This paper concerns memory and, in particular, how the human mind perceives and retains traces of things and experiences. What makes this a matter of historical inquiry, and not simply a psychological or a neuro-scientific one, is that how we think about memory – what makes it possible, what is worth remembering, and whether it is a meaningful way to think about human abilities – can vary radically. People living in different times and places, with differing ways of making sense of the world and attributing value to things, may put forth quite diverging ideas about the mind’s capacity to perceive, remember and retain. And assumptions that may once have been taken for granted may give way to alternative proposals about whether – and how – an experience may be kept and made to endure over time.

In the larger trajectory of the history of thinking about memory in China, the Song period represents an important turning point. Around the eleventh century, certain prominent intellectuals came to challenge the notion of memory as it had been conceived and practiced in the learned culture of preceding centuries, and along with it, the values it embodied. In a 1993 article entitled, “Pursuing the Complete Bamboo in The Breast. Reflections on a Classical Chinese Image for Immediacy,” Michael Fuller recounts two intriguing anecdotes that illustrate how Wu Daozi (fl. 710-760) and Su Shi (1037-1101) – individuals who were both celebrated for their artistic creativity – could conceive of their ability to remember in radically distinct ways.1

The first is an entry about Wu Daozi in the Record of the Celebrated Painters of the Tang Dynasty (Tang Chao Ming Hua Lu 唐朝名畫錄) by Zhu Jingxuan 朱景玄 (written c. 840). This entry recounts how Wu Daozi was dispatched by the emperor Xuanzong to go and sketch the scenery surrounding the Jialing River, for which the emperor had been feeling nostalgic. Wu Daozi went as instructed and upon his return, the emperor asked to see what he had done. Wu then replied that he had no sketches, but that "all is set down in my heart (bing ji zai xin 並記在心)." Thereupon, he is said to have sat down and painted “the entire panorama of over 300 li in a single day.”2

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2 Tang chao ming hua lu, Siku Quanshu edition, 2b. Translations of this text can be found in Alexander Soper, “T’ang Ch’ao Ming Hua Lu. Celebrated Painters of the T’ang Dynasty by Chu Ching-hsuan of T’ang,” Artibus
The second anecdote concerns Su Shi, who goes on an outing to a place called Lone Hill and, upon returning home, writes a poem about it. The crux of his poem is not where he describes what he saw and experienced on Lone Hill, but where he tells of how he came to write the poem. The poem is about his writing of the poem. The main passage in question is the following:

This outing has been simple but of replete joy.
Reaching home, I was dazed, as though just waking from a dream.
I wrote this poem swift as fire, pursuing the evanescent –
For a pure scene, once lost, cannot be described again (清景一失後難摹).³

Su Shi’s account, like that of Wu Daozi, emphasizes the speed of artistic execution. But Su’s description of how his poem came about also betrays a certain urgency stemming from the need to write down his experience before it becomes lost.⁴ Fuller in fact brings up these anecdotes as two different examples of the same phenomenon: the idea of “immediacy” as the ground upon which traditional Chinese aesthetics is based. Immediacy involves internalizing something observed in the world and then “adequately representing” it to the world. In contrast to this immediacy is the notion of representation, which undergirds the Western aesthetic tradition. Fuller doesn’t deny the differences between the accounts of Wu Daozi and Su Shi: he calls attention to the fact that Su Shi’s account of his poetic moment possessed an “unusual urgency” to project the “inner image of Lone Hill out onto paper before the scene blurs into the general mass of memory.”⁵ And he notes that Su is someone “whose sense of mutability is particularly strong.” As for Wu Daozi, Fuller calls him a “more representative and less nervous illustration of the immediacy of the inner object in artistic creation.”⁶

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⁴ An even more obvious example of this urgency can be found in Su Shi's description of Wen Tong's painting of bamboo:

Therefore, in painting bamboo, one must first attain the complete bamboo in one’s breast 必 (先得成竹於胸中). One picks up the brush and looks with concentration, and then when he has seen what he wants to paint, immediately rises to pursue it. Like a hare jumping when a falcon swoops, if one loses focus for even a moment, all is lost. ("Wen Yuke hua yun dang gu an zhu j据文與可畫篔簹谷偃竹記," Su Shi Wenji 蘇軾文集, ed. Kong Fanli. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986, 11.365.

