Summary

Su Shi was a Song dynasty poet and intellectual. Like many of his contemporaries he was a true polymath, excelling in poetry, painting, calligraphy, and philosophy. He served as an official in different positions and locations, but was exiled three times for his outspoken opposition to the reform policies of Wang Anshi. His poetry is beloved and remembered for its perceived spontaneity, showing the temporality and imperfection of the author’s existence, with a timeless and universal appeal. Readers also relate to Su Shi’s humor and stamina in the face of adversity.

Often known by his style name Dongpo, Su Shi was considered by many to be the preeminent figure of his age. Any biographical account cannot but begin with a list of his achievements: a major premodern Chinese poet; a prose master and eclectic thinker who was deeply and equally versed in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism (Taoism); a calligrapher; painter; high-ranking official influential in national politics; a humorist; alchemist; and, finally, a gastronome who, according to legend, created the meat dish called Dongpo pork that still bears his name in the twenty-first century. Perhaps even more important than his reputation as an overachiever is the fact that Su Shi is also arguably the most beloved poet of generations of Chinese readers. What endears him to readers is a perceived spontaneity in his writing—evident as well in his visual artistic creations—that intimates the temporality and imperfection of the author’s existence, while simultaneously rendering it timeless and universal. Readers can also relate to the humor and stamina that Su Shi demonstrated in the face of adversity. In response to his opposition to the “New
Policy” reforms of *Wáng Ānshí 王安石 (1021–1086), chancellor to Emperor Shényánggōng 神宗 (r. 1067–1085), he was exiled on three occasions—the last time to Hainan, at the time an outermost frontier of Chinese cultural influence. He adapted and survived, but died shortly after his final return to the country’s central region.

The Topography of Culture in the Early Song Dynasty

His dazzling variety of accomplishments qualified Su Shi as a leading *literatus*, or *wénrén*, with the combined identity of poet-scholar-bureaucrat. The formation of the elite class of *literati* can be attributed to the social and institutional forces that defined the intellectual transition that occurred from the ninth to the eleventh century—or from the Late Tang to the Early Song.

The Sòng 宋 dynasty (960–1279 CE) emerged from the political disintegration and cultural destruction of the interregnum period that followed the fall of the Táng 唐 (618–907 CE). To avoid the armed rebellions and coups-d’état that had defined the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960 CE) era of the north, the Song dynasty’s founding emperors sought to curb the “power of the sword” while increasing that of “the brush.” A series of changes was undertaken to optimize the civil service examination system, which began in 605 CE and was used to select government officials. These changes included dramatically increasing the numbers of degrees awarded, creating a three-tier examination system (comprising prefectural, departmental, and palace examinations), and articulating procedures to ensure the anonymity of the written examinations—and therefore the impartiality of those responsible for grading them. As a result, the state-education and examination systems were extended to attract increasing numbers of students from a broader spectrum of social strata to compete for seats in an ever-expanding civil government. Candidates who successfully passed the metropolitan examination given at the capital Kaifeng were called *jinshi* 进士, “advanced” or “selected” scholars. Poetry, Confucian classics, and policy essays were routinely tested in the examinations, and constituted the core curricula of a general education. Furthermore, the purpose of education became, at that point, intrinsically tied to bureaucratic duties.

The most successful *jinshi* degree holders, Su Shi among them, entered Chóngwén Academy 崇文院, an institution set up by the second Song emperor, *Tàizōng 太宗* (939–997; r. 976–997), to collect books and talents. Chongwen consisted of three separate academies and an imperial library, located close to the imperial palace. Academicians served as literary attendants to the throne and carried

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.*
out light administrative duties. Many would eventually enter the bureaucracy’s top echelons. Calligraphy was deemed a necessary skill for executing imperial obligations. Often painting and connoisseurship were practiced to complement the academician’s elegant lifestyle. These academicians were the earliest and archetypical “literati.”

