

Unity and Diversity:

Explaining Culture and History

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This is a personal reflection on how Professor G. William Skinner's scholarship has deeply influenced generations of academics who are interested in state agrarian societies and their modern transformations. I juxtapose his regional systems analysis with the works of Maurice Freedman, Arthur Wolf, Myron Cohen, Barbara Ward, James Watson, and David Faure to highlight their perspectives in explaining unity and diversity in Chinese culture and history and in understanding "the original trans-local society and its modern fate."

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I thank Professors Shu-min Huang and Shuenn-Der Yu, for inviting me to participate in a panel organized by SEAA on July 4, 2009 in memory of Professor G. William Skinner. I am proud to have been a student of Bill Skinner and very honored to have a chance to comment on his scholarly influence. This is not a formal paper, but more a reflection on how some of us have engaged with his work. On things Taiwan, I must defer to my academic elder brothers, Stevan Harrell, Steven Sangren, and John Shepherd. I have devoted most of my thirty years of research to the China mainland.

Unity and Diversity: A Cultural Nexus of Power

A generation of Asian anthropologists has focused on complex state agrarian societies with literate traditions, long histories, and broad geographic spread. Both in theory and method, it is crucial to place our ethnographic site, research subjects, and our own positions in larger structural contexts. One clearly cannot treat Chinese culture as timeless and bounded. The question is how to appreciate its infinite diversity and intense unity. How do centers, regions and localities relate to one another through layers of sociality, economy and polity? Furthermore, how are the layers represented in spatial and temporal terms?

Few would deny the unity and diversity embedded in the historical evolution of Chinese civilization. However, different disciplines have given this process different emphases. Philosophers may see the continuity of a cultural core, and political scientists may stress integrative administrative mechanisms. Anthropologists and historians, on the other hand, focus more on differentiating folkways and localized events. My focus in this paper is on the different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon and process. Professor Skinner and some of his most noted peers (Maurice Friedman, Arthur Wolf, Myron Cohen, Barbara Ward, James Watson) provided various models with their own theoretical assumptions. If one creatively combines their subjects and conceptual schemas – marketing structures; hierarchies of gods, ghosts, and ancestors; marriage, family, and property related to kinship, descent and contract; popular drama and ritual practices – one may find dynamic life worlds linking villagers to various cultural complexes of power, interest, and authority. Together, these societal structures form an organic “civil society” from which individuals and groups have drawn their identities. They relate to this cultural, historical repertoire in symbolic and instrumental terms. Through such layered interactive processes, the imperial state reached out to local subjects.

On the general question of how centers relate to localities, I should mention Mark Lewis' book, *The Construction of Space in Ancient China* (2006). Through his me-

ticulous reading of ancient texts, Lewis delineates the narrative strategies of an imperial enterprise that gave its subjects respective places, linking the individual, family, lineage, community, and region to what claimed to be the political center. Cultures and customs that differed from the imperial core were rendered “regional” and “at the margins.”

Professor Skinner’s spatial framework is much less reliant on elite (statecraft) views and the decoding of literate texts. He sees Chinese dynastic history as constituted by regional cycles of economic growth and decline. His concept of regional systems begins with a model for a hierarchy of rural marketing structures created from villagers’ calculations of transport costs. The periodic marketing schedules for highly differentiated central places allowed maximum circulation of goods, people, and information (Skinner 1964, 1965). The peasant world opened and shut with the pulsating rhythms of periodic markets and dynastic fortunes (Skinner 1971). At higher-level marketing nodes, economic functions intertwined with administrative ones (Skinner 1977, 1985).

The important insight we draw from the Skinnerian model is that the world of peasants in late imperial China, however discreet and homogenous at one level, was cut across and connected to the next higher level of marketing and social activities. With a Durkheim touch and neo-classical economic assumptions, Skinner viewed regional systems as structurally differentiated and functionally integrated. Peasants were calculating economic actors, and there was no stark rural/urban divide. As social, cultural, and economic units, communities were porous in a dynasty’s heyday. They turned inward only in times of political decline and endemic disorder. If an anthropologist defines a locality as within the physical (or administrative) boundary of a village, he/she might have only a partial view of the “site.” Analytically, the basic unit of analysis for the Chinese peasant world should start with a standard marketing community, not a village.

Maurice Freedman, on the other hand, does not map social and cultural content onto an economic skeleton to describe the body politic. He starts with cultural principles – those of kinship and descent. Working from a structural-functional perspective, Freedman argued that rich rice agriculture and the need for irrigation and defense created the conditions for the emergence of corporate lineage communities in southeastern China in the late imperial period.

Freedman’s seminal works on kinship organizations may differ from Bill Skinner’s in their theoretical assumptions, but his insights on unity and diversity were similar. Corporate kin groups stressed their unique identities, which were reinforced by written genealogies, landed wealth, ornate ancestral halls, elaborate rituals, and even belligerent political behavior against local competitors. But they were linked to higher-order kin organizations (real or fictive) that extended far beyond local society. Moreover, they sought authority from a shared Confucian culture and morality, the origin of which was credited

to the political center. Improvising on the unifying structural principles of kinship and descent enabled the formation of a diverse range of lineage organizations on the ground.

