Bai Juyi: Pearls Falling on Jade

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

Life of the Poet

Bai Juyi was born in Northern China and came to the capital Chang'an to pass his examinations for the civil service in 800. There he became close friends with the novelist and poet Yuan Zhen (779-831) (Tan, 2025). He soon became a prolific and popular poet, with the courtesy name *Lètiān* (□□, happiness of heaven: optimism) (Waley, 1949). Bai Juyi and his predecessors, Li Bai, Wang Wei and Du Fu, are considered the four great poets of the Tang Dynasty (Geng, 2021). He became renowned in Japan where he was known as *Haku Rakuten* from the Japanese transliteration of his courtesy name (□□□). In 815, the prime minister Wu Yuanheng was brutally assassinated because he would not agree to the demands of some rebellious warlords. Bai Juyi wrote a memorial calling upon the emperor to seek out and punish the assassins. However, the politics were complicated. Bai Juyi was considered presumptuous – it was not for him, a tutor in the imperial household, to advise the emperor. He was exiled and demoted to a minor position

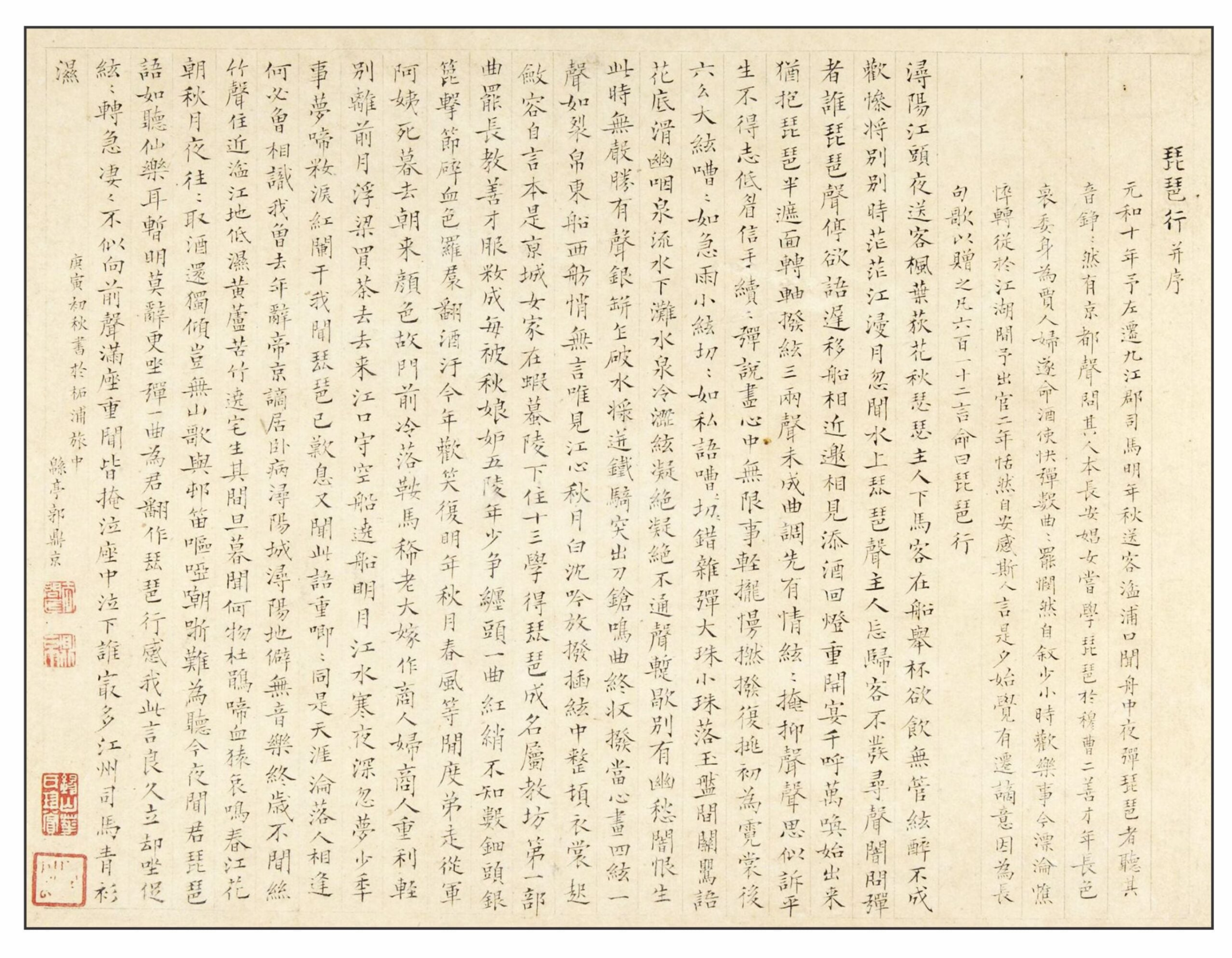
(“master of the horse”, essentially an adjutant) in Jiujiang, then known as Jiangzhou (Waley, 1949, pp 101-104). While there, he heard the playing of a pipa near the river and wrote his famous poem *The Ballad of the Pipa.* Bai Juyi was allowed to return to Chang’an in 1819. He then served for periods of time as governor of Hangzhou and governor of Suzhou. Bai Juyi was a devoted Chan Buddhist and when he grew old, he retired to a Buddhist monastery near the Longmen caves famous for their colossal statues of Buddha (carved in 672 and 676). At the monastery he was able to compile a full collection of his poems before his death.

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

Translating the Ballad of the Pipa

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

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



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

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

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

The Setting

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

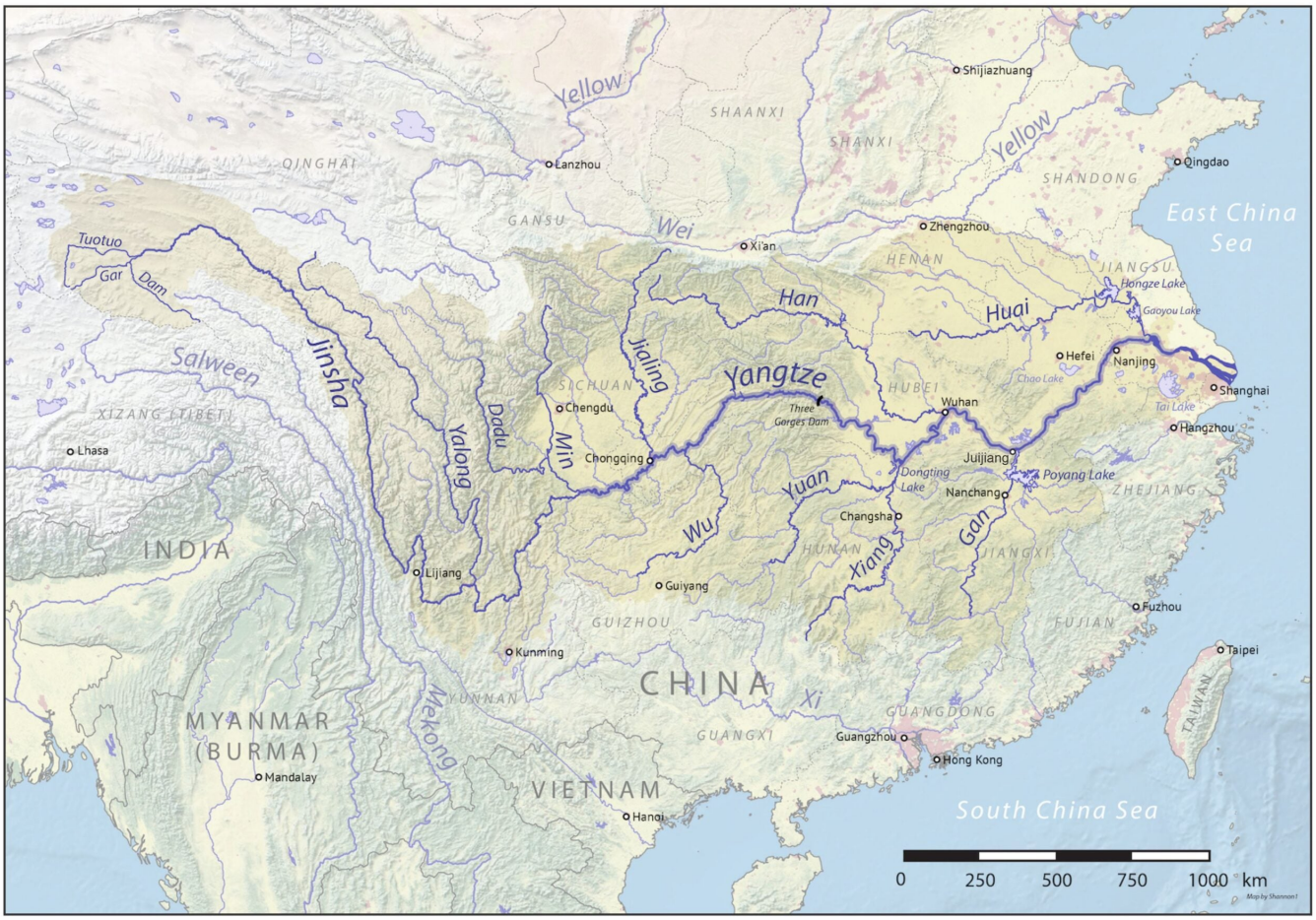
同	是	天	涯	淪	落	人
tóng	*shì*	*tiān*	*yá*	*lún*	*luò*	*rén*
same	exist correct	sky heaven	border shore	perish fall	missing decline	person

