

# **Truth, Morality, Poetics: Language and Silence in Traditional Chinese Culture From Early Times to the Six Dynasties**

*Yong Ren*

## **ABSTRACT**

This essay is a response to a tendency in recent comparative studies on Western and traditional Chinese theories of language to overemphasize the influence of the Daoist view of language in Chinese culture, to the effect of isolating it from the larger historical and intertextual contexts. By tracing the early development of language theories in the Confucian and Daoist traditions, it contends that the Confucian view of language has exerted a dominant impact on the culture, although its lack of ontological concern also prevents it from engaging the Daoist polemic on its own ground. It points out that the vigorous ontological investigation of Laozi and Zhuangzi begins to lose its edge in the Neo-Daoist era, when the "inadequacy of language" becomes the institutionalized doctrine of the elites. The essay focuses, however, on the "aesthetic turn" in Chinese thinking on language in the Six Dynasties (as typically shown in the critical works of Cao Pi, Lu Ji, Liu Xie, and Zhong Rong) resulting in a new concept of the aesthetic and creative potential of language, which may be considered a form of counter-discourse against both the Confucian and the Daoist claims on language. It is also in the Six Dynasties that the Daoist valorization of the "enlightened silence" begins to be transformed into an aesthetic theory of poetic expression.

## **KEY WORDS**

Cao Pi  
Six Dynasties  
Laozi

Language  
Confucianism  
Wang Bi

Confucius  
Zhong Rong  
Lu Ji  
Derrida  
Daoism  
Gadamer  
Heidegger

Liu Xie  
Criticism  
Zhuangzi  
Ouyang Jian  
Plato  
Poetics  
Silence

In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of scholarly interest devoted to comparative studies of Daoist and Twentieth-century Western theories of language.<sup>1</sup> While these studies are largely fruitful and illuminating, they show a tendency of overemphasizing the influence of the Daoist view of language in Chinese culture, to the effect of isolating it from the larger historical and intertextual contexts. In this essay I will attempt to trace some of the significant developments in traditional Chinese thinking on language, with special attention to the crucial transition in the Six Dynasties period (220-589) which may be considered a form of counter-discourse against both the Confucian and the Daoist claims on language. Because of the nature of this investigation, reference to Western concepts of language is made only occasionally, for comparative purposes.

## 1

A prominent feature of the Daoist philosophy is its serious concern with the problem of languages. Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子),<sup>2</sup> the founding philosophers of the tradition, both see language as a system of metaphors alluding to a reality which it can never contain, assimilate, or authentically represent. While the ideas of language contained in *Laozi* (老子) and *Zhuangzi* (莊子) show a similar vein of philosophical skepticism, it is also important to note a degree of internal tension or complexity within the frame of early Daoist writings on language.

"The Dao that can be spoken about is not the constant Dao." (道可道，非常道。) (Chap.1) In this famous opening statement Laozi makes clear the impossibility of grasping the ultimate truth/mystery of the universe through language, since the totality of Dao exceeds the scope of any linguistic unit of symbolization: "The Heavenly Music is hardly audible; the Dao is hidden, without a name." (天音希聲，道隱無名。) (Chap.41) More importantly, Laozi perceives an antithetic relationship between man's capacity for spiritual apprehension and his adeptness at conventional use of language. In Laozi's words, "The great eloquence is that which utters few

words." (大辯若訥。) (Chap.45) With repeated emphasis on the ineffable nature of the Dao, Laozi does imply a functional view of language as a mechanism operating almost entirely outside the realm of human spiritual experience.

In spite of its marked difference from Western metaphysics, the philosophy of Laozi, with its preoccupation with the problem of cosmic origin and clearly hierarchical structure of reasoning (often disguised under a playful relativism), evinces an obviously logocentric inclination. In his *Language-Paradox-Poetics: A Chinese Perspective*, James Liu contends that "the Daoist view of language forms a marked contrast to Western logocentrism" (15). In arguing against Zhang Longxi's notion of logocentrism as a feature of thinking shared by Chinese and Western philosophers, Liu contends that Zhang's concept of logocentrism is based on a rather "broad" understanding of the Western term, without taking into consideration its Derridean or Lacanian associations with phonocentrism and phallogocentrism, or the Christian connotations of the concept (20-25). It needs to be pointed out that discrepancies as such generally do not constitute a valid ground for disqualifying the use of a critical term in cross-cultural contexts, in so far as the cultural specificities of the term in question do not interfere with the issue under discussion. For instance, when James Liu refers to the "general positivistic outlook" of the Confucian approach to literature, he seems comfortably assured that the reader would take it as an analogy rather than an absurd assumption of a perfect match of cultural and historical specifics between the traditions of Confucianism and European Positivism.

James Liu's challenge nevertheless raises an important issue: Is logocentrism necessarily connected with phonocentrism, or is it not? While Zhang Longxi in his article "The *Tao* and the *Logos*: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism" suggests a phonocentric vein in early Chinese writings on language, with a rather dubious use of Zhuangzi's "wheelwright" story, in a later review of James Liu's *Language-Paradox-Poetics* he seems to have changed his mind as he states that "Phonocentrism may not be a problem in the way Chinese think about language," and that phonocentrism and logocentrism are separate issues (193). In his article "Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered," Hongchu Fu finds that Zhang Longxi has demonstrated "persuasively the hierarchy of speech over writing found in Chinese as well as in the West" (306), although he also agrees that such a hierarchy in China is generally "reflecting no logocentric tendency as it is in the West" (308).

The crucial issue involved in this controversy, which Zhang Longxi and Hongchu Fu have only vaguely touched upon, is that the ancient Chinese have two co-existing theories on the origin of writing: One is to see writing as recording of oral speech, and the other one—concerning particularly the invention of the written form of Chinese characters—conceives of writing as an imitation of visual patterns of the natural world. Since the two theories account for different aspects of the written language, critics typically (such as in the case of Liu Xie<sup>3</sup>) refer to both of them as legitimate hypotheses. While Chinese characters in general do represent spoken words, their written forms remain stable as integral parts of the writing system, regardless of the changes in the world of oral representation, and in this way, undermine the phonetic components of the language they originally attach to. As Zhang Longxi points out in his discussion of “the power of Chinese writing”: “Chinese writing tends to project the nature or quality of trace in writing better than any phonetic writing does and thus reveals language as a system of differential terms” (*The Tao and the Logos*, 33). The tradition of attributing the invention of the system of writing to the engineering effort of a single legendary figure, such as Cangjie (蒼頡), implies precisely such a conception.

These observations will allow us to compare Laozi with philosophers in the Western metaphysical tradition since Plato, even though he has not shown any obvious tendency of phonocentrism or phallogocentrism. The similarities between the ideas of language in Laozi and Plato are especially worth noticing. After citing a passage from one of Plato's *Thirteen Epistles* on the inadequacy of language, for instance, Qian Zhongshu (錢鍾書) observes in his *Guan Zhui Bian* (管錘編) that “[this] may almost be seen as an annotation to Laozi.” (幾可以譯注老子也)。(2:410) *Cratylus*, which contains Plato's most concentrated argument on language, is a work of immense complexity in which Plato overwhelms his reader with a constant play of irony. It seems clear, however, that the role Socrates plays in the *Dialogue* is to mediate, or to show the necessity of mediating, between the two extreme views of language. While arguing against the nominalist view of names as merely a matter of convention by confirming a corresponding relationship between linguistic categories and real distinctions in the natural world, Socrates also rejects the notion of objective truth in language, contending that language is also an art, or artifact, which demands its own perfection. Eventually, Socrates turns to the issue of the “stopping point” in the process of naming:

And at what point ought he to lose heart and give up the inquiry? Must he not stop when he comes to the names which are the elements of all other names and sentences? . . . But if, in the end, we obtain something which is incapable of further resolution, then we shall be right in saying that we have at last reached a primary element, which we are no longer obliged to resolve into other names. (3:84-5)

In his typical way, Socrates cries out for help, lest he “fall into the absurdity in stating the principle of primary names” (3:85).

