

# The Interplay of Philosophical and Literary Thought in Su Shi's Later Years

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## ABSTRACT

Su Shi's literary thought has an important historical value, and people nowadays tend to focus on Su Shi's literary achievements as a generation of great writers, but seldom pay attention to him as a philosopher. In fact, Su Shi's literary achievements have their deep ideological roots and are inseparable from his philosophical thoughts. Exploring the Taoist thought revealed behind Su Shi's literary creations is of great significance to his overall literary achievements, which can not only help us understand the dialectical tension embedded in Su Shi's literary works, but also further improve the grasp of his literary content by later generations. Through this study, it can be seen that Su Shi's literary and philosophical thoughts complement each other, and due to his special life experience, his attitude toward Taoist thought is not one of complete conformity, but one of both criticism and inheritance, which is also the uniqueness of his works.

**Keywords:** *Su shi in his later years, Philosophical thoughts, Literary thoughts*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a literary master of the generation, Su Shi's literary creations are a rich treasure trove in ancient Chinese literature. Today, domestic and foreign academics have studied Su Shi's literature, philosophy, calligraphy, cooking and other fields in detail. When Su Shi is mentioned, people mostly look at him as a literary scholar, but seldom start from Su Shi's identity as a philosopher and explore the interplay between Su Shi's philosophical thoughts and literary thoughts. When existing studies talk about Su Shi's literary thought, they all talk about the influence of Su Shi's philosophical thought on Su Shi's literary creation, but when talking about Su Shi's philosophical thought, they seldom consider that Su Shi's literary thought also influenced the shaping and practice of Su Shi's philosophical outlook. It is generally accepted in current academic circles that Su Shi's philosophical thought is generally integrated with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In fact, when studying the philosophical thoughts of Su Shi at different ages, it can be seen that Su Shi's philosophical thoughts in his later years were inclined to learn Taoist philosophical thoughts, which has a great relationship with Su Shi's life conditions and life experiences in his later years. At the same time, Su Shi's philosophical thought of Taoism in his later years had great significance to the style, content and mood of Su Shi's literary creation, and his literary

creation in his later years also influenced the establishment of his philosophical thought system and the practice of his philosophical outlook. Therefore, this paper will explore the mutual influence of Taoist thought, the most prominent philosophical thought in Su Shi's later years, and Su Shi's literary thought.

## 2. THE INTERTEXT OF SU SHI'S PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE IN HIS LATER YEARS

### 2.1. The Pursuit of Transcendence and Freedom

Unlike his youthful vigor and aggressiveness, his "vigorous determination to be a man of the world" [1], and his "old man's feverishness" [2] when he was sent to Mizhou and sang "The Great River Goes East" [2] when he was relegated to Huangzhou. "In his later years, Su Shi pursued an ethereal and free state of life. He wrote in his "Zongbi" in Huizhou, "The white head is full of frost and phoenix, and the small pavilion with a vine bed is full of sickness. He reported that the gentleman slept beautifully in spring, and the Taoist lightly beat the five-shift bell" [3]. Although this poem depicts an ordinary, gray-haired, sickly old man sleeping sweetly in spring, it paints a picture of a carefree, comfortable life without worrying about his illness. Therefore, this poem is considered to

represent Su Shi's open-minded, optimistic and positive attitude towards life in his later years. As a matter of fact, Su Shi had great expectations for his career future in his early and middle years, and his literary creations were mostly characterized by enterprising and loyalty to the country, which were inseparable from his upright and brisk character, his courage to speak and write, and his clear love and hatred, as the historical books evaluated Su Shi: "He was upright and unyielding, and dared to speak up when things went wrong" [1]. These character traits were also reflected in the early stage of Su Shi's career, but it was because of Su Shi's excessively open and distinctive personality that Su Shi experienced half a life of hardships and tribulations and lived a turbulent life. After that, from his middle age to his later years, Su Shi was relegated to Huangzhou, Huizhou and even Danzhou, the southernmost state of China, so it can be said that he was relegated again and again, and there was no possibility for Su Shi to return to the political center at that time. In fact, before he was relegated, Su Shi also lived a privileged life, enjoying the generous salary of the scholarly officials in the Song Dynasty. At that time, most of the scholarly officials in the capital lived a luxurious and generous life, which made Su Shi very happy, but after his relegation, the poor conditions in the places he went, as well as the bad climate and the harsh natural environment made him suffer from both mental and physical torture, which was a world of difference from the once prosperous life in the capital. Along with the sinking of his career, Su Shi had to be separated from his beloved brother and children one after another, and his delicate wife also died early on the way of exile following Su Shi. It can be said that Su Shi's relegation is the process of his continuous separation from family, friendship and love.

