

A way out of the predicament of social sciences in the 20th century: a dialogue with Clifford Geertz's essay "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture"(Part II)



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Abstract

Clifford Geertz's essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" comprehensively explored the basic problems encountered in the theoretical efforts of 20th century social sciences. As a response to his reflection, this paper tries to reveal the methodological roots of the predicament of interpretive anthropology and all social sciences, through an epistemological analysis of social science. In addition, with the Theory of Belief as an analytical tool, it also tries to offer a solution to one of the classic predicaments in social sciences: "what is ethnography".

Keywords Clifford Geertz · Culture · Ethnography · Social science · Interpretive anthropology · Theory of belief · Anthropology of belief

1 Introduction

Human Pondered by Human establishes a theory of belief by identifying the causal entity, the belief, that dictates human behavior through a comparison of four types of body representation systems. Beliefs are conceptual beings. If the research object in social sciences is human behaviour, a given belief or a conception shapes a pattern of behaviour. For this reason, the author refers to beliefs as cultural facts and patterns of behaviour as social facts. The aggregation of various belief networks of an ethnicity is culture (Cai 2008). As a result, we reach a clear distinction between cultural facts and social facts. The author established an ontology appropriate for social sciences and, for the first time, proposed a scientific perspective of social sciences

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based on discovering and demonstrating the conceptual being of belief. The following analysis and argumentation on “what is ethnography” will be carried out within the framework of the theory of belief.

Clifford Geertz’s *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (summarized as “*Thick Description*” below), published in 1973, records Geertz’s reflections on the primary questions facing the social sciences in the 20th century (Geertz 2000b). Any advance in cultural anthropology and social sciences cannot actually occur without addressing these questions. What intellectual process did Geertz pass through in this part of his academic activities? What puzzles does he leave us? What lessons can we draw from his legacy?

In 2001, Geertz published *The Visit*, a lengthy review of my book *A Society without Fathers or Husbands*, in *The New York Review of Books*. Later, on February 7th, 2002, he emailed me saying he hoped to see my further research. His words were keen and challenging. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to see my *L’homme pensé par l’homme* (Human Pondered by Human), which was published in 2008. Geertz’s passing away left a vacuum in one of the fields of anthropology and left us feeling lonely. I should have responded to *The Visit* earlier. Now, in this paper, I will assess *Thick Description* and, in the meanwhile, discuss several epistemological issues concerning ethnography in *The Visit*.

2 The entity of the object in social sciences

2.1 The root of the cultural black hole

In order to exhaustively examine the root of obstacles in exploring “culture”, I will get back to Tylor’s definition of culture: “culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society” (Tylor 1871).

Geertz maintains that Tylor’s definition obscures a good deal more than it reveals. We respectfully disagree. From the perspective of methodology, we can see that this definition judiciously and selectively collects terms concerning fundamental differences between humans and other animals. Its advantage is that it could serve as a reference for anthropologists, directing them to focus on objects of study, while its disadvantage is that it attends to different matters all at once. Moreover, its most marked defect is not providing a qualitative analysis of the terms’ referents. Without analysis, this definition neither conceal or reveal anything.

Now, let’s examine Geertz’s methods. Linguistics and semiotics were in their prime in the 1940s, with scholars of other disciplines draw nourishment from these ideas. In the 1940s, Lévi-Strauss borrowed structural analysis (which was shown to be a failure), and then Geertz borrowed “symbol” and “meaning”, though Geertz never explicitly identifies what he means by symbol by example. As we all know, since interpretive anthropology emerged in the 1970s (even till now), many disciplines of the social sciences have been busy defining the symbols in their fields, aiming to interpret their meanings.

Probing the entity of the objects in social science is the highest priority of all priorities. According to this standard, we advocate, we should affirm that interpretive anthropology, which focuses on meaning, is progress compared with previous methods.

