

Study on Su Shi's Humanistic Sentiment and Its Role in Creating the Aesthetic Realm of His Poetry and Paintings

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Abstract: Su Shi can be described as a true genius of his time. Whether in poetry, lyrics, songs, fu, or in life itself, his charismatic personality and rare optimism make him a once-in-a-century talent. This paper takes Su Shi's poems as a guiding thread and explores the conceptual spirit and practical significance reflected in four works: The Cold Food Observance, The Complete Works of Su Dongpo: An Account of Paintings at Jingyin Temple, and Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map, analyzing them from an artistic perspective. It strives to reveal the profound humanistic sentiments Su Shi evoked in the vast, ever-changing world, as well as the pure and exquisite poetic and pictorial beauty he bestowed upon it.

Keywords: Su Shi; Calligraphy and painting; The Cold Food Observance; The Complete Works of Su Dongpo: An Account of Paintings at Jingyin Temple; Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map

Online publication: July 31, 2025

1. Introduction

Su Shi, as an artistic giant and literary master in the brilliant galaxy of Chinese culture, his artistic achievements, which “shine with a comprehensive and brilliant light and look down upon a thousand generations”, are not only confined to his poetry, songs, and prose, but also largely stem from his insight and understanding of life, as well as his pursuit of inner freedom and his love and dedication to a beautiful life. In the field of painting, Su Shi mainly used bold ink and light colors, with a concise and simple yet grand and imposing artistic style. The most prominent of his innovations was the unique “Ink Play” technique, as seen in his “Ink Bamboo Painting,” which features vigorous and bold brushstrokes and vivid charm ^[1]. Together with Mi Fu, Li Gonglin, Huang Tingjian, Su Zhe, and others, he explored the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. Under the influence of the spirit of Chinese civilization, he fully demonstrated the spirit of a scholar and the unique charm of brush and ink. With calligraphy as the technical principle and poetry as the spiritual content, he was unique and ingenious, leading the ancient painting circle to a new artistic style that was more distinctive and representative.

2. Su Shi's humanistic feelings: Book

Su Shi, a representative of the bold school in the poem, “The old man talks about the madness of youth, the left leads the yellow, the right Qingcang, the brocade hat and the ermine Qiu, and the thousand horses roll Pinggang.” In order to repay the city, follow the Taishou, shoot the tiger in person, and watch Sun Lang. The wine is still open, and the temples are slightly frosty, so what's the matter? In the clouds, when will Feng Tang be sent? Will hold the bow like a full moon, look northwest, and shoot the wolf. This word was created when Su Shi was demoted to Mizhou, and his heart longed to regain the lofty words written by the imperial court, and at this time it can also be seen that Su Shi still has a “madness,” in which Su Shi faces the scenery of “lonely smoke in the desert” and “the sunset of the long river” with chic and heroic feelings to depict the beauty of the long-term artistic conception of literati painting, and the literati creative attitude of “poetry and painting are the same” is vividly expressed ^[2].

Although Su Shi's life is floating like duckweed in the world, his optimistic spirit and humanistic feelings of caring for the world are as tenacious and persevering as the bamboo and stone he painted, and this perseverance is also reflected in his works of art such as “Dead Wood and Strange Stones” ^[3] and “Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone.” In terms of ideology, Su Shi admired Zhuangzi and was deeply influenced by Taoist thought since he was a child. Zhuangzi believes that there is no distinction between high and low in heaven and earth, and Jia Rudao said in “Yuesheng Sui Copy”: “Su Zizhan loves the corporal of the world, no virtuous and unscrupulous, and is happy.” Taste yourself: You can accompany the Jade Emperor on the top, and you can accompany the beggars in the Beitian Courtyard. Throughout Su Shi's life, his heart for the people is the principle of life in his world, whether it is the Jade Emperor or the beggar of Beitianyuan, there is no distinction between high and low status in his heart. All he has is the will to serve the country and the wish to benefit the people. Su Shi's life can be described as tossing and turning, but because of this, there are Su Shi's hand-me-down works today. Su Shi is not only the leader of the literary world in the middle of the Northern Song Dynasty, but also single-handedly raised the art of painting to the same historical status as literary works. Su Shi's spirit of governance and literary and artistic connotation is worthy of the world's eternal praise and learning model.

