

# The Mentality of Literati and Literary Creation in the Context of the Convergence of the Three Religions in the Song Dynasty

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## Abstract

The Song Dynasty marked a pivotal moment in the ideological and cultural convergence of the three religions. While the three religions existed independently during the Tang Dynasty, they not only merged superficially during the Song Dynasty but also became deeply integrated. Emperor Taizu of Song promoted Confucianism and supported Buddhism, while Emperor Zhenzong of Song honored Taoism. This relaxed support provided space for interaction among the three religions. The literati, intent on integrating culture, incorporated Neo-Confucianism into Buddhism and Taoism, furthering the convergence. This ideological framework transformed the spirit of Song Dynasty scholars: while adhering to the Confucian principle of "cultivating oneself and governing the country," they also relied on Buddhism and Taoism to "enlighten their minds and see their nature" and "follow nature" to alleviate the worries of officialdom, gradually becoming "Confucian on the outside, Buddhist and Taoist on the inside." Su Shi's open-minded attitude of "living life in a raincoat and a straw hat" and Fan Zhongyan's broad-minded attitude of "not being happy with things or sad with oneself" are both clear examples of this mentality. This mindset is also reflected in literature: in poetry, "using Zen as metaphor" and "incorporating Taoism into poetry" are commonplace, ci poetry transcends eroticism to incorporate philosophical and broad-minded ideas, and prose, while grounded in Confucianism's "clarifying the Dao for practical application," also incorporates the Buddhist and Taoist concept of "clearing the mind and observing things." Combining the lives and works of Su Shi, Ouyang Xiu, and Huang Tzu, we examine how the integration of these three religions shaped their mindsets and how it interacted with their creative work. Ultimately, the aim is to understand the roots of this "blending of emotion and reason" in Song Dynasty literature.

## Keywords

The integration of the Three Religions in the Song Dynasty, literati's mindset, literary creation, Neo-Confucianism, the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

## 1. Introduction

After Emperor Wu of Han abolished all schools of thought and promoted Confucianism alone, Confucianism long dominated the intellectual landscape, while Buddhism and Taoism continued to flourish. Buddhism, introduced in the Eastern Han Dynasty, spread through the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and reached its peak during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, gradually integrating into local culture. Taoism, drawing on pre-Qin Daoism, gained reverence in the early Tang Dynasty due to the imperial family's recognition of Laozi as their ancestor.

The Song Dynasty ended the wars of the Five Dynasties, and rulers needed to stabilize society through ideological unification. After Emperor Taizu of Song "released military power with a cup of wine," he advocated for the literati to "rule the country through culture," establishing Confucianism as the orthodox doctrine while not rejecting Buddhism and Taoism, creating

policy space for the integration of the three religions. The literati served as both bureaucrats and intellectuals, employing Confucianism in court and seeking relief from anxiety when careers proved unsuccessful. Reality pushed them toward a fusion of the three religions.

The rise of Neo-Confucianism theoretically solidified the convergence of the three religions. Zhou Dunyi used the Taoist concept of Tai Chi to interpret the Confucian concept of Tai Chi, arguing for "Wuji and Tai Chi"; Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi absorbed the Buddhist concept of "the inherent purity of mind and nature" and advocated "preserving the principles of Heaven and eliminating human desires"; Zhu Xi integrated the Buddhist and Daoist concept of "investigating things" with the Confucian concept of "seeking knowledge" to form the systematic Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism, with Confucianism at its core and drawing on the essence of Buddhism and Daoism, became the mainstream ideological tool for literati.

At this point, the mindset of Song Dynasty literati no longer relied solely on Confucianism for advancement or Buddhism for escapism, but rather on "balancing worldly engagement and detachment, and reconciling ideals with reality." Literature carries the mentality, with a wide range of themes, deep artistic conception and rich philosophy. Clarifying the relationship between these two perspectives can help us understand the root of the "differences" between Song literature and Tang literature and discern the maturation of the literati's spiritual tradition—this is the significance of this article.

