The Sights and Sounds of Red Cliffs: On Reading Su Shi
Author(s): Robert E. Hegel
Published by: Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/495262
Accessed: 18/02/2009 09:04

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=clear.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR).
The Sights and Sounds of Red Cliffs: 
On Reading Su Shi

Robert E. Hegel

Washington University, St. Louis

For Eugene

"It was in the autumn of the year renxu, one night past the full moon in the seventh month . . . ." So begins the first of Su Shi’s famous rhapsodic essays on boat trips in the vicinity of the Chibi ("Red Cliffs") Chibi fu 前後赤壁賦, dated 1082. The title gives the place, a section of the Yangtze downstream from Wuhan in Hubei, the text provides the precise date, and the circumstances of the outing are presented in great detail. Readers are likewise provided with the sights and sounds of that place and time—and even with a narrative of how the events of the evening led one to another. Thus the piece has generally been read as if it were a detailed diary. But it is not. Nor is it, presumably, entirely fictionalized, a story. It is an essay of sorts, a fu 賦, but not quite like the "prose fu" wenfu 文賦 developed about that time as part of the guwen 古文 or "classical prose" movement. The piece contains poetry and prose, some relatively straightforward, other sections very elegant in diction and phrasing. It is a composite literary exercise, a very carefully constructed art work that suggests a variety of readings in addition to the common interpretation of the work as autobiography.

My purpose here is to push beyond the images to their meaning: it matters little whether Su Shi ever took that particular boat ride (and I have my doubts that he did); he used the literary arts then available to him to express ideas, to explore feelings, and to play with writing. That he succeeded marvellously on all counts is clearly attested by its durability as a staple of literary anthologies; it is simply among the greatest works of literature in Chinese. And what of its companion piece? That is a bit harder to appreciate—in part, because it is so different from the first. Most readers will need no introduction either to the writer or his representative work; I will provide a brief summary of his life to indicate how the trajectory of this investigation first follows, and then veers away from, the standard "autobiographical" interpretation.

Origins and Influences

Su Shi 蘇軾 (also well known as Su Dongpo 東坡, 1037-1101) penned these essays during his exile in Huangzhou, at a time when his frustration had succumbed, to some degree, to sober reflection on the outspoken criticisms that had repeatedly occasioned his dismissal from office. In the words of one scholar, they reflect his "spirit of philosophical accommodation that was ripening during this period." Su was a

brilliant and witty—although not circumspect—statesman, essayist, poet, calligrapher, painter (especially of bamboo, which became a hallmark of the literati, wenren 文人, painting tradition); he was also a Confucian thinker who was profoundly influenced by intellectual Taoism and Buddhism.

As both writer and thinker, Su Shi followed in the footsteps of Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), whose essays have also been regularly anthologized as Tang period models of the guwen style. Ostensibly Han Yu might be thought of as a singleminded, even hidebound, Confucian for his outspoken statements on Buddhism and the other “heretical” teachings of Taoism. Han’s Lun Fogubiao 论佛骨表 (“Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha”) written in the year 819 is rich with sarcasm: his radical disbelief in the revered relic occasions his portrayal of the fragment merely as a decaying piece of the body of a long-dead barbarian—who taught alien beliefs. Worse yet, by contrasting the longevity of the pre-Buddhist sage kings of China with later emperors Han Yu there intimates that treating Buddhism with favor will shorten the Emperor’s life. His attitude is confrontational; in the words of Stephen Owen, Han Yu is “belligerently uncompromising and . . . disrespectful to the point of personally insulting the emperor.”

But Han Yu seemingly was not fully serious. Here as in his famous Yuan dao 原道, “On the Origins of the [Proper] Way,” Han made such exaggerated denunciations of Buddhism and Taoism that his words must be read as hyperbolic or even humorous; although his comments seem not to have quite the level of verbal irony as to require reading his meaning as opposite to its surface content, in his essays Han Yu clearly meant more (or less) than he seemed to be saying. Even so, Han Yu incurred imperial disfavor because of his ostensible opposition to Buddhism.

By the time he wrote his Red Cliffs essays, Su Shi, too, was well known for his verbal wit and literary complexity, although he and his contemporaries generally sought to appear quite different from their illustrious Tang period predecessor. Su had been born in Meizhou 眉州 in Sichuan early in 1037, the son of Su Xun 順, a wealthy silk merchant, a notable Confucian thinker, and, later after his business began to falter, a high official. Su’s younger brother Su Che 淘 and his two younger sisters were all poets; he, his father, and Che became famous as essayists, known as the “Three Sus” 三蘇 regularly counted among the “Eight Masters” of the Tang and Song periods. Che also served in office later in life.


Su Shi's early education was under the direction of a Taoist priest; at around the age of five he began his studies at local village school. Later he studied with his mother, née Cheng 程, herself a highly educated woman. Su Shi was married at age 17 and earned the jinshi degree at just age 19; by then he had impressed the multi-talented Ouyang Xiu and others of the older generation with his writing.

Su Shi's patron thereafter, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-72), is also well represented in anthologies of guwen prose. A dominant figure in politics and literature during the Northern Song period, Ouyang was the leader of group of prose stylists who established the guwen movement to “recover the style of the ancients”. He, too, appropriately came to be considered one of its Eight Masters. He served as editor of an official dynastic history, the Xin Tang shu 新唐書; he also served as Chief Examiner for the civil service examinations in 1057 (when Su Shi placed second). These positions of great authority gave him the power to advocate use of this style in examination essays and other writings.

Personally not so fond of philosophy as he was of singing girls, Ouyang generally focused on daily life in his own work. Among his most famous prose pieces are Zuiwenting ji 醉翁亭記 “An Account of the Pavilion of the Drunken Old Man” and Qiusheng fu 秋聲賦 “Rhapsody on the Sounds of Autumn.” In the first he chides himself for his intoxication with the art of writing through the apparent metaphor of drinking; in the second he ironically undercuts his persona’s concern with the passage of time. Both contain gentle self-mockery; both are wonderfully profound. These, like prose works by Han Yu and other Great Masters, are to be found in a number of anthologies such as the mid-Qing Guwen guanzhi 古文観止. Su Shi was to infuse his works with a similar tone; as in his poetry, the younger poet also followed the model of Ouyang Xiu in his detailed descriptions of setting.