It is in this sense Hans-Georg Gadamer claims to have found the true “intention” underlying *Cratylus*, that is, “to make thought dependent on itself alone” (368). If the Socrates at the beginning of the *Dialogue* seems rather positive in the “correctness” and usefulness of names, he is much closer to Laozi at the end, where his jocular playfulness turns into a grave skepticism of “knowing” and the worth of language, as a whole: “. . . no man of sense will like to put himself or the education of his mind in the power of names” (3:106). Words, that is, provide no access to the pure thought of ideas, which is a dialogue of the soul with itself.

If the author of *Zhuangzi* has obviously shared with Laozi a view of the inadequacy or futility of language in approaching the ultimate Dao, he adds significantly to the tradition by treating the issue with discussions far more substantial and direct than does Laozi’s aphorism. In the thirteenth chapter, for instance, Zhuangzi defines the limitation of linguistic representation in terms of its intrinsic metaphoricity:

Although the world values it [language], I still do not, because it is valued not for what is valuable. For what can be seen when one looks are forms and colors, and what can be heard when one listens are names and sound. How sad is it that people of the world find forms, colors, names, and sound adequate for capturing the nature of things!<sup>4</sup>

世雖貴之，我猶不足貴也。為其貴非其所貴也。故視而可見者，形與色也，聽可聞者，名與聲也。悲夫，世人以形色名聲為足以得彼之情。（“Tian Dao” 天道, 2:488-89）

As language suffers inevitably from its confinement of the senses, it lacks

the necessary deftness required to approach intangible reality.

If ideas of language in the later "outer chapters" of *Zhuangzi* often seem to be echoing, paraphrasing, or enunciating Laozi, in the "inner chapters" the author treats the problem of language with a strikingly fresh and vigorous approach, questioning the ontological status of all linguistic representations:

Speech is not merely the blowing of breath; the speaker has something to say. But what he says is not at all certain. Has something been said? Or has it not? It may be different from chirping of fledglings. But is there really any difference? Or there is no difference?

夫言非吹也，言者有言。其所言者特未定也。果有言邪？其未嘗有言邪？其以為異于鷦音，亦有辨乎？其無辨乎？（“*Qi Wu Lun*” 齊物論，1:63）

This statement is not merely a play of relativist rhetoric, as James Liu interprets it (12), which would allow Zhuangzi to escape the problem of language altogether. It carries, instead, a philosopher's serious inquiry into the possibility of meaning. To Zhuangzi, the assumption of meaning in language as a separate form of existence is problematic in itself. If linguistic representation can be finalized into a reality, Zhuangzi argues, there would then be a signification of this second reality, and soon, in an endless sequence of representation: "The oneness [of the world] and speech would make two; two and another would make three—if it were to go on like this, even the smartest accountant would not be able to keep track of it, not to mention people of ordinary talent!" (一與言為二，二與一為三。自此以往，巧歷不能得，而況其凡乎?) (“*Qi Wu Lun*,” 1:79)

If Lao's functional view of language is reminiscent of Plato, Zhuangzi reminds us of the deconstructionist theory of Jacques Derrida, who claims that meaning can never be present, as essence, in any linguistic unit. However, if in Derrida presence is simply not available, to Zhuangzi, it is a question of accessibility. As Zhuangzi observes, our perceptive and rational faculty may fail us on the simplest test in daily life: "Chickens crow and dogs bark—this is what people know. But even a man of greatest wisdom cannot find an explanation of how they have come to be so from their own words; nor can he use his intelligence to predict what they will do in the next moment." (雞鳴狗吠，是人之所知。雖有大知，不能以言讀其

所自化，又不能以意測其所將為。)(“Ze Yang” 則陽, 4:916) In other words, the limitation of language arises from the same condition of helpless dependence on the senses which has made the human cognitive endeavor, as a whole, such a precarious enterprise.

The Daoist preoccupation with the truth value of language seems to have predetermined its tendency of mistrusting the seductive impact of language. If Plato sees language as mimesis of reality twice removed from its source, Zhuangzi treats the mediacy of language in a similar scheme of hierarchy in his famous “wheelwright” story, in which he perceives the role of language as solely to capture and preserve a real-life object:

When I chop a wheel, if the blows are too slight, the chisel slides and would not catch. If the blows are too hard, the chisel sticks and would not enter. Not too slight and not too hard: This is something one masters with his hands and echoes in his heart. Although one cannot put it in words, there is a knack to it somewhere.

斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之于手應之于心。口不能言，有數存焉其間。(“Tian Dao,” 2:491)

The effectiveness of expression therefore makes only a marginal difference. For even the most skillful description pales when contrasted to the immediacy and full presence of a life experience. On this basis Zhuangzi claims that all books are the “dregs and lees of the ancients.”(君之所讀者，古人之糟粕已夫。)(2:491) To Zhuangzi, there can be no linguistic compensation for the lack of representational truth. What beauty can a human artifact contain, after all, compared with the sublime beauty of nature? In Zhuangzi’s words, “Heaven and Earth have great beauty but do not speak.”(天地有大美而不言。)(“Zhi Bei You” (知北游), 3:735)

The Daoist concern with the seductive impact of language goes, in fact, far beyond disinterested indifference. Laozi and Zhuangzi both warn against crafty use of language, not only because it is, more often than not, attempted for manipulative purposes, but also because of its potential effect of shifting the locus of significance to language itself, thereby threatening to obscure the very issue of truth. From the Daoist perspective, this tendency is merely part of the general debasement of humanity in consequence of the rapid growth of civilization, as shown in the association Laozi makes between clever use of language and market mentality:



“Beautiful words can be for sale, in exchange for status.” (美言可以市尊。) (Chap. 62) But it is with his typical aphoristic charm that Laozi makes his most famous statement on the ultimately conflicting interests between the aesthetic, ethical and representational dimensions of language:

True words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not true.  
Those who are good do not speak well; those who speak well  
are not good.

信言不美，美言不信。善者不辯，辯者不善。(Chap.81)

With a similar inclination to privilege the representational value of language, Zhuangzi also sees the pursuit of verbal beauty as a way of obscuring the true nature of language: “Speech is obscured by decorative eloquence.” (言隱于榮華。)(“Qi Wu Lun,” 1:63) Thus, “the more eloquent the speech, the further away it strays from the point.” (言辯而不及。)(“Qi Wu Lun,” 1:83)

Instead of advocating a plain language, or actually practicing it themselves, Laozi and Zhuangzi invest heavily in the potential of silence. The Daoist concept of silence involves a conscious effort to reach beyond language and the world of finite objects, which constitutes a crucial and authentic access to spiritual enlightenment. It is therefore not an idle state of indifference, but necessitates the mind’s active pursuit of an ultimate level of intentionality: “One who has never spoken for his whole life has never stopped speaking.” (終身不言，未嘗不言。)(“Yu Yan” (寓言), 4:949)

Although Laozi and Zhuangzi both offer refraining from speaking as a piece of practical advice—a way of survival in the world of *realpolitik*, the fundamental assumption underlying the Daoist glorification of silence is its significance as the inner resemblance to the Dao. If the Dao is shapeless, nameless, but full of potentiality, man can approach the Dao only through a spiritual journey of return to his primordial self, which is a silent state of non-distinction. In Laozi’s words, “Scarcity of speech is the natural state [of man’s existence].” (希言自然。)(Chap. 23) Zhuangzi also relates to the significance of silence in terms of its affinity with the Dao: “Eloquent speech is not as good as silence. And since the Dao cannot be heard, listening is inferior to stopping the ears. And this is called the Great Gain.” (辯不若默。道不可聞，聞不若塞。此所謂大得。)(“Zhi Bei you,” 3:747) To call it “Great Gain” is not only to play with paradox, but to install an enormously positive value in the experience of contemplative silence, as

potentially a spiritual journey into the *mysterium tremendum* of the Dao.

