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Recent developments in anthropological methods for the study of complex societies

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Abstract

The focus of traditional anthropology has been on the "simple and primitive" tribal societies that still exist. The question of how anthropology can carry on to study complex civilizations, especially those with a long history like Chinese civilization, has gained attention due to the discipline's development and expansion. Anthropologists around the world have developed several significant research methods in the study of complex societies in response to this challenge. Taking anthropology research in China as an example, these methods include not only the summary and improvement of Western anthropological methods applied by Chinese scholars to Chinese practice but also methodological innovations based on traditional Chinese research paradigms and explorations of anthropological fieldwork methods in the digital age. In China, the latest advancements in anthropological methods for studying complex societies can be seen in historical anthropology, multi-sited ethnography, internet anthropology, and Rapid Anthropological Assessment. This effectively responds to many doubts about whether anthropological fieldwork methods are capable of studying complex societies and spurred anthropology's reciprocal adaptation to new fields of study and contemporary needs. In this sense, anthropological research on complex societies is entirely possible, feasible, and necessary.

Keywords Complex societies · Community research · Historical anthropology · Multi-sited ethnography · Rapid Anthropological Assessment · Digital anthropology

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Abbreviations

PAR   Participatory Action Research
RRA   Rural Rapid Appraisal
PRA   Participatory Research Appraisal
RAA   Rapid Anthropological Assessment
RAP   Rapid Assessment Procedures
PRA   Participatory Rural Appraisal

1 Introduction

In the development of anthropology, anthropological research had long been narrowly defined as the study of primitive tribe which, according to Eric R. Wolf, was "the people without history" (Wolf 2018).

If one were to indicate a chronic shortcoming of traditional anthropological research with a simple concept, he or she would have to conclude that both the object and the methodology of such studies lack a "sense of history." This raises a further question: Can the theories and methods developed within this framework remain "applicable" as anthropology inevitably has to shift, to a certain extent, toward the study of societies with complex historical backgrounds? As Chinese scholars, we are particularly concerned about what theoretical approaches and analytical concepts will enable us to accurately comprehend the essence of the society of a nation like China, which has a remarkably long history of civilization. In this respect, Qiao Jian[1] aptly noted, "Given that traditional anthropological approaches primarily evolved from the study of small, simple, and relatively primitive societies, whether this method can be effectively utilized for the study of China, a broad and complex society with a long history, poses a profoundly challenging methodological question" (Qiao 1998). The development of anthropology has been challenged at the methodological level.

Consequently, in the second half of the 20th century, European and American anthropology generally began to take the countryside and the metropolis as new fields of study. This led to the flourishing of new research domains, such as rural anthropology and urban anthropology, as well as applied anthropology built upon past studies with varying orientations (Li 1987). This transition signifies a shift from early tribal societies to complex societies in the anthropological research paradigm, whereas, to some extent, the discipline's value orientation shifts from primitivism to modernism (He 2019). In fact, many scholars contributed to redirecting the focus of anthropological research from simple societies to complex societies. Francis L. K. Hsu categorized these efforts into three main types: (1) investigations into one specific aspect of complex lives, (2) examinations of a community within complex societies, and (3) holistic studies of complex societies from a psychological perspective. He identified the shortcomings of the three categories of anthropological research:

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[1] The names of Chinese scholars in the text of this paper follow the rules of Chinese, with surnames first.

The first type of study often focuses on a specific aspect, such as politics, economics, religion, or literature, and the researchers show no significant advantages over scholars specialized in that particular field; the second concentrates solely on the present state of communities and neglect the historical perspective; and the third, such as national character studies, tends to oversimplify the subject, as they explore common psychological patterns across different civilizations and levels. Hsu also proposed several improved research methods, including the analysis of dominant kinship relationships (dominant dyads) and basic cultural assumptions, and a comparative approach in the study of literate civilizations (Hsu 1979).

As research interests gradually shifted toward rural societies, anthropologists began to study societies with complexities distinct from those of primitive and tribal societies. The genuine initiation of rural social studies can be traced back to the early 20th century, with pioneers like Daniel Harrison Kulp, Manuel Gamio, R. Redfield, and T. Parsons. Kulp's study of Fenghuang Village in Chaozhou, China (Kulp 1925) can be considered the second milestone in the history of world anthropology, as it opened up directions of anthropological research of rural societies (Redfield 1941). Anthropologists perceive the peasant culture in rural societies as an integral part of socio-cultural totality. A. Kroeber defines peasants as individuals residing in rural areas while maintaining connections with urban areas; they constitute a class within the broader population including urban dwellers (Kroeber 1938). The conceptual foundation for the study of complex societies was established under Redfield's influence. In 1947, he authored an influential paper titled *The Folk Society*, offering a simple definition of the folk society that significantly impacted the relevant research for the next two decades. In his subsequent research, Redfield challenged the oversimplification of the rural-urban dichotomy in complex and dynamic social systems. As a result, he defined village communities as units within the more extensive system and coined the term "Little Tradition" for peasant villages. In contrast, towns and cities, which are non-rural communities, were defined by Redfield as "Great Tradition." Folk traditions exhibit variable characteristics across different villages, while cities serve as stable, centralized, unified centers for religion, culture, and the arts (Redfield 1956).

