

When Archaeology Begins: The Cultural and Political Context of Chinese Archaeological Thought

Xinyi Liu and Martin Jones

University of Cambridge

(xl241@cam.ac.uk and mkj12@cam.ac.uk)

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the construction of world history has been dominated by Western Europe. In Jack Goody's recent work, *The Theft of History* (2007), he demonstrates that the interpretation of the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened in Europe, and more often in Western Europe. Chinese archaeology, under the control of Western imperialism in the early 20th century, believed that it had to destroy Confucianism and come up with a new philosophy. However, with the arrival of many different kinds of western ideas, such as evolution and diffusion, Chinese archaeology was reformulated many times. Such issues have been discussed in several publications (Chen 1997; Liu and Chen 1999; Falkenhausen 1993). In this paper, we reexamine some of the key concepts of Chinese archaeological thought.

China in an Evolutionary Context

During the 19th century in China, a growing spirit of skepticism about the past became the key driver of archaeological enquiry. China's deteriorating political and economic situation led many Chinese intellectuals to critically review the foundations of their world view, drawing on Confucianism and traditional textual histories (Falkenhausen 1993; Shelach 1999). During the second half of the 19th century, before archaeological investigations were carried out on Chinese territory, European colonial expansion generated a series of cultural and political conflicts. Two Opium Wars were concluded by treaties between China and Western powers. The consequent sense of anger, humiliation and fear led some Chinese intellectuals to ask how the country could survive as a cultural and political entity (Pusey 1983). This reaction to Western imperialism, at a time of great concern for China's fate, provided the intellectual context for a critique of Chinese traditional histories and an emerging interest in social Darwinism.

In 1897, Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (*Tian Yan Lun* in Chinese) was published in an edition that reached the whole country. The book was an unusual publication for China. In particular, many of those who read it were to later shape the development of 20th century Chinese politics and culture. In the following decade after the publication of *Tian Yan Lun*, social Darwinism became an important influence on Chinese political discourse. Many key revolutionary philosophical concepts, such as cultural and nationalist and communist revolutions, were informed by the theme of 'survival of the fittest'. At the beginning of the 20th century, archaeology was discussed in China for the first time, as a part of a broader discussion of a possible Chinese cultural revolution led by Liang Qichao (1989). The intellectual basis of such a revolution not only threw open all of China's past to agonizing reappraisal, but also seemed to force Chinese intellectuals to create or discover a whole new philosophy of life. Given this social context, archaeology was seen by many as the scientific method or means with which to challenge the ancient texts of China which had for centuries been accepted as the ultimate source of knowledge about the past (Falkenhausen 1993).

Western Connection of Chinese Archaeology

From Darwin to Huxley, from Yan Fu to Liang Qichao, there is one thing that preoccupied the majority of Chinese people – that was the idea of progress and how to make it happen. However,

when Chinese archaeology was first undertaken in 1920s and 1930s, the idea of ‘progress’ was no longer of major interest among western anthropologists, particularly among British post-Victorian pessimists (Childe 1956). Instead, for both foreign archaeologists coming to China and for young Chinese scholars studying abroad, the major influence on their archaeological work came from a very different tradition — diffusionism.

The archaeological campaign of the Swedish geologist, Johan Gunnar Andersson, at the village of Yangshao, in Henan province in 1921 is seen by many as marking the “birth” of Chinese archaeology. It has recently transpired that the great Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius played an important role in supporting the allocation of Swedish funding for Andersson’s archaeological research in China. In 1920, after Montelius’ intervention, the Swedish Parliament awarded 90,000 Swedish crowns to Andersson, to carry out his work in China (Chen 2003). Montelius’ diffusionist interpretation of archaeology was clearly part of more widely held views about human creativeness fashionable at the end of the 19th century. Montelius and many other archaeologists believed that prehistoric cultures had first developed in the Near East and then their achievements had been carried to Europe by waves of diffusion and migration of people (Trigger 2006). These theoretical standpoints greatly influenced the development of Chinese archaeology through Andersson’s work and through the translations of Montelius’ work into Chinese in 1930s (Yu 1999).

Moreover, there are some interesting parallels between Montelius and early Chinese archaeology with regard to the use of archaeology in the development of nationalism. Oscar Montelius was one of the key figures on using archaeology to contribute to the idea of an enduring Swedish nation. For him, the great significance of Andersson’s work in China was that it showed how the small nation of Sweden could help to elucidate the origins of civilization in the one of the world’s largest nations (Fiskesjo and Chen 2004). For Chinese archaeologists, the significance of the Yangshao culture excavated by Andersson, for the Chinese people, was that it was evidence that Chinese culture had its own ‘prehistory’.

