

Aesthetic Comparison Between Baudelaire's Correspondence Theory and Qu Yuan's Bi and Xing

Jiaying Li

*Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, China
2281760708@qq.com*

Abstract. This paper takes Baudelaire's Correspondence and Qu Yuan's Li Sao as the research objects to explore the differences and cultural connotations between Baudelaire's Correspondence Theory and the traditional Chinese Bi and Xing. Baudelaire's Correspondence Theory is grounded in Swedenborg's mysticism, and constructs a vertical transcendental symbolic system through sensory intercommunication, aiming to confront the subject-object division of Enlightenment rationality and pursue the eternity and autonomy of art. The Bi and Xing tradition in Li Sao is rooted in the Confucian ethical system and the witchcraft culture of the Chu region, and realizes political identity expression and patriarchal order maintenance by constructing the ethical images of "vanilla and beauty". The differences between the two reflect the fundamental cognitive divergences of Chinese and Western poetics towards human beings and the world.

Keywords: Correspondence Theory, Bi and Xing tradition, Symbolism, Sino-Western comparative poetics

1. Introduction

The Bi and Xing technique in Li Sao is a product of the integration of the "witchcraft tradition" of the Chu region and the Central Plains "poetry education tradition" in the Warring States Period. Its core lies in solving the identity anxiety of scholars through the ethicalization of natural images. Correspondence, on the other hand, is a reflection on the "subject-object division" of Enlightenment rationality in 19th-century Europe, intending to reconstruct an integrated experience of the world through synesthetic techniques. Both respond to the spiritual crises in their respective cultures. The "vanilla and beauty" system in Li Sao and the "symbolic forest" system in Correspondence both build complete symbolic systems independently. Both construct symbolic metaphors through natural images, but Qu Yuan's "vanilla system" points more to the publicity of moral exhortation, while Baudelaire's "forest system" emphasizes more the privacy of sensory experience and the sense of transcendental experience. This stems from different cultural genes, but both the "vanilla system" and the "symbolic forest" realize the connection of "object-mind-meaning" at the psychological level. The rationality or similarity of their comparison originates from the universality of human poetic thinking.

Regarding the relationship between Baudelaire and Qu Yuan, both poets have the core of Romanticism and advocate a unified symbolic system. Baudelaire was a French poet in the 19th

century, while Qu Yuan was a poet of the Chu region in China around the 3rd to 4th centuries BC, with a gap of more than 2,000 years between them. It needs to be demonstrated whether the former's poetry was influenced by the latter. French sinology developed rapidly in the 19th century. Sinologists such as Stanislas Julien translated a large number of Chinese classics (such as *The Book of Songs* and *Tao Te Ching*), but the systematic translation and introduction of Qu Yuan's works came relatively late. The French academic circle in Baudelaire's era had limited knowledge of Chu Ci and Qu Yuan. Later, A.C. Graham and Ezra Pound mentioned "Qu Yuan", but it was also based on scattered information or second-hand translations in early European sinological works, rather than direct reading of Qu Yuan's texts. In the existing research materials, letters, diaries of Baudelaire and records of his contemporaries, there is no exact evidence mentioning that he read Qu Yuan's works or was influenced by Chinese poets. A large number of written materials left by Baudelaire, including his poetry creation notes and correspondence with friends, mainly focus on the literary trends, philosophical thoughts in Europe at that time and his own creative ideas, and no direct discussions related to Chinese classical poetry have been found.

2. Creative context

Since Plato proposed in *The Republic* that art is "an imitation of an imitation, a shadow of a shadow" of the ideal world, Western art has long been constrained by the stereotype of representing reality. The reflection on and breakthrough from the ancient Greek theory of imitation constitute the theoretical premise of his "Correspondence Theory". Baudelaire believed that an artist who purely imitates is actually a slave of nature. Through the "synesthesia theory" of the Swedish mystic philosopher Swedenborg, he sublimated artistic creation into the exploration of the hidden connections of all things in the universe. He first systematically expounded the "Correspondence Theory" in his poem *Correspondence* of the same name in his poetry collection *The Flowers of Evil* [1], proposing that there is a mysterious and universal corresponding relationship between nature and the human spiritual world. This relationship is not only reflected between senses and emotions, but also extends to multiple dimensions of matter and spirit, visible and invisible. Liang Zongdai believed that the "Correspondence Theory" expresses the harmonious relationship between all things in the universe and the state of unity of object and self with the fusion of form and spirit [2].

