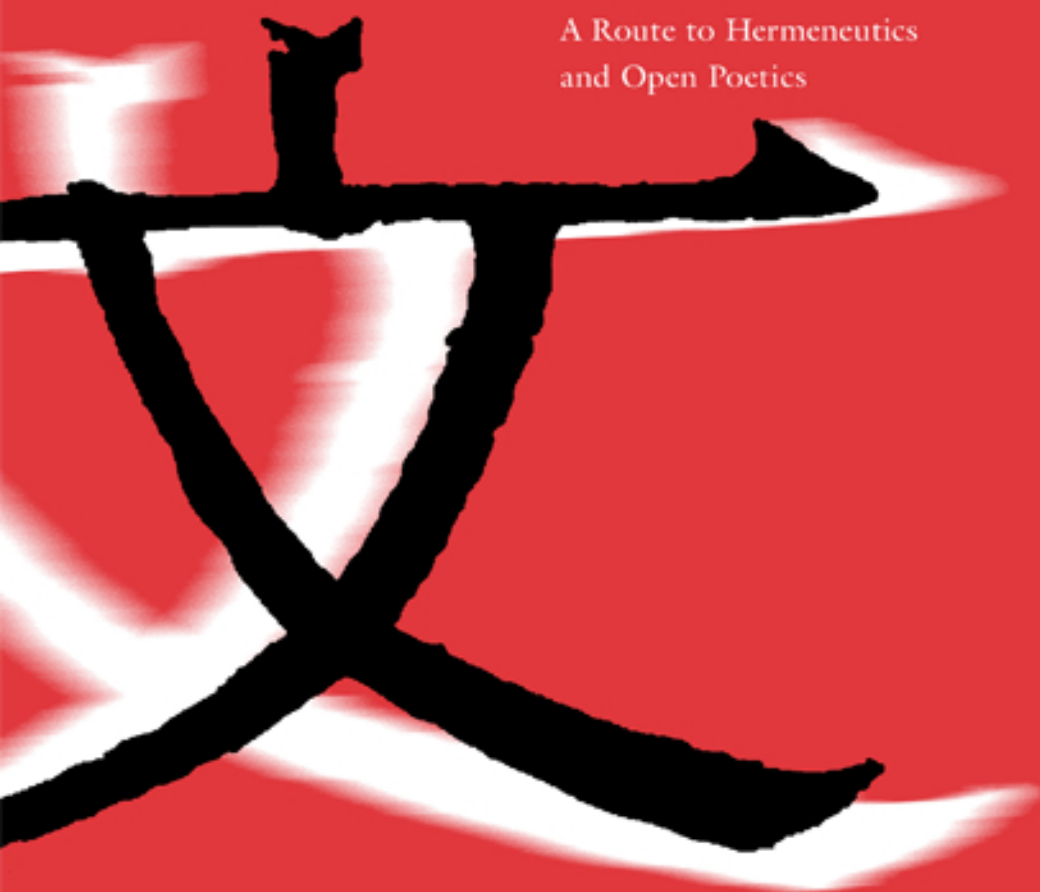




# Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing

A Route to Hermeneutics  
and Open Poetics



Ming Dong Gu

# Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing



SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture

Roger T. Ames, editor

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*A Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics*



Ming Dong Gu

*State University of New York Press*



To the memory of  
my father, Gu Shirong (1929–2000)  
and  
my mother, Xu Hongzuo (1931–2000)

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## *Preface*



Traditional China does not lack conceptual inquiries into reading and writing, but the insights are scattered in different kinds of discourses and have never been synthesized into a clearly defined system. Whether in Chinese or other languages, a systematic study of Chinese theories of reading and writing in intellectual thought and critical practice is long overdue. This study attempts to fill that blank. It argues that the Chinese tradition has formed an implicit system of reading and writing with fascinating insights that not only predated similar ideas in the West by centuries but also anticipated contemporary ideas of hermeneutic openness and open poetics. Furthermore, it seeks to construct a Chinese system of hermeneutic theories, reflect on it from a comparative perspective, and tease out theoretical insights that may contribute to the formulation of a transcultural open poetics for textual criticism and creative composition.

Initially, however, I was motivated only by the desire to unseat hermeneutic inertia and to locate new strategies of reading. As my research deepened and broadened, it gradually dawned on me that hermeneutic openness is really a pivotal point on which different issues of criticism, hermeneutics, and literary theory in contemporary discourse intersect. In the past fifty years or so, fundamental and far-reaching changes have taken place in modern criticism and literary theory. The changes, comparable to paradigm shifts in the natural sciences, seem to focus on one central issue: the conditions of the text. For all the dazzling varieties, one of the central concerns of modern hermeneutic thought is with the question of hermeneutic openness: Is a text an enclosed space of unity, harmony, and at most a balance of opposites, which allows only for nuanced and coherent exegeses, or an open space of different views, voices, values, attitudes, and ideologies, which invites different and conflicting interpretations? As a result of this realization, such general theoretical issues as “author,” “reader,” “text,”

“context,” “meaning,” “intention,” “signification,” “semiosis,” and the like, naturally became categories under my consideration.

My study undergoes another readjustment thanks to insights gained from reading some books on Chinese and Asian intellectual thought. In their series of books on Chinese thought, David Hall, Roger Ames, and other scholars of Asian intellectual thought have pioneered a comparative and dialogic approach that successfully brings about meaningful dialogues between Chinese/Asian and Western thought.<sup>1</sup> Their inspiring success confirms my long-held conviction that despite some unique features of Chinese hermeneutic thought, its concerns with endless meaning of a text converge with similar concerns of its Western counterpart and have a cross-cultural value. Because of this conviction, my inquiry takes another turn and becomes a comparative study of Chinese reading and writing in relation to Western hermeneutic theories and in the larger context of post-modern theories. I am convinced that if we wish to locate a bridge across the divide between Chinese and Western hermeneutic thought, hermeneutic openness is definitely a viable one. Across this bridge Chinese and Western ideas can travel in a two-way flow and engage in truly meaningful dialogues. As a result of this realization, my study of reading and writing in the Chinese tradition became a cross-cultural inquiry.

