Sixty Years of Archaeology in New China

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In the sixty years since the founding of the People’s Republic, Chinese archaeology has made remarkable progress. To summarize this development, the present paper will state the main advances in the preceding thirty years (1949-1978) and those in the successive thirty years (1979-2009), and call the two stages “Earlier 30 years” and “Later 30 years” respectively.

I. General Development of Chinese Archaeology in the Past 60 Years

1. Guiding Ideology. In the 60 years since the founding of New China, Chinese archaeological circles have all along tried hard to adhere to Marxism as their guidance. But on the issue of how to put it into effect, they went through a process of practice and realization. In the earlier 30 years, some archaeologists attempted to analyze ancient Chinese society with the Marxist theory of social development. Because of the limitation of the then historical condition and cognitive level, their studies could not completely avoid dogmatic understanding of some inferences in Marx’ and Engels’ theories. Nevertheless, this was the inceptive effort of archaeologists in New China to combine Marxist theories with the practice of Chinese archaeological researches and the reality of historical development in ancient China. Since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up period, Chinese archaeology have gradually shaken off the manacles of dogmatism, and archaeologists have been more actively exerting themselves to precise comprehension and correct application of the fundamental tenets of Marxism as the guidance of archaeological studies, and have been striving to use substantial archaeological data of China to enrich and develop Marxism. In this aspect the most representative were the theoretical researches of Xia Nai, Su Bingqi and some other archaeologists on the origin of Chinese Civilization and the formation and development of states in China.

2. Archaeological Theories. In the earlier 30 years, Chinese archaeology took the studies of archaeological cultures in various areas and the establishment of their local evolutionary sequences as the basic tasks. Its guiding theories were mainly those on the archaeological cultures, archaeological stratigraphy and typology. In the first half of the 1980s, Xia Nai and Su Bingqi, based on their summarization of related work in Chinese archaeological circles, formed respectively the theory of the denomination of archaeological cultures and that of archaeological “regional systems and cultural types” and thus made important contribution to the guidance of Chinese archaeology’s advance in the correct direction.

Since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up Era, with the increasing deepening of international exchange, various archaeological theories and schools have been successively introduced into China and exerted greater or lesser influence upon the development of Chinese archaeology. The advance of Chinese archaeology needs understanding, adopting and using foreign archaeological theories and methods for reference, but we should absolutely not copy indiscriminately or imitate mechanically the experience of others. In other words, the theories and methods of international academic circles should be adopted and used for reference in accordance with the reality of Chinese archaeology and on the basis of persisting in and developing our own fine tradition so as to form finally theories and methodologies characteristic of Chinese archaeology that conform to China’s distinctive features. This principal has become a common concept in the overwhelming majority of Chinese archaeologists.

3. Archaeological Institutions and Professional Personnel. Before the “Cultural Revolution,” the ar-
archaeological personnel in China were rather small in number, comprising only the archaeological teams under the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology and the Institute of Archaeology, Academia Sinica, the Archaeology Department at the Museum of Chinese History and the provincial museums and commissions for the preservation of ancient monuments, as well as the teachers of Archaeology Specialty at some universities, such as Peking University and Northwest University. Since the early 1980s, provincial institutes of cultural relics and archaeology sprang up one after another, and municipal institutions have also been founded in some cities of prefecture rank. Up to the present, there have been above 40 various-rank institutes or academies of cultural relics and archaeology throughout the country. As a vital force on the archaeological front, they are increasingly presenting their importance in the archaeological circles of China.

4. Cultivation of Special Personnel. Before the “Cultural Revolution,” throughout China only a very few institutions of higher learning, i.e. Peking University and Northwest University, set up archaeological specialty, and the graduates they provided every year for archaeological work totaled merely several dozens. In the mid 1970s, this type of specialty was founded at other seven or eight universities. In the recent decade, the archaeology departments and the archaeological or antiquarian specialties were established in succession at twenty or so tertiary educational institutions, which, along with other graduate schools, finished cultivation of bachelor, master and doctor degrees every year for hundreds of students.

5. Academic Societies. In the earlier 30 years, there were no nationwide archaeological societies in China. In 1979, the Chinese Society of Archaeology was founded as the only national organization in Chinese archaeological circles. From then on it has been steadily growing, and at present has become an organization with nearly 2,000 members. Since the 1980s, province-level archaeological societies have been set up one after another throughout the country. All these academic organizations are playing an active role in strengthening mutual exchange among archaeologists all over the country and promoting the development of Chinese archaeology.

