

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”¹ (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"²—he questioned whether it was appropriate not to regard Shun's blind old father as subject after Shun became the king.³ 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.⁴

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."⁵ 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."⁶ When Gongsun Chou asked, "*He wei zhiyan* (What is meant by *zhiyan*)?"⁷ Mencius explained: "If someone's words are one-sided, I know what has clouded his mind. If someone's words are exces-

sive, I know in what he has indulged himself. If someone's words are warped, I know how he has strayed from the right path. When someone's words are evasive, I know where he is at his wit's end."⁸ Stephen Owen rightly points out: "Mencius' 'understanding language' is not simply an understanding of the meaning of words and certainly not an understanding that merely reflects or reproduces what the speaker thinks the words say. Mencius' knowledge of language is a knowledge of what the words reveal about the speaker, what they make manifest."⁹

Mencius' idea of "knowing language" seems to have evolved out of a saying in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, attributed to Confucius. Confucius was quoted as saying: "The record has it that language adequately conveys one's intent, and literary embellishment makes one's language adequate. If one does not speak, who will know what is on his mind? If his language lacks embellishment, it will not go far."¹⁰ Thus, it is not inappropriate to say that Mencius' idea of "knowing a person through his language" represents a thesis in the Confucian school of thought.

Mencius viewed writing and reading as a connected process of communication between the writer and the reader. The writer's *yi* or thought is the source of a text. It is transmitted through the text to the reader, who receives it through his own *yi* or thought. Conceptualized as such, the text is like a conveyance belt, which can transmit its content from the writer to the reader. In reading, so long as the reader is adequately trained and uses contextualization sensibly, he will be able to get what the writer intended through the text. Clearly, Mencius regarded meaning as thought willed by the author (*zhi*), permanently recorded in a series of words (*ci*), and retrievable by the reader's understanding (*yi*). In this sense, his idea comes close to E. D. Hirsch's intentionalist theory. Like Mencius, Hirsch is concerned with whether an interpretation is the correct meaning of the text. He wants to locate a criterion for validating interpretations that does not depend totally on the reader's subjective reading. The criterion that he proposes is the authorial intention that produced the text. The goal of interpretation is, at least in principle, to reconstruct that authorial intention. Hirsch's theory is based on Edmund Husserl's view of meaning as an "intentional object."¹¹ The Husserlian view conceives of meaning as a wordless act willed by the author, which is fixed in a series of codes for all time and may be understood through the same system of codes. We can see a basic similarity in Mencius' and Hirsch' theories of reading. Both conceive of writing as an intentional act willed by the author and fixed in a series of words, the original intention of which may be retrieved by decoding the words.¹² For this reason, I may call Mencius a premodern Husserlian, and his idea of reading is, as James J. Y. Liu calls it,¹³ an intentionalist theory.

Zhuangzi's Counterstatement

Zhuangzi, who was slightly younger than Mencius, unwittingly entangled Mencius in an argument though they might never have even heard of each other. Unlike Mencius, Zhuangzi was keenly aware of the problematic relationship between the author and his writing and adopted a negative view of reading. He totally rejected the idea of reading as a reliable process of communication and mistrusted language as a tool for recovering the author's intention. In terms of Mencius' positive view of reading, Zhuangzi's view, as Stephen Owen aptly puts it,¹⁴ may be viewed as a counterstatement. His negative thesis was presented in the famous parable of "Wheelwright Bian":

Duke Huan was reading in his hall. Wheelwright Pien, who was cutting a wheel just outside the hall, put aside his hammer and chisel and went in. There he asked Duke Huan, "What do those books you are reading say?" The duke answered, "These are the words of the Sages." The wheelwright said, "Are the Sages still around?" And the duke answered, "They're dead." Then the wheelwright said, "Well, what you're reading then is no more than the dregs of the ancients."

The duke became very angry with the wheelwright and threatened to put him to death if the latter failed to offer a reasonable explanation for his claim. The wheelwright explained his claim in terms of his own profession and told the duke why it was impossible to pass on something to another person through transmission. His conclusion was: "The ancients have died and, along with them, that which cannot be transmitted. Therefore what you are reading is nothing more than the dregs of the ancients."¹⁵

As far as reading is concerned, Zhuangzi's parable offers these conceptual insights. First, long before the postmodern age, Zhuangzi proclaimed one of the postmodern tenets in reading and writing: the author is dead. A casual comparison tells us that the essential spirit Zhuangzi expressed in this parable is exactly what Barthes means by his famous saying, "the death of the author." Second, contrary to Mencius' positive conviction, Zhuangzi dismissed any text as capable of transmitting the writer's ideas and thoughts to the reader. This total skepticism was reiterated in another statement:

Writing is that by which people of the world treasure the Dao. Writing is no more than words. Words have something valuable. What make words valuable are ideas. Ideas follow certain things. What is followed by ideas cannot be transmitted by words, but people of the world transmit writing

because they cherish words. Although people of the world cherish words, still I don't think words are worth cherishing because what people treasure is not that which deserves cherishing.¹⁶

Zhuangzi expressed an idea about language and writing similar to the reputed Confucian saying in the *Xicizhuan* [*Appendixes to the Book of Changes*]: “*Shu bu jin yan, yan bu jin yi* (Writing cannot fully express words; words cannot fully express ideas).”¹⁷ Clearly, Zhuangzi did not agree with Mencius on the capacity of language to convey ideas and feelings. In the context of modern hermeneutics, his view represents perhaps the earliest rejection in the world of Husserl's intentionalist theory, which views meaning as a wordless act willed by the author, fixed in a series of codes and may be transmitted to posterity. Zhuangzi continued to tell us why an intentionalist theory does not work:

Those which can be seen when one looks are shapes and colors; those which can be heard when one listens are epithets and sounds. What a great pity that people in the world consider shapes and colors, epithets and sounds as adequate means to obtain another person's inner feelings. If indeed shapes and colors, epithets and sounds are not adequate means to obtain another person's inner feelings, then “a wise person will not speak; he who speaks is not wise.” But how can worldly persons understand this?¹⁸