Anthropologists gradually developed a set of community research methods as anthropology transitioned toward studies of complex societies. Community studies can be traced back to three primary sources: Germany's Ferdinand Tönnies who emphasized theoretical studies; the Chicago School represented by Robert Ezra Park, with a focus on community practices; and the structural-functional school represented by A. Radcliffe-Brown in the UK, concentrating on the integrity of communities. Since the 1930s, Radcliffe-Brown applied methods from primitive society research to study complex societies, particularly agricultural societies. Long before his arrival in China, Radcliffe-Brown sent his students to use these concepts and methods in their studies of societies in Mexico, the Philippines, and Japan (Brown 2002). In 1935, his lecture at Yenching University prompted a group of Chinese scholars to adopt anthropological methods for rural research, leading to the development of a methodology known as "community studies."

According to Ding (2020), the concept of "community" in Chinese was proposed by Fei Xiaotong and discussed collectively by the faculty and students of the

Department of Sociology at Yenching University; Wu Wenzao was the first scholar from the Yenching School of Sociology to elaborate extensively on the concept of "community," initiating the "Chinese School of Sociology," with the community as its research method; and it is the contribution of Fei Xiaotong and his former wife Wang Tonghui who adopted community as a fieldwork method for studying and understanding Chinese issues — In 1934, Fei Xiaotong and his newly married wife Wang Tonghui conducted fieldwork in the Dayao Mountains in Guangxi, marking the beginning of China's community research, and was referred to by Wu Wenzao as the "foundation of community studies."

The author believes that Fei Xiaotong's research on Kaixiangong Village in Wujiang of Jiangsu Province stands as the most important milestone in the early studies of rural communities in China, and *Peasant Life in China* written by Fei based on his study of Kaixiangong Village, remained a must-read book in anthropological research. However, Edmund Leach, a distinguished anthropologist, criticized the rural community studies initiated by Chinese anthropologists, to which Fei Xiaotong responded in an article, though Leach had already passed away. In his 1982 book *Social Anthropology*, Leach (1982) raised his doubts about Fei's studies: "Although Fei titled his book *Peasant Life in China*, he gave no evidence to show that the social system he described was typical for the whole country." Fei summarized Leach's arguments into two questions: First, is it appropriate for anthropologists to study their native society, as seen in the case of Chinese anthropologists? Second, can individual micro-studies be extrapolated to represent the entire national context? Leach clearly held a negative stance on both questions. Prior to this, Maurice Freedman, a prominent anthropologist, also expressed his views concerning this issue. In his 1962 speech commemorating Bronislaw Malinowski, Freedman criticized the community research method — In the preface he wrote for *Peasant Life in China*, Malinowski suggested that researchers may examine the epitome of China at large by becoming acquainted with the life of a small village under a microscope. Freedman labeled this perspective as "the anthropological fallacy par excellence" (Freedman 2017). He argued that even if Fei continued the research after the 1950s based on the anthropological concepts he proposed in the 1930s, he would not fulfill Malinowski's prophecy because his research field is too narrow and limited to villages. According to Freedman, this was an error in transferring the grasp of totality when transplanting the tools of traditional anthropological research on primitive societies to complex societies. It was argued by Freedman (1979) that " … they might still today have been piling up samples of local communities; the ethnographic map of China would have had many more flags in it, but the anthropologists would probably have been no nearer that understanding of Chinese society of which Malinowski wrote than they were ten years ago."

Fei responded directly to the issue: "Considering a village as a typical representation of all Chinese villages is a mistake. However, viewing a village as entirely unique and distinct from others, a sui generis case is also inappropriate" (Fei 1999). Fei acknowledged that Kaixiangong Village itself could not represent the vast complexity of all Chinese villages, but this is not to say that the study was pointless for understanding China. He argued that the study of the village's economy undeniably held overall anthropological significance. The accumulated case materials and

community research methods from the study of Kaixiangong Village could serve as a reference model for understanding the fundamental structure of Chinese society. After completing his doctoral studies abroad, Fei continued to explore and summarize the various patterns of the complex Chinese society till his later years of academic research.

Although community research has been extensively adopted as a basic method in anthropological studies, defining a community in specific contexts has increasingly become a challenge in community research. Predecessors, such as Fei Xiaotong, translated the German term "Gemeinschaft" and the English term "community" into Chinese as "社区 (shequ)," giving this strongly territory-oriented notion an academic identity (Hu and Jiang 2002). This also initiated the sinicization of "shequ" based on the academic foundation of "Gemeinschaft" (Liu 2021). However, in contemporary China, which has seen gradual deterritorialization, traditional regional communities are yielding to migrant communities, which marks a societal shift from "regional society" to "migrant society" (Zhou 2017). Defining a community is no longer as easy as it once was, which raises the question of how to innovate community research methods in the face of new social circumstances.

