

The background of the book cover is a dark green to black gradient, overlaid with large, expressive Chinese calligraphy in a cursive style. The characters are in a lighter green color, creating a layered effect. The calligraphy appears to be a mix of characters, some of which are clearly legible as '唐' (Tang), '韓' (Han), '伯' (Bo), '蕭' (Xiao), '幽' (You), '蘭' (Lan), '賦' (Fu), '勅' (Chu), '敬' (Jing), '書' (Shu), '於' (Yu), '續' (Xu), '熙' (Xi), '毅' (Yi).

# The Poetics of Appropriation

The Literary  
Theory and  
Practice of  
Huang  
Tingjian

David Palumbo-Liu

The  
Poetics of  
Appropriation

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David Palumbo-Liu

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D. P.-L.



## Preface

The culture of ancient China is often regarded as tradition bound, always reverent of its past and anxious to preserve it, yet the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) witnessed a radical reinterpretation of many facets of traditional culture—history, philosophy, art, and literature. Those who performed these reinterpretations legitimized their re-reading of the past first by assimilating it and then by asserting that they were the proper extension of past tradition in the present day. This was the age of the great encyclopedias, compendiums, imperial anthologies, and catalogues; however, while promoting the collection, classification, and preservation of traditional texts, a group of literati created new ways to interpret and create cultural objects that transformed the representation of the past.

In literature, this revision of the past had specific ramifications. Northern Song poets confronted what they themselves acknowledged as the Golden Age of Chinese poetry, the Tang dynasty (618–907). Many Northern Song poets, particularly those writing during the last century of the dynasty, were haunted by a deep sense of self-consciousness, an awareness of the challenge to emerge from the shadows of the greatest poets of the tradition even as they claimed an affinity with their predecessors. The effort to surpass prior poetry was part of the larger act of re-interpretation—poets strove to find a way to situate themselves within the cultural tradition while declaring themselves distinct.

The poetry produced under such historical contingencies and cultural imperatives has often been compared unfavorably to that of the Tang. Critics, from the Northern Song to today, have charged that the Northern Song lyric poet profoundly failed to meet the challenge he sensed for

himself. Both traditional and modern critics agree on two reasons for this failure. First, they see in the Northern Song lyric a strong and dominating discursive strain of “philosophizing”—the poet is too absorbed in reasoning out ideas, too little concerned with conveying feeling. Second, they find Northern Song verse too allusive, too “bookish.” Both critiques are informed by the same aesthetic—both argue against *mediation*. For these critics, the Northern Song lyric is too opaque, too dense: it demands an intellectual investment precisely at the moment that the primary values of lyric poetry call for an immediate emotional response.

Discussions of the negative aspects of the Northern Song lyric frequently mention Huang Tingjian (1045–1105). He, more than any other poet of his time, openly acknowledged and actively exploited the mediated quality of lyric poetry in his poetic theory and practice. Huang regarded the past as an inescapable presence. In response, he engendered a poetics that recognized and incorporated the textual histories of words in order to create new meanings, meanings with his imprimatur.

Critics chide Huang most for expounding a theory that they see as a platform for plagiarism, an excuse for acts of poetic appropriation. The perception of Huang’s verse as a pastiche of allusions, coupled with the criticism that for Huang poetry is simply an opportunity to display his erudition, leads to a reading of Huang’s verse that is itself only an exercise in erudition. The reader seeks to identify the source of recondite allusions as a way to dissipate the density of the poem and discovers that once he has excavated those sources, the poem is but an empty form, a pretext for a game of wit. But this hermeneutic strategy ignores the historical forces that occasioned Huang’s poetics and consequently misses the reasons why in many respects Huang is an *exemplary* (not anomalous, or marginal) Northern Song poet.

