

The Confusion and New Turn of Ethnographic Writing——Read Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography

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Abstract: Since the book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of (Writing Culture hereafter)* was published, it arouses great echo in the circle of anthropology, whose influence involved multiple humanities. The study of ethnography has entered an era of reflection. Based on this background, the author discusses the writing of ethnography. By discussing the concepts of “ethnography”, “ethnography poetics” and “ethnography politics”, this paper expounds the current confusion in ethnography writing and the new turn of ethnography writing after the 21st century. In order to provide help for the further development of ethnographic writing.

Keywords: *Writing Culture*; Ethnographic writing; Confusion; Turn

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1. Introduction

Since the British scholar Taylor, known as the “father of anthropology”, put forward the idea of “about cultural science” in his book *Primitive Culture*, anthropology formed in the late 19th century inherited Taylor’s definition of culture and began to establish culture as the term of science. Later scholars followed Taylor’s steps in order to understand the laws of human living conditions through the study of culture, hoping that anthropology could imitate the natural science to discover the universal cultural laws and the universal human living conditions in the field of human culture. “This desire and ambition of early anthropologists reflects the western optimism of the supremacy of reason and spirit since the Age of Enlightenment, as well as the enthusiasm and ideal of pursuing natural science brought by Darwinian evolution to the confused humanities and social sciences.”^[1] However, in the 1960s, a “post-modernism” trend of thought appeared in the western circle, which questioned authority, scientism and structure comprehensively. Since the 1980s, the rise of “reflective anthropology” represented by *Writing Culture*^[2] has exposed the prejudices and presuppositions held by American ethnographers. By studying the book *Writing Culture*, this paper intends to start with the relevant concepts of ethnography, and then to study the confusion in the process of ethnography writing and the new turn of ethnography writing.

2. Relevant Concepts

2.1 Ethnography

The concept of ethnography has two meanings. In the broad sense, there are two different aspects. First, anthropologists conduct on-site “participant observation” of research objects, which is called “field investigation”. Second, ethnographers write descriptive texts based on surveys. In terms of the second meaning alone, according to Mr. Xu Jianxin, the word “ethnography”, as a foreign word, has two functions in two dimensions when it is translated. One is that it has western cultural references; the other is when it is grafted into the Chinese context, its meaning has changed and new content has been derived^[3].

2.2 Ethnographic Poetics

Ethnographic poetics is one of the important theoretical schools of American folklore in the 20th century. In oral type theory and under the influence of ethnography, some interest in anthropology, linguistics, American poet and some have a good study of poetry has a consensus between anthropologists and linguists, emphasize will tell, praising, singing sounds back to proverb, riddles, changing songs, hymns, fables, public speaking and oral culture such as narrative. Ethnography poetics, as it were, by exploring the mode of text rendering on oral performance in expression and rhetoric way of care, and cross-cultural perspective multicultural tradition solution, provide people with a set of oral expression of the effective tools to appreciate, and people for better knowing and the under-

standing of its subordinate group factors contained in the oral communication of art provides the help ^[4].

2.3 Politics of Ethnography

“Ethnographic politics” refers to a shift from “participatory observation” to “participatory observation”, in which a clear direction or innuendo is taken, such as highlighting its moral purpose and public power in research projects. It is an important trend in the diversity of anthropological curiosity and research and exploration, it needs to be some problems within the scope of the world to make substantive feedback in time, it is necessary to understand and grasp the activities, forms, relations and development rules of social public power based on a certain economic basis, instead of being obsessed with closed debates, models and theoretical traditions.

3. Confusion in Ethnographic Writing

3.1 Factors Influencing Ethnographic Narration

First of all, anthropologists are influenced by subjective and objective factors in choosing fields. At the time of arrival, there are still subjective and objective factors, and the anthropologist fragments or extracts objects for “own use” as the destination. Mead repeatedly emphasised the randomness of fieldwork in the face of “posterity” scepticism about *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Secondly, anthropologists are deeply influenced by their own cultural background in ethnographic creation. Ethnographic writing varies according to the author’s cultural background and writing level. That is, “knowledge limitation” limits the perfection of the text. Although anthropologists have intensified the study of language, this has also led to “language and speech” problems, which make it difficult for people to grasp the true meaning of different ethnic languages. Therefore, the lack of language knowledge has been questioned by postmodern scholars. In addition, the knowledge defects of the observed themselves will also affect the quality of the text. They will tell the story in terms of what they are interested in and what they can learn. Finally, the political and economic context affects the authenticity of ethnography. In the process of collecting materials and writing texts, anthropologists may not realize the existence of political and economic background, but it can’t be denied that its objective existence has dealt a heavy blow to scientific ethnography. This is the politics of ethnographic writing mentioned in *Writing Culture*. Anthropological funding has long been a headache for anthropologists. After the end of western colonialism, anthropologists were not only worried about the funding of scientific research, but also faced new

problems such as the loss of “field” and the transformation of investigative identity.

3.2 Reason and Object of Ethnographic Writing

Ethnographic works are not to see the non-Western world from the western perspective, but the field threshold of mutual learning and understanding between the two sides, so that the exchange and communication between each other can occur, and achieve peaceful communication ^[5]. Ethnographic works are the third space between the western world and non-Western world ^[6]. The ultimate purpose of ethnographic writing is to communicate rather than to describe the world. Thus, ethnography today is the translation of different cultural systems, values and beliefs in order to understand and communicate with each other ^[7]. Ethnographic writing is the process of the author’s interpretation of the object of study. Therefore, anthropological writing should not only aim at communication within the circle of scholars, but also aim at a broad audience ^[8]. Today’s ethnographic writing should break out of the discipline framework and enter into a broader interdisciplinary vision. Anthropology should be combined with history, journalism, film making and other disciplines to represent the human world that everyone has a share in, and its target audience should also be diversified ^[9].

