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Body-Mediated Self-Healing in Poetry of Medicinal Herb Cultivation by

Su Shi and Su Zhe

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in East Asian Studies

by

Yijie Wang

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Body-Mediated Self-Healing in Poetry of Medicinal Herb Cultivation by

Su Shi and Su Zhe

by

Yijie Wang

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Huijun Mai, Chair

This thesis examines how bodily restoration mediates spiritual self-healing in the medicinal herb cultivation poetry by Su Shi and Su Zhe during their political exile. Exile disrupted these two Northern Song literati's self-identification on both spatial and temporal levels, severing connections to familiar places and interrupting the continuity of their established identities. When material impoverishment intensified bodily suffering through hunger and illness, their fractured senses of selves further deepened. Through close reading informed by pharmacological knowledge, this project demonstrates that cultivated herbs function as both emblems and agents in the Su brothers self-healing processes. Herb cultivation reconstructs everyday bodily nourishment routines around growing and ingestion, providing bodily

nourishment that grounds spiritual transcendence. Su Shi's *Five Odes of the Small Nursery* employs "transplantation" as a poetic device that restores his fractured identities as northern sojourner and banished official, ultimately allowing him to inhabit Huizhou as a southerner dwelling in the present. Su Zhe's *Two Poems on Cultivating Herbal Seedlings* reveals a different dynamic. On the one hand, the agricultural routine of herb cultivation establishes temporal and spatial continuity and produces a poetic food abundance. This contributes to the poet's sense of lodging as a sojourner. On the other hand, the failure of herbal remedies to cure his failing eyesight exposes the limitations of external solutions, compelling him toward Buddhist meditation as the true path to self-healing. For both poets, the body operates not as an obstacle but as a mediator, with sustained bodily nourishment forming the corporeal foundation upon which spiritual transcendence unfolds.

The thesis of Yijie Wang is approved.

Andrea S. Goldman

David C. Schaberg

Huijun Mai, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

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I am bad at delivering an emotional speech—both verbally and textually. All I can do is give a list of names.

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Introduction

The Song Dynasty witnessed an unprecedented propensity for horticulture. Gentlemen were passionate about all kinds of plants in their gardens. Previous scholarship has already contributed detailed observations on these active botanical engagements among the literati. Xiaoshan Yang has examined how plants in private gardens reflected the literati's taste and social identity.¹ Ronald Egan has probed into the fever of peony appreciation, which triggered lasting moral-aesthetic debates in the Northern Song.² Hou Naihui broadly has examined plants as emblems of seasons and the culture that shaped landscapes in the literati's gardens.³ Huijun Mai has investigated the boom of botanical knowledge production and focuses on the development of the grafting technique as a literary discourse, which incited the evolving understanding of the ethics of the time.⁴ These various studies unpack the potential of literary writings that represented and reshaped gardening as a literary culture in Song China.

Taken together, existing discussions also demonstrate an ongoing shift from asking what plants signify to reflecting on what plants themselves are. Building on symbolic readings, scholars have turned to explore material, biological, and epistemic inquiries. Plants are no longer merely aesthetic objects, but agents influencing humans' intellectual and cultural discourse through their material engagements.

1. Xiaoshan Yang, "The Poetics of Space: Presence and Mediation," in *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2003), 51-73.

2. Ronald. C. Egan, "The Peony's Allure: Botanical Treatises and Floral Beauty," in *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2006), 109-61.

3. Hou Naihui 侯迺慧, *Shi qing yu youya: Songdai yuanlin yishu yu shenghuo fengshang* 詩情與優雅: 宋代園林藝術與生活風尚 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2022).

4. For the botanical knowledge production, see Huijun Mai, "Thinking Things: The Material Turn in Song (960-1279) Literary Culture (PhD diss., Harvard Univ., 2020); for the grafting technique as a discourse of ethics of time, see Huijun Mai, "'Gardening Time: Horticulture and Meditations on Time in Song (960-1279) China," in *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 14 (2023): 749-71.

This thesis participates in this discussion by examining the specific cases of medicinal herb cultivation by Su Shi 蘇軾(1037-1101) and Su Zhe 蘇轍(1039-1112) as banished officials. As an elastic botanical category, medicinal herbs are plants with life-preserving value to restore and improve physical and spiritual well-being. This power, blessed by their materiality of healing, can be a discursive vehicle of transformation. As a professionalized agricultural practice, the cultivation of medicinal herbs experienced large-scale growth in the Song dynasty.⁵ Together with the widespread production of medicinal herbs was their prevalence in literati gardens.⁶ Existing studies have noticed the parallel between the fashion for medicinal herb cultivation among the literati and the rise of medical knowledge in the Song Dynasty. Yet, this observation invites us to think further: rather than responding passively as informative accounts in literary embellishment, how might literature take advantage of knowledge of herbs' *materiality* and *meaning* to reframe our understanding of herb cultivation? This study attempts to offer one plausible answer through close readings of the poetry of medicinal herb cultivation by the Su brothers, both of whom wrote about their engagement with plants during their exile/political banishment.

Political banishment constituted a serious threat to a literatus's self-identification in the Northern Song. Peter Bol has concluded that office holding, learning, and pedigree were the building blocks of literati identity.⁷ For a well-rounded literatus, being an official was

5. Liang Songtao 梁松濤 and Su Hong 蘇紅, "Lun Songdai yaocai zhongzhi jishu" 論宋代藥材種植技術, *Nongye kaogu* 農業考古, no.1 (2020):116–22.

6. Tang Wenxiu 唐文秀, "Songdai shidafu de caoyao caiji yu zaipai" 宋代士大夫的草藥採集與栽培 (master's thesis, Sichuan University, 2021). Xu Wengang 許文剛, "Songshi yu Songdai yaocai yanjiu" 宋詩與宋代藥材研究 (master's thesis, Xibei Normal University, 2021).

7. Peter K. Bol, *"This Culture of Ours": Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 32–75.

primary, while being a poet was secondary.⁸ Within this context, relocation due to exile robbed Su Shi and Su Zhe of political identity, disrupting their sense of self both spatially and temporally. The experience uprooted these cultivated official-scholars from familiar places, routines, and social orders, while interrupting the continuity of their past identity (their origins and the roles that had previously defined them). For elderly gentlemen, bodily suffering (hunger, illness, age-related decline) compounded such challenges. Material impoverishment, the shortage of food and medicine, further exacerbated their sense of disorientation by intensifying bodily unease. In the Su brothers' medicinal herb cultivation poetry, herbs serve as agents of bodily restoration, which mediate their spiritual healing of selfhood fractured by displacement.

Hence, in this thesis, I will probe how bodily restoration significantly mediates the Su brothers' self-healing from spiritual displacement to spiritual transcendence by examining Su Shi's *Five Odes of the Small Nursery* (*Xiaopu wuyong* 小圃五詠) and Su Zhe's *Two Poems on Cultivating Herbal Seedlings* (*Zhong yaomiao er shou* 種藥苗二首). In both poetic works, cultivated herbs function as both emblem and agent. They symbolize the poets' spiritual conditions, while participating in their self-healing through the reconstruction of everyday life-preserving routines around cultivation and ingestion. The political turmoil after Zhezong Emperor's assumption of rule led to the Su brothers' political banishment.

For Su Shi, his poetry of medicinal herb cultivation functions as strategy to cope with his identity as a sojourner and banished official, as well as his damaged sense of self-worth in Huizhou 惠州, situated on the geographic, political, and cultural margin. Similarly, Su Zhe

8. Uchiyama Seiya 內山精也, *Miaotang yu jianghu: Songdai shixue de kongjian* 廟堂與江湖: 宋代詩學的空間, Zhu Gang tr., et al. (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2017), 6-8.

also turns to herb cultivation poetry to wrestle with the question of “who am I?” Yet, his poetry also serves as guidance, an encouragement to his followers around him in Yingchang 潁昌, a symbolic place of political banishment for a particular group of literati sharing similar statecraft beliefs and moral principles. My analysis approaches Su Shi and Su Zhe’s poetic representation of body-mediated self-healing along two dimensions: I offer a thematic analysis of the poets’ crises of selfhood through close-reading and thick-contextualization; and I draw upon epistemic resources from pharmacological literature and medicinal texts to illuminate how herbal materiality influenced the Su brothers’ poetic design. In the case of Su Shi, I also apply formal analysis of compositional patterns across poetic sequences.⁹

9. This analysis applies Huijun Mai’s method of reading formal structure and sequence architecture in Su Shi’s exile poetry, developed in her thesis “Censored Writing: Negotiation, Self-surveillance, and Consolation in Su Shi’s Poetic Sequences from 1080 to 1084” (master’s thesis, Harvard University, 2014). I apply this approach here to the Small Nursery sequence’s treatment of Su Shi’s self-healing process mediated by bodily nourishment, formalized by the entire sequence.

Chapter 1

Su Shi's Small Nursery in Huizhou

.....Ziwei is diligent in his learning and possesses literary talent. He claimed to know prognostic arts and foretold that I would certainly not die in the Lingnan region.

.....子微篤學有文，自言知數術，雲僕必不死嶺表。¹⁰

——*A Letter as Proof of Gift to Yang Ziwei*

——《書贈楊子微》

In 1094, on his exilic journey to Lingnan, Su Shi encountered Yang Ziwei 楊子微 in Chen Liu 陳留. As a son of Su Shi's townsman, Yang Jifu 楊濟甫, Ziwei spared no effort to visit Su Shi and offer comfort. This erudite young man guaranteed that it would be impossible for the graying gentleman to pass away in the tropical frontier. Fabricated or not, Ziwei's fortune-telling must have sounded like a strong consolation to Su Shi. For an old man of fifty-nine, his constant ailments, the perennial mist and steaming temperature, and scarce food and medicine were enough to claim his life through deprivation and depression.

Su Shi's political enemies probably wished to put send him to his death by the hand of the harsh natural world in Lingnan. However, Su Shi refused to resign himself to death. Bearing in mind the romantic image of Huizhou 惠州 (in modern Guangdong province) as an immortal realm at the foot of Mt. Luofu, Su Shi dived into cultivation to become an immortal. In fact, Su Shi's dialectical pursuit of spiritual transcendence through bodily cultivation was a significant part of his exile in Lingnan 嶺南 (modern-day Guangdong province and Hainan province). Previous research on this practice has focused on esoteric

10. See Su Shi, "Shu zeng Yang Ziwei," 書贈楊子微, in *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu* 蘇軾全集校注 (hereafter *SSQJJZ*), annot. Zhang Zhilie 張志烈, Ma Defu 馬德福, 周裕楷, et al. (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2010), 7:71. 8099-100.

Daoist practices oriented toward transcendence from worldly constraints through liberation from the mortal body.¹¹ My reading of the Small Nursery sequence offers an alternative understanding by revealing another dimension of this phenomenon. Su Shi's self-liberation also emerged from bodily care in everyday life-preserving herb cultivation and ingestion. Through this practice, which was grounded in the desire for bodily satiety and rejuvenation, Su Shi achieved spiritual self-healing. Ironically, perhaps, Su Shi's spiritual transcendence was accomplished precisely through the continuous nourishment of the body.