Semiotics' mission is to investigate the relationship between languages as well as other symbols and their meanings. Its research unit is a certain symbol's meaning. Once the meaning is made clear, the research is complete. Behavior is not included as an object of study. From the epistemological perspective, choosing to focus on "meaning" seems to require finding an analytical tool, which seems to be able to make various phenomena commensurate. However, this is also its defect. Anthropology has borrowed a double-edged sword. Semiotics or hermeneutics has been dealing with nothing but symbols and meanings since the symbol became the basic unit of study. It doesn't probe the initial condition, nor does it consider the implication of the meaning of the symbol (Cai 2012). Apparently, such learning is far from meeting anthropology's expectations. In addition, it is faced with some other practical problems. For example, moving away from languages and taking up practice, how do we work in the field (especially among ethnic groups with languages but no characters) with this tool? Even more challenging, we are sometimes faced with some phenomena in which there are symbols without meanings, or meanings (belief) without symbols (corresponding words). Semiotics is not anthropology. These phenomena would not be identified if one doesn't go to the field, nor can these connections be identified. Therefore, the methodology of semiotics doesn't suit anthropology. This conclusion is compatible with the below judgment: Hermeneutics and semiotics that aim to explicate ancient documents will continue playing their roles in their fields, such as exegesis.

Geertz's practice is precisely the opposite of semiotics. He reserves both "meaning" and "social action" in "culture". By the means of semiotics, Geertz takes a correct step—abstraction. Nevertheless, he continues the confusion that began with Tylor: mixing qualitatively different things together to make a whole. This is also a classic mistake anthropology has kept making during the last hundred years. For that matter, Tylor, Franz Boas, Kluckhohn and Geertz all follow the same path.

When "culture" is considered a priori meaning (A) and action (B), the only way to define it is to regard it as either one or the other. Given the preconditions have already imposed restriction on making the judgement that culture is not A or B, culture is therefore both A and B. However, an argument that culture is A + B fails to provide anything new and is almost like saying nothing because it is the very premise of this qualitative analysis. Consequently, we can only try to explore a thing that is neither A nor B but implying both A and B. Since meaning is conceptual and social action is the consequence of the conception, the objects referred to by these two concepts, i.e, meaning and action, are incommensurable. We cannot define culture (by means of both concepts) if they do not have a common denominator. Geertz's analysis is thus driven into nihilism—"something"—by formal logic. In other words, he is driven out of this research field. Once the hidden prerequisite of "culture" is revealed, we can understand why Geertz has three definitions of culture: (1) culture is meaning; (2) culture is social action; (3) culture is neither of the two,

but “something”. Obviously, one doing qualitative analysis on culture with such prerequisites is actually destined to set off into a dead end.

Geertz originally intends to develop “a narrowed, specialized, and, ... theoretically more powerful concept of culture”. It’s a pity that no “culture” appears at the end of his research, not to mention “more powerful”. Here, we see a difficult fight.

In contrast, the author of this article argues that the aggregation of various belief networks of an ethnicity is culture. Since beliefs constitute the connotation of culture and belong to the category of conceptions, the essence of culture is conceptual reality. A culture constitutes a world of conceptions. Given that human communities behave according to their beliefs and that the opposite logic has never been found in empirical facts, it is identified that human behaviors gravitate towards beliefs. Thus, the author of this article refers to this “gravity” of beliefs on human behavior as the structuring force of beliefs. For this reason, beliefs (conceptual reality) mould patterns of behavior (social realities), i.e., beliefs determine human cultural (or non-biological) identities and modes of movement (Cai 2008).

2.2 What is ethnography

As I have stated in *Human Pondered by Human*, the entity of study object in social sciences is belief, that is, conceptual existence. A given belief shapes the form of behavior. Hence, I term belief as a cultural fact and behavior as a social fact. Thus, we have made a clear distinction between cultural and social facts. Based on the finding and the proof of belief as conceptual existence, I set up a new ontology that is appropriate for the social sciences and put forward for the first time a new conception of science for the natural and social sciences (Cai 2009).