3.3 Literary Turn of Ethnographic Texts

Under the wave of reflection caused by *Writing Culture*, anthropologists have to question and criticize the self-claimed “value-free” and “scientific objectivity” of traditional ethnography, and deal with the expression crisis of ethnography with new experimental ideas. This wave has far-reaching influence, among which the most profound influence is to trigger the literary turn of ethnography. However, the advocacy of ethnographic “literary turn” has not been recognized and supported by all anthropologists. Because anthropology has its own academic tradition, there is the exclusive way of writing, and this “literary turn”, in the view of some scholars holding the anthropological tradition, has the meaning of making anthropology give way to other disciplines. Therefore, those anthropologists not only pointed out the exploration “how knowledge demands a rhetorical” approach can reduce the credibility of anthropology as a science, and they also think that anthropologists for text creation, its purpose is not to form some kind of independent style of writing, or establish some kind of literariness of observation, more is not to the pursuit of perfection in rhetoric. Therefore, to reflect on literary problems such as “how the pursuit of knowledge is rhetorical” is undoubtedly to put the cart before the horse and futile.

4. A New Turn in Ethnographic Writing

At the end of the 20th century, the world of postmodernism gradually changed into a world dominated by globalization. The common point of postmodernism and globalization is that they both try to deconstruct and transcend the theoretical framework of modernism, advocate pluralistic thinking and value orientation, and oppose a single theoretical perspective. Since the 21st century, ethnographic writing has been faced with new problems and challenges in the context of globalization, and a new turn has appeared.

4.1 Choice of Field Point: From Single Point -- Multi Point -- Globalization

In the stage of scientific ethnography, anthropologists generally focus on a single point of work and advocate doing a long and in-depth interview in one place. In the second half of the 20th century, spatial boundaries were further broken, population mobility was frequent, the Internet changed the traditional social model, and the way of interpersonal communication was completely changed. GEORGE E. MARCUS began to wonder about the limitations of a single point study when he surveyed Tongan society. He argues that “the early understanding of multiethnography was only that it was associated with the movement and fluidity of ethnographic survey points—emphasis on empirical studies of new relationships and procedural changes arising from changes in globalization.”^[10] Moving into the 21st century, he is more concerned with key elements that have been preserved in a particular culture until now, how they are scattered in different locations, and how they are tracked.

Since the 1980s, the national field has gradually shifted from a single (static) point to a two-point (dynamic) point. After entering the 21st century, anthropologists began to incline to multi-point research, and subsequently, multi-point research gradually changed into global research. Ethnographic fieldwork has moved to more points and globalization is an emerging approach. It focuses on how long-standing patterns of ethnographic practice are adapted to complex objects of study. Ethnography moves from the traditional location of a single place, from the macroscopic social order, such as the context constructed by the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation, such as “local” and “global”, “living world” and “system”. Thus, the ethnography produced is within and outside the world system^[11]. In short, no matter multi-point ethnography, global ethnography or clue ethnography, it is advocated to trace a clue by breaking single point field method, and then to discuss prob-

lems in a broader space and time.

4.2 Statement: Change from Third Person to First Person

In the ethnography of science, it is advocated that researchers should not bring in emotions, and pursue objectivity and scientificity at the narrative level, while writing in a realistic style. Postmodern ethnography no longer aims at objectivity and authenticity, but reflects on what is real and how to express it. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that adding literary fiction to the text has become a new direction of ethnographic writing.

To be specific, ethnography presents a narrative shift from realism to fiction. In terms of narrative perspective, it is mainly reflected in the transformation from the third person to the first person.

In the process of writing scientific ethnography, in order to make the work appear scientific, anthropologists usually do not use the first person to tell the events and systems they see, thus masking the relationship between the author and the objects described, the methods of obtaining ethnographic materials, and so on. There is a detailed explanation of the field work experience, such as the maps, charts, photos, preface, postscript and footnote of the investigation site to explain the limitations of research, etc., but these are only to make the work show the authority and science, there is little space to truly explain my field experience in the book. Therefore, what person to narrate has become the focus of postmodern ethnography. The development of ethnography of science to ethnography of interpretation reflects the transformation of the researcher’s identity from authority to interpreter. They generally use the method of “experiential approach” to transform the narration between the first person and the potential narrator, so as to facilitate readers’ understanding and immersive experience. A large number of local idioms are applied in the works, which enhance the realism of the works, provide readers with value information objectively, and have historical significance of cultural records. Anthropologists often apply the rhetoric of the first person to ethnographic works in such a way as to vividly describe the specific thoughts and activities of the first person protagonists.

5. Conclusions

Through questioning and criticizing the traditional ethnography, the book *Writing Culture* raises the problems in the process of ethnography writing about the lack of authenticity and science. Although at present, postmodern ethnography has a dominant trend, but this does not mean that the ethnographic writing paradigm will end

here. With the further development of *The Times* and the diversification of anthropological research orientation, the complicated situation inevitably requires the ethnographic writing to advance in a new direction. In addition, in understanding the debates and discussions about ethnographic writing, I also realized that the contradiction between objectified ethnographic representations and subjective experiences in field work may never be reconciled, such as the relationship between the self and the other, and the pattern of field work, will also be the subject of constant debate among anthropologists, and perhaps experimental ethnography does not fully answer the conundrum of ethnographic writing. Although we cannot predict where the final fate of ethnographic writing will go, we should always keep the courage to face the reality and face the imperfection, always be full of the enthusiasm of anthropological field research, constantly approach the cultural reality, and let the reflective consciousness run through the ethnographic writing.

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