

INTRODUCTION

Wimal Dissanayake

The fifteen essays included in this book primarily focus on two sets of important questions related to the understanding of the interplay among self, image, and culture. The first set of questions deals with the nature and significance of the interconnections of self and image. What is the nature of an image? How is it related to the concept of self? How do images—visual, auditory, tactile, and so on—serve to define the contours of the self and the dynamics of self-formation? The second set of questions addresses issues related to the ways in which cultural variabilities affect the relationship between self and image, the importance of culture in the construction of self and image, the role of cultural epistemology in self-constitution and image-construction. Both these sets of questions, it need hardly be added, are vital to an understanding of the interlinkages among self, image, and culture. Interestingly, the second set of questions serves to define more clearly the import of the first set of questions. In order to locate these questions in a larger discursive framework and horizon of understanding, it is important to pay attention to the conceptual cartography of self and image.

To think of self in terms of image is to open up an important avenue of understanding of self. Here I use the word “image” in its broadest sense to include the graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, verbal, and conceptual dimensions. Self and image are inextricably linked, and an inquiry into the complex functioning of images in human communication at various levels would underline their inseparably close linkages. Etymologically, the word “image” is derived from the Greek word *eikon*, connecting such meanings as

imitation, similarity, and likeness. Anyone familiar with Plato's dialogues will realize that this word constitutes an important dimension in his metaphysical speculations. The word image has been closely associated with metaphysical, aesthetic, and epistemological thinking in both the East and the West from ancient times, and hence a just estimate of its true nature and importance demands a study of the fascinating ways in which it is embedded in cultural, social, and political discourses of various types.

The relationship among self, image, and cultural communication is as complex as it is fascinating, as is borne out by the essays that follow. For purposes of analysis, we can examine this relationship at three levels: the way self is conceived through images, the way images are textualized, and the way readers and spectators respond to images and attribute meaning and significance to them. Let us first consider the ways in which self is conceived and produced in terms of image. Here I would like to focus on the work of three scholars representing the disciplines of philosophy, cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis. They are George Herbert Mead, Irving Hallowell, and Jacques Lacan. One can, of course, add to this list with profit. Mead addressed himself to the question of a unified and coherent self. He placed great emphasis on the concept of role in social life, but realized that a role or a number of roles by themselves will not generate a unified self. Mead conceptualized self as a phenomenon of cognition and hence questions of a unified and coherent self and self-consciousness are inextricably linked. A number of American social scientists have shown a great interest in the concept of self and its relationship to society. The theoretical writings of George Horton Colley, James Baldwin, and George Herbert Mead are particularly important in this regard. All of them have pointed out the crucial role played by society in the formation of self. The work of Mead deserves very close attention. His book, *Mind, Self and Society* has exercised a profound influence on many who have been concerned with the problematic of self. Mead, in his theory of symbolic interactionism, maintained that the self is essentially social and that it arises as a consequence of the interaction with other members of society. Its stability and changeability depends upon social interaction. This is indeed a phenomenon that one can observe in the earliest stages of human growth right up to adulthood and beyond. In childhood the self emerges as a result of symbolic interactions with a significant other that in later times paves the way for the interaction with a generalized other.

According to Mead and the symbolic interactionists, the self is what an individual is able to see for himself or herself as an object, an image. The

individual, through the exercise of the imagination, is able to become disengaged from his or her personhood and is capable of looking at the self as others do. What this really means is that the individual is able to assume the role of significant others and reference groups and see himself or herself from their perspectives. The self, then, according to the symbolic interactionists, is a social object that we can identify and categorize in a world of social objects. The idea of image is central, in the view of symbolic interactionists, to the constitution of self. The self is in point of fact the image that a person constructs of himself or herself in relation to the interactions with others.