This study is aimed at providing the background for understanding why Huang was so greatly admired, especially by outstanding literati of his age such as Su Shi and why later scholars claim Huang is the characteristic Northern Song poet. In this work, I relate his poetics to both the larger context of traditional Chinese poetry and specific changes in late Northern Song material history. Huang Tingjian’s was an extremely complex intellect—he discoursed freely on art and calligraphy, philosophy and literature, and he was deeply influenced by Buddhism (although his perception of Buddhism is highly syncretic, and his application of it highly metaphoric). A comprehensive study of Huang’s poetry would thus involve a more profound exploration of the interrelationships among these discourses than I provide here, as well as an analysis of his

*ci* poetry. Our understanding of Huang Tingjian, his literary theories, and his poetic practices is impeded by the facts that one of his central pronouncements comes to us only through the records of another and that his various collections contain poems that scholars claim were written by others.<sup>1</sup> In this monograph I confine myself to the particular task of elucidating a specific element of his theory and practice that provides a logic uniting all his comments on poetry and a way of identifying the salient characteristics of his verse. It also offers a particularly compelling point of comparative study.

Huang's poetics reflects a basic rethinking of the key issues of the classical Chinese poetic tradition and allows us to sense both the salient characteristics of classical Chinese lyric poetry and their relation to Western notions of poetry. In his heavily allusive and intellectually complex re-reading and rewriting of the past, we have a crucially important set of observations on the nature of literature and culture and the relation of the past to the present, as well as a daring transformation of the literary canon.

In the first part of this study, I locate Huang within the context of Northern Song letters and focus especially on the manner in which that age, and others, have defined the Northern Song against the backdrop of the greatest age of classical poetry—the Tang. How did Northern Song poets respond to their uncomfortable proximity to such impressive predecessors, and how did their response shape their literary art? In the second part, I examine the theories and poetic practice of Huang Tingjian to see how he both incorporated the response of his contemporaries in his own works and developed that response into a highly individual program of composition.

This study is bracketed by a consideration of how Huang's poetics can be related to Western literary concerns. It is not my intent to fit Chinese literature into the frame of Western literary discourse, far from that; rather, I wish to use my analysis of Huang Tingjian to scrutinize that frame in a comparative critique. The introduction thus surveys important documents of Western literary criticism that remark on issues with which Huang was deeply concerned: imitation, technique, and spontaneity of composition. I point out ways that these discourses grapple with the contradiction between craft and nature, a contradiction that informs Huang's poetics to a great extent. I then discuss Huang's particular response and how that response was determined in large part by Huang's position as a classical Chinese poet writing at a historical moment that articulated these issues as explicit questions.



In the conclusion I return to the consideration of how Huang's literary project resembles, but ultimately differs from, Western literary theories of influence and intertextuality. My main argument is that radically different notions of textuality separate classical Chinese poetics from the basic presumptions of Western literary composition. In Huang Tingjian's poetic theories and practice, we have an extremely important set of tools to view the classical Chinese lyric tradition and its relation to the Western tradition.

## Abbreviations

For complete publication data on the books cited in the following list, see the Bibliography, pp. 227–38.

CLEAR	<i>Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews</i>
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
LDSH	He Wenhuan, ed., <i>Lidai shihua</i>
NHZJ	<i>Zhuangzi: Nanhua zhenjing</i>
SBBY	Sibu beiyao ed.
SBCK	Sibu congkan ed.
SHSG	Huang Tingjian, <i>Song Huang Shangu xiansheng quan ji</i>
<i>Shi</i>	Huang Tingjian, <i>Shangu shi zhu</i>
SKQS	Siku quanshu ed. (Taipei: Yingshu, 1978)
SRYX	Wei Qingzhi, comp., <i>Shiren yuxie</i>
SWGS	Su Shi, <i>Su wenzhong gong shi bianzhu jicheng</i>
TX	Hu Zi, comp., <i>Tiaoxi yuyin conghua</i>
WJ	Henzō Kinkō, <i>Wenjing mifulun</i>
WX	<i>Wen xuan</i>
WXDL	Liu Xie, <i>Wenxin diaolong</i>
XLDSH	Ding Fubao, <i>Xu lidai shihua</i>
YZ	Huang Tingjian, <i>Yuzhang Huang xiansheng wenji</i>



