

Lessons for General Social Theory in the Legacy of G. William Skinner from the Perspectives of Gregory Bateson and Terence Turner

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It cannot be said that G. William Skinner's legacy has failed to receive the attention it deserves – indeed, it is widely recognized by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists as among the most important bodies of work in the study of China. Skinner's methodological caveats with respect to controlling for hierarchically structured social space and temporally patterned social time (i.e., cycles) and his massive efforts to discern order in intimidatingly complex Chinese social process and history have set a widely emulated, although seldom achieved standard. Nonetheless, important lessons for social theory at more abstract and general levels in Skinner's work remain largely unrecognized – to some degree even by Skinner himself. To demonstrate this point, I call attention to unexpected analogies to Skinner's most general visions of social process in the works of anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Terence Turner. Specifically, Bateson's attempts to discern social life, evolutionary processes, and individual psychology as linked or “nested” cybernetic learning systems invite reconsideration of Skinner's work. Turner's Marxian-inspired analyses of small-scale societies as “recursively hierarchical” systems of social production and reproduction envision a part-whole/local-encompassing dialectic that has important affinities to Skinner's overarching view of China. Building upon these similarities, I argue that they suggest nothing less than a thoroughgoing critique and reconsideration of fundamental categories of social and cultural analysis, that is, what we imagine “culture” and “society” as *systems* to be. More concretely, I suggest that Skinner's early efforts to accommodate the vast temporal horizon and unparalleled complexity of “China” as analytical object constitute an important object lesson with respect to contemporary academic discourses on topics like “globalization” and historical change.

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Introduction

I am honored to contribute to this special issue of the *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* celebrating G. William Skinner's legacy as teacher and scholar. "Needless to say,"¹ Skinner's academic achievements in China anthropology, in comparative sociology, and in regional analysis are unmatched. No other China anthropologist has influenced cognate disciplines – political science, economics, sociology, history – as profoundly.

The importance and quality of Skinner's work has been widely recognized, perhaps most notably in his election to the National Academy of Sciences (1980), a rare achievement for an anthropologist. Yet in his home discipline, anthropology, his interests and achievements have had less impact, apparently perceived as tangential to anthropology's defining focus on culture. Among those preoccupied with various currents of disciplinary fascination of the past three decades – structuralism, post-structuralism, the "interpretive turn," postcolonialism, globalization, etc. – Skinner's work on regional organization and cyclical process has generated relatively little comment or interest. This oversight is symptomatic of the movement of anthropology's center of gravity toward humanistic questions and methods and away from those of social science.² In this milieu, Skinner's work seemed too macro in focus, too heavily data-oriented in method, too unapologetic in its allegiance to empirical discovery and scientific objectivity. Probably most importantly, his work seemed distant from the discipline's focus on meaning – in my view a misapprehension to which I return below.

So, although it would be ludicrous to suggest that Skinner's work has been overlooked, his legacy's relevance to mainstream anthropological theory has been insufficiently appreciated. Throughout his extraordinarily productive career, Skinner was a relentless and effective advocate for the analytical payoffs gained by controlling for location in hierarchically organized social space and for phase in cyclically pattern social process – lessons more thoroughly appreciated by sociologists, economists, and historians than by cultural anthropologists. But his advocacy of methodological control for spatial and

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- 1 This favorite phrase is diagnostic of Skinner's logic-driven prose. Skinner's writing is laudable for its clarity, parsimony, and transparency, by which I mean that in his prose argument comes before displays of erudition, implicit academic alliance building, ego construction, or other extraneous values.
 - 2 Bell weathers of this "interpretive turn" are Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* and *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973a).

temporal context should not be construed as a narrowly behavioristic or reductive focus foreclosing interest in more widely discussed issues fundamental to social and cultural theory.

