Lu Ji's Theory of Reading and Writing: Medieval Chinese Anxieties about Literary Creation

Wendy Swartz

There is no more fruitful period than the early medieval era to focus an inquiry on the development and blossoming of Chinese literary thought. This period witnessed massive gains in cultural wealth as new literary genres and discursive forms were introduced, and the proliferation of examples ensued. The affordability and availability of paper enabled the expanding circulation of manuscripts and their duplication, hence increasing the likelihood of the transmission of texts to a more informed public. The widespread dissemination of texts in turn fostered nascent or new forms of literary and textual studies, such as bibliography, genre study, anthology making, and literary criticism, that undertook an accounting of this rapidly accumulating cultural capital. Early medieval literary critics and historians sought to manage the multiplication and spread of literary texts by composing cohesive or systematic accounts using the tools of definition, selection, and/or ranking. These critical readers seemed to have perceived and certainly attempted to address the need to arbitrate not only what was good literature but what literariness even was. The aspects that distinguished literature from other types of writing and branches of learning, such as the classics and histories, became the concern of critics and theorists who assumed the mandate to shape literary culture in the tradition that developed after the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) and *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭).

One such theorist was Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303), who, according to one influential though probably spurious account, set out to probe the art of writing and explain the process of literary creation at the tender age of twenty.¹ Most modern scholars dispute that account and instead date the composition of Lu Ji's masterwork to around the age of forty.² The contention is not merely a

1 In "Zui ge xing" 醉歌行 (Drunken song: a ballad), Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) writes that "At twenty, Lu Ji composed 'Rhapsody on Literature.'" The basis for Du's claim is uncertain.

2 See, for example, Lu Qinli 遼欽立, "Wen fu' zhuan chu niandai kao," 文賦撰出年代考, in *Han Wei Liuchao wenxue lunji* 漢魏六朝文學論集 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1984), 421–34; and Zhou Xunchu 周勛初, "Wen fu' xiezuo niandai xintan" 文賦寫作年代新探, in *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue luncong* 魏晉南北朝文學論叢 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe,

literary-historical matter of chronology in the life of Lu Ji, but implies a debate on the theoretical question of “what is a credible age for any writer to comment authoritatively on the art of writing and the workings of literary creativity?” Whether “Rhapsody on Literature” (“Wen fu” 文賦) was written by a precocious genius or an experienced master, Lu Ji's work has been justifiably celebrated for over seventeen hundred years as one of the most inspired theoretical pieces in Chinese literary history. This work of meta-literature not only details the preparations of a writer, but also candidly discusses the various fearsome and obsessive challenges that concern the writer. These challenges range from the difficulty in finding at times apt expressions, the occasional disconnection between idea formation and articulation, to the dread of unintentionally imitating or duplicating a prior work. This essay will explore the ways in which Lu Ji represents the process of the creative act and the questions his work raises about reading and writing, tradition and invention, and conception and representation.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading for Writing

It is a basic truth widely acknowledged that every writer must first be a reader. Lu Ji's “Rhapsody” probes into just how connected the practices of reading and writing were for the early medieval Chinese writer.

佇中區以玄覽 He stands at the center, observing in darkness,³
 頤情志於典墳 And nourishes feeling and intent in ancient writings.
 遵四時以歎逝 He follows along the four seasons, sighing at their passing,

1999), 28–35. Among the reasons these modern scholars set forth as persuasion for a later date of composition include: Lu Ji was around forty when he composed the other works mentioned along with “Rhapsody on Literature” in his famous letter to his younger brother Lu Yun 陸雲 (262–303); “Rhapsody on Literature” shows the influence of the then-current metaphysical discourse, “learning of the mysterious [Dao]” (*xuanxue* 玄學), which was not present in works that predate his move to Luoyang in his mature years; and the piece evinces a maturity that comes with many years of experience.

