

LI XUEQIN 李學勤 (1933–2019)



*The death of Li Xueqin is a great loss to international sinology and the field of Early China studies. There can be few readers of Early China who have not read any of his work, which is often cited in the articles published herein. He also contributed articles to the journal and participated in our forums. Moreover, Early China 35–36 (2012–13), guest-edited by Xing Wen 邢文, was dedicated to Li in honor of his eightieth birthday and included “Interviews with Li Xueqin” by Wang Tao and Sarah Allan, in which he discussed his life and work.<sup>1</sup>*

*Li Xueqin was one of the first Chinese sinologists to travel abroad when China opened up after the Cultural Revolution, visiting Australia in 1979 and the United States not long afterwards. He was already well known outside of China from his publications.*

*Li was unusual among his generation of Chinese sinologists in having serviceable English. Like so much else that he knew, his English was largely self-taught, from reading books in English. This reading also gave him unusual sophistication about Western society and he adapted easily, making a number of friends from a generation that we have been losing one by one, including K. C. Chang, Noel Barnard, David Nivison, and David Keightley. Others, fortunately still with us, included Michael Loewe and Léon Vandermeersch.*

*From the time of these first visits on, Li Xueqin played an important role in promoting international scholarly cooperation and collaboration through institutional exchanges, international conferences and publications. He also often introduced Western scholarship in his teaching and writing. I met him in 1981 and had the extraordinary good fortune of collaborating with him on numerous projects over the subsequent decades. Many other Western scholars were also the beneficiaries of his friendship and intellectual generosity.*

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1. “Interviews with Li Xueqin: The Life of a Chinese Historian in Tumultuous Times,” Part One, by Sarah Allan. *Early China* 35 (2013): 1–35; Part Two, by Wang Tao. *Early China* 35 (2013): 36–55.

*Sarah Allan's obituary of Li Xueqin was published in the Guardian newspaper and may be accessed online at [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/05/li-xueqin-obituary](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/05/li-xueqin-obituary). The following essay, written by Liu Guozhong 劉國忠, a professor of history at Tsinghua University and Li Xueqin's long-time aide, was published in Guangming ribao 光明日報.<sup>2</sup> The translation here is by Edmund Ryden, who studied with Li Xueqin at the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in 1992–93, when he was a doctoral student at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.*

*This obituary is followed by short personal remembrances of Li Xueqin by Sarah Allan, Geneviève Barman, C. A. Cook, Carine Defoort, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Li Feng, Michael A. N. Loewe, Chrystelle Maréchal, Christopher Rea, Edmund Ryden, Edward L. Shaughnessy, Francesco Sisci, Helen Wang, Wang Tao, Frances Wood, Beth McKillop, Yau Shun-chiu, Crispin Williams, and Robin D.S. Yates.*

*Sarah Allan, Editor, Early China*

## Obituary

Li Xueqin, a founder professor of Liberal Arts at Tsinghua University and Director of the Center for Research and Conservation of Unearthed Documents died this morning (February 24, 2019) at the age of 86.<sup>3</sup> Li Xueqin was a renowned specialist in history, archaeology, palaeography, and ancient texts, who made outstanding contributions in the research fields of oracle bone inscriptions, bronzes, bamboo slips and silk manuscripts, and ancient Chinese civilization more generally. The death of Li Xueqin is unquestionably a great loss to the Chinese academic world.

### **“Something about Everything and Everything about Something”**

The mere mention of Li Xueqin's name is enough to evoke feelings of admiration among those who knew him. The breadth of his research was extraordinary: from ancient inscriptions and symbols to the history of twentieth-century Chinese scholarship; from archaeology, palaeography, and ancient history to the study of ancient texts, the history of aesthetics, and international sinology; from oracle bones, bronze vessels, and silk manuscripts to jades, seals, and numismatics. In each field

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2. The Chinese text may be found online at [www.guancha.cn/liu-guozhong/2019\\_02\\_26\\_491430\\_s.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/liu-guozhong/2019_02_26_491430_s.shtml); <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190225/20190225Ao8NY0.html>; and [www.guoxue.com/?p=56506](http://www.guoxue.com/?p=56506).

3. Eighty-five by Western reckoning. Current Chinese practice begins life with age 1.

he conducted systematic research and made so many pioneering finds that he was called an “Encyclopedic Scholar.” Apart from admiring him, people also wonder how it was that Li managed to achieve such great success; what lay behind it that could deservedly merit our emulation and imitation.

