Chapter 6. Li Bo (701–762)

The outlines of his life are simple. He was born abroad, in an ethnically mixed region of the far west, where Chinese, Uyghurs, Sogdians, and Indians lived together under nominal Chinese rule. Perhaps his first language was Turkic. When he was still small, the Li family moved back to the interior, settling in present-day Sichuan — that’s still a rough trek south-west from the Tang capital of Chang’an.

The Chronology of Li Bo begins, “According to accounts in his own poetry, Li Bo descended from the ancient General Li Guang.” That surname Li is commonplace, but the Tang Emperors claimed descent from the same general, so Li Bo would refer to the royal family as “cousin.” There’s no family tree for evidence, we rely here on his word as poet.

Li means plumtree, Bo means white, so his name can be read as a chromonym, like Red Skelton’s. His public name was Taibo, “Great White.” That’s also the name of a Chinese mountain, the name of the planet we call Venus, and a perfect translation of the common Turkic name, Appaq.

Li describes his late teen years in Sichuan:

I once lived in seclusion with the hermit Master East Cliff on the south side of Mount Min. I holed up there several years, never setting foot in town or market. You could count in the thousands the number of rare animals we cared for. When we called, they’d all come eat from our palms, without the slightest starting or suspicion.

The Prefect of Chengdu heard of this and wondered at it. He paid a formal visit to observe us in person, and accordingly awarded us the title “Possessing Dao.” But we strongly declined.

He roamed out from Sichuan soon after, never returning. In 726 he made a good marriage, but its circumstances did not turn into
poetry — mostly we know him from his poems, so this marriage is mostly invisible to us.\textsuperscript{14} And from about age thirty until his death, he roamed again, seeking men of letters, great officials, Daoist masters, mountains, companions, wine, the Emperor.

This roaming (\textit{you 遊}) is not just casual wander or literary flaneurism. Two among its great precursors:

the Daoist sage Zhuangzi \textit{莊子}, who

rode the cloud energies, mounted sun and moon, and roamed beyond the Four Seas,\textsuperscript{15}

and the anonymous poet of “Far roaming,” from the \textit{Songtexts of Chu}:

\begin{quote}
I pace through azure clouds, 
flooding, surging, roaming, ah.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

A friend recalls their first meeting a decade later:

I was originally named Wan, then Dan. When I was still Wan, I ordered my driver to cross the Yangtze — not so great a distance — and find Li Bo. I went first to Mount Tiantai and finally met him when I got back to Guangling. The pupils of his eyes blazed sharply, quivering like a hungry tiger. Sometimes he would dress formally, raffish, elegant, and generous with wine. Since he’d received Daoist ordination in Qi, he might wear the accompanying green silk hood. When young, he’d been a swordsman, and with his own hand run through several people.\textsuperscript{17}

Midway through this period, about 742, he made his way to the capital, Chang’an, and was introduced to the court.\textsuperscript{18} For a while things went splendidly: the Emperor took a vivid shine to him and “loaned me his horse to ride.”\textsuperscript{19} Then the honeymoon ended — in slander, perhaps? We don’t know how long this took, maybe a year or two. A later biographer saw it like this:
If you’re a dragon, you can be divine among the clouds and rain,
but you can’t be employed by men.
If you’re a phoenix, you can adorn the ruler’s court,
but you can’t be tamed by men.20

蛟龍能神於雲雨，不能為人用
鳳凰能瑞於王者，不能為人畜

So Li Bo wandered out again, through the central provinces. In 755 rebellion split the realm. He soon found himself in the wrong place, was charged with treason and nearly executed, then released and pardoned. He roamed again, a bit forlorn, until his death in 762 midway up the Yangtze.

Among his thousand poems, here’s one that disappeared:

Bright Moon Pond is in Pingwu, Long’an, near Bright Moon Ferry. They say that every night the moon casts shadows here. A poem by Li Bo was once carved into the rock cliff, but over time waters have worn it all away, and now all that remains is a poem by Yuwen Tong of the Song dynasty.21