

On Locus and Narration: Revisiting Anthropological Agent A Taiwanese Catholic Village Case Study: Shuiwei Village

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To argue that culture is socially and historically constructed; that narrative is a primary, in humans perhaps the primary, mode of knowing; that we assemble the selves we live in out of materials lying about in the society around us and develop "a theory of mind" to comprehend the selves of others; that we act not directly on the world but on beliefs we hold about the world; that from birth on we are all active, impassioned "meaning makers" in search of plausible stories; and that "mind cannot in any sense be regarded as 'natural' or naked, with culture thought of as an add-on"—such a view amounts to rather more than a mid-course correction. (Clifford Geertz, 2000).

When there is a yanxi 演戲 traditional performance in Shuiwei, I will return you your money. This is one of the first sentences that I heard about Shuiwei village. Of course the meaning of this joke is that you will never return back the money, because in Shuiwei village there never are yanxi traditional performances.

As many (if not all) Taiwanese people know, this kind of performance is offered to thank the deities for a good gain, a vow that has to be released, an happy event which happened in the family and so on. Usually a “stage-truck”, a little or big truck which carries in its body a stage for performances, is parked in front of the temple or in front of the house which wants to offer the performance. Since the stage is positioned just in front of the temple's main door, and since these shows are followed by few spectators - if not by anyone - it is clear that the recipients, the real audience of these performances are the deities, and not the people.

The meaning of the joke mentioned at the beginning of this page must be found in the fact that Shuiwei village is for the most part inhabited by Presbyterians and Catholics people¹. Consequently, no such performances are offered to any deity. This little village is located in the northern part of Lunbei Township 崙背鄉, just south of the Zhoushui Stream 濁水溪 that marks the border between the

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1 In Shuiwei there is a strong presence of Catholics and Presbyterians believers. I prefer to refer to them using the specific terms Catholic and Presbyterian. When I will use the term Christian, I will refer to both Churches.

counties of Zhanghua 彰化 and Yunlin 雲林.

In this paper I would like to demonstrate that this village has taken a special meaning for the people of Lunbei Township, and I'll try to analyze how this place became so different and at the same time so meaningful.

I. FIELDWORK PLACE

1. Lunbei Township: a Simple Presentation

Lunbei is a countryside township in the Taiwanese province of Yunlin. The township sits at the southern part of the Zhuoshui Stream, which marks the border between the counties of Zhanghua and Yunlin. In its shape, the township in some ways resembles Italy: it looks like a rain boot.

The area is generally flat, the highest spot being 21 m and the lowest spot 7 m above sea level. This kind of situation favors farming and more characteristic agricultural products are watermelon and cantaloupe. Thanks to the assistance of the Farmers' Association, cantaloupe has become a specialized product in Lunbei. The growing area of cantaloupe is concentrated in the three villages: Luocuo 羅厝村, Aquaen 阿權村 and Fengrong 豐榮村.

In 1973 the government started to improve economic construction in agricultural villages and effectively used labor force in villages to set up a dairy area in Lunbei. By August 1984, the number of dairy farmers and the scale of dairy farms had greatly increased. In order to improve production costs, dairy farmers have cooperated.

By 2002, the Township had 58 dairy farms counting about 10,000 cows and the annual production capacity of milk was of several tons. With an annual production value of approximately NT\$500 million to NT\$600 million, dairy is really an important industry in the township.

There are fourteen villages in Lunbei Township, and for statistical purposes we should mention that in the all territory of Lunbei township there are 8,309 households with a total population of 27,471.

Here are some statistical data (Yunlin City Government 2011):

Villages	Neighbourhood	Household	Male	Female	Total
Dayou	23	642	1,118090	882	1,972

Wukuai	11	323	571	515	1,086
Shuiwei	14	458	806	729	1,535
Xirong	14	572	922	898	1,820
Fangnan	10	299	539	478	1,017
Dongming	19	505	821	777	1,528
Aquen	20	755	1,398	1,188	2,586
Nanyang	21	903	1,486	1,355	2,841
Zaohu	14	516	1,007	857	1,864
Lunqian	18	864	1,326	1,218	2,544
Gangwei	15	510	903	810	1,713
Jiuzhuang	14	432	777	730	1,507
Fengrong	24	740	1,224	1,083	2,307
Luocuo	23	798	1,355	1,262	2,617
Total	240	8,317	14,225	12,782	27,007

Except for the above mentioned economic resources, the social composition of Lunbei is also worth being highlighted; the great concentration in this little township of many different particular features makes Lunbei a very interesting and particular place. Different religions (Taiwanese folk religion, Presbyterian and other Protestant Churches, Catholic, Buddhist, Yiguandao), different ethnic groups (Minnan, Zhaoan Hakka, Mainland Chinese, Southeast Asia people) and different political orientations inhabit the same place. On the other hand, we can see how these religious and ethnic differences disappear if we look at this situation from an economic point of view. Intensive agriculture is the most important economic way of subsistence. Sharing agricultural machineries, products or physical labor, is a common practice among farmers in Lunbei (as in other townships of the Taiwanese countryside). This “mutual help” promotes contact between persons and families, helping in this way mutual knowledge and respect.

