

# Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS  
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



*May 2020*

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

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*In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity*

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# WILLARD J. PETERSON



Willard J. Peterson, the Gordon Wu '58 Professor of Chinese Studies and professor of East Asian studies and history, was born and raised in Oak Park, Illinois, a village, as he likes to point out, with many houses by Frank Lloyd Wright. He went through public school before enrolling at the University of Rochester where he had applied to study engineering, but then became a history major. More interested in seminars than in lectures—a preference he maintained throughout his long career—he found his place in the history honors program at Rochester. In his junior year, he began to take courses on “Far Eastern history” but no Chinese language courses were offered at Rochester. Thus, after graduation and arrival at Yale University for graduate studies, he first devoted himself to taking up Chinese language study—a decision not unanimously appreciated by his teachers in the history department there. In consequence, after just one year at Yale, Willard joined the famed School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) at the University of London in 1961, invited by Denis C. Twitchett, at the time the rising star in premodern Chinese history. SOAS offered an unrivalled cast of then young but by now legendary sinologists: Angus C. Graham and D.C. Lau in philosophy, Michael Sullivan in art history, Patrick Hanan in literature, Stanley Weinstein in religion, Twitchett in history.

In 1964, Willard completed his master's thesis, a biography of the 17th-century thinker Gu Yanwu, and went on to the Ph.D. program at Harvard University. Here, his adviser Yang Lien-sheng encouraged him to publish his master's thesis in two installments as “The Life of Ku Yen-wu (1613–1682)” in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28 (1968) and 29 (1969)—altogether 90 pages of detailed reconstruction and rigorous analysis, and still the authoritative account of one of China's most influential intellectuals of the late imperial period.

At Harvard, Willard's seminars with such luminaries as Yang and John K. Fairbank all focused on readings in classical Chinese. In 1967–68 he went to the (Inter-University) Stanford Center in Chinese Studies in Taiwan for advanced language training; the following year, on a Harvard traveling fellowship, he spent at the Vatican Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the British Museum library for research on 17th-century Jesuits' writings in Chinese. A major portion of

his 1970 Harvard dissertation was published in 1975 as a long essay, “Fang I-chih, Western Learning and the ‘Investigation of Things,” followed by his first book, *Bitter Gourd: Fang I-chih and the Impetus for Intellectual Change* (Yale University Press, 1979), both of which are now classics in the field. Willard was most sympathetic to Fang Yizhi’s proposal in 1637 that a life devoted to collaborative scholarly inquiry had at least as much standing and value as one engaged in making money or serving in government.

After earning his Ph.D., he was still in his first year of teaching modern Chinese and East Asian History at Dartmouth College, when, in December 1970, he was called up by Marius Jansen in Princeton’s Department of East Asian Studies, a new department that had been formed just the previous year. In fall 1971, Willard began what would become his 49 years of teaching at Princeton. Located in Jones Hall—formerly Fine Hall, home of the mathematics department—East Asian studies was a start-up, complete with the world-famous Gest Library (today’s East Asian Library and Gest Collection) upstairs, the establishment of language programs in Chinese and Japanese, and all the enthusiasm involved in building something new. Willard’s formative years as a young professor were also the formative years of the department, a fortuitous constellation that shaped his deep personal commitment to East Asian studies at Princeton.

By his second year, Willard was the departmental representative and ran the Wednesday afternoon coffee-hour seminars, helping the department to develop into an intellectual community where colleagues—and their spouses—socialized together. Later, even during his years as the department’s longest-serving chair (1988-1999), Willard never took any course release: he taught what needed to be taught, including a frequent overload with the annually team-taught HIS/EAS 207, “History of East Asia to 1800.” His signature courses, however, remained his upper-level undergraduate seminars: “Intellectual History of China to the Fifth Century” (EAS/HIS 415) and “Intellectual History of China from the Ninth to the 19th century” (EAS/HIS 416). Meanwhile, on the graduate level, he served as main or second Ph.D. dissertation adviser for dozens of students over the years, many of whom went on to illustrious careers. They sought him out not only for his capacious knowledge; as his students grew into young scholars, Willard had a unique way of asking questions. Often, these questions were less about the “what” of things than about the “why”; in his friendly and yet incisive Socratic way, he guided his students to discover gaps in their analysis seemingly on their own. Uncounted remain the moments

of calm confidence when after a job talk, a visitor's public lecture, or a dissertation defense he would ask "a simple question" about something "you just said and I don't fully understand."