We are both lost at the edge of the world

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

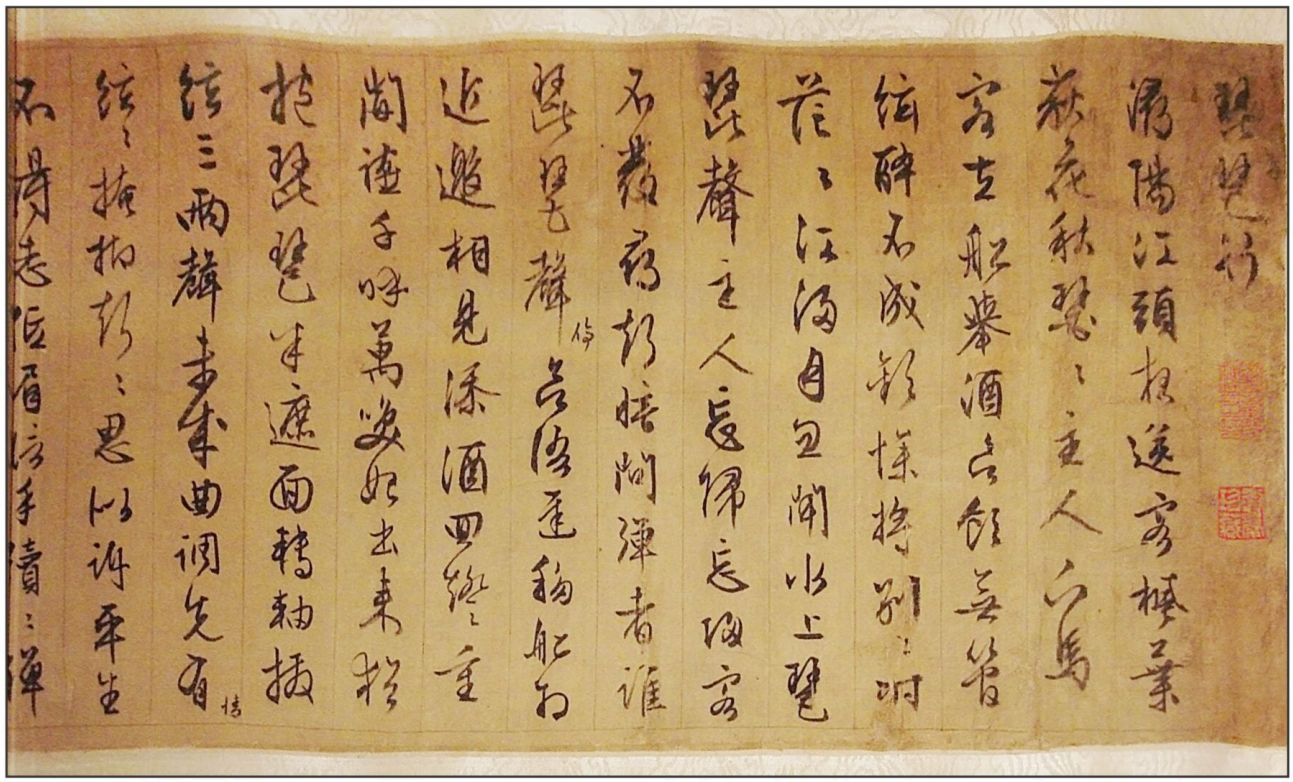
Jiujiang, which had once been known as Jiangzhou, is a city on the Yangtze River. The region of the river near Jiujiang was sometimes known as the Xunyang River. The Yangtze River, the

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



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

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



Beginning of the Ballad

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Pipa

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

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

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

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

The Music

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

大	絃	嘈	嘈	如	急	雨
dà	*xián*	*cáo*	*cáo*	*rú*	*kè*	*yǔ*
big large	chord string	noise tumult	noise tumult	like as	urgent impatient	rain

小	絃	切	切	如	私	語
xiǎo	*xián*	*qiè*	*qiè*	*rú*	*sī*	*yǔ*
small tiny	string	cut slice	cut slice	like as	secret private	speech language

嘈	嘈	切	切	錯	雜	彈
cáo	*cáo*	*qiè*	*qiè*	*cuò*	*zá*	*dàn*
				complex intricate	mix	play pluck

大	珠	小	珠	落	玉	盤
dà	*zhū*	*xiǎo*	*zhū*	*luò*	*yù*	*pán*
big large	pearl	small tiny	pearl	fall drop	jade	plate tray

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

四	絃	一	聲	如	裂	帛
sì	*xián*	*yī*	*sheng*	*rú*	*liè*	*bó*
four	string chord	one	sound tone	as like	rend split	silk

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

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

The Life of the Pipa Player

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Yin-yo laps in the reeds, my guest departs,
> The maple leaves blot up their shadows,
> The sky is full of autumn,
> We drink our parting in saki.
> Out of the night comes troubling lute music,
> And we cry out, asking the singer's name,
> And get this answer:
> "Many a one
> Brought me rich presents; my hair was full of jade,
> And my slashed skirts, drenched in expensive dyes,
> Were dipped in crimson, sprinkled with rare wines.
> I was well taught my arts at Ga-ma-rio,
> And then one year I faded out and married."
> The lute-bowl hid her face.
> We heard her weeping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

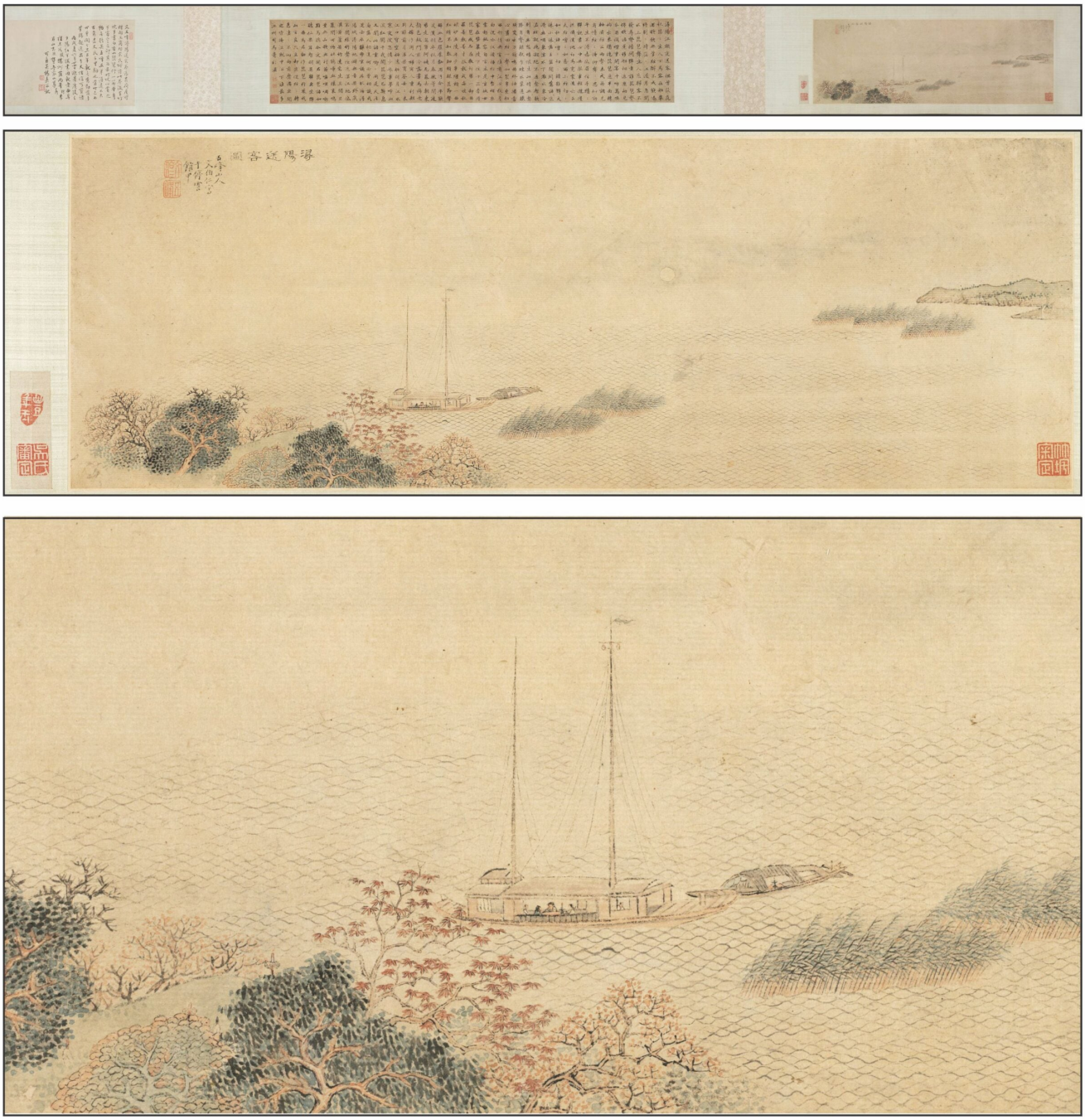
https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Wu-Man-performs-Night-Thoughts-x.mp3

