

The Chinese Spirit Embodied in Su Shi's Literary Works: An Interpretive Analysis

Yan Ling

Xi'an Innovation College of Yan'an University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710100, China

Abstract: Chinese culture, characterized by its profound historical depth and extensive breadth, has achieved remarkable accomplishments in literary arts throughout the millennia. Song Dynasty ci poetry constitutes an indispensable component of classical Chinese literature, and Su Shi, recognized as one of the Eight Great Masters of Tang and Song Dynasties, demonstrated exceptional achievements across multiple domains including poetry, prose, and calligraphy. Su Shi's literary corpus, deeply influenced by traditional Chinese cultural philosophy, embodies numerous exemplary manifestations of the Chinese spirit. This study examines selected works from Su Shi's poetic and prose writings to interpret the Chinese spirit contained therein. These spiritual elements represent not merely Su Shi's personal emotional expressions but rather constitute concrete embodiments of China's excellent traditional culture. The Chinese spirit manifested in Su Shi's literary works remains worthy of contemporary study and promotion, while simultaneously facilitating international cultural dissemination and demonstrating distinctive Chinese characteristics to global audiences.

Keywords: Su Shi's literary works; Traditional culture; Chinese spirit

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1. Introduction

Su Shi stands as a representative figure in Song Dynasty literary circles, enumerated among the Eight Great Masters of Tang and Song Dynasties, with distinguished literary achievements that have endured through centuries. His life experience was remarkably rich, and his official career traversed numerous vicissitudes. Against this backdrop of adversity, rather than succumbing to negative resignation or misanthropic withdrawal, he confronted life's inequities with an optimistic and magnanimous disposition, thereby creating numerous celebrated works that have been transmitted to the present day. Within Su Shi's literary compositions, readers can discern not only his extraordinarily elevated literary accomplishments but also derive spiritual insights and comprehend the Chinese spirit embodied in his works.

Examining Su Shi's biographical trajectory provides essential understanding of his personality formation and ideological evolution. During his childhood, Su Shi received exemplary family education, with his father's rigorous expectations and his mother's character cultivation enabling him to develop into a young man possessing profound literary foundation and resolute determination. After ten years of diligent study, Su Shi successfully passed the jinshi examination and achieved immediate renown. However, his mother's untimely death compelled him to return to his hometown to observe the three-year mourning period. Upon completion of this filial obligation, Emperor Renzong of Song specially established the zhike examination to select talented individuals. Su Shi participated in the "Forthright Remonstrance" (zhiyan jijian) category, earning profound appreciation from both the examiner and Emperor Renzong himself, subsequently entering official service. Following three years serving as an official in Fengxiang Prefecture and returning to the capital, he experienced the unfortunate loss of his wife. The subsequent year brought the death of his father, Su Xun, necessitating another three-year mourning period in his hometown. Upon his return to court, the political landscape had undergone dramatic transformation, with Wang Anshi and others determined to implement reform policies, precipitating fierce debates between supporters and opponents. During this period, Su Shi departed the capital to assume official positions successively in Hangzhou, Mizhou, Xuzhou, and Huzhou. Throughout his tenure in these

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localities, Su Shi demonstrated profound concern for people's livelihood and implemented beneficial policies, receiving both popular support and imperial commendation. During his leisure time, he also created numerous outstanding literary works, including "Drinking on the Lake, First Clear then Rainy" (Yin Hu Shang Chu Qing Hou Yu) composed during the Hangzhou period and "Prelude to Water Melody: When Will the Bright Moon Appear" (Shui Diao Ge Tou: Mingyue Ji Shi You) written during the Mizhou period, both of which have been incorporated into contemporary primary and secondary school textbooks. While serving as a local official, Su Shi remained deeply concerned with national affairs and presented policy recommendations to the emperor. However, because his positions obstructed certain reformist officials' interests, he was falsely accused and imprisoned in what history records as the "Wutai Poetry Case." Through various interventions, Su Shi ultimately escaped capital punishment but was demoted to Huangzhou. During his Huangzhou period, Su Shi's mentality underwent a series of transformations, transitioning from a local official receiving imperial salary to a disgraced official possessing nominal status without substantive authority. Rather than succumbing to despondency, he discovered joy amid hardship and actively confronted adversity. Beyond cultivating farmland for self-sufficiency, he devoted himself to scholarly pursuits, completing annotative work on the *Analects* (Lunyu) and the *Book of Changes* (Zhouyi) while publishing his academic thought. Although relegation to Huangzhou represented a nadir in Su Shi's political career, it constituted a sublimation of his spiritual world, during which he composed "Ode to the Red Cliff" (Chibi Fu) and "Remembering the Past at Red Cliff to the Tune of Nian Nujiao" (Nian Nujiao: Chibi Huaigu). Subsequently, he experienced political rehabilitation but once again encountered political turbulence, resulting in his demotion at over sixty years of age to Qiongzhou (present-day Hainan Province), then considered the most perilous and desolate territory. Three years later, a new emperor ascended the throne and proclaimed general amnesty. Su Shi returned to the mainland from Qiongzhou and died of illness in Changzhou. Throughout Su Shi's life trajectory, one observes that from childhood he received excellent education and formed a sound personality, subsequently entering officialdom where, despite experiencing numerous vicissitudes, he maintained an upright heart and expressed his political attitudes and life ideals through his literary works.

