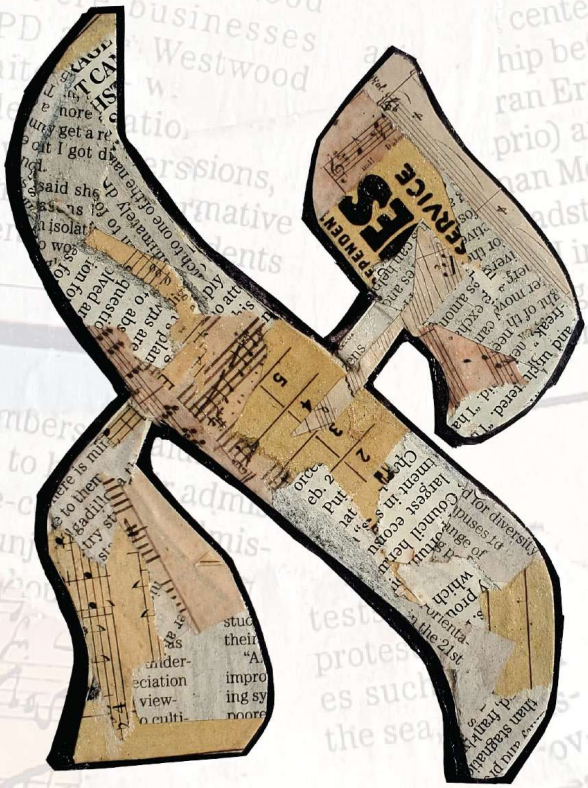
Chinese Archaeology as a Function of Politics

Conner Lee



Chinese Archaeology as a Function of Politics

Conner Lee

Abstract: Before one can address the pressing questions within any discipline, it is worth investigating the narratives and assumptions that undergird the answers. In Chinese archaeology, there have been observable points in time where politics have exerted significant force on academic opinions - certain political epochs correspond to homogeneity in opinion. This begs the question: in the context of Chinese archaeology, how exactly has politics affected archaeological interpretations of discoveries and theoretical frameworks? Within the modern era, I look to three major eras that have well-documented effects on Chinese archaeology to chart the changes in the discipline over time: 1) the Republican era, 2) the Maoist era, and 3) the post-reform period (i.e., 1978 and onwards). In interpreting these broad eras and the political views that characterize them, I will appeal to Michel Foucault's concept of the episteme. That is, the underlying assumptions that ground the way people understand the world and their surroundings. I find that, regardless of what political narratives become dominant, nationalism is always a core fixture of these interpretations. Further, I also find that nationalism did not appear as a spontaneous phenomenon but served a very specific purpose: to counter the Western colonization of the discipline.

Keywords: *Chinese Archaeology, Nationalism, Episteme, Michel Foucault, China*

Politics and Archaeological Interpretations

The deployment of the historical past has been a major tool in the maintenance of Chinese political narratives. Indeed, leaders of China, modern and old, have often claimed the utility of the past in service of the future (古为今用). That is, how we interpret history can be used to buttress political movements. Despite radical changes in the political landscape, this topic has remained within the academic consciousness of China. At the same time, it can also be said that the reverse in the direction of influence is true. Existing political values shape interpretations of history. This could also be true given that people may seek to defer to the prevailing political narrative not as a way to advance the interests of a political framework but rather as a way of conformity. The primary claim that I wish to advance here is that one does not lean on the other without its support; politics and the interpretation of history are mutually reinforcing structures. It is simply not true that only one is conditionally dependent on the other for its existence. How we interpret history may furnish our political views just as our political views affect how we interpret history. In Foucauldian terms, interpretations of history may arise within an episteme but also serve in its construction. In the context of Chinese archaeology, archaeological developments exist within political movements and may also serve as the kindling to ignite further movements.

The Foucauldian Episteme and its Application

In pursuit of finding a grander explanation for these political movements, we shall appeal to the works of 20th-century French philosopher Michel Foucault. His transdisciplinary research, which stretched across philosophy, sociology, history, and other subjects, primarily focused on dissecting the production of truth. Indeed, this is an explanation that he insisted was representative of his research (Kelly n.d.). In simpler terms, however, he was interested in investigating the formation of knowledge and its interaction with social institutions, history, norms, etc. One important outgrowth of his intellectual work on truth was the idea

of an episteme. It is this idea that we shall use to interpret the evolution of archaeological thought in China.

