

Yang Kun's academic shifts: from the French Annales School to Marxist ethnology



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Abstract

As one of the first generation of Chinese Ethnologists, Yang Kun witnessed the development of Chinese ethnology in the twentieth century. Since his return from France in 1931, he had devoted almost 70 years before his death in 1998 to the teaching and research of Chinese Ethnology. The inheritor of the ethnology of the French Annales School in China, he was committed to promoting the School in China and applying its methodologies in the Chinese context. But after the 1950s, he shifted his academic focus to Marxist ethnology and became one of the founders of Chinese Marxist ethnology. The academic legacy left by Yang Kun has since emerged as a crucial academic foundation for Chinese Ethnology.

Keywords Yang Kun · History of Chinese Ethnology · French Annales School · Marxist ethnology

Introduction

If we trace the origins of Chinese Ethnology back to 1926 when Cai Yuanpei published his essay “On Ethnology” (Cai 1926), then the discipline has almost gone through a hundred years. Over the period, China has undergone upheavals and profound transformations, while ethnology, an academic discipline originating in Western countries, has also experienced twists and turns along the way in China. In response to the changing times, Yang Kun, one of the first generation of Chinese ethnologists, underwent a significant reorientation in his academic career. Originally

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a follower of the French Annales School, he later emerged as one of the founders of the Chinese Marxist ethnology system. His academic research covered a broad range of topics from a variety of perspectives, and was full of creativity. Delving into the academic shifts of Yang Kun can provide valuable insights into the origins and transition of the history of Chinese Ethnology, while providing important references for us to understand the development direction of Chinese Ethnology today.

Research methodology

This paper studies the history of Chinese Ethnology and adopts a research approach centered on a scholarly biography. The primary objective is to examine the academic career of Yang Kun (1901–1998), an influential figure in the history of Chinese Ethnology, and explore the major shifts in his academic research and their significance in the history of ethnology. The study seeks to comprehensively gather and cite Yang Kun's academic works, autobiographical writings, and relevant literature concerning research on Yang Kun, while examining them in the context of the society and era in which they were published.

In addition to the “Introduction”, “Research methodology”, and “Conclusion”, the body of this paper, “Results and discussion”, consists of five sections. The first section describes the process in which the ethnology of the French Annales School was introduced to China through the efforts of Yang Kun and others, and introduces what major works have been selected and translated into Chinese. The second section discusses Yang's efforts to promote the sinicization of the French Annales School, including his doctoral thesis and other academic contributions. The third section introduces Yang's academic turn in the context of great changes and his steadfast commitment to Marxist ethnology even under extreme adversity. The fourth section summarizes Yang's contributions to the systematization of Marxist ethnology in China. The fifth section mainly discusses recent new findings of Yang's academic legacy by the Chinese academic circle. Overall, this paper regards Yang's personal academic experience as a unique path for understanding the century-long history of Chinese Ethnology.

Results and discussion

Through the description of the most critical academic turn in Yang Kun's career, this paper reaches a fundamental conclusion that the society and era in which ethnologists have lived and how ethnologists have responded during times of societal upheaval can greatly influence the direction of ethnology's development in China.

The seven decades of Yang Kun's academic pursuit represent not only a period when Chinese society went through hardships, turbulence and major changes, but also a process in which ethnology, as a discipline imported from Western countries, gradually found its place in the pattern of academic knowledge in Chinese society. Although ethnological schools from different countries have encountered different situations after being introduced into China, most of them have gone through the

stages from being admired first, then being questioned or rejected, to being accepted, reformed and reconstructed (sinicized). The French Annales School, which was introduced and disseminated by Yang Kun, is no exception. The academic research by Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Marcel Granet was highly advocated by Yang Kun, who went all out to defend it with in-depth explanations when the Chinese academia rejected it. Like other Chinese scholars of his time, Yang Kun was also committed to the sinicization of ethnology. He employed the theories and methods of the Annales School to study issues related to Chinese society and culture, and guided students in conducting fieldwork. Thanks to Yang Kun's efforts to introduce intellectual resources of the French Annales School to China, Chinese Ethnology has been interacting with and complementing a diversity of schools of thought since it came into being. In his teaching and research practice, Yang Kun endeavored to integrate the French Annales School with other schools, such as evolutionism and functionalism. In a sense, this is also a form of the sinicization of Western ethnology.

In 1949, the People's Republic of China adopted Marxism as the state ideology. Various Western ethnological schools officially considered "imported" were reevaluated and subsequently criticized or even banned. Yang Kun's attitude towards Western ethnology, including that of the French Annales School, was both critical and inheriting. He criticized its colonialism, Western-centrism and bourgeois ideologies, and inherited its accumulated data, research methods, and some of its progressive viewpoints. Encouraged by Zhou Enlai, Yang Kun's goal of establishing Chinese Marxist Ethnology was more distinct than any other scholars of his time, and he started to do it earlier, too. Although in 1958 he was criticized as a representative of "bourgeois ethnology", Yang Kun remained steadfast in his belief that Marxist ethnology could avail itself of the appropriate academic resources from Western schools of ethnology; and as the disciplinary system of ethnology was about to be outlawed, Yang Kun made a final defense of the legitimacy of Marxist anthropology.

In 1978, Yang Kun was able to resume his academic career after a twenty-year hiatus. He dedicated himself to two academic pursuits: the systematization of Marxist ethnology and the resumed promotion of French ethnological traditions, which he found compatible with each other. The system of Chinese Marxist ethnology Yang Kun had envisaged and was determined to build includes political academic practices after Lewis Henry Morgan, from Engels' Origin of Family, Private Property and the State, Marx's anthropological notes in his later years, to the Soviet ethnic school, and then China's ethnic identification, China's survey of the social and historical investigation of ethnic minorities, and ethnology of social morphology, as well as ethnology from different Western schools—they all needed to be combined with the reality of China and integrate with each other. Yang Kun made great efforts to trace the academic history of Marxist Ethnology, including Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov and Paul Lafargue into its pedigree.

The Chinese Marxist Ethnology system constructed by Yang Kun only lasted a brief brilliant period for about 10 years from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. After the 1990s, a multitude of new theories and achievements in Western anthropology and ethnology were translated and introduced to China, thus making Marxist Ethnology no longer stand alone. More importantly, ethnology no longer needed to

support its legitimacy through the label of “Marxism”, because it gained a more tolerant development prospect in China.

