Remarks at the opening of the Skinner field photography exhibition

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I first met G. William Skinner in 1976. Skinner was an eminent scholar in the China field. I was a graduate student at Berkeley. Berkeley students are permitted to take courses at Stanford, so I enrolled in Skinner's Chinese society course. It was one of the best classes I have ever taken. It was dense with insight about China and about social science in general. Our class read Skinner's landmark articles on rural marketing that originated in Gaodianzi. Skinner's edited volume *The City in Late Imperial China* was in press at the time, and we also read the galleys of his chapters on the urban hierarchy and regional systems. This juxtaposition made the connections between local peasant markets and higher level city systems abundantly clear.

In *The City in Late Imperial China* Skinner proposed a model that decomposed China into nine semi-autarchic regions—he called them physiographic macro-regions--that were defined by major watersheds and river systems. Each macro-region encompassed a major social and economic system. A macro-region had a densely settled and urbanized core, and it had sparsely settled and impoverished periphery. Social and administrative structures varied

through macro-regional space. Cores and peripheries were linked by the flows of goods and people moving through the urban network, and a shock to the core would be felt in the periphery. Macro-regional systems also had economic cycles that were generally out of sync with each other, but if several macro-regions experienced a downward swing simultaneously, it often signaled the end of a dynasty. This way of looking at Chinese society was influential, particularly among historians.

The links between Skinner's work in Gaodianzi and the later development of his theory of the spatial structure of Chinese society were always clear, but reading Skinner's field notes made me see new regularities in the way Skinner interrogated social and economic data. I'll try to explain what I mean. Skinner was an inductive theorist. He examined data looking for patterns, and then tried to explain them. Following the publication of county-level data in the 1982 and 1990 censuses, Skinner set out to further refine and test his theories. He compiled large data sets and very early on used Geographic Information Systems technology to map his data, and he assigned counties to membership in one macro-region or another. Once I visited Skinner and asked him how he decided which macro-region a peripheral county belonged to. He showed me. He pointed to a map of counties that were marked with a blended index of economic activity.

He pointed to a county with a very low value, and then he looked at each adjacent county for the lowest value, and then he repeated the process for that county. His selected counties formed a string that marked the macro-regional boundary. He then looked for other indicators to assign the counties to a macro-region, such as road links or continental divides. *Some* counties seemed to belong to the macro-region on either side of the border. He called them "Janus-faced counties".

I thought of that when I read in his field notes. He observed how peasant marketing united people from different hamlets into a large social field—a community in which everyone knew everyone else, at least passingly, and arranged marriages for their children with each other. He called this unit the "standard marketing area". But to define this area, he had to find its boundaries, and his field note for December 16th, 1949, explains how he did it:

> I changed into less cumbersome and less warm Western Clothes, pumped air into the bike tires and headed for town. … My objective, aside from a few pictures, was to find the limits of the Gaodianzi market-town area. I followed the road to Xindianzi, the nearest market town to the south, and after I'd gotten to a point some 8 li away, I began asking people which town

> they preferred to go to go to for market. In this fashion, I finally arrived at a point where my questions precipitated nothing but confusion, the people saying that some went to Gaodianzi and others to Xiandianzi, and others to both depending on the circumstances. This point, about a li beyond Luo Jia Da Qiao, I took to be roughly the limit on this road of the Gaodianzi market area.

This is hardly different from the way he later located the boundaries of physiographic macro-regions.

Anthropologists generally don't publish their field notes. As far as I know, neither Malinowski nor Margaret Mead published theirs. Field notes are rough and raw, and quite personal. Skinner's own notes would never have met the high standards that he set for himself. As a scholar and teacher, Skinner tended to be rather formal and aloof. The field notes give us an entrée into the mind of a great scholar before he was great, and let us hear him speak unfiltered thoughts. And what we hear is a man who is unusually mature for his 24 years of age. Unusually sensitive and observant, engaged with people, fascinated by his surroundings, ambitious, meticulous, and at times eloquent. One of my favorite passages from the notes has nothing to do with fieldwork, but tells us a lot about Skinner. On

January 20th, 1950, Skinner was visiting primary schools in the township, and towards the end of the day he visited Zhongxin School.

