

## Original Paper

# The Exploration of Su Shi's Life Values

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### Abstract

*Su Shi is a famous Chinese poet who is a household name and arguably one of the greatest exponents of Chinese poetry, as well as being highly accomplished in poetry, lyrics, prose, calligraphy and painting. Through the study of Su Shi, we can find out the unique thoughts of this great writer on the values of life, which are important for our understanding of the development of poetry and the social history of the Northern Song Dynasty.*

### Keywords

*Su shi, poetry, life values*

## 1. Introduction

Song poetry, which developed from Tang poetry, has had a great influence on later generations and occupies an important place in Chinese literary history. The Northern Song poet Su Shi (1037-1101 AD) was one of the great poets of this period, influenced by the three cultures of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and forming a unique outlook on life, values and the world. Under the combined influence of these three cultures, he had different realms of life at different stages of his life. This article takes the poetic creations of the Song dynasty as the object of study, analyses the descriptions of life values in his poems, and explores the realm of life of Su Shi and the cultural underpinnings behind it.

## 2. A Moral Outlook Based on Temperament

Su Shi's outlook on life was very complex, and he not only incorporated but also integrated all the reasonable elements of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. However, Su Shi's view of life was very unique, for the "unity of the three religions" was not the end of his thinking about life, but only its starting point, and his view of life was self-contained. In a letter to Fu Bin, Su Shi's disciple Qin Guan once spoke highly of Su Shi's outlook on life: "Su's way is most profound when life is self-fulfilling.

Secondly, Su Shi's way of life is most profound when he is self-possessed. As for the essay, it is the most coarse of all. You are trying to respect Su, but you are trying to be inferior to him!" Qin Guan is a true disciple of Su Shi.

Su Shi once clearly revealed his attitude towards the "unity of the three religions" in his *Essay on the Sacrifice to Longjing Fancui*: "Confucius and Lao are different, and Confucianism and Buddhism are separate palaces. In the midst of this, the Zen and the Law are at odds with each other. I see the sea, with its north, south and east. Though the rivers are different, their reach is the same". As this is an essay about a monk, it speaks more about Buddhism. In fact, Su Shi's view of life was first based on Confucianism, especially on important issues such as the meaning of life, and his value judgement was developed on the basis of Confucianism. Su Shi wrote three scripture works, namely *Yi Zhuan* (The Book of Changes), *Shu Zhuan* (The Book of Books) and *Analects of Confucius* (The Analects of Confucius), which contain a large number of expressions on the concept of life.

Su Shi's life was characterized by a dashing and unrestrained demeanour, a lively and vivid spirit even in the face of controversy or displacement, yet his moral pursuits were no less high than those of Zhu Xi. Huang Tingjian praised Su Shi for his "love and hatred in the world, and his public loyalty in the dynasty", which can be described as knowing words. The words of Huang Tingjian, who taught his disciples: "Seeing his ordinary life, there is no difference from the common people, facing the great festival and cannot be taken away, this is not common people". This can also be regarded as a footnote to Su Shi's moral values. The Qing dynasty's Zhang Xiantao praised Su Shi, saying, "In the Song dynasty, there were many confined Confucians, but you were the only one who was energetic". This is quite representative of most later generations' perception of Su Shi's character.

### 3. Epistemology with a Focus on Practice

Su Shi valued practice rather than empty talk. For example, when he was in Huangzhou, he asked others to talk about gods and ghosts with the attitude of "just talking about them", but that was just a way to pass the time when he was bored, so his own attitude was also "just listening to them", not taking them seriously. Su Shi did not acknowledge that there was a sage who was born to know, and he believed that all knowledge and talent must come from practice. He believed that all knowledge and talent must come from practice. Throughout his life, Su Shi always put his feet on the ground and practised, no matter in government or in the field, and no matter in good times or bad, he never indulged in the nebulous realm of doing nothing. In his letter to Bi Zhongju, he said: "The old man who studies Buddhism is expected to be quiet and attainable, quiet like laziness, attainable like release, the scholar may not reach his expectation, but get his likeness first, not for no harm. I have often doubted myself in this way, so I also thought I would offer it". It was because Su Shi was alert enough to the evils of both Buddhism and Taoism that he was seldom influenced negatively, despite his close interactions with many monks and Taoist priests, and despite his extensive dabbling in Buddhist

scriptures and Taoist texts.

Su Shi's *The Elephant Book*, in which he explains the *Qian trigram* says, "Heaven is healthy, and a gentleman is self-improvement": "Heaven is healthy because it is rigid. It is also healthy because it does not rest. The flow of water does not rot, and the use of tools does not compel. Therefore, a gentleman is strong in respect and strong in peace. If you are strong, you will grow, but if you are sluggish, you will disappear". These words were the motto that Su Shi followed for the rest of his life, and it was with the positive attitude of "self-improvement" that he approached life, and his life was a life of constant effort and practice.