Community-based research is a new approach explored in the world anthropological transformation of the object of study from simple to complex societies and is applied in American and African studies. Following its arrival in China, community research was refined by early scholars like Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong to align with the local context. In Chinese traditions of anthropological studies, community research, an effective research approach, was once considered the "foundation" of the Chinese school of socio-cultural anthropology (Wang 1996).

Before academic disciplinary adjustments in 1950s China, community research had already been established as a crucial method in Chinese anthropology. Despite a temporary interruption due to these adjustments, community research persisted as an essential method employed by Chinese anthropologists. Along with the reinstitution of Chinese anthropology in the 1980s, urban anthropology was introduced to China. In 1986, G.E. Guldin from Pacific Lutheran University led a team of graduate students to conduct urban anthropological research at Sun Yat-sen University. The First International Symposium on Urban Anthropology was held in Beijing in early 1990, and the China Urban Anthropology Association was founded in Beijing in 1992. Since the reinstitution of anthropology in China, research on complex societies has taken a path of practical studies that reflect Chinese characteristics, style, and ethos. In terms of specific methods, Chinese anthropologists have primarily adopted methods such as historical anthropology, multi-sited ethnography, Rapid Anthropological Assessment, and digital anthropology to study complex societies.

2 Methods

This paper adopts two research methods, namely literature review and typological analysis, to offer fresh insights into the research and organization of anthropological methodologies. The literature review method lays the groundwork by providing fundamental literature and contexts for the theoretical framework and analytical

structure of new anthropological methods for the studies of complex societies. Meanwhile, it highlights typical cases of complex societies in terms of anthropological study, which helps better review and summarize the academic evolution in the past. Additionally, this paper delves into classical concepts related to complex societies from Chinese anthropological literature, underscoring the technical characteristics of research methodologies and exploring their social and cultural dimensions since the reinstitution of anthropology in the country. Based on the literature review, this paper conducts further categorization and summarization using typological methods, one of the fundamental pathways in anthropological research. The typological analysis proposes several innovative methodologies that have emerged in anthropology within the framework of a new research horizons — complex societies. These methodologies include historical anthropology, multi-sited ethnography, Rapid Anthropological Assessment, and digital anthropology.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Orientation of historical anthropology

Historical anthropology has been a prominent research method and disciplinary orientation since the inception of Chinese anthropology. During its development, Chinese anthropology has consistently embraced a historical perspective. On the one hand, China boasts an abundance of historical documents available for research, and on the other hand, early scholars engaging in anthropological and ethnographic research in China often had backgrounds in history or classical Chinese studies, with expertise in historical studies. Moreover, understanding the essence of China's socio-cultural development necessitates a historical approach.

When anthropology was introduced to China in the early 20th century, studies in Chinese anthropology were already deeply intertwined with history. Chinese scholars blended diachronic and synchronic studies, cultivating a comprehensive approach to historical anthropology. This characteristic is particularly evident in the anthropological research orientation prevalent in southern regions of China, known as the Southern School, which was heavily influenced by the theory of cultural diffusion in Germany and cultural relativism in the US. To date, the Southern School of Anthropology centered around institutions like Sun Yat-sen University, Academia Sinica, and Xiamen University, tends to focus on the study of minority ethnic groups in border regions and field investigations of ethnic and cultural regions. The analytical models of the Southern School typically revolve around the holistic characteristics of culture, emphasizing "expanding materials and presenting facts without explanation." The Southern School argues that "once the research materials are set in order, the facts will be clear" (Zhou 2009). The series of post-1949 ethnic surveys in China have also been approached from a historical perspective, and Chinese scholars have consistently embraced the historical orientation in their anthropological studies. Huang Shuping once appraised the methodology of historical anthropology, stating, "The method of combining historical research with contemporary surveys is a commendable tradition in Chinese anthropology and ethnology and represents a

methodological contribution that can be of value to anthropological studies around the world" (Huang and Gong 1998). Throughout the development of this discipline, particularly after the reinstitution of anthropology in China during the 1980s, a large number of scholars embraced historical anthropology as their research paradigm and disciplinary orientation, making notable contributions in both theoretical and practical dimensions.

The concepts that best embody the research interest of historical anthropology include, notably, the notion of "structuring" proposed by Helen Siu and Liu Zhiwei, "ritual marker" introduced by David Faure, and "backward observation from now" put forward by Zhao Shiyu. In historical anthropology, "structuring" serves as the object of study, "ritual marker" and "backward observation from now" represent the entry points and specific methodologies or techniques in this research paradigm. The combination of "structuring," "ritual marker," and "backward observation from now," therefore, constitutes a comprehensive research framework in historical anthropology, covering both the object of study and the methodologies involved.

