

IN MEMORIAM: PROFESSOR WANG LI

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Wang Li, a towering figure in Chinese linguistics, died on May 3, 1986 in Peking, China at the age of 85.

Wang was born in Bobai 博白, Guangxi 广西, On August 10, 1900. Since his family was poor, he was forced to suspend his formal education at an early age to become a primary school teacher in his home town. After attending college for two years in Shanghai, he entered Qinghua University to study with Wang Guowei 王国维, Liang Qichao 梁启超 and Y.R. Zhao 赵元任. Later, he went to Paris to pursue graduate studies, and in 1931 received his doctorate with a thesis on the experimental analysis of Bobai phonology. From 1931 to 1954 he successively taught at various major universities in China, first at Qinghua and Yenching in Peking, the Southwest United University in Kunming during the war, and Zhongshan and Lingnan in Canton after the war. From 1954 he was on the faculty of Peking University. In 1939-40 he spent a sabbatical year at Ecole française d' Extrême-Orient in Hanoi, Vietnam to study Sino-Vietnamese. In 1957 he was invited to lecture in Poland. At the founding of the Linguistic Society of China in 1980 he was elected Honorary President. He also served as an advisor to the State Commission on Language Reform from 1954, a member of the Advisory Board of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences from 1956, and twice as a member of the National Political Consultative Committee.

Wang Li was a founder of Chinese linguistics as a modern discipline. A prolific writer, he produced more than 40 books and 130 articles during a career spanning six decades. A comprehensive vision characterized his versatile scholarship. Among the giants of the field, only he made permanent contributions to almost every aspect of Chinese linguistics: modern grammar, historical grammar, historical phonology, development of the lexicon, history of Chinese linguistics, history of Chinese prosody, and teaching of Classical Chinese.

In Old Chinese phonology, Wang Li's greatest contribution lies in his 1937 demonstration that zhi 脂 *-it, *-id and wei 微 *-ət, *-əd constitute two separate categories. Beginning with Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 (1613-1682), the Qing philologists made a sustained effort to classify the rhyme categories of the Odes. By the late 19th Century general consensus was reached on the 21 categories established by Wang Niansu 王念孙 (1744-1832) and Jiang Yugao 江有诰 (?-1851). Wang Li showed that Jiang's zhi category could in fact be divided into zhi and wei, with different vocalism in OC, and that their reflexes remained distinct up to the 3rd and 6th centuries A.D. Wang's result went beyond Karlgren and his own teacher, the great Wang Guowei. No generally accepted proposal for further refinement of the rhyme categories has been advanced since Wang Li's, and his linkage of the zhi/wei distinction in OC with their separate reflexes in Early Middle Chinese opened up an entirely new avenue of research.

Wang Li's Zhongguo Yinyunxue (Chinese Phonology, 1936) was the first comprehensive treatise on the subject written in Chinese. Used for many years as the standard textbook, this work explains traditional descriptive phonology in modern terms, surveys the achievements of Qing philologists with extensive citations, points out the relevance of modern dialects for historical research, and introduces the work of Karlgren and Li Fang-kuei on MC and OC reconstruction. Hanyu Yinyun (Chinese Phonology, 1962) revises his earlier work and adds

sections on Early Mandarin phonology and the initials of OC. Written as a popular book, it is still one of the best concise introductions to Chinese historical phonology.

Wang Li's study of Chinese grammar began in 1925-26 when, as a student at Qinghua, he wrote a thesis on Classical grammar under the direction of Y.R. Chao and Liang Qichao. In France he was persuaded by Marcel Granet to concentrate on phonology, but upon his return to China in 1931, Wang renewed his pursuits in grammar. 1936 witnessed the publication of Zhongguo Wenfa Chutan (An Exploratory Study of Chinese Grammar), soon to be followed by a seminal paper on historical grammar, Zhongguo Wenfazhong de Xici (The Copulative Particles in Chinese Grammar, 1937). On his way to Kunming at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, he bought a copy of the Dream of the Red Chamber in Changsha and began his serious study of Modern Chinese grammar, a subject he later taught for a number of years at the Southwest United University. Two books were produced from his course of lecture: Zhongguo Xiandai Yufa (Modern Chinese Grammar, 1943) and Zhongguo Yufa Lilun (Theoretical Issues in Chinese Grammar, 1944-45). These works, written under the influence of Jespersen and Bloomfield, profoundly effected subsequent developments in the field. The drawing of all illustrative sentences from vernacular sources--such as Dream of the Red Chamber, Ernü Yinxiong Zhuan 儿女英雄传, and more recent writings--was an important innovation at the time. This practice of studying modern grammar on the basis of a systematic survey of empirical data, preferably from written sources, is still followed in China today. From the beginning of the 20th Century, Chinese linguists had been complaining that grammatical systems based upon European languages, especially Latin, were ill-suited for the analysis and description of Chinese. In Wang's work, he made the first partially successful attempt to construct a system capable of capturing the characteristic features of Chinese grammar.

On the basis of his synchronic studies, Wang Li proceeded to investigate the diachronic development of Chinese grammar from Old Chinese to the present. This resulted in the first comprehensive treatment of the subject in Chinese, that is, the second volume of Hanyu Shigao (A Draft History of the Chinese Language, 1958). The first volume dealt with historical phonology (1957), and the third volume with the development of the lexicon (1958). Taken together, these three volumes represent Wang's crowning achievement in historical linguistics. At the age of 80, he started to revise the Draft History, but he only finished the revision of the first volume.

Wang Li was an accomplished poet in the Classical style. As a graduate student in Paris, he translated Moliere, Alexandre Dumas and Andre Gide and wrote booklets on Greek and Roman literature to supplement his income. Interest in both literature and linguistics led him to offer a course on the history of Chinese prosody, from which a manuscript was completed in 1947 but only published in 1958: Hanyu Shilu Xue (Chinese Prosody). His course on the history of Chinese linguistics in the early sixties produced another study, first published as a series of articles in the ZGYW (1963-64), and later as a book in Hong Kong: Zhongguo Yuyuanxue Shi (History of Chinese Linguistics).

Under Wang Li's direction, the Chinese Department of Peking University compiled Gudai Hanyu (Classical Chinese, 1962) in three volumes. The best textbook on Classical Chinese ever produced, this work includes not only the usual selected readings, but also a list of high frequency words, a systematic description of Classical grammar, and a set of specially written essays on various aspects of Classical culture. In other respects, Wang Li also put his linguistic expertise at the service of society at large. In 1940 he wrote a booklet urging the reform of Chinese characters, and in 1936 a booklet teaching Wu speakers how to speak the

Standard Language. In the fifties he was a leading supporter of simplified characters, pinyin spelling and the use of the Standard Language.

Above all, Wang Li was a great teacher. Most of his books began as syllabi for his courses. The systematic and comprehensive nature of his published works reflects his dedication to teaching. His students and their students are now leaders of linguistics in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other parts of the world. Just as he learned from Granet and Pelliot, he in turn passed on his insight to M.A.K. Halliday and S.E. Yakhontov. Always the promoter of new talent, in 1985 Wang Li donated the entire royalty from his Collected Works, over 100,000 RMB in all, to set up the Wang Li Prize in Linguistics.

Rising from humble circumstances, undeterred by war and political upheaval, Wang Li devoted his entire life to the advancement of linguistics in China. Linguistics made him a great scholar, and he in turn made Chinese linguistics a modern discipline. A man who was able to accomplish so much in a lifetime must have been a very happy man.

Note: The reader may wish to consult the Yuwem zazhi (August 1980), published in Hong Kong, for a short biography of Wang Li, and a reasonable complete list of his publications.
