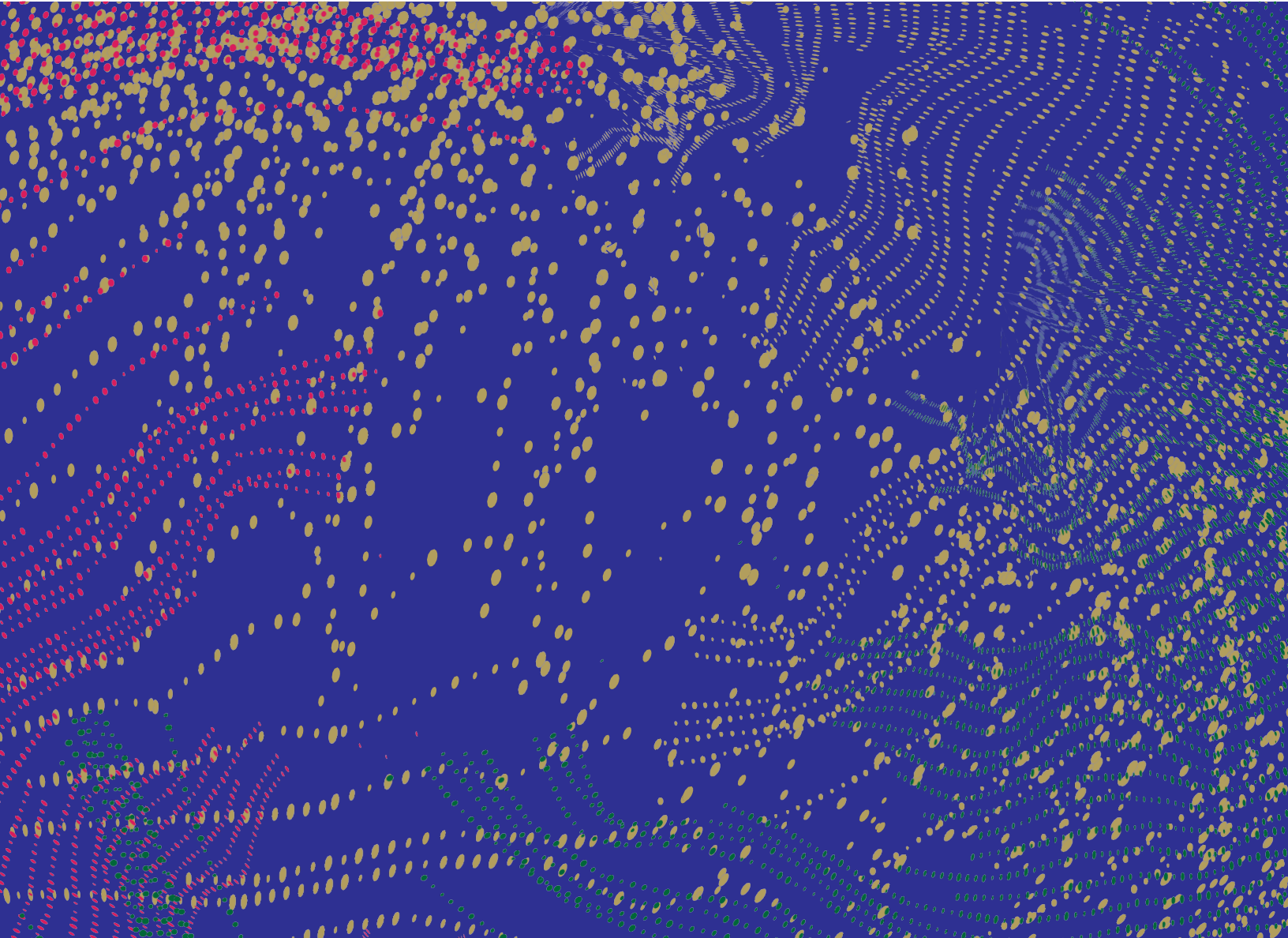


The World Humanities Report

Studies of Minority Nationality Languages

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Studies of Minority Nationality Languages

