

The National Spirit in Su Dongpo's Poetry and Calligraphy

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Abstract: The sacred land of Bashu nurtures an exceptional Bashu culture, where Su Shi's calligraphic creations and scholarly philosophy stand as indispensable intellectual crystallizations and cultural pioneers. His calligraphic essence has profoundly influenced calligraphy creation, research, and education in the Bashu region. Both his calligraphic works and poetic compositions embody the patriotic spirit characteristic of the Chinese nation. This paper analyzes Su Dongpo's national integrity manifested in his calligraphic creations by integrating the cultural features of Bashu with his calligraphic philosophy. Through tracing the evolution of calligraphy via his scholarly journey and considering Bashu's unique regional characteristics, it aims to re-examine the core essence of Su Shi's calligraphy.

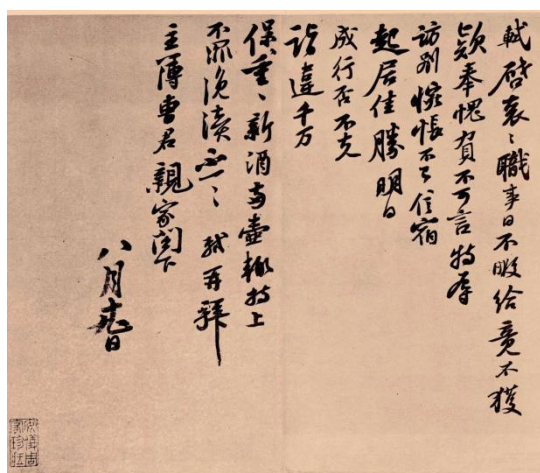
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Su Dongpo was a key contributor to the development of Bashu culture. Throughout his life, he achieved remarkable accomplishments in poetry, literature, and calligraphy, setting a benchmark for his era. His works, deeply influenced by Bashu culture, reached extraordinary heights. Notably, Su Dongpo also excelled in painting, while also making significant contributions to cooking and medicine. Throughout the evolution of Bashu culture, Su Dongpo left behind a vast body of writings that served as a bridge for cultural inheritance. His works embody the resilient and progressive qualities that define our nation, standing as a prime example of cultural dissemination. From the Su family's unique educational philosophy to his unwavering commitment to governance, and the widespread influence of Dongpo culture, these elements have infused Bashu culture with powerful vitality and dynamism.

1 The Poem of "I Take This Stone Back, My Sleeve Holds the East Sea"

Su Dongpo's profound influence on Bashu culture is most evident in two domains: poetry and calligraphy. His poetic works, shaped by Bashu cultural traditions, captured the spirit of the age, responded to social calls, and expressed the poets' inner vitality. Previously constrained by traditional norms, poetry was limited to delicate romantic themes. Su Shi broke this mold, pioneering new horizons in poetic content that depicted landscapes, rural scenes, historical allusions, and reflections on the times. As Hu Zai noted: "After Su Dongpo's southern migration, his poetry closely resembles Li Bai's works after Kuizhou, embodying the elderly rigor characteristic of his later years." This innovative approach undoubtedly opened new windows for the era, loosening the constraints on poetic expression and infusing boldness into creative styles. In linguistic innovation, Su Shi adapted Li Bai and Du Fu's verses into ci poetry, abandoning the ornate style of Huajian poets to embrace simplicity and elegance. As a pivotal figure in Bashu culture, Su Shi became an indispensable key player in the development of Song ci poetry. By diversifying poetic content and styles while enhancing emotional depth, he elevated ci poetry to new heights, transcending mere stylistic experimentation. A new artistic expression. "The mighty river flows eastward, its waves washing away all heroic figures of past ages"... This passage from Su Shi's masterpiece "Nian Nu Jiao: Reminiscence of Chibi" epitomizes his grand and heroic poetic style, which became a hallmark of his work and laid a solid foundation for the evolution of Chinese poetry. His repertoire also includes serene and profound pieces like "Shui Diao Ge Tou: When Did the Bright Moon Appear," as well as delicate and restrained works such as "Jiang Cheng Zi: Ten Years of Life and Death in Vastness." These diverse themes showcase Su Shi's remarkable versatility, though his primary artistic voice remains bold and unrestrained.^[1]