Step by step, Zhuangzi dismantled Mencius' communicative model of writing and reading and vehemently argued that writing cannot transmit the Dao; words cannot transmit ideas; language cannot transmit subtle thoughts. Because of the inadequacy of speech and language as a means of communication, Zhuangzi dismissed writings in general. Perhaps, this may have inspired later Chan Buddhists' dismissal of language and books as instruments for transmitting the truth. In a way, his idea about the transmission of the Dao comes close to the Hermetic thought regarding the truth of the world. According to Umberto Eco's study, Hermeticism maintains: “Truth is secret and any questioning of the symbols and enigmas will never reveal ultimate truth but displaces the secret elsewhere.”¹⁹ The epistemological basis of Hermeticism is “the gnostic conviction that human salvation depends on revealed knowledge of God and of human and natural creations.”²⁰ Hermetic thought turns the whole world into a linguistic phenomenon and yet like Zhuangzi, Hermetic believers cherish profound mistrust for language's power of communication. Language cannot communicate truth; truth can only be personally experienced through moments of revelation. Interestingly, Zhuangzi upheld similar ideas, especially with regard to the Dao and language:

Speaking is not a puff of breath. A Speaker has words, but what he says cannot be determined by any special means. . . . What beclouds the Dao to such an extent that truth and falsehood appear? What beclouds language to such a degree that right and wrong appear? To what extent has the Dao reached so that it does not exist? To what extent has speech existed so that it becomes inappropriate? The Dao was beclouded by small achievement. Speech was beclouded by florid words. Hence, there arose the debate between the Confucianists and Moists over right and wrong.²¹

In Zhuangzi's opinion, limited knowledge will only hinder people from accessing the Dao; a plethora of words will only harm language's function as a tool of communication. The debate between the Confucianists and Moists only makes right and wrong more confounded. While attributing the difficulty of accessing the Dao and language to limited knowledge and plethora of words, Zhuangzi also identified the slippery nature of language as part of the difficulty: "A speaker has words, but what he says can not be determinate by any particular means." Like a modern theorist of language, Zhuangzi further attributed the difficulty to the slippage of meaning in language representation: "There is no object which is not 'that'; nor is there any object which is not 'this.' From the position of 'that,' the position of 'this' will not show itself. But from the position of 'this,' the speaker knows it is 'this.' Hence it is said that 'that' grows out of 'this'; 'this' also depends on 'that.' . . . 'This' is also 'that.' 'That' is also 'This.'"²²

Zhuangzi noticed the slippage of meaning due to subjective positions in representation and understanding. In *Problems in General Linguistics*, Emile Benveniste arrived at a similar understanding: "There is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept 'tree' to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer. . . . Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker."²³

While Zhuangzi viewed "this" and "that" as reversible categories because of subjective positions, Benveniste describes the pronounced "I" and "you" as signifiers, which are only able to signify their meanings in concrete discursive situations. Except for the different usage of pronouns, both Zhuangzi and Benveniste arrived at the same understanding: these pronouns always imply a speaker and a listener in dialogue. The roles of the speaker and listener are endlessly reversible as the pronouns that depend upon them. The speaker acts as a speaker for one moment and will become a listener for another moment. The pronouns possess only a peri-

odic meaning and have no standardized and permanent significance. There is no doubt that Zhuangzi's idea anticipated Benveniste's more abstract view. Because of the indeterminate nature of language, Zhuangzi viewed meaning as unstable and slippery and the intention of the author as untransmittable to and unattainable by the reader. In a sense, his idea also anticipated the deconstructive view of language and meaning based on Heidegger's language philosophy. The Heideggerians contend that meaning, including authorial meaning, is not as stable and determinate as the Husserlians claim. The reason it is so is because meaning is the product of signs, which have something slippery about them. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know what an intention or meaning is. Moreover, an author's intention is itself a complex text, which may be variously interpreted like any other text.²⁴ For this reason, we may call Zhuangzi a premodern Heideggerian, and his view of reading a premodern deconstructive theory of reading.

In his theoretical inquiry of interpretation, Eco relates some of the contemporary theory of textual interpretation to the Hermetic legacy in the Western tradition and finds some similarity between Hermetism and Gnosticism on the one hand and many contemporary approaches to texts (especially the Deconstructive school of criticism) on the other. Because those strands of interpretive theories share with Hermetism the similar denial of language's power of communication and the refusal to grant a text its final and attainable meaning, Eco satirically labels those interpretive theories "a Hermetic approach to texts."²⁵ Without Eco's satirical implication, I wish to call Zhuangzi's ideas concerning reading a Hermetic theory because his ideas share with Hermetism the basic Gnostic principle. In denying language the power to transmit the Dao or communicate meaning and in refusing to read books because they are incapable of conveying the author's meaning, and in advocating an intuitive approach to communication, Zhuangzi's approach to texts may certainly be called a Hermetic approach.

Mencius' Hermeneutic Circle

I have presented Mencius' and Zhuangzi's basic ideas on reading as a positive thesis and a counterstatement. This is the general drift of their thought. However, if we treat their views on reading as two dichotomies that absolutely oppose each other, we would be committing the error of oversimplification with regard to their theories in particular and to the theories of reading in general. Both of them were aware of the complexity of reading due to the nature of language and representation; and both

of them attempted to supplement their major ideas with modifications and further elaborations. Their further elaborations on reading seemed as though they were carrying on a dialogue, each trying to answer the other's interlocutions.

Mencius seemed to have been aware of the problematic aspect of his main thesis, which may be boiled down to one question: If you believe that one can form an understanding of a text and match it with what was intended by the author through the text, how can you verify that what you have grasped is the original intention of the author now that he is long gone? As though in response to Zhuangzi's declaration that the author is dead, he supplemented his main thesis with another idea: *zhiren lunshi* (to know the writer and his world):

A good scholar of a community will make friends with other good scholars of the community. A good scholar in a state will make friends with other good scholars of the state. A good scholar under heaven will make friends with other good scholars under heaven. Because it is not enough to make friends with other good scholars under heaven, a good scholar will also go back in time to discuss people of the ancient past. Is it acceptable to sing an ancient person's poetry and read his books without knowing about this person? For this reason, one [needs] to discuss the time in which the ancients lived. This is how to make friends with the ancients.²⁶

Mencius meant to say: a good scholar should befriend not only other scholars in his community, his state, and under heaven but also ancient scholars in the past. When people today want to make friends with people of the past, it is impossible for them to communicate directly; they can only indirectly communicate through the writings left behind by the ancient people. But to correctly understand the writings of ancient people, we must have knowledge of the persons who wrote those books and of the times they lived in. By knowing the person and discussing his time (*zhi qiren, lun qishi*), we may be able to contextualize his writings and fully understand them. Mencius' statement was originally not concerned with reading per se but with how to make friends with ancient people. However, because making friends with ancient people has to be done through reading ancient people's books, his remark directly concerns reading as well. Likewise, although the central idea in the statement "to know a person by discussing his time" was not directly related to his central thesis on reading, "to use one's understanding to trace it back to the author's intention," in the large context of his thought and in view of the fact that both statements are concerned with reading, the two ideas are implicitly linked together.

