Li Bo Unkempt

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Chapter 22. La matière de Li Bo: An Epistemology

JAY These are the hot sheets?

Kay pulls a copy of the National Inquirer from the stand and gives the guy a buck.

KAY Best damn investigative reporting on the planet. But hey, go ahead, read the New York Times if you want. They get lucky sometimes.

— *Men in Black*

*Fig. 15. Screenshot from *Men in Black*.***

La matière de Bretagne, or the Matter of Britain, is the medieval lore-corpus of Arthur and the others, of Llyr and Lear, Gogmagog, their mythopoeia, the Grail. Information that has been lost from later historians’ accounts. In the above scene from *Men in Black*, Agents Jay and Kay are seeking information on an alien landing, data not available to the uptown press. Kay knows where to look: the tabloids. In fact, the *National Inquirer* takes them right to the site, and they work their magic there. (We like the *New York Times* well enough — after all, they keep up with Li Bo. But they have a rather coarse sense of time.)
Like these two Black Men, we find our best leads on Li Bo in the extraterrestrial. Like this story of four celestials who walk into a bar:

A Daoist ran a wine shop in Chengdu. Four men with fine silk hats and goosefoot staffs used to visit. Each time they’d drink dipper after dipper of wine until they had drunk more than a thousand liters, and they’d always pay their bill. They loved talking about Sun Simiao, King of Medicines, who’d lived a hundred years before.

Someone reported this to the magistrate, who ordered a special investigation. One day when they’d appeared, the magistrate stole over to the wine shop with a few followers. As he watched, the four men came prancing out and bowed twice, talking among themselves. They turned to look at each other, then rose leisurely into the sky, leaving only purple ashes and four staffs by their bar seats. They never appeared again.

At that time the Bright Emperor was fond of Dao, so the magistrate submitted a report on the matter. In response the Emperor issued a proclamation, calling for the late Master Sun, King of Medicines, to be summoned. When the Emperor asked him, Sun replied, “They were Li Bo and the stars of the Wine Constellation, the highest level of immortal. Whenever they come to the human realm, they go everywhere drinking wine. They especially like central Sichuan.”

Now, when we pick up any text, we waive our rights to non-fiction. But it’s not just that words are unrepentantly mendacious — and who would ever hold that against them? — it’s that the matière de Li Bo is not fundamentally material. His life is peopled with immortals and with the Queen Mother of the West.

Clothed in rainbow, trailing a wide belt,  
I go drifting up to Heaven.  
The Queen Mother invites me to her Cloud Terrace,
and the immortal Wei Shuqing and I exchange a formal bow.  

霓裳曳 шир, 飄拂升天行  
邀我登雲臺, 高揖衛叔卿。

it traffics in the miraculous,

Early in life I drank the elixir and was freed from worldly attachments,  
I harmonized the energies of body-mind and for the first time attained Dao.  

早服還丹無世情, 琴心三疊道初成。

and culminates in drunken apotheosis, when Li Bo, out in a small boat, is so enamored by the water-moon — what we would call the moon’s reflection in the river — that he reaches out to embrace her, he appears to have drowned, and he ascends to the Heavens. Three centuries later, Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–60) tells the story:

Under the Stone Quarry moon, I met Li Bo, the Banished Immortal,  
wrapped in brocade, sitting in a fishing boat at night.  
Drunk, in love with the moon hanging inside the river, playing with the moon, he stretched out his hands and fell overboard.  
He couldn’t have tumbled into the wet mouth of a river dragon, he must have mounted a whale and risen to the azure Heavens.

採石月下逢謫仙, 夜披錦袍坐釣船  
醉中愛月江底懸, 以手弄月身翻然,  
不應暴落飢蛟涎, 便當騎鯨上青天.
This world is all swoop and soar:

Touching Heaven, I pluck the Gourd Star,
entranced, enraptured, I forget my home.
I run my hand through the Milky Way
and get tangled in the Weaving Maiden’s loom.\(^\text{122}\)

摳天摘匏瓜，恍惚不憶歸
舉手弄清淺，誤攀織女機。\(^\text{90}\)

It flows ever outward and resolves back into itself ceaselessly:

Wild bamboo split the azure haze,
a waterfall, in flight, hangs on an emerald peak. \(^\text{123}\)

野竹分青靄，飛泉掛碧峰。

There is nothing ordinary here, only marvel. And thus it is hardly extraordinary that Li Bo appear in dream to men of the next dynasty:

The retired official Zhang Zi copied out Li Bo’s poems with perfect reverence. Once as he dreamed, Li Bo suddenly descended from the Heavens to discuss poetry with him. Zhang Zi wrote a song to commemorate it, part of which says:

High Heaven knows I’m always thinking of that man,
and made him come to the human realm that I could see him in this dream.\(^\text{124}\)

上天知我憶其人，使向人間夢中見

And it is entirely reasonable that Li Bo might be seen, long after he has joined the moon in water, by people with keen eyes:

Han Yu used to say that Li Bo attained immortality and left the world. In the early 800s a traveler from Beihai saw Li Bo
and a Daoist priest on a high mountainside, laughing and
talking the longest time. Presently they were enveloped by
a dark blue mist, and the priest hopped on a red dragon and
set off. Li Bo roused himself, took a couple of big strides, and
jumped aboard. The two of them rode the dragon off to the
east.125

What is this Li Bo, then, whose presence creates this world? The
Daoist sage Zhuangzi had already described him a thousand
years before his birth:

The great swamps may burn, but they cannot scorch him.
The great rivers may freeze, but they cannot chill him. Fierce
lightning may shatter the mountains and wind quake the
seas, but they cannot alarm him. This kind of man rides
cloud energies, mounts the sun and moon, and roams be-
yond the Four Seas. The transformations of birth and death
don’t affect him, so how could mere benefit and harm?126

In the centuries after Zhuangzi, this presence came to be called
a xian 仙 or immortal.127 We’ve already met four of them in a
Sichuanese wine shop. Here are some of their other qualities and
actions:

When on earth, they often live in mountains.
Riding the elements, they rise and descend at will.
They roam the whole universe, visible and invisible.
The female are often more powerful than the male.128
They live an indeterminable length of time, perhaps as long
as Heaven-and-Earth.129
They are unharmed by elements of the physical world.
They cure the ailments of both humans and the natural world.
They are rare, but hundreds of biographies exist.130
You can become one.131

Their physical attributes vary in time and circumstance.132 Here
is how they appeared to the early Ming painter Shang Xi 商喜:
And to Yan Hui 颜辉 about the year 1300:

So we might say of Li Bo that “his poetry doesn’t seem to come from the human realm. Is he, then, fully divine?” He’s not telling. But certainly by normal human standards he seems to be
having much too much of a good time, to drink too much, to
swagger too joyfully, to delight in his self-presentation. To roam and roam.

And where does Li Bo roam? Someone once asked him. He answered with this poem:

In the mountains, replying to a man of the world

You ask me why I would lodge at Emerald Mountain. I smile and do not reply, my heart at ease in itself. Peach blossoms, flowing water, gone out of sight. There are heavens and earths other than the human.

山中答俗人
問餘何意棲碧山，笑而不答心自閒，桃花流水窅然去，別有天地非人間

By now we can see that this isn’t just a nature poem, nor some “state of mind.” Concealed in Li Bo’s silence are the vibrant, myriad dimensions of the immortals, a grimoire of the world of form, appearance, transformation, and disappearance.

How does the immortal Li Bo abide in the human world? In the 1984 movie National Lampoon’s Bachelor Party the young heroes set themselves this task: how do you get a living mule through the hotel lobby, up the elevator, and into the room? The solution: disguise it as a mule, in a two-person mule suit from the days of vaudeville.

So too Li Bo, an immortal disguising himself as an immortal.
A note on translation:
We’ve seen how Master Sun, King of Medicines, claims that Li Bo is an immortal, a *xian* 仙. But in English an immortal is someone who never dies. So this translation is *prima facie* incorrect, since a *xian* is like everything else in China, even Heaven and Earth — it arises, it frolics, it dissolves. The common form of the graph, 仙, shows a man 人 standing beside a mountain 山 — it’s a pictograph that combines two other pictographs. Apt enough. But the original graph was written 僮, a man 人 beside 㺓, “ascension.” So a better translation for immortal might be “ascendant.” And the earliest attested usage of xian is as a man at an eighth-century BCE banquet, drunk, rising to dance a bit inappropriately.

Many people in Taoist studies prefer “transcendent,” because the *xian* is unbound by worldly concerns. But China’s is an utterly immanentist culture — there’s no where else to go.

Rob Campany gets around all this in an elegant way, speaking not of deathlessness but of “living as long as Heaven and Earth.” And how long is that? And what happens then?