Scholarly talents could not be decoupled from the availability of books. During the interregnum period, northern China was devastated by internecine warfare and nomadic invasions resulting in the heavy loss of books and the disruption of knowledge transmission. Many scholars fled to the south, which enjoyed relative peace and prosperity during the ongoing struggles for power among regional kingdoms. Books were avidly collected and preserved by royal families eager to prove their cultural and political legitimacy. Block-printing technology, begun in the mid-Tang era, was improved and books became more accessible. The concentration of culture in the south was partly reflected in regional poetic styles. While in the north a colloquial style that focused on the quotidian prevailed, southern poetry tended to emphasize elegance and refinement. A touch of the northern easiness and southern elegance, combined with the erudition befitting a unified empire, would come to define the outlook expressed in Song poetry.

After the Song-era reunification of China, books collected in the south furnished the newly founded imperial library, providing resources for the editing and printing of imperial encyclopedias. The percentage of “degree-holders” from the south increased, partly due to the importance of poetry as a subject in the metropolitan test, to such an extent that, in 1064, the formidable *Simā Guāng 司马光 (1019–1086), himself a native of the north, petitioned to limit the number of southern jinshi. The topography of culture in the early Song helped to explain how the Su family—relatively obscure local gentry in southwestern Sichuan—could have produced three of the most brilliant talents of the period.

Su Shi’s Early Life

Su Shi was born on 8 January 1037, during the reign of Rénzhōng 仁宗 (1010–1063; r. 1022–1063), the fourth Song emperor. His family lived in Meishan County, Sichuan. Genealogical records have shown that Su’s clan was related to the Tang magistrate Sū Wèidào 苏味道 (648–705), a talented (albeit notorious) character. Perhaps due to the chaos of the late Tang to the Song that severed the region from national politics, the Su clan harbored no grand ambitions. His father Sū Xún 苏洵 (1005–1066) began his serious studies only at the age of twenty-seven sui (a traditional Chinese way of recording age, counting the number of calendar years somebody had been alive, usually one or two years more than their actual age). Su Shi was his fifth child. Xun, Shi, and the equally precocious
sixth child, Sū Zhé (1039–1112), would be later known as “the Three Sus from Meishan,” all ranked among the eight greatest “ancient prose” (gǔwén 古文) masters of the Tang and the Song.

Su Shi’s talent and career had been, in one way or another, shaped by his regional background. After the fall of the Tang dynasty, the Sichuan area was ruled by two successive Shu regimes until the Song conquest in 965. Decades after that conquest, the coercion policy of the central and local governments continued to result in cycles of rebellion and repression. Though the gentry continued to educate their youth, the purpose of that education became less focused on career success and more on maintaining a clan’s prestige. Before Su Xun’s uncle Sū Huàn (1001–1062) successfully passed the metropolitan exam in the year 1024, few students in this area had ever attempted the civil service examinations.

The separatist character of their region must have contributed to the three Sus’ decision to employ the archaic essay style, so different from the highly ornamented and mannerist style popular among metropolitan students. By chance, when Su Xun brought his two sons to the capital for the jinshī exam in the year 1057, the statesman and scholar *Ouyáng Xiū (1007–1072) was then chief examiner. Unsatisfied with the popular contemporary style, Ouyang was determined to promote “ancient prose” that emphasized clarity and argumentation. This examination became a watershed in Song literary history. The two sons rode on a tide to success. Su Shi ranked second in the departmental examination; his younger brother, Zhe, trailed not far behind. The Sus won not only national acclaim but also the patronage of Ouyang Xiū, the most renowned literatus and statesman of the period.

The sudden death of their mother halted the Sus’ career progress. After the required period of ritual mourning, in early 1061 they continued to succeed in the Decree Examination (zhìke制科), the highest level exams in the Song examination system; these special-purpose examinations were organized by imperial decree either in the case of a specific promotion or to identify particularly talented men. Throughout the three-hundred-year Song era, only thirty-five candidates passed this exam. Su Shi ranked third (i.e., the highest de facto) rank—the first three ranked candidates were given “first-class” status—and Su Zhe ranked fourth.

