Dietrich Harth (Heidelberg)

Comprehending Literature in Terms of Intercultural Communication

The lively interest in intercultural communication today is obviously due to changes in culture itself. Not long ago literary history and literary criticism in a traditional sense were more or less confined to a concept of culture that stressed the idea of nationalism. And it is an intriguing fact that today this concept is losing its normative power at least for Western scholars working in the field of cultural research.

Since it is of some importance for my theme, I will give an inevitably partial and superficial account of the main shifts from the traditional to the new views. That is I have to deal at first, and in some length, with the concept of national culture. My second point will be to question the expectations and assumptions of a literary critic, whose readings are guided by the concept of intercultural communication. And finally an attempt will be made to apply a special thesis of mine to the readings of two literary examples which I consider suitable for the study of intratextual communication between different cultural world views.

I.

At the end of the 18th century, the idea of national culture identity was strongly associated with the growth of the modern national state. In a recent study Benedict Anderson has pointed out that nationalism as a cultural phenomenon was born in Western Europe mainly on the basis of intellectual acts - including political theory as well as the codification of national languages and literatures (Anderson: 67). The foundation of the disciplines of literary history in different European countries during the 19th century shows very well to what extent the hitherto unquestioned paradigmatic function of classical antiquity was waning. The modern societies with their competitive class-structures and nationalistic, i.e. middle-class interests were in need of a new legitimizing, identity-strengthening cultural basis. And modern philologies became the strongholds for national and eventually nationalistic education in universities and schools. A general aim of this movement was not to emulate communication but to draw sharp lines between their own and extraneous cultures, the latter being very often considered inferior in comparison with indigenous national standards.

But this is only one side of the coin. During the 19th and the early 20th century the idea of nationalism was exported with the help of a new wave of aggressive colonialism. To understand the impact of this on our present notion of inter-

cultural exchange we have to recall the early period of world-colonization in the 15th and 16th centuries. This colonization, pivoting about the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, spread the influence of European languages, customs, institutions etc. all over the non-European world. "Non-European" - the meaning of this expression gives a hint as to the one-sided evaluation of foreign cultures. However, the history of colonization was worse than that. I cannot say how many autonomous oversea cultures were violently obliterated by Europeans. But I think we have to take account of the fact that behind the current meaning of intercultural communication there is a fierce story of suppression and destruction.

During the 19th century the English version of the national community, together with a forceful Anglicization, spread throughout those countries which today are considered as the breeding grounds of what I would like to call the post-colonial New Literatures in English: Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. To point to an example, New Zealand finally was annexed by the British when the French rival turned up to lay hands on the island. But long before, in 1814, cultural colonization had begun - i.e. Anglicization - by the missionary work of Samuel Marsden and his followers. For half a century British soldiers fought down numerous uprisings of the natives who were deprived of their land, their natural rights and their indigenous culture. Since those days there is only one hegemonial culture in New Zealand: English.

By using this example I want to reemphasize in mind with that questioning the mediation of cultures is connected with, and even dependent upon, the history of European expansion and colonization. There is a large library of colonial literature especially in French and English: A literature comprising missionary texts, traveller's records, adventure-stories, novels. To mention some famous English authors: Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham. I dare say that this literature, which is representative of the European colonizer's penetrating and often enough arrogant attitude toward the extraneous, does not pay any attention to the question of intercultural communication. Colonial literature, therefore, is the best mirror for the self-portrait of the European who intends to strengthen his own identity by developing exotic views about non-European cultures.

Exotism is certainly of some importance for my question because it operates with projections and does not intend to understand what is beyond its own cultural horizon. If we therefore consider the meaning of cultural mediation within the framework of post-colonial English writing abroad we must not forget the colonial background. Remembering that, we may even doubt the sense of mediation, since

English culture and language have left no room for many alternatives during their forceful expansive process .

II.

My second point is concerned with the presuppositions that may guide a possible reading of literary texts as documents of cultural mediation. Looking at a literary work as a medium of, or vehicle for, cultural transfer certainly requires some theoretical decisions. Therefore I will briefly try to delineate some of the key-concepts underlying these decisions.