In spite of various readjustments, this study has remained focused on two interrelated critical issues: interpretive openness and the making of hermeneutic space. Here, I will dwell a little on why I have focused on these two issues. First, I am not primarily concerned with searching for texts that may be said to be open. I attempt to explain why a text is open and to explore how we can open up a text. In so doing, I am preoccupied with the poetics of reading as well as writing. Second, I believe that an exploration of the making of hermeneutic space will facilitate a balance between the two major trends in reading: the postmodern one that emphasizes the primacy of contemporary theories, and the traditional one that affirms the value of sensitive and sensible close readings. In a most recent book, *Reading after Theory* (2002), Valentine Cunningham reviews the dissemination of reading theories from the 1960s to the present day. While criticizing conservatives of reading who naively dream of natural and independent readings uncontaminated by prejudices and preconceptions and free from theories, especially postmodern theories, he, like Umberto Eco, accuses postmodern theories of encouraging textual abuse and diminishing humanly rich experiences of reading.<sup>2</sup> I believe that only with a balanced approach can reading and interpretation perform the multiple function of illuminating critical practice, discovering structures and conventions of textual discourse, and enriching the human experience of reading and writing.

This study grew out of a substantial portion of a doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago. In its present form, it owes a great deal to the guidance, advice, and encouragement of my advisors, Professors Anthony C. Yu, David T. Roy, Edward L. Shaughnessy, and W. J. T. Mitchell. I consider myself fortunate in having these scholars as my mentors, who are truly worthy of that honorable name. In that intellectually stimulating institution, I was also indebted to a number of teachers and scholars, from whom I received instruction, assistance, and encouragement: Professors Françoise Meltzer, William Sibley, James Ketelaar, Judith Zeitlin, Wu Hung, Xiaobing Tang, Prasenjita Duara, Guy Allito, George C. C. Chao, and Norma Field; and to my classmates and friends from whom I received encouragement and assistance in both life and scholarship: Yiwen Li, Hongbing Zhang, David Sena, Yiqing Wu, Ke Peng, Weihong Bao, Lin Hong Lam, and Feng Li. Among these, I am most grateful to Yiwen Li, who has facilitated my access to the East Asian materials in the University of Chicago library.

I have owed an intellectual debt to scholars from other institutions. Sections of chapters 1 and 2 were presented at two panels that I organized for the Association for Asian Studies (2000 and 2002). I benefited a great deal from the comments by panel members including Professors Stephen Owen of Harvard University, Kang-I Sun Chang of Yale University, Haun Saussy of Stanford University, Pauline Yu of the University of California at Los Angeles, Anthony C. Yu of the University of Chicago, Shuen-fu Lin of the University of Michigan, Dore Levy of Brown University, and Longxi Zhang of the City University of Hong Kong. I must express my special thanks to two scholars: Professor Kang-I Sun Chang at Yale University and Professor Chung-ying Cheng of the University of Hawaii. Professor Chang, despite her own busy schedule, took the trouble to read earlier versions of chapters 7 and 8, supplied me with some useful materials, and offered detailed suggestions for revision. I did not have the honor of meeting Professor Cheng until he attended one of my presentations at a scholarly conference. After hearing my presentation, he kindly sought me out, had a long talk with me, and provided valuable guidance and suggestions for my conceptual inquiries into Chinese intellectual thought. In addition to scholars whom I know personally, I am also indebted to many scholars whom I never met but whose scholarships have influenced my study. In my early manuscript, I acknowledged my indebtedness in detailed notes and a long bibliography, but because of the compelling need to save space, I have reduced almost all long notes to mere citations and only listed works cited in my study.

Ideas and sections of this study have appeared in revised form in some scholarly journals. Materials in the introduction, chapter 2, and conclu-

sion were incorporated into an article published in *Comparative Literature* 55.2 (2003), pp. 112–29. Sections of chapter 2 were published in revised form in *Philosophy East and West* 53.4 (2003), pp. 490–513. A shorter version of chapter 4 was published in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 31.4 (2004), pp. 469–88, and an earlier version of chapter 3 appeared in *Philosophy East and West*, 55.2 (2005). I thank the editors of the journals for their permission to use the published materials. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers of the State University of New York Press who offered perceptive comments on my manuscript and recommended it for publication, and the press's editor, Ms. Nancy Ellegate, for her vision and encouragement. Finally, I thank my present institution, Rhodes College, for providing me with three summers of faculty development endowment grants, and my wife, Ping Lu, for her unfailing emotional support, which has helped me pull through setbacks and frustrations.

MDG  
Wancheng Studio

## *Introduction*



# Hermeneutic Openness: A Transcultural Phenomenon

## The Rise of Hermeneutic Openness

Hermeneutics is “the art or theory of interpretation, as well as a type of philosophy that starts with questions of interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> Even after the term has acquired a broad significance in its historical development, it is still very much concerned with textual interpretation as it once was with exegeses of canonical texts. The text-centered feature is especially prominent in literary hermeneutics, which may be loosely defined as the theory of the interpretation of literary texts. Whether it is philosophical hermeneutics or literary hermeneutics, hermeneutic experience entails a sense of openness in interpretation because, as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, it “has its own fulfillment not in definite knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.”<sup>2</sup> Gadamer views adequate interpretation as a result of the “fusion of horizons” between the reader and the text in a dialogic interaction. Since the text and reader have their historicity and intentionality, and there are generations of readers, the hermeneutic space is theoretically open, and the horizon of meaning is consequently boundless. Hence, we may say that hermeneutic experience is invariably open.

Hermeneutic openness in literary studies is called “literary openness.” It is a major aesthetic issue in literary traditions, East or West. In theory, it means that a literary text is not an enclosure of words whose messages are finite and limited, but a hermeneutic space constructed with imagistic or verbal signs capable of generating unlimited interpretations.