Willard's career has been inextricably linked to one of the grandest of all projects in Chinese studies, the multi-volume *Cambridge History of China*, an enterprise initiated by his mentor Denis Twitchett. By 1980, Twitchett had joined Princeton and soon thereafter tasked Willard with writing two chapters for the volume on the Ming dynasty. When Twitchett retired 14 years later, it was left to Willard—not really by his own choice—to lead and oversee the entire project. By then, the *Cambridge History* had expanded far beyond its initial outline, now with multiple volumes dedicated to individual dynasties. Thus, Willard found himself rewriting half of the first volume on the Song dynasty, and then was the editor of volume 9, published in two parts of well over 1,500 pages in 2002 and 2016, "The Ch'ing Empire to 1800." Sandwiched between volumes 7–8 and 10–11 by his seniors, Mote and Fairbank, respectively, volume 9 broke new ground: for the first time in the series, there were detailed chapters relating to women and gender relations, science and medicine, and a host of other topics, in what, according to Willard, became "a totally new enterprise." Today, after some 30 years of his involvement and authorial contributions of hundreds of pages, the entire *Cambridge History* is now finally nearing completion, having been sustained over time by a succession of grants and an influx of new authors and volume editors.

Yet despite Willard's career-long focus on 17th-century Chinese history in all its aspects, his two most famous articles are directed elsewhere altogether, illustrating his principal interest that was at once wider and more focused than his work on the *Cambridge History*: more focused on philosophy and intellectual history, and wider to encompass the entire time span of premodern China. First, "Making Connections: The 'Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations' in the Book of Change" (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42 [1982]), remains the most thorough and sophisticated Western-language study of the third- or second-century BCE philosophical treatise on the ancient *Classic of Change*. And second, "Another Look at *Li*" (*Bulletin of Sung Yuan Studies* 18 [1986]) tackles the central philosophical concept of *li*—a term hitherto translated as "principle," "pattern," "reason," "law," "organization," etc.—in 12th-century thought. In his own exploration of *li*, Willard developed a series of eight propositions and offered the novel understanding and translation as "(cosmic) coherence." Neither one of these two essays is for the faint of heart, but as he ended the

latter one, “We need not complain that a concept which occupies such an important place in Ch’eng Yi’s and Chu Hsi’s teaching is complicated rather than simple.”

Willard thus worked—and trained doctoral students—across an extremely wide range in terms of both time period (some 2,500 years from antiquity through the 19th century) and historical disciplines. Over the last three decades of the 20th century, few scholars in the West taught and researched regularly on the intellectual history of Chinese antiquity, that is, the age of Confucius (trad. 551-479 BCE), but Willard’s commitment turned out to be prescient: Following the spectacular and still continuing archaeological discoveries of ancient artifacts and manuscripts in recent years, research on Chinese antiquity has since developed into one of the most dynamic fields in all of Chinese studies in the humanities. Just over his last decade of teaching, Willard on average advised or co-advised one Ph.D. student per year on the ancient period (in addition to those in the later periods), dedicating countless hours of calm yet rigorous mentoring in his paper-filled office—209 Jones Hall—that once was Albert Einstein’s.

Looking for “coherence” in Willard’s work, one may consider the titles of the chapters he contributed to the *Cambridge History of China*, from “Confucian Learning in Late Ming” and “Learning from Heaven” in volume 8 to “Arguments over Learning Based on Intuitive Knowing in Early Ch’ing,” “Advancement of Learning in Early Ch’ing: Three Cases,” or “Dominating Learning from Above During the K’ang-hsi Reign” in volume 9. As these titles show as clearly as his article “Making Connections,” Willard’s passion has always been not just to learn, but to learn about learning. “A noble man said: ‘In learning, one must not desist’ (*junzi yue: xue bu keyi yi*),” states one of the great philosophical texts from ancient China that Willard taught his students with masterful insight and always more questions than answers, and for many years with his beloved dog lying under the seminar table.