

The Field of Memory: Cultural Memory in Tang Dynasty Leyouyuan Poetry

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Abstract: This paper explores the cultural significance of Leyouyuan-themed poetry in the Tang Dynasty from three perspectives. Firstly, in terms of material significance, Tang poets preserved the remnants of Leyouyuan through their poetry, creating the distinctive regional characteristics of Leyouyuan. Their depictions of natural scenery and palace architecture on Leyouyuan unconsciously transformed it into a symbolic and carrier of historical memory. Secondly, in terms of functional significance, Leyouyuan possesses rich and unique historical memories, including the festive joy, solemnity of temple activities, and cultural exchanges between China and foreign lands. These activities are presented in the space of Leyouyuan, recorded by Tang poets, thus activating complex and multidimensional collective memories. Thirdly, in terms of symbolic significance, the emotional attachment to Leyouyuan presented in Tang poetry highlights the timeless charm of Leyouyuan, becoming an unconscious collective abode. The symbolic significance of Leyouyuan as the “field of memory” is further emphasized.

Keywords: Tang poetry, Leyouyuan, cultural significance

1. Introduction

“The setting sun seems to sublime, but it is nearing its dying time.” With continuous writings by literati throughout the ages, Leyouyuan has solidified into a unique “field of memory.” The concept of the “field of memory” was introduced by French scholar Pierre Nora in “Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past.” He pointed out that the “field of memory” is a concrete, functional, and symbolic space. [1] In the hands of Tang poets, Leyouyuan, as the “field of memory,” stores the historical memory of the Tang Dynasty, possessing a distinctive cultural interpretive function. It serves as a living fossil of discourse, experiences, and emotions, conveying the discursive representations hidden behind poetry. This paper aims to analyze relevant poems from these three aspects, discussing the evolutionary process of Leyouyuan as a “field of memory.” Through this exploration, we seek to unveil its historical and cultural significance.

2. Natural Landscape—The Material Significance of Leyouyuan as a “Field of Memory”

Leyouyuan, also known as “Leyou Park,” where “Yuan” refers to its geographical features, as explained by Xu Shen in “Shuowen Jiezi”: “Elevated and flat terrain is called ‘yuan,’ a place people ascend.” [2] In the ancient city of Chang’an during the Tang Dynasty, there were many such uniquely elevated and flat terrains, with Leyouyuan being one of them. Since the Qin and Han periods, Leyouyuan had gained imperial favor, with extensive imperial gardens constructed on its grounds. By the Tang Dynasty, Leyouyuan became part of a large public park in the southeast corner of Chang’an, offering a superior geographical location that allowed a panoramic view of the prosperous scenes of Chang’an. As a renowned natural landscape during the Tang Dynasty, Leyouyuan itself is a concrete and material place.

Pierre Nora points out: “Some places have geographical colors; their significance lies entirely in their exact location and the land to which they are rooted, as in all tourist destinations.” [3] Leyouyuan becomes a “field of memory,” closely related to its geographical environment. Compared to other landscapes in Tang Chang’an, Leyouyuan has a deeper historical heritage. The beautiful scenery of Leyouyuan, the garden architecture, and the observable meteorological phenomena within Chang’an are vividly portrayed in Tang poetry. Du Fu’s “Song of Leyouyuan” reads, “乐游古园萃森爽，烟绵碧草萋萋长。公子华筵势最高，秦川对酒平如掌。” In just a few strokes, the unique terrain of Leyouyuan and the misty natural scenery are depicted. Leyouyuan’s “alfalfa embracing the wind” is praised by many. According to the “Taiping Guangji · Muhua”, “乐游原，自生玫瑰树，下多苜蓿，一名怀风，时人或谓之光风，风在期间常萧萧然。日照其花有光彩，故名苜蓿为怀风。” [4] Han Yu’s “酬司门卢四兄云夫院长望秋作” captures the real scene of this landscape: “乐游下瞩无远近，绿槐萍合不可芟”. This is a true depiction of the scenery.