In common sense, it means that a literary text has no “correct” interpretation, or has multiple interpretations. Literary “openness” as a theoretical concept was first proposed by Umberto Eco in his *Opera aperta* (the Open Work) in 1962,<sup>3</sup> but in the Chinese tradition, the idea can be traced back to high antiquity. Very early in the development of Chinese literature, Chinese writers seemed to have felt the impulse for artistic openness and toyed with the idea and practice of open work. The earliest interest in openness is found in the inquiry into the origin, nature, and function of the *Zhouyi* (*Book of Changes*) and in the composition and interpretation of the *Shijing* (*Book of Songs*). Later inquiries into openness permeated Chinese poetic criticism and interpretations of canonical works.

### Origins of Openness in China

Initially, awareness of openness in China emerged from two major sources: metaphysical inquiry of the universe and interpretive practice of canonical texts. In the metaphysical inquiry into textual openness, the Chinese tradition had an earlier start than the West. As early as the fourth century BC<sup>4</sup> in China, there appeared in the appended verbalizations to the *Yijing* 易經, also known as the *Zhouyi* or *Book of Changes*, a famous saying, which has since become a household word for rationalizing different interpretations of the same text or phenomenon: “[In the interpretation of the Dao,] a benevolent person who sees it will say that it is benevolent; a wise person who sees it will say that it is wise.”<sup>5</sup> In the second century BC, the Chinese Confucian thinker Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c.179–c.104 BC) articulated a dictum that is directly related to literature: “[*The Book of*] *Poetry* has no constant [or thorough-going] interpretation 詩無達詁.”<sup>6</sup> Although this dictum referred specifically to the exegesis of the *Book of Poetry* (or *Book of Songs* in Waley’s popular translation), it was later extended to all poetry. Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673–1769), for example, in relating Dong Zhongshu’s dictum broadly to all poetry, practically viewed poetry as an open hermeneutic space amenable to what contemporary theory calls reader response criticism:

The words of ancient poets contain within themselves unlimited implications. When posterity reads them, they will come to different understandings, depending upon their dispositions, which may be shallow or deep, high or low. . . . This is what Master Dong had in mind when he said: “[*The Book of*] *Poetry* has no constant interpretation.” Commentaries, annotations, and interpretations are all posterity’s views from different quarters and corners.<sup>7</sup>

In critical practice, openness in the Chinese tradition emerged from critical blindness rather than conscious insight. In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man examines the works of some influential European and American theorists and critics and finds in them a gap between their statements about the nature of literature and the results of their practical criticism. Paradoxically, de Man argues, their critical blindness to the gap frequently gives rise to some very fascinating insights into literature, art, culture, and hermeneutics.<sup>8</sup> The same may be said of the emergence of hermeneutic openness in the critical discourses by traditional Chinese thinkers and scholars. In their statements about some canonical texts, they viewed the text as an enclosure of words that contained the original intentions of the author and declared that it is the task of a commentator to ferret out those intentions that constitute meaning. But in their actual commentaries, the multifaceted interpretations of a given text not only fragmented the text but also implied that it was an open hermeneutic space. The *Shijing* (*Book of Songs*) hermeneutic tradition is a case in point. There has been a perennial search for the original intentions of the anonymous poets. While the search was aimed at discovering the original meaning that was supposed to reside in a given poem, it led to a multiplicity of interpretations that effectively open up a given poem to different and even conflicting interpretations. Take the first poem of the *Shijing*, “Guanju,” for example. In a later chapter, I will show that there are, according to my incomplete statistics, eight major interpretations and many more minor readings. Of the major interpretations, the poem has been construed to cover heaven and earth, individuals and society, government and politics, mores and morality, family relations and human relations, customs and habits, physical passion and spiritual sublimation, and eulogy and satire. The interpretations are not always compatible with each other. In fact, some directly conflict and contradict each other. In terms of the multiple interpretations, we may say that the poem is practically open. This is also true of many other poems in the anthology.

I, therefore, suggest that in critical practice, hermeneutic openness in Chinese tradition emerged from critical blindness rather than conscious insight. To a large extent, the Chinese notion of openness grew out of the conflict between a canonical precept and critical practice. Confucius, who started the *Shijing* hermeneutic tradition, posited a monolithic thematic guideline: “If out of the three hundred poems one were to choose one phrase to summarize the theme, I would say: there is no evil thought.”<sup>9</sup> Since Confucius was regarded as a sage, Confucian scholars took his words literally. But to their chagrin, they found that the anthology contains poems which not only deviate from this thematic guideline but also can be considered obscene by Confucian moral standards. To cope with this

disconcerting discovery, they had to resort to various exegetical methods which led to a multiplicity of readings. As a result, although in theory they viewed a text as a closed entity, in practice, they opened it up.

Since the Confucian canon incorporates other classics in addition to the *Book of Songs*, metaphysical openness and critical openness converge in Chinese poetics. Dong Zhongshu's dictum, "Poetry has no constant interpretation," marked the convergence. It certainly grew out of the attempt to cope with deviations from the monolithic guideline and represented a search for a theoretical underpinning to justify the practice of reading the *Book of Poetry* in terms of changing circumstances. The historical circumstances in which his dictum was uttered indicate that metaphysical and critical openness gradually merged into a notion of textual openness, which differs little from the contemporary idea of hermeneutic openness. In the *Chunqiu fanlu*, someone asked why the *Spring and Autumn Annals* did not observe its stated practice of using a proper title for addressing a ruler. Dong replied: "I have heard that the *Book of Poetry* has no constant interpretation; the *Book of Changes* has no constant divination; and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* uses no constant wording. All follow changing circumstances and meanings, but all obey the heavenly principle with a unified purpose."<sup>10</sup> What merits our attention is not just Dong's advocacy of the necessity for recontextualization in accordance with changing circumstances of interpretation; his reasoning touches upon different aspects of hermeneutics. "The *Book of Poetry* has no constant interpretation" concerns literary openness; "The *Book of Changes* has no constant divination" addresses the making of openness, or the poetics of openness; "the *Spring and Autumn Annals* uses no constant wording" recognizes the signifying flux of language. Since the *Book of Poetry* is a writing of poetic form, the *Book of Changes* a writing composed of both verbal and semiotic signs, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* a writing of prose form, Dong Zhongshu's dictum may be viewed as a pithy but comprehensive expression of the concept of hermeneutic openness in the Chinese tradition.

