involved reading good poetry and writing more of it, thereby propagating the normative models of the tradition in one's own time and transmitting them to the future. (p 317)

Du Fu found himself bewildered by the state of the world. He sought to convey this confusion rather than explain it:

Du Fu doubts the possibility of indefinitely applicable moral categories. The conceptual tools by which we make moral judgments, he suggests, are always inherited from a past that can – and, in a world as various and changeable as ours has proven to be, often will – diverge from the exigencies of the present. As a result, not only are our values unlikely to be either universal or timeless; more important, if we pay careful attention to the details of our experience, they are unlikely to work unproblematically even here and now. (Bender, 2021, p 319)

The complexity of Du Fu's poetry – the difficulty in understanding some of his juxtapositions – becomes a challenge. The past provides no help in the interpretation. We must figure out for themselves what relates the mountain, the clouds and the poet's breathing in the first poem we considered. And in the last poem we must try to locate for ourselves the place of the gull between heaven and earth.

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# Language and Meaning

## Language and meaning

I have just returned from a brief trip to Korea. I had learned the Hangeul alphabet, but my vocabulary was limited to some rudimentary phrases. I could read but I could not understand. This led to some thoughts about language and meaning. My posting will take a roundabout course, beginning with a Korean scholar from the Silla dynasty. Be patient: I shall try to find some meaning before the day is done.

## Choe Chi Won (857-925?)

At the age of 12, Choe Chi Won (Hangeul 최치원; Chinese 崔致遠;

literary name 孤云, Go-un, "Lonely Cloud") was sent from Korea to study in Xian (Chang'an), the capital of the Tang dynasty in China. There he learnt the practices of Confucianism and the arts of poetry and calligraphy. He passed the Imperial Examination at the young age of 22 years, and rose quickly through the ranks of the Chinese Civil Service.

However, the Tang dynasty (618-907) was slowly coming to its end. In 874, Huang Chao had initiated a rebellion against the Emperor. By 880 he had taken control of the capital and assumed the throne, calling himself the "Emperor of Qi." Choe served as the secretary to the Tang general Gao Pien in his campaign against Huang Chao. By 884, the rebellion was finally defeated and the Tang emperor Xizong reinstated in Xian.

However, the Tang empire was in pieces. Feuding warlords commanded different regions, and in 907 the Tang dynasty came to an end. China's political turmoil continued through the period of the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms," until some stability was finally regained with the Song dynasty in 960.

In 885, Choe asked to return to Korea as an envoy to the Silla dynasty. However, his home country was also in a period of decadence and political upheaval. The 900-year old Silla dynasty was slowly coming apart. It would finally succumb to the Goryeo dynasty in 935.



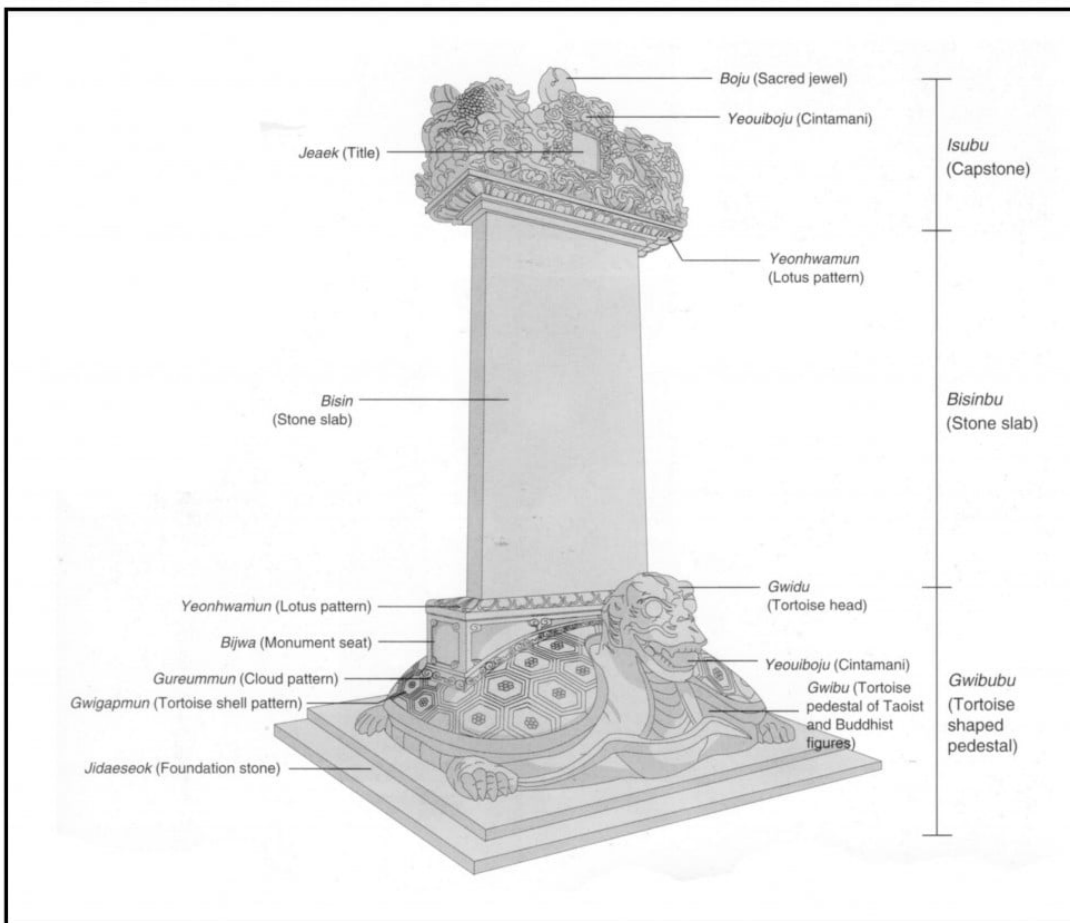
The Silla Royal Family and the court refused to accept Choe's advice about how to improve their government. Disillusioned, Choe left the court to become a provincial magistrate. Finally, he retired completely from public life, spending his last years in meditation at various Buddhist monasteries in the southern regions of Korea. For a brief while he lived in Busan, where he gave the name Haeundae (해운대 Sea Cloud Platform) to Dongbaek Island. He had these characters inscribed on one of the rocks near the present lighthouse. The photo to the right shows Choe's memorial statue on the island (now connected to the mainland in the Haeundae region of Busan. The exact date of Choe's death is unknown. Legend has him wandering off into the forest never to be seen again.

