“If a scholar stops reading for three days, moral principles will not come to his heart. Looking at the mirror he will find his face disgusting; speaking to people he will find his words dull and tasteless,” the Northern Song (960–1126) poet Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) thus admonished his son. For Huang Tingjian, the reading of books was an essential part of a scholar’s life, providing nourishment for his character, purifying his speech, and maintaining his very identity as a scholar. This book studies the changing notions of reading and writing in the poetics of Huang Tingjian and the group of writers retrospectively designated the Jiangxi Shipai 江西詩派, or “Jiangxi School of Poetry.” The latter were a loosely connected group of writers that gathered around Huang at the turn of the twelfth century and came to be closely associated with him. Their theory and practice exerted deep and long-lasting influence in the Southern Song (1127–1279); the values, models, and paradigms they established significantly affected how poetry was written, taught, learned, and studied in late imperial times. Their legacy still resonates in our contemporary debates on the relationship between literary form and content, tradition and innovation, poetic spontaneity and craftsmanship.

The poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School differed not only from that of the poetic giants of the Tang dynasty (618–907), but also from that of their more immediate predecessors in the Northern Song. Its most prominent feature has long been identified as a strong interest in the “methods” or fa 法 of poetry. I further argue in this book that for Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School, the term fa carried much
broader cultural significance than the mere skills or techniques of poetic composition with which it has traditionally been associated. Indeed, their concern with poetic methods was considerably more involved in the intellectual and material culture of the time. Beneath the familiar claim that poetry could be learned through a mastery of formal rules, that poetic excellence could be achieved by following certain normative paths, is the intense eleventh-century desire for procedures and guiding principles, for underlying structure and deep meaning, for “methods” beneath the appearance of spontaneity and effortlessness. This desire is manifested in almost all spheres of intellectual and cultural activity of the period. From state fiscal policy, to the interpretation of the Classics, to the reading and writing of poetry, we see a broad movement toward looking for methodology, toward providing rationality and rationale for the familiar and the usual, toward finding constancy and coherence for the myriad and incessant stream of daily events and happenings. At the core of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School’s search for poetic methods was their desire to find an essential new way of reading and writing, to empower the reader with the necessary tools to go beyond the surfaces of texts, into the underlying forces and structures that animate them, and to provide the writer with a roadmap that will effectively guide him through the strenuous and multifarious stages of poetic composition, from the conception of an idea to its full manifestation in a poem.

To describe and delineate this new way of reading and writing is the major task of the book. My argument is further motivated by the ongoing scholarly discussion of the interrelationship between the development of ideas and the material cultural forces that nurture and shape the intellectual process. Specifically, I propose that Huang Tingjian’s poetics, especially the most important and most far-reaching component of it, that is, its preoccupation with “methods” of reading and writing, was a response to the burgeoning new print culture of the late eleventh century. The dramatically changed, and rapidly changing, conditions of textual production of the late eleventh century not only provided the broad context for the rise to prominence of Huang Tingjian’s poetics but also shaped the key terms of its argument. This response, however, as I will show, was in most cases not a direct one but was heavily mediated by Huang’s temperament, his personal style of poetry, and most importantly, his unique understanding of, and characteristic approaches to, the literary past he
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and his late eleventh-century colleagues had inherited—the intellectual and textual landscape of which was being radically reshaped and reconfigured during his lifetime. This book represents, in essence, my attempt to explore that rich, intense historical moment of change and the productive poetic and critical processes embedded in it.

A Hermeneutic Response to Printing

The importance of printing for the social and cultural development of premodern China has long been recognized. Its physical and technical aspects have received sustained scholarly attention over the past century, both in Chinese and in Western languages. Its social and cultural consequences have been routinely mentioned in studies of Song social and intellectual history and culture, with broad connections made particularly between the burgeoning print culture in the Northern Song and the fervent intellectual and literary culture of the time. By making reading materials easier to access and accessible to a larger number of people, as Thomas H. C. Lee has noted, printing not only created more opportunities for education, but also facilitated an increased awareness among readers of the “possible diversity of ideas,” which intellectually paved the way for the radical social and political reforms of the late eleventh century.

In the past two decades, efforts to explore these connections have only intensified. Printing, for example, has been shown to have had a direct linkage to a new type of textual scholarship flourishing in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries of the Southern Song. This renewed interest in ascertaining textual authority and stability, as Susan Cherniack has argued, was to a large degree prompted by the overabundance of texts created by more than two centuries of accelerating development of print culture. Zhang Gaoping’s recent book on the relationship between Song printing and the unique characteristics of Song poetry represents the most comprehensive attempt to explore printing’s influence on the field of literary composition and criticism during the period of the Northern and Southern Song. On the other hand, recent and emerging scholarship on textual transmission and reception in the pre-print manuscript world, for example Xiaofei Tian’s study on manuscript culture and the making of Tao Yuanming, and Christopher Nugent’s study on the production and circulation of poetry anthologies in the Tang, is sharpening our
understanding of how the forces and conventions at work in medieval manuscript culture were radically renegotiated within the post-manuscript world after the Northern Song.

My book is informed by this recent eruption of interest in both medieval manuscript culture and the effects of printing on that culture. I share especially with Xiaofei Tian and Zhang Gaoping an interest in exploring the paths through which the material aspects of literary production and consumption traveled to the field of literary criticism. Underlying the premise of this book is a general conviction that reading and writing are not merely acts of mental and intellectual comprehension and meaning production, but activities that have deep roots in the social and historical processes and material culture in which they originate and are actualized. It is upon this premise that the book’s particular arguments on Huang Tingjian’s poetics and its proposed connection to the burgeoning print culture of the late eleventh century are constructed.

This book differs from previous studies, however, in two major aspects. First, the main concern of the book is not print culture per se, but its effect on literature and literary criticism. More specifically, I focus on what I call the interpretive or hermeneutic responses to printing, that is, how increased availability changes the ways in which texts are consumed by individual readers and how that, in turn, changes how writers write. As the unfolding digital transformation of our own time keenly reminds us, printing is of special historical significance and merits continued scholarly attention precisely because of the nature of its products. As a means of the material production of texts, printing not only facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and the spread of literacy, but it also profoundly affected our relationships with texts on both a collective and an individual level. By the end of the twelfth century, our evidence shows, printed texts had already deeply penetrated the lives of not only literati readers but also ordinary citizens, who had numerous opportunities to encounter printed material in quotidian life situations such as viewing printed government policy proclamation bulletins in public places. But this kind of experience with printed material was largely a one-time encounter and did not demand deep engagement with the printed text as an object of learning and intellectual consumption. What a hermeneutic relationship requires is exactly that kind of deep, and often protracted, experience with the text. The sudden and radical change in the amount of text available

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for scholarly consumption in the Southern Song print culture not only greatly increased textual variety and the depth of contemporary literary life, irrevocably changing the material and textual landscape of learning, but also severely disturbed the equilibrium of established habits and traditional approaches to reading and writing. This created, among other things, an enormous demand for “methods.”

Second, the book focuses on the early development of this print culture in the Northern Song rather than the mature, more developed form of it in the Southern Song and later periods. Scholars of the Chinese print culture generally agree that the eleventh century of the Northern Song, as the first century in which printing was put to widespread use as a means of textual production, was a critical juncture in the historic transition from script to print in China. Compared with later periods, however, the period remains utterly underrepresented in current scholarly efforts to explore the rich possibilities of the new culture.

The eleventh century, as I will show in the book, proves to be an especially rich period in which personal and emotional responses of individual readers and writers to the radical change in textual production brought about by printing abound. These responses may seem a less-than-perfect object for quantitative analysis, but they are invaluable for investigating the consequences of printing. Huang Tingjian and the majority of the original members of the Jiangxi School belonged to this first generation of readers. Their intimate, fresh, and mostly intuitive responses provide us with a good opportunity to understand how the material aspects of textual production and consumption crept into literary critical discourse, the exuberance and intensity of which were much blunted in the later developments of the culture when the impact of the clash had been largely absorbed and order and control had been effectively reestablished. A close look at the reactions of individual readers and writers also offers us a rare chance to observe the historical and cultural processes by which some deeply seated assumptions about reading and writing fostered in medieval
manuscript culture were fiercely challenged, renegotiated, and reformulated under radically changed circumstances.

