Chapter 57. The Return to Chang’an

The new Emperor recaptured Chang’an in the fall of 757. His father returned there in early winter. To solemnize the event, Li Bo wrote a suite of ten poems in stout and formal language, of which we translate the last. It was an awkward moment, for there seemed to be two Emperors. Li Bo’s poem, then, is about reconciling pairs of things. It will require some explanation.

Ten songs of the Former Emperor on his circuit west to inspect the Southern Capital — number 10 of 10

Through twin passes of the Sword Pavilion, the northern gate to Shu, the Former Emperor and his horses return, like villages of clouds. In Chang’an the young Emperor relights the Ridgepole Star. Hanging in the sky, the pair of sun and moon reflect great yin and yang.524

“Former Emperor” is the Bright Emperor’s title once his son has usurped the throne. “Former” is literally “Elevated” (shang 上) — political necessity sometimes subverts the normal use of words.

The Southern Capital is Li Bo’s hometown Chengdu, here sacralized by imperial presence. The “circuit west” is what European monarchs called a royal progress, an inspection tour that marks, claims and recalibrates the territories of the realm.525
The Sword Gate Pavilion is a geo-strategic marvel, a mountain pass whose walls are sharp as swords, whose belly is perfectly filled by its fortified pavilion, and whose single opening commands the only entranceway to Shu. It is through this pass that the Former Emperor returned to Chang’an. Because this is a poem about doubling, Li Bo also refers to its twin, a smaller gateway downroad. Today it looks like this:

Fig. 71. Jianmen pass.

Where one man with a halberd halts ten thousand in their tracks.

“In Chang’an the young Emperor reopens the Purple Ridgepole,” writes Li Bo. That ridgepole is a star, and also a celestial palace, and equally the Emperor: these are three ways of pointing to the same thing. That astral light, the suite of buildings, the Emperor’s human body, though, are less things than functions, cosmic activities. But the star comes first: “The ruler builds his palace as its simulacrum (xiang 象),” says an ancient commentator. And the Emperor is that star only insofar as he displays his/its majesty. Each earthly brilliance, human or geographical,
has its heavenly twin, such that grottos and statesmen and even middling poets are fused with their celestial counterparts. (Li Bo, we know, is Venus.)

The pair of sun and moon, hanging in the sky, reflect great yin and yang. Only instead of yin and yang, Li Bo says Qian 乾 and Kun 坤, the first two hexagrams of the Yijing 易經 or Classic of Change, which graphs yang and yin as solid and broken lines ☰☷. Qian and Kun are also Heaven and Earth, male and female, active and receptive. Here they are sun and moon, and also the Bright Emperor and his son.

This is a classics-based solution to a uniquely awkward political circumstance. For there cannot be such a thing as two Emperors, two One Gods, two suns in a sky — the universe would literally disintegrate, and meaning end. Li Bo, however, celebrates the situation by transforming one sun into a moon, a complementarity. His nonchalance so irritates orthodoxy that a later commentator remarks, “He doesn’t know Dao!”

Li Bo holds a cloud satchel of many magic weapons. Here he wields a gate, two emperors, a star, many horses, the sun and moon. This space is not habitable by human beings with human feelings and concerns.

After his return, the once-Bright Emperor lives under palace-arrest for four and a-half years, until his death in 762.