HKFP

OPINION

Obituary: The Li Xueqin I knew – a leading Chinese archaeologist who trod carefully around political pitfalls

by **ILARIA MARIA SALA**

09:45, 17 MARCH 2019 Updated 22:55, 31 MARCH 2020

Li Xueqin, arguably China's most important archaeologist, early China historian and interpreter of oracle bones' writings, died in Beijing on February 24. He was 85, and his health had been frail for a number of years.

I met him in Beijing in the early 90s, when I was a student. I was interested in the women's script developed in Hunan, called nüshu, but I was also keen on researching the archaeological finds at the Han Dynasty tombs in Mawangdui, in Changsha, also in Hunan.

Being the inquisitive and curious mind that he was, and having been fascinated by scripts all his life, his research in the Oracle Bones inscriptions was groundbreaking. It changed and enlarged the field forever – he was capable of giving me abundant clues on how to investigate little known topics, and was undaunted by my lack of focus.

Li Xueqin. Photo: Tsinghua University.

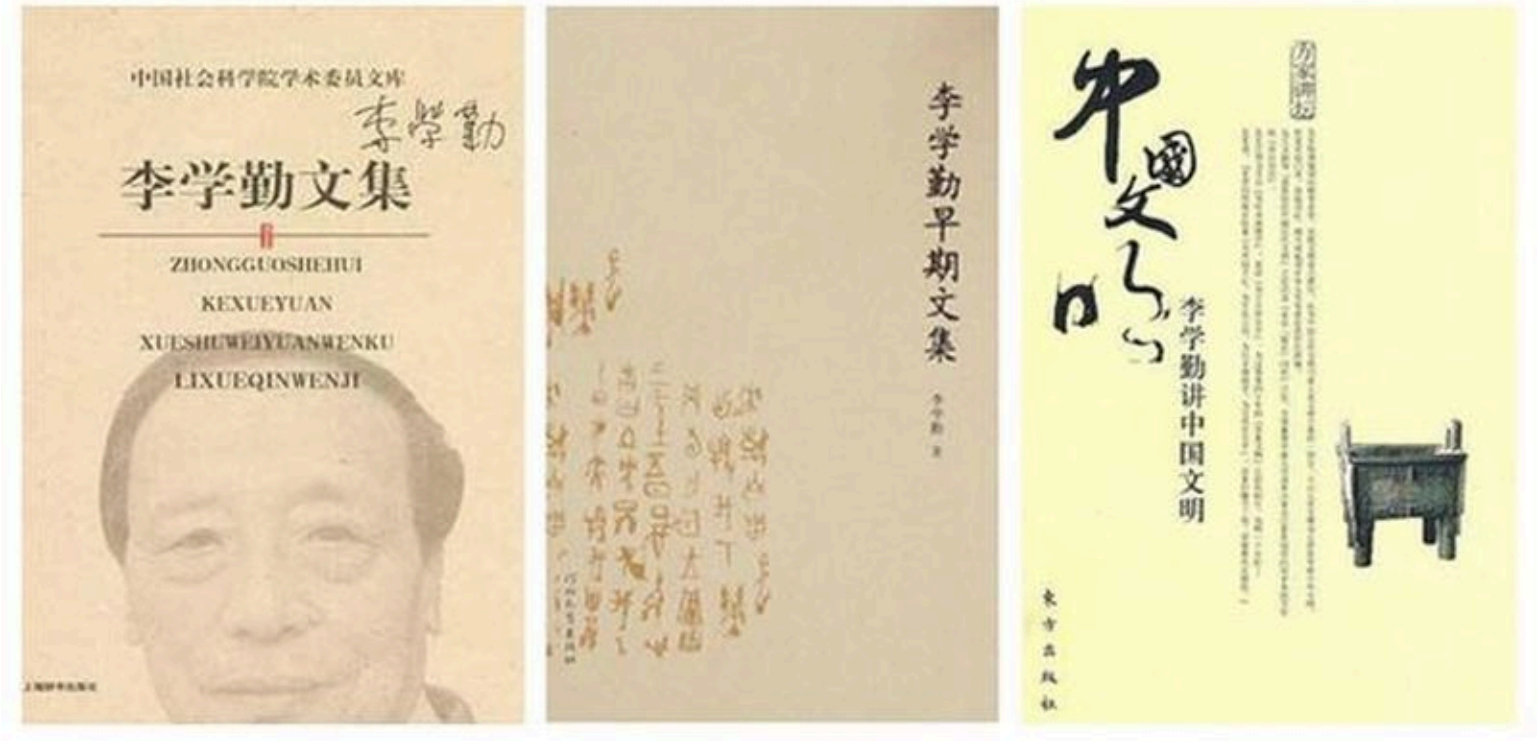
He was one of the first people to work on the silk manuscripts that had been unearthed at Mawangdui, and since 1973 he had been busy deciphering the treasure trove of texts buried with the Marquis of Dai, his wife and what was probably their son, adding punctuation in order to make the long inscriptions intelligible.

Both because of his prominence, and because China in recent decades has been increasingly honing its propagandistic use of history, modern and ancient, to emphasize national greatness and justify the current regime, his death has been reported in detailed obituaries both in China and abroad.