In this vein, my first thought for an essay celebrating Skinner's work was to develop a critique of how uses of "globalization" now ubiquitous in anthropology fail to measure up to the standards Skinner set earlier with his work on the complexity of China's social system in spatial and temporal terms. China's complexity and scale certainly rival that of the contemporary world system, and Skinner's work constitutes welcome inspiration and rectification for the overly metaphoric imageries – especially with respect to social-cum-cultural space – and the sweeping grandiose historicism that in my view diminish much academic discussion of "globalization."³

Although this is an important critique (and I shall suggest briefly some relevant elements), I have chosen instead to identify and develop a potential that is more evident in the style of Skinner's thinking than in the substance of his work. In brief, I suggest that, at a high level of abstraction, Skinner's vision of hierarchically nested social space and cyclically patterned social action bears important similarities to Gregory Bateson's use of Bertrand Russell's theory of "logical types," on the one hand, and to Terence Turner's emphasis on part-whole relations in the dialectics of social production, on the other. I juxtapose these three scholars' works in part because each constitutes a distinctive and highly original vision that I have found helpful in my own work. But I also suggest that although they seem to have little in common, they in fact share a laudable vision of non-reductive dialectical complexity. This vision is implicitly out of synch with the ethos of much contemporary anthropology which, in the face of postmodern heterogeneity, critiques of Western orientalism, and movement toward interpretation and away from explanation,

3 Emblematic of the sort of discussion I have in mind here is Arjun Appadurai's ambitious and influential book, *Modernity at Large* (Appadurai 1996). Skinner freely but informally expressed disappointment with respect to the looseness of much contemporary scholarship, but avoided, for the most part, published critique, preferring to marshal his energies more positively by producing better analyzed and empirically grounded examples in his own work.

has flirted with disavowing anthropology's status as science⁴ I begin with a brief overview of those elements in the thinking of each of these scholars that warrant comparison.

G. William Skinner

Skinner is best known for his pioneering work on regional systems, epitomized by his paradigm-setting series of articles on marketing systems that appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (Skinner 1964, 1965a, 1965b).⁵ The broader potential of this approach is developed most thoroughly in several substantial essays included in the *City in Late Imperial China* (Skinner 1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1977d, 1977e). These contributions, among others, constitute nothing less than a revolution in social-scientific and historical understanding of "China" as a human phenomenon and, it follows, as an object of academic understanding.⁶ One can quibble with some of the details, but his main idea stands – that China is best conceived as an amalgam of nine physiographic macro-regions structured complexly by a nested hierarchy of economic system levels and tied together by an only proximately isomorphic bureaucratic system that is governed by imperatives quite

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- 4 Here and elsewhere I allude briefly and critically to contemporary trends in anthropological discourse. One of the reviewers of this article notes that invoking Skinner's work as an antidote to such broadly characterized trends in the absence of greater specificity (i.e., naming and characterizing particular scholars' arguments) risks painting with too broad a brush. Although I agree, I retain these shorthand characterizations, first, because I believe most readers will recognize the trends I mention; second, because launching a more thoroughgoing critique would distract from this paper's main points and, as noted above, Skinner himself generally refrained from doing so; third, because it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the implicitly dissident, or at least defiantly independent, tenor of Skinner's work with respect to much of mainstream anthropology. I do, however, cite a few particularly influential and representative examples.
 - 5 Of course, Skinner's earlier work on overseas Chinese in Thailand was pathbreaking with respect to its focus on urban social organization, ethnicity, and history, and it remains a benchmark study (Skinner 1957, 1958). Skinner's editorship of his massive bibliography, *Modern Chinese Society: An Analytical Bibliography*, was also a major contribution to scholarship (Skinner 1973). But with respect to general theoretical issues, Skinner's greatest impact has remained in the area of regional analysis.
 - 6 In a recent assessment of the significance of China anthropology to general anthropology, I invoke Skinner's work (Sangren 2004). Despite the fact that China constitutes what is arguably a single ethnographic case and is in this sense not unique, China is unique with respect to its scale and complexity. It is the challenge of comprehending this scale and complexity that defines China's significance for anthropology. Skinner's pioneering work stands nearly alone in taking up this challenge.

different from those governing “natural” economic systems. It would be difficult to overstate the significance and originality of this vision. In the wake of Skinner’s work, dichotomies of social space like urban/rural or generalizations of historical process in China as a whole that do not distinguish among China’s macro-regions seem naïve. Although this dimension of Skinner’s work is still insufficiently integrated into China studies, it is relatively well recognized and, no doubt, what Skinner himself would most emphasize.

Less widely appreciated, however, is Skinner’s interest in emergent economic rationales structuring regional systems and in the administrative efficiencies associated with social control, taxation, and bureaucratic organization; metaphorically speaking, he devised a sort of Cartesian/spatial-cum-temporal framework for understanding a whole spectrum of social and cultural phenomena not generally approached in these terms.⁷ Several of Skinner’s remarkable but less frequently noted articles provide provocative illustrations.