The conceptualization of cultural and social facts is decisive in terms of developing a basic theory of the social sciences. Once the entity of study object in social science is grasped, a series of classic puzzles in anthropological history have all gained precise and rigorous answers. Accordingly, the definitions of cultural and social facts make defining “ethnography” possible: ethnography is the description of an ethnic group’s living institutions, knowledge, art and technical systems as well as the behaviors underpinned by them for a time (a year or several sequential years). Ethnography offers a cross-section of the history of the researched ethnic groups according to prolonged ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnography, a kind of writing of scientific research that we seek to be as complete as possible, not only includes data verified by what indigenous people say and do (words and deeds) as its main content but also uses all existing historical documents and relics as much as possible to fully examine various cultural facts’ causes and effects as verified by ethnographers during fieldwork. Meanwhile, as a necessary follow-up, it should also include structural analysis of the ethnic group’s cultural and social facts as well as revelation of the social mechanism of the ethnic group.

2.3 The possibility of understanding foreign ethnic groups

Are ethnographers destined to understand only a small part of foreign ethnic groups' culture or social discourse? We see that Geertz thought so from 1973 till 2000. However, if it's believed that one can understand part of something and can't understand the whole, then the general judgment of "one can only understand part of something" is invalid and even false. Instead, if the proposition of "one can only understand part of something" is true, one is necessarily able to understand other parts of it and then ultimately understand its whole. Thus, according to my field experiences, contrary to Geertz's opinion, our answer is: we are not only able to understand part of foreign ethnic groups' discourses, but also the whole.

Fortunately, Geertz's opinion changes with anthropological development. In 2001, he wrote,

"Hua (CAI) goes on to trace out, methodically and in remorseless detail, the variations, the social ramifications, and the ethnographical specifics of all this" (Geertz 2001). "The question that in the end we most want answered and the one most insistently raised by the very circumstantiality of Hua's ethnography 'What is it like to be a Na?' goes largely unattended. We are left with a compact, well-arranged world of rules, institutions, customs, and practices: a 'kinship system'" (ibid.).

Geertz's evaluation showed that at least in 2001 he had already realized it was no longer impossible to understand in enormous detail and describe faithfully and methodically another ethnic group's institutions, lifestyle and the social consequences of both. Doing ethnography(fieldwork, writing ethnography and analysis) can't be regarded as a fragmented understanding or a faded, incoherent description. Thus, the conditions of discussions about ethnographic contents and dependability are quite different since the spiny and foundational question about whether we can only understand a small part of exotic ethnic groups' social life has been eliminated.

Therefore, we intend to emphasize that systematic observation, prolonged analysis, and close questioning of the observational results are the pith of anthropological methodology. When an ethnographer realizes he or she only acquires fragmented information about an ethnic group's social life and social discourse, the researcher comes to understand that his or her practice of participant observation, especially deep interview methods, still has some room for improvement.

The above arguments don't, in the least, mean fieldwork is an easy enterprise. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that fieldwork in different domains has different sorts and degrees of difficulty. For example, in comparison with the investigation of kindred lives, fieldwork on political life may be greeted with a forbidding iron curtain rather than a soft sunblind. Aspiring to take part in participant observation about the chief of state's decision-making may be the craziest idea in politicians' eyes (anthropologists could be just this kind of people). The details of political life can only wait to be disclosed from the release of declassified files and dealt with by historians. However, this doesn't mean anthropology can't research a country's political institutions and behaviors. Performances on the stage stubbornly reveal secrets behind the scenes. Through listening to what he or she says and observing what he or she does, people are always able to understand a country's administrative policies and conduct to recognize who is heroic or mediocre,

licentious or despotic. Time will tell. More extended fieldwork is the ransom political anthropology must pay.

It is known that in an ethnographer's mother tongue, there is often no corresponding word for translating the particular words which represent the basic concepts of the ethnic group he or she studies; nevertheless, he or she can introduce these kinds of concepts through a drawing-like description. In addition, when we meet with a particular word in fieldwork, the indigenous people present its meanings in different contexts by telling us its intention and extension, i.e. presenting us the concept represented by this word through a "sketch". An ethnographer can refer to the concept through transliteration or choose a similar word from his or her mother tongue, giving particular explanation in the text, thus completing a faithful (or original) representation of the indigenous social discourse and achieving objectivity according to anthropological standards. Therefore, ethnography is not a construction of constructions. I have made extensive arguments on this issue in *Contemporary Methodology of Ethnography* (Cai 2014).