According to historical records, “Wutai Poetry Case” is a turning point in Su Shi's life, after which he was demoted to Huangzhou as the deputy envoy of Huangzhou regimental training, although he was not willing, but he wrote the “Water Tune Song Head,” “Chibi Fu,” “Hou Chibi Fu,” “The Cold Food Observance,” and other nouns and songs, among which Huang Tingjian, one of the “Song Four Families” (1045–1105, the word Luzhi, the number Qingfeng Pavilion, the valley Taoist, Fu Weng) made an inscription on Su Shi's “The Cold Food Observance” (Figure 1).

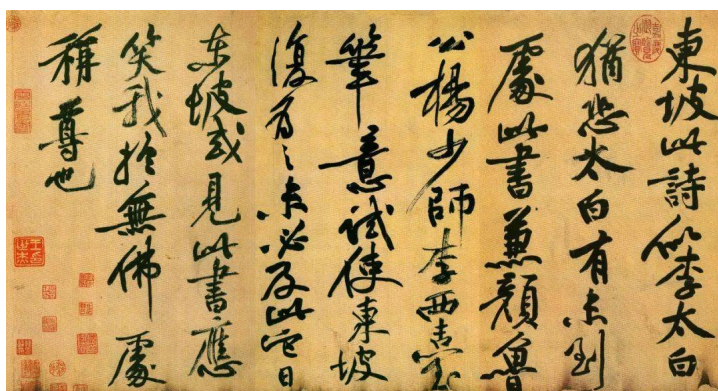


Figure 1. Huang Tingjian (Title: Su Shi's The Cold Food Observance) running script; It is now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

This poem is like Li Taibai, I'm afraid that Taibai has not arrived. This book is also written by Yan Lugong, Yang Shaoshi, and Li Xitai. "Try to make the eastern slope revert, but it may not be as good as this. It is the east slope or see this book, should laugh at me in the place where there is no Buddha to be respected."

The "Huangzhou Cold Food Observance" was donated by Japanese collector Kikuchi Takamura to the National Palace Museum in Taipei. In Volume Three of Song Zeng Minxing's "Duxing Magazine," there is a story recorded: Su Dongpo said, 'Ru Zhi (the style name of Huang Tingjian) writes beautifully and forcefully, but at times his strokes are too thin, almost like a snake hanging from the treetops.' Shan Gu replied, 'Though I would not dare to make light of your writing, I feel it is quite flat, similar to a stone pressing down on a toad.' The two gentlemen laughed heartily, believing they had accurately pinpointed each other's shortcomings. In essence, Su Dongpo felt that Huang Tingjian's characters were overly thin, resembling a snake on a tree branch, while Huang Tingjian critiqued Su Shi's writing as being too flat, likening it to a stone crushing a toad. They both shared a laugh, acknowledging the valid points made about their respective styles.

The "Huangzhou Cold Food Observance" is a work by Su Shi created during his exile in Huangzhou, coinciding with the Cold Food Festival. The emergence of this piece solidified its status as the "third best cursive script in the world" following the "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering" and the "Memorial for My Nephew." From the perspective of brush technique, its strokes flow, as Ru Zhi noted, like "a stone pressing a toad," appearing somewhat flattened in shape ^[4]. However, in terms of artistic expression, there remains a sense of space and positioning in the characters. For instance, the "self" in "I came to Huangzhou, having already passed three Cold Food festivals" and the character "year" in "longing for spring year after year" is elongated, resembling someone rising from near death. The emotional expression while writing is subdued, and the movement of the brush and ink is both plain and slow. In contrast, the phrases "the spring river wishes to enter the door" and "cooked cold vegetables in an empty pot" exhibit a rapid, vigorous, and forceful brushwork, reminiscent of a symphony on the brink of a climax, akin to the anticipatory storm before a windy building. By the eleventh line, "the broken stove burns wet reeds," the strongest sound of the entire piece suddenly erupts, allowing the author's feelings of anger and sorrow to be released in an uninhibited manner. Su Shi's artistic approach of "deriving new meanings, not treading on ancient paths" and his belief that "unintended excellence is still excellence" aligns with the Song dynasty scholars' emphasis on "the essence beyond the rhythm, and the intention preceding the brush." The Song dynasty's poetry, calligraphy, and painting highlight the idea that the thought must arrive before the brush, with Xiong Bingming explaining in "The Theoretical System of Chinese Calligraphy" that this signifies "a serene and joyful creation," emphasizing a lyrical beauty in the creative process. Su Shi's "Huangzhou Cold Food Observance" displays an appreciation for the poetic beauty akin to the aesthetics found in scholars' paintings (Figure 2).

