

Epistemology of Nonwritten Cultural Materials : Some Philosophical Problems concerning Perception

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Four years have almost passed since Kanagawa University started its COE Program of “Systematization of Nonwritten Cultural Materials for the Study of Human Societies.” Next year will be the last one for us. This subject of our COE Program was derived from research carried out at our Institute for the Study of Japanese Folk Culture. So far, however, our work has essentially been based on individual research. We have not discussed the method of putting together and systematizing individual research results. An Integration of Theory Group was created this year to promote theoretical systematization of our research, and as the head of this group, I have been in charge of developing its theoretical tasks.

First of all, I found that the very definition of “Nonwritten Materials” was used ambiguously among us, most of us assuming that this concept covers all except written materials. As a result, we agreed on the general definition that “all but written materials are Nonwritten Materials.” Obviously, this open-ended definition can encompass any research. However, we do not have enough time to consider any Nonwritten Materials to carry out “the study of Human Societies” effectively, but only that which relates specifically to this study.

We should not only complete the identification of the Nonwritten Materials concerned at the outcome of our task, but also present positively the method by which we analyzed such material and the conclusion that we came to.

Moreover, our COE Program has an obligation to “systematize” Nonwritten Materials. According to the French Diderot, who published the “Encyclopédie” in the 18th century, “Systematization,” implies devising a basic principle which can explain all consistently. In other words, each particular research work must be explained properly by a single principle.

As a matter of course, I know that this task is quite difficult, but I would like to think about some working hypothesis for systematizing the study of Nonwritten Materials as a contribution to the study of human societies.

Firstly, we want to think about the definition of Nonwritten Material, that is, essentially about the possibility of defining such material as how it should be used in relation with written materials, the definite means for the understanding of human culture.

Secondly, I want to analyze some philosophical problems of how human culture, including Nonwritten Materials as well as written materials, has formed. Such problems are related to ancient philosophical issues of the times of Plato and Aristotle, namely the problems of perception through human senses (of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste), in other word the capability for the human being to perceive outside of the body, and also the ones through the mind (soul, ego) of humans inside their bodies. Though it is not an easy task to solve these philosophical issues, we must be aware of them because they connect with the epistemological ones, which could allow us for example to address suitably the topic of Nonwritten Materials. Recently, such

problems have been dealt with through Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. The problem of how to memorize, reminisce and analyze an object scientifically without falling in error and prejudice, is crucial to dealing with written material through hermeneutics and phenomenology.

After introducing the definition of Nonwritten Materials and some philosophical problems, I finally want to bring up some problems concerning our research on how “Physical Techniques, Landscape and Illustrated Material” which are our research subjects, should be investigated and systematized.

1. Nonwritten Materials Definition

(1) Written versus spoken word

The concept of Nonwritten Materials is used in contrast to the written one. Culture is mostly composed of written materials, but most descriptive objects in fact constitute Nonwritten Materials. If Nonwritten Materials did include all but written material, then most of it could be converted into a coded system of language.

By written materials, we mean here a “sign” that man uses for memorization. It naturally includes numeral information and signals as well as language as a code system based on grammatical rules developed in each culture. Probably man could have easily memorized it all using digital combinations, if he had an unlimited memory capacity. Man has constructed a code system of language making communication possible in all situations through combinations of small words. By adding many sorts of Adjectives, Objects and Complements to the Subject and Predicate, man has developed unlimited means of expression.

The spoken language (“la parole” in French), the conversation we use now, are nothing but a code system based on the written language. Our conversation is influenced by education based on the written language and holds some similarities with it in structure.

However, it is natural that we should find some expressions which differ from the language even if we translate oral conversation into written words. Because the written word is always polished, rewritten, added or eliminated, it extinguishes even the traces of the men who are speaking. The written word uses the style of a monologue.

In particular, the written word is not directed to anyone, but to an abstract person. Thus, a writer erases his own personality as much as he can, and speaks as an abstract personality. Libraries conserve much written materials for the purpose of communication from past to future, but the personality of a writer does not appear, even when reading his book in depth.