It is inside the above mentioned background that we must read the situation of the Catholic Church in Lunbei and in particular the situation of the village of Shuiwei.

2. *Shuiwei Village*

Shuiwei village is a little village located in the northern part of Lunbei Township, just south of the Zhuoshui Stream (that, as we mentioned above, marks the border between the counties of Zhanghua and Yunlin).

Shuiwei village has been the first village in Lunbei which embraced the Christian religion and, until now, the majority of Presbyterians and Catholics still live in this village, where there are two important familiar groups: Zhong 鍾 and Li 李 (Liao 2005).

The arrival of the Christian faith in Shuiwei is a very interesting topic. Around the year 1898, three brothers of the Zhong family were the bosses of the local criminal community. They exercised their power also in places ten or more kilometers from Shuiwei, like Erlun 二崙鄉 or Xiluo 西螺鎮. At that time a Presbyterian Church was founded in Xiluo. The Pastor of the Church was a missionary from England, who owned a bicycle which he used to pay visits to the faithful. At the time there were only a few bicycles in the whole community, and therefore, having a bicycle was considered as a status symbol. The older of the three brothers and chief of the local mafia (*dage* 大哥) was very curious about this bicycle, which in Chinese is called “Iron Horse” (*tiema* 鐵馬), and he decided to go ride “a horse that doesn't eat grass”. Because of his inexperience he fell down several times. At this point the missionary jumped on the bicycle and rode on it, arousing the admiration of Mr. Zhong. After that time, whenever Mr. Zhong went to Xiluo to collect his protection money, he tried to ride the missionary's bicycle, and while resting, he started listening to the sermons of the Pastor. Unexpectedly he became more and more interested in the Christian faith, being particularly touched by the Gospel sentence “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” (John 14,27). Meditating on this sentence he realized that, the lacking think in his life was just this peace, his kind of life being very hard and dangerous. Thereupon he communicated his choice to his brothers. One of them – Mr. Zhong Qin 鍾欽老先生 — agreed with him, and also received baptism, while the third brother on the other hand continued his previous kind of life. In order to show their faith, the people in Shuiwei built a church that was also used as a place to dry the rice. However, on a day the two families – the old brother and Mr. Zhong Qin - started

to quarrel and entered in conflict because each family wanted to put rice inside the church earlier than the other. The relationship between the two families became more and more tense, and when a Catholic medicine's seller arrived in the village starting to preach out his Catholic faith while he was selling his medicaments, Mr. Zhong Qin, decided to convert himself and his family to the Catholic faith. His grand-grandson is the actual Bishop of the dioceses of Jiayi 嘉義.

From what I have mentioned above, it is clear that the Catholic Faith was embraced by Zhong Qin without the help of any missionaries, who settled permanently in Shuiwei only many years later, after the end of the Second World War. Because this change of faith, the relationship between the different Zhong family groups became cooler in a certain sense: Catholic people were forbidden to participate in the traditional ancestral ceremonies at the family temple and were also forbidden to marry with non Catholic people. Because of this many Catholics in Shuiwei, with the help of the missionaries, married women from other Catholic villages. This situation continued at least until two generations ago.

3. Present-day Situation

The present situation, after one hundred years and more than five generations, is that the two-thirds of the Shuiwei village are involved in the Christian (one third Protestant and one third Catholic) faith. After the Second World War missionaries from Mainland China arrived in Lunbei and started to build a Church and a little community begun to grow. Few years ago the, Parish priest of Lunbei was also charged to take care of the Shuiwei Church, celebrating the holy Mass there, but because he started to become too old and because his health progressively got worse, the bishop decided to reunify the two Parishes, therefore at the present moment the Holy Mass is celebrated in Lunbei, while the Shuiwei church is used as catechism class for the children or as study group class. Moreover every day at 8 pm many of the old people of Shuiwei go to the church in order to pray the Holy rosary.

Besides Shuiwei village, Christianity is also well represented in the other villages of Lunbei Township. The Catholic and the Presbyterian churches are both situated on the village of 南陽 Nanyang, and on the main roads of Lunbei it is very common to find stores with names unequivocally belonging to the Christian tradition (Agape, Sacred Heart, Charity). Pharmacies, dental clinic, private hospitals, agricultural products' store, in all these stores people can find images of Holy Mary, sentences from the Holy Bible, crucifixes and so on. It is important to say that now all the faithful from Shuiwei and Lunbei attend the same Mass which is performed in Lunbei.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, a very important role was played by the Catholic priest (a Taiwanese one), who was often called in by the township government and also called in by temples because of coffee making ability, or because was member of the Yunlin County Bird Association. One year after our arrival, he left Lunbei and went to take care of another Parish, and the priest of Xiluo started to take care of the Lunbei Parish.

