

The Early Spread of Anthropology in China

Wang Wenpu

Chengdu Technological University Chengdu, Sichuan 611730, China

ABSTRACT. *Anthropology, a discipline studying human beings in any place at any time, has been introduced into China from the West for over 100 years. Its introduction and development have played an important role in the construction of Chinese social sciences. This paper tries to explore the reasons and channels of the early spread and localization of anthropology in China, hoping to shed some lights on understanding the current status of this discipline in China and provide some suggestions for its future development in this country.*

KEYWORDS: *Early spread, Anthropology, China, Localization*

1. Reasons behind the early spread of anthropology in China

1.1 China and the World in the 19th Century

To trace the reasons why early anthropology was introduced into the Chinese country, we had to first discuss the situation in China and the world in the 19th century. At that time, under the influence of the Great Discoveries of Geography and global voyage, new routes were opened up and global trade and capitalism developed rapidly, which results a prosperity of European countries far exceeding those in Asia. Economic prosperity at that time led to the great Industrial Revolution, and the technological and economic progresses as the result of the Revolution brought about the emergence of various natural sciences and the birth or remodeling of social sciences including sociology, anthropology, history, etc. in those countries.

In contrast, in the same period, China was in a state of poverty and backwardness as the result of a long-term self-closure and corruption of the authorities. Especially during Qing Dynasty, after a series of wars and unequal treaties, China fell into a semi-colonial country, and the rule of the Qing Court was crumbling. Against this background, pioneering intellectuals in China, out of patriotic nationalist aspirations for national salvation, took the initiative to transform Chinese society so that the nation could go from a poor and weak one to a prosperous one.

1.2 Western Learning Spreading to the East

To achieve their ambition to save the nation, the pioneering intellectuals strived

to borrow from the currently advanced nations, especially by introducing in various social thoughts from the West. As a result, there emerged a historical phenomenon called “Western Learning Spreading to the East”, that is, the spread of Western academic thoughts to China and the great changes in social thoughts it caused from the late Ming Dynasty in China to modern times.

As Rong Hong, the first Chinese student who graduated from Yale University in the United States and one of the first of Chinese overseas students, said: “Instilling Western academic thoughts into China will make China a civilized and powerful country.” “By improving its Eastern culture through learning from Western civilization, the ancient empire is bound to transform itself into a young and new one.” [5] Under such background, anthropology that was led by classical evolution theory entered China [7].

1.3 Anthropology as an Ideal Tool to Save the Nation

Anthropology is a discipline studying human beings in any place at any time [4] and the product of the Great Discoveries of Geography in the 19th century as the result of global expansion of European countries. Since Huxley first adopted the term “anthropology” in 1871 [1], it has been introduced into China for over 100 years [8], which was among the first batch of social sciences that were borrowed from other countries.

The reason behind this is that anthropology, especially the classical evolution theory of anthropology that dominated the discipline at that time, fits the idea of the Chinese revolutionaries in the early 20th century who tried to save the nation from subjugation and ensure its survival to improve the society, and subsequently became an important basis for them to initiate social changes.

The 19th-century classical evolution theory is based on Darwin’s theory of biological evolution. It believes that all humans have “psychic unity”, and further predicts that social culture of humans will gradually evolve from low to high along the same route [1]. The classical evolutionary theory of anthropology reflects and explains the social and cultural changes brought about by the European technological revolution in 19th century, provides new predictions for human development, and advocates the use of anthropological research as the basis for implementing social improvement.

For Chinese pioneering intellectuals, on the one hand, anthropology, especially its “evolutionary views of human history” explained the current social problems of China and the threats it faced, while on the other hand, it provided a “spiritual weapon to inspire fighting spirit” in order for them to reform the society and save the nation [6].

2. The Channels of Early Spread of Anthropology in China

2.1 The Main Channels

The main channels for the spread of anthropology to China are through the translation and introduction of Western works by missionaries and other Westerners as well as some Chinese scholars, the learning, acceptance, and dissemination of Western academic ideas by Chinese officials, businessmen and overseas students, the publication and circulation of books, periodicals, newspapers, the establishment of new style schools and the establishment of new disciplines, etc.

2.2 Early Translated Works

In 1901, the first book on evolutionary theory of anthropology appeared in China. It is the Chinese translation of *The Evolution of the Family* by Japanese jurist Ariga Nagao. Ariga Nagao based his work on *The Study of Sociology* by Spencer and *Ancient Society* by Morgan, both of which were representatives of the classic evolutionary theory. Subsequently, ethnology and archaeology were introduced to China in the same way [3].

In 1903, Yan Fu's translation of *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays* by T. H. Huxley from the United Kingdom in 1895, Lin Shu and Wei Yi's translation of *Ethnography* by Michael Haberlandt from the German-Austrian Empire, and Yan Fu's translation of *The Study of Sociology* by Herbert Spencer from the United Kingdom were published. In 1925, Xu Deheng's translation of *The Rules of Sociological Method* by Émile Durkheim from France was published.

It can be seen from the above that the classical evolution theory dominated early anthropology introduced to China, although since the 1920s, other schools such as the French ethnology school and Marxism gradually entered China.