In exploring these interactions, the book takes up a point of view that is both historical and interpretive. It situates the rise to prominence of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School in the particular historical context furnished by one of the most dramatic changes in the means of textual production in Chinese history. It aims, at the same time, to provide an explanation of Huang’s poetics by submitting it to the intrinsic logic and the larger transformation of the poetic tradition itself. The ultimate goal of the book, however, is not to evaluate Huang’s place in literary history, nor to offer an isolated interpretation of his poetic works, but rather, through a close examination of the particular literary and material cultural context Huang was in, to provide a more solid interpretive framework for the better understanding of his works and his time. At the heart of the study is an intensive reading of Huang’s own writings, supplemented by the reading of a variety of other works produced by his contemporaries—the generation of avid readers who matured and wrote in the last quarter of the eleventh and the first quarter of the twelfth centuries, a period of time referred to in this book as the “late Northern Song.” The highly selective examples of his own work discussed in the chapters of the book do not pretend to offer a complete picture of Huang Tingjian’s poetry and poetics; instead, they focus largely on those writings of his, both verse and prose, that are directly or indirectly related to his views on what poetry is, how it should be composed, and how poetic excellence can be achieved. In other words, the book is about Huang Tingjian’s poetic thought rather than his composition.

These two concerns and lines of inquiry are motivated and sustained in the book by two interrelated questions: How did Huang Tingjian and the first generation of readers and writers of the new print culture rise to the occasion and come up with a poetic strategy and program that accommodated traditional values and the new textual reality equally well? What prompted and conditioned the rise of a poetics that placed such heavy emphasis on “methods” of composition and reading? To better understand the terms under which these questions are asked, we need to take a look back at the poetic tradition in which Huang Tingjian and his late Northern Song colleagues operated and against which their new theory gained traction and flourished.
Searching for the Source of Poetic Composition

There is an emerging new consensus among contemporary Huang Tingjian scholars that the poetic practice and theory of the Northern Song poet, designated founding father of the Jiangxi School, famous calligrapher, and paragon of filial piety represented a new peak in Chinese literary history, rather than a decline from the glories achieved in the Tang. This line of thinking proposes to put Huang Tingjian’s work in the larger historical context defined by the great poetic transformation begun in the Tang, a transformation, as proponents of this theory argue, that was not complete until the late Northern Song with the key contribution of Huang Tingjian. This long historical view provides a basic point of departure for the current study. I further argue, along the lines of the above theory, that the success of that transformation not only provided Song poetry with a unique collective identity and, for that matter, late classical poetics with an important new set of analytical tools, but also significantly shifted the theoretical basis of poetic composition in Chinese poetics. At the core of that shift is the changing conception and understanding of what the source of poetic composition is.

The dominant model of poetry in medieval China, which was developed from the exegetical tradition and practice associated with the Shijing 詩經 (Classic of poetry) and embodied most succinctly in the formula “poetry articulates aims” (shi yan zhi 詩言志), considers poetry (shi 詩) as a spontaneous and natural process, transparent, unproblematic, totally comprehensible, something that happens inevitably and immediately once the internal state of the author’s mind (zhi 志) is ready. In a well-known later reiteration and elaboration of the formula, the movement from the interior of the author’s mind to poetry, or from zhi to shi, is further depicted as an uncontrollable eruption of the poet’s expressive energy, with poetry being conceived as one among many possible venues of expression. “Poetry is that to which what is intently on the author’s mind goes,” the Great Preface to the Shijing (Shi Daxu 詩大序) famously proclaims. “In the mind it is zhi [aims]; coming out in language, it is a shi [poem]. The emotions are stirred within and take on form in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing them. If singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them” 詩者, 志之所之也, 在心為志,
The passage duly recognizes the importance of “words” (yan 言) in the poetic process: they give linguistic form to eruptive poetic energy. The main concern of the passage, however, is not linguistic expression itself, nor the movement from zhi to shi. The main concern is rather the unhindered path of that movement, the spontaneous nature, absolute intelligibility and expressiveness of the poetic process: the passage conceives poetry as a natural destination to which the poet’s expressive energy, his zhi 志, just “goes” (zhi 之).

The passage says little about what zhi is—except that it resides internally in the author’s mind and that it is related to—or is the source of—“emotions,” another central concept in traditional Chinese literature. This latter question is addressed in a significant subsequent development of the model that extends the focus of attention from the relationship between zhi and shi to the source of poetic composition—how or on what basis zhi is formed. And this is realized most notably by bringing an important third component to the classical model: the key role played by “external objects” (wu 物) in the stimulation of the poet’s mind. This revised model, which puts the emphasis on external stimulation, a process known in Chinese literary theory as “stimulation by objects” (gan wu 感物), considers poetic composition as residing ultimately in the restlessness and movement of the universe. “Springs and autumns follow on in succession, with the brooding gloom of dark Yin and the easy bright light of Yang,” as the famous early medieval Chinese literary theorist Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 522) writes in the “Wu se” 物色 (Sensuous colors of physical things) chapter of the Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍 (The literary mind and the carving of dragons):

[A]s the sensuous colors of physical things are stirred into movement, so the mind, too, is shaken. When the Yang force sprouts [in the twelfth moon], the black ant scurries to its hole; and when the Yin begins to coalesce [in the eighth moon], the mantis feasts. It touches the responses of even the tiniest insects: the four seasons stir things into movement deeply.

Locating the source of poetic composition in the physical world and natural order of things is a prominent feature of traditional Chinese poet-
ics and lies at the very heart of its success and appeal. With its profuse attention to the use of natural images and its claim on spontaneity and immediacy of expression, however, this model of poetry is essentially unconcerned with how the process can happen, how the poet’s sensual and emotional responses to stimulation from the physical world can be poetically and linguistically realized in a poem. In other words, it shows little interest in the particular ways, means, processes, and procedures through which elusive authorial intent, the zhi, is transformed into the material form of a poem.

What distinguishes the poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School from this classical model is its meticulous and unrelenting attention to these ways and means of realization and materialization, known to them and to later scholars collectively as fa. Despite the complexity of the term fa (see discussion below), what it means for Huang Tingjian is essentially some normative procedures or principles that will make the presumably amorphous process of poetic composition graspable, describable, and transmissible. It signifies at the same time a pathway that leads to a destination, a roadmap that ensures the successful arrival at that destination, and the specific stages and measures that constitute the actual journey. It is arguably the poetics for the ordinary, average writer who needs the traces of the axe to guide him perhaps more than lofty theories about what poetry is, and for whom creative spontaneity means little if there are no tangible paths leading toward it. In its emphasis on the importance of “methods,” this new poetics also has the effect of downplaying the role of the poet as creator and initiator, and of reinforcing his role as a follower and enforcer of normal procedures and prescribed rules. Equipped with the appropriate set of skills and techniques, the new poetics promises, any writer can take control of the poetic process. He is still expected to respond spontaneously to stimulation from the “sensuous colors of physical things” (wu se), but the task now seems much more manageable.