Witchcraft prevailed in the Chu region. Qu Yuan's view of nature originated from the animism tradition of primitive religion. Plants and trees were regarded as spiritual beings, whose prosperity and decline were not only the embodiment of natural rhythms, but also carried the mysterious function of communication between humans and gods. The vanilla and beauty system constructed by Qu Yuan in *Li Sao* [3] developed Bi and Xing from fragmentary application in *The Book of Songs* into a systematic symbolic system, and scholars at that time also consciously used Bi and Xing for political metaphors. His creation originated from the drastic turbulence of the political environment of the Chu Kingdom in the late Warring States Period and the profound crisis of Qu Yuan's personal fate. At that time, King Huai of Chu was in power, and the Chu Kingdom gradually lost its dominant position in the great-power game of vertical and horizontal alliances. Internally, the noble clique clashed, and the conservative forces headed by Zilan and Jin Shang monopolized the court, resulting in the complete collapse of the "ideal government" reform implemented by Qu Yuan. Burdened with the frustration of political ideals and the anxiety of the motherland's peril, Qu Yuan constructed the symbolic system of "vanilla and beauty" in *Li Sao*, projecting political ethics onto natural images.

3. Historical origins

Baudelaire's "Correspondence Theory" originated from the criticism and reconstruction of the traditional philosophical system. Plato's theory of ideas was not challenged until the rise of Romanticism in the 19th century. Baudelaire emphasized that artists should not mechanically copy reality, but reconstruct the world through subjective perception, turning artistic creation from the pursuit of eternal ideas to the capture of instantaneous perceptions. The image in his poem *Correspondence* that "Nature is a temple, where living pillars murmur symbols" is precisely the subversion of Plato's dualism. Nature is no longer a pale reflection of ideas, but a symbolic system full of mysterious images.

Kant's transcendentalist theory is an important source of Baudelaire's correspondence thought. Kant believed that art has the ability to transcend the real world and reach a higher spiritual realm. With the help of this theory, Baudelaire emphasized the vertical correspondence relationship between art and reality. Fourier's theory of transitional passions and the principle of universal analogy also influenced Baudelaire's correspondence thought. These theories helped Baudelaire construct the complex relationship between senses, forming a horizontal and vertical correspondence structure [4]. Later, influenced by the "theory of universal correspondence" of the 18th-century Swedish mystic thinker Swedenborg, the latter advocated that there is an accurate corresponding relationship between the material world and the spiritual world [5]. In the creation of *Correspondence*, the poet transformed sensory experiences such as smell and hearing into synesthetic images, such as "fragrance is as fresh as a child's skin". The integration of senses is essentially a metaphorical revelation of the transcendental world. The statement in the poem that "fragrances, colors and sounds echo each other" is a metaphysical interpretation of the inner unity of the universe. Schelling's natural philosophy, a German Romantic philosopher, further strengthened this corresponding relationship. His theory of "absolute identity" was transformed into a transcendental interpretation of urban landscape and modern experience in Baudelaire's poetic practice [6].

The historical origin of the traditional Chinese Bi and Xing technique can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, and its rudiment first appeared in the "Six Principles" system in *The Book of Songs*. *The Rites of Zhou: Spring Officials* records "Six Poems: Feng, Fu, Bi, Xing, Ya, Song" [7]. It is an important rhetorical device and creative principle. "Bi" in Bi and Xing refers to metaphor, that is, expressing emotions or thoughts through analogy; "Xing" means evocation, that is, arousing emotions or associations through natural scenes or things. In fact, the Bi and Xing poems in *The Book of Songs* that express thoughts and feelings through external things already have a lot of symbolic meaning, which is determined by the implicitness of Bi and Xing. Mr. Zhu Guangqian once said: "The two categories of Bi and Xing in *The Book of Songs* intentionally use images to symbolize sentiments, but usually they rarely achieve complete symbolism, because Bi and Xing are only an introduction, and the original words to be said must be spoken bluntly." [8] Later, the symbolic meaning of *The Book of Songs* added a layer of ethical and moral connotation through the interpretation of pre-Qin scholars. Furthermore, through Confucius' statement that "One is inspired by poetry, established by rites, and perfected by music", "Xing" was placed at the top of the function of poetry. This cognition profoundly shaped the ethical attribute of Bi and Xing, which was gradually incorporated into the Confucian poetry education system, and also gradually developed and covered the theory of "comparing virtues". Poets were good at using the characteristics of animals and plants to establish the symbolic correspondence between natural images and ethical values.