It is out of such a life experience that Su Shi's poem "Xijiang Yue", written on the mid-autumn night in Danzhou, mentions, "The world is a big dream. How many autumn cools does life have?" [3] In the poem, Su Shi uses the coolness of the autumn moon and the vagaries of nature to allude to his own life's unpredictable encounters, with profound meaning and far-reaching rhyme. Under the lonely and cold moonlight night, the poet looks at his lonely figure hidden under the dim candlelight, revealing his deep thoughts on life. There are many scholars who have studied this poem, and their general opinion is that what Su Shi reveals in this poem is his dissatisfaction and sorrow for his political encounter. However, in my opinion, Su Shi actually accepts his destiny of life's impermanence, and what he calls "the world is a big dream" is actually a broad and open-minded way to face all that he encountered, even though his heart is full of sad feelings and helpless lamentations, he still has his own transcendent and liberal personality. Su Shi's literary works here already reflect a rich philosophy of life, which also confirms that the transcendent and unrestrained human attitude in

Laozhuang's thought influenced Su Shi's outlook on life and worldview, and seeped into his literary creations. In 1094, the aged Su Shi was relegated to Huizhou, a city in the south of the Lingnan region that was feared by literati and scholars. According to historical records, ancient northern literati had a deep fear and resistance to the treacherous natural environment of Lingnan. For example, when Han Yu, a great literary figure of the Tang Dynasty, was deported to the southern city of Chaozhou, he was "so frightened that he became ill, and helped to raise the people along the road to know that it was difficult". However, when Su Shi first arrived in Huizhou, he faced the harsh environment of the southern wilderness with an optimistic and relaxed attitude towards life. Su Shi composed a number of poems to describe the Lingnan litchi, this is a reflection of Su Shi's experience of customs and people, and also reflects his free and happy, unrestrained, and enjoyable attitude to life. One of the most popular poems is "Eating Lychee Two" (a selection), in which he says, "Eating three hundred lychees a day, I will not resign myself to being a Lingnanese" [2]. In this seven-word poem, "three hundred" is an exaggerated description of the number of lychees and "Lingnan people" is a nickname for the people of Lingnan, which is a proof of Su Shi's above personality traits. Obviously, in his later years, Su Shi had given up the ideal of returning to the political center, and he gradually settled down to the life in Lingnan, and began to build a new residence for himself with new hopes, and then started a new free and leisurely idyllic life.

## ***2.2. The Insistence on Truth and Simplicity***

Su Shi's literary thought has different characteristics in different periods, and the literary thought of seeking truth and simplicity is Su Shi's constant pursuit. Although social experiences and thoughts can have an important influence on the writer's creation, the writer's own literary thoughts and creative ideas can also inspire the writer to understand and observe the world from a new perspective, and have an impact on the writer's analysis of the external experiences he endured and the construction of his own thought system. For example, in his early years, he was influenced by Confucianism, and his literary works mostly conveyed ambitious ideals of career based on national reality. After the famous "Wutai Poetry Case", Su Shi suffered his first major setback in life, and after his escape from death, he began to pay attention to his words and actions, and his literary works also conveyed his resignation and helplessness in life, which mostly reflected his deep contemplation on karma and cause and effect in Zen Buddhism. At the beginning of his relegation, Su Shi still had great hopes for returning to the center of political rights, and the lyrical objects in his works were still serving the court and defending the country. In his later years, Su Shi gradually gave up the ideal of returning to the capital city and devoted himself

to cultivating the place where he was relegated, making important contributions to the economic, political and cultural development of the Lingnan area.

In Su Shi's view, the essay has independent artistic value, it not only "carries the way", but also "does the way", that is, it has the function of expressing the higher form of human spiritual activities. Based on this, we can see that Su Shi has his own unique opinion on literary creation, and he not only requires that the content of the essay should be flowing, and that things and I should be one, so as to achieve the natural effect, but more importantly, he also needs to add his own thinking, which is precisely the characteristic of "freedom and nature" in Taoist thought. However, Su Shi also pointed out that the essay should conform to the laws of the objective world and achieve the naturalness of literature and reasoning. The "Tao" in his mind is not limited to the Confucian way, but refers to the laws of things in general. Liu Xizai of the Qing dynasty said in volume 1 of the "Yigai" that "Dongpo's "Reply to the Book of Xie Minshu" said that Yang Xiong was good at difficult rhetoric and easy to say." [5] It means that Su Shi in his "Letter with Xie Minshu Tuiguan" [2] made in his later years explicitly criticized Yang Xiong of the Han Dynasty for deliberately using complex and difficult words to describe simple things, contrary to the creative principle of natural truth and practical language. This shows that Su Shi always takes the objective world as the basic element of creation in his literary thought. Of course, it also shows that the dreamy life attitude of Taoist thought which is detached from the objective world and only pursues the subjective world does not affect Su Shi, and he can still make a sober criticism of this negative out-of-this-world life attitude. And in 1084, Su Shi wrote an investigative travelogue "Shi Zhong Shan Ji" [3] after visiting Shi Zhong Shan, in the first paragraph of this essay, Su Shi raised his doubts about the origin of the name of "Shi Zhong Shan": "The sound of the stone, where are also, but this is only named after the bell, why? " Su Shi was puzzled by the fact that the local people only named a mountain after a bell, but there were rocks everywhere that were similarly qualified to make a sound. Finally, at the end of the essay, Su Shi concludes, "If you do not see and hear, but conclude that it is there or not, can you?" It means that it is very ignorant to rely on subjective thoughts to judge the existence or otherwise of things without experiencing them firsthand. Therefore, we can conclude from this prose travelogue that Su Shi believes that if one wants to judge things correctly, one should base on reality and have accurate information investigation. This also reflects Su Shi's persistent pursuit of seeking truth and simplicity.