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

靜夜思	**A Tranquil Night**
床前明月光	Before my bed a pool of light
疑是地上霜	Is it hoarfrost upon the ground
舉頭望明月	Eyes raised I see the moon so bright
低頭思故鄉	Head bent in homesickness I’m drowned

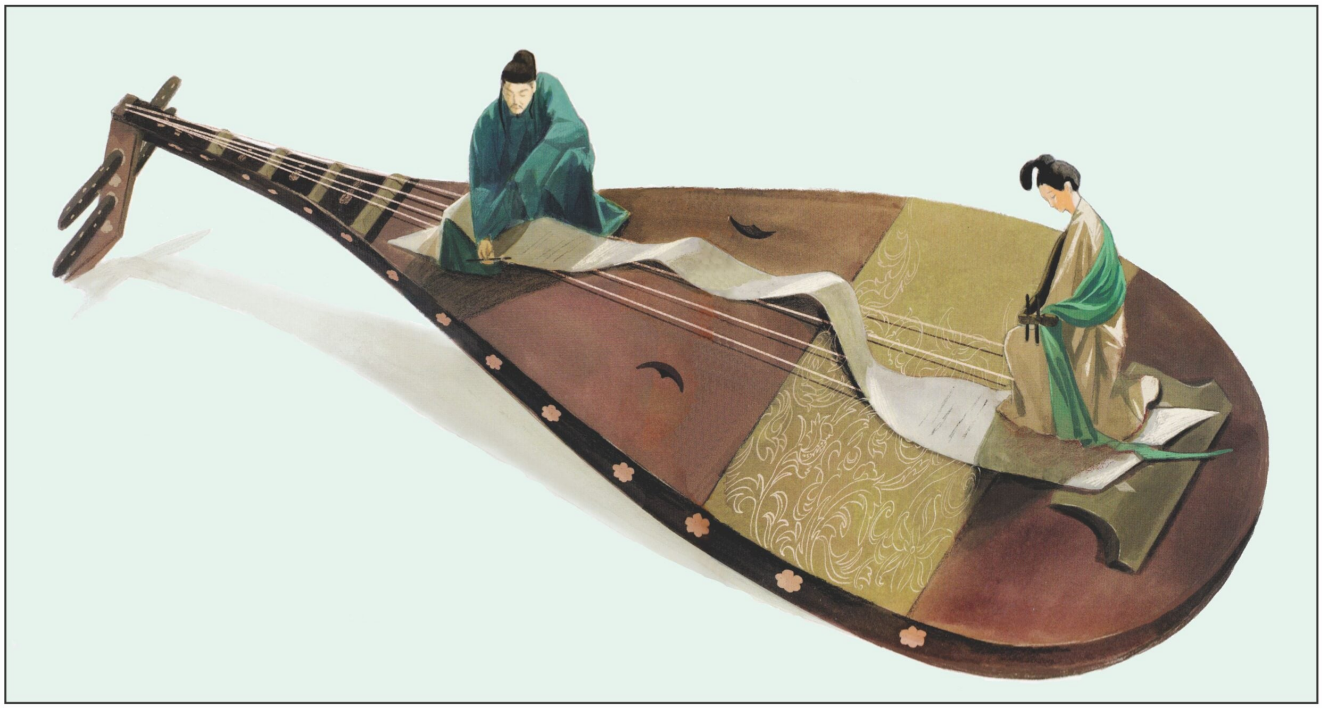
The Life of the Poem

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



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

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



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Wang Wei: the Wheel River Poems

Wang Wei (□□; traditional □□; 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 boddhisattva *Vimalakirti* (Chinese name □□□ *Wéimójí*). Vimalakirti taught the practice of *sunyata* (Sanskrit, emptiness; Chinese □□ *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* (□□□ 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 (□ □ 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 *Wǎngchuān jí* (□□□) is a collection of poems containing 20 quatrains (□□ *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 □□ (*Wǔjué*). The poems describe various locations near Wang Wei's villa on the Wang River. The name of the river (□ *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, Day in, day out, cold mountain in view.
But voices of men are heard. A

wayfarer comes and goes alone;
Sun’s reflection reaches into the woods Knows no things of the pine-forests
And shines upon the green moss. But tracks of buck and doe.

鹿	柴
lù deer	chái fence

空	山	不	見	人
kōng empty	shān mountain	bù not	jiàn see	rén person
但	聞	人	語	響
dàn but/only	wén listen	rén person	yǔ speech	xiǎng sound
返	景	入	深	林
fǎn return	jǐng sunlight	rù enter	shēn deep	lín forest
復	照	青	苔	上
fù return	zhào shine	qīng green	tái moss	shàng up/upon

日	夕	見	寒	山
rì sun/day	xī night	jiàn see	hán cold	shān mountain
便	為	獨	往	客
biàn ordinary	wéi do/make	dú alone	wǎng towards	kè visitor
不	知	深	林	事
bù not	zhī know	shēn deep	lín forest	shì thing
但	有	麋	麑	跡
dàn but/only	yǒu exist	jūn deer	jiā stag	jì footprint

The following is a reading of this poem from a website associated with Zong-qi Cai’s book on *How to Read Chinese Poetry in Context* (2018).

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ww-deer-park.mp3

The difficulty of translating this poem into English was the subject of Eliot Weinberger’s book *Seventeen Ways of Looking*

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 □ *chái* now means “firewood,” although it likely once also meant a “fence,” such as that enclosing a park.