Qu Yuan can be regarded as a poet who faithfully exerted the rationalism of pre-Qin Confucianism. The complex and profound symbolic meaning endowed to the Bi and Xing technique in his poems is perfectly interpreted, and the symbols in his poems have become a model for the symbols of later poetic creation. His rhetorical method of "Good birds and vanilla are matched with loyalty; evil birds and stinky things are compared with slanderers; spiritual cultivation and beauty are matched with the monarch" [9] uses natural scenes to metaphorize the way of governing the country, reflecting the thinking mode of "observing objects to form images" of the ancient people. Confucianism has a decisive influence on the theoretical construction of the Bi and Xing technique. Later, Preface to Mao's Commentary on The Book of Songs in the Han Dynasty listed Bi and Xing side by side with Feng, Ya and Song, making Bi and Xing a political tool for poetry to intervene in reality. This poetic tradition was continued in works such as Du Fu's Eight Songs of Autumn and Bai Juyi's New Yuefu. Poets realized the function of "praising and satirizing" through Bi and Xing, and constructed a unique ethical symbolic system of Chinese poetry.

4. Aesthetic characteristics

In artistic expression, Baudelaire's Symbolism pursues the infinite extension of sensory synesthesia, that is, the extensive use of synesthetic techniques. It breaks the boundaries of the physical world through synesthetic rhetoric and constructs a transcendental experience of sensory correspondence, whose essence is to break the dual opposition between matter and spirit. Baudelaire's theory of universal correspondence between human spiritual emotions and nature is very similar to the traditional Chinese view of harmony between man and nature and interaction between man and heaven. To a certain extent, synesthesia, as a medium of universal correspondence, shows man's transcendental state: the communication and integration between human spiritual emotions and nature.

The aesthetic characteristics of the two are reflected in the text that Li Sao forms an ethical hierarchical order through vanilla images, while the image group of Correspondence constitutes a ubiquitous perceptual system. The personified description in the poem that "The forest gazes at him with familiar eyes" originates from the emanation theory of Neoplatonism, which holds that the material world is a reflection of the divine idea; the "infinite" described in the last paragraph obviously points to God in Christian theology, and its symbolic system ultimately serves the pursuit of absolute truth. The traditional Chinese Bi and Xing originates from the thinking of "observing objects to form images" in The Book of Changes. As Liu Xie stated in The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, "Poets are moved by objects, and associate endlessly", and its symbolism is based on the horizontal correspondence between object images and mental images. It is worth noting here that the ancient people showed two tendencies in understanding Bi and Xing: one is the simple analogy of ethics and morality, and the other is the broad discussion of the relationship between Bi and Xing and image-taking, meaning-taking and expression, that is, emphasizing the literary analogy [10]. However, in the long process of literary creation, the simple analogy of ethics and morality has almost become the mainstream of Bi and Xing analogy. Presumably, this is because Confucian culture is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, and poets are influenced in thinking, thus forming an unconscious embodiment in creation and criticism. But essentially, there is no fundamental conflict between the two analogy tendencies, and they are often integrated into one.

5. Differences between Chinese and Western poetics

5.1. Different subject positioning

Baudelaire was born into a bourgeois family in Paris, France. He was not financially well-off all his life and never played an important role on the political stage. He lived in a period of drastic social changes in France, witnessed all kinds of ugliness and contradictions in capitalist society, and wandered outside the mainstream society, creating as a bystander and critic [11]. In the period of alienation of industrial civilization, as an urban marginal man in Paris, France in the 19th century, his poetry was a rebellion against capitalist material civilization. He deconstructed the rational order through synesthetic synesthesia in *Correspondence*, constructed a transcendental shelter, and confronted the alienation of industrial civilization with poetry. His rotten images not only exposed the urban pathology, but also confronted utilitarianism with decadent aesthetics.

