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# Introduction: Learning and Economic Agency in China and Taiwan

Guest Editor

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Although anthropologists have written a great deal about economic life in cross-cultural perspective, surprisingly little of this research has focused specifically on questions related to *learning*. It should go without saying that economic agency—whether in China, Taiwan, or anywhere else—requires the acquisition of at least basic, and sometimes very complex, skills. In a given context these might include the ability to make or grow things, an understanding of marketing, or an elementary grasp of accounting techniques. Anthropologists *have*, of course, been very interested in the impact of culturally specific knowledge on economic life—for example, in the fact that Maori morality impinges on Maori exchange. However, they have rarely asked how it is that human agents actually acquire such knowledge in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, some important anthropological research on learning and economic agency has been conducted. To cite one example, Jean Lave, whose early work focused on apprenticeship in Africa (Lave 1977), has more recently investigated the learning and use of mathematics in everyday life (Lave 1988). Among other things, she takes the numerical calculations carried out by shoppers in supermarkets as an instance of “cognition in practice”—i.e., of human thinking embedded in real world activities. Lave’s research on mathematics should be seen alongside those interdisciplinary studies of apprenticeship,

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<sup>1</sup> This may reflect, in part, a more general anthropological “aversion to things psychological”—i.e., a tendency to forget, even when studying cultural *knowledge*, that “there is only one place where something is actually known, and that is inside an individual head” (Hirschfeld 2000:620).

schooling, literacy, and work which, drawing on Vygotskian approaches, have underscored the fundamentally social and historical nature of human cognition (for an overview and synthetic discussion see Cole 1996). This is also true of the work of the anthropologists Edwin Hutchins and Tim Ingold, who have examined closely related questions surrounding skill and expertise. They seek to understand how knowledge is acquired and deployed by actors in real world contexts, including economic ones. Hutchins, for example, approaches the issue of “distributed cognition” through an ethnography of the navigation of large ships. He shows that cognitive processes such as decision-making may be fundamentally collective rather than individual, and also that decision-making is mediated through artefacts (such as navigational tools) which are themselves products of cognitive processes (Hutchins 1995; see also Engeström and Middleton 1996). Ingold, for his part, examines the development of skill in the context of tool use, human evolution, and our everyday engagement with the natural and social worlds in which we live (Ingold 2000).

Clearly, many of the activities studied by Lave, Hutchins, Ingold and others, including working and shopping, may be seen as quintessentially economic. The fact remains, however, that research of this kind has largely been taken as a contribution to the anthropology of learning and cognition, rather than as a contribution to anthropological economics. It is perfectly possible to teach a course in anthropological economics without once mentioning issues related to learning, knowledge, cognition, skills or techniques, and students on such courses would be perfectly entitled to conclude that learning is, at best, epiphenomenal to the real business of economic agency. There are, however, strong grounds for concluding otherwise.

### **Economic Socialization/Enculturation**

To return to the most obvious point: economic activities are inevitably premised on the possession of certain forms of knowledge. For Trobriand exchange to occur, somebody somewhere must know something: how much the ceremonial objects are worth, how different kinds of objects relate to one another, how they should be produced and transported for exchange, how negotiations should proceed, and so on. For such economic knowledge to be known, somebody somewhere has to have learned it. But precisely how? Was it learned “on the job”? At school? Was it learned during childhood? Was it taught explicitly, or did it form part of a whole package of enculturation diffusely located in the informal learning environments of everyday life?

As it happens, such questions about processes of economic socialization and enculturation—largely overlooked by anthropologists—have been taken

up extensively by psychologists. (For overviews of this research see Leiser et al. 1990; and Lunt and Furnham 1996.) William Harbaugh and colleagues have, for instance, carried out research on children's bargaining behavior in the United States. Rather than studying this in naturalistic settings, they organized bargaining games (called "Ultimatum" and "Dictator") to see how children of different ages, sizes, and sexes would behave when confronted with different circumstances. They conclude that "cultural knowledge" acquired during childhood has a significant impact on bargaining behavior, and also—perhaps less predictably—that the heights of boys and girls can strongly influence the kinds of offers made by them during bargaining games (Harbaugh et al. 2002). Other rather more conventional research projects have examined children's knowledge of profit and interest, their representations of economic inequality, their saving and spending habits, and so on (Nakhaie 1993; Burgard et al. 1989; Furnham 1999).

