

OBITUARY

David Noel Keightley (1932–2017)

David Keightley, who died on February 23, 2017, was an historian of early China, whose main focus was on the history of the Shang Dynasty, using oracle-bone inscriptions as his primary source material. He was a founder of the Society for the Study of Early China and the founding editor of *Early China* (1975). The importance of his contribution was well expressed in a motion proposed on behalf of the Society by Robin Yates and seconded by David Nivison, and passed unanimously at the Annual Meeting of the Society on March 6, 2004, San Diego: “The Society for the Study of Early China hereby gratefully acknowledges its profound debt to Professor David N. Keightley, of the University of California, Berkeley, its founder and creator, and first Editor of the journal, *Early China*, for his tireless energy and wise foresight in establishing the Society and the journal in the first instance; for promoting and disseminating excellent scholarship in the field of early China studies; for guiding the development of the Society and the journal; and, as long-term Secretary-Treasurer, for ensuring and safe-guarding its financial well-being. The Society wishes him an enjoyable, healthy, and productive retirement.” This fortieth volume of *Early China* is dedicated to his memory. Personal remembrances by friends, colleagues, and students and a comprehensive bibliography and research guide to Keightley’s published and unpublished works, compiled and annotated by Frank Joseph Shulman, follow below. See also the Letter from the Editor (Sarah Allan) above.

David Keightley’s father was American and his mother Anglo-French. He was born in London and educated in British schools until the family returned to the US in 1947. He graduated from Amherst College in 1953 with a major in English and Biochemistry. This was followed by a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Lille where he studied medieval French and an MA in modern European history at New York University in 1956. He then worked as an editor and freelance writer in New York. From 1962 to 1969, he was a graduate student in East Asian history at Columbia University. During that time, he spent two years in Taiwan studying Chinese and doing research.

Keightley was a member of the faculty of the History Department at the University of California at Berkeley from 1969 to 1998. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1978 and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1986. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2000, served on the American Council of Learned Societies and



Figure 1. David N. Keightley c. 1980+.

the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, and was Chair of the Center for Chinese Studies from 1988 to 1990 and Chair of UC Berkeley History Department from 1992 to 1994, as well as Interim Director of the East Asian Library from 1999 to 2000. He travelled to China seven times and was a visiting scholar at Peking University in 1981.

Keightley's doctoral dissertation, "Public Work in Ancient China: A Study of Forced Labor in the Shang and Western Chou" (Columbia University, 1969), was written under the supervision of Hans Bielenstein, an economic and administrative historian of the Han Dynasty and a student of Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978). It was essentially a response to the question of the implications of large-scale public labor in the development of civilizations, a question first raised by Karl Wittfogel (1896–1988) in *Oriental Despotism* (1957). As this topic suggests, it was the historical problem of public labor that prompted Keightley to study oracle-bone inscriptions rather than an interest in early Chinese writing

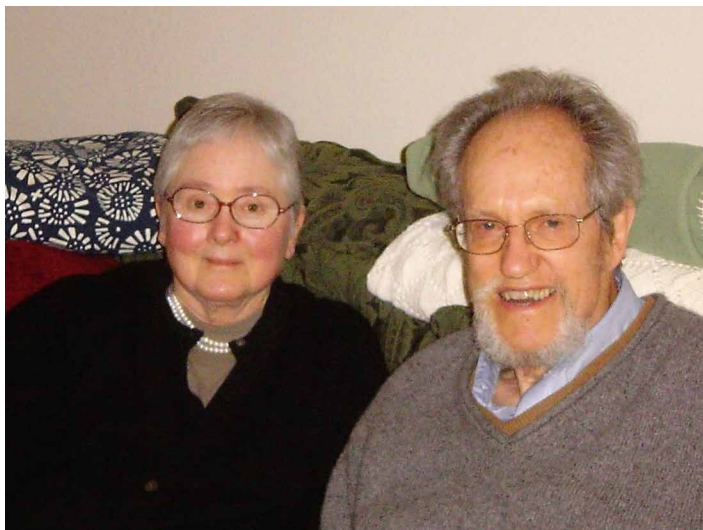


Figure 2. (color online) David and Vannie Keightley 2007.

that led him to do research on Shang history and society. Nevertheless, he soon became immersed in trying to establish a methodology for learning to read the inscriptions. Shima Kunio's 島邦男 concordance of oracle-bone inscriptions (*Inkyo bokuji sōrui* 殷墟卜辭綜類), first published in 1967 and reviewed by Keightley in 1969, allowed one to examine the inscriptions by content in a systematic manner for the first time, but it was still necessary to go from there to the original collections of inscriptions to find the rubbings, their transcriptions, and explanations. These were widely scattered and it was important to understand the nature of each collection. This effort resulted in his first and best-known book, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), which introduced the methodology of reading oracle-bone inscriptions to an English-speaking audience for the first time. After the *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 and related collections and reference works were published in China in the 1980s, the methodology for researching oracle-bone inscriptions changed substantially. Nevertheless, the meticulous care and detail with which Keightley presented his materials in *Sources of Shang History* meant that it remains an important reference work.

Keightley did not publish his doctoral dissertation, but continued to work on the problem of labor mobilization in the Shang. *Working for His Majesty: Research Notes on Labor Mobilization in Late Shang China* (2012) is a compilation of his notes, including archaeological materials,

translations of related oracle-bone inscriptions, and observations, both specific and general.

Keightley had a heart attack in 1992 and his last years were plagued by illness. He had long planned a multi-volume work on the Shang, and Volume 20 (1995) of *Early China*, guest-edited by Lionel Jensen and dedicated to David Keightley, lists three books in press or in preparation: *Divination and Religion in Shang China*, *Divination and Kingship in Shang China*, and *Where Have All the Heroes Gone: Reflections on Art and Culture in Early China and Greece*. Although these books were never published, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.)* (2000), which is based on a series of lectures Keightley gave at the University of Washington, provides a succinct and lucid overview of Keightley's research on Shang religion and society over the previous decades. Much of Keightley's writing was in the form of articles and he frequently circulated article drafts in mimeographed form, sometimes in more than one version. Twelve of his published articles are reprinted in *These Bones Shall Rise Again: Edited and with an introduction by Henry Rosemont Jr.* (2014).¹ Frank Joseph Shulman, "David Noel Keightley (1932–2017), Publications and Unpublished Writings: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Research Guide," below, lists many public lectures and unpublished papers and often links these to his published work, thus providing a good record of his intellectual development and scholarly career.

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1. Some information in this obituary is taken from Henry Rosemont's Preface and Introduction in *These Bones Shall Rise Again*. A few months before his death on July 2 of this year, Henry Rosemont, just out of hospital, touchingly notified me of the bibliography of Keightley's work in that book and wrote that "I also had my say about our personal relationship in that book, so don't feel I should add anything now."