DIALECTICS OF SPONTANEITY: ART, NATURE, AND PERSONA IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SU SHI (1037-1101)

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ABSTRACT

Spontaneity” is a central albeit problematic concept in Chinese and European aesthetics and ethics. Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), whose literary and artistic creativity opened a new era in Chinese aesthetics, is regarded as a “natural” and “spontaneous” genius. By examining his life and works, this dissertation aims to reveal the paradoxes and dialectics beneath the ideological construct of “spontaneity.” Through close reading, the rhetoric of spontaneity is found to define Su Shi’s artistic pursuit, justify his material possession (in the form of connoisseurship), fashion a literary and political persona, and provide religious relief. Further, after rejecting the naïve notion of “spontaneity” as unpremeditated, unintentional, and immediate, I attempt to present a more nuanced understanding of spontaneity that embraces mediacy, including materiality, craft, learning, rules, ritual, and tradition. Such a dialectic notion consistently underlies Su Shi’s diverse writings on art and natural beauty and is based upon his theory of human nature.

Throughout this project, close reading is integrated with critical thinking, informed by a range of theories and perspectives. Chinese native intellectual traditions that have influenced Su Shi’s thinking are examined as such. Western aesthetic, anthropological, and ethical theories provide systems of reference. The internal logic in Su Shi’s thinking on related issues leads my inquiry from the aesthetics of art to the aesthetics of nature, and finally to ethics (defined as the study of the best-lived life). This dissertation is accordingly divided into three parts, each consisting of two chapters.

The first part problematizes the notion of “artistic spontaneity” by analyzing the role and function of art as “skillful means” in the pursuit of enlightenment. Su Shi’s understanding of human nature provides a common basis for his theories on artistic and ethical spontaneity alike.
The second part discusses how natural beauty is constructed as the paradigm of art and, in this very process, becomes the after-image of art. Su Shi’s connoisseur literature on flowers and rocks are examined, and the historical transformations in the cultural meaning of related natural objects are discussed. The third part discusses Su Shi’s pursuit of complete spiritual and corporeal spontaneity. He emulated the cultural models of ancient poets and practiced the occult art of Daoist alchemy; in both kinds of activities ritualized behavior and cultural paradigms functioned as medium. Thus his understandings of artistic and ethical spontaneity share the same dialectic model: not only both are mediated, but both mean unimpeded resignation in the course of active and constant self-improvement.
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Writing a dissertation is like fighting a long and patient battle, but it is not lonely fought. When the battle has come to an end, though the judgment of history is still unclear, those individuals who have helped and supported me through these years shall be thanked.

My academic interests in Su Shi began in spring 2004. As a MA student of comparative literature at Peking University, I attended a class on Su’s poetry given by Zhang Ming. The same spring I took Yuan Xingpei’s class on Tao Qian. The result was a published paper on Su Shi’s emulation of Tao Qian, a literary emulation that, I argued, influenced Su’s actual drinking habit. I did not contemplate much then on the distance between the author’s person and his publically displayed persona. After I came to Princeton for the doctoral study, with my interests in aesthetics increasingly grown, I began to call into question Su Shi’s spontaneous literary (and artistic) persona.

So the first persons to thank are my teachers at Peking University, who fostered in me an intellectual appetite. Besides Zhang Ming and Yuan Xingpei, I thank Cheng Yuehong, Meng Hua, Yue Daiyun, and Zhang Pei for their guidance.

At Princeton, I benefited from Martin Kern, Andrew Plaks, Anna M. Shields (Maryland), and Wang Ping’s seminars on Chinese literature, Willard Peterson’s seminars on Chinese intellectual history, Benjamin Elman’s seminar on methodology, Stephen F. Teiser’s seminars on religions, Jerome Silbergeld’s seminar on Chinese art history, and Daniel Heller-Rosen and Thomas Hare’s seminars on aesthetics. Susan Naquin’s writing workshops cleared up my English writing. David Prager Branner (Columbia) taught me some basic medieval phonetics. All
these outstanding scholars are my role models, and to describe them individually would exhaust all the positive-meaning adjectives in the English language. The best way to express my gratitude is to show them how these diverse trainings have found explicit or implicit expressions in the current dissertation. A few chapters have grown out of term papers written for Profs. Peterson, Heller-Rosen, and Hare – if such a growth has been dramatic, part of the reason would be their meticulous corrections, insightful comments, and surgical critiques.

Since the writing of the dissertation began, I spent a year (2009-2010) at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, where I took Christian Nimtz’s classes on linguistic philosophy. As an assistant researcher in the International Research Consortium of “Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication in East Asia and Europe,” I benefited from my learned colleagues specialized in religious studies, but above all from those long hours of discussion with Michael Lackner, director of the Consortium. The direct results are the sections on Su Shi’s understanding of human nature and on alchemy, found in Chapter Two and Six respectively.

Except the last two chapters, all earlier chapters have been presented on conferences in various shapes and forms. Questions and comments that I received then and there have been helpful in revising these chapters. Other scholars, who have read substantial parts of the dissertation and gave me good advices, include Michael Nylan, Ronald C. Egan, and Michael A. Fuller. During my short visit to Oxford, Craig Clunas referred me to the anthropology of things, a methodology that eventually enriched Chapter Four of the dissertation. Comments from my committee members –Wang Ping, Stephen F. Teiser, and Anna M. Shields (Maryland) – have helped to shape this dissertation into its final form.

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But above all, I thank my advisor Martin Kern, a most learned and inspiring scholar. He has overseen my scholarly transformation over the years. He has enriched my project with philosophical insight. He has patiently and painstakingly revised each and every chapter of my draft. His moral and pragmatic support has been essential for me to come out of the graduate school well. It is my fortune to have an advisor in the true sense of the word.

In the end, my most endearing thoughts go to my family. My husband, Mitja Stadje, has sustained me with his love and inspired me with unfailing optimism. As for my parents, everything I am, I owe to their love.
Mid-Northern Song 北宋 (960-1127), the age of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), was a time of civil governance and ideological strife. Literati, the class of educational elites, enjoyed unprecedented, though not uncontested, power. Their different opinions on how to use such power led to incendiary factionalism at court. The personal fate of members of the factions was closely associated with their political fortune. They underwent swift promotion or exile en masse. Politics aside, their private life was agreeable. Everyone was a poet; some were painters, calligraphers, or musicians too. Refined \textit{objets d’art} or tasty pieces of nature decorated their studios and gardens. Life was busy and good, were it not for the exiles. Meanwhile, the permeating force of culture and politics nurtured a discreet yearning among their finest members – a yearning for liberation and spontaneity as an escape from the institutionalization of the self.

Su Shi was the premier literatus of his time. Every account of him will begin with a long list of his multifaceted achievements: a poet, prose master, calligrapher, painter, and connoisseur whose literary and artistic creativity opened a new era in Chinese aesthetics and who has been regarded as a “natural” and “spontaneous” genius; an original thinker whose eclectic philosophy crossed intellectual boundaries by combining elements from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism alike; a prominent figure in politics prosecuted for his speech and exiled repeatedly, the last time to the southernmost Hainan Island; a humorist; an alchemist and alleged author of a
pharmaceutical handbook.\(^1\) What united these multifaceted activities was an unerring pursuit of spontaneity – artistic and ethical – that had come to define the outlook of Su Shi’s literature, artwork, and philosophy.

My inquiry is two-fold. First of all, I problematize the image of Su Shi’s “spontaneity” by examining the paradoxes and dialectics beneath the ideological construct of “spontaneity.” Through close reading, the rhetoric of spontaneity is found to define Su Shi’s artistic pursuit, justify his material possession (in the form of connoisseurship), fashion a literary and political persona, and provide religious relief. Second, after rejecting the naïve notion of “spontaneity” as unpremeditated, unintentional, and immediate, I will attempt to present a more nuanced understanding of spontaneity that embraces mediacy, including materiality, craft, learning, rules, ritual, and tradition. Such a dialectic notion consistently underlies Su Shi’s diverse writings on art and natural beauty and is based upon his theory of human nature.

Different from scholars who choose to transliterate a Chinese term (e.g., *wen*, *qi*, and the like) that corresponds to multiple concepts in the English language, I employ an English term that finds its expression in a cluster of Chinese words. Simply put, “spontaneity” in this dissertation is not the counterpart of any Chinese term. It describes a persuasion that various types of human behavior and cultural accomplishment can be concrete articulations of the Way and are therefore expurgated of conscious human agency. A primary Chinese term for this notion is *ziran* 自然 (literally, “self-so-ness”). This concept, to be further explained in Chapter One, could be understood as an adjective, “being natural,” or adverb, “naturally,” but not as a noun in

\(^1\) This handbook, *Su Shen liangfang* 蘇沈良方 [*Effective Medical Recipes of Su and Shen*], was compiled after his death and was based primarily on the work of Shen Gua 沈括 (1031-1095; also read as Shen Kuo).
the modern translation “nature.” The semantic gist of “spontaneity” is also found in such terms like tianran 天然 (“become as such by heaven”), tianjun 天鈞 (“Heaven, the Potter”), tiancai 天才 (“heavenly endowed genius”), shensi 神思 (“inspired thinking”), wuxin 無心 (“mindless”), wuyi 無意 (“without intention”), wuwei 無為 (“without agitation”), and so forth. Furthermore, it is implied in metaphorical images implying artistic creativity, such as a rushing river or a water-mirror, or in comparisons of works of art to natural objects and phenomena (see Chapter One). This cluster of notions constitutes a central set of vocabulary in Chinese ethics and criticism. Therefore, an investigation on the nuanced meaning of “spontaneity” will at the same time illuminate an essential aspect of Chinese aesthetics and intellectual tradition.

Su Shi: a Short Biography

Historical circumstances are important to understand the theoretical concerns of this dissertation. Since most of the chapters focus on a certain issue or concept and do not spend much time explaining the historical circumstances of particular events in Su Shi’s life, it might be useful to begin with a short biography.

Su Shi was born on January 8, 1037,² during the reign of Renzong 仁宗 (1010-1063; r. 1022-1063), the fourth emperor of the Song Dynasty. His family lived in Meishan County.

² Or in Chinese traditional calendar, the nineteenth day in the twelfth month of the third year of the Jingyou Reign 景祐 (1034-1038). In this dissertation, years are generally converted to the international calendar, so are the dates of birth and death. The days and months of events, however, follow their traditional format. The dates and most factual aspects of Su Shi’s life are cited from Kong Fanli 孔凡禮, Su Shi nianpu 蘇軾年譜 (hereafter SSNP).
Sichuan. Genealogy related this clan to the Tang magistrate Su Weidao 蘇味道 (648-705), a talented albeit notorious character. Perhaps due to the pandemonium from late Tang to Song which severed the tie of this region to national politics, the Su clan had been local gentry without a national ambition. His father Su Xun 蘇洵 (1005-1066), known later as a prose master and scholar, began his serious study only at the age of 27 sui. Su Shi was his fifth child. Shi and the sixth child, Su Che 蘇轍 (1039-1112), grew up together as two precocious children. They had a happy childhood among the green mountains of Sichuan. Decades later, the aged poet would fondly talk about his hometown as an idyllic rural utopia, even though he never returned to it after 1069, the end of the three-year mourning period after his father’s death.

Su Shi’s talent and career had been in one way or another shaped by his regional background. After the fall of Tang, the Sichuan area had been ruled by two successive regimes, the Former Shu 前蜀 (907-925) and the Later Shu 後蜀 (934-965), until the Song conquest in 965. Decades after the conquest, the coercion policy of the central and local governments still resulted in cycles of rebellions and repressions. Though the gentry continued to educate their youth, the purpose was less about career success than maintaining the clan’s prestige. Before Su Xun’s uncle Su Huan 蘇渙 (1001-1062) succeeded in the metropolitan jinshi 進士 exam in the year 1024, few students in this area ever attempted civil examination. The separatist regional

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3 See Ma Doucheng (2005), 23-24, 26.

4 According to the traditional calculation of age, when a baby is born, it is 1 sui, and it increases one sui at every New Year. If a child is born at the end of the year (like in the case of Su Shi), it will become 2 sui at the New Year, though its biological age is less than one month. On Su Xun’s determination to study in 1035, see Kong Fanli (2004), 38.

character must have contributed to the archaic essay style cultivated by the three Sus, distinct from the highly ornamented and mannerist style popular among metropolitan students. As chance had it, when Su Xun brought his two sons to the capital Kaifeng (in modern Henan Province) for the jinshi exam in the year 1057, Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007-1073) was the chief examiner. Unsatisfied with the contemporary style, Ouyang was determined to reverse the trend. This examination became a watershed in Song literary history, marking the rise of “ancient prose” (guwen 古文) which emphasized clarity and argumentation. The two younger Sus rode the tide to success. Su Shi was ranked number two in the departmental examination – presumably only because Ouyang suspected this essay to have been written by his own disciple and demoted it on purpose. The Sus won not only national acclaim but also the patronage of Ouyang Xiu, the most renowned literatus and statesman at the time.

Just one month later, Su’s mother passed away. The father and sons hastened home for the funeral and spent one and a half years in ritual mourning. When they returned to the capital in early 1061, Shi and Che continued to succeed in the Decree Examination (zhike 制科), the

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6 According to Su Shi’s letter to Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002-1060), the examiner who recommended Su’s paper to the chief examiner, “Shi has grown up in the wilds and has not learned the ‘contemporary style;’ for this reason, my language is rustic without decoration;” see Su Shi, “Xie Mei Longtu shu” 謝梅龍圖書, Su Shi wenji 蘇軾文集 (hereafter SSWJ), 49:1425.

7 For more on Ouyang Xiu’s role in the “ancient prose” movement, see Egan (1984), 12-28, esp. 27-28.

8 This story is related in Su Shi’s epigraph, written by Su Che (see “Wangxiong Zizhan Duanming muzhiming” 亡兄子瞻端明墓誌銘, Su Che ji 蘇轍集, houji 22:1117-8), as well as in other contemporary sources. Since in the Song jinshi exam, after the papers were submitted, not only the candidates’ names would be covered, but their answers would also be copied by clerks to give them unified handwriting, this story was not implausible.
highest rung in the Song examination system. Throughout the Song, only 35 candidates passed this exam. Shi scored the third (i.e. the highest de facto) rank, and Che the fourth. Even though their examination triumph did not immediately translate into political fortune – under the Song bureaucratic system which valued seniority above all else, they had to begin as low-ranking officials in local governments – they were marked for grand expectations. Su Shi began his bureaucratic career as administrative assistant in Fengxiang (in modern Shaanxi Province) for three years. This was the standard term for a provincial tenure, after which an official should go back to the capital, report on his work, and be assigned to another post. In 1063, Renzong died without leaving an heir, so that his nephew Yingzong (1032-1067; r. 1063-1067) succeeded

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9 Zhike examination was instituted in 964. Only successful jinshi candidates recommended by qualified high officials could take this exam, chaired by the emperor himself. Through the Northern and the Southern Song, zhike was held only 22 times, with 40 candidates who successful passed the exam. See Zhang Xiqing et al. (2001), 227-32; Zhu Shangshu (2006), 125-43. Theoretically, the zhike degree had five ranks, but the highest two ranks were never filled. Even the third rank was rarely given. Before Su Shi, there was only one other candidate who had ever reached this rank; see Kong Fanli, SSNP, 4:93-94. Su Shi’s six essays written during the zhike exam are now collected in SSWJ, 2:43-51.

10 The system of selecting and promoting officials under the Song was notoriously complex. Roughly speaking, according to Deng Xiaonan, the system could be divided into two major venues: one was mokan, in which the rank (tied to salary) of an official was reevaluated (usually) every three years; the other was chaiqian, which took into account one’s qualification such as examination success, accomplishment, and patronage. In the mokan system, seniority trumped qualification; but for people with extraordinary talent or other privileged qualifications, they could enter the faster track of chaiqian. See Deng Xiaonan (1993), 22, 67-70, 88-118.
the throne. When Su finished his term and returned to the capital, he was promoted to Academician in the Academy of History, a coveted sinecure.

Yet again, death visited the Su family. His wife Madam Wang, whom he had married in 1054, died this year, leaving behind a son, Su Mai 蘇邁 (1058-1112). The next year, his father Su Xun also passed away. Shi and Che escorted two coffins back to Sichuan for interment. After the mourning period, he married Madam Wang’s cousin and returned to the capital in the second month of 1069.

In the same month, Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) was promoted to chancellor by the new emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1048-1085; r. 1067-1085). Wang was a renowned classical scholar. Having passed the jinshi exam at 22 sui, he repeatedly refused official appointments, a gesture that stood for moral integrity and earned him immense reputation in and outside the court. Aware of the deep social, economic, and military crisis hidden beneath the surface prosperity of his age, he managed to persuade the ambitious young emperor to push forward a series of socioeconomic reforms, known as “New Policies” (xinfa 新法). These methods soon encountered vehement resistance from officials of more conservative convictions. Their struggle foreshadowed the vicious cycles of reforms and restorations that would contribute to the steady decline of the Song against its nomadic neighbors. This powerful whirlpool also absorbed the political fate of Su Shi and his allies.

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13 For the background, method, and consequence of this reform, see, e.g., James T. C. Liu (1959), Qi Xia (2001), Li Jinshui (2007).
The antagonism between Su Shi and Wang Anshi was perhaps not inevitable, had Wang been more moderate in the pace of reform and more tolerant of different opinions. Wang wanted to radically modernize Song systems of agriculture, transportation, finance, and military service. To a certain extent, he introduced a business model into the operation of the state.\textsuperscript{14} Practicality of these means aside, he was confident in his own integrity to a fault. His rejection of even well-intended and reasonable criticism alienated many, resulting in his speedy promotion of opportunists. One of his major confrontations with Su Shi was on education and examination policies. Since the seventh century, literary talent was a major, if not the sole, concern in the \textit{jinshi} examination. Yet Wang Anshi, a poet himself, regarded literature as useless for practical matters and proposed to replace the test of poetry and rhapsody with commentary on the classics.\textsuperscript{15} Su Shi, in his court indictment on Wang’s reform, opposed this on the ground that neither poetry nor the classics were of any pragmatic value for governance. To write poetry well, however, an examinee must be familiar with the classics and history and would apply their moral and historical lessons to actual governance. In contrast, classicists were opinionated and often versed only in one classic and little else, let alone history or literature.\textsuperscript{16} Shenzong was said to be an avid reader of Su Shi’s prose and was not unsympathetic to his argument, but Wang had a tighter grip on the imperial aspiration. After repeated conflicts, Su Shi withdrew from this losing battle and petitioned for a provincial post. In the end of the year 1071, he became Censorial Vice Governor of Hangzhou (in modern Zhejiang Province).

\textsuperscript{14} On Wang Anshi’s economic reforms, see Deng Guangming (1997), 126-83; Qì Xia (2001), 122-61. A recent monograph on this issue is Li Jinshui (2007).

\textsuperscript{15} See Qì Xia (2001), 100-3.

In the picturesque city of Hangzhou, Su Shi enjoyed the society of poets, singing girls, and Buddhist monks. Here he started to compose *ci* 詞, the popular music poetry genre mainly intended to be sung. He would later give this genre a discursive and masculine voice, initiating the “heroic abandon” (*haofang* 豪放) tradition in lyric poetry and blurring its difference from the more prestigious *shi* 詩. Hangzhou was then the epicenter of Chan Buddhism. At the time, Song Buddhism was divided into Chan, *vinaya*, and teaching lineages, though the actual boundaries in practice were not absolute. Su Shi’s parents had been devout lay Buddhists, but their belief apparently had little to do with the novel Chan style. Perhaps under their influence, the younger Su Shi showed little sympathy to Chan. He revered instead the *vinaya* lineage, regarding it the proper duty of a monk to abide by ascetic precepts in exchange for the exoneration from tax and corveé. The Chan doctrine with its “public case” (*gong’an* 公案) practice appeared to him as self-indulgent, absurd games of little intellectual value. Ironically, soon after he came to Hangzhou, Su Shi began to enjoy the company of some exceptionally intelligent Chan monks and participated in the “public cases” himself, as shown in his witty poems from this period. Many of these monks were so-called “poet monks” whose poetry often betrayed a vivid interest in worldly affairs observed through a transcendental state of mind. Eventually, Su Shi came to accept poetry and fine art as “skillful means” to enlightenment (see Chapter One). The society of poet monks must have contributed to this conclusion. It was in the same period that he became a

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floral afficionado, as seen in his essays and poems written on the peony garden of the Jixiang Temple 吉祥寺 (see Chapter Three).

Besides the elegant life style provided by the southeast, the provincial tenure gave Su Shi chances to observe the malpractice of “New Policies” on the ground. As Vice Governor of Hangzhou, and then Governor of Mizhou (now Zhucheng, Shandong Province) and later of Xuzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province), Su Shi was obligated to carry out the policies that he was opposed to. Those were years of devastation. The countryside was frequented by flood, drought, locusts, and bandits, but officials promoted to push through the reforms chose to cover up the disasters, so as to glorify their governance. In charge of relief works, Su Shi grieved over and was outraged by the miseries of the population. Unable to influence the course, he satirized it. His poems written in this period were often open or concealed acts of criticism of the reforms.

In 1076, Wang Anshi stepped down the second time and lived since in semi-recluse in Nanjing. Years of political turmoil and little accomplishment had weakened the emperor’s trust, and natural disasters were interpreted as divine signals of disapproval. As conservatives saw their chance for a comeback, the remaining reformists at court fought harder still. When Su Shi was transferred to Huzhou (in modern Zhejiang Province) in 1079, he sent a routine report to the throne and groused in it with obvious frustration: “Your Highness knows that I am too foolish to change with the time, and that I cannot follow and accompany the newly promoted talents; Your Highness describes that I am too old to make trouble, so that I could perhaps herd and nourish the common folk.” A confident writer, he knew that the emperor enjoyed his prose. He forgot that less admiring readers were reading it too.

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Under the Song, remonstrance officials were privileged to report on any perceived or suspected crimes or misconduct by officials of all ranks, without revealing their source. Theoretically, even if their allegation was found to be ungrounded, they should not be punished for being alert.\(^{22}\) In the time of factional strife, however, this system could be rigged to serve dominant factions.\(^{23}\) The new chancellor Wang Gui 王珪 (1019-1085), feeling his position insecure, tried to further damage the conservative cause.\(^{24}\) Su Shi, who was broadly connected and whose satirical poems and essays were widely popular, was a starter. A selection of his poems written during his provincial posts was identified as libel against the reforms and consequently against the throne. Su was seized in Huzhou, moved to the capital, and imprisoned at the Crow Terrace for interrogation.\(^{25}\) Many who had previously received these poems were implicated, demoted, or exiled. In the end, partly because the interrogators failed to produce substantial evidence for conviction, partly because of the rescue efforts by many, including the Empress Dowager and Wang Anshi himself, Su Shi was spared of death. He was exiled to the desolate Huangzhou (in modern Hubei Province).

\(^{22}\) On this “remonstrance based on hearsay” (fengwen yanshi 風聞言事) system, see Yu Yunguo 虞雲國, “Zhidu yu juwen zhijian: Songdai taijian kaocha defang de xinxi qudao” 制度與具文之間：宋代台諫考察地方的信息渠道, in Deng Xiaonan (2008), 85-91. Again, theoretically, the remonstrance official could even reject the emperor’s request to reveal their source; in reality, however, there were quite a few cases when remonstrance officials were punished for false allegations. See ibid., 90.

\(^{23}\) For more on the remonstrance system’s “catalyst role” in factional strife, see Shen Songqin (1998), 88-114.

\(^{24}\) See Li Yibing (1983), 281-2.

\(^{25}\) For more on this case, known as “the Crow Terrace case of poetry” 烏臺詩案, see Hartman (1990), (1993).
It was in Huangzhou that Su Shi became Dongpo, or “East Slope,” the style name by which he is commonly known to date. It refers to his farming on a piece of waste field east of the city wall. This name also relates him to Bo Juyi 白居易 (772-846), who during his tenure at Zhongzhou (in modern Sichuan province) gardened on a slope east of the city. Yet where Bo Juyi the Prefect saw in horticulture an analogy for governance, Su Shi the exile was driven by necessity.26 A closer analogy for his situation was Tao Qian 陶淵 (352-427),27 a poet recluse whose limpid poetic style Su Shi consciously emulated in a set of eight pentasyllabic poems celebrating the farming life. This ease with adversity, however, did not come without a painful period of transition. When Su first came to Huangzhou, he was tormented by the sense of guilt and shame. His rage against injustice turned inward to become self-censorship. He remorse that his unlicensed urge for writing had made him vulnerable and implicated those close to him. When he did not hide indoors, he meditated in the Buddhist Anguo Temple 安國寺 and read only sutras for some time.28 It seemed that he reached mental tranquility first by transcending the glory and disgrace in the phenomenal world and then by the catharsis of physical labor and its


27 There had been many debates on Tao Qian’s name and date. For a summary, see Swartz (2008), 1n1, 5n10. She chooses Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, while I prefer Tao Qian, since the different contexts when Su Shi used “Tao Qian” and “Yuanming” suggest that he regarded Qian as the formal name and Yuanming the polite name. The dates of Tao Qian follow Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, “Tao Yuanming nianpu jianbian” 陶淵明年譜簡編, in Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu 陶淵明集箋注 (hereafter TYM), 845-65. For the contention over his dates and its implications, see n.7, Chapter Five.

immediate joy. The seclusion also gave him quiet time for study. Having made remarkable progress in writing, scholarship, calligraphy, and painting, he saw his reputation rising in proportion to the harshness of the persecution. A transcendent attitude toward the vicissitudes of life, most famously exhibited in the former “Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” 赤壁賦 written in 1082, came to define the image of Su Shi ever since.

In the year 1084, Shenzong finally resurrected Su Shi by sending a “hand-written edict” which circumvented the entire court bureaucracy and transferred him to Ruzhou (in modern Henan Province), a city close to the capital. Cautious against the intricacies of court politics, Su petitioned to retire in Changzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province) and was granted his request in the second month of 1085. Just one month later, Shenzong died at 38 sui. His teenage son Zhezong 哲宗 (1076-1100; r. 1085-1100) ascended the throne. The custodian of the emperor was the grandmother, Empress Dowager Xuanren 宣仁太后 (1032-1093), the widow of Yingzong.

The Empress Dowager admired the governance of Renzong, her father-in-law, and was determined to restore his more conservative policies. The formidable octogenarian Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) ended his retirement at Luoyang and came back to lead the court. Bearing in mind Renzong’s high opinion of the Su brothers, she patronized Su Shi and promoted him swiftly. He was summoned back as Gentleman for Court Service, a mere prestigious title. Yet before he even arrived at the capital, he was promoted to Director of Rites. He arrived at Kaifeng at the end of 1085 and was appointed Imperial Diarist two weeks later. In the third month of 1086, he was further promoted to Secretariat Drafter, a post that empowered him to draft

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29 Su Shi, “Chibi fu” 赤壁賦, SSSJ, 1:5-6.
imperial edicts or to reject doing so when he deemed the matter improper. His meteoric ascension made him again a target of libel.

Politics in this period, known as Yuanyou 元祐 (1086-1094), were marked by swift upward and downward mobility in the deadly clashes of powers. It began with the dyarchy of Sima Guang, resolute to dismantle the whole New Policies, and Zhang Dun 章惇 (1035-1105), a beneficiary of the reforms. Zhang was soon expelled. Su Che was now a member in the board of remonstrance. His vehement impeachments resulted in the dismissal of many high-ranking reformists. Their edicts of reprimand, moreover, were often drafted by the elder Su, whose rhetorical flair frequently added insult to injury. Yet Su Shi was in essence a moderate. His sympathy toward some measures of the reforms did not find in Sima Guang an attentive ear.

When the restoration was in full swing, Sima Guang died in the ninth month of 1086, a mere four months after Wang Anshi’s death. The reformist court immediately splintered into more factions. Anecdotes had it that Su Shi and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), a rising lixue 理学 scholar and new tutor to the throne, held each other in disdain. Su Shi was then a Hanlin Academician and further appointed imperial tutor Reader-in-waiting in 1087. Su Che soon joined the tutorial board. The Sus’ scholarship, recommending pragmatism and historicism, was in stark contrast with the moral philosophy of the Chengs – Cheng Yi and his elder brother, Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032-1085). Since the Sus came from Sichuan, the ancient state of Shu 蜀, while the Chengs were active in Luoyang, their respective followers’ groups were thus called the Shu School 蜀學 and the Luo School 洛學. The two schools were in constant tension over issues of

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31 In particular, Su Shi was against Sima Guang’s recovery of the conscription system, proposing instead to retain the reformist measure of building a professional army. See Li Yibing (1983), 466-72.
education and examination. Cheng Yi was expelled from the court in the eighth month of 1087. The rapid promotion of the Sus had also unsettled some followers of Sima Guang, loosely called the Shuo Faction 朔派, or “the Northerners.”³² Though the Empress Dowager remained Su’s unfailing guardian, he was demoralized by the endless strife, and so he again petitioned for a provincial post. In the fourth month of 1089, he left the capital to govern Hangzhou, an agreeable task.

Despite politics, Su Shi was in the best time of his life. He enjoyed the metropolitan comfort and company. Among his many younger protégés were the “Four Scholars”: Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), Qin Guan 秦觀 (1049-1100), Chao Buzhi 晁補之 (1053-1110), and Zhang Lei 張耒 (1054-1114). Huang Tingjian more than anyone else was regarded his disciple and peer. Huang and another member of this circle, Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053-1101), would later be called the founders of the Jiangxi School 江西詩派, the most influential school of Song poetry.³³

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³² For a general description of the Yuanyou period factional strife, see Shen Songqin (1998), 299-303; for Su Shi’s experience in particular, see Li Yibing (1983), 484-547.

³³ The name “Jiangxi School” (Jiangxi shipai/江西詩派) came from Lü Benzhong’s 呂本中 (1084-1145) “Jiangxi shishe zongpai tu” 江西詩社宗派圖, composed in the early 1100s or 1130s; on the contention of its date, see Wu Xiaoman (2005), 12-16. In reality, though Huang Tingjian was a native from Jiangxi, not all of the twenty-five poets that Lü included in this “school” came from Jiangxi. Furthermore, though members of this school were more or less influenced by Huang Tingjian’s poetry, there was no direct lineage of transmission that formalized anything resembling a “school” when these poets were alive. Nevertheless, Lü’s retrospective creation of this school exerted huge influence in Southern Song and beyond. For more on the Jiangxi School, see Gong Pengcheng (1983), Mo Lifeng (1986), Huang Qifang
Su’s successive provincial tenures, for all we can tell, were active and pleasant. In Hangzhou (1089-1091), he dredged the silts in the West Lake and built a dyke with the mud. It was commemorated as the Su Dyke, named in parallelism to the Bo Dyke built by Bo Juyi. He spent a year (1091-1092) in Yingzhou (in modern Anhui Province) and desilted their West Lake too. He suppressed bandits and organized famine relief. In early 1092 he was transferred to Yangzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province), but a mere half year later was again summoned to court, appointed Minister of War and Reader-in-waiting.

Su Shi enjoyed governance more than politics. Even on his way back to the court, he petitioned repeatedly for some provincial post, to no avail. He was soon appointed Minister of Rites, in charge of state ritual ceremonies, and was honored with two academician titles: Academician of Duanming Hall and Hanlin Academician Reader-in-waiting. This was a rare honor. With his brother as Vice Director of the Chancellery, they both were one step away from chancellorship, and hence attracted vehement attacks. Su Shi’s repeated petitions for provincial posts were routinely ignored by the Empress Dowager – confident in her powerful patronage.

In the eighth month of 1093, his second wife Wang Runzhi 王闱之 (1048-1093) died, leaving him two sons, Su Dai 蘇迨 (1070-1126) and Su Guo 蘇過 (1072-1123). One month later, Empress Dowager Xuanren also passed away, causing a political seism. The young emperor had long borne a grudge against the authoritarian grandmother and was eager to gain control. The court was reshuffled: reformists flocked back and conservatives were demoted. Su Shi’s previous request to govern Dingzhou (in modern Hebei Province), a barren frontier prefecture, was granted.

Dingzhou was less of a city than a fortress, perpetually on guard against Liao (907-1125), the Khitan Empire. This nomadic neighbor had been ailing Song ever since its foundation. By means of a treaty signed at Chanyuan (now Puyang, Henan Province) in 1004, Song bought peace with annual tributes of silver and silk. Compared to the cost of warfare, it was a good bargain. But peace, as Su Shi found out, had idled the Song troops. He engaged himself in military drills and discipline.

Meanwhile, a storm was gathering in court. The emperor decided to continue with his father’s reforms. Zhang Dun again became Chancellor. In the intercalary fourth month of 1094, an edict arrived at Dingzhou which deprived Su Shi of his “academician” titles and demoted him to Yingzhou (now Yingde, Guangdong Province). The last decade of exiles in Su Shi’s life began.

Altogether 119 officials who served in the Yuanyou period were whisked to remote margins of the empire. On his southward journey, Su Shi came across Su Che, also on his way to Ruzhou. They decided to let Su Mai bring most members of the family to Yixing (in modern Jiangsu Province). Still on the journey, Su Shi received another edict banishing him farther to Huizhou (in modern Guangdong Province), a semi-barbaric miasmatic region. Only his youngest son Su Guo and his concubine Wang Zhaoyun 王朝雲 (1062-1096) accompanied him.

Curiously, amidst solitude, humiliation, and destitution, Su Shi found peace. As I will explore in the last section of this dissertation, he modeled himself after Tao Qian, a recluse, and Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343), a Daoist alchemist. He wrote matching poems to the entire poetic

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34 It has been generally agreed that Ge Hong was born in 283. Whether he lived 61 or 81 years, however, is subject of debate. For a comprehensive summary of this issue, see Yang Mingzhao 楊明照, *Baopuzi*
corpus of Tao Qian, practiced inner alchemy, and perhaps also experimented with laboratorial alchemy. Despite his thick interests in medicine, Zhaoyun died in the summer of 1096 of miasma.

Without a lodge of his own, Su Shi built a house on the White Crane Peak at Mt. Luofu 羅浮. After it was completed in the second month of 1097, Su Mai brought over the rest of the family for permanent residence. Barely two months later, however, another edict arrived and banished Su Shi farther across the strait to Danzhou (in modern Hainan Province). This time he brought Su Guo alone.

In the even less civilized Danzhou, Su Shi was challenged by the lack of medicine or company. He filled his solitude by playing literary games with Guo, matching poems of Tao Qian, and pursuing classical scholarship. In 1099 he finished a commentary on the *Book of Changes*. It was a project started by Su Xun and complemented later by Su Che, thus representing the scholarship of the Su family. The defining voice, however, is Su Shi’s. Su Shi declared this work, together with a commentary on the *Analects* written during his exile in Huangzhou and a commentary on the *Book of Documents*, to be his greatest intellectual pride.\(^{35}\) For intellectual historians of today, Su’s commentaries represent an alternative tradition to that of *lixue*, defined by the Chengs and later by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200).\(^{36}\)

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*waipian jiaojian* 抱朴子外篇校箋, Appendix VII, 795-806. Yang argues that Ge Hong died in 343. For the contending opinion of the year 363, see Wang Liqi (1997), 35-36.


\(^{36}\) In Peter K. Bol’s words, Su Shi represented the intellectual tradition of “unity with individuality” or “unity with diversity;” see Bol (1992), 254-99.
Despite the isolation of Hainan, Su Shi’s poems written there were nevertheless widely disseminated on the mainland. Their central theme was to celebrate his acceptance of fate, as he repeatedly declared to have integrated into the local “barbaric” ethnic group – a claim to be examined and challenged in Chapter Five. But then, yet another wave from the epicenter reached him. Renzong died in the first month of 1100, at the age of 25 sui, leaving no heir. His brother Zhao Ji (1082-1135; r. 1100-1125) succeeded the throne, to be known as Huizong, a fine painter and calligrapher whose tutelage saw the empire’s downfall to the Khitans. In the general amnesty celebrating the enthronement, Su Shi returned from Hainan. He took time to decide where to retire. His long unseen hometown was too far. He finally decided upon Changzhou, where he had some estates. He followed the waterway from Jiangxi to Jiangsu. The hot weather and tumble of the journey finally seized him. On August 24, 1101, he died of miasma soon after he arrived at Changzhou.

State of the Field

Su Shi was one of the most studied poets in pre-modern China. During his life, more than a dozen anthologies of his work had already been published and broadly circulated as far as Liao, Japan, and Korea. Despite the 1105 imperial ban on his writing, his shi poetry and prose collection, believed to be largely edited by himself, was published soon after his death, titled as Dongpo liu ji 東坡六集 [Six Collections of Dongpo]. With some addition, it became Dongpo qi ji 東坡七集 [Seven Collections of Dongpo] in the twelfth century. This edition served as the

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37 See Zeng Zaozhuang (2001), Ch.1 & 2.

38 As related by Wang Pizhi 王闢之 (1031-?) in Shengshui yantan lu 澶水燕談錄, 7:89-90.
foundation for subsequent Su Shi collections. It was, however, different from today’s *Dongpo qi ji* edition which was recompiled in the Ming. Because of Su’s popularity, many dubious works were credited to him even in his lifetime. Some were included into *Dongpo da quanji* [Complete Collections of Dongpo], a commercial print published in the Southern Song (1127-1279).\(^{39}\)

Scholarship on Su Shi also began in the Southern Song, with many biographies and commentaries published. More than ten *nianpu* 年譜 biographies were written, including one by the renowned historian Li Tao 李燾 (1115-1184). Four of these *nianpu* are still extant. About eight commentaries on Su Shi’s poetry were published, but only two have been transmitted in relatively complete form. One is known as the “Wang commentary” 王注, credited to Wang Shipeng 王十朋 (1112-1171) and organized according to genres. Scholars suspect, however, that it was produced by book merchants. The other commentary, published in 1213, was composed by Shi Yuanzhi 施元之 (d.u.), Gu Xi 顧禧 (d.u.), and Shi Su 施宿 (d.u.), and hence called the “Shi-Gu commentary” 施顧注. It is chronologically arranged.

Together with the revived interests in Song poetry, a few prominent Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) scholars contributed to Su Shi studies, including Zha Shenxing 查慎行 (1650-1727), Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805), Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733-1818), Feng Yingliu 馮應榴 (1741-1801), and Shen Qinhan 沈欽韓 (1775-1831).\(^{40}\) The most comprehensive critical edition, *Su...* 

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\(^{39}\) On these Song editions, see Liu Shangrong (1988), 1-5.

\(^{40}\) Published connotated editions include: Zha Shenxing, *Bu zhu Dongpo Xiansheng biannian shi* 補注東坡先生編年詩 and Feng Yingliu, *Su Wenzhong gong shi hezhu* 蘇文忠公詩合注. For more detailed discussions on pre-modern editions, see Wang Jinghon (1969), Zhu Chuanyu (1982) (No. 11 & 14), Liu
Wenzhong Gong shi bianzhu jicheng 蘇文忠公詩編注集成, was however compiled by Wang Wengao 王文詡 (1764-?), a relatively obscure scholar.

Traditional commentaries and biographical studies on Su Shi have largely converged into – and to a certain extent, been eclipsed by – the work of a single scholar, Kong Fanli 孔凡禮 (1923-2010), editor of Su Shi shiji 蘇軾詩集 (1982) and Su Shi wenji 蘇軾文集 (1986), and author of Su Shi nianpu 蘇軾年譜 (1998), all published by Zhonghua shuju in Beijing. Su Shi shiji is chronically arranged and annotated, while Su Shi wenji is arranged by genre, not annotated, and unfortunately includes a few dubious pieces. Zhonghua shuju continued to publish a complete collection of Su Shi’s lyric songs in 2002, annotated and arranged chronically.

Shangrong (1988), and Zeng Zaozhuang (2001). An English summary may be found in Fuller (1990), 311-15.

41 Some of the dubious pieces are compiled separately in the last volume “Lost Writing,” but occasionally also find their ways into the authenticated main collection. For instance, a playful piece, “Shuixiang ji” 睡鄉記 [“History of the Land of Sleep”] is collected in the “Records” section (SSWJ, 11:372), and a very similar piece titled as “Zuixiang ji” 醉鄉記 [“History of the Land of Drunkenness”] is found in the “Lost Writing” [SSWJ, yiwen 佚文 1:2419]. The latter is in fact Wang Ji’s 王績 (585-644) work, mentioned in his biography in the History of Tang; while the former is a parody written by Su Shi’s pupil Chao Buzhi 晁補之 (1053-1110), titled as “Shuixiangge ji” 睡鄉閣記 [“Record of the Tower of the Land of Sleep”], found in Jilei ji 雞肋集, juan 31. Since Jilei Ji was compiled by Chao himself, pieces in it are considered authentic. I thank Professor Zhang Ming 張鳴 (Peking University) for this information.
Taiwan publishers have contributed to the cause mostly by republishing pre-modern editions, making them more readily available.\footnote{Including: \textit{Dongpo qiji} 東坡七集 (Taipei, 1965); \textit{Su Wenzhonggong shi bianzhu jicheng} 蘇文忠公詩編注集成 (Taipei, 1967); \textit{Su shi pingzhu huichao} 蘇詩評注彚鈔 (Taipei, 1967); \textit{Song ke Shi Gu zhu Su shi} 宋刻施顧注蘇詩 (Taipei, 1969); \textit{Dongpo shi jizhu} 東坡詩集注 (Taipei, 1981); \textit{Dongpo quanji} 東坡全集 (Taipei, 1983).
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There have been ample studies on Su Shi, but most, especially perhaps those published in Chinese, tend to be biographical, philological, and literal. Not enough attention has been heeded on the distance between the author’s person and his literary persona. Nor has there been enough genuine effort to bring Su Shi, a truly original thinker who thinks through imagistic literature, into the dialogue of comparative literature. Below I will attempt to summarize extant scholarship, so as to show the sources that have enriched my project and the tendencies that it argues against.

Su Shi scholarship in Chinese, especially that prior to the mid-1980s, has been summarized in several major series of compilations, produced by Sichuan University (1980, 1994), The Society of Su Shi Studies (1982, 1983, 1986), and the Tianyi publisher in Taiwan (1982). Here I will only briefly introduce some important works published since the mid-1980s. Xue Ruisheng (1988) examined closely such terminologies like Su Style, Su Learning, and Su School. Zhang Sanxi (1988) and Zhou Xianshen (1988) discussed the aesthetic features of Su Shi’s poetry. For Su Shi’s philosophical and religious pursuits, Zhong Laiyin (1990) and Jiang Shengdiao (1998) examined Su Shi’s engagement with Daoism, while Tang Lingling and Zhou Weimin (1996) provided a general discussion on elements in Su’s intellectual system. Attempts of bridging the gap between the studies on Su Shi’s literature and philosophy (or religion) include Leng Chengjin (2003), Zhou Yukai (2001), and Chen Zhongzhe (2004). Various genres...
of Su Shi’s writing have received special attention: see, for instance, Xie Minling (2000) on Su Shi’s history prose, Xu Yuefang (2002) on Su’s bureaucratic writing and epistles, and Zheng Fangxiang (2006) on Su Shi’s exile poetry. Su Shi’s lyric songs, though important and influential, received little pre-modern scholarly attention. In accordance to the modern elevation of lyric song in the hierarchy of genres, Yeh Chia-ying (1988) and Liu Shi (1992) have produced exemplary works. In addition to these separate studies, Zeng Zaozhuang (1984), Wang Shuizhao (1994), and Zhu Jinghua (1983, 1997) all have attempted to define the general understanding of Su Shi and his influence.

Su Shi has enjoyed long-standing scholarly attention in Japan. The post-war study was led by two prominent scholars, Chikusa Masaaki (1964, 1967) and Yoshikawa Kōjirō (1966). In the 1960s and 1970s, Nishino Jōji also published a series of articles on Su Shi. His research was mainly focused on the influence that Su Shi received from previous poets and on his circle, studied in its contemporary literary and political context. More recently, Ogawa Tamaki (1997) discussed the aesthetic and phonological features of Su Shi’s poetry. Important Su Shi scholars now active in Japan include Hokari Yoshiaki (1987, 2005) and Uchiyama Seiya (1996, 2005). Hokari’s study is focused on Su Shi’s lyric songs. Uchiyama expands his attention to the different media through which Su Shi’s reputation was promoted and his works circulated, like manuscript copying, block printing, and gossip.

Su Shi is one of few Chinese poets who have attracted particular attention in English scholarship. Its first English biography, The Gay Genius (1947) by Lin Yutang, remains a witty reading to date. George C. Hatch (1976), as a long section in Sung Biographies, is a succinct summary of Su Shi’s life. It serves as a starting point for serious students. The work of Ronald C. Egan (1994) is so far the most ambitious attempt in presenting Su Shi’s intellectual life in his
totality. It contextualizes his works against a vast backdrop of contemporary politics, philosophy, and art. It is perhaps the best biography of Su Shi written in any language so far. It does however tend to present a more “orthodox” Su Shi whose interests in religion were mostly philosophical. My inquiry will instead show a more esoteric and less serene man: he was often haunted by inner struggles and self-doubt; his religious beliefs included such “popular” elements as Buddhist soteriology or Daoist alchemy.

Su Shi has been the subject of eight full-length English monographs, all originally written as dissertations.\(^43\) Liouyi Yuh (Univ. of Washington, 1972) gave a comparative reading of Liu Yong’s 柳永 (987?-1053?) and Su Shi’s lyric songs. Peter K. Bol (Princeton, 1982) discussed how Su Shi and his followers, by giving priority to learning from past experience and the apprehension of Dao as sources of values, contributed to the reevaluation of the role of culture in literati life; creativity was essential to their pursuit of Dao. Though Bol tends to conflate the various meanings of \(\textit{wen}\)\(^44\) as if they all shared the same agenda (a tendency which remains in his later chef d’oeuvre, “\textit{This Culture of Ours}”), his discussion has influenced many subsequent works on Su Shi and remains relevant to scholarship to date. Vincent Yang (1989) offered a comparative study between Su Shi and William Wordsworth, arguing that both exhibited a shift of perspective in their poetry from this-worldliness to other-worldliness, as observed in the relation of self and nature in their landscape poetry. In the characterization of Su Shi’s literature

\(^43\) Below, reference to an unpublished dissertation gives both the institution and the date of the degree, while that to a published one gives only the date of publication.

\(^44\) Depending on the context, it could mean very different things, including natural pattern, cultural accomplishment, literature, and most particularly, prose. Bol’s tendency is shown when, for instance, he quotes Su Shi’s comment on his own writing and tries to imply that it refers rather to \(\textit{wen}\) “as a concept, as an ability, as an institution”; Bol (1982), 104.
as “Romanticist” and his intellectual position as “Neo-Confucian,” however, Yang’s work is fundamentally dubious. Kathleen M. Tomlonovic (Univ. of Washington, 1989) discussed Su Shi’s exile poetry. Her focus on the theme of “returning home” shared some similar concerns with Chapter Five of this dissertation. Michael A. Fuller (1990) delivered a thoughtful analysis sitting between poetics and intellectual history, tracing the evolving content and skill of Su Shi’s poetry from his early period through the Huangzhou exile, and arguing that this evolution was associated with Su’s ever-broadening understanding of the patterns of human experience (li 理).

Alice Cheang (Harvard, 1991) also attempted to read Su Shi’s literature as part of his pursuit of the Way, arguing that his exile poetry was an alternative expression of his Confucian commitment. The author appears somewhat too eager, however, to read everything as a Confucian allegory, including even poems on alchemy and medicine. Beata Grant (1994) produced a comprehensive and in-depth examination of Buddhist influence in Su’s life and writing. Her discussion on the link between Buddhist enlightenment and literary spontaneity has substantially informed my dissertation. In the most recent PhD dissertation on Su Shi, Bi Xiyan (2003) attempted to understand how Su Shi’s creativity interacted with received rules, literary genres, and conventions. On the matter of spontaneity, she argues that in Su Shi’s view, the Confucian classics were in essence spontaneous responses to worldly affairs based on common human feelings; thus, accepting the essence of the classical tradition means to celebrate spontaneity.

Other books that notably deal with Su Shi include Kang-I Sun Chang (1980) and Murck (1983), on his lyric songs, and Xiaoshan Yang (2003) and Egan (2006), on his connoisseurship.
In addition to these monographs, many interesting articles have been published. This dissertation has been particularly inspired by Egan (1983) and Fuller (1993), both concerning more or less the questions of “spontaneity” or “immediacy” in Su Shi’s painting theory, as well as Fuller (2005), which has discussed Su Shi’s notion of meaning in aesthetic experience.

The abundant scholarship on Su Shi presents a bold opportunity and a challenge. Biographical or philological studies on him have long been exhaustive. On the other hand, a task has just started to claim scholarly attention, that is, to read Su Shi sympathetically and critically, from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective, so as to renew his relevance to our contemporary discourse on Chinese poetry. The current project tries to transcend the traditional categories like wen and Dao, or Confucianism versus Buddhism, partly by exploring (and perhaps restoring) the contexts, purposes, and undertones of Su Shi’s writing. I argue that Su Shi’s image as a spontaneous genius is a deliberately constructed poetic persona, which fulfills multiple rhetorical or pragmatic functions. To my mind, one cannot deduce this poetic persona from his poetry and take it as faithful description of the author, and then reversely apply this image of the author to interpret his poetry. Such circular interpretation eternalizes a myth that this dissertation aims to debunk.

Methodology and Chapter Outline

This dissertation attempts to integrate close reading and critical thinking, informed by a range of theories and perspectives. These theoretical approaches are called for by the texts to illustrate

their rich dimensions. The internal logic in Su Shi’s thinking on the issue of “spontaneity” leads my inquiry from the aesthetics of art to the aesthetics of nature, and finally to ethics.

The first part of the dissertation, “The Making of Spontaneity in a Work of Art,” discusses spontaneous art as an aesthetic ideal. The term “artistic spontaneity” is an oxymoron, since, unlike a natural object, a work of art must be made with craft and through the intentionality of the artist. The issue of intentionality and its relation to artistic creativity has been a central theme in aesthetic reflections in European and Chinese traditions alike. For this reason, Western theories on the nature and function of art, on subconsciousness, and on art as mnemonics are brought into dialogue with Su Shi’s answer to questions that are asked differently but share similar concerns.

Chapter One, “On the Way of Language,” argues that the pursuit of spontaneity through art resembles the pursuit of the Way (or Buddhist Enlightenment) through language, both aiming at the negation of their means. Su Shi proposes that art can be used as “skillful means” to approach the ultimate goal. For Su Shi, poetry is the most effective means precisely because of language’s relative independence to perishable material mediums, which in turn promises literary immortality. The end of the linguistic way is paradoxical, leading both to the negation of the means and the celebration of it, a phenomenon also observed in the historical relation of Buddhism to language.

Chapter Two studies the mechanism of making the spontaneous appearance of art. Su’s theory of art is grounded in his understanding of human nature (xing 性), including the nature of the Sage, as ever imperfect. Instincts and desires are an essential part of human nature. This ethical theory distinguishes him from other contemporary thinkers. For him, art is the means of self-cultivation. An artist must engage in persistent practice to internalize artistic rules into his
physical being. At the moment of composition, however, he must sink into dynamic oblivion, discarding conscious control and forgetting even his pursuit of perfection. The imperfection of the spontaneous artwork preserves the individuality of the artist, making his physical traces immortal. It manifests itself in the individualism and expressionism of Su Shi’s artwork, as art historians have observed.

As Part One examines how art attempts to become non-art (a notion inspired by Adornian ethical aesthetics), Part Two, “Material Meaning,” discusses how natural objects are given agency in connoisseur discourse and are collected and exchanged like works of art. The legitimacy of nature aesthetics has been contested in the history of aesthetics as an academic discipline. An aesthetic attitude toward nature cannot but constantly translate the sheer presence of materiality into meaning. For Su Shi, the resistance of a natural object to utilitarian appropriation, even to the generation of sensual delight, makes it particularly meaningful. This interplay of materiality and meaning is shown by examining the connoisseur histories of certain objects, Su Shi’s discourse on them, and his role in the historical transformation of their meaning. As examined in Chapter Three, “Flowers That Understand Language,” Su’s literary representation on the calamus, the peony, and the plum witnessed a transition of aesthetic ideals from the sensual to the symbolic; the aesthetics of nature became possible as nature was seen as linguistic and full of meaning. Chapter Four, “Eloquent Stones,” examines Su’s literature on inkstones and garden rocks. The sociological study of things and the anthropological study of gift and commodity exchange provide systems of reference. The “unbelongingness” of natural objects is found to be an ideological construct, justifying their aestheticization, signification, moralization, and sometimes commodification.
Part Three, “The Spontaneous Body,” discusses Su Shi’s pursuit of total spiritual and corporeal spontaneity, represented by his emulation of the recluse poet Tao Qian and of the alchemist Ge Hong during his last exiles. Since Su Shi’s theory on human nature emphasizes the centrality of physical instincts, the transformation of the human body is an integral part of self-cultivation. Therefore, in using the term “ethics,” I do not imply the narrow study of moral conduct corresponding to the Confucian concept of *dexing* 德行. Instead, I use the Aristotelian concept of “ethics” as the study of *eudaimonia*, “the best-lived life,” which includes both spiritual and physical aspects.

Chapter Five is concerned with the relation of the literatus as an individual to the state. In exile, Su Shi wrote hundreds of verses matching the entire poetic corpus of Tao Qian, redefining his banishment as by choice instead of by force. To him, Tao Qian’s resignation represented an option of “individual salvation” resisting the centralized imperial ideology of loyalty and universalism. Su’s own banishment, similarly, resulted from the honest expression of his authentic nature. Paradoxically, when Su Shi experienced his semi-barbaric surroundings through the lens of Tao’s farmstead poetry, the uncultured nature lost its immediacy and was familiarized as a cultural landscape. His return *into* nature was simultaneously his retreat *from* nature into an inner state of spontaneity. His version of Tao Qian’s Peach Blossom Spring became an inner utopia accessible in dream and in meditation.

The last chapter examines Su Shi’s belief in and practice of Daoist alchemy. For him, the physical transformation of the human body was in accordance with the cosmic process and would result in complete spiritual and corporeal spontaneity. Even if immortality could not be achieved, however, it remained a moral imperative to prolong one’s physical existence through medicine or alchemy, as much as to resign philosophically at the arrival of death. In conclusion,
just as the aesthetic ideal of spontaneity is always mediated, Su Shi’s ethical ideal of spontaneity was mediated by rituals and cultural paradigms. Both are defined as a dynamic equilibrium: the spontaneous resignation in the course of perpetual self-improvement.

The multiple theoretical perspectives that I bring to my analysis include aesthetics, art history, anthropology, psychology, and, less explicitly, experimental ethics. The eclectic feature of Su Shi’s thoughts further necessitates a survey of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Chinese political traditions, and alchemical theories. In combining these diverse concepts and phenomena toward a consistent and systematic study, I do not attempt to discuss theoretical perspectives on their own. Instead, I focus my analysis closely on the texts, even though one never escapes the perspectives one brings to them.
PART I: THE MAKING OF SPONTANEITY IN A WORK OF ART
CHAPTER ONE

On the Way of Language

Spontaneous Art as an Aesthetic Ideal

“Spontaneity” is a central albeit problematic concept in Chinese and Western theories of art. As an ideal type, a “spontaneous artist” is void of self-consciousness or intentionality, inasmuch as

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1 It may appear anachronistic to apply the term “art” to a pre-modern Chinese context and to call Su Shi, among others, an “artist.” This legitimate challenge invites justification. According to the art historian Hans Belting, the era of art in Europe did not begin abruptly until 1400, when “art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake – art as invented by a famous artist and defined by a proper theory;” see Belting (1990), “Foreword,” xxi. The art critic Arthur Danto further argues that the era of art ended in the 1980s, when artists and museum curators ceased to care about any a priori criterion as to what that art must look like; see Danto (1997), 4-6. Danto regards the concept of “art” representing only a certain model of narrative in the life of art practice, which lived before and after the era of art. In this regard, Su Shi lived in a world where there was art practice but not the modern concept of art. To potential critics who may question whether it is appropriate to call a Song painting “a work of art,” I will answer that it is no less so than, say, calling Laocoon “a work of art.” I will not venture to provide a general definition of “art,” which is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. For a summary of contemporary debates on the definition of art and a reference list for further reading, see Stephen Davies, “Definitions of art,” in Gaut & Lopes (2005, 2007), 227-39. In this dissertation, I put in the category “art” those works which have aesthetic forms, produced by creative activities, and recognized as “art” by historical consensus. My category of “art” includes poetry, thus a poet is an artist, though an artist is not
his sheer force of creativity controls the making of his artwork. The opposite is the image of the artist as a craftsman, who methodically composes his work through his training and preconceptions. The tension between these two ideal types gives rise to a variety of different artistic theories.

This tension in effect only reflects the oxymoronic nature of the term “spontaneous art.” “Spontaneity” suggests immediacy. In contrast, “art” etymologically suggests craftsmanship, which is routine, technical, and mediated by material. “Art” derives from the Latin word *ars*, meaning “skill, craft.” In Greek, art is *techne*. According to Plato’s mimesis theory, an artist is an image-maker, who makes something that is not a real thing, but merely an image of a thing. An artist is a craftsman, and a secondary one. Likewise, the etymology of “poetry” is *poetica* in Latin and *poesis* in Greek. *Poein*, the verbal form of *poesis*, means “to make or compose” – nothing spontaneous is implied about the poetic craft.

Plato, however, also famously attributed the origin of the poetic art to externally induced “divine inspiration.” In *Ion*, he lets Socrates declare that poets must be bereft of their senses through direct intervention by the Muses. As instruments of gods, they make poetry without real knowledge of their arts. In *Phaedrus*, poets are said to be in a “divine madness” when possessed by the Muses. Poets in the inspiration theory are no longer artisans, but are more like prophets, completely void of self-consciousness in the process of creation.

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necessarily a poet. Su Shi is called an “artist” in the strong sense of the term, because he was an acclaimed poet, calligrapher, and painter.

2 Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 595a-b; see Plato (1968), 277.


From classical to medieval times, poets frequently invoked the muses or God as the origin of their creativity—either with religious piety or as a figure of speech. This rhetoric reflected the external-induced theory of inspiration. With the rise of Romanticism, theorists began to suggest that the origin of inspiration was not from without, but from within, from individual genius. In his second preface (1802) to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) proposed that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Coleridge (1772-1834) later modified Wordsworth’s position and distinguished two kinds of poets, those who wrote “by an act of will” and those “by the inspiration of a genial and productive nature.” But it was the second kind that he regarded as the most original poetic talent. Generally conceived, eighteenth century Romanticism emphasized the need for spontaneity in thought and action and in the expression of thought, as well as natural genius and the power of imagination. Though later poets and literary critics have mostly rejected their unreserved exaltation of emotional spontaneity, the internal-origin theory finds its modern proponent in psychology and psychoanalysis, where subconsciousness or unconsciousness is often regarded as the origin of creativity. The tension between art and spontaneity remains an important issue to

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5 Wordworth & Coleridge (1963), 240.
6 Coleridge (1985), 320.
7 Like Coleridge, Freud distinguished two kinds of poets, those who “take over their material ready-made,” and those who “seem to create their material spontaneously.” It was the second kind that he was interested in, and they were day-dreamers, their creativity coming from thwarted desires and memories. See Sigmund Freud, “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming” (1908), in Freud (1958), 44-54. C. G. Jung further proposed that collective unconsciousness was the origin of “archetypes” expressed through myths and fairytales; see Jung (1968), 3-5, and passim. The archetype theory was later developed by Northrop Frye into paradigms of literary criticism; see Frye (1957), 131-239. The relation between
CHAPTER ONE

date. Indeed, contemporary art appears to be often composed of various expressions of freedom, where artists vie to discard reified forms and techniques and to test the flimsy boundary separating art from nature. As Adorno remarked, “art that is simply a thing is an oxymoron. Yet the development of this oxymoron is nevertheless the inner direction of contemporary art.”

It appears that “artistic spontaneity” is neither pure craft nor pure spontaneity, but something paradoxically in between. The prophetic role that Plato grants to the poet makes him a medium between God and men, not unlike the paradigmatic philosopher who in Symposium compares himself to a daemon (which in Greek mythology is a messenger between gods and men) – Eros, a perpetual desirer of beauty. Similar to the role of Eros, aesthetic judgment for Kant (1724-1804) is a middle term between understanding and reason. In the disinterested aesthetic experience, imagination in its freedom accords with understanding in its conformity to law. An heir of the idealist aesthetics, Schiller (1759-1805) calls the artist a daemon, who, driven by the “play impulse” (Spieltrieb), strives to produce the Ideal through the union of the unconsciousness and creativity is also the topic of many psychological experiments. The best-seller writer Malcolm Gladwell’s book, Blink (2005), is a highly readable summary of these empirical findings, despite its being intellectual fast-food. A contemporary psychologist even proposes that intuition should find broader application in psychotherapy, since spontaneity is “an essential and perhaps most important quality of psychic life, sustaining all forms of creativity,” see Fiumara (2009), 4.

9 Adorno (1997), 58.
12 Kant (1952, 2007), 117.
possible with the necessary. In this aesthetic state of free play with beauty, the artist is “at the same time in the condition of utter rest and extreme movement.”

Notably, there are many parallels between Schiller’s aesthetic state of “free play” and the Buddhist “play in samādhi” (youxi sanmei 遊戲三昧). Samādhi is a meditative state where consciousness is concentrated and the distinction between subject and object is nullified. The mind of the Chan practitioner thus can respond to things spontaneously and instantaneously, without disturbing its meditativeness. This is a spiritual state of simultaneous dynamism and stillness. Also, Schiller regards all aesthetic experience potentially liberating because it is disengaged from the material. For instance, the audience takes pleasure in the representation of tragedy or violence because they do not experience the object per se, but only the “resemblance” of it. Not unlike the principle of disinterestedness, in the state of samādhi the practitioner shall not “abide” in any illusory form, thus he will feel neither attachment nor disgust. The doctrine of “play in samādhi” justifies quotidian activities as well as (perhaps especially) artistic compositions as external representations of the meditative mind. Schiller’s aesthetic education, moreover, bears an ethical agenda of fostering moral freedom. What the Chan practitioner

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13 Schiller (2004), 52, 74-75.
14 Ibid., 81.
15 Wu Rujun (1993), Preface, II.
16 As characterized allegedly by Huineng 惠能, the Six Patriarch of the Chan lineage, in Platform Sūtra (Liuzu dashi fabao Tanjing 六祖大師法寶壇經), T no.2008, 48:358b.
18 See Wu Rujun (1993), 164.
19 It is meanwhile a social and political agenda, since Schiller understands the ethical reform of individual prerequisite to political reform. See Murray (1992), 49-52.
professes to pursue through art is truth, by whose pursuit aesthetics and ethics are intrinsically intertwined. Last but not least, Schiller’s aesthetic freedom is realized in the world of appearance. And despite the Buddhist truth of emptiness, the freedom of “play in samādhi” presupposes a certain affirmation of the phenomenal world.

Admittedly, these arguments proceed from drastically different backgrounds and toward respective ends. Yet their parallels not only attest to the centrality of the concept “spontaneity” across intellectual boundaries but also open a potentially productive arena of comparative aesthetics. Furthermore, both theories strongly suggest that “artistic spontaneity” resides somewhere in between two worlds, that of form and of formless, or that of necessity and of freedom. This is the central theme to be elaborated in the following discussion on Su Shi’s aesthetic thinking.

Su Shi was a poet, a calligrapher, a painter, as well as an eclectic theorist. His understanding of art integrated elements from all intellectual traditions available at his time, especially Zhuangzian Daoism and Chan Buddhism, but also a reviving and revolving

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20 According to the Kyoto School philosopher Hisamatsu Shinichi 久松真一, the “subjectivity of the dynamic nothingness” (能動的無的主体), represented through Zen art par excellence, is the reason of human being human. See Hisamatsu, “Zen geijutsu no rikai 禅芸術の理解”, in Furuta Shōkin et al (1996), vol. II, 89.

21 For Schiller’s innovative reading of the Kantian Erscheinung (appearance) on this point, see Kooy (2002), 109-10.

22 On the influence of Zhuangzi on Su Shi, see, e.g., Zhong Laiyin (1990), Jiang Shengdiao (1998), and Yang Cunchang (2003).

23 On the influence of Chan Buddhism on Su Shi, see, e.g., Jiang Qian (1947), Chikusa Masaaki (1964), Grant (1994), and Chen Zhongzhe (2004).
Confucian philosophy which increasingly put emphasis on understanding abstract concepts like human nature and moral and cosmic principles. Su was a reluctant participant in the contemporary trend.

As suggested in many Zhuangzian anecdotal stories, “artistic spontaneity” is the kind of craft (ji 技) that embodies the Way (dao 道). In a story, a butcher showed great virtuosity in dissecting a bull. He explained that it was because he had practiced to see the invisible, thus his exercise was no longer craft, but partaking of the Way. Like the butcher, humble craftsmen in Zhuangzi often displayed the essence of the Way through their concentrated practice, be it making wheels, catching cicadas, or diving into rapids. As A. C. Graham comments, a

24 In the “Yangshengzhu” 養生主 chapter, Zhuangzi 莊子, Cook Ding庖丁 once butchered a bull in front of the King of Liang. He showed such marvelous skill that his action looked like dancing, and his knife encountered no hindrance. Upon the king’s inquiry for the secret of his divine craftsmanship, Cook Ding replied that it took him three years to see no longer a full bull, but the inner structures of the bull; he butchered in accordance to the patterns of heaven. See Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, Zhuangzi jishi 莊子集釋, 3:117-24.

25 In the “Tiandao” 天道 chapter, Zhuangzi, a Wheelwright Bian 輪扁 boldly advised King Huan of Qi to discard books, since written words were nothing but the dreg of the Sage. This insight came from his own experience, because even his son could not be talked to know the art of making wheels, which was accessible only through wordless practice. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 13:490-1.

26 In the “Dasheng” 達生 chapter, Zhuangzi, Confucius on his journey to Chu met an old hunchback catching cicada with marvelous deftness. Confucius asked whether it came from craft or from the Way, and the hunchback said it was from the Way. He acquired the Way after endless practice; now in catching cicadas he was so single-minded that none of the ten thousand things could break his concentration. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 19:639-40.
Zhuangzian craftsman is “spontaneous from the very center of his being,” and his motions “derive not from himself but from Heaven working through him.”

Heaven is silent but manifests itself in the natural formation and transformation of things. Emulating Heaven’s silent creation, the practitioner gains the hands-on, tacit knowledge of the Way. For *Zhuangzi*, language is a vehicle to be left behind—ironically, though, its teaching cannot but be imparted in words.

The Zhuangzian craftsman has become an archetypical artist who realizes the pattern of heaven through the words and works of man. Resonances of *Zhuangzi* are found in literary theoretical works from the third to the ninth century. For instance, the first systematic literary theory, proposed by Liu Xie 刘勰 (465?-?), argues that the poet should make his mind “empty and still” before his composition, so that the forms of things come naturally to his mind, and he can capture the forms of things like a stamped impression. Such an artist could compete with

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27 In the “Dasheng” chapter, *Zhuangzi*, when Confucius stood by the Lüliang River, he saw a man jumping into the rapids. Thinking that this man would drown, he let his disciples to follow the river, waiting for a chance to rescue. After 30 li, however, the man emerged out of the water, singing. The amazed Confucius asked him whether he had the Way, and the man answered no; it germinated from his innate possession, grew with his natural life, and completed as a matter of destiny, without him knowing how it came to become as such. See Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 19:656-8.


29 In the “Waiwu” 外物 chapter, *Zhuangzi*, it states that once the fish or the hare is caught, the fishing stake or the snare becomes useless; once the meaning is understood, language becomes useless. See Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 26:944.


“the heaven’s craft”;\textsuperscript{32} his artwork, like natural objects, would appear to have become as such by itself (\textit{ziran} 自然; literally, “self-so-ness”). This term, \textit{ziran}, would also appear as an essential poetic style in the late Tang hermit Sikong Tu’s \textit{Ershisi shipin} 二十四詩品 [\textit{Twenty-Four Properties of Poetry}]. The poem which celebrates this property ends with \textit{tianjun} 天鈞, or “Nature, the Potter,” a metaphor which appears in the \textit{Zhuangzi} “to express the concept that the natural processes of change evolve myriads of forms in the world continuously and spontaneously, as a potter creates forms at will from clay.”\textsuperscript{33} Unlike a common potter, the divine potter has no intentionality, his craft comparable to cosmic creation in Nature’s workshop. If, as Wendy Swartz recently argues, \textit{ziran} in the Six Dynasties primarily meant “verisimilitude,”\textsuperscript{34} by the Late Tang, and especially in the Sung, this term had been firmly established to describe spontaneous expressions of the artistic mind, a point to be elaborated later in regard to Su Shi as a “spontaneous artist.”

Buddhism is another powerful intellectual source which has contributed to the formation of this archetypical persona. Enlightenment is generally described as liberation or a state of absolute spontaneity. To achieve this goal, a practitioner with limited understanding and capacity must rely upon \textit{upāya} (\textit{fangbian} 方便), namely, “means,” “expedient,” or “skillful means.” In Mahāyāna Buddhism, various forms of Buddhist teaching and practice are all declared to be provisional means, skillfully set up by the Buddha to teach the unenlightened.\textsuperscript{35} It includes not only concrete images or methods, but also such a central teaching as that of nirvana itself.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, 40:495.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Robertson (1972), 344.
\item \textsuperscript{34} See Swartz (2010).
\item \textsuperscript{35} Pye (1978), 1. I have silently modified Pye’s term “skillful means” to more standardized spelling.
\end{itemize}
At Su Shi’s time, “lettered Chan” (wenzichan 文字禪) was gaining prominence among monastic and lay Buddhist circles. Proponents argued that language, or more specifically, literary composition, could be used as skillful means to pursue enlightenment. During the Southern Song, many critics even equated Chan with the practice of poetry, arguing for “enlightenment” in poetry. It might be a rhetorical claim, but it nevertheless posed questions on the relation between the two practices. According to Richard John Lynn, lying behind the Chan-poetry analogy are the Daoist concepts of the spontaneous and the natural, especially as they appear in the Zhuangzi. In this hybrid intellectual system, poetry becomes a path (in Buddhist term, mārga) leading to the ultimate goal of spontaneity, be it the Daoist Way or the Buddhist enlightenment.

The central paradox in all theories of artistic spontaneity remains the same – spontaneity is unmediated while artistic excellence is mediated by artwork. The artist is not an innocent who behaves or speaks spontaneously. Instead, he must convey his alleged spontaneity through the work. His “spontaneity” is mediated by the material and not shown in its immediacy. Only the “spontaneous” appearance of the artwork can convince the audience of the “spontaneity” of the artist. Thus the question is not whether the artist is truly spontaneous, but what kind of aesthetic appearance he shall make so as to be perceived as spontaneous. After all, the audience faces a

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36 Ibid., 36.
37 Monographic studies on the “lettered Chan” include: Du Songbai (1976), (1980); Zhou Yukai (1992), (1998), and Sun Changwu (1997).
finished artwork, not the working artist. Based on how they perceive and interpret the aesthetic appearance of the artwork, the audience may deduce that the artist has been truly “spontaneous” in his or her creative process. Its members have concluded so because of their own imagination, received critical tradition, or perhaps their biographical knowledge about the artist. Whether the artist has been spontaneous in creating the artwork becomes therefore an unimportant, if not utterly irrelevant, question. In this regard, artistic spontaneity is nothing but the enchantment created by the appearance of an artwork.

As to be followed later, “spontaneous” artwork is often compared to a natural object, like cloud, water, or the sound of nature, which display aesthetic forms without intentional making. This is a jaded figure of speech in Chinese art criticism. In essence, it proposes that, though an artwork must have been made, its trace of making should be minimal to the extent that it appears to be given, like a natural object, standing holistically, independently, and unexplainably. In Adorno’s words, the dialectic nature of art always pushes art to move against itself and toward its opposite, the non-art.⁴⁰ An artwork perceived as non-art will make its making a mystery. In the case of Su Shi, this mystery is at the center of his image as a spontaneous genius, soliciting admiration, controversy, and attempts of modification.

At Su Shi’s time, all theories of art essentially assumed that the origin of art was the artist. Hence our inquiry will begin by examining the notion of a “spontaneous artist” and the relation between art and the Way. In the next chapter, the inquiry continues to discuss the “spontaneous” making of a work of art, the mediated nature of artistic spontaneity, and the final appearance of such a work – that of individuality and, more often than not, imperfection.

⁴⁰ Adorno (1997), 128.
Su Shi as a Spontaneous Artist

In Su Shi’s first English biography, *The Gay Genius: the Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (1947), Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895-1976) described him in enthusiastic terms:

Here was a man! All through his life he retained a perfect naturalness and honesty with himself. Political chicanery and calculation were foreign to his character; the poems and essays he wrote on the inspiration of the moment or in criticism of something he disliked were the natural outpourings of his heart, instinctive and impetuous, like “the bird’s song in spring and the cricket’s chirp in autumn,” as he put once; or again they may be likened to the “cries of monkeys in the jungle or of the storks in high heaven, unaware of the human listeners below.”

Lin Yutang represented a modern version of a tradition which portrayed Su Shi as a spontaneous poet. His literary writing was described as the “instinctive and impetuous” outpourings of his heart and was further likened to the sounds from natural creatures. Such a description suggests that Su Shi was engaged in purely automatic aesthetic activities without self-consciousness or intentionality. The last sentence rephrases a couplet by Su Shi, originally praising the poetry of monk Daoqian 道潛 (1043-?; also known as Canliao 參寥). In this poem, Su Shi compared the

41 Lin Yutang (1947), Preface, viii.

42 It reads: “The gibbon wails and the stork honks, essentially having no intention,/ unaware that below them travelers are passing” 猿吟鶴唳本無意，不知下有行人行, “Ciyun Daoqian jian zeng” 次韻僧潛見贈, Su Shi, *Su Shi shiji* 蘇軾詩集 (hereafter *SSSJ*), 3:881.
mind of Daoqian to a water-mirror (shuijing 水鏡); in its clear reflection, myriad forms arise or
dissipate, with nowhere and nothing to hide. This capacity recalls that of the Buddha, who is
omniscient yet tranquil. The person who writes such poetry is an enlightened being. Adopting
this metaphor, Lin Yutang cast Su Shi as a man who acquired “the Way.”

The artist as a man of the Way was an ideal type found across theories of the major polite
arts – poetry, calligraphy, and painting – by the end of the eleventh century. For the first time in
history, a literatus could potentially master all these art forms and combine them into a single
artwork, such as a painting with a versified colophon written in his calligraphy. These arts were
known as the “three perfections” (sanjue 三絕), a phrase first coined during the eighth century in
praise of the Tang poet-painter Zheng Qian 鄭虔 (d. 764).  

And even though language and visual image remained two distinctive forms of expression, in art criticism they were often
treated as a unity, with poetic criticism serving as the paradigmatic model. Furthermore they
began to share a common aesthetics recommending understated simplicity and subjective
expression. The formerly pejorative word pingdan 平淡 (literally, the “plain and bland”) was
now found to represent the ideal of concealment indicating the substance behind a modest
surface and was applied broadly as the highest artistic achievement to poetry,  
calligraphy,  
and painting.  

The purpose of art was increasingly understood as expression instead of
representation, and the origin of its inspirational power the artistic mind. Qiyun 氣韻 (literally,

44 See Yoshikawa (1967), 35-38, where this term is translated as “calmness and ease.” On Su Shi’s
elaboration of it, see Chapter Two.
45 See Sturman (1997), 140-1, where this term is translated as “even and light.”
46 See Cahill (1964), 98-99, where this term is glosses as “the virtue of concealment.”
“breath and tone”), a term which in pre-Song painting criticism mainly meant “a lively representation,” was now thought to reflect the nature of a painter and to come from innate talent alone.\(^47\) If the Chinese term for an artist’s style, ti 體 (also mean the “body”), had always potentially alluded to its equation with the artist’s own person, from this period on their identification was finally and firmly sealed.\(^48\) It was in the Song that calligraphers’ or poets’ surnames were frequently coupled with the word ti to describe their individual styles, such as Yan-ti 顏體 (the calligraphic style of Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 [709-785]), Bo-ti 白體 (the poetic style of Bo Juyi 白居易 [772-846]), or Su-ti 蘇體 (the poetic or calligraphic style of Su Shi). For those genteel artists of late eleventh century, the maker of the best kind of art had acquired the Way, by which his creativity found expression through multiple art mediums, regardless of their different skill sets or materiality; his expression consistently and adequately conveyed his mood and feelings at the moment; and the purity of his expression attested to his moral nobility. He was the aesthetics of spontaneity incarnate.

Su Shi gave a human face to this ideal artist. He was not only an exemplary achiever in the three art forms but also an original thinker who gave direction to the aforementioned developments of artistic theories.\(^49\) The myth of him as a spontaneous artist began in Su’s own time with his portrayals of himself. The following passage is originally a description of his prose writing, but has been frequently cited by various discussions on Song aesthetics, be it of poetry,}


\(^{48}\) For the anatomical or physiognomic connotations of Chinese terms for style, see Sturman (1997), 6-7.

\(^{49}\) Su is generally regarded as the founding figure of “literati painting” (wenrenhua 文人畫) theories, though he probably did not have in mind the same kind of painting as when Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) finally coined this term. See Cahill (1964), 91; Bush (1971), 1-3, 13; Silbergeld (2009).
calligraphy, or painting. Its currency far beyond its original context is partly due to the fact that Su was the first advocate of the unity of these three arts. More importantly, it provides an apt analogy of unrestrained artistic creativity as a gushing fountain turning into a rushing river.

吾文如萬斛泉源，不擇地皆可出，在平地滔滔汩汩，雖一日千里無難。及山與山石曲折，隨物賦形，而不可知也。所可知者，常行於所當行，常止於不可不止，如是而已矣。其他雖吾亦不能知也。

My writing is like a fountain gushing out ten thousand buckets of water, surging forth without choosing the ground. On the plains it dashes in broad waves and rapid torrents, easily travelling a thousand li in a single day. When it encounters mountains or rocks, it twists and turns, taking its form according to the forms of things. No one knows [how it will change]. What is knowable is that it always goes when it should and always stops when it must. It is as simple as that! Even I know nothing more than that.

More accurately, Su Shi often claimed that poetry and painting shared the same principle; see, e.g., Su Shi, “Shu Yanling Wang Zhubu suo hua Zhezhi ershou”書鄢陵王主簿所畫折枝二首, SSSJ, 29:1525; “Ciyun Wu Chuanzheng ‘Kumuge’” 次韻吳傳正枯木歌, SSSJ, 36:1961-2. His discussion on calligraphy, however, seems to fall largely into the same theoretical frame. For more on this issue, see Liu Guojun (1984), 122-8; Murck & Fong (1991), “Introduction,” xv; Leng Chengjin (2003), 623-38.

Though the translation may sound awkward to native English speakers, I choose literal translation because it is a significant rhetorical strategy for Su Shi to give agency to inanimate natural objects, a theme to be followed in Chapter Three and Four.

CHAPTER ONE

The river metaphor would later become the most stable element in a repertoire of critical arguments on Su Shi. Different from a tranquil water-mirror, a river is in constant motion. It bursts forth urged by pure impetus of creation, without “choosing the ground.” The “ground” is a generic term, referring to all kinds of formal choices such as meter, rhyme, length, or genre – in short, the foundational grid supporting a literary work. In the appearance of a rapid torrent or a soft flow, his writing changes its momentum and takes its form “according to the forms of things.”

Su Shi claims to know nothing about the mechanisms of making this linguistic marvel, except that his every word feels just right. In this self-portrait, Su Shi presents himself as unconscious of his art – not unlike Daoqian whom he praised to be a water-mirror. Water is a conventional allegory of the Way. Su Shi in his commentary on the Book of Changes proposes that water has no constant form, thus symbolizing the supreme good; it is in closest resemblance to the Way. Like water, the Way resides in the constant mutual transformation of

53 Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) in a letter similarly talks about how his writing is “fetched from the heart and poured into the hands, coming like rapid torrents” 取於心而注於手也，汩汩然來矣; see “Da Li Yi shu” 答李翊書, in Han Yu, Han Changli wenji jiaozhu 韓昌黎文集校注, 3:170. It might have provided inspiration for Su Shi. Han Yu’s emphasis, however, is not on writing in spontaneity, but rather on taking classics as the pure and single source of one’s writing, to be internalized in rote memorization, so that unadulterated words come “naturally” to one’s mind. The relation between memorization and spontaneity will be explored in Chapter Two.

54 Here he cited Laozi, “the supreme good is like water” 上善若水; see Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, Laozi jiaoshi 老子校釋, 8:31.

