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GEORGE WILLIAM SKINNER  
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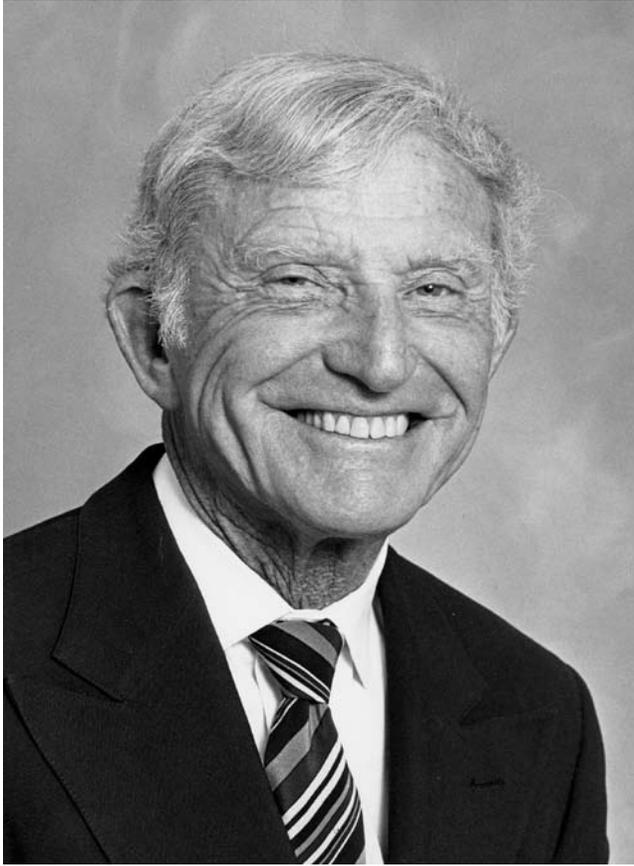
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*A Biographical Memoir by*  
E. A. HAMMEL

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*Biographical Memoir*

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*William Krueger*

# GEORGE WILLIAM SKINNER

*February 14, 1925–October 26, 2008*

BY E. A. HAMMEL<sup>1</sup>

GEORGE WILLIAM (“BILL”) SKINNER, the most eminent anthropological sinologist in the United States, was born in Oakland, California, in 1925. He attended Berkeley High School and then Deep Springs College (California) in 1942–1943.<sup>2</sup> In 1943 he joined the Navy V-12 Program at Missouri Valley College for two years, followed by 18 months of instruction in Chinese at the U.S. Navy Oriental Language School at the University of Colorado. He then matriculated at Cornell University, earning a bachelor’s degree with distinction in East Asian studies in 1947. From 1948 onward he was a doctoral student in anthropology at Cornell, receiving the Ph.D. in 1954. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1980 and awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Hong Kong in 2001. Skinner’s ultimate research directions, like the goals of many other anthropologists, were influenced by his military service. The role of wartime experience in shaping the careers of anthropologists is itself worthy of attention.

Skinner died quietly at home on October 26, 2008, of an aggressive cancer diagnosed shortly before his death. He is survived by his wife, Susan L. Mann, and their daughter, Alison, as well as by his first wife, Carol B. Skinner, and three of their four sons (James, Mark, and Jeremy, the eldest, Geoffrey, having perished in a tragic accident in 1989).

Skinner was raised during the Great Depression in a hardworking middle-class family in which all were achievers with intellectual and professional aspirations. His paternal grandfather emigrated from London to San Francisco via Australia. His father, John James Skinner, dropped out of school in the eighth grade to support his family, served in the Navy in World War I, worked in a drugstore, learned pharmacology, and opened his own drugstore in Oakland. His two children, Bill and Jane, worked after school and on vacations behind the soda fountain. They would make themselves huge ice cream cones and parade through the neighborhood; when asked where they got such astonishing treats, they replied, "Skinner Drug, of course." Of their father's seven siblings, only two survived to adulthood: John James and his sister, May. Aunt May played an important nurturing role in the lives of Bill and Jane. Their mother, Eunice Grace Engle Skinner, was a music teacher and ultimately the director of musical education for the Berkeley school district. Jane followed in her footsteps as a musician, perhaps herself playing a role in the development of Bill's daughter, Alison, who is a choral conductor.