#### Indefatigable, unrelenting study

Li Xueqin was born in 1933 in Beijing, where his father worked at the Peking Union Hospital. As an only child and of a somewhat weak constitution, he had no playmates when he was young. Fortunately his mother taught him to read so that he could read a book before he was four. His father arranged for a private tutor and he thus completed his primary school studies in two years. However, since he was so young, he was put in grade three when he joined the school. What he was taught came nowhere near to satisfying his desire to learn, so, in his spare time, he read all kinds of other books, particularly the journal *Science Pictorial*.

Given the broad range of his interests, his reading was likewise wide-ranging. However, his family was not well-off, so he often skipped breakfast or lunch and saved his money to go to the bookshops and book stalls to buy old books, which he would sell once he had read them, using the money to buy other books. At that time, the Commercial Press published many academic books, most of which Li read. Indeed, he even planned to read every book the Press produced, which shows how hooked he was on reading and study.

When Li was at Tsinghua University in the 1950s, his classmates, including Qian Gengsen 錢耕森, were once invited to his home. They were deeply impressed by the richness of his collection of books:

We were amazed when we saw his library. All four walls had bookshelves packed with books, the famous works of China and overseas, of the past and the present. His study was not like that of a secondary school pupil, nor that of a freshman at university, but more like that of a graduate student or even one of the young professors.

In the memoirs, Hou Wailu 侯外廬 recalls that the young Li was particularly attracted to books about symbols. The more difficult the book was to understand, the more he was fascinated by it. He liked to read things that could excite his intelligence and that had an air of mystery about them, so that one needed to make some effort to understand them. Once, at a second-hand bookstall, he bought a book printed by an English club. It was very beautiful, but upon opening it, he was dumbstruck: it was written entirely in symbols and was completely incomprehensible. In fact, it was an English novel typed on an old typewriter using only the

non-alphabetic keys, where each symbol, such as # or \*, corresponded to a particular letter. The brain first had to convert the symbols into the appropriate letter of the English alphabet in order to read the book. The aim was to strengthen brain power.

Li had a particular liking for this book, which he kept in his satchel for a long time, taking it out to read constantly. He also read Jin Yuelin's 金嶽霖 *Logic* (*Luoji* 邏輯) many times. The third chapter, "Introducing a System of Logic" (Jieshao yi luoji xitong 介紹一邏輯系統), is about mathematical logic. The many symbols it used were unknown to Li but greatly fascinated him. In 1951, he earned the top marks in the exam to enter the Philosophy Department at Tsinghua University, which he wanted to do simply to follow Professor Jin's class on logic. However, owing to the historical conditions at the time, he was never able to fulfill this wish.

While still in secondary school, Li had heard that the hardest subject was oracle-bone script. This awakened a great interest in him and he began paying attention to oracle-bone script. Whenever he had the time, he would go to the Beijing Library on Wenjin 文津 Street to study the script by himself. He took the characters written on the plastrons of turtles and the scapular bones of oxen as another form of symbols, although something very significant.

One effect of Li's long-time application to study was that he developed a good habit of reading. Whenever he had the opportunity, he would deliberately absorb himself in studying and research, not wanting to waste any time whatsoever. The hard work of his youth laid a foundation for the depth and breadth of his learning. Even when, later, he was burdened with administrative duties and had to deal with a lot of complicated affairs, as soon as he had a moment free, he would read and write, and in this way he published a great number of research papers.

Given the broad range of his interests, he also developed another long-standing habit, which was the ability to switch rapidly from one task to another, from one area of research to another. One minute he might be studying oracle bones, the next he could be discussing Qing dynasty scholarship. At any time or place he could become deeply absorbed in arcane research, but, when need be, could leave it without hindrance. Thanks to this, Li was highly productive in his work. He described himself as a multi-wave radio that could be changed from medium to short wave and receive any frequency at the touch of a switch. It should be said that this ability of his was something few people can attain.

#### Uniting China and the West: Understanding Past and Present

After the restructuring of all academic institutions carried out in 1952, Tsinghua became a purely technical university. Unlike most of his class-

mates, Li did not transfer to Peking University but went to the Archaeological Institute of the Academy of Sciences to take part in editing the *Yinxu wenzi zhuihe* 殷墟文字綴合 (Compendium on the Writing at the Yin Ruins) and from then on, he was on an academic track.

