Li Bo Unkempt

Kidder Smith, Kidder Smith, Mike Zhai, Traktung Yeshe Dorje, Maria Dolgenas

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Chapter 36. A Patriarch

When Li Bo was in his late twenties, he met the Daoist Master Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647–735), then in his seventies. Li Bo knew him as his teacher. He recalls:

Long ago I was in Jingzhou and met Sima of Tiantai. He said that I had the style of an immortal and the bones of Dao, that I could roam the outer edge of the universe with the gods.\textsuperscript{301}

予昔於江陵見天台司馬子微，謂予有仙風道骨，可與神遊八極之表。

Li Bo makes no further mention of Sima anywhere in his works.\textsuperscript{302} The following poem, though, expresses something of their relationship. The poem’s first words, “Great White,” is of course the planet Venus, is a mountain near Chang’an, and also Li Bo’s public name.

Ancient Airs #5

Great White in the sky’s deep blue.
Tiers of forest higher than the stars,
only a hundred miles below Heaven,
cut off from the distant world.
Here a raven-haired old man
wraps himself in clouds, reclining in pinetree snow.
He neither smiles nor speaks,
but lodges deep inside the cliff.
I’ve come to meet this Realized Man.
I prostrate to him and request instruction.
Radiant, smiling, showing his jade-white teeth,
he explains the making of the elixir.
I inscribe his teachings in my bones.
Then he shoots skyward, his lightning flash already gone.
I look up, but my sight falls short.
The Five Emotions are burning into vastness.
I’ll refine the elixir
and forever take leave of this world.³⁰³

By all public accounts, Sima Chengzhen is the greatest Daoist of Tang. I don’t think it matters how you measure that, though the conventional way to have your biography included in the Dynastic History would require four or more items from this polythetic list:

- the right forebears
- skill in essay and poetry
- the Emperor’s ear
- a series of high appointments
- administrative acumen
- a wide circle of important friends
- skill in calligraphy, painting and music

Sima Chengzhen had all of these.³⁰⁴ But he was also successor to the patriarchy of Highest Clarity Daoism. And he was also a great realized master in that tradition. This last is the foundation of it all, while the others are his marvelous skills over apparent phenomena.
The Bright Emperor wrote him poems, gave him titles, composed his epitaph. We’ve seen how Sima brought Daoist and Imperial cosmologies into alignment on the question of the Marchmounts. And in 724 he conferred initiations on the Emperor, of several kinds. One set seems similar to what Li Bo received — our chapter on grotto-heavens gives details of these, the registers and talismans. Another set included rituals in cosmic parallel to the imperial enthronement rites that had consecrated the Emperor on his ascension to rulership. And it seems that something further happened as well:

At that time the Bright Emperor held all-under-Heaven, and he deeply loved the methods of Dao. Earnestly he summoned Sima Chengzhen to the Capital, lodging him in the inner palace and showing extreme respect. The Emperor asked him about life extension and transcending this world. Sima took the Emperor aside and spoke privately to him. The Emperor then preserved this secretly, so that no one learned of it.

After that the Bright Emperor ruled the state for more than forty years. Even though An Lushan rebelled and His Majesty withdrew to Shu, he became the Retired Emperor and returned to Chang’an. Only seven years later did he relinquish his life. Truly this is Heaven’s calculation, how could he live so long without help from the powers of Dao?