Laozi: the Nature of the Dao

Laozi (老子, *lǎozǐ*, “the old master”) was a legendary character from the 6th 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 2nd 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).

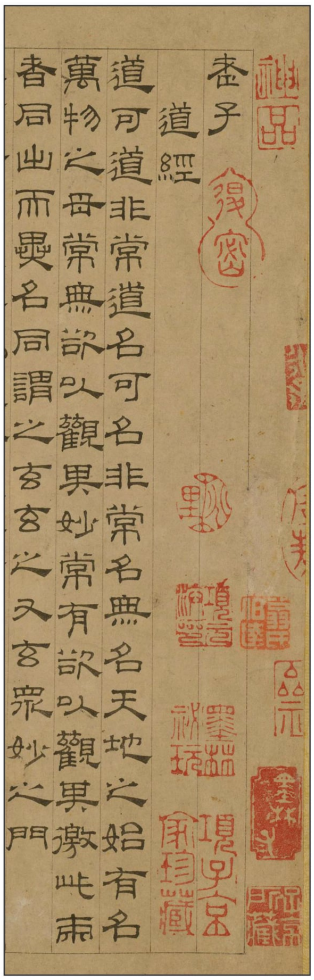
> 道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。
> 無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。
> 故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，
> 以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，
> 同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門

> 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 (□□, fl. 14th Century) in the Palace Museum in Beijing, and on the right in regular script from a scroll by Zhao Mengfu (□□□, 1254–1322). The latter includes a portrait of Laozi as a benevolent old gentleman.



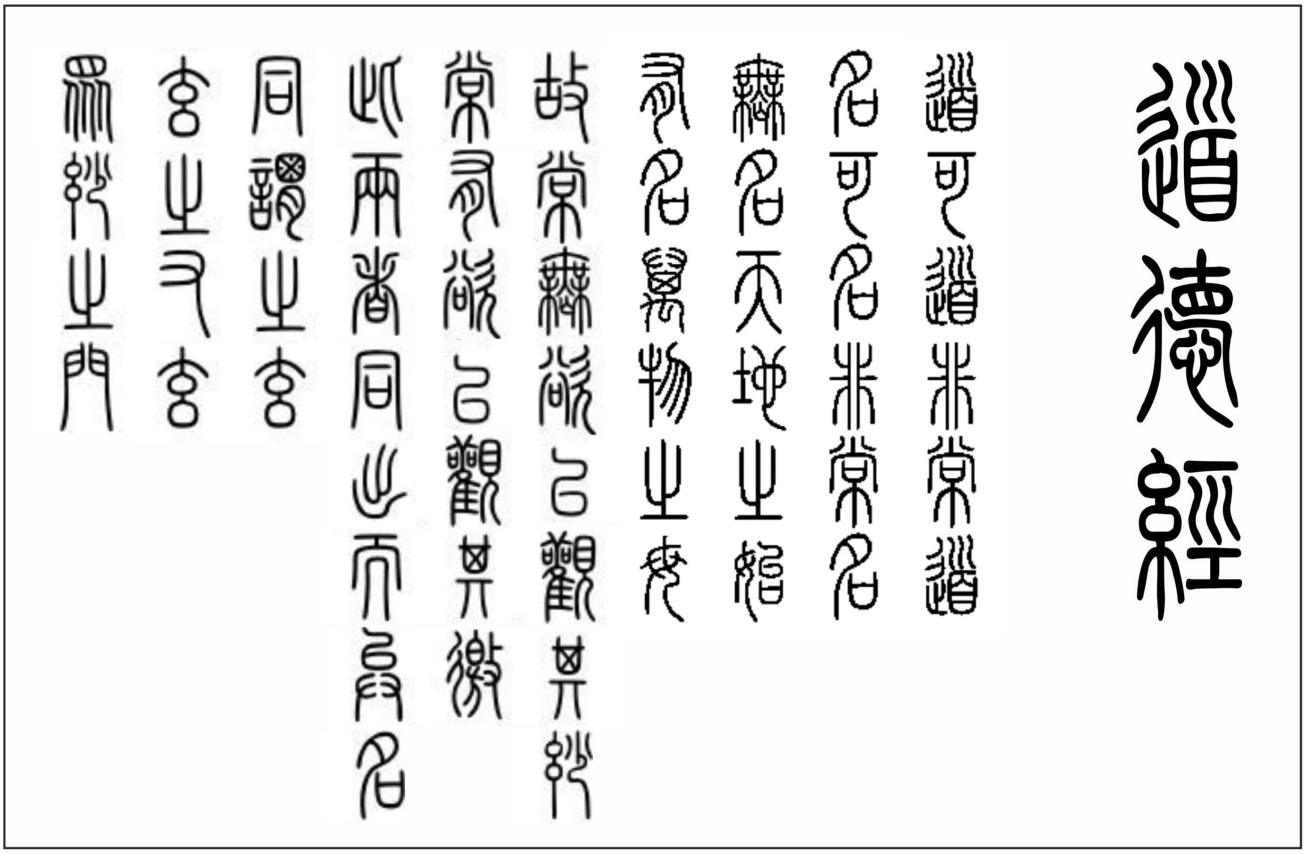
The following is a recitation of the first chapter from the dao-de-jing website, and the text in pinyin romanization:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/chapt

er-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
dào	*kě*	*dào*	*fēi*	*héng*	*dào*
way, path road speak doctrine	can may	speak	not	constant enduring (常, *cháng* eternal)	way