- 3 “Observing in darkness” (*xuan lan* 玄覽) appears in the tenth chapter of the *Laozi*, signifying where the mind resides and how it encounters the world, according to the Heshang Gong 河上公 (2nd century CE?) commentary, a reading Lu Ji would have known: “the mind resides in a dark and obscure place, from which it observes and knows the myriad things. Hence this is called ‘observing in darkness.’” This observing is a type of reflection that can lead to a clarity of vision. D.C. Lau, following the Western Han Mawangdui version of the *Laozi* which reads *jian* 監 (“mirror”) in place of *lan* (“observing”), renders *xuan jian* as “mysterious mirror,” a metaphor for the mind. With the mind's eye, as it were, the writer observes things in the world. See Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 14.

瞻萬物而思紛 Looks at the myriad things of the world, reflecting on their profusion.
 悲落葉於勁秋 He grieves over falling leaves in forceful autumn,
 喜柔條於芳春 And delights in tender branches in fragrant spring.⁴
 (LL. 1–6)

As the reader prepares to write, he must first journey through past works, which nourish the two faculties essential to writing, feeling (*qing* 情) and intent (*zhi* 志). For Lu Ji, literary creativity may be stirred by things in the natural world, but it germinates directly from the nourishment of past models, a synesthetic process aptly expressed through mixed metaphors, such as intoning the fragrance of predecessors and wandering through the forest of letters. Lu Ji elaborates on this last point:

詠世德之駿烈 He sings of the great enterprise of the virtuous forebears,
 誦先人之清芬 And intones the pure fragrance of his predecessors,
 遊文章之林府 He roams the grove and trove of literary works,
 嘉麗藻之彬彬 And admires the perfect balance in these beautiful pieces.
 慨投篇而援筆 Feeling moved, he puts aside books and picks up a writing brush,
 聊宣之乎斯文 And gives it manifestation through literature.
 (LL. 9–14)

Stirred by writings from the past, the reader is inspired to express his sentiments, thus becoming a writer. In this way, literary creation becomes the direct, immediate, and necessary result of reading.

For practical purposes, reading provides a primary means for writers to access the reserve of verbal possibilities. The “assemblage of words” (*qun yan* 群言, translated below as “pool of words”) refers to the entire linguistic reservoir that is constituted by all literature, including the Classics.

傾群言之瀝液 He imbibes the drip drop from the pool of words,
 漱六藝之芳潤 Rinsing in his mouth the aromal moisture of the Classics.
 浮天淵以安流 Drifting between heaven and watery depths, he is at rest in
 the flow,
 濯下泉而潛浸 Bathing in the cascading stream, immersed in its recesses.
 於是沈辭拂悅 Then, submerged phrases struggle to surface,
 若遊魚銜鉤而出重淵之深 Like swimming fish, with hook in their mouths, emerging
 from the depths of a layered pool.

4 All citations of Lu Ji's “Wen fu” are from *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 17.761–782.

浮藻聯翩

若翰鳥纓繳而墜曾雲之峻

Peacocky displays of artistry drift down,

Like winging birds, taken by tasseled arrows, falling from the heights of storied clouds.

(LL. 21–28)

Lu Ji employs impressionistic metaphors to evoke the experiential acts of reading and writing: reading is cast as the consumption of liquids (swallowing and gargling existing literature) and writing the selection of materials (fishing and fowling signifying the process of literary composition). This consumption and selection are not only constructive but also destructive. Neither the clumsiness of the fish's ascent nor the elegance of the birds' descent palliates the ultimate violence done to the animals. The idea that the act of reading in particular constitutes culturally-sanctioned violence would find sensationally grim articulation in the ruminations of the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). On reading, he said, "It is necessary with one blow of a cudgel to leave a scar; with one slap on the face to draw a handful of blood. When you read the writings of others, it should be just like this. Do not be lax!" 須是一棒一條痕；一攔一掌血。看人文字，要當如此，豈可忽略。⁵ In this view, reading means aggressively interrogating and deconstructing those writers, causing in the process damage to the writings. Similarly, in Lu Ji's vision, reading is the destruction of another's writing, an act of breaking down existing matter to assemble materials for one's own thought or writing. And writing is made possible by the disassembled remains of others.

