

Seventy years of study on ethnic paleography in China



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Received: 5 April 2024 / Revised: 29 April 2024 / Accepted: 9 May 2024 /

Published online: 03 June 2024

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Abstract

This paper systematically presents the development process of studying ancient Chinese ethnic scripts over the past seven decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, including the establishment of related research institutions and academic disciplines. Firstly, it records the establishment of the Chinese Association for Ethnic Paleography, the emergence of ancient scripts of ethnic groups in China as an academic discipline, and the conduction of a comprehensive and in-depth study of ancient Chinese ethnic literature in history. Secondly, this paper outlines the establishment of the National Leading Group for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books, the census of ancient books written in ethnic scripts, the specialized preservation and conservation of ancient ethnic books in Xizang and Xinjiang, the promotion of compiling and publishing ancient ethnic books, and how the promotion further drives the protection of and research on ancient books written in ethnic scripts. Thirdly, the paper lists many innovative outcomes in studying ancient ethnic books. Fourthly, the paper proposes to conduct further censuses and in-depth research in this area, establish a grading system for ancient ethnic books, and utilize the resource of ancient ethnic books written in ethnic scripts in a modern context to further promote the excellent cultural heritages of the Chinese nation and enhancing ethnic unity and national unity.

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Keywords China's ethnic scripts · Paleography · Ancient books · Compilation and research

China is a multi-ethnic country where all ethnic groups have jointly created the splendid Chinese national culture. In China, in addition to the commonly used Chinese Han script, many ethnic groups created and used a total of more than 30 scripts in different historical periods. China's ethnic groups have left many and a wide variety of ancient books, which are rich in content and constitute an essential part of Chinese ancient books. These ancient books have significantly contributed to the cultural development and exchanges of various ethnic groups in China and added glorious chapters to the Chinese national culture.

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, studies on ethnic paleography had already begun but did not receive due attention for historical reasons. From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, many books written in ancient ethnic scripts were discovered in some ancient ruins in Xinjiang and stone chambers in Dunhuang, Gansu. Those books were written in various scripts, including the Kharoshthi, the Yanqi-Kutsi, the Khotanese, the Sogdian, the Old Turkic, the Uyghur, and the Old Tibetan script. Before long, many documents written in the Xixia (Tangut) script were discovered at the Blackwater City site in Ejin Banner, Inner Mongolia. As most ethnic script documents were taken abroad, they attracted the attention of foreign scholars before China's scholars began their research. At that time, Chen Yinque (TschenYinKoh), one of the most prominent historians of modern China, used his profound academic skills in the study of many ancient languages and scripts, such as the Yanqi-Kutsi, Old Turkic, Old Uyghur, Old Tibetan, Xixia (the Tangut), Mongolian, and Manchu scripts.

Some younger scholars also devoted themselves to the study of ancient scripts of ethnic groups in China and made remarkable achievements under the initiative and influence of Chen Yinque,¹ Wang Guowei, Luo Zhenyu, and Zhao Yuanren. For example, Ji Xianlin studied the Yanqi-Kutsi script; Han Rulin and Cen Zhongmian studied the Old Turkic script; Feng Jiasheng studied the Old Uyghur script; Luo Fuchang, Luo Fucheng, and Wang Jingru studied the Xixia script; Luo Fucheng, Wang Jingru, and Li Dingkui studied the Khitan script; Luo Changpei, Han Rulin, and Lu Zhiwei studied the hP'ags-pa script; Luo Fucheng, Jin Guangping, and Jin Qicong studied the Jurchen script; Jin Liang and Li Deqi studied Manchu script; Yu Daoquan studied the Old Tibetan script; Yang Chengzhi, Ding Wenjiang, and Ma Xueliang studied the Yi script; Shi Zhongjian studied the Bai script; and Fang Guoyu and Fu Maoji studied the Tomba script, among others. These scholars pioneered the study of ancient ethnic writing systems in China and laid the foundation for subsequent research on ethnic paleography and documents.

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

1 Studies on ethnic paleography in the early period of the People's Republic of China

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government implemented a policy of equality among all ethnic groups. Under the government's initiative for greater attention to ethnic groups, the study of ethnic paleography was gradually revitalized. In the 1950s, an essential task for the government was ethnic identification. In 1956, a large-scale investigation into ethnic societies, cultures, and histories was launched, involving more than a thousand experts and scholars. The investigation covered the use of ancient and modern ethnic scripts and collected some ancient documents written in ethnic scripts while focusing on the society, history, and language of each ethnic group. For example, literature and documents written in the Old Tibetan script, the Old Dai script, the Classical Yi script, the Chagatay script, and the Shui script kept in the library of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences were collected at that time.

The study of ethnic paleography has always been a rarely-focused field, with only a few researchers interested. However, some related works were still published in the 1950s and 1960s. Examples included *Research on "Hetian maqian"* (Xia 1962) and *Collection from nomad domes* (Han 1982). In the 1960s and 1970s, studies on the Xixia script and the Old Uyghur script gradually started. However, the systematic study of ethnic paleography did not begin until China's reform and opening-up in the late 1970s.

2 The establishment of the Chinese Association for Ethnic Paleography and the academic discipline of ethnic paleography

Since the launch of China's reform and opening-up in 1978, the spring of social science has been ushered in, and the study of ethnic paleography has prospered and reached a high point in the new era. While senior experts resumed their research on ethnic paleography, young and middle-aged scholars also took the academic stage. Theses on this subject sprang up. As academic communities saw increased numbers, these young and middle-aged scholars reached out to their senior counterparts to establish a specialized research association. At an academic conference held in 1979 in Tianjin, 16 respected scholars, including Ji Xianlin and Weng Dujian, advocated greater attention to the research on the literature of ancient ethnic scripts and proposed the founding of the Chinese Association for Ethnic Paleography (from now on referred to as "the Association"). This proposal was mind-opening and pioneering because of a weak foundation of China's research on ethnic paleography, the scarcity of specialized experts on this subject, and language barriers among different ethnic languages and scripts.

2.1 The establishment of the Chinese Association for Ethnic Paleography

In the spring of 1980, an expert symposium was held at the Institute of Minzu Studies, currently the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IEACASS). More than 20 senior experts, including Ji Xianlin, Weng Dujian, Chen Shu, Jin Kemu, Ma Xueliang, Li Sen, Xiong Deji, and young and middle-aged scholars attended the conference to discuss the crucial academic value of researching ancient Chinese ethnic scripts and their practical significance for developing ethnic culture, enhancing ethnic unity, and maintaining national unity. The experts and scholars emphasized the importance of establishing a research association for conducting academic research and exchanging, organizing, and uniting experts in ethnic paleography to form a joint force. They decided to establish the research association in August 1980. In July 1980, Junast, a linguist specializing in the Monguor language, and Shi Jinbo, a historian of ethnic paleography, met staff with government organizations such as the Relics Bureau of Chengde Municipal in Hebei province to prepare for the founding.