Su Shi's "Zhi Shi Tie"

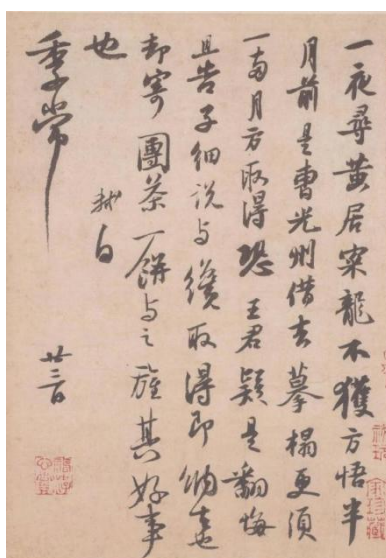
In Su Shi's literary works, one can clearly perceive a profound patriotic sentiment. When confronting Wang Anshi's new reforms, regardless of whether his stance was right or wrong, this bold voice that dared to question the new elite in the face of national development was truly commendable. For instance, when addressing Wang Anshi's imperial examination reforms, he remarked: "The art of winning people's hearts lies in knowing them, and the method of knowing them lies in holding them accountable. May you possess the talent to discern

people... Even if we restore ancient systems, I believe they would still fall short." In poetry creation, Su Shi broke free from conventional limitations, charting a new path for poetic development that marked a milestone. On the other hand, he challenged the notion that ci poetry could only serve as lyrics for musical compositions. Su Shi reinterpreted this trend since the late Tang Dynasty, achieving a "detachment" from traditional themes and artistic conceptions in both subject matter and imagery, thus establishing a new poetic form capable of independent development. The evolution of this new genre demonstrated remarkable emotional resonance, making significant contributions to enriching Bashu culture while exerting profound influence on both contemporaries and posterity. This period saw the emergence of renowned poets like Huang Tingjian, Chen Shidao, and Wang Anshi, whose creative philosophies were deeply influenced by Su Shi, resulting in a wealth of outstanding poetic works. Approximately 4,000 of Su Shi's poems survive today, encompassing diverse styles and themes, imbued with romanticism, and... In his work **The Original Poems**, Su Shi wrote: "His poetic realm transcends all boundaries of time and space, where heaven, earth, and all things—whether laughing, crying, or scolding—find expression through his brush." Zhao Yis **Oubei Shihua** observes: "The fusion of prose and poetry began with Su Shi, who later expanded his poetic language to create a groundbreaking style that defined an entire era.... What makes him unparalleled is his natural talent for vigorous brushwork—swift as a pears ripening, swift as pruning, with the hidden strength to achieve and the evident passion to express. This is why he became a great master after Li Bai and Du Fu, though his shortcomings lie precisely in this." Su Shi's representative works include **Nian Nu Jiao** and **Shui Diao Ge Tou**, and he is celebrated alongside Xin Qiji as "Su Xin." His calligraphy, ranked first among the "Four Masters of the Song Dynasty" alongside Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, and Cai Xiang, excels in running and regular scripts. Drawing inspiration from the essence of Jin-Tang and Five Dynasties masters, he later developed his unique style under the influence of Wang Shengqian, Li Yong, Xu Hao, Yan Zhenqing, and Yang Ningshi. His works are characterized by grandeur and simplicity, with dynamic forms that embody the beauty of "technique approaching the Dao," reflecting his Buddhist and Taoist philosophical influences. He once said: "My calligraphy is created without fixed rules," and "I pursue originality, never imitating the ancients." Huang Tingjian remarked: "His early brushwork was refined, but later became more natural," and added: "After arriving in Huangzhou, his strokes gained extraordinary power."^[2]