In the year 1060, at the age of 23 Su Shi was given his first official post, but by 1071 he had offended the radical reformist Prime Minister Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) and had been sent to Hangzhou. In 1079 (age 42) he was posted to Huzhou; once there he wrote a memorial of thanks which, with along with others among his writings, was condemned by the Wang faction at court for sarcastic references to and criticism of Imperial policies. As a consequence he was thrown into the Censorate prison. Convinced he was to be executed as his accusers had recommended, he wrote


6Egan, Literary Works, pp. 34-35, 110-11, and pp. 124-31, discusses the descriptions of sound in Ouyang’s poetry; for a translation of this second prose piece, see pp. 127-29. Burton Watson, trans., Su Tung-p’o: Selections from a Sung Dynasty Poet (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 59, translates the first of Su Shi’s two 1078 poems “Reading the Poetry of Meng Chiao” in which he compares Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751-814) unfavorably to Han Yu and concludes: “Why should I strain my ears/ Listening to the squeaks of this autumn insect?” One can only wonder if this is a reference to Ouyang Xiu’s Qiusheng fu.

7Yoshikawa, p. 103.
But his lot was to be yet more convoluted. Granted a reprieve, in 1080 Su Shi was exiled to Huangzhou (modern Huanggang), an isolated location on the Yangtze River in southeastern Hubei. This experience greatly affected his outlook on life. Although he had a nominal title, it carried no stipend, leaving him no income at all. He endured this internal exile from the winter of 1080 to the spring of 1084. The Huangzhou area was mountainous, forested thickly with bamboo. Initially Su Shi's life there was largely devoted to religious activities: daily prayers, offerings of incense, and contemplation at a nearby temple. It was during his sojourn at Huangzhou that he began Buddhist meditation. He also explored the area, fished, and got to know the local people, often with the help of the local wine.

Despite his desperate poverty, through the intercession of a friend in 1081 he acquired a parcel of land from the local military garrison on which to raise food; he cleared it, and planted rice, fruit trees, and mulberries. He recorded these labors in poems; it was here that he refined his poetic voice, as Michael Fuller observes. In the following year he bought a small piece of land adjacent to fields and there, on the eastern slope of the hill on which the government post house known as the Lin'gao Pavilion rested, built a study called the Xuetang 雪堂 ("Snow Hall") painted all white inside, to cleanse and cool his mind. From this time he began to refer to himself as Dongpo jushi 東坡居士, "Layman of the Eastern Slope." In this new study he wrote interpretive commentaries on Yijing, the Lunyu, and Shujing; presumably his purpose was to return to the origins of Confucian values, to reconstitute his moral mind, and to seek justification for his past political behavior.

In 1082, at the age 45, he wrote his Chibi fu, referred to in English as either the "Poetic Expositions" or "Rhapsodies on Red Cliffs." In 1086, at the age of 49, Su Shi was recalled because of Wang Anshi's death; a conservative government had been reestablished and all banished statesmen were being reprieved. In 1089, at age 52, he was reposted to Hangzhou, built a causeway across West Lake that still stands, and then he was once again recalled to the capital. This still did not mark the end of his political troubles, however: in 1094 (age 57) he was banished to Guangdong; three years later (at age 60) he was further banished to Hainan Island. In 1100 he received a pardon and was posted to Chengdu, but he died of illness on the way at age 64.

---

8 For a detailed discussion of the writings that got Su Shi into trouble, and the underlying political sensitivities of the time, see Charles Hartman's "Poetry and Politics in 1079: The Crow Terrace Poetry Case of Su Shih," CLEAR 12 (1990), 15-44.


10 Chen Yu-shih (Images and Ideas, p. 135) finds the basis for Su Shi's metaphysical speculations in Yijing; she also confirms his engagement with contemporary thinkers.

11 About his engagement with Buddhist thought and clerics at that time, see Grant, pp. 107-29; on his meditation practices there, see Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, pp. 238-39.
By all accounts, it was during his sojourn at Huangzhou that Su Shi’s thinking matured philosophically; his brother Su Che noted that his writings also developed to a significant degree after he arrived in Huangzhou. Chen Yu-shih notes that after 1080 his tendency was to emphasize what is natural (tian 天) over human (ren 人) affairs and shifted his focus from artistry (gong 工) to intention (yi 意) in his writing. To Qian Zhongshu this was a shift in emphasis from the work of art to the mind of the artist; Qian also comments on the spontaneity with which Su Shi seemingly composed. In fact, Su even compared his own style to flowing water.\(^\text{12}\)

Several scholars have described in great detail the extent to which the exile at Huangzhou was a turning point in Su Shi’s emotional and artistic lives. About Su Shi’s introspective bent at that time, Beata Grant has observed:

This inward-looking tendency comes to a climax during Su’s first exile in Huang-chou in 1080, when for a time he desists from writing and immerses himself in Buddhist texts and meditation. This period of exile also marks a significant spiritual turning point in Su’s life. He could not refrain completely from writing, and when he took up the pen again, he did so with a new creative vitality and force. This new vitality is paralleled and even inspired by his personal struggle to find a modus vivendi between the inner and the outer, the transcendent and the immanent--between samsara and nirvana. . . . This tension finds its most creative expression during the Huang-chou exile, and in many ways it is the most outstanding characteristic of Su’s Buddhist spirituality.\(^\text{13}\)

In an essay about the Snow Hall study he constructed in Huangzhou, Su Shi wrote: “As the hall had been finished in a great snowstorm, Master Su painted snow all around the walls without missing a spot. Standing up and sitting down, lying still and looking high, gazing around and glancing down—everywhere was snow. Whenever he stayed there, Master Su was completely immersed in his creation. He kept to himself and slept during the day; he was cheerful and seemed to be content, not grumbling even when something woke him from sleep. When anything went wrong, he would cover his eyes with his hands and shuffle off to his hall.” Presumably it was in Snow Hall that Su Shi wrote his Chibi fu, perhaps in conjunction with introspection or even meditation. This fact has engendered the usual approach to their interpretation. But consider how much this reminds us of Tao Qian’s 陶潜 (365-427) several seemingly “autobiographical” writings that project a similar image of tranquillity and contentment. I refer to his Wu liu xiansheng zhuan 五柳先生傳 “Biography of Master Five Willows” and even his Ziji wen 自祭文 “Elegy for Myself.” There the earlier poet presented images of “self” that varied widely from those presented in poetry that complained of


\(^\text{13}\)Grant, Mount Lu Revisited, pp. 9-10. For another outstanding study, see Michael Fuller, The Road to East Slope, which concludes with this period in Su Shi’s life.
hunger, personal tragedy, and frustration.\textsuperscript{14} I will explore these parallels below, but first a look at the Su Shi texts.

\textit{Translations}

(Many translators have tried their hand at English versions of these pieces; mine, although done independently, cannot but reflect my readings of earlier translations. I have not intentionally borrowed the phrases of others, however. Notes on specific references and allusions will follow.)