名	可	名	非	恆	名
míng	*kě*	*míng*	*fēi*	*héng*	*míng*
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* (□ simplified □ lunar, feminine, passive, cool) and *Yáng* (□ simplified □ 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* (□□□, 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 □ *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 □ (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 □ (constant) was replaced by □ (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* (□□, Master Zhuang, Chuang-tzu in the Wade-Giles romanization) a Daoist philosopher who lived in the 4th 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 cosmogeny

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

有	名	萬(万)	物	之	母
yǒu	*míng*	*wàn*	*wù*	*zhī*	*mǔ*
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* 無 [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* 無名 [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 (5th 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 (母, 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，是謂天地根。
>
> 綿綿若存，用之不勤

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 天下母 (*tiān xià mǔ*, the mother of all under heaven):

> 有物混成，先天地生。
>
> 寂兮寥兮，独立不改，
>
> 周行而不殆，可以为天下母。
>
> 吾不知其名，字之曰道，强为之名曰

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 understoon that the world is based on interacting male ane 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* 無无). The 42nd chapter recounts the actual process of creation (translation by Wu, 2016):

> 道生一，一生二，
> 二生三，三生萬物。
> 萬物負陰而抱陽，
> 沖氣以為和。

> *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* (氣) – 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 (氣), Yin-Yang, and harmonized physical energies (和氣). 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
gù	*cháng*	*wú*	*yù*	*yǐ*	*guān*	*qí*	*miào*
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
cháng	*yǒu*	*yù*	*yǐ*	*guān*	*qí*	*jiao*
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 □ (*miǎo,* tiny, minute) for □ and □ (*jiao*, pursue) for □. This leads to the idea of the development from minute origins toward the mature things of the present.

Another difficult is whether the character □ 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□ and □ the subjects of the sentences rather than

modifiers of □. 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* □(□) and *you* □:

> **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
cǐ	*liǎng*	*zhě*	*tóng*	*chū*	*ér*	*yì*	*míng*
this these	two different	this (referring to things)	same identical together	exit out	yet but	different separate	name describe

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

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
xuán	*zhī*	*yòu*	*xuán*
mystery dark	of	again	mystery dark

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

Laozi uses two words for mystery:

> 玄 (xuán) is *dark, mysterious, unseen, withdrawn, deep.* But 妙 (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 chapter 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 辶 (*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),

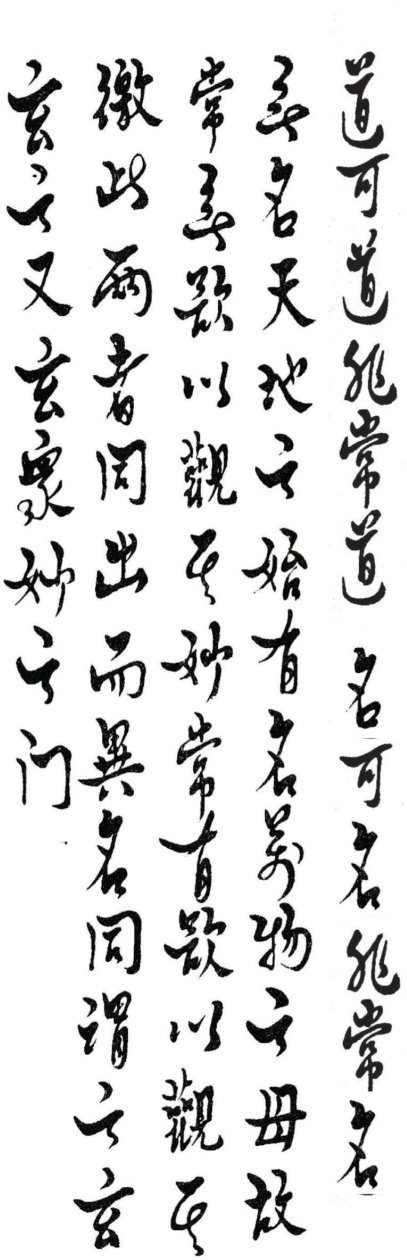
Fu (1973) describes six dimensions of the Dao:

> (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, thing 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:



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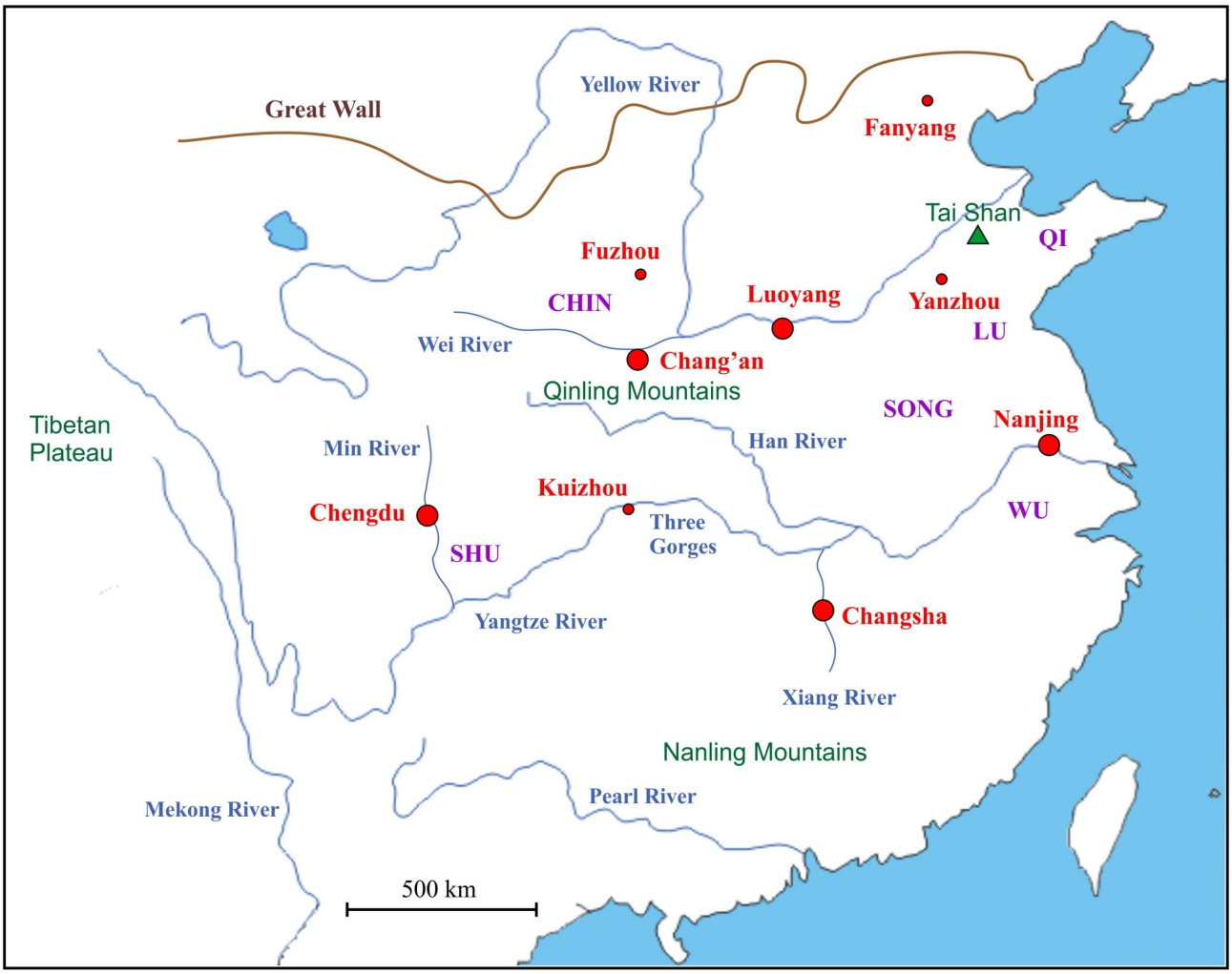
Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

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

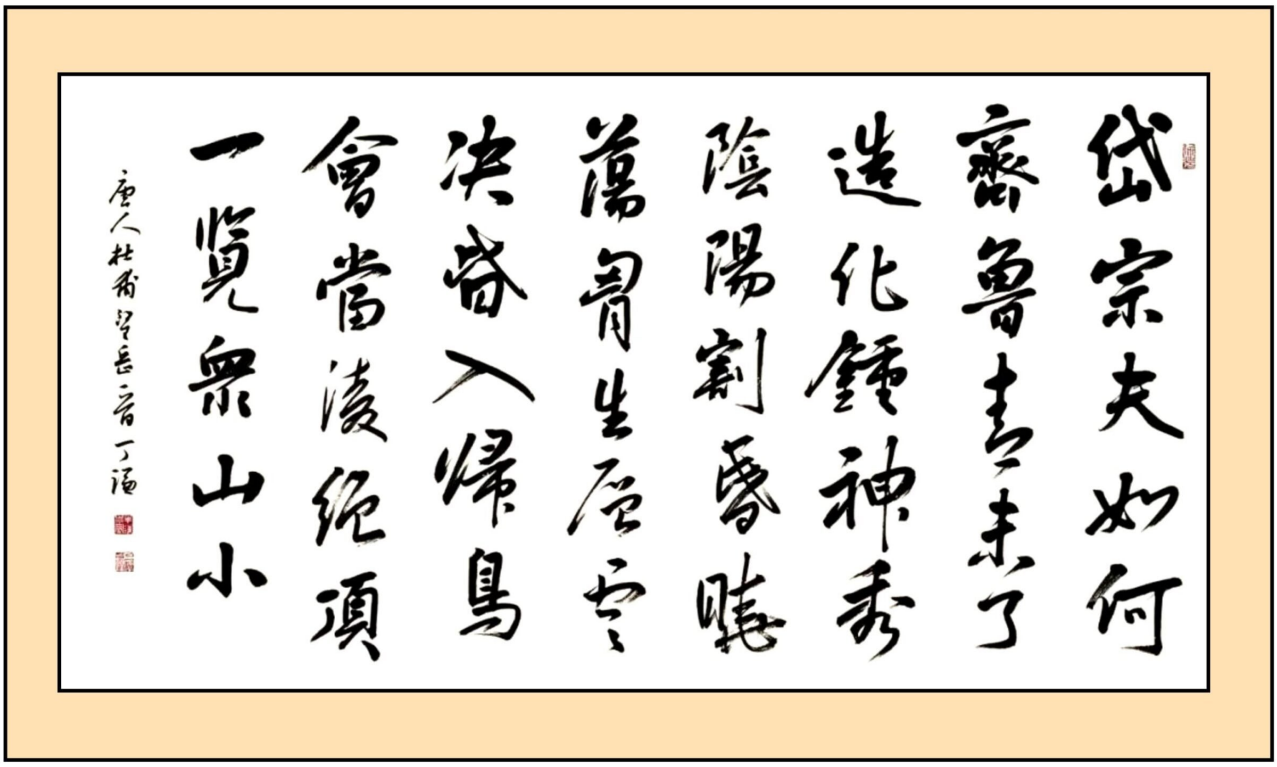
We can begin our examination of Du Fu’s poetry with one of the early poems written during his time in Yanzhou: *Gazing on the Peak* (737 CE). The peak is *Taishan* (exalted mountain), located in Northeastern China. Taishan is one of the Five Great Mountains (*Wuyue*) of ancient China. Today one can reach 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,	dài zōng fū rú hé
齊魯青未了。	qí lǔ qīng wèi liǎo
造化鍾神秀,	zào huà zhōng shén xiù
陰陽割昏曉。	yīn yáng gē hūn xiǎo
盪胸生曾雲,	dàng xiōng shēng céng yún
決眥入歸鳥。	jué zì rù guī niǎo
會當凌絕頂,	huì dāng líng jué dǐng
一覽眾山小。	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

