

Exploring the Different Interpretations of Shijing in Kongzi Shilun and Mao Poetry from Foucault's Notion of the "Author Function"

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Abstract: Foucault's notion of "Author Theory" was proposed after Barthes shouted that "the author is dead". Foucault believed that we should not only focus on the problem of the disappearance of the empty author, but also pay attention to the formal functions released with the disappearance of the author of the text, that is, the functional meaning of the author. Foucault's theory of "author function" has profound significance for modern literature, and also provides enlightenment for human research on early Chinese literature. Over the years, scholars have interpreted *Shijing* in many different ways. As one of the most respected interpretations of *Shijing* for more than 2,000 years, *Mao Poetry* represents the mainstream view of the academic community to a certain extent, and its historicized interpretation of poetry has a decisive influence in the literary world. Although *Kongzi shilun* has not been circulated in the world and was unearthed relatively late, its interpretation focusing on moral aspects has provided a new perspective for the academic community to understand poems. This article compares the interpretations of *Shijing* in *Mao Poetry* and *Kongzi shilun*, and explores the reasons for the different interpretations, namely the lack of the writing environment of *Shijing*, and combines with the two main ideological characteristics of the theory of "author function" to study the fluidity characteristics reflected in different interpretations of *Shijing* and the problem of "breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning" in the application of *Shijing*.

Keywords: *Shijing*, *Mao Poetry*, *Kongzi shilun*, author function.

1. Introduction

Shijing is an important component of early Chinese literature and the beginning of Chinese poetry. The current edition of *Shijing* consists of 305 poems, including three parts: "Airs", "Odes" and "Hymns". Over the years, there have been numerous studies on *Shijing* in the academic community, but few scholars have combined the "author theory" with *Shijing* to explore the author functions embodied in different interpretations of *Shijing*. In 1969, Foucault proposed the theory of authorship based on archaeological methods in his speech "What is an Author?". The "author function" is the core concept of his theory, which embodies the characteristics of the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses in a society [1]. This article uses the literature analysis method, combines with the "author function" theory to analyze the interpretation of *Shijing* represented by

Kongzi shilun and Mao Poetry, and explores the reasons and effects of different interpretations, as well as the problem of "breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning" in the quotation of *Shijing*. It is hoped that more in-depth exploration is carried out in the field of author function research in early Chinese literature, so as to provide value for relevant academic research.

2. Different Interpretations of *Shijing* in Mao Poetry and *Kongzi shilun* and the Reason for this Phenomenon

In the early Han Dynasty, the most prominent schools of thought in *Shijing* were Lu, Han, and Qi. After Emperor Ping, Mao Poetry gradually became one of the most respected and influential schools of thought in the field of *Shijing* research. Martin Kern pointed out that proponents of Mao Poetry believe that the texts of Mao Poetry were transmitted from the first generation of Confucius's disciples, and therefore have the highest authenticity and authority [2]. Like the other three schools of thought, Mao Poetry uses *Shijing* as a political record, in an attempt to combine poetry with historical background, designating a historical figure or political event for all implicit comparisons and implications in the poem. Although the interpretations of *Shijing* by subsequent scholars, such as Zhu Xi, Zheng Qiao, Ouyang Xiu and others are not completely consistent with Mao Poetry, most of them are based on it. For two thousand years, such historical interpretation as Mao Poetry have been the mainstream study of *Shijing* in traditional academic circles. As for *Kongzi shilun*, it has not been circulated in the world and was unearthed relatively late, but after archaeological testing, its writing year is earlier than Mao Poetry. In addition, there is no interpretation of the historical and political background in the interpretation of *Shilun* like that seen in Mao Poetry [3], which mainly emphasizes moral cultivation, and there is no specific object of application to the evaluation.

