

## INTERVIEWS WITH LI XUEQIN: THE LIFE OF A CHINESE HISTORIAN

### Part Two

*The following interview with Li Xueqin took place at his home in the Tsinghua University campus on June 5, 2012. In the early 1980s, I was a graduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and I first became acquainted with Li when he was on a visit to SOAS. My interview began with questions about Li's experiences travelling to the West soon after China first opened up and his contributions towards building a bridge between the Chinese and Western academic communities and his.*

Wang Tao

### Contacts with Western Scholars

*Li Xueqin is one of the most 'international' Chinese scholars of his generation. This is partly due to his wide reading in foreign literature and scholarly works from an early age and his ability to communicate in English. It is also because, after the Cultural Revolution when China's intellectuals began to rebuild relationships with American and European academic communities, he began not only to attend international conferences, but to spend periods abroad as a visiting scholar at universities such as Cambridge and the School of Oriental and African Studies in the UK, Paris, and Stockholm in continental Europe, and the University of California at Berkeley and Dartmouth in the US.*

*Li's first visit to the UK, to Cambridge University in 1981 at the invitation of Michael Loewe, led to a collaboration with Sarah Allan on a number of projects which aimed to publish Chinese materials in foreign collections in China, making them available to Chinese scholars. These collaborations included the publication of the oracle bone collections in Great Britain and those in the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden, collaborations in which Qi Wenxin 齊文心 of the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) also participated.<sup>22</sup> Li and Allan also travelled together in Europe to study collections of Chinese bronzes. The results were published in a book with the English title, *Chinese Bronzes: A Selection from European Collections*.<sup>23</sup> Li also*

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22. Li Xueqin, Qi Wenxin, Ai Lan, *Yingguo suocang jiaguji; Ruidian Sidegermo Yuan-dong Guwu Bowuguan cang jiagu wenzi* 瑞典斯德哥爾摩遠東古物博物館藏甲骨文字 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1999).

23. Li Xueqin, Ai Lan, *Ouzhou cuocang Zhongguo qingtongqi yizhu* 歐洲所藏中國青銅器遺珠 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1995).

wrote many personal articles about his travels abroad and the artifacts that he saw in foreign collections.<sup>24</sup>

As Deputy Director of the Institute of History from 1984 to 1988, Li was instrumental in setting up an exchange program between the Institute of History and the Far East Department of SOAS, which allowed a number of other scholars from the Institute of History to travel to London, including Song Jiayu 宋家鈺, Zhang Gong 張弓, Wang Xu 王矜, Wang Yarong 王亞蓉, and Yu Taishan 余太山. One of the results of these early exchanges was a collaboration between SOAS, the British Library, and the Institute of History to publish the non-Buddhist manuscripts in the British Library.<sup>25</sup> This project, which resulted in the publication of fourteen volumes of photographs of manuscripts, was the forerunner of the current International Dunhuang Project. WT

**WT:** You discussed your first visit to the USA in your interview with Sarah Allan. How did it come about?

**LXq:** It is an interesting story. (As I mentioned in that interview,) there was a visit of a delegation of Han scholars led by Yu Yingshi 余英時, with two deputies, K.C. Chang and Hans Frankel. K.C. Chang told me later that, while they were sitting together and having a chat, I laughed at their jokes and they realized that I could understand English. There were very few people who understood English back then. So, they wanted to invite me to visit the US. Soon after they went back, I received an invitation.

**WT:** In the late 1970s and early 1980s, contact between the Chinese and foreign scholars began to resume. The US and China had just established a formal relationship. At that time, the Chinese knew very little, almost nothing, of the situation in the USA, so how did you prepare?

**LXq:** Communication and exchanges were very limited. So, I found a Japanese survey of worldwide Sinology. I cannot remember the title of the book now. It was a thick volume, published in the late 1960s or early 1970s. I learnt about Sinology in the US from the information in it, and I made a plan of the universities and scholars I wished to visit based upon that. The US Embassy was really impressed.

**WT:** What was your initial feeling when you went abroad? And after

24. Many of these were later collected and published in Li Xueqin, *Sihai xun zhen* 四海尋珍 (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1998).

25. *Dunhuang Manuscripts in British Collections: Chinese texts other than Buddhist Scriptures*, 14 volumes (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1990–97; Chinese title: *Yingcang Dunhuang Wenxian: Hanwen Fojing Yiwai Bufen* 英藏敦煌文獻: 漢文佛經以外部分). On the British side, these exchanges were funded by the British Council and the Sino-British Fellowship Trust.

your personal contact with Western sinologists, what was your first impression of the field of Sinology overseas?

**LXq:** To be honest, I did not feel anything was too strange or too different. This is because, from a young age, I read books written by foreign scholars. I understood the situation, or at least some of the situation.

**WT:** Did you have the sudden feeling there was no common language between you and them? Or that somehow you all had a shared language?

**LXq:** There was indeed a shared language. I did not feel like a stranger at all. That was probably the reason why these Western scholars were willing to invite me in the first place. But I believe that many Chinese scholars might have had the cultural shock you describe.

