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

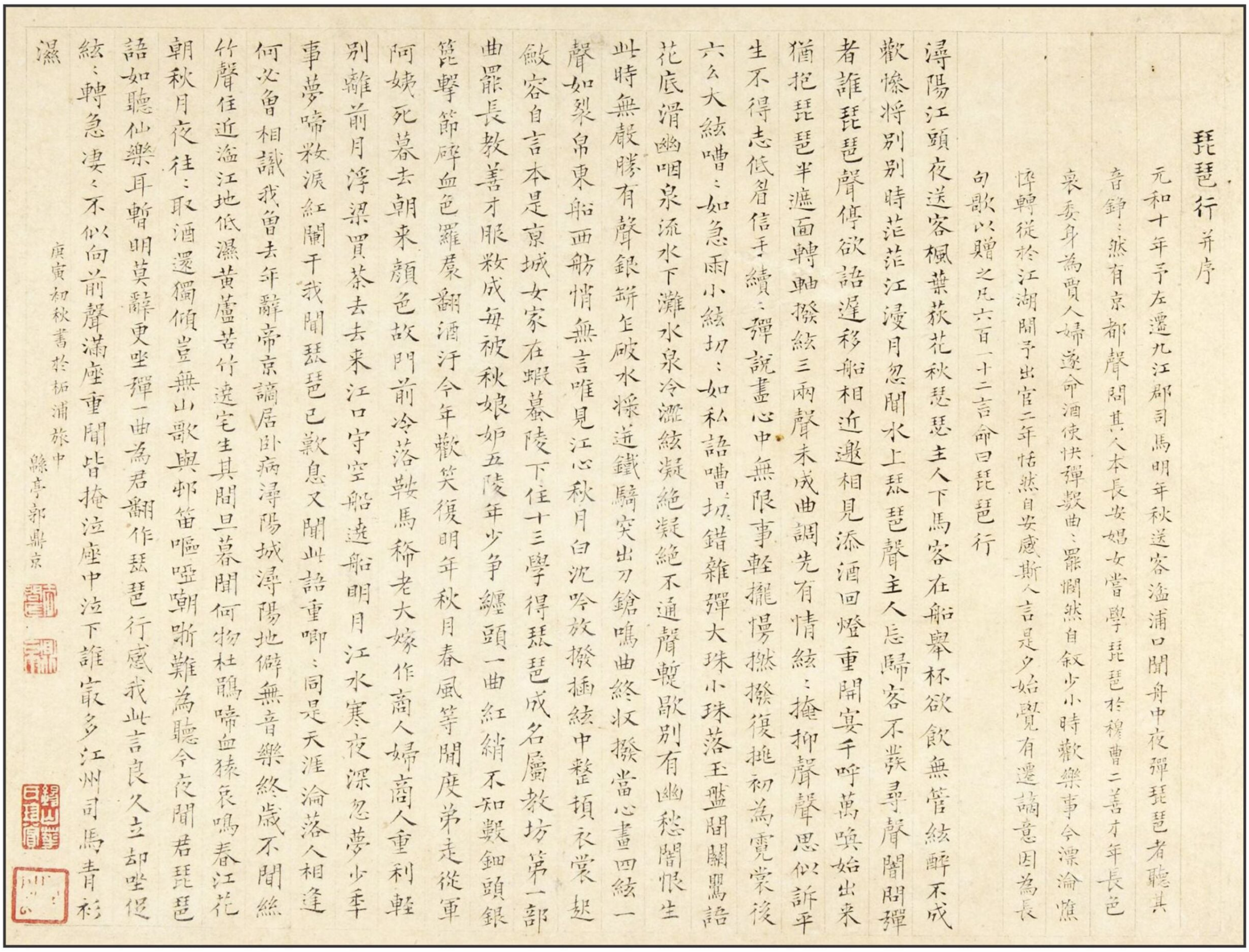
(“master of the horse”, essentially an adjutant) in Jiujiang, then known as Jiangzhou (Waley, 1949, pp 101-104). While there, he heard the playing of a pipa near the river and wrote his famous poem *The Ballad of the Pipa.* Bai Juyi was allowed to return to Chang’an in 1819. He then served for periods 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:


琵琶行并序
元和十年予左遷九江郡司馬明年秋送客湓浦口聞舟中夜彈琵琶者聽其
音錚錚然有京都聲問其人本長安倡女嘗學琵琶於穆曹二善才年長色
衰委身為賈人婦遂命酒使快彈數曲曲罷憫然自叙少小時歡樂事今漂淪憔
悴轉徙於江湖間予出官二年恬然自安感斯人言是夕始覺有遷謫意因為長
句歌以贈之凡六百一十二言命曰琵琶行
潯陽江頭夜送客楓葉荻花秋瑟瑟主人下馬客在船舉杯欲飲無管絃醉不成
歡慘將別別時茫茫江浸月忽聞水上琵琶聲主人忘歸客不發尋聲闇問彈
者誰琵琶聲停欲語遲移船相近邀相見添酒回燈重開宴千呼萬喚始出來
猶抱琵琶半遮面轉軸撥絃三兩聲未成曲調先有情絃絃掩抑聲聲思似訴平
生不得志低眉信手續續彈說盡心中無限事輕攏慢撚撥復挑初為霓裳後
六么大絃嘈嘈如急雨小絃切切如私語嘈嘈切切錯雜彈大珠小珠落玉盤間關鶯語
花底滑幽咽泉流水下灘水泉冷澀絃凝絕凝絕不通聲暫歇別有幽愁闇恨生
此時無聲勝有聲銀缾乍破水漿迸鐵騎突出刀鎗鳴曲終收撥當心畫四絃一
聲如裂帛東船西舫悄無言唯見江心秋月白沈吟放撥插絃中整頓衣裳起
斂容自言本是京城女家在蝦蟇陵下住十三學得琵琶成名屬教坊第一部
曲罷長教善才服妝成每被秋娘妒五陵年少爭纏頭一曲紅綃不知數鈿頭銀
篦擊節碎血色羅裙翻酒汙今年歡笑復明年秋月春風等閒度弟走從軍
阿姨死暮去朝來顏色故門前冷落鞍馬稀老大嫁作商人婦商人重利輕
別離前月浮梁買茶去去來江口守空船遶船明月江水寒夜深忽夢少年
事夢啼妝淚紅闌干我聞琵琶已歎息又聞此語重唧唧同是天涯淪落人相逢
何必曾相識我曾去年辭帝京謫居臥病潯陽城潯陽地僻無音樂終歲不聞絲
竹聲住近湓江地低濕黃蘆苦竹遶宅生其間旦暮聞何物杜鵑啼血猿哀鳴春江花
朝秋月夜往往取酒還獨傾豈無山歌與邨笛嘔啞嘲哳難為聽今夜聞君琵琶
語如聽仙樂耳暫明莫辭更坐彈一曲為君翻作琵琶行感我此言良久立却坐促
絃絃轉急淒淒不似向前聲滿座重聞皆掩泣座中泣下誰最多江州司馬青衫
濕
庚寅初秋書於栢浦旅中
綠亭郭鼎京

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:

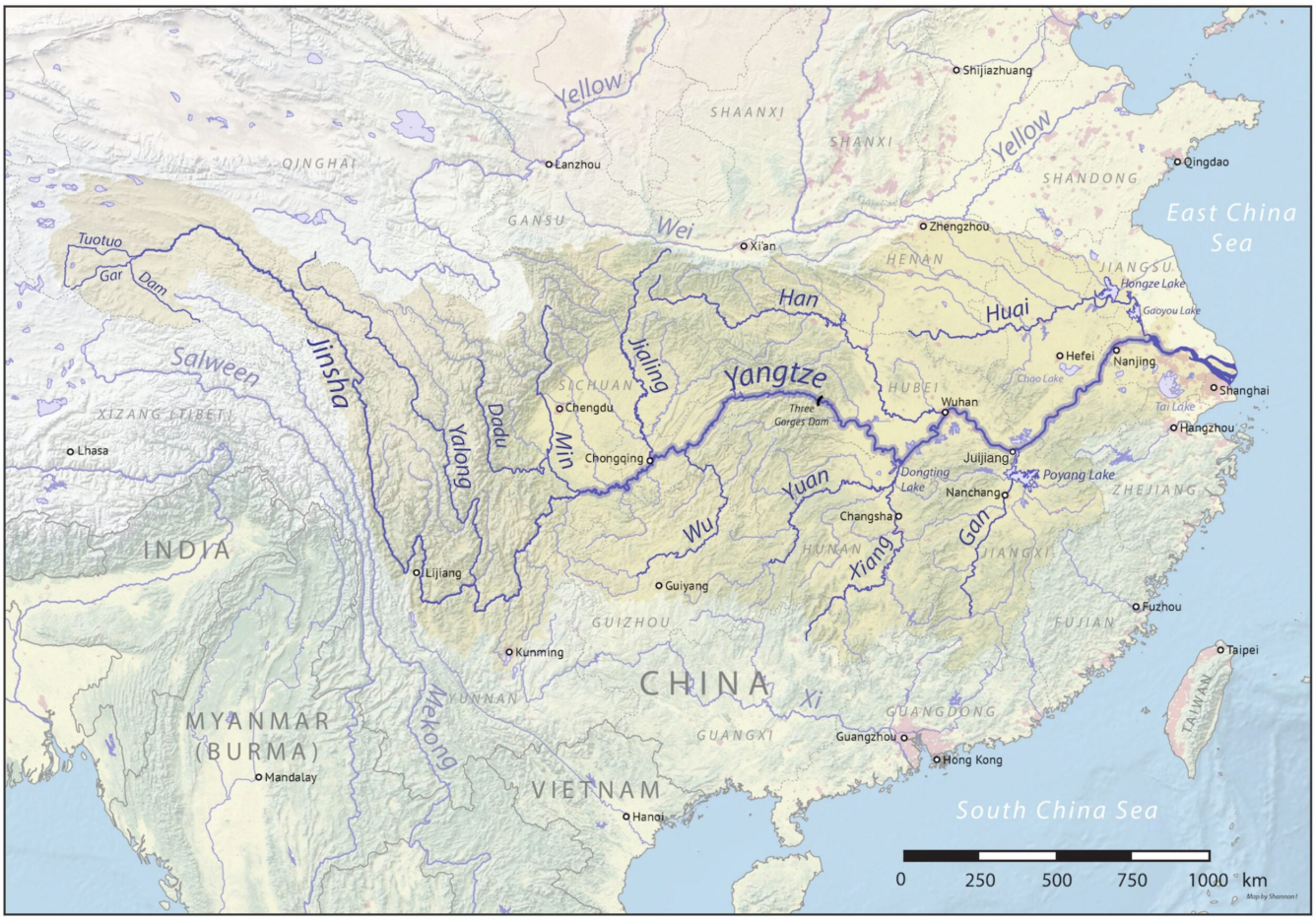
同	是	天	涯	淪	落	人
tóng	*shì*	*tiān*	*yá*	*lún*	*luò*	*rén*
same	exist correct	sky heaven	border shore	perish fall	missing decline	person

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

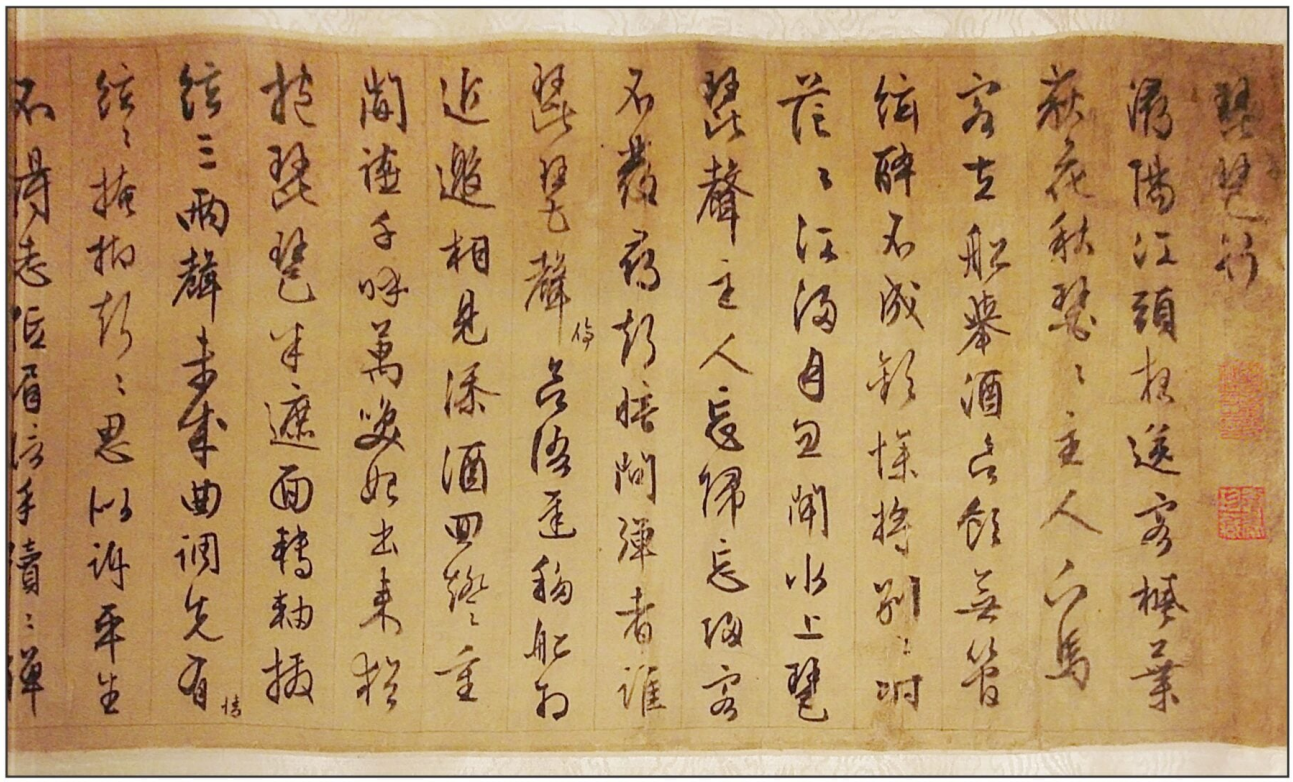
Jiujiang, which had once been known as Jiangzhou, is a city on the Yangtze River. The region of the river near Jiujiang was sometimes known as the Xunyang River. The Yangtze River, the

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.