## **2. The Historical Context and Specific Manifestations of the Convergence of the Three Religions in the Song Dynasty**

The convergence of the three religions in the Song Dynasty was not accidental; it was an inevitable consequence of the ideological evolution of the Tang and Five Dynasties, ultimately resulting in a structure characterized by "Confucianism as the core and Buddhism and Taoism as the core." The convergence of the three religions in the early Song Dynasty was centered on policy guidance. Emperor Taizu of Song, who established the country through military power and deeply understood that "military rule is inferior to civil rule," immediately ordered the expansion of the Imperial College, reinstated the imperial examination system, and established Confucianism as the orthodox school of thought. He also emphasized both "protection and regulation" for Buddhism, repairing temples destroyed during war and recruiting eminent monks to participate in government affairs, while also prohibiting excessive Buddhist expansion to avoid the Tang Dynasty's "anti-Buddhist" policy. Emperor Zhenzong of Song Dynasty particularly favored Taoism, posthumously bestowing the title "Taishang Laojun Hunyuan Shangde Emperor" on Laozi. He also compiled a comprehensive collection of Taoist classics, tying Taoism to imperial power, and gradually established the saying "Confucianism governs the world, Taoism cultivates the body, and Buddhism nourishes the mind," laying the foundation for the coexistence of the three religions. By the mid-Northern Song Dynasty, the three religions had merged into a theoretical framework, with the key being the rise of Neo-Confucianism. Zhou Dunyi, the founder of Neo-Confucianism, centered his "Taiji Tushuo" on the concept of "Wuji and Taiji." He fused the Taoist "Wuji" with the Confucian "Taiji" to construct a cosmic framework in which "Taiji gives rise to Yin and Yang, and Yin and Yang give rise to the Five Elements." This combined the Confucian principle of "the unity of all things" with the Taoist concept of "natural inaction." The two Cheng brothers focused on the "mind and nature" and said that "nature is reason", saying that the human heart has the natural law, but it is covered by selfish desires. This is the idea of borrowing from Buddhism and Zen. They also advocated "investigating things to gain knowledge", combining the Confucian "investigating things" and the Taoist "observing things" to form a practice method of "exhausting reason and fulfilling nature". In the Southern Song Dynasty, the protagonists of the fusion became literati, and it was also put into practice. Zhu Xi was the culmination of Neo-Confucianism. He criticized Buddhism

and Taoism for being "out of touch with the world", but in fact he secretly picked up a lot of good things - "investigating things to gain knowledge" and learning Buddhism "slowly practicing", "preserving the natural law and eliminating human desires" and the Taoist idea of "fewer selfish desires" [1]. The literati of the Southern Song Dynasty did not really care about the good or bad of the three religions: Lu You's official career was not smooth, so he relied on Confucian beliefs to support himself and used Taoist health preservation to relieve his worries; Xin Qiji failed to resist the Jin Dynasty, adhered to Confucianism and used Buddhism to understand grief and anger. This "using whatever is lacking" shows that the fusion of the three religions from book principles to life became a common practice of literati in the Song Dynasty.

### **3. The Impact of the Convergence of the Three Religions on the Mentality of Song Dynasty Literati: From "Conflict" to "Harmony"**