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

The characters □□ 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

gū alone yuè moon zhèng up(right) páihuái walk back and forth

谷 口 猿 聲 發

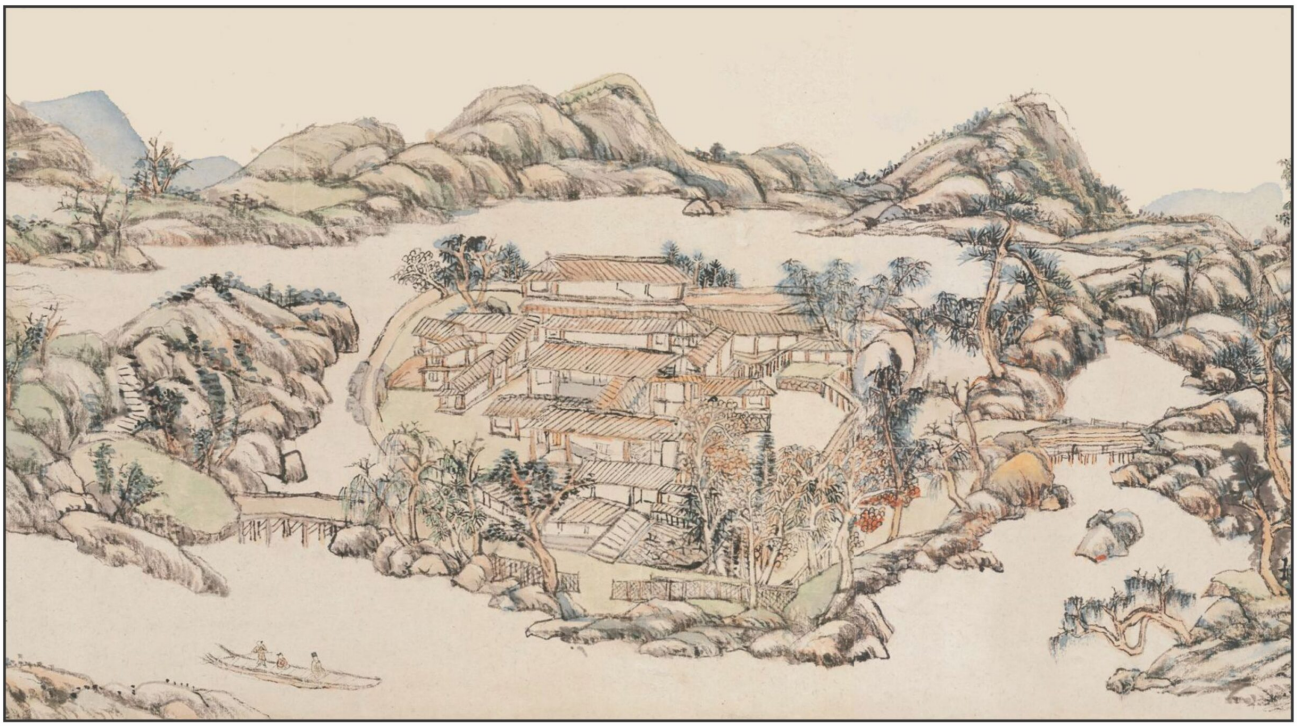
gǔ gorge kǒu mouth yuán monkey shēng voice fā emit

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. Vast emptiness: lake has no limits.
Sun at dusk: to see my lord off. Blue glimmer: sky’s hue merges.
On the lake, merely turning my head: Moor the boat with a long whistle:
Mountain’s green—curling, white clouds. From four sides clear winds come.

欹	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
yǐ 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 in blue. Modern Chinese has evolved the terms 蓝 *lán* for blue and 绿 *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,
Strum the lute and unloose my voice.
Grove so deep, no one knows.
The moon comes to shine upon me.

Have been to the Bamboo Grove,
Daily to get close to the Way.
In and out, only mountain birds.
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

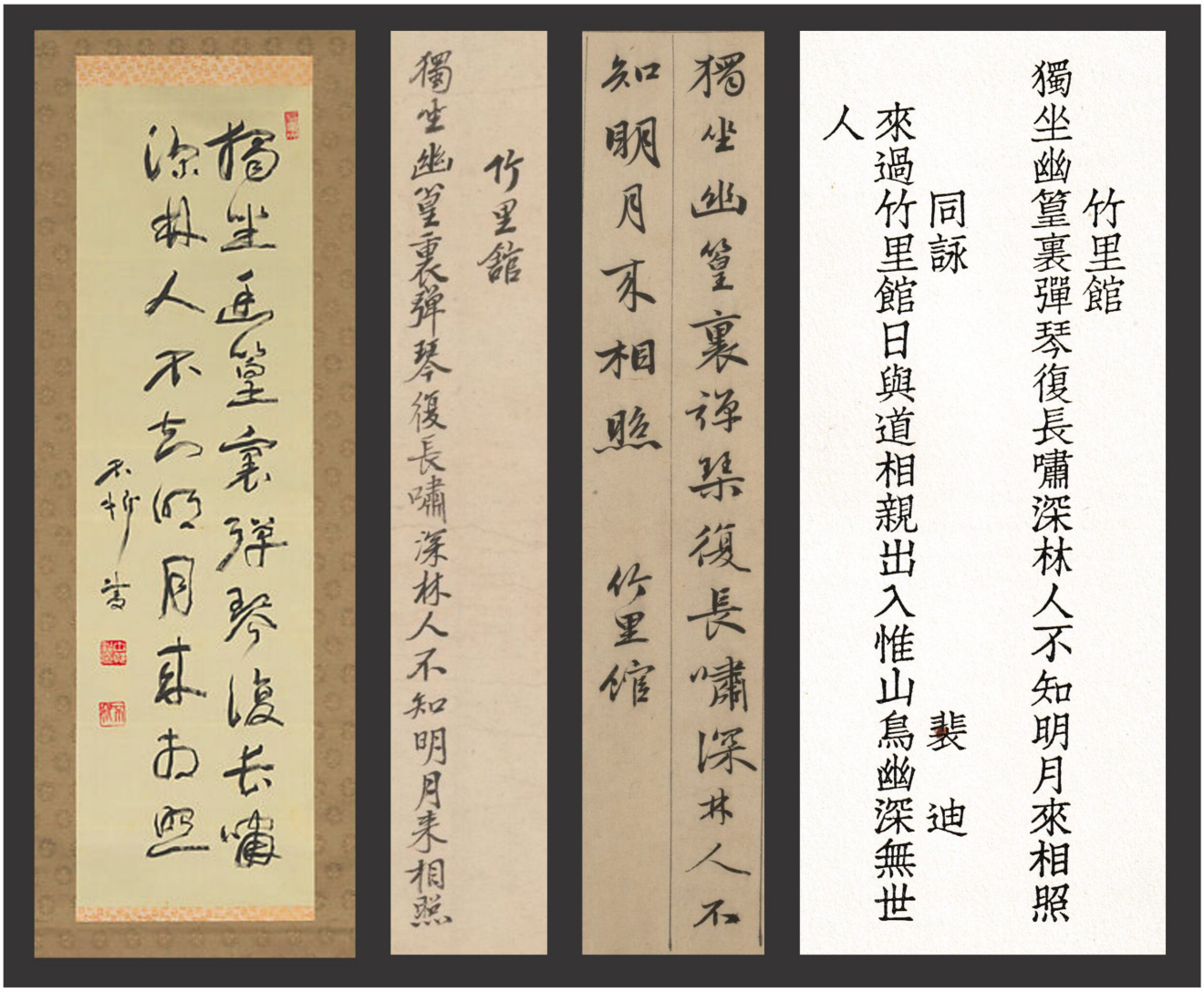
> a combination of Taoist breathing techniques and whistling

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* (□) commonly translated as “The Way” – the underlying principle of the universe considered in Taoism. The character □ *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.



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	z ǐ 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	罥	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	d ǐ ng cauldron	yòng use/eat
願	君	垂	採	摘
yuàn desire	jūn lord	chuí bend	c ǎ i pick	zhāi select

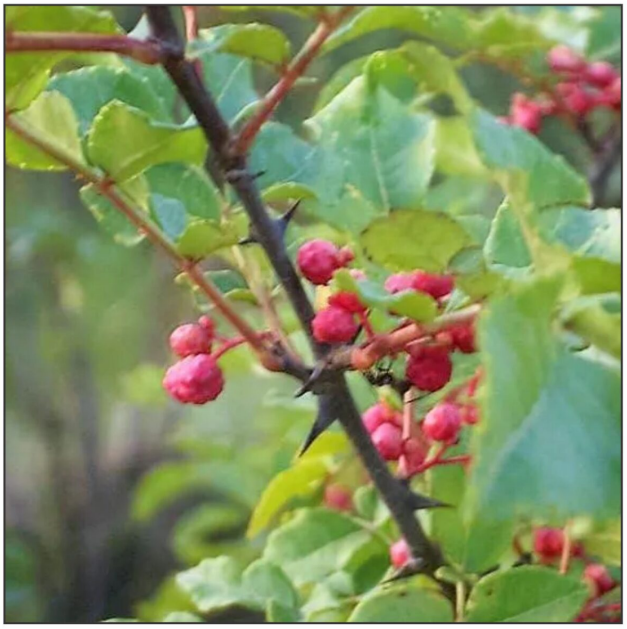
Wang Wei's quatrain alludes to some ancient Chinese songs used to invoke the appearance of the Gods. Several of these songs were incliuded in the *Juejie* ("Nine Songs") which were anthologized in the collection called *Chuci* ("Songs of the South," or "Songs of Chu"). The following is from the first 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 5th and 6th 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.