> There was quite a crowd gathered in the schoolyard, and we soon learned that there had been an accident. A student had found a hand grenade left behind by the troops who had occupied the school building, and it detonated in his hand, blowing it pretty well to smithereens. I surveyed the scene, found the poor lad sitting up at a table, the stub of his bleeding hand covered with cotton, all sitting in a great pool of blood on one of the tables. The crowd was packed around, and the boy was in agony. I managed to convince the principal that a tourniquet should be put on, and put one on him, and I also told her that the boy would be much happier if he didn't have to stare at the pool of blood and the masses of curious people, so the people were removed and the boy was moved elsewhere in the schoolroom. A huajiao (sedan chair) had been called to take him to Huada, and Mr Guo wrote a letter to a friend of his who is a doctor in surgery there (so I felt a letter to Dr Outerbridge would be superfluous). After I had been running around doing these things, I suddenly felt faint and (after I got to a chair) passed out cold. When I came to, the boy had been moved onto the huajiao. I managed to come to my senses enough to tell them to loosen

> the tourniquet every half hour on the way. The boy's parents had arrived and were going in with him. The reason I passed out on seeing the mess and the blood, etc., was that I had hardly eaten a thing all day and had walked all over the xiang until I was quite exhausted, because I've done first aid on lots worse accidents than that and never felt faint. Be that as it may, I was sick as a dog…

Here the young Skinner takes charge of a situation, instructing the school principal and others on the proper treatment of a trauma patient; his own bout of illness was not due to any squeamishness. The incident is reported matter-of-factly. Just another day in Gaodianzi.

Skinner's describes life in the Chengdu Plain in 1949 just before the whirlwind of rural revolution and class struggle. Skinner's hosts in Gaodianzi, the Lin family, were what the Communists would call a rich peasant household. It is highly likely that such a family would be dispossessed of most of their land, assigned a bad class label, made the object of political struggle, and then persecuted in various political campaigns in subsequent decades. Skinner's account brings the Lin family to life. They have a large household with renters and tenants and employees, but they are still a working peasant household, tilling

the soil, washing their clothes in the stream, and selling their produce by the side of the road. It is hard to imagine them as the cruel exploiters or class enemies of the communist program. Of course, we don't know what befell the Lins, but thanks to Skinner's account, we would like to know.

The persons that populate Skinner's narrative do not know the future, any more than Skinner did. People were anxious and wary of the new communist authorities, but the local officials, the secret society bosses, the school teachers, none of them could imagine the events that would soon overturn their world, including the frenetic campaigns and the gruesome famine that were just ahead. When the organizers of the Dong Yue temple festival adorn the temple with a large red star and dedicate the festival "In Celebration of Liberation", it is a naïve and hopeful gesture, akin to placating the unpredictable spirits of the netherworld. We the readers know what is coming, and that knowledge infuses Skinner's narrative with pathos.

Three decades after Skinner left the Chengdu Plain, it just happens that *I* was in the Chengdu Plain doing field work. The commune I was studying was quite different from the world Skinner describes. The temples were gone, the altars to the earth-god were gone, and the peasant marketing, having been

suppressed for many years, was permitted only once per week. It was a drab world compared to the one portrayed in Skinner's notes and photographs. Moreover, Skinner enjoyed the freedom to ride his bicycle through the countryside, set his own schedule and develop his own network of contacts. Three decades later, the foreign researcher had little autonomy, and all his interactions with research subjects was carried out under the surveillance of a delegation of officials. Reading Skinner's notes made me more than a little envious.

In the rolls of film that we retrieved from Skinner's files, there is no photograph of Skinner himself while in China. I doubt that this omission was a matter of modesty on Skinner's part. Recording himself was probably just not a priority. We know from the notes that Skinner, at least at times, wore local attire as he went about his work. He probably wore a long dark gown of the kind we can see in his photographs. Sitting in a tea house, chatting with the local power elite, he must have cut a very distinctive figure.