2. The Chinese Spirit Embodied in Su Shi's Literary Works

(1) Patriotic spirit

Patriotism constitutes the fundamental spirit of the Chinese nation, manifested not only in contemporary times but also in its continuous transmission from antiquity to the present. Su Shi expressed profound patriotic sentiment in "To the Tune of Jiangchengzi: Hunting in Mizhou" (Jiangchengzi: Mizhou Chu Lie). At that time serving as prefect of Mizhou, Su Shi's hunting experience inspired the magnificent aspirations within his breast. The verse "To report to the townspeople who pour out of the city gate to watch the tiger-hunting magistrate" (wei bao qing cheng sui taishou, qin she hu, kan Sun Lang) employs an allusion to Sun Quan, with Su Shi comparing himself to this historical figure to demonstrate his heroic spirit. The line "Holding credentials in the clouds, when will the court dispatch Feng Tang?" (chi jie yun zhong, he ri qian Feng Tang) articulates the lofty ambitions harboring in Su Shi's heart, expressing his hope that despite advanced age, the court might appoint him to important positions just as Emperor Wen of Han dispatched Feng Tang to pardon Wei Shang. The concluding verse "I shall draw my carved bow like a full moon, aiming northwest to shoot down the celestial wolf" (hui wan diao gong ru man yue, xi bei wang, she Tian Lang) conveys Su Shi's determination to resist foreign aggression and manifests his ambition to strengthen the nation. Throughout this poem, from thematic selection to imagery description, Su Shi articulates his patriotic sentiments. Within these verses, readers perceive his far-reaching political aspirations and, more profoundly, experience his loyalty and devotion to the nation, as he aspired to realize his ideals and serve his country through personal endeavor.

However, Su Shi's forthright remonstrance resulted in his political ideals remaining unrealized as he had envisioned, even affecting his subsequent life trajectory through official career setbacks, false accusations, and successive demotions to remote regions. In "Sixty-Eight Poems Sent to Teng Dadao" (Yu Teng Dadao Liushiba Shou), the verse "This heart burns

with sincerity, devoted to concern for the nation" (ci xin geng geng, gui yu you guo) reveals Su Shi's profound concern for national destiny. Although his political aspirations remained unfulfilled, he continued working diligently in his assigned posts without complaint, conscientiously managing people's livelihood in his jurisdictions and earning respect and praise from local populations. Despite suffering consecutive setbacks in his official career and demotion to remote areas, in "Composed in a Dream and Sent to Zhu Xingzhong" (Meng Zhong Zuo Ji Zhu Xingzhong), he wrote "To this day I have not coveted treasures, maintaining an awe-inspiring righteousness that illuminates the mortal world" (zhi jin bu tan bao, lin ran zhao chen huan). From this verse, one discerns that Su Shi employed biographical reference to express his own character, demonstrating his noble virtue and aspirations. Even in relegation, Su Shi maintained a patriotic heart, preserved his righteous spirit, and remained profoundly loyal to nation and people. These three works collectively demonstrate Su Shi's patriotism and vividly express the patriotic spirit of ancient Chinese literati. This patriotic spirit, when integrated with contemporary contexts, assumes significant importance. Each individual should love their nation and transform patriotism into national honor and ethnic pride. We must possess confidence and conviction as Chinese people, internalizing this patriotic spirit and externalizing it through action, connecting personal efforts with national construction, intensifying cultural output, promoting Chinese culture, and demonstrating Chinese excellence to the world.