Later scholars noticed the relevance of the two ideas and joined them into a connected thesis. Gu Zhen 顧鎮, a scholar of the Qing dynasty, made an apt comment on the inner relationship of Mencius' separate ideas in his poetic criticism: "It is impossible to know about someone without considering his time. Likewise, it is impossible to trace back to what was on the writer's mind without knowing about the person. . . . Therefore, one must discuss a writer's time and learn about his person. Only after this can one adopt Mencius' idea of tracing one's understanding to the intention of the writer."²⁷ Gu Zheng made explicit what was implicit in Mencius' original statements: without "knowing the writer and his time," "to use one's understanding to trace it back to what was on the mind of the author" is not entirely possible, because there is no way to verify whether the reader's *yì* (understanding) could match the author's *zhì* (intention). With adequate knowledge about the author and his time, the subjectiveness of the reader's understanding can be minimized. When the two ideas are combined, they complement each other and make a reader's reading substantially objective.

Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), the last traditional Chinese literary theorist, also came to the realization that the two ideas about reading expressed in separate places in the *Mencius* should be viewed as a connected argument. In his comment on Mencius' ideas of reading, Wang states:

Mencius' view of reading poetry is superb: "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." It is up to me to trace the idea to its origin, but what is intently on the mind belongs to the ancient writer. What can I do to make my grasp of meanings retain the intention of the ancient writer? In talking about this technique of reading, Mencius said: "Is it acceptable to chant a person's poetry and read his books without knowing about this person? Because of this, one must discuss the time of the writer." Thus, one can know about the writer through his time and trace his intention through the knowledge about him. In this way there will be few ancient poems that cannot be understood.²⁸

The joining together of the two ideas in separate statements filled the gap left by the death of the author and made the communication model expressed in *yiyi nizhi* theoretically sound. In his original model imparted in Mencius' main thesis, there are these elements: the reader (*shuoshiren* or poetry commentator), code (*wen* and *ci*), text (*shi* or poetry), local context (the context of the writing), and an interpretative strategy (to use

one's understanding to trace it back to the author). Now it adds some other essential elements: author (ancient writers) and historical context (writer's time). With the added elements, Mencius' model of reading is complete.

If we examine the complete model, however, we will notice that Mencius' advocated theory of reading is somewhat tautological or circular. If I may synthesize Mencius' ideas, the circular pattern of reading is clearer. *Yiyi nizhi* (to use one's understanding to trace it back to what was on the mind of the author) is the act of reading. Reading is done through language. Through language, the reader may learn about the author's intention. But words alone are not the key for latecomers to unlock the mystery of the author's intent. The reader needs to go back in time to learn about the author. But how can one know about the author? To know about the author, the reader needs to know about his time. How can the reader know about the author's time? The answer returns to where it starts: to read his poetry and books. In a nutshell, one needs to read a writer's books to know the writer and his time and to know his person and time in order to better understand his books.

The circularity of Mencius' model is not problematic but insightful. In a way, Mencius' model of reading reminds us of Schleiermacher's discovery of the hermeneutic law: every idea of the author is invariably related to the unity of an organically structured subject, and of his famous "hermeneutic circle": interpretation is circular in nature. The circularity of interpretation concerns the relation of parts to the whole. The interpretation of each part is dependent on the interpretation of the whole, which is also dependent on the interpretation of each part. It is in the constant interaction between the part and whole that adequate interpretation is achieved.²⁹ Of course, in Mencius' model, the whole consists of not only a writer's complete works but also his historical time. In dwelling on the importance of knowing the person and his time, Mencius seemed to have come up with a theory of interpretation that comes close to the central idea of hermeneutics in contemporary theory. The central problem of hermeneutics is one of overcoming alienating distanciation: With the death of the author and the elapse of time, how can a work cut off from its original historical circumstances communicate with or be understood by the reader of a different culture and time? Hermeneutic understanding results from an authentic dialogue between the past and the present, which occurs when there is a "fusion of horizons" between the text and reader in Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of interpretation.³⁰

Gadamer's view is quite complicated. Briefly, it proposes a dialogic relationship between the reader and the author. On the one hand, a text is a historical product produced by an author using a specific system of

codes at a given historical time. Its historicity is therefore essential to the consideration of its meanings. On the other hand, the reader who interprets the text is grounded in his own historicity, which is also essential to the process of interpretation. At the beginning of interpretation, because of the difference and distance between the two historicities, the text resists the reader's efforts to turn it into something amenable to his perspective. However, when the two historicities merge into one experience as a result of the fusion of the two different viewpoints, a breakthrough in interpretation appears. The text as a meaningful human product has its intentionality. The reader has his own intentionality in approaching the text. When the two kinds of intentionality meet in the encounter of reading, and when the two kinds of historicities are adequately taken note of, there can be a fusion of the author's and reader's horizons, which gives rise to meaning.³¹

Mencius' notion on reading makes a similar proposal. Faced with a text produced in the past, he advised the reader first to form an understanding of his own (*yi*). This is the reader's intentionality. Then, the reader should use his own understanding to trace it back in history to the author's intentionality (*zhi*). When the reader's intentionality (*yi*) matches with the author's intentionality (*zhi*), there is a proper grasp of the meaning of the text. Mencius was keenly aware of the difficulty of matching the reader's intentionality with the author's intentionality, a difficulty made doubly difficult by the gap between the past and present, the author's and reader's historicities, and by the reader's subjective judgment. But he did not abandon the hope for a reading model that views reading as a verifiable reenactment of the subjective experiences. I have mentioned that his idea of tracing back to the author's original intention resembles Hirsch's intentionalist theory, but in his supplementary idea about historical circumstances, one's own understanding, and imagined dialogues between the author and reader, we may find insights of similarity shared by Heidegger's existentialist hermeneutics.

In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger proclaims a hermeneutics that stresses human beings' locatedness in both history and language. In tackling the problem of understanding, Heideggerian hermeneutics rejects a disinterested inquiry into another person's mind. In its place, it emphasizes one's embeddedness in a temporal world the meaning of which precedes him but of which he has a tacit understanding. We exist understandingly, and the aim of interpretation is to make explicit this preunderstanding that we already have of our being-in-the-world.³² In Mencius' central thesis, the reader's understanding (*yi*) is precisely a preunderstanding generated by the reader's mental activity and shaped by his temporal situation. Heidegger's existential model also suggests that

literature is less the expression of an individual's thoughts or intentions than the raising to consciousness of a historical sense and a world. Through reading, we experience in literature a world portrayed by the author rather than particular and idiosyncratic mental states or intentions. In the following, I will demonstrate that Mencius' ideas of "using the reader's understanding to trace it back to the author's intentionality" and "knowing the writer and his time" are endowed with similar insights into reading.