There are some unanswered questions about Bill's early history. Since he graduated from Berkeley High, he could easily have gone to the University of California at Berkeley to study with some of the most prominent anthropologists in the profession (Kroeber, Lowie, Gifford, and others). Why did he go to a school as exotic as Deep Springs? Was it because as valedictorian at Berkeley High he was offered a scholarship to Deep Springs, or because of a fond association with central California, having spent summers there at a dairy farm? Did he enter the Navy because of his father's history of service, or because the V-12 Program allowed him to pursue his academic interests in wartime? He had begun to study Chinese at Deep Springs; what attracted him to

Asian studies? Why did he pursue that option rather than other areas and languages available in the V-12 Program, if indeed he had a choice? Did he continue his studies at Cornell because of the old link between Deep Springs and Cornell, as many other Deep Springs alumni did? It is ironic that a man profoundly affected by a monastic idealism that stressed scholarship and romanticist isolation from the corrupting influences of civilization and urban life should spend his career dedicated to the study of cities and urban hierarchies.

His first teaching post was as instructor in sociology at Cornell in 1949. From 1951 to 1955 he served as field director of the Cornell Southeast Asia Project and from 1956 to 1958 was a research associate in East Asian studies at Cornell. Following two years as assistant professor of sociology at Columbia (1958-1960), he became associate professor and professor of anthropology at Cornell (1960-1965), later serving as professor of anthropology at Stanford (1965-1989) and at the University of California at Davis (1990-2004); he retired in 2005 at the age of 80 but remained active professionally. Between 1977 and 2002 he was visiting professor at five universities, including Keio University in Tokyo and Hong Kong University.

Skinner's contributions to knowledge span five disciplines: anthropology, demography, geography, history, and sociology—and employed data from five countries: China, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and France. They fall into four main groups. The first is the study of assimilation and acculturation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, a broadening of his dissertation. The second is what he came to call the study of “hierarchical regional space,” the main core of his work that began with analysis of rural marketing in Sichuan, China. The third is what he called “family systems theory,” the way kinship and household organization affect behavior,

especially economic and demographic behavior; data for this work came from France, China, and Japan. The fourth is a series of essays that overlap the first three and had a profound influence on the historiography of China.

Skinner's first fieldwork was in the summer of 1948, in a Hispanic village and a Navajo community in New Mexico. His intended doctoral fieldwork, the study of a market town and its region in China, began in 1949 at Gaodianzi, near Chengdu, Sichuan Province, while the communist revolution against the Kuomintang government was in progress. The final victory occurred about three months into his fieldwork. In March 1950 his notes were confiscated, he was removed from the market town, quartered under veritable house arrest with a Canadian missionary family (Earl and Katharine Willmott) in Chengdu, and ultimately expelled from China in September 1950. While he was obliged to abandon that field research and shift his dissertation goals, the field experience with a market system in Sichuan and his discovery of the way a market town articulated with its satellites on the ground planted the seed of much of his future career. Despite the restrictions on his activities and his expulsion from China, he published four papers in 1951 based on his Chengdu experience, including one that early signaled his interest in demography.

The next phase of his work preserved the utility of his language and area training in the service of a new dissertation topic. During 1950-1951, he conducted a field survey of overseas Chinese throughout Southeast Asia, followed in 1951-1953 by an intensive field study of Chinese social structure and community leadership in Bangkok, Thailand. His dissertation (1954) was a study of the Chinese community of Bangkok, combined with an historical review of the Chinese in Thailand. He pursued similar themes in further

fieldwork: a study of regional variation in overseas Chinese culture in Thailand and of Chinese assimilation to Thai society (1954-1955) and a study of assimilation, acculturation, and national integration of overseas Chinese in Indonesia (1956-1958). Interestingly, despite his temporary shift away from the articulation of social systems on the ground, his early scholarly productions from this work were maps, largely concerned with the distribution of ethnicity or other demographic characteristics. These interests carried through to his early major publications on the Chinese in Thailand (1957, 1958). The latter reveal Skinner's intellectual focus. They are structural, not "contentual." They call to mind later works by others on power elites and network analysis.