Daizong (ancient name for Taishan) then
like what
Qi *Lu* (regions near Taishan) green/blue
never end
create change concentrate divine beauty
Yin *Yang* (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 6th 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 *lǜshī.* 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 xīng 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 again mystery
creek pathway remnant cold pass ice snow
stone gate slant sun reach forest place
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.


澗道餘寒歷冰雪
石門斜日到林丘
乙巳臘月寫
少陵詩意十
二幀似
旭盛賢翁時年
七十有四 時敏

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-ye-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

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

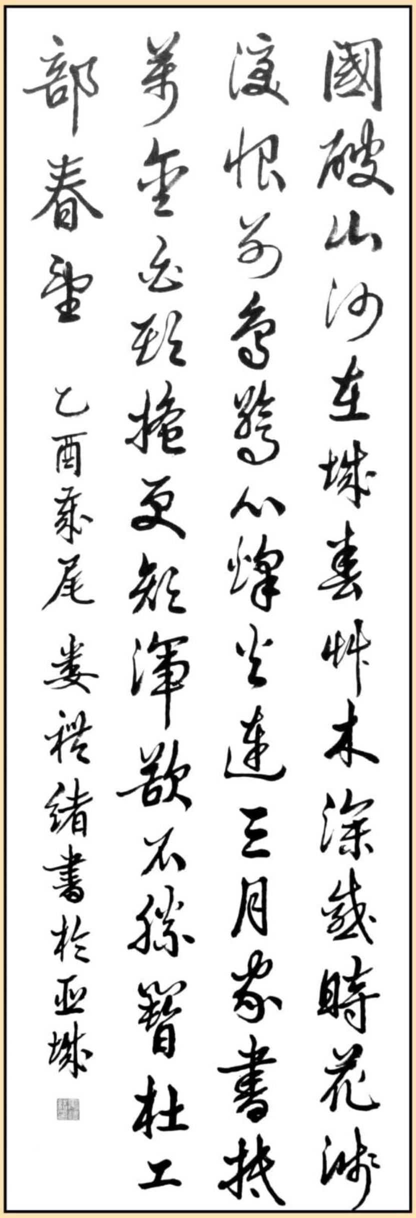
The following is a reading of the poem from the website

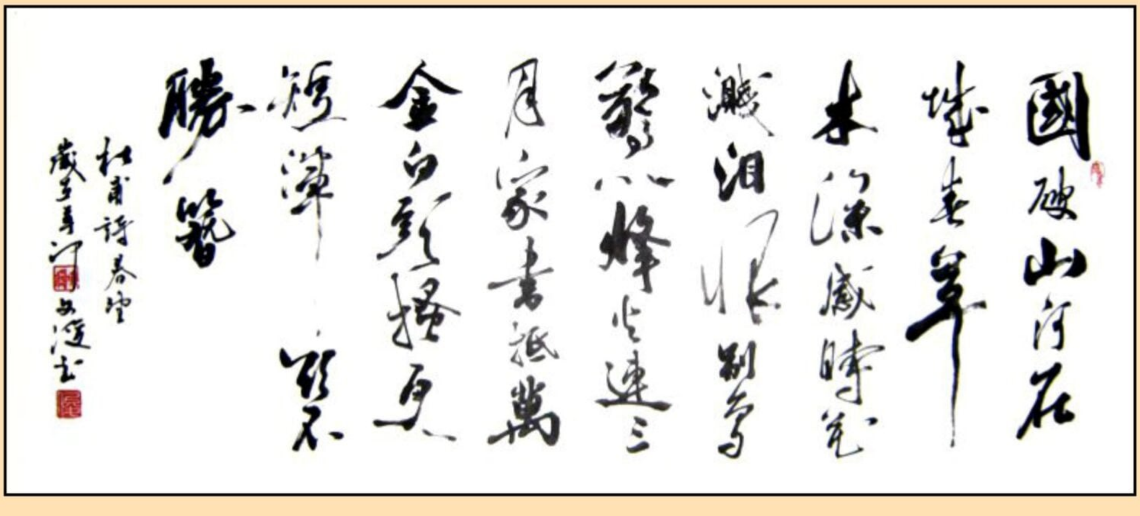
associated with *How to Read Chinese Poetry* (ZongQi-Cai, 2008, poem 8.1):

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 Shiuh Lou is gently cursive. At the bottom the calligraphy by an anonymous calligrapher is unrestrained: it accentuates the root of the growing grass (8th character) and the radicals that compose the character for regret/hate (16th 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
杜甫春望 辛丑臘月


