


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Older and Younger Brothers: Su Shi and Su Zhe

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## Abstract

Here we have a pair of brothers whose relationship is known to us primarily through the hundreds of poems they exchanged with each other through their lives, during which they spent more time apart than together. To have a relationship rooted in literary work this way was not unusual in Chinese life. What was unusual was the fame these particular brothers attained, even while still alive. This article explores the nature of the brothers' relationship as best we can discern it through their actions and what they wrote to each other, including their mutual affection, disagreements, and competition. Their lives were played out against a backdrop of high office, empire-wide renown, and political persecution. We see that their relationship to each other was in some ways the most enduring and sustaining aspect of their lives, even when their ultimate ideal of spending their final days together went unrealized.

**Keywords:** Su Shi; Su Zhe; brothers; fraternal affection; hierarchy; competition

“Brothers” (*xiongdi* 兄弟) is one of the five cardinal relationships in Chinese thought and society, joining with ruler–subject, husband–wife, father–son, and friends to fill out the five. Three of the other four (all except that between friends) are hierarchical relations, and “brothers” is too, since one is bound in Chinese to say “older brother” and “younger brother,” rather than putting them on the same footing. This introduces an element of precedence and distinction into the fraternal relationship, from which it rarely manages to be freed.

So it is with the example of famous historical brothers to be examined in this essay, the brothers Su: Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), the elder, and Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112), the younger. As exceptional as the pair was in many respects, in one trait they typified the fraternal relationship of their culture: there was never really any question of whose star shone more brightly. Su Zhe lived out his life largely in his elder brother's shadow. The few attempts by their own contemporaries to argue otherwise, which we encounter here and there, only serve to remind us how dominant and persistent was the view of Su Shi as the more formidable one of the pair, whether in thought, literary work, or deed. We could, of course, find examples in Chinese history of brothers who contradict this presumed ranking, in which the younger one outperforms his elder in the eyes of their contemporaries and of posterity, for example the Three Kingdoms period military strategist Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234) and his much less famous older

brother Zhuge Jin 諸葛瑾 (174–241), or the great fourth-century calligrapher Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386) and his vastly less prominent six elder brothers. But those are exceptional cases. Nevertheless, despite having to go through his life as “Dongpo’s younger brother,” as Su Shi himself once dubbed Su Zhe (see below), that younger brother was also a person of real achievement. We will try to reconstruct something of Su Zhe’s own distinctive voice and personality in the pages that follow, and to see how he coped with the role of being “younger brother” to a giant of a man.

Do we study a particular case of a cardinal human relationship because it is typical or atypical? We are attracted to the topic of “brothers” because it has broad significance in the native culture (as with all the relationships treated in this issue), but we choose the example to treat in detail because, beyond what it illustrates about the nature of that relationship in the culture generally, it has special interest; it stands out. Both hold true with these Su brothers. The two of them together enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame because of early brilliance on the civil service examinations, and thereafter their promotion to high office, their encounter of hostility owing to political factionalism, their repeated demotion and exile, followed each time by reinstatement—in all of these respects their lives moved in tandem and reinforced the perception that the two were inseparable. In this they may be said to exemplify the special bond assumed to exist between brothers. But the official eminence (and controversy) that they experienced, and even more important, the repute they enjoyed in the eyes of their world, not only among intellectuals and literati but even among less-than-elite admirers, these set them apart from any other pair of brothers in their day.<sup>1</sup>

Our impression of the relationship between the two Su brothers is one that rests almost entirely upon poetry they exchanged, usually across great distances. It need not have been this way. We can imagine their relationship being rooted in other phenomena. The common perception of them might have sprung from actions that the brothers performed jointly or one for the other. Or it might have been based on other kinds of writing they exchanged, such as letters or even more intellectual writings they produced jointly. In fact they did exchange letters, but only a handful survive, and they did divvy up the canonical Confucian classics and write commentaries on them, but those commentaries are either lost or not much read in later times. It is the poetry they wrote to each other, in three standard forms (*shi* 詩, *ci* 詞, and *fu* 賦), that captured people’s attention, at the time and through later centuries. That poetry is still available for us to read today.

Poetry is well-suited to capture and transmit a sense of the mutual affection between two persons. Poetry is the expression of sentiment in the Chinese tradition, and it is also presumed to be inextricable from personal experience, thus to be infused with deep purpose and with genuineness of intent. Poetry that expresses sentimental attachment between male friends (including devotion, commiseration, nostalgia, loneliness, and even admonition) is legion in Chinese literary history. In early times, we think of verses purportedly exchanged by the Han compatriots Li Ling 李陵 (150–74 BCE) and Su Wu 蘇武 (140–60 BCE) during their Xiongnu captivity. In the Tang, we think of all the affection conveyed in verses exchanged by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Yuan

<sup>1</sup>For a recent study of Su Shi and Su Zhe, which concentrates on textual studies of their writings, see Zhu Gang 朱剛, *Su Shi Su Zhe yanjiu* 蘇軾蘇轍研究 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2019). For a more general and topical study of Su Shi, see the same author’s *Su Shi shijiang* 蘇軾十講 (Shanghai: Sanlian, 2020). For a general English-language study of Su Shi’s life and writings, see my *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1994).

Zhen 元稹 (779–831), as well as the earlier exchanges between Wang Wei 王維 (699–761) and Pei Di 裴迪 (b. 716), Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) and Li Bai 李白 (701–762, a very one-sided exchange), and countless others.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in the Su brothers' own century, we think of the friendships sustained in poems sent back and forth between Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–1060), and Su Shunqin 蘇舜欽 (1008–1048).<sup>3</sup> We can also think of examples of affection expressed poetically between brothers (Wang Wei and his younger brother Wang Jin 王績, or Bai Juyi and his younger brother Bai Xingjian 白行簡, 776–826), but such fraternal friendships seem not so many or so memorable. Why? In the case of brothers, there was a limiting factor, a constraint. Because it was so prestigious, poetry had something of a public face. A man's poetry collection was in many cases what he left behind at the end of his life; it is how posterity would know him. There was often, consequently, some reluctance to write about private matters, especially those within one's immediate family. If we look, for example, for expressions of personal sentiment between husband and wife in poetry collections, or between father and son for that matter, more often than not we come up empty-handed. Such expression was generally deemed inappropriate to put into writings that would probably circulate publicly sooner or later. So too with fraternal relationships. The Su brothers crossed this line; this constraint apparently meant nothing to them. They freely expressed their affection and concern for each other over and over in poems they exchanged, knowing full well that these writings would eventually circulate (if not immediately). To this day in Chinese societies the best-known poem capturing Mid-Autumn Moon Festival sentiments, when one thinks fondly of home and distant loved ones, is a song lyric (*ci* 詞) that Su Shi sent to Su Zhe in 1076, expressing regret that the two found themselves apart once again on this festival day.<sup>4</sup> These brothers excelled at crafting verse about their own relationship that was highly effective and affecting. We might say, then, that their fame as a fraternal pair owes as much to the distinctive nature, quantity, and effectiveness of the poetry they exchanged as it does to anything truly distinctive in their relationship with each other (which would be difficult if not impossible for us to gauge, in any case). As for effectiveness, we should recall that the elder brother is widely regarded as the greatest literary talent of the entire Song period (and one of the top talents of all of Chinese literary history), so it is not surprising that poems full of feeling he addressed to his brother have lasting appeal.