\textit{Qian Chibi fu} 前赤壁賦: At Red Cliffs (I)\textsuperscript{15}

It was in the autumn of the year \textit{renxu}, one night past the full moon in the seventh month when Master Su and his guests floated about at the foot of Red Cliffs. \textit{Light breezes came gently; Nary a wave rose from the water.} He took up the wine and poured for his guests: they sang the "tenderness" verse of the "Bright Moon" \textit{Ode}. Shortly thereafter, the moon rose over the mountains to the east, seeming to tarry between the Dipper and Ox; white mist spread across the river, the brightness from the water reaching into the sky. They let their reed-like boat drift where it would, riding the nebulousness of this great expanse. \textit{So vast--as if leaning on space and driving the wind--that none can know where it will end; floating--as if one had left the world behind to stand alone, like sprouting wings and ascending with the Undying.}

By then they were filled with pleasure from drinking; they sang aloud, tapping on the gunwale to keep time:

\begin{quote}
\textit{"The cassia oar, oh, the magnolia sweep;}
\textit{We dash the light reflection, oh, its brightness flows away.}
\textit{Turgid, turgid, oh, the feelings in my breast;}
\textit{Afar I seek my beloved, oh, on Heaven’s further shore."}
\end{quote}

Among the guests one played the flute; he accompanied them in harmony with their singing. The flute’s low, mellifluous sounds seemed resentful or yearning, like sobs or complaints; their echoes faded away unbroken, like threads—causing the dragon hidden deep beneath the waves to dance, the widow in her solitary boat to weep. Deeply moved, Master Su sat upright, straightened his robe, and asked: "How came it to be so?"

The guest replied: ""The moon so bright that stars are few,

\textsuperscript{14}George Hatch, "Su Shih," \textit{Sung Biographies}, ed. Herbert Franke (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976), p. 951; I happily acknowledge that my interest in Su Shi was initially whetted by the unflagging enthusiasm and insights of my colleague, George Hatch. For the Tao Qian prose pieces, see James Robert Hightower, \textit{The Poetry of Tao Ch'ien} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 4, 6; Owen, \textit{Anthology}, pp. 314-15, 615-16. I refer to poems such as 鄰圃田居 “Returning to the Fields to Dwell” No. 3 (see Hightower, p. 52; see also pp. 64-65, 105, 157-58, 163); surely these idealized views of Tao Qian should be read with an eye to the utopia of \textit{Taohuaquann ji} 桃花源記 “Peach-Blossom Spring,” itself a literalization of \textit{Daode jing} Section 80: “小國寡民，…” see \textit{Daode jing} (Sibu beiyao 四部備要 edition), xia 23b-24a.

\textsuperscript{15}For translations, see Owen, \textit{Anthology}, pp. 292-94; Watson, \textit{Su Tung-p’o}, pp. 87-93; Le Gros Clark, pp. 126-35.
Crows and magpies fly southward.’
—is this not a poem by Cao Mengde? Seeing afar in the west Xiakou, away in the east Wuchang, with mountains and the river circling each other, dense with luxuriant foliage—is this not where Mengde was cornered by Young Master Zhou? He had just subdued Jingzhou and was proceeding from Jiangling by following the current eastward; his craft and vessels extended a thousand li, his banners and pennons obscured the sky. Pouring a libation over the River, he laid his lance crossways and recited this verse: unquestionably the hero of the age, and yet now—where is he now?

And what of you and me, brother? Mere fishermen and woodcutters on the sandbars of the River, companions of fish and shrimp, friends of stags and deer, sailing on this boat no larger than a leaf, toasting each other with gourd flagons: like mayflies between heaven and earth, like a single grain in the vast dark sea. We lament that our lives last but a moment, envy the endlessness of this Long River. We might clasp hold of a flying Transcendent and thereby roam freely, or clutch in our arms the bright moon and have done with it forever. But knowing these are not quickly to be had, I added these lingering echoes to this sad air.”

Master Su replied, “Do you also know this about this River and the moon: ‘That which passes away is like this,’ and yet it is never gone; what waxes and wanes is like that, and yet in the end it never diminishes or increases. If we look at at a situation from that which changes, then neither Heaven nor Earth has ever lasted more than a blink; if we look at it from that which does not change, then neither things nor I will ever come to an end. What is there further to envy?

“More to the point: between Heaven and Earth all things have their master; if it is not something of mine, I would not take it, no matter how small. Only the pure breeze across the River and the bright moon between the mountains: my ears take the one and make it sound; my eyes encounter the other and it becomes visible. I can take these without prohibition, can use them without depletion. These come from the inexhaustible storehouse of the Creator, the place where you and I may help ourselves.”

The guests smiled at his enjoyment. They washed their vessels and poured once more. When the snacks were finished, the plates and dishes piled wildly, they piled themselves up, pillowed against each other, in the middle of the boat, and before they realized the east had begun to lighten.

Notes on the Translation

The seventh month: the first month of autumn by the lunar calendar; the day after full moon (jiwang 既望) is always the 16th. The excursion was dated precisely: August 12, 1082, probably to authenticate the experience recorded here.

The “tenderness” (lit. yaotiao 瘦窕) verse of the “Bright Moon” 明月Ode: This is the first stanza of Shijing 143, also known as Yuechu 月出, “Moon Rising;” 月出皎兮。佼人僚兮。舒窈紗兮。勞心慅兮。 In Arthur Waley’s version it reads: “A moon rising white/ Is the beauty of my lovely one./ Ah, the tenderness, the grace!/ Heart’s pain
consumes me." Since yaotiao appears in a stanza of this poem, I have resisted the temptation felt by some readers to identify it as a reference to famous lines in the first poem in Shijing, the Guanju 关雎, with its tenor of happy anticipation. The author plays on the two names of the one poem by including the words yuechu in the next line. The sense of the lines quoted here is separation and longing, a striking contrast to the merriment of drinking attributed to "Master Su" and his companions.

The moon (four times in this piece referred to as 明月 or "bright moon"): Su Shi had written elsewhere about moonlight, especially in the ci poetic form; the moon was associated by legend with the search for immortality, but also with Buddhist enlightenment, for the perfect roundness of the bright full moon.

"Seeming to tarry" 徘徊: The moon moves, if slowly; that it appeared not to move, to "tarry," indicates the fixity with which the drinkers observed it, or their losing track of time. The latter interpretation seems implicitly to have been followed by most interpreters.

Dipper and Ox 斗牛: According to Shujing, two lunar mansions or su 宿 in the area of the sky in which the sun sets at mid-autumn. Su means "lodging" as well; probably Su Shi was playing with the pun implied here.

"Mist" is literally "dew" 露, but dew droplets do not hang over water, while mist does; I suspect that Su Shi sought euphony rather than literal accuracy. The whiteness of the water vapor might visually suggest dew or frost on vegetation—if in fact this piece were ever intended to describe any specific scene or occasion. Dew is one of the standard symbols of the transience of all conditioned existence, including of course objects of perception and mental states, in the verse at the end of the Jin'gang jing 金剛經 or Diamond Sutra.