1.1 Transplantation: Restoration of Selfhood through Everyday Bodily Healing

In the twelfth month of 1095, Su Shi composed the poetic sequence *Five Odes of the Small Nursery* on five medicinal herbs: ginseng (*renshen* 人參), rehmannia (*dihuang* 地黃), wolfberries (*gouqi* 枸杞), sweet chrysanthemum (*ganju* 甘菊), and adlay (*yiyi* 薏苡).¹² All these herbs produce the “lightening body” (*qingshen* 輕身) effect, which contributed to more than corporeal relief. They supported the poet's hope for self-liberation from spiritual burdens.¹³ By constructing his herbal nursery, Su Shi was attempting to overcome the spiritual suffering induced by his disrupted self-identification. The foundation for his spiritual healing is the poetic reconstruction of his everyday life, organized by life-preserving activities.

This sequence consists of two distinct compositional templates. The first three

11. Zhiyi Yang, “The Spontaneous Body,” in *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Su Shi (1037-1101) in Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 164-201.

12. The plant *yiyi* is better known in English as Job's tears, but for this essay on poetry composed in the eleventh-century China, I will use the term “adlay” to avoid the cognitive dissonance of referencing a Biblical name in the context of middle period China.

13. See *Shennong bencao jing ji zhu* 神農本草經緝注, comp. Ma Jixing 馬繼興 et. al (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1995), 2.34-6, 39-40, 54-5, 91.

poems—*Ginseng*, *Rehmannia*, and *Wolfberry*—are structured around stanzas depicting everyday life in the form of an agricultural cycle from cultivation to life-preserving practice. The remaining two—*Sweet Chrysanthemum* and *Adlay*—chart Su Shi’s emulation of Tao Qian’s 陶潛 (365-427) life through plant engagement. The cultivation, here formalized by “transplantation” as a cross-boundary movement, serves as a pivotal device: it is present in the first three poems, but is absent in the last two. What is Su Shi trying to tell his readers through this difference?

Ginseng 人參¹⁴

移根到羅浮， I transplanted their roots to the foot of Luofu Mountain,
越水灌清池。 Irrigating them with the crystal-clear waters of the Yue region.
地殊風雨隔， Even in this distant land with its different wind and rain,
臭味終祖禰。 The scent of my ginseng is ever faithful to its ancestors.
青莖綴紫萼， The green stems are embellished with purple corolla,
圓實墮紅米。 Bowing under the weight of round and full red drupes.

14. Su Shi, "Xiaopu wuyong," 小圃五詠, no.1, 7:39. 4683.

開心定魂魄， They brighten my heart and settle my soul,
 憂恚何足洗。 What need to wash away my concern and anger?
 糜身輔吾生， They mashed themselves to support my life,
 既食首重稽。 Having thus eaten them, I must kneel in reverence.

Su Shi first confronts his problematic identity as a “northern sojourner” (*beike* 北客).¹⁵ The first stanza depicts the irrigation of ginseng in its native habitat by an imagined invisible cultivator harnessing the waters of the cosmos. The poet transposes the cosmic irrigation to his own nursery, enacting it by himself with the water in the south. Through this creation of a northern space, Su Shi asserts his self-recognition. The harvesting of ginseng is a poetic imagination, yet this imagination is significant.¹⁶ The transplanted ginseng functions as more than a spatial emblem. Its robust growth symbolizes Su Shi’s physical adaptability, while its unchanged scent signifies his moral integrity. Across the first three poems, the physical vitality of cultivated herbs operates as both an emblem of the poet’s bodily health and an index of spiritual well-being.

Then comes the poet’s imagined enjoyment of herbal ingestion. The abundant life-preserving resources guaranteed by the ginseng harvest shield the herb farmer against hunger and illness. Without it, he will suffer from a full year of living in poverty (*qiongnian* 窮年).

15. This term of self-identification appears in Su Shi’s poem *Shi binlang* 食檳榔 (Eating betel nuts): “Initially as a northern sojourner I was not familiar with this fruit, but it was not easy to turn down local urgings.” 北客初未諳，勸食俗難阻。 See Su Shi, “Shi binlang,” *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 4668-69.

16. According to *Bencao tujing* 本草圖經, a state-patronized medical encyclopedia published in 1063, it takes ginseng more than ten years to mature, which means it was impossible for Su Shi to harvest ginseng during his three-year exile in Huizhou: “When first sprouting, the small young ginseng is about three to four inches tall, with one branch and five leaves. After four or five years, it produces two whorls of five leaves, ending in a flowering stalk. By the tenth year, it grows three whorls; in later years, four whorls, each with five leaves. From the center arises a single stem, commonly called the “hundred-foot pole.” In the third and fourth months it blossoms, the flowers are fine and minute like millet, with filaments as slender as threads, purple and white in color. After autumn it bears fruit, seven or eight in number, like large beans; they are green when unripe and red when mature, and they fall off by themselves.” 初生小者，三、四寸許，一極五葉；四五年後生兩五葉，未有花莖；至十年後，生三極；年深者生四極，各五葉。中心生一莖，俗名百尺杆。三月、四月有花，細小如粟，蕊如絲，紫白色；秋後結子，或七、八枚，如大豆，生青熟紅，自落。 See Su Song 蘇頌, *Bencao tujing* 本草圖經 (hereafter *BCTJ*), annot. Shang Zhijun 尚志鈞 (Hefei: Anhui kexuejiushu chubanshe, 1994), 92.

Farming-ingesting-healing, as an organized daily life-preserving routine, is repeated in the first three poems. The recurrence of this routine explicitly accentuates that sustaining bodily nourishment is foundational for Su Shi's idealized version of everyday life. Exile in the south can turn even basic survival needs into a crisis. The hungry poet imagines hurried harvesting ("I scooped the yellow soil with my own hands to harvest." 黄土手自啟) and eating ("I gnaw them down to the last bit of root." 齧齧盡根柢). Impatiently, the poet expresses his bodily yearning as an emergency. For Su Shi, bodily nourishment maintained by quotidian consumption of food and medicine is fundamental to restoring his life order. It grounds his later spiritual relief.

Through the nourishment of his heart, the sojourning poet gains a sense of rootedness, his soul settled by the herb (*dinghunpo* 定魂魄). To repay the sacrifice of the ginseng, he performs a grand gesture of gratitude. Depicted in the last couplet of *Ginseng*, the reciprocity between the poet and his herb recurs in couplets illustrating the attentive care in the second and third poems. The herb farmer devotes himself to his herb's growth via soil fertilization (*fuworang* 附沃壤) and fence construction to protect the new shoots ("I put up humble fences to protect my new plants," 短籬護新植). In return, the nourished herb always provides a substantial harvest. Transplantation, therefore, is a mutual commitment of sustainable healing between Su Shi as a human and his plants. Both immigrants, together they maintain the sustainable vibrancy.

In the first poem, *Ginseng*, Su Shi delineates the healing process of his spiritual disorientation as a northern gentleman. It is through the bodily restoration of "brightening

the heart” (*kaixin* 開心) that the poet transcends his melancholy as a sojourner.¹⁷ His ginseng cultivation contributes to his self-healing beyond the construction of a northern space for self-consolation. It enables the restoration of his heart for his ultimate joy. At the same time, *Ginseng* establishes several dominant patterns throughout the first three poems. In addition to its role as an agricultural trope for productivity, “transplantation” functions as a key poetic device. It brings together the routine of everyday life and activates the life-nourishing relationship between the poet and his herb. Also, the recurring use of this device across the first three poems constructs a coherent poetic process of bodily healing. These formalized everyday life-preserving activities become the foundation for Su Shi’s spiritual transcendence after bodily restoration. Within *Ginseng*, the unfolding bodily nourishment routine formalized in the poetic architecture ensures that Su Shi, too, would become rooted in Huizhou like his herb.

Rehmannia 地黃¹⁸

地黃餉老馬, Feeding an old horse with Rehmannia,
 可使光鑑人。 Can make its appearance glossy enough to reflect one’s image.¹⁹
 吾聞樂天語, I heard these words from Letian,
 喻馬施之身。 Then likening myself to the old horse.
 我衰正伏櫪, In my weakness, I prop my body against the stable,²⁰
 垂耳氣不振。 My drooping ears showing weariness.

17. “Ginseng...calms the spirit, stabilizes the souls, brightens one’s heart to relieve emotional constraint, and enhances cognitive function.”人參...安精神,定魂魄...開心,益智. See *Shennong bencao jing jizhu*, 2.34-6.

18. “Xiaopu wuyong,” no.2, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 4686.

19. This couplet alludes to Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) “Cai dihuang zhe” 采地黃者 (The Rehmannia Collector): “I send the rehmannia to you for feeding your fattened horse, it will make it glossy enough to illuminate the ground beneath it.”與君啖肥馬, 可使照地光. See Bai Juyi, *Bai Juyi ji jian jiao* 白居易集箋校 (hereafter *BJYJJJ*), ed. Zhu Jincheng 朱金城 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 1:1.54.

20 This verse alludes to Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220) “Bu chu Xiamen xing” 步出夏門行 (Steps through the Illustrious Gate): “An old war-horse may be stabled, yet still it longs to gallop a thousand *li*,” 老驥伏櫪, 志在千里. See Lu Qinli 逯欽立, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 1:3.354.

移栽附沃壤， I replanted them in my nursery and spread fertile soil on their roots,
蕃茂爭新春。 [Where] they grew lushly, competing in vitality
with the new spring.

沉水得穉根， I soaked the tender roots in water,
重湯養陳薪。 Then, kindled wood to heat the steaming double boiler.
投以東阿清， I added Donkey Glue from the County of Dong E,
和以北海醇。 And seasoned with it with mellow ale from the County of Bei Hai.
崖蜜助甘冷， Its minty sweetness is enhanced with the honey from the cliff,
山薑發芳辛。 Its pungent fragrance is sharpened with mountain ginger.
融爲寒食餚， This fusion serves as my syrup-like meal
during the Cold Food Festival,
嚙作瑞露珍。 And I sip them as a precious brew.
丹田自宿火， My cinnabar field has harbored smoldering fire for a long time,
渴肺還生津。 And my thirsty lungs are oozing with moisture.
願餉內熱子， I hope to provide the processed herb to myself
as one suffering from internal heat,²¹
一洗胸中塵。 Completely washing away the dust in my mind.

Su Shi's allegory of the "old horse" speaks to his two concerns. Besides the inevitable bodily decline due to aging, Su Shi is frustrated as a banished official with unfulfilled ambition.

Through herb transplantation, the poet transforms mourning into anticipation. The vibrancy of the herb, "[where] they grew lushly, competing in vitality with the new spring in" 蕃茂爭新春, mirrors the poet's bodily improvement. In addition, "new spring" is a temporal trope of the poet's vision for his future. Rather than an extension of his past tragic political career, rejuvenation in exile represents a new phase of the poet's life. Through cultivating rehmanna, Su Shi's mood is upbeat as he reorients time itself.

Echoing the urgent hunger described in *Ginseng*, the poem moves to a busy

21. This is an allusion to *Zhuangzi* 莊子 that relates to concern about political responsibility, "I got my orders this morning and already I am sucking on ice chunks this evening, as if my insides were on fire!" 今吾朝受命而夕飲冰,我其內熱與! See *Zhuangzi jin zhu jin yi* 莊子今注今譯, annot. Chen Guying 陳鼓應, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), "Ren jian shi" 人間世, 2. 135. For the English translation, see "Chapter Four: In the Human World," in *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, tr. and annot. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2020), 38.

preparation of an herbal meal in the poet's kitchen—perhaps only in his mind.²² The enumeration of herbal ingredients is an ostentatious exhibition figuring the material abundance imaged by the poet. More importantly, it is a poetic act of defiance against his immobility in exile. Indeed, Su Shi plans to ingest the spatial vastness of the empire covering Dong E 東阿 (in modern Shandong province) in the north and Bei Hai 北海 (in modern Guangxi province) in the south. Although at the surface level this stanza depicts meal preparation based on the poet's pharmacological knowledge, the discursive emphasis is on his self-liberation from confined mobility: he is able to reach faraway places through gustatory travelling. Su Shi spiritually escapes from the current moment when he is imprisoned in immobility in exile. Again, the ingestion of rehmannia resets the clock.