By the sixth century, the Chinese tradition already formed an inchoate theory of hermeneutic openness that centers on the seminal ideas and concepts like *yiyin* 遺音 (lingering sound), *yiwei* 遺味 (lasting flavor), *congzhi* 重旨 (literally, double intention, equivalent to multivalence), *fuyi* 復義 (literally, multiple meanings, equivalent to polysemy), *wenwai quzhi* 文外曲致 (subtle connotations beyond the text), *bujin zhiyi* 不盡之義 (endless meaning, equivalent to unlimited semiosis).<sup>11</sup>

### Origins of Openness in the West

In the West, the idea of hermeneutic openness in the sense of multivalence and polysemy started very late. The early prejudice against poets and poetry practically nipped the idea of openness in the bud. In Plato's "Protagoras," Socrates is described as making derogative comments on differing interpretations: "No one can interrogate poets about what they say, and most often when they are introduced into the discussion some say the poet's meaning is one thing and some another, for the topic is one on which nobody can produce a conclusive argument. The best people avoid such discussions."<sup>12</sup> Plato's open condemnation of poets as liars further made it difficult for ideas of openness to appear in early Western literary thought. By the first century AD, in his *On the Sublime*, Longinus could only timidly suggest that if something "does not leave in the mind [of a man well versed in literature] more food for reflection than the words seem to convey, . . . it cannot rank as true sublimity because it does not survive a first hearing. For that is really great which bears a repeated examination."<sup>13</sup> It was not until the sixteenth century that the idea of literary openness resurfaced, and it had to assume the form of nonliteralness or metaphysical emptiness comparable to the philosophical conception of the Dao in the Chinese tradition. Philip Sidney (1554–1586), in his defense of poetry against Plato's charge of lying, declared, "the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." In his argument, there is already a faint notion of open hermeneutic space: "The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, no laboring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be."<sup>14</sup>

If in China, a strand of literary openness grew out of an exegetical desire to smooth out inconsistencies, discrepancies, and conflicting views in interpreting the canonical works, interestingly enough, an early practice of literary openness in the West emerged from similar circumstances and was based on similar theoretical rationale. The Christian allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* in the Bible gave rise to a critical practice that sanctions multiple interpretations of the image of the Beloved: she stands for God, Israel, Christ, the Church, or simply an object of erotic love.<sup>15</sup> Just as Chinese Confucian scholars made ingenious and often far-fetched moves to interpret poems of erotic themes as canonical texts of moral virtue or metaphysical ideas, Christian exegetes made similar moves to replace the object of erotic love with morally and theologically meaningful categories. In his comparative study of the *Book of Poetry* and the *Song of Songs*, Longxi Zhang convincingly argues: "The

way Christian exegetes use allegorization in order to read the *Song of Songs* as a theologically meaningful and morally edifying composition and thereby to justify its canonicity bears striking similarities to the way many traditional Chinese scholars read part of the Confucian canon, *Shi Jing* or the Book of *Poetry*.<sup>16</sup> The multiple interpretation evolved from a similar reading strategy to smooth out discrepancies and inconsistencies, a strategy, interestingly enough, called “allegorical reading” in both traditions. Although the Christian allegorization is not as multifaceted as the Confucian allegorical exegeses, there is no doubt that it unconsciously promoted an idea of multiplicity, which anticipates the modern idea of openness.

Inquiries into literary openness in the true sense of the word did not appear until modern times in the West, but the belated efforts have been rigorous, systematic, and profound. An interest in literary openness was inaugurated by William Empson’s theory of literary ambiguity expounded in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and further sustained by New Critical explorations of irony, paradox, tension, and total meaning in the theoretical works of I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, and Monroe C. Beardsley.<sup>17</sup> The exploration of multiple interpretations then went from literary ambiguity all the way to a most radical claim that a text is only a picnic for which the author brings nothing but words while the readers bring all that makes sense.<sup>18</sup> However, only with the advent of Eco’s *Opera aperta* [the Open Work] in 1962, the actual concept of openness was articulated for the first time as an aesthetic category that anticipated some major issues of the contemporary debates on and discussions of literature, art, and culture in general. In 1970, Tzvetan Todorov, Hélène Cixous, and Gerard Genette jointly founded an influential journal of literary criticism and literary theory, *Poétique*. In the editor’s introduction to the first number of the journal, an open poetics, which embraces both open critical practice and open interpretive practice, was declared: “All play of language and writing, all rhetoric in action, every obliteration of verbal transparency, whether in folklore, in ‘mass communications,’ in the discourse of dream or madness, in the most modestly constructed texts or the most fortuitous encounters of words—all these enjoy full rights in the realm of modern poetics, which must be a poetics, above all, open.”<sup>19</sup> Since then, literary openness has become quite a common word in literary criticism and evaluation, and retained its enduring power because, as one scholar puts it, it is central to two major themes of contemporary literary theory: “the insistence on the element of multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy in art, and the emphasis on the role of the reader, on literary interpretation and responses as an interactive process between reader and text.”<sup>20</sup>

### Paradoxes in Interpretive Theories

There has been a paradoxical situation with regard to the concept of literary openness in both the Chinese and Western traditions. In the West, since Eco first raised the concept of open work and explored its poetics, other theorists' work has directly or indirectly enriched this concept. Indeed, as new theoretical explorations have pushed the boundaries of hermeneutics further and further, the concept has brought on a reaction. Ironically, Eco, who first articulated on open work and poetics of openness, takes some steps backward and questions some postmodern theories that espouse unlimited interpretations. His two works, the *Limits of Interpretation* and *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, seem to have marked some retrogression from his former positions on literary openness by their titles alone. In both works, he not only implies that there are certain limits to interpretation but also unequivocally labels some interpretations as "overinterpretation."<sup>21</sup> Eco's criticism of overinterpretation caused some leading theorists (Jonathan Culler for example) to come out with an open defense of overinterpretation.<sup>22</sup> The controversy has not been satisfactorily resolved. And such questions as What is openness? Why is a text open? How is openness achieved? To what extent is the hermeneutic space of a text open? and How can a reader open up a text to generate new interpretations? have remained unanswered.