55 It is not the Way per se, since the Way has no form; see Su Shi, Su Shi Yizhuan 蘇氏易傳, vol.1, 7:353.
opposites, but its movement reveals no intentionality.\textsuperscript{56} By comparing his writing to water, Su Shi appeared to indicate that he gained the “Way” of writing by discarding intentionality.

In this self-referential comment, Su Shi describes the multifaceted feature of his writing. Witticisms, hyperboles, or rhetorical stances are often required by the moment or the context of the composition. But if this insight is reversely applied to this passage itself, should it not be read as representing only one facet, but not the totality, of Su Shi’s reflections on his art? Indeed, Su Shi’s writing on various other occasions would show his consciousness of his craft, as will be elaborated upon in Chapter Two. Many later critics also noticed the craft and erudition in his writing, which would have suggested artistic self-consciousness. Yet the powerful metaphor of a rushing river not only defines the dominant perception of Su Shi’s writing but also overshadows other conflicting elements. Efforts were made later to redefine or subjugate these traces of making, in order to reconcile with the image of Su Shi as a spontaneous artist.

One way to redefine his craft is to argue that it is not craft at all. According to Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), Su Shi’s making of his artwork was like the Creator’s making of things.

東坡先生佩玉而心若槁木，立朝而意在東山。其商略終古，蓋流俗不得而言。[…]

虎豹之有美，不彫而常自然。至於恢詭誣怪滑稽於秋兔之穎，尤以酒而能神。故其觴次滴瀝，醉餘顰申。取諸造物之鑪錘，盡用文章之斧斤。

\textsuperscript{56} The comparison between water’s lack of constant shape and the individual’s lack of mind/intention has also been noted by Ronald C. Egan; see Egan (1994), 82.
Though Master Dongpo wears ceremonial jade, his heart is as tranquil as a withered tree. Though he stands in court, his mind is among the Eastern Mountains. How is it possible to impart his easy manners and archaic style to the vulgar minds! [...] Tigers and leopards have their own beautiful stripes, which are not chiseled but have become as such by themselves. As for the humorous, cunning, deceitful, strange, and jocular, which he represents with a hair brush made from an autumn hare, they become even divinely conveyed after drinking. So he sips goblet after goblet; then in tipsy drowsiness he frowns and stretches. Then he takes over the stove and the hammer from the Creator and uses them as his axe in carving a piece of literature.

Among Su Shi’s contemporaries, Huang was his most diligent and influential critic. He often praised Su’s natural gift (tianzi 天資) and his lofty morality which brought a heroic aura to his literary and artistic works. In this entry, Su Shi’s mind is free from the burden of power and wealth; likewise, or because of that, he was able to create in a spontaneous fashion. Both his

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57 Reference to the “Qiwulun” chapter in Zhuangzi. In this story, Nanguo Ziqi 南郭子綦 once sat in total oblivion of either the object or the subject, and his amazed disciple compared his form to a withered tree, his mind to dead ashes. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 2:43.

58 Su Shi was known as fond of drinking, but did not have the tolerance. He would soon get drunk and fall asleep. After a short nap, he would wake up and immediately grasp a brush to write or to draw. See Huang Tingjian, “Ba Dongpo zi hou” 跋東坡字後, in Huang Tingjian, Huang Tingjian quanji 黃庭堅全集, zhengji 正集 28:771.


60 See, e.g., Huang Tingjian, “Ba Dongpo shu” 跋東坡書, entry III, ibid., zhengji 28:774.
ethical and artistic freedom signaled his acquisition of the Way. As a result, his works of art seemed to have “become as such by themselves.” They showed no trace of making, just like beautiful patterns on furs, endowed by nature. The “axe” he used to carve a piece of literature referred to the Zhuangzian craftsman Wheelwright Bian, who suggested that written words were nothing but the dregs of the Sage’s mind, while the true art was accessible only through wordless practice. Now holding the axe of this proverbial craftsman, Su Shi applied it to the art of words. It implied that, by virtue of his acquisition of the wordless Way, Su Shi was able to emulate the Creator’s craft and compose in divine spontaneity.

Huang also suggested that Su’s creation was enhanced by drinking. As will be elaborated upon in Chapter Two, Su Shi mentioned drinking as a method which helped the artist to lose the conscious control of his craft. Compared with the acquisition of the Way, drinking appears to be a shortcut, but its advocacy further attests that artistic spontaneity is understood as the absence of self-consciousness.

Yet for certain readers, Su Shi’s claim of spontaneity seemed to raise a puzzle. Significant efforts have been made to redefine his river metaphor. Even among his contemporaries, some critics argued that the weakness of Su’s writing was precisely the byproduct of his spontaneous style, as the Song author Cai Tao 蔡絛 (?-1126) commented:

東坡詩，天才宏放，宜與日月爭光。凡古人所不到處，發明殆盡，萬斛泉源，未為過也。然頗恨方朔極諫，時雜以滑稽，故罕逢藴藉。

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61 See n.25.
Dongpo’s poetry shows his vast and expansive natural genius, which is as illustrious as the sun and the moon. He has discovered and illuminated all those territories where the ancients had never reached. It is truly not excessive to compare his writing to “a fountain gushing ten thousand buckets of water.” I only regret that he was like Dongfang Shuo\(^{62}\) whose unreserved remonstration sometimes mingled with jest, so it was rare to find pregnant subtlety.\(^{63}\)

Cai Tao understood Su Shi’s “gushing fountain” as the capacity to exhaust thematic and technical possibilities in poetry. This was a rather limited interpretation of the bursting creativity implied by Su’s metaphor. Cai, moreover, did not regard creativity a virtue in itself. Instead, he saw Su’s unrestrained style as a weakness, resulting in the lack of “pregnant subtlety.”

Another critical twist of the river metaphor came from Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the renowned lixue 理學 (literally, “the Learning of Principles;” also known in Western academia misleadingly as Neo-Confucianism) scholar whose philosophy was in antagonism with that of Su Shi. He chided Su’s style as too “crafty” (qiao \(^{15}\)) and “ornamented” (huali 華麗), at best a distraction that trivialized the expression of the Way.\(^{64}\) He acknowledged, however, the power of Su Shi’s writing:

\(^{62}\) Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 BCE) was a humorous rhapsody writer under Han Wudi 漢武帝 (156-87 BCE; r. 141-87 BCE).

\(^{63}\) Cai Tao 蔡绦, *Cai Baina shiping* 蔡百衲詩評, in Wu Wenzhi et al. eds., *Song shihua quanbian* 宋詩話全編, 2518.

\(^{64}\) Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, in *Zhu Zi quanshu* 朱子全書, 139:4300, 4302, 4305-6, 4308, 4314.
東坡雖是宏闊瀾翻，成大片滾將去，他裏面自有法。

Although Dongpo’s style is vast and broad like writhing waves, rolling forward in huge swathe, in essence it is governed by laws.\textsuperscript{65}

Zhu Xi did not consider it contradictory to describe Su’s writing as both crafty and spontaneous. In fact, he argued that it was the restraint within the unrestrained appearance that gave Su’s writing its strength. This opinion showed Zhu’s own philosophical and literary preference for rationality, moderation, and control.

Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610), a Ming poet and essayist, praised the poetry of Su Shi as having broadened the horizon of poetry received from the Tang Dynasty. His writing had such exhaustive treatments of subject matters, rules, emotions, and virtual realms, that it became “torrential and vast like a broad river.”\textsuperscript{66} As is obvious, Yuan almost literally borrowed Su Shi’s metaphor; and like Cai Tao, he understood it mainly in concrete terms.

Together with the Song poetry revival, Su Shi attracted immense critical attention in the Qing. Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814), better known as a historian, devoted two chapters in his discourse on poetry to Su Shi. He noted the display of skill and erudition of Su’s poetry, but considered Su’s genius as in transcending these elements.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}, 139:4318.

\textsuperscript{66} Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, “Xuetaoge ji xu” 雪濤閣集序, in \textit{Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao} 袁宏道集箋校, 18:710.

Yuan originally juxtaposed Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072) and Su Shi in his praise as representatives of the Song style. Although Ouyang was an innovative figure, his poetic style was however not usually compared to a river. Thus Yuan’s appraisal on Song poetry in general was more informed by critical discourse on Su Shi in particular.
坡詩有云: "清詩要鍛煉, 方得鉛中銀。” 然坡詩實不以鍛煉為工, 其妙處在乎心地空明, 自然流出, 一似全不著力, 而自然沁入心脾, 此其獨絕也。

A verse from Dongpo says: “A pure piece of verse needs refining/ so as to extract silver from lead.”67 But Dongpo’s poetry does not actually strive for craftiness through refining. What is marvelous about it is that his mind is empty and luminous, [his words] flowing out spontaneously, as if without any effort, while permeating naturally into [the reader’s] heart and mind. This is his unique excellence.68

Zhao quoted Su Shi’s exhortation to “refine” a verse before quickly adding that the true marvel of Su’s poetry was not made by his craft, but instead in the spontaneous flow of his mind. As Zhao put it, his mind must be “empty” and “luminous.” These terms usually describe the Buddhist state of enlightenment. Zhao Yi proposed that Su’s transcendental state of mind gave him the capacity to talk intimately to the reader in a heart to heart manner. This was a secularized vision of dharma transmission. In Chan Buddhism, it was allegedly through wordless gestures or actions that the dharma had been transmitted from the mind of one patriarch to that of another

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67 This line comes from “Cui Wenxue Jia xiewen jianguo xiaoran you chucheng zhi zi […]” 崔文學甲攜文見過蕭然有出塵之姿[…], SSSJ, 45:2441-2. The couplet in the received version has a minor variant in the second line: nai de 乃得, instead of fang de 方得. This poem in general is a piece of advice for a younger poet. Using lead to extract silver from the raw mineral rock is a metallurgical practice, which is also used as a metaphor in Daoist inner alchemy for obtaining life essence (symbolized by silver) in the kidney (symbolized by lead). On Daoist inner alchemy borrowing outer alchemical terms, see Chapter Six.

68 Zhao Yi, Oubei shihua 甌北詩話, 57.
链条一 ("transmission of mind through mind," *yixinchuanxin* 以心傳心). 69 Here for Zhao Yi, the essential message of the author was conveyed not through a wordless gesture, but on the contrary, through learned words which only cultural insiders could fully grasp. Zhao used the word *ziran* twice to characterize Su’s creative process, the same word used by Huang Tingjian to describe Su’s artwork. According to him, the spontaneity of the poet guarantees the spontaneous formation of his words, which in turn guarantees the appearance of spontaneity of the work, and finally, the instinctive, unimpeded understanding of the audience. In this idealized vision of artistic creation and reception, the craft and erudition which Zhao noted in Su’s poetry are covered under the shining appearance of spontaneity.

Recent scholarship on Chan Buddhism points out that the lineal transmission of dharma was nothing but a constructed myth, or a carefully maintained “optical illusion.” 70 The claim of the “transmission of mind through mind” was a rhetorical strategy employed by certain Chan Buddhist schools to gain a competitive edge. 71 Similarly, the portrayal of Su Shi as a spontaneous artist was perhaps nothing but an optical illusion made to elevate his poetry above that of others. A Song author He Yuan 何薳 (1077-1145) reported that he had the chance to see some of Su Shi’s manuscripts, and found them layered with revisions. 72 This image of Su Shi painstakingly revising his poems contradicts the perception of his poetry as the spontaneous

69 It was said that when Śākyamuni Buddha once raised a flower in an assembly, only Mahākāśyapa smiled, showing his silent understanding. See Puji 普濟, *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元, 1:9.


72 He Yuan, *Chunzhu jiwen* 春渚紀聞, 7:102.
overflow of his mind, a myth repeated to date. His received portrait grows out of a palimpsest, on which all traces of paradoxes and inconsistencies have been marginalized from memory or erased by time.

**The Aesthetic Education of a Young Monk**

The rhetorical importance of the Way as the origin of excellent and spontaneous art is a unique feature in Chinese aesthetic discourse. *Wen* 文 literally means “the pattern.” On a cosmic scale it refers to the manifestation of the Way in the phenomenal world, and the study of *wen* ultimately leads to the knowledge of the Way. As stated in the *Book of Changes*: “[The Sage] looks up to observe the pattern of heaven and looks down to examine that of the earth, so as to know the causes of darkness and light.”

Literature, in a narrower sense of *wen*, manifests the Way in human cultural enterprise. Thus Liu Xie titled the first chapter of his systematic work on literary criticism “The Origin of the Way” (*Yuandao* 原道) and declared: “The patterned language is the heart of heaven and earth!”

As Liu’s highly elaborated style showed, by the “patterned language” 言之文者, he was already using *wen* in its strictest sense: belletristic literature.

It was the innate urge of belletristic literature to please by skill and embellishment that caused the eleventh century contention on the legitimacy of literature as a means of knowing the Way. To begin with, defining the Way as the ultimate goal of artistic pursuit already challenged the uniqueness and necessity of art. There were many paths to the Way, be it rulership, 

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73 “Xici shang” 繫辭上, *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 7.65, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, 77.

scholarship, meditation, religious devotion, moral cultivation, or even practical crafts. It was questionable whether literature was a privileged means to the Way. It was acknowledged, if sometimes not without reluctance, that language was needed to transmit the Way. Thus Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), a scholar who would be retrospectively enshrined as the “founder” of Song lixue studies, proposed that “literature is the vehicle of the Way” — no more than that, though a minimum decoration was recommended to make the vehicle more desirable. On the other hand, the aesthetic pleasure accompanying artistic practice might dangerously lead the student astray from his proper pursuit of the Way toward this pleasure itself, pure and simple. Perhaps because of this consideration, Su Shi’s contemporary Cheng Yi (1033-1107) promptly and radically declared: “Crafting literature harms the Way.” Cheng Yi practiced his motto and had very few poems in circulation. As Cheng Yi’s major philosophical opponent of the day, Su Shi was the leader of those literati sharing a more literary and aesthetic bend. He must defend literature, and fine arts in general, as an essential means in the pursuit of the Way.

Su Shi’s vision of the Way as “unity in diversity” has been discussed in depth by Bol and others. Here, I will further explore how Su Shi’s following essay defends this philosophical conviction – not to his fellow Confucians, but to his contemporary Buddhist circle. Furthermore, its central message is performed by the very form and structure of this essay. In its appearance, it

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75 Zhou Dunyi, Zhou Lianxi ji 周濂溪集, 6:117.

76 Cheng Yi opines that literary composition is just a plaything which distracts the student’s concentration on the pursuit of the Way; see Cheng Hao & Cheng Yi, Er Cheng ji 二程集, 239.

77 See discussion on the state of the field in the Introduction.
seems to represent the “rushing river” to which Su Shi has compared his writing, though closer examination reveals immense textual complexity beneath the facile surface.

This essay was written in the fourth month of 1091 for Sicong 思聰 (1063-after 1094), a poet-monk from Hangzhou. This picturesque city was then the center of Chan Buddhism where Su Shi, during his two provincial tenures, made acquaintance with monks famous for their religious achievement, poetic composition, or both. Very likely, Sicong had accompanied Su back from his second tenure in Hangzhou to the capital and was about to return. In it, Su Shi defended art as a legitimate path to enlightenment, and poetry the best path among the arts. This artist progresses in the learning of various arts and Buddhist philosophy toward the final goal of enlightenment.

For the convenience of discussion, I present the text in three paragraphs.

送錢塘僧思聰歸孤山敘

Seeing off Sicong, a Monk from Qiantang, on His Return to the Hill of Solitude

[1] 天以一生水，地以六成之，一六合而水可見。雖有神禹，不能知其孰為一、孰為六也。子思子曰： “自誠明謂之性。自明誠謂之教。誠則明矣，明則誠矣。” 誠明合而道可見。雖有黃帝、孔丘，不能知其孰為誠、孰為明也。佛者曰：

“戒生定，定生慧。” 慧獨不生定乎？伶玄有言： “慧則通，通則流。” 是鳥知真


慧哉？醉而狂，醒而止，慧之生定，通之不流也審矣。故夫有目而自行，則褰裳疾走，常得大道。無目而隨人，則扶輪曳踵，常仆坑阱。慧之生定，速於定之生慧也。

Heaven gives rise to water by the virtue of One. Earth completes it by the virtue of Six. When the virtues of One and of Six match, Water appears. Even the divine Yu could not tell the One from the Six as its cause. Master Zisi said: “It is in [human] nature to acquire illumination from genuineness; it is in teaching to realize genuineness from illumination. Once genuine, one is illuminated; once illuminated, one is genuine.”

When genuineness and illumination match, the Way appears. Not even the Yellow Emperor or Kong Qiu (aka. Confucius) could tell genuineness from illumination as its cause. The Buddha said, “Precepts give rise to concentration, and concentration gives rise to wisdom.” Why could not wisdom vice versa give rise to concentration? Jester

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80 This appears to be a summary of numeric cosmology as speculated in the Book of Changes and the Book of Documents. According to the “Xici” 系辭 chapter in the Book of Changes, One and Six, among other numbers, are assigned to the heaven and the earth respectively as their numeric virtues; see Zhu Xi, 周易本義, vol. 1, 60. The commentators to the “Hongfan” 洪範 chapter in Shangshu further expatiates this theory according to the Five Phases scheme. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 proposes that “the virtue of One in the heaven gives birth to Water on the north… the virtue of Six in the earth complements the birth of Water on the north, and combines itself with the One of heaven;” see Sun Xingyan 孫星衍, 尚書今古文注疏, 12:296.

81 Reference to The Doctrine of the Mean, entry 21; see Zhu Xi, Zhongyong zhangju jizhu 中庸章句集注, vol. 1, 11.

82 In Śūraṃgama Sūtra, Śākyamuni Buddha declared to Ānanda: “To constrain the mind, this is the so-called precept. The precept gives rise to concentration, and concentration gives rise to wisdom – this is
Darkness said: “Wisdom gives rise to facility; facility gives rise to overflow.” How could he claim to know the true wisdom! When a man is intoxicated, his behavior is bewildered; when he sobers up, his bewilderment halts. This shows that wisdom results in concentration, while facility will not result in overflow! For the same reason, when a man has eyes, he can walk by himself. Even when he lifts his robe and walks fast, often he will find the great way. When a man has no eyes, he must follow. Even when he holds to a wagon and treks after the wheel, often he will tumble into pitfalls. True, it is faster for wisdom to bring out concentration than for concentration to bring out wisdom!

This paragraph parades erudite citations from a broad range of sources. It starts with the Book of Changes, proceeds then to the Confucian classic Doctrine of the Mean, then to the Buddhist Śūramgama Sūtra, and finally, to Zhao Feiyan waizhuan 趙飛燕外傳 (The Unofficial Biography of Zhao Feiyan84), an erotic fiction of the lowest register in the textual tradition. All these lines are cited out of context. Su Shi plays upon the multiple meanings of some essential terms and slyly distorts their original sense, so that they form a tenuously cohesive argument.

The first reference is a succinct summary of the cosmological correspondence theory, which in mystic terms proposes that water comes from the perfect integration of Heaven and Earth, which respectively have the virtues of One (unity) and Six (multiplicity). Here underlies called ‘three learnings that have no omission’. See Dafoding Rulai miyin xiuzheng liaoyi zhu pusa wanxing shou lengyanjing 大佛頂如來密因修證了義諸菩薩萬行首楞嚴經, T no.945, 19:131c.

83 Lingxuan 伶玄, Zhao Feiyan waizhuan 趙飛燕外傳, 8:5496.

84 Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (32?-1BCE) was the empress of Han Chengdi 漢成帝 (51-7 BCE; r. 33-7 BCE).
an iconoclastic mockery: since Yu was the mythological hero who tamed the cosmic flood,\textsuperscript{85} he should know the nature of water best. If he had no idea of its cause of genesis, who else could tell? The second reference proposes that the Way comes from the perfect integration of “genuineness” and “illumination.” Their locus classicus is the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}. In his treatise on this classics, Su defines “genuineness” as “taking delight in it (the Way of the sage),” and “illumination” as “knowing it.” “Genuineness” comes from human nature, while “illumination” comes from teaching. By this definition, genuineness is the inborn, instinctive quality that inspires a human to respond to the Way of heaven. If it is fully internalized, it will make him a sage. Illumination, as its complement, is the knowing of the Way (though not in its entirety). The Way appears only when one engages in the knowing of the Way and takes delight in practicing it. The second citation seems entirely unrelated to the first. Rather, they are juxtaposed through similar chiastic structures, and the juxtaposition is further strengthened by the author’s comments phrased in an identical, parallel form.

Similarly, the third and fourth citations are bound together by parallelism in the same trisyllabic, concatenate structure. The two lines share the key word \textit{hui} 慧 ("intellect" or “wisdom”; Skt. \textit{prajñā}) and are seemingly in a dialogue over its relation with \textit{ding} 定 ("meditation" or “concentration”; Skt. \textit{samādhi}). The first term of this triad, \textit{jie} 戒 ("precepts" or “morality”; Skt. \textit{sīla}), is somehow left behind. A glance over the original contexts, however, will betray the heterogeneity of their topics. The third reference discusses the relation between a meditative mind and Buddhist wisdom. The fourth reference is originally part of a line which comments: “As for indulgence in sex, only a clever man can do this. Cleverness gives rise to

\textsuperscript{85}See Sima Qian 司馬遷, \textit{Shiji} 史記, 2:50-52.
facility; facility gives rise to licentiousness." This citation, however, is now stripped of its context and is forced into a dialogue with the third citation. The juxtaposition gives both lines a new context, in which “cleverness” and “licentiousness” would be understood as “wisdom” and “overflow.” Then Su Shi challenges both citations and proposes that wisdom can better bring out concentration. This line of argument does not refute the meaning of these citations in their original contexts, but refutes the meaning assigned to them in the new context. He first refutes the fourth citation with an illustrative situation that a sane person is less likely than a drunkard to behave wildly. Then he refutes the third citation, arguing that a blind man is more likely to fall, which analogously suggests the importance of knowing to maintaining concentration.

This paragraph is remarkably defiant. The wisdom of sages and Buddha is challenged and trivialized, their words juxtaposed with those of Jester Darkness, a humble figure compared with these cultural dignitaries. Confucius is addressed by his taboo name Qiu. By breaking taboos and taunting authorities, Su Shi has gained equal ground in a dialogue with his formidable forbearers. This self-elevating rhetoric grants importance to his opinion on the issue under dispute.

But what is the issue? Taken together, it seems to be a discussion on the relationship between a harmonized, meditative inner state (One, genuineness, concentration) and the cognitive capacity (illumination, wisdom) to know the external world of diversity (Six). Yet the true intention of the author remains undeclared. The reader must keep following his intellectual exercise, groping through the jungle of citations.

[2] 錢塘僧思聰，七歲善彈琴。十二舍琴而學書，書既工。十五舍書而學詩，詩有奇語。雲煙蔥朧，珠璣的皪，識者以為畫師之流。聰又不己，遂讀《華嚴》諸

86 Lingxuan, Zhao Feiyan waizhuan, 8:5496.
Sicong, a monk from Qiantang (modern Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province), was good at playing the zither when he was seven. He put down the zither and started practicing calligraphy when he was twelve. After he excelled in calligraphy, at fifteen he put down calligraphy and started studying poetry. His poems contain some truly marvelous lines! They read like clouds and mists forming a blue nebulosity, or big and small pearls shining and twinkling. Those who recognized his talent ranked him among the master painters [in poetry]. Yet Sicong did not stop. He proceeded to read sūtras like the Avatamsaka and entered the realm of dharma of oceanic wisdom. He is now twenty-nine sui. Old masters and erudite scholars all respect and cherish his talents. Qin Shaoyou (aka. Qin Guan 秦觀 [1049-1100]) took Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī’s words in Śūramgama Sūtra and gave him the style name Wenfu (literally: “returning upon hearing [the truth]).

From the high ground of metaphysical speculation in the first paragraph, the rhetoric in this paragraph plunges sharply in register. It is a selective resume of the addressee, a young monk from Hangzhou. It is both unexpected and belated, given that the title, bearing Sicong’s name, has made the reader expect his appearance much earlier. This unique structure creates tension in the text. According to Su Shi, Sicong’s education has progressed from music, to calligraphy, to poetry, and finally to Buddhist teaching. This progression clearly parodies a famous passage in the Analects where Confucius recounted how his insight increased along with his study at

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87 According to the Śūramgama Sūtra: “The three realms are like illusory flowers; returning [to the origin] upon hearing [this truth], and get rid of the root of illusion.” See Shou Lengyanjing, T no.945, 19:131a.
different ages. Sicong was a concrete case supporting the theory that intellect leads to concentration – this was apparently not an acolyte buried in dogmatic learning, but an avid young artist with intelligence and imagination, donning a monk’s robe. Yet he nevertheless reached prodigious profundity in his religious study – a sign of his grounded mind.

Sicong’s aesthetic education recalls a traditional curriculum recommended to a Confucian gentleman, termed as “the Six Arts.” The original syllabus has little, if any, aesthetic content. An eleventh century gentleman, however, was unlikely to follow the ancient design, which included archery and charioteering. Instead, he would be educated in fine arts like poetry, calligraphy, painting, or music. This diversified curriculum also interprets the mystical citation in the opening line, namely, when One and Six match, Water appears. If Six is understood as various artistic practices, and One as Buddhist wisdom, then such a combination will give rise to “Water” – an essential image to be expatiated in the next paragraph.

[3] 使聰日進不止，自聞思修以至於道，則《華嚴》法界海慧，盡為蓬廬，而況書、詩與琴乎。雖然，古之學道，無自虛空入者。輪扁斫輪，傀儡承蜩，苟可以發其巧智，物無陋者。聰若得道，琴與書皆與有力，詩其尤也。聰能如水鏡以一含萬，則書與詩當益奇。吾將觀焉，以為聰得道淺深之候。

88 Analects 2:4; see Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, Lunyu zhengyi 論語正義, 43.

89 The “Six Arts,” or liuyi 六藝, are defined in Zhouli 周禮 as ritual 礼, music 楽, archery 射, charioteering 御, writing 書, and mathematics 數; on the discussions and modifications of this curriculum in the following centuries, see Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, Zhouli zhengyi 周禮正義, 26:1010-7.
If Sicong will progress daily without halt and reach the Way through listening, reflecting, and practicing, then even *Avatamsaka Sūtra* with its oceanic wisdom in the realm of dharma will just become a guest house [to the Way], not to mention calligraphy, poetry, and zither! Even so, no pursuer of the Way since the olden times has ever entered its realm through emptiness. Just like the Wheelwright Bian crafted wheels\(^\text{90}\) or the Old Hunchback caught cicadas\(^\text{91}\) – a thing is never too base if it inspires one’s dexterity and intelligence! If Sicong would achieve the Way, then zither and calligraphy will both have helped, and poetry particularly so. If Sicong could imitate a water-mirror, which contains the myriad forms in its Oneness, then his calligraphy and poetry will become even more marvelous. I will observe them as indicators of his progress toward the Way.

The last paragraph shows Su Shi’s high expectation for the younger monk. Here is another twist of thought: Su Shi aptly points out that the ultimate goal for a monk is to acquire enlightenment, and all his aesthetic education is but skillful means used to achieve this goal. He suggests three paths to the Way: through Buddhist precepts and meditation, through fine arts like music, calligraphy and poetry, or through practical crafts as in the Zhuangzian stories. Su Shi does not argue for the relative virtues of any path. Instead, in regard to the Way, even *Avatamsaka Sūtra* “with its oceanic wisdom in the realm of dharma” is just a guesthouse to be left behind. All skillful means, in this respect, are self-destructive. In Michael Pye’s words, “in so far as they work, they bring about their own redundancy.”\(^\text{92}\) It is not unlike in *Zhuangzi* where a fish trap is

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\(^{90}\) See n.25.

\(^{91}\) See n.26.

\(^{92}\) Pye (1978), 36.
to be discarded once the fish is caught – similarly, language is to be dispensed with once its meaning is understood. The differences among various means are consequently negligible. Still, as Su Shi quickens to add, just as making wheels and catching cicadas help to acquire the Way, aesthetic education can certainly help as much as, if no more than, the study of sūtras.

When he defines the function of these skillful means as “to inspire dexterity and intelligence,” Su Shi intimates his preference for art over precept and meditation. As he has suggested earlier, “wisdom gives rise to concentration” faster than the other way around. Water, a quintessential element defined in the beginning of this essay, reemerges now as a metaphorical image for an enlightened and meditative mind. Without disturbing its tranquility, it reflects spontaneously and simultaneously ten thousand forms as what they are. This is the appearance of spontaneity eternalized in art. The image of a water-mirror relates the ending to the beginning of the essay, making it a closed circle.

Close reading has revealed the complexity of Su Shi’s argument. The reader must enter a circle of interpretation. Each part contributes to form a general understanding and should be reread in the new light once an overriding understanding is formed. Its aesthetic effect is embedded in a gradual sequence of surprise. The reader is led to enter an argument in many seemingly irrelevant references, each opening a new direction, only to be readjusted by the next. In the end a holistic vision emerges, where the author’s voice dominates those resurrected voices of the past.

The “river” metaphor which characterizes Su’s writing seems to be the opposite of the “water-mirror” which Su expects the monk Sicong to achieve. The two images of water, however,

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93 See the “Waiwu” 外物 chapter in Zhuangzi; Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 26:944.
may in actual fact complement each other and are united as one single metaphor for the writing which embodies the Way – the poetry of temporality and spontaneity.

The “water-mirror” is an ancient metaphor. As Beata Grant has noted, it is often used in Confucian texts to refer to a person’s particular perceptiveness, discrimination, and vision. When used by Su Shi, it is further enriched by the Buddhist metaphor of the mirror, which reflects all the phenomena of the world faithfully without possessing them or being attached to them.94 Another couplet in a poem to Daoqian elaborated upon the image of a water-mirror:

静故了群動 By the virtue of its tranquility, your mind is aware of the myriad movements;

空故納萬境 By the virtue of its emptiness, your mind contains ten thousand virtual realms.95

The water-mirror captures the mobility of things and virtual realms because of its tranquility and emptiness. It differs from the mirror metaphor in Plato’s mimesis theory. When Plato compares art to a mirror which reflects the forms in nature,96 he does not attribute to it any cognitive value. A “water-mirror,” however, represents the meditative mind of the poet. It does not merely reflect

94 Grant (1994), 94.

95 Su Shi, “Song Canliao Shi” 送參寥師, SSSJ, 17:906.

96 Plato, Republic, Book X, 596d; see Plato (1968), 279. Plato’s analogy initiated a long tradition in European theories of art, though many used it in different ways than Plato, giving art higher powers than being a mere reflector; see Abrams (1953), 30-46.
visible forms, but also reveals the “movements” and “virtual realms” which usually evade our sensory faculties.

Second, the tranquility and emptiness of a meditative mind does not necessarily suggest a serene poetic style. According to Su Shi, Daoqian’s poetry displays his “heroism and fierceness” (haomeng 豪猛). It is the same in the case of Sicong, whose poetry is praised as “masculine and unconstrained” (xiongfang 雄放).97 Su Shi’s own writing, in the appearance of a rushing river, has often been characterized in such terms. Thus the difference between a water-mirror and a rushing river may not be so great as the two metaphors appear to suggest. If tranquility is the state of the meditative mind, then mobility is the fleeting of forms reflected upon its surface. Furthermore, water acquires its tranquility or mobility according to the circumstance. When the rushing river stills, it is just like a water-mirror. These two metaphors are united as two phases of the same water – or perhaps a single phase, since mobility and tranquility is relative to the reference. The poetic mind might be like a water-mirror, while his poetry captures the fleeting forms like a rushing river. In this regard, “spontaneity” is a meta-style that allows the individual style to form in coherence to the author’s true person. It implies the equation of personality and persona.

Another issue at stake is Su Shi’s stance on “the sudden vs. the gradual” controversy. Without recounting the long debate on this issue in Chinese Buddhism, I would like to note that the difference of the two approaches is not only on the speed of enlightenment, but more importantly, on the efficacy of “skillful means.” A strict “sudden” approach regards enlightenment as completely within oneself, so it denies any external force like reified teaching.

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97 See Su’s interlineal note in his poem “Zeng shiseng Daotong” 贈詩僧道通, SSSJ, 45:2451.
or ritualized practices. Richard J. Lynn argued that Su Shi, who in his writing often alluded to freedom and spontaneity as the ideal of writing, should belong to “the ‘sudden’ camp,” if he had to choose sides. By proposing a gradual progression of learning toward enlightenment, Su Shi appeared to be however a gradualist. He even suggested that one’s grasp of the Way (dedao 得道) could be measured, degree by degree, through his poetic achievement.

These issues outlined above will be further examined in the next chapter. Here we are to focus on the question how for Su Shi the art of language was a “skillful means” par excellence.

**Language as Skillful Means**

Sicong belonged to the group of poet-monks (shiseng 詩僧) who populated the middle ground between the secular and the sacred elites since the late eighth century. These were Buddhist clerics who composed poetry in the literati mode. Not all but most of them were in the Chan

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98 The reality of religious practice was certainly much more complex than the polarized terms would have suggested, and teachings in many schools were nuanced combinations of both approaches. For more on the sudden and the gradual controversy, see essays collected in Gregory (1987) and Buswell & Gimello (1992).


100 It is true that in the Six Dynasties, monks like Zhi Daolin 支道林 (314-366) had already started to socialize with the cultural elites and occasionally wrote poems. Their verses, however, were limited in number and were mostly short gathas. Poetry from legendary, if not fictive, Chan monks like Wang Fanzhi 王梵志, Hanshan 寒山 and Shide 拾得 also gained broad circulation in early and mid-Tang society, but these poems were mostly vernacular. “Poet-monks,” in contrast, wrote in the main-stream poetic style.
order, and they became active when Chan was gaining force in the society. They reflected a new approach of Buddhism toward language. Yao Mian 姚勉 (1216-1262), a late Southern Song literatus, commented: “Monks in the Han Dynasty were devoted to translation; monks in the Jin were devoted to preaching; from Liang and Wei till early Tang, monks started practicing Chan, but did not yet write poetry. In Late Tang, Chan reached its prime, and monks’ poetry also reached its prime.”¹⁰¹ Translation and preaching, two indispensable enterprises in the introduction and promotion of Buddhism, were replaced by the silent meditation of Chan. Yet when the Chan lineage discarded language as tool, it soon embraced it as art.

Before the rise of Chan, Chinese Buddhism was already a verbose religion. Monastic libraries were stacked with numerous translated sūtras, indigenous sūtras, apocrypha, treatises, commentaries, sub-commentaries, dictionaries, and popular brochures. Monks were well aware of “the uneasy presence of words in the transmission of the allegedly wordless truth.”¹⁰² Chan Buddhism arose as reaction to the obsession with scholastic studies. It claimed legitimacy on the purported transmission of dharma when Mahākāśyapa smiled in response to Śākyamuni Buddha’s raising of a flower. The Buddha was said to have declared: “Do not stand on words [, but rather on] a separate transmission outside the teachings” 不立文字教外別傳.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰¹ Yao Mian, “Zeng Jun-shangren shixu” 贈俊上人詩序, in Xuepo ji 雪坡集, 1184:37:6; further arguments on the association between the rise of Chan and the rise of monastic poetry, see Sun Changwu (1997), 339-46.


¹⁰³ Puji, Wudeng huiyuan, 1:9.
transmission of dharma from Boddhidharma to the first ethnically Chinese patriarch Huike 慧可 (487-593) was similarly based on a wordless gesture.\textsuperscript{104} This peculiar way of transmission emphasizes the ineffable nature of dharma, which can be conveyed not in language, particularly not in written words, but only in the intimate performances of the enlightened ones.

Even Chan, however, could not exile language entirely from its terrain. To elevate itself above its competitors, it must commemorate that singular, historical gesture of the Buddha, on which its claim of superiority was based. Thus history writing was needed to preserve and celebrate the past (justified as not the past, but an ever-present moment). Furthermore, restricting the dharma message to wordless performance would limit its audience to selected monks in numbered temples, weakening the popularity and credibility of the Chan order in the society at large. For the lay patrons of educated elites, classical study was their worthiest devotion and history writing a duty call. Under this established order of prestige, a foreign religious order without a canon or history would look dubious. Consequently, immediately after the rise of Chan, it did not hesitate to expand temple libraries with their own selected sūtras, “recorded sayings” (\textit{yulu 語錄}), “public cases” (\textit{gong’an 公案}) and “transmission of the lamp” hagiographies (\textit{chuandenglu 傳燈錄}).\textsuperscript{105}

A byproduct of the rise of Chan was the prosperity of monastic poetry. Since the late eighth century, some monks began to be known as “poet-monks” and established close

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}, 1:81.

\textsuperscript{105} The Tang dynasty is celebrated in these texts and consequently perceived in literature as the “golden age” of Chan, but most of these works were compiled under the Song. Recent scholarship has argued that these are not historical records of Tang Buddhism, but rather “reflect most directly on the beliefs and concerns of the age in which they were actually compiled.” See Foulk (1993), 149.
associations with educational elites. Jia Dao 賈島 (779-843), representative of the Late Tang poetry style, was once a monk. He was exemplarily painstaking in polishing his poems,\(^\text{106}\) an attitude emulated by many poet-monks of this era. Monastic poetry from the Late Tang to early Song was exclusively pentasyllabic, characterized for its terseness, imagistic intensity, and strict phonetic control.\(^\text{107}\) Those monastic authors readily acknowledged their “addiction in versification” (\(\text{yinpi 咏癖}\)).\(^\text{108}\) From the eighth to the eleventh century, monks famous for their poetic compositions included Jiàoran 皎然 (720-804), Guanxiu 貫休 (832-912), Qiji 齊己 (863?-937?), and the Nine Monks in early Song known as a group. Among Su Shi’s monastic friends, more than a dozen were known mainly because of their poetry.

Scholars have tried to explain the appearance of poet-monks from various perspectives, like the general popularity of poetry in Tang society, the monks’ need of lay patronage, or their secular education before cleric training.\(^\text{109}\) It is also argued that, since Chan Buddhism proposes to seek enlightenment in the common and the quotidian, including in trivial objects and physical

\(^{106}\) It is said that before he joined the monastic order, he bumped into Han Yu’s retinue, when he in a trance was brooding over the choice between “to push” (tui 推) and “to knock” (qiao 敲) in a pentasyllabic line. Upon hearing his story, Han Yu did not punish the imprudent monk, but instead offered his opinion: “To knock is better.” “To push or to knock” henceforth becomes the synonym for the painstaking conceptive process. See Ruan Yue 阮閱, \textit{Shihua zonggui qianji} 詩話總龜前集, 11:130-1. This couplet which Jia Dao brooded upon is: “A bird perched in a pond-side tree; a monk knocked the door beneath the moon” 鳥宿池邊樹，僧敲月下門, see Jia Dao, \textit{Ti Li Ning youju} 题李凝幽居, \textit{Quan Tang shi} 全唐詩 (hereafter \textit{QTS}), 572:6639.

\(^{107}\) See, e.g., Zhou Yukai (1992), 41-42.

\(^{108}\) See Wang Xiulin (2004), 67-72.

\(^{109}\) See Wang Xiulin (2004) and Lu Yongfeng (2002), 368-78.
labor, then writing and painting could also be part of the Chan practice, insofar as they help to cultivate concentrated meditiveness.\(^\text{110}\) Therefore, when translation and preaching was discarded, poetry became an alternative “skillful means.” This argument merits careful examination.

“Skillful means” are hard to be dispensed with. As the Vimalakirti Sutra warns, a peculiarly dangerous bondage for Buddhist practitioners is the greed for emptiness. This is called “Bodhisattva’s bondage” 菩薩縛.\(^\text{111}\) Pure meditation might expose its practitioner to this special danger. Indeed, there is no easy way for humans to command the instincts and impulses within. Instead of gazing into the engulfing emptiness, one can more dependably achieve self-oblivion through mundane, routine, and concentrated work.

But the devotion to poetry is different from other monastic uses of language, since it has transgressed the basic Buddhist taboo against “ornamented language.” The Four-Part Vinaya (Sifen lü 四分律), a vinaya broadly abided by all Buddhist lineages, clearly prescribes that even chanting sūtras and preaching dharma must be timely, lest the words of dharma turn into “ornamented language” (qiyu 綺語).\(^\text{112}\) Measured in this standard, poetry is the ultimate “ornamented language,” one of the severest transgressions that can be committed because of the karma of the mouth.\(^\text{113}\) Su Shi was aware of this prohibition and used it sometimes to admonish himself. He once acknowledged in a letter: “A hundred kinds of crafty arguments are nothing but

\(^{110}\) Zhou Yukai (1992), 39.

\(^{111}\) The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra (Weimojie suoshuojing 維摩詰所說經), T no.475, 14:545b.

\(^{112}\) Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔, T no.1804, 23b, 136c.

\(^{113}\) The other three kinds of transgressions of the mouth are: ambiloquy, cursing, and lying. See, e.g. Epitan ganlu wei lun 阿毘曇甘露味論, T no.1553, 28:966b.
ornamented language”\(^\text{114}\) – a warning against his own strait of argumentativeness. As a Chan master preached, an acolyte should follow the suit of those achieved Chan masters famous for their deeds and reticence; if, however, he “follows the man of letters to learn overstating and ornamented language,” he would sink deeper into delusion.\(^\text{115}\) Such admonition against poetry was ubiquitous in the Chan order and the circle of their influence. Anecdotally, even the famous poet-monk Jiaoran regretted his earlier infatuation in poetry in his advanced age, confessing: “It only disturbed my true nature! I should rather sit on my meditation couch, facing in silence a lonesome pine, a piece of cloud!”\(^\text{116}\) Both the author and the audience of his hagiography must have relished in Jiaoran’s expected regret. His lovely description of his meditation couch however suggests that his karmic link with poetry was perhaps not entirely severed.

The elites’ reactions to the poetry of monks varied. Some sympathized with poet-monoiks but nevertheless felt this issue delicate. For instance, Bo Juyi, in the preface of a poem addressed to a poet-monk, felt obliged to apologize: “The master’s words are all upright. I therefore know that he writes for righteousness, for dharma, for the expedient wisdom, for the liberated nature, but not for poetry.”\(^\text{117}\) His uneasy apology betrayed the difficulty of his defense.

Less sympathetic secular poets summarily dismissed monastic poetry as amateurish composition. In an anecdote related by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1172), a mischievous literatus living in early Song summoned nine famous poet-monoiks, asking them each to write a poem

\(^{114}\) Su Shi, “Yu Shen Ruida ershou” 與沈睿達二首, SSWJ, 58:1745.

\(^{115}\) Xuetang Daoxing 雪堂道行, Xuetang Xing shiyilu 雪堂行拾遺錄, HJ no.1576, 83:372a-b.


\(^{117}\) Bo Juyi, “Ti Daozong Shangren shiyun bing xu” 题道宗上人十韻并序, in Bo Juyi ji, 21:470-1.
without using any word like mountain, water, wind, cloud, rock, star, flora and fauna. As a result, not a single poem was written.118 This story held to mockery the monks’ limited talent and vision. 

Others, however, celebrated monks’ writing of poetry as evidence of their conversion to secular values. According to Yao Mian, “Chan is still the proper engagement of monks. From practicing Chan to practicing poetry, the monks are eventually returning to our Confucianism!”119 The verb “return” (gui 归) suggested that “our Confucianism” (wuru 吾儒) was where these monks rightfully belonged. The competition between monastic and secular writers was hence interpreted by the latter as the monks’ willing submission to their cultural suzerainty. 

Song lixue scholars like Cheng Yi might be wary of Yao Mian’s enthusiasm, since they had a similar issue with the role of “ornamented language” in the pursuit of the Way. Su Shi’s following defense of poet-monks in the Buddhist circle thus paralleled his defense of literary talents in the Confucian circle. In a poem addressing Daoqian, he proposed that “poetry and dharma do not hamper each other.”120 In “Seeing off Sicong,” Su even argued that poetry was a supreme way to enlightenment, better than painting, calligraphy, and perhaps also meditation or sūtra reading. His proposal suggests a hierarchy among the “skillful means.”

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118 Ouyang Xiu, Shihua 詩話, in Ouyang Xiu quanji 歐陽修全集, 1951-2.


120 Su Shi, “Song Canliao Shi” 送參寥師, SSSJ, 17:907.
Poetry of Non-being, Poetry of Immortality

A highly influential school of thinking on the Chinese Buddhist approach to enlightenment was Tiantai 天台,\textsuperscript{121} to which many of Su’s monk friends belonged.\textsuperscript{122} The central doctrine of Tiantai was the “twofold truth” theory, proposed by Nāgārjuna in \textit{Mūlamadhyamakakārikā} (\textit{Zhonglun} 中論, or \textit{Knowledge of the Middle Way}). It argues that there is the worldly mundane truth and there is the truth of supreme meaning. In reality, they are both distinct and united as two views of the same truth.\textsuperscript{123} This theory was further developed by Zhiyi 智顗 (538-597), founder of the Tiantai School, into a sophisticated soteriological system. Zhiyi interpreted reality as a threefold truth, or a single unity with three integrated aspects: emptiness (\textit{kong} 空), the ultimate truth; conventional existence (\textit{jia} 假), the temporary existence of the phenomenal world; and the Middle (\textit{zhong} 中), a simultaneous affirmation of both emptiness and conventional existence as aspects of a single integrated reality.\textsuperscript{124} Around this threefold truth, Zhiyi proposed a system of gradations toward the ultimate identity. Therefore, the teaching of “sudden” enlightenment could be united with the “gradual” practice. It also means that every practitioner must choose an individual path in a hierarchic system in accordance to one’s endowed capacity.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{121} Neal Donner, “Sudden and Gradual Intimately Conjoined: Chih-l’s T’ien-tai View,” in Gregory (1987), 202-3.
\textsuperscript{122} Grant (1994), 23.
\textsuperscript{123} Swanson (1989), 1-2.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}, 6.
Su Shi’s reflection upon difference and identity shows the influence of the Tiantai School. For him, the teaching of nonduality is in dialectic unity with the affirmation of relative distinctions. The paths to enlightenment may include crafts, arts, physical labor, or meditation. They ultimately lead to the same goal; but there are distinctions in quality, momentum, and direct pursuit.

如來得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，曰：“以無所得故而得。”舍利弗得阿羅漢道，亦曰：“以無所得故而得。”如來與舍利弗若是同乎？曰：何獨舍利弗，至于百工賤技，承蜩意鉤，履稀畫墁，未有不同者也。論道之大小，雖至於大菩薩，其視如來，猶若天淵然，及其以無所得故而得，則承蜩意鉤，履稀畫墁，未有不與如來同者也。[…]故《金剛經》曰：一切賢聖，皆以無為法，而有差別。

Śākyamuni Buddha has achieved the supreme, correct enlightenment,¹²⁶ and he says: “I have gained it because of my no-gaining.”¹²⁷ Sariputra¹²⁸ has achieved the arhat’s enlightenment, and he also says: “I have gained it because of my no-gaining.”¹²⁹ Are the Buddha and Sariputra so much the same? I would say: not only Sariputra, but even the humble craftsmen of a hundred trades, like catching cicadas,¹³⁰ single-minded hook-

¹²６“The supreme, correct enlightenment” 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提 is the transliteration of the Sanskrit term “anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi.” Anuttarā means “unsurpassed;” samyak means “correct;” and sambodhi means “enlightenment” or “awakening.”

¹²７Jingang boruoboluomi jing 金剛般若波羅蜜經, T no.235, 8:749c, 751c.

¹²⁸The first of the ten disciples of Śākyamuni Buddha.

¹²⁹The Vimalakīrti Sūtra, T no.475, 14:548c.

¹³₀See n.26.
making smithcraft, observing pigs’ feet, and painting walls, none of them is different [from the Buddha]. Talking about the greatness or pettiness in their achievement of the Way, even a great Bodhisattva facing Śākyamuni Buddha is just like an abyss facing the sky. In terms of gaining because of no-gaining, however, even catching cicadas, hook-making, observing pigs’ feet, and painting walls—these craftsmen are all not different from the Buddha. […] Therefore the Diamond Sūtra declares: all the wise and sagacious regard non-being as dharma; however, there are distinctions in it.

This account, written in 1095 when Su Shi was exiled to Huizhou, represented his Buddhist thinking in its maturity. The dialectics of the Buddha’s “gaining because of no-gaining” comes

131 In the “Zhibeiyou” chapter, Zhuangzi, an eighty-year-old ironsmith could still make very sharp hooks. When asked whether it came from mere craft or the Way, the ironsmith offered the similar response as the cicada-catcher (see n.26). See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 22:760-1.

132 In the “Zhibeiyou” chapter, Zhuangzi, Master Dongguo asked Master Zhuang: “Where is the Way?” “Everywhere” was the answer. Master Dongguo asked for examples, and Master Zhuang offered ants, rice-field weeds, tiles, and human excrements. To the offended silent response of Dongguo, Master Zhuang explained that, just like an experienced market supervisor knew the fatness of pigs from examining their feet, the Way manifested itself most tellingly in the basest objects. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 22:749-50.

133 In Mencius 6.4, Mencius discusses with his disciple whether one should reward the intention or the result. He argued for the second option and offered a hypothetical scenario: if a craftsman destroys tiles to paint the walls, he should not be paid for his labor; see Jiao Xun 焦循, Mengzi zhengyi 孟子正義, 12:429. Su Shi obviously has borrowed this term for the sake of parallelism with “observing the pigs’ feet,” despite that its original context has nothing to do with possession of the Way.

134 Su Shi, “Qianzhou Chongqing Chanyuan xin jingzang ji” 虔州崇慶禪院新經藏記, SSWJ, 12:390-1.
from the *Diamond Sūtra*, and in the case of Śāriputra, from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. In the *Diamond Sūtra*, when Subhūti asked the Buddha: “The World-honored One! You have gained the supreme, correct enlightenment; does it mean you have gained nothing?” The Buddha approved his insight and declared that his dharma was a great unity in which there was no self, no human, and no sentient beings. In the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, a goddess overpowered Śāriputra, the Buddha’s principle disciple, by virtue of her insight of the dharma. Śāriputra thought her female form was inferior to a male form, a thought revealing his attachment to the form. The goddess asked if Śāriputra gained his arhat’s enlightenment because of his no-gaining. He concurred. Then she declared that it was the same with all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Both stories suggest that distinctions are illusory. As Su Shi further points out, the distinction among various crafts, or between a craftsman and a bodhisattva, is only that of quantity, while their distinction with the Buddha is of quality. The former kind of quantitative distinction is relativized and dismissed as negligible. Push this logic to an extreme, and every art or craft would be seen as essentially the same. And indeed, all distinctions should then be abolished, qualitative or quantitative, since when one calls distinction “distinction,” one is in reality already making a distinction.

Yet in the end, Su Shi abruptly reaffirms the distinctions. The original context of the quotation explains why. As the Buddha points out to Subhūti, the servants of the Buddha all regard emptiness as dharma, but they approach and promote dharma in different ways, for instance, donation, holding precept, or preaching. These varying approaches do make differences. Elsewhere, Su Shi provides another analogy for the theory of relative distinctions within a grand unity:
我法不然，非千非一。如百千燈，共照一室。雖各偏滿，不相壞雜。

My dharma is not like that—it is neither a thousand nor just one.

It is like hundreds or thousands of lights, shining together in a single chamber.

Though each shines through the whole space, it does not infringe or mix with another.  

This inscription was composed in the first month of 1101, shortly before Su Shi’s death. Its lamp metaphor is an apt comment on the account quoted above. The reaffirmed distinction is no longer the initial distinction, but a distinction made in the awareness of its illusory nature.

Arthur Danto, a contemporary art theorist, once quoted the well-known “public case” of the Southern Song Chan master Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信 to expound his theory of art. Qingyuan declared that there were three stages in his understanding of the dharma: the first stage, seeing mountain as mountain and water as water; the second stage, seeing mountain not as mountain and water not as water; and the third stage, seeing mountain still as mountain and water still as water. According to Danto, the last stage is an analogy of aesthetic resemblance. Just like saying “the black paint is black paint,” while knowing that it is identified with something else, this is implies at the same time is not. Similarly, in the eyes of an enlightened one, the distinction among the means simultaneously is a distinction and is not a distinction.

Su Shi thought the skillful means to be not only distinctive but also hierarchical. As Susan Bush has similarly noted, Su Shi established a hierarchy of arts in which painting was ranked lower than calligraphy and calligraphy than literature. She regards it a matter of the social

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136 Xu Chuandenglu 續傳燈錄, T no.2077, 51:614b-c.

usefulness of respective skills. It is true that poetry traditionally enjoyed the highest cultural prestige and, since the civil examination system was established in the seventh century, had become a highway to fame and riches. Su’s hierarchy, however, might also be informed by philosophical speculations. Su Shi argued that the supremacy of poetry to other arts came foremost from its minimum dependence on materiality. Unlike calligraphy and painting, reliant on the presence of brush and paper, poetry appeared to be a purer mental form. It could be composed in mind and transmitted by mouth, independent of external “things.”

Su Shi constantly admonished painters and calligraphers to be wary of their dependence on the materiality of their arts, lest they be “enslaved” by things. His warning resonated with a persistent theme in Chinese intellectual history. Xunzi says: “A gentleman enslaves things (yiwu 役物); a little-man is enslaved by things.” Similarly, Buddhism proposes to “transform things” (zhuanwu 轉物), instead of “being transformed by things.” Such admonitions shared the same philosophical caution on ownership. Modern capitalism regards one’s material possession as the extension of one’s self, ergo property rights are inalienable and the accumulation of wealth equivalent to the increase of individual power. The intellectual traditions that Su Shi inherited, however, regard the concentration and tranquility of one’s subjective self to be the sole source of one’s power. Yet unlike Buddhists, Xunzi certainly did not denounce ownership per se. Social, economic, and political status has always been one essential aspect


139 Wang Xianqian 王先謙, Xunzi ji jie 荀子集解, 2:5.

140 “To transform things” is used in many Buddhist texts. Its idea might come from Seng Zhao’s 僧肇 “Discourse on the Unreal-Void” 不真空論, though he did not explicitly use this term. See Seng Zhao, Zhao lun 肇論, T no.1858, 45:152a-b.
defining the genteel class. Rather, the gentleman can continue to possess things, but his self is
not dispersed into his possessions; thus he is undisturbed by his material loss or gain. Su Shi’s
“non-attachment” theory largely followed this argument. His theory, summed in Ronald Egan’s
terms, was “not allowing oneself to become attached to things or possessive about them.” To
do so, one’s mind must be constantly kept tranquil and empty – the same “water-mirror” mind
which, in artistic creativity, responds to things without disturbing itself. The capacity to avoid
being “enslaved by things,” therefore, is coherent with capacity of spontaneous creation.

Among the three genteel arts, poetry promises its practitioner the least degree of
enslavement by things. When writing under request for a newly built painting studio, Su Shi
argued that “a gentleman’s mind could reside (\textit{yuyi} 寓意) in things, but should not linger (\textit{liuyi}
留意) on things;” then he suggested that calligraphy and painting were especially dangerous
“things,” because, being such noble delights, they might enchant even the best minds into
obsessive possession and accumulation. This danger was not only imminent in collection and
connoisseurship, but partly also in learning calligraphy and painting per se. During the Song,
without modern galleries or picture books, the student must acquire a number of originals or
hand-made copies of exemplary artwork. A fine calligraphic copy was dear, since it required the
copier to trace the strokes attentively from the original or from another fine copy. Only taking a
rubbing from a stone inscription could make it cheaper. The study of painting would cost even
more. Besides, a large amount of materials were needed just for practice. Su Shi once joked with
a calligrapher: “A proverb from my hometown Sichuan says, ‘learning calligraphy costs paper,

\footnotesize


[just like] learning medicine costs people.” Su Shi entertained the idea that real art should be independent of materiality. As the Jin recluse Tao Qian 陶潛 (365-427) suggested, the best zither had no strings; Su Shi, in addition, would like to borrow this string-less zither and fiddle his finger-less play. In this regard, the lack of materiality in the poetic art guarantees its highest degree of spontaneity, which in turn promises the highest artistic achievement.

The concern for artistic achievement, however, turns out to be perhaps just another hindrance on the way toward enlightenment. Artwork is the artist’s passport to immortality – not the imperishability of his flesh, but the perpetuation of his name. The artist lives his after-life in the eyes and ears of the world. Fear consequently rises over the decay of his chosen medium. Su Shi speculated on this issue through the voice of another:

或以謂余，凡有物必歸於盡，而恃形以為固者，尤不可長，雖金石之堅，俄而變壞，至於功名文章，其傳世垂後，乃為差久。

I was once told: every “thing” will come to its end, and those counting upon their material forms for durability will particularly not last long. Even things as solid as metal and stone will soon change and decay. As for political and literary accomplishments, they

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144 On Tao Qian’s string-less zither, see his biography in Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, Jinshu 晉書, 64:2463. Su Shi’s proposal: “Let me borrow your string-less zither, and apply my finger-less play” 借君無弦琴，寓我非指彈, see “He Tao Dongfang you yishi” 和陶東方有一士, SSSJ, 41:2265-6.
may last longer, due to the fact they will be remembered by generations and set examples for the future.\footnote{Su Shi, “Momiao Ting ji” 墨妙亭記, SSWJ, 11:354-5.}

Similarly, Su declared in a colophon on a painting: “The traces of brush and ink are dependent on material forms, which must also decay.”\footnote{Su Shi, “Ti Bizhen-tu” 题笔阵图, SSWJ, 69:2170. Ronald Egan has also noted this colophon, but it leads him to a different conclusion: “[…] for Su Shi [… ] the practice if not collecting calligraphy is just an amusement;” cf. Egan (1989), 412. In my opinion, Egan has taken Su Shi’s claim (“calligraphy is finer than playing chess”) too literally. Dismissing the significance of calligraphy might well be a way to relieve him from the anxiety over the decay of material forms that bear his “traces” of existence.} This anxiety did not appear to be Buddhist or Daoist – both philosophies may simply recommend him to celebrate the demise of forms. It rather reflected an innate fear of death solidly rooted in the heart of Su Shi that no philosophical persuasion could eradicate. He was a restive pursuer of immortality – spiritual and physical. His alchemical practices and pursuit of physical immortality will be examined in the last chapter of the dissertation. His notion of literary immortality is apparently informed by a passage in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 commentary to *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *locus classicus* for the standards that confer spiritual immortality in China. In this passage, the wise Lu minister Shusun Bao 叔孫豹 suggested “three non-decays”: the establishment of virtue, of successful service, and of words.\footnote{Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi 春秋左傳正義 [Xiang 24], in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 27:277.} Su Shi quietly left out the sagely “virtue,” probably because this criterion was vague and declaring one’s intention of reaching it would sound brazen, if not hypocritical. He did aspire for political accomplishment, but his life experience proved this criterion dependent upon...
the fickle time and fate. In the end, a literatus had only one controllable path to immortality: the establishment of words.

Su Shi’s notion of immortality had an iconoclastic clang to the conservative ears, but it was already considerably more conservative than that of his eccentric younger friend Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107), calligrapher and connoisseur. Peter C. Sturman noticed how Mi Fu essentially pronounced “the unpronounceable: art was the fourth non-decay.” 148 Mi observed that precious objects sometimes did survive longer than a good reputation, let alone fine works of art. Su Shi might not have approved Mi’s radical statement, nor was Mi Fu’s opinion as philosophically reflective as Su Shi’s. The younger Mi’s bluntness, however, must be developed out of a general, tacit, contemporary consensus on the power of literary and artistic immortality, intimately expressed by Su Shi’s fear of decay.

Coda

The linguistic art is simultaneously a means in the pursuit of enlightenment and a passport to immortality. These two seemingly conflicting pursuits may just reveal the paradoxical nature of language. Poetry distinguishes itself from other arts by its seemingly immaterial nature. Unlike prose, moreover, it is pithy, paratactic, and often surprising. The reading of poetry can approximate the immediacy of transmission of the wordless Buddhist dharma: the reader is transported beyond the quotidian and is forced to fill the silent poetic moments with the whispering dialogue of him and the author, in which he gains inarticulate insight into his own self. But the seeming emptiness of a poem can be delusional. Language in essence is a semiotic

system attempting to represent all human experience, but the ultimate truth is beyond representations. Instead of accepting the truth of non-being, the poet uses his art to immortalize his traces of living in a historical time and space. If the pursuit of enlightenment reflects a “death instinct,” a longing for an abrupt departure from the illusory life, then writing poetry and making art in general reflects a “life instinct,” a longing for eternal life in the human world.

Ultimately, “enlightenment” itself is a word – it is thus embedded in a system of meaning and cannot break free from a field of references. The poetry of spontaneity is oxymoronic because it reflects the desire of language to tear down its own boundary. It wants to captivate the boundlessness, to voice the wordless, and to immortalize the temporary. This ideal of poetry is summarized in the metaphor of a water-mirror or a rushing river. Yet the harder a poet tries to realize this ideal, the deeper he feels the limit of language and of himself. He begins to doubt whether ultimate, complete enlightenment is possible. And even if it does become possible, the poet may find him reluctant to abandon the means at the threshold of enlightenment. This is because, along the way of language, the means has become the goal.
CHAPTER TWO

Oblivion and the Art of Imperfection

For Su Shi, the appearance of naturalness was made by the highest craft. As he advised his nephew:

凡文字，少小時須令氣象崢嶸，采色絢爛，漸老漸熟乃造平淡，其實不是平淡，絢爛之極也。

As for writing in general, when you are young, you should make its aura lofty and steep, its color vivid and splendid. When you age and mature, eventually your writing will achieve plainness. It is in fact not plainness, but ultimate splendor.¹

There are two ways to understand the ideal of “plainness” (pingdan 平淡): the simple absence of artistic design, or the understated appearance within which there hides ultimate skill and strength. Su Shi was of the latter opinion. He practiced his advice by emulating the poetry of Tao Qian 陶潛 (352-427), celebrated for its simplicity, in the last decade of his life. What he found valuable in Tao was a “withered plainness” (kudan 枯澹), defined as “withered outside and saturated inside; seemingly plain but rich in taste.”² Different from earlier scholarship on this issue,³ my

¹ Su Shi, “Yu Erlang zhi yishou” 與二郎姪一首, SSWJ, yiwen 佚文 4:2523.
argument does not stop at pointing out this dialectic unity as Su Shi’s aesthetic ideal, but will proceed to examine the mechanisms of its making. I argue that the appearance of spontaneity is created in the dynamic process of practice and oblivion⁴ and remains imperfect by necessity. Furthermore, Su Shi’s aesthetics is closely related to his ethics. As to be seen below, Su’s theory of art is intrinsically grounded in his understanding of human nature.

**Human Nature Is Imperfect**

Despite the rising importance of “human nature” (xing 性) in intellectual discussions since Late Tang, Su Shi was not keen to engage with this concept. In a court memorial written in 1069, Su Shi chided “contemporary scholars” for their “feeling abashed if they cannot discuss human nature or heaven’s decree (ming 命).”⁵ Since Confucius never talked about human nature or the Way of heaven, Su Shi recommended them to model after the Master, whose silence on these issues was noted in the *Analects.*⁶ The accused included the newly promoted Prime Minister

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⁴ Charles Yim-tze Kwong argues that in understanding Tao Qian’s simplicity one should avoid two opposite assumptions: that simplicity means the absence of artistic design; and, antithetically, that all impressions of simplicity are appearances fabricated out of painstaking effort. His own explanation of Tao’s simplicity is that “a natural genius eminently capable of writing spontaneously under the hold of inspiration;” Kwong (1989), 63. My own explanation differs from any of the assumptions above. Simplicity, or “plainness,” certainly does not mean the lack of design, nor is purely fabricated, nor is the mythic flow of natural genius. Instead, it is achieved by deliberate practice as well as induced oblivion at the moment of artistic composition, as to be elaborated further in this chapter.


⁶ *Analects*, 5:14; see Liu Baonan *Lunyu zhengyi*, 184.
Wang Anshi (1021-1086), whose reform of the education and state examination system was harshly criticized in this memorial.

Wang Anshi formulated his theory of human nature before his ascent in court. He argued that human nature in essence is beyond the dichotomy of good and evil, a dichotomy which arises only together with sentience (qing 情). After the birth of this dichotomy, nature and sentience will then couple in mutual dependency, and neither of them is purely good or evil. Yet through education, people are moved toward good. Wang consistently refuted the moral sufficiency of human nature and proposed the potential unity of self and society. The “sage” sought to transform society by establishing models all men could adhere to. Wang’s moral philosophy provided a theoretical foundation for his political agenda. His 1069 education reform excluded literature (poetry and rhapsody) from the jinshi 進士 examination curriculum and focused solely on classical commentary and policy questions. Su Shi regarded it nothing but folly, since examination could judge only talent, not morality or administrative capacity. Since it was hard to entice the most upright people with fame or wealth, they would not necessarily serve. Using “morality” as the criterion of selection vainly encouraged hypocrisy.

The debate around examination policy reflected the fact that in the Song, scholarly specializations were often divided along the lines of classical studies, history, and literature. Whether academic brilliance could be readily translated into administrative capacity was another

8 Bol (1992), 226-8.
cause of contention. Su Shi proposed to foster the all-around talent that he himself aspired to represent. He passed the *jinshi* examination in 1057, where poetry and rhapsody were major topics, and the *zhike* 諸科 examination in 1061, where his policy arguments were tested. He composed twenty-five essays in preparation for the *zhike* examination, mainly treatises on classics and history. Su regarded all these fields crucial for the development of individual talent, while for Wang Anshi, only classical study and policy making capacity were worthy pursuits.

Su and Wang differed on their understanding of the perfectibility of human nature, demonstrated in their respective conceptualizations of the “sage” (*shengren* 聖人). In the Song, the concept of the sage was of “theological significance.” It was a central metaphor upon which a system of moral philosophy was built. Wang Anshi regarded the sage on a par with heaven-and-earth as well as perfectly moral, capable and therefore responsible to rectify the world. Su Shi, on the other hand, held that a sage was neither omnipotent nor omniscient. Instead, he must go along with the tide of his time and accomplish his desired ends in accordance to established ways. For Su Shi, a sage did not have a “perfected” nature, but represented the highest potential

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10 For a comprehensive account on this issue, see Zhu Shangshu (2006), 190-209.

11 For more on this exam, see Su Shi’s biography in the Introduction.


13 A phrase used by Michael Lackner in regard to Zhang Zai’s conceptualization of the Confucian Sage; see Lackner (2008), 25-40.

14 Bol (1992), 228.

that humanity could achieve.\textsuperscript{16} Where Wang Anshi regarded moral standards as absolute, Su Shi regarded them as relative to human situations.

The \textit{locus classicus} of the Confucian doctrine on human nature was the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}, originally a chapter in the \textit{Book of Rites}. Under the Song, it eventually became an essential Confucian classic.\textsuperscript{17} It begins by declaring: “What heaven has decreed is called nature”

\textsuperscript{16} Su Shi’s opinion finds its modern echo with the ethical philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah argues that humans do not have fixed character; one’s moral behavior is rather decided by the situation. Thus, instead of following the Aristotelian ethics aiming to transform people into \textit{good} person, he proposes that one with limited cognitive sources could just follow what a virtuous person would do in a certain situation, in order to maximize the chances that he would do the same good. Virtue is not being, but doing. Appiah’s argument is based on empirical psychological experiments. Su Shi’s theory bears much resemblance to this “ethical Situationism.” Appiah’s logical conclusion, however, is that there is no moral intuition – a step which Su Shi might not venture to take. See Appiah (2008), 38-53, 56-62, 75-76, and passim.

\textsuperscript{17} The status of the Confucian classics had been in a relatively fluid state largely until Zhu Xi. On the rise of the status of the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean} since the ninth century, see Zhang Quancai (1999), 47-52. Treatises on Zhongyong from early Song to Su Shi’s time include: Qisong 契嵩, “Zhongyong jie” 中庸解, in \textit{Tanjin wenji} 鐵津文集, 卷 no.2115, 52:665c-667c; Fan Zuyu 范祖禹, “Zhongyong lun” 中庸論, in Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, \textit{Songyuan xuean} 宋元學案, 21:78-85; Cheng Yi (or Cheng Hao), “Zhongyong jie” 中庸解, in \textit{Ercheng ji}, jingshuo 經說 8:1152-65. Su Shi had written treatises on the \textit{Book of Changes}, \textit{Book of Documents}, \textit{Book of Rites}, \textit{Book of Odes}, \textit{Spring and Autumn Annals}, and \textit{Doctrine of the Mean} (see \textit{SSWJ}, 2:52-64), showing his understanding of these works as “classics,” elevated in nature from other kinds of writing. Later in his life, he wrote commentaries on the \textit{Book of Changes}, \textit{Book of Documents}, and \textit{Analects}. He regarded these commentaries to be the highest accomplishment of his life; see his biography in the Introduction. The importance that he granted to these works further attests to their classic status.
Most theories on human nature in the Song Dynasty were articulated through commentaries on the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Su Shi’s treatise on this classic, written in 1061, was decidedly different. He avoided defining human nature and even suggested that the first passage in this classic was blatant interpolation. His exegesis was centered instead on “genuineness” (*cheng* 誠), a crucial term appearing in Chapter 23 (quoted already in “Seeing off Sicong”), which states:

自誠明, 謂之性。自明誠, 謂之教。誠則明矣, 明則誠矣。^{19}

It is in [human] nature to acquire illumination from genuineness; it is in teaching to realize genuineness from illumination. Once genuine, one is illuminated; once illuminated, one is genuine.

Su’s reading proposes that illumination (*ming* 明) is knowing, which does not necessarily lead to doing. One acts only when taking genuine delight (*le* 樂) in what one knows and is about to do. A sage is the one who takes delight in the Way, not the one who knows the most. Since even the sage cannot accomplish the ultimate task, one can follow suit and thus feel at ease with the most difficult moral command. On this ground, Su understands the doctrine of “holding on to the Mean” (*zhizhong* 執中) as “constantly at the Mean” (*shizhong* 時中). One by necessity will deviate from the Mean, but one should keep trying and constantly come back to the Mean. This is why Confucius praised Yan Hui 順回 for holding onto the Way for three months at a time –

^{18} See, e.g., Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong zhangju jizhu*, vol. 1, 1.

^{19} See, e.g., *ibid.*, vol. 1, 11.
but, as Su Shi notes, not any longer. The Mean is grounded in human sentience as well as in his limits. This dynamic definition of the Mean encourages a person to answer the highest moral call without exceeding his present capacity. He will then take delight in practicing the ethical doctrine without being crushed by the challenge and thus succumbing to his base desires. He will then achieve not absolute freedom but unimpeded resignation to his nature in the process of continuous effort to improve himself. This dialectic state of being is defined by Su Shi as ethical spontaneity.

Su avoided direct discussion on human nature in this treatise. He did talk about it, however, in essays on historical figures written in the same period, which made his silence in the aforementioned treatise all the more conspicuous. In his essays on Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE-18) and Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), he proposed that human nature was neutral. Like a tree, it had the tendency to grow. This was a quality that was in its nature and was also common with all other trees. Its timber might become hard or soft, big or small – all of which was in its potentiality (cai 才) and varied individually. His understanding bore some resemblance to that of Gaozi 告子 (fl. 4-3cent. BCE), better known as Mencius’ opponent, who compared human nature to wood and morality to a wooden vessel. Su’s theory also showed the influence of Qisong 契嵩 (1007-1072), a prominent Buddhist scholar whose treatise on the Doctrine of the Mean was the first of its kind written in the Song. Qisong proposed that humans shared common

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20 Analects 6.7; see Liu Baonan, Lunyu zhengyi, 221.

21 Su Shi, “Yang Xiong lun” 楊雄論, SSWJ, 4:110-1.

22 Su Shi, “Han Yu lun” 韓愈論, SSWJ, 4:113-5.

23 Mencius 11.1; see Jiao Xun, Mengzi zhengyi, 22:732.
nature, while their sentience was specific to individual.\textsuperscript{24} Being a monk, Qisong defined human nature with deliberate defiance as sensual desires such as those for food and sex. Su Shi said the same. Contrary to most contemporary moral theorists who denounced sentience as the origin of evil, Su acknowledged the legitimacy, and indeed necessity, of instinctive physical desires.\textsuperscript{25} In his later theories of human nature, this basic belief remained unchanged.

In these early writings, Su Shi’s paradoxical effort to define human nature and simultaneous condemnation of any like efforts\textsuperscript{26} reflected his ambiguity. He indeed sometimes argued that no universal definition of human nature could be found.\textsuperscript{27} This argument appeared to have taken the individualistic sentience as part of human nature too. In short, his understanding of human nature was strikingly physical and individualistic, suggesting that imperfection was a necessary human condition. Later, his conceptualization of human nature underwent significant development in his commentary on the \textit{Book of Changes}, the writing of which began during his exile to Huangzhou (1083-1084) and was finished during his last exile to Hainan (1097-1100). It integrated a draft by his father Su Xun and was complemented by his brother Su Che. Nevertheless, Su Shi’s was the dominant voice in this family project. In my subsequent analysis, I will treat the basic arguments as Su Shi’s, an approach taken so far by scholarly consensus.

Su Shi’s argument on human nature consists mainly of three aspects. First, just like the Way, human nature is invisible and ineffable, neither good nor evil. Su compares the Way to

\textsuperscript{24} Qisong, “Zhongyong jie,” \textit{卍} no.2115, 52:667a.

\textsuperscript{25} For a more extensive survey on this issue, see Leng Chengjin (2003), 132-67. Leng however argues that Su equated nature with sentience, an opinion which ignores Su’s later mature thinking on this issue.

\textsuperscript{26} As also shown in Su Shi, “Zisi lun” 子思論, \textit{SSWJ}, 3:94-95.

sound, and human nature to hearing – the former exists independently, while the latter comes into being only with the presence of a sentient agent. Human nature is an individual manifestation of the Way. Being good or evil is the result of nature coming into touch with things, but not in nature itself. Second, good and evil coexist within a single individual in varying proportion. Moral cultivation or abandon changes the proportion, but cannot eliminate the existence of either. Thus, even sages like Yao and Shun could not eliminate the element of evil from their nature, and nor could villains eliminate that of good. That which cannot be eliminated is innate in nature. Third, man must go back to the origin to meet the unity of the invisible (human nature) and the visible (heaven’s decree). Their unity is unreflective and spontaneous, like feeling hungry and eating food or thinking of and using one’s own hands. This emphasis on empirical knowledge of human nature and heaven’s decree relates Su’s moral philosophy to his aesthetic theory.

Su Shi’s mature understanding of human nature differed sharply from that of Cheng Yi, who later became another formidable opponent of his in political thinking and classical studies. Cheng followed Mencius in declaring that “human nature is originally good.” His theory presupposed the perfectibility of human nature and granted man the epistemological capacity to know the Way in its totality, which Su Shi regarded as impossible even for the sage. To realize

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the Way, Cheng Yi argued, one should examine one’s “original mind” (*benxin* 本心)\(^{33}\) and hold onto the Mean, which he defined as “what is correct.”\(^{34}\) It was a categorical and universal definition that contrasted distinctly with Su Shi’s contingent and individualist understanding of the Mean.

Cheng Yi’s theory was largely inherited by Zhu Xi, the giant of Southern Song Confucianism. The differences between Su Shi and Zhu Xi’s philosophy have long attracted scholarly attention. Peter K. Bol argued that Zhu Xi represented a narrowed intellectual tradition, in which the moralistic “Learning of *dao*” (*daoxue* 道學) eclipsed the diversity of cultural accomplishments (*wen* 文) represented by Su Shi.\(^{35}\) In a recent article, Michael A. Fuller argued that one major distinction between the poetics of Su Shi and Zhu Xi was over the epistemological adequacy of language in representing patterns that underlie the phenomenal world.\(^{36}\) Zhu Xi believed in the epistemological adequacy of language and of one’s cognitive capacity, but Su Shi was much more agnostic in this regard. For him, it is not only that the Way and human nature proper cannot be known, but language also cannot express adequately what one does know. His agnostic view of the Way is best expressed in an essay titled as “The Sun Analogy” (*Riyu* 日喻), where Su Shi argues that a born blind cannot know the sun; using analogies to instruct him of the shape or the warmth of the sun may even create further


\(^{34}\) *Ibid.*, *jingshuo* 8:1153.

\(^{35}\) Bol (1992), 259; also see 340-1. In a recently submitted paper “Zhu Xi as Poet,” I have suggested to modify his argument and proposed to examine not just Zhu Xi’s argument about literature, but also his thinking through literature.

\(^{36}\) See Fuller (2005).
confusions. This situation is analogous to the unenlightened trying to know the Way. The key line in Su’s argument is “the Way can be acquired but not be sought” 道可致不可求. To “acquire” the Way is like acquiring the art of diving – one needs practice rather than theory. Good divers have a tacit knowledge of the nature of water but are unable to articulate it. For students of the Way, classics provide the theory, but the instinctive, empirical knowledge comes rather from concrete practices such as encyclopedic study, literature, art, and experience. All these are “skillful means,” only expedient, but indispensable. Moral study alone cannot be the shortcut to the Way.

Aesthetic practice also gives the student tangible delight in his effort. It is no mere coincidence that in ancient China, music theory serves as the classical source of literary and art criticism, and the word for “music” (yue 樂) simultaneously means “delight,” making their correlation almost tautological. Delight in artistic practice ensures its sustainability.

Given the imperfection of human nature, however, if spontaneity is the pursuit, there should not be a universal ideal of “perfection” to judge all, just like there is no universal definition of human nature. Instead, the artist by necessity must let his imperfect and individual nature flow spontaneously into his work. The style of his artwork will be perceived as informed by his eccentric personal traits, unsuppressed in their expression. He thus will even compromise to accomplish a lesser imperfection: not the kind of imperfection defined as the highest possible perfection that the best of the human race can achieve, but the imperfection defined as the highest attainable accomplishment within the limit and eccentricity of an individual. This compromise leads to the expression of individuality in works of art. Ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics are intrinsically interrelated on this issue.

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37 Su Shi, “Riyu,” SSWJ, 64:1981. This essay is also examined in Bi Xiyen (2003), 73-74.
Practice, Practice, Practice

Su Shi occasionally claimed a need for “not-learning” (buxue 不學) and “having-no-models” (wufa 無法), a claim that is taken by some scholars literally as evidence of his proposal for “sudden enlightenment.”38 Others have noted instead Su’s exhortation for practice and learning.39 Often neglected, however, is that these contradictory claims were almost always conditioned by context or staged at an ironical distance. For instance, in a poem addressed to Su Che, Su Shi boasted:

吾雖不善書 Although I am not good at calligraphy,
曉書莫如我 No one knows it better than I do.
苟能通其意 Once you understand the idea of it,
常謂不學可 As I often say, it is fine to learn no more.40

This poem was a response to Su Che’s comment on his calligraphy, who exalted: “You have mastered the style of whomever you learn from,” and then proceeded to compare Su Shi’s

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various styles to famous calligraphers of the past.\footnote{Su Che, “Zizhan jishi Qiyang shiwu bei” 子瞻寄示岐陽十五碑, in \textit{Su Che ji}, 1:19.} Understood in this dialogic context, Su Shi’s jovial reply in effect showed his humility, declining to be ranked among the greats. By declaring to have not learned, he staged himself as a mere connoisseur.

Su Shi often wears a mask of \textit{naïveté} in his social poetry. This staged poetic persona appears in another poem which ostentatiously proposes “having-no-models.”

石蒼舒醉墨堂 Shi Cangshu’s Drunken Ink Hall\footnote{Su Shi, “Shi Cangshu Zuimo tang,” \textit{SSSJ}, 6:235-6.}

人生識字憂患始 All anxieties and troubles in life start with literacy;
姓名粗記可以休 It is enough to know roughly how to write our names.
何用草書誇神速 Why even boast about the vivacity and swiftness of your cursive script?
開卷惝怳令人愁 When I unfold your scroll, I am at utter loss and so puzzled!
 [...] 
君於此藝亦云至 You, sir, could also be called supreme in this art;
堆牆敗筆如山丘 Worn-out brushes pile up by the wall like a hill.
興來一揮百紙盡 When inspired, you complete a hundred sheets by a wave of wrist,
駿馬倏忽踏九州 Like fine steeds galloping over the Nine Provinces in the blink of an eye.
我書意造本無法 My calligraphy, however, is a mind-craft, following no models;
點畫信手煩推求 Casually I dot and stroke without taking care.
胡為議論獨見假 But why does the public hold me in such high opinion,

隻字片紙皆藏收 And collects even two characters on a palm-size sheet?

不減鍾張君自足 You, sir, are no inferior to Zhong and Zhang,\(^{43}\) sufficient in yourself;

下方羅趙我亦優 On a lower rank, I am like Luo and Zhao,\(^{44}\) also not bad.

不須臨池更苦學 I have no need of painstaking practice by the pond;\(^{45}\)

完取絹素充衾裯 So to keep all the white silk for my bed linen.