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工
部春望
乙酉春尾


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
杜甫詩春望

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):

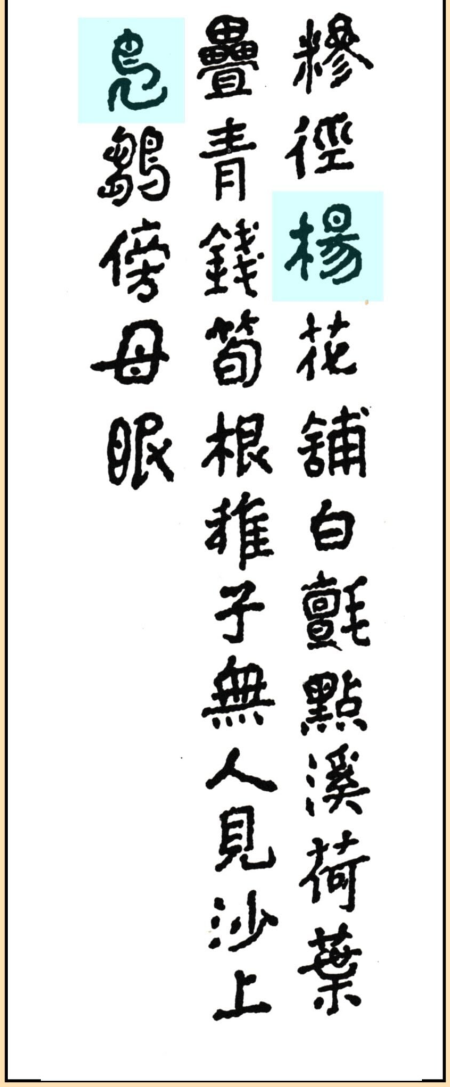
糝徑楊花鋪白氈，　　sǎn jìng yáng huā pū bái zhān
點溪荷葉疊青錢。　　diǎn xī hé yè dié qīng qián
筍根雉子無人見，　　sǔn gēn zhì zǐ wú rén jiàn
沙上鳧雛傍母眠。　　shā shàng fú chú bàng mǔ mián

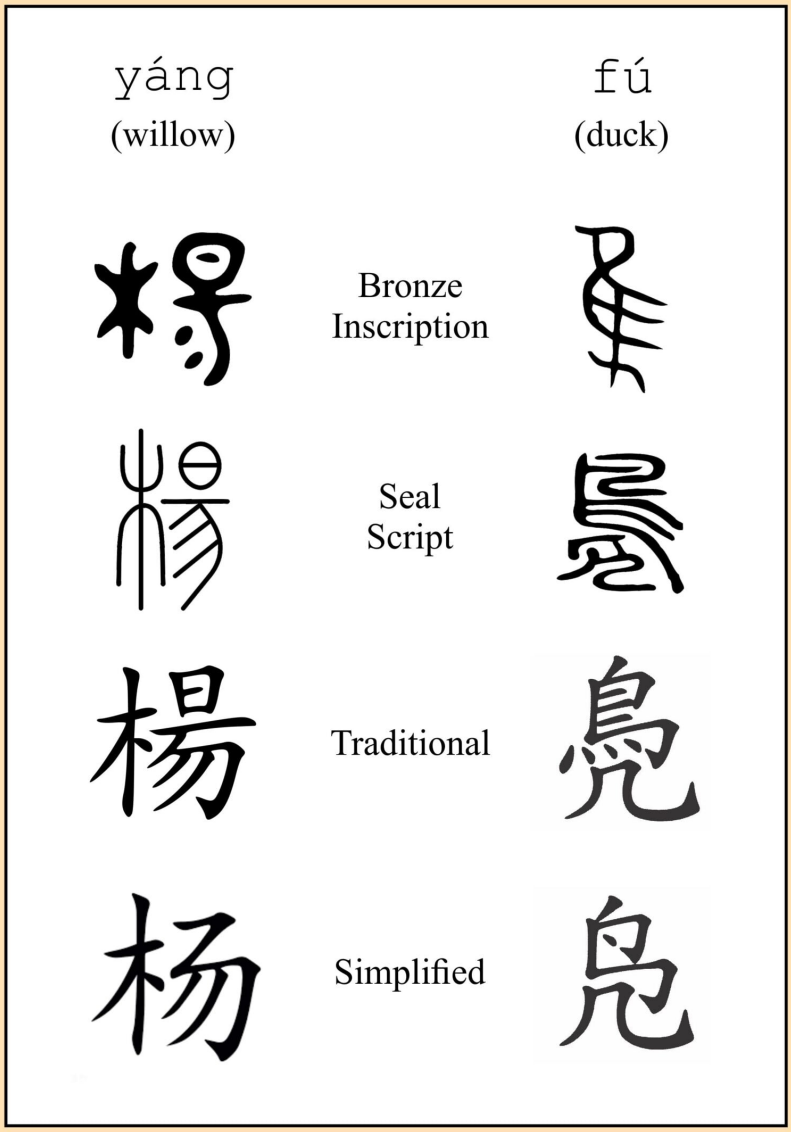
grain path poplar/willow blossom pave white carpet
little stream lotus leaves pile green money
bamboo shoot root sprout no person see
sand on duckling beside mother sleep

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.





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.

