

An Inquiry into the Causes of the Discrepancy in Evaluations of Su Shi's Stay in Huizhou and Han Yu's Tenure in Chaozhou

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Abstract: Su Shi's stay in Huizhou surpassed Han Yu's in Chaozhou in terms of duration, literary output, and overall achievements. However, evaluations of the two figures in later times vary significantly. Through painstaking literature research on their works and local historical records, this study endeavors to explore the causes of the evaluative bias concerning Su Shi's legacy in Huizhou. The findings reveal that the Yuanyou Party Struggle precipitated Su Shi's political downfall, as he was listed on the Yuanyou Party Tablet, ending his career. Socially, his low rank subjected him to strict surveillance, and even got those helping him into trouble, isolating him. Culturally, his works and inscriptions were damaged. In contrast, Han Yu was forgiven when relegated to Yuanzhou and had fewer negative impacts. The privacy of letters made most of Su Shi's achievement records in Huizhou disappear. While his construction of "Two Bridges and One Dyke" in Huizhou West Lake was public and documented, causing later generations to focus more on his West Lake contributions. Hence, Su Shi's achievements in Huizhou were long underestimated.

Keywords: Su Shi's Stay in Huizhou, Yuanyou Party Struggle, Huizhou West Lake, Evaluation Bias

1. Introduction

Su Shi arrived in Huizhou on October 2, 1094, during the Shaosheng period of the Northern Song Dynasty and departed for Danzhou on April 19, 1097. Over his two years and seven months in Huizhou, he created 587 literary works including prose, poetry, prefaces, and postscripts. Han Yu, on the other hand, took office as the prefect of Chaozhou on April 25, 819, during the Yuanhe period of the Tang Dynasty and left for Yuanzhou in December of the same year. His tenure in Chaozhou lasted only eight months, during which he composed 34 poems and 14 prose works. Despite Su Shi's substantial literary output and extended stay in Huizhou, later evaluations of his time there mainly focus on his contributions to Huizhou West Lake, whereas assessment of Han Yu's tenure in Chaozhou are relatively comprehensive, covering his administrative achievements, cultural influence on later generations, and the emulation of his governance by subsequent officials.

Scholars have explored the reasons behind Han Yu's enduring influence in Chaozhou from various perspectives. For example, Yang Ziyi attributes Han Yu's greater historical impact to orthodoxy, celebrity effect, and regional cultural ecological differences. Similarly, Li Zhixian examines the

deification of Han Yu in Chaozhou through multiple factors. Nevertheless, the academic community has not thoroughly explored the underlying reasons for the differences in their actions and evaluations in Huizhou and Chaozhou.

This article uses a literary and historical analysis approach, drawing on their works, local chronicles, historical books, and others' poems, to examine how the ancient political environment shaped the evaluation of literati. By doing so, this research seeks to provide new perspectives on cultural inheritance, historical research, and the utilization of local cultural resources, as well as to refine research methods for studying historical celebrities. Furthermore, it aims to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of ancient literati relegation and its cultural influence.

2. The Catastrophe of the Yuanyou Party Struggle

The Yuanyou Party Struggle during the Northern Song Dynasty was an extremely fierce political turmoil, akin to a violent storm that wrought catastrophic consequences upon Su Shi. Politically, it shattered his career prospects; socially, it isolated him and jeopardized those who associated with him; culturally, it severely damaged his works and reputation. Compared to Han Yu, Su Shi was pushed into a far harsher plight.

In the political arena of relegation, Su Shi's name was inscribed on the Yuanyou Party Stele, dooming him to be "permanently barred from employment" and bringing his political career to an abrupt and irreversible end. "The Yuanyou Party members were impeached on a plethora of charges. Among which 'forming cliques for private gain' was particularly exploited by the New Party as a pretext. As a result, the living were successively impeached and then exiled. Even those initially proposed for lenient punishment were repeatedly demoted" [1]. In ancient times, the distance from the capital was a pivotal criterion for the relegation of officials. Su Shi's initial relegation to Huizhou was followed by a further exile to Danzhou, progressively distancing himself from the political center and plunging him into increasingly dire circumstances. In the second year of Shaosheng, the court issued an amnesty pardoning certain demoted officials, yet Yuanyou Party members were conspicuously excluded. On the day of Jia Shen, the imperial edict declared: "Lu Dafang and others shall never be reinstated, regardless of the term or the amnesty" [2]. This decree extinguished any glimmer of hope for Su Shi's political restoration. In sharp contrast, Han Yu's relegation followed a markedly different trajectory. His transfer from Chaozhou to Yuanzhou, a location closer to the capital, signified that he had obtained the emperor's forgiveness. His circumstances steadily improved, highlighting a clear divergence from Su Shi's beleaguered state.