At the end of 1953, the Academy of Sciences was planning to create an Institute of History, and Li was again chosen, this time as assistant to Hou Wailu, to help write the *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* 中國思想通史 (Comprehensive History of Chinese Thought). In the 1970s, with the discovery of silk texts at Mawangdui 馬王堆, of Han Dynasty bamboo-slips at Dingxian 定縣, of Qin-dynasty bamboo slips at Yunmeng 雲夢, he again shifted the focus of his work, moving into archaeology and epigraphy. In 2003, after fifty years at the Institute of History, he returned to Tsinghua to rebuild the humanities there.

In the course of the more than sixty years of his academic life, Li Xueqin's accomplishments piled up. He published over forty books and authored over 1,000 papers. The abundance of his achievements and the breadth of subjects covered are dazzling. He would jokingly call his research "miscellaneous studies" (*za xue* 雜學): "My interests are very broad, and that which I have studied is eclectic rather than pure (*za er bu chun* 雜而不純). Because my work experience led me to engage in different fields of research, it is very difficult to find one line of development in my thought in all that I have written." ("Author's Preface" to *Li Xueqin Ji* 李學勤集 [Collected Works of Li Xueqin], Heilongjiang People's Press, 1989.)

On this matter, three points should be clarified. First, Li's description of himself as "eclectic and not pure" is only partially true. The term "eclectic" is correct inasmuch as he read widely and had a broad range of interests, but in each area of research to which he applied himself, within the range of his research, he was very "pure." Moreover, once he had decided to work on something, he always wanted his scholarship to place him at the forefront of that type of research.

Professor Li liked to use an English saying: "something about everything and everything about something" to explain his scholarly experience. "Everything about something" meant whatever one is studying, one should learn everything about it. "Something about everything" means you should also learn something about the other research fields.

Li set out on a scholarly path by means of self-education and in the course of his studies, he paid great attention to what his predecessors had written. In the 1950s, he taught himself oracle-bone script by using Hu Houxuan's 胡厚宣 *Wushinian jiagu lunzhumu* 五十年甲骨論著目 (Index of Articles on Oracle Bones over the Past Fifty Years) as his guide. He read every single item in this *Index* that dealt with oracle bones, whether in Chinese or a foreign language, until he had grasped the history of the field, its present state, and the problems that still existed.

On the basis of this foundation, he did intensive research on the chronological divisions and historical geography and such fields even though oracle bone studies were not yet the focus of his academic research.

Again, though he was not a specialist on the *Book of Changes*, he was fully immersed in the *Changes* and wrote *Zhou Yi Suyuan* 周易溯源 (The Origin of the 'Book of Changes') from the perspective of archaeology and textual studies. This unusual work resolved many difficult problems that had long perplexed scholars of the *Changes*, and it won him praise from the famous specialist on the *Changes*, Jin Jingfang 金景芳, who said in his encomium: "How comprehensive is the material used by Comrade Li Xueqin in his research on the text and commentaries of the *Book of Changes*! How very perceptive his analysis!"

It was in the late 1970s that Li was first invited to visit the United States. Since scholars in China had been cut off from the outside world for so long, there was little knowledge of sinology abroad. So, Li relied on reports on the findings of sinological research in various countries compiled by Japanese scholars as a preparation for visiting the relevant American universities and institutions and the relevant scholars of renown. By this means, he was able to rapidly grasp the history and current state of sinological research abroad. After this, Li consistently supported research in international sinology. This was closely related to his own familiarity with international sinology.

Secondly, although the fields of research covered by Li were broad, there was in fact one common thread running through them all: the central focus of his research was an investigation of the profound mystery of China's early civilization. Moreover, as time went on, this connective thread became more and more evident. It was for this reason that he narrowed his field of research. He explained this many times:

The fields in which I have been involved often give the impression that I am too scattered. Yet, in fact, my focus is very simple, namely the early period of China's historical civilization, roughly equivalent to the opening and closing of the *Shi ji* 史記 by Sima Qian 司馬遷. The problem is that it is not easy to define the study of this period. It can be history or archaeology, or else the study of ancient texts, paleography, and the history of technology, art or thought. A broad grasp of the intersection of all these fields is necessary. I think this field is best described as the "study of China's ancient civilization" ("Xu yan" 序言, *Zhongguo gudai wenming shijiang* 中國古代文明十講 [Ten Lectures on China's Ancient Civilization], Fudan University Press, 2005).