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，	kuí fǔ gū chéng luò rì xié
每依北斗望京華。	měi *yī běi* dǒu wàng jīng huá
聽猿實下三聲淚，	tīng yuán shí xià sān shēng lèi
奉使虛隨八月槎。	fèng shǐ xū suí bā yuè chá
畫省香爐違伏枕，	huà shěng xiāng lú wéi fú zhěn
山樓粉堞隱悲笳。	shān lóu fěn dié yǐn bēi jiā
請看石上藤蘿月，	qǐng kàn shí shàng téng luó yuè
已映洲前蘆荻花。	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
櫓搖背指菊花開

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.

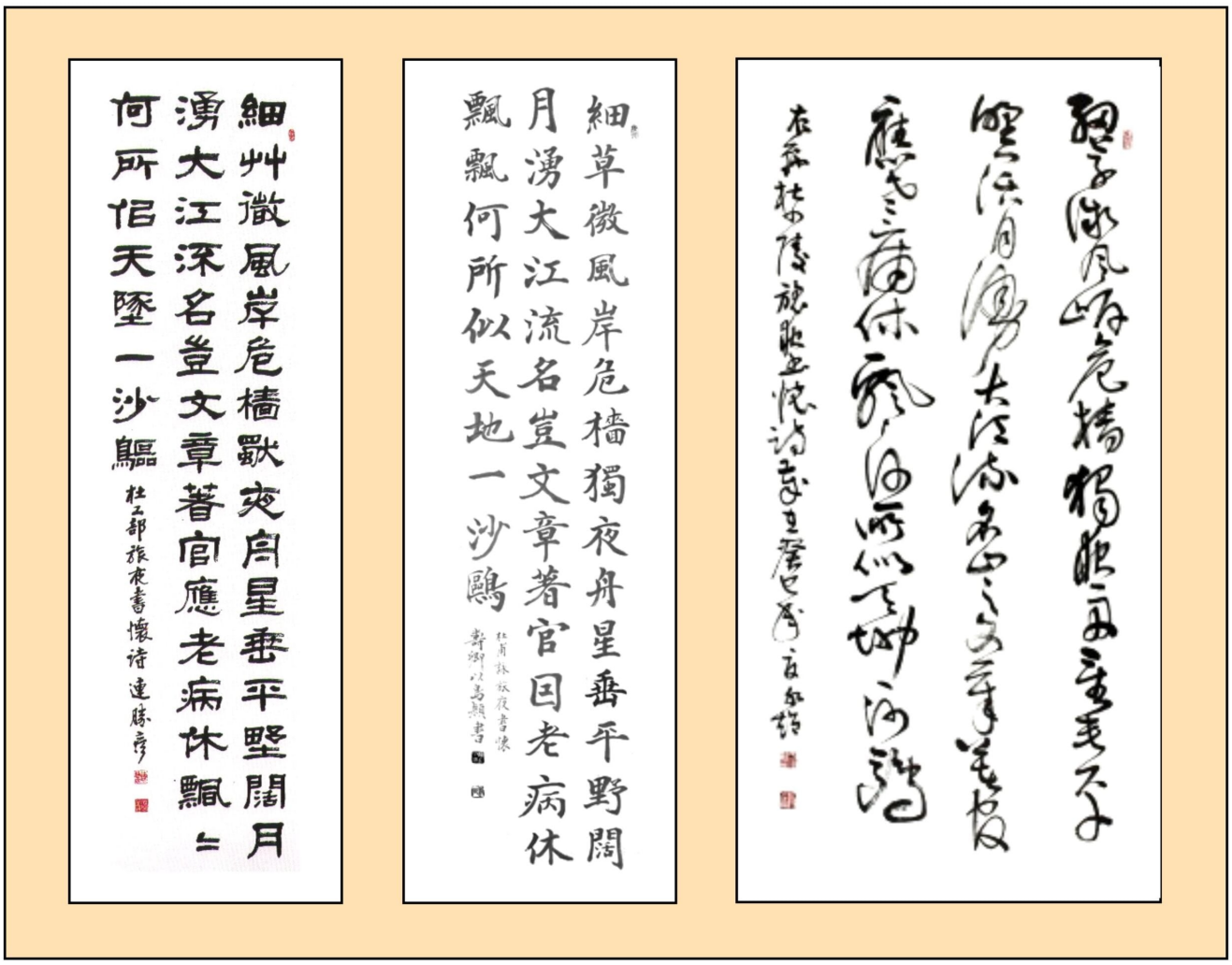
Drifting, drifting,
what do I resemble?
A lone gull
lost between earth and heaven.

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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Searching for the Dao

This post presents some ideas about the *Dào* ("Way") as described in the *Dàodéjīng* ("Book of the Way and its Virtue"), that legend claims was composed by *Lǎozī* in the 5th Century BCE. The *Dào* cannot be explained in words. But that has never stopped anyone from writing about it.

An Incident at Hangu Pass

No one is sure of the season or even the year. It was probably at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), and it would have been appropriate if it were autumn. An old man riding on a water buffalo, together with a young servant,

requested passage to the west through the frontier gate at Hangu. They were leaving the violence and corruption of the Kingdom of the Eastern Zhou, which was slowly dissolving into anarchy, a time that later historians called the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE).

Yǐnxǐ, the head guardsman, realized that the old man was of some importance. In answer to his questions, the old man confirmed that he had been the Royal Archivist at the court of Zhou. He had resigned his position, and was now on his way to the mountains to find peace. *Yǐnxǐ* requested that the old man not leave without providing him with a summary of his wisdom. The scholar obliged and wrote out a summary of all that he considered important. And then he departed, never to be heard of again.