The Qinglong Temple on Leyouyuan was not only a famous temple at the time, but the landscape within its courtyard was also highly praised. Zhu Qingyu’s “Inscription on the Qinglong Temple” reads, “寺好因岗势，登临值夕阳。青山当佛阁，红叶满僧廊。” In the late sunset, with red leaves filling the corridor, the sound of insects buzzing, the Qinglong Temple appears particularly tranquil. Leyouyuan’s unique terrain and beautiful environment attracted many dignitaries to settle in. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Princess Taiping’s Mountain Villa. According to the “New Book of Tang, Biographies of Princesses,” Princess Taiping “田园逼近甸，皆上腴……始主作观池乐游原，以为盛集。” [5] Liu Yuxi’s “Strolling in the East of the City” gives us [6] a glimpse of the original appearance of Princess Taiping’s Mountain Villa: “借问池台主，多居要路津。千金买绝境，永日属闲人。竹径萦纡入，花林委曲巡。斜阳重客散，空锁一园春。” In addition, Leyouyuan still retains many relics from the Qin and Han dynasties. Therefore, the spatial landscape of Leyouyuan also presents a rich historical flavor. “Leyou Temple” is one of the most important buildings on Leyouyuan. Built by Emperor Xuan of Han, it frequently appears in Tang poetry, carrying special and profound meanings. German scholar Aleida Assmann points out: “Although places do not possess inherent memories, they have important significance for the construction of cultural memory fields.” [7] Despite the erosion of time, Leyouyuan has lost its original appearance. However, Tang poets have preserved the remnants of Leyouyuan through their poetry, fixing the memories of the prosperous era on Leyouyuan and forming its unique geographical characteristics. Unconsciously, they have passed down Leyouyuan’s natural scenery and palace architecture as symbols of historical memory.

3. Historical and Cultural Significance—The Functional Meaning of Leyouyuan as a “Field of Memory”

As a renowned landscape during the Tang Dynasty, Leyouyuan has been infused with emotional resonance and value orientations from generations of literati. Pierre Nora points out that the functional domain within the “field of memory” plays a crucial role in “shouldering the responsibility of shaping and transmitting memory.” [8] The historical and cultural heritage of the Tang Dynasty goes beyond mere historical records, with Tang literati vividly showcasing its unique charm through literary writings.

3.1. Festival and Folk Custom Functional Domain

During the prosperous Tang era, with flourishing economic activities, the popularity of sightseeing soared. Whether emperors, generals, or common people, everyone would engage in outings during leisure time, especially on festivals. Du Fu’s “Song of Leyouyuan” vividly records the grand scene of Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei enjoying an outing during the Mid-Autumn Festival: “青春波浪芙蓉园，白日雷霆夹城仗。阊阖晴开映荡荡，曲江翠幕排银榜。拂水低徊舞袖翻，缘云清切歌声上。” Moreover, Leyouyuan was also an excellent destination for spring outings and prayer rituals during the Qingming Festival. Huangfu Ran’s “清明日青龙寺上方赋得多字” describes the scene: “上方偏可适，季月况堪过。远近水声至，东西山色多。夕阳留径草，新叶变庭柯。已度清明节，春秋如客何。” During the Qingming Festival, the author, together with friends, visits Qinglong Temple to appreciate the scenery and go for a spring outing. The colors of the setting sun make the experience even more enchanting, conveying a serene state of mind. During the Double Ninth Festival, climbing high and enjoying distant views were common activities, with Leyouyuan being the preferred location. Pei Yizhi’s “和邢郎中病中重阳强游乐游原” reads: “嘉晨令节共陶陶，风景牵情并不劳。晓日整冠兰室静，秋原骑马菊花高。” On the auspicious morning of the Double Ninth Festival, the poet, despite being ill, ventures out on Leyouyuan on horseback. Watching the blooming chrysanthemums glisten in the sunlight, the poet’s mood improves. Records in “New Records of the Two Capitals” state that Leyouyuan was “其地最高，四望宽敞，每年三月上巳、九月重阳，士女游戏就此，袂褰登高，幄幕云布，车马填塞，骑罗耀日，馨香满路，朝士词人赋诗，翌日传于京师。” [9] The prevailing social entertainment culture during the Tang Dynasty made Leyouyuan particularly lively during various festivals. This intense pursuit of happiness and joy not only manifested the prosperous atmosphere of the era but also embodied the aspirations and solace of its aesthetic philosophy. These festivals, built upon traditional cultural memories, encapsulate the complex and diverse relationships within Tang Dynasty’s humanistic historical culture.

These traditional festivals were documented by Tang literati and gradually solidified into cultural memories preserved on specific historical occasions. They record Tang people’s perceptions and practices of traditional culture, revealing the spiritual features of the Tang Dynasty. “We can only recreate the world that has forever vanished through history and imagination. Although gone, it remains present, giving rise to something different from oneself, a cryptic, mysterious, and enchanting world, stepping out of a coherent history and surviving within the disjointed realm of memory.” [10] While the Tang Dynasty has disappeared, Tang poets vividly depict the customs and sentiments on Yueyouyuan during that era, thereby anchoring them in this domain and becoming a potent medium for future generations’ imagination and recollection.

3.2. Religious Activities Functional Domain

During the Tang Dynasty, with open-minded thinking and cultural prosperity, Buddhist culture experienced significant development in this era. Numerous Buddhist temples in Chang'an City had a profound impact on people's thoughts and lives. As essential public spaces, Buddhist temples served multiple functions. Ge Zhaoguang, in his collection "Chinese Religion and Literature Essays: Introduction," points out, "Buddhist and Taoist temples, often serving as centers for folk gatherings and religious ceremonies, are also places for Chinese intellectuals to read, relax, and escape." [11] Buddhist temple architecture often embodies a triple identity—serving as a site for religious practice, scenic beauty, and cultural entertainment spaces. These multifaceted functions are distinctly presented in the relevant poems about Qinglong Temple.