The element of assimilation in reading has lent the act to alimentary metaphors (e.g. ingestion, absorption, incorporation, rumination) across cultures. Textual consumption—figural, even literal—served also in the West as a rhetorical marker for reading and understanding. Eating a book (or scroll) figured in lessons from Hebrew and Christian scriptures to medieval European devotional texts on the rewards of opening oneself up to the nourishment of divine words. In the Old Testament, Ezekiel receives the command to eat a scroll so that he may then convey the divine words in his native language to his people (Ezekiel 3). The fifteenth-century English friar John Capgrave recounts a comedic scene where a fourteenth-century English priest and translator of the *vita* and *passio* of Saint Katherine protested the command of an angel to eat the book containing the *vita* for which he was searching by reasoning that its covers are rotten, its pages dark and moldy, and its size too large to fit down his throat. The poor priest missed the point of the command and its scriptural basis, but in his *Life of Saint Katherine* John Capgrave seizes upon the viscerally

5 Zhu Xi, *Zhuizi yulei* 朱子語類, ed. Li Jingde 黎靖德 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 10.164.

suggestive power of eating and digesting to conjure up the act of ruminative reading.⁶

The reader in Lu Ji's work has no such trouble swallowing texts, which are consumed so smoothly and fluidly that he could even rinse his mouth with them. These materials may go down easily, but the fishing metaphor that follows in the same passage suggests that they do not simply remain down there. Fish being drawn from the bowels of the pool evokes the act of purging that must follow any consumption. Writing is cast as the necessary, even organic outcome of reading. In a seminal study of memory in European medieval culture, Mary Carruthers cogently links together memory, reading, and writing: "merely to store memory by reading is an incomplete process without composition, for composing is the ruminative, 'digesting' process, the means by which reading is domesticated to ourselves."⁷ But this process of composition using familiar, incorporated materials is by no means an easy passage, according to Lu Ji. Phrases are not only "submerged," but they also "struggle to surface," like swimming fish resisting the hook and line. This prompts the question "why is there such difficulty in this (re)composition?"

Throughout Lu Ji's exposition on the writing process, there is persistent indication of an uneasy relationship with predecessor works. The tension is especially perceptible in the following passage:

必所擬之不殊 乃闇合乎曩篇 雖杼軸于予懷 恍佗人之我先	If what your work aspires to be lacks distinctiveness— It unintentionally matches a piece from long ago. Though what comes out of the shuttle and loom are my own feelings, I fear that others may have come before me. (LL. 139–142)
--------------------------------------	---

During the process of literary production, the writer may know that his feelings will be woven into a texture that bears his own mark, but still fear that the textual product has already been made, a text that the writer already read or will one day read. The fear of unwittingly duplicating or repeating a prior work is revelatory of the angst-generating literary contradictions of early medieval Chinese society. While originality was not openly demanded in a labor that assumes extensive reading as a prerequisite for writing, it was nevertheless

6 For a detailed discussion of John Capgrave's use of alimentary metaphors and their implications, see Shannon Gayk, "Ete this Book: Literary Consumption and Poetic Invention in John Capgrave's *Life of Saint Katherine*," in *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2011), 88–109.

7 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 238.

somehow expected to emerge as the author goes along conforming to past models and citing predecessors as prescribed by the cultural norm. One may reasonably view Lu Ji's fear as an early medieval Chinese expression of "the anxiety of influence," a descriptive term popularized by Harold Bloom for a latter-born writer's struggle against the influence of one's forefathers. In his elaboration of the notion, Bloom sees fit to draw upon impressionistic metaphors of inundation: "The anxiety of influence is an anxiety in expectation of being flooded ... every good reader properly *desires* to drown, but if the poet drowns, he will become *only a reader*."⁸ A writer must first be a good reader, "bathing in the cascading stream, immersed in its recesses" (l. 24), as in Lu Ji's description, and then somehow emerge distinctly as a writer rather than drown merely as a reader. Bloom astutely articulates both the peril and necessity of immersive study for artistic innovation: "The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded."⁹ Lu Ji would have agreed with Bloom on the double-edged condition underlying reading for writing.