In addition, when collecting and studying Su Shi's literary works at various ages, it can be seen that Su Shi's literary creations in his early, middle and late years were influenced by the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism to different degrees. Although Su Shi's literary

works have diverse characteristics, one thing always runs through Su Shi's literary creation philosophy, that is, to insist that the works come from the real reality. For example, in the concluding paragraph of Su Shi's essay, "The Day Metaphor," written in 1078 as governor of Xuzhou, it is said, "In the old days, when scholars were selected by sound and rhythm, they studied in a variety of ways but did not aspire to the Way; nowadays, when scholars are selected by scripture, they seek the Way but do not study." [3] It means that in the old days, scholars were selected by poetry and rhythm, so they studied in a variety of ways and did not aspire to the Way of Confucianism. [3] The meaning is that in the old days, poetry and rhythm were used to select talents, so the scholars studied a lot of content and miscellaneous, and did not aspire to the way of Confucianism; however, nowadays, scripture is used to select talents, so the scholars only know to force righteousness, instead of learning knowledge in a practical way. Su Shi bravely criticized the rigidity and inadequacy of the selection system for scholars in the Song Dynasty at that time, and implicitly revealed the dilemma and deviation of learning intentions of intellectuals under the highly feudal system. This fully reflects Su Shi's insistence on the pursuit of truth and pragmatism. It can also be argued that Su Shi had his own reality-based thinking about literary thought and was not influenced by the subjective thought of Taoism which was detached from the objective world. From this, we can conclude that Su Shi insisted on the literary thought of seeking truth and simplicity and being based on reality in his literary creation.

### ***2.3. A Response to Pragmatism and Nature***

In his later years, Su Shi gradually accepted the reality that he would be an official in Lingnan forever, which was closely related to the idea of following nature in Taoist culture. At the same time, the liberal and free thinking of Taoism and the innate sense of responsibility of the Northern Song scholars made Su Shi show his human attitude of understanding people's feelings and enjoying experiencing the life of common people during his official period in Lingnan, for example, he often talked with the local peasants living in the countryside and have fun with them during the misery. It was the change in living conditions and the sublimation of his mind that prompted Su Shi to maintain an optimistic attitude toward life during his relegation, thus changing the style of Su Shi's literary creation in his later years. Su Shi's adherence to "Wu Wei" is mainly expressed in his poems for Linghai where the people are simple and the scenery is naturally beautiful, the good local living environment and experience made his works mostly present in a free and cheerful style, which also reflected Su Shi's Taoist attitude of following his heart and being at ease in his later years. Just like the folk fun poem "Coconut Crown" made by him in his later years in Hainan, "more with short eaves and high hats, Dongpo

what does not go against the time" [6], which expresses that it is not too late for Dongpo to do anything and does not care about the achievement that what he does can bring.