## 2

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that early Chinese thought on language had been shaped by the Daoist philosophy alone. Confucius certainly did not take the issue lightly, when he apparently surprised his students by declaring that the first government duty he would perform was to "rectify names" (正名), should his anticipated appointment as the State of Wei come about (*Lun Yu* 13/3). The extensive comments on the socio-political function of language attributed to Confucius in *Lun Yu* (論語), or *The Analects*, reveal a keen insight into the vital impact of language in shaping human behavior. "A gentleman of virtue is anything but casual when his speech is concerned"<sup>5</sup> (君子于其言，無所苟而已矣) (13/3), because correct use of language is instrumental for maintaining or restoring social order and moral integrity. For this purpose, Confucius proposes such concepts as "sincerity" (忠), "truthfulness" (信), "deference," (謹), and "prudence" (慎) as guiding principles for the practice of language,<sup>6</sup> and warns against clever, crafty use of language for its corrupting effect of obscuring the true nature of things. "It is a rarity indeed that a man who practices cunning words and puts on a ingratiating face can be benevolent at the same time." (巧言令色，鮮矣仁。) (1/3) On another occasion, Confucius claims that "Artful words corrupt man's virtue." (巧言亂德。) (15/27)

But perhaps the most important aspect of Confucius' view on language, which has exerted a far-reaching influence on Chinese culture, is one implied in his own way of life, as a hard learner, a tireless teacher, and a diligent compiler of ancient texts. As Confucius describes himself, "Silently to store up knowledge, to learn with unwaning enthusiasm, and to teach without getting weary: These present me with no difficulties." (默而識之，學而不厭，誨人不倦，何有于我哉?) (7/2) This is a person who has truly enjoyed reading and teaching as a life-fulfilling experience; he in fact finds so much pleasure in the occupation that his fondness for learning comes close to a form of addiction: "He exerts himself to such an extent as to forget eating, and the pleasure he finds in doing so makes him forget worries of life and the fact that death is approaching." (發憤忘食，樂以忘憂，不知老之將至。) (7/19)

The love for bookish learning implies that language is far more than just a lubricating agent for the social and political mechanism, that it is in

fact a vital tool for carrying, preserving and transmitting tradition and culture, which allows the learner to transcend the limitation and pettiness of ordinary human existence. For this reason, to Confucius, books constitute not only a storage-space for knowledge and culture, but also a source of inspiration: "I once had the experience of spending a whole day without eating or a whole night sleepless [in thinking for a solution]. This did me no good and the time was not as well spent as it would have been on learning." (吾嘗終日不食，終夜不寢，無益，不如學也。) (15/31) To be sure, Confucius' approach to language has never been a strictly pragmatic one, as he considers verbal embellishment an integral part of the cultivation of a well-balanced benevolent personality. It turns out that "sincerity," "truthfulness," "deference" and "prudence" alone no longer suffice for the verbal expression of such a personality: "Without learning the *Odes*, one does not know how to speak [properly]." (不學詩，無以言。) (16/13)

It is not surprising that later Confucian masters, with their ever urgent agenda of moral education, social reform and cultural restoration, continue to cultivate an ethicopolitical approach to language by maintaining the distinction between constructive and corrupt use of language. Mencius (孟子) (390?-305 BC) claims that the ability to detect falsity in words is in fact one of his specialties: "From biased words I know wherein the speaker is blinded; from immoderate words, wherein his is ensnared; from heretical words, wherein he has gone astray, and from evasive words, wherein he is at the end of his wits." (破辭知其所蔽，淫辭知其所陷，邪辭知其所離，遁辭知其所窮。) (2B/3) Equally active is Mencius in his own pursuit of verbal discourse. Finding himself in the arena of intense competition for ideological dominance among the One Hundred Schools, Mencius declares that the option of silence, even as a way of survival, is simply not available: "How could I love debate for its own sake? I have no other recourse." (予豈好辯哉？予不得已也。) (3B/9) Similarly, the image of an ideal Confucian personality projected by Xunzi (荀子) (313?-238 BC) is also one of a professed talker: "This is what a gentleman of virtue would do with language: He is fond of it in his heart, exercises it safely in his conduct, and finds it a pleasure to discuss it. Therefore a gentleman of virtue is bound to be an eloquent speaker... Therefore a gentleman of virtue is never tired of speaking." (君子之于言也，志好之，行安之，樂言之。故君子必辯。…故君子之于言無厭。) ("Fei Xiang" (非相), 55) In contrast, Xunzi argues, ignorant silence is a clear sign of vulgarity, typical among those who "are more fond of material gains than culture." (鄙夫反是：好其實而不恤其文。) (55)

## 3

It is fair to say that in the early development of Chinese civilization, it is the Confucian rather than the Daoist view of language which has exerted a dominant impact on the culture. On the other hand, however, Confucian masters, preoccupied with their social and moral concerns, also show little interest in treating the problem of language as a form of ontological investigation. The crisis of the Daoist discourse on language seems to emerge, at least at the beginning, not from an outside challenge, but from within.

The paradoxical nature of the Daoist view of language is evident in the early Daoist writings. Laozi questions the plausibility of "naming the Dao" in the sense that the connection between the name and the named seems rather accidental: "I do not know its name; constrained, I designate it 'Dao'." (吾不知其名，強字之曰道。) (Chap. 25) This "confession" reveals, on the other hand, a compelling need for the author to rationalize and communicate is spiritual experience by no other means than "naming" or defining a name, however problematic or flawed the procedure seems to be. Interestingly, after defining man's spiritual union with the Dao as a speechless state of being, Zhuangzi also reflects on how one can possibly approach such a state of existence without using language:

I am born together with Heaven and Earth, and the world and I are one. If the world and I are one, where is the space for speech? But since I have just said that the world and I are one, how can speech not exist?<sup>7</sup>

天地與我并生，而萬物與我為一。既已為一矣，且得有言乎？既已謂之一矣，且得無言乎？("Qi Wu Lun," 1:79)

Also problematic to Zhuangzi is the assumption that a metalanguage exists to allow a discourse on the condition and possibilities of language above and separate from the "conventional usage" which it attempts to objectify:

Now I have presented my speech in this discourse; does this belong to the same category with the speeches of others? Or does it not? Yes or no, it is in the same writing form as the others. There is then no real difference to distinguish between them.

今且有言于此，不知其與是類乎？其與是不類乎？類與不類，相

與為類，則與彼無以異也。(1:79)

This irony becomes painfully apparent in the Neo-Daoist era, when the “meaningless nature” of language becomes one of the favorite topics for lengthy “pure talks” within the elite cultural circle. According to the *Shishuo Xinyu* (世說新語) by Liu Yiqing (劉義慶) (403-444), the elaboration on the inadequacy of language had become so institutionalized in the aristocratic life of the Eastern Jin Dynasty that it constituted little more than a tedious rehashing of a worn-out ritual.

It is evident that by the time of the Six Dynasties (220-589), Chinese thought on language was ready to take a new direction. In his commentary on *Yi Jing* (易經), or *The Book of Change*, Wang Bi (王弼) (226-249), the representative philosopher of Neo-Daoism, creatively expands Zhuangzi's dictum of “getting the meaning and forgetting the words” into an elaborate theory of the representational capacity of signs. Since signs, which in Wang Bi's context designate the mind's reflective conceptions, are made to represent meaning, there is no better way to attain meaning than through signs. For the same reason, words also provide the crucial access to the intelligibility of signs. In this way Wang Bi differs considerably from Laozi and Zhuangzi by reconfirming the mind's necessary dependence on language and signs for understanding. Because of their representational role, words and signs are taken as nothing more than provisional devices, adopted for their utility rather than for their intrinsic values. Understanding, in Wang Bi's program, is thus a process of continuously “leaving behind” the sensuous and the tangible: “Getting the meaning is to forget the signs, and getting the signs is to forget the words.” (得意在忘像，得像在忘言。) (2:609)

If Wang Bi's notion of the inadequacy of language is a widely accepted one in his time, the opposite opinion shows an equally vigorous vein of ontological reasoning. Calling himself “Mr. Iconoclast” (違眾先生), Ouyang Jian (歐陽建) claims that language is capable of fully conveying meaning, in the sense that there cannot be any meaning outside language. In his short essay “Yan Jin Yi Lun” (言盡意論), or “On Language's Capacity of Fully Representing Meaning,” Ouyang Jian begins his inquiry by addressing the apparent paradox of language: if language is indeed external or even superfluous to the essential human transcendent experience, what has made it so indispensable, even to the sages? In reply to his own question, Ouyang Jian explains that language is not external as it seems to be,

but plays a crucial role in the functioning of the human mind: "The reason begotten from the mind cannot develop fully without words; things external, although fixed in their nature, are not distinguishable [to the mind] in the absence of verbal signification." (理得于心，非言不暢。物定于彼，非言不辯。)(109/16b) Ouyang Jian further points out that the fact that the goal of cognition and communication can be achieved through diverse linguistic procedures indicates that there is no "natural" relationship between words and the objects of their signification. In other words, no external criterion exists by which language can be judged or evaluated.