At the outset of his exposition, Lu Ji claims dependence on prior works for creativity and expression, yet he also disavows that knowledge in the immediate process of composition. A journey of the mind, in which the writer relies solely on his imagination to discover the world, precedes the act of writing in the following account.

其始也，皆收視反聽 耽思傍訊 精驚八極 心遊萬仞 其致也，情曛曠而彌鮮 物昭晰而互進	At the beginning, vision is retracted, hearing suspended; ¹⁰ Immersed in thought, he examines all around. His essence swiftly gallops to the eight ends of the world; His heart roams ten thousand fathoms. At the end, feelings first dimly glimmer then become brighter; Things become radiant and clear, revealing one another. (LL. 15–20)
---	---

The beginning of this description outlining the preparation of the writer echoes a passage in *Zhuangzi* 11, "Let it Be, Keep it Within Bounds" 在宥, in which Master Guangcheng teaches the Yellow Emperor how to lengthen his life. Since the essence of the Perfect Way is enshrouded, he advises that first there be "no seeing nor hearing" 無視無聽, then "enwrap the spirit in stillness"

8 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57.

9 Ibid., 154.

10 *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 11.381.

抱神以靜。"If the eyes do not see, the ears do not hear, and the mind does not know, then the spirit will safeguard the body and the body will live long" 目無所見，耳無所聞，心無所知，女神將守形，形乃長生。The *Zhuangzi* passage ostensibly describes a self-cultivation practice of the Daoist sage: to close off bodily senses, which would then lead the mind to the highest form of clarity, what Master Guangcheng calls "Great Illumination" 大明, a gateway to unlimited cognition. The continuation of the *Zhuangzi* passage tells the critical reason for shutting out external stimuli: "Be careful of what is within you; close off what is outside you, since too much knowledge causes harm" 慎女內，閉女外，多知爲敗。Lu Ji seems to find in this prescription for Daoist spiritual cultivation an application for the writer grappling with the influence of past works. Knowledge of literary history needs to be cautiously managed, for the writer must be ever aware of what he has already read but be prepared to block off that knowledge in order to allow one's own feelings to form distinctly and one's own conceptions to emerge clearly.

At the heart of Lu Ji's inquiry into the creative process are tangled questions of conception, or thought-formation. How do literary history, mnemonic recall, envisioning or imagination figure in the process? One of the most elliptical and cryptic passages in the "Rhapsody" concerns the workings of the mind prior to setting down words on a sheet:

觀古今於須臾	He observes past and present in an instant,
撫四海於一瞬	And sweeps over the four seas in the blink of an eye.
然後選義按部	Then, he selects ideas, arranged in categories,
考辭就班	Examines phrases, putting them in order.
	(LL. 33–36)

The ability to survey all of history in a single moment logically develops from extensive reading and intimate knowledge of that history. The power to skim the whole world in the blink of an eye suggests a capacity for envisioning or imagining that is substantiated, though not limited, by book knowledge. It seems apropos, then, that Lu Ji's account of the thought process draws from his book knowledge. In the same chapter 11 of *Zhuangzi*, Lao Dan thus describes the marvelous workings of the human mind: it is so swift that it can again "sweep over the four seas" and beyond in the time it takes to raise and lower one's head.¹¹ Extensive reading and book knowledge may underwrite the capacity to see far and wide, but history compressed into a single instant and the world captured in the blink of an eye unequivocally underscore the mysterious

11 *Zhuangzi jishi*, 11.371. The original reads: 其疾俛仰之間而再撫四海之外。

workings of recall and imagination which no quantity or quality of words can elaborate. Indeed, Lu Ji does no more than repeat the metaphor of celerity from the *Zhuangzi* in his attempt to track and represent the workings of the mind. Elsewhere in the "Rhapsody," Lu Ji openly acknowledges the inherent difficulty, even impossibility, to explain creative inspiration.