**WT:** When did you first go to the UK?

**LXq:** In 1980, Michael Loewe applied for a grant and invited me to the University of Cambridge as a visiting fellow at Clare Hall for one year. I went to England in 1981, but in the beginning of the year I was assigned the job by Wang Yeqiu 王冶秋 (then Director of the National Bureau of Cultural Relics), together with Yu Haoliang 于豪亮, to work on the newly discovered Han dynasty wooden slips from Juyan (Juyan Han jian 居延漢簡). It was only two of us, and I was put in charge. Because I wanted to go to England, I told Yu Haoliang: "You could start by familiarizing yourself with the cursive script (*caoshu* 草書), in particular the *zhangcao* 章草 style." I could not read *zhangcao* either, so I suggested that Yu learn it first, and we would start work on the Juyan slips once I returned from England. But, not long after I arrived in England, Yu Haoliang became very ill. I had to come back (without staying the full year).

**WT:** Did you meet Sarah Allan while you were at Cambridge?

**LXq:** The person who first introduced Sarah to me was Jessica Rawson.

**WT:** How? Did you get to know Jessica Rawson because she was working at the British Museum?

**LXq:** I first met her in China. She was visiting Beijing and was told I was going to England. I don't know who told her that, perhaps someone in the Institute of Archaeology (CASS). I went to see her at her hotel and told her about my planned visit to Cambridge. She told me something of London, and invited me to visit the British Museum. I said, "I will not miss the British Museum." She replied, "You will if you don't try."

**WT:** Did Jessica Rawson tell you about SOAS?

**LXq:** She probably did mention SOAS. But I already knew Paul Thompson

who was at SOAS. So, when I settled down at Cambridge, it was very easy for me to go to London, by train to King's Cross.

**WT:** So, you visited SOAS and met Sarah there for the first time?

**LXq:** It is not that simple. Sarah might not remember the details. I first met her when I went to the British Library to look at their oracle bones. The collection of oracle bones was in the Store Street building, not in the main Library (which was still housed in the British Museum). Jessica Rawson took me there and said she wanted to introduce someone to me. When the person came, it was Sarah, who was carrying some large notepads. This is how we met. We looked at the oracle bones together, and later on we talked about the possibility of collecting all the data on oracle bones in the UK. I made the proposal. It resulted in our collaboration to publish the oracle bone inscriptions in the UK collections. This was the first successful collaboration between us. Qi Wenxin of the Institute of History, CASS, later joined the project. I have known Sarah for over 30 years now, and we have become friends.

**WT:** You and Sarah also visited many other European countries to look at bronzes?

**LXq:** Indeed. I had a very fruitful trip with Sarah to Europe in 1986. Japanese scholars began collecting materials on Chinese bronzes in foreign collections earlier than Chinese scholars; for example, Umehara Sueji 梅原末治 made significant contributions, and even earlier, there was Hamada Kosaku 濱田耕作, who was a student of Flinders Petrie. In China, Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 was probably the first. He published *Haiwai jijin lu* 海外吉金錄; but it is a list, rather than a monograph. The most important Chinese scholar was Rong Geng 容庚 who was a student of Luo Zhenyu. He compiled *Haiwai jijin tulu* 海外吉金圖錄. Actually, Rong Geng had never been overseas, but he had a close relationship with Japanese scholars and managed to use their materials without going abroad himself. Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 was different; he got involved as a visiting fellow at the University of Chicago. He did not have many followers, but I'm one of them. I followed his example for the book on European bronzes. I was fortunate enough to work with Sarah and to participate directly in a project she organized from the UK; otherwise there would have been no way for me to get to see materials in so many European museums. We visited many countries and everywhere we went, people showed us (their Chinese bronzes and other ancient Chinese artifacts). If it were just Chinese scholars, we could not have achieved this goal even if we had sent a big delegation around the world.

**WT:** You and Sarah also set up the exchange program between SOAS

and the Institute of History, CASS. As a student then, I remembered seeing you from time to time in London, and almost every year, there were scholars from the Institute of History coming to SOAS.

**LXq:** You are right that I was responsible for setting up the exchange between CASS and SOAS. I was the Deputy Director of the Institute of History in charge of research. I held the position for four years from 1985 to 1988. In 1988, I stepped down. I went back to my old research group.

**WT:** Did you go back to your old position as the head of the Pre-Qin Research Group (*Xian Qin shi* 先秦室)?

**LXq:** No. After stepping down from the Deputy Directorship, for two years (1989, 1990) I had no administrative role at all. Later, I was appointed as the Director of the Institute of History. I held that position from 1991 to 1998. When I reached age 65, according to the official rules (of CASS), I could not carry on as the director.

**WT:** You visited London in October 1989. Was it to do with the (collaborative) Dunhuang Project? I remember Wang Xu and Wang Yarong taking photographs of the Dunhuang manuscripts at the British Library.

**LXq:** They were working for the Dunhuang project. But I myself don't do research on Dunhuang materials, so I didn't get involved.