In China, the situation is even more intriguing. While on the one hand, some thinkers and scholars advocated that poetry has no constant or thoroughgoing interpretation and one of the criteria for judging a good poem is whether it has unending meanings (*bujin zhiyi*), the whole hermeneutic tradition was dominated by an endless search for the original intention of the author, whether he was a sage, a poet, or an essayist. This is especially prominent in the exegesis of the Confucian canons. Under the aegis of various dynastic governments, traditional Chinese scholars brought out a number of so-called correct interpretations of the Confucian canons. Among them, *Wujing zhengyi* 五經正義 (Correct Meanings of the Five Classics) is perhaps the most ambitious project in the endeavor to establish correct interpretations. It is certainly representative of the Chinese hermeneutic impulse to search for the original intention of a text. Because of this dominant trend in the Chinese hermeneutic tradition, Chinese literary thought on openness has remained an unexplored undercurrent despite the fact that ideas similar to and compatible with literary openness have consistently been regarded as a most desirable characteristic feature of first-rate verbal art.

Despite an incredibly early start, up to the present day, literary openness in Chinese hermeneutic tradition has never been systematically

explored. Haphazard inquiries have seldom risen to a theoretic level higher than when the seminal ideas were first formulated. Rarely have intuitive insights into openness been brought to confront opposite ideas as though they belonged to separate currents of thought that were not supposed to meet. As a result, something like an intentionalist theory has prevailed in premodern Chinese literary thought. Generally speaking, a text is usually viewed as an enclosure of words that carries the intention of the author and it is the reader's task to retrieve that intention. Mencius (372–289 BC) believed that a poet's original intention could be recovered through adequate reading, as he said: "Therefore, a commentator of the *Shijing* should not allow literary ornaments to harm the wording, nor allow the wording to harm the intent of the poet. To trace the intention of the poet with the understanding of a reader—only this can be said to have grasped the poet's intention."<sup>23</sup> Mencius' statement is a refutation of an interlocutor's reading of a *Shijing* poem in a different context. He was against contextualizing a poem by supplying a different context but in favor of the restoration of the original context of the poem so as to get the original meaning. From a comparative perspective, Mencius' idea reminds us of E. D. Hirsch's intentionalist theory based on Edmund Husserl's view of meaning as an "intentional object."<sup>24</sup> The similarity lies in that both conceive of meaning as an intentional act willed by the author and fixed in a series of signs, which may be retrieved by the use of the same system of signs.<sup>25</sup> Mencius' idea underlay the exegetical assumptions of traditional hermeneutics that constituted the dominant exegetical trend in the Chinese tradition. However, as James Liu rightly points out, despite the dominance of Confucian moralism and Mencian intentionalism, Chinese literary thinkers, without openly repudiating the mainstream hermeneutic thought in interpretation, "quietly developed other modes of interpretation, which were concerned with neither moralization nor authorial intent but with such linguistic aspects of poetry as prosody and verbal style, or such supralinguistic concepts as 'inspired mood [*xinqu*],' 'spirit and tone [*shenyun*],' and 'world [*jingjie*].'"<sup>26</sup> Ironically, while "endless meaning" has consistently been treasured as a hallmark of good poetry, modern Chinese scholars sometimes have to be reminded by similar Western ideas of the fact that the idea of multiple meaning existed in the Chinese tradition.<sup>27</sup>

With the appearance of Deconstruction, the view of a literary text as a closed entity has been completely shattered in the West. Nevertheless, the controversies over literary openness in reading and interpretation are far from being resolved and many related issues remain unsettled. Whether it be in the Western tradition or in the Chinese tradition, an inquiry into hermeneutic openness and open poetics has a multiple significance for

cross-cultural studies of literature and art, for the theoretical consideration of hermeneutics, and for the practical uses of literary criticism and creative writing.

## Two Hermeneutic Traditions in China

In a provocative book on cross-cultural studies, Roland Barthes calls Japanese culture an “empire of signs.” His epithet would apply to Chinese culture equally well.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, traditional China is, as some scholars put it, an “empire of texts” or “empire of writing.”<sup>29</sup> It takes pride not just in its numerous texts but also in a long tradition of hermeneutics, which centers on exegeses of various classical texts and interpretive theories on poetry, fiction, and drama. Just as in the West, hermeneutics originated from the religious need to interpret Christian classics, so in China, hermeneutics arose as a result of the doctrinal need to interpret state-approved canons. Since most canons are avowedly Confucian classics, Chinese hermeneutic tradition is predominantly Confucian with a dual emphasis on political indoctrination and moral education. There, however, has existed another more intriguing tradition. If we call the dominant tradition a politico-ethical tradition, the other may be termed a metaphysical-aesthetic tradition because it originated from metaphysical and artistic concerns with the conditions of texts. Without openly challenging the dominant tradition, the “other” tradition engages it in a dynamic interaction, which not only enriches Chinese hermeneutics as a whole but also changes the course of Chinese exegetical practice. In the interaction between the dominant and subordinate traditions, there has been a visible but little studied trend, characterized by a movement from exegetic closure required by Mencius’ intentionalist theory to hermeneutic openness guided by a theory of aesthetic suggestiveness. While the Mencian theory dictated the main direction of Chinese hermeneutics, the theory of suggestiveness develops into an intriguing system of hermeneutics, the core principles of which anticipate contemporary theories of reading and interpretation, especially the ideas of literary openness and open poetics.

