

Su Shi's Poems and the Dilemma of Chinese Traditional Scholars

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Abstract: Su Shi's poems are most bold and unconstrained, and grand and magnificent among Song Poems. But Su Shi's official career had lots of ups and downs and was full of complications, and he felt frustrated. Throughout Su Shi's life, his literary talent in poems and official career just reflect the dilemma of traditional Chinese scholars. Su Shi's talent and personality were unparalleled, but his destiny was dark, he was very depressed and unable to achieve his ambition. The research reflects the dilemma of Chinese traditional scholars in ancient times through the analysis of Su Shi's poems, reveals the real situation of ancient Chinese scholars, and analyzes the aspiration expression dilemma of poetry art.

Key words: Su Shi; poems; traditional scholars; dilemma

Introduction

Su Shi's fame was widespread for his peerless talent. He enjoyed success when young, met with mishap at middle age and was demoted in his twilight years. His life was full of ups and downs. Although he did not live under others' thumb and adhered to the life philosophy of scholars, he could not pay attention to his own moral uplift without thought of others. In a sense, Su Shi is the epitome of Chinese traditional scholars, he was talented but unsuccessful, profoundly learned and had no place to make use of political wisdom. Eventually, he could only abandon himself to poems. Su Shi was lucky. He lived in the Song Dynasty, when the government didn't kill literati and officialdom and intellectuals had the most freedom to express their ideas, but he still encountered the censorate poetry case. When disappointed in his official career, Su Shi continued to enhance his literature and became one of the poets most influential to Chinese culture by virtue of his poetic achievements. Su Shi had composed more than 3,000 poems in his life and he took first in transforming Tang poems into Song poems and made immortal contributions to Chinese culture. Reviewing Su Shi's poems from the historical dimension of scholar class and culture can not only provide new ideas to the research of Chinese poetry culture, but also be beneficial to re-understand Chinese scholars in the era.

1.Literary expression of Su Shi's poems

1.1The expression of aspiration by poems

In Sushi's poems, there is heavy use of aspiration expression, which in essence shows Sushi's ambition of caring the world. In *Patio Spring, Lonely House with Dim Oil Lamp*, Su Shi's feelings were stirred up by the scenery and he remembered the past and the hardships and misfortunes in his life, "I croon alone on the horse, it is silent around and a lot of past events rise in my mind." At that time, a myriad of thoughts crowded into Su Shi's mind, and he was tortured by his failure in achieving his ambition. However, in the section of the poem, Su Shi remembered the time when he and his younger brother were together in Chang'an. "Fortunately, I have magic pen in hand, nimble thread of ideas in writing and thousands of volumes of poems and books in mind. I think I can assist the emperor to become a great man like Yao and Shun, and my career is bound to be successful." With his talent, Su Shi could compose thousands of poems and make the people live happily and wealthily. This is not difficult for him. Although he had the lofty sentiment and aspiration of assisting Yao and Shun, there was no opportunity for him to show his talent in reality. The Northern Song Dynasty was long struggled in the conflicts between parties, and Su Shi had no chance to show his talent. He could only devote himself to poetry, but could not promote to a strong position to win public recognition. Su Shi had no alternative but to give up his preference. In *Hu Cizi Rhythm in Deshan, Fuchou*, he implicitly expressed his lofty aim: "Why are you reluctant to leave your former residence? How can brutal people tolerate you?" He hoped that one day he could make full use of what he learned and ride on the crest of success. Obviously, as a typical traditional scholar, Su Shi's

ambition was to cultivate himself, regulate the home, rule the country, and achieve peace in the world, not to achieve high post with matched salary, which can be clearly seen from his poem *"Parted with Ziyu at the west gate of Zhengzhou on November 19th of Xinchou Year, composed a poem on the horse for him"*. In the poem, he wrote: "I hope you don't forget the significance of your early retire." In order to achieve his ambition, he had to accept the ups and downs in the officialdom and endure the tribulation without losing his heart.