This “technical” turn in Huang Tingjian’s poetics not only changes the tacit power relationship between the poet and the process of poetic expression, but also subtly yet significantly changes the role external objects (wu) play in the process. As evidence from recently discovered bamboo manuscripts from the Warring States period suggests, wu as a philosophical entity played a prominent role in early China, perhaps much more prominent than received texts had previously indicated. Although deno-
tative of the broader philosophical sense of “object,” *wu* in medieval Chinese literary criticism refers primarily to physical things from the natural world. It is worth noting here that this narrower definition of *wu* as external stimulus for the poetic process was largely a Six Dynasties development, the result of the active construction of poetic theory based on the newly risen five syllable verse by theorists and critics like Liu Xie and Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (fl. 502–19).¹⁴ In Huang Tingjian’s theory, natural objects and the process of “stimulation by objects” (*gan wu*) still play an important role. But it is a role heavily mediated by a larger concern with formal rules and technical procedures. Poetic composition in Huang Tingjian is no longer conceived of as a spontaneous act that occurs simultaneously, on the spot, at the scene of stimulation, but as a protracted and painstaking process that requires not only stimulation from natural objects, but also strenuous honing and perfecting of skills and diligent exertion of effort.¹⁵

The spontaneous model based on lyric poetry assumes that poetic composition happens immediately when the poet encounters an object or scene in the natural world. An example is the line “Spring grasses grow on the banks of the pond” (*Chitang sheng chuncao* 池塘生春草) by the Six Dynasties poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433).¹⁶ The eternal appeal of this seemingly simple line in Chinese literature derives largely from the fact that the poet’s supposedly immediate and intuitive reaction to fresh spring vegetation epitomizes the ideal of poetic spontaneity. This valued stimulus-reaction model of poetic composition has deep roots in the Chinese literary tradition, reaching back to its very beginnings in the *Shijing* with its abundant reliance on natural images for moral and political persuasion. It is a model in which objects from the natural world are favored over human-made objects or creations, including literary texts. Terms that describe the spontaneous encounter and perfect fusion of mind (*xin* 心) and object (*wu* 物)—or emotion (*qing* 情) and scene (*jing* 景)—in its later permutation—abound in traditional Chinese literary criticism. Prominent examples are the Six Dynasties literary critic Zhong Rong’s unabashed favoring of “what meets the eye” (*jimu* 即目) and “direct looking” (*zhixun* 直尋) over “past precedents” (*gushi* 故實) and “secondary borrowing” (*bujia* 補假), and the seventeenth-century scholar and literary critic Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 (1619–92) passionate use of expressions such as “to let what comes from the mind meet the scene at
hand” (yu jing xiang ying 與景相迎) and “to let the scene meet the mind” (ji jing hui xin 即景會心) to describe that fusion.\footnote{17}

The notion of immediacy and spontaneity inherent in this classical poetic model, however, faced a serious challenge when a particular type of poetic practice became fashionable and began to be firmly established in the compositional scene of Huang Tingjian’s time. This was “matching the rhymes of others” (ciyun 次韻), a practice that can be traced back to social and occasional poetry of the early medieval period. Although it gained substantial momentum in the mid-Tang through the highly celebrated poetic exchange between Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), ciyun was not influential until the late eleventh century, when poets closely associated with the Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) circle began to write huge amounts of such poetry to one another.\footnote{18} The poetry of Huang Tingjian, who himself was a prominent member of the Su Shi circle, provides a good illustration of the growing popularity and importance of this style of writing: an astonishingly high and unprecedented proportion of over 40 percent of the poems in Huang’s extant poetry collection fall in the ciyun category.\footnote{19}

What happens with ciyun poetry is that natural objects or scenes, the primary source of poetic inspiration in the classical model, cease to function in the new model as the major force that drives poetic production. As a result, existing literary texts now become a legitimate and increasingly fashionable alternative to natural objects. In other words, writing becomes a response not to natural objects or images alone and is increasingly bound to existent texts created by the poet or other writers. Ciyun poetry, by taking previously created texts as the basis of poetic inspiration and composition, weakens the traditional linkage between poetry and the physical world.

One consequence of the compromised association between poetry and the natural world is that past literature as an entity in general begins to play a more prominent role in the theoretical and critical discourse on literature. Undoubtedly, texts created by authors from the past always played an important role in Chinese literary thought prior to Huang Tingjian. The Western Han scholar Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (53 B.C.–18 A.D.) famous remark that only when one has read a thousand rhapsodies (fu 賦) can one compose the fu oneself is a concise and apt reminder of the traditional emphasis on broad reading as the basis of literary production.
and creativity. The prominent role played by standard literary anthologies such as the Wenxuan (Selections of refined literature) also testifies to the high esteem past literature enjoyed in medieval Chinese literary life. It was, however, largely due to the special efforts of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School to inexorably tie poetic performance to the reading and mastery of past material that literary heritage as an entity began to enter into the literary critical and theoretical discourse of the Northern Song and thereafter. Under the new regime that emphasizes past literature, a poem becomes the receiving end or receptacle of a multitude of other texts and voices, each with its own full history of prior usages and meanings, all interacting and resonating with one another toward the formation of the new text. One inevitable result is that created texts could now serve the same function previously reserved for objects from the natural world—to provide stimulation and act as initiator of the poetic process. According to this new poetics, the study and effective use of past literature is vital to a writer’s success; writing is determined first and foremost by the writer’s ability to read, and imperfection of composition results ultimately from the lack of reading. In other words, the writer is now conceived of primarily as a reader, and reading becomes the essential basis of literary composition. Simply put, to write well, one needs to be well-read.

Poetic Allusion and Its Implications for Material Culture

The bold assertion of the key importance of past material in the creation of new literature is a salient feature of Huang Tingjian’s poetic thought. He was deeply interested in the history of words and seriously concerned with the failure of contemporary readers and writers to see through the surfaces of a word into “where it comes from” (laichu). If the search for methods (fa) represented his desire for underlying forces and principles that bring a text into existence, the search for origins (laichu) represented a closely related yearning to view a text historically, to see beyond a word’s current usage back to its prior existences and functions. The acceptance and dissemination in the late Northern and the Southern Song of this new poetic thinking not only significantly changed the textual landscape of Song poetry, but also considerably affected the formation of its unique character. Huang’s own poetry is a good example of this. Considered by many as having opened a new era in Chinese poetry and as the
true representative of Song poetry, his works were revered and imitated by
generations of writers in the Southern Song, taken to be the inevitable
path to poetic excellence. What sets Huang’s poetry apart from that of his
distinguished Northern Song predecessors, the Southern Song literary
critic Liu Kezhuang 劉克莊 (1187–1269) has argued, is the fact that
Huang’s works were the result of arduous and diligent exertion of per-
sonal effort, a value that became consecrated during the Song, rather than
issuing from a spontaneous flow of talent, a characteristic Liu attributed
to the poetry of such prominent eleventh-century masters as Ouyang Xiu
歐陽修 (1007–72) and Su Shi.21

In his poetic compositions, Huang Tingjian makes a special, and often
self-conscious, effort to bring the rich textual tradition into play through
the heavy use of allusions.22 To read his poetry is to travel through a huge
and extended textual space, with the reader sometimes experiencing, in
the words of one contemporary Song observer and commentator, “as
many as six or seven works by past authors in a single line or word” (yi ju
eyi zi you li guren liu qi zuo zhe 一句一字有歷古人六七作者).23 The use
of allusions in poetic composition was of course nothing new. It was
a time-honored practice in traditional Chinese poetry. The overly heavy
reliance on allusions in some types of poetry was severely criticized by
many scholars in the early medieval period, including Zhong Rong,
whose preference for a direct encounter with nature over tapping “past
precedents” and “secondary borrowing” for poetic imagery I have just dis-
cussed. There is, however, an important difference between Huang Ting-
jian’s use of allusions and that of his medieval predecessors. In Huang
Tingjian’s poetry, both the number and variety of previous works alluded
to and the ways in which past works of literature are brought into play in
the new poem are unprecedented. A couple of comparisons will help clar-
ify this point.

Although the Six Dynasties poet Yu Xin’s 庾信 (513–81) heavy reliance
on allusions in his “Ai Jiangnan fu” 哀江南賦 (Lament for the south)
may present tremendous difficulty for the modern reader, these allusions,
as William T. Graham, Jr. argues, “would have been quite intelligible” to
the poem’s six-century audiences. This is so not only because there are
“recent events lurking behind every allusion,” but also because, as Graham
keenly observes, Yu “returns again and again to the same events and the
same allusions” in his writings.24 The same can also be said of the ninth-
century Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隠 (813–58), who has remained one of the most mystic poets in Chinese literary history and whose works have come to symbolize poetic ambiguity. Dense and opaque as Li’s allusions are, they occur quite infrequently throughout his poems. The unique difficulty of understanding his poetry derives not so much from the obscurity of the allusions used as from the loss to modern readers of the intimate “culture of romance,” to use Stephen Owen’s words, and the local context of poetic appreciation and circulation shared by Li’s friends and contemporary readers.