行到水窮處
坐看雲起時

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
山色有無中	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 (無, 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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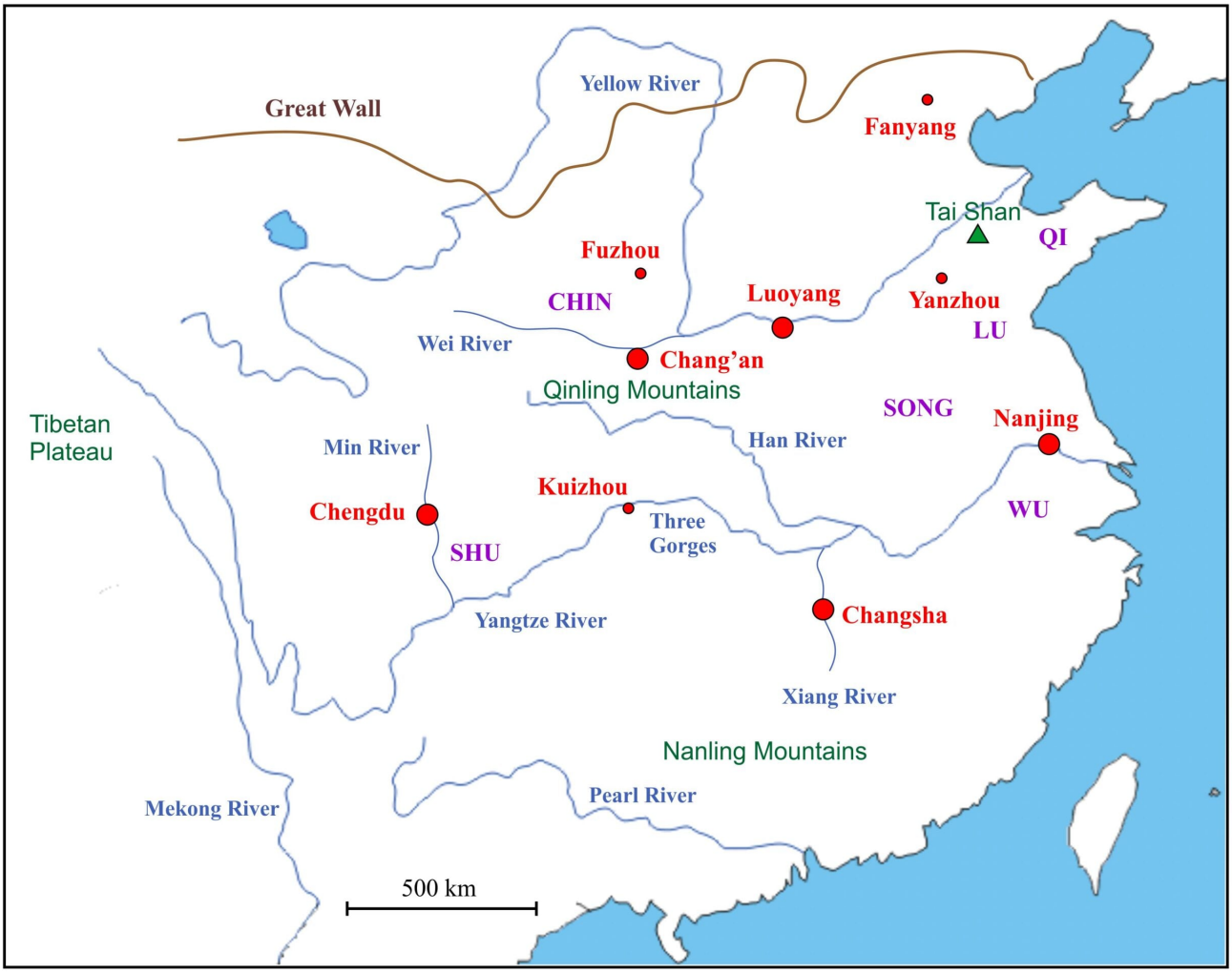
Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

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:

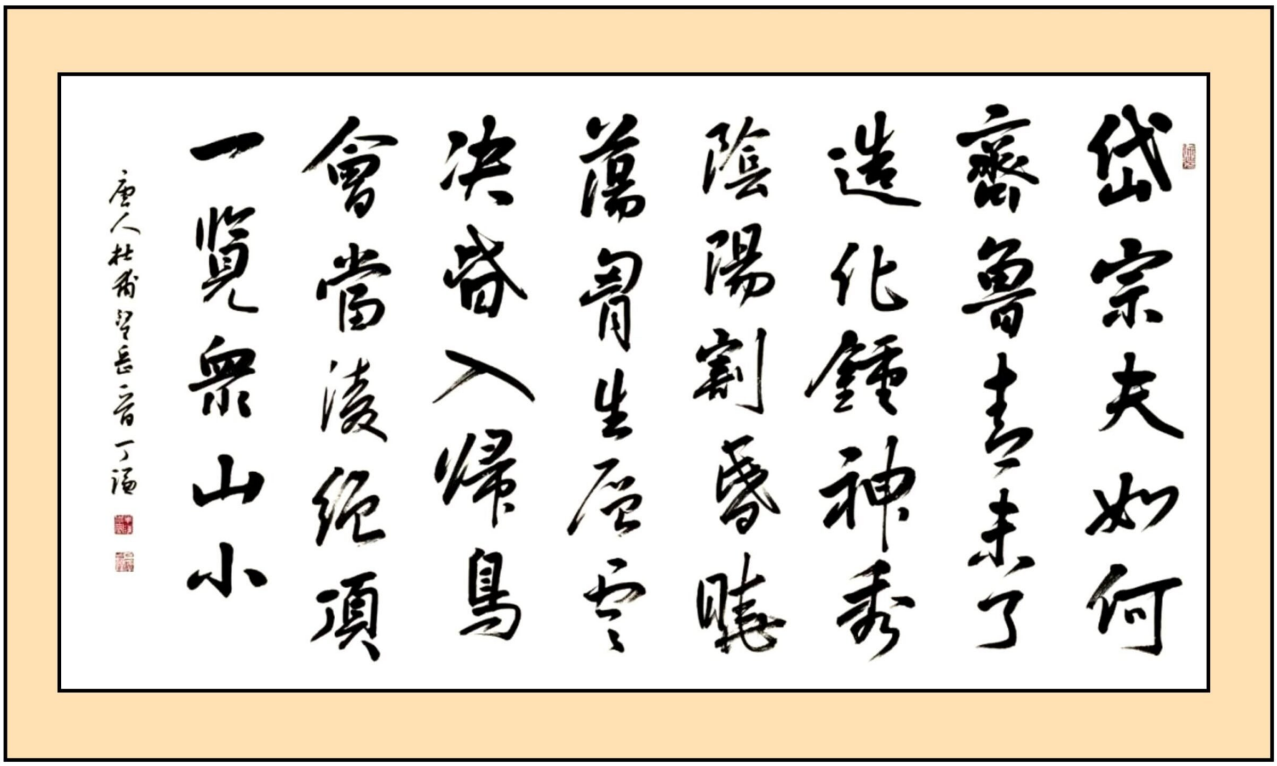
望嶽	wàng yuè
岱宗夫如何,	dài zōng fū rú hé
齊魯青未了。	qí lǔ qīng wèi liǎo
造化鍾神秀,	zào huà zhōng shén xiù
陰陽割昏曉。	yīn yáng gē hūn xiǎo
盪胸生曾雲,	dàng xiōng shēng céng yún
決眥入歸鳥。	jué zì rù guī niǎo
會當凌絕頂,	huì dāng líng jué dǐng
一覽眾山小。	yī lǎn zhòng shān xiǎo