The Fickleness of Inspiration

Throughout the "Rhapsody," Lu Ji concedes the unpredictability of the writing process. Composition can be casually smooth or stubbornly difficult:

或操觚以率爾 Sometimes he grasps the tablet and composes with casual ease,
或含毫而邈然 Other times he holds the brush in mouth, his mind distant.

(LL. 59–60)

Or it can be easy to execute or hard to manage:

或妥帖而易施 Other times it is steady and stable, easily carried out,
或岨嶇而不安 Or it is rough and unruly, hard to settle.

(LL. 45–46)

The rhapsody writer unsurprisingly does not miss the opportunity to impress his point upon his readers with exquisite metaphors. Instant, spontaneous composition is compared to winds of thought that arise in the breast and a flow of words spilling from one's mouth, while the writing brush rushes to try to capture it on silk:

思風發於胸臆 A gust of thought emerges from the breast;
言泉流於脣齒 A spring of words flows from lips and teeth.
紛威蕤以駢逌 Such flourishing with teeming continuity
唯毫素之所擬 Can only be copied by brush and silk.

(LL. 231–234)

Slow, reflective composition is pictured as words struggling to surface like fish with a hook in its mouth, being reeled up from the bottom of the deepest pool, as we have seen earlier: "Then, submerged phrases struggle to surface,/ Like swimming fish, with hook in their mouths, emerging from the depths of a layered pool."

For the uncertainty that inheres in each experience of writing, Lu Ji seems to cast blame upon the caprices of inspiration. Some of the most ingenious passages in the exposition describe in impressionistic detail either inspired creation or depressive sterility. Inspiration is cast as a force of nature in these tropes from the passage above about spontaneous composition: “gust of thought,” “spring of words,” and “flourishing [vegetation].” The lack of inspiration is similarly illustrated by the natural metaphors of “withered tree” and “dried-up creek” in the following passage:

及其六情底滯	Then when the six affects are stifled and stalled, ¹²
志往神留	When the intent moves toward something, but the spirit stays:
兀若枯木	One is stuck motionless like a withered tree,
豁若涸流	Empty like a dried-up creek.
攬營魂以探賾	He clasps the soul to probe its profound reaches,
頓精爽於自求	Holds still the spiritual essence to search within himself.
理翳翳而愈伏	Yet the inherent principle, dim and dark, is ever more hidden,
思乙乙其若抽	Thought, finding it hard to come out, as if needing to be pulled.

(LL. 237–244)

Inspiration may be natural, even familiar, but its workings are mysterious through and through: in terms of human effort, the poet deems it appropriate to answer these unfathomable workings with equally esoteric notions as “searching the soul” and “grasping the spiritual essence.”

A remarkable moment arrives in an exposition that lays out the process of writing, from conception to execution, when Lu Ji concedes his inability altogether to convey creativity. This he smartly does by invoking a classical example of ineffability and intransmissability, the story of Wheelwright Bian from the *Zhuangzi*.

譬猶舞者赴節以投袂	It is like a dancer flinging her sleeves to the rhythm of the beat,
歌者應絃而遣聲	Or the singer delivering his sounds in response to the strings.
是蓋輪扁所不得言	This is undoubtedly what Wheelwright Bian could not speak about,
故亦非華說之所能精	Hence nor is the most flowery discourse able to capture its essence.

(LL. 199–202)

12 According to Zhongchang Tong's 仲長統 *Chang yan* 昌言, the six affects are pleasure, anger, sorrow, happiness, fondness, and hatred.

