

## A Historical Overview on Anthropology in China

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### PART I: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW ON THE DISCIPLINE

China is a country with a long history and vast territory, and its anthropological knowledge dates back to the Shang Dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> B.C. –11<sup>th</sup> B.C.). This is known because records of primitive beliefs of the Shang nationality were found in inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells dated to that time. As a modern science, it began to develop after the western countries' anthropology formed into an independent discipline during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, anthropology has a history of more than 150 years in the western countries, and of more than 100 years in China. The history of anthropology in China can be divided into three different stages as follows:

#### I. Initial Development Stage from the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to 1950s

The first anthropological book introduced into China was *Ethnology* written by a German scholar named Michael Haberlandr. This book was translated by Lin Shu and Wei Yi, and published in 1903. Its main purpose is to explain the race concepts of Germany as well as to give a comprehensive commentary on the ethnic groups of North America, Oceania, Asia, and Europe. In the same year, the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) issued *Educational System and Disciplines of the Universities* in which featured one new course – *Race and Anthropology*. In 1912 (the first year of the Republic of China), the Ministry of Education promulgated the educational system and disciplines of the universities. In particular, one course named *Human Being and Study of Race* was included. However, among colleges and universities across the country, only Peking University established this course and named it anthropology.

In 1916, Sun Xuewu published his paper *An Introduction to Anthropology* in *Science* magazine (No. 4. Volume 2) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and gave an introduction to European and American anthropology. This

was the first time for a Chinese scholar to formally use the concept of anthropology. In 1918, Chen Yinghuang, a Professor of Peking University, wrote a book named *Anthropology* which was published as the Peking University Series by the Commercial Publishing House. Special emphasis was placed on physical anthropology, mainly involving the types of physiques, evolution of physiques and the world distribution of the races. This was the first monograph in China named officially as anthropology. In 1926, Mr. Cai Yuanpei (1868 - 1940) published his paper *Talking about Ethnology* in *General* magazine (No.12. Volume 1) and began to formally introduce ethnology. This was the first time the concept of ethnology was used in China.

Mr. Cai Yuanpei studied in Germany around 1907, majoring in philosophy and anthropology. He had been devoting himself to the introduction of western sociology, anthropology and ethnology. He later became one of the most important founders of anthropology and ethnology in China. In the above mentioned paper *Talking about Ethnology* (1926), Cai explained that ethnology mainly studied culture, and it was a kind of knowledge investigating the culture of different ethnic groups, then taking notes or making comparisons. It was different from study of race, which mainly focused on the classification of races, and it was also different from anthropology, which laid special emphasis on the biological nature of human beings (Cai, 1967). In April of 1928, he set up the Ethnology Research Group at the Institute of Social Sciences of the Academia Sinica and served as head of it. Later he founded the Anthropology Research Group and began to make a major effort to train young anthropologists. Under his advocacy, anthropologists went to the minority areas to do fieldwork where they made many achievements in scientific research.

In the 1920s, a large number of anthropological books from Britain, Germany, France, and Japan were translated and introduced into China one after another. Examples include *Theory*

on *Social Evolution* written by Mullor Lyer (translated by Tao Menghe and published by Commercial Publishing House in 1929), *Ancient Society* by Lewis H Morgan (translated by Yang Dongsun and Zhang Liyuan and published by Shanghai Kunlun Bookstore in 1929), and so on. During the 1930s and 1940s, there were many anthropologists in colleges and universities as well as some research institutions, and anthropology was further developed. Some universities, such as Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, Zhongshan University, and Xiamen University set up anthropology departments or disciplines. Other universities like Yanjing University (later Peking University), Furen University, and the Central University offered anthropology courses or ethnology courses. In 1933, Tsinghua University founded the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology in the Graduate School, and invited the famous Russian scholar Shirokogoroff to be a professor of the institute. Fei Xiaotong, one of the most distinguished anthropologists of modern China, was the first graduate student of this department. At that time, Yanjing University also introduced social anthropology from Britain and imparted it to students as comparative sociology. Dr. Fei Xiaotong was well nurtured by the anthropology taught in these two famous universities. Later, in his doctoral dissertation titled *JiangCun Economy*, he used the traditional anthropological methods that were used to study foreign culture at that time to study the modern rural society of Chinese native culture. This was a milestone for anthropology to study modern complex society.