⁵ Fuller p. 15.
⁶ Fuller p. 15.
Since Fuller’s discussion of Su Shi is given in the context of a distinction between Western vs. Chinese assumptions about poetics, it is natural that he would gloss over the differences between the two accounts. But these differences are far from insignificant: whatever commonalities they may possess, there remains the fact that, while Wu Daozi was confident in his ability to store his experiences in his mind (ji 讘) for an extended period of time and to recollect them at will, Su Shi was not. Su found himself struggling to capture a scene that, with the passage of time, was receding from him (zhui wang bu 追亡逋).

Why does Su Shi have such a poor memory? And is this a meaningful question? Are we simply talking about two different individuals with two different relationships to life and art? Or are there larger forces at work, suggesting that the kind of remembering that was admired and celebrated among creative individuals in the Tang was no longer viable or desirable among some of their most distinguished counterparts in the Song?

By the time Su Shi was writing, there had existed, in the West, a long tradition of discoursing on the art of memory, and this discourse was shaped by a persistent set of images that was predominantly architectural. In the Greco-Roman as well as the biblical traditions, memory was often conceived as a storehouse: Zeno the Stoic (4th to 3rd Century BC) spoke of memory as a “storehouse of mental images” (thesaurismos phantasion), while the Rhetorica ad Herennium, which for centuries was the most important primer for medieval students training in the memory arts, referred to it as a “treasurehouse of the ideas supplied by Invention” (thesaurus inventorum). In Book X of the Confessions, Augustine (354-430) speaks of the “fields and vast palaces” of his memory, “where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses.” In later medieval times, western thinkers often reflected upon, and depicted, their own process of learning and composition in terms of the metaphor of architectural building: the writer was a “master builder” engaged in the act of constructing an edifice of the imagination. These edifices ranged from storage rooms to palaces to gardens to amphitheatres, and served as a gathering place in which to collect and organize images of things that would be used in one’s composition. Writing was the retrieval and rearrangement of things remembered.

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If we consider Chinese developments in light of this vast discourse on memory and the memory arts in the West, it appears that Su Shi was in good company. From early on, the most prominent and influential thinkers seem to have been unconcerned with the understanding and practice of memory. Early discussions of knowledge and understanding very much departed from the kind of multifarious, cumulative learning that was presupposed by the western art of memory.

In the *Lun Yu*, Confucius claims that he possesses no knowledge (*wu zhi ye*無知也; 9.8) and that he is not someone who "by learning widely knows many things" (*duo xue er shi zhi zhe yu*多學而識之者與). Instead, there is "a oneness connecting everything together (*yu yi yi guan zhi*予一以貫之; 15.3)." Likewise in the *Dao De Jing* we find an emphasis on the emptiness of things as the essence of their virtue. The usefulness of the cart, the vessel and the room arises from the fact that they are empty. The Way itself is also empty and because it is empty, it can be used without ever being exhausted. This empty Way is put forth as a model for human action as well, and those who would realize the Way are exhorted to do away with learning (*jue xue*絕學) and its condition of emptiness (*zhong 賄*).

In later periods this ideal of emptiness and oneness remained a compelling paradigm for knowledge and understanding, and Daoist, Buddhist and Neo-Confucian philosophical discourse all disapproved of the functional kind of knowledge that memory represented.

Now, this is not to say that thinkers in China did not value memory or that there was no significant discourse on memory. An active engagement with memory was, of course, an essential part of classical learned culture, and with the expansion of literacy, mastery of the textual tradition was necessary for both social and political advancement. Memory was also important in religious devotion and instruction. Buddhist monks and preachers, for example – particularly in the late medieval and Tang periods – used devotional images and sensually-evocative language to instill the teachings of the Buddha in the minds of believers. They also made extensive use of lists and vast classification systems, both for organizing doctrines and scriptures and remembering them.

