

Hidden Manifesto: Revisiting Su Shi's "A Record of the Night Visit to Chengtian Temple" Through the Lens of "Yinxu" and Encoding/Decoding Theory

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Date: 2025-10-22T13:42:04+00:00

Abstract

This paper constructs a new interpretive framework by taking Liu Xie's concept of "Yin Xiu" (Hidden and Manifest) as its theoretical foundation and applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory as its methodological tool to reinterpret Su Shi's "A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple." The study argues that this essay represents a sophisticated literary encoding practice completed by Su Shi under specific structural pressures during his exile in Huangzhou following the "Wutai Poetry Case." The text employs an impeccable leisurely narrative as the surface layer of "Xiu" (manifest beauty), while covertly encoding a profound spiritual breakthrough and philosophical contemplation within the image-symbol system of the "moonlit illusion." Through analyzing the narrative fissures created by "hidden liubai (intentional blank space)" and the translation of inner spiritual processes into the image sequence of "moonlight entering the door—clear water reflecting emptiness—algae and waterweeds crisscrossing—shadows of bamboo and cypress," this paper reveals how Su Shi, through this sophisticated symbolic arrangement and integration of Buddhist and Daoist philosophical resources, achieved spiritual self-salvation and philosophical sublimation from a "metaphor of predicament" to "ontological confirmation." The concluding question "Which night has no moon?" is interpreted as a symbolic gap that summons readers to decode and a declaration of rupture in the reconstruction of the "idle person" identity. This study aims to provide an interpretive paradigm that combines the depth of classical literary theory with the perspective of modern methodology for understanding the literary writing strategies and spiritual transcendence of Chinese literati under structural pressure.

Full Text

A Hidden Manifesto: Revisiting Su Shi' s *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* Through the Lens of “Yin Xiu” and Encoding/Decoding Theory

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Abstract

This paper constructs a new interpretive framework by taking Liu Xie' s concept of “Yin Xiu” (Hidden and Revealed) as its foundation and applying Stuart Hall' s encoding/decoding theory, offering a fresh reading of Su Shi' s *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*. The study argues that this essay represents a sophisticated literary encoding practice undertaken by Su Shi during his exile in Huangzhou following the “Wutai Poetry Case,” executed under specific structural pressures. The text employs an impeccable leisurely narrative as the “Xiu” (revealed) surface, while “Yin” (hidden) encoding embeds a profound spiritual breakthrough and philosophical contemplation within the imagistic-symbolic system of the “moonlit illusion.” By analyzing the narrative fissures created through “hidden omissions” and the translation of inner spiritual processes into the imagistic sequence “moonlight entering the room—clear water—intertwining algae—shadows of bamboo and cypress,” this paper reveals how Su Shi, through this meticulous symbolic arrangement, integrated Buddhist and Daoist philosophical resources to achieve spiritual self-rescue and philosophical sublimation, moving from “metaphor of predicament” to “ontological affirmation.”

The concluding question “Which night lacks moonlight?” is interpreted as a symbolic gap that summons readers to decode and as a declaration of rupture in the reconstruction of the “idle person” identity. This study aims to provide an interpretive paradigm that combines the depth of classical literary theory with modern methodological perspectives for understanding Chinese literati' s literary strategies and spiritual transcendence under structural pressure.

Keywords: Su Shi; *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*; Yin Xiu theory; encoding/decoding; imagistic system; spiritual breakthrough; writing strategy

1. Problem Statement: From Leisurely Narrative to Hidden Manifesto

In the sixth year of the Yuanfeng era (1083), nearly four years into his exile in Huangzhou, Su Shi existed in the interstices between “convict” and “idle official,” his every word and deed undoubtedly under intense scrutiny. Within this special context, *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*—a brief essay of merely eighty-four characters—has been praised by Lin Yutang as an “unparalleled masterpiece” [1]. For generations, scholars have approached it primarily through its artistic style

and aesthetic mood, enshrining it as a model of Song dynasty leisurely essays and focusing on elucidating its “luminous clarity” of language and “relaxed contentment” of mood. This interpretation has formed the dominant “leisurely narrative” consensus in the reception history of this text.

However, when examined against the political trauma following the “Wutai Poetry Case” and the author’s specific mindset of “fearing punishment and sealing his lips” and “daring not to write” [2], this seemingly natural “leisurely” narrative itself becomes deeply suspect. Its “unparalleled” quality lies not only in artistic perfection but likely in its being a deeply encoded text, meticulously constructed under specific political pressure and driven by “taboos of speech” —essentially a philosophical manifesto of highly concealed form yet resolute spiritual intent. The core interest of this paper is to break through the interpretive framework of “leisurely narrative” and reveal the deep textual mechanisms and spiritual codes of this work as a “hidden manifesto.”

Previous scholarship has already noted this dimension. For instance, Wang Shuizhao has incisively pointed out that the Huangzhou period was a stage of profound self-reflection and intellectual leap for Su Shi, whose literary creation displayed a complex, multidimensional spiritual visage [3]. This points the way toward understanding the text’s spiritual substratum beyond mere “leisure.” Li Zehou, from a broader aesthetic history perspective, observes that during his exile, Su Shi “pursued a plain, unadorned, and naturally elegant sentiment...and elevated all this to a certain philosophical height of thorough enlightenment” [4]. This profoundly reveals the philosophical depth behind Su Shi’s plain writing. Such studies undoubtedly transcend simple “leisurely narrative” and touch upon the complex intellectual dimensions of Su Shi’s Huangzhou writings. However, their focus remains largely on holistic descriptions and elaborations of the author’s thoughts, emotions, and aesthetic style. There remains room for deeper interpretive exploration regarding how this text functions as a highly self-conscious strategic writing practice, how its “leisurely” surface serves as a sophisticated semiotic disguise, and how it achieves encoding and concealment of meaning within power networks—this deep textual mechanism as a “hidden manifesto.”

The core questions this paper seeks to answer are: Under harsh political pressure, how did Su Shi complete his spiritual manifesto beneath the surface of leisurely narrative through a sophisticated literary encoding strategy? What operational mechanisms governed this encoding process? Furthermore, how can the classical literary theory concept of “Yin Xiu” generate new interpretive power through dialogue with modern semiotic theory?

To systematically analyze this issue, this paper’s academic contribution manifests on three levels:

First, innovative integration of theoretical approaches. By constructing an interpretive framework of “Yin Xiu as foundation, encoding/decoding as application,” this study achieves critical dialogue between Chinese classical literary

theory and modern communication theory, providing a new paradigm for interpreting classical texts that combines aesthetic depth with analytical tension regarding power.

