

Comparative Study on the Changes of Chinese and Western Poetry under the Influence of Deconstructionism

Songhe Bai *

School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds, Yorkshire, UK

* Corresponding Author Email: baisonghe4396@outlook.com

Abstract. Taking deconstructionism as the theoretical entry point, this paper systematically examines the developmental trajectories and differential characteristics of Chinese and Western contemporary poetry under the influence of deconstructionism in the mid-to-late 20th century. The study finds that during the period of social transformation, Chinese contemporary poetry demonstrated a paradigmatic shift from the collective narrative of Misty Poetry to the individual experience writing of Third Generation poets, deconstructing traditional authority through colloquial expressions and everyday narratives. Western poetry, by contrast, focused on linguistic experimentation, constructing a new postmodern poetic ecology through fragmented narratives, visual poetics, and the dissolution of genre boundaries. The disparities between the two are rooted in three factors: Chinese poetry faced dual deconstructive pressures from traditional aesthetic paradigms and power discourses, while Western poetry concentrated on internal innovation within the self-sufficient poetic system; Chinese poets utilized deconstructionism to highlight the epochal nature of individual experiences, Western poets achieve the transfer of interpretive authority to readers through linguistic decentering; China's politico-cultural genes and the critical thinking tradition in Western philosophy shaped distinct deconstructive paths respectively. This research reveals the complex mechanism by which literary development is co-shaped by social context, cultural genetics, and theoretical reception purposes, providing a novel perspective for cross-cultural poetic studies in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Deconstructionism, contemporary poetry, comparative differences.

1. Introduction

Deconstruction, in brief, is the practice of anti-structure, de-structuring, or dissolving structural centers. Emerging in the late 1960s with Jacques Derrida's of *Grammatology* as its theoretical cornerstone, its core lies in subverting the deeply rooted structuralism and logocentrism of Western philosophy, and dismantling the myth of "absolute truth" and "ultimate meaning." Its decentering perspective rejects any concept as a fixed origin of meaning, arguing that meaning perpetually circulates through "différance": texts have no center, and the signification of each word relies on its exclusion of other words, an exclusion that is inherently arbitrary and deconstructible. As Wang Xiangfeng states, "Derrida endows the term 'différance' with its own subversive power. It infiltrates every conceptual entity, every word--nothing escapes its deconstruction" [1]. This decentering not only undermines the structuralist whole-part hierarchy but also challenges the legitimacy of authoritative narratives: binary oppositions such as gender, ethnicity, and class are no longer natural orders but products of power constructs. In literary studies, deconstruction introduces a decentered underlying logic to the entire field. As Attridge observes, "In creative fields, too, Derrida's influence is widely perceptible: these include the visual arts, music, theatre, poetry and fiction, and new developments in electronic art forms" [2]. Literary criticism no longer clings to structured interpretations, instead revealing self-deconstructive possibilities within textual exegesis; literary creation has also transcended the fetters of binary oppositions, manifesting boundless potential through fragmented narratives, semantic reconstructions, and other techniques. Fundamentally, decentering itself depends on the existence of a center: while it subverts established relationships, it simultaneously enables marginalized elements to emerge. For this reason, deconstruction profoundly influenced intellectual currents such as postmodernism and feminism. As Fang Xiaoli argued, "deconstruction refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and

shows how deeply such logocentric incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art", positioning it as a formidable critical tool in the 20th century [3].

In poetic creation, deconstructionism has also exerted profound influence. Since the 1980s in China, with the deepening of Reform and Opening-Up and the influence of Western culture, Chinese contemporary poetry has undergone significant transformations. Some poets began experimenting with new poetic forms and linguistic expressions, while deconstructionist ideas gradually permeated contemporary Chinese poetry. Creative groups represented by the Third-Generation poets were among the first to put these concepts into practice, using colloquial language to dissolve historical grandeur and employing playful irony to dismantle the sacrosanctity of literary canons. As Hu Guoping argued, "Contemporary poetry has entered a phase of qualified affirmation, engaging in extensive personalized narratives that seek to counter grand historical discourses through individualized language and events" [4]. However, this systematic dismantling of grand narratives and traditional poetics in China ultimately led to a nihilistic predicament at the value level, plunging the masses into existential confusion stemming from a vacuum of meaning. In the West, by contrast, deconstructionism instead catalyzed the diversified fragmentation of poetic ecology: from reflective writings on gender hierarchies, to postcolonial poets' interrogations of cultural identity, to experimental writing that dissolves genre boundaries, poetry has developed an ecological landscape featuring coexisting minority discourses, subcultural expressions, and avant-garde experimentation amid sustained marginalization. The divergent trajectories of Chinese and Western poetry under the deconstructionist wave not only reflect differing cultural responses to modernity's impact but also reveal an intrinsic poetic dilemma: when deconstruction becomes an instinctual creative approach, how should poetry establish its footing?