One must not let our interest in kinship formations overshadow the dynamics of popular religion and its state-society interface. Arthur Wolf (1974), Stephan Feuchtwang (1992) and James Watson (1985) each in their own ways stress the percolation of the imperial metaphor and political etiquette to everyday popular beliefs and religious rituals. Generations of peasants might have never left their villages, but through ritual practices, they earned their respective places in the imperial order and learned the authoritative workings of the bureaucracy (Emily Ahern 1981).

This cultural complex of power linking center to locality would not be complete if we leave out the formal workings of the civil service examination system. According to intellectual historian Benjamin Elman, the examination system sustained cultural, social and political reproduction in which the economic power of land holding, the social power of education, and the political power of officialdom remained intertwined over the centuries (1991). The resilience of the imperial system rested on it being practiced as a cultural idea. It took on the appearance of imposing political machinery only in times of crisis.

The integrative mechanisms of cultural practice, be they formal educational institutions based on classical scholarship or the vernacular stories and theatre performances in popular circulation, helped construct identity and define membership. In his forward to a volume on the Chinese narrative by Andrew Plaks, the literary scholar Cyril Birch has the following to say:

Chinese stories and novels no doubt belonged to a minor tradition rather than to the central elite culture of historiography, philosophical prose, and lyric verse. But the divergence can easily be exaggerated. The long cycles that seem to have grown like coral reefs by process of accretion ended by enshrining the moral values and philosophical bases of an entire civilization....Read by children or by the semi-educated, orally presented by storytellers or transferred to the dramatic stage, the great masterpieces of fiction confirmed cultural identity just as surely as the dazzling beauty of the cathedral told the European peasant he was a Christian. [Plaks 1977: xi]

The Original Translocal Society: A Weberian Turn

Each scholar has his/her own theoretical take. While appreciating how our teachers blazed the trail, David Faure and I have tried over the years to go beyond them, to find a distinctive path for historical anthropology. David Faure (2007) has been very much influenced by Max Weber and by Barbara Ward's work in the New Territories of Hong Kong (1985). He assigns to lineage and to other formations historical moments of conscious construction. For instance, in a review of his book (Siu 2007a), I highlight his point that it was during the Ming and Qing, as the empire was extending to a developing Pearl River delta, that claiming settlement rights became an important component of lineage construction in South China.

Affiliation with literati pedigree (real or fabricated) and migration charters in lineage genealogies all point to translocal elements in the making of local society. The language of lineage in late imperial China was a powerful means for indigenous populations to differentiate into ethnic and Han, settled farming groups, the mobile, and the excluded. A "site" comprised of lineages, full of meaningful cultural markers, was a historically grounded construction defined by those involved in its making (Faure and Siu 1995). We term this process "the original translocal society" (Faure and Siu 2003). Clearly influenced by Barbara Ward's model developed in her work on the fishermen in Kau Sai, Hong Kong, in the 1950s (Ward 1985) and the importance of an imaginary "center" in local self-fashioning, David and I lean toward viewing the region as a conscious construct. Identities, statuses, institutions, and alliances are remade and negotiated, in flux with human intentions, meaningful manipulations and power play.

But things do come together, and it is that conjuncture of historical processes which produces significant regional structures with a lasting impact. Here, we beg to differ from Professor Skinner's perspective. Where, in his 1985 Presidential Address to the Association of Asian Studies, he used cyclical structures of growth and decline in regions to illuminate dynastic histories, we use historical processes to understand how certain regional structures emerged and were selectively remembered as guiding principles for action.

A New Rural-Urban Interface

What has been the modern fate of the original translocal society? This is an important question for any social scientist who selects his/her "site" of research. Here Skin-

nerian perspectives have given me a great deal of conceptual inspiration. Allow me to illustrate with an example. When I started my fieldwork in the 1970s in Guangdong, Vivienne Shue, a political scientist, went to North China to conduct hers. By the 1980s when we were colleagues at Yale University, we had good-natured debates about how much the Maoist state had penetrated rural society. Her book, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (1988), argues that villages continued to assume the form of traditional villages – isolated, earth bound, and cellular – and that the local cadres acted as patrons to their village clients in resisting the Maoist state. But I drew a different conclusion in South China (Siu 1989). Granting that regional differences may exist between the north and south, the crucial point of our difference was the way we conceptualized “village.” I perceived traditional Chinese villages as having a history of being very “translocal,” as described by Skinner, Wolf, Freedman, and for North China, Prasenjit Duara and others. In the 1970s, I saw the product of three decades of deliberate social engineering: the hierarchy of marketing systems was replaced by state channels of supply and procurement; complex alliances within and among lineages, temple cults, crop-watching and irrigation societies had become insignificant with the demise of ancestral estates, halls, rituals and their managers; community festivals were largely erased from public memory; popular religion and the rituals in which the pantheon of gods – *Tudigong, Chengwang, Beidi, Hongsheng, Tianhou, Guanyin*, among numerous others – was displayed were no longer available to a younger generation of villagers; temples were abandoned and ritual specialists discredited and replaced by ideological campaigns trumpeting the achievements of the Maoist revolution. In a word, diverse forms of cultural authority were step by step marginalized and all but destroyed. What remained was the skeleton of a traditional site, a cellularized village with a drastically shrunk social world, a cultural vacuum, and a local leadership whose authority was increasingly dependent on the party-state machinery. The villages I saw in the 1970s were stripped-down versions of traditional villages, left bare by three decades of intense political transformation under Mao. If I had not had a long historical understanding of how villages were constructed and embedded in hierarchies of marketing nodes and sociality over the centuries, I would not have appreciated how reduced they had become in the Maoist era. I have used my monograph, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution*, to illustrate the processes of that reduction.

