3.
Implications of Literacy in Traditional China and India

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In order to test and expand the hypotheses put forward by Goody and Watt it is necessary to have accounts of the uses of literacy in a wide range of societies. In what follows I shall discuss their suggestions at a very general level in the light of comparisons with India and China.

"Widespread" Literacy

An initial difficulty arises over the meaning of "widespread literacy." Was literacy more widespread in sixth-century Ionia or fifth-century Attica than, for example, in the heartlands of the Maurya or Gupta empires or in Han or Sung China? Granted that the majority of Greek citizens of the fifth century B.C. constituted a book-reading public, it is uncertain how widespread literacy was among non-citizens. McNeill, quoting Beloch and Gomme, concludes that "adult male citizens in Athens probably numbered between 35,000 and 50,000 on the eve of the Peloponnesian War, and the total population of Attica was probably between 250,000 and 350,000, of which somewhat less than half were slaves and disfranchised foreigners."[1] With a majority of women in classical Greece illiterate, it is possible that Gupta India of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., or even the central region of the Maurya empire (fourth and third centuries B.C.), had almost as high a percentage of literate people, at least in the areas round their capitals.

In these empires, as in later, medieval India, literacy appears to have been universal among men of the two upper classes of society, the Brahmans (priests, lawgivers and scholars) and the Kshattriyas (rulers and military). Literacy was probably widespread, also, among the middle-ranking Vaishyas (traders, crafts-

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men and some of the peasantry), for early inscriptions record donations by wealthy merchants and craftsmen to religious causes. It was, moreover, the trading classes who favoured Buddhism and Jainism, with their rejection of Vēdic literature and rites and their promulgation of vernacular sacred writings. These three upper classes, the "twice-born," certainly had legal access to most of the writings of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism if they cared to make use of them.

The fourth class, of Sūdras or manual labourers, ranked much lower. They formed an "unclean," largely servile category, forbidden by law to amass wealth or to hear or recite the Sanskrit Vēdas. It seems probable that the Sūdras, together with the still lower-ranking Untouchables or exterior castes, were largely illiterate in ancient as in medieval north India. Even so, some Sūdras in ancient north India did acquire wealth and, although they were forbidden to study the Vēdas, there was no prohibition on their studying the later epics and *purānas* or reading the devotional vernacular literature of post-Mauryan times. In south India, again, the early Tamil kingdoms of the first to fourth centuries honoured poets from the Sūdra and even the Untouchable castes, as did the later Tamil kingdom of Chōla in the tenth to twelfth centuries (Basham 1954: 142–4; Sāstri 1955: 132).

While quantitative estimates are hazardous, it is possible that up to half of the men, and perhaps one-fifth or one-sixth of the women, were literate in the periods of greatest prosperity and brilliance of both the north and south Indian irrigation-based empires. The percentages may have been even higher in the small kingdoms of Kērala, based on rainfall agriculture and overseas commerce, in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

As in Greece, writing in India was rapid and materials easily available, the most common being processed leaves of the talipot and palmyra palms. Birch-bark, sized cotton, silk, and thin slips of bamboo or wood were also used locally. Ink was applied with a reed pen in northern and central India. In the south, the letters were scratched with a stylus and the leaf then rubbed with powdered lamp-black (Basham 1954: 194, 198–9; Sāstri 1955: 132).

A similar level of literacy may have characterized the periods of high culture in China after the introduction of brush-writing and the standardization and simplification of letters in the Ch'in empire of the third century B.C. Needham notes that Han China of about 145 B.C. provided for the education of at least some peasants in local schools, to a level below that required of scholars intended for the bureaucracy. Hundreds of books written on wood, bamboo tablets, silk and paper were stored in libraries, and by 145 B.C. university chairs were established for each of the major divisions of learning. The peak of pre-modern Chinese learning was apparently reached in the Sung period of the tenth to thirteenth centuries A.D. Printing was widespread by A.D. 980, and a rapid form of cursive writing, comparable in speed to shorthand, was known by the tenth century and practised by Chinese scholars as far afield as Baghdad (Needham 1954: I, 101–2, 111, 219).

While the evidence of literacy rates is extremely unsatisfactory, we must, I think, place both the Indian and Chinese high civilizations, along with the Greek, in Parsons' category of "advanced intermediate" societies. As such, they contrast with Parsons' "archaic" societies, possessing an esoteric craft literacy

confined to small, highly specialized groups, usually of religiosi or magical practitioners (Parsons 1966: 51).