Recall that in *Zhuangzi* 13, "Way of Heaven" 天道, Wheelwright Bian tells Duke Huan that the book he is reading is but the dregs and draff of the ancients. Based on his experience of attempting to teach his son his own craft, Wheelwright Bian argues that there are certain principles and ideas that cannot be put into words, and are therefore not transmissible.¹³ That which cannot be transmitted in his craft, as with the sages' teaching, must then end with the source. What is transmitted is, therefore, not the essence of the ancients' teachings, but merely the dross sapped of its original strength. According to Lu Ji, the workings of creativity, natural as a dancer flinging her sleeves to musical beats and undeliberate as a singer sounding his response to musical notes, can no more be revealed in language than Wheelwright Bian's craft. The unmanageability, even unpredictability, of the creative force is already foreshadowed in the preface of the "Rhapsody," where Lu Ji writes: "As for grasping an axe to hew an axe-handle, even though the model is not far, yet the permutations that follow the movements of hand are truly difficult to convey in language" 至於操斧伐柯，雖取則不遠，若夫隨手之變，良難以辭逮. No matter how closely one follows the model, such as examples by past worthies, in the execution of writing there can arise unplanned developments that run their own course. It is as if the hand assumes a life of its own, and the work writes itself in a moment of inspired creation. From this vantage point, inspiration becomes the wild card that can make the winning hand in the competition against one's predecessors as one adheres to models yet can somehow diverge from duplicating them.

As much as "Rhapsody on Literature" grants that certain key aspects of the writing process exceed knowledge and therefore control, hence the appeal of guiding rules, it nonetheless boldly asserts supernal command for the writer.

籠天地於形內 He encages Heaven and Earth within forms,
挫萬物於筆端 And subdues the myriad things with the tip of his brush.
(LL. 49–50)

Nowhere in the "Rhapsody" does Lu Ji make a more confident claim about a writer's prowess and ability: through conception and language, the writer wields the power to bound and dominate even the greatest of things. He manages and contains that which are beyond measurement, such as Heaven and Earth, and beyond calculation, such as the myriad things of the world. The brashness of this claim is approximated in another passage in the "Rhapsody":

¹³ See *Zhuangzi jishi*, 13.490–91.

函綿邈於尺素 He contains vast distances in a foot of silk,
 吐滂沛乎寸心 Spews out a surging torrent from a square inch of heart.
 (LL. 65–66)

These lines suggest a view of language at radical variance with Lao-Zhuang thought, which shaped to a great extent the intellectual discourse of early medieval China. One of the principal charges brought against language by the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* is that words are delimiting, and they therefore undermine any attempt to represent the boundless Way. Lu Ji makes instead a positive claim about language: conception and writing are forms of containment and tools of domination that return to the writer a good measure of agency in the creative process. From this vantage point, the use of language (from conceptual organization to linguistic expression) is a form of constructive containment that could also serve as a steadying counterpoint to the unbridled force of creative inspiration.

Conclusion

Lu Ji appears to track the creative movement from origin to end (or dead-end) in this key passage from the “Rhapsody” and thus reveals another facet of his anxiety concerning literary creation:

若夫應感之會 As for the meeting of stirring and response,
 通塞之紀 The juncture of passage and obstruction,
 來不可遏 What comes cannot be halted,
 去不可止 What goes cannot be stayed.
 (LL. 223–226)

From this vantage point, cogitation arises when a stirring—be it from nature, predecessor works, or imagination—elicits a response, and inchoate thoughts or phrases may come fully into being or not in the ever mystifying workings of creativity. The creative impulse seems to hold the writer in suspense, as emergent ideas and words hang between expression and dissipation. The writer's inability to control, even predict, the flow of creativity can lead to bitter frustration.

雖茲物之在我	Although this thing is within myself,
非余力之所勦	It is not something I can draw forth with my concentrated efforts.
故時撫空懷而自惋	Hence at times I stroke my empty bosom and resent myself,
吾未識夫開塞之所由	As I do not know the reasons behind blockage or pouring forth.

(LL. 247–250)

“This thing” (*zi wu* 茲物) refers to none other than the subject of the rhapsody, *wen*, which here encompasses the meanings of writing, a literary work, and literary creativity. The writer keenly feels the pang of resentment over bearing within oneself a living creature, as it were, whose movements so often operate wholly outside of one’s control. The torrent of stimuli within the writer in the form of mental cogitations and the rapid appraisal of expressive possibilities, at a certain point, compels the externalization of the creative work. The desire to discharge from one’s body “this thing” seems not to be a simple matter of alleviation. Rather, it would present the ultimate opportunity for the creator to imprint definitively his own mark in the birth of his work.