To the tune "Prelude to Water Melody"—"How long will the full moon last?"
水調歌頭・明月幾時有

Text Information
Author | Su Shi 蘇軾
Language | Chinese
Period | 11th Century
Genre | Songs
Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋 (ed.). *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965, 279.
Collection | Songs of Love and Loss: Lyrics from the Chinese Song Dynasty, Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
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Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Dante Zhu.

Introduction to the Text

Su Shi wrote this song on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, a harvest festival on the full moon, to express his homesickness after a seven-year separation from his brother. It includes broader philosophical reflections on happiness, sorrow and separation. It is interesting to note how Su Shi draws connections between the moon's shape and the grieving, rejoicing, separating and reuniting of human beings. In ancient China, a full moon was a metaphor for happiness and fulfilled goals, whereas a moon that wasn't full meant loss and regret.

The *ci* genre of Chinese poetry first emerged in the Sui dynasty (581-619), was further developed in the Tang dynasty (618-907) and matured in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127). *Ci* is usually translated into English as "song lyrics". This is because *ci* were composed by poets to fit pre-existing tunes. The number of lines, the line lengths, and the tonal and rhythmic patterns of *ci* vary with the tunes, which number in the hundreds. One common occasion for composing *ci* would be a banquet: song lyrics would be scribbled down by guests and then sung by musical performers as entertainment. Other occasions for composing and enjoying *ci* would be more casual: the poet might sing the lyrics to himself at home or while travelling (many *ci* poets were civil servants of the Imperial Court and often had to travel great distances to carry out their work). Sometimes the lyrics would be sung by ordinary people in the same way as folk songs. This oral and musical quality sets it apart from other genres of poetry in China during the same period, which were largely written texts with more elevated objectives. There are two main types of *ci*: wǎnyuē (婉约, "graceful") and háofàng (豪放, "bold"). The wǎnyuē subgenre primarily focuses on emotion and many of its lyrics are about courtship and love, while the háofàng subgenre often deals with themes that were considered more profound by contemporary audiences, such as ageing and mortality, or the rewards and disappointments of public service.

Su Shi 蘇軾 is one of the most popular Chinese poets of all time, and certainly one of the best-known poets of the Song Dynasty. Among his many roles - principled politician, esteemed poet, celebrated calligrapher - he was also a major reformer of the *ci* genre. Before Su Shi, the primary form of *ci* was *wǎnyuē* (婉约, "graceful"). This was considered to be an inferior form of literature due to its thematic focus on love and desire and its association with the courtesans who usually performed it. Su Shi wrote lyrics on a broad range of non-traditional topics, often closely related to his own life experience. His compositions dealt with themes that were considered more profound by contemporary audiences, such as ageing and mortality, or the rewards and disappointments of public service. As a pioneer of the *háofàng* (豪放, "bold") type of *ci*, he incorporated references to typically masculine pursuits, including frequent use of a hunting motif. He also frequently incorporated ideas from Buddhist philosophy and allusions to political events, which usually appeared only in more elevated forms of poetry.

Although Su Shi was a highly-regarded poet during his lifetime, his political career was consistently unfortunate. In 1066, he was forced to leave the Court when he openly opposed the chancellor's socio-economic reforms, known as the New Policies. Over the next thirteen years, he was frequently demoted, serving as prefect or sub-prefect in Hangzhou, Mizhou, Xuzhou and Huzhou. Many of his *ci* reference these postings and the exhaustion of constant travel. A report about the troubling economic conditions of local people written while he was prefect of Huzhou landed him in prison for three months. He was finally sent back to Hangzhou and given a job with no salary. Although living in poverty, he grew fond of Hangzhou and wrote many of his most famous *ci* there.

Because of the occurrence of specific real names and locations in Su Shi's lyrics, as well as the introductory notes he wrote to accompany many of them, his lyrics often invite a biographical reading. This differentiates him from other *ci* poets featured in this collection, whose writings did not usually reference their own lives in such a direct way. Yet although Su Shi's lyrics evoke specific lived experiences, the enduring popularity of his poetry is due, in part, to the fact that diverse audiences can identify with the feelings he describes.

About this Edition

The original text of this *ci* is based on the edition by Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋 (Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965). Punctuation follows the edition. Since ci poetry rarely includes personal pronouns, and gender-differentiated pronouns did not exist in Classical Chinese of this period, the gender of the speaker as well as their perspective (e.g. first, second or third person) must often be deduced by the translator from context.

Further Reading

Chang, Kang-i Sun. The Evolution of Tz'u Poetry: from Late Tang to Northern Sung. Princeton UP, 1980.

- *A standard survey of the early history of Chinese song lyrics (romanized as both ci and tz'u).*

Egan, Ronald. "The Song Lyric." The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, vol. 1, edited by Stephen Owen, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 434-452.

- *An overview of the genre.*

Owen, Stephen. Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries. Asia Center, Harvard UP, 2019.

- *A recent new history of the genre.*

Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋, editor. Quan Song Ci 全宋詞. Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 5 vols.

- *A comprehensive edition of ci from the Song dynasty and the source text for the ci in this collection (introductions and annotations are in Chinese).*

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水調歌頭	To the tune "Prelude to Water Melody"
丙辰中秋歡飲達旦	On the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1076 CE,
大醉作此篇兼懷子由	I drank in joy until dawn. Completely drunk, I wrote this piece to express my longing for Ziyou[1].
明月幾時有，	How long will the full moon last?
把酒問青天。	I raise my wine cup and ask the azure sky.
不知天上宮闕，	I wonder: in the palace up in the sky[2],
今夕是何年。	Which year is it tonight[3]?
我欲乘風歸去，	I want to ride the wind and return[4],
又恐瓊樓玉宇，	yet I fear that in the jade and crystal mansion up there,
高處不勝寒。	so lofty and high, one cannot stand the cold.
起舞弄清影，	I rise and dance with my own pure shadow;
何似在人間。	am I still in the world of men?
轉朱閣，	The moon turns at the vermillion pavilion,
低綺戶，	Hanging down at the carved window
照無眠。	and shining on sleepless me.
不應有恨，	It cannot have pity on men,
何事長向別時圓。	yet why does it only become a full moon when people are apart?
人有悲歡離合，	Men grieve, rejoice, separate, and reunite;
月有陰晴圓缺，	The moon dims or brightens, waxes or wanes.
此事古難全。	Since antiquity, such things have never been perfect.
但願人長久，	We can only hope that all our friends and families can live long lives,
千里共嬋娟。	Looking at the moon together, across a thousand miles.

Critical Notes

Translation

1 Ziyou was the younger brother of the speaker.

2 According to ancient Chinese folklore, there was a palace on the moon named Guanghan Palace 广寒宫, where a goddess resided by an osmanthus tree with her rabbit. "The palace up in the sky" refers to this palace.

3 In Chinese mythology, a day in the human world is a year on the moon. By asking what year it is on the moon, the speaker is also asking what day it is in the human world.

4 i.e. to the palace mentioned in the previous line.