According to *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*], when the warlord Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202BCE) was a child, his uncle taught him writing, without success. When berated, Xiang Yu replied that it was enough to know how to write his name, so as to spare him the time to learn the art of war.\(^{46}\) Unlike Xiang Yu, Shi Cangshu was a calligrapher who enjoyed the reputation as having acquired the essence of the cursive script style. In Su Shi’s discourse on art, this highly

\(^{43}\) Zhong You 鍾繇 (151-230) and Zhang Zhi 張芝 (?-192), famous calligraphers in the cursive script style.

\(^{44}\) According to Wang Wengao’s 王文誥 commentary, it refers to Luo Shujing 羅叔景 and Zhao Yuansi 趙元嗣, two calligraphers contemporary with Zhang Zhi. Both had much popularity then, so Zhang Zhi joked that although he could not be compared to earlier calligraphers like Du Cao 杜操 and Cui Yuan 崔操 (77-142), he was certainly good enough to surpass Luo and Zhao; see *SSSJ*, 6:236.

\(^{45}\) It refers also to a story concerning Zhang Zhi. It is said that all the newly woven silk and cloth in his family must first be used for Zhang’s practice of calligraphy before they were dyed. He practiced so hard by the pond that the water in the pond eventually turned black. Later on, the same “ink pond” story was said to refer to Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361); see Zeng Gong 曾鞏, “Mochi ji” 墨池記, in *Zeng Gong ji* 曾鞏集, 19:279-80.

\(^{46}\) Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 7:295.
abstract style exemplified the ideal of “spontaneity.” Su’s poetic persona assumed a candid voice, complaining that Shi Cangshu’s calligraphy was too hard to decipher. Shi’s pile of used brushes showed, however, his seeming spontaneity was achieved through diligent practice. In contrast, Su claimed to abide by no previous models. His casual dotting and stroking presumably represented not Shi’s practiced spontaneity, but actual absence of internalized rules. He then feigned innocent surprise at his own popularity. He compared Shi to Zhong You and Zhang Zhi, while comparing himself to much inferior calligraphers. Being content with this lower position, he said, he had no need to practice as hard, and thus saved a clean pond and white linen.

Su Shi deliberately employs a casual tone in his writing. Poetry sometimes collapses into prose and colloquialism. Jovial hyperbole creates a sense of intimacy, so that this poem reads like tipsy talk among friends. Since this hall is named “Drunken Ink,” the casualness in tone calls to mind Shi Cangshu’s calligraphy of wine and oblivion.

Su’s poetic persona also maintains an edge of irony with the actual person. The reader gets this impression already from the opening couplet, which taunts intellectualism and mocks the author himself, whose literary talent familiarized him to all the troubles in life. Ironical self-deprecation, however, could be used either to slight his counterpart or to mask authentic humility. It might be possible that Su Shi was mocking Shi Cangshu’s diligence as futile by claiming his share of effortlessly popularity. This reading, though not implausible, neglects a certain social protocol at play. Since it was a social poem written on behalf of Shi Cangshu, Su could be playful but not sarcastic. The ironic distance more likely aimed at acknowledging Shi’s higher accomplishment without diminishing Su’s own. Besides, the diligence of a calligrapher was expected by convention. Virtually all the major calligraphers, including Zhang Zhi, Wang Xizhi
王羲之 (303-361), Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386), and Huaisu 懷素 (725-785), were associated with such stories like having dyed a whole pond black from washing brushes or having worn out a hilly pile of brushes in practice. Admitting that one had not practiced enough was a way to acknowledge one’s inferiority, and was a modest claim despite its bombastic overtone.

Su Shi also used the term “mind-craft” (yìzào 意造) in an essay exhorting learning and practice through the example of the culinary art. Su observed that if two men cooked a dish or brewed wine with the same material, under the same conditions, and according to the same recipe, their outcomes could still be drastically different. It followed that study did not necessarily produce excellence; but if one discarded learning, abided by no rule, and depended on his “mind-craft” alone, the result was usually unpalatable. This and many other instances suggest that Su Shi never denounced learning. That Su Che praised him to have grasped the essence of earlier masters indeed might after all be an accurate description. As Huang Tingjian remarked, when Su Shi was young, he learned the calligraphic styles of Wang Xizhi, Xu Hao 徐浩 (703-782), and Liu Gongquan 柳公權 (778-865); and when older, from Li Yong 李邕 (678-747), Yan Zhenqing, and Yang Ningshi 杨凝式 (873-954). Elsewhere, he found in Su Shi’s studio practice sheets in the styles of Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558-638), Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596-

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47 Not to be confused with another term, “craftsmanship of the mind” (yìjiàng 意匠), used often to describe marvelous artwork which is seemingly not made of human crafts.


49 See Huang Tingjian, “Ba Dongpo moji” 跋東坡墨蹟, in Huang Tingjian quanji, zhengji 28:774-5.
In the eyes of his admirers, Su Shi appeared an avid learner of previous models.

Su Shi’s practice in calligraphy shared the same principles as in painting. In the following essay on his cousin Wen Tong’s bamboo painting, Su Shi first retails Wen’s painting theory, which is to completely study the form of bamboo and then to visualize “the complete bamboo in the chest” (xiōngyǒu chéngzhú 胸有成竹). With this mental image ready, the painter shall execute it onto paper in swiftness and spontaneity. But knowing does not guarantee doing:

与可之教予如此。予不能然也，而心識其所以然。夫既心識其所以然而不能然者，内外不一，心手不相應，不學之過也。 [...] 子由未嘗畫也，故得其意而已。若予者，豈獨得其意，並得其法。

Thus Yuke (aka. Wen Tong) instructed me. I cannot do this, though I recognize in my mind how it works. Now, what is recognized in the mind could not be performed as such – the reason is that the inner and the outer are not in accord, and the mind and the hands do not correspond. It is the failure from not practicing enough! [...] Ziyou (aka. Su

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51 Michael A. Fuller, in his insightful study of the issue of “immediacy” that my inquiry has otherwise benefited from, translates this line as: “Though I knew the nature of bamboo, I could not convey it to paper” (Fuller [1993], 10). The difference between our translations is crucial. I disagree with Fuller’s translation, since suoyiran 所以然, literally “that-by-which-it-is-so,” simply cannot be understood as “the nature of bamboo.” Rather, it refers to the process “that-by-which” a bamboo painting should be painted.
Che) does not paint, so he can only get the idea. As for me, I have attained not only the idea, but also the methods! 52

Ironically, Su Shi admits that he cannot paint the “complete bamboo in the chest” in swift and spontaneous execution due to the fact that he has not practiced enough. In this regard, spontaneity in artistic creation is intrinsically espoused with study and practice. Nevertheless, Su is confident in his better understanding than his brother’s because Che has never practiced this art but can only “get the idea.” This statement contradicts what Su Shi jokingly proposes in the poem sent to Su Che, namely, once you get the idea, it is fine to learn no more. Here, getting the idea is clearly not enough. Art is an empirical craft, and only training can make one’s “mind and hands” correspond.

Su Shi’s exhortation for practice in calligraphy and painting shows a “gradual” approach to enlightenment, as discussed earlier in “Seeing off Sicong.” One’s progress in art and poetry reflects one’s degree of advancement toward the Way. But Su Shi also remarks that practice alone does not guarantee artistic excellence. If spontaneity is a feature of the processes that embody the Way and is an indispensable element in artistic excellence, it follows that an enlightened person will show the highest degree of spontaneity in art. Before reaching this goal, however, when and how could the artist exhibit spontaneity while treading the path of diligent cultivation toward enlightenment? This kind of relative spontaneity comes, as Su argued, at the moment of oblivion in artistic creation.

As argued in the previous chapter, for Su Shi, the ideal art resides in immediacy and is independent of its material medium. A student of art must practice diligently to internalize the rules and crafts of his trade, but at a certain point, he may find that his conscious pursuit has become the greatest encumberance to bring him to the realm of art. This is the moment when the student finds that “the way of language is severed, and all ground disappears wherever the mind goes” 言語道斷心行處滅. One attains enlightenment only when discarding all “skillful means” to jump over a gaping abyss.

Su Shi proposed that the actual internalization happened only when the practitioner forgot about his art together with his pursuit of perfection. The moment of spontaneity came abruptly when he realized that the truly enslaving principle was his inner submission to his desire, even though the desired object was transcendence.

53 Seng Zhao, *Zhao Lun*, T no.1858, 45:157c, and broadly quoted in later Buddhist works.
to speak; he must practice his hand to the extent of forgetting the handling of the brush, and only then will he be able to write. This is what I know! If his tongue does not forget about its own sound, then its utterances can hardly be linked into a significant pattern; if his hand does not forget about the brush, then his written characters can hardly become precise and complete. When he comes to the supreme oblivion, he would be able to employ his figure, his facial expression, his mind, and his craft to reciprocate the transformation of ten thousand things, in a seeming trance, without being self-conscious. In the eyes of those uninitiated, would not his divine intelligence and wondrous achievement appear as transcendent as those of the Buddha?  

Su Shi proposes to learn one’s mother tongue as well as calligraphy by first internalizing and then forgetting man-made rules. “Forgetting the articulation of sounds” suggests that we must lose the conscious control over the sounds of the words we are uttering. Otherwise we will be gagged by self-consciousness, unable to speak fluently and coherently, and dwelling upon the production of split notes of sound instead of pronouncing whole words or sentences. Similarly, a calligrapher would not be able to handle his brush, if he were focused on every movement of his wrist. Both kinds of learning are based on natural faculties. Even though speaking and writing capacities might be biologically based, however, articulating speech or writing in

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55 Arthur Miller, in Joyce Carol Oates’s novel, offers a like advice to Monroe: “In my opinion it’s much better for an actor to retain an edge of something raw and unexplored in a character. […] What if a hummingbird becomes conscious of its beating wings, its flight pattern, could it fly? If we become conscious of every word we utter, could we speak?” Joyce Carol Oates, Blonde (NY, 2000), 559.
accordance to aesthetic rules is not an inborn skill. These skills require conscious teaching and learning. Rules, artificial as they are, are necessary to realize one’s natural potential. A child learns to speak his mother tongue through a continued process of modifying the patterns of his linguistic behavior. When the vocabulary and linguistic rules of the mother tongue become his second nature, he will eventually begin to think. He experiences and interprets the physical world through the medium of the language taught to him. Su suggests that when one has achieved the ultimate internalization of rules, one will “reciprocate the transformation of ten thousand things,” without being self-conscious. This is the state of aesthetic spontaneity, and the ideal artist appears to be an enlightened being who shares the Buddha’s nature. But this is only in the eyes of the “uninitiated.” The artist’s spontaneity partakes of the absolute spontaneity of the Buddha while still remaining distinct.

This paragraph provides an aesthetic explanation on the principle of “gaining through no-gaining.” The learning of every craft begins with daily progress (gaining). Once all the rules are completely internalized, he realizes there is nothing else to gain since everything is inside of himself. He will then reach the moment of true gaining – gaining nothing and everything. The rules thus fade from the surface of consciousness into the abyss of oblivion. On the road toward aesthetic spontaneity, oblivion completes learning.

Su’s comparison of calligraphy to the learning of language is further explored in his encomium on the calligraphy of the Heart Sūtra. It suggests that calligraphic styles practiced since childhood can be naturalized just like a native tongue. If practiced only since adulthood, however, it paradoxically requires constant mental control to forcefully enter the state of oblivion.

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56 For more on the development of thinking through the child’s transformation of his own language in the direction of the mother tongue, see Lewis, M. M. (1963), 47-57.
小篆般若心經贊 Encomium on the *Heart Sūtra* in Small Seal Script

The cursive and the clerical scripts have been used for a thousand years;

We practice them from childhood, and our hands feel at ease.

Like the tongue does not choose among the words,

But it answers and responses all day long.

Suddenly if we are made to write in big or small seal scripts,

It would be like walking into a wall.

Even if we learn and grasp the basics,

When we hold the brush, about to write, we still need to ponder.

Like a parrot which has learned to speak,

It says what it has learned, and otherwise becomes mute.

If we keep fast in mind forms and sounds, or dots and strokes,

How could we seek the spirit beyond script?

People in the world cannot leave the world;

But they want to learn the dharma beyond the world.

Every single movement and every single thought are dustily stained;

Though at whiles they arise to meditation and discipline.

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Mr. Li’s calligraphy in small seal script was so fine because he had obliterated the artificial distinction between this later-mastered style and the naturalized clerical script. Otherwise he would be like a parrot learning to speak, slavishly repeating the forms of words without comprehending their meaning and being limited to utter just these words. Since he related the foreign language (seal script) to his mother tongue (clerical script), he could then “forget” the mediating means (hand and brush) and write as if pouring his mind directly onto paper. Su Shi further compared the learning of the seal script to the practice of Buddhist meditation. To acquire the dharma, he argued, one must habitually exercise mental control until forgetting one’s will for control. One’s mind then becomes constantly meditative.

Su in effect suggested that artistic spontaneity was achieved through control and manipulation. If pushed further, Su Shi might agree that all forms of learning involve cultural
manipulation, including in the case of learning one’s mother tongue. Modern research on infanthood suggests that babies have the extraordinary ability to utter all kinds of sounds. During the process of acquiring a native tongue, however, it will lose much of its linguistic malleability and be restricted to much of the sound spectrum of one or several particular languages.\textsuperscript{58} In a certain sense, a child becomes a full human being when he has learned to behave in accordance to cultural patterns. Acquiring virtuosity in art, similarly, is to restrict the movements of a certain physical faculty according to the established technical rules of an art. This part of the artist’s body forms such professional habits that its movements are modularized even in the seeming absence of mind. Unlike the common use of the term “spontaneity,” artistic spontaneity is intrinsically associated with restriction and manipulation.

On the other hand, imprisonment can become a form of liberation. That is, when one is habituated to the restraints and forgets about their existence, one’s movement will begin to dance within and across the boundaries imposed by training. In the case of Li, his spontaneity in writing seal script was achieved after forgetting its distinction from clerical script. He could afford to do so because he had internalized both styles. As Su Shi’s praise of Wu Daozi’s painting states, the wise creates, the capable transmits.\textsuperscript{59} Wu Daozi had exhausted all the possibilities of this art, so he could -

出新意於法度之中，寄妙理於豪放之外。

\textsuperscript{58} See Lewis, M. M. (1963), 20-22.

\textsuperscript{59} Reference to the “Kaogongji” 考工記 chapter in the Rites of the Zhou; see Sun Yirang, Zhouli zhengyi, 74:3114.
Express novelty within the measures of rules, and lodge subtlety beyond heroic abandon.60

Later critics used precisely the same terms to describe Su Shi’s contribution to poetry.61 This allows Su Shi, as Ronald Egan has noted, to position himself between two extremes, that is, abolition of the tradition and slavish study of it, so that he could find a way “of reconciling the weight of the tradition with his quest for novelty.”62

What should be completely absorbed and then “forgotten” are not only artistic skills but also the subject matter. In more than one instances, Su Shi argues that one should thoroughly study the representational object, not to mechanically memorize it, but to absorb, transform, and create a mental image of it. In a colophon on the “Mountain Villa” painting (Shanzhuangtu 山莊圖) by Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106), an exemplary literatus painter, Su Shi praises it as a marvelous representation of the true mountain; when asked, however, whether it is because Li has a wonderful memory (Li painted not in situ), Su disapproves; instead, he explains, when Li was in the mountain, his mind did not “linger upon things, so his spirit communicated with the myriad things.”63 Memorization suggests attachment to things, impairing the spontaneous mobility of the mind. But how exactly can the painter represent his subject matter without

60 Su Shi, “Shu Wu Daozi hua hou” 書吳道子畫後, SSWJ, 70:2210-1.

61 As for instance in an often quoted comment by Zhao Bingwen 趙秉文 (1159-1232); see “Dongpo Sidazhai ming” 東坡四達齋銘, in Zhao Bingwen, Fushui ji 淆水集, 1190:20:1.

62 Egan (1994), 275. Egan has also noted Su Shi’s proposal of becoming oblivious to the rules at the moment of execution; see ibid., 276-81.

63 Su Shi, “Shu Li Boshi Shanzhuangtu hou” 書李伯時山莊圖後, SSWJ, 70:2211.
memorizing the forms of things? In the aforementioned record of Wen Tong’s painting of bamboo, Su recounts Wen’s instruction that the painter shall first “have a complete bamboo in the chest,” then “holding a brush in hand, observing it long and thoroughly, he will see what he wants to paint.” It appears that the bamboo he has in the chest is the generic bamboo; the duration of his long observation on the mental bamboo marks a gradual process of imagination, through which he could finally visualize an individual bamboo that he wants to paint. Having the generic bamboo form in mind allows the painter to “forget” the actual bamboo existing externally to his mind. The eventual evolution of the generic to the individual bamboo is simultaneously a process when memory fuses into imagination and creation.

The idea of visualizing a mental image as the blueprint of artistic representation is supported by a long Chinese intellectual tradition. Michael A. Fuller argues that the Chinese notion of emotion (qing 情) essentially allows the fusion of the inner and the outer, since qing also means “circumstances.”

Lu Ji’s 陆機 (261-303) “Rhapsody on Literature” (Wenfu 文賦) gave the first elaborated articulation to the inspirational process as follows:

其始也，皆收視反聽，耽思傍訊，精鶩八極，心游萬仞。其致也，情曈曨而彌鮮，物昭晰而互進。

In the beginning he withdraws sight,

Suspends hearing, deeply contemplates, seeks broadly.

Letting his spirit race to the eight limits,

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64 Su Shi, “Wen Yuke hua Yundang Gu yanzhu ji.”

65 Fuller (1993), 12.
Letting his mind roam ten thousand spans.

Then, at the end, his feelings, first glimmering, become even brighter;

Things, clear and resplendent, reveal one another.66

Inspiration begins in a meditative state. The writer induces his mind to sink into subconsciousness, from which his imagination explores the entire cosmos. Lu Ji’s phraseology suggests that the mind does not actively seek or select images of things; rather, those mental images emerge spontaneously from the abyss of consciousness, in his own words, like fish biting the bait. The same process is summarized by Liu Xie pithily as:

寂然凝慮，思接千載。悄焉動容，視通萬里。

Be tranquil and contemplative,

So the thought communicates with a thousand years;

In silence the expression moves,

When the sight has penetrated ten thousand li.67

Liu Xie describes this contemplative state as “emptiness and tranquility” (xujing 虛靜), where the “divine inspiration” can be shaped like pottery (taojun shensi 陶輪神思). Note again the metaphor of pottery-making, which, as remarked in Chapter One, compares artistic composition to cosmic creation. The emphasis on the meditative mental state as the preparation stage of


67 From chapter 26, “Shensi” 神思; see Yang Mingzhao, Zengding Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu, 6:369.
writing assumes that there is a homogenous relationship between the writer’s mind and his style. Thus his mental state is necessarily reflected in the final aesthetic appearance of his work. As Su Shi argues, this direct correlation is ensured when the necessary artistic skills are fully internalized. Nevertheless, when all the internalizations – subject matter and skills – are done, the artist faces solely his self in the process of creation. He is liberated from the external world and is fully submerged in subconsciousness.

As cited earlier, Su Shi compared his own writing to a rushing river. River is a universal symbol of the art of subconsciousness and oblivion. The German classical scholar Harald Weinrich argues that the river of magic water is a significant symbolism for art. In Greek mythology, Lethe is the stream of oblivion running through Hades. In its “soft flow,” “the hard contour of reality-remembrance is lost and becomes ‘liquidized.’”68 Weinrich argues that, etymologically, the Greek word for truth, aletheia, is comprised of a negative prefix a-, followed by -leth-. Thus, European philosophy that follows the Greek tradition has for many years seeking truth from the side of non-oblivion, as well as memory and remembrance.69 The intrinsic relation (if not identification) of knowledge to memory in ancient Chinese culture is expressed through the word shi 識 (“to recognize, to know”), which in the Eastern Han lexicon Shiming 釋名 [Expounding the Names] is glossed as zhi 幡, namely, to mark; to leave a mark for future inspection.70

Oblivion, in contrast, possesses the power of liberating man from the burden of memory, as well as from sorrow and pain. In the cult of Dionysos, wine is bestowed by gods as a divine

68 Weinrich (2005), 18.
69 Ibid., 15.
70 Liu Xi 劉熙, Shiming, 12.39; see Wang Xianqian, Shiming shuzheng bu 釋名疏證補, 176.
drug to “dispel sorrows” (Euripides). The association of wine and oblivion in China is ancient and became particularly pronounced in the literature of the Six Dynasties as well as in that of the Tang. It is also shown in the poem to Shi Cangshu. Shi named his studio “Drunken Ink;” it suggested that he used alcohol to help him sink into a state of oblivion, lose deliberate control over his art, and execute his cursive script calligraphy in the dimming light of consciousness. Advocacy of this method further attests that artistic spontaneity is performed in the absence of consciousness. Though such a state of mind should ideally be experienced through meditation, the artist can approximate this experience by drinking, a “skillful means.” In a rhapsody extolling the power of wine, Su Shi described the state of drunkenness as “letting forgotten” (zuowang 坐忘). This term in Zhuangzi refers to the utmost achievement in spiritual practice when a person loses his sense of self and feels living in nonduality with the external world.

In the Western tradition, the art of oblivion (ars oblivionis) is the bliss of darkness which heals humans from the scorching light of truth. Truth, in turn, is a certain kind of mnemonics, as for Plato, it is the remembrance of the shining eidos in heaven that the soul was once exposed to. Oblivion is consequently a liberating force. Drinking the water of Lethe will free a person from his earlier existence, leading to his rebirth in a new body. Similarly, in our case, oblivion temporarily liberates the artist from his relentless pursuit of enlightenment. Mythical and theological, an artist living in the human realm must first transform his physical being to embody the Way before attaining full spontaneity. And if he could do this, would he still be human? Su stated that human nature is by necessity imperfect. Everyone should keep trying; no one can

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73 See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 2:43.
reach the goal. The relentless pursuit polishes one’s art, but will also become a burden of consciousness at the moment of creation. To achieve spontaneity in artistic creation, the artist must momentarily, and only momentarily, forget his art and forget all together his pursuit of the Way.

**Lodging in a World of Resemblance**

From the perspective of the artist, artistic spontaneity resides in an eternal, dynamic dialectics between imprisonment and liberation. Su Shi provided an eloquent account on this tension through a fictive dialogue. The setting was in his painting studio, Snow Hall 雪堂, built in 1082 during his exile in Huangzhou. This exile followed Su’s imprisonment at the Crow Terrace. It was the first major political misfortune in Su Shi’s life, due to the fatal clash of ideologies around the “New Policy” reform. The prosecution ended his early political prospects. He interpreted this case as a spiritual purgatory testing his integrity and purity. The exile in Huangzhou was consequently a liminal period in Su’s life, during which he redefined his own identity. He was a criminal surviving at the mercy of the state. To support his livelihood, he started farming on the “East Slope,” or dongpo 東坡, a place to be commemorated as his style name. Farming relieved him from starvation, while artistic creation in Snow Hall, as to be seen from the following account, would liberate him from fear, self-pity, and shame.

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74 See Su Shi’s biography in the “Introduction.”

75 As Michael A. 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” (Fuller [1990], 251).
雪堂記

A Record of Snow Hall

Master Su acquired a deserted garden by the East Slope. He constructed a fence around it and built a hall in it, calling it “Snow Hall.” Since this hall was built in a heavy fall of snow, he painted snow on the four walls without a single blank space left. Wherever he was in activity or in repose, looking around, it was all snow. When Master Su dwelt in it, he was truly at rest! Master Su leaned on a desk and fell asleep in the day. Vividly, he felt he was going somewhere and was about to arise. Before he woke up, something touched him and he was stirred. So he did not manage to go [where he was about to go in his dream]. He felt as if in a loss. He covered his eyes with his palms and put his feet into his shoes, dragging himself to wander outside the hall.

The record begins with a realistic narrative: the location of the hall, its construction, the reason of its naming, and so forth. Yet everything about the hall suggests a certain marginality and

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This essay also appeared with some textual variants and a different title as “Xuetang wen Pan Binlao”雪堂問潘邠老, in Su Shi, *Dongpo zhilin* 東坡志林, 4:80-83.
liminality. The garden had been a waste one, located outside the city wall; the hall was built in a heavy fall of snow, when the world was monochromatic and blanketed in obscurity; and the owner is an exile. To befit the setting, the walls are covered with paintings of snow. A snow painting painted with black ink creates the supreme visual illusion. It is paradoxical just like articulating the wordless or naming the nameless. The function of this hall is to provide a tangible material abode for the poet’s mind. Snow Hall is thus a liminal realm of naming and illusion-making. Analogous to the art world, it is a self-sufficient and shadowy realm of resemblance, located between the “real world” and the Great Void. The poet finds it truly delightful.

The author intensively refers to Zhuangzi in describing his life in Snow Hall. “Leaning on a desk” alludes to the state of “letting forgotten” in which the Zhuangzian persona has lost his sense of self. The way he daydreams alludes to the famous story that Zhuangzi once dreamed of being a butterfly, as vividly (xuxuran) as in reality. When he woke up, he found himself to be Zhuangzi again. So he did not know whether he was Zhuangzi who dreamed to be a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed to be Zhuangzi. The daydreaming Su Shi thus appears to be residing in the nonduality – there is no distinction between his self and the external world of things. He is woken up, however, in his daydream (as implied by the phrasing: he was stirred but did not wake up) by a certain “thing.” The following account appears to be a dream within the daydream. His self is again juxtaposed with the “thing.” Thus, feeling at loss, he does not manage to reach the true realm of nonduality.

77 From the “Qiwulun” chapter, Zhuangzi; see Chapter One, n.57.

78 See the “Qiwulun” chapter, Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 2:112.
[2] 客有至而問者曰：“子世之散人耶，拘人耶？散人也而天機淺，拘人也而嗜慾深。今似繋馬而止也，有得乎而有失乎？”蘇子心若省而口未嘗言，徐思其應，揖而進之堂上。

There came a guest. He asked: “Are you a man disengaged from the world or fettered by the world? To be a disengaged man, you are too shallow in heaven’s endowment. To be a fettered man, you need to sink deep in lust and desire. Now you are like a horse bridled to stop. What have you gained, or what have you lost?” Master Su felt as if he realized something in mind, but he could not put it into words. He pondered on how to respond, while bowing to invite the guest into the hall.

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79 Referring to the “Renjianshi” chapter in Zhuangzi. When Craftsman Shi went to Qi, he saw a gigantic sawtooth oak on an altar. He passed by without casting a second glance. His apprentices were puzzled and asked why. Craftsman Shi replied that it acquired longevity exactly because it was a “useless tree” (sanmu 散木). That night he dreamt of this oak tree, which politely protested that, were it useful, it would have already been humiliated or destroyed. Furthermore, being a mortal heading toward death, Craftsman Shi himself would end up being a “useless man” (sanren 散人) as well. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 4:170-4. San literally means “to disperse,” “to let loose,” or “to disengage.” Thus a sanren is a person disengaged from the world and useless to it. In the context of Zhuangzi, “useless” will be a more accurate translation, as will be elaborated in the next two chapters. Here I choose to translate san as “disengaged,” in order to keep its consistency through the whole text.

80 A term from the “Dazongshi” chapter in Zhuangzi. This passage describes the “true man” (zhenren 真人) of old, who did not dream while asleep and did not worry while awake. In contrast, those who were deep in lust and desire were shallow in heaven’s endowment. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 6:229. A variant for tianjiqian 天機淺 is weineng 未能 (see “Xuetang wen Pan Binlao,” Su Shi, Dongpo zhili, 4:80), which will clarify the meaning of this sentence as: “To be a disengaged man – you are unable to.”
The guest appears to him from the “outside.” There is no description of the appearance of the guest – neither on his looks nor on his attire. In other words, he does not belong to the world of form and materiality, but to the “outside” world of truth, of non-being. The guest understands Su’s dilemma: he is somewhat in between two worlds, between freedom and imprisonment, as well as between gain (the knowledge of nonduality) and loss. Su Shi is unable to respond, but he invites the guest into his liminal world of resemblance, where art both liberates him from the phenomenal world and imprisons him in it.

[3] 客曰：“嘻，是矣，子之欲為散人而未得者也。予今告子以散人之道。夫禹之行水，庖丁之投刀，避眾礙而散其智者也。是故以至柔馳至剛，故石有時以泐。以至剛遇至柔，故未嘗見全牛也。予能散也，物固不能縛，不能散也，物固不能釋。子有惠矣，用之於內可也。今也如蝟之在囊，而時動其脊脅，見於外者，不特一毛二毛而已。風不可摶，影不可捕，童子知之。名之於人，猶風之與影也，子獨留之。故愚者視而驚，智者起而軋，吾固怪子為今日之晚也。子之遇我，幸矣，吾今邀子為藩外之遊，可乎？”

The guest then said: “Yes, I see! You desire to be a disengaged man without success! Now let me tell you the way to become disengaged. As for how Yu channeled the flood to the ocean\(^{81}\) or Cook Ding applied his knife to a bull\(^{82}\) – they avoided all hindrances and were truly wise in disengaging. Therefore, when the softest [water] rides
the hardest [rock], rocks will split in due time.\textsuperscript{83} Using the hardest [knife] to cut the softest [flesh], this is why Cook Ding does not see the whole bull. If you can disengage, nothing can fetter you. If you cannot, nothing can release you. If you are intelligent, apply it inside! Now you are like a hedgehog in a sack, which sometimes arches its back. What can be seen outside are just one or two hairs.\textsuperscript{84} The wind cannot be kneaded; the shadow cannot be caught – even a child knows that! A name to a man is just like the wind or the shadow. But you alone lingered [upon the name]! Thus the foolish sees your name and is startled; the wise rises and chides you. I am indeed surprised you have come to this stage so late! It is fortunate of you to meet me. Now I invite you to roam beyond the boundaries, would you?"

Once inside, the guest begins to understand Su’s plight. He then tries to enlighten Su, teaching Su the way of disengagement. For him, intellect should be hidden inside, not to be shown to others. According to the Zhuangzian doctrine, when a man makes himself useful to the world, he would be charged with all kinds of responsibilities and deprived of his self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{85} Now, Su Shi in Snow Hall has hidden himself largely from the sight of others. But just like a hedgehog in a sack which could not help arching its back, he cannot help writing or painting. Art-making is

\textsuperscript{83} In the “Kaogongji” chapter in the \textit{Rites of the Zhou}, it states: “Rock splits, water freezes, ice melts – all in due time, this is called the heaven’s timing.” See Sun Yirang, \textit{Zhouli zhengyi}, 74:3121.

\textsuperscript{84} An idiomatic expression to describe numerousness, first used by Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-168BCE); see Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 et al., \textit{Xinshu jiaozhu 新書校注}, 1:57.

\textsuperscript{85} There are a few stories in \textit{Zhuangzi} expatiating upon this morale; see Guo Qingfan, \textit{Zhuangzi jishi}, 1:39-40, 4:170-4, 20:667-8. See also Svarverud (2006), 157-68.
one form of showing off his intellect. The guest questions why Su Shi lingers upon the name, *ming* 名, a multivalent word referring both to name and to fame (making one’s name known). Su Shi’s attachment to the name is manifested in the naming of the hall as well as in his making of artwork, which would potentially raise his fame. To help Su Shi sever his attachment, the guest invites him to roam beyond the boundaries.

Master Su said: “At this stage, I think that I have been long beyond the boundaries! Where else do you want to go?” The guest said: “How extremely difficult to make you understand! Power and wealth are not enough to be the boundary. Fame and vainglory are not enough to be the boundary. *Yin* and *yang* forces are not enough to be the boundary. 尊者曰：‘甚矣，子之難曉也。夫勢利不足以為藩也，名譽不足以為藩也，陰陽不足以為藩也，人道不足以為藩也。所以藩予者，特智也爾。智存諸內，發而為言，而言有謂也，形而為行，則行有謂也。使子欲嘿不欲嘿，欲息不欲息，如醉者之失言，如狂者之妄行，雖掩其口執其臂，猶且喑呿踞蹙之不已，則藩之於人，抑又固矣。人之為患以有身，身之為患以有心。是圃之構堂，將以佚子之身也？是堂之繪雪，將以佚子之心也？身待堂而安，則形固不能釋。心以雪而警，則神固不能凝。子之知既焚而烬矣，烬又復然，則是堂之作也，非徒無益，而又重子蔽蒙也。子見雪之白乎？則恍然而目眩，子見雪之寒乎？則竦然而毛起。五官之為害，惟目為甚。故聖人不為。’

雪乎，雪乎，吾見子知為目也。子其殆矣！”

Master Su said: “At this stage, I think that I have been long beyond the boundaries! Where else do you want to go?” The guest said: “How extremely difficult to make you understand! Power and wealth are not enough to be the boundary. Fame and vainglory are not enough to be the boundary. *Yin* and *yang* forces are not enough to be the boundary.
Human norms are not enough to be the boundary. Our boundary is intelligence alone!\(^{86}\) Intelligence lodges within. When it is manifested in words, the words have meaning; when it is manifested in actions, the actions have meaning. Now it makes you desire to be silent but cannot be silent and desire to rest but cannot rest. It is like the angry words of a drunkard or the wild behaviors of an insane – though his mouth is covered and his arms caught, he is still mumbling and wiggling. So your boundary is especially steadfast on you! Man has worries because of his body, and his body has worries because of his mind. Now you build a hall in the garden. Is it to comfort your body? Now you paint snow in the hall. Is it to comfort your mind? If your body depends upon the hall to be at ease, you cannot be released from your form. If your mind depends upon the snow to be alert, you cannot solidify your spirit. Your intelligence has been burnt to ashes,\(^{87}\) but now the ashes are catching flame again. So the building of this hall cannot benefit you but will only further obscure your mind. When you see the snow being white, your eyes are dazed by its radiance. When you see the snow being cold, you feel a sudden chill and hairs erect on your skin. The harm of the five senses is the gravest through the eyes. That is why the sage never does it. Oh, snow, snow! I see that your intelligence is dependent on your eyes. You are in danger!”

Su Shi honestly replies that he considers himself long beyond the boundaries. The guest chides him for his ignorance; because intelligence is also a prison, and is the hardest one to break. This

\(^{86}\) This derives from the Buddhist concept “the hindrance of intelligence” (zhizhang 智障). See Mohezhiguan 摩訶止觀, T no.46, 1911:16c.

\(^{87}\) Referring again to the state of “letting forgotten”; see Chapter One, n.57.
idea has its root in Daoism,\textsuperscript{88} but the term Su uses (zhifu 智縛) is rather loaned from Buddhism. “The hindrance of intelligence” (zhizhang 智障) is regarded as the reason why the most gifted cannot be enlightened.\textsuperscript{89} Su Shi appears to believe that he belongs to this category.\textsuperscript{90} Even though writing brought him close to disaster only recently, it has become his second nature, too deeply internalized to eradicate. The guest reveals to Su that the use of art in the pursuit of the Way is a double-edged sword: taking delight in it seemingly helps the student to sever his worldly concerns, but it also fosters a dangerous kind of dependence, preventing him from acquiring the real Way. Furthermore, the form of the snow stimulates his sensory faculties, disturbing the stillness of his mind. What Su Shi has taken in the beginning as the ease is now reversed by the guest as the greatest “danger” (dai 殆).

[5] 客又舉杖而指諸壁，曰: “此凹也，此凸也。方雪之雰下也，均矣。厲風過焉，則凹者留而凸者散，天豈私於凹而厭於凸哉，勢使然也。勢之所在，天且不能違，而況於人乎？子之居此，雖遠人也，而圃有是堂，堂有是名，實礙人耳，不猶雪之在凹者乎？”蘇子曰: “予之所為，適然而己，豈有心哉，殆也，奈何！”

\textsuperscript{88} In the “Quqie”胠篋 chapter in Zhuangzi, it states: “Discard sagaciousness and abandon intellect – so the great bandits will disappear;” see Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 10:353. Similar statements are also found in the “Zaiyou”在宥 chapter in Zhuangzi (see ibid., 11:377) as well as in Laozi (see Zhu Qianzhi, Laozi jiaoshi, 19:74).

\textsuperscript{89} See n.86.

\textsuperscript{90} It was in fact a general belief about Su Shi in and after his time. Ever since the Song, there had been many Buddhist masters who used Su Shi as a textbook example to illustrate the doctrine of “the hindrance of intelligence;” see Grant (1994), 181.
客曰： “子之適然也。適有雨，則將繪以雨乎？適有風，則將繪以風乎？雨不可繪也，觀雲氣之洶湧，則使子有怒心。風不可繪也，見草木之披靡，則使子有懼意。覩是雪也，子之內亦不能無動矣。苟有動焉，丹青之有靡麗，水雪之有水石，一也。德有心，心有眼，物之所襲，豈有異哉？”

The guest then raised his stick to point at the walls, saying: “Here it is concaved; here it is raised. When the snow falls indiscriminately, its surface is even. When a strong wind blows, the concaved snow stays and the raised disengages (or is dispersed). Does heaven show favoritism to the concaved snow and dislike the raised? It is decided by the situation. What is decided by the situation cannot even be violated by heaven, not to say by man! Though you live here far apart from men, you still build this hall in the garden and give this name to the hall. Is it not a hindrance just like the snow at the concave[, unable to disengage]? Master Su replied: “I did it because this idea happened to come to me. Did I intend to do so? Now I am in danger, but what can I do about it?” The guest said: “You say it happened to come to you – if it happened to rain, would you have painted the rain? If it happened to be windy, would you have painted the wind? The rain could not be painted, because if you see the dark cloud roaring and surging, you will be moved into rage. The wind cannot be painted, because if you see the grass and trees bending in the wind, you will feel fearful [for the mortality]. Looking at this snow must also be moving you from inside. If your mind moves, it does not make any difference if
the painting is embellished or not, with ice and snow or with water and rock. When virtue has mind and mind has eyes, are they not all infringed by external things?”

Using the snow as analogy, the guest explains that Su could not “disengage” not because he is disliked by heaven, but because he is still tied to form and name. This discourse is indeed not so much about painting, but instead about naming. It is the name “Snow Hall” itself which makes a difference between the hall and the external world. Painting illusory snow on the walls complements the act of its naming. Although Snow Hall transcends fettering forces like power, fame, and human norms, naming it as such already exposes Su’s attachment to names. Unable to refute the charge, Su pleads that he did not intend to paint the snow, but it simply occurred to him to do so. The relentless guest, however, challenges his claim. He points out that making art cannot be void of intentionality, since he must make a choice among available forms. The fact that he did not paint the rain or the wind shows his preference for the snow. His mind is moved regardless what he paints or how he paints, and his intentionality proves that he does not live beyond the boundary of “things.”

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91 I find this line obscure. There is one variant for shuixue as bingxue 冰雪 (see SSWJ, 12:414, n.28; Su Shi, Dongpo zhilin, 4:96, n.13), which I take in my translation. It does not reduce the obscurity but helps to avoid the repetition.

92 In the “Lie Yukou” 列禦寇 chapter in Zhuangzi, it states that the greatest harm is for virtue to have mind (i.e. intention) and mind to have eyes. According to the commentaries, the passage warns against one deliberately feigning virtue or seeing with imagination (instead of seeing the reality). See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 32:1057-8.
[6] 蘇子曰： “子之所言是也，敢不聞命。然未盡也，予不能默。此正如與人訟者，其理雖已屈，猶未能絕辭者也。子以為登春臺與入雪堂，有以異乎？以雪觀春，則雪為靜。以臺觀堂，則堂為靜。靜則得，動則失。黃帝，古之神人也。游乎赤水之北，登乎崑崙之丘，南望而還，遺其玄珠焉。游以適意也，望以寓情也。

意適於游，情寓於望，則意暢情出，而忘其本矣。雖有良貴，豈得而寶哉。是以不免有遺珠之失也。雖然，意不久留，情不再至，必復其初而已矣，是又驚其遺而索之也。余之此堂，追其遠者近之，收其近者內之，求之眉睫之間，是有八荒之趣。人而有知也，升是堂者，將見其不遡而僾，不寒而慄，淒凜其肌膚，洗滌其煩鬱，既無炙手之譏，又免飲冰之疾。彼其趑趄利害之途、猖狂憂患之域者，何異探湯執熱之俟濯乎？子之所言者，上也。余之所言者，下也。我將能為子之所為，而子不能為我之為矣。譬之厭膏粱者，與之糟糠，則必有忿詞。衣文繡者，被之皮弁，則必有愧色。子之於道，膏粱文繡之謂也，得其上者耳。我以子為師，子以我為資，猶人之於衣食，缺一不可。將其與子游，今日之事，姑置之以待後論。予且為子作歌以道之。”

Master Su said: “What you said was completely correct. How dare I not listen to your teaching? It is not, however, the whole case yet, and I cannot keep silent. It is like a person in a lawsuit will keep protesting though his case is lost. Do you think there is any difference in climbing a spring terrace or entering Snow Hall? Comparing the snow to

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93 In Laozi it states: “The people are pleased as if they are enjoying a bull banquet or climbing a terrace in spring.” See Zhu Qianzhi, Laozi jiaoshi, 20:79. In translating Su Shi’s text, I have modified “a terrace in spring” to “a spring terrace” to preserve its literal parallelism to Snow Hall.
the spring, the snow is more tranquil. Comparing the terrace to the hall, the hall is more tranquil. When the mind is tranquil, it obtains; when it moves, it loses. The Yellow Emperor was a divine being of old. He once roamed to the north of the Red River and climbed Mt. Kunlun. He gazed at the southern terrains and returned. But he lost his Dark Pearl.\(^4\) Roaming was to release his mind, while gazing was to lodge his emotions. His mind felt at ease in roaming and his emotions were lodged in gazing, so that when his mind was unblocked and his emotions were released, he forgot his authentic self. Though he got something precious, how could he still hoard his ‘jewel’? That was why he lost his pearl. Even so, the mind would not linger long and the emotions would not come back again [to be his trouble]. He would by necessity return to his original state. That was why he was alarmed by his loss and had the pearl sought after. Inside this hall, I chase after the things far away and make them near; I collect the things near and contain them inside. I find the things between my eyebrows and my lashes. This is how I have obtained all the pleasure within the whole universe. For those who are intelligent, when they ascend this hall, [at seeing the snow,] they will feel choked without swimming against the stream, or feel chilled without the weather being cold. [The painted snow] freezes their skin and

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\(^4\) In the “Tiandi” 天地 chapter in Zhuangzi; the Yellow Emperor lost his “dark pearl” (metaphor for his authentic nature) in the far roaming to Mt. Kunlun. When he returned, he had his ministers to seek after the lost pearl. Lizhu 離朱 (metaphor for clairvoyance) and Chigou 喫詁 (metaphor for sophistry) both failed, but Xiangwang 象罔 (metaphor for the absence of intentionality) finally found it. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 12:414-5.
purges their pent-up worries. They will be rescued from the sarcasm of ‘burning hands’\textsuperscript{95} as well as from the sickness of ‘drinking ice.’\textsuperscript{96} Those who tumble on the way of gains and pains in the realm of craze and worry, are they unlike those who are sticking their hands into boiling water or holding burning flames, eager to wash [their hands in snow]? What you have said, sir, was the supreme path, and what I have said is the lower path. However, I can do what you do, but you cannot do what I do. For instance, if you give coarse food to those daily fed with refined cuisine, they will certainly complain. If you dress those daily wearing embroidered clothes with raw leather, they will certain look ashamed. Your approach to the Way is like refined cuisine or embroidered clothes, which is the supreme path. I will follow you as my teacher, and you can use me as your aid – it is like man cannot live without either clothes or food. I shall follow you! As for our argument today, leave it for later discussion. Let me sing a song to express my mind!”

After all his excuses are spent and refuted, the poet is inspired to discover the true nature of his action. Stillness and mobility, he argues, are relative to one’s point of view. One gains in tranquility and loses in mobility. In the legend, even the divine Yellow Emperor lost his precious pearl in pleasurable roaming. Mobility, like far roaming, releases the pent-up intentions and

\textsuperscript{95} A metaphor for someone being so powerful that whoever touches him gets his hands burnt. It appears to have been used first under the Tang as satire of Li Linfu 李林甫 (683-752), a prime minister; see Wang Yinglin 王應麟, Kunxue jiwen 困學紀聞, 18:1902.

\textsuperscript{96} In the “Renjianshi” 人間世 chapter in Zhuangzi, Ye Gao 葉高 was sent on a diplomatic mission to Qi, which was extremely delicate. Thus he said: “I received the mission in the morning and drank ice in the evening, because I felt so hot inside [from the worries].” See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 4:152-3.
emotions. Even though the beneficial effect cannot make up for the loss, only after the catharsis may one return to one’s original state and try to seek one’s “lost pearl,” namely, mental tranquility. For Su Shi, it is easier to achieve transcendence if he lets his mind reside in this hall – itself the resemblance of transcendence. His mediated way, dependent on the “skillful means” of painting, is indeed inferior to the guest’s absolute independence. But, just like a rich man could no longer take coarse food, while a poor man could enjoy delicacy, Su is able to aspire to his guest’s Way while his guest might not understand his.

Su’s argument suggests that the fear over entanglement is not necessary. A person can only follow the way which provides comfort to his nature and ease to his mind. No one can jump from being into non-being. If he tries to do so, he is already over-stretching his capacity and hence will be further fettered by his greed for liberation. The “guest,” as an “outsider,” cannot understand the necessity of such skillful means. Without an immersion into the deep snaring forces of the world, he knows not how hard it is for those born in prison to break out of the prison. If he understands, he would then pardon minor vices like comfort and ease. Doctrinal argument, however, falls again into the entanglement of intelligence and rationality. To end it, the poet bursts into singing.

[7] 歌曰： “雪堂之前後兮，春草齊。雪堂之左右兮，斜徑微。雪堂之上兮，有碩人之頎頎。考槃於此兮，芒鞋而葛衣。挹清泉兮，抱甕而忘其機。負頋筐兮，行歌而採薇。吾不知五十九年之非而今日之是，又不知五十九年之是而今日之非。
吾不知天地之大也，寒暑之變，悟昔日之癯，而今日之肥。感子之言兮，始也抑吾之縱而鞭吾之口，終也釋吾之縛而脱吾之鞿。是堂之作也，吾非取雪之勢，而取雪
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之意。吾非逃世之事，而逃世之機。吾不知雪之為可觀賞，吾不知世之為可依違。性之便，意之適，不在於他，在於羣息已動，大明既升，吾方輾轉，一觀曉隙之塵飛。子不棄兮，我其子歸。”

Here is my song: “Snow Hall is surrounded, in front and behind, by spring grasses of even height. Snow Hall is embraced, left and right, by narrow paths of no straight lines! In Snow Hall, a gentleman stands high and lofty. ⁹⁷ He makes music ⁹⁸ in straw sandals and loose hemp robe. He fetches water from a clear fountain, holding a jar in his arms, oblivious to the chicanery of the world. He loads a bamboo basket to his back, singing while walking and gathering the vetches. ⁹⁹ I do not know whether I have been wrong for

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⁹⁷ The term *shuoren* 碩人 is the title of a song in the *Book of Odes* (Mao 57), although originally referring to a female persona. The term also appears in the song “Kaopan” (see n.98), however, as a male persona. *Qi* 頎 is used in “Shuoren” literally meaning tall, but it also suggests the nobility and virtue of the persona; see Ma Ruichen 馬瑞辰, *Maoshi zhuanjian tongshi* 毛詩傳箋通釋, 6:202-3. I avoid translating *shuoren* as “a tall gentleman” because Su Shi was not known to be tall. Thus I take some liberty here and translate all the allusions to height as “standing high and lofty,” meaning his moral stance.

⁹⁸ The term *kaopan* 考槃 is the title of a song in the *Book of Odes* (Mao 56). According to the Mao commentary, *kao* means to complete, and *pan* means music; see Ma Ruichen, *Maoshi zhuanjian tongshi*, 6:200-1. Southern Song scholars have proposed different readings. Zhu Xi thought it to mean “to complete one’s reclusive chamber”; Chen Fuliang 陳傅良 (1141-1203) proposed that it means “to clap at a dish-like instrument.” For both readings, see Zhu Xi, *Shijing jizhuan*, 2:25. These later readings, however, would not have been known to Su Shi.

⁹⁹ The term *caiwei* 采薇 is the title of a song in the *Book of Odes* (Mao 167). The context relates it however to the legend of Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 brothers who escaped royal succession, fled into the mountains, and lived on wild vetches. See “Boyi liezhuan” 伯夷列傳, Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 61:2123.
fifty-nine years while today I am correct, or perhaps I have been correct for fifty-nine years while today I am wrong. They do not know the vastness of heaven and earth or the changing of seasons. I realize that I have been emaciated in the past while nourished today. I am touched by your words indeed! At first it curbed my indulgence and whipped my tongue. Finally it released my fetter and broke my bridle. My building this hall is not to borrow the snow’s power, but only its idea. I am not to escape from worldly affairs, but only from its snares. I do not know if one can take delight in the snow; I do not know if one can subject to the world. The comfort to my nature, the ease to my mind – it is found in no other moment but when the animated multitude is set into motion and the Great Light rises upon the horizon! Then I toss about on my couch and see the dust flying in the morning ray. If you don’t reject me, I will return to you!”

Su Shi was only in his late forties when he wrote this essay, thus this line is not actual description, but rather a quotation from Zhuangzi. In the “Zeyang” 則陽 chapter, when Qu Boyu 蘧伯玉 was sixty sui, he had already transformed himself sixty times; what he thought correct one day might prove to be wrong another day. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 25:905. The exact same is said about Confucius; see “Yuyan” 寓言 chapter, Ibid., 27:952. Su Shi used this expression again in a letter written in Huizhou (1094-1097); see “Yu Wu xiucai sanshou” 與吳秀才三首, no.2, SSWJ, 57:1738. His use of this allusion proves to be confusing to some scholars. Wu Xuetao, for instance, decided that the aforementioned letter must be written in 1095, when Su Shi was sixty sui; see Wu Xuetao (1990), 402-3.

Reference to a poem by Han Yu where he laments: “Alas, my Way cannot be used to nourish oneself” 嗟我道不能自肥; see Han Yu, “Song Ou Hongnan gui” 送區弘南歸, QTS, 339:3797. Here Su Shi borrowed this term with a twist, suggesting that when he felt at ease with himself, he was already nourished physically and mentally.
Prose recedes to poetry when emotion reaches climax, symbolizing the succession of analytic to poetic reason. \(^{102}\) The form of this song is deliberately archaic, with classical interjection \(xi\)兮 and lines of uneven length. It uses a complex rhyming pattern which combines regularity and variations. \(^{103}\) The major rhyme group is level tone \(wei, /i-3a/\), assisted by five other rhyme

\(^{102}\) Martin Kern has observed similar rhetoric in Han historiography, where heroes (and heroines) usually burst into songs in moments of danger and demise; see Kern (2004).

\(^{103}\) According to the medieval guangyun 廣韻 system, the major rhyming group in this song is \(/i-3a/\) (上平微韻), assisted by other rhyming groups including \(/ei-4/\) (上平齊韻), \(/i-3b/\) (上平支韻), \(/iH-3d/\) (去聲寘~志同用韻), \(/eiH-3b/\) (去聲祭韻), \(/eiK-3b/\) (入聲錫韻), and a few rhyming binomes. It appears that, even though this song is deliberately archaic, its rhyming pattern is nevertheless intrinsically "modern" in the standard of Su Shi’s time. An analysis of the rhyming pattern is as follows:

\[\text{雪堂之前後/ouQ-1/兮/ei-4/，春草齊/ei-4/} \]
\[\text{雪堂之左右/ouQ-3b/兮/ei-4/，斜徑微/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{雪堂之上兮/ei-4/，有碩人之頎頎/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{考槃於此兮/ei-4/，芒鞋而葛衣/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{挹清泉兮/ei-4/，抱甕而忘其機/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{負頃筐兮/ei-4/，行歌而採薇/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{吾不知/i-3b/、五十九年之非/i-3a/，而今日之是/iH-3d/} \]
\[\text{又不知/i-3b/、五十九年之是/iH-3d/，而今日之非/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{吾不知/i-3b/、天地之大也，寒暑之變} \]
\[\text{悟昔日之癯，而今日之肥/i-3a/} \]
\[\text{感子之言兮/ei-4/} \]
\[\text{始也抑吾之縱，而鞭吾之口} \]
groups including level tone \( qi \) rhyme, \( zhi \) rhyme, departing tone \( zhi \) rhyme, \( ji \) rhyme, and entering tone \( xi \) rhyme. It means a single line can catch up to three rhymes. Yet the intensive rhyming sometimes breaks, allowing a long sentence like “the comfort to my nature, the ease to my mind […] and see the dust flying in the morning ray” rhyming only at the end (\( fei / fi-3a/ \) 飛), intimating the fluid flow of climatic emotion. Such a form craftily creates an impression of casualness and spontaneity.

The poet describes himself in many terms borrowed from the *Book of Odes*. He appears to live in unity with nature and is oblivious even to the distinction between right and wrong. He confesses to have no knowledge about the external world – and only then he becomes sufficient in himself. His song, through a series of negation, leads to a series of affirmation, albeit apologetic ones. It ends with describing the cosmic moment of sunrise, when he wakes up from a dream and welcomes transformation on a grand scale. For him, it comforts his nature and eases his mind if he could observe the phenomenal world and transform himself together with it.

終也釋吾之縛，而脫吾之鞿/i-3a/
是堂之作也
吾非/i-3a/、取雪之勢/eiH-3b/，而取雪之意/iH-3d/
吾非/i-3a/、逃世之事/iH-3d/，而逃世之機/i-3a/
吾不知/i-3b/、雪之為可觀賞
吾不知/i-3b/、世之為可依/i-3a/違/i-3a/
性之便，意之適/eiK-3b/，不在於他
在於羣息已動，大明既升
吾方輾/anQ-3b/轉/anQ-3b/，一觀曉隙之塵飛/i-3a/
子不棄/iH-3d/兮/ei-4/，我其子歸/i-3a/
Contrary to the guest’s negation of any worldly form, this song celebrates it as the true path to liberation. This song is a piece of art which learnedly defends art as life-affirming instead of life-negating force.

[8] 客忻然而笑，唯然而出，蘇子隨之。客顧而頷之曰： “有若人哉。”

The guest chuckled in pleasure, acquiesced, and took his leave. Master Su followed him out. The guest looked around, nodding slightly, and said: “How could there be such a fellow!”

The guest is persuaded by Su Shi’s eloquence. The “skillful means,” which acknowledges the human imperfection, may ultimately open an access for the poet to enter the realm of true freedom outside his “Snow Hall.”

This account simultaneously pays homage to the ultimate Way of negation and defends the aesthetic way of affirmation. Language is necessary for the communication between the two realms. The guest, who is the incarnation of the truth of non-being, has to use language when he bestows his teaching to a man. The man can consequently debate the guest’s truth with his own truth. The individual does have the freedom of choice: between the absolute freedom, void of materiality, and the limited freedom, within the realm of art.

Conveyed in artful language, Su’s contemplation on entering the realm of emptiness seemed mere contemplation. He entertained this idea but could not practice it. As the setting of this account suggests, it was a daydream. He could never enter the realm of emptiness. And even if he could, he might not choose to do so. As he wrote in a poem for a senior Chan monk:
若忘记遗言，真有道
The master has forgotten words and truly acquired the Way;

我除拽句百无功
I, however, have accomplished nothing but in seeking verse.

明年採药天台去
Next year I shall pick herbs on Mount Heaven Terrace;

更欲题诗满浙东
And write poems all over the east of the Zhe River.\(^{104}\)

If forgetting words was the only path to the Way, Su Shi was not ready for it. His “oblivion” included forgetting the pursuit of enlightenment itself. As a typical Daoist motif, “picking herbs on Mount Heaven Terrace” showed his desire for physical transcendence. Writing poems all over the realm of the southeast showed an alternative – not immortality in flesh, but in words.

**Coda: Spontaneity in Imperfection**

Back to the beginning: was Su Shi a spontaneous artist?

The answer to this question depends upon which definition of “spontaneity” the interlocutors agree to take. The first, quotidian definition of “spontaneity” means acting in the complete absence of intentionality or self-consciousness; then a work of art by definition cannot be made in the artist’s “spontaneity.” The second, idealistic definition of “spontaneity” means such perfect internalization of skills and subject matter that the artist can execute a work of art in the complete absence of intentionality or self-consciousness. This is the notion of “artistic spontaneity” that Su Shi proposed, and such an artist would simultaneously be an enlightened

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being. On the other hand, since human nature can never be perfected and the complete
enlightenment is ever beyond his reach, conscious pursuit of this ideal will in reality burden the
artist’s mind. The third, dialectic definition of spontaneity is the dynamic, temporary resignation
to one’s imperfection at the moment of execution, an imperfection which nevertheless represents
a high virtuosity of skill and familiarity with the subject matter. It is the temporality crystalized
in a work of art, a constant temporality inviting the audience’s presence. Since the question “Was
Su Shi a spontaneous artist?” already assumes that artistic spontaneity is possible, it can only be
in the last sense that the answer is affirmative. For Su Shi the “spontaneous artist,” the
individualism and imperfection of his artwork became a trademark of authenticity.

Spontaneity, thus understood, is not a style, but rather a meta-style, in the sense of style
being “a mode of personification.”105 “Style” shows a family of features which exhibit a
common genealogy, constitutes the distinctive consistency underlying a corpus of artwork, and is
as recognizable (at least to the trained eyes) as a person’s physiognomic features.106 Even the
physiognomic notion of style, however, does not necessarily assume the homogeneity of the self
of the work. A “spontaneous” work of art, on the other hand, is seen as identifiable with its
author. Its aesthetic appearance is transparent, if only deceptively so; it convinces the audience as
having conveyed the existential truth of the artist (understood in traditional China often as his
moral characters) at that particular historical moment, without distortion or mediacy. When the
audience looks at such a work, they see instead the living person behind. With spontaneity
becoming the highest ideal of art, artistic excellence cannot but be defined in individualistic

106 See Ibid., 726-31.
terms. Arguably, the emphasis on spontaneity was correlated with the increasingly bold expression of individualism shaping major literati arts since the eleventh century.

Susan Bush notes that Su Shi in his calligraphy “aimed at spontaneity and directness rather than at aesthetic perfection,” and his manners were distinctively individual. Su Shi compared the individuality of artistic styles to the individuality of female beauty, both not necessarily perfect. “Being short, tall, plump, or slender,” according to him, “each has its own charm; who dares to detest Yuhuan 玉環 as fat or Feiyan 飛燕 as thin?” Su Shi’s own calligraphy was often criticized by his contemporaries as technically flawed, such as his wrist was not perpendicular and his elbow strutted against the paper. Huang Tingjian, however, defended him through the same analogy of female beauty. “They do not know,” Huang scorned, “when Xishi 西施 pressed against her chest and frowned, though it was for her illness, it became her beauty.” Just as truly beautiful women are all beautiful in their different ways, truly outstanding artwork must be individualistic. This means never hiding who one truly is. As quoted earlier, Su Shi learned from many earlier calligraphers, some of whom later lost his respect. But unlike Mi Fu who deliberately manipulated his style to erase the traces of such models, Su Shi allowed his calligraphy to betray all these early influences. As Sturman argues, it

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108 Su Shi, “Sun Shenlao qiu Momiao Ting shi” 孫莘老求墨妙亭詩, SSSJ, 8:371. Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (719-756) was the empress of Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (685-762; r. 712-756); Zhao Feiyan, see Chapter One, n.84.

109 Huang Tingjian, “Ba Dongpo Shuilu-zan” 跋東坡水陸贊, in Huang Tingjian quanji, zhengji 28:772.

110 Ibid. The story of Xishi having chest pain refers to the “Tianyun” 天運 chapter in Zhuangzi; see Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 14:515.
was because Su Shi simply paid no more attention to his models, so that he could focus on who he was simply by trusting the brush to leave its own faithful record.\textsuperscript{111} By doing so, his imperfect calligraphy, and his artwork in general, reflects his existential truth.

In the form of individuality, a work of art preserves its author together with his personality and life experience. After Su Shi’s death, Huang Tingjian was once asked to appraise a calligraphic work credited to Su. He examined it carefully and decided that it was a forgery. His reason was as follows:

\begin{quote}
東坡先生晚年書尤豪壯，挾海上風濤之氣，尤非他人所到也。

The calligraphy of Master Dongpo in his late days was especially powerful and heroic, carrying the aura of the winds and waves on the sea. No one can emulate that!\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

The work of the artist is understood not only as the overflow of his personality, which is “powerful and heroic” in Su Shi’s case, but also the crystallization of his life experience in its totality. Presumably, Su Shi’s last exile to Hainan Island is manifested by the aesthetic appearance of his calligraphy. The author’s spontaneity ultimately guarantees his artwork to transsubstantiate his self. A kindred spirit will recognize the person from his work and take it fondly, carrying this memory along within his own being.

In the theme of individuality, we hear the reverberation of the yearning for immortality. Knowing in this case does not necessarily lead to doing. The artist senses the realm of emptiness beyond the world of phenomena. Yet he turns his gaze away from emptiness with resolution and

\textsuperscript{111} Sturman (1997), 47.

\textsuperscript{112} Huang Tingjian, “Ba weizuo Dongpo shujian” 跋偽作東坡書簡, \textit{Huang Tingjian quanj\i}, zheng\i 26:673.
defiance. He yearns rather to preserve his personal trace within the human realm and to immortalize his individuality. Even when doing so, he commits himself to the memory and the destiny of the human race, to imperfection, oblivion, and decay.
PART II: MATERIAL MEANING
CHAPTER THREE

Flowers That Understand Language

Aesthetics of Nature

The oxymoronic ideal of “spontaneous art” celebrates works of art that appear not to be made but to be natural. In contrast, 11th century China also saw pieces of nature becoming proper objects of aesthetic contemplation. They were uprooted from their natural environments, became collectibles, and were exchanged like works of art. In Su Shi’s discourse of connoisseurship, these natural objects are often allegorized as a symbol of resistance to utilitarian appropriations and meanwhile anthropomorphized as recluses resisting political institutions. This was a special kind of nature aesthetics that speaks not solely in the vocabulary of aesthetics, but also in that of ethics.

Whether nature can be the legitimate object of aesthetic study has been much contended in the history of Western aesthetics. According to Hegel, aesthetics is by definition the “philosophy of fine arts.”1 “Natural beauty” is excluded from its proper field of study since only artistic beauty reflects the freedom of spirit.2 Yet a simple and undeniable fact is that nature does inspire feelings of beauty, life, and freedom, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Kant maintains that even a bird’s song seems to have more freedom and offer more for taste than the human voice singing in rules of music – although he also asserts that nature in itself is neither ugly nor

1 Hegel (1993), 3.
2 Ibid., 4.
beautiful, and it is only through the perceptive mind of man that it can be experienced as such.\(^3\)

The juxtaposition of natural and artistic beauty and the assertion that follows suggest, first, that natural beauty is always perceived in its relation to human art; and second, that the reason for such bias is the anthropocentric viewpoint necessary to form any system of meaning. The admiration of a bird song belies the self-criticism of human art: when the freedom of natural beauty provides a constant ideal, any emulation of this ideal will infringe upon its principle of non-intentionality and spontaneity. In the center of man’s relation with nature is his criticism of his cultured self.

As Wolfgang Kubin argues, the awareness and idealization of nature in the West appeared parallel to the rise of capitalism and industrialization, that is, the large-scale assault on the natural environment. As a result, this idealized nature acquired interiority – like one’s innermost self, it provided an escape from the pressures of society and civilization.\(^4\) With this, however, “nature” also lost its independence and became now a counter image to the human realm, a cultural construct and was embraced by the very civilization it purportedly offered an escape from. Furthermore, “natural beauty,” aesthetically perceived, served traditionally as either the archetype (das Vorbild) or the afterimage (das Nachbild) of art.\(^5\) In this sense, elaborations upon the aesthetics of nature are simultaneously reflections upon the identity of art.

When critics of the modern society strived to divorce art from anthropocentric hubris, they found in nature an inhuman language, free of grammar. Walter Benjamin suggests that language is the capacity for communication, and it is in the nature of all beings to communicate

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\(^3\) Kant (1952), 73-74.


\(^5\) Ibid., 11, 16.
their mental meanings. Things “speak” to man, and only through the linguistic being of things can man gain knowledge of them from within himself, that is, he translates the language of things into that of man.6 In Benjamin’s hierarchy of language, however, the naming language of man is nevertheless the highest and the most perfect kind. In contrast, Martin Heidegger distinguishes the “thing” (das Ding) from the Kantian “object” (der Gegenstand). According to him, a thing is self-sufficient, while an object is not, despite the Kantian effort to define a “thing in itself” (der Gegenstand an sich).7 If the thing is self-sufficient, why should it communicate with man? Paul Celan suggests that, although things murmur in monologue, the poet alone can hear them speaking and translate the fragments of their words into the human language, by which he renews the words worn out in daily communications.8 Yet the “thing” itself remains beyond touch. As Lyotard observes, it is not waiting to be destined. The “thing” is presence which cannot be presented to the mind, always withdraws from the mind’s comprehension, and does not offer itself to dialogue or dialectic.9 The muteness of nature is a mystery. To emulate its silence, Adorno suggests, the poet must write in parataxis, rebelling against the realistic principle or classical harmony.10 All such attempted revolutions in art, to conclude, are efforts to break into the territory of absolute spontaneity of things.

Lyotard’s argument also leads to a question that may never be satisfactorily answered: should nature be understood as presence or as meaning? Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht proposes that materiality is sheer presence, while metaphysics gives higher values to the meaning of phenomena.\(^{11}\) In this regard, just like “artistic spontaneity,” the “aesthetics of nature” is also an oxymoron, since aesthetics is essentially interpretation. Whenever nature is talked about, it is no longer nature in its sheer material presence, but the linguistic representation of it. The language of things is ultimately defined as what the language of man is not. This insight casts light upon the discourse of things in Chinese connoisseurship of the eleventh century.

The Language of Insentient Things

The title of this chapter refers to a conventional trope in Chinese poetry: “flowers that understand language” (jieyuhua 解語花). In Late Tang poetry, flowers were frequently compared to beautiful women in two diametric ways: (1) because they were flowers, they did not understand language,\(^{12}\) or (2) because they were like women, they did understand language.\(^{13}\) This trope

\(^{11}\) Gumbrecht (2004), xiv, 18, 29.

\(^{12}\) A famous example for the former use was Luo Yin’s 羅隱 (833-909) “Peony,” which lamented: “If the peony understood language, her beauty would send a state into decline;/ though she has no sentience, she moves man all the same” 若教解語應傾國，縱是無情也動人; see Luo Yin, “Mudanhua” 牡丹花, QTS, 655:7532. Living in the interregnum after the Tang Dynasty, Luo played upon a common theme which compared Yang Yuhuan, the empress under whose charm the dynasty purportedly strayed to decline, to the frail and luxurious beauty of the peony. Calling the peony “having no sentience” (or no emotion/love) revealed a certain degree of Buddhist influence.
suggests that the visual appreciation of flowers is analogous to the verbal communication of meaning between the botanic spectator and the botanic spectacle. When it came down to Su Shi, he sought to renew the meaning of this trope, as seen in a poem on peach blossoms:

我觀解語花 I observe the flowers that understand language -

粉色如黃土 Your maiden pink is just like yellow dust.

一言破千偈 A single word defeats a thousand gāthās;

況爾初不語 Let alone you, in effect, do not speak.\(^{14}\)

The trope “flowers that understand language” was already a cliché at Su’s time, as indicated in the matter-of-fact tone of the first line. The second line guides the reader’s attention to the lovely color of the peach blossoms, only to admonish that they will soon turn into dust. Their beauty appears to be illusory, and so is their linguistic capacity. He alludes to an ancient adage: “The peach and the plum do not speak,/ but paths form naturally below them.”\(^{15}\) Their silence is recommendable since truth is beyond the description of language. If even a single word is more

\(^{13}\) As exemplified by Sikong Tu’s 司空圖 (837-908) “Apricot Blossom,” which wistfully said: “If the apricot knows to smile, she should also understand language; her tender voice is more lovely than the chirping of an oriole” 解笑亦應兼解語，只應備語倩鸚聲; see Sikong Tu, “Xinghua” 杏花, QTS, 634:7280.


\(^{15}\) Sima Qian who lived in the second century BCE already mentioned it as “an adage,” showing the antiquity of this term; see “Li Jiangjun liezhuan” 李將軍列傳, Shiji, 109:2878. Paths form naturally below these trees because of their tasty fruits.
powerful in revealing the truth than a thousand gāthās, more so are the flowers that do not speak. The first line integrates the natural flower into an anthropocentric system of meaning, and the last line destroys such illusion, redeeming their material presence. Yet this presence itself gains a higher meaning as the silent, permanent truth.

This short stanza shows a syllogism of signification (flowers speak), de-signification (flowers do not speak), and re-signification (flowers become a symbol in the language of man). Its logical structure resembles the Tiantai theory of the threefold truth (discussed in Chapter One), namely, that truth is a single unity with three integrated aspects: emptiness, conventional existence, and the Middle. The middle way reaffirms the legitimacy of this-worldly, albeit provisional, presence.

Su Shi frequently finds in the meaningful silence of nature a language of truth. A poem written on Mount Lu states:

溪聲便是廣長舌 The murmur of the creek is the Buddha’s broad and long tongue;\(^{16}\)

山色豈非清淨身 Isn’t the form of the mountain the body of purity?\(^{17}\)

夜來八萬四千偈 They have preached to me eighty-four thousand gāthās over the night;

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\(^{16}\) In *Madhyamagama Sūtra*, “The broad and long tongue” is one of the thirty-two appearances of the Buddha, that is, a tongue long and big enough to cover his face. See *Zhong’ehan jing* 中阿含經, T no.26, 1:685c, 686c, 688b.

\(^{17}\) A parable in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* describes a Buddhist prince who has “the body of purity” as well as the “broad and long tongue;” he has the complete thirty-two appearances of the Buddha, and will certainly become a great Wheel-turning King (*zuanlunwang* 轉輪王). See *Dafangguangfo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, T no.278, 9:757a-b.
Allegedly, Su wrote this poem the next morning after discussing with the Chan master Donglin Changzong 東林常總 (1025-1091) on whether insentient things had the Buddha’s nature. Regardless of the authenticity of the anecdote, Su’s poem did reverberate with the theory of Zhanran 湛然 (711-782), a Buddhist scholar from the Tiantai School. Zhanran argued that though plant lives did not have sentience, they nevertheless shared the Buddha’s nature. This proposal was grounded upon the doctrine of the universality of the Buddha’s nature inherent in Mahayana Buddhism. Despite the theological difficulty that it posed to Buddhist soteriology, it left an indelible print on Chinese and Japanese cleric and lay literature. Weishan Lingyou 湧山靈祐 (771-853), founder of the Weiyang 潸仰 sect of Chan Buddhism, further declared that every animate or inanimate thing was the manifestation of the Buddha’s mind. In this view, things in the phenomenal world were not alien objects but shared the same mental entity with man. A meditative and attentive listener, like Su Shi during the sleepless night at Mount Lu,

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19 See Zhengshou 正受, Jiatai pudenglu 嘉泰普燈錄, 卍 no.1559, 79:428c.


23 Dahui Zonghao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163), Zhengfayan cang 正法眼藏, 卍 no.1309, 67:611b.
could hear the language of things. But this language was that of silence. So Su declared himself to be at a loss of words when he tried to impart his lesson.

Su’s poem was broadly quoted and discussed among Song Buddhists. Ironically, for some Chan masters, his writing of a poem betrayed precisely his attachment to language and his externality to the dharma teaching of silence.24

Since nature speaks a language that only the attentive few could hear, this proposal opens gate to the connoisseurship of nature objects. Only the initiated few could appreciate, categorize, and evaluate these objects and tell them apart from other non-connoisseur items, natural or man-made. To be sure, aesthetic appreciation of nature is ancient, as seen in early Chinese poetry. What was distinctively novel since the Late Tang through the Song was a connoisseur culture. Connoisseur items differ from household objects in that they do not have any explicit utilitarian function. When objects become desirable primarily for their aesthetic features, they are isolated from their habitats, carefully cultivated, and dearly exchanged. A “useful” thing becomes “useless” when its aesthetic character overrides its utilitarian value. This process suggests that the “usefulness” or “uselessness” of a thing is an ideological construct, depending solely on the human point of view. A thing in itself is neither useful nor useless – it is beyond such criteria. And when it is understood as “useless,” it serves yet another purpose: it provides aesthetic pleasure and often becomes part of the collector’s understanding of his ideal self. The “useless” is “useful” in a supreme way.

The development of connoisseurship gave rise to a strong sense of possession25 and anxiety,26 leading also to the increasing specialization of naturalistic scholarship.27 Himself an


avid collector, Su Shi wrote prolifically about his collection and aesthetic experience. Language played an essential role in interpreting the meaning of things and in constructing their values. It is the aesthetic discourse that distinguishes an object from rank and file objects that silently serve quotidian needs. This object thus finds another purpose – not an explicitly utilitarian purpose, but a purpose in generating meaning and in constructing an exegetic scheme of things. Whether the poet finds an object significant determines its career in the aesthetic sphere. Only to a limited extent is the value of an aesthetic object determined by its utilitarian function. By and large, its value is mainly decided by tradition, culture, society, and contemporary aesthetic standards – in short, by the proliferating discourse about it, not unlike in the case of evaluating a work of art.

The following two chapters examine Su Shi’s aesthetic contemplation on natural objects of, flowers and rocks in particular. Flowers and rocks have inspired poetic imagination since the beginnings of Chinese literature. When plants in their seasonal vicissitude perform the eternal reoccurrence of the same, rocks bare to the sky the unyielding bones of the earth. They have been celebrated for their respective resilience and resistance to changes in the passage of time. Su Shi’s poetry on them often shows a contradictory attitude. On one hand, he frequently praised a natural object for its independence of human attention or care – an image of his ideal, spontaneous self. This rhetorical device reflected his desire to escape the entangling network of social, cultural, and political forces. On the other, when doing so, he was already transforming the presence of this object into meaning. It was linguistically represented as self-sufficient, its

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26 On fetishism and anxiety from the Late Tang to the Song, see Yang Xiaoshan (2003), 91-148; Egan (2006), 162-236.

27 For an extensive study on the Song Dynasty naturalistic scholarship, see Siebert (2006).
essence beyond the communicative capacity of language – even though this “outsider” status was significant precisely because of its reference to an established cultural system of meaning.

The present chapter discusses Su Shi’s literary representation of the calamus, the peony, and the plum. He constantly contemplated on the sensual experience of the moment and sought to sublimate it into meaning. This process of signification not only determined his perception of these flowers, but also left an indelible mark in their reception through subsequent generations.

The Calamus: from Utilitarian to Aesthetic Appropriation

The calamus (shichangpu 石菖蒲, L. Rhizoma Acori Graminei) has been an important medical plant in Chinese pharmaceutics. Its dark green leaves are long and hard, its root knotted; it is air-

28 It may appear confusing that both li 李 (L. prunus) in the aforementioned adage and mei 梅 (L. prunus mume) are translated as “the plum.” Since li appears only once, however, I opt for a simple solution: from this point on, all the “plum” refers to mei, a tree that flowers in late winter, usually before the leaves grow.

29 The proper English translation for shichangpu 石菖蒲 (Rhizoma Acori Graminei) is “grass-leaf sweet flag.” In the essay translated below, Su Shi wants to distinguish shichangpu, an air-born plant, from baichangpu 白菖蒲, a wetland plant. Both are subspecies under the “sweet flag” or “calamus” (Rhizoma Acori Calami; Chinese name: changpu 喜蒲 or changyang 昌陽). The term changpu have been used in reference to either of these subspecies, which clearly leads to the confusion of nomenclature Su Shi has discussed. In Su Shi’s nomenclature, shichangpu is synonym to changpu, and baichangpu to changyang. To simplify our translation, hereafter I use “calamus” for the air-born shichangpu/ changpu, and “sweet flag” for the wetland baichangpu/ changyang. The Ming pharmacologist Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593) has similarly defined the medical changpu as shichangpu, the root of which is lean, tight, knotty, and dirty
born and can survive with little soil or water; its purple blossom is a rare sight. For Su Shi, what made this plant precious was its unique aesthetic appearance. The desire to keep its physical form intact conflicted with the utilitarian calculation over its medical efficacy. Therefore, though the medical effect of the calamus inspired the poet’s imagination of longevity and immortality, such potency remained unrealized. Both its aesthetic and medical characteristics, moreover, could be interpreted ethically. The ethical interpretation certainly happened also on many other medical plants since no later than the Han. The calamus attracts special interest here since, unlike its many famous peers, previous literature rarely, if ever, notices its aesthetic merits or allegorical significance, a phenomenon to be examined later. Its signification seems to begin with the literature of Su Shi and his contemporaries. It provides thus a telling case for the Song aesthetics. The following encomium on the calamus by Su Shi manifests the mutual transformations of its utilitarian, aesthetic, and ethical values.

Encomium on the Calamus, with Preface

《本草》: 菖蒲, 味辛温无毒, 开心, 补五臓, 通九竅, 明耳目。久服轻身不忘, 延年益心智, 高志不老。注云: 生石磧上穊节者, 良。生下湿地大根者, 乃

red, while shuichangpu or baichangpu has flabby and white root. See Bencao gangmu 本草綱目, 19:1063-5. See also Qiu Dewen 邱德文 et al. (1998), 433.

是昌陽，不可服。韓退之《進學解》云：“薦醫師以昌陽引年，欲進其稀苓。”不知退之即以昌陽為菖蒲耶，抑謂其似是而非不可以引年也？

According to *Materia Medica*, the calamus tastes spicy and is warming; it is nontoxic; it clarifies the mind, nourishes the five organs, penetrates the nine orifices, and sharpens the auditory and visual capacities. If taken for a long period of time, it helps to disburden the body and strengthen memory, to prolong life and increase intelligence, and to keep the spirits high into an advanced age. The commentary says: “If it grows on gravels and has dense joints, it is good; if it grows on a low and wet ground, with swelling roots, then it is the sweet flag and cannot be taken medically.” In “Explanation upon Entering the Academy,” Han Tuizhi (aka. Han Yu) says: “[It is as if] one blames the physician for using the sweet flag to prolong life, and wants to take the umbrella polypore instead.” Did Tuizhi mistake the sweet flag for the calamus? Or did he rather mean that it was similar to the calamus, but was actually different, hence could not prolong life?

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31 *Bencao* refers to a cumulative tradition of medical compendia. The earliest of such works was *Shennong bencao jing* 神農本草經, first mentioned in *Suishu* 隋書 but possibly composed much earlier. Other now lost *Bencao* works compiled in the Tang and the Song might have also been Su’s source. The text quoted by Su Shi appears later also with minor differences in Li Shizhen’s *Materia Medica*; see *Bencao gangmu*, 19:1064.

32 It should be Tao Hongjing’s 陶弘景 (456-536) commentary to *Shennong bencao jing* 神農本草經, as found in Li Shizhen, *Bencao gangmu*, 19:1063.

33 See Han Yu, “Jinxue jie” 進學解, in *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu*, 1:49. The previous line says: “It is as if questioning the craftsman for not using stakes as pillars.” In this context, Han Yu certainly intends to mock those ignoramuses who expose their ignorance by criticizing the professionals. Since changpu is alternatively called *changyang*, the context helps to decide that by *changyang* Han Yu certainly means
All the plants living upon rocks need some soil to attach their roots to, like the rock felt fern and the noble dendrobium. Although they do not depend on the soil to live, if you detach them from their rooted spot, they will dry and die immediately. Only the calamus, if you take it together with its attached rock, wash off the soil, soak it in clear water, and put it in a pot, it can survive for decades. Though it will not flourish, its joints and leaves are stern and lean, its roots and fibers intertwined, glimmering of dark green on the desk. The longer it endures, the more delightful it looks. Its medical effects, like disburdening the body and prolonging life, are already beyond the reach of the sweet flag. As for its enduring cold and hardship, its settling in impoverishment, its making company with pure water and white pebbles, and its living independently to the soil – how could the sweet flag even match! When I travelled among the hills in Cihu Lake, I acquired a

the “calamus,” which nourishes the body, while the umbrella polypore ((*Polyergus umbellatus* [Pers.] Fr.; Chinese name: *xiling* 稀苓, alternatively written as 稀苓, a.k.a. *zhuling* 豬苓) is a laxative, whose medical function is the opposite of the calamus.

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few roots of the calamus and raised them in a stone pot. I put them in my boat and decorated them with some patterned pebbles. The pebbles and the plants looked so splendid and luxurious! I did cherish them fondly. I was worried, however, that they could not survive my land trip, so I sent them to Hu Dongwei, a Daoist priest in Jiujiang, and entrusted them to his care. If I pass by again, I will ask about their well-being!