The writings that he left with *Yǐnxǐ* became known as the *Dàodéjīng* – the "Book of the Way and its Virtue" (*Tao Te Ching* in the old Wade-Giles system of romanization), containing about 5000 characters in 81 brief chapters. The first section of the book (chapters 1-37) dealt with the *Dào* ("way"), and the second section with *Dé* ("virtue"). The author became known as *Lǎozī* – the "Old Master" (*Lao Tzu* in Wade-Giles). Sometimes the book itself is also referred to as *Lǎozī.*

I have told the story as best I can. There are several legends about what happened, and I am not sure which are true, or even whether *Lǎozī* was an actual person (Graham, 1998; Chan, 2000). The story does explain the nature of the book – an anthology of cryptic sayings and opinions on the nature of the universe and how people should behave.

The Eastern Zhou dynasty had its court in Chengzhou, now called Luoyáng. From there the king tried to maintain his rule over the surrounding feudal states. After many years of internecine warfare, the Qin state in the west ultimately prevailed over the others and founded the first Chinese Empire in 221 BCE.

The frontier gate in the Hangu Pass has been preserved as the centerpiece of an archeological site in Xin'an:

Lǎozī on his water buffalo was portrayed by *Chao Buzhi* in an ink painting (around 1100 CE) now in the Palace Museum in Taipei:

A carved jade circle from the early 19th Century represents the meeting between *Lǎozī* (right) and *Yǐnxǐ* (left) with the Hangu Gate at the top.

In 1938, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) felt definite empathy for *Lǎozī*. He was living in Denmark, an exile from his home in Germany, which was descending into the horrors of Nazism. He wrote a poem *The Legend of How the Tao te Ching Came into Being on Lao Tse's Journey into Exile,* which was later published in *Tales from the Calendar* (1949, translated 1961). The custom's officer asks the boy attending on *Lǎozī* what he has learned from the old man and receives the answer

> … Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung
> Mit der Zeit den harten Stein besiegt.
> [That over time the gentlest water
> Defeats the hardest stone]

This paraphrases some lines from chapter 78 of the *Dàodéjīng*

Brecht ends his poem with

> Aber rühmen wir nicht nur den Weisen Dessen Name auf dem Buche prangt! Denn man muß dem Weisen seine Weisheit erst entreißen. Darum sei der Zöllner auch bedankt: Er hat sie ihm abverlangt.
>
> [But we should not just praise the Sage
> Whose name is displayed on the book.
> Since we must retrieve from the Wise their wisdom,
> The customs officer should also be thanked
> For demanding it of him.]

The Nature of the Dào

The main focus of *Lǎozī* 's book is the *Dào* (pinyin, *Tao* in Wade-Gilles). The character is composed of the "walk/march" radical on the left (a leg taking a step forward) and the "head/chief" radical on the upper right (a head with hair or horns above a stylized face). The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version (which would have been used at the beginning of the Qin dynasty) on the left, and the modern version on the right.

As a noun, *Dào* is most often translated as "way" or "path." When it is used as a verb it generally means "say" or "explain." This confluence of "way" and "word" also occurs in the Christian gospel of *John* (1:1, and 14:6), where the source

of everything is called the word (*logos*) and salvation is obtained through the way (*odos*) (Ching, 1993, p. 88).

In *Lǎozī* 's book, the *Dào* represents the underlying and enduring principle of the universe, something completely beyond human comprehension (Schwartz, 2000):

> The *Dào* that can be explained is not the eternal *Dào*;
> The Name that can be told is not the eternal Name.
>
> The nameless is the source of heaven and earth,
> The mother of everything which can be named.
>
> Free from desire, you can realize its mystery;
> Caught in desire, you see only its manifestations.
>
> That these two aspects are both same and different
> Is the paradox:
>
> Mystery of mystery,
> Gateway to wonder.
>
> [Chapter 1, my translation. I am indebted to Mitchell (1988) for the opposition of "mystery" and "manifestations." And to Pepper and Wang (2021) for their word-by-word analysis.]

Livia Kohn (2020, p 16) proposed:

> One way to think of *Dào* is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is *Dào* at the root of creative change– tight, concentrated, intense, and ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment… The larger circle at the periphery is *Dào* as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here we can see *Dào* as it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens– the everchanging yet everlasting, cyclical alteration of natural patterns, life and death… This is *Dào*

> as natural transformations: the metamorphoses of insects, ways of bodily dissolution, and the inevitable entropy of life. This natural, tangible *Dào* is what people can study and learn to create harmony in the world; the cosmic, ineffable *Dào*, on the other hand, they need to open to by resting in clarity and stillness to find true authenticity in living.

Her description fits with that in Chapter 11 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

> Thirty spokes converge on the wheel's hub,
> The emptiness of which allows the cart to be used.

And perhaps point to Eliot's image in *Burnt Norton* (1941)

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement.

As pointed out by Kenner (1959, pp 297-8))

> This is the philosophers' paradox of the Wheel, the exact center of which is precisely motionless, whatever the velocity of the rim.

Yīn* and *Yáng

The *Dào* is the source of all the different things in the word. The multiplicity of the world is described in Chapter 2 of the *Dàodéjīng* (translation by Ursula Le Guin, 1997):

> For being and nonbeing
> arise together;
> hard and easy
> compete with each other;
> long and short

shape each other;
high and low
depend on each other;
note and voice
make music together;
before and after
follow each other.