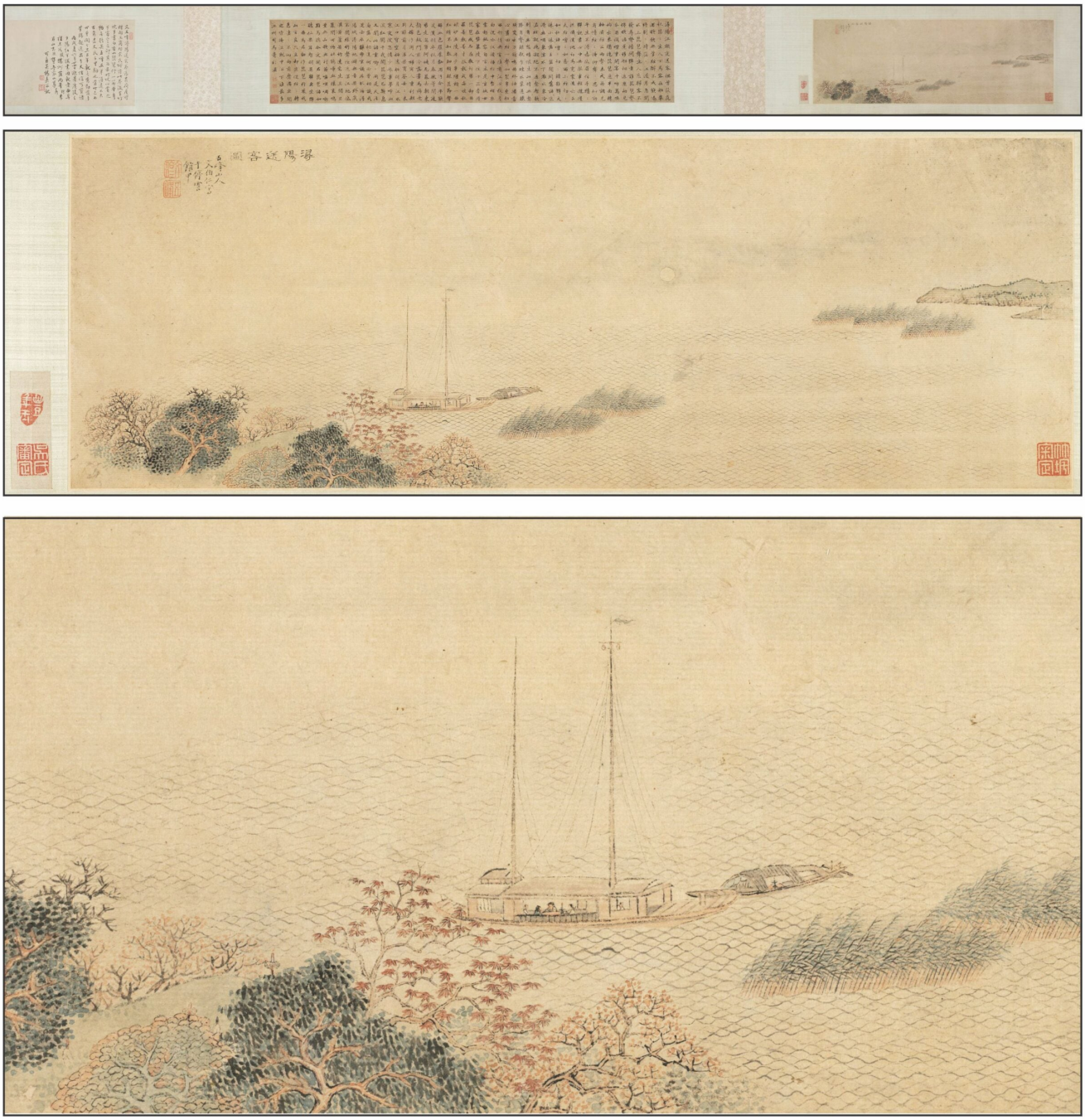
https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Wu-Man-performs-Night-Thoughts-x.mp3

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

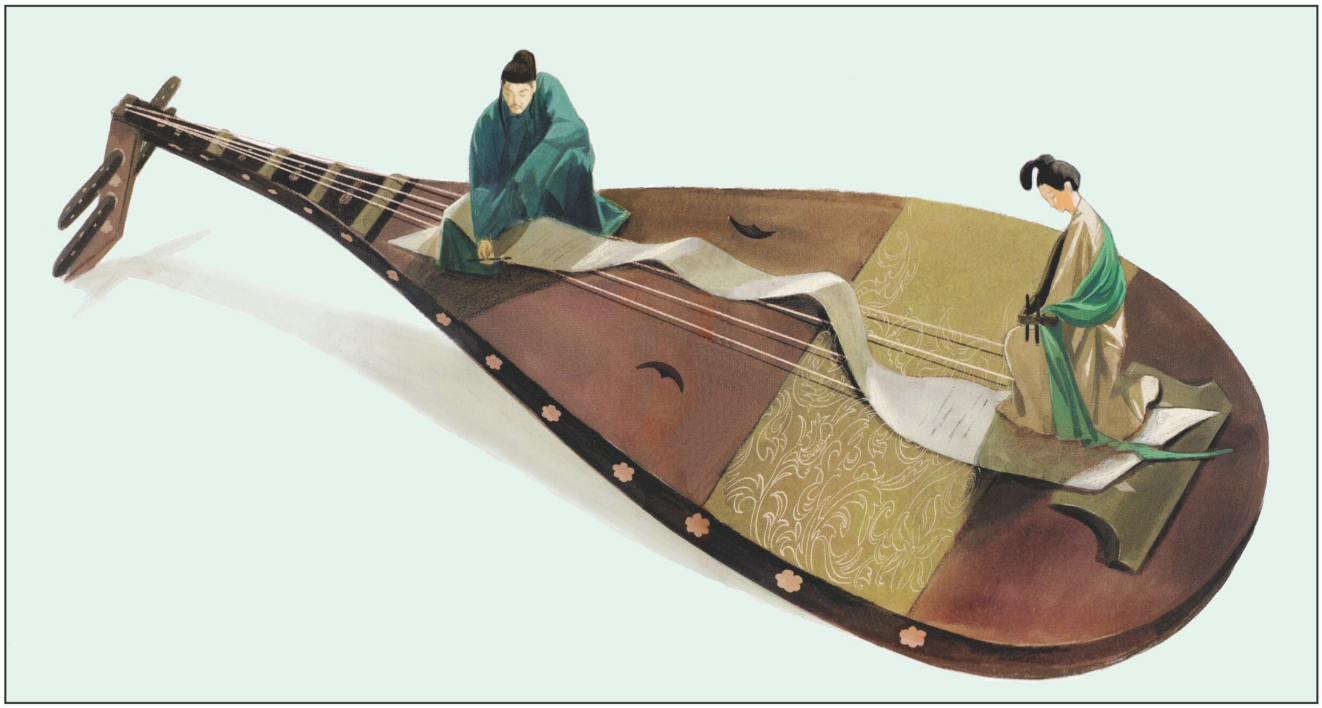
The Life of the Poem

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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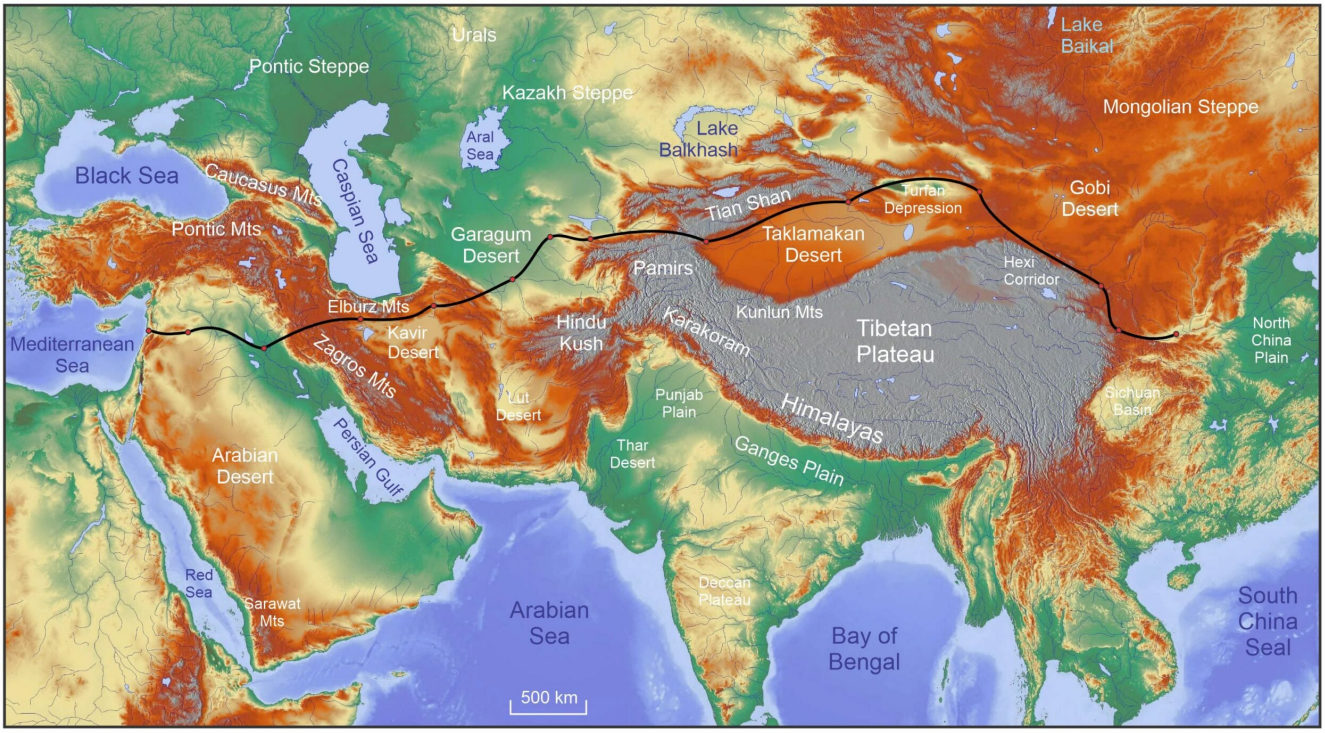
Silk Roads: Paths for the Faithful

