Placing Ideas: Memory and Forgetting in Tang and Song Theories of Learning, Writing and Art

Curie Virág

Presented on July 7, 2009 at the conference, IDEAS, NETWORKS, PLACES: Rethinking Chinese History of the Middle Period
TWO ACCOUNTS OF MEMORY


Entry on Wu Daozi 吳道子 (fl. 710-760), in Tang Chao Ming Hua Lu 唐朝名畫錄 (c. 842)

“All is set down in my heart” (並記在心)
Painted “the entire panorama of over 300 li in a single day”

Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101)

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)
Why does Su Shi have such a poor memory?

Shifting discourses of memory

- Tang as a culture of remembering
- Song as a culture of forgetting
THE ART OF MEMORY IN THE WEST

- Architectural image of memory
THE ART OF MEMORY IN THE WEST

- Architectural image of memory
  - Zeno the Stoic (4th to 3rd Century BC): memory as a “storehouse of mental images” (thesaurismos phantasion)
THE ART OF MEMORY IN THE WEST

- Architectural image of memory
  - Zeno the Stoic (4th to 3rd Century BC): memory as a “storehouse of mental images” (thesaurismos phantasion)
  - Rhetorica ad Herennium (c. 90 BC): memory as a “treasurehouse of found things” (thesaurus inventorum).
THE ART OF MEMORY IN THE WEST

- Architectural image of memory
  - Zeno the Stoic (4th to 3rd Century BC): memory as a “storehouse of mental images” (*thesaurismos phantasion*).
  - *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 90 BC): memory as a “treasurehouse of found things” (*thesaurus inventorium*).
  - Augustine (354-430), *Confessions* (Book X): speaks of “fields and vast palaces” of his memory “where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses.”
THE ART OF MEMORY IN THE WEST

- Architectural image of memory
  - Zeno the Stoic (4th to 3rd Century BC): memory as a “storehouse of mental images” (*thesaurismos phantasion*)
  - *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 90 BC): memory as a “treasurehouse of found things” (*thesaurus inventorum*).
  - Augustine (354-430), *Confessions* (Book X): speaks of “fields and vast palaces” of his memory “where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses.”
  - Middle ages: metaphor of building and the writer as a “Master Builder”
TRADITIONAL CHINESE THOUGHT: LITTLE CONCERN FOR MEMORY AS ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE

- Confucius
  - Claims to possess no knowledge
  - Not one who “learns widely and retains what he has learned in his mind (多学而识之者与)” but has “a single thread binding it all together (予一以贯之).”

- Dao De Jing
  - Virtue of things is emptiness (虚)
  - Emptiness of the Dao
PRACTICES OF MEMORY

1. Memorization necessary for literacy, social and political success
2. Memory emphasized in Buddhist devotion and instruction
DISCOURSES OF MEMORY

1. Power of cultural memory – of concern with past

2. Early conceptions of memory

Xunzi (312-230 BCE)

[The mind] has never stopped storing (zang 臧), but nevertheless it possesses what is called emptiness (xu 虛); the heart/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 is called emptiness.

Six Dynasties literary theory

Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), Wen Fu文賦
Liu Xie 劉勰 (465-522), Wenzin Diaolong 文心雕龍

One must “accumulate learning so as to build a treasure house (積學以儲寶)” (Shen si 神思 chapter)
PASSAGES ON MEMORY IN TANG WRITINGS

- **Correct Meaning of the Five Classics (Wujing Zhengyi 五經正義), subcommentary on the Daxue 大學 (653)**
  - Mind is “what encompasses the myriad cares (總包萬慮謂之為心)”
  - **Yi/conception** (意) is “what the feelings recollect (情所謂意念謂之意)”
Pei Xiaoyuan 裴孝源, History of Paintings in Private and Public Collections (貞觀公私畫史) (c. 639)

The painter’s mind “preserves (zun 存) these traces of virtue and mysteriously constructs their correct forms (乃心存懿迹默匠儀形).”

Ancient scribes (shí3 史)
- responsible for picture-making (tu 圖)
- gave form to things (ti wu zhi zuo 體物之作) so as to “illuminate the distant and reveal the obscure” (照逺顯幽) and to “match and order the myriad images” (侔列羣象).
Wu Daozi

- Remarkable memory
- Power to create a profusion of images

“Guiding his delicate brush, innumerable varieties of things issue forth from his mind (萬類由心展). Allowing the capacities of the square-inch of his mind to unfold, a thousand li (里) reside within his grasp.”

Paintings evoked the creative powers of nature (造化).
Su Shi

- Anxiety about losing hold of an experience
- Li Gonglin’s marvelous landscape is not due to his powerful memory (*qiang ji* 強記) but to the fact that he
  1) doesn’t leave his intention behind in particular things, allowing his “spirit to intermingle with the myriad things”
  2) possesses both Dao and artistry (*yi* 藝).

- Erasure of autonomous space of mind
  - Against deliberation (*si* 思)
NEO-CONFUCIAN CRITIQUE OF MEMORY

Zhu Xi: importance of “scrubbing clean” the mind and wiping out past knowledge
- against “effortful memorization” (qiang ji 强记)

Cheng Hao: memorizing, reciting and amassing vast knowledge was to “trifle with things (wan wu 玩物) and lose one’s purpose.”
Su Shi: art as a solution to the problem of stasis, opening up the possibility of permanence in the midst of change

Two visions of memory, two ways of conceiving of self and the place of culture

Wu Daozi’s memory: Value and identity bound up with vast accumulation of texts, cultural forms, historical events.

Su Shi’s forgetting: Attempt to transcend the particularity of human experience and merge with timeless and ahistorical truth.