On August 1st, 1980, the founding conference and the first symposium of the Association was held in Chengde Mountain Resort. About 100 passionate participants attended the event, including young and middle-aged scholars and senior experts such as Weng Dujian, Chen Shu, Jin Kemu, Ma Xueliang, Li Sen, Xiong Deji, Jin Qicong, Yan Wanzhang, Wang Jun, Chen Shilin, and Zhang Keqiang, along with government officials such as Jiang Ping of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, Ma Yin of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, Ya Hanzhang of the Institute of Minzu Studies of the CASS, Zhang Yangwu of the Central Institute for Ethnicities (present Minzu University of China), and Li Hongfan of the Ethnic Publishing House.

With a focus on the significance of the research on ancient scripts of ethnic groups, the conference also gave an overview of different ethnic scripts, marking a groundbreaking event in China's research on ethnic paleography. It unprecedentedly gathered experts and scholars specializing in the subject to exchange ideas and symbolized the study of ancient scripts of ethnic groups as an academic discipline. This new academic discipline complemented the research on the ancient Chinese script, improving and enriching the academic studies of China's ancient scripts. It was determined at the conference that the Association was a non-official academic society of subject matter scholars and non-professionals and was affiliated with the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the CASS. Bao Erhan and Ji Xianlin were chosen as Honorary Presidents. Fu Maoji, a renowned linguist specializing in ethnic languages, was elected President of the Association.

2.2 The first significant academic activity after the establishment of the Association: holding an exhibition of ancient ethnic scripts

In October 1980, the Association held its first important academic event: The Exhibition of Ancient Scripts of Ethnic Groups.

In the leading up to the founding event of the Association, the organizer asked experts to take some originals, books of rubbings, or sample papers of ancient scripts of ethnic groups for showcasing and discussion. During the founding conference, these items were exhibited in the Tower of Mist and Rain in Chengde Mountain Resort, temporarily used as a two-floor exhibition hall. This small exhibition received positive feedback, encouraging the organizer to hold a more extensive exhibition. With no funds, exhibits, or experience, the Association devised creative approaches to starting from scratch and managed to make the large exhibition happen. With the support of the cultural division of The National Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Cultural Palace of Ethnicities, the problem of lacking funding and exhibition spaces was solved. Exhibits were offered for free by related organizations across China, from national-level cultural institutions like the Palace Museum and Beijing Library (now the National Library of China) to regional institutions located in faraway ethnic regions.

After a month of busy preparation, the Exhibition of Ancient Ethnic Scripts opened in the Cultural Palace of Ethnicities on October 1st, 1980, jointly held by the cultural division of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Association, and the Cultural Palace of Ethnicities. The Association undertook all professional tasks. This exhibition featured nearly a thousand exhibits that gave a systematic overview of ancient scripts of ethnic groups, showcased plentiful papers, and popularized the significance of researching ethnic paleography in China. The exhibition showcased plentiful items of about 20 ancient ethnic scripts, including the Kharoshthi script, the Yanqi-Kutsi script, the Khotanese script, the Old Tibetan script, the Old Turkic script, the Old Uyghur script, the Chagatay script, the Xixia script, the Old Dai script, the Classical Yi, the Tomba script, the Geba script, the Khitan script, the Jurchen script, the Uighur-Mongol script, the hP'ags-pa Script, and the Manchu script. Many of these essential exhibits were shown in public for the first time.

This 1-month exhibition attracted more than 12,000 visitors and received significant attention from the central government and relevant authorities. More than ten Party and state leaders, including Ulanhu, Seypidin Ezizi, Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme, Wan Li, and Deng Liqun, visited the exhibition. During the visit, some of the attending leaders expressed concern over the status of this academic discipline and their expectations accordingly.

This exhibition garnered significant attention in academia, drawing enthusiastic participation from many renowned experts. Upon touring the distinctive exhibition, many visitors felt that this extraordinary exhibition broadened their horizons and increased their knowledge. Some of them even commented on the guest book, saying that even with still exhibits, this exhibition was super appealing and refreshing, brimming with vitality. While the exhibition was more attractive to ethnic visitors, it also has great appeal to foreigners, with foreign guests from more than 20 countries, such as Britain, France, the United States, Japan, and the Netherlands, as well as officials from the United Nations coming to visit one after another. The exhibition also gained significant attention from the press, with coverage from CCTV, Beijing TV, Xinhua News Agency, *Guangming Daily*, *Beijing Daily*, and *Beijing Evening News*, including a 30-min introduction in multiple languages to international audiences dedicated by China Radio International.

This exhibition marked the first systematic introduction of the general situation of Chinese ethnic paleography and the relevant literature to domestic and foreign visitors, which promoted the value and significance of the research on ethnic paleography, enabling worldwide to learn about this precious cultural heritage of excellent Chinese traditional culture. It promoted academic exchanges and enhanced national unity and the prosperity of the Chinese national culture.

2.3 Organizing the research on China's ethnic paleography

After the establishment of the Association, it has actively engaged in the organization of ethnic paleography research and specified the focus of the research at different stages. It has also done a great deal of work in strengthening the organizational construction of related teams, promoting academic exchanges among association members, editing and publishing research results and academic materials, and compiling ancient books. So far, the Association has held 11 national conferences among its members, academic seminars, and several small and medium-sized regional and thematic academic seminars. Many members have made remarkable achievements in compiling document materials and thematic research work, positively contributing to academia at home and abroad.

The Association edited and published the *Sample scripts of ancient ethnic writings in China* (Fu 1990), which comprehensively introduced Chinese ethnic paleography and more than 300 kinds of related documents for the first time, making a significant impact domestically and internationally. Subsequently, the Association edited and published several collections of essays titled *Ethnic Paleography Research in China* and various books and materials on this subject.

Moreover, the Association has also effectively promoted the study of various ancient ethnic characters, fostering a commendable tradition of exploring, pragmatism, progress, and unity. The study of ethnic paleography has thus shown a strong trend of all-around development. In 2010, on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Association, a conference was held in Chengde to review and summarize the achievements and experiences of the Association in the past 20 years and outline the future development direction. In 2019, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Association, an academic conference was held in Yinchuan for related discussion and summary, which produced remarkable significance.

3 The establishment of the leading national group for compilation and publication planning of ancient ethnic books to promote the research and collation of ancient ethnic books

On September 17, 1981, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) issued an important document entitled "Instructions on the Compilation of China's Ancient Books." In December, the State Council of China resumed the work of the National Planning Group for Compilation and Publication of Ancient Books, with Li Yimang as the group leader. More efforts have been devoted to compiling

China's ancient books hereafter. On January 20, 1982, Li Yimang published his article "On ancient books and the compilation of ancient books" in the *People's Daily*. Huang Runhua, the then Deputy Secretary-general of the Association, wrote a letter to Li Yimang, explaining the importance of ancient ethnic books. Later, Li Yimang wrote another article about the compilation work of ancient books in the *People's Daily*, explicitly discussing ancient ethnic books and emphasizing that ancient ethnic books constitute an integral part of China's ancient books. It was later revealed that Li Yimang attached great importance to Huang Runhua's letter and submitted it to the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, as the Commission leaders were also concerned about this matter and were seeking opinions from various sources.