Helen Siu focuses her studies on the Chrysanthemum Festival in Xiaolan Town of Zhongshan City. She regards social and cultural phenomena as a historical process that has either been completed or is currently underway. Siu argues that researchers can interpret and study these phenomena from an anthropological perspective to gain profound insights into the nature, significance, and driving forces behind cultural expressions that are considered commonplace. Furthermore, she observed how these factors interact with the region's local political and economic transformations, leading to the present state. Siu attempted to use historical methods to uncover the holistic relationship between contemporary beliefs, ritual behaviors, and local society and culture, treating them as a historical process for discussion (Siu 1990). This approach is significant as it breaks away from the conventional anthropological dichotomy between the two fundamentally related concepts of "structure" and "change" during the specific process of understanding. Instead, Siu integrated the diachronic and synchronic dimensions, giving rise to a holistic research perspective and methodology. Based on this foundation, historical anthropology tends to explore the "role" played by "individuals" in history, emphasizing the understanding of not "structure" but "structuring." Individuals, through purposeful actions, weave networks of relationships and meanings (structures) within the historical and social context, and these networks, in turn, help or constrain their ongoing actions, thus creating an endless process (Siu 2004). Understanding and studying this process can elucidate the consistent thought patterns of individuals across different historical and social backgrounds. "Ritual marker" is a type of material that historical anthropologists are required to collect during fieldwork. David Faure and Ching May-bo categorized this type of material as "objectively observable indications of ritual traditions considered to be significant by members of a local society." This classification represents a crucial step for making historical anthropology feasible. Faure also listed a series of "significant ritual markers," including religious traditions, titles, core worship elements (e.g., deities, ancestors, etc.), architectural patterns (e.g., family temples), industrial control, and non-religious social organizations. Although Faure did not provide detailed explanations about these markers, it is safe to say that his

definition is relatively broad. In a nutshell, such markers are considered significant by members of a local society (Faure and Ching 2016). According to Zhao Shiyu, "backward observation from now" involves observing the living structural elements at the field site and tracing them back to their historically verifiable origins. Following this method, researchers should then narrate these structural elements sequentially from the historical origin to recent times, culminating in a comprehensive depiction of the historical structural process in the region. The purpose of "backward observation from now" is to reveal the rhythmic changes in the historical development of a region. Although "backward observation" begins from the contemporary world, going "backward" by a certain period of time is aimed at identifying a historical node, transforming it into the starting point for the narration from history to now (Zhao 2018). The advantage of this reverse deduction lies in its capacity to reexamine commonplace elements from the past within their specific historical contexts.

In the development of historical anthropology, Sun Yat-sen University played a pioneering role by establishing the Centre for Historical Anthropology. In 2004, the center became Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Universities (the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China). "The History in the Field" book series, published by SDX Joint Publishing Company, summarized representative research outcomes from the Centre for Historical Anthropology, offering a key team-based contribution to China's research on historical anthropology. As stated in *Approaching the Historical Scene*, the general preface of the series, "Through unremitting efforts, scholars have developed a relatively systematic and effective method for interpreting various materials in rural society. These materials include genealogies, contracts and deeds, inscriptions, books on religious rituals, account books, letters, and legends. This unique scholarship and methodology could be referred to as folk studies of historical literature not fully grasped or understood by traditional historians, anthropologists, or sinologists" (Chen 2006). In this series of studies, Zhang Yingqiang, in his *Flow of Timber*, combined the contract documents with field investigations and depicted the flow of timber trade in the Qingshui River Basin in Guizhou since the Qing Dynasty. The study centered on market flows and explored the development of a regional market network and the interaction between the traditional state authorities and local society (Zhang 2006). Huang Shuping's *Research on the Hereditary Servant System of Guangdong* took account of genealogies, local records, historical documents, and interviews to study the widespread phenomena of "细仔 (xizai)" and "下户 (xiahu)" (both terms refer to hereditary servants) in the Pearl River Delta before the period of the Republic of China. The book pointed out that the hereditary servant system is a form of slavery embedded within the patriarchal clan system (Huang and Gong 2001).

It is noteworthy that one must avoid potential pitfalls in employing the method of historical anthropology. As historical anthropology features a prominent tradition of studies on regional social history (Lan 2001), beginners may overlook how extensive history differs from regional histories in their adaptation to and interpretation of local culture in different dimensions. This oversight can lead to a state of nihilism regarding larger historical contexts, potentially steering research into a provincialism that emphasizes local histories that "differ" from the extensive history. Such an

approach makes it a challenging task to identify cultural connections within the historical circumstances.

The research methodology of historical anthropology not only holds significance for Chinese anthropology but also plays a crucial role in advancing the development of world anthropology. Chinese anthropology should inherit this research orientation and combine rich classical literature with field investigations to accumulate academic insights that contribute universally to world civilizations, thereby fulfilling anthropology's essential task of studying civilized societies.

3.2 Beyond individual cases: multi-sited ethnography

Anthropology has traditionally emphasized long-term, in-depth fieldwork, often conducted by an individual researcher in a small community. Since Malinowski established the method of "scientific ethnography," ethnographic writing based on fieldwork has remained a fundamental and distinctive mode of anthropological research. Malinowski's fieldwork experiences, summarized in the preface to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 2014), established an effective set of scientific rules, marking anthropology as an accepted scientific discipline.