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

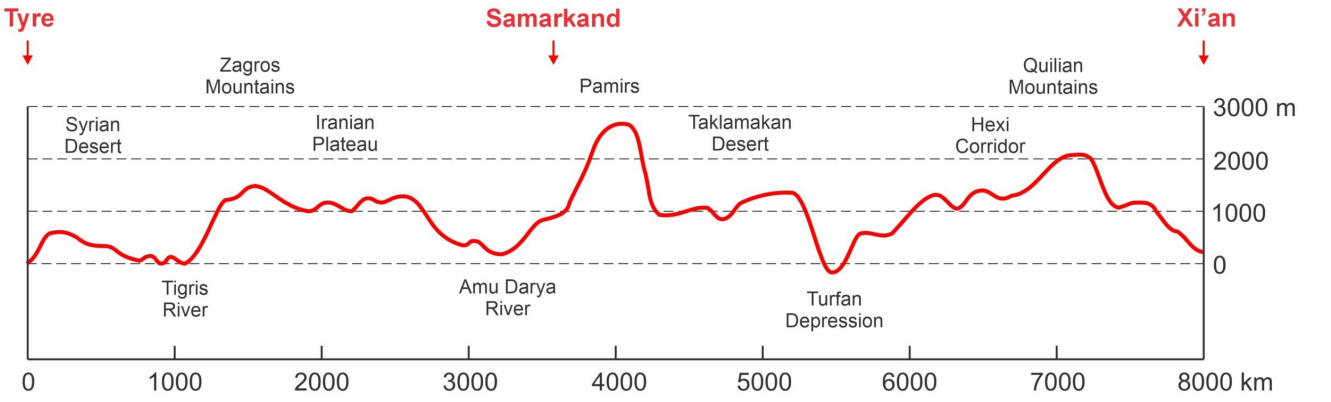
Central Asia

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

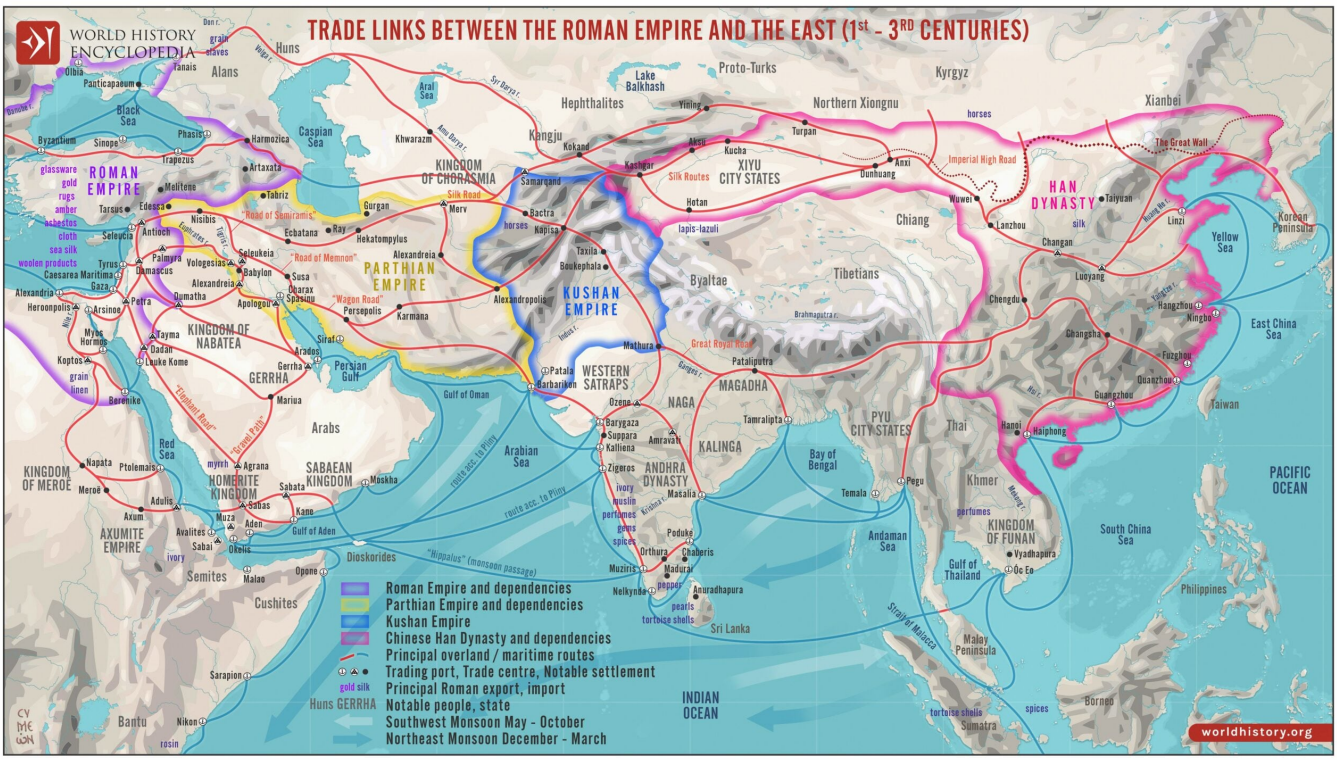
The following map shows the topography of the region and traces one of the many possible Silk Roads from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Tyre on the Mediterranean.

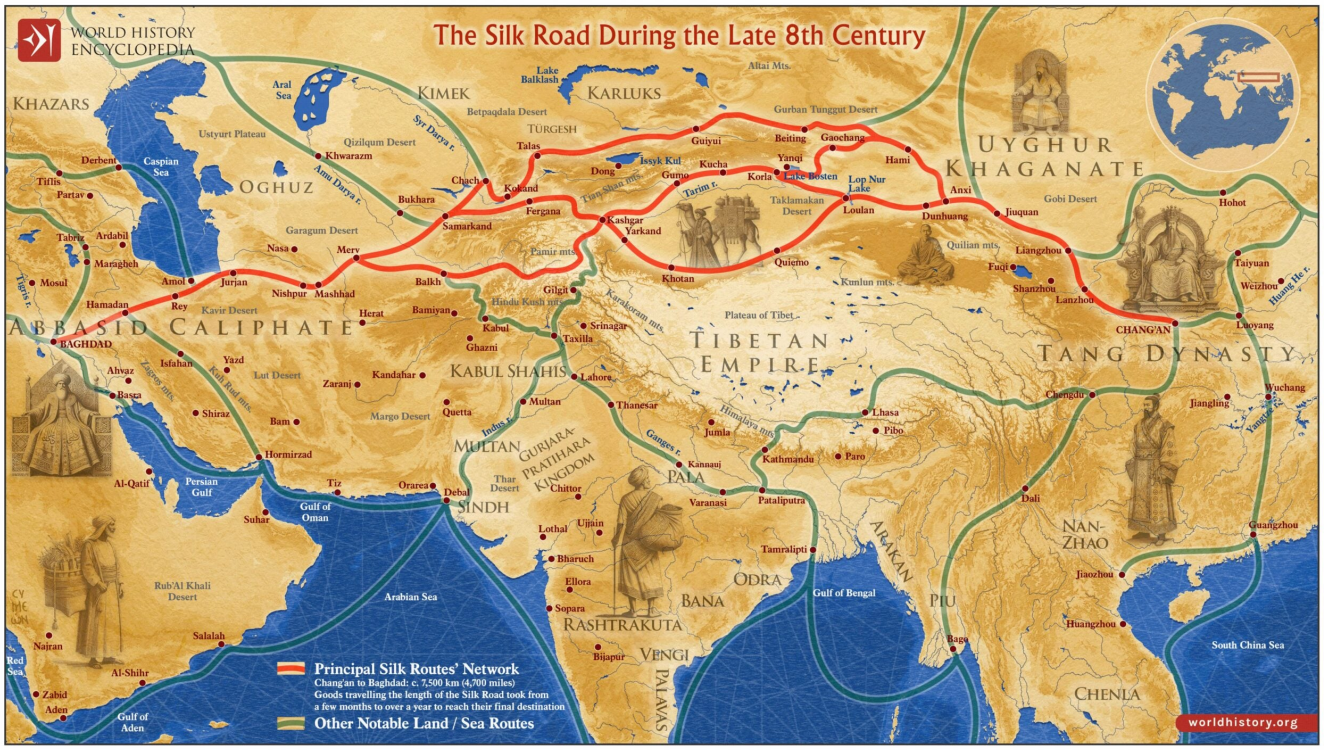


The following diagram, modified from Wood (2002), shows the changes in altitude (in meters above sea level) over the journey. It also notes the main mountains that are traversed, the deserts that are crossed and the main rivers on the way.



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

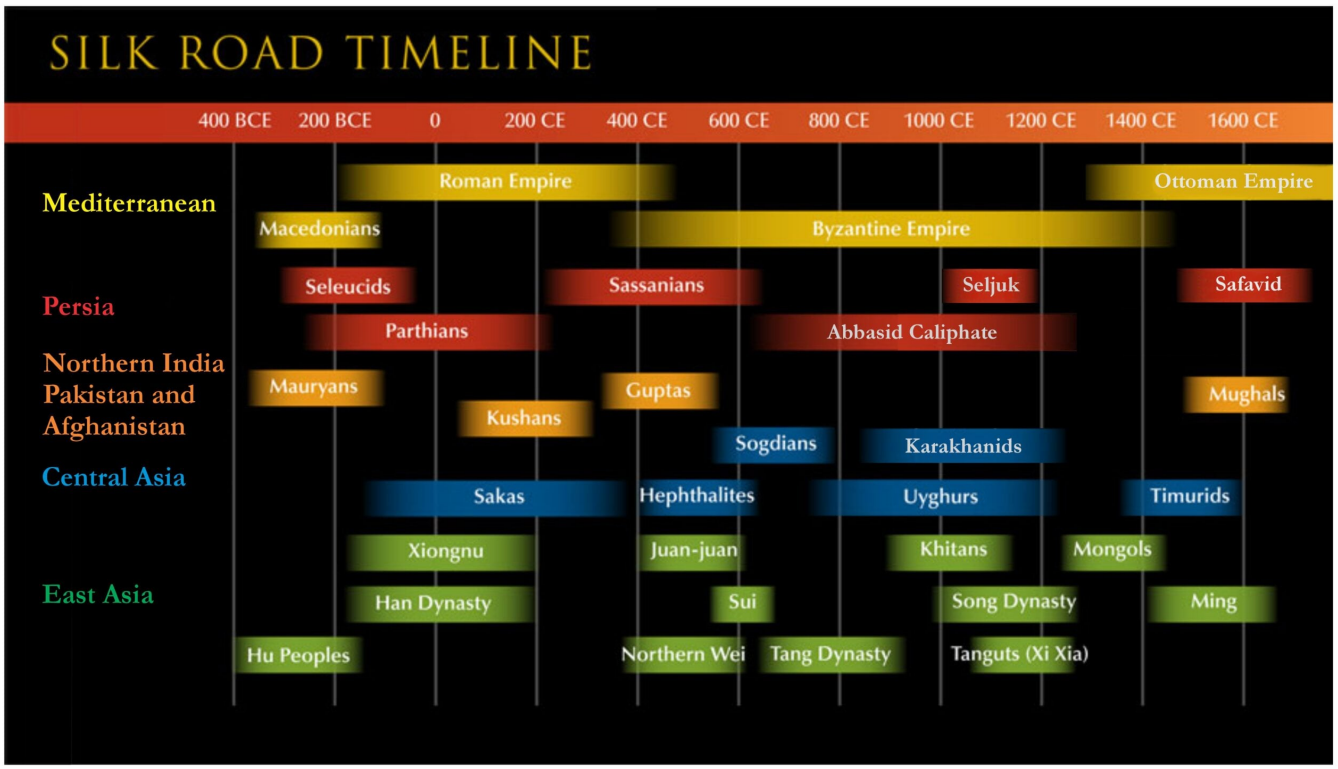




The Mongol Empires (1206-1368) supported trade along the Silk Roads. However, in the 14th Century CE the Mongol Empires fragmented, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) blocked overland connections between the Silk Roads and Europe. Trade between China and Europe continued

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

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



The Library at Dunhuang

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

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

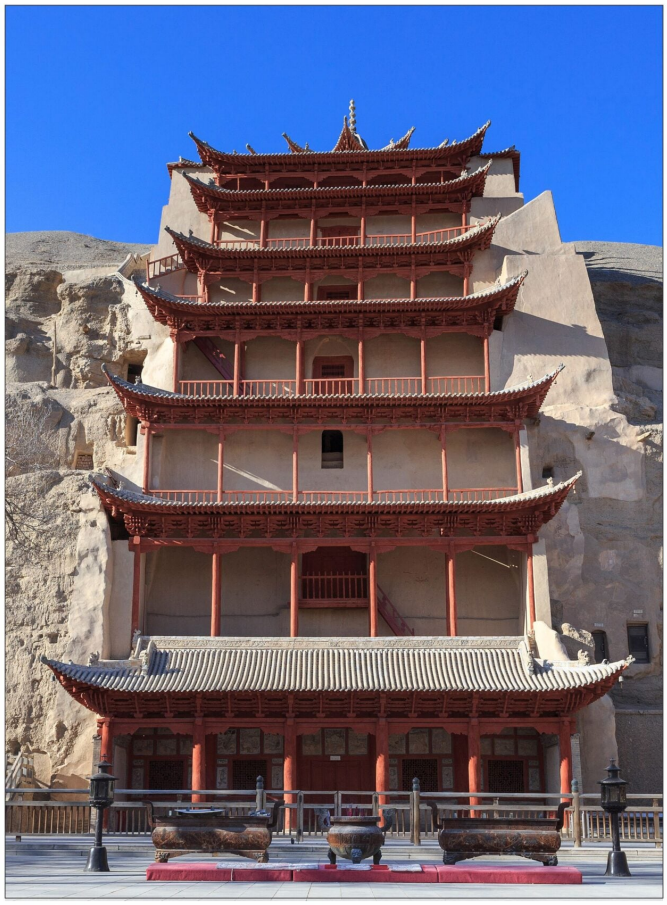
Buddhist monks first arrived in Dunhuang in the early centuries of the common era. In the 4th Century CE, they began carving caves into of the sandstone cliffs 25 km southeast of the city. These Mogao Caves – "Caves of a Thousand Buddhas" – are a system of about 500 separate temples decorated with wall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

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

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

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

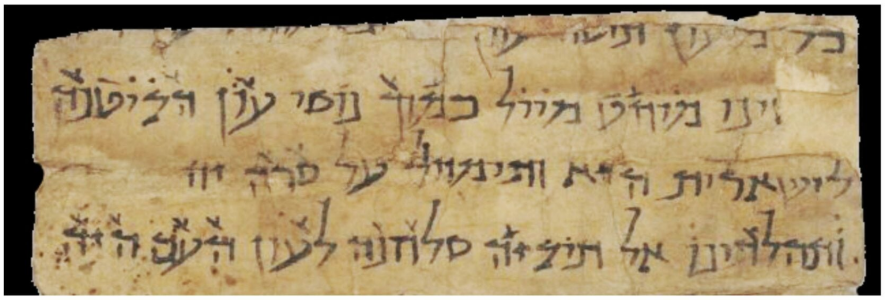
The following illustration shows on the left the entrance to the Mogao Caves. Most of the building is from the 20th Century. On the upper right is the statue of Hong Bian in the Library Cave. On the lower right is an impression of what the cave must have looked like in 1900.