The reed-like boat 蒻: see Shijing 61, Heguang 河廣: 誰謂河廣。一葦杭之。誰謂宋遠。跂予望之。 "Who says the River is broad? On a single reed you could cross it.\ Who says that Song is far away?\ By standing on tip-toe I can see it." Note also the legend of the Chan sect founder Bodhidharma 菩提達摩 (fl. 520) who, when he came to the Yangtze, decided not to wait for a boatman but simply threw a reed 蒻 into the water, climbed aboard, and rode it across the River. This double reference to the sufficiency of a tiny craft reinforces the idea of ease of completion despite handicaps, a suggestion contradicted later in the piece and in the second Red Cliffs fu.

---

18 Le Gros Clark, p. 129, explains that these stars are found in the constellation Sagittarius; more precisely, Ho Peng Yoke, Li, Qi and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilization in China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1985), pp. 116-17, cites the Yaodian 儀典 section of the Shujing in which the sage king Yao identified the star Xu 吳, the central star in the Xuanwu 玄武 group of lunar mansions, which include Nandou 南斗 and Niu 牛, as a reference to use with the setting sun as a means to determine the mid-autumn day. Ho further explains, p. 134, that Nandou and Qianniu 虎 are the eighth and ninth of the lunar mansions; his chart on p. 139 demonstrates that Sagittarius is in Nandou, and Qianniu is east of it.
19 See Waley, Book of Songs, p. 53.
The Undying, elsewhere, transcendent: xian 仙, the “immortals” of Taoism.

Riding the wind 御風. Probably a reference to Zhuangzi 莊子, the Xiao yaoyou (“Free and Easy Wandering”) description of the Holy Man (shenren 神人) who 乘雲氣御飛龍而遊乎四海之外 “climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas.” 20 Magical flights are even more commonly associated with Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340-278 BCE), the exiled minister who by tradition penned the Liao 禦 (“On Encountering Trouble”) in the Chuci 楚辭. 21 In his Qu Yuan miaofu 屈原廟賦 (“The Temple to Qu Yuan”), 22 Su Shi records passing the temple and compares the records of his contemporaries, and himself, unfavorably to Qu Yuan’s legend of selfless devotion to his state. See also the note on Feng Yi below.

Cassia oar and magnolia sweep 桂棹蘭槳: Again, terms appearing in Chuci, this time in one of Jiuge 九歌 (“The Nine Songs”), Xiang jun 湘君 (“The Goddess of the Xiang”); I agree with Stephen Owen that lan 蘭 is more likely “magnolia” than “orchid.” magnolia is at least a tree from which one could conceivably make a sweep—even though the wood is not strong enough for tools. Although the exoticism of the image may be its only significance, here again the tenor of the original poem is that of longing, of aspiration unfulfilled. The form of these lines is that of the Sao in Chuci, another confirmation that we are to read this essay through Liao—the classic account of the worthy but unrecognized minister. 23

“My beloved” meiren 美人, literally “my beauty,” refers presumably again to the object of the poet’s search in Liao, either the ruler who spurned Qu Yuan or, more abstractly, recognition for one’s talents and abilities.

The widow in her solitary boat 孤舟之寡婦: This is one of the more complex images in the piece. First, since “Master Su” and his friends are out sailing in the moonlight, that a single woman should also be out on the river is not so likely (Could she be fishing?). It would appear that the image is not meant to designate any concrete event or person but some abstraction. Some years ago Eugene Eoyang convincingly demonstrated how images of “solitary boats” or “empty boats” 虛舟 served as tropes for the poet in Tang poetry. Tao Qian’s poem 五月放舟和戴主簿詩 “On the First of the Fifth Month to Match a Poem by Secretary Dai” may have been the progenitor; he uses “empty boat” xuzhou to describe the vagaries of his life, its ups and downs. The “solitary boat” appears in another of Tao Qian’s poems (始作鎮軍參軍序曲阿作 “Lines Written As I Passed Through Qu’e: On First Being Made Advisor to the General”), but more frequently in Tang nature poetry: What makes a boat “solitary” is the subjective response of the poet to the boat and its surroundings; to Du Fu 杜甫 it is “a mental

---

20For the text, see Zhuangzi (Sibu beiyao ed.) 1.7a; for this translation, see Burton Watson, trans., The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 33.

21See especially David Hawkes, trans., The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 73ff.

22Translated in Le Gros Clark, pp. 99-105.

23See Hawkes, p. 107; on the lan question, see Owen, Anthology, p. 292.
construct, rather than a familiar naturalistic detail.” In a poem by Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689-740) several other images are strikingly parallel to those of Su Shi here:

Mountain darkness, hear the ape’s complaint,
Wide river rushes on at night.
Wind calls from leaves on both banks,
Moon illumines one solitary boat.
Jiande—this is not my land,
Yangzhou—memories of former travels.
Again I will take these two lines of tears
To send far away to the shores of the sea.

Similarly, Liu Zongyuan’s 柳宗元 (773-819) image of “a solitary boat with old man in rain cloak and leaf hat” who is fishing alone in the snow also fits well enough here to have been in Su Shi’s mind as he wrote. Perhaps even more relevant here is a *ci* poem by Ouyang Xiu in which reads, in part: 獨自上孤舟。倚危檣目斷。難成蒼雨。更朝雲散。涼勁殘葉亂。新月照澄波波。今夜裡顫顫離縮難消遣。 “Alone I board the solitary boat,/ Leaning against the mast, I exhaust my view./ Evening rain is slow to come,/ And next morning, disappears. /Unremitting cold, falling leaves pell-mell. /New moon shines down, pure waves shallow. /Tonight, parting thoughts abound, hard to dispel.” There is irony here in Ouyang Xiu’s commonly used image for lovemaking, clouds and rain, in the midst of a melancholy scene. To read the Su Shi pieces in this context shows how little the essays owe to descriptions of the natural phenomena of autumn: no leaves, no clouds. However, as Eoyang has also pointed out, the “solitary boat” has its philosophical origins image in *Zhuangzi* 32, “Lie Yukou 列御寇,” in which the “man of no ability” is described: 若不繫之舟。虗而遨遊者也。 “Drifting like an unmoored boat, emptily and idly he wanders along.” Although we ought not to ignore earlier poets’ uses of this image, particularly Tao Qian and Ouyang Xiu who influenced Su Shi in other ways, it is obvious that this image suggests more than it says, and all indications suggest that it is a self-reference. Consider, for example, the late Ming uses of female characters, and the subordinant female relationships to men, to suggest the marginalized position of the underemployed intellectuals of that time.²⁴

“The moon so bright that stars are few” 月明星稀。鳥鶴南飛：lines of a poem attributed to Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220) in *Wenxuan* 文選 27.²⁵

---

²⁴See Eugene Eoyang, “The Solitary Boat: Images of the Self in Chinese Nature Poetry,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 32.4 (1973), 593-621. Eoyang discusses Tao Qian’s poem on p. 606; for a translation of “Lines Written ...” see Hightower, p. 95, and his discussion, pp. 95-98. Eoyang’s discussion and translation (on which mine is based) of the Meng Haoran poem is on p. 611; he discusses Liu Zongyuan on p. 613. Eoyang, pp. 606ff, cites the passage mentioned here, from *Zhuangzi* 10.7b-8a; translation from Watson, *Complete Works*, p. 354; Eoyang observes that the “unmoored boat... is presented as a model of behavior.”

