

Representation of China through Malayali eyes: An Analysis of *Marunna*

China (Changing China) by V.K. Madhavankutty

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Abstract:

Travel writing is a popular literary genre that has been gaining acceptance in the recent times. Studies are limited on Indian travel narratives written in regional languages. The present study aims at familiarizing the travel narratives written on China by Malayali writers during twentieth century, with a focus on *Marunna China (Changing China)* by V.K.Madhavankutty. It is inferred from the study that Madhavankutty has tried to portray China at its best without being prejudistic or stereotypical as a foreign traveller. His true quest to understand China and how he perceives China as reflected in the narrative is revealed through the study.

Index words: Travel-China-Malayali-Twentieth century-Representation

I Introduction:

Maarunna China (Changing China) is a travel narrative written in Malayalam by V.K.Madhavankutty and published in 1979. This work is considered one among the significant

travel narratives written on China during twentieth century by a travel writer from Kerala. He is a famous journalist and the narrative is written based on his four weeks stay in China as part of his official visit along with a group of journalists. Unlike other travel narratives, this work by Madhavankutty is not an easy read as it has several layers of history and political background of China and a constant discussion of its past, present and future. He goes there with the Indian Foreign Affairs Minister to visit and study about the Indo-China relations. This work discusses various facets of the life of Chinese people in depth and presents the facts in an effective manner to the Malayali readers who has an age old bond with China.

The prominent travel critic, Carl Thompson in his definition of travel writing states that, “it reveals something of the culture from which that writer emerged, and/or the culture for which their text is intended” (Thompson 10). Agreeing to his definition, the travel narrative *Marunna China (Changing China)* reveals the Malayali culture of V.K Madhavankutty as he presents his views on China to the Malayali reader community.

Research and Findings:

The research is qualitative in nature and textual analysis is carried out as a research tool. As the primary text is written in Malayalam and not translated, necessary translations of the passages are provided by the authors of this paper. Apart from the primary text, a background study of China and the political, social and historical context during twentieth century is carried out to analyze the work in detail.

The early travels from China to India as given by Xiaofei Tian in his article, *Chinese Travel Writing* thus:

The first extant travelogue by a Chinese author about his foreign travels was written by a Buddhist monk, Faxian (c.340–c.421), who embarked on a journey to India in 399 ce in search of the complete Vinaya Pitaka, a text outlining rules and regulations for Buddhist monks and nuns. The land journey took him through some thirty kingdoms of Central Asia and India; thirteen years later, he finally boarded a merchant ship from the 'Kingdom of Lions' – Sri Lanka – and returned to China via the sea route (185).

Unlike other countries, travelling to China during twentieth century was not so easy as several restrictions were imposed on the travellers who showed interest in visiting China.

Chinayil Oru Yatra (1952) by K.M.Panicker is supposed to be the first Malayalam travel narrative written on China by a Malayali writer post-independence in Kerala. K.M. Panicker wrote this travel narrative based on his experiences of working as an official in China. He looks around various parts of China during the last three weeks of his stay before retirement and such experiences are contained in his narrative.

China Munnottu (1953) by Joseph Mundassery is another narrative written on China. During such a time, when there happened several talks on the transforming China, the popular Malayali writer Joseph Mundassery set out his journey to find out the actualities of China as part of his participation in the Peace Conference in Peiking. He spends more than a month's time there and his fascination for the changing China towards progress is reflected in the travel narrative. Another interesting work, *Ente China Paryadanam* (1984) by T.M.Jacob also contributed to the travel writings on China by Malayali writers.

Marunna China as the title indicates, presents the changes that the travel writer as a journalist witnesses in China in various realms. The travel writer makes a comparison between the developments in China and those in his country. He is astonished by the degree of

development that China has acquired in a short span of time and lists down various transformations that China has witnessed after the rule of Mao.

The Malayalam travel critic Ramesh Chandran, in his work, *Sancharasahityam Malayalathil (Travelogues in Malayalam Literature: A Study)*, makes a detailed study of the various travel narratives written by Malayali writers on China and he observes: "If Joseph Mundassery's *China Munnottu* is a great travel writing about China during the rule of Mao, V.K. Madhavankutty's *Maarunna China* becomes an extensive study about the changes in China after Mao" (Chandran 217).

The writer mentions his conversation with a Chinese officer:

we do not fall under the category of a rich and prosperous country; ours is a country of poor laborers. Whatever we have here is enjoyed by all our citizens without any difference. You may only write whatever you see here in our country (48).

In another instance, an official said, "Even though the wages we get here is not that huge, with that we are able to eat enough, dress well and satisfy the basic needs of our family" (60). He observes that China strives hard to attain progress in different fields of life with the help of its citizens who work sincere towards the development of their country.

From visiting communes to schools to factories, the travel writer shows interest in knowing about the economic, social, political facets that shapes the day to day life in China. As rightly observed by the critic Roy Bridges, the critic Roy Bridges-

Travel writing...has a complex relationship with the situations in which it arose. It is taken to mean a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture. Travel writing may embrace approaches ranging from an exposition of

the results of scientific exploration claiming to be objective and value-free to the frankly subjective description of the impact of an area and its people on the writer's sensibilities (53).

The travel writer, in this context fits into either of these approaches as he takes the stance of being objective while providing details on the historical and geographical facts about China and at the same time, he gives a subjective description on the socio-political aspects in China based on his personal experiences and presents his perspectives in a descriptive manner.

For instance, his concept about the capital city of a prosperous country is altered by visiting the city of Peiking in China. In his words, "one does not feel that Peiking is the capital city of a rich country. Many old houses of poor families can be seen. Nobody owns a car or scooter and most of the citizens use cycle as their means of transport" (34).

In another instance, he describes the dressing style of people in China. He writes: "In China, everyone dresses in a uniform manner in either blue or grey colours. Unlike in Kerala, they do not wear any gold or jewelry except for the tribal people in villages" (37).

Unlike other writers of his time, Madhavankutty does not objectify the women in China and instead he expresses his happiness in seeing women enjoying equal privileges like that of the men population and wishes to see a similar approach in his native land. He also familiarizes the agricultural practices as well as the educational trends in China to his Malayali readers.

The traveller writes about the film and entertainment industry in China and how it is different from that in India and particularly in Kerala, where the actors are given much popularity and stardom,

"one cannot hear the usage of 'star value' here in China. Though there are many experienced artists in the field, it is not the actors, but the content of the film that catches

the attention of the audience in China. It takes almost thirty lakhs to make a colour film and the time span to complete a film project can go up to eight months” (103-104).

Likewise, the travel writer describes in detail about the unique Chinese cuisine, the cultural practices as well as the political ideologies that holds the residents of China. His narrative style is simple and employs a journalistic approach of viewing and reporting a country that is not so familiar to his targeted readers.

Conclusion:

After making a thorough analysis of the travel narrative, the historical facts about China and how such facts are described through the eyes of a Malayali travel writer are revealed. It may be concluded that *Maarunna China (Changing China)* remains a significant work in marking China during the changing times and it presents an unbiased view of China to the Malayali readers during such a period in Kerala, when mobility was limited to distant lands.

As this travel narrative has been written in the 20th century, it shows the developing stage of China in various fields. By taking up travel narratives written in 21st century by Malayali writers on China, the transition of China from a 'developing' country to a well 'developed' country can be taken up for further research.

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