

## Tradition and Innovation: Linguistic Field Research in China

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**[Abstract]** This article combs the Chinese traditional and modern linguistic field research. It is widely admitted that modern Chinese linguistic fieldwork practice is introduced from the West, but also that knowledge in the humanities is strongly situated, especially in the field of language studies. The article, in terms of linguistic historiography, offers an overview of Chinese traditional linguistic fieldwork and the spread of modern Western linguistic fieldwork practice in China, and conducts a contrastive analysis between the two in order to reveal that modern Chinese linguistic fieldwork, though introduced from the West, is, by nature, a combination of Chinese traditional linguistic fieldwork in Fangyan studies and Western linguistic fieldwork practice.

**[Keywords]** traditional Chinese linguistic fieldwork; Fangyan studies; modern linguistic fieldwork

### Introduction

It is universally admitted that most renowned linguists worldwide always adopted field research as a basic method in collecting linguistic data, and in surveying language use or in learning the survival state of languages. For instance, Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811), Johann Christoph Adelung (1732-1806), Wilhelm Freiherr von Humboldt (1787-1835), and so on in the Western world, and Yang Xiong (53 B.C.E-18 A.D.) Xu Shen (58 A.D.-147A.D.), Liu Fu (1891-1934), Ma Xueliang (1913-1999), and so on in China are known figures in the area of linguistic field research with *A Survey of Modern Wu Dialect* (1928), *A Report of Hu Bei Dialects Survey* (1948), and *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1965) as examples.

It is safe to say that field research is a cardinal approach to collecting linguistic data in almost every aspects. This is especially true for descriptive linguistics and sociolinguistics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the development and influence of the above two subjects, field research finally becomes the primary approaches and methods of modern linguistics.

Some modern linguists define linguistic field research as follows:

*Linguistic field research or fieldwork is the collection of linguistic data outside of a laboratory, library or workplace setting, and it is also the process of observing systematically the informants in the chosen survey locations and studying the linguistic data from the observation. The approaches and methods used in field research vary across disciplines with sociology, socio-psychology, anthropology, dialectology, economics, etc. for instance. Field research involves a range of well-defined, although variable, methods including informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, collective discussions, analyzes of personal documents produced within the group, self-analysis, results from activities undertaken off- or on-line, and life-histories. Although the method generally is characterized as qualitative research, it may (and often does) include quantitative dimensions. (c.f. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field\\_work](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_work))*

However, some world linguists believe that it is a mixture of Western modern anthropology and linguistics, and it was translated into Chinese in the 1920s. Furthermore, some linguists assume falsely that field research is preserved for sociolinguistics, with no relation to other aspects of linguistic study. Actually, the fact is not as they believed. What Claire Bower (2008) maintains can prove this argument that field research keeps close relation to all aspects of modern linguistics, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Historically, as a practical guide to all the steps in linguistic

fieldwork, it is not the product of 20<sup>th</sup> linguistics, and keeps a long history in both Western and Chinese traditions.

### Chinese Tradition of Linguistic Field Research

According to Jia (2012), it is as early as in the Zhou dynasty and the Qin era that linguistic field research has existed. In *Da Liuxin Shu* 答劉歆書 [The Epistle to Liu Xin (around 14A.D.)], mainly a refusal to the order of his senior official Liu Xin, to end his compilation of linguistic fieldwork notes of speeches throughout the then China and in other neighboring states, and to send Liu his fieldwork book unfinished, Yang Xiong (53 B.C.E-18A.D.) states: “I was once told that linguistic fieldwork notes by Light-Carriage Messengers had been deposited in the libraries of Zhou and Qin Houses.” In *Fengshang Tongyi Xu* 風尚通義序 [Preface to *Anthology of Han Custom* (around 194A.D.)] being a first travel notes in China, recording the ancient institutions, customs, and anecdotes of Han Dynasty, especially including historical notes on Mount Tai in current Shandong Province, Ying Shao (153A.D.-196A.D.) states that in the Era of Zhou and Qin, imperial emissaries were sent on chariots every August to make annual surveys of regional speeches throughout China and from neighboring states. Both archival works affirm that linguistic fieldwork in China starts in the era of Zhou and Qin.

