Chapter 48. The Yunnan War

Ancient airs #34

Winged call to arms, like falling stars,
tiger tally joined in the garrison town.
With urgent cries they rush to aid the borderlands,
flocks of birds cry through the night.

The white sun shines in the Celestial Palace,
and the Three Bureaus keep government in balance.
Heaven and Earth are unified,
and all is pure and peaceful within the Four Seas.

So why this call to arms?
We’re recruiting peasant soldiers in the south,
in June they crossed Lu River
on their expedition to Yunnan.
These fearful farmers aren’t real troops,
yet they marched through murderous heat.
With long cries they left their kin,
and the colors drained from the sun and moon.
They wept until their tears became blood,
their hearts broke and they fell silent.
They’re hobbled beasts sent to meet fierce tigers,
small fish used as chum to catch fast whales.
Of a thousand who go, not one returns,
thrown into battle, how could they survive?

Better to perfect your virtue
and pacify the barbarians with your awe.\textsuperscript{389}
古風 其三十四

羽檄如流星, 虎符合專城
喧呼救邊急, 群鳥皆夜鳴
白日曜紫微, 三公運權衡
天地皆得一, 澹然四海清
借問此何為, 答言楚征兵
渡瀘及五月, 將赴云南征
怯卒非戰士, 炎方難遠行
長號別嚴親, 日月慘光晶
泣盡繼以血, 心摧兩無聲
困獸當猛虎, 窮魚餌奔鯨
千去不一回, 投軀豈全生
如何舞干戚, 一使有苗平

Yunnan 雲南, “the place that lies south of the clouds,” the farthest reaches of empire. Homeland of the Nanzhao 南詔, who are the ostensible enemy in this poem. These people are not Chinese, maybe Tibeto-Burman, still today they retain some language and custom.⑨①

With Tang support, in 737 a local chieftain unified surrounding tribespeople and founded the Nanzhao kingdom. In 750 the military governor of nearby Sichuan attempted to rob Nanzhao envoys on their way to court.
The Nanzhao king retaliated. The *Comprehensive Mirror*, China's magisterial history, reports what happened next:

The year 751. Summer. On the 29th of May the military governor of Sichuan, with 80,000 troops, attacked the Nanzhao barbarians. He suffered a great defeat south of Lu River. [...] The king of Nanzhao announced, “Yunnan does not belong to the Tang.”

The military governor attacked again. Sixty thousand of his soldiers died, and he barely escaped with his life. Yang Guozhong concealed the circumstances of the defeat and reported a military victory.\(^{392}\)

Yang Guozhong, corrupt minister, I’ll return to him in a minute.

On this map the main Tang territories are to the right. The kingdom of Nanzhao is rendered in orange. To the north-west is the nascent Tibetan empire, as the great king Trisong Detsen comes to the throne.

*Fig. 61. Map of the Nanzhao kingdom, around 879 CE.*\(^{393}\)
And thus the first quatrain of Li Bo’s poem:

Winged call to arms, like falling stars,  
tiger tally joined in the garrison town.  
With urgent cries they rush to aid the borderlands,  
flocks of birds cry through the night.

A more literal translation of the first line would be, “Feathered calls to arms, like a meteor.” Feathers, for emphasis. On 10 July 1937, Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek used the same phrase as the title of his radio address, seeking to rally all Chinese against the invading Japanese:

A meteor is only bad news: a random disordering in the Heavens, always with an occult message. The Old Tang History reports a similar event, seven years prior to the Yunnan war:

On the 4th of April 744 a star as bright as the moon fell in the south-east, landing with great noise. Citizens of the capital spread rumors that officials had been sent out to seize human
livers to sacrifice to a star-god called Heaven’s Dog. People fed each other’s fear, especially in the capital region, so that messengers were dispatched to pacify them.\textsuperscript{397}

The second line of the poem reads “the tiger tally was joined in the garrison town.” Before a general went on deployment with his troops, he and his ruler would split a tally, each keeping one half. Later, when the general received an order in the field, it would be accompanied by the ruler’s half of the tally, and the general could match the two halves, so as to ascertain the order’s authenticity. Since ancient times these tallies have often had the shape of a tiger, like this:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{tiger_tally.png}
\caption{Qin Dynasty-era bronze tiger-shaped tally.\textsuperscript{398}}
\end{figure}

Here, the Chinese general in the outlying garrison receives from the governor general of Sichuan an order to attack, accompanied by the governor’s half of the tiger.\textsuperscript{399}

We’ve translated the second quatrain of this poem like this:

The white sun shines in the Celestial Palace, and the Three Bureaus keep government in balance. Heaven and Earth are unified, and all is pure and peaceful within the Four Seas.\textsuperscript{400}
The bright white sun is His Majesty. Li Bo’s poem states that, because the sun is in the Palace, that is, because the Son of Heaven is ruling in accord with cosmic norms, therefore “Heaven and Earth are unified” — literally, “have attained the One (deyi 得一).” But this is all irony — it is Li Bo’s best shot at political criticism without becoming executed. The History with which we began this chapter concludes by saying that “Yang Guozhong concealed the circumstances of the defeat and reported a military victory to the throne.” Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (died 756) was second cousin to the Precious Consort, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃. No one besides the Bright Emperor seems to have liked him, but perhaps that’s because his later activities were the casus belli An Lushan needed to begin his rebellion, five years after this Yunnan war. The military governor of Sichuan was Yang Guozhong’s client. Therefore Yang covered up the fiasco. Eventual further mishaps led to the death of 200,000 Chinese troops.

Li Bo can’t say this. So instead he asks, with faux naïveté, How can there be disorder, since His Majesty’s governance is perfect? And then he tells his poem-story of jungle warfare. (The U.S.A. has also had bad experience in this part of South-East Asia.) And he concludes with a radical suggestion, drawn from the classics. We’ve translated it as

Better to perfect your virtue and pacify the barbarians with your awe,

but it is more literally, “Better to perform the dance of shield and axe, and pacify the barbarians with your awe.” In the story behind this dance, the barbarians are the Miao 苗, some of whom now call themselves Hmong. In ancestral times the Chinese Sage-Kings fought them in the northern heartland, but by Tang they had been driven to the mountains of the deep south, where many still reside. In the following account, the Sage-King in question is Shun, Yu his heir apparent:

The Miao held fast and would not submit. Yu asked permission to attack them, but Shun said, “My virtue is too thin.
Military action is contrary to Dao. I cannot manifest a virtue that I myself have not yet accomplished.” So he trained for three years, practicing the dance of shield and axe. The Miao tendered their submission.\textsuperscript{404}

This account invokes a Dao-ful governance, where the splendor of royal virtue compels all subjects to willing submission. But virtue, \textit{de} 德, also means potency, and the dance of shield and axe is magic, it is intimidating, it is grand display, it is a wisdom that conquers without violence. \textsuperscript{405} What of this survived in Tang?\textsuperscript{406}