Second, micro-empirical analysis of encoding mechanisms. Through meticulous dissection of the narrative fissures created by “hidden omissions” and the spiritual mapping of “imagistic translation,” this paper reveals how the imagistic sequence from “moonlight entering the room” to “shadows of bamboo and cypress” systematically completes the philosophical sublimation from predicament metaphor to ontological affirmation.

Third, reorientation of literary historical significance. Breaking through the traditional positioning of this text as a model of leisurely essays, this paper argues for its milestone significance as “spiritual breakthrough” writing by Chinese literati, shifting its coordinates from the pinnacle of art to a beacon in intellectual history.

This paper will argue that the essence of *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* is a “hidden manifesto.” To systematically analyze its generation and operational mechanisms, this paper’s argument proceeds according to the following framework: first constructing a theoretical framework that integrates Liu Xie’s “Yin Xiu” concept with Hall’s encoding/decoding theory; then analyzing its encoding strategies to reveal the specific techniques of “hidden omission” and “imagistic translation”; finally conducting philosophical decoding and examining its reception history to ultimately reveal how this text transforms a spiritual transcendence attained during an “accidental night visit” into an eternal “inevitable inscription.”

2. Fusion of Theoretical Frameworks: A Cross-Temporal Dialogue Between “Yin Xiu” and Encoding/Decoding

To deeply analyze the encoding mechanism of *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*, this paper constructs an analytical framework that integrates the Chinese classical literary theory of “Yin Xiu” with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory. This framework’s establishment is not simple theoretical grafting but rather a committed cross-temporal critical dialogue—it takes Chinese literary theory’s subjectivity as its “foundation” and Western theory’s methodological sharpness as its “application,” aiming to form an interpretive path rooted in indigenous aesthetic qualities while responsive to modern academic concerns.

2.1 “Yin Xiu” Theory: The Deep-Structure Aesthetics of Classical Texts

The “Yin Xiu” theory originates from Liu Xie’s *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*: “Yin means layered meanings beyond the text; Xiu means outstanding elements within the text” [5]. This incisively summarizes one of Chinese classical literature’s core aesthetic ideals. “Xiu” refers to those vivid,

outstanding images and diction that directly present themselves to the reader's senses—the text's surface structure. "Yin" refers to the rich implications latent beyond the words, requiring the reader's careful appreciation—the text's deep structure. Together they constitute a dual textual world that moves from surface to depth and mutually generates meaning.

However, traditional "Yin Xiu" theory has focused primarily on static description and value judgment of textual aesthetic qualities. It remains methodologically insufficient regarding how "Yin" is actively and strategically constructed by authors within specific socio-historical contexts and power relations, and how "Xiu" as a semiotic system concretely guides, restricts, or opens paths for readers to explore "Yin." It treats the text as a nearly perfect aesthetic object while relatively neglecting its nature as a "discursive practice" produced under concrete historical pressure, full of strategic and even agonistic qualities.

2.2 Encoding/Decoding Theory: Power and Contestation in Meaning Circulation

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory provides crucial methodological supplementation precisely here. This theory treats information transmission as a dynamic process of "encoding—sign—decoding" constrained by specific power relations [6]. For Hall, the encoder injects particular meanings into the semiotic system based on institutional contexts, ideological frameworks, and taboos of speech. These produced signs are not transparently neutral but possess "polysemy," though their meaning fluctuation is structurally constrained by "dominant meaning." The receiver decodes based on their own social position and cultural knowledge, a process that may generate different interpretive positions such as "dominant-hegemonic," "negotiated," or "oppositional." The core value of Hall's theory lies in pulling textual meaning generation from pure aesthetic contemplation back into concrete social power relations and communication practices for dynamic examination, providing operational analytical tools for analyzing text-context interaction and revealing the ideological contestation behind meaning production.

2.3 Critical Integration: From Complementarity to Creative Interpretation Through Tension

This paper's theoretical integration first rests on the profound functional isomorphism and internal complementarity between the two approaches. Hall's theory's acute insight into the connection between power relations and meaning production precisely compensates for "Yin Xiu" theory's relative weakness in socio-historical dimensions. Its fine-grained analysis of semiotic operation provides concrete pathways for understanding how "Xiu" as a surface semiotic system guides readers to explore "Yin." Conversely, "Yin Xiu" theory injects the spiritual core and poetic qualities of Chinese classical aesthetics into Hall's communication model, preventing it from becoming a mechanical sociological footnote when analyzing non-Western texts like Su Shi's essays, and making it

more appropriate and interpretively profound. Most importantly, the communication process of “encoding–sign–decoding” in Hall’s theory shares profound functional isomorphism with the generation and reception structure of “meaning (Yin)–image (Xiu)–purport (Yin)” implied in “Yin Xiu” theory. Both point toward a complete meaning cycle of authorial encoding, textual presentation, and readerly decoding.

However, true theoretical dialogue derives its vitality not only from complementarity but also from confronting and transforming internal tensions. The core creative tension of this integration stems precisely from the profound differences in philosophical foundation and value orientation between “Yin Xiu” theory and encoding/decoding theory. Liu Xie’s “Yin Xiu” is rooted in the medieval tradition of literary self-consciousness, its ultimate concern being the aesthetic realm of “natural subtlety” and “implied richness.” It presupposes a harmonious poetic universe of subject-object fusion accessible through refined artistic cultivation. Hall’s encoding/decoding model, born on the critical battlefield of twentieth-century cultural studies, has as its theoretical 底色 an unrelenting examination of ideology and power structures, revealing a meaning circulation field full of contestation, negotiation, and opposition.

Placing the former within the analytical horizon of the latter means we deliberately employ Hall’s “power-sensitive eye” to examine how the classical aesthetic category of “Yin Xiu,” under the specific historical pressures Su Shi faced, was activated and shaped into a sophisticated discursive strategy. This essentially constitutes a “politicized” and “historicized” interpretive experiment applied to classical aesthetics. We do not aim to dissolve the aesthetic value of “Yin Xiu”; on the contrary, it is precisely by revealing its strategic nature that we can more profoundly appreciate the exquisite balance Su Shi achieved between “artistic perfection” and “discursive risk.” In *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*, the “luminous clarity” of the “Xiu” realm is not a purely transcendent aesthetic utopia but rather a carefully constructed symbolic shelter, erected under harsh political pressure to preserve the self and transmit inner voices. Beneath its surface of “natural enlightenment” pulses the encoder’s high rational consciousness and survival wisdom.