Ultimately, with a robust body, Su Shi, as the “patient suffering from the internal heat” (*neirezi* 內熱子), reaches a spiritual transcendence. He puts his political concerns aside and achieves inner peace. The reconstruction of his everyday life around the consumption of the herbal harvest allows him to let go of his political identity and focus on the future. With an energized body, the poet indulges in spiritual connection with the entire empire, enabling him to temporarily forget the present.

22. Su Shi probably never harvested rehmannia, or at least, enough rehmannia. According to his letter written in the seventh month of 1096, he needed this herb but had to turn to Zhai Dongyu 翟東玉 (?-?) for help: “I have long wished to consume more fresh rehmannia root, yet it is difficult to obtain it on a regular basis. Recently, I heard someone say that Ouyang Shuxiang, the magistrate of Xingning in Chaozhou Prefecture, grows this medicinal plant in abundance in his county garden. I intend to write to request some but have not yet dared to do so. Since you are an old acquaintance of Shuxiang, might you convey this intention on my behalf?” 欲多食生地黃而不可常致。近見人言,循州興寧令歐陽叔向於縣圃中,多種此藥。意欲作書干求而未敢,君與叔向故人,可爲致此意否? See “Yu Zhai Dongyu yishou,” 與翟東玉一首, *SSQJJZ*, 8:58.6376-77.

Wolfberry 枸杞²³

神藥不自閼, This type of magical herb does not hide itself,
羅生滿山澤。 It spreads out all over the mountains and marshlands.
日有牛羊憂, Every day, it lives in fear of being eaten by the cows and sheep,
歲有野火厄。 And every year, the calamity of wildfire.
越俗不好事, The Yue custom has little use for it;
過眼等茨棘。 In the eyes of the locals, it is nothing more than thorny burrs.
青莢春自長, Its green tender shoots grow freely in the spring,
絳珠爛莫摘。 And the scarlet fruit rots unharvested.

短籬護新植, I put up humble fences to protect my new plants,
紫筍生卧節。 Then its young shoots sprout among the fallen nodes of bamboo.
根莖與花實, From the roots and stalks to the flowers and fruit,
收拾無棄物。 I harvest it without wasting a single thing.

大將玄吾鬢, Eating the large berries will turn my white forelocks black;
小則餉我客。 The smaller one I'll serve to my guests.

似聞朱明洞, I heard that in the Zhuming Cave [of Luofu Mountain],
中有千歲質。 There was a variety that lasted one-thousand years.
靈龐或夜吠, The spiritual root sometimes barks at night like a dog;²⁴
可見不可索。 Its shadow is visible, yet it remains elusive.
仙人倘許我, I wonder if the divine being would permit me
借杖扶衰疾。 To borrow his stick to support myself as I grow feeble and ill.

Su Shi further explores his selfhood by focusing on his damaged sense of self-worth. His sympathy for the neglected wolfberries seems to arise from a pointed commiseration. A plant with value as “magical herb” (*shenyao* 神藥) becomes “nothing more than thorny burrs” (*dengjinji* 等荊棘). Just like the wolfberries, his talents and skills are squandered. With genuine worth, both of them still remain unrecognized.

To console both himself and his herbs, the poet transplants the wolfberries with patience and care. With herbal expertise, he maximizes their value. Therefore, he enriches his

23. “Xiaopu wuyong,” no. 3, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 4688-89.

24. This verse alludes to Bai Juyi, “He Guo Shijun ti gouqi,” 和郭使君題枸杞 (Matching Guo Shi Jun’s Poem on Wolfberries): “I had not known that the root of this spiritual herb becomes a dog, no wonder I often hear barking at night.” 不知靈藥根成狗, 怪得時聞吠夜聲. See *BJYJJJ*, 3:25.1074.

life-nourishing routine all year round.²⁵ Through the recognition of their value, the poet subtly recognizes his own worth. He is not a sidelined gentleman with useless knowledge, but a resilient scholar managing to maintain and enhance his everyday rhythm of life-preservation to survive and revive. The wolfberries, whose every part proves useful, become an emblem of the poet's own diverse talents.

Having affirmed his worth, Su Shi turns to longing for the reversal of bodily aging. The mutual nourishing relationship between the poet and wolfberries here goes beyond the physical nourishment. Through this act of recognition, the poet reclaims his sense of existential legitimacy. This affirmation of self-worth naturally leads to nourishing his worthy self. The most tangible form of such self-care is bodily restoration. Corporeal immortality is its ultimate expression. Hence, though he had cultivated wolfberries, what would work best for him is the immortal variety, only existing in literary allusion. With a liberated spirit, Su Shi pursues absolute freedom inhabiting a body free from aging decline.

The first three poems in the Small Nursery sequence delineate how Su Shi restores his self-identification within the reconstruction of everyday life-preserving routine. His transplantation of medicinal herbs contributed to his bodily nourishment. Thanks to this sustained routine of life-preserving, Su Shi goes through his selfhood crisis at this stage. Transplantation, as a generative act in poetry, enables the poet to reconstitute his spatial belonging, temporal reorientation, and ontological restoration. In addition, it serves as a literary device that introduces the repeatable routine of cultivation and life-preserving activities. This pattern formalizes the poet's spiritual healing into a poetic structure. Based on

25. "Wolfberries...the leaves are collected in spring and summer, the stems and fruits in autumn, and the roots in winter." 枸杞...春夏採葉,秋採莖實,冬採根. See *BCTJ*, 356.

his robust body, secured through a life-nourishing routine, Su Shi steps into his poetic absorption for idealized living and being in exile.

1.2 Emulation of Tao Qian: Reconstruction of the Idealized Way of Being

With his crisis of selfhood seemingly resolved, Su Shi turns to crafting a better existence in exile. The last two poems in the Small Nursery sequence, *Sweet Chrysanthemum* and *Adlay*, adopt another template: emulation of Tao Qian 陶潛 (372?-427). In Huizhou, Su Shi became excessively obsessed with poetic correspondence with this spiritual friend, while asserting the very character of himself.²⁶ Here, the engagement with southern plants for bodily nourishment is Su Shi's adaptation of Tao Qian's "returning" (*gui* 歸) to nature to achieve self-liberation.

Sweet Chrysanthemum 甘菊²⁷

越山春始寒, The valleys of Yue are chilly in early spring,²⁸
霜菊晚愈好。 Frost-coated chrysanthemum blooms better as the season turns late.
朝來出細粟, Basking in the sunlight, they put forth their stamens like tiny grains,
稍覺芳歲老。 While they slightly sense the passage of youth with the fragrance.
孤根蔭長松, Only chrysanthemum shelters beneath the canopy of towering pines,
獨秀無衆草。 Lonely, standing out without a surrounding multitude of plants.²⁹

26. Zhiyi Yang, "Return to an Inner Utopia," in *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Su Shi* (1037-1101) in *Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 119-61.

27. "Xiaopu wuyong," no. 4, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 4691.

28. According to Su Shi's observation in his "Ji Hainan ju" 記海南菊 (Record of the chrysanthemum in Hainan): "In Lingnan the climate is warm, and plants sprout and wither without fixed seasons; only the chrysanthemum blooms late. I have discovered the reason for this phenomenon lies in the chrysanthemum's firm and unyielding nature: it refuses to flourish or fade together with the other plants and must wait for the descent of frost before it blooms. Yet in Lingnan, frost appears only lightly around the Winter Solstice, and thus it is that it blooms so late." 嶺南地暖, 百卉造作無時, 而菊獨後開。考其理, 菊性介烈, 不與百卉並盛衰, 須霜降乃發, 而嶺南常以冬至微霜故也。" See *SSQJJZ*, 12:73. 8431.

29 This couplet alludes to *Zuo zhuan* 左傳: "Under the pines and cypresses, the grass does not flourish." 松柏之下, 其草不殖。 This line indicates that under powerful authority, feeble people will be hard pressed to survive. Yet, in Su Shi's verse, the chrysanthemum grows under the very powerful trees, indicating the flower and the poet's unmatched stubbornness and moral integrity. See *Chunqiu Zhuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, annot. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 3.1155. For the English translation, see also *Zuo Tradition/Zuo Zhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals,"* tr. Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li,

晨光雖照耀, [Now] they enjoy basking in the spring sun,
秋雨半摧倒。 [But] by autumn, half of them will be ruined by the rain.

先生卧不出, I lie in my room without stepping beyond the door,³⁰
黃葉紛可掃。 Fallen yellow leaves lie scattered on the ground, too profuse to sweep.
無人送酒壺, Nobody comes to bring me a jug of ale,³¹
空腹嚼珠寶。 So, I gnaw on chrysanthemum buttons to fill my empty stomach.
香風入牙頰, Their aroma seeps in between my teeth and cheeks,
楚些發天藻。 Prompting me to recite the ornate celestial diction in *Lisao*.³²

新萸蔚已滿, Fresh buds have already covered the ground,
宿根寒不槁。 Perennial roots in the freezing season will not wither.
揚揚弄芳蝶, You tango with the beautiful butterfly in a carefree mood,
生死何足道。 With no concern for life or death.
頗訝昌黎翁, I am quite taken aback that old Changli,
恨爾生不早。 Regretted that you did not bloom earlier.³³

The chrysanthemum is a flower associated with Tao Qian, but Su Shi uses it to assert his solitude (*du* 獨) as an absolute transcendence. In fact, he was accompanied by his son Guo 過 and concubine Zhaoyun 朝云 in Huizhou. But as “Su Shi” in the herbal wonderland, he prefers a life with nobody else (*wuren* 無人). This existential mode aligns with his situation as someone

and David Schaberg (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2016):2.29.3, 1233.

30. This verse also appears in Su Shi’s poem for Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019-1086) “Garden of Solitary Joy.” See Su Shi, “Sima Junshi Du Le Yuan,” 司馬君實獨樂園, in *SSQJZ*, 1:15.1497.

31. This verse alludes to an anecdote in the *Song shu* 宋書: “Once on the Double Ninth Day, having no ale at hand, [Tao Qian] sat for a long while among the chrysanthemums by his house. Just then, [Wang] Hong happened to bring ale, Tao Qian immediately drank it on the spot till he became drunk, and only then did he return home.” 嘗九月九日無酒, 出宅邊菊叢中坐久, 值弘送酒至, 即便就酌, 醉而后歸。 See Shen Yue 沈約 et al., comp., *Song shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), 93. 2513.

32. This couplet borrows the image of flower chewing in *Lisao* 離騷 in *Chuci* 楚辭: “In the evening I dine on the fallen petals of autumn chrysanthemums.” 夕餐秋菊之落英。 The term *chu xie* 楚些 refers to *Chuci*, since every sentence in *Zhaohun* 招魂 ends up with the modal particle *xie* 些。 The term *tian zao* 天藻 refers to ornate diction by immortals, see Ban Gu 班固 (32-92), *Han Wudi neizhuan* 漢武帝內傳, Guangxu 15 (1889) Shanghai Hongwen shuju 鴻文書局 woodblock edition, based on the Shoushan’ge 守山閣 copy, *juan* 1, fol. 3b. On the image and term from *Chuci*, see Wang Yi 王逸 (89-158) comp., *Chuci zhang ju* 楚辭章句 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017), 1.8, 9.2023.