In summary, Yang Kun’s endorsement of the Annales School of French sociology constituted a crucial academic foundation for China’s nascent social sciences, including sociology and ethnology, to grow and thrive. His pursuit of Marxist ethnology was solemn and stirring for younger generations of scholars,¹ and he left a valuable academic legacy in Chinese ethnological history. His creative life vividly exemplifies the holistic developmental path of Chinese Ethnology, spanning from the 1920s through the end of the century (Krvukov 1988).

Introducing the French Annales School of ethnology to China

Yang Kun, who was born in 1901, obtained an opportunity to study abroad at the Sino-French University in Lyon, France in 1921. Yang Kun stayed in France for ten years afterward and became a typical Chinese scholar of that era who went to the West to study “new learning”, that is, Western learning, and hoped to apply his acquired knowledge to serve the country after returning to China. From 1931 to 1949, he was devoted to three endeavors: First, introducing what he had learned about French sociological and ethnological doctrines, theories, and methods to the Chinese academia; second, conducting research on issues related to Chinese society and culture using the theories and methods of the French Annales School; third, endeavoring to establish new disciplines including sociology, ethnology, and folkloristics in China.

During the 1930s and the 1940s, ethnology and anthropology theories of various Western schools were spread in China. At that time, the scholars who spread that of the French Annales School included Yang Kun, Ling Chunsheng, Yang Chengzhi, Rui Yifu, Xu Yitang, Wei Huilin, Hu Jianmin, and so on. Yang Kun, in particular, earned recognition as the inheritor of this School in China, owing to his diligent efforts in the translation and interpretation of related books and theories (Wang 2000).

Yang Kun argues that the Annales School of French sociology inherits the traditions of French Enlightenment, French Revolution, Comtean positivism, and classical evolutionism. It is not only progressive but also characterized by a rational spirit and rigorous scientificity. The Annales School of French sociology has achieved a comprehensive integration of various disciplinary knowledge (such as sociology, ethnology, folkloristics, and history studies) and academic focuses into a single social science framework. It regards various forms of data such as history, ethnology, and folkloristics as materials for sociological research,

¹ Author’s note: As Yang Kun’s *Introduction to Ethnology* continued the thinking of the research subjects in a closed environment since the 1950s, it was soon regarded as outdated and few people have mentioned it now. Although some scholars occasionally discuss the construction of the “Marxist Ethnology” system, its connotation is also quite different from that of Yang Kun’s era.

I am a younger generation deeply influenced by Yang Kun’s Marxist Ethnology. I am well aware of the hardships and difficulties of Yang Kun’s lifelong pursuit, and also know that the “Marxist Ethnology” he discussed is out of date in today’s China. Therefore, I have a sense of solemnness and sadness. I hope that ethnology with Chinese characteristics should include Yang Kun’s academic practice.

emphasizing the use of statistical data and data from ethnographic fieldwork. It places “social facts” at the center of attention, considering society as a complex and inseparable whole composed of multiple social facts and cultural phenomena, which form its distinctive realistic characteristics. Different from psychological and biological phenomena, social facts exist objectively and can be studied through empirical and comparative approaches. As a prominently unique branch on the academic genealogy of Western ethnology and anthropology, the French Annales School was significant to China because its dissemination helped prepare the country’s modern academia to embrace more diversified theories.

Yang Kun devoted many years to introducing, disseminating and advocating the theories, doctrines, and research methods of the French Annales School. He taught in various universities, compiled lecture notes, textbooks and gave lectures based on the academic achievements of French Ethnology, and published many translations and comments (Yang 1932a, 1932b, 1932–1933, 1936a, 1937b). The doctrines, opinions, and theories of many French scholars, including Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Arnold Van Gennep, Marcel Déat (Déat 1931), Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1932), Marcel Mauss, Marcel Granet, Paul Lafargue, Claude Lévi-Strauss, were introduced one by one by Yang Kun, covering topics such as primitive thinking, folkloristics, social morphology, family evolution theory, primitive society, and structuralism.

At the end of 1928, Yang Kun went to the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris for advanced studies. Through Maurice Courant, he became acquainted with Marcel Granet of the Sinology Research Institute who then introduced him to study under Marcel Mauss. Since then, he had been profoundly influenced by many masters of the French Annales School, including Durkheim, Mauss, and Granet. He was especially keen on the theories of Mauss and Granet, and made systematic efforts to introduce them to Chinese scholars, along with commentaries and interpretations, after he returned to China.

Yang Kun believed that by the time of Mauss, who took up the academic mantle of Durkheim, co-founder of the French School of Ethnology, the focus of the French Annales School had come to bear more resemblance to that of ethnology, so the school could be renamed “the French School of Ethnology”. In his article “Professor Marcel Mauss’s Sociological Doctrine and Methodology” (Yang 1938), Yang Kun comprehensively introduced Mauss’s academic background and doctrines. He conducted extensive research and reading of relevant Chinese and French literature on the Annales School and the doctrines of Durkheim and Mauss, and summarized the contributions and values of Mauss’s doctrine on the basis of working up the French academic genealogy (Yang 1943a, 1944a). Yang Kun pointed out that Mauss’s academic wisdom, in contrast to Durkheim’s sociological writings which were conceptually clear, abstract, and rich in philosophical imagination and speculation, was characterized by “flexibility”. While Durkheim’s argumentation was more theoretical than factual, Mauss’s doctrine was largely based on ethnological and religious facts. Whereas Durkheim tended to build his theory on concepts, Mauss would analyze the social facts of ethnography while striving to find explanations from facts. Instead of jumping to broad and vague assumptions, he let the facts speak for themselves and was cautious with his conclusions.

Yang Kun compared and analyzed the interconnected yet distinct sociological classification systems of Durkheim and Mauss, as the organization of sociological knowledge into a coherent system was a persistent problem within the context of the French Annales School. In Durkheim's theoretical framework, his ethnological focus was on the so-called "backward ethnic group". However, their social systems should not be isolated from those of semi-civilized or civilized countries. In Mauss's system, sociology is a part of the so-called "Complete Anthropology (Anthropologie Complète)", which comprises biological anthropology, psychological anthropology, and social anthropology. Unlike narrow studies that exclusively target primitive people or "backward" peoples, his social anthropology includes the study of the whole human social life and inspects facts of history, modern civilized society, folkloristics and ethnology. Yang Kun highlighted that although Mauss was a successor to the Durkheim's theories, his explorations went beyond Durkheim's framework in many aspects, particularly in cross-cultural comparative studies based on ethnographic facts. In his studies, Mauss's research focused on specific, true but "complete", that is, universal social facts. For instance, both his ethnological investigation into social behaviors related to gift-giving and his socio-morphological study on seasonal variations of the Eskimo pointed to his fundamental belief in the wholeness of human social and cultural life.