There are at least two very common types of approach to a literary work. The first conceives of the work as a medium whose aim it is to supply information for the reader. The second type instead concentrates on the features of the work itself, evaluating its form and structure in terms of aesthetic distinctions. The information-type considers the literary work as a source of knowledge, while the evaluation-type focuses on its aesthetic truth, which is beyond all intentional meaning or purposeful information.

When considering literature as a medium of cultural transfer it is beyond any doubt that such an approach belongs to the information-type because the reader wishes to learn something about the culture depicted in the chosen literary work. Of course, the reader knows that the reality presented in a work of art is not the same as the reality of real-life. Nevertheless, if he is interested in enhancing his knowledge, he may concentrate on the image of life, the expression of feelings and those symbolic contexts that form part of the cultural system which the particular work belongs to. It is indeed quite common to consider particular literary works as the true representations of the culture they belong to. The world of Oedipus, the world of Hamlet, the world of Don Quixote, the world of Faust - isn't each of those names like a brandmark applied to Greek, English, Spanish and German culture in the sense of a holistic view?

One important question, however, is: What are the reasons for speaking like this about the representational function of literature? Does it make sense to see in a single classical work an image that stands for the whole of a particular culture? If we compare literature with the representational functions of certain architectural signs in cross-cultural communication, we will have to say, yes. In mass-communication today there is a well established habit of using the picture of the castle of Neu-Schwanstein as a key to German culture; or think of the Eiffel Tower, the

Statue of Liberty, the Gate of Heavenly Peace[1] etc. It would not be too difficult to show the cultural specificities compressed within a single architectural sign, and I do not hesitate to include literature in this view.

So we can now say that there exists at least a third main approach to literature, which I would like to call the *imagotype* approach. This type mainly concentrates - as the examples above have shown - on the names and adventures of certain literary heroes. They are the key-figures to cultural identity and, if we unite them under a common roof, they may even represent the whole of European culture in contrast to other cultures beyond the border. Nevertheless, under the impact of modernization, the images which the classical heroes and stories bring forth account for the diversity within one cultural system because the latter bears the imprint of permanent change in our consciousness. This is why it does not make sense to consider cultural identity as a monolithic block. Culture systems are - even under the pressure of totalitarianism - fundamentally open systems. In modern societies, what depends very much upon the role of the literary *élites* is the extent to which frictions between different cultural ideas arise thus conducing to the shifting of common habits and values.

The analyst of culture - and I include the analyst of intercultural communication - has to be careful not to impose on the other culture an unreflected holistic view. And there is another pitfall that has to be avoided. Culture as a "web of significance" (Geertz: 5) is identical neither with the social nor with the personality system. It rather is, in the terms of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "a context, something within which [social events, personal convictions and behaviors, institutions or processes] can be intelligibly [...] described" (Geertz:14). And there is a third problem, if we read literature, in terms of the *imagotype* approach. Imaginative literature - even if canonized by the educated *élite* - belonging to one particular culture system never contains an image of the whole. It is just a thread in the whole "web of significance", and very often a fragment, the functions of which may disturb or transcend the biasses common within the system in question.

Thus one cannot restrict the study of culture to literature; neither is it enough to read a book of fiction and then trust in cultural mediation. We usually make our first acquaintance with some traces of a foreign culture by looking at signs - iconic or written. I should like to call this "making acquaintance by reading a code". But reading implies all those shortcomings which are typical ofone-sided communica-

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1 Jonathan D. Spence uses this sign in the title of his book on Chinese culture in the revolutionary period between 1895-1980 (Spence 1981).

tion. And when we try to understand the foreign text in the way our hermeneutic system has taught us, we cannot do more than study all the contexts that give us, if we are lucky, a more feeble certainty about the particular foundation and surroundings of the Other. But interaction and direct experience are still lacking and there is an infinite space left for uncontrollable projections. I am convinced that there is in that process, euphemistically called intercultural literary communication, much more unidirectional transfer on the part of the reader than real mediation between cultures.

