

SU DONGPO

also known as Su Shi, was a renowned Chinese artist, poet and storyteller who lived between 1037 and 1101 A.D. He was also a mandarin, a public official in the Chinese empire, who served in a high position in the emperor's civil service. As he aged, Su Shi also became increasingly more outspoken—and this vociferousness, in turn, often resulted in conflict with a more powerful and corrupt political faction led by Wang Anshi, the emperor's favorite advisor. Su Shi's open conflicts with Wang Anshi, and his protests against the corruption and abuse of power that Wang represented, won Su Shi wide favor and a legendary reputation among the people, but it also resulted in his three times being exiled from court to distant provinces, eventually landing him on Hainan Island in 1094.

Through a series of message runners—the early Chinese version of a postal service—Su Shi received word from his brother, another well-placed mandarin in the emperor's civil service, of an ominous development: Wang had manipulated the emperor into establishing a new, onerous tax on merchants and farmers, and had been given wide-ranging authority to collect the new taxes through force. Worse yet, as their fee for enforcing the emperor's new tax mandate, members of Wang's political faction were given the right to retain one third of all goods and property they confiscated from tax evaders.

What could Su Shi do to block this egregious abuse of power by Wang? He no longer had any direct voice at court, and his exile on Hainan Island made it difficult for

him to travel through the provinces. Even so, Su Shi felt compelled to try to temper the response of local village leaders, who were certain to meet Wang's forces with small militias of their own, resulting in skirmishes that might quickly escalate into a full-scale civil war.

Fortunately, Su Shi understood the power of storytelling as the traditional method of capturing the hearts and minds of the masses. He had seen the impact of captivating stories and had watched how quickly well-told tales spread through the populace—from storyteller to storyteller, from village to village, and from province to province. Su Shi's stories, calling attention to the corrupt policies of Wang Anshi and his political faction at the imperial court, spread through the land like wildfire. Within weeks, his tale was everywhere, uniting people throughout China in a shared idea of how good government should work, and informing them about how dangerous to civil peace a corrupting power at the top can be. The mass sharing of Su Shi's stories served as a vehicle to create the impression that the people were uniting against the emperor because of the abuses of Wang and his followers. Fearing civil war and the loss of the "Mandate of Heaven"—the ancient

Chinese belief that the emperor's power to rule is a moral right granted by Heaven—the emperor capitulated to Su Shi's demands: He rescinded the new tax, disbanded Wang's army and diminished his authority and influence at court. Su Shi's stories worked.

From his island exile perch, Su Shi had used the mass medium of his day to change the public agenda, taking what must have initially seemed like a foolhardy stand against decisions being made by the emperor and his government. Su Shi understood a key point about power: that the perceived will of the masses could be even more powerful than their actual physical presence in persuading the government to take the right actions. The account of Su Shi illustrates how stories, when well structured and well told, can rouse sentiment and produce solidarity across a vast population, creating a shared experience and, therefore, a shared meaning. Stories inspire a sense of identification with their plots' characters and situations. They also help to establish a level of ownership—that is, *affinity*—with the messages being communicated. The influence of stories delivered through mass media can never be overestimated.

Assignment 1

Read about Su Dongpo, also known as Su Shi. Then describe a modern, real-world example of how the power of stories and storytelling has resulted in social, cultural, or political change. This could be the result of a news story or popular book, song, photograph, movie, television show, or a story from another medium. Your example must be about change in the real world, such as the example of Su Dongpo. Your example may not be about change in a fictional world.