The study of transformations in Chinese and Western contemporary poetry under the influence of deconstructionism holds significant academic value and research significance. From the perspective of literary development patterns, meticulous comparison of divergent trajectories in Chinese and Western poetry reveals general literary laws and complex underlying determinants. In China, poetic works challenged traditional paradigms under deconstructionism, moving toward dissolution of authority and grand narratives--a process intricately linked to social transformation and cultural shifts. In the West, contemporary poetry demonstrated pluralistic fragmentation and stylistic hybridity amid deconstructionist waves, reflecting multicultural landscapes and postmodern trends. These disparities highlight that literary evolution is shaped by sociopolitical changes, indigenous traditions, and external cultural impacts, providing unique case studies for constructing comprehensive literary theories. Furthermore, globalization's acceleration underscores the importance of this research in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. As quintessential cultural carriers, poetic works embody national spiritual cores and values. Analyzing evolutionary trajectories under deconstructionism enhances mutual understanding of cultural connotations and aesthetic orientations. Such exchanges expand creative horizons, drive innovation, and promote intercultural respect, fostering global diversity and flourishing.

2. Developmental Transformations

Under the impact of deconstructionist thought, Chinese and Western contemporary poetry have diverged into two distinct trajectories of fragmentation: Chinese poetry has undergone a paradigm shift from the collective narratives of Misty Poetry to the individual experience writing of Third Generation poets, while Western poetry has moved from New Criticism's closed meaning systems to decentralized experiments with linguistic ontology. This global literary transformation shares the theoretical core of deconstructionist "decentering" yet assumes unique practical forms due to cultural contextual differences. These disparities not only reconstruct poetic discourses but also fundamentally rewrite the aesthetic landscape of modern poetry.

2.1. From Misty Poetry to the Third Generation

In China, the transition from Misty Poetry to Third Generation poets marked a deconstructionist-inflected shift from collective allegory to individual experience. Whereas Misty poets were self-conscious celebrants of collective sentiment, Third Generation poets emerged as fervent advocates of egoism. Starting with works like Farewell, Shu Ting, and Bei Dao and The Collapse of the Poet, they unilaterally declared the dissolution of Misty Poetry, rejecting collectivist narratives and traditional historical aesthetics while elevating the individual as the creative nucleus. This transformation manifested in two key dimensions of poetic practice: First, at the content level, Third Generation poetry shifted from Misty Poetry's reflection on collective emotion to a wholesale rebellion against past authoritative cultural systems. Second, in terms of linguistic style, it transitioned from Misty Poetry's imagery-dominated approach to colloquial stylistics.

In terms of creative content, poetry shifted from reflecting on collectivity to rebelling against authority. Emerging during a critical historical transition, Misty Poetry poets began exploring the relationship between the individual and the collective. While inheriting the first generation's focus on political themes, they transformed expressive modes by reflecting on collective sentiment from an individual perspective. Works such as Shu Ting's After the Storm and Bei Dao's Rainy Night exemplified individual resistance within political contexts, while Jiang He and Yang Lian engaged in profound reflections on history and national culture. By contrast, Third Generation poets embraced egoism and launched a wholesale rebellion against authoritative cultural systems. Han Dong's on the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda dismantled the grandeur previously attached to the pagoda in Yang Lian's works, while Yi Sha's Crossing the Yellow River by Train subverted Gong Liu's exalted depictions of the river--Kong Zhonghua described this as "dissolving grandeur and hypocrisy through the physical pleasure of urination" [5]. Li Yawei's Chinese Department and Zheng Chouyu's The Mistake further disrupted classical aesthetic mechanisms. As Yu Cuimei observes, "Third Generation poets lacked the legendary life experiences of Misty poets, positioning themselves as bystanders to political and historical events" [6]. Through anti-rational and anti-grand narrative postures, they not only repudiated the collective narratives and rational individual value systems constructed by Misty Poetry but also penetrated the core of classical aesthetic systems, reshaping poetic discourse through parodic subversion and deconstruction. This marks a new epoch in Chinese contemporary poetry brought about by deconstructionism.