As globalization and urbanization trends are reshaping societies, the traditional approaches to studies of singular small communities are faced with new challenges in coping with contemporary changes. In a world that increasingly emphasizes on global interconnections, social complexity, and the timeliness and specialization of academic studies, the once-scientific Malinowskian ethnographic writing has confronted rounds of skepticism and doubts. "From the seminar in 1984 to the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* in 1986, as the scientific positioning of the one-way relationship between the subject and object in ethnography faced intense doubts, reflective, multi-voiced, and multi-sited ethnographic experiments gained legitimacy" (Gao 2006). This period of reflection and doubt saw the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. In the mid-1990s, George E. Marcus proposed the concept of multi-sited ethnography in clear terms. Since then, anthropological ethnographic writing has no longer sought solely to express the cultural wholeness of a micro-society but has taken the initiative to engage in fieldwork across diverse spaces, with a focus on the global society.

Initially, multi-sited ethnography was seen merely as related to certain characteristics of ethnographic research, such as the movement and mobility of survey locations. This implied that research employing the method of multi-sited ethnography would focus on empirical studies of new social relations and systemic transformations caused by globalization. Such an orientation, relatively easy to grasp, typically involved selecting multiple sites for field investigation. Multi-sited ethnography can be broadly categorized into three practical approaches: (1) field investigations that resemble traditional fieldwork, with a single researcher choosing multiple sites for study; (2) fieldwork where a team of researchers selects sites with distinct characteristics to investigate similar issues or the same issue; (3) fieldwork where a team of researchers focuses on a specific topic across multiple regions. In the early 1990s, James L. Watson gathered five anthropologists to

investigate McDonald's in five cities, namely Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, and Tokyo, which could be seen as an exemplary case of multi-sited ethnography. The study showed that the expansion of McDonald's in East Asia represented an ongoing process of embedding "local" factors. The research provided a robust critique of "globalism" or "McDonaldization" and highlighted the significance of "transnationalism" and "localization" (Watson 2015).

Current development shows that multi-sited ethnography increasingly focuses on the impact of globalization on the investigated areas, aiming to uncover the process of this change. As Marcus once summarized, while immigrant studies amid current changes serve as convenient samples of multi-site ethnography during its transformation in a globalized world, the latter also includes other new views concerning what to focus on, how to focus, and how to track the process. Nevertheless, Marcus also pointed out that the suggestions or judgments of multi-sited ethnography have raised concerns among anthropologists, with some fearing that this process might render ethnography "thin" and lead to the disappearance of the depth of fieldwork, which ensures the uniqueness of anthropological research and knowledge (Marcus 2011).

Based on this logic, Marcus' multi-sited ethnography essentially involves cross-regional investigations with methods such as following the people, following the thing, following the metaphor, following the conflict, or following the life (Marcus 1995). Fundamentally, the purpose of multi-sited ethnography is no longer merely to depict the entirety of a region's culture but "to actively coordinate its expressions in the collaborative relationships formed during fieldwork, focusing on the unintended consequences of relationships among actors and subjects without connections or apparent connections (however, due to the process of globalization, these actors and subjects, though distant, are increasingly aware of each other)" (Marcus 2011).

Multi-sited ethnography has found extensive application in China. For instance, the author previously led a team to conduct multi-sited ethnographic research on issues and strategies related to new urban immigrants in cities such as Chengdu, Shenyang, Hangzhou, and Dongguan. Different communities and samples of new immigrants were selected in each city, and the research involved a combination of in-depth interviews, community observations, and surveys for comparative analyses. The results of such research take into account both the differences and similarities between different regions in China (Zhou 2014). Utilizing the research method of multi-sited ethnography to study Chinese society not only helps present the changes in Chinese society under the backdrop of globalization but also, through this process of understanding, facilitates reflection on the disciplinary significance of anthropological research itself. In the study of traditional Chinese medicine, for example, researchers treat the collaboration between investigators and subjects in different fieldwork sites as a method to integrate macro-medical-narratives (i.e., efforts to systematize traditional ethnomedicine) and micro-medical-experiences (practices of individual medical practitioners) for knowledge production and daily lives (Lai 2014). Multi-sited ethnographic research, therefore, offers a broader comparative perspective compared to studies focusing on a single location. While discussions about multi-sited ethnography have persisted since its introduction, if one

acknowledges the need for anthropology to discover a holistic existence, then multi-sited ethnography remains a valuable method for understanding the whole picture.

3.3 Rapid Anthropological Assessment: methods of applied anthropology

Participatory Action Research (PAR), Rural Rapid Appraisal (RRA), and Participatory Research Appraisal (PRA) are commonly employed methods in applied anthropology. PAR involves collaboration between researchers and communities or groups, engaging in collective action to benefit community or group members. This method requires concerted efforts in analysis, education, or survey activities for implementing the measures required to bring about change. While PRA generally spans a long period of time, it has gained popularity in North America and other developed regions, particularly in bottom-up policy-making projects, such as community development, social work, public health, education, and childcare. PAR advocates, along with the groups most affected by the research projects, hold the most authority in analyzing their realities and taking action to change their circumstances. This method actively encourages marginalized and exploited individuals to conduct their own research and formulate their own policies (Chen 2011).