As a result of the efforts made by the Association, more types of ancient characters of ethnic groups have been discovered, along with the continuous findings of ancient books and documents. Following the expanding impact of such efforts, there have been growing calls for comprehensive compilation, publication, and research of ancient ethnic books. In June 1983, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission held a panel meeting on the compilation of ancient ethnic books at Wat Pho Temple in Beijing. The meeting was chaired by Deputy Director of the Commission Wu Jinghua, attended and addressed by Deputy Directors of the Commission Huang Guangxue and Lobzang, along with Zhou Lin, Deputy Director of the State Education Commission. Li Yimang made a keynote speech at the meeting. These speeches profoundly impacted the delegates at the meeting and guided subsequent work in compiling ancient ethnic books. Shi Jinbo and Huang Runhua also attended the panel meeting on behalf of the Association.

3.1 Establishment of the National Leading Group for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books to promote the work on ancient ethnic books

On April 19, 1984, the General Office of the State Council forwarded the National Ethnic Affairs Commission's "Request for the Rescue and Compilation of Ethnic Groups' Ancient Books." Several months later, in July, the State Council established a national institute for the compilation of ancient ethnic books, namely the "National Leading Group for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books". This group was led by the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, which involved multiple commissions and ministries, including the State Education Commission, placing the compilation of ancient ethnic books under the management of the central government departments in charge of ethnic affairs. As a result, comprehensive efforts were initiated in the preservation and conservation, rescue, compilation, translation, publication, and research of ethnic groups' ancient books. This signified a pivotal moment of compilation and research of ancient ethnic books moving on to a more organized and planned track. Following that, various provincial-level "Offices for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books" were successively established as the local subordinate institutions under the National

Ethnic Affairs Commission, which actively launched a series of compilation and publication work of ancient ethnic books.

In 1985, the first national conference on the compilation of ethnic ancient books was held in Beijing. After that, the national ancient ethnic books conference was convened multiple times, continuously advancing the organization, planning, publication, and research efforts of ancient ethnic books.

In 1989, the “National Leading Group for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books” was renamed the “National Ethnic Ancient Books Compilation and Research Office”. This office is responsible for organizing, coordinating, liaising, and guiding the work of rescue, collection, compilation, and publication of ethnic groups’ ancient books, managing relevant data and information, and providing guidance on talent cultivation and training. It is also tasked with drafting relevant policies and regulations and organizing the development and implementation of critical projects and significant national research topics.

3.2 Census of ethnic ancient books and compilation of Synopsis on the General Catalog of Ancient Ethnic Books in China

The “National Leading Group for Compilation and Publication Planning of Ancient Ethnic Books” organized the census, rescue, collection, and protection of ancient ethnic books across various regions. This initiative received widespread support from various ethnicities and segments of society, fostering self-esteem, pride, and confidence among people of different ethnicities in their cultural heritage and contributing positively to the promotion of the rich traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Furthermore, it catalyzed advancing ethnic unity and progress.

In 1996, the National Ancient Ethnic Books Organization and Research Office planned to compile the *Synopsis of the General Catalog of Ancient Ethnic Books in China* to summarize the achievements made by the general survey of ancient ethnic books, which was a significant effort to rescue, organize, and preserve the cultural heritage of ethnic groups.

This plan was officially approved as a project in 1997, implemented in 1998, and formally included in the “Outline of the National 11th Five Year Plan Period Cultural Development Plan” in August 2006. The *Synopsis on the General Catalog of Ancient Ethnic Books in China* is the first bibliographic set serving as a guide to China’s ancient ethnic books. It has an overall design of 110 books in about 60 volumes published by the Encyclopedia of China Publishing House. As of 2018, synopses for ancient books of 36 ethnic groups had been released.

This work has enriched the content of Chinese history and culture, provided valuable information for understanding the origins of diverse cultural forms, unveiled the trajectories of social and cultural development, and provided a new perspective for the historical research of ethnic relations in China.

3.3 Growth of the research team for ancient ethnic books and the convening of the international academic symposium on Chinese ancient ethnic books and documents

Various regions, including provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, have engaged experts specialized in ancient ethnic books. With the compiling and research group continuously expanding, organizing and compiling local ethnic ancient books has been carried out in an orderly manner. Over the past 30 years, numerous publications on the research and comprehensive, systematic studies of ancient ethnic books have been continuously published. National and local planning institutions for compiling ancient ethnic books have convened several working meetings and academic conferences. For example, in 2010, the International Academic Symposium on Chinese Ancient Ethnic Books was initiated by the Minzu University of China and jointly organized with the Ethnic Affairs Committee of Beijing, Southwest Minzu University, and the Association. This annual symposium has been held for nine consecutive years, providing a platform for robust international academic exchanges on the development of ethnic classical literature discipline.

4 Carrying out the nationwide protection project of ancient ethnic books and promoting the research

With the world's richest collection of ancient books preserved, China has a long-standing tradition of preserving these valuable historical documents. On January 19, 2007, the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Strengthening the Preservation of Ancient Books," providing guidance and arrangements for the nationwide initiative to enhance the protection of ancient books. The issuance of this document marked the beginning of a new phase in protecting China's ancient books, including ancient ethnic books.

4.1 Comprehensively promoting the protection of ancient books and carrying out a general survey of ancient ethnic books

Under the State Council's leadership, the National Ancient Book Protection Committee, composed of 10 ministries, protected national ancient books. The Ministry of Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China) took the lead in implementing the national ancient book protection. It established the National Ancient Book Protection Committee, Expert Committee, and the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books. Subsequently, ancient book protection centers across the nation were established at the provincial level (provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government). In July 2007, the Ministry of Culture convened a national conference on ancient book protection, attended by the then Vice Premier of the State Council, Liu Yandong. In September 2007, the Ministry of Culture dispatched several

inspection teams to conduct local (provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government) inspections and supervision, including in areas inhabited by ethnic groups.

Since 2007, China has carried out a nationwide comprehensive survey and registration of ancient books, aiming to strengthen the management of ancient books and make targeted and focused efforts to preserve ancient books. It represents the first large-scale nationwide survey covering both classical Chinese books and ethnic language classics, marking a significant event in the development of ethnic cultures. After that, with the coordinated arrangement of the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books, regions and relevant institutions preserving ethnic languages and ancient books have carried out ancient book surveys in an orderly way.