This interruption and reformulation of his research agenda is reminiscent of the experience of Edmund Leach who, driven from Burma by the Japanese invasion in World War II and bereft of his notes, went on to write *Political Systems of Highland Burma*,<sup>3</sup> similarly concerned with the geographical distribution and shifting patterns of social institutions and definition of ethnic groups. Leach was able to use existing sources in pursuit of that topic, and Skinner ultimately followed the same strategy.

His interest in the influence of topography on culture had predecessors in anthropology in the work of numerous diffusionists, in Kroeber's studies of culture trait distribution and ecological adjustment (as for example in *Cultural and Natural Areas in Native North America*<sup>4</sup>), and in geography in the work of Friedrich Ratzel. There are important differences between Skinner's work and earlier ones. Those in anthropology were concerned primarily with the content of culture. Skinner's work focused on the structure of social institutions and the way such institutions were articulated on the landscape. Similarly, he departed from Ratzel's

work—the foundation of cultural geography and thus the closest to Skinner’s of all of these 19th- and early 20th-century efforts—in avoiding any geographical determinism. Numerous ethnographers and historians have observed the importance of riverine and road systems to the establishment of networks of exchange and control. Skinner’s work was broader and more rigorous than any of these. He did not simply provide a plausible explanation for the odd fact but offered topography as a constraining template for broad fields of social interaction and behavior. His documentation of the distribution of social action, both geographically and hierarchically, was meticulous.

Despite recognizable roots in Ratzel, Skinner took as his major referent the central place theory of Walter Christaller and (early on) August Lösch, some of whose principles he had already formulated for himself before encountering their work, as is evident from some field notes he had sent home prior to his expulsion from Sichuan. Even while finishing his work with overseas Chinese, Skinner developed an analysis, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China,” published as three articles in successive issues of the *Journal of Asian Studies* in 1964-1965, in which he showed how periodic markets form the lower rungs of a complex urban hierarchy. These magisterial papers firmly established his reputation. He returned to China in 1977 and deepened his analysis of marketing systems and other social structures, both cross-sectionally and over time. Out of these several efforts came some of his most enduring publications: “Mobility Strategies in Late Imperial China” (1976), his five essays in *The City in Late Imperial China* (1977), and in 1985 “The Structure of Chinese History,” his presidential address for the Association for Asian Studies, a theoretical work laying out the relationships between hierarchical regional space and historiography.

It is interesting to reflect that Skinner's interest in cities on the landscape is an echo not only of Christaller's orientation toward the urban center but also of Ratzel's conviction that cities were the ideal locus for the study of society, in contrast to the folkloristic, peasant-oriented focus of Goethe, Herder, the Grimms, and other romanticists that informed much of traditional social and cultural anthropology. Whereas the romanticists were interested in *Volksgeist*, Skinner was interested in sociological mechanics, making him a man more of the Enlightenment. We must then observe that if Skinner's exhaustive documentation of regional hierarchies is correct, it is inevitable that cities should be the prime focus of social investigation, because that is where the spider sits in her web. It is the construction of that web across terrain, across climates and soils, along the varyingly optimal routes of transport that was Skinner's concern.

His work on hierarchical regional space is also notable for its inclusion of the interaction and mutual constraints among economic trade, political control, and family and kinship organization. These planes of the social structure are seldom well aligned, and optimization on one plane is seldom optimal on another. Skinner's attention to these interactions means that his picture of regional systems is not static but dynamic, constantly in flux as surrounding conditions change and as the conflicting substructures and facets of social organization vie for supremacy.

In considering the relation of Skinner's work with that of other influential anthropologists of the 20th century, we note another set of parallels, this time with Julian H. Steward. Steward not only preceded him at Deep Springs (1918-1920) but, following a year of study at Berkeley under Kroeber and Lowie, also laid down a trail for Skinner by moving to Cornell for his B.A. Renowned for his development of concepts of cultural ecology, Steward examined how social organization

adapted to the land and to the subsistence framework. Although his early research was with subsistence hunters and foragers, he later developed his influential notion of “levels of sociocultural integration,” encouraging his students to consider how social space is hierarchically organized from locality to region to nation. This very formulation was one that Skinner sought to nuance in his models of regional systems.