Their examination triumph did not immediately translate into political fortune; under the Song bureaucratic system that valued seniority above all else, they were required to begin as low-ranking officials in local governments. They had grabbed the attention of officials who had grand expectations for their futures, however. Su Shi began his bureaucratic career as an administrative assistant in Fengxiang (in modern-day Shaanxi Province) for three years. This was the standard term for a provincial tenure,
• Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography • Volume 2 •

after which an official was called back to the capital to report on his work and to be assigned another post. In 1063, when Emperor Renzong died without leaving an heir, his nephew Yingzong 英宗 (1032–1067; r. 1063–1067) succeeded him. Su finished his term and returned to the capital, where he was promoted to the post of Academician in the Academy of History, a coveted sinecure.

Once again, death visited the Su family. Su Shi’s wife, Wang Fu 王弗 (1039–1065), whom he had married in 1054, died, leaving behind a son, Su Mài 苏迈 (1058–1112). The following year, his father Su Xun also passed away. Shi and Zhe escorted the two coffins back to Sichuan for interment. After the mourning period, he married Wang Fu’s cousin, Wang Rùnzhǐ 王闰之 (1048–1093), and returned once again to the capital during the second month of 1069.

That same month, Wang Anshi was promoted to the post of chancellor by the new emperor, Shenzong 神宗 (1048–1085; r. 1067–1085). Aware of the deep social, economic, and military crises underlying an apparent prosperity, Wang managed to persuade the ambitious young emperor to push forward a series of socioeconomic reforms, known as the “New Policy” (xīnfǔ 新法). These methods soon encountered vehement resistance from more conservative-leaning officials. Their struggle foreshadowed a vicious cycle of reforms and restorations that would contribute to the steady decline of the Song vis-à-vis its nomadic neighbors. This powerful political whirlpool would also consume the political futures of Su Shi and his allies.

The Reformist Years
The theatrical antagonism between Su Shi and Wang Anshi would perhaps not have been inevitable had Wang been more moderate in the pace of his reform and more tolerant of different opinions. Wang wanted to radically modernize Song systems of agriculture, transportation, finance, and the military service. To a certain extent, he introduced a business model into the operation of the state. Leaving any issue of the practicality of these means aside, he was confident in his own integrity to a fault. His rejection of even well-intended and reasonable criticism alienated many, resulting in his speedy promotion of opportunists.

One of his major confrontations with Su Shi concerned education and examination policies. Since the seventh century CE, literary talent had been a major, if not the sole, concern of the jinshi examination. Yet Wang Anshi, a poet himself, regarded literature as unrelated to practical matters and proposed to replace the literary composition section of the test with a section comprising commentary on the classics. Su Shi, in his later court indictment on Wang’s reform, opposed this on the grounds that neither poetry nor the classics were of any pragmatic value for governance. He claimed that to write poetry well, however, an examinee...
must be familiar with the classics and history, and should apply their moral and historical lessons to actual governance. In contrast, classicists were opinionated and often versed only in one classic and little else, let alone history or literature. Emperor Shenzong was said to be an avid reader of Su Shi’s prose and was not unsympathetic to his arguments, but Wang had a tighter grip on imperial aspirations. After repeated conflicts, Su Shi withdrew from this losing battle and petitioned for a provincial post. At the end of the year 1071, he became Censorial Vice Governor of Hangzhou (in modern Zhejiang Province).

In the picturesque city of Hangzhou, Su Shi enjoyed his association with poets, singing girls, and Buddhist monks. He began to compose lyric or ci poetry—sung according to one of a number of set patterns—called cípái 词牌—each associated with a specific title that dictated a particular tonal and rhythmic pattern. Several ci might share the same title, which may or may not have anything to do with the actual subject of the poems. Hangzhou was then the epicenter of Chán 禅 Buddhism (Zen in Japanese). At the time, Song Buddhism was divided into Chan, vinaya (律, or “discipline”), and “teaching” (jiào 教) lineages, although, in practice, the actual boundaries between these categories were not absolute. Su Shi’s parents had been devout lay Buddhists, but their beliefs were apparently little affected by the novel Chan style. Perhaps because of their influence, the younger Su Shi showed little sympathy to Chan. He revered instead the vinaya lineage, regarding it the proper duty of a monk to abide by ascetic precepts in exchange for a tax exoneration and the imposition of corvéé (obligatory government service, such as military service or labor).