Yet, there is no need to describe the process of literary communication only in negative terms. If we reduce our expectations as to the mediative effect and open our minds to the special aesthetic values of imaginative literature, there is still something more left than a vast playground for egomania or ethnocentric projections. Our own European concept of imaginative literature already implies a certain aesthetic semantic from which we cannot simply abstract. We just have to perceive other cultures through the looking-glass we have ourselves designed and constructed. And there is no pure and absolutely safe methodical control of unconsciously transferring one's own idiosyncrasy to the Other. By this remark, I do not wish to undermine, by sheer scepticism, the use of methodical readings. But the sentence "Try hard to understand!" is an ethical rather than a methodical maxim, and the colonial background involved has to be supplemented by the imperative: "Try hard to understand your own prejudices!"

Taking into account all these obstacles which handicap, or at least complicate, the conception of cultural mediation in the field of literary research, I propose to analyse the books I've chosen in terms of intercultural communication, the subject of which is nothing else but this type of communication itself. Admitting that a well-written novel plays with the conventions governing ordinary life and language, we may find out, by stressing the study of the proposed type of literature, that the various possible forms of cultural interchange are subjected to a critical reading that focusses on the intratextual mediation between different cultural values and views.

III.

To illustrate what I mean, I'll compare two novels telling the stories of Chinese families. Both novels were published in 1931, and had been written by authors participating in the views of different cultures but intending to import or to depict values and images of another culture.

The first is the novel *Family* (Jia) by the Chinese writer Ba Jin, born 1904 in Chengtu, Szechwan province, who in his twenties studied in Europe for a few years. His book is highly esteemed in China as a classical example of modern Chinese narrative writing. - The novel *Family* is to be compared with Pearl S. Buck's famous *The Good Earth*, a book awarded both the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize. Buck was born 1892 in the United States and went to China at an early age where her parents preached the Christian faith. Her novel is of special interest for our question, because, for decades, it formed the image of Chinese culture in the heads of Western readers.

Since I have to concentrate on the aspect of intratextual communication let me start with a short commentary of Ba Jin's *Family* (Jia): The novel forms part of a trilogy entitled *Turbulent Stream* (Jiliu) which tells of the decline of a large gentry-family - four generations living together with a great number of maid- and man-servants in a traditional urban compound. The story of the whole trilogy unfolds against the historical background of the years 1919-1923 (Mao: 88).

The first part entitled *Family* shows in some detail the rigid way of life in a family governed by Confucian norms with a stubborn grandfather at the top of the hierarchy, defending the orthodox code against a group of rebellious young family members. It is rather obvious that this family with its intrinsic conflicts is nothing else but a model of Chinese society in the turbulent years of revolutionary dissociation and civil wars. To this extent the novel represents a form of perception by analogy, deeply rooted in old Chinese traditions. These traditions prescribe a highly formalized communication style between family and members of society. The way of interaction is defined by kinship-relations and a patriarchal structure which excludes the modern concept of individual self-determination. The orthodox Confucian code, the so-called *Wulun*, comprises all relations inside and outside the family and subjects them to the following hierarchy: ruler - subject, father - son, elder brother - younger brother, man - wife. Ba Jin uses this as a score to arrange a realistic scenario of the old Chinese gentry (Kubin: 309).

But, no doubt, the narrator's point of view and partisanship are on the side of the rebellious young generation. And the ideas fostering the young generation's resistance against the Confucian norms are taken from Western thought, or, to be more precise, from Western literature introduced to the young generation through a progressive Chinese English-teacher and through the articles published in Chinese vernacular in the journal *New Youth*, a journal that provided the most im-

portant platform for the first national revolution, the May Fourth Movement, set off by students in Beijing in 1919.

The author, making use of Western literature, breaks with the traditional norms of constructing fictitious actors. His characters, for the first time in Chinese narrative literature, show the inner life of psychologically designed protagonists. I need not point out that the new technique is generally applied to the rebels and victims living under the Confucion dictate. The victims are especially those who, due to their birth and status, cannot participate in the intellectual debates among the young members of gentry. Their fate is to accept the imperatives of the Confucian code, to wear - as the novel says (Ba Jin: 17) - their every-day masks, or to extinguish theirselves by committing suicide.

> "I'm so lonely!", complains the most anarchic figure in the novel, "our home is like a desert, a narrow cage. [...] In our family, I can't even find anyone I can talk to" (Ba Jin: 84).