Psychological research of this kind suggests a number of avenues which anthropologists—perhaps especially those whose work focuses on children and child development—might wish to explore. In my own recent research, for instance, I have examined the development of numerical cognition among children in rural China and Taiwan, and the relationship of this to their participation in economic activities, including buying and selling.<sup>2</sup> Presumably nobody would doubt that numerical skills are relevant to economic life. However, to study learning processes such as the acquisition of numeracy with any depth, we must be prepared to take seriously the psychological literature (in this case, the huge literature on numerical cognition), and to examine in detail the micro-processes which actually shape human cognitive development. This is a tall order. In the case of China and Taiwan, for instance, the development of numerical cognition is influenced by the cognitive capacities and constraints of our species, by micro-features of the Chinese language, as well as by culturally specific conceptions—which draw on religious and philosophical traditions—of what numbers mean. Not only do Chinese and Taiwanese children learn how to count and how to add and subtract, they also encounter very complex—sometimes literally poetic—ideas about numerical value. All of this, I would suggest, impinges directly on their involvement in economic life (Stafford 2003).

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## The Significance of Learning for Economic Agency

But should the acquisition of knowledge of this kind—that is, learning how to calculate, or learning to see numbers as poetic—be seen simply as a *prelude* to economic practice? Or is it possible to link learning and economic agency in a more synthetic and compelling fashion? What if economic agency could itself be conceived, in all circumstances, as an ongoing learning process?

Interestingly, a number of economists, including Robert Lucas, seem open to this possibility and have made learning central to their theories of economic change. Lucas's growth theory draws heavily on models of "learning by doing," in which it is assumed that "the production of goods and the production of knowledge are tied together" (Lucas 2002:14). A classic illustration of this may be drawn from U.S. wartime shipbuilding; in one such programme, dramatic productivity growth seems to have derived, very directly, from knowledge gained by workers in the course of production.<sup>3</sup> For anthropologists, a conclusion of this kind may seem completely unremarkable. But for neoclassical economists, the acceptance that workers' evolving knowledge is a highly significant—and quantifiable—economic variable is a major concession. I should stress that the point, for Lucas and others, is not simply that learning directly influences productivity. Rather they suggest that patterns of knowledge distribution, including "spillovers" which occur when new knowledge is shared between individuals, institutions, and nation-states, can help to explain, at a deep level, the history of economic growth in the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, the notion that economic agency is a learning process should be an easy one for anthropologists to accommodate. After all, this is surely one of the main—if occasionally forgotten—premises of the practice theory approaches which continue to be highly influential within social and cultural anthropology. Allow me to briefly explain. As everyone knows, the concept of practice, as it is used in contemporary social science, derives from earlier Marxist discussions. And Bourdieu's practice theory, as he himself stresses, is largely an attempt to reconcile his Marxism with his structuralism (Bourdieu 1990:1-21). That is, his practice theory can be understood as an attempt to grasp how human agents situated in history (cf. Marx) come to act on the

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent and fascinating critique of the literature surrounding the shipbuilding example, see Thompson (2001).

<sup>4</sup> See also the institutional economist Geoffrey Hodgson (1999). Hodgson argues that economic theory has been seriously constrained by its failure to account for processes of learning.

dispositions derived from their immersion in “symbolically structured environments” (cf. Lévi-Strauss). Practice, in other words, is structuralism historicized.

But what is sometimes forgotten in all this, in part because of the way Bourdieu himself addresses it,<sup>5</sup> are questions of learning and economic agency. Here it should be remembered that the discussion of practice in anthropology is derived not only from Marx, but also from the philosophical tradition of German idealism, including of course the work of Hegel, but also that of Fichte and others. Within this tradition, the fundamental issue is how the human species comes to have knowledge of itself in the world. To emphasize: it is not just about knowing, it is about *coming* to know. And within this long philosophical conversation, one highly influential perspective, initially expressed in Fichte, later repeated in Hegel, and then later repeated in Marx, holds that human self-education (or self-realization) is, to a significant extent, a product of our ongoing struggle with the natural and social worlds in which we are embedded. For Marx, an essential element in this is that work—the human effort of transforming the natural world, and engaging in social relationships to that end—significantly defines who we are and what we know. In other words, economic agency, whatever else it may be, should be conceived as an ongoing process of self-education and self-realization. From this vantage point, the study of learning, far from being marginal to anthropological economics, should be at its core.