2.4 Differences between ethnography and fiction

When the definition of "ethnography" was uncertain, there was a lack of the prerequisites for comparing ethnography and fiction. Clarifying ethnography makes the comparison possible. Geertz says this when he talks about the similarity between ethnography and fiction again:

Her [Madame Bovary's] story was created while Cohen's was only noted. The conditions of their creation and the point of it (to say nothing of the manner and the quality) differ. But the one is as much a *fictiō*—"a making"—as the other (Geertz 2000b).

The difference between ethnography and fiction shouldn't be flashed with a sentence wrapped in parentheses (not to mention its manner and quality). The crucial question is the difference between the conditions and the gist of writing. In particular, how are they fundamentally different? It's right that in the sense of being made by humans, ethnography and fiction are all makings. But are they homogenous because of this? We know that fiction creates characters through stories under certain space-time circumstances. Whatever kind of fiction, its basic characteristic is fabrication. So, if traced in real life, it is certain that no character or story corresponds fully with real existence.

Instead, ethnographers' fieldwork aims to understand an ethnic group's social institutions and behavior patterns. Being together day by day, even year by year, ethnographers repeatedly learn and verify the basic details of the ethnic groups' daily social lives through all-in and highly intense participant observation and deep interviews. The ethnography is written based on what he or she has kept in his or her memory and the field notes after such a process. Thus, the personal stories told in ethnography are just the vivid representation of social ethos and (or more exactly)

illustrations of social institutions and behavior patterns, only taking second place in the text after the institutions.

Generally speaking, the behavior patterns, institutions, social structures and mechanisms of a given ethnicity are a set of autonomous entities and are highly stable for a given period (especially before modernization began). Researchers can't possibly coin a set of social institutions, not to mention change the social structures that he or she studies, which are independent of researchers.

The study object of anthropologists is other ethnic groups' institutions, which are embodied in daily life. Every ethnic group repeats the same behavior pattern yearly, just like we do in our social environment. Where can we see examples of transient behavior patterns? Which ethnic group's life mode is changing every day?

Engaging in ethnography is a scientific activity. The description and theories in an ethnography are scientific and contribute to gains in scientific knowledge if they are based on empirical facts. Otherwise, they are pseudoscientific. Instead, fiction doesn't have such restrictions. Creative fiction contributes by putting forward new ethnic orientations and values to provide readers with new thoughts and choices. Ethnography tries to record and describe the existing issues, while fiction tries to open up something.

Hence, if we are fortunate to live with an ethnographer in the same period, and if the society described in the ethnography is not in a transformational phase, then other anthropologists, if they visit the society, will generally see everyone (instead of someone) is living a life just like that in the ethnography. One is creation and fabrication, while the other is a faithful drawing verified by ethnographers and able to withstand re-verification by others. That's the essential difference between ethnography and fiction.

Here emerges a question: What ethnography should be considered good? Geertz's answer is great: "Good anthropological tests are plain and unpretending" (Geertz 1989). But he only answers the question in terms of writing style or, to say, form. The answer must have dimensions of both essence and formation. Thus, my answer is: when ethnography has made a basically complete and exquisitely detailed drawing (plain and unpretending) of an ethnic group's social institutions and the corresponding life mode so that even if the life mode disappears, the complexity and delicate description can enable a group of people who admire such a lifestyle to reestablish a society like that based on the drawing: such ethnography should be considered top-grade.

Historians' experiences show that various historical materials seldom record details of their author's contemporary social life. Why? My experience reveals to me that's because self-evident things needn't be told. In comparison, ethnographers are experts at self-evident things for natives. Excellent ethnography consists of holographs of different realms of that ethnic group's social life in its author's fieldwork period. Seen from the future, a piece of ethnography, once written, is a book of history.