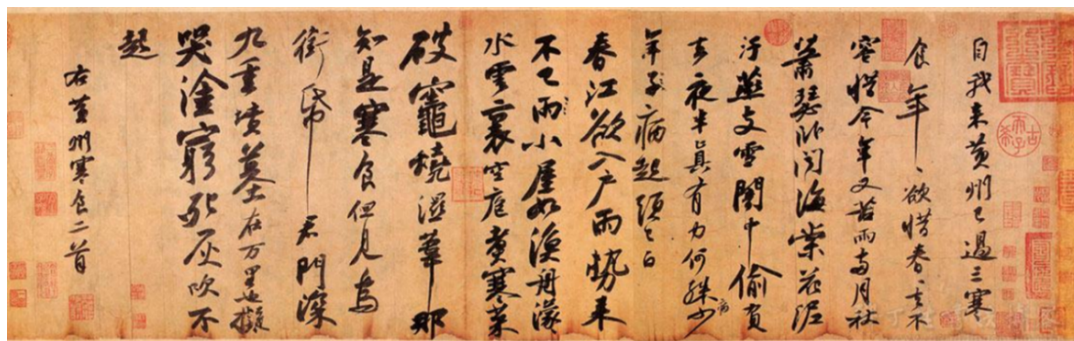


Figure 2. "Huangzhou Cold Food Observance" Su Shi wrote poems and books, ink sketches; It is now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

3. Su Shi's "On Bamboo"—A study of life and art: Spirit

In the record of *The Complete Works of Su Dongpo: An Account of Paintings at Jingyin Temple*, it states: "... The representation of bamboo, rocks, and withered trees by Wen Tong can truly be said to grasp their essence. In such a state of existence and demise, contracting and withering, or thriving in a flourishing manner, the roots, stems, leaves, veins, and patterns possess ever-changing forms, never overlapping, yet each fitting in its proper place. This aligns with nature's creation and is distasteful to human desire. It is the place where the accomplished scholars reside, perhaps?" He describes how Wen Tong expresses vitality in painting bamboo, withered trees, and bizarre rocks, and how he conveys lifelessness. In painting bamboo, he meticulously observes and contemplates the inherent growth patterns and differing characteristics of the plants, believing that both the roots and stems, as well as the leaves, veins, and textures, exhibit a myriad of changing forms. Therefore, arranging the positions of bamboo and rocks appropriately within the composition aligns with the creation of heaven and earth, in accordance with the aesthetic tastes of literati and scholars; this is likely what is meant by the principle that only those of high disposition and extraordinary talent can discern.

In *The Complete Works of Su Dongpo: An Account of Paintings at Jingyin Temple*, there is a concept referred to as "constant principles." The author speculates that "constant principles" refer to the laws of the universe, the conservation of energy, where all things in the world are interconnected and communicate with one another, subsequently transforming into new themes, while the conservation of energy remains unchanged. The "Yi Jing" states: "The character 'Yi' contains three meanings: it refers to the continuous change, the simplicity, and the unchanging nature." Firstly, it refers to "change"; secondly, it refers to "simplicity"; and thirdly, it refers to "unchangingness." The first refers to the path of change, as all things are in a constant state of flux; the second refers to a yin and yang duality that encompasses the principles of myriad things, distinguishing between heaven and earth, the apparent and the hidden, in opposition yet in a harmonious order; the third level, "unchangingness," indicates that despite the intricate and multifaceted nature of worldly matters, there exists an unchanging element—the laws, such as the operation of the universe, the changing of seasons, the coming and going of cold and heat, the waxing and waning of the moon, the sun's tilt at noon, and the principle that extremes lead to reversals—these are the laws of the cosmos. The development of all things encompasses both fixed elements and variables, much like Su Dongpo's rise and fall in life; the fixed elements have rules to follow, while the variables change according to circumstances. The fixed elements contain variables, and the variables also encompass fixed elements; regardless of whether they are fixed or variable, the overarching situation remains unchanged, subtly reflecting the twists and turns of Su Shi's life.

Su Shi also mentioned the author Zhuang Zhou of 'Zhuangzi,' using the terms 'taran' and 'nianshen' to depict a state of deep meditation. This interpretation of artistic creation also appears in the story of Zi Qing carving wood into a ladle in 'Zhuangzi: Da Sheng': 'with heaven harmonizing with heaven' indicates that the carpenter's innate qualities have merged with the essence of the wood, allowing for the creation of perfect works through 'common principles.' Su Shi emphasized the artistic aesthetic function of 'expressing my heart through literature and adapting my intention through painting,' and the spiritual essence of aesthetic interest as embodied in his painting *Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map*.