### Brothers as best friends

This is a pair of brothers, separated by only two years in age, who come across to us as best friends. This itself is unusual. Not that it was rare for brothers to develop deep affection and understanding for each other, but that, given the constraint mentioned above, it was unusual for brothers to convey those feelings so openly or so frequently

<sup>2</sup>On friendship in Tang poetry, see the full-length study by Anna Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge, MA: Asia Center, Harvard University, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>For a study of the social functions of poetry exchanges among these and other mid-Northern Song literati, see Colin Hawes, *The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song: Emotional Energy and Literati Cultivation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Su Shi, "Shuidiao getou: mingyue jishi you" 水調歌頭：明月幾時有, *Su Shi ciji jiaozhu* 蘇軾詞集校注, in vol. 9 of *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu* 蘇軾全集校注, ed. Zhang Zhilie 張志烈 et al., 20 vols. (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin, 2010), 1.161.

in their writings. The issue of brother as friend, even as best friend, comes up explicitly in Su Shi's writing. Three times, in different poems, Su Shi uses the phrase "a single Ziyou" 一子由 (Ziyou being Su Zhe's *zi* and the way Su Shi usually referred to him) in the sense of "my one true friend." For example, "Apart from this I have only a single Ziyou / in office and out, we stagger about together" (此外一子由, 出處同徧僮).<sup>5</sup> The "this" in this couplet is Su Shi's winecup, which he is addressing here. It is tempting to say that any such claim uttered by Su Shi is patently untrue. Su Shi was a famously sociable person who had a large number of friends (not to mention a far larger number of admirers and would-be friends). And yet in Su Shi's mind, at least, Ziyou (Su Zhe) clearly occupied a special place. This may be the effect of peculiar biographical circumstances.

The two of them grew up together in their hometown of Meishan (Emei, Sichuan), the only two brothers in their family. They made a dramatic entrance upon the social and political world together, at a youthful age, when their father brought them from their native Shu to the capital of Kaifeng to take the *jìnshì* examinations. Years later, Su Shi wrote of this period: "At the age of twenty I had no friends, / within the four seas there was only a single Ziyou" (我年二十無朋儔, 當時四海一子由).<sup>6</sup> Their lengthy journey from Shu to the capital, the weeks they spent holed up together preparing for the examinations in the spring of 1057, their exceptional joint success on the exams (both placed in the highest rank), their seclusion again three years later when preparing for the special decree exam the two of them were given—these would all be frequently recalled nostalgically in their poems of later years.

As celebrated as their early examination successes were, there were soon also other experiences, joyless ones, that must have reinforced their bonding and cemented a life-long intimacy. Between 1057 and 1066, the brothers lost both of their parents. Those deaths meant that Su Shi and Su Zhe had to make the long journey from the capital back to Meishan twice, to observe the parental mourning period (each leg of this journey, whether going west to Meishan or east back to Kaifeng, took approximately three months). The first of these journeys was for the death of their mother right after their exam success, when the brothers accompanied their father back to Meishan. The three-some did not return to the capital until 1060 (after the two-plus years of mourning ended). Their father died in the capital six years later. This necessitated a second return to Meishan, taking their father's remains with them, and a second mourning period. The brothers did not return to the capital until early 1069. In other words, over a twelve year period, from 1057 to 1069 (for Su Shi, from age 20 to 32), the brothers were together most of the time, and were engaged in solemn family duties. These years are not the topic of nostalgic reminiscences in their later poetry, but they must have had a profound impact upon the brothers' lives and common bond.

Su Shi would live another thirty-two years after their return to the capital in 1069, that is until 1101 (Su Zhe would live another forty-three, until 1112). During that time, the brothers were seldom in the same place. They were together for an extended amount of time only once, the three years of early Yuanyou (1086 through 1088), when they both held high posts in the capital. Aside from those years, the brothers saw each other just a few times, sometimes meeting for no more than a few days when one of

<sup>5</sup>Su Shi, "He Tao lianyu duyin ershou" 和陶連日獨飲二首, no. 1, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu* 蘇軾詩集校注, in vols. 1–8 of *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu*, 41.4858.

<sup>6</sup>Su Shi, "Song Chao Meishu fayun yousi nianxiang fuque" 送晁美叔發運右司年兄赴闕, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu* 35.4029.

**Table 1.** Poems Exchanged by Su Shi and Su Zhe

	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>F</i>
	poems addressed to brother	total output of poems	column <i>a</i> as percentage of column <i>b</i>	number of 次韻 poems in column <i>a</i>	number of 和 poems in column <i>a</i> <sup>a</sup>	columns <i>d</i> plus <i>e</i> as percentage of column <i>a</i>
Su Shi	216	2824	7.6	63	44	49.5
Su Zhe	309	1854	16.6	174	77	81.2

a. The two types of response poems, *heshi* 和詩 and *ciyunshi* 次韻詩, have different histories, but in the Su brothers' works the two are formally similar: both require the response poem (by the second poet) to use the same rhyme words as the original poem (by the first poet) and in the same sequence. Because of earlier convention, there remains some expectation that the *heshi* will stick closer in theme and sentiment to the original poem, while more license is permitted in the *ciyun*, although this distinction is not always sustained in practice.

the two was *en route* to a new provincial post or a new exile destination. Basically, then, in the second half of their lives, the brothers were mostly separated, and often several years passed without any reunion. For example, they did not see each other for seven years during the 1070s, when both held various provincial posts. After 1089 they met only twice, once for a few days in 1094, when Su Shi was on his way into exile at Huizhou, and again in 1097, when they managed to travel for a month together into new and harsher exiles in Leizhou (Su Zhe) and Hainan Island (Su Shi); that was the last time they ever met. Regardless, after the two entered the decade of their thirties, actual meetings were no longer essential to sustain their relationship. By then each had become a defining presence in the other's life and self-identity. Their personalities complemented each other; the trajectory of their official careers also moved in tandem. Su Zhe was twice sent into exile because of his association with his more outspoken and even reckless older brother. Although rarely in each other's presence during these decades, the two maintained a steady stream of communication through the poems they exchanged, no matter how far apart they were or what exigencies they faced in daily life.<sup>7</sup>

### The poetry exchange

We know that it is not just the number of poems Su Shi and Su Zhe exchanged that matters, it is what they expressed in those poems that readers remember. Still, quantity is not of negligible importance. A few points jump out. **Table 1** shows the number of poems the brothers addressed to each other, as well as the number of poems written "in response" to an earlier poem one had received from the other (the figures are based on complete *shi* poems of the two men as preserved today in *The Complete Song Poetry* 全宋詩).<sup>8</sup> Of course, these figures are only an approximation; there were surely many poems the two brothers addressed to each other over the years that for

<sup>7</sup>On travel in Song dynasty China, including travel into exile, see Cong Ellen Zhang's *Transformative Journeys; Travel and Culture in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011). On the complex ways that exile informed the painting and poetry of Su Shi and his friends, see Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Asia Center, Harvard University, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>The figures given in this section are based on searches conducted in the database *Quan Songshi fenxi xitong* 全宋詩分析系統 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000).

various reasons never made it into their poetry collections and that we do not know about today.