Qu Yuan was born into a noble family of the Chu Kingdom, a descendant of Qu Xia, the son of King Wu of Chu. He was deeply trusted by King Huai of Chu in his early years, held important official positions such as Zuo Tu and San Lü Da Fu, actively participated in the political affairs of the Chu Kingdom, and was committed to reforming the country to become strong and allying with Qi to resist Qin [12]. This noble status and political role closely linked him to the fate of the Chu Kingdom, and his poetic creation was also endowed with a strong sense of political mission and responsibility. His work *Li Sao* is full of political anxiety, and its creation is essentially a political lyric poem, emphasizing political ideals and patriotism. The construction of his vanilla system serves the ideal of "ideal government", and the mythological pursuit is a compensatory imagination for realistic frustration. The Bi and Xing technique has become a tool for his ethical persuasion. The identity of a scholar-official directly affected the theme of his poetry and the aesthetic function of the Bi and Xing technique, and the autobiographical narrative logic also strengthened the moral trait of "loyalty to the monarch and patriotism". The subject "I" in *Li Sao* always intervenes in reality as an ethical practitioner. His subject positioning is not only binding individual fate to the rise and fall of the Chu Kingdom, but also transcending the mundane to reach the sacred through the construction of mythological space. The tear between the real space and the Kunlun Hanging Garden stems from the strength of his subjectivity, and finally he can only sacrifice himself for his ideal by drowning himself in the river.

Baudelaire's subjectivity originates from the alienation of modernity. As a "loner in the crowd", his pain comes from the incommunicability between self and the world; Qu Yuan's subjectivity is an extension of the Confucian ideal of "inner sageliness and outer kingship", and his pain stems from the huge separation between ideal and reality. The different subject positioning of the two determines the differences in their poetic thinking and realistic perspective, reflected in the distinct aesthetic characteristics of their poems.

5.2. Divergence in the relationship between subject and world

In Baudelaire's works, the relationship between subject and nature is vertical and transcendental. For example, the "temple" and "forest" in *Correspondence* symbolize the correspondence between the phenomenal world and the ideal world, and the subject tries to reach the realm of transcendental beauty through sensory intercommunication. The Bi and Xing system in Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* is the horizontal integration of subject and world, comparing the object image (vanilla) with the virtue of loyalty, and then reflecting the heavenly order of the ideal government. The analogy between object image and ethics reflects the thinking of harmony between man and nature. The connection between

subject and world is mostly through "synesthesia", but the synesthesia in "correspondence" is different from that in Bi and Xing. The former pays more attention to overall correspondence, while the application of synesthetic techniques in the latter is more reflected as a rhetorical device.

In Baudelaire's Correspondence, the symbolic system is constructed on the basis of transcendental mystic philosophy. The verse "Nature is a temple, where living pillars occasionally emit vague words" implies the essential characteristics of its symbolic mechanism, namely the synesthetic effect between senses and the universal connection of all things in the universe. The combination of "horizontal correspondence" and "vertical correspondence" makes natural images a ladder to the metaphysical world. This symbolic logic is transcendental, pursuing the unity of sensory experience and mysticism. In contrast, the vanilla and beauty system of Qu Yuan's Li Sao follows the ethical rules of Confucian poetry education. The theoretical framework stated in The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons·Bi and Xing that "Bi is to accumulate resentment to rebuke, and Xing is to use metaphors to satirize" determines that its symbolic mechanism has clear moral orientation. Its symbolic meaning is doubly constructed by the Confucian ritual system of "loyalty or slander" and the witchcraft thinking of the unity of man and god. This symbolic logic is ethical, serving political identity expression and patriarchal order maintenance.

5.3. Differences in poetic orientation

Qu Yuan's Li Sao carries the cultural gene of "poetry expresses ambition" of pre-Qin scholars, and its functional goal has distinct characteristics of ethical construction. Through the Bi and Xing system of "vanilla and beauty", Qu Yuan expressed his yearning for the ideal of good government and his dissatisfaction with the dark reality. His creation paid more attention to the conflict between individual emotions and social reality, trying to express his sense of responsibility for the rise and fall of the Chu Kingdom and his desire for an ideal society through poetry. Its core purpose is to express personal emotions and reflect social contradictions, rather than focusing on the philosophical exploration of sensory unity and the mysterious world like Baudelaire. Qu Yuan sublimated his personal political experience into collective moral feelings. The pursuit course of "The road ahead is long, and I will search up and down" in the poem is essentially the artistic expression of the Confucian ideal of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world". Different from Baudelaire's philosophical meditation on how individuals and nature achieve transcendental existence, Qu Yuan paid more attention to the social enlightenment function of poetry. His Bi and Xing technique always served the value system of "loyalty to the monarch and patriotism", aiming to realize the functional goal of expressing personal emotions and criticizing reality, and expressing the pursuit of an ideal society through literary expression. Creation served more political and social purposes rather than pure artistic aesthetics.