In 1985 Skinner went to Japan to explore the use of materials on the historical ethnography and demography of the Nôbi region and again in 1988 and 1995 for a study of sources in the Ogaki region. This work was a continuation of another parallel track in his intellectual career, which culminated in his concept of family systems theory. It hearkens to his earliest work on overseas Chinese, the nature of culture, and of social institutions. Like British structural-functional anthropologists, Skinner was attentive to the way culturally transmitted structures, especially systems of kinship and family, shape behavior. Social structure, itself influenced by geography, is the second mold into which behavior is poured. Skinner’s particular contribution in this area is in the articulation of social structure with demographic process. His paper, “Conjugal Power in Tokugawa Japanese Families” (1993) is a classic.

Another paper, “Family Systems and Demographic Processes” (1997), is a magisterial essay on the mutually reflective spheres of what anthropologists would call “kinship and social organization” and what demographers might call “population reproduction,” especially the processes of nuptiality, fertility, and mortality. Its aim is reminiscent of the work of G. P. Murdock in its attempt to describe systematically an enormous variety of kinship arrangements. In its focus on the relationship between social structure and

behavior, especially demographically relevant behavior, it also resembles the work of Jack Goody on social reproduction and has the strong empirical flavor of the tradition of British structural-functional theory and practice going back to Radcliffe-Brown. The paper is impressive in its control of detail and the carefully worked out examples of how family structures are influenced, sometimes obviously but sometimes not so obviously, by demographic rates. It is even more enlightening about the way family structures and inheritance patterns affect chances of survival and reproduction.

Despite these other interests, his work on space and social structure remained his principal concern. After 1989 he developed technologically more sophisticated models for hierarchical regional space analysis, using geographic information system techniques for China, Japan, and France. His work was instrumental in the formation of the China Historical Geographic Information System from 2001 onward. This endeavor (CHGIS) was inspired and shaped by Skinner. The project has produced a comprehensive database of central places and a dynamic record of their administrative positions throughout Chinese history. It is a monumental compilation that provides a versatile matrix for data related to China and will likely exert a strong influence on the way that historians and social scientists organize their data on Chinese society.

Skinner's influence on scholarship came not only from his scholarly publications and formal teaching and mentoring but also from his lectures to professional audiences and his participation in conferences. Although not an eloquent performer, he was a methodical and persuasive speaker. Many of his lectures have yet to be published. He was quite formal in his presentations. A story is told that he once had a class with only one student. Undeterred, he spoke from behind a lectern.

All three of his major fields of interest—acculturation, assimilation, and culture change; the spatial and hierarchical organization of social action; and the interplay between family systems and behavior—converged in his focus on China. His theoretical and empirical work and his interpretive essays in volumes he edited or presented at conferences had a profound effect on the study of Chinese history. He made it possible to understand more closely the complexity of governance across regions and down hierarchies, issues that are paramount in China even to this day and that are similarly important in all states in which different social groups, usually ethnically defined, have territorial or hierarchical stakes.

Skinner was in all professional senses a scientist and originally of a rather Newtonian cast. As his career progressed he shed his simpler schemata and worked on the interactions of complexly nested systems, advancing from central place theory to hierarchical regional space. One could think of this as an advance from a Euclidean to a more complex geometry. It is instructive to think about what kind of scientist Skinner was. In some ways he was an anachronism. Where many modern social scientists would employ statistical tools to analyze the problems that held his attention (and as many quantitative and economic geographers do), his approach was different. One might say it was profoundly innocent of such techniques, or at least that he was deeply skeptical of them. It may be said that Skinner did not have an algebraic but a geometric, indeed, an architectural mind. One of his former students remarked that in the early years Skinner's customary tools for the analysis of regional space were a red and a blue pencil. Another noted that Skinner was still using red and blue pencils in 2008. Skinner's approach to data was to soak himself in them; it is in its empirical style reminiscent of the *Beagle*. It is the approach followed by Boas, and echoes the injunction pronounced by Boas's teacher,

Virchow, "*Tatsachen, Tatsachen, immer nur Tatsachen!*"<sup>5</sup> One can see from these examples the century to which he philosophically belonged. Yet from that century came great advances in understanding, often based in profound observation of data rather than in formal manipulation.

