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Reminiscing about Antiquity at Red Cliff (“Chibi Huaigu”) by Su Shi

TRANSLATED BY LI WANG

The author, Su Shi 苏轼 (1037 – 1101), is regarded by many as one of the greatest poets in Chinese literary history. He was also a writer, artist, calligrapher and statesman of the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279). Su Shi excelled in *shi*, *ci* and *fu* forms of poetry, as well as prose, calligraphy and painting. Thousands of his poems and hundreds of his letters have survived. His 350 *chi* (style) poems have been regarded as the summit of his poetic achievements.

The *ci* poem *Chibi Huaigu* 赤壁怀古 is one of his most famous poems. In this poem, the poet borrowed the event of the naval battle in the Three Kingdoms era, the battle at Red Cliff in 208, to express his deep feelings about life. Su Shi has a reputation for his free and powerful style in writing, and this poem is considered an excellent example.

A *ci* poem is a lyric composed to a certain tune. The tune of the translated poem is *Niannu Jiao* 念奴娇. *Niannu* is the name of a maiden singer. The original meaning of the tune title can be translated as “Charm of a Maiden Singer”. During the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907) the subject matter of a *ci* lyric used to correspond to the meaning of its tune title, but after the late Tang the subject of a *ci* poem gradually lost its thematic connection with the tune pattern. As the tune has no connection thematically to the translated *ci* poem, I chose to use the *pinyin*, *Niannu Jiao*, instead of “Charm of a Maiden Singer”, to avoid a misleading meaning, though both of them would represent the original Chinese tune title 念奴娇 in characters.

Due to its long history, the *ci* poem has two versions with some words different. I use the version given in textbooks in mainland China with 乱石穿空, 惊涛拍岸, rather than 乱石崩云, 惊涛裂岸, and 人生如梦 rather than 人间如梦.

念奴娇

赤壁怀古

Chibi Huaigu
苏轼 (1037-1101)

大江东去，
浪淘尽、千古风流人物。
故垒西边，
人道是、三国周郎赤壁。
乱石穿空，
惊涛拍岸，
卷起千堆雪。
江山如画，
一时多少豪杰！

遥想公瑾当年，
小乔初嫁了，
雄姿英发。
羽扇纶巾，
谈笑间、
檣櫓灰飞烟灭。
故国神游，
多情应笑我，
早生华发。
人生如梦，
一樽还酹江月。

Tune: Niannu Jiao

Reminiscing about Antiquity at Red Cliff

by Su Shi (1037-1101)

Eastwards the Great River flows,
Waves wash away all the gallant heroes
Through thousands of bygone years!
West of the ancient rampart they call it Red Cliff
Of the Three Kingdoms the battle field,
Remembered by the name of General Zhou.
Jagged rocks pierce the clouds,
Tempestuous waves lash the shore,
Whipping up thousands of layers of snow.
What hosts of heroes once there were
In such a splendid painting of mountain and river!

Imagine young General Zhou in those days,
Having Xiao Qiao, the bride so fair,
Majestic and spirited himself,
With a silk kerchief binding hair,
And a plume fan in hand,
Laughing and jesting,
While Cao Cao's fleet was destroyed as planned.
Were I to visit the ancient Kingdom,
Sentimental, I would be laughed at,
And my hair turned grey earlier.
Life is but a dream,
Let me pour a libation
To the river with moonlight gleam!