Before the integration of the three religions, scholars often found themselves caught between the Confucian pursuit of progress and the Buddhist and Taoist escapism. For example, Li Bai, who simultaneously aspired to "save the people and secure the country," yet also yearned for "letting his hair down and rowing a small boat," ultimately fell into depression. Song Dynasty scholars, leveraging the integration of the three religions, adjusted their mindsets, resulting in two distinct life styles. Fan Zhongyan exemplified the path of "cultivating Confucianism and nourishing the mind through Buddhism and Taoism," demonstrating both commitment and open-mindedness. He embraced the Confucian ideal of benevolent government, and his poem "Yueyang Tower Inscription" exudes a sense of responsibility, expressing his concern for the world before his own. When his career struggled, he sought solace in Buddhism and Taoism, even discussing the shared principles of Confucianism and Buddhism with the eminent monk Qisong. He also read the "Tao Te Ching" and advocated "contentment." In his "Song in Response to Ge Hong, the Temple Secretary's Flower Reception," he sang, "Life's honors and disgraces are like floating clouds," eschewing egocentricity. Another approach embraced "Zen enlightenment and Confucian practice," demonstrating both introspection and practicality. Huang Tingjian exemplified this approach. He studied under Huitang Zuxin, who said that "learning poetry is like learning Zen" and that one needs to "understand one's mind and see one's nature"; he advocated "the connection between Zen and Confucianism" and wrote in "A Letter to Han Qiong Xiucan" that "Taoism is the essence and Confucianism is the function". He reduced taxes as an official and used Zen to understand the complicated, achieving the unity of "inner sage and outer king". The third is the natural and steadfast mindset of "Taoism as the realm, Confucianism as the backbone," exemplified by Lu You. He embraced the Confucian ideal of "resisting the Jin and restoring the nation," and his poem, "Lying stiff in a lonely village, I do not mourn," reveals his Confucian spirit. In his middle age, he lived in seclusion in Shanyin, reading the Huangting Sutra. His poem "Youju" incorporates the Taoist principle of "conforming to nature," viewing change from the perspective of "the constant nature of all things," without passivity [2]. These three mindsets are essentially the result of the integration of the three religions—dissolving the opposition between "involvement" and "detachment," enabling scholars to both "apply knowledge to the world" in the court and "cultivate the mind" in private, becoming one of the mature spiritual paradigms of ancient Chinese literati.

### **4. Thematic and Stylistic Transformations of Song Dynasty Poetry Against the Context of the Confluence of the Three Religions**

Poetry was the core of Song poetry's expression of sentiment. The confluence of three religions and the creation of subject matter and style: Tang emphasized emotion and Song embraced reason Song poetry encompassed a range of themes, including patriotic themes informed by the "complementary Confucianism and Taoism" approach and philosophical themes informed

by Buddhism and Zen. Lu You exemplified the former: "In my early years, I knew the hardships of the world; looking north from the Central Plains, the aura is as majestic as the mountains" expresses Confucianism's anti-Jin sentiment and patriotism; "Visiting Shanxi Village" incorporates the Taoist principle of open-mindedness, using scenery as a metaphor for resolving difficult situations, with its lines like "Mountains and rivers, seemingly endless, willows and flowers, another village." The latter category is centered around Su Shi and Huang Tingjian: Su Shi's "Inscription on the Wall of the West Forest" reads, "Looking from the side, it becomes a mountain, looking from the side, it becomes a peak... It is because I am in this mountain." When writing about Mount Lu, he used Buddhist and Zen wisdom to point out the confusion of those in power, and incorporated Buddhist and Zen enlightenment into his poetry [3]. Huang Tingjian's "To Huang Jifu" reads, "A cup of wine in the spring breeze of peach and plum blossoms, a lamp for ten years in the night rain of rivers and lakes." He used image contrast to express his thoughts about his friends, mixed with Confucianism and Taoism, and hid the Buddhist and Zen sentiment of "the impermanence of time and space." In terms of style, Song poetry was influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, and has the characteristics of "using Zen to illustrate poetry" and "using Taoism to introduce poetry." "Using Zen to illustrate poetry" was proposed by Huang Tingjian. "Turning iron into gold" in "Reply to Hong Ju's Father" is derived from Buddhist scriptures, referring to the poet's enlightenment like a Zen master, refining new ideas from the old sayings of the ancients. The Jiangxi School of Poetry often uses this phrase, such as Chen Shidao's "Quatrain", "Books should be read with pleasure and are easy to finish... I wish I could read them again and again in a hundred years." The words are simple and common, but they are like Zen sayings that are worth pondering. "Incorporating Taoism into poetry" focuses on a clear artistic conception and a natural perspective, with Su Shi and Yang Wanli being the most typical examples. Su Shi's "Drinking on the Lake, First Sunny, Then Rainy" describes West Lake, which embodies the Taoist emphasis on nature, with sunny and rainy days perfectly matching the principles of yin and yang; Yang Wanli's "Chengzhai style" works, such as "Small Pond", use a fine brush to depict small natural scenes, without deliberately expressing emotions, but rather bringing out the flavor of "sitting and forgetting". The transformation of Song poetry reflects the mindset of the literati, with Confucianism lending a sense of reality and Buddhism and Taoism adding depth. This fusion of the two allowed Song poetry to break free from the lyrical stereotypes of Tang poetry, achieving a style where "reason controls emotion, and reason blends emotion and reason," a core difference in the "Tang vs. Song Poetry Debate."