Stylistically, poetry transitioned from imagery-dominated expression to colloquial narrative. During the Misty Poetry era, poets conveyed emotions through symbolic imagery: Shu Ting employed techniques like imagery, sensory perception, and implication, while Bei Dao constructed dense clusters of symbolic imagery to create lyrical atmospheres. By contrast, Third Generation poets adopted colloquial language strategies, abandoning imagery and embracing radical deconstruction. For example, Yu Jian's No. 6 Shangyi Street recorded quotidian details in plainspoken language, dismantling the elitist mystique of traditional imagery. As Qiu Zhiwu notes, these poets "advocated returning to the lived reality of everyday life, rejecting lofty senses of responsibility, and embodying a naturalistic and unadorned realist perspective" [7]. This infusion of fragmented, quotidian elements into poetic texts constructed an entirely new poetic discourse system, reflecting both rebellion against and innovation in traditional poetic imagery.

2.2. From Closed Meaning Systems to Linguistic Deserts

Before deconstructionism emerged on the historical stage, New Criticism dominated literary circles during the 1940s-1950s. Advocating that poetry constitutes an "organic whole" independent of authorial intent and external reality, New Criticism emphasized constructing closed, self-contained meaning structures through linguistic techniques such as metaphor, paradox, and irony. In terms of research orientation, it shifted critical focus from authors to texts, prioritizing the poem itself over the poet. This philosophy profoundly influenced the subsequent reorientation of poetic critical focus after deconstructionism's rise. Following deconstructionism's ascendancy, poets exhibited two distinct deconstructive tendencies in their practices. On one hand, they continued to emphasize textual

autonomy by eradicating authorial subjectivity, treating works as self-sufficient entities. On the other hand, they dismantled the very language they had previously trusted, challenging traditional assumptions about textual unity and certainty through the dissolution of linguistic meaning and poetic structure.

In terms of authorial identity deconstruction, two strategies emerged: first, fluidizing the "self" to blur boundaries between author, narrator, and character. Derridean deconstruction dismantled the notion of a unified self, positing identity as a construct of linguistic and cultural signs rather than a stable, essential entity. Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* merged classical myth with personal narrative by challenging boundaries between past and present, myth and reality, self and other, disrupting the singularity of poetic voice. Murray describes it as "the autobiography of autobiographical writing itself" [8]. Susan Howe incorporated archival materials and historical documents into her poetry, extensively using quotations, parodies, and intertextual references--often unattributed or ambiguously framed--to create polyphonic effects that erase distinctions between historical chroniclers and poets. Second, foregrounding the artificiality of writing to draw attention to the act of composition itself, making readers aware of language's unreliability as signifier. For example, Paul Muldoon's poetry employs puns, irony, and paradox to make readers question whether poetic statements should be taken literally.

Poets employed diverse methods to deconstruct language. Some argued that meaning is fluid, shifting with context and interpretation, and emphasized contradictions or self-negation in words to highlight linguistic gaps and ambiguities. Influenced by this perspective, Jorie Graham and John Ashbery composed open-ended poems that oscillate between abstract imagery and elusive syntax, forcing readers to actively construct meaning rather than passively consume it. Meanwhile, non-linguistic elements entered poetic texts, as Luo Liangong observed: "Non-linguistic components such as sound, typographical forms, and visual configurations became integral parts of poetic texts, gradually integrated into meaning-construction mechanisms" [9]. For example, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* erased and fragmented historical documents to emphasize language's visual and material dimensions. Additionally, fixed poetic structures were dismantled through frequent use of blank spaces, ellipsis, abrupt tonal shifts, and narrative/logical discontinuities. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* disrupted autobiographical conventions with non-sequential memories, deconstructing traditional poetic forms. Western contemporary poetry under deconstructionism's influence is thus an elusive, self-conscious enterprise that immerses readers in a world of unstable meanings, playful yet unreliable language, and fluid identities. These poets deploy fragmentation, blank spaces, and nontraditional forms to challenge assumptions, offering novel modes of reading and interpreting the world.