1.2The expression of firm and persistent personality by poems

Su Shi suffered a lot of hardships in his life and faced the choice of living and death many times, but he made clean breast and even sought joy amid sorrow. For example, in twilight years, he was exiled farther and farther, he wrote *Zongbi* in Huizhou: "Everyone knows that Mr.Su is sleeping soundly. The Taoist priest in the temple gently rings the bell early in the morning in order not to wake up him". With the up hills and down dales and thousands of miles on the journey, Su Shi lived a displaced life, he was acclimatized and felt mentally and physically exhausted. The then Huizhou had no big difference from those remote places beyond civil influence, so Su Shi could hardly eat meat and even had to grow vegetables to earn a living. His life was a world of difference from that when he was the teacher of the emperor. But he still wrote in his poem that he could sleep peacefully even in the poor conditions in Lingnan. This poem brought disaster to him, and he was demoted to a real uncivilized place, Hainan. In this place, he can also leave a famous poem: "If I can eat 300 lychees every day, I am willing to be a Lingnan local". This thought of joy in spite of everything is not only what Mencius said "be born at hardship, died of happiness", but also the spirit of striving to transcend realistic difficulties with the spiritual world. In *Crossing the Sea on the Night of June 20*, Su Shi expressed such thought more clearly. He wrote, "I don't hate the near escape I experienced in Lingnan, it is the greatest adventure in my life and brings me unprecedented new feelings." This also embodies the resolute character and indomitable spirit of ancient Chinese scholars. Su Shi interpreted Mencius' words: "When heaven is about to place a great responsibility on a great man, it always first frustrates his spirit and will, exhausts his muscles and bones, exposes him to starvation and poverty".

1.3The expression of profound insights to life by poems

In *Remember Past Times with Ziyu at Shengchi*, he sighed with emotion, "What is life like? It should be like the swan goose tramping on snow slush." This poem reflects profound philosophy of life and expresses the thoughts of Confucian school, Taoist school and Buddhism with two lines of seven characters. The affairs of the world are inconstant, life is but a dream, life is cyclic, and things are easy to disappear. Great undertakings of lasting importance in the world will eventually turn to dust. No matter how great a man's vision is, or how many books or theories he wrote or set up, or he had held the world in awe, what he left in the long river of history is just footprint destined to be covered or melted, just like the swan goose tramping on snow slush. In *West River Moon, Affairs of Human Life like a Big Dream*, Su Shi wrote, "The affairs of human life like a big dream, life is several cycles of the four seasons", which deeply expresses his insights to life. In *The Poem of Jiaobei Yue*, Su Shi completely expressed his understanding of life, that is, "I became an official when I was young, with the ambition to help others; when I entered later years, I was weary of wondering and sight-seeing and had no intention to make friends. ", which shows Su Shi's a series of insights from making contributions to seeing through human life.

2.The dilemma of Chinese traditional scholars reflected in Su Shi's poems

2.1From caring the world to improving oneself

In *Prelude To Water Melody* (Anshi in the East China Sea), Su Shi wrote that "once accomplished both success and fame, I will retire to the country". Retire after winning merit is the ideal of Zhuge Liang and other traditional scholars. After they made immortal achievements, they chose to retire from the world. However, in the history, the ideal of retire after winning merit did not exist in reality for Chinese scholars. Zhuge Liang was the closest to the ideal. During the three visits to the cottage, he told his family to be prepared to return to cultivate land in the future, but he sacrificed before achieving triumph. In history, from Zhang Liang to Liu Ji, they retired to run away from calamity, they were afraid of jeopardizing the emperor's position and causing fatal disaster. In order to elude empire Goujian, Fan Li sailed across the five lakes. Xie An was afraid that emperor Xiaowu of Jin would be suspicious and jealous of him, so he