(2) Innovative spirit

During the Northern Song Dynasty, Su Shi repeatedly proposed innovative reform concepts in political affairs and made outstanding contributions to the ancient prose movement in the literary domain. As a representative figure of the bold and unrestrained ci school, he exerted profound influence on subsequent literary creation. During Su Shi's relegation to Huangzhou, he composed a travel record titled "Record of a Night Visit to Chengtian Temple" (Ji Chengtian Si Ye You). This travel record demonstrates remarkable innovation, as despite comprising merely eighty-some characters, the content proves comprehensive and substantial, encompassing character depiction, temporal specification, spatial location, scenic description, and emotional expression within an ingeniously conceived narrative.

The original text reads as follows: "On the night of the twelfth day of the tenth month in the sixth year of the Yuanfeng reign, I removed my clothes to sleep. As moonlight showered into the room, I arose with delight and ventured forth. Thinking there was no one with whom to share this pleasure, I proceeded to Chengtian Temple to seek Zhang Huaimin. Huaimin, too, had not yet retired for the night, and together we walked in the central courtyard. Below in the courtyard, it appeared bright and clear as accumulated water, with aquatic plants crisscrossing within the water, which proved to be shadows of bamboo and cypress trees. What night lacks a moon? What place lacks bamboo and cypress? But there is a dearth of idle persons such as we two."

Su Shi's travel record differs absolutely from ordinary "running account" style diaries, demonstrating deliberate artistry in diction, sentence construction, and article structure. He naturally yet concisely portrayed images such as the nocturnal courtyard. Although no sentence directly describes the moonlight, the lunar radiance permeates the text through other sentences, appearing everywhere. Combined with the displaced association between bamboo and cypress shadows and aquatic plants, the entire travel record manifests ingenious conception. Su Shi opposed creative styles characterized by deliberate rhetorical accumulation and artificial construction, employing concise yet exquisite descriptive techniques to transform the seemingly ordinary "diary style" into vivid and ingenious prose essays, thereby exerting positive influence on the development of prose literature during the Ming and Qing Dynasties while simultaneously demonstrating exceptional innovative spirit.

From antiquity to the present, the spirit of innovation has consistently provided abundant inspiration. In contemporary society, innovative spirit manifests not only in literary creation but permeates all aspects of life. Exploring the unknown and forging ahead in scientific research constitutes innovation, as does developing new models and proposing novel concepts in professional contexts. China's rapid technological development and continuously strengthening comprehensive national power remain inseparable from the spirit of innovation.

(3) Spirit of practice

During Su Shi's time in Huangzhou, to investigate the true origin of Shizhong Mountain's name, he composed "Record of Shizhong Mountain" (Shizhong Shan Ji). Within this record, one finds questioning of previous explanations based on independent thinking, a rigorous attitude toward knowledge-seeking during the practice process, and verification and reflection following personal investigation. This travel record embodies the practical spirit of daring to question and daring to explore. Li Daoyuan of the Northern Wei Dynasty believed that Shizhong Mountain adjoined a deep pool, where gentle breezes and flowing water striking stones produced sounds resembling a great bell. Li Bo of the Tang Dynasty once discovered two rocks beside the deep pool at Shizhong Mountain, and upon striking these rocks, found that the southern rock produced thick and muffled sounds while the northern rock generated loud and crisp sounds, hastily concluding this explained Shizhong Mountain's nomenclature.

The opening paragraph of "Record of Shizhong Mountain" raises the question "However, I particularly doubt this explanation. Stones that produce resonant sounds when struck exist everywhere, so why is this mountain uniquely named Shizhong Mountain?" (ran shi shuo ye, yu you yi zhi. Shi zhi keng ran you sheng zhe, suo zai jie shi ye, er ci du yi zhong ming, he zai), indicating Su Shi's disagreement with Li Bo's explanation. He did not evade hardships but personally visited Shizhong Mountain, ultimately arriving at his own conclusion. Although this result, due to various limitations of the time, was not entirely correct, it embodied Su Shi's practical spirit of daring to experience personally and daring to explore. The rhetorical question "Is it acceptable to arbitrarily judge the existence or non-existence of something without seeing or hearing it oneself?" (shi bu mu jian er wen, er yi duan qi you wu, ke hu) represents Su Shi's optimal interpretation of the spirit of practice.