6. Archaeological Excavations. In the earlier 30 years, archaeological excavations centered mainly on certain academic researches and were carried out merely in tens every year. Since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up, archaeological work in capital construction has steadily increased. Presently excavation projects are implemented in hundreds every year. For example, in 2007, the excavation items submitted for approval exceeded 700 across the country, of which above 90% were in coordination with capital construction. A few years ago, in the Three Gorges Project, more than 80 archaeological institutions nationwide participated in the archaeological work, archaeological excavation and protection items totaled nearly 1,100, the prospected areas reached 3,100 ha and the excavated areas amount to 180 ha upon the funds of approximately one billion CNY. In the works of South-North Water Transfer (SNWT) Project carried out presently, over 50 archaeological organs have taken part in archaeological projects, in which the over 1,600 ha have been surveyed and about 170 ha will be excavated.

In recent years, with the increase of state-invested funds for the protection of large sites, archaeological excavation in this aspect has been greatly expanded, which has become a distinctive feature of archaeological excavation in the new century.

7. International Interchange. In the earlier 30 years, there were rare interchanges between our archaeologists and international counterparts. This situation has been distinctly changed since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy. Hundreds of middle-aged and young archaeologists went abroad for advanced studies, and still more archaeologists, antiquarians and museum workers had opportunity to go to abroad for short term visits through various channels. Meanwhile, hundreds and even thousands of international archaeologists came to China for visit and investigation and made direct communication with Chinese archaeologists. At academic symposia held in China, we often heard the voice of archaeologists from abroad. In various regions of the world, Chinese archaeologists appeared frequently at international archaeological conferences. By opening up the gateway of our country and striding to the world, Chinese archaeologists greatly expanded their view and widened their thinking. On the other hand, international academic circles are increasingly deepening their understanding to Chinese archaeology, whose achievements are winning more and more attention and appreciation among their international counterparts.

6. International Cooperative Excavations. In the earlier 30 years, for the reason of related policies, Sino-
foreign joint excavation was embodied only in the work of the Sino-Korean Cooperative Archaeological Team in Northeast China in the first half of 1960s. In the later 30 years, Sino-foreign joint surveys and excavations have reached above 60 projects. Thanks to joint field operation, Chinese archaeologists have more directly understood methods and concepts of archaeological reconnaissance and excavation their foreign colleagues practiced and summed up, and have drawn beneficial enlightenments and inspirations. Meanwhile, some prospecting means and experience characteristic of Chinese archaeology, such as its effective coring and excavation methods, have gained interest and attention from foreign experts.

9. Archaeological Journals. In the earlier 30 years, throughout the country there were only the so-called three major archaeological journals, i.e. Kaogu (Archaeology), Kaogu Xuebao (Acta Archaeologica Sinica) and Wenwu (Cultural Relics). Since the early 1980s, a number of provincial-level institutions have initiated academic journals. Presently there have been more than 20 journals with national serial numbers and above 30 archaeological, antiquarian and museum magazines issued with regional journal numbers or as informal publications. This constitutes an aspect reflecting the vigorous development of Chinese archaeological undertakings.

10. Academic Activities. In the earlier 30 years, for the limitation of various factors, academic symposia were rarely held. In the last 30 years, academic activities were rapidly increased. Academic symposia or conferences were held several or a dozen or so times every year, including a number of international academic meetings and numerous lectures conducted by archaeological institutions. Providing arenas for academic interchange and forming occasions of learning discussion, these academic activities played an active role in the progress of Chinese archaeology.

11. Research Subjects and Accomplishments. In the earlier 30 years, no systematic structure of research subjects was formed, and archaeologists’ researches were mostly individual works. Since the initiation of the Reform and Opening-up, with the development of archaeological undertakings, a system of multi-level subject researches has been established with national, provincial-departmental and institution-organized studies carried out on an unprecedented scale.

In the 60-year period, over 300 archaeological excavation reports have been published, of which over a half came out in the last decade. Moreover, hundreds of archaeological monographs of various types and about ten thousand theses have been published since the founding of the People’s Republic.

12. Protection of Cultural Heritage. The official promulgation of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics forcefully enhanced the protection of ancient monuments. The awareness of protecting cultural heritage has been stroking root more and more deeply in the people’s hearts. Relaying mainly on protection, giving first place to salvage, utilizing rationally and strengthening preservation – these principles have become the common understanding of the scholars and administrators in relevant fields. Since the late 1990s, the government has taken still more vigorous actions to protect large sites and listed about one hundred state-protected monuments in the program of protection, which greatly promoted the protection of these large sites.

13. Public Archaeology. In the earlier 30 years, archaeologists’ consciousness of popularizing archaeological knowledge was fairly weak, the contents of archaeological work were little known to the people, and the public’s awareness of protecting cultural relics was poor. These circumstances have been distinctly changed in the later 30 years. Especially in the last decade, with the growth of economy and the constant rise of living level, the people’s consciousness of protecting cultural relics has been increasingly heightened, and the public become more concerned in archaeology. The media are publicizing archaeology increasingly, and their live transmission of field archaeology sites, such as the whole salvage of the wrecked ship South-China-Sea-I, shortened the distance between archaeology and the public. There sprang up a number of popular readings as well as movie and TV works about archaeological accomplishments. The Institute of Archaeology, CASS and Peking University set up public archaeological centers, which are actively engaged in spreading and popularization of archaeological knowledge.