To understand how the Foucauldian episteme functions within my greater argument, it would be valuable first to clarify what it means. In the *Order of Things*, Foucault makes the case for the existence of the episteme, or the unconscious rules of formation that determine what is legitimate knowledge. This is grounded within the historical context of an epoch, with all forms of knowledge being subordinate. In any given instance, the current episteme of an epoch exercises great influence over how we think about the world and it "prescribes rules for the ordering and classifying of our concepts" (Bevir 1999, 3). In that sense, our understanding of the world becomes fixed. The episteme comes to circumscribe the very intellectual limits of possibility for truth. To some degree, things external or in conflict with the episteme are discarded as non-knowledge and are treated as psychologically unintelligible; the episteme defines not only knowledge but also rationality itself (Turner 2017, 3). I intend not to focus on the parts of the Foucauldian episteme with psychological and rational implications so much as I want to focus on the social aspect. Epistemes also have implications for the production of knowledge socially, as they condition what other people see as knowledge. In that sense, even if someone does manage to break free from the epistemic determination of the episteme, they are still limited by what other people perceive as legitimate forms of knowledge.

Foucault only recognized the existence of three epistemes: 1) the Renaissance, 2) the Classical, and 3) the Modern, but I wish to broaden the scope of the application of his thought to things beyond Western civilization. Chinese society, and specifically Chinese academia, is rife with examples of unconscious epistemological constraints that affect how we see the world. This seems all too easy to say and much harder to implement in practice. How exactly do we apply Foucault's teachings to our historiography of Chinese archaeology? One way to make sense of the episteme is to understand it as a system that"isolates selective aspects of phenomenological experience, directs our attention to these part-elements...and promotes the establishment of formal

causal relations" (Leary and Chia 2007, 5). In simpler and more relevant terms, it is the tacit organizational rules that help us identify salient archaeological and historical phenomena and render a more cohesive understanding of the world. Importantly, this is not something that develops in a vacuum. The episteme occurs "within socio-cultural contexts. They are motivated by a need for achieving economy, coherence, consistency and hence legitimacy in our thoughts and actions" (Leary and Chia 2007, 6). Thus, the episteme is grounded in the context of the time in which it emerges - it exercises influence on society but is itself impressionable to influence.

Nationalistic Discourse in Early Chinese Archaeology

After gaining independence from both dynastic rule and the colonial interests of Western powers, China witnessed a large nationalistic charge for a new national consciousness and a Chinese identity based on cultural and historical grounds (Lu 2002). At the spearhead of this new effort was the burgeoning field of Chinese archaeology, which was beginning to attract a large public interest. China began to import foreign experts to start the excavation of Chinese soil. It was at this time that some of the most important excavations were done: Zhoukoudian, Anyang, and Yangshao.

At the Zhoukoudian caves, some of the oldest hominid remains were discovered, leading to new hypotheses about the provenance of the Chinese people. The caves, which were settled many times over history, yielded not just homo erectus remains but also exhibited signs of early modern human settlement. The most famous of these remains - the Peking Man - has taken a central role in discussions about the ancestral origins of the Chinese population. In nationalistic discourse, some scholars maintained the notion of a *sui generis* Chinese race, reinforcing the nationalistic belief of the indigeneity of the Chinese people (Sautman 2001, 6). It was thought that the homo erectus that inhabited the Zhoukoudian caves were part of a larger population who were the direct ancestors of the Chinese people. Indeed, founders of the nationalist party like Sun Yat-sen believed in

a sort of total ethnocentric nation whereby all Chinese people come from a single distinct race (Liu 2017, 41). This contrasts with the modern recognition of interbreeding between homo sapiens and extant populations in certain regions. On some level, early modern human populations leaving Africa came into contact with the coextensive homo erectus in China and interbred (Wilshaw 2018, 5). It is not entirely clear, then, that there is a distinctly Chinese race as some people envisioned. In any case, the chronology of nationalistic archaeology places the fossils found at the site as the fore of Chinese civilization. Thus, ancient history becomes valorized as a source of nationalist pride, a trend that will continue throughout successive periods.

