

THE GREAT TANG REALM IN THE SOUND OF RAIN: GEOGRAPHICAL WRITING AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RAIN-LISTENING POETRY IN THE TANG DYNASTY

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Tang Dynasty rain-listening poetry from a geographical perspective, revealing its distinct regional writing characteristics and cultural connotations. Within the vast imperial territory, rainscapes from different regions were imbued with unique meanings: the rain in Chang'an was linked to courtly power and literati careers; the drizzles of Jiangnan embodied aesthetic refinement and poetic living; the miasmic rains of Lingnan reflected the bitterness and fears of exiled officials; the bitter rains of the frontier often metaphorized war and homesickness; and the night rains of Bashu symbolized the sorrows of travel. This diversity stemmed from the Tang's expansive territory, population mobility, and cultural exchange, allowing "rain" to transcend mere natural phenomena and become a core poetic symbol carrying complex emotions and cultural significance.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty rain-listening poetry; rain imagery; geographical writing; regional culture; cultural significance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented territorial expanse and developed transportation networks of the Tang Dynasty provided a solid foundation for the geographical inscription of rain imagery. According to statistics from the Complete Tang Poems, over 470 rain-listening poems carry explicit geographical markers, covering at least 32 major administrative divisions (such as circuits and prefectures) within the empire, showcasing panoramic and diverse spatial writing. The deep palaces and high walls of the capital Chang'an, the pavilions and towers of the Jiangnan waterlands, the dense jungles and deep valleys of Lingnan's miasmic regions, the Gobi outposts and solitary forts of the Northwestern frontier, and the perilous clouds and rains of the Bashu plank roads — these distinct geographical environments and climates infused rain-listening poetry with strong regional characteristics and cultural genes. Poets resonated the sound of rain in their ears with the land beneath their feet and the spaces they inhabited, creating artistic worlds rich in unique charm and spiritual depth.

2. CHANG'AN CITY: THE SYMPHONY OF RAIN, POWER DYNAMICS, AND THE LITERATI SOUL

As the political heart of the empire, the sound of rain in Chang'an was intrinsically tied to power structures, court rituals, and the vicissitudes of literati careers. Night rain within the deep palace courtyards was often imbued with the auspicious symbolism of "heavenly dew nourishing all

living beings." Court officials, in poems composed by imperial command, depicted the pattering rain accompanying the emperor reviewing memorials late at night, not merely recording a natural phenomenon but implicitly expressing expectations and praise for enlightened governance and imperial benevolence. For poets caught in the whirlpool of officialdom, the sound of rain became an emotional reflection of their career fortunes. Han Yu's line, "The fine rain on Imperial Avenue moistens like cream" ("Tian jie xiao yu run ru su"), vividly sketches Chang'an's vibrant early spring scene and the poet's joyful mood during career success. In contrast, numerous mid-to-late Tang poems, such as those describing "cold rain taps the window, lonely candle shadows flicker" or "autumn rain scatters locust blossoms over the old capital," use the desolate sound of autumn rain and falling petals to convey the desolation of exile, career setbacks, and nostalgia for home. The cultural phenomenon of the "Jinshi Rain" by the Qujiang Pond south of Chang'an was a unique collective memory symbol of the capital. During the rainy season following the imperial examination results announcement, the spectacle of newly minted jinshi (进士, presented scholars) feasting and touring in the rain became a seasonal sight. Clad in sodden brocade robes, moving between taverns and song houses, the splashing sounds of their robes treading water intertwined with banquet music and the pattering rain, forming a unique sonic backdrop to their moment of peak glory. In stark contrast were the impoverished scholars stranded in inns, having failed the exams. Chanting lines like "Lying I listen to Chang'an's night rain; Tomorrow I'll be a wanderer on rivers and lakes again," they internalized the monotonous sound of night rain on plantain leaves into a melancholic tune of rootlessness and uncertain futures. Thus, the rain of Chang'an served both as a solemn footnote to imperial majesty and courtly auspiciousness, and as a profound emotional mirror reflecting the fluctuating fortunes of countless literati.