retired many times. The Seven Sages were unwilling to associate with evils, so they didn't become officials. Liu Ji's final retire didn't bring him a good ending in exchange. Bai Juyi concerned everyone in the world in his early years, but he awoke in his declining years. In *Shi and Ziyou composed four poems of four lines respectively in last spring and summer and when autumn turned into winter*, Su Shi wrote, "Except for the good fortune in love affairs, my life experience and thoughts are like Bai Juyi." Su Shi's lifetime explains the dilemma from caring the world to improving himself. When he first arrived in Huangzhou, he wrote, "I feel ashamed that I contributed nothing, but the government paid for my wine bag." This shows that he still wanted to serve his country and did not want to fiddle about. He even dared to compose the poem "Today's scenery is hideous, the county officials press for payment of rental and knock at the door at night", which satirizes the then politics tartly. When in Huangzhou, although Su Shi did not change his ambition, he began to look back at his past mistakes and introspect himself. He even intended to buy farmland and plough to spend his remaining years. In *The Travel to Xishan Temple in Hanxi, Wuchang*, he mentioned that "I have made up my mind to buy farmland, and the spring water is suitable for making wine. I need a bamboo forest, and I will build a well deep in it." Because he farmed in Dongpo, he gained the name Su Dongpo.

2.2Lofty aspirations depleted in reality

In the early years of entering the official career, Su Shi showed high sense of responsibility of the scholar-officials, and thought that he could realize his ambition. But it is only an ideal state "Whether I can be promoted to an important position depends on the current situation, and it is up to me whether to go into the society". Actually, Su Shi's life was the least bit not from person. In the conflict between old and new parties, Su Shi's lofty aspirations were depleted, and he even showed that he could hardly bear the heavy load. He expressed his yearning for Tao Yuanming's life in his poems. In his twilight years, he wrote one hundred poems more than Tao Yuanming, and in his lifetime, he composed nearly one thousand poems with replying rhyme, which follow the style of Tao Yuanming. In *The Comments on Han Liu's Poems*, he wrote, "it is withered outside but abundant inside, plain in appearance but beautiful in fact." Su Shi highly praised Tao Yuanming not merely from the literary perspective, just as he said, "Did I only appreciate Yuanming's poems?I also have emotional resonance with him". In *Yuanming, the Scholar in the East*, he even wrote, "I am Yuanming, Yuanming is me." He showed this thought more clearly in *Jiang Shenzi* and regarded Yuanming as his prelife, "I wake up when drunk from dream. Yuanming, he is my prelife." In fact, Tao Yuanming's unwilling to bow to the superior in order to get the scanty pay is only an ideal state, the vast majority of scholars in ancient China would not leave office because they refuse to bribe superiors or hate the ugliness of officialdom. Tao Yuanming dared to leave, as he had noble moral character and proper pride, besides, his talent gained a world reputation, so he had the confidence to challenge the assistant to the prefecture head. But how could those scholars at the bottom layer incapable of making a living independently fight against reality? Obviously, they could not deal with their basic necessities of life merely with the mental strength of Confucianism. Hence, even the great litterateur like Su Shi, the once important official in the court, did not dare to resign from office and could only be demoted all the way.

2.3Contradiction and transcendence

Since ancient times, Chinese scholars' circle had been in contradictions. They wanted to transcend reality, pursue the realm of sages and men of virtue, integrate knowledge with action and practice benevolent government according to doctrine of Confucius and Mencius. But the feudal monarchs could never realize Mencius' wish that the people are more important than the ruler. They could only adopt the Legalism's system and govern the country in the guise of Confucianism. Although Shang Yang trapped himself in a hard situation by institutional reform and Li Si cut his own throat by practicing Han Fei's political reform, it was not Mencius' policy of benevolence that finally unified the six countries, but the despotic rule of the first emperor. The lofty ideal always need to face the reality. The Confucians emphasized inner cultivation but ignored the pressure on people from external environment. Scholars were not only officials, but also intellectuals. They were always in contradictions between undertaking social responsibility, pleading for the people and obeying the orders from upper bureaucrats and promotion. Therefore, Su Shi sighed with emotion: "Scholars have not regarded the national affairs as their own duty for a long time!" This in fact sums up the dilemma of scholars, "In the face of major events, they seldom adhere to their morality and justice", because it is extremely difficult

for "ministers to serve the emperor with the Tao". Therefore, they could hardly surpass Confucius' Tao. Meanwhile, it is more difficult to realize the "Tao is superior to power" put forward by Mencius in a society with monarchical power supremacy.