According to historical reports, linguistic fieldwork then is conducted under the royal orders. In order to strengthen the power of the royal house and the bilateral relations between the royal house and other neighboring states by means of learning their languages and customs, the Royal Houses of Zhou and Qin send off their imperial emissaries in every August to collect their linguistic data and arrange the fieldwork notes into books accordingly. This historical picture is affirmed in the tenth volume of *Huayang Guozhi* 華陽國志 [A Chronograph of South-western China], a chronograph of history, geography, historical figures, etc. in the south-western part of Ancient China that the messengers in the era of Zhou and Qin conduct linguistic fieldwork by gathering customs and linguistic data throughout China and in other lands to inform the lords the customs under heaven (He, 2006). Though linguistic fieldwork comes into being in the era of Zhou and Qin, Yang Xiong in the Han dynasty pushes it to the peak by practicing linguistic fieldwork approaches and launches his fieldwork book.

As suggested above, linguistic fieldwork notes of the Zhou dynasty and the Qin era were stored in the royal libraries and missing when both empires declined. As for the linguistic notes, Yang Xiong had no chance to read then. He, instead, learned only a general framework from Linlv Wengru, his relative on his mother side, and received a note with no more than a thousand words from his friend Yan Junping when Yan died in the current Cheng Du city. In 13 B.C.E, Yang moved to take his position in Xi'an, the then royal city, hereby getting the opportunity to familiarize the then official language (*Jin* Language as lingua franca) and to meet people from other lands. He referred to the linguistic fieldwork tradition of the Zhou and Qin eras and came to meet the envoys from other lands in both Xi'an and Chengdu, holding a writing brush and *bujihx*<sup>1</sup>, noted down their speeches in the daytime, and arranged them in the night. This work lasted for 27 years and came with the birth of *YouXuan Shizhe Juedaiyu Shi Bieguo Fangyan* 輶軒使者絕代語釋別國方言 [Local Speeches of Other Countries in Times Immemorial explained by the Light-Carriage Messenger] (later shortened to *Fangyan*), which is the first Chinese dictionary of dialectal terms and meanwhile is also the first systematic linguistic contrastive work known in China until now.

*Fangyan* in Yang's eyes refers to the speeches in Korea in the north-east, those in the Hexi Corridor<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A kind of white cloth served as paper today to record information in ancient China.

<sup>2</sup> In ancient China, this corridor is a principal land route from mainland area to Xinjiang area, starting from Wu Qiao Ranges 烏鞘嶺 in the east to Yu Men Pass 玉門關 in the west, ranging from Nan Mountains 南山 (namely Qi Lian Mountains 祁連山 and Altyn Tagh 阿爾金山) to Bei Mountains (Ma Zong Mountains 馬鬃山, He Li Mountains 合黎山 and Long Shou Mountains 龍首山) and covering almost 900 km. it was originally named Gan Su Corridor 甘肅走廊 after its location largely in the province of Gan Su area, as it is located in the west of Yellow River, it was given the current name.

in the north-west, those in the Wu State, Yue State, Xi'ou State, etc. in the south-east, those in the Liang and Yi States, and those in the Guilin area in the south. As shown above, *fangyan* semantically ranges across *language*, *regional speech*, and *dialect*, which is usually but problematically translated as the English equivalent "dialect". Therefore, John DeFrancis (1984) suggests *regionalect* (p.57) while Mair (1991) suggests *topolect* (p.7) for translating *Fangyan* in Chinese tradition.

Since Yang Xiong, the linguists of dynasties have conducted linguistic fieldwork and edited dialectal works, but their influence has not been able to emulate Yang and his *Fangyan* (13B.C.E-14A.D.). Although linguists in the time of the Zhou dynasty and the Qin Empire pioneered in linguistic fieldwork practice, the linguistic field research in modern linguistics is not inherited from the pioneers of the Zhou dynasty and the Qin Empire. It is, instead, the combination of traditional Chinese linguistic fieldwork and what is translated from modern Western linguistics.