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

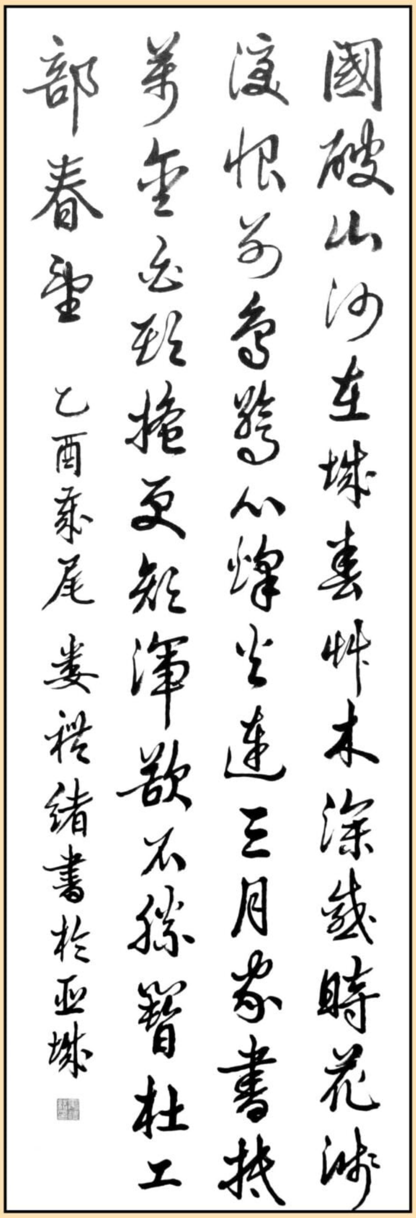
The following is a reading of the poem from the website

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 王心皓


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
婁禮緒書於亞城


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):

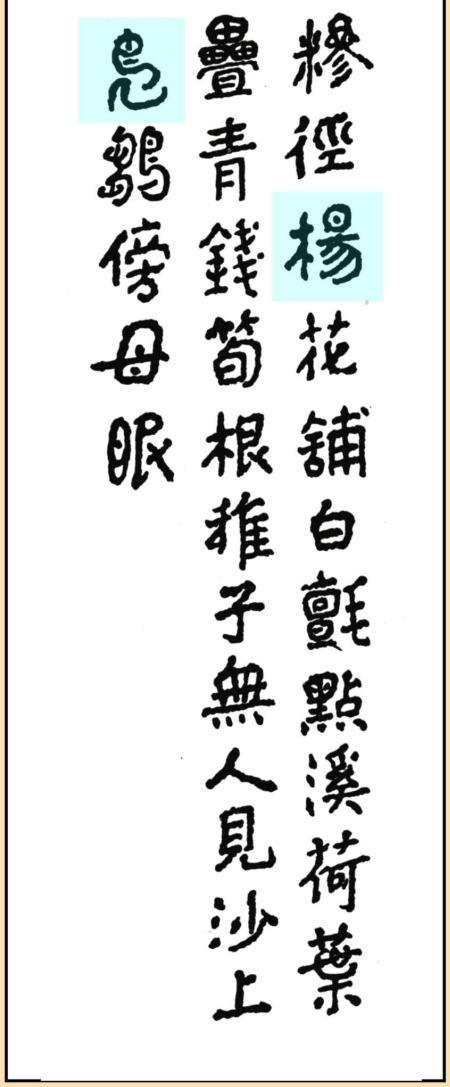
糝徑楊花鋪白氈，　　sǎn jìng yáng huā pū bái zhān
點溪荷葉疊青錢。　　diǎn xī hé yè dié qīng qián
筍根雉子無人見，　　sǔn gēn zhì zǐ wú rén jiàn
沙上鳧雛傍母眠。　　shā shàng fú chú bàng mǔ mián

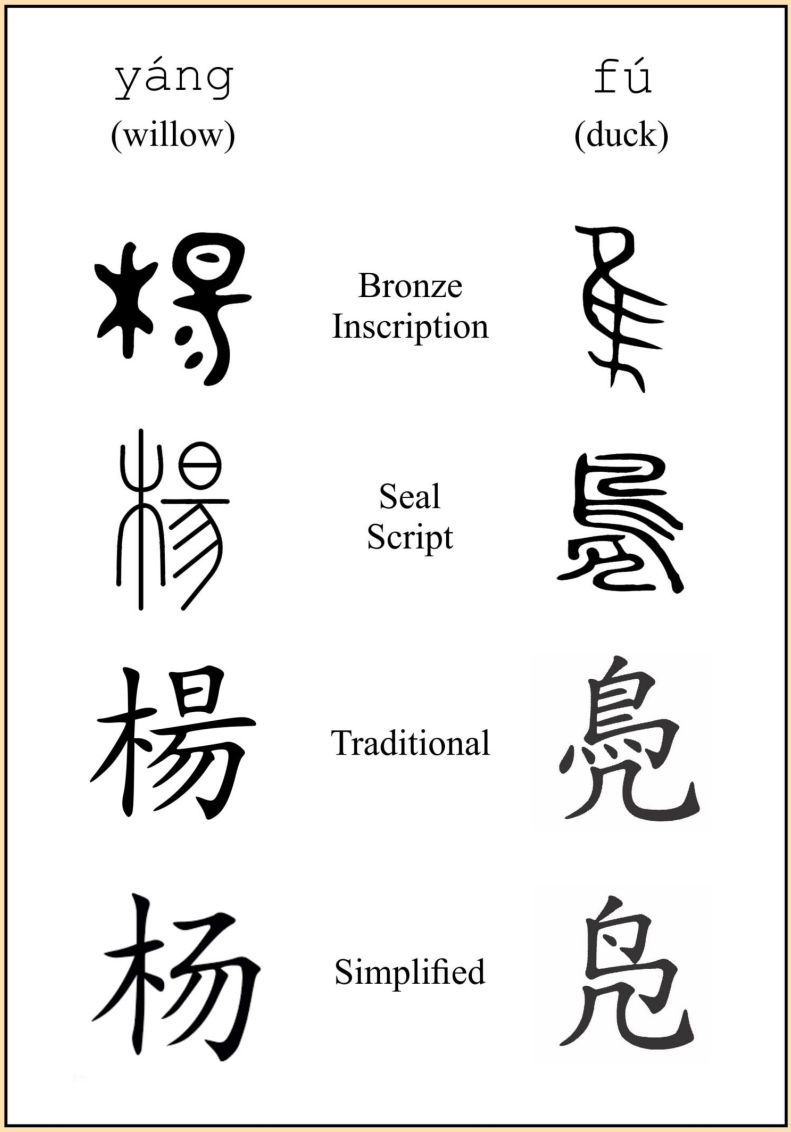
grain path poplar/willow blossom pave white carpet
little stream lotus leaves pile green money
bamboo shoot root sprout no person see
sand on duckling beside mother sleep

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.

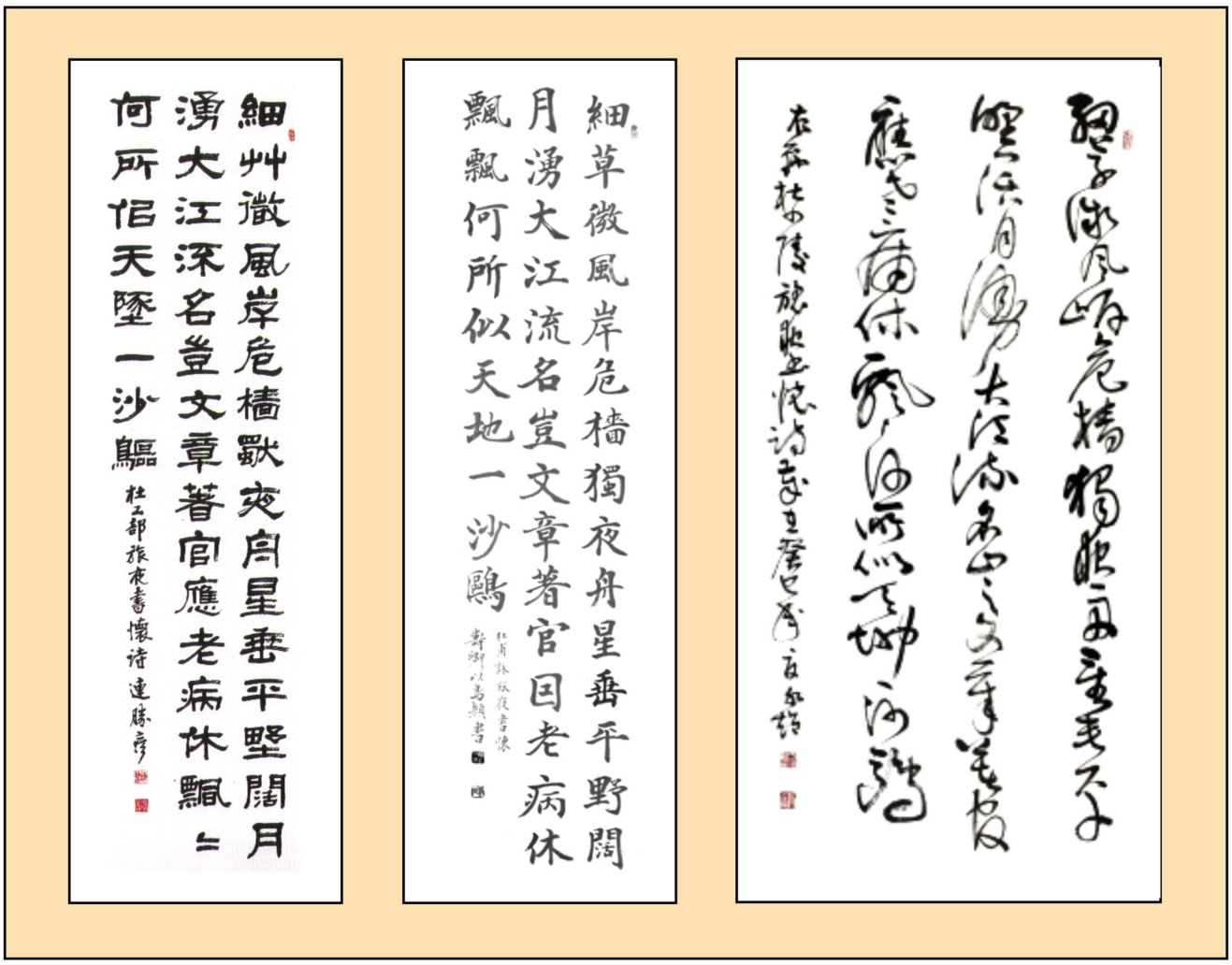
Drifting, drifting,
what do I resemble?
A lone gull
lost between earth and heaven.