The result of this interaction between Christian believers and society, is that in contrast with many other places in Taiwan, the Christian faith is not only well accepted, but also well-known in Lunbei. What I mean is that it is very common for people in Lunbei to have a Christian workmate or classmate. In my view this is very important, because, living in this kind of environment, people in Lunbei starts to relate to the Christian religion as a local religion rather than a foreign element.

This particular situation is, and in my view this is very important, that the recognition by the Lunbei people of the “indigeno-ization” of the Catholic Church lets Catholic people reinforce their Catholic identity, and consequently lets religion become one of the most important requirements - if not the most important - in order to define personal and communitarian identity.

II. ON LOCUS AND NARRATION

In order to explain in an exhaustive way my argument, I have to fix two basic concepts deeply linked with my reasoning: the concept of *Locus* and the concept of *Narration*.

1. On *Locus*

Traditionally a *locus* could be considerate as the place where something is situated or occurs, as well as a center of activity, attention, or concentration. Giving some examples we can say that in democracy the *locus* of power is in the people, or that a certain area became a *locus* of resistance to the government (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

According to these words, we can consider *locus* as a space, which can be a physical space, like a street, a house, a square, a room, as well as a symbolic space like the above mentioned *locus* of power, Internet, the web, and so on. In my view this formal division is in some ways misleading, because as such made by man, also a physical spaces could be considerate ultimately as a symbolic spaces. Clearly all these affirmations bring with them many insights and meanings which worth a further discussion.

In his book “Body and Space, Comments on Art, Sculpture and Space”², the German philosopher

2 I will refer to the Italian version of this book.

Martin Heidegger arises the question: what is space? (Heidegger 2000: 31). The answer that Heidegger tries to extrapolate from a previous analysis of Aristotle definition of space is in some ways shattering cause its profundity of thought: Man is the space where the space itself becomes aware of its unjustified existence³.

Man doesn't create space, the space is not even a subjective way of intuition, and it is not even anything objective as an object. Rather, the space in order to make space as space needs man. This mysterious relationship, which not only concerns the relation between man and space and time, concerns the relations between the Being and man (event). (Heidegger 2000: 37)⁴

Therefore we can say that there are no spaces, and consequentially, there are no *loci* without man. And this could be considerate as true because the power of abstraction, the power to symbolize the external (and internal) reality, which is a specific prerogative of human being. In other words, and summarizing, we can say that space exists only because man exists, and more important, because man is a "symbolic animal".

That man is a "symbolic animal", a being able to create and leaded by symbols, has been already affirmed by Ernst Cassirer⁵ (1944). According to this German philosopher, the difference between propositional language and emotional language is the threshold between human and animal world: both have practical imagination, but the symbolic one is unique feature of human being. The primary characteristic of man, even before his tendency to create social aggregations, is expressed by his symbolic ability. Cassirer considers this characteristic as manifested in the emotional language, in the ability to communicate through an articulation of significant symbols. The appearance of the symbolic system transforms the existential situation of Man. He lives in a "different" dimension of reality. Throughout his symbolic capacity, he goes over the limits of organic life.

Man no longer lives in a universe only physical, but in a symbolic universe. [...] Man is no longer directly in front of reality; so to speak, he can no longer see it face to face. Physical reality seems to recede as the Man symbolic activity advances. (Cassirer 1944: 80) ⁶

In other words man can receive and - more important - interpret reality only throughout symbols, only in a symbolic way.

3 See also M. Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics. I will refer to the Italian version of this book. See especially page 54 ff.

4 My translation

5 E. Cassirer, An Essay on Man. 1944. I will refer to the Italian version of this book.

6 My translation

Now, what kind of influence can have the concepts mentioned above, on the contingent situation of Shuiwei village? Or better, how these concepts have influenced my fieldwork as well as my way of reading and interpret the data collected in the field? According to the situation in Shuiwei village, it is of course the presence of particular people – people whose life does not seem to be governed and subjugated to the various taboos that very often clearly affect the lives of other people - and especially their interactions – inside and outside the boundaries of the village - which attaches importance and meaning to this *locus*. But at the same time it is anyway true that this *locus* assume a particular and charismatic reputation and influence to people who live inside and outside them. This happens because, as we mentioned in the first part of this paragraph, the perception of a space – of a *locus* in fact – occurs only through symbolic processes. These symbolic processes are those by which we interpret the many activities of persons who, just because their activities and interactions create a specific space, and give to it a specific symbolic valence. Because we are able to perceive and to interpret these particular symbolic values only putting them inside a specific – and as we will see, personal – world (Eco, 2008), it follows that the first things (or symbols) that will strike our perception are the newer ones, the unexpected ones, or in other words, those which are outside of our “world”.

