

# Liang Siyong and Xia Nai: leading pioneers of Chinese archaeology

By WANG XING

Liang Siyong (1904–1954) and Xia Nai (1910–1985) were two important figures in the history of Chinese archaeology. Liang was honored as “the first scholar in China who has formally trained in modern Western archaeology,” while Xia was praised as “one of the founders of modern Chinese archaeology.” For over 20 years, the two cooperated as master and apprentice, their joint efforts reflecting the development of Chinese archaeology.

In June 1934, Xia graduated from the Department of History at Tsinghua University, and was admitted to study archaeology in the United States at public expense four months later. Prior to leaving, he was required to take preparatory courses and an internship for a year in China. The influential Chinese historian Fu Ssu-nien and archaeologist Li Chi were designated as Xia’s advisors by Tsinghua University. Both Fu and Li mentioned Liang Siyong in their guidance opinions. Li even expressed being out of date with the latest developments of archaeology abroad, and believed that Liang, who had just returned to China, was more familiar with relevant schools and mentors overseas. In the summer of 1930, Liang graduated from Harvard University and worked as an archaeological team member at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica. As the first professionally trained Chinese archaeologist, Liang was able to provide Xia with valuable mentorship.

On March 12, 1935, Xia arrived in Anyang, Henan, and participated in the 11th excavation of the Yinxu Ruins led by Liang, during which he had discussed choosing overseas colleges with Liang. Finally, with the help of Liang and Li, Xia succeeded in changing his plan to studying in the United Kingdom.

## Anthropology and fieldwork

After obtaining a bachelor’s degree in archaeology and anthropology at Harvard, Liang shifted to East Asian archaeology, which further raised his awareness of the value of anthropology in archaeological



FILE PHOTO: Liang Siyong (left) and his brother Liang Sicheng at the Yinxu site in 1935



FILE PHOTO: Xia Nai reading an issue of *Acta Archaeologica Sinica*

research. He told Xia that anthropology could lay the theoretical foundation for archaeology. He also suggested that while studying in Europe, Xia should pay attention to the “anthropological background” of European archaeology. These views influenced Xia’s understanding of archaeology. When studying overseas, Xia took courses in anthropology and physical anthropology and read extensively on the subjects. He regarded anthropology as the “foundation” of archaeology, coinciding with Liang’s opinion. After 1949, Xia emphasized the close relationship between anthropology and archaeology many times in his works on archaeological theories.

The early stage of modern Chinese archaeology saw a weak point in archaeological techniques and methods. During Xia’s internship in Anyang, Liang often emphasized the importance of learning advanced “technology” for fieldwork when studying overseas. In the UK, Xia took optional courses closely related to archaeological technology, such as “the purpose and methods of field archaeology” and “field excavation and indoor sorting of archaeological remains.” He learned a handful of archaeological techniques not yet applied in China, such as digging trial trenches and open-area excavation, by participating in the excavations at Maiden Castle in the UK and Armant in Egypt. He also honed his sorting skills by participating in indoor sorting work of antiquities. Undoubtedly, in addition to Xia’s own efforts, Liang’s previous guidance also played a role in inspiring Xia to master the latest archaeological concepts and technical methods. As the cradle of modern archaeology, the UK provided Xia with systematic and professional training.

## From learning to cooperating

In 1934, shortly after learning that he had been accepted as a state-sponsored student to study overseas, Xia started to read *Ang’angxi Prehistoric Sites*, an excavation report written by Liang. While overseas, Xia continued to read Liang’s works and remained updated on his academic ideas and the develop-

ment of Chinese archaeology. After returning to China in 1941, Xia had more opportunities for face-to-face discussions with Liang while working for the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica. The two also exchanged ideas on specific work-related matters, and Liang often talked about his own work plans.

From May 1949 to July 1950, Xia made an important life decision. That year, he was invited by the Chinese historian Xiang Da to become a professor at Peking University. Another historian, Han Rulin, invited him to teach at Nanjing University, and the leading scholar Zheng Zhenduo made an offer to be the director of the Department of Antiquities [later renamed the Department of Cultural Relics] under the National Cultural Heritage Administration. Xia declined them all, choosing instead to work as the deputy director of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) [the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) was established in 1977, based on the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the CAS, and the Institute of Archaeology was re-set under the CASS]. Liang’s previous letters encouraging him to take the job played a crucial role.

In the first few years following the establishment of the Institute of Archaeology, Liang, as the deputy director, managed to take charge of the daily issues of the institute, even while on his sickbed. Xia was also appointed as the deputy director, directing fieldwork and cultivating field archaeologists. When travelling farther to host fieldwork, Xia always wrote to Liang to inform him of the latest progress. After returning from excavations, Xia would also promptly communicate his findings with Liang. In addition to actively promoting fieldwork, indoor work, and talent cultivation, the two also frequently discussed academic issues.