In particular, a piece in the New York Times describes Li as having been a great scholar, but one who made too many compromises with the Party.

Reading that criticism got me thinking about him in a different way. He wasn't a dissident, that is for sure – but he certainly was an independent thinking mind.

The first time we met, we had lunch together in a small restaurant near the offices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where he was working then. The restaurant was the kind of place that was becoming popular at the time, with mahogany-like dark wooden furniture hinting at classical refinements and a certain ceremoniousness around the way tea was served.



Book collections of Li Xueqin's articles and talks.

As the menu arrived, Li stated very firmly that we should only choose a few light dishes: "I prefer rather simple meals, we have nothing to prove," he said. The days of sumptuous banquets even at small family-run restaurants were in full swing, and I was relieved we didn't have to go through that performance for discussing Mawangdui at lunch.

I enjoyed his conversation very much, thanks to his wide-ranging knowledge and his openness to being sidetracked by sudden irrelevant queries on my part.

When we had finished off a plate of *jiachang tofu* (braised tofu with vegetables) and another of *tutou si* (thinly shredded potatoes with green peppers doused in Zhejiang vinegar,) he wrote his phone number on a piece of paper, and used traditional characters for his name.

To my surprised look, he waved his hand and said: "I can't use simplified… It's too troublesome. I learned to read on the traditional ones, I'm not used to these." A small act of

elegant rebellion that didn't make him into an opponent of the regime but at least someone capable of standing up for his values – in itself, no small feat.

Of the conversations with him I do recall, one detail stuck with me, as it again revealed more about his way of thinking than I would have assumed: I had told him about a German student at Peking University who had had her PhD thesis rejected because in her conclusions she defended that there was never a Xia Dynasty.

Her supervisor had advised against it, but she had wanted to go ahead – and lost her somewhat naïve gamble. This is still, to this day, a strong topic for anyone interested in Early China: the famed Three Dynasties, Xia, Shang and Zhou, lost in the fog of myth and archaeology, have become hopelessly entangled with the Communist Party's desire to shape patriotic citizens by providing them with a linear and heroic version of Chinese history.

Li Xueqin (right) appointed as head of the National Museum of Chinese Writing in 2011. Photo: Tsinghua University.

The myth of Chineseness requires ancient roots, and these are duly provided: from a smallish area that was ruled by the Xia, starting in 2000 BC, to today's large China ruled by the CPC, it is but one direct trajectory, from feudal to communist, a desirable civilisation that never conquered or waged war but seduced and self-defended, for 5000 years of history.

That this neat scheme should rest on the sand-like foundations of a Xia dynasty is troublesome only to some, at least inside China, and how this blurry past can justify claims to the South China Seas and, say, the hard repression in Tibet and Xinjiang is clear only to those well trained in authoritarian states' propaganda.

I had brought up the uncanny experience of my acquaintance, thinking this would elicit a reaction from Li and an interesting exchange, but he only pursed his lips, and nodded.

A few years after this episode, in 1995, Li Xueqin was appointed Chief Scientist and Chair of the Board of Specialists for a five-year-long project set up by the State Council, involving 200 scholars and financed with 20 million RMB, called the Xia Shang Zhou Chronology Project.

This was meant to prove the existence of the Xia, and provide precise dates for the other two ancient hereditary dynasties. That Li Xueqin, a cosmopolitan researcher who did a lot to foster dialogue between international scholars of Early China and their Chinese counterparts, was so keen on this research is puzzling, but I remember his attitude as being always positive: how do we study this subject? How do we access this material?

If it meant political compromises, or if it meant being capable of following with conviction certain rules, it showed only in hindsight.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visiting Tsinghua University in April 2016, meeting Li Xueqin. Photo: Tsinghua University.

And so it was that, when I saw he was at the head of what I called the “Prove the Existence of the Xia Dynasty Project,” I was again surprised by Li, wondering if he believed in it, or if he wanted to show political reliability. It is an ambiguity only too common among many Chinese intellectuals.

The issue with the Xia Dynasty, however, is a bit like that with the Bible, or any other sacred test: shall they be taken literally? Can one have faith, without blind faith in those written words? Can ancient texts be approached critically, or do we need to ignore the dinosaurs, or the earth’s orbiting around the sun?

The Xia dynasty is mentioned in Chinese ancient texts, so different schools of thought for thinking of these pre-historic times have developed: the Xin Gu, or Trust Antiquity. The Yi Gu, or Doubt Antiquity. And the one Li Xueqin seemed to favor, Shi Gu, or Interpret Antiquity, which had been put forward by his former professor, the philosopher Feng Youlan – which could still be made to mean that Early China wasn't a set of different cultures, inhabiting what only recently has been described as "China," but a single and glorious civilisation.

Li Xueqin's efforts in that project ended without a precise conclusion: in the published studies, a set of dates were offered, but there still was no Xia Dynasty's smoking gun, so to speak.

Maybe, in the same way in which he had become so skilled at joining oracle bones to interpret their meaning, there were other joinings that took place in his life. That joining of experiences and contradictions that make up everyone's trajectory, and maybe Li Xueqin's more than others. And that make our own rush towards judgment at times premature.