

SPECIAL THEME: THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE
AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN ASIA

Introduction: Toward an old understanding of philology: Exploring the literary construction of place as religious and social commentary in Asia

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There is no doubt that the idea of place matters. Human beings have long been willing to fight and die for rights, symbolic and material, over both tangible and intangible places. However, the types of expression and performance that transmit and adapt ideas of place are less well understood than the brute fact of the enduring power of certain charged locations. That is to say, we know that certain places are significant but we are less sure as to the mechanisms of how and why they are made so. In addition, scholarly work in this area has tended to consider the literary and performative construction of place to always be bound up with these determinate locations rather than a variety of social functions. Literary engagements with the category of place, as this volume will demonstrate, encompass a wide range of uses. A suggestive but by no means exhaustive list of those that reflect the analytic content of this volume would have to include: political and religious legitimization, the construction of the significant past, the expression of agreement and dissent in relation to prevailing and emergent ideologies, and the transmission and adaptation of systems of socially significant knowledge in response to a wide variety of historical circumstances. Literatures of place, then, provide an extraordinarily rich source of information as to the ways in which human beings maintain and transform their understandings of not just the world around them, but themselves.

The terms that circulate in the title of this volume should also be the subject of a certain amount of critical attention: We intend the term ‘literary’ in the rather restricted sense of ‘being committed to writing’. The contributors to this volume have, in fact, all focused on narrative literature, something we will take up below. The ideas of ‘construction’ and ‘commentary’ reflect an orientation to human social life that seeks to understand processes in the origination, transmission and adaptation of forms

of significant social knowledge: from understandings of the past and present and expectations with regard to the future to the construction of ideas of environment, self, 'other', and durable systems of exchange (of ideas, persons and goods). 'Construction' and 'commentary' are also related to issues of power: of who gets to say what about whom, when, where, and for what purposes. This broadly 'constructivist' approach has come to dominate the humanities and social sciences over the last few decades, and it is one that does not look to eternal verities within social groups and instead emphasizes the piecemeal, processual and often conflictual nature of the construction and negotiation of reality. Place is the master term in this volume: It is the point of departure and the theoretical focus of our enquiries. Place is the investment of a portion of space, here understood simply as the context of extension, with structure and significance. The anthropologist Ann Feldhaus distinguishes between space and place as follows:

Whereas space is abstract, homogeneous, unmarked, and neutral, place is concrete, particular and differentiated ... At a more fundamental level, a sense of place is formative of one's cosmology and basic orientation to the world (Feldhaus 2003, 5–6).

This formative role can be as simple as the giving of a name to a location or as complicated as a narrative account of an extended pilgrimage. Places are, then, somewhat counter-intuitively, not found but made. This is obvious when one is dealing with a wholly imaginative creation, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch*, but rather more difficult to bear in mind when one is standing in one's hometown. The historical development of the constructivist orientation to place will be taken up, briefly, below. The artificiality of place applies, of course, to the major geographical designation in our title, which delimits the area of enquiry of this volume: Asia. This is of course a European cartographic designation that is now invested with a series of sedimented significances that it is not the task of this volume to investigate. However, the proximity of the linguistic and social groups within 'Asia' and the fact of their extensive and varied forms of historic and contemporary interrelationship make it sensible to consider them together. This is without failing to acknowledge the fuzziness of this concept, particularly at its boundaries. We also make use of two adjectives, 'religious' and 'social': 'Religious' in the context of this volume will denote a concern with culturally postulated superhuman agencies and/or forms of personally or collectively transformative knowledge.¹ 'Social' will refer to more general concerns with modes of collective organization, conceptualization and practice as outlined above.

Having taken up our terminology, I will turn now to our central hypotheses. The

¹ This is the phrase of Lawson and McCauley in their *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (1990). I have added the reference to forms of transformative knowledge. This is to acknowledge the centrality of empowered religious pedagogies across Asia.

first of these relates to the narrative focus of the volume, the second to the idea of place. This volume, then, seeks to demonstrate the validity of two interrelated hypotheses: that narrative is a significant form of theoretical activity in social groups and that the narrative construction of place is religiously and socially significant across Asia. It is this second hypothesis that stands at the centre of the present volume. It is, however, dependent on the first. It is for this reason that I will now say a few words about the orientation to narrative in this volume.