## ‘Pass the torch’

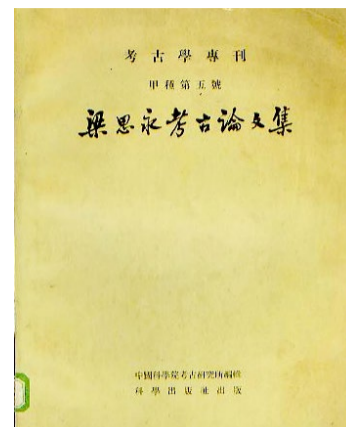
On April 2, 1954, Liang died of a heart attack. For Xia, the best commemoration of his teacher was to sort out and publish his academic works. In 1959, *Liang Siyong’s Archaeological Essays* was published. As a personal monograph on archaeological research quite rare in the 1950s, the smooth publication of this book depended on Xia’s hard work. Xia did not simply collate Liang’s posthumous works, but wrote several “Editor’s Notes” and three “Editor’s Postscripts,” in which he revised Liang’s views on some specific points. Xia’s editing and organizing of Liang’s posthumous works not only enabled more scholars to understand Liang’s academic propositions, but also inspired further exploration of the Yangshao culture, the Longshan culture, and Neolithic pottery.

Opinions vary on the standards of “scientific archaeology.” Xia highly praised Liang for his scientific archaeological concepts and excavation techniques. Regarding the early archaeological excavation reports published by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Xia believed that many of them still needed improvement from the perspective of scientific standards. Liang had set a high bar for compiling scientific archaeological reports. Xia also attached great importance to this work in his later archaeological activities. He believed that the compilation of scientific archaeological reports was not only a continuation of fieldwork, but also helped to cultivate young archaeologists. The timely and scientific publication of archaeological findings relies on this work.

Stratigraphy is one of the basic research methods of archaeology. In 1931, Liang discovered the famous “three-layered accumulation” in Hougang, Henan, where the layers consisted of the ruins of the Yangshao culture, Longshan culture, and Yinxu [last Shang capital] from bottom to top [thereby proving in stratigraphy that the Chinese civilization evolved along the same strain and was not inherited from the West]. His discovery greatly promoted the development of stratigraphy in China. While emphasizing the importance of stratigraphy, Xia keenly summarized what should be noted when applying stratigraphic principles. Discerning the chronological relationship between two archaeological cultures with a scientific and cautious attitude required the study of the stratigraphic relationships of several sites. Both Xia and Liang had devoted themselves to promoting the “scientificization” of Chinese archaeology, which also became their common career pursuit.

Liang’s archaeological achievements were mainly made between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, while Xia’s were after the mid-1940s. The periods of 1921–1928, 1928–1948, and after 1949 corresponded to the birth, preliminary development, and comprehensive development of Chinese archaeology, respectively. Liang and Xia made great contributions to the different development stages of Chinese archaeology. Liang played a significant role in advancing traditional epigraphy to modern archaeology. On this basis, Xia further raised the level of Chinese archaeology. Their academic efforts pointed to the same direction: to constantly improve the scientificity of Chinese archaeology and develop its voice in international discourse.

The article was edited and translated from *Chinese Social Science Digest*. Wang Xing is an associate professor from the Yuelu Academy at Hunan University.



FILE PHOTO: *Liang Siyong’s Archaeological Essays*

## Liang Siyong

By REN ZHIYU

On January 10, 1927, Tsinghua University held a meeting to celebrate the previous year’s archaeological excavations in Xiyin Village, Shanxi Province. The Chinese historian Li Chi and the geologist Yuan Fuli said in their speeches that they were waiting for a true professional in the field of archaeology. This person was Liang Siyong (1904–1954), the second son of Liang Qichao (1873–1929), China’s foremost intellectual leader in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Before the 1920s, modern archaeology was still seen as a strange, Western discipline. Liang Siyong chose such an unpopular major due in part to his father, who had vigorously promoted the development of Chinese archaeology. Liang Qichao introduced new historiographical ideas incorporating Western archaeological concepts to China and guided his children to become pioneers in the practice of these ideas. On hearing Li and Yuan were expecting his son, Liang Qichao wrote to Liang Siyong, who was studying at Harvard at that time: “On hearing this, I was happy for you, but also worried about you. How can you live up to the reputation of ‘China’s first professional archaeologist’ in the future? You have to work very hard.”

In 1930, Liang Siyong graduated and returned to China. In autumn, he went to Heilongjiang Province to excavate the Ang’angxi site. The archaeologist Chen Xingcan recorded that Liang and his colleagues traveled thousands of miles under extremely difficult conditions, and it took them 38 days to complete China’s first systematic archaeological survey of the northeast. In 1931, Liang took part in the excavations at the Yinxu site, Henan. He brought scientific archaeological concepts and methods to the excavations. At Hougang, Liang proposed the “three-layered accumulation” after exploring the layers consisting of the ruins of the Yangshao, Longshan, and Shang cultures. He thus became the founder of Chinese archaeological stratigraphy.

Liang lived up to his father’s expectations, devoted all his knowledge and efforts to Chinese archaeology, and kept working until the day he passed away.