

My Research Career

Ma Xueliang

[Translated by Jackson T. S. Sun
Academia Sinica (Taipei) and UC Berkeley]

I was born in Rongcheng County in Shandong province on June 22, 1913. In 1934, I was admitted to the Department of Chinese at Peking University, where I studied linguistics and Chinese historical phonology under two famous linguists, Professor Luo Changpei and Professor Wei Jiangong. At the same time, I was learning ancient Chinese graphology and Chinese historical semantics from Professor Shen Jianshi and Professor Tang Lan. By that time, I was engaged in studying *Fangyan*, a book by the Western Han author Yang Xiong, which purports to be an amalgamation and commentary on various dictionaries. As such, the book was obviously based on multiple sources. My philological research revealed that the author of *Fangyan* intended the book to be an exegesis of the ancient dictionary *Erya* by drawing on his contemporary dialects. I published the result of this research in the form of a paper "*Fangyan Kaoyuan*", which appeared in *Luo Changpei Xiansheng Jinian Wenji* (Memorial Volume Dedicated to Professor Luo Changpei).

In 1939, I was admitted to the Graduate School of Humanities at Peking University. My advisors at that time were professors Luo Changpei, Li Fangkui, and Ding Shengshu. Under Professor Li's guidance, I began to study the minority languages of China and set out on a field trip to the Sani area (a subgroup of the Yi people) in Yunnan to record and analyze their language. This fieldwork experience consolidated my knowledge of theoretical linguistics and laid down much of the foundation for my later linguistic research. On the basis of this fieldwork data, I wrote my thesis *Sani Yiyu Yanjiu* (A Study of the Sani Yi Language), which was published as a special publication of the Institute of Linguistics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences by the Shangwu Publishing Company in 1951. This work not only provides comprehensive and detailed phonological, morpho-syntactical, and lexical analyses of Sani, but incorporates rich linguistic data, including texts (stories, nursery rhymes, riddles) a Sani-Chinese lexicon, and a short Sani Yi syllabary. The first comprehensive and systematic study in China of any nationality language at that time, this book blazed a new trail for the scientific investigation of the non-Sinitic languages of China.

I spent most of the 1940's in the Yi territory of Yunnan. To prepare myself for the impending task of translating the traditional Yi Scriptures, I conducted research on Yi society, making an extensive collection of materials dealing with the indigenous religion. Two important publications from this period are *Luowen Zuozhai Jing Yizhu* (Annotated Translation of the Yi Scriptures on Fasting) and *Luowen Zuojl Xianyao Gongsheng Jing Yizhu* (Annotated Translation and Annotation of the Yi Scriptures on

Worship, Medication, and Animal Sacrifice). In 1942, as I was doing fieldwork on the Yi dialects of Wuding and Luquan Counties in Yunnan, I discovered a phonemic contrast of tense vs. lax vowels¹. The unraveling of this phenomenon, which turns out to be quite pervasive not only in Yi but also elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman, has revolutionized established views on Loloish phonology, and provided a new perspective on the linguistic history and subgrouping of the Tibeto-Burman family. The result of this study originally appeared in *Liutong Biele*, Supplementary Publication No. 3 of the Institute of History and Philology, 1945.

In 1949, I was employed by Peking University to teach in the Department of Oriental Languages. In 1951, I was assigned to help establish the Department of Nationality Languages at the Central Institute of Nationalities, where I served in various posts as professor, departmental chair, and dean of the Graduate Institute of Nationality Languages. In the early fifties, the government started to devise writing systems for the unwritten nationality languages with a view to raising the cultural levels of their speakers. Students from the Department were actively involved in these projects, so that they might put their knowledge to practical use. It was also at about this time that I participated in an extensive survey of the nationality languages of China, and, heading the team on Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) languages, went to the respective localities of these languages to conduct fieldwork. Prior to the start of the survey, I took charge of organizing a training workshop on the investigation of nationality languages, in order to upgrade the basic skills and theoretical backgrounds of the survey crew. The two lectures I gave at that time, "On the fundamental requirements for the investigation of nationality languages" and "How to collect and collate lexical data", were published later in the book *Yuyan Diaocha Changshu* (*Fundamentals of Linguistic Fieldwork*).