## Learning and Economic Agency in China and Taiwan

The papers which make up this special issue of the *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* were prepared for a workshop entitled “Learning and Economic Agency in China,” which was held at the London School of Economics and Political Science in May 2002.<sup>6</sup> Each of the contributors has extensive experience of studying Chinese and/or Taiwanese economic life. The point of the workshop was, of course, to ask them to focus specifically on those questions related to economic learning that have been largely overlooked by anthropologists. Above all, their papers are richly ethnographic. Based on recent fieldwork in China and Taiwan, the authors provide us with a hugely varied pic-

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* can be seen as a theory of learning (or “inculcation”), and his discussions of learning through “embodiment” have obviously been especially influential. However, Bourdieu tends to take learning processes themselves for granted, thus leaving him open to the kinds of objections posed by cognitive anthropologists such as Hirschfeld (see note 1, above).

<sup>6</sup> This workshop was also funded by the ESRC grant specified in note 3, above.

ture of learning and economic agency—whether in Sichuan or Fujian or Guangdong, whether among entrepreneurs or schoolteachers or farmers. The papers also elucidate a number of key themes related to learning and economic agency: the historical specificity of economic learning, the collective nature of economic knowing and economic activity, the impact of gender on the distribution of economic knowledge, the role of economic practice in the construction of individual and collective identities, and so on.

The first paper, by Ellen Oxfeld, focuses on the apprehension of new economic regimes in a Hakka community in Guangdong. Drawing on schema theory from cognitive anthropology, she examines the ways in which property disputes become opportunities for learning, situations in which understandings of the changing rules of economic life in post-Mao China can be “tried out” by local people. Oxfeld narrates at some length the case of one man who—controversially—attempted to sell collective land to his cousin from Taiwan. As this example shows, there is a significant degree of uncertainty surrounding property rights in rural China today, and claims to ownership are rarely uncontested. As a result, local people must focus mental energy on disputes as they seek to define what is permissible vis-à-vis competing claims, and to respond to a legal situation in flux. Indeed, the new economic rules which people need to master are, to a significant extent, the product of their own engagement in disputes. To put this more broadly, the learners of knowledge are simultaneously producers of knowledge and the inventors of some aspects of new economic realities. They are developing new cultural schemas against a background of political-economic change.

If Oxfeld’s paper is about having to find your way intellectually in unfamiliar surroundings, Susanne Brandtstädter’s paper, which focuses on new forms of entrepreneurship in South Fujian, concerns whether and how the lessons learned should be shared. She describes a situation in which shrimp farmers’ “know-how”—a kind of intellectual property which might, in theory, have been secretly harboured by its practitioners—instead becomes widely distributed throughout the village where she conducted fieldwork. How can these Fujianese entrepreneurs not understand that, under capitalism, the secrets of success should not be shared? As Brandtstädter goes on to explain, the activity of shrimp farming—which became almost universal across the community—is not especially prestigious, nor is it seen to be a long-term strategy for economic survival. The income from shrimp farming is merely “money plucked from the sky,” and so the requisite know-how can be distributed freely. What is more important for villagers as a life strategy is the maintenance of good social ties in the local community, something which can be enhanced through the free sharing of economic knowledge with others.

While Oxfeld and Brandtstädter explore the tensions surrounding collective forms of learning and knowing, Yunxiang Yan describes a very different situation encountered during his fieldwork in Heilongjiang. Here an individual—"the bookkeeping man," as he is known locally—is seen to possess a specialist competence which clearly sets him apart from everybody else. Yan's paper is of considerable importance, not least because of the unfailingly precise and minutely detailed household accounts kept by Mr. Wang ("the bookkeeping man") starting in 1976. These documents tell us a great deal about patterns of income and expenditure in rural China over a crucial historical period. But the man's own story is also a fascinating case study of an economic practice—in this case, accounting—providing the basis for individual identity. As Yan explains, many of the concepts directly relevant *both to* Mr. Wang's accounts and to his life story are heavily culturally loaded, including the notions of calculability and reciprocity. (Many of the entries in his account books relate to gift exchanges between the Wangs and other local families.) Moreover, the "learnedness" implied by Mr. Wang's unusual abilities as a bookkeeper becomes a key element in how he is perceived by everyone else in his community.