Different from Mauss, who enjoyed considerable recognition for his theories on gift-giving and primitive classification, Marcel Granet remained obscure within the Chinese intellectual community. Majoring in history and sociology, he took up his study of China under the guidance of his teacher, the sinologist Édouard Chavannes. With very limited fieldwork experience in China, he tried to employ the methods of the French Annales School in his sinology studies. In his published works, such as *Coutumes matrimoniales de la Chine antique* (Marriage Customs of Ancient China) (1912), *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China* (1919), *Dances and Legends of Ancient China* (1926), *Chinese Civilization* (1929), and *Chinese Thought* (1934), he demonstrated an innovative perspective on and approach to sinology studies. However, in 1931, V. K. Tink wrote a scathing critique of Granet, highlighting numerous common-sense errors stemming from Granet's lack of understanding of ancient Chinese society, including inaccuracies in the selection and interpretation of historical sources (Tink 1931). Eight years later, in 1939, Yang Kun responded to Tink's criticism with an article, arguing that the criticism was unfair. To cement his argument, Yang collected the works of Granet and the comments on Granet in French, English, German, Japanese, Chinese and other multilingual literature to conduct a systematic review of Granet's academic lineage and research, and particularly his methodological contributions (Yang 1939; Yang 1942–1943).

According to Yang Kun, Granet was heavily influenced by Chavannes, Durkheim and Mauss while having a great deal of innovative output of his own. Granet agreed with Chavannes's idea that Chinese culture and society should be regarded as a holistic research object. He believed that the study of Chinese culture needed fieldwork experience in China and needed to be combined with the reality of Chinese society. Perceiving ancient Chinese society as a whole, Granet started with examining Chinese myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies, and familial structures and so on, to explore the social institutions of ancient Chinese

civilization and its spiritual dimensions such as ethics, beliefs, worldviews, and thinking. Instead of relying solely on textual documents or linguistic exegesis, he adopted the approach of the French Annales School to analyze ancient Chinese society and civilization. Through this approach, he was able to unveil enduring social facts that had been overlooked by the Chinese themselves. Therefore, Granet's contribution lies in his rectifying the philology approach commonly employed in traditional sinology, which tends to underestimate the fundamental realities of Chinese society. Yang Kun regarded Granet as the pioneer in applying the methods of the French Annales School to the study of ancient Chinese society, who not only set sinology studies on a new path and fostered a new sociological school in the Western sinology community, but also made the methodology of the French Annales School more precise and effective due to the application in the new field.

Yang Kun focused on the analysis of Marcel Granet's methodological characteristics, pointing out that Granet's pursuit was to analyze facts, and his grasp of facts depended on accuracy rather than quantity. Therefore, the key to his methodology lay in how to discover fundamental and universal social facts from historical materials and literature. Granet dismissed the distinction between orthodox and unorthodox historical materials, considering them as different perspectives dealing with the same subject matter. Thus both could serve as a source of factual information. Through the review of Marcel Granet, Yang Kun actually discussed the similarities and differences between the historical method, sociological and ethnological methods in the study of ancient Chinese civilization, and the possibilities of combining both methods in future studies. When collecting historical data, Granet focused on searching for and verifying facts instead of engaging in trivial exegesis, as he believed that historical facts were social facts that once lived in the past. He did not completely trust the chronology of ancient Chinese texts but still thought it might be of some value. He had his own criteria for selecting historical materials. For example, he tended to favor religious and mythological materials, because he believed that the ancient Chinese civilization was religious. In addition, while he only selectively referred to ethnological materials, he placed a greater emphasis on folklore materials that belong to the Chinese cultural system and incorporated a significant number of them into his research. As Yang Kun pointed out, Granet surprisingly discovered many amazing facts from old literature that had been studied exhaustively before, and thus opened up new possibilities for further Sinology studies.

According to some scholars, because of the divergence between his academic interest and the focuses of the dominant British and American mainstream social sciences of that time, Granet's sociological studies on ancient Chinese civilizations received limited attention from the Chinese intellectual community. Additionally, the sociology research in China predominantly concentrated on the study of modern society, further contributing to the lack of recognition of Granet's work (Wang 2010). Moreover, Marcel Granet did not accept the notion that only official dynastic history records should be regarded as correct or that China had consistently been a "homogeneous" sovereignty or a society/civilization with a unified ideology (Granet 2014). His sociological methods did not fit in with the traditional characteristics of ancient Chinese historiography (Sang 1999), which made it difficult for him to

be accepted by Chinese historians from both old and new schools, sinologists, and other scholars with a more general academic focus (Yang 1942–1943).

Through Yang Kun's explanation, the exemplary nature and contribution of Granet's methodology in China research could be clearly demonstrated. Yang Kun held the view that historical research should be conducted, as Marcel Granet did, by adopting analytical methods of sociology and ethnology, to establish a sociology-based history discipline, or a sociological school in historical research (Yang 1936b).

Sinicization of the French Annales School

Yang Kun's doctoral thesis was titled "Research on Ancestor Worship as the Organizing Principle of the Chinese Family (Recherches sur le culte des ancêtres comme principe ordonnateur de la famille Chinoise: la succession au culte – la succession au patrimoine)". On 30 May, 1930, Yang Kun successfully passed his dissertation defense and earned his Doctor of Arts degree from L'Institut Franco-Chinois in Lyon. Maurice Courant reckoned that this study had both historical academic value and practical significance. It extensively drew from well-documented literature, both old and new, to provide an in-depth analysis of ancestor spirit worship rituals and their role in establishing a connection between ancestors, land, and descendants. The thesis highlighted the enduring nature of these rituals, which have been passed down since the time of Confucius, showcasing the preservation of ancestor worship over time (Chen and Zhou 2021). In his thesis, Yang Kun delved into topics such as Chinese family organization, composition and in-family property ownership in terms of sacrifice, ancestral temples, ownership systems, rituals and legal rights, and elaborated on the importance of ancestral sacrifice in Chinese families and even in Chinese society by analyzing relevant materials in ancient Chinese classics. According to Yang Kun, as a key feature of Chinese families, ancestor worship had always exerted its influence on various actual conditions of Chinese people's lives and property. In his thesis, Yang Kun provided comprehensive descriptions and explanations of ancestor worship rituals, particularly highlighting the connections between different sections of these rituals. The basic writing method of his thesis was to make the facts and the "original text" speak, emphasizing their significance and connections if necessary.