贊曰：清且泚，惟石與水。託於一器，養非其地。瘠而不死，夫孰知其理。不如此，何以輔五藏而堅發齒。

Encomium: how clear, how limpid, it needs only stone and water. It resides in a single vessel and is raised out of its habitat. It emaciates but will not die. Who knows the reason why! Were it not the case, how could it assist the five internal organs and firm the hairs and the teeth!

The pot of the calamus sent to a Daoist priest was certainly not intended for medical use but was an aesthetic object. It is the medical efficacy of this plant, however, upon which the first half of the essay elaborates and which the final encomium eulogizes in near mythic terms. This rhetorical strategy reveals a hidden hierarchy of values, that is, utilitarian value was still considered as more justifiable than aesthetic value, even though the latter had come to actual dominance.

In the Ming Dynasty Compendium of Materia Medica (Bencao gangmu 本草綱目) which compiled most Materia Medicas in its lineage, the entry “Calamus” includes various medical
documents, anecdotes, and recipes that promise to cure mundane diseases or even mortality.\textsuperscript{34} Judging from the *Compendium*, the basic medical effect of the calamus is to accelerate the metabolic process and to enhance memory. Since it helps to rejuvenate people physically and mentally, it appears as elixir in Daoist efficacious stories. According to Ge Hong, the calamus is a divine medicine which enhances intelligence.\textsuperscript{35} Han Zhong 韓眾, after dining on the calamus for thirteen years, had white fur covering his body, felt no cold in the winter, and could memorize ten thousand words in a single day.\textsuperscript{36} Scholar Anqi 安期生 acquired expedite transcendence after taking one inch of a nine-gnarled calamus root which sprouted purple blossoms, the most efficacious calamus of all.\textsuperscript{37} All these fantastic stories are also collected into this medical compendium.

Similarly, some Buddhist sūtras also mention the calamus as “wisdom drug” (*congming yao* 聰明藥). In the hagiography of Huiju 惠炬, a Huayan 華嚴 monk from the Northern Qi 北齊 (550-577), he dreamed of the Youth Sudhana promising him a “wisdom drug.” The next day, upon seeing the calamus by a lake, he ordered his acolyte to dive into the lake, who discovered a gigantic calamus root. Upon dinning on the root, he became clear-minded and could “memorize ten thousand words in a single day.”\textsuperscript{38} His intelligence seems to have been modeled upon Han

\textsuperscript{34} For the traditional Chinese notion of mortality as a curable disease, see Chapter Six.

\textsuperscript{35} See the “Xianyao” 仙藥 chapter in *Baopuzi* 抱朴子; Wang Ming 王明, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋, 11:196.

\textsuperscript{36} *Ibid.*, 11:208. "Han Zhong" 韓眾 is written as its homophonic "Han Zhong 韓終."

\textsuperscript{37} Ji Han 稽含, *Nanfang caomu zhuang* 南方草木狀, 1:256.

\textsuperscript{38} *Dafangguangfo huayanjing ganyingzhuan* 大方廣佛華嚴經感應傳, T no.2074, 51:174b. The author of this hagiographical account might have confused the wetland sweet flag with the air-born calamus.
Zhong’s story. Furthermore, in esoteric Buddhist sūtras, the calamus was sometimes recommended as a magic recipe granting the mastery of eloquence, just like in the Daoist lore of Scholar Anqi. Studies have shown that Buddhism and Daoism often loaned scripture, ritual, and hagiography from each other. In the use of the calamus, Buddhism might have borrowed from the indigenous Daoist literature and reinforced the Daoist tradition of the calamus as a magic drug.

In contrast to the utilitarian speculation over the medical or magical uses of the calamus, Su Shi suggests that he cherished the calamus primarily for its moral characteristics, such as perseverance, serenity, and independence. Physical features of the plant are interpreted as human virtues. His encomium renders the calamus into a paradigm of longevity and transcendence. The materiality of the plant is readily translated into meaning.

This meaning, however, is based upon the material presence of the calamus. Notably, Su Shi uses a series of verbs to depict the calamus’ moral quality (“to endure,” “to settle in,” and “to

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39 In Dhāranī Incantation of the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva with a Thousand Hands and Eyes, a monk who desires unimpeded eloquence is recommended to follow this recipe: grind some calamus roots to fine powder, mix the powder with oil and honey, knead the dough into pellets, and take seven pellets daily while chanting dharani spells and contracting seals, for a hundred days. See Qianshouqianyan Guangshiyiing Pusa Laotuoluoishen jing 千手千眼觀世音菩薩姥陀羅尼身經, T no.1057, 20:98b. Similar recipes are found in Shengjiani Fenjujingang Tongzipusa chengjiuyigui jing 聖迦柅忿怒金剛童子菩薩成就儀軌經, T no.1222b, 21:123b, 127a; Dafangguang Pusazang Wenshushili genben yigui jing 大方廣菩薩藏文殊師利根本儀軌經, T no.1191, 20:897c; and Bukong Juansuo Piluzhenafo Daguandingguang zhenyan 不空罥索毘盧遮那佛大灌頂光真言, T no.1002, 19:606c. All are esoteric sūtras.

take company with”). He gives the calamus agency, so that the insentient plant behaves as if it was sentient. Different from the fragrant herbs in *Lisao* 離騷 [*“Encountering Sorrow”*] that are analogous to the virtue of the hero, Su Shi’s calamus has virtues of its own. This characteristic resembles what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls “transubstantiation,” a term he has borrowed from Catholic theology to mean a sign not based on a distinction between a material signifier as surface and an immaterial meaning as depth. Rather, it brings together a substance and a form, so that “there is no ‘immaterial’ meaning detached from a ‘material signifier.’” The substance of the calamus is regarded as sharing the same quality as the substance of a gentleman. Hence it does not signify virtue – it is virtuous.

A poem on the calamus is seldom about the plant per se, but more often also about its host, indicating that the man who takes company with the calamus shares its virtues. For instance, in a poem written for a scholar from Yangzhou, Su Shi notices particularly a pot of the calamus on his desk:

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41 The agency of objects, paradoxical as it sounds, is an influential anthropological theory proposed by Alfred Gell. Gell proposed to attribute agency to those persons and things “who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events.” See Gell (1998), 16. In this chapter, however, I am not to discuss the agency of things per se, but rather the rhetoric which describes things in a way as if they are agents of events.

42 As Wang Yi 王逸 (d.158) famously commented, in *Lisao*, “good birds and fragrant herbs are analogous to the loyal and upright; evil birds and odorous things are compared to the defamatory and fawning;” see Hong Xingzu 洪興祖, *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注, 1:2.


Held by multicolored smashed jade is the calamus;
A scoop of clear spring brims a stone bowl.
By a clean desk, below a bright window, in small regular script,
You write like commenting the insects and fish in *Erya*.\(^{45}\)

Similarly, for an abbot from Changzhou, Su Shi wrote:\(^{46}\)

An emerald bowl holding scarlet carnelians,
Raised in the pristine water from the morning well\(^{47}\) is the calamus.
I do know that the dharma-offering is inexhaustible;
But let me ask you, Chan master: are you hungry or not?

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\(^{45}\)“Insects and fish” is a fixed term for meticulous philology. “*Erya* zhu chongyu” 爾雅注蟲魚 refers to a line from Han Yu, who mocks such pedantry in contrast to the greater ambition of ordering the world; see Han Yu, “Du Huangfu Shi ‘Shu Gong’an yuanchi shi’ shu qihou ershou” 讀皇甫湜公安園池詩書其後二首, no.1, *QTS*, 341:3824. When quoting this line, however, Su Shi certainly intended not to insult but to joke with his friend Wen Jue. Elsewhere he also used the same phrase to describe himself; see “Zhang Jin Jizhong you longwei zishi yan yi tongjian yi zhi” 張近幾仲有龍尾子石硯以銅劍易之, *SSSJ*, 23:1237-8.


\(^{47}\) *Jinhuashui* 井花水 is the first-bucket of virgin water fetched in the morning from a well.
Save for the rhymes, the first couplets of these two poems are interchangeable. Both describe the calamus planted in a refined environment of pebbles, pristine water, and a stone bowl. So carefully arranged, the calamus is certainly not to be dug out, cooked, and dined upon. The hosts of the calamus have deprived them of any soil, which would have been granted to them in a natural habitat. This artificial treatment highlights the unusual character of the calamus, modifies its otherwise unspectacular appearance, and makes it a sign of endurance and transcendence. The plant becomes its host, be him a fastidious philologist or a fastening monk. Judging from the “Encomium,” Su Shi himself must have raised his calamus in a like fashion, which was becoming increasingly popular among the educated elites of the time.

Literary evidence suggests that the aestheticization of the calamus began around Su Shi’s century. In Tang poetry, the calamus never appeared as a garden plant. It was often combined with the verb “to collect” (cai 採), suggesting a wild habitat. The collector was usually a practitioner of Daoist recipes. Not until the early eleventh century did poets begin to mention the calamus as a garden plant. The first evidence was found from Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019-1068),

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48 For instance, Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698-756) related in a poem that when he collected the calamus on the southern slope of Mt. Song 嵩山, a Daoist immortal gave him a scroll of elixir recipes; see Wang Changling, “Jiu daoshi wen ‘Zhouyi cantong qi’” 就道士問周易參同契, QTS, 141:1431. Li Bo, in two poems also related with Mt. Song, depicted scenes of collecting the calamus in the pursuit of transcendence and longevity; see Li Bo, “Song Yang-shanren gui Songshan” 送楊山人歸嵩山, Li Taibai quanjí 李太白全集, 17:829; “Songshan cai changpu zhe” 嵩山採菖蒲者, ibid., 25: 1162. Another evidence of the Daoist association is that the monk Guanxiu mentioned the calamus only in two poems related with Daoism; see Guanxiu, “Jiangbian ci” 江邊祠, QTS, 826:9310; “Ji Xin’an Zheng Daoshi” 寄信安鄭道士, QTS, 831:9370.
who had transplanted some lotus, water lily and calamus into a fish basin. Liu’s aesthetic pleasure, however, derived primarily from the fish, not from the plants.

Curiously, Su Shi and his close literary circle were the earliest to write about the calamus planted in the highly aestheticized fashion. Scant evidence from other sources forestalls hasty conclusion. Yet even if the Su circle did not necessarily initiate the trend, the ways that they planted the calamus, exchanged it as gift, and praised it for its moral transcendence had been emulated since then in numerous poems through the Song Dynasty. Su Shi, in particular, left a lasting imprint on the aesthetic experience of the calamus. For instance, Zhu Xi’s father Zhu Song 朱松 (1097-1143) wrote that he found some white pebbles accumulated in a stream like a “marble pit” (danziwo 弹子渦), so he requested some calamus from a friend to match these

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49 See Liu Chang, “Xin zhi penchi zhong lian he changpu yang xiaoyu shushitou […]” 新置盆池種蓮荷菖蒲養小魚數十頭[…]，Quan Song shi 全宋詩 (hereafter QSS), 466:5652. It is possible, though, that the changpu here refers to the wetland sweet flag.


51 Abundant examples of raising the calamus came right after Su Shi’s time. A few instances by authors living between the two Songs include: Zeng Ji 曾幾 (1084-1166), “Shichangpu” 石菖蒲, QSS, 1660:18597; Zhang Jiucheng 張九成 (1092-1159), “Changpu” 菖蒲, QSS, 1792:19988, and “Pen zhong shichangpu” 盆中石菖蒲, QSS, 1796:20016; Hu Yin 胡寅 (1098-1156), “Cong Zhao Miao qiu changpu” 從趙廟求菖蒲, QSS, 1875:21022; and Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091-1157), “Fang Yang Caishu buyu liu ji sengshe” 訪楊才叔不遇留偈僧舍, QSS, 1782:19802, and “Bai Bajiao Qingchanshi” 拜芭蕉情禪師, QSS, 1782:19809. References to the calamus among Southern Song authors are too numerous to be listed here.
pebbles. This act is meaningful only in reference to an anecdote about Su Shi, who once found numerous lovely pebbles under a cliff smashed by waves, a place the locals called the “marble pit” by the sea of Wendeng (in modern Shandong Province). He brought a few pints to Hangzhou and used some of them to raise the calamus. Zhu Song’s reference to Su Shi was literal but undeclared. It shows that Su’s poetry was read by literati of the twelfth century to such a broad extent that the mere mention of the “marble pit” and “the calamus” was enough to trigger their association. Furthermore, any behavior of Su Shi’s, insignificant as it was, would be faithfully commemorated by his admirers. It was logical to infer that Su’s poems on the calamus promoted its transplantation in the aesthetic fashion through the Southern Song and after. As a matter of fact, the calamus increasingly became a commonplace decoration in a literatus’ studio. It remained a sign of moral self-sufficiency, a paradigmatic image established by Su Shi.

Ironically, precisely because of its much admired independence from any form of human care or attention, the calamus was carefully transplanted and methodically raised. The Southern Song author Shu Yuexiang 舒岳祥 (1219-1299) mentioned the extreme difficulty to raise the calamus, since it should be neither ignored nor lavished with care. Such precious calamus still had medical value, but its major function was to please the eyes. After undergoing the process of

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52 See Zhu Song 朱松, “Xiuning cunluo jian you qishi ru danziwo suo chu yi yang shichangpu Cheng Dezao xu yi kui wo yishi du zhi” 休寧村落間有奇石如彈子渦所出宜養石菖蒲程德藻許以饋我以詩督之, QSS, 1853:20694.


aestheticization and objectification, a wild, tenacious, and highly useful plant became domesticated, delicate, and indeed “useless.”

**The Peony: Form, Emptiness, and Nostalgia**

The peony and the plum represent antithetical ideals in floral aesthetics. Unlike the calamus, neither has much utilitarian value. The peony usually blossoms in the warm late spring. Its exuberant large flower is a marvel of horticulture. In contrast, the plum blossoms in late winter among ice and snow. Their images in poetry illustrate the interplay between materiality and meaning. In Su Shi’s literary representations of them, the peony is the sensuous, lush beauty in need of meticulous attendance, while the plum is the recluse among the flowers, tender but persevering, appealing through its solitude and seclusion, daring the beholder with the wintry chill. The peony represents the humanized nature, its beauty celebrating human craft over natural selection. The plum celebrates the inhuman nature that is alien and even hostile to man. Paradoxically, the plum had eventually gained greater popularity under the Song than the peony, the favorite of the Late Tang poets.\(^5\) This process was represented in Su Shi’s poetry and life. It

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\(^5\) Ronald Egan argues that, before Ouyang Xiu, the peony “had previously been considered, because of its sensuous allure, far inferior to plants such as the plum and bamboo, admired for their austere demeanor”; Egan (2006), 4. Ouyang Xiu did declare that the peony was not praised by the Tang poets, but his claim was already refuted by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202); see “The Tang people cherished the peony,” in Hong Mai (2005), 2:17. Ouyang Xiu ignored that the peony was not found in poetry before mid-Tang because its cultivation started only in mid-Tang. Furthermore, unlike other celebrated plants like the pine and the cypress that had been praised for their toughness since the Han, the “austere demeanor” of
appeared that he ceased to appreciate the peony aesthetically precisely because of its powerful sensual appeal which prevented an aesthetic distance, unsettling its beholder for the risk of losing his meditative mind.

Su Shi had an intensive aesthetic experience with the peony in the late spring of 1072, when he newly arrived in Hangzhou as Vice Governor. He wrote a few poems on the peony in the Buddhist Mingqing 明慶 and Jixiang 吉祥 temples. In a preface to Governor Shen Li’s 沈立 Mudan ji 牡丹記 [Record of Peonies], Su recounted the feasting and merrymaking of the day in the Jixiang Temple. The peony blossoms were presented on gold trays or in baskets decorated with colorful silk ribbons, alluding to slender girls dancing on gold trays, their silk robes flying. Since the banquet was held in a Buddhist temple, there must be no entertaining girls; therefore the flowers became substitutes. On this occasion, the peony was analogous to female beauty not only in literary convention, but also in their common social function of entertainment.

The banquet was such a success that all the fifty-three honorable guests got drunk, including nondrinkers like Su himself. Su appeared to have heartily inhaled the sensual

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58 On Su Shi getting drunk on this occasion, see a verse commemorating the same event: “Returning in drunkenness and aided on the road, it truly gives people a good laughter.” 醉歸扶路人應笑, in “Jixiang-si shang mudan.” On Su Shi being a nondrinker, see Ch.1, n.58. Nor was he yet fond of drinking, according to a claim he made in the same year: “In all my life I do not drink; but I dare to discuss with you on the art of poetry” 平生不飲酒，對子敢論詩; see “Da Ren Shizhong ciyun” 答任師中次韻, SSSJ, 8:363. Su
exuberance of the occasion, despite or because of the austere monastic surroundings. The next
day, Governor Shen took out a Record of the Peony in ten scrolls that he composed in privacy,
asking the renowned youth for a preface. Unexpectedly, Su Shi suddenly unleashed moralistic
wrath against the peony –

蓋此花見重於世三百餘年，窮妖極麗，以擅天下之觀美，而近歲猶復變態百出，務
為新奇以追逐時好者，不可勝紀。此草木之智巧便佞者也。
This flower has been prized by the world for more than three hundred years. It is
extremely seductive and enchanting. It thus champions the appreciation of beauty in all
under heaven. In recent years, it has produced again hundreds of varying looks,
deliberately making the novel and the unusual to cater to popular tastes. Such cases are
beyond recording! It is indeed the canny, crafty, opportunistic, and fawning member of
the floral kingdom.\footnote{Su Shi, “Mudan ji xu” 牡丹記敍, in SSWJ, 10:329.}

Su’s harangue must have surprised Governor Shen and his contemporary readers. It was perhaps
offensive, even in the eleventh century, to call one’s superior’s favorite flower immoral and his
love for it infatuation. A possible explanation, as proposed by some scholars, is that Su offered
here a veiled criticism against the “New Policies,” hinted here as “the novel and the unusual.”\footnote{See Zeng Zaozhuang (1984), 94.}

\footnote{Seemed to become a constant drinker only twenty years later, during his Yangzhou term (1092), the same
period when he started to match Tao Qian’s “Drinking” (Yinjiu 飲酒) poems; see Su’s preface to “He Tao Yinjiu ershi shou” 和陶飲酒二十首, SSSJ, 35:1881.}
It was true that Su had been edged out of the court to this provincial post because of his antagonism of the reform. But even if it could be the case, the fact that Su had singled out the peony instead of any other flower to bear his charge must be explained through the characteristics of the peony itself.

Notably, Su granted the peony agency. Like in the case of the calamus, the peony did not simply signify the morally depraved – it was by nature depraved. This charge against the peony had no precedence in literature. Before Su Shi, criticisms were often against the extravaganza of the peony faddism, but not against the splendor of the peony per se. Bo Juyi famously denounced: “A single clump of deep-hued peony/ – Ten medium households’ tax.” 一叢深色花十戶中人賦.⁶¹ Ouyang Xiu felt uneasy about the “hundreds of variations” and fierce beauty contest characterizing peony connoisseurship, but he condemned only the crafty human mind that produced such artificialities.⁶² In contrast to previous literature, Su Shi invented a moral crusade of his own. He reproached the peony for its moral duplicity. Because of its “fawning” nature, it seemed to have seduced and used fallible men to enhance its sensual appeal.

The reason for Su’s denouncement was that the beauty of the peony was artificial. Su Shi correctly observed that this kind of garden peony had appeared only since the eighth century. As Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803?-865) reported, the peony was not found in early literature or historiography. At the end of the Kaiyuan period (714-741), a vice minister Pei Shiyan 裴士淹 came back from a mission to the north. He passed by a Buddhist temple in Fenzhou (now Fenyang, Shanxi Province), where he obtained a cluster of white peony. He transplanted it into

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⁶¹ Bo Juyi, “Maihua” 買花, in Bo Juyi ji, 2:34. Noted also in Egan (2006), 112-3.

⁶² Ouyang Xiu, “Luoyang mudan tu” 洛陽牡丹圖, in Ouyang Xiu quanji, 2:34.
his private residence in Chang’an. During the Tianbao period (742-756), it became a rare sight of the capital. Duan’s account, among others, suggests that the peony as we know it was created by mid-Tang horticultural innovation. Natural species of the peony spread broadly but did not hold any aesthetic appeal. Under the reign of Xuanzong (685-762; r. 712-756), the cultivated peony quickly became a metropolitan sensation and was possibly planted in palatial gardens. Later poets often compared the peony to Imperial Consort Yang, a *femme fatale* whose beauty was accused to have caused the decline of a powerful dynasty. Nevertheless, as Bo Juyi’s “Changhen ge” 長恨歌 [“Song of Everlasting Sorrow”] attests, the accompanying danger only intensified the allure of the beautiful woman, an allure that was transferrable onto her botanic counterpart—the peony flower. Together, the female and the floral beauty represented a golden age that concealed in its splendor the dangerous tension of seduction, human weakness, and decline, stirring nostalgia among poets of later centuries in the shadow of

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63 Duan Chengshi 段成式, *Youyang za zu* 酉陽雑俎, 19:185.
64 See, e.g., the accounts of Li Deyu 李德裕 (787-850) and Shu Yuanyu 舒元輿 (791-835) in Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 ed., *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成, 64:717.
65 *Luoyang mudan ji* 洛陽牡丹記, in *Ouyang Xiu quanji*, 75:1096.
66 According to the anecdotal romance *Taizhen waizhuan* 太真外傳, quoted in the preface to the three “Qingping diao” 清平調 lyric songs; see Li Bo, “Qingping diao,” in *Li Taibai quanji*, 5:304. The authenticity of this romance and of these songs is however questionable.
67 The three “Qingping diao” lyric songs credited to Li Bo were presumably commissioned by the emperor for Yang Yuhuan. The third song states: “The reputed flower and the beauty who overpowers states take delight in each other’s company;/ constantly they enjoy His Sovereign’s smiling gaze” 名花傾國兩相歡常得君王帶笑看; see *ibid.*, 5:306.
its ruins. As a token of lost grandeur, the peony was broadly planted in the ninth century, enhanced to greater variety and exuberance by ever more sophisticated horticultural experiments. Together with this came an outburst of poems on the peony. In the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, there are 131 poems with “peony” (*mudan*) in their titles, outnumbering the poems on any other plant.⁶⁹ The first poem was from Pei Shiyan,⁷⁰ the alleged discoverer, and more than ninety percent were written after the ninth century.

Buddhist temples played a leading role in the horticultural experiments⁷¹ as well as in spreading the peony throughout the territory.⁷² These cases suggest collaboration between the

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⁶⁹ A quick search in the *QTS* database yields that there are about a hundred poems on the plum, 99 on the chrysanthemum, 48 poems on the rosebush, 11 poems on the herbaceous peony (*shaoyao* 芍藥), and 12 poems on the crape myrtle (*ziwei* 紫薇). Note also that the poems on the peony began only since mid-Tang, while the other flowers had been garden plants since earlier times. I have used the *QTS* database provided by Yuanzhi University, Taiwan.


⁷¹ Ci’en Temple 慈恩寺 in Chang’an was mentioned to be the leading peony garden, producing the most precious varieties. See Duan Chengshi, *Youyang za zu*, 19:185; *xuji* 續集, 6:262-3; Wang Dang 王讜, *Tang yulin jiaozheng* 唐語林校證, 7:628.

⁷² The transplantation of the peony in Chang’an and Luoyang, recall, initiated from the Zhongxiang Temple 罡香寺 of Fenzhou. Its first successful cultivation in Hangzhou began with a monk Huicheng 惠澄 of the Kaiyuan Temple 開元寺, when Bo Juyi was the magistrate (821-824); see Tian Rucheng 田汝成, *Xihu youlan zhiyu* 西湖遊覽志餘, 10:164-5. Its cultivation in the southwest began when the Late Shu 後蜀 (934-965) emperor Meng Chang 孟昶 (919-965; r. 934-964) fetched a specimen from a temple of Taizhou (in modern Jiangsu Province); see Hu Yuanzhi 胡元質, “Mudan pu” 牡丹譜, in Chen Menglei ed., *Gujin tushu jicheng*, 67:700.
religious and the bureaucratic elites. By planting the peony, the monks attracted potential patrons to their temples. In other words, they provided sensual entertainment to promote a religion which purportedly negates the phenomenal world. The potential contradiction begged doctrinal justification. The Chan master Nanquan Puyuan 南泉普願 (748-834) reportedly pointed to a cluster of peony in his court and said: “Look at this flower – just like a dream!” The action of planting the peony in his court was interpreted as deliberate negation. The peony became a synecdoche of the beautifully illusory world.

This Buddhist device of justification was similarly used by Su Shi. In the same spring when he wrote his preface, the monks of Jixiang Temple requested Su to name their newly built tower. Su named the tower “Observing the Emptiness” (guankong 觀空) and wrote a poem on this occasion. His moral rage against the peony suddenly evaporated. He defended the challenge of the beauty by denying its agency, suggesting that the danger of the flower came totally from within the perceiving subject.

過眼榮枯電與風  It blossoms and sheds in a blink of an eye like lightning or a gust of wind;

久長哪得似花紅  What can be as long-lasting as the bright red of these blossoms?

上人宴坐觀空閣  The Superior sits at rest in the Tower of Observing the Emptiness;

觀色觀空色即空  He observes the beauty, as if observing the emptiness, since beauty is empty.  

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73 See Fozu tongji 佛祖統紀, T no.2035, 49:385b.

74 Su Shi, “Jixiang si seng qiu ge ming” 吉祥寺僧求閣名, SSSJ, 7: 331.
The Buddhist term *se* (Skt. *rūpa*, “form/phenomenon”) literally means in Chinese “color,” “beauty,” or “sensual pleasure.” Since this tower was likely built to overview the peony garden, the word *se* played on its multivalence, referring at once to the bright colors of the peony, its sensual appearance, and the illusory form that it symbolized. The peony thus challenged the monastic gardeners, whose time and effort were spent in cultivating flowers instead of in religious practice, as well as the elite patrons, who might remember the ancient warning that the lust for sensual pleasure endangered one’s cultivation of virtue.75 Su Shi, however, dissolved such danger by evoking the nonduality principle provided by the *Diamond Sūtra*.76 Exactly because of its temptation, the peony tests the tranquility of the mind of the observer. The enlightened one should see the beauty as no different from emptiness (Ch. *Kong* 空; Skt. *śūnyatā*).

This clever rhetoric, however, also shows that the peony could not avoid falling mute when absorbed into a system of cultural significance. That is, it did not fit into any discourse system which could justify its *raison-d’être*. The sensual beauty had to be either reproached, when its own agency was taken into account, or affirmed provisionally for its negation.

The third way to accommodate the beauty of the peony was nostalgia. The same winter, Su Shi visited Jixiang Temple twice, alone. To his own amusement he asked himself: “Whoever else is like Master Su, who, not in the season of blossoms, would come alone?” 何人更似蘇夫

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75 See *Analects*, 1.3, 1.7, 9.18.

76 “…Form does not differ from emptiness, and emptiness does not differ from form” 色不異空空不異色; see Xuanzang 玄奘 trans., *Boreboluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經, T no.251, 8:849c.
The righteous censor now betrayed himself as the most faithful lover, who came to the peony’s company when her beauty had foregone and forgotten. After Su Shi left Hangzhou, the peony was commemorated time and again as a symbol of his carefree younger self. He watched the peony blossoming in a Buddhist temple in Changzhou in the spring of 1074, and one year later, again in an old temple in Mizhou. On either occasion, what he wrote about was not the blossoms in front of him, but the peony that he experienced in the irrevocably bygone spring – the thousand-leaf peony blooming in the Jixiang Temple, scarlet and purple kindling the Tower of Observing the Emptiness. Every new enjoyment eternalized this memory. Nostalgia distanced the sensual allure of the peony – an aesthetic distance essential for the generation of meaning.

On the other hand, if the immediate sensual experience could only be justified in nostalgia, in Su’s eyes it never acquired legitimacy in its own right. Su Shi had always resisted the immediate presence of the peony. He constantly distanced himself through moral reprimand, through philosophical negation, and through nostalgia. This gesture of detachment cast the author as an “outsider” to the crowd that heartily enjoyed the sensual stimulation of the peony. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the pursuit of cultural distinction is an essential factor influencing the

77 Su Shi, “Dongzhi ri du you Jixiang si” 冬至日獨遊吉祥寺, SSSJ, 8:394. His next visit is recorded in: “Hou shiyu ri fu zhi” 後十餘日復至, SSSJ, 8:395.

78 See four poems in SSSJ, 11:556-7.


80 The “thousand-leaf” peony (qianye mudan 千葉牡丹) was a breed of the highest rank, which had multiple layers of petals.

81 Su Shi, “Xi hua;” and “Changzhou Taiping si guan mudan” 常州太平寺觀牡丹, SSSJ, 11:556.
aesthetics of the elite class. In the case of the peony, its cult started with the elites. When its
vogue spread through all strata of the society, however, the cultural elites felt obliged to
distinguish themselves, if not in action, then at least in discourse. The poet might have immersed
himself like everyone else in his immediate aesthetic experience, but to find meaning in such
experience, he must detach himself from that immediacy through reason or poetic convention.
The immersion in and the detachment from aesthetic immediacy may happen almost
simultaneously, driven by an instinctive need of the poet to understand, to interpret, and to
versify.

When Su Shi’s light-hearted nostalgia of Hangzhou was tarnished by harsher memories,
the sensual pleasure that it commemorated could no longer be evoked without pangs of heart.
Since his exile to Huangzhou, the peony with its innocent sensuality disappeared from his poetry.
When he returned to Hangzhou in the year 1090, he wrote instead dozens of poems eulogizing
the plum on the Hill of Solitude, a local pride almost unmentioned during his previous stay.

The Plum: Homely in the Wilds

For those familiar with Chinese painting and poetry, the plum commonly conjures up an image
of blooming in isolation when the winter cedes to the spring, stoically holding against natural
enmities like storm, sleet, or snow. Yet this image has only been standardized since the Song
Dynasty. From the Book of Odes to the poetry of the Six Dynasties, the plum had been mainly
associated with innocent, youthful female beauty. For instance, in the ode “Dropping are the
Fruits from the Plum Tree” (Biaoyoumei 標有梅, Mao 20), the falling plum fruit is compared to

82 See Bourdieu (1984), 1-3, 18-44, and passim.
a girl in the proper age of marriage. The same could be observed in Six Dynasties poetry, where the plum blossoms conventionally symbolized lovely young women, waiting to be plucked by the earliest puff of spring wind.

In Tang poetry, around eighty percent of the poems on the plum came after the ninth century. Possibly influenced by the *zeitgeist* of nostalgia, compared with poetry of the previous periods, a Late Tang poet would increasingly contextualize his aesthetic experience of the plum as a meaningful event happened at a particular moment of his past. The blossoms and the younger poet were fused into a single nostalgic symbol, evoking emotional responses from the audience. Two poems on the plum may illustrate this point.

The Liang Dynasty poet He Xun 何遜 (469-519) described an early blossoming plum tree in the following terms:

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銜霜當路發
映雪擬寒開
枝橫卻月觀
花繞凌風臺
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Bearing the frost, it bursts into flowers by the roadside.
It reflects upon the snow and blooms against the chill.
Many branches lean by the Temple of Half Moon;
And blossoms circle around the Terrace of Riding the Wind.85

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84 Thus Wu Jun 吳均 (469-520) in a poem on the plum (*Meihua shi* 梅花詩) declared: “The nature of the plum is originally frivolous” 梅性本輕蕩; see Lu Qinli 邱欽立, *Xianqin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (hereafter *XQHW*), Liang 11:1751. Different from the general image of the plum through the Six Dynasties but closer to that of the Song is Bao Zhao’s *Meihualuo* 梅花落; see Huang Jie 黃節, *Bao Canjun shizhu* 郭參軍詩注, 2:66. The poem praises the integrity and perseverance of the plum, clearly identifying it with the author.
In contrast, Bo Juyi, when he remembered the plum blossoms he saw in Hangzhou, wrote:

三年閒悶在余杭  Three years of idle boredom in Hangzhou -
曾為梅花醉幾場  How many times did I get drunk for the plum?
伍相廟邊繁似雪  By the Temple of Prime Minister Wu, exuberant like snow;
孤山園裡麗如妝  In the Garden of Mount Solitude, beautiful like dressed-up girls.\(^{86}\)

Admittedly, selecting these two poems out of hundreds of others is arbitrary. Nevertheless, they appear to represent two distinctive modes of description. He Xun’s plum has a timeless beauty. Despite the names of buildings mentioned in the poem, the plum is sketched as a universal image which could have bloomed anytime, anywhere. Bo Juyi’s plum, however, was associated to himself, and specifically, to his younger self who was the merrymaking magistrate in Hangzhou. Its long-lasting appeal comes from the empathy of the reader with the poet whose aging and nostalgia is universal. The emphasis has been shifted from the flower to the person.

With the poetry and legend of Lin Bu 林逋 (967-1028), an early Song recluse in Hangzhou, the plum was increasingly used a sign of the poet as a righteous gentleman. Lin was said to have repeatedly declined invitations of the court, remained in celibacy, and claimed the

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\(^{85}\) He Xun, “Yong zaomei shi” 詠早梅詩, XQHW, Liang9:1699-1700.

\(^{86}\) Bo Juyi, “Yi Hangzhou meihua yin xu jiuyou ji Xiao Xielü” 憶杭州梅花因敘舊遊寄蕭協律, Bo Juyi ji, 23:522.
plum as his wife and cranes as his children. In his most celebrated poem on the plum, Lin Bu compares the plum to a secluded noble lady who is a kindred spirit of him, a recluse.

眾芳搖落獨暄妍  Other flowers are scattered and fallen; you alone, warm and shining,
佔盡風情向小園  Command all that is charming, here in the little garden.
疏影横斜水清淺  Sparse branches slant across clear and shallow waters;
暗香浮動月黃昏  Secret scent drifts through a moon-lit dusk.
霜禽欲下先偷眼  Preparing to fly down, frosty birds first steal a glance;
粉蝶如知合斷魂  Powdery butterflies, if they knew, would break their hearts!
幸有微吟可相狎  Lucky am I to coax you with songs in a soft voice,
不須檀板共金樽  No need for sandalwood clappers or wine cups of gold.

Held as the finest example of all poems on the plum by later Song poets, Lin’s verse contributed to establishing a cultural image of the plum as an “outsider” and a recluse of the flora kingdom.

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87 As recorded by Shen Gua; See Hu Daojing 胡道静, Mengxi bitan jiaozheng 夢溪筆談校證, 10:402.
88 Lin Bu, “Shanyuan xiaomei” 山園小梅, QSS, 106: 1217-8. My translation has consulted Burton Watson’s in Yoshikawa (1967), 53-54, with some revisions, most notably in the penultimate line: while Watson understands the lucky subject to be the plum (“You’re in luck – here’s a soft voice to coax you with songs”), I understand it to be the poet himself.
89 Song brush records have mentioned at least Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, and Wang Zhifang 王直方 (1069-1109) among the admirers of Lin Bu’s poetry on the plum; see Chen Jingyi 陳景沂, Quan fang bei zu 全芳
As Yoshikawa Kōjirō aptly points out, with the generalization of the centralized education and examination system, by the mid-eleventh century, men who like Lin Bu wrote poetry but remained private citizens all their lives were already rare to find.\(^90\) A plum blossoming among the wilds does not benefit from the warmth of the sun – symbol of the imperial favor. The harsh natural surroundings, moreover, underlined the perseverance of the plum. Thus it was no surprise that most of Su’s plum poems were written after 1079, the year when he was imprisoned and persecuted at Crow Terrace, his writing censored for sarcastic criticism denouncing reformative policies. For the exiled poet, the plum became an analogy of his self, an outcast from the court who sought to survive in the harsh “wilds.”

Four months after his imprisonment at Crow Terrace, a shattered Su was exiled to Huangzhou. On his way he encountered a fully blossoming plum tree among ice and snow in a deep valley. It touched Su for its very forlorn beauty.

春來幽谷水潺潺  As spring arrived, water tinkled in the secluded valley;

的皪梅花草棘間  Twinkling like jewels, plum blossoms shone among thorny bushes.

一夜東風吹石裂  Through a whole night, the blowing east wind cracked the rocks;

半隨飛雪渡關山  Half of the blossoms, following the snow flakes, flew across Mt. Fortress.

備祖, 1:2-3. The Southern Song lyric song writer Jiang Kui 姜夔 (1155?-1221) had created two lyric titles, “Anxiang” 暗香 and “Shuying” 疏影 in terms borrowed from Lin Bu’s poem. These lyric titles were used exclusively for songs on the plum. See Xia Chengtao 夏承燾, *Jiang Baishi ci biannian jianjiao* 姜白石詞編年箋校, 48.

\(^90\) Yoshikawa (1967), 83.
Although the plum was rooted fast to its spot in a deep valley, Su depicted it in a series of rapid movements, flying or flowing, tossed by natural forces – just like him, a traveler chased by destiny. Not without a touch of narcissism, he projected his desired self onto the secluded plum, which blossomed unappreciated in the early spring chill, fought with natural adversities, and displayed admirable heroism.

In Huangzhou, Su Shi practiced Buddhist meditation and started farming on the East Slope. The next winter, when he felt more in control over his troubled self, he wrote again on a plum tree blossoming by the roadside. This poem depicts that when even the fragrant orchid and the persevering chrysanthemum were destroyed in the coldness, a string of aroma resurrected the plum on the mountain ridge. 

Similarly identifying the poet to the plum, this poem showed a sense of equanimity facing animosity and uncertainty.

Su Shi was a persecuted exile, not a recluse. Yet he constantly projected himself into the cultural models set up by recluses like Tao Qian and Lin Bu. Such rhetoric eased his adaptation.

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to the hardships, since banishment was by force, while reclusion was by choice. His redefinition of identity through the model of Lin Bu can be seen in the following poem on the plum, written at the end of 1083, during the last days of his Huangzhou exile.93

西湖處士骨應槁 The recluse by the West Lake, your bones shall be withered now;
只有此詩君壓倒 But this single poem alone still overwhelms!
東坡先生心已灰 The heart of Master Dongpo has turned to ashes;
為愛君詩被花惱 Yet for the love of your poem, it is disturbed by the beauty of flowers.94
多情立馬待黃昏 Sentimentally I halt my horse, waiting for the dusk;
殘雪消遲月出早 The remnant snow lingers unmelted; the moon appears early.
江頭千樹春欲暗 A thousand plum trees by the river, a spring day at dusk;
竹外一枝斜更好 Lovelier is a single branch slanting beyond the bamboo grove.
孤山山下醉眠處 Where I once slept drunken below the Hill of Solitude,
點綴裙腰紛不掃 The petals peppered my garment without being swept away.
萬里春隨逐客來 Ten thousand li, the spring follows the exile;
十年花送佳人老 Ten years, the flowers have accompanied the beauty aging.

93 Su Shi, “He Qin Taixu ‘Meihua’” 和秦太虛梅花, SSSJ, 22:1184-5. Taixu is Qin Guan’s style name.

94 Reference to Du Fu’s 杜甫 line: “I am incessantly disturbed by the riverside flowers” 江上被花惱不徹, see “Jiangpan dubu xunhua qi jueju” 江畔獨步尋花七絶句, no.1, in Qiu Zhao’ao, 仇兆鰲, Du shi xiang zhu 杜詩詳注, 10:817.
去年花開我已病  When the plum blossomed last year, I was already sick;
今年對花還草草  This year when I do face the flowers, my spirits are still low.
不如風雨卷春歸  Better let the wind and rains wrap up the spring, take it away;
收拾餘香還畀昊  And clear out the rest of the fragrance, leave it in the hands of heaven!95

Su Shi cursed Lin Bu for leaving such a wonderful poem that late-comers were all doomed to live in his shadow. He referred to Du Fu when complaining to be “disturbed by the flowers.” But unlike Du Fu, who was disturbed by the flowers in front of his eyes, Su Shi’s disturbance was mediated by Lin Bu’s poem on the plum. He sought to reenact Lin’s poem by going out and waiting for the dusk, since Lin’s plum is set in dusk. Between Lin Bu’s Hill of Solitude and Su Shi’s East Slope, there was the distance of space and time. Like Bo Juyi, Su Shi recalled his days in Hangzhou and lamented for his increasing age and declining health. Sentimental pursuit or lament vainly disturbed his “ash-like” heart. In the end he proposed a solution: let heaven take the flowers away, so that the poet could regain perfect mental equanimity, free of the fragrant itch. The final reference to the classics conveys a sense of tranquility associated with antiquity.

Lin Bu’s plum represented a private citizen whose virtue does not serve an imperial cause. The Vice Governor of Hangzhou falling asleep below the Hill of Solitude did not find his

95 “Bihao” 畀昊 is a portmanteau from the phrase “tou bi youhao” 投畀有昊, i.e. leave it to the hands of Heaven; see “Xiangbo” 坊伯 (Mao 200), Maoshi zhengyi, 12.3:188, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 456.
identification with this role model. Only a decade later in Huangzhou, as an exile, his awoken love for the plum confirms this transformation of identity.

The poet and the plum formed an ongoing conversation. The plum had faithfully accompanied the aging poet, without, however, losing its own timeless youth. The erudite references to history increased the contrast between botanic and human lives, since the blossoming of the plum remained the same, while those fellow poets who once enjoyed a similar sight were long foregone. Nature appeared both sympathetic and cruel. Its permanence challenged the poet’s self-identification: when the poet compared his aging to the shedding of flowers in the wind and rain, was he not deluded by an optical illusion, oblivious to the fact that the flowers would blossom again, while his youth was forever bygone?

Since his Huangzhou exile, Su Shi championed the plum over all other flowers. Of the many poems on the plum he wrote since, the most renowned was a series of three plum poems written in the winter of 1094 on his way of banishment to Huizhou. Time and space collapsed when the poet saw, standing in the far south, a physical resemblance of the plum that had accompanied his days in Huangzhou. Spiritually, he had come to the final stage of his life when he understood himself more in terms of a private citizen, not partaking of the imperial grace. The plum therefore became an apt symbol of his self. In all three poems, the plum presented itself to the poet in his dreams, incarnated as a goddess and reminding him of a higher existential realm. These poems share the same set of rhymes, and the penultimate couplets all end with yan

96 For more on this issue, see Chapter Five and Six.
妙意有在終無言  The subtle message [of the incarnated plum] lies in her not speaking.97

鸚能歌舞花能言  Birds can sing or dance and flowers can speak.98

惜花未忍都無言  Cherishing the flowers, I cannot help but to speak.99

The three lines, taken together, suggest yet another syllogism: the flower does not speak; the flower speaks; and in the end, it was the poet who could not help speaking for the flower and for himself.

Su Shi’s last poem on the plum was written during his return journey from Hainan Island. This plum tree, standing on a mountain ridge, had already passed its prime of blossom. The poet downplayed the emotions of return and reencounter. Instead, he wrote in anti-climactic plainness:

梅花開盡百花開  The plum has shed; now hundreds of flowers are blossoming.

過盡行人君不來  All the travelers were gone, but the mister did not return.100

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100 Su Shi, “Zeng lingshang mei” 贈嶺上梅, _SSSJ_, 45:2424.
In this poem, the plum becomes a symbol of loyalty and longing, carrying moreover the poet’s memories of his past journey. Su Shi did not manage to see the plum blossoming again. In the seventh month of that year (1101), Su Shi passed away in Changzhou.

The association of the plum with Su Shi’s exiles reveals a political dimension in its symbolism. For Su Shi, the plum stands both in and beyond the human realm. It is independent of humans, blossoms not for anyone’s appreciation, and becomes one’s companion only if one would venture into its territory amongst the vast wintry wilds. This image of the plum symbolizes the ideal relationship of a literatus to the court. He should be self-sufficient and subject to the ruler only when the ruler yields to his lofty standards. Like the poet who truly understands the plum, the ruler should understand the literatus in the vocabulary of companionship. Needless to say, this was only an ideal. The plum was often found planted in gardens, and the literatus could hardly quit from service, regardless when he was in or out of the court. Su Shi, a political convict banished into the southern landscape, was longing to be free, like a plum tree freestanding in the wilds. He never managed, however, to escape the court-centered political magnetic field, even when he was an outcast away from this center. Nor could he ever return, either to his hometown beneath Mt. Emei or to his natural state of being, unaltered by education or experience. A tiny cry for the freedom lost was heard, when the independent plum replaced the dependent peony to become literati’s aesthetic ideal.

Coda

The German philosopher Martin Seel proposes that the aesthetic engagement with nature consists of three aspects: the nature’s “dynamic independence,” its “meaningful perceptibility,” and its
CHAPTER THREE

presence as a living world.\textsuperscript{101} This syllogism acknowledges both the externality of nature to aesthetic observation and the legitimacy of aesthetics to absorb nature into our living world. To replace the traditional perception of “natural beauty” as either the archetype or the afterimage of art, he proposes an aesthetics that deals with the reasons behind our feelings toward nature.\textsuperscript{102} Notably, Seel has shifted the paradigmatic relationship from “nature-art” to “nature-human.”

This paradigmatic shift helps to clarify much confusion in the aesthetics of nature. In Su Shi’s connoisseurship discourse, an insentient object behaves \textit{as if} it is sentient. This “as if,” as argued in the first chapter, generates aesthetic resemblance. The plants are represented as having personality and emotion, engaging in dialogues with humans, and being appraised for their respective moral character. At the same time, the poet clearly knows that all is his imagination, and the objects \textit{per se} remain beyond language. Yet their externality is again endowed with meaning, representing the limit of representations. Flowers now understand language in its sound as well as in its silence. Arguably, nature could become the proper object of aesthetics not only because it is beautiful – the sensuality of the peony, for instance, forestalls interpretation – but more so because it is meaningful, even in its very resistance to meaning.

At the same time, these natural objects are frequently anthropomorphized. The independence and spontaneity of nature in its linguistic representation is analogous to that of man. In traditional Chinese characterology, a man who engages with society and tries to transform it is admirable; yet a man who disengages from society and leaves it alone is equally,

\textsuperscript{101} Seel (1991), 20-21.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, 9.
if not more, admirable for his moral stature.\textsuperscript{103} An aestheticized object becomes useless, just like a man who chooses to disengage. As a result, the aesthetics of nature becomes deeply ethical.

Meanwhile, whether an object is natural, useful, or aesthetic depends solely on the viewer’s attitude. The boundaries separating these realms are artificial as well as ideological – nature itself is a continuous realm unbroken by the use of it. As Martin Seel puts it, “nature remains a territory of ‘the unconstructed’ (\textit{des Nicht-Gemachten}).”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{103} For more on the Chinese hermit tradition, see Li Chi (1962/63); Vervoorn (1990); Berkowitz (1994), (2000).

\textsuperscript{104} Seel (1991), 21.
As a poet and connoisseur, Su Shi had composed around thirty inscriptions on inkstones. He took particular pride in an inscription on a Dragon Tail Inkstone 龍尾硯.\(^1\) It follows a prototypical order, beginning with a technical account of the stone’s utilitarian value, proceeding to its aesthetic features, and culminating in how it symbolizes human virtues.

Unadorned and weighty, it cannot follow man south or north at his will.\(^2\)

Su Shi often attributed to inkstones and rocks character, morality, desire, and agency. This chapter will examine the anthropocentric rhetoric on objects, its significance, its agenda, and its function in the commodification of rocks. As evident in this inscription, the inkstone is

\(^1\) It was quoted by him repeatedly, as in “Shu yan (zeng Duan Yu)” 書硯 (贈段瑀), SSWJ, 70:2237-8; and “Shu Tanxiu Longwei yan” 書曇秀龍尾硯, SSWJ, 70:2241-2.

\(^2\) Su Shi, “Kong Yifu Longwei yan ming” 孔毅甫龍尾硯銘, SSWJ, 19:549.
anthropomorphized into a literatus, and its material features are interpreted as symbolisms of his virtues. The Dragon Tail Inkstone was one of the most valued inkstones in the Song Dynasty. As Su Shi explained elsewhere, when an inkstone has an unglazed surface, it abrades the brush; otherwise it is too slippery for the inkcake ground upon it to produce ink. Kong’s inkstone achieved a rare balance. The unpolished appearance (“clawed-skin”) of the inkstone forms a sharp contrast with its refined inner quality. Jinsheng 金聲, which suggests that its echo is like a bronze bell, literally also means “golden repute.” Yude 玉德, which describes the fine quality of the rock, could also eulogize the lofty virtues of a gentleman (junzi 君子). According to the Book of Rites, a gentleman should wear jade for all occasions, because jade is a symbol of virtue.

These shared metaphors for the virtues of an inkstone and of a gentleman helped to establish the analogy between them. An inkstone is enduring, literally capable of “viewing” people over generations. The phrase “to view people” (yueren 閲人) imagines the inkstone as an experienced judge of characters – the objects being “viewed” must be displayed, with nothing to hide from the viewer. A gentleman cannot literally “view” people over generations, but if he has studied history, he will be able to apply his knowledge about antiquity to contemporary affairs. Lastly, the ponderousness of an inkstone is compared to the steadiness of a gentleman. However, he who wants to carry the inkstone with him must be its owner; he who demands the gentleman to change his mind must have predominant power. The last line suggests that the inkstone’s relationship to its owner is a metaphor for the literatus’ relationship to political power.

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4 See Sun Xidan 孫希旦, Liji jijie 禮記集解, 13B:820-2.
Su Shi declared himself a man who loved rocks. Throughout his life, he had collected inkstones, garden rocks, and sometimes simply pebbles, through his life, he had collected among other stony objects. For him, this love was not just the source of private delight, but the subject of public display. He confessed his predilection in poems, accounts, inscriptions, letters, and brush notes. Idiosyncratic though it seemed, at his time, interest in stones was fairly conventional. There had been many writers who professed their love of rocks since the 9th century, when inkstones and garden rocks rose from purely useful or decorative objects to collector’s items. It has been argued that compared to earlier centuries, a new “aesthetics of rocks” distinguished the appreciation of rocks since mid-Tang, in terms of the rock fanciers’ possession, obsession, and self-expression. Accompanying this aesthetic turn was a moral uneasiness about the heavy burdens imposed on the populace, for instance, when labors were drafted to obtain and transport the Tai Lake rocks over long distance into fanciful gardens, or when human lives were lost in the process of fetching precious inkstones.

For Su Shi, however, it was a type of metaphysical danger which was particularly grave – he understood material ownership as a form of slavery by “things” (wu 物). As discussed in Chapter One, in Confucian and Buddhist traditions, the “thing” was often treated as a threat to one’s mental freedom. The assumption was that the care toward one’s material possession made his mind less free, thus the owner seemed to become a slave. As to be discussed later in the poetry exchange concerning the Qiuchi 仇池 rock, however, Su Shi argued that one should not force himself to discard things, because such deliberation would equally hamper the spontaneous

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5 See, for instance, “the marble pit” episode related in Chapter Three.

6 Xiaoshan Yang (2003), 98.

7 Also noted by Xiaoshan Yang (2003), 190.
expression of his innate nature. The equilibrium of mind should be a fine balance between craving and denying.

Su’s warning was related to yet another kind of anxiety which he voiced through the medium of personified stones. The appropriation of natural stones symbolized the appropriation of human nature. It is true that all significations about objects are external to them, since objects exist in absolute immediacy, regardless of the human treatments of them. From an anthropocentric perspective, however, some objects which are put to human services are “appropriated” from nature. Those remaining in their natural states are in contrast “spontaneous,” namely, not belonging to any human system. In this sense, the processing of stones into various products was analogous to a literatus being educated, cultivated, and institutionalized. Similarly, if a stone was projected as having abandoned its freedom in nature for the comfort and luxury in the literatus’ household, this was an analogy to the poet-collector’s own existence, who, like a stone, was collected and tossed about by the imperial court. Thus, when the collector let the stone argue for its choice to enter the human realm, he was justifying his choice to enter social networks and political sphere. And when he lauded a stone for being “useless” and “spontaneous,” he might be expressing a secret desire to disengage from institutionalizing forces.

The connoisseur literature on stones had multiple agendas. It showed the collector’s interest and scholarship. It could, as argued above, help to voice his concerns. It was also a discreet form of self-advertisement. When a collector compared a stone to a literatus of lofty morality and then identified himself with the stone, he was trying to persuade his audience to accept his self portrait.

On the other hand, the anthropomorphosis of the stone also redefined his possession. Personifying a rock as an independent human agent problematized the ownership of the rock.
Thus the rhetoric of friendship was employed to project the owner as a host accommodating a friend (the rock), instead of a possessor of luxury. He could contend that the rock had chosen his house out of its own will; it was there not because of its owner’s money or power, but because of his understanding of the stone’s true essence.

Paradoxically, when a rock was portrayed as a free agent, like a friend, and not for sale, its market value rose. Reputation was the priciest asset of a collector’s item. The more Su Shi wrote about an inkstone or a garden rock, the higher it was virtually priced. Though reality might differ, however, ideally the literatus’ economy was a market place without money. As represented in literary accounts, these objects usually changed their ownership through gift exchange or barter. Every transaction engaged a certain amount of emotions from both parties and contributed to the perpetuation of social relations.

Inkstones and garden rocks are discussed here as the primary cult objects featured in Su Shi’s literature. A study on inkstone connoisseurship in particular would disclose the concern and aesthetics of the cultural elites, since, unlike garden rocks which were collected also by rich merchants, precious inkstones were a status symbol unique to the literatus class.

**The Aestheticization of Inkstone**

As one of the most ancient of writing paraphernalia, inkstones were increasingly aestheticized through the Song as the subject of collection and connoisseurship. To be precise, an inkstone is only one type of the inkstab, which is a slightly concaved utensil made of stone, clay, metal, jade, or lacquerware, against the surface of which an inkcake could be ground to produce ink. Its invention was closely associated with that of ink and brush among Chinese essential writing
appurtenance. The early samples of inkstabs were usually a plain piece of stone disk, discovered in Qin archaeological sites and might have been in use since earlier antiquity. Embellished inkstabs were found since Western Han, showing the increasing importance of their aesthetic appearance aside from instrumentality.

Despite its early use, inkstab did not appear in written documents until Ban Gu’s (32-92) *Hanshu* 漢書 [History of the Han], where it is written as *yán* 研 (usually as a verb, “to grind”) instead of the later standard form *yàn* 研. A few decades later, the standard form *yàn* appeared in Xu Shen’s (67-148) *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [An Explication of Written Characters], glossed as “a smooth piece of rock” (*shihua* 石滑). Another lexicon at the end of Eastern Han, *Shiming* 釋名 [Expounding the Names], simply glossed it as its homonymic variant *yán*, namely, “to grind ink and make it blend into water.” The first dictionary entry gives a succinct description of its surface, while the second entry provides an account of its function. Outside of dictionaries, the first appearance of *yàn* was in Xun Yue’s (148-209) *Qian Han ji* 前漢紀 [Record of the Former Han], where Emperor Xuan 宣帝 (91-49 BCE; r. 74-49 BCE) is said to have “shared the inkstab and mat and read books” 同硯席讀書 with a fellow student.

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8 See Wang Daiwen et al. (1998), XII-XVII.
9 See Zheng Shaozong (1964).
10 *Yan1* appears once in the biography of Xue Xuan 薛宣: “[Xuan] has devised plans even on things as trivial as budget, expenditure, brushes, and inkstabs” 下至財用筆研皆設方略; Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書, 53:3391.
11 Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, 453.
Zhang Pengzu 張彭祖.\textsuperscript{13} Tellingly, Ban Gu’s *Hanshu*, upon which Xun’s work was based, told this instance differently as that they “shared the same mat and studied books” 同席研書.\textsuperscript{14} Obviously, Xun Yue had shifted the sequence of *xi* ("mat") and *yǎn*, replaced the verb *yǎn* with its homophonic noun *yàn*, and added *du* (“to read”) before “books.” This expression might have become a standard phrase for study camaraderie by Xun Yue’s time. It shows the increasing attention paid to inkstabs as a symbol of student life.

These early records on inkstabs do not show much interest in their aesthetic features. It remained largely this case through the Six Dynasties. In the preface to *Yutai xinyong 玉臺新詠* [*New Songs of the Jade Terrace*], a collection of court poetry edited in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, the editor Xu Ling 徐陵 (507-583) described his ideal reader as a highly educated beauty who “never departs for a second with her glazed-glass inkstab case,” among other refined objects.\textsuperscript{15} The aesthetic gaze here is cast toward the beautiful inkstab case, not the inkstab itself. Only in Tang poetry, instabs, particularly those made of stone, began to appear as aesthetic objects. Poems were written to describe in detail their appearance, and they were often presented as gifts.\textsuperscript{16} They were “aestheticized,” namely their aesthetic features were given increasing importance, independent to their utilitarian value. As a consequence of aestheticization, its connoisseurship

\textsuperscript{13} Xun Yue 荀悅, *Qian Han ji* 前漢紀, 18:15.

\textsuperscript{14} Ban Gu, “Zhang Tang zhuan” 張湯傳, *Hanshu*, 59: 2651. Zhang Tang 張湯 (?-115 BCE) was Pengzu’s prominent grandfather, thus Pengzu’s story was related as an extension to his biography.

\textsuperscript{15} Wu Zhaoyi 吳兆宜 et al., *Yutai xinyong jianzhu 玉臺新詠箋注*, 12.

was established. The first record of inkstones was among *Wenfang sipu* [Four Records on Studio Paraphernalia], composed by the early Song scholar Su Yijian 蘇易簡 (958-996).

Su’s pioneering work was soon followed by a short *Yan pu* 砚譜 [Record of Inkstones] by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), and later, the more extensive *Yan shi* 砚史 [History of Inkstones] by Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107).

Connoisseur literature described, appraised, and ranked inkstones. In Ouyang’s record, the utilitarian criterion, namely the facility of the inkstone in grinding the inkcake to produce ink, is still primary in judging its value.\(^\text{17}\) In comparison, Mi Fu’s record shows a combination of criteria at play, including the utilitarian, the aesthetic, and the mercantile. It also shows naturalistic interests in enumerating the quality and appearance of inkstones, taxonomizing them according to quarries and even to various pits in the same quarry. Mi Fu’s scholarly undertaking was followed by Southern Song authors like Li Zhiyan 李之彥 (d.u.), Ye Yue 葉樾 (d.u.), and Hong Shi 洪適 (1117-1184), among others. It suggests that inkstone connoisseurship was eventually specialized and elevated to a field of scholarly expertise.

Along with its aestheticization, rock became the predominant material to make an ink slab. Su Yijian’s record has a passage on making Fine Clay Inkst lab澄泥硯, ranked together with three other kinds of inkstones as the most reputed inkstabs under the Tang.\(^\text{18}\) Half a century later, Ouyang Xiu still regarded the Guozhou (now Xin’an, Henan Province) Fine Clay Inkstab as the champion of all inkstabs, since virtually all tiles were better than stone in producing ink (which

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\(^\text{17}\) Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Yan pu* 砚譜, in *Ouyang Xiu quanji*, 75:1094.

is easy to understand because of the tile’s porous surface). He reported that by his own time, the technique of producing Fine Clay Inkstab was however already lost.\(^\text{19}\)

The reason was that perhaps for a calligrapher, materiality of the writing tool was equally important as its practicality. In Sturman’s fine phraseology, “[t]he devoted calligrapher handles the inkstone – washes it, grinds the ink in it – and is rewarded with an awakening of the senses in preparation to writing.”\(^\text{20}\) The smooth and patterned rock simply gives a tactile pleasure unmatched by clay. Despite all the carving and decoration, an inkstone appears to be the product of minimal human craft, preserving the hue, weight, sound, and texture of the natural stone, appealing to the visual, aural, and tactile faculties.

Furthermore, as collectibles, inkstones are unique. As Su Shi bemoaned in an account on the Stone Powder Inkstab 石末硯, a kind of tile inkstab from Qingzhou (in modern Shandong Province), although this inkstab was good and was highly esteemed in the Tang, it was unfortunately too easy to acquire; the same ceramic could be made into many other utensils, so it was not the proper material for inkstabs.\(^\text{21}\) In contrast, he praised stone as “authentic material” showing “its true nature.” Evidently, inkstone was prized by Su for its individuality and authenticity, displaying rather than hiding its natural materiality. Inkstabs of man-made materials are reproducible, while natural rocks are limited. Once inkstabs become collector’s items, those of limited accessibility would have higher monetary value than inexhaustibly accessible ones. For instance, the authentic Duan rock 端石 (from the Duan County, now Zhaoqing, Zhejiang

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\(^{19}\) Ouyang Xiu, *Yan pu*, 75:1095. The later revived Fine Clay Inkstone presumably used a different formula; see Wang Daiwen et al. (1998), IX-X.

\(^{20}\) Sturman (1997), 197.

Province) had become rare in the Song. The Red Thread rock 紅絲石 (from Qingzhou), the most reputed material under the Tang, had already been exhausted by then.\(^{22}\) Even more so, some finest rocks came from deep water caves, so that it sometimes risked lives to acquire.\(^{23}\) All these factors limited the availability of good inkstones and thus added to their value. Besides, every rock differs from another rock, calling for distinctive workmanship, thus every good inkstone is unique. Any connoisseur worth his salt shall not confuse it with another stone.

The anxiety over possession rose together with aestheticization. A connoisseur would now accumulate dozens or hundreds of inkstones, more than he would ever use. In addition to the literatus’ concern over his attachment to things, the moral status of the thing itself also begged legitimation. Despite their actual “usefulness” to a literatus, the surplus of inkstones threatened to reduce them to “useless” or “superfluous” things (zhàngwu 長物).\(^{24}\) In a society ideologically dominated by the economic principle of austerity, their redundancy raised a questionable ethical standard. The term “superfluous thing” comes from an anecdote on Wang Gong 王恭 (?-398) in Shishuo xinyu 世說新語 [A New Account of Tales of the World]. When Wang Gong returned from his tenure in Kuaiji (now Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province), he brought back a beautiful bamboo mat. His clansman Wang Chen 王忱 (?-392) took fancy of it. Thinking that Gong should have plenty of them, Chen asked for the mat. Gong gave it to him immediately. To Chen’s surprise, he later found Gong sitting on a straw mat. Asked why, Gong replied that he never accumulated “superfluous things.”\(^{25}\) Wang Gong’s much admired answer suggests that

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\(^{22}\) Wang Daiwen et al. (1998), III-IV.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., V.


\(^{25}\) See Xu Zhen’e 徐震堮, Shishuo xinyu jiaojian 世說新語校箋, 1:27.
acquisition of things should not exceed necessity. More than that, the rest would either be hoarded away in idleness or be sent as presents. In the latter case, the gift-sender enters a social network, anticipating immediate or future reciprocations from the gift recipients. As Mary Douglas puts in the foreword to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*:

> [E]ach gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. […] The system is quite simple: just the rule that every gift has to be returned in some specified way sets up *a perpetual cycle of exchanges* within and between generations [my own italic]. 26

Marcel Mauss argues that the Chinese civilization “acknowledges the indissoluble link that binds everything to its original owner. […] Through the thing passes on, even if it is consumable, the alliance that has been contracted is no momentary phenomenon, and the contracting parties are deemed to be in a state of perpetual dependence towards one another.” 27 The act of sending gift proves the giver not independent of his society, but enmeshed in a “perpetual cycle of exchanges.” Rejecting “superfluous things” in contrast shows one’s economic austerity as well as self-sufficiency.

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26 Mary Dougler, “Foreword: No Free Gifts,” in Mauss (1990), viii.

27 *Ibid*, 63-64.
The Rivalry of the Dragon and the Phoenix

Song connoisseurs often attempted to rank inkstones. A major debate was to decide the “best” inkstone, with the competition mainly between the She rock 歙石 (i.e. the Dragon Tail, from the She County, now Wuyuan, Anhui Province) and the Duan rock. For a collector, establishing his ranking of inkstones not only demonstrated his expertise and authority, but also raised the reputation and virtual market value of his collection. A case in point was Su Shi’s attempt to promote a rock of obscure origin: the Phoenix Beak rock 鳳咮石 from Fujian.

According to Su Shi, the Phoenix Beak was a paragon of deceitful appearance: its ugliness concealed its peerless virtue; furthermore, its imposter, made of rock from the same river, was identical in appearance without possessing the same virtue. Su had altogether written three inscriptions, in addition to two other short dottings, on the Phoenix Beak. The first inscription aimed to distinguish his Phoenix Beak with one in the possession of Kong Pingzhong 孔平仲 (jinshi 1065), a renowned collector. Su questioned the authenticity of Kong’s rock:

昔余得之鳳凰山下龍焙之間, 今君得之劍浦之上黯黮之灘。如樂之和, 如金之堅, 如玉之有潤, 如舌之有泉。此其大凡也, 為然為不然? 然也, 雖胡越同名猶可; 不然, 徒與此石同谿而産, 何異於九鵬而一鷄。

I once got mine among the Dragon-Roast Tea gardens below Mount Phoenix (now in Jian’ou, Fujian Province),\(^{28}\) while you got yours from a dark shoal by the Sword Ford

\(^{28}\) This mountain was famous for producing the “Dragon-Roast Tea of Mount Northern Garden (aka. Mount Phoenix)” 北苑龍焙 in the Northern Song; see Zhao Ruli 趙汝礪, *Beiyuan bielu* 北苑別錄, 6.
(now in Nanping, Fujian Province). Like the harmony of music, like the hardness of gold, like the luster of jade, like the fountain below the tongue – such should be its generic features. Is it the case with your inkstone? If it is the case, though they are from two areas far apart, they could still share the same name. Otherwise, in vain yours comes from the same river of my inkstone, but their difference is like nine mythic peng versus one sparrow hawk.

Su Shi’s challenge to the authenticity of Kong’s inkstone sounds professional. He first notes the difference of their origins: Su’s Phoenix Beak was from a legendary tea garden, Kong’s, some dubious shoal. But since the two places are connected by the same river, Kong’s might still be authentic, if his stone had been carried by water to travel so far. Thus Su proposes to examine the quality of Kong’s stone in terms of sound, hardness, luster, and its facility to produce and hold ink. If Kong’s would fail this test, then it would be worthless: a sparrow hawk is a decent bird, but it would be immediately crushed when facing a single peng, let alone the nine of them.

In the eyes of a connoisseur, mediocrity was worthless. Literature from this period relates that even for inkstones made of rocks from the same pit, an unblemished one cost hundreds of times the price of a slightly flawed one. Kong’s inkstone seemed to have failed the test, as

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29 Jian’ou and Nanping are two cities on the Min River 閩江, with Jian’ou on the upstream.

30 Peng is a mythic bird, which, according to Zhuangzi, is transformed from the huge fish kun; it first beats its cloud-like wings for three thousand li upon the ocean before riding the storm to the height of ninety thousand li, journeying to the South Sea. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 1:2.

31 Su Shi, “Kong Yifu Fengzhouyan ming” 孔毅甫鳳咮石硯銘, SSWJ, 19:549.

32 See Mi Fu 米芾, Yan shi 硯史, in Chen Menglei ed., Gujin tushu jicheng, 80:710.
suggested by Su Shi’s second inscription. This time Su aimed to give a defining account on the authentic Phoenix Beak, so as to dismiss its imposters once and for all:

北苑龍焙山，如翔鳳下飲之狀。當其咗，有石蒼黑，緻如玉。熙寧中，太原王頤以為硯，余名之曰鳳咮。然其產不富。或以黯黮滩石為之，狀酷類而多拒墨。

Mount Dragon-Roast in the Northern Garden looks like a flying phoenix stooping to drink water. At the position of its beak, there is a certain kind of rock which is pitch dark and has a jade-like texture. In the Xining period (1068-1077), Wang Yi, a native of Taiyuan (now in Shanxi Province), made it into inkstone. I named it the Phoenix Beak. It is rather limited in production. Some people make it from dark shoal rock, which looks extremely similar but is too slippery for the inkcake.  

Su carefully specified the place of origin, appearance, quality, and history of the Phoenix Beak. He revealed that it was in fact named by no one but Su himself. The same story was related by Su Che, who suggested that the Phoenix Beak must have helped Su Shi in writing his commentary on the Book of Changes. Su Shi once again stressed the danger of imposture. By dismissing those imposters of lowly provenance, he reassured the rarity, if not uniqueness, of his own stone.

The third inscription on the Phoenix Beak was a poem, peculiar for its rhyming pattern: it rhymes at the end of every line (instead of every couplet) in deflected (instead of level) tones.


34 Su Che, “Fengzhou shiyan ming (bing xu),” 厳味石硯銘並序, Su Che ji, 18:344.
The eccentricity of the poem seemed to be calculated to match the uniqueness of the stone. Su Shi again emphasized the unremarkable appearance of the inkstone, whose intrinsic value could only be recognized by a true knower like himself.

凤咮硯銘        Inscription on the Phoenix Beak Inkstone

帝規武夷作茶囿        His Majesty ruled Mount Wuyi to serve as a garden of tea;

山為孤鳳翔且嗅        The mountain became a lonely phoenix, flying while stooping to smell.

下集芝田啄瓊玖        It once lowered to rest in the polypore field and pecked at the dark jade;

玉乳金沙發靈竇        By jade nectar and beneath golden sands, it unearthed a wondrous gem.

残璋斷璧澤而黝        Like a relic scepter, like a broken jade disk, it shimmered with dark luster.

治為書硯美無有        When worked into an inkstone, its excellence had no peer.

至珍惊世初莫售        The world was dazed by this supreme treasure, so at first it did not sell;

黑眉黄眼争妍陋        It had to contest its beauty among other black-browed and yellow-eyed.

蘇子一見名鳳咮        Master Su, upon one single glance, named it “Phoenix Beak”;
This inscription endeavors to elevate the stature of this inkstone, depicting its origin as a mountain bathed in imperial grandeur and cosmic forces. Jade, gold, and water, several elements which in the first inscription describe the physical aspects of the inkstone, are used here to promote the supernatural aura of its origin. Such linguistic transference establishes the resonance between the inkstone and its natural abode. Wang Yi, the discoverer of the Phoenix Beak, is not mentioned in this inscription. Instead, its discovery is depicted as a divine incident, when the mountain incarnated into a phoenix and pecked it out of golden sands. Su Shi alone is credited as its appreciator, who has rescued the inkstone from obscurity, given it a name that sells, and ruled its supremacy at the expense of Dragon Tail, an inkstone of long established fame since it won the fancy of Li Yu 李煜 (937-978; r. 961-975), the poet-emperor of the Southern Tang.36

In these inscriptions, Su showed confidence and authority as an inkstone connoisseur. He challenged the expertise of another renowned collector; he defined criteria to judge the authenticity of the rock and ranked it against other famous rocks. Yet the promotion of Phoenix Beak apparently failed – it was rarely mentioned in later connoisseur literature.37 Perhaps it was because there was no such a thing as the “Phoenix Beak Inkstone” at all. The Southern Song writer Hu Zi 胡仔 (1095?-1170) claimed to have been to Mount Phoenix and found no dark rock. There was not even any pond below the peak from which Su Shi thought his rock was fetched.

37 It was only mentioned in Li Zhiyan’s Yan pu 砚譜, ibid, 80:711. But Li only quoted Su Shi’s praise, showing no evidence that he himself had ever seen it.
The only type of inkstone produced in this area was from Sword Ford, where Kong’s rock was found. Hu concluded that Su must have been swindled. 38

If those crucial differences between Su’s “authentic” and Kong’s “fake” Phoenix Beak inkstones were imaginary, Su Shi’s expertise in inkstone connoisseurship was perhaps questionable. Nevertheless, his literary reputation made his promotion of Phoenix Beak influential. His naming of his stone was obviously a confrontational gesture, since the Phoenix Beak was in literal parallelism with the Dragon Tail, further mocked to be the “bull’s rear,” a trope for inferiority. 39 The naming reveals his ambition to replace Dragon Tail with an inkstone of his discovery, which, if successful, would make his name in the history of inkstones. He reported, with apparent glee, that his injustice against Dragon Tail ignited the furor of the She County folks, who refused to meet his request for an inkstone. At last a gentleman agreed to give him a fine Dragon Tail, on the condition that he could overturn the jurisdiction. Su Shi accomplished this task by giving a grandiloquent argument on the metaphysical relationship of an inkstone with its human possessor.

龍尾硯歌並引

Song of the Dragon Tail Inkstone, with a Preface 40

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39 In Zhanguoce 戰國策, Su Qin 蘇秦 tried to persuade the King of Han to join their ally against Qin by quoting a proverb: “Rather to be the beak of a rooster than to be the rear of a bull” 寧為雞口不為牛後; see Zhu Zugeng 諸祖耿, Zhanguoce jizhu huikao 戰國策集注匯考, 26:1355.

CHAPTER FOUR

I once wrote an inscription on the Phoenix Beak Inkstone. In brief it says: “Master Su, upon one single glance, named it the Phoenix Beak;/ it easily reduces the Dragon Tail to the shameful rear of the bull.” Afterwards I sought an inkstone from Xi. The people of She retorted: “You have already your Phoenix Beak – what’s the use of our inkstone?” They did bear me some hard feelings! Court Gentleman Consultant Fang Yande had a big Dragon Tail inkstone, which was extremely wondrous. He told me that if I could write a poem to slightly soften down my previous words, he would present it to me. Thus I write this poem:

黃琮白琥天不惜  
Yellow cong or white guo\(^{41}\) – the heaven never begrudges its treasure;

顧恐貪夫死懷璧  
But it does fear the greedy would die to possess a precious jade disk.

君看龍尾豈石材  
Look, sir, the Dragon Tail is no simple rock!

玉德金聲寓於石  
It resides in rock the jade-like virtue, the gold-sounding repute.

與天作石來幾時  
How long had it been a rock for the sake of heaven?

與人作硯初不辭  
It did not decline to become an inkstone on behalf of man!

詩成鮑謝石何與  
When a marvelous poem is written,\(^{42}\) what has the rock helped?

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\(^{41}\) Both cong and guo are ritual jade vessels. Cong is in the shape of a tube with a circular inner section and squarish outer section. Guo is in the shape of a tiger.

\(^{42}\)
In his poem, Su Shi first reassures the indifference of heaven to wealth, which is valued only by man. A stone is similarly insouciant to its destiny in the hands of man. It has been named

42 Bao and Xie refer to Bao Zhao 鮑照 (414?-466) and Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464-499) respectively, used here as metonymy for poetry of the highest quality.

43 Zhong and Wang refer to Zhong You 鍾繇 (151-230) and Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321-379) respectively, used here as metonymy for calligraphy of the highest quality.
“Dragon Tail” because of its fine qualities pleasing its human appreciators, but their appreciation has nothing to do with the rock itself. The verb “to reside” (yu 寓) suggests contingency. The name “Dragon Tail” is an arbitrary signifier attached to the stone, alluding to those virtues which happen to “reside” in it. A stone shows no intentionality in choosing its fate. And when it is discovered and polished into a precious inkstone, it is oblivious to the poetry or calligraphy written with its inadvertent aid. The human treatment cannot matter less to the stone – whether it is treasured in a luxurious container or used in daily toils. So why should it care about a joke? Su then envisions his treatment of the inkstone: he will neither hoard it nor slight it, but will put it in a refined studio and respect it as a worthy companion; he will not deliberate his artistic style to match the quality of the inkstone, but will simply write spontaneously. His casualness will show that his mind is not hindered by the precious presence of such an inkstone in his studio. He projects himself “a man of oddity,” just like the inkstone, “an idle thing.” Their kindred spirit qualifies Su Shi to host the inkstone in his studio, and this desire is voiced by the inkstone itself at the end of the poem.

Su Shi used the rhetoric of friendship to justify his material possession. The reader may be tempted to ask: if the inkstone is void of intentionality, how can it show any preference to accompany a certain owner, even if this owner is Su Shi? The rhetoric of non-intentionality and that of kindred attraction contradict each other. As to be further observed below, in cases concerning the transactions of rocks, these two sets of rhetoric are used alternatively for different ends. The rock is a mirror reflecting human desires.
The Biography of an Inkstone

Su Shi’s penchant to give inkstone a human voice culminates in the following fictive biography of an inkstone, personified as Luo Wen 羅文, the Lord of Ten Thousand Stones. The fate of inkstone in the commodity sphere becomes a parable for the literatus’ fate in the bureaucratic system, both possessed by the larger economic or socio-political network. The material features of the inkstone are elaborated to construct the protagonist’s personality and life stories. Initially a virtuous recluse, he was summoned into the court, participated in imperial cultural projects, underwent glory and disgrace, and suffered from envy and malignity. It was in short a paradigmatic life of a literatus-bureaucrat. The historical background was set in the court of the Martial Emperor of Han (Han Wudi 漢武帝, 156-87 BCE; r. 141-87 BCE), whose cultural policies had decided some basic characters of the ensuing Chinese civil states. I present the text in seven sections to facilitate the discussion.

萬石君羅文傳

Biography of Luo Wen, the Lord of Ten Thousand Stones

[1] 羅文，歙人也。其上世常隱龍尾山，未嘗出為世用。自秦棄詩書，不用儒學，漢興，蕭何輩又以刀筆吏取將相，天下靡然效之，爭以刀筆進，雖有奇產，不暇推擇也。以故羅氏未有顯人。

Luo Wen was a native from the She County. His ancestors were mostly recluses in Mount Dragon Tail, who never left the mountain to serve the world. The Qin reign abandoned classical studies and rejected classical scholars. When the Han was established, Xiao He and his colleagues promoted generals and ministers based on the same standard to select knife-brush legalist clerks. Thus the whole world followed suit and vied to present their knife-brush talents. Though there were other extraordinary products, they were ignored from recommendation or selection. For these reasons, none of the Luo family became prominent.

The name Luo Wen puns with Mount Luowen 羅紋山, another name for Mount Dragon Tail. Luowen literally means the fabric patterns on fine silk cloth, which is analogous to the exquisite patterns on certain types of Dragon Tail rocks.\(^\text{45}\) The name Luo Wen therefore simultaneously refers to the geographic origin of the protagonist and implies his true identity – a patterned Dragon Tail inkstone. Since Luo 羅 is already a family name, Su Shi has only replaced wen 紋 (fabric pattern) with its homophonic wen 文 (culture; literature) to give the protagonist a proper human name. This name not only refers to the education of the protagonist, but also pays homage to the cultural functions of the inkstone: it serves on a cosmic scale to represent the order of civilization, and on an individual level the writing of literature.

This passage, as well as the whole biography, is peppered with puns. Like all actual biographies, it begins with relating the pedigree of the Luo clan, which for generations had been

“hiding” (yin 隱, to hide; to retreat) in the mountains and would not be “used” (yong 用, to use; to employ) by the world. Their scholarly specialty was in classical studies. As a historical fact, under the Qin and the early Han, when legalists (daobili 刀筆吏) were in the fast track to government jobs, classicists were in relative negligence. The former is known for their tools – knife (used to scrape off the surface of the bamboo to make corrections) and brush, while the latter alone can be said to represent wen. Therefore when legalists were in power, “knives and brushes” were presented instead of the inkstones. The Luo clan, as inkstones or as classicists, lived undisturbed in their natural habitat.

[2] 及文，資質溫潤，縝密可喜，隱居自晦，有終焉之意。里人石工獵龍尾山，因窟入見，文塊然居其間，熟視之，笑曰：“此所謂邦之彥也，豈得自棄於岩穴耶？”乃相與定交，磨礱成就之，使從諸生學，因得與士大夫游，見者咸愛重焉。

As for Wen, he was suave and polished in quality and was delightful for his exquisite character. He lived in retreat, hid his luster, and intended to spend his whole life in this way. County folk Shi Gong once hunted in Mount Dragon Tail. He found the cave and entered, seeing Wen sitting all by himself calmly like a rock. Shi observed him carefully and then laughed, saying: “You are the so-called ‘excellent talent on this land.’ How could you abandon yourself in a rocky cave?” Thus he established friendship with Luo, ground his talent to its full capacity, and let him follow other students to study. Luo then began to socialize with literati. Whoever saw him appreciated and cherished him.
The description on Wen’s human character are puns for the texture of the rock, as the translation strives to convey: *wenrun* 温潤, for rock, means a sleek surface which is slow to dissipate the body temperature upon touch, while for human, means a gentle temperament; *zhenmi* 繹密, for rock, means its exquisite and dense texture, while for human, means a cautious character. The name Shi Gong 石工 puns for stonemason. The story alludes to the actual discovery of the Dragon Tail Inkstone. It was said that under the Kaiyuan reign (713-741) of Tang, a hunter chasing beasts into the mountains saw some lovely, lustrous rocks, which were brought back and made into inkstones. The term *kuairan* 塊然 means “all by oneself in calmness”; but *kuai* is also a measure word for rocks, and *ran* means “-like,” thus *kuairan* literally refers to Luo Wen standing in the cave “calmly like a block of rock” which it was. *Molong* 磨礱, similarly, means both to grind a rock and to polish one’s talent. Either as a wonderful rock or as a promising talent, Luo was successful among the local luminaries. His entrance into the literary society implies the commoditization of the rock. He had been ground and polished for this purpose; his natural integrity had been compromised to achieve a sleek appearance. Now not only the discerning Shi Gong, but everyone who saw him would take delight in his company.