By contrast, Huang Tingjian’s use of allusions relies on neither contemporary eleventh-century events nor a particular esoteric locale or subculture. It relies predominantly on texts of past literature made universally available to readers and writers of his time. Furthermore, Huang’s allusions are no simple or direct borrowings from past material; their use points to an integrated meaning structure and system where traces of voices of past authors and prior usages are still visible but are brought tightly under a new semantic regime and space governed by the purposes and functions of the new poem. The integration of old and new is so seamless that the existence of past texts in the new work is sometimes totally unrecognizable. Contrary to the common belief that in reading Huang Tingjian’s poetry one is being constantly led astray to past authors and texts while the current poem becomes wrapped deeply within layers of transported meanings, an engaged and attentive reader of his works will experience a highly integrated, consistent, and synthesized view, voice, and poetic personality.

The unified vision that governs Huang Tingjian’s use of allusions should be understood in the larger context of his poetic thought and creative life. The poet’s concentration and single-minded devotion to the art of poetry was legendary during his lifetime. He once wrote a friend that he was so preoccupied with the poetic genres that he wouldn’t let himself be distracted by even talking about other genres of writing. The twentieth-century Chinese scholar and literary critic Luo Genze 羅根澤 (1900–1960) calls Huang Tingjian a “pure poet” (chuncui de shiren 純粹的詩人), one who considered poetry his primary calling in life, something that was, as Luo points out, quite unusual for his time. This unadulterated concentration of mind gave rise to a kind of poetry that demonstrates a rare degree of integrity and consistency both in content and in style. Pan
Boying 潘伯鷹 (1899–1966), author of a popular anthology of Huang Tingjian’s poetry, calls the most distinctive feature of this poetry its “descriptive realism” (xiejing de zhenshi xing 写景的真實性). “No matter what the subject is, be it a flower, a building, a panoramic view or a close-up,” Pan writes, “he can always find the most accurate words and appropriate sentence structures for it. The reader needs only to follow the words and use a little imagination to reconstruct the whole picture the poet describes.”

This realism in the description of natural objects, as Pan suggests and I further argue, derives ultimately from the poet’s being true to his heart throughout his life, so much so that whatever he puts down in words shows a real and honest self.

A single example will suffice to show Huang’s rare combination of unalloyed passion for poetry, veristic attention to the details of description, and rigorous technical control. The following couplet is from a poem written in 1088 while the poet was on duty at the Imperial Library on a cold, solitary winter night. As on so many such occasions in the Chinese poetic tradition, the loneliness, quietude, and meditative quality of the moment provides the poet with an opportunity for self-reflection and for thinking of an old friend. And as in so many other poems written in this style, the poet rises up from a nap, goes out to the courtyard, and sets out, in the remaining part of the poem, to express his deep appreciation of the friend’s virtue in staying true to his heart despite adverse situations. Yet unlike many earlier works, the poet’s deliberating thoughts are not set in a featureless, amorphous, quasi-natural environment whose function it is mainly to provide a backdrop to the poet’s internal thinking. His thoughts are firmly grounded in the actual surroundings of the moment. “The Moon Goddess, hand in hand with the Green Maid, lights up ten thousand tiles with a single smile” 姮娥携青女, 一笑粲萬瓦. The couplet, which compares the shining moonlight to the smile of the Moon Goddess (Heng’e 姮娥 or Chang’e 嫦娥) and the Goddess of Frost, i.e., the Green Maid (Qingnü 青女) in the poem, is unanimously hailed as quintessentially Huang Tingjian. The sharpness of the situation is vividly captured by the character can 砼 in the third position of the second line. Used as a verb here, and serving, as later critics would claim, as the “eye” of the line (juyan 句眼), the word describes the “beaming smile” (the original meaning of the word) of the goddesses, employed in the couplet as a metaphor for the bursting radiance of the moonlight.
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What is worth noting, however, is not only the vividness and clarity of this shining description, but also, and more importantly, the unrelenting realistic framework that underlies and animates it. The goddesses are presented in the poem not as faceless, amorphous entities that reside solely in the folkloristic, mythological realms up in heaven, as in many of Li Shangyin’s poems on the Chang’e legend, but as real, human-like beings that actively interact and communicate with the human sphere below. This is most tellingly illustrated in the ways in which the deafening brilliance of the moonlight is depicted—not as a still and constant presence, but through the effect of a sudden movement: as the moon bursts out of the vast winter night sky, it abruptly casts its exuberant, all-embracing shine on the frost-clad, glistening rooftops of the imperial palace. This image of the moon abruptly emanating its brilliance is superimposed further upon the image of a smiling human face. And behind all these rest the calmly observing eyes of the poet. What emerges ultimately from the couplet (and from the poem as a whole) is the image of a real person in a real life situation, a poet who intensely watches as the clearly demarcated night environment gradually unfolds and then suddenly illumines all that is under its auspices.31

The unified vision in Huang Tingjian’s use of allusions and the realistic framework of his poetic depiction inevitably point to some aspects of his poetry that cannot be satisfactorily addressed by looking at the intrinsic formal qualities of his works alone. In this book I propose to place the intrinsic formal qualities of his poetry not only within the historical development of the poetic tradition itself, but also within the particular intellectual and material cultural context in which Huang lived and wrote. It is this broad intellectual and material cultural milieu, I argue, that made the unified vision and consistent framework of his poetry so appealing to his contemporaries, and so comprehensible and meaningful to generations of readers and writers in the twelfth century of the Southern Song and thereafter. And it is here that the two themes of the book converge.

The dramatically increased availability and physical presence of texts brought about by printing in the late Northern Song not only greatly sharpened the sense of a text’s historicity, but also posed tremendous challenges for reading and writing. In order to keep abreast of the new development in textual production, the late Northern Song writer needed not only to fully master the most sophisticated skills and techniques of poetic
composition of the day, but also to familiarize himself with a large and rapidly increasing number of texts from the literary past, which had been made newly available by printing technology. Similarly, the reader needed to have a much higher degree of familiarity with a formidable number of texts so that the meanings of contemporary writings, which were beginning to make increasingly liberal and sophisticated use of these newly rendered texts, would not elude him. This placed great pressure on the acts of reading and writing, a pressure that was not only psychological but intellectual as well, exerted and felt at both the hermeneutical and the methodological levels. The impact was also felt broadly, across different spheres of the intellectual and literary life of the time, and most acutely by those who were particularly concerned with appropriate ways to interpret and renew the literary and cultural heritage. As texts began to emerge out of their previous shadowy existence among bibliographic listings and official catalogs, in private libraries and individual memories, and became real objects for reading and intellectual consumption, it became incumbent upon the self-appointed bearers of the tradition to find a way to interpret them more effectively and efficiently. This inevitably brought questions like what to read and how to read to the forefront of the discussion.

The key issue here is not the actual number of books in an individual reader or scholar’s library (information about which is scanty for this period), but what can perhaps be called a text’s assumed availability, that is, the possibility that a text can be physically obtained when the need arises. This kind of availability is akin to Huang Tingjian choosing to borrow the catalog of a colleague’s library rather than the actual titles in it, or a modern college professor giving students a “reading list” for a course without having to provide the actual books to them. The late eleventh and early twelfth centuries of the Northern Song were such a critical moment in the early history of Chinese printing, as technology had reached the essential capacity of bringing the huge accumulation of literary production of the past few centuries, especially the prolific poetic production of the Tang, directly before the reader. This was also the period during which Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School rose to national prominence, and their poetics gained currency among the new generation of readers and writers who suddenly found themselves in a culture filled with printed books. The question as to whether it was printing that gave rise to this particularly diligent and avid generation of readers or
the other way around—their unusual thirst for books stimulating and propelling the historic growth of the technology—is open to debate. The dynamic interaction between the two, however, is not.

This book explores that interaction by taking a deep look at a time-honored expression that Huang Tingjian made particular use of and that I in turn have adopted for this book’s title: *wanjuan* 萬卷, “ten thousand scrolls.” This expression’s range of meaning was experiencing some very significant changes during the time Huang Tingjian was writing, changes that I argue were emblematic of the bigger historical shifts happening in the literary and intellectual culture of the time. Long denoting the sense of “many” and representing an important symbolic threshold for the number of books one could possibly possess or read, the connotative range of the term’s meaning experienced a significant shift in the late Northern Song. Gathering “ten thousand scrolls” of books, a formidable task for even the most resourceful of private book collectors throughout the medieval period, was becoming around the mid-eleventh century something that ordinary well-to-do literati families could aspire to achieve with relative ease. The immense interpretive and compositional space this new development opened up for readers and writers of the time is something that neither a person from a mature modern print culture nor someone nurtured in the preceding manuscript culture could fully imagine. The change had profound implications not only for people living in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, for these patterns of change resonate resoundingly with our current struggle to reconcile the rapidly changing notions, methods, and patterns of reading and writing created by the epically unfolding digital transformation.

