In this Issue

The articles in this issue, diverse as they are, share some commonalities in source materials and general approaches. Oral traditions, songs, and political cartoons constitute the fundamental sources used by the authors of these articles. These sources allow Frank Proschan to challenge prevailing conceptualizations of ethnicity, Ann Maxwell Hill to offer some refinements in how we think about slavery, Liu Fei-wen to arrive at a new understanding of widowhood, Hugh Urban to gain a stronger sense of the meanings of the Bengali marketplace for the people who traded there, and Peter Duus to show us a new aspect of the political dynamics of Japan in the first half of the twentieth century.

PETER DUUS's article delineates the development of the examination of the political cartoon in Japan. His essay explains to us humor and political context in cartoons which would have been obvious to their intended audience, but which time and distance have made obscure. The article examines cartoonists who take a variety of positions vis-à-vis the state. Duus cautions us against seeing the cartoons as exhibiting a trajectory from dissent to collaboration. Rather, he sees the deeply ambiguous position of political cartoonists as emblematic of the complexities of their position as well as indicative of the contradictory impulses implicit in the political culture of the nation-state.

FRANK PROSCHAN looks at the origin myths of the Kmhmu, a highland people of northern Laos and adjacent regions, to explore indigenous conceptions of ethnicity. He finds local imaginings of ethnicity which predate the colonial encounter. In Kmhmu myths, all people are descended from a primal brother-sister pair, but from the moment of their initial appearance, differences among them have been pronounced. He finds what he calls primal multiculturalism in these origin myths. Although the stories he uses were recorded recently, he argues that they represent a continuity with older stories.

ANN MAXWELL HILL looks at the processes surrounding slavery in Xiao Liangshan, in China's southwestern hinterlands, and concludes that while the Nuoso were a society with slaves, they were not a slave society. She bases her argument on the fact that slave labor was not essential to the structures of production in Xiao Liangshan. She uses both written and oral sources to delineate the nature of slavery and to demonstrate ways in which previous categorizations of the Nuoso have been problematic.

HUGH URBAN writes about songs of the marketplace in colonial Bengal, showing ways in which Bāuls, Sāhebdanīs, and Kartābhajās appropriated metaphors of capital into their religious imagery. He both argues that markets represented a knot in the net of political, social, and economic relations and shows how the marketplace had a subversive edge. But he cautions against idealizing groups like the Kartābhajāas, who despite their utopian visions, developed ultimately exploitative hierarchies.

LIU FEI-WEN writes about the representation of widows in *nüshu* and *nüge,* women's writing and women's songs, in Jiangyong in Hunan province. *Nüshu* is a form of writing that was used only by women, and *nüge* are songs whose written form is in that script. Liu contrasts the representation of widowhood in these texts with widowhood as it is represented in local gazetteers of the same area, and finds significant differences in the two genres.

We sent all of the articles to all of the authors, and invited each author to respond to the articles, commenting on resonances, commonalities, or contrasts among the articles. Peter Duus, Frank Proschan, Hugh Urban, and Liu Fei-wen all noted commonalities in source materials and the ways in which new sources can lead to new analyses. Duus wrote:

> What struck me as the most visible thread running through all the essays was the attempt to abandon "graphocentrism" (to use Frank Proschan's term) of conventional document-based historical (and ethnographic) research. All the essays seek some kind of truth not in the written word but in song (Urban and Liu), the spoken word (Hill, Liu, and Proschan) or the drawn image (Duus).
>
> (Duus, letter, 14 August 2001)

Frank Proschan elaborates a similar point when he writes:

> Immediately apparent is a shared concern (for Duus, Urban, Liu, and Proschan) with the paraliterary—texts that fall on the fringes of the literary, if not outside of it. Each of the authors deals with a body of work that offers invaluable perspectives on one or another crucial aspect of society: widowhood and fidelity, ethnicity and identity, politics and community—perspectives that would be less accessible were these works to be ignored or consigned to the realm of the trivial or insubstantial. The popular images of Japanese cartoonists, written or unwritten songs of Hunanese women, religious sung poetry of Bengalis, or creation myths of Kmhmu villagers might all be seen by some as peripheral genres, but what the essays together remind us is how productive it can be for us as scholars to lurk on those generic fringes. Each essay is an example in its own way of centripetal cultural criticism—approaching societies and their expressive culture from outside in and from bottom up, rather than from center out or top down.
>
> (Proschan, e-mail, 6 August 2001).