[3] 武帝方向學，喜文翰，得毛穎之後毛純為中書舍人。純一日奏曰：“臣幸得收錄以備任使。然以臣之愚，不能獨大用。今臣同事，皆小器頑滑，不足以置左右，願得召臣友人羅文以相助。”詔使隨計吏入貢。蒙召見文德殿，上望見，異焉。因玩弄之曰：“卿久居荒土，得被漏泉之澤，涵濡浸漬久矣，不自枯槁也。”

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The Martial Emperor had just leaned toward scholarship and was fond of literature. He promoted Mao Ying’s offspring Mao Chun to Drafter in the Secretariat. One day, Chun submitted a memorial to the throne, which stated: “Your Majesty, I am lucky to be registered to your service. But because of my clumsiness, I am of no great use alone. Now my colleagues are all of petty capacity, obstinate and slippery, unworthy to serve by your side. I wish that Your Majesty would summon my friend Luo Wen to assist me.” Upon an imperial edict, Luo Wen came to court along with an accounts clerk escorting tributes. He was received in the Hall of Civil Virtues. When His Majesty saw him in a distance, he already deemed Luo as peculiar. Fondly he stroked Luo, saying: “You, sir, have lived long among the wasteland, nourished by a seeping spring, soaked and lubricated in virtues. You have not withered in abandonment!” His Majesty then knocked him with questions and found his responses loud and clear. His Majesty was delighted. “In the olden times, some were said to have jade-like quality and gold-sounding repute – now you are truly one of them!” He commanded Luo to wait for the edict in the Palace Secretariat, and after some time promoted him to Drafter.

Historically, the Martial Emperor of Han was reputed to have replaced legalism with classicism as a ruling philosophy. Accepting this narrative, Su Shi let Luo Wen the classicist become the first of his clan to serve. To a certain extent, Luo Wen’s ascension was an analogy of the author’s own, who came similarly from a mountainous region; moreover, since the Song’s conquest of
Sichuan area, he was among the earliest students from that area who succeeded in metropolitan exams to serve in the imperial court.

Su Shi let the character Mao Chun (literally, “pure hair”) be an offspring from Mao Ying (literally, “hair spike”). Ying, whose archetype was a rabbit-hair brush, appeared in a fictive biography written by Han Yu, the mid-Tang essay master. Su Shi paid homage to his literary predecessor by making his fictive figure’s offspring the recommender of his own protagonist. The derogative terms Mao Chun used to describe his colleagues were undesirable qualities for an inkstone as well. Since the imperial brush sought for a matching inkstone, Luo Wen came to the court along with the accounts clerk escorting the tributes. Becoming the royal tribute is the highest honor for a commodity, just like the audience of the emperor was the highest aspiration for any literatus. Wen successfully became the most coveted commodity within the empire.

A string of puns is used to narrate the emperor’s audience. The fact that inkstones are often nurtured by water is compared to the gentleman being nourished by his virtue. Its metallic sound was compared to the reputation of such a literatus. These puns were possible also because of the long established metaphoric vocabulary of using natural objects to describe human virtues. Jade, in particular, is a favorite metaphor for a perfect gentleman since the early period. The personification of inkstone developed out of this metaphoric tradition.

[4] 是時墨卿、楮先生，皆以能文得幸，而四人同心，相得歡甚。時人以為文苑四貴。每有詔命典策，皆四人謀之。其大略雖出於上意，必使文潤色之，然後琢磨以墨卿，謀劃以毛純，成，以受楮先生，使行之四方遠夷，無不達焉。上嘆嘆

47 See Han Yu, “Mao Ying zhuan” 毛穎傳, in Han Changli wenji jiaozhu, 8:566-9.
曰：“是四人者，皆國寶也。”然重厚堅貞，行無瑕玷，自二千石至百石吏，皆無如文者。命尚方以金作室，以蜀文錦為薦褥賜之。其後于阗進美玉，上使以玉作小屏風賜之，并賜高麗所獻銅瓶為飲器，親愛日厚，如純輩不敢望也。上得羣才用之，遂內更制度，修律曆，講郊祀，治刑獄，外征伐四夷，詔書符檄禮文之事，皆文等預焉。上思其功，制詔丞相御史曰：“蓋聞議法者常失於太深，論功者常失於太薄，有功而賞不及，雖唐虞不能以相勸。中書舍人羅文，久典書籍，助成文治，厥功茂焉。其以歙之祁門三百户封文，號萬石君，世世勿絕。”

At that time, Mr. Mo and Master Chu were both favored in court for their literary talents. The four of them shared the same mind and were extremely happy in their mutual friendship. The contemporaries regarded them as “the Four Nobilities in the Garden of Literature.” Whenever an imperial edict, command, or legislation was issued, it was always completed through the discussion of the four. Though it was in principle the idea of His Majesty, Wen would always be commissioned to polish it. Then Mr. Mo would thoroughly grind it, and Mao Chun would draw the lines. After it was completed, Master Chu would carry it out, spreading it through all the corners of the empire and even to the remote barbaric lands. His Majesty once sighed: “These four, they are the treasures of our state!” Nevertheless, in regard to the heft, magnitude, solidity, and integrity, as well as the impeccable behavior, among officials whose salary ranged between two thousand and a hundred stones of grains, no one could match Wen. His Majesty ordered the chamberlain to construct for Wen a gold chamber, bestowed him embroidered brocade from Sichuan as his ticking. Later, when the King of Khotan sent fine jade as tribute, His Majesty had it made into a small screen and bestowed it to Wen, together with a brass
vase as Wen’s drinking vessel. His fondness of Wen rose daily, far exceeding the aspiration of Chun or other colleagues. Since his Majesty had put these talents to his employment, he had domestically changed the institutions, established the music scale and calendar, discussed rites and sacrifices, and constructed legal and justice systems. Outside the empire, he waged righteous wars against barbaric lands. Wen and his colleagues participated in all these missions concerning edicts, documents, commands, condemnations, and rites. His Majesty had his accomplishments in mind and issued an edict to chancellors and censors: “I have once heard that those who discuss the laws are often flawed in being too harsh, while those who reward the services are often flawed in being too stringent. Once the meritorious service is not properly rewarded, even sage kings like Yao or Shun could change it no more. Luo Wen, Drafter in the Secretariat, has long been in charge of the files and documents. His assistance to our civil governance is abundant in accomplishments! Now I enfeoff Wen with three hundred households in the Qimen area of She County, give him the title of Lord Ten Thousand Stones, and let his offspring prosper for generations!”

Luo hit career success together with Mao Chun, the pure-hair brush, Mr. Mo, the ink, and Master Chu, the fine paper made of mulberry wood. These “Four Nobilities in the Garden of Literature” are apparently personifications of their namesake, “the four treasures in the studio” (wenfang sibao 文房四寶), a term fashioned again after Su Yijian’s Wenfang sipu. Luo chaired imperial cultural projects and enhanced the brilliance of Chinese civilization. He became the favorite of the emperor, living in a gold chamber, clothed in Sichuan brocade, sheltered with Khotan jade screens, and drinking from a Korean brass vessel. These precious goods in miniature sizes are
accessories to an inkstone. Mr. Inkstone had now become a cultural symbol dignified with luxuries from all the areas under the pale of Chinese imperial power. The emperor’s fondness of him above his three colleagues reflects the higher degree of fetishization of inkstones than other writing paraphernalia in Su Shi’s time. Finally, Wen was enfeoffed as the Lord of Ten Thousand Stones. “Stone” 石 was both a measure word for grain (read as dàn), paid as official salary, and a pun for Wen’s natural identity. The peak of glory, however, was to be followed by the eclipse of Wen’s reputation and the eventual decline of his career.

[5] 文為人有廉隅，不可犯，然搏擊非其任，喜與老成知書者游。常曰：
“吾與兒輩處，每慮有玷缺之患。”其自愛如此。以是小人多輕疾之。或讒於上曰：
“文性貪墨，無潔白稱。”上曰： “吾用文掌書翰，取其便事耳。雖貪墨，吾固知，不如是亦何以見其才。”自是左右不敢復言。文體有寒疾，每冬月侍書，輒面冰不可運筆，上時賜之酒，然後能書。

Wen, stern and angular in character, could not take any joke. But fighting was not in his capacity. He liked the companionship of those mellow and learned. He often said: “Mingling with those younlgings, I am constantly worried of being stained or dented.” Since he cherished his intactness so much, many mean men despised and detested him. Some once defamed him to the throne: “Wen is greedy and sullied; his reputation is not pure and clean.” His Majesty said: “I use Wen to be in charge of the documents, because he is good at this business. Though he is greedy, I know it well. Were it not so, how could his talent shine?” Since then the close attendants did not dare to mention this issue any more. Wen suffered from feeling chill. In the winter, when he attended the throne in
writing, he became immediately frozen in his face, unable to move the brush. His Majesty would then bestow him some wine, so that he could write.

*Lianyu* 廉隅 literally means the edge and corner of an object, and analogously means the integrity of a person. Wen could not fight, fearing to be “stained or dented.” Not being able to fight might seem a weakness for normal stones, but not for a precious inkstone. His caution discloses a certain anxiety over losing his intactness in a human realm, where he was no longer sufficient in his natural self, but was defined and hazarded by his relationships to humans. Now he had a desire – to survive and to succeed, so he sacrificed his freedom in disposing his body, which was no longer pure existence, but was an instrument to means.

It is ambiguous from the text to decide whether the charge against Wen was totally slanderous, since Wen, an inkstone, would indeed be greedy for ink (metaphor for being sullied), and the emperor acknowledged his awareness of that. He even suggested that Wen’s greed was a boost to his literary talents. What is the connection between talent and greed?

Luo Wen was more or less modeled after Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE), the brilliant rhapsody poet in the court of the Martial Emperor who similarly came out of the mountainous Sichuan. In his *Hanshu* biography, Sima Xiangru was once impeached as having accepted bribery, and was consequently demoted for about one year. Sima Xiangru’s case was

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48 Ban Gu, “Sima Xiangru liezhuan” 司馬相如列傳, in Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, 57b:2589. Similarly, in *Shiji*, greed was treated as a forgivable defect in many talented individuals. Wu Qi 吳起 (?-381 BCE), the famed Warring States general (see “Sun-zi Wu Qi liezhuan” 孫子吳起列傳, *Shiji*, 65:2166), Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 BCE; r. 202-195 BCE) (see “Xiang Yu benji,” *ibid.*, 7:311), the first emperor of Han, and Han Anguo 韓安國 (?-127 BCE), a talented early Han general (see “Han Zhangru liezhuan” 韓長孺列傳, *ibid.*,
cited by Yan Zhitui’s 顏之推 (531-595?), when he lectured his family and chided: “Since the olden times, men of letters were often lapsed in virtue.” These historiographical accounts suggest that Sima Xiangru was not a paragon of virtue and was purportedly greedy. Since then, “men of letters are lapsed in virtue” became an idiomatic expression, to the effect that such behavior was, if not encouraged, at least acquiesced as the occasional price paid for unusual talents. Perhaps for this reason, Su Shi let the Martial Emperor not to expect Luo Wen to be morally impeccable.

Luo Wen resembled Sima Xiangru even further when he was said to suffer from “feeling chill” – Sima Xiangru was said to suffer from feeling thirsty, a symptom of diabetes. But it was a joke to say that Wen’s face would be so “frozen” in the winter that he could not write, since Su Shi must have seen the ink pooled upon an inkstone be frozen to ice in an unheated chamber.

[6] 元狩中, 詔舉賢良方正。淮南王安舉端紫, 以對策高第, 待詔翰林, 超拜尚書僕射, 與文並用事。紫雖乏文采, 而令色尤可喜, 以故常在左右, 文浸不用。

上幸甘泉, 祠河東, 巡朔方, 紫常扈從, 而文留守長安禁中。上還, 見文塵垢面目, 108:2863), were all said to be greedy. Liu Bang’s greed and lust did not prevent him to win the empire; while when Wu Qi and Han Anguo were charged, their rulers chose to forsake their greed in order to enlist their valuable services.

49 Wang Liqi (1996), 9:237. Yan chided Sima Xiangru for having committed thievery. Commentators have suggested that this charge might be metaphorical, referring either to Sima Xiangru’s elopement with Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, equaling to thievery from her father, or to his extortion of money from her. Ibid., 9:242, n.19. The same story is found in “Sima Xiangru liezhuan,” Hanshu, 57a:2530-1.

In the mid of Yuanshou Reign (122-117 BCE), His Majesty issued an edict to raise the Worthy and Excellent, Square and Upright. Liu An, the King of Huainan, recommended Duan Zi, who ranked high on policy questions. Zi was first commanded to wait for the edict in the Imperial Academy; then he was speedily promoted to Vice Director in the Department of State Affairs, serving together with Wen. Though Zi lacked literary talents, his flattering hue was extremely pleasing, thus he served often by the side of the throne, while Wen eventually phased out of use. When His Majesty visited the Sweet Spring Palace, sacrificed at the East of the Yellow River Shrine, and inspected the northern regions, Zi was constantly in his retinue, while Wen stayed in the palace of Chang’an. When His Majesty finally returned, he saw Wen’s dusty face and took pity on him. Wen thus remonstrated to the throne: “When Your Majesty employs talents, it is truly as what Ji An said, ‘the latecomers come above.’” His Majesty said: “It was not that I did not think of you. But since you are old, you may succumb to waxing and waning.” His close attendants heard it and thought that His Majesty was not pleased with Wen, thus they no longer paid attention to him.

Liu An 刘安 (179-122 BCE) was a famous patron of letters. It was no surprise then that he recommended a competitor to Luo Wen in this fictive history. Duan Zi refers to the most coveted purple-hued inkstone from the Duan Stream. The ranking of the Duan versus the Dragon Tail rocks was disputed among Song connoisseurs. Su Shi might have followed his mentor Ouyang
Xiu in dismissing the Duan rock as merely good-looking but of little practical value. The competition among inkstones could happen on every literatus’ desk. Wen, now phasing out of use, became a “superfluous thing.”

Su Shi’s reference to Shiji was further manifested when Wen was said to have stayed in Chang’an when the emperor was inspecting the empire. According to Sima Qian, his father Sima Tan 司馬談 (?-110 BCE) was obliged to stay behind when the emperor sacrificed at Mount Tai 泰山; outrage by such negligence, Tan died soon after. Here, Wen had not completely fallen out of the emperor’s favor, as their brief exchange had shown. Wen quoted Ji An 汲黯 (?-112 BCE), who was famed for his piquant criticism on the Martial Emperor. He once reportedly told the emperor: “Your Majesty are full of lust inside, but outside you practice the humane and the righteous. How could you emulate the sagacious governance of Yao and Shun?” The aphorism quoted by Wen was formulated when Ji An saw latecomers soaring to become his equals, and sometimes higher than him. Ji An’s, and here, Luo Wen’s sarcasm was tolerated by the emperor. But it was already clear that Wen had fallen out of imperial favor.

[7] 文乞骸骨伏地, 上詔使駙馬都尉金日磾翼起之。日磾, 胡人, 初不知書, 素惡文所為, 因是擠之殿下, 頽仆而卒。上憫之, 令宦者瘗於南山下。
Wen prostrated himself to the ground, begging to retire. His Majesty commanded Commander-in-chief Jin Midi, his son-in-law, to help him to his feet. Midi was of Hun origin and initially was not familiar with the classics. He always disliked Wen’s behavior, thus he took this chance to nudge him when he walked down the steps of the court. Wen stumbled, fell to the ground, and died. His Majesty, out of mercy, ordered the eunuchs to bury him below Mount Zhongnan.

According to *Hanshu*, Jin Midi (134-86 BCE) was a captive prince of the Huns, a highly austere and respectful personality. Jin was known for having killed his son, simply because the latter, as a favorite of the emperor, meddled with palace ladies. This gave Su a good reason to choose him as the killer. Jin was self-conscious of his ethnic identity. He declined the general Huo Guang’s offer of custodianship to the new emperor, on the ground of him being a foreigner. His ethnicity turns his killing of Luo Wen to a political parable: a military man of barbaric origin had killed the representative of Chinese civil culture. In addition, his name is a pun – *di* literally means a kind of black paint used to dye fabrics, thus will efface *luowen*, patterns of fine silk.

Luo Wen’s constant fear of being hurt in fighting proved portentous. He was buried under Mount Zhongnan. Because of its vicinity to the capital Chang’an, many literati under the Tang chose to be recluses in this mountain so that their reputation would quickly reach the imperial ears. It was called a “Zhongnan shortcut.” Choosing Mount Zhongnan as Luo Wen’s burial site thus ironically reminds the reader of his early life in reclusion. As Zhuangzian

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parables suggest, when a tree is useful, it risks of being chopped down.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, when a recluse makes himself useful to the world, he risks of shortening his life span.

In reality, the very title of this biography is a parody. In \textit{Shiji}, there is indeed a “Lord of Ten Thousand Stones” – Shi Fen 石奮 (?-124 BCE), a high-ranking minister in early Han. In contrast to Luo Wen, Shi Fen was famed precisely for \textit{not} being a scholar. He was an extremely cautious bureaucrat, a stark contrast to the literary talents of his time. He and his four sons had all reached the rank of “two thousand stones (of grain),” thus he was bestowed the title “Lord of Ten Thousand Stones.” In 139 BCE, when the literatus Wang Zang 王臧 (?-139 BCE) was dismissed and prosecuted for instigating the young Martial Emperor to regain the power from his grandmother, the Empress Dowager Dou 竇太后 (?-135 BCE) recommended Shi Fen as a counter example. \textit{Shiji} relates: “The Emperess Dowager considered scholars (ruzhe 儒者) as having too much embellishment (wen 文) and too little substance (zhi 質); in contrast, the Lord of Ten Thousand Stones was taciturn and devoted to practice.”\textsuperscript{57} Shi Fen enjoyed unchanging imperial favor through a few reigns and died a good death. He was the paradigmatic visionless bureaucrat whose success alone was admirable. In comparison, Wen’s career was hinged upon a highly luminous albeit barely pragmatic function – to decorate the regime with words. As the “flourish” instead of the “substance” of bureaucracy, he was a “superfluous thing.”

\textsuperscript{56} The moral about the useless tree has been told in \textit{Zhuangzi} in a few stories, with slightly different emphases. The dialogue between \textit{Zhuangzi} and Hui Shi 惠施, see Guo Qingfan, \textit{Zhuangzi jishi}, 1:39-40; the story about Craftsman Shi 匠石, see \textit{ibid.}, 4:170-4; the story about Zhuangzi walking in the mountains, see \textit{ibid.}, 20:667-8.

\textsuperscript{57} Sima Qian, “Wanshi Zhangshu liezhuan” 萬石張叔列傳, in \textit{Shiji}, 103:2765.
Su Shi projected Wen as a passive receptacle of fate, not an active agent. His life was featured with passivity – discovered, recommended, employed, favored, slandered, excused, slighted, and murdered. His desire and intentionality were significantly absent from the whole account. Through the biography, he has spoken exactly two sentences, the first uttering his concern over losing his integrity if he hazarded the companionship of warriors, the second quoting Ji An to quibble on the latecomers’ speedy promotion. Both sentences expressed anxiety. Power and fortune did not seem to overjoy him. He was only said to be “extremely happy” in the company of other objects – brush, ink, and paper. Human company brought him no such joy. An inkstone, in this regard, is both fortunate and unfortunate to be discovered and employed. While he was realizing his natural potentiality in promoting the dynastic cultural brilliance, he had sacrificed his self-sufficiency and natural life span.

When a rock/recluse leaves the mountain, it/he would have to sell it-/himself in a market place, literally or metaphorically. If singularity is for both the most valuable asset, their tradability in contrast implies dispensability and commonality – they could be exchanged for something else, be it cash or another thing. To retain their singularity, the stigma of commoditization must be washed off as soon as they pass the transformative stage of identity. In Arjun Appadurai’s terms, they fall into “the category of objects whose commodity phase is ideally brief, whose movement is restricted, and which apparently are not ‘priced’ in the way other things might be.”\(^{58}\) Such singular items phase “in and out of the commodity state.”\(^{59}\) After transactions are over, they will stay in one’s collection (or in the imperial court), no longer considered to be commodities.


\(^{59}\) Ignor Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process,” in *ibid.*, 64-91.
Su Shi interpreted inkstones alternatively as symbol of incorruptible integrity, a moral image he aspires to, or as symbol of the literatus, subject to corruption and demise. Thus the story of Luo Wen is paradoxically both a lament and a eulogy – while lamenting the unavoidable entanglements with worldly obligations and temptations, Su Shi also projected the ideal attitude toward the tough choices confronting a scholar-bureaucrat – that is, to be a passive receptacle of fate. The result is conditioned spontaneity: not to be absolutely free from obligation or entanglement, but to be free from causing, from intending, and from choosing.

**The Lesson from a Grotesque Rock**

In the quoted poem on the Dragon Tail Inkstone, Su Shi let the stone call itself “idle” in nature. Once it becomes an inkstone, however, it becomes also very “useful,” employed at best to aid cultural enterprises and at worst in daily toils. In contrast to the inkstone, his literature on garden rocks treated them as truly “superfluous” and useless. For this reason, they had paradoxically become symbols of moral integrity.

This rhetorical strategy was employed to justify Su’s possessions of rocks, and he did this by letting the silent rock break into language.

咏怪石  
**On a Grotesque Rock**

家有粗隕石  
I had a coarse and rugged rock in my house;

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60 Su Shi, “Yong guaishi,” SSJ, 48:2605.
植之疎竹軒 Installed by a veranda, among sparse bamboos.
人皆喜尋玩 Other people liked to visit and appreciate it,
吾獨思棄捐 I alone wanted to discard it away.
以其無所用 Since it had no use,
曉夕空嶄然 Showing vainly its distinctive form, dawn to dusk.
碪礎則甲斮 Use it as a chopping board – it would break the knife;
砥硯乃枯頑 Grind it into an inkstone – it would drain the ink.
于繳不可碁 It could neither be worked into a stone arrowhead to shoot the birds,
以碑不可鐫 Nor be incised upon as a stela.
凡此六用無一取 Of all the six uses, it was qualified for none;
令人爭免長物觀 So why not spare the view of a superfluous thing?
誰知兹石本靈怪 Who would have known that this rock was in fact a genie,
忽從夢中至吾前 Appearing suddenly to me in a dream.
初來若奇鬼 When it came, it first looked like a deformed monster;
肩股何孱顏 How rugged-looking are his shoulders and thighs!
漸聞砳砳聲 Eventually I heard rolling thunders,
久乃辨其言 And only after a while did I begin to tell his words.
云我石之精 He said: “I am the genie of the rock;
憤子辱我欲一宣 Enraged by your insult, I want to protest.

61 For some reason, only four kinds of uses are listed.
CHAPTER FOUR

天地之生我

Heaven and earth have given birth to me,

族類廣且蕃

Among a widespread and populous race.

子向所稱用者六

Those which you, sir, hold as useful in six possible ways,

星羅雹布盈谿山

Spread like stars or hails all over valleys and mountains.

傷殘破碎為世役

They are hurt, deformed, and broken to serve the world;

雖有小用烏足賢

Despite their petty utility, how could they be called wise?

如我之徒亦甚寡

Members like me are indeed rare,

往往掛名經史間

But often our names are numbered in the classics and histories.

居海岱者充禹貢

Rocks on the seaside paramount are listed in the “Tribute of Yu,”

雅與鉛松相差肩

As lofty equals with lead and pine.\(^62\)

處魏榆者白昼語

A rock from Weiyu once spoke in the day,

意欲警懼驕君悛

Intending to warn the arrogant king and make him repent.\(^63\)

或在驪山拒強秦

A rock once withheld the powerful Qin, refusing to be moved to Mount Li;

萬牛喘汗力莫牽

Ten thousand oxen, gasping and sweating, could not draw it along.\(^64\)

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\(^62\) The “Tribute of Yu” (Yugong 禹貢) chapter lists tributes from various places to King Yu; under “Haidai” 海岱 (seaside paramount, i.e. Mount Tai 泰山) it lists silk, hemp, lead, pine, and strange rock. See *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, 6:36, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 148.

\(^63\) According to *Zuo zhuan*, in the spring of 534 BCE (Zhao 8), a rock from Weiyu 魏榆, Jin Kingdom, once spoke. The king of Jin asked the music master Kuang 師曠 for an explanation, and Kuang replied that it was because of the people’s complaint on the king’s building of a new palace. See *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi*, 44:350, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 2052.
或從揚州感盧老
代我問答多雄篇
子今我得豈無益
子盍節槩如我堅
勉書此詩席之端

A rock in Yangzhou once inspired the respectful Lu,
Who borrowed its voice in a dialogue, producing many marvelous poems.  
Haven’t you benefited, sir, from your acquisition of me?
You, sir, should have moral integrity as staunch as mine!
And respectfully I wrote this poem on the margins of the sitting mat.

子盍節槩如我堅

According to the commentary to this poem, which quotes Chang'an zhi 長安志, it refers to a local lore around a tortoise-shape rock in Lintong 临潼 County. When the First Emperor of Qin died, this rock was fetched from afar to build his tomb under Mount Li 驪山; but at its present spot, it suddenly would not be moved any more. See n.10, SSSJ, 48:2606.

The Tang poet Lu Tong 卢仝 (795?-835) once sojourned by the Xiao family villa in Yangzhou, where he wrote a series of twenty poems in which a rock under the steps personifies as dialogic participant. See Lu Tong, “Xiao zhai ersanzi zengda shi ershi shou”萧宅二三子贈答詩二十首, QTS, 387:4373-6.
The plot of this poem mirrors a story in *Zhuangzi*. It says, when Craftsman Shi went to Qi, he saw a gigantic sawtooth oak on an altar. He passed by without casting a second glance. His apprentices were puzzled and asked why. Craftsman Shi replied that it acquired longevity exactly because of its uselessness. That night he dreamt of this oak tree, which politely protested that, were it useful, it would have already been humiliated or destroyed. Furthermore, the craftsman and the tree were both “things,” so why don’t they respect each other just as “a thing?” Craftsman Shi woke up and related his dream to his disciples. The moral is that sheer existence is more preferable (to oneself) than being useful (to others).

Emulating Craftsman Shi, Su Shi’s poetic persona assumes the voice of a utilitarian. Though other people’s appreciation of the rock might attest to its aesthetic value, Su argues that such value alone cannot spare it from being a “superfluous thing.” Against the charge of utilitarianism, aesthetic argument seems pale, thus the *raison d’être* of the rock has to be defended from the perspective of moral symbolism.

The rock comes to its defense in the form of a rugged-looking monster, whose appearance is an incarnation of the primordial chaos. It mocks Su Shi’s utilitarian logic and disparages its “useful” clansmen as unwise, who, like the fruit trees in *Zhuangzi*’s story, allow their lives to be harmed for the interests of men. Instead, those strange and useless have better chances to survive history. It then learnedly quotes several efficacious cases, exhibiting non-utilitarian ways in which rocks have historically interacted with humans.

The first case was the “strange rocks” on Mount Tai, listed among the tributes to King Yu. Commentators have speculated them to be “strange, fine rocks which resembled jade,” with no

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suggestion of their possible use. The second case was an oracular rock which once spoke and warned the king of his extravagance. This case attests to the ethical resonance between man and the heaven. Since a “useless” rock does not serve the needs of man, it becomes an agent of heaven. The third rock was another paragon of integrity, demonstrating the inarticulate but headstrong defiance against a tyrant, showing the heaven’s displeasure. The fourth rock, lying under the steps of the Xiao villa, inspired the poet Lu Tong 窮 (795?-835) to apologize in its voice for being “neglected for long, my whole face stained with dark lichen.”

The rock spoke for the poet himself, a low-ranking scholar thirsty for appreciation. Despite or precisely because of their uselessness, the four rocks represent how the “useless” are put into ritual, political, and moral appropriations.

The eloquent rock continues its apology and portrays itself to be a moral symbol. It argues that it has benefited the poet in the best way – as a reminder of moral integrity and self-sufficiency. The poet is abashed for being oblivious to such a significant moral message. Upon wakening, he respectfully writes down this poem on the margins of his sitting mat. This action emulates the sagacious King Wu, who, upon hearing a king’s proper behavior, wrote mottos on the four margins of his mat, among other furniture and utensils. Unlike King Wu’s mottos, which usually have only four characters, Su Shi’s long poem would however have been difficult to fit onto the margins of a sitting mat. The unlikelihood of the last scene reveals the fictive nature of the whole narrative. In reality, the rock could not have talked in the poet’s dream; consequently, the poet’s threat to abandon it must have also been rhetorical – he lets his poetic persona play the devil’s advocate in order to solicit the rock’s response. The poem betrays

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68 See “Shi qing ke” 石請客, among “Xiao zhai ersanzi zengda shi ershi shou,” QTS, 387:4373.

69 See Wang Pingzhen 王聘珍, Dadai liji jiegu 大戴禮記解詁, 6:104-5.
conflicting desires of the poet – to conform to the utilitarian principle of austerity and to possess “superfluous things.” He reconciles these desires by moralizing the rock’s presence, so that the useless finds a short cut to the highest cultural pertinence.

Arguably, no “thing” is utterly useless – this strange rock, for instance, could still be “hurt, deformed, or broken” to serve various human needs, like pounding silk or supporting a couch. It provides a further evidence that the category of the “useless” things has been ideologically constructed to provide vocabulary for symbolisms of the self.

**Gift or Barter: the Literati Economics**

“Superfluous things” are intrinsically tradable: they are neither indispensable nor consumable, but are valuable enough to be sought after. In the Song, precious rocks were in constant transaction, especially those of smaller sizes. As argued earlier, it is a stigma for a collector’s item to become commodity, since commoditization compromises its celebrated singularity. Thus it should pass through the commodity phase as speedily as possible – or pretend not to be a commodity at all.

The transaction of objects implicated their possessors in a complex social network of exchanges. Every form of exchange, monetary trade, barter, or gift exchange, implies a different set of social relations and economic mechanisms. In Su Shi’s time, monetary exchange and even barter were seldom recorded in literature. Of all the inkstones and strange rocks that Su Shi collected, he mentioned the price only once, that is, a hundred silver ingots for a rock which he did not manage to buy. In contrast was his silence on the prices of the rocks that he did manage

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to buy. Commodity exchange appeared to be still stigmatized among the literati class when it concerned a collector’s item, since it would present the engaged parties as calculative or profit-seeking, unworthy of the refined object at the center of the bargain. They might be the *de facto* dominant forms of exchange, but such cases rarely, if ever, found their way into literature of high registers.

In the literati economy, reciprocity was seldom calculated in monetary value, but more in terms of social solidarity, strengthened through gift exchange. Marcel Mauss’ observation points out a crucial function of gift exchange, namely as a token of alliance. Poems were often exchanged as an integrated part of a gift exchange. Their multiple functions will be observed in the cases below.

I. Gift Exchanges with the Two Fans

In 1092, Su Shi sent a set of “moon-rock inkstone and screen” to Fan Bailu 范百祿 (1030-1094) and a “starry inkstone” to his nephew Fan Zuyu 范祖禹 (1041-1098).\(^71\) Bailu was then the Vice

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\(^71\) See “Shi jin yi yueshi yan ping” xian Zigong Zhongshu gong, fu yi ‘hanxingyan’ xian Chunfu Sijiang […]” 軾近以月石硯屏獻子功中書公復以涵星硯獻純父侍講[…]，*SSSJ*, 36:1924-6. The editor Kong Fanli has punctuated between *zhongshu* and *gong*, which suggests that Bailu sent the “starry inkstone” to Zuyu. However, the rest of the title, the poem itself, as well as the following up poem all strongly suggest that it was Su Shi who sent the “starry inkstone” to Zuyu. Thus *gong* should follow *zhongshu* as a respectful epithet to Bailu, who was elder in age and senior in rank than Su Shi.
Director of the Secretariat Chancellery (rank 2a),\textsuperscript{72} while Zuyu, Expositor-in-waiting (rank 7a), was a tutor to the young emperor Zhezong. Zuyu’s office was lower in rank, but it was highly prestigious and influential.\textsuperscript{73} Su Shi was newly summoned back from his provincial tenure as the governor of Yangzhou. Because of the patronage of the Empress Dowager Xuanren, grandmother of the emperor, he had successively been appointed to Minister of War (the ninth to the tenth month, 1092; rank 2b) and then Minister of Rites (the eleventh month, 1092 to the eighth month, 1093; rank 2b).

I have noted their ranks because their official status informed the social relations involved. They were peers, which may conclude that Su did not send the gifts craving for favor, but to strengthen their collegiality and political alliance. There was, however, an imbalance in the amount of gifts, as Bailu got a stone screen in addition to an inkstone, while Zuyu only an inkstone. Accidentally or not, this imbalance corresponded to their bureaucratic hierarchy. Zuyu might have interpreted this as snobbery; thus when Bailu sent Su Shi a poem as a token of gratitude, Zuyu kept his silence. Su Shi sensed Zuyu’s dissatisfaction. He then matched Bailu’s poem in rhyme and sent a copy of the poem to Zuyu, together with a stone screen, urging his response. Zuyu finally sent him a poem, acknowledging his gratitude for both the inkstone and

\textsuperscript{72} The ranks of the positions follow Gong Yanming (1997), since Hucker (1087), whose translation of the positions are largely followed in this dissertation, sometimes fails to reflect the official institutional reform in the year 1080.

\textsuperscript{73} It is said that Su Shi called Fan Zuyu “the best imperial expositor of our time;” see “Huayang xuean” 華陽學案, in Huang Zongxi, Songyuan xue’an, 21:76.
the screen. Su Shi matched Zuyu’s poem in response, concluding this gift-poetry exchange cycle.  

Through his interlinear notes, Su Shi explained that the “moon-rock” screen was a dark screen with a light-colored moon shape in the middle; the screen should be totally flat, otherwise the moon shape must be faked out of another rock. Su Shi’s first poem, addressing both Fans, alludes to these physical features as symbolizing heavenly bodies descending on the literatus’ desk. Looking at them, their possessor will “clear his eyes,” and find “the world is like foam and shadow; there is no need to distinguish the big from the small, falsehood from the truth.” The names of the stones are sublimated into symbolisms of transcendence, and their existence in a studio would allegedly remind the scholar of a world of permanence above this human world of relative values.

Fan Zuyu, austere in personality and conservative in his Confucian scholarship, might have read Su’s poem as too Buddhist. Thus in his response poem, he repeated the comparisons of these rocks to heavenly bodies, but gave no hint at the impermanence of this world or

75 In the collection of Tokyo National Museum, there is a “moon-rock inkstone,” which is described as “having the shape of a ball divided in half, with the ink-pool (mochi 墨池, a cavity where the ink is held) and the ink-hall (motang 墨堂, a flat surface against which the inkstick is ground) resembling precisely a lotus.” The Japanese curator, perhaps following tradition, suspects it to be once in Su Shi’s possession. I have not seen this item in person. Its description is found on the museum website: 
76 See “Shi jin yi ‘yueshi yan ping’ xian Zigong Zhongshu gong […]” 轾近以月石硯獻子功中書公 […], SSSJ, 36:1925.
illusoriness of distinctions. Su might have sensed Zuyu’s disapproval. In his response poem, he purged the Buddhist flair, alluding instead to a kind of transcendence more conformable to Zuyu’s Confucian standard – noble disengagement with worldly affairs.77

Poetry played multiple functions in this exchange. First of all, it was a signal from the recipient confirming his satisfaction with the gift, as Bailu and Zuyu’s different responses had shown. Second, it interpreted the transaction, engaged the participants in a dialogue, through which they reached an agreement on the interpretation of an object. Third, it helped to realize the purpose of a gift exchange. As argued earlier, a gift exchange does not require reciprocity in equal monetary value or expect to be concluded after a single transaction. It aims instead to set up “a perpetual cycle of exchanges” to enhance social solidarity. For this purpose, a reciprocated poem was even better than a reciprocated gift, because social decorum required that when the gift sender received a poem from the gift recipient, he must compose yet another poem in response, usually using the same rhyming words. A poem accompanying or responding to a gift thus would trigger at least another cycle of poetic exchange, continuously generating social solidarity. Lastly and most importantly, it was a publically displayed behavior with written records, to be witnessed by the literary audience in and after the participants’ time, irrevocably announcing their liaisons. Poetry helped to define the nature of their exchange, shaping the way in which the author wanted it to be understood. Due to the last feature, it justified the gift exchange, distinguished it from backdoor bribery, and created the camaraderie of shared ethical and aesthetic standards.

II. A Barter of Inequity

Despite the literati aversion to commodification, barter was occasionally proposed. Appadurai defines barter as “the exchange of objects for one another without reference to money and with maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs.” It is presumably the most straightforward type of exchange. But in the case to be examined below, the situation was far from simple because of the role of poetry and because the proposed bargain seemed unfair.

This exchange took place in 1084 between Su Shi and Zhang Jin 張近 (d.u.), an official known for his courage and insight. Zhang was not among Su’s close social circle. It began with Su Shi requesting Zhang’s “Dragon Tail son-of-the-rock” inkstone. The “son-of-the-rock” (zishi 子石) was believed to be the stony core formed within a big rock, like a fetus within a pregnant body. It was regarded as the essence of the rock, extremely rare. Su Shi proposed to exchange it with a bronze sword. Even though Zhang might be an aficionado of swords, a nondescript sword for a rare inkstone would be a hard sell. Su must have anticipated Zhang’s reluctance, so he sent a poem together with the sword, explaining his proposal:

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79 Or perhaps a pair of bronze swords. Prior to this exchange, Su Shi had once gotten drunk in the house of Guo Xiangzheng 郭祥正 and painted bamboos and rocks on his walls. Guo gave him a pair of bronze swords in thanks. See “Guo Xiangzheng jia zuihua zhushi bishang […]” 郭祥正家醉畫石壁上[…], SSSJ, 23:1234-5. It might be Guo’s swords that Su Shi used to trade Zhang’s inkstone.

我家銅劍如赤蛇
My bronze sword is like a vermilion snake,

君家石硯蒼璧橢而窪
Your inkstone, a concaved, oval dark jade disk.

君持我劍向何許
Where would you go with my sword in hand?

大明宮裏玉佩鳴衝牙
In the Palace of Great Light, it clings with the jade tusk.81

我得君硯亦安用
What would I do, when I acquire your inkstone?

雪堂窗下爾雅箋蟲蝦
Below the window of Snow Hall, commenting on the insects and fish in *Erya*.82

二物與人初不異
The two things do not choose their human companions;

飄落高下隨風花
Like flowers scattering high or low with the wind.

蒯緱玉具皆外物
A straw-stringed or jade handle is only external to the sword;83

81 “The Palace of Great Light” 大明宮 was a Tang Dynasty imperial palace built in 662. “Tusk” (*chongya 衝牙*) refers to the pointy jut on a jade pendant, described in the *Book of Rites*; see *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, 30:254, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 1483.

82 “Commenting on the insects and fish (*chongyu 蟲魚*) in *Erya*” is a fixed expression for meticulous philology, as used by Su Shi in “Guo Wen Jue Xiangong fang” 過文覺顯公房, *SSSJ*, 25:1345. Here, Su Shi has changed it to “insects and shrimp” for the sake of rhyming. I have replaced “shrimp” again with “fish,” since “shrimp” seems rather awkward when rhyming disappears in translation.

83 *Kuan* 阏 means straw-string; *hou 綯* means the handle of a sword. This term comes from the biography of Lord Mengchang 孟嘗君, where Feng Huan 馮驩, a low-rank scholar, possessed such a sword. Its shabby handle bespoke its owner’s lack of fortune. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 15:2359.
Drafting in court or in privacy makes no distinction to the inkstone.\textsuperscript{84}

Don’t you see, sir,

The Qin once traded cities for a jade disk from the Zhao?

Those map-pointers and pillar-lookers competed their ruse.\textsuperscript{85}

Don’t you also see,

The two scholars once traded a concubine with a horse?

The horse neighing, the girl sobbing, both longing for home.\textsuperscript{86}

Better give each other a non-sentient thing.

\textsuperscript{84} “Supervising imperial drafts” refers to Sima Xiangru, who was said to be commissioned for this task when Emperor Wu wanted to send anything to Liu An, the King of Huainan, in awe of Liu An’s literary reputation; see Liu An’s biography in Ban Gu, \textit{Hanshu}, 14:2145. “Drafting \textit{Taixuan},” here translated as “drafting in private,” refers to Yang Xiong (53 BCE-18), who had composed this work in privacy; see Yang Xiong’s biography in \textit{ibid.}, 57:3565.

\textsuperscript{85} It is said that the Qin once wanted to trade fifteen cities with the Zhao for “Mr. He’s Jade Disk” (\textit{heshibi}和氏璧). Aware of the Qin’s possible treachery, Lin Xiangru 藺相如 was commissioned to take care of the jade. When Lin found out in the Qin court that the King of Qin was likely to break the promise, he retrieved the jade at the excuse of pointing out a flaw, and held it looking askance at a pillar, menacing to commit suicide and smash the jade. The king thus pointed at the map, pretending to show him the fifteen cities in exchange; Lin in mistrust devised another ruse and finally brought the jade back to the Zhao. See Lin Xiangru’s biography in Sima Qian, \textit{Shiji}, 81:2439-41.

\textsuperscript{86} This couplet refers to the exchange between Pei Du 裴度 (765-839) and Bo Juyi, when Pei sent Bo a horse, together with a poem requesting Bo’s beloved concubine. This incidence has been analyzed in Xiaoshan Yang (2003), 160-97.
Unlike in a market place, Su Shi does not begin his proposal by calculating the price. Instead, he depicts the niceties of both objects with studied fairness. Notably, he uses grandiloquence in projecting Zhang wearing the sword in royal service, while down-plays his self-portrait as engaging in pedantic works. This rhetorical maneuver appears to be calculated to offset Zhang’s negative response to this proposal. Su Shi then expatiates upon the indifference of sentient objects to their destinies in human hands. It implies that the obsession toward possession is totally subjective, unjustifiable from the point of the view of the object. Xiaoshan Yang has also translated this poem and observed the rhetoric on the independence of the objects, but he interprets it as an “anticlimactic declaration” and does not consider it relevant to the transaction.  

In my opinion, however, the unbelongingness of objects plays an essential function in Su’s proposal. Since an object is transcendental to human obsession, it is emotionally detached from changing hands, bringing no intrinsic mark of ownership along. So the exchange does not concern the object, but concerns only the two parties of exchange. Furthermore, an unbelonging object is beyond human value system and should not be monetized, thus the exchange between the two parties should not be mercantile. So what is the nature of their exchange? Su lists a few historical examples of exchanges only to contradict them. That between the Qin and the Zhao involved too much imbalance of power and caused devastating distrust. That between Pei Du 裴

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87 Reference to “Mugua” 木瓜 (Mao 64), see Maoshi zhengyi, 3.3:59-60, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 327-8.

88 See Xiaoshan Yang (2003), 171.
度 (765-839) and Bo Juyi traded two sentient beings and caused too much pain. Unlike in these two cases, Su suggests, they should exchange tokens of friendship, as described in the *Book of Odes*. Ironically, the last line, exchanging “peach and plum” for “a jade flower,” implies the imbalance of monetary values, contradicting therefore Su Shi’s earlier effort to project the two objects as equals. Thus Su Shi in effect admitted the unfairness of his proposal, pleading instead to Zhang’s friendship to accept his offer.

Zhang did not accept Su’s sword. Nevertheless, he sent Su the inkstone, together with a poem. This poem is no longer extant, which otherwise would have explained his action. Three possible interpretations. He might have wanted to display his magnanimity, so he not only gave Su the inkstone for nothing in return, but composed also a poem to signal and explain his goodwill. Such generosity perhaps would not be shown to just anybody. From Su Shi, a cultural luminary, he expected not materialistic reciprocity, but social solidarity. Another possible explanation: he felt the sword useless to him, so his return of the sword was no simple magnanimity, but rather motivated by pride. In this scenario, his action had virtually mocked Su’s stinginess. The third possibility: he was not necessarily dissatisfied with the sword, but with Su’s advertisement of it. Despite its euphemism, Su’s poem in fact did not justify why Su should have the inkstone while Zhang the sword, except implying that Zhang would be dignified by the sword in court attendance, while Su needed the inkstone for his scholarly work. In a society prizing cultural enterprises above political ambition and military feat, Su’s implication was dangerously close to insult. Zhang was thus obliged to reverse the situation by emphasizing his little concern on the bright career prospect symbolized by the sword.

Su Shi seemed to have understood Zhang’s action in the last way. Thereupon he sent Zhang yet another poem with the sword. The second poem compared Zhang to those roaming
warriors frustrated and eager to employ their talents for some noble cause. This portrayal might have pleased Zhang, since it had purged the unworthy hint of wealth or power, associating the sword instead with integrity, royalty, and heroism.

The poetry exchange helped to define the material exchange. Su’s first poem hesitated between barter and gift exchange. Zhang’s response clarified the ambiguity and declared it a gift exchange. By sending a poem, which conventionally invited another poem in response, he also suggested his inclination to prolong their cycle of exchanges. Su Shi confirmed his equal willingness to enhance their social solidarity by responding to this poem. He was reluctant however to be the sole recipient of material benefit in this exchange, which would project his motivation as exploitive. So he sent the sword again, underscoring his sincerity, and offered a fresh interpretation of the sword. When Zhang finally accepted the sword, the initially proposed barter had been transformed through poetry into a gift exchange.

III. A Sabotaged Exchange

The third case to be examined happened in 1092 between Su Shi and Wang Shen 王詵 (1048-?), who had married the daughter of Emperor Yingzong and was then uncle of the young

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90 This exchange has also been examined in Xiaoshan Yang (2003), 179-95, as well as Egan (2006), 226-32. Yang’s major argument is that Su’s possessiveness has motivated his resourceful use of poetic rhetoric to overcome the unequal power relationship. Egan concludes from the exchange that Su Shi’s
Zhezong. To Su Shi, Wang was not only a close friend, but also a political ally. When Su Shi was prosecuted for his poetry satirizing the “New Policies” in 1079, Wang Shen was among those implicated and exiled. Thus despite Wang’s excessive request and Su Shi’s blatant stinginess, they strived to maintain the delicate balance of friendship.

The exchange began with Wang sending Su Shi a short poem, requesting to “borrow” his Qiuchi rock, named after a legendary mountain resided by earthly immortals. Su had depicted this rock on various occasions as a symbol of divine mountains or of his hometown. It was his favorite rock. So Su Shi begrudged. Instead of sending the rock, he sent Wang a long poem, expressing his concern that Wang, being the powerful party, would seize the rock. Three of their common friends matched Wang Shen’s poem and provided their opinions: Qian Xie 錢勰 (1034-1097) and Wang Qinchen 王欽臣 (d.u.) both tried to dissuade Wang’s request; Jiang Zhiqi 蔣之奇 (1031-1104) initially supported Wang, but upon actually seeing the rock, renounced his support. Having rallied supports from the mediators, Su Shi proposed to trade the rock with a celebrated horse painting by the Tang painter Han Gan 韓幹 (fl. 8th cent.) in Wang’s possession. It was not uncommon that Su Shi regarded strange rocks as products of nature had the same market value as works of art. In 1085, he had already traded a painting of his
own with an unusual garden rock. Su’s evaluation of rocks was however not necessarily shared by others. Wang Shen, a reputed painter and collector, tightened his fist. To break the deadlock, Qian Xie proposed to take both the rock and the painting into his own custody, while Jiang Zhiqi proposed to destroy both. Unwilling to accept either proposal, Su Shi wrote the third poem in sequence, mobilizing his resourceful sophistry to keep the rock.

春冰無真堅  The ice in spring does not have true solidity;
霜葉失故緑  The frosty leaves lose their former green.
鷃疑鵬萬里  A quail may doubt if the huge peng can fly ten thousand li;\(^6\)
蚿笑夔一足  And a millipede laughs at the monster kui for being one-legged.\(^7\)
二豪爭攘袂  When two gallants fight, grabbing at each other’s sleeve,
先生一捧腹  The master holds his belly, roaring in laughter.\(^8\)

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\(^{94}\) See “Shu huabi yishi” 書畫壁易石, SSWJ, 70:2214.
\(^{95}\) See “Shi yu yi shi yi hua Jinqing nanzhi […].” 軾欲以石易畫晉卿難之[…], SSSJ, 36:1947.
\(^{96}\) In *Zhuangzi*, when the mythic peng wants to fly to the southern sea, a quail laughed at its ambition, since it appears to the quail that flying among the bushes for a few feet is high enough. See Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 1:2.
\(^{97}\) According to *Shanhaijing* 山海經, kui was a monster living on a mountain among the eastern sea; it looked like a dark bull without horns, and had only one leg; see Yuan Ke 袁珂, *Shanhaijing jiaozhu* 山海經校注, 14:361. In *Zhuangzi*, kui once asked the millipede how it managed to handle its thousands of legs, since it was already troublesome enough for it to deal with its single leg; see Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 17:592-3. Su Shi used this allusion but put it in a way as if the millipede laughed at kui.
明镜既无台  Since the bright mirror has no pedestal,^{99}

淨瓶何用蹙  What’s the purpose to kick over the clear-water pitcher?^{100}

盆山不可隱  A miniature mountain is no place for reclusion,

畫馬無由牧  Just like a painted horse cannot be herded.

聊將置庭宇  Leave it for now in my courtyard, sir -

何必棄溝瀆  Why must you discard it into a ditch?

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^{98} In his “Eulogy on the Virtues of Wine” (Jiudesong 酒德頌), Liu Ling 刘伶 (221?-300) called his persona “Master Great Man” (Darenxiansheng 大人先生), whose single dedication was drinking. A young aristocrat and a country gentleman heard of his behavior and started arguing for its approvability, which ended up with a brawl. The master, however, could not care less about their debate and kept drinking in happy transcendence. See Liu Ling’s biography in Fang Xuanling 房玄龄, Jinshu 晋書, 49:1376.

^{99} According to the legend, when the fifth patriarch of Chan lineage, Hongren 弘忍 (601-675), was looking for his successor, his primary disciple Shenxiu 神秀 (606-706) demonstrated his understanding by a gatha, comparing his body to the pedestal of a bright mirror (the mind) which should be frequently dusted. Huineng 惠能 (638-713), who would later become the sixth patriarch, retorted that the bright mirror originally did not have a pedestal, so there was no need to brush off the dust. See Jingde chuandenglu 景德傳燈錄, T no.2076, 51:222c.

^{100} Reference to the story of Master Weishan Lingyou 潭州溈山靈祐 (771-853). When Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (749-814) intended to transmit him the orthodoxy of his lineage, a senior monk, Hualin 华林, protested on the ground of his own seniority. Baizhang offered to test his understanding by pointing to a clear-water pitcher and saying: “It shall not be called a clear-water pitcher.” Hualin responded: “Then it shall not be called a wood stake either.” Baizhang asked Lingyou the same question, and Lingyou responded by kicking the pitcher over. So Lingyou won the contest and succeeded the orthodoxy. See Tanzhou Weishan Lingyou chanshi yulu 潭州溈山靈祐禪師語錄, T no.1989, 47:577b.
He who has burnt a treasure is truly attached to the treasure;

He who has smashed a jade never forgets the jade.

I have long known the young lord’s wisdom;

His words could lower even his seniors’ heads.

I wanted to observe the marvel of transforming things;

So I tested him by requesting the horse painting.

Yet even though Vimalakīrti had abandoned the sylphs,

The sylphs still lingered by his side.\textsuperscript{101}

He gave them an endless burning lamp,

To illuminate their long darkened valleys.

If the mind is settled, with nothing in hindrance,

The dharma’s pleasure will conquer the five corporeal desires.

Below the lofty three peaks of Emei is my hometown;

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\textsuperscript{101} Reference to \textit{Vimalakīrti Sūtra}. The demon king once assumed the form of Sakyamuni Buddha and led twelve thousand sylphs to tempt a bodhisattva, insisting to leave him with the sylphs as household maids. The bodhisattva, unable to turn down the command, was rescued by Vimalakīrti, who recognized the demon king and proposed to take the sylphs to himself. The demon king agreed in fear, and Vimalakīrti preached to the sylphs to enjoy the dharma’s pleasure, instead of following their corporeal desires. The sylphs, now transformed, refused to return to the demon’s palace. When the demon challenged Vimalakīrti for keeping the sylphs in his company, he replied that he had already abandoned them, but they chose to stay by his side. In the end, he persuaded the sylphs to return to the demon’s palace, since they had already acquired “the endless burning lamp” and should now go back to convert their fellow servants. See \textit{Weimojie suo shuo jing 維摩詰所說經}, T no.475, 14:543b.
Su Shi begins by depicting the impermanent nature and limited vision of earthly things. Only the limited beings will brawl over petty moral causes like abstinence from wine, while a Master Great Man, who disregards human limitations, will only laugh at their fight. It is because he understands that, above the world of contingency and relativity, there is a world of permanence, symbolized by the bright mirror or the clear-water pitcher. These things are indifferent to human treatment, be it gingerly dusting or defiant kicking. They remain self-sufficient. Despite his frequent rhetoric of comparing art forms to real things, Su Shi is well aware of its rhetorical nature, as here he points out in shrewd common sense: nobody can go into reclusion in a miniature mountain or to herd a painted horse. As he reveals at the end of the poem, he does desire to retire among the mountains, while Wang Shen longs for heroic warfare. Thus possessing these symbolic artifacts reflects the viewer’s desire for these real objects. If so, why must the owner dump them in deliberation? As argued in Chapter Two, strenuous effort to acquire spontaneity is itself a hindrance to the mind. Su Shi uses this argument to first defeat Jiang Zhiqi’s proposal of destroying both treasures, which is the most urgent threat. Then he comes to terms with Wang Shen’s lust for possession.

By eulogizing Wang’s wisdom, Su puts him on a high intellectual ground, so that Wang is obliged to follow the game played on a metaphysical level. Then Su Shi tactfully disclaims his own request for Wang’s painting, saying that his sole purpose was to test Wang’s marvelous wisdom as the master, not the slave, of “things.” He does not chide Wang’s request for the rock
as failing the test. On the contrary, he praises Wang for being another Vimalakīrti, who has abandoned his possession, though it follows him anyway. Su expatiates on the reference to Vimalakīrti in a few couplets, arguing for the supremacy of the dharma’s pleasure above the gratification of corporeal desires. It implies that painting provides Wang with the dharma’s pleasure. By first challenging Wang and then exonerating him from the charge, Su also defended his own possession of the rock as the dharma’s pleasure.

If, like in the case of Zhang Jin, the argument above does not justify why each of them should own his particular object, Su now gives his last reason: the Qiuchi rock reminds Su of his hometown, so he is in emotional need of its company; the horse painting reminds Wang of heroic warfare, which is his secret ambition (Wang was the grandson of a general). Artistic forms, which have earlier been disclaimed as illusory resemblances, are redefined here as symbols of the real things. The “three peaks of Emei” refers both to the real mountain and the Qiuchi rock; similarly, the “ten thousand horses” refers both to the real warhorses and the painted horses. The possession of an object is once again justified for the object’s symbolic value and for its alleged kindred spirit with its owner.

In all the three exchanges examined above, gift exchange was the dominant form, while the idea of barter was only entertained as a way to launch or forestall an acquisition. The objects did have monetary values, and the participants in these exchanges were keenly aware of that. Fan Zuyu was displeased for getting less. Su Shi felt apologetic for proposing an imbalanced barter. Wang Shen’s reluctance might have been nourished by the thought that a natural rock should price less than a masterpiece painting. But these calculations never emerged onto the textual
surface. Rhetorically, the sole concern was about the objects’ symbolic value of transcendence and their spiritual affinity with humans. Money was never foregrounded in the literati economy.

Yet it was not necessarily hypocrisy. As Su Shi tried to establish, if an object does not belong to any human system, it should be intrinsically value-free. All these utilitarian, monetary, aesthetic, or symbolic values are external to it. Su Shi recognized this point. Despite his tendency to theorize their existence, he frequently disclaimed his own signification, emphasizing instead the externality of these objects. After all, a rock is a rock.

Coda

It is arbitrary to distinguish the “useful” from the “useless.” After all, when inkstones exist in surplus on a literatus’ desk, at one time only one of them will remain useful and the rest will become useless. Similarly, garden rocks could well serve various human needs just like their less loved peers. Objects do not become useful or useless by themselves — it is decided by their human possessors and also, perhaps particularly, by the literary depictions of them. The utilitarian principle itself is ideological.

The fascination with objects comes neither from utilitarian calculation nor from philosophical signification. Rather, it reflects the sheer power of sensuality held by the object. There is something childish and innocent in fetishism. As Su Shi recalled a natural inkstone (tianshi 天石) that he discovered as a child:

軾年十二時, 於所居紗縠行宅隙地中, 與羣兒鑿地為戲。得異石, 如魚, 膚溫莹, 作淺碧色。表裏皆細銀星, 扣之鏗然。試以為硯, 甚發墨, 顧無貯水處。先君曰:
“是天硯也。有硯之德，而不足於形耳。”因以賜軾，曰：“是文字之祥也。”軾寶而用之。

When Shi was twelve, I once played with other children to dig into a vacant ground in our house in the silk market. I found a strange rock, looking like fish, its skin sleek and gleaming, and its color pale green. Its whole body and surface sparkled with tiny silver stars. It clanged metallically upon knocking. When I tried to use it as an inkstone, it was good at producing ink, but had no concave to store it. My late father said: “It is a natural inkstone. It has the virtue of an inkstone, but is short in form.” He bestowed it to me with the words: “It is an auspice for your literature.” I used it with endearment.102

When the child Su Shi was enamored by the unusual appearance of the rock and attempted to put it into use, Su Xun, his father, quickly derived a paradox between inner virtue and outer form, and further interpreted it as an auspice. The child’s initial reaction to this stone was aesthetic surprise, which was then turned into pragmatic calculation. Both reactions came without cultural mediacy. The father, however, represented the force of culture. He interpreted nature as mimics of the human and divined a supernatural order which worked nature to the favor of man. The perceptive child accepted his father’s indoctrination and composed an inscription to elaborate upon the paradox that he was taught to discern. In the many inscriptions and poems on inkstones composed by the adult Su Shi, signification had become an internalized mode of response. But even when the innocent reaction had been irrevocably overwritten by cultivated interpretation, Su Shi’s persistent fascination with rocks still showed certain childish ecstasy. Perhaps his constant signification was only an afterthought to legitimize this ecstasy. As Lyotard argues,

there exist in everyone two contradictory forces: the human and the inhuman. If we are not born “human,” the “inhuman” may well be a trace of childhood persisting up to the age of adulthood. Or quite on the contrary, it is rather the harmonization of the heterogeneous, the education and institutionalization, that is inhuman. In whichever case, the enchantment of objects originates from a desire to go back in time, to erase the incessant, automatic signification built in by culture. It is a bitter reminder of our irreversible separation from nature.

The motif of “returning” in Chinese literature represents the desire to go back in time. In Su Shi’s long bureaucratic life, he repeatedly expressed the nostalgia for his hometown below Mt. Emei, symbolized by his miniature Qiuchi rock. But he never returned – even when he had the chance to. For him, “home” was associated with the memories from his childhood and of his hometown, referring not so much to a real place, but rather to a spiritual state of spontaneity. As he wrote in the year 1095 during his exile to Huizhou, then a semi-barbaric land:

東坡信畸人 Dongpo is indeed a man of odds;
涉世真散材 He comes into the world like a useless tree.
仇池有歸路 Here I find a way to return to Qiuchi -
羅浮豈徒來 It is not in vain that I have come so far to Luofu!
踐蛇及茹蠱 Trumping on snakes, dining on insects -
心空了無猜 When my mind is empty, I take no dislike!
攜手葛與陶 Holding hands with Mr. Ge and Mr. Tao,

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In the Zhuangzian story quoted earlier, Craftsman Shi calls the sawtooth oak a “useless tree.” Su Shi, who once played the role of the craftsman in the poem on the strange rock, now identifies himself with the tree. Likewise, “a man of odds” in similar phrasing has appeared in the poem on the Dragon Tail Inkstone, used by the stone to describe him. This poem further shows that all these “idle,” “superfluous,” and “useless” objects are for Su Shi symbols of the self. He has found the road to return only after being convinced of (xin 信; zhen 真) his uselessness. As he exclaims not without mockery, the sad exile to Luofu turns out to be the happy path to Qiuchi, though the two mountains are thousands of miles apart. Qiuchi is here a rich symbol, referring to his miniature garden rock, the legendary mountain, his hometown under Emei, his nostalgic memory of childhood, and a transcendental abode of permanence. This rock in his household was a daily reminder of his road to return.

On this ever returning road, Su Shi wanted to hold the hands of Tao Qian, a Jin recluse, and Ge Hong, an alchemist. These two chosen companions, as to be discussed in later chapters, represented two aspects of the spontaneity Su Shi aspired to acquire: as spiritual transcendence projected into a political persona and as physical transcendence pursued through esoteric arts.

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PART III: THE SPONTANEOUS BODY
As argued in earlier chapters, generations of readers have perceived in Su Shi’s works an image of the author’s self as spontaneous and unrestrained. This image has been the most successful creation of Su’s works and, in turn, an essential element sustaining their lasting charm. Through his works, Su interprets his last exiles to Huizhou (in modern Guangdong Province) and Danzhou (in modern Hainan Island) teleologically as the realization of a life-long trajectory of returning into nature. As a purported result, his “authentic self” was eventually disengaged from institutional forces like those of culture, society, or politics. The irony of it being a forced return was not lost in his reflection. To solve this paradox, Su actively integrated the forced nature of his exile into a systematic hermeneutics of spontaneous behavior, proposing that one shall not actively seek disengagement, but shall follow whatever destiny dictates. Ethical spontaneity, thus understood, is a dialectical middle ground between active freedom, that is, “free to,” and passive freedom, that is, “free from.” The individual desires liberation, yet he waits for his chance till all those restraining conditions loosen their grip, so that his liberation comes with minimum external struggle.

Disengagement had been a constant theme in Su Shi’s poetry ever since his youth. As early as in 1059, on Su’s second journey from his hometown to the capital, the poet already wrote about his desire to lead a secluded life in the mountains, withdrawing from the road to
power and glory.¹ And again, in the eleventh month of 1061, when Su Shi was leaving the capital to his first official post in Fengxiang (in modern Shaanxi Province), he urged his brother Su Che to retreat early together, lest the duty of office distanced their fraternity.² Given the youth of the poet, such sentiment was less likely the genuine expression of worldly weariness than an exercise on a conventional theme. Nevertheless, the longing for return matured into a dominant note in his exile poetry, beginning with his Huangzhou exile and fully developed in his last two exiles, despite or precisely because either retirement or resignation was no longer an option. A fresh interpretation was thus born from demand, which understood “return” as a mode of transcendence over spiritual and corporeal sufferings by mental and physiological exercises.

During the Northern Song, Huizhou and especially Danzhou represented the southernmost margin of Chinese civilization. Su’s accounts of the local Dan 蠻 and Li 黎 peoples suggests a strong Han ethnocentric perspective. Solitude, alienation, and material deprivation often haunted the aging poet. He strived to transcend his predicament in two ways: through philosophical persuasion by matching the poetry of Tao Qian 陶潛 (352-427), a recluse who resigned and returned to his farmstead; and through physical transformation by practicing the art of Ge Hong 葛洪 (284-343), an alchemist who allegedly returned to the pre-natal state of no death.

The very fact that Su longed for both kinds of transcendence suggests that neither alone was adequate. Philosophical persuasion, it seems, had its limits for him. Su Shi admired Tao Qian’s serenity toward deprivation and death, which was an image created both by Tao’s poetry


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and by Su’s imagination of him. Su idealized Tao to reflect his desired self-image, even though he was acutely aware of their difference: Tao abruptly resigned from office for a trivial slight, but Su remained a bureaucrat despite malicious defamation and successive exiles. To justify his identification, Su defined reclusion as an inner state of spontaneity, unconditioned by external contingencies. Tao’s resignation was thus understood as consequence of his natural dispositions – just like Su’s exile, a natural outcome of his unyielding character. In this regard, both not only returned to live a spontaneous life within nature, but also chanced their return in different, but equally spontaneous, fashions. Their difference was thus not a matter of choice (Tao) verses force (Su), but solely in that Tao’s return was earlier, more resolute, and thorough. For this reason, Su should and could emulate this paradigm of disengagement to complete his course of return.

Yet another irony appears to have eluded Su Shi. When he sought to experience his exile through Tao’s poetry, the wild southern landscape lost its immediacy and was fashioned after the poetic representation of Tao’s organized farmstead. The immediate surroundings thus were distanced and aestheticized, transformed into a reflection of another literary landscape. In this sense, Su’s return into nature was simultaneously his retreat from nature in its raw, undomesticated state. His journey of no return into the ever farther south thus became a journey of returning “home,” which was an inner state of spontaneity perpetually alienated from, while paradoxically nourished by, one’s station in the material nature.
Literary Correspondence with an Ancient Author

In 1092, Su Shi, then Magistrate of Yangzhou, wrote twenty poems each matching a piece in Tao Qian’s series of “Drinking” (“Yinjiu” 飲酒). He declared to have developed a penchant for staying tipsy – or more precisely, due to his little tolerance of alcohol, for holding constantly an empty wine cup.

“Matching poetry” (changhe 唱和, “sing and respond,” or chouchang 酬唱, “exchange of singing”) is a refined form of poetry writing initiated in late Eastern Han. It is quintessentially a social genre. On an occasion of literary gathering, one person writes a poem and the others write in response, either “matching the meaning” (heyi 和意) or “matching the rhyme” (heyun 和韻) of the initial poem. In any case, the original poem’s choice of meter is followed, but the heyi form asks the matching poem to be longer than the original, the extra lines a free-style comment on the original poem. Of the heyun form, finer distinctions can be made: using the same rhyme category, the same rhyme words but in undefined order, or the same rhyme words in the same order. Since Late Tang, the last and most challenging fashion became dominant. The catch is to dance a shackled dance in seeming freedom. Su Shi, a master of this game, generally abided by the strictest formal rule when he matched Tao. His matching poems are not necessarily related to Tao’s originals in meaning, but often display a discernible pattern of dialogue through which the matching poem seeks to support, interpret, or modify the original poem.

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4 On the early forms of “matching poetry” from Late Han to Tang, see Zhao Yiwu (1997). On its practice in the Song, see Yoshikawa (1967), 40-41.
His matching of Tao in Yangzhou would have been a whimsical, singular event, were it not that in the third month of 1095, during his exile to Huizhou, he was inspired by his son’s reciting of Tao Qian’s poems and determined to undertake a project of matching the entire corpus of Tao’s poetry. This systematic enterprise cast his experiment in Yangzhou into perspective and gave it retrospective meaning as an early revelation of a predisposition which would be fully developed in his exiles. This project was closed in the spring of 1100, with the last poem written shortly after the newly enthroned Huizong declared amnesty and granted his return to the central regions. The one hundred and nine pieces of “matching Tao” (hetao and陶) poems were issued separately in four fascicles soon after Su Shi’s return, with a preface written by Su Che and modified by Su Shi himself. This collection enjoyed immediate popularity

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6 There is some minor dispute over whether “He Tao ‘Guo Zhubu ershou’” 和陶郭主簿二首 (SSSJ, 43:2350-2) or “He Tao ‘Shijing Qu’e’” 和陶始經曲阿 (SSSJ, 43:2355-6) was the last title. Judging from Su’s preface, it is clear that the former were written on the Qingming 清明 (the 24th day in the 3rd month) Day, while the latter was written when he heard the news of his absolution, the edict of which was issued on the 13th day of the first month. Thus Kong Fanli decided that the latter was written prior to the former; see SSNP, 39:1320, 1323. Qing editors including Zha Shenxing and Wang Wengao, however, both decided that the latter should be the last poem; see SSSJ, 43:2355. Perhaps they considered that the edict would need a few months to travel to the Hainan Island; perhaps they desired the drama of ending the “Matching Tao” poems with the moment of absolution. I leave this issue open.

7 See Su Che, “Zizhan he Tao Qian shiji yin” 子瞻和陶淵明詩集引, Su Che ji, houji 21:1110-1 (also commonly known as “Dongpo xiansheng he Tao Qian shi yin” 東坡先生和陶淵明詩引, as quoted in SSSJ, 35:1882-3).
among his contemporaries. Many of Su Shi’s followers undertook on themselves to write similar poems “matching Tao,” a practice so widespread that it earned Chao Shuizhi’s (1059-1129) mockery: “In just a single day, many Tao Yuanmings suddenly crowded the realm of man.” It was preposterous for lesser talents to write “matching Tao,” as Chao argued, since Su Shi alone deserved to be Tao’s match.

What motivated Su Shi’s “matching Tao” enterprise? By Su Shi’s time, poetic exchange was an indispensable pastime on literati social gatherings. Its practitioners comprised of every stratum of the learned society, from emperors and ministers to recluses and monks alike. The percentage of matching poems among one’s compositions during a certain period, if faithfully recorded, served as an index of one’s social activity. Around one third of Su Shi’s extant poems were composed as matching poetry to his contemporaries. The percentage of poems explicitly containing the word 他 or 次韻 in their titles was the highest during his capital tenures and was the lowest during his three exiles (excluding “matching Tao”). In the solitude of Huizhou and Danzhou, however, Su Shi normalized the practice of matching the poetry of an ancient author by methodically going through the entire corpus of Tao Qian. This practice beckoned the society of a kindred spirit of the past and was distinguished from other poetic exchanges by an ideological agenda.

Poetry exchange with a contemporary was a gesture of intimacy, announcing a literary liaison to the republic of letters. It supplemented and often accompanied other forms of exchange

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8 This anthology was highly popular in the Song and had been printed repeatedly in various editions. The earliest existent wood-block print, preserved in National Taiwan Library, was first issued at the end of the Northern Song in Huangzhou; see Liu Shangrong (1988), 24-33.

9 See Hong Mai 洪邁, Rongzhai suibi 容齋隨筆, 3:32.
like gift, service, or other tokens of collegiality. Yet no one would match a contemporary poet’s works in their entirety. In comparison, Su’s matching of Tao’s entire corpus elevated their relation from the level of friendship to virtual identification. Social exchange, moreover, could often be obligated by decorum within an immediate setting. Matching an ancient author, on the other hand, was an act of choice, breaking free the limit of time or space. Such a choice was thus invested with the significance of identifying a role model, whose literary merit and moral stature were both objects of emulation. Chao Buzhi’s disapproval of his contemporaries’ hetao faddism and his singular praise of Su’s undertaking suggest the success of Su’s project, which made him the “match” of Tao Qian.

Su Shi prided “matching Tao” as his innovation. As he declared to Su Che, “poets of earlier times had ‘imitation of the old’ poems but had never matched the poems of an ancient author. Matching the poetry of an ancient author (zhuihe guren 追和古人) begins with Dongpo!”

10 As Wendy Swartz has aptly remarked in Swartz (2008), 200-1.

11 See Su Che, “Zizhan he Tao Qian shiji yin.” To be precise, some poets before Su Shi occasionally wrote poems matching a precursor. For instance, Li He 李賀, “Zhuihe Liu Yun” 追和柳恽, QTS, 390: 4395, “Zhuihe He Xie ‘Tongque ji’” 追和何謝銅雀妓, QTS, 392:4412; Li Deyu 李德裕, “Zhuihe Taishi Yan gong tong Qingyuan daoshi you Huqiu si” 追和太師顏公同清遠道士遊虎丘寺, QTS, 475: 5392; Pi Rixiu 皮日休, “Zhuihe Huqiu si Qingyuan daoshi shi” 追和虎丘寺清遠道士詩, QTS, 609:7029, “Zhuihe Youdujun ciyun ershou” 追和幽獨君次韻二首, QTS, 609:7030; Lu Guimeng 陸龜蒙, “Ci zhuimei Qingyuan daoshi shiyun bing xu” 次追和清遠道士詩韻並序, QTS, 617:7114, “Ci Youdujun yun” 次幽獨君韻, QTS, 619:7128; etc. Such practices, however, were rare, whimsical, not influential. There are also a few “matching Tao” poems attributed to Tang Yanqian 唐彥謙 (jinshi 861), now collected in QTS (671:7677). But scholars
To be sure, Tao Qian and Su Shi remained two distinctive poets. Even in his “matching Tao” poems, Su Shi, in the words of the Qing commentator Ji Yun 紀昀 (1727-1805), “collected his talent to approximate Tao, but from time to time revealed his true colors.”\(^{12}\) The couplet often quoted to make this point is:

三杯洗戰國  In three cups he [Cao Can] washed away the Warring States;

一斗消強秦  One peck of wine dissolved the powerful Qin.\(^{13}\)

This couplet praises the early Han statesman Cao Can 曹參 (?-190 BCE). It said that when Cao was the Prime Minister of the Qi feudal state, a local wise man Mr. Gai 蓋公 persuaded him to practice the governance of “without interference” 無為而治. So in the nine years of Cao’s office, he did nothing but drinking, and by doing so, the wounds of centuries of warfare were healed.\(^{14}\) In both of Su’s lines, the light amount of wine is balanced against a historical period synonymous with war and chaos, connected by a verb which suggests the soft power of water. In comparison, the original Tao Qian line, lamenting over the loss of Confucius’ teaching during the times of warfare, states:

洙泗輟微響  Between the Zhu and Si rivers, the tiny sound [of a schoolyard] had ceased;

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\(^{12}\) Quoted in *SSSJ*, 29:1891

\(^{13}\) Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Yinjiu’ ershishou,” no.20, *SSSJ*, 29:1891.

\(^{14}\) Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 54:2029.
Confucius’ school was purportedly located between the said rivers. “The tiny sound” of the schoolyard, alluding also to the sound of the waves, is the civil voice inundated in the Warring States pandemonium. Su Shi’s couplet is cleverer in its juxtaposition and balance. Thus, as the poet and critic Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190-1257) remarked: “Though Dongpo matched the poetry of Tao, its aura and appearance is simply of Dongpo.”

Despite their undeniable difference, Su Shi’s later poetry did transform under the influence of Tao. It became more understated and at times deliberately “clumsy.” For Su Shi, Tao’s poetry represented the ideal surface of spontaneity concealing ultimate splendor. Yet his emulation was not only motivated by the literary value of Tao’s poetry, but equally, if not more, by his admiration of and identification with Tao’s poetic persona. He empathized with Tao’s “weakness,” which was a “stubborn nature and unwieldy endowment, often in collision with the external world” 性剛才拙與物多忤. He argued that his remaining in office was but “[external] trace” 跡, not worthy evidence to judge a character. Despite their different “traces,” Su intimated that he and Tao shared the same inner state which dictated their choices in life.

16 Yuan Haowen, “Ba Dongpo ‘Yinjiushi’ hou” 跋東坡飲酒詩後, quoted in SSSJ, 29:1891.
17 See Chapter Two.
18 Su Che, “Zizhan he Tao Qian shiji yin.”
19 This argument, though found in Su Che’s preface, was perhaps written by Su Shi himself. According to a Song author, who had a chance to see the manuscript of the preface at Su Che’s third son Su Xun’s 蘇遜 place, Su Che’s original preface had it here that Tao Qian was in effect a lesser talent, and that Su
Su Shi’s admiration played a crucial role in Tao Qian’s canonization, a process beginning in the Tang and culminating in the Song. In her study on Tao Qian’s reception history, Tian Xiaofei discusses how Su Shi changed the word “gaze” (wang 望) in the celebrated number five of Tao’s twenty “Drinking” poems to “see” (jian 见), so as to dissolve the intentionality implied by the second verb and make Tao’s behavior represent complete spontaneity. Editors had since accepted Su’s revision as standard; critics argued for the obvious superiority of “gaze,” since this word is consistent with a persona which serves as the cornerstone of Tao’s attraction. Wendy Swartz similarly observes how Su Shi, deliberately or not, misinterpreted Tao’s poem to support his argument that Tao had genuine understanding of the Way, an affirmation against some Tang criticism and one that was seconded by most Song critics.

As a result, when Su Shi identified himself with “Tao Qian,” he was identifying with an icon of his own making. That was a figure whose unconventional behavior was not driven by whimsical impulses, but was rather sustained by a tenacious adherence to the ideal of spontaneity. In the end of this canonization process, Tao represented no longer an eccentric individual hovering at the margin of literary history, but a cultural category of “Moral Hero” whose reclusion was obliged by time and whose behavior consistently expressed authentic drives in accordance with the Way.

Shi’s admiration showed his humility to appreciate every virtue in others. Su Shi revised this passage to its present form. See Fei Gun 費袞, Liangxi manzhi 梁溪漫志, 4:1-2.

20 Tian Xiaofei (2005), 31-32.

21 Swartz (2008), 120-1.

22 The “Moral Hero” was used by Alan Berkowitz to characterize the Confucian ideal that “when the Way prevails in the world, he will make his appearance; when the Way is absent, he will remain hidden.” See
To sum up, Su Shi’s matching of Tao Qian was not just about finding a literary precursor, but equally about conscious identification and self-persuasion. Through such efforts, Su Shi redefined his situation as not by force but by choice, namely, it was his adherence to natural dispositions that caused his exile. In other words, his predicament was a result of his own will and he should be fully responsible for it. Such philosophical persuasion might not have alleviated his material hardship, but made it endurable. As Su repeatedly argued, the exile for him was just like the reclusion for Tao Qian, both providing an opportunity of returning to one’s authentic state.

Reconstructuring the Southern Landscape

The wild landscape of the south posed physical and existential challenges to Su Shi. He needed to adapt not only to deprivation, but also to an alien ethnic culture. This was especially the case for Danzhou, divided from the central plain by a broad surging strait. As Kathleen Tomlonovic observes, “in crossing the natural barrier of water, Su Shi had passed over a cultural barrier as well. Although the island was under the jurisdiction of the Song court, which had designed policies for subduing the inhabitants, the area, particularly the interior, remained the domain of the native peoples.”

To cope with a deep feeling of dislocation, Su Shi had to domesticate the alien in a system of meaning. He did this by linguistically transforming the wilds after the map of Tao Qian’s cultivated landscape. The culturally distinctive people were assorted to various

Berkowitz (2000), 21. Tao Qian’s transformation to such a Moral Hero and Su Shi’s giving of consistency to his image, see Swartz (2008), 55, 73, 89-90.

23 Tomlonovic (1989), 169.
archetypes familiar to a poetic countryside. Yet the role that he assumed was far from definite. At times he represented himself as completely integrated into this barbaric landscape; at times, however, he adamantly adhered to his political and cultural identity and played a civilizing force.

Modern academic literature often celebrates Su’s later exile poetry as evidence of his genuine love of nature and of “the folk.” Yet, despite Su’s repeated invocation of “I shall return! I shall return!” 归哉復歸哉, it remains dubious how thorough and “natural” his return into the southern landscape was. Around half of his poetry written in Huizhou and Danzhou is “matching Tao.” This fact is often overlooked since it poses an uneasy question on how much Su Shi allowed his immediate experience in nature to flow into words, if the whole experience itself had been mediated by Tao Qian’s poetry.

One obviously missing factor in Su Shi’s matching Tao poems is the description of actual farming. Even though Tao’s so-called “farmstead poetry” is not all about farming, farming is a reoccurring theme, let alone a defining aspect of Tao’s identity and poetry. The only period that Su had any farming experience was in Huangzhou, where he was obliged to pick up the hoe to support his livelihood. To commemorate this experience, he wrote eight “East Slope” poems25 in reference to Tao’s style. He did not farm again in Huizhou or Danzhou, probably because of his age as well as his improved financial status after eight years of senior governmental positions. Absence of mud and sweat is not necessarily a grave problem in matching Tao, since Su does not always respond to the original poem in terms of content. Where the farming life is referred to in such rhyming words like “field” (tian 田), “a bundle [of grain]” (chan 廠), or “to plow” (geng 耕), however, Su is compelled to use these words creatively. Where Tao writes:


炎火屢焚如 The seething sun frequents like burning fire;
螟蜮恣中田 Insects and pests wantonly harm the central fields.
風雨縱橫至 When the wind and rains arrive in swath,
收斂不盈廛 The collected harvest is no more than a bundle-full.26

Su Shi matches:

人間少宜適 Naturally nothing befits us in the realm of man.
惟有歸耘田 All we can do is return and plow the fields.
我昔墮軒冕 I once fell prey to fancy chariots and official hats,
毫厘真市廛 Turning my inch-wide heart truly into a market place.27

Tao’s is a realistic depiction of a devastated harvest. Su Shi’s matching lines, however, are
distinctively abstract and metaphorical. “Return and plow the fields” refers usually to resignation
or retirement, and here, in Su Shi’s case, is used as euphemism for exile. One does not have to
plow the fields in person in order to claim that he had “returned to the fields.” Ouyang Xiu, for
instance, titled his collection of notes dotted in retirement Guitianlu 歸田錄 [Records of
Returning to the Fields], a collection by and large of gentlemanly gossips and nothing about the
fields. As for Tao Qian’s “bundle of grain,” Su exploits the multivalence of the word chan 庠,

meaning also a plot of land in an urban space, which can refer to a market place as in the compound *shichan* 市廛. In Su’s couplet, this term is again used metaphorically, referring to his unpurified mind at the peak of his career. Through such linguistic maneuver, Su transforms Tao Qian’s actual farmstead into a generic space external to the central court, but not to the entire bureaucracy.

