

In Memoriam

G. William Skinner, 1925–2008

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Part I: A Professional Appreciation

George William Skinner, the most important American anthropologist to study China in the 20th century and a towering figure worldwide in China studies and spatially oriented social science, died of cancer on 26 October 2008. With his boots on.

Bill Skinner was born in Oakland, California in 1925, the son of a druggist and a music teacher, and attended Berkeley High School and Deep Springs College, a tiny, two-year, all-male institution in the California desert. He then entered the US Navy, where he was trained at the Navy Oriental Language School, continuing an interest in Asia that had begun at least as early as Deep Springs. After the War he attended Cornell University, where he earned his BA in Asian studies in 1947 and his PhD in anthropology in 1954. He was field director of the Cornell Southeast Asia Project from 1951 to 1955, and research associate in East Asian Studies from 1956 to 1958. After a brief stint as assistant professor of sociology at Columbia from 1958 to 1960, he returned to Cornell as associate professor of anthropology from 1960 to 1965. He was professor of anthropology at Stanford University from 1965 to 1989, and at the University of California, Davis, from 1990 until his formal retirement at age 80 in 2005. He continued active research until shortly before his death. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1980, and was President of the Association for Asian Studies in 1983.

A truly great scholar is defined less by his specific topics of interest than by his cast of mind and patterns of thought. Skinner's mind and thought were those of a social *scientist*, searching for patterns, causes and systematic relationships among variables, and building testable models of those patterns, causes and relationships. This intellectual habitus led him to eminence beyond his own discipline – he was at least as well known in geography, demography and sociology as in his home discipline of anthropology. In fact, he was somewhat uncomfortable with the “soft,” critical or humanistic side of anthropology. This requires a little explaining, because he was such a humanist beyond the classroom – an accomplished pianist, a lover of all kinds of music, the father of a professional conductor, a connoisseur and collector of Chinese and other Asian art – and because he always thought of himself as an anthropologist. I even remember his saying once that the point of all the hexagons, arrows and tables was to explain culture. Perhaps it was the impossibly high standards he set for himself that prevented him from engaging actively with anthropology's more literary and humanistic side. He greatly admired and appreciated what his humanistic colleagues did,

but he did not feel he was up to the task. He had confidence in his own strengths, and it was in the area of modelling systems that he made his lasting contributions.

Skinner modelled social systems along three quantifiable dimensions: time, space and demography. Each of his major projects emphasized some of these dimensions more than others, but all his work was concerned with the relationships among them. He began by emphasizing the spatial dimension, when he flew to Chengdu in late 1949 to begin fieldwork for what would have been his dissertation, on the structure of markets on the Chengdu Plain. The plane made a semi-crash landing in a rice field, and Skinner had a fever at the time, but he quickly settled in the town of Gao Dianzi for fieldwork that was soon interrupted by the arrival of the People's Liberation Army. They sent Skinner to Chengdu, where he resided with the Willmott family, practised the piano, and had his field notes confiscated. Still, this brief field experience formed the foundation for his spatial modelling, and led eventually to one of his most influential works, "Marketing and social structure in rural China," published in three instalments in the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 1964–65. In this work, Skinner deployed the central-place theory of Christaller and Lösch to model social structure in rural China as a hierarchy of nested systems based on the centripetal and centrifugal flows of people, goods and ideas following an intricately meshed pattern of periodic and daily market schedules. Although these articles are usually cited as examples of spatial modelling (they have been standard in geography classes for many years), the second and third articles are mainly concerned with the evolution of spatial systems through time. This temporal emphasis led to Skinner's immense influence among a generation of historians of China, including Philip Kuhn, Evelyn Rawski, Susan Naquin, Joseph Esherick and many others. There were also those, including historian Philip Huang and economists Barbara Sands and Ramon Myers, who disagreed with Skinner's precise model, but developed their own alternatives as reactions to Skinner's. It is thus no exaggeration to say that China studies post-"Marketing and Social Structure" was a different field than it had been previously. And Skinner continued his interweaving of temporal and spatial scales in further work, including *The City in Late Imperial China* (1977), *The Chinese City between Two Worlds* (with historian Mark Elvin, 1974), and three integrative articles: "Chinese peasants and the closed community: an open and shut case" (1971), "Mobility strategies in late imperial China" (1976) and the magisterial summary in his 1983 presidential address to the Association of Asian Studies, entitled "The structure of Chinese history."