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

Judaism

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



כל מיעון תיסר עון

[נק]ינו מיחַט מִייל כַּמוך נוסי עָון הַבִּיטָנה

לישארית הזא ותימחל על סָרָה זה [

ותהלָתינו אל תיבזַה סלַחנָה לָעון הָעַם הָזֶה

every abode(?). Remove iniquity

we are clean of sin! Who is a God like you, who bears iniquity? Look please at this remnant, and pardon for ... this defection

Do not spurn our praise. Forgive please, the iniquity of this people

Compare: Numbers 14:19

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

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

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

Zoroastrians

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

(i) Biblical Magi

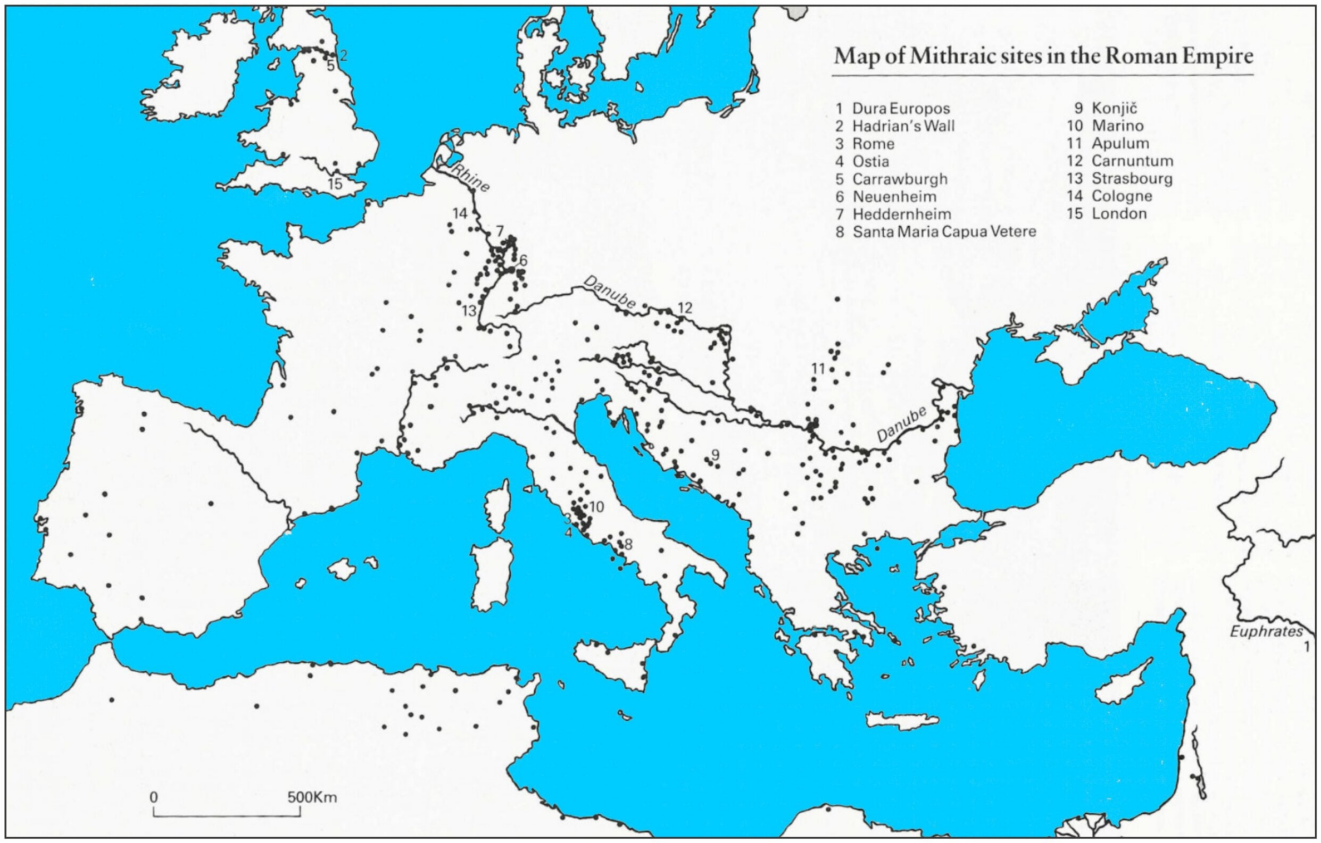
The Gospel of Matthew relates how three *magi* (translated as "wise men") came from the East to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

> Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
>
> Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (*Matthew* 2: 1-2)

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

(ii) Mithraism

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

(iii) Sogdians

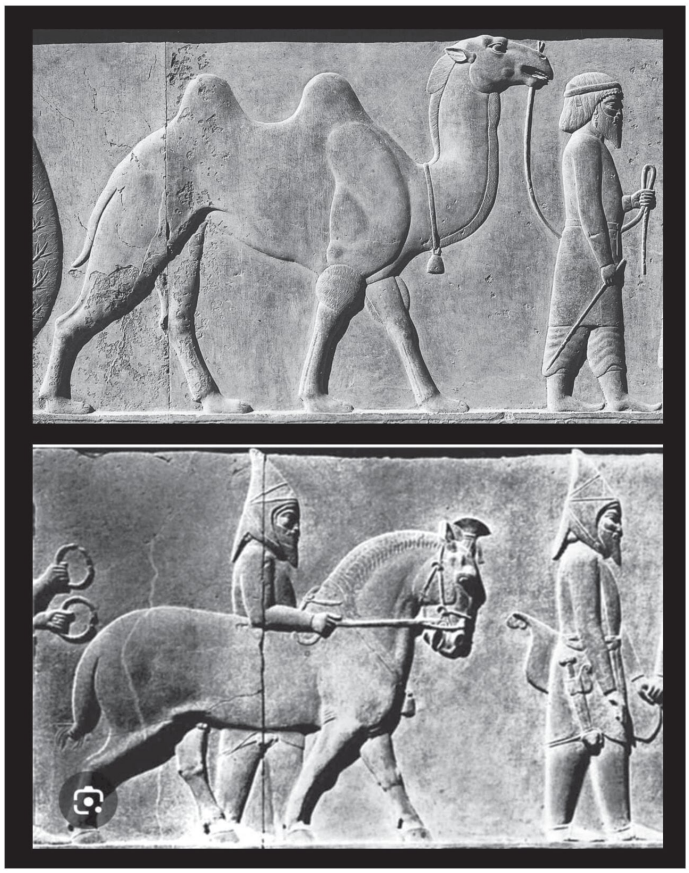
At the time when trading was at its height, the main middlemen on the Silk Roads were Sogdian merchants (Pin Lyu, 2024). Sogdia was the name for the area of land between the Amu Darya (or Oxus) and the Sri Darya Rivers. Its capital was Samarkand. The following map shows the location of Sogdia in Central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

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

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

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

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



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

funerary couch was set up.

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

Buddhism

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

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

(i) Gandhara

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

(ii) Colossal Buddhas

As their religion spread along the Silk Roads, Buddhist monks

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

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

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

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

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

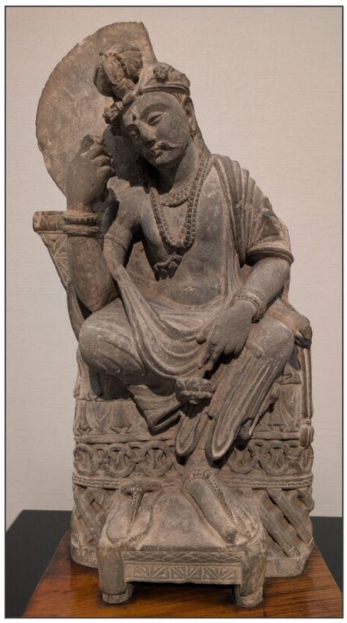
(iii) Avalokistesvara

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

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

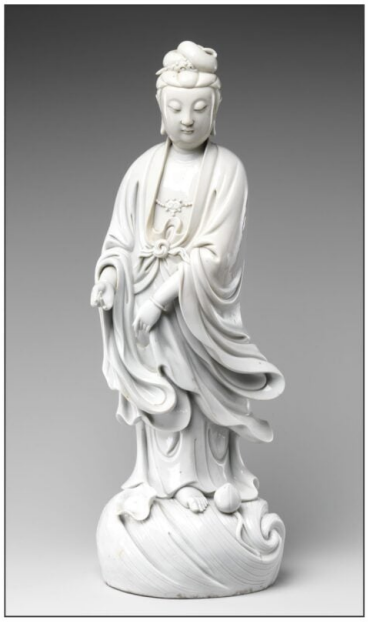
The following illustration shows the transformation of Avalokistesvara. In order from left to right and then form up to down:

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







(iv) The Diamond Sutra

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

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

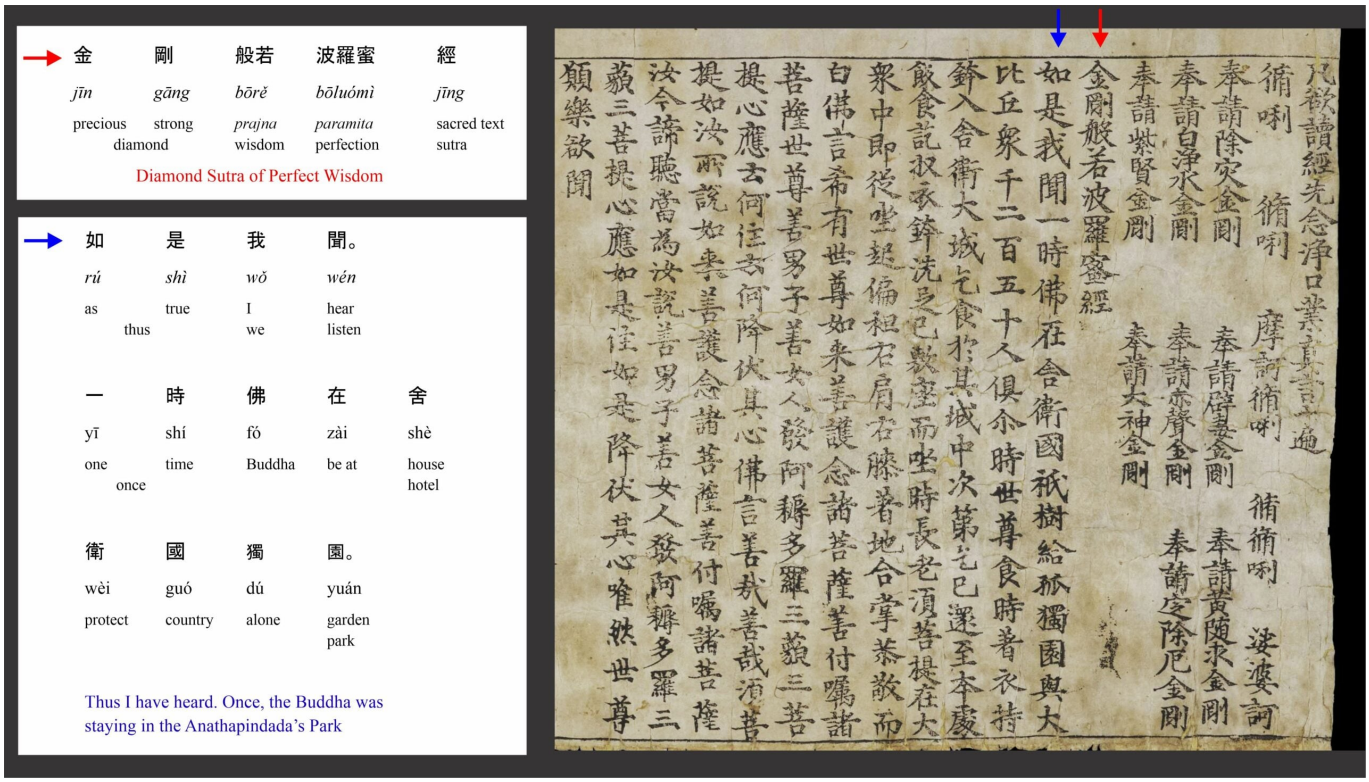
following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view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