### Western Tradition of Linguistic Field Research

Linguistic field research in modern linguistics comes up with the interests of European linguists in the languages of the whole world, and the compilation of comparative vocabulary works. According to Robins (2007) and Humboldt (2008), the first comparative vocabulary survey in Europe is under the title *Mithridates* (1555) published by the Swiss Conrad Gesner (1516-1565), in deference to the polyglot monarch Mithridates of Pontus (120 B. C. E-63 B.C.E); the second remarkable works of the sort is *The Comparative Vocabularies of the Languages of the Whole World* (1786-1789) published by German linguist P. S. Pallas in Saint Petersburg, with word lists from 200 languages collected by linguistic questionnaires over Russian dominions under the order of Catherine II (1729-1796); the third survey work also titled *Mithridates, oder allgemeine Sprachkunde* by Johann Christoph Adelung who referred to Pallas's material, with the first volume issued in 1806, followed by the other two issued under the superintendence of Johann Severin Vater (1771-1826), containing almost 500 languages in the world. All the works above consist of linguistic data from the questionnaires conducted under political or religious powers. However, these efforts are not by nature linguistic fieldwork.

A linguistic fieldwork indeed is conducted in language communities, collecting linguistic data by means of questionnaires, informal interviews, direct observation, collective discussions, etc. In review of the features mentioned above, it is German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) who starts the modern linguistic fieldwork tradition in the West by recording, observing and participating in local community life of many states and countries. Humboldt's approach of linguistic research is the foundation of modern linguistic fieldwork, and also offers a modern scientific approach to modern linguistics.

The linguistic research tradition based on fieldwork was inherited by F. Boas, E. Sapir, etc. to observe and describe the languages of American Indian tribes, and was borrowed into sociolinguistics with its peak coming in the 1960s and 1970s. However, what was introduced into China is the linguistic fieldwork tradition of modern American anthropological linguistics and modern French linguistics in the 1920s.

### Modernization of Chinese Linguistic Field Research

The modernization of Chinese linguistic field research comes with the spread and reception of Western linguistic field research theories in China. The spread of modern Western linguistic field research in China started around 1920s-1930s, mainly in the areas of experimental phonetics, *Fangyan* and Chinese minority languages.

In the area of experimental phonetics, Zhao Yuenren adopted a modern Western linguistic approach to studying Chinese speech tones and published *The Experimental Approach of Chinese Speech Tones* in Science (Vol. 7, 1922), introducing experimental approaches of modern linguistics into China. Later, Chinese linguist Liu Fu collected Chinese speech tones from ten provinces by means of linguistic fieldwork, analyzed the data by French experimental phonetic technology, and published *Étude expérimentale sur les tons du Chinois* (1924) in the Shanghai Qunyi Bookstore, marking as a representative work in the area of experimental phonetics only second to Zhao (1922). As Liu did in 1924, Wang Li collected *Po-peï* 博白

sound data in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, analyzed the data by using experimental phonetic equipments at the University of Paris, and finished his doctoral dissertation *Une prononciation Chinoise de Po-pei* in 1931. The above three works are important references for Chinese linguists in conducting modern phonetic research by combining experimental phonetic technology and linguistic fieldwork.

In the area of *Fangyan*, Zhao Yuenren noted down the sounds of modern Wu dialect by using international phonetic alphabets during his linguistic fieldwork and published *A Study of Modern Wu Dialect* in 1928, which is considered as the model of modern *Fangyan* studies and Chinese sociolinguistics. Later, he published *Notes of Zhongxiang Dialect* (1931) and *A Survey Report of Hubei Dialects* (1948), based on his linguistic fieldwork, which are considered representative works of modern Chinese *Fangyan* field research.

