Proceeding of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium: Urban Industrial Innovation and Resilience-oriented Regional Transformation
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HZ29937

Echoes of a Lonely Tower: A Study of the "Li Ling Tower" Imagery in Qing Dynasty Poetry

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Abstract. "Li Ling Tower" appears as a literary imagery in a great number of Qing dynasty poems, but there is still a lack of systematic academic research on this topic. By using materials from the Database of Chinese Classics Ancient Books and adopting a mixed method of documentary research and textual analysis, this study explores Qing dynasty poems that include the "Li Ling Tower" imagery. It first traces the historical origins and literary traditions of this imagery, and then classifies the poems into four main thematic types: frontier travel poetry, farewell and remembrance poetry, epic and nostalgic poetry, and painting poetry. The research shows that the "Li Ling Tower" imagery is not only a typical geographical symbol of frontier, but also reflects poets' contradictory views on the historical figure Li Ling, their strong longing for hometowns, and deep thoughts on the rise and fall of dynasties in history. The diverse writing strategies used in relevant poems combine geographical, emotional and historical dimensions, which makes these poems an important way to understand the spiritual world and historical awareness of Qing dynasty literati.

Keywords: Li Ling Tower, Qing dynasty poetry, study of imagery, geographical lyricism

1. Introduction

After the Records of the Grand Historian and the Book of Han established the basic narrative framework, the image of Li Ling was continuously reinterpreted and represented in later literary works [1]. As an extension of its spatial sense, "Li Ling Tower" has gradually developed into a typical imagery in poetic themes like nostalgia for history. The number of works involving this imagery in Qing Dynasty poetry is considerable, but those works lack systematic organisation and research. This research is mainly based on the historical literary background of "Li Ling Tower" imagery, the subject types of poems related to the imagery of "Li Ling Tower" in the Qing dynasty, and the use strategy of it in poetry. It aims to analyse the use of the "Li Ling Tower" imagery in Qing dynasty poetry and explore its multiple connotations.

This study adopts a variety of research methods. On the one hand, the literature research method is used to collect and sort out the poems of the Qing dynasty containing the imagery of "Li Ling Tower" retrieved in the Database of Chinese Classics Ancient Books to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the materials. On the other hand, the text analysis method is used to deeply analyse the

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HZ29937

imagery construction, emotional expression and other aspects according to different poetic themes, and explore the cultural connotation behind the imagery.

Through in-depth research on relevant poems, it can not only deepen the understanding of the historical concept and emotional structure of scholars in the Qing dynasty, but also provide new perspectives and materials for the study of Qing poetry, which is of important academic significance and practical value.

2. The historical foundations and literary tradition of Li Ling Tower

2.1. Historical context and geographical research

Li Ling Tower was built by the Western Han general Li Ling after his surrender to the Xiongnu. Longing for his homeland, he would often ascend this tower to gaze upon his native land. The Old Book of Tang records: “Mount Yanran bears the Li Ling Tower, constructed of piled stones. It is said that when General Li Ling could not return home, he ascended this place to gaze upon the Han.” Hu Zeng's poem Li Ling Tower also states: “The hero did not yield to die in barbarian lands, but built a high tower to gaze upon his homeland.” The annotation reads: “Li Ling, unable to return to Han, constructed a tower within the frontier to gaze upon the Han pass.”

In history, the geographical location of Li Ling Tower has undergone several changes. The earliest account appears in Du You's Comprehensive Institution: “The Great Protectorate of the Chanyu was under the jurisdiction of Zhao during the Warring States period, and was part of the Yunzhong Commandery during the Qin and Han dynasties. In the third year of the Longshuo era of the Tang dynasty, the Protectorate of Yunzhong was established, and the Protectorate of Hanhai (formerly known as the Protectorate of Yanran) was relocated north of the desert. The two protectorates were demarcated by the desert. In the first year of the Linde era, the Protectorate of Yunzhong was renamed the Great Protectorate of the Chanyu. It administered one county: Jinhe.” The annotation reads: “There are the Great Wall and the Jin River. It receives the Zi River and Xiang Water, then flows south into the Yellow River. There are also Li Ling Tower and Wang Zhaojun’s Tomb.”