W.J. Ong, an American philologist, claims in his book entitled “Orality and Literacy” that the written word describes the visual world and that the spoken language voices the world as heard. Judging from the side of the reader and that of the listener, his assertion may be right. When reading written words, we must focus partly on the sentence while taking in phrases one by one. On the contrary, as we listen to the spoken language, we must understand its overall contents, and cannot understand on a phrase by phrase basis.

Even when oral expression is not grammatically correct, we can roughly understand its general contents from the situation in which it is being expressed, whereas if we read sentences as they are written down, we can hardly understand what they mean.

When memorizing a story that is not narrated in written words, we use rhetorical and rhymed phrases so as to facilitate memorization. The more rhythmically we narrate a tale, the more vividly we can understand its contents, which is the reason why listening is easier to understand than reading.

Though written materials have indeed enormously contributed to human culture, it is necessary to read carefully, and ponder over long sentences to learn about human culture. The young dislike reading because written materials force them to think in depth.

(2) What are Nonwritten Materials ?

The spoken language certainly belongs to Nonwritten Materials due to its very nature. However, in circles where people are familiar with written materials, the spoken language undeniably is governed by grammatical rules applying to written words. In this sense, the spoken language can also form part of written materials. Our COE Program does not address the spoken language.

Assuming that the spoken language based on the written language belongs to written materials, then what are Nonwritten Materials? Let us examine the opposite assumption, i.e., that Nonwritten Materials are devoid of any code system, including numerals and signs.

In other words, let us suppose that Nonwritten Materials are aggregate of various things in which we have no particular interest in daily life, and indeed even a signal color or body odor are means which we use to communicate with each other. Conversely, we have herein assumed that Nonwritten Materials were made up of nothing but objects (“Ding an sich” as defined by Kant) that we cannot use in communications with other people and cannot memorize. Such things in themselves (“Ding an sich”) form an almost meaningless material which are neither perceived nor understood through any human action, and it is uncertain whether they will be in future.

Therefore, we will not define Nonwritten Materials as a “thing in themselves,” but as necessarily useful for human culture. Assuming that Nonwritten Materials are aggregate of all that are not clearly expressed and meaningful similarly to written materials, but that implies and suggests something. Physical techniques, sound and smell belong to this category.

Anything containing some sort of a sign belongs to this category, except for written material expressed in a clear grammatical code at any time in history. Letters fall into this group, if they were not written according to a grammatical code system.

Therefore, we suggest to redefine Nonwritten Materials as signs without a grammatical code system. Because it includes signs, it is not simply a thing in itself, but the means with which we can communicate with each other. As such, it necessarily has an inherent systematical value and conveys common meaning with which people can commonly understand each other at a given period of time. If Nonwritten Materials are devoid of such a meaning, i.e. if it can only be understood for a limited period of time, then it does not belong to the said category. In all cases, it must be composed of signs with which people can commonly understand each other in a particular geographical area and at a given period of time.

Thus, the definition of Nonwritten Materials simply as opposed to letters is too vague. We can rather define it as a material conveying common meaning. If Nonwritten Materials can be commonly understood, we must refer

to the philosophical problems of how we can commonly perceive an object.

Written Materials are the most important vectors of common meaning. Even if it contains an additional hidden sense, we can identify a common meaning through the grammatical code system, for example even in ancient written material provided that it uses a grammatical structure we can translate into modern grammar. Conversely, we cannot identify a common meaning from material written arbitrarily and randomly with no reference to any grammatical code.

Naturally, some difficulties may occur as we cannot always understand easily what a writer wanted to say in written materials, even if he used a grammatical code, so not all written materials have a clear meaning and there may be gaps in our interpretation. We know about the concept of “difference” as defined by J. Derrida, a French postmodern philosopher, namely that interpretation is no more than a time lag and a difference in meaning.

Just as written materials cannot be expected to be clear, we should not necessarily pursue clarity in Nonwritten Materials. We should rather look further than common meaning and beyond the historical period suggested by Nonwritten Materials. The diversity of interpretation through Nonwritten Materials is closely related to philosophical epistemology of perception. Let us examine philosophical perception problems to understand the above-mentioned “difference”.