In the area of Chinese minority language studies, Chinese minority linguists borrowed a modern linguistic fieldwork approach used in the areas of modern Chinese experimental phonetics and *Fangyan* studies. Fu Maoji adopted Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943)'s writing pattern of "from form to function and from function to form" to describe the sound system and grammar of the *Naci* language and published *A Study of The Moso Language (Wei-Hsi Dialect)* (1940-1943) in four volumes of the Journal of Institute of Chinese Language and Culture Studies, which is the earliest work to study the *Naci* language in modern Chinese linguistics. Xing Gongwan described the sound system of the *Bouyei* language and published *Notes of Zhong Ge Song in Yuan Yang Village* (1942) in the Journal of Linguistics and Anthropology. Gao Huanian described the grammar system of the *Yi* language and published *On Grammar of the Black Yi Language* (1944) in the same journal, just to name a few. All these works in the area of Chinese minority language studies are grounded on linguistic fieldwork.

As indicated above, linguistic fieldwork in Chinese modern linguistics comes from the spread of experimental phonetics in China, starting with *Fangyan* and Chinese minority language studies in the 1930s. Linguistic fieldwork before 1949 was in its embryonic stage with its focus mainly on observing and collecting the sound and grammar data of *Fangyan* and Chinese minority languages, and describing its distribution, state, use and phonetic and formal features in order to reveal the attitudes the Chinese minority people hold towards their mother tongues and Mandarin Chinese. Generally, linguistic field research in this period has, if there is any, little theoretical and logical analysis (Jia, 2011).

Since 1950s, linguistic fieldwork has become the primary approach to Chinese minority linguistic research with several general surveys of *Fangyan* and Chinese minority languages nationwide. Unfortunately, with the collapse of Sino-USSR relations (1958-1965) and the coming of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), linguistic surveys had to stop till 1980s. Through the development of the past 30 years, Chinese linguistic fieldwork has evolved into an integrated approach consisting of documental analysis, collective discussion, armchair talk, direct observation, participation in informants' lives and questionnaires.

### **Contrastive Analysis between Traditional Approach and Modern Version**

To find out how traditional Chinese linguistic fieldwork is different from modern linguistic fieldwork, we need to make a contrastive analysis between them in terms of method, goal, scope and mission, with Yang Xiong case as the example of Chinese fieldwork tradition.

#### **Method**

Although it is in the Zhou dynasty and Qin era that the practice of Chinese linguistic fieldwork has been conducted under the order of royal houses throughout China and in neighboring states, one of its great achievements is *Local Speeches of Other Countries in Times Immemorial* by the former Han dynasty linguist Yang Xiong. What Yang did before his linguistic fieldwork launched is search for and read through the Chinese classics previous to his time in order to find *Fangyan* vocabularies and to explore the origins of these vocabularies (Pu, 2002), based on the framework and data from Yan Junping and Linlv Wengru, two linguists before him. Actually, this practice is the same as documental analysis in the modern linguistic fieldwork.

As aforementioned, Yang interviewed the officials and soldiers from other lands with a Chinese brush and *buyjihx* in his hands (fieldwork journal), and noted down the vocabularies different from the lingua franca then. This practice in modern linguistic fieldwork is similar to the interview and one-to-one questionnaire method. Meanwhile, he stayed with the officials and soldiers in order to observe how they used these vocabularies and what customs they appreciated in their tradition, which is similar to today's direct observation in linguistic fieldwork.

As informed above, Chinese linguists in the Han dynasty had conducted documental analysis, interviews, and direct observation in their tradition. As to whether there were questionnaires in today's technical sense, we hardly have any literature to refer to.

### **Goal**

The goal of linguistic fieldwork varies with the time and the academic atmosphere it was practiced in, and also the need of the government and its people. Linguistic fieldwork in the Zhou dynasty, Qin era and Han dynasty carries strong political missions, namely to strengthen the royal power and the bilateral relations by learning the local speeches of neighboring states, and the local customs.