In the 1970s, methods of rapid research were introduced in applied anthropology, with Rapid Anthropological Assessment (RAA), also known as Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP), emerging as the most widely used approach. RAP often involves collaboration among researchers from different disciplines or professions and typically requires active participation from the research subjects. Relying primarily on qualitative methods for data collection akin to ethnographic field research, RAP emphasizes local values and perceptions of reality. In China, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a commonly used method encompassing a set of fieldwork tools for rapidly collecting information on rural resources, development status, and peasant preferences used to evaluate the path of development. Originating from the practices of developed countries in various development projects in third-world nations, PRA aims to transfer the right to speak, the right to analysis, and the right of decision-making to locals, encourage them to deepen their understanding of themselves, their communities, and their environmental conditions, and enable collaborative efforts between locals and project managers for formulating and implementing appropriate action plans. PRA emphasizes reverse learning by rural residents and is not confined to fixed survey procedures and questionnaires. Instead, investigators can adjust and refine the procedures and content of their survey based on the information obtained, seeking diverse answers for a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, attention is given to the differences and contradictions reflected in the information gathered during the survey. The method highlights local engagement, with investigators helping the respondents conduct, analyze, and report their own research. Building on this foundation, both investigators and respondents engage in reflection, sharing information and findings, and ultimately enhancing the quality of the investigation (Zhou 2004). PRA tools, characterized by speed and flexibility, help investigators who are new to the field or time-constrained researchers rapidly master the traditional methods of investigation. PRA tools provide researchers with

suitable opportunities to introduce themselves, elaborate on their themes, and gain local understanding. Presently, PRA tools are broadly categorized into eight types: interview, analysis, ranking, display, record, illustration, meeting, role-play, and direct observation (Li 2001). These tools are extensively adopted in international development projects and are among the most straightforward and effective methods. From the author's experience in participatory rural development research and fieldwork in China, PRA proves to be not only applicable but also effective in the assessment of the country's social development. However, several issues should be noted in the practical application of PRA tools. Firstly, PRA tools are empirical summaries from field practices rather than components of a rigid doctrine. New, innovative PRA tools have continued to emerge, and blind adherence should be avoided, as they ought to be applied flexibly based on the investigation's theme and field conditions. Secondly, the appropriate and effective use of PRA tools hinges on the investigator's field experience, and proficiency in using these tools must be gained through field practice. Thirdly, in practice, adopting one tool does not exclude the application of other tools, as the successful and appropriate use of a tool often requires the combined deployment of multiple tools. Lastly, due to the limited period of investigations, researchers adopting PRA tools may have to cope with shortcomings in the depth of investigation and the partnerships with respondents, requiring investigators to combine PRA with traditional anthropological research methods, such as participant observation, while striving to build harmonious relationships with respondents.

In recent years, applied anthropology has increasingly adopted quantitative methods and advanced technologies, using tools such as Geographic Information Systems for data collection or employing methods like focus group interviews and triangulation, which carry stronger policy and political implications. Focus group interviews often replace in-depth interviews in ethnography for collecting materials rapidly and economically. Triangulation, a widely used practice in social sciences, involves validating the research findings by combining results obtained from various methods. This approach integrates qualitative methods (e.g., participant observation, focus group interviews, and individual interviews) and quantitative methods (e.g., censuses and questionnaires), making it more effective than the independent use of a single method (Chen 2011).

After decades of development, applied anthropology in China has yielded fruitful results, making substantial contributions to areas such as planning for rural poverty alleviation (Zhang 2014), development in ethnic minority regions (Yang 2008), and more. Since 2000, the author has led several efforts with the World Bank, covering projects such as the Social Assessment of the World Bank-financed Jiangxi Provincial Highway No. 2 and Bundled Project, Social Assessment of the World Bank-financed Sheep Integration Development Project, Social Assessment of the World Bank-financed Anhui Highway Project, and Water Resource Assessment for the World Bank-financed Pearl River Delta Environmental Development Project, among others. The applied research projects led or participated in by the author have covered over ten provinces in central and western regions of China, addressing themes such as agriculture, environment, education, community development, and migration. Published by Sun Yat-sen University Press, *Seeking Endogenous Development: Ethnicity and Culture in Western China* (Zhou et al. 2005a) and *Participatory Social*

Assessment: Decision-making through Listening (Zhou et al. 2005b) stand as works showcasing the sound development and fruitful results of applied anthropology research and assessment in China.