### Research on Bronzes

**WT:** I want to ask about your research on ancient bronzes. You published a book in English about ancient Chinese bronzes a long time ago.<sup>26</sup>

**LXq:** Yes, it was published by the Foreign Languages Publishing House.

**WT:** So, how did you begin doing research on ancient bronzes?

**LXq:** I began to study bronzes by myself early on. As you know, my earliest research was on oracle bones inscriptions—they were my passion. I also studied inscriptions from the Warring States period. Over time, I realized the deficiency in my knowledge of bronze inscriptions and artifacts. I had attempted to write about bronzes back in the 1950s, but always felt that I did not know enough to do it well. I could not date the bronzes correctly. Hence, I decided to leave aside the study of oracle bones inscriptions after 1960, and switched my attention to bronzes. I got the opportunity during the Cultural Revolution when I was called back from Cadre School to assist in the project to write a general history of

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26. *The Wonder of Chinese Bronzes* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), revised as *Chinese Bronzes: A General Introduction* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1995).

China led by Guo Moruo 郭沫若.<sup>27</sup> I was put in charge of the reference library. No one else really came to read the books, and the entire library of the Institute of History was used by me alone. I had plenty of time, so I read as many archaeological reports about bronzes as I could, basing my research on the chronological order of the sites.

**WT:** But, research on objects is different from research based on writing or books; for instance, in the study of vessel typology.

**LXq:** Yes. But, I always liked objects and took my interests with me where ever I travelled. It was the same when I went to the UK and US in the 1980s and 1990s. I took notes on whatever I saw in museums.

**WT:** I remember going with you in London to look at Chinese bronzes in antiquity galleries.

**LXq:** I take every opportunity to both look at artifacts as well as to read books. This is my way of learning. I also read many foreign publications in England that were not available in China.

**WT:** It is interesting that you started with oracle bones first, then bronze inscriptions and bronze artifacts. Did those interests lead you into archaeology?

**LXq:** (As I explained earlier), I first began my study of oracle bone inscriptions by reading the relevant excavation reports. Although I was not a specialist in archaeology, I read almost every archaeological report (on the Shang excavations). I did not have much instruction from anyone, but I believe my method of research was correct. When I began to study bronze inscriptions, I used the same method and studied the bronzes in tandem with reading the archaeological reports.

**WT:** I remember my first lesson with you on how to read oracle bone inscriptions. You told me that one had to understand the position of each fragment, with a mental imagery of the entire bone (or plastron). The majority of oracle bone scholars only looked at the inscriptions. But you seemed to put particular emphasis on the material itself. How did you develop this technique on your own?

**LXq:** Maybe by chance.

**WT:** Are you still doing research on bronzes?

**LXq:** Sure. I'm a panel member of the National Committee for Authentication of Bronzes, which advises the State Administration for Cultural Heritage on related matters.

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27. See Part One of these interviews.

### The Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project and the Institute of History

In 1996, The State Council of the People's Republic of China launched the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project (*Xia Shang Zhou duandai gongcheng* 夏商周斷代工程). This was a state-sponsored research project that aimed to provide accurate dates for the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties. It was a vast, multi-disciplinary project, which involved more than two hundred scholars from many different institutions, representing disciplines such as history, archaeology, paleography, astronomy, and the natural sciences. Li Xueqin was appointed Chief Scientist and Chair of the Board of Specialists. Over a period of four years, the scholars worked to build a chronology of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties by correlating astronomical records and material archaeological evidence, in particular radiocarbon dating, with historical textual records and contemporaneous inscriptions on oracle bones and bronzes. To this end, it commissioned a number of special research projects, including archaeological excavations. The project produced a brief report on schedule in 2000 with specific dates for the Zhou Dynasty and approximate ones for the Xia and Shang.<sup>28</sup> The methodology and results of the project incited much controversy.<sup>29</sup> WT

**WT:** In the middle of the 1990s, you became heavily involved in the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project. Were you still officially working at CASS?

**LXQ:** The Chronology Project didn't start until May of 1996. As the Director of Institute of History, I took the lead. We had three sub-groups; each group had a Chief Specialist (*shouxu kexuejia* 首席科学家). For archaeology, the leader was Li Boqian 李伯謙, who was then the head of the Archaeology Department at Peking University; for history of science, we had Xi Zezong 席澤宗, an Academician at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), and the former Director of the Institute of History of Natural Sciences and Qiu Shihua 仇士華, who headed the archaeological science group, from the Institute of Archaeology, CASS.

28. Xia Shang Zhou Duandai Gongcheng Zhuanjia Zu 夏商周斷代工程專家組, ed. *Xia Shang Zhou duandai gongcheng 1996–2000 nian jieduan chengguo baogao: jianben* 夏商周斷代工程 1996–2000 年階段成果報告: 簡本 (Beijing: Shijie tushu, 2000). Some of Li Xueqin's own research on chronological problems may be found in his *Zouchu yigu shidai*; Li Xueqin, *Xia Shang Zhou niandaixue zaji* 夏商周年代學札記 (Shenyang: Liaoning University Press, 1999); and Li Xueqin, "The Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project: Methodology and Results," *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 4 (2002): 321–333.