When judgment and recognition are manifest, then names and categories become differentiated; and when words and terms meet [their corresponding realities], the feelings and intentions flow freely. To find the reason for this by racing to its origin, we find that it is not that things have their natural names, or Reason has a fixed designation; it is rather that we differentiate names in order to distinguish the nature of things, and when we wish to proclaim our intention, then we establish names [for them].

鑒識顯而名品殊，言稱接而情志暢。原其所以，本其所由，非物有自然之名，理有必定之稱也。欲辯其實則殊其名，欲宣其志則立其稱。(109-16b)

In other words, cognitive differentiation and linguistic categorization may be considered different aspects of the same process. To Ouyang Jian the relationship is like sound with its echo, or a figure with its shadow—the two are inseparable. (此猶聲發響應，形存影附，不得相與為二矣。)(109/16b) In this way, Ouyang Jian reminds us of an issue which has also been fundamental to Martin Heidegger's philosophy of language: "It's the structure of a simple propositional statement. . . the mirror image of the structure of the thing? Or would it be that even the structure of the thing as thus envisaged is a projection of the framework of the sentence?" ("The Origin of the Work of Art," 24) In his *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer also makes a powerful argument for the inseparability of thinking with language:

Language and thinking about objects are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pre-given system of possibilities of being, with which the signs

at the disposal of the signifying subject are associated. A word is not a sign for which one reaches, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another it is not an existent which one takes up and to which one accords the ideality of meaning in order to make something else visible through it. . . Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already. (377).

While lacking the eloquence and the rigor of philosophical reasoning in Heidegger and Gadamer, and burdened also with the typical indirectness of parallel prose, Ouyang Jian is nonetheless able to sustain a counter discourse against the traditional Daoist theory of language, by problemizing the ontological root of its logocentric preassumptions.

#### 4

A radical reframing of the issue of language takes place, however, not as part of the philosophical debate, but as a direct result of the rapidly growing awareness of literary genealogy, aesthetic values, and individual authorship during the Six Dynasties period, which marks the beginning of traditional Chinese criticism as a self-conscious discipline. A major event of this period is the discovery of the power of language as a vital instrument to carry an author's personal and spiritual experience to posterity. It is nothing short of a miracle to a critic like Cao Pi (曹丕) (187-226) that a piece of literature, seemingly born out of the author's temporal experience, could then endure in its materialized form for an apparently unlimited period of time. In his *Dianlun Lunwen* (典論論文), or *On Literature*, Cao Pi observes:

Human life has its limits, and glory and pleasure are restricted to one's own person: These are bound to come to an end, unlike literature that has an eternal value. This is why the authors of ancient times lodged themselves in the world of writing and displayed their ideas in books and essays. Not depending on records of fine historians, nor attaching themselves to those of high positions, their names and reputation passed down to later generations, quite on their own.

年壽有時而盡，榮辱止乎其身。二者必至之常期，未若文章之無

窮。是以古之作者，寄身于翰墨，見意于篇籍，不假良史之辭，不托飛馳之勢，而聲名自傳于後。(159)

If Confucian authors tend to see the role of language as being to carry and transmit culture and tradition, to Cao Pi, the value of language lies in its potential to preserve individual identity and creative originality. The fact that the writings of the ancients do not fade away but are renewed and made fresh by each generation of readers suggests a real possibility of extending one's presence, though as a transformed and textualized existence, to an immense future audience beyond the boundaries of time and space. In view of this prospect, Cao Pi points out, all the ups and downs, enjoyment and suffering an author may experience within his life span may be seen as obstacles and temptations that he must overcome in the effort of winning immortality.

Significantly, in the attempt to identify the source of the seemingly magnetic impact of words in the literary works that he finds admirable, Cao Pi attributes the effect to something he describes as *qi* (氣), or "spirit" (rather than any representational value). *Qi*, according to Cao Pi, is a quality which is intangible, or even ineffable, but nonetheless securely contained within the verbal frame of the work as its vital essence. Unique in nature and varying from author to author, *qi* is the end product, or effect, of the author's effort to bring out his personal idiosyncrasy through linguistic channels.<sup>8</sup> Cao Pi's comments on the "Seven Masters of the Jian'an," which might be seen as an application of his theory of *qi* in practical criticism, show a keen interest in specifying the aesthetic impact of the masters' works, such as "harmony" (和), "robustness" (壯), "density" (密), or "lofty wonder" (高妙) (158).

This shift of importance to the aesthetic constituent of language has a twofold effect of subverting both the Confucian and the Daoist schemes of hierarchy. In reaction to the Confucian notion of moral correctness as an ultimate criterion for the practice of language, Cao Pi points out that there is simply no corresponding relationship between man's virtue and verbal achievement: "In observing authors of literature in ancient as well as in modern times, I find that they are generally not particularly thoughtful of details of life, few of them can distinguish themselves by their social and moral deeds, as much as by their literary achievement." (觀古今文人，類不護細行，鮮皆能以名節自立。) ("Yu Wu Zhi Shu" (與吳質書), 165) On the other hand, for an author who has set his eye on the future, the Daoist ar-



gument of the ontological uncertainty of language also becomes a rather remote issue. The ultimate purpose of writing for such an author is no longer simply to present a life object for its own sake, or even to come to some spiritual insight at the private level, but to create a textual quality which is capable of transcending the confinement of physical reality. In fact, too much involvement with the "real world" would only hinder the author from receiving posthumous recognition. As Cao Pi observes:

Things that attend to immediate needs are seen to, and the task of a one-thousand-year legacy is left behind. Above, the sun and the moon go away each day in turn; below, mortal bodies and appearances decay: Sooner than he expects, a man runs through his natural course. This is the greatest sorrow for man of noble aspiration.

遂營目前之務，而遺千載之功。日月逝于上，體貌衰于下，忽然與萬物遷化，斯志士之大痛也。(159)

The world of "books and essays" is such a competitive one that it requires lifelong devotion for winning an entrance.

If Cao Pi has only proposed a concept of "the world of writing" as a separate reality, in his *Wen Fu* (文賦), or *Prosepoem on Literature*, Lu Ji (陸機) (261-303) poeticized the concept with elaborate visual imagery. To Lu Ji, visiting such a world through reading is like touring a gallery of unearthly beauty and elegance: "He tours in the halls and the forests of writings, delighted with the elegant charm of beautiful words." (游文章之林府，嘉麗藻之彬彬。) (1:170) One can also become part of this world of exhibition through creative achievement and in this way transcend the confinement of mortal life:

It spreads itself to myriad miles without confronting obstacles,  
 And bridges the gap between ages for countless years.  
 Below, it sets a precedent for future generations,  
 Above, it mirrors the images of ancients.  
 It sustains [the way of the Kings] Wen and Wu when it is in  
 danger of being betrayed,  
 And spreads the sound of the Airs to prevent it from extinction.  
 No road is too long for it to come across,  
 No truth is too subtle to be woven into its web.

Matching mist and rain in nourishing moistening,  
And like ghosts and spirits in their transformations.

恢萬里而無闕，通億載而為津。

俯貽則于來葉，仰觀象乎古人。

濟文武于將墜，宣風聲于不泯。

途無遠而不彌，理無微而不綸。

配沾潤于雲雨，象變化乎鬼神。(1:175)

In this concluding statement of the *Wen Fu*, Lu Ji glorifies the enduring power of words not simply as a tool of preserving individual identities, but as a creative potential of cosmic scope and significance. In other words, it is through the use of language that an individual participates most effectively in the moral, intellectual and spiritual transitions of the human community.