2 The Calmness of the Calligraphy of "Drinking Wine in the Rain, Sleeping in the Evening Sun"

Su Dongpo's surviving running script works number over fifty volumes, with representative pieces including "Huangzhou Cold Food Festival Postscript", "Front Red Cliff Ode Scroll", "Skys Edge Dark Cloud Postscript", and "Dongting Spring Colors Ode". He studied under Wang Xizhi, Xu Hao, Yan Zhenqing, and Li Yong, most admiring Yans calligraphic style. By synthesizing the strengths of various masters, he developed his unique style. Dong Qichang famously noted: "Su's calligraphy often features slanting strokes, which is also a flaw." Critics criticized his brushwork as "casual writing". Yet it was precisely this casual, unrestrained quality that forged his innovative style, pioneering the Song Dynastys "intentional calligraphy" movement. Unlike most calligraphers who preferred suspended elbow techniques, Su practiced wrist-supported writing, which constrained his brushwork but created a distinctive style Huang Tingjian called "stone-pressed toad" – heavy, flattened characters infused with Yans seal script essence. His running script combines fluidity with rugged weight, featuring straightforward brushstrokes that reveal his unfiltered writing habits. Turning points blend square and round forms without fixed rules. The lines exhibit bold variations in thickness, predominantly using central-tip strokes with minimal connecting threads. Though seemingly casual, his brushwork demonstrates remarkable mastery. The rare indulgence in writing. This can be seen in his theoretical work "Shu Lun" (Treatise on Calligraphy), where he mentions "hastily writing without time for cursive script."

In his seminal work **Ping Shu Tie**, Qing dynasty calligrapher Liang Yan articulated the celebrated principle: "The Tang valued methodical precision, while the Song championed artistic expression." As the quintessential Song calligrapher, Su Dongpo epitomized this "expression-oriented" style. By inheriting Tangs rigorous standards while pioneering a spontaneous approach, he established the foundational framework for Song calligraphy and became its seminal figure. In his treatise **On Calligraphy**, Su Dongpo proclaimed: "Calligraphy achieves excellence through effortless spontaneity," advocating that true mastery emerges not from deliberate refinement but from natural, unforced execution.



Su Shi's "Jichang Tie"

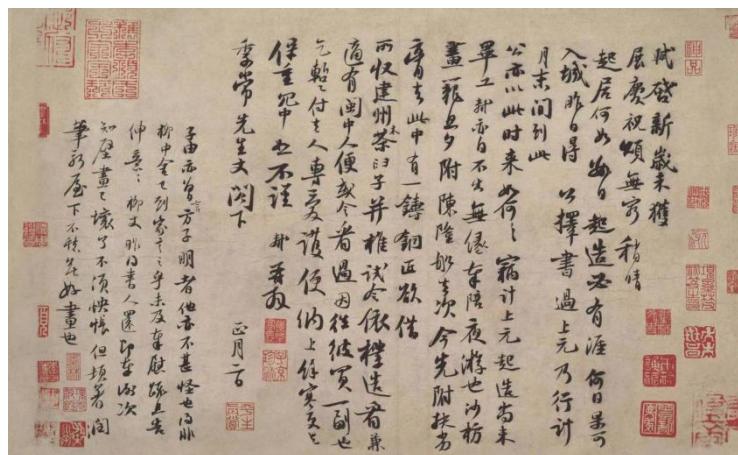
Su Dongpo's evaluation of his calligraphic composition is elaborated in his treatise on calligraphy. In his poem "Shi Cangshus Drunken Ink Hall," he states: "My calligraphy is spontaneously created without fixed rules, strokes flow effortlessly without deliberate refinement."