Su deemed the Chan doctrine with its “public case” (gōng'ān 公案, or kōan) practice—that is, describing an interaction between a Chan master and his student to demonstrate the master’s insight—to be comprised of self-indulgent, absurd games of little intellectual value (Kong 1986, 12: 384–385). Ironically, soon after he came to Hangzhou, Su Shi became acquainted with some exceptionally intelligent Chan monks and participated in the “public cases” himself, as is shown in his witty poems from this period. Many of these monks were so-called “poet monks” whose poetry often betrayed a vivid interest in worldly affairs observed through the prism of a transcendental state of mind.

In addition to an elegant lifestyle, provincial tenures offered Su Shi the opportunity to observe first-hand the malpractice of the “New Policy” reforms. As vice governor of Hangzhou, and subsequently the governor of Mizhou (now Zhucheng, Shandong Province), and finally governor of Xuzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province), Su Shi was obligated to carry out policies that he was opposed to. Those were years of devastation. The countryside was affected by flood, drought, locusts, and
bandits. But officials, promoted to implement the reforms, chose to cover up such desolation to window-dress the effect of the policies. In charge of relief works, Su Shi grieved over the miseries of the populace. Powerless to influence the situation, he satirized it. Poems he wrote during this period often openly or covertly criticize the reforms.

In 1076, Wang Anshi stepped down a second time and lived his remaining years in semi-reclusion in Nanjing. Years of political turmoil and of little accomplishment had weakened the emperor’s trust in him, and natural disasters were often interpreted by his opponents as divine signs of disapproval over his measures. Conservatives sensed a chance for a comeback, but the remaining reformists at court fought harder still. Soon after Su Shi was transferred to Huzhou (in modern Zhejiang Province) in 1079, he sent a routine report back to the throne; in it he groused with obvious irony. A confident writer, he knew that the emperor enjoyed his prose. He forgot that less admiring readers were reading it too.

Under the Song, remonstrance officials were charged with reporting on any perceived or suspected crimes or misconduct by officials of any rank, without having to reveal their sources. Theoretically, even if their allegations were later found to be ungrounded, they were not to be punished for being “alert.” In a time of factional strife, however, this system could be rigged to serve the dominant factions. The new chancellor Wang Gui (1019–1085), thinking his position to be insecure, sought to further damage the conservative’s cause. Su Shi, who was broadly connected and whose satirical poems and essays were widely popular, was a perfect victim. A selection of his poems written during his provincial postings was judged to be libelous regarding the reforms and, consequently, the throne. Su was seized in Huzhou, moved to the capital, and imprisoned at Crow Terrace for interrogation. Many of those who had previously received these poems were implicated, demoted, or exiled. In the end, partly because the interrogators failed to produce sufficient evidence for conviction, partly because of the rescue efforts from many, including the Empress Dowager and Wang Anshi himself, Su Shi was spared a death sentence but was exiled to desolate Huangzhou (in modern Hubei Province).

It was in Huangzhou that Su Shi became Dongpo, or “East Slope”—the style name by which he is commonly still known—which refers to his farming on a piece of barren field east of the city wall. The ease with which he faced adversity is reflected in his “farming” poetry; however, it did not come without a painful period of transition. When Su first came to Huangzhou, he was tormented by a sense of guilt and shame. His rage against injustice turned inward and evolved into a form of self-censorship. He regretted that his unbridled urge to write had rendered him vulnerable and implicated those close to him. When he was not keeping to
A Poem by Su Shi: Water Tune Introduction

The following poem was written by Su Shi in Huangzhou on the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival, or the Moon Festival, of 1076, and sent to his younger brother Su Che. It is a lyric song in the “Water Tune Introduction” 水調歌頭 style.