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10 See esp. chs. 4, 5, 11, 16, and 20.
11 Benjamin Elman has surveyed the extent to which people throughout Chinese history *did* memorize, and were in awe of those who did so effortlessly and successfully. Those who possessed a photographic memory were highly regarded throughout the imperial period, and legends spread of people like Hu Yi, who achieved fame for having memorized the Five Classics by the age of six. An important part of instruction in the schools was to facilitate the memorization of characters and texts among young students by presenting characters in sets of four or in matching, balanced, antithetical or rhymed pairs, which functioned as mnemonic devices. See his *Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, esp. ch. 5.
12 A landmark study of memory in Buddhism, as regarded from both the doctrinal and practical perspectives, is Janet Gyatso, ed., *In the Mirror of Memory. Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992. On the use of lists for organizing and
As for discussions of memory, these usually took the form of a concern with the past rather than with the mental capacity for people to remember per se – past texts, past events, things and places experienced in the past, past perfection that had now been lost. Traditional Chinese culture was heavy with nostalgia, even in the days of Confucius, who, while denying that he possessed any knowledge whatsoever, insisted that he was a transmitter of past traditions (shu er bu zuo 述而不作, 7.1). However, we do find references to memory in early philosophical and literary writings that address the mind and its processes. Xunzi, for example, recognizes the importance of positive and cumulative knowledge in Ch. 21 of his work, where he presents a two-fold model of the mind as a kind of container that is capable of storing things but is nevertheless always empty. The mind, he writes,

has never stopped storing (zang 善), but nevertheless it possesses what is called emptiness (xu 虚); the mind has never stopped moving, but nevertheless it possesses what is called stillness. From birth human beings have awareness (zhi 知); having awareness they possess memory (zhi 志). Memories are stored, but the mind possesses what is called emptiness. Emptiness is never allowing what has been stored to jeopardize (hai 害) what will be received.13

The recognition of knowledge as something that is accumulated and stored in the mind was a posture that resonated particularly with those who argued that cultural institutions such as Ritual, Music, and an orthodox textual tradition were necessary for shaping human morality. It appealed to supporters of empire who asserted the importance of having a strong ruler to order and govern the populace by means of these cultural institutions.

But it also appealed to those who theorized about culture – particularly the cultural forms of literature and painting – who may not have had such direct political motives, but who remained committed to the view that art was fundamentally about an engagement with the world of “things” (wu 物). In the 3rd Century, Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303) describes in his “Poetic Exposition on Literature” (Wen fu 文賦) how the poet prepares to write by first withdrawing from his senses and embarking on an interior journey into his imagination, where he re-encounters and re-experiences the things in the world. The poetic act here is not one of remembrance in the sense of retrieval, arrangement and building – activities that place the writer in the role of a creator or builder. Instead, memory furnishes the opportunity to travel beyond the confines of time and space, and to encounter and remembering Buddhist doctrine, see Rupert Gethin’s essay in this volume, “The Matikas: Memorization, Mindfulness, and the List” (pp. 149-172).

experience things in all their numerous diversity. Memory, in this sense, offers the possibility of transcending the limits of one’s own bodily situation in time and space, and re-enacting one’s past encounters with things. Temporal distance is bridged through the image of spatial movement, thereby reaffirming the pastness of the past.

Two centuries later, Liu Xie 劉勰 (465‐522), in the Wenxin Diaolong 文心雕龍, also describes the process of writing poetry as an imaginative journey in which one recalls past experiences, as well as images and words from the vast cultural tradition. The opening paragraph of the “Shen Si 神思” chapter (ch. 26) states:

As for the thinking involved in writing, one’s spirit travels great distances. Thus when in stillness one gathers together his reflections, his thoughts encompass a thousand years; and when in silence he moves his face, his vision penetrates ten thousand li.14

Here, Liu Xie’s poet does not simply retreat into his mind; for him the mind serves as a meeting ground between himself and the actual things in the world. This encounter is mediated through the senses and through the possibility of learning. In this same chapter Liu Xie describes learning as a process that requires one to “accumulate learning so as to build up a treasure house” (ji xue yi chu bao 積學以儲寶).”15 Here, the mind is conceived partly as a dwelling place of things remembered, and the possession of a rich collection of treasures is a prerequisite for writing. Although as in the Xunzi, the goal is a subtle balance in which the accumulation of experience takes place alongside the cultivation of emptiness and stillness (xu jing 虛靜), this account does emphasize that the invoking of images is a process of remembering. Indeed, the term si 思 itself refers not just to thought, but to the recollection – tinged with longing – of past encounters with things, places, people and events that have left its traces in the mind.16

