

Beyond Political Rivalry: A Historical Re-examination of the Su Shi-Wang Anshi Relationship in the Northern Song Dynasty

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Abstract

Su Shi and Wang Anshi, two towering cultural figures of the Northern Song Dynasty, have long been portrayed in historiography as binary opposites — the literary genius versus the ruthless reformer. This paper argues that such a dichotomy is a later construction rooted in political stances rather than an accurate reflection of their true relationship. By re-examining the details of their interactions across three periods — their initial acquaintance and literary-political clashes during the Jiayou era, their confrontation during the Xining New Policies reform, and their reconciliation at the Jinling Meeting in the Yuanfeng era—this study traces the evolution of their relationship from antagonism to mutual appreciation. Particular attention is given to the historical significance of their late-life meeting in Jinling and Su Shi's composition of the "Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict" after Wang Anshi's death. The paper concludes that, beneath their intense political disagreements, Su Shi and Wang Anshi consistently maintained a scholar-to-scholar mutual respect that transcended factional divisions, embodying the classical ideal of "harmony in diversity".

Keywords

Su Shi; Wang Anshi; Northern Song Dynasty.

1. Introduction

Su Shi and Wang Anshi are two celebrated cultural figures of the Northern Song Dynasty [1]. In historical records and modern scholarly discourse, their relationship has often been interpreted as one of binary opposition. Scholars such as Liang Qichao and Deng Guangming approached Wang Anshi from the lens of political reform, thus holding him in high regard. Lin Yutang observed Su Shi from the perspective of literature and art, thus holding Su Shi in high regard and disparaging Wang Anshi, portraying him as a villain. But do they truly reflect the full picture of the relationship between the two? This perception might be a product constructed by later generations based on political stances. By re-examining the details of their interactions from the Jiayou to the Xining period, especially the historical records of their meeting in Jinling in their later years, this paper discovers that beneath their intense political disagreements, Su Shi and Wang Anshi also shared a mutual appreciation as men of letters.

2. Clash of Values and Political Views

2.1. The Jiayou Period

In the sixth lecture of his work *Ten Lectures on Su Shi*, Professor Zhu Gang devotes a special section to the "Wang-Su relationship" to explore the interactions between the two [2]. The understanding between Wang Anshi and Su Shi originated from the Jinyou period when Su Shi, Su Zhe, and their father Su Xun went to the capital to take the imperial examination. Su Shi and Su Zhe obtained jinshi degrees in the second year of the Jiayou era [3]. During this process, Su Shi received assistance from Ouyang Xiu. As the chief examiner of the imperial examination, Ouyang Xiu hoped to reform the literary style by selecting young people who matched his

literary taste. Su Shi's articles were highly appreciated by Ouyang Xiu, and thus he was successfully admitted. Ouyang Xiu also introduced Su Shi and his father to other officials such as Han Qi and Fu Bi. However, Wang Anshi did not approve of such behavior.

After the sons obtained their jinshi degrees, Su Xun and his sons rushed back to their hometown to mourn the death of the boys' mother. Upon completing the ritual mourning period in the fifth year of the Jiayou era, they returned to the capital. Su Shi and Su Zhe took the decree examination. Su Zhe criticized the emperor's lax governance and shortcomings in his answers to the examination questions, accusing him of being obsessed with women's beauty and neglecting state affairs. [4] Wang Anshi believed that Su Zhe was shifting blame away from the chancellor. Since the country was poorly managed, the chancellor was also responsible. However, Su Zhe insisted that the responsibility lay with Emperor Shenzong. Sima Guang vigorously advocated for Su Zhe's admission. Ultimately, Su Zhe was admitted with his grade reduced by one rank. However, when appointing Su Zhe, the then Imperial Scholar Wang Anshi refused to write the official letter of appointment for him. As a result, Su Shi and his father had a direct confrontation and conflict with Wang Anshi.

During this period, Su Xun's essay *On Discerning Villains* (Bianjian Lun) sparked considerable debate within scholarly circles [5]. In this essay, Su Xun identified Wang Anshi as a consummate villain [6], writing: "Events follow an inevitable course, and underlying principles dictate certain outcomes. Only those with profound inner tranquility can perceive the subtle and foresee the manifest." The meaning is that only one who maintains inner calm can detect, in the faintest signs, the great changes that lie ahead. Su Xun pointed out that Wang Anshi was a man who "recited the teachings of Confucius and Laozi, while mimicking the austere deeds of Bo Yi and Shu Qi." Outwardly, he presented a facade of being an erudite and virtuous scholar, but inwardly, he was exceedingly ruthless, and his personal habits were bizarrely eccentric compared to ordinary people. Su Xun described Wang Anshi as "a Wang Yan and Lu Qi in one person," implying that Wang Anshi possessed Wang Yan's outward rectitude while harboring Lu Qi's inner malevolence and cunning. Such a person could easily deceive others and inflict enormous harm upon the state and society.