According to Heidegger, all human inquiries are circular. In fact, the very notion of inquiry presupposes circularity and foreknowledge, because a lack of prior knowledge of what one seeks would practically prevent any possibility of questioning. Heidegger presents this idea at the very opening of his *Being and Time* as "a knowing search."³³ He further asserts: "Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way."³⁴ Heidegger's existential-ontological hermeneutics explicitly and implicitly suggests that the exploration of Being and the interpretation of a text are essentially one and the same matter in the sense that just as being is somewhat already known in advance by the explorer, so the being (or form) of a text that can be repeatedly read must already be known somewhat by the reader. Interestingly, Mencius came to an understanding of reading that displays similar insight. Mencius' idea, "to use one's understanding to trace it back to what was on the mind of the author," suggests that a reading is invariably a kind of knowing search, for, as the word *yí* (reader's idea or understanding) indicates, the reader has already formulated a kind of understanding, and what needs to be done is to verify its relatedness to the author's intentionality. Heidegger's claim, "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted,"³⁵ should serve as a most apt footnote to Mencius' central thesis of reading. To some, Mencius' central idea may smack of subjective presuppositions. Again, Heidegger's existential hermeneutics comes to its defense: "An interpretation is never [despite those committed to objectivity, including Husserl] a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."³⁶

In terms of Heidegger's existential hermeneutics, Mencius' hermeneutic circle is not a vicious one, for it emphasizes the author's and reader's locatedness in history, and the foreknowledge or preconception formulated at the outset of reading keeps being enriched by circular readings. Mencius' idea of "knowing the writer and his time" is an effective means to overcome alienating distanciation, enabling the reader to enter the world created by the author in his writing. As a whole, Mencius' theory of reading, especially the complete model that combines the central ideas

in his statements and reading practice, touches upon both the Husserlian and Heideggerian hermeneutics for adequate reading.

In spite of his interest in the author, Mencius is a text-oriented theorist of reading. He believed in the text as a medium that inscribes the author's totality: his personality and social context. This belief anticipated Edward Said's alternative to Foucault's conception of the author as a discursive function, which is "to take the author's career as wholly oriented towards and synonymous with the production of a text." Said's suggestion that we should view an author's career as a course "whose record is his work and whose goal is the integral text that adequately represents the efforts expended on its behalf" would serve as a most apt elucidation of Mencius' idea, "*zhiren lunshi* (to know a person through his time)," and of his rhetorical question, "Is it acceptable to chant a person's poetry and read his books without knowing about this person?" Mencius' emphasis on the relationship between the text and its author also anticipated Said's understanding: "... the text is a multidimensional structure extending from the beginning to the end of the writer's career. A text is the source and the aim of a man's desire to be an author, it is the form of his attempts, it contains the elements of his coherence, and in a whole range of complex and differing ways it incarnates the pressures upon the writer of his psychology, his time, his society."³⁷

By emphasizing *zhi* (intent or intention), Mencius considered writing as an intentional act. Nowadays, it is suspect to talk about intentions in literary studies due to the "intentional fallacy." Mencius' idea of *yiyi nizhi* (to use one's own understanding to trace it back to the original intention of the writer) coupled with the idea of *zhiren lunshi* (to know the writer and his time through his writing) does not smack of intentional fallacy (the author's pretextual or retrospective purpose), but may restore part of authorial intention to its rightful place in the domains of literary studies. His idea amounts to an inclusive totality of the relationship between the writer and the reader and anticipates Said's idea of "beginning intention." Like most modern theorists, Said dismisses a simplistic view of intention, which regards meaning as merely what the author intends to convey in a text, and proposes notion of created inclusiveness that develops out of the totality of a relationship between the text and its author.³⁸

An overview of Mencius' complete statement on reading reveals that he firmly believed in the effectiveness of language to convey one's inner thoughts, and even involuntarily to reveal a person's personality, predilection, and behavior. It also reveals that Mencius viewed writing as constituting outer and inner spaces. Its inner space inscribes the writer's conscious meaning (*yì*), willed intention (*zhi*), and personality structure

(*qi*). Its outer space covers the wording (*yan*), literary embellishment (*wen*), and text (*wenzhang*). Language is the ultimate form of mediation that connects the inner and outer spaces. It imparts most perfectly and yet problematically the correspondence between the inner and outer spaces. Through language, one can perceive the totality of a writer by tracing from *wen* (literary embellishment) and *yan* (wording) to *yi* (thought), *zhi* (intention), and *qi* (personality). Mencius' theory of reading is optimistically positive—reading can objectively reflect the original intention of the author and the conditions of his time—but it did not directly address the linguistic skepticism raised by Zhuangzi and the *Xicizhuan*. His theory did not deal directly with the anxiety that can be constantly troubling to a writer, an anxiety expressed by many thinkers and writers. It was succinctly summarized by Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303): “I am constantly troubled by the anxiety that my ideas are inadequate for objects of the world and my writings incapable of capturing my ideas.”³⁹

Zhuangzi's Wordless Communication

In terms of Mencius' positive theory of reading, Zhuangzi's negative thesis can be said to be one of agnosticism bordering on nihilism. I have mentioned that Zhuangzi's negative view of reading is derived from a language philosophy that views language as an inadequate means of communication. He was not the only one who held this view. His idea was echoed in the *Xicizhuan*, where Confucius was quoted as saying: “Writing cannot fully express speech; speech cannot fully express ideas 書不盡言，言不盡意。”⁴⁰ But having voiced an opinion about the inadequacy of language and writing as a means of communication of ideas, Confucius hastily added a remark to qualify his negative view of language and representation: “The sages established images to fully express their thought, designed hexagrams to fully express the true and false conditions of affairs, and attached verbalizations to fully express what they wanted to say.”⁴¹ Thus, the *Xicizhuan* adopted a dialectical view of the relationship between language and thought. If we continue the imagined dialogue between Mencius and Zhuangzi, we could hear the former asking the latter, How can you tackle the same question raised to Confucius? “If writing cannot fully express speech; speech cannot fully express ideas, then does it mean that the sages' ideas cannot be shown (seen)?”⁴² As though in response to this question, Zhuangzi supplemented his main thesis with a distinction: “That which can be talked about in words is the general aspect of things. That which can be communicated through ideas is the refined aspect of things. That which cannot be talked about in language

or observed and communicated through ideas cannot be described in terms of the general and refined conditions."⁴³ Zhuangzi was practically saying, "I do not mean that language is totally useless, nor that representation by language is completely impossible." There is a distinction that is the tricky part of the matter. Language can describe the general conditions of things; but it cannot describe the subtle aspect of things, which only the mind can intuitively grasp. Things in the world are tangible objects (*xing'ershia*), but metaphysical objects like the Dao cannot be described by language or understood by the mind.

