

# The Study of Vexillology in China

by Xing Fei

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**Abstract** At one point, China had a traditional flag culture influenced by its rich history. However, its modern flag culture is mostly inspired by Western influences and has only attained a moderate level of development. The study of vexillology is still in its early stages in China.

The number of researchers studying Chinese vexillology is few in number. Currently, there are no dedicated private or government research institutes. There is only a limited amount of research, mainly focused on the flag of China and various countries, the Chinese Communist Party's flag, and the Chinese People's Liberation Army's flag. There is also very little study regarding traditional flags of China and the flags of the Republic of China. Because of historical and legal reasons, the Chinese people and researchers have little exposure to western vexillology.

Many problems need to be solved to advance vexillology in China. The steps that must be taken include: studying advanced vexillology concepts and methods in the world; gathering comprehensive research regarding world and Chinese flag studies; collaborating with vexillologists from other countries and attending vexillology events; researching China's traditional flag culture; and earning the support of the public, researchers, and the government.

China once had a long history of traditional flag culture. Illustrations dating back more than 18 centuries and written records exceeding 3,500 years prove the existence of this great and illustrious tradition [1]. About 170 years ago at the end of the late Qing Dynasty, China's traditional flag culture felt the impact of the stronger European flag culture, leading to its gradual decline. And China's traditional flags were at last replaced by Western flag designs about 102 years ago. That year marked the end of the Qing Dynasty and the formation of the Republic of China. The decline of traditional flags became commonplace in various countries of the Orient.

In the past century, China's flag culture went through a period of turbulent development, gradually forming the modern national flag system. These flags play important roles in international affairs and everyday life. China's modern flag culture abandoned its historical heritage, but did not fully absorb Western flag influences. It also reflects a unique "national fervor." As a result of the above, China's flag culture has only attained a moderate level of development, with a wide gap relative to the more advanced flag cultures of Europe and the Americas.



Compared to the slow development of China's flag culture, it is evident that the development of vexillology in China is even further behind. The main cause of the current condition is China's history of being a closed and reserved state for long periods of time. During these times, China took a stance of being on guard against the influence of Western culture. Flag culture and vexillology were also regarded as a means of reflecting ideology. In the 30 years since the reform and opening up of China, Western flag culture again clearly influenced China. However, it had very little impact on vexillology in China[2].

After World War II, Western vexillology went through a phase of rapid development. Many research facilities were established and a group of professional and amateur vexillologists emerged. There were also many people who were simply interested in vexillology. Research publications came out one after another. Meetings at various levels were held in succession and international exchange occurred frequently. All these reflect the impact of advancement in culture[3]. The slow development of China's vexillology field is noted in comparison to the development of Western vexillology.



Qing Dynasty 1888-1911



Revolution of 1911



R.O.China 1912-1928



R.O.China 1928-1949



P.R.China 1949--



CPC 1921--



P.L.Army 1949--



CYL 1950--



HKSAR 1997--



Books on Vexillology



The current state of vexillology in China is not satisfactory. The main reason is the virtual absence of professional researchers and the lack of amateur researchers. There is also no government-established research institutions or privately-established research organizations [4]. There are only a few research papers on vexillology, which are narrow in scope, shallow in discussion, and lack a clear objective. The main topics being researched include: China's flag and the flags of nations, the flag of the Chinese Communist Party, the flag of the People's Liberation Army, and the flag of the Republic of China and ancient traditional flags [5].

From the viewpoint of the academics and the public, Chinese flag culture and the related field of vexillology is far from a perfect or obvious research topic and certainly not a Chinese-style "discipline." Therefore, it must not be important. This kind of thinking is also reflected in the actions of the government. For example, public universities will not proactively research vexillology. As a result of this different viewpoint, vexillology is not included among the official disciplines to be studied. For this reason, the development of vexillology is a very difficult problem to solve.

Further growth of vexillology in China will require many solutions to address various problems. The main ones include:

A proactive approach to understanding and adopting the advanced vexillology concepts and methods around the world; emphasizing the process of study; fully grasp-



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ing the vexillology materials from around the world, gathering published research, and establishing initial document depositories through the internet and other traditional methods; eagerly exchanging knowledge with vexillologists from other countries, frequently attending international conferences, and inviting foreign experts to lecture in China.

