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ANTHROPOLOGY

LITERATURE AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC AID¹

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Literature can afford a rich secondary source for cross-cultural analysis. Fiction, especially, can provide for the anthropologist preparing to leave for the field, data on social structure, indigeneous customs, political conflicts, or prevailing personality types. It can serve as an aid in orienting the Western raised and trained social scientist to the new environment which he will be investigating, and can give him conversational material with which to put his informants at ease.

Fiction as a secondary source, of course, must always be used with care, with the realization that the writer has added his own personality in his creative effort. Nevertheless, literature can be used as a cultural document, because no writer is ever wholly free of his cultural training and background. A particular writer may retreat from his milieu, another rebel against it, still another defend it, but each is constantly commenting on some aspect of it. Later some mention will be made of the possible ways in which the element of individuality can be partially controlled or, at least, compensation for it made.

Illustrations of the premise that literature can be effectively used as cultural document, as an ethnographic aid, will be limited in this paper to an exploration of literature as a factor in ascertaining the dominant values of a specific culture. For this purpose, the work of the following eight authors is employed: Lu Hsun, Mao Tun, Lin Tai-yi, C. Y. Lee, Hsia Yen, Anand, Markandaya, and Narayan. The first five are Chinese and the last three from India; two books of short stories, two novels, and a play are used for learning about Chinese values, while six novels are employed for the investigation of Indian values. Such a small sample obviously does not give a good spatial or social representation, yet even these few works show that the content of literature is helpful in learning seven things pertinent to the value orientation of specific societies.

First, fiction reveals the complex of traditional beliefs which form the engrained, highly inculcated value system. Many twentieth century Chinese and Indians hold to age-old beliefs about the nature of the

¹ This paper carries out some of the ideas developed in anthropology by the late Ruth Benedict. A discussion of the theoretical implications of the subject is given in M. Mead and R. Métraux (eds.) *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 219-263, and elsewhere.

world and of man. In each of these works of literature, some character voices the ancient beliefs concerning man's fate and man's place in nature and society. The people in "Winter Rain" (*Spring Silkworms*) still believe that Heaven sends a "true" emperor whenever a dynasty becomes hopelessly corrupt, while Margayya of *The Financial Expert* feels he must propitiate the Goddess Lakshmi in order to achieve success. Just as the Chinese villagers in "Winter Rain" pin their horoscopes to a straw man in an attempt to save themselves from destruction, the Indian villagers in *The Guide* consult an astrologer when a bad drought occurs, relying on traditional concepts in time of crisis, though the beliefs may have no connection with a scientific remedy.

One of the attitudes which both Chinese and Indian cultures value is that of resignation. Man is expected to accept his fate and his place in society. One of the classic portrayals of resignation is found in "The True Story of Ah Q." Ah Q's resignation is depicted as characteristic of peasants who endure fictional droughts and well-to-do men who lose their fortunes. In addition, the Chinese maxim that each must go his own way in life injures those who must suffer at the same time that it excuses those who cause suffering. Anand describes the Indian Gangu of *Two Leaves and a Bud* as possessing the "resigned indifference of the Hindu," while Markandaya portrays the same attitude in Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve*, when this peasant woman is unable to understand why the British doctor wants the Indians to cry out for help if they suffer.

The emphasis upon resignation and acceptance of the laws of fate does not necessarily mean that an individual will not try to better his material condition. It does mean that he will be more philosophical about his failures. Such is the case with editor Wu in *The Eaves-dropper*, with Mr. Lin in "The Shop of the Lin Family" (*Spring Silkworms*), with Margayya of *The Financial Expert* and Raju of *The Guide*.

The second aspect of a value system that fiction can reveal is that of valued behavior patterns. For example, keeping up a proper front is important to the members of the "bourgeoisie," as with Mr. Lin who is embarrassed to have a bill collector sitting right in his shop or with Margayya who keeps the key to his success a secret, since it would not be proper to have made a fortune from a book which deals with how to act in bed.

Despite the existence and even the ready availability of modern methods, people cling to the old patterns of behavior, the traditional ways of doing things. Examples of this appear frequently in even this small sample. For instance, in the title story of *Spring Silkworms*, Old Tung Pao insists on raising silkworms by the age-old method which includes an elaborate ritual ceremony and does not include the use of an electric pump which would make irrigation more adequate. In *Two Leaves and a Bud* the tea plantation clerk chooses to burn thup and use a midwife rather than call the British doctor who is within shouting distance.

With one short description C. Y. Lee captures the relationship of

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the traditionally accepted beliefs and behavior with beliefs and behavior of the modern generation. In *Lover's Point* Mr. Yee has to put a kitchen god above his deep freezer because his mother fears that evil spirits will choose that appliance to hide in.