A distinct characteristic of Lu Ji's discourse on literary creation is that he defines the affective impact of language almost exclusively in formal terms. Although writing does have a cosmic or moral purpose, theoretically speaking, it is not to cosmic or moral issues, but to the aesthetic effect of language, that an author must give his focused attention:

The things [described] are of many sorts;

The style [of description] frequently shifts.

In matching meaning[with reality] one values skill;

In picking [the right] words, one values beauty.

The sound alternates in such an orderly manner,

That it is like five colors enhancing one another's glory.

其為物也多姿，其為體也屢遷。

其會意也尚巧，其遣言也尚妍。

暨音聲之迭代，若五色之相宣。(1:172)

By the same token, a "flawed" piece of writing, according to Lu Ji, is not one that contains a wrong message, or one deficient in representing an object, but rather one that evinces imperfection in structure and expression.

While Confucian moralism seems to have lost, to a considerable degree, its hold on the literati of the Wei-Jin period, Lu Ji's formalism and aestheticism emerge in an era which may be described as the heyday of Neo-Daoism. In this context, adopting and appropriating Daoist paradigms becomes a distinct discursive strategy of *Wen Fu*. In relating to the experi-

ence of literary creation as ultimately ineffable, Lu Ji evokes the popular Neo-Daoist theme of the ontological gap between words and meaning: "Constantly present is the feeling of regret that the meaning apprehended does not represent the object observed; and, furthermore, words fail to arrive at meaning." (恆患意不稱物，文不逮意。) (1:170) But Lu Ji's insight into the difficulty of language as a medium of representation does not lead to a depreciation of language; on the contrary, to Lu Ji, it is precisely the challenge of transcending established boundaries of conventional language which gives the strongest push for creative competition. Perfection, rare as it is, is nonetheless possible. Is it too much to hope for, Lu Ji contemplates, that such perfection may even be attained in criticism, so that "Some day we may almost come to say that the subtlety [of the experience of writing] has been fully brought out?" (他日殆可謂曲盡其妙。) (1:170) To Lu Ji's author, the motivation for writing arises not from preoccupation with a certain object, but rather, from the internal desire for creative pleasure and aesthetic perfection:

The sheer enjoyableness of this endeavor,  
Is surely why it has been treasured by the sages and worthies,  
As an act of asking non-existence to yield existence,  
And knocking on silence in search of sound.  
伊茲事之可樂，固聖賢之所欽。  
課虛無以責有，叩寂寞而求音。(1:171)

In such a memorable way, Lu Ji employs familiar Daoist vocabulary to frame what may be considered a counter discourse to the Daoist concept of language as representation, or a makeshift substitute.

## 5

If the tension between the traditional and the "modern" aesthetic views of language is palpable in the writings of Cao Pi and Lu Ji, no one has made a more painstaking effort to close the gap than Liu Xie (劉勰) (466?-520?) does in his monumental *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍), or *The Literary Mind Carves the Dragons*. While playing a major role in promoting the new trend, Liu Xie initiates a systematic attempt to contextualize the issue in traditional terms of ontological inquiry and cosmic speculation, to the extent of inventing a peculiar system of cosmology largely his own.

The net effect of this innovative "return" to cosmology is to give words (*yan* 言) and writing, or the aesthetic substance of writing (*wen* 文),<sup>9</sup> a more grandiose status than ever before. In Liu Xie's scheme of the "trinity" of Heaven, Earth, and the Mind as key components of the universe, the aesthetic *wen* is anything but superfluous and "external." In a larger sense, nature also has its *wen*—its shapes, colors, and sound that please our senses and touch our heart:

As for the mixture of various colors, and the distinction between square and rounded shapes—with these the sun and the moon unfold their brilliance to manifest the patterns of Heaven, and mountains and rivers brighten their splendor to form the shape of the land: this may be seen as the *wen* of the Dao.<sup>10</sup>

夫玄黃色雜，方圓體分。日月疊璧，以垂麗天之象。山川煥綺，以鋪理地之形。此蓋道之文也。（“Yuan Dao” (原道), 1)

Are these patterns merely external and trivial adornment, Liu Xie asks, or do they have an origin deep in the nature of things? (夫豈外飾，蓋自然爾。) (1) If, Liu Xie asks, even unintelligent things such as plants and animals all have their beauty, how much more so should it be with a subject endowed with a conscious mind? In other words, language, or the aesthetic use of it, arises from the mind's natural impulse to manifest itself: "When the Mind is born, words are established. And when words are established, writing appears—these happened in a natural sequence." (心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也。) (1) This is to say that the process of the Mind's "externalization" is also one of its self-fulfillment and self-realization.

In historical retrospect, this elaborate system of cosmological design in the opening chapter of *Wenxin Diaolog* constitutes a landmark in the development of classical Chinese theory of language in that it contains the first serious and systematic attempt to confirm language's capacity of illuminating truth. What better examples can be found of this capacity of language, Liu Xie asks, than the magnificent presence of the Confucian classics as the carrier of the otherwise inaccessible Dao? For it is through the words of the classics alone that we may attain a grasp of the intellectual and spiritual essence of Confucius' teaching and a vision of his personal character and charisma:

Attainable to us are the writings of the Master—this is to say

that the sentiments of the sage are captured in words. The early kings' noble teaching spreads through the volumes of documents; the personal grace of the Master emerges from his model sayings.

夫子文章，可得而聞，則聖人之情，見乎文辭矣。先王聖化，布在方冊；夫子風彩，溢于格言。（“Zheng Sheng”（征聖），15）

In contrast to the Daoist concept of ultimate truth as inaccessible to the senses and the linguistic faculty, Liu Xie proposes the notion of Divine Reason (神聖) as the Dao's intrinsic tendency to reveal itself through signs and patterns:

From this we know that the Dao resides in words through the hands of sages; [in other words,] sages illuminate the Dao with writings . . . The reason that some words have their impact felt in the whole world is that they are no other than the manifestation of the Dao.

故知道沿聖以垂文，聖因文而明道。…辭之所以能鼓天下者，乃道之文也。（“Yuan Dao,” 2）

To be sure, what is crystallized in this cosmic process of manifestation still does not suffice for a full presence of truth. But even a tangible aspect (or “trace”) of the Dao can be so vital as to constitute an origin all by itself: “It is capable of generating countless ramifications without reducing its own energy; with applications day after day, its resource remains inexhaustible.”（旁通而無滯，日用而不匱。）(2) In Liu Xie's metaphorical comparison, the status of the Confucian canons is like the magnificent Mount Tai, which takes root in the phenomenal world but also extends itself to the great mystery of the ultimate Other, receiving and passing down its “rain” to vast regions below.（太山遍雨，河濶千里。）（“Zong Jing”（宗經），22）

While Liu Xie's glorification of the Confucian classics requires a degree of borrowing from the scholastic tradition of the Han Dynasty, he also makes a radical departure from the tradition, by approaching the Confucian texts as aesthetic presence. To Liu Xie, it is the supreme textual beauty of the Confucian classics which lends the most eloquent proof of their spiritual authenticity and cosmic value: “The elegant beauty of the sagely writings is indeed endowed with both the blossom [of verbal beauty] and the fruit [of moral and spiritual substance].”（聖文之雅麗，固銜華而佩實者也。）

("Zheng Sheng," 16) The concept of "modeling on the classics" (宗經) as a central theme of *Wenxin Diaolong* thus entails not reworking or elaborating on specific Confucian doctrines, but a keen apprehension of their embodied principle of articulation and expression. According to Liu Xie:

An author who follows the model of the classics successfully is more apt to attain these six qualities in the impact of his writing: that his emotion is deep, without affectation; that his style is pure and suffers no inconsistency; that his references are trustworthy, untarnished by falsehood; that his ideas are upright, without evasiveness or perversity; that his form is succinct, allowing no prolixity or disorder; and that his words are beautiful without indulgence in excess.