At that time, there were more than thirty periodicals on anthropology, frontier studies and minority studies. And there were also more than one hundred books, such as *History of Social Evolution* by Cai Hecen (1926), *Problems of World Races* by Huang Xinmin (1927), *Modern Anthropology* by Zhang Liyuan (1931) and *Cultural Anthropology* by Lin Huixiang (1934), and so forth.

In July 1934, the First International Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences Conference was convened in London, and Prof. Yang Chengzhi, Wu Dingliang and Ouyang zhu participated in this conference on behalf of the Chinese anthropological circle.

During the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945), Tsinghua University, Peking University and Nankai University established the Southwest Joint University in Kunming, which mainly focused on frontier study of China as well as strengthened teaching in the subjects of anthropology and ethnology. The Central University and Northwest University of Xi'an set up the Departments of Frontier Studies in succession, offering anthropology and ethnology as the main required courses. After victory in the War, Tsinghua University, Zhongshan University and Zhejiang University established anthropology departments one after the other. Professor Wu Zelin, head of the anthropology department of Tsinghua University, also set up the first exhibition room of national relics of China in the department. Professor Lin Huixiang of Xiamen University established the preparatory department of the anthropological museum in 1934. This was the first specialized museum of anthropology in China.

Main achievements during this period included four aspects: firstly, large quantities of western anthropological books were translated and introduced into China; secondly, Chinese anthropologists set up a large number of publications on anthropology and ethnology; thirdly, a stable research team was formed; and fourthly, Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists began to do a lot of fieldwork in the minority areas, accumulated plenty of materials and achieved a great deal of research, such as the investigation of Gaoshan nationality made by Lin Huixiang (1929), the investigation of Hezhe nationality made by Ling Chunsheng (1930), the investigation of Yi nationality of Liangshan area made by Lin Yaohua and Ma Xueliang (1940-1943), the investigation of Zang nationality of Chuankang area made by Lin Yaohua and Chen Yongling (1938-1945), and so forth. During 1928-1945, there were more than 30 scholars who made investigations into 16 different ethnic groups.

On the whole, before the 1950s, anthropological science in China had already made great leaps, achieving some progress and occupying a prominent place in the international academic circles.

One important point concerns the relationship

between anthropology and ethnology. In the process of their development in China, anthropology and ethnology formed a very complicated relationship. As I have mentioned earlier, Mr. Cai Yuanpei used the concept of "Ethnology" in his paper for the very first time in China, and later he set up the Ethnology Research Group at the Academia Sinica. Because of the extremely high prestige of Mr. Cai and the position of the Academia Sinica, "Ethnology" became an official name used for minority studies (Qiao, 1995). After the 1930s, anthropological books, mainly about cultural anthropology/social anthropology began to be introduced into China in large numbers. From then on, the concept of "Anthropology" became popular. However, anthropology was mostly attached to sociology at that time, such as Yanjing University and Tshinghua University. In 1952, all of the national higher learning institutions were restructured by the Government. Ethnology, being a discipline of minority studies, was kept, while anthropology and sociology were cancelled. Only at the end of the 1970s, were anthropology and sociology revived and restored step by step. Now in the discipline lists of the Academic Commission of the State Council, Ethnology is the first-level discipline, and there are four second-level disciplines belonging to it, including Marxist theory and policy of ethnicity, history of Chinese minorities, art of Chinese minorities and economics of Chinese minorities. Anthropology is one of the four second-level disciplines under the first-level of Sociology, but initially it was under the first-level of Biology and Ethnology. Three other second-level disciplines included in Sociology are sociology, demography and folklore. From the present condition of research and use, these two concepts are interchangeable in China with "ethnology" being more popularly used than "cultural anthropology". Now some anthropologists are trying their best to make these two concepts clearer.