Furthermore, Su Xun pointed to certain eccentric and unfeeling aspects of Wang Anshi's conduct. He stated: "When one's face is dirty, one naturally washes it; when one's clothes are soiled, one naturally launders them. This is the most basic human disposition. Yet, he acts completely to the contrary. He wears the rags of slaves and captives, and eats the slop of dogs and pigs. With the disheveled hair of a prisoner and the unwashed face of a mourner, he sits there discoursing on the *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of Documents*. How could this possibly be his genuine nature?" In other words, everyone knows that one should wash a dirty face and launder dirty clothes; this is entirely normal. Wang Anshi wore ragged clothes, ate coarse food, and paid no attention to hygiene. To expound upon the Confucian classics while presenting such a disheveled appearance was fundamentally contrary to normal human behavior — and it was precisely for this reason that Su Xun believed him to be a truly great villain.

Su Xun's criticism regarding the unnaturalness of Wang Anshi's conduct and bearing can be corroborated by numerous Song-dynasty sources. Su Xun believed that Wang Anshi's frugality, his apparent indifference to wealth, food, and possessions, was all feigned — that Wang Anshi was surely a deeply concealed arch-villain.

Wang Anshi also had criticisms of the literary style of Su Xun and the Su brothers. Volume 14 of the Shaoshi wenjian houlu records Wang Anshi's critique of Su Xun's writings. Wang commented that Su's essays carried the stylistic flavor of the political strategists from the Warring States period, adding that his works were largely "discourses on military tactics, power plays, and cunning maneuvers" [7]. To put it simply, the essays of Su Shi and his father were adept at argumentation, but in their pursuit of rhetorical brilliance and ingenuity, they often disregarded principled stances and sought only the elegance of the prose. Wang Anshi regarded

such an approach as lacking in moral grounding — a path of expediency and cunning — and therefore held it in contempt.

It can be seen that at this stage, the key points of divergence between the two were habits and lifestyle, comportment and conduct, and literary style — reflecting a clash of values in both everyday life and literary culture.

2.2. Political Confrontation During the Reform Period

During the Xining era of Emperor Shenzong, Wang Anshi launched his political reform measures and immediately encountered widespread opposition. To facilitate the implementation of his reforms, he established a new institution, the Finance Planning Commission (Zhizhi Sansi Tiaoli Si), to carry out the reform. Su Shi initially joined this Commission. Su Shi was not entirely opposed to Wang Anshi. However, as the reform advanced, the political disagreements between Wang Anshi and Su Shi became increasingly apparent. When Wang Anshi planned to reform the imperial examination system, intending to abolish the poetic essay (shifu) component, Su Shi wrote the "Memorial on School Examinations and Recruitment" (Yi Xuexiao Gongju Zhuang) [8] and submitted it to the court.

In his Memorial on Schools and the Civil Service Examination, Su Shi primarily discussed the key considerations for the government when selecting talent. He argued: "The way to obtain the right men lies in understanding men; the method of understanding men lies in demanding substantive results" [8]. In his view, the key to talent selection rested in the officials' capacity for character judgment — in grasping the real substance of a person. Otherwise, even if examination reforms were implemented, capable men would remain difficult to select. Su Shi considered that the imperial examination had been in use for a hundred years and that it was not the determining factor in the rise and fall of the state: "The method of tribute examination has been in practice for a hundred years; the order and disorder, the rise and decline of the state, have never originated from it" [8]. Thus, Su Shi did not endorse Wang Anshi's reform of the imperial examination. In the course of the New Policies' implementation, Su Shi and Wang Anshi remained at odds on matters of governance. Wang Anshi possessed a steadfast commitment to his reformist convictions and ideals, and he was determined to remove any person or action that obstructed the implementation of the reform. Consequently, during this period, Su Shi was subjected to repeated attacks by the censorate officials (taijianguan) of the Song court.

To escape the relentless assaults from the reform faction, Su Shi requested assignment to a provincial post, leaving the capital to serve in local administrations. While in the provinces, Su Shi wrote numerous poems, some of which betrayed dissatisfaction with and grievances against the implementation of the reform. These poems were later used as evidence of his alleged mockery of the reforms and slander against the court, leading to his arrest by the Censorate (Yushitai). By this time, Wang Anshi had already resigned from the chancellorship, yet he still interceded with the court on behalf of the imprisoned Su Shi.

It can be said that during this period, Su Shi and Wang Anshi held significant differences regarding the philosophy of state governance and the criteria for talent selection. At heart, however, this was a contest between gentlemen (junzi) among the Northern Song scholar-official class, rooted in divergent views on statecraft and cultural-aesthetic sensibilities.

