Prologue

This book is a comprehensive comparative study of Western and Chinese poetics, two of the world’s major traditions of literary thought that have existed well over two thousand years. The greatest challenge I face in this project is to achieve an optimal balance of scope and depth. The scope must be broad enough to allow me to review the historical development of these long traditions and to formulate my general views about their overriding concerns, their distinctive orientations, and their culture-specific systematics. To gain such a panoramic view, I begin with broad parallel surveys. Promising and indispensable though they are, such surveys are extremely hazardous. The danger of overgeneralization is particularly high as I need to spread my attention over a vast area of inquiry. To minimize this danger, I try my utmost to ensure that the limited amount of material that can be included in my surveys is representative. I focus on the important statements, tenets, or manifestos that are generally considered to define Western and Chinese literary thought at different historical periods. Moreover, I pursue detailed studies of particular subjects and issues central to Western and Chinese poetics at different periods. These thematically focused studies will yield ample concrete illustrations of my general views on Western and Chinese poetics. By combining the broad surveys with these in-depth studies, I believe that a proper balance of scope and depth can be achieved.

The first part of the book, made up of the first four chapters, focuses on the macrocosmic structures of Western and Chinese poetics. The macrocosmic structures of a critical tradition may be understood
as constituted by its foundational concepts of literature. The first two chapters provide an overview of major Western and Chinese concepts of literature. Chapter 1 begins with Plato and Aristotle, continues through Wordsworth and Romantic criticism, then moves on to the New Criticism, phenomenological criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction of recent times. Chapter 2 begins with the Book of Documents, a Zhou chronicle of legendary and historical events from high antiquity to seventh century B.C., proceeds to the Spring and Autumn Annals of sixth century B.C. and the “Great Preface to the Book of Poetry” of the Han, and moves on to Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons by Liu Xie of the fifth century. The detailed discussion of these texts is followed by summary accounts of the influential concepts of literature developed from the Six Dynasties to the Qing. In both Western and Chinese traditions, new concepts of literature often arise in response to the broader paradigmatic shifts of cosmological thinking. To better acquaint general English readers with Chinese philosophical traditions, chapter 3 reviews the highlights of several major Chinese cosmological theories that have fostered various early concepts of literature. Synthesizing the findings of the first three chapters, chapter 4 sets forth the systematics of Western and Chinese poetics. Western critics demonstrate an overriding concern with literature’s relationship with truth. They constantly reconceptualize literature in relation to truth and develop corresponding conceptual models for investigating particular literary subjects and issues. By contrast, Chinese critics share an overriding concern with literature’s role in harmonizing various processes affecting human life. They continuously reconceptualize literature in relation to cosmic and sociopolitical processes and establish various critical tenets centered upon the Dao. By furnishing new centers of reference for critical judgment, Western and Chinese concepts of literature give rise to particular literary theories and movements and therefore set Western and Chinese poetics on their distinctive paths of development.

The second part of the book, chapters 5 to 8, examines microcosmic textures of Western and Chinese poetics. Microcosmic textures may be conceived as a host of particular literary theories crucial to the development of a critical tradition. I shall compare Plato’s and Confucius’ theories of harmony in chapter 5, the Romantic and Chinese theories of literary creation in chapter 6, the modernist and Chinese theories of the Chinese written character in chapter 7, and the postmodernist and Buddhist theories of deconstruction in chapter 8. These
chapters provide in-depth discussions of many critical issues of pivotal importance. Among these issues are mimesis and praxis, intellectual and ethical pursuits, sensory perception and suprasensory imagination, emotion and image, the forces of nature and of subjectivity, metaphor and allegory, graphs and representation or nonrepresentation, the nature and modes of linguistic signification, and so forth. Special effort will be made to show how Western and Chinese critics explore these critical issues within their own conceptual models and therefore yield different yet equally valuable theoretical insights.

Most of these issues lie at the heart of four major movements of Western literature—the classical, the Romantic, the modernist, and the postmodernist. So my discussion of Plato, Wordsworth, Pound, and Derrida can help flesh out what I have said about the constant shifts of critical locus in Western poetics. Many of these issues also are of great importance to the development of Chinese poetics at different periods. Although the Chinese texts discussed in chapters 5 to 8 do not fall into a neat chronological order, they demonstrate the shaping influence of three major schools of Chinese thought—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—on Chinese poetics. My analysis of these texts serves to testify, reverberate, and amplify my general observations on the shifting loci of Chinese cosmological and literary thought. In short, by discussing the divergences within each tradition as well as between them, I strive to shed light on the inner dynamics of Western and Chinese poetics, sustained by their own evolving differentiae.