Asian narrative data has previously been considered from the perspective of philology, history, religious studies, or anthropology. Although these perspectives have yielded important results, they have tended to regard the data as a means to something else: Philologists have excavated textual material and speculated about the chronology of textual layers and linguistic change, historians have reconstructed and dated socio-political developments in a positivist mode, and religionists have approached texts as windows onto distinct religious traditions. Anthropologists have, though not without exception, tended to relate narrative to the immediate concerns of the social group with which they are working. This volume is informed by these approaches, but concentrates on narrative discourse as a form of theoretical activity as it emerges and is consolidated within Asian textual sources across a range of ideological and social formations. This scholarly agenda requires attention to primary data, balanced with a new theorisation of narrative's functional capacities. It is necessary that we come to an understanding of narrative activity, not as a second order form of expression, but as a critical means for both the transmission and adaptation of ideas in social groups.² R.B. Nair, in her *Narrative Gravity*, suggests that 'narrative ... is a structure that introduces the question "why?" and the connective "because" into the world' (Nair 2002, 344). Nair's compellingly clear characterisation of narrative activity suggests that, as a mode of expression, narrative is not optionally commentarial and speculative but, rather, constitutively so. Nair suggests that narratives 'present particular hypotheses about phenomena in the world and present a paradigm to explain them' (ibid., 343). The particular context in which we explore the theoretical capacities of narrative in this volume is in the construction and adaptation of ideologically charged understandings of place. This analysis, of the narrative construction of significant place, can then be connected to a wider engagement with strategies and conflicts in what Arjun Appadurai has termed 'the management of meanings', and the role of diverse knowledge systems, in isolation and conjunction, across Asia (Appadurai 1981, 203).

² The realisation of the salience of narrative studies for human social and cognitive development and the reciprocal application of cognitivist approaches in the humanities has resulted in a number of publications. From the work of specialists in English such as Nair 2002 and Turner 1996 to the work of Evolutionary Anthropologists such as Tomasello 1999.

When Jacob Neusner suggested that ‘... stories do constitute facts of history. If they are not factitious for the history of the period of which they speak, then they surely testify to the social relationships and imaginative life—the history—of the periods to which they speak’ (Neusner 2004, 243). He opened up an area of analysis which can be enriched by a wide variety of new theoretical orientations to the forms and functions of human conceptualization and communication. It is still, however, a considerable undertaking to attempt to put together an idea of the social relationships and imaginative life of the people of a given period or location: and it is one which we only initiate here in relationship to the focalizing concept of place. This is a concept that has led an active and varied life in the humanities and social sciences of recent years, and it is to this that we now turn.

The theoretical context of the volume

The concept of place and its role in human social organisation and conceptualisation has been subject to renewed scholarly attention over the last three decades. Previous to this, perhaps the most celebrated inter-disciplinary initiative to focus on place and on more general issues of cultural geography was that of the *Annales* school. A consideration of the role of conceptual geographies and of the land itself in forms of social organisation and their historical development was a critical aspect of their wider agenda of recovering the *mentalité* of a given society and of hypothesising over forms of historical development in the ‘*longue durée*’.³ This agenda, of ‘total history’, was heavily influenced by the works of Durkheim, Mauss and, subsequently, Lévi-Strauss. Their basic principle of operation with regard to the physical environment has been summarised by one of their founding figures, Lucien Febvre:

It is not true that four or five great geographic influences weigh on historic bodies with a rigid and uniform influence; but at every instant and in all phases of their existence, through the exceedingly supple and persistent mediation of living beings endowed with initiative, called men, isolated or in groups, there are constant, durable, manifold, and at times contradictory influences exercised by all those forces of soil, climate, vegetation—and many other forces beside—which constitute and compose a natural environment (Febvre 1925, 89–90).