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## Critical Introduction

If there is one thing that allows us to employ the word “lyric,” derived from a particular poetic form in the West, to the *shi* poetry of traditional China, it is the primacy accorded by poets in both traditions to the notion of spontaneous composition and originality. In the course of this study, I will exert some critical pressure on both these concepts and tease out the differences in their articulations in the West and traditional China. I begin by quoting three exemplary passages, the first by Khakheperresenb (ca. 2000 B.C.) and the next two by Huang Tingjian (1045–1105), that variously show a shared investment in the image of poetry coming forth afresh and immediately from an emotional response to the world.

Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance which has grown stale, which men of old have spoken.

In Du Fu’s [712–70] composing of verse and Han Yu’s [768–824] composing of essays, there is not one word that does not come from somewhere else. Probably, because later generations do not read enough, they say that Han Yu and Du Fu made these expressions up themselves. Those of old who were able to compose literature were able to mold the myriad phenomena. They took the expressions of the ancients and entered them into brush and ink—it was like a pill of Spirit Cinnabar, which spots iron and turns it to gold.

The meaning of poetry is inexhaustible, yet the talent of men is limited. In pursuing inexhaustible meaning through the use of limited talent, even Tao Yuanming [365–427] and Du Fu could not achieve mastery in capturing it.<sup>1</sup>

The mournful echoes of the voice of an Egyptian scribe dead some three thousand years have been used by two twentieth-century critics of

Western literature as an emblem of a key motif in literary history. Their combined remarks bracket nearly all of neo-classical, modern, and post-modern English literature. W. Jackson Bate, in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, uses Khakheperresenb's words to remark on a theme that he traces from Restoration England to the Romantic age—a writer's constant awareness that his language is not his alone, that his art is always haunted by the art of others. John Barth, addressing the question "Is postmodernist fiction an art form to take seriously?" uses the passage to assert the "exhaustion" of "the aesthetic of high modernism" and the legitimacy of a new form of writing.<sup>2</sup> The questions this topic raises form a major set of concerns in both ancient and modern Western literary criticism and deeply shape our understanding of literary art.

It is tempting to draw a simple correlation between all three quotations to form a smooth consensus bridging time and cultural space, bringing the classical Chinese poet within our horizon of understanding. I will forestall that moment, however, in order to probe more deeply the differences between Western ideas on the use of past texts and those of classical Chinese poets. Perhaps precisely *because* these quotations seem so complementary it is important to see how they ultimately reflect very different presumptions about what poetic language *is*. At the same time, this differentiation allows us to perceive on what grounds the two traditions share similar concerns.

The question of language's "exhaustibility" is inextricably linked to the production of literature: the assertion that language is *not* exhaustible is a solace of latter-day writers—it leaves open the possibility of "true" literary creation. If language *is* exhaustible, then all latter-day writers can do is attempt to mask their work's secondary nature—the art of revision becomes synonymous with art itself.

In both China and the West, meditations on these questions take form in discourses on the art of composition. Such discussions implicitly or explicitly link the issues of imitation and originality to a questioning of the very nature of art, counterposing spontaneous, pre-reflective composition (originality) to imitation (the use of literary models); the freedom of "pure" creation against the necessity of writing in/to a tradition. The possibility that poetic language is prescribed leads to both a heightened sense of the importance of revision and a rethinking of the relationship between past and present poets.

On the one hand, one recognizes prior greatness in order to master one's craft; on the other hand, one must go beyond such models to emerge as distinct. Yet the questions remain: Is verbal art limited to sim-

ply revising the works of others? Is one's work always haunted by the ghosts of previous articulations?

