Review Article

Working for His Majesty

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Working for His Majesty represents a feat of outstanding scholarship in the centennial history of studies dealing with late Shāng-dynasty China. Based primarily on oracle-bone inscriptions, jiǎgǔwén 甲骨文, the earliest extant body of Chinese texts dating from the thirteenth to the eleventh century BC, the author delves into the divinatory materials – notwithstanding their ephemeral and biased nature by origin1 – in an all-out pursuit of scholarship on labor mobilization.

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1 Every kind of divination may be characterized, in my view, as fundamentally ephemeral: once a particular mantic act has served its useful purposes it becomes unimportant and eventually forgotten. The inscriptions made on the oracle bones, typically turtle plastrons and bovine scapulas, were forgotten for more than three millennia and discovered at the very end of the nineteenth century. Also, the basic nature of oracle-bone inscriptions (abbrevi-
tion. He does this in ways no one has done before, presenting his findings with lucidity and eloquence.

It took more than forty years for the author to complete this work which began life with his Ph.D. dissertation, “Public Work in Ancient China: A Forced Labor in the Shang and Western Chou” (1969). While in that seminal work we found a total of 284 bibliographical items (29 in the primary and 255 in the secondary sources), Working for His Majesty features staggering 1,582 items, occupying about twenty percent of the whole book in terms of page count: 61 items in the primary (5 pp.), and 1,521 in the secondary sources, in English, Chinese, Japanese, French, and German (109 pp.). One is indeed impressed by the number of “thick” references, mostly in footnotes, to any particular scholarly issue at hand. To give just one example, over forty references are provided (n. 23, p. 131) to maintain that “the Shang as a whole must be regarded as a cereal-based civilization” and “the main cereal was millet,” even though these understandings are generally shared by scholars. Such scholarly attitude and practice are characteristic of the whole book, which comes with the befitting subtitle “Research Notes on Labor Mobilization...” My impression of Keightley’s opus as a whole is that it delivers seasoned, rather than boldly argued, accounts of various topics, including handicraft industries, warfare, hunting, construction, and the sundry legacies the Shāng left to the succeeding epochs.

We turn to specifics. Besides the “Preface” – where we find, among other things, an interesting, anecdotal account of how the author became interested in OBI, and “Notes about the Sources, Citation, and Transcription Conventions,” the book has eighteen chapters. These are followed by Figure 1, “The Royal Genealogy Recorded in Late Shang Sacrifice Inscriptions”; Table 1, “Persons in Command of the Zhong 羣, Zhongren 羣人, and Ren 人”; Table 2, “Days of Divination by Topic”; Table 3, “Distribution of Ancestral Gan 干 in Bronze Inscriptions (Shang with some Western Zhou)”; further followed by Appendix I, “Inscription Glosses” and Appendix II, “Glossary of Shang Terms and Phrases.” Especially valuable for Shāng students and scholars alike are the two Appendices, which represent the culmination of Keightley’s research on OBI for nearly fifty

2 I was particularly struck by the copious notes on the prominence of cereals in Shāng agriculture, because two pages before n. 23, n. 18 (p. 129) already features twenty-two references on the importance of agriculture, including an observation on millet cultivation by Yáng Xīzhāng 楊錫璋, now a retired archaeologist of the Ānyáng work station, CASS, who observed in 1981 that “Some millet, but not much, is grown in the Anyang area today ...”; the twenty-two references in this note are all different from the forty-odd references in n. 23.