2.3 Anthropological Works Translated from Japanese Versions

It is worth mentioning that before 1920, the early anthropological thoughts were mostly translated from the West into China via an important intermedium, that is, Japan. After the abolition of the imperial examination system in China in 1905, students in China began to seek studying abroad. Japan became the major destination for early Chinese overseas students for cultural similarities and convenient transportation shared by the two countries, and because of the deterrent effect of Japan's military strength at that time. Japan, in a period of social reform, was actively absorbing Western social sciences, making it a powerful country both in economy and in culture.

Among the early Chinese students studying in Japan were some famous revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen, Huang Xing and Chen Tianhua, who believed that the Chinese version of anthropological works translated from Japanese advocated the classical evolution theory and can thus support their revolutionary assertion that the monarchy was not divinely granted. Thus, we can see that these early translation activities have obvious political purposes [3]. This further explains the current development of anthropology in China, which will be discussed later.

3. Localization of Early Anthropology in China

3.1 Early Anthropological Works by Chinese Scholars

Based on the early translation and introduction activities, the earliest anthropological works written by Chinese scholars appeared.

In 1916, Sun Xuewu officially translated the term “anthropology” into “*ren lei xue*” (Chinese pinyin meaning a discipline on humans) [2], which was later used as an official translation. In 1918, Chen Yinghuang published China's first real anthropological work titled *Anthropology* [3], which consciously used the Western anthropological theory introduced to China at that time to analyze China's history and culture, and played an ideologically enlightening role for the spread of anthropology in China.

3.2 Early Localization of Anthropology in China

With further spreading of anthropology in China, Chinese scholars started to apply the theory and principles of anthropology to Chinese society. This was the early localization of anthropology in China.

In 1927, Guo Moruo published *Research on Ancient Chinese Society*, applying Engels' views to Chinese society, and supplementing the European paradigm proposed by Engels and Morgan through a case study of ancient Chinese society. In 1926, Cai Yuanpei, a well-known Chinese educator, published an article titled “On Ethnology”, which was “the first time Chinese people have discussed their ethnological issues in their own language” [3] and he thus became the first person to try to apply Chinese ethnology to ethnic minorities in China.

3.3 Undue Focus on “Ethology” and “Sociology”

It can be seen that since the discipline of anthropology was introduced in China in a pragmatic way with the goal of saving and ensuring the survival of the nation, from the initial introduction of anthropology into China, it has been based on Darwin's theory of biological evolution and classical evolution theory. This leads to an undue focus on “ethology” and “sociology” by Chinese practitioners, with the philosophical aspects of anthropology, that is, commitment to the study of the essence, much ignored [6]. This has a long-lasting influence on the development of anthropology in China until now, in a way that the discipline in China has been developed in an unbalanced manner. Thus, there is a need for a return of anthropology in China to “a wholistic one covering biological, cultural and philosophical aspects” [6], so that the discipline can develop in a balanced way to serve more purposes.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be seen that the main reason for the spread of anthropology in China was the motivation of pioneering intellectuals to learn from the West at that time in order to save the nation from subjugation and ensure its survival. Under such background, the current dominating theory of anthropology, the classical evolution theory played a leading role for the Chinese revolutionists to explain the social problems and to reform the nation, while other schools of anthropology entered China later one after another. The pioneering intellectuals at that time absorbed and promoted anthropological theories and principles through translated works, most of which were indirectly translated from Japanese versions.

Based on the early translation of Western anthropological theories, China's native anthropology disciplines gradually took shape. Chinese scholars continued to use anthropological theories to explain China's social phenomena and began to supplement Western anthropology theories with new ideas. However, due to the introduction of anthropology in China in a pragmatic way, the development of anthropology in China as a discipline has been uneven. This calls for a return of anthropology in China to a wholistic one covering biological, cultural and philosophical aspects.

References

- [1] Barth, B. F., Gingrich, A., Parkin, R., & Silverman, S (2008). *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*. [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- [2] CHEN Guo-qiang (1985). Review and Prospect of Anthropology Research of Xiamen University [J]. *Anthropology Research* (Trial Issue), pp. 1-2.
- [3] GU Ding-guo (2000). *History of Chinese Anthropology* [M]. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2000.
- [4] Haviland, W. A (2002). *Cultural anthropology* [M]. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- [5] HUANG Yu-shun (2012). From “Western Learning to the East” to “Chinese Learning to the West” – The Historical Mission of Contemporary Chinese Philosophers [J]. *Academic Monthly*, vol. 11, pp. 41-47.
- [6] XU Xin-jian (2008). Returning to “A Holistic Anthropology”-A Brief Outline Based on Chinese Scenarios [J]. *Ideological Front*, vol.34, no. 2, pp. 1-5.
- [7] ZHOU Da-ming, LIU Zhao-hui (2003). *A Centennial Review Anthropology in China* [M]. Beijing: National Publishing House.
- [8] ZHOU Da-ming (1992). A Decade after the Reconstruction of Anthropology in China – Review and Prospect [J]. *Social Science Front*, vol. 2, p.p. 137-145.