明月幾時有 When does the bright moon ever shine?
把酒問青天 Holding a cup of wine, I ask the dark blue sky.
不知天上宮闕 I wonder, in the celestial palaces,
今夕是何年 Which year will it be tonight?
我欲乘風歸去 I long to ride the wind and return,
又恐瓊樓玉宇 Yet fear, in those crystal terraces and jade towers,
高處不勝寒 Unbearable is the ethereal cold on high.
起舞弄清影 Now I dance to my own clear shadow,
何似在人間 How is it like in the realm of man!

轉朱閣 Turning around the vermillion loft,
低綺戶 Stooping to a silk-curtained window,
照無眠 Shining on this sleepless one—
不應有恨 You who should have no regret
何事向別時圓 Why do you always fully shine, on broken ties?
人有悲歡離合 At times men are sad or merry, apart or reunited;
月有陰晴圓缺 At times the moon is shadowed or clear, waxing or waning.
此事古難全 Since olden times, such things can never be perfect.
但願人長久 I only wish for a long, long life;
千里共嬋娟 That across a thousand miles, we share the lovely light!

himself indoors, he meditated in a Buddhist temple and read only sutras (Buddhist scriptures; from the Sanskrit for thread) for long moments. It seemed that he reached a state of mental tranquility first by transcending the glory and disgrace of the phenomenal world and subsequently via the catharsis experienced through physical labor and the immediate well-being that that effort engenders. Seclusion also provided him with quiet time for study. Having made remarkable progress in writing, scholarship, calligraphy, and painting, he witnessed his reputation rising in proportion to the harshness of the persecution he suffered. Some of his most famous poetic works were written during this period. A transcendent attitude toward the vicissitudes of life, most famously exhibited in the “Former Rhapsody on the Red Cliff” 前赤壁賦 written in 1082, came to define the image of Su Shi that has persisted since.

The Metropolitan Period
In the year 1084, Shenzong finally reprieved Su Shi by sending a “handwritten edict,” a special form of edicts which circumvented the entire court bureaucracy, and had him transferred to Ruzhou (in modern Henan Province), a city close to the capital. Leery of the intricacies of court politics, Su petitioned for retirement in Changzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province), a request that was granted in the second Chinese lunar month of 1085. Just one month later, Shenzong died at thirty-eight sui. His teenage son Zhézōng 晤宗 (r. 1086–1101) ascended the throne. The custodian of the emperor was his grandmother, Empress Dowager Gāo Taotao (1032–1093), the widow of Yingzong (1032–1067).

The Empress Dowager admired the governance of Renzong—her father-in-law—and was determined to restore his more conservative policies. Sima Guang, by now an octogenarian, ended his retirement at Luoyang, returning to lead the court. Bearing in mind Renzong’s high opinion of the Su brothers, she patronized Su Shi and promoted him swiftly. Within just a few months, he had already been promoted to Secretariat Drafter, a post that empowered him to draft imperial edicts or reject doing so when he deemed the matter improper. His meteoric ascension again made him a target of libel.

Politics during the Yuányòu 元祐 period (1086–1094) was marked by the swift upward and downward mobility of many of those involved in its deadly power clashes. It began with the dyarchy of Sima Guang, who was determined to completely dismantle the “New Policy” reforms, and Zhāng Dūn 章惇 (1035–1105), a beneficiary of those reforms. Zhang was soon expelled. Su Zhe, Su Shi’s beloved younger brother, was now a member of the board of remonstrance. His vehement impeachments resulted in the dismissal of many high-ranking
reformists. Their edicts of reprimand, moreover, were often drafted by the elder Su, whose rhetorical flair frequently added insult to injury. Yet Su Shi was in essence a moderate. His sympathy toward some measures of the reforms did not sway Sima Guang.

