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Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing: A Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics. By Ming Dong Gu. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 334. $85.00.

While it may be cogently stated that the hermeneutic imperative is an integral part of the human condition — that is, the inexorable need to perceive and to understand — it was only in the past century that self-conscious and critical attention has been lavished on the theoretical issues of reading, interpreting and understanding. In the process, a whole array of questions has arisen to occupy much of the domain of the humanities: What is a text? What is context? What is the nature of language with which texts are produced? How is meaning produced? Who is an author? Who is a reader? What is the role of authors' intentions in relation to readers' receptions? In the field of literary criticism, many scholars (Foucault, Derrida and Barthes, just to name the iconic ones) have tasked themselves with the job of deconstructing the act and structure of reading, laying bare the ideological components of writing while interrogating the limits of language as the medium of signifying and conveying meaning. In the discipline of philosophy, many thinkers (Buber, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer, again just to list the obvious) have turned from the preoccupation with the metaphysical question of being to the investigation of the ontological conditions of understanding. If, these days, we are wont to say that there has been a linguistic turn in the human sciences, then we may well also say that such a turn is in large part a hermeneutic one.

Thus, Ming Dong Gu's book on the Chinese theories on reading is most welcomed and timely, inasmuch as it proffers a rigorously systematic study of how the Chinese were hermeneutically engaged in the act of reading and writing as they pondered a plethora of textual and interpretive questions that resonate with contemporary Western concerns. The monograph complements and dovetails neatly with the works of the authors collected in the two conference volumes on Chinese hermeneutics edited by Ching-I Tu, which, regrettably, elude Gu's bibliography.[1] (One may also note another unfortunate bibliographic oversight: absence of Chun-chieh Huang's *Mencian Hermeneutics: A History of Interpretations in China.*[2])

Gu's investigation is animated by one central question — the hermeneutic openness of the text — which he regards as a cross-cultural problematic of reading and understanding. He is concerned with explicating and exposing the nature of the text as the site of contestation between two approaches of reading: one emphasizing the unity and coherence

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1 *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers at Rutgers University, 2000), and *Interpretation and Intellectual Change: Chinese Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers at Rutgers University, 2004). While the timing of publication explains why the 2004 volume is not included, there is no reason why the first should not be included in Gu's otherwise fairly comprehensive list of references.

2 New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers at Rutgers University, 2001.

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of the text, whose originary meaning as intended by the author conditions the manner in which, and the extent to which, the text can and ought to be interpreted; the other focusing on the malleability of the text, wherein multiple and plural meanings can be found, depending on the reader's prejudices and the contingent contexts (ideological, historical, sexual, and so on) in which the text is situated. What Gu aims to achieve is a sort of cross-cultural dialogue enabled by deep analyses and thick descriptions of Chinese materials within a comparative framework. For instance, in the chapter devoted to deciphering the exegeses of the *Yijing,* the author reveals his familiarity with classical Chinese commentaries and their philological moorage, while writing effusively about the relevance of semiotic theories of signification. In the chapter dedicated to examining the "poetic unconscious," the author demonstrates his fascination and facility with Western literary theories of poetry and psychology, even as he dives headlong into the sea of Chinese words and phrases to retrieve their native meanings. And in the chapter dealing with the hexagram images, the author brings his understanding of Barthes' infamous declaration of "the death of the author" to bear on his analysis of Wang Bi's *Zhouyi* learning. In so marrying Chinese empirical data with Western theories, he seeks to construct and identify a Chinese theory of reading premised on hermeneutic openness.

Gu sees the dynamics of the Chinese theory of reading in terms of the creative tensions between two major hermeneutic impulses and traditions. The first is the mainstream "politico-ethical tradition" of elucidating the canon (the Confucian classics), driven by the impulse to retrieve the putative original meanings of the sages' texts. In this tradition exemplified by Mencius' approach, the primary goal of reading is to recapture *in toto* the intended meanings of the authors, insofar as texts are predefined and delimited verbal spaces ensconced in their historical contexts of yore. The second is the subordinate "metaphysical-aesthetic tradition" that celebrates the multiplicities, pluralities and diversities of meanings that texts are capable of engendering as they are mediated by readers who are historically situated in their own particular temporal junctures and spatial locations. It is especially in the latter tradition that we may uncover the core Chinese hermeneutic openness, which Gu regards as a common cultural practice of the Chinese reading community. For the purpose of analysis, Gu further suggests that we may construe this cultural practice as a "conceptual category" in order to explore and comprehend the Chinese world of reading, inasmuch as that the Chinese readers of texts throughout the ages have actually embraced and practiced hermeneutic openness, even though they did not reflect on it systematically, conceptually or critically.