Thus, while recognizing the slippery nature of language, Zhuangzi divided objects of representation into three categories: (1) that which can be represented by language, (2) that which can only be understood in nondiscursive ways, (3) that which cannot be grasped by whatever means. The category that can be understood only by intuition and contemplation embraces the unnamable and indescribable feelings and transcendental principles. Metaphysical categories like the Dao cannot be perceived through language or understanding. But other categories can be understood either through language or through contemplation. Liu Xie explicated this idea in clear terms:

That which rises above tangible shapes is called the Dao; that which exists in tangible shapes is called object. The divine Dao is difficult to imitate, for even the most refined language cannot capture its ultimate form. Tangible objects are easy to depict, for robust words are capable of representing their real conditions.⁴⁴

Did Zhuangzi mean to say that the metaphysical principles like the Dao are totally beyond language and understanding? Not exactly. In a later chapter, Zhuangzi reiterated the boundlessness and indescribable nature of the Dao, but gave his idea a twist: "The name of the Dao can function only when it relies on something." He further stated: "If language is adequate, a whole day's talk will be able to exhaustively transmit the Dao; if language is inadequate, a whole day's talk can only exhaustively describe the appearances of things. The Dao is the ultimate principle of things and cannot be conveyed by speaking or silence. [A mode of representation] between speaking and silence may discuss its ultimate principle."⁴⁵ Thus, Zhuangzi did not completely reject language or representation. In a subtle way, Zhuangzi admitted to the function of language as a necessary tool for verbal communication:

The fish-trap is a tool to catch fish. Once the fish is caught, the fish-trap is forgotten. A rabbit-snare is a tool to catch rabbits. Once the rabbit is

caught, the snare is forgotten. Language is a tool to hold ideas. Once ideas are conveyed, language is forgotten. Where on earth could I find a person who has forgotten words to have a word with him?⁴⁶

Here, “rabbit-snare” and “fish-trap” are obviously metaphors for words, which stand for language. By the same token “rabbit” and “fish” refer to ideas or thought. By saying that snares and traps can catch rabbits and fish, Zhuangzi was using figurative language to underscore his idea that language can perform the function of conveying ideas or thought. But the last sentence in the above passage gives his idea a subtle twist. It suggests that though Zhuangzi recognized the communicative power of language, he still considered it a second-best tool that is incapable of communicating the subtle and delicate. The last sentence of Zhuangzi’s statement is a rhetorical question. It implies that Zhuangzi pined for a person with whom he can communicate without the aid of language. Thus, in the final analysis, he still preferred wordless communion as the most ideal mode of communication. Moreover, in using metaphors, Zhuangzi was aware of the metaphorical nature of language (the gap between language and thought), and mistrusted the function of language. He therefore advocated abandoning language as a communicative tool and posited a mode of communication that does not use language. The condition in which one can communicate with another person without language represents, for Zhuangzi, the highest status of communication. This is another way of conveying his understanding that some subtle things like the meaning of the Dao cannot be communicated to another person by the use of language.

The contradictory stance in his statement indicates that Zhuangzi was aware of the paradoxical nature of language as a tool of communication. On the one hand, he seemed to have suggested that language is a tool for communication and it is an illusion to think that one can get ideas (fish and rabbits) without words (snares and traps). But on the other hand, his rhetorical question implies that there should be persons who can communicate without the use of language. Although Zhuangzi did not categorically say language and thought are inseparable, his question suggests it: ordinarily, people conceive of language as a tool in the way one uses a fish-trap or a rabbit-snare. This conception is a specious illusion. One cannot retain *yi* (ideas) without *yan* (words). Once one gets hold of *yi*, *yan* will stick to the *yi* whether he likes it or not; or to put it in another more appropriate way, whether he is aware of it or not. Heidegger, in his metameditation on the nature of language, touches on a phenomenon in language communication similar to the situation in Zhuangzi’s argument. He points out that human beings’ “relation to language is vague, obscure, almost speechless.” In our everyday life, we have a paradoxical relation

with language. Though we are so close to language and speak it every day, we scarcely notice the existence of language. We become conscious of the existence of language only when we “cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us.”⁴⁷ Zhuangzi made a similar point. Ordinarily, people do not become conscious of the use of language. Once they express their ideas or understand the idea imparted by others, they seldom think about the language that transmits the ideas. This is like abandoning a tool after using it. But this is an illusion, which results from the conventional view of language as a container that holds meaning. According to this container theory, the process of signification is like this: an addresser has an idea, which is a message. He encodes it and puts it in language, which is the carrier. An addressee comes along, gets the container (language), and decodes the message in the container. Once he gets the message, the container (language) is cast away. The idea imparted by the rhetorical question may be viewed as an argument against the illusion and the conventional view. It seems to imply that it is impossible to communicate with a person who has forgotten language.

Thus, Zhuangzi revealed the paradoxical relationship between language and ideas. Language and thought are compatible and conflict with one another. The former can represent the latter but only to a certain extent. This is because although language is the direct realization of ideas, language is not equivalent to ideas. Language can only express general ideas, but what is on the mind of a writer/speaker is something particular. Therefore, it cannot express the individual thought of an individual writer. From the writer’s point of view, Zhuangzi suggested that because *yanbu jinyi* (language cannot fully express ideas), a writer should go beyond the confines of language and make full use of the suggestiveness of language to capture thought. But what should a reader do given the fact that language is a second-best tool? Zhuangzi’s advice is: give up reading altogether. Do not read books for the truth of the Dao, but rely on direct experience. But since wordless communication is rare and communication through words, verbal and written, is an everyday occurrence, how can one deal adequately with the paradox of language communication? Zhuangzi did not elaborate on this point. He left a huge puzzle for later thinkers, Chinese and Western, to unravel.