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With the founding of New China in 1949, surveys of China's ethnic national minority languages, writing systems, and customs were set in motion in order to lay a foundation for learning ways in which to support endeavors in the ethnic nationalities regions. In spring 1956, under the leadership of the Central Committee for Nationalities Affairs and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, more than seven hundred researchers and workers concerned with minority nationality languages were organized in seven survey teams to travel to the nationalities regions to conduct a census of languages. By 1959 they had surveyed more than fifteen hundred issues having to do with forty-two types of nationalities languages, to gain a basic understanding of the geographic distribution of the major languages of the various ethnic nationalities, the situation of those populations who used them, their structural characteristics and internal differences, and their relation to languages of ethnic nationalities in neighboring regions, and it systematically appraised the languages, writing systems, and national sentiments (*guoqing*, a notion that is broader than "customs") in the ethnic nationality regions. This also equipped them to propose concrete plans to resolve problems in the writing systems of the ethnic nationalities. The survey teams also offered their views of the systemic classes of languages and their distinctions, which provided an important reference point for the task of identifying the ethnic nationalities in China. In this way, the big survey established a foundation, on a number of levels, for research of the nationalities languages in New China.

In 1991, at the request of the State Council of China, the Cultural Propaganda Department of the National Civil Affairs Commission, and the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences jointly presented the findings of their survey of ethnic nationality languages and language use, and the outcomes of their survey findings reflected the current state of the Chinese nationalities' language use and the results of

implementation of policies pertaining to minority nationality languages and literatures, as seen in these publications: *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenzi* [Writing forms of Chinese minority nationalities] (1992), *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan wenzi shiyong he fazhan wenti* [Issues concerning the use and development of writing forms for the languages of Chinese minority nationalities] (1993), and *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan shiyong qingkuang* [The situations under which China's ethnic minority languages are used] (1994). They also conducted survey research of the use and development of twelve different writing forms that were created or updated in the 1950s for various ethnic minority languages, including Tai Lue (also called Xishuangbanna Dai) alphasyllabic script (or *abugida*); the Jingbo (Jinghpaw, or Kachin, in Burmese) nationality in Yunnan and Burma, who have a Latin-based alphabet using twenty-three letters; the writing systems used to transcribe Miao (Hmong) languages, which are varied, as populations are scattered in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and elsewhere; and the Wa (or Kawa, referring to the Chinese *Wa*) romanization, known as new Wa orthography that was introduced by the Chinese in 1956. They also completed a report “Our Nation’s Experience of Implementing New Orthography and Improvements in Writing Forms for Ethnic Minorities and Theoretical Studies.”¹ Since the start of the twenty-first century, a few small-scale surveys concerning attitudes toward the ethnic nationality languages and scripts have been carried out and refined. For instance, the Central Nationalities University is the locus for a 985 Project to build on the foundation of field surveys,² for which Dai Qingxia served as editor of “Papers on the Language Use of Chinese Minority Nationalities in the New Era of Reform and Opening Up] and has published fifteen volumes since 2007.³

Descriptive Linguistics Research

Since 1992 the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has conducted surveys of undiscovered languages with

¹ *Wo guo xinchuang he gaijin shaoshu minzu wenzi shixing gongzuo jingyan zongjie he lilun yanjiu* (N.p.: China Social Science Research Fund, 1995).

² The 985 Project is an abbreviation for the date May 1985, when Premier Jiang Zemin announced the Chinese Ministry of Education had designated nine top research universities to receive special status and funding to carry out world-class research. The 985 Project later expanded to include thirty-nine research universities.—Trans.

³ Dai Qingsha, ed., *Xin shiqi Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan shiyong qingkuang yanjiu congshu* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2007–20).

the support of the National Social Sciences Fund and has published *Zhongguo xin faxian yuyan yanjiu congshu* [Research papers on newly discovered languages in China], including more than forty ethnic minority languages, as well as *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan fangyan yanjiu congshu* [Research papers on dialects of the ethnic minority languages in China], in more than ten volumes.⁴ Many of the newly discovered languages are endangered languages. *Han Zang yu gailun* [Sino-Tibetan languages], edited by Ma Xueliang and first published in 1991; Ni Dabai's *Dongtai yu gailun* [A general introduction to Kam-Tai language] from 2000; and Li Zengxiang's 1992 *Tujue yu gailun* [General introduction to Turkic languages] are comprehensive theoretical studies of important language families. Sun Hongkai and colleagues edited *Zhongguo de yuyan* [The languages of China], published in 2007, building on the foundation laid by the works listed above to offer general introductions to 129 language types found in China. It is a major compendium of descriptive surveys of the various Chinese ethnic nationality languages.