It is this feeling of diversity, particularity or even mystery that assign to a *locus* a particular power that we can call the power of agency. I will show, on the next pages, few examples of it.

2. *Stories of Shuiwei*

Mister Yang is the president of a cultural association in Lunbei. He is very involved in trying to preserve the local custom and especially the local Hakka language. I and my wife, especially during the first phase of our fieldwork, were often invited to take part to the activity of his association. One night, after an activity, we started to drink tea and talking about our life and our studies. There are not many things that can help an anthropologist in Taiwan more than a relaxing conversation in front a cup of good tea on a summer' nights. The weather, usually very hot and humid, lets people – at least in the countryside – sit down together outside the house, searching for a pleasant breeze. At this moment it seems that there are no fences between persons and everybody enjoys the conversation.

That night the topic of the conversation was the village of Shuiwei and its interesting peculiarity. As Mister Zhong told me, “that village is very different from our places, there is no temple and when the Taiping Mazu 太平媽祖, the Mazu of the Fuxing Temple 福興宮 in Xiluo, arrives in Shuiwei, they started to run in order to leave that place as quickly as possible”. This decision is taken on the fact that nobody goes on the road to welcome the goddess, therefore the persons who have the charge of

carrying the statue of Mazu, “*Juede hen buhaoyisi* 覺得很不好意思 felt this situation very embarrassing for her”.

Actually I have been a witness of this event, and I can testify that there were only two people on the road when Mazu came across the main road of Shuiwei: I and my son. Arriving in Shuiwei people who were carrying the traditional flags, the statues of the deities and so on, jumped on the truck to leave this place in a hurry.

Mister Yang also told me a very interesting history about the Shuiwei village. As he told me, he has been a pig farmer for a certain time. As everyone knows, the hoof of the pig is formed of four parts, but occasionally it may happen that a fifth "finger" shows up into the pig's paw. Mr. Yang told me that this situation is difficult to resolve: the fact that the pig has five fingers instead of four places the pork, because of the belief in the cycle of reincarnation, in an intermediate state between men and pig. He is not a man, but certainly can no longer be regarded as a pig. In other words, it is not yet completely purified to be reborn as a man, but for the fact that it has five fingers, it is reborn in a higher level than that of the pig. The difficulty is how to solve this problem. As mister Yang told me, most of the farmers who encounter this problem tend to set the pig free, which will have to find a way to survive on its own. But for the people of Lunbei there may be another solution. Mister Yang sought advice from another pig farmer in the area, and he told him to give the pig to the people of Shuiwei, because “they do not believe in these things, when I encounter these problems, I always give them the pig”. And so did Mr. Yang, bringing the pork to a Christian pig farmer. And when he brought the pork he asked to this Christian farmer how he will solve the problem. The answer of the Christian farmer it was “I will cut off the fifth finger and then go sell it”.

Fengrong is a Catholic believer who works around Lunbei as plumber. Because of his job – and his sunny character - , he is very well known in all Lunbei Township. He worked on the construction of many temples of Lunbei; therefore he knows some aspects of the Taiwanese folk religion. He told me that after the completion of the construction of a temple, it is necessary to have a big ritual in order to open it. One of the parts of this ritual requires to burn some sticks of incense inside the big incense burner located inside the temple, and usually dedicated to Tian Gong 天宮(the lord of heaven),in this way when the door will be open, incense sticks – that symbolize the presence of the god – are already burning inside the temple. During the opening ceremony of a temple where he had worked, Fengrong told me that people of the temple met a very serious problem. Since the lives of Taiwanese people are linked to various taboos and elaborate geomantic calculations – that affect the proper name, orientation,

and many other aspects -, it is considerate very important to calculate who, in a determinate moment, in a determinate place, can or cannot do certain things. For example, in certain days people cannot marry, buy or sell things, cannot go out and so on. That day, people of the temple, throughout geomantic calculations and after asking to the deities, decided that a certain time was the right time in order to open the temple doors, but the problem was that in that precise time, no people were able to go into the temple, because cause these geomantic calculation and their belonging to one of the twelve terrestrial branches – the Chinese zodiac – which in that particular moment could not enter in the temple without causing misfortune to the person and to the temple, nobody was allowed to enter in the temple in order to burn incense sticks.

Looking at this situation, even if he is a Catholic believer, Fengrong decided to help these people. He said: “no problem, just give me the incense sticks, I’ll go inside and I’ll put them in the incense burner”. The first thing that people asked him was: “to what birth sign do you belong?” and Fengrong: “Monkey”. At this point, since monkey was one of the interdicted signs, people were agreeing on don’t let him go inside the temple, but Fengrong replied: “no problem, I am a Catholic believer, therefore I absolutely don’t care about these things, if you want I can help you”. Finally Fengrong entered inside the temple and burned the incense sticks inside the incense burner, thus allowing the ritual to continue.