29. See Yun Kuen Lee, "Building the Chronology of Early Chinese History," *Asian Perspectives: the Journal of Archaeology for Asia and the Pacific* 41.1 (2002), 15–42; Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Chronologies of Ancient China: A Critique of the 'Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project'" in Clara Wing-chung Ho, *Windows on the Chinese World: Reflections by Five Historians* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, Lexington Books, 2009), 15–28.

He was also the first scientist to carry out Carbon-14 dating in Chinese archaeology.

**WT:** This project was very significant. Nothing like this had been seen in China before. Because it was conceived and organized as a large state project, almost like an engineering project, some people had misgivings about it.

**LXq:** They could not adapt to it.

**WT:** Were you under some kind of pressure, coming from various directions?

**LXq:** To be honest, it was difficult. Why was I appointed as the head of Xia-Shang-Zhou Project? It is not complicated—it was because I was Director of the Institute of History and this project was historically oriented. The project was initiated by the state leaders, and it happened to fall into my area of academic specialization. The project was initiated by Song Jian 宋健, then the President of the National Scientific Committee, equivalent to the Minister at the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China today. We discussed the proposal over and over and I was appointed as “Chief Scientist” by the State Council.

**WT:** So, you would not have been given another task, such as compiling the history of the Qing Dynasty?

**LXq:** True. If it were a Qing history project, Dai Yi 戴逸 (who was head of the Institute of Qing History at Renmin University) would have been chosen. I was also qualified for the Chronology project because I had long been interested in the Natural Sciences. This enabled me to better understand and organize the project. My appointment was not as accidental as it seemed.

**WT:** Can you explain why the Institute of History was asked to take the lead of that project? Was it because of its expertise?

**LXq:** The Institute of History was established quite early after the foundation of the New China. The Institute of Archaeology was earlier. It was set up very quickly because archaeology could not wait for too long. The new government took on some archaeologists from the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica (*Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, Lishi yu yuyan yanjiusuo* 中央研究院歷史與語言研究所) who had not gone to Taiwan with the Nationalist Government, and also people from the former Peiping Academy (*Guoli Beiping yanjiuyuan* 國立北平研究院); it basically consisted of those two groups of people. When the Chinese Academy of Sciences [later divided into the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Social Sciences] was first conceived, it was intended to



be the highest institution of learning. This idea was in fact imported; for example, the Collège de France. Later, China followed the Soviet model of an Academy of Sciences. Many people went to the Soviet Union to study, so their model was very influential. The Academy had the greatest possible prestige. But it no longer holds the same position, for a number of reasons.

**WT:** In theory, the Institute of History should represent the highest standard in historical research in China, but there are now many centers, and the Institute of History is like any other institution. Everyone wants to have accomplishments and the standards of many other institutions have improved. It must be very hard to maintain the dominance that CASS once had. What is your opinion about this?

**LXq:** That is precisely what I tried to address. In earlier times, we thought of ourselves as the engine of historical research, taking the lead in all areas. We had a lot of power. Every year, we could select the best graduates from the universities. The Institute of Archaeology had the same power. Once you selected someone, the university could not say 'no.' In those days, the graduates all had jobs assigned to them; they did not go out and find their own jobs. We wanted the best and we selected the best students from the best universities and the best researchers and so we had many talented people. The Institute should also not have any missing links. Pre-history could go to the Institute of Archaeology, but the Institute of History was supposed to cover all periods from the Shang dynasty onwards. For example, if we were given a task, such as writing a general history of China, we should have the specialists necessary to do it competently. (As Director,) I could not say that I needed to invite someone from outside to work on it. This was the case when I first became the Director of the Institute, but I could not maintain this (comprehensiveness) throughout my tenure. For example, we had a scholar who was a specialist on Xixia 西夏 history. But one day, this scholar decided to resign to move to the National Library. I was very concerned. I wanted to hire another Xixia specialist, but up until the time I left the Institute, that vacancy was not filled.

**WT:** In the new social dynamics, traditional institutions like CASS have to face new challenges. Do you think this is good?

**LXq:** In my opinion, it is worth combining academic research with higher education. Of course, we are still in need of specialist research institutions like the Institute of History and Institute of Archaeology. There are not many (research institutes like these) in the world today. Formerly, such institutions were designed to gather the most talented scholars together and to work on special projects.

**WT:** So, the Institute needed to be able to take on any projects of an historical nature?

**LXq:** Right, to be a system that includes every necessary component. If the government asks the Institute of History today to compile a general history of China, it should be able to immediately come up with a plan of action and to start the process. This is utterly impossible at any of the universities.

**WT:** Do the researchers at CASS select their own research topics?

**LXq:** In that regard, our ideas and practices differ from mainstream institutions in Europe and Taiwan, such as the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France and the Academia Sinica in Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> Those institutions were largely designed to suit the specializations of the scholars, for example, at Academia Sinica, Chen Pan 陳槃, who primarily researched divination documents and Wang Shumin 王叔岷 who compiled ancient classics. But the responsibility (of CASS) was to take on tasks assigned by the government, though individuals and groups within it also did research that they themselves proposed.