This doctoral thesis can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Yang Kun showed the fundamental characteristics and historical continuity of ancient Chinese families by interpreting classics such as the *Yili* (*The Book of Etiquettes and Ceremonials*), *Liji* (*The Book of Rites*), *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*), *Jiali* (*The Family Rituals*), and *Tongli* (*Comprehensive Rituals*); in the second part, he summarized the features of Chinese families from the perspective of legal rights by making a series of references to laws and cases of the Qing dynasty (*The Great Qing Existing Criminal Law* published in 1910) and the Republic of China (*A Compilation of Court Cases of Daliyuan* published in 1924–1925). He cited in the thesis a huge number of individual cases and real examples of ancient Chinese families, which made the historical research on Chinese family issues relevant in real life. His doctoral thesis,

which was published in 1934 by the French publishing house Bosc Frères & Riou in Lyon, attracted widespread attention from the European sinology community. It was the first time that European academia realized the link between ancestor worship, sacrifice rituals and the Chinese family system as well as their significance to the whole Chinese society (Yang 1934). Some insightful discussions Yang Kun made and conclusions he gave in the thesis, such as the position of ancestors among the living, the Chinese family existing as a society composed of both the living and the dead, and ancestors being worshiped as protectors of the coexisting family society, had produced varying degrees of influences on European sinologists and anthropologists studying Chinese society. Some of the issues discussed in his thesis remained subjects of interest for later generations of researchers, such as the role of “Sangfutu” (mourning clothing categories) and “Zhaomu System” (ancestral tablet sequence relations) in adjusting kinship relations, which did not go out of date until the 1920s, and the relationship between ancestral sacrifice rituals and family property inheritance as well as the correlation between family organization and ancestral property. For example, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s discussion on the “Zhaomu System” in his book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* should have been inspired by Yang Kun’s doctoral thesis.

After his return to China in 1931, in addition to translation and introduction work, Yang Kun also devoted himself to the study of Chinese society using the theories and methods of the French Annales School (Yang 1991b). Most of the textbooks he compiled used Chinese native ethnology and folklore materials and his lectures also combined native materials on Chinese society to explain the theories and ideas of the French Annales School. From the 1930s to the 1940s, Yang published numerous papers on marriage and family, religion and folklore, the countryside and the frontier, as well as social history and social issues. While his research angles and many of his ideas were based on the French Annales School, he sought to explain them with the fundamental facts about Chinese society. A case in point is Yang’s discussion on the sociological significance of abolishing the lunar calendar and festivals in China (Yang 1932d), which can be seen as an extension of the Annales School’s ethnological perspective on socio-cultural rhythms (Liu 2021). Likewise, his debate with Lou Zikuang on potlatch-related problems (Yang 1933) was an attempt to bring the classic questions of Western ethnology and anthropology into the discussion of Chinese society and history.

In 1944, Yang Kun published a most well-known thesis “Zaoshen Kao” (Research and Interpretation on the Kitchen God) (Yang 1944b). The thesis used a large amount of materials from ancient literature, along with archaeological objects and folklore materials,² to conduct a thorough and systematic examination of the name, category and evolution of “Zao” (the kitchen range); the relationship between “Zao” and “frog”; and the origin and evolution of “Zaojunye” (another name for

² For example, the relics of stoves in Neolithic cave dwelling sites in Shanxi Province, pottery stoves in the Han Dynasty, and other physical objects; In North China, evidence for the folk customs of putting “burning bricks” into the quilt for warmth, or in some places in northern China burning stones to cook or roast food (stone cooking method). These Folklore materials are rarely found in historical documents.

the Kitchen God) in Chinese history and folk religion, presenting many novel conclusions that had not been touched upon by previous scholars, which had produced a profound influence on academic circles at home and abroad. “Zaoshen Kao”, in which Yang Kun applied the methods of sociology and ethnology to the study of Chinese history and folklore, was inspired by Marcel Granet’s emphasis on social facts and the connection between history and reality. In 1949, Yang Kun conducted a field survey in Yu’an Township, which was inhabited by many ethnic minorities, near Kunming. Combining various data sources, he completed a survey report entitled “Yunnan’s Rural Areas”. The report described the classification of Yunnan’s rural areas, farmers, and cultivated land, and discussed the local tenancy system, religious life, political organization, and so on, giving a vivid depiction of the coexistence of multi-ethnic minorities in Yunnan. While the report used research methods influenced by the French Annales School, it was primarily a result of Yang Kun’s own fieldwork.

Yang Kun also made significant contributions to the development of local disciplines of sociology, ethnology and folkloristics in China. He wrote extensively on these subjects, providing systematic analyses of their origins, historical development, and fundamental principles, and further explained the differences and relationships among them. These discussions became important academic documents for the establishment and early development of the three disciplines in China. In Yang Kun’s view, the three disciplines tended to develop independently then, but they were also complementary and mutually reinforced. The three disciplines may seem like different fields now, but in Yang Kun’s era, they were closely related from the very beginning. In his article “Schools and Trends of Modern Chinese Sociology”, for instance, Yang Kun discussed the new progress of Chinese sociology in sequential order, starting with “social investigation”, followed by “ethnological investigation” and concluding with “investigation of etiquette and customs” (Yang 1932c).

As one of the first generation of Chinese Ethnologists, Yang Kun played a ground-breaking role in the development of Chinese ethnology in terms of translation, investigation, research and academic organization. The translation, interpretation and explanation made by Yang Kun and his peers in Western social sciences represented not just an effort to copy Western knowledge but a new endeavor to digest, fully understand and put the knowledge into practice. In particular, it involved practical work to enable adaptation and localization in the Chinese context. For Chinese scholars like Yang Kun, the sinicization of social sciences, in addition to applying Western theories and methods to the “objectification” of Chinese society and culture, was more aimed at developing academic disciplines in China that could engage in dialogues and exchanges with the Western academic system, ultimately leading to the creation of theories and methodologies specific to Chinese social sciences. In December 1934, Yang Kun, together with Cai Yuanpei, Wu Wenzao, Ling Chunsheng, and Sun Benwen, launched the Chinese Ethnological Association. The purpose of the Association was to bring together scholars specializing in ethnic studies across the country, promote the science of ethnic studies, investigate and study ethnic groups in the border areas of China, and publish journals and book series on ethnic studies. The Association was committed to promoting the union of various

schools of ethnology in China so that they could contribute collective wisdom to the development of Chinese Ethnology.