Liu Xie’s idea of memory as the storing of past experiences corresponds to a particular stance towards culture, and Liu Xie’s literary theory is marked by the affirmation of both the value of the received textual tradition, and the possibility of truthfully apprehending the world. Such an ethical and epistemological posture is also readily seen in the Wujing Zhengyi, or the Correct Meaning of the Five Classics – the court-sponsored orthodox classics commentaries of the early Tang. The “correct meaning” of the Great Learning defines the heart/mind (xin) as “what encompasses the myriad cares (緒包萬慮謂之為心).” It also explains “yi 意” as “what the feelings

15 Ibid., 6.1b.
recollect (情所意念謂之意),” thus asserting the importance of feelings, or qing, as in the recollection of past experiences.\(^\text{17}\) As a politically motivated text, the *Wujing Zhengyi*’s depiction of the mind as a container of experience corresponds with the aim of portraying ordinary humans as passive and thus requiring the guidance of a sage-ruler.

But in the discourse of art and poetics, the human capacity to remember corresponds to a somewhat different conception of the self, for the individual who perceives, stores and recalls is also an agent of creation. So in Tang painting theory, where the mind is seen as containing things or their images, the greatest painters are described as engaging in a god-like production of forms. In the *History of Paintings in Private and Public Collections* (貞觀公私畫史) by Pei Xiaoyuan 裴孝源 (c. 639),\(^\text{18}\) dating from around the early 7th century, we find an account of the origins of painting that invokes the image of the mind as a vehicle that “preserves” (zun存) all the things, events, people, and moral examples that take place in the world and that are perceived by the human eye. Having preserved these traces of things, the painter “mysteriously constructs their correct forms (乃心存懿迹黙匠儀形).” This faith in the mind’s ability to absorb and hold onto the traces of things reflects an interest in things themselves, in all their multiplicity and tangible qualities. Pei thus describes how the scribes (shi史), who were the first to be appointed the task of picture-making (tu圖) were engaged in the work of giving form to things (ti wu zhi zuo體物之作) so as to “illuminate what is distant and display what is subtle (zhao yuan xian you照逺顯幽) and to “pair up and arrange the multitude of images” (mou lie qun xiang侔列羣象).\(^\text{19}\) It is also worthy of note that the term invoked to describe the act of painting, jiang匠, is an image from carpentry and is a distinctively craft-based concept.

This brings us back to Wu Daozi with the fantastic memory that could store an entire landscape, with all of its variegated forms, within his heart/mind. In the account given by the *Tang Chao Ming Hua Lu*, what is noted is not only Wu Daozi’s vast memory, but his sudden outpouring of production. Without any sketches, Wu Daozi is reported to have sat down and completed an “entire panorama of over 300 li in a single day.” Wu Daozi’s incredible powers of perception thus go hand in hand with his speed and breathtaking ability to create a profusion of diverse images out of his own mind.\(^\text{20}\) He is thus the figure who comes closest to embodying Zhu Jingxuan’s ideal of the Sage-

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\(^\text{17}\) Li Xueqin ed., *Li ji zheng yi 禮記 正義*. Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1999, 60.1594.

\(^\text{18}\) This essay is also transl. in Susan Bush and Hsiao-yen Shih, p. 50.

\(^\text{19}\) Siku Quanshu edition, 1b.

\(^\text{20}\) Elsewhere in his entry, Wu is noted for his ability to paint “secular figures, Buddhist icons, demons, birds, beasts, landscape, architecture, plants and trees” and is said to have produced such “strange and unusual forms that there were no two alike.” Ibid., 3a.
painter: “Guiding his delicate brush, innumerable varieties of things issue forth from his mind (wan lei you xin zhan 萬類由心展). Allowing the capacities of the square-inch of his mind to unfold, a thousand li reside within his grasp.”21 Wu Daozi, then, was more than simply a painstaking representer of forms. His paintings were invariably marked by an energy and dynamism that evoked the creative powers of nature itself (zao hua 造化). And his ability to store images in his mind was bound up with a certain vision of creativity, in which the boundary between human and divine was blurred, and individuals with special gifts held the key to god-like acts of creation.