Cao Mengde 曹孟德, or Cao Cao, was military commander of most of north China during the latter years of the Han; he fully controlled the last emperors although he never took the throne himself. During his campaigns against his rivals, especially Sun Quan 孫權 of the state of Wu 吳 south of the Yangtze, he amassed a great flotilla of watercraft to ferry his enormous northern army across the River. A fateful battle was fought at Red Cliffs in the year 208. The victims of southern stratagemis that were greatly romanticized in later fiction and plays, Cao’s forces were routed with great loss of life; the defeat is generally explained as the consequence of Cao Cao’s arrogance and heedlessness of good advice.\textsuperscript{26} Ronald C. Egan notes that commentators regularly situate Su Shi’s party a hundred miles or so from the site of the historic battle. “But it is not that Su Shi was grossly mistaken. In fact, he was well aware of the dubiousness of what must have been local claims that the Huangzhou Red Cliff was the battle site. But he evidently chose to suspend his skepticism in his rhapsody so as to lend to his surroundings the kind of historical and nostalgic appeal he required.”\textsuperscript{27} This deliberate dislocation of the events will be discussed below.

Young Master Zhou 周郎: Zhou Yu 周瑜, chief strategist for the state of Wu 吳 on the south bank of the River.

Jingzhou 荊州, Jiangling 江陵: Jingzhou was the region of China above the Three Gorges of the River, including portions of modern Hubei and Sichuan.

The bright moon 明月 here has several significations: at the surface it means transcendence, escape from the vulgar world in which Su Shi is suffering. It might well also refer to the Tang poet Li Bai 李白 (or Li Bo, 701-762), on several of whose poems Su Shi based his own verse.\textsuperscript{28} By popular tradition Li Bai was free spirited and drank a lot, but according to legend died when he leapt into a body of water to embrace the full moon he saw reflected there, hence my translation of the line 抱明月而長終 as “clutch in our arms the bright moon and have done with it forever” in contrast to the usual understandings of this attachment as a means to preserve life. In this case the moonlight on the ground in the second essay becomes the opposite of the moon here.

“What passes away” is a quotation from Lunyu 9.17: “子在川上曰。逝者如斯夫。不舍晝夜。” “While standing by a river, the Master said, ‘What passes away is, perhaps, like this. Day and night it never lets up.’”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} For a summary of these events, see Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, p. 221.

\textsuperscript{27} Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, p. 221. For a map of central China showing the locations relevant to Su Shi’s career, see Ogawa Tamaki 小川環樹, So Shoku 蘇軾 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), Vol. 1, following p. 174.

\textsuperscript{28} See Owen, Anthology, pp. 577-78.

Hou Chibi fu 後赤壁賦 At Red Cliffs (II)\textsuperscript{30}

On the night of full moon in the tenth month of the same year I was walking back from Snow Hall to Lin’gao; two guests accompanied me as we crossed Yellow Mud Slope. Frost and dew had already fallen, and the trees had completely shed their leaves. We cast shadows on the ground; I raised my head and noticed the bright moon. Looking over our shoulders we enjoyed it, singing songs to each other as we walked along. When we finished, I sighed and said, “I have guests but no wine; if I had wine I have no snacks—on such an excellent night as this, with the moon so white and the breeze so light!”

A guest said, “Just today at about dusk, I raised my net and caught a fish; with huge mouth and tiny scales, in form it is like Song River perch—but consider whence we might obtain wine?”

We went home and I talked it over with my wife. My wife said, “I have a jug of wine that I put away long ago in preparation for your untimely need.” Thus carrying the fish and the wine, again we roamed at the foot of Red Cliffs.

\textit{The Riverflowed noisily, Broken shores rose a thousand feet;}
\textit{The mountains tall, the moon so tiny; Water had fallen, leaving rocks exposed.}

—Just how many days or months could it have been, and yet the River and the mountains were no longer recognizable!

I then raised my robes and climbed upward, stepping lightly on the precipitous cliff, clutching at clumps of plants, crouching like tigers and panthers, ascending like dragons young and old, grasping the perilous nests of perching falcons, bending down over Feng Yi’s hidden palace. But my two guests could not follow me there: at my long piercing whistle, plants and trees shuddered, mountains cried out and valleys echoed, the wind arose and the water surged upward. I, too, fell silent and was mourful, felt awe and was troubled, became afraid that I could no longer stay there. I returned and boarded the boat, which we let drift with the current, letting it come to rest wherever it would.

By then the night was nearly half over; in all directions it was silent. Just then a solitary crane came eastward across the river, his wings turning like wheels, dark robed and white jacketed; with a long, discordant cry he brushed lightly over our boat and went west. Soon thereafter my guests left, and I too went off to sleep. I dreamed of two Taoists, dancing along in feather robes, passing below Lin’gao; they bowed to me and said, “Roaming about at Red Cliffs: was it enjoyable?” When I asked their names, they turned away and did not answer.

“Alas, alack! I knew it! That night long ago, the one who flew over us crying—that would have been you, sir, was it not?” A Taoist looked over his shoulder at me and smiled, and I was startled awake. I opened the door to look for him, but I could not see where he was.

\textsuperscript{30}For other translations, see Owen, pp. 675-76; Watson, \textit{Su Tung-p’o}, pp. 91-93; Egan, \textit{Word, Image, and Deed}, pp. 245-46.
Notes on the Translation

The night of full moon: As with the first of these essays, precisely dated November 7, 1082.

A perch from the River Song: This river is in Jiangsu, a more familiar, more “civilized” place than Huangzhou.

Tigers and leopards: These animals are paired in Zhao hun 招魂 (”The Summons of the Soul”) in Chu ci as guardians of the Gates of Heaven; there they are frightening, even deadly images rather than what they appear at first glance to signify here: images of wild but liberating “naturalness.”