## 5. The Impact of the Confluence of the Three Religions on Song Dynasty Ci: The Breakthrough from "Eroticism" to "Elegance"

From the Tang Dynasty to the early Northern Song Dynasty, most of the ci poems were "erotic", describing love and separation with a gentle style; when the three religions merged, ci poems integrated the responsibility of Confucianism, the magnanimity of Buddhism, and the naturalness of Taoism, changing from entertainment to a spiritual carrier and becoming "refined". This was centered on innovation in subject matter and style [4]. In terms of subject matter, Confucian patriotic ci, Buddhist and Zen philosophical ci, and Taoist hermit ci emerged. Confucian patriotic ci were exemplified by Xin Qiji and Yue Fei. Xin Qiji's "Pozhenzi" (Pozhenzi) expresses the heroic spirit of resisting the Jin army, with the line "I want to speak, but I hesitate" in "Ugly Slave" (Ugly Slave) alluding to obsessions and relieving grief and indignation through Buddhist and Taoist references. Yue Fei's "Manjianghong" (Manjianghong) expresses the Confucian ideal of loyalty and patriotism, with its "hair standing on end in anger" at its core. Su Shi and Zhu Dunru are prominent representatives of Buddhist and Zen philosophical ci. Su Shi's "Ding Feng Bo" features the lines "A raincoat shrouding me in mist and rain, a life without wind

or rain," and "Neither wind nor rain nor clear," embodying the Buddhist and Zen detachment and the Taoist concept of non-attachment and open-mindedness. Zhu Dunru's "Quail Sky" uses a self-descriptive metaphor of "a man of mountains and rivers," embodying the Taoist and Buddhist detachment of "unburdened by external things." Representatives of the Daoist hermit *ci* are Liu Yong and Jiang Kui. The Chengzhai style favors using a fine brush to capture natural shimmers, avoiding forced lyricism and imbuing it with a Taoist spirit of "sitting and forgetting." Liu Yong's "Eight Sounds of Ganzhou" reveals the Taoist sentiment of "the impermanence of worldly affairs," while Jiang Kui's "Yangzhou Slow" incorporates Confucian sentiments and Taoist realms, adding a boldness and a fresh, clear tone. Su Shi's "Nian Nu Jiao," with its "Eastward Flowing River," draws on Confucian history to lament heroes and Taoist perspectives on impermanence, revealing a broad-mindedness within its grandeur. Xin Qiji's "Yong Yu Le," grounded in Confucian loyalty and righteousness, integrates Buddhist and Taoist principles of the impermanence of time and space, creating a tragic yet profound poem. Jiang Kui is the most famous poet for his poems. Zhang Yan commented on his poems: "Wild clouds fly alone, leaving no trace." The "moonlight of the old times" in "An Xiang" uses cold imagery to create the Taoist realm of "clearing the mind and observing things." It is not deliberately lyrical, but the meaning is still unfinished. The root of the "refinement" of Song Dynasty poems is that scholars incorporated the thoughts of the three religions into the "erotic genre", which changed poems from entertaining to expressing feelings and understanding the truth. It opened up a new path and raised its status. It eventually became a landmark of Song Dynasty literature, standing shoulder to shoulder with poetry [5].