Out of concern for the earlier historical change’s contemporary implications, I consider it a major task for me to try, in my discussions of the following chapters, not to obscure the contradictions or incongruencies that occasionally accompanied Huang Tingjian’s own discovery and exploration of the changed landscape that this new interpretive and compositional space opened up for him. The palpable tentativeness and hesitancy in some of his writings, I argue, can best be understood as an inevitable by-product of the historical and cultural negotiation Huang and his colleagues were conducting, a necessary step in their initiation into and historic journey toward a new culture.
Methods and Poetic Originality

Two interrelated questions remain. The first is the originality of Huang Tingjian’s poetics. The second concerns the concept of fa in his poetics. The two most prominent features of Huang Tingjian’s poetics, that is, its emphasis on the importance of book learning and its emphasis on the importance of skills, techniques, and methods for poetic composition, were deeply rooted in the literary tradition Huang had inherited. What makes his poetics unique? What distinguishes him from his predecessors? These questions need to be answered before we can move on to discuss the specifics of his poetics in the ensuing chapters.

Huang’s emphasis on the technical nature of poetic composition rests upon a general hypothesis, a hypothesis Huang shared with many of his predecessors, that literary composition is difficult, and that the difficulty is itself a justification of the endeavor. The Western Han scholar Yang Xiong, whose remark on the importance of reading for composing rhapsodies I cited above, provides a classic example of this understanding in the chapter of his Taixuan jing 太玄經 (Grand mystery classic) entitled “Jie nan” 解難 (“Dissolving objection” or “Explaining difficulty”). In a rhapsody responding to a criticism that he overtly resorts to abstruse language, he put the root cause of the difficulty in the innately difficult nature of literary and linguistic expression itself, arguing that, in David R. Knechtges’s summarization, “great ideas are necessarily clothed in difficult and refined languages, and are not meant for the eyes and ears of the masses.”

The difficulty of literary writing is a central issue in Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261–303) “Wen fu” 文賦 (Rhapsody on literature). The whole conceptual framework of this much-acclaimed piece of literature and literary criticism from the Western Jin author is informed and motivated by what Lu Ji himself describes as the “constant fear that conceptions are not equal to the things of the world and that writing is not equal to conceptions” (heng huan yi bu chen wu, wen bu dai yi 恆患意不稱物, 文不逮意). The work as a whole can be considered as Lu’s attempt to alleviate the situation by breaking down the seemingly indescribable process of literary composition into a few manageable components, aspects, and stages. Lu Ji recognizes that the greater difficulty lies in understanding the compositional process not in theory but in practice and execution. And the stated goal of the work is accordingly to “grasp the ways in which [talented writ-
ers] executed their minds” (de qi yong xin 得其用心). This interest in the inner workings of the writer’s mind, as Stephen Owen argues, represented a movement “away from the usual issues of literature, such as its ethical purpose, its social grounds, and the inscription of personality,” and pointed to a new model that “had scarcely been touched on by earlier writers.” While in earlier discussions such as those in the Yue ji 樂記 (Record of music), “mind is caught amid uncontrollable stirrings from external things,” in Lu Ji’s “Wen fu,” Owen writes, “mind wanders through the microcosm within, looking for encounters that will be the origins of a literary work.”

Lu Ji’s exploration of the internal landscape and universe of the writer’s mind was continued and expanded by Liu Xie in his Wenxin diaolong. For Liu Xie, the inner workings of “the literary mind” (wenxin 文心), the word that forms the first half of the book’s highly expressive but somewhat mysterious title, are inexorably tied to and determined by the technical maneuverings that constituted an essential part of literary crafting, described by the term “dragon carving” (diaolong 雕龍) in the title, a word Liu borrowed in part from earlier literature. Liu Xie fulfills his ambition to fully and systematically describe the various aspects and technical procedures of literary writing by carefully mapping the imaginative landscape of the writer’s mind onto a meticulously constructed web of interrelated genres, subgenres, styles, rhetoric, literary history, and theory that quintessentially defines the work.

The analytic and technical momentum demonstrated in these works, however, was often mitigated by other powerful concerns and impulses. Yang Xiong’s argument for the necessity of abstruse language, as David R. Knechtges has reminded us, needs to be taken in the context of his thought on fu composition as a whole, which in general favors the idea of poetry as a “moral and ethical instrument used primarily for persuasion” over that of poetry as an “aesthetic object concerned with the artistic manipulation of languages for its own sake.” Stephen Owen also situates the new literary model demonstrated in Lu Ji’s “Wen fu” in the larger context of the so-called “Neo-Taoist theory of mind,” which tended to question any argument for the sufficiency of linguistic expression. Liu Xie’s work was produced in the same general literary and cultural environment that favored expressive spontaneity and personal experience.
rather than the kind of “expository machine” that is both the hallmark of Liu Xie’s genius and symbol of his shortcomings.

Although modern scholars of traditional Chinese literary criticism are quick to point out the pedagogical value of Lu Ji’s “Wen fu” and Liu Xie’s *Wenxin diaolong*, the influence of these works, especially that of the *Wenxin diaolong*, was quite limited in poetic pedagogy and theory during the subsequent Tang and Five Dynasties period. The Tang and Five Dynasties poetic pedagogical landscape was dominated, as I have discussed elsewhere, by a particular genre of poetic criticism known as the *shige* 詩格, popular manuals for poetic composition produced in large quantities during this period that aimed at helping beginning writers understand the formal features and prosodic patterns of poetry through examples abstracted from works by famous authors. If the technical momentum and pedagogical insight of the *Wenxin diaolong* are buried in Liu Xie’s complex and sophisticated discourse machine, they are exuberantly represented in these *shige* manuals. With its single-minded devotion to composition and to regulated verse (*lüshi* 律詩), its relentless pursuit of thematic and prosodic precision, and what I have called its “examples-centered mode of presentation,” the *shige* pushed the inchoate and tentative tendencies inherent in earlier poetic criticism to front and center stage. It had cast such a tight spell on the popular imagination on poetry in the Late Tang and the Five Dynasties period that when Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School began to rise to national prominence in the late Northern Song literary and cultural scene, they and their allies had to fight vigorously the genre’s lingering grip and influence on both poetic terminology and practice.

That Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi poets established the legitimacy of their theories through criticizing (what seemed to them) the abuses and malpractices of the *shige* genre does not necessarily mean that their own poetics represented a total departure from the *shige* authors. The main criticism Huang and his colleagues hurled toward these authors was not that they had committed themselves too much to the trivial technical details of poetic composition, an interest that was prominently shared between the two, but that they had chosen the wrong model for their theoretical and critical inquiries. Instead of basing their theories on the works of such great High Tang masters as Li Bai 李白 (701–62) and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), the *shige* authors were accused of wasting their time on
Late Tang minor poets like Jia Dao 賈島 (779–843) and Xue Neng 薛能 (jinshi 846). To a modern scholar, this criticism is anachronistic and reveals more about the particular theoretical and critical environment in which it was launched than the shige works themselves, because, as I will show in Chapter 1, the consecration of High Tang values and, especially, the canonization of Du Fu were largely a phenomenon of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School’s own making. And it is here, in the establishment of Du Fu as the absolute model of poetry, that the originality of Huang Tingjian’s poetics begins.

There are many reasons why late Northern Song poets chose Du Fu as the ultimate model of poetry. In this book I argue that the key reason is because in him two prominent earlier traditions and models triumphantly converge, and this convergence is facilitated by the critical and theoretical mediation and construction of Huang Tingjian. Du Fu’s poetry illustrated sophisticated poetic skill and at the same time perfectly embodied the ideals of poetic spontaneity and social and moral responsibility. For Huang Tingjian, however, the choice of Du Fu served another urgent purpose as well: Du Fu’s poetry offered not only a beautiful object to be desired and emulated but also the ideal pathway to the poetic and literary past, which was becoming ever more tangible due to the unprecedented materializing and actualizing power of the printing press. In other words, Du Fu represented for Huang Tingjian a perfect rallying point for his concerns with poetic convention, technique, and innovation.