Turning to Su Shi, we see that his inability to remember invites reflection not only about Song conceptions of the mind but also about the process of artistic creation. Anxious about his own ability to hold onto an experience long enough to express it in art, Su raises the question of whether a powerful memory helps a painter to faithfully depict a scene from the real world. In a discussion of a mountain landscape by Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049–1106), Su asks how it was possible for Li to produce such a true likeness of the original landscape. Is it because he is one who exerts his memory (qiang ji 強記) and does not forget? Su thinks not, reasoning that how the natural world looks, or how our bodies work are part of the constant workings of nature, and we do not have to exert ourselves to remember what they are like. What is remarkable about Li Gonglin, Su notes, is that “when this monk travels through the mountains, he does not leave his intention behind in one thing, and therefore his spirit (shen 神) intermingles with the myriad things.” Moreover, there is Dao and there is Artistry (yi 藝), and “if you possess Dao but no artistry, then although things take form in the mind (wu sui xing yu xin 物雖形於心), they does not take form in the hand (bu xing yu shou 不形於手).”22

So Su’s claim here is that what distinguishes Li Gonglin is not his extraordinary capacity to remember. All of us are capable of remembering certain basic things. But the kinds of things that he thinks we all remember are not what painters like Wu Daozi used to remember. We remember what the sun looks like. But we also remember how our bodies work – that even if we are drunk or asleep we know that we don’t drink through our noses and pick things up with our toes. These are things we come to know and remember from living in this world, and they require no effort – no qiang ji. In producing great art, what is more important than memory is a) cultivating a proper relationship to the world so that we don’t become attached to the forms of particular things and b) paying attention to the transition between conception and execution – getting the hand to give form

21 Tang Chao Ming Hua Lu, op. cit., preface, 2a.
to the image in one’s mind – and not just to apprehension and knowing. Both these points are reiterated throughout Su Shi’s philosophical and aesthetic writings. 23

But Su Shi’s memory of experiences that are not part of his everyday life – of things like his visit to Lone Hill – is short. Why? Because knowing something and putting it into action should ideally be one and the same thing, which means that any notion of a distinct and autonomous space of the mind - normally the site of memory of specific events and experiences – must disappear. All apprehensions of moral significance must be immediately enacted through the body. And if it doesn’t, it disappears. The erasure of this distinct mental space24 can be seen in writings such as his “Inscription for the Hall of Deliberation,” where he scoffs at the idea that one can actually go to some designated place to deliberate (思). He himself claims to be incapable of deliberation, insisting,

When I encounter something, I react – I have no time to deliberate. If I were to deliberate before responding, I would never get around to reacting. If I were to deliberate after reacting, then it would be too late. I have been like this my entire life, never knowing how to deliberate. Words issue forth from my heart/mind and gush into my mouth, If I blurt them out, I offend people; if I swallow them, I offend myself....25

When I happen on something, I respond. I have no time to deliberate...The words respond in my mind and burst into my mouth......” In his Buddhism-inspired writings, such as his “Inscription for the Pavilion of Great Compassion,” Su explains that the failure of ordinary people to respond

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23 Cf. Su’s description of Wen Tong’s painting of bamboo, where he disparages those painters who possess theoretical knowledge of how things are, without the capacity to unify “inner and outer,” or coordinate their “mind and hand” – equally lamentable failures that bespeak inadequacy in learning. Su Shi, “Wen Yuke hua yun dang gu yan zhu ji,”  Su Shi Wen ji, 11.365.

24 Cf Zhu Xi’s characterization of the mind as a distinct but empty (虚) space that contains no things:

Everything possesses a mind and the space within this mind must be empty. This is like a dish containing chicken hearts or pig hearts. Once you cut into it you can see them. The human heart is also like this. But this empty place still encompasses and stores the many moral principles that fill Heaven and Earth and embrace past and present. (Zhu Xi, Zhu zi yu lei. Li Jingde ed. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju, 88.14)

Emptiness and wondrousness are the original substance of the mind; it is not that I am able to make it empty. As for the seeing and hearing of the eyes and ears, that which allows for seeing and hearing is the mind, so how can there be forms and images in the mind?” (Zhu Xi, Zhu zi yu lei, 5.8).