Since 1957, I have been occupied mainly with teaching and research related to devising, improving, and propagating writing systems for nationality languages. Among other things, I wrote the paper "Some problems in devising writing systems for the nationality languages" in which I elaborated on such topics as the choice of the representative or "standard" dialect and the locality for the standardized phonological system, the approximation of the devised writing system to Pinyin, the unification of variant native scripts, and standardization as a means of enriching and developing the nationality languages. In another paper, "The tasks of translating and compiling materials before propagating devised nationality writing systems", I proposed these important preparatory tasks: upgrading linguistic investigation, accumulating language data, translating and compiling textbooks for primary schools and adult education programs, preparing supplementary teaching materials, grammars, and dictionaries. My proposals were intended to help ensure the smooth propagation of the scripts designed for the unwritten nationality languages.

¹This distinction is now usually understood as one of phonation, i.e. creaky (laryngealized) vs. plain-phonation vowels. [Translator's note]

On the basis of the considerable first-hand linguistic data gathered during my extensive fieldwork, I have come to realize that the study of the many non-Sinitic Sino-Tibetan languages can shed light on research into Chinese itself, e.g. in the realm of Chinese diachronic phonology. Among the important linguistic writings in this vein that were published in the sixties are "Wo guo Han-Zang yuxi yuyan yuanyin de changduan (Vowel length in the Sino-Tibetan languages in China)" and "*Qieyun chun sidengyun de zhuyao yuanyin* (On the nuclear vowels of the true rhymes of the fourth grade in the *Qieyun*)", two papers that I co-authored with my friend Luo Jiguang. The former paper enhances our understanding of vowel length as an important phonological trait of the Sino-Tibetan languages by giving a synopsis of its phonetic nature, distribution, relation to other phonetic features, and general evolutionary tendencies. The latter paper applies the findings from this research to Chinese diachronic phonology by proposing a theory of "transitory sound expansion", which enables us to reconstruct a long /i/ in the rhymes of the pure fourth grade and more adequately account for certain thorny issues in the phonological development of modern dialects, particularly with regard to the relationship between the third- and fourth-grade rhymes.

In the 1970's, I presented the paper "Yiyu '20', '70' de yinbian (Morphophonemic alternations in the words for '20' and '70' in Loloish)" at the 12th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics held in Paris. In this paper, I relied on such evidence as the developments of the stop codas and vowel tensing (laryngealization) in Tibeto-Burman languages, as well as the nasal and checked Chinese syllables used to transcribe the Bailang language in the ancient bilingual text *Bailang Wang Ge* (*Songs of the Bailang King*, Han dynasty) to account for the particular sound change from aspirated to unaspirated stop initials involving the component morph '10' in the Loloish words '20' and '70'.

In order to do better justice to the many minority languages of China, I edited *Yuyanxue Gailun*, the first introductory textbook on linguistics that is distinctly China-oriented. Instead of slavishly importing an inordinate proportion of examples from Indo-European languages, this book is closely linked with the linguistic realities of China, incorporating a wealth of data which embody the results of years of research work on the nationality languages of China. As such, it contributes to promoting linguistic education and enriching theoretical linguistics in China. Since its publication, the book has received "outstanding teaching material" awards from both The Society of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Peking and the National Board of Education.

In the last few years, I have published a couple of translated and edited ancient texts written in the traditional Yi syllabic script. I translated *Quanshanjing* (*Scriptures on Edification*), edited the enlarged version of *Cuanwen Congke* (*An Anthology of Yi Texts*), and translated and annotated the Yi narrative epic *Ashima*. These efforts provide important sources for in-

depth studies on the Yi language and literature. As a continuation of this endeavor, I am currently occupied in compiling *Yiwen Guji Cidian* (*Dictionary of the Ancient Yi Manuscripts*).

At present, I am directing graduate students in both Ph.D. and M.A. programs in order to train new specialists in linguistics and literature. These students conduct research on the following topics: ethnolinguistics, collation and translation of ancient Yi manuscripts and Yi literature, and bilingualism, all three being new areas where graduate students have been accepted for the first time in China.

Besides teaching and research, the concrete contributions I have made to promoting literary and linguistic studies of the nationality languages of China during the last thirty years of my career include serving in the various posts below: president of the Research Society of Bilingual Education for the Nationalities of China, vice president of the Society of Linguistics of the Nationality Languages of China, vice editor in chief of the *Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Yuyan Jianzhi* (*Brief Descriptions of the Nationality Languages of China*) series, as well as vice editor-in-chief on the nationality language sections of the volumes on language and ethnology of *Zhongguo Dabaike* (*Encyclopedia Sinica*).