Qinglong Temple, one of the cradles of Esoteric Buddhism, played a crucial role in the dissemination of Esoteric Buddhist culture. According to legend, Esoteric Buddhist monks had the ability to ward off disasters and offer blessings. "Records of Qinglong Temple" states, "后至唐太宗皇帝女城阳公主有疾，请苏州僧法朗持念观音神呪而获疾愈。"[12] Hui Guo also performed rituals for Emperor Dai Zong and princesses, and after their recovery, the incense at Qinglong Temple flourished, attracting a continuous stream of visitors. Additionally, Qinglong Temple, located near Qujiang, became a venue for the purification ceremony during the Shangsi Festival. "Purification" is a custom gradually formed by ancient people to ward off evil and avoid disasters. On this day, people often go to the water's edge to cleanse impurities. After the purification ritual to dispel disasters, they engage in activities of prayer and supplication. Going to Leyouyuan on the third day of the third month, visiting Qinglong Temple for purification and blessings, has become a fixed ritual. Simple folk beliefs and vibrant cultural memories are vividly presented in these practices.

Temples serve not only as religious sites but also as social spaces, and Qinglong Temple played a significant role in the social activities between Tang Dynasty literati and monks. Many scholars who participated in the imperial examination or held official positions would visit Qinglong Temple for sightseeing, lodging, or to visit monks. The strong religious atmosphere within the temple allowed poets to engage in discussions with Zen masters about Buddhist teachings, leaving behind numerous poems expressing their insights into Buddhist philosophy. In Wang Wei's "青龙寺昙壁上人兄院集," the verse "眼界今无染，心空安可迷" [13] reflects the poet's hope to remain undisturbed by worldly affairs, reminiscent of the Zen charm of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng's "本来无一物，何处惹尘埃". Additionally, due to the inclusive nature of Esoteric Buddhism's doctrines, it attracted not only numerous Chinese monks but also gained fame, influencing monks from neighboring countries such as Japan, Silla, Java, and others who came to study. Among them, Kūkai is the most famous. Kūkai, who studied under Huiguo at the Qinglong Temple, went on to establish the Dongmi school upon his return to Japan. In his farewell poem "别青龙寺义操阿闍梨" composed at the moment of departure, the lines "同法同门喜遇深，游空白雾勿归岭。一生一别难再见，悲梦思中数数寻。" express a profound longing for Yicāo Āshuòlí. This deep sentiment not only illustrates the boundless nature of Buddhist teachings, transcending national boundaries, but also stands as a testimony to the friendly relations between China and Japan during that period.

Moreover, on specific days, Qinglong Temple would host secular lectures and dramas, attracting a large number of people. Cao Song's "Presented to Monk Yunhao of Qinglong Temple" records the situation when Qinglong Temple held secular lectures: "紫檀衣且香，春殿日尤长。此地开新讲，何山锁旧房。僧名喧北阙，师印续南方。莫惜青莲喻，秦人听未忘。" Furthermore, Qinglong Temple staged various dramas, enjoying popularity among the people of Chang'an. According to Song Qianyi's "New Book of the Southern Region," "长安戏场，多集于慈恩，小者在青龙，其次荐福、永寿。"[14] Su Yi's "奏和恩赐乐游园宴应制" mentions, "座密千官盛，场开百戏容". The

emperor hosts a feast, where numerous officials gather to enjoy successive acts of drama, creating an exceptionally lively atmosphere. Tang poets' writings about Qinglong Temple are rooted in their emotional reliance on religious beliefs and their appreciation of cultural customs. These writings contribute to the unique character of Leyouyuan as a "scene."

4. The Golden Age Reminisced — The Symbolic Significance of Leyouyuan as a "Memory Field"

According to Nora, the symbolic nature of memory fields lies in "depicting the characteristics of the majority through an event or an experience that only a few have undergone." [15] Leyouyuan preserves the historical memories of the Tang people, with their splendid poems delineating the social customs, singing of the prosperity of the era, delving into the historical glory and disgrace, and revealing the changes in aesthetics, the waves in the officialdom, and the cultural dimensions. Under the writings of literati throughout the ages, "Leyouyuan" has solidified into a cultural symbol, embodying the complex emotions of the Tang people towards Leyouyuan. It provides us with a pattern different from history to contemplate memory.