Therefore, the strength of this paper’s theoretical framework lies precisely in this tension. It enables us to simultaneously see how Su Shi, with his unparalleled artistic talent, created a text that conforms to the highest classical aesthetic ideals (Xiu), while also acting as a cautious operator within power networks, using this aesthetic form as a safe vehicle to undertake a dangerous spiritual manifesto and philosophical encoding (Yin). This tension allows our analysis to transcend static aesthetic appreciation or mechanical sociological reduction, bringing us closer to the complex state of mind Su Shi experienced during that Huangzhou night visit—where artistic pursuit at its peak conceals the edge of survival, and where spiritual freedom bursts forth under the tight shroud of risk.

2.4 Rebalancing the Risk of “Over-Interpretation”: Between Intuitive Perception and Rational Formulation

Of course, any interpretation that attempts to penetrate the “Xiu” layer and explore the “Yin” purport inevitably faces the charge of “over-interpretation.” Especially for an author like Su Shi, who lived under intense pressure on speech, his true intentions often remain submerged in historical silence, difficult to locate with direct evidence. However, the purpose of this paper’s interpretive path is not to provide an indisputable “final conclusion” but rather to construct a more powerfully explanatory framework of plausibility.

The value of this framework lies in its ability to systematically explain those narrative fissures, the philosophical weight of imagery, and the resolute posture of the conclusion that the “leisurely narrative” interpretation ignores or cannot explain. Simultaneously, this framework forms deep intertextuality with Su Shi’s overall intellectual trajectory and writing strategies during the Huangzhou period.

In constructing this framework, we must also maintain caution: attributing the text’s generation entirely to a lucid, step-by-step “sophisticated encoding” plan would oversimplify the complex truth of genius creation where inspiration, intuition, and rational conception intertwine. That night’s spiritual leap was first and foremost more likely an unexpected, intuition-filled peak experience and vital inspiration. Therefore, an understanding closer to the truth of creation is that what Su Shi experienced was a profound spiritual enlightenment and aesthetic intuition, while the subsequent act of writing was the strategic formulation process that naturally accompanied transforming this fresh and potentially “dangerous” enlightenment into a public text under specific discursive ecology. The sophistication and self-consciousness of his “encoding” need not stem from a pre-drafted blueprint but rather manifests as a state of mastery where, under the dual constraints of artistic and survival laws, he moved “with the heart’s desire without transgressing boundaries”—his profound learning and survival wisdom having become internalized as instinct, making strategy and artistry seamlessly integrated in the final text.

Precisely in this sense, this paper’s reading can be considered a “plausibility inference based on textual symptoms and historical context.” We contend that when confronting highly condensed texts like *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*, an “adventurous” interpretation that both respects the sensuous sources of artistic creation and prudently analyzes its rational construction comes far closer to the inherent richness and generativity of great literary classics than a “safe” conclusion that flattens its meaning.

3. Encoding Strategies: Hidden Omissions and Imagistic Translation

This text's brilliance first lies in its construction of an impeccable leisurely narrative surface, thereby providing a safe "vehicle" for deep spiritual encoding. When examined within the political context following the "Wutai Poetry Case" and the author's mindset, a profound paradox emerges: the text's overly perfect leisureliness forms a stark contrast with the deep anguish expressed in Su Shi's other Huangzhou writings, such as "the imperial gate lies nine layers deep, the grave ten thousand miles away" and his cautious "fearing punishment and sealing his lips." This very contrast transforms ultimate leisureliness from a mere reflection of mood into the most conspicuous manifestation of its nature as "strategic disguise." American scholar Stephen Owen, discussing Chinese classical poetry, has observed that Chinese ancient poetry uses words to guide imagination while attempting concealment, "which instead enhances the allure of what lies beneath their cover" [7]; apparent simplicity sometimes precisely serves to mask inner complexity and danger. Here, Su Shi consciously employs the safe literary topos of "leisureliness" as protective coloring for transmitting complex ideas.

This hidden encoding strategy specifically manifests as a sophisticated process moving from "cause" to "effect": the author first creates narrative fissures and suspense through concealment and omission, then completely translates the unspeakable inner spiritual process into an intuitively perceivable imagistic-symbolic sequence.

3.1 Concealment and Omission: Narrative Fissures and the Erasure of the "Catalyst"

The text contains at least two key narrative interruptions that are not accidental omissions but active encoding based on "taboos of speech." First is the complete concealment of the "midnight secret conversation" content. From "thinking there was no one to share joy with" to "we walked together in the courtyard," the process is clear, yet not a single word is devoted to their conversation in the courtyard. Considering Su Shi's "fearing punishment and sealing his lips" mindset at the time and his deep resonance with Zhang Huaimin as a spiritual confidant, their moonlit dialogue could not possibly have been mere idle chatter. Referencing the profound philosophical thoughts unfolded through "host-guest dialogue" in the contemporary *Ode to the Red Cliff*, we can reasonably infer that this conversation, deliberately omitted from the text, was precisely the "catalyst" triggering his subsequent spiritual transformation. Su Shi's choice was to completely erase this dangerous "catalytic process," presenting only its purified result—the inner world illuminated by moonlight.

The second, more exquisite fissure appears in the concluding question "Which night lacks moonlight? Which place lacks bamboo and cypress?" and its elipsis. This is a typical "encoding gap" that suspends the conclusion rather

than providing an answer. This strategy forms an elegant echo with the earlier concealment of the “secret conversation” : the former hides the process of the spiritual event, the latter suspends its conclusion. Through this echoing encoding method, Su Shi’ s text is endowed with an internal “summoning structure.” He not only completes sophisticated concealment beneath the “leisurely” narrative but also, through omissions and fissures, actively paves a decoding path for readers, quietly awaiting kindred spirits to penetrate the surface and explore the unique spiritual significance hidden beneath the universality of moonlight and bamboo-cypress.

3.2 Imagistic Translation: The Symbolic Presentation of Spiritual Breakthrough

After concealing the “cause” (secret conversation) and suspending the “effect” (resolution), Su Shi’ s core strategy lies in the imagistic encoding of the entire “spiritual breakthrough” process. He meticulously translates complex inner activities—from entrapment, clarity, awakening, to affirmation—into a “discovery” sequence of visual imagery.

This “discovery” is the pivot of the entire text, cleverly packaged as an accidental aesthetic experience, yet its internal logic is seamless: the hidden conversation (cause) leads to inner clarity (the result of “emptiness and brightness”); inner clarity reflects external predicament (the illusion of “algae”); ultimately, under the mind’ s moonlight, the illusion is penetrated, and the personality’ s ontology is confirmed (the reality of “bamboo and cypress”). Zhang Yi points out that Su Shi’ s Huangzhou writings demonstrate a transformation “from retreat from the external world to construction of the inner world” [8], and this text’ s imagistic translation is precisely the most exquisite semiotic presentation of this transformation.