#### 4. A Pleasant Attitude to Life

Su Shi loved life and enjoyed all its pleasures, even the ordinary and simple ones. Su Shi was a gourmand, and whether it was a delicacy or an ordinary food, Su Shi would taste it with great relish, and he would write about it in poems and articles for his fellow poets. Su Shi was the first poet in ancient and modern times who wrote about food in many different ways.

Su Shi loved nature and visited the local landscapes in every place he visited. On the 15th day of October in the eighth year of Yuanfeng, Su Shi went to Dengzhou and five days later he received an order from the court to become the Minister of Rites. Dengzhou is bordered by the sea and the most famous sight in the region is the mirage. Su Shi wanted to see the long-known mirage, but the local fathers said that the mirage usually only appeared in spring and summer, and now it was winter, so it was impossible to see it again. Su Shi felt very sorry for him and went to the temple of the sea god, Guangde Wang, to pray, but to his surprise, the sea market appeared the next day. Su Shi was so delighted that he wrote a poem about it.

For example, the famous West Lake in Hangzhou, where the "Spring Dawn at Su Causeway" and "Three Pools with the Moon" are directly attributed to the dredging project planned by Su Shi himself.

Su Shi's love of nature was all-encompassing, meaning that he loved not only the majestic and magnificent mountains and rivers, but also the obscure and ordinary ones; not only did he have a strong interest in Hangzhou, which was known as the "cave of the southeast", but he also had a fondness for the mulberry fields and the barren mountains of Pinggang in Mizhou. If it were not for Su Shi's inscriptions, would the Maer and Changshan mountains in Mizhou be widely known? How could the Red Cliff in Huangzhou have become such a famous spot? Although the Jinshan Temple in Runzhou has been a famous temple in the sea since the Southern Dynasty, it is close to the city and is crowded with tourists, and poets have not left many famous inscriptions in the Tang poems. Su Shi, however, was so delighted with the panoramic view of the river and the sky that he visited the temple many times during his life and left behind one of the most famous poem of all time, *Visiting Jinshan Temple*. The reason is that Su Shi was always in a happy mood to embrace nature, and in his view, all the mountains and rivers in the world were not famous.

## 5. An Easy-going Wise Man

People of great talent are often lonely and friendless. Subjectively speaking, their arrogance and isolation can turn people away from them; objectively speaking, ordinary people will also respect their tall image of standing on their own. Su Shi is an absolute exception. Although he enjoyed such a great reputation, Su Shi was always easy-going, neither arrogant and arrogant like some talented men, nor moralistic like some scholars.

Not only did Su Shi travel all over the world among the clansmen, he also had an equal and cordial attitude towards the common people. In the sixth year of the Xining period (1073), Su Shi went to the county of Yuqian (now the town of Yuqian in Lin'an, Zhejiang province) to inspect the area and saw that the people were living and working happily under the administration of the magistrate Diao Companions. He wrote a poem about a local village girl: "The green skirt and onyx robe of a woman in Yu Qian are as frosty as two feet and no sandals. I can see the hair on my sideburns and the silk on my loom, walking in front of the wind and rain. The old girls have been handed down to their fathers and grandfathers, and to this day the survivors mourn their former masters. The willows of the Campsis River are in early flutter. I don't believe that Ji and Jiang have a Qi and Lu!" This is not a condescending pity, but a heartfelt praise. Only Su Shi, who had a commoner's consciousness, would sing about a barefoot village girl with a completely equal attitude.

There are few great men in the history of ancient culture who have been respected by posterity, but few have had as great an affinity as Su Shi, and herein lies the reason. If many great men are like steep peaks rising from the ground, which one can only admire from afar without being able to climb them, then Su Shi is a gently sloping peak, whose height is by no means inferior to that of any other mountain, but one can gradually ascend to the summit along a gently rising path.

## 6. Conclusion

As a great literary figure of his generation, Su Shi's existence has become a special icon of ancient Chinese literature. Therefore, an all-round and multi-angle collation of Su Shi's thought and culture is an inevitable requirement for further study of Su Shi. The optimistic and open-minded qualities that Su Shi possessed, the ability to take things in stride, and the ability to forget about favour and disgrace, are extremely important to contemporary society. It can be said that these qualities are applicable to people at different levels in modern society. As a leader, we should learn from his integrity and honesty as a government official; as an ordinary person, we should learn from him to maintain our integrity and independence even in adversity, and never follow the crowd. Life values, as an integral part of people's intellectual life, provide a new perspective for our understanding of the image of Su Shi.

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