2.5 Inductive method

Since every ethnic group has its unique belief system formed from ancient times, it's meaningless in social science activities to infer another ethnic group deductively from the research of a certain ethnic group; neither can we deductively infer (like Geertz's guess) an ethnic group's other beliefs based on the known parts of its belief system. The people observed are the only ones who own the knowledge and thus have the right to explain their behavior patterns. Therefore, natives provide the first layer and the only explanations (rather than interpretation). Geertz believes ethnographers need to provide the second and third interpretive layers. This opinion is a result caused by the misjudgment that "there is only interpretation but no fact". If psychological analysis (like Geertz's cockfight analysis) doesn't correspond to Geertz's so-called second and third layer analysis, there are no examples to prove its existence. Thus, it is necessary to stress again that inductive inference is indeed an unshakable, absolute imperative of anthropology or the methodology of all social sciences. Deviating from it means abandoning one's greatest ability.

2.6 Cultural burdens

The discussion between Geertz and me provides a perfect example of the influence of traditional and modern cultural background on researchers. *The Visit* not only approves and applauds but also challenges my monograph, *A Society without Fathers or Husbands*.

Geertz writes:

[S]ome of this inability or unwillingness, it is hard to be certain which to face up to the less edged and outlined dimensions of Na life may be due to what we have come these days to call Hua's 'subject position'. As a Han Chinese, brought up in what must be one of the most family-minded, most explicitly moralized, least unbuttoned societies in the world, studying as non-Han a society as it seems possible to imagine (and one located in 'China' to boot) by using the concerns and preconceptions of Western-phrased 'science', Hua has his work cut out for him. In itself, this predicament is common to all field anthropologists, even ones working in less dramatic circumstances, and there is no genuine escape from it. The problem is that Hua seems unaware that the predicament exists that the passing of 'Na institutions' through Chinese perceptions on the way to 'doing the West a service' by placing them 'in the anthropological literature' raises questions not just about the institutions, but about the perceptions and the literature as well (Geertz 2001).¹

¹ It puzzles me why Geertz must baffle the others in this paragraph of comment, since the predicament of anthropology's destiny is inextricable for anthropologists including the himself.

This comment contains three questions: emic and etic approaches, the influence of my Han cultural background on myself, and the influence of concepts and theories dominating at that time in French anthropology of kinship on my research.

The distinction between emic and etic approaches doesn't correspond to anthropological experience in practice. It is another spiritual "gymnastics" borrowed from semantics, which is actually a false proposition. For example, totally in accordance with the Na's narrative of their social and cultural facts, when we faithfully describe Na society, the whole book, each chapter and even every section's composition in *A Society without Fathers or Husbands* relies on the author's recognition of the structure of the Na's cultural logic system. Additionally, for a subject with a broad scope, one basic writing principle is to avoid repetition and every researcher has his or her own way of that. So, there are various possibilities for how to compose so long as the description is authentic. Due to this fact, the imagined emic approach can't possibly accomplish its mission since no natives can tell us the structure of their cultural logic system. If there is a native who can accomplish such a difficult task, he or she must be an excellent anthropologist and outsider-researchers are not needed. In terms of the etic approach, it is a complete illusion. Concerning this observation, the etic approach is nonsense because observers are always etic. When it concerns writing, the etic approach describes ethnographers' feelings about exotic culture rather than the universe of the others. Has such an ethnography ever been written? Ethnography is usually written by objects, i.e. ethnographers from foreign ethnic groups, instead of subjects, i.e. the natives under research. Therefore, the real question is: are the results of our observation and interview objective? How can they be objective? Is the description faithful? How can it be faithful?²

Moreover, since I am a Han researcher, what roles does Han culture play for me in the process of understanding Na culture? In the 1980s, all mainstream opinions and focus in kinship anthropology saw "kinship" (consanguinity + affinity) as biological and cultural (consanguinity is biological, and affinity is cultural). However, in comparison with such an argument, we know that *zongqin* (宗亲, all the members of the patrilineal lineage in traditional Han society, i.e. only calculating patrilineal relatives as the kindred of Ego) is purely prescribed by their culture, totally independent of biology. As the kinship system in traditional Han culture is purely and extremely patrilineal, Han's patrilineal culture not only has not been a barrier to our understanding of Na culture, but is immensely beneficial for us and helps us to identify the fact that both kinship dimensions are cultural.