One of the most important discoveries in the Mogao Caves near

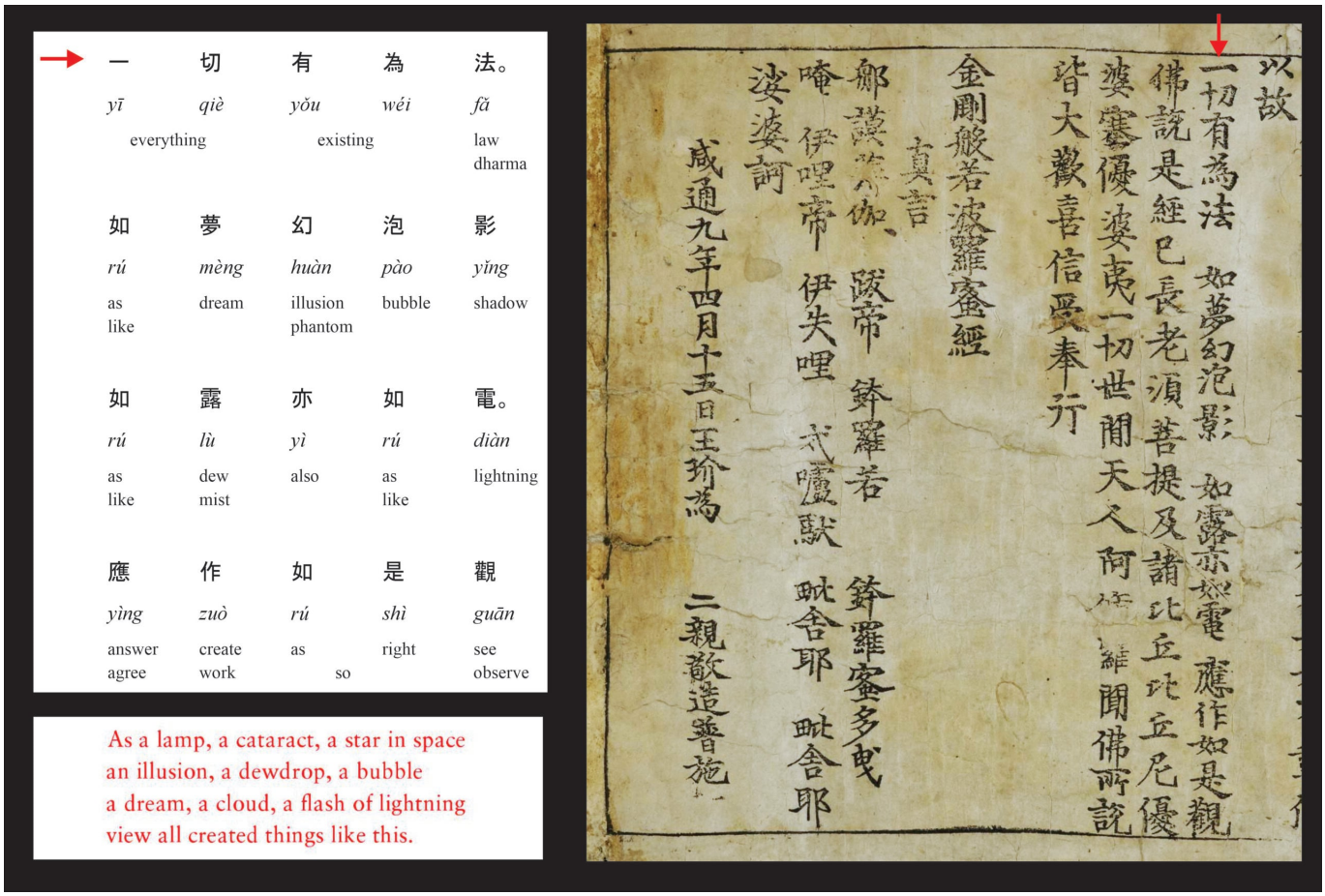
Dunhuang was a woodblock-printed copy of Kumarajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra. The pages were printed by Wang Jie in 868 CE, probably in Sichuan, and then pasted together to form a scroll about 5 m long. The colophon gives the date and notes that the sutra was being made freely available to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

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

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



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



Christianity

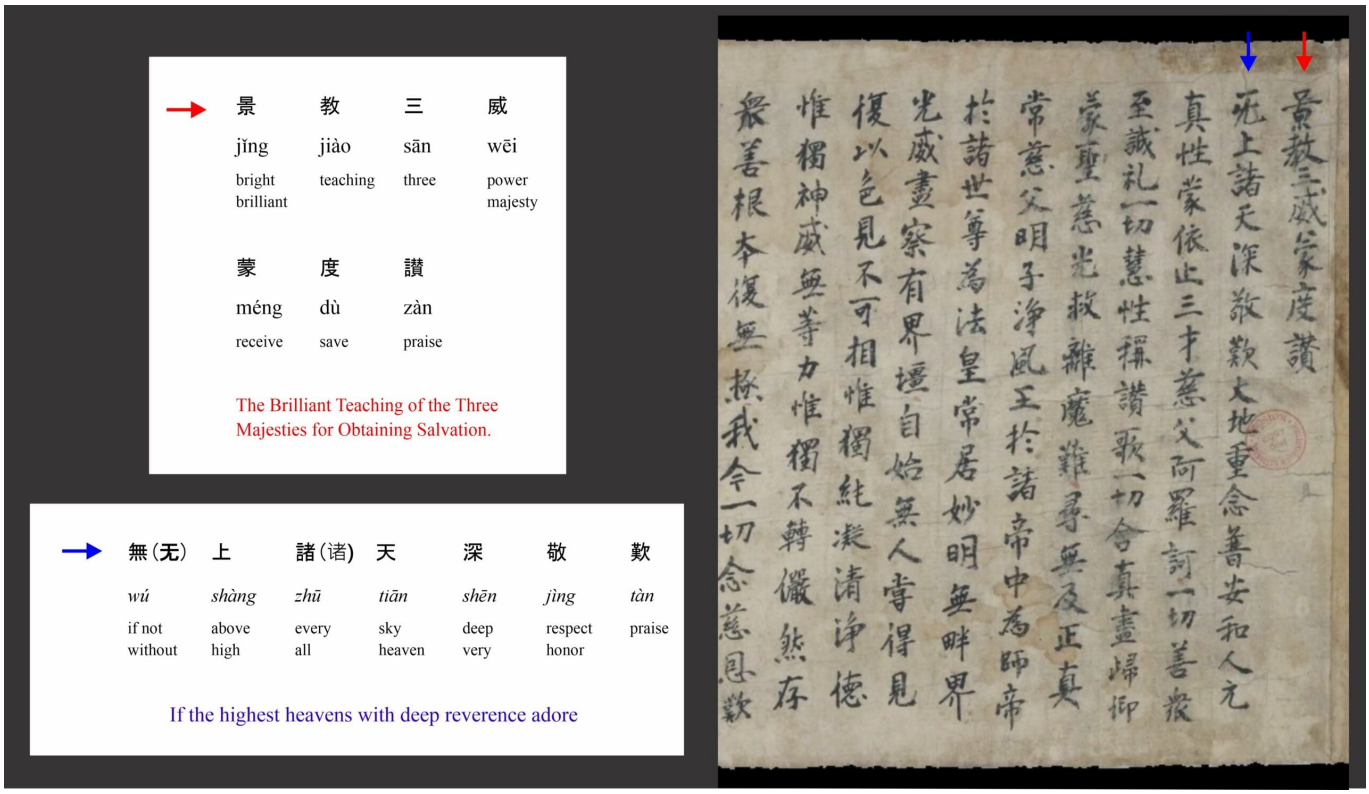
During the first 4 centuries of Christianity, the nature of Jesus as both God and Man was extensively discussed. One position was that Jesus was of two distinct natures – *dyophysite*; another was that his two aspects were conjoined as one – *miaphysite*; and yet another was that his Jesus became fully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

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

(i) The Dunhuang Glora

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

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



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

> If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore,
> If the great earth earnestly ponders on general peace and harmony,
> If man's first true nature receives confidence and rest,
> It is due to Alohê the merciful Father of the universe.
>
> All the congregation of the good worship with complete sincerity;
> All enlightened natures praise and sing;
> All who have souls trust and look up to the utmost;
> Receiving holy merciful light to save from the devil.
>
> Hard to find, impossible to reach, upright, true, eternal,
> Merciful Father, shining Son, holy Spirit, King,
> Among all rulers you are Master Ruler,
> Among all the world-honoured you are spiritual Monarch

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

(ii) The *Jingjiao* Stele

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

大	秦	景	教	流	行
dà	*qín*	*Jǐng*	*jiao*	*liú*	*xíng*
large	state	bright	teaching	spread	travel
Roman Empire		Christianity			

中	国	碑
zhōng	guó	bēi
middle China	kingdom	monument

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

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

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

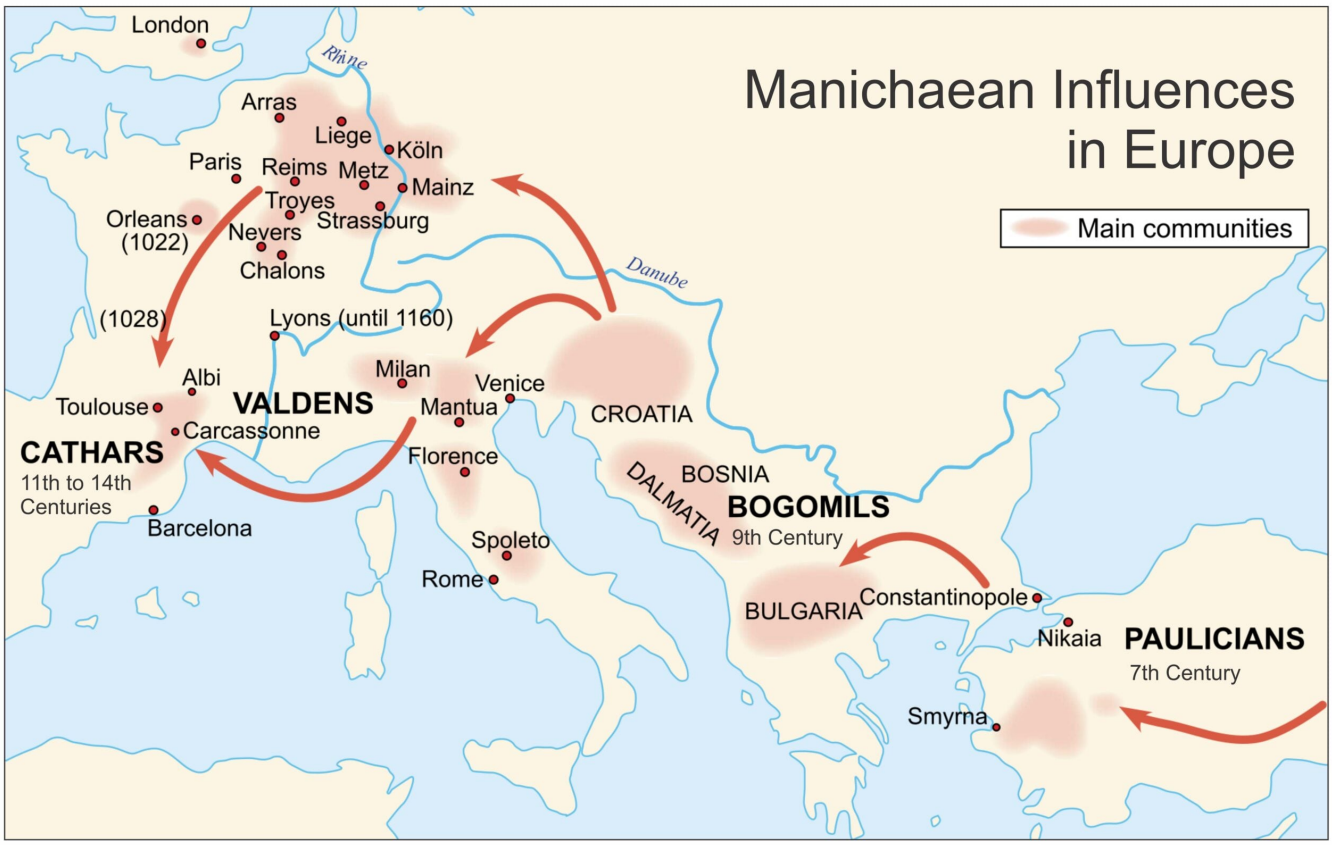
Nevertheless, the Church of the East continued to send missionaries along the Silk Roads and several centuries later, Christian Churches were built throughout the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368) were tolerant of the different religions. The foreign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

Manichaeism

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

(i) Spread to Europe

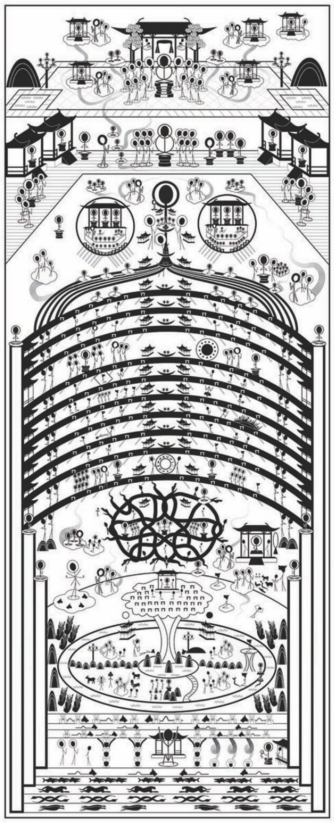
In Europe, Manichaeism declined after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. However, some isolated groups, such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Southeast France, continued to follow Mani's teachings:



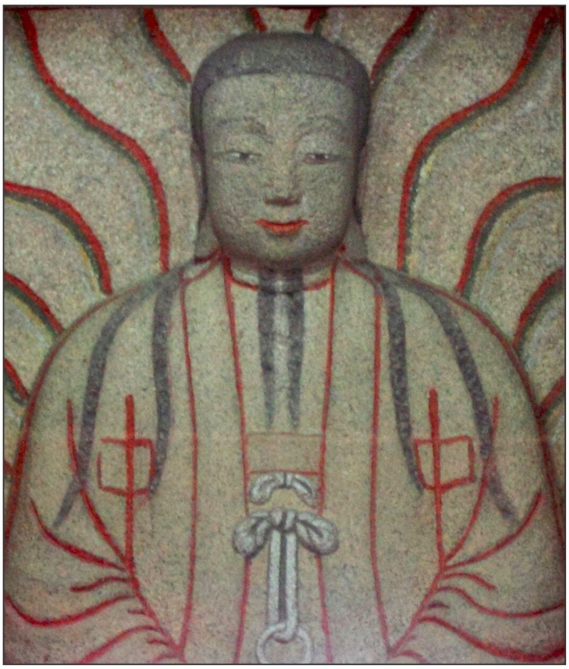
(ii) Spread to China

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

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



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



The inscription reads

Purity (□□, *qīngjìng*), Light (□□, *guāngmíng*),

Power (□□, *dàlì*), Wisdom (□□, *zhìhuì*)

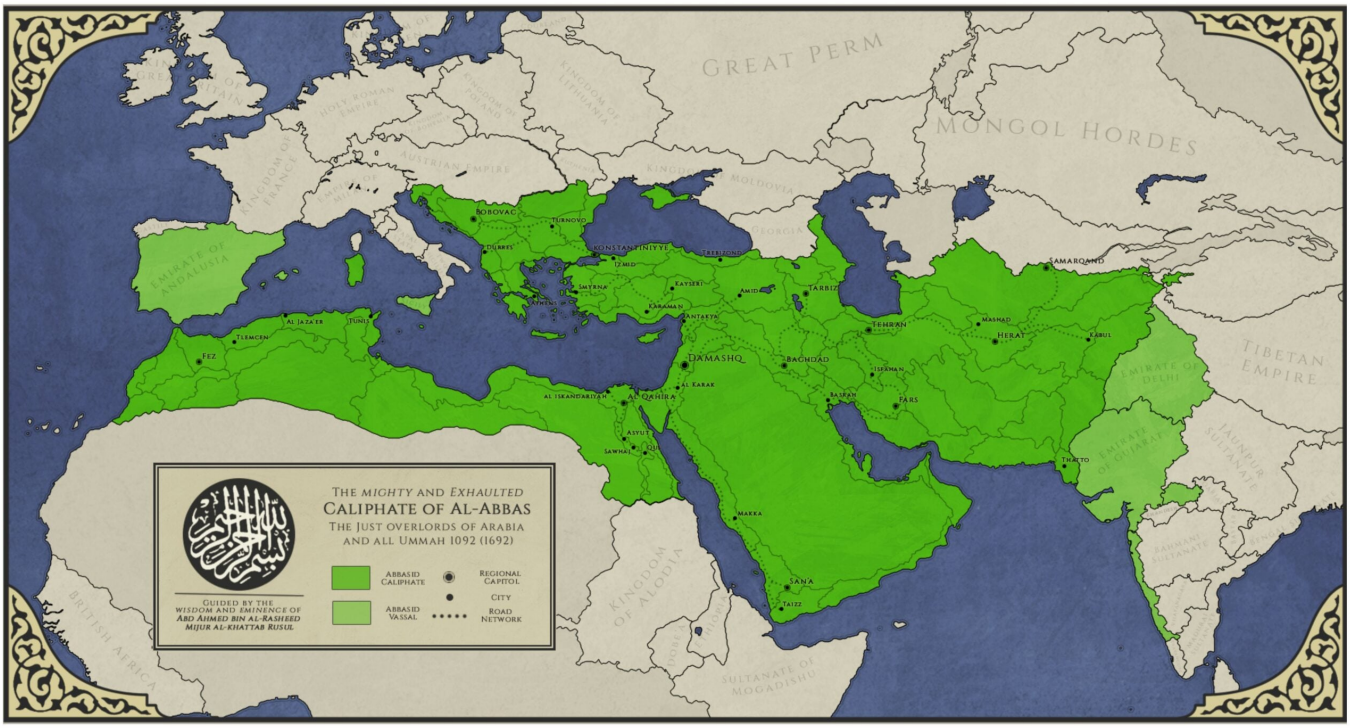
Supreme (□□, *wúshàng*), Ultimate Truth (□□, *zhìzhēn*)

Mani (□□, *móní*), the Buddha of Light (□□ *guāngfú*)

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

Islam

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



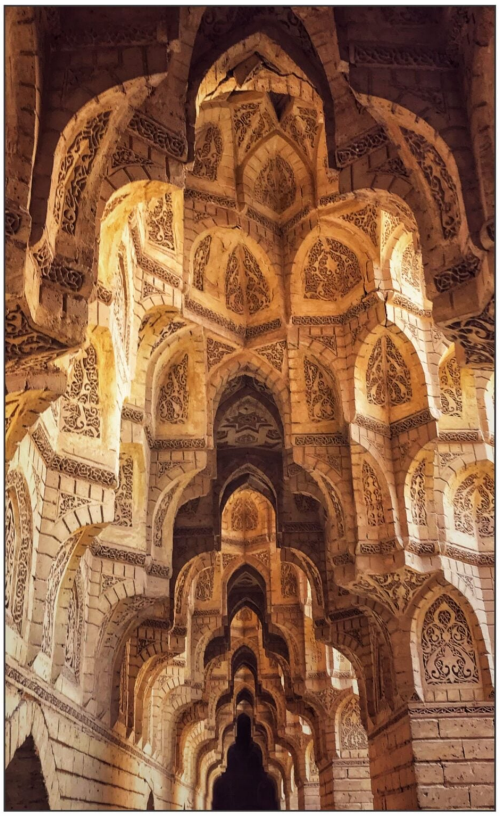
(i) Abbasid Caliphate

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

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

longer limited to the elites.

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

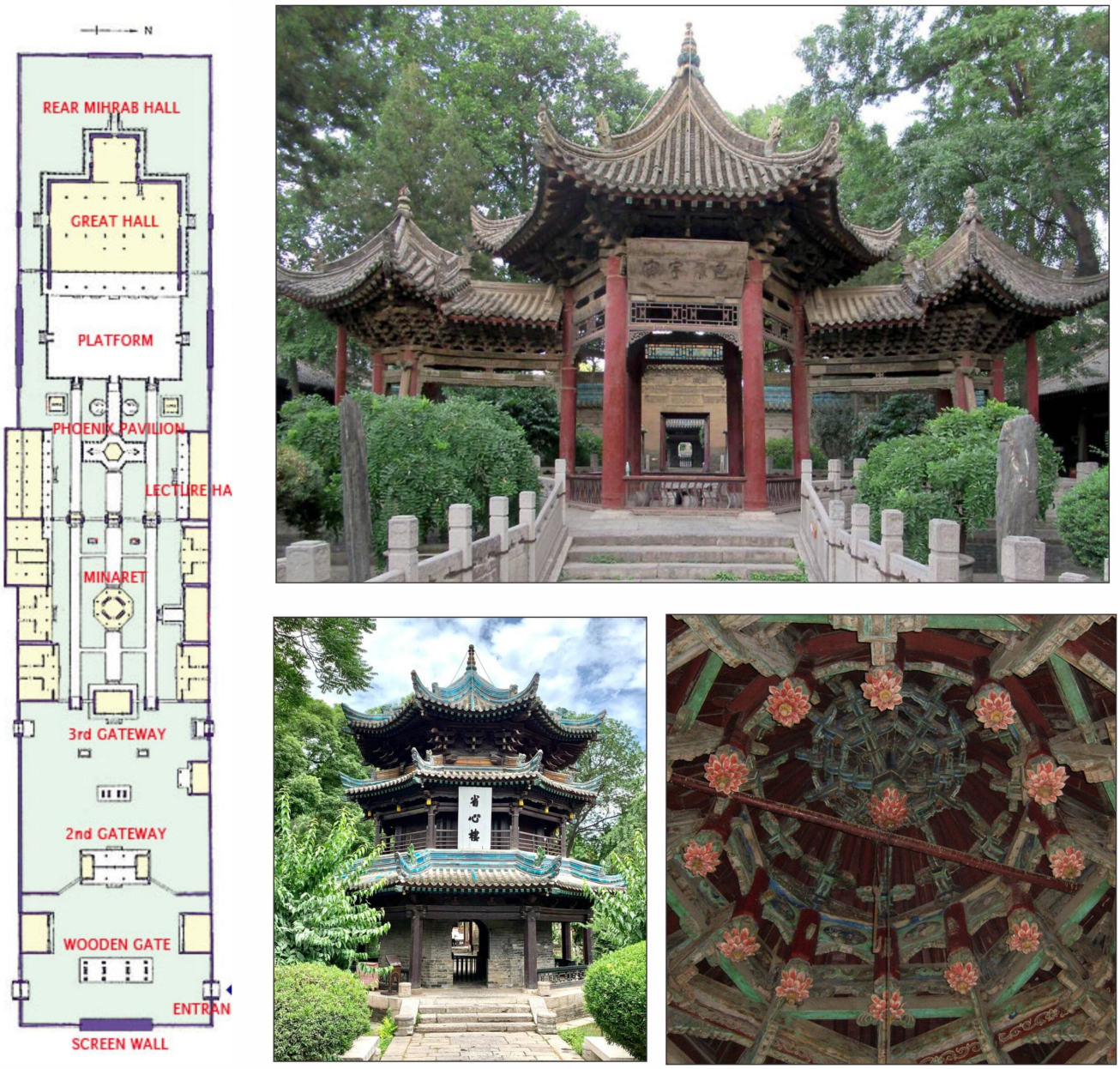


(ii) The Great Mosque in Xi'an

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

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

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



Epilogue

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

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

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

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

> We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
> Always a little further: it may be
> Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow
> Across that angry or that glimmering sea.
>
> White on a throne or guarded in a cave
> There lives a prophet who can understand
> Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
> Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand
>
> …
>
> Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
> When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
> And softly through the silence beat the bells
> Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.
>
> We travel not for trafficking alone;
> By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:

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

The following is a reading of these verses by Roger Helmer

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

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

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

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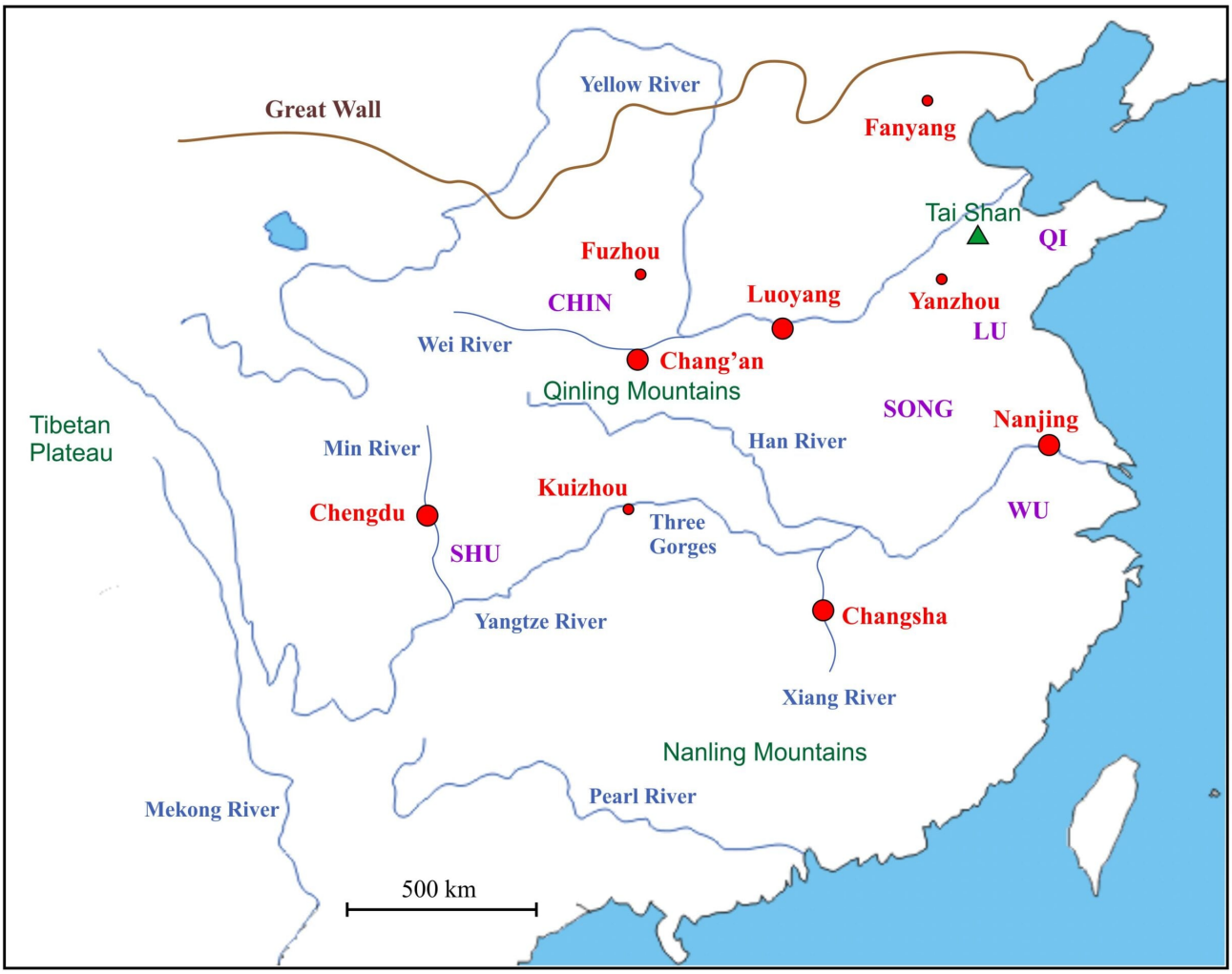
Du Fu: Poet, Sage, Historian