33. The last two couplets allude to Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), “Qiu huai Shi Shiyi Shou,” 秋懷詩十一首 (Eleven Poems on Autumn Feelings): “You tango with the beautiful butterfly in a carefree mood, yet you still do not grow early enough.” 揚揚弄芳蝶, 爾生還不早。 See Han Yu, *Han Changli shi ji biannian jianzhu* 韓昌黎詩集編年箋注, annot. Fang Shiju 方世舉 (1675-1795), ed. Hao Runhua 郝潤華 and Ding Junli 丁俊麗 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 2:8.430-32.

noble but fallen into a hostile environment.

Su Shi appreciates the local chrysanthemum through the lens of historical allusion. Through this rewriting of local plants, the poet incorporates this exotic herb into the landscape of literary culture. Building on this point, the literary allusions regarding herbs throughout the Small Nursery highlight Su Shi's effort to place his nursery within the center of elite culture. Within this cultural space, Su Shi associates himself with a sequence of extraordinary poets via evocation of famous literary luminaries: Letian 樂天 (Bai Juyi 白居易), Changli 昌黎 (Han Yu 韓愈), and Zimei 子美 (Du Fu 杜甫). Furthermore, Su Shi blurs the existence of "I" by using the same verse from his poem for Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019-1068) Garden of Solitary Joy. He merges himself into the literati ideal of cultured individuality. This cultural relocation provides the poet with a sense of belonging that helps him reorient himself as a high-status literatus in the uncivilized southern frontier. Intriguingly, through herb cultivation, the lonely poet inserts himself into the company of a group of spiritual friends, and their culture of *wen* 文. He transfigures the herbal nursery into a visionary cultural club. Yet this fantasy remains anchored in his bodily act of chrysanthemum ingestion.

Su Shi further reinforces his solitude as a way of being through poetic architecture. The opening and closing stanzas focus on the flower, whereas the middle stanza depicts the lonely poet. On one hand, the poetic "Su Shi" is isolated from the external world; on the other hand, he is surrounded by chrysanthemums, just like Tao Qian in the anecdote. Intriguingly, this poetic capsule also functions as a symbol of the paradox of Su Shi's solitude in the real world: it accentuates his moral stubbornness as a banished official, while relieving his

loneliness as a human via herbal companionship. Thanks to this structural design, Su Shi effectively resolved the duality of his solitude. He highlighted his moral resilience while muting his emotional fragility, so as to avoid excessive self-melancholy. This poetic encapsulation affirms the poet's dignity without exposing his vulnerability.

Despite the poem's immersion in literary culture, bodily nourishment, as is demonstrated by the poetic structure, is the central focus of Su Shi's self-healing. Without ale, Su Shi still manages to enjoy his chrysanthemum through ingestion. He chews the herbal flower, thus acting like an immortal. Nourished by this hunger-relieving flower, the poet's body becomes the vehicle for absolute transcendence. This desire is also mirrored by the chrysanthemum surviving the destructive autumn rain: the co-existence of its fresh buds (*xinti* 新萸) and perennial roots (*sugen* 宿根) transcends the binary format of life and death. Finally, the poet foresees the carefree blossoms blessed by the literary allusion, which serve as an extension of his own desire.

The absence of "transplantation" as a cross-boundary movement aligns with the poet's textual absorption into the chrysanthemum. It is an entanglement of the poet's self-consolation and self-isolation on various dimensions. Asserting his moral stubbornness, Su Shi withdraws from the hostile political environment. Yet in this withdrawal, he needs chrysanthemums to alleviate his loneliness. Engaging with the herbal flower symbolizing his elite taste and aesthetics, Su Shi rewrites Lingnan as a cultural margin into his literary hometown. But this relocation deepens his spiritual inaccessibility to those around him in the real southern frontier. Even the bodily nourishment through chrysanthemum ingestion reflects this paradox. Su Shi seeks immortal transcendence by the act of flower chewing, a behavior

of the divine, not of humans. Isolation perfects itself as consolation. Su Shi's body, as a vehicle of immortality, reconciles withdrawal and sustenance.

So far it is clear that Su Shi appears poised to reach an existential mode of solitude, as a complete isolation from his reality. Far more than a solace for Tao Qian as a spiritual friend, his immersion in the chrysanthemum is a fantasy of absolute solitude from any connections in the real world. It is the bodily nourishment toward immortality by herbal flowers that supports the poet's spiritual aspiration for an unconditionally liberated selfhood beyond the social, spatial, and temporal realm. Dwelling in the poetic structure of the herbal capsular, Su Shi decides not to step out of his fantasy (*buchu* 不出).

Yet, in the next section, I will demonstrate Su Shi's return to his reality as the final solution to his selfhood crises in exile. Through a thick reading of the last poem, *Adlay*, I will reveal that the poet's self-healing is less a fluent linear process toward absolute fantasy, but more a fraught battle with himself back in the real world.

1.3 An Exiled Official's "Internal Heat" and Becoming a Southerner

Adlay is the most unusual poem in the Small Nursery sequence. Su Shi's emulation of Tao Qian is only discernible in a single line: "Only the thriving plants fill my heart" 但愛草木長.³⁴ Within the entire Small Nursery sequence, the only negation of the medical effectiveness of the herbs is provided in the beginning section of *Adlay*. More importantly, the literary allusion to Ma Yuan's 馬援 (14 B.C.E.-49) political dilemma betrays Su Shi's

34. This verse alludes to Tao Qian's "Du *Shanhaijing* shisan shou," 讀山海經十三首 (Thirteen poems on reading the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*): "In the first month of summer, the plants flourish, and around my house luxuriant trees are scattered." 孟夏草木長, 遶屋樹扶疏. See Tao Qian, *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu*, annot. Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 1.36.

failure to fully resolve his identity as an exiled official:

Adlay 薏苡³⁵

伏波飯薏苡, General Fubo treated Adlay as a staple,
禦瘴傳神良。 With its miraculous effect on resisting miasma.
能除五溪毒, Though capable of expelling the toxic vapors of the Five Streams,
不救讒言傷。 It failed to save him from slander after his death.³⁶
讒言風雨過, Just as slander always fades with the wind and rain,
瘴癘久亦亡。 So, the miasma is bound to dissipate with the passage of time.
兩俱不足治, For me, there is no need to cure either of these two matters,
但愛草木長。 Only the thriving plants fill my heart.

Lack of settlement is a key theme in the opening stanza, as the poet's ability to express himself is compromised. Su Shi's implicit self-identification with General Ma Yuan could be perilous. Following the Crow Terrace Poetry Case (*wutai shian* 烏台詩案), his words always risked overinterpretation.³⁷ However, his emotions immediately shift from discontent to tolerance of his life-threatening environment. Consistent with this restraint, his attitude toward the healing function of adlay is unstable. He acknowledges it at first, then downplays its value, and finally sets it aside. Su Shi endures the hostile environment, just as he treats the miasma. In reality, the "wind and rain" (*fengyu* 風雨) whipped up by the prime minister, Zhang Dun 章惇 (1035-1106), was too ruthless to withstand.³⁸ Su Shi likely wished to prevent hostile readers from

35. "Xiaopu wuyong," no.5, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 4693.

36. Historical allusion in the first two couplets refers to the oft-cited anecdote from Ma Yuan's Biography in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, which says that Ma Yuan regularly consumed adlay in Jiaozhi 交趾 to ward off miasma and intended to bring back the large southern variety as seed stock, loading a cart full of them upon return. After his death, however, officials falsely accused him of transporting pearls and rhinoceroses' horn, provoking the emperor's anger. Terrified, his family did not dare return his coffin to the ancestral graveyard and buried him instead on a small plot west of the city. See Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445) et al., comp., *Hou Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 24. 2513.

37. In 1079, Su Shi was accused of "slandering the court" in poetry. He was first imprisoned, and then almost sentenced to death, and eventually exiled to Huangzhou 黃州. See Peng Jiuwan 朋九萬, *Dongpo wutai shi an* 東坡烏台詩案 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1939).

38. According to Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), Su Shi's exile to Huizhou was seen as an attempt by Zhang Dun to kill Su Shi. See Kong Fanli 孔凡禮, *Su Shi nianpu* 蘇軾年譜 (Beijing: Zhonghua

interpreting his use of adlay as a metaphor for healing his political trauma. It would inevitably have been interpreted as a critique of the court.

To further prevent possible over-analysis of his political critique, Su Shi makes a clear announcement. First, he cares about neither the political slander nor the miasma, since there is no need to cure them (*buzuzhi* 不足治). Second, he only wants to return to the world of lush plants, in imitation of Tao Qian. He intends to live as a recluse, with no involvement or interest in the social world.

Nonetheless, Su Shi's life as an exiled official with unfulfilled ambitions was not as carefree as a simple verse of retreat. If there was "no need to cure them," why did he write four couplets on the topic?

Referring to previous poems, Su Shi directly expresses his need for medication to improve his mental well-being in *Ginseng* and *Rehmannia*. Specifically, in *Rehmannia*, he uses the term "internal heat" (*nei're* 內熱) to describe the spiritual unease entangled with an unpleasant bodily sensation. Apart from its Zhuangzian connotation, "internal heat" also the described poet's bodily symptom in need of medication. According to mainstream medical knowledge in the Northern Song, with which Su Shi would likely have been familiar, the symptom of "internal heat" in one's heart contributes to an unsettled mood, which in turn exacerbates bodily discomfort.³⁹ In other words, an unsettled mood is both the cause and

shuju, 1998), 3:33.1143.

39. The notion rooted in the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine's* 黃帝內經 emphasis on the mutual influence between heart and emotion remained influential in Northern Song medical and intellectual discourse. See Xu Yiming 徐儀明, *Xingli yu qihuang* 性理與岐黃 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue yuan chubanshe, 1997), 198.

According to *Taiping shenghui fang* 太平聖惠方, a state-patronized medical prescription encyclopedia published in 992, the unsettled heart would lead to a feeling of tightness and fire in one's chest: "When the *qi* of the heart becomes excessive and replete, *qi* and blood become congested and stagnant. The circulation of *yin* and *yang* is then obstructed, the flow of nutritive and defensive energies is blocked, and stagnation accumulates in the upper burner — thus causing vexing heat and discomfort in the chest and heart region." 夫心氣盛實, 氣血

effect of “internal heat.” Although *Rehmannia* represents the poet’s attitude of moving forward without regard to his thwarted political career, his return to this issue in *Adlay* reveals that he was struggling to fully overcome his compromised political identity.

Su Shi’s spiritual unrest can be traced in his engagement in local public affairs during his exile in Huizhou. His discontent with the ruling party did not compromise his loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to the emperor and his sense of responsibility to “nourish the people” (*jimin* 濟民).⁴⁰ Indeed, he actively engaged with local social issues despite having to maintain a low-profile in exile. Hence, he always acted in a self-contained manner, which he made explicit in his epistolary voice. For example, in 1095, the year he composed the Small Nursery sequence, Su Shi kept in communication with his cousin, also a local magistrate, Cheng Zhicai 程之才 (c.a. 1027-?), about several public matters. He repeatedly exuded an apprehensive tone in instructing the recipient of the letter not to disclose his participation in the matter:

However, I earnestly beg you to keep this in strict confidence. Should there be the slightest leak, your unworthy younger brother will not be safe here.