3. Divergent Transformations

Under the impact of deconstructionist thought, Chinese and Western poetry diverged significantly due to differences in their objects of deconstruction. Chinese poetry faced a unique historical and cultural context: thousands of years of literary development had accumulated profound aesthetic experiences, forming a stable poetic paradigm that functioned as an inescapable genetic backdrop for poets. Meanwhile, the power discourse system established after the founding of the People's Republic of China exerted significant influence over poetic orientations. When poets developed rebellious consciousness and sought to transcend established creative frameworks, these two formidable cultural forces naturally became primary targets of deconstruction. Breaking free from traditional aesthetic paradigms and power discourses emerged as critical for Chinese modern poets to explore new poetic frontiers. By contrast, Western poetry under deconstructionism focused on renovating its internal structures. Western poets embraced the concept of poetry as a self-sufficient independent system, believing that traditional narrative perspectives and linguistic rules severely constrained expressive potential--whether in terms of poetic subjectivity or language use. To unleash poetic vitality, they actively dismantled these conventions through experiments with novel linguistic combinations and

narrative innovations, producing highly avant-garde and experimental works. By reconstructing poetic forms from their foundational elements, Western poetry demonstrated unprecedented innovation and uniqueness amid deconstructionist waves.

Chinese and Western poetry diverged sharply in their deconstructive approaches. Influenced by deconstructionism, Chinese poets employed language as a pragmatic weapon to dismantle traditional poetic norms. Rapid lifestyle changes and evolving ideological-emotional expressions in contemporary society created a need to transcend historical burdens, which traditional poetic rules could no longer fully accommodate. Attuned to these zeitgeist demands, Chinese poets leveraged deconstructionism to challenge established conventions, transforming it from a theoretical concept into a practical tool for breaching creative constraints. Through linguistic experimentation--such as breaking metrical restrictions and renovating imagery systems--they aligned poetic form and content with modern spiritual landscapes, achieving substantial transformations in traditional poetic rules. By contrast, Western poets treated poetry as a self-sufficient system, focusing on excavating its latent possibilities. In practice, they simultaneously interrogated subjective positions and explored innovations in phonology, rhythm, and lexical combinations--even inventing entirely new expressions. This process saw poetic language shed its traditional referential function and transition toward self-referentiality. Poetry became not merely a carrier of external meaning but a locus for linguistic self-exploration and innovative play, akin to a carnivalesque celebration of language itself. This demonstrates Western poetry's unique trajectory and experimental ethos under deconstructionism.

Finally, under deconstructionism's influence, Chinese and Western poetry diverged significantly in their outcomes. Chinese poetry successfully charted modernized discursive paths aligned with temporal rhythms, undergoing profound transformations in both content and form. Thematically, it transcended classical imagery frameworks and generalized expressions of social macro-emotions, instead directing attention to contemporary pluralistic realities and individuals' complex inner worlds. By capturing everyday details, emerging social phenomena, and nuanced portrayals of personal contradictions, perplexities, and unique insights, poets expanded poetic content's breadth and depth. Formally, liberation and colloquial trends intensified, as Shen Jinhao argued: "released from formal constraints, poetic expressivity achieved infinite liberation--from lexical concepts to structural arrangements, it became better attuned to modern life and sensations, capable of depicting both material and spiritual dimensions of modern existence" [10]. Chinese poetry broke free from traditional formal constraints like fixed meter and rhyme, adopting free-flowing syntactic structures to manifest poets' unique expressive rhythms. Meanwhile, extensive incorporation of colloquial elements brought poetic language closer to everyday communication, highlighting individualized expressive disparities and transforming poetry into a literary form marked by temporal specificity and personal style. By contrast, Western poetry under deconstructionism constructed theoretical frameworks centered on linguistic concepts, prioritizing internal conceptual innovations and reconstructions. In these systems, poetic creation revolved around the text itself, with structural organization, meaning-production mechanisms, and semiotic features becoming focal points of research and practice. This gave rise to diverse schools such as Language Poetry and experimental movements, each exploring linguistic frontiers from distinct perspectives to actualize their unique visions of poetic essence. Western poetry thus evolved into a vanguard space for continuous exploration of poetic ontology, driving theoretical and practical innovations in poetic art.

4. Causes of Divergence

Three factors explain why Chinese and Western poetry evolved differently under deconstructionism. Socially, China's specific historical period of social transformation--marked by coexisting classical aesthetics and political centralization--urged poetic modernization. This reality shaped deconstructionism into a tool for poets to explore new expressions. Amid dynamic societal restructuring, poets navigated tensions between tradition and modernity, centralized norms and