Stepping lightly 等, etc.: Ronald Egan sees these images as descriptive of rock formations, hence he reads these lines: “... squatted on tigers and leopards, and climbed among scaly dragons until I could pull myself up to the nests of the hawks...” While Egan’s rendition reads well as narrative, I have sought to preserve the brevity and the suggestion that the descriptions refer to the poet himself.

Feng Yi’s hidden palace: Feng Yi is a River god—or goddess; according to some early sources the same as He Bo 河伯, the god of the Yellow River, in others his consort.

The whistle: As Ronald Egan points out, “a well-known method, associated with Taoist practices, by which the devotee prepares his own mind for the experience of nature and, simultaneously, attempts to elicit a sympathetic reaction” from nature.

Went west: Far to the west, up the River, was Sichuan, Su Shi’s home.

Feather robe: From Han onward Taoist transcendents were portrayed as growing feathers or wearing feather robes to indicate their transcendence of earthly ties and their ability to roam freely; bird-like characteristics were later replaced by cranes as companions and then by folk images of transcendents riding on the backs of cranes to sublime places. The “dancing” movement imitated the gait of cranes.

A Taoist: As Chen Yu-shih shows, the more authoritative text, that in the Sibu beiyao collection, has two Taoists, despite the efforts of generations of commentators and translators to make one to fit with the solitary crane that flew over the boat.

That night long ago: the logic of the narrative would suggest that he meant “last night” but Su Shi used an archaic term to be found in Zuo zhuan 左...
(Xuan 宣 2) and in the Tangong 檀弓 chapter of Liji 禮記 meaning "some time ago" or "in the past." Are we to read this—and the apparent confusion over the number of Taoists vs. cranes—as an example of the dislocations in time to which the sleeping mind is prey? Or as a semantic lapse on Su Shi’s part? Surely not, in such a deliberately constructed essay as this; see below.

**Discussion**

Qian Chibi fu ostensibly reconstructs reality, an event in the life of poet Su Shi conjured up through memory and written down at some remove after the evening outing on the river. Like others of his fu, his pace is deliberate in this first essay, and he varies it from seemingly straightforward prose to highly polished lines in a variety of poetic forms (the latter set in italic type here). Yet as Ronald Egan has noted, "There is little in the first piece to prepare us for the direction in which the second develops." This second fu has never been as popular with readers and was not so frequently anthologized; it seems to have generally been read as "vaguely disquieting" compared to the more comfortable first Red Cliffs fu. He and other critics have taken pains to explain these differences.

In her study of four of the Eight Masters of guwen prose, Chen Yu-shih asks whether these two pieces should be read as separate from each other or as one. She chooses the second alternative, against the common practice of anthologizers, on the basis of the "underlying unity" of the two parts; to her reading, the essays exemplify Su Shi’s idea of "two-oneness." The first essay, she concludes, "is a statement on human mortality and freedom cast in the form of a dialogue between Su Shih and his guest. In contrast to more conventional readings of the second as a continuation of Su Shi’s meditation on transcience, Chen draws attention to the contrast drawn between changing elements in landscape and mood, on the one hand, and the unchanging elements of nature on the other. The key, to her mind, is the "one crane-two priests enigma." Reading the piece through the “butterfly dream” of Zhuangzi, she concludes that the second essay reflects on the nature of reality; as in the Taoist philosophical classic, she sees a merging of states of existence in the crane-Taoists. That is, the crane is itself and simultaneously the Taoist, which together make two as Su Shi perceives them in his dream. The two pieces together then constitute “a steady progression from the concrete to the abstract, from the human to the natural, and from change-in-time (historical moments such as Ts’ao Ts’ao’s battle at the Red Cliff) to timeless becoming (the dream).” This frees Su Shi, as it did Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu, from “the necessity of the tragic” in human life and in writing.

In his extensive discussions of these pieces, Ronald Egan begins with the first by

---

36See Qian Zhongshu’s comments in his Preface to Le Gros Clark, p. xxii.
38Chen, pp. 146-52; the longer quotation is from p. 150.
HEGEL, The Sights and Sounds of Red Cliffs

itself: he finds its enduring appeal in Su Shi’s assertion of the continuity of “human consciousness and community” that links minds across time and space. He reads the piece against some of Su’s earlier writings as a successful accommodation to the frustrations of exile; here the author moves beyond his particular problems to confront mortality as the human condition, he concludes.39

The second piece, as Egan demonstrates, emphasizes how different the circumstances were on that later occasion. Here Su Shi is “seeking, in effect, to step outside of time and mortality altogether;” Egan reads this piece also as primarily, if not exclusively, autobiographical, reminding us that Su Shi had explored the Cliff on previous occasions. However, “[t]his is not a social outing or excursion. Su is off to experience the height as the immortals experience it, and this goal precludes accompaniment by his everyday acquaintances.” The “prolonged whistle” which Egan identifies with Taoist practice previously appeared in Su Shi’s writings, and in those of Li Bai, among others. But the overwhelmingly negative response from nature humiliates Su Shi. Egan reads the essays as demonstrating a “puny and pathetic” whistle from Su Shi that provoked nature’s angry response for his “trespassing.” By this reading, the flight of the crane over the heads of the boaters is also threatening. Egan concludes: In these essays, Su Shi gave his interests in “withdrawal and immortality . . . free reign in the second Red Cliff rhapsody and lets it run its full course. He follows it all the way to the top of the cliff, where his doubts—not so much about immortality as about his own suitability for the task—finally reassert themselves.”40

Other interpretations have been hinted at, if not developed in detail. Cyril Drummond Le Gros Clark traces the scholarship that equates the unnamed flautist of the first essay with the Taoist Yang Shichang 楊世昌, Su Shi’s friend; Su wrote out a calligraphic scroll for Yang in which he mentioned the latter’s visit to the Red Cliffs on the full moon of the tenth month. Consequently certain commentators identify the Taoist who appears in Su Shi’s dream as Yang Shichang.41 Pursuing these deductions to their logical conclusion makes the image of the Taoist more complicated: If Su Shi were making a joke with his friend about being the crane who flew over the boat—even if in dream—then the significance of the crane as image of transcencence becomes less mysterious—and far less profound. The paired essays would seem to constitute an elaborate and complex literary game played on and with his Taoist friend—who may have missed the second outing in person but attended anyway—in the shape of a crane. (Had he been excluded from the second outing?) However, I believe that one can derive more meaning from these texts by interpreting what is in them rather than

39Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, pp. 224-28. Egan contrasts the fu with a ci poem written about the same time on the Red Cliffs theme, tentatively concluding that the two differ because of generic considerations. I would disagree that the contradiction “is not satisfactorily explained by genre alone,” (p. 227) although I am persuaded that Su Shi sought to identify with the young Wu strategist Zhou Yu as “heroic” (p. 228); more about Su Shi’s self-image below.

40Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, pp. 247-50; the final quotation is from pp. 249-50.

41See Le Gros Clark, pp. 130-31.
speculating on what has not been made explicit. I propose a rereading of several key images.

First, let us consider the moon, a symbol that appears most frequently in the first essay. In itself, the full moon appears commonly in Buddhist teachings as a symbol of perfect enlightenment—and an example of an object of mind, as it is an object of sight. In both senses, the duality of perceiver and perceived must be overcome for true enlightenment. But more explicitly here, the moon suggests transience: as it was on the first occasion (for all practical purposes), the moon is at its fullest on the second evening as well. Yet all had changed: the first outing took place in August, the second in November; although ostensibly both were in “autumn,” the first was in warm weather, and by the time of the second excursion the weather had become decidedly colder. Likewise the beautiful mist of the first essay had become frost on the ground in the second. Thus one can see in the moon both permanence and transience, as “Master Su” suggests in the first essay.

In the first prose essay, Su Shi’s “musings on impermanence,” in Ronald Egan’s apt phrase, are not original; they echo sentiments in a variety of sources, including the Yijing or Classic of Changes of the Confucian school no less than Buddhist scriptures. “It is the appropriation of the old idea in a dramatized literary work that is new and striking.” But, to Egan, Su Shi uses this transience to link past with present, individuals through time; he has “moved beyond dissatisfaction with the place in which he finds himself” to consider universal concerns with mortality. 42

Ronald Egan also demonstrates how closely Su Shi aligned his activities, and his writings, with those of Tao Qian. Because the earlier poet retired from minor office in contrast to Su Shi who was exiled from important posts in the capital, their political situations were certainly not identical. However, both were reduced (and perhaps, to a degree, philosophically drawn) to raising their own food; both complained about and exhulted in the work of farming. Su Shi recorded his experiences as a farmer (in much greater detail than Tao Qian ever had), and his reactions, in a series of eight shi poems entitled Dongpo 東坡 “East Slope.” Later Su was to write matching poems for all 120 in Tao Qian’s extant corpus. One of the more marked contrasts between the works of the two poets is Su Shi’s consistent and “determined optimism” in contrast to the discordant tenor of Tao Qian’s verse.43 And as Michael Fuller points out, Su Shi’s “poetic personality, with its firm, philosophic, yet jovial poise of spirit, was created by Su Shi’s major writings in Huangzhou. . . . the image of Su Shi finding joy even in the worst of adversity has become part of the Chinese cultural heritage.”44

Even if the first of these Red Cliffs essays contributes to this view, the second is more problematic. The two pieces could hardly be more dissimilar: in length, in tenor, in apparent level of linguistic and literary complexity, in philosophical subtleties. On

42Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, 224.
43See Egan, Word, Image, and Deed, pp. 229-37; five of the poems are translated on pp. 229-31.
44Fuller, p. 251.
its surface, the first seemingly presents views of Su Shi’s sense of transcendence of his worldly troubles. However, as we have seen, not all images in either poem contribute to a sense of tranquillity; in fact, the piece initially is filled with symbols of frustration, of being slighted or overlooked, of failing to meet with the object of one’s aspirations. These contrast with the rural “contentment” conventionally seen in Tao Qian’s prose writings; Tao Qian, as did Su Shi in his poetry, was willing to fabricate the details of setting or emotion for the sake of creating a satisfactorily untrammelled persona. Michael Fuller notes several elements in the “East Slope” poems from this period that do not square with reality at that time for Su Shi; the poet seems to have engaged in “radical revision” of his situation to make it appear heroic. “In its abstraction from the details of Su Shi’s personal circumstances and its barrage of interpretative images, ‘Moving to the Lin’gao Pavilion’ builds a strong undercurrent of malaise pulling against the rhetorical control of the poem’s surface,” Fuller explains. Thus the persona of the first Red Cliffs piece is not necessarily the real Su Shi, even if he wished it were.

In the second essay the images suggest that Su Shi’s exile is clearly in mind: even the local fish is different from what he wants and expects; they remind him of his marginal place as well as his social position. In marked contrast to the youthful strategist Zhou Yu alluded to — and to the eloquent and relaxed Master Su — in the first piece, the first person persona here is not in charge; he presents himself at the mercy of others. His friend must bring food, when he has none to provide; his wife finds wine when he is without resources. In a sense, then, his human relationships are harmonious, and his friends and relations come to his aid. In Confucian human terms he is presented as relatively secure, even though located in a remote mountainous place. But when he turns to self-expression, or perhaps even to self-aggrandizement, by challenging nature on his own, his situation changes dramatically. The formerly tranquil landscape is now transformed by violent and forbidding or unfamiliar images: is this the poet’s rereading of scene, or did he really not see this location in this light before?

It is of considerable significance, I feel, that in the first essay he stayed in his boat, stayed intoxicated, experienced emotional ups and downs as “Master Su” and his friends travelled back and forth through time, among a variety of literary genres, and along a spectrum of emotions. There is no poetry quoted or sung in the second essay; the closest is the sing-song rhyming response of the friend who brings the fish and the few lines that describe the scene on the river. In contrast to the first excursion, here the solitary “I” gets out of the boat, away from the water and from literature, to take to the “mountains,” as he scrambles up the cliff. The author’s persona quickly outstrips his companions in the climb, metaphorically taking on the forms of nature himself, if we read the tiger and other images to describe Su Shi rather than his surroundings. Then there is the harsh (not “puny” as Egan understands it) Taoist meditative whistle—or primal scream, in effect—which makes him fearful of his own pretensions to power, knowledge, and individuality. From the height of his perch on the cliff he can see that

\(^{45}\) Another contemporary poem “gives an even more intense sense of the poet’s restlessness;” Fuller, pp. 264-65; cf. pp. 266-67 for that poem.
all is not tranquil, that dangers lurk, perhaps even death awaits in the depths below—likely an echo of the problematic reference to embracing the moon in the first essay, reminding of the Li Bai legend of how he “ha[d] done with it forever” through unwitting suicide. In the earlier essay Master Su played at being philosophically content in Taoist terms; in the second the first person persona pretends to be a Taoist adept, and he becomes frightened by own arrogance. Significantly, this second figure is mocked by a “real” Taoist—one of the “feathered” ones mentioned in the Qian Chibi fu—whether in the reality of the essay or in its fictional dream. Whichever interpretation we give to the relationship between the two personae, “Master Su” and “I,” and the historical Master Su, it is clear that Su Shi took great pains in crafting these works of art, disavowing mere reality—his persona’s attempt to reconcile dream with waking reality fails, and he concludes without comment beyond representing the persona’s considerable confusion, even consternation, at his misunderstanding.