Another diversion of mine from the Skinnerian perspective is in my conceptual treatment of human actors. It intrigues me that for centuries, members of local societies were able to join the imperial state on their own terms, bringing diverse cultural resources into the process. In our historical work on the Pearl River Delta, David Faure and I have argued that local society was integrated into the Chinese imperial system through

the constant redefinition of lineages and territorial and ethnic identities. We reconstruct the “civilizing process” in the Delta by highlighting how local inhabitants used symbolic and instrumental means to become part of Chinese culture and polity (Faure and Siu 1995).

Over the entire twentieth century, however, one sees a process in which villages and their residents were “othered.” They were typically seen as passive victims swept along by political currents quite beyond their control. As an ideological category, peasants became an object of transformation in reform or revolution. But I argue that historical processes were forged with a great deal of complicity from peasants themselves. The word “agent” in my book is often misunderstood by colleagues as *dailiren*. In fact, by agent I mean a person who complied, acquiesced, resisted, and was also complicit with larger political forces. The peasants made themselves as they helped make the revolution.

Spatial dynamics where the rural and urban intersect, a Skinnerian preoccupation in late imperial and republican periods, continue to influence the way I view post-reform China. In the past few years, I have ventured into another kind of locality – village enclaves at the margins of rapidly growing Chinese cities. In “Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Spaces in Post-Reform South China” (Siu 2007b), I stress the importance of historical argument in interpreting contested “space.” I would highlight two points from that piece here. First, the two hundred million migrants who flock to the cities are not experiencing “translocality.” Rather, their physical movements carry the heavy historical baggage of cultural and institutional isolation imposed by decades of a restrictive *hukou* system. Moreover, the original village residents in these *chengzhongcun*, who rent their collective village land to factories and their private houses to migrants, are not rural remnants of a previous era waiting to be transformed into modern urbanites. They and their migrant tenants are grappling with three major phases of China’s development at once – the lingering socialist bureaucracy that no longer values labor, an unbridled and amoral market distorted by state policies and entrenched interests, and a government eager to promote national pride at all costs. The villagers are forced to dig in their heels. They shrewdly and at times desperately manipulate the rising values of their collective land on the edge of expanding cities. They find eager clients in the migrant workers who subject themselves to substandard housing in return for low rent. They collude with local officials who reap unimaginable profits from real estate deals and then construct new central business districts, highways, and malls to satisfy their vanity. All are major stakeholders in China’s lightning progress toward becoming the world’s factory and a modern global player. The villagers, however rich they become, and their migrant renters, however mobile they seem, are caught in a kind of social, cultural, and political trap, grounded within this fluid urban space.

By stressing power and meaning as I think through the villagers' predicaments, I have taken a distinctly Weberian turn away from Professor Skinner's definition of locality and human action. Still, as a point of contrast to the village enclave's "modern cellular fate" in today's China, Professor Skinner's insights about the original nested, translocal model of villages and village life could not have been more relevant.

To conclude, Professor Skinner was never a conventional scholar. His analytical interests spanned macro and micro perspectives, and covered demography, geography, history, economics, politics, sociology and anthropology. I have drawn much inspiration from his pioneering conceptualization of regional systems and the cultural dynamics of state agrarian societies. We might have differed in our approaches, but he was most generous toward his students. Some of us have made every effort to further what he started, to look beyond the theoretical schema of our times. For his commitment to us as a teacher and colleague, I am forever grateful.

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同一與分殊： 詮釋文化與歷史

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本文為筆者反思施堅雅教授的學術風範：對於國家農耕社會（state agrarian society）及其現代轉變有興趣的學術世代，有深遠的影響。筆者將他的區域系統分析與 Maurice Freeman、Arthur Wolf、Myron Cohen、Barbara Ward、James Watson 和 David Faure 的作品並列，強調他們如何詮釋中國社會和文化的同一與分殊，及理解原初之「跨地方社會（translocal society）與其現代命運」的觀點。

關鍵詞：跨地方，中國社會，同一，分殊，施堅雅