## II. Further Development of Anthropology in China from the 1950s to 1970s

After the establishment of People's Republic of China (1949), anthropology traveled a complicated road. In 1952, all of the national higher learning institutions were restructured

according to the new situation. Like sociology, political science, law science and religion science, anthropology was cancelled as a kind of 'bourgeois Pseudo-Science'. Only Fudan University continued to have a teaching and research section of physical anthropology because of the special concern of Premier Zhou Enlai. In Taiwan, however, anthropology was further developed at that time. In 1949, the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology was founded at Taiwan University, and in 1955, the Political University set up the Department of Frontier Studies. In 1970, this department was renamed the Department of Ethnology and Sociology. In 1955, the Academia Sinica in Taiwan prepared to set up the Institute of Ethnology. It was founded formally in 1965, and Prof. Ling Chunsheng held the position as head of the institute. During that time, anthropologists in Taiwan made many successful field studies, devoting themselves to the study of Gaoshan nationality and the culture of the Pacific. From the 1970s, academic circles of Hong Kong also began to pay great attention to the development of anthropology. In 1980, an anthropology department was established at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Areas of special research interest at this university include: folk culture, characteristics and relationships of ethnic groups, archaeology, Chinese minorities, overseas Chinese, applied social problems, and so on. In mainland China, during the twenty years after the restructuring of national higher learning institutions, the research of anthropology and ethnology was not promoted in an all-around way, yet the Central Institute for Nationalities (1951) and the Institute of Nationality Studies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (1956) were established in succession after the 1950s. In addition, the Central Ethnic Affairs Commission organized large-scale national investigations of the social history of minorities. Some other provinces also set up the Institute of Nationality Studies and the Institute for Nationalities one after another to study the history and reality of minorities. At the same time, branches of anthropology, such as physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistics, were developed quickly. They all achieved great success in their research.

The main research achievements of this period

were reflected in three aspects: identification of different nationalities; investigation of the social history of the minority nationalities; and research on the social formation of the minority nationalities. In the first place, before 1953, the number of ethnic groups in China was unknown. According to the statistical data of 1953, more than 400 ethnic names were registered, and just in Yunnan province, for example, there were more than 260 ethnic names. To implement the policy of regional autonomy for the minorities, from 1953 on, the Central Ethnic Affairs Commission began to organize anthropologists, ethnologists and researchers of minority areas from all over the country to do research on the identification of different nationalities. This project was named "Ethnic Group Recognition" (min-zu-shi-bie). Thus a number of minorities were recognized as members of the multi-ethnic nation of China. This led to the establishment of the 55 minority nationalities in China. Secondly, to guide minority nationalities at different stages of social development onto a new developing road, a large-scale investigation was carried out all over the country from August 1956 to May 1964. Researchers achieved remarkable success. Research reports of more than 40 million words were put into print. Also 13 documentary films about minority nationalities were made during this period. Most importantly, a key team for anthropological and ethnological study was also formed in the course of the investigation. Thirdly, during the 1940s and 1950s, the social development situation of minority nationalities differed greatly. To provide an important basis for the implementation of social reform in the minority areas, research on the current social conditions of different nationalities was carried out, and at last they were clarified for the first time. In addition, with regard to research into minority languages, a comprehensive knowledge of the situation of minority languages was obtained, which assisted 16 minorities in creating or reforming their writing systems. The above projects led to a collection of considerable amounts of invaluable historical data, as well as publication of large quantities of research results. All of this had played a very important role in the formulation of minority policies and in decision-making by the P.R.C Government.