然千萬密之。若少漏泄,即劣弟居此不安也。⁴¹

I truly did not wish to speak of this, fearing it might compromise your affairs, yet I rashly have done so; please, I implore you to guard it in secrecy.

深不欲言,恐誤老兄事,故冒言,千萬密之。⁴²

壅澀,陰陽不通,榮衛隔塞,上焦壅滯,故令心胸煩熱也。Wang Huaiyin 王怀隐 (925-997) et al., comp., annot. Tian Wenjing 田文敬, et al., *Taiping shenghui fang* (Zhengzhou: Hebei kexuejishu chubanshe, 2015), 1:4.192

40. For Su Shi’s political ethos in his later years, see Wang Shuizhao 王水照 and Zhu Gang 朱剛, “Zhengzhi renge,” 政治人格, in *Su Shi pingzhuan* 蘇軾評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 407-16.

41. “Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishi yi shou” 與程正輔七十一首, no.30, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 5799.

42. “Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishi yi shou,” no. 36, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 6000.

I earnestly hope you will take heed and again keep this secret, letting no one know that it came from me, your younger brother—be careful! Be careful!

切望兄留意,仍密之,勿令人知自弟出也,千萬!千萬!⁴³

Above all, do not let it be known that this matter came from your unworthy younger brother. I entreat you! I entreat you!

此事切勿令人知出不肖也。切告!切告!⁴⁴

The concise but earnest lines within these letters reveal clear fear. Every time he sent thorough observations and meticulous strategies to Cheng Zhicai, Su Shi asked him to keep them secret. His constant pleas to “keep my suggestion a secret” and “do not let others know of my participation” functioned to avoid any appearance of involvement. The risk of new attacks on himself or his friends and family triggered by renewed political engagement should not be ignored. The tension between continued political engagement and protecting both himself and his associates led to Su Shi’s compromised political identity. He had to restrain his actions and use of his political voice. Worse, his devotion to the state’s well-being would neither be acknowledged nor made visible.

As a poet and politician, Su Shi was deprived of full freedom of expression. His epistolary self-surveillance underscores this omnipresent oppression in his daily life. The “internal heat” is a bodily metaphor for his accreted spiritual unsettlement. The poet’s inability to rectify this bodily unease is evident in the opening stanza of *Adlay*, where a complaint is followed by immediate self-restraint.

Ultimately, in the second half of *Adlay*, Su Shi returns to his model of Tao Qian’s way of living to transcend the conflict between his political frustration and the impulse to channel

43. “Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishi yi shou,” no. 47, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 6013.

44. “Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishi yi shou,” no. 49, *SSQJJZ*, 7:39. 6021.

negative emotions:

草木各有宜, Every type of plant has its best place,
珍產駢南荒。 Precious products abound in the southern wilderness.
絳囊懸荔支, Lychees hanging on branches are round like scarlet pouches,
雪粉剖枕榔。 Inside the split betel nuts is hidden the snow-white flour.
不謂蓬荻姿, I never imagined that among the weed-like grass,
中有藥與糧。 [I would find] the grains of medicine and food.
舂爲芡珠圓, What I grind is round like the bulb of *qianshi*,⁴⁵
炊作菰米香。 What I cook is scented like water chestnuts.
子美拾橡栗, Long ago Zimei collected acorns,
黃精誑空腸。 And polygonatum to deceive his empty belly.⁴⁶
今吾獨何者, And now what kind of person am I?
玉粒照座光。 Just enjoying the jade grains shining light on my seat.

To ameliorate the negative emotions induced by his fractured political identity, Su Shi immersed himself in the fruitful southern landscape for life-preserving resources. His re-acknowledgement of the medicinal value of adlay is not a self-contradiction. Instead, it shows that bodily nourishment forms the foundation of his spiritual healing. By the word “deceive” (*kuang* 誑), Su Shi teases Du Fu’s awkward material hardship while practicing self-consolation. His praise of the shiny, jade-like food transforms his meager table into a precious feast. It offers both sensory pleasure and a means of reordering life in exile. Through bodily self-care, Su Shi builds his spiritual healing upon bodily nourishment through herbal ingestion, and this quotidian act became central to his self-healing in exile.

45. The plant *qianshi* is better known in English as Euryale Seeds or Fox Nuts, but for this article on poetry from the eleventh-century China, I have chosen to use the Romanized term, “Qianshi.”

46. This couplet alludes to Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), “Qianyuan zhong yuju Tonggu xian zuo ge qi shou” 乾元中寓居同谷縣作歌七首 (Seven songs written while residing in Tonggu County during the Qianyuan reign), no.1 and no. 2, which depicts Du Fu relief from hunger by collecting acorns and Polygonatum, in *Dufu quanji jiaozhu* 杜甫全集校注, ed. Xiao Difei 蕭滌非, Liao Zhongan 廖仲安, et al. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2014), 4:1770. For the English translation, see also Stephen Owen, tr., *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 2:8.255.

By invoking Du Fu at the end of *Adlay*, Su Shi returns to the concrete realities of exile. The allusion to Du Fu's hunger brings the poet back to his own bodily struggle with insufficient life-preserving resources.⁴⁷ Again, he does not present a moment of transplantation. Rather, he delineates the fruitful indigenous wildlands where adlay grows.

The absence of transplantation in this poem stands in sharp contrast to that in *Sweet Chrysanthemum*. The poet no longer isolates himself from the southern frontier by retreating to a cultural wonderland. Instead, he erases the boundary between his herbal nursery and the south. The “world of plants” (*caomu* 草木) he returns to is not that of Tao Qian, but the actual place where he lives. Such accommodation asserts Su Shi's self-identification not as a sojourner from the north, but as a resident in the south. It also brings the time in the Small Nursery sequence back to the present. Su Shi neither dwells on his past political career nor attempts to project it into his future. Rather, he turns to the local plants for bodily nourishment—as he claimed, “every type of plant has its best place.”

Finally, bodily nourishment shifts from a vehicle of isolation to a means of integration. Through the ingestion of local plants, Su Shi merges into the local landscape. A body satiated by precious life-preserving resources is still the foundation for his spiritual healing, but now it grounds the poet in tangible reality. Adapting Tao Qian's return to nature, Su Shi accomplishes the reconstruction of his selfhood by opening the gate of his poetic nursery. His bodily engagement with local plants nurtures his accommodation to exile, enabling him to inhabit his *here* and *now*. It is through this body nourished by the southern materials that Su Shi finally liberates himself from his selfhood crisis: he chooses to live as a

47. During his exile in Huizhou, the gulf between Su Shi's poetic self-identification with Tao Qian and that of Du Fu was widened. See Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, 233.

southerner.

Su Shi would not die in the remote wilderness as his enemies had wished. In his herbal wonderland, he nourished his weary body and restored vitality to his impoverished quotidian existence. Herb cultivation was not a gesture of survival, but a poetic reclaiming of abundance and selfhood healing mediated by means of bodily restoration.

Chapter 2

Su Zhe's Herb Cultivation in Yingchang

As Su Shi's younger brother and a staunch opponent of the New Policies, Su Zhe was also subjected to severe political repression that led to his exile in the southern frontier of Leizhou 雷州. After returning to the central plains, he was briefly appointed as a "temple official" (*ciguan* 祠官), a titular post without any authority. Finally, he fully retired from political life and settled in Yingchang 潁昌, a locus of political dispossession in the late Northern Song. Its geographic proximity to the capital attracted many expelled individuals from the Old Party. Lili Xia has comprehensively investigated the tension between Su Zhe's literary self-portrayal and his public persona. Not a leader of any literati group in Yingchang, Su Zhe recognized himself as an old man enjoying his everyday routine and literary exchanges with friends and family. However, his virtue and unwavering principles made him a kind of iconic public figure, earning him countless followers."⁴⁸

For a banished official who was deeply resented by the authorities, winning so much respect was problematic.⁴⁹ In Yingchang, Su Zhe strove to keep a low profile as much as possible. According to Zhu Gang, Su Zhe preferred to craft his poetic image as an elderly man who stayed indoors; his critiques of the New Policies were embedded in obscure metaphors of extreme weather conditions.⁵⁰ Yet, such a poet of social escapism composed

48. Lili Xia, "'Su Men' 'Xu Dang' yu wannian suzhe: jianlun beisong moqi 'Yuanyou dangren' de qunti mianmao" "蘇門" "許黨" 與晚年蘇轍——兼論北宋末期 "元祐黨人" 的群體面貌, in *Xin Song Xue* 新宋學 0 (2016):69-80.

49. Dated back to Su Zhe's exile in Leizhou 雷州, local residents offering him residence fell into trouble. 初, 蘇轍謫雷州, 不許占官舍, 遂就民屋, 惇又以為強奪民居, 下州追民究治....See "Zhang Dun zhuan" 章惇傳, in *Song Shi* 宋史, ed. Tuo tuo 脫脫, et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 471.13713

50. Zhu Gang, "Dan Piao Wu He You, Zuo Shi Re Zhong Chang: Lun Su Zhe Wan Nian Shi," 簞食吾何憂, 作詩熱中腸——論蘇轍的晚年詩, in *Su Shi Su Zhe yanjiu* 蘇軾蘇轍研究 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2019), 312-34.

Two Poems on Growing Herbal Seedlings 種藥苗二首 with the intention of sharing and circulating it. These two poems are composed in the four-syllable verse form, simple and concise to remember and recite. It is precisely within this tension between self-concealment and public moral authority that this pair of poems deserves closer examination, not merely as an expression of leisure writing about “fields and gardens.” Instead, these two poems chart the unease of Su Shi’s spiritual self-healing mediated by his bodily restoration, as well as his everyday life centered around life-preserving herb cultivation and ingestion. Unlike Su Shi’s self-entertaining Small Nursery sequence, Su Zhe’s body-mediated spiritual restoration would be read by his contemporaries as an example to emulate.

2.1 Does Food Matter Most?

In his later years in Yingchang, Su Zhe constantly emphasized his self-identification with Yan Hui 顏回, the most favored disciple of Confucius. This almost sage-like figure was admired from the emperor to common scholars in the eleventh century for his unaltered joy in self-cultivation, which he pursued with faith and bravery, even in a life of poverty and powerlessness. The humble life of “a simple meal in a bamboo basket and a gourd of water” (*dansiipiaoyin* 簞食瓢飲) was frequently adopted by Su Zhe as an allusion in his poems composed in Yingchang. Yet, his tolerance for plain food was not strong. This weakness is betrayed in his preface to *Two Poems on Growing Herbal Seedlings*:

While residing in seclusion at Yingchuan, I live in poverty and cannot even afford

meat. Every transition from summer to autumn, before the cabbages and mustard greens were ready for harvest, my meals became utterly bare. Someone suggested that I plant poppies and cassia seeds as a supplement. Since many of the households in Yingchuan are unaware of this, I write the two poems regarding cultivating herbal seedlings to inform them.