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

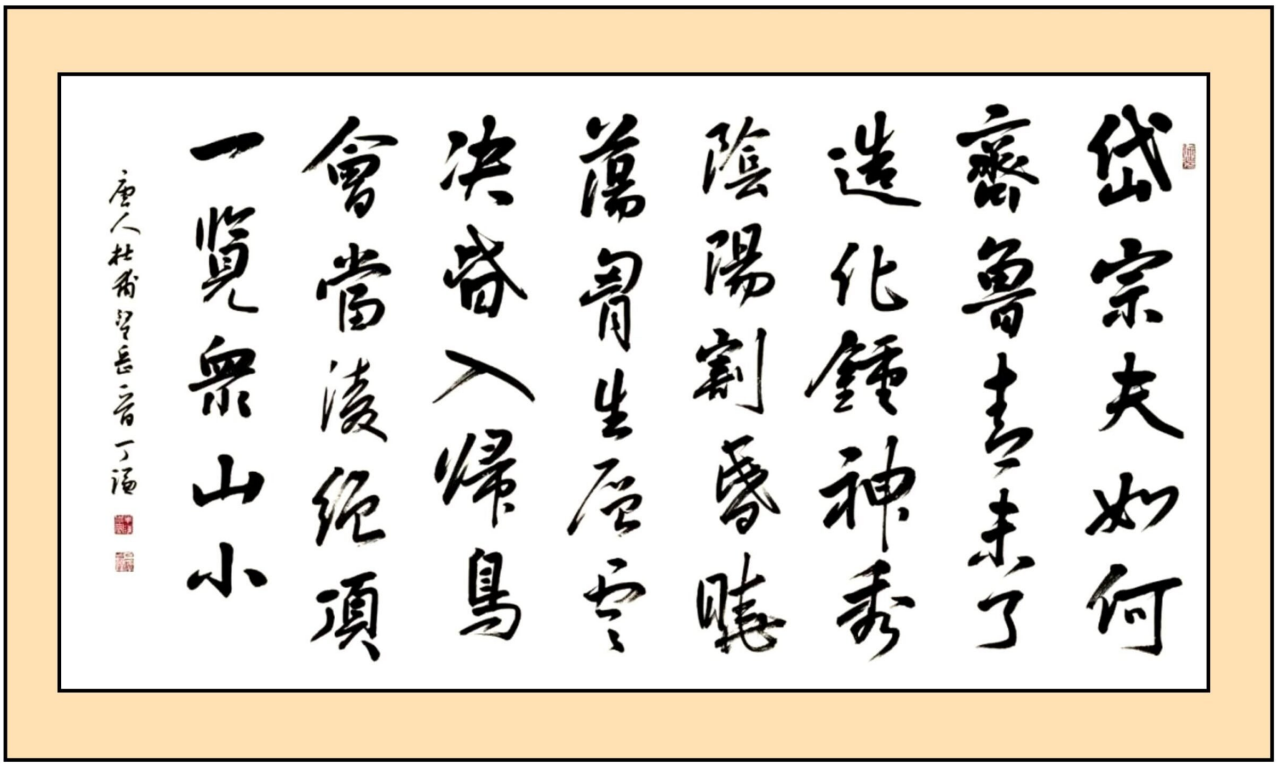
We can begin our examination of Du Fu’s poetry with one of the early poems written during his time in Yanzhou: *Gazing on the Peak* (737 CE). The peak is *Taishan* (exalted mountain), located in Northeastern China. Taishan is one of the Five Great Mountains (*Wuyue*) of ancient China. Today one can reach 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

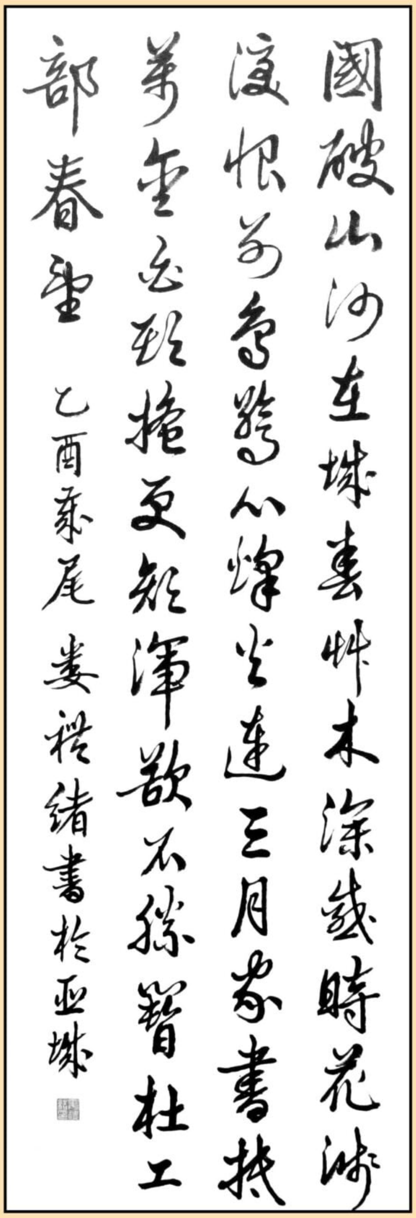
The following is a reading of the poem from the website

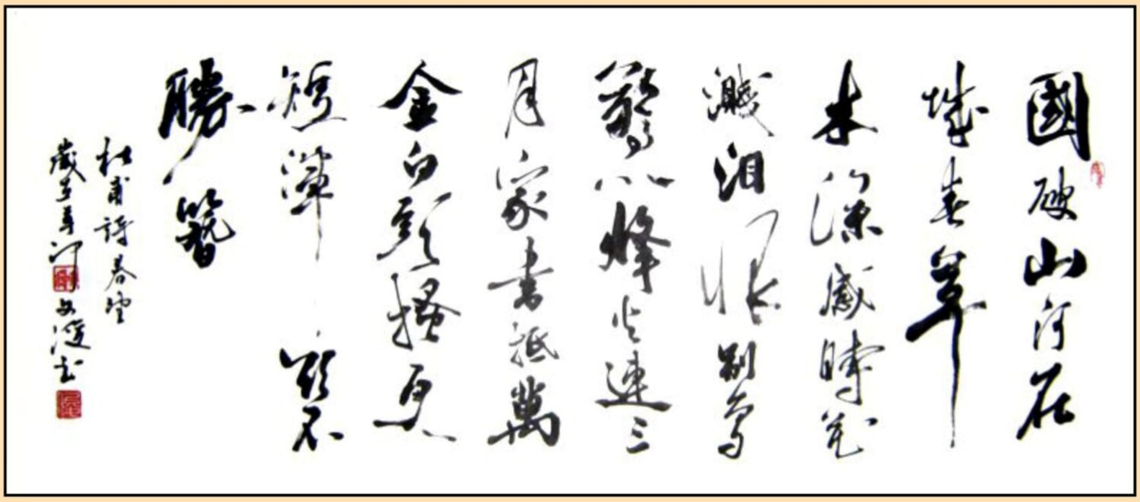
associated with *How to Read Chinese Poetry* (ZongQi-Cai, 2008, poem 8.1):

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


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):

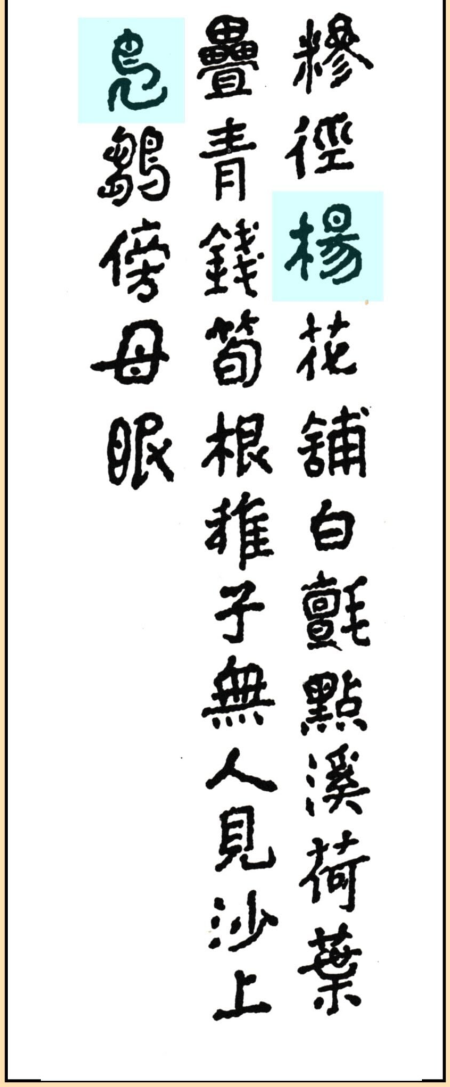
糝徑楊花鋪白氈，　　sǎn jìng yáng huā pū bái zhān
點溪荷葉疊青錢。　　diǎn xī hé yè dié qīng qián
筍根雉子無人見，　　sǔn gēn zhì zǐ wú rén jiàn
沙上鳧雛傍母眠。　　shā shàng fú chú bàng mǔ mián

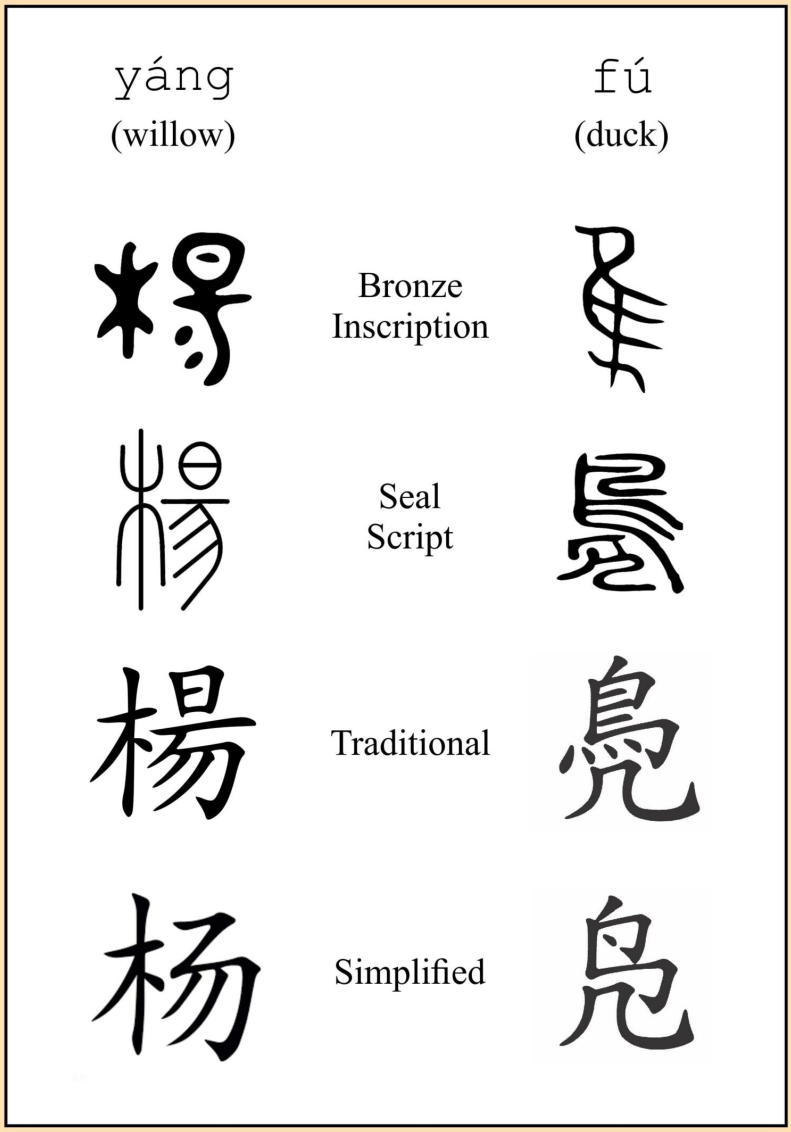
grain path poplar/willow blossom pave white carpet
little stream lotus leaves pile green money
bamboo shoot root sprout no person see
sand on duckling beside mother sleep