To bring to light the creatively dynamic interaction between these two hermeneutic traditions and the resultant hermeneutic openness, Gu canvasses a wide range of theoretical espousals and a vast number of textual materials. The book is divided into four parts, under which are subsumed eight chapters, together with a preface, introduction and conclusion. The first two chapters constitute part one. Chapter one, by pulling together the diverse threads of hermeneutic approaches — those of Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Yang Xiong, Lu Ji, Liu Xie — stitches together a fabric of the pattern of the basic Chinese ideas of reading, the significance and import of which Gu expounds with reference to the foundational ideas in Western hermeneutics of such well-known figures as Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer. This pattern, as Gu contends, is essentially a bipartite one, each

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part being represented by Mencius and Zhuang, respectively. The former affirms the possibility and capacity of empathetically apprehending the minds of the authors and hence the original meanings of his words; the latter mistrusts the ability of language to convey meaning and so the reader's grasp of what the text says can only be incomplete and subject to his/her own predispositions. Chapter two focuses on the hermeneutic nomenclature, apparatuses, precepts and practices in Chinese aesthetic thinking, which, according to Gu, point clearly to what may be regarded as literary and poetic openness. Here, Gu discourses on such Chinese poetic notions and practices as *yiyin* (lingering sound), *yiwei* (lingering taste), *bujin zhiyi* (endless meaning), *hanxu* (subtle reserve), *wu* (ontological non-being) and *tuiqiao* (self-reflexive making), all of which may be categorically described in terms of aesthetic suggestiveness that lends the Chinese act of reading its unmistakable openness.

Part two comprises chapters three and four, focusing on the exegesis and study of the *Yijing*. Chapter three argues that the *Zhouyi* is an open hermeneutic system that accommodates varied representations of its pristine meanings. As such, it furnishes the paradigm of hermeneutic openness that makes possible open poetics in the Chinese literary universe. Chapter four, while addressing the contention between the *xiangshu* (image-number) and *yili* (meaning-principle) camps within the *Zhouyi* commentarial tradition, prominently features the interpretations of Wang Bi, who, by arguing in favour of forgetting the images in order to apprehend their meanings, initiated the shift from the author-centred approach to one that privileges the mediating role of the reader.

Chapters five and six occupy part three, which concentrates on another classic, the *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*). Chapter five painstakingly and critically surveys the exegetical history of some of the main odes, uncovering and revealing the enormous heterogeneity of interpretations that have attended the interpretations of these much-read songs. As Gu avers, this inherent allowance in the *Shijing* for interpretive openness — the built-in aporia, as it were — explains its durability and enduring freshness, as it enables multiple usage of the text for myriad purposes. Chapter six dwells on an interesting paradox in the long commentarial history of the *Shijing*. At the same time that a multitude of commentators searches long and hard for the original intents of the author(s) so as to secure the coherent and unified meanings of the Classic — a form of hermeneutic "blindness," as Gu, following Paul de Man, puts it — they nonetheless yield great hermeneutic insight as they annotatively and philologically weave the text into a polysemic verbal tapestry of multivocal expositions, as notably evidenced by the exegeses of the Great Preface.

Part four, consisting of chapters seven and eight, shines the spotlight on literary texts. Chapter seven offers in-depth analyses of some choice poems, such as Tao Qian's "Wine Poems" (*Yinjiu*), Chen Zi'ang's "Song on Climbing Youzhou Terrace" (*Deng Youzhoutai ge*), Wang Wei's "Deer Enclosure" (*Luchai*), Meng Haoren's "Mooring at the Jiande River" (*Su Jiandejiang*) and so on. Gu seeks not to provide new readings of these works but rather to answer a series of fundamental hermeneutic questions, such as why a poem is prone to interpretive heterogeneity and what makes possible multiple readings in poetry. As Gu shows, the answer rests much on the weakness of formal logic in the Chinese poetic tradition. The ensuing chapter eight probes the linguistic factors in the formation of this very tradition. Relying and building on the hermeneutic insights of Gadamer, with special regard to the ways in which language unconsciously conditions the construction and perception of

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texts, Gu posits that the Chinese poetic language, with its syntactical ambiguity and therefore indeterminate meaning, is apt to express and embody "the poetic unconscious," which is a compressed but infinitely open hermeneutic space. In this interpretive space, the reader semiotically interacts with the author as the former responds to the poetic words as a succession of signs whose meanings refer simultaneously to their *referents* (what the author intends the words to refer to) and their *interpretants* (what arise in the reader's mind as he/ she confronts the words as signs).