Hugh Urban makes a similar point when he writes that "all five pieces offer important challenges and alternatives to many scholarly methods, allowing us to hear these cultures, as Liu Fei-wen puts it, in 'stereo' rather than in the monotone of elite or literary sources" (Urban, e-mail, 13 September 2001).

Peter Duus amplifies on the analytical dividends to be gained from using these kinds of sources:

> The exploration of "non-graphic" or "non-written" evidence seems to reveal not only alternative forms of telling but also alternative narratives. And not surprisingly, these narratives, by giving voice to the subaltern or the ignored, often subvert conventional understandings produced by the higher clerisy (bureaucratic, academic, or otherwise). Liu's essay, for example, shows that Jiangyong peasant women saw widowhood as a set of practical problems, rather than as an occasion for displaying virtuous behavior, as Confucian scholars did; and Hill's essay likewise shows how different the meaning of "slavery" was for the Nuoso hill people and the Chinese ethnographers, blindered by Marxist narratives, who studied them.
>
> (Duus, letter, 14 August 2001)

Liu writes. "Taken together, these articles send a strong message regarding the relationship between voices and expression. Voices must be expressed in order to be heard and understood. . . . Access to hearing requires sensitive detection of the distinctive forms of expression employed by the subjects examined." She goes on to repeat a point she makes in her article, that it is important that we be aware that sometimes voices are missing because we, as scholars, fail to hear them. She elaborates that awareness of that fact is:

> heuristically significant in that it allows us to question the epistemic authority of our taken-for-granted form of expression (for example, the scribalism described by Proschan) and reminds us of the pitfall that the subordinate or subaltern may be doubly silenced—first, by the dominant discourse of society, and second, by researchers who have failed to sense, and are hence unable to extract messages from, distinct expressive strategies or media that are different from their own.
>
> (Liu, e-mail, 15 September 2001)

Urban notes particular resonances between his article and that of Liu Fei-wen. He writes that he particularly appreciates "her basic points—that we must attend to both the self-perceptions of Chinese women and the way that they are viewed by Chinese scholar-officials, and that these two views differ fundamentally in terms of historiography and epistemology" (Urban, e-mail, 13 September 2001). Urban and Liu both discuss languages that are specific to certain social groups in particular locations. Urban writes about the "language of the mint," an esoteric coded discourse which is a feature of Kartābhajā songs in Bengal. Liu writes about *nüshu*/*nüge*, women's writing and women's songs, which were produced and circulated among women's communities since at least the late nineteenth century (and probably much earlier) in Jiangyong in Hunan Province. Although the transmission of the *nüshu*/*nüge* was not marked by the same complex ritual initiations as were the Kartābhajā songs, it was still restricted to women in specific geographic areas. By examining these songs, Liu and Urban are able to give voice to people whose voices are not often heard in historical discourses and suggest ways in which these new voices complicate dominant discourses. Liu's article adds a new voice to the discourse on widowhood in China, and Urban's, to the discourse on capitalism and colonialism in Bengal.

One of the issues that is raised in Liu's article is the question of the multiple meanings of literacy. Proschan writes that she:

> offers a fascinating deconstruction of "literacy," prising apart literacy in the national language and in the esoteric women's script, and distinguishing reading ability from writing ability and from reciting ability, recalling to me Solange Thierry's study of Cambodian tales and their circulation (Thierry 1985).
>
> (Proschan, e-mail, 6 August 2001)

Several of the articles are concerned, in varying ways, with issues of appropriation and how to conceptualize it. Proschan notes the ways in which questions of appropriation arise in Duus's article:

> The cartoons that Duus presents are inherently parodistic and thus generally hybrid, appropriating both endogenous and exogenous styles and artistic techniques. . . . [T]his is in no way simply passive consumption or adoption of those styles; rather, the process Duus describes is one of utilizing all possible artistic means of expression. His argument does not depend on whether the incorporated images are appropriations

> of received images and styles or not. His central argument, returning to the way in which his essay resonates most strongly with the others, is that the objects of his study "constitute a vast archive that reveals. . . sentiments left unvoiced by the silence of other texts and other archives."
>
> (Proschan, e-mail, 6 August 2001)