The moonlit night at Chengtian Temple thus becomes not merely a physical space but a carefully constructed symbolic field and crucible for spiritual alchemy. The temple’ s religious attributes provide natural legitimacy and shelter for this spiritual activity, while its tranquil courtyard serves as a perfect screen for projecting inner landscapes. Here, dangerous speech is replaced by silence, and direct manifestos are sealed within imagistic codes. A profound spiritual self-rescue quietly completes itself under the cover of leisurely narrative.

4. Philosophical Decoding of the Symbolic System: From Predicament Metaphor to Ontological Affirmation

Su Shi’ s encoding wisdom concretely manifests in his construction of a logically rigorous, deeply meaningful imagistic-symbolic system.

4.1 Activation of the Imagistic System: From “Moonlight Entering the Room” to “Clear Water”

The imagistic sequence begins with “moonlight entering the room,” where the word “entering” suggests an unexpected external illumination that provides the opportunity for subsequent spiritual activity. The phrase “the courtyard was like clear, still water” offers a core model for decoding Su Shi’s imagistic encoding system. Here, the “water” imagery transcends mere scenery description to become a cultural symbol bearing the essence of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy. Its mood merges two profound philosophical traditions: on one hand, its attribute as a plane for illusory projection aligns with the Buddhist metaphor of “flowers in a mirror, moonlight on water,” suggesting all phenomena are empty; on the other hand, its clear, tranquil quality directly inherits the Daoist ideal of mental cultivation through “still water and bright mirror,” symbolizing the empty, bright realm of contemplating one’s original mind. Su Shi’s “clear, still water” perfectly fuses these dual philosophical implications.

The two characters “empty-bright” seem divinely inspired, serving not only as exquisite descriptions of moonlight’s quality but also as the most direct revelation of the omitted conversation’s content. Specifically, “empty” carries Buddhist principle, pointing to complete abandonment of worldly attachments to fame and external pursuits and the “emptying” of the inner self, discerning their dreamlike essence; “bright” connects to mind-nature, signifying the subject spirit’s sudden illumination after penetrating ignorance, the process of external moonlight transforming inwardly into prajna heart-light. Ye Jiaying repeatedly emphasizes in her poetry studies that the core function of imagery lies in building bridges between external objects and inner emotions and spirit [9]. The “clear, still water” here is undoubtedly an excellent embodiment of this principle.

4.2 Unfolding of the Spiritual Drama: From the Predicament of “Intertwining Algae” to the Ontology of “Bamboo and Cypress Shadows”

Upon the “empty-bright” foundation, the imagery of “intertwining algae” emerges. As rootless aquatic plants, algae in Chinese literary tradition have accumulated symbolic connotations of drifting helplessness. This imagery is no casual detail but Su Shi’s precise metaphor for the two men’s current predicament as “convict-officials,” like duckweed on water. These seemingly entangled algae are the projection and manifestation in an already clarified mindscape of external predicaments: political ostracism, life difficulties, and uncertain prospects. “They were the shadows of bamboo and cypress”—this process of misrecognition and penetration is the text’s finishing touch and the decisive moment of spiritual transformation. The word “were” serves as a decoding pivot, like Chan Buddhist “sudden enlightenment,” announcing an epistemological leap from attachment to “appearance” to return to “ontology.” This leap is not only an inward journey of “mind-essence” clarification but also philosophically completes the return from phenomenon to essence. The introduction of the “shadow” imagery is the essence of the encoding: those seemingly real predicaments are essentially illu-

sory, secondary, dependent “shadows,” merely projections of the real ontology under light; while the truly constant, self-supporting substance is the bamboo and cypress that stand firm and never wither in winter!

Thus, the imagistic transformation from “algae predicament” to “bamboo-cypress integrity” is not merely textual rhetorical progression but a profound mind-nature practice. Through this, Su Shi completes the reconstruction of identity from externally defined “convict” to internally upheld “gentleman,” achieving the reconstruction of mental order. He completely transforms external political pressure into a spiritual event occurring within the “courtyard” as “mind-domain”: the “moonlight entering the room” awakens the inner original brightness; contemplation of “clear, still water” presents the direct manifestation of the mind-essence cleansing dust and returning to empty brightness; and the momentary penetration of “they were bamboo and cypress shadows” is not rational logical deduction but the “sudden comprehensive understanding” or “enlightenment” pursued by mind-nature learning—the direct affirmation of one’s bamboo-cypress-like steadfast ontology by the mind-essence in its clarified state. Su Shi once again mobilizes profound cultural resources, making bamboo and cypress—symbols of gentlemanly personality and steadfast integrity in Chinese tradition—the ultimate code declaring victory of inner values.

4.3 Declaration of Rupture: Reconstruction of the “Idle Person” Identity and Spiritual Transcendence

Spiritual transformation inevitably leads to transcendence of previous existential states. The concluding sigh “Which night lacks moonlight? Which place lacks bamboo and cypress? Only idle people like us two are rare” is no mere expression of leisure but a value declaration filled with subjective self-consciousness after completing imagistic decoding.

To understand this sentence’s resoluteness, we must complete its deep logic. The full dialogic structure should be: “Which night lacks moonlight?” —(Yet only this night can illuminate my heart and lead to empty brightness!) “Which place lacks bamboo and cypress?” —(Yet only this courtyard can reflect our bamboo-cypress nature and affirm our ontology!)

Through this clever question-and-answer omission, Su Shi completes a decisive temporal-spatial severance and meaning reconstruction. “This night” is thus stripped from the endless river of time to become the “first year, first night” of rupture with the old self and spiritual rebirth; “this courtyard” emerges from countless worlds to become the origin point of the “new world” where one can settle and live. The universal existence of moonlight and bamboo-cypress, at this moment, precisely highlights the irreplaceability of “this night” and “this courtyard” due to their endowed spiritual significance. This sigh is essentially a high degree of subjective assertion: external universal laws are transcended by internal, experienced moments, and the world’s meaning is no longer externally conferred but defined by “my” spiritual awakening at this moment.

The “idle person” identity proclaimed here is the final achievement of this meaning reconstruction, the ultimate code of his spiritual nirvana, profoundly integrating resources from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This identity is not 凭空产生 but the crystallization of Su Shi’ s intellectual tempering during the Huangzhou period, finding clear intertextual traces in his contemporary writings:

Buddhist “Release” : Mentally, completely letting go of attachments to official career glory and shame (emptiness), penetrating worldly illusions (shadows), and abiding in the present bright mind (brightness). This embodies the *Diamond Sutra*’ s “generate mind without abiding anywhere” and results from Su Shi’ s deepened Buddhist cultivation during the Huangzhou period. In *Record of Anguo Temple in Huangzhou*, he writes: “Every day or two I go to burn incense and sit in silence, deeply self-examining, until self and objects are forgotten, body and mind both empty,” precisely the direct pursuit of the “empty-bright” mind-state.

