

Exploring the Differences Between Modern Poetry and Modern Songs from the Perspective of “Pin-Point”

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ABSTRACT

There have been numerous discussions on the distinction between song and poetry. Before the emergence of vernacular poetry, poetry and song in China were not completely separate. There were instances where songs were incorporated into poetry, and there were also phenomena where poetry was sung and transformed into folk songs. Liu Yong's poetry is one such example. In comparison, the differences between modern poetry and modern songs are even greater, with poetry and songs being completely separate entities. This reflects a complex background issue of a major linguistic system shift from classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese. Unlike most current studies that focus on external aspects such as linguistic features, stylistic styles, and dissemination perspectives of poetry and song, this article aims to explore the similarities and differences between the critical points of modern Chinese poetry and modern Chinese song from the perspective of the text itself.

Keywords: Modern poetry, Modern song, Differences, Text, Pin-points.

1. INTRODUCTION TO “PIN-POINT”

The “pin-point” theory was proposed by Roland Barthes, a French thinker and semiotician in the 20th century. Similar to the research paths of most Western philosophers, Barthes studied Western literature, culture, history, religion, and other aspects in his early years, and similarly turned to art in his later years. “La Chambre Claire (Camera Lucida)” is a representative work of Roland Barthes in his later years, which focuses on photography. The theory of “pin-point” was proposed in this book. (As shown in “Figure 1”)

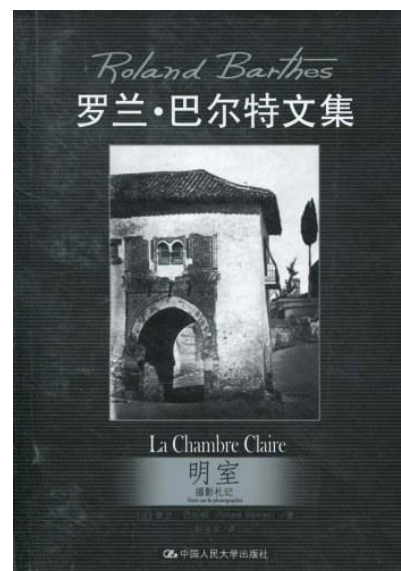


Figure 1 Cover of “La Chambre Claire (Camera Lucida)” by Roland Barthes (France).

The book is titled “La Chambre Claire (Camera Lucida)”, which is related to Roland Barthes' perspective on photographic art. Unlike the general understanding of art, such as representation,

expression, symbolism, etc., Barthes believes that photography is neither a simple representation of life, nor an expression of inner emotions or a symbol of the spiritual world. Instead, it “illuminates”. Photography illuminates “all points” in life, and thus, it is a “camera lucida”. So, how do photos illuminate life? This is where Roland Barthes’s “surface/pin-point” theory comes into play. Roland Barthes argues that the “surface/pin-point” theory refers to the presence of both a surface and a punctum within a single photographic work. For example, in a large landscape painting, such as Monet’s “Impression, Sunrise”, if the misty morning scene on the canal is the surface, then the rising red sun is the pin-point. As Barthes states in “La Chambre Claire (Camera Lucida)”, the surface

is that “‘middle’ emotion, neither good nor bad, belonging to the sort of emotion that is almost strictly educated” [1], and it “belongs to culture, ... its meaning can be deciphered by the cultured” [2]. In other words, the surface is a kind of social contract of the masses; it always exists in a middle state—whether existential or cultural—and is content that the general public can understand. In contrast, the pin-point refers to “the element that disrupts the surface... a contingent thing” [3]; it is not a conventional, stable middle ground, but rather “lively”, “agile”, and “makes no promises regarding morality or elegance” [4]. It is a disruptor of rules, a mutagenic factor and a point of mutation. (As shown in “Figure 2”)



Figure 2 [France] Monet's “Impression, Sunrise”.

Through the analysis of the “surface/pin-point” theory, their respective characteristics have become relatively clear. In fact, the “surface/pin-point” theory is widely applied, not only for the analysis within the same text, but also for the stylistic analysis of different texts, as well as for the analysis between different categories or genres. For example, in Vincent van Gogh's “Wheatfield with Crows”, if the vast wheatfield floating with the wind is the surface, then the flock of crows are the puncta. For another example, within the entire broad category of culture, art stands out as a pin-point compared to economy, politics, and technology. In the broad cultural category of literature, there is also a distinction between exhibition and pin-point. Starting from the perspective of literary genres, it can be observed

that while prose and novels possess their own unique qualities, they still seem somewhat tame compared to the leaps, non-conformity to rules, and unexpectedness of poetry. Therefore, in literature, if prose, novels, dramas, etc. are the surfaces, then poetry is undoubtedly the prickly point. This article attempts to explore the differences between modern poetry and modern songs based on Roland Barthes's “pin-point” theory. Setting aside the previously prevalent external perspectives on the distinctions between poetry and song, such as linguistic features, stylistic styles, dissemination, and reception, the researchers delve deeper into the texts to more clearly explore the similarities and differences between the two.