II. Development and Change of the Aims, Concepts and Methods of Archaeological Studies in the Past 60 Years

1. In the earlier 30 years, the main task of Chinese archaeology was to establish evolutionary sequences of archaeological cultures in various areas. In the later 30
Sixty Years of Archaeology in New China

years, together with the perfection of sequences of archaeological cultures, scholars began to pay their main attention to the researches on the cultural contents and people’s living of different periods as well as ancient society, which enriched increasingly our knowledge about these aspects of prehistoric and historical times.

2. Archæologists’ consciousness of historical studies has been gradually strengthened. Their main attention has been turned from the typological and chronological studies to investigating the original state of history. They stress inquiries into the people’s ideologies, behaviors and interrelationships reflected by archæological remains according to the principle “to see man through objects,” which has become a common research concept of most archaeologists.

3. Concerning research theory and methodology, Chinese archaeology has developed from studies by using archæological stratigraphy and typology to researches by applying the theories and methods of social archaeology, archæology on subsistence, cognitive archaeology, experimental archaeology, environmental archaeology, archæological statistics, GIS, paleoethnobotany, zooarchæology and contextual archæology according to the subjects. The diversity of archæological theories and methods is an important symbol for the increasing maturity and prosperity of Chinese archaeology.

4. In the last 30 years, various natural scientific and technical means are more and more widely applied in archæological researches, which extremely enriched the methods of archæological studies and expanded research scope. This has greatly deepened our understanding on the level of agriculture, husbandry, handicraft and technology, the migration of populations, human physical developments, people’s diet patterns, raw material resources, and man’s relationship with natural environments. The application of natural scientific and technical means has enhanced to a greater extent our knowledge about the aspects of ancient people’s living than that in the earlier 30 years. In a sense, the use of these means made extremely deep-going changes in Chinese archaeology.

5. The study of the relationship of human activities with their environments has been increasingly drawing researchers’ attention and has made obvious progresses. In the earlier 30 years, archæologists paid attention principally to man’s activities and their cultural remains; no enough concern were shown and no appropriate research means were taken to the investigation of man’s living environments and man’s relationship with these ecological and geographical conditions. In the last 30 years, thanks to the wide application of natural scientific means, archaeologists have been able to understand natural environments in various times and regions, thus it has become possible to explore the man-land relationship. The choice of living environments, the influence and restriction of natural environments to man’s activities, and man’s action on natural environments in various periods have all become important research subjects, and these researches have made progresses in various levels.

6. Researches on the ancient people’s spiritual world (cosmology, worldview, religious beliefs, aesthetics, etc.) are drawing more and more attention from archaeologists. Some relevant cultural remains and relics have been unearthed, and gratifying results have been obtained in the exploration of prehistoric and historical religions, sacrifices, Buddhist temples, as well as in the revelation of the music, painting, sculptural and architectural arts of different periods.

7. Settlement archaeology is increasingly becoming archaeologists’ concerns. Distinct achievements have been gained from regional surveys in the Yiluo, Huan and Banzhijian River Valleys and in the Liangchengzhen area of southeastern Shandong. As a result, more and more Chinese archaeologists came to understand that carrying out regional settlement studies in a sturdy and careful manner, analyzing the number, scale and distribution of settlements in different periods within certain regions, taking into account the layout of the central settlements and their change and studying the social organizations and structures in different regions constitute the most effective methodology for revealing the social conditions of prehistoric times.

8. Considerable attention has been paid to the study of the exchange and interrelationship between different cultures and peoples. This includes not only the investigation of the interactions among the different regions within China and their influence upon the historical development course of certain regions (e.g. the civilizing process in various areas), but also the researches on the communications between Chinese cultures and foreign cultures in different periods. For example, by researching into the overland and maritime silk and jade roads, scholars have over and over again specified their understanding of cultural interchanges and interactions both among different regions within our country and between
China and foreign countries.
In the past 60 years, Chinese archaeology has gained plentiful achievements, which symbolizes the arrival of its ripe era. In a sense, Chinese archaeology has entered a Golden Age with unprecedented development. China is sturdily striding forward from a country rich in archaeological resources to that rich in archaeological researches. The future of Chinese archaeology will be boundless bright.

Postscript: The original titled Xin Zhongguo Kaogu Liushi Nian 新中国考古六十年 (Sixty Years of Archaeology in New China) was published in Kaogu 考古 (Archaeology) 2009.9:3–14. The original author and the rewriter of the abridged version is Wang Wei 王巍 and the translator of the English version is Mo Runxian 莫润先.