Daoist “Transcendence”: Behaviorally, “joyfully rising to walk” and “walking together in the courtyard” display a leisurely, spontaneous life attitude that flows with natural rhythms; the contemplation of “the courtyard was like clear, still water” more directly manifests the mind’ s transcendence of court politics and communion with the spirit of heaven and earth, 暗合 Zhuangzi’ s realm of “riding things to wander the mind.” This transcendence develops in *Ode to the Red Cliff* into philosophical contemplation on change and constancy: “What passes flows on like this, yet never really goes; what waxes and wanes is like that, yet never truly diminishes or grows,” and the aesthetic possession of “only the clear wind over the river and the bright moon between mountains...are the inexhaustible treasure of the Creator.” His famous line from *Settling the Wind*— “Don’ t listen to the sound of rain beating on leaves, why not chant and whistle while walking slowly” —is precisely the action manifesto of this transcendent, spontaneous personality attitude.

Confucian “Resolute Vitality” : In essence, this is positive striving and responsibility after value reevaluation. The “resolute vitality” here does not point toward traditional ambition to return to power centers but rather a new life agency based on inner value affirmation. The phrase “they were bamboo and cypress shadows” explicitly declares the steadfastness of gentlemanly personality using bamboo and cypress’ s winter-unwithering essence; the concluding sigh is actually an affirmation of this new identity based on inner values, a resolute gesture of re-founding cultural life. This attitude’ s core lies in shifting the foundation of responsibility from external “position” to internal “personality,” making any situation a potential field for practicing Confucian values. In Huangzhou, Su Shi devoted himself to community welfare, writing in a letter to Zhang Zhifu: “Though discarded, I have not forgotten to worry for the state,” precisely this new responsibility of “worrying without position.” In a letter to his brother Ziming, he frankly states: “All worldly affairs are not worth minding...when the breast is empty of all things, then within heaven and earth...all become

sources of joy for my family,” revealing the psychological foundation supporting this “resolute vitality”—a positive and self-sufficient abundance based on constructing an inner spiritual world.

Thus, the “idle person” proclaimed at the text’s end is precisely the new personality form Su Shi forged in Huangzhou’s “spiritual purgatory” by absorbing and creatively transforming three teachings through profound internalization. It is not passive world-weariness but a positive subjectivity that merges Buddhist “release,” Daoist “transcendence,” and Confucian “resolute vitality.” This signifies not only a transcendental reconciliation with harsh external reality but also a decisive transformation of his personality from a dependent on external evaluation systems to a builder and master of inner value worlds—thereby establishing the “mind” as the source of meaning.

This perfectly rounded philosophical visage itself contains the internal tension within the “Yin Xiu” and encoding/decoding perspectives. If we look back through Hall’s “power-sensitive eye,” Su Shi’s integration of three teachings in specific historical contexts can also be viewed as a strategic synthesis. Choosing to present himself under the rich yet ambiguous identity of “idle person” allowed his manifesto to evade the risk of being labeled and criminalized. Therefore, philosophical roundedness directly translates into discursive strategy: the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the “Xiu” layer precisely “hides” survival wisdom in power games. The establishment of the “idle person” identity thus becomes the ultimate embodiment of encoding strategy—it declares value alienation from dominant political logic through an impeccable aesthetic posture. Ultimately, this text’s “Yin Xiu” structure constitutes not only an aesthetic double world but also displays a sophisticated “discursive practice” in the power field.

5. The Labyrinth of Reception: Decoding Practices of Readers Through the Ages

Hall’s encoding/decoding theory reveals that the ultimate realization of textual meaning depends on readers’ decoding activities, a process inevitably deeply influenced by historical context and readers’ own horizons. A meticulously encoded text, like a multi-faceted prism of meaning, necessarily generates diverse or even contradictory interpretations in its reception history. The dissemination and reception history of *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* is precisely a long decoding practice surrounding its “Yin” meaning, vividly illustrating Hall’s spectrum of “dominant-hegemonic,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” readings.

5.1 Dominant-Hegemonic Decoding: Disciplined “Leisureliness” and Aesthetic Co-optation

Throughout the long traditional society, constrained by ideology and the powerful inertia of the “leisurely essay” literary paradigm, most commentators adopted a “dominant-hegemonic decoding.” They unanimously focused on the text’s “Xiu,” praising it as “immortal writing” and repeatedly extolling its “empty-bright”

and “leisurely” aesthetic mood, while consciously or unconsciously ignoring or avoiding the possible political trauma and spiritual resistance in its “Yin” layer.

Case Study: Take the commentaries of Li Fujiu’s *Hundred Examples of Classical Prose Techniques* from the Qing dynasty and Wang Najian’s *Su Shi’s Short Essays* from the Ming dynasty. Li Fujiu notes that “the character ‘idle’ is the eye of the text; all transformative vitality emerges from it” [10]; Wang Shengyu also emphasizes that “the entire essay is ‘idle’ sentiment” [11]. Such interpretations completely incorporate the text into the aesthetic canon sequence of “leisurely essays,” constantly reinforcing its “leisurely” and “contented” surface as an unproven aesthetic endpoint. Meanwhile, latent political details—such as the exile circumstances behind “night visit” and the career frustration and spiritual alienation implied by “idle person” identity—are “purified” and “co-opted” by this adept aesthetic discourse. This interpretive approach is actually the result of disciplining by specific cultural power and literary tradition, which softens the text’s potential critical tension into aesthetic expressions conforming to mainstream expectations, thereby completing a “safe” processing of the encoder’s deep intentions.

5.2 Negotiated Decoding: Seeking “Yin” Purport in Modern Perspectives

Entering modern times, with the liberation of academic thought and diversification of research perspectives, scholars began conducting “negotiated” decoding. On one hand, they acknowledged the text’s surface artistic achievements; on the other, they resolutely pushed interpretation toward its inner complex spiritual world, conducting tension-filled negotiations between “Xiu” and “Yin.”

Case Study: Wang Shuizhao’s discussion provides a model, incisively noting that Su Shi’s Huangzhou literary creation “intertwines various complex emotions and attitudes of sorrow and openness, world-renunciation and engagement, depression and heroism” [12]. When applied to *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*, this judgment constitutes a typical negotiated reading: it neither completely denies the “openness” of the “Xiu” layer nor remains satisfied with it, but insists that beneath it “intertwine” more complex “Yin” emotions like “sorrow” and “depression.” Zhu Gang’s insight is even more subtle, observing that Su Shi’s Huangzhou works “condense complex philosophy and life experience into text that appears uncomplicated but is actually extremely concise and essential” [13]. This precisely captures the duality of Su Shi’s text “Xiu” and “Yin” — “uncomplicated” is a negotiated acknowledgment of its accessible surface, while “extremely concise and essential” points directly to the complexity and condensation of its deep structure. This marks the beginning of decoding activities breaking through dominant model constraints, attempting to build a bridge between aesthetic appreciation and spiritual source-tracing.