Academic turning point and maximized persistence: towards Marxist ethnology

After 1949, Yang Kun, like most intellectuals at his time, faced a major ideological turning point (Nie 2015). Hoping to use what he had learned to serve the newly founded People's Republic of China, he began to study historical materialism and dialectical materialism, accepted and adopted the stance, viewpoints and methodology of Marxism as guidance to his teaching and research. In 1953, due to departmental adjustments of universities in China, the departments of sociology and ethnology were close to being canceled. Yang Kun, previously affiliated with the sociology department, was reassigned to the ethnic history teaching and research section within the history department at Yunnan University. However, he remained committed to conducting ethnological fieldwork and research, and set up an ethnic cultural relic and literature room. From 1953 to 1960, Yang Kun participated in the ethnic identification work of the Yi area of Kunming, the investigation of the Bai area of Jianchuan in Dali, the social and historical investigation of the Va area of Ximeng, and the investigation of the Yi area of Liangshan in Sichuan, and later published a series of investigation reports. In these reports, he tried to adopt the viewpoint of historical materialism. However, the influence of the French *Annales* School remained evident in his application of ethnological survey methods to the study of ethnic history.

On April 8th, 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai met with Yang Kun and his wife in Kunming to discuss the topic of Marxist Ethnology. This meeting served to inspire Yang Kun's endeavor to establish Marxist Ethnology in China (Yang 1978). Between 1957 and 1964, Yang published a series of research papers to discuss the practicability of Marxist ethnology in China. In the research paper "What is Ethnology" (Yang 1957a), he argued that ethnology is a science of history focusing on studies of the special laws of the historical development of various ethnic groups through direct observation. In his paper titled "A Discussion on the Origin and Development of Bai People in Yunnan" (Yang 1957b), he discussed topics such as "the primitive era of the Bai", "the transition of the Bai from a tribe to an ethnic group", and the criteria by which the Bai is identified as an ethnic group. The paper showed how Yang Kun had studied a specific ethnic minority from the viewpoints of Marxist ethnology. In the meantime, Yang Kun also compiled or participated in compiling a number of textbooks, including *Handout of Marxism-Leninism Theory on Ethnological Problems and Communist Party of China's Policies on Ethnicities (First Draft)*, *Handout of Primitive Society History and Ethnography (First Draft)* and *Survey Methods of Ethnology (First Draft)*. Through these efforts, he attempted to incorporate the "ethnological theories and ethnic policies" with Chinese characteristics into the discipline of ethnology. As Classical Evolutionism was reformed and absorbed into Marxist historiography, the studies of primitive society that originated from the Western Schools, gradually evolved into the studies of "Urgesellschaft" in China. As a result, the "history of Urgesellschaft" that studied the evolution of communities (in

the form of clan, tribe, chiefdom and ethnicity) in human history became an organic component of Marxist Ethnology. In the early 1960s, aside from *the Handout of the History of Ethnic Minorities in China (First Draft)* and *Syllabus and Textbooks for Ethnology Teaching*, Yang Kun also compiled *Syllabus and Teaching Materials for Primitive Religions*. His research aims were closely related to both the sociology of religion of the French Annales School and the history of the Urgesellschaft of Marxist Ethnology.

While Yang Kun had shifted his research direction from the French Annales School to Marxist ethnology, he did not view these two directions as mutually exclusive. He believed that the development of the Chinese School of Marxist ethnology required references from the theories and methodologies of the Soviet School of ethnology and efforts to draw on the experience of Western Schools in this regard, or at least their survey methods. He studied the connections and distinctions between Marxist ethnology and other Western Schools of ethnology, aiming to incorporate their valuable insights into the development of the Chinese School. While criticizing certain ideas within the Annales School, he also acknowledged its achievements and maintained a willingness to draw inspiration from it (Wang 2022). The Marxist ethnology envisioned by Yang Kun is an ethnology with Chinese characteristics that can serve China's socialist construction on the basis of drawing upon some ideas and methods from various schools of ethnology, including Classical Evolutionism, the French Annales School, and the Soviet School of ethnology.

In 1958, Yang Kun faced criticism for “representing Western bourgeois ethnology”. Starting from the early 1960s, ethnology received widespread criticism in China, with the term “ethnology” itself being labeled as “bourgeois” and deemed useless in China (Shi 1964). Nevertheless, Yang firmly maintained that ethnological studies were vital for the Chinese academia and that China could establish its own Ethnology under the guidance of Marxism. During the late 1950s, when the Soviet School of ethnology gained popularity in China, many scholars indiscriminately embraced its ideas, but as the Sino-Soviet relations went strained, their attitudes turned to harsh criticism. In contrast, Yang Kun took an objective standpoint and acknowledged its contributions (Yang 1984a) while believing that it could be a good inspiration for the Chinese School of Marxist ethnology. Even when the term “ethnology” almost became taboo in Chinese academia, he compiled the *Syllabus and Textbooks for Ethnological Studies* in 1963 and insisted on publishing many research papers in 1964 to make the final defense for the legitimacy of Marxist ethnology focusing on the issues of the classification of ethnic communities (Volksgemeinschaft)³ and the historical period of primitive society (Urgesellschaft).

Yang Kun's handouts on ethnology and its research methods not only provided a positive appraisal of the participant observation method of the Functionalist School and the comprehensive research method of the Soviet School, but also praised the convening of “symposium” as a Chinese-style fieldwork method (Yang 1984b). He believed that the symposium method featured a summary of the collective

³ “Ethnic community” refers to a theory believing that an ethnic group was developed through the evolution process of clan, tribe, chiefdom and ethnicity.

experience of Chinese scholars in the work of ethnic identification and the survey of social history of ethnic minorities. This method could outperform the Western traditional fieldwork methods and play an important role in the methodological framework of ethnological research in China, because it could draw on broad ideas and help to obtain more comprehensive materials from the plural information providers at the same time.

Between 1965 and 1977, Yang Kun was forced to pause his research for well-known reasons. During this period, ethnology no longer existed as an independent discipline, and relevant knowledge was included in the framework of “ethnic studies”.

Interruption and resumption: the systematization of Marxist ethnology

Ethnology was not acknowledged at the national level until the launching of China’s Reform and Opening Up in 1978. It was also in this year that Yang Kun wrote an article recalling Premier Zhou Enlai’s remarks on ethnology, revealing that Premier Zhou believed that the existence of Marxist ethnology was reasonable and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* by Engels was the classic work of Marxist ethnology (Yang 1978). This article garnered significant attention in China and in 1978 Yang Kun was able to resume his ethnology work that had been interrupted since the late 1960s.