The two “matching Tao” poems containing a modicum of field experience depict his vegetable garden in Hainan. Their originals are Tao’s poems on harvesting, a theme explicitly referred to in the titles. By virtue of these titles alone Su may feel obliged to labor. Yet even in these poems, the aesthetic feature of the garden is valued as equally, if not more, important as its provision. Su Shi admits that he opened this garden because of “a feeling of unease for having my belly full” 飽食不自安, therefore “I’d like to cultivate this patch of vegetable garden,/ to slightly enrich the view when I wander” 願治此圃畦，少資主遊觀.28 And when his vegetables were ready for the kitchen, he “did not have the heart to cook them right away,/ but instead circled and watched the garden a hundred times a day” 未忍便烹煮，繞觀日百回.29 In comparison, Tao Qian seldom wrote about watching his grain or vegetables.30 Such a contrast sustains the impression that farming was for Tao Qian an essential means of livelihood, while for Su Shi more symbolic and aesthetic.

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30 He did mention once the sprouts growing in the spring wind in “Kuimaosui shichun huaigu tianshe ershou”癸卯歲始春懷古田舍二首, no.2 (*TYM*, 3:200, 203), but even there the delightful sight of crops is not the focus of the poem.
The metaphorical nature of Su’s landscape leads to its idealization. It is at times so utopic that its rural population is all moral ideals incarnate. This feature is explicit in Su’s first “matching Tao” poem written in Huizhou, in response to Tao’s “Returning to My Garden and Fields” (“Gui yuantianju” 歸園田居). The opening verse in Tao’s series celebrates his return after thirty (or thirteen) years of service. Of the ten couplets, eight are in perfect parallelism,

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Tao’s original consists of five verses, but Su Shi’s matching series has six. The collection of Tao in his possession must have an editorial mistake to include a sixth poem, that is an imitation poem by Jiang Yan (444-505), titled as “Tao Zhengjun tianju” 陶徵君田居, in a series of thirty “Zatishi” 雜體詩; see Hu Zhiji 胡之驥, Jiang Wentong ji huizhu 江文通集彙註, 4:156-7. This imitation poem was not infrequently collected in early editions of Tao’s poetry. The fact that Su Shi duly matched without questioning its authenticity may pose an interesting question on how much he could truly “see” Tao Qian in Tao’s poetry.

Whether Tao’s original fourth line was “Away I had been from home for thirty years” (yiqu sanshi nian 一去三十年) or “thirteen years (shisan nian 十三年) is not just a question of textual variants, but associated with the broader picture of Tao’s chronology, biography, and the traditionally quintessential question on whether he was so loyal to the Jin Dynasty that he refused to serve under the Song (and even purportedly refused to use its reign names). Tao Qian’s bureaucratic career has many obscurities. Yuan Xingpei’s latest study supports the argument that he did serve under the Song. According to Yuan, Tao Qian held some short bureaucratic posts in his twenties. He lived idle until joining the military government of Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369-404) in 398, practically aiding the latter’s rebellion against the Jin Dynasty (317-420). He stayed in service until the winter of 401, when his mother died and he returned home for the three-year ritual mourning. Huan Xuan was defeated and killed by Liu Yu 劉裕 (363-422; r. 420-422), later the founding emperor of the Liu Song Dynasty (420-479). Tao Qian then joined Liu Yu’s military government in 404, became the Magistrate of Pengze County in 405, and resigned after some eighty days. See Yuan Xingpei, “Tao Qian nianpu jianbian” 陶淵明年譜簡編, TYM, 849-58. Clearly, if this poem commemorates his returning home after roughly three decades of desultory civil services, it should

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creating a sense of order associated with the farmstead life, in contrast to the chaos in the world outside. In Su Shi’s matching poem, strict parallelism is used only in the first four couplets, in which he recreates Tao Qian’s orderly landscape:

環州多白水 Surrounding this prefecture, many white waters;
際海皆蒼山 Hemming the sea coast, all dark hills.
以彼無盡景 By virtue of this infinite landscape,
寓我有限年 Let me reside my limited days!
東家著孔丘 The neighbor on the east houses Kong Qiu (aka. Confucius);
西家著顏淵 The neighbor on the west houses Yan Yuan (aka. Yan Hui)!
市為不二價 The merchants always set an honest price;
農為不爭田 The farmers never fight over their fields.  

The “infinite landscape” of rapid waters and dark mountains suggests a sublime nature. The brevity and smallness of the author’s limited existence make the besetting landscape seem eternal and overpowering. Using Tao’s zooming-in perspective and orderly depiction, however, Su turns this wilderness into a protecting force, benignly “surrounding” and “hemming” the human domain. They delineate a small utopic society where people poetically reside. With an easy stroke, he waves away the fear of mortality – perhaps too easily, reflecting eager make-

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believe. The description of Huizhou folks is hardly realistic: not only residents in Su’s elite Hejiang Belvedere 合江樓 neighborhood\textsuperscript{34} are Confucian sages, but even common merchants and farmers are paragons of decency. In this idealized vision, Huizhou appears no longer a wild place at the very periphery of Chinese civilization, but a privileged heartland representing natural order, civil harmony, and moral perfection.

Tao Qian’s poetry is not all about \textit{joie de vie}. In effect it often betrays a tangible fear of whiling away a life in insignificance, symbolized by natural forces predating on his harvest –

\begin{quote}
常恐霜霰至 \small The arrival of frost and sleet is my constant fear,

零落同草莽 \small Lest my crops fall prey, like grasses grown in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

In Su Shi’s matching couplet, he appears to have deliberately downplayed such fear. In his cosmos, nature itself imposes the principle of order and is the real author of regulated and cultivated poetic lines –

\begin{quote}
春江有佳句 \small The spring river contains marvelous lines of poetry;

我醉墮渺莽 \small But in my drunkenness they fall into the vast nebulosity.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} On Su Shi’s residence in the Hejiang Belvedere, see Chapter Six.


The poet claims that nature itself writes poetry, and all he needs to do is pen down the wonderful lines that the river imparted to him. Ironically, he says that he was too drunk to do so, even though he did write a verse to commemorate his oblivion after all. Does it make this verse a lesser poem compared to the one offered by the river, or simply a different poem? What would the poem of nature be, if the poet was sober enough to transcribe it? Or would nature talk to him at all, were he in a sober state? Drunkenness, as argued in Chapter Two, is an assimilation of the state of spontaneity. It appears that the poet in the soft dissolution of consciousness feels at one with the flowing river – itself a symbol of spontaneous creation. If nature does not write poetry after all, as Su Shi in his soberness knows well, it is then the silent poetry of spontaneity within the unconsciousness of the poet that has finally eluded him. Whatever comes to his brush, it is already a cultivated language, mediated moreover by cultural memories and paradigms of the past. It merits notice that even here, miaomang 渺茫, the “vast nebulosity,” might not have naturally occurred to Su Shi; he said so only because Tao Qian rhymed in mang 莽, the unruly wilds. The mang in Tao’s line represents vegetation to be consumed by the merciless season, while in Su, it is the oceanic unconsciousness that he willingly falls back to. Again, nature is for Su Shi no longer ruthless and insentient, but essentially benign and protective to the human cause.

**Poetic Ethnography**

At the same time of Su’s reconstruction of the landscape, he also develops a way of reenvisioning the local native’s ethnicity. To begin with, Su’s writing of this period often noted the ethnicity of the local people. Han ethnocentrism was a perspective hardly avoidable partly because its ideology was encoded in Chinese writing per se. Certain natives of Huizhou were
addressed as Dan 螃. As a variant of yan 螃 (“slug”), this etymologically derogative term referred to an ethnic group which lived in boats upon waters. The natives of Hainan were called Li 黎, namesake of a local mountain “Mother of Li” 黎母山. It literally means “black,” referring to the native’s dark skin due to the tropical climate. Since dark skin suggests daily toil in the fields, its association implies social, economic, and political subjugation, an association established and strengthened by, for instance, such ancient terms for lower classes: limin 黎民, “dark skinned folks,” or qianshou 黔首, “heads wrapped in black handkerchiefs” – the old Qin Dynasty term for the common people. Such ethnic terms evoke exotica, sense of alienation, as well as Han ethnic superiority.

Su Shi’s colorful report on local customs might have selectively magnified the exotic, either intentionally or subconsciously trying to impress his elite Han audience back in the central areas. His poetry was certainly also read by local elites whom he probably assumed to share the same Han-ethnocentric perspective. According to him, in Huizhou he sometimes trod upon snakes and dined on insects. In Danzhou, he reported that the Li people planted little rice and dined instead on tarot roots and sometimes smoked mice and bats; they wore coconut hats and clothes made of cotton tree fiber; they killed oxen in shamanic sacrifices to cure diseases instead of employing them to plow the fields. In his letters to friends across the strait, he once sorely wrote: “I and my son are doing fine; but mixing with the Li and the Dan, we barely feel

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38 See Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Quannong’ liushou” 和陶勸農六首, SSSJ, 41:2254-7; “Wen Ziyou shou” 閩子由瘦, SSSJ, 41:2257-8;
our humanity” 某與兒子粗無病，但黎、蜒雜居，無復人理.41 Here, the definition of “human” is an ideological construction, specific to ethnicity. As Robert F. Campany points out, eating grain and cooking are presented in the Book of Rites as “among the traits possessed by human beings par excellence. Anything less – even if the result of natural, local variations – counts as less than fully human and needs to be modified.”42 Su Shi among the southern natives appeared to feel the eventual dissolution of his own ethnic identity, or even renli 人理: “that-by-which” he recognized himself as properly man.

Traces of such despair articulated in prose, however, are rarely found in his poetry, where more often than not he celebrates the rustic society. Here he again models himself after Tao Qian, who in his poetry cordially drinks with farmers in his neighborhood43 or chats while standing on a village road.44 Similarly, Su Shi writes:

I.

江鷗漸馴集 River gulls get familiar and gather around me;

蜑叟已還往 The old man of Dan has become my company.45


42 Campany (2005), 8-9.

43 See, e.g., Tao Qian, “Yinjiu” no.9 & no.14, TYM, 3:256, 268; “Lianyu duyin 連雨獨飲, TYM, 2:125 (where the neighbor sent over some wine); “Kuimaosui shichun huaigu tianshe ershou,” no.2, TYM, 3:203 (where he sent over some wine to a new neighbor).


45 Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Gui yuantianju,” no.2.
II.

一與蜑叟醉 Getting drunk with the old man of Dan –
蒼顏兩摧頹 Two greying faces glow in utter waste.46

III.

鴂舌倘可學 Were it possible to acquire their butcherbird tongue,
化為黎母民 I shall transform to a native below Mt. Mother of Li.47

In couplet I, Su Shi refers to a story in *Liezi* where river gulls would gather around a guileless fisherman, until one day he was persuaded by his father to catch the gulls; the gulls discerned his treacherous intentions and refused to fly down any more.48 Su Shi wants to reassure his reader that he has forgotten all chicanery, so that creatures of nature, and even the “old man of Dan,” come to his company. Juxtaposing the Dan native with the river gulls suggest a perspective from which the local natives are viewed as natural creatures. The viewer places himself in a position of active agency, observing and commentating on the passive local subjects. It marks a subtle but sharp distinction between Su Shi and Tao Qian. Tao’s original couplet states:

時復墟曲中 From time to time, in amongst the village alleys,

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I and the farmers wearing coir raincoats meet.49

Tao Qian’s perspective is relatively on a par with other farmers. They wear the same ungainly peasant’s coat and, as the next couplet suggests, share the same concern for their frost-smitten mulberries and hems. The difference in perspectives results perhaps from the fact that, though Tao enjoyed cultural distinction, socio-economically he was his neighbor’s peer. In contrast, the distinction between Su Shi and “the old man of Dan” was too sharp to disguise.

Couplet II celebrates his unassuming drinking spree with an “old man of Dan.” We do not know whether this is the same old man mentioned in couplet I, or another, or fictive. Like in couplet I, this good friend of Su’s is identified only by his gender, age, and ethnicity. These are all generic features, making him less individualistic than stereotypical. In contrast, in Tao Qian’s scene of drinking parties, though his neighbors are also unidentified but called simply as tianfu or fulao 父老, they are endowed with agency, capable to initiate actions or to give speeches. Such realistic details make Tao’s rustic company more convincing and individualistic, if not necessarily more true.

In couplet III, the author jovially announces his alacrity to become a native of Li – if only he was able to acquire their “butcherbird tongue”! Su Shi in Hainan apparently suffered from linguistic alienation. He did not quite understand Hainan native dialect, but was able to tutor some local students, probably due to their capacity to speak in some modified and standardized accent. Himself a native of Sichuan, Su Shi after decades of itinerant bureaucratic career must have understood, if not spoken, more than one dialect. Yet nowhere else through his career did he comment in writing on the local dialect. Only in Hainan, not only the native people appeared

to be innocent as natural creatures, but their language resembled also bird chirps, deprived of meaning to the “cultured” ears. The political, economic, and cultural dominance of central China was simultaneously understood as an anthropological advantage. Su Shi’s incapacity to learn the local dialect was regarded physiological – since his tongue, literally, was that of human, not of a butcherbird.

Notably, these zoogeographical metaphors were applied only to local natives alien to Han culture, who would not be able to read these verses. Nevertheless, these poems should have been read by local elites, including officials, students, and some others of the gentry and Buddhist or Daoist clerical classes. Su Shi clearly did not mean to insult his hosts. He used such metaphors because he used them unthinkingly as an embedded part of the established cultural hierarchy, assuming that his hosts were sympathetic to the perspective of Han cultural dominance.

When Su Shi’s prose laments his dislocation, his poetry romanticizes his relocation. Their discrepancy betrays an element of deliberate persuasion in Su Shi’s vow of assimilation. It is a performative act directed toward his audience and himself. To assimilate his own outlandish figure among a cast of local characters, Su Shi’s other approach is to dress them with outfits of cultural archetypes. As a result, if the alien people of the south first strike Su Shi as being virtually part of nature, then on second thought, he suspects their hidden intelligence or humanity, with their apparent innocence resembling the disguises of recluses or earthly immortals.

This second thought partly derives from Tao Qian’s poetry as well. For instance, in Tao Qian’s ninth poem in “Imitation of the Old,” he depicts a “scholar of the East” who lives in deprivation (eating only nine times in thirty days and changing his hat once in ten years) but exhibits divine physical and spiritual well-being. Evidently, this is a Daoist figure nourished not by normal food but by immaterial energy. Tao Qian expresses a desire to follow him “from now
on to the time of cold.” The “time of cold” (suihan 岁寒) refers to a cosmic winter when man must rely on his own inner source of warmth to fight against reaping forces like age, disease, and death. This poem could be read either as a Daoist or as a moral allegory.

Su Shi matched this poem twice. In one poem, he transforms this “scholar of the east” to a woodcutter of Li ethnicity:

黎山有幽子  There is a secluded mister in the Mountain of Li,
形槁神獨完  His form wizened, his spirit alone remains intact.
負薪入城市  Bearing a load of firewood to the market in town,
笑我儒衣冠  He laughed at my scholar’s robe and hat.
生不聞詩書  In his life he never heard of the Odes or Documents,
豈知有孔顏  Not to mention knowing Confucius or his disciple Yan.
翛然獨往來  In utter freedom, he comes and goes all alone.
榮辱未易關  Glory or disgrace hardly crosses his mind.
日暮鳥獸散  At sunset, birds and beasts retreat to their hidings;
家在孤雲端  He heads to a home atop the lonely clouds.
問答了不通  I barely understand his questions or replies;
歎息指屢彈  I sign and flick my fingers in despair.
似言君貴人  He seems to say: “You, sir, are of noble standing;

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50 See Tao Qian, “Nigu jiushou” 拟古九首, no.5, TYM, 4:327. The sequence of Tao Qian’s nine “Nigu” poems in essentially all modern editions differs from the edition used by Su Shi.
C HAPTER FIVE

草莽棲龍鸞  Like a dragon or a simurgh, you come to nestle among the weeds.”

遺我古貝布  He presents me a bolt of cotton tree cloth –

海風今歲寒  The sea wind of this season is cold.51

Except for his ethnicity, this “secluded mister” resembles many proverbial woodcutters in reclusion literature. Like Tao Qian’s scholar nourished by immaterial energy, his intact spirit defies the decline of his form. He is a son of nature never blighted by education. He laughs at Su Shi’s scholarly attire, just like in the Analects, the busy traveler Confucius was jeered by recluses who preferred to keep their virtue private.52 Not even knowing the Confucian sages proves that his virtue is developed naturally instead of by cultivated moral commands. Like a Daoist figure, he roams in freedom and cares little about worldly affairs. Su could barely understand him, a speaker of the “butcherbird tongue.” Yet the woodcutter nevertheless knows Su Shi as a man of standing, now in misfortune. He may not know of Su’s spectacular talent, the “New Policies,” or the consequent factional struggles, all of which happened in the distant world across the straits,

51 Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Nigu jiushou’” 和陶擬古九首, no.9, SSSJ, 41:2266.

52 A few such stories are recorded in the “Weizi” 微子 chapter. In one, Confucius was mocked in the market of Chu by Jieyu 接輿 for trying to halt the unstoppable decline of the world. In another, Changjiu 長沮 and Jieni 桀溺 were plowing the fields when Confucius passed by with his disciples. When Zilu 子路 was sent to ask for the direction to the ford, he was only mocked for not knowing even that, while trying to save the world. Yet another story tells that, when Zilu went astray, he met an old man carrying across his shoulder on a staff a basket of weeds. The old man mocked Zilu for calling Confucius “master” since the latter knew nothing about actual labor in the fields. These people are thus called “untrammeled subjects” (yimin 逸民). Analects, 17.5-8; see Liu Baonan, Lunyu zhengyi, 21:718-30.
yet he appears to understand it all. His sympathy is presented in a simple token of warmth – a bolt of home-woven cloth. The portrayal of this woodcutter combines elements from various poetic stereotypes, like a Daoist recluse, an earthly immortal, and an enigmatic zhiyin 知音 – a kindred spirit who understands one’s wordless music.

Su Shi in this poem constructs himself through the voice of the common man. His moral stature is recognized by a commoner whose genuine nature is not manipulated by established cultural or political hierarchy, at a time when it is demeaned in the capital. By depicting the periphery as if superior to the center, Su Shi sent to his readers, especially those at the central court, a political complaint.

In contrast, the other matching poem to Tao’s “scholar of the East” identifies this scholar as no other than Tao Qian and expresses Su’s desire to follow such a figure. If for Tao Qian, the fictive scholar provides an existential other to express his unrealized longings, then for Su Shi, Tao Qian, in turn, becomes this other.

Both matching poems provide for Su Shi an existential other. Yet they differ drastically in terms of Su Shi’s self-identification. The woodcutter of Mt. Li provides an image whose desirability derives from what he is not – that is, not being exposed to learning, not caring about worldly power or glory, and not being enmeshed in the network of meaning. Su Shi cannot become a native under Mt. Li because his “state zero” was irrevocably lost in the past. What he can do is “return,” Tao Qian style. In a reversal of established discourse on virtue, Su Shi is “displaced” into the true realm of humanity – which is also the realm of non-civilization. This is a strong comment on the “civilized world” of central Han culture.

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Yet the acquired traces of culture are so deeply engraved on Su Shi that it becomes the very essence of his identity. Thus his poetry betrays a perpetual struggle between the deliberated abandon and the adherence to his political and cultural self. This is evident in Su’s paradoxical attitude toward playing a cultural force among the local natives. Another poet whom Su Shi frequently read in Huizhou and Danzhou was Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819). According to the Southern Song poet Lu You 陸遊 (1125-1210), Su once called Tao and Liu his “two friends of my banishment to the South.”\(^5^4\) When Liu Zongyuan was banished to Yongzhou (in modern Hunan Province), he turned himself into a cultural force committed to the noble cause of “transforming the barbarians.”\(^5^5\) Su Shi explicitly opposed to this approach, as he once declared: “I should not be like Mr. Liu (Zongyuan), Vice Director of the Ministry of Rites,/ preaching the Odes and Documents to the savage folks” 莫學柳儀曹，詩書教氓獠.\(^5^6\) But despite all his claims of losing a sense of rank and cultural identity, some revealing cases show that Su Shi defended his identity all the more in the threat of an alien surrounding. Both his reversal of established cultural hierarchy and his defense of his own cultural identity had political implications.

Su Shi was not officially obligated to “transform the barbarians.” Under the Tang and the Song, exiled officials often assumed various local administrative and educational duties. Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan were magistrates in charge of prefectural affairs; Su Che in Yunzhou (now

\(^{5^4}\) See Lu You 陸遊, *Laoxuean biji* 老學庵筆記, 9:120.


Gao’an, Jiangxi Province) was a tax clerk. Su Shi, however, was typically discharged of all duties in his exiles. Yet even so, Su could not help feeling obligated from time to time. In Huizhou he dispensed medicine, built a bridge, and advised on the aqueduct system in Guangzhou, among other public activities. Half a year after coming to Danzhou, he composed a series of “Exhorting Farmers” (“Quannong” 勸農) poems in tetrasyllabic meter, for the explicit purpose of promoting agriculture and sericulture among the natives. It is true that this series is composed as part of his “matching Tao” project. According to Jinshu 晉書 [The History of Jin], “exhorting farmers” was a county official’s duty. Tao possibly composed these poems as part of his job when he was a libationer (jijiu 祭酒), a minor educational official of the prefecture. If Su wanted to match every single poem of Tao’s, then he by necessity needed to match this series as well. Yet as a man out of office, in doing so he inevitably projected himself as an overseer of the farmers, reversing therefore his repeated claim of becoming one of them. As a result, these poems reaffirmed Su’s political and cultural identity.

The paradox between reclusion and officialdom is conceptually identical with that between hiding/obscurity (yín 隱) and revealing/prominence (xiān 顯). Thus, on this abstract level, even if one is out of office, one may still be criticized as not truly in “hiding” by making oneself famous. The autobiographical nature of Tao Qian’s poetry belies the same paradox. Unlike Su Shi, whose life was well recorded in contemporary accounts, readers virtually know nothing about Tao Qian except from his poetry. Tao became his own biographer par excellence.

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57 As noted in Tomlonovic (1989), 192-3.
58 Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Quannong’ liushou.”
59 See “Zhiguanzhi” 職官志 in Fang Xuanling, Jinshu, 24:746.
60 See Yuan Xingpei’s note to this poem, TYM, 1:35-6.
It props some critical readers asking, in Stephen Owen’s terms: why would Tao Qian even write autobiographical poetry, if he was truly – as he claimed to be – a recluse, or “scholar in hiding” (yinshi 隱士)? The act of versification is already a statement of seeking recognition in the cultural memory of future generations.

This question asked by posterity did not necessarily concern Tao Qian, since for him, to foster good name was all reclusion was about. As he wrote in 401, the year when he concluded his most extensive period of service:

投冠旋舊墟 I shall discard the official hat and return to my old village,
不為好爵縈 And not be detained by a lucrative rank.
養真衡茅下 I shall foster my genuine nature under a thatched roof,
庶以善自名 In order to nourish my own good name.

Here is a self-conscious author anxious to preserve his public image and historical legacy. At least for Tao, writing autobiographical poetry was not ironical, but consistent with his choice of life – that is, not to become a living definition of a “scholar in hiding,” but to be remembered as an individual writing in a confident authorial voice.

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62 See n.32.
63 Tao Qian, “Xinchou sui qiyue fujia huan jiangling yexing tuzhong yishou” 辛丑歲七月赴假還江陵夜行塗中一首, TYM, 3:194.
Su Shi, on the other hand, pushed the authorial self-consciousness even further and was quick to see the irony. Recall how in the “Record of Snow Hall,” the anonymous interlocutor raises a question: why would he linger upon the name, like a hedgehog in a sack, when he should want to hide from the world? There Su Shi argues that art-making is a naming act, by which the poet associates his own name with the names of things, thus inevitably betraying his adherence to this-worldly existence and the notion of immortality. Such awareness propels Su Shi to present a slightly satirical view on poetic fame. In his matching poem, he recounts a mid-night stroll under the moon through a Hainan hamlet, which disturbed village dogs to bark, village folks to curse, and village maidens to peek. Back home, he sat in silent meditation. He concluded:

莫赴花月期 I shall avoid rendezvous with flowers or the moon;
免為詩酒縈 And not be detained by poetry or wine.
詩人如布穀 A poet is like a cuckoo bird,
聒聒常自名 Which garrulously calls its own name. 65

The name of cuckoo bird (bugu 布穀) is an onomatopoeia for its chirping. A man is called a poet because he writes poetry. Both names tautologically refer to their languages. Just like a cuckoo bird which must call its own name, a poet by definition cannot help writing poetry, and while doing so, cannot hide his name. Poet and “recluse” in its strict sense are mutually exclusive identities.

64 See Chapter Two.
65 Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Fujia jiangling yexing’ 和陶赴假江陵夜行, SSSJ, 41:2259.
Tao Qian and Su Shi must be poets because they both felt the urge of speaking, of transmitting words worth remembering. Despite his obscurity in life, Tao Qian boldly offered his words for the later-born to hear:


\[ \text{歲云夕矣} \quad \text{As the age sinks into twilight,} \]
\[ \text{慨然有懷} \quad \text{With forceful pathos I express my mind’s care.} \]
\[ \text{今我不述} \quad \text{If now I did not transmit these words,} \]
\[ \text{後生何聞哉} \quad \text{What would the later-born hear?!} \]

Tao refers to Confucius’ wish to emulate the silent heaven and “not to speak” (*Analects*, 17.19), but he declares himself more sympathetic to the master’s disciples’ point of view: if he did not speak, what would the later-born know about his life or his insight in the meaning of life?

Agreeing with Tao Qian, Su Shi further felt the obligation to eternalize cultural accomplishments of the past:


\[ \text{大道久分裂} \quad \text{The great Way has long been fragmented;} \]
\[ \text{破碎日愈離} \quad \text{Broken and shattered, its pieces drift daily apart.} \]
\[ \text{我如終不言} \quad \text{If I did not speak, after all,} \]
\[ \text{誰悟角與羈} \quad \text{Who will illustrate distinctions like that between jiao and ji hairstyles?} \]

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67 Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Zashi’” 和陶雜詩, no.10, *SSSJ*, 41:2278. In the *Book of Rites*, it is said that at the end of the third month, a day should be picked to cut the hair. Man should use the *jiao* style; woman, the *ji*. 

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The distinction of these classic hairstyles was a pedestrian case of erudition. For his contemporaries like Wang Anshi and the Cheng brothers, it would be a case of useless learning par excellence, since it would not illustrate moral or governmental principles. For Su Shi, however, erudition and curiosity were part and parcel of the great, holistic Way, manifested in every concrete thing.

Who were Su and Tao talking to? Certainly not their farmer neighbors. Tao explicitly recommended his words to the “later-born.” This gesture of writing for the future recalls similar remarks from Confucius, Sima Qian, and Yang Xiong, cultural heroes who suffered from their contemporaries’ misunderstanding and trusted their immortality to future generations.68 In contrast, though Su Shi must have like-mindedly written for the later-born, he did enjoy a huge contemporary audience and was aware of his popularity. According to Zhu Bian 朱弁 (1085-1144), ever since Su Shi’s youth, things he wrote were immediately copied and broadly recited.69 Scholars have argued that since the Crow Terrace case, Su Shi became wary of the dissemination of his works, and this awareness had left its impact on his literary compositions.70 Rumor had it that he was banished further to Hainan after the chancellor Zhang Dun 章惇 (1035-1105) read a

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69 See Wu Wenzhi et al.eds., Song shihua quanbian, vol.III, 2950.
70 See Uchiyama Seiya (2005), 272-92.
poem celebrating his life of simplicity and ease at Huizhou.\textsuperscript{71} His Hainan poetry appeared to have already spread on the mainland through certain channels. During Chongning 崇寧 (1102-1106) and Daguan 大觀 (1107-1110) reign periods, when the government ban of his writing was imposed, his “oversea poetry” was still in such broad popularity that whoever could not recite these poems suffered from a disadvantage in conversation.\textsuperscript{72} With this large contemporary audience in mind, Su Shi must have cautiously controlled his political persona. Thus although on one hand, he gaily reported every step of his “return into nature,” on the other, he reassured his reader that he never forgot the proper responsibility of a good bureaucrat to domesticate the semi-barbaric natives. These two sides are combined into a powerful albeit paradoxical political persona of lofty transcendence as well as dutiful perseverance.

Soon after Su arrived at Hainan, a friend sent him more than a thousand fascicles of books across the sea.\textsuperscript{73} Su might have used these books generously to tutor local students. They kept him constant company,\textsuperscript{74} and in turn were sometimes advised in writing and calligraphy.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{71} This anecdote was first recorded by Zeng Jili 曾季狸 (12\textsuperscript{th} cent.); see Tingzhai shihua 艇齋詩話, 66-67. The concrete plot was not necessarily true, but Zhang Dun’s desire to see the death of Su Shi perhaps was. As a poem by Huang Tingjian states: “When Zizhan was banished to the South of the Dayu Ridge,\textsuperscript{72} then Chancellor wanted to see him dead” 子瞻謫嶺南，時宰欲殺之; see “Ba Zizhan ‘He Tao shi’” 跋子瞻和陶詩, Huang Tingjian quanji, 17:604.

\textsuperscript{72} See Wu Wenzhi et al., Song shihua quanbian, vol.III, 2950.

\textsuperscript{73} See Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Zeng Yang zhangshi’” 和陶贈羊長史, SSSJ, 41:2281-2.

\textsuperscript{74} See e.g., Su Shi, “Beijiu duxing, bianzhi Ziyun, Wei, Hui, Xianjue sili zhi she, sanshou” 被酒獨行遍至子雲威徽先覺四黎之舍三首, SSSJ, 42:2322-3; “Yong Guo yun, Dongzhi yu zhusheng yinjiu” 用過韻冬至與諸生飲酒, SSSJ, 42:2324-5; “Zeng Li Si Yanwei xiucai” 贈李兕彥威秀才, SSSJ, 43:2352-3; etc.
One of these students, a certain Jiang Tangzuo 姜唐佐 (jinshi 1103), was especially gifted.\textsuperscript{76}

Since no candidate from Hainan had ever succeeded in the metropolitan exam, Su Shi encouraged Jiang to “break heaven’s desertion” (potianhuang 破天荒). Two years after Su Shi’s death, Jiang succeeded.\textsuperscript{77} Even though Su Shi avoided explicit commitment to “transforming the barbarians” as Liu Zongyuan avidly did, his contemporaries never failed to remark on his far-sighted and beneficial cultural influence.\textsuperscript{78}

Hīnayāna Tao Qian and a Private Sphere

If every act of writing is public display, it is particularly the case with Su Shi. As argued above, he was keenly aware of the consequence of his words. The public and court attention paid to his writing, especially shī poetry and prose, decided its exotic nature. But there were moments calling for a less restrained catharsis in the face of strong emotions like love, despair, or political suffering. The privacy of these moments fostered a special kind of esoteric writing that belonged to and consisted of his private sphere, the boundary of which was relative and fluid.

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75 See Fei Gun, \textit{Liangxi manzhi}, 4:2.
77 Although Su Shi’s poem to Jiang Tangzuo is not collected in his anthology, this story is authenticated by the fact that Su Che was the reporter; see Su Che, “Bu Zizhan ‘Zeng Jiang Tangzuo xiucai’ bing yin” 補子瞻贈姜唐佐秀才並引, \textit{Su Che ji, houji} 3:909.
78 This story is also related in Shao Bo 邵博, \textit{Shaoshi wenjian houlu} 邵氏聞見後錄, 17:133-4.
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On the fifth day of the seventh month, 1096, Su Shi’s long-term companion Wang Zhaoyun 王朝雲 (1063-1096) died of miasma. A native from Hangzhou, she had joined Su Shi’s family in 1074 as a handmaid and eventually became his concubine. In 1084, she gave birth to a son in Huangzhou, who died one year later soon after Su had completed his exile and was returning to the capital. 79 Since then she became a devoted Buddhist believer. She was the only woman who voluntarily accompanied Su Shi to Huizhou, for which the aging poet was grateful. 80 Now her untimely death fell as a heavy blow. Su Shi reported that the dying Zhaoyun chanted a gātha from the Diamond Sūtra, which stated: “All the conditioned existence is like a dream, like an illusion, like the foam, like the shadow, like the morning dew, or like the lightning. This is the way it should be observed!” 81 In response to her last words indicating the brevity of life, Su Shi wrote:

駐景恨無千歲藥 I regret not to have an elixir to stay the dimming sunlight;
贈行惟有小乘禪 To see you off, I presented only the Hīnayāna Chan! 82

The Buddhist term Hīnayāna (literally: Lesser Vehicle) refers to the doctrine of individual salvation. It was created as a derogatory catchphrase in a late Indian sectarian debate by its

79 On this son, Su Dun 蘇遯, see Su Shi, “Qusui jiuyue ershiqi ri zai Huangzhou shengzi […]” 去歲九月二十七日在黃州生子[…], SSSJ, 23:1239. See also SSNP, 22:581; 23:639.
81 See Kumārajīva trans., Jinggang bore boluomi jing 金剛般若波羅蜜經, T no.235, 8:752b.
Mahāyānist (Mahāyāna, literally: Great Vehicle) opponents preaching universal salvation. In the Chinese milieu, the two phrases are sometimes used in analogy to the distinction between Daoism and Confucianism, since the former appears to be solely concerned about individual transcendence, while the later promotes the happiness of all in a blood, cultural, or political community. Su Shi, suffering from political downfall, his aspiration of practicing the Way under the patronage of an enlightened ruler smashed, voiced a secret wish to convert to the Hīnayāna school. Since zhaoyun literally means the morning rosy cloud, Su Shi lamented that her beautiful light had to fade so soon. Her death, moreover, was caused by the hardship of exile, which in turn was caused by Su Shi’s ambition to serve the world. Thus the regretting poet bitterly swore to practice only the Hīnayāna Chan, since his ambition of “universal salvation” failed to protect even his beloved one.

This mourning poem may have revealed Su Shi’s esoteric thoughts, that is, his political discontent. Unlike the loss of a wife which called for immediate public announcement, the death of a concubine was usually a private misfortune. Indeed writing a poem and an epitaph for a concubine already deviated from common decorum, and for this reason, such writing and the obituary notice were likely kept tight from circulation. Thus four years later, on Su Shi’s return to the mainland, one of his major disciples, Li Zhi 李廌 (1059-1109), still wrote to ask after Zhaoyun’s health, and Su replied that she had already died. He briefly recounted to Li what had been written in her epitaph but did not mention the poem. This letter offers a glimpse into the

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83 For instance, the Lotus Sūtra claims that Sakyamuni practices himself the Mahāyāna dharma to salvage all the sentient beings and treat them as equals; Hīnayāna salvation, on the other hand, will save only oneself. See T.9.262.8.

psychological depth of Su Shi’s silent grief. It appears that when Su Shi wrote the epitaph and especially the poem, he was not anticipating a public audience. His wish to practice the “Hīnayāna Chan” was therefore likely a private thought whispered only occasionally aloud.

Wang Zhaoyun was only one victim of the persecution against Su Shi. Among all those “conservatives” expelled from the capital, Su Shi and his clique received the harshest punishment. His brother, sons, disciples, and friends were all banished to the southern periphery. Death was a constant threat. Fan Zuyu died in 1098 in Huazhou (in modern Guangdong Province) and Qin Guan, in 1100 in Tengzhou (in modern Guangxi Province). Su Shi’s outstanding talent made him the primary target of jealousy and malevolence, while his outspoken words fed to his doom. In his epistles, Su Shi lamented the death and suffering caused by his unrestrained nature. On the way into exile, he repeatedly claimed purity, an effort to transcend the sense of guilt as well as political resentment.

Traditional scholarship generally emphasizes Su Shi’s activism in and out of office as evidence of his subscription to the Confucian doctrine of “humaneness” or the Buddhism teaching of “compassion.” Yet despite or precisely because of Su Shi’s devotion to public good,

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85 As argued in Li Yibing (1983), 897-9.


88 See Egan (1994), 108-42. Su Shi managed to participate in local administrative affairs mainly through his cousin Cheng Zhi'ai 程之才, Judicial Commissioner of Guangdong; see “Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishiyi shou” 與程正輔七十一首, no.18, no.30, no.36, no.47, and no.49, SSWJ, 1595-6, 1600-2, 1604-5, 1608-9,
an irony stung deep that such devotion failed to improve his welfare as well as that of those dear to him. This bred a sense of discontent and frustration. Shortly after he came to Huizhou, he wrote in a poem for Shouqin, a monk from Suzhou:

崎嶇真可笑 How laughable, this frustrated life –
我是小乘僧 I am indeed a Hīnayāna monk!89

The last line could also be read as imperative: “I should be a Hīnayāna monk!” Possibly, these were but fleeting moments of despair. Yet their rarity does not render them less true. In effect, those moments reflected a transformation in Su Shi’s political thinking, that is, his recognition of the value of individual life which should not be sacrificed even for the supreme ruler without total conviction. Political orthodoxy demanded the opposite. A common belief, as the Ode “Beishan” 北山 (Mao 205) summarizes, was that “all under heaven, nowhere is not the King’s land; to the borders of the land, no man is not the King’s subject” 溥天之下，莫非王土; 率土之濱，莫非王臣.90 In Zuo zhuan, these lines were quoted to justify a comprehensively hierarchical society from which no one could escape.91 Perhaps there was a narrow escape, as Mencius points out, provided only to such selected individuals like the King’s father, since the ritual hierarchy

89 Su Shi, “Ciyun Dinghui Qin zhanglao jianji bashou bing yin” 次韻定慧欽長老見寄八首並引, no.1, SSSJ, 39:2114.
90 See Maoshi zhengyi, 13:195, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 463
91 Zuo zhuan zhao 7, in Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi, 44:345-6, Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 2047-8.

and 1609-12. Another figure who helped was Wang Gu 王古, Governor of Guangzhou; see “Yu Wang Minzhong shibashou” 與王敏仲十八首, no.11 and no.15, SSWJ, 56:1692-3 and 1695.
between a father and a son should override that between a ruler and a subject.92 Dying for one’s ruler without hesitation received the highest accolade in official histories. Against this orthodoxy, the Hīnayāna doctrine could be seen as subversive. It provided some theoretical support, however apologetic and unarticulated, to Su’s construction of a private sphere beyond the reach of centralized politics, once again following the model of Tao Qian.

For many traditional Chinese literati living in the grip of a bureaucratic state, the dilemma between public service and disengagement was perpetual. As noted by Aat Vervoorn, “the gentleman serves in office as long as by doing so he can further the Way; once that becomes impossible he must resign to avoid moral compromise.”93

Did Tao Qian resign because he failed to advance the Way, or did he simply follow his heart’s desire for a quiet life? He did once say:

或擊壤以自歡  Some delight themselves in playing the game of “hitting the wood-stick”;  
或大濟於蒼生  Some bring great benefit to the whole humble populace.94

*Rang* is a shoe-shaped stick made of wood. In the game, one plants first a *rang* distantly and then throws another to hit it. A story relates that an octogenarian, living under the rulership of

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92 In *Mencius* (5A.4), Xianqiu Meng 咸丘蒙 asked why King Shun did not regard his father as a subject, quoting this stanza. Mencius replied that one should not understand this stanza literally, and that filial piety should be the holiest value held in the ritual system. See Jiao Xun, *Mengzi zhengyi*, 18:637-41.

93 Vervoorn (1990), 30.

Emperor Yao, played “hitting the wood-stick” game by the roadside. When an onlooker praised the virtue of the emperor that ensured his happiness, the old man retorted: “I rise when the sun rises; I rest when the sun sets. I dig a well to drink and plow the fields to eat. What does the power of the emperor have to do with me!” 95 The original moral lesson is the Daoist ideal of governance without interference. Tao Qian, however, used this reference to illustrate an example of private virtue which delights only its possessor. This was the life that Tao himself chose to lead, but at the same time, his poetry often betrays an anxiety over a life wasted and unfulfilled. 96 Despite his awareness that to “bring great benefit to the whole populace” was noble and laudable, he resigned. Explanations for his motivation differ. Perhaps it was simply because of those quotidian scribbles and squabbles in a lowly bureaucrat’s humdrum life; perhaps his reason was more complex and individual than that. Yet since Late Tang, the warfare of his age spurred speculation that his resignation was of a grander nature, such as a protest against the moral and ritual disorder of his time. According to this version, Tao’s choice was totally consistent with the Confucian attitude of seeking employment with dedication until all measures are tried and failed in an age of darkness. 97

The second reading however inconvenienced Su Shi’s identification with him. Unlike the inconsequential Tao Qian, Su was prominent and had to carefully avoid criticizing the current regime. Any hint of frustration would be counted as lèse majesté, inappropriate at the least and dangerous at the most. Unsurprisingly, Su Shi contended that Tao Qian (and he himself) was

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95 This game is defined and the story related in Li Fang 李昉, Taiping yulan 太平御覽, 572:7.

96 On Tao Qian’s sense of social mission, see Kwong (1989), 37-40.

97 See Swartz (2008), 55-73, passim.
simply endowed with a “partial nature” ill-fitted to the world. Both Tao’s and his return were but a natural result of their disposition:

嗟我與先生  Alas, you and me, sir –
所賦良奇偏  Both are endowed with an extremely partial nature.
人間少宜適  Nothing, if any, befits or pleases us in the realm of man.
惟有歸耘田  Return and plow the fields is all we can do.\(^98\)

To support his point, Su Shi highlights a fact which seldom catches attention in Tao Qian’s resume, that is, his initial acceptance of official appointment. He argues that Tao’s taking office and his resignation were both motivated by his authentic self, dictated by concrete circumstances instead of by a grand moral agenda.

淵明初亦仕  Yuanming initially also entered officialdom;
弦歌本誠言  It was sincere of him to say that ritual music was his livelihood.
不樂乃徑歸  Taking no delight in it, he simply returned.
視世羞獨賢  Looking at the world, he was shamed to be virtuous alone.

\(^98\) Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Yuanshi shi Pang Deng” 和陶怨詩示龐鄧, SSSJ, 41:2271.

*Xiange* 弦歌, or “string music and singing,” refers to a story in the *Analects*. Confucius’ disciple Ziyou 子游 was once the magistrate of Wucheng 武城 (in modern Shandong Province). Despite
the insignificance of this county, he taught students to play refined music and chant the *Odes*, much to the Master’s approval.99 Tao Qian, however, reportedly claimed that he would consider *xiange*, i.e. the appointment of county magistrate, only to provide for his family.100 Su Shi admired Tao’s unpretentious reply,101 which showed a true aversion to power. In Su’s vision, what drove Tao into officialdom was not a moral/political vision but basic human needs. Yet more unbearable than hunger was his finding no delight in a bureaucratic life. Thus he “simply returned.”

In this interpretation, Tao Qian’s behavior was motivated solely by hunger and delight, two of the most visceral, instinctive drives of life. It being spontaneous reveals the truth and authenticity of his ethical state. As I argued in Chapter Two, Su Shi defines “sagehood” as taking delight in knowing and practicing the Way. This “pleasure principle” serves as an instinctive guide for one’s moral behavior. When facing tough choices in life, one should not let analytic reason interfere but should reach a decision according to one’s innate impulses. If one finds no pleasure in trying to rectify the depraved world, one should rather stop trying and keep one’s


100 See Tao Qian’s biography in “Yinyizhuan” 隱逸傳, Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 64:2461.

101 Su Shi first expressed this opinion on Tao Qian’s motivation of service in a poem written at the end of 1091 during his Yingzhou term, “Ouyang Shubi jianfang, song Tao Yuanming shi, tan qi jue shi […]” 歐陽叔弼見訪誦陶淵明事嘆其絕識[…], *SSSJ*, 34:1815. He expressly admired Tao’s “superior insight” of entering the officialdom only for the lack of provision at home, an opinion formed under the influence of Ouyang Fei 歐陽棐 (1047-1113; aka. Shubi 叔弼), the third son of Ouyang Xiu. In another poem written slightly later for Ouyang Fei, Su Shi used the same term to describe him: “Your learning of the Way has recently gained new insight; for poverty, however, you reenter for now the officialdom” 學道新有得，為貧聊復仕; see “Yi ping shan zeng Ouyang Shubi” 以屏山贈歐陽叔弼, *SSSJ*, 34:1823.
virtue private. As I will show below, Su Shi implies that this is the Hinayāna model established by Tao Qian.

In the late spring of 1097, Su Shi was obliged to leave his newly built house in Huizhou to be banished across the strait to Hainan. Su Che was also banished further to Leizhou (in modern Guangdong Province). They traveled together to the harbor and bid farewell – the last farewell, as their instinct foreboded. From their youth they always slept in the same hotel room when traveling, and this time they spent a last sleepless night together – on Su Shi’s side, sleepless partly due to the affliction of hemorrhoids, a chronic disease he caught in Huangzhou. Su Che thus recited Tao Qian’s “Abjure Drinking” (“Zhijiu” 止酒) poem, since alcohol would exacerbate the ailment. Su Shi then matched Tao’s poem to show his resolution.¹⁰² In the beginning lines he recounted how they both fell into the present predicament:

時來與物逝  When the time comes, we depart along with [the transformation of] things.
路窮非我止  When the road comes to an end, we stop despite our will.
與子各意行  You and I took a journey at our own whim,
同落百蠻裏  And have similarly fallen amidst a hundred barbaric tribes.

This picture is composed of a few broad strokes of time and fate. The reader sees two brothers of extraordinary talent being swept by powerful tides of time across the central plains, briefly coming to company at the margin of a landmass, only to be separated again by a surging ocean. Then Su Shi paraphrased his brother’s suggestion:

勸我師淵明  You advice me to follow the example of Yuanming,
力薄且為己  Since my capacity is low, I should consider for my own.
微疴坐杯酌  This ailment is caused by many cups of wine;
止酒則瘳矣  Stop drinking, and it will be cured.
望道雖未濟  Gazing at the Way, I have not yet reached its coast;
隱約見津涘  But afar, I can vaguely discern the ford and shore.

Su Shi’s apology for his “low capacity” could be read both as intolerance of alcohol and as limited capacity in practicing the Way. Similarly, the “way” that the poet gazed at might be read either as the actual way of banishment or, metaphorically, as the Way writ large, the ultimate truth, as encoded in the word “ford,” referring to Confucius’ seeking of practicing his philosophy in actual governance.103 In the case of Su Shi, however, his “ford” may not be the grand Truth of salvaging the world, but the individual truth of self-knowledge, since it awaits him across the ocean – he can reach it only after abandoning the central realm and all its associated political and cultural identities. Once reaching its shore, he will be left with himself alone.

Su Che recommended the teaching of “for oneself” (wei ji 為己) as cure to Su Shi’s ailments. This term comes also from the Analects, where Confucius states: “People of the olden times studied for their own; people today study for others.”104 The Master recommends the study “for oneself,” since only by enriching oneself independent of whimsical expectations of the time

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103 See n.52.
104 Analects, 14.24; see Liu Baonan, Lunyu zhengyi, 14:586.
can one adhere to permanent principles. Su borrowed such textual authority to sanction Su Che’s suggestion without committing to the Master’s ultimate goal – salvaging the world – but instead to support his personal conviction. Su Shi regarded Tao Qian a paradigm of virtue kept “for oneself.” Such understanding did not contradict the fact that Su Shi’s worldly ailment was perhaps never cured, just like Tao Qian, from drinking who was never abstained.

Yet Su Shi also emphasizes that his turn to the teaching of “for oneself” is not an active choice but because “the time comes” to the point that “when the road comes to an end, we stop despite our will.” In other words, it is dictated by fate. The Hīnayāna conversion is passive and can be temporary, actualized only by the fact that Mahāyāna engagement with universal salvation is not possible when one’s capacity is low. Ostensibly, it is not inconsistent with the Confucian ideal. Such poetic self-representation, however, might have masked a deep change in Su Shi’s political thinking, that is, his loss of faith in the definition of loyalty as total mental and physical devotion to the service of the throne. Instead, a literatus, even in the role of a bureaucrat, was entitled to cultivate his private sphere outside of the public realm.

This subversive message is encoded in Su Shi’s reflection on the “three worthies” (sanliang 三良) who died at the funeral of Duke Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (r. 659-621 BCE; d. 621BCE). According to Zuozhuan, they were used as sacrifice (weixun 為殉), their death was bitterly mourned by the metropolitan public, and public opinion held it as evidence of Duke Mu’s innate cruelty.105 The phrasing suggests that their death was not voluntary, but forced and violent. Yet Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200) proposed the hypothesis of their suicide out of

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105 Zuozhuan wen 6; see Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi, 19a:142, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 1844.
In 1061, during Su Shi’s first official post in Fengxiang County, he seconded Zheng Xuan’s opinion in a verse on Duke Mu’s tomb, a local tourist attraction. He maintained that the people of old had the superior morality to die for being appreciated by a powerful patron, like in the case of Tian Heng 田横 and his guests; such heroic deeds were no longer seen today, ergo the suspicion that their death was coerced. It should be mentioned that Su Che in his matching poem rejected Su Shi’s surmise forthright, pointing out that a better way to repay the ruler’s appreciation would be to serve his son, the next king; ergo these wise gentlemen could not have chosen to die.

Su Che’s argument, however, is premised upon the fact that the royal lineage of Qin was not severed. In contrast, since Tian Heng was ordered to death by Han Gaozu 漢高祖 (256-195BCE; r. 202-195BCE), avenging his death would have equaled to treason. It left Tian’s guests no other option to show their loyalty than suicide. It remains an open question what Su Che would have suggested, had Qin fallen before or together with Duke Mu’s death, leaving the

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106 The Mao commentary to the ode “Huangniao” 黃鳥 (Mao 131) seems to suggest that they were forced to die, as it says: “The people of the capital satires King Mu using humans to follow his death” (yiren congsi 以人從死). The Zheng commentary, however, glosses congsi as “suicide.” See Maoshi zhengyi, 6:105, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhuwen, 373.

107 According to the “Tian Dan liezhuan” 田儋列傳 in Shiji, Tian Heng was a famous patron of knights-errant between Qin and Han. When Han was founded, Gaozu dreaded Tian’s influence and trapped him to death. His two most loyal guests, though given official titles, committed suicide by his grave. See Sima Qian, Shiji, 94:2648-9.


109 Su Che, “Qin Mugong mu” 秦穆公墓, in “He Zizhan ‘Fengxiang baguan’ bashou” 和子瞻鳳翔八觀八首, Su Che ji, 2:27.
“Three Worthies” no one to serve even if they chose to live. Su Che’s poem does not represent a fundamental break with the traditional ideology of individual loyalty.

Almost four decades after his first poem on the “Three Worthies,” Su Shi wrote on this topic again, this time in response to Tao Qian. Tao also accepted the alternative tradition that the three committed suicide, based on a story related by Ying Shao 应劭 (fl. 153-196). In this version, Duke Mu once sighed on a happy banquet that he would very much like someone to share his pleasure of life and his grave of death, so the three volunteered. Their later death was to fulfill their oath. 110 Ying’s narrative of the banquet scene is a distinctively late Eastern Han setting. Nevertheless, it must have found a large audience, including Tao Qian. Tao’s poem reveals conflicting emotions. He sympathizes that the three chose to enter officialdom, an action he interpreted as driven by the fear of consuming one’s life in idleness. He subtly disapproves, however, its consequence as “being privatized by the ruler” 遂為君所私, since, once the ruler showed his diabolic wish at an intimate moment, they had no other choice than volunteer. The poet respects their loyalty. Still, tears shed onto his robe question the very value of absolute dedication to a ruler, who is but another human being. 111 In this regard, Tao’s resignation was a trade-off: he might risk consuming his life in idleness, yet at least he preserved his most precious self – to himself.

To Tao’s thoughtful poem, Su Shi’s response is extraordinary. He dismisses all the theoretical fine points and moral ambiguities, completely overturns his youthful admiration for their loyal behavior, and argues instead there should be a limit to one’s service to the ruler. He elaborates upon the distinction between public service and private sphere, insisting that

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110 As quoted by Shiji zhengyi 史记正义; see Sima Qian, Shiji, 5:195, n.4.

111 Tao Qian, “Yong Sanliang,” TYM, 4:383.
individual life has an intrinsic value that shall not be sacrificed in vain, not even for a ruler’s death. As he reasons:

此生太山重  The weight of this life is heavy as the Paramount Tai;
忽作鴻毛遺  How in a sudden is it discarded as a goose feather, so light?
三子死一言  The three gentlemen died for a single word --
所死良已微  What they died for was truly, alas, a triviality!
賢哉晏平仲  Sagacious was Yan Pingzhong, the Qi minister,
事君不以私  Whose service to the ruler was not of a private nature.\(^\text{112}\)
我豈犬馬哉  Am I a dog, a horse,
從君求蓋帷  Which follows the king for an exquisite carriage?
殺身固有道  There is a proper way to let oneself die,

\(^{112}\) In Zuozhuan Xiang 25, it states that the powerful Qi minister Cui Zhu 崔杼 (？-546 BCE), often known for his posthumous name as Cui Wuzi 崔武子, married a beautiful widow who later had an affair with Duke Zhuang 齊莊公 (r. 553-548BCE). When Duke Zhuang came to his house, Cui trapped him and committed regicide. Many ministers of Qi died in the ensuing bloodbath. The renowned minister and philosopher Yan Ying 晏嬰 (polite name Ping 平, posthumous name Zhong 仲, which were later often combined as Pingzhong 平仲) came to mourn at Cui Zhu’s gate. He rejected the options to die, flee, or resign, since, he argued, only when a ruler died for the sake of the state should one die for the king. In this case, the ruler died dishonorably in adultery, so he should mourn for his death as ritual dictated it, but nothing more. Then he mourned for the dead duke, whose body was still in Cui Zhu’s hostage, and left. Cui Zhu scrupled to kill him, in awe of his reputation. See Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi, 36:281, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 1983.
大節要不虧  That is his great integrity shall remain intact.

君為社稷死  If the king died for the sake of the state,

我則同其歸  I shall then follow his fate.

顧命有治亂  A royal command may bring order – or chaos;

臣子得從違  So the subject can opt to follow – or disobey.

魏顆真孝愛  Wei Ke’s rejection of his father’s wish] showed true filial affection;¹¹³

三良安足希  The death of the “Three Worthies” deserves no admiration!

仕宦豈不榮  Doesn’t an official career bring glory?

有時纏憂悲  It sometimes entails a sorrowful story.

所以靖節翁  For this very reason, the old man Jingjie¹¹⁴ -

服此黔婁衣  Chose to wear Mr. Qianlou’s shabby clothing.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ In Zuozhuan Xuan 15, it states that Wei Ke’s father Wei Wuzi 魏武子 had a favorite concubine. When Wuzi first caught a deadly disease, he asked Wei Ke to remarry this woman properly after his death. But when he was about to die, he ordered Wei Ke to sacrifice her to his grave. After Wuzi died, Wei Ke remarried the woman. Asked why, he replied that his father’s first request was issued in his sanity, while the second was probably not. Wei Ke thus chose the command which showed an inner state of being in orderliness (zhì 治), instead of in chaos (luàn 乱), lest to tarnish his father’s reputation. See Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi, 24:186, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 1888.

¹¹⁴ Tao Qian’s posthumous name.

¹¹⁵ Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Yong sanliang’” 和陶詠三良, SSSJ, 40:2184-5. Qianlou 黔婁 was a lofty character of such extreme poverty that when he died, he was covered by a cotton blanket too short to cover simultaneously his head and his feet. When some suggested to incline the blanket for forty-five degrees
Of all the five historical instances Su Shi quoted, the example of the “Three Worthies” is set in contrast against those of Yan Ying, Wei Ke, Qianlou, and Tao Qian, and reveals its little desirability or admirability. Though Su Shi followed the alternative tradition and believed that they died for an oath, their commitment to a despotic request alone reduced them to the ruler’s pets. Unlike Yan Ying, they served not the state, but the ruler’s private person. They should perhaps follow the example of Wei Ke: although Wei could not help but commit himself to his father’s contradictory wishes, he ultimately chose to follow his reason. Similarly, the “Three Worthies” should dare to break the oath, since it would tarnish the Duke’s posthumous reputation. Their blind loyalty thus has nothing in it to admire. The last allusions to Tao Qian and Qianlou further imply that perhaps their very choice of entering officialdom was wrong. Wealth and glory is bought at a price: one’s precious self.

Su’s late political view finds its theoretical support in his commentary on the *Book of Changes*. In the *yin* and *yang* binary system, the ruler is in the *yang* position, and his ministers are in the *yin* position. The *yang* controls the *yin*, but neither could it exist without the *yin* nor should it deprive the *yin* of its dignity. Neither force should overpower the other. The hexagram “Gravest Mistake” (*daguo* 大過) represents precisely an age when the ruler is arrogant and the power of the ministers is shattered.¹¹⁶ A virtuous person shall endeavor to rescue the world when so as to cover the whole body, his wife replied that better to be upright than to have adequate. See Huangfu Mi 皇甫谧, *Gaoshizhuan* 高士傳, 57.

he sees the early symptom of a disaster. But if the situation is beyond rescue, he should better stay away from the kings and lords to save his own skin.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 205.}

This theme rings a distant echo of the pre-Qin Yang Zhu and Zhuangzian schools’ doctrine of “valuing life” (guisheng 貴生). The former purportedly argued that if to benefit the world demanded one to pluck a single hair, one should refuse.\footnote{This saying, however, is quoted only derogatorily in \textit{Mencius}, 7A.26; see Jiao Xun, \textit{Mengzi zhengyi}, 27:914.} Similar expressions are found in many passages throughout \textit{Zhuangzi}. One instance relates that the Yellow Emperor once asked Master Guangcheng 廣成子 about the Way of ordering the human realm and the universe, only to be dismissed as having asked an unworthy question. After three months of isolated meditation, the Yellow Emperor went back again to ask about the Way of ordering the body and of acquiring immortality. Delighted by his speedy improvement, Master Guangcheng imparted on him the Supreme Way.\footnote{As found in the “Zaiyou” 在宥 chapter; see Guo Qingfan, \textit{Zhuangzi jishi}, 11:379-81.} Su Shi wrote a commentary on this passage, arguing that immortality is the substance in the scheme of things, while nurturing the populace is only a byproduct of the Way; using the populace as an excuse to learn the supreme Way is hypocrisy.\footnote{Su Shi, “\textit{Zhuangzi jie}” 莊子解, \textit{SSWJ}, 6:176-7.} As I discuss in the next chapter, Su Shi’s emphasis on the individual value of life is closely related to his pursuit of immortality during the same period.

Su Shi’s change of attitude toward the “Three Worthies” suggests a shift of emphasis from absolute loyalty to the individual value of life. For a traditional literatus cultivated to think of morality as having an ultimately altruistic and public purpose, the Hīnayāna option provided
an escape into privacy. This sphere may be accessorized materially by a garden, a refined studio, “useless” objects and casual garments, but essentially it was an inner utopia furnished by a meditative mind.

**Inner Utopia**

A private sphere is where one escapes from pervasive institutional forces. A life in retreat is one conventional option to secure this sphere. Yet Su Shi was an exile, marginalized but obliged to stay within the system. His escape was thus by necessity an introverted one, as illustrated in Su Shi’s transformation of the “Peach Blossom Spring” (taohuayuan 桃花源) theme. Originally a secluded agrarian society of Tao Qian’s literary imagination, the theme of Peach Blossom Spring evolved through centuries. It was most often depicted as a Daoist grotto-heaven. Under Su Shi’s brush, it became an inner utopia accessible in dream and meditation.

In *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim defines a state of mind as ideological (in the narrow sense of the term) when it confirms existing order, while utopian when it is incongruent with the state of reality within which it occurs. A man purportedly not fitting with his time, Tao Qian left an indelible mark in Chinese utopic thinking with “Peach Blossom Spring,” a long poem with a preface. In this iconic poem, a stray fisherman encountered a clear stream, on the banks of which stood groves of blossoming peach trees. Rowing against the stream, he found a narrow entrance to a cave and, on the other side, an open space occupied by a small hermetic agrarian community. It had been established centuries earlier by people escaping the warfare at the end of Qin. The hospitable residents wore archaic attires, lived in autonomy and self-

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121 Mannheim (1936), 192.
sufficiency, knew no kings and paid no taxes. When the fisherman went home, he broke his oath of secrecy and guided the magistrate of Wuling 武陵 (in modern Changde, Hunan Province) to seek the cave. But Peach Blossom Spring was never found again. 122

The ambivalence of Peach Blossom Spring between the realistic and the mythic is central to its appeal. As Susan Nelson argues, Tao Qian “borrowed elements from fables about Immortals current in his day; however he modified them, notions of the supernatural were at their origin and core.” 123 These supernatural associations include the peach blossoms at the entrance which intimate immortality, the tunnel entrance which suggests a grotto heaven, the stream nourishing perhaps a “spiritual fount,” and the disappearance of the entrance upon seeking. 124 These are all common mythemes in Daoist lore. As Yin-tze Kwong observes, however, though this story might be inspired by Tao’s contemporary stories about immortals, its narrative is decidedly realistic, making it “at once utopian and this-worldly.” 125

Needless to say, this was a place where “a scholar in hiding” could truly “hide” well. However, though residents in Peach Blossom Spring disengaged from centralized social and political forces, they did not discard essential social norms, enjoying furthermore a communal life. This state of being represented a social ideal, attracting numerous literati over the centuries.

122 Tao Qian, “Taohua yuan ji bing shi” 桃花源記并詩, TYM, 6:479-80.
125 Kwong (1989), 49.
It was a utopia, in terms of it being incongruent with the existing hierarchical political order, albeit conservative in nature for confirming values held central to traditional political thinking.126

Life at Peach Blossom Spring is eudaimonic. *Eudaimonia*, an Aristotelian concept often misleadingly translated as “happiness,” means “flourishing” or “living well.” The state of *eudaimonia* occurs when people are using all of their powers to their fullest extent, and things are going as well as they could.127 It is facilitated by a communal life. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle conceives ethics as part of political science, since it seeks to discover the good for an individual and a community.128 It suggests that an individual can truly live well only in a well-organized community. Each utopia, as a human community, represents an ideal of *eudaimonia*. Tao Qian’s “Peach Blossom Spring” represents a unique concept of a pre-modern Chinese utopia where people live in a small rural community secluded from centralized political control; there – especially in the later development of this theme – people enjoy spiritual spontaneity as well as physical longevity.129 Studying the transformation of this theme in literature thus provides a glimpse, however limited in scope, on visions of a eudaimonic life. Su Shi’s vision, as to be seen

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126 For more extensive discussion relating the “Peach Blossom Spring” to political philosophy expressed in the *Book of Rites*, *Laozi*, among others, as well as actual refugee settlements of Tao’s time, see Kwong (1989), 50-53.

127 Thomson & Missner (2000), 68.

128 See Terence Irwin, “Introduction,” Aristotle (1999), xvi. I am borrowing this term without accepting all these Aristotelian qualifications of it.

129 According to Tao Qian, in Peach Blossom Spring, “old men and boy were carefree and happy”; see “Taohuayuan ji bing shi” 桃花源記并詩, *TYM*, 6:479-80. As to be discussed below, since the Tang, poets including Su Shi characteristically understood this place as nourishing longevity, if not immortality.
below, is built upon existing literature on Peach Blossom Spring over the centuries since Tao Qian.

I. Peach Blossom Spring as a Princely Estate

Given the fact that Tao Qian’s poetry was held to be only in the “middle rank” through the Six Dynasties, \(^{130}\) few poets of this period referred to the Peach Blossom Spring theme. And if they did, it was often a euphemism for a princely garden. Yu Xin 庾信 (513-581), for instance, wrote:

梁王修竹园 The prince of Liang’s garden of slender bamboos –

冠盖风尘喧 Their crowns overtop the clamor of wind and dust below.

行人忽枉道 A passenger may suddenly go astray,

直进桃花源 And intrude straight into a Peach Blossom Spring. \(^{131}\)

Ironically, the residents in such a Peach Blossom Spring are no longer farmers escaping a despotic rulership, but the rulers themselves. Tall bamboos overtopping dust and clamor symbolize their power. The hapless passenger is a parody of the stray fisherman – awaiting him is certainly not hospitality. At best he will be expelled as a joke in the eyes of a gentleman like Yu Xin. Peach Blossom Spring is no longer a classless society, but a privatized, privileged space, the ruthlessness of which is revealed only upon intrusion.

\(^{130}\) Zhong Rong 鍾嶸, Shipin jizhu 詩品集注, 260.

\(^{131}\) Yu Xin, “Feng bao Zhaowang huijiu shi” 奉報趙王惠酒詩, XQHW, beizhou 3:2377.
Aside from Tao’s poem itself, the “Peach Blossom Spring” is mentioned only in four poems prior to the Tang. Of these four poems, two referred to princely estates, the third to a mountain villa, and the fourth to a Buddhist temple. All have more or less to do with an aestheticized, artificial garden rather than a rustic, natural space. The only feature they have in common is their exclusivity.

This usage of “Peach Blossom Spring” extended well into the Tang Dynasty. When Lu Zhaolin 蘆照鄰 (636?-after 695) wrote on a banquet held in a high society villa, he began with the couplet:

風煙彭澤里 The wind-blown mist covers a Pengze-like village;
山水仲長園 Mountain and river circle a Zhongchang’s garden.

Pengze (in modern Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province) is Tao Qian’s hometown. Zhongchang refers to Zhongchang Tong 仲長統 (180-220), a Late Han literatus known for his unrestrained words and deeds. The reclusive appearance of this place, however, is quickly revealed as deceitful:

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132 In addition to the poem of Yu Xin quoted above, there is also his “Yong huapingfeng shi ershiwushou” 詠畫屏風詩二十五首, no.5, XQHW, beizhou 4:2395.
CHAPTER FIVE

門開芳杜逕  The gates open toward a path of fragrant wild ginger;
室距桃花源  The chambers locate against a Peach Blossom Spring.
公子黃金勒  My young lord rides a horse of gold bridle;
仙人紫氣軒  To an immortal of purple-aura alone can his nobility compare.

As Stephen Owen argues, Tang estate poem features “an encounter of antithetical extremes, in which the center of political power […] and the place defined by its rupture from centered political space […] came together.” The example that he raises is Shen Quanqi’s 沈佺期 (656?-714?) wonderful formulation: “Peach Blossom Spring meets the ninefold Palace.”\textsuperscript{137} In the above-quoted poem from Lu Zhaolin, the opening lines seemingly describe a place withdrawn from the world, before “my young lord” with his gold-bridled horse gaudily rides into view. Convention requires the poet to admire the rich décor and end the poem with the gentry traffic returning to the city. The owner of this “Peach Blossom Spring” appears to be yet another “weekend recluse” (in Stephen Owen’s term), whose ideal of a eudaimonic life was representative of the high society.

When he compares the unnamed “young lord” to an immortal surrounded by purple aura, Lu Zhaolin borrows from another popular adaptation of the “Peach Blossom Spring” in the Tang, that is, the residence of immortals.

\textsuperscript{137} Owen (1995), 44, 46. Shen Quanqi’s line, \textit{huayuan jie jiuchong} 花源接九重, is from “Feng he xing Wei Sili shanzhuang shiyan yingzhi” 奉和幸韋嗣立山莊侍宴應制, see \textit{QTS}, 97:1054.
II. Peach Blossom Spring as a Grotto Heaven

The Southern Song author Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1203) observed that residents in Tao Qian’s original “Peach Blossom Spring” were mortals, but Tang poets generally depicted the space as a supernatural realm accommodating earthly immortals. During the Tang, “Peach Blossom Spring” as a literary motif gained popular currency, verging on becoming a cliché. As an allusion and a motif, it appears in more than 200 poems in the extant Tang poetic corpus, called alternatively taohuayuan 桃花源, taoyuan 桃源, huayuan 花源, Wuling yuan 武陵源, or Wuling xi 武陵溪. It was most often described as an escapist, pristine realm of transcendence and had entered some Daoist scriptures to become a blessed grotto heaven.

In Tang poetry, these mythemes latent in Tao’s depiction now proliferated into various combinations and elaborations. Wang Wei’s “Song of Peach Blossom Spring” (“Taoyuan xing” 桃源行), for instance, clearly declares that those farmers running away from war and tyranny somehow became immortals:

初因避地去人間 At first they escaped the warfare and left the realm of man;
及至成仙遂不還 Till they became immortals and would never return.

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139 Listed as Taoyuan shandong 桃源山洞 in a “Tiandi gongfu tu” 天地宮府圖; see Zhang Junfang 張君房, Yunji qiqian 云笈七籖, 618.
Tao Qian’s description of life in Peach Blossom Spring was transplanted onto other conventional themes of immortals’ life such as dining on turtle shells, drinking stone marrow, wearing deer fur, and planting jade or fantastic, efficacious plants. When the word “Peach Blossom Spring” was used as a synonym of any generic grotto heaven accommodating any mythical element, its semantic core also shrank accordingly. For instance, in the following poem by Li Bo:

仙人騎彩鳳 The immortal, riding a phoenix of colorful plumes,
昨下閬風岑 Descended yesterday from the high-wind peak.
海水三清淺 The ocean becoming clear and shallow, trice [has he seen];
桃源一見尋 Once he visited Peach [Blossom] Spring.142

This poem uses “Peach [Blossom] Spring” as a handy parallelism to “ocean water” but otherwise contains no reference to Tao Qian’s story. Indeed, Tao’s rural utopia had become so closely associated to a Daoist heaven that although Han Yu chided all stories about immortals as nonsensical, he nevertheless proceeded to elaborate in great detail upon a painting on “Peach Blossom Spring” as a domain of immortality.143

This literary tradition of Peach Blossom Spring represents another vision of eudaimonic life. It is no longer a duty-free haven for refugee peasants, refusing those less lucky, nor a high

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141 See, e.g., Lu Zhaolin, “Guo Dongshan gukou” 過東山谷口, QTS, 42:529; Quan Deyu 權德輿, “Taoyuan pian” 桃源篇, QTS, 329:3679; Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫, “Taoyuan xing” 桃源行, QTS, 356:3995; etc.
142 Li Bo, “Nigu shiershou” 擬古十二首, no.10, Li Taibai quanji, 24:1100.
society garden, refusing those born lowly, but a pleasure house for immortals, denying entrance to all mortals together. What these visions have in common is the exclusivity of eudaimonia.

III. Peach Blossom Spring as a Dream World

Corresponding to Tao Qian’s prefaced poem, Su Shi’s matching poem to “Peach Blossom Spring” also has a preface. It begins by correcting the Tang poets to redeem the original meaning of Peach Blossom Spring as a rural utopia, a point made by close reading of Tao’s text:

世傳桃源事，多過其實。考淵明所記，止言先世避秦亂來此，則漁人所見，似是其子孫，非秦人不死者也。又云殺雞作食，豈有仙而殺者乎？

Popular legends about Peach Blossom Spring are usually overblown. If we examine Yuanming’s record carefully, he only said that their ancestors came to that place to escape the warfare at the end of the Qin. So whom the fisherman met seemed to be their descendants, not some immortals from the Qin. He also said that they killed chickens for meals. How could an immortal kill chickens?¹⁴⁴

Su Shi notices the residents’ non-vegetarian diet and holds it central to his argument. As to be seen later, food is deeply meaningful to define a space. Susan Nelson remarks that Su Shi was the first person who argued convincingly against describing Peach Blossom Spring as a paradise, initiating an “immortality controversy” on the nature of this place.¹⁴⁵ While claiming to redeem

¹⁴⁴ Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Taohuayuan’ bing yin” 和陶桃花源并引, SSSJ, 40:2196.

the “authorial intention” of Tao Qian, however, Su Shi gave this theme his own twist. For him, many Peach Blossom Springs hide in secret nooks of the world beyond the reach of centralized political or cultural forces; yet they are readily accessible in dreams.

An old legend has it that there was a chrysanthemum creek in Nanyang. The water was sweet and fragrant. There were some thirty households and they drank from its water. They all lived long, some up to a hundred and twenty or thirty years. Amidst Mt. Qingcheng of Sichuan, there was an old-man village, where some had lived to see their fifth generation descendants. The road to this village was extremely treacherous and long-winding, so all their lives, they had never tasted salt or vinegar. There grew many wolfberry trees in the stream, the roots of which were as thick as snakes and dragons.

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146 A story found in the “Xianyao” 仙藥 chapter, Baopuzi; see Wang Ming 王明, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi 抱朴子内篇校釋, 11:207-8.
Whoever drank its water lived long. In recent years, the condition of the road has improved, so eventually the residents are able to acquire various kinds of cuisine and seasoning. Their life expectancy, however, has decreased. Could Peach Blossom Spring be also its kind? Had the Magistrate of Wuling managed to find it, it would have long become a battlefield of fighting and snatching! In my opinion, there are many places like this between heaven and earth, not just Peach Blossom Spring. When I was in Yingzhou, I once dreamt of arriving at an official building. The people there did not differ from the mundane, but the mountains and rivers formed a vista clear and vast, which was truly delightful. I looked back into the hall and found a tablet with the inscription “Qiuchi.” Then I woke up. It occurred to me that Qiuchi used to be the homeland of the Di natives from Wudu, under the protection of Yang the Irresistible.\footnote{Di is the ethnic tribe occupying this region. Wudu (in modern Gansu Province) is the name Han Wudi gave to this prefecture in 111 BCE. The Yang clan of Di came to live on Qiuchi since the end of the Eastern Han. See Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛, \textit{Shuijingzhu jiaozheng} 水經注校證, 20:481. Yang Nandang 楊難當 (literally: Yang the Irresistible) was the chief of his clan from 429-442, until being crushed by the Liu Song Dynasty. His history is recorded in Sima Guang, \textit{Zizhi tongjian} 資治通鑒, 121:3978-124:3929.} How did I get here? The next day I asked my guests. A guest called Zhao Lingshi, whose polite name was Delin, said: “Why did you ask, sir? This is a land of bliss adjunct to the Grotto Heaven. Du Fu once said: ‘The Qiuchi Cave has existed since age immemorial;/ a secret path leads to it, a minor heaven.’”\footnote{Quote from Du Fu, “Qinzhou zayong” 秦州雜詠, no.14, in Qiu Zhao’ao 仇兆鰲, \textit{Du shi xiang zhu} 杜詩詳注, 7:584.} Some other day, Wang Qingchen, whose style name was Zhongzhi, Vice Director in the Ministry of Works, told me: “Once on my return from an envoy trip,
I passed by Mt. Qiuchi. It was nourished by ninety-nine fountains and surrounded by myriad mountains. It was truly a place to hide from the world, just like Peach Blossom Spring.”

Since his Yingzhou dream, Qiuchi became Su Shi’s private obsession. Originally a place recorded in *Shuijingzhu* 水經注 [Commentary to the Book of Water Ways], it is a rocky and clffy mountain cut steep at all sides with only one stringy path leading to the peak; but at its peak it spreads flat hundreds of acres of arable land nourished by a rich fountain. Su Shi’s dream visit to Qiuchi was made in 1091 or 1092, during his tenure in Yingzhou. Shortly after he transferred to Yangzhou in the spring of 1092, Su Shi acquired a pair of rocks. One was green, resembling a mountain range penetrated by a tiny hole leading from the front to the back; one white, smooth as a mirror. Recalling the dream in Yingzhou as well as Du Fu’s poem, he named this pair of rocks Qiuchi. He brought them back to the capital and caused the aborted transaction with Wang Shen’s precious horse painting, mentioned in Chapter Four. The Qiuchi rock accompanied his long journey of banishment to Huizhou and Danzhou. Notably, the beginning of his matching Tao exercise coincided with his acquisition and naming of the rock. The poetry and the rock both disclosed the escapist thoughts increasingly haunting Su’s mind.

Su Shi was aware that the eudaimonic character of such secret domains was protected by their exclusivity, thus any intrusion of an outsider would breach its blessed isolation. As he

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elaborates in the matching poem, however, Peach Blossom Spring is only a metaphor for an inner realm of bliss, to which access is guaranteed in absolute mental tranquility.

凡聖無異居 Commoners and sages do not differ in their residence;
清濁共此世 The pure and the sinful share this same world.
心閑偶自見 When my mind is idle, I catch an occasional glimpse.
念起忽已逝 But when a single thought stirs, it vanishes like a flash.
欲知真一處 To find out where hides the one single truth,
要使六用廢 Let abandon your six senses!
桃源信不遠 Peach Blossom Spring is truly not far,
杖藜可小憩 Reachable by walking with a goosefoot stick while taking small rests.
躬耕任地力 There people farm in accordance to the capacity of the land;
絕學抱天藝 There learning is abandoned, and embraced is the heavenly craft.
臂雞有時鳴 The arm-roosters occasionally crow;
尻駕無可稅 And the thigh-carriages cannot be unfastened.\(^\text{151}\)
苓龜亦晨吸 The tuckahoe-turtles also suck the morning air;\(^\text{152}\)

\(^{151}\) In the “Dazongshi” chapter, Zhuangzi, Ziyu 子輿 becomes sick and is asked whether he feels disgusted of his deformed body. He exclaims that he shall accept all kinds of transformations that destiny dictates. If his arm is transformed into a rooster, he would let it crow to announce the time; if his thigh is transformed to a wheel and his spirit to a horse, he will ride this carriage; and so forth. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 6:261.
And wolfberry-dogs occasionally bark at night.\textsuperscript{153}

Farmers and woodcutters find sweet and fragrant things;

They eat them raw without cooking or pickling.

Though Ziji failed to tramp its soil,\textsuperscript{154}

Yuanming already visited it in mind.

High mountains are not hard to climb;

Shallow waters are trivial to wade.

How is it like my Qiuchi,

Raised high above for many everlasting years!

Where life and death are always treated equal;

\textsuperscript{152} The most efficacious tuckahoe is said to assimilate the form of a turtle. In a story related in \textit{Baopuzi},

the turtle gingerly sucks the morning air and thus gains longevity; see Wang Ming, \textit{Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi},

3:48.

\textsuperscript{153} A story in the early Song compendium \textit{Taiping guangji} 太平廣記 tells that Zhu Ruzi 朱孺子, an acolyte

to the Daoist Wang Xuanzhen 王玄真, once saw two spotted puppies disappearing into a cave. He told

Wang and they dug into the cave together, only to find two spotted wolfberry roots. Wang told Zhu to cook

them in an alchemist tripod. After guarding the fire for three days, Zhu was enticed by the smell and drank

the soup alone. Afterwards he shared the root with Wang. Zhu thus became an immortal and Wang only

enjoyed extreme longevity. See Li Fang, \textit{Taiping guangji}, 24:7-8. The same comparison of wolfberry to a

dog is used by Su Shi also in "Ciyun Zhengfu tongyou Baihuishan" 次韻正輔同游白水山, \textit{SSSJ}, 39:2150;


\textsuperscript{154} In Tao Qian’s story, Liu Ziji 劉子驥 was a recluse who also wanted to find Peach Blossom Spring, but

unfortunately died before departure.
Recently, the foolish and the clever have become the same.

The Calamus Gully is the domain of Scholar Anqi; 155

Mount Luofu is the territory of Mr. Ge Hong.

In dreams I follow their roaming;

The encounter of our spirits shall enlighten my delusions!

Peach blossoms brim an entire court;

A flowing stream outside of the door.

Now I laugh at those who escaped the Qin despot –

They still had fears – my true kindred spirits they were not! 156

In Su Shi’s vision, this world of ours is both shared and divided. It is a common space from which no one can escape. But one can have a divided realm to one’s own: a secluded corner accessible when the mind is idle. A single thought stirs, and the entrance is closed. The journey to this realm, in other words, is an exercise of mental tranquility and spontaneity. Paradoxically, the ultimate mobility of spiritual roaming is achieved only in the absence of intentionality.

Living in such a realm, moreover, demands one to dispossess learning and craft. This eudaimonic life is nourished by raw food of high nutritious concentration. As Su Shi argues in the preface, the people of Nanyang and Qingcheng enjoyed longevity because of their medicinal

155 The Calamus Gully is in Mt. Baiyun 白雲山 (in modern Guangzhou, Guangdong Province), where the calamus grows plenty. Scholar Anqi was a legendary recipe master who dined on the calamus and became immortal. See Chapter Three.