5.3 Oppositional Decoding Paradigm: Revealing the “Hidden” Manifesto and Power Structure

What this paper attempts might be understood as an interpretive path tending toward “oppositional decoding.” It must be clarified that “oppositional” here does not target the text’s author Su Shi or his creative intentions but rather aims to oppose the singular, dehistoricized “leisurely narrative” interpretive paradigm that was “disciplined” into being through ideology and literary tradition in the long reception history. We do not seek to deny the aesthetic value of “leisureliness” but attempt to argue that, under one possible reading, this text can be interpreted as penetrating the symbolic disguise of leisurely narrative to point directly at its essence as a “hidden manifesto,” striving to restore Su Shi’s encoding strategies and resistant intentions within specific power structures. This interpretive approach finds profound resonance in overseas sinology research.

Case Study: Ronald Egan’s research in *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, though not explicitly using the term “oppositional decoding,” may provide powerful support for this paper’s interpretive path. Egan emphasizes that due to the trauma of the “Wutai Poetry Case,” Su Shi developed a profound awareness of the danger of direct speech during his Huangzhou period, consequently evolving a highly personalized, symbolic new mode of expression [14]. He no longer directly criticized current politics but encoded complex emotions and thoughts within writings about natural scenery, daily life, and even Buddhist and Daoist philosophy [15], establishing a private symbolic system to speak the unspeakable, beneath whose plain natural surface often lurked turbulent undercurrents [16]. This judgment provides strong external support and academic resonance for interpreting *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* as a sophisticated “encoding practice” rather than a simple “leisurely record,” making our “oppositional” reading not isolated speculation but a deeply grounded scholarly pursuit.

From ancient praise of “immortal writing” to modern scholars’ revelation of “complex experience,” and then to this paper’s attempted reading that emphasizes restoring power structures and encoding strategies, the changes in reception history themselves can be seen as an illustration of Hall’s theory’s validity—decoding is always a dynamic process driven by specific historical contexts, academic paradigms, and personal positions. And the interpretive history of *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* is precisely the manifestation of its “Yin Xiu” structure being continuously activated and generating new meanings across different eras.

6. The Nature of the Event: From “Accidental Night Visit” to “Inevitable Inscription”

Through layer-by-layer analysis of textual encoding strategies and philosophical implications, we must ultimately respond to a fundamental question: Beneath the universality of “Which night lacks moonlight? Which place lacks bamboo and cypress?” why did Su Shi uniquely write about “this night”? What en-

dowed this night with absolute value to be written and remembered? The text's own clues indicate this was not a planned elegant gathering or deliberate philosophical construction but a spiritual encounter that began in loneliness and was completed by accident. Su Shi records in documentary style a spiritual harvest catalyzed by multiple contingencies yet exceeding expectations—it is precisely this “unexpected” value that makes writing inevitable.

6.1 Inevitable Anguish: The Emotional Foundation of Night Visit

The essay begins with a soft sigh: “Thinking there was no one to share joy with.” This sentence is the key to interpreting the entire text. It reveals Su Shi's deep loneliness, anguish, and loss of value during his Huangzhou exile. This emotion was not unique to this night but constituted his existential norm as a “convict-official.” It was precisely this difficult-to-dissipate depression that became his internal motivation for seeking spiritual comfort and emotional connection late at night.

6.2 Contingent Opportunity: The Unexpected Invitation of Moonlight

However, inner anguish does not necessarily lead to spiritual leap. The trigger for action depends on an unexpected external factor— “moonlight entering the room.” This beam of clear moonlight is a pure contingent invitation. Its arrival cannot be planned by human effort, and Su Shi's “joyfully rising to walk” response is also an instantaneous reaction without thorough planning, carrying a certain spontaneity. Thus, the event's beginning is actually a meeting of inevitable mood and contingent external cause.

6.3 The Transcendent Moment: “Contingency Within Contingency” and Structural Necessity

The event's crucial sublimation occurs within the courtyard conversation completely concealed by the text. The conversation with Zhang Huaimin, a spiritual confidant, exceeded expectations in content and depth, becoming a “contingency within contingency.” Like an unpredictable catalyst, under the combined effect of moonlight and mood, it facilitated Su Shi's unexpected cognitive, emotional, and spiritual leap and intense sublimation.

Our understanding of this “blank space” must transcend speculation about specific words to grasp its structural function. This omitted conversation is the inevitable pivot connecting the entire text's logic. It carries forward the lonely root of “thinking there was no one to share joy with” and opens up the clear mind-state of “clear water” and the ontological affirmation of “they were bamboo and cypress shadows.” It is precisely this decisive spiritual turning point that elevates a night visit connected by contingencies into a philosophical event of eternal significance. Without the fundamental enlightenment catalyzed by this night's conversation, “this night” would be no different from countless ordinary

moonlit nights, and the concluding sigh that decisively severs “this night” from the flow of time would have no basis.

Therefore, the existence of this concealed conversation is itself inevitable, serving as the core pivot that connects this night visit from emotional venting to philosophical sublimation and ultimately endows it with absolute value to be written.

6.4 The Value of Writing and the Necessity of Concealment

(1) The Value of Writing: Textual Affirmation of a Fundamental Experience

It is precisely the layer-by-layer progression from “inevitable” to “contingent” and then to “contingency within contingency” that endows this night with irreplaceable uniqueness. Long-term spiritual seeking suddenly crystallized and thoroughly penetrated in a night connected by contingencies. This huge “unexpected harvest” makes this night stand out from countless similar nights and grants it absolute value to be written.

This sophisticated encoding also constitutes a logical refutation of the “pure scenery description” theory: if this essay were merely a leisurely work inspired by immediate scenery, why would Su Shi conceal the core moonlit conversation? Why conclude with philosophical questioning rather than aesthetic praise? Why employ such highly symbolic imagistic encoding? Crucially, this is a post-event recollective writing. If that night’s experience had been merely aesthetic pleasure or temporary relief, its spiritual efficacy would inevitably decay over time, and the author would likely sink again into the predicament of “the imperial gate lies nine layers deep.” However, recollective writing itself is a selection and affirmation of meaning—Su Shi’s specific extraction of “this night” from the river of time and endowing it with immortal textual form precisely proves that this night visit reached not momentary pleasure but a fundamental spiritual enlightenment and thorough transcendence.