3.4 Anthropological research methods in the digital age

With the popularization of the Internet in the digital age, traditional societies have undergone significant transformations, necessitating corresponding changes in anthropological research methods. In the past, anthropological studies focused on well-defined communities, and even multi-sited ethnography within the context of globalization remains rooted in physical spaces. However, in the digital age, cyberspace is characterized by its asynchrony, anonymity, accessibility, and storage capability from its inception, and it is challenging to determine the boundaries of this virtual space with an open structure (Kozinets 2016). This realization alone prompts scholars to acknowledge that research on the Internet in a digital society faces a research environment differing from conventional anthropological studies from the very beginning. Therefore, a set of ethnographic research methods adapted to cyberspace in the digital age is required to meet the challenges of conducting research within an open structure. This demand has given rise to the field of netnography.

Anthropological research in the digital age deals with novel technological interfaces such as computers, personal terminals, and the Internet. The objects, time, methods, and frequency of communication for individuals immersed in this environment differ significantly from those observed in traditional anthropological settings. Understanding this cultural backdrop is essential for comprehending and reflecting on social phenomena related to this new environment. Fundamental differences exist between netnography and traditional ethnography due to the intrinsic disparities between online and face-to-face social experiences.

The first difference lies in the mode of intervention in research. In traditional anthropological research, building trust by befriending local community members is crucial. However, conducting online surveys poses specific challenges. Observing individuals through conventional means becomes challenging in cyberspace, where a middle-aged man may register as a young woman online. In the online world, one essentially interacts with a virtual persona, reflecting the humorous sentiment depicted in a well-known cartoon featured in *The New Yorker*: On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog. Conducting surveys on the Internet involves concerns about the authenticity of online data. The challenge for researchers in conducting fieldwork on the Internet is how to intervene effectively in cyberspace to ensure the online data allows them to continue with their research. In this context, the researcher could even study things that do not exist in reality, allowing them to pose questions based on virtual phenomena. For instance, for the study of a virtual role-play community, the social structures implied by the process of how people assume different roles could be a valid research topic if anthropologists acknowledge that people follow certain constant patterns of human society in social interactions even when playing roles significantly different from their real-world attributes. The authenticity of online data is no longer a hindrance to anthropological fieldwork;

rather, it challenges the capabilities of anthropological researchers. Moreover, even in studies primarily conducted in online settings, whether netnography is confined to online research depends on factors influencing specific research questions. Practical experiences have shown that, although cyberspace is virtual, it is not entirely detached from physical space. Online users navigate between online and offline spaces and scenes to construct their daily lives. In this sense, the online and the offline are mutually constitutive, which further complicates netnography (Bu 2012).

Secondly, the presentation of netnography differs from that of traditional anthropology. Ethnography, as a key research component originating from anthropological fieldwork, serves as an authentic record of the culture of a particular group. In a digital society, the movement and heterogeneity of culture exhibit unprecedented complexities. Consequently, anthropological fieldwork is expected to reflect this movement and heterogeneity. Traditional multi-sited ethnography falls short in meeting the demands of such cultural studies focusing on digital society. With an open structure, digital society is highly expansive and vibrant. Netnography is inherently required to research asynchronism, cultural heterogeneity, and geographical dispersion. It delves into the representation of social structures in virtual spaces featuring any of the above three or random combinations, thereby examining the social structure built on this basis. Netnography highlights a nodal form of social representation. In other words, netnographic studies should not only present specific nodes in cyberspace but also identify the relationships between these nodes to unveil the flow of information and cultural shifts in a digital society. The resulting representation builds interconnections between cultural interactions and differences. As the cultural shifts are rapid, providing a comprehensive depiction of the online culture becomes challenging. For instance, while *Peasant Life in China* portrays a rural society in southern Jiangsu Province throughout the early 20th century, *Tianya Virtual Community* can only capture the status of online forums in 2003 (Liu 2005). Today's online forums have undergone significant evolution, serving as indicators of the ongoing social transformations in the digital age. In this context, researchers are required to adopt specific anthropological methods that help uncover the links amid this constant flow.

Lastly, the digital era is characterized by a detachment from physical scenes, as the Internet bridges the gap between presence and absence (Bai and He 2003). Meanwhile, being present on the Internet poses new challenges in the virtual space, where the traditional context of human communication is fundamentally altered. This transformation poses challenges for observers, as conventional observation methods become a specific and simplified pattern when scenes are detached. Such observations struggle with inherent limitations. In addition to the detachment from traditional scenes, the emergence of the digital environment also warrants attention. In face-to-face communication, nuances such as tone, facial expressions, and external conditions contribute to varying interpretations of identical expressions, as Geertz's Thick Description famously illustrated with "winks" and "blinks." These nuances are absent in online fieldwork. As the Internet evolves, netizens have fostered new online cultures to compensate for these missing scenes. From the early popularity of "emoji" (Jing 2020) to the emergence of the "Martian language" (Yin 2009) on the Chinese Internet and the enduring appeal of "memes" (Liu 2017),

social trends in cyberspace underscore the desire to reconstruct the detached scenes in the virtual world using alternative methods. This reminds anthropologists that diverse observational methods are required in the digital age to understand how people construct society. In conducting ethnographic studies, researchers need to explore not only the subjects themselves but also the surrounding environment and atmosphere, commonly referred to as the context. Netnography typically confines its analysis to discourse and text and fails to examine the context. Whether popular Internet events represent authentic contexts or are intentionally shaped by anthropic factors is a solid research topic. In addition, the Internet abounds with all types of fans, and understanding how they appear, become popular, and eventually fade away is also a valid research topic (Zhou 2018).