## Objectives and Scope of Inquiry

This is a study of Chinese theories of reading and interpretation, but because reading and writing are inseparably bound and adequate interpretation depends upon substantial knowledge of language representation, it is also a study of writing. In addition to introducing the Chinese system

of reading and writing theories, it is preoccupied with a cultural practice that the Chinese had been engaged in for millennia before modern times but that has been largely overlooked. In terms of “modernist” and “post-modern” interpretive practice in the West, it may be called “hermeneutic openness.” Of course, the Chinese did not give that cultural practice a conceptual category; nor did they reflect on the phenomenon systematically. What I will do in this study is to give it the conceptual category of “hermeneutic openness,” reflect on it systematically, and tease out conceptual insights that may contribute to the formulation of a transcultural open poetics in reading and writing.

This study examines materials of Chinese hermeneutics mostly in the premodern periods. The analytical data are chosen not only for their formative impact upon the development of Chinese literature and culture, traditional and modern, but also for the fact that over history studies of these materials have already constituted the hermeneutic mainstream in the Chinese tradition. The whole study consists of an introduction, eight chapters grouped into four parts, and an epilogue. The introduction opens the ground for the whole study, describing its nature, identifying its objectives, delimiting its scope, establishing its methodology and approach, and raising some theoretical questions to be answered by the whole research.

Part 1 consists of two chapters and will address general and conceptual issues of reading and writing in Chinese intellectual and aesthetic thought. Chapter 1 conducts a conceptual inquiry into some foundational ideas of reading and writing in the Chinese tradition from a cross-cultural perspective and argues for a reconsideration of the significance of these foundational ideas. By bringing Chinese notions of reading and writing by Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Yang Xiong, Lu Ji, Liu Xie, and other thinkers into a meaningful dialogue with similar notions by modern theorists of hermeneutics like Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Jacobson, Hirsch, and others, it attempts to chart a course of development through the scattered conceptual ideas and work out a model of reading and writing based on them.

Chapter 2 centers on an inquiry into the conceptual insights of openness in Chinese aesthetic thought. It aims at constructing a conceptual framework for exploring Chinese notions of openness in textual exegeses. This part will synthesize scattered ideas of openness from different historical periods into a system with a philosophical basis and make attempts to redefine intuitive insights in terms of conceptual categories. By examining a series of key terms, concepts, and discourses on Chinese literature in relation to contemporary Western literary theories, it argues that although literary openness is a modern concept, its connotations are by no means alien to Chinese literary thinkers. An abundance of Chinese ideas

of suggestiveness not only gestures beyond aesthetic suggestiveness but also effectively forms a Chinese system of open poetics.

Chapters 3 and 4 form part 2. It focuses on the hermeneutic tradition centering on the exegeses of the *Zhouyi* or *Book of Changes*. Adopting a semiotic approach to the *Zhouyi* texts, and examining their relations to interpretations, commentaries, and exegetical methodologies, chapter 3 argues that the *Zhouyi* is an open system of representation and, after examining the mechanisms of its openness, I suggest that although the *Zhouyi* is not generally considered a literary text, *Zhouyi* hermeneutics pioneered for the Chinese tradition an open poetics of reading and writing and formulated some fundamental principles of exegesis that will help open up any text, verbal or imagistic. This chapter will also formulate a semiotic model of reading and representation based on the insights teased out. Chapter 4 focuses on the debates between the *Xiangshu* (Image-Number) school and *Yili* (Meaning-Principle) school in *Zhouyi* hermeneutics with an emphasis on Wang Bi's seminal discourse on the clarification of images. Situating the debate within the larger context of reading and interpretation in the Chinese tradition, I will explore the linguistic, philosophical, and literary significance of the debate beyond the immediate context of *Zhouyi* hermeneutics. By showing how ancient Chinese thinkers have been preoccupied with the conflict between interpretive closure and hermeneutic openness, I suggest that the debate anticipated modern debates in reading and hermeneutics, and its outcome marked a paradigm shift in reading from author-centered exegeses to reader-oriented interpretations.

Part 3 centers on another major hermeneutic tradition: the exegeses of the *Shijing* or *Book of Songs*. In chapter 5, by documenting the exegetical history of a few poems, I suggest that like the *Zhouyi*, the *Shijing* is an open classic, whose textual and extratextual elements contribute to multiple interpretations. Through an examination of the various sources of openness, I advance the notion of an open field as a complex system of signifying relations in a poem. Chapter 6 studies the major approaches to the classic and argues that the *Shijing* commentators and critics from ancient times to the present day have all been bogged down in a search for the original intention or meaning of a given poem. Their blind search, however, has led to a multiplicity of readings and a proliferation of exegetical methodologies and yielded enough insights to form an open poetics of reading and writing. Out of the foundational text in *Shijing* hermeneutics, the Great Preface, I will extract a writing model of intertextual dissemination.

Part 4 turns to textual openness in literary hermeneutics. Chapter 7 concentrates on a few chosen masterpieces from traditional Chinese poetry and makes an attempt to answer a few basic questions: Why does a poem

elicit different interpretations? What makes a poem open to different readings? and To what extent is a poem open to interpretations? The major objective is, therefore, not to offer new and interesting readings, but to locate poetic elements that have contributed to the openness of a poem. Chapter 8 deals with linguistic openness in poetic creation. Since interpretation is understanding, and all understanding is linguistic, special attention is paid to the conscious and unconscious structuring function of poetic Chinese in the formation of open space through the mechanisms of signification and representation. After examining open textual elements, syntactic ambiguity, and inherently open qualities of poetic Chinese, I connect the openness of Chinese poetry with oneiric language and the linguistic model of the unconscious, and suggest that a major source of literary openness in traditional Chinese poetry comes from what I call "linguistic suture," a complex procedure through which the hermeneutic space of a poem is made open. Linguistic suture is at the core of what I would call the "poetic unconscious" and a conscious open poetics.