(2) The Necessity of Concealment: Symbolic Breakthrough in a Tragic Predicament

Yet under the political shadow of the “Wutai Poetry Case,” this value could not be spoken directly. Any direct writing about spiritual enlightenment and identity reconstruction could trigger renewed risk. Su Shi faced a dilemma: he had to speak but was deprived of the right to speak directly; he longed to publicize this spiritual victory but could only painstakingly seek safe expression paths under close surveillance.

Thus, writing itself became a symbolic practice of seeking survival through concealment and using aesthetics as a shield in a tragic predicament. He encoded that profound spiritual breakthrough beneath the surface of leisurely narrative, constructing a sophisticated imagistic system through “contingent moonlight entering,” the Chan meaning of “clear water,” the metaphor of “intertwining

algae,” and the affirmation of “bamboo and cypress shadows.” This painstaking effort reflects both clear-eyed recognition of harsh reality and remarkable wisdom in navigating forbidden zones of speech.

It is precisely this predicament of “unspeakability” that forges *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple*’s unique artistic character—it carries extremely rich implications in minimal form, achieving spiritual eternity through aesthetic perfection. This short essay thus becomes a “hidden manifesto,” ultimately fixing a night visit triggered by contingency yet endowed with eternal meaning through spiritual awakening as a public inscription passed down through millennia, witnessing a literatus’ s unyielding spiritual pursuit under political pressure.

6.5 Subsequent Confirmation of Huangzhou Breakthrough: Spiritual Trajectory from “This Night” to “After This Night”

The most powerful evidence for the existence and profundity of “this night” s conversation comes not only from internal encoding strategies but even more from the consistent spiritual visage and creative practice Su Shi displayed “after this night” in Huangzhou and even after leaving Huangzhou. The spiritual realm reached during this night visit was not a fleeting flash of inspiration but constituted a stable cornerstone for his personality completion and intellectual maturity, marking the decisive turning point of his “Huangzhou breakthrough.”

This turning point manifests on two levels:

Unity of Thought and Practice: The “Buddhist release, Daoist transcendence, Confucian resolute vitality” achieved through imagistic translation in the text was no longer paper speculation but became the fundamental posture of his subsequent life practice. In Huangzhou, he did not sink into the sorrow of a “convict” but, as an “idle person,” actively devoted himself to local public welfare, his words and deeds displaying a Confucian world-saving spirit of “not in position, yet still planning for governance.” This responsibility is precisely the “bamboo and cypress” symbolized Confucian gentleman personality standing resolutely in reality. Meanwhile, his openness in *Settling the Wind*’s “Let me live through life in a straw raincoat, through wind and rain,” and the philosophical contemplation in *First Ode to the Red Cliff* that “viewed from the perspective of what doesn’t change, both things and I are inexhaustible,” are all continuations and deepening of the “clear water” mind-state and “penetrating illusion” wisdom in subsequent creations.

Establishment of Literary Writing Paradigm: The “Yin Xiu” encoding strategy perfected in the Chengtian Temple night visit became the mature paradigm for his Huangzhou and later writings. He no longer needed to be as directly sharp as before the “Wutai Poetry Case” but wove profound thoughts and complex emotions seamlessly into daily narratives and natural imagery, forming his unique aesthetic style of “plain yet profound as high mountains and deep waters.” This short essay is precisely a complete record of a successful “spiritual experiment,” establishing a symbolic path from “predicament metaphor” to “on-

tological affirmation” that provided reusable spiritual templates and expressive techniques for his later masterpieces like *Odes to the Red Cliff* and *Record of Visiting Pine Wind Pavilion*.

Thus, “this night” and “after this night” constitute a clear and coherent spiritual genealogy. Without the fundamental enlightenment triggered by this night’ s concealed, “catalytic” deep conversation, it would be difficult to explain how Su Shi could rapidly transform and stabilize from the terror of “soul flying to boiling water, life like a chicken” upon first arriving in Huangzhou to a rounded, open, and creative life state. This night visit thereby rises from an “accidental event” within the text to a necessary node of generative significance in Su Shi’ s life trajectory. It is not only a “hidden manifesto” but also the “primal night” of his spiritual life’ s nirvana and rebirth.

7. The Unbroken Code of a Millennium: The Self-Protective Mechanism of Perfect Encoding

If *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* is indeed, as this paper argues, a meticulously encoded “hidden manifesto,” a fundamental question must be answered: Why has this cryptographic system not been systematically cracked and revealed in the centuries since its birth? The answer to this question conversely confirms the ultimate success of Su Shi’ s encoding strategy—its “Yin Xiu” structure itself constitutes a rigorous self-protective mechanism. This mechanism’ s efficacy lies not only in its artistic perfection but more in its construction of a textual labyrinth that makes any single interpretation necessarily appear “excessive,” through systematic integrity, surface self-sufficiency, and the non-local-verifiability of meaning.

7.1 Systematic Integrity: The Encoding Closed Loop as Implicit Architecture

Isolated literary symbols are easily accused of being far-fetched, but interlocking semiotic systems possess powerful internal persuasiveness. What Su Shi constructed in *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* is precisely such a sophisticated encoding closed loop composed of four interlinked stages, whose logic progresses layer by layer to collectively serve the generation and transmission of the “hidden manifesto.”

(1) Presetting a Safe Framework: Constructing Legitimacy Barriers Through Genre and Space

Su Shi’ s encoding strategy begins with designing the text’ s living environment. Through the dual setting of the “record” (ji) travelogue genre and the “Chengtian Temple” religious space, he constructs a solid legitimacy foundation for the entire text. This design is far from random: the “travelogue” grants literary writing legitimacy, placing the text in the private domain of personal expression; the “temple” provides ideological exemption, using the transcendence of

religious space to dissolve potential political sensitivity. This dual shelter allows any potentially transgressive interpretation to be redirected into safe categories of “impromptu elegant affair” or “beyond-the-world contemplation,” thereby presetting a perfect disclaimer mechanism for subsequent dangerous speech.

(2) Poetic Displacement of Core Information: From Dangerous Dialogue to Aesthetic Mood

After establishing the safe framework, Su Shi conducts complete semiotic processing of the text’s most crucial and dangerous element—the content of the moonlit secret conversation. He does not simply omit it but completely displaces that unspeakable spiritual dialogue with the ultimate aesthetic mood of “the courtyard was like clear, still water.” The “evaporated” conversation’s spiritual essence has been fully integrated into that empty-bright moonlight, becoming a poetic symbol both publicly appreciable and accountability-avoiding. This exquisite displacement transforms potentially calamitous “speech” into universally admired “literary brilliance,” elevating dangerous intellectual exchange into safe mood creation, demonstrating Su Shi’s extraordinary wisdom in converting political risk into literary advantage.

