

EXCERPTS FROM THE RED CLIFF, PART I
By Su Shi (Su Dongpo)

Introduction

Su Shi (1036-1101), also known as Su Dongpo, had a long career as a government official in the Northern Song. Twice he was exiled for his sharp criticisms of imperial policy. Su is also one of the most noted poets of the Northern Song period.

The following short essay describes a small boat party on the Yangzi River. The boat-trip took place at Red Cliff, traditionally thought to be the place where the general Cao Cao (155-220) suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of his enemies, Liu Bei and Sun Chuan, in 208.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Anthology of Chinese Literature, Volume I: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, edited by Cyril Birch (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 381-382. © 1965 Grove Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from The Red Cliff, Part I
By Su Shi

In the autumn of the year *jen-hsu* (1082), on the sixteenth day of the seventh month, I took some guests on an excursion by boat under the Red Cliff. A cool wind blew gently, without starting a ripple. I raised my cup to pledge the guests; and we chanted the Full Moon ode, and sang out the verse about the modest lady. After a while the moon came up above the hills to the east, and wandered between the Dipper and the Herdboy Star; a dewy whiteness spanned the river, merging the light on the water into the sky. We let the tiny reed drift on its course, over ten thousand acres of dissolving surface which streamed to the horizon, as though we were leaning on the void with the winds for chariot, on a journey none knew where, hovering above as though we had left the world of men behind us and risen as immortals on newly sprouted wings.

Soon when the wines we drank had made us merry, we sang this verse tapping the gunwales:

Cinnamon oars in front, magnolia oars behind
Beat the transparent brightness, thrust upstream against flooding light.
So far, the one I yearn for,
The girl up there at the other end of the sky!

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

EXCERPTS FROM THE RED CLIFF, PART I, BY SU SHI (SU DONGPO)

One of the guests accompanied the song on a flute. The notes were like sobs, as though he were complaining, longing, weeping, accusing; the wavering resonance lingered, a thread of sound which did not snap off, till the dragons underwater danced in the black depths, and a widow wept in our lonely boat.

I solemnly straightened my lapels, sat up stiffly, and asked the guest: "Why do you play like this?"

The guest answered:

"Full moon, stars few

Rooks and magpies fly south. ...'

"Was it not Ts'ao Ts'ao who wrote this verse? Gazing toward Hsiak'ou in the west, Wu-ch'ang in the east, mountains and river winding around him, stifling in the close green ... was it not here that Ts'ao Ts'ao was hemmed in by young Chou? At the time when he smote Ching-chou and came eastwards with the current down from Chiang-ling, his vessels were prow by stern for a thousand miles, his banners hid the sky; looking down on the river winecup in hand, composing his poem with lance slung crossways, truly he was the hero of his age, but where is he now? And what are you and I compared with him? Fishermen and woodcutters on the river's isles, with fish and shrimp and deer for mates, riding a boat as shallow as a leaf, pouring each other drinks from bottlegourds; mayflies visiting between heaven and earth, infinitesimal grains in the vast sea, mourning the passing of our instant of life, envying the long river which never ends! Let me cling to a flying immortal and roam far off, and live forever with the full moon in my arms! But knowing that this art is not easily learned, I commit the fading echoes to the sad wind."

"Have you really understood the water and the moon?" I said. "The one streams past so swiftly yet is never gone; the other for ever waxes and wanes yet finally has never grown nor diminished. For if you look at the aspect which changes, heaven and earth cannot last for one blink; but if you look at the aspect which is changeless, the worlds within and outside you are both inexhaustible, and what reasons have you to envy anything?"

"Moreover, each thing between heaven and earth has its owner, and even one hair which is not mine I can never make part of me. Only the cool wind on the river, or the full moon in the mountains, caught by the ear becomes a sound, or met by the eye changes to colour; no one forbids me to make it mine, no limit is set to the use of it; this is the inexhaustible treasury of the creator of things, and you and I can share in the joy of it."

The guest smiled, consoled. We washed the cups and poured more wine. After the nuts and savouries were finished, and the wine-cups and dishes lay scattered around, we leaned pillowed back to back in the middle of the boat, and did not notice when the sky turned white in the east.

Questions:

1. What mood does the party start out with, and why does the musician change the mood so drastically?
2. How does Su Shi restore the mood of the outing?