The epilogue engages in a general inquiry into the positive and negative aspects of open poetics in reading and writing. It first examines some cases of literary inquisitions in Chinese history in relation to controversies in hermeneutic openness and seeks to clarify some hitherto vague and controversial issues in the postmodern inquiry into the nature, function, and value of hermeneutic openness. Second, it analyzes a few famous cases of poetic composition in Chinese history and argues that hermeneutic openness is a positive thing in both reading and writing. It concludes the study by calling attention to the benefits that may be derived from a self-conscious awareness of hermeneutic openness and open poetics.

### Assumptions and Orientations

In contemporary thought, hermeneutics consists of three related strands: (1) hermeneutic theory; (2) hermeneutic philosophy; (3) and critical hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup> My study is not concerned with hermeneutics as a general theory of interpretation, or as a philosophy of life, or as a tool of critique. Because of my preoccupation with some major hermeneutic practices in the Chinese tradition, it seeks to explore the interaction between the politico-moralistic mainstream and the metaphysico-aesthetical undercurrent and its impact upon the perception of the nature of the text, author, reader, and exegesis with an emphasis on the open trend in reading and interpretation. In dealing with literary hermeneutics, I have blurred the subtle distinction between "theory of literature" and "literary theory," advanced by James J. Y. Liu: "the former being concerned with the basic

nature and functions of literature, the latter with aspects of literature, such as form, genre, style, and technique.”<sup>31</sup> In my study, “open poetics” certainly refers to “literary theory,” but “literary openness” is inescapably tangled in “theory of literature.” Whereas openness is defined in terms of the idea of unlimited possibilities in interpretation, open poetics refers to how openness is conceived and made in writing practice.

My first assumption is that hermeneutic openness is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and the impulse for artistic openness in literature has deep roots in the Chinese and Western traditions. As history advanced, it eventually blossomed into a major concern in literary thought, East and West. Ironically, insights of openness generally took the form of blindness in Paul de Man’s conception, especially in the Chinese tradition. For over two millennia, China has produced a staggering amount of exegesis filled with insights of openness. These insights, however, are paradoxical in nature. Many theorists, commentators, and exegetes have proclaimed the endless meaning of a text to be a supreme goal for a literary work, but more have insisted that the aim of interpretation is to seek out the original intention of the author. Few have been willing to acknowledge the openness of a text, still less to recognize the profound implications of their theories, commentaries, and exegeses for a conception of openness and open poetics. By examining selected materials central to the Chinese hermeneutic tradition, *Yijing* and *Shijing* hermeneutics, traditional poetics and literary thought, and commentaries on classical poetry, this study hopes, with the aid of contemporary theories on linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and representation, to tease out enough insights of openness to construct a Chinese open poetics.

My second assumption is that the Chinese hermeneutic tradition has traversed a road of development from exegetic closure to interpretive openness similar to that of the Western tradition. But I suggest that the Chinese tradition arrives at that destination through a quite different route. This study is therefore also an attempt to explore hermeneutic openness from a comparative and cross-cultural perspective. Theory-driven, it is not a study of critical practice but one of poetics, for even in the discussion of individual works, the primary attention will be directed to how a text generates its meanings, and the final goal for critical analysis is not so much to enrich our understanding of a particular text as to tease out insights of openness and to advance open strategies of reading and writing. From a purely theoretical perspective, this study will explore not only the essential factors in theories of reading and writing, such as author, reader, text, context, and meaning, but also these central issues: what constitutes openness in reading and interpretation, how openness is manifested in a particular work, to what extent a conscious use of language and writing

strategies may give rise to different degrees of openness, and how significant an open poetics is for the making of verbal art. Although its immediate aim seems to be one of identifying elements of openness and mechanisms of openness in the selected materials and formulating a hermeneutics of openness in the Chinese tradition, the larger aim is to find new ways of conceptualizing reading and writing and to work toward a cross-cultural open poetics.

*Part I*



Conceptual Inquiries into Reading and Openness

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## *Chapter 1*



# Theories of Reading and Writing in Intellectual Thought

## Reading in a Comparative Context

In contemporary literary thought, theories of reading have constituted an international subject of inquiry. They saw their heyday in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Many international theorists, literary or otherwise, have engaged in this subject at some time and to some extent. The direct reason for the popular interest in the subject may have been what can be called the “theoretical turn” in literary studies, driven by the advancement in hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, representation, mass communication, and so on. The fundamental reason for its popularity, however, seems to lie in the basic question people from different cultures and traditions have been asking themselves throughout the ages: How can one read a text adequately? All the essential factors in theories of reading, such as author, reader, text, context, and meaning, center on this core question.

Whether in the East or West, conceptual inquiries into reading grew out of the practical need to interpret canonical texts. In the West, the rise of theories of reading as a category of inquiry may be said to be concurrent with the rise of classical hermeneutics in the eighteenth century, though sporadic inquiries into the topic appeared much earlier. In China, the beginning of conceptual inquiries into reading may be traced to the fourth century BC. Very early in China, reading constituted an integral part of cultured life and an essential procedure for scholarship. Conceptual

notions of reading began to emerge in high antiquity, as Chinese thinkers engaged themselves in interpretations of classics, history, poetry, arts, and metaphysics. Aware of the gap between language and thought, or *yan* (words) and *zhi* (ideas) in Chinese terminology, they became concerned with the question of how to read a text adequately. Since then, theories of reading have formed a significant part of traditional Chinese hermeneutic thought. Scholars who have pondered on reading are numerous, but their insights are scattered in philosophical treatises, commentaries, prefaces, postfaces, personal letters, and random reading notes on the margins of a text, and even in literary texts themselves.