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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Wine-Cup Immortal

Li Bai (701-762 CE), also known as Li Po, was one of the famous Tang dynasty poets who called themselves the *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (an irreverent allusion to the Eight Immortals of Taoism). Li Bai wrote prolifically, and over 1000 of his poems survive. Much of his life is mythical, the stuff of novels rather than of history (Elegant, 1997). He was a devotee of Taoism, a fine swordsman, and a great lover of wine. In his youth he served the emperor. After becoming involved in one of the rebellions, however, he was exiled from the court. He then spent much of his later life wandering “beyond the gorges” in the hinterland of Imperial China. Legend has it that he died drunkenly trying to embrace the moon’s reflection in the Yangtze River, but his death was perhaps a suicide. The illustrated portrait (from the Tokyo National Museum) was painted by Liang Kai in the early 13th century. The seal in the upper right corner signals that the painting was owned by Anigo, an important official in the Imperial court of the Yuan dynasty.

Appreciating Chinese poetry requires seeing as well as hearing. The beauty of the calligraphy is as important to the poetry as the music of the words. The poems are therefore difficult to assess without some feeling for the characters in which they are written, since these allude to meanings beyond

those directly expressed by the spoken words. This post therefore begins with a few notes on Chinese characters.

Some Chinese characters derive from pictograms (simplified images):

Pictogram	Character	Sound	Meaning
	日	rì	sun
	月	yuè	moon
	山	shān	mountain
	水	shuǐ	water
	雨	yǔ	rain
	目	mù	eye
	人	rén	person
	木	mù	tree

Other characters derive from ideograms (graphic representations of an idea):

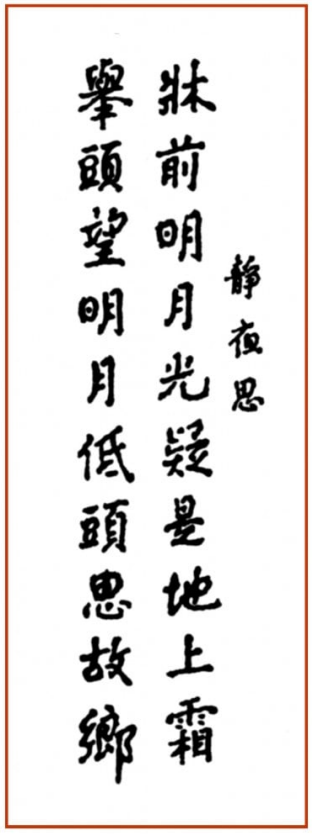
上	shàng	above	下	xià	below
中	zhōng	middle	不	bù	not
一	yī	one	二	èr	two
三	sān	three	五	wǔ	five

Most characters are formed by combining other characters. Some of the combinations are based on the meaning of the components; others are based on their sound:

木 (mù, tree)	+	木 (mù, tree)	=	林 lín	forest
口 (kǒu, mouth)	+	“away”	=	言 yán	words
日 (rì, sun)	+	月 (yuè, moon)	=	明 míng	bright
女 (nǚ, woman)	+	子 (zǐ, child)	=	好 hǎo	good

In Li Bai’s name, the character Li means “Plum” – a tree on top with many children (blossoms) below. The character Bai means “white” – it originally comes from a pictogram of an acorn (which is white inside).

Chinese poetry has a long history. *The Book of Poetry* was compiled around 600 BCE. Confucius (551-479 BCE) made it an essential part of the education of a scholar or statesman. By the time of Li Bai court poetry had become quite regular – common forms were an octet or a quatrain of five-syllable lines, with every second line rhyming. The following quatrain is one of Li Bai’s most famous poems. The English translation is by Arthur Cooper and the Chinese calligraphy is by Shui Chien-Tung (Cooper 1973):



Quiet Night Thoughts

Before my bed there is bright moonlight

So that it seems like frost on the ground;

Lifting my head I watch the bright moon,

Lowering my head I dream that I’m home.

Chinese poetry is generally written from top to bottom and from right to left. For simplicity, the following representation of the poem together with the word for word translation presents the characters from left to right to facilitate listening to the sound and following the translations.

靜夜思	Quiet Night Thoughts					jìng yè sī				
床前明月光	bed	front	bright	moon	shine	chuáng	qián	míng	yuè	guāng
疑是地上霜	suspect	is	ground	top	frost	yí	shì	dì	shàng	shuāng
舉頭望明月	raise	head	gaze	bright	moon	jǔ	tóu	wàng	míng	yuè
低頭思故鄉	lower	head	think	old	home	dī	tóu	sī	gù	xiāng

The original Chinese for Quiet Night Thoughts is from Zong-Qi Cai's anthology (2008). The reading of the poem in Chinese (by an unknown reader) is from the sound files associated with the anthology:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/lipo_quiet-night-thoughts.mp3

The following is an octet of Li Bai that celebrates the joys of drinking by moonlight:

花間一壺酒	flowers	among	one	pot	wine	huā jiā yī hú jiǔ
獨酌無相親	alone	drink	no	mutual	dear	dú zhuó wú xiāng qīn
舉杯邀明月	lift	cup	invite	bright	moon	jǔ bēi yāo míng yuè
對影成三人	face	shadow	become	three	men	duì yǐng chìng sān rén
月既不解飲	moon	not	not	understand	drink	yuè jì bù jiě yǐn
影徒隨我身	shadow	vainly	follow	my	body	yǐng tú suí wǒ shēn
暫伴月將影	temporary	with	moon	with	shadow	zàn bàn yuì jiāng yǐng
行樂須及春	practise	pleasure	must	catch	spring	xíng lè xū jí chūn
我歌月徘徊	I	sing	moon	linger	to-and-fro	wǒ gē yuè pái huí
我舞影零亂	I	dance	shadow	scatter	disorderly	wǒ wǔ yǐng líng luàn
醒時同交歡	wake	time	together	exchange	joy	xǐng shí tóng jiāo huān
醉後各分散	rapt	after	each	separate	disperse	zuì hòu gè fēn sǎn
永結無情遊	always	tie	no	passion	friendship	yǒng jiē wú qíng yóu
相期邈雲漢	mutual	expect	distant	cloud	river	xiāng qī miǎo yún hàn

A translation of the poem by Arthur Waley (1919) reads

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

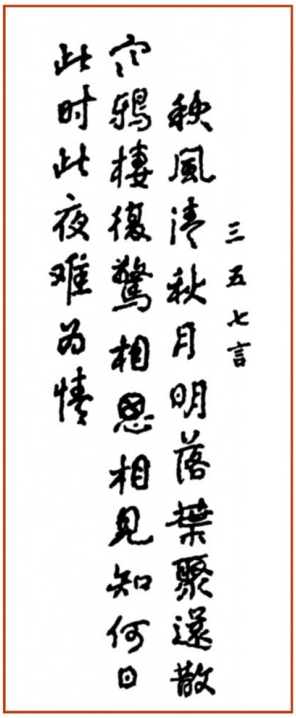
A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.