Anthropologists who have written persuasively about the construction of self, too, have focused on the idea of image, although they may not necessarily have used that word. A. Irving Hallowell has pointed out the significance of what he has termed the "behavioral environment" on the formation of self, and this behavioral environment, as he saw it, was essentially culturally constituted. While agreeing with the notion that self-awareness is a generic human trait, Hallowell goes on to make the observation that the nature of the self, taken in its conceptual context, is a culturally identifiable variable. The human individual acts and behaves in accordance with a normative image that he or she creates on the basis of this behavioral environment. Clifford Geertz, who does not totally endorse Hallowell's views of the self, nevertheless makes the point that becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning, in terms of which human beings impart form, order, point, and direction to their lives. Hence the role of culture and inherited history is crucial to Geertz's understanding of self. Some of the concerns of Hallowell and Geertz have been fruitfully extended by modern ethno-psychologists who are interested in the cultural understandings and cultural formations of the self and the processes and dynamics of interplay by means of which these formulations find expression in quotidian life. The idea of culturally validated and normative images is at the heart of their thinking on the constitution of the self. As Hallowell remarked, an individual's self-image and interpretation of his or her experiences cannot be divorced from the concept of self that is characteristic of that society. Indeed, such concepts are the primary means through which different cultures promote self-orientation in ways that make self-awareness of crucial importance in the maintenance of social order. As he observed, "in so far as the needs and goals of the individual are at the level of self-awareness, they are structured with reference

to the kind of self-image that is consonant with other basic orientations that prepare the self for action in a culturally constituted world.”¹

The work of Jacques Lacan, in its own distinct way, also serves to highlight the importance of the concept of image in the constitution of the self. Lacan, while reinterpreting Freud in the light of cultural anthropology and linguistics, focused attention on the social and linguistic construction of self, and the idea of image is central to his project. According to Lacan, it is in what he refers to as the mirror stage that the articulation of self takes place. He believes that the recognition of the self by the child in the mirror proceeds in three stages. First, the child who is in the presence of an adult confuses his own image with that of the adult who is with him or her. Second, the child begins to realize that it is an image that he sees and not his or her real self. Third, he comes to the realization that what he sees is not only an image but that it is dissimilar to the images of others. Lacan develops these ideas in terms of the constitutive power of language in the making of the self. Once again we see an important dialectic between self and image.

I have so far discussed very briefly the role of image in the constitution of self. Next, it is important to reflect on the complex ways in which the image is textualized in various representational practices. Images do not produce meanings naturally and immanently. Indeed, as commentators like Roland Barthes have cogently pointed out, meanings are generated through various codes that are operative in representational practices, and they are consciously produced. What this means is that the generation of meaning through images takes place in diverse social, cultural, political, philosophical, and ideological domains. The relationship between text and image can be examined fruitfully at different levels of analysis. In terms of the themes explored in many of the essays gathered in this volume, the cultural encodings of images as they appear in various texts and representational practices can prove to be a productive line of inquiry. Let us, for example, consider a genre-like portraiture where one would think that cultural codes and conventions play a very inconsequential role. In point of fact, however, the opposite is the case. As Richard Vinograd points out, one of the central paradoxes of portraiture in any culture is that it purports to be about individuals, but to communicate effectively it must of necessity rely on the shared codes and conventions. Commenting specifically on Chinese portraiture, he says that it is important to bear in mind the fact that while Western cultures place greater emphasis on the value of individualism and personal autonomy, Chinese culture stresses family affiliations as the source of identity and the acting out

of designated social roles as the realization of the self. These characteristics and valorizations find eloquent expression in Chinese portrait paintings in interesting and complex ways. As Vinograd remarks, "One culturally widespread system of signification that was relevant to the experience of portraits at large was that of physiognomy. The lore of physiognomic and phrenologic fortune-telling was part of everyday culture of traditional China. Human appearances were thought to be revelatory not only of personal characterological traits but also of fated destiny in terms of familial prosperity, professional success, and other crucial life events. Physiognomy and portraiture were thus both linked to the performance of familial and social roles."² What these remarks point to is the centrality of codes, conventions, and discourses of a given culture in shaping images of self.

Next we need to discuss the relationship between image and audience as a way of probing into the constitution of self through images. Images, whether they be in poetry or in cinema, tend to act as signifying systems positioning and addressing the audiences in diverse ways. This does not, of course, mean that the audiences have to passively accept the self-positioning decreed by the images. Indeed, very often they resist such positionings. What is interesting to observe here is the interaction that texts set in motion between images and audiences in different cultural practices. How readers, listeners, and spectators make sense out of the images presented to them in symbolic contexts has much to do with the cultures that they have been born into. Similarly the social and historical conjunctures from which images arise and in which audiences are located are crucial to the constitution and communication of self through images. Let us for example consider Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography.³ The "prison" is clearly the dominant trope in it, operating at a number of levels of signification. One can identify at least five dimensions. First, there is the physical presence of the prison in the narrative with all the connotations of restrictiveness, loneliness, and oppression. The prison constitutes a massive presence in Nehru's autobiography, and some of the most memorable accounts deal with the life of the prison. Second, the prison becomes a metonym for the British administration that Nehru and his colleagues in the Congress were so vigorously fighting against. In prison, Nehru saw the inhuman side of the British administrative apparatus of repression at its worst. Third, the prison becomes for Jawaharlal Nehru a metaphor for the constricting ways of thought that India has inherited from feudal times and within which he has to operate in his struggles to emancipate India both politically and spiritually. His attempts to break out of the prison