In this first chapter, I will bring Chinese conceptual notions of reading by some early thinkers into a meaningful dialogue with similar notions by modern theorists of hermeneutics in the West. In so doing, I attempt to reconsider the foundational ideas of reading and interpretation in the Chinese tradition and hope to reconceptualize scattered conceptual ideas into a model of reading. Among early Chinese thinkers, Mencius 孟子 (c. 372–289 BC) and Zhuangzi 莊子 (c. 369–286 BC) are the pioneers in the conceptual inquiries into reading. Although Mencius and Zhuangzi are separated from contemporary Western theorists by time, space, and tradition, their ideas of reading are amazingly similar to those of contemporary theorists. With a comparative move that seeks to break the barriers of time, space, and culture, I wish to explore whether people's conceptions of the nature, rationale, and epistemology of reading share similarities across historical periods and cultural backgrounds, what insights the ancient Chinese ideas may offer into theories and practice of reading, and to what extent we can bring traditional Chinese ideas into a meaningful dialogue with contemporary Western theories.

### Mencius' Positive Thesis of Reading

In traditional literary thought, Mencius and Zhuangzi started their inquiries into the problematics of reading in approximately the same historical period. Mencius (c. 372–289 BC), an older contemporary of Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BC), inaugurated the inquiry into reading with his famous notion “*yiyi nizhi, shiwei dezhi* 以意逆志，是為得之”<sup>1</sup> (to use one's understanding to trace it back to what was on the mind of the author—this is how one grasps the meaning of a text). As this idea shows his optimistic belief that reading can get what is meant in a text, his view may be called a positive statement. Mencius' positive view of reading came from his answer to the inquiry of one of his students with regard to the understanding of poetic lines in a poem from the *Shijing* (the *Book of Songs*).

Xianqiu Meng, one of his students, accepted Mencius' claim that when the sage king Yao was old and abdicated the throne to Shun, Shun did not regard himself as the ruler to whom Yao was a subject, but quoting from a poem in the *Shijing*—"Of all that is under Heaven,/No place is not the king's land;/ And to the farthest shores of all the land,/No man is not the king's subject"<sup>2</sup>—he questioned whether it was appropriate not to regard Shun's blind old father as subject after Shun became the king.<sup>3</sup> To this questioning, Mencius made the following statement concerning the reading of the poem:

This is indeed from the *Book of Songs*, but it is not what you have said. The poem dwells on the poet's inability to care for his parents when he is laboring in royal service. It says, "Isn't it the royal business? Why should I labor diligently alone?" Therefore, a commentator of the *Shijing* should not allow literary ornaments to harm the wording, nor allow the wording to harm the intent of the poet. To trace the intention of the poet with the understanding of a reader—only this can be said to have grasped what is expressed in a poem. The poem "Yunhan" says: "Of the remaining multitudes of the Zhou, not a single person survived." If these words were to be taken literally, then this means that there was not any person left in the Zhou.<sup>4</sup>

Mencius' statement is a refutation of a distorted reading that resulted from contextualizing a poem by supplying a different context. He argued for the restoration of the original context so as to get the original meaning. His reply not only advances a practical method of reading but also implies an inchoate theory of reading. As a practical method, his idea opposes far-fetched readings that result from splitting the text, ignoring the context, and doggedly sticking to the wording of a text. As a theory of reading, Mencius may be the first Chinese thinker to view reading as part of a communication process and an act of decoding within a context.

Mencius' statement involves a number of central issues on reading: textual meaning, authorial intention, context, contextualization, and the reader's approach to a text. Mencius touched upon several issues in a conceptual inquiry into reading. First, he proposed that the meaning of a text should be decided in its own context, not on a few separate elements. Xianqiu Meng's reading was problematic and wrong simply because he committed the common error in reading: to pick a strand of meaning by separating a discourse block from its context. Second, Mencius emphasized the importance of proper contextualization in the reading of a text. He argued against contextualizing a poem by supplying a different context but in favor of restoring the original context of the poem so as to get the original meaning. Third, he argued against understanding words literally

and allowing literary embellishment to hurt the intention of the author. Fourth, he believed that a poet's original intention could be recovered through adequate and sensible reading. His proposed method: "one uses one's own understanding to trace it back to what was originally in the writer's mind" constituted the core of his positive thesis on reading.

Mencius' thesis, when schematized, forms a model that is in essence comparable to the hermeneutic model based on Roman Jakobson's model of verbal communication: "The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication."<sup>5</sup> Although Mencius did not use specific terms like addresser, addressee, context, message, contact and code, almost all of Jakobson's terms are implicitly covered by Mencius' statement. The poet is the addresser. Mencius and his student are the addressees. The poem in its textual form is a point of contact, and *wen* and *ci* are the code; the poet's intent *zhi* is the encoded message; his explanation about the poem's origin forms the context. Mencius' and Xianqiu Meng's acts of reading the poem constitute decoding.

Reading is different from verbal communication in that the addresser is only implied. But despite the addresser's absence, Mencius believed that the process of communication is intact and the communication channel is unblocked because the reader can use *wen* and *ci* (language) as a sure tool to generate his *yi* or understanding and then trace it back to what was originally on the mind of the author. In Mencius' opinion, the encoded message from the author could be decoded by the reader so long as the reader places his act of decoding in a sensible context. The decoded message could, at least in principle, match the encoded message. It is in this sense, that his optimistic belief in verbal communication and decoding may be labeled a positive thesis on reading in Chinese tradition.

Mencius' positive view of reading is based on a positive belief in language as an adequate means of communicating the author's intention. His conviction in language's communicative adequacy is reflected in his famous saying, *zhiyan* (knowing language). Gongsun Chou, another of Mencius' students, asked in what Mencius excelled. The latter replied: "I understand [through] language."<sup>6</sup> When Gongsun Chou asked, "*He wei zhiyan* (What is meant by *zhiyan*)?"<sup>7</sup> Mencius explained: "If someone's words are one-sided, I know what has clouded his mind. If someone's words are exces-