VI

Violent Death

From Li Bo’s “Letter to Han Jingzhou”:\textsuperscript{373}

When I was fifteen, I loved the art of the sword.\textsuperscript{374}

From \textit{The Chronology of Li Bo}:

He enjoyed swordplay. In his practice of chivalry he killed several men with his own blade.\textsuperscript{375}
Chapter 45. Ci Fei Beheads Two Dragons

From the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, chapter 12:

There was a man from the South named Ci Fei, Ci the Flyer. From the great battlefield of Gansui he’d obtained a treasure sword. When he was halfway across the Yangtze on his way home, the River Lord sent out massive waves, and two dragons wrapped around his boat, seeking his sword. Ci Fei said to the boatman, “In the past when something like this happened, how did you survive?” He replied, “I’ve never seen it before.” At this, Ci Fei closed his eyes and straightaway drew his sword, addressing the dragons, “It’s permissible for a warrior to use decorous speech in his requests, but it’s not permissible to seize things by force. You river-dwellers of rotting flesh-and-bone, just surrender! How could I have any sympathy for you?” Then he jumped into the river and stabbed the dragons, cutting off their heads. Everyone in the boat survived, and wind and waves subsided. His King ennobled him as Holder of the Gnomon.

Li Bo’s poem:

In praise, as I contemplate a painting of Ci Fei beheading the dragons

Ci Fei beheaded two long dragons —
you can see it in this old painting.
Once in the boat, he howled like a tiger,
roiled the water, and plunged straight into the dragon fight.
He startled the waves and shook the mountain chains.
Unsheathing his sword, he drew down thunder and lightning.
Their scales broke beneath his white blade,
their blood dyed the dark green river red.
A thousand autumns pass, but when you see this painting, you’re face to face with an ancient hero.\textsuperscript{376}

観佽飛斬蛟龍圖贊

佽飛斬長蛟，遺圖畫中見
登舟既虎嘯，激水方龍戰
驚波動連山，拔劍曳雷電
鱗摧白刃下，血染澗江變
感此壯古人，千秋若對面

Here’s Ci Fei’s twentieth-century legacy:

\textbf{Fig. 55. Tang Jiyao 唐繼堯.}\textsuperscript{377}

Tang Jiyao 唐繼堯 (1883–1927), “the last King of Yunnan,” was military governor of that far southern province from 1913 to his death in 1927. He named his personal body-guard the Ci Fei Regiment. It was limited to sixty men, all of whom must be six feet tall.
Fig. 56. Members of the Ci Fei Regiment.

Three chapters hence we will translate a Li Bo poem on eighth-century warfare in that same Yunnan.