The National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books, together with its provincial-level (provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government) branches, has established census teams and offered related training to accomplish the census of China's ancient books as planned. China's ethnic areas once lagged behind others in identifying, preserving, and conserving ancient books, lacking related professionals. The National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books has thus organized numerous training sessions on the survey of ancient ethnic books and the identification and preservation of ethnic scripts and books across the country. Over the past decade, there were ten sessions on the survey and identification of ancient ethnic books, training more than 490 individuals, and 16 sessions on identifying ancient books and rubbings, targeting over 1,000 participants.

4.2 Review of the catalog of a massive number of China's rare ancient books

It is a list of precious ancient books and archives established in China to ensure the safety of precious ancient books, promote the protection of ancient books, enhance citizens' awareness of ancient books protection, and promote international cultural exchange and cooperation. The Ministry of Culture drafted and approved the list by the State Council before being announced.

In November 2007, the Review of the Catalog of China's Rare Ancient Books officially began. The catalog was formulated by the Ministry of Culture and released upon approval by the State Council to complete the archives of China's rare ancient books, ensure the safety of rare ancient books and improve related preservation and conservation work, raise public awareness about ancient books protection, and promote international cultural exchanges and cooperation. The cataloged books were mainly written or printed before 1912 in the traditional Chinese bookbinding style and had significant historical, ideological, and cultural value. A case in point is ancient books written in the languages of Chinese ethnic groups. Among the five review groups, the "Ethnic Language and Literature Group" evaluates ancient scripts and books of ethnic groups. The Group consists of Shi Jinbo, Huang Runhua, Wang Yao, Zhang Gongjin, Liang Tingwang, Tsering Thar, Dalizhabu Bao, Met Raim, Zhang Tieshan, Huang Weizhong, Wu Yuanfeng, Huang Jianming, Zhu

Chongxian, Wu Guibiao, Dongzhu Cairang, Xianba, Zhao Shihong, Dai Hongliang, Saren Gaowa, Quan Guihua, Zhuang Xiufen, Guo Jingjing, and so on.

Since 2008, multiple reviews have been conducted. The process typically begins with submissions from various regions. After local ancient books protection centers review the submissions, they are submitted to the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books for review by a specialized group of experts. Each review is conducted strictly according to established standards. It involves repeated discussions and usually lasts for 1 or 2 months. By 2016, the State Council released five batches of the project of “Catalog of China’s rare ancient books,” totaling 12,274 books. In terms of writing, each batch covers several ethnic languages. Titled *Illustrated catalog of China’s rare ancient books* (Zhan and Zhou 2008–2016), the five batches were compiled and edited by the National Library of China and the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books in succession and published by the National Library of China Publishing House by batch successively, and five batches have been published so far. (the 1st batch: 8 volumes, published in 2008; the 2nd batch: 10 volumes, published in 2010; the 3rd batch: 8 volumes, published in 2012; the 4th batch: 6 volumes, published in 2014; and the 5th batch: 6 volumes, published in 2016), with Zhan Furui and Zhou Heping serving as Editor-in-Charge, Li Zhizhong as Managing Editor, Shi Jinbo and Zhu Fenghan as Deputy Editor-in-Charge. The last volume of each batch is always a rare ancient ethnic book. In this sense, the five batches include 1,000 such books. In 2019, the review of the sixth batch started countrywide. The catalog covers China’s rare ancient books written in Han characters and other Chinese ethnic scripts. It means a lot to promoting the culture of China’s ethnic groups and accelerating its development.

The published *Illustrated catalog of China’s rare ancient books* contains ancient books written in China’s various ethnic languages. Specifically, they are written in the Yanqi-Kutsi, the Khotanese, the Old Tibetan, the Old Uyghurt, the Xixia, the Uighur Mongolian, the Chagatay, the Square Bai, the Classical Yi, the Manchut, the Tomba, the Old Dehong Dai, the Shui, the Old Zhuang, and the ancient Bouyei scripts, and some of the rare ancient books are written in a combination of more than one ethnic script. These marvelous works partly present the exquisiteness of ancient books in China’s ethnic languages and the richness of China’s multi-ethnic culture. Among them, the most representative ones are as follows:

- a) *Maytri simit*, completed in the Yanqi-Kutsi script in the 5th–6th century, known as the earliest drama work in Chinese history, now collected in the Xinjiang Museum;
- b) *Dhāraṇī*, written in the Khotanese script over a thousand years ago, now collected in the National Library of China;
- c) *Catalog of Buddhist texts collected in Pangtang palace*, written in the Old Tibetan script and compiled in the ninth century, believed to have been lost for a long time, now collected in the Xizang Museum;
- d) *On Hetuvidya*, written in the Old Tibetan script about Hetuvidya by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyeltsen, a Tibetan spiritual leader and Buddhist scholar and the fourth of

- the Five Sakya Forefathers; published in Dadu (now Beijing), capital of the Yuan Dynasty; now collected in the Xizang Museum;
- e) *Maytri simit*, written in the Old Uyghur script in the Northern Song Dynasty, now collected in the Xinjiang Museum;
 - f) *A lithograph of a Western Xia Dynasty's Buddhist texts translating activity*, the only surviving ancient picture book that vividly reflects the translation activities and sites then, now collected in the National Library of China;
 - g) *The secret history of the Mongols*, a historical literature written in the Uighur-Mongol script, believed to have been lost for a long time and found in recent years in the Tholing Monastery, Zanda County, Ngari Prefecture, Xizang Autonomous Region, now collected in the Tholing Monastery in Zanda County, Xizang Autonomous Region;
 - h) *Collected poems of Ali-Shir Nava'i*, a book of collected poems written in the Chagatay script by Ali-Shir Nava'i, a great Uyghur poet and thinker in the 15th century, now collected in the Xinjiang Museum and the National Library of China;
 - i) *Euclid's elements*, written in the Manchu script, with comments of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty, now collected in the Inner Mongolia Library;
 - j) *Annals of Qing Dynasty events*, *Words of Qing Dynasty Emperors*, and *Aisin Gioro clan* (Genealogy Records), written in the Manchu script for Qing Dynasty's royal families;
 - k) *Yi people's records*, written in the Classical Yi script to record the ancient society of the Yi people in the form of pictures and texts, now collected in the Yunnan Office for Ethnic Minority Ancient Books Compilation and Publication Planning;
 - l) *On Karma*, a palm-leaf manuscript made with special techniques and written in the Old Dehong Dai script with gold and silver powder, now collected in the Office for Ethnic Minority Ancient Books Compilation and Publication Planning in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan;
 - m) *Dongba dance notation*, written in the Tomba script, a kind of hieroglyphic, with content and version all of significant artistic value; now collected in the Dongba Cultural Research Institute in Lijiang, Yunnan;
 - n) *Shui people's Encyclopedia*, written in the Shui script, dubbed as the encyclopedia of Shui ethnic society, now collected in the Guizhou Sandu Shui Autonomous County Archives Bureau;
 - o) *A 3000-word Chinese-Old Zhuang script dictionary*, written in a unique style and form in the Old Zhuang script serving as a reference book for Zhuang people to learn Chinese characters, now collected in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Office for Ethnic Minority Ancient Books Compilation and Publication Planning.

