Chapter 14. “Lines of a Short Song”

How short, short this bright sun —
our hundred years fill so easily with sorrow.
The vaulted blue-green sky floods on and on,
for ten-thousand eons reality flows on.
The goddess lets down two locks of hair,
already half frost-white.
The Lord of Heaven plays at darts with her
and laughs through a million thousand spaces.
I want to rein in the sun’s six dragons,
turn round their chariot, and tether them at world’s end.
The Northern Dipper pours fine wine —
I’ll persuade each dragon to drink a goblet.
Wealth and honor aren’t what we want
to halt the ruination of our brightness.48

短歌行

白日何短短，百年苦易滿
蒼穹浩茫茫，萬劫太極長
麻姑垂兩鬢，一半已成霜
天公見玉女，大笑億千場
吾欲攬六龍，回車掛扶桑
北斗酌美酒，勸龍各一觴
富貴非所愿，與人駐顏光

If you have time now for a longer conversation, we’ll translate this poem a bit differently. At the fourth line we’ve said, “for ten-thousand eons, reality flows on.” “Reality” is a loose translation of Taiji 太極, the Great Ultimate, that undifferentiated circumstance that is just prior to form — just prior to Yin and Yang.49 How long can it go on? The Indians measure big time in kalpas, a word that the Chinese, like us, couldn’t translate, so they preserved its sound, “kiap-pua” 劫波.50 It means the life span of a
world realm, from when it was created to when it is destroyed and then created once again. In the time of modern physics, this might be some six or seven billion years. So Li Bo actually tells us the Great Ultimate will go on for ten-thousand kalpas.

The goddess in question is Magu 麻姑, whose name means “Hemp Maiden.” On one occasion she got a message from her lover Wang, saying, “It’s been a long time since you were in the human world. I’ve just arrived here today, and I’m wondering if you might come and chat awhile with me.” She arrived,

a fine-looking young woman, maybe eighteen or nineteen. Her hair was done up on top of her head, with the remainder falling down to her waist. She said, “Since I’ve served you, already thrice I’ve seen the Eastern Sea turn into mulberry groves and planted fields.”

And beyond the Eastern Sea lies Fusang 扶桑, “Beside the Mulberries,” where the sun starts its circuit, drawn by six dragons through the sky, which in the above translation we’ve rendered “world’s end.”

To understand the Lord of Heaven, whose real name is the Eastern King, we’ll need recourse again to Dongfang Shuo, that jester to the Han’s Martial Emperor. His Classic of Divine Marvels (Shenyijing 神異經) begins like this:

Within a mountain in the Eastern Barrens is a great rock room, wherein dwells the Eastern King. He’s ten feet tall, with bright white hair, human body, bird face, and tiger tail. He keeps a black bear, who keeps looking around in every direction. He and a Jade Woman are always playing Pitch Pot (touhu 投壺 “throw the arrow in the pot”). They get 1,200 tries.

When he gets an arrow to stay in, Heaven suspires for it. When the throw misses and the King can’t grab it, Heaven laughs for it.

A commentator explains:
“Suspire” means “sigh.” When it says “laugh,” it means that flowing fire comes dazzling out from Heaven’s mouth. Now, in under-heaven when it doesn’t rain but there are lightning flashes, this is Heaven’s laughter.54

![Fig. 7. The Xuanzong Emperor of Ming playing Pitch Pot](image)

In the above translation we portrayed this game as darts, but the arrow game actually goes back to the first millennium BCE. In Tang there was a guy who could always get the arrow in, even with his back turned.56

The Northern Dipper is the same constellation that we see in our northern sky. The *Classic of the Precious Ocean of Mysterious Gateways* (*Xuanmen baohai jing* 玄門寶海經) elaborates on its power:

The stars of the Northern Dipper are the purple seal upon the Great Ultimate, the numinous bed of Mystery Truth. [...] The Yellow Emperor says, “When the cock crows, think of the seven stars of the Northern Dipper, and the heavenly deities will send down the medicine of deathlessness, and seal for you long life without aging.”57

It doesn’t pour just wine: everything comes from it.
Thus a translation of the poem that incorporates the materials from Dongfang Shuo and others:

Lines of a Short Song

How short, short this bright sun —
our hundred years fill so easily with sorrow.
The vaulted azure sky floods on and on,
the ten-thousand kalpa-long Great Ultimate flows on.
Magu lets down two locks of hair —
one half’s already frost-white.
The Lord of Heaven sees the Jade Woman
and laughs through a million thousand spaces.
I want to rein in the sun’s six dragons,
turn round the chariot, and tether them to Fusang’s mulberry tree.
The Northern Dipper pours fine wine —
I’ll persuade each dragon to drink a goblet.
Wealth and honor aren’t what we want
to halt the ruination of our brightness.