2. THE PURSUIT OF VISUAL IMAGERY AND EMOTIONAL RESONANCE: COMMONALITIES BETWEEN MODERN POETRY AND MODERN SONGS

As mentioned earlier, within the broader realm of literature, poetry stands as an eternal pin-point. Compared to other genres—such as novels, plays, essays, and songs—analyzing poetry in terms of stylistic differences, linguistic characteristics, and modes of dissemination and reception is certainly valid, but such approaches remain fundamentally external. The reason this is termed “external” is that such analyses typically involve categorizing and classifying literary genres or types before comparing their differences. While this approach objectively appears to clearly list the characteristics of each genre one by one, it does not actually delve into the internal workings of the texts. Every genre possesses its own “literary quality” within its texts—this is what truly constitutes its intrinsic nature. Therefore, only by delving into the inner workings of poetic and song texts to examine their similarities and differences can we gain a deeper understanding of both, and only then can we grasp why poetry serves as the “pin-point” of literature, while songs are merely its “surface”.

Although poetry and song belong to two different literary genres, according to the theory that poetry originated from song, they share many similarities. It is said that the traditional poetry anthology “The Book of Songs” was compiled from ancient folk songs. Taking modern poetry and modern songs as examples, their similarities lie in the following: Firstly, both of them possess a sense of imagery and storytelling in their content. For example, the modern poet Zhang Zao's “In the Mirror” is quite famous, and the line “Whenever I think of the things I regret in life, / plum blossoms fall all over the southern mountain” is particularly memorable. The effect of creating scenery in poetry is very strong. Taking the poem “As long as you think of the regrets in your life, plum blossoms will fall all over Nanshan” as an example, just looking at this sentence, a scene similar to a person standing by the window, plum blossoms falling, and contemplating will come to mind. Although only one sentence can achieve such an effect, the poem “In the Mirror” also uses other phrases and imagery to expand and perfect this poetic image. For example, in the first half of the poem, the poet describes some fragments of life experiences: “such as watching her swim to the other bank of the river”,

and “watching her ride back/warm cheeks/gradually shy, bowing her head/answering the emperor”, etc. These similar experiences and descriptions, along with the final sentence “As long as you remember the things you regret in your life, plum blossoms will fall all over Nanshan”, form a complete storyline and picture. Similarly, songs, especially modern pop songs, whether intentionally or unintentionally, mostly tell a story. Taking mainland Chinese folk singer Xu Wei's “Hometown” as an example, the imagery or storytelling presented in this song is particularly strong. Overall, the meaning of the song is: the reluctance of a person who is about to leave their hometown and walk alone in the distance towards their hometown. At the beginning of the song, a scene of leaving home is depicted: “The sunset on the horizon once again reflects my face/My restless heart/Where is this place still so desolate/That endless journey so long”. In “my” dream, “my” impression of “my” hometown was, “You stand under the sunset with a beautiful face/That's your clothes fluttering/That's your tenderness like water”. In this way, the song as a whole forms a sense of unity and imagery of “leaving hometown - homesickness”.

Secondly, the content expressed in poetry and songs has resonance. Even for obscure and difficult to understand literary subjects like poetry, it is the same. As stated in the “Great Preface to the ‘Book of Songs’”: “Poetry is the embodiment of aspiration. What dwells in the mind is aspiration; when uttered in words, it becomes poetry. Emotion stirs within and takes form in language. When words fall short, we sigh; when sighing falls short, we chant and sing...”[5] Similarly, as noted in “Chapter on Music” from the “Records of the Grand Historian”: “All sounds arise from the human heart. The movement of the human heart is caused by external things. Stirred by external things, it takes form in sound; sounds respond to one another, thus creating variation; variation takes pattern, which we call tone; tones are arranged to make music, accompanied by shields, axes, plumes and ox-tails. Music originates from tone, and its root lies in the human heart being stirred by external things.” [6] Therefore, whether it's poetry or song, their ultimate purpose lies in “conveying aspirations”, “expressing emotions”, and expressing what people share and resonate with internally. Gu Cheng and Bei Dao, two representative figures in the contemporary obscure poetry school, not only evoked widespread resonance in that confusing era, but also leave a deep impression in modern times.