In addition, there are multi-lingual ancient books written in two or more languages, including those combining Chinese Han and ethnic scripts and those featuring a combination of various ethnic scripts. This reflects the history of China

as a multi-ethnic country, highlighting the close ties, exchanges, and integration among various ethnic groups. The most representative ones are as follows:

- p) *The translation of Hui-tong-si-yi guan*, with the Chinese-Ethnic language version and 31 translations;
- q) *The Five-language Book of Manchurian, Mongolian, Tibetan, Jiarong, and Uighur Languages*, a Qing Dynasty dictionary using five different scripts to record the pronunciation of the same word, now collected in the Library of the Palace Museum;
- r) *Manchu-Mongolian-Chinese Han-Tibetan Dictionary of Qing Dynasty*, *Manchu-Mongolian-Chinese Han-Tibetan-Uygur Dictionary of Qing Dynasty*, and *A Dictionary for Proper Names of the Western Region*, written in the Manchu and five other scripts);
- s) *Calligraphy collection*, a Qing Dynasty publication that gathers calligraphy works of the Chinese Han, Indian, Xinjiang, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibetan, Mongolian, and other languages with illustrations of Tibetan Buddhist precepts, which is of great value to study the languages of ethnic groups, now collected in the Xizang Norbulingka Administration Office.²

4.3 Specialized preservation and conservation work of ancient books in Xizang and Xinjiang

The preservation of ancient ethnic books is of great importance to China. This is why the country has implemented effective special measures to protect these invaluable historical treasures for future generations. To further promote the protection of ancient books written in the Tibetan script, on November 6, 2009, eight ministries and commissions, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, National Press and Publication Administration, National Religious Affairs Administration, National Cultural Heritage Administration, and National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, jointly issued the "Notice on Supporting the Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Book in Tibetan-language." As a result, a working group for protecting ancient books in Tibetan-language affiliated with the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books was set up and established special funds for protecting ancient books in the Xizang Autonomous Region with the funding of the

² The following manuscripts mentioned are unpublished: *Maytri simit* (弥勒会见记), *Dhāraṇī* (陀罗尼), *Catalog of Buddhist texts collected in Pangtang palace* (旁唐目录), *On Hetuvidya* (量理宝藏论释), *Maytri simit* (弥勒会见记), *A lithograph of a Western Xia Dynasty's Buddhist texts translating activity* (西夏译经图), *Collected poems of Ali-Shir Nava'i* (纳瓦依诗集), *Euclid's elements* (几何原本), *Annals of Qing Dynasty events* (实录), *Words of Qing Dynasty Emperors* (圣训), *Aisin Gioro clan* (玉蝶), *Yi people's records* (百乐书), *On Karma* (羯磨说), *Dongba dance notation* (东巴舞谱), *Shui people's encyclopedia* (万年经镜), *A 3000-word Chinese-Old Zhuang script dictionary* (三千书) *The translation of Hui-tong-si-yi guan* (会同四译馆译语), *Calligraphy collection* (书法集).

Chinese Ancient Books Protection Initiative. Members of the joint conference of eight ministries and commissions on the preservation and conservation of ancient books in Tibetan-language, as well as ancient book protection experts from the National Center for Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books, the National Ancient Books Protection Committee, the China Tibetology Research Center and the Xizang Autonomous Region, attended a symposium on the protection of ancient books in Tibetan-language in Beijing. The project for the protection of ancient books in Tibetan-language was launched.

With rich experience from the successful implementation of the project of ancient books protection project in Xizang, the eight ministries and commissions jointly issued the “Notice on Supporting the Preservation and Conservation of Ancient Books in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region” in January 2011, which initiated a special project for protecting ancient books in Xinjiang, creating a more favorable environment for the protection work with the state’s key special support.

Providing special targeted support policies for the two autonomous regions with rich ethnic ancient books is a pragmatic and adaptive initiative in the innovative construction of ethnic culture. This approach holds significant importance in advancing the protection and research of ancient ethnic books.

4.4 The standards for classifying Chinese ancient ethnic books

On August 1, 2007, the Ministry of Culture issued the “Notice on the Issuance of the National Census of Ancient Books and Other Documents”, which stipulated that “standards on classifying Chinese ancient ethnic books shall be formulated under the leadership of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission and promulgated for implementation”. On January 14, 2008, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission issued the “Notice on Preparation for Classifying Chinese Ancient Ethnic Books,” which further stipulated that the Library of the Cultural Palace of Ethnicities should take the lead in preparing the standards.

In the process of Reviewing the Catalog of China’s Rare Ancient Books, the review group of ancient ethnic books on the actual needs of the work studied and formulated the “Selection Criteria of the National Catalog of Rare Ancient Ethnic Books” in December 2008 concerning the grading standards on ancient books of the Chinese Han people, and in accordance with the characteristics of ethnic books of multi-language and multi-types, to accurately facilitate the review of rare ancient ethnic books, which is, in effect, a preliminary formulation of grading standards for the first and second levels of ancient ethnic books.

In April 2009, the Expert Argumentation Meeting on Classification of Ancient Ethnic Books was held at the Cultural Palace of Ethnicities, with Yang Changhong, Shi Jinbo, Wu Guibiao, Aihemaiti Maimaiti, Li Xiaodong, Zhang Zhiqing, Dong Wenliang, Li Dongsheng, Yang Chongqing, Baoyin Jigela, Cui Guangbi, Xianba, Huang Runhua, Wang Yao, Zhang Gongjin, Liang Tingwang, Huang Jianming, Dalizhabu Bao, Tsering Thar, Zhu Chongxian, Huang Youfu, Wu Yuanfeng, Chen Hongyan, and some other scholars participating in drafting the Standards on Classifying Chinese Ancient Ethnic Books. After repeated discussions and revisions,

the draft of grading standards was completed in 2012, during which many research seminars and discussion forums were held in ethnic areas, and experimental classification was implemented in many relevant areas, yielding positive results. The final “Standards on Classifying Chinese Ancient Ethnic Books” was released on September 17, 2018, by the State Administration for Market Regulation and China’s Standardization Administration and implemented on April 1, 2019. These necessary grading standards play an irreplaceable role in guiding the grading and protection of ancient ethnic books in a more scientific and legalized manner.

