

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2017

The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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BENJAMIN A. ELMAN



Ben Elman, the Gordon Wu '58 Professor of Chinese Studies, is recognized as the world's leading authority on the cultural and political history of the Chinese civil service examination system, has written pathbreaking, field-defining works on the social and intellectual life of China's ruling elites in imperial and modern times, and has reinvigorated the field of East Asian history of science. In 2011, he received the prestigious Mellon Foundation Distinguished Achievement Award in recognition of his enduring scholarly contributions to the study of the history of China and East Asia.

In the midst of his undergraduate studies at Hamilton College, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in philosophy, Ben took a junior year to begin studying Chinese at the University of Hawaii. He served in the Peace Corps in Thailand, where he learned Thai. Ben then pursued his interests in Chinese history, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1980. His dissertation was the basis for his first book, *From Philosophy to Philology: Social and Intellectual Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, which, in retrospect, might be seen as a core from which his interests have spread so broadly.

Ben joined the East Asian studies and history departments in 2002, coming to us from the history department at UCLA. His welcome presence in Princeton had already been established when he served at the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study for two years in 1999–2001 as the Mellon Visiting Professor of Traditional Chinese History and Civilization; this residency was so successful in demonstrating the intellectual significance and the broad reach of pre-modern Chinese and East Asian studies that our colleagues at IAS were persuaded to create a new, permanent position.

Once at Princeton, Ben continued as he had at UCLA to actively mentor graduate students who have gone on to hold academic positions in Chinese and Japanese history and history of science at major institutions in the United States, East Asia, and Europe. They are part of his extensive personal and academic international network of colleagues. He served East Asian studies as the director of graduate studies and department chair, and as the director of the

East Asian studies program. He was the founder and leader of the ongoing collaboration of colleagues from Princeton, Fudan University (in Shanghai), and University of Tokyo, dedicated to broadening the comparative history of East Asia in the early modern world. For more than thirty years, Ben has sustained the indispensable website, “Classical Historiography for Chinese History.”

Ben’s reputation as an intellectual leader is established from work that is wide ranging, including intellectual history, history of science and medicine, philology and language, education, technology transfer, and more. So far he has authored six monographs (three translated into Chinese, two into Korean, and one into Japanese) and two collections of articles (one in Chinese, and one in English). *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch’ang-chou New Text School of Confucianism in Late Imperial China* discussed the eighteenth-century revisionist interpretation of political values. The long process of incorporating science into Chinese was analyzed in *On Their Own Terms: Science in China 1550–1900* and *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*. Ben’s monumental *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* is a highly detailed account of the practices and processes, including anxieties and dreams, of the most significant social institution over more than five centuries in China. In *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, Ben explored how the examinations after 1450 affected education and intellectual and social life. He also has edited or coedited seven books, many of which originated as conferences and encouraged crossing some of the arbitrary boundaries of geographical and temporal units. The number of his journal articles and chapters of books in English and Chinese is almost too large to count, and more are still in the works.