Third, literature gives evidence as to which material possessions are the most highly prized. The peasant in either China or India values most of all his land. Selling even a part of the family's fields is a tragedy for Old Tung Pao's family in "Autumn Harvest" (*Spring Silkworms*). The Indian Gangu feels that he can do without everything else but land, that he can endure all else if he can only have a small bit of land for his own (*Two Leaves and a Bud*). Certain things become essential status symbols because of the value attached to them. Perhaps the status symbol is a maid, a tutor, or volumes of Ibsen and Shelley as in the stories by Lu Hsun; it may simply be an English cane chair as in *Untouchable*, gold rimmed glasses as in *The Financial Expert*, or two sets of rooms and servants as in *Some Inner Fury*. Even in this sample of fictional works the difference between the symbols of various social segments is apparent, giving the ethnographer an idea of what to look for when he is in the field trying to ascertain social groupings as well as values.

In all segments of society money is highly valued because of the things which it brings to its possessor. Revelation of this often comes in the words of those characters who suffer because they do not have money. Such is the case with the members of Old Tung Pao's family as they struggled unsuccessfully to keep out of debt. In *Two Leaves and a Bud* Anand writes the following: "For Gangu knew that as soon as you possess anything the world takes on a rosier hue; everything seems to go straight, and you rise in your own estimation as well as the eyes of others, for you then . . . are on the side of the angels against the devils. . . . Every absurdity appears agreeable in a man on whom gold has smiled, even though he look like a dog and think like a donkey . . ."

Fourth, works of fiction can be employed in order to get some idea of the range of value orientation which exists within a particular culture. Two of the novels examined provide especially good presentations of individual reaction to the traditional value system. Both *The Eavesdropper* and *Some Inner Fury* present characters who fall along a continuum from acceptance of traditional values to a rejection of the old. In the former book the tubercular Feina and her parents represent acceptance of the ancient Chinese way of looking at things, while the Kuan family stand for the corruption which was indigenous to the old way of life, which existed by playing upon the resignation of others. Henry Lee retains traditional values, brought to New York from China, although he makes some concessions after years of living surrounded by another value system. The protagonist, Shutung, is caught between the Chinese and the American value systems, able to operate in either, yet unconvinced that either is right. Both Wang Yuen and Fulton Lee reject the old value system, the former substituting the Communist and the latter the American value system for the traditional one.

Somewhat the same range is evidenced in Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*. Premala holds to the basic Indian values, while Mira subscribes to some of those values, but does not accept the place traditionally allotted to women. Mira, however, is less independent and action-oriented than Roshan, who can live comfortably with both traditional values and British values, being accepted by people who hold to both systems. Kit, the anglicized Indian, rejects many of the Indian patterns, feeling more at home in British circles, while his brother, Govind, rejects a good many of the traditional values, especially that of resignation, to become a revolutionary.

As in these two novels, the range of value orientation portrayed in fiction provides a clue as to the social and cultural conflicts taking place in society. For example, the incompatibility seen between Kit's position and that of Govind reflects the value conflict present in the India of 1942. Thus, while literature reveals traditional and widely accepted values, it also provides illustrations of the conflicts and compromises which individuals face in reality.

Fifth, literature is often used to inculcate new values. Often the new values are merely suggested as at the end of *Untouchable*, when Anand, through the speeches of several characters presents resolutions to the problem of the sweeper. In other instances the very purpose of the work may be to instill or reinforce an entire set of new values. The best example of this is the Chinese play entitled *The Test*. Despite the poor quality of the play as a play, it serves as a definite aid in the enculturation of the Communist values of hard work, devotion to the Party, and practical self-education. Raising the production quota, eradicating waste of time and materials, and achieving a "high level of political consciousness" are supposed to be the goals of the individual. Instead of a resignation which leads to the acceptance of calamity and injustice at the hands of fate, *The Test* advocates individual subordination to the materialistic concerns of the State and the Party.

At no time is retention of the traditional value of family—unity and continuity—encouraged. Women, like men, are expected to work for the State whether or not they are wives and mothers. The only family activity mentioned in the play is cancelled because of some work that a character must do for the factory which employs him. At no place in the play is age respected as in the traditional system. Old Chien is presented as a model older man only because he approves of the new order, works hard, and spends his spare time improving his industrial mind. On the other hand the young Hsu is the paragon of virtue, to be emulated because of his energy, devotion, and ability which are dedicated to the State.

It should be noted that the Communists are not the only ones who use fiction as an aid in inculcating new, non-traditional values. Although this sample of Chinese and Indian fiction does not include such an example, a well-known Burmese play, U Nu's *The People Win Through*, clearly illustrates this. This play emphasizes democratic values and condemns traditional Burmese resignation. It also condemns the alternative Communistic values.

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The sixth aspect of value orientation which literature helps to reveal is the value commitment of the writer. Each writer will select and stress those values of which he himself approves, portraying in a poorer light those values of which he disapproves. Such is the case in Mao Tun's short stories which criticize feudalism and imperialism or in Lu Hsun's stories such as the one about Ah Q. Anand's condemnation of British self-complacency and cruelty is clearly seen in the depiction of the British personnel on the tea plantation in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, with Reggie representing the very worst of the faults of the British as conceived by the author.