4.5 Ancient ethnic books in the “Facsimile Reprint Project of Chinese Rare Books”

In 2002, China set up a national key cultural project, the “Facsimile Reprint Project of Chinese Rare Books”, which is a systematic cultural project to protect and rationally develop and utilize ancient books through large-scale reproduction and publication, with substantial government funding. The project is co-chaired by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Culture and carried out by the National Library of China in cooperation with a group of top Chinese scholars. In this sense, those rare ancient books can be put into practical use by the academic community and shared by the public. The “Facsimile Reprint Project of Chinese Rare Books” includes “Compilations of the Tang and Song Dynasties”, “Compilations of the Jin and Yuan Dynasties”, “Compilations of the Ming Dynasty”, “Compilations of the Qing Dynasty”, and “Compilation of Literature in Ethnic Minority Languages.” Each compilation consists of classics, history books, works of various philosophies of Buddhism and Taoism, anthologies, and series.

The project is divided into two phases. In the second phase, more than 30 kinds of ancient books in ethnic scripts were selected, including *Maytri simit* in the Yanqi-Kutsi script, *Dhāraṇī* in the Khotanese script, *A biography of the Tripitaka master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* in the Old Uyghur script, *Tangut version of Samputa-santra* in the Xixia script, *Prajnaparamita sutra* in the Square Bai script, *The classic of Filial Piety*, and *Biography of Altan Khan* in the Uighur-Mongol script, *The four medical classics* in the Old Tibetan script, *The collected poems of Nawa'i* in the Chagatai Script, *The imperial poem to the city of Shengjing* in the Manchu script, *San he bian lan* in the Manchu, Chinese Han and Mongolian scripts, *The book of good behaviors* in the Yi script, *The book of genesis* in the Tomba script, *On Karma* in the Old Dehong Dai script, *Me po tang* in the Old Zhuang script, *Geng jia* in the Shui script, and so on.³ These are all masterpieces of ancient ethnic books, demonstrating the splendid culture of the Chinese nation and the superb craftsmanship of the production of ancient ethnic books.

³ The following manuscripts mentioned in the text are unpublished: *A biography of the Tripitaka master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (大唐慈恩寺三藏法师传), *Tangut version of Samputa-santra* (吉祥遍至口合本续), *Prajnaparamita sutra* (仁王护国般若波罗密经抄), *The classic of Filial Piety* (孝经), *Biography of Altan Khan* (阿勒坦汗传), *The four medical classics* (四部医典), *The collected poems of Nawa'i* (纳瓦依诗集), *The imperial poem to the city of Shengjing* (御制盛京赋), *San he bian lan* (三合便览), *The book of good behaviors* (劝善经), *The book of genesis* (创世经), *On Karma* (羯磨说), *Me po tang* (么破塘), *Geng jia* (庚甲).

5 New progress in the study of ancient ethnic scripts and books

In the past 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially in the past 40 years since China's Reform and opening-up, the research on ethnic paleography has seen unprecedented development. It has yielded numerous spectacular results that have received increasing attention both at home and abroad, thanks to the endeavors of two or three generations of specialists.

Since the 1990s, numerous comprehensive and systematic studies of ethnic scripts and books have been published, including *Sample scripts of ancient ethnic writings in China* (Fu 1990), *An introduction to Chinese ancient ethnic books* (Wu 1995), *An overview on ethnic ancient books* (Zhang 1997), *Scripts and literature of Chinese ethnic groups* (Wei 2004), *Studies on ancient ethnic scripts and literature* (Shi and Huang 2008), *Collection of precious classics in Chinese ethnic scripts (Vol. 1–28)* (Zhang et al. 2017).

A great deal of research has also been done on various ancient ethnic scripts, briefly listed as follows:

- (1) Kharosthi script studies: The issue of the dating of the Kharosthi documents unearthed in Xinjiang (Ma 1979), A comprehensive research of the ancient Kharosthi scripts in the Shanshan and Khotan areas (Ma 1980), and *The Shahai scroll: the Kharosthi documents unearthed in China* (Lin 1988).
- (2) Yanqi-Kutsi studies: *The thirty-two features of the Buddha in Tocharian A* (Ji 1982), and *Translation and interpretation of Tocharian "Maitreyasamīitnātaka"* (Ji 1998).
- (3) Old Tibetan script studies: *Collection of the ancient Tibetan inscriptions* (Wang 1982); *Comprehensive record of Tubo bamboo* (Wang and Chen 1986), and *Tibetan historical documents found in Dunhuang* (Wang and Chen 1992), *Catalogue and explanatory questions of the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscript collected in France* (Wang 1999).

Collated and translated studies on ancient Tibetan historical books: *Records of Tibetan kings* (Wang 1949); *Records of Tibetan kings and ministers* (Guo 1983), *The blue chronicle* (Guo 1985), and *Bu-ston's history of Buddhism in Tibet* (Guo 1989), *The new red annals* (Huang 1984), *Biography of Milarepa* (Liu 1985a) and *Tu guan zong pai yuan liu* (Liu 1985b), *A collection of Han and Tibetan histories* (Chen 1986), and *The red annals* (Chen 1988), *The history of politics and religion in the Amdo region* (Wu et al. 1987), *The history of the Sakya lineage* (Che and Gao 2002), *A scholar's feast—A translation and commentary on the history of the Tubo* (Huang and Zhou 2010).

In addition, there are also some ancient Tibetan literature and history books collated and published documenting important families, monasteries, and

historical figures, such as *The history of Lang's family*, *The chorography of Tal temple*, and *Polhané Sönam topgyé*.⁴

- (4) Old Uyghur script studies: *Two Old Uyghur contracts* (Feng 1960) and *Three Uyghur documents concerning buying and selling of a slave named Pintung* (Feng 1958), *Gaochang guan ke* (Hu and Huang 1981), *Introduction to ancient Uyghur culture and literature* (Geng 1983), *Studies on Uyghur ancient literature* (Geng 2003), and *Studies on socio-economic documents in the Old Uyghur script* (Geng 2006), *Studies on socio-economic documents in the Old Uyghur script found in Turpan* (li 1996), *An introduction to ancient Uyghur characters and literature* (Niu 1997), *Literature and culture of the Old Uyghur* (Yang 2003), *A Discussion on Contractual Document in the Old Uyghur Script* (Liu 2000), and *Translation and annotation of contracts of sale and purchase in the Old Uyghur Script* (Liu 2006).
- (5) Xixia script studies: large-scale literature series including *Xixia documents from Khara-Khoto collected in Russia (Vol. 1–29)* (The Saint Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, and the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of CASS 1996–2019), and *Documents from Khara-Khoto collected in Britain Vol. 1–5* (North Minzu University, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, and the British Library 2005–2010).