house of tradition constitutes a significant dimension of the book. Fourth, the way in which the autobiographical narrative unfolds, the prison becomes emblematic of the troubled relationship that he had with Mahatma Gandhi. Fifth, the trope of the prison becomes an enabling device to give definition to, and provide us with, a hermeneutic for understanding Nehru's agonizing consciousness that he was a member of the bourgeoisie who was seeking to lead the Indian masses. In his autobiography, Nehru seeks to convey a complex image of himself. However, this image derives its force and emotive power from the social and historical conjunctures from which it arises and in which the readers are located. Without a deep awareness of the intertextualities, the roots of his cultural life, the complex image that he constructs will not yield its full significance. As John Berger rightly points out, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception and recognition of an image also depends upon our own ways of seeing and understanding.

The importance of image in the understanding of self cannot be over-emphasized. As many scholars have convincingly argued, self can best be understood in terms of narration, and the end product of narrative is a powerful image or a complex of images related to the character or characters in the narrative. This is most evident in autobiography, lyric poetry, and first person narratives in fiction. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur observed that, "Our own existence cannot be separated from the accounts we give ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false; fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity."⁴ What this remark underlines is the fact that self is produced through the instrumentality of narrative, and what all narratives end up with is an image or complex of images of the self. What these narrativized images serve to accomplish is to give concreteness to what we valorize and hold in high esteem and to articulate in terms of cultural representation what a person is and what he or she desires. It provides the orientation for living. Scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor in their different ways have explicated the centrality of narrativized images in the construction and understanding of images.⁵

Most intellectual traditions, in both the East and West, posit an idealized image of the self, and the aim of virtuous men and women should be to approximate that image as closely as possible in day-to-day life. Let us, for example, consider Confucianism. The concept of self found in Confucianism is most interesting and can help us better understand the relationship between

self and image. Confucianism abhors the all too familiar polarities of body and mind, sacred and profane, self and society, inner world and outer world, which in many ways have contributed to the current understanding of self. As Tu Wei-ming remarks, it seeks to emphasize the relationship between part and whole, inner and outer worlds, surface and depth, root and branches, substance and function.⁶ The emphasis shifts from the static, mechanistic, and analytical distinctions of earlier Chinese thought to subtle relationships, internal resonance, dialogical interplay, and reciprocity of influence. Consequently, Confucianism seems to promote an idealized image of human beings that valorizes connectedness, interdependence, and the infinite potential for development.

According to the teachings of Confucius, the self needs to be perceived as the center of relationships in an open system. The idea of self-actualization entails the promotion of human interrelatedness in ever-widening circles that would include the self, the family, the nation, the world, the cosmos. Indeed, the search for self-actualization needs to be seen as search for interrelatedness. As Tu Wei-ming has observed, since the self as a center of relationships is an open system, self-actualization entails the establishment of an ever-widening circle of human relatedness.⁷ Such a circle must also rise above selfishness, nepotism, anthropocentrism, and ethnocentrism in order to preserve its authenticity and dynamism. Clearly, there is a dominant moral strain in Confucian thinking. When poets seek to create idealized images against which their lives can be measured, they invoke this Confucian image. The essay on Du Fu's poetry contained in this volume aims to bring this out. Similarly, most other religious and intellectual traditions of Asia, as indeed in the West, embody an idealized image of an exemplary person that needs to be emulated and against which the successes and failures are measured.