**WT:** The Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology project combined both social and natural sciences, and had over 200 scholars working for it. This had no precedent. The large sum of money from the government was also unprecedented.

**LXq:** It was indeed the first time the government gave such a large grant to a subject in the Humanities; approximately twenty million RMB for five years. It might not be a great figure for engineering projects, but for the Humanities it was the largest grant ever.

**WT:** That project also led to the later projects, such as the Exploration of the Origins of Chinese Civilization Project (*Zhonghua wenming tanyuan gongcheng* 中華文明探源工程)?

**LXq:** Yes. We proposed the *Tanyuan gongcheng* after completing the Xia-Shang-Zhou chronology project.

**WT:** Are you leading this new project?

**LXq:** I'm no longer involved. The exploration of the origins of civilization project is not so much an historical enquiry, as a pre-historical one. I'm not a pre-historian.

**WT:** But, in theory, you could have taken on this task.

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30. The Academia Sinica (*Zhongyang yanjiuyuan* 中央研究院), which is the forerunner of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, is now based in Taiwan.

**LXq:** No. It is not my field. I would not taken it on even if asked to do so. The *Zhonghua wenming tanyuan gongcheng* 中華文明探源工程 is basically an archaeological project. It is logical that the Institute of Archaeology should take the lead. I don't have any objections.

**WT:** Do you now still have any official links to CASS?

**LXq:** In theory I still have some affiliation with them; I was a Standing Member of the Academic Committee of CASS, for the first and second elections. I'm now an Honorary Research Fellow of the Institute of History, and was the Director of their Center for the Study of Ancient Civilizations until recently. Wang Wei has now been elected as the Director of the Center and I have become the Chair of the Academic Committee of the Center.

**WT:** So, you still have this official tie with CASS?

**LXq:** It is perhaps more ceremonial rather than substantial. I go there once in a while, but I am not involved with the running of the Center. I found that I now know not more than half of the people at the Institute. Of course they may know me. This is what it's like nowadays. I'm going to the Institute tomorrow to participate in a panel for the nomination of the Guo Moruo Award for Historical Studies. It is a national award, very prestigious, so I ought to take part.

### The Institute of International Sinology at Tsinghua

**WT:** In the 1990s you set up the Institute for International Sinology at Tsinghua University. How did you get involved with Tsinghua?

**LXq:** As you know, I was once a student at Tsinghua. Personally I was very fond of the time I spent at Tsinghua — it was like an obsession. Why? Because I started to read books written by professors who taught at Tsinghua long before I entered it; such as Jin Yuelin and Feng Youlan. I was in the Philosophy Department. We had to learn mathematical logic. Learning mathematical logic was an aspect of studying philosophy. Previously, mathematical logic could not be separated from philosophy. I wanted to study philosophy at Tsinghua because it was the only place where you could take such courses in China at that time. But, unfortunately I could not finish the course. I sometime joke that I 'betrayed' (*beipan* 背叛) Tsinghua. I left it and went to the Institute of Archaeology to work on oracle bones, giving up philosophy.

Though Tsinghua changed into a technological university, it still needed to run some options in politics for students. I have some old

classmates (*lao tongxue* 老同學) who completed the course and stayed at Tsinghua. Most of them have retired; some have passed away. In the 1980s, when Tsinghua University decided to re-build their Humanities subjects, some of my old friends from my university days came to talk to me, asking if it would be possible for me to go back to work for Tsinghua. I told them that it was not possible, as I was then Director of the Institute of History. But I said, "Give me some time, maybe I can help Tsinghua in some way." My real involvement was in 1992.

**WT:** Weren't you still working for the Institute of History at CASS, while setting up the Institute of International Sinology at Tsinghua University?

**LXQ:** I was initially given the title of "Visiting Professor" and later, "Part-time Professor," but I wasn't an official employee of Tsinghua University. Tsinghua did offer me full-time employment, but I couldn't take it.

**WT:** Could you please explain a little more about setting up the Institute of International Sinology?

**LXq:** It was a coincidence. I remember it clearly; in 1992, I was at a meeting about the plans for the publication of ancient texts held at Xiangshan 香山. I picked up *Guangming Ribao* 光明日報 and read in the news that a small university in Anhui (or Jiangsu) borrowed some teachers from other universities to set up such a department. I thought it was not a bad idea. There were people from Tsinghua University at the meeting. So, I mentioned this idea and expressed my willingness to help. It was not common at that time for staff to move from one institution to another. But, the situation was much improved after Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 made his speech in the South. The people I met at that meeting passed the message on to the Chinese Department at Tsinghua. Tsinghua had a Department of Chinese Language and Literature, headed by Mr. Xu Baogeng 徐葆耕. Xu himself was originally trained in water management, but had written several plays. He was a very nice person who, unfortunately, passed away a couple of years ago. I have a very good memory of him. Xu informed the then president of Tsinghua University, Zhang Xiaowen 張孝文, of my idea. Mr. Zhang later became the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education. He is still alive, but not in good health. Mr. Zhang said, "It is very good to have a former Tsinghua student who is willing to contribute to our university; please ask him if he can run a new institute or something similar." At the time, there were no major mainland universities where Sinology was a subject of research. So, I decided to set up the Institute of International Sinology at Tsinghua University. There was a lot of opposition and criticism of the name.

