

Obituary

Li Chi (1896–1979)

Li Chi, the veteran Chinese archaeologist, died on August 1, 1979. The profession has lost a guiding pioneer of Chinese archaeology, a major figure in studies of ancient China, and a principal advocate of international scholarly cooperation in Chinese studies.

Dr. Li Chi, who received his degree in Anthropology from Harvard University, assumed the responsibility of organizing the first archaeological section at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, in 1928, after teaching anthropology at Nankai (1923–1924) and Tsinghua (1925–1928) universities. In this position, Dr. Li organized fifteen excavations of Shang sites at Anyang and the neolithic site at Lungshan. These two major projects, together with the excavation of the Hsi-yin-t's'un neolithic site, are regarded as the first systematic scientific archaeological endeavors in China. In 1934 Dr. Li was appointed to begin organizing a central museum, a task which, though it was never fulfilled, eventually paved the way for the establishment of the Palace Museum at Taipei.

In 1948 Dr. Li was elected as one of the first group of Academicians of Academia Sinica, the highest honor a Chinese scholar can achieve. Dr. Li moved with the Institute of History and Philology to Taipei in 1949 and was appointed to serve as the Chairman of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at National Taiwan University, the only one of its kind in China. He succeeded the late Professor Tso-pin Tung as head of the Institute of History and Philology in 1955, a position he held until his retirement in 1973.

Dr. Li always actively led the advancement of Chinese studies with modern methodology and global perspectives. In the various capacities in which he served, such as chairman of the Chinese Council for East Asian Studies, board member of the National Science Council of the Republic of China, or his academic positions, he promoted research in the humanities and the social sciences. During the 1960s and early 1970s the China Council for East Asian Studies, subsidiary organization of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, played a significant role in sustaining academic research in Taiwan in spite of the lack of substantial assistance from other sources. His many visits to the United States, Australia, and Europe, and his role in initiating cooperation between the U.S. and the ROC testified to his service as an important link between Chinese scholars and foreign colleagues.

The last task which absorbed much of his effort was the compilation of a series of research articles on ancient Chinese history, a project sponsored by the China Foundation. Dr. Li intended to use this project to establish a collective work in Chinese and a reliable reference system for the dissemination of the results of highly specialized research. By the time of his death, 95 percent of the projected essays had been reviewed and were ready to go to press. He had not yet written the lengthy preface he had in mind to crown this work. It is a permanent loss to the profession that such an important contribution remains unrealized.

His dedication to the pursuit of knowledge, his scrupulous research, and his legacy to archaeology guarantee Li Chi a place of permanent respect in the hearts of his colleagues and students.

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Archaeology has had a long history in China, but Li Chi qualitatively changed it. In the last sixty years—which coincided with Li Chi's professional career—modern archaeology has transformed Chinese ancient history, and at its best its practice consistently conforms with the highest standards of excellence. Several generations of many dedicated Chinese scholars are responsible for this achievement, but in my opinion Li Chi is responsible for most of the major features of the direction modern archaeology has taken in China.

Li Chi wrote on a wide range of topics. A bibliography compiled after his death by his younger son, Li Kuang-chou, lists 142 titles dating from 1925 to 1978, exclusive of translations. Of these, eighty-six titles are archaeological, twenty-two are on broad intellectual issues, eleven are on biographical and autobiographical topics, nine on physical anthropology, six on ethnology, five on ancient history, two on museology, and one on literature. His impact on modern Chinese scholarship has thus been multifarious, but I will concentrate on archaeology. Li Chi was an eclectic archaeologist, and that in itself had an important impact on other archaeologists.

Li Chi's central contribution to Chinese archaeology was unquestionably his direction of the excavations of the Yin hsü in Anyang from 1928 to 1937, and of subsequent research and the publication of the Yin hsü material. This material constitutes the foundation of not only ancient Chinese history, but also its prehistoric extension and, thus, the scientific history of the Chinese people and their civilization. Through these excavations, Li Chi was able for the first time to apply modern archaeological concepts and methods to an important Chinese site on a continuing basis, which enabled these concepts and methods to take root in the Chinese scholarly community. Among these we can single out the following as the cardinal principles that still govern the discipline today: that ancient objects to be authenticated must be excavated or at least have their provenance verified by trained scholars; that association and context of the objects are as important as the objects themselves; and that stratigraphy is the single most important chronological criterion. Since these excavations were carried out by the central government on a large scale for many seasons, almost all the archaeologists trained in China during the nine crucial years from 1928 to 1937, when the war broke out, were trained at Yin hsü and became conversant with these principles. Some of these same archaeologists—among them Liang Ssu-yung, Kuo Pao-chün, and Hsia Nai—were the national leaders in the early 1950s, when the present generation of archaeologists began their training. To those of us who are familiar with the discipline as it was practiced in prewar China and as it has been practiced in post-1949 China, the conceptual and methodological continuity is evident. I believe Chinese archaeologists on the mainland would be the first to recognize the degree of their intellectual indebtedness to Li Chi, who moved to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek after 1949, even though they themselves have certainly advanced the archaeological discipline to higher levels in other important areas of research—notably, settlement, scientific, and processual archaeologies. In fact, in a recent essay

on modern archaeology in China (in *Kaogu*, no. 3, 1979), Hsia Nai spoke of Li Chi's huge contributions in bringing modern scientific archaeology to China.

Another area of Yin hsü research on which Li Chi has left a lasting imprint is the fundamental issue of the classification of artifacts. The classification of bronze vessels in traditional Chinese antiquarianism is conceptually and methodologically confused, encumbered by a long historical burden and by the traditional Chinese emphasis on words over real things. Terms in classical texts were used arbitrarily on vessels, and once so used they gave unwarranted concreteness to the resultant categories. To correct this, Li Chi designed a purely formal approach to the classification of pottery and bronze vessels: they are to be classified primarily according to the form of the base, which leads to such classes as flat-base and round-base vessels, tripods, quadropods, and ring-footed vessels. Secondary criteria are then used within each class. This classificatory system is now a part of the Chinese archaeological language. Li Chi also designed a similarly formalistic system for the classification of tools, implements, and weapons, and made detailed analyses of the decorative designs on Shang dynasty bronze vessels. Consequently, for anyone who wants to study Chinese archaeology, i.e., to study ancient Chinese artifacts, Li Chi's archaeological works are required readings, and they will remain so within the foreseeable future.

Perhaps even more important than his writings on specific topics, Li Chi has set a standard of excellence for aspiring archaeologists. As a student of his in college and a junior scholar afterwards forever eager for his advice, I found that Li Chi was the most difficult teacher to satisfy. Not that he ever was excessively picky, but I always felt, from looking at him and his writings, that every scholarly statement of his had to be based on many solid facts, and that he expected the same of others. He was also a true patriot—he insisted on staying in China to lead his Archaeology Section despite wartime hardships and despite the lures of job offers elsewhere, and he always insisted on protecting the sovereign rights of China over her antiquities; but he was never an emotional nationalist or an isolationist. He was completely open in seeking international contact and cooperation in scholarly pursuits. Quite possibly he may be criticized for not having dazzled everyone with his theoretical versatility, or for emphasizing the “conjunctive approach” of Walter W. Taylor less in his later years than he could have or even should have. But to this day no one in the vast field of Chinese archaeology has exceeded his standards of scholarly excellence. With his death, a giant passes.

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