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water source and their natural recipe, unadulterated by processed products like salt and spice. Despite their job description as farmers and woodcutters, those residents were actually collectors dining upon raw food. Robert F. Campany argues that in the meaning system of Chinese cuisine, eating grains, cooking, and living in settled agricultural communities are among the traits possessed by human beings par excellence.\textsuperscript{157} In contrast, the “cuisine of transcendence” is based on something other than grains, ingested raw (or prepared according to secret methods different from the standard cooking technique), prepared and consumed ritualistically. An alternative diet is an essential component in the endeavor to transcend the sedentary, agricultural society together with its political and ideological authorities.\textsuperscript{158} Despite the Daoist mythemes used to construct Tao Qian’s Peach Blossom Spring, the chicken-killing and millet-cooking residents are physiologically human. Su Shi has noticed this point in his preface to support his argument that Peach Blossom Spring is not a grotto heaven. In his poem, however, it is precisely their cuisine that has been modified to be raw and natural, seemingly vegetarian. Their distinctive dietary habits have now become consistent with the socioeconomic and political “otherness” of this community.

The Daoist feature of Su Shi’s Peach Blossom Spring is further highlighted by its wondrous population including arm-roosters, thigh-carriages, tuckahoe-turtles, and wolfberry-dogs. Human body parts, manufactured objects, plants, and animals seem to be in constant metamorphosis, characteristic of the Daoist worldview. According to Isabelle Robinet, the Chinese philosophy of metamorphosis does not perceive the appearance of the world as a creation, and there is no ontological separation or discontinuity in nature. “When arriving at a

\textsuperscript{157}Campany (2005), 8-9.

\textsuperscript{158}Campany (2005), 50-52.
terminal point of development, each thing reverses itself into its opposite or otherwise changes its form.”\textsuperscript{159} Those hybrid beings under Su Shi’s brush appear to be caught at the most revealing moment of their transitional stage, when their forms are still in fluidity. Does it imply that the spiritual density of this land facilitates the metamorphosis of things, and that therefore they are constantly in transformation and easily caught as such? Would a visitor partake of the spiritual density and transform himself into something else, perhaps into purer and higher existence? In any case, this land facilitates the direct observation of the grand transformation of things, the understanding of which represents a “hallmark of intellectual knowledge.”\textsuperscript{160}

Those defining features of living at Peach Blossom Spring mirror the life of a Daoist adept, whose meditative spirit is in free roaming, who observes a raw food diet (or ideally dines upon air alone), and who partakes of the metamorphosis of things through chemical or physiological alchemy. This explains Su Shi’s proposal to follow Scholar Anqi and Ge Hong, both local celebrities in or around Mt. Luofu, in dream and in fantasy. He laughs at those residents at Peach Blossom Spring, whose discovery was motivated by fear, an undesirably mental activity hampering true spontaneity. It implies that one does not need to relinquish one’s worldly engagements and go into reclusion. To physically seek a separate realm is a highly deliberate act, motivated perhaps by fear of being contaminated by one’s external environment. It is therefore an inferior form of access. Access to an inner utopia, on the other hand, is gained when one sinks into a state of non-intentionality, as in dream or in meditation. One no longer needs to find Peach Blossom Spring so long as one can recreate a eudaimonic life through Daoist practice and receive all its mental and physiological bliss.

\textsuperscript{159} Robinet (1993), 154.

\textsuperscript{160} Robinet (1993), 155.
Compared to earlier visions of Peach Blossom Spring, all depicting an exclusive space, Su’s is more egalitarian. It is also more meritocratic: virtually anyone can enter, so long as they are Su’s “kindred spirits.” It is moreover completely individualistic. Since it exists only in one’s inner space, no stray fisherman or passenger can intrude. It is an ultimate “private sphere.”

Return

In the topography of mental reality, a true land of bliss is accessible only in absolute spontaneity. Su Shi often entertained this idea in various degrees of earnestness, sometimes as witticism, sometimes to alleviate the pain of dislocation. It must have comforted him to argue that “return” (gui 归) does not demand an actual journey to one’s hometown. His notion of “return” thus betrays an element of Daoist esoteric thought as returning to one’s authentic state. In reality, “return” in this sense is the only option to overcome his displacement.

To be sure, there is self-persuasion in this argument. “Return” is commonly understood as home-going, usually as a result of retirement or in some few cases resignation. Since these options were denied to a man in exile, homesickness was an unaffordable disease. Better, therefore, not to catch it:

痴人常念起 Even a paralyzed person often thinks of rising –
夫我豈忘歸 How could I forget to think of return.
不敢夢故山 But I dare not dream of my homeland mountains,
Lest to arouse the grief over my forefathers’ graves.¹⁶¹

This poem was written shortly after he arrived at Hainan and dreamt one night of his newly built house at White Crane Peak in Huizhou. This, he interpreted, was because a dream of his hometown would be too sad. The comparison of him to a paralyzed person suggests a spell he could not break. A paralyzed patient is imprisoned in his physical handicap. An exiled man is imprisoned in the vast landscape.

As noticed by Yoshikawa Kojirō, one of Su Shi’s favorite metaphor is “my life is like a sojourn only.”¹⁶² Yet instead of indulging himself in nostalgia and melancholy, Su Shi decided to resign to the fluctuation of life and settle in the present moment, so as to ensure that his true inner life “lie[s] in a continued resistance.”¹⁶³ Therefore, on one hand, since life is in constant sojourn, “home” is but an illusion; on the other hand, he redefined “return” as return to one’s authentic state, so that wherever he was, he was already “home.” As a result, as early as in Yangzhou (1092), he attempted to regard the lack of career success as felicitous for such a return.¹⁶⁴ In his final exile, he further argued that misfortunes facilitated his recognition of his “original face.”

The [broken] vase had always stayed close to peril.
A falling pot knows that it will not remain intact.

¹⁶¹ Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Huan juju’” 和陶還舊居, SSSJ, 41:2250-1.
¹⁶² Yoshikawa (1967), 111.
¹⁶³ Ibid., 114.
¹⁶⁴ See Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Yinjiu’ ershishou,” no.9, SSSJ, 35:1886.
In dream I seek the bow lost in Chu;
Laughingly I take off the hat, redundant among the natives of Yue.
All of a sudden, I come to see myself in the mirror,
And recognize in it my original face.
The road of return has always been under my feet;
The layered passes of Mt. Yao and Tong disappear.  

In the “Jifu” 跡府 chapter of Gongsun Longzi 公孫龍子, it is said that the King of Chu once lost his precious bow in hunting. When his attendants volunteered to find it, the king stopped them and said: “When a Chu man lost it, a Chu man will find it. What is the loss?” This reference suggests that Su’s loss of rank is not a loss at all. In a Zhuangzian parable, a merchant of Song brought many embroidered ritual hats to Yue, a hard sale among the half-naked natives.167 Taking off his official hat in laughter, Su Shi shows his willingness to discard the redundancy of culture, so that he can finally see his own true form. The “road of return” is not through the imposing passes of Mt. Yao and Tong (in modern Shaanxi Province) which separates southwest Sichuan from the central plains. Instead, his home is nowhere but in his innermost mind, so that his feet have been always treading upon this “road of return.” The geographical distance between Hainan and his Sichuan hometown is translated into psychological space, easily covered in a single thought.

166 Wang Guan 王琯, Gongsun Longzi xuanjie 公孫龍子懸解, 1:34.
167 See the “Xiaoyaoyou” chapter in Zhuangzi, Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 1:31.
In this vision, the body becomes the lodge of mental activities such as dream, meditation, and spiritual roaming. It should be well maintained to facilitate these activities. Yet anxiety over mortality lurks behind Su Shi’s every thought of return, since death is its ultimate form. The following rhymeprose matches Tao Qian’s “Return!” (“Guiqulaixi ci” 龔去來兮辭) rhyme by rhyme and rewrites Tao’s celebrated moment of home-coming, scene by scene, into an esoteric hymn on Daoist meditative practice. I have divided the text except for the preface into four sections to facilitate the discussion.

和陶歸去來兮辭

Matching Tao’s “Return!” 168

子瞻謫居昌化，追和淵明《歸去來辭》，蓋以無何有之鄉為家，雖在海外，未嘗不歸云爾。

Zizhan is banished to live in Changhua (aka. Danzhou). He matches Yuanming’s “Return!” to take the Land of Nothingness as home. Even though he is beyond the seas, he is ever returning.

The preface intimates that the true purpose of this composition is self-persuasion. Su shows resolution to settle in “the Land of Nothingness.” This land appears in a Zhuangzian parable, where a gigantic ailanthus tree could be valued for being useless. 169 The “Land of Nothingness”

169 See the “Xiaoyaoyou” chapter of Zhuangzi. Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 1:39-40.
accommodates the unbelonging. When the poet is attached to no place, everywhere can be for him “the Land of Nothingness,” a pun on the material deprivation of Hainan. Yet as Su argues, if his own settled mind is his true home, he is constantly returning.

[1] 归去來兮，吾方南遷安得歸。卧江海之澒洞，弔鼓角之悽悲。迹泥蟠而愈深，時電往而莫追。懷西南之歸路，夢良是而覺非。悟此生之何常，猶寒暑之異衣。豈襲裘而念葛，蓋得觕而喪微。

Return, return! I am just banished to the South, so how can I return? I lie amongst the expansion of the rivers and oceans, lamenting over the dolorous drums and horns announcing hours. I left traces crouching in the mud, ever more deeply; gone is the time like flashes of lightning beyond my chase! I think of the southwest road of return; dreaming is truly correct, but wakening is not. I realize the inconstancy of this life, just like changing clothes at the shifts of seasons. But I shall not miss the ramie clothing of the summer when wearing wintry fur, since I have rather gained big and have lost small.

The poem evokes Tao’s famous invocation “Return, return!” only to declare it beyond the capacity of an exile. To Tao Qian’s “I realize today I am correct and in the past not” 覺今是而昨非, Su responds that for him only dreaming is correct, since he can return home only in dream. Reality forces him to face the inconstancy of life. He persuades himself to stop the vain nostalgia and to settle in the present moment. He argues that his predicament is in fact a bargain.

170 See Tao Qian, “Guiqulaixi ci”歸去來兮辭, TYM, 5:460.
My return is truly facile, without galloping or rushing. Every instant when I lie or rise, I have returned home. I get off my carriage and lock the gate. Though fences and walls have crumbled, the hall and chambers are still intact. I fetch my Ale of Heaven and pour it into a concaved cup. I drink moonlit dew to cleanse my heart and dine upon the morning rosy cloud to brighten my cheeks. The guest and the host become one and the same, so that the mother- and daughter-in-law can live in peace. I realize there is no thief or robber, so I shred the gate and break the lock. I expand my round mirror to reflect the external world, which contains the myriad phenomena to be observed from the middle. I dredge the deserted well to fetch fresh water in the morning. A hundred springs surge and brim overnight. I guard the ultimate tranquility¹⁷¹ and let the energy rise by itself. At times it is like a leaping sparrow¹⁷² or a twirling salamander.¹⁷³

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¹⁷¹ See Laozi 16, “Acquiring the ultimate emptiness and guard solidly the tranquility” 致虛極守靜篤; Zhu Qianzhi, Laozi jiao shi, 64.

¹⁷² Jueyue 爵躍 is a variant to queyue 雀躍. In the “Zaiyou” chapter of Zhuangzi, Yun 雲 (literally, the cloud) met Hongmeng 鴻蒙 (literally, the vast nebulosity) in his roaming. The latter was patting his thigh and leaping around like a sparrow, about to roam too. Hongmeng’s true wisdom, it turns out, is in hiding his wisdom. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 11:358.

¹⁷³ In the “Yingdiwang” chapter of Zhuangzi, Huzu 壺子 bewildered a shaman by showing varying appearances manipulating the latter’s physiognomy. He could do this because, as he explained, he was
Tao Qian describes himself as riding a rushing carriage to return home, showing his ecstasy and urgency. By contrast, Su Shi declares to have no such urge. Using a rhetorical device often found in Daoist literature, he transforms the physical space of a house to metaphors of one’s body. His cosmic drink and food provide pristine energy that nourishes his physical and mental well-being. When the conflicting forces within (the “mother- and daughter-in-law”) are harmonized, he makes no longer distinctions between the external and the internal (the “guest” and the “host”). He is then capable of opening himself to the myriad forms, reflecting them inside as they are. His body is now a miniature of the cosmos. The mirror metaphor symbolizes the tranquil, spontaneous mind which has omniscient cognitive capacity. Its relation with water is implied in the next line where a Daoist fountain of energy flows from within. By guarding the ultimate tranquility, the poet finally transforms himself into Zhuangzian figures who are incarnations of the primordial nebulosity (symbolized by Hongmeng 鴻蒙 who jumps joyously like a sparrow) or of the deepest depths (symbolized by Huzi 壺子 who hides like a twirling salamander). The body becomes the physical embodiment of spontaneity.

[3] 归去来兮，請終老於斯游。我先人之敝廬，復舍此而焉求？均海南與漢北，挈往來而無憂。畸人告予以一言，非八卦與九疇。方飢須糧，已濟無舟。忽人
Return, return! Allow me to live through my days in this roaming voyage. My forefathers have left me this shabby hut – why shall I abandon it and seek elsewhere? Hainan and the central plains are the same. I bring myself along in coming and going without worry. A Man at Odds gives me one wise word: there is no use of the Eight Diagrams or the Nine Laws! When a man is hungry, he needs food. When he has crossed the river, discard the boat. All in a sudden, the cowboy and the buffalo both disappear.\textsuperscript{175} What remain are but tall trees and high hills. With alert, the six faculties stay in abandonment; from one single root, I reverse the flow.\textsuperscript{176} Gazing afar at my old home, I long to rest. Yet how could I have rested already thrice midway?

This paragraph continues his self-persuasion. The “shabby hut” refers to his own body that he cannot abandon. He has learned to discard divination or human norms, since these are the “skillful means” like a boat no longer needed. This state of truth is illustrated in Buddhist terms

\textsuperscript{175} Referring to “Ten Pictures of Buffalo” (\textit{Shiniutu 十牛圖}), a series of painting which depicts the ten phases of a cowboy seeking a lost buffalo. The last eighth is the cowboy and the buffalo have forgotten each other, represented by a full circle in the picture, symbolizing the disappearance of all distinctions. The earliest version of these pictures was made by Master Qingju 清居 around 1050, which had only eight phases. See \textit{Zhu Dingzhou Liangshan Kuo’an heshang Shiniutusong 住鼎州梁山廓庵和尚十牛圖頌} no.1269, 64:773c-775a.

\textsuperscript{176} A quote from \textit{Śūramgama Sūtra} states: “Reversing the flow to preserve the One; let the six faculties stay in abandonment.” 反流全一六用不行. See \textit{T}.19.945.141.
as the mutual oblivion of the subject and the object of seeking (the “cowboy” and the “buffalo”).
This is the moment when one abandons the six sensory faculties and returns to the common
origin of myriad things. Su fears however that he may fail to truly return, since his capacity is
low. Given the constant imperfection of human nature, his weakness represents a common
human condition. Even though he knows that he shall not rest, he nevertheless has to stop and
catch his breath, already thrice midway. His home remains fully in view but beyond reach.

[4] 已矣乎, 吾生有命歸有時, 我初無行亦無留。驾车隨子聽所之, 豈以師
南華而廢從安期。謂湯稼之終枯, 遂不溉而不耔。師淵明之雅放，和百篇之新詩。
賦歸來之清引，我其後身蓋無疑。

Alas, let it be! My life is destined; my return timed. I initially should neither go
nor stay. Let me say: I will go wherever you go. How can I, because of my following the
teaching of Zhuangzi, neglect to follow Anqi’s suit! How can I, because planting crops in
the drought will ultimately wither, refuse to water or to cultivate the sprouts!177 I take
Yuanming’s elegant abandonment as my example and have written hundreds of new
poems in matching rhymes. I write also the pure prelude of “Return!” – I must be his
reincarnation, no doubt!

In this last paragraph, Su Shi decides to reconcile with his limited capacity. If Zhuangzi
represents the understanding of the ultimate philosophical truth, that is, the equation of life and

177 An analogy from Ji Kang 稽康, “Yangsheng lun” 養生論; see Dai Mingyang 戴明揚, Ji Kang ji jiaozhu
嵇康集校注, 3:143-4. For more on Ji Kang’s treatise and this analogy, see Chapter Six.
death, Scholar Anqi represents another esoteric truth, that is, a mortal can succeed in defeating death. Su Shi declares that he will follow both examples. He understands the ultimate destiny of decay, but nevertheless, as the crop analogy borrowed from Ji Kang’s 嵇康 (223-263) “Treatise on Nourishing Life” (“Yangsheng lun” 養生論) suggests, he should not give up nourishing his own life just because every effort ends in vain. In the end, he claims to be Tao Qian’s reincarnation, even though in effect, in announcing their identity, Su has already modified the meaning of Tao’s precedence. To “return” in Su Shi’s fashion, one must exercise oblivion, let oneself sink into a meditative, spontaneous mental state; one should also practice the Daoist art of longevity and immortality to maintain the “shabby hut” in which he is accidentally housed – ironically, to deter death, the ultimate “return.”

Coda

Su Shi’s emulation of Tao Qian was of long-lasting literary historical significance. In the reception history of Tao Qian’s poetry, it was a decisive link leading to the gradual canonization of Tao through the Song Dynasty. In the development of his own poetry, Tao’s style contributed to the formation of Su’s “old state” (laojing 老境), characteristic for its limpidity, syntactic fluidity, suppression of dramatic tension, and understated aesthetics. It provides also an especially telling case further problematizing the categorization and definition of “nature poetry.”

The term “nature poetry” is used in modern (often Western) scholarship as a catch-phrase to designate two kinds of poetry, traditionally called in China separately as “farmstead poetry” (tianyuanshi 田園詩) and “landscape poetry” (shanshuishi 山水詩). This conflation of terms suggests that nature here is understood as the counterpart of “urban civilization,” a notion
coupled in the West with the age of industrialization. Yet the lack of an equivalent notion of “nature” in traditional China does not necessarily disqualify the use of this term in a traditional Chinese context. One may quicken to notice that both tianyuan and shanshui were constructed since their beginning as counterpart not only of the socioeconomic city space, but more importantly, of the political space of the court. Literary history commonly dates the birth of these two genres with the poetry of Tao Qian and Xie Lingyun, respectively. When Tao traded officialdom for a quiet farmstead life, Xie was demoted to Yongjia (in modern Zhejiang Province) and engaged himself in conquering the local mountains, followed by a large retinue who cleared the jungles and guaranteed his civil pleasure within the wilds. Their poetry, in their seeming celebration of nature, hides simultaneously a staged gesture of self-marginalization from the social and political center, which, ironically, reaffirms the perspective of the center. Designating their poetry as “nature poetry” therefore leads to the politicization of the notion of “nature.”

Neither Tao Qian nor Xie Lingyun, moreover, ever attempted to denounce the cultural order that they imposed upon nature – literally, given Tao’s cultivation of his farmland and Xie’s clearance of wilderness. Nature, harnessed and conquered, finds its representation in phonetically harmonious, formally coupled or paralleled, and semantically referential poetry. It certainly demands naive make-believe to argue that “nature poetry” is a faithful mirror held to reflect nature in its true form, without any intentionality of the poetic agent. Mountains, streams, and fields do not write about themselves, let alone in couplets and learned allusions, nor do they ever “inspire” a poet in the way that a muse actively breathes thoughts into a Greek poet’s mind. Instead, it is the agency of the poetic mind that seeks images from nature, finds words for them,

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associates them with cultural memories or literary descriptions of the past, assorts these elegant and learned phrases into perfectly paralleled couplets abiding by all those rigid formal and metric rules, and furthermore, makes these couplets work as a whole poem. Poetry, moreover, is linguistic in nature. Names are but linguistic entities used to denominate things in shared codes for the purpose of communication among a linguistic community. In this sense, “nature poetry” is never “natural.”

Su Shi’s emulation of Tao Qian further exposed the mediated nature of “nature poetry.” His “return into nature” is now found utterly cultural. Possibly, it was not just a matter of representation, but also of perception. The nature that he saw was already conditioned by the literary descriptions of Tao Qian, among other literary precedents, that he read and absorbed in the past. Yet on the other hand, he did manage to create in his late poetry a “natural” style and a “natural” persona, both under the influence of Tao Qian. Su learned from Tao Qian a limpid style which disguises the poetic agent and seemingly lets nature speak in its immediacy. More importantly, he also emulated Tao’s poetic persona – albeit a persona that he helped to shape – that follows its natural instincts and chooses “nature” as an individualistic, private sphere, opposite to court-centered politics.

Again, Tao Qian and Su Shi remained two distinctive poets. Su impresses the reader as much more complex, reflective, and resourceful, if less consistent. Even though in his “matching Tao” poetry he suppressed such richness, it nevertheless exudes in terms of allusions, phraseology, subject matter, grammatical structure, and emotional depth. But “spontaneity” is not a single style. What Su admired the most is Tao’s spontaneous persona; though he

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179 Similar observations are made in Marther (1958) and Westbrook (1980).
deliberately learned from Tao, the command of “being spontaneous” decides that he must let his own personality be exposed in his poetry.

Certainly, poetic persona does not necessarily equate with the actual person. Tao Qian, perhaps partly due to the fact that not many of his poems were left, presents only a selective image of the self, defined by a few decisive moments of his life, most significant of which are his resignation, farming, and death. Numerous biographical blank spaces, especially of his official career, remain hidden. In comparison, Su Shi was a prolific writer, and his entire corpus was better preserved because of his high social status as well as through the development of printing technology in Northern Song. It thus shows him as a far more complex persona and author. Furthermore, Su Shi in his “matching Tao” poems creates an image of Tao Qian even further simplified (than, say, from a modern reader’s perception) to serve his own purpose. Su’s interpretation purges any inconsistency, accident, or inner doubt that Tao Qian occasionally betrays. Tao Qian in this narrowed vision was a life predestined to become a metaphor. It represents Su’s longing for an original state of the self oblivious to the chicaneries of the external world or arbitrary mandates of fate. Summarily put, Su elevated Tao’s life into a cultural paradigm by abstraction.

A “man in abstract,”180 however, ignores individual particularity like his aspirations, struggles, and empirical experiences. And even though Su Shi attempted to adhere to this model,

180 I have borrowed this argument from experimental ethics. Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a concrete person’s moral decision in a concrete situation can hardly be decided by abstract principles. For instance, one can reasonably accept the fact that all humans are mortal but still loathes death. Ethical quandary has limited effects in answering real ethical questions because it deals with a “man in abstract,” not a man in his individuality. See Appiah (2008), 195-6.
it was precisely for his individuality and past experience that he found this model restrictive and felt an insuppressible need to break it. Furthermore, in Su’s transformation of Peach Blossom Spring theme and his redefinition of “return,” there is a unity of spiritual and physical transcendence absent in Tao’s originals. When Su Shi regarded dining upon raw food, absorbing cosmic essence, and practicing longevity techniques essential to his eudaimonia, he was in effect modifying Tao Qian’s understanding of life with that of Ge Hong’s, with the latter’s occult science promising to defy, instead of deny, death. As discussed in the next chapter, it was freedom and immortality that Su Shi simultaneously desired.
Silently standing in perennial mist and tropical verdure, Mt. Luofu 羅浮山 in Huizhou was where the ancient Daoist Ge Hong 葛洪 (284-343) spent his final years experimenting on an alchemical elixir, the taking of which would make him an immortal (xian 仙). Legend had it that he succeeded. When Su Shi was banished to Huizhou in the year 1094, he interpreted the destination of his journey as a sign of fate urging his final commitment to the pursuit of immortality.

Modern scholars tend to dismiss the earnestness or significance of Su Shi’s Daoist practice. It usually is ignored, sometimes mentioned cryptically like a scandal, or assumed to be purely medical.\(^1\)

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1 The Chinese notion of xian does not necessarily imply they never die. They may live extremely long, such as for a few hundred years, or achieve seeming immortality – that is, living as long as heaven and earth exist. Here the term “immortal” is used as a handy translation for xian. For finer distinction among the immortals, see later discussion in this chapter.


3 For instance, Wang Shuizhao (2000) mentions how “others” suggested Su Shi to practice the Daoist art of longevity (541).
In this chapter, I argue that Su’s pursuit of immortality is an essential part of his construction of “spontaneity” as an ideal in art and in life. In the conceptual world that Su Shi inhabited, the distinction between the “scientific” and the “miraculous” medicine was unclear, if existent at all. A common belief was that death was a curable disease. With regulated intake of herbal and mineral medicine, aided by meditational practices, physical dilapidation was reversible. Immortals were roaming in disguise among the mortals, ready to impart their art to those extraordinarily diligent and/or lucky. The question was whether the candidacy for immortality was egalitarian or preselected. Su Shi, as to be seen below, struggled between the two theologies. He believed, however, that even those whose chance of immortality was written in the register of fate needed dedicated practice, and that even those less lucky might achieve extreme longevity through diligence. In this sense, fathoming one’s fate is futile; one should simply dedicate to the art of immortality and hope for the best.

Being an immortal means absolute freedom. An immortal is beyond the rules of restrained existence, his physical body in divine transformation, and his omniscient mind in constant spontaneity. The pursuit of immortality, however, has a high rate of failure. Regardless of the final result, a true adept shall diligently improve his physical and spiritual nature while resigning to his failure, when death comes. The pursuit of immortality therefore shares the dynamic structure of practice and resignation as observed in Su Shi’s aesthetics, resulting in the kind of spontaneity which is provisional and conditioned by human imperfection. As Su Shi argues, man has the moral obligation to prolong his life as much as possible, using all miraculous or medicinal means available to him; but when death comes, he shall accept his fate without

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further ado. In this hybrid system of religion and philosophy, the physical body is transformed into a locale where dialectic spontaneity takes place.

The History and Theory of Su Shi’s Alchemic Practice before Mt. Luofu

Su Shi’s engagement with Daoism was not atypical of his time. The Zhao imperial family of the Song did not promote themselves as the direct descendants of Laozi, like the Li family of the Tang did. Nevertheless, several emperors were devoted adepts, and their zealotry was mirrored by many of the literati class. A short description of Su Shi’s engagement with the Daoist art of immortality is an apt case study of his age.

The child Su Shi was initially schooled in a local Daoist temple at Mt. Qingcheng (in modern Sichuan Province). During his Danzhou exile, he once dreamed of going back to that temple and heard a pupil reading *Laozi*. It suggests that Su had some preliminary study of *Laozi* with Zhang Yijian 張易簡, a Daoist priest who tutored pupils from local gentry families. The aged and banished poet repeatedly recollected that at a tender age, he was fond of Daoism; were it not that his father obliged him to marriage and civil service, he would have escaped into the mountains to become a Daoist reclusive. But memory of an old man is not always reliable. Perhaps Su Shi in retrospect had magnified selected elements of the past in order to establish some biographical consistency uniting his early fascination and his final dedication, therefore reducing his worldly fame and glory to unfortunate aberration. As he said, “reading my younger

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compositions, they resemble events happening in another life or the writing of someone else.”

He severed relation with the words that brought him fame and declared his exile an opportunity to realize his true self.

On closer examination, however, it appears that Su Shi’s practice of the Daoist art before Huizhou was half-hearted and inconsistent, foreboding nothing like a final return. It was true that he read Daoist canons early. A poem written in 1059 mentions his reading of Huangtingjing [The Yellow Court Scripture], a canon which establishes the essential theories of Daoist “inner alchemy” (neidan 内丹), or physiological alchemy. This term stands in dichotomy with “outer alchemy” (waidan 外丹), or laboratory alchemy. The Northern Song saw a general

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8 A narrative accepted by the most detailed study of Su Shi’s involvement with Daoist practices, Zhong Laiyin (1990), which unfortunately tends to read Su Shi’s statements literally and unquestioningly.
9 See Su Shi, “Liu ti Xianduguan” 留題仙都觀, SSSJ, 1:18-19. The Yellow Court (huangting 黄庭) is a Daoist term referring to the fictive middle space of the human body, named as such since yellow is the color representing “middle” in the Five Phases (wuxing 五行) cosmology, while the court is the (political and cosmological) middle of the world. It corresponds usually to the spleen. It is also sometimes said to be consisted of three parts, corresponding respectively to the middle of the brain, of the heart, and of the spleen. See Shangqing huangting nei jing 上清黃庭內景經, in Zhang Junfang 張君房, Yunji qiqian 云笈七籖, 190, 197; Schipper (1993), 106; Robinet (1993), 57. Another theory is that three “Yellow Courts” locate within the head, within the spleen, and within the lower cinnabar field; see Robinet (1993), 57.
10 Here I use the conventional definitions of neidan and waidan in modern scholarship; see, e.g., Needham & Lu (1983), xxiv. According to Isabelle Robinet, however, examined from a historical point of view, the exact boundary between waidan and neidan remained flexible; their nuances differed according to time as well as author. Their boundary is further obscured by the fact that the terminologies of
transition from laboratory to physiological alchemy. From the 2nd century BCE to the Late Tang, laboratory alchemy had been in dominance. Roughly speaking, it uses the alchemist stove as a miniature cosmos in which various minerals are tempered into alchemist gold. Taking “cinnabar pellets” made of alchemist gold shall transform the human body into endurable materials that defy its decay. Minerals used to make cinnabar pellets, however, are highly poisonous. Many practitioners including emperors fell victim to the “cinnabar poison,” though their deaths were often interpreted by Daoists, who were instrumental in making these pellets in the first place, as “deliverance from the corpse” (shijie 尸解). In contrast, inner alchemy recommends a safer, organic, let alone cheaper approach. The body of an inner alchemist is transformed into a system of meaning where its various parts correspond to cosmic elements and its functioning mimics laboratory alchemy could be used metaphorically in describing the process of physiological alchemy. See Robinet (1991), 4-5, 31-32. Farzeen Baldrain Hussein has traced the development of the term neidan and argues that this development had reached its climax by the twelfth century, when Wu Wu 吳悟 defined neidan as a syncretic system comprising all the longevity methods: gymnastic, respiratory, dietary and sexual techniques. See Hussein (1989), 187.

11 See Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 4:71-72.

12 “Deliverance from the corpse” is one of the common ways a Daoist practitioner could become an immortal, that is, he pretends to have died by discarding a corpse behind while his spirit roams in freedom. See Robinet (1979).

On the death of Tang Daoist practitioners, see Chen Guofu (1963), 383-4, 388-9. According to Chen Guofu, in the Tang, Daoist priests were already aware of the harm of these pellets. Thus they produced alchemist gold and silver mainly for profit, not to be taken by themselves. See ibid., 391-2. Dan 丹 means cinnabar, since cinnabar is a main ingredient in producing alchemist gold. Alchemist gold could be distinguished from real gold by burning. When burnt, the fake gold emits multicolored aura. See ibid., 393.
that of an alchemist stove. This approach resembles (if not precurses) modern nutriology and alternative therapies. Since the Song, inner alchemy eventually became the mainstream among clerical and lay Daoist practitioners. His reading of the Yellow Court Scripture at the age of 22 sui revealed that Su’s alchemical exercise was mainly physiological. His method would eventually combine respiratory control, abstinence, meditation, gymnastics, and gathering cosmic essence of the sun and the moon, aided by the intake of herbal medicine.

Four years later, in his first official tenure at Fengxiang, Su Shi had the chance of visiting the Daoist library in the Shangqing Taiping Temple 上清太平宮 and reading its collection of Daoist scriptures. Su Shi called them simply daozang 道藏 without further clarification. It might refer to Yunji qiqian 雲笈七籖 [Seven Bindings of Scriptures from above the Clouds], an imperial collection in 120 fascicles compiled under the chief editor Zhang Junfang 張君房 (jinshi 1005) and presented to Zhenzong 真宗 (968-1022; r. 997-1022) in 1019. It represents a “core collection” among the anarchic assemblage of texts loosely called “Daoist” and included such diverse subjects like cosmology, laboratory and physiological alchemy, divination, medicine, geography, and astronomy. The imperial patronage of compiling Daoist texts

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13 See Robinet (1993), 82. For graphs representing an alchemist body, see Needham & Lu (1983), 68-72.
14 See Zhong Laiyin (1990), 4-7; Chen Guofu (1963), 393-4.
15 Methods of this practice vary. But in general, such methods recommend standing facing the sun or the moon and visualizing its presence, circulation, and accumulation inside of the human body, often accompanied by respiratory control and salivary deglutition. Cf. Zhang Junfang, Yunji qiqian, 23:532-8. Such practices have been called in English scholarship “actino-therapeutic complex” or “phototherapeutic procedures;” see Needham & Lu (2003), 31-32, 181-4.
16 See Chen Guofu (1963), 134.
continued until the end of Northern Song, culminating in the publication in 1116-17 of the
Wanshou daozang [Treasury of Daoist Scriptures for His Majesty’s Ten Thousand
Years of Longevity] in 5481 fascicles, the first collection of Daoist canons published in block
printing. Su did not live to see its publication, but these instances suggested that Daoist
scriptures were actively collected and circulated during Su Shi’s life time, and he had a better
chance than earlier scholars to gain access to a diverse assemblage of texts.

Among the many Daoist libraries, the one at Fengxiang was not particularly well-known.
Su Shi depicted a rich collection of a thousand boxes wrapped in blue silk, the quantity of which
was already beyond an amateur’s casual perusal. He seemed to be primarily interested in
meditation techniques. If this library did collect any book on laboratory alchemy, it seemed not
to have attracted Su’s attention.

After perusing the Daoist library in Fengxiang, Su Shi soon built a Hall of Escaping the
World, probably for the purpose of meditation. He failed, however, to show much
commitment until almost two decades later, during his Huangzhou exile. In between, he met
many Daoists during his provincial tenures in Hangzhou, Mizhou, and Xuzhou, and occasionally
flaunted such ideas as becoming an immortal. He might have occasionally sat in meditation. Su
Che started to practice inner alchemy since 1071 because of his lung disease and showed great
dedication. By 1077, when they met in Xuzhou, Che surprised Shi for being already an
experienced practitioner. Su Shi admired Che for being focused and grounded, unlike himself.

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19 See Kong Fanli, Su Che nianpu 蘇轍年譜, 89.
20 See ibid., 147, 155.
addicted to the diversity of life experiences.\textsuperscript{21} Not until his exile to Huangzhou did he make the first solemn oath to abjure from worldly engagement and sensual pleasures – which was not very hard, considering his conviction and poverty. Prompted further by eye disease and early signs of aging, he retreated to the Daoist Tianqing Temple 天慶觀 for uninterrupted forty-nine days of meditation at the end of 1080.\textsuperscript{22} He blithely told his disciple Qin Guan: “Were it not for the dismissal and exile, how could I have managed to do this?”\textsuperscript{23} Such practices apparently helped his recovery. Encouraged by his success in physiological alchemy, Su Shi eventually requested cinnabar from his friend Wang Dingguo 王定國 in Guangxi, ambitious to make the elixir of immortality. He theorized in a letter:

大抵道士非金丹不能解化，而丹材多在南荒，故葛稚川求岣嶁令，竟化於廣州，不可不留意也。

Generally speaking, the Daoists cannot be delivered and transformed [from their bodies] without the Golden Cinnabar. But cinnabar materials are mostly produced in the southern barbaric lands. Therefore Ge Zhichuan (aka. Ge Hong) requested to be the Governor of Vietnam, and he ultimately transcended in Guangzhou. We have to pay attention to this!\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{23} “Da Qin Taixu qishou,” no.4.

Wang Dingguo was Su’s playmate from childhood who, according to the admiring Su Shi, had little worldly ambition but was keen in practicing the Daoist art.\(^{25}\) The argument that true immortality is attainable only by taking the Golden Cinnabar was proposed by Ge Hong in *Baopu zi 拥朴子* [*Master Who Embraces Simplicity*]. Ge Hong argues that herbs and other efficacious natural materials are all “small drugs” which can prolong life but do not guarantee immortality. Only by taking the Golden Cinnabar, that is, cinnabar reversed nine times in the alchemist stove (or by taking multiple doses of cinnabar reversed less times), could the practitioner transcend into heaven together with his thoroughly transformed body. To put his theory into practice, Ge Hong requested to govern Vietnam where the best cinnabar allegedly was produced. He was detained, however, by the Governor of Guangzhou. Enticed by the efficacious materials grown on Mt. Luofu, he retreated into Huizhou and died a few years later. Presumably, he achieved immortality through “deliverance from the corpse.”\(^{26}\)

Wang Dingguo might have tried to dissuade Su Shi from home-making the elixir, as Su Shi twice again urged him to send cinnabar\(^{27}\) and reassured him: “My drug is indeed fabulous! But it only provides some strange spectacle in my idleness. By no means shall I dare to take it!”\(^{28}\)

Su Shi also attempted to gather the cosmic essence of the sun and the moon. In the Daoist universe of general correspondences, the body is a microcosmos which can be further divided


\(^{26}\) See Ge Hong’s biography in Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 72:1911-3.


into three corresponding parts: the cerebral, the thoracic, and the abdominal. Each part is again a microcosmos. This system is called “Three-One” (sanyi 參一), or triadic unity. The sun and the moon, as heavenly bodies, metaphorically refer primarily to the eyes, located in the cerebral section, but also to inner lights shining upon the landscapes in the middle and lower body sections of the practitioner. Su Shi’s procedure attempts to absorb the essence of these cosmic energies to strengthen the corresponding organs in the body. Su might have read about such practices only from books, as he admitted that he did not know the proper incantation accompanying such practice, so he composed one by himself. Oral transmission contributes to the self-perpetuating mystery of the occult science. Daoist canons are often written in deliberated abstruse language or in ecliptic fashion, so that oral instructions (koujue 口訣) are necessary in order to understand the meaning of the written instructions. Without the orally transmitted invocation, Su Shi might lack confidence in the efficacy of his practice. It was never mentioned again in his writing, perhaps discontinued.

After the Huangzhou exile, Su Shi was ready to retire. But shortly the death of Shenzong brought him back into the storm. The following eight years saw Su Shi at the peak of power and

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29 According to Isabelle Robinet, the polyvalence of symbols is caused by their applicability to different levels or stages in the process of progressive spiritualization, depending on where the adept starts his meditation (whether focus on the lower or upper part of the body); see Robinet (1993), 52. This triadic unity of the body can be explained by the principle of “Three-One”; see Robinet (1993), 125-6, 187-8.

30 See Chapter Five.

31 On the practice of absorbing the sun and the moon essences, see Needham & Lu (1983), 182-4.


33 As exhorted by Ge Hong; see Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 14:155-6; mentioned also in Pregadio (2006). 80.
glory. Efficacious medicines would be simply presented to him for a favor or a price. Once he received even a “flesh fungus” (rouzhi 肉芝) that had the form of a baby’s arm. According to Ge Hong, taking a “flesh fungus” guarantees immediate immortality. Su Shi cooked it and shared it preciously with his brother. The promised immortality, however, did not seem to have occurred. Su Shi did not doubt the efficacy of the fungus per se, but doubted that immortality could be such an easy gain for those in power. He compared his situation to an old silkworm trapped in its cocoon:

老蠶作繭何時脫  When can this old silkworm be delivered from its self-woven cocoon?
夢想至人空激烈  I vehemently dream of the supreme beings in vain.
古來大藥不可求  From olden times, the Great Drug cannot be sought;
真契當如磁石鐵  True correspondence must be like that of iron and a magnetic stone.

In Baopuzi, “great drug” is a term referring to chemical cinnabar pellet. Here it simply means any expedient elixir. If the Great Drug could be presented or purchased, then the realm of immortality should be long populated by the powerful and wealthy. Another sign showing his

35 See Su Shi, “Shizhi.”
36 See the “Xianyao” 仙藥 chapter in Baopuzi; Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 11:201.
37 Su Shi, “Shizhi.”
38 It is relative to “minor drug” (xiaoyao 小藥), i.e. herbal medicine. See the “Jindan” 金丹 chapter in Baopuzi; Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 4:70-72.
lack of “true correspondence” was his cooking of this efficacious fungus, an act that he later found laughable, since, as argued in Chapter Five, only raw food contains miraculous power.

In the metropolitan days, his schedule filled with official and social obligations, Su Shi’s practice of meditation was sporadic. He lamented:

寸田滿荊棘 My square-inch [Cinnabar] Field is overgrown with thorny shrubs;

梨棗無從生 Where can the pear-and-dale elixir be grown?

何時反吾真 And when can I return to my authentic nature?

歲月今崢嶸 Years foregone have left a rugged face.

Thus when his career suffered yet another abrupt strike, Su Shi saw in it an opportunity and a mandate to reengage in his long abandoned pursuit. Better still, he was exiled to Huizhou, the cinnabar-producing site of Ge Hong’s transcendence. He appeared to interpret it as a sign. He wrote on crossing the Dayu Range 大庾嶺, a ring of mountains separating the miasmic Guangdong and Guangxi from the central plains:

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39 Abbreviation for jiaoli huozao 交梨火棗. The pear in Daoist terminology is called jiaoli (literally: alteration pear) since its skin is green while its flesh white, its tree blossoming in the spring and its fruit ripening in the autumn, symbolizing the alteration and combination of wood (green; spring) and metal (white; autumn). The dale is called huozao (literally: fire dale) because its sweet flavor and deep red color symbolize fire and the yang force. In inner alchemy, jiaoli refers to the mercury and huozao refers to the lead. Together they refer to the elixir born in heart produced through physiological alchemical processes. See Hu Fuchen (1995), 1213.

一念失垢污  A single thought purges all stains of filth.
身心洞清淨  The body and mind become both thoroughly pure.
浩然天地間  Between the lofty heaven, the vast earth,
惟我獨也正  I alone am solitary and just.
今日嶺上行  Today I am crossing the mountain range,
身世永相忘  And shall since forget my origin, my past.
仙人拊我頂  The immortal lays his hand on my head,
結髮受長生  Tying my hair into a knot, I hereby receive the endless life.41

The poetic persona resembles that of Qu Yuan, the suffering moral hero, as well as that of Li Bo, the exiled immortal. The last couplet is a literal quotation from Li Bo’s poem. Written after Li was exiled to the ancient southern state of Yelang (now Huaihua, in Hunan Province), Li’s poem fictively recalls his admission into the rank of immortals; but “by mistake” he chased after sensual pleasures and was trapped in the world of man.42 In reference to Li Bo’s poem, Su Shi shows his wish to return to the state of blessed purity. On crossing the symbolic boundary between the center and the periphery, Su Shi seeks to sublimate his sense of guilt, announces his innocence, and expresses resolution to transcend mundane trivialities once and for all.

Su was convinced of his destiny in reference to historical precedence and the classics:

42 See Li Bo, “Jing luanli hou tian’en liu Yelang yi jiyou shuhuai zeng Jiangxia Wei taishou Liangzai” 經亂離後天恩流夜郎憶舊游書懷贈江夏韋太守良宰, Li Taibai quanji, 11:567.
Letian (aka. Bo Juyi) once built a thatched hut in Mt. Lu, intending to make cinnabar pellets. When his undertaking was about to succeed, the stove and the tripod exploded. The next day, an edict arrived, appointing him magistrate of Zhongzhou. So he knew that businesses in and out of the world could not coexist. I have had a similar resolution for a long time but did not succeed. It was also because my business in the world had not failed. Now it has truly failed. The *Documents* says: “What man desires, Heaven grants.” It proves true.  

In this regard, it was a mandate that Su Shi should follow Ge Hong’s suit, whose appeal came not only from his alchemical achievement, but, perhaps more so, from his authorship in writing a “master” (*zishu* 子書) work that established a theological system.

**The Theology of Ge Hong**

Like Tao Qian, Ge Hong frequented Su Shi’s thoughts in Huizhou. A descendent from a prominent clan and educated early in the Confucian classics, Ge Hong had been in and out of government service for decades before decidedly assuming the identity of a reclusive Daoist

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master. His *Baopuzi* is an all-encompassing work advocating Ge’s own thinking on cosmology, governance, literature, and his theory of immortality.

Ge Hong’s theory was born not in isolation but from an ongoing theological debate. A central question was whether normal humanity could possibly become immortal. The Eastern Han iconoclast Wang Chong 王充 (27-97?) argued that immortals were inexistent, since there was no spiritual existence independent of the physical body. Another school of thought was from the eccentric Ji Kang, who in a “Treatise on Nourishing Life” argued for the existence of immortals; however, only some chosen few were predestined to transcendence. Normal people, with extreme care, were only able to extend their life span, up to a thousand years.

These theories are articulated by anonymous interlocutors in *Baopuzi*. Against Wang Chong, Ge Hong argues that what is invisible is not necessarily inexistent. Human cognitive capacity is limited, so the origin of things or immortality is simply beyond our perceptive scope. What is observable, however, is the constancy of transformation. It follows logically that a man can also transform his corruptible body into something more durable, so that he shall live longer or forever. Divine beings seldom reveal themselves to man, but they have left abundant traces in historical records so that their existence is unquestionable, unless the honesty of all historians was in doubt. A promising adept should be resolute, adamant, and able to unburden his mind of power or wealth and to distinguish genuine performers from charlatans. One shall never be misled by charlatans and lose faith in the existence of immortals.

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44 See the “Lunsi” 論死 chapter in *Lunheng* 論衡; Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, 20:871-83.


46 See the “Lunxian” 論仙 chapter in *Baopuzi*; Wang Ming, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, 2:12-22.
With the same *bona fide* confidence, Ge Hong refutes Ji Kang’s fatalistic theory. Every immortal had been a diligent adept. Since all men are endowed with the same luminous intelligence (*mingzhe* 明哲), the art of immortality is everyone’s study. The ancients left reliable methods for us to follow, including taking herbal and mineral drugs as well as establishing moral virtues and worldly accomplishments. These methods should be studied comprehensively and with discretion.\(^{47}\)

Ge Hong’s emphasis on true immortals as all-round achievers addresses a theological difficulty, namely: could someone simply take a drug found perchance or made by others and become an immortal? Ge Hong’s answer is a clear “no”; moral capital, accomplishments, good teachers, as well as the comprehensive study of all arts of immortality are all necessary conditions.\(^{48}\) The high threshold of immortality is designed to rid the adept of any expectation of fluke, even though Ge Hong also records some immortals who succeeded by fluke.

In Ge Hong’s alchemist theory, immortals also live in a hierarchic society. Taking the alchemist golden elixir, one will become a “heavenly immortal” (*tianxian* 天仙) together with one’s fully transformed body; the second best is to become an “earthly immortal” (*dixian* 地仙), roaming in freedom on the earth; and the lowest is to become a “deliverance-from-the-corpse immortal” (*shijie-xian* 尸解仙), whose mortal body is not totally transformed and must be discarded.\(^{49}\) There is a catch, however, in the immortals’ hierarchy. Ge Hong quotes from

\(^{47}\) See the “Duisu” 對俗 chapter in *Baopuzi*, Wang Ming, *Baopuzi nei pian jiaoshi*, 3:46-54. The same argument is reiterated in the “Jiyan” 極言 chapter; *ibid.*, 13:239-40.

\(^{48}\) See the “Weizhi” 微旨 chapter in *Baopuzi*; *ibid.*, 6:123-9.

\(^{49}\) See the “Lunxian” chapter in *Baopuzi*; *ibid.*, 2:20.
Pengzu 彭祖, who is said to have stayed in the human realm as an “earthly immortal” for eight hundred years before finally ascending to heaven. It is because in heaven, immortals are charged with bureaucratic duties, and new-comers are often low-ranking factotums.\(^{50}\) Ironically, the “heavenly immortal” is no freer than a bureaucrat, and Ge Hong himself was said to have been delivered from corpse.\(^{51}\)

Ge Hong’s work is individualistic and eclectic. Daoist scriptures typically claim divine origins, but *Baopuzi* speaks loud and clear in the author’s individual voice. Its language is rational, accessible, argumentative, and interlocutory.\(^{52}\) All these features put this work squarely in the tradition of “master writing.” The choice of genre shows the author’s scholarly training. Its eclectic feature is revealed in his recognition of Confucian sages who valued ordering the external world more than perfecting their own beings. Despite his confidence in chemical alchemy, he also accepts herbal medicine and respiratory-control as acceptable, though inferior, alternatives to deter death. All these traits appealed to Su Shi, a scholar and eclectic.

Ge Hong’s theology has much in common with Su’s notion of human nature. As argued in Chapter Two, Su does not share the daoxyue belief of man’s omniscient cognitive capacity. He argues that there are things no one – not even the sages – would ever know. When Su talks about the “sages,” he means the Confucian sages, who are also members of mankind. For Ge Hong, Confucian sages are to be respected in their own way. They handle pragmatic affairs of this world and take care of others; they follow the natural course and do not regard their own bodies as private – instead, their whole being is public. But as a result, they remain mortals, not

\(^{50}\) See “Duisu” 對俗 chapter in *Baopuzi*, *ibid.*, 3:52.

\(^{51}\) See Ge Hong’s biography in Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 72:1913.

\(^{52}\) See Pregadio (2006), 124.
immortals, and thus are limited in capacity and in vision. The fact that Confucian sages do not study the art of immortality neither disqualifies such pursuit nor serves as model behavior for everyone. Su Shi appears to agree with this agnostic and cosmopolitan view.

Su interpreted his exile to Huizhou as opportune and predestined. On his first excursion to Mt. Luofu, he wrote to his son Su Guo (1072-1123):

東坡之師抱朴老     Old Master Who Embraces Simplicity is truly Dongpo’s teacher;
真契早已交前生     Their true correspondence has been bound in a former life.
玉堂金馬久流落     I have long wandered away from Jade Hall and Golden Horse Gate;
寸田尺宅今歸耕     Now I return to this foot-high house and plough this square-inch field.

Consistent with his contemporary development of alchemical theory, Su Shi rejected Ge Hong’s suggestion that chemical alchemy was superior to inner alchemy. What made Su to take Ge Hong as his teacher was the latter’s theology that immortality was accessible to everyone. Su Shi praised it as evidence of Ge Hong’s Confucian compassion for all beings.

53 See the “Shizhi” 釋滯 chapter in Baopuzi; Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 8:155.
54 “The Jade Hall and Golden Horse Gate” refer to Western Han palaces, meaning high academic positions in court.
55 Su Shi, “You Luofushan yishou shi erzi Guo” 游羅浮山一首示兒子過, SSSJ, 38:2069. The “foot-high house” and “square-inch field” could refer either to a tiny estate or, in Daoist physiological alchemy, to the face and the cinnabar field.
虽独善
爱物均孔颜
欲使蟪蛄流
知有龟鹤年

Though Zhichuan holds his virtue to him alone,
His compassion for things is just like that of Confucius and Yanhui.
He wants to let those cicada-like beings of short lives,
To know about the longevity of turtles and cranes.  

Here, Su Shi literally borrows terms from Ge Hong’s argument against the Wang Chong-ian interlocutor. The interlocutor chides Ge’s effort as futile, since no cicada’s life can be prolonged to over a year. Ge replies that creatures like turtles and cranes can live forever (a common misbelief); since beings are in constant transformation, like birds becoming clams or rotten grass becoming fireflies – another misbelief of classical authority  
  - why cannot a cicada transform into a turtle or a crane?  

For Su Shi, Ge Hong’s authorship was evidence of his compassion. Ge stood somewhere between the Confucian, who represented utter altruistic engagement with the external world without attending to their own well-being, and the Laozian, who represented self-contained virtue without regard to the salvation of others. Their difference could be summed up as the Mahāyāna versus the Hīnayāna approach, as argued in Chapter Five. Those taking an absolute Hīnayāna approach are admirable in their own way. Yet a teacher is nevertheless needed for later-comers like Su Shi to gain access to the knowledge of salvation. Ge Hong served this

57 In the “Yueling” 月令 chapter of the Book of Rites, for instance, it states that in the third month of summer, rotten grass transforms into fireflies; in the third month of autumn, a sparrow dives into water to become a clam. See Sun Xidan, Liji jijie, 16:456, 17:477.
58 See the “Lunxian” chapter in Baopuzi; Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 2:12-14.
function. He understood the necessity of individualistic soteriology but was benevolent enough to transmit his insights to a universal audience. As Su wrote in Danzhou:

博大古真人 The ancient Authentic Men were grand and great indeed.
老聃關尹喜 They were Lao Dan and Xi, Director of the Pass.
獨立萬物表 They stood alone above the surface of myriad things;
長生乃餘事 The endless life was simply a side achievement.
稚川差可近 The teaching of Zhichuan, however, was more accessible.
倘有接物意 He still had the intention of welcoming things.
我頃登羅浮 I once climbed onto Mt. Luofu.
物色恐相值 The forms of things, I am afraid, encountered me.
徘徊朱明洞 I wandered outside of the Cave of Vermilion Light,
沙水自清駛 Below which water ran clear and rapid on the sand.
滿把菖蒲根 I held a fistful of the calamus root;
歎息復棄置 But, sighing, I discarded them again.59

Daoist sages like Laozi and Guanyin Xi (literally, “Xi, Director of the Pass”) were so great and grand that even though immortality was not their proper pursuit, it was nevertheless accomplished as a sideshow. They did not, however, leave playbooks for others to follow, which was provided only by Ge Hong. Su Shi recalls his excursion to Mt. Luofu. It should be

59 Su Shi, "He Tao 'Zashi' shiyishou" 和陶雜詩十一首, no.6, SSSJ, 41:2275.
mentioned that after he came to Hainan, he lost faith in his chance of immortality. This poem thus laments his foregone chance at Luofu. In its divine landscape, he should have concentrated on nothing but his inner physiological exercises, but instead, the vivid phenomenal world nevertheless “encountered” and distracted him. His following couplet recreates the powerful beauty of the phenomenal world. The Cave of Vermilion Light was located behind Chongxu Temple 沖虛觀 where Ge Hong once lived. Local legend had it that it was the seventh Grotto Heaven in Mt. Luofu. The miracles of this cave are recorded in another poem, which states that locals sometimes heard dogs barking at night in the depth of this cave. Presumably, the roots of thousand-year-old wolfberry trees growing in the hidden dimensions of this cave had transformed into miraculous canines. Su Shi juxtaposes this cave, symbol of eternity and transcendence, with the clear water running rapidly on a sandy riverbed, symbol of the brevity and beauty of this temporary existence. The calamus root was an immortal drug associated with the local lore of Scholar Anqi. He collected a fistful of them, only to discard them again, heaving a long sigh. This gesture suggests his longing for transcendence as well as his reconciliation with mortality. It is a summary gesture of Su Shi’s pursuit of the Daoist art.

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60 See Su’s own note in “You Luofushan yishou shi erzi Guo,” SSSJ, 38:2069.

61 See Su Shi, “Ciyun Zhengfu you Baishuishan” 次韻正輔同游白水山, SSSJ, 39:2148-50. See also Chapter Five on the miraculous effects of ancient wolfberry trees.

62 See Chapter Three; Chapter Five.
Immortality in Words and in Deeds

Su Shi in Huizhou practiced the Daoist art with zest. His undertakings can be roughly divided into three major categories, mutually complementary: studying Daoist works, taking herbal nutrition, and practicing inner alchemy. Below is an examination of their literary representations. Where possible, their psychological, sociological, and philosophical implications will also be taken into account.

I. The Textual Study of Immortals

Textual references to Daoist works are frequently found in Su Shi’s prose and poetry written in this period. Previous translations of Su Shi’s late poetry contain already multiple references to the Yellow Court Scripture, an essential canon in physiological alchemy. Su Shi had studied this scripture before, but might have reread it with greater insight now. Another text that he restudied was Ji Kang’s “Treatise on Nourishing Life,” which he repeatedly copied by hand. In a colophon to this treatise, he wrote:

東坡居士以桑榆之末景，憂患之餘生，而後學道，雖為達者所笑，然猶賢乎己也。
以嵇叔夜《養生論》頗中余病，故手寫數本[……]

In the dimming sunlight among mulberries and elms, with the remnant of a life consumed by worries and suffering, Layman Dongpo has finally begun to study the Way. Though those of supreme understanding may laugh at me, it is still a wise thing to do for my own.
Since Ji Shuye’s [aka. Ji Kang] “Treatise on Nourishing Life” sees precisely through my weakness, I have made a few copies of it by hand […] 63

Ji Kang’s treatise, as discussed earlier, differed theologically from Ge Hong. Yet even though Ji Kang championed the elite, exclusive approach to immortality, he also argued that it was a moral mandate to take care of one’s physical well-being, just like a farmer who should irrigate his crops diligently even at the time of drought when their withering was destined. 64 Many understood but could not practice this doctrine, because the care was meticulous and the benefit was in the long run. 65 Su Shi was especially touched by the “crop” analogy and borrowed it in his poetry. 66 He was aware that devotion to Daoist practices appeared laughable to those who held the fear of death in contempt. Yet he did it not for others, but for his own sake – a Hīnayāna resolve.

Su Shi was engaged during this period in completing his commentary to the Book of Changes, but it was unclear how much he was familiar with Zhouyi cantongqi 周易參同契 [Concordance of the Three, Commentary on the Book of Changes], a work credited to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 of late Eastern Han but perhaps written by different hands and compiled over time. Ostensibly expounding the Book of Changes, it has been traditionally regarded as a seminal work in the “imagery and numerology” (xiangshu 象數) lineage and was especially influential in

64 Ji Kang, “Yangshenglun,” see Dai Mingyang, Ji Kang ji jiaozhu, 3:144-5.
65 Ibid., 3:154.
inner alchemical works since the Tang, despite its occasional references to chemical alchemy. Su Shi did occasionally refer to the *Cantongqi* system in his alchemical theory, but it was not necessarily due to Su’s study of this work itself, given the fact that *Cantongqi* was progenitor to numerous works and its system prevalent in any discussion of inner alchemy. The reason of Su Shi’s likely negligence of *Cantongqi* was his disinterest in calculating fate. Although he admitted in his “Treatise on the *Changes*” that the *Changes* was initially a divinatory book and numerology was important in carrying its message, the Sage only contributed to the expatiations following each hexagram, showing little regard to the numerology. In his commentary on the *Book of Changes*, he similarly expounded only on the philosophy, not the numerology. In reality, calculating fate is not only difficult, if possible at all, but also superfluous. Fate (*ming* 命) has nothing to do with human aspiration (*zhi* 志); one can only employ oneself to the uttermost extent of what one can, and let whatever comes come. By doing so, there is a chance that human endeavors may overcome heavenly-mandated fate.

Notably, Ge Hong was also disinterested in the “imagery and numerology” (*xiangshu* 象数) and “Five Phases” (*wuxing* 五行) systems. Even though his subject appears mystic to a modern reader, he avoids deliberate mysticism, preferring a language of scientific certainty and clarity based upon reason and facts. Reference to the abstruse *Cantongqi*, were it available to

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67 On the author and periodization of this book, see Meng Naichang 孟乃昌 & Meng Qingxuan 孟慶軒 eds., *Wangu danjing wang* 萬古丹經王, 30-48.


70 On Ge Hong’s lack of interest in the “Imagery and Numerology” system represented by *cantongqi*, see Lu Yang (2006).
him, is absent in his work. Su Shi appeared to share similar preference for the clarity of language. For such and a variety of reasons, despite Su Shi’s hesitation to follow Ge Hong’s chemical alchemy, what he most explicitly and frequently referred to as having “read” (du 謡) was Baopuzi. This fact suggests that his reading of Daoist works was not just to seek practical guidance; instead, significant emphasis was put on their literary value as well as on his feeling of empathy with the author. Baopuzi as an individualistic work provides a locale of his communication with a kindred spirit of the past.

A few verses from “He Tao ʻDu Shanhaijing” 和陶讀山海經 [“Matching Tao’s ‘Reading the Book of Mountains and Seas’”] have already been quoted earlier. The whole series of thirteen verses is explicitly said to reflect his study of Baopuzi. Su thus not only matches Tao’s verse, but also matches Tao’s reading act of Shanhaijing with his own reading of Baopuzi. Notably, Shanhaijing is a book about miraculous creatures, gods, products, and plants from inscrutable nooks and crannies of the world, but it is not a guidebook of access to these wondrous things. Baopuzi, in contrast, is less descriptive than prescriptive. It confidently points out an access to a fantastic world not unlike that found in Shanhaijing. If Tao Qian only casted a longing glance onto the world of eternity, where “life of ten-thousand years is the norm,”\(^\text{71}\) Su Shi was resolute to put Tao’s longing into action.

These thirteen poems present Su Shi as a reader actively responding to a text which he reads with acute interests. The series has a clear structure. The first poem sets the keynote of his response. The next two poems summarize Ge Hong and Tao Qian’s different attitudes toward death. Nine poems thereafter recapitulate his reading of Baopuzi, commenting particularly on the

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\(^{71}\) See Tao Qian, “Du Shanhaijing,” no.8, TYM, 4:407.
matter of immortality. And the last poem expresses his desire to befriend both Ge Hong and Tao Qian in the path of “return.”

The first poem depicts the outset of his reading:

今日天始霜 Today frost begins to descend;
眾木敛以疎 Trees collect their expanse, sparse of leaves.
幽人掩關臥 I, secluded, close the gate and recline.
明景翻空廬 Bright rays are dancing in my empty hut.
開心無良友 To delight myself, I find no good friends,
寓眼得奇書 But only a wondrous book where my eyes sojourn.
建德有遺民 In a Country of Established Virtue lives an archaic people;\(^72\)
道遠我無車 The road to it is far, and I have no carriage to travel.
無糧食自足 Short of food, but I do have sufficient ration –
豈謂穀與蔬 By which I do not mean a cereal or vegetarian cuisine.
愧此稚川翁 Overwhelmed by gratitude am I to this Old Man of Zhichuan,
千載與我俱 Who, across a thousand years, has come to my company.
畫我與淵明 If I and Yuanming are painted together with him,

\(^72\) In the “Shanmu” 山木 chapter of Zhuangzi, Master Shinan 市南子 tells the story of a “Country of Established Virtues” (Jiande zhi guo 建德之國) in Southern Yue, where people are foolish and simple, having no sense of self and little desire, knowing to plant crops but not to hoard their harvest, giving for no return, and having no idea of virtues. See Guo Qingfan, Zhuangzi jishi, 20:671-2.
可作三士圖 Another “Picture of the Three Gentlemen” it will be.

學道雖恨晚 Though my learning of the Way is ruefully late;

賦詩豈不如 In writing poetry, I am of no lesser weight!

“Picture of the Three Gentlemen” (*sanshitu* 三士圖), also known as “Three Laughs at the Tiger Creek” (*Huxi sanxiao* 虎溪三笑), is a painting motif depicting a fictive society of Tao Qian, the Buddhist patriarch Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-416), and the Daoist master Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406-477). It was said that Huiyuan, during his secluded residence in the Donglin 東林 Temple on Mt. Lu, never crossed the Tiger Creek (*Huxi* 虎溪) regardless of the rank of the guest. One day Tao Qian and Lu Xiujing paid a visit. They were so immersed in animated discussion that, when sending the two guests off, Huiyuan unawarely crossed the Tiger Creek. The tiger roared in warning, and the three gentlemen laughed. Given that Lu Xiujing was three generations later than Huiyuan and that no evidence proves Huiyuan and Tao Qian’s acquaintance, this is mere legend. Nevertheless, it describes an ideal of friendship based upon spiritual altitude, regardless of the disparate intellectual or religious persuasion to which each subscribed. This picture represents the harmony of Buddhist, Daoist, and secular studies. The delight in such friendship risks transgression, about which the empathetic nature, incarnated as a guardian tiger, duly warns. Yet there is no malice in the good tiger’s roaring, as their knowing laughter reassures.

Su Shi now wanted to form another triadic society on Mt. Luofu, with two authors whose books were his daily company. This form of friendship reiterates the ancient notion formulated

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73 See “Donglin Shiba gaoxian zhuan” 東林十八高賢傳, 卍 no.1543, 78:119c. See also the entry on the Tiger Creek in *Lushanzhi* 廬山志, Wu Zongci (1996), vol.1, 103-4.
in *Mencius* that a successful act of reading is defined as understanding the author’s mind.\(^{74}\)

Reading compensated Su Shi’s deprivation of society. His picking of Tao Qian and Ge Hong into an exclusive community was apparently based on two criteria: learning of the Way and writing of poetry (or works of literary merits). His disadvantage in the first criterion was compensated by his strength in poetry – a remarkable confidence considering his otherwise total admiration of Tao’s talent.

The second poem, translated earlier, lauds Ge Hong for spreading the gospel that immortality is within every man’s reach. It is an act comparable to Confucian benevolence. The third poem, however, praises alternatively Tao Qian’s lack of desire for immortality. It states:

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淵明雖中壽
雅志仍丹丘
遠矣無懷民
超然邈無儔
奇文出纊息

Though Yuanming enjoyed only an average length of life,
He had the noble mind of the Cinnabar Hills.
Distant is this mind-free commoner;\(^{75}\)
Superbly removed is he from his peers.
A marvelous poem was written on his deathbed;\(^{76}\)
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\(^{74}\) As Mencius argued in the case of reading the Odes, the reader shall not let the phrasing hamper his understanding; instead, he should use his mind to fathom the author’s intention (*yi yi ni zhi* 以意逆志).


\(^{75}\) "Wuhuai min" 無懷民 is the abbreviation of “Wuhuaishi zhi min” 無懷氏之民, or “commoner under the reign of Emperor Mind-Free.” It comes from Tao Qian’s self-description in the autobiographical “Wuliu xiansheng zhuang” 五柳先生傳; see *TYM*, 6:502.
Su Shi found in Tao Qian a role model which transcended death by disregard. This philosophical attitude was not alien to Su Shi. In effect, it is the most celebrated aspect of Su Shi’s spiritual legacy, as suggested by such titles of his biographies: the “gay genius,” the “transcendence of suffering,” or “an untrammeled life.” Yet Su Shi was complex. Among the “Three Companions,” he alone unites Ge Hong and Tao Qian. Su Shi’s simultaneous embrace suggests ambiguity toward both attitudes. Intellectually, he understands death in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, he desires immortality. He tries until he fails. An alternative solace would be literary immortality, like that Ge and Tao had already secured. In this, the “Three Companions,” celebrated in a poem, shall survive across time.

These three poems thus constitute the full gamut of Su Shi’s philosophy toward death. Following are nine versified commentaries on the content of Baopuzi. These poems generally

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76 Tao Qian had written his own elegies and mourning text, allegedly on his deathbed, showing his transcendence to the fear of mortality; see “Ni wangeci sanshou” 諧挽歌辭三首, TYM, 4:420-5; “Zi ji wen” 自祭文, TYM, 7:555-6.


78 Title of Lin Yutang’s biography (1947).


80 Title of Li Gengyang 李賡揚 and Li Boyang’s 李勃洋 biography (2001): xiaosa rensheng 潇灑人生.
first recapitulate arguments and narratives from this text; only in the final couplets, Su offers his opinion. It is sometimes a reflection:

口耳固多偽  Hearsays [about immortals] are indeed often false;
識真要在心  Recognition of the truth relies on one’s [discerning] mind.\textsuperscript{81}

Sometimes it is an emotional response:

聞此不能寐  Hearing these stories [of the immortal’s life], I cannot sleep;
起坐夜未央  Sitting up in bed, amid the yet dark night!\textsuperscript{82}

Sometimes he questions Ge Hong’s sagacity in even taking the trouble to expose charlatans, thus eternalizing their undeserved notoriety:

稚川亦隘人  Zhichuan was also pedantic,
疏錄此庸子  To record such frauds – what a mistake!\textsuperscript{83}

Su Shi also takes to task Ge Hong’s theology, namely, that herbal medicine and breath control could only prolong life while chemical alchemy was the only true path to immortality. Su argues

\textsuperscript{81} Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Du Shanhaijing’,” no.7, SSSJ, 39:2133.
\textsuperscript{82} Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Du Shanhaijing’,” no.8, SSSJ, 39:2134.
\textsuperscript{83} Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Du Shanhaijing’,” no.12, SSSJ, 39:2136.
that the mineral “golden elixir” is perhaps unnecessary, since one can achieve immortality just as well through inner alchemy.

金丹不可成 The golden elixir cannot be made;
安期渺雲海 Anqi lives across the remote cloud and sea.
誰謂黃門妻 Who knows that the wife of a simple Gentleman of the Palace Gate, 
至道乃近在 Holds in such vicinity the supreme Way?
尸解竟不傳 She delivered from the corpse and did not transmit her instructions.
化去空餘悔 She was transformed, leaving her husband to regret in vain.
丹成亦安用 But even if the elixir was made, what is the use of it?
御氣本無待 Riding the cosmic pneuma shall rid you of any dependence!

Su Shi contrasts the unsuccessful alchemist with his wife and proposes that one should not seek the supreme Way in the fabulous and the remote. Inner alchemy is accessible to everyone,

84 In the “Huangbai” 黃白 chapter of Baopuzi, it is said that a certain Cheng Wei 程偉, Gentleman of the Palace Gate, married a Daoist master’s daughter. Cheng tried to make alchemist silver without success. Seeing it, his wife threw in some content from her satchel and the project immediately succeeded. Cheng in surprised exclaimed: “The Great Way is as close to me as in you! Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” He exhorted and then tortured his wife to crack her secret, but she refused, thinking Cheng unfit for her teaching. In the end she became mad and died. See Wang Ming, Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi, 16:285. Su Shi suggests that Cheng’s wife feigned madness and death to be delivered from the corpse.

making the practitioner self-sufficient and independent of external things such as the mineral elixir.

These poems could be regarded not only as matching poems to Tao Qian, but also to Ge Hong: matching the rhymes of the former and the meaning of the latter. Even Su Shi’s technique of summarizing Ge’s text in all but the last couplet of the poem is an old one: “matching the meaning,” the earliest form of “matching poetry” in the Six Dynasties, requires the response poem to rephrase the original poem in a different, elegant way, and exactly at the same length, before offering one’s own opinion in the last one or two couplets. Su’s poems are therefore virtual dialogues in the new “Picture of the Three Gentlemen.” To conclude this series, Su Shi reiterates the ideal society of the three in the thirteenth poem (quoted at the end of Chapter Four), in which he, Tao Qian, and Ge Hong “return” hand in hand.

II. The Acquisition and Representation of Efficacious Herbs

Soon after his arrival at Huizhou, Su Shi suffered from severe hemorrhoids, a chronic disease that had been torturing him for decades. To alleviate the pain, he followed a strict daily diet of unseasoned noodles and smashed Tuckahoe paste mixed with black sesame. Since a meager diet was recommended as recipe for longevity, Su Shi was glad that his disease gave him that extra push to finally do what he should. His reading of immortals’ biographies told him that many acquired transcendence in seeking the cure of their diseases. Su Shi was wistful that his suffering

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86 See Chapter Five.

from hemorrhoids might be a blessing in disguise. In addition to this diet, Su Shi sought to acquire medical plants, through gift exchange or home growing.

Efficacious herbs were expensive and taking them constantly was a status symbol. Since Su’s fall from grace, it became beyond his economic means. But he still had social and cultural capital to spend. In Huizhou, he often sent letters of request, for instance, to his friend Wang Dingguo, for dry dales and ginseng. His major benefactor during this period, however, was Cheng Zhicai 程之才, Judicial Commissioner of Guangdong.

Cheng Zhicai was Su Shi’s maternal cousin. The two families had severed their communication since Su’s sister married Cheng and was soon tortured (according to the Sus) to death. Su’s prosecutors thus knowingly appointed Cheng to inflict Su’s further suffering. Cheng, however, had another plan in mind. In the third month of 1095, upon his arrival, he courteously met Su on the river and presented him with handsome gifts. Afterwards, he became Su’s protector in Huizhou as well as his source of medicine.

In the extant seventy-four letters that Su sent to Cheng in just ten months, a large number concerns exchanges of various types. According to these epistolary records, Cheng often sent, usually without Su’s request, objects of three categories: 1) high quality food, including tea, noodles (for Su’s diet), fruit, mushrooms, honey, and so forth; 2) household medicine like rhubarb, a stomach-soothing drug, and yellowbird (its meat believed to enhance virility); 3)

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90 See SSNP, 1:31.
CHAPTER SIX

household goods like a hat, a hairpin, and an ivory comb (for Zhaoyun). Cheng often requested reciprocation, which were usually Su’s poems, calligraphies, and paintings. Su Shi did not always respond to such requests immediately; instead, he often delayed on the excuse of disease, inertia, or sheer avoidance of writing poetry. Su’s reluctance in effect implied that his art valued higher than Cheng’s gift. Cheng might have sensed Su’s reluctance, and his request for poems decreased. Yet his request of a biography for Cheng Renba 程仁霸, his paternal and Su’s maternal great-grandfather, Su not only accepted with alacrity, but wrote the biography respectfully with finest ink and paper. An explanation was that this biography was not reciprocation to any material gift, but a formal token of restored blood ties by commemorating a common ancestor.

Su’s reciprocation usually consisted of cultural products, partly due to his poverty. Material gifts he sent only twice: once a large incense seal, sent in the early stage of their extensive gift exchange, which he probably brought along from the north, and once a bolt of silk as a funerary gift after the death of Cheng’s wife. Together with the incense seal, Su Shi also made his first active request, that is, roucongrong 肉蓯蓉, or desert-living Cistanche, which enhances virility. It was probably around the same time that Cheng sent the ivory comb to Zhaoyun and Su requested chuanxiong 川芎, or Sichuan angelica, a herb effective to cure female


diseases. These gifts referring to the inner quarter of Su’s household suggested their increasingly intimacy. The virility drug suggests Su’s possible engagement in sexual practices known as fangzhong 房中, “the bedroom arts.” As a common part of longevity techniques, fangzhong theory recommends using sexual intercourse to realize the unification of yin and yang forces; however, Su Shi never refers to fangzhong explicitly in his writing.

Other than that, almost all material gifts that Su actively sought were related to his Daoist practices, including white Tuckahoe, wine, barley yeast, alchemist silver, pine oleoresin, sulfur, and iron stove and pan. They were clearly used for dietary or laboratory purposes. Su Shi might have experimented in making cinnabar pellets again, though it was not recorded in other writings from this period.

Unlike Cheng’s gifts which rarely found versification, Su Shi composed careful poems on his homegrown herbs. Possibly, receiving gifts suggests his possession of social and cultural capital, which no longer befit his newly cast image as a “recluse.” In contrast, planting herbs served this image well. In the year 1095, Su Shi began to grow a herbaceous garden in his Hejiang Belvedere 合江樓 residence and wrote five poems on ginseng, rhubarb, wolfberry, chamomile, and Job’s tears (yiyi 薏苡; Coix lacryma-jobi). Job’s tears fights miasma, the disease from which Zhaoyun died the next year. The effects of the other herbs appear less urgent – they are all mentioned in Baopuzi as “minor drugs” which help to deter death.

95 See Su Shi, “Yu Cheng Zhengfu sanshou,” no.1, SSWJ, yiwen 3:2488
96 The poems themselves do not give any clue on the time of composition. Kong Fanli dated them at the end of 1095; see SSNP, 34:1218. For these fives poems, see Su Shi, “Xiaopu wuyong” 小圃五詠, SSSJ, 39:2156-61.
97 See the “Xianyao” 仙藥 chapter in Baopuzi; Wang Ming, Baopuzi neiyan jiaoshi, 11:196-210.
The Qing commentator Ji Yun regarded Su Shi’s poems on these herbs “very deliberate” (yongyi 用意) compositions. Su’s artistic investment underlines their significance. The poem on the wolfberry, in particular, reveals his wish to use these drugs for both quotidian and miraculous purposes:

神藥不自閟  The miraculous drug does not hide;
羅生滿山澤  It grows in clusters all across mountains and marshes.
日有牛羊憂  Daily it is harmed by grazing cows and goats;
歲有野火厄  And yearly hazarded by wildfires.
越俗不好事  Lassez-faire is the custom of the South;
過眼等茨棘  The wolfberry is seen like any thick-growth or thorn.
青荑春自長  Its green, soft stems extend long in the spring;
絳珠爛莫摘  [In autumn] scarlet beads twinkle, left unpicked.
短籬護新植  I have built a low fence to protect the new plants;
紫筍生臥節  Purple sprouts shoot from couching roots.
根莖與花實  Their roots, stems, blossoms, and fruits –
收拾無棄物  All will be collected with nothing to waste.
大將玄吾鬚  Large fruits shall darken my hair;
小則餉我客  Small ones shall feed my guests.

似聞朱明洞  I have vaguely heard that in the Cave of Vermilion Light,

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98 See SSSJ, 39:2156.
中有千歳質  There is a wolfberry tree of one thousand years.

靈厖或夜吠  Magic canines sometimes bark in the depth of night.

可見不可索  Be seen they might; be sought they won’t!

仙人倘許我  The immortals! A word of permission,

借杖扶衰疾  And I would borrow the wolfberry cane to support me in my decrepitude! 99

Just like there are two kinds of people – the immortals and the mortals – there are two kinds of wolfberries: the constantly hazarded wild growth and the long-living magic ones. The latter kind transgresses the boundary between botanic and animated lives, symbolizing the principle of transformation. It is the counterpart of the immortals in the flora kingdom, thus digesting it promises longevity or even immortality. The wolfberry dogs can only be seen by chance but not be actively sought, like a Grotto Heaven itself. Thus their discovery is not just a matter of luck, but perhaps involves a reckoning by the guardian gods, to whom Su Shi’s last appeal is made.

Yet even if he is denied access to the miraculous wolfberry, he can still dine upon normal wolfberries planted in his garden and hope to “darken his hair,” that is, to make him young again.

These garden herbs thus acquired both a medicinal and a miraculous significance. In addition to their medicinal function, they are not themselves but symbols of some more miraculous members of their kind. They are daily reminders to the poet that, although the realms of immortality and of normalcy are in continuum, they are separated by a tipping point where

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one quality decisively transforms into the other. To pass this tipping point, one needs a miracle, a sign of divine providence.

Becoming an immortal, it appears, demands deliberate effort, but effort alone does not promise the leap. The Daoist adept must be constantly prepared, waiting for the happening in the void of intentionality. The “magic canine” can be seen but not be sought; but when he sees it perchance, the adept is ready to follow. This readiness is acquired by internalizing all the essential qualifications of becoming an immortal, such as the capacity of physical transformation and the mental state of utter freedom. In Su Shi’s view, efficacious medicine is certainly necessary, but more importantly, one shall master the art of physiological alchemy.

III. Physiological Alchemy

Of Su Shi’s works concerning alchemy, a “Discourse on the Dragon and the Tiger, or Lead and Mercury” (“Longhu qiangong shuo” 龍虎鉛汞說) is of pinnacle importance. A large part of it is literally repeated in “A Sequel to the ‘Treatise of Nourishing Life’” (“Xu yangshenglun” 續養生論), namesake of Ji Kang’s aforementioned treatise. But Su’s treatise leaves out, perhaps deliberately, the practical aspects which are central to the discourse, expatiating instead on grandiloquent theoretical constructions. This may suggest that, in comparison, the discourse is

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100 Part of this discourse has been translated by Arthur Waley as evidence that alchemy in the Song China came to mean “not an experimentation with chemicals, blow-pipes, furnaces, etc… but a system of mental and physical reeducation;” see Waley (1930), 15. Waley’s translation and argument are also quoted in Needham & Lu (1983), 22.

relatively esoteric. Written as a private letter to Su Che, the text contains the most extensive
account of an oral revelation from a certain “recluse” (yinzhe 隱者) in 1096. The fact that Su Shi
frequently referred to this revelation during this period, in various forms and degrees of
exotericity – in a discourse, a treatise, three poems,\(^{102}\) and perhaps also orally\(^ {103}\) – underlines its
quintessential status in Su’s study of physiological alchemy. I present the text in four sections to
facilitate the discussion.

龍虎鉛汞說（寄子由）
Discourse on the Dragon and the Tiger, or Lead and Mercury (Sent to Ziyou)

[1] 人之所以生死，未有不自坎、離者。坎、離交則生，分則死，必然之道
也。離為心，坎為腎，心之所然，未有不正，雖桀、跖亦然。其所以為桀、跖者，
以內輕而外重，故常行其所不然者爾。腎強而溢，則有欲念，雖堯、顔亦然。其所以
為堯、顔者，以内重而外輕，故常行其所然者爾。由此觀之，心之性法而正，腎
之性淫而邪，水火之德，固如是也。子產曰：“火烈，人望而畏之。水弱，人狎而
侮之。”古之達者，未有不知此者也。龍者，汞也，精也，血也。出於腎，而肝藏

\(^{102}\) Three poems written in this period seem to be related to this revelation. See Su Shi, “Haishangdaoren

\(^{103}\) According to his own note to the poem “Haishangdaoren chuan yishenshouqi jue,” Su sent this to Wu
Ziye 吳子野, a fellow student of Daoist alchemy, in the first month of 1097; but before that, he had already
imparted in detail what it was about. See Zha Shenxing’s comment under the title of this poem.
The life and death of humans all result from [the interactions of] the kan and li trigrams. When kan and li are coupled, we live; when they separate, we die. This is a law of necessity. Kan corresponds to the heart, and li, to the reins. What the heart recognizes as correct is always upright. This is the case with even [evil-doers like] King Jie and Robber Zhi. Their being Jie and Zhi was because their internal drives were weak, while their external drives were strong. Therefore they constantly practiced what their hearts recognized as incorrect. When the reins are strong, their influence overflows; hence rise desires. This is the case with even [sages like] King Yao and Yan Hui. Their being Yao and Yan was because their internal drives were strong, while their external drives were weak. Therefore they constantly practiced what their hearts recognized as correct. From this point of view, the nature of the heart is disciplined and upright, while the nature of the reins is licentious and evil. Likewise are the virtues of water and fire. Zichan once said: “Fire is fierce, thus people at the look of it fears it. Water is weak, thus people fiddles with it in disesteem.”

