To the tune "The Moon Over the West River"—"The moon shines on the wild fields"
西江月 · 照野瀰瀰淺浪

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, 284.
Collection | Songs of Love and Loss: Lyrics from the Chinese Song Dynasty, Love Songs of the Medieval World: Lyrics from Europe and Asia
URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/su_shi_moon_shines_wild_fields/

Translation by Qian Jia. Introduction and notes by Dante Zhu.

Introduction to the Text

Su Shi was demoted and transferred to Huangzhou when he opposed reforms to the Imperial Examination System (which selected new civil servants) instituted by the chancellor at the Song court, Wang Anshi. This *ci* was written during his posting in Huangzhou. In the first stanza, the speaker highlights the beauty of a moonlit view of the city. Beholding a landscape far removed from the noisy, complicated, political world that he had come from, Shu Shi purports to have written this song in calligraphy on a pillar of a bridge.

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).*

To the tune "The Moon Over the West River"—"The moon shines on the wild fields"
西江月 · 照野瀰瀰淺浪

西江月	To the tune "The Moon Over the West River"
春夜行蘄水中過酒家飲。	*Riding along the Qi River on a spring night, I stopped by an inn, where I had a few cups[1].*
酒醉，	*I got drunk,*
乘月至 一溪橋上，	*and in the moonlight I stopped on a bridge over a creek;*
解鞍曲肱少休。	*taking down the saddle, I bent my arm and rested for a while.*
及覺，	*When I woke up,*
已曉。	*it was already dawn.*
亂山葱蘢，	*The disarray of mountains were green and lush;*
不謂塵世也。	*I thought that I was no longer in the dusty world[2].*
書此語橋柱	*Thus I wrote[3] this on one of the pillars of the bridge.*
照野瀰瀰淺浪，	The moon shines on the wild fields; low waves surge on the vast water.
橫空隱隱層霄。	Across the sky are dim layers of clouds.
障泥未解玉驄驕。	The saddle is still tied to my fine, strong steed.
我欲醉眠芳草。	Yet I want to lie in drunkenness among the grass and flowers.
可惜一溪風月，	How lovely, the beautiful moonlit view and the refreshing breeze on the creek.
莫教踏碎瓊瑤。	Do not let it trample the jade-like reflection of the creek into pieces[4]!
解鞍欹枕綠楊橋。	I untie the saddle, lean on it as a pillow, and lie on the Lü Yang bridge.
杜宇一聲春曉。	The cuckoo utters one cry and it is already dawn of a spring day.

Critical Notes

Translation

1 Refers to cups of alcohol, but the type of alcohol is unspecified.

2 The dust (塵) here means the dust scattered on the road when the carriages and horses pass through. 塵世 ("dusty world") was originally used to describe the noisy and bustling city, but became a metaphor for a society filled with distractions and false appearances. It often implies a sentiment of rejecting or being bored by this kind of lifestyle, and wanting to have something truthful (love, tranquility, or religious belief) which will transcend the pursuit of money or fame. It may also bear a spiritual meaning, in which the "dusty world" signifies the mortal world.

3 With a writing brush specifically for calligraphy.

4 "It" refers to the horse.