**WT:** Why?

**LXq:** Some people felt that the term *hanxue* 漢學 or “Sinology” was foreign, used by colonial powers, and that it was politically incorrect. I said, “it is a Chinese name as well.” Zhongfa 中法 University once had an Institute of Sinology. I added the word “International,” and called it the “Institute of International Sinology.” The principle of this institute differed from other institutes with this name. My intention was to introduce modern Western scholarship on ancient China. In traditional Sinology, the majority of scholars, both Chinese and foreign, tend to study ancient history. My aim was somewhat different

**WT:** Do you mean that you wanted to study contemporary Western scholarship on traditional China?

**LXq:** Precisely. I wanted to emphasize modern studies; because what we needed most was to understand the new, contemporary scholarship of Western scholars. This was my idea at that time. The Japanese began before us, but they called it *Zhongguo xue* 中國學 or “China studies.” In fact, I was not the first person in the mainland to promote this subject. There was a scholar named Zhang Liangchun 張良春, who was a professor at the South-West College of Foreign Languages (*Xinan Waiguoyu Xueyuan* 西南外國語學院). He established an Institute for Foreign China Studies and published a book called *Guowai zhongguoxue yanjiu* 國外中國學研究, for which Ji Xianlin 季羨林 wrote the preface.

**WT:** Does that institute still exist?

**LXq:** I think that institute came to an end very quickly, without leaving any trace, except for the book. Mr. Zhang was not known to any of us who worked in the field of Sinology. So my initiative, back in 1992, still counts as one of the earliest effective attempts. At Tsinghua I worked closely with Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 in forming the Institute. [*Ge has now moved to Fudan University.*] The Institute at Tsinghua still exists. But I find it very difficult to devote much time to it now.

**WT:** Now, the Beijing Foreign Studies University 北京外國語大學 has a Center for Overseas Sinology (*Haiwai Hanxue Zhongxin* 海外漢學中心), run by Zhang Xiping 張西平.

**LXq:** Frankly speaking, if we had adequate support at the time, we would not have done less well than the Beijing Foreign Studies University. I know many of the people there and have often been invited to their meetings. They probably still respect me for starting off the subject. But, in fact, their main focus differs from mine.

**WT:** They are mostly interested in Jesuit archives, documents about the foreign missionaries, and China-West communications.

**LXq:** Indeed. For me, the priority is to understand the current studies in the West. We need to understand each other better.

**WT:** I know that Peking University has established a Study Center for International Sinologists (*Guoji hanxuejia yanjiu jidi* 國際漢學家研究基地) and they publish a journal. Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 plays a major part in organizing their activities. They seem to be going in this direction. What do you think of their work?

**LXq:** I think they are doing a good job; they have concrete topics and results. Rong Xinjiang has his own specialization; he is a Dunhuang scholar, and the subject itself is very international. However, many Chinese scholars who work on archaeology or ancient texts seem less interested in exchanges, carrying on working in isolation. They think that they have nothing to learn from foreign scholars.

**WT:** You are well connected with many Western scholars. You know everyone.

**LXq:** Not really. Most of the Western scholars I personally know of are from the older generation. I am not familiar with the new generation of Western scholars.

**WT:** In many areas (of Sinology), Chinese scholars' views seem to differ from those of Western scholars.

**LXq:** Let's put it this way, Chinese and Western scholars have different methods and they follow different traditions.

**WT:** What is your general view of Western Sinology? Are there any differences among Western sinologists, for example, the English, French, or American? Writing in English, are the British scholars closer to their American counterparts? Do you think that there is a general consensus among Western sinologists?

**LXq:** I think it is fairer for me to comment on the big picture instead of specific individuals. To a degree, Sinology is an academic discipline, like Egyptology or Assyriology. But, in fact, the contents of these fields are very broad and encompass various disciplines. The history of China is very long, thousands of years. How could one person study it all? In fact, different scholars deal with different fields. This is why some people call it *Zhongguo xue* 中國學 or "China Studies." But, narrowly speaking, when one studies Egyptology, it doesn't include everything; Egyptology focuses on ancient, not modern Egypt. For the foreigner who studies Sinology, he or she also focuses on traditional Chinese culture.

Overall, I would recommend that scholars respect one another's strengths and make use of their own advantages. For example, it does not make sense for an American scholar to know ancient Chinese scripts from the Warring State period as well as his Chinese counterparts; but he or she has something the Chinese scholars don't have. Scholars from different countries, even scholars from different schools, have their own advantages that distinguish them from others. Foreign scholars often criticize Chinese archaeologists as producing only reports from excavations without any theoretical analysis. On the other hand, Chinese scholars don't fully understand Western archaeological theory, such as the 'new archaeology,' and insist on (their method of) digging and seeing the unearthed objects before drawing any conclusions. As Chinese scholars and their foreign counterparts each have their own strengths, I would not recommend looking only at each other's weaknesses. Learning from each other would create a mutually beneficial academic environment. Each scholar's research is inevitably influenced by the local academic tradition in which the person was educated. I think it is very important to recognize that foreign scholars have their own tradition, of which they themselves may not be fully aware. Having received this tradition, they bring it into the study of Sinology. They are our colleagues, but their foundation differs from ours.