One of his perennial themes was the futility of subdividing space and time into convenient blocks of static, uniform characteristics. He insisted on a functional approach to regionalization and periodization. This approach highlights the linkages between social processes in urban cores and rural hinterlands, and the cyclical dynamism of temporal patterns. He said to one of his colleagues in the last months of his life, "I play with the data. I take an inductive approach. The data tell me everything." This principle is well illustrated in one of his lesser known yet impressive works, "Sichuan's Population in the Nineteenth Century," based on county-level population reports in the 19th century for just a handful of years. Through a tenacious deconstruction of the data, Skinner was able to conclude that most were fabricated by local officials, and relying on his remarkable grasp of Qing administration, he was able to demonstrate how and why they did it. Best of all he showed which data points were the most reliable. Extrapolating from these findings Skinner concluded that oft cited mid-19th-century estimates of Chinese population size were considerably overstated. The insights thus gained would lead naturally to a reinterpretation of population dynamics in the late Qing and Republican eras.

Much of Skinner's work occurred during a profound paradigm change in anthropology, which to some extent reduced his potential influence on that discipline despite his prominence in China studies and geography. While much of social and cultural anthropology after the early 1960s was exploring layers of meaning, Skinner was writing down facts and drawing maps. He did not enter the philosophical

debates of the time but held himself aloof. I can recall our organization of a joint seminar in historical demography (Stanford-Berkeley) in 1972 and meeting on the Berkeley campus with tear gas in the air, which he regarded as a nuisance not to be allowed to impede our discussions. For the next three decades and more he was a strong supporter of the revival of the graduate programs in demography at Berkeley and a steady participant in the monthly *StanBerk* and later *BacPop* (Bay Area Colloquium in Population) after he moved to Davis.

Nevertheless, his strong political principles were evident in department politics. One year he chaired the Stanford Admissions Committee in Anthropology and, despite the opposition of his colleagues, insisted on running the process gender blind. The result was an all-female entering class. Owing to the nature of his work his students moved readily into the neo-Marxist critical anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than the alternative strain of Geertzian symbolic anthropology. It was a sign of his intellectual breadth that he found much to admire in both kinds of work.

Despite this public face of science, empiricism, scholarship, and fairness, there was a romantic Skinner behind it. How else can we explain his selection of Deep Springs, his relentless pursuit of the linguistic and cultural knowledge that would allow him to work as an explorer of foreign ground? Had he been inspired by the writings of Sven Hedin, Owen Lattimore, or other adventurers who unveiled the mysteries of the East?

This kind of professional complexity was part of Skinner's manifold personality. An accomplished musician, he appreciated art in all its forms. A story is told that the first time he attended a ballet performance he was so overcome by its beauty that he fainted. When he left Sichuan in September 1950, he carried with him a collection of Chinese works of

art (a substantial amount of which he lost to zealous customs officials at checkpoints), and he showed and discussed these with pride and discernment. The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University is the beneficiary of this collection. In his personal relations he exhibited a contradictory nature. His students remember him as a demanding yet generous and conscientious teacher and mentor whose courses were masterpieces of synthesis and whose guidance of dissertations pushed them to exceed their limits. A number of them recall his concern for their welfare, his skill in communication, and his ability to address each student's concerns at the level of expertise that that student had attained. At the same time he was intellectually challenging and demanding. In peer-to-peer professional relations he was often gentle and magnanimous, but on other occasions supercilious and dismissive. He was occasionally known to end a dispute with, "There's no point to discussing this further; you're simply wrong." Skinner was not a man to suffer fools gladly. Yet his friends knew him as a compassionate and forgiving person.

As we look back at his history, we see a remarkable striving that goes back at least to his father, perhaps to his grandfather. His ambition and commitment were transmitted to many who knew him, his students, and his children. His family history as an adult continues the pattern of his own upbringing. His first wife, Carol B. Skinner, became a professional psychotherapist, active in student health services at Cornell for many years. His second wife, Susan L. Mann, is a renowned historian of China. His three surviving sons hold doctorates (chemistry, botany, psychology); his daughter is a choral director. It might be said, with some whimsy, that Skinner took rather seriously his paper on mobility strategies in late imperial China, founding not just a family but a dynasty.