The range of the texts I survey in this introduction covers the ancient period to the modern age. In this comparative analysis it becomes clear that not only a sense of the abiding nature of the contradiction but also the *discursive responses* to such a dilemma are shared by a wide range of critics in Western literary history. Only after recognizing and comparing certain key elements of the responses of writers in the West and classical China to this dilemma can we gauge the validity and usefulness of transposing Western theoretical concepts such as the "anxiety of influence" and "intertextuality" to the classical Chinese tradition.

By the same token, making these distinctions will give us a more accurate sense of how both traditions conceived of the basis of literary art. Most specifically, Huang Tingjian's poetics will mean more to us if we see how writers and critics in the classical Chinese tradition articulated concepts similar to those in the West yet founded them on very different notions of literary composition—if we see the affinities between the two traditions and at the same time use their differences to better understand their distinctness.

Here I trace the basic and profound vacillations in the strategies of Quintilian, Longinus, Edward Young, Schiller, and T. S. Eliot as they seek to evade the central contradictions in their arguments on imitation and originality. Despite Khakheperresenb's early pronouncement on belatedness, writers in the West felt the threat of literary exhaustion differently in different times. Yet the primary issue is not so much exhaustion as the fear of repetition. It is this fear that serves as a subtext for all discourses on imitation and originality, for repetition cancels the basic value of the lyric—it negates the ideal of a speaking subject's autonomy and authenticity.

### Longinus on Imitation

Aristotle suggests a relationship between the individual and the collective and between innate and acquired literary skill: "Ordinary people do this [practice some form of rhetorical argument] at random or through practice and from acquired habit. Both ways being possible, the subject can plainly be handled systematically, for it is possible to inquire the reason why some speakers succeed through practice and others spontaneously; and everyone will at once agree that such an inquiry is the function of an art."<sup>3</sup>

Later Quintilian introduced a tension between these two notions in his discussion of imitation:

From these [great authors of the past] . . . is to be derived a supply of words, varied figures of speech, and the principle of verbal arrangement; by them, too, the mind is to be directed towards examples of every good quality in writing—for there can be no doubt that the greater part of art lies in *imitation*. Discovery clearly came first, and is of first importance. But it is none the less profitable to follow up other people's successful discoveries. And every technique in life is founded on our *natural desire to do ourselves what we approve of in others*. [Italics added]<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting how Quintilian straddles the issues of invention, discovery, and imitation. He mentions discovery, the thing of “first importance,” only briefly, as if it went without saying. The rhetoric of this passage implicitly diminishes the stature of discovery, for which we may read “originality,” and elevates the topic at hand, *imitation*.

Quintilian gives only one reason for the primary importance of discovery: it *came* first. The valorization of the idea of origin stands out clearly here, but the text in which this statement is embedded argues in another direction. Quintilian first borrows Aristotle's claim regarding our imitative nature (“Imitation is natural to each man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation”) and extends it to the realm of literary composition.<sup>5</sup> Although the rhetoric of the passage suggests it is “natural” to award discovery primacy, imitation is nonetheless *equally* “natural” and, most important, the only way that we progress. If we pair Aristotle's statement with Quintilian's, it becomes clear that imitation is the very thing by which culture (ethics, art, science) perpetuates itself, the only way that society retains cohesion and longevity.

But no sooner does Quintilian set up this argument than he makes it a foil for another, different, assertion. The hinge of this transition lies in the lines: “Yet this very principle [imitation], which makes every accomplishment so much easier than it was for men who had nothing to follow, is dangerous unless taken up cautiously and with judgement.” The judgment that Quintilian proceeds to elaborate is an account of discovery that argues a much stronger case than simple temporal priority. The significance of the notion that the originals of antiquity confronted a much harder task than do the moderns because those first poets had to create things *ex nihilo* gradually changes; it becomes clear that what is of

real importance to Quintilian is setting up an argument that will allow the moderns equal, if not greater, status than the ancients. Discovery, and the assertion of individuality that is concomitant with discovery, returns to center stage in Quintilian's discourse, but this resuscitated type of discovery is qualitatively different from the first.