Gu Cheng's "A Generation", "The night gave me black eyes/But I use them to seek the light.". Bei Dao's "Life", "Net", both express, in extremely concise words, the hope and predicament of existence in life. Similarly, most modern songs also convey resonant content related to outlook on life, values, and other aspects. For example, the songs of Zhang Xuan, a singer from Taiwan region, China, besides the aforementioned content, are more philosophical and can be compared to poetry. In the song "How", she sings: "How do you forgive the foolishness of that time/How do you forgive the struggles that were silent/After painstaking efforts, look at the eternity of the tides/The years here are cool and gentle like silk yet can burn the body/ Youth is a river flowing in the distance", fully expressing the ups and downs, prosperity and decline, struggles yet silence of life. In "You in Rose-Colored Tones", the line "A life in which you've planted a million flowers / That bloom and wither on their own through the four seasons" also evokes a sense of the vicissitudes of life and a shared experience.

Finally, there are linguistic features of both. Modern poetry and modern songs both beautify or distance themselves from everyday popular language. The theme will form a contextual limitation, for example, the language in modern poetry or songs will make people subconsciously feel that it is different from everyday language, because they are poetry, songs, belonging to metaphysical things, and have a distance from daily life. Because in the specific creation, the language of modern poetry and modern songs is very different from everyday language. For example, in Cui Jian's "A Red Cloth", the lyrics read: "That day, you covered my eyes with a red cloth and also covered the sky. You asked me what I saw, and I said I saw happiness." Unlike everyday language, modern songs incorporate language beyond practical communicative language, such as imaginative and psychological language. The lyrics in "A Red Cloth" such as "I covered my eyes and also covered the sky" and "I said I saw happiness" reflect this. The same goes for modern poetry. In Hai Zi's "Or Dreams as Horses", he finally wrote: "Faced with the great river, I am infinitely ashamed. My years have been wasted and I am exhausted. Like all poets who use dreams as horses, time flies without a drop left". Here, there are more descriptions of psychological language, but words like "dreams as horses" and "time flies without a drop left" are not commonly used by people.

Therefore, from within the text, there are still many similarities between modern poetry and

modern songs. Both of them focus on creating a sense of imagery, artistic conception, or telling a story as a whole. From the fact that their content is an emotional or resonant expression, and from their beautification and distancing of everyday language, they are the same. However, modern poetry and modern song are not the same genre after all, they are different. According to Roland Barthes' theory of "surface/pin-point", songs are exhibition, while poetry is thorn. How modern songs differ from modern poetry in terms of surface and pin-point, or what they express, is a question that needs to be elaborated and explained in detail.

3. THE LEAP IN VOCABULARY AND THE DEGREE OF PHILOSOPHICAL DEPTH IN MEANING: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MODERN POETRY AND MODERN SONGS

The distinction between poetry and songs is primarily reflected in the depth of their language. Part Two discussed how both modern poetry and modern songs employ techniques to either embellish or distance themselves from everyday vocabulary. This is beyond doubt. However, although both involve "distancing", the degree of this distancing varies. In comparison, the language of modern poetry is more profound, while that of modern songs is somewhat more down-to-earth. This effect of profundity or down-to-earthness is related to the depth of semantic shifts that words undergo within the overall context of the poem or song, or in the connections between adjacent contexts. Take the first two lines of Xu Wei's "The You of the Past" as an example: "I once dreamed of wandering the world with a sword in hand / To see the splendor of the world / A young heart is always a bit reckless / Now I call the four seas my home". The overall context is coherent and easy to understand; that is to say, it does not create ambiguity and is not difficult to grasp. It expresses a universal emotion that people can readily relate to. Modern poetry, however, is different; it does not aim to convey a stable, easily grasped meaning. Therefore, modern poetry is a "pin-point". Take Hai Zi's poem "Wheat Fields in May," for example. It begins with "Brothers from all over the world / Are to embrace in the wheat fields"—an abstract image whose meaning is not immediately clear; then comes "Looking back on the past / Reciting our own poems," as the imagery continues to unfold; and finally, "Sometimes I sit alone in the

wheat fields, reciting Chinese poetry for all my brothers / With neither eyes nor lips.” Reading it, one cannot fully grasp the imagery and meaning of this poem. However, good poetry must be able to move the reader—that is, to be “moving”. From this perspective, poetry necessarily possesses a meaning, even if it is an inexplicable one. Not all poetry that is inexplicable or lacks a fixed meaning is bad poetry, because poetry is a “point of contact”; it has its own unique state of existence and “paradigm”, distinct from ordinary speech. As Xie Zhen of the Ming Dynasty put it: “There are poems that can be understood, those that cannot be understood, and those that need not be understood; like water, the moon, a mirror, or flowers, do not dwell on their traces”. [7]