individual freedom, resulting in poetry that excavated unique personal experiences within complex social landscapes. By contrast, Western societies had stabilized into postmodern maturity with relatively fixed social structures and cultural orders. Here, deconstructionism shifted poetic focus from meaning to language itself and theoretical speculation. Since existing frameworks required no radical reimagining, poets prioritized exploring language's pluralistic meaning-production in stable contexts. Thus, divergent social backgrounds fundamentally shaped poetic responses to deconstructionism. Motivationally, Chinese poets utilized deconstructionism to assert individuality. The complexities of societal transition endowed personal experiences with uniqueness and depth, which poets sought to articulate by dismantling traditional forms and signification. This self-centered approach positioned poetry as a vehicle for individual responses to historical change. Conversely, Western poets aimed to decentre authorial authority through deconstruction, returning interpretive power to readers. Rooted in postmodern emphasis on pluralism and readerly agency, this approach rejected unidirectional author-to-reader communication, redefining poetry as a site of text-reader interaction. These differing motivations led Chinese poetry toward self-exploration and Western poetry toward reconstructing reader-text dynamics. Culturally, China's literary tradition has long been deeply intertwined with politics, leaving an indelible imprint on poetic creation. Under deconstructionism's influence, poetry first had to overthrow the dominance of centralized discourse, emerging on the historical stage as an act of rebellion. A failure to overtly reject this authority would have precluded poetic renewal. By contrast, Western literature is philosophically rooted. As Sikirivwa argues, "deconstruction is a critique of the Western philosophical tradition, and is seen as a response and reaction against some important 20th-century philosophical movements" [11]. The critical and reflective nature of philosophical thinking propelled Western poetry under deconstructionism to dismantle existing meaning systems from perspectives such as philosophy of language and existentialism, exploring the ontological essence and boundaries of language. These divergent cultural heritages charted distinct evolutionary paths for Chinese and Western poetry, producing pronounced differences in their transformative outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines transformative trajectories of contemporary Chinese and Western poetry under deconstructionism, revealing three dimensions of divergence. In China, the paradigmatic shift from Misty Poetry to Third Generation poets marks an experimental transition from collective mythology to individual experience, characterized by colloquial expression and subversive parody. While dismantling traditional aesthetic hierarchies and political grand narratives, this movement also precipitated a public crisis of meaning in the post-ideological era. Meanwhile, Western poetry developed self-referential linguistic practices, constructing open textual systems through visual poetics, fragmented structures, and readerly engagement. Differences arise from three structural factors: China confronts dual modernity challenges of poetic paradigms and political discourse, while the West focuses on intratextual innovation; Chinese poets instrumentally deploy deconstructionism to assert individual subjectivity, whereas Western poets philosophically interrogate linguistic ontology; China's politically-inflected literary heritage and the West's critical philosophical tradition shape distinct deconstructive paths.

This research demonstrates that poetic experimentation is not merely formal innovation but a mirror of deep cultural struggles with modernity. Deconstructionism functions not as a universal methodology but as a context-sensitive cultural tool. Literary evolution results from dynamic interactions between theoretical frameworks, societal transformations, and cultural DNA. In an era of accelerating globalization and cultural hybridity, this study offers a critical lens for understanding how poetic practices resist and adapt to dominant discourses, revealing literary expression's resilience in fragmented times.

References

- [1] Wang X. From Structuralism to Derrida's Deconstructionism. *Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2018, 46 (1), 118 - 122.
- [2] Attridge D. Deconstruction today. *Études anglaises*, 2005, 58 (1), 42 - 52.
- [3] Fang X. A review on deconstruction and criticism. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2017, 1 (1), 134 - 139.
- [4] Hu G. Ethical witness of the contemporary community and the emergence of the Other: The "Ethical Turn" of contemporary poetry. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies Quarterly*, 2024, (8), 28 - 48.
- [5] Kong Z. Always "Pioneering". (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Jilin University, 2024.
- [6] Yu C. On the poetics of daily life in the "Third Generation" Poetry. *Qingdao University*, 2023.
- [7] Qiu Z. The third-generation poetry: The presentation and reflection of the Realist Spirit. *Poetics*, 2022, (2), 14 - 27.
- [8] Murray S J. The autobiographical self: Phenomenology and the limits of narrative self-possession in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*. *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 2005, 31 (3), 101 - 122.
- [9] Luo L. The visual poetics of contemporary American poetry. *Foreign Languages Research*, 2023, 40 (4), 80 - 86+112.
- [10] Shen J. The evolution of poetic forms and contemporary poetry creation. *Journal of Foshan University (Social Science Edition)*, 2024, 42 (5), 56 - 63.
- [11] Sikirivwa M K. Deconstruction theory and its background. *Journal of English Literature and Culture*, 2015, 43 (7), 212.