3. JIANGNAN: AESTHETIC IMAGERY AND REFINED PLEASURES AMIDST MISTY DRIZZLE

The soft, continuous drizzle of Jiangnan, with its unique gentleness and haziness, readily sparked artistic inspiration and aesthetic reverie. Crisscrossed by waterways and dotted with exquisite gardens, the sounds of raindrops falling on whitewashed walls, black-tiled roofs, bluestone paths, lotus leaves, and swaying bamboo created rich, natural layers of rhythm, an inexhaustible source of poetic inspiration. Liu Changqing's line, "Fine rain dampens clothes unseen; Idle flowers fall to earth unheard" ("Xi yu shi yi kan bu jian, xian hua luo di ting wu sheng"), captures with exquisite subtlety the pervasive yet almost imperceptible moisture and tranquility in Jiangnan's air. During his exile in Jiangzhou, Bai Juyi often listened quietly to night rain from his boat. His wondrous association, "Night rain drips on the boat awning, Like the strains of a pipa song" ("Ye yu di chuan peng, you si pipa qu"), perfectly fuses the natural sound of raindrops with the man-made art of music (pipa sounds), creating a synesthetic aesthetic realm. Du Mu, strolling on Yangzhou's Twenty-Four Bridges amidst mist-shrouded painted boats and towers and vast, misty waters, wrote, "Blue hills fade in the distance, waters stretch far and wide; Autumn ends south of the Yangtze, yet grass has not died" ("Qingshan yinyin shui tiaotiao, qiu jin Jiangnan cao wei diao"). This elevates Jiangnan misty rain beyond a specific scene into an eternal cultural symbol and aesthetic mood, contrasting sharply with the solemn grandeur of northern capital rain poetry and epitomizing the literati's pursuit of an elegant, poetic existence.

Local literati also developed highly self-conscious rain-listening customs and spatial artistry. They specifically built "Rain-Listening Pavilions" (Tingyuxuan) or "Stay-and-Listen Pavilions"

(Liutingge) in private gardens, carefully laid pebble paths (where raindrops produce crisp sounds), and planted broad-leaved plants like banana trees and lotus. During rainfall, the rustling ("shasha") of trembling leaves, the dripping ("dada") from eaves, and the plinking ("dingdong") of ripples on ponds combined to form a multi-layered, three-dimensional natural symphony. Such deliberately crafted aesthetic spaces centered on rain-listening greatly deepened the artistic conception of Jiangnan rain poetry, giving birth to serene moods like Zhao Shixiu's "My guest has not come though midnight is long past; Idly I tap a chess piece, watching lamp-flowers fall" ("You yue bu lai guo ye ban, xian qiao qi zi luo deng hua"), where waiting is filled with listening to rain and savoring life's subtle pleasures.

4. LINGNAN: ALIEN EXPERIENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROJECTION AMIDST MIASMIC RAIN AND BARBARIAN MISTS

For literati exiled to Lingnan (modern Guangdong/Guangxi), the hot, humid, and rain-drenched climate, starkly different from the Central Plains, spawned numerous poems filled with bitterness, oppression, and even fear. Lingnan's torrential downpours were often exceptionally fierce: giant banana leaves crackled like drumbeats in the rain, and the roar of flash floods echoed ceaselessly through the night, forming a sharp contrast with the gentle, silent drizzles familiar in the Central Plains. During his exile in Liuzhou, Liu Zongyuan frequently juxtaposed the violent sound of rain with mournful ape cries and deafening thunder, as in "Collapsing clouds descend on the Li River; Sudden rain pounds the lonely boat" ("Beng yun xia Li shui, zhou yu ming gu zhou") (To Lu Hengzhou upon Receiving His Letter, Sent with a Poem), using turbulent natural imagery to project his inner political repression, isolation, and fear of the perilous environment.

Even more unbearable for northern literati was the "miasmic rain" (zhangyu) — the hot, humid mist rising from forests after rain, carrying the scent of decaying vegetation. This unique and unpleasant experience generated numerous metaphors related to disease and death in poetry. When ill in Tongzhou (modern Dazhou, Sichuan, part of the broader southern humid lowlands), Yuan Zhen wrote, "Misty rain contends darkly in its outpouring; Shadowy spirits angrily swallow in secret" ("Wu yu hui zheng xie, yin ling nu an tun") (In Reply to Bai Juyi's 'One Hundred Rhymes: Traveling Southeast'), directly linking bodily suffering to the gloomy, oppressive rainy weather, laden with somber symbolism. After his exile to Chaozhou, Han Yu penned, "Scorched by rain and sun, swept by wild fires; Guarded by ghosts, vexed by their fierce cries" ("Yu lin ri zhi ye huo liao, gui wu shou hu fan hui he") (On Visiting the Temple on Mount Heng and Staying Overnight at the Monastery, Inscribed on the Gate Tower), using imagery of alternating torrential rain and scorching sun, and wildfires raging across the plains, to highlight his tragic despair at being forgotten on the empire's remote frontier. These works broke free from the traditional seasonal framework of "spring rain" or "autumn rain," distilling Lingnan's unique climatic features (torrents, miasmic rain) into profound cultural symbols. They served both as authentic records of an alien environment and as powerful projections of the poets' psychological distress at being politically marginalized and physically afflicted, significantly expanding the emotional depth and expressive boundaries of rain-listening poetry.