25 Su Shi,  Su Shi Wen ji, 11.363.
properly to things is due to the fact that they “engage in deliberation,” in contrast to the Boddhisattva, who “never deliberates” and is therefore able to meet things when they come. Whereas in many previous writings from the Tang and earlier exhibit a concern for things as such, and for their diversity and particularity, indicated a kind of epistemological distance between self and things, we see in Su Shi the closing of such a distance and an attempt to merge the self and things. Thus in his description of Wen Tong’s painting of bamboo, Su notes how his own frequent failure to actualize on paper the conception in his mind is due to “inner and outer [not being] one.”

A negative discourse of memory was present in Song Neo-Confucian writings as well. Zhu Xi’s 朱熹(1130‐1200) recorded conversations recount numerous statements in which he exhorts students to first “scrub clean” their minds before setting about to learn, in effect wiping out all past knowledge and preconceptions that they bring to the learning of a given text. One of Zhu Xi’s constant laments about people aspiring to learn in his time is that do not know the true meaning of learning. Rather than seeking the Way within themselves, they spend their time amassing extrinsic knowledge through effortful memorization (qiang ji) and trying to write artful and elegant prose. Cheng Hao criticized the pervasive tendency among students to memorize, recite and amass vast knowledge, as nothing but “trifling with things (wan wu) and losing sight of one’s purpose.”

Neo-Confucians were not against remembering things per se. Cheng Yi, in fact, characterized the sage as one who “does not remember things (bu ji shi 不記事)” and for this reason “is able always to remember (chang ji de常記得).” He explained that the reason his contemporaries tended to forget things was that they remembered them (今人忘事以其記事). In both these statements about memory we see that both the process of remembering and the object of it are being redefined. One should not exert oneself to remember, and one must also avoid accumulating extensive knowledge of diverse things. Instead, one should keep one’s mind on the big picture, and naturally, this big picture will become part of oneself. One will remember without having had to make the effort to remember.

Su Shi’s reasons for rejecting memory in the texts we have discussed are somewhat different from those implicit in the Neo-Confucian writings because he is interested in the artistic expression of one’s apprehension of the world. For this reason, he is particularly sensitive to the

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26 Su Shi Wen ji, 11.365.
27 Zhu Xi, Zhu zi yu lei, 11.3.
29 Ibid., 2.15a.
30 Ibid., 4.7a.
problem of change and to the need to overcome it through rejecting any theory that would imply stasis, or being stuck in a particular perspective or relationship with things. However, he shares some basic commonalities with the Neo-Confucians in his attempt to create a seamless relationship with the world by redefining the mind as an empty space rather than a place that contains things. He also emphasizes – as Zhu Xi would – the importance of being engaged with the world not only in mind but also in body so that the proper state of being – what is good to be – meant being physically and emotionally involved with things. In this case, a purely mental relationship with the world is meaningless, which is why memory is so reliable and, even, unnecessary.

Because memory is not a viable place in which to store images or other traces of one’s experiences, art for Su Shi – as Michael Fuller has stressed – has to be immediate. The conscious rejection of various kinds of memory, however ambivalent, represents the attempt on the part of some of the most prominent and influential cultural figures in the Song to redefine subjectivity in accordance with a new relationship to past forms of knowledge and values. Thus we see that Wu Daozi and Su Shi represent two different ways of spatially configuring the self – differences that are played out in contrasting perspectives on the possibility of memory. Wu Daozi’s memory – his ability to retain the scene of the Jialing River in his heart and to carry it with him for a long time – assumes a notion of the mind as a place to store one’s experiences. It is the expression of a personal ideal in which value and identity are bound up with a vast accumulation of texts, cultural forms and historical events. And it betrays a culture that remembers and nostaligmically longs to reanimate the events of the recent as well as the distant past. For Su Shi, the passage of time diminishes the intensity of an experience because there is no place to store it. And so he forgets. Confronted with this forgetting, Su endeavored to transcend the particularity of human experience and achieve oneness with a timeless and ahistorical truth, all the while recognizing that the full physical and emotional impact of a situation could only be felt once, never to be felt again, and was thus worth monumentalizing in art, for future generations to remember.