Views of Reading after Mencius and Zhuangzi

Scholars after Mencius and Zhuangzi felt the power of their arguments and were at the same time disturbed by their conflicting implica-

tions. A casual look at the ideas of reading after the Warring States period seems to suggest that scholars were divided into two opposing camps. While one camp sided with Mencius' positive view of language and reading, the other sided with Zhuangzi's negative view. Although there certainly existed a division among scholars, I venture to suggest that because all of them were engaged in an effort to get to the bottom of language representation, there was also a trend that aimed at reconciling the conflicting views on language and reading. Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53–18 BC) may be the first to notice the contradictory stance in Mencius' and Zhuangzi's positions and to make an effort to reconcile the opposite views:

Speech cannot express the heart; writing cannot express one's thought. Indeed, it is difficult! Only sages can obtain the meaning of speech and the essence of writing. . . . Nothing excels speech in expressing the desires at heart and in understanding the complex feelings of people. Nothing excels writing in comprehensively covering things under heaven, recording bygone eras, clarifying the distant past, illuminating the murkiness of ancient times, and transmitting what happened afar. Therefore, it is said that speech is the voice of one's heart; writing is the picture of the heart. When speech describes the shapes and forms, superior and inferior men will be distinguished. What the speech pictures is that which moves the hearts of gentlemen and inferior men alike.⁴⁸

This passage contains a contradiction and a solution for it. The contradiction seems to center on the discrepancy between language and thought, but if we place Yang Xiong's statement in the large context of Chinese views of reading and writing, the contradiction is really a conflict between Mencius' and Zhuangzi's positions on language and representation. Yang Xiong started with the idea that traces its origin to the "Appended Verbalizations" and Zhuangzi: speech cannot express the heart; writing cannot express thought. He seemed to side with Zhuangzi. But he ended his argument with a conflicting idea: speech adequately expresses one's inner thoughts; writing adequately expresses desires. He shifted his position and sided with Mencius. He himself must have been aware of the contradictory stance in his statement. So, he made a move to reconcile the contradictory positions by relying on the sagacity of sages. For ordinary people, speech cannot express the heart; nor can writing convey adequately one's inner thoughts. But sages are persons of a different caliber. In the hands of sages, speech and writing are adequate means of communication. Yang Xiong's reconciliatory effort offers a solution to the conflicting views in Mencius and Zhuangzi.

His solution was in a way indebted to the passage in the "Appended Verbalizations" that quotes Confucius as saying, "Writing cannot fully

express speech; speech cannot fully express thought.” Then an interlocutor raises a question: “If this is so, then does it mean that the ideas in the mind of sages cannot be perceived?” Confucius is quoted as replying: “The sages established images to fully express their thought, designed hexagrams to fully express the true and false conditions of affairs, and attached verbalizations to fully express what they wanted to say.”⁴⁹ In an ingenious move, the writer of the “Appended Verbalizations” combined the opposite ideas of *yan bu jin yi* (words cannot exhaustively express ideas) and *yan yi zu zhi* (words can adequately convey intention) into a whole statement and smoothed out their conflicting views. Thus, long before Yang Xiong, Confucius was believed to have already relied on the sages in an attempt to bridge the gap between thought and language and to reconcile the opposite views on language representation. The difference lies in that while Confucius discussed how the sages solved the contradiction in sign representation through a triadic structure of *yi* (idea), *xiang* (image), *yan* (language), Yang Xiong was purely concerned with the problems in language representation. Yang Xiong’s attempt at reconciliation shifted the focus from sign representation to language representation, and made the focus more directly related to writing and the reading of texts.

Yang Xiong’s solution did not lay to rest the differences in language and representation arising from the opposite views of Mencius and Zhuangzi. The dispute came to a head in the famous debate that took place during the Wei-Jin period. The debate centered on a positive thesis and a counterargument. The positive thesis is: “Language can exhaustively express thought 言可盡意.” The counterstatement is: “Language cannot exhaustively express thought 言不盡意.” The debate, encouraged by the self-consciously inquisitive spirit of the Wei-Jin period, challenged the so-called Confucian saying from opposite directions. From one direction, some scholars questioned the authority of sages. The unknown writer of the “Appended Verbalizations” invoked the authority of sages to smooth out the discrepancies in the opposite views on language representation. But when it came to the Wei-Jin period, scholars were no longer willing to take sages’ authority for granted. Xun Can 荀粲 followed Zhuangzi’s line of thinking in the parable of the wheelwright and said: “I often ponder on Zigong’s remark that the implications of Confucius’s talk on human nature and the heavenly way cannot be comprehended. If so, then, even though the six kinds of classics exist, they are essentially the chaff (worthless stuff) left behind by sages.” His brother quoted the reputed Confucian saying to argue with him: “The *Zhouyi* states, ‘The sages established images to fully express their thought and attached verbalizations to fully express what they wanted to say.’ Why on earth can’t subtle language be conveyed and comprehended?” To this he replied:

The subtlety of a rationale is not embodied in objects and images. Now the *Xicizhuan* says, “the sages established images to exhaustively express ideas.” This is not connected to that which is outside ideas. The *Xicizhuan* also says: “[The sages] attached verbalizations to fully express what they wanted to say.” This is not expressing words which lie beneath the surface. Ideas beyond images and words beneath the surface are deeply hidden and remain latent.⁵⁰

In his opinion, metaphysical subtlety cannot be conveyed by images and words. His idea further refined Zhuangzi’s linguistic skepticism and paved the way for the later notions of *bu jin zhi yi* (endless meanings) and *hanxu* (subtle reserve). In the debate on the relationship between words and ideas, Wang Bi was the first to conduct a systematic inquiry into language representation, but as I will examine his treatise in one of the following chapters, I will not discuss his ideas here. Due to the ethos of the age, the counterstatement seemed to have had the upper hand. This state of affairs provoked a challenge from the opposite direction. Ouyang Jian 歐陽建 (?–300) questioned linguistic skepticism in the “Appended Verbalizations” and defended the positive thesis. He wrote a treatise titled “*Yan jin yi lun* (Words Can Exhaustively Express Ideas)” to counter the negative thesis:

If one traces the origin of things and seeks the root cause of events, [he will see that] it is not that an object is endowed with a natural name, nor does a rationale have its inevitable name. If one wants to express his intention, he will establish a name. The name changes with objects; words change with principles. This is the same as the fact that an echo follows a sound and a shadow attaches to the shape. They cannot be separated from each other. If they are inseparable, then, nothing like endless meaning exists. Therefore I think words can exhaust meaning.⁵¹

He touched upon something that borders on the performative function of language. But he failed to take into account situations in which it is often impossible to adequately perform the language function. Under certain circumstances, words really fail to express the fullness of ideas in the mind. Hence the common expressions like “indescribable,” “unnamable,” and “speechless.” Ouyang Jian’s defense left a gap.