What I try to show with these experiences is that people who live outside Shuiwei acknowledge that this place is “different”. Mister Zhong as well as Mister Yang knows very well that Shuiwei is a particular place and that people who live there are not subjected to the many taboos and prescriptions that model the behavior of their life. It seems to me that it is this awareness of the differences, and above all the narrations of these differences that contribute to create this special agency linked with this particular place. Living inside a symbolic world, and being a man able to see and interpret reality only in symbolic terms, it is clear that the differences of behavior are interpreted - using Foucault's concept - in an epistemic way. This happens because cultures, peoples or ethnic groups are not clusters of identity defined by the boundaries of consensus, but variety of participation in a collective life. With a further analysis we can see how this difference is delineated by the encounter with this kind of above mentioned experiences as well as the personal encounter with people who live inside the village.

3. On Narration: Telling Stories Makes the World

These stories lead us to the second point of my theoretical outlines, the concept of *Narration*. Many cognitive psychologists argue that an essential cognitive activity of human thought it is to narrate and to narrate it means to re-weave the events of our life in a time line and in a logical sequence that is, telling stories. If we have a look at the work “Acts of Meaning” of Jerome Bruner (1990), we can see how the author proposes a fresh approach to psychology that retrieves and places at the center of analysis, “a science of mind based on the concept of meaning and processes by which meanings are created and traded within a community”. The revolution lies in the proposal to shift the focus from the concept of “information processing”, which became prevalent in those days (we are speaking about early nineties), to the “construction of meaning”. In doing so, Bruner turns to the so-called “folk psychology” or “common sense” and leaves us some critical reflections on the narrative and the role of narrative in our daily lives.

Folk psychology [is] narrative in nature rather than logical or categorical. Folk psychology is about human agents doing things on the basis of their beliefs and desires, striving for goals, meeting obstacles which they best or which best them, all of this extended over time (Bruner 1990: 42-43).

Bruner observes how in everyday experience narrative is an omnipresent activity, which serves several functions: coding experience intra-and inter-personal, negotiating our explanations, supporting mutual rhetorical performance, and so on. The popular or daily narrative then serves the very important task of maintaining order, incorporating the dissimilar and the extraordinary on a shared background. Many of the popular narratives are stories of transgressions, they do not tell how things are but as they should be, and they do this incorporating into a fabric of common references facts that otherwise would be exceptional.

It is a view now universally recognized, but in my opinion is a partial view. Before you start telling a story, in fact, all of us – spontaneous writers or experts – we have already figured the world in which the story takes place (Eco 1990). The first act that human thought does attempt in order to re-order and give meaning to the reality, it is not telling stories but actually build and re-construct the worlds in which those personal and/or fictitious stories will find their environment and will be structured. We simply, all the time, manipulate the world around us according to narrative criteria, in order to orient, adapt and defend ourselves against it.

At this point after demonstrating that build narrative worlds, both in life and in fiction, is an activity that is so congenial and so important for human being, we need a further step: we must to enter into the minefield of definitions. What is, finally, a narrative world? What defines it, exactly? What do

we do when, both in daily life as well as writing the screenplay for a movie, we reorganize the narrative material (existential or fictional) in order to create the world of our history?

The first thing we do, we have already said, is to select for create a order. But, one might ask, an order of what? I think that we can answer to this question in this way: an order of existing. According to Seymour Chatman (1990), these existing, within the narratology area⁷, are the characters and environments of a story. Therefore we can try to give a first definition: a narrative world is a order of existence, a set of related characters and environments in order to create a coherent and button unity, a delicate and complex organism, an entity with a recognizable structure yet capable of evolving.

I am aware that this definition is not enough in order to explain myself. Therefore it is necessary another further step. Or at least it is necessary to indicate the direction in which this step will be accomplished. In other words, we have to make clear what are the tools, within the infinity of all possible representations, which allow us to reconstruct (even unconsciously) which order of existence it is more useful, more reassuring and more enjoyable?

According to the Italian anthropologist Carlo Tullio Altan (1995) if we consider the Ethnos, non as a merely “physical” identity , but as a “complex symbolic whole seen as constitutive of identity of a people and as social aggregation, the key elements that characterize it will be easily recognized”. Therefore he selects five elements, or maybe will be more correct say dimensions, that as we will see interact in order to form a narrative world. These five elements may be thought as a sieve to which we continuously pass the reality to make one of the more important “alchemical” transformations for our survival: the reduction of magmatic chaos in which we are immersed in the image of a world endowed with sense and stability.

These five elements are: Epos, Ethos, Logos, Genos and Topos. Clearly, as constitutive elements of Ethnicity, they have different meaning. Therefore the Epos is considerate by Altan as a symbolic transfiguration of historical memory, the Ethos as a sacralization of rules and institutions of origin both religious and civil. Logos, which is realized through social communication, the Genos, as symbolic transfiguration of a family relationship, and the Topos as a symbolic image of the mother country and the territory. These components, in part made by natural and physical elements, but above all made by cultural elements and by a “early symbolization”of them.