In other words, the essence of kinship present in my traditional Han culture corresponds more than the bilateral system to that of all kinds of kinship. Apparently, the bilateral kinship system (my predecessors studying kinship are almost from the cultures where the kinship system is bilateral) is more similar to genetic law: chromosomes from father and mother account for 50 per cent each. However the seemingly same phenomenon blinds the eyes of scholars, making them always cast their eyes on biological relations and believe blood relations to be solely biological. This

² I have offered an exhaustive demonstration to these questions in this essay's companion piece "Contemporary Methodology of Ethnography". (See Cai 2014).

belief becomes a long-lasting obstacle that prevents them from realizing the cultural essence of kinship.

Indeed, for an individual whose mother is not his “cultural relative”, it is not easy to understand a society without fathers and husbands (i.e. a society in which biological males of the previous generation have no relationship with oneself in either of the two dimensions, biological or cultural). But it’s not impossible to imagine this. Born into the absolutely patrilineal Han society, I’m fortunate to do fieldwork in the absolutely matrilineal Na society and a typically bilateral French nation. These extraordinary experiences with three different basic types of kinship provide me with a broad view. The comparison between the empirical facts I gained gives me enormous advantages in my approach to the essence of kinship. These facts prove that my culture not only hasn’t cut me off from my work so as to place me in a predicament, but instead, the difference between Han culture and Na culture has helped me to understand the Na’s essential cultural characteristics and then to successfully reveal the mistake and its reason in the focus and presumption of modern western “science” (mainstream opinions represented by Lévi-Strauss) (Cai 1997).³

Geertz’s generalization seems to be unjust. Ethnographers from different societies facing different cultures encounter various difficulties as well as advantages.

The word “culture” is plural in Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which shows that he believes his book to be about the interpretation of concrete cultures. In 2000, Geertz expressed his thoughts as follows:

What we need are ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities (Geertz 2000a).

At the same time, the slogan he comes up with is “toward an interpretive theory of culture”. Although Geertz adopted it in 2000, he never published any essay to claim the completion of his interpretive theory of culture. He is always on the way toward an interpretive theory of culture (Shankman 1984; Micheelsen 2002).⁴ In 2000, Arun Micheelsen interviewed Geertz about interpretive anthropology’s potential development in the new millennium. He evaded the point: “As for cultural anthropology, it will in my view go on in reasonable continuity with its past.” When the interviewer continued to inquire whether Geertz thought interpretive anthropology should be more systematic, Geertz replied, “some parts of it will become more systematic and taken for granted...But then again, I cannot predict the future” (Micheelsen 2002). But actually Geertz already gave his conclusion in *Thick Description*:

³ It’s necessary to specify that placing “Na institutions” “in the anthropological literature” on the way to “doing the West a service” cited above is from a review and recommendation by Claude Lévi-Strauss for *A Society without Fathers or Husbands* (see the fourth cover of its English edition). Geertz inserted this sentence to ridicule Lévi-Strauss. I explain here since Geertz didn’t provide a clear reference for the citation.

⁴ Paul Shankman doesn’t make the basic fact clear that Geertz has never put forward any theory but only set a so-called “theoretical” goal, so that Geertz refused to respond to his long criticism.

One cannot write a “*General Theory of Cultural Interpretation*.” Or, rather, one can, but there appears to be little profit in it, because the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them (Geertz 2000b).