The digital age has also ushered in new possibilities for observation, providing researchers with expanded opportunities for conducting studies through various cameras that record people's behaviors for big data analysis. One extreme example of this is studies conducted in prisons. The author once supervised two doctoral candidates for a research project conducted in prison (Sun 2013; Shao 2016). In this prison, where every bed is equipped with surveillance cameras, inmates can be comprehensively observed and captured through extensive data collection. While such research presents enormous ethical challenges, the aforementioned doctoral candidates navigated these issues by engaging in thorough communication with the inmates participating in the study and obtaining informed consent prior to commencing their investigation. When direct communication with subjects might not be possible, the research using this method warrants careful consideration.

4 Conclusion: anthropology's shift toward the study of complex societies

Over a century has passed since Chinese anthropology was founded in the early 20th century. Following Li Ji's initiation of modern archaeological studies in China, the four branches of anthropology — physical anthropology, archaeology, socio-cultural anthropology, and linguistics — have gradually taken root across the vast expanse of China, enduring the challenges of different eras yet persisting to the present day. From its inception, Chinese anthropology has predominantly focused on complex societies, with key academic achievements emerging from the study of these intricate social structures. Anthropological research on China remains closely intertwined with the realities of the complex Chinese society. Moreover, ongoing developments in anthropological methods for studying complex societies reflect the evolving practical demands for anthropology. In addressing the challenges confronting the development of Chinese anthropology, Qiao Jian envisioned the future prospects of the discipline. He argued that the foundation for the development of Chinese anthropology lies in the commonalities and differences within traditional Chinese culture, coupled with rich regional characteristics, which would provide abundant materials for researchers who were previously unable to enter China. Additionally, the extensive reservoir of historical literature in China holds the promise of providing a clearer and more accurate understanding of the cultural transformations in the country and, by extension,

the entire human cultural evolution. Furthermore, the fact that China is a unified multiethnic state. While many nations worldwide are multiethnic, it is unparalleled that China has the unique convergence of numerous ethnic groups, collectively navigating through millennia and achieving coexistence, mutual prosperity, and great unity. As they approach such unique patterns of society, anthropologists can offer a more comprehensive, objective, and systematic interpretation (Qiao 1998). China's proposition of "forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation" presents a more promising outlook for the development of Chinese anthropology.

In the face of complex societies, particularly those as expansive, diverse, and historically rich as China, new methods of investigation and analysis play a crucial role in helping anthropology, along with other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, to generate experiences, ideas, and theories. Pioneering Chinese anthropologists like Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong, when introducing anthropology to China, aspired to understand the country through anthropological community research and sought methods for China, a country with profound cultural traditions and a long history, to achieve national rejuvenation. Subsequent studies in historical anthropology aimed to understand how the traditions of regional societies intersect with national narratives, further unveiling the complexities inherent in this complex society. The approach of multi-sited ethnography indicates a quest for connections that often reside within complexities of our daily lives that we can recognize but do not notice. Such connections allow the interactions between the abstract and the concrete to be perceived by different subjects. The application and development of the assessment methods in applied anthropology proclaim the practical relevance of anthropology, dispelling the criticism that anthropology is a "useless" discipline. Netnography enables anthropologists to traverse the realms of virtual and real, moving beyond a holistic understanding of real-world society to explore how modern individuals, who live in reality and cyberspace, perceive their living environments.

The academic community is currently discussing the shift from "disciplinary-oriented research" to "problem-oriented research" (Xu 2022). The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China has been advocating for the development of "new humanities" and "new sciences disciplines," driven by skepticism regarding the relevance of past categories of academic disciplines. This shift implies two key propositions: (1) the categories of academic disciplines established a century ago no longer align with modern development, and (2) a singular academic discipline is inadequate to address contemporary issues. In reality, research methods have long transcended disciplinary boundaries, becoming shared tools across various disciplines, which is why the names of many textbooks contain "methods for humanities and social sciences." Community research methods serve as a good example. Community research, which originated from anthropology and sociology, has evolved into a research tool used across different disciplines since the 1980s. The term "社区(shequ)" also progressed from being solely an academic subject to becoming a part of community work and government policies (e.g., the transformation from residents' committees to communities as China's community-level governance structure) (Ding 2020). It is foreseeable that anthropological methods will be borrowed by other academic disciplines, and beyond that, anthropology itself will continue to integrate methods from other academic disciplines to address increasingly complex social issues.

Availability of data and materials The data used and analyzed in the study are available from the author on reasonable request.

Declarations

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Comments