In 1086, with the restoration in full swing, Sima Guang died, a mere four months after Wang Anshi’s death. The reformist court immediately splintered into more factions. Anecdotes circulated that Su Shi and Chéng Yí 程颐 (1033–1107)—a rising lǐxué 理学 (known today as Neo-Confucianism) scholar and new tutor to the throne—held each other in disdain. Su Shi was then a Hanlin Academician and would be appointed imperial tutor known as Reader-in-Waiting in 1087. Su Zhe soon joined the tutorial board. The Sus’ scholarship, which recommended pragmatism and historicism, was in stark contrast to the moral philosophy of the Chengs—Cheng Yi and his elder brother, Chéng Hào 程颢 (1032–1085). The constant tension between the two sets of brothers over issues of education and examination resulted in Cheng Yi’s dismissal from the court in the eighth month of 1087. The Sus’ increasing power had also unsettled some of Sima Guang’s followers, dubbed the Shuo Faction 朔派, or “the Northerners.” Though the Empress Dowager remained Su Shi’s unfailing supporter, he was demoralized by the endless strife. So he again petitioned for a provincial post. In the fourth month of 1089, he left the capital to govern Hangzhou once again, an agreeable change for him.

Despite the vicissitudes of politics, Su Shi was enjoying the best period of his life. He took pleasure in the comfort and companionship he found there. He met with many younger protégés, the most prominent of whom were the “Four Scholars”: *Huáng Tíngjiān 黄庭坚 (1045–1105), Qin Guān 秦观 (1049–1100), Cháo Būzhǐ 晁补之 (1053–1110), and Zhāng Lěi 张耒 (1054–1114), who were to become famous poets themselves. Huang would later initiate the highly influential “Jiangxi School” of poetry, representative of the Song style.

Su’s successive provincial tenures were, seemingly, active and pleasant. In Hangzhou (1089–1091) he had silt dredged from the West Lake and built a causeway made of mud, which still bears his name, the Su Causeway. He spent a year (1091–1092) in Yingzhou (in modern Anhui Province) also to de-silt their West Lake. He tried to rid the area of bandits and organized famine relief. In early 1092 he was transferred to Yangzhou (in modern Jiangsu Province), but a mere half year later was again summoned to court, this time to be appointed Minister of War and Reader-in-Waiting.

Su Shi enjoyed governance more than politics. Even on his way back to court, he petitioned repeatedly for a provincial post—to no avail. He was
Shi discovered, had softened the Song troops. In response, he practiced military drills and discipline.

Meanwhile, a storm was gathering at court. The emperor decided to continue with his father’s reforms. Zhang Dun again became Chancellor. In the intercalary fourth month of 1094, an edict arrived at Dingzhou, depriving Su Shi of
his “academician” titles and demoting him to Yingzhou (now Yingde, Guangdong Province). Su Shi’s last decade of exiles thus began.

**Final Exiles to the Far South**

Altogether one hundred and nineteen officials who served in the Yuanyou period were whisked off to remote corners of the empire. On his southward journey, Su Shi came across Su Zhe, who was traveling to Ruzhou. They decided to let Su Shi’s son, Su Mai, bring most members of the family to Yixing (in modern Jiangsu Province). As he was still making his way, Su Shi received another edict banishing him even farther, to Huizhou (in modern Guangdong Province), a semi-barbaric miasmic region. Only his youngest son Su Guo and his faithful concubine, Wáng Zhāoyún 王朝云 (1062–1096), accompanied him. The latter would soon die of subtropical diseases caused by miasma (zhàng 柆).

Curiously, amid his solitude, humiliation, and destitution, Su Shi found peace. Excluded from active governing, he participated in local charity works and sponsored bridge- and aqueduct-construction projects. He modeled himself after Táo Qián 陶潜 (c. 352–427 CE), a reclusive poet, and Gē Hóng 葛洪 (283–343 CE), a Daoist master. He wrote matching poems for the entire poetic corpus of Tao Qian, in the process reinterpreting his exile as not having occurred by force, but by choice—namely, in accordance with his natural inclinations. He practiced alchemy (for health reasons), and occasionally entertained the idea of becoming an “immortal.” He eventually built a house on Mt. Luofu. In the second month of 1097, Su Mai brought the rest of the family to permanently reside with Su Shi. Barely two months later, however, another edict arrived that banished Su Shi, yet again, this time farther across the strait to Danzhou (in modern Hainan Province). Thinking that there would be no further chance to return from exile, he brought only Su Guo with him.

