

Biographical Notes

George William Skinner (1920 – 26 October 2008) – Anthropologist, academic

George William Skinner was an American academic considered to be one of the world's foremost anthropologists of China.

Skinner was born on 14 February 1925 in Oakland, California. Skinner's father, John James, owned a pharmacy and his mother, Eunice Engle, was a music teacher.¹ Skinner was educated in Berkeley High School and then, Deep Springs College, an all-male liberal private liberal arts college where the education included manual labour.²

In 1943, Skinner joined the Navy V-12 Program at the Missouri Valley College after two years at the Deep Springs College.³ The Navy V-12 Program was established by the War Department to provide officers for the navy during World War II.⁴

After two years in the Program, Skinner went on to study Chinese at the U.S. Navy Oriental Language School in the University of Colorado for 18 months. Subsequently, he continued his studies at Cornell University, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in 1947 with a Distinction in Far Eastern Studies.⁵ He earned his PhD in anthropology from Cornell in 1954.⁶

Skinner's academic career began when he became an instructor in Sociology at Cornell University in 1949. Over the years, Skinner moved through various positions and institutions. At Cornell, Skinner was a Field Director of the Cornell Southeast Asia Program (1951-1955), Research Associate (Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1956-1958), Associate Professor (1960-1962) and Professor (1962-1965). From 1958 to 1960, Skinner moved to Columbia University where he was an Assistant Professor of Anthropology. From 1965 to 1989, Skinner was Professor of Anthropology at Stanford. From 1990 to 2005, Skinner taught at the University of California, Davis.⁷

Skinner established his reputation as a pre-eminent historian of China following the publication of *Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China* in 1964-1965.⁸ During his doctoral studies, Skinner developed an interest in market towns and conducted fieldwork in China's Sichuan province in 1949.⁹ This study was aborted when the Chinese Communist Party came to power later that year.

Another of Skinner's key works was *The City in Late Imperial China*. This volume, which Skinner also edited, contained five chapters which he wrote on the commercial and administrative features of eight urban systems which he had identified in China.

¹ Verdery, Katherine and Smith, Carol A., "Obituary: George William Skinner (1925-2008)", *American Anthropologist*, Vol 111, Issue 3 (Sept 2009), p. 398.

² Harrell, Stevan, "In memoriam: G. William Skinner, 1925-2008", *The China Quarterly* (June 2009), p. 453; Deep Springs College, "History", Deep Springs College website, retrieved from <https://www.deepsprings.edu/history/>; "Elite, All-Male University of the Wild West To Go Coed", *The New York Times*, (19 September 2011), retrieved from <https://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/deep-springs/>

³ Verdery and Smith, "Obituary", p. 398; "G William Skinner Papers", *Cornell University Library website*, retrieved from <https://rnc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMA02778.html>

⁴ "Navy V-12 Program", *Northwestern University website*, retrieved from https://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/agents/corporate_entities/1591

⁵ "G William Skinner Papers", *Cornell University Library website*.

⁶ Harrell, "In memoriam", p. 453.

⁷ Verdery and Smith, "Obituary", p. 398; "G William Skinner Papers", *Cornell University Library website*.

⁸ "G William Skinner Papers", *Cornell University Library website*.

⁹ "G William Skinner Papers", *Cornell University Library website*.

Although often considered a China scholar, Skinner also did considerable research on overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, notably in Thailand and Indonesia. Two of his most well-known works on Thailand - *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (1957)¹⁰ and *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand* (1958),¹¹ were derived from sections of his doctoral dissertation.¹² Skinner also wrote on Chinese communities in Indonesia,¹³ and even on Tokugawa Japan.¹⁴

In 1980, Skinner was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, and in 1983, became President of the Association for Asian Studies.¹⁵

He died at home on 26 October 2008 of cancer.¹⁶ He was survived by his wife, Susan Mann, and their daughter, and Carol Skinner, his first wife, and three of their four surviving sons.¹⁷

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¹⁰ Skinner, William G., *Chinese Society in Thailand*, New York: Cornell University Press (1957).

¹¹ Skinner, William G., *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, New York: Cornell University Press (1958).

¹² Harrell. "In memoriam", p. 454

¹³ "The Chinese of Java," Morton Fried (Ed.), *Colloquium on Overseas Chinese*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations (1958); "The Chinese Minority", Ruth McVey (Ed.), *Indonesia*, New Haven: Yale University (1963); See also <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis/data/skinner/metadata/gwspublications2000.htm>

¹⁴ Skinner, William G., "Conjugal power in Tokugawa Japanese families: a matter of life and death", Barbara Diane Miller (Ed.), *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, New York: Cambridge University Press (1993) pp. 236-270.

¹⁵ Harrell, "In memoriam", p. 453.

¹⁶ Verdery and Smith, "Obituary", p. 398.

¹⁷ Hammel, E. A., *George William Skinner, 1925 – 2008: A biographical memoir*, Washington: National Academy of Sciences (2009).