**Fa in Historical Perspective**

Like many other concepts in traditional Chinese literary thought, the term *fa* already had a rich history before Huang Tingjian’s time. Scholars of early Chinese intellectual and political history have thoroughly canvassed the word’s pre-Qin usages and have generally agreed that its meaning experienced a significant shift during that period, from “model” or “standard” to “law,” with the rise of the *Fajia* 法家, translated as the “Legalist School,” “School of Law,” or simply “School of Fa”—the doctrine, in Frederick W. Mote’s words, “with which the Chinese empire was forged.” In his study of the early Legalist figure Shen Buhai 申不害 (fourth century B.C.), for example, Herrlee G. Creel provides a detailed analysis of the many levels of meaning the word possesses, ranging from “model,” “standard,” “method,” and “technique” to “rule,” “regulation,” and “law.” Roger T.
Ames has closely examined the word’s semantic history in a study of ancient Chinese statecraft, tracing "the evolution of the character fa from its primary meaning of ‘model or standard’ to the notion of ‘penal law.’"52

Scholars of early Chinese philosophy and political thought also agree that the Chinese word fa is much broader than the Western term “law”—in the sense of “coercively enforced, codified, prescriptive laws used by governments.”53 Some of these scholars, including Herrlee G. Creel and Benjamin I. Schwartz, have pointed out that the English translations “Legalism,” “Legalist School,” and “School of Law” are sometimes misleading because, as Creel argues, they do justice only to what he calls the “Legalist wing of the Fa-chia” at the expense of other similarly prominent senses the word fa had at the time, most importantly the senses of “model” and “method.”54 In their efforts to address this deficiency, these scholars have come up with different rhetorical strategies; a common practice is to stick with the Chinese word and redefine its meaning in more general terms. Mote, for example, defines Legalism broadly as “a system of methods and principles for the operation of the state.”55 Schwartz argues that as “normative rules and patterns of behavior,”56 fa provides the “ultimate common foundation of Legalism”—the “universalistic, impersonal, and objective mechanisms for controlling human behavior.”57 Chad Hansen considers fa as “the measurement-like standard guiding behavior in general,” and argues that under this definition, penal codes are only the “instances of fa,” not fa itself.58 Hansen pushes this understanding of fa a step further, considering it not merely standards for the operation of the state and for guiding and controlling people’s behavior, “but public, projectable, objective, constant, reliable standards of language use and interpretation.”59

Another common strategy is to try to find an intellectual or logical connection between the word’s various usages. Creel points out that all the different meanings of the word fa are “closely related to the special nature of the Chinese idea of law as being that of a model.”60 He accordingly treats the word’s many meanings not as discrete steps, “but rather a scale of infinite gradations, like a spectrum.”61 This desire for unity, however, does not obscure their careful efforts to bring to light the differences between the word’s many possible meanings. Creel notes that “it is quite certain that fa was very often used to imply more than one sense.”62 In some cases, for example, as he points out, the word meant both "law" and
“method.” In the 204 cases (out of 225 occurrences in total) where the word is translated by Duyvendak as “law” in the *Shangjun shu* (The book of Lord Shang), Creel writes, “it is not always easy to be sure of the meaning of fā. The old sense of ‘model’ persists.”

This ambiguity or simultaneity in the meaning of the word *fā*, especially the fact that the word can mean both “law” and “method” and that its later usages are deeply rooted in its oldest sense of “model” or “standard,” is important for our understanding of Huang Tingjian’s use of the term. Creel further contemplates the possibility that the ambiguity or simultaneity might have been intentional, “to accommodate both those who advocated law and those who advocated careful use of administrative method.” The question of intentionality aside, it is significant for our purposes here that the three most prominent meanings the word *fā* had in early Legalist writings, that is, “model,” “method,” and “law” (broadly conceived), all play an important role in Huang Tingjian’s use of the term in poetic criticism. In his use of the word, we can differentiate three closely related but distinct layers of meaning. At the core and most technical level, the term means specific techniques or methods that govern the composition of particular poetic couplets, as indicated by the term *jufā* 句法. These techniques or methods need to be acquired; they can be honed and perfected, taught and learned. This basic meaning of *fā* as techniques or skills of poetic composition is what the Song “remarks on poetry” (*shihua* 詩話) authors, including Huang Tingjian himself, were especially fond of talking about. It is also what Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School have often been identified with in poetic critical discourse since their time.

This level of meaning of *fā* shares with the popular Tang *shige* genre a concern with the technical and formal aspects of poetic composition but differs from it on one key point. While the *shige* are interested mainly in stipulating and describing the techniques, rules, or standards, Huang Tingjian’s interest lies primarily in the ways, means, and procedures through which those techniques, rules, and standards can be obtained.

This brings us to the next level of meaning in Huang Tingjian’s use of the term. *Fā* for him means not only particular skills or techniques of poetic composition but also, and more importantly, steps and normative procedures that can be universally applied. This usage corresponds most closely to what the Western word “method” denotes. As the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* defines it, the word “method” in the modern
Western context means “any procedure which applies some rational order or systematic pattern to diverse objects.” The late Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong argues in his classic study on Peter Ramus (1515–72), the sixteenth-century French humanist and logician who according to Ong played the most significant role in the development of the modern concept “method” before Descartes, that the grounds of this Western notion are a “practical activity forced into a frame and designed to be communicable, not simply intelligible.” The key features of the term “method” described here—normative procedures, universal communicability and applicability—are all prominent in Huang Tingjian’s conception and use of fa. The combination of structure and practicality present in the early conception of “method” in the Western tradition as suggested by Ong is especially illuminating in understanding Huang Tingjian’s use of the Chinese term, because his fa, as we will see, has an essential commitment to activity and practice.

We are entering murkier ground when we come to the most abstract level of meaning held by the word fa in Huang Tingjian’s poetics, that is, fa as a guiding principle, a general system or way of doing things, an ultimate reality or truth. This sense of the word also derives from early Legalist usages. Benjamin Schwartz offers an excellent analysis of how this abstract sense can be deduced from the word’s more basic meanings discussed above. “From this meaning [as model or standard],” Schwartz writes, “one can readily derive the verbal meaning of the word as copying, imitating, or ‘modeling oneself on.’ One can also see how the term comes to be extended to mean a prescriptive method or techne designed to describe the rules of a craft or political techniques designed to control social behavior. In a broader extension of meaning and often compounded with other words (fa-tu [法度], fa-chih [法制]), it seems to refer to complex networks of relations which probably mean something like ‘institutions’ or ‘systems’ of patterned behavior.”

It is at this level of meaning that the word’s semantic field overlaps substantially with that of other prominent terms of the time, for example, the Neo-Confucian notions of “way” (dao 道) and “principle” (li 理). Huang Tingjian’s fa shares with these contemporary schools or systems of thought the common concern with appropriate ways of doing things and an emphasis on unity in goal and means. As Peter K. Bol argues, both Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–86) and Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86), the
two figures who played the most important roles in shaping the political culture and landscape of the late Northern Song, supposed that “there was a method of learning that guaranteed the adequacy of the conclusions they reached.” 70 Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), the most important Neo-Confucian thinker before Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), also asked literati scholars to try to “learn in the right way,” promising that “those who thought in the correct manner would know for themselves” and “reach the same conclusions as everyone else.” 71 What distinguishes fa from these other contemporary intellectual and scholarly concerns is the technical rigor and pragmatism inherent in the word’s long history of usage, a quality that makes the word especially appropriate for a poetic theory that was proud of its down-to-earth approaches to poetic composition and of its concern for the common writer. The distinction also comes from the fact that the basic sense of model or standard embedded in the Legalist usages of the term remains a strong motivating force in Huang Tingjian’s conception of poetic methods although essentially absent in dao or li.

