

Knight Biggerstaff

February 28, 1906 — May 13, 2001

Knight Biggerstaff, Cornell Emeritus Professor of Chinese History and Asian Studies, died on May 13, 2001, in Ithaca, New York. Born in Berkeley, California in 1906, he belongs to a distinguished generation of scholars who, after studying together in Peking, launched Chinese studies in the universities of this country. His particular contribution was to establish Asian Studies at Cornell in addition to teaching Chinese history. He chaired the Department of Asian Studies from 1946-56, helping to create Cornell's China (later East Asia) and Southeast Asia Programs, and he chaired the History Department from 1956-63. On the national scene, he played a major role in founding the Association for Asian Studies and was its President in 1965-66. He was a pioneer in almost everything in which he was involved, and his passing marks the end of an important era in American international studies.

He completed his Bachelor's degree at the University of California in 1927, and when he began his graduate career at Harvard in the same year, he decided to concentrate on Chinese studies. At the time, his teachers told him that his should be the first generation of American scholars to learn Chinese well enough to study original historical texts. Since Harvard did not provide the necessary language training, he was sent to China.

In 1928, with no financial aid from Harvard, he borrowed \$1,000 from his father and sailed across the Pacific on the S.S. Jefferson. Upon reaching China, he took a train to Peking and from the train's window he saw, as he later recalled, "busy farmers and carefully cultivated fields, crowded villages, grave mounds, everywhere a totally new world to me." From then on, his life was centered on learning about China.

After spending a year in Peking at the North China Union Language School, he applied for a new two-year fellowship which was offered jointly by Harvard University and Yenching University, and he was selected as one of the first two Harvard-Yenching Fellows. He used this fellowship to support his language study and research at Yenching University in Peking, 1929-31. During these years, he met and courted Camilla Mills, head of the Department of Home Economics, who had been at Yenching University since 1922, and they were married in 1931. A few days after their wedding in Peking, they returned to the United States and set up a household in Cambridge where Knight completed his Ph.D. degree in 1934. At the time, Harvard's History Department had no faculty members specializing in China, so Knight was admitted to the Government Department, which approved his doctoral dissertation, "The Change in the Attitude of the Chinese Government Toward the Sending of Diplomatic Representatives Abroad, 1860-1880," and granted his degree.

On completing his Ph.D. degree, Knight received a two-year postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, and he used it to do research in Peking, 1934-36. For him as a research scholar, these were perhaps the most productive years of his life. He gained an impressive command of Chinese materials—historical reference works, private collections of documents, and archival materials—and he produced significant scholarly publications based on his knowledge of these sources. He and a Chinese colleague, Teng Ssu-yu, prepared the path-breaking compilation, *An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Chinese Reference Works*, which was published in 1936. Subsequently they published revised editions in 1950 and 1971 with Harvard University Press. In their lucid annotations for this volume, they set a standard for bibliographical work on China that has still not been surpassed. In addition, Knight used his research as a basis for biographical sketches which he contributed to a classic compendium, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1912)*, edited by Arthur W. Hummel.

During these same years, 1934-36, Knight and his circle of Chinese and Western scholars in Peking generated stimulating ideas that have had enduring significance. Completely absorbed, they made no distinction between serious academic research and the pleasures of everyday life. As Knight fondly recollected,

“It was a wonderful time to be in Peking. We consulted helpful Chinese scholars, familiarized ourselves with reference works and documentary collections, practiced the colloquial Chinese that most of us had started in the very good North China Union Language School, visited imperial palaces, temples, bookstores, and markets, walked on the city wall, hiked in the Western Hills, and took occasional trips to other parts of China.”

On their return from China, Knight and the other members of this group proceeded to create the field of Chinese studies in the United States during the late 1930s and 1940s.

In 1936, Knight became Instructor of Chinese language and History at the University of Washington and came to Cornell two years later as the first full-time faculty member specializing on China. During World War II, he directed a Cornell training program in Chinese, served in the State Department as a China specialist for six months, and was Chinese Secretary in the Chungking embassy from 1945-46. There he had the opportunity of assisting, and admiring at close quarters, General George C. Marshall, who was negotiating an interim cease-fire between the Nationalist government and the Chinese Communist Party. In the course of his duties, he met Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai, and other prominent figures of that time.

In 1949, the year of the Communists' victory over Chiang's forces, Knight was back in China once again—this time on sabbatical from Cornell at Nanking University, where he combined his powers of observation with his sense of history to record in letters home the People's Liberation Army's takeover of the city of Nanking. Published three decades later under the title *Nanking Letters, 1949* (Cornell University East Asia Papers, 1979; reprinted 2000), the

letters are fresh, lively, and remarkably prophetic. Like several other astute American observers in China, Knight became a target of Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against diplomats accused of the "loss" of China. With support from Cornell's administration and help from an able civil rights lawyer, however, he was fully vindicated. In the 1950s, after weathering the political storms in his own country as well as in China, Knight resumed his scholarly work on a subject that preoccupied him throughout his career: Chinese education. His book, *The Earliest Modern Government Schools in China* (Cornell University Press, 1961), established his reputation as the acknowledged authority in this field. The durability of Knight's scholarship was evident in the decision to republish his collected essays in 1975 under the title, *Some Early Chinese Steps Toward Modernization*.

Knight's scholarly efforts to apply the concept of modernization to Chinese history helped him achieve a major breakthrough in teaching. Immediately after World War II, he became the first teacher ever to offer a course entitled, "The Modernization of China," thus introducing an approach that has been widely used by Chinese historians.

Knight's colleagues and many others will remember him for his keen sense of duty, the encouragement he invariably gave, and his generous hospitality. He was a devoted teacher of both undergraduate and graduate students, and he was among the first graduate advisors in the country to have a large number of women complete their Ph.D. degrees in Chinese history under his supervision. When Knight finally ceased to teach at Cornell, teaching was so much a part of his life that he volunteered to give a course on China at Ithaca High School, and he did so for thirteen years, 1974-87.

In his long life, Knight received many tributes to his teaching, and he was deeply touched by one that arrived unexpectedly only a few months ago. The letter came from a former student, a member of the Cornell Class of 1958, who had seen a photograph of Knight in *Cornell Magazine* in the spring of 2000. The student was prompted to express his gratitude to Knight for courses that had continued to serve as his inspiration for more than forty years.

At age ninety-four and suffering from poor vision and Parkinson's disease, Knight was unable to write, so he dictated this reply:

It was that wonderful old Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) who said "Knowledge is the beginning of conduct; Conduct is the completion of knowledge." I take the liberty to add what he might also have said, "The student who takes the time and has the thoughtfulness to, in later years, contact his teachers, provides the teacher with his greatest reward and the student elevates himself to a best scholar status."

Knight's students and friends will not be surprised to see that he valued thoughtfulness in others and remained thoughtful himself to the end.

Knight is survived by his wife, Nancy, who is also the widow of John Echols, former Professor of Linguistics and Asian Studies at Cornell, making her the first woman to have been married to two presidents of the Association for Asian Studies.

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