The same is true of the unearthing of the Shang capital of Anyang. The Shang dynasty, at the most generous estimate, lasted between 1760 BCE to 1030 BCE. It is purportedly the second dynasty, following the Xia, and had many cities that it once called its capital. The excavations at one of these capitals, Anyang, were completed with more robust archaeological and technological abilities and with Chinese archaeologists at the helm. It was hoped that, in finding something of significance, archaeologists would be able to identify the cultural roots of Chinese civilization. At Anyang, a great quantity of oracle bones, temples, and royal tombs were found, cementing the idea of not just an ancient Chinese civilization, but a highly developed one (Grimberg 2019, 3). Thus, within the greater nationalistic project, the excavations at Anyang were not directed toward proving the indigenous genesis of the Chinese people, but rather toward proving cultural sophistication. However, there was still the notion of foreign influence to contend with - something that held much credence in the archaeological world.

Perhaps the most important of the three excavations covered in this survey is the work done on the Yangshao culture. It gave archaeologists a rare peek into the life of Neolithic Chinese settlements, with the archaeological record showing the practice of early agriculture, animal husbandry, and a thriving pottery industry. At the time in which excavations took place, scholars were highly displeased with the diffusionist hypothesis which interpreted Chinese archaeological remains as products of

external influence. Archaeologists like Johan Gunnar Andersson, one of the first people to lead excavations on Chinese soil, were determined to find a path of eastward cultural influence. According to Andersson, the ceramic products unique to each culture could act as breadcrumbs that traced back the lineage of influence. He thought that the Yangshao culture was preceded by an earlier Qijia culture in the far Western corner of China, so there should be an even more Western vector of influence that allowed for this path (Liu 2017, 44). This view dominated archaeological circles until the 1950s, only being defeated by Xia Nai's later work in the Marxist era. Irrespective of the dominance of diffusionism, the seeds of nationalistic discourse had been sown, with great implications for archaeological discourse in the following years.

Across these formative years in Chinese archaeology, we can observe two primary objectives that Chinese archaeologists tried to defend: 1) to construct a new national consciousness, a cultural history, based on archaeological remains, and 2) to defend not just the indigeneity of the Chinese people but also their culture. Here, we can already see the promotion of ethnic and cultural nationalism as enterprises conjoined with archaeology. However, there is not yet an episteme, as the political aims of this era are not so internalized to the point where every thought is hemmed by the constraints of the aims. However, what can be observed is the *development* of this very episteme: if every new archaeological development is being framed as confirmation of the native genesis of the Chinese people and their culture, then it would seem as though discourse will eventually come to be circumscribed by these thoughts.

Political Shifts and Interpretations Under Communism

Despite having a good number of productive years, the still nascent Chinese archaeological program had to suspend fieldwork due to war. The specter of war reared its ugly head, with the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the Second World War that followed inflicting deep wounds in the nation. These were further deepened by the civil war which broke out right as WWII concluded. However, after many years of intense warfare,

archaeological work could finally resume; the only difference was that instead of work being done under the Nationalist government, it was now under the Communist government which had taken in its stead.

This had some important implications on questions of interpretation of archaeological remains. While the previous era had interpreted archaeological developments in a more explicit character of nationalism, the Communist government interpreted these things under the backdrop of historical materialism and the Marxist understanding of human history. The core intuition behind this new conceptual movement was that society should be understood as a web of social relations forged by conflict (specifically, class struggle). In studying the archaeological record of human settlements, the "calculating activities of political man can emerge from the artifacts" (Kohl 1981, 111). That is, a historical materialist could explain the nature of class structure in a society and how it influenced a society's productive activity.

We see these new theoretical developments in action after the Communist takeover. At excavations of Neolithic sites, Marxist thinkers excitedly used new findings as confirmation of Friedrich Engel's evolutionary theory which maintained the matrilineal structure of prehistoric society (Liu 2017, 47). Indeed, these theories found much currency, as cultures like the Yangshao culture seemed only to prop them up. Other discoveries like mortuary and settlement data of other Neolithic sites gave further proof for Marxist readings of "the emergence of private property, class differentiation, the practice of matrilineal or patrilineal social organizations, and state formation as the result of class conflict" (Liu 2017, 48). The primary goal was the confirmation of Marxist theory, with archaeology being its tool.

