Chapter 33. “Climbing to the Peak of Great White”

I’m headed west up Great White’s peak, scrambling to the very top in the evening sun. Great White speaks with me, opens the Gate of Heaven to me. I’ll ride off now on cool winds and reappear among floating clouds. I raise my hand and almost touch the moon, going on as if no mountains were there at all. Having passed the last peak, when would I ever appear here again?

登太白峰

西上太白峰, 夕陽窮登攀
太白與我語, 為我開天關
願乘泠風去, 直出浮云間
舉手可近月, 前行若無山
一別武功去, 何時復見還

Great White, Taibo 太白, is the name of a mountain near the capital. It’s also the name of the planet we call Venus. It’s also Li Bo’s public name.

That mountain is part of the great east-west chain that protects Chang’an from the south. A millennial home to hermits and refugees, and still that today. Taibo, the tallest peak within the range, 12,000 feet up. The view from there:
The planet Taibo makes war, not love. “Venus is the military. It is also the star of punishment,” says the *New Tang History.*267 “When Venus should not yet appear but does appear, throughout the world armies will set forth.”268 It is the west, autumn, metal.269

Elsewhere Li Bo writes:

When Venus transits the moon, enemies can be destroyed.

太白入月敵可摧270

All of this is Li Bo, and the great mountain and baleful star merely point in his direction. Thus his contemporary Cui Chengfu (崔成甫 n.d.) writes:

All along I sought Li Bo beyond the Heavens, but I snagged a drunk immortal in Nanjing.271

天外常求太白老,金陵捉得酒仙人

*Bo* 白, “white,” means radiant, effulgent, the brightness of the sun. It also means death, the clothes of mourning.

*Tai* 太, “extreme, maximum.” So Taibo is Maximum White. (This is not an Aryan Nation name.) 272 Here’s how Li Bo writes it himself:
Lichtenberg says that very few people have ever seen pure white. So do most people use the word wrong, then? And how did he learn the correct use?
— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*²⁷⁴

Un soir, un comédien me demanda d'écrire une pièce qui serait jouée par des Noirs. Mais, qu'est-ce que c'est donc un Noir? Et d'abord, c'est de quelle couleur?
— Jean Genet, *Les nègres, clownerie*

One evening, an actor asked me to write a play that would be performed by Blacks. But then, what is a Black? And first of all, of what color?
— Jean Genet, *The Blacks, A Clown Show*²⁷⁵