## **6. The Fusion of "Clarifying the Dao" and "Expressionism" in Song Dynasty Prose from the Perspective of the Confluence of the Three Religions**

Song Dynasty prose, the core of the "Eight Great Masters," was influenced by the convergence of the three religions. It adhered to the Confucian principle of "literature to illuminate the truth" and embraced the Buddhist and Taoist principle of "expressive expression." This "pragmatic, ethereal, reasoned, and emotional" style is often found in political commentary and travelogues. Political commentary draws on the Confucian principle of "clarifying the truth and applying it to practical use" and also draws on Buddhism and Taoism to illuminate its principles. Wang Anshi, in his "Reply to Sima Jianyi," refuted the reforms, citing the "Zhou Gong Reforms" as justification and drawing on the Taoist principle of "changing with the times" to argue that "natural disasters are nothing to fear," thus avoiding the extremes of Tang Dynasty political commentary. Su Shi's "Letter to Emperor Shenzong" integrated the three religions: emphasizing the principle that "the people are the foundation of the state" to encourage lighter taxes, advocating lenient punishments based on "compassion," and advocating for less harassment through the principle of "non-action," employing a gentle approach to reasoning. His travelogues employed Buddhist and Taoist freehand expression to express Confucian sentiments. Ouyang Xiu's "Drunken Old Man's Pavilion" depicts the four seasons of Chuzhou, embodying the ideal of "sharing joy with the people" and showing open-mindedness through the Taoist view of nature; "The drunkard's intention is not to drink" embodies the Buddhist wisdom of "non-attachment" [6]. Su Shi's "Red Cliff Fu" depicts "clear wind and ripples" to create an ethereal scene, and uses the words of the guest to express "sadness for life" to show the impermanence of Buddhism. It finally integrates the Confucian "accepting fate" and the Taoist "equality of all things", and arrives at the conclusion that "if it is not mine, do not take even a hair", making the travelogue a vehicle for "enlightenment". The literary style is also influenced by the three religions: Confucianism's "pragmatism" makes Wang Anshi's writing "thin and hard", and Buddhism and Taoism's "freehand" makes Su Shi's writing "smooth and flowing". Ouyang Xiu's "Six One Poetry Talk" advocates "simple writing and profound meaning",

and "Ode to the Sound of Autumn" depicts the sound of autumn and combines realism and freehand. The fusion of "Ming Dao" and "Xie Yi" in Song Dynasty prose is essentially the literati's integration of the three religions into a creative method - Confucianism established the core, Buddhism and Taoism enriched the techniques, and got rid of the "parallel and gorgeous" and "ancient and difficult" drawbacks of Tang Dynasty prose, forming a style of "plainness and rationality", which set the paradigm for later generations.

## 7. Conclusion

The confluence of the three religions in the Song Dynasty was more than a simple amalgamation of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Through political guidance, theoretical integration, and the practical promotion of literati, it forged a unified approach characterized by "Confucianism as the core and Buddhism and Taoism as the application." This approach, while adhering to the Confucian principle of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world," also drew upon the Buddhist and Taoist principles of "enlightenment" and "conforming to nature," helped Song Dynasty literati resolve the conflict between ideals and reality. This ideological framework transformed the mindset of the literati: they escaped the dilemma of choosing between "entering the world" and "leaving it," and embraced a life characterized by "Confucianism on the outside, Buddhism on the inside." Take Fan Zhongyan, for example, who was both capable of taking on responsibilities and remaining open-minded; Huang Tingjian, who was both introspective and practical; and Lu You, who followed nature without losing his resolve. These individuals not only carried a sense of responsibility but also withstood setbacks, a true sign of the maturity of the literati's spirit. This shift in literati's mindset also transformed literature: poetry shifted from purely lyrical expression to a blend of emotion and reason; ci poetry shifted from eroticism to elegance; and prose blended "clarifying the truth" with "freehand brushwork." Unlike its Tang counterpart, Song Dynasty literature wasn't simply for entertainment; it became a medium for literati to express their true feelings and soothe their emotions. More broadly, the Song Dynasty inherited the Tang Dynasty's tradition of the coexistence of the three religions and embarked on the path of integration of the three religions during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, transforming the motto "when prosperous, benefit the world; when poor, seek personal well-being" from empty rhetoric into reality. It also shows the tolerance of Chinese culture - the confluence of the three religions helped scholars solve problems, pick out the good ones and discard the bad ones, making their thoughts more innovative. This wisdom is the root of Song Dynasty culture and the core of Chinese culture that has been passed down for thousands of years.

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