A second major project involved a different kind of space–time interaction. Lacking data to complete a dissertation based on his abortive Chengdu field experience, Skinner travelled to Bangkok in 1951–53 to study the social structure of the Chinese community in Thailand, which was the topic of his doctoral dissertation, later turned into two books, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (1957), and *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand* (1958). These works represented Skinner's only real, extended ethnographic

research, but typically for him, they were not only systematic in their own right, but formed the basis for his extremely influential comparative model of assimilation among overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. There he drew contrasts between societies such as Thailand, where Chinese identity was ordinarily extinguished by the third generation of immigrants, and those such as Malaya and Indonesia, where separate Chinese communities maintained their identities across the centuries. Several articles explored this field of comparison over space and time, culminating in “Overseas Chinese leadership: paradigm for a paradox” (1968).

Skinner’s third major project, on family organization, began with the Chinese in Indonesia; he travelled to Jakarta between 1956 and 1958 as part of his project on comparative overseas Chinese communities, and there he became intrigued by families that had enough children (eight or more were common) to test the ideas he had been forming about sibling position and personality. Skinner was intrigued by the literature on sibling position in psychology, but was openly contemptuous of the actual models that scholars had used to differentiate, for example, between first, only, and later children, considering them hopelessly simplistic. Instead, he took his systematic models from coalition theory, deriving personality outcomes from the particular configuration of parents and older and younger siblings of both sexes. In my memory, Skinner was forever working on charts showing the relationship between sibling position and other variables, but little of this work was ever published in his lifetime. He did, however, continue to extend his work on family demography and demographic history in China, and expand it to other parts of the world where data were of better quality than those available for China. He wrote one major synthesis, “Family systems and demographic processes” (1997), as well as a case study on “Conjugal power in Tokugawa Japanese families” (1993). Among the unfinished projects left at Skinner’s death are “The cultural logic of Chinese reproductive behavior,” “Fertility–nuptiality index and spatial analysis in France” and “Family system change in modern China.”

These three dimensions of structure – space, time and demographic process, remained Skinner’s focus to the end of his life. And as he grew older, the electronically based possibilities for sophisticated modelling and analysis grew greater, his ambitions broader and his standards higher. Early computer programming enabled his monumental, three-volume *Chinese Society: An Analytical Bibliography*, a project to which Skinner devoted much of the best years of his life and one that was already obsolete by the time it was published, having been eclipsed first by electronic and then by online bibliographic resources. But other projects enriched by new technology are destined to have a more lasting legacy. Two papers that came out of the China Regional GIS project that he co-founded at Harvard are models of how regional analysis can shed light on contemporary problems: “Differential development in Lingnan” (1994), and “China’s fertility transition through regional space” (2000, with Henderson and Yuan). As he was dying, Bill called upon his long-time local collaborators

Mark Henderson and Kyle Matoba, his Harvard colleagues Peter Bol and Merrick Lex Berman, his Seattle protégé Bill Lavelly, and his students Michele Ladenson and myself to continue work on 12 unfinished projects, five on regional systems to be headquartered at Harvard, and seven on family and demography to be headquartered at Seattle. He programmed his boots to keep marching, but who could fill his shoes?

G. William Skinner is survived by his wife, Professor Susan Mann, by their daughter Alison Skinner, by his former wife Carol B. Skinner, and by three of their sons, James, Mark and Jeremy Skinner. His eldest son, Geoffrey, was killed in a tragic accident in 1989.

Part II: A Personal Remembrance¹

For me, Bill Skinner was 42 years of superlatives. The tallest, the thinnest, the blondest, the nattiest, the fussiest, the courtliest, the earliest, the tardiest, the scariest, the grammatically stickliest, the most systematic, the most synthetic, the most eclectic, the most perfectionist, the greatest connoisseur, the hardest worker, the most loyal, the most generous, the most intimidating, the most inspiring, the most interesting, the most important person in my professional life.

Sometime in Fall 1966 as an audacious 19-year-old junior, I found my way through the sandstone columns of Stanford's Old Union to the temporary office of some new professor who taught the anthropology of China, to ask if I could enrol in his Winter Contemporary Chinese Society class without the prerequisite. Why did he agree? He asked me where I had done my undergraduate work, and loaded me down with a thick syllabus and bibliography list.

Even as an undergraduate I felt his magnetism and his intellectual force. Like everyone else in the China studies community at Stanford, I both got what we called *The Green Weenie* – “It’s a nice paper, but it shows an almost militant disregard for all important theoretical considerations” – and received the benefit of hours’ worth of tiny squiggles from his famous Red Pen, culminating in summary comments like “very encouraging,” or “deserves further work.” Positive comments like those were not as immediately memorable as *The Green Weenie*, but in retrospect they were probably more common, and when they happened they made our day.