Although a large number of mythological images and surreal scenes are also used in Li Sao, its symbolic logic originates from the pre-Qin poetry education tradition. The Bi and Xing system of "vanilla and beauty" in the poem is essentially a literary practice of the Confucian view of "comparing virtues". Wang Yi clearly pointed out the ethical writing rule of "Good birds and vanilla are matched with loyalty; evil birds and stinky things are compared with slanderers" in Collected Commentaries on Chu Ci, which is also in line with the interpretive tradition of "Guan Ju metaphorizes the virtue of the queen" in The Book of Songs. The mythological images such as "Mi Fei and Yi Nü" created by Qu Yuan are not for the pursuit of transcendental experience of mysticism, but for constructing a political metaphor system of "evoking Xing according to poetry and making analogies" through the recombination of historical and ethical images. Zhu Xi specially emphasized the Bi and Xing technique of "expressing emotions in plants and trees, entrusting

meaning in men and women" in Li Sao in Collected Annotations on Chu Ci, whose essence still points to the realistic concern of "clarifying the loftiness of morality and the principles of governance and chaos". This difference actually reveals two essential orientations: Western Symbolism "seeking truth through beauty" and the Chinese poetry education tradition "carrying Tao through poetry".

6. Conclusion

From "correspondence" and "Bi and Xing", we can see the differences between Chinese and Western poetic models: the subjectivity of Chinese poetics is always based on Confucian ethics, while the subjectivity of Western poetics swings in the confrontation and connection between divinity, humanity and materiality. In addition, Chinese poetics is rooted in the cosmic view of "harmony between man and nature", where "emotions and aspirations" coexist with "heavenly principles", and truth, goodness and beauty are integrated; Western poetics adheres to the dual framework of the ideal world and the real world, and the relationship between subject and world is connected through mysterious revelation. Therefore, the structure of Chinese poetics is often regarded as an organic whole, while the structure of Western poetics emphasizes the decomposability and analyticity of the symbolic system; the former often serves ethical enlightenment, and the latter points more to aesthetic autonomy.

References

- [1] Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil* [M]. Trans. Guo Hongan. Anhui: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013: 15.
- [2] Liang Zongdai. *Poetry and Truth* [M]. Annot. Wei Jianmin. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2006: 82.
- [3] Zhu Xi. *Collected Annotations on Chu Ci* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2022: 7-41.
- [4] Li Junping. Baudelaire's Correspondence Theory and Fourier's Cosmology [J]. *Journal of Shantou University (Humanities & Social Sciences Edition)*, 2008.
- [5] Li Junping. Baudelaire's Correspondence Theory and Swedenborg's Telepathy—Also on Kant [J]. *Journal of Zhanjiang Normal University*, 2009: 6-10.
- [6] Chen Haiyan. On Schelling's View of Art and Nature [J]. *Eastern Forum*, 2012(4).
- [7] Zhou Gong. *The Rites of Zhou* [M]. Trans. Xu Zhengying. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2022: 471.
- [8] Zhu Guangqian. *Poetics* [M]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1998: 77.
- [9] Hong Xingzu. *Supplementary Annotations on Chu Ci* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983: 2-3.
- [10] Li Jian. *A Study on Bi and Xing Thinking—An Aesthetic Investigation of an Ancient Chinese Artistic Way of Thinking* [D]. Doctoral Dissertation of Jinan University, 2002: 11.
- [11] Claude Pichois. *Baudelaire: A Biography* [M]. Trans. Dong Qiang. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2021.
- [12] Sima Qian. *Records of the Grand Historian·Biography of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi* [M]. Annot. Chen Xi, Zhou Min, et al. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2022.