This complaint gives us a clue as to the means the author uses to show a way out.

Communication with other like-minded and loyal people, communication with oneself using the form of soliloquies or diary-entries, communication with a fictitious other - these are the possible ways to break the cage of tradition in the double sense of aesthetic and social norms. The way in which the narrator describes how two of the central characters experience their readings of Ibsen's *Nora* and Tolstoi's *Resurrection* is therefore of special interest for the question under consideration. In the first case, the reading girl recognizes herself when reading Nora's words: "I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are...".

She recognizes herself as a self-aware individual and comes to important conclusions: "She saw clearly", says the narrator, "that her desire was not hopeless, that it all depended on her own efforts" (Ba Jin: 27).

In the second case the young man is frightened by the mirroring effect of the protagonist in Tolstoi's *Resurrection*: "I was afraid", he notes in his diary, "that book might become a portrait of me, even so its hero's circumstances are very different from mine..." (Ba Jin: 84). The end of Ba Jin's novel eventually shows that the young Chinese has felt the truth: He, as the only member of the dissipating, but still resisting traditional gentry-family, like his fictitious Russian counterpart, leaves everything behind in the search for a completely new life. On the boat that carries him away he watches "the on-rushing river, the green water that never for

an instant halted its rapidly advancing flow" (Ba Jin: 320). This last sentence of the novel makes again use of a traditional Chinese emblem - water symbolizing the irresistable force of gradual change.

Pearl S.Buck's novel *The Good Earth* seems in many respects the exact opposite of Ba Jin's book. In the cosmic system of the Chinese world view the earth (in the sense of materia and principium) is in the centre of the five elements constituting the complex order of a microcosmos and macrocosmos: Wood - Fire - Earth - Metal - Water (Granet: 284). There are a number of correlation-rules in Chinese thinking that allow us to connect this order with the four directions of the compass, the seasons, the parts of the body, the cardinal social virtues etc. The resulting hierarchy of orders excludes a strict contradiction between nature and society as can also be seen in the manner in which Ba Jin depicts the garden as a place of longing and harmony.

Pearl S. Buck's story, however, clings to a typical Western world-view when suggesting that the decline of her Chinese family is caused by the movement from country to town. The title of her novel already alludes to its allegorical conception, the good Earth being the mythified subject of a good life, a life of intellectual simplicity, hard labour and moral soundness. For her protagonist, who could be considered as the very antagonist of Ba Jin's intellectual student-heroes, is a simple peasant. The novel relates his way of life in a straight and very detailed manner. It is a life shaped by industriousness and fertility inside and outside the house. And the narrator suggests that this life stays in continuity with the natural cycles until one day the family is compelled to leave the land by a long period of dryness and the entailed danger of starving . They go south to live in the "big city". And this is the very place of corruptness because, during the turmoils of a war sweeping the city, the peasant and his wife suddenly find themselves among looters, snatching away gold and jewels from other people. - When back on their land in the north, the peasant family uses the loot to lay the foundation for an economic advancement which finally enables them to move into the nearby town. Here they buy the compound of an impoverished gentry-clan and soon represent the same type of an extended family that is the target of Ba Jin's social critique.

Buck's endeavour to give an almost impartial narrative account of the foundation and advancement of a Chinese peasant family must not be underestimated. There are numerous traits of authenticity in the depiction of everyday life, and there is an at least honourable attempt to imitate a superficially understood Taoism. But the norms of Western culture and poetic composition are too strong

to be simply shed off. It cannot be denied that the good old biblical story of Man's Fall is stitched into this narrative web of significance, not to mention the allusions to the seven plagues and to "that old man in heaven" (Buck: 206f.), despite the peasant's worshipping of two little earthen figures which represent the local "gods of the fields" (20).

But one can taste not only that strong ferment of a postcolonial, albeit missionary, perhaps even puritan bias, when reading *The Good Earth*; there is also, at the depth of the discourse, a distinct discontent with Western civilization. The appraised form of life is not sought the strife for individual self-determination which unfolds within the process of verbal communication. Rather is it the silent physical movement of the labouring peasants that the novel describes in the manner of a liturgical and at the same time erotic act:

> Moving together in a perfect rhythm, without a word, hour after hour, he [Wang Lung] fell into a union with her [his wife] which took the pain from his labour. He had no articulate thought of anything; there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. [...] Each had his turn at this earth. They worked on, moving together - together producing the fruit of this earth - speechless in their movement together (Buck: 26).