During the Yuan dynasty, Li Ling Tower served as a post station along Kublai Khan's inspection tour route from Dadu to Shangdu. The Total Annals of the Qing Dynasty records: “The Weilu post station, is also called Li Ling Tower.” Records of Water Control in The Capital Area records: “Weilu City, known to the Mongols as Boluo River Village, corresponds to what the Han Chinese called Green City. It lies sixty li northeast of Ming'an City.” Wang Yun's Records of Central Hall Affairs states: “On the 24th, I passed by the old city of Huanzhou. Forty li to the southwest was Li Ling Tower.” [2].

2.2. The transformation of Li Ling's character

Li Ling, whose courtesy name was Shaoqing, hailed from Chengji in Longxi. Born into a military family, he was the grandson of the renowned “Flying General” Li Guang. Regarding his life and historical reputation, the earliest accounts can be traced back to the Records of the Grand Historian and the Book of Han. According to the Records of the Grand Historian, Li Ling earned the deep favour of Emperor Wu of Han when he grew up. He successively held the posts of Superintendent of the Jianzhang Palace and Cavalry Commander. The Book of Han also records Sima Qian's appraisal of him: “I observe him to be a man of extraordinary character: filial in his devotion to his parents, trustworthy in his dealings with scholars, upright in his handling of wealth, and justice in his

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HZ29937

acquisition and disposal of property. He distinguishes between what is rightfully his and what should be yielded, treating subordinates with respect and frugality. He's always thinking about stepping up to dangerous tasks to meet the country's urgent needs, but never cares about his own safety. Judging by his behaviour all these years, I'm sure he is a true national scholar."

Li Ling's early experiences shows that he was undoubtedly a distinguished descendant of the military family. He possessed both virtue and talent and should have a promising future. However, his fortune underwent a dramatic reversal at the Battle of Mount Junji. In the year 99 BC, Li Ling led five thousand soldiers on a campaign against the Xiongnu, only to be surrounded by the forces of the Left Chanyu at Mount Junji. He led his troops in fierce combat for several days. By then, his ammunition and provisions had run out, and the number of casualties had already exceeded half his men. Even in this desperate situation, he still failed to await reinforcements. Ultimately, he was defeated by overwhelming odds. Deeming himself "unworthy to report back to His Majesty," he surrendered to the Xiongnu. After Li Ling's surrender, Emperor Wu of Han was extremely enraged, and the court officials all condemned Li Ling for his crimes. Later, Emperor Wu of Han swayed by the slanderous words of petty men and mistakenly believed that Li Ling was training the Xiongnu army to attack the Han forces. In a fit of rage, he had Li Ling's entire family executed. Li Ling had originally intended to return to the Han court, but upon learning that his family had been killed, he realised there was no longer any possibility of his return. From that day forth, he remained beyond the frontier for the rest of his life.

Li Ling's complex personal fate provided ample creative space for the literary works of later generations. Literary works from the late Han dynasty to the Sui dynasty began to address the theme of Li Ling, especially in poems and prose texts dealing with the themes of friendship and farewell. Among the most notable works are Liu Kun's Song of Fufeng, Zhou Xingsi's Reply to Wu Jun, and Jiang Yan's On Hatred. During this period, Li Ling's image was marked by literary nuances. Poets often integrated Li Ling's exploits into their own life experiences and used them as a means of expressing their feelings.

