Chapter 65. “Praise on a Painting of the Monk Baozhi”

The moon in water
totally can’t be grasped.
Heart and mind all emptied,
a vast centerless space.
With your bird-claw fingernails, you cut off friends
and walk alone, wrapped in brocade,
a knife sliding through
three dynasties worth of kings.
Your shining painted face
comes and goes nowhere at all.601

誌公畫贊

水中之月，了不可取
虛空其心，寥廓無主
錦幪鳥爪，獨行絕侶
刀齊尺量，扇迷陳語
丹青聖容，去住無所

An early Ming witness:

Today the Monastery of the Numinous Valley has a stone in-
scription entitled “Praise on a painting of the monk Baozhi.”
Wu Daozi did the painting, Li Bo the praise, and Yan Zhen-
qing the calligraphy—these men were called “the three in-
comparables.” The old inscription is already ruined—this is
a reinscription, you can no longer see the marvel of the cal-
ligraphy.602

Wu Daozi 吳道子 (680–ca. 760), greatest painter of the Tang.
His “Mountain demon” and his “Eighty-seven divine immor-
tals,” their bodies trails of light:
Of his Laozi Temple murals, Du Fu remarks:

Their dense ranks turn the earth on its axle,
a wondrous perfection shakes the palace walls.\textsuperscript{605}

森羅回地軸，妙絕動宮牆

A ninth-century evaluation of Tang painters couldn’t fit him into its ranks, saying merely,
Wu Daozi, by himself. His talents were unleashed by Heaven, he walks alone in this world.606

His contemporary Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿 (709–785), greatest of Tang calligraphers. And great too in ways that don’t much overlap with Li Bo: a lexicographer, ritualist, patrician (seven of Confucius’s disciples share the same surname), moralist, incorruptible public administrator, unshakable loyalist against Rebel imprecations. One thing he and Li Bo do have in common is that they won’t be quiet. A dozen times Yan Zhenqing is exiled for his stubborn true speech, and in 783 he’s sent to induce the surrender of yet another rebel dynast near the Eastern Capital of Luoyang. He speaks so bluntly that the rebel leader hangs him. He was seventy-six at the time.607 Here’s a bit of his masterwork, a stone inscription for his great-grandfather:

![Fig. 79. Stele for Yan Qinli, by Yan Zhenqing.608](image)

But who is the monk Baozhi? The Transmission of the Lamp (Jingde chuangdenglu 景德傳燈錄) states:

As a youth Baozhi became a monk at Daolin Temple, where he practiced Zen meditation. In the late 460s his behavior
suddenly became erratic. He slept here or there, and ate or drank at uncertain times. His hair grew out several inches, and he'd walk about unshod holding his tin-ringed staff, to the end of which he attached a pair of scissors, a bronze mirror, or sometimes a strip or two of cotton cloth. He'd go several days without eating, but with no sign of hunger. Sometimes he would sing songs of a prophetic nature. All the townspeople revered him.

In 488 Emperor Wu of the Qi dynasty declared that Baozhi was bewitching the populace and had him imprisoned in the capital. But at dawn people saw him entering the marketplace. When the matter was investigated, he turned out to be still in jail. The local magistrate reported this, and the Emperor invited Baozhi to visit him in the inner halls of the Palace. […]

When Emperor Gao of the Liang dynasty ascended the throne, he proclaimed, “Master Baozhi, you leave footprints in the dust of this polluted realm, but your spirit roams in spaces imperceptible and serene. Water and fire can neither drench nor scorch you, snakes and tigers cannot bite or frighten you. When you speak of Buddha's principles, your voice is heard on high. When you discourse on hidden doctrines, you are exalted among the secret immortals. How could you be subject to the emotions and empty phenomena of ordinary people? How could the previous Emperor’s decrees be so boorish? From now on you are free to enter the imperial palace at will.”

The Biographies of Eminent Monks adds:

During the succeeding Chen dynasty there was an imperial bondsman whose whole family served Baozhi devotedly. Once he manifested his True Form (zhênxing 真形) to them. In the aureole surrounding him were the marks of a bodhisattva.
That true form is the eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara. Here is Baozhi amidst the process of that revelation:

![Statue of Baozhi, Saiouji, Kyōto.](image)

You can see three very small worn faces just above his headband.