The *Annales* historians were, however, by no means crudely deterministic in their orientation to the relationship between society and its environment. Traian Stoianovich comments on what he terms the ‘*Annales* Paradigm’ in which, ‘change is perceived

³ This is something of a bald summary of course. To take up the relation of the *Annales* school to developments in German historical theories of the 19th century and early 20th century such as those of Dilthey and Lamprecht is beyond the scope of the present introduction. There is no doubt that there is a, not un-critical, debt to conceptions of *Kulturgeschichte*, *Geistesgeschichte* and the notion of *Geisteswissenschaften*. See Dilthey 1962, 68–71.

not as progress, regular development, or continuity, but in terms of a need for other functions, or as part of a process of structuring, destructuring, and restructuring'. The *Annales* historians, then, were vital in establishing a link between environment and the forms and modes of human conceptualisation and even memorialisation.⁴ Despite this excellent start, it was not until relatively recently that there was resurgence in attention to the category of place in human social life across the humanities and social sciences.

If the *Annales* historians were concerned with the relationship between humanity and its environment then the human geographers, philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists of the last three decades have been far more concerned with the more elusive role of 'patial thinking' and the broader 'geographical imagination' in all aspects of human social life. Perhaps the most significant figure in this regard is Yi-Fu Tuan who, through his many publications on the social role of concepts of place, *Topophilia* (1974) and *Space and Place* (1977), has argued that human beings come to know the world primarily through ideas of place:

Place can be as small as the corner of a room or as large as the earth itself: ... Geographers tend to think of place as having the size of a settlement: the plaza within it may be counted a place, but usually not the individual houses, and certainly not the old rocking chair by the fireplace (Tuan 1974, 245).⁵

The work of Tuan, and others, inspired a large number of studies of the socio-political character of concrete places.⁶ There has also been a concurrent emphasis on more general considerations of the role of place in the formation of human consciousness *in toto*. The argument for the anthropological universality of thinking in and through place has been formulated philosophically in the work of Edward Relph and subsequently in the well known work of Edward Casey. For Relph and Casey, consciousness and intentionality are founded on a basic sense of place as the 'profound centre of human existence' (Relph, 1976) and as the 'bedrock of our being-in-the-world' (Casey 1993, xvii). Indeed, Casey states:

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs was also associated with the *Annales* school. His work on the social determination of memory prefigured the explosion of speculation and publication in this area some 40 years later. See Halbwachs 1992. The *Annalists* were also capable of radical acts of critical insight into received historical chronologies and their points of origin. Febvre, for example, contends that it was the prominent 19th century French historian Jules Michelet who invented the Renaissance: 'But a great historian, a creator of genius like Michelet binds together for the first time a bunch of heterogeneous but contemporary facts. He baptizes them with a beautiful name *Renaissance* which for quite personal reasons he finds alive within himself. And so that label, the Renaissance, becomes in turn a living reality in opposition to the middle ages. It confronts and destroys the middle ages. But it also to a large extent determines our way of conceiving of the middle ages'. Such notions are more generally associated with the work of Foucault in contemporary scholarship. See Febvre 1973, 266.

⁵ This sort of broad understanding of place is also close to the idea of 'Social Space' elaborated in the works of Henri Lefebvre, see Lefebvre 1991.

⁶ For an overview of these materials, see Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga 2007.

I shall accord to place a position of renewed respect by specifying its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are not) (ibid., xv).

This volume, like these more philosophically minded theorists, wishes to move away from the notion of place as simply a matter of location. However, the more philosophic and Husserlian commentaries on the concept of place, in the very act of ‘bracketing’ the everyday, and in their larger project of ‘epoché’, the analysis of the essential structures of consciousness, attend to a universalist agenda which is somewhat distant from the scholarly goals of the present volume. The Phenomenologists share an emphasis on ‘Place’ as an abstraction rather than on ‘place’ as always filled with determinate contextual content. The establishment of the centrality of place in the formation and functioning of human consciousness is, more than likely, foundational to our undertaking.⁷ However, our interests are somewhat more ‘concrete’ and ‘contextual’ and, in this way, reflect more closely the analytic agendas of both the *Annales* school and the more recent engagements with the analysis of place that have taken form in both human geography and anthropology.⁸ We wish, in other words, to undertake a philosophically nuanced but contextually grounded investigation of the religious and social function of palatial thinking and the geographic imagination within literary cultures across Asia. In this way, we intend to move from the ‘Place’ of the Phenomenologists to the many ‘places’ of historians, human geographers and anthropologists.