It is here where we witness some key interplay between the episteme and archaeology. It may seem as though the new Communist government took a path entirely different from the Nationalist government it succeeded. However, what belies this goal to confirm Marxist theories is little more than the same nationalistic character from the previous era. There is still the same crusade against diffusionism and the suggestion of foreign

influence. Indeed, Xia Nai's excavations under Academia Sinica showed that the Qijia culture that Andersson thought came before the Yangshao culture was its successor. Efforts like these were likely motivated by the desire to prove the native genesis of Chinese culture. It has been observed that this triumph over the diffusionist view 'became a legend, which has inspired Chinese archaeologists for decades" (Liu 2017, 45). We may say, then, that the original objectives of the previous era had not yet been extinguished and were still operative in Chinese archaeology. If we import the concept of the episteme, we see that there is an underlying relation between Marxist interpretations and nationalism. Marxist interpretations of history are subordinate to the nationalist goals that they serve. In that sense, there is no thematic change from the previous political era and this one - only a change in interpretive minutiae. There might be superficial changes to how it is presented, but the core elements remain preserved. In that sense, nationalism inherits the character of the episteme since it serves as the boundaries for thought. There is little deviation in the actual goals and it constitutively makes up what is considered rational. Nationalistic views become the standard and those who argue against it are pilloried for their view.

Post-Reform Era: Multicultural Perspectives

The post-reform era and the opening up of China made information readily accessible for academics and laymen alike. For once, there was finally free scholarly exchange, and information flowed freely between China and the globalized world. With these new freedoms came a stream of new, multicultural views of Chinese culture. People began to write in ways that dealt with the multicultural realities of China and recognized the possibility of a multiregional origin for Chinese civilization (Grimberg 2019, 7). Indeed, research models like those proposed by Su Bingqi in the early 1980s have been stepping stones in the greater project of recreating a historical narrative of China that is better rooted in the multiregional origins of China. The idea of the transmission of culture from an external culture into China is no longer

discarded a heretical notion but rather as a theory better aligned with historical realities.

There always exists, however, some political valence to archaeology. Under the rule of Xi Jinping, the tide of nationalism has risen once more, much like the past. To some level, the same sentiments exhibited nearly a century ago can be seen today. The archaic humans at Zhoukoudian are still of significance today. When some archaeologists challenged the accepted narrative that they could control fire and lived in the caves, many archaeologists "defended the original understanding of Peking Man 's unique status with great passion" (Liu 2017, 50). This reaction can only be understood when we look at it from the backdrop of increasing nationalism. The national identity built within the nascent years of Chinese archaeology is epistemically baked into the perception of what is considered reasonable. Exploration outside the bounds of reason is met with strong condemnation, as seen in this particular example. Thus, while the episteme of nationalism seems to be on its way out, its effects still linger, continuing to pervade our understanding of the world.

The Utility of Nationalism

Since we have established the fact that there is nationalism present in Chinese archaeology, it is valuable to ask why it emerged in the first place. If we think about the context from which Chinese archaeology came about as a discipline, we see that there was colonization not just of the land but also of academic disciplines. The 19th and 20th centuries in Chinese history were marred with Western colonial activity, and Western mastery over China even appeared in archaeology - European scholars had taken charge of Chinese excavations, plundered antiquities, and, to rub salt into the wound, used their findings to proclaim the backwardness of the Chinese people (Johansson 2016, 1). Indeed, the architect of Chinese archaeology, Xia Nai, observed that Chinese archaeology operated under a semi-colonial context and desired to extirpate all forms of bourgeois knowledge (Doyon 2023, 529). Having studied in Egypt (which was under British colonial rule), he observed a broader pattern of

Western domination in archaeological endeavors. This prompted him to make an effort to reassert agency over China's historical narratives during his tenure as the central planner of Communist China's archaeological policy.

In that sense, it is not difficult to see how nationalism emerged. Nationalism served to be one of how Chinese scholars resisted colonial discourse and maintained control of their discipline. A crucial point of nationalist rhetoric is the right to self-determination - that is, the right to autonomously make choices that align with our preferences without external coercion. It serves as a rejection of the domination of another power and asserts the subjugated nation's right to self-determination (Colclough 2006, 68-69). By embracing some level of nationalism, Chinese archaeologists can resist the colonization of their discipline and determine its future course without interference from other parties. There would be no more denigration of Chinese culture or rewriting of its history. Nationalism, then, was not a spontaneous, isolated development but rather emerged with a specific purpose.