For example, and apropos of contemporary anthropology’s disavowal of ethnography limited conceptually and geographically to local communities conceived of as autonomous cultural worlds, Skinner’s early articles on marketing systems pointed out the fallacy of approaching Chinese villages as isolated or autonomous social worlds. This point was amplified in his 1971 discussion of the temporally cyclical and functionally differentiated processes (i.e., economic, cultural, political) of interaction linking villages to higher-level regional systems (Skinner 1971). Briefly stated, Skinner argues that social and cultural interactions linking villages in a complex civilization to wider regional and political formations “cycle.” The so-called “closed corporate community” proposed by Eric Wolf – and later elaborated by James Scott – is, at least from the perspective of China, symptomatic of a particularly un-integrated *phase* of a cyclical process, and should not be misconstrued as a constant of agrarian civilization (Scott 1976; Wolf 1957). Chinese villages, as Skinner so eloquently argues, have never been wholly autonomous social worlds, but are elements in a system whose measure of integration and, inversely, local autonomy varies – that is, cycles – in response to the state of the system as a whole.

7 Reflecting on his work, Skinner himself indicates that, although much of his work sets about re-conceptualizing how we comprehend social space, “The intellectual excitement comes with the substantive analyses that the spatial framework makes possible” (Skinner 2004: 48). Much in this spirit, I develop a critique of great tradition/little traditions rubrics that builds from Skinner’s framework elsewhere (Sangren 1984). Many of the issues revolving around cultural and social complexity that occupy contemporary discussion of globalization are anticipated in attempts to reconcile so-called “great tradition” and “little tradition” approaches to comprehending agrarian societies.

By the same token, dichotomies like urban-rural or, relatedly, traditional-modern are crude and misleading with respect to understanding complex societies like China. In comparison, the penchant of some contemporary theorists of globalization to suppose that the world has moved recently along a trajectory from autonomous, bounded, local cultures toward de-territorialized, trans-national, global forms is an egregiously lazy misapprehension of both the undeniably changing complexity of the contemporary world and the state of some imagined, even romanticized, past.⁸ Such dichotomies are fundamentally misleading because they assume that changes in social systems are unidirectional, ignoring not only cyclical processes, but also the fact that cyclical process is intrinsic to the system under study. Further, contrasting local to global systems ignores the fact that systems are regionally structured and nested in ways that, again, are intrinsic to understanding what, in fact, the system one claims to describe actually is.

Social worlds are patterned at many levels, so the cavalier leap from local to global without attending to mediating processes throws into question the degree to which we can take contemporary academic discourse seriously. This point comes across with particular force in Skinner's analysis of mobility strategies in late imperial China (Skinner 1976). Skinner shows that patterns of local-system specialization and migration up the hierarchy of central places has long been an important social and cultural part of Chinese civilization, effectively integrating *and* differentiating local, regional, and macro-regional systems in characteristic fashion. The point is not so much that local communities are no longer bounded social worlds, but that in China they never have been. Parenthetically, Skinner's analysis reveals that "diaspora," another catch-phrase of the contemporary academic infatuation with de-territorization, has been a constant and important element of China-as-system for centuries. From this vantage, then, Skinner's Cartesian spatial-cum-temporal coordinates are much more than methodological controls essential for good social science, as Skinner himself frequently emphasized; even more fundamentally, they are intrinsic to social process itself. Skinner's work thus avoided the contemporary penchant to leap from the problematically conceived bounded, territorialized cultures of the past to the equally problematic notion of the contemporary world as somehow transcending spatial structuring altogether.

8 Again, I refrain from plunging into a thoroughgoing review and assessment of anthropological interest in "globalization" here, but note George Marcus's review and championing of multi-sited ethnography in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Marcus 1995). Many of its points were not only wholly anticipated, but in fact realized in actual empirical analysis in Skinner's oeuvre. Yet Skinner's work does not merit mention in the article.

