

Description	Image
Deng Erya (1884 – 1954) Poem in Seal Script Not dated Fan, ink on paper 17.1 x 51.2 cm Donated by Mr Zeng Zongling Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art FA1995.0011	

Poem in Seal Script by Deng Erya

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Deng Erya dedicated a poem on a folding fan for his student Zeng Zonglin. The seal script is the basis of analysis of Chinese characters and the art of Chinese calligraphy. Remarkable for its liveliness, seal script ideograms are often composed of components that denote physical objects, abstract concepts, or phonemes. For instance, the first character “jue” is represented by two strands of silk cut in the middle.

In the eye of the contemporary reader, each seal script character looks like a small picture. When we appreciate a piece of seal script calligraphy, it is beguiling to note how the radicals and other components form the meaning of the characters, and the ingenuity of the calligrapher’s brushwork that is both writing and drawing. Each character is a story.

What text had Deng Erya chosen for this student? He chose two *qijue* poems (a form of classical Chinese poem composed of four 7-character phrases) from Qing dynasty poet Gong Zizhen’s *Miscellaneous Cycle of Poems of the Jihai Year (Jihai zashi)*, and wrote them on a folding fan. A calligraphic dedication can be an original text written by the calligrapher, or a quotation of literary text from other authors. Quoting existing poems in calligraphy is like dedicating a song to someone on the radio and telling the recipient to “pay special attention to the lyrics”. The one who sends the message is definitely well-read, but the recipient is no layman either; otherwise, it would be like casting pearls before swine.

Gong Zizhen embraced strong political ambition, and expressed it in his writings. However, his high hopes were met with harsh realities and he lived in a state of dejection until the end of his life. Goddess Tiannü and emperors, youth and old age were mentioned in these two poems. They are full of raging pride and painful recollections at the same time. Which of these contrasting sentiments did Deng Erya intend for his student to get from his message? There is no answer; only those who know each other from the heart could feel it.

Viewers of this fan would guess that Deng Erya might have discussed Gong's poetry with his student and had expressed his feelings towards these poems. Now as they are written on the fan, they became a code, that as the student read these poems on the fan, he would immediately recall Deng Erya's teaching. The sentiments were both expressly written, and implied wordlessly at the same time.

Bonding between teacher and student is like the seal script: it is composed of countless small anecdotes, and a short message that contains a lot between the lines.