However, Su Shi did not fully comply with the Taoist idea of ruling by doing nothing and following the order of heaven. Wherever he was relegated, Su Shi diligently operated the cause of benefiting people's livelihood, repairing water conservancy, building ancient rooms, promoting education, and constantly reporting the hardship of the people living in the southern wilderness to the court, etc. Although Su Shi's enthusiasm for Taoist philosophy was higher than ever in his later years, he also made considerable contributions to the society of his time with his practical actions. Therefore, it can be said that Su Shi's outlook on life seems to be a kind of "inaction", but in fact it is a kind of "action" for self-promotion. In fact, at first, Su Shi was also troubled by the contradiction between entering and leaving the world, so he always tried to find a balance between leaving and entering the world. But with his open-minded attitude to life and special life experience, he eventually formed his own unique wisdom attitude to the world. This peculiarity of Su Shi's thinking is fully reflected in his literary works, which contain not only the Confucianism's active entry into the world, but also the Laozhuang's diversified thoughts of looking beyond utilitarianism and aspiring to a transcendent and liberal state of life. For example, in "Crossing the Sea on the Twentieth Day of the Sixth Month", Su Shi shouts "I do not hate to die in the southern wilderness" [2]. Although Su Shi inwardly accepted his miserable career fate, he did not fall down because he was relegated to the southern wilderness. When he saw the ever-improving living standard and improved folkways in the southern wilderness under his diligent work, as well as the local people's love and respect for him, it inspired Su Shi to see from the feedback of the objective world the role of the times that he needed to have as a literati. In addition, in the "Self-inscribed Portrait of Jinshan" made by Su Shi in his later years, Su Shi summed up his life's achievements by saying, "Ask yourself about your life's achievements, Huangzhou Huizhou Danzhou" [7], which has a self-deprecating meaning, but it is undeniable that Su Shi inwardly recognized his personal achievements during his relegation time, which occupied most of his life. In addition, Su Shi spent the last days of his life in Danzhou, the farthest southern wilderness from the capital, where he actively spread advanced northern science and technology, built agricultural water conservancy and dug wells and springs, advocated national unity and equality, and made significant contributions to the development of national causes such as the unity of the Chinese nation. It can be said that Su Shi's livelihood achievements during his relegation period in his later years are truly "learn with the result to be officer" and represent his lifetime achievements in his officer career.

It was through his literary works and his own life practice that Su Shi in his later years re-analyzed the objective material world and inherited Taoist thought, eventually forming his own unique philosophical outlook. Some of Su Shi's seemingly helpless lamentations are in fact a reflection of his freedom and open-mindedness, not following the current, and also a deep analysis of what is "inaction" and "action" in the objective world, it shows that he drew on the Taoist idea of "inaction" to a certain extent. This thought of Su Shi tells us that life is impermanent, but we should have the critical spirit of perseverance and transcendence. In his later years, Su Shi, having undergone a life of trials and tribulations, no longer had any obvious joy at being able to return to the capital city to which he once aspired. At this time, Su Shi was no longer under the influence of worldly merit, and in the long distance of relegation full of thrilling trials and tribulations and going forward and backward with the people, in the cultivation of the Taoist thought of inaction in his later years and in the reflection of his life practice, Su Shi gradually understood what was the most suitable state of life for himself and what was the ideal of his career that he should really pursue, that is, the free and ethereal life mentality and the life practice of seeking truth and simplicity. Su Shi's attitude of always doing things based on reality and caring for the dawn people had a profound influence on later generations, and it warns us that instead of fighting in the dirty officialdom, we should really do practical things for the people. In my opinion, the changing life situation and realistic practical experience of Su Shi in his later years is a typical criticism and inheritance of Taoist thought, and he finally succeeded in integrating Taoist thought into his own unique and mature philosophy of life through the reanalysis of the material world by his literary works.

### 3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Su Shi's literary thought in his later years and his philosophical thought of Taoism interact with each other. In the attitude of life, Su Shi embodies the pursuit of transcendence and freedom. In literary creation, Su Shi always adhered to the literary idea of seeking truth and simplicity. The changing living environment in his later years and Su Shi's own life practice prompted him to realize the critical inheritance of the inaction and practical life in Taoist thought. Mr. Ge Zhaoguang once said that the relationship between Taoism and literature is a field in which people are less involved, and Su Shi's works provide us with just such a valuable research idea. Nowadays, more and more people devote themselves to the study of Taoist culture and literature, and the relationship between Taoist thought and literature is gradually being discovered and innovated. Taoist culture, as the indigenous orthodox culture of China, has been alive and well for thousands of years, bringing great contributions of varying degrees to China's politics, economy, culture, and education. It can be said that Taoist

culture is deeply rooted in the ideological genes of Chinese people. Su Shi, as a great writer of his generation, had a rough and tumultuous fate, but it was because of the guidance of Taoist thought that he was able to obtain intellectual liberation from his suffering and the true meaning of life in his ordeal. This shift from the suffering of life to the ultimate pursuit of the beauty of life not only provided Su Shi himself with the conditions to create a large number of superb works, but also provided meaningful life guidance for people nowadays. At the same time, the rich treasure Su Shi left for ancient Chinese literature is also an important material for our current study of Taoist philosophy regarding the analysis of real material life.

The comparative study of the relationship between Su Shi's literary and philosophical thoughts breaks through the boundaries of the traditional study of simply studying his works in the field of literature, making his ideological system appear more three-dimensional and vivid, and thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of Su Shi's works. This attempt provides a new way for people to study the intellectual works of the literati, and has new methodological significance. Continued deeper investigation along the issue and method will allow further understanding of the mainstream ideas, popular culture, and main creative atmosphere that influenced

society at that time in the future, thus providing new perspectives for interpreting the ideas and works of other figures.

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