3. Cultural Identity Beyond the Political Arena

3.1. The Jinling Meeting

After his release from prison, Su Shi was banished to Huangzhou. In the seventh year of the Yuanfeng era (1084), he received an appointment transferring him to Ruzhou. He traveled downstream along the Yangtze River and arrived at Jinling (Nanjing). At this time, Wang Anshi

had resigned from the chancellorship and was living in retirement in Jinling. According to historical records, the two men toured scenic spots together, conversed about poetry, and left behind a number of memorable anecdotes. In one such story, Wang Anshi took the initiative to go to the riverbank to welcome Su Shi; the two traveled together to Mount Jiang (Jiangshan), engaged in a poetry contest, and Su Shi bested Wang Anshi. While discussing poetry, Wang Anshi pointed out two Daoist allusions in Su Shi's verse, and Su Shi was sincerely convinced of his erudition. Wang Anshi praised Su Shi, remarking, "What a fine Hanlin Academician he would make." Wang Anshi also encouraged Su Shi to rewrite the Records of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi), but Su Shi declined and instead recommended the historian Liu Daoyuan to take his place.

The anecdotes reveal that the atmosphere between the two men upon reunion was relatively relaxed. By this point, neither remained at the center of power: Wang Anshi lived in seclusion, while Su Shi had been demoted; the political barriers between them had dissolved. Removed from the political arena, each appreciated the other's talents. Wang Anshi greatly admired Su Shi's poetry and prose and even exchanged poetic compositions with him. Su Shi recognized Wang Anshi's extensive learning, noting that the latter could identify allusions that eluded others, and praised him, saying, "Among those who study the Venerable Jinggong, who could match such breadth of erudition?" This mutual recognition demonstrates that, in private, the two men genuinely held each other in high esteem.

At this juncture, the two also experienced a sense of regret at not having met sooner. Su Shi wrote the line, "Having come to follow you, I already feel this is ten years too late." [9] expressing the wish that he might have followed Wang Anshi earlier. These words are tinged with a certain regret. In their youth, the two had stood on opposing political ground; now, their attention was directed more toward poetry and Chan philosophy. In their later years, with their minds at ease, their genuine mutual respect could at last reveal itself. The Jinling Meeting was a moment of mutual encouragement between two men at life's low ebb. They no longer debated who was right and who was wrong, instead traveling together through hills and streams, discussing poetry and prose. Later, Su Shi wrote in a letter that Wang Anshi was "a figure who appears only once in several centuries," and Wang Anshi, for his part, regarded Su Shi as a friend to whom he could speak from the heart.

Wang Anshi once urged Su Shi to purchase a residence in Nanjing so that they might be neighbors, and Su Shi responded with enthusiasm. In the end, this plan did not materialize. Su Shi continued to write to Wang Anshi, and in his letters he even recommended Qin Guan to Wang Anshi — a gesture that speaks to Su Shi's trust in and recognition of Wang Anshi, and demonstrates that the two had long since set aside their political disputes and become friends who deeply appreciated one another.

3.2. The Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict (Zeng Taifu Zhi)

Not long after Su Shi left Nanjing, Wang Anshi passed away. At this time, the political situation in the court also changed. Su Shi was promoted to the position of Hanlin Academician. After Wang Anshi's death, the court bestowed upon him the posthumous honorific title of Grand Guardian (Taifu), and the task of composing the bestowal edict fell to Su Shi. Su Shi drafted the *Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict* (Zeng Taifu Zhi) in a restrained and respectful tone [8].

Most of the content in the essay affirms Wang Anshi's talent and efforts. He was aware of the sensitivity of Wang Anshi's identity and thus avoided mentioning his political successes or failures. This approach not only shows respect but also avoids unnecessary disputes. The essay demonstrates a rational and measured attitude. The *Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict* aroused much attention in the Song Dynasty. Many people attempted to find out if Su Shi had hidden criticism of Wang Anshi within it, but there was no conclusive evidence to prove that Su Shi made any criticism of Wang Anshi in the essay [10]. In the "Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict,"

Su Shi neither offered indiscriminate praise nor wholly repudiated Wang Anshi on account of their earlier disagreements. This spirit of "harmony in diversity" commands admiration. The reason for this is that Su Shi did not completely reject Wang Anshi's reforms. During the Yuanwu period, the Conservative Faction attempted to abolish the immunity law in Wang Anshi's reform measures. Su Shi firmly opposed this approach. From this, it can be seen that in terms of political views, Su Shi adhered to a certain value in his heart, rather than making a choice between the Reform Faction and Conservative Factions. This also explains why, in drafting the *Bestowal of Grand Guardian Edict*, he neither disparaged Wang Anshi nor articulated the failures of the reform.

4. Conclusion

This paper conducts a historical investigation into the relationship between Wang Anshi and Su Shi, covering the emergence of contradictions, the disputes over political views, and their mutual appreciation in old age. By re-examining the relationship between Su Shi and Wang Anshi, it is possible to discover different contextual factors, which may lead to different perspectives of observation. The paper believes that the relationship between Su Shi and Wang Anshi embodies a valuable spiritual trait - 'Although their political views differ, their moral principles are in agreement', demonstrating the political bottom line of 'harmony in diversity' and the cultural grace.

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