From the vantage point of social freedom, Su Shi was relegated to Huizhou as the Deputy Military Governor of the Ningyuan Army, a lowly-ranking eighth-grade official. This position not only thwarted any remaining political aspirations but also prohibited him from signing official documents. Moreover, he was subjected to continuous impeachment and surveillance. His colleagues, gripped by the fear of the Party Struggle's aftermath, largely maintained a distance from him. According to *The General History of Fujian*, "When Su Shi was relegated to Huizhou, his colleagues were intimidated by Zhang Dun's power and dared not visit him. Only Zhan Fan treated him with kindness and frequently brought wine to engage in poetic exchanges with him" [3]. Furthermore, Su Shi's dilemma also ensnared those who endeavored to assist him. Wang Gu, who helped Su Shi establish a hospital and resolve the drinking water issue, was impeached and relegated to Yuanzhou [4-5]. Zheng Jinglao was banished to Leizhou merely for borrowing books from Su Shi, and Zhu Xingzhong was also demoted because of his contact with Su Shi. In contrast, Han Yu, as a fourth-grade official during his relegation to Chaozhou, was able to maintain normal correspondence with his friends. For example, Jia Dao's "Sending a Letter to Han Yu in Chaozhou" and "Sending a Letter to Han Xiang" attested to his relatively unfettered social interactions, while Su Shi was mired in severe isolation.

In the sphere of cultural inheritance, as a member of the Yuanyou Party, Su Shi's anthologies were subjected to extensive destruction, and the inscriptions he had authored in various locales were also damaged. *The Chronicle of Song History - Cai Jing's Usurpation of Power* recorded that in the second year of Chongning (1102), "In the fourth month of summer... on the day of Yi Hai, the imperial edict ordered the destruction of Fan Zuyi's 'Tang Jian' and the anthologies of the Three Sus, Huang Tingjian, and Qin Guan" [6]. This political purge severely impeded Su Shi's cultural inheritance, and subsequent generations were extremely circumspect when evaluating him. Conversely, after Han Yu was relegated to Chaozhou, his literary works continued to circulate and thrive in the local area. He was highly esteemed by Zhao De, one of the eight sages in Chaozhou. Zhao De painstakingly compiled and selected "Wen Lu" for him, thereby facilitating the dissemination of Han Yu's works in Chaozhou [7].

Undoubtedly, the Yuanyou Party Struggle exerted a momentous influence on Su Shi across three pivotal dimensions: politics, social interactions, and cultural heritage. Politically, his once-promising career path was brutally severed, and he was incessantly subjected to political oppression, losing all prospects of a comeback. Socially, he found himself in a state of utter isolation as colleagues shunned him to avoid trouble, and those who dared to offer assistance were also dragged into the quagmire, highlighting the harsh social consequences. Culturally, the dissemination and preservation of his works faced severe setbacks, and his reputation was marred by the political stigma.

In contrast, Han Yu fared relatively better in these regards. The Yuanyou Party Struggle pushed Su Shi into a much more vulnerable and difficult situation compared to Han Yu. This not only thwarted his attempts to exhibit his capabilities in Huizhou but also left an indelible negative mark on the way his stay in Huizhou was evaluated in the following years, deeply affecting his historical standing.

3. The Secrecy of Su Shi's Letters and the Prominence of Huizhou West Lake

The confidential nature of Su Shi's letters, in conjunction with his remarkable contributions to the construction of Huizhou West Lake, jointly exerted a profound influence on the evaluation of his legacy. Later generations have primarily focused on Su Shi's role in overseeing the construction of the "Two Bridges and One Dyke", which is the reason why Huizhou West Lake was able to be ranked among the three West Lakes. Despite his outstanding achievements, Su Shi was under surveillance due to the intricate political environment. His achievements were primarily documented in the form of letters, which were imbued with a strong sense of privacy.

He composed approximately 51 political letters to his old friends and repeatedly exhorted them to incinerate the letters after reading. For instance, in "Seventy-one Letters to Cheng Zhengfu (No. 30)", he made such a request, which resulted in the loss of many letters. Additionally, neither his self-compiled anthologies *Dongpo Anthology* nor *Dongpo Posthumous Anthology* incorporated these letters, indicating his intent to keep them from public record. In a letter to Cheng Zhengfu in the second year of Shaosheng, he mentioned compiling and presenting poems imitating Tao Yuanming to Cheng and instructed not to show them to others [8]. Similarly, in a letter to Fan Zuyi in the fourth year of Shaosheng, he again emphasized the need for caution in not revealing it [9]. These instances demonstrate his resolute determination to safeguard the privacy of the letters, which led to the loss of a large number of letters recording his achievements in Huizhou. Consequently, later generations have struggled to form a comprehensive understanding of his actions in Huizhou based on these materials.