Results of literature collation and research include *A Study on a sea of characters* (Shi et al. 1983), *A study of the homophones* (Li 1986), *A study on leilin* (Shi et al. 1993), *A new collection of Xixia proverbs* (Chen 1993), and *A study of zhen guan yu jing jiang* (Chen 1995), *A study on sea of meanings established by saints* (Kychanov et al. 1995), *Amended and reapproved law of the Tiansheng reign* (Shi et al. 2000), *A study on dexing ji in Xixia language* (Nie 2002), *A study of “Confucius and Laozi at the Altar” in Xixia language* (Kychanov and Nie 2009), *A Collection of textual research of Xixia literature* (Sun 2015), *A study on Xixia literature unearthed in Wuwei* (Liang 2015a), *A collating research on the Tangut medical literature in Heishuicheng unearthed* (Liang 2015b), *A study of Xixia's economic documents* (Shi 2017), and *Research on the Liri literature in Xixia language in Russian* (Peng 2018). Other research works include *Liangzhou alliance and Tibetan Buddhism in Xixia: An interpretation of the remains of “Dabaisangai Tuoluoni jing” in Xixia language* (Shi 2016).

- (6) Khitan script studies: *A study of the Khitan small script* (Chinggeltei et al. 1985), *Looking for a path in the forest of riddles: A New approach to the decipherment of Khitan small script* (Ji 1996) and *Plowing the field of riddles: further deciphering Khitan small script* (Ji 2012); *Classified compilation of*

⁴ The manuscripts mentioned above are unpublished: *The history of Lang's family* (朗氏家族史), *The chorography of Tal temple* (塔尔寺志), *Polhané Sönam topgyé* (颇罗鼐传).

- studies on Khitan scripts Vol. 1–4* (Liu 2014), and *Further research on Khitan small script* (Vol. 1–3) (Chinggeltei and Ji 2017).
- (7) Jurchen script studies: *A study of Jurchen language and script* (Jin and Jin 1980), *An edited interpretation of a Jurchen text “The Jin victory memorial stele”* (Chimeddorji and Xi 1984), *Gaochang guan zazi* (Hu and Huang 1984), *A Jurchen characters dictionary* (Jin 1984), *The Jurchen language in Jin Dynasty* (Sun 2004), and *Jurchen language translation supplement and Jurchen language dictionary* (Liu 2019).
 - (8) Uighur Mongolian script studies: *A compilation of documents in Uyghur Khaganate style Mogolian document* (Daubu 1982). Annotated translation works of Uighur Mongolian script: *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Xie 1957), *The Mongol chronicle altan tobci* (Liu 1980), *Chinese translation of outlines of the golden history of the Mongols* (Zhu and Jia 1985), *The secret history of the Yuan Dynasty* (Geshkbatu 2000). *The Study of “Erdeniin tobchi”* (Ulaan 2000) and *Collated edition of the secret history of the Mongols* (Ulaan 2012), and *A Study on Mongolian manuscripts unearthed in Ngari prefecture, Xizang* (Sarengaowa 2013).
 - (9) *hP’ags-pa Script studies: HP’ags-pa characters and Chinese in the Yuan Dynasty* (Luo and Cai 1959), *A critical edition of Menggu Ziyun* (Junast and Yang 1987), *HP’ags-pa characters and Mongolian literature, Part 1: Research* (Junast 1990), *HP’ags-pa characters and Mongolian literature, Part 2: Documents* (Junast 1991), and *A new edition of hundred family names in Yuan Dynasty in the HP’ags-pa characters*. (Junast 2003).
 - (10) Chagatay script studies: *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi: A history of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (The Institute of Ethnology of Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences 1983), *Annotated and edited translation of the “Tarikh-i-Rashidi”* (Wang 1985), and *Ta’rikh i amniye* (Wang 2000), and *Annotated translation of Chagatay literature in the Qing Dynasty* (Miao 2013).
 - (11) Manchu script studies: *Union catalog of world Manchu texts* (Fu 1983), *The original files of the Ministry of Justice in Shengjing area from the 3rd to the 4th year of Chongde reign* (The First Historical Archives of China 1985), *Files of the 9th year of Tiancong reign of Emperor Taizong of the Qing Dynasty* (1635) (Guan et al. 1987), *Old Manchu archive* (The First Historical Archives of China and Institute Of History, Chinese Academy Of Social Sciences 1990), *The Tongki fuka akū hergen i dangse Vol. 1–10* (Feng 2005), *Comprehensive catalog of Manchu books in Beijing* (Manchu Editorial Department of Beijing Ethnic Minority Ancient Books Compilation and Publication Planning Group 2008), *A complete edition of Old Manchu archive Vol. 1–20* (The First Historical Archives of China 2010), *Union catalog of Manchu books and other materials* (Huang and Qu 1991), and *Illustrated record of Manchu documents in the holdings of the National Library of China* (Huang 2010).
 - (12) Classical Yi script studies: *The Nuosu book of origins: A creation epic from Southwest China* (Feng 1986), *Chronicles of the Southwestern Yi* (Guizhou Institute of Ethnology 1982), *Dialogues on universe and humanity* (Luo and Chen 1984), *Updated compilation of Cuan wen Ccong ke Vol 1–3* (Ma and Luo 1986–1987), *Translation and annotation of the “Quan shan jing” in Yi*

- language (Ma and Zhang 1986), *History of the Clan Tribes of the Yi People* (Yang 1992), *Collected translations of the “book of guiding” in Yi script* (Guoji and Ling 1993), *Outline of the Yi ethnic ancient literature* (Huang 1993), *The chronicles of the Yi in Southwest China* (The Yi-Chinese Translation Group in Bijie, Guizhou Province 1988), and *The history of the Yi Vol. 1–4* (The Yi-Chinese Translation Group in Bijie, Guizhou Province 1989), *The history of the Yi* (Wang and Wang 2005), and *The Chronicles of the Yi in Southwest China Vol. 1–26* (Wang and Wang 2015).
- (13) Tomba script studies: *Translations and annotations of Mo-so classics: Nine volumes* (Li et al. 1978), *Selected translations of Dongba classics* (He 1984), *A survey of Naxi Dongba culture books and inheritance* (Bu 1999), *A study of Naxi Picture Writings of the “The white Bbat’s journey”* (Fu 2012).
 - (14) Old Zhuang Script studies: *Dictionary of Old Zhuang script* (The Ethnic Groups Ancient Books Compilation and Publication Planning Group of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 1989), and *Selected annotations of Old Zhuang literature* (Liang 1992).
 - (15) Shui script studies: *Studies on the culture of the Chinese Shui* (Pan and Wei 2004).

The above list includes only a part of the research results on ethnic paleography, covering not only comprehensive and macroscopic research on the ancient scripts of various ethnic groups and their literature but also in-depth interpretation of those scripts and relevant literature, not only the basic collation and translation of the literature but also the innovative results of further research; not only the writings of scholars but also the book series compiled by groups of scholars. Research on ancient Chinese ethnic scripts has created numerous outstanding and original achievements in various fields and remarkable global contributions.

