Chapter 12. Big Words

Presented to Li Yong

When the peng-bird rises on the wind,
there’s only cyclone, ninety thousand miles straight up.
If the wind dies and he falls back down,
he can always rumble back over to the blue Darksea.
My big words seem strange and out of tune,
so everyone laughs coldly at them,
but even Confucius should fear the next generation.
Adults, don’t take us lightly!  

上李邕

大鹏一日同风起
搏摇直上九万里
假令风歇时下来
犹能簸却沧溟水
世人见我恒殊调
闻余大言皆冷笑
宣父犹能畏后生
丈夫未可轻年少

Li Bo had a presumptive kinsman named Li Yong 李邕 (678–747), the highest paid prose writer of the age. In 720, when Li Bo was a teenager living in the province we now call Sichuan, Li Yong was posted nearby. Basing himself on some unknown common progenitor, Li Bo called on him and sent in this cheeky poem by way of introduction.

Li Yong was a marveled, moody, brilliant, generous man. The Old Tang History says of him,

Despite his generally good reputation, he was frequently dismissed from office. He would spout disquisitions as he
walked through the streets, unfathomable to those who followed behind. When folks of the Western and Eastern Capitals saw him, they took him for an ancient.\(^{43}\)

Li Bo’s poem mentions “my big words.” These refer not just to him but to the mega-word braggadocio of Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (ca. 160–ca. 93 BCE), wise buffoon to the Martial Emperor of Han, and frequent counterpoint to Li Bo. The Martial Emperor had sent out a call for worthy men to present themselves to the throne. Thousands came forth and were dismissed. Dongfang Shuo sent in this letter:

[When young, I studied the classics, the military texts and fencing], and by the time I was nineteen I could recite 440,000 words. I am twenty-two, nine feet three inches tall, with eyes like pendant pearls, teeth like ranks of shells, as brave as Meng Ben, nimble as Qingji, scrupulous as Bao Zhu, and loyal as Wei Sheng. Because of this, I am fit to act as a great minister to the Son of Heaven.\(^{44}\)

The Emperor concluded he was no ordinary man, and kept him on.

The fabulous bird of the first lines comes to us from Zhuangzi, whose own very first words are:

In the Northern Darksea is a fish called the Kun. I don’t know how many thousand miles round its girth is! It transforms into a bird called the Peng. I don’t know how many thousand miles long its back is! When it’s aroused and takes to flight, it beats the waters for three thousand miles, a swirling cyclone, rising up 90,000 miles.\(^{45}\)