**WT:** That leads to different perspectives. Since Chinese civilization is a crucial part of world civilization, what do you foresee as the future of Sinology?

**LXq:** I think there is a lot of room for growth. K.C. Chang, with whom I was friends for decades, made significant contributions to the study of ancient China, using Social Science methodologies. He achieved a higher standard than most of us. His generalizations were significant, and he pointed out the contributions of the Chinese to world civilization. China has always had a large portion of the world population, and therefore has always had a crucial impact on world civilization. With Chinese culture being so different from the rest of the world, we need to view it in its own context and enhance communication with each other. Currently the communication is very limited even though we have a close relationship.

**WT:** Do you think it is limited?

**LXq:** Really limited. It is a shortcoming. While sometimes we are able to invite famous scholars to speak here, the scope and depth of the speeches are still limited. It is a shame because the topics are very good. In order for us to understand each other better, we need to have more shared academic platforms. Recently we invited a number of overseas speakers for the Tsinghua Wang Guowei Seminar (*Wang Guowei Jiangzuo* 王國維

講座). The lectures seem to have been well-received — a lot of handclaps. But how can we reach a deeper understanding?

**WT:** There are many international conferences now.

**LXQ:** And we need to make them more frequent. One-off meetings, where we each make a report, do not serve our purpose. Otherwise, it is no different from each of us independently publishing our own thoughts.

**WT:** In fact, I feel the same way from my own experience in the UK. Simply making a speech at conferences is not enough; we need real sparks. We need critiques from and discussions with experts who have in-depth knowledge in our fields.

**LXq:** Absolutely. What we need is to read what each other have written and exchange views. I mean real reading, not just looking, but reading properly. Many people talk a lot, but don't read. The best example is the discussion of totemism in China now. People talk so much about totems that it gives me a headache (*jiang tuteng jiangde touteng* 講圖騰講得頭疼). But hardly anyone reads the classic sources on the topic. No one reads Claude Lévi-Strauss. How can this be right?

### Tsinghua University and the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips

*The Tsinghua Bamboo Slips (Qinghua jian 清華簡) are a collection of about 2500 Warring States period bamboo slips written in the Chu script that were acquired in 2008 by Tsinghua University. The bamboo slips had been excavated illegally and taken to Hong Kong. Their source is unknown, but the script is similar to that on the bamboo slip manuscripts from Guodian 郭店 Tomb One in Hubei Province and radiocarbon dating suggests that they were also buried around 300 B.C.E. Whereas the Guodian slips are primarily philosophical in nature, the Tsinghua slips are primarily historical, including many manuscripts that are closely related to the historical classic, the Shang shu 尚書. Li Xueqin is currently leading a team of scholars and graduate students at Tsinghua who are researching the slips and preparing them for publication. The fourth volume is scheduled for publication in December, 2013.* WT

**WT:** When and how did you finally move to Tsinghua?

**LXq:** For several years, I had a dual role as professor at both CASS and Tsinghua. I was still at CASS, but came to Tsinghua regularly and took part in many projects and events here. The Xia-Shang-Zhou project formally ended in 2000, but there were still some matters that remained to be sorted out. I was formerly transferred from CASS to Tsinghua in 2003.

**WT:** Did Tsinghua provide you with this apartment when you came here?



**LXq:** I was officially transferred from CASS to Tsinghua in August 2003 and moved into this apartment in December.

**WT:** It is a big change. Perhaps you now have a different perspective. Have you tried to implement any changes since you moved to Tsinghua? Do you have any reflections on developing Humanities subjects at Tsinghua?

**LXq:** In fact, Tsinghua recruited me precisely because they were hoping I could spearhead the development of Humanities. Otherwise they would not have brought me here when I was seventy years old. I told myself, first of all I needed to familiarize myself with methods of university education. As you know, I had been lecturing extensively in universities over the years, but it was not my main job and I did not have to do it. I very much enjoyed being with young people and spent a lot of time teaching them. I still teach today. But I stopped grading essays in my classes, as I had an excessive number of students. Now, the university no longer schedules courses for me. I hold weekly seminars in my apartment. There are usually about ten people in the seminar and, since they engage in discussion, I do not really need to work too hard. This seminar is simply for those who are interested in the subject. It is not for credit, so hopefully the students and I will both find it easier.

**WT:** Do you think the leadership of Tsinghua University has truly realized the importance of Humanities education?

**LXq:** They are doing a good job already. If I were a young teacher I might think it is not enough. However, I must say, from my many years of experience as an administrative leader, I know how difficult is to make changes. The leaders may have the power to do certain things, but they are not able to use the power as they wish. For example, when I was the director of the Institute of History, I myself had the power to hire or fire. But in reality, how would I dare to use it? No university president or institute director can exercise it easily, even today.