There have also been active accomplishments in writing dictionaries of the languages of the ethnic nationalities. From the founding of New China in 1949 to the 1980s, various types of dictionaries of more than two hundred dialects (or some aspect of the dialect) of China's ethnic nationalities have been published, but these works focus primarily on the Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, and Korean nationality languages, whose writing systems have a relatively long history and relatively abundant textual materials. Since the 1990s the work of editing and writing dictionaries for ethnic nationality languages has entered a new phase, with the first preparations and publication of dictionaries for nationality languages that have no writing or do not have a long history of using written scripts. Further, the types of reference works have progressed from using Chinese as an interface to define the ethnic nationality language to dictionaries that solely reference the nationality language, or dictionaries using a language (or more than one language) other than Chinese as interface to give definitions of the nationality language. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has collaborated with the Australian Academy of the Humanities to prepare and illustrate the *Zhongguo yuyan ditu ji* [*Language Atlas of China*], parts 1

⁴ Sun Hongkai, ed., *Zhongguo xin faxian yuyan yanjiu congshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 1997–99; Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2000–2012); Sun Hongkai, ed., *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan fangyan yanjiu congshu* (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2001–; other works in the series were published in Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1998–99).

and 2, and those sections devoted to ethnic nationality languages show the geographic location, the region, and typology of each of the languages of the minority ethnic nationalities.⁵ This has had profound impact nationally and internationally.

Since entering the new millennium, there have been active advances based on descriptive linguistic research using new research models. Dai Qingxia was chief editor of the *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan cankao yufa yanjiu xilie congshu* [Series compendium of Chinese ethnic minority language reference grammar studies], which led to a number of studies of the grammar of ethnic minority languages following a common template. Starting in 2010 the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences initiated research for *Zhongguo minzu yuyan yufa biao zhu wenben* [Chinese ethnic nationalities grammar annotated texts], to conduct descriptive studies of several dozen ethnic minority languages using innovative models based on a collection of grammar annotations suited to the ethnic minorities and pertaining to the entire system of grammars. Since 2016 members of the institute have already published volumes on more than twenty language types in the Chinese Ethnic Nationalities Grammar Annotated Text Series, which constitutes a new development in the study of grammar.

Studies of Comparative Historical Linguistics

There is a large number of Chinese ethnic minority languages, each distinct in type and form. Yet most of these languages have few textual sources, posing a challenge for comparative historical study. To date, progress has been made mainly in the two areas of language family classification and the common origins and relations among languages. The major research results are *Miao Yao yuyan yin gouni* [Miao Yao phonetic modeling], *Dong-Tai yuzu gailun* [Introduction to the Dong-Tai language family], *Zang Mian yu yuyin he cihui* [Tibeto-Burman pronunciation and vocabulary], and *Zhongguo Meng Gaomian yuzu yuyin yu Nanya yuxi* [China's Mongolian-Khmer language phonology and South Asian language classification],⁶ among others. We must take note

⁵ S. A. Wurm, Li Rong, Theo Baumann, Mei W. Lee, and the China Academy of Social Sciences, eds., *Language Atlas of China*, 2 parts (Hong Kong: Longman Group (Far East) Limited, 1987 and 2012).

⁶ Wang Fushi and Mao Zongwu, *Miao Yao yuyan yin gouni* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995); Liang Min and Zhang Junru, *Dong-Tai yuzu gailun* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996); Sun Hongkai et al., eds., *Zang Mian yu yuyin he cihui* (Beijing:

that the comparative history of languages of the ethnicities has played an important role in the work of differentiating China's ethnic nationalities.

In China the long history of communication, exchange, and interaction among ethnic nationalities has led to a pronounced depth and breadth of contact among the ethnicity languages. The different languages show interweaving and mutual borrowing, shaping common regional characteristics and language alliances in the geographical areas they share. Therefore, the biggest stumbling block in study of Chinese minority nationality languages is how to distinguish expressions that share common origins and borrowed phrases, particularly in the comparative historical study of languages in the Sino-Tibetan language family, where we need to constantly seek new theory and methods. A 2019 article published in the journal *Nature* concerning the historical origins of the Sino-Tibetan language system is the result of cross-disciplinary investigation using comparative historical linguistics and molecular anthropology.⁷ New paths for development based on intersections among several disciplines will aid in broadening and deepening historical linguistics research on the Chinese ethnic minority languages.