I will base my analysis on these five elements mentioned by Altan, but I will add a further element, Chronos the time, in order to make a more complete presentation of what I mean when I said that the main activity of man is to create narrative world.

⁷ Please refer to Todorov, 1969.

Topos, from the Greek place, is the territory, the space. Synthesizing we can say that Topos is the place where the story takes place. Refers to the external environment may indicate the different sites (natural or artificial) in which the events are set. This point could be easily linked with the above mentioned concept of *locus*, and since these concepts share many common points, I will not spend much time in order to describe it.

Therefore, we can continue our discourse taking in consideration the second point: Epos, the “historical memory”. A group of people remember their past by looking at its positive aspects, as something that gives not only prestige, but also a sense of dignity and belonging, they look at it as something that deserves to be experienced as such. It thus becomes the Epos, in which a people can recognize and ennobling – or complaining about - itself. Altan took some notable examples of this way of representing the past as a value. The Homeric epic fits into this theme, as well as the content of the biblical text, which project - in a divine dimension and transcendent nature - the function and history of the people of Israel. This reality then necessarily belongs to any ethnic identity.

In addition to this, what is taken as a value is also a way to live by the rules and institutions of a certain social group, these institutions too are transfigured in values which are taken as something that gives meaning to public life. These values give to the collective life the coordinates and a sense of belonging to something noble, to something that is not only necessary to live, but help people to live according to certain rules and to very basic value. Calling it with a synthetic term we can use the word the Ethos.

In order to introduce the next point, I have to resort to a quote from an ancient text, which in fact I already mentioned before, the Bible. In the biblical text we read in Genesis 11, 6:

If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do. Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says.

Here the dimension of language is associated with the value of language, throughout language people can communicate, can act together, cause of this Yahweh, jealous of the attempt made by the people to build a pyramid at the top of the sky, and produces the confusion of languages. In this way Yahweh dissolve the unity of people, because cause this unity people were able to contend with His transcendent power. Concluding we must include the Logos, with its importance, in this group of symbols.

Besides this, another very important element is the feeling of belonging to an ancestral lineage, the

Genos. To belong to the same ancestors it means to be connected, through a sequence of generations, to a non-temporal dimension, a dimension that some Australian tribes denote with the term “Alchera”, “the timeless time”, the “time of eternity”, and the “time of mothers” (Turpin, 2004). To descent from the summit of this timeless existence, and then in a certain sense, from eternity, gives to the continuity of the people a sense of belonging to a lineage, an ancestral lineage. Ancestral lineage that is the base of a system of kinship, of lineage, on which tribes are structured and show out a way of being and living together, focused on this principle, on this link, on this being part of a stock, that dates back to a very old period.

Last but not least, I am introducing a new element to those proposed by Altan: Chronos, the time. Chronos is the element that embodies and gives a specific rhythm to all the narration. Here, we have to make a distinction between the time of narration, that usually is a precise and free choice made by the narrator⁸ – he is always in a specific temporal position relative to the story he/she is telling – and the narrative time, that corresponds with the time of the story and gives a meaning to the plot of the story. According to Ricoeur (1985), when we tell stories we start at a definite spot, a point of reference that will contribute to the wholeness of the narrative, so that we can communicate an acceptable conclusion: an ending that is neither present in time nor coordinating within it. Characters, the principal players in the plot operate within this conception of time:

(...) the heroes of stories reckon with time. They have or do not have time for this or that. Their time can be gained or lost. It is true to say that we measure this time of the story because we count it and that we count it because we reckon it. The time of the story retains this reckoning at the threshold of measurement (Mitchell 2004: 171).

The true measurement of time, the passing of day and night, is divisible from the actions of characters within a story. The characters are not responding to the passage of time but rather to the events that take place within the plot. Time is represented through the action of events. However, for Ricoeur this displacement of time is not altogether hopeless. He suggests that the intrinsic power of narrative, and its representation of time, is to place the narrated time within the hands of the public. This is because of two factors: the characters in a story correspond to a community, and because

⁸ Genette (1980), describes four kinds of narration:

1. Subsequent narration: This is the most common temporal position. The narrator tells what happened in some past time.
2. Prior narration: The narrator tells what is going to happen at some future time. This kind of narration often takes the form of a dream or prophecy.
3. Simultaneous narration: The narrator tells his/her story at the very moment it occurs.
4. Interpolated narration: This complex type of narration combines prior and simultaneous narration. For example, a narrator tells what he experienced during the day (after the fact), and also includes his current impressions about these events.

the narrating of a story places itself within a public sphere. The characters of a story, are the representation of a society, thus the time that inhabits the story corresponds to the conceptions of the public. This both informs the public of the particularities of time, and exposes them to a kind of causation, which is alternatively neither false nor necessary.