When writing, Su Dongpo would not pre-plan the layout but instead write freely, disregarding meticulous deliberation, boldly pursuing an innocent compositional effect. His compositions feature rich variations, with smooth transitions between individual characters that exhibit dynamic contrasts in weight. He often incorporates heavily weighted characters or character groups to create focal points, instantly capturing the viewers' attention and enhancing the works' rhythmic flow. Since Su Shi's calligraphy did not require deliberate arrangement, much of its composition evolved with his emotional state during writing. Consequently, most of his calligraphic works possess a strong sense of blockiness—light areas resembling down and snow, while heavy areas resembling dark clouds, creating intense visual impact. Su Dongpo's unique character structure stems from his distinctive writing habits. His running script characters are flattened, with widened horizontal spacing, lowered left lower sections, and tilted right upper sections, emphasizing the use of slanting strokes within characters. Moreover, when concluding characters with long vertical strokes, Su Dongpo often elongates them or even integrates them into the structure of the next character, expanding the compositional space to achieve a balance of density and openness.

Su Dongpo's calligraphic works predominantly feature running script, with fewer surviving regular script pieces. Representative works include the "Table of Loyalty to the Temple", "Stele of the Upper Purenness Storehouse Palace", "Stele of Sima Wen Gongs Sacred Path", "Record of Fengle Pavilion", and "Stele of Luochi Temple". Most are stone carvings, with only a few ink traces preserved, such as the "Eulogy for Huang Jidao". As stele calligraphy often served official purposes, Su Dongpo deliberately restrained his bold momentum and "intentional" style, adopting the fundamental rules of Tang regular script while reducing unrestrained strokes. His regular script style was heavily influenced by the Tang regular scripts "rule-based" approach, particularly the Yan-style, featuring thick, outward-expanding characters that exude dignified grandeur. Notably, his large regular script on stele inscriptions demonstrates robust brushwork with the strength to "hold a tripod". He predominantly used central-tip strokes. Ming scholar Dong Qichang praised him: "Using only central-tip strokes, this is Su Dongpo's version of the Orchid Pavilion." Su Dongpo excelled in learning from Yan Zhenqings techniques, applying precise brushwork with light horizontal strokes and heavy vertical ones, rounded starting points, and decisive turns that lacked hesitation. This not only emphasized weight but also deepened his understanding of regular script brushwork. Whether in character composition or calligraphic refinement, his unique insights were evident. While these stele works exhibit more solemnity compared to Su Dongpo's daily writing, they don't rigidly adhere to Tang regular script rules but rather integrate...At the same time, Gu Kai changed the strict rules of Tang Kai according to his calligraphy practice for many years, and formed his own unique artistic style.

Among these works, the "Huangzhou Cold Food Festival Post" is acclaimed as the "Third Greatest Running Script in the World," enjoying immense prestige in the calligraphy community. In his postscript to Su Dongpo's running script work "Du Fus Alnus Poem Scroll" during the Ming Dynasty, Jin Mian remarked: "In the past, the Master often praised Du Fus poetry and Yan Zhenqings calligraphy, seeking their excellence beyond mere rhythm and strokes. Now, observing the Masters' calligraphy of Dus poems, even after a thousand years, it appears as if he wrote them yesterday—this is because he infused his spirit into his brushwork, and his talent and character naturally flowed. If judged solely by cosmic standards, such appreciation may not be equally valid." This demonstrates later generations' high regard for Su Shi. Su Dongpo, along with Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, and Cai Xiang, is collectively known as the "Four Masters of the Song Dynasty," representing the pinnacle of calligraphic style and artistic achievement in the Song era. Huang Tingjian wrote in his "Shangu Ji": "Among the calligraphers of our dynasty, (Su) should undoubtedly be ranked first."