Finally, since Li was simultaneously engaged in a broad range of subjects and in very careful specialization, his research was particularly good at seeing and integrating connections and using different research

strategies. Uniting China and the West and bringing past and present together was the ideal of scholarship that Tsinghua University always sought. The method of two types of evidence was initiated at Tsinghua by Wang Guowei for the study of ancient history. Li happily carried on this outstanding tradition of the University and brought it to new heights in his own research.

Li summarised his method as follows:

I think that, for the study of ancient civilization, it is most desirable to use a research method that is multidisciplinary and comparative, by multidisciplinary, I mean combining history, textual studies—including traditional study of the classics—archaeology, paleography, art history, and the like ... with a special emphasis on showing how ancient texts and archaeology can corroborate each other. By comparative study, I mean comparison between the ancient civilization of China and the various civilizations of the rest of the world, investigating ancient Chinese civilization in the context of the whole of human civilization (“Author’s Preface” to *Li Xueqin Ji* 李學勤集 [Collected Works of Li Xueqin], Heilongjiang People’s Press, 1989).

This type of research was precisely what was needed to allow Li to develop his specialization. He not only studied the past broadly, he also related it to the present; he was not only familiar with Chinese civilization, he also knew about world civilization and, within his own research, was able to integrate the two. Nonetheless, he was not satisfied with his own achievements, since he had a more distant goal in sight. We all know that over the years Li constantly advocated comparative archaeology and that he wrote the book *Bijiao kaoguxue suibi* 比較考古學隨筆 (Random Jottings on Comparative Archaeology), which was highly regarded in the field. Yet his aspirations did not merely remain there. Since his youth he had hoped to engage in the comparative study of civilizations. Unfortunately, owing to various causes—such as age and insufficient knowledge of foreign languages—he knew he could not fulfil his ambitions.

One time he spoke about his own imagined ideal to a visiting reporter:

We hope that there would be someone who could study two areas or even three. The ideal would be to study ancient Greece and Rome, then ancient Egypt and then ancient China, but to do this for all three would require the knowledge of two or three modern languages and also the languages of these three civilizations. Once I really hoped to go in that direction; that was my dream. If it had not been for the Cultural Revolution, perhaps I could have done part of it; it was not completely impossible (“What I hoped to do in my life and failed to do,” in *Shu cheng* 書城 [Book Town], January 2008).

Even though Li could not realize this ideal, his efforts were truly impressive.

Stooping down from on high; Scholarship exceeding the mundane

Li started in the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua, hoping to study mathematical logic, but he was unable to do so owing to the historical period. Nonetheless, his teacher, Jin Yuelin, was deeply impressed by him and praised his aptitude for philosophy. This can be taken as affirmation of his potential for theoretical thinking.

In the 1950s, Li went to the Institute of History as assistant to Hou Wailu, to help write the *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* 中國思想通史. Hou was a well-known historian of Marxism and was gifted at a high-level of theoretical thought. He frequently encouraged young scholars such as Li to pay close attention to their own “growth spots” (*shengzhang dian* 生長點). By this he meant that, in the course of development, a person would not be wholly balanced; some area always required strengthening. Those were their “growth spots,” or, in other words, their weak spots. As Hou saw it at the time, the young Li Xueqin was very much at home with textual history and also had a good grasp of foreign languages, but his grounding in theory was weak. Therefore, he reminded Li many times that he should strengthen his grasp of theory and not concentrate only on oracle-bone script and bronze inscriptions. That is, he should become a great historian—a theoretical historian. What Hou meant by strengthening his grasp of theory was not only to study and master the thought of Marxist and other scholars; it was far more a case of reminding Li that his own research and the manner in which he approached problems should be accompanied by higher level theory.

From 1956 onwards, Li not only conscientiously read a lot of Marxist classics, he also read different types of theoretical works that were related to Marxism. His effort on this score was something that others found inconceivable. For instance, in order to clarify the issue of the “Asiatic mode of production,” he collected materials everywhere; going to all kinds of libraries and bookshops, reading everything that Chinese authors had to say about the topic; he also read original texts in German, English, and Japanese, compiling over 500 pages of notes.

