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Hu Jingcao on Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin

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In October, CCTV's high-definition channel broadcast a new six-hour, eight-episode documentary on the famous husband-and-wife duo Liang Sicheng (梁思成, 1901-1972) and Lin Huiyin (林徽因, 1904-1955). Liang is renowned as a pioneering architectural historian, Lin as a writer, but their presence in China's historical consciousness defies easy categorization. Both came from prominent families (Sicheng's father was Liang Qichao, the scholar and reformer of the late Qing and early Republican period) and they left multifaceted legacies (their son, the noted environmentalist [Liang Congjie](#), died in Beijing on October 28; American artist Maya Lin is Huiyin's niece.)

Titled "Liang Sicheng Lin Huiyin," the documentary was directed by Hu Jingcao (胡劲草), a 42-year-old video journalist. Like her subjects, Hu (who spent the 2000-01 academic year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University) seems compelled to cross cultural and national boundaries. She previously made "You Tong" (幼童), an account of the 120 boys sent by Qing officials to study in the United States in the 1870s. Like that documentary, this new work draws extensively on previously unexplored materials from both the United States (where Liang and Lin studied for several years) and China, as well as Japan. It tells much of their story through the lens of their long and close friendship with John King Fairbank and Wilma Fairbank. Their photographs and their voluminous correspondence are drawn on extensively, along with interviews of their children (Holly Fairbank and Liang Zaibing as well as Liang Congjie) and many other people who knew them. The documentary's [official site](#) has all eight episodes available for viewing; [this page](#) has an index of YouTube links for all the episodes, most in high-definition.

[Benjamin L. Read](#), assistant professor of politics at UC Santa Cruz, interviewed Hu via email for China Beat, and also condensed and translated the exchange.



Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng

BLR: Perhaps you could start by telling *China Beat* readers about the cultural background surrounding Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin. People are obviously fascinated by them, perhaps especially Lin, her life

and her poetry. What is the general impression of these figures that viewers in China will have **before** they watch your documentary?

HJC: The subjects of the documentary are very well known to the Chinese public, especially Lin Huiyin. She is seen as personifying the woman with both beauty and talent. Of course, there are other reasons for her fame as well. Last year, the influential *Southern People Weekly* selected the twelve most beautiful women in the history of the PRC, and Lin was number one. They wrote, in part:

It is often only through the light given off by a man that we see the woman behind him, particularly so for young women in the arts who emerged from the republican era. But Lin Huiyin is an exception. In her, we see the reflection of many outstanding men of the time, but in fact it is she who adds extra color and shine to their images.

Lin Huiyin is renowned for the group of outstanding men that swirled around her, and particularly the love stories that people never tire of relating. The most famous of these concern the poet Xu Zhimo and the philosopher Jin Yuelin, who remained unmarried his whole life due to his feelings for Lin.

It is always television shows that give the public most of its information about things. Ten years ago, a TV show called "The Days of April" brought Lin Huiyin to the attention of many Chinese viewers. But Liang Zaibing and Liang Congjie, Liang and Lin's daughter and son, penned angry protests after seeing it. They wrote:

"The 'Lin Huiyin' in this show is just a spoiled little girl who only knows how to strike affected poses, make flirty gestures, sniffle and sob ..."

"This show portrayed my mother merely as a pathetic figure hounded to the point of desperation by Xu Zhimo's pressure, then grasping at the straw of Liang Sicheng to save herself, never escaping Xu's clutches. This flies in the face of the historical facts."

"Lin Huiyin was not like what you pictured!!!"

So what was she then?

In comparison, Lin's husband Liang Sicheng has considerably less of this kind of "fame." His name has been mentioned more and more often in recent years, though. The reason is that people have become increasingly unhappy with the living environment around them. As cities expand boundlessly, traffic becomes more and more clogged, and people become surrounded by tall, identical buildings, they feel that they no longer know where they are living. This brings the name Liang Sicheng to people's minds. It has become a kind of spiritual talisman for people dissatisfied with the environment they live in. But then the question becomes: What exactly did Liang do?