予閑居潁川，家貧不能辦肉，每夏秋之交，菘芥未成，則盤中索然，或教予種
罌粟、決明，以補其匱。寓潁川諸家，多未知此，故作種藥苗二詩以告之。⁵¹

This pair of poems serves as notes on medicinal herb cultivation as a strategy for hunger relief. At the same time, Su Zhe expresses his yearning for pleasant flavors. The deprivation of meat and tasty vegetables becomes an urgent problem, and the erudite scholar has to learn from an experienced farmer. In fact, in the Northern Song, these two herbs were already commonly cultivated in nurseries and gardens, and they were typical ingredients in medicinal recipes.⁵² It is questionable whether Su Zhe had no idea about them since reading pharmaceutical literature was a habit for many literati in his era. At least in this preface, the poet adopts the voice of a naive amateur farmer to allude to his struggle to adapt to a life of poverty.

This preface is not the only indicator of Su Zhe's penchant for good flavor, which makes it hard for him to endure the material hardship of exile. A brush note by Lu You 陸游 (1125-1210) reveals this very personality of Su Zhe through sharp comparison with his optimistic elder brother Su Shi:

Lü Zhoufu relates: When Master Dongpo and Gentleman Huangmen were exiled to the south, they met between Wu and Teng. There was a vendor selling hot noodles by the roadside, and they bought some to eat together. The noodle was coarse and unpleasant. Gentleman Huangmen put down his chopsticks with a sigh, while Dongpo had already finished his portion. He then said to Huangmen, "My brother, Jiusan, are you still trying to chew it?" and rose with a huge laugh. When Qin Shaoyou heard of this, he said, "This is

51. Su Zhe, "Zhong yaomiao er shou," 種藥苗二首, no.1, in *Su Zhe ji* 蘇轍集 (hereafter *SZJ*), 2nd ed. Chen Hongtian 陳宏天 and Gao Xiufang 高秀芳 comp. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 3:1203.

52. See *BCTJ*, 137-38, 609-10.

precisely what the Master meant when he said, ‘As for drinking ale, I merely drink for its sense of wetness.’”

呂周輔言：東坡先生與黃門公南遷，相遇於梧、藤間。道旁有鬻湯餅者，共買食之。穉惡不可食。黃門置箸而歎，東坡已盡之矣。徐謂黃門曰：“九三郎，爾尚欲咀嚼耶？”大笑而起。秦少遊聞之，曰：“此先生‘飲酒但飲濕而已’。”⁵³

Unlike Su Shi, who finished the awful hand-torn noodle soup without hesitation, Su Zhe was unwilling to take even a single bite. For Su Shi, anything that provided satiety would be helpful for him to adapt to the environment. In contrast, Su Zhe’s habitual resistance to mediocre meals figures in his broader difficulty in reconciling himself with the frustrating reality of exile. Such inflexibility regarding food deprivation aligns with his statement about his table in the poetic prelude, “there was scarcely anything on the plate” (*panzhong suoran* 盤中索然). To enrich his table, Su Zhe turned to the cultivation of poppies:

Cultivating Poppies 種罌粟⁵⁴

築室城西， I built chambers in the West of the city,
中有圖書。 With piles of books inside.
窗戶之餘， In the space between the windows,
松竹扶疏。 There are lush pine trees and bamboo.
拔棘開畦， I uproot the thorns to open up a plot of farmland,
以毓嘉蔬。 In order to cultivate favorable vegetables.
畦夫告予， A farmer offered me a suggestion:
罌粟可儲。 Poppies can be stored.

罌小如罌， Their small shells are like clay vessels,
粟細如粟。 Their fine seeds are like grains.
與麥皆種， Their planting season is the same as wheat,
與稌皆熟。 Their harvesting season is the same as non-glutinous millet.
苗堪春菜， Their sprouts equate to spring vegetables,
實比秋穀。 Their fruits match autumn grains.
研作牛乳， I grind the fruits to obtain a milk-like liquid,
烹為佛粥。 And cook it into Buddhist porridge.

53. Lu You 陸游, *Lao xue an biji* 老學庵筆記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 1.13-4.

54. Su Zhe, “Zhong yaomiao er shou,” 種藥苗二首, no.1, in *SZJ*, 3:1203.

老人氣衰, I, an old man with deficient energy,
飲食無幾。 Have little appetite for eating.
食肉不消, I eat meat, but I cannot digest it,
食菜寡味。 I eat vegetables, but they have little flavor.
柳槌石鉢, I process the poppy fruits with a willow branch and a stone bowl,
煎以蜜水。 I brew them with sweet water.
便口利喉, It purifies my mouth and comforts my throat,
調養肺胃。 It regulates and nourishes my lungs and stomach.

三年杜門, I have kept my door closed for three years,
莫適往還。 Not a single person came to visit me.
幽人衲僧, Now I, an isolated man, sit with a monk wearing a patched robe,
相對忘言。 We stare at each other and communicate in silence.
飲之一杯, Each of us drinks a cup of poppy water,
失笑欣然。 And then burst into laughter happily.
我來潁川, I come and lodge in Yingchuan,
如遊廬山。 And now feel as though I were roaming in Mt. Lu.

This poem describes the cultivation of poppies as part of Su Zhe's settling down process in Yingchang as a sojourning banished official. In the opening stanza, Su Zhe incorporates his herb cultivation into the construction of his residence, an essential activity in strengthening his embrace of his new lodging.⁵⁵ Guided by the farmer, Su Zhe instructively lists all he has learned about his herbs. The enumeration of poppies' nutritional value as equal to various foodstuffs (wheat, millet, spring vegetables, autumn grains, milk-like liquid) creates an illusion of dietary abundance. More importantly, by this enumeration, Su Zhe bridges the material impoverishment amplified by the temporal rapture of his daily routine. According to the preface, the transition between summer and winter (*xiaqiu zhijiao* 夏秋之交) as a lean

55. Zhu Gang's research on Su Zhe's 苏辙 (1039-1112) poetry in his late years in Yingchang 潁昌 as a banished official has already touched upon this issue. He observed Su Shi's obsession with writing poetry regarding the continuing process of his house construction and the solar terms. See Zhu Gang, "Dan piao wu he you, zuo shi re zhong chang: lun Su Zhe wannian shi," 簞食吾何憂, 作詩熱中腸—論蘇轍的晚年詩, in *Su Shi Su Zhe yanjiu* 蘇軾蘇轍研究 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2019), 312-34.

season for farming households mirrors the poet's hunger. As a correspondence, the sixth and seventh couplets map the growth of poppies onto the established agricultural timeline of wheat and millet. Then the harvest of poppies sprouts, and its seeds are likened to seasonal vegetables and crops. Through these verses, Su Zhe transforms the herb cultivation into a new agricultural timeline that restores the order of his culinary life. Such a strategy is also seen in the second poem, where he claims "In the autumn, I plant poppies, in the spring, I plant sickle pods" 秋種罌粟, 春種決明. The poetic agriculture calendar set up by Su Zhe's herb cultivation poetry reconstructs a sustaining culinary practice, which enhances his sense of satiety. In addition, this agricultural calendar contributes to a temporal dimension of his sense of lodging by embedding his everyday routine into the life cycle of his plants.

Though Su Zhe treats herb cultivation as an essential solution to alleviate his hunger, thereby reconstructing his daily culinary routine, in the rest of the poem, turns to the therapeutic function of poppies. Departing from the factual tone of the preface, he gives another explanation for his herb cultivation. It is not food deprivation but the loss of appetite and a weary spirit that prompts the poet to cultivate poppies. Thus it is that in the third stanza he informs his readers how to brew poppies in sweet herbal water, which has the effect of soothing the organs to clearing internal heat.⁵⁶ He intentionally suppresses his craving for food by claiming indigestion, a bodily symptom related to a surplus of food supply and excessive gustatory desire. In the end, the poet delineates his enjoyment of herbal water, through which he liberates himself from his present immobility by transforming Yingchang into the Buddhist sanctuary of Mount Lu. What he accentuates is not the satisfied sensual

56. See *BCTJ*, 609-10.

pleasure given by pleasant flavor, but the spiritual transcendence.

Growing Poppies is supposed to be a poem about literary instruction on cultivating poppies to enrich one's plate, but its central focus is the herb's transformative medicinal power. The sustaining resources provided by poppies relieve Su Zhe's hunger, and the cultivated herbs enhance the poet's spatial and temporal sense of continuity, thus helping the him to gain a sense of belonging as a sojourner. Nonetheless, he refuses to fully encourage the pursuit of good flavor. This attitude is an explicit sign of his adherence to the basic moral principles of a Confucius scholar in front of fellow readers living around him in Yingchang. Instead, through his emphasis on the medical effects of poppies, he advocates for spiritual transcendence through bodily restoration rather than gustatory enjoyment. His bodily refinement becomes the vehicle for his spiritual healing that transforms a place representing his political failure into a sanctuary for self-liberation. With the magical herbal water, he enjoys Yingchang like a carefree traveler roaming among the landscape of transcendence. In the preface, Su Zhe does not refrain from mentioning his hunger and desire for better vegetables. The temporal rupture symbolizes the instability of his material life. In terms of this aspect, food matters. But when the crisis of basic sustenance is solved, food does not matter most. Transforming his attitude to the place where he lives as a sojourner with an unsuccessful political career is the essential self-cultivation that must become part of his everyday life.

Unexpectedly, the second poem *Growing Sickle Pods* 種決明 shifts to an opposite direction of expression and emotion. This time, the medicinal effect of his herbs does not work. Through analysis of his unsuccessful bodily restoration through medication, I deepen

our understanding of Su Zhe quest for self-knowledge.

2.2 Eyesight, Reading, and Self-Healing

Cultivating Sickle Pods 種決明⁵⁷

閒居九年， I have lived as a banished officer for nine years,
祿不代耕。 My salary never frees me from farming.
肉食不足， My consumption of meat is insufficient,
藜烝藿羹。 I merely steam goosefoot and make soup out of patchouli.
多求異蔬， I eagerly seek vegetables with magical effectiveness,
以佐晨烹。 In order to improve my morning meals.
秋種罌粟， In the autumn, I plant poppies,
春種決明。 In the spring, I plant sickle pods.

決明明目， The seeds of sickle pods can enhance visual acuity,
功見本草。 Such effectiveness is recorded in pharmaceutical documents.
食其花葉， Its flowers and leaves are edible as well,
亦去熱惱。 They indeed remove the heat and perturbation.
矧可以飽， Also, it can satiate the appetite,
笑杜陵老。 How I laugh at the old Du Fu.⁵⁸

老人平生， As an old gentleman, I reflect on my whole life,
以書為累。 Only to find that I have taken the book as my burden.
夜燈照帷， I used to live a life where a night light shined on my bed drapery,
未曉而起。 And I got up before daybreak.
百骸未病， My hundreds of bones have not been troubled by illness yet,
兩目告瘁。 But my two eyes are already worn out.
決明雖良， Even though sickle pods are an efficacious medicine,
何補於是。 How could they heal this ailment?

自我知非， Since I know my fault,
卷去圖書。 I sweep away all my books.
閉目內觀， I close my eyes to peruse inwardly,
妙見自如。 And I perceive with profound clarity and ease.
聞阿那律， I hear the instruction from Aniruddha,
無目而視。 And even without eyes I can see.
決明何為， What can sickle pods do for me?
適口乎爾。 They only satisfy my mouth.

57. "Zhong yaomiao er shou," no. 2, 3:1204.