(Biographical details for Choe Chi Won are available in Jones, 1903; Lee, 1997; Lin, 2011, and on David Mason website).

### **The Mountain Stelai**

Before he died, however, Choe composed the inscriptions for four stelai commemorating the achievements of famous Korean

Buddhist monks. As well as describing the lives of the monks, these inscriptions commented upon the philosophy of Buddhism and how it might be made compatible with Confucianism.





Each stele contained a flat stone slab upon which the inscriptions were carved. This was set upon a tortoise base and topped with a cloud-dragon capstone. Tortoises and dragons both symbolize immortality. The above figure shows the general structure of a stele (from Park 2002), and the photograph on the right shows the actual stele commemorating the monk Chin'gam Hyeso (774-850) at the Ssanggye monastery in Southern Korea (from the webpage of David Mason). This monk had studied in China and returned to Korea in 830 to establish a monastery and transmit to his disciples the principles of Seon Buddhism.

## **Seon Buddhism**

Although Buddhism first came to Korea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, it did not become prominent until the advent of Seon Buddhism in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. This line of Buddhism derived from China's Chan Buddhism. Zen Buddhism in Japan had a similar source though it began much later (in the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Chan Buddhism emphasizes meditation as the primary means to enlightenment – “Chan” comes from 禪 (pinyin: *chánà*, meaning meditation), which itself derives from the Sanskrit *dhyana*. The key scripture describing the principles of Buddhist meditation is the *Lankavatara Sutra* (Red Pine, 2012; also available in a web translation), which was compiled in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century and translated into Chinese in the 5th century

Chan Buddhism traces itself back to the patriarch Bodhidharma (known as Daruma in Japan), who lived in China in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Suzuki, 1956, Chapter 3; Red Pine, 1989). Bodhidharma may have journeyed to China from India, though the details of his life come more from myth than history. He is usually portrayed as a fierce, bearded sage, with brow furrowed from concentration, eyes staring after years of meditation (“wall-watching”), and earlobes extended with enlightenment.

As well as meditation, Chan Buddhism fostered asceticism, irrationality, chanting and martial arts. Truth was conveyed from master to pupil; scriptures were irrelevant other than as used by the masters to suggest what could only be attained by meditation. The goal was to drain the consciousness of self and thus to share in the vast emptiness beyond being.

One teaching, attributed to Bodhidharma, but likely composed much later is

- A special transmission outside of scriptures;
- No dependence upon words and letters;
- Direct pointing at the soul of man;

Seeing into one's nature to attain Buddhahood.  
(adapted from Suzuki, 1956, p. 61)



The last two lines are inscribed above the portrait of Daruma by the Japanese Zen Monk Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768, illustration from Wikipedia).

Chan Buddhism differs from the other main line of Chinese Buddhism, Pure Land, which stresses recitation of the scriptures, and mindfulness directed specifically to the Amitabha Buddha (Ching, 1993, Chapter 8 Mysticism and Devotion. Buddhism becomes Chinese). Chan meditation halls are simple and unadorned; Pure Land temples have a baroque exuberance, with statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas everywhere. Chan seeks inside for emptiness, Pure Land looks

outside for fulfillment.