The epilogue is devoted to theoretical reflections on the three critical perspectives introduced in this book—the intracultural, the cross-cultural, and the transcultural. Each of these perspectives is devised to steer this project clear of particular kinds of flawed approaches and prejudiced views. The intracultural perspective stresses the investigation of the roots and patterns of development of a tradition without explicit comparisons with another tradition. This perspective serves to counter the questionable practice of taking critical issues out of their own cultural contexts and comparing them as if they were universals in a cultural vacuum. The cross-cultural approach emphasizes the need to cross the barriers of cultural biases, especially the polemics of similitude and the polemics of difference that have long plagued West-China comparative studies. The transcultural perspective represents a search for a new, all-embracing interpretive horizon in which we can assess our findings of similarities and differences in ways that enable us to transcend cultural biases and better appreciate our common human-
ity. These three perspectives help me to explore the dynamic relationship of cultural specificity and commonality in Western and Chinese poetics.

In studies of Western and Chinese poetics, cultural specificity is neglected or misconstrued for different reasons. In the case of Western poetics, it is largely neglected due to the dominant role of Western poetics in the current literary scholarship. Since Western poetics has long been in the powerful position of setting trends of literary scholarship around the world, it is only natural that scholars of Western literature seldom feel the need to reflect upon the cultural specificity of Western poetics. Consequently, some scholars are tempted to take Western critical terms, concepts, and paradigms as universally valid and apply them to studies involving non-Western traditions. For instance, this tendency is quite obvious in some projects of postcolonial cultural studies. Although these projects aim to expose the Western cultural domination over non-Western traditions, they, ironically, are conceived on strictly Western postmodernist paradigms. As shown in chapters 1 and 4, Western poetics is in large measure a product of thinking about literature within truth-based cosmological paradigms. By developing an awareness of this cultural specificity of Western poetics, scholars of Western literature will clearly see the need to go beyond the confines of Western poetics and draw theoretical insights from non-Western critical traditions.

In the case of Chinese poetics, cultural specificity is often misconstrued due to the entrenched practice of evaluating Chinese poetics in terms of its conformity to the Western critical system. Much of the twentieth-century scholarship on Chinese literary criticism is oriented toward a modernization, or rather Westernization, of Chinese literary thought. Modern literary theoreticians not only develop new literary theories modeled on different Western critical schools, they also seek to present traditional Chinese literary thought within the framework of Western poetics. When forced into this framework, however, Chinese critical terms, concepts, and modes do not exhibit the kind of internal coherence demanded of a critical system. This gives rise to a widely held belief that Chinese critical writings are mostly random, impressionistic, and woefully unsystematic. This alleged lack of systematic coherence has been perceived as a prominent, culture-specific feature of Chinese poetics. This is obviously a gross mistake. The cultural specificity of any critical tradition should not be defined negatively in terms of the deficiency, alleged or otherwise, of certain elements valued by other traditions. Rather, cultural specificity should be
defined in terms of a tradition’s foundational concepts of literature, its pattern of historical development, and its underlying cosmological paradigms. Seen in this light, the cultural specificity of Chinese poetics is anything but lacking in systematic coherence. Rather, it possesses a process-based systematics as opposed to the truth-based systematics of Western poetics. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, we perceive clear patterns of internal coherence on various levels of Chinese critical discourse. We may even reconstruct a nomenclature of Chinese critical terms that are often considered hopelessly elusive. Hopefully, by reflecting upon the cultural specificity of Chinese poetics, scholars of Chinese literature can do a better job systematically introducing it to Western readers.

As long as we treat Western and Chinese poetics on equal footing, we are able to appreciate the cultural specificity of each as evidence of the rich diversity and resourcefulness in our common endeavor to understand literature. To ensure that it will help deepen our sense of commonality, I place my discussion of cultural specificity within a broader field of common critical concerns. As indicated by the titles of chapters 5 to 8, the subjects of my inquiry are not confined by geographical and cultural boundaries. Literature’s nature and functions, poetic harmony, and the creative process are obviously subjects of common interest to most, if not all, critical traditions. In comparing Western and Chinese approaches to these subjects, we shall be able to understand them in more diverse ways than known to the Western or Chinese tradition alone.

Indeed, a balanced, constructive dialogue between Western and Chinese poetics can yield enormous benefits of mutual illumination. Whether or not this book succeeds in demonstrating such benefits, I hope it will stimulate scholars of Western and Chinese literature to intensely engage with each other and work together to integrate Chinese and other non-Western poetics into the mainstream of literary scholarship. Such a common endeavor will help us transcend geographical and cultural boundaries and broaden immeasurably the horizon of our critical inquiry in the twenty-first century.