**WT:** I thought it is easier to hire and fire now.

**LXq:** There are unspoken rules that people have to follow. Talent nowadays seems to be mobile, as you suggested, however people are not as mobile as we think. They are bound by a lot of obligations and cannot choose to work on whatever project they wish. When people have performed their jobs and served their years as agreed, they should at least have the option to opt out at the end of their contract. Now, unfortunately, most people have to renew because they have nowhere else to go. This problem will hopefully be solved when society gets more mature. I

would not complain too much now. Such problems can only be solved at an appropriate time.

**WT:** This does create a problem for academic institutions.

**LXq:** As you can see, it takes tactics to be a leader. For example, each year we have to evaluate a certain percentage of the research topics submitted, 70% are fine, but the other 30% are not. What do you do about this? One solution is to approve the 70%, and then to raise funds for the rejected ones. Everyone is happy that way. Otherwise the leader will have a troubled time.

**WT:** Any idea how to solve the problem? This could hinder the entire academic development in China if it does not change.

**LXq:** I do not think there is a fundamental solution at the moment.

**WT:** How about over time, like a year or dozens of years in the future?

**LXq:** I am sure there will be a way in the future for us to fix this. It is one of many problems we need to solve.

**WT:** From what you can recall, how many students have you worked with, including both Masters and PhDs, excluding undergraduates?

**LXq:** Dozens I would say. I taught at Northwest University, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and other universities. For example, Wang Ying 王迎 was a Masters student of mine at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. But I never did an official count. I was closer to my early students, as there were fewer of them then.

**WT:** Apart from teaching and the Institute of International Sinology, which we have already talked about, do you consider your major contribution to Tsinghua University to be the Center for Excavated Texts Research and Preservation; in particular, the study of the Tsinghua bamboo slips?

**LXq:** Of course I think that the study of the Tsinghua bamboo slips is the most important field. The Tsinghua bamboo slips are a significant discovery, with many unexpected ramifications. We can achieve some real results working with this material.

**WT:** There seem to be a lot of research topics in the Tsinghua bamboo slips.

**LXq:** We are working on the third volume of the Tsinghua slips—we are already one month behind. During our meeting this morning, Shen Jianhua 沈建華 scolded me, saying that the original deadline was May

7th, and it is almost June 7th now. You know, it always takes more time than you thought. We are now one month behind. But, we will definitely have it ready by the end of this year, however much work it takes. Just to let you know, there is some very interesting material in this volume, including some poems, long and beautiful verses.

**WT:** I was told that there are six or seven texts.

**LXq:** Six texts, eight manuscripts altogether. Three (manuscripts) correspond to the “Yue ming” 說命 chapters of the *Shangshu* 尚書, which is the number recorded in transmitted literature. Volume Three will be ready by the end of the year, unless something unexpected happens. But, there has not been much discussion yet on the *Xinian* 繫年 (chronology) published in Volume Two. We expect the (two) songs from the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Songs*) in Volume Three to attract fewer readers.

**WT:** The *Book of Songs* should have a larger audience.

**LXq:** We are not talking about birds and flowers. They involve historical matters and are very hard to understand.

**WT:** Is the text hard to decipher?

**LXq:** Very. It can be cryptic.

**WT:** You could perhaps combine International Sinology with the study of Tsinghua bamboo slips project at Tsinghua and there would be more interaction.

**LXq:** I have told Sarah that we can do this together. Sarah suggested we have a conference once every couple of years. Chinese specialists can help with the reading of the bamboo slips. The (Warring States period Chu script) on the bamboo slips is very difficult to decipher.

**WT:** Aren't you planning to have an international conference on the Tsinghua bamboo slips next year?

**LXq:** Yes. We already have scholars that have gone to the USA from here to give seminars. I think this can build a good foundation, and is something that realistically we are able to do.

**WT:** This reminds me of the project at Dartmouth years ago, on the Chu bamboo-slip *Laozi* 老子 found at Guodian, which I found very exciting.

**LXq:** That conference was really good. The Guodian bamboo slips were very suitable for an international conference, and it involved a lot of people with various research specializations, including philosophy, history, literature, and archaeology. Hence, it would be ideal for us to find

a similar theme for the Tsinghua bamboo slips. I think a concrete subject can attract a lot of people. Let's come up with some broad topics, not too narrow, so that there is a broad appeal, not only attracting the handful of specialists in the field around the world. We all know each other. This kind of (narrow) research has a limited impact on Sinology as a whole.

**WT:** In some way, it almost felt like a 'heavenly gift,' that the bamboo slips came to Tsinghua. Otherwise, it would have been difficult to have a center of such a nature here. One cannot achieve so much without the research materials.

**LXq:** Indeed. It was such a table turner! It not only enabled me to start this center, but also spearheaded Humanities research at Tsinghua. Heavenly gift? You might be right—something for which we have no logical explanation. However, we should also remember that this project would not have succeeded without the unreserved support of the university. Many people got involved. Other universities might be content with a small scale program with a couple of students, but Tsinghua had the ability and ambition for a great program like this.