3 "Do not think of the old country and old friends, and try new tea with new fire" calligrapher national spirit



Su Shi's "New Year Celebration: A Letter to the Guests"

The national spirit in Su Dongpo's calligraphy is mainly reflected in the content of his writing and the creative effects of his calligraphy. On one hand, because China is a multi-ethnic country, the interactions among various ethnic groups have been increasing, and the deepening exchanges in politics, economy, and culture have influenced the creation of literature with new creative ideas, methods, and expressive techniques, reflecting different ethnic characteristics. The "Biography of Su Shi in the History of Song" records that during his tenure as a local official, Su Shi wrote in his poems that he "used events to satirize," which led to his imprisonment. Su Shi was originally an open-minded and generous person, indulging in a comfortable life, but life often proved unsatisfactory. Su Shi's official career could be described as "three twists and turns," with him being demoted three times. However, Su Shi remained broad-minded, facing these hardships with renewed vigor and composure. "Do not listen to the sound of raindrops piercing through the leaves; why not hum and stroll slowly? A bamboo cane and straw sandals are lighter than a horse. Who fears? A life of mist and rain in a single cloak. The chilly spring breeze awakens me from wine, slightly cold, but the slanting sun on the mountain greets me. Looking back at the desolate place I came from, returning, there is neither wind nor rain, nor clear skies." These lines from "Ding Feng Bo" are perhaps the best interpretation of Su Shi's mindset. During his

demotion, he created a large number of works, including the "Cold Food Festival Postcard of Huangzhou." This piece captures the emotional turmoil of Su Shi's exile. The work comprises two poems: the first from "My Arrival in Huangzhou" to "My Hair Now White from Illness," and the second from "Spring River Flows into My Home" to "Ashes Cannot Be Blown Back Up." As a representative work of Su Shi, this poem expresses his reflections during the Cold Food Festival (a traditional Chinese holiday) in 1082 AD, when he was exiled to Huangzhou. The verses convey profound loneliness and desolation, which inspired the calligraphy. The content and style of the calligraphy stem from genuine emotion, reflecting the artist's inner world. To truly appreciate a work, one must not judge its quality solely by the calligrapher's appearance but also carefully interpret its content, understand the artist's mindset, and feel the emotions it conveys. Only then can one connect with the creator's heart and gain deeper insight into the artistic expression. Sometimes, our inability to comprehend a work is due to a lack of understanding, but rather a failure to "approach" the artist. Only by truly engaging with the artist's perspective and experiencing their emotions can we achieve a "surprising" understanding of the work's final presentation.

4 sum up

Su Shi's life was marked by twists and turns, yet it was precisely these hardships that forged him into a polymath of exceptional artistic mastery in Bashu culture. By tracing his life journey, calligraphic works, and poetic creations, we can journey through history to engage directly with Su Shi, sensing the national spirit embodied in his art. This unwavering pursuit of artistic excellence is not only a key reason for the enduring vitality of Chinese traditional culture, much like the Yangtze River's ceaseless flow, but also a vital source of Bashu's distinctive cultural identity. His accomplishments in literature, calligraphy, and other fields all emerged from Bashu's cultural soil, while enriching the region's literary heritage in turn. Analyzing and emphasizing the national spirit in Su Shi's artistic legacy holds profound contemporary relevance, serving as a powerful catalyst for promoting modern values and patriotism, offering rich practical insights for fostering patriotic sentiments and personal integrity in today's world.

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Annotation

- [1] Volume 30 of the Second Part of Hu Zai's "Tiaoxi Yuyin Conghua"
- [2] Su Shi's "Memorial on School and Imperial Examinations" [Song Dynasty] by Su Shi, edited by Kong Fanli, in "Collected Works of Su Shi", Volume 25, Zhonghua Book Company, 1986 edition, page 732

Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House

Note: Central Universities Basic Research Business Fund Special Project (Social Sciences) - Humanities and Social Sciences Revitalization Research Foundation Special-Youth Growth Project (Exploring the Integration of Strengthening the Sense of Community of the Chinese Nation into College Calligraphy Courses)