Naturally, since the writer is a part of his culture, his value system will contain some of the same items as the value system of his culture as a whole, but often the writer's rejection of particular values or certain patterns of behavior may be a harbinger of social change. An inspection of the writer's values can help the field-bound anthropologist in anticipating social protests and social reforms. An analysis of the writer's values in connection with an inspection of the range in value orientation presented by the fictional characters can prevent the anthropologist from getting an over-simplified picture of the value system of the country in which he is interested.

Seventh, literature can be used as a way of beginning to isolate and characterize the ethos of a particular culture. The emphasis found in these works of fiction upon a particular life crisis rite is one indication of the ethos of the culture. For example, the rite which is repeatedly present in the Chinese works of this sample is the final life crisis rite, the funeral. A proper funeral is important both to the individual and to the family group, since each person must properly join the family ancestors. The funeral serves to reenforce the ties of the living family with the ancestors, to remind the young of their duty and obedience to their elders, to strengthen the bond among the living relatives.

The final life crisis rite is discussed from a number of points of view in the sample used for this paper. Lu Hsun discusses the way Wu Lien-shu, although a "modern," goes into deep mourning for his grandmother, kow-tows to her coffin, has mass held by Buddhist monks and Taoist priests, even wails himself according to convention. In another story by the same author the reader learns that the dead are buried with some of their possessions and must be reburied if the grave is disturbed. In *Lover's Point* Mrs. Yee feels that she must die in China and be buried in the ancestral burial ground, although she has been living in San Francisco for a number of years. Other mentions of the importance of funerals and proper burial can undoubtedly be found upon further investigation of the literature.

In contrast, the concern apparent in the sample of Indian fiction is with the life crisis rite of the wedding. A wedding joins two families and insures caste purity, maintaining the well established social order. Not only must the individuals be carefully chosen, their horoscopes matched, and the amount of the dowry settled, but the celebration itself must be something to remember for families and friends. Even anglicized Kit of *Some Inner Fury* allows his mother to find

him a wife, while Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve* worries about providing the right food for her daughter's wedding feast.

Of course, exceptions are also depicted. Margayya, the financial expert, changes astrologers until the horoscope of the girl he prefers is pronounced acceptable, whereas Marco, in *The Guide*, obtains his wife by advertising in an English language paper.

Thus, if one looks in literature for mention of traditional beliefs, valued behavior patterns, tangible items which are valued, the range of value orientation, as well as the values of the author, he can ascertain a fair idea of the basic value system of the culture in which he is interested. If his sample is adequate, he can discern what new values have begun to be inculcated or which values may be enculturated in the near future. He can arrive at a preliminary formulation of the ethos of the culture. Perhaps, most important, he can prepare himself for field work or check upon the field work of others. Literature should be more extensively used as a secondary source wherever possible. Besides its practical value to anyone interested in another society, it can be highly enjoyable in and of itself.

This brief illustration of one specific way in which literature can act as an ethnographic aid could be expanded into a longer and more sophisticated study, possessing a greater degree of accuracy and validity. Whether the objective is a study of values, some aspect of material culture, political organization or religious beliefs, a three dimensional framework could be employed with a much larger number of fictional works providing the material. The total framework, cubic in shape, would represent the whole of one society. One dimension would be that of space or geography, another that of social groupings, and the third that of time. Both the author and the subject of any work used would be located in this matrix so that the analyst could have some idea of the author's qualifications in speaking about the particular cubic segment which appears in his novel or play. Although the author need not necessarily belong to the segment about which he is writing, he should have had experience in or extensive contacts with the segment he is depicting.

The use of such a matrix has a number of advantages. As just mentioned, it allows the location of author and subject matter, permitting the analyst to assess the validity of the portrayal. It allows the analyst to define for others the segment of the whole with which he is dealing, as well as allowing other analysts to check on his findings and conclusions. Furthermore, it permits the compilation of segmentary studies into a coherent whole, with adequate representation of each of the small cubes which make up the total societal cube. Moreover, after such a compilation, future social scientists could extract information from the particular segmental study or dimensional data accurately and with a minimum of effort and time.

For example, an anthropologist going into southern India to investigate conditions among the money lenders could obtain a list of books describing this segment of Indian society during the nineteen fifties as well as reading the conclusions of the analyst who had previously surveyed and studied the literature pertaining to that seg-

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ment. Unfortunately, such a systematic organization of literature as a secondary source is highly unlikely, because of the effort it would involve to cover adequately each social segment, and to cover the many cubes which go to make up a number of societies. Ideally, analysts would be employed to investigate all the aspects of culture pertaining to each of the small cubes making up a number of societies, with standard definitions of the three dimensions being outlined before work began. Thus, a comparison of Indian money lenders from a certain geographical section of that country could be made with money lenders from a comparable geographic district in China, Japan, or any other country which possesses a written literature.

The possibility of using literature as an ethnographic aid is exciting and intriguing. Even if the ideal cannot be met, the conception of a matrix such as that just discussed can help provide some control. In any case literature as a practical and illuminating secondary source should be employed by the ethnographer or by any social scientist interested in studying culture.

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