Li often said that one need not necessarily be engaged in theoretical work, but that a theoretical vantagepoint was essential. In the course of research, you might have to investigate only one character, but you must see the larger picture. An example can illustrate this:

The riddle of the state of Zeng was a point of contention among twentieth century scholars of ancient (Chinese) history. Received texts record a Zeng 鄆 state ruled by a family with the surname Si 姒 in what is now Shandong. In 1933, at Shouxian 壽縣, Anhui, a pair of Zeng Ji hu 曾姬壺



vessels were unearthed from the tomb of a king of Chu, which showed that, during the Spring and Autumn Warring States period, a Ji-family Zeng State still existed. After this, new finds related to Zeng continued to emerge, especially important was the discovery of the tomb of Zeng Hou Yi 曾侯乙 at Suizhou 隨州 in Hubei, which created a sensation. However, it was very puzzling that there was no record whatsoever of a Ji-family Zeng state in the ancient texts.

On this subject, Li Xueqin wrote “Zengguo zhi mi” 曾國之謎 (The Riddle of the State of Zeng) and other papers,<sup>4</sup> in which he pointed out that the activities of the Zeng people were largely confined to the northern part of Hubei, lying to the east of the Han 漢 River, the northernmost reach being Xinye 新野. It was not that a Ji-family Zeng state did not appear in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and other similar historical records; it was simply that the name Sui 隨 was used for it. The Zeng state discovered by the archaeologists was the Sui state of the ancient texts. Zeng and Sui were two names for the same state. [The Si-surnamed Zeng 鄫 was not the same state.]

This path-breaking explanation immediately aroused vigorous debate in academic circles. But later discoveries confirmed to the accuracy of Li’s position. In the twenty-first century, in the vicinity of Yejiashan 葉家山 in Suizhou 隨州, a Zeng state tomb dating to the early Western Zhou was found, which meant that the enfeoffment of Zeng could be dated back to the early Western Zhou. Meanwhile, an inscription on a bronze bell (*bianzhong* 編鐘) from the tomb of Zeng Hou Yi had already stated clearly that the first feudatory recipient of Zeng state was Nangong Kuo 南宮括, one of the four companions of King Wen 文.

Just as scholars were proclaiming that this important find verified that Zeng and Sui were the same, Li wrote a paper that explained the historical significance of the enfeoffment of Zeng in the early Western Zhou from a theoretical vantage point. He pointed out that the discoveries related to Zeng gave us a new perspective with regard to important problems concerning the Western Zhou and indeed on the whole history of the Zhou. From the time that King Wu 武 defeated Zhòu 紂, the problem of the south had a particularly important influence on the political and social situation of the whole Zhou dynasty. According to the Da Wu 大武 music section of the *Yue ji* 樂記, included in the *Li ji* 禮記: “Wu [first] set out and headed north. He was successful a second time and destroyed Shang.” This music section has six successes altogether; that is, there are six sections of music. The second, quoted above, is the destruction of Shang. The text continues: “He was successful a third time

4. *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, 4 October 1978.

and went south. He was successful a fourth time and made the southern states the border." Scholars had not paid due attention to this passage. In fact, aside from the destruction of the Shang, the establishment of the southern states as the border was very important, since it meant that the southern territory was included within the Zhou kingdom. The text continues: "He was successful a fifth time and created a division, with the Duke of Zhou 周 on the left and Duke of Shao 召 on the right," which meant that the Dukes of Zhou and Shao were set to rule on the east and west of a line defined by the Shaan 陝 Pass. The extent of the southern territory gained after the conquest of the Shang was vast and of immense importance to the entire structure of the Zhou dynasty. That the southern territory was ruled by the Duke of Shao has been verified by the Tai Bao 太保 jade *ge* 戈 and other materials. The development of the Zhou in the south was centered around the Han river basin. The center of this basin lies at Suizhou, in the area of Dahongshan 大洪山 at Hanyang 漢陽, to the east of the Han river. The Zhou gave this area as a fief to Nangong Kuo, one of the four companions of King Wen. The status of this area was roughly similar to that of Yan 燕, the fief of the Duke of Shao, and Lu 魯, the fief of the Duke of Zhou. Therefore, the establishment of the state of Zeng was originally an important part of the Zhou plan for the southern states. Once we have grasped this point, we gain a new appreciation of the rise and fall of Zeng and its relevance to the rise and fall of the entire Zhou dynasty, and many issues can be threaded together. An insight made from such a high theoretical vantagepoint is something no ordinary scholar could have achieved.

It was precisely such a vision and theoretical attainment that enabled Li to propose a "re-evaluation of China's ancient civilization" and "leaving behind the era of doubting antiquity." This was a theoretical and conceptual change in research on China's ancient civilization, something that was both reasonable and substantive.

Liu Guozhong, translated by Edmund Ryden\*

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