Therefore, according to Ricoeur words, there are deep and strong links between a story and the public sphere, the community to which this story is told. Starting from this concept, I would like to stress out that telling stories helps to create symbols – creating new ones or investing the old with new meaning - linked with a particular *locus*. Moreover, as I already tried to demonstrate, if the *locus* itself is only a symbolic cluster, it follows that the construction of a specific locus can be attributed to this making and sharing stories as well as the intentional actions of thinking agents. Mister Zhong, Mister Yang, were not only telling something about Shuiwei, but also they were building Shuiwei as *Locus*, as well as Fengrong, who – being a resident of Shuiwei village – was (and he still be) one of the main protagonist of the many stories about Shuiwei village circulating in Lunbei.

III. ON AGENCY

1. Narrative World as Agent

Locus and Narration are therefore not only deeply linked; both exist only in relation with the other, as well as the stories only exist inside the relationship between the individual and the community. Since they are indispensable to each other, it is difficult to find or to draw a precise and net boundary between these entities. We must therefore consider all these entities as a whole, and both refer to the six points mentioned above in order to ensure that our analysis will be most extensive, and at the same time, more accurate as possible. In this way – and according to my experience, only in this way – we are able to understand how it means the sentence that I heard so many times in Lunbei: Shuiwei is a different place.

It is different because people who inhabit it live according different taboos, different traditions, and different way to solve their problems. In other words they lived in a different Topos, sharing a different Epos that creates different Ethos, they use a different Logos, belong to different Genos, according to a different KKChronos. It is clear that these six point are not completely different from those belonging to the people of Lunbei; Catholic and Protestant farmers are use to go to the same agricultural products store, take tea, play card and chatting with non Christian farmers, they share the same education system, watch the same television programs, after all they share many of their experiences - of the symbols - with non Christians. For this reason we can assert that many times these six points are

overlapped, but on further investigation we can say that they diverge in a very important way, creating in this way different experiences, different ways to interpret reality and above all different existents which make a specific narrative world.

Still following my reasoning we can assert that it is this special narrative world that gives to this *locus* the power of agency. Let's see how it is possible.

2. *Agent as a Person*

It is quite common in the anthropological world – but also in certain philosophical discourse - to discuss and to consider an agent as always a person who is acting, or has acted, or is contemplating action. It follows that an agent must be free and responsible, with a certain maturity, rationality, and sensitivity, which normal adult human beings are taken to have.

This condition of the anthropological agent can be read very clearly in many and important works of distinguished anthropologist. I will cite just the works of Marshal Sahlins (1985, 1995) or the works of the Comaroff spouse (1985, 1991, 1997). Methodologically these authors tend to frame the concept of agent inside a contact of cultures context. This can be understood if we consider the agent as a person (or more persons) who voluntarily acts to achieve a specific goal. In other words, in anthropological terms, the agent with his appearance and his agency power is able to change – or at least challenging - the cultural structure creating in this way what we call history, as happened with the arrival of Captain Cook for the inhabitants of Hawaii (Sahlins 1985, 1995). The works of Comaroff spouse describes the history of the contact between colonial evangelism and the Southern Tswana in South Africa. With their very detailed and impressive work they show out how the encounter between colonial missions and local traditions creates new cultural practices, new patterns of production and consumption, new ideas of style and beauty, as well as new forms of class distinction and ethnicity.

We can say that they created a new approach, a dialectic one, to the study of colonial encounter. Colonialism is considerate as a complex system of determinations, and not a one sided relationship between colonialist power and local people. According to them, only this dialectical approach and way of study could let us understand actual situation in these ex-colonial countries.

Here's we can find a more open approach in which all the participants in this “dialogue” could be considerate as agent, because all of them – doesn't matter if considerate as subject or object - actively contribute to build new cultural practices, or using other words, a new cultural environment.

In recent years, some scholars such as Alfred Gell (1998), speaking about art objects, and Bruno Latour (2005) speaking about social network theories, asserted that also objects can be considerate as

agent, at least upon particular situations. More specifically Alfred Gell makes a distinction between primary – human beings - and secondary – objects – agents, while Latour introduces the term “actant” in order to overcome the concept of agent intended only as conscious being. His definition of “actant” covers any things by which our world is made. Their intimate feature is the ability to do actions, therefore both people and material objects as statements, inscriptions (anything written), technical artifacts, concepts, organizations, professions, skills, money and so on, could be considerate “actant”. According to him

No actant is so weak that it cannot enlist another. Then the two join together and become one for a third actant, which they can therefore move more easily. An eddy is formed, and it grows by becoming many others. (Latour 1988: 159)

The implication of this sentence is that every “actant” is connected with, depending on, influencing, and strengthening the position of every other, creating in this way an actant-network.