BLR: With this as the backdrop, it's clear that you aimed to paint a respectful and high-minded portrait of this couple. Indeed, you seem to have given figures like Xu and Jin only the minimum necessary treatment here — you don't want them, and their relationships with Lin, to take the spotlight. What aspects of Liang and Lin's lives, as shown in your work, will be most surprising or least known to your audience?

HJC: Most of the audience thinks only of "love stories" when they hear the name Lin Huiyin. My goal in making this documentary was to provide as complete a portrait of Liang and Lin as possible. So naturally the love stories will seem like they've been given short shrift. That's not because I've tried to "downplay" them, it's just the way I've treated the vast amount of material I've gathered about the two figures after considering it in its entirety. It isn't at all that I've been concerned that dwelling on Lin's amours would "hurt" her "shining" image, because everyone knows that love only makes a woman more beautiful. As far as the Lin-Xu story is concerned, I've tried to take this information, which the public is already aware of, and convey it in the most concise and poetic form possible. In contrast, with Jin Yuelin, he is someone the public knows little about, but who in fact was a warm, ever-present friend of the Liangs, as I see it. Accordingly, I have sprinkled bits of first-hand information about him and the Liang family throughout.

This documentary is about the lives of Liang and Lin in their entirety. I don't feel that, after watching it, the audience (which has only a hazy sense of them) will have been surprised by any particular story or detail. Rather, I hope that they will see, looking in full at the lives of these two intellectuals, the steep price that husband and wife both paid for the art to which they were so devoted.

We could take this back to the premise of the question. If the public knows about all the love that Lin inspired, surely they also would want to know: why?

BLR: Your documentary pays special attention to Liang and Lin's long friendship with John King Fairbank, who became one of the most influential American scholars of China in the post-war era, and his wife Wilma Fairbank. We see pictures of the four spending the summer of 1934 together in Fenyang, Shanxi. We read excerpts from their voluminous correspondence. We taste the sadness of the communication cut-off in 1949, which lasted through Lin's death in 1955 and Liang's in 1972. Wilma published a book on Liang and Lin and edited a posthumous collection of Liang's work.

What created this extraordinary bond? How many pages of their letters did you read, and what did you learn from them? What is the significance of this friendship for our understanding of Liang and Lin?



Wilma Fairbank, Lin Huiyin, John King Fairbank, and Liang Sicheng

HJC: This private correspondence, the great majority of which has never previously been made public, was a precious asset for us in making the documentary. It comes to about 700 pages in total, 90 percent of which is letters sent by Liang and Lin to the Fairbanks between 1935 and 1948. The other half of the correspondence, the part that had been sent to China during this period, was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. (According to the recollections of Liang Sicheng's second wife Lin Zhu, Liang kept these letters for a long time, but after repeated raids on his home in the Cultural Revolution, he finally decided to destroy what could have been lethally disastrous evidence of intimate dealings with American imperialists.)

The great majority of the letters were written by hand, and we spent tremendous effort converting them into typewritten form. I read all of them. It makes you grateful for the era of written correspondence — facing such wide separation, the two couples cherished each chance they had to communicate by letter, and they poured out everything they wanted to express in written words. Due

to the long duration of this correspondence, it gives you, up until 1949, a very complete sketch of what's going on in their lives and their thoughts. You read in it the incredible, life-long friendship between them.

What was it that created this kind of emotional bond?

Some two months after our wedding we met Liang Sicheng and his wife Lin Hui-yin. Neither they nor we were aware that years of close friendship lay ahead, but we were captivated from the first. (Wilma Fairbank, [*Liang and Lin: Partners in Exploring China's Architectural Past*](#), 1994, p. xii)

If it was common interests and sensibilities that brought these two young couples together with such immediacy, then later it was an acknowledgment of mutual admiration for one another's talents that made them so close. This friendship underwent a baptism by fire in the war years, becoming indestructible.