4. The painting *Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map* by Su Shi, one of the three Su brothers

Su Shi's painting theory emphasizes the depiction of its "common sense" according to the "normal shape" of things ^[5], everything in the world has a "normal shape," and the rules contained under the surface of the "normal

shape” are similar or even connected. Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty discussed “both form and spirit,” “portrayal of the spirit, is in the middle of the block.” The general painter can only depict things accurately, and only by relying on a certain amount of accumulation, and the artist who has a part of the innate knowledge can grasp the internal principle of things. Su Shi’s Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map (**Figure 3**) was displayed as one of Su Shi’s only two surviving works (the other “Dead Wood and Strange Stones”) was displayed at the “50 Years of Donated Works Exhibition” held by the National Art Museum of China in 2010. Zhu Xi said, “Dead Wood and Strange Stones”: “Its proud wind and snow are still reading the ancient and modern, so I want to see its people.” It is believed that his artistic conception of creation is lofty, and Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map is as Mr. Deng Tuo said ^[6]: “A soil slope, two stones, a few bushes of sparse bamboo, left and right smoke and water clouds and mountains, endless, just like the Xiangjiang River and Xiaoshui meet, remote Dongting, the scenery is vast, it makes people feel refreshed and happy, wandering and staring, and can’t bear to leave.” If it is said that the cold forests, old trees, and ancient monuments in Li Cheng’s “Reading the Stone Tablet and Stone Map” give people the impression of “the ethereal camp hill ink fairy, floating out of the air without interruption.” Then Su Shi’s Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map is “the jade bone that is sad and misty, and the ice posture has its own fairy wind,” “Gao Qing has chased the clouds and the sky, and does not dream with the pear blossoms.” The pursuit of the Bingqing and Yujie literati style and Gao Feng Liangjie are not afraid of the “miasma” invasion, and the noble sentiment of serving the people can be compared!

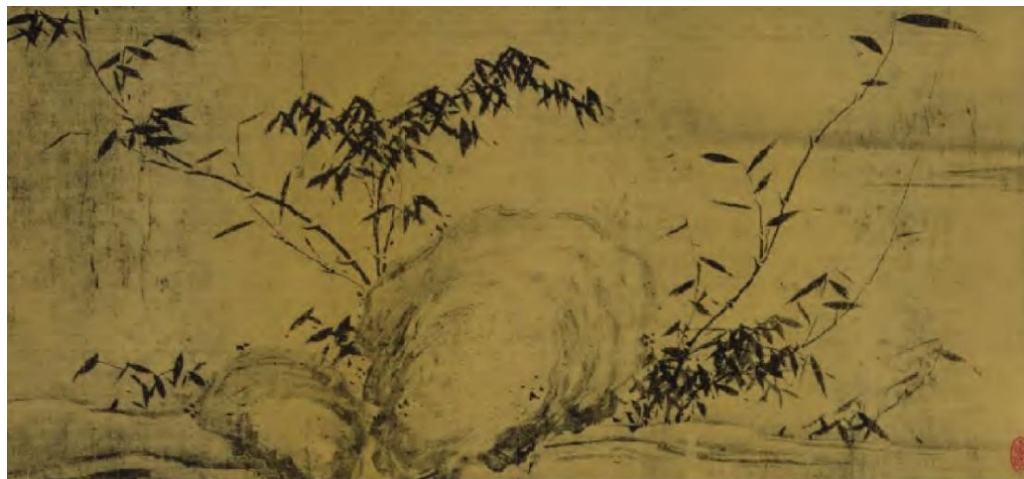


Figure 3. Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map Silk; 28 cm long, 105.6 cm wide; It is now in the collection of the National Art Museum of China.

Su Shi’s poems and his painting theory are in the same vein, “poetry and painting are the same,” Su Shi believes that Li Gonglin “ancient painters are not laymen, and wonderful ideas are actually the same as poems.” The poet of Longmian is a poet who can make the dragon pool fly a thunderbolt. The allusion to “Dragon Pond Thunderbolt” comes from a poem by Du Fu, it is said that Cao Ba painted the Tang Ming Emperor’s favorite horse, and the dragon pond sounded the thunderbolt finger painting workmanship, which also implied that Su Shi praised Li Gonglin as an excellent painter and an excellent poet. Su Shi once wrote in a landscape painting by the scholar Yan Su: “Yan Gong’s brush is natural and new; it has left the degree of painting, and got the beauty of the poet. It can be seen that he has such an evaluation of other people’s paintings, and he has high requirements for himself. As one of the only surviving books in China, Su Shi’s Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map is constructed from a distant perspective from the composition, and the light and shadow of the riverside

on the distant bank are found to be depicted after zooming in on the lens, and the bamboo and stone block the end of the river and leave endless imagination space. In the background, the open and endless river is used as the background, and the main object of the space, bamboo and stone, is prominent, and at the same time, the poetry spreads suddenly. The river behind Zhushi is believed by some scholars to be the confluence of Xiaoshui and Xiangjiang rivers in this area.