"Leyouyuan" not only preserves the memories of the prosperous Han Dynasty but also serves as a witness to the "Kaiyuan Golden Age" of the Tang Dynasty. Overlapping layers of historical memories have transformed "Leyouyuan" into a symbol of prosperity, official success, and patriotism. During the early reign of Xuanzong, the Tang Dynasty reached its pinnacle through diligent governance, the appointment of talented officials, and the establishment of the "Kaiyuan Golden Age." The grandeur of the Tang Dynasty's prosperity, especially during the reign of Emperor Taizong, is vividly portrayed in the Leyouyuan poems composed by literati. In Xuanzong's poem "同二相已下群官乐游原宴," he vividly describes the splendor of Leyouyuan: "万方朝玉帛, 千品会簪裾..... 阑归骑转, 还奏弼违书." This depiction captures the magnificence of the era, showcasing the brilliance of the "Golden Age." The literatus Guan Shiming of the Qing Dynasty commented, "Zhang Qujiang, Song Guangping, Zhang Yangu, Su Xugong, their works responding to imperial assignments, were vigorous and outstanding, witnessing the grandeur of the interactions between monarchs and ministers in that generation." [16] After the An Lushan Rebellion, "memory made them aware that they had lost something. Due to this loss, what was once taken for granted in the past now has new value." [17] Therefore, in the mid-Tang period, literati constantly reminisced about the prosperous and glorious era of the past, expressing a strong desire for national revival. However, facing the difficulties of the times with rivers and lakes in decline, the people of the Tang Dynasty collectively developed a complex of the "prosperous era," symbolized by geographical images such as "Leyou Temple" and the "Five Imperial Mausoleums of the Han Emperor." Numerous nostalgic poems were composed with Leyouyuan as the theme, "It is the accumulation in the poet's psychological structure under the stimulation of countless similar experiences, approaching a kind of collective unconsciousness. Whenever encountering similar situations, it reflexively manifests itself." [18] Geng Wei's poem "Ascending Leyouyuan" uses the Han Dynasty as a metaphor for the Tang Dynasty, evoking memories of a prosperous era. Dou Luhui's "Ascending Leyouyuan and Reflecting on the Past" subtly hints at the poet's aspirations for national rejuvenation. Born in the late Tang Dynasty, when the sun was setting and the afterglow lingered, poets of this period, while nostalgic for the golden age, also expressed concerns about the fate of their country. In Du Mu's late Tang poem "Ascending Leyouyuan," he writes, "长空澹澹孤鸟没, 万古销沈向此中。看取汉家何事业, 五陵无树起秋风。"[19] This poem was composed by the poet when he was unjustly accused, demoted, and about to leave the capital. At this moment, the country was in turmoil, and upon reaching Leyouyuan, the poet witnessed a scene of desolation and decay, prompting him to feel deep and profound emotions. In Liu Yongji's "Essence of Tang Dynasty Quatrains," he commented on this

poem: “此诗第三句为一篇之主，盖就汉代言，亦与万古同其消沉，故曰‘看取汉家何事业’言试看今日汉家尚馀何事可供凭吊，即五陵亦已残破不堪，则他何可问？”[20]The poet skillfully embeds his patriotic sentiments within historical reflections, using subtle language to convey profound emotions and a heavy, desolate atmosphere, expressing deep and distant reflections. The creation of Tang poets' Leyouyuan poems serves as both evidence of Tang historical and cultural memories and a material vessel to evoke personal life memories. It is also an embodiment of Tang individuals' spiritual beliefs. These works not only express personal emotions but also reflect strong patriotic sentiments and concerns for the rise and fall of the nation. They are not only the externalization of personal ideals but also the inheritance of a national cultural spirit. From the early prosperity of the Tang Dynasty, where historical changes led to a growing concern for their own destiny, to the mid-to-late Tang, which presented a patriotic sentiment through contemplation, reminiscence, lamentation, or satire regarding ancient relics, these poems demonstrate a deepening reflection on history and a heightened understanding of life. The recurring themes of poetic ideals and aesthetic orientations in these poems also continuously emerge. Tang poetry not only preserves historical memories but also reveals the evolution of literary concepts across generations. As scholars, they speak of the changes in history, and as poets, they have their own poetic concepts. Through their poetry, we can see the transformation of poetic concepts and aesthetic pursuits in the Tang Dynasty, forming the historical impressions of that era.

Tang individuals, experiencing ups and downs in their official careers centered around Chang'an, encounter each other unexpectedly on Leyouyuan, where the poetic sentiments they express highlight the timeless charm of Leyouyuan. It becomes a dwelling for collective unconsciousness, and Leyouyuan, as a symbol of the “memory field,” takes on greater significance.

5. Conclusion

Leyouyuan exhibits a seamless intertwining of materiality, functionality, and symbolism, collectively shaping a complex and profound cultural memory. Through continuous layering, combination, and inscription of these memories, Leyouyuan not only infuses historical significance into present activities but also continually molds and refreshes the collective memory of Leyouyuan.

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