6 Conclusion

Reviewing the past and looking forward to the future, we find that the prospect of research on ancient ethnic scripts and books is brilliant. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done. In addition to the continuous cultivation and construction of the professionals, the following suggestions are expected to be valued.

6.1 Carrying out the census of ancient ethnic books

The extensive volume and wide distribution of ancient ethnic scripts and books are far beyond people’s expectations. For example, abundant ancient Tibetan books are yet to be further collated and studied in the five libraries of the Potala Palace in Xizang. Xinjiang has created a model of pairing volunteers and experts in the census of ancient ethnic books, and many new ancient ethnic books have therefore been discovered. As many ancient ethnic books are still kept in temples and by folk people,

the census needs to reach grassroots levels. Therefore, there is a long way to go for the census of ancient ethnic books, and it is crucial to carry it through.

6.2 Developing further research on ancient ethnic books

Although the census of ancient ethnic books has been gradually carried out, the knowledge and identification skills of these ancient books are still lagging, which hindered the protection of ancient books. At least two aspects that require particular attention.

- (1) Emphasis on guiding and strengthening the research on the versions of ancient ethnic books. Compared to the study of versions of ancient Chinese books, research on the versions of ancient ethnic books is still in its early stages. There is a lack of in-depth examination from the perspective of version identification, affecting the cognition and identification of ancient ethnic books. Addressing this issue is urgently needed.
- (2) Enhanced research on the content and value of critical ancient ethnic books and subsequent focus on publishing and digitization efforts. Compilation and publishing involve direct photocopying for the academic community to see primary sources and translating them into Chinese for broader dissemination. Without language barriers, the latter approach will have a larger audience and make a more significant impact. To bring the scripts in ancient ethnic books to life and maximize their utility, we should translate valuable ancient ethnic books into the standard national language, conduct extensive research, and explore their value. Only then can such an outstanding cultural heritage be shared with a broader audience.

6.3 Optimizing the classification of ancient ethnic books

While “The Standards on Classification of Chinese Ancient Books in Ethnic Minorities’ Languages” has been implemented, the different languages and forms of ancient ethnic books bring new problems and thus require ongoing research and refinement of classification standards. This involves holding targeted training sessions and building expert teams to evaluate and classify essential collections of ancient ethnic books. In addition to the experts in corresponding languages, the team should have experts in version identification, history, ethnic culture, and other subjects to examine from a multi-dimensional perspective to draw accurate conclusions.

6.4 Further strengthening the philological and linguistic research on ancient ethnic books

Over the 70 years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the study of ethnic paleography has gained increasing attention as an academic discipline. CASS designated it as a “specialized discipline” twice in 2006 and 2017 and strongly supported its development. In 2018, the National Social Science Fund of China

established specialized research programs for obscure and endangered disciplines, among which more than 20 research fields, such as Dunhuang studies, Tibetology, Xixia studies, Mongology, ethnolinguistics, paleography, and the compilation and study of ancient books and literature, were related to the study of ethnic paleography. The support reflects the great importance that China attaches to the study of ethnic paleography. However, there is still a need to strengthen the philological and linguistic research on ancient ethnic books. It is crucial to focus on both general and comparative graphology of newly discovered ancient ethnic scripts, enhance the research on the linguistic methodology of ethnic paleography, and bolster diachronic linguistic research on phonetic ethnic scripts. By doing so, we will be able to uncover the historical evolution of the languages recorded in these texts, which, in turn, will aid in the standardization, regularization, and informatization of contemporary ethnic languages and scripts.

6.5 Deepening the understanding of the practical significance of research on ethnic paleography and books

Ancient ethnic scripts and books represent the brilliant gems in the treasure trove of Chinese national history and culture, holding rich connotations of ethnic progress, harmony, coexistence, communication, exchanges, and national unity. By organizing, translating, and studying ethnic paleography and books, we can fully reveal these positive ideologies of various ethnic groups throughout Chinese history. This has important practical significance for consolidating the national consciousness of various ethnic groups and strengthening the collective consciousness of the Chinese nation.

For example, the compilation of Manchu Ancient Book *Official biographies of Mongolian and Hui princes and nobles recognized by imperial edict for their meritorious service* in the forty-fourth year of Qianlong's imperial reign (1779) and its publication in the Chinese Han, Manchu, and Mongolian languages in the seventh year of Qing Emperor Jiaqing's reign (1802) hold academic value and practical significance for studying the history of the Mongols, Tibetans, Uygurs, and the close relationships among various ethnic groups during the Qing Dynasty. Another example is the ancient book that was recently discovered in the Xixia script. *Dabaisangai Tuoluoni jing*⁵ tells the story that the Mongolian prince Kuoduan accepted Tibetan Buddhism in Liangzhou, which was a former territory of Western Xia (Xixia); in 1244, he had Buddhist scriptures engraved in the Tibetan, Xixia, and Chinese Han scripts. Later, he reached the Liangzhou Covenant with the Tibetan religious leader Sakya Pandita, leading to the incorporation of Xizang into the Yuan Dynasty's territory and the realization of national unity. This story is robust evidence for important events in the formation and development of China as a multi-ethnic nation, holding significant historical and practical value.

⁵ Unpublished manuscripts: *Official biographies of Mongolian and Hui princes and nobles recognized by imperial edict for their meritorious service* (钦定外藩蒙古回部王公功绩表传), *Dabaisangai Tuoluoni jing* (大白伞盖陀罗尼经)

The significant achievements and remarkable progress in the research of China's ethnic paleography have enriched historical and cultural knowledge of the Chinese nation, showcased the rich and diverse cultures of different ethnic groups, promoted a comprehensive understanding of the unity in diversity within the Chinese nation and boosted cultural confidence of all Chinese ethnic groups. Ancient ethnic scripts and books are not only a form of culture but also a valuable resource, serving as an essential asset in fortifying the collective consciousness of the Chinese nation.

The flourishing and splendid achievements in China's ethnic paleography research represent China's pioneering effort as a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-script country, which not only fully reflects the policy of equality of all ethnic groups but also revitalizes the ancient scripts and books of China's 56 ethnic groups. The research has made practical contributions to promoting the outstanding cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, strengthening ethnic unity, and safeguarding national unity. It is foreseeable that the research on ancient scripts, literature, and books of Chinese ethnic groups will have even brighter prospects in the new era, making renewed and more remarkable contributions to modern civilization in contemporary China.

Acknowledgements Not applicable.

Authors' contributions Jinbo Shi was in charge of collecting, organizing, and writing about the scripts and documents of the Xixia and the ethnic groups of Southern China; Runhua Huang was responsible for the collection, organization, and writing of the scripts and documents of the ethnic groups of Northern China; Jinbo Shi compiled and edited the manuscript into the final form. The authors read and approved the final manuscript in Chinese. Jinbo Shi read and approved the final manuscript in English.

Funding Not applicable.

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

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

Competing interests I have no competing interests.

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