Subsequently, Su Shi was transferred from Huangzhou to Ruzhou, and while passing through Jiujiang, he toured Mount Lu with friends. Upon first arriving at Mount Lu, Su Shi discovered that clouds and mist made it extremely difficult to perceive the mountain's complete appearance. After several days' rest, he visited Mount Lu again and, before descending, inscribed a poem on the wall of West Forest Temple: "Viewed horizontally, it forms ridges; viewed from the side, it becomes peaks; from far and near, high and low, each perspective differs. We cannot recognize Mount Lu's true face, merely because we stand within this very mountain" (heng kan cheng ling ce cheng feng, yuan jin gao di ge bu tong. Bu shi Lushan zhen mian mu, zhi yuan shen zai ci shan zhong). This poem, "Written on the Wall at West Forest Temple" (Ti Xilin Bi), has been selected for inclusion in contemporary elementary school Chinese textbooks and enjoys wide circulation. It reflects not only dialectical thinking regarding the necessity of transcending partial perspectives to apprehend the whole but also demonstrates the crucial role of practice in cognition.

The aforementioned literary works demonstrate that Su Shi himself highly valued practice and personally explored the unknown. The spirit of practice remains equally important for contemporary society. Whether in academic research or daily study and life, beyond mastering necessary theoretical knowledge, the most crucial element involves practicing and exploring research methods or study approaches, life patterns or work modes that suit individual circumstances.

(4) Optimistic and magnanimous spirit

Su Shi's official career experienced repeated turbulence, and his thought evolved correspondingly with different life stages. The most conspicuous transformation occurred during the period following the "Wutai Poetry Case" when he was demoted to Huangzhou. Having been falsely accused, imprisoned, and narrowly escaped death, Su Shi attempted to adjust his mentality and seek spiritual consolation. "The First Ode to the Red Cliff" (Qian Chibi Fu) embodies Su Shi's integration of various philosophical schools and manifests his transcendent and magnanimous life attitude when confronting setbacks and difficulties. I grieve the brevity of our lives and envy the infinity of the Yangtze River" (ji fu you yu tian di, miao cang hai zhi yi su. Ai wu sheng zhi xu yu, xian Chang Jiang zhi wu qiong). Su Shi responds "Moreover, between heaven and earth, each thing has its owner; if it does not belong to me, I shall not take even the slightest bit. Only the clear breeze upon the river and the bright moon among the mountains—when the ear receives them, they become sound; when the eye encounters them, they become color. Taking them is inexhaustible, using them is

unending; these are the infinite treasures of the Creator" (qie fu tian di zhi jian, wu ge you zhu, gou fei wu zhi suo you, sui yi hao er mo qu. Wei jiang shang zhi qing feng, yu shan jian zhi ming yue, er de zhi er wei sheng, mu yu zhi er cheng se, qu zhi wu jin, yong zhi bu jie, shi zao wu zhe zhi wu jin zang ye). This passage demonstrates that after absorbing Daoist thought, Su Shi attained a transcendent and expansive spiritual realm wherein "heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me" (tian di yu wo bing sheng, wan wu yu wo wei yi).

This optimistic and magnanimous attitude when facing setbacks does not signify, for contemporary society, passive withdrawal from the world, indifference toward difficulties, or allowing situations to develop unchecked. Rather, it means that in today's fast-paced life characterized by high academic and professional pressures, we must confront potential difficulties with a positive attitude. Even when facing unchangeable circumstances, we must adjust our mentality and face them optimistically.

3. Conclusion

As the founder of Song Dynasty poetic style, the pioneer of the bold and unrestrained ci school, and one of the most accomplished prose writers of the Song Dynasty, Su Shi bequeathed to posterity over seven thousand poems and prose works during his creative career spanning more than forty years. Among these works are numerous celebrated pieces that continue to be recited today. These literary works not only manifest his personal life attitudes but also embody many core spirits of traditional Chinese culture. This represents concrete manifestation of Su Shi's abundant and enduring creativity and constitutes optimal evidence of his remarkable achievements in poetry, ci, and prose composition. The Chinese spirit embodied in Su Shi's literary works remains worthy of contemporary study and research in numerous aspects. This article selects representative works from Su Shi's corpus and, through examination of four dimensions—patriotic spirit, innovative spirit, practical spirit, and optimistic and magnanimous life attitude—provides interpretive analysis of the concrete manifestations of Chinese spirit in Su Shi's literary works, offering reference for future cultural pedagogy. Exploring the Chinese spirit in Su Shi's literary works enables better comprehension of the works' connotations and facilitates learning regarding the role of Chinese spirit, which has continued to the present day, in contemporary society. Furthermore, it promotes traditional Chinese culture from more diverse perspectives and enhances the cultural confidence of the Chinese people. Su Shi's literary works have added magnificent strokes to ancient Chinese literature. The Chinese spirit embodied therein has been transmitted through generations, remaining perpetually renewed, and continues to radiate distinctive vitality even in contemporary society.

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