58. This couplet alludes to Du Fu, "Qiuyu tan san shou" 秋雨嘆三首 (Seven songs written while residing in Tonggu County during the Qianyuan reign), no.1, in *Dufu quanji jiaozhu*, 465. For the English translation, see also Stephen Owen, tr., *The Poetry of Du Fu*, 1:3.164.

In this poem, Su Zhe explores his identity as a scholar whose statecraft talents no longer have the chance to be demonstrated. In the opening stanza, Su Zhe is grappling with his meager meals. Yet, his search for “vegetables with magical effectiveness” (*yishu* 異蔬) reveals a desire not only for sustenance but also for gustatory relief that might soften the bitterness of exile. The toughness Su Zhe has to confront must be more than the material impoverishment, which will be later revealed by the poet himself.

Then in the next stanza, he lists the culinary and medical value of his sickle pods, which seems to be a kind of self-consolation through mockery of Du Fu’s indifference to this magical herb. With cultivated sickle pods, he will live a life without concern for food and medicine. More importantly, this herb promises him a better spiritual condition due to its therapeutic function of clearing the heat and perturbation (*re’nao* 熱惱).

However, Su Zhe’s optimistic attitude toward this transformation suddenly disappears when in the second half of the poem. He claims that sickle pods are of no use healing his weary eyes, which have been worn out by a lifetime of reading. Complaint about poor eyesight caused by reading is common in Song literati’s poetic self-representation. Yet, for Su Zhe, famous for his diligence and erudition, this complaint deserves further investigation. What makes his self-identification as a scholar problematic? How is his spiritual struggle and ultimate transcendence mediated by his bodily restoration process?

To solve this puzzle, it is necessary to trace how reading plays a fundamental role in Su Zhe’s personal development. The Song Dynasty was a golden age of reading when literati devoted themselves to books, whether to pursue worldly success or the wisdom of

enlightenment.⁵⁹ Even in such an era that encouraged reading as an essential path to individual accomplishment, Su Zhe's passion for books stood out. It originated from the childhood education earnestly provided by his parents. His father, Su Xun 蘇洵 (1009-1066), was a late bloomer who failed to realize the significance of reading until his young adult years. Based on his faith in books, he strictly guided his sons.⁶⁰ Su Zhe's mother, also a firm believer in reading, taught the Su brothers herself. She expected her sons to become loyal defenders of the Way.⁶¹ The Su family believed that reading was a foundational part of external and internal cultivation. It unlocked one's potential to become an ideal official as well as a qualified personal practitioner of the Way. Su Zhe did not fail to live up to his parents' expectations, growing up to be a gentleman passionate about reading. He often pictured himself as a bookish scholar who remembered thousands of volumes.⁶² Also, his erudition was frequently recognized by his contemporaries.⁶³

59. The development and expansion of woodblock printing in Song China played a significant role in this process. All types of institutions, from the state to the private, began to print various types of books. See Lucille Chia, "Printing and Publishing in East Asia through Circa 1600: An Extremely Brief Survey," in *Mediaevalia* 41 (2020): 129-62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdi.2020.0005>.

60. Su Shi wrote a poem about his dream that recalled Su Xun's strict teaching: "By night I dreamed of myself playing like a child; when my father, as my teacher, examined and reproached me, I started in fright and returned to my books. 夜夢嬉游童子如, 父師檢責驚走書。

61. "When Su Shi and Su Zhe were young, Madam Cheng instructed them on her own. She frequently warned them, saying: 'When you read, do not imitate Cao Ou, who sought nothing more than to gain fame through books.' She would often invoke the integrity and moral exemplars of the ancients to encourage them, saying: 'If you can truly die for the integrity of the Way, I shall have no cause for grief.'" 軾、轍之幼也, 夫人親教之。常戒曰: "汝讀書勿效曹耦, 止欲以書自名而已。" 每稱引古人名節以勵之曰: "汝果能死直道, 吾無戚焉。" See Sima Guang, "Su Zhubu Cheng Furen muzhiming" 蘇主簿程夫人墓志銘, in *Sima Wengong ji biannian jianzhu* 司馬溫公編年箋注, ed. Li Zhiliang 李之亮 (Chengdu: Ba shu shushe, 2009), 5:76.534.

62. This self-identification is scattered across Su Zhe's poetry. For example, in "Ciyun Wuxing Li Xingzhong xiucai jianji bing qiu Zuimian Ting shi er shou" 次韻吳行中秀才見寄並求醉眠亭詩二首, there is a line "All that I have is the ten thousands books in my chest." 唯有胸中萬卷書。See *SZJ*, 1:110.

63. During the Yuanyou period, my grandfather, together with Su Zirong and Liu Gongfu, served in the Zhongshu Menxia Sheng. Su and Liu each remarked, 'What we read in our youth we have forgotten in old age.' Su Zhe said the same. Liu Gongfu then added, 'Judging from your writings, however, your memory remains remarkably keen.' Su Zhe declined the compliment. The two continued, 'We, from our youth, could only remember books by copying and extracting passages, and even then we would gradually forget. But you and your elder brother never made such extracts, and yet whenever you put brush to paper your citations are precise and apt—this shows that yours is true recollection.' 元祐間, 公及蘇子容、劉貢父同在省中, 二人各云: "某輩少年所讀書, 老而遺忘。" 公亦云然。貢父云: "觀君爲文, 強記甚敏。" 公辭焉。二人皆曰: "某等自少記憶書籍, 不免抄節, 而後稍不忘。觀君家昆仲未嘗抄節, 而下筆引據精切, 乃真記得者也。" See *Su Zhou* 蘇籀

Su Zhe understood that the act of reading was inseparable from one's aspiration to engage with political and social realities. The pursuit of knowledge through books was instrumental in strengthening one's sense of civic duty. This notion appeared in his praise of Ma Zhijie's 馬知節 (955-1019) lofty integrity in politics:

Gentleman Ma Zhijie has one *juan* of *Shicao*. In his postface, my grandfather writes: "Gentleman Ma Ziyuan is bold in action when confronted with affairs and forthright in speech at court. As the son of a military family, he is nourished by his reading; composing poetry is merely a secondary matter.

馬公知節《詩草》一卷，公跋云：“馬公子元，臨事敢為，立朝敢言。以將家子得讀書之助，作詩蓋其餘事耳。”⁶⁴

In this opening section of his postscript (*ba* 跋) to the anthology of Ma Zhijie's poems, Su Zhe emphasizes the author's bold assertiveness in political speech and action over his literary accomplishments. He highlights the formative role of reading in Ma's development. Relatively, literary skill is regarded as a secondary matter (*yushi* 餘事) when weighed against the essential virtues expected of an official. Particularly for someone from a military family background with less emphasis on administrative education, the transformative effect of reading in nurturing his characteristics was self-evident. The short comment Su Zhe made for Ma Zhijie proves that he recognized a strong linkage between reading and the “external cultivation” of governance.

Even in his twilight years in Yingchang as a banished official, Su Zhe held this belief and put it into practice. Alongside his exegetical study of the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist

(1091?-1164), *Luancheng yuyan* 樂城遺言, in *Quan Song biji* 全宋筆記 (hereafter *QSBJ*), ed. Zhu Yi'an 朱易安, Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, et al., 9th series (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2019), 34:155.

64. *QSBJ*, 9th series, 34:160.

classics, Su Zhe simultaneously worked to develop political resources pertinent to the present. In his *Record for the Book Chamber* (*Cangshushi ji* 藏書室記), he incorporated the cultivation of inner morality into individuals' growth toward the accomplishment of political subjectivity.⁶⁵ He dove into historical archives and reflected on the successes and failures of state governance from antiquity to the Tang Dynasty. These insights were crystallized into a sequence of prose essays entitled, *Discourse on Dynastic Political Affairs* (*Lidai lun* 歷代論). In the preface, Su Zhe depicts himself as an old man with a body ravaged by illness and a mind saturated with sorrow. However, his obsession with reading is irrepressible:

Having put my worldly circumstances out of mind, I have lived six-years like a passing moment, with nothing that truly engages my attention. Again, I have indulged myself in books and historical records like a habitual refuge. From time to time, when insights emerge in my mind, I restart to write a few remarks. Yet, I am already old. My eyes blur when I read, my hand trembles when I hold the brush, and my concern grows when I contemplate political affairs. Compared with my writings in earlier years, my thoughts have become superficial. Even so, what my heart is obsessed with cannot be restrained, and I write it down on paper whenever I can.

身世相忘，俯仰六年，洗然無所用心，復自放圖史之間。偶有所感，時復論著。然已老矣，目眩于觀書，手戰於執筆，心煩於慮事，其於平昔之文益以疏矣。然心之所嗜，不能自己，輒存之于紙。⁶⁶

This monologue discloses Su Zhe's insatiable impulse to keep writing as a materializing practice of inscribing insights incited by reading. This daily routine was also a channel through which he kept engaged with current politics. Probing into the ruler-official relationship in the past, Su Zhe gave voice to the current political scene and criticized those

65. Su Zhe, "Cangshushi ji" 藏書室記, in *SZJ*, 3:1238-39.

66. "Lidai lun yi," 歷代論一, in *SZJ*, 3:958.

in positions of authority as well.⁶⁷ His bodily decline, like blurry eyes and a trembling hand, did not impede him from daily reading as external cultivation to sharpen his political acumen and articulate his critical stance.

Su Zhe's passion for reading to engage with intellectual and political discourse never ceased. Such a resilient and self-disciplined book lover, however, created a self-image of indifference to reading in his poetry. From time to time, the poet denied the value of the book as an object of cultivation. Instead, he claimed to have sold books for his residence construction, degrading his proud possession into something that had only economic value.⁶⁸ These radical expressions subtly reveal Su Zhe's lamentation over his worsening financial condition, which exacerbates his sense of failure.

Circling back to Su Zhe's *Cultivating Sickly Pods*, the poet's identification of reading as a "mistake" (*fēi* 非) signifies his constant melancholy over having become an unsuccessful scholar. This is in sharp contrast with the reality that his devotion to reading formed a regular part of his everyday routine.⁶⁹ Also, it creates a self-conflicted expression within the *Two Poems on Growing Herbal Seedlings*. The first poem, *Growing Poppies*, begins with Su Zhe's explicit claim about his possession of books ("I built chambers in the West of the city, with piles of books inside." 筑室城西, 中有圖書). Piles of books are the very place where Su Zhe lodges himself within Yingchang as an erudite scholar. Yet, when it comes to *Growing Sickly Pods*, the poet attributes his burned-out eyes to his reading. Books now become useless, contributing to nothing but the poet's bodily decline.

67. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊, *Su Zhe pingzhuan* 蘇轍評傳 (Chengdu: Ba shu shushe, 2017), 199.

68. See Su Zhe, "Yong zhu er shou" 詠竹二首 and "Qi Dong Zhai" 葦東齋, in *SZJ*, 3:421.

69. "I observed that apart from sitting in quiet repose throughout the day, my grandfather merely read books from time to time...." 見公終日燕坐之餘, 或看書籍而已.... See *QSBJ*, 34:159.

In his prose, Su Zhe highlights his resilience to overcome bodily decline through reading and thinking; in his poetry, he underlines his fragility by accentuating his weary bodily condition no longer robust enough to sustain daily reading and thinking. This discrepancy invites us to think further about the tension between Su Zhe's bodily suffering and his spiritual pursuit as a scholar concerned with issues of governing.