Language Typology Research

Studies of language typology in the Chinese mainland started with translations, introductions, and evaluations of the state of the field and new findings in language typology overseas in the 1950s and 1960s. Beginning in the 1980s, building on thematic research in phonological typology and formal semantic typology of Chinese language and ethnic minority languages, linguists deduced and summarized the broad types of ethnic minority languages and common internal elements and distinctions among these language types to establish the foundation for more thorough understanding of the commonalities, regionalism, and distinctions among our nation's ethnic minority languages.

Since the start of the twenty-first century research on the typology of ethnic minority languages using functionalist typology studies has gradually become richer. The methods of language typology have enabled relatively more thematic research on regional typology, language family typology, and also

Zhongguo shehe kexue chubanshe, 1991); Yan Qixiang and Zhou Zhizhi, *Zhongguo Meng Gaomian yuzu yuyin yu Nanya yuxi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2012).

⁷ Population geneticist Jin Li and Pan Yuyun are lead authors, with Yan Shi, Zhang Mengyuan, et al., "Phylogenetic Evidence for Sino-Tibetan Origin in North China in the Late Neolithic," *Nature*, no. 569 (2019): 112–15.

phonetics, morphology, vocabulary usage, semantics, and language contact typology, which have achieved rich research outcomes.

As linguistic research has deepened and research horizons have broadened, the study of language typology will continue to be an area of keen interest and a major research field. It is necessary to introduce some new research methods, such as dialect geography, volumetric typology, morphological typology that should be expanded in analytic language research in the South, in order to thoroughly arrange, derive, and summarize the characteristics of ethnic minority language typologies. This will provide important typological cases and theoretical support for research on language typology and language commonality.

Research on Ancient Writing Forms and Text Materials of the Ethnic Minorities

The 1950s survey of Minority Nationality Social History and the Nationality Languages Survey collected various types of material resources and ethnic nationality ancient writing systems and texts transmitted in a range of media. At the same time, the survey nurtured and trained a large cohort of nationality scholars and specialists (or “ethnologists”). Besides a large number of studies of single writing forms and their form and transmission, the data survey gave rise to several surveys that looked comprehensively at writing systems and involved relatively high-level research, such as *Zhongguo minzu guwen zi tulu* [Illustrated catalogue of ancient writing forms of China’s ethnic nationalities], *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu guji zhenpin tudian: Minzu gu wenzi guji zhengli yanjiu 100 nian tongjian* [Illustrated rare classics of China’s ethnic nationalities: An overview of a century of collection and research on ancient writing forms and texts from the ethnic nationalities], *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu guji jijie* [Collected commentaries on Chinese ethnic minority classic works], *Minzu gu wenxian gailan* [An overview of ancient textual sources of the nationalities], *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenzi guji zhengli yu yanjiu* [Collecting and research of Chinese ethnic minority writing forms and classic works],⁸ among other studies that will help us to do collection and translation studies of ancient writing forms and texts of

⁸ Fu Maoji and Zhongguo minzu gu wenzi yanjiu hui, eds., *Zhongguo minzu gu wenzi tulu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1990); Zhang Gongjin et al., eds., *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu guji zhenpin tudian* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2018); Zhang Gongjin and Shao Xianshu, *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu guji jijie* (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006); Zhang Gongjin et al., *Minzu gu wenxian gailan* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 1997); Cui Gongbi, Wu Guibiao, and Zhongguo minzu tushuguan, eds., *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenzi guji zhengli yu yanjiu* (Shenyang: Liaoning minzu chubanshe, 2011).

each ethnic nationality from a systematic perspective. The compilation of the *General Catalogue of Ancient Books of Chinese Minority Nationality Groups* [*Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Guji Zongmu Tiyao*] was launched in 1997 and began publication in 2010, as a project to assemble classic textual materials that was spearheaded by the National Minority Ancient Books Research Office of the Minority Affairs Commission.⁹ The *General Catalogue* is projected to include sixty sections, in hundred and ten volumes, aiming to rescue, assemble, and preserve the ancient works that are a major component of China's cultural heritage. This is also an overall review of collection, translation, publishing, and research outcomes of ancient works of the minority nationalities in New China.

The development of research on the nationalities' ancient writing systems and textual materials has systematically enhanced the protection of ancient script forms and textual sources of each ethnic nationality. Since 2008 valuable ancient works composed in each ethnic nationality group's writing form has been included in the *Guojia zhen'gui guji minglu* [National catalogue of precious ancient books], divided in separate groups. The first four volumes of the *Guojia zhen'gui guji minglu tulu* [Illustrated national catalogue of precious ancient books], including ancient works composed in minority nationality scripts belonging to fourteen script types, a total of hundred and ten literary works. In 2009 the Chinese Writing Forms Museum opened in Henan Province, Anyang (which is the locus of China's earliest dynasty, the Yin-Shang, in archaic times), as an important outcome to preserve the nationalities' scripts. The museum's collection covers ancient writing forms, the traditional written scripts of nationality languages, newly created writing forms, and nationality languages that are modeled on Chinese characters, character codes the ethnicities created on their own, and scripts for nationality languages created by missionaries, among other materials.