Another question to consider before turning to the term’s Buddhist connections (the word fa was universally adopted for the translation of the Buddhist term dharma during this period) is whether it experienced another major shift of meaning trending toward “method” at Huang Tingjian’s time. I would hesitate to come to this conclusion and would maintain that the change did not come until much later, with the full-scale introduction of Western terms and concepts (among them the modern Chinese word fangfa 方法, 72 a closer equivalent to the Western concept of “method”) in the nineteenth century. 73 This notwithstanding, I would argue that in Huang Tingjian the word’s focus of meaning shows obvious signs of beginning to shift toward this modern sense. This of course does not mean that it is the only sense in which he used the word. As in earlier Legalist usages where the sense of “model” or “method” lurks behind almost every occurrence in which a sense of “law” is indicated, in Huang’s use of fa, the sense of “method” often coexists with that of “model” or “law” (broadly conceived). All these considerations should be kept in mind while attempting a “method”-oriented interpretation of Huang’s use of the word.

The complexity of the word’s semantic situation in Huang Tingjian’s usage can be looked at from yet another perspective that is central to understanding Huang Tingjian’s poetics. A prominent feature of his con-
The notion of *fa* is that the notion is composed of not only standard steps and procedures but also results and consequences these steps and procedures are supposed to achieve. In other words, for Huang Tingjian a destination is always implied in the means by which we arrive at the destination. This inclination toward effect and result often puts his commitment to standard steps and procedures under the pressure of an external motive or larger goal. In some cases discussed in this book, we see that the traditional desire to achieve a greater goal or purpose often triumphs over the locally generated yearning for communicability and transferability of methods. But how does this work at the practical level?

I have already mentioned Herrlee G. Creel’s remark about the “special nature of the Chinese idea of law as being that of a model.” Benjamín Schwartz has further commented that in Legalist usage, “the model or standard is very often the model not of an object but of a pattern of behavior.” In discussing the connection of *fa* as “model” to it as “punishment” or “penal law” (a meaning denoted more clearly by the related word *xing* 刑), Schwartz, drawing upon Léon Vandermeersch’s idea of traditional Chinese penal punishment as means of “re-forming men,” pushes the point a little further by defining it as “a kind of mold forcibly imposed from above to correct the aberrant behavior.” This framing and behavior-shaping element constitutes an important part of Huang Tingjian’s conception of poetic methods, as is tellingly illustrated in his establishing Du Fu as the absolute model of poetry. For him the purpose is to take the coercive power provided by a model, which is conceived as a mold, and use it to foster in the beginning writer a desired pattern of behavior that will manifest itself later, when the writer is presented with the opportunity to respond to real poetic situations and finally produce works that conform to accepted norms of poetry. The task of the critic or theorist is to help form the coercive mold or norms of composition.

The importance of this embedded idea of framing and shaping in Huang Tingjian’s poetics can be best seen in his fondness of using such stock metaphors as the carpenter’s marking lines and ink (*shengmo* 绳墨), his compasses and squares (*guiju* 规矩), or his axes and hatchets (*fuxue* 斧削), all tools for measuring and gauging, for bringing forms into being, for making a sometimes recalcitrant material conform to certain preconceived ideas or functions. These tools of measuring and shaping are important for Huang because they provide the most unyielding standards
and therefore can serve as the best guide for a writer’s habitual response to the often unpredictable needs and circumstances of poetic composition. Not surprisingly, these metaphors were also beloved by earlier Legalist thinkers and assumed enormous significance in their thought, as Schwartz, Graham, and Hansen have all noted in their studies.77

In discussing the importance Huang Tingjian attached to these forceful processes of modeling, molding, framing, and shaping in poetic composition, or what Benjamin Schwartz calls “the coercive connotation of the word fa,”78 however, we must keep in mind another powerful tendency in the Chinese intellectual and literary tradition that also played an important role in shaping Huang Tingjian’s own thinking. This is the prominence given to the idea of naturalness in poetic composition, as shown above in my earlier discussion of poetic spontaneity. It needs to be mentioned in the current context, however, that the appeal to naturalness had a strong Daoist connection, too. Shared by many early schools of Chinese thought, the idea was given the most explicit expression by Daoist philosophers. The connection between Daoism and the Fajia may at first glance seem difficult to envision, but as the studies on early Legalist thought have shown, the connection was not only there but was very strong.79 Benjamin Schwartz considers correspondence to “a truly ‘natural’ system of human organization” the ultimate goal of Legalism. “Once the system of rewards and punishments has become ingrained in habitual behavior, once the methods of defining the proper relations of ‘names and performances’ in government are in place and all the devices for controlling bureaucratic behavior are operative, once the acceptance of the authority of the ruler has been internalized in the attitudes of all men,” Schwartz writes, “one will finally be able to say that the processes of human society correspond to processes of the tao in nature.”80

Thus the ultimate goal, for both Huang Tingjian and early Legalist thinkers and practitioners, is always to approximate or be able to react spontaneously or habitually to the natural order. For Huang, priority is without question given to the normative processes and procedures that will guarantee communicability and universal application of poetic methods. His emphasis on artificial devices and formal mechanism, however, does not preclude the desirable possibilities of naturalness and spontaneity either in theory or in practice. Quite to the contrary. To transcend purely technical concerns and requirements and achieve spontaneous and
natural reaction is always considered a higher goal in poetic composition. As I will show in the following chapters, a prominent feature of Huang Tingjian’s writing and thinking is that although he rarely explicitly challenges the core premises of time-honored traditional ideas and theories (such as that of poetic spontaneity), he often brings substantial changes to those ideas and theories by significantly extending or shifting their semantic scopes or terms of signification. This is often done by juxtaposing old notions and new arguments in a single sentence, putting them in seemingly unthinkable or contradictory contexts or situations. Looked at closely, however, we find that they forcefully point to a central and integral vision that manifests in many of his writings. One of his favorite expressions, “not resorting to the [carpenter’s] marking lines and chopping axes and yet fitting naturally” (bufan shengxue er zihe 不煩繩削而自合), which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2, is a good example of this. This is no evidence of ambivalence or promiscuity but, as I shall argue, emblematic traces of an intense theoretical and personal struggle out of which the basic contours of his poetics and that of Song poetry emerged.

The Buddhist Connotations of the Term “fa”

The question of how the Buddhist concept of dharma may shed light on our understanding of Huang Tingjian’s ideas about methods of poetry is difficult to answer in definite terms. While discussing the influence of Buddhism on Neo-Confucian thought, Arthur F. Wright writes, “The molders of neo-Confucianism lived in a climate suffused with Buddhist influence. Even the language and the modes of discourse at their disposal had developed in the ages of Buddhist dominance. The new dimensions of meaning which they discovered in the ancient Chinese classics were dimensions which experience with Buddhism had taught them to seek and to find.” This apt description also holds true for the religion’s wide-ranging and pervasive influence over Huang Tingjian, who lived and operated in largely the same Buddhism-saturated context as did his Neo-Confucian counterparts. Furthermore, Huang Tingjian was especially known among his contemporaries for his personal devotion to the belief. Specific connections between Huang Tingjian’s poetics and Buddhism, especially those between the Buddhist idea of dharma and Huang’s idea of fa for poetic composition, however, are hard to establish. This difficulty has not been much alleviated by the recent eruption of
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scholarly interest in the diverse and rich interactions between Buddhism and native Chinese thought during this period. 83

A few broad observations about the possible intellectual or logical connection between the two, however, may help us better appreciate the points made above about the Chinese term’s roots in native Legalist thought and its revival in Huang Tingjian’s poetics. As one of the most important terms central to Buddhist thought, the word dharma, like that of fa, also covers a broad range of interrelated meanings. The Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms provides a rambling list of possible meanings: “that which is held fast or kept, ordinance, statute, law, usage, practice, custom,” “duty,” “right,” “proper,” “morality,” and “character”; and points out its wide applicability: it is used “in the sense of all things, or anything small or great, visible or invisible, real or unreal, affairs, truth, principle, method, concrete things, abstract ideas, etc.” 84 Ryūichi Abé identifies eight common usages of the term: (1) ultimate reality, (2) the Buddhist teachings, (3) principle, law, standard, (4) morals and ethics, (5) phenomenal existence, (6) attributes, (7) categories of existence, and (8) fundamental elements of existence. 85 The core meaning of the word, however, is still being debated among scholars of Buddhist thought and philosophy. 86 The Russian scholar Th. Stcherbatsky, in his classic study of this concept in Buddhist thought, begins his discussion with a concern about the “uncertainty” that prevails over the meaning of the term and ends it with a paragraph that vividly delivers his deep sense of despair over his inability to capture the “inmost nature” of the word: “[A]lthough the conception of an element of existence [which Stcherbatsky considers the word’s root sense] has given rise to an imposing superstructure in the shape of a consistent system of philosophy,” he writes, “its inmost nature remains a riddle. What is dharma? It is inconceivable! It is subtle! No one will ever be able to tell what its real nature (dharma-svabhāva) is! It is transcendental!” 87