From the Tang dynasty onwards, literary works about Li Ling began to appear, mainly in the form of poems, but also in a small number of treatises, fu, memorials and edicts. The attitude of the literary world towards Li Ling was generally open. At the early and flourishing Tang dynasty, many works described the melancholy of the farewell between Su Wu and Li Ling or praised General Li Ling's famous military exploits, such as Wang Wei's Ode to Li Ling. During the middle Tang period, expressions of sympathy or regret towards Li Ling predominated, though criticism and scepticism were also present. Examples include Lu Lun's Song of Joining the Army and Bai Juyi's Treatise on the Han General Li Ling. During the late Tang period, frontier poetry and elegiac poetry predominated. Through lamentations over heroes unable to return home, they expressed criticism of the ruling authorities, as exemplified by Guan Xiu's Fighting in the South of the City.

During the Song dynasty, the number of prose works increased, the literary style shifted from poetry to argumentation, and Li Ling's figure gained greater historical significance. Some scholars criticised his surrender and advocated the principles of loyalty to the ruler. Others used him as a theme to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of military strategies and explain the concepts of warfare. The general style tends to be rational and reveals the Song dynasty scholars' deep reflections and original ideas about historical events. Qin Guan and He Qufei both wrote treatises entitled Treatise on Li Ling, in which they discussed the strategic mistakes Li Ling made in his attempt to fight an overwhelming force [3].

During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the portrayal of Li Ling's character exhibited a polarized trend. Under the Yuan dynasty's foreign rule, the Han people were relegated to a lowly status,

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becoming “marginalized individuals”. This shared the same plight as Li Ling, who was caught between the Han dynasty and the Xiongnu in his time. Consequently, literati sharing similar circumstances tended to sympathize with Li Ling and portray him as a hero who found no avenue to serve his country and was compelled to act against his will [4]. Yang Weizhen wrote in his Inscription to the Painting of Su Wu Herding Sheep: “Li Ling was unwilling to part, and shed tears that filled the bridge.” Yet numerous literati of the Ming dynasty chose to conform to the oppressive political and cultural regime, adhering strictly to feudal norms. Their fierce condemnation of Li Ling's actions branded him as disloyal and unfilial. For instance, in Four Poems Composed in Hangzhou in the First Month of the Gui Si Year, Liu Ji bluntly declared, “Li Ling was no true man,” while Zhang Kai also vehemently condemned Li Ling for “clinging to life in shame.” [1].

2.3. The theme of ascending height in the tradition of geographical lyricism

Geographical lyricism refers to the use of various lyrical techniques related to geographical objects to construct poetic style and express poetic themes [5]. In literary history, the most common form of geographical lyricism is undoubtedly that of ascending heights to express one's feelings. When the poet ascends the steps and stands upon a tower, a mountain peak, or a lofty hill, his gaze transcends the confines of daily life to embrace a far vaster world. The visual expanse inevitably leads to boundless spiritual extension. The scenes within sight become a medium for triggering historical memories and present emotions.

As one of the objects of ascent, the high tower becomes a favoured vehicle for lyrical expression among literati and scholars. Chen Zi'ang's On the Tower of Youzhou reads: “Where are the great men of the past, and where are those of future years? The sky and earth forever last; Here and now I alone shed tears.” Upon the Youzhou Tower, the individual feels profound solitude amidst the vastness of history and the eternity of heaven and earth. Du Fu's line “A thousand miles from home, I'm grieved at autumn's plight; I'll now and then for years, alone I'm on this height,” blends the scene of ascending the tower with the sorrow of his personal circumstances and the anxieties of his homeland. Wang Anshi's Fragrance of Osmanthus Branches: memories at Jinling shifts from the natural scenery of Jinling to reflect upon the historical lessons of the rise and fall of the Six Dynasties, demonstrating a politician's insight.

As a renowned historical site, Li Ling Tower possesses both the spatial form of an elevated terrace and an association with the controversial and tragic historical figure of Li Ling. This duality endows it with a unique emotional tension, making it a significant focal point for later poets who ascended heights to contemplate antiquity.

