

Su Shi

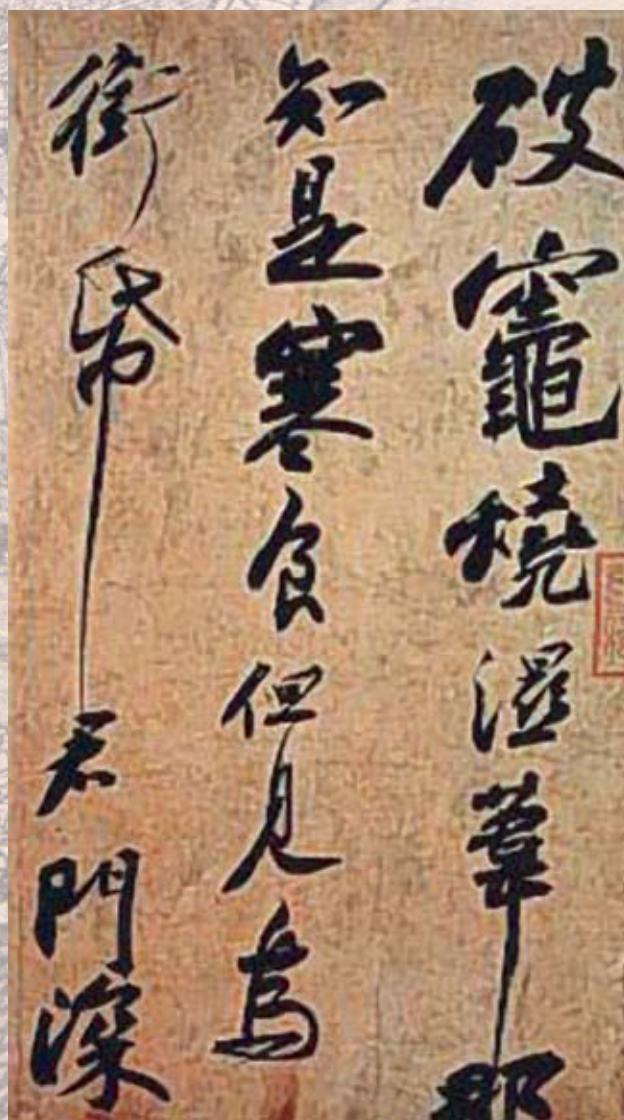
Sū Shi 苏轼

1037–1101 Northern Song dynasty scholar-official

Su Shi was perhaps the most renowned scholar-official of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126), with pathbreaking accomplishments in several aesthetic fields, including all major genres of poetry (*shi*, *ci*, and *fu*), old-style prose (*guwen*), calligraphy, painting, and even cuisine.

Su Shi was the renaissance man of what was arguably the renaissance in Chinese intellectual and cultural history of the tenth and eleventh centuries. This period marked a threshold in Chinese history with the rise of the scholar-official class empowered by a merit-based examination system, new infrastructures of travel that made the new scholar-official elite a mobile and cosmopolitan class, and an intellectual revival of Confucianism that encouraged this new class to conceive of itself as “co-rulers” of the empire alongside the emperor. However, Su Shi’s most enduring impact on the Chinese literary tradition was the way he responded to the challenges of displacement in official travel and exile through his literary works.

Su Shi was born in the southwestern mountain town of Meishan (Sichuan Province). In 1057 at the age of twenty-one he traveled with his father, Su Xun (1009–1066), and younger brother, Su Che (1039–1112), to the capital, Kaifeng, in the north to take the official examination. Su Shi placed second in this highly competitive exam and thereby came to the attention of Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), the chief examiner and a major political



An example of Su Shi’s calligraphy.

reformer of the time. Many groups of scholar-officials sought to have their visions for “ordering the world” implemented by the court, but the day was won by Wang Anshi (1021–1086), who advocated a set of “New Policies,” a kind of state socialism that sought to build up the central government’s wealth and military strength vis-à-vis its nomadic neighbors to the north. Su Shi’s outspoken opposition to some of the inadvertent ill effects of these policies on the local populace caused him to be sidelined to a series of provincial appointments. In addition to directly criticizing the New Policies, Su wrote satirical poems addressed to his allies to voice his protest. He was arrested in 1079 on a trumped-up charge of high treason and was subjected to the “Crow Terrace Poetry Trial” in which his literary works were gathered and examined for treasonous passages. After one hundred days, a death sentence was commuted to an open-ended exile to the Huangzhou (Hubei Province) in the central Yangzi (Chang) River valley. This five-year period of exile (1080–1084) was a time of intense self-reflection and Buddhist practice for Su Shi during which many of his greatest literary works were written. Su Shi sustained himself during his exile by farming a plot of land known as the “Eastern Slope,” and it was from this plot of land that he took the name “Layman of the East Slope.” The death of Emperor Shenzong and the regency of the Grand Empress Dowager (Shenzong’s mother) brought the return of Su Shi and other opponents of the New Policies to the capital. During this brief period Su Shi wrote the greatest number of “poems on paintings” (*tihua shi*). These poems, along with his prose writings on the arts of the brush, crystallized the theories of literati painting, including the idea that painting possesses the same expressive capacity as poetry. The ascent of Shenzong’s son, Zhezong, to the throne in 1093 led to the restoration of the New Policies administration of his father, and Su Shi was exiled for a second time to the distant south, first to Huizhou (Guangzhou Province) from 1094 to 1096 and then to Qiongzhou (Hainan Island) from 1097 to 1100. Although he was allowed to return to the mainland in 1101 in order to take a post in his home province, he fell ill and died on the road home.

Shi poetry was a classical form of verse written in lines of five or seven characters, organized in couplets with rhyme falling on the even numbered lines, with roots stretching back to the Zhou dynasty (1100–256 BCE). By the Tang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties,



An illustration of Su Shi. Lamenting the flood season in one of his poems, Su Shi wrote: “The spring river wants to pour through the window, the force of the rain is unrelenting.”

shi had become perhaps the highest ranking genre of poetry and the ability to compose *shi* became one of the criteria by which candidates for employment in public office were chosen. As such, *shi* poetry became associated with literati expressions of commitment to the affairs of the state. Su Shi's *shi* poetry continued within this tradition, but his *shi* poems had a strong philosophical and discursive or prosaic flavor, as was characteristic of Song dynasty *shi* poetry. In his *shi* poetry, like his ancient-style prose, he developed a style that embodied both spontaneity and objectivity, emphasizing the images of flowing water and the moon that represent the continuity or pattern (*li*) that he discovered within change.

He also took up the song lyric (*ci*), a genre of poetry quite unlike *shi* poetry in both form and generic status. The song lyric was a form of verse of relatively low generic status written within the format of popular songs, often characterized by uneven line lengths and more colloquial language, and was associated with urban entertainment quarters, the female performers who sung them, and the themes of delicate emotions and romantic love. Su Shi elevated the status of this popular song lyric by expanding its topics to include aspects of public life that were formerly the domain of *shi* poetry. While he wrote song lyrics on romance and the more delicate emotions, he also expanded the thematic scope of the song lyric to focus on longing for place and for like-minded historical figures of the past.

Su Shi was a scholar-official of multifaceted accomplishments who drew the full range of poetic genres and

art forms into the common repertoire of literati aesthetic pursuit while leaving the indelible imprint of his own signature style on each.

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