Quintilian recalls the notion of the naturalness of imitation from his opening remarks and twists it in a direction that reconciles imitation with discovery. He encourages poets to imitate the originals *in being original*:

What would have happened in those times which lacked models if men had thought that they should do and think nothing that they did not already know? Obviously nothing would have ever been discovered. How, then, can it be wrong for us to discover something that did not exist before? Those untutored men of old were led by sheer natural talent to bring so much to fruition: are we not to be inspired to search by the very fact that we know that those who have sought in the past have found? Can we not make use of our experience in one set of facts to dig out another? Shall we have nothing except by someone else's courtesy—like painters whose only ambition is to copy pictures by a process of guidelines and measurements?

Quintilian goes on to further modify the pristine image of the ancients—he asserts that “among the orators whom so far we know as masters, no one has appeared who cannot be found lacking, or open to criticism, in some respect or another.” In this case modeling one's writing on one's predecessors is to mimic the imperfect. Quintilian's final move away from imitation is to declare that “the greatest qualities of an orator—talent, facility of discovery, force, fluency, everything that art cannot supply—these things are not imitable.”

This passage is the first articulation of what becomes paradigmatic in discourses on imitation: a proclamation or concession of the value of models, a call to imitate those models, and then a gradual inversion that allows the modern to equal and eventually surpass the ancient; the original inevitably gains ascendancy over imitation. Models are first set up for emulation, then competition, and as the contest is announced, the argument, which was at first weighed heavily in favor of those who will always retain temporal primacy, is balanced by pointing out the imperfection of originals: since they are not perfect, they are imperfect models for imitation. Finally, the nature of the discourse switches from prohibition to fatalism—one *cannot* imitate the things of greatest value. The discourse on imitation thereby sets its own limitations while pointing out the ultimate value of what lies beyond it.



The tension between art and something whose greatness transcends art is intensified in Longinus. Again this issue is inextricably linked to questions of originality and imitation. At some point, individual talent must surpass what it can gain from traditional models.

The question from which I must begin is whether there is in fact an art of sublimity or profundity. Some people think it is a complete mistake to reduce things like this to technical rules. Greatness, the argument runs, is a natural product, and does not come by teaching. The only art is to be born like that. They believe moreover that natural products are very much weakened by being reduced to the bare bones of a textbook.<sup>6</sup>

Longinus goes on to defend his project:

What Demonsthenes said of life in general is also true of literature: good fortune is the greatest of blessings, but good counsel comes next, and the lack of it destroys the other also. In literature, nature occupies the place of good fortune, and art that of good counsel. Most important of all, the very fact that some things in literature depend on nature alone can itself be learned only from art. (2.3; 463)

Longinus attempts to balance the two aspects and rationalize his project, but even in this rationalization, art necessarily comes second. The last, and “most important,” reason he lists has, in fact, little to do with the technique of composing—it is rather a consciousness of what technique *cannot* do.

Longinus’ treatment of the subject of imitation, like Quintilian’s, contains a movement that elevates the ancients only to deflate them. His first move is to gather both ancients and moderns into a commonality that effaces difference. He begins by evoking his famous analogy—the model of divine inspiration is transferred onto a model wherein latter-day poets receive the spirit of prior poets. What is of particular note, however, is that this transference is both unbidden and unproblematic: “Many are possessed by a spirit not their own. . . . The genius of the ancients acts as a kind of an oracular cavern, and effluences flow from it into the minds of their imitators” (13.2; 476).

From this analogy Longinus speaks of emulation: “These great figures, presented to us as objects of emulation and, as it were shining before our gaze, will somehow elevate our minds to the greatness of which we form a mental image” (13.2; 476). The commonality implicit in the analogy of oracular possession is lessened in the practice of emulation. The ancients are no longer represented by the metonymy of disembodied spirits that infuse the spirit of the latter-born poet. (And the extension