3. Thematic categories of Qing Dynasty poetry featuring the imagery of “Li Ling Tower”

This study, through retrieval from the Database of Chinese Classics Ancient Books, found that Qing dynasty poetry containing the imagery of “Li Ling Tower” primarily falls into four thematic categories: frontier travel poetry, farewell and remembrance poetry, epic and nostalgic poetry, and painting poetry.

3.1. Frontier travel poetry

Li Ling Tower, as a geographical landmark symbolizing the border, frequently appears in poems about the frontier or in poets' accounts of their journeys to the frontier. It is primarily used to describe the desolate landscapes in the frontier and to express the poets' sense of loneliness and

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longing during their travels. Through this imagery, poets connect their personal experiences with the vast and desolate borderlands. For example, in Three Poems about Arriving in Yunzhong, Cao Rong uses Li Ling Tower to express the boundless sky and land he experienced when he first set foot on the border, as well as his sadness at being far from home [6]. However, works by Wu Weiye, such as On the Frontier and Hunting in the Snow, skillfully weave the Li Ling Tower into the historical atmosphere of the military campaigns. Other works include Dong Wenhuan's On the Road to Datong, Wu Xiong's Flute Melodies at the Frontier, Liang Peilan's Frontier Grass, and Ye Runchen's Warhorse.

3.2. Farewell and remembrance poetry

The imagery of “Li Ling Tower” is also common in works that bid farewell to friends leaving for distant lands or express nostalgia for someone far away. The historical aura inherent in isolation lends a deeper and more tragic nuance to the sadness of parting. Representative works include Chen Shouqi's In Memory of Senior Scholar Chen Xingzhai, Zhu Yizun's Seeing Off Minister Cao to Command the Garrison at Datong, Ru Lunchang's Seeing Off Lan Gu to Yunzhong, and Mao Qiling's Ambassador Geng Assumes His Post at Weizhou.

3.3. Epic and nostalgic poetry

The historical controversy and tragic overtones surrounding Li Ling's deeds render the Li Ling Tower a significant imagery of epic and nostalgic poetry in the Qing dynasty. Poet face the historical site of Li Ling Tower, offering commentary and reflection on the complex fate of Li Ling himself, and thereby expressing profound historical sentiments concerning integrity, destiny, and ethnic relations. Related works include Chen Gongyin's The Sorrow of Wang Zhaojun, Qu Dajun's The Green Mound, Jiang Xiangnan's The Tomb of Su Ziqing, and Li Gengyun's In Response to a Friend's Historical Ode.

3.4. Painting poetry

Moreover, the imagery of “Li Ling Tower” also appears in painting poems depicting frontier incidents and historical narratives, such as the story of Cai Wenji's return to Han (Liang Zhangju's Cheng Yuechuan's Entrustment of Inscribing the Painting of Cai Wenji's Return to Han and Peng Zhaosun's Three Poems on the Painting of Cai Wenji's Return to Han), the story of Su Wu herding sheep (Peng Sunyi's Inscription on the Painting of Ziqing Herding Sheep), the tale of Li Ling and Su Wu parting on the bridge (Cao Kaitai's Painting of Sunset on the Bridge) etc. Additionally, there are other works such as Dai Heng's Inscription on Jin Renzhi's Painting of Autumn Wind Beyond the Frontier and Zhang Dashou's Inscription on the Painting of Hunting Scene. Their literary significance lies in the transformation of spatial composition into literary expression. Whether describing picturesque scenes or offering historical commentary, these poems reveal the unique artistic charm of the fusion between poetry and painting.