To appreciate the quantity of poems the two men exchanged (columns *a*, *b*, and *c*), it is important to bear in mind that poetry, being the pre-eminent written form of social contact and communication at the time, was exchanged with not just dozens but hundreds of other people. Considering that, the number of poems the two brothers sent to each other, as a percentage of their total respective output, is very large. That percentage is larger in Su Zhe's case, but even with Su Shi the percentage is strikingly high (although it might not look that way at first glance). For perspective, we should compare the number of poems Su Shi sent to his best friends, those who were his closest associates or proteges in the realm of letters (I give the recipients' alternate names, *zi* or *hao*, in parentheses because those are used instead of the given names in the poem titles): Qin Guan 秦觀 (1049–1100, Shaoyou 少游, Taixu 太虛), 15; Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105, Luzhi 魯直), 19; Chao Buzhi 晁補之 (1053–1110, Wujiu 無咎), 7; Wang Gong 王鞏 (1048–1118, Dingguo 定國), 25; Wang Shen 王誥 (fl. 1080, Jinqing 晉卿), 26; Canliao 參寥 (1043–1106, Daoqian 道潛), 20; Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053–1102, Lüchang 履常, Wuji 無己), 7; Li Chang 李常 (1027–1090, Gongze 公擇), 23; Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049–1106, Longmain 龍眠), 10; Qian Xie 錢颯 (1034–1097, Mufu 穆父), 26; Sun Jue 孫覺 (1028–1090, Shenlao 莘老), 24.

Of these twelve men, only a few received more than *one tenth* of the number of poems Su Shi addressed to his brother. The number of poems Su Shi addressed to all twelve of them together (202) still falls short of the number he addressed to Su Zhe.

As for the Su brothers themselves, the numbers reveal a clear hierarchy in their poetic exchange. The number of poems Su Zhe sent to his older brother, as a percentage of his total output in this form, was significantly higher than that Su Shi sent him. Not only that, the percentage of “response” poems among those Su Zhe wrote (exactly matching the rhyme words, in order, of a poem he had received, or matching the rhyme category) was also notably higher. Su Zhe was the more reactive member of the pair, evidently feeling something of an obligation to respond deferentially when his older brother sent him a poem. Eighty-one percent of Su Zhe's poems sent to Su Shi were such responses to an exchange Su Shi had initiated.

A related point concerns the rate of this poetic exchange. We can date just about all of Su Shi's poems with a high degree of certainty. If we look at the poems he addressed to Su Zhe distributed across the chronology of his life, we find something interesting. As we might expect, there is a bulge of output in the early years, when Su Shi was in his late teens and twenties, before he became the Su Shi of empire-wide renown. Consequently, through those years, the years when the brothers were in closest contact (the years of their examinations, the two mourning periods, and their earliest provincial assignments), the number of poems Su Shi wrote to or with Su Zhe is disproportionately high. By the time Su Shi left the capital for his first stint in Hangzhou in 1071, he had already written nearly 40 percent of the poems he would ever write to his brother. The more surprising aspect of this poetry exchange is what happened afterward. For the next thirty years, until his death in 1101, Su Shi kept up a reduced but remarkably steady flow of poetic communication with his brother. The average is four poems per year, through thirty years. It does not matter where Su Shi was, whether in high office or in exile, whether physically proximate to Su Zhe or distant, the rate of poetic communication is constant, four poems per year on average (and no, they were not written seasonally; there was no set time that the brothers wrote to each other). How about in the last year of Su Shi's life, when he was sick and dying? He sent four poems to Su Zhe.

The rate of exchange is only slightly higher during the 1070s, when it rises to about six poems per year (presumably because Su Shi had not yet learned how much trouble his poetry writing could land him in). Exchanging poems was not something the brothers did every week or even every month, yet it was a form of communication that ran through their lives and was never allowed to lapse. The act of sending poems to each other was an unbroken thread through the years for them; one is tempted to say it became a principle of their lives.

### Deference and disagreement

We have seen that in the way the brothers exchanged poems some hierarchy is clear. What about in other aspects of their relationship? Older brother and younger brother are not, after all, usually thought of as equals in Chinese culture. Moreover, it is obvious that the general perception of the two, in the eyes of their contemporaries, was that although they were both outstanding, their exceptionality had different degrees. It was Su Shi who came out on top in the civil service examinations, and who inspired the examiner Ouyang Xiu to say it was time for him to step aside. It was Su Shi who made more of a name for himself by outspoken dissent against Wang Anshi's 王安石 (1021–1086) New Policies, and it was Su Shi's writing that were so abrasive that they eventually got him arrested. The understandable public perception, then, was that Su Shi outshone his brother (for better or for worse). That was the public perception; what about the ways the brothers viewed each other?

They regularly defer to each other, asserting that the other is the better person or the better writer. Often this must be out of polite consideration or genuine humility. Still, the ways they defer to each other differ in some respects. In Su Zhe's statements about his brother, acknowledgments of his greater talent are open and straightforward. When Su Shi praises his brother, he adopts a different rhetorical technique, saying the Su Zhe *seems* to be less accomplished, but that is just an appearance he deliberately cultivates. Consider the following passage from a letter Su Shi wrote to their mutual friend Zhang Lei 張耒 (1054–1115). The letter opens with polite formulae, then turns to the topic of some new writings by Zhang Lei that he had just sent to Su Shi. This leads into remarks about Ziyou's writing and personality:

As for the collection of writings you kindly sent me, I read them through several times, exclaiming with admiration. How much your writing resembles Ziyou's! To tell the truth, Ziyou's writing is superior to mine. The world does not understand this and thinks his does not come up to mine. Actually, he is the kind of person who deeply wants to avoid being known by others, and his writing is the same. That is why it comes across being endlessly placid and calm, but still it inspires sighs of admiration with every phrase. In the end, its aura of preeminence cannot go unnoticed. Still, when he composed his "Rhapsody on Yellow Tower" he roused himself to an unusual pitch, as if determined to startle men who are dazed and confused. Some people concluded that I must have ghostwritten it for him. How absurd! I am just one who knows when I see someone who shoots an arrow better than I could ever do.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Su Shi, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu* 蘇軾文集校注, in vols. 10–20 of *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu*, 49.5322.