Of the word’s many meanings, however, that of the Buddhist “teaching” or “law” should stand out as the most easily recognizable and most relevant to our purposes. Just as the Chinese word fa even in its strictest Legalist sense is broader than what penal law can indicate, the Buddhist concept dharma as “law” need also be understood broadly, in the sense of
ultimate “reality” or “truth,” or in Stcherbatsky’s words, “elements of existence.” That the term *dharma* covers more semantic ground than “law” or “method” can also be deduced from the fact that, as Arthur F. Wright has pointed out, when Buddhism was first introduced into China, “the ancient and honored word *tao*, the key term of philosophic Taoism, was sometimes used to render the Buddhist term *dharma*, ‘the teaching.’” 89 That the word *dharma*’s semantic field overlaps with that of the all-embracing native Chinese term *dao* (“way”) and that it was later found that *fa* was actually a more accurate translation of *dharma* should tell us something about the vast meaning ranges of both the Buddhist term and its Chinese equivalent.

How and when medieval Chinese translators of Buddhism settled with the term *fa* for *dharma*, and whether in the process the native Chinese term experienced a change of meaning (as Hansen suggested), 90 are unclear to me, except that the transition must have happened long before Huang Tingjian’s time. However, the Chinese term shares a key quality with its Sanskrit counterpart that may help us better understand the rationale behind the choice. I mentioned earlier that in Huang Tingjian’s conception of poetic methods, paths and procedures are considered inseparable from the ultimate goals these paths and procedures are supposed to serve and fulfill. The notion of path is also internally envisioned in the Buddhist term *dharma*. According to Stcherbatsky, “The moral teaching of a path towards Final Deliverance is not something additional or extraneous to this ontological doctrine [that is the Buddhist *dharma*], it is most intimately connected with it and, in fact, identical with it.” 91 Noa Ronkin, in her recent study of the early development of Buddhist thought, also emphasizes that an important concern for early Buddhism was “with the processes that govern our experience, not with the nature of the sensory phenomena themselves.” 92 If the duality of goal and path is inherent in both the Chinese word *fa* and the Buddhist term *dharma*, it will not be surprising at all that *fa* should have triumphed over other native terms for translating *dharma* into Chinese; nor will it be surprising that Huang Tingjian was able to emphasize the all-importance of methods and at the same time earnestly desire their transcendence.
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Each of the five main chapters in this book addresses one important aspect of Huang Tingjian’s poetics and its grounding in late Northern Song intellectual and material culture. Chapter 1 examines the intense eleventh-century striving for perfection in the area of poetic composition and criticism, a process that, I argue, culminated in the establishment of Du Fu as the ultimate model of a poet in both critical discourse and practice. The relatively uneventful poetic history of the first half of the eleventh century was marked nonetheless by intermittent but persistent attempts to look for appropriate models from the past. This uncertain quest for poetic models took a definitive turn when Huang Tingjian’s generation rose to the national scene and rediscovered Du Fu, ushering in a new era for Song poetry. In this chapter, I show how the development of Huang Tingjian’s poetics constituted an integral part of the grand eleventh-century quest for model and identity, and how an essentially forward-looking movement was characterized by a determined backward gaze toward the past. The chapter also aims to provide a conceptual background, and a point of departure, for the more focused discussion of Huang’s poetics in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 discusses the meaning and significance of *fa* in Huang Tingjian’s poetics by way of exploring one of his favorite metaphors. *Fa*, the primary force that animates and guides the poetic process, and the major standard against which poetic excellence is defined and measured, functions for Huang Tingjian like the “handle” of a hatchet—that key part of the instrument through which the carpenter’s intent and will are transmitted to the object being worked on and by which the poet-carpenter claims and maintains control of the process of poetic crafting. I argue that this search for handles is a natural extension of the search for absolute poetic models discussed in Chapter 1. If the canonization of Du Fu represents the desire for an absolute destination, the search for handles represents the desire for paths leading toward that destination. These paths are conceived not as direct marches from one place to another nor as shortcuts that guarantee sudden enlightenment, but as journeys that require assiduous exertion of effort. I further argue that the convergence of the search for grand models and the search for paths in Huang Tingjian’s poetics was a key defining moment in Northern Song poetic history. It represents the completion of a long poetic transformation that was
begun in the Tang but whose impact failed to fully register in mainstream discourse on poetry until the late Northern Song with the rise of Huang Tingjian and the Jiangxi School.

Chapter 3 extends the discussion of Huang Tingjian’s *fa* beyond purely technical considerations, relocating it in the larger intellectual and cultural discourses and contexts in which the concern with *fa* emerged and functioned. The metaphor in the title of the chapter refers to a legendary black leopard who, in order to nurture the desired skin pattern, hides and starves himself in the fog-shrouded mountain for seven days. Traditional Chinese literary critics favored this parable primarily because the beautiful pattern on the leopard skin was a natural metaphor for the sophisticated aesthetic patterning of literary writing. Huang Tingjian, driven by his interest in paths and models, substantially changed the nature of the metaphor by shifting the focus of attention from the end result of the leopard’s effort (the beautiful skin) to the processes that created it. In this chapter I also discuss how Huang Tingjian’s theories on nurturing the writerly capability to compose literature differ from the Mencian theory of nurturing the human mind. This chapter, together with Chapter 2, serves a particular rhetorical purpose as well. It gives a specific example to illustrate the characteristic Huang Tingjian way of thinking and writing—how he excels at bringing old phrases and metaphors to life by using them in oftentimes totally unexpected semantic contexts or combinations.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of Huang Tingjian’s theories on fostering the writer’s capacity to write by focusing on a special type of literary self-cultivation that had a particular anchor in the intellectual and material culture of the day: the reading and study of books. Unlike his predecessors, Huang Tingjian considers book learning not only an important path to knowledge but also a direct source of poetic composition. In the chapter, I first discuss the radical reconceptualization of reading in the eleventh century and Huang Tingjian’s strenuous theoretical efforts to ground poetic composition in book learning. I then turn to the shift in his conception of the methods of reading—a shift from the breadth to the depth and thoroughness of reading. This shift, I argue, was indicative not only of a major change in literary sensibility but also of the complex process of interaction by which the burning issues in the material culture of the day penetrated the intellectual and literary discourse, forcing the latter to change. I conclude the chapter by taking a close look at the compli-
cated issues involved in Huang Tingjian’s use and renovation of the term *wanjuan*, as an example of how a seemingly innocent word was quickly problematized by the dramatically changed and changing conditions of reading and textual production.

Chapter 5 brings together the many themes and lines of investigation explored in the previous chapters by repositioning them in the special context of the rapid development of print culture over the eleventh century. In the first part of the chapter, I examine the limited circulation of Han Yu’s works before the midcentury upsurge in textual productivity and availability. I then move on to explore in more general terms the effects and consequences of increased book availability in the second half of the century on literary interpretation and writing. I end this chapter by conducting a close reading of an essay written by Su Shi on a friend’s legendary book collection held in a Buddhist monastery. My aim is to analyze the complicated issues and contexts surrounding the popular discourse on copying texts by hand, and observe how that discourse was changed by the intricate web of interrelated interests and concerns at the crossroads of the historic shift from script to print. The texts I examine in this chapter are also intended to bring into sharper focus the degree and range of change in the material culture, and to gauge how individuals responded to that change. Intense emotional responses from individual writers are especially worth exploring because they open an extraordinary window onto not only the historical processes of change, but also the universal human struggle behind the change.

In the Conclusion, I briefly contemplate the legacy of Huang Tingjian’s poetics and the post-Jiangxi poetic sensibility and critical landscape. I emphasize the deep and long-lasting influence Huang’s theories have had on poetic learning and discussion in the Southern Song and far beyond.