In May 1969, he changed my life for good. I was just back from nine months in Taiwan as an East Asian Studies master’s candidate, Barbara and I were recently married, and I needed a summer job. I was, frankly, scared to go to Skinner, but I knew he had money for graduate students to work on his massive Bibliography Project. To my surprise, he offered me something different. I was reputed, he

1 The personal remembrance was distributed at the memorial service for G. William Skinner, held at Davis, California, 20 December 2008. I am grateful to Susan Mann for encouraging me to publish it. For help with the facts presented in the professional appreciation I am indebted to Eugene Hammel, whose biographical memoir on behalf of the National Academy of Sciences can be found at books.nap.edu/html/biomems/gskinner.pdf. The term “Green Weenie” was invented by Carter Weiss.

said, to have the best classical Chinese this side of Susan Mann, and what he really needed was someone who could read local gazetteers and plot market towns on his huge mylar maps of the Ning-Shao region. I eagerly accepted, and that summer I learned how supportive and loyal Skinner could be. He praised my work, repeatedly – no Green Weenies all summer – and by late July I was telling him maybe I wanted to be an anthropologist. He told me that September's PhD class had been chosen in February, but he would talk to the Department Chairman as soon as the Chairman returned from Guatemala on 8 September. On 9 September, Skinner called me at home to tell me I was in the PhD programme. He had the Chairman in his pocket the entire time.

His teaching style mirrored his research style. Usually late to class – thought of one more thing – always calm and precise, always welcoming questions, but never afraid to say what he thought. In class as in print, his vocabulary was a kind of signature – systems, synthetic, perduring, nested, node, abode, this *qua* that, something else *par excellence*, and one thing *cum* another. Also, “imbecilic,” “puerile,” and that all-time favourite, “egregious.” “Individual” was an adjective, not a noun; his Red Pen would teach us the difference between “which” and “that” if it took our entire graduate careers. We had a vocabulary for him, too. He was “Mr Skinner” to his face, “Skinner” otherwise, except that his secretary Charlene would call and say “G-doubleU-S would like to talk to you.” When Barbara and I were in the field in Taiwan, he wrote a letter and signed it “Bill.” This meant, we surmised, that we were supposed to call him “Bill.” Easier said than done, but we managed it, blushing at first and then more naturally. After that, Charlene would call and say “Bill would like to talk to you.”

He attended anthropology and East Asian Studies gatherings now and then, though he usually faded out sometime before 9 pm, since he had been up since who-knows-when and at work since 4:30 am at the latest. And when he wasn't there, he was the sole topic of conversation. Senior faculty, assistant professors, grad students, staff, spouses and partners – it didn't matter. What we talked about was Skinner. What was he wearing when we saw him scoot by in the yellow sports car, who got the Green Weenie that week, did he modify his stance on medicine as the counter-clockwise exception to the compliance cycle? One time, at a gathering mostly for graduate students, the word spread that Skinner was about to show up. Would he eat the burgers we were grilling? Maybe somebody should rush out and buy him a steak. Would he sit in the improvised, graduate-student furniture, or should we try to find a nice chair? As I recall, Skinner showed up and sat happily on the rug and had a burger.

In 1974, Ron Nigh and I were both about ready to finish our degrees, both living on the same courtyard in married student housing in Escondido Village, with wives who liked to cook and two-year-old daughters. We all decided that before we scattered, the Harrells to Seattle and the Nighs to Mexico City, we should invite Skinner to dinner (he might have been Bill to his face by then, but behind his back he was still Skinner). Kippy and Barbara decided on the menu, including several things from Julia Child, and spent two days preparing. We talked

incessantly about the plans. Where should Skinner sit, what would Skinner like to drink, would Skinner eat apple pie, did we need special dishes for Skinner? Finally the night came, and we sat, everything ready, on the edges of our chairs in the Nighs' living room. A knock came on the door. Two-year old Asha ran excitedly out of her room, and shouted "Hiiiiiii, Skinner!" He loved it; he always loved babies and little children.

Later on, saying "Bill" was no problem, and he lost some of his earlier edge, but I was never one of those for whom, as a colleague put it, "God William Skinner turned into Just Plain Bill." As friendly as we were – to the point where Bill and I could share a dinner in Chicago with several glasses of good wine, Bill scraping the last chocolate sauce off the dessert plate with his thumb and then licking it clean – he was always the mentor, always the beacon, always the standard that none of us could ever quite reach. When I sent him drafts for comments, I was more than a little nervous waiting to see what he would say. When he praised an NSF proposal of mine (anonymous review, but all those *quas* and *par excellences* gave it away), his praise was more than just something that would help me get funding. When he introduced my talk at Davis in 2004, I was overwhelmed by his tribute. But did I deserve it? I still needed to try harder.

The man is gone now, but the beacon, the tall, thin, blond, demanding, loyal, generous, perfectionist beacon is still shining, and the greatest tribute we can pay is to continue our ultimately futile quest to live up to his standards. We have said "Byyyyye, Skinner," but China Studies, like so many other fields, will feel his presence for a long time to come.