When it comes to Yang Kun’s remarks on ethnology made after 1978, the noteworthy points are as follows:

- (1) Yang Kun persisted in his efforts to provide arguments for the legitimacy of ethnology. In the late 1980s, although ethnology was nominally recognized, many scholars still believed that it could be replaced by or included in the study of “ethnic theories and policies”. Therefore, it was still necessary to continue to provide proof for the legitimacy of ethnology.
- (2) Yang Kun continued to discuss the basic issues of Marxist ethnology, encompassing topics such as anthropogenesis, the history of *Urgesellschaft*, the relationship between the Doctrine of Morgan’s theory and Marxist ethnology, Engels’s theories of two modes of production, Marx’s anthropological notes about anthropology in his later years, and so on. Most of these topics represented a continuation of the academic consciousness in the ethnology of the 1950s to 1960s, with more focus on Marx’s anthropological notes in his later years (Yang and Zhou 1988).
- (3) Some of Yang Kun’s remarks were related to the history of ethnology of other countries, including the evaluation of Lafargue (Yang 1985) and the introduction to Lévi-Strauss structuralism anthropology (Yang 1981a, b; Yang and Zhang 1981). In his exposition on the history of ethnology, Yang Kun not only traced back to the previous history of Marxist ethnology, but also reevaluated the French Annales School of sociology. More importantly, he provided an up-to-date introduction to French Structuralism Ethnology. All these efforts underscored his constant academic emphasis on the history of ethnology. Yang

Kun published *Compiled works on Ethnic Studies* in 1991 (Yang 1991a) and *Sociology and Folkloristics* in 1997 (Yang 1997), which included translations of and commentaries on the French Annales School from his earlier years, making French sociology and ethnology once again become an important reference for Chinese social science studies. Yang Kun believed that the development of Marxist ethnology should be based on a critical examination of Western ethnology with a focus on assimilating its most valuable aspects. Specifically, he advocated rejecting what was related to racism, colonialism and Western centrism in Western ethnology, while stressing that some academic theories and viewpoints from different schools of Western ethnology, as well as a large amount of their research materials, and technical methods for fieldwork and research, should not be rejected.

- (4) Yang Kun's remarks were also related to ethnic communities, such as discussions on the concept and classification of ethnic groups and the relationship between ethnic groups and subgroups (Yang 1984c 1984d). Due to the long-term influence of "ethnic theories and policies", the studies of Chinese Ethnology resumed after the interruption were obviously characterized by the "ethnic community" consciousness. Therefore, Yang Kun was actively involved in the studies of "ethnicity" and "ethnic community" (Yang 1964). Despite the fact that he had defined ethnology as a discipline studying the development laws and patterns of "ethnic community/Volksgemeinschaft", Yang Kun continued to focus his ethnology research and exploration on cultural events and social facts. His long-time emphasis on studies of the religious life, marriage customs, family, and material cultures of ethnic minorities showed that he was more or less influenced by the French Annales School.

Yang Kun began to pursue Marxist ethnology in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1980s that he was able to work on it systematically. This was evident in his successive publications of research work collections (Yang 1983) and monographs on ethnology. These works remarkably reflected his ideas on forming the framework of Chinese Ethnology studies and generally represented the academic height of ethnology development in China in the 1980s.

Yang Kun's *An Introduction to Ethnology* (1984) was the first basic theoretical textbook on Marxist ethnology in China. In this book, Yang Kun specified the definition of ethnology and its position as an academic discipline, and in particular clarified its relationship with related disciplines, thus providing a groundwork for defining the position of ethnology in social sciences. The reason why Yang Kun paid more attention to the relationship between ethnology and related disciplines is that he tried to clarify the disciplinary characteristics of ethnology from other disciplines by comparing the differences between ethnology studies and other social science studies, which after all concerns the legitimacy of ethnology as an independent academic discipline. Different from the stance of Western centralism, Yang Kun believed that China's ethnology could benefit from its abundant local academic resources, and the "prehistory" of Chinese Ethnology could trace back to ancient oracle bone inscriptions and a series of classic works, including, *Zuozhuan* (*The Commentary of Zuo*) and *Shijing* (*The Book of Songs*) written during the Spring

and Autumn Period (770 BC–476 BC), *Shanhaijing (The Classic of Mountains and Seas)* written during the Warring States Period (476 BC–221 BC), and *Shiji (Historical Records)* written in the Han Dynasty (220 BC– 202 BC). *An Introduction to Ethnology* comprises the history of Western ethnology, from ethnology “before Morgan” to the current status and prospect of future development of ethnology in the world. It briefly introduces the major schools of ethnology, and has a chapter dedicated to discussion on the development history of Marxist ethnology, ranging from recognition of the academic contributions made by Plekhanov from Russia and Lafargue from France to an overview of the respective characteristics of Soviet School and Chinese School of ethnology. In addition, the book provides a wide range of fundamental knowledge about ethnology by discussing the development of human society from various perspectives such as ethnic community, technology and property, marriage and family, and spiritual culture including religion, morality and language. Recognized as an important achievement in Chinese social sciences, *An Introduction to Ethnology* was officially designated as a textbook for history departments of universities and colleges in China, and was reprinted many times.

History of Urgesellschaft (Yang 1986) represents yet another remarkable achievement made by Yang Kun in ethnology studies. It was originally inspired by the imagination and overview of primitive society found in Western ethnology which was regarded as fundamental to studies of social evolution history after its introduction to China in the 1920s. Since relevant thoughts from Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* were incorporated into Chinese Ethnology studies, the “history of Urgesellschaft” had gradually developed into a classic research field of Marxist ethnology in China (Tong 1988).

The first textbook on the history of Urgesellschaft published in the People’s Republic of China was *Handout of History of Urgesellschaft and Ethnography (Draft)* compiled by Yang Kun in March 1955 drawing on the syllabus of the Ministry of Higher Education of the USSR. The book aimed to discuss the general history of the Urgesellschaft from the perspective of Historical Materialism and the Socio-economic Formation Theory. It was used as lecture notes for the ethnic history major of the History Department at Yunnan University. Differing from traditional historians, Yang Kun relied more on ethnological materials than on archaeological materials (Wang 2020). This approach emphasizing the utilization of ethnographic data from “primitive people” to demonstrate the form of primitive society belongs to the “Ethnology of Social Formation” summarized by later scholars, but it is a construction of a theoretical model rather than an empirical prehistory study.

Methods of Ethnological Investigation published (Yang 1992) was regarded by Yang Kun as the second volume of *An Introduction to Ethnology*, and it held a significant position in Yang Kun’s envisioned system of ethnology. The emphasis on fieldwork was one of the lessons Yang Kun learned from the French Annales School. Over the years, Yang Kun also regarded the methods of fieldwork as a methodological basis to distinguish ethnology from “ethnic theories and policies”. Yang Kun conducted numerous ethnological fieldwork in many places in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, which facilitated his compilation of the textbook *Methods of Ethnological Fieldwork*. This textbook was used in the History Department of Yunnan University in the 1950s, and continued to be used and revised in the 1980s when

Yang Kun lectured at the Institute of Minzu/Ethno-National Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (renamed Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2002), History Department of Beijing Normal University, and the Sociology Department of Peking University.