The foregoing vision of layered, synergistic complexity is amply demonstrated in Skinner's essays in *The City in Late Imperial China* and elsewhere, but it is perhaps most succinctly and imaginatively conveyed in a short but dense article co-authored with Edwin Winckler on policy cycles during the Maoist era (Skinner and Winckler 1969). In this remarkable analysis, Skinner and Winckler propose a model of policy cycles that links local-system responses to mainly ideologically driven initiatives from central power holders in a fashion that explains elegantly how China vacillated between radical change and more liberal respites during the 1950s and 1960s. That there were policy cycles was abundantly evident to all, but the Skinner/Winckler analysis shows how understanding the nature of these cycles is enhanced by understanding the spatial-cum-temporal nature of China-as-social system. The dialectics of initiative-response-feedback evident in this model calls to mind Bateson's approach to social systems as cybernetic in nature, or, in Bateson's terms, as "learning" systems.⁹

In some respects, although I suspect that Skinner himself might not agree, the policy-cycles article conveys most succinctly and evocatively the breadth of Skinner's vision of what manner of phenomenon "society" in fact is. My reason for suspecting that he might disagree is because the article's analysis is presented explicitly as a model; compared to Skinner's work on regional systems, this model is more speculative and lacks the massive bulwark of empirical and quantitative data¹⁰ that he clearly viewed as essential

9 A frequent complaint leveled at systems-oriented analysis, that it cannot accommodate change, seriously misses the point. Change from the vantage of cybernetics is intrinsic to a system. Of course, systems at a higher logical type or system level can generate stimulus external to the particular system under scrutiny, and thus initiate change therein. In quite different language, Piaget's models of the development of cognitive systems in terms of assimilation (i.e., system reproduction) and accommodation (change or adaptation) constitute a good example (Piaget 1962). The essential point is that to understand change, one must understand not only the nature of the system that changes, but also its context with respect to higher-level systems in which it is embedded and lower-level ones that it encompasses, on the one hand, and the likelihood of cyclical system dynamics, on the other.

10 Skinner's prolific publications are augmented by a massive legacy of unpublished but largely analyzed geographic and demographic data, data which should provide an invaluable resource for future scholarship.

to a wholly compelling social analysis.¹¹ Still, the article brings together in a closely reasoned case the synergistic links between spatial and temporal organization, on the one hand, and the cybernetic/dialectical nature of system-as-process, on the other.

Gregory Bateson

Gregory Bateson became something of a cult figure in the 1960s, yet assessing his impact on anthropology is difficult. He is widely respected for having been ahead of his time in many respects; his introduction to *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* remains one of the most powerful critiques of reductionism in social science (Bateson 1972). Yet against the current of much contemporary anthropology, self-conceived as interpretive more than explanatory, Bateson defined his interest in phenomena as varied as octopus communication, schizophrenia, alcoholism, art, cosmology – the list appears to have no boundaries – as unapologetically scientific.¹² In this regard, David Lipset's excellent biography is appropriately subtitled "Legacy of a Scientist" (Lipset 1980). Although Bateson is admired for the breadth of his philosophical vision, his insistence upon viewing anthropology as a science vexes some. For example, George Marcus, in an otherwise appreciative assessment, takes him to task for precisely this approach (Marcus 1985). I suggest that Bateson, like Skinner, remains a somewhat peripheral figure, both admired but also

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- 11 Carol Smith, inspired by Skinner's work, provides an illuminating discussion of the role of deductive model building and inductive data-based generalization that dispels widespread confusion as to their respective strengths and draws attention to the synergies between them possible for social-science research (Smith 1976). The crucial point is that scientific progress depends on model-building inspired by data and by data production and collection inspired by theory-generated modeling. Thus, critics have pointed out that Skinner's early market-system models derive deductively from contestable "maximizing" (neo-classical) assumptions. But in broader terms, Skinner's employment of these assumptions is proximate; his work is not set up to validate the assumptions as explanations for behavior, but rather to propose a model to ascertain whether it adequately accounts for data or observation. Where observation/data deviate from the model, the model must be modified or abandoned.
- 12 Note that Bateson described his thinking as simultaneously loose and rigorous, by which he meant that seeing pattern replicated in phenomena lacking any material connection – e.g., schizophrenia and Iatmul rituals – requires license to think freely in terms of similarity of pattern rather than reductive causation. But comprehending the operations of cybernetic process also requires allegiance to logical rigor. My comparison here of thinkers as evidently unconnected as Skinner, Bateson, and Turner is an exercise in much the same spirit.

little emulated, because anthropology has moved so enthusiastically in a humanistic as *opposed to* a scientific direction.¹³