Parsons defines advanced intermediate cultures as those having full literacy for adult males of an upper class. Such societies usually organize their cultures around a set of sacred writings, knowledge of which is expected of all educated men. He argues that only modern industrial societies institutionalize literacy for a majority of both men and women. It could perhaps be argued that fifth- and fourth-century Greece had a higher proportion of literacy than any other pre-modern society. Lacking adequate evidence, however, I am obliged to class the high cultures of India and China along with that of Greece on grounds of qualitative criteria such as the existence of universities, libraries, public inscriptions and village schools. More precise research may, however, reveal quantitative differences in literacy which are in fact crucial for some of the cultural differences to be discussed.

The Alphabet

Assuming that Greek, Indian and Chinese societies were all "advanced intermediate" with *relatively* widespread literacy, we come next to the question of the alphabet. The most salient fact is, of course, that although alphabetic writing has been known to the Chinese since the second century A.D., they have refused to accept it right up to the present time. The Chinese presumably rejected the alphabet because, by the time it was presented to them, their own more cumbersome script—a combination of ideographic and rebus symbols—had, over centuries, become the medium for a large body of literature, as well as being intertwined with religious institutions and accepted as the hallmark of the educated gentry.[2]

Chinese retention of predominantly ideographic writing seems to undercut some of the claims made for the alphabet by Goody and Watt. First, as I have argued, it is possible that literacy may have been almost as widespread in some periods of traditional China as was alphabetic writing in classical Greece. Second, this is certainly the case today. Universal literacy is an immediate goal in China, yet the Communist government, although it has devised a simplified script, has not instituted the alphabet. Widespread literacy does not, therefore, require the alphabet, although there can be little doubt that an alphabet, coupled with easily used writing instruments, greatly facilitates literacy. The fact that alphabetic writing, invented and permanently accepted only once in history, eventually spread from Phoenicia throughout the literate world with the exception of the extreme Far East, suggests that alphabetic writing has usually prevailed over ideographic because of its greater simplicity and analytic utility. The Chinese exception indicates, however, that ideographic writing *can* yield widespread literacy, and has done so where it was already deeply engrained before the advent of the alphabet.

It should perhaps be mentioned that the various Indian scripts are also not alphabetic in the strictest sense of the term, but semi-syllabic, a trait attributable to their direct Semitic origin (Kroeber 1948: 532). Only initial vowels have special

characters, and the characters for consonants carry the vowel *a* unless a special diacritical sign is used to remove it. Where two consonants precede a vowel, they are condensed into a single character. Vowel sounds other than *a* are represented by a variety of diacritical marks attached to the character for the preceding consonant. Most Hindu scripts are distinguishable from Semitic in having twice as many letters, new symbols having been devised not only for compound consonants but for sounds which occur in Indian and not in Semitic languages. Thus Sanskrit has forty-eight letters; Malayālam, the Dravidian language of Kērala, fifty-three.

The letters of Indian scripts are arranged in a phonetic and logical order, in which groups of sounds formed against the back and front palates, gums, teeth and lips, follow each other in sequences. Kroeber regards this arrangement as evidence that phonetics and grammar had developed into sciences in India before writing was introduced (Kroeber 1948: 533). Apart from the early, undeciphered Indus script, it is true that no known Indian inscriptions date from before the mid-third century B.C. Basham, however, thinks it possible that writing was introduced from Mesopotamia by merchants in the Aryan period before 600 B.C. (Basham 1954: 43). Kosambi believes writing was introduced by 700 B.C. in view of the evidence of urban routines, trade, and accurately weighed silver coinage by that date (Kosambi 1966: 88). I am unable to judge whether or how the semi-syllabic character of Indian writing, or its probable introduction by merchants and early rejection by the priesthood, may have influenced Indian modes of thought. Certainly, the Brahmans, like Plato, have always regarded written transmission of knowledge as inferior to oral. The orthodox maintain this attitude to the present day. It is for this reason that, in spite of the vast bulk of Hindu religious literature, the Vēdas themselves are still transmitted and memorized orally in villages—often, it must be noted, with very little understanding of their meaning. Indeed, they are not known to have been regularly written down or systematically edited before the second half of the fourteenth century (Kosambi 1966: 78).