Similarly we can examine the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a religious and philosophical poem that continues to exert a profound influence on the thought and sensibility of the Hindus, inflecting their attitudes to self and social order.⁸ Just as in the *Analects* by Confucius, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is enfigured an image of an ideal person that invites admiration. The idealized image that emerges from the *Bhagavad Gītā* is of a person committed to the maintenance of the *Dharma* or the sacred law and order and duty as decreed in Hinduism. He follows meticulously the norms of conduct prescribed in accordance with his social background, age, kinship structures; the term *Dharma* carries with it associations of religious and social duties that one has to perform in keeping with one's position in the social ladder. It is

also linked to one's own mental and spiritual development. The idealized image given figurality in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is of a person who pursues diligently his duties and is deeply aware of his moral obligations. He is committed to the proposition of performing actions without attachments to the fruits of action. The ideas of discipline, duty, spiritual knowledge, love of and devotion to the divine are central to the constitution of this idealized image as represented in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He constantly seeks to transcend his egotistical desires through the devotion and pursuit of spiritual knowledge; he is engaged in a profound quest for self-actualization that is to be achieved through the total identification with the power of Being. This ideal person aims to emancipate himself from the fetters of worldly existence through detachment and union with the Absolute. It is a composite image of this nature that emerges from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and that becomes the norm against which later writers have sought to measure their own projected valorized selves in their writings.

If we take a poem like the *Dhammapada* from the Buddhist tradition we can find the emergence of an image that is somewhat different.⁹ Behind all texts such as the *Dhammapada* that seek to influence our moral conduct, we can discern an image of a highly valorized ideal person who inspires emulation. In the case of the *Dhammapada*, this ideal person is one who is thoughtful, mentally serene, disciplined, free of excessive sensual desire. He is engaged in a quest for real freedom through the instrumentalities of nonattachment, self-control, and the cultivation of wisdom and insight. He is one who does not depend upon any supernatural powers and seeks by dint of his own effort to overcome the suffering that inheres in the world. Indeed, it is this complex image that gives coherence to the poem and invests it with emotional power.

In the essays that follow, the way images of self are represented in literature, painting, cinema, and so on, are discussed in relation to Chinese, Indian, and Japanese cultures. Hence the idea of representation deserves closer study. Traditionally, representation was seen as a transparent act. A poet, for example, writes about an incident and the language that he or she uses is merely an instrument of communication; it is transparent. However, as a consequence of newer theorizations on this subject it has become evident that language is not transparent; the poet is not totally in command of the language. Language always exceeds the writer's intentions and creates ambiguities of meaning. Moreover, questions of cultural discourse, power, ideology, and so forth, are never absent from representation. Hence when we examine the ways in which images function to construct meaning in works of literature, cinema, and art, we need to pay closer attention to the problems associated

with representation. In this volume, one such problem that is repeatedly stressed is the role of culture—how cultural codes, conventions, discourses, and valorizations shape these images and give them life.

The papers included in this volume, needless to say, do not explore all the varied and knotty interconnections between self and image that I have hinted at. However, they do focus attention on the cultural work of images and the role that culture plays in shaping the idea of self as image. They underline the need to examine the relationship of self and image in the context of a larger thought world. Many of the essays contained in this book deal with representational practices like art, literature, and cinema. The point that often emerges from these essays is that works of art are not transhistorical and transdiscursive and that they serve both to reflect and inflect social discourse. Any discussion of the construction of self through images has to bear this in mind. With this line of thinking as a backdrop, many of the chapters in this volume explore the role of images in the life of individuals as well as cultures, especially as manifested in China, India, and Japan. Hence, this book as a whole, I believe, opens an interesting window onto the complex ways in which culturally grounded, culturally produced, and culturally legitimized images connect with the concept of self in China, India, and Japan.

Arthur Danto's essay serves the purpose of widening the discursive boundaries of self and image and introducing a newer angle of approach. Although it does not specifically deal with Asian cultures, the distinction it draws between sign and manifestation, symbol and expression, is extremely helpful in understanding the elusive nature of self and how it gets constructed discursively in representational practices.

Notes

1. A. Irving Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955).
2. Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits 1600–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 5.
3. Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980).
4. Paul Ricoeur, "History as Narrative and Practice," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 29, N. 4 1985, p. 214.
5. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre

Dame Press, 1984), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

6. Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

7. Ibid.

8. Wimal Dissanayake, "Bhagavad Gītā and the Discourse of Social Order." Typescript.

9. Wimal Dissanayake, *The Path of Virtue—An English translation of the Dhammapada*, with a critical introduction. Forthcoming.