故文能宗經，體有六義：一則情深而不詭，二則風清而不雜，三則事信而不誕，四則義直而不回，五則體約而不蕪，六則文麗而不淫。(“Zong Jing,” 23)

Apparently, these are simply the qualities Liu Xie has in mind for all "good writing." In this way Liu Xie proposes a strikingly fresh view of the legacy of Confucian writings, which is to see the problem of language as the central—if often implicit—subject of all Confucian classics. In spite of the apparent discrepancy in reference and style, Liu Xie argues, Confucian canons each arrive at the level of great *wen* in their own way, sustaining an underlying unity: "It is the unique depth of the sagely writings which each give rise to a distinguished pattern of expression." (此聖文之殊致，表裡之異體者也。) ("Zong Jing," 22) In this mode of thinking, language can no longer be seen as a neutral or accidental element of the Confucian texts, or, for that matter, anything less than a constituent of the spiritual essence of the Confucian doctrine.

If Liu Xie's concept of language as essential human experience sets the ground for his continuous attack on the "formalist" tendency of his time, which implies a view of language as merely a technical matter, it also lends crucial support to his defense of the aesthetic cause, which makes him the first critic to stand in direct confrontation with the Daoist view of language. In defending Confucius against the charge of being "devoted to decorative arts" made by Yan He (嚴闔), a character in one of Zhuangzi's "fables," Liu Xie declares that Yan "fails in his attempt to undermine the sagehood of Confucius." (雖欲訾聖，弗可得已。) ("Zheng Sheng," 16) To

him, the beauty of the Confucian texts is that of a perfect balance between embellishment and substance—"blossom and fruit." Liu Xie also suggests a "deconstructive" reading of Daoist and Legalist texts, in a way he describes as "savoring" (研味), or "scrutinizing" (詳覽), in the effort to bring out the hidden or "unconscious" side of their involvement with language: "Reading Zhuangzi and Han Fei closely, we find that they are clearly on the excessive side in managing the relationship between substance and verbal embellishment." (詳覽莊韓, 則見華實過乎淫侈。) ("Qing Cai" (倩彩), 537) In other words, the writings of Zhuangzi and Han Fei exemplify the trend of the Warring states Period, which is to put increasing emphasis on verbal effect (537). In his oft-quoted critique of Laozi, Liu Xie balances Laozi's antagonism against verbal beauty with the observation that the exquisite beauty of Laozi's writing implies a distinct aesthetic impulse:

Because of his distain for falsehood, Laozi claims that beautiful words are not true. However, his own work of five thousand words are refined and delicate; it is then clear that he has not forsaken beauty, after all.

老子疾偽, 故稱美言不信。而五千精美, 則非棄美矣。 ("Qing Cai," 537)

In explaining such an apparently paradoxical situation Liu Xie concludes that "the desire for a subtle balance between substance and verbal beauty finds its root in basic human nature." (研味《孝》《老》, 則知文質附乎性情。) (537) Interestingly, Liu Xie is careful to present his critique of Laozi not as a doctrinal position, but as an observation of what he understands as basic and self-evident in the human condition.

Like the Christian concept of the Incarnation, Liu Xie's view of the cosmic significance of language also involves a degree of mystery. For in an ultimate sense, the Word for Liu Xie is not an isolated phenomenon of human utterance, but the expression/manifestation of the cosmic Mind which pre-dates any individual human existence. The impulse for language arises, therefore, not from an individual's need to relate to an external object, but rather from an internal push of the cosmic Mind, which is prototype of all verbal creations in concrete forms, including the Confucian classics.

This vision of language-making as cosmic process and "pure event" shows a remarkable affinity with some of the Twentieth-century theories

of language, such as Martin Heidegger's view of the hermeneutic structure as the "preontological" condition of human existence. "Language speaks," Heidegger claims, and "mortal speech must first of all listen to the command. . . . Every word of mortal speech speaks out of such a listening, and as such a listening" ("Language," 193, 209). Liu Xie also attributes the driving force of mortal speech to a cosmic impetus. After enumerating the incidents of miraculous emergence of sacred texts in the Confucian legends, he asks: "What made all these happen, if not the Divine Reason itself?" (誰其尸之? 亦神理而已。) ("Yuan Dao,"<sup>2</sup>) In this way Liu Xie's notion of the cosmic significance of language opens the possibility of a powerful critique of the Daoist philosophy of language. For if language does have a cosmic origin, and if humanity itself is conditioned by language *a priori*, the attempt to objectify language as a "problem," or an "option," seems pointless, if not absurd.

Liu Xie's view of language as cosmic event does not, however, prevent him from seeing language also as an act of individual practice and invention. Language speaks, but we also speak language. And in its localized settings language does express inner feelings and represent outside objects. In this way, Liu Xie's dialectic approach comes full circle. In fact, it is Liu Xie's close examination of the problems of linguistic representation at the practical level that allows him to develop an elaborate theory on the creative process. Speaking or writing, Liu Xie observes, involves an effort of transforming the intangible inner intention or conception into concrete forms of expressions though sound or signs: "Conception is derived from thought; and words from conception." (意授于思, 言授于意。) ("Shen Si" (神思), 494) Sometimes the internal process is triggered by an external object; in this case, the experience may be described as "Emotion is affected by the thing; and words follow emotion." (情以物遷, 辭以情發。) ("Wu Se" (物色), 693) This process of externalization, if at all successful, always results in concretization of expression in linguistic units:

Following a moved emotion, words are formed; when Reason is evoked, writing appears: this may be described as a process of tracing the hidden in the effort to make it manifest, and complying the internal to make it tally with the external.

夫情動而言形, 理發而文見, 蓋沿隱而致顯, 因內而符外者也。 ("Ti Xing" (體性), 505)



Is writing a response to, or a representation of, an object in the external world? Or does it actually follow language's intrinsic rules and is a product of the mind itself? In a tactful but nonetheless profound way Liu Xie answers: It is both.

To describe the force and to limn the features, one must follow the way things turn out; to capture the colors and record the sound, one must likewise accord with the vacillation of the heart.

寫氣圖貌，既隨物以宛轉，屬彩符聲，亦與心而徘徊。（“Wu se, 693”）

Like Lu Ji, Liu Xie also stresses the enormous gap between the internal and the external, intention and expression, which makes the transitional process enormously difficult and constantly frustrating. In Liu Xie's words, “The process in which the mind generates literary writing involves organizing and tailoring hundreds of thoughts.” (夫心生文辭，運裁百慮。) (“Li ci”(麗辭), 588) To Liu Xie, like Lu Ji, it is precisely in overcoming the transitional difficulty that the secret of literary greatness lies. In Liu Xie's vocabulary, the author who has achieved this transition is like one who has overcome gravity and is able to fly.

## 6

If an author may feel at the personal level that he has successfully transformed his vision or experience into an aesthetic presence, the question remains whether this aesthetic value will be safely contained within the verbal frame of his work, allowing future anonymous readers to retrieve through hermeneutic reconstruction. In the opening of his chapter on “Critical Appreciation” (知音), Liu Xie indicates that a penetrating insight that fully justifies the intrinsic value of a literary work is attainable, but extremely scarce in actual situations of critical evaluation. “Authentic understanding is hard to find, isn't it?” (知音其難哉!) (“Zhi Yin”(知音), 713) In Liu Xie's observation, it is something so rare to find that one may take it as an ideal condition which is only theoretically possible: “The tone of words is indeed hard to comprehend, and those who have real understanding of the tone are indeed hard to find. [For an author] to find an understanding critic—one may say that such a thing happens once in a thousand

years.” (音實難知·知實難逢·逢其知者·千載其一乎!) (713) In this way, Liu Xie shows a much more sharpened awareness of the complexity of the hermeneutic problem than that of earlier critics.