I turn now briefly to the implications of literacy for modes of thought, as discussed by Goody and Watt. The remarks that follow are tentative, both because of the imprecision of some of the concepts and, even more, my limited knowledge of Indian and Chinese literatures. A beginning may, however, be attempted.

The Distinction Between Myth and History

India is noted for its dearth of historical records. It can probably be said that myth and history scarcely diverged before the Muslim period. The reason most commonly given is the theocratic character of Hindu society in most periods and the supremacy of the Brahmans. In Buddhism and Jainism too, although Brahman supremacy and the belief in gods were rejected, the material world continued to be denigrated or even seen as unreal. The search for truth continued to mean primarily spiritual truth to be found through meditation and right living. In such a society, where the highest aim of the dominant literacy class was to lift its eyes from both the natural and social worlds towards other-

worldly realities, it is perhaps not surprising that historiography failed to develop.

In China, by contrast, a this-worldly approach emphasizing profound interest in correct social relations was fostered by secular monarchs and bureaucracies of literati. Perhaps because of this, reliable historical research and exact chronological records appeared by the time of the first major empire (Han). According to McNeill, "the very bulk of surviving materials complicates the task of ascertaining the main lines of Chinese development, while giving (Chinese) political history an unrivalled precision" (1962: 304–5). Needham concludes that "the Chinese have one of the greatest historiographical traditions in the world" (1954: I, 74).

Lineal Conceptions of Time

Like all literate peoples, the Indians and Chinese had several conceptions of time, utilized in different intellectual contexts and by different social strata or occupational groups. In many contexts in both societies, especially among the common people, significant events were thought of as occurring cyclically, without precise measurement or chronology. This view of time applies of course to the succession of night and day, the light and dark halves of the moon, the annual seasons, the female menstrual cycle, and both the lunar and solar years. The Indians elaborated it to describe the four ages of human life and also the cycles of rebirth through which souls, both animal and human, were believed to pass.

Both Indians and Chinese thought of the universe, too, as existing in cyclical time, in contrast, for example, to the Hebrew view of time as a linear passage from the creation to the end of the world. The Hindus saw the universe as passing through cycles *(kalpas)*, each divided into fourteen secondary cycles *(manvantaras)* of 306,720,000 years. Each secondary cycle comprised seventy *mahāyugas* (aeons) and each *mahāyuga*, four *yugas*. Chaos supervened at the end of each *mahāyuga*, with the earth destroyed by flood or fire. The whole universe was thought to be eclipsed and recontained within the body of Brahma, the creator, at intervals within each *kalpa*. The Buddhists took a similar scheme of *kalpas* to China, together with a characteristically Indian view of the infinity of space and time, the plurality of worlds, and vast distances, comparable to light years, existing between the worlds. The Neo-Confucians of the Sung period also believed in time cycles, each terminated by chaos and each composed of a dozen ages.

As Leach points out (1958: I, 116), cyclical conceptions of time are in general characteristically primitive, since they do not require records or the notion of chronology. In the cycles of ages, however, the Indian and Chinese literati elaborated these primitive concepts through calculations of vast numbers. Since these numbers did not refer to empirical events they constituted a pseudo-scientific, "magical numerology." But they did set forth a view of the universe similar to the modern one in its stress on the magnitude of distances between planets and the infinity of time and space. Such conceptions of what Leach calls "magical time" are evidently widespread in early literate societies, the Babylonian and Mayan systems being comparable examples.

As might be expected from their greater concern with history, the Chinese had a stronger sense of chronology and thus of "linear time" than did the Indians. They were interested both in recording the correct chronological sequences of events, especially political events (what Leach calls "historical time") and also in accurately measuring the sequences in ten-year and sixty-year periods. Thus, although the Chinese, like the Indians, referred to events in terms of dynasties, their chronology of major events is judged accurate by modern historians back to 900 B.C., and is carried back with less certainty to 2,000 B.C., whereas Indian dynasties and major events can be dated only tentatively before the Muslim period. Both Indians and Chinese developed a number of calendars dating back to the beginning of particular dynasties, some of them of short duration. Both, of course, developed methods of measuring short divisions of the day through sundials, hour-glasses, etc., but the Chinese elaboration of water clocks and clockwork seems to show a greater concern with exact measurement of small units of time than was found in India.