The first generation of Chinese scholars venturing abroad for their archaeological training included the son of Liang Qichao (the translator of Huxley, see above), Liang Siyong, and Li Ji. They studied at Harvard University in the USA in the 1920s (Edward and Wang 1997). On their return, these two archaeologists were pivotal in the creation of an Institute of History and Philology at the Academia Sinica. In the years following its establishment, the institute launched several excavations, including one at Anyang, which is today viewed as among the most fundamental of research in Chinese archaeology. In 1949, when the Communist army seized control of most of China, Li Ji and almost half of the members of the Institute of History and Philology retreated to Taiwan together with the Nationalist Government. On the mainland of China, Liang Siyong and Xia Nai remained together with other left wing colleagues. In the following decades, Xia Nai became an important and remarkable figure in Chinese archaeology through his leading fieldwork and his training of a generation of students in the People’s Republic of China. Xia Nai was the Communist government’s primary advisor on archaeological matters from the 1950s onwards, and in 1962, he was appointed the Director of the Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology in Beijing.

Xia Nai had trained at the Institute of Archaeology in London, between 1938 and 1941. Sir William Flinders Petrie, the great diffusionist, had previously directed the Institute and while Xia Nai had only met Petrie on one occasion in Jerusalem (Falkenhausen 1999). The influence of Petrie’s rigorous field work strategies and broad interpretative approaches are clearly evident on Xia Nai’s later work (Xia 1959). And Petrie’s seriation techniques inspired and influenced Xia Nai’s 1959 book, which would become the standard text book of archaeological students in China for a number of decades.

Solution: Towards an Indigenous Origin of Chinese Civilization

Since the 19th century the diffusionist paradigm of a western origin for Chinese civilization was widely believed. Its inference was that the prehistoric cultures of China were the result of ‘a process

(of transferal of) ideas, objects or cultural traits from the ancient civilizations of the West'. It was a culture history model that placed Chinese archaeologists in a difficult position ideologically within the political context of a Chinese nationalism based on the idea of progress. Their solution was, in essence, to transpose Montelius and Petrie's analysis of the development of civilizations around the 'Great Rivers' in the West, to that of similar development of civilizations around the 'Great Rivers' in the East. Much that had been narrated, argued and analysed or the development of civilizations around the Nile, and the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, could be reformulated to explain the development of civilizations around the Huang of China became the foci, both of archaeological fieldwork, and of discussion about the stages in the progress of Chinese civilization: the emergence of agriculture, social complexity and the state, and finally, of an enduring Chinese national identity.

Since the end of the 19th century, as in many places elsewhere in the world, the development of the Chinese history has struggled between European dominated perspectives and indigenous traditions. Archaeology, since its very beginning has played a central role in establishing a new social ideology for modern China. Ironically, despite the western origins of ideas about 'evolution', 'diffusion', and 'civilization beside great river valleys', the application of these ideas to local Chinese archaeological contexts was so that they could prove the contrary – that the West and the East had diverged.

References

- Chang, K. C. 1986. *The Archaeology of Ancient China*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Chen, X. C. 1997. *Research of History of Chinese Archaeology*. Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- 2003. 'An Important Document in the History of Modern Chinese Science: Andersson's Letter to the Swedish Crown Prince, with Commentary', *Gujin Lunheng* 8: 10–17. (in Chinese)
- Childe, V. G. 1956. *Man Makes Himself*, pp. 1–2. London: Watts and Co.
- Edward, R. and T. Wang, 1997. 'Xia Nai: The London Connection', *Orientalism* 28.6: 38–41.
- Falkenhausen, L. v. 1993. 'On the Historical Orientation of Chinese Archaeology', *Antiquity* 67: 839–849.
- 1999. 'Xia Nai (1910–1985)'. In T. Murray (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: The Great Archaeologists*, vol 2, pp. 601–614. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Fiskesjo, M. and X. C. Chen, 2004. *China Before China: John Gunnar Andersson, Ding Wenjiang, and the Discovery of China's Prehistory*. Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.
- Goody, J. 2007. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liang, Q. C. 1989a. 'Prolegomenon to Chinese History'. In Q. C. Liang *Yin Bing Shi He Ji*, vol 9. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju. (in Chinese)
- Liu, L. and X. C. Chen, 1999. 'China'. In T. Murray (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, vol 1, pp. 315–333. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Pusey, J. R. 1983. *China and Charles Darwin*. Cambridge MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Shelach, G. 1999. *Leadership Strategies, Economic Activity, and Interregional Interaction: Social Complexity in Northeast China*. New York: Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers.
- Trigger, B. G. 2006. *A History of Archaeological Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, Z. S. 1985. 'Brief Biography of Mr. Xia Nai', *Kaogu* 215: 678–685. (in Chinese)
- Xia, N. 1959. 'Methodology of Field Archaeology'. In Nai Xia *The Basis of Archaeology*. Beijing: Science Publishing House. (in Chinese)
- Yu, W. C. 1999. 'A Milestone of Chinese Archaeology in This Century'. In B. Q. Su *Zhongguo Wenming Qiyuan Xintan*, pp. 1–13. Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House. (in Chinese)