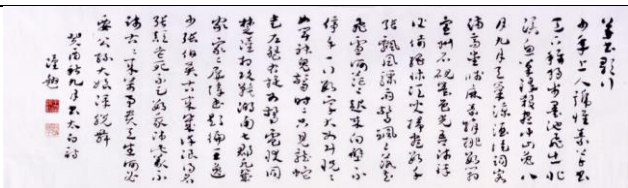


Description	Image
Wong Hon-kiu (1914 – 2005) Poem by Li Bai in Clerical-cursive Script 1993 Horizontal scroll, ink on paper 35 x 109 cm Donated by Wong Hon-kiu's family Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art AC2006.0069	

Li Bai's *Song of Cursive Script* from *Old Tales Retold*¹

Text: Lee Yat-hong, Angus Writer, PhD, Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Hong Kong Baptist University

The first sword: giant fish of the Northern Ocean bounced out of a pond of ink

Before he became the Poet Immortal, Li Bai was said to have practised swordsmanship on Mount Qingcheng under General Pei Min. Whenever he reached a state of being as one with his sword, Li Bai would throw his sword up in the clouds. When the sword fell, some saw the sword turning into a dragon, some would say it was a python. Whenever the dragon or python appeared, a mass of cool rays would radiate from the sea of clouds among layers of mountains, just like flashes of the brush from a sea of ink.

At the blink of an eye, all hares in the mountain were killed.

The second sword: vanity since antiquity

The party of guests were deeply absorbed in Li's narrative, and started to murmur among themselves. Finally, one of them could not hold his curiosity any longer. "May I ask, do you practice swordsmanship in order to become an immortal swordsman like your

¹ This flash fiction combines the historical background of Li Bai's poetry and folklore to imagine Li's state of mind when he composed his poem. It comprises his past and present interactions with mentors and friends, and reveals his unique insight into the art of calligraphy, while at the same time encompassing the peerless aloofness and solitude.

master?” he asked in a tiny voice. “No,” replied Li. “You must be imitating the older generations. Legend goes that young master Ji Zha of the pre-Qin times hung his sword on the grave of his friend. On the way to report duty as an ambassador, Ji Zha visited his friend Xu. Ji knew that Xu loved his sword, but as the sword was his token of identity for his duty as ambassador, he could not offer it to Xu as a gift at that time. After he had finished his terms of office, Ji Zha returned to Xu’s home to offer his sword, only to find that Xu had already passed away. In order to fulfill his pledge, Ji hung the sword on Xu’s gravestone. ‘Ji Zha’s sword’ has since become a metaphor for faithfulness. Mr. Li, you are so virtuous and honorable!” said another guest of the drinking spree, who was full of confidence as if he knew the answer.

“No,” Li replied coldly.

The third sword: number one cursive script calligrapher in the world

While the entire party was perplexed, Li Bai took up a brush well dipped in ink, together with his drunkenness and forlornness. He looked as if he was dancing or wielding his sword. Either way, he produced a poem afterwards. From the finished poem, some saw a scene of falling petals and drifting snow against a vast sky; some saw armies of Chu fighting against that of Han; some saw a map of the seven counties across the country.

Li Bai did not want to say anything anymore.

The couch that Pei Min reclined on when he was drunk gradually overlapped with Li Bai’s shadow. Many years later, calligrapher Huai Su covered the walls of temples, his clothes and utensils with cursive script, amid incomprehension and misunderstanding.

Swiftly, he left a line: “I learn from the truth but not from antiquity.”