Bateson's later works, especially *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* and *Mind and Nature*, are complex and philosophical and, I would argue, still insufficiently assimilated by anthropology and cognate disciplines (Bateson 1972, 1979). I cannot develop this claim fully here, but would draw attention to the inspiration Bateson drew from Bertrand Russell's theory of logical types and John von Neumann's work on cybernetic theory. Bateson noticed that cybernetic systems – that is, systems that can be characterized by stimulus generated from outside, response, and effect or feedback – can be discerned in a wide variety of natural and cultural phenomena, including evolution, computers, psychopathologies, and, notably, culture. Moreover, in such systems, understanding or explanation pertains to system organization rather than to reductive material causalities. And most importantly, cybernetic systems are both constituted by or encompass other cybernetic systems at different logical-typical levels and are themselves contained within higher-level systems. For example, from the vantage of a species, stimulus originates in environment, and response is in the form of natural selection and genotypical change. Yet ecological studies reveal that this level of adaptation – a form of learning – is itself embedded in a longer temporality in which species' adaptations can effect (feed back into) changes in environments or ecosystems.¹⁴

In other words, and here we observe affinities to Skinner's work, complex systems like ecosystems or social systems are constituted of differentiated levels or logical types. Moreover, it is in the nature of such systems that what is external to any particular system level is internal to a larger encompassing one, or may be better understood in the context of a smaller encompassed one. Terms like change, adaptation (which

13 I concede, again, that my broad-brush characterization shortchanges massively complex philosophical debates. Few enthusiasts of pragmatism, interpretive anthropology, and other critics of essentialism or reductionism explicitly disavow scientific values, often arguing instead to the effect that cultural phenomena are better approached in philosophically different terms. Glosses like the "human" or "interpretive" sciences are invoked both to index the distinction between anthropology and "harder" (i.e., more quantitative, data-oriented) social sciences and to finesse the question of anthropology's scientific status. See, for example, Clifford Geertz's influential essay "Anti Anti-Relativism" – persuasive but, in my view, misguided (Geertz 1984).

14 In this regard, Bateson's "ecology," broadly conceived, anticipates the critiques of sociobiology or, as currently denoted, evolutionary psychology advanced by evolutionary biologists like Jonathan Marks (2002), Stephen J. Gould (1996[1981]), and Richard Lewontin and Richard Lewins (Lewontin 2000; Lewins and Lewontin 1985). Evolutionary psychology and sociobiology mistakenly insist that only one system-level (i.e., the "selfish gene") possesses, ultimately, causal efficacy.

Bateson notes provocatively can also be viewed as “addiction”), stability, etc., applied to any system level must distinguish clearly the level to which they apply. So, for example, with respect to Skinner’s analyses, historical change in China – say, during the heyday of Western imperialism – manifested quite differently in the various macro-regional system levels. Consequently, to speak of “China’s response to the West” ignores these regionally differentiated effects. Even more generally, questions of cultural continuity require distinguishing among the various system levels – individual psychology, ideology, local-system social organization, regional economies, etc. – under analytical scrutiny.

Spelling out in more detail the very important general implications of Bateson’s work for anthropology exceeds the scope of this paper, but I do hazard the claim that much of Skinner’s legacy is not only consistent with Bateson’s rather more abstract and general philosophical vision of science, but also stands as an eloquent demonstration of it. The similarities in their understanding of hierarchically nested systems suggest that meaning systems – both at the level of shared symbolic systems and individual psychodynamics – submit to the same kinds of logical-typical, cybernetic, nested parameters as do, say, economic ones. (I return to this point below.) Well before interdisciplinarity became fashionable, Bateson and Skinner put little stock in disciplinary boundaries. But the nature of their ecumenicism differed from that championed by today’s advocates of “human sciences,” who insist on heterogeneous or multiple social realities. For Bateson and Skinner, although understandings of reality may differ, science insists that at a higher level of encompassment (or logical type) there is really only one way of “knowing” scientifically.¹⁵

Terence Turner

Terence Turner’s work draws importantly from Lévi-Strauss, Jean Piaget, and especially Marx, and – like Skinner’s and Bateson’s – is oriented primarily toward discern-

15 This assertion should not be misconstrued to claim that any particular scientific argument is unsailable. Understandings are always revisable when data and logic provide superior explanations. In this regard, reductive thinkers (be they rational-choice theorists or sociobiologists) and anti-science postmodernists share a misapprehension of what must remain a fundamental of science – to wit, that science does not discover or produce ultimate truths, but rather that it provides a set of values or criteria for choosing the best among competing explanations. Science, in the best sense, refuses both reductive positivism and indeterminate relativism.