3. Anthropological Agent: Another Key to the Reading

It seems to me that till this moment nobody has considered local context as agent, or, at least, this definition of agent doesn't enter yet inside the “core” of the anthropological discourse. In order to define and explain what I mean with local context, I must to make some preliminary remarks. The topic of my research is a contact between cultures. This kind of situation has been studied by many distinguished scholars (as the above mentioned Sahlins and Comaroff for example) but I found the method proposed by Nicolas Standaert (2009) more appropriated in order to analyze the situation that I met during my fieldwork. In his work about cultural exchange between China and Europe in the seventeenth-century China, Standaert point out that

[Missionaries arriving in China] created a space of interaction that led to the reframing of that space wherein traditional actions and ideas are reconceived. Thus the focus is neither on the transmitter [*agent*] nor on the receiver [*structure*]. The starting point is on the interstices, on what is “in between” (...). Methodologically, therefore, there is a shift from the search for the other to the search for the space of interaction (Standaert 2009: 214-215) (Italics Added.).

This space can be physical, like a Church, it can be a moving space, such as a funeral procession, and can be a narrative space. It is this place, made by the symbolic activities of man that become a *locus*, therefore language, texts, images, songs, rituals and at last but not least every person (who was in contact with the new cultural tradition) everyday life could be considerate as existents, as subjects full of intention able to build a narrative world.

In the same context, contacts between China and Catholic Church, also Losada (2001) pointed out the importance of the place where the evangelization process has been carried out:

“The missionaries who arrived in China to import a foreign cosmology and ritual system spent enormous of time and money constructing buildings. Once a space becomes a place, it is animated by the experiences of the people who use it; like commodities, places develop a social life through both mundane and spectacular social exchanges. Buildings like the churches built by the French and American Catholic missionaries accrete stories grounded in local experiences and meaning”. (Losada 2001: 86) *And again*: “the stories are kept alive because they tell the people of L.R. who they are – not primarily in relation to the state, but in relation to each other. It is their shared memory, especially of the Catholic faith held by their ancestors and themselves, that makes a community like Little Rome a coherent social unit (Losada 2001:87) (Italics Added.).

Also in these words of Losada we can see how in this particular encounter between Chinese people and Catholic faith, space becomes a place, animated by the presence and by the experiences of people who use it. In other words we can say that social exchanges let that place develop its social life.

To hark back this conversation to my fieldwork place, Shuiwei Village, I think that the method proposed by Standaert is very useful and that it will open lots of theoretical experiments. Considering the encounter as a space, attests that this space is filled up and takes its meaning thank to the symbolic interactions that occur between different agents. The point here is that all the existents must be considerate as agent, not only the “outsiders” (western people, Captain Cook and so on) as “required” by structuralism theories. Standaert approach (approach which has deep roots in the philosophical field of Todorov, Buber and above all Bachtin theories) is more dialogical, there are not subject and object, but subjects involved in a dialogical relationship. In this way we can consider this space as an encounter full of different agencies. What I mean is that cultures enter in contact in particular places and always mediated by persons but also mediated by the stories told by these persons. It is of course the presence of these persons, their interactions which attach importance and meaning to the locus, because it doesn’t matter if they are persons, houses, facts, things, memories, because all of them are existents able to create narrative worlds. But at the same time it is anyway true that inside these stories these *locus* assume a particular and charismatic reputation and influence to these people who lives inside and outside them: in other words *locus* becomes a existent *per se*.

In this way we can accept the reasoning that I have postulate in this paper: being an existent, a character – often the main character –, *locus* could be considerate as an agent inside the anthropological discourse and analysis.

IV. CONCLUSION

I tried in this paper to elaborate a new approach to the concept of agent – and agency – such as is commonly understood in the anthropological world. A part from some remarkable exceptions – such as

Gell or Latour -, the anthropological context of studies always emphasizes the intentional nature of the agent. I don't reject this vision but I tried to argue that we can have also another way to discuss and to define the anthropological agent.

Throughout the analysis of concepts like *locus* and *narration*, I tried to demonstrate that considering man as a symbolic animal. Believing that it is through this symbolic ability that man can organize and give an order to his life, I stressed out how man, their actions, their symbolical productions and above all the *narrations* linked with these surrounding symbols can create a particular context which I called *locus*.

In an ulterior step I demonstrate how *locus* itself is an existent present in many *narrations*, therefore a subject full of agency, as testified by the stories told by people living inside and outside Shuiwei village.

At this point may someone could be ask a house, a tomb, a funeral ceremony could be considerate as agents? In my view yes, because there substantial differences between traditional Taiwanese home and the Catholic one in Shuiwei, moreover in Shuiwei there are particular ways in which are performed ceremonies like weddings or funerals. All of them are existents, are subjects – and very often main characters – of the stories told in Lunbei. From this point of view we can assert that all these things are full of agency, and consequentially they are agents.

Concluding we can say with Ludwig Wittgenstein, that the world is all that is the case. Everything that happens has the power to affect our symbolic systems, and consequentially has the power to build to create a world, to create a narration that will give us the certainty of being alive in a more or less friendly and known world.

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