2. What is cognition?

(1) How can all men perceive objects correctly? Cartesian problems.

Probably no other subject has been more important to philosophers than cognition. Philosophically speaking, it relates to Epistemology, and to the issue of human perception of objects, as well as the problems about the accuracy of human perception, in other words, not less than the history of Philosophy.

The problem of perception is discussed as follows. How are we conscious of an object? How do we reminisce this conscience once it has been memorized, and what do we imagine from this? Such processes pertain to philosophical questions. This series of processes forms not only cognitive action in everyday life, but also scientific action. What is the way to finding the truth without being deceived by error or prejudice? Can knowledge be totally and strictly accurate? If not, there is no accuracy in science. To ascertain the accuracy of modern science also applies to the accuracy of cognitive actions.

Plato asserted in “Phaidon” that the spirit can survive even if the body has died, if there is a belief in the eternity of spirit. This assertion that only the spirit remains after the body and brain have died may seem very strange, but according to Plato, man can reminisce the past through the spirit after rebirth. The spirit of Plato is the key to finding the reason why man can reasonably understand the outside world immediately after being born.

The 17th century philosophers also studied this problem. Descartes, who questioned the clarity of all things, concluded in “Discourse on method,” that the mere fact of thinking (Cogito) means truth. A subject trying to know means reason with which we can foresee what the truth is, and judge properly when we perceive the outside world. Reason making ego is the first condition of judgment in perception. Anywhere and always, man

has been able to coolly analyze the outside world and judge it correctly, because he has reason. Sense organs perceiving the outside world are nothing but plica, and what is essential for perception is human reason.

(2) Perception by sense organs –Enlightenment in 18th century

Only Descartes deserves to be considered a founder of Philosophy, because he emphasized the subjectivity of human judgment as opposed to objective perceptions. Shortly after him, the English philosopher John Locke analyzed empirically the cognition in “An Essay concerning Human Understanding.” As a result, he asserted that the ability of cognition is not given a priori, but is formed a posteriori by the function of senses. However, his assertion is quite contrary to that of Descartes, as he was an empirical philosopher, and a forerunner of the 18th century Enlightenment who criticized rational analysis forming the Cartesian philosophy.

Such empirical analysis of cognition started from Locke and reached its peak with “Encyclopédie” by Diderot and D’Alembert. In an empirical approach, they proved that the human faculty of cognition is formed through education in the outside world. The assertion that our perception is formed by acquired information, namely education, language and custom, was also proved from the example of the wolf boy found in the forest in the 18th century. Because he was brought up by wolves, this child was deprived of the cognition faculties of normal human beings until his death. Even more so, the emphasis on reason resulted in the superiority of European civilization over the others.

The 18th century was an age when the Occident established its superiority over the Orient as it was gaining confidence in its culture. The culture of Enlightenment was based on scientific theory and civilization, while science produced a system of knowledge pertaining to all fields, as “Encyclopédie” divided all such fields of knowledge into three dimensions, with art, history, and science dealing respectively with imagination, memory, and reason, and asserting that no knowledge exists outside of them. But such a fanatic belief in reason often brought about tragic results. For example, the French writer Anatole France narrated the tragic story of revolutionaries deceived by reason in “Gods are thirsty.”

European explorers, accompanied by many painters, set out to scientifically report on the situations of Asia and Africa. Though the precise data they gathered, to the minute details, seemed the result of scientific accuracy, they were in fact sketched from a rigid perspective and based on prejudice. In the case of fish, they represented the animal sideways, and however detailed it was, it was never shown from front or swimming. If even the men who were scientifically educated were prejudiced, then who could scientifically see the object? Therefore, what is the meaning of cognition?

(3) Perception by Intention-Phenomenology and Husserl

The new approach to epistemology, namely phenomenology, emerged between the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of 20th century.

