Chapter 24. The Moister South

From the South, a thousand years before Li Bo, comes this story of the poet Song Yu and his king.

The King of Chu and Song Yu went roaming in the wetlands of Cloud Dream, where they spied a fine building in the morning clouds. There was an energy in it, a certain \( qi \) 氣, at every moment endlessly changing. The King asked, “What is this energy?” Song Yu replied, “In the past a former king went roaming in the Gaotang Pavilion. During the day he fell asleep and dreamed he saw a woman. She said, ‘I am the fourth daughter of the God of Heaven. My name is Lady Turquoise. I died young and was given the terraces of Shaman Mountain as my fief. I heard that the King has come roaming. I would like to share his pillow and sleeping mat.’”

Elsewhere Song Yu finishes the story:

The King delighted in her. As she left, she said, “I dwell in the sunny-yang side of Shaman Mountain, at the precipice of High Hill. At dawn I am the morning clouds, at dusk the pouring rain. Morning and morning, evening and evening, below the Terraces of Yang.”

At dawn the King looked for her, and it was just as she had said. So he had a temple built there called “Morning Clouds.”

They never met again. Here is Li Bo’s poem:

Inspiration: poem one of eight

Lady Turquoise, daughter of the God of Heaven, essence of five colors transforming into morning clouds, twists her way again into night dreams, indifferent to the Lord of Chu.
Her brocade quilt wraps the autumn moon,  
the silk bed has lost the smell of her sweet lotus.  
Who can truly plumb boundless darkness?  
— and not just fruitlessly repeat Song Yu’s stories.\(^{150}\)

感興 八首其一

瑶姬天帝女，精彩化朝云  
宛轉入宵夢，無心向楚君  
錦衾抱秋月，綺席空蘭芬  
茫昧竟誰測，虛傳宋玉文

China’s old culture grew in the dry north, the Yellow River plains, among millet fields and tamped earth walls, heartland of Confucius, the Five Classics, ideals of government service.

But Song Yu and his king live in the South. Wet-rice culture, paddy fields. The Yangtze and its flooding. Humid days, warm nights, with their unfamiliar plants and fragrances.\(^{151}\) A moving frontier, aboriginal peoples not fully joined to Empire, shamanic realities.

The North had its anthology of folk songs and ritual hymns, the Classic of Poetry (Shijing 詩經), stately lines of four words each, one-two, one-two. The South had its own anthology, The Songtexts of Chu (Chuci 楚辭), long lines and short, wherein we find the story of Song Yu. These poems also tell how a third-century BCE poet–shaman quit himself of the world and journeyed:

I set off at morning from the Ford of Heaven,  
At evening I came to the world’s western end.  
Phoenicees followed me, bearing up my pennants….  
Warily I drove along the banks of the Red River,  
Then, beckoning the water-dragons to make a bridge for me,  
I summoned the God of the West to take me over.\(^{152}\)

朝發轫於天津兮，夕餘至乎西極。  
鳳皇翼其承旗兮，遵赤水而容與。  
麾蛟龍使樑津兮，詔西皇使涉予。
And yet the whole thing ends badly. He goes on for three hundred extravagant lines, and then in the last quatrain abruptly collapses.\textsuperscript{153}

The \textit{Songtexts} is important to us here for several reasons. First, its poetic expression opened a new form of literary intimacy with the divine, and many hundreds of poets entered thereby. Further, the poems’ sensory opulence could never be naturalized as a classic of poetry — they remained always at the edge of gentlemen’s culture, facing outwards. They survived because they could pass as literature, and indeed lyric poetry of the Tang is descendant of both northern and southern traditions, a \textit{ménage} that began in the early centuries of the Common Era.\textsuperscript{154}

But successful transcendence was always in jeopardy. And most every poet who attempted such a journey was unable to complete it, fell back into the ordinary.\textsuperscript{155} Li Bo is nearly unique for being free of this legacy of failure.\textsuperscript{156} He has no need for Song Yu’s stories, he’s already in the soup.\textsuperscript{157} Even in his own longing there’s never the scent of separation.\textsuperscript{158}