

# Symbolic Anthropology Studies in China

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**Abstract:** As a crucial branch of cultural anthropology, symbolic anthropology holds significant importance for the discipline of anthropology. Symbols have long been analyzed at the philosophical level in the West, and later matured within the field of anthropology under the theoretical paradigms of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. In Chinese anthropological circles, symbolic anthropology has achieved considerable development while also facing numerous limitations. This paper aims to briefly review the development of symbolic anthropology and discuss the predicaments it confronts.

**Keywords:** symbol, China, theoretical schools, predicament, ritual

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## 1. Introduction

In the theoretical system of cultural anthropology, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz are often regarded as two masters of symbolic anthropology. However, prior to the formation of their theories, cultural anthropology had already left numerous traces in the field of symbolism. Compared to other theoretical schools, symbolic anthropology appears more inclined to focus on rituals with religious overtones.

Victor Turner centered his attention on the tripartite model of rituals, a perspective directly related to the theories of the early French folklorist Arnold van Gennep[1]. Nevertheless, Turner was clearly influenced by British anthropology, leading to distinctions between his theories and van Gennep's. In contrast, Clifford Geertz focused on cultural interpretation and the tracing of meaning. In essence, the differences between these two scholars reflect the divergences between British and American anthropology.

As mocked by its name, the school of symbolic anthropology enjoyed immense popularity in the 1960s and 1970s but was soon overshadowed by other theories. However, this does not mean the school has vanished entirely. To this day, symbolic anthropology remains revered as an ideal by a segment of anthropologists.

In China, with the revival of anthropology in the 1980s, many renowned anthropological predecessors have conducted research on Chinese rituals and rural societies based on symbolic anthropology theories. Consequently, symbolic anthropology in China has experienced a period of vigorous activity and sound development[2].

## 2. Symbolic Anthropology and Chinese Anthropology

In the history of anthropology, Victor Turner's research is regarded as a pivotal starting point for symbolic anthropology. In fact, prior to the emergence of Turner's theories, the British anthropologist Audrey Richards had already developed a comprehensive understanding and response to the views of Arnold van Gennep, as evidenced in her concise work describing a female coming-of-age ritual in Zambia's Bemba society. However, this book failed to provide a systematic theoretical paradigm, rendering it less influential than the more structured *The Ritual Process*.

The reason for mentioning Audrey Richards' research on symbolism here is to illustrate that, as a perspective for studying society, "symbolism" had already matured prior to Victor Turner. For instance, *Death and the Right Hand* by the prominent French scholar Robert Hertz can be regarded as a canonical work in the anthropological study of bodily symbolism[3]. Undeniably, however, Victor Turner's analysis of rituals in Zambia's Ndembu society laid the systematic foundation for symbolic anthropology as a discipline.

In the theoretical development of symbolic anthropology in China, its primary theoretical source is Victor Turner. Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, is mostly introduced as an interpretive anthropologist. As pointed out in Turner's *The Forest of Symbols*, a simple symbol embodies both coercive elements and human desires. This symbolic analysis, with its strong functionalist overtones, resonates naturally with Chinese scholars.

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the advocacy of senior scholars such as Wu Wenzao, functionalism achieved substantial development in Chinese anthropological circles and even influenced the advancement of social sciences and humanities in China at that time. When Chinese anthropology re-emerged in the 1980s, it first embraced anthropological works closely related to functionalism, a development inseparable from the academic background and ad-

vocacy of Fei Xiaotong[4].

Looking back today, after the restoration of Chinese anthropology in the 1980s, most anthropologists continuously conducted fieldwork in China's border regions, marking an important period in the theoretical development of Chinese anthropology.

### 3. Qu Ming'an's Research and Perspectives

Key perspectives on symbolic anthropology in China are concentrated in Qu Ming'an's book *The Theory and Development of Symbolic Anthropology*. It is important to note, however, that a prominent characteristic of Chinese symbolic anthropology is the lack of theoretical innovation, with most research being an inheritance of Western symbolic anthropology. Nevertheless, through *The Theory and Development of Symbolic Anthropology*, Qu Ming'an provided an excellent summary of the global development of symbolic anthropology, making a significant contribution to the field[5].

Since symbols are a research object of interest across multiple disciplines, scholars from different disciplines—even within the same discipline—have interpreted the concept of symbols and related issues from their respective perspectives. Qu Ming'an's definition of the concept and basic characteristics of “symbols” in his book fully reflects academic inclusiveness. Most importantly, the work not only summarizes symbolic anthropology after Victor Turner but also conducts a detailed study of interpretations of symbols in semiotics, philosophy, psychology, and other fields since the 18th century. It also explores the definition of symbols during the 1960s and 1970s, when symbolic anthropology occupied a prominent academic position, as well as Chinese scholars' research and understanding of symbols[6].

In addition to Qu Ming'an's *The Theory and Development of Symbolic Anthropology*, Liang Yongjia published a collection of essays titled *Symbols Elsewhere*. If Qu's work is a summary of global symbolic anthropology, Liang's *Symbols Elsewhere* represents a theoretical exploration and tracing at the conceptual level, also serving as an important academic work in the field of Chinese symbolic anthropology.

### 4. Conclusion

To conclude this brief review of symbolic anthropology, we borrow Qu Ming'an's perspective: current research on symbolic anthropology in China not only lacks significant achievements in the theoretical construction of symbols but also exhibits deficiencies in theoretical analysis in some empirical studies on symbolic systems in Chinese ethnic cultures, which draw on Western symbolic anthropology theories and methods.

In other words, a sound theoretical framework for symbolic anthropology in China has not yet been established, despite the numerous challenges involved in achieving this breakthrough. For example, scholars engaged in symbolic anthropology in China constitute a small minority, unlike in other areas of anthropology where talent abounds. Nevertheless, we must not abandon such efforts, as symbolic anthropology holds profound practical significance for a correct understanding of Chinese society.

In the field of symbolic anthropology in China, generating academically influential works with international impact is an important mission and responsibility for scholars. Qu Ming'an has also emphasized that Confucian culture, as a theoretical system based on ritual studies, is closely related to the ritual symbolism, religious symbolism, and overall cultural symbolism that Western symbolic anthropology focuses on. Therefore, to achieve the localization or sinicization of symbolic anthropology theories and methods, an important task is to conduct symbolic anthropological research on Confucian ritual studies from multiple perspectives. By extensively absorbing the essence of traditional Chinese theories and Western symbolic anthropology, conducting comparative and comprehensive studies, and proposing new theoretical hypotheses, we can initiate a new phase in the theoretical research of symbolic anthropology in China.

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