In the foregoing synopsis I have generally followed interpretive directions suggested by Ronald Egan and George Hatch. I would conclude here with not an alternative reading but a yet closer reading of specific images. Without belaboring the point, I would suggest that the various images included in the two essays are mutually contradictory; more particularly, those of the second essay throw into question, if not fully subvert, the reading of philosophical quietude with which the first is assumed to conclude. While it is certainly possible to justify the readings cited above, images such as those referring to the moon reveal anxieties that generally seem to have gone unnoticed. Furthermore, in the second essay there is the concluding clash of waking reality with all other levels of consciousness and reference in this and in the previous essay: Su Shi’s alter ego stands alone, in the dark, bereft even of his aspirations for transcencence.

Let us consider several of these images from a Confucian perspective, knowing Su Shi’s investment in Confucian classical scholarship around the time he composed these essays, the river (or water) and the Cliffs (or mountains) Together they constitute shanshui, landscape, the greater Nature, the Creation, that Su Shi addresses in these essays. Let us reconsider the breakneck dash up the face of the cliff: Su Shi could have done this on his own; we know that the historical poet wandered alone in the area on other occasions. Why when there is food, wine, and company should he desert his “guests” to run off for a personal meditative experience? This does not make sense in the context of the historical poet’s individual circumstances; because the “I” character’s motivation is not presented here, it does not make a convincing story either. However, as we have seen, Su Shi was playing elaborate literary games with the image of the moon in the first essay: all of them lead him back to his boat on the river, where, as

On this final point, even George Hatch seems to have missed this last logical step: “Su Shih exercised a defiant imagination in his literature, preferring to project his personal needs rather than acknowledge reality. He created literary worlds in which to live innocently; he believed in them, even as he doubted their validity. The figure atop Red Cliff, shaking the world with his cry, is playing at being Creator; it is an overwhelming awareness of pretense which brings him tumbling down.” (Hatch, p. 952) I would submit that what tumbled here was the created image, not necessarily the ego of the poet himself.
dawn breaks, the narrative concludes.

Obviously, the River suggests transience, by allusion to the Confucian classic as mentioned above, here especially in reference to human affairs. Along these lines, consider Confucius's famous dictum contrasting rivers and mountains in Lunyu 6:23:

“The Master said, ‘The wise find joy in rivers; the benevolent find joy in mountains. The wise are active; the benevolent are still. The wise are joyful; the benevolent are long-lived.’” When “Master Su” stayed on the river, he was, one might conclude, successful in the terms presented by the essay: if we read this first fu as a summation of his efforts to calm his own mind and to achieve a state of emotional tranquillity in the face of the dramatic turns his life had taken, by the writer’s testimony “Master Su” has taken a Zhuangzian perspective on transience and the continuity of human art by its end. Thus if we apply the Confucian dictum to the first essay, then its persona has found some modicum of “wisdom,” even if aided by wine. He is “wise” in his activity, having found joy in water despite all symbolic suggestions to the contrary.

However, the second essay demonstrates just the opposite when this same Confucian commentary is applied. To the extent that he can be identified with the historical poet, the first person narrator may have “found joy” in the rocky cliff face on previous occasions, but clearly here the “mountain” took no joy in him. He is still “active”—even more so than in the first of the two pieces; in the second there is none of the “stillness” of mind with which the earlier essay concludes, even though this persona is struck silent by the reactions of nature to his whistle. Having been rejected by the mountain, may we conclude that the persona is thus not “benevolent?” I believe we must; surely we see, with the help of Ronald Egan, George Hatch, and other scholars, that Su Shi was anything but “still” emotionally at this moment in his life. And, on the basis of the emotional tenor of the last half of the second fu, we should conclude that the persona is not so wise either—having no longer found any joy, but rather strangeness, in the river itself.

Should we conclude that these observations are as valid for the writer as for his writings? Although it has been conventional to do so with Chinese poets, perhaps we should be a little more cautious with Su Shi: given his self-consciousness as a writer, his encyclopedic knowledge of earlier literature, his proven skill in responding to the works of many of his predecessors, these strikingly crafted essays should be read first as art, and only later as autobiography in any loose sense of that term. The shift in self-referential terminology surely should not be overlooked as is usually done. Students of self-writing nowadays take for granted the proposition that every writer constructs a self, a persona, when writing. The “Master Su” of the first and the “I” of the second, poor conceited and tremulous creatures that they are, could only be pale reflections—and not necessarily the same reflection—of the true genius of the writer Su Shi. They are

---

47 Lau, trans., The Analects, p. 54 (modified: Lau reads shui as “water” although conventionally in contrast to mountains it means rivers).

48 Note Michael Fuller’s impressive explorations of his “allusive density,” pp. 170 ff.
self-consciously limited creations that link him emotionally with writers and situations of the past through remembrance and allusion, that present him as he would be remembered. And how is this? Not as intoxicated and contented, drowsing in his boat as dawn brightens the sky, but instead as frustrated, anxious, sad, alone, hopeful, philosophical—and in the end, standing alone in his doorway in his nightshirt on a cold autumn evening finding no object, no concept on which to fasten his dreams and imagination. Except, of course, the previous writers (the unnamed poets of Shijing and Qu Yuan, Cao Cao, Tao Qian, perhaps Meng Haoran, and even Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu) whose works he draw upon and the readers of other times and places who might glimpse the complexity of his feelings during these few months through the suggestive specificity of the images he relied upon to represent them. This solitary figure is decidedly not a heroic portrait, instead it is most wonderfully human, a true picture of a unique genius seeking to communicate through rich imagery and spare narrative. These essays demonstrate the staggering creativity of the writer, and the uniqueness of his expression. This is why these essays are still fresh after countless rereadings, none of which can ever be completely definitive.49

49In these last few lines I am inspired by Stephen Owen, Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Chinese Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 1-3, and Xiao Chi, “Lyric Archi-Occasion: Coexistence of “Now” and Then,” CLEAR 15 (1993), 17-35. As I was completing this essay, William H. Nienhauser, Jr. brought to my attention Stephen Owen’s collection of studies, The End of the Chinese ‘Middle Ages:’ Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). There (pp. 15-16) Owen raises the very interesting conception of singularity in the writings of the Tang poets Li Bai and Du Fu—and in Tao Qian and Qu Yuan. He further observes: “In ways large and small, writers [of the Tang] begin to assert their particular claim over a range of objects and activities: my land, my style, my interpretation, my garden, my particular beloved.” (p. 7) Although he does not specifically identify Su Shi with that attitude, it fits: these two essays display, if nothing else, the singularity, the solitude, of Su Shi—and his sense of unity with other writers who found themselves similarly isolated.