ing the logic in complex processes of social production and reproduction.¹⁶ In addition to elements of social organization including kinship, these processes include the role of ideology and meaning. Turner's longstanding ethnographic engagement with the Kayapo of the Brazilian Amazon are consistently oriented toward addressing general theoretical issues in these terms (Turner 1986, 1990b). Also like Skinner and Bateson, Turner's analyses develop linkages among nested systems – notably life cycles of individuals, nuclear families, extended families, moieties, and, at the highest level of encompassment, villages (Turner 1979b, 1979c).¹⁷ Indeed, what sets Turner's work apart from most standard ethnographic descriptions is the dialectical complexity and intersystem-level synergies of productive-cum-reproductive process he reveals. His work far surpasses classical functionalism in its emphasis on the temporally dynamic logic of production encompassed at a higher logical type by reproduction. Moreover, his work goes well beyond revealing what can only be described as the elegantly and complexly organized traditional system comprised by even small-scale societies like the Kayapo, by showing how understanding this system precisely as a system of production and reproduction or again, in Bateson's terms, as a cybernetic system, enables us to understand Kayapo responses to historical changes stimulated by contact with an encompassing process (via would-be Brazilian settlers, miners, and the state) (Turner 1988a; Turner 1988b).

Turner, however, takes system-oriented analysis in directions not developed explicitly in Skinner's work and only tangentially in Bateson's. In particular, Turner is interested in meaning, symbol, ideology, and (distinctively) "value" (Turner 1984, 1985, 1991b). Invoking Marx's notion of alienation, Turner shows that misrecognition plays an important productive – i.e., cybernetic – role as a symbolic system nested within the social system as a whole. In other words, Turner shows how Kayapo consciousness is both an effect of the system as a whole and an important constituent in its reproduction. Note that we are far removed here from the notion that anthropology should be confined to, as Geertz epitomizes the position, interpretation of meanings or thick description (Geertz 1973b). What Turner's work suggests, then, is that to comprehend symbols, culture, or meaning, one must comprehend their roles in encompassing social systems as wholes.

Conceptual affinities in Skinner's and Turner's work include a focus on nested hierarchy, system dynamics, and a combination of inductive and deductive logic and

16 I provide a more thorough overview and bibliography of Turner's work elsewhere (Sangren 2006; Sangren and Boyer 2006).

17 In some more recent work, Turner has addressed higher levels – the Brazilian state and world economy – as they have impinged upon Kayapo social processes (Turner 1979a, 1988a, 1988b, 1990a, 1991a, 1993, 1995).

methods. But there are also more profound potential linkages. In this regard I note my own efforts to link symbolic and ideological (i.e., “meaning”) systems in China to the social reproduction of local identities, on the one hand, and integration into more complex regional systems, on the other. As Skinner demonstrates, regional integration is accomplished through administrative institutions as well as economic organization, and also through such mechanisms as religious pilgrimage (Sangren 1987, 2000)). For example, comprehending the salient cultural category *ling* 靈 (the efficacy or power attributed to supernatural entities) requires comprehending the concept as both a generator of social action in a multitude of contexts or linked system levels (family processes, local identity, and local-state interactions) and as an effect or product of these same processes of social production within which it is embedded. Because alienation or misrecognition is intrinsic to processes by which symbols are socially effective, the anthropological project cannot be understood simply as interpretation, but as Skinner might put it, requires the anthropologist’s intervention as *analyst*.

Conclusion

I conclude briefly with a few hortatory comments that I offer in the holistic spirit of Skinner’s, Bateson’s, and Turner’s various and varied projects.¹⁸ Here I take my cue from Bateson’s trenchant critique of reductive social sciences cited above. Bateson lamented the penchant of 1960s-era social sciences to seek explanation reductively in singular, particularly material, causes when they should have been focusing on systems as reproducers and producers of information or pattern. Misleading reductionist epistemologies, including rational-action theory, evolutionary psychology, and the grandiose claims of some geneticists to link all human behaviors directly to genetic endowments, remain a force in contemporary social science. Most anthropologists (or at least most cultural anthropologists) today would applaud Bateson’s critique of such reductionisms.