Methods of Ethnological Fieldwork was written based on Yang Kun's revised and supplemented lecture notes, providing relevant guiding information and detailed fieldwork outlines for various topics such as ethnic profiling, human physical form, name, population, language, economic life, politics and legislation, family and marriage, religion, folk literature and art, science and technology and education, traditional customs and habits, and ways of life. It also discusses the issues that need to be emphasized in fieldwork for different purposes. Yang Kun saw ethnological fieldwork as an "advanced form" of social investigations, and proposed that investigators should better eat, live and work, or even learn and play together with the investigated people during the fieldwork. He also believed that ethnological research based on fieldwork could be a comprehensive study spanning from ancient times to the present, or a topic-specific and comparative study; it should combine macro and micro perspectives, drawing on information and achievements from other disciplines, especially history, archaeology, and linguistics.

Rediscovery of Yang Kun's academic heritage

Although the academic shift from the French Annual School to Marxist ethnology formed the main trajectory of Yang Kun's academic career, these two research areas did not encompass his entire academic legacy. After Yang Kun passed away in 1998, his academic heritage continued developing in three research areas. Firstly, Chinese scholars re-examined and highly appraised Yang Kun's insightful commentaries on the works of prominent scholars from the Annales School of ethnology and French sinology and folkloristics, including Durkheim, Mauss, Granet, Lévy-Bruhl, and Arnold Van Gennep. Secondly, an academic re-evaluation was made on Yang Kun's significant contributions to the development of "Sociological Folkloristics" during his tenure at Yenching University in the 1930s and 1940s. Thirdly, recognition was given to Yang Kun's contributions both as an academic critic and as an educator specializing in ethnology and folkloristics.

Influenced by the tradition of criticism freedom in French academia, Yang Kun developed a keen sense of academic criticism. He described himself as an "academic peer" and believed that academic research required critical thinking. Therefore, whether it was concerning classic works of sociology and ethnology or research achievements of other scholars, he could equally raise questions based on his independent thinking and judgment.

Numerous examples could illustrate Yang Kun's inclination toward academic criticism. He disagreed with Durkheim and Mauss regarding their viewpoints that ethnology is only a descriptive sub-discipline of sociology rather than "an independent social science discipline". In 1932, in the preface he wrote for his friend Lou Zikuang's book *Records of Chinese New Year Customs*, he expressed his regret for Lou's failure to clarify the material collecting and organizing methods. In the same

year, when the prominent Chinese sociologist Wu Wenzao and some other scholars proposed to compile a book about the “history of barbaric life”, Yang Kun wrote to criticize their claims as arbitrary, biased, and lacking clear standards and stances. In 1933, Yang Kun commented on another Chinese sociologist Li Jinghan’s book *Methods of Social Fieldwork Survey*, highlighting his dissatisfaction with Li’s lack of ethnological knowledge such as “kinship terminology” and Li’s excessive use of tables without sufficient explanations. Yang Kun spoke highly of Ling Chunsheng’s *The Hezhe People Living in the Downstream of Songhua River* and considered it “a decent work” in the Chinese ethnological community, but he still thought Ling’s fieldwork was regretful since it only lasted for three months. Now Yang Kun’s academic criticism is believed to be both sincere and well-grounded, though somehow sharp and harsh, which is part of his contribution to Chinese Ethnology.

Despite the fact that academic criticism became increasingly difficult in China during the 1950s and 1960s when Chinese scholars returning from abroad were persuaded by some universities to abandon their Western academic views, Yang Kun remained steadfast in his belief that Western approaches to ethnological studies could offer valuable insights. When Morgan’s theories on family formation gained traction in China after the 1950s, Yang Kun was the first ethnologist to challenge the existence of the so-called “blood family” and “Punaluan family”, two out of the five family forms defined by Morgan. Almost every article included in Yang Kun’s published collection *Ethnicity and Ethnology* was a source of controversy showing a sign of academic debates during China’s special period of history, it also demonstrates in a way his unwavering adherence to his own academic views. Yang Kun believed there was always room for improvement in academic research. He spoke highly of the fieldwork-based research described in Li Weizu’s book *The Cult of Four Animal Spirits* and considered it an example for the fieldwork and study of vernacular religions, though he believed that further improvement could be made, such as incorporating additional information from the literature on local history to expand the scope of the research. Yang Kun’s conscientiousness in academic research also manifested itself in his willingness to accept criticism from others, even those very harsh criticisms raised during the ideological extreme period. He regarded all criticisms as scholarly debates and tried his best to clarify and defend his own arguments.

Yang Kun devoted more than half his life to teaching. For decades, he taught sociology, ethnology and folkloristics in many universities and academic institutions in China, and cultivated generations of scholars in these academic areas, including scholars from ethnic minorities. Although he belonged to the French Annales School, he held no sectarian bias in his research work and could make objective and fair comments on other schools, such as the British Functionalism School, the American Boasian School and the Soviet School. In his teaching, he required his students to draw on the insights of scholars from different countries, integrate and innovate to achieve their own independent academic knowledge.

Yang Kun held that the Functionalism School achieved fruitful outcomes in developing the method of participant observation and viewing ethnology as an applied science. Meanwhile, he highly appreciated Wu Wenzao, who focused on the British Functionalism School, and recognized Wu’s efforts and achievements

in introducing functionalism to China, promoting the development of community studies in the country, and establishing the Chinese School of Community Studies (Yang 1943b). Yang Kun also admired Malinowski's cultural functionalism. When instructing his students in fieldwork research, he often recommended referencing Malinowski's *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays* and Wu Wenzao's "Notes on Cultural Tables". This suggested his belief that academic researchers could achieve the same goals through different paths and did not have to be confined to any particular school.