The long review of *Thick Description* above may impress upon the reader that Geertz and I have no shared opinions. The actual situation is just the opposite and far more complicated. We share some opinions but have subtly different ideas at other points. To be concrete, like the opinion mentioned above, engaging in systematic ethnography is the main activity of anthropologists, and ethnography is a basic form of anthropological knowledge. This is common sense for all anthropologists. As another example, Geertz’s sharp intuition realizes “sciences (are) more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction. Only short flights of ratiocination tend to be effective in anthropology; longer ones tend to drift off into logical dreams” (ibid.). Indeed, as Belief Theory shows, anthropology doesn’t have to provide verbose reasoning after grasping the entity of our study object. As another example, Geertz writes, “The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live” (ibid.). We are, beyond any doubt, holding the same opinion that anthropology’s study object is the “conceptual world” in which exotic ethnic groups live. But when such a statement is associated with “though [culture is] ideational, it does not exist in someone’s head”, I have no idea whether Geertz’s “conceptual world” is still the same as my “conceptual universe”. Besides, Geertz seeks to “understand” them, while I not only try to understand but also seek a universal explanation for them, i.e., searching for law, and a unifying explanation, i.e. fundamental principles. It seems to be a methodological difference but includes a widely different purpose and theoretical pursuits.

Interpretive anthropology aims at particularities, while belief anthropology explores the basic laws between the diversity of human conceptual activities and their social consequences. The research results in *Human Pondered by Human* also prove Geertz’s opinion:

Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning...but the movement is not from already proven theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim...A study is an advance if it is more incisive-whatever that may mean than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side (ibid.).

Indeed, the way in which Geertz deals with the concept of culture is totally different from his predecessors, and again, mine differs from his as well.

Moreover, Geertz’s evaluation of *A Society without Fathers or Husbands* shares my opinions: “Since the Na have no matrimonial relationship, they falsify both theories (A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s ‘descent theory’ and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ‘alliance theory’).” Furthermore, it’s not impossible to completely understand an ethnic group’s institutions, behavioral patterns and their social consequences. Many details worthy of comparison remain for future discussion.

The most representative and concise critical comment on Geertz's theoretical research is "sterile beauty" (Walters 1980). This conclusion is indeed indisputable in its dimension of theorization. The fecund beauty of opening up a broad perspective is naturally the highest level of scientific activity. But there is no regal path to scientific progress. *Thick Description* is full of contradictory arguments on many issues. From this unreasonable appearance, the author's uncertainty exuded. As scientific history reveals, confusion and disappointment are often companions to hope around the turning point of a historical breakthrough to find a new path.

However, it's easier to criticize than contribute. Contrary to mean opinion (sterile beauty), not only are Geertz's courage, acumen and academic achievement admirable, but his dedication is touching: few people have ever tried to solve these kinds of problems, even fewer are brave enough to talk openly about their arduous "cultural" journey. Confusion and disappointment are always seen as being beneath the researcher's dignity, so many scholars are terrified and withdraw from the discussion, and even fewer are courageous enough to go ahead. If we review *Thick Description* positively, as a master of American social sciences, in the process of exploration, Geertz confronted almost all the basic problems facing the whole social scientific community. Through this close-up, *Thick Description* brings us face-to-face with a thinker chained by philosophy. Interpretive anthropology becomes the last classic case of the Popperian method of trial and error in the 20th century's social scientific history following evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, structural-functionalism and structuralism. It records the problems the author leaves, provides peers with puzzles to be solved, and encourages us to probe the invisible barriers besieging the social sciences. All these are Geertz's legacy, and this is the power of his "tragedy".

3 Conclusion

The glamorous word "culture", referring to both ideas and behavior, comes to the world with inherited effects and generates a terrible black hole in the field of social scientific thought. For this reason, Geertz's analysis of the word "culture" with its confused meanings winds up falling into nihilism. Thus, the whole analysis in *Thick Description* has no empirical facts at its base and no coherence in its basic concepts. Given that Geertz doesn't know what culture is, for example, what the essence of social sciences' study object is, he has actually already lost his object of interpretation. Due to the lack of classification of diverse human activities, their qualitative analysis, and the exploration of the causality between different components within human activities, the methodology of the deep interview didn't have direction, and the characteristics of ethnography couldn't be grasped.

For this reason, it's necessary to restate that ethnography is a particular form of anthropological knowledge and that synchronic cultural and social facts gained by anthropologists during fieldwork are the main components of this knowledge. Any concept and theory in social sciences must be rooted in the comparison of different types of cultural and social facts selected from all ethnic groups. From this perspective, it follows that ethnography is social sciences' cornerstone.