In 2011 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established fifteen projects devoted to the supporting the discipline of "disappearing knowledge," which involves Tangut language; 'Phags-pa script (also written Basiba, or Pasipa) designed as a unified phonetic alphabet for the written languages current under the Yuan dynastic rule (1271–1368); Khitan scripts devised in 920 and used under Liao dynasty (960–1125); Jurchen script that was used under Jin dynasty rule (1115–1234) and is derived from Khitan script; the Naxi nationality group's Tomba language, and ancient Tibetan. The National Social Science Fund

⁹ Quanguo shaoshu minzu guji zhengli yanjiu shi, eds., *Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Guji Zongmu Tiyao* (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu chubanshe, 2007–21).

began to offer funds specified for support to revive research on disappearing knowledge, providing national-level support for research on textual materials composed in nationalities' scripts. Textual resources written in the scripts of ethnic minorities are an important element of the cultural heritage of China's treasury of nationality cultures and must play a greater role in constructing the cultural enterprises of the shared national sentiment of China's nationalities.

Research on Sociolinguistics and Cultural Linguistics

Research in the sociolinguistic aspects of ethnic minority languages is an important branch of Chinese sociolinguistic research, including specialized research fields such as language policy and planning, surveys of language and national sentiment, the regularization and standardization of language, and language teaching (bilingual education). These topics of research are closely related to work on the languages and writing forms in the nationalities regions, and they have remarkable relevance and visible significance. Sociolinguistic surveys of particular languages (or dialects) and specific areas of language use have actively contributed to the development of ethnic minority languages, to maintaining the vitality of ethnic minority languages, and to protecting pluralism of language cultures. At the start of the twenty-first century, new situations and new features appeared in developments in the use of ethnic minority languages, and the scholarly community largely pursued research investigations on language resources and linguistic life. From 2006 on, the Ministry of Education released an annual "Report on the State of Chinese Linguistic Life" [*Zhongguo yuyan shenghuo zhuangkuang baogao*]. This tentative government report and policy document for debate and discussion touches on language ability and cooperation, language identity, language vitality, disappearing languages, and the condition of language, among other important issues having to do with ethnic minority language life, and all of these questions led to numerous research outputs. With adoption of the "Regulation of Scripts for National Common Languages" [*Guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi fa*] and the guiding principle to "scientifically protect each nationality group's language and writing forms," sociolinguistic research on China's ethnic minority languages entered a new phase, making it feasible to promote and carry out the project of preserving China's language resources.

Cultural linguistics takes the interaction between language and culture as the object of study and studies language against the background of specific

ethnic group's cultural background. As a branch of linguistics, this discipline seeks to interpret the cultural significance of language and its cultural value, but it is also an interdisciplinary mode of study. Cultural linguistics only began to gradually develop after the founding of New China, and its emergence, development, and expansion has clear Chinese characteristics. It is an area where Chinese linguistics has made significant contributions to world languages and cultural developments. Moreover, the rich cultural linguistic resources of the China's many nationality languages offer singularly thick conditions for the development of this discipline. As we enter a new age forty years after reform and opening up, progress in cultural linguistics can usher in a more expansive space for development. This trend benefits from the pluralism of resource-based Chinese linguistic cultures, and it also gains from the continuously deepening view of language by the Chinese Communist Party, the state, and various sectors of society. Furthermore, the practical needs for constructing the languages and cultures of each of China's fifty-five nationalities also requires the foundation of knowledge in cultural linguistics.

With the acceleration of globalization, the scope of ethnic minority language use is shrinking day by day, and its function in social interaction is gradually declining. Some of the ethnic nationality languages are gravely lacking in vitality, and more and more of the minority languages are nearing or tending toward endangered status. In the 1990s the ethnological language research community was aware of the danger of losing native languages, and in a scholarly conference on endangered languages in 2000, scholars of the minority ethnicity languages first broached the concept of endangered languages. In 2008 the National Language Committee launched the project of building a Chinese Language Resources Audio Database and thereby signaled that the work of language preservation has been taken up at the national level.