In September 1937, Yang Kun joined the Department of Sociology at Yenching University which remained in Beijing during the war time and succeeded Wu Wenzao as a lecturer teaching courses on primitive societies, sociology, contemporary sociology, community studies, family and society, and anthropology. During his teaching tenure at Yenching University, he led and instructed his students in a number of participant observation surveys and special fieldwork tours related to sociology, ethnology and folkloristics in rural suburbs of Beijing, aiming to carry forward the university's academic tradition of community studies. From 1938 to 1941, the research reports and academic theses written by students that Yang Kun supervised covered various topics including family, marriage, faith and material culture in rural areas. These research works were grounded on theories and methodologies from an eclectic blend of various sociological schools (Yang 1948). For example, when Li Weizu was writing *The Cult of Four Animal Spirits* (Li and Zhou 2011), Yang Kun instructed him to adopt many theoretical approaches, including the identification of what Durkheim called "social facts" and the application of functionalist theories. Yang Kun stressed the significance of employing the participant observation method, which went beyond seeking mere inspiration. The students were asked to live the same life as the villagers and make friends with them in the villages where they conducted surveys so that they could obtain research data from their own experiences and observations. Chen Yongling recalled that when he was working on his investigation of "temple religion", Yang Kun told him to strictly follow the anthropology principle in making objective and truthful descriptions and analyses without any subjective assumptions (Wang and Wang 2009). Apart from focusing on case studies, community life history, individual life history, and oral history records, he guided students to place great importance on community-based microscopic studies and functional analyses while encouraging them to integrate literature review with fieldwork. In recent years, scholars such as Yue Yongyi have conducted in-depth academic-historical research into the above-mentioned research works authored by Yang Kun and his students and found they were of high academic value (Yue 2018).

As an educator, Yang Kun made great efforts to promote the knowledge of ethnology and wrote *A Self-learning Guide to Ethnology* (Yang 1987) for young people who wanted to study ethnology. He pointed out that education in ethnic minority areas, especially primary and secondary education, should focus on local teaching materials with ethnic characteristics. Back in 1937, Yang Kun wrote an article to propose the research on "frontier education and pedagogy" (Yang 1937a), and he was the first scholar in China to propose this endeavor. He argued that each ethnic group had its own unique education system that deserved careful studies and that like the researchers who engaged in fact-based "anthropology of frontiers" or

“ethnology of frontiers”, researchers on “frontier education and pedagogy” should live the same life as the frontier local people did before they could gradually develop clear concepts and framework in this research area. Imposing an external education on the frontier people without understanding their long-standing education system will often result in failure.

Conclusion: a new era for Chinese Ethnology

Since the 1990s, the social environment and academic pattern of Chinese Ethnology have undergone drastic changes and Marxist ethnology which emerged in the 1980s as a preliminarily systematic academic discipline has gradually suffered from neglect for many reasons. For example, ethnology no longer needed to defend itself under the label of “Marxism” in China, meaning that China has provided a more favorable environment for ethnology development, and various social science studies including ethnology have seen a less ideological disciplinary development process. Yang Kun’s works published since the 1980s are primarily based on his university lecture notes in the 1950s and 1960s and the fact that they were published after an interruption of 20 years could be considered as a new journey from its original starting point. However, because of the knowledge discontinuity as a result of the prolonged isolation, Yang Kun’s publications failed to feature a sufficient integration with the global academic progress in ethnology and anthropology made since the mid-1960s. Furthermore, some of the subjects that Yang Kun had quite persistently worked on, such as the origins of marriage, family and religion as well as the historical period of primitive societies, have lost their significance or relevance in the current context.

Even in the late 1980s, ethnology studies remained controversial in the Chinese academia, especially in that the relationships between ethnology and “ethnic studies”, “ethnic work”, and “ethnic theories and policies” were not yet defined and clarified. From 1987 to 1989, Yang Kun attempted to clarify the relationships between “ethnic theories” and ethnology when he supervised his doctoral students’ dissertations on “political ethnology” (Zhou 2022). Starting from the late 1980s, dialogues and exchanges between Chinese Ethnology and international ethnology and anthropology were resumed. As a result, related Western doctrines and theories flooded into China once again, leading to transformations in the overall knowledge structure of Chinese social sciences. For example, the ethnic group theory produced impacts on the definition of “ethnicity (Minzu)” as recognized by the government in Chinese ethnic identification and on the “ethnic community theory” in Chinese Ethnology. After the beginning of the twenty-first century, due to the popularization of the ethnic group theory and the emergence of the inter-ethnic research paradigm, the emphasis on conducting research solely based on legally determined “ethnic group” has somehow weakened. Consequently, an inter-ethnic perspective applied to study multi-ethnic societies and the narrative of the Chinese nation as one single community are becoming the mainstream approach.

In the twentieth century, Chinese Ethnology developed several features, including its Marxism attributes reflected in the forming of a socio-morphological

ethnology system. While the theory of social development has declined in prominence, Marxism still serves as a major foundation for Chinese ethnological narratives. Chinese Ethnology used to strongly emphasize “ethnic community” consciousness and focus more on the study of ethnic minority groups. Since the 1990s, Chinese Ethnology has shifted its focus from ethnic community to culture and many scholars have increasingly prioritized “culture” over “ethnicity”.

Since the 1990s, China’s new generation of ethnologists and anthropologists have come on the scene one after another, choosing an academic path that integrates with Western ethnology and anthropology in both theory and methodology. This has led to the construction of a new Chinese Ethnology and anthropology landscape. Meanwhile, the Chinese Ministry of Education has adjusted the disciplinary classification system (major catalog) for the purpose of allocating academic resources, directly affecting the outcome of knowledge production in Chinese Ethnology. At present, apart from its complicated relationships with ethnic studies involving “ethnic theories and policies”, Chinese Ethnology is developing more complicated relationships with sociology, anthropology and folkloristics. Despite the common practice in the Chinese academia to treat ethnology as synonymous with cultural anthropology or social anthropology, motivation still exists to separate ethnology from anthropology, especially in the system of disciplinary classification. Significant progress has been made primarily within ethnic universities and colleges in ethnic minority regions. However, there is a risk that the development of ethnology might be constrained, as academic disciplines from other countries such as cultural anthropology and social anthropology have achieved a more rapid development and widespread presence among Chinese universities and research institutes nationwide. The separation of ethnology from anthropology will in fact lead to a landscape where the study of ethnic minorities occupies a more prominent position.

In the twenty-first century, Chinese Ethnology is benefiting from new opportunities for further growth. Some scholars believe that a Chinese school of ethnology, described as a Marxism-guided historical functionalism school, is emerging, and that Chinese Ethnology has entered a new era characterized by “a native school with global influence” (Yang 2008). In this sense, the Marxist ethnology founded and studied by Yang Kun and his fellow ethnologists calls for reidentification and reevaluation. More importantly, the theoretical diversity that scholars of Yang Kun’s generation brought to modern social sciences like sociology, ethnology, and folkloristics in the twentieth century with their lifelong efforts still deserves to be maintained and further promoted today.

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