For this reason, it is interesting to set Yan's contribution alongside Scott Simon's essay, which follows, and which focuses on women from Taiwan's aboriginal communities. Here again we see direct links between learning, economic practice, and personal identity. The larger research project from which this essay is drawn examined the lives of Taiwanese women entrepreneurs, primarily as told through life histories. Simon found that, among his sample of aboriginal informants, a contrast was consistently drawn between childhood enculturation into aboriginal traditions and the process whereby they acquired the skills necessary for participation in modern Taiwanese economic life. However, the very fact of economic participation—i.e., the experience of doing business and achieving success in Taiwan *as* an aborigine—becomes as much a source of identity as the traditional markers. The narratives of these women, which Simon provides in considerable detail, evoke their personal histories of economic learning as a process of self-education and growth.

The last three papers—by Hill Gates, James Wilkerson, and myself—also relate, in different ways, to histories of learning and economic agency. Gates's thought-provoking contribution is based primarily on interviews conducted with elderly Chinese women in Sichuan. Asked about childhood in the pre-revolutionary era, they talk about bound feet, spinning cotton, paper making, etc., and their narratives consistently display a high degree of "numerical specificity." That is, they seem interested in using numbers and specifying quantities. As Gates observes, "These women, even as young girls, were fluent



in counting, simple arithmetic, keeping mental accounts of money earned and products made, and making long-term calculations about their possible future dowries.” This is especially striking given that 90 percent of the 300 women interviewed by Gates and her research team identified themselves as illiterate. Why should they be able to reckon but not read? The answer to this question is exceedingly difficult to reconstruct from the available data. But Gates situates her informants’ numeracy with reference to historically and culturally specific influences—for example, the fact of foot-binding, which doomed many girls and women to working lives in which they mainly performed house-bound repetitive tasks—and also with reference to the human biology of emotion. To put this differently, she seeks to integrate Chinese political-economic histories with the natural history of our species.

Political-economic histories are also at the core of James Wilkerson’s account of learning in rural villages in Penghu in late imperial times. As he suggests, the explication of individual learning and economic agency—something that might be addressed at the micro level—should also be seen against the background of the broader forces within which they are situated. It is not simply that this approach will tell us something new about learning; it may also help to reorient our stance on classic themes in the anthropology of China. The stated goal of Wilkerson’s paper is to “engage a recent shift in the study of local life in late imperial China. That shift moves us away from the more narrow economic emphasis on control of land, irrigation, labor, and the state, to consider in addition learning and competence in practical knowledge in the production and reproduction of social formations.” He discusses, among other things, the ways in which account books—relics, if you like, of learned economic agency in the past—can also tell us a great deal about lineage and temple organization, providing extensive cross-referencing of power relations in the local community.

The contributions by Gates and Wilkerson are both highly ambitious in scope and historical depth. My own contribution to this collection takes a more limited biographical approach. Through an examination of life histories, I seek to address the question of the range of techniques agents may need to master in order to participate in economic life. On the one hand, we find easily definable economic skills, such as the ability to make things which can be sold at market. On the other hand, we find much less clearly defined dispositions and attitudes which, in direct and indirect ways, may profoundly influence economic outcomes. Drawing on two very different case studies from rural Yunnan—one concerning an elderly teacher, the other concerning a young entrepreneur—I highlight three features of learning and economic agency. First, that economy agency may draw on a surprisingly wide-ranging set of

techniques, including ones which may, at first, appear only very peripherally related to economic life. Second, that the learning of such techniques should, in many cases, be seen as a life-long process rather than as a set of one-off experiences. Third, that processes of economic learning are always historically situated, and must therefore be analyzed with respect to the long socio-historical trajectories which make them possible in the first place.

## Conclusion

We very much hope that the papers in this special issue of the *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*, when taken together, will give readers some sense of the range of topics which are opened up for anthropologists by a focus on learning and economic agency. Studies at the micro level of individual learning—for example, the development of numerical cognition among schoolchildren in one village, or the peculiar history of one man who famously kept accounts—can be set alongside studies which take a broad socio-economic perspective and treat learning and the distribution of knowledge as collective phenomena. Historical analyses can be set alongside contemporary ones. Studies focusing on the issue of gender can be set alongside those focused on the issue of ethnicity. In each case, the emphasis on economic practice as something requiring knowledge—and therefore requiring the *acquisition* of knowledge—can provide new insights and open up new vistas for research.

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