Liu Xie continues by giving three reasons for this difficulty of understanding: first, the tradition of valorizing ancient authors at the expense of contemporary talents; second, personal and sectarian biases; and third, lack of knowledge and good judgment (713). With direct borrowing from earlier critical writings, such as from Wang Chong (王充), Ge Hong (葛洪), and Cao Pi (曹丕), Liu Xie treats the issue with only sketchy overviews, which makes his theory of literary reception much less substantial than his approach to the creative process. While emphasizing self-evident reasons for critical misunderstanding and misjudgment, Liu Xie seems to have only touched upon the less obvious but more fundamental issues, i.e., the necessary historicity of understanding, and the mediacy of language.

To be sure, Liu Xie in his *Wenxin Diaolong* has shown a remarkably sophisticated view of the powerful but often arbitrary ways politics, ideology, and cultural fashions affect aesthetic perception. If Liu Xie is keenly aware that the creation of a literary work may be profoundly affected by the cultural historical circumstance of its time and the life experience of the author, he needs to take another step to realize that reading is an equally personal and culture-bound experience, involving the projection of the reader's own values and preconceptions into the textual world. To complicate the matter further, in order to understand, the reader needs to come to a grasp of the “content” of the text through language, which is neither a transparent medium of representation, nor a reliable mechanism for registering and transmitting “meaning,” even at the basic functional level.

Without taking these problems into serious consideration, Liu Xie seems to have raised a question which he could not answer adequately himself. For if correct understanding requires only good knowledge and an open, cultivated mind, the low success rate of critical understanding would imply an unreasonable proportion of errors and negligence among literary professionals.

In his effort to rise above this question, Liu Xie conceptualizes the process of reading as a way of tracing back to the state of mind of the author. Not necessarily identifying the text with auctorial intention, he contends that the text always affords enough clues for the reader to attain an adequate, authentic insight into the author's inner world, through a deli-

cately controlled exercise of textual study and reconstructive imagination:

The first experience of the author is his inner feeling, which he then seeks to express in words; the reader, on the other hand, by tracing through the written words, works himself into the feeling of the author. With this endeavor of tracing the waves of water back to their source, even the most hidden and obscure emotion will be revealed.

夫綴文者情動而辭發，見文者披文以入情，沿波討源，雖幽必顯。  
(715)

Though the text can never make up for the loss of the full presence of the author, it offers an authentic but also challenging possibility of recovering his unique personality: While the physical appearance of the author has long passed beyond our view, by carefully examining his writings we can always come to a vision of his mind." (世遠莫見其面，亂文輒見其心。)  
(715)

As for the mediacy of language, Liu Xie argues that, after all, writing is a medium far less impeding than some of the more abstract kind of art forms: "When a man's mind is set on mountains and rivers, his inner feelings may be expressed by the sound of the lute. How could the reasoning of the mind become obscured, then, when it is crystallized in writing?" (夫志在山水，琴表其情，況形之筆端，理將焉匿?) (715) In this way Liu Xie seems to contradict the statement he has made at the beginning of the chapter, by installing a positive possibility for authentic reading and understanding.

This confidence in the possibility of bridging the gap between the author and the reader does not imply that Liu Xie sees interpretation primarily as a matter of positivistic restoration of the auctorial intention. Actually, Liu Xie does not show any serious interest in investigating biographical details surrounding any particular literary work; nor is he preoccupied with recovering the temporal "state of the mind" of the author in the actual creative process. To Liu Xie, "understanding," or even "reading the author's mind," involves a more direct grasp of the text itself, which always entails an aesthetic judgment. Making this judgment, according to Liu Xie, requires not extensive historical research, but rather a close reading of the text itself, and a command of its intertextual contextuality. And it is precisely in this direction one needs to move in preparing oneself to be an understanding critic: "Generally speaking, one who has practiced one

thousand melodies can then understand music, [just as] one who has seen one thousand swords can then become a connoisseur of fine arms.” (凡操千曲而後曉聲·觀千劍而後識器。) (715) In other words, to understand is not merely to come to some factual knowledge, but rather to be able to recognize the originality of the work by locating it in the map of its intertextual relations. In Liu Xie's own expression, “To understand is but to see the difference.” (見異唯知音耳。) (715)

It is again Liu Xie's faith in the enduring value of aesthetic establishment that affords the crucial underpinning to his positive view of the hermeneutic project: “Divine animals such as the unicorn and the phoenix are remarkably different from ordinary hornless deer and wild chickens; pearls and jade are immeasurably superior to gravel and rocks.” (夫麟鳳與麋雉懸絕·珠玉與礫石超殊。) (714) Understanding is possible because aesthetic distinction is true and recognizable, and is capable of penetrating historical distance and the mediacy of language to make its impact felt. Exactly for this reason, an author may count on the hermeneutic responses of anonymous readers for continuous revitalization of his work as aesthetic presence, even though his personal identity and the historical reference of his work may remain largely concealed from them. The communication between the author and the reader thus takes place primarily at the intellectual and discursive level:

The universe is boundless and everlasting, and worthy men are numerous and varied. If one is to stand out from the crowd or rise above one's peers, it can only be by wisdom and skill, and nothing else. Time is fleeting and human life is transitory. If one wishes to send aloft one's reputation and give wings to one's achievements, it can be only through writing, and nothing else.  
夫宇宙綿邈·黎獻紛雜·拔萃出類·智術而已。歲月飄忽·性靈不居·騰聲飛實·制作而已。(“Xu zhi”(序志), 727)

In his typical euphemistic way, Liu Xie expresses his own desire to address a vast audience posthumously through the writing of *Wenxin Diaolong*: “In remote ages to come [this work of mine] may continue to confuse the sight of the forthcoming generations as dust.” (渺渺來世·尚塵彼觀也。) (727)

## 7

If by defining language as a cosmic phenomenon and essential human experience Liu Xie simply cancels physical silence as an option; he also plays a crucial role in transforming the Daoist discourse on silence into an aesthetic issue, by directing focused attention to the allusive potential of language. In the chapter on "The Implicit and Outstanding Beauty" (隱秀), Liu Xie proves to be the first critic in Chinese literature to isolate the use of "space" in language as a separate critical issue: "The most distinguished works in literature have both of these qualities: brilliance and implicitness." (文之英蕤，有秀有隱。) ("Yin Xiu" (隱秀), 632) A "meaningful silence" is possible because language is capable of contextualizing a designated space, to the effect of carrying an "unspoken" message: "The term 'implicit' designates the presence of an important message outside words." (隱也者，文外之重旨也。) (632) The texts endowed with implicit beauty are superior in that they fully explore the inner dynamics of language by creating a maximal effect of indeterminacy and multiplicity of meaning. "The implicit, as a form of style, suggests that the meaning is produced beyond the words. Its secret echoes are indirectly understood, while its crouching beauty radiates beneath the surface." (夫隱之為體，義生言外，秘響傍通，伏彩潛發) (632) Such a beauty, Liu Xie observes, has a special capacity to lead the reader into active participation in a process of hermeneutic realization of the text, where the reader's interpretive solutions become multiple extensions of the text itself. "The depth of a work may be hidden or clouded; but its lingering taste is indirectly included in it." (深文隱蔚，余味曲包。) (633) In this effort to explore the poetic potential of space, Liu Xie begins a new trend in traditional Chinese criticism, which later becomes an influential theory of poetic language in the hands of Sikong Tu (司空圖) (837-908) and Yan Yu (嚴羽) (?).

In spite of the monumental scope and depth of Liu Xie's theory of language and literary invention, it is the poetics of his contemporary critic Zhong Rong (鍾榮) (468-518) which seems to have anticipated more directly the later development of Chinese criticism. In his *Shi Pin* (詩品), or *Ranking of Poetry*, Zhong Rong exerts a far-reaching influence on Chinese criticism in two significant ways: one is to shift the emphasis to practical criticism, and in this way, moving away from the ontological ground of critical investigating altogether the other one is to develop a critical vocabulary aimed at capturing the aesthetic feel of the poetic language.