An in depth study of China's traditional flag culture, fully utilizing the large pool of talent, the solid foundation of related research, and the advantages of having a rich collection of historical documents; continued research of China's modern flags, with the goal of improving China's flag system in order to better serve its function.

Obtaining the support and understanding of vexillology from academia, the public, and the government through various methods in order to gradually change preconceptions, improve the societal environment necessary for the development of flag culture, and improve the academic environment facing vexillology; focus on encouraging future generations to understand and undertake the study of flags; establishing "national flag teams" composed of honor students at every university with the responsibility of lowering and raising the national flag every day.

The future of the development of vexillology in China is an optimistic one. After the expansion of the China's economy, the revival of culture has become an important societal goal. As a result, China is placing more emphasis on developing its own culture heritage and is more willing to learn from the advanced practices of foreign countries. A China that is more integrated globally and more open in its actions and attitudes will speed the establishment of a vexillology discipline in academia, further the development of vexillology, and make a contribution to vexillology worldwide. China will become an important contributing member of the big family of vexillologists across the world.



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## Notes and References

- 1 X. Fei, *A look at traditional Chinese flags across eighteen centuries*, NAVA 46 (2012) <<http://www.nava.org/nava-meetings/meetings/46>> (Accessed on 10.06.2013)
- 2 The Washington Flag Congress, ICV 24/NAVA 45 (2011) <<http://washingtonflagcongress.org/attendees.htm>> (Accessed on 10.06.2013) There were about 168 registered participants (Who's coming), without Chinese members.
- 2 International Federation of Vexillological Associations, <<http://www.fiaf.org/FIAV.html>> (Accessed on 10.06.2013) There were no Chinese FIAV Members.
- 3 Since the 1960s, as a symbol by foundation of the FIVA, NAVA and other organizations, studies on vexillology and various related research activities have been carried out thereafter, with vigorous development across the world.
- 4 A search from the largest Chinese search website "Baidu" <<http://www.baidu.com>> (Accessed on 10.06.2013) containing Chinese characters such as "Chinese vexillology", "vexillological society (research council, association, etc)" showed results as "0".
- 4 Performing the same search mentioned above using the governmental website from the China Ministry of Civil Affairs <<http://st.chinapo.gov.cn/index.html>> (Accessed on 10.06.2013), including one national and 32 provincial civil affairs, results are also "0".
- 5 A search in China's largest online bookstore "Amazon" using the Chinese character "flags" returned 194 results. After removal of duplicates, there were 156 books, of which only 5 were monographs on vexillology. <[http://www.amazon.cn/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss\\_1?\\_\\_mk\\_zh\\_CN=%E4%BA%A9%A9%AC%E9%80%8A%E7%BD%91%E7%AB%99&url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=%E6%97%97%E5%B8%9C](http://www.amazon.cn/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_1?__mk_zh_CN=%E4%BA%A9%A9%AC%E9%80%8A%E7%BD%91%E7%AB%99&url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=%E6%97%97%E5%B8%9C)> (Accessed on 19.06.2013)
- 5 A search in the world's largest network of Chinese old books "Confucius/Kong-Fuzi", using the Chinese character "flags" <<http://search.kongfz.com/book.jsp?act=newSys&query=%E6%97%97%E5%B8%9C&sale=0>> (Accessed on 19.06.2013) returned 3376 results. After removal of duplicates, there were about 1500 books, of which 6 were monographs on vexillology.

## Biography

Dr Xing Fei was born in August 1953 in Inner Mongolia, China. He had his higher education and studies firstly in the Department of History, Inner Mongolia University, and then in the Institute of Historical Geography, Shaanxi Normal University. He was promoted PhD degree on History at 1988, with the doctoral dissertation entitled "The Population Geography of Tang Dynasty". His current position is researcher of the Thirteen-Hang Research Centre of Guangzhou University. His representative publications on vexillology includes: "The Taoist Three Star Flag and Sanyuanli in the Battle against English Colonialism, (2002)", "Commentary on the Cultural Significance of the Guangzhou Chen Ancestral Temple Flag Pole, (2009)", and "A Look at Traditional Chinese Flags across Eighteen Centuries, NAVA 46 (2012)", etc. He became member of the NAVA since 2012.