“Xiaoxiang” contains a special cultural image in ancient poetry and painting, which generally refers to being far away from the political center, being the spiritual exile of ancient Chinese literati, carrying the rich imagination of the sadness and freedom of the literati. Therefore, using the water of Xiaoxiang as the background of bamboo and stone is equivalent to placing the inspirational theme in the misty inner world, so that the painting realm transcends the specific reference and sublimates the life situation that can only be understood but cannot be expressed. In the face of the embarrassment of life, Su Dongpo can still survive tenaciously under the weight of the “boulder,” full of arbitrariness, and carefully depicts the artistic pursuit of “poetry and painting, heavenly and fresh,” Su Shi’s pride and ambition and “bamboo cane shoes are lighter than horses, who is afraid?” The ideal of life has always been presented in his theory of poetry and painting, and the literary and artistic works he left behind are “a star in the sky” in this vast universe, embellishing the vast sky into an eternal and endless starry twinkle.

5. Conclusion: Su Shi’s humanistic feelings

Confucianism starts from “righteousness” and “does nothing for it,” Su Shi spent his life doing his best to complete his beliefs, and at the same time, implementing Confucian morality while rescuing the people of Li. He served the people all his life and followed his heart. Su Shi communicated with Abbot Wei Lin at the end of his life, and the abbot asked him to recite “Western Elysium” to really lead to Elysium, but Su Shi said that “focus is poor” translated as “reluctantly think like this is wrong,” highlighting Su Shi’s open-minded attitude in the face of life and death, and behind facing death, it also shows the comfort and promotion of Taoist culture to his soul: “The way to liberation lies in nature, and is good without knowing goodness,” “doing nothing and asking for nothing” is Su Dongpo’s lifelong belief in life, which is also the so-called “knowing fate.” In “A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy,” Mr. Feng Youlan explained “knowing one’s destiny” as follows: “It is impossible for a person to do nothing, because everyone has something to do, but when he does these things, he is not doing them for any other purpose. From Su Shi’s body, it can be seen that the general” “Shi Cangshu Drunken Ink Hall” records: “At the beginning of life’s literacy and troubles, you can take a break from the rough memorization of your name.” “Literacy” refers to learning to think, and the “sorrow” felt refers to his solitary and sober heart, from the “Spring Dawn at Su Causeway” and “Three Pools Reflecting the Moon” in Hangzhou’s West Lake to “Water Tune Song Head,” “Huangzhou Cold Food Observance,” “Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone Map,” and other words, poems and paintings, as well as the establishment of China’s first public hospital “Anle Fang” and the suggestion to Guangzhou Taishou when he was transferred to Danzhou to use bamboo tubes to divert Pujian water into the city, making Guangzhou the first city in China to have “tap water” and so on..... Su Shi’s life is “a great competition” for the people of the world, and when he was degraded, he still entertained himself and said: “No meat makes people thin, no bamboo makes people vulgar” optimistic emotion!

Su Shi’s spirit of striving upward and his genuine passion for benefiting the people are vividly reflected in his literary and artistic works. In his piece “To Xian Yu Zi Jun,” he wrote: “Recently composed a minor

poem; although it lacks the flavor of Liu Qilang, it still represents a distinct style, ha ha.” Such daring use of tonal patterns and rhyming is something that, to this day, seems to belong solely to Su Shi! Finding joy amidst suffering was the norm of Su Shi’s life, yet even so, one can discern his free-spirited, talented, and humorous attitude towards life. The colors of Su Shi’s existence are as ethereal and vast as those depicted in his paintings, just as he himself wrote: “Vast as if soaring through the void on the wind, unaware of where I may land; floating as if standing independently in a world apart, fluttering upward to become an immortal...” Su Shi’s “calligraphy,” “spirit,” “painting,” and “meaning” possess a power that can blur the boundaries between life and death. In the interplay between the illusory dreams and painful realities, he expressed the most touching declarations and sentiments of humanity. With the most intense emotions, he conveyed the profound truths and infatuations of this world. Su Shi dedicated his life to endowing his artistic works with a powerful appeal, enabling future generations not only to appreciate art but also to engage more deeply in theoretical research and artistic recreation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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