### III. The Promoted Stage (After the 1980s)

After "the Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) was over, the social sciences were given more attention by the Chinese Government. As a result, anthropology and ethnology stepped into a new stage of development. On October 26 of 1980, the founding of the Chinese Ethnological Society was proclaimed. Later, the Chinese Anthropological Society was also established in May 1981 during "the First National Academic Symposium of Anthropology" convened in Xiamen city. These two academic societies published periodicals and bulletins, playing an important role in the further promotion of anthropology and ethnology in China. In March 1983, "the Eleventh International Academic Symposium of Anthropology and Ethnology" was held in Canada, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences sent a delegation to participate. Later on, international academic exchange was further broadened and strengthened, and intimate academic relationships were built with the anthropology and ethnology circles of Japan, North Korea, France, Germany, Italy, England, America, Canada and Australia, and so on. By the 1990s, many prominent universities and research sections, such as Peking University, the Central University for Nationalities, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Xiamen University, Zhongshan University, Lanzhou University, Yunnan University, etc, established anthropology departments, specialties or research centers, enrolling and cultivating specialized personnel on different levels, including undergraduate students, graduate students, Ph.D. candidates and post-doctoral fellows. For example, before 2000 there were three specialties in Ethnology Department of the Central University for Nationalities. They were ethnology/culture anthropology, museology and ethnic theory. From 1983 to 2000, the sum total of graduates of ethnology/culture anthropology specialty of this department was 683, including 392 undergraduate students, 225 graduate students and 66 Ph.D. candidates. Thus anthropology and ethnology began to be accepted by people from all circles of Chinese society.

As far as the research emphases of this period were concerned, after the 1980s, Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists continued their

study on the traditional culture of minority nationalities. At the same time, they also paid great attention to the research on the new situation and new problems that appeared in the minority areas in the course of "modernization". For example, some research topics which are finished or still in progress in our department include "the Study of the Movement of Chinese Ethnic Groups by the end of this Century", "the Rescuable Records and Research Program on the Three Gorges", "the Study on the Issue of Modernization of Tibet", "the Study on the Opening West and Ethnic Relations", and so on. Accordingly, anthropological and ethnological knowledge are put into practice frequently.

## **PART II: THE LOCALIZATION OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN CHINA**

In recent years, the localization of anthropology in China has become a topical subject in Chinese academic circles. So far, the discussion on this issue is still ongoing.

As early as the 1930s, when anthropology first came into being as a new discipline in China, many scholars put forward ideas of establishing a discipline system of Chinese anthropology from different perspectives. Mr. Cai Yuanpei, the founder of anthropology and ethnology in China, raised the idea of developing native anthropology during the initial stage of anthropology and ethnology in China. He encouraged anthropologists to proceed to different areas to do fieldwork, and tried to establish a Chinese discipline system. Accordingly, the localization of anthropology in China began as early as the 1930s.

As for the meaning of "localization of anthropology", Dr. Wang Jianmin of the Central University for Nationalities once gave an explanation. He believed that localization of anthropology should be going on under the presupposition of the introduction of the western countries' academic thoughts of anthropology. It would China-lize those non-Chinese origins or localize them. Localization presupposed the absorption of foreign philosophy and culture. It was the spreading of foreign philosophy and culture in China that brought about the issue of localization. The key to this issue is to bring forth new ideas in theory and method. This is also the

basic aim of anthropology and ethnology in China in the 21st century (He, 2000a).

Both subjective and objective factors are considered to be the reasons for localization of anthropology in China. As far as subjective factors are concerned, there are differences between the cultural background of Chinese scholars and western scholars that lead to the differences in explanation and understanding of matters. In addition, the different knowledge structures of different scholars also result in a noticeable difference of study methods. In China, a number of anthropologists are minority members themselves, and they are well versed in the history and culture of the nationalities they belong to. Even some Han scholars have had experiences of working in the minority areas before they engaged in nationality studies, thereby acquainting themselves with knowledge on minorities. Therefore, in the course of their fieldwork, they do not investigate all aspects of minorities, but focus mainly on the collection of the latest information as well as verify the accuracy of the formerly investigated results. This has become one of the distinctive features of the fieldwork of Chinese anthropologists (He, 2000b). As for objective factors, Chinese and western societies differ greatly in cultural traditions as well as some basic ideas. Hence, it would not work if Chinese anthropologists use western theories indiscriminately to explain Chinese society. Dr. Li Yiyuan, one of the remarkable anthropologists in Taiwan, understood this point deeply. Dr. Li studied at Harvard University in his early years, and received his anthropological training there. However, in the course of his later studies, he has always been considering the problems that arise when Chinese cultures are explained by western theories. He once gave an example to explain this point. During the 1960s, a theory was developed named the "achievement motivation theory". It was very popular in the United States at that time, and was put forward by Dr. David McClelland at Harvard University. The main idea of this theory is that a nationality must pay more attention to training their children's psychological characteristics so as to enable them to improve and become enterprising spirits. This will in turn give the nationality the opportunity to develop quickly.