4. The writing strategy of the “Li Ling Tower” imagery

4.1. As a quintessential geographical landmark of the frontier

In the relevant poetry writing, “Li Ling Tower” imagery first appears as a typical geographical landmark. Poets use it to build frontier space and render the unique environmental atmosphere. Liu

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Kai's On the Frontier has a sentence that “Clouds swirl above Li Ling Tower, Autumn sky does not fear the drifting dust and smoke”. This line depicts the scene of clouds circling on the tower and dispersing dust to emphasise the desolate atmosphere of the frontier. Wang Chongqian's verse “Yellow sands, white geese, and Li Ling Tower” from Seeing a Friend Off to Datong employs the layering of three imagery elements to depict the features of quintessential frontier landscapes. Tan Jingzhao's line, “The border winds topple Li Ling Tower, The setting sun and cold clouds grow dim,” employs hyperbole to emphasise the harshness of frontier weather. Zhu Yizun's line, “That day when I reached the frontier was still early spring, willow trees abounded around Li Ling Tower,” and Sun Erzhun's, “The melody of Qiang flute carries the spring scenery far and wide, willow catkins scatter across Li Ling Tower,” both employ the willows by Li Ling Tower to depict the spring scenery of the frontier. In another poem, Zhu Yizun also penned a similar line: “Try singing a song before the wine cup, Plum blossoms scatter across Li Ling Tower.” This line employs the image of plum blossoms drifting from Li Ling Tower to underscore the guest's consummate skill in his performance [7].

Some poems juxtapose Li Ling Tower with other geographical landmarks to form an antithesis. Liang Peilan's line, “Travelling with sorrow past the Guanglu Pass, I gaze but lost sight of Li Ling Tower,” juxtaposes Li Ling Tower with the Guanglu Pass. Employing the words “sorrow” and “lost”, the poet not only highlights the vast distances and arduous journey but also conveys the melancholy of being stranded beyond the frontier. Ye Runchen's verses, “The warhorse reaches the frontier pass, Yellow sand sweeps across the land. Hard to find Su Wu Shrine, Where lies Li Ling Tower?” also employ a similar approach to highlight the harsh conditions of the frontier. Lu Shikai's Two Poems in Memory of Deputy Governor Cao Jiegong states: “To test a steed, one must go to Yinguan County; To summon a hawk for the hunt, one must ascend Li Ling Tower.” This vividly sketches a grand panorama of frontier activities.

4.2. Express commendation and censure

Poets also use the imagery of “Li Ling Tower” to express their praise or condemnation of Li Ling. In their specific expressions, they typically contrast Li Ling with other historical figures, and use negatives to convey their emotional stance towards him. Examples include Chen Gongyin's “Do not let the grass on the green mound grow towards Li Ling Tower,” Liu Zhuanfang's “If the spring grass possessed spirit, it would form a green mound, yet would not grow towards Li Ling Tower,” and Dai Heng's “When gazing towards my homeland, I shed tears, yet I did not ascend Li Ling Tower.” The first two poems take the grass upon Wang Zhaojun's tomb as their point of departure while the latter. Through the voice of Wang Zhaojun, they collectively express utter contempt for Li Ling's act of surrender and affirm a resolute refusal to associate with him [8]. Jiang Xiangnan's line, “The cold clouds over the tomb differ from those above Li Ling Tower; the Qilin Pavilion opens in honour of his integrity,” contrasts Su Wu's steadfast virtue—ultimately honoured with enshrinement in the Qilin Pavilion—with Li Ling's loss of integrity and the desolate fate of dying in exile. The phrase “differ from” further underscores the author's disdain for Li Ling [9]. Qu Dajun's line, “Though I might journey a thousand miles to seek Su Wu Shrine, I would not set foot upon Li Ling Tower,” similarly expresses a contrasting attitude towards visiting Su Wu Shrine and Li Ling Tower, which conveys praise for Su Wu and censure for Li Ling [10].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HZ29937

