Center of Everything
a. The Great Tang
A century before Li Bo was born, a Turko-Chinese family established a multi-ethnic empire they called the Great Tang (Datang 大唐). It would last three hundred years. During Li Bo’s lifetime it looked something like this:

![Territory of the Great Tang in 742](image)

The Great Tang unified 50,000,000 Chinese speakers and held suzerainty over much of central Asia. Only once before, under the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), had a dynasty demonstrated such dominion, and the Martial Emperor of Han (Han Wudi 漢武帝, rg 140–87) hung over the shoulders of imperial practice.

At the center of everything was Chang’an 長安, “Constant Peace,” western capital, fulcrum of the Emperor. An unprecedented concentration of power that radiated across all Asia, and in turn received those foreign energies in its streets and markets, palaces and garrisons. Buddhist temples, a Nestorian Christian church, grape wine, Turkic singing girls, Uyghur money lenders,
silk merchants, lavish private gardens, skilled metalsmiths, unemployed soldiers, extravagant poets, one million inhabitants, the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world. Like this:

Fig. 9. Map of Chang’an during the Great Tang.

Li Bo glimpsing it:

As spring colors return to Chang’an, they enter Blue Gate Avenue first. The new-green poplars don’t restrain themselves, they turn all topsy-turvy with the wind.
The west wind blows into the streets of Chang’an, 
the great avenues of the city spread across the Nine Heavens.\textsuperscript{65}

A piece of moon in Chang’an, 
the sound of ten-thousand households shaking out their clothes. 
You can always feel the frontier in the autumn wind that doesn’t stop.\textsuperscript{66}

So far we’ve seen the Great Tang in the two dimensions of its physical extent: east–west and north–south. The third dimension is time, but in Chang’an the past is fully present. Especially the Han dynasty: the city has the name and nearly the shape it had then, half a millennium ago.\textsuperscript{67} If we are statesmen, we know these Han practices as historical precedent, and they govern our decision making, right now. Language, too: a poem, a compliment, an imperial rescript, these reverberate with 1,500 years of words, both canonical and private — if we are poets, we know these as literary allusion. You could call the whole collection “China” for short.\textsuperscript{68} To be well educated is to be child and steward of this realm, and maintain its records.\textsuperscript{69}

And then the fourth dimension, space. Here the capital of Great Tang is the node where the Emperor fulfills his most essential function: to bring the blessings of Heaven onto the plane of Earth.\textsuperscript{70} The Emperor, then, is divine, and the good ordering of everything on earth — the seasons, cropping, social harmony, human decency — depends on his virtue.\textsuperscript{71}
b. The Bright Emperor
For most of Li Bo’s life the Great Tang was ruled by a man known as the Bright Emperor (Minghuang 明皇, rg. 712–756). He held more power than anyone within a three-month journey. And more potency. Both these are forms of yang 陽, light, sun, the male. The former is denominated in armies, bureaucracies, and agricultural surplus, the latter in awe, splendor, and the control of natural forces. For forty years the Emperor wielded these with almost unimaginable energy and attention. It’s not surprising that he had fifty-nine children.

He was also an adroit musician, poet, calligrapher, a student of esoteric Daoism and Indian tantric Buddhism, and thus equally a dévoté of yin 隱, darkness, moon, the feminine. In his fifties, he took his son’s young wife as lover. Surnamed Yang, she became Yang Guifei 楊貴妃, “Yang the Precious Consort,” his world. As his attention faded from empire, his administration lost its head. When rebellion rent the state, the Bright Emperor fled, abandoning the throne. His guard blamed it all on her; the Emperor consented to her strangulation.

c. At Court
A century before Li Bo, in the early years of the dynasty, to write a poem pretty much meant that the names of your father and grandfather and great-grandfather were all already known to the poem’s recipients. That is, that you were scion of the Great Fami-
lies that dominated the society of early Tang. These patrilineages constituted a centuries-old self-perpetuating elite, nearly impermeable of entry. They provided the bulk of a national bureaucracy of 10,000 men, half in the capitals and half throughout the realm. Filiality and loyalty were their desiderata, in that order.

As scion, your social relations, your deportment and your learning were all self-consciously based on ancient models, in turn derived from the natural order of things. Confucius and other sages had first discerned these models, and a cumulative cultural tradition had seen to their elaboration. Speaking on their behalf, Peter Bol says, “These cultural forms were real.” Education meant mastering them through studied imitation.

Your poetry was similarly model based. Steve Owen says it perfectly:

In the early seventh century, poetry was primarily a form of stylized social discourse practiced mainly in court circles. [...] The court poetry of the Early Tang rigidly circumscribed the occasions for composition, the topics, the diction, and the structure of poetry. [...] [Its poets were] bound by decorum, committed to aristocratic society and its ambience, held proudly to mannered formality, and disdained the showiness of bold metaphors and stylistic tours de force.

To illustrate, here’s a poem by Li Shimin 李世民 (598–649), de facto founding emperor of Tang, who killed his brothers and forced his father into abdication. Known posthumously as Taizong 太宗, the Great Ancestor. Written to Xiao Yu 蕭瑀 (574–648), warrior prince of a former dynasty who had joined the Great Tang and served as Taizong’s trusted chancellor.

Presented to Xiao Yu

Only in fierce winds do we know the strong grasses,
only in disorder do we recognize the honest minister.
How does the brave man recognize righteousness?
The wise man must also embrace kindness.
賜蕭瑀
疾風知勁草，板蕩識誠臣
勇夫安識義，智者必懷仁

Li Bo came to the capital around 742. He had no human family of consequence, and his model-work was somewhat lax. He met famous men, officials, the Bright Emperor’s sister. And he met the Emperor himself.