The source of this multiplicity is proclaimed in Chapter 42 (my translation)

The *Dào* gives birth to one
One gives birth to two
Two give birth to three
Three gives birth to the myriad things of the world.

These carry *Yīn* on their back and *Yáng* in their arms
And together they achieve harmony

Yīn is water, earth, night, female; *Yáng* is fire, sky, day, male. Through much of the *Dàodéjīng*, *Lǎozī* is more partial to *Yīn*, the eternal female. *Yīn* and *Yáng* mix to form a third type of being and from this intermingling comes everything – *Wànwù* (ten thousand things). This process is depicted in the *Tàijítú* symbol*:* the outer circle represents the whole while the light and dark areas represent its opposing manifestations. The *Tàijítú* in turn becomes the center of the *Bāguà* ("eight symbols") map, representing all the different elements of the world.

Name	Nature
乾 Qián	天 Sky (Heaven)
巽 Xùn	風 Wind
坎 Kǎn	水 Water
艮 Gèn	山 Mountain
坤 Kūn	地 Earth
震 Zhèn	雷 Thunder
離 Lí	火 Fire
兌 Duì	澤 Lake

The Rule of *Dé*

The character for *Dé* (pinyin, *Te* in Wade-Giles) contains on the left the radical for “step/road.” The upper right of the character represents “truth” – something placed on a pedestal to be examined. The lower right is the radical for “heart.” The character thus embodies the idea of following the path of the true heart. *Dé* is translated as “virtue” or “morality.” The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version on the left and the modern version on the right.

According to *Lǎozī*, virtue is attained by behaving in harmony with the *Dào*. Exactly how one does this is not completely clear. When he wrote his book, *Lǎozī* had decided that he needed to retire from the world, and much of his thought espouses the concept of *wéiwúwéi* – “acting without acting.” He urged leaders not to interfere with the lives of their people

and not to overburden them with taxes. He urged generals to exercise restraint and patience.

Acting in harmony with the *Dào* means doing things for the good of all rather than the benefit of one. Occasionally *Lǎozī* does recommend particular virtues. The following is from Chapter 67 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

> I have three treasures
> that I hold and protect:
> first is compassion,
> second is austerity
> third is reluctance to excel.
>
> Because I am kind I can be valiant,
> Because I am frugal I can be generous
> Because I am humble I can be a leader.
>
> [My translation owes much to Red Pine (2004), from whom I took the names of the treasures. Other expressions derive from Pepper and Wang (2021).]

The Religion of Dàoism

In the 2nd Century CE, *Zhāng Dàolíng* was visited by the spirit of *Lǎozī*, and proclaimed himself the first "Celestial Master" of the Dào. (Ching, 1993; Hendrichke, 2000, Kohn 2020; Robinet, 1992; Wong, 1997). Dàoism became an organized religion. *Lǎozī* was deified. Various other sages and believers were raised to the rank of "Immortals." The descendants of *Zhang Dàoling* have continued to lead the religion to the present day. Dàoism as a religion provided its adherents with rituals, prayers, scriptures, talismans, and divination. Some of the "austerity' of *Lǎozī* was perhaps lost in the proliferating ceremonies.

Dàoism was immensely popular. Temples sprang up everywhere. Dàoism was particularly attracted to the mountains, perhaps because this is where *Lǎozī* attained his immortality after

leaving through Hangu Pass. Statues of *Lǎozī* and the immortals abound. The following is a large statue of *Lǎozī* created during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It is located in the Qingyuan Mountain Park near Quanzhou city in Southern China.

The Art of Dàoism

Much of the art associated with Dàoism concerns the activities of the Immortals (Little, 2000; Little & Eichman, 2000). However, during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) when the Mongols controlled China and ruled an Empire that spread as far west as Europe, several artists evolved a style of landscape painting that attempted to portray the simple power of nature (Barnhart, 1983; Cahill, 1976; Scott, 2006).

Probably the most famous of these painters was *Ní Zàn* (1301-1374), an aristocrat who gave up his worldly goods and retired from public life to live as an ascetic. One of his

last paintings, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is entitled *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* (1372).

The poem appended to the top of the painting identifies where it was created and concludes:

> We watch the clouds and apply our paint;

> We drink wine and write poems.
> The joyous feelings of this day
> Will linger long after we have parted.

The painting portrays the stillness of the water in the lake and the power of the mountains on the further shore. These seem to embody the eternal forces of *Yīn* and *Yáng*. In the foreground are a few of the ten thousand things that make up our particular world. The most powerful part of the painting is that which is not painted – the water representing the force of *Yīn*.

> The spirit at the center of all is called the dark female,
> Gateway of the foundations of heaven and earth,
> Which lasts unbroken and forever: use it.
> [*Dàodéjīng,* Chapter 6, my translation]

Final Thoughts

Most people believe that the universe is governed by rules. Many believe that such rules are purposeful and that the universe is evolving toward some goal. We are a hopeful species and we like to think of this process as benevolent rather than blind. Many of our religions urge us to fit our individual intentions to this more general goal. Of all this we are unsure. But there is something behind it all:

> Something there is, whose veiled creation was
> Before the earth or sky began to be;
> So silent, so aloof and so alone,
> It changes not, nor fails, but touches all:
> Conceive it as the mother of the world.
> I do not know its name;
> A name for it is “Way.”
> [*Dàodéjīng,* Chapter 25, Blakney (1955) translation]

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