5. FRONTIER: VAST AMBIENCE AND WAR METAPHORS IN THE SOUND OF BITTER RAIN AND COLD

Soldiers garrisoning the Western Regions and Northern frontiers heard rain sounds often mixed with the howl of wind and sand, cold and harsh. Cen Shen, writing from firsthand experience, recorded the hardships of frontier military life with plain yet vivid descriptions like "Rain wets the felt walls; Wind shakes the woolen tent, rank" ("Yu fu zhan qiang shi, feng yao cui mu shan") (First Autumn at Luntai). Here, the sound of rain lacked the gentle poetry of Jiangnan; instead, it often mingled with hail and sleet, biting cold. Wang Han's lines, "Night rain freezes camel bells; Cold washing blocks shatter the traveler's heart" ("Ye yu dong tuo ling, han zhen sui ke xin") (Two Liangzhou Songs, No. 1), convey the soldiers' piercing homesickness and bitter survival experience through the sluggish, trembling clang of metal camel bells in the cold rainy night and the fragmented desolation of distant (or imagined) clothes-pounding blocks.

Notably, frontier poets often deliberately amplified the rain's military attributes and war associations: the dense patter of rain on armor was likened to "ten thousand arrows striking golden mail"; the roar of rain drowning out war drums was rendered as "thunder-drums sink in the rain-curtain." This creative technique of transforming natural wind and rain sounds into war imagery highlighted the frontier's austere, tense atmosphere and the soldiers' specific perceptions. Yet, battle-hardened veterans on rainy frontier nights often experienced auditory hallucinations of "seeming to hear the clothes-pounding sounds of home," unexpectedly infusing the brutal battlefield with a touch of warmth and nostalgic longing, revealing the complex layers of humanity within war.

6. BASHU: GEOGRAPHICAL BARRIERS AND SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGHS AMIDST NIGHT RAIN ON PLANK ROADS

Surrounded by mountains and famed for its perilous plank roads, the perpetually overcast and rainy environment of Bashu (modern Sichuan/Chongqing) became a crucial vessel for Tang poets to express the sorrows of travel and life's reflections. Rugged plank roads winding through clouds and rain curtains, the monotonous sound of night rain tapping on simple post-house or cottage roofs, intermingled with the roar of mountain streams in deep valleys, created a highly distinctive regional soundscape. Confined here, poets often transformed the geographical isolation into an opportunity for emotional expression and spiritual transcendence. Li Shangyin's depiction in Night Rain: To the North — "Night rain on Ba Mountains swells the autumn pools" ("Ba shan ye yu zhang qiu chi") — uses a direct and tense audiovisual image (night rain, overflowing autumn pools) to powerfully convey a sense of loneliness doubly sealed by mountains and autumn rain, along with profound longing.

Wang Jian wrote in Listening to the Rain: "At midnight, missing home, sorrowful in sleep; Rain sounds luoluo fall upon the eaves" ("Banye si jia shui li chou, yu sheng luoluo wu yan tou"). The continuous, monotonous "luoluo" sound of night rain dripping on the post-house eaves elevates the individual experience of wandering into a shared emotional memory of countless travelers. The repetitive rhythm of raindrops hitting roofs and windowsills intensifies the loneliness of solitary late nights and restless sleep, while also implying that across the empire's vast territory, countless travelers experienced the same emotional resonance in similar geographical and climatic settings. This distillation of universal human experience (the sorrows of travel) from Bashu's specific geographical and climatic features (high mountains, treacherous roads, frequent night rain) allowed the "Bashu Night Rain" imagery to transcend regional limitations, becoming one of the most evocative tropes in Tang and later dynasties' travel-weary poetry.

7. CULTURAL ROOTS AND INTERACTIVE BLENDING OF GEOGRAPHICAL WRITING

The rich geographical diversity evident in Tang rain-listening poetry stemmed from the empire's unprecedented territorial expanse, continuous population mobility, and the collision and exchange of diverse cultures. The imperial examination system spurred scholars to roam the land seeking patronage and office; the exile policy forced officials to distant frontiers; and prosperous trade fostered economic and cultural exchange between North and South — these profound social changes enabled poets to personally encounter and experience diverse natural landscapes and human environments. Chang'an poets used rain sounds to record the solemnity of court rituals and their own career fluctuations; Jiangnan literati adorned elegant gatherings with rain rhythms and constructed poetic dwellings; exiles vented their resentment and alienation through Lingnan's storms and miasmic rains; frontier soldiers expressed homesickness and patriotism amidst the bitter cold rain beyond the passes; and travelers savored the taste of rootlessness in Bashu's night rains. These rain sound writings from different regions collectively constructed a complete and vivid spiritual panorama of Tang society.

More importantly, rain-listening poetry from different regions did not exist in isolation but exhibited significant interaction and blending. When Bai Juyi composed the Song of the Pipa Player in Luoyang, he clearly drew upon and incorporated the delicate descriptive techniques and plaintive mood of Jiangnan waterscape rain scenes. Wang Wei's ethereal, Zen-infused depictions of rain colors on Mount Zhongnan were deeply influenced by the southern landscape poetry aesthetic tradition dating back to the Southern Dynasties. This cross-regional artistic borrowing and stylistic fusion ultimately elevated "rain," a natural phenomenon, beyond simple weather description into one of the most expressive core symbols in Tang poetry, capable of bearing complex emotions and profound cultural significance.

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