惠示文編，三復感歎。甚矣，君之似子由也。子由之文實勝僕，而世俗不知，乃以為不如。其為人深不願人知之，其文如其為人，故汪洋澹泊，有一唱三嘆之聲，而其秀傑之氣，終不可沒。作《黃樓賦》乃稍自振厲，若欲以警發憤憤者。而或者便謂僕代作，此尤可笑。是殆見吾善者機也。

The “Rhapsody on Yellow Tower” was a *fu* (“rhapsody”) that Su Zhe wrote to celebrate the construction of Yellow Tower at Xuzhou in 1078, which itself commemorated the effort led by Governor Su Shi in the preceding year to stave off floodwaters that threatened to inundate the city.<sup>10</sup>

A poem Su Shi wrote in 1077, after Su Zhe had visited him in Xuzhou, also contains revealing lines about the brothers’ relationship:

初別子由

我少知子由  
天資和而清。  
好學老益堅  
表裏漸融明。  
豈獨為吾弟  
要是賢友生。  
不見六七年  
微言誰與廣。  
常恐坦率性  
放縱不自程。  
會合亦何事  
無言對空枰。  
使人之意消  
不善無由萌。

“Having Just Parted from Ziyou”<sup>11</sup>

I have known Ziyou since I was young,  
his inborn nature is harmonious and pure.  
His fondness for learning has become firmer with age,  
he’s grown more wholesome and clear, inside and out.  
Is he only a younger brother to me?  
More importantly, he’s a worthy friend.  
I have not seen him for six or seven years—  
who is a match for the subtleness of his words?  
My outspokenness always worries him,  
being so impetuous, I’m unable to restrain myself.  
But once I see him, what more problem do I have?  
He does not speak, facing an empty chessboard.  
His presence dispels any selfish thoughts a person has,  
so that wickedness cannot begin to sprout.

Here, there is less of a pose than in the letter to Zhang Lei; Su Shi seems to be pinpointing a real personality divergence between the two of them. The commentary in the Qing imperial anthology *Tang Song shichun* 唐宋詩醇 remarks that when Su Shi says that upon not seeing Su Zhe for a time he worries about his own in-born impetuous inability to restrain himself, but that once he sees his younger brother his “wickedness cannot begin to sprout,” readers are filled with admiration, adding that if it were not for these lines the poem would have been quite ordinary.<sup>12</sup>

When Su Zhe writes about his older brother, it is often from a more distant vantage point and with a tone of reverence: “People say, ‘My older brother’; I say, ‘My teacher’” (人曰吾兄，我曰吾師).<sup>13</sup> When Su Shi writes to Su Zhe early on, in 1062, soon after taking up his first post in Fengxiang, and says how much he misses him, Su Zhe writes back, in his response poem, observing: “I’m sure my older brother is taking pity on me, /

<sup>10</sup>Su Zhe, “Huanglou fu” 黃樓賦, *Luancheng ji* 樂城集, ed. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1987), 17.417–19.

<sup>11</sup>Su Shi, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 15.1563.

<sup>12</sup>This comment is quoted in the *jiping* 集評 section appended to the poem in *Su Shi shiji* 15.1567.

<sup>13</sup>These lines are not found in Su Zhe’s *Luancheng ji*. They are quoted in a twelfth-century commentary on Su Shi’s poetry, where they are identified as coming from an inscription Su Zhe wrote on a portrait of his brother, “Ziyou ti xiansheng xiangzan” 子由題先生像贊, see Shi Yuanzhi 施元之, *Shizhu Sushi* 施註蘇詩 (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 ed.), 13.2a.



how could it be because you have few fine friends in the world?" (自信老兄憐弱弟，豈關天下少良朋).<sup>14</sup> And again, Su Zhe on his efforts to improve his calligraphy: "I wish to learn from my older brother's example, / washing my older brother's inkstone and standing to your left" (願從兄發之，洗硯處兄左).<sup>15</sup>

That is not to say that Su Zhe was incapable of disagreeing with his older brother or even of admonishing him. It will probably come as no surprise that after Su Shi got himself in so much trouble with his literary writings (mostly poems, but also some prose writings as well), Su Zhe told him that he had crossed a line. We must realize that Su Zhe must have been concerned for his own safety as well as his older brother's, since he and other mutual friends were implicated in crimes (as recipients of Su Shi's writings, now deemed to be treasonous) and found themselves also demoted and sent into exile. When Su Shi's writing was used a second time to incriminate him in 1093, resulting in more guilt by association and exiles, Su Zhe's protests against his older brother's habit of writing rose to a new level. We have an account of Su Zhe's demands from Su Shi himself, in a letter he wrote to a cousin during his Huizhou exile:

I have not matched the various poems you have sent me in over the past few months. It is not out of laziness. In fact, Ziyou recently sent me a letter strictly warning me against composing poetry. His words were extreme, saying: "You must burn your inkstone and throw out your writing brushes. It is not enough just to hide away whatever you write." I do not dare to disregard his worry and concern for me, and so I have not composed a single word of poetry, I hope you bear this in mind.<sup>16</sup>

前後惠詩皆未和，非敢懶也。蓋子由近有書，深戒作詩，其言切至，云當焚硯棄筆，不但作而不出也。不忍違其憂愛之意，故遂不作一字，惟深察。

Still, Ziyou's reaction may strike us as expected, given the trouble that Su Shi's writing continued to cause for him and his associates. What may be more noteworthy is that long before Su Shi's habit of including snide references to imperial policy in his literary work, Su Zhe already sometimes took issue with a viewpoints his older brother expressed. We may find instances of this, for example, in response poems that Su Zhe wrote to poems his brother addressed to him during the early 1070s, when Su Shi was an official in Hangzhou. This was years before Su Shi got arrested for his writing, and probably at the time neither of the brothers ever dreamed that such literary persecution could one day happen. So there is no caution at this time from Su Zhe about Su needing to restrain his writing out of fear for political reprisal. It seems instead that Su Zhe simply disagrees with what Su Shi is saying, and that comes through clearly in his response poems.

For example, among the most anthologized poems Su Shi wrote during those Hangzhou years is a series of five quatrains entitled "Mountain Villages" (山村).<sup>17</sup> These were poems Su wrote in early 1073, when sent out from the prefectural seat to surrounding counties, probably on the pretense of "encouraging agriculture" in the spring season. What Su Shi ending up writing about in this poetic series was the ill

<sup>14</sup>Su Zhe, "Ciyun Zizhan qiuxue jianji ershou" 次韵子瞻秋雪見寄二首, no. 2, *Luancheng ji*, 1.19.

<sup>15</sup>Su Zhe, "Zizhan jishi Qiyang shiwu bei" 子瞻寄示岐陽十五碑, *Luancheng ji*, 1.22.

<sup>16</sup>Su Shi, "Yu Cheng Zhengfu," no. 16, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu*, 54.5968.