Sociolinguistic and cultural linguistic studies of China's ethnic nationality languages have promoted a sense of the equality of all of China's languages and an understanding of language rights, the notions of language ecosystems and language resources. The concern with language resources directly prompted the policy of "scientific protection of the languages and writing systems of each of the minority nationalities" that was included in the communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (adopted in October 2011) and implementation of a project for the preservation of China's language resources. In 2015 the Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee launched the Chinese language

resource protection plan, and the first phase was successfully completed in 2020. A large number of endangered Chinese dialects and ethnic minority language corpora was scientifically and systematically surveyed for preservation, including 430 thematic research survey projects on Chinese ethnic minority languages; 319 of these projects were ordinary language sites, and 111 projects involved endangered language corpora, covering 130 language types and 360 dialects or colloquial language spoken by 56 ethnic minority nationalities, which include the languages of communities who are not officially recognized as ethnic nationalities, such as the Deng (or *Dongba*, Chinese transcription of the Taraon-Kaman languages situated in Chaya township, southwestern Tibet) and Lingao (speakers of Be language, also called Ongbe, Bê, or Vo Lingao, situated on the north-central coast of Hainan Island, who are classified as Han Chinese). The findings took various forms, including endangered language annuals, language and culture repositories, language atlases, and services to further enhance and develop the depth of language materials. In September 2018 the inaugural Conference on the Protection of World Language Resources was held in Changsha. In February 2019 the Yuelu Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Diversity of the World was released, marking that China's experience with language resources led us to take a position of global leadership.

Computational Linguistics and Experimental Phonology Research

Building on the foundation of computational linguistics studies of ethnic minority languages having gone through several decades of development and results, scholars accumulated rich experience. First, after completing computer coding of characters, they succeeded in computer input of writing forms in current use and ancient writing forms from this research, as well as output, viewing, and printing, and they were able to bring into being web-based transmission and output of ethnic nationality writing forms based on a unified code. This has laid the foundation for informatization of ethnic nationality writing forms and texts, as well as for building database resources for the preservation and transmission of culture based on ethnic nationality writing forms. The eighteenth section of the Chinese Character Data Bank that began in 2011 calls for “collecting and sorting out the ancient writing forms of ethnic minorities and creating a character bank” and “collecting and sorting out writing forms of ethnic minorities in current use and creating a character bank.” The aim is to

scan images of ethnic minority text materials, in order to create a character coded bank of original script modeled on the ancient writing forms and currently used writing forms. Second, research efforts to arrange the ethnic minority language “writing forms” produced a quantity of scientific research results. The foundational research area is dedicated to dividing words, segmenting the word stem (also called “word root,” *ci gen* in Chinese) and affix, and notating the word types for ethnic minority languages including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Korean, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Nuosu Yi language scripts. This research has produced rich results and will allow for building a quantity of digital resources to develop language research and analytic tools. This has basically met the need to sort out natural language forms of the ethnic minority languages. The third task is for the grammar, semantic, and text research on the ethnic nationality languages to take shape. The continued accumulation of databanks for materials at sentence-level and text-level facilitates through study of ethnic nationality language forms theoretical studies and applied studies. Fourth, these research findings have clearly led to social benefit, and speech recognition and machine translation systems for Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uyghur have basically reached a level suitable for practical use and have facilitated cultural exchange among the various ethnic nationalities.

The discipline of experimental phonetics research employs various types of testing apparatus to study and analyze phonetics. In 1985 the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established a phonetics laboratory that signaled the founding of the discipline of experimental phonetics for ethnic nationality languages. Since the 1980s research milestones have been set in studies of the natural models for voicing segments, supersegments, sentence or text in phonetics; phonetic acoustic spatial distribution typology; voicing (*fasheng tai*, called “phonation” in the area of phonetics), and prosodic features, among other topics. Since the start of the twenty-first century, the major bidding project for the National Social Science Fund, “Research on the Construction of a Unified Platform for Speech Acoustic Parameters of Chinese Minority Languages,”¹⁰ and acoustic research of the national language speech system enabled scholars to immerse themselves in using the automated notation and retrieval system of phonetic acoustic parameters to

¹⁰ The project came to a successful conclusion in March 2021, led by principal expert Hu He and director Wang Yongping at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

forcefully move toward regularization, standardization, and automation and to spur development of the study of nationality languages as a discipline.

Translated from the Chinese by Kathryn Lowry

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