Secondly, there is a difference in the degree of philosophical (or metaphysical) depth in the expression of meaning between modern poetry and modern songs. While both modern poetry and modern songs tend to explore and express metaphysical or spiritual themes in their content, modern poetry generally conveys a stronger sense of philosophical depth. For instance, the rock music that emerged in China in the 1970s, represented by Cui Jian, and the pop music in Taiwan region represented by Li Zongsheng and Luo Dayou, are both highly representative in their exploration and expression of contemporary issues, spiritual themes, life insights, and emotional dimensions. Musician Chen Sheng’s “Outside the Peony Pavilion”, set against the backdrop of Tang Xianzu’s play “The Peony Pavilion”, sings of the vicissitudes of human love. The line “Songwriters put on a show of righteousness / While listeners are the most heartless” has resonated deeply with countless listeners. Compared to the overt emotional expression of “Outside the Peony Pavilion,” Li Zongsheng’s “Hill” appears more reserved and wiser, evoking the feeling of having weathered life’s storms, letting go of worldly concerns, and returning to a state of authenticity. The lyrics go: “Perhaps the droplets of my life’s thoughts / Might by some stroke of luck converge into a river / Then, standing at opposite ends, / Gazing at the winding river, we finally dare to be bold / And face life’s hardships with a smile”. Compared to modern songs, modern poetry is indeed more profound and philosophical. This is not to say that modern poetry expresses something that has never existed or is utterly mysterious, but rather that what it expresses is never fixed; it is open and ever-changing, allowing readers to come infinitely close yet never quite reach it, and thus it is all the more profound.

From this perspective, modern poetry is indeed a “pin-point”. Take, for example, the series of poems “Mother” by the poet Zhai Yongming. Based on the title of Zhai Yongming’s poems, readers can superficially infer that the content likely revolves around “motherhood.” However, how it is written, how it is expressed, in what manner, and what specific details it covers remain elusive. The poet’s sensitivity and passionate dedication to poetry allow them to swiftly grasp the profound truths of the world (or philosophical insights) that elude the average person. “I was abandoned in this world, all alone, the sun’s rays sorrowfully / enveloping me. When you bend down to the world, do you know what you have left behind... The existence of an orphan lays bare all blessings, yet who knows best / that whoever has stood in a mother’s hands will eventually die because of birth” (“Mother”). Zhai Yongming profoundly captures the nature of the “mother” as a figure who presides over “birth” and equally guides “death”! Yet this is a necessary process that no one can alter. Perhaps Zhai Yongming’s “Mother” series of poems can be interpreted in other ways, but in any case, as poetry, the meaning it conveys is profound.

Finally, the difference between modern poetry and modern songs is also reflected in the degree of lexical leap. Modern poetry and modern songs differ in the extent of their lexical discontinuity; in other words, the semantic space created by the relationship between words varies between the two. Due to this difference in the size of the semantic space, the visual imagery evoked in readers or listeners by an entire poem or song is entirely different. Genres with a high degree of lexical discontinuity tend to present more open imagery and contexts, whereas those with a low degree of discontinuity tend to present relatively closed imagery and contexts. Take the song “Pigeon” by contemporary Chinese folk singer Song Dongye as an example: “Lost pigeon, oh / On a night when my hands are clasped together, I long for a pair of wings / To fly south”. The vocabulary in these lyrics—lost, hands clasped, night, south—all carry a sense of uncertainty. However, when these words are placed within a sentence and connected, they still form a complete context, yielding a generally clear meaning. For instance, the song expresses a lost heart and a bewildered self, yearning to regain freedom with the same devotion as a pigeon. Nevertheless, compared to some fast-food-style music, this folk song offers a much richer visual imagery. In terms of poetry, let’s take “That Place” by contemporary poet Han Dong as an example.

“That is the place I long for / But will never go to / There aren’t many such places / You can reach them, but you can’t stay long”—on the surface, each of these lines seems fine, with little discontinuity between words. The problem is that the connections between the lines are hard to grasp. Each line seems to convey a clear meaning, but only in isolation or in terms of the parallel relationship between one line and the next. Overall, the meaning between sentences is difficult to connect because the leaps between them are too great. Finally, the poet Han Dong continues: “That place, generation after generation / For a thousand years now / Has flickered in books / Appearing and disappearing / That is the place I will never go to, yet cannot forget”. At this point, the text becomes even more enigmatic; the poetic context expands once again, and the reader is bound to wonder: What exactly is “that place”? In summary, when compared to modern songs, modern poetry exhibits a greater degree of discontinuity in its vocabulary and phrasing. Consequently, the resulting context and visual imagery are far more expansive. In this regard, modern poetry stands out as a “pin-point”.

4. CONCLUSION

As a literary genre, modern poetry and modern songs have many similarities. However, from the perspective of “pin-points” and analyzing based on the text itself, they are very different. Each genre has its own rationality and cannot be replaced, as each genre faces different problems. As Thomas Transtrom once said, “Conventional language and perspectives are necessary when dealing with reality, reaching limitations, and achieving specific goals, but at critical moments, we will find that they are inadequate. If they dominate us, we will be led into the fate of isolation and disintegration. In my opinion, one of the functions of poetry is to resist this development. Poetry is meditation, not for hypnosis, but for awakening.” [8]

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