3.The root cause of scholars' dilemma

The most essential cause of "Scholars have not regarded the national affairs as their own duty for a long time" lies in the system of monarchical power supremacy. Sage emperor and wise courtiers is only an ideal state. Only when the emperor was enlightened, could they practice Tao. The lofty ideal of traditional scholars lacked binding force, all depended on the efforts of people, that is, from the emperor to common people, they were all based on self-cultivation. But in front of the supreme authority of the emperor, scholars could hardly keep to the moral defense line. Throughout the Chinese history, talents were most prosperous in the Three Kingdoms Period. Kong Rong, Yang Xiu and Mi Heng were celebrated for their literary talent, but none of them died a natural death. Although Shang Yang trapped himself by practicing institutional reform, more tragedies came from Han Fei's burning Confucianist's books and clarifying decrees. Chinese traditional scholars, especially those with independent thoughts, often lived in panic, and self-conceited and insolent scholars may cause disaster by careless talk. The censorate poetry case is a typical example. In the Song Dynasty, when the academic research was highly free, scholars were unable to express their aspirations. This kind of suppression reached its peak in the Ming Dynasty, and the intellectuals' creativity was exhausted under the system of official selection by stereotyped writing, and they could only spend their life in the boring word game of eight-part essay. Therefore, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, splendid poetry culture of the Tang and Song dynasties was seldom seen. The imagination of poems was restricted under the majesty of the emperor, and scholars tried to follow the theories of Confucius and Mencius and limit monarchical power. In the period of Emperor Xiaozong, eunuch He Wending entered the forbidden palace and wanted to kill the royal uncle Zhang Heling with his sword. During the royal court's trial, he was asked who instigated him. He refused to answer and the emperor had no way, because Confucius and Mencius inspired his loyalty and filial piety. This made a lot of scholars feel deeply ashamed, their moral courage was not a patch on an eunuch. In the Qing Dynasty, Zeng Guofan, the minister who made the major contribution to reviving, chatted with people only on poems and avoided government affairs, so as to cultivate himself with poems and play safe.

The other cause is the reality of survival problem. One shall have his peace of mind when he possesses a piece of land. The traditional scholars all occupied a post, they did not cultivate but had food, didn't do business but profited, didn't produce but enjoyed products. In the pre-Qin times, the basic necessities of life of scholars came from people who supported them. For example, Mr. Mengchang provided good food, carriage and house to Feng Xuan. After the Qin and Han dynasties, the government exerted increasingly strong control over the support for scholars, scholars began to render a service to the country, and the imperial examination system was the best way for promotion. Since the scholars got a salary from the country, their right to independently express opinions was restricted. If they were poor and could not make a living, they may even lose their dignity because they stayed in a humble position for a long time. For example, Gongsun Hong, the high-ranking official under the rule of Emperor Wu, abandoned the tradition of traditional scholars' admonition in order to promote to the position of prime minister. The reality is like a strike at the head, scholars could only seek freedom in poems, but there was no freedom in poems. Even Su Shi would have the anxiety of seeking a livelihood, "There was hunger in the mountain forest since ancient times, and being reluctant to retire without land is too greedy." He even thought about how Tao Yuanming dealt with the famine of farming. "but I am afraid that Tao Yuanming was often perplexed by hunger." He also admitted that, in terms of survival problem, scholars preferred high official positions and riches than moral aspirations: "When heroes were haggard, they seek food when hungry and drink when thirsty, and scholarly honour ranks first."

Conclusion

Su Shi realized early the fact that "Scholars have not regarded the national affairs as their own duty for a long time", but his strong consciousness of taking Confucianism as the fundamental made him always want to care the world. However,

in the era of supreme monarchical power, his aspiration could not be achieved. Hence, Su Shi could only turn to poems, so as to seek consolation and sustenance and express his unrealized aspirations.

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