Future Directions: Epistemic Shifts and Nationalism

Where exactly, then, does this leave us today? Perhaps we may see some ideological trench-fighting as the current episteme becomes supplanted with a new one, but I think that a far more likely direction is a slow, invisible displacement. Previous understandings of the world will erode as discoveries and science dislodge the old. Old theories will be discarded, politics will shift, and the production and limits of knowledge will change. This, however, is only true if there is a change in episteme at all. The increasing nationalistic fervor of today's China may be a boon for the current episteme, serving to reinforce its constraints on knowledge production. The utility of using the past to achieve current political objectives has long been recognized, making archaeology key to any nationalistic agenda. While archaeology no longer has to solve squabbles about identity politics and the indigeneity of whatever race, it is a reasonable expectation to see it still being used in some nationalistic capacity. As archaeology responds to the beck and call of these politically motivated goals,

the epistemic attachment to nationalism will only be prolonged. It is fair to say then that the modern Chinese archaeological tradition, since its inception, has been and may very well continue to be entrenched in the boundaries of the temporal a priori.

References

Bevir, Mark. "Foucault, Power, and Institutions." *Political Studies* 47, no. 2 (June 1, 1999): 345–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00204.

Colclough, Kevin. "Imperial Nationalism: Nationalism and the Empire in Late Nineteenth Century Scotland and British Canada," 2007. https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/2228.

Doyon, Wendy. "Xia Nai's Egypt in the Archaeology of China: Field Workers and Field Methods in Xia Nai's Diary at Armant, Egypt, 1938." 2023. https://www.academia.edu/106657094/Xia_Nai_s_Egypt_in_the_Archaeology_of_China_Field_Workers_and_Field_Methods_in_Xia_Nai_s_Diary_at_Armant_Egypt_1938.

Grimberg, Phillip. "Nationalism and Politics in Chinese Archaeology." In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, 1–11. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_3366-1.

Johansson, Perry. "The Collaborative Dimension of Johan Gunnar Andersson's Search for a Western Origin of China" 26, no. 1 (November 30, 2016): Art. 11. https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-545.

Kelly, M. "Foucault, Michel | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Accessed February 10, 2024. https://iep.utm.edu/foucault/.

Kohl, P. L. "Materialist Approaches in Prehistory." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 10 (1981): 89–118.

Liu, Li. "A History of Chinese Archaeology." In *Handbook of East and Southeast Asian Archaeology*, edited by Junko Habu, Peter V. Lape, and John W. Olsen, 39–58. New York, NY: Springer, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-6521-2_4.

Lu, Tracey Lie-dan. "The Transformation of Academic Culture in Mainland Chinese Archaeology." *Asian Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (January 2002): 117–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2002.10552523.

O'Leary, Majella, and Robert Chia. "Epistemes and Structures of Sensemaking in Organizational Life." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (December 2007): 392–406. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492607310976.

Sautman, Barry. "Peking Man and the Politics of Paleoanthropological Nationalism in China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 95–124. https://doi.org/10.2307/2659506.

Turner, Hannah. "Organizing Knowledge in Museums: A Review of Concepts and Concerns." *KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION* 44, no. 7 (2017): 472–84. https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2017-7-472.

Wilshaw, Alex. "Out of Africa Hypothesis." In *The International Encyclopedia of Biological Anthropology*, 1–7. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584538.ieba0357.

Author Bio

Conner Lee is a philosophy major graduating with departmental honors at UCLA. After finishing high school early, he was admitted to UCLA and started his college career at 16 -- now, he is on track to graduate at 18. During his time at UCLA, he was a Lead Developmental and Lead Copy editor for the 2022-2023 publication of Aleph and was heavily involved with the Association of Chinese Americans (ACA). Although his primary interests lie in analytic philosophy and in asking questions about formal logic, he also enjoys reading about critical theory and social analysis. With a keen interest in applying formal systems of philosophical reasoning to analyze social issues, Conner aspires to pursue a degree in law upon graduation