Whereas, besides the indirect service to national political missions in making and carrying out the language policy and language planning by offering linguistic data concerning the current status, distribution, language use, language relations, and the attitude the speakers hold towards languages nationwide, modern linguistic fieldwork aims to collect and analyze linguistic data of sound, form (vocabulary and grammar) and meaning, and to explore the historical change and its causes of the above aspects of a given language or *Fangyan* in order to offer linguistic evidences to general linguistics, historical linguistics, etc.

### **Scope**

*Fangyan* in ancient China has a wider referent, not only including regional and social dialects and speeches, but also the foreign speeches such as Korean. Its reason is so simple that Chinese linguistic fieldwork in the past covers all peoples governed by or under the reign of the royal house. Moreover, linguistic fieldwork in the past China focuses on only vocabularies, with its aim to serve the political missions.

Comparatively, modern linguistic fieldwork mostly aims to survey the sound, form, meaning, language use, language status, the elements influencing the language use and its inter-generation change, language change, etc. of a given language or dialects in a given area and beyond. Sometimes, there is also a project or two conducted across regions or borders, but it is not typical linguistic fieldwork conducted in modern times. However, linguistic fieldwork in Europe and America follows a different tradition and serves for different academic missions. In order to better learn the world languages and to construct the linguistic typology, European and/or American linguists often conduct fieldwork beyond the language or dialect in a give region as a center. For instance, American Japanese linguist Mantaro Hashimoto did linguistic fieldwork across East-Asia and published *Geographical Typology of Languages* (言語類型地理論, 1977) in Japan. Especially in recent times, more and more linguists have come to do fieldwork in Chinese minority regions such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, etc.

### **Mission**

As we have mentioned above, linguistic fieldwork in ancient times only emphasizes vocabularies (oral and written) in order to serve the royal house by learning the local speeches and customs and facilitating information transmission.

Aiming to serve the better management of national language affairs and construct Chinese linguistics, modern linguistic fieldwork focuses on not only the sound, form and meaning of Chinese minority languages and regional and/or social speeches, but also on their current status, language use, historical change, language attitude, language relations, language vitality, and the languages in the urbanization

process. In modern times, Chinese linguistic fieldwork plays more of an important role in drafting language policy and carrying out language planning, and making language education policies for Chinese minority people.

### Implications and Conclusion

Traditional Chinese linguistic fieldwork is an important part of world linguistic field research. However, previous Chinese and world linguists did not consider its values in the development of Chinese *Fangyan studies* (dialectology) and Chinese linguistics.

Pu (2002) highly evaluated the Chinese tradition of *Fangyan study*, especially the significance of Yang Xiong's effort and the language materials (oral and written vocabularies) it contained in the history of Chinese *Fangyan studies*. Though she mentioned the collection works by Yan Junping, Linlv Wengru, Liu Xin and Yangxiong (p.87) and documental analysis conducted by Yang (p.106), Pu did not consider what Yang had done in terms of Chinese linguistic fieldwork tradition and did not comb systematically what Yang had done for developing Chinese linguistic field research.

Wang (2007) argues that *Local Speeches of Other Countries in Times Immemorial* by Yang is a descriptive linguistic work (p.163), considering only the vocabularies in the past. He (2006), based on the modern academic criteria, points out that Yang's work is not sufficient in collecting vocabulary work and ignoring the sound system of these speeches. Thus, we can assert that they did not fully consider the contribution of Yang's work to the construction of Chinese tradition of *Fangyan study* and linguistic field work. Actually, as we told above, Yang has formed a so-called scientific system consisting of documental analysis, interview, direct observation, fieldwork journal writing and arranging.

Grounded on the documental analysis and contrastive study, this article combs the history of linguistic field research in China and in the West, and the introduction of modern linguistic fieldwork in China as well as its spread in China, followed by a contrastive study between traditional and modern Chinese linguistic fieldwork to reveal that modern linguistic fieldwork is the only development of traditional Chinese linguistic fieldwork, and that modern Chinese linguistic fieldwork, though introduced from the West, is, by nature, a combination of Chinese tradition of linguistic fieldwork in *Fangyan studies* and Western linguistic fieldwork practice.

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