For example, in the interpretation of "Guan Ju", *Mao Poetry* said: "Guan Ju is the virtue of the Queen Consort and the beginning of the Airs. It is the means by which the word is influenced and by which the relations between husband and wife are made correct" [4]. (《關雎》，後妃之德也，風之始也，所以風天下而正夫婦也。) *Mao Poetry* adds a historical background to this poem, believing that "Guan Ju" is a tribute to the virtues of King Wen's Queen Consort Tai Si of Zhou Dynasty. However, the interpretation of "Guan Ju" in *Kongzi shilun* focuses on "transformation", which is intended to illustrate that this gentleman has gone from ignorance to understanding, from lustful to a spiritual level of joy. It is to metaphorically and illustrate the norms and meanings of etiquette through the emotion and sex between men and women [5] (以色喻于礼). In addition, the interpretation of "Han Guang" in *Mao Poetry* can also reflect the characteristics of its historicized text. *Mao Poetry* states: "Han Guang sings for virtue that is so extensive as to influence all quarters of the kingdom of Zhou. King Wen's Way prevails throughout the south, and culture produces an impact on the areas about the Yangtze River and the Han River that no one thinks of transgression of ritual but chooses to court a girl though it may not win her heart" [4] (《漢廣》，德之所及也。文王之道被於南國，美化行乎江漢之域，無思犯禮，求而不可得也。) It mentions King Wen and forcibly links this poem with him, but in fact, the main story in the text is about a boy pursuing a girl and cannot obtain her, without any sentences related to King Wen. The interpretation of "Han Guang" in *Kongzi shilun* is "wisdom" [5], which believes that this girl does not think about non-discrimination and does not force the impossible, which is a manifestation of wisdom. What is more, in the interpretation of "Yanyan", *Mao Poetry* said: "Yan Yan", Duke Wei Zhuang's wife sent the concubine back [4]. (《燕燕》，衛莊薑送歸妾也) *Mao Poetry* adds a historical background to the poem, stating that it depicts Zhuang Jiang, the wife of Duke Wei Zhuang, and the concubine Dai Gui. And the interpretation of "Yanyan" in *Shilun* is "Yanyan's affection, with its uniqueness" [5] (燕燕之情，以其獨也). In a short sentence, the interpretation focuses on "affection" and praises deep affection.

In addition, there are many examples of *Mao Poetry* historicizing, among which the interpretation of "Jiang Zhongzi" is very representative. *Mao Poetry* said: "Jiang Zhongzi", satirizing Duke Zhuang of Zheng [4]. There is no basis for criticizing Duke Zhuang's explanation in the text. The literal meaning only expresses the pressure and fear of young women against public opinion, and has no connection with politics. Therefore, since the Tang and Song dynasties, most scholars do not agree with this viewpoint. For example, Zhu Xi's *Shi Ji Zhuan* quoted Zheng Qiao's *Shi Bian Wang*, stating that "these are words that mean obscenity" [6].

It can be seen that the interpretation of *Shijing* in *Mao Poetry* reflects the characteristics of the historicized text interpretation, while *Shilun* takes morality as the core of interpretation and praises simple and beautiful feelings. *Mao Poetry* and *Kongzi shilun* focus on the historical and moral aspects of the interpretation of *Shijing*, respectively. The fundamental reason for this is the lack of writing environment such as authorship and writing purpose. Due to the uncertainty of the writing environment, the reader cannot know the emotions and core ideas of one or a group of creators when creating the poem. People can interpret it differently for different purposes. Based on the characteristics of *Kongzi shilun*, Martin Kern has deduced that *Kongzi shilun* is a specific school text—a pedagogical device—to teach how to interpret and how to apply the ancient poems [3]. While *Mao Poetry* uses the *Shijing* as a political record. Therefore, the lack of writing background is the basis for the diversity of interpretations of *Shijing*.

3. Different Interpretations and the Notion of "Author Function".

Based on the different interpretations of *Shijing* in *Mao Poetry* and *Kongzi shilun*, some scholars have begun to focus on which interpretation is more authentic and correct, but this discussion ignores the possibility that different interpretations are all feasible. Due to the lack of authorship and background, there is no individual author for poetry, and future generations constantly reconstruct it in dissemination, resulting in diverse interpretations of poetry. The following text will combine the author function to analyze the reasons for different interpretations of *Shijing*.

After Roland Barthes proposed 'the author is dead' [7], the disappearance of the author left behind an empty space, which was redefined and redistributed. The fluid and varied functions released in this process are the formal functions of the author. At this time, Foucault's theory of authorship emerged. The 'author function' is the core concept of this theory, which embodies the characteristics of the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses in a society. Foucault believed that the author, as a function of discourse, has four main characteristics: firstly, it is an occupied object, a discourse mode controlled by power, which determines the scope of discourse. Moreover, the "author function" is not universally present or stable in all civilizations of all eras, and the way discourse exists varies depending on the historical era. In addition, it is the result of a complex set of operations aimed at constructing a rational entity called the author, which will vary depending on the period and type of discourse. Finally, it does not simply refer to an actual individual, it can simultaneously trigger many types of self.

The different interpretations of *Mao Poetry* and *Kongzi shilun* reflect that the "author function" is a way of discourse controlled by power, which determines the scope of discourse. Due to the lack of writing background in *Shijing*, the understanding of poetry by later generations can not be limited to the author and the time boundaries, and there are no limitations on the scope of discourse. Therefore, *Shijing* has become an open interpretation text. Since there is no such thing as independent neutral writing, the work is always at the opposite poles. But in the case of *Shijing*, since there is no clear authorship, in other words, no original author of a poem has the right to own it, so no poem will be questioned because of its authorship. At the same time, when the discourse is punished, that is, when the poem is negatively evaluated, no author can be questioned for the poem. Poetry does not need an author to take responsibility for it.