Yet echoing Bateson’s scientific allegiances, I would shift the focus of his critique and argue that what most diminishes contemporary anthropology, what Bateson might

18 Skinner provides his own brief but insightful comments on the state of contemporary anthropology of China. In addition to caveats on controlling for regional space and cyclical process, he notes that anthropologists of China tend to be too “presentist” in the sense that they are overly focused (I would say almost journalistically) on topically delineated issues and too little on analysis that links such currency to general social science. They are too parochial – that is to say, too absorbed by anthropological fashion and too little cognizant of the other social sciences (Skinner 2004).

term an equally misleading epistemology, lies elsewhere, in what I would characterize as culturalist essentialism. In the interest of defending cultural analysis from reductive paradigms of the sort Bateson lamented, many anthropologists have increasingly, and perhaps unwittingly, defined our key disciplinary object, culture, as effectively beyond explanation in any terms other than culture (conceived as “meaning”) itself.¹⁹ Although scientific values are seldom explicitly foresworn, the aspirations of ethnographers to produce scientific accounts of the societies they study or knowledge that transcends the culturally specific or unique is all but abandoned if not ridiculed in favor of much more vaguely defined objectives – to construct enjoyable or evocative narratives of others’ experiences or understandings.

There is nothing wrong with these objectives, but ethnographic description must still be judged by the degree to which it produces an explanatory understanding of social realities – realities that include, but are not exhausted by, the understandings of those we study. Among the virtues shared by the writings of Skinner, Bateson, and Turner is the conviction that even highly complex systems like culture (including meaning) can be approached scientifically, and that social-scientific holism and interdisciplinarity should focus on refining our understanding of the nature of systems, their cybernetic structures, logical-typical linkages, and reproductive as well as adaptive properties. The works of each of these exemplary scholars should convince us that neither the reductive causalities of materialist social science nor the metaphysical flattening of social process to idealist symbol or language should provide a refuge for lazy epistemological self-satisfaction.

19 I have in mind here, for example, arguments to the effect that categories like emotions, gender, or persons are cultural constructions. On the one hand, I do not dispute that conceptions of the person, gender identity, etc. vary across cultures, but on the other, invoking these definitions as explanations of, for example, different gender roles or behaviors seems quite deficient. Cultural meanings are, in effect, invoked to explain cultural differences. Such arguments imply that cultural meanings themselves are beyond explanation. I view this algorithm (quite ubiquitous in cultural anthropology) to be both logically tautological and a form of reductive essentialism, begging precisely the question that is seldom asked – What accounts for cultural meanings? I address this issue more thoroughly in a recent article on gender inequality (Sangren 2009).

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從 Gregory Bateson 和 Terence Turner 的觀點 看施堅雅學術傳承中的一般性社會理論

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我們不能說施堅雅教授留下的學術傳承未獲應得的注意——事實上，在中國研究的重要著作中，他受到社會學、歷史學和人類學家廣泛肯定。施堅雅在方法論上提醒我們要控制如階序性結構的社會空間，和時間模式化的社會時間（如循環）等變項，他從複雜得驚人的中國社會過程和歷史中找出秩序的諸多努力，都樹立了許多人追尋但鮮能企及的標準。然而他的作品對更抽象和普同層次的社會理論所能提供的借鏡，多半還未受到重視——某種程度而言，甚至連他自己也沒注意到。為了說明這個論點，我指出施堅雅教授和人類學家 Gregory Bateson 以及 Terence Turner 在社會過程的普同視野上，出人意表的相似之處。特別是 Bateson 覺察社會生活、演化過程和個人心理是連結到或「結集於」（nested）控制學習系統（cybernetic learning systems）的嘗試，讓我們可以重新思考施堅雅的作品。Turner 受馬克思主義啟發，視小規模社會為社會生產和再生產的「回歸性階序」體系（'recursively hierarchical' system）的分析，擬想了一個部分－整體（part-whole）／地方－圍繞（local-encompassing）的辯證，與施堅雅對中國的全局性觀點關係密切。在這些相似性之上，我認為他們提出的是對社會與文化分析的基本類別的徹底批評和再思考，亦即我們想像作為系統的「文化」和「社會」是什麼。更具體的說，我提出施堅雅早期努力將中國廣闊的時間向度和非平行的複雜納入作為分析對象，在當代學術論述討論的課題如「全球化」和歷史變遷上，建構了重要的一課。

關鍵詞：控制論，巢狀階序（nested hierarchy），中國社會，系統理論，區域分析