<sup>17</sup>Su Shi, "Shancun wujue" 山村五絕, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 9.867-871.

effects that the New Policies were having on life in the rural villages. Number 3 in the series is particularly sarcastic in its unobvious reference to the new Salt Monopoly that took salt out of the hands of private merchants. This had the effect of making raising the price of salt so much that many ordinary people could no longer afford it:

老翁七十自腰鎌 慚愧春山筍蕨甜。 豈是聞韶解忘味 邇來三月食無鹽。	An old peasant of seventy years wears a sickle at his waist, it's lucky bamboo shoots and bracken in the spring hills are sweet. Was it hearing Shao ritual hymns that made him lose interest in food? No, he's had no salt for his meals for three months.
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It was Confucius who, upon hearing the ancient ritual music of Shao, was so moved that he became oblivious of the taste of his food for the next three months.<sup>18</sup>

Here is the matching poem, also no. 3 in the series, that Su Zhe wrote:<sup>19</sup>

旋春紅稻始經鎌 新煮黃鷄取次甜。 無慕無營人自樂 莫將西子愧無鹽。	Quickly husked, the red rice first cut from plantings, freshly boiled, yellow chicken is more sweet with every bite. With no yearning or designs, the commoners naturally are happy, don't imagine Xi Shi would be ashamed before Wuyan.
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This is quite the opposite of what Su Shi had written. The opening couplet presents images of peasants with plenty of provisions, enjoying their fresh spring food. The third line continues in this vein: the commoners in the countryside, free of aspirations and designs, enjoy their lives. This line is at odds with what Su Shi had written in his second poem in the series: “wherever people live, they *should* find peace in their lives” (有生何處不安生), implying that was no longer true in the villages he was passing through. Su Zhe’s fourth line is addressed directly to his brother: you must not imagine that the legendary beauty Xi Shi could possibly be ashamed of her looks when standing beside the infamously ugly woman Wuyan. In other words, do not imagine shame where there is no rationale for it to exist (Su Shi’s fifth poem contains this line: “Ashamed am I of myself for clinging to a salary and neglecting to retire” (竊祿忘歸我自羞)). There is no shame in enforcing court policies that improve the lives of the people. Su Zhe is stretching to make a point in this last line: the obscure figure Wuyan is not nearly so well known as Xi Shi and the idea that Xi Shi could feel ashamed of her looks beside the ugly woman is far-fetched. But then Su Zhe needs to find a way to use the rhyme word *yan* 鹽 (lit. “salt”) in that line, precisely the word that Su Shi had used so effectively as the final rhyme word in his poem.

There are several other lines in Su Zhe’s matching “Mountain Villages” series that expand upon his disagreement with the points Su Shi had made in his poems. In poem no. 2 Su Zhe refers to the need of local officials to go out to the countryside to encourage agriculture (the mission Su Shi was on), whereas Su Shi had complained that were it not for government policies interfering with the natural rhythms of life in the countryside such encouragement would be unnecessary (his poem no. 2). And because in his last poem Su Shi said he was ashamed of participating in such policy enforcement and longed to withdraw from the government, Su Zhe pointedly reminds

<sup>18</sup>The Analects 7/14.

<sup>19</sup>Su Zhe, “Ciyun Zizhan shancun wujue” 次韻子瞻山村五絕, *Luancheng ji* 5.103.



the preface he wrote to this song, Su Shi explains the circumstances under which he wrote it, saying, “This year Ziyou spent over a hundred days with me here in Pengmen (Xuzhou), passing the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival with me before he needs to leave. He wrote his song as a farewell piece. Feeling that its language is excessively melancholy [余以其語過悲], I wrote the following piece in response.” As an objection, this is mildly expressed; but it is a real objection, nonetheless. We will see another example of this kind of disapproval from Su Shi below.

### Joking, teasing, competing

With such life-long intimacy, the brothers’ closeness sometimes manifested itself in joking and teasing each other. Su Shi was known for his sharp tongue generally, and often indulged in teasing and poking fun at those close to him. He does this with all his friends (e.g., Canliao, Qin Guan, Huang Tingjian, Wen Tong 文同 (1018–1079), Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107)), so it is hardly surprising that his brother is not spared from this habit of his. When he is in this mood, Su Shi tends to portray Su Zhe as a bookworm. Su Zhe was tall, apparently considerably taller than Su Shi himself. In the opening lines of a poem entitled “Written in Jest to Ziyou,” Su Shi brings together Su Zhe’s bookishness, the cramped quarters in which he lives as a humble prefectural instructor in Wan Hill (Chenzhou 陳州), and his height:

宛丘先生長如丘	The gentleman of Wan Hill is as tall as a hill,
宛丘學舍小如舟。	Wan Hill’s teachers’ quarters are as cramped as a boat.
常時低頭誦經史	For long hours he lowers his head, reciting classics and histories,
忽然欠伸屋打頭。	suddenly stretching and yawning, he bangs his head on the ceiling. <sup>23</sup>

Another poem from the same time speaks of Ziyou “attacking” his books like a ravenous bookworm.<sup>24</sup>

Su Shi is often thought of as a gourmand because he writes frequently and with great gusto about eating (and drinking). Su Zhe obviously knew this, and when he decides to repay his brother’s teasing, it is often Su Shi’s flair for eating that he invokes jestingly. In his first appointment at Fengxiang, Su Shi had written about the fish of Meibei Lake (漢陂湖), outside of Chang’an and not far from where he was serving. Meibei Lake was known for its tasty fish, and Su Shi’s poem focuses on this quality.<sup>25</sup> Su Zhe’s response poem lightheartedly teases Su Shi about his preoccupation with this delicacy:

嗟君遊宦久羊炙	Too bad you’ve eaten the itinerant official’s roast mutton so long,
有似遠行安野店。	like one who, traveling afar, gets used to rustic inns.
得魚未熟口流涎	Before the fish is fully cooked you’re already salivating,
豈有哀矜自欺僭？	do you regret deceiving yourself about a career? <sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Su Shi, “Xi Ziyou” 戲子由, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 7.642. Written in 1071, when Su Shi was in Hangzhou and Su Zhe was serving as a prefectural schoolteacher in Chenzhou.

<sup>24</sup>Su Shi, “Chao Ziyou” 嘲子由, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 7.648.

<sup>25</sup>Su Shi, “Meibei yu” 漢陂魚, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 5.439.

<sup>26</sup>Su Zhe, “Ciyun Zizhan Meibei yu” 次韻子瞻漢陂魚, *Luancheng ji*, 2.44.

Teasing that has a bit more of a bite also occurred from time to time. When Su Shi ran afoul of the powerful reform officials who could not tolerate his sarcastic poems and was exiled to Huangzhou, Su Zhe was incriminated by association and demoted and sent to Junzhou 筠州 (modern Gaoan shi 高安市, Jiangxi, just west of Nanchang). Su Zhe calls his posting to Junzhou an “exile,” but his punishment was not nearly so severe as his brother’s. Su Zhe still had an official post, the prefectural collector of salt and wine tax (unlike his brother, whose post was only nominal), which means he had a salary; he went to an office everyday and had regular duties. He was not so hard-pressed that he had to start growing his own food, as Su Shi did in Huangzhou.<sup>27</sup> Still, Su Zhe felt very deprived. He built a studio for himself east of his prefectural office, which he named Eastern Veranda 東軒, where he had a hundred bamboos planted. He intended to use Eastern Veranda as a retreat to relax in. But to his dismay, he found that the office he worked in was suddenly understaffed and he had to work long days there, going over accounts and arguing with local merchants who were in arrears in their tax payments.