Its forerunner was Maine de Biran, a French Philosopher who criticized the cognition of perception by the Enlightenment thinkers in his “Rapports du Physique et du moral de l’homme” (The relations between Physique and human moral) in 1811. He addressed the question of spirit once more, demonstrating the concept of the original inner feeling (le sentiment intérieur), the part of the spirit which reflects what the sense organs feel.

It was on the basis of this inner feeling that a new method of phenomenology was devised by the new Kantians in the second half of 19th century. What is phenomenology as described by the Jewish philosopher Husserl ? It consists of an approach to investigating in depth the question of inner feeling. Our perception is not only of the effects produced by the outside world, but also positively reflects what we perceive, what Husserl called the reflection intention. This approach by which we project our intention on the effects produced by the outside world, constitutes phenomenology.

Thrown into the world, men must look for what they perceive, while being affected by the outside. Thus, this inner feeling by which to make judgments is not just individual's ego (miles away from Descartes' theory), but a common subject with which men are able to communicate with one another in the society where they live. Husserl named such ego Intuition. After men have forgotten all their prejudices, the reason they have must be something beyond ego, what Husserl called the Transcendental Ego, which was not formed, but transmitted earlier. In this sense, phenomenology tends towards ontology by stressing existence such as Heidegger did.

What Husserl asserts is that our perception is not the simple reflection of effects produced by the outside world, but positive and subjective participation in the latter. Perception needs union between man and the world in which he exists. Thrown into the world, all men need a common subject which forms the Inter-Subjective relation. Therefore, perception is not as simple a process as human brain reflecting materials.

(4) Modern problems about perception and object

The 20th century philosophy contributed to the critique of simple materialism born in 18th century, according to which men can completely and accurately understand the outside world. Indeed, what Husserl advocated was scientific exactness as opposed to simple scientism, but instead he aroused skepticism against perceptive abilities to the contrary.

The negative heritage of simple scientism was the idea that men always perceived objects accurately. As a consequence of oppositions to this point of view, criticism emerged against positivism in History as well as against Orientalism in Ideas. Many years have gone by since the collapse of simple progressive views of history whereby every country in the world develops in the same direction, as stated by simple positivism, but the latter has continued to prevail in scientific methods.

After the French Revolution of the 18th century, museums and archives were constructed as places of exhibition and conservation of documents and works of art, mostly glorifying the accumulation of human culture. Such products of Western scientific achievements played a leading cultural role as a model for non-developed Europe, Asia and Africa. However, the accumulation and analysis of such material and works of art was not only the result of science, but also of high pressure to this effect.

By the way, Musée du quai Branly, the museum of arts and civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and America (non-western civilization), was recently inaugurated on the left bank of Seine River, leading to many controversies. In France, there is a clear-cut divide between museums devoted to western and non-western cultures. Surely, non-western museums are immediately accepted as cultural places, but sophisticated western culture is very clearly distinguished from the more primitive ones, which stand outside the borders of conventional western culture originating in the Greek and Roman times, and developing through the Middle

Ages and the modern era, as if it were heretical, so to speak. Non-western art belongs verges on heresy when compared to art. This time, many scholars debated on the meaning of building a non-western art museum, which is that, in order to be able to understand human culture, many different points of view must be taken into consideration concerning other cultures.

Thus, our research in Nonwritten Materials should be also more than the analytical and functional classification of such and such item of past material. In fact, to understand a given item of material is not to perceive it materially, but to gain a sense of its value depending on its age and to compare it with modern counterparts. For example, we must ask ourselves whether an illustrated item reflect facts or nothing but metaphor. And concerning the Japanese detailed sketches of folk implements, we must confront them to the scientifically detailed illustrations of "Encyclopédie." Failing such an approach, we will not be able to analyze illustrated materials properly.

3. Illustrated materials, Physical Techniques and Landscape as Nonwritten Materials

After considering such points of view, I will now examine the possibilities offered by our COE research program on Nonwritten Materials, which deals presently with illustrated items, folk implements and landscape.