4.3. Express homesickness

Li Ling Tower, which is also called the Tower of Homesickness, takes on an added emotional layer in poetry that goes beyond the praise or criticism of Li Ling's actions. Instead, the tower turned into a key symbol—one that soldiers and travellers use to voice their longing for home. Peng Yunzhang's Uncle Jiang Shouyu Returns Home from His Service in Gansu contains the line: “I once visited Zhangye Prefecture during my service; I gazed upon Li Ling Tower while longing for home.” Tang Yifen's Inscription on Official Yunfu's Painting of Spring Feelings in the South of the City, Written as a Farewell also contains the line: “On Li Ling Tower my heart breaks, Spring winds carry dreams to your home.” In Shen Shijun's Border Song, the line “Tonight, the moon above Li Ling Tower shines upon those somewhere pounding winter garments,” masterfully intertwines three imageries: “Li Ling Tower”, “the moon”, and “pounding winter garments”. The moon above Li Ling Tower also illuminates the loved ones back home who are pounding clothes for the soldiers. This thus breaks through spatial barriers, expressing the profound sorrow of parted lovers separated by distance in the shared vision of gazing upon the same bright moon.

4.4. Reflect on history

In Qing dynasty poetry, the imagery of “Li Ling Tower” serves not merely as a geographical and moral symbol, but a medium through which poets interrogate history and express sentiments of prosperity and decline. It bears the poets' lament over the passage of time and the change of dynasties, alongside reflections on the individual's place within grand historical currents which reflect the profound historical consciousness of Qing dynasty poets.

Poets likewise construct spaces for historical reflection by juxtaposing Li Ling Tower with other historical relics. Li Gengyun's In Response to a Friend's Historical Ode laments profoundly: “Both heroes shared the annals of history, one was enshrined in the Qilin Pavilion, the other only left the site of Li Ling Tower.” Though both the “Qilin Pavilion” and “Li Ling Tower” are recorded in the annals, they represent the polar opposites of glory and disgrace. There are also poets who transcend simplistic moral judgements and contemplate history from a higher perspective. Dong Wenhuan's On the Road to Datong reads: “On the desolate road of Great Wall, I ponder talents of past and present. Cold clouds over Su Wu Shrine, Setting sun above Li Ling Tower.” He links the desolate imageries of “cold clouds” and “setting sun” with Su Wu Shrine and Li Ling Tower. This organically intertwines the two sites with frontier and history, elevating them into a lament that regardless of the circumstances Li Ling and Su Wu faced at the time, or whether later generations praised or criticised them, both historical sites now lie beneath the vast desert sky and are lost in the mists of time. Gu Sili's line, “The bugle call by Li Ling Tower sounds woefully sad, While moss grows green upon Qilian Tomb,” conveys a similar sentiment: regardless of merit or fault, all ultimately fades into silence, with only nature enduring eternally.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the imagery of “Li Ling Tower” in Qing dynasty poetry as the core. Through the systematic analysis of the four major themes of frontier travel, farewell and remembrance, epic and nostalgic, and painting poetry, it reveals the multiple connotations of this imagery. In the specific poetry writing, “Li Ling Tower” imagery first appears as a geographical landmark of the frontier, constructing a vast space-time scene, which highlights the unique desolation and magnificence outside the border. At the same time, it is also the fulcrum of the poet's judgement of history. By

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juxtaposing it with other geographical features like Su Wu Shrine and Wang Zhaojun's Tomb, poets contrast Li Ling with Su Wu and Wang Zhaojun, thereby conveying the moral reflection on Li Ling's loyalty and treachery. At the level of personal emotion, it becomes a symbol of nostalgia as the Tower of Homesickness. Finally, “Li Ling Tower” imagery also evolves into a carrier for poets to commemorate and question history. This reflects the deep feelings of the literati in the Qing dynasty about the rise and fall of dynasties and the changeable world.

Research shows that the imagery of the “Li Ling Tower” in Qing dynasty poetry has three dimensions: geographical, emotional and historical, which offers an important perspective for understanding the spiritual world and historical consciousness of Qing dynasty scholars. In the future, relevant research could further explore the meaning of this imagery by placing it in the context of political ecology, inter-ethnic relations, and the mentality of Qing dynasty literati. At the same time, scholars could extend the scope of research to the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties in order to conduct a diachronic study of the “Li Ling Tower” imagery, which would offer a broader academic perspective for understanding this imagery.

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