## Chin'gam Hyeso Stele



The monument to Chin'gam Hyeso was erected in 887. Choe Chi Won composed the inscription using regular script (*kaishu*) in the style of Ouyang Xun (557–641), a Chinese scholar and calligrapher. Some of this balanced and graceful script is illustrated above (derived from Park, 2002). Choe's calligraphy was then engraved by Hwan Yong. The inscription begins with a brief introduction, continues with a summary of the life and achievements of Chin'gam Hyeso, and ends with some poetry celebrating his greatness. The following brief quotations and translations are from Jorgensen (2012).

The introduction begins

□□□□, □□□□.

The path is not distant from human beings, and human beings are not different due to country.

The first part of this sentence is a quotation from the beginning of Chapter 13 of the Confucian classic "Doctrine of

the Mean” (中庸 Zhongyong, in the Book of Rites): “The Way is not something separate from man” (Muller translation; Ezra Pound translates the teaching as “The process is not far from man, is not alien from him” in *The Unwobbling Pivot*, 1951). Confucius is pointing out that truth is not beyond the grasp of the human mind. The second part of this introductory sentence is original to Choe. This scholar was educated in a foreign land, and was treated as an alien when he finally returned home. He therefore insists that all human beings should be treated equally, regardless of country, language or race. The statement can also be translated as “For man there is no foreign country.” These words also have a metaphorical meaning – that there is no limit to what the human mind can consider – that complements the initial quotation.

Choe goes on to consider how Buddhism might be reconciled to Confucianism. How can freedom from the world fit with allegiance to the state? Choe refers to the work of an early Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Huiyuan who wrote a treatise on why monks should not pay homage to kings. This does not challenge the government of kings since monks have no desire for worldly power. (The argument is analogous to “Render unto Caesar” from Matthew 22:21 – see Hurvitz, 1957). Thus, apparent contradictions can be dissolved through interpretation. Choe quotes from the Confucian classic “Book of Rites” (礼记, Liji, Chapter *Jiyi*, Verse 7)

□□□□□□, □□ □□□.

How could a word have only one side? Each [side] has a valid point.

Choe then goes on to discuss how the meditation process of Buddhism is impossible to describe in words:

□□□□□□, □□□□, □□□□, □□□□.

□□□□, □□□□, □□□□, □□□□.□□□□□□, □□□□.

Regarding the Buddha's spoken words on the mind-dharma, it is the arcane within the arcane; the name that cannot be named, the explanation that cannot be explained.

Although it is referred to as pointing at the moon or sitting in oblivion [of the surrounding world], in the end it is like [attempting] to bind the wind or like the difficulty of capturing a shadow. But as one progresses from what is far to what is near, what harm is there in using metaphors?

However, even metaphors cannot do justice to the mind-dharma. The experience cannot be put into words. Choe once again quotes Confucius:

□□□□.

What words does Heaven speak?

The full context (Analects, Yang Huo, Verse 19) for this is

The Master said, "I would prefer not speaking." Zi Gong said, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" The Master said, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?"

This reference to Confucius provides Choe with his segue into the biography of the Seon master Chin'gam, the monk who was able to transmit to his disciples the experience of the mind-dharma without using words. The truth cannot be taught; it can only be experienced.

### **Final words**

After the biographical details, Choe concludes with a set of poems in praise of Chin'gam. Among the lines are Choe's attempt to describe the meditative experience:

□□□□,

□□□□.

He fiercely searched for the tiger's cave,  
floating afar over huge waves.

He also portrays the way that the monk was able to release himself from the all the distinctions and suffering of the world:

□□□□,

□□□□.

He lacked [discriminative] thinking and anxiety,  
he was uncut and uncarved.

Just before these final poems, Choe apologizes. He was asked by the King to write the text of the monument and to promote the Buddhist principles, but he is ashamed for trying to describe what is ineffable.

□□□□□, □□□□,

The Dharma can neither be written down nor expressed in words.

## Meanings

I feel great empathy for Choe. Like him, I am deeply involved with words. Like him, I realize that experience cannot be fully expressed in language. Metaphor helps, but can often be misleading. Some things seem true by intuition – the heart has its reasons that reason cannot comprehend (Pascal).

Language does not always connect clearly to meaning. Poetry slips easily into different meanings – tell the truth but tell it slant (Dickinson). Irony allows a meaning completely opposite to the words. As Confucius said, any set of words has more than one interpretation. How one arrives at their correct meaning is sometimes a mystery.

Nevertheless, I trust what can be put into words. Language allows me to tell others about my experiences and to learn about theirs. It helps me to remember what has happened. It allows me to formulate ideas and hypotheses for testing and revision.

The ineffable troubles me. How can I tell that it is not illusory? If it cannot be scrutinized or tested, how can I know that it is true?

I realize, of course, that those who devote their lives to meditation consider the world that I experience as illusory. They would say that I can read but I cannot understand.

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