The debate on the relationship between language and ideas sharpened later scholars’ perception of the slippery nature of language and the unreliability of language representation. But the Mencian view of language representation seems to have regained its dominant position in later times. In the Song dynasty, for example, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72) reexamined the dictum in the “Appended Verbalizations” and criticized a blind advocacy of linguistic skepticism in language representation:

“Writing cannot adequately express words; words cannot adequately express ideas.” But aren’t the ideas of ancient sages that have been sought out through extrapolation since high antiquity transmitted by words? Aren’t books the means by which the ideas of the sages were able to survive? If so, then writing cannot exhaustively convey the plethora of words but can adequately express their generalities; words cannot exhaustively convey the subtlety of ideas but can adequately convey their principles. Those who uphold writing’s inadequacy of expressing words and language’s inadequacy of expressing ideas do not hold profound and clear views.⁵²

Yang Wanli 楊萬里 (1127–1206) of the Southern Song dynasty offers an innovative understanding of the dictum in the *Xicizhuan*:

It is not that the sages’ words cannot exhaustively convey their ideas. The sages can adequately express their ideas but simply do not thoroughly express them. It is not that the sages’ books cannot exhaustively convey the meanings of their words. They can adequately express the meanings of their words but simply do not thoroughly express them. Why don’t they want to seek thoroughness in expressions? Because they do not dare to pursue this end. The *Golden Mean* states: “Leave room and never seek exhaustiveness.” This is the subtle brilliance of the *Book of Changes* and the *Golden Mean*. But why didn’t the sages dare to seek thoroughness in expression? Because they fear that thorough expression may lead to people’s mental retardation.⁵³

In his opinion, the sages adopted a heuristic method in teaching their ideas. They deliberately left some blank space in their teachings for people to generate doubts, to fill up the gaps, and to create new ideas out of existent ideas. He further cited the ambiguity of the *Book of Changes* to expound his understanding: “The profound implications of the *Book of Changes* are what plunges people of the world into doubts and makes them think.” Clearly, he was aware that writing could be suggestive on the part of the author and open to the reader’s understanding. Ge Zhaoguang, a contemporary historian of Chinese thought, considers this kind of consciously or unconsciously left gaps to be the fertile intellectual space in which later thinkers constantly exercise their imagination and open up new avenues to intellectual thought.⁵⁴

The debate on language representation sensitized scholars’ views on reading and writing. In the Wei-Jin period, Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) who wrote *Wenfu* 文賦 (the Rhyming Prose on Literature) transposed the debate on language and meaning into literary study and related it to reading and writing. In his discourse on literature, he stated in the preface:

Whenever I read the writings by talented writers, I secretly nurse the idea that I have been able to grasp their intentions. Although they displayed colorful mutations in their verbal expressions, we can still grasp their descriptions of the beautiful, the ugly, the good and the bad, and talk about them. Each time I compose my own writing, I become more keenly aware of their state of mind. I constantly worry lest my ideas are inadequate for objects and my writing inadequate for my ideas. It is not so much that knowing is hard as that performance is hard.⁵⁵

Lu Ji discussed language representation from both the writer's and reader's points of view. From the reader's perspective, he believed that the reader could have access to the writer's mind through his writings despite the dazzling mutations in ways of representation. But from the writer's perspective, it is a difficult endeavor to perform adequately the function of language in representation, although it is by no means impossible to perform it well. It is not difficult to conceptualize things in representation. What is difficult is how to find adequate means for representation. He seemed to have held the belief that so long as the writer finds adequate means for representation in his writing, the reader would be able to grasp fully what is represented. In his contemplation of literary creation, he viewed reading and writing as a connected process of verbal communication and broadened the scope of language representation beyond the *Xicizhuan's* triadic relationship among thought, image, and words. In other words, he brought the object of representation into consideration.

In "Writing cannot fully express speech; speech cannot fully express thought," the triadic relationship covers thought, speech, and writing. This triadic structure is like the Western model of language representation: thought is located in the mind; speech is close to thought as it is a transcription of ideas; writing is once removed from the mind because it is a transcription of speech. But the *Xicizhuan* model leaves out objects, or the world, to be represented. Lu Ji's reconceptualization resulted in a model of language representation that covers the three essential elements in language representation: the world, thinking, and writing. In Chinese language, they are respectively *wu* (objects), *yi* (thought or meaning), *wen* (writing). More importantly, he seemed to have offered a clue as to how language can adequately represent ideas. First, clear thinking is a prerequisite for representation. To put it another way, to judge whether writing can adequately express thought, one must see whether one's ideas are fit for the observation of objects. Second, language representation is an intricate skill: "It is not so much that knowing is difficult as that performance is difficult." Here, he filled the gap left behind by Ouyang Jian. Lu Ji's contemplation yields an inchoate model of language representation in

reading and writing. It comes quite close to Peirce's triadic model of sign representation, which covers object, thought, and sign.

In *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522) extensively discussed language representation. His views are indebted to both Mencius and Zhuangzi. In chapter 26, he stated:

The subtle meanings beyond our thought and the profound inner workings of the heart inexpressible in words are not to be reached by language; here one should know enough to halt his brush. Only the most subtle pen can transmit their secret, and only the most intricate mind can comprehend the methods of writing. The master chef Yi Zhi was unable to impart to people the knack of cooking, and Wheelwright Bian could not talk to people about how he wielded his ax. The art of writing is indeed subtle.⁵⁶

By citing the parable of Wheelwright Bian in the *Zhuangzi*, Liu Xie was evidently in agreement with Zhuangzi and approved of his linguistic skepticism and wordless communication. But immediately after the above statement, he shifted his position in the next chapter. In chapter 27, he stated in a fairly technical way Mencius' positive conviction in language's capacity of conveying ideas: "When a writer's emotions are stirred, they will take form in words; and if a rationale is to be expressed, it manifests itself in writing. This is because a writer's thought moves from what is latent in the mind to what is manifest on the page. What is within corresponds with what lies without."⁵⁷ His view is another way of stating Husserl's view of meaning as an "intentional object"⁵⁸ and paves the way for his positive belief in the possibility of retracing the intention of the author through reading in chapter 48, "Zhiyin 知音 (An Understanding Critic)." The chapter is a treatise on the nature, rationale, characteristics, and methodology of literary criticism and evaluation. As both criticism and evaluation depend on reading, it also touches upon the nature and rationale of reading and writing. Following Mencius' positive thesis, Liu Xie believed that just as writing is capable of expressing what is intently on the author's mind, a reader may be able to recover the author's intention through adequate reading. Citing the famous legend in which a sympathetic music connoisseur correctly revealed what is expressed by a lute player, he reiterated Mencius' positive belief in writing's capability of expressing an author's inner feelings:

If it is possible for a man's impressions of mountains and rivers to find expression in his lute playing, how much easier it must be to depict physically tangible forms with a brush, from which no inner feeling or idea can be successfully hidden. Our mind reflects reason just as our eyes perceive

physical forms; as long as our eyes are keen, there are no physical forms which cannot be distinguished, and as long as our mind is alert, there are no feelings or idea which cannot be conveyed.⁵⁹

Of course, Liu Xie admitted that it is very difficult to read an author's writing adequately and even more difficult to give adequate evaluation. But basing himself on the positive belief, he voiced a method of reading similar to that of Mencius:

Moved by his inner feelings, a writer expresses his thoughts in words. A reader peruses the writing so as to enter the writer's inner feelings. If the latter can trace the waves back to their sources, there will be nothing, however deeply hidden, that will not reveal itself. Although the reader is unable to meet the writer because they are separated from each other by distant eras, he may succeed in grasping the inner thoughts of the writer through the reading of his writing.⁶⁰

In this statement, Liu Xie, like Mencius, viewed reading and writing as a process of communication through language codes. His view is more nuanced and refined than that of Mencius and further enriches Lu Ji's conception of reading and writing as a connected process of communication and representation.

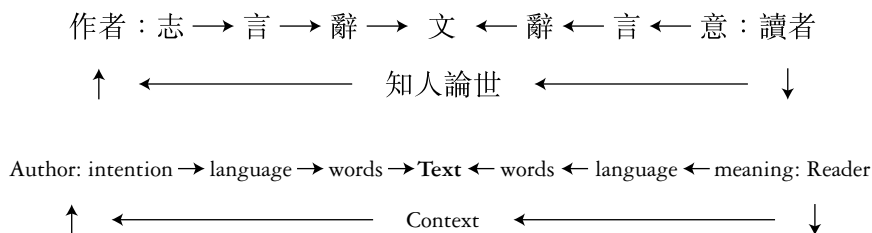
Through the debate on *yan* (words) and *yi* (ideas), scholars became clearly aware of the capacity of language and its paradoxical nature in its function of thinking and communication: language has both its strengths and limitations. Its strengths lie in that it can adequately represent objects and convey some ideas. Its limitations exist in the fact that it cannot adequately represent the subtle, delicate aspects of complex feelings, rich imagination, and metaphysical principles. The two sides of the paradox are adequately conveyed by the two expressions: "language is capable of conveying intention 言以足志," and "language is incapable of exhaustively expressing ideas 言不盡意." How can we break through the limitations of language and solve the contradiction between *yan* and *yi* in reading and writing? Synthesizing Mencius' positive view of language and Zhuangzi's skeptical view of language, later scholars proposed a syncretic view. Guo Xiang 郭象, for example, proposed a view in his comment on Zhuangzi's ideas: "Words and ideas are being, but that which is spoken of and conceived of is non-being. One should seek [meaning] from the surface of words and ideas but enters the realm of no words and no ideas. Only then can one reach there."⁶¹

Guo Xiang's proposal synthesizes Mencius' hermeneutic circle and Zhuangzi's wordless communication. It maximizes the strength of language: "language can be adequate in conveying one's intent," but mini-

mizes its shortcoming: “language cannot exhaustively express ideas.” In writing, because “language cannot fully express ideas,” a writer should find a method of expression that makes a full use of language’s function to convey ideas and at the same time takes advantage of metaphor, suggestion, symbolism, and other suggestive ways to set in motion the reader’s imagination and association so as to convey implications beyond the expressed words. In reading, a reader should not be restricted by what has been expressed in the words on the page, but instead tries to imagine along the path of thought strewn with metaphor, symbol, and suggestive details to seek the implications beyond the words on the page. In this way, the negative thesis, “language is incapable of adequately expressing ideas,” will stand on its own head and give rise to the supreme condition in Chinese literary art: “meanings beyond words 言外之意” and “endless meanings 不盡之意.” In Liu Xie’s opinion, under these circumstances, the writer and the reader may be connected in a rapport, conducive to a perfect understanding: “When the description of physical things in a writing comes to an end but the feelings aroused in the reader are more than plenty, the reader’s understanding dovetails perfectly with what the author wants to impart.”⁶²

A Chinese Model of Reading and Writing

Mencius and Zhuangzi are pioneers in the exploration of reading and writing in the Chinese tradition. Later thinkers and scholars have basically followed their pioneering efforts and conducted their conceptual discussions of reading and writing along the pioneers’ lines of thought. In terms of contemporary theories of language, communication, and representation, I may schematize the foundational ideas of reading in Chinese intellectual thought into a model of reading and writing:



From one direction, the writer conceptualizes his ideas in his mind, uses a language system to dispense his ideas in language codes, and creates a

text. From the opposite direction, the reader formulates an initial understanding of the text, traces its meanings back to the author's ideas through language codes, and refines his meanings by situating his reading within the context of the writer and his time.

With the aid of the formulated model, the differences in Mencius' and Zhuangzi's ideas of reading can be better understood. In Mencius' conception, with the text as the center, the communication channel between the writer and the reader is not blocked if one adopts a right approach to the text. What the writer intends the reader can grasp through sensitive and sensible reading. For this reason, we may regard him as a premodern Husserlian. But Mencius was not unaware of the problematics of communication. He, therefore, supplemented his positive conviction with extra-textual and supralinguistic considerations, making his idea of reading close to those of existentialist hermeneutics propounded by Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. To Zhuangzi, the communication channel is not always through because language cannot exhaustively express the writer's intention, nor can it exhaustively recover the writer's intention for the reader. As a result, what the reader understands may not always be what the writer has intended. In this sense, he may be considered a premodern deconstructionist. Their concerns are basically the same as those with which contemporary theorists of reading are preoccupied. As they lived in high antiquity, their precious insights may be said to have anticipated the contemporary inquiries into the complex relations among language, thought, representation, and hermeneutics. The fact that Mencius and Zhuangzi can be brought into a meaningful dialogue with contemporary theorists of hermeneutics suggests that reading is truly a subject of inquiry across time, space, and culture. Mencius' view of reading as a process of making friends with authors not only anticipates Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," but also suggests that reading is a human endeavor that requires sympathetic understanding, constant modification of one's preconceptions, and relentless overcoming of prejudices and biases. By contrast, Zhuangzi's view of reading based on linguistic skepticism produces a liberating effect that sanctions conceptual inquiries into openness by later thinkers and encourages explorations of interpretive and creative openness by traditional commentators, critics, and writers.