Researchers also formulated a questionnaire using the research results in order to measure achievement motivation training of different nationalities. Dr. Li was the student of Dr. McClelland, and later he brought the questionnaire back to Taiwan and carried out tests there with his collaborator Dr. Yang Guoshu, a well-known psychologist. Unfortunately, the results were not ideal. They found the theory put forward by American scholars was admittedly a good one, but it could not be applied wholly to explain Chinese society because of its lack of consideration for different cultures. According to the social activity and background of personality characteristics of the Chinese people, they initially classified the “achievement motivation” into two categories – personal achievement motivation and group achievement motivation. They discovered that the Chinese people’s group achievement motivation was generally higher than their personal achievement motivation. When Chinese people were asked what caused them to exert themselves, only a few would answer that they were promoted by personal achievement motivation. This differed from the thoughts of western people (Li 2000). Therefore, one question that Chinese anthropologists often think about nowadays is how can we develop a set of theories with Chinese characteristics on the basis of western anthropological theory, meanwhile, combine the unique nationalities, cultures, environment and social conditions of China so as to make the interpretation of cultures more meaningful than before, and also contribute to the development of anthropology all over the world?

The practices of thinking and studying on the issue of localization of anthropology by Chinese scholars show that Chinese anthropology has developed from the initial stage of simply introducing and indiscriminately imitating western academic theories into a more mature stage of comprehensively analyzing western anthropological theories, and combining these with Chinese reality to blaze new trails. However, this does not mean that Chinese anthropology will be isolated from the international academic circle, since “the final aim of it is still to establish the theory of activity and culture which is suitable

for different cultures and different nationalities of all the human beings” (Li 1998), thus providing Chinese anthropologists with the opportunity to make a special contribution to the development of social sciences. Hence, the localization of Chinese anthropology is based on internationalization, and it will come true only under the presupposition of internationalization.

On the point of the developing prospects of Chinese anthropology and ethnology, Dr. Qiao Jian, a famous Chinese anthropologist, summarized four aspects in which China differs from other countries in the world. First of all, Chinese culture is a unique, magnificent and wide open one in the world culture system, and it differs between provinces, municipalities, towns and villages. On the one hand, they all share general characteristics; on the other hand, each one has its own specific character. Secondly, China has the longest and continuous recorded history in the world, and therefore her historical documents are among the richest to be found worldwide. Thirdly, China is a multi-ethnic nation. She is the only nation where so many ethnic groups have lived together, and gone through thousands of years in concert, and attained co-existence, prosperity and unity at last. Only anthropologists can explain this pattern comprehensively, subjectively and systematically. Finally, Chinese culture is considered to be the main branch among the non-western cultures. Chinese anthropologists should make full use of comparative methods and structural analysis methods that anthropology is especially good at to go deeper into the culture resources of China, and refine its thought pattern and world outlook to enrich or even rejuvenate the modern anthropology (Qiao 1995). Thus it can be said that anthropology and ethnology in China has a bright future, and has the possibility to make unique contributions to the world anthropological circle.

**KEY WORDS** China. Anthropology. Localization

**ABSTRACT** Anthropology in China has a history of development of 100 years or so, and now it is playing an increasing important role in the world anthropological circle. This article gives a historical overview on the development of anthropology in China, and provides information mainly on social/cultural anthropology and ethnology. Meanwhile, it also introduces one topical subject on the localization of anthropology in China.

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