Lin Huiyin was a woman who had been deeply influenced by Western culture throughout her upbringing, then studied in the United States. Her craving for spiritual connection ensured that the circle of intellectuals swirling around her would be composed of others who also had been schooled in Britain or America. But the appearance of the Fairbanks brought extra color to her life. Lin wrote this letter in 1935, after John and Wilma had finished their stay in China:

You see, I was biculturally brought up, and there is no denying that bicultural contact and activity is essential to me. Before you two really came into our lives here at No. 3 [Liang and Lin's home in Beijing, No. 3 Beizongbu Hutong], I was always somewhat lost and had a sense of lack somewhere, a certain spiritual poverty that needed nourishing ... (quoted in Wilma Fairbank, *Liang and Lin*, p. 91)

As everyone knows, Lin was surrounded by infatuated men, and few of her friends were women. The stories of her and women like Bing Xin or Lin Shuhua are all about suspicion and rivalry. But in this letter to Wilma Fairbank, you can see a different Lin Huiyin:

I did not think once that I could have a friend in a woman. It is my luck to have met you because otherwise I may never know and enjoy this certain warm flow of feelings between two women. (Sent from Beijing, May 1937)

After their 1935 separation, they missed one another; being apart only strengthened the feelings between them. Later, the war brought profound changes to the life of the Liang family. For a period of time, the Fairbanks provided a source of important material support. From one of Liang Sicheng's letters:

We are so short of reading matters and reference books here. We — Lao Chin, Tuan-sheng, Phyllis [Huiyin] and I and friends — shall appreciate it so much if every now and then you send us some out of date best sellers that you pick up from some second hand book shop. We are thirsty to read things from left to right instead of from top to bottom. ... While I am typing this, begging for books, I discovered Phyllis is writing Wilma for old cloths. It seems we actually turn beggars! (Sent from Kunming, April 1939; rendered verbatim)

Due to the cruelty of politics, not only were these two couples, who shared such close friendship, unable to see each other again after 1949, they could not even exchange letters or send word to one other for the rest of their lives. Even so, Wilma Fairbank seems to have dedicated the final stage of her life to her dear friends. As her husband wrote:

Our closest friends in China (or elsewhere, for that matter) were Liang Ssu-ch'eng and his wife Lin Whei-yin, two people who combined the Chinese and the Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions. (John King Fairbank, [*China Bound: A Fifty-Year Memoir*](#), 1982, p. 104)

These letters are of such great importance to the documentary not merely because they had previously lain untapped, or because they show us the sincerity of the friendship between the two couples. Even more than that, their continuity makes it possible to convey a first-person narrative

over time. Could there be any more truthful or believable way to convey the story of people of such stature other than to hear them tell it themselves?

BLR: The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and their effects on Liang Sicheng, are dealt with in a highly abbreviated way. I assume that you have taken it to what you see as the limits on these topics. You do show quite a bit about Liang Sicheng in the 1950s: His ill-fated plans for preserving the old [Beijing] city and its walls, the political debates over his architectural ideas, his own conflicted allegiances and his application to join the Communist Party. How sensitive are these topics today?

HJC: The last of the eight episodes deals with the twenty years from 1950 to the end of the subjects' lives. Seeing the way these two decades were boiled down to 45 minutes, anyone's natural reaction would be to say that numerous sensitive topics in this period have been deliberately abbreviated. In China the many different media outlets vary widely in terms of the breadth of discourse space they are allowed, and because of its wide impact, television is always given relatively less space. You could call those the political considerations behind the "selective narrative" in the last episode.

Apart from that, I'd like to say something about professional expression in the field of television, which is a very special medium. Its fusion of sound and visual images gives it extraordinary power. It has a penetrating force that goes beyond that of written words. In fact, every medium has its own limits, things it's not capable of doing. Within the limits of this particular time and place, I've always stayed focused on the mission I wanted to accomplish, and tried to make the documentary as meaningful and influential as possible.

I hope that through my telling of the story of Liang and Lin, you see two beautiful lives, you see poetry and art, you see perseverance and sincerity. In the end, you will feel sadness and anguish. This pain comes from a place outside the limits of this time and place — it comes from inside your heart.

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