In both countries, astronomy early became established as a science. Western classical astronomy influenced both countries, especially India, but both made advances on Greek astronomy as a result of their improvements in mathematics. The invention of the zero in India by the fifth or sixth century A.D., and its rapid transmission to China, was of course crucial in this respect and ideally requires a separate treatment in any discussion of the effects of systems of writing. It seems probable to me, indeed, that the presence or absence of the zero may be of greater significance for the development of several kinds of knowledge (astronomy, algebra, arithmetic and, ultimately, of course, the whole of modern experimental science) than is the distinction between ideographic and alphabetic writing. The subject is, however, too complex to be undertaken here.

As in ancient Greece, and in Europe generally until the seventeenth century, astronomy in both China and India remained bound up with astrology, as part of a belief in what Leach calls "magical time" (1958: I, 116). The movement of the heavenly bodies being believed to be co-ordinated with the fortunes of men, specialists made calculations from the planets to predict and guide actions both in the state and in the lives of individuals. Auspicious times had to be fixed for marriages, journeys, and other important undertakings, and portions of the day were regarded as favourable or unfavourable for particular activities.

Summing up, both India and China fit Goody and Watt's theories that societies with widespread literacy have some interest in exact time sequences and time-keeping devices, and some development of a linear concept of time. But cyclical and magical conceptions of time were also prominent in both countries, and in India, as contrasted with China, interest in the chronology of societal events was extraordinarily weakly developed.

Objective Descriptions of Space

Maps were prevalent in China from the third century B.C. Scientific cartography began with Phei Hsiu (A.D. 224–71), whose work has been compared with that of Ptolemy. The science developed in the Sung period, especially with the eleventh-century invention of the magnetic compass. By the fourteenth century Chinese maps were superior to European and comparable in accuracy to those of

the Arabs (Needham 1954: III, 556). Chinese sailing charts were also highly developed, especially from the fifteenth century, with the scientific exploration of the South Seas and the Indian Ocean.

By contrast, Indian geography and cartography are poorly developed in the extant literature, although pilgrims, military conquerors, seamen and merchants must have had a sound practical knowledge of India and the neighbouring regions. Religious cosmography and geography dominated the scene, although a small élite of Indian scientists recognized that the earth was spherical, and Brahmagupta (seventh century A.D.) gave its circumference with fair accuracy (Basham 1954: 488). In China, religious cosmography seems to have been confined to Buddhism and Taoism and to have been overshadowed by scientific cosmography and geography from early times (Needham 1954: III, 566). Both civilizations developed exact land records, and Indian astronomers, like Chinese, had a fairly accurate knowledge of the longitudes of important places in their own country. The scientific exploration and recording of space, like that of time, was evidently more advanced in pre-modern China than in India.

The Sceptical Questioning of Traditions and the Conscious Search for Objective Truth

Forms of scepticism and of reverence for tradition vary, so that it is difficult to assess this criterion. I would judge India to have been more tradition-bound and less sceptical than China, but both civilizations incorporated both attitudes. Orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism placed the greatest possible emphasis on the sacredness of oral traditions, on other-worldly preoccupations and on the observance of traditional ritual and custom. Hence, probably, the weak development of geography, experimental physics and chemistry, as well as the comparative lack of interest in chronologies of social events. On the other hand, Indian medicine and surgery surpassed those of the Greeks in some respects, developing through the Hindu interest in yogic exercises and the Buddhist concern with charity hospitals. The science of bureaucratic politics also had at least one famous expression in the *Arthasāstra* of Kautilya, supposedly a Brahman adviser of Chandragupta, India's earliest great emperor, of the fourth century B.C. Indians also went far in mathematics, phonetics, grammar, astronomy and other knowledge concerned with non-textual experience. Some schools of philosophical sceptics, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, questioned the existence not only of God but of the material universe itself. Those who chose mysticism as the path to salvation have also usually denied the validity of ritual and myth. Indian science was not, however, systematically experimental until modern times.