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:

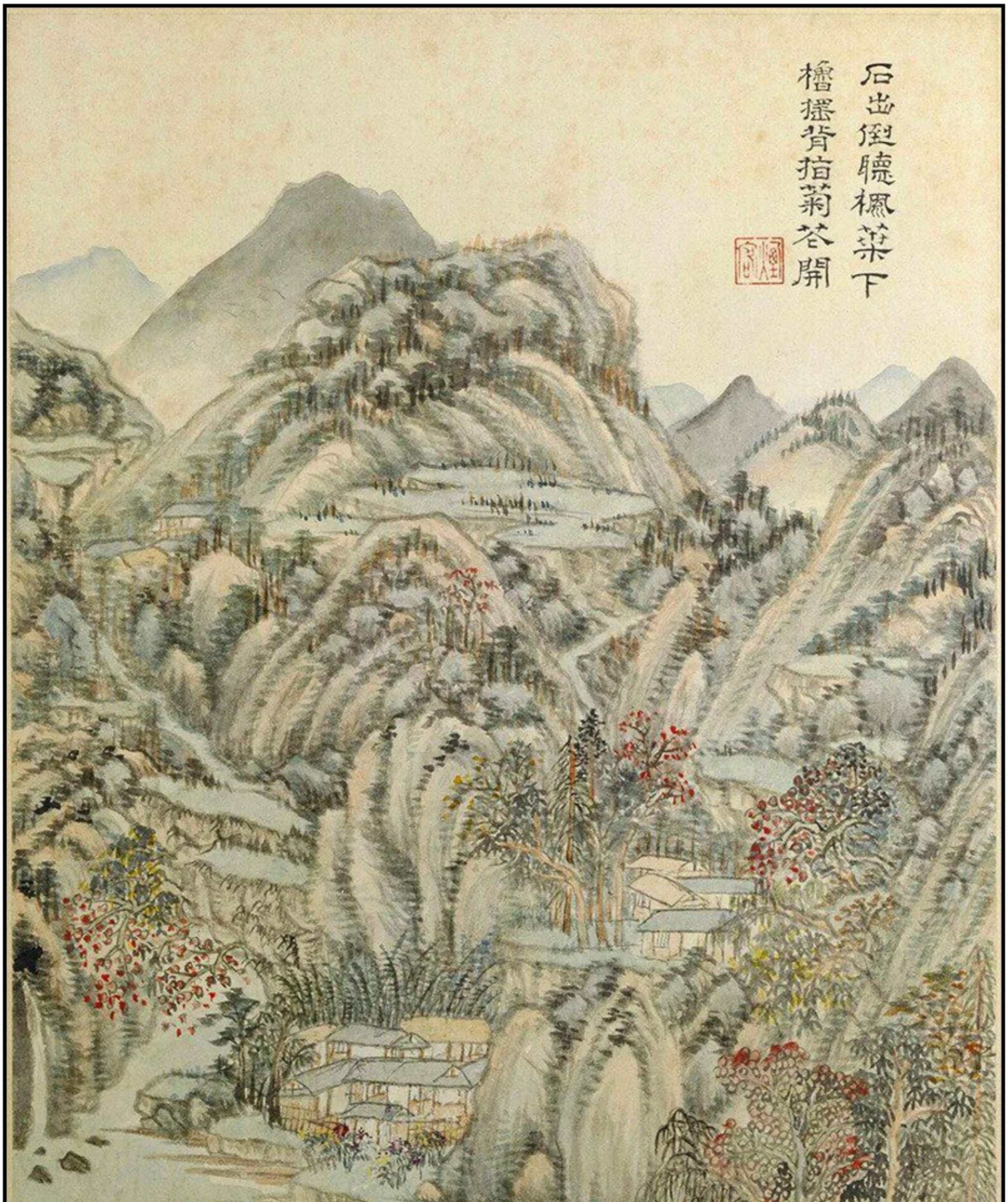
> blue/green curtain white boat/raft Yizhou arrive
> Wu gorge autumn waves heaven/sky earth/ground turn (around)
> stone/rock leave/exit fall listen maple leaf down
> scull/oar swing carry point chrysanthemum flower open/blume

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.

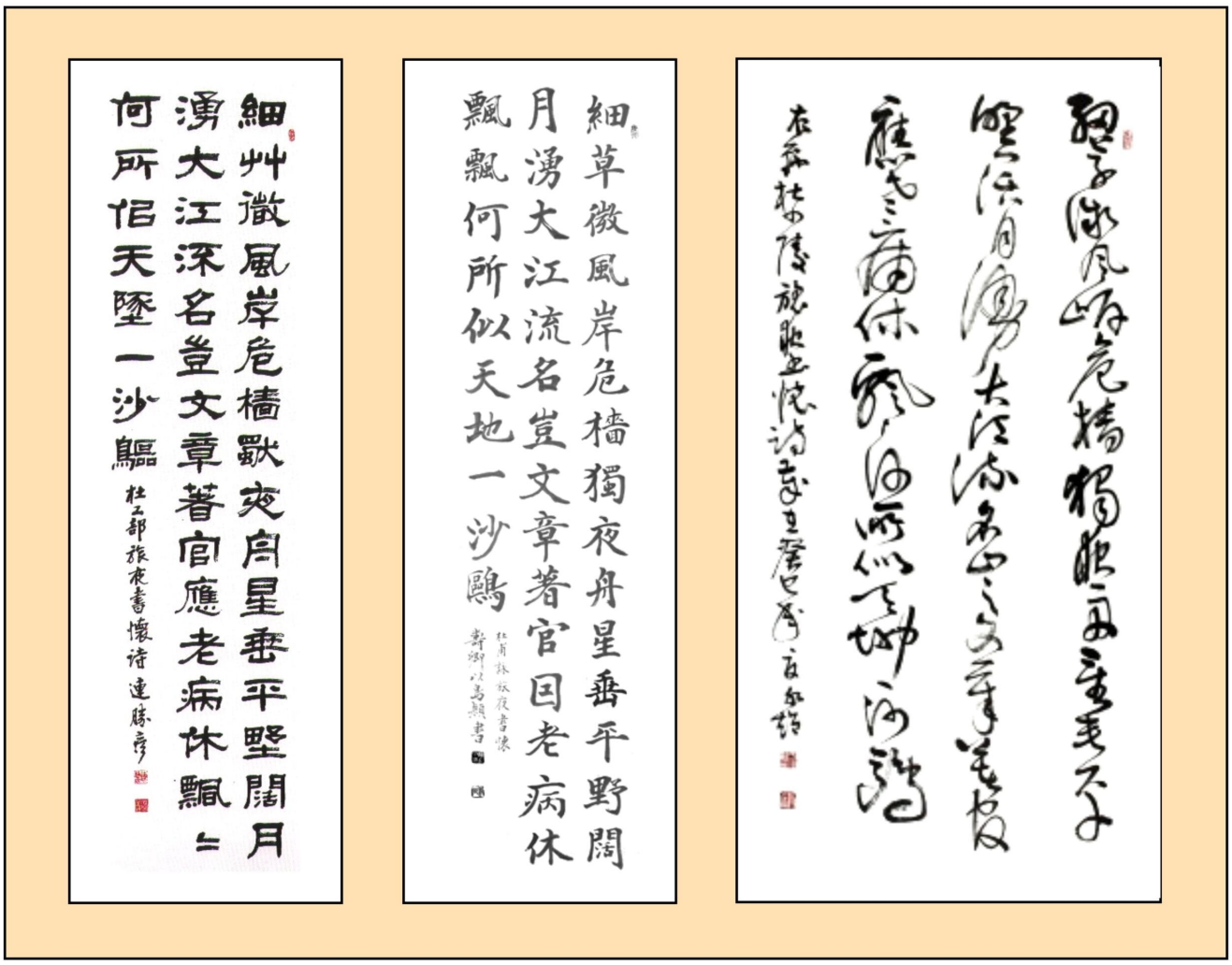
Drifting, drifting,
what do I resemble?
A lone gull
lost between earth and heaven.

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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Language and Meaning

Language and meaning

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

Choe Chi Won (857-925?)

At the age of 12, Choe Chi Won (Hangul □□□; Chinese □□□;

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

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

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

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

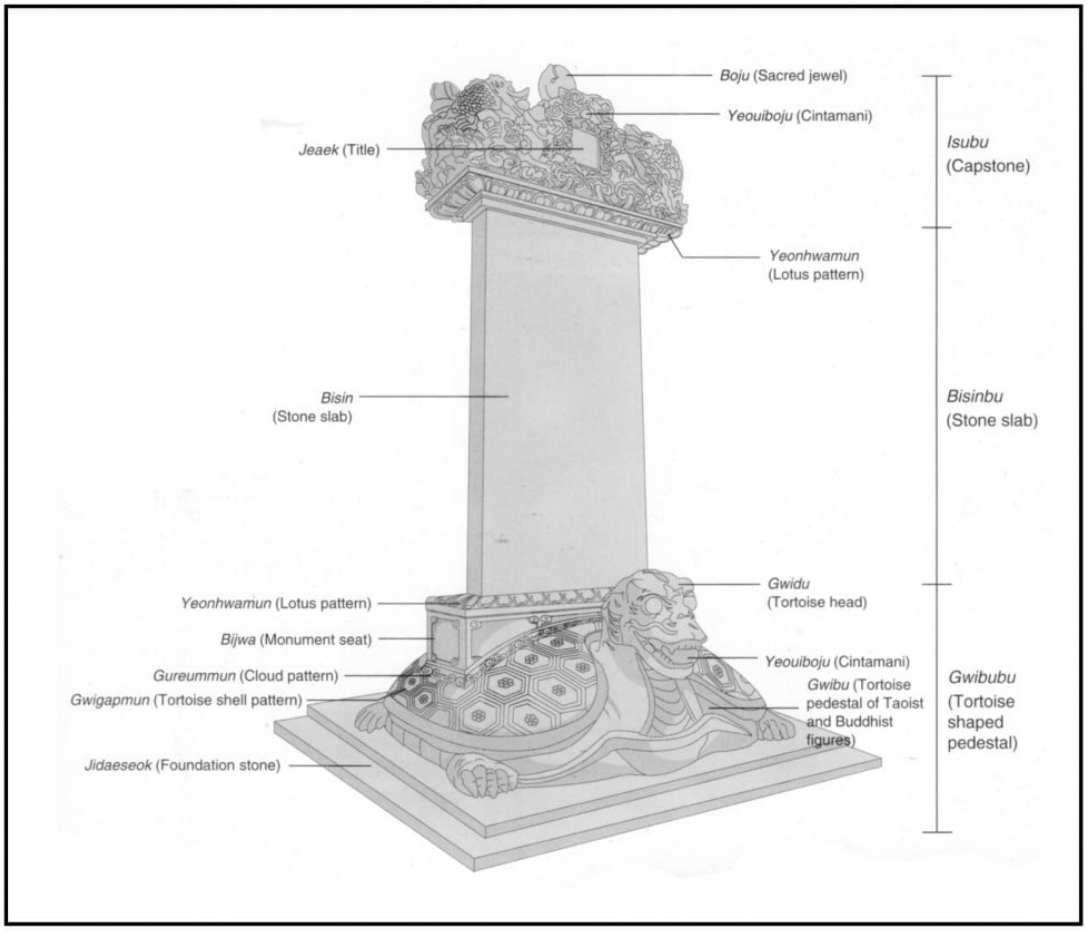
The Silla Royal Family and the court refused to accept Choe's advice about how to improve their government. Disillusioned, Choe left the court to become a provincial magistrate. Finally, he retired completely from public life, spending his last years in meditation at various Buddhist monasteries in the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

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

The Mountain Stelai

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

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



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

Seon Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

outside for fulfillment.

Chin’gam Hyeso Stele

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

The introduction begins

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

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

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

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

> 言豈一端而已， 夫各 有所當．
>
> How could a word have only one side? Each [side] has a valid point.

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

> 至若佛語心法， 玄之又玄， 名不可名， 說無可說．
>
> 雖云得月， 指或坐忘， 終類係風， 影難行捕．然陟遐自迩， 取譬何傷．

> Regarding the Buddha’s spoken words on the mind-dharma, it is the arcane within the arcane; the name that cannot be named, the explanation that cannot be explained.
>
> Although it is referred to as pointing at the moon or sitting in oblivion [of the surrounding world], in the end it is like [attempting] to bind the wind or like the difficulty of capturing a shadow. But as one progresses from what is far to what is near, what harm is there in using metaphors?

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

> □□□□.
>
> What words does Heaven speak?

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

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

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

Final words

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

猛探虎窟，

遠泛鯨波．

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

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

無思無慮，

匪斲匪雕．

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

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

況法離文字， 無地措言，

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

Meanings

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

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

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

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

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

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