It is the myth of the Earth that combines with a self-content natural lifecycle, which is obviously meant as an antidote to the progress of modernization, a process that encourages - at least in the eyes of the author - physical and moral corruption. But this myth has nothing to do with the traditional Chinese faith in physical reincarnation (Granet: 301). The myth of the Earth is a substitute for the moral and social responsibility of the individual, as the following citation may illustrate:

> As he [the protagonist Wang Lung] had been healed of his sickness of heart when he came from the southern city and comforted by the bitterness he had endured there, so now again Wang Lung was healed of his sickness of love by the good dark earth of his fields and he felt the moist soil on his feet and he smelled the earthy fragrance rising up out of the furrows he turned for the wheat (Buck: 162).

The peasant's "sickness of love" and entailed moral sin was caused by the desire - although he was married - to possess a concubine, whom he had met in a teahouse. What this means to his mythical bond with the Earth is symbolized by the name of the girl, whom he takes into his house against the will of his wife. She is called "Lotus", not an uncommon Chinese name. But within the context of the story the choice of this name reveals a meaning that goes back as far as Greek mythology - eating the seeds of Lotus, Ulysses' companions forgot their voyage

home. And something similar occurs to the Chinese peasant Wang Lung. The concubine Lotus is in the eyes of the narrator a forbidden fruit, that causes temporary oblivion as far as the good Earth is concerned.

IV.

There is more to be said about the impact of European ideas on Buck's image of China. But I have to come to an end and shall try some conclusions.

If we take communication seriously as a process of exchange between different cultural entities, neither of the two examples completely fits into this pattern of understanding. But anyhow, both represent - at least in my reading - different interesting ways of cultural mediation, if we understand the notion of mediation as an attempt to use alien cultural patterns on the basis of motives that are rooted in one's own culture. Behind Ba Jin's book there is an interest to enhance the traditional techniques of Chinese writing by using of Western techniques of novel-writing. Even the grammar of his Chinese language follows the elaborate syntactical code of English.[2] As this modern Chinese novelist could not rely on an indigenous set of examples, his book had to give birth to the first prototype of this Western genre.

Of course, he intended to do more than just to improve a technique of writing. The introduction of Western literature within the plot of his story documents that he was ready to accept certain values of Western culture as well, e.g. the idea of individuation, in order to set up a countermark against the petrified structures of his own culture. Western modernization did not terrify him. Rather the opposite is the case. Therefore I should like to call his book an attempt to mediate between Western and Chinese literature in the sense of functionalizing the alien for the purpose of enlightening his fellow-countrymen. No doubt, his aim was to construct a new society, equipping it with a national character that would fit into modern times.

The motives underlying Buck's novel for mediating Chinese and Western views are quite different. Her writing has nothing to do with a functionalizing operation. I am convinced that she used the plot techniques I tried to describe free from any doubts as to means and ends. Her interest was to criticize the alienation present within the Western ways of life, without even mentioning these ways. Only once in

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2 For this observation I am indebted to the sinologist Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (Heidelberg).

her novel does the figure of a Western woman turn up , but she is seen with the horrified eyes of her Chinese hero. And what he perceives is an exotic picture which assures him that he is a member of the Chinese collective.

Buck's novel, to me, exemplifies the projection of an ideal rural life, threatened by the ambition to live in luxury. The motive at the basis of this projection certainly results from an aversion against modern Western culture. I do not hesitate to call this an "exotistic" view. Even her attempt to tell the story from an internal point of view did not preclude the infiltration of typical Western patterns of perception into her style. To be honest, if she had followed the advice of Victor Segalen, the great French theoretician of comunicative exotism, who recommends to depict the incromprehensible in the alien culture, her novel would probably never have won the literary awards that provided its fame and success amongst Western readers. - Consider this: Ba Jin as a winner of the Nobel Prize. In fact, from time to time he was nominated so he is at least a candidate.

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