To approach this conundrum, we must go back to Su Zhe's *Cultivating Sickles Pods* and examine how he copes with his dimming sight. At first, he resorts to sickle pods to dispel the bodily-spiritual sense of "heat and perturbation." Indeed, the sickle pods' therapeutic function of clearing heat inside the body makes this herb common in prescriptions for certain types of eye diseases.⁷⁰ Yet, in Su Zhe's poem, this herbal remedy fails. This failure of bodily restoration by medication suggests that the "heat and perturbation" he suffers from cannot be reduced to a somatic ailment—it is, rather, a metaphor for the emotional unrest that disturbs his inner peace. To soothe this turmoil, the aging poet turns to Buddhist meditation and the practice of "looking inward" (*neiguan* 內觀). In the poetry of his later years, Su Zhe frequently talks about his seated meditation, while particularly in *Cultivating Sickles Pods* he highlights this action as a counterpoint to his eyesight. In Buddhist thought, vision holds a privileged status; yet, paradoxically, enlightenment does not depend on physical vision. One who has heard the Buddha's sermon may attain enlightenment even without actual seeing, while the truly blind are those who do not accept spiritual insights.⁷¹ Eyes as a bodily sensory

70. For example, a foundational text of ophthalmology in medieval China, *Nāgārjuna's Introduction to Ophthalmic Diseases* (*Longshu pusa yanlun* 龍樹菩薩眼論), prescribes sickle pods in prescriptions for certain types of eye diseases. See *Ryūju bosatsu ganron* 竜樹菩薩眼論. [Place of publication unknown]: [Publisher unknown], [n.d.]. PDF, Waseda University Library. Accessed November 29, 2025. https://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ya09/ya09_00059/ya09_00059.pdf.

71. Wei Li, "Seeing the Light Again: A Study of Buddhist Ophthalmology in the Tang Dynasty," in *Religions* 14 (2023): 880, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070880>.

organ do not necessarily guarantee one clarity of mind. Through the “looking inward” practice, Su Zhe regains a sense of transparency with concerns not by the physical improvement of his eyes, but by purifying his desire and focusing on introspection. This aligns with his understanding of a central tenet of Buddhism: to recover one’s “original face” (*benlai mianmu* 本來面目) by stripping away attachments shaped by external conditions.⁷² In the end, Su Zhe achieves a state of “profound clarity and ease.” At this stage, the sickle pods are simply a type of herb with culinary value, while its medical function does not help much. What liberates the poet from his unrest, both bodily and spiritually, is not reliance on herbs as “external things” (*waiwu* 外物), but the spiritual illumination achieved by himself. His feeble body is not an obstacle for spiritual healing, but a mirror reflecting the unease in his mind. The unsettled craving clouds the original purpose of engaging with texts. Hence, the Buddhist practice of “looking inward” is a direct form of spiritual self-healing relying on the poet’s determination and resilience to wrestle with his absence of political recognition. When Su Zhe finally manages to stabilize his mind, he realizes both bodily and spiritual transcendence.

Cultivating Sickle Pods relates moral guidance through an unsuccessful medical experiment in bodily restoration. By sharing his own lived experiences of ingesting sickle pods, Su Zhe exemplifies how to solidify one’s belief in self-cultivation through learning, even in a situation where one’s loyalty and contributions are persistently overlooked. To the poet and his banished fellows, an unsuccessful political career might destructively impact one’s faith in the value of lifelong learning required for personal growth toward an ideal official. Su Zhe offers a response to this potential crisis through his self-struggle with his

72. “Shu Chuandeng lu hou” 書傳燈錄后, *SZJ*, 3:1231.

weary eyes. Relying entirely on external circumstances—such as placing one’s hope in medicinal herbs or longing for recognition from the court—is, for him, inadequate and unreliable. These external supports cannot sustain one’s commitment to self-cultivation; rather, they might become obstacles, much like reading itself if driven by impure motives. Before one could truly benefit from reading, resentment and the longing for recognition had to be dispelled. Only by protecting the purity of one’s original intent could reading become a vehicle for genuine growth.

Though both food and medicine are life-preserving resources, in Su Zhe’s *Cultivating Herbal Seedlings*, they serve different poetic expressive purposes. Besides creating the poetic abundance of tasty food for self-consolation, herb cultivation establishes a stable agricultural routine that both generates a sense of spatial stability as part of Su Zhe’s continuous building and refinement of his residence in Yingchang and mends the temporal disruptions in his life-sustaining rhythms. For a sojourning banished official living in poverty, herb cultivation was crucial for him to heal his sense of displacement and regain a sense of control in his everyday life. While the food essence of herbs grounds Su Zhe’s roots in banishment, its medicinal essence functions as experiments for his spiritual transcendence as a scholar-official living in confinement with a fractured political subjectivity. The poppy water helps this isolated poet to rewrite his banishment in Yingchang as an ideal site for spiritual cultivation, while the sickle pods’ failure in curing blurry vision indicates the limits of reliance on external things. For Su Zhe, whose self-identification was closely entwined with his political capability founded on tons of books, it was challenging to grapple with a reality in which reading was degraded into a quotidian activity removed from merit and honor. When the bodily

restoration—in the form of eyesight improvement through herbal remedy—fails, Su Zhe finally finds his solution. The real remedy is nothing but himself.

During his years in Yingchang, Su Zhe was highly admired by others who regarded him as an impressive model.⁷³ Yet, in *Cultivating Herbal Seedlings* for readers around him, the poet simply calls himself an “old man” (*laoren* 老人) possessed of joy and frustration just like anyone else. What he truly emphasizes through this self-recognition via his medicinal herb cultivation is not being trapped by identities but immersing oneself into the whole-life contentment of cultivating morality and scholarship. Correspondingly, his poetry does not conceal his sensual needs, even as bodily restoration is not always successful. But what the poet ultimately highlights is the spiritual transcendence that overcomes not the corporeality of the physical body, but the inevitable human nature that seeks recognition from the external sources. True self-healing, he seems to be saying, can be achieved only through one’s firm belief in the inner self-accomplishment that is put into practice day by day, whether through reading or meditation.

73. “Su Huangmen, returning from Haikang to Xuchang some time earlier, had been living there in quiet repose for quite a while. Even till the second year of Zhenghe, those younger scholars were still able to recognize him. His attire retained the solemn style of antiquity, and his speech was sparse while his countenance was grave. He is an absolute grand gentleman of the Yuanyou era.” 蘇黃門頃自海康歸許下,安居云久。政和二年,晚生猶及識之,衣冠儼古,語簡而色莊,真元祐鉅公也。See Zhang Yuangan 張元幹 (1091-1170), “Ba Su Huangmen tie” 跋蘇黃門貼, in *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, ed. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊, Liu Lin 劉琳, et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2006), 182:4006. 409.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown that Su Shi's *Five Odes of the Small Nursery* and Su Zhe's *Two Poems on Cultivating Herbal Seedlings* foreground bodily cultivation as central to their spiritual healing in exile. When herbs function as active material agents alongside their emblematic meanings, the body becomes an autonomous, self-sustaining force enabling the poet's reconstruction of selfhood. Particularly in Su Shi's case, the homology between plants as living organisms and the human body established through cultivation reminds us that plant materiality operates on dual registers, as active physical agents and as poetic emblems. Attending to this material dimension enriches our interpretive understanding of how bodily nourishment mediates spiritual transcendence.

Chapter 1 focusing on the Small Nursery sequence uncovers the significance of the body for Su Shi's spiritual healing, which does not require escaping bodily limitations, but rather unfolds through constant bodily cultivation. The body is the foundation for inhabiting the world with a reconstructed sense of self. The entire poetic sequence consists of two parts. The "Transplantation" section in the first three poems maps out Su Shi's restoration of his damaged selfhood, relieving displacement triggered by his fractured identities as a northern sojourner and banished official. In the end, he regains his sense of self-worth. The poet then shifts compositional strategy in the "Emulation of Tao Qian" section, poems four and five. It envisions the reconstruction of an ideal mode of living and being in exile. Through his consumption of the chrysanthemums, the poet accentuates an existential mode of solitude by relocating himself within an elite cultural landscape. Retreating into the fantasy, Su Shi

pursues corporeal immortality through flower chewing to seek absolute ontological transcendence beyond the social, spatial, and temporal confinement. Nonetheless, in *Adlay*, Su Shi makes his final choice. Merging into the southern landscape by ingesting local plants, he becomes a southerner dwelling in the *here* and *now*. Throughout this spiritual dynamic of selfhood negotiation, bodily nourishment remains the consistent mediator, a material practice that grounds Su Shi's self-cultivation in the quotidian realities of exile rather than in the fantasy of escape.

Su Shi brilliantly adopts "transplantation" as a multifunctional literary device. First, it establishes the homology between the poet and his herbs. The shared robustness reflects a mutual commitment to bodily nourishment that enhances sustainable resilience. Second, it consolidates the everyday routine of life-preserving activities as continued support for the poet's spiritual self-cultivation. Most importantly, both its presence and absence shape the poet's spatial, temporal, and ontological sense. It is the presence-absence of "transplantation" that makes Su Shi's self-healing a dynamic process. Anchored in the nourished body, Su Shi negotiates his transforming selfhood within the herbal nursery, while the nursery simultaneously becomes an integrated southern landscape.

Chapter 2 conducts a thick reading of Su Zhe's *Cultivating Herbal Seedlings* poems to reconstruct the duality of his medicinal cultivation poetry: as a poetic representation of his self-healing and as a moral guidance to his community of readers. While Su Shi's engagement with herbs does not separate the culinary and medical essence of herbs as life-nourishing resources, Su Zhe's approach treats the expressive purposes of these two essences differently, based on his moral principle as a Confucian scholar-official who finds his peace

through Buddhist meditation, acknowledging his sensual desire but prioritizing the pursuit of spiritual self-cultivation. As a seasonal laborer, herb cultivation enables Su Zhe to not only sustain his basic life-preserving needs but also reconstruct the continuity of his everyday rhythms by inserting them into the agricultural calendar and residence construction. Su Zhe's spiritual transcendence via herbal medication is not always successful. Although the poppy water improves his bodily well-being, grounding his self-liberation in the place of banishment as a sojourner, the failure of the sickle pods to cure his eyesight indicates the limits of pursuing self-healing through "external things." Rather, by turning to Buddhist meditation, Su Zhe finally gains the truth that self-healing consists in overcoming his own discontent and desire for external recognition, even as he retains his belief that lifelong reading is the path toward a more accomplished self. For Su Zhe, bodily unease is a mirror reflecting his spiritual battle with the self.

Beyond enriching our understanding of Su Shi and Su Zhe's medicinal herb cultivation poetry as literary strategies for coping with life in exile, my case study raises broader questions for two fields. For exile literature, my reading foregrounds the body as a site wherein a sense of displacement is experienced and must be addressed. Centered around the body as a medium through which literati inhabit themselves in exile, I also highlight everyday life not merely as a theme, but as an existential pattern of continuity. How did the habitual routines of mundane experiences, such as agricultural rhythms and life-preserving practices, matter to literati struggling to reconstruct livable existence in exile? For Song poetics, my analysis of transplantation as a poetic device reveals how the literati experienced material plant engagement beyond symbolic representation. While Xiaoshan Yang has

already established the spatial poetics of Tang-Song China concerning how plants reflect literati taste and identity, my reading of transplantation in the Small Nursery sequence complicates this model by revealing a tension between the materiality of plants and their botanical symbolism in the literati's temporal, spatial, and even ontological sense, which in turn significantly shaped literati ways of living and being.

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