The moon, alas, is no drinker of wine;
Listless, my shadow creeps about at my side.
Yet with the moon as friend and the shadow as slave<
I must make merry before the Spring is spent.
To the songs I sing the moon flickers her beams;
In the dance I weave my shadow tangles and breaks.
While we were sober, three shared the fun;
Now we are drunk, each goes their way.
May we long share our odd, inanimate feast,
And meet at last on the Cloudy River of the sky.

Chinese poetry has both rhyme and rhythm (Liu, 1962; Cai, 2008). The rhymes often come at the end of every second line (e.g. in Drinking Alone by Moonlight). Rhymes are mainly determined by the vowels, and less related to the attendant consonants. However, many of the rhymes depend on pronunciation that was current in the time that the poem was written, and may not always be apparent in the way the poem sounds nowadays. Chinese is a tonal language with the vowels showing unchanging, descending, descending-ascending, and ascending pitches. These changes are represented in the accents above the pinyin transliterations. The first type of vowel has a longer duration than the others. The rhythm of the poetry depends on both the duration of the vowel and the different changes in pitch.

Recitations of the poem *Drinking Alone by Moonlight* are available in both English and Chinese at Librivox.

Li Bai also invented new poetic forms. The following poem has lines of three, five and seven words (translation and calligraphy in Cooper, 1973).



Three five seven words

The autumn wind is light,
The autumn moon is bright;

Fallen leaves gather but then disperse,
A cold crow roosts but again he stirs.

I think of you, and wonder when I'll see you again?
At such an hour, on such a night, cruel is love's pain!

The translation of Chinese poetry is difficult. The first translations of Chinese poetry into a European language were in French by Judith Gautier and the Marquis d'Hervey Saint-

Denis in the middle of the 19th Century. These were further translated from French into German by Hans Bethge, who published *Die Chinese Flöte* (Chinese Flute) in 1907.

Gustav Mahler adapted seven of the Bethge poems for his 1911 song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The following are excerpts from the beginning of two of the songs, translated from the German to English. The tenor is Fritz Wunderlich; Otto Klemperer conducts the New Philharmonia Orchestra; the recording is by EMI in 1967.

> **Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde** (Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow)
>
> The wine already beckons from the golden goblet,
> but don't drink just yet – first, I'll sing you a song!
> The song of sorrow shall sound out
> in laughter in your soul. When sorrow draws near,
> the gardens of the soul lie wasted,>
> both joy and song wilt and die.>
> Dark is life, dark is death.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_trinklied_beginning.mp3

Von der Jugend (Of Youth)

> In the middle of the little lake
> stands a pavilion made of green
> and white porcelain.
> Like a tiger's back
> the bridge of jade arches
> across to the pavilion.
> Friends sit in the little house,
> beautifully dressed, drinking, chatting;
> some are writing down verses.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mahler_wunderlich_jugend-beginning.mp3

The “translations” are full of mistakes. The line “Dark is Life, dark is Death” (Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod) is an interpolation that fits with the idea of Li Bai’s poem but is not so directly stated in the original Chinese. The porcelain pavilion is actually the pavilion owned by someone named Tao (which can also mean “porcelain”). Bethge called his poems *Nachdictungen* (recreations). The Mahler Archives has a wonderful website that describes the changes in the translations leading to *Das Lied von der Erde.*

The first major translations of Chinese poetry into English were by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in his 1915 book *Cathay*. At the time, Pound knew no Chinese, and his translations were based on the notes that Ernest Fenellosa, an American art historian working in Tokyo, had made from discussions with two Japanese professors (Mori and Ariga). These notes were given posthumously to Pound by Fenellosa’s widow. Despite his lack of any understanding of the originals, Pound’s translations are true and forceful (Yip, 1969). Most of the poems in *Cathay* are by Rihaku – the way that the characters of Li Bai’s name are pronounced in Japanese. As well as the *hiragana* and *katakana* symbols (*hiragana* and *katakana*), Japanese writing also uses many Chinese characters (*kanji*), but these are pronounced differently from the Chinese.

The following is one of Li Bai’s poems that became famous with the Pound translation. Pound combined the poem with a summary of Fenellosa’s notes that has its own cryptic beauty

The Jewelled Stair Grievance

> The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
> It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
> And I let down the crystal curtain
> And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

NOTE: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore

a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of the weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

More recent translations are by David Hinton (1996):

> Night long on the jade staircase, white
> dew appears, soaks through gauze stockings.
> She lets down crystalline blinds, gazes out
> through jewel lacework at the autumn moon.

and by Charles Egan (in Z-Q Cai, 2008);

> On jade stairs, the rising white dew
> Through the long night pierces silken hose
> Retreating inside, she lowers crystal shades
> And stares at the glimmering autumn moon.

The story behind the poem is only hinted at. A lady at the palace in love with the emperor finds herself no longer in his fancy. The autumn moon suggests the cooling of their summer passion. The crystal curtains suggest that the scene is viewed through tears. Pound puts the poem into the first person. Though not indicated in the original, this personal point of view accentuates the longing and the regret. Another translation that follows Pound’s use of the first person is available on Mark Alexander’s webpage which provides translations for many different Chinese poems.

Discerning the true meaning of a poem through different translations is a little like looking for the numinous through different scriptures.

Another of Pound’s translations records the story of a young woman, married in youth and innocence, learning to love her husband and finding out that love can bring sorrow as well as happiness.

The River Merchant’s Wife

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse;
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden –
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fo-Sa.

Li Bai was very musical and many of his poems deal with the sounds of the lyre or the flute. Harry Partch composed *17 lyrics of Li Po* in the early 1930s using the translations of Shigeyoshi Obata (1928). He tried to remove the music from the tonality conventions of the Western traditions. The following is one of the lyrics. It is intoned by Stephan Kalm (who provides the flute sounds as well as the words) with accompaniment on tenor violin by Ted Mook. The recording is by Tzadik, 1995.

Whence comes this voice of sweet bamboo?
Flying in the dark?
It flies with the spring wind,
Hovering over the city of Lo.
How memories of home come back tonight!
Hark! the plaintive tune of “Willow Breaking”,p>

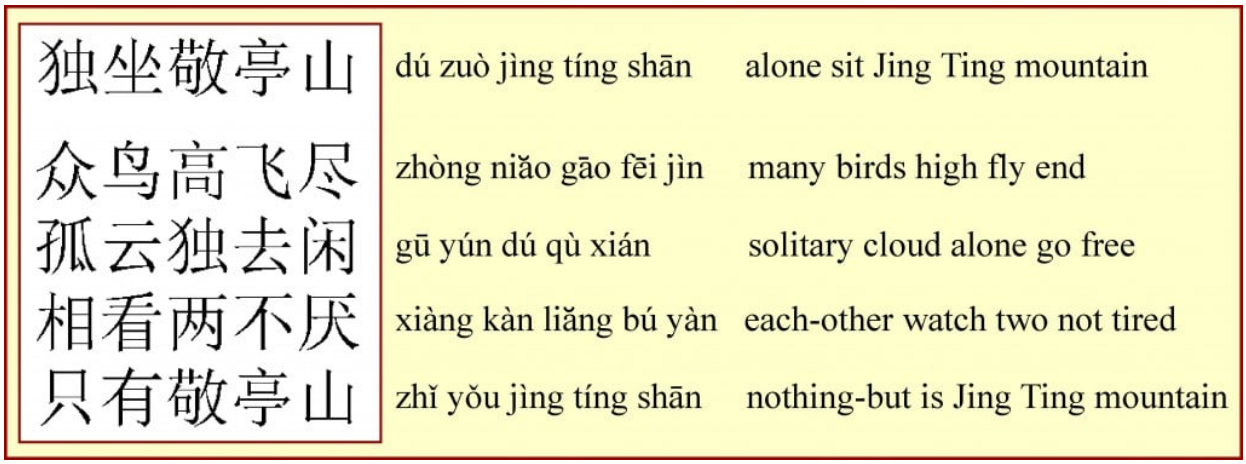
https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/partch_lipo_flute.mp3

(“Willow-Breaking” is the name of a sad folk song.)

Li Bai spent some time in the monasteries that were scattered through the hills of China, and became adept at meditation, or *zazen*. One of his poems (translated by Sam Hamill, 2000) gives the essence of this process. Jing Ting mountain is near Xuancheng city in the Anhui province of China. Further notes on the poem and a version of the poem in song are available on the webpage of Shirley Yiping Zhang.

Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.



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