Because the old ambiguous, never clarified word “culture” confuses independent and dependent variables within social sciences’ study object, all the researchers basing their study on this term would have placed themselves in the black hole of “culture” since their first work, regardless of their extraordinary talents. This is one of the fundamental reasons why it is hard for anthropology in the 20th century to bear fruit in terms of “culture”.

Besides the drag of the cultural black hole, another reason, traced to its source, for why Geertz’s efforts fail is the intrinsic opposition between the interpretive method that aims to identify particularities on one side, and, on the other, the theory and science that aim to reveal universalities. Its methods and targets are mutually exclusive. Therefore, from Dilthey, through Weber, to Geertz, choosing the interpretive method as the path to pursue science is choosing the wrong road.

Among the three study objects, i.e. thought, feelings and action, Geertz’s interpretation actually prefers feelings. Geertz pursues the coherent whole of inner experiences by observing the interaction of people’s different inner experiences (i.e. psychological reactions such as the feelings and venting of the gamecocks’ owners) through deductive inference. The direction of his research has a bias towards psychological studies.

Moreover, it has to be pointed out that Geertz regards ethnography as fiction as a result of self-reflection based on the outcomes of his ethnographic work. His judgment that ethnography is not objective exposed a soft rib of anthropology- a special knowledge castle at that time. The lure brought out by the enormous contrast between this weakness and Geertz’s great fame swept the naïve, clumsy and rigid successors of antiquated agnosticism–postmodernists, so that the latter, particularly some literature reviewer, launched an abrupt intrusion into anthropology. Though unusually fierce arguments have arisen between postmodernists and Geertz, Geertz is not an adversary of post-modernism but a source of post-modern trends. In some sense, he is a pioneer in post-modernism.

The axioms set up by philosophy, which are not admired by natural scientists and deductive inferences from the natural sciences, belong in their essence to western culture. They are like strong ropes hobbling certain social scientists. *Thick Description* appears rather irrational, especially in its mistake of misusing Lakatos’s judgment about the driving force of the direction of science. It would be dangerous if the judgments from epistemology, which are not definitive cognitive results, were followed as the ultimate truth.

In Geertz’s pursuit, the black hole of culture and philosophy’s tradition (interpretation as a method, etc.) constitute the dual sources for the biting cold confronted by interpretive anthropology. Moreover, deductive inference, which applies only to the natural sciences, lingers like a phantom. Generally speaking, the above three main characteristics constitute the basic features of the social sciences in pre-scientific times. Therefore, under the circumstance when the objects of interpretation are lost, with the fragmented *Thick Description* in written form, establishing theories and science with this method of interpretation cannot avoid the fate of disillusionment. Considering that in terms of experiences, the slogan toward an interpretive theory of culture deviates from reality and in terms of methodology, it faces a logical predicament: this slogan is indeed the product of the imagination. Just as other loud-for-a-time sayings, the interpretive theory of culture is just an abortive idea, a phrase. No one in the past has ever, and no one in

the future will ever, put forward any theory following this path. Interpretive anthropology using semiotic methods has little prospect for future value.

Through analysis and comparison of thoughts in Chinese and western cultural backgrounds, this essay aims to participate in science games, revealing the essence of ethnography emulating other scholars' thoughts in challenging and being challenged by way of the anthropology of belief.

As a telling description of an ethnicity's institutional, intellectual, artistic, and technological systems and the behaviors they dictate over a year (or years), an ethnography presents a cross-section of the ethnic history investigated by an ethnographer during his or her long-term fieldwork. Meanwhile, as necessary subsequent steps after the portrait, the analysis of an ethnic group's cultural and social facts, the clarification of the structure of these facts, and the elucidation of the ethnicity's social operation mechanisms should also be comprised in the ethnography. For this reason, ethnography constitutes the main body of social scientific knowledge. It is the comparative object of anthropology and, therefore, the cornerstone of social science theory.

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Comments

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