To the tune "Fortune Teller"—"The waning moon hangs on the thinning sycamore tree"
卜算子 · 缺月挂疏桐

Text Information
Author | Su Shi 蘇軾
Language | Chinese
Period | 11th Century
Genre | Song lyric (*ci*)
Source | Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋, editor. *Quan Song Ci* 全宋詞, vol 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1965. 295.
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_waning_moon_hangs/

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 Song Court chancellor, Wang Anshi. Despite his diminished circumstances, he remained defiant and criticized others for going along with the reforms. In this song, he compares himself to a lone wild goose (鸿), conveying both pride in his choices and the loneliness of his new position. The wild goose was often used by Chinese poets to represent heroic figures with grand ambitions. A good example can be found in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记) by Sima Qian 司马迁, where a rebellion leader disparages his opponents with the following line: "How could swallows and sparrows understand the ambitions of wild geese and swans?"

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.

The *Global Medieval Sourcebook* (sourcebook.stanford.edu) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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).*

The *Global Medieval Sourcebook* (sourcebook.stanford.edu) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To the tune "Fortune Teller"—"The waning moon hangs on the thinning sycamore tree"
卜算子・缺月挂疏桐

西江月 梅花		To the tune "The Moon Over the West River" Plum Blossom
黃州定慧院寓居作		*Composed while lodging at Dinghui Monastery in Huangzhou*[1]
缺月挂疏桐，		The waning moon hangs on the thinning sycamore tree.
漏斷人初靜。		The dripping clock stops;[2] all men become quiet.
時見幽人獨往來，		Sometimes I would see an isolated man come and go on his own
縹緲孤鴻影。		like the distant and vague silhouette of a lone wild goose.
驚起卻回頭，	5	Startled, it flies up and turns its head;
有恨無人省。		It has resentment in its heart yet no one notices.
揀盡寒枝不肯棲，		Picking from all the cold branches[3], but not resting on any,
寂寞沙洲冷。		It is alone and abandoned on the freezing isle of sand.

Critical Notes

1 Su Shi was banished to Huangzhou. Without a place to live, and shunned by the locals who feared being implicated if they associated with him, he had no choice but to lodge at the monastery.

2 The dripping clock is a water clock; when all the water drips down, the clock stops, indicating that it is midnight.

3 There is a Chinese proverb that "good birds choose branches (that suit them) to rest on", which means that good officials should choose their kings carefully to ensure that they (the officials) will be allowed to pursue their ambitions. Here, Su Shi depicts the goose's refusal to pick from the branches to imply that he is unwilling to pursue his political ambitions any further.

The *Global Medieval Sourcebook* (sourcebook.stanford.edu) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.