By the time I go home in the evening I’m physically exhausted and drift right off to sleep, hardly knowing if its day or night. In the morning I must return to my duties, and so I never get to relax in my Eastern Veranda. Every morning and evening as I walk past I look at it and laugh at myself for being so foolish.<sup>28</sup>

These words come from the inscription that Su Zhe wrote for Eastern Veranda, whose theme is just this, how little he gets to enjoy himself in the building. The inscription goes on, at considerable length, to describe how Su Zhe now regrets his decision to enter officialdom and embark on a career. He characterizes himself as being shackled and manacled by his office, unable to free himself from its “filth” and drudgery, and now wishes he could be impoverished but at least regain control of his life.

Su Shi was not amused. He clearly did not approve of this level of self-centeredness and self-pity. He responded with a poem, explaining in its title: “Ziyou in Junzhou wrote an inscription for Eastern Veranda, and some people began teasing him, calling him ‘Old Man of Eastern Veranda.’ His son-in-law, Cao Huan 曹煥, was going to Jun, and so I composed a quatrain to send Cao off and to tease Ziyou some more.”<sup>29</sup> It turns out this poem accompanied an object that Su Shi gave Cao Huan to take with him to Junzhou; that object was a birdcage, as we learn from the poem itself:

君到高安幾日回	You are off to Gaoan, what day will you return?
一時斗擻舊塵埃。	Then you can shake off the dirt you will have accumulated.
贈君一籠牢收取	I give you a little cage to take with you,
盛取東軒長老來。	come back with the Old Man of Eastern Veranda inside it!

Su Zhe had written about feeling like a criminal (or animal) in chains, and so Su Shi teases him by saying he intends to “rescue” him in this cage. Su Zhe must have been

<sup>27</sup>Cong Ellen Zhang’s study of travel contains a whole chapter devoted to the legacy of Su Shi’s exile to Huangzhou in that place, that is, remembrances of him there after he left, see *Transformative Journeys*, 180–206.

<sup>28</sup>Su Zhe, “Dongxuan ji” 東軒記, *Luancheng ji*, 24.507.

<sup>29</sup>Su Shi, “Ziyou zai jun zuo Dongxuan ji huo xizhi wei Dongxuan changlao...” 子由在筠作東軒記或戲之為東軒長老, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 23.2547. This is the beginning of a long explanatory title of Su Shi’s poem.

embarrassed by this sarcasm. He wrote a response poem back, saying this time that since the Old Man of Eastern Veranda had already achieved the Buddhist ideal of “Emptiness,” how could he ever be placed inside a cage?<sup>30</sup> In fact, Su Zhe’s inscription for his studio sounds anything but transcendently Buddhist. Su Shi had made his point, and he never refers to Su Zhe as the Old Man of Eastern Veranda in a subsequent poem.

The closeness of the two brothers, their early acclaim, their sustained prolificacy in poetry and prose, their eventual rise to high office (and perhaps their spectacular demotions as well), all these inevitably led to comparisons between them and questions of relative merit and talent. When this question comes up, the response tends to be a rush to defend Su Zhe, which takes the form of acknowledging that he may *appear* to be the less talented of the pair, but that is because he wants it that way. In fact, this defense maintains, Su Zhe’s cultivation of that appearance is a mark of his superiority. We have seen this line of thinking from Su Shi himself earlier, in his letter to Zhang Lei. We see it again in a letter that Qin Guan (1049–1100), who knew both brothers well, sent to Fu Binlao 傅彬老, excerpted here:

Now, as for the Secretariat Official (Su Shi) and the Remonstrance Official (Su Zhe), I have personally attended upon both of them. The Way of the Secretariat Official is like the sun, moon, and the stars; it pervades and organizes all within heaven and earth. Everyone alive knows to lift up their eyes to gaze upon its loftiness and brilliance. The Remonstrance Official is different. His Way is like primal *qi* that circulates through the inchoate cosmos. The ten thousand things derive from it but are unaware of it. That is why the Secretariat Official often says, “I cannot compare to Ziyou.” I myself consider these knowing words. If you, sir, would take a few days provisions and go call of these two gentlemen in the capital, or, failing that, turn to their writings and read them carefully, intuiting from them what kind of men they are, you will know that my words are not mistaken.<sup>31</sup>

今中書，補闕二公，則僕嘗身事之矣。中書之道如日月星辰，經緯天地，有生之類皆知仰其高明。補闕則不然，其道如元氣，行於混淪之中，萬物由之而不知也。故中書嘗自謂「吾不及子由」，僕竊以為知言。閣下試贏數日之糧謁二公於京師，不然取其所著之書，熟讀而精思之，以想見其人，然後知吾言之不謬也。

The consensus seems to be that everyone’s immediate impression is that the older brother is more brilliant and impressive. Any other view is advanced as a hidden truth, one that defies ordinary perception.

Mention was made earlier of the abundance of response poems (*he* 和 or *ciyun* 次韻) poems the two brothers exchanged. A detailed study of these poetic exchanges would require a separate study by itself. We may say, by way of generalization, that when Su Shi wrote the responding poem in the pair, he consistently moved the poetic

<sup>30</sup>Su Zhe, “Dongxuan changlao ershou” 東軒長老二首, no. 1, *Luancheng ji*, 12.277. There was a fourth person involved, whom the son-in-law stopped off to see along the way, a Chan monk of Lu Mountain, Yuantong Zhishen 圓通知慎, who also contributed a poem. That helps to explain Su Zhe’s use of Buddhist terminology in his response.

<sup>31</sup>Qin Guan, “Da Fu Binlao jian” 答傅彬老簡, *Quan Songwen* 全宋文, 360 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu, 2006), 119:2575.337.

discourse to a higher level of reasoning or abstraction. It may well have been his competitive spirit that spurred him to do this—and that spirit is not seen only when he responds to Su Zhe’s poems. In any case, the shift to a more ambitious level of thinking is unmistakable and occurs regularly. Consider the following case or two poems the brothers exchanged.

These poems were exchanged early on, in 1061. Su Shi was on his way to take up his initial appointment in Fengxiang (west of Chang’an). Su Zhe, who would stay on in the capital, accompanied his brother as far as Zhengzhou (the Plain of Zheng in the poem below), where they took leave of each other. As he continued his journey westward to Fengxiang, Su Shi would pass by Mian Pool County (澠池縣, just west of Luoyang), which the two brothers had passed through in 1056 on their way to the capital to take the exams. It must be because Su Zhe knows his brother will be passing that place, this time traveling westward instead of eastward, that he has the idea of writing this poem that recalls when the two of them (actually, three of them, with their father as well) stayed there six years before. In that earlier time, the Sus stayed in a monk’s quarters in a temple in Mian Pool; Su Zhe had even had a county clerk’s position lined up for himself in Mian Pool, but never took it because word came that he had been approved to take the exams in the capital (hence line 5 of his poem). Because these are “harmonizing” poems, in his response Su Shi matches the rhyme words of Su Zhe’s poem. In the translation I have italicized the English equivalents of those rhyme words (the English word needs to be changed in some cases, reflecting the fact that the response poem does not always use the Chinese rhyme word in the same sense the initial poem had), to show more clearly what is involved in the rhyme word matching:

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|--|--|
| 懷澠池寄子瞻兄                                    | Su Zhe, “Fondly Recalling Mian Pool, Sent to My Elder Brother, Zizhan” <sup>32</sup>   |
| 相攜話別鄭原上<br>共道長途怕雪泥。                        | Holding hands, we bid farewell on the Plain of Zheng,<br>both saying the road would be long, worried about<br>snow and <i>mud</i> .  |
| 歸騎還尋大梁陌<br>行人已渡古嶠西。<br>曾為縣吏民知否<br>舊宿僧房壁共題。 | My returning horse goes in search of the path to Daliang,<br>the traveler must already have crossed <i>west</i> of ancient Xiao.<br>I was almost a clerk in that county, do the people know?<br>We stayed in the monk’s room back then, <i>inscribed</i><br>poems on the wall. |
| 遙想獨游佳味少<br>無言驢馬但鳴嘶。                        | From afar I think of you traveling alone, there’s little<br>fine flavor in that,<br>no one to talk to, only the <i>neighing</i> of your dappled horse.   |
| 和子由澠池懷舊                                    | Su Shi, “Harmonizing Ziyou’s Poem on Fondly<br>Recalling the Past Mian Pool” <sup>33</sup>   |
| 人生到處知何似<br>應似飛鴻踏雪泥。<br>泥上偶然留指爪             | What, after all, does a human life resemble?<br>The footprints of a wild goose treading on snow and <i>mud</i> .<br>By chance it leaves its claw marks in the mud,   |

<sup>32</sup>Su Zhe, *Luancheng ji*, 1.15.

<sup>33</sup>Su Shi, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 3.186.

鴻飛那復計東西。 老僧已死成新塔 壞壁無由見舊題。 往日崎嶇還記否 路長人困蹇驢嘶。	but once it flies off, does it know their <i>whereabouts</i> any more? That old monk died, creating a new pagoda-shrine, the wall collapsed, no way to read our <i>inscribed</i> poems now. Do you remember, the difficulties we had back then? The road long, we weary, the lame donkey <i>braying</i> .
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Su Shi added a note to his final lines, explaining that as they had approached Mian Pool years before, one of their horses died and they had to enter Mian with one of them riding on a lame donkey.

Su Zhe's initial poem recalls the past as it imagines his brother riding through that place again on his way to his new post, expressing concern that he is now alone. It is a competent and quite conventional poem addressed to a traveler. Su Shi's response is anything but conventional. He takes the topic, and the rhyme words, and utterly transforms them into reflections on the randomness of human life and experience. This transformation is characteristic of Su Shi's poetic exchanges with his brother (even as this particular poem stands out): typically, Su Shi pushes the thought to a more elevated level. When we realize that Su Shi did this sort of thing regularly, it is hardly surprising that even during the brothers' lifetimes there was a widespread perception of Su Shi as the more ingenious and creative of the two, in terms of writing and thought. As often as this perception is challenged or even denied, sometimes even by Su Shi himself, it was never really overturned and only became more firmly established through the decades and centuries after their death.

What we seem to see in this pair of brothers is the social assumption in medieval China of older and younger brother as a hierarchical relationship, rather than one existing on an equal footing, being reinforced by the elder brother's in-born boldness, talent, and, undeniably, ego. The ending of one poem Su Shi wrote about his brother stands out in this regard. When Su Shi was on his way into exile in distant southern Huizhou in 1094, he met up briefly with Su Zhe along the way in the place Su Zhe had just been demoted and removed to, in Ruzhou 汝州 (modern Ruzhou, in southern Henan). The meeting lasted only a few days before Su Shi felt obliged to resume his journey into exile. It is remarkable that there are no poems from this visit that the two brothers exchanged. Newly incriminated and demoted, the brothers probably felt it would be tempting fate to put their true feelings about their situation into verse. But there is one poem that Su Shi wrote about something Su Zhe had already done after taking up office as governor of Ruzhou, before Su Shi stopped off to see him. He had restored a centuries-old Buddhist mural painting by Wu Daozi 吳道子 (680–740) in a local temple there. The poem ends, as do so many of Su Shi's poems, with a thought projected into the future. Visitors to the temple in future times will appreciate the painstaking restoration of the painting that Su Zhe had supervised, and they will celebrate his name. But how exactly will they think of him? The last line of the poem provides the answer: "His name will be remembered: 'Dongpo's younger brother!'" (姓名聊記東坡弟).<sup>34</sup> Even if this line was intended to bring a smile to Su Zhe's face, as it may well have been considering how jarring it is, there is no denying Su Shi's brashness and arrogance here. He is crediting his brother in a way that forefront's his own name and presence. More to the point, in my understanding of the relationship

<sup>34</sup>Su Shi, "Ziyou xinxiu Ruzhou Longxing si Wuhua bi" 子由新修汝州龍興寺吳畫壁, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 37.4329.



between the two brothers it is inconceivable that, if their roles in this event had been reversed, Su Zhe could have written a poem crediting Su Shi as “Ziyou’s older brother.”

### The unfulfilled pledge

Through the years the Su brothers promised each other endlessly that they would eventually retire to their hometown of Meishan and live out their old age together. The ideal of talking together into the night from adjoining beds, while hearing rain outside, inspired by a poem by Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737–792) became a common refrain in their writings to each other, and is invoked again and again through decades in the poems they sent each other.<sup>35</sup> Yet this is a reunion that never happened. By the time of his exile to Huangzhou, Su Shi seems to have already given up the idea of eventually returning to his homeland of Shu. He was already laying plans to buy farmland in one of various places in Jiangnan to support himself in retirement. But the promise the brothers make each other at least to live together again somewhere, even if not in their hometown, keeps being repeated. Since it is a promise that is never fulfilled, one may wonder how seriously it is made. One of Su Shi’s very last letters to Su Zhe sheds some light on this issue. It was written in the fifth month of 1101, after the two brothers had returned from their distant southern exiles. Su Shi was then resting in Zhenzhou on the Yangze River. In the letter Su Shi explains his decision not to accept Su Zhe’s request that he come live with him in Yingchang 潁昌, just south of the capital:

Ziyou, younger brother: I received your letter of the twenty-second day of the second month, brought by the man Huang Shishi sent and am pleased to learn that recently you have been fine. I am here in Zhenzhou; my family and I are also fine. My travel plans, whether north or south, have changed several times. To have such things happen to me—it’s regrettable and at the same time it’s laughable! I had already decided to do as you advised and go live with you in Yingchang. The date for my departure was set. But it happened that Cheng Deru stopped by Jin Mountain, and I went to see him. There were one or two other old friends present when we met, and they had heard quite a lot about events in the north. There were reasons that I absolutely must not go to live in a place so close to the capital as Yingchang. (The events they discussed are believable. What they told me is that there are many men who are envious and plan to attack me, and that as the time for my trip north approached, things were getting more and more unsettled.) So now I have decided to go live in Changzhou. I can rent a place to live from a Sun family there, which is just fine. I get along well with the people of Zhe, and there will be no problem for me there. I will stay in Zhen about ten more days, then will cross the Yangzi River and proceed toward Chang. After being on the road for over a year, and now resting here, I regret that you and I will not be reunited in our old age. This must be Heaven’s will—and what can I do about Heaven? I just don’t understand why Heaven is so set against the two of us brothers being united again! A gentleman in this world should do whatever he can to diminish effort and expense. This decision I have made, which will not permit us to be together again, was not my original intent, but it is best for diminishing effort and avoiding harm. After I arrive and

