To the tune "The Moon Over the West River"—Pingshan Hall
西江月 · 平山堂

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, 283.
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

Ouyang Xiu, whose work is also included in this collection, was a highly respected and influential teacher of Su Shi. He built Pingshan Hall in 1048 CE. Before the composition of this song, Su Shi had passed by the hall twice due to transfers at work. The song marks the occasion of his third visit to Pingshan Hall, at which point Ouyang Xiu had long since passed away. The song serves to commemorate Su Shi's teacher, as well as to reflect on the inconstancy of life; the latter effort is supported by Su Shi's use of Buddhist imagery, such as "a flick of the finger" to express the rapid passing of time. The final lines, especially the sentiment that lived experience is a dream, refer to the philosophy of the *Diamond Sutra* (金刚经).

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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三過平山堂下，
半生彈指聲中。
十年不見老仙翁。
壁上龍蛇飛動。
欲弔文章太守，
仍歌楊柳春風。
休言萬事轉頭空。
未轉頭時皆夢。

To the tune "The Moon Over the West River[1]" Pingshan Hall[2]

By the time I stopped by the Pingshan Hall for the third time[3],
Half of my lifetime had gone in a flick of the finger[4].
For ten years I have not seen the old immortal[5],
On the walls, dragons fly and serpents move[6].
I want to commemorate the Prefect of Fine Composition,
but instead, I sing the song for the willow and the spring breeze[7].
Do not say that all things become empty in a blink of an eye.
Even before your eyes blink, it is all just a dream.

Critical Notes

Translation

1 This song was written in 1079 when the speaker passed by the city of Yangzhou.

2 Pingshan Hall was the study of Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072 CE), who was a mentor to Su Shi. This whole song is a commemoration of the speaker's beloved teacher.

3 Su Shi was transferred to Hangzhou as a Tong Pan (a court official in charge of food transportation and irrigation works); later he was transferred to Mizhou in 1074. By the time he wrote the song, it was his third time being transferred and passing by Pingshan Hall on his journey to the new posting.

4 "A flick of the finger" refers to the transitory nature of time. It is a quantifier for time in Buddhist Scriptures. According to Buddhist Scriptures, the time period of twenty thoughts equals a moment, and twenty moments equal a flick of the finger.

5 The "old immortal" refers to the poet's mentor and friend, Ouyang Xiu, who had already passed away when Su Shi wrote this song.

6 The "dragons" and "serpents" refer to Ouyang Xiu's calligraphy.

7 "The willow", "the spring breeze", and "the Prefect of Fine Composition" all come from Ouyang Xiu's ci "Seeing Liu Zhongyuanfu Off For His Departure to Guard Weiyang". "The Prefect of Fine Composition" was originally used by Ouyang Xiu to describe his friend, Liu Zhongyuanfu, but here, Su Shi is using it to refer to Ouyang Xiu. "The willow" and "the spring breeze" imagery are taken from the same song: "The willow planted by me [i.e. Ouyang Xiu] in front of Pingshan Hall, after I left, has turned green many times in the spring breeze". Ouyang Xiu's song expresses a desire to live in the moment, which may also be the sentiment Su Shi wishes to convey with this line.