With its emphasis on secular and social learning, Chinese scepticism entered more pervasively into scientific history and geography, attacks on myth and on traditional knowledge, and the recording and comparison of physical and social events. Wang Chhung, philosopher-scientist of the first century, systematically questioned much of the received knowledge of his time, including beliefs in ghosts and immortality, the anthropocentrism of nature, and the connection between ethical and cosmic irregularities. After Wang Chhung the sceptical rationalist tradition became incorporated into much of Confucian thought, and

persistently combated both old superstitions and the new ones that appeared with the rise of Buddhism. Needham argues that traditional Chinese scepticism found its fullest development in humanistic studies, textual criticism and archaeology (1954: II, 390). China also outstripped other cultures at various periods in some branches of natural science, especially magnetic science, botany, zoology and pharmaceutics. Medieval Chinese science, in fact, contributed much that was essential to the groundwork of modern European science. Natural science in the Ming period was impeded from flowering to the extent that it did in Europe because of the Chinese failure to mathematize scientific hypotheses and to test them by experiment. Needham holds that the Chinese social structure, with its weaker development of overseas commercialism and its stricter separation of functions between mental and practical workers, was responsible for the failure to develop modern natural science. The same would be even truer of India, but there the scholarly élite was unconcerned not only with practical applications of most knowledge but also with the actual exploration of many facets of the material and social worlds.

Branches of Knowledge

The development of scientific logic came early in both India and China, supporting Goody and Watt's theory that writing (although not necessarily alphabetic writing) encourages sequential thought and the development of syllogisms. Both cultures divided knowledge into autonomous cognitive disciplines similar to those established by the Greeks, although, as we have seen, they emphasized and excelled in different fields. There was clear recognition of a world of knowledge transcending political units—especially in India, where empires were smaller and of shorter duration than in China. The question of the separation of natural and divine worlds, and of theology and science, is difficult in that early Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, as well as some schools of Hinduism, were in theory atheistic. If we shift the question to one of the extent of separation of the supernatural and the natural worlds, and of their study, this separation seems to have occurred, but to have been less complete in India and China than in modern Europe. Both in India and in China there were philosophers and scientists who disregarded or ridiculed the "knowledge" of religious specialists when it contradicted their own researches. On the other hand, such pseudo-sciences as alchemy, astrology and other forms of divination had an honourable place in the world of learning and appear to have been regarded by most scholars as inseparable from their cognate sciences such as chemistry and astronomy. I would question, in fact, whether the separation between supernatural and natural science has been as thoroughgoing anywhere in the past as it became in modern Europe with the application of mathematics to experimental science.

Social and Psychological Effects of Widespread Literacy

Substantially widespread literacy has not produced or been accompanied by "democracy as we know it" in either China or India, with the possible exception

of India since 1947. The concept seems too vague to test in its present form, although it may eventually be possible to relate specific uses of literacy to specific forms of the state. It does seem improbable that centralized states containing more than about a million people can exist, or can hold together easily, without some use of writing for political administration. Beyond this it is hard to generalize directly from literacy to political structure. Pre-modern states with substantial literacy have included aristocratic, oligopolistic and democratic city-states, feudal regimes, and bureaucratic despotisms of the "Oriental" type. Modern mass society includes both fascism and parliamentary democracy, as well as military regimes with varying popularity, in the capitalist bloc, and both highly bureaucratic centralism and more decentralized forms of popular participation in the communist world. There is little doubt that both the Maurya and the Han empires offered less popular participation in government than did sixth- and early fifth-century Athens. It seems doubtful, however, whether this difference can be ascribed to differences in literacy rates, for Athens' overseas expansion from about the mid-fifth century was accompanied by the growth of marked wealth differences and a more authoritarian political system. As Kosambi points out, moreover, a simple contrast between the ideals of the *Arthasāstra* and Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* is "pretentious irrelevance," for "Aristotle's royal pupil Alexander did not put the learned Stagirite master's political ideas into action. Athenian democracy failed after a singularly brief span, for all the supposed practical wisdom of its constitution, precisely because of Plato's closest friends" (Kosambi 1966: 141). I am inclined to emphasize ecology and external political and economic relations as causal factors in the development of political systems rather than the spread of literacy. On the other hand, the distribution of literacy between social and occupational classes may well be, in large measure, a *result* of the political and economic systems. The society's values and idea system, which are themselves heavily conditioned (although not, I think, entirely determined) by its current technology and social structure, may also act back to some extent to shape political forms and the uses of literacy.