Given Gu's wide-ranging evidence, both textual and theoretical, it is easy to endorse and subscribe to, in general, his thesis that the Chinese world of reading is an open hermeneutic space that readily accommodates multiple interpretations. But I wonder if his rather sanguine propounding of hermeneutic openness and open poetics does not warrant some tempering. Gu's definition of such openness is formulated primarily in terms of readerly response. As pointed out earlier, he sees a paradigm shift with Wang Bi's exegesis of the *Yijing* images, which moved the hermeneutic center of gravity from authorial intents to readers' receptions. His examination of Zhuangzi's reading and the Chinese poetic tradition is similarly predicated on the idea of the cannibalization and mediation of the original meanings, which is based on the standard postmodern deconstructionist argument that texts, confected by unreliable and inadequate language, are unstable entities imminently and infinitely susceptible to multiple readings independent of the texts' historical origination and the authors' original purport. Small wonder that Gu sees in Zhuangzi's philosophy of language strong allusion to the postmodern Barthesian proclamation, "the death of the author," and in Chinese poetry, "syntagmatic imagination."

It seems to me that the rich diversity of the commentaries, such as those on the *Yijing* and *Shijing,* should not be understood principally in terms of the postmodern conception of readerly response. For the Confucian exegetes, truth resides in the classics, and accordingly, their philosophical conception of truth is construed in textual and commentarial terms. They are convinced that the ancient classics speak directly to the Confucian readers, and via hermeneutic routes, they bridge the chasm of space and time. They read because they are in search of the transcendent, universal and timeless truths of the classics. In that sense, their hermeneutic is religiously inspired, motivated and oriented. To be sure, the classical hermeneuts' readings of the classics are circumscribed and conditioned by the contexts of their reception, and are therefore multifariously varied. But their interpretations always take place within a communal context in which the classical texts are taken to be in possession of some fundamental, consensual normative perspectives that are ontologically substantive. These predetermined perspectives are *authorly* intents. Thus, regardless of how apparently diverse the *readerly* responses are, they are all preoccupied with the classics' communicative intents. They all strive to preserve these texts' coherence and unity by buttressing their normative and moral authority. Gu's conception of hermeneutic openness gives short shrift to this deeply religious reverence of the sacrality of the classics.

Another weakness in Gu's thesis is the neglect of the ontological dimension of the Chinese act of reading, which is quite unlike the Western counterpart with its epistemological import that presumes the separation of the investigating subject and the investigated object. Even the so-called philosophical hermeneutics of a Heidegger or a Gadamer is designed to answer the Cartesian-Kantian question of what it is to know and how

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it is to know. On the other hand, Chinese hermeneutics is not disinterested and detached dissection of reality as object. Rather, with our mind's power of feeling and response (*ganying*), we come to know and realize the fundamental reason for, and the reasonableness of, the triadic integration of heaven, earth and humanity (to wit, reality as a whole). In the Confucian case, knowledge of the text through reading is not underpinned by a positive theory of epistemology, according to which knowledge is pursued for knowledge's sake. For the Confucian readers, ontological and cosmological being is fully integrated with epistemological and experiential becoming in the act of reading and writing. While Gu makes a point in the preface to acknowledge his debt to Chung-ying Cheng, his bibliography does not include those works by Cheng on "onto-hermeneutics," which might have led him to consider the crucial fact of the interlarding of ontology and hermeneutics in the Chinese world of reading.

To so voice my dissatisfaction is not to undermine my overall admiration for Gu's book, which represents a notable step forward in our effort to better understand reading and writing in a culture renowned for its veneration of words. Ming Dong Gu, in comparative and theoretical terms, has reformulated and re-asked significant hermeneutic questions to which the Chinese act of reading and writing is the right answer. To that extent, he has succeeded in initiating a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue, an open hermeneutic space unto itself.

ON-CHO NG
The Pennsylvania State University

The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism. By Karen J. Leong. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. x + 236. $55.00/£35.95 cloth, $21.95/£13.95 paper.

This book attempts to show how three women contributed to the American popular images of China from the 1930s to the end of the Second World War. They were Pearl Buck, a missionary and writer who spent many years in China with first-hand knowledge of the lives of ordinary Chinese; Anna May Wong, a Chinese American who played Asian roles in American movies; and Mayling Soong, the first lady who appeared to speak on behalf of the Chinese people. As Karen J. Leong argues, they formed part of the China mystique which emerged and developed since the 1930s as a result of changing international relations.

Leong believes that the 1930s marked a turning point, as the American public began to view China differently, and popular images seemed to produce a "new China," which Americans thought would be readily receptive to American culture and democracy. As Leong writes, "the China mystique was an American ideology that incorporated notions of 'modern women.'" These three women—Buck, Wong, and Soong—"embodied the China mystique for Americans during the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 2). Why was the China mystique a "feminine" concept? Leong gives a reason which can be further explained and developed—she thinks that American orientalism focused on the exportation of American

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