The shape of the volume

Fittingly, this volume organises itself on the basis of a palatial conceit: The contributions move from west to east in terms of the areas and peoples upon which they focus. They commence in Persia and finish in China. Each of the contributions is presented, below, in terms of its dominant theme in relation to the exploration of the narrative construction of place as a form of religious and social commentary.

Alan Williams takes up a 16th century Persian poem that tells of the Zoroastrian migration from Iran to India in the 8th century. He demonstrates that the text functions as a series of *rites de passage* in which the migrant Zoroastrians are symbolically ‘replaced’ into the new Indian social milieu. Adheesh Sathaye continues our exploration of place through an analysis of Sanskrit epic materials, and in particular legends of the sage Viśvāmitra. He argues that these texts seek to naturalize *varṇa* within their

⁷ In much the same way as it has been in the ‘local theories of dwelling’ in the anthropological researches of Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso. See ‘Introduction’ in Feld and Basso (1996), pp. 3–12.

⁸ As for example in Bourdieu’s consideration of the cultural significance of the Berber House. See his ‘The Kabyle House’ in Douglas 1973, 98–110.

'storyworlds' as an embodied and spatialized social practice. Taylor McComas takes up the construction of empowered places in Purāṇic discourse. He suggests that we find in the Purāṇas a series of organising tropes of place that are designed to reinforce the authority and power of these texts for successive audiences. Travis Smith continues with Purāṇic sources and explores the narrative imagination of Vārāṇāsi in the context of succeeding theological and political dispensations. After a sequence of papers on Sanskrit sources, Naomi Appleton takes up the Pāli Jātakas. She analyses their recurrent focus on certain charged narrative locations and their enduring capacity to mediate between local and trans-local forms of religious experience. She suggests that the lack of explicit external referents in the Jātakas aids them in providing 'centrally legitimated relevance for each and all'. Appleton also considers historic and recent threats to this discursive capacity. Ulrike Roesler not only moves us across another linguistic boundary, this time to Tibetan sources, but she also moves us from textual studies to anthropology. Roesler takes up the adaptation of traditional modes of the textual empowerment of places of pilgrimage to the legitimisation of forms of religious institution (specifically the Tibetan Buddhist monastery) not normally subject to aggrandisement or empowerment in these terms. Max Deeg's paper completes the volume, both in terms of its movement from Persia to China and as a consequence of its broad theoretical reflections on the narrative construction of space and place in Sanskrit and Chinese sources. He presents an overview of differing orientations to the construction of place and attendant forms of cultural memory in South and East Asian pilgrimage literatures. In this way, the volume begins and ends with a series of theoretical reflections on the nature and function of literatures of place in Asia.

It is ironic that it has taken a combination of new currents of thought in the contemporary humanities and social sciences and a series of well wrought and compelling analyses of a wide variety of Asian textual sources to articulate an orientation to the idea of place in human society that is sensitive to, and capable of reconstructing in some small measure, the forms and functions of the 'imaginative life' of a given social group. In some ways this reconstitutes an older understanding of the discipline upon which, in one way or another, all the contributions of this volume are founded, that is to say, philology. Croce says of Vico's orientation to philology, for example:

By Philology Vico means not only the study of words and their history, but since words are bound up with the idea of things, he means also the history of things. Thus philologists should deal with war, peace, alliances, travels, commerce, customs, laws and coinage, geography and chronology, and every other subject connected with man's life on earth. Philology, in a word, in Vico's sense, which is also the true sense, embraces not only the history of language or literature, but also that of events, philosophy and politics (Croce 1913, 23).

It is hoped that this volume provides a small contribution to the ongoing refinement of such a new/old philology.

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