In the far-less civilized Danzhou, Su Shi filled his solitude with classical scholarship. In 1099 he finished a commentary on the *Classic of Changes* (I Ching or Yìjìng 《易經》), a project which had been started by his father, Su Xun, and was complemented later by Su Zhe, thus illustrating the full spectrum of the Su family’s scholarship. The defining voice, however, is Su Shi’s. Su Shi declared this work, together with a commentary on the *Analects* written during his exile in Huangzhou and a commentary on the *Classic of Documents* (Shūjìng 《尚書》), to be the source of his greatest intellectual pride. For twenty-first century intellectual historians, Su’s commentaries represent an alternative tradition to that of lixue, defined by the Chens and later by the inimitable thinker, *Zhū Xi 朱熹* (1130–1200).

While enduring the isolation of Hainan, the poems Su Shi wrote there were nevertheless widely disseminated
on the mainland. Their central theme was a celebration of his acceptance of his fate. But then, yet another wave from afar reached him: Emperor Renzong died in the first month of 1100, at the age of only twenty-five sui, leaving no heir. His brother Zhào Jí 趙佶 (1082–1135; r. 1100–1135) succeeded the throne, and would be known as Huīzōng 徽宗, a fine painter and calligrapher whose tutelage would bring the empire’s downfall to the Khitans. In the general amnesty celebrating Huizong’s enthronement, Su Shi returned from Hainan, taking his time to decide where to retire. His long-unseen hometown was too far away, so he finally opted for Changzhou, where he owned some estates. He followed the waterway from Jiangxi to Jiangsu, succumbing to the hot weather and difficult journey. He died of illness soon after he arrived at Changzhou, in August 1101.

Su Shi’s Influence

Su Shi has left an impressive and diverse legacy in literature, classical studies, calligraphy, painting, and aesthetics.

High-register poetry since the Late Tang, generally speaking, had become increasingly reflective, referential, argumentative, and socially oriented. Su Shi’s poetry is representative of this tendency and, because of its sheer gravitas, instrumental in its development. Yet he was also able to imbue a touch of freedom and spontaneity into such learned poetry, making it, at the same time, referential and expressive. Since his death, his poetry has continued to be broadly read throughout East Asia and from Mongolia to Korea and Japan.

Su Shi’s talent was also one of breaking boundaries. This he also did in his lyric-song poetry, a genre traditionally written in a feminine voice intended to be sung by singing girls. Su Shi’s discursive and masculine lyric songs therefore initiated the “heroic abandon” (háofàng 豪放) tradition in this genre, contributing also to an increase in its register.

His classical scholarship constituted a unique intellectual tradition that emphasized the pursuit of Dao (or “the Way”) through a diversity of cultural accomplishments and empirical experiences, in contrast to the singular emphasis of the Song dynasty’s lixue 学 school on the moral learning.

Compared to his well-preserved corpus of writing, much of Su Shi’s artwork, of equally important influence, did not survive. A dozen extant calligraphic works and two paintings are credited to him. These works seemingly testify to his aesthetic theory. Su believed that art was to be used as a means to pursue Dao, and that artistic spontaneity can be achieved only after the artist has first internalized rules and skills, and then, at the moment of execution, he sinks into active oblivion and creates in the seeming absence of intentionality. Su Shi’s calligraphic works betray a temporality and seem to constitute an extension of their author’s existence. His painting
theory similarly emphasizes expression rather than representation. His ethical-aesthetics established the foundation for “literati art” that recommends learned simplicity and practiced spontaneity, a style that would fully mature only two centuries later.

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Further Reading