The uses to which Liu, Hill, Proschan, and Urban put the oral sources they use are very different. Liu, Hill, and Proschan collected the stories and songs they use from living informants; Urban, whose article is on the nineteenth century, worked from published collections of song texts. In different ways, Liu and Hill are interested in juxtaposing what they learn from their informants with information from other sources (local gazetteers in Liu's case, scholarly accounts and theorizing in Hill's). Hill writes about ways in which Urban's work suggests to her ways in which she might approach future research projects:

> While my article does not presume to speak about slave consciousness or slave discourse, it has always been clear to me, and to other ethnographers, that Nuoso slaves strategized to make the system less onerous and exploitative. Some of this strategizing comes across in the anecdotes about upward mobility contained in the article. Urban's interpretation of subaltern agency, of course, benefits from the existence of song texts from the colonial era. Nuoso cultural communication was, and is, largely oral, with the exception of ritual texts used by a few literate specialists. Yet there exists a large body of songs, aphorisms, and folk stories, only some of which has been translated into Chinese. Having just begun to explore this material, and anticipating future fieldwork, I see these oral forms as potentially rich sources of insight into the institution of slavery, as well as other kinds of subordination in Nuoso society.
>
> (Hill, e-mail, 8 August 2001).

Hill finds differences in how the people she studies in Xiao Liangshan and the Kmhmu that Proschan studies imagine the relationship between the origins of the cosmos and the origins of ethnic groups. She writes of the Nuoso:

> their discourse on their origins and history, as I know it from interviews, is not markedly ethnogonic, in contrast to the creation myths of the Kmhmu. The creators of the universe were Nuoso (Yi) ancestors, and they are linked by descent to Nuoso lineages, explaining why some are more highly ranked than others. When pressed to comment on their historical relation with the Han and other ethnic groups, sometimes Nuoso will invoke the view that the Yi, Han, and Zang (Tibetans) are as three brothers. But this seems to be a patently metaphorical statement rather than an argument for ethnogony.
>
> (Hill, e-mail, 8 August 2001).

Two questions arise in several of these papers: How can we use sources collected in one era as evidence for past beliefs and practices, and how can we most productively conceptualize ways in which one culture uses images, metaphors and symbols which come from outside that culture? Proschan and Urban, in particular, are both dealing with the ways people constitute their imagined universes (and even cosmogonies) in the wake of colonialism and other forms of contact with outsiders. The societies they are studying are very different, as are their time frames. But their fundamental approaches also differ. Proschan articulates the difference this way:

> Where Urban sees modernist images in folk poetry as appropriations of dominant discourses and thus, it would seem, necessarily derivative from or even parasitic upon them, I take a contrary tack. For me, folk discourse is nether dependent on nor derivative from elite discourse. Images of modernity—Italians, Russians, Americans, motors, cars, and pens—are incorporated in contemporary tellings of an ancient myth, much as images of commerce and the marketplace are incorporated into Urban's poems, but where Urban sees "ingenious appropriation" I argue instead for authochthonous creation. . . . For Urban, to be sure, the Bengali poets are not in any way passive consumers, but if I read him correctly, their agency is nevertheless limited in important ways to appropriating and reinterpreting received images of modernity.
>
> (Proschan, e-mail, 6 August 2001)

Urban voices a skepticism about Proschan's argument which demonstrates, in another register, the epistemological difference between these two scholars:

> [Proschan] is claiming that these Southeast Asian groups had indigenous notions of ethnicity that preexisted and were independent of modern Western concepts of ethnicity—a claim that sounds plausible enough on the face of it. Yet, the source he cites are, by their very nature, post-Western-contact; and in fact, they even clearly mention white people (Americans and French). . . . In my experience with Indian traditions, myths are more or less always changing, always adapting to new social, historical and political events. I see no reason to believe that these myths have been told since ancient times, and see no reason to think that their narrative form and their views of ethnicity might not have been profoundly influenced by contact with the white world.
>
> (Urban, e-mail, 13 September 2001)

These essays, in their creative use of non-written sources, suggest, as Duus pointed out, not only new ways of telling stories, but new stories. Not only do the sources the authors use differ, their approaches (and perhaps even their fundamental assumptions) differ. Nonetheless, these five essays may be productively read side by side, and, as I hope this brief essay has suggested, each may illuminate the others in unexpected ways.

Works Cited

THIERRY, SOLANGE. 1985. *Le Cambodge des contes.* Paris: L'Harmattan.