Chapter 38. A Princess

Princess Realized-in-Jade (Yuzhen 玉真), dear younger sister to the Bright Emperor and student of Sima Chengzhen. Li Bo writes of her:

A poem of Princess Realized-In-Jade, the Immortal

The Immortal, Realized-In-Jade —
sometimes she’s off to Great Flower Peak,
at clear dawn she sounds Heaven’s drums,
she’s a sudden whirlwind galloping a pair of dragons,
she never stops playing with lightning,
she’s always moving clouds and never leaves a footprint.
When she enters the holy peaks of Mount Song,
Great Echo! The Queen Mother of the West comes out to greet her in response.

We also know her in five other ways.

1. As nun and Daoist priest
   In February 711, at about age twenty, she and her elder sister Immortal-in-Gold (Jinxian 金仙 [ca. 688–732]) were ordained in a ceremony at the palace. Thereafter each maintained her own abbey within the Imperial City.
   Yet Realized-in-Jade still maintained a somewhat public role. In 735 she represented the throne at her teacher Sima Chengzhen’s home base on Mount Wangwu, participating in
a multi-day ritual to “harmonize the forces of nature, prevent natural calamities and disasters, prolong the life of the emperor, and guarantee prosperity for the empire.” In 744, in her early fifties, she petitioned her brother “to have her royal title revoked, her appanage abolished, and her revenues and manors returned to the throne.” He refused, she insisted, he acceded.

2. As connoisseur of poets
The princess ran a literary salon at both her abbey and her country estate. She was especially fond of the poet Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), whose Buddhist-related verses of the natural world we still prize today. About 742, when Li Bo came to Chang’an, he was introduced to her, and it is likely she who recommended him to the throne, whence his prominence in the Capital.

3. As granddaughter of Empress Wu
That Empress was the most powerful woman in all China’s history. Unwilling to rule through her son, she overthrew the Tang and founded her own dynasty, the Zhou 周, in 690. It did not survive her.

From the princess’s point of view, that reign was accomplished only by terror: her mother was murdered, her father’s life ever uncertain, his allied officials executed in the marketplace. This political style persisted a full decade after the Empress’s death in 705 and occasioned a misogynistic backlash. The Princess’s ordination protected her from much, but not all, of it — though she was exempt from ordinary marriage, court officials sought to block her abbey and blamed her for the drought of 713.

4. As recipient of the earliest ordination ceremony for which we have an eyewitness account
Over ten days and an evening in February 711, she received key ritual texts — “scriptures, commentaries, writs, registers, tallies, talismans, injunctions” — texts that had arisen be-
fore the worlds and been preserved in the heavens, eventually bestowed on certain gods, and only eons later entrusted to a human recipient. These rituals came with oaths of strictest secrecy.

The final day, between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. on the morning of 20 February 711, Lord Lao, the deified form of Laozi, “descended to the altar and spoke to the Princesses.”

5. As rejected bride of the immortal Zhang Guo
From the Old Tang History, chapter 191:

Zhang Guo 張果. His place of origin is unknown. During the time of Empress Wu he lived in reclusion on Zhongtiao Mountain, coming and going between the Fen and Jin Rivers. At this time people reported that he possessed the secret arts of long life. He himself said that he was several hundred years old. Empress Wu sent an official to summon him, but he pretended to be dead and did not proceed to the Capital […].

[In 733 he accepted the Bright Emperor’s invitation to visit the court.] The Emperor first took his seat and warmly asked Zhang about ways of governance and the matters of divine immortals and their elixirs. He also asked about his uncertainties concerning “unfathomable transformation.”

The Bright Emperor said to his chief eunuch Gao Lishi, “I’ve heard that if someone can drink an extract of monkshood without distress, he is a realized Master.” When the weather was coldest, he had someone give the monkshood to Zhang. He thereupon drank three gobs, becoming tipsy as if he were drunk. He turned to someone and said, “It’s not the best wine.” Then he went to sleep. When he awoke, he looked at his teeth in a mirror. They were scorched all black. He ordered the attendants to get him an iron scepter, and he knocked his teeth out, storing them in his sash. Then he took some immortals medicine from his breast, light red, and rubbed down his gums with it. Then he slept again a long time. His teeth all grew back, pure white and gleaming. Only then did the Emperor have full confidence in him.
The Bright Emperor loved divine immortals, and he wanted to ennable Zhang Guo as a prince, but he hadn’t yet said a word about it. Zhang Guo remarked to two officials, “There’s a saying, ‘To marry to become a prince, that’s really dangerous.’” The two men looked at each other, not understanding his words. Then an Imperial Commissioner arrived and announced, “Princess Realized-in-Jade has loved Dao from an early age. His Majesty wishes to bestow her on you in marriage.” Zhang Guo gave a great laugh but did not go so far as to accept the command. Only then did the two other men realize the meaning of his previous words. Afterwards he politely declined the offer and returned to the mountains.\textsuperscript{328}