Conversely, Su Shi's construction of the "Two Bridges and One Dyke" in Huizhou West Lake emerged as a highly visible and publicly recognized achievement. To address transportation difficulties on both sides of the West Lake, he took the lead by "donating his rhinoceros belt" and mobilized his sister-in-law to contribute funds. The project was overseen by the monk Xi Gu of

Qichan Temple, beginning with the construction of a dyke, followed by the building of a Xixin Bridge. By June of the third year of Shaosheng, both the dyke and bridge were completed [10]. Su Shi composed poems to record the event and celebrated with the people. Subsequently, this dyke was named Su Gong Dyke. After the completion of Dongxin Bridge and Xixin Bridge, there were records such as "the sign reads Dongxin Bridge" and "the sign reads Xixin Bridge" [11]. The display of the bridge names required official approval, indicating that the government managed and registered the construction and naming of the bridges. Numerous local chronicles such as *The Grand Ming Unification Record*, *The Jiaqing Huizhou Prefecture Chronicle*, *The Great Qing Unification Record*, and *Huizhou Prefecture Chronicle* all documented that Su Shi utilized the money bestowed by the emperor to build the dyke [12-15]. Simultaneously, the Song Dynasty had a well-established tradition of erecting steles for bridge construction built by officials. The "Dongxin Bridge Stele Record" explicitly stated that Su Shi was the initiator of the construction: "Huizhou is an important passage of the Dongjiang River. The county and prefecture governments are located on opposite sides of the river, and there is a bridge in the middle called Dongxin. It was planned and assisted by the Taoist Deng Shou'an and Su Shi in the Song Dynasty." This public and traceable display of achievements firmly linked Huizhou West Lake with Su Shi.

Consequently, the letters that chronicled Su Shi's achievements remained concealed because of their private nature. In contrast, the construction of the "Two Bridges and One Dyke" in Huizhou West Lake was highly publicized and meticulously documented. This disparity steered the evaluations of subsequent generations to center mainly on his undertakings and poems related to the West Lake. As a result, their comprehension of his other contributions in Huizhou was rather restricted. This has significantly shaped the perception of later generations regarding both Su Shi and Huizhou West Lake, influencing how they are remembered and studied.

4. Conclusion

This study zeroes in on the comparison between Su Shi's stay in Huizhou and Han Yu's tenure in Chaozhou. Through an in-depth analysis of historical literature, it is unearthed that the Yuanyou Party Struggle precipitated Su Shi's political suppression, social isolation, and cultural obstruction. The privacy of his letters rendered it difficult for his achievements to be transmitted, and the prominence of the "Two Bridges and One Dyke" led to a deviation in the attention of later generations. It can be concluded that the evaluation of Su Shi's actions in Huizhou in later generations is one-sided, and his achievements have not been fairly treated. Although the current research has unveiled some reasons, there remains a dearth of in-depth exploration in areas such as Su Shi's contributions in multiple fields, the depth of comparison with Han Yu, and the mechanism of cultural integration with the local area. In the future, multidisciplinary methods should be integrated to comprehensively sift through the details and impacts of Su Shi's activities in Huizhou, explore the profound interactions between him and Huizhou's social and cultural fabric, augment the dimension and precision of the comparison with Han Yu's case, and construct a more comprehensive evaluation system for the influence of ancient literati relegation, so as to reshape the complete image and status of Su Shi in the history and culture of Huizhou.

To further augment our understanding of this topic, it is imperative to conduct more detailed research on the specific contributions made by Su Shi during his stay in Huizhou. For example, aside from his well-documented achievements in infrastructure projects like the "Two Bridges and One Dyke," further research should examine his efforts in promoting local education, agriculture, and cultural development. By analyzing local historical records, folk tales, and family genealogies, we may unearth more valuable information about his activities and their far-reaching impacts.

Moreover, a more comprehensive comparison between Su Shi and Han Yu is necessary. This should go beyond a comparison of their official positions and the duration of their relegation, instead

encompassing an in-depth analysis of their different responses to the local cultural environment, their interactions with the local populace, and the long-term effects of their actions on regional development. Such an approach will provide more profound insights into the shared and divergent experiences of ancient literati during exile, leading to more valuable conclusions.

Furthermore, the mechanisms of cultural integration between Su Shi and Huizhou warrant further exploration. How did Su Shi's cultural thoughts and artistic creations interact with the local culture of Huizhou? What were the specific manifestations of this interaction? By answering these questions, we can acquire a more profound understanding of the cultural connotations and historical values of Su Shi's stay in Huizhou and provide more robust theoretical support and practical guidance for the inheritance and development of local culture.

In conclusion, the research on Su Shi's stay in Huizhou is a complex and protracted task. By continuously expanding the research scope, deepening the research depth, and refining the research methods, we can gradually peel back the layers and reveal the true essence of Su Shi's stay in Huizhou, thereby offering a more accurate and comprehensive evaluation of his historical status and cultural contributions. This will not only contribute to the study of ancient Chinese history and culture but also furnish valuable references for modern cultural construction and heritage preservation.

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