104 The wise men of the old all knew it well. The dragon is the mercury, the semen, and the blood. It comes out of the reins and hides in the liver. It

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104 This is Zichuan’s last words as recorded in Zuozhuan, Zhao 20; see Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi, 49:392, Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 2094.
is a kan substance. The tiger is the lead, the breath, and the strength. It comes out of the heart and is fostered by the lungs. It is a li substance. When the heart sets into mobility, together arise pneuma and strength. When the reins overflow, together emit semen and blood. Like smoke coming out of fire will never return into the wood, so what is released will never return. Common people do not study the Way. Their dragon often comes out of water, so when the dragon flies away, their share of mercury lightens. Their tiger often comes out of fire, so when the tiger escapes, their share of lead exhausts. This is the constant principle of human lives. Those who follow this course die. Those who reverse it become immortals. Therefore the Man of Truth says: “Following this course is humanity; reversing this course is the Way.” And again:

“The art of reversing the Five Phases,
Is to let the dragon come out of fire.
When the Five Phases run reverse –
In water the tiger is born.”

Su Shi often begins a discourse by theorizing a universal principle. This one expatiates upon life and death: death results from kan 坎 and li 離 vital forces separating daily apart, and immortality is achieved only by reversing this natural course. Among the eight trigrams in the Book of Changes, the qian 乾, kun 坤, kan, and li trigrams become the foremost in Daoist alchemy. In the seminal Zhouyi cantongqi, qian and kun are the “parents” of all hexagrams, but as origins they

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105 Quotation from a certain Taibai zhenren 太白真人 in the Daoist canon Xishan qunxian huizhenji 西山群仙會真記; see Shi Jianwu, 施肩吾, Sishan qunxian huizhenji 西山群仙會真記, 1:10.
are hidden; \textit{kan} and \textit{li} are their exoteric manifestations in the transformations of the phenomenal world.\footnote{Meng Naichang, \textit{Wangu danjing wang}, 1, 26-27.} Within the human body, \textit{kan} and \textit{li} represent the binary forces of the inner cosmos, just like \textit{qian} and \textit{kun} correspond to the heaven and earth of the external cosmos. Su Shi further relates these two primary forces to characterology. His is a physiological interpretation of human nature, arguing that the nature of the sage is not essentially distinct from that of common people. The sage may also err from the mean, but can hold longer and more constantly to the mean.\footnote{See Chapter Two.}

Here, an ethical doctrine finds its “scientific” support. A sage and a villain consist of the same \textit{kan} and \textit{li} forces. Only in a sage, the \textit{li} force prevails, while in a villain, the \textit{kan}. Yet both forces are needed to be human. Sages control, but do not eliminate, the evil power within each and every man. This theory of human nature connects Su’s moral and alchemical studies.

The heart and the reins are the respective hosting organs of \textit{kan} and \textit{li} forces. Lead and mercury (also called the “true [or vital] lead” \textit{zhengqian 真鉛} and the “true [or vital] mercury” \textit{zhengong 真汞}, to be distinguished from actual lead and mercury used in chemical alchemy\footnote{Chemical alchemical and physiological alchemical terms are often used in common; see Needham & Lu (1983), 22-24. On the “true” (or vital) lead and mercury, see \textit{ibid.}, 25, 49, 60, and \textit{passim}.}) are their manifestations; tiger and dragon, metaphors of their power.\footnote{According to the Five Phases theory, the dragon corresponds to the \textit{kan} trigram, the east, wood, water, mercury, and the reins; the dragon corresponds to the \textit{li} trigram, the west, metal, fire, lead, and the heart. On application of the Five Phases system in physiological alchemy, see Schipper (1993), 35.} In the forms of ferocious animals, the two forces literally devour human vitality from inside. To tame them is to let them be harmonized by their opposites. As the cited verse proposes, once the natural course of the Five Phases is reversed, the heart and the reins shall generate their opposite forces.
“Reverse” (fan 反) or “return” (gui 歸) is perhaps the single most important concept in physiological alchemy. “Returning to infancy” is an ancient Daoist slogan, as found in Laozi, suggesting that human vitality is fully charged upon parturition and constantly discharges with every natural cycle of breath. In the Daoist vision of human life, a fetus’ conception is this person’s birth, as a child’s age is determined not from the date of parturition, but from the beginning of gestation. A child thus leads an “inner life” inside the womb. This embryonic stage provides a model for a person’s whole life span. The theoretical ground for this belief is that, as Isabelle Robinet points out, human beings are considered in Daoist canons “the product of the condensation of the breaths of the Nine Heavens which are knotted into essence and are transformed into spirit which is then transformed into man.” These congenital knots, however, are also the “death-roots of the womb,” planting a morbid breath into man. Thus “we receive death at the same time we receive life.” These germs of death must be cut off ontologically as the “counterpart of physiological obstructions which breath techniques must overcome.” The alchemic process is thus to retrace “one’s steps along the road of bodily decay” by forming an immortal embryo within, so as ultimately to replace the adept’s mortal body.

If the course of life and death is natural – as Su tells us, “this is the constant principle of human lives” – would not reversing it be “unnatural,” violating an essential message of Daoism? Ji Kang’s answer is no. His “Treatise on Nourishing Life” strongly argues that the normal course

110 Laozi 55: “He who has in himself abundant virtue is comparable to an infant” 含德之厚比於赤子; see Zhu Qianzhi, Laozi jiaoshi, 218.
112 See Robinet (1993), 140-1.
113 Needham & Lu (1983), 25; also 130-5, passim.
of life is considered “natural” only by “people of mediocre intelligence or below.” The Daoist adept follows instead secret principles of nature unseen by common eyes. Su Shi does not make this proposition explicit, but he does agree, through quotation, that it is merely “human” to follow the natural course, while it is in the true Way to reverse it. The untold textual authority supporting this claim is a Laozi citation: “Returning is the movement of the Way” 反者道之動. The Daoist thus may claim to follow the esoteric rule of nature through seeming contradiction to its exoteric rule of life and death.

Simple in theory as it seems to become an immortal, the real challenge is the move from theory to practice. And this is the bread and butter of Su’s discourse.


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115 Laozi 40; see Zhu Qianzhi, Laozi jiaoshi, 165.
輕，方閉息時，常卷舌而上，以舐懸癕，雖不能到，而意到焉，久則能到也。如是不已，則汞下入口。方調息時，則激而烹之，須滿口而後嚥。（若未滿，且留口中，俟後次也。）仍以空氣送至下丹田，常以意養之，久則化而為鉛。此所謂‘虎向水中生’也。”

A recluse taught me: “One shall sit upright, clench one’s fists and settle one’s mind. When the breath becomes quiet, slowly subdue it. (“Bodhidarma’s embryonic-respiration practice” also requires subduing the breath. If one waits for it to stop by itself like suggested in Buddhist sūtras, I am afraid that the mercury will not reach [the heart and the lungs].) Then, although one has nothing in mind, one feels tall and luminous, courageous and fierce, like a fire which cannot be assaulted. When one breath exhausts, let the air penetrate slightly; with a quiet breath, subdue it again. (When the air is about to penetrate, limit it to one breath; once this breath returns, it has already descended into the Cinnabar Field.) Do it. The more, the better; the longer, the greater

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116 Embryonic respiration means to breathe through neither mouth nor nose, but through the navel, like a fetus in the womb; see Needham & Lu (1983), 145-6. “Bodhidarma’s embryonic-respiration practice” refers to a method prescribed in Taixijing 胎息經, which recommends “stopping the qi”气住. See Huanzhen xiansheng 幻真先生, Taixijing zhu 胎息經註, 129-31.

117 The parenthesis appears to mark Su Shi’s comment on the received teaching from the anonymous Daoist.

118 This refers to the believed circulation of the breath in the body, not the actual respiratory circulation as described in modern biology.

119 A Daoist terminology referring to the source of energy in the body. It usually corresponds to the place three inches deep from the navel, though, according to the triadic unity theory (see n.29), there are other
you will accomplish. Within ten days, you shall feel the Cinnabar Field warm with water swelling upward. The longer you practice it, the warmer it feels, almost to the extent of boiling, swelling up like a fountain, vegetating like clouds, steaming into your Mud Ball. It is because *li* means ‘to adhere,’ like it is in the nature of things to catch fire once adhered [to fire]. My eyes are attracted to forms, my ears to sounds, my mouth to tastes, and my nose to fragrances, so that fire follows and adheres to them. Now if I rest in quietude without being attracted to anything external, there will be nothing for the fire to adhere to. Then where does the fire go? The water is its consort, so it will necessarily follow the water. *Kan* means “a concave.” It is in the nature of water to receive things whenever they arrive, let alone being the consort of the fire. When water and fire unite, fire will not burn and water will naturally swell. This process is the so-called ‘the dragon comes out of fire.’ When the dragon comes out of fire, the dragon will not fly, and the mercury will not exhaust. In just above ten days, your brain will be full, and your waist and feet will feel light. When you practice breath control, constantly curl your tongue backward to lick your uvula. Even though it might not reach, maintain the mindfulness, and eventually it will reach. Keep doing it, and the mercury (i.e. saliva) will trickle into your mouth. When you practice breath control, rinse [the accumulated saliva] and turn it


120 A terminology referring to a brain cavity situated three inches behind the middle of the eyebrows. See Robinet (1993), 125.

121 In the *Book of Changes*, the trigram *li*離 is explained as *li*麗, that is, to “adhere to,” just like the sun and the moon “adhere” to the sky or the vegetation “adheres” to the soil. See *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 3:31, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 43.
into steam; wait till it fills your mouth and then swallow it. (If it is not yet full, keep it in your mouth and wait for the next cycle.) Send it with empty breath into the lower Cinnabar Field and constantly nurture it in your mind. Longer, it will transform into lead. This is the so-called ‘in water the tiger is born.’”

An anonymous Man-in-the-Hiding (literally, *yinzhe* 隱者) comes to transmit the much awaited guidance. What is curious about his practice, however, is the dearth of instructions. His message can be boiled down to two points: a practitioner shall subdue his breath and lick his uvula. The rest is either explanatory or descriptive. Since this discourse is a letter addressed to Su Che, it was hardly likely that Su Shi hid information from his brother. Possibly, since Su Che was an experienced practitioner, he knew how to supplement the missing pieces, such as the meditative control of breath circulation, which are common knowledge in Daoist practices. This is why Su Shi’s own interlineal notes are inserted only in regard to breath control and saliva production, debating different techniques and prescribing strategies under actual situations. The rest, though ostensibly mystic and fabulous, requires no explanation to a selective, informed audience. More significant to insiders of the Daoist art are in effect those deceitfully simple tricks.

One subject of debate is whether to subdue (*bi* 閉) or to stop (*zhǐ* 止) the breath. Needham and Lu suggest that pre-Tang respiratory control recommended holding the breath to the extent of stopping it, which might have resulted in unfortunate, sometimes mortal, accidents. Thus since the Tang, breathing became secondary to an imaginative voluntary circulation of *qi* through the internal organs, assisted by aerophagy (air-swallowing). The practitioner literally eats air (*fuqi* 服氣) and forces its circulation in his intestinal tract, where it is supposed to be
Su’s suggestion of swallowing saliva with “empty breath” (*kongqi* 空氣) into the abdomen is apparently a form of aerophagy.¹²³

The method of licking the uvula to produce saliva is also mentioned, though less explicitly, by the Daoist physician Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581?-682?).¹²⁴ Saliva is precious nectar in Daoist physiological alchemy. According to Isabelle Robinet, it is variously called the “divine juice” (*lingye* 靈液), “gold liqueur” (*jinli* 金醴), and “pure water of the jade lake” (*yuchiqingshui* 玉池清水) in the *Yellow Court Scripture*, among other euphemisms. Saliva accomplishes two complementary functions. The first concerns the rinsing of the mouth. The second and most essential function is “the nourishment of immortality during the course of meditation.”¹²⁵ It is treated as the water-of-life which irrigates and moistens the body. The effect of saliva might not be only theoretical, but also practical. Needham and Lu suggest that the ingestion of saliva took its rise in the Tang, when aerophagy was added to breath-retention as part of breathing control practice. Salivary deglutition is closely connected with aerophagy physiologically since hyper-salivation makes air-swallowing easier.¹²⁶ Given the vital importance of saliva, its supply is a

¹²⁴ Sun quoted the legendary immortal Xianger 想爾 who recommended: “Reverse your tongue into the throat, then rinse the trickle and swallow the saliva” 反舌塞喉漱漏咽液; see *Sheyang zhenzhong fang*, in Zhang Junfang, *Yunji qiqian*, 737.
¹²⁵ Robinet (1993), 90.
¹²⁶ See Needham & Lu (1983), 150-1.
crucial concern of this practice. Saliva, as liquid jade, is the *yin* part of the couple “jade-gold.” After it is tempered in the furnace of the body, as Su Shi suggests, it will turn into lead, the *yang* or “gold” part of the binary system. The “true lead” transformed from saliva is the tiger born in water.

This same “recluse” was very likely the “Daoist from the sea” (*haishang daoren* 海上道人) mentioned in a highly cryptic poem by Su Shi, written in 1096, under the title: “A Daoist from the sea has taught me an oral invocation to guard my vital pneuma with spiritual meditation.”

A bona fide explanation is provided by Zhong Laiyin, which relates this poem

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127 See Robinet (1993), 90.

128 This enigmatic poem may be tentatively translated as follows:

- 但向起時作 (Simply stir upon rising);
- 還於作處收 (And collect where it stirs);
- 蛟龍莫放睡 (Do not let the dragon sleep);
- 雷雨直須休 (Nor let it release the thunderstorm);
- 要會無窮火 (Convene with the eternal fire);
- 嘗觀未盡油 (Observe the inexhaustible grease);
- 夜深人散後 (In the depth of the night, when the crowd is dispersed);
- 惟有一燈留 (Your lamp alone shall burn bright).

See Su Shi, “Haishangdaoren chuan yishenshouqi jue” 海上道人傳以神守氣訣, *SSSJ*, 40:2209-10. Its hermetic nature is underlined by the fact that existent commentaries to this poem, as compiled by Kong Fanli, only attempted to relate a few phrases to similar ones in *Baopuzi, Book of Changes*, or *Zhuangzi*, but none of these associations helps to understand the poem per se.
closely to the discourse. As discussed earlier, the moment of receiving an oral transmission from an accomplished practitioner is regarded as crucial for a Daoist adept. Without it, he may fumble among exoteric written texts, oblivious to their true meaning. Nor should an oral transmission be written down, at least not in an exoteric fashion. Therefore, as a versified version of the oral teaching that Su received, this poem was very likely not intended to be understood. The act of writing it at all, however, shyly exposed a secret moment. The poet ached to leave a textual record of this revelation, perhaps simply out of habit, as an indicator of a true message—an indicator that is paradoxically designed to defy the reification of writing.

According to Zhong, the first line means that one shall start to practice upon rising up at the third watch; the second line means that one’s mind shall guard the circulation of breath intently, maintaining the same state from the beginning to the end; in the third line, the dragon, like in the “Discourse,” refers to semen and blood; the thunderstorm refers to ejaculation, since one essential Daoist practice is “returning the semen to nourish the brain.” See Zhong Laiyin (1990), 168-9. On retention of the semen, see also Needham & Lu (1983), 30. Zhong’s interpretation is not entirely convincing, given the fact that the poem’s highly condensed message allows multiple readings.
CHAPTER SIX

This theory is unusual yet reasonable, wondrous yet simple. Its credibility is beyond question. But I have a big problem. In my life I have made such oaths for hundreds of times, all to no avail. In my opinion, this art cannot be accomplished unless one practices it with total devotion of the body, receives its teaching in one’s hollowed heart, and abides its command till the end of one’s life. Now, I am already sixty, my reputation and career ruined, separated from my brother and sons, living in a barbaric country, with no foreseeable future to return north. The insipid flavor of this world – I know it all! I would not be man if I kept on neglecting this call. So in the last few days, I anew made an oath. Just like an ancient person who hid in a desolate mountain to escape disaster or was sent on a mission into remote territory, feeding upon grass or snow – how is it like to be such a man! I have ordered a meditation couch and two big desks to put under a bright window solely for this purpose. I also had a hundred cakes steamed and aired. Since the first day of the second month, I shall abjure all human affairs. Whenever I feel hungry, I will eat those cakes only, drink no soup or water and accept no other kinds of food. I shall chew slowly to nurture saliva and drink only a sparing amount of wine. After noon, I shall take a short nap. I shall lie at the first watch and rise at the third, sitting in waiting of the dawn. When the sun rises, I shall gather the essence of the sun; when the moon rises, that of the moon. In the remainder of time, I will either count my breath and temper the yin force within, or practice the dragon-and-tiger formula related
above. If I do it for a hundred days, I might achieve something. I shall neither read nor write – put it aside for another day. I shall not excurse to mountains or rivers. I shall not receive any guest or drink with others than accomplished practitioners of the Way. All such things do me no good. But I fear deeply that my undisciplined nature will ultimately prohibit this oath from being fulfilled. So I write it down beforehand to let you know, so that I would not dare break this promise, lest I feel shameful in front of my own brother. But this matter is very difficult indeed! I do not know whether I might end up feeling ashamed after all. This letter thus intends both to strengthen my resolution and to inspire you, my brother.

When Su Shi talks about his devotion, it is sometimes hard to decide his seriousness. He spends a large part of the paragraph to convince the reader of his absolute commitment, only to declare toward the end his volatility. The bathos raises the question: did he succeed?

Su Shi’s practice include a dry cake and wine diet, a rigorous schedule, gathering the cosmic essence, respiratory control, and the dragon-and-tiger physiological exercise. The diet ensures that all sources of water must be nourishing, thus only saliva and wine are allowed. Wine is a crucial food supplement in a “grain abstinence” (bigu 斷穀 or duangu 斷穀) diet. Daoist works since the Han generally believe in the topological correlation of diets and dispositions. In Huainanzi, it states: “Those who eat flesh are brave and daring but fierce; those who eat qi are spirit-illumined and live long; those who eat grains are knowledgeable and clever but short-lived;

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I translate this term daoren 道人 as “accomplished practitioners of the Way,” instead of “Daoists,” since I suspect that Su’s criterion included Buddhist monks or lay practitioners.
those who do not eat do not die; they are (or become) spirits.”\textsuperscript{131} The \textit{Huainanzi} topology is not restricted to human beings but includes the animal kingdom. In contrast, a similar topology in \textit{Baopuzi} concerns only the diet of man. Ge Hong has dropped the category of “those who do not eat,” adding instead “those who eat vegetation are good in running but stupid.”\textsuperscript{132} Ge does not agree that one shall eat \textit{qi} alone, a proposition of the “\textit{Qi}-circulation School” that he regards as biased. From a pragmatic point of view, not eating any food or eating \textit{qi} alone seems impossible, thus Ge prescribes only herbal and mineral food that one can eat methodically. Wine is generally allowed, even encouraged, but since it is made of grain, one should drink it sparingly.\textsuperscript{133} Su Shi related that his fellow practitioner Wu Ziye 吳子野 had undertaken a diet of drinking a certain “Authentic One Wine” (\textit{zhenyijiu} 真一酒) alone, aided by the “Heaven-Made Drug” (\textit{tianzaozhiyao} 天造之藥) formed through physiological alchemy.\textsuperscript{134} Wine helps blood circulation and is thus perceived as a \textit{yang} substance related to blood and semen, in contrast to saliva, a \textit{yin} substance. Drinking them, and them alone, facilitates the practitioner to achieve the inner cosmic balance.

\textsuperscript{131} See “Dixingxun” 隕形訓 in \textit{Huainanzi}; Liu Wendian 劉文典, \textit{Huainan honglie jijie} 淮南鴻烈集解, 4:143. Translated and discussed by Robert Ford Campany; see Campany (2005), 34 (with modification).

\textsuperscript{132} See the “Zaying” 雜應 chapter in \textit{Baopuzi}; Wang Ming, \textit{Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi}, 15:266.

\textsuperscript{133} See \textit{ibid.}, 15:167-8.

Su Shi did not abstain from cooked cereal food, but he kept his indulgence at a minimum, eating unflavored dry cake alone, lest his appetite be aroused. His method was eclectic, a compromise between theoretic purity and practicality.

[4] 卷舌以舐懸癕，近得此法，初甚秘惜之。此禪家所謂 “向上一路子，千聖不傳人”，所見如此，雖可笑，然極有驗也。但行之數日間，舌下筋急痛，當以漸馴致。若舌尖果能及懸癕，則致華池之水，莫捷於此也。又言：“此法名 ‘烘爐上一點雪’。”宜且秘之。

Curling one’s tongue to lick the uvula is a method that I recently learned. At first I rather cherished it and kept it secret. This is what the Chan monks say: “The way of advancing above cannot be imparted, even if you beg a thousand sages.” My understanding is truly laughable, but it is very effective. After a few days of practice, unfortunately, the tendon under my tongue has sharp pains. It needs to be domesticated first to perform this challenge. If the tip of my tongue can really reach the uvula, then it will be the fastest way to fetch water from the Blossom Pond.

[The Daoist] also said:

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136 Another term for the mouth, or the “Jade Pond” (yuchi 玉池). It acquires this name because the Daoist practitioner shall use his tongue to stir saliva accumulated below the tongue till foams are formed, then he should swallow the foams. The white form is thus compared to “jade” or “blossom.” See *Shangqing huangting neijing jing* 上清黃庭內景經 [The Yellow Court Scripture of Inner Landscape of the Shangqing Sect], in Zhang Junfang, *Yunji qiqian*, 284-5.
“This method is called ‘a patch of snow above a melting stove’.” Keep it secret at least for now.

The last passage again employs anticlimactic bathos. The coveted secret involves a banal difficulty in practice: the reader can almost imagine the poet’s tongue wriggling to reach the hanging uvula at the far back of the throat, inflicting on himself sharp pains. Yet the poet pleads his brother, and the reader, to keep the secret, when he is leaking it in indelible words.

Su Shi was fond of penning down the secret arts of longevity. To what extent he practiced these methods remains questionable. He might believe himself not made for such practices which demand perseverance and devotion. In another letter he sent to Su Che, he similarly relates a few methods that he recently learned. Yet the purpose, revealed toward the end, is to adjure Su Che, the quiet and resolute younger brother, to become an immortal first, so that Su Shi might become an immortal by association. There might be a sting of political sarcasm in it, since Su Che’s banishment was due to his “guilt by association” with Su Shi. Huang Tingjian in a colophon relates Su’s fascination with the arts of longevity and his incapacity to abide by a certain prescription for a long period of time. A certain “Daoist from the sea,” possibly the same anonymous Daoist mentioned here, called Su Shi a “banished immortal.” Huang’s colophon suggests the likelihood that this Daoist transmitted Su the secret of his art because of Su’s destined candidacy for immortality. It may also explain why his method is so emphatically simple: it was designed for the “undisciplined” Su Shi to follow. Yet

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137 See Su Shi, “Ji Ziyou sanfa” 寄子由三法, SSWJ, 73:2339.

even so, judging from his own characterological diagnosis (as well as the impractically Spartan intake of water), the reader has good reason to suspect Su’s failure.

This discourse is written in a private voice, especially compared to “A Sequel to the ‘Treatise of Nourishing Life’.” The treatise shares the same theoretical framework with the discourse and at times repeats it verbatim (especially the first two paragraphs). Yet the private voice is replaced by a public one, featuring elaborated theoretical constructions and canonical quotations from, for instance, the Confucian Analects. Su’s personal commitment and self-doubts about practicing this method are not mentioned in the treatise, and neither is the comical recommendation of licking one’s uvula. The treatise, in short, is written for a serious, public purpose. The detailed practical guidelines are kept esoteric, and all individual pains or struggles are deemed improper.

Could the private voice in the letter also be used as disguise? Su Shi’s letters were seldom kept private, a fact well known to him. They were collectibles because of the fame of the author and of his calligraphy. As Sturman points out, epistle calligraphy was in effect especially prized in China because of its casual nature and presumed spontaneity. Su Shi’s exhortation of keeping secret “for now” (qie 且) anticipates its leak. An intimate voice, as a rhetorical device, gives credibility to the jests and doubts in Su’s letter. Yet the speaker is also aware of a large, anonymous audience standing behind his brother, listening attentively to each and every word. A joke can be told to hide an earnest purpose. As to be seen below, Huizhou represented the period in Su’s life when he most firmly believed in the art of immortality. Possibly, Su Shi took his chance of becoming an immortal seriously, even though he dressed his ambition in laughter.

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The Daoist on White Crane Peak

When Su Shi first came to Huizhou, the local magistrate Zhan Fan 詹範 hosted him in Hejiang Belvedere located at the scenic juncture of the Western Riverlet 西枝江 and the East River 東江. This hotel was usually used to welcome commissioners from the central court. Accommodating an exile here risked transgression and maybe Zhan’s career. A week later, Su moved into Jiayou Temple 嘉祐寺, a secluded location on the eastern bank of the Western Riverlet. His arrival gained attention among literati and officials of the Guangdong area. Magistrates of the nearby five prefectures all sent him wine. When on the level of national politics Su Shi suffered from disgrace, in the provincial circles he still enjoyed respect and celebrity. Famous Buddhist monks and Daoists came to his acquaintance as well. His welfare was substantially secured since Cheng Zhicai became Judicial Commissioner in Guangdong. Within half a month of Cheng’s arrival, Su moved back into Hejiang Belvedere. On the New Year of 1096, Su was planning to build a permanent garden house and move his sons and grandchildren over. He felt content with life in Huizhou.

Cheng Zhicai was abruptly summoned back to court at the end of this month, possibly when news of their cozy relationship reached the capital. Su Shi, unaware of this inauspicious signal, began to build a new house on the deserted Daoist temple compound on White Crane Peak 白鶴峰 at Mt. Luofu. This project was necessitated by his moving back to the Jiayou

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140 The account of Su’s life in Huizhou, here and below, see SSNP, 33:1178-245.

Temple in the fourth month. The humid location of the temple must have accelerated, if not directly caused, Wang Zhaoyun’s death three months later.

The building of this house showed Su Shi’s readiness to retire on White Crane Peak as a Daoist adept and would-be immortal. The following poem, written after the ground-breaking of the construction, envisions a life above the crowds:

前年家水東  The year before last, to the east of the river I was housed;
回首夕陽麗  Looking back, glorious was the setting sun.
去年家水西  Last year, to the west of the river I was housed;
濕面春雨細  The misty rain of spring moisturized my face.
東西兩無擇  To the east or to the west – I picked no side.
緣盡我輒逝  When the karma was over, I took prompt departure.
今年復東徙  This year I have again moved to the east,
舊館聊一憩  And take a short rest in my old residence.
已買白鶴峰  I have already bought White Crane Peak,
規作終老計  Planning to spend there my remaining days.
長江在北戶  A long river winds outside of my northern door –
雪浪舞吾砌  Its snowy waves dance on my steps.
青山滿牆頭  Verdure mountains densely lie over the walls –
鬌幾雲髻  Like vixen women’s loose hairdo, many cloud-piled buns.
雖慚抱朴子  Though I should be shamed by Master Embracing Simplicity,
金鼎陋蟬蛻  Who with his golden-cinnabar tripod thought lowly of cicada-sloughing;

猶賢柳柳州  Yet still I shall be superior to Liu [Zongyuan], the magistrate of Liuzhou;

廟俎薦丹荔  Scarlet lychees were offered to his memorial temple.  

吾生本無待  My life, as it should, has nothing to rely upon.

俯仰了此世  Rising high or falling low – I pass the world with the flow.

念念自成劫  As every single thought turns into a *kalpa*.

塵塵各有際  Each grain of dust has its boundary in space.

下觀生物息  From here I observe the breathes of living things below.

相吹等蚊蚋  Like mosquitoes or buffalo gnats, into each other they blow.  

In the first eight lines, Su Shi recounts the life in Hejiang Belvedere and in Jiayou Temple with studied even-handedness. In reality, the belvedere was radically more agreeable than the miasma-infested temple. But Su Shi declares that he cannot care to choose. Part of the unstated reason is that his housing option was decided by a larger political game beyond his control. Buying this piece of land on White Crane Peak announces him taking control of his life: he hereby plans (gui 規) an old age uninfluenced by the political barometer. His new house shall be blessed by a natural landscape as well as by his own cultural landscape of symbolism – the “snowy waves” possibly refer both to the real waves of the river and to a “Snow Wave Rock”

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142 According to Han Yu’s sacrificial text to Liu Zongyuan’s temple in Liuzhou (in modern Guangxi Province), where Liu Zongyuan died in exile, tropical fruits including lychees were included in the offering. See Han Yu, “Liuzhou luochi miaobei” 柳州羅池廟碑, in *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu*, 7:494.

(xuelang shi 雪浪石) in his possession. “Snow,” as in the case of his Snow Hall built in Huangzhou,\(^{144}\) symbolizes purity and externality to the mundane, which is especially true in a subtropical climate where snow, if any, is a rarity. In this private space, not only natural and metaphorical landscapes lose their distinction, but nature also undergoes metamorphosis into human agents, such as verdure mountains transforming into charming women next door.

This vision of transcendence and transformation provides the context for an abrupt change of mood. The poet compares himself to two ancients – Ge Hong and Liu Zongyuan – who both died in the southern landscape. “Cicada-sloughing” is a kenning for “deliverance from the corpse,” a technique that Ge Hong regarded as inferior to taking the golden cinnabar produced in the alchemist tripod. Su Shi’s “embarrassment” suggests that he settles with an aspiration that the master held in contempt. Yet even so, he still regards it no small accomplishment in comparison to Liu Zongyuan, who died in exile at forty-seven sui. The locals built a temple in his memory and offered tropical fruits. But their exotica were only a painful reminder of the dislocation and untimeliness of his death.

The last six lines are permeated by ambiguity and aggrandizement. The poet appears again unsure whether he shall swim against the current of life. Daoist alchemy, as argued earlier, is essentially to “reverse” the flow and to “return to the root.” In the poet’s conflicted mind, he doubts whether the pursuit of immortality would finally prove futile, and in that case, whether it would be wiser to adopt the attitude of philosophical resignation. Yet he is well aware that in Buddhist terms every thought represents a kalpa, i.e. the growth and decay of a universe in itself. Everything, be it a thought or a grain of dust, has its limit in time and in space. What he thinks at this moment represents nothing but a momentary thought subject to change. The last couplet

\(^{144}\) See Chapter Two.
recalls the famous opening paragraph of *Zhuangzi*. In the vision of the gigantic fish-turned-into-bird *peng*, the surface of the earth is submerged in nebulous mists, flowing dusts, and the breath of living beings blown into each other.\(^{145}\) Su Shi adopts the perspective of the *peng* when he envisions himself standing atop White Crane Peak and observing the multitude below. On second thought, however, is he not also one of the “living things,” breathing like a mosquito or a buffalo gnat? As he is yet to move into his new house and undertake the immortality project, Su Shi is hopeful of his immortal’s candidacy while being haunted by self-doubts. In the last couplet of the poem, he is observing his earthly self from an imaginative height.

Su Shi’s resolve to become an “earthly immortal” is also confided in a letter written to his fellow Daoist practitioner Wang Dingguo. It declares:

某一味絕學無憂，歸根守一，乃無一可守。此外皆是幻。此道勿謂渺漫，信能如此，日有所得，更做沒用處，亦須作地行仙，但屈滯從狗竇中過爾。勿說與人，但欲老弟知其略爾。

Single-mindedly, I hold on to the doctrines of “abstaining from study and having no worries,”\(^{146}\) “returning to the root,”\(^{147}\) and “guarding the One.”\(^{148}\) Only then there is no such One to guard. Other than this is nothing but illusion. Please do not think this devotion dubious and remote. If I can indeed practice it, I shall see daily gains. Even though it has no other use, I should at least become an earth-roaming immortal. The only

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\(^{145}\) See the “Xiaoyaoyou” chapter in *Zhuangzi*; Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 1:4.
\(^{146}\) See *Laozi*, chapter 20; Zhu Qianzhi, *Laozi jiaoshi*, 76.
\(^{147}\) See *Laozi*, chapter 16; *ibid.*, 65.
\(^{148}\) A variation from “embracing the One” 抱一, as in *Laozi*, chapter 10; *ibid.*, 37.
disadvantage is that I should submit myself to the humiliation of living a dog life. Please do not tell anyone else. I only want you, my dear friend, to understand me.\textsuperscript{149}

The “humiliation,” as another poem suggests, is to suffer from starvation, dining upon raw plants, and abstain from all sensual pleasures.\textsuperscript{150} It invites ridicule from “those of supreme understanding” who hold the pursuit of immortality in contempt. Nevertheless, Su Shi is willing to endure these material and mental sufferings for his own good – a Hīnayāna resolution which he would like his friend to keep secret.

Early 1097, his villa on White Crane Peak was finally built. He planted various fruit trees, fetched his other sons and their families over, and was ready to spend the rest of his life at Mt. Luofu, after Ge Hong’s example. His wish of becoming an immortal is explicitly shown in a liturgical text written for the “installing the [last] beams” (\textit{shangliang 上梁}) ceremony celebrating the completion of the house:

\begin{quote}
白鶴新居上梁文

Liturgical Text for Installing the Beams of My New House on White Crane Peak\textsuperscript{151}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{150} See Su Shi, “Anqisheng” 安期生, \textit{SSSJ}, 43:2349-50. This poem will be discussed later.

\textsuperscript{151} Su Shi, “Baihe xinju shangliangwen,” \textit{SSWJ}, 64:1989-90. \textit{Shangliang}, or “installing the [last] beams,” marks the completion of a house, usually done on an auspicious day. Sacrificial ceremonies are held with food thrown to different directions accompanied by the incantation of liturgical texts. Su Shi wrote yet another liturgical text for installing the beams in 1095 for a new construction in the local Yongfu Temple 永福寺; see Su Shi, “Haihuidian shangliangwen” 海會殿上梁文, \textit{SSWJ}, 64:1990.
[1] 鵝城萬室，錯居二水之間；鶴觀一峯，獨立千巖之上。海山浮動而出沒，
仙聖飛騰而往來。古有齋宮，號稱福地。鞠為茂草，奄宅狐狸。物有廢興，時而隱
顯。東坡先生，南遷萬里，僑寓三年。不起歸歟之心，更作終焉之計。越山斬木，
泝江水以北來；古邑為鄰，遠牙牆而南峙。送歸帆於天末，掛落月於床頭。方將開
逸少之墨池，安稚川之丹竈。去家千歲，終同丁令之來歸；有宅一區，聊記揚雄之
住處。今者既興百堵，爰駕兩楹。道俗
來觀，里閭助作。願同父老，宴鄉社之雞豚;
已戒兒童，惱比鄰之鵝鴨。何辭一笑之樂，永結無窮之歡。

The myriad households of Goose City are scattered at the crossing of two rivers;
the lonely peak of White Crane Temple stands above a thousand cliffs. Mirage Mountains
float in the ocean like fleeting phenomena. Immortals and transcendents soar into the sky
in constant traffic. In olden times there was a solemn temple called a blessed place. It
nourished lush greens and became foxes’ den. Things prosper and decline; at times they
appear or hide. Banished ten thousand li to the south, Master Dongpo has been hosted
here for three years. He has no intention of return and even plans hither to die. He has
mountains crossed and trees cut; he has come to the north against the river. In his
neighborhood is an ancient town, surrounded by teeth-like walls and facing the peak from
the south. His gaze sends away returning sails till the end of the horizon; a falling moon

152 Aka. Huizhou. Its namesake is a Flying Goose Mountain (Fei’eling 飛鵝嶺), named after its shape,
fringing the southwest of the city, strategically the highest point of the urban area.
hangs ahead of his couch. He is about to open the Ink Pond of Yishao\(^{153}\) and to set up the cinnabar stove of Zhichuan. After a thousand years away from home, he has finally returned together with Ding Lingwei.\(^{154}\) Having a house of the size of a single furrow, he idly records this residence of Yang Xiong. Now the hundred walls\(^{155}\) erected, he rides a carriage to arrive at the pair of front gate columns. Clerics and lay men all observe this occasion, and the whole village comes to his aid. He wishes to feast these respectful elders upon chicken and pork on this rural banquet; he forbids children to harass the neighbors’ geese or ducks. How could you decline the joy of a single bout of laughter? Let us tie the bound of eternal pleasure!

The opening lines depict the singularity of White Crane villa. Built upon the temple ruins on an imposing peak of a highly significant mountain, facing the ocean where immortals live on Mirage Mountains, the villa itself symbolizes transcendence and eternity. It is, however, an eternity in constant transformation. The vicissitude of things on this ground is a metaphor for the poet’s fate, who similarly at times “hides or appears,” or “retreats or prospers” (both yinxian 隱顯). This term provides a transition from the transformation of things to Su’s transformation of

\(^{153}\) Aka. Wang Xizhi. On the “Ink Pond” story, see Chapter Two, n.45. The commemorated site of Wang Xizhi’s Ink Pond is in modern Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province.

\(^{154}\) According to Soushen houji 搜神後記 (a work traditionally credited to Tao Qian), Ding Lingwei 丁令威 was a legendary Daoist who transformed into a crane and went home. See Wang Shaoying 汪紹楹 ed., Soushen houji 搜神後記, 1:1.

\(^{155}\) The term “a hundred walls” 百堵 comes from the Ode “Hongyan” 鴻雁 (Mao 181); see Maoshi zhengyi, 11:163, in Ruan Yuan, Shisanjing zhushu, 431.
identity. Banished to the south like many of his literati precursors, the poet would yet welcome another transformation: from the hapless exile to a self-sufficient Daoist recluse. What he retains from his former identity is being a man of letters, symbolized by the comparison of his house to that of Wang Xizhi, the calligrapher, and Yang Xiong, the classicist. The second reference alludes to Su’s writing of a commentary on the *Book of Changes* during this period. Otherwise, he is a would-be immortal like Ge Hong or Ding Lingwei. The end of this paragraph returns to the proper theme of house-construction. The ex-bureaucrat, poet, and would-be immortal disguises himself in the role of a farmer-recluse. He is trying to blend into this countryside community, like another Tao Qian, drinking with farmers from his neighborhood.

[2] 兒郎偉，拋梁東。喬木參天梵釋宮。盡道先生春睡美，道人輕打五更鐘。

兒郎偉，拋梁西。嫋嫋虹橋跨碧溪。時有使君來問道，夜深燈火亂長堤。

兒郎偉，拋梁南。南江古木蔭回潭。共笑先生垂白髮，舍南親種兩株柑。

兒郎偉，拋梁北。北江湖水搖山麓。先生親築釣魚臺，終朝弄水何曾足。

兒郎偉，拋梁上。璧月珠星臨蕙帳。明年更起望仙臺，縹緲空山隘雲仗。

兒郎偉，拋梁下。鑿井疏畦散鄰社。千年枸杞夜長號，萬丈丹梯誰羽化。

My good boys! Throw [the grains] to the east of the beams! Where the tall trees grow into the sky used to be a Buddhist or Daoist temple. Men all say – the master sleeps soundly in the spring; strike lightly the fifth-watch, ringer of the temple bell!

My good boys! Throw [the grains] to the west of the beams! A slender rainbow bridge rides across an emerald river. When the magistrate at times comes to ask for the Way, lantern lights scatter along the long bank till the depth of night.
My good boys! Throw [the grains] to the south of the beams! Ancient trees on the south riverbank cast shades on a swirling pond. Everyone laughs at the gray-haired master, who is planting in person two orange trees to the south of the house.

My good boys! Throw [the grains] to the north of the beams! Reflections of the mountains sway upon the north river waves. The master builds in person a fishing terrace. For a whole day he entertains himself with the water, never enough.

My good boys! Throw [the grains] above the beams! The jade-like moon and pearl-like stars shine upon a canopy of orchids. Next year the master will yet build a Terrace of Gazing at the Immortals. The misty empty mountains form a gate for the retinue of clouds.

My good boys! Throw [the grains] below the beams! A well is dug, the vegetable garden ploughed, and the neighborhood banquet now dispersed. Thousand-year-old wolfberry dogs wail long at night. On the cinnabar ladder stretching into the sky, who is being transformed into a feathered one?

Similar liturgical texts for “installing the beam” ritual are broadly found in anthologies of Su Shi’s contemporary major literati, including Ouyang Xiu, Wang Anshi, Wang Tingjian, and Chen Shidao, among others. These texts generally follow the same formula: beginning with a prose narrative of the construction of the building, followed by verses each beginning with the trisyllabic incantation of a direction, either with or without the phrase erliangwei （“My good boys!”），and ending with prosaic prayers for auspice. In the repetitive opening line(s) of each stanza, the only variant is the character for the six directions, vertical and horizontal, representing the whole universe. The word for the direction also fixes the rhyme for each stanza.
This liturgical formula might well be accompanied by actual action of children throwing agricultural products to each direction of the beams. The rest of the stanza is heptasyllabic, rhyming at the end of the third and the fifth lines. In Su Shi’s composition, the third line describes the auspicious environment of the villa. The last two lines, notably, encode the gist of the message of each stanza.

In the first stanza, the ending couplet depicts a “master” in contented sleep. He is well respected, as the narrative voice urges the temple bell-ringer not to disturb him by the announcing of time. His sleep thus appears timeless. It recalls the iconic sleep of Chen Tuan 陳摶 (?-989), the Daoist master at Paramount Hua, who slept so long that it lasted sometimes for months, leaving the emperors’ envoy to wait in vain.\(^{156}\) His negligence to worldly power or the passage of time suggests his externality, and by the same capacity, he advised the throne without subjecting to the imperial power. Su Shi imagines himself another Chen Tuan, as in the second stanza, the local magistrate comes to ask for the Way of governance. Stanzas three to five depict a series of planting and building projects. “The master” labors in person, indicating that such endeavors are deeply satisfactory. His undertakings, however, are encoded in rich symbols. The orange tree is alternatively called “wooden slave” (\textit{munu} 木奴). Li Heng 李衡 (3\textsuperscript{rd} cent.), magistrate of Danyang (in modern Jiangsu Province), left a thousand “wooden slaves” to his

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\(^{156}\) Chen Tuan’s legendary sleep was popular among Su Shi’s contemporaries. The first extensive account appears to be “Huashan chongxiu Yuntaiguan ji” 華山重修雲臺觀記, by Zhang Fangping 張方平 (1007-1091), statesman and prime minister. See Zhang Fangping 張方平, \textit{Lequan ji} 樂全集, 33:11-15. Su Shi’s cousin Wen Tong has also an account on Chen Tuan’s legend, though far less detailed; see “Shu Gongzhou Tianqing guan Xiyi xiansheng shi hou” 書邛州天慶觀希夷先生詩後, in Wen Tong 文同, \textit{Danyuan ji} 丹淵集, \textit{shiyi} 拾遺 2:2-3.
sons to provide for their livelihood, ensuring their economic independence. Su Shi’s planting of two orange trees signifies a similar wish for material independence to official salary or charity. His next step is building a fishing terrace. Holding a fish pole symbolizes both longing for and resistance to imperial power. Historical examples include many would-be advisors to the throne, most famously Lü Shang (11th cent. BCE), the founding minister of the Zhou Dynasty, and Yan Guang (1st cent. CE), recluse and friend of the first Eastern Han emperor. The whiffing fisherman does not actively catch the “fish,” i.e. imperial recognition, but instead wait patiently for it coming to the “bait,” i.e. his self-sufficient virtue and infinite potential in governance. If the fish does not come, however, this fisherman is fine with that too – he has another plan in mind. He is to build a Terrace of Gazing at the Immortals. If the imperial retinue does not welcome him into the court, he will instead depart with the retinue of clouds into the empty mountains.

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157 See the biography of Li Heng, in Xi Zaochi, Xiangyang ji, quoted by Pei Songzhi’s commentary in the biography of Sun Xiu, in Chen Shou, Sanguo zhi, 48:1156-7.

158 Lü Shang, also known as Jiang Shang, was said to have remained in poverty until a high age. He then designed a scheme to encounter Chief Xibo of the Zhou tribe, known later as King Wen of Zhou, by fishing at the River Wei shore. With Jiang Shang’s assistance, Xibo and his son King Wu conquered the Yin (16th – 11th cent. BCE) and established the Zhou Dynasty (11th cent. – 256 BCE). See “ Qi Taigong shijia” in Sima Qian, Shiji, 32:1477-8.

159 Yan Guang, style name Ziling, was said to be a classmate of Liu Xiu, the founding emperor of the Eastern Han (25-220). When Liu Xiu ascended the throne, Yan changed his name and went into reclusion. The emperor finally found him in the disguise of a fisherman and fetched him into the court. Yet since Yan persistently declined any rank, he returned into reclusion. See Yan Guang’s biography in “Yimin liezhuan” in Fan Ye, Houhanshu, 2763-4.
In the last stanza, the poet, while playing the role of an amiable neighbor, watches himself transforming into a feathered one on a long ladder of life (symbolized by the cinnabar) stretching into the night sky. The spectator is no other than a wolfberry-dog. This miraculous dog itself is transformed from the root of a thousand-year old wolfberry. It lives in the Cave of Vermilion Light not far from Su’s villa and now, in the small hours of the day, sees his silent transformation.

At the end of the liturgical text, Su again plays a good farmer-recluse. He has no other wish than the health of his family and the fortune of his associates. The subtext, however, is that he has always been a curse in others’ lives – Zhaoyun just died of miasma and his friends were still victims of his downfall. Now, he wishes no more suffering, perhaps so that he could take his departure in the peace of mind.

Compared to the previous poem written before the construction of the villa, this liturgical text is cheerful and optimistic. The poet sees himself enjoying a certain alterity, displaying multiple identities in different contexts. Among the villagers, he is an amiable neighbor. With the
local magistrates, he is a high-minded counselor in hiding. Yet at the end of the day, he is the
would-be immortal climbing a cinnabar ladder into another realm of existence.

The construction of the villa at White Crane Peak culminated Su’s reconstruction of his
identity as a Daoist alchemist and recluse. Only two months later, however, Su was further
banished to Hainan. His aspiration for immortality was disillusioned and crushed.

Retreat from Nature

If the legend was true, Su Shi’s jovial couplet, “Men all say – the master sleeps soundly in the
spring; strike lightly the fifth-watch, ringer of the temple bell,” stirred great ire in the heart of his
learned enemy, Zhang Dun. To deprive Su of such ease, he further banished Su to Danzhou,
presumably as a diabolic jeu de mots: the character dan 儋 shares the same phonetic with zhan
儋, as in Su Shi’s style name Zizhan 子瞻. By the same token, Su Che was banished to Leizhou
雷州 (in modern Guangdong Province): the character lei 有 has in its composition you 由, as in
style name Ziyou 子由. Their close friend Sun Shenlao 孫莘老 was banished to Xinzhou 新州
(now Xinxing, Guangdong Province): the character xin 新 shares the phonetic xin 辛 with shen
莘. Huang Tingjian was also relocated to Yizhou 宜州 (in modern Guangxi Province), given that
Huang’s style name is Luzhi 魯直, while the character zhi 直 graphically resembling yi 宜.

160 See Chapter Five, n.71.
Legend further has it that Zhang Dun was revenging Su Shi’s ridicule of his mentor Wang Anshi’s etymological interpretation of the classics.\(^{161}\)

Far-fetched though they sound, there is perhaps a grain of truth in these legends: for men who spend their lives in texts, words are as real as life. This was an insider’s game for the literati, the meaning of which is only comprehensible in textual references. After all, the same could be said of Su Shi. The previous chapter has examined how he experienced his exiles through the poetry of Tao Qian. This chapter further shows that he perceived Mt. Luofu as his destined locus of transcendence only because of Ge Hong’s precedence, whose attraction came from his authorship of *Baopuzi*, itself a highly referential text deeply embedded in a shared textual tradition. Mesmerized by the ample textual references encoded in the name Luofu, Su Shi reached a reading of his fate – a reading that proved wrong because of Zhang Dun’s reading of a text which encoded Su’s reading of fate.

His forced departure from Huizhou seemed to be disillusioning. Su Shi realized that he was not predestined to retire in peace – or to become an immortal – on White Crane Peak after all. He did not lose faith in the Daoist art but in his own chance of admission into transcendence.

This change of mind is summarily represented in Su Shi’s “Rhapsody on the Milky Spring of the Tianqing Temple,”\(^{162}\) written in 1098. This rhapsody is said to be held by himself

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\(^{161}\) This story is recorded in slightly different versions in Lu You, *Laoxuean biji* 老學庵筆記 (4:50), as well as Luo Dajing 羅大經 (1196-1242), *Helin yulu* 鶴林玉露 (bingbian 丙編 5:315), two usually reliable works. The only difference is that Lu’s record does not include Huang Tingjian, while Luo’s does not include Sun Shenlao.

as his best composition at Hainan. In this text, he first expatiates on a general theory of water as the source of vitality. According to him, all water could be dichotomized into “sweet” (gan 甘) and “salty” (xian 鹹), associated respectively with vitality and death. Corporeal liquids, including sweat, tear, urine, blood, and so forth, are all salty, representing material forms of the death essence which tends to depart from the human body. Only the “true liquid of the Blossom Pond,” i.e. saliva, is sweet, which is the original drug of immortality. The cosmic sweet water circulates in the forms of rain, dew, frost, and snow, and accumulates in rivers, lakes, wells, and springs. In this perpetual cycle of transformation, water is eternal and inexhaustible, and so is vitality. Sea water and salty springs, on the other hand, are the accumulated death essence of the cosmos, which kills and does not nourish life. From this general theory, Su Shi comes to describe his encounter with a sweet spring in a Daoist temple, which to him represents the source of immortal life.

吾謫居儋耳，卜築城南，隣於司命之宮，百井皆鹹，而醪醴湩乳，獨發於宮中，給吾飲食酒茗之用，蓋沛然而無窮。吾嘗中夜而起，挈缾而東。有落月之相隨，無一人而我同。

汲者未動，夜氣方歸。鑄瓊佩之落谷，灩玉池之生肥。吾三咽而遄返，懼守神之訶譏。却五味以謝六塵，悟一真而失百非。信飛仙之有藥，中無主而何依。渺松喬之安在，猶想像於庶幾。

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Since I was banished to live in Dan’er,\(^{164}\) I divined a construction spot to the south of the city wall, next to the temple of the God of Fate. All the local wells are salty, except one spring sweet like ale and milk surging from within the temple. It provides for my cooking, drinking, and making of wine and tea. How abundant and inexhaustible! Once I rose in the middle of the night, took a drinking bottle, and went east. Only the setting moon was following me – no human companions.

The water fetcher did not stir, and the cosmic air of the night just began to retreat. The spring clanged like jade pedants falling into a valley. The jade pond, scintillating, gave birth to rich foams.\(^{165}\) I gulped thrice and returned immediately, afraid to be chided by guardian gods. I shall abjure the five flavors\(^{166}\) to decline the six kinds of dust.\(^{167}\) When I realize the one single truth, I shall shed all the hundred misdeeds. I believe in the elixir leading to immortality. But nothing presides deep within me, so what can I depend

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\(^{164}\) Aka. Danzhou, coming from its ancient people’s (presumably) ethnographic feature of having huge ear lobes.

\(^{165}\) This line borrows literally from *Shangqing huangting nei jing*, Chapter 29, which states: “In the jade pond, pure water gives birth to rich foams” 玉池清水上生肥. The “jade pond” refers to the mouth. “Pure water” refers to pure saliva. The Daoist practitioner shall use his tongue to stir saliva accumulated below the tongue till foams are formed, then he should swallow the foams. This is the source of the fluid circulation in Daoist inner alchemy. See *Shangqing huangting nei jing*, in Zhang Junfang, *Yunji qiqian*, 285; cf. also *ibid.*, 272.

\(^{166}\) Referring to food which tastes sour, bitter, sweet, spicy, or salty. See Hu Fuchen (1995), 472.

\(^{167}\) Referring to six kinds of worldly desires which becloud one’s authentic nature. The concrete numeration differs. One definition suggests that these are the dusted six “roots,” i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Another definition lists wealth, lust, fame, gluttony, sleep, and laxity. A third theory lists lust, music, fragrance, taste, touch, and dharma. See Hu Fuchen (1995), 472.
upon? Alas, Master Scarlet Pine, Prince Qiao, where art thou? Let my imagination, let my fantasy, to capture thee!

At daytime, this spring displays an appearance of deceptive normalcy: it supplies the local households with their quotidian water. Yet this only fresh-water source is located nowhere other than in the palace of the God of Fate. The location associates the spring to the realm of fate and transcendence, opening a virtual field of meaning.

The poet does not explain what made him restive at midnight and drove him to a nocturnal excursion. He might have been either sleepless or practicing meditation. In any case, he seemed to be possessed by some mystic inspiration. He found the spring refreshing itself at the cosmic moment of the night slowly changing into the day, a moment symbolized and strengthened by the change of rhyme. (In my translation, I divide the text into two paragraphs to indicate the rhyme change.) He calls it a “jade pond,” a physiological alchemical term which relates the spring water to saliva, source of vitality. But the devoted adept felt uneasy among the suspected presence of the supernatural. He took three – a symbolic number for triadic unity – gulps of water and returned immediately, as if having violated a territory he had no right to enter. Despite his belief in the drug of immortality, he knew that his recent devotion came too late in life to prepare him for taking it. To receive the drug, he needed something “presiding” (zhu 主) inside. This presiding force might refer to a spiritual embryo (lingtai 靈胎) formed through physiological alchemy. The ultimate goal of Daoist practice is to form an “embryo of the subtle and immortal body” which must replace the adept’s gross body, as discussed earlier. Without

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168 See Robinet (1993), 89.
this embryo fully formed to preside over the mortal body, the adept shall not achieve, but could only fantasize about, a supernatural existence.

The structure of adventure into a transcendental realm, followed by an immediate retreat, appears also in an earlier rhapsody: the “Latter Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” (“Hou Chibi fu” 後赤壁賦), written in the late fall of 1082 during his exile in Huangzhou, three months after composing the “Former Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” (“Qian Chibi fu” 前赤壁賦). In the widely celebrated “Former Rhapsody,” Su Shi declares that he shall transcend the fear of mortality by entrusting his self to the cosmic cycle of change, since the distinction between the eternity of the universe and the transience of individual life is but illusory, relative to perspective.\(^\text{169}\) However, in the relatively obscure “Latter Rhapsody,” also after a nocturnal boat excursion to the Red Cliff together with two guests, Su Shi is driven by unexplained disquietude. Thus he climbs the cliff alone, ventures into the realm of dangerous creatures, and heaves a long whistle at the top of the cliff. Nature responds with resounding echoes and surging wind and waves. Feeling a sudden chill of fear, the poet retreats. When he is again in the boat, a lone crane soars over his head and emits a shriek loud and long. That night Su Shi dreams of a Daoist in a feathered robe asking him “Was the excursion to the Red Cliff delightful?” but refuses to tell his name. Su Shi realizes that he is no one but the crane. The Daoist smiles and disappears, leaving the poet to wake with a throb of heart.\(^\text{170}\)

The tone of optimistic abandon in the “Former Rhapsody” disappears from the “Latter.” The poet’s enchanted climbing sets him apart from his two guests, who are incapable to leave the

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\(^{169}\) Su Shi, “Qian Chibi fu” 前赤壁賦, SSWJ, 1:6.

secured realm of man. He sees tigers, leopards, dragons and falcons in their true forms at night, dangerous but indifferent to his existence, and peeps even into the hidden palace of Pingyi 馮夷, the River God. Yet in the neighborhood of divinity, the poet only feels his own alienness – his unbelonging. He retreats abruptly with awe and fear. The crane, incarnated as the feathered Daoist in his dream, is a signal sent by this transcendental realm. But its intention is vague. The long shriek may be either to beckon or to warn. And if the poet in the “Latter Rhapsody” still holds hope to have been beckoned by the transcendental, the poet in the Tianqing Temple has altogether lost such hope. His fetching of the primordial water appears to him a hasty theft, risking the chiding of guardian gods.

As the last line of the “Rhapsody on the Milky Spring” suggests, he may not achieve the ultimate spiritual and physical freedom, represented by immortals like Scarlet Pine or Prince Qiao. Nevertheless, his freedom is secured in creative imagination. Imagination literally takes flight in the form of spiritual roaming. As in the case of Su Shi’s vision of inner utopia, he retreats from nature into an inner cosmos. Even the power of dreaming and meditation, however, is limited by the physical span of life. In another hermetic poem written in a restive night, Su Shi tried to pacify his anxiety over mortality:

故山不可到 The hometown mountains cannot be reached –
飛夢隔五嶺 My flying dream is obstructed by the Five Ridges.\textsuperscript{171}
真遊有黃庭 The true roaming is within the Yellow Court;
閉目寓兩景 When eyes are closed, the sun and the moon are locked within.\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{171} The Five Ridges is a ring of mountains separating Guangdong and Guangxi from the central area.
室空無可照  But the chamber is empty – there is nothing to illuminate.

火滅膏自冷  When the flame burns out, the oil will naturally chill.¹⁷³

披衣起視夜  I put on my garment, rise up, and look into the night.

海闊河漢永  The ocean is vast; the Milky Way, eternal.

西窗半明月  The western window is lit by a bright half-moon;

散亂梧楸影  Dispersed are the shadows of phoenix and catalpa trees.

良辰不可繫  This beautiful moment cannot be detained,

逝水無由騁  Just like the bygone water will not gallop again.

我苗期後枯  I expect only that my sprout will wither a little later.

持此一念靜  Holding this single thought, my mind becomes tranquil.¹⁷⁴

This poem begins with images of distance and obstruction. His dream is concretized as a flying bird, but its wings are not powerful enough to flap across the mountain range separating the southern regions from the central plains. When physical “return” cannot be accomplished, the poet resorts instead to pure meditation within the “Yellow Court” as a form of true roaming.

¹⁷² The two “lights,” i.e. the sun and the moon, in physiological alchemy refer to the eyes (the left eye is the sun and the right eye the moon). In Daoist meditation practice, when the two eyes are closed, the adept shall imagine the sun and the moon shining through his “inner landscape” (neijing 内景), that is, his internal organs. See Shangqing huangting neijing jing, in Zhang Junfang, Yunji qiqian, 200-1. For a detailed description of this inner landscape, see Schipper (1993), 105-8.

¹⁷³ The “flame” refers to vital energy, while the “oil” refers to the flesh.

¹⁷⁴ Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Zashi’ shiyishou” 和陶雜詩十一首, no.2, SSSJ, 41:2273.
Even in this inner cosmos, however, where eyes transform into the sun and the moon, Su realizes that his inner chamber is empty – perhaps suggesting again that his “spiritual embryo” has not formed yet. He is running out of time, as his fire of life is dying and his flesh chilling. Such fear of mortality cannot be dissuaded by philosophy, and the poet is disquieted. The vast ocean and eternal Milky Way signify constancy, but the sinking half-moon and dispersed shadows symbolize his waning hours and draining vitality. Regardless of the beauty of the present moment, it is incessantly fading into the past. After denouncing the power of mental reality, Su Shi in the small hours of the night concludes that he should try to nourish his physical well-being, without which nothing can be helped. The penultimate line refers to the aforementioned “crop” analogy in Ji Kang’s “Treatise on Nourishing Life.” Though a diligent farmer cannot save his crops from a universal drought, it is a moral command for him to keep doing so. Though death is the ultimate call, it is a moral command for man to prolong his life as much. When the crop finally withers, at least the farmer feels tranquil.

**Active Immersion in Transience**

Now that the aged poet knew that he was destined to demise, possibly soon, the constant fear of mortality could only be fenced by living in the present moment. Su Shi in Hainan suffered from destitution and disease. Thinking of no past or future at least made life easier. The past could not be saved; destiny could not be fathomed. The spiritual spontaneity of living in transience was for him not just a philosophical catchphrase, but a deeply pragmatic choice.
This sentiment permeates many of Su Shi’s writings at Hainan and is best articulated in a triad of poems matching Tao Qian’s allegorical “Form, Reflection, and Spirit” (“Xing ying shen”形影神).

Tao’s is a versified dialogue among the three aspects of human existence. The form laments over its mortality and vaguely desires immortality. The reflection, pointing out that the wish for immortality is vain given the extreme challenge of the task, proposes that the only thing remaining after death is one’s good deeds. Each speech ends with the gesture of toasting a cup of wine. The spirit offers to appease the anxiety of the form and the reflection by arguing that not even good deeds matter. Everything is over when one dies, but there shall be no fear, since this is the natural course of things.

縱浪大化中 Surrender to the tide of Great Transformation!
不喜亦不懼 With neither delight nor yet fear.
應盡便須盡 When it is time to go, then let go;
無復獨多慮 No need to worry so much and alone!175

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175 Tao Qian, “Shen shi” 神釋, in “Xing ying shen” 形影神, TYM, 2:67. David Hawkes understands these three poems representing respectively intellectual traditions of religious Daoism, Confucianism, and Zhuangzian Daoism (or Heavenly Teacher sect); see Hawkes (1970), 44-45. He translated the title as “Substance, Shadow, and Spirit.” I choose to translate it as “Form, Reflection, and Spirit” since this set of terms works better for Su Shi’s argument.
Su Shi admired Tao for his philosophical equanimity, despite his own ambivalence and inconsistency. In his matching poem, he offered three sophisticated yet distinctive approaches to the problem of death. First speaks the form:\footnote{Su Shi, “He Tao ‘Xing zeng ying’” and “Tao 形贈影,” SSSJ, 42:2306.}

天地有常運
日月無閑時
孰居無事中
作止推行之
細察我與汝
相因以成茲
忽然乘物化
豈與生滅期
夢時我方寂
偃然無所思
胡為有哀樂
輒復隨漣洏
我舞汝凌亂
相應不少疑
還將醉時語
答我夢中辭

Heaven and earth have their constant courses;
The sun and the moon never take a moment of rest.
Who in his idleness,
Has calculated and implemented their movements?
In close scrutiny, I and you –
Have become as such in mutual dependency.
All in a sudden we may ride the Transformation of Things;
Who has given us a determined span of life and death?
In dreams I shall sink into quietude;
At ease, not a single thought may stir.
Why do I then feel sad or happy,
And sometimes even burst into tears?
When I dance, you are agitated too;
We respond to each other, without a grain of doubt!
Please give me your words of drunkenness,
To answer my talks from a dream.
The form represents the physical aspect of human existence. From its point of view, the greatest fear in life is the unknown, which often assumes a metaphysical dimension. Death is the ultimate unknown. The only certainty is the precise correspondence between the physical existence and its own reflection, referring to one’s reputation in the world.

The reflection then responds:\textsuperscript{177}

丹青寫君容 When paint is used to depict your countenance,
常恐畫師拙 An unskilled painter is a constant fear.
我依月燈出 When I appear together with the moon or a lamp,
相肖兩奇絕 Our resemblance is marvelous without peer.
妍媸本在君 My beautiful or ugly form depends all on you;
我豈相媚悅 How can I possibly flatter or fawn?
君如火上煙 You are like the smoke on a flame;
火盡君乃別 When the fire burns out, you depart.
我如鏡中像 I am like the image in a mirror;
鏡壞我不滅 When the mirror breaks, I do not demise.
雖云附陰晴 Though I follow your change of weather,
了不受寒熱 I do not suffer from heat or cold.
無心但因物 I follow only things, with no mind of my own.

萬變豈有竭  My myriad transformations never come to an end.
醉醒皆夢耳  To be drunken, to be awake – all but a dream;
未用議優劣  “Which is superior?” is not a worthy theme.

The reflection represents the world’s perception of an individual’s existence. Any action has its consequence on one’s perceived image, which, like reflection in a mirror, does not vanish even when the mirror is smashed. At least this seems to be what Su Shi meant to say. Arguably, this mirror analogy works only to a certain extent, since reflection in the mirror will vanish if the person looking into the mirror ceases to be. In any case, Su Shi’s use of the mirror metaphor contradicts the Buddhist metaphor of “images in a mirror” (*jingzhongxiang* 鏡中像), which regards the phenomenal world to be mere illusory reflections of the eternal truth. For Su Shi, the reflection does not have its own mind, thus it can faithfully resemble the form through its myriad transformations. This reflection resembles the archetypical artist that Su Shi desires to be, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. Does it suggest that spontaneous artwork is the best “reflection” to preserve one’s trace in this world and ensure one’s immortality? The last couplet raises the doctrine of non-duality. It might be a conventional manner of speech, responding smartly to the ending of the first poem. Or it does have serious meaning in it, suggesting that active cognitive capacity (being awake) or the lack thereof (being drunk) does not make a difference in a dream world. As argued earlier, a dream world is the world of art.

At last, the spirit comes to offer its solution.¹⁷⁸

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The two gentlemen had no ultimate selves,
But assumed their forms by adhering to things.
Is it only because of the decrepitude of age,
That with every single thought your state deteriorates?
Knowing that you are unlike metal or stone,
How can I consign myself long to you?
Please don’t follow the words of Lord Lao;
Nor use the Buddha’s talk.
The immortals’ mountain or the Buddha’s Land,
For me there is none, I fear!
My heart pains to follow the old man Tao –
Move the household to the country of wine!
But being drunken or awake, either comes to an end.
There is no easy way to escape one’s fate.
All my life is like chasing a child’s play.
Leaving playthings wherever I stay.
Everywhere I go, people gather to watch me.
Pointing or eyeing they blame or praise me.
Now in a single feat of fire,
Like or hatred are completely burnt.
There remains no more ado to load or carry,
又无寇攘懼 Nor any fear of inroad or robbery.
仲尼晚乃覺 Confucius realized this point only late—
天下何思慮 What thought or worry does All-under-Heaven have?\textsuperscript{179}

Ironically, the spirit, here behaving as the thinking faculty of man, concludes that its own retirement alone promises happiness. It leaves open to interpretation whether this proposal is candid or ironic, since the spirit reaches its conclusion so thoughtfully. Its starting point of reasoning is that no material vehicle is permanent. Even the “reflection,” as trace of one’s existence in the world, relies on ink, paper, silk, or the words and memory of man for its perpetuation.\textsuperscript{180} The only way to preserve the independence of the spirit is for it to stand all alone. Both Daoism and Buddhism promise escape from decay. But Su Shi admits misgivings on both choices. Feeling unable to make a commitment, he opts to forget both and escape to an alternative destination. Yet the state of drunkenness is not forever. Ultimately man must face his fate, soberly and alone. In front of the looming death, he regrets the futility of his life-long engagements with the world, with his traces littered like playthings left by a child. Praise or blame depends on others, not on him. He feels nothing left in him. Like in the \textit{Book of Changes}, an aged Confucius coming to see a world of harmony created without the interference of

\textsuperscript{179} In the “Xicixia” 繫辞下 chapter in the Book of Changes, the Master says: “What thought or worry the all under heaven has? The all under heaven has the same destination albeit via different paths, the same purpose albeit in a hundred thoughts. What thought or worry the all under heaven has?” 天下何思何慮？

\textsuperscript{180} See Chapter One.
intelligence or intentionality, Su Shi, equally aged and commenting upon the *Book of Changes*, abjures any more thinking or worrying. He and the world leave each other alone.

The active immersion in transience is an insight boasted in many of Su Shi’s Hainan poems, often admired by commentators as part of his “old state.” It finds its expression in, for instance, a triad of poems titled “Three Comforts in the Life of Exile,”\(^\text{181}\) celebrating respectively combing one’s hair in the morning wind, napping below the window at noon, and bathing one’s feet warm at night. All these comforts have a tactile quality. They are quiet, physical pleasures that saturate only a peaceful body. Yet there is something disturbingly joyous in Su Shi’s jester “Who can write down this pleasure, / and present it to those lords whose purses of gold weigh heavily on their waists?” 誰能書此樂，獻與腰金公，\(^\text{182}\) or in his jibe “Who [after enjoying this life of exile] would again wrap himself up, / in official hats or shoes like a monkey after bath?”

His contemporary audience included not only his fellow exiles, but also his audience of courtiers who spoke of the “old state” as a form of political weariness, and the “purses of gold” as the wares of a nouveau riche.

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\(^\text{182}\) See “Danqi lifa” 旦起理髮, in *ibid*, *SSSJ*, 41:2285. The “heavy purse of gold” originally comes from Bo Juyi’s line, written on the occasion of his 66th birthday, “being emaciated, I feel the purse of gold weighing heavily at waist; turning old, I take pity on the snowfall on my hair” 瘦覺腰金重，衰憐鬢雪繁; see “Liushiliu” 六十六, *Bo Juyi ji*, 33:754-5. The Song poet and statesman Kou Zhun 寇准 (961-1023) later adopted this line and wrote: “Turning old, I feel the purse of gold weighing heavily at waist; being weary, I sense the jade pillow too cold” 老覺腰金重，慵便枕玉涼. According to Ouyang Xiu’s *Guitianlu* 歸田錄, Yan Shu 晏殊 (991-1055), lyric poet and prime minister, taunted it as the word of a *nouveau riche*.


\(^\text{183}\) See “Yewo zhuozi” 夜臥濯足, in *ibid*, *SSSJ*, 41:2287. The last line refers to the story of Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE), who, after conquering Qin, burnt the palaces and desired a speedy return to his homeland Chu, disregarding the proposal of establishing a dynasty in the heart of the central land. The
but also those dressed in official robes and carrying heavy purses of gold. They also knew very well that Su did not choose this life of “comfort,” nor would they be persuaded to abandon theirs in exchange. The feisty sarcasm betrays again a certain self-persuasion in Su Shi’s ostensible ease with himself and with the world.

The Final Return

Su Shi transformed a life of hardship into a flow of enjoyable moments. By this mental exercise, a strict regimen, and physiological alchemical practices, Su persevered to see Huizong’s general amnesty in 1100. Once across the strait, Su Shi wrote many social poems with Buddhist monks encountered on his north-bound return. Priding himself as a survivor, he used these poems to express insights gained from the experience of exile. In a poem to a Chan master in Qianzhou (now Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province), he expatiates on his understanding of time:

未来发展不可招  What is yet to come cannot be summoned;

已过那容遣  What has passed can no longer be dispatched.

中間見在心  Midway is the mind of transient presence,

一一風輪轉  Which turns and turns like a wheel of the wind.  

proponent thus said sarcastically that the man of Chu was but a bathed monkey given a hat. Xiang Yu cooked him alive. His subjugation to Liu Bang, however, vindicated this man’s prophecy. See “Xiang Yu benji” 項羽本紀 in Sima Qian, Shiji, 7:315.

Su Shi, “Mingri Nanchan heshi budao […]” 明日南禪和詩不到 […], SSSJ, 45:2436.
The active immersion in transience keeps the mind constantly engaged midway between a bygone past and an unforeseeable future. It responds to every puff of wind with readiness and alert. One’s physical body is thus transformed into utter spontaneity, like that of the Creator, an archetypal artist who creates without intentionality. In the “Spirit’s Solution,” Confucius sees a harmonious world as such. Once arriving at this state of being, one shall actively maintain it to the end of one’s life, until death snaps it all. That demands not to deter death by magic, but to let it befall at its due time.

Death indeed caught Su Shi by surprise – he fell to malaria soon after he arrived at Changzhou, where he had bought some land and chosen to retire. Ironically, his philosophical “return” to the southern territories prolonged life, but his physical return to the central plains brought death. Allegedly, he wrote a poem on his deathbed, which states:

大患緣有身 The greatest suffering comes from having the body;
無身則無疾 Without the body, there is no more disease.
平生笑羅什 All my life I have been laughing at Kumārajīva –
神呪真浪出 Whose magic spells [on his deathbed] were a waste.185

The official biography of Kumārajīva, the Kuchean monk and great translator, related that he tried to deter death by incanting magic spells.186 Authentic or not, this story tells the close affinity of early Buddhism with magic, when high-ranking monks, especially those of foreign

186 See Kumārajīva’s biography in “Yishuzhuan” 藝術傳, Fang Xuanling, Jinshu, 95:2502.
origin, were often magicians and miracle workers.\textsuperscript{187} For a later Buddhist adept like Su Shi, Kumārajīva’s attempt must strike him as scandalous, let alone futile, since an enlightened being shall eliminate even the distinction between life and death. Despite Su’s own Daoist practices to deter death, there seems to be a fine line between cultivating the physical being with care and fencing off death by magic. Using Ji Kang’s crop analogy, the former is to water the sprout, so that it may fulfill its natural life span; the latter is to artificially revive the sprout when its number is already up. Just like his cultivation of artistic spontaneity, Su Shi’s attitude toward life combines diligent nourishing of one’s potentiality and active resignation to one’s limit.

\textbf{Coda}

Literature and life were no longer distinguishable in Su Shi’s practice of the Daoist art. Despite his lack of faith in laboratory alchemy, he chose to follow Ge Hong, perhaps primarily for Ge’s power of persuasion. Ge was an “author” in the strong sense of the term. He founded a school of thinking that bears his individual voice, a feature that sets him apart from rank and file Daoist masters. Su Shi, exiled to the semi-barbaric extreme south, reinvented himself in reference to a lineage of authors who faced and overcame similar plights. He found in Tao Qian a model to transform his forced exile to chosen reclusion, and in Ge Hong one to defeat and transcend the threat of death. The authors of the past provided Su Shi with alternative identities. With these literary identities, Su Shi reinvented the dire reality, making it aesthetic and therefore livable.

\textsuperscript{187} Kumārajīva’s biography, for instance, provides many cases of him performing magic and prophecy, which is perhaps why it is listed among the biographies of magicians and sorcerers (\textit{yishu} \text{藝術}).
His was a mediated escape. On one hand, he linguistically restrained his poetry in accordance with Tao’s paradigm of the past, and on the other, he practiced prescribed Daoist rituals, dietary regimens, and physiological exercises. This definition of spiritual and physical spontaneity is not unlike the aesthetic spontaneity that is achieved through diligent practice. Spontaneity as an aesthetic and ethical state of human existence appears by necessity mediated. Random doodling from untrained hands is not calligraphy; a madman’s abandon does not make a lofty recluse. When it comes to spontaneity, training, internalization, and temporary oblivion are interrelated stages. In the end, this ideal persona is like a natural object, perceived as beautiful but oblivious to its beauty, and useless enough to live through its naturally endowed lifespan. The actual person, certainly, differs from a natural object by the virtue of his consciousness. Using it as a vehicle, he seeks to return to a blessed state where this vehicle must be discarded.

Or maybe we as readers of Su Shi are deluded by our very reading. Maybe spontaneity is mediated only because of the nature of historiography. The two ways of reflecting upon this issue need not exclude one another. What deserves historical memory always entails a referential tradition. To be remembered as a spontaneous person, one must create works which bear one’s eccentric and individualistic persona, be it in style or in deeds. One’s articulation shall be recognizable in reference to the tradition, while at the same time unfamiliar, distinct, and individualistic, worthy to be remembered by generations to come. By this definition, spontaneity is not absolute freedom, but a mode of literary expression which is deep embedded in a referential tradition. It creates a persona whose every word and deed is perceived, by readers sharing the same tradition, as intuitive, yet meaningful, aesthetic, and memorable.
TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

In David Lodge’s *Small World* trilogy, Professor Morris Zapp, an ambitious Jane Austen specialist, wanted to write such a comprehensive work on Jane Austen that he could put the field to an end, once and for all. Scholars of Su Shi studies know better. There have been so many attempts at a “comprehensive” or “most authoritative” reading of Su Shi ever since the twelfth century; yet the reading goes on. Each generation of readers finds its own new way to approach the giant, who has become the Mount Lu that he describes in a poem: “It is a long range seen from the front, or a lofty peak from the side; seen from afar, from nearby, from high or low, it changes constantly [according to the point of view].”¹ My current reading has become possible only after every valley and rock of this mountain have been examined microscopically by previous scholars. Different from their approach, my reading attempts to find a hidden geographic dynamism that had enabled the mountain to take its current shape.

This dynamism comes from the constant tension between creativity and conventionality, reconciled into a dialectic notion of “spontaneity.” This notion is understood here as a state of being that is mediated, yet nevertheless striving to approximate the appearance of complete freedom through the induced oblivion of its own mediacy. To Su Shi, only when human behavior is completely in accordance with the Way could absolute freedom be achieved. Given the imperfectability of human nature, however, one cannot discard the existence of a conscious self but has to compromise with it. Learning and craft, poetry and art, contemplation on natural

beauty, cultural paradigm, or ritualty can all be used as “skillful means” – not as ends in themselves, but as necessary mediums in the course of self-cultivation. These means help the individual to lose his conscious grip and to approximate the freedom of cosmic transformation.

Three tentative observations from my analysis:

First, freedom, thus defined, is both active and passive. It embraces its opposite – control, training, and cultural imprisonment. Aesthetic freedom means to temporarily relinquish one’s acquired craft at the moment of artistic creation. It postulates deliberate and persistent practice prior to (and after) this moment. Likewise, ethical freedom means being free to leave (the officilodom or “worldly affairs”) and free to die. Being free to do so with utmost tranquility of mind requires active engagement with service and life in possible or impossible situations, so that when external natural or human forces mandate failure, individual liberation can be embraced with relief. This implies that freedom is a state of constant temporality and contingency.

Second, Su Shi values corporeal experience of the Way more than cognitive knowledge of the Way. Again, given the limit of human capacity, no one, not even the sage, can know the Way: the utmost profundity, the origin of things. Rather, like the Zhuangzian craftsmen who in their works articulate the Way of Heaven through physical language, one acquires the tacit knowledge of the Way through concrete studies, primarily of poetry and fine art. This is because the Way is embodied in myriad things of the world and functions in their transformations. While physically understanding and participating in the functioning of things, one transforms one’s body into a milieu where such transformations happen. This is not only an alchemical principle but also a principle in artistic creation, since the artist approximates the Creator in creating art objects. In a “spontaneous” fashion like a water-mirror, the ideal art reflects the transformation
of things faithfully without the intervention of a conscious artist. Accomplishment in artistic creation hence becomes an index of one’s progress towards the Way. This approach tells Su Shi apart from the theories of Wang Anshi and Cheng Yi who both rejected cultural accomplishments as worthy pursuits. Cheng’s tradition would eventually dominate the Southern Song inquiry of the Way.

Third, many debates in modern art result from confusing the quotidian meaning of spontaneity with its interpretive function in aesthetics and ethics. In a quotidian context, spontaneity often refers to unpremeditated behavior carried out in the absence of consciousness or intentionality. It has gained interpretive power in the discourse on art and ethics perhaps exactly because of its apparent oddity with the groundwork of art or model behavior: training, skill, control, convention, and tradition. These categories, though indispensable, seldom explain greatness. Thus, one resorts to the notion of “spontaneity” to describe creativity as an original, irresistible force that erupts from the subconsciousness of the prophetic artist and is otherwise inexplicable in the finished artwork or established tradition. In the history of Western art since the late 19th century, established traditions have been increasingly challenged. Walking into any exhibition of contemporary art, we see various attempts to break down the boundary between art and non-art. For instance, is virtuosity the defining element of “outstanding art”? If not, then what is? What, if anything, tells artwork apart from the ready-made? How about an objet d’art that does not have a definite form but is in liquid transformation? How about behavioral art? In all these experiments, the definitions of art have been repeatedly challenged to incorporate an even greater degree of spontaneity. Yet, if the conclusion of this dissertation is taken to understand this internal movement of art history, we may argue that contemporary experiments at spontaneity are ill-informed. Artistic spontaneity must embrace, and has been embracing,
virtuosity and tradition. Its significance comes from a perpetual internalization of, and breaking loose from, the latter. When the latter is completely discarded, however, the pursuit of spontaneity will be trapped by the self-destructing emptiness within itself.

This dissertation is and is not an inquiry about Su Shi. This author’s wish is exactly the opposite of Professor Zapp’s, namely, not to put any certain study to an end, but to point at an underexplored direction. I wish to further develop the methodology of close reading combined with interdisciplinary examination. I also wish to help pushing the discourse on Chinese literature toward comparative literature and poetics. The national and the comparative shall nurture and further each other, without either superseding or disregarding the other’s agenda. Toward this goal, this dissertation is a preliminary attempt.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is divided into two sections, “Pre-Modern Chinese Resources” and “Other References,” corresponding to the two systems of citation formats used consistently throughout this dissertation.

Abbreviations


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*XQHW: Xianqin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩. Ed. Lu Qinli 逯欽立.


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