Thus, it can be argued that ancient Athens developed political democracy mainly because of its small size coupled with the industrial and commercial character of its economy—indeed, its incipient capitalism (Polanyi 1957: 64–96); whereas China and India developed their centralized bureaucratic empires on the basis of their agrarian irrigation economies. There was, however, in all these societies a particular kind of "set" to the idea system, which may itself have been determined in large measure both by past history and by the character of the political economy and of men's reactions to its strictures. Thus in India, from at least the sixth century B.C., a strong strain of other-worldly asceticism made for the formation of small communities of scholarly ascetics, who went to live separately in the forests under relatively democratic forms of self-government. Such men pursued their own research into the nature of the good life independently of the main political structure, and in a sense lived above it. Later, monasteries were built for such communities of both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics, and, in course of time, in both India and China, monastic communities often acquired wealth and developed their own hierarchical administrations. But in both Hinduism and Buddhism the ideal persisted of the small community of

scholars living in voluntary poverty apart from the public domain. In ancient Greece, as in early China, by contrast, scholars who were out of power or alienated from the political scene, as were Socrates, Plato and Confucius, nevertheless studied politics and society rather than other-worldly salvation, for it was unthinkable in their societies that wise men would be unconcerned with public administration (McNeill 1962: 232–66).

A measure of democratic self-government also existed *within* some other occupational classes of traditional India and China, for example some merchant and peasant communities. But such institutions are probably not attributable to widespread literacy. Among south Indian Hindus, for example, the most egalitarian and democratic caste assemblies tend to be found among the lower castes of Harijans, almost all of whom were until recently illiterate. We cannot therefore simply attribute democracy to widespread literacy, although it is perhaps difficult for large-scale representative democracies—like large-scale dictatorships or bureaucracies—to function in the absence of substantial literacy.

Similarly, it does seem probable that widespread literacy tends to be accompanied by an interest in record-keeping. This interest was strongly developed in the political sphere in both India and China. Here again, however, I would argue that literacy in itself is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Literacy, along with high economic productivity, makes possible complex political economies, which in turn require a more or less great emphasis on record-keeping.

Again, I would not precisely agree with Goody and Watt that widespread literacy of itself necessarily produced "a vast proliferation of more or less tangible distinctions based on what people had read" (see p. 58). Nor would I agree that the development of widespread literacy necessarily produces the psychological alienation of the modern specialist. I would argue that classes, whether modern or ancient, are based primarily on division of labour and relationships to the means of production, and that differences in levels of literacy and reading habits tend to spring from these arrangements rather than giving rise to them. Further, it does not seem to be true that literate society has no system of elimination and thus no structural amnesia, as Goody and Watt argue. Many books do, after all, go out of print, and it is possible for literate societies, like primitive ones, to ignore phases of their own histories or to reinterpret their histories in the light of current concerns. Similarly, the alienation of overspecialization may be, I suspect, a feature of highly bureaucratized modern industrial states (whether socialist or capitalist) rather than pre-eminently of an overaccumulation of literature. In future, with the development of cybernation and thus of prolonged leisure periods, it may be possible to overcome much modern alienation by broadening the interests of the highly literate, breaking down the separation between mental and manual work, and creating wider areas of self-government.

At all events, psychological alienation can certainly result from other causes than literate specialization. Confucius, Buddha and Plato apparently all experienced acute alienation, but in each case this seems to have stemmed mainly from political impotence and disapproval of the goals of their own societies, rather than from the overspecialization of the scholar. In short, alienation seems to stem from particular forms of complex political and economic

structures rather than intrinsically from the spread of literacy.

The individualization of experience and the liking for privacy, again, do not seem to me necessarily to characterize literate society in general, although literacy may well be a necessary precondition for a high evaluation of privacy and individualism. In both China and India, the main body of literati evidently conformed rather strictly to the mores of their class and were discouraged from unwonted expressions of individual experience. Thus Granet writes of Chinese literate society in Han times:

> Civic morality, having gravitated towards an ideal of strained politeness, seems to tend solely to organizing among men a regulated system of relations, in which the actions befitting each age are fixed by edict, as are also those for each sex, each social condition and each actual situation. Finally, in political life, where the stage is reached of advocating the principle of government by history, it appears that it is claimed as sufficient for everything to follow solely the virtues of a traditionalist conformity. (Granet 1959: 427)

Compare Basham on the Sanskrit literati of classical Hindu society:

> The poets lived in a comparatively static society, and their lives were controlled in detail by a body of social custom which was already ancient and which had the sanction of religion behind it. They were never in revolt against the social system, and Indian Shelleys and Swinburnes were lacking. Most of this literature was written by men well integrated into their society and with few of the complex psychological difficulties of the modern literary man; hence the spiritual anguish of a Cowper, the heart-searchings of a Donne, and the social pessimism of a T. S. Eliot, are almost entirely absent. (1954: 415–16)

The main exceptions to these pictures of the conforming literati were, of course, the wandering mystics. Their devotional literature, tends, however, to deal with the relationship between devotee and supreme spirit rather than with unique or intimate interpersonal relations. Neither traditional Indian nor Chinese literature contains personal diaries, although Chinese has novels and numerous biographies, and some of the Indian dramas and narrative tales depict character with realism. The dialogue was also a preferred medium in the early philosophical literature of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, as in ancient Greece. In all these cases the dialogue seems to me, however, the medium of a society where much learning is still transmitted orally, rather than necessarily an expression of the individualized experience of a highly complex literate society.[3]

In general I would suggest that the intense individualism of modern western society is chiefly (albeit indirectly) a product of capitalism rather than intrinsically of widespread literacy. To the extent that the Greeks anticipated it, this, too, may have resulted indirectly from the commercialism and incipient capitalism of their economy and the consequently high degree of individual action and experience enjoyed by the literate community.

Conclusions

Contemporary China indicates that, although advantageous, the alphabet is not essential for widespread literacy. We cannot say whether *alphabetic* writing has particular effects: China lacks the alphabet, and India has semi-syllabic scripts. The literacy rates for traditional China and India are unknown, but both, like Greece, had substantial if not widespread literacy and are classifiable as "advanced intermediate" literate civilizations.

Widespread writing does not necessitate a clear distinction between myth and history, as India shows. It may require some degree of "linear" codification of time and of reality generally, but this is variable: cyclical conceptions of time can co-exist with linear, or even remain dominant, in quite highly literate societies. The scientific exploration of space is also widely variable as between comparably literate civilizations. So, too, is the sceptical questioning of authority. Both China and India reveal a conscious striving for objective truth which seems to spring from literacy and from the consequent emergence of scientific logic; but in India the search took primarily "inner" and mystical forms, while in China it produced an extreme interest in societal verities and in history. In neither did it turn toward the application of mathematics to experimental science. China and India both suggest that widespread literacy may automatically produce distinctions between the main branches of knowledge similar to those found in the West. They also indicate, however, that these may be developed with widely varying emphases.

Apart from some concern with record-keeping and some tendency to develop large and complex political units, societies with substantial literacy do not appear necessarily to produce particular forms of political structure. Widespread literacy may be necessary for large scale representative democracy to function easily, but it certainly does not necessarily produce democracy. As literacy develops and the number of written words increases, social classes and occupational groups are necessarily divided from each other partly on the basis of reading habits. I would not, however, regard this as a primary *source* of division between social classes, and it can apparently occur with quite variable amounts of social mobility. Widespread literacy does not necessarily, so far as I can see, produce extreme individualization, a marked need for privacy, or alienation. It is suggested that, in their modern forms, these spring more from capitalism or (in the case of alienation) from the bureaucratization and personal impotence experienced in modern industrial society, rather than intrinsically from literacy.

Writing, like other communications media, is problematic because it forms part of both the technological and the ideological heritage of complex societies, as well as being intricately involved with their social structures. Difficulties arise because it is hard to disentangle the implications of literacy from those of other techniques (for example, plough agriculture, settled cultivation, rapid transport or power industries), or of other institutions (for example, specialized priesthoods or powerful governments) commonly found in advanced societies. Literacy appears to be, above all, an *enabling* factor, permitting large-scale organization, the critical accumulation, storage and retrieval of knowledge,

the systematic use of logic, the pursuit of science and the elaboration of the arts. Whether, or with what emphases, these developments will occur seems to depend less on the intrinsic knowledge of writing than on the overall development of the society's technology and social structure, and perhaps, also, on the character of its relations with other societies. *If* they occur, however, there seems little doubt of Goody and Watt's contention that the use of writing as a dominant communications medium will impose certain broad forms on their emergence, of which syllogistic reasoning and linear codifications of reality may be examples. The partial supersession of writing by new communications media will no doubt throw into relief more and more of the specific implications of literacy.