In addition, different interpretations reflect that the "author function" is a complex movement that changes with different types of discourse and changes in different eras. During the Spring and Autumn Periods and the Warring States Period, people did not know or pay attention to the authors of poetry, but only paid attention to the content of the poetry. Only a very small number of people have access to books, and poetry is mainly transmitted orally. People are accustomed to transforming what they hear into written form based on their own understanding after listening to others' oral transmission. Every person who delivers may generate a new text. This results in many different and chaotic versions of the same poem coexisting simultaneously. For example, according to professor Martin Kern's paper, the text of "Crickets" in *Mao Poetry* actually had many differences from the version of the Qinghua Bamboo Slips period in 300 BC [8]. The author of *Mao Poetry* may have made choices and modifications to the text during the editing process. So, poetry has been continuously reconstructed by future generations in the process of transmission. The poetic texts people read today can not represent the original text, but rather only the one discovered among hundreds or thousands of versions. This means that poetry is a fluid and flexible work. Authorship gradually disappears with the flow of poetry. Therefore, authorship is not the source of our understanding of poetry, and reconstructing or exploring a specific authorship and its creation time is useless and misleading. Because poetry is a composite text composed of modularly pieced together content from a shared "repertories". Their formation is a dynamic editing process, and these composite texts have never been separated from each other. As Stephen Owen said that poetry is a concrete realization that is constantly generated from various themes and expressions in the form of "poetic materials" and "repertories" [9]. As mentioned above, there can be an infinite number of variations of a poem in the course of circulation, so people do not have to search for the original version and authorship of the poetry.

The lack of authorship has a positive significance for readers to understand poetry, which can make *Shijing* as a fluid text that meets the different needs of society at the content level, that is, "breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning". Early Chinese people often liked to quote a certain chapter of *Shijing* in different contexts to express their emotions according to their own understanding and needs. It is mainly reflected in literary monographs such as *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu*. It is said in *Zuozhuan*: "When composing poetry, I take out of context, I just take what I need, how do I know what is the same sect but different?" [10] (賦詩斷章,餘取所求焉,惡識宗?) It can be seen that the style of writing poems and breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning in the Spring and Autumn Period. In the early days, people in China did not think there was anything wrong. For the listeners at that time, they did not know or pay attention to the fixed context of the poem, and the expression and reception of the situation gave the poem a constantly updated meaning and connotation. People use these poems, which are composed from the repertories, as a new "repertories", and flexibly use the verses and fragments in them to some complex and subtle daily communication. This is a reflection of the fluidity and instability of poetry. It can be seen that when poetry is created, it becomes an open text. Poetry is open to different interpretations. Different readers who receive the text have their own different rules of understanding. People at different times, with different needs and experiences, have different understandings of the same text. Later generations' understanding of poetry can not reflect the thoughts of the ancients when they wrote poetry. Therefore, the meaning of the text does not have to be traced back to the author.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the comparison between *Mao Poetry* and *Shilun* shows that scholars from different eras have different interpretations of the *Shijing*. The reason for different interpretations is the lack of background in poetry writing, including the authorship, writing purpose, and so on. Combining the two core contents of Foucault's notion of author function can explore the significance and impact of

the lack of writing background. Moreover, it is futile and useless for future scholars to attempt to trace the writing background of poetry. Poetry are fluid composite texts, and we cannot and do not need to know the author's identity. In early China, people were accustomed to using poetry "breaking a stanza off [from its context] to generate meaning" for different situations. These readers' different understandings and continuous reconstruction of poetry are particularly important, reflecting cultural memories from different periods and worthy of academic attention, research, and discussion.

Due to the limited length of this article, only the two most representative interpretations of *Shijing*, *Mao Poetry* and *Kongzi shilun*, were studied in the comparative section. With sufficient word count, the doubts and new perspectives of Tang and Song literati such as Ouyang Xiu and Zhu Xi on *Mao Poetry*, can also be used as supplements to the different understandings of different readers in different periods. This can better reflect that poetry is a complex movement, and readers have the right to have their own understanding of the meaning of poetry. In addition, the author believes that different interpretations of the Book of Songs can also be extended to another characteristic of the notion of author function, which is that different historical periods have different ways of discourse existence. Due to space limitations, this characteristic hasn't been analyzed, but from the early China period, when people did not care about the author of a work, to the Western Han Dynasty, when scholars such as Sima Qian began to explore the author or editor of a work, it can be seen that the existence of poetry varies in different historical periods.

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