Skinner's enduring scholarly legacy is not only in his publications and the effects of his presentations to both professional and student audiences. It lies in the vast repository of meticulously recorded data that he has now made available to the scholarly community. Toward the end he concentrated on the documentation and organization of his data, in cooperation with colleagues at other institutions.<sup>6</sup> During the four months between his terminal diagnosis and his death, he devoted all his energy to preserving his intellectual legacy for scholarly use, refusing the chemotherapy that debilitated him so that he could not work. Skinner was always game for a challenge; how else would he have gone into Sichuan with Mao's victorious forces aimed at his doorstep? His last challenge was racing against death to secure his life's work for others. Now, with the help of Peter Bol at Harvard, William Lively and Stevan Harrell at the University of Washington, and Mark Henderson and Kyle Matoba at the University of California, Davis, other scholars in the future may stand on his shoulders.

What a remarkable life.

## NOTES

1. I undertake the task of this memoir with an appreciation of the difficulty of describing an intense and complex intellect and personality, of which I personally knew only facets. I have consulted extensively with others who have known other facets or known them better than I, and I am deeply grateful for their help. I am especially indebted to Peter Bol, Don Donham, Stevan Harrell, Claudio Lomnitz, Mark Henderson, Charles Keyes, William Lavelly, Susan L. Mann, Kyle Matoba, Don Nonini, and Katherine Verdery. What I learned from them about the Skinner that I did not know greatly illuminated the Skinner that I did know. By shining a beam into the corners, they illuminated the stage. I have sometimes taken their words, their sentences, and blended them into the text, but none of them are responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation in this memoir.

2. Deep Springs College was founded by L. L. Nunn, a successful industrialist, in 1917. Nunn had difficulty finding qualified engineers and decided to create an educational system to produce them. His philosophy was to admit a small number of male students for two years to live in isolation from urban life and cultivate learning, self-sufficiency, and personal discipline. There appear to be two strands to Nunn's thinking. The first is that urban contact is inimical to the pursuit of knowledge, an idea that seems to have informed the siting of many institutions of higher learning in the United States. The second is that communities of scholars should be essentially monastic. The first site of Nunn's experiment was Telluride House at Cornell, founded in 1911, but it failed to fulfill all of Nunn's expectations, presumably because Cornell was not sufficiently isolated from the corrupting influences of urban life. The second site (to which Skinner went) was in an isolated valley in eastern California between the Sierra Nevada and the White Mountains, near Bishop. The students admitted in cohorts of perhaps three or four dozen for a two-year course of study were on full scholarships but expected to be self-sufficient, growing their own food, herding the school's cattle, and remaining aloof from any urban contact during the school year. Indeed, they were forbidden to visit places that had fewer cows than people. Monasticism aside, Nunn's motivation parallels that of the development of the Morrill Land Grant Act, beginning in the early 1840s with recognition of the need to establish colleges in agriculture and the mechanical arts, culminating after more than two

decades of difficult negotiation in Congress, with the signing of the act by President Lincoln in 1864. While the Morrill Act was entirely practical, the siting of early universities and Nunn's ideas exhibit a certain medievalism about institutions and a kind of Baden-Powell Eagle Scout ideal of the personal behavior of young males.

3. E. R. Leach. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954.

4. A. L. Kroeber. *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 38. Berkeley: University of California, 1939.

5. "Facts, facts, nothing but facts!"

6. At this writing it is anticipated that Skinner's scholarly materials will be distributed as follows:

- The Southeast Asia materials will go to the Special Collections at the Cornell University Archives.

- The data on regional systems will go to the Spatial Analysis Project at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, where they will be archived and made available online under the supervision of Peter Bol and Lex Berman (see <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis/intro/index.html>).

- The demographic data will go to the University of Washington to be digitized under the supervision of William Lively and Stevan Harrell (see <http://csde.washington.edu/skinner>). Skinner's archive of reprints and unpublished materials related to China and other areas outside Southeast Asia will go to the East Asia Library of the University of Washington, where they will be examined and those deemed worth preserving will be catalogued, archived, and digitized (see <http://www.lib.washington.edu/East-Asia>).

- Other projects actively underway at the time of Skinner's death are being seen through to publication by Mark Henderson, Kyle Matoba, and Michele Ladenson (see <http://people.mills.edu/mhenderson/gws>).

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