(3) Imagistic Translation of Philosophical Thought: Naturalized Presentation of Spiritual Journey

After completing the poetic transformation of core information, Su Shi further systematically encodes the entire inner spiritual breakthrough process. The imagistic sequence “moonlight entering → clear water → intertwining algae → they were bamboo and cypress shadows” constitutes a rigorous semiotic system that completely translates the complex mental journey of “predicament—clarity—penetration—affirmation” into a natural aesthetic discovery process. Each image bears specific philosophical functions: “moonlight” is the opportunity for revelation, “clear water” is the mind-state of enlightenment, “algae” is the metaphor for predicament, and “bamboo and cypress shadows” is ontological affirmation. Through this imagistic grammar, private intellectual revolution gains public readability, and deep philosophical contemplation is perfectly disguised as surface scenery description.

(4) Implicit Publication of Value Declaration: Identity Establishment Through Conceptual Reconstruction

After completing all previous encoding preparations, the concluding sigh about the “idle person” becomes the finishing touch of the entire system. This seemingly self-mocking sigh actually employs sophisticated semantic stealth strategy. Through conceptual reconstruction, the signifier and signified of “idle person” are quietly separated: the surface points to the politically marginalized loser, while the deep level marks the value self-sustainer based on inner personality. This semantic gap allows Su Shi to complete a subversive reconstruction of traditional value coordinates within mainstream-expected self-expression—shifting the foundation of identity from external official rank to inner character cultivation, thereby achieving the ultimate declaration of spiritual independence

beneath the surface of self-mockery.

These four stages constitute a progressive, interlocking encoding system: from external framework legitimacy construction, to core content aesthetic processing, to thought expression imagistic translation, and finally to value declaration through semantic stealth. It is precisely this systematic integrity and logical rigor that elevates Su Shi's "concealment" strategy beyond simple rhetorical reserve into a complete and self-consistent literary encoding practice—this is also the structural reason why his "code" could remain unbroken for a millennium.

7.2 Surface Self-Sufficiency: Aesthetic Perfection Dissolving Motivation for Deep Exploration

This encoding system's most successful defense mechanism lies in the "Xiu" layer's consummate artistic achievement. The "empty-bright clarity" mood and "immortal writing" style themselves constitute a self-sufficient, meaning-complete aesthetic universe. This universe is so captivating that it itself forms a powerful meaning endpoint, generating an "interpretive inertia" through its ultimate aesthetic charm. Generations of commentators, intoxicated with extolling its "leisureliness" and "contentment," did not suffer from lack of insight but responded directly and satisfyingly to this perfect surface symbolism. When the surface is already so complete, deep exploration appears superfluous. This "seductive shielding" constituted by artistic perfection itself is the most brilliant aspect of Su Shi's encoding strategy.

7.3 Non-Local-Verifiability of Meaning: Natural Barrier to Systematic Argumentation

This text's self-protective mechanism also lies in the non-local-verifiability of its meaning. Even if perceptive readers sensed that "clear water" exceeds scenery description or that the term "idle person" contains deeper meaning, without simultaneously revealing: the causal relationship between narrative blanks and imagistic translation; the philosophical opposition between "algae" as predicament metaphor and "bamboo-cypress" as ontological symbol; and how all this collectively supports the reconstructed manifesto of the "idle person" identity—then any isolated insight would easily be dismissed by mainstream interpretive paradigms as personal speculation due to lack of 呼应 and support from other textual links. Not that no one perceived its deep meaning, but before this systematic encoding, any non-systematic interpretive attempt inevitably appeared insufficiently evidenced. Under traditional commentary-style critical paradigms, it was nearly impossible to produce and verify a holistic interpretation that needed to interlink and mutually verify the title, blanks, imagery, and conclusion.

Therefore, the fact that Su Shi's "code" remained uncracked for centuries is not historical accident but clear proof of his literary encoding strategy's complete success. He constructed a textual world so systematically complete as to be

non-locally-verifiable and so surface-self-sufficient as to dissolve motivation for deep exploration, forcing later interpretations into a profound dilemma: either remain satisfied with its aesthetic self-sufficiency, or venture into a systematic interpretation that, due to its interlinked evidence chain and high demand for mutual verification, is easily accused of being “excessive.” It is precisely this unique dilemma that indefinitely postponed systematic cracking of its deep code within its aesthetic perfection.

Only when modern academic paradigms provided analytical tools fusing “Yin Xiu” theory with encoding/decoding theory did we finally obtain the methodological key to decipher this millennium-old code. This theoretical framework enables us to simultaneously observe its aesthetic surface and deep meaning, linking its sophisticated encoding stages into a logically coherent whole, thereby completely unlocking this silent and magnificent spiritual breakthrough accomplished within the square inch of text. Ultimately, we recognize: the depth of its concealment is the ultimate manifestation of its power.

Conclusion

In its eighty-four characters of extreme brevity, *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* carries a highly self-conscious, exquisitely brilliant literary encoding and spiritual self-rescue practice undertaken in political adversity. Through dual strategies of “hidden omission” and “imagistic translation,” Su Shi implicitly encoded a dangerous inner revolution and Buddhist-Daoist philosophical contemplation within the rigorous imagistic-symbolic system of the “moonlit illusion,” achieving spiritual sublimation and value reconstruction from “predicament metaphor” to “ontological affirmation.” The final highlighting of the “idle person” identity is actually a silent yet resolute spiritual manifesto using aesthetics as cover.

The interpretive path practiced in this paper of “Yin Xiu as foundation, encoding/decoding as application” not only provides a key to deciphering Su Shi’s “hidden manifesto” but also reveals a unique “Yin Xiu-type” writing tradition in Chinese literary history. From Li Shangyin’s elusive boundlessness to the hidden language systems of Ming-Qing transition loyalist writings, the literati class often constructed inner spaces resisting reality and settling the mind through meticulous arrangement of aesthetic imagery within the square inch of text. Su Shi’s essay is precisely the most mature model of this tradition.

Therefore, the literary historical coordinates of *A Night Visit to Chengtian Temple* should be shifted from the pinnacle of art to a beacon in intellectual history. It should no longer be simply viewed as a model of leisurely essays but established as a milestone of “spiritual breakthrough” writing in Chinese classical prose history. This study also demonstrates that Chinese classical literary theories like “Yin Xiu” contain rich modern interpretive potential. Through critical dialogue with contemporary theory, these classical categories can be activated and transformed into effective analytical tools, thereby more profoundly interpreting

the experience and wisdom of Chinese literature and revealing its vitality beyond temporal boundaries. Su Shi's unique model of using literary encoding to achieve spiritual transcendence in adversity is precisely the enduring, ever-fresh profound mark he left in Chinese literary and intellectual history.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.