To the tune "River God"—Recording a Dream on the Night of the Twentieth of the First Month of 1075 CE
江神子・乙卯正月二十日夜記夢

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, 300.
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

When Su Shi was nineteen, he married his first wife, a sixteen-year-old named Wang Fu. She died when she was only twenty-seven. This *ci* is a eulogy to Wang Fu. The first stanza depicts the loneliness and melancholy of the poet thinking about his late wife. The second stanza recalls a dream in which his wife is alive and well. In the final lines, he imagines his wife still longing for him from beyond the grave.

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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十年生死兩茫茫。	For ten years, the dead and the living have been separated by a vast and obscure distance[1].
不思量。	I forced myself not to think of you,
自難忘。	But it is hard for me to forget.
千里孤墳,	The solitary grave, a thousand miles away[2],
無處話凄涼。	Nowhere to speak about this loneliness and misery of mine.
縱使相逢應不識,	Even if we could meet, you would not recognize me.
塵滿面,	Dust all over my face[3],
鬢如霜。	and the hair at my temples like frost.
夜來幽夢忽還鄉。	Yesterday night, in a mournful dream, I suddenly returned to my hometown.
小軒窗。	By the small window,
正梳妝。	you were combing your hair and doing your makeup.
相顧無言,	We gazed at each other, speechless;
惟有淚千行。	only thousands of lines of tears coursed down.
料得年年腸斷處,	I know your heart breaks for me year after year
明月夜,	On moonlit nights,
短松岡。	upon the hill with the low pine trees.

Critical Notes

Translation

1 Su Shi's first wife, Wang Fu, died in 1065 CE; by the time he wrote this song, it had been ten years since her death.

2 Wang Fu was buried in Meizhou, far away from Su Shi's current location in Mizhou.

3 During the Song Dynasty, people traveled by horse and carriage, and "Dust all over my face" implies that the poet traveled a lot during the ten years. It also suggests that a lot had happened to him, and that complicated life experiences had made the older poet very different from his younger self.