<sup>35</sup>It was Su She who first used this image, in a poem written when parting from Su Zhe in 1061, “Xinchou shiyi yue shijiu ri...” 辛丑十一月十九日..., *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 3.181; cf. the discussion of the image in *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 15.1565n11.

settle down for one or two months, I will send Mai off to take up office, and Dai will go to relocate his family. Guo will stay by my side.<sup>36</sup>

As for my burial place, I ask you to decide the matter on your own. The burial site of Balang's wife could serve.<sup>37</sup> In fact, any place at all is fine with me. To waste a thousand strings of cash to buy burial land—would it not be better to put money toward the funeral expenses? Whatever you do, don't follow the customs of our time!<sup>38</sup>

子由弟：得黃師是遣人賚來二月二十二日書，喜知近日安勝。兄在真州，與一家亦健。行計南北，凡幾變矣。遭值如此，可歎可笑。兄近已決計從弟之言，同居潁昌，行有日矣。適值程德孺過金山，往會之，并一二親故皆在坐。頗聞北方事，有決不可往潁昌近地居者。事皆可信，人所報，大抵相忌安排攻擊者衆，北行漸近，決不靜耳。今已決計居常州，借得一孫家宅，極佳。浙人相喜，決不失所也。更留真十數日，便渡江往常。逾年行役，且此休息。恨不得老境兄弟相聚，此天也，吾其如天何！然亦不知天果於兄弟終不相聚乎？士君子作事，但只於省力處行，此行不遂相聚，非本意，甚省力避害也。候到定豐一兩月，方遣邁去注官，迨去般家，過則不離左右也。葬地，弟請一面果決。八郎婦可用，吾無不可用也。更破千緡買地，何如留作葬事，千萬勿徇俗也。

Su Shi was ailing when he wrote this letter, and he would die two months later, soon after he did, in fact, take up residence in Changchou. The letter certainly makes it sound like he was on the point of continuing to make his way northward to join Su Zhe in his residence at Yingchang, but was dissuaded from doing so by the chance meeting he had with Cheng Deru 程德孺 (Cheng Zhiyuan 程之元, a younger cousin also from Meishan) and a few other old friends at Jin Mountain. Based on what he heard at this meeting, and presumably his friends' urging, Su Shi decided it was too dangerous for him to join Su Zhe in a place so close to the center of political power. This was not the first time that something like this happened. Years earlier, in 1090, during his second appointment in Hangzhou, Su Shi confides in a letter to a friend that he longs to see his brother again and would like to return to the capital to do so, but that he will not do so because he fears the attacks and slander he would encounter there.<sup>39</sup> Again in 1092, when Su Shi was leaving his short appointment in Yingzhou 潁州 to transfer to a new posting to Yangzhou, Su Zhe had written to him specifically requesting that he come visit him in the capital before heading south to Yangzhou. Su Shi again declines and even writes, by way of apology, a song lyric addressed to Su Zhe, telling him how much he misses him (and looking forward to the day they will be reunited in retirement).<sup>40</sup> This song lyric does not give a reason for resisting Su Zhe's urging. Again, it is in a letter to another person that Su Shi broaches his reason for not going to the capital: he has decided "to strive to avoid trouble" (務省事).<sup>41</sup> As

<sup>36</sup>Mai, Dai, and Guo were Su Shi's three sons, named here in order of age.

<sup>37</sup>Balang's wife is identified as the woman who had been married to Su Zhe's third son, Su Yuan 蘇遠. She had died two years earlier, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu* 60.6641n10.

<sup>38</sup>Su Shi, "Yu Ziyou di" 與子由弟, no. 8, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu* 60.6639.

<sup>39</sup>Su Shi, "Yu Zhang Junyu" 與張君予, no. 5, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu*, 55.6126–27. See the discussion of this letter by Kong Fanli 孔凡禮, *Su Zhe nianpu* 蘇轍年譜 (Beijing: Xueyuan, 2001), 15.427.

<sup>40</sup>Su Shi, "Manjiang hong: qing Ying dongliu" 滿江紅：清潁東流, *Su Shi ciji jiaozhu*, 2.659.

<sup>41</sup>Su Shi, "Da Fan Chunfu" 答范純夫, no. 3, *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu*, 50.5428.

the learned commentator Wang Wen'gao 王文誥 (b. 1764) points out, this must allude to factional attacks Su Shi expects he would encounter in the capital.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than conclude that because the often-mentioned promise to join each other in retirement was never fulfilled that the promise itself was not seriously intended—that it was an empty ideal, just reassuring words—there is another way to think of it. The brothers' lives and even their interaction with each other came to be inseparable from the political pressures within which their lives were played out. When, at the very end, after return from years of distant southern exile, they seemed to have a chance finally to fulfill that promise, political pressures intervened once again to prevent that from happening. Perhaps we could even say that the sentiment that bound them together and the forces that kept them apart augmented each other. Some such dynamic may be found in Su Shi's letter above, where he returns repeatedly to his frustration over having to deliver the news of his decision to Su Zhe.

Still, the idea of an unwavering commitment to each other is the legacy of the writings they exchanged over their adult lives; it is what lived on, long outlasting the brothers themselves. In 1083, during his Huangzhou exile, Su Shi sent his brother a poem that opens this way:

百川日夜逝 物我相隨去。 惟有宿昔心 依然守故處。	A hundred rivers flow on, day and night we and everything else are carried off by them. It is only our hearts of yesteryear that, steadfast, hold to their old place. <sup>43</sup>
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This poem then develops an extended reminiscence of the time the brothers crammed for the examinations together decades before, at an inn outside the capital. And the poem ends, yes, with a hopeful image of the two of them together again in the not-too-distant future, chatting with each other through a long rainy night.

This is what is remembered about the brothers, their affection for each other, so often expressed in the poems they exchanged. These were brothers whose lives played out against the demands of the official careers they had embarked upon and which, ultimately, took control of those lives, as so often happened in imperial China. Still, in the end it was what Su Shi and Su Zhe wrote to and about each other that mattered more to posterity and its lasting image of the brothers than the political forces that prevented them from keeping their promise to end their days together. Because of those writings, these brothers came as close as any ever did in China to fulfilling a fraternal ideal of being closest confidants and friends as well as brothers. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they contributed to the formation of that ideal, which endured after them, as much as they fulfilled it. Given the culture in which they lived, it is fitting, in any case, that they approached the embodiment of that ideal through the literary work they produced.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The author declares none.

<sup>42</sup>See Wang Wen'gao's interpretation of Su Shi's phrase and additional commentary on this letter in Su Shi, *Su Shi ciji jiaozhu*, 2.659–60n1.

<sup>43</sup>Su Shi, "Chuqiu ji Ziyou" 初秋寄子由, *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, 22.2451.