What happened then? He wrote marvels. And drank tankards. The Emperor appointed him not as government official (as he may have wished) but to his private Hanlin Academy 翰林, where Li Bo drafted edicts and diplomatic rescripts as well as writing poetry and song lyrics. And after a couple of years he had to leave. Was he indiscreet? (While drinking, about state secrets.) Was he rude? (Making the chief eunuch remove his muddy boots for him.) Was he calumnized? (Malicious gossip due to envy.) Stories like these have been told over and over, the way a painting gets painted over with nearly the same scene, so that you have numerous semi-identical images all atop each other. Or the way when something is very bright, it’s hard to keep it in focus along with the ordinary things around it, so we tend instead to see its reflections in those things, to normalize its image.

In the next chapter we’ll translate one of these story-sets, and in subsequent chapters offer other vignettes of his life in the capital.
Chapter 16. Night Music

One late spring night the Bright Emperor convened a music party with the Precious Consort in his favorite pavilion. He needed Li Bo to write new lyrics to the old tunes.

Their story is denominated in all the senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, body sensations, emotions, where the deities reside. We start with place, a garden in a palace of the imperial city of Chang’an (fig. 9, p. 57).

This city is five to six miles on a side, so its square footage is only slightly less than the twenty arrondissements of Paris. At the top, the north, is the main imperial complex, and nearby along the eastern wall, to the right, are the grounds of the Xingqing Palace 興慶宮, the Palace of Exalted Grace, within which this story takes place. The Bright Emperor had recently moved here to live with his beloved, the Precious Consort. This is what it looks like today:

![The Agarwood Pavilion in Chang’an](image)

*Fig. 12. The Agarwood Pavilion in Chang’an (upper left)*
In the upper left of this photograph is the Agarwood Pavilion (Chenxiangting 沈香亭), the actual site of the music — you can see it more precisely here:

![The Agarwood Pavilion](image)

*Fig. 13. The Agarwood Pavilion.*

Agarwood is intensely aromatic — I would say its closest cousin among mainstream scents is sandal, but it is gorgeously more pungent and complex. 88

In front of the Pavilion was a garden of tree peonies. Ordinary peonies grow to perhaps a meter tall, and their stems die off each fall. By contrast, a tree peony may grow to three or more meters, and its woody trunk and branches produce blossoms year after year. A picture:

![A peony tree](image)

*Fig. 14. A peony tree.*

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87. The Agarwood Pavilion.
88. Agarwood is intensely aromatic — I would say its closest cousin among mainstream scents is sandal, but it is gorgeously more pungent and complex.
89. In front of the Pavilion was a garden of tree peonies. Ordinary peonies grow to perhaps a meter tall, and their stems die off each fall. By contrast, a tree peony may grow to three or more meters, and its woody trunk and branches produce blossoms year after year. A picture:
This is where our story begins.\textsuperscript{90}

A decade or more previous, during the Kaiyuan period (713–742), His Majesty had first come to prize tree peonies. (They come in four colors: red, purple, light red and true white.) Accordingly he had them transplanted in front of the Agarwood Pavilion, just east of Exalted Grace Pond. The thick flowers were now at the moment of their fullest bloom. On a moonlit night, with the Precious Consort accompanying him in her palanquin, the Emperor ordered select members of the Pear Garden troupe to perform music for sixteen instruments.\textsuperscript{91} Li Guinian, the most celebrated vocalist of the time, held the clappers. Directing the musicians, Li prepared to sing.\textsuperscript{92}

But His Majesty said, “We’re enjoying marveled flowers, and in the presence of the Precious Consort. How can you use old lyrics?” So he had Li Guinian take some gilt paper to the Hanlin Academician Li Bo with orders to come up with three new verses for the Plain and Level modes.\textsuperscript{93} Li Bo received the order with delight. He was hung over from a rough night and still half asleep, but he took up his writing brush and composed these verses:

\begin{verbatim}
poem #1

Clouds dream up her clothing,
flowers dream her face,
spring winds play on the railing,
dew luxuriant and thick.
Did I see her on the mountaintop
in the forest of jade?
Have we met at the jasper terrace
under the moon?

雲想衣裳花想容，春風拂檻露華濃
若非群玉山頭見，會向瑤台月下逢
\end{verbatim}
poem #2

A sprig of red seduction,
a fragrance congealed in dew.
A night of love at Shaman Mountain
breaking hearts for nothing.
Who's like her in
all the palaces of Han?
Only Flying Swallow,
putting on her rouge.

一枝紅艷露凝香，雲雨巫山枉斷腸
借問漢宮誰得似，可憐飛燕倚新妝

poem #3

Beloved peonies and a beauty who topples kingdoms:
these delight in one another.
The king holds them both
in his smiling gaze.
Releasing spring breezes,
free of care,
she leans on a railing
at the north side of Agarwood Pavilion.  

名花傾國兩相歡，長得君王帶笑看
解釋春風無限恨，沈香亭北倚欄干

Li Guinian presented these verses to His Majesty, who had him
sing them, accompanied by the strings and winds of the Pear
Garden troupe.  The Precious Consort drank Liangzhou grape
wine from a glass cup decorated with the Seven Treasures, smil-
ing, flush with enjoyment.  His Majesty played along on his jade
flute, alternating between lead and harmony, then embellishing
the music by varying his tempo.  When the Precious Consort
had finished drinking, she rearranged her embroidered scarves
and prostrated repeatedly to His Majesty.