At the opening of his preface to *Shi pin*, Zhong Rong develops a pattern of making quick token gestures to all the transcendental agents traditionally held responsible for poetry:

The spirit (*qi*) of nature influences things, things affect men. Men, having their natural attributes and feelings moved and agitated, give expressions to them in dance and song. [Poetry is thus] an illumination of Heaven, Earth, and Man, and a beautification of all things. Divine spirit awaits it as the offer of sacrifice, depending on it, the most subtle distinctions in the universe are revealed. To move the Heaven and Earth and to bring gods and ghosts to tears, nothing can compare with poetry.<sup>11</sup>

氣之動物，物之動人，故搖蕩性情，形諸舞詠。照燭三才，暉麗萬有。靈祇待之以致餉，幽微籍之以昭告。動天地，感鬼神，莫近于詩。(1:1)

With this galloping speed in referring to one standard signifier of poetic origin after another, Zhong Rong shows an impatience with, rather than interest in, cosmological or ontological projects as a way to establish the *raison d'être* of something which seems to him rather self-evident. With an almost "anti-theoretic" undertone in its particular context, Zhong Rong asks: "When exposed to the affective power of nature and the intensity of the human drama, how can one not seek in poetry for an emotional outlet?" (非陳詩何以展其義，非長歌何以騁其情？)(1:2)

In contrast to his seemingly unsystematic way of treating critical issues, Zhong Rong makes an elaborate effort to develop a critical vocabulary which aims at capturing the aesthetic impact of language by "simulating" its effect through figurative and allusive use of natural images, such as clouds, winds, storms, pine trees, flowers, mountains, rivers, jade, gold, birds, dragons, and so forth. This tendency to poeticize the critical "metalanguage" later takes an extreme form in Sikong Tu's *Ershi Si Shi Pin* (二十四詩品), or *Categorization of Poetry, in Twenty-Four Poems*, where the critic confines his critical expressions exclusively to a poetic form and an "elliptical, non-discursive, image-laden language" (Yu 82). While the method may be termed an "impressionistic" one, it bears a theoretical implication of reconfirming the accessibility of aesthetic values through intuitive knowledge.

Also important is Zhong Rong's assertion of "aftertaste" as one of the three major poetic principles: "Words are limited, but there is always more

to meaning.” (言有盡而意有余。) (1:2) By dramatizing the relationship between words and the meaning(s) they are capable of carrying, Zhong Rong sets the crucial critical paradigm for the poetics of silence in the Tang and the Song Dynasties. For example, in his *Shi Shi* (詩武), or *Patterns of Poetry*, Jiaoran (皎然) (730-799) proposes the concept of “ideal poetry” as one in which “only sentiments and personalities are visible, but not words.” (但見情性，不睹文字。) (1:31) To Sikong Tu, it is a kind of poetry that “captures all the charm and beauty without placing a single character.” (不著一字，盡得風流。) (1:40) To Quyang Xiu (歐陽修) (1007-1072), poetry reaches the level of excellence when it “contains inexhaustible meaning beyond words.” (含不盡之意，見于言外，詩乃佳爾。) (1:267) Yan Yu, in making his own dictum, shows a direct borrowing from Zhong Rong, by describing “intangible” poetry as one with “limited words but unlimited meaning.” (言有盡而意無窮。) (2:668) In short, it seems justified to see Lix Xie and Zhong Rong as forerunners of a long tradition in Chinese criticism which prefers an underspoken quality in poetry.

## 8

For an overview, we may observe that the Chinese conception of language experiences a crucial transition in the Six Dynasties era, when the more traditional views, such as the Confucian pragmatic moralism and the Daoist philosophical skepticism, give way to a new concept of language which emphasizes its aesthetic value. This historic transition affords us a significant context to reflect on some contemporary arguments on language and traditional Chinese poetics.

In his critique of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy, Donald Wesling argues that “Chinese philosophical and literary tradition, for instance in such works as Lu Chi's [Lu Ji's] *Essay on Literature* and Liu Hsieh's [Liu Xie's] *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, is to the same extent as the Western tradition subject to the myth of origin and presence” (111). James Liu also agrees that the writings of Lu Ji and Liu Xie show a logocentric tendency (25).

While these claims may find support in passages and phrases in *Wen Fu* and *Wenxin Diaolong* quoted in isolation, a close reading of Lu Ji and Liu Xie, considered against the larger background of the “aesthetic turn” in the conception of language at the time, would make us realize that their cosmic claims are largely strategic, if not merely rhetorical. If anti-

aesthetic critics of the Twentieth century tend to see a relationship of complicity between aesthetics and the dominant ideology, derived primarily from a Western perspective, the emergence of aestheticism in Chinese criticism tells a much more painful story of a marginal discourse forcing itself into the established frames of two powerful ideological institutions.

By fabricating its own cosmological program, the new discourse seeks to justify, in metaphysical terms by necessity, a practice of language which is preoccupied with neither recovering cosmic truth (origin), nor commanding existing objects of the real world (presence), but instead with "playing" with the signifier themselves. This discourse is not so "free," however, as Derrida claims, because it abides by the rules of the textual world as a separate reality.

While the notion of self-sufficiency of language may seem rather close to Derrida's concept of an "ideal language," the Chinese critical experience also implies a disillusionment with such a "dream language," in revealing that institutionalized aestheticism also runs the risk, like any ideology, of becoming a closed, repressive system. It may seem ironic that in the post-Six Dynasties era, it is critics of Confucian, rather than Daoist, tendency who have put out the most persistent resistance against the formalist view of language, by insisting upon language's necessary attachment to the outside world—the subject, the reference, and history. In the Six Dynasties, no one had anticipated this prolonged battle earlier and better than Liu Xie does in his *Wenxin Diaolong*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 231; A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 227; James Liu, *Language-Paradox-Poetics*, Chapter One; Michelle Yeh, "The Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu," 95-6, 101-5, 115-21; Zhong Longxi's article "The Tao and the Logos" and his later book *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, Chapter One, and his review of James Liu's *Language-Paradox-Poetics*; Hongchu Fu, "Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered," Part II, and Christopher Connery's review of Zhang Longxi's *The Tao and the Logos*.

<sup>2</sup> "Laozi" and "Zhuangzi" in this essay refer to assumed authors rather than historical persons.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the first chapter of *Wenxin Diaolong*, Liu Xie as-



sumes that spoken words precede written signs: (心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也。) (“Yuan Dao” (原道), 1) But later in the book, he also follows the tradition of seeing the written language as being inspired by the patterns of the natural world: “When sets of written signs emerged, they replaced the practice of knot tying; with the observation of the marking of birds, written documents were created... When Cang Jie made it (the written system), ghosts cried and heaven rained grain.” (夫文象列而結繩移，鳥跡明而書契。…倉頡造之，鬼哭粟飛。)(“Lian zi” (練字), 623)

<sup>4</sup> For translating passages from *Zhuangzi*, I have consulted Burton Watson’s translation *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia UP, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> For translation of passages from *The Analects*, I have consulted D. C. Lau’s translation *Confucius: The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese UP, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> See *The Analects*, 15/6, 13/20, 12/23, 10/1, 19/25, 1/13.

<sup>7</sup> This translation is based on Wing-tsit Chan’s translation of the chapter in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 186.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the concept in traditional Chinese criticism, see Pollard, “Ch’i in Chinese Literary Theory.”

<sup>9</sup> Liu Xie intentionally makes *wen* a versatile term in *Wenxin Diaolong*. In its broadest sense, *wen* refers to external patterns of things in physical as well as mental realities. *Wen* also designates “writing,” as in juxtaposition with *yan*, or “spoken word.” In its narrowest sense, *wen* signifies literariness, stylistic beauty, or the affective impact of writing, a quality which could be isolated and analyzed, as Liu Xie believes, in all forms of writing—canonical, bells-lettristic, or practical. In this essay, I use “aesthetic substance” or “aesthetic value” to render this particular concept of *wen* in *Wenxin Diaolong*.

<sup>10</sup> For translating passages from Liu Xie’s *Wenxin*, I have consulted Vincent Yuchung Shih’s translation *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (New York: Columbia UP, 1959).

<sup>11</sup> For translating passages from Zhong Rong’s preface to *Shi Pin*, I have consulted Siu-kit Wong’s translation “Preface to the Poets Systematically Graded,” in his *Early Chinese Literary Criticism* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1983) 89-114.

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