(1) Illustrated Materials

Items of illustrated materials consist of pictorial images, with our main purpose being to gather information from those made in Japan, China and Korea. The sense involved in interpreting illustrated materials being vision, some problems arise due to visual capabilities. As it is impossible to encompass visually as large an image as a pictorial image as a whole, we must concentrate on some of its parts. We must divide the whole picture into some sections in order to comprehend it fully. In other words, the process of understanding a pictorial scroll is similar to analyzing written materials which was initially understood in part only.

In dealing with pictorial images, special attention must be paid not to confuse the method for written materials with that for Nonwritten Ones. The idea that the whole is composed of the parts is a misconception stemming from the inability to obtain an all-encompassing vision. The fact that its subject is Nonwritten Materials and its means of analysis based on written ones, is not necessarily adversely affecting, but we should not forget the whole as a whole, and neither should we focus excessively on the analysis of too minute parts, for example everyday life implements. If systematization of Nonwritten Materials includes that of the method of analysis, then we need to reexamine this method once again.

Whereas we definitely cannot read written materials as a whole, it is not always impossible to view a pictorial image as a whole. Iconographic analysis is essential for this purpose.

(2) Physical Techniques

The media of physical techniques is a body which we cannot grasp as such because it is constantly alive and moving, and so naturally we cannot understand this moving body on a still picture. When carrying out our research on a ritual ceremony, we use a 3D video camera to analyze the moving body.

The issue of the body in Philosophy has become quite popular since Michel Foucault, a French Philosopher,

first introduced it. If the body and spirit were indivisible, the formation of the spirit would affect that of the body. In fact, the modern spirit emerged as a result of the modernization of body, an issue which has been discussed for thirty years now.

Research has been carried out for a long time on the appearance of the female body and that of the human race as a whole in modern society. This issue anyway is inseparably linked with that of the spirit, the latter one being relatively easy to understand from written materials, as opposed to the former which we could not comprehend by reading such materials. We must observe the body action in order to grasp the significance of the body as part of the ritual ceremony. The potential of the physical techniques we use depends on how much we can understand the contents created by the body through measurement of action at the ritual ceremony.

Moreover, we are also researching in folk implements as an extension of the body, for example agricultural implements, which also involves measurement. However, if we can reach comprehension of human action and role in society and social relations through folk implements, our research will be wide-ranging, and we will be able to relate it to the body issue.

(3) Landscape

Our landscape research follows two main guidelines, the first one being rapidly changing landscape, for example during earthquakes and disasters, or changes in Japanese shrines in Korea, while the second one focuses on slowly evolving landscapes.

Changes due to disasters and earthquakes are documented by such media as photographs and pictures taken before and after, and the bigger the changes are, the more interesting research is. Research from surveys of ruins of Japanese shrines on the Asian Continent is also based on a comparative study of photographs taken before the war confronted to the recent landscape, such a topic having obvious interests for us.

However, the research is limited to given locations and does not relate to daily life. In this respect, when investigating how landscape is understood in daily life, the comparison research between the past and the present using Shibusawa Photographs may be better suited to our COE program. Recalling how men first saw the landscape as sea and mountains in history, the French historian Alain Corbin earlier addressed the landscape issue as part of his "history of sensitivity." The understanding of living spaces on sea and mountains differs widely in history. If this changing comprehension could get any clearer through our research, it could lead to new research objectives as part of our Nonwritten Materials.

From now on, however, the research will be mostly devoted to collecting data, and should lead as soon as possible to the analysis of data concerning everyday life.

Conclusion

Nonwritten Materials were discussed herein with emphasis on possible methodology. We are currently facing the types of problems any new research always produces. While we engage in secret maneuvers, we lose balance in past research. We should not necessarily think of the "Systematization of Nonwritten Cultural Materials for the Study of Human Societies" as an extension of the past research, as the word "systematization"

refers to the development of new methods. In this respect, we should take the risk of trying new possibilities.

In particular, as major changes have taken place in academic research methods, the positive research we took for granted must be reexamined by introducing some philosophical disputes. I hope that our COE Program will be positively challenging to the development of new methods.