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*"A Friend of the East Asian Library Journal: Denis C. Twitchett 1925-2006", The East Asian Library Journal 12, no. 2 (2006): 1-3, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/a.EALJ.v12.n02.p001.pdf>*

A Friend of the  
*East Asian Library Journal*

Denis C. Twitchett

BORN LONDON 23 SEPTEMBER 1925  
DIED CAMBRIDGE 24 FEBRUARY 2006

**D**enis Twitchett was the most eminent scholar of the Tang period of Chinese history when he joined the Princeton University faculty in 1980 as the first Gordon Wu '58 Professor of Chinese Studies in the East Asian Studies Department.

After serving in British Naval Intelligence as a young Japanese-language officer during World War II, Twitchett started to study Chinese and China after the war. As he liked to say of himself, he was largely self-taught in his specialized fields. Twitchett was a leader of the new generation that was moving the study of China away from old-style European Sinology devoted to classical philological and textual studies and what he called the “amateur stage” in the study of Chinese history. He was applying meticulous scholarly standards to sources in new subject areas, even as he acknowledged earlier work, such as that by his friend Etienne Balazs in Paris. Twitchett took the lead in integrating resources under-utilized in the study of Chinese history after the so-called classical period. As a graduate student at Cambridge University he decided to go to Japan to the prestigious Tōyō Bunka Kenkyūjo at Tokyo University. (It was at this juncture that he met Ichikawa Umeko, who became his

wife.) Working with the great legal historian Niida Noboru, Twitchett was able to build on the foundation of Japanese secondary scholarship on law, administrative systems, and local society in medieval China. Twitchett also made effective use of the collections of Tang manuscript materials recovered from Dunhuang and Turfan on the Silk Road in the western reaches of the Tang empire to show how local society functioned. Primarily his research was built on his mastery of the extensive corpus of Tang sources that survive in various printed forms. Twitchett's scholarly model spread, particularly after his precocious appointment in 1960 as the Professor of Chinese in the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. Twitchett was quickly recognized as the leader of Tang studies in the Western world and as a social-economic historian.

Twitchett produced rigorous scholarship on historical issues in the largely neglected middle period of Chinese history. He made many contributions dealing with the financial and legal regimes under the Tang dynasty that are still the standard accounts. He was an expert on medieval criminal law and judicial procedures. He published an influential study of the early history of printing in medieval China. Twitchett wrote several important studies on aspects of Chinese historiography; in particular, he wrote a comprehensive account of the sources, procedures and personalities involved in the mid-tenth century production of the great, standard dynastic history of the Tang. His work inspired and challenged succeeding generations of scholars to incorporate his results and generate their own.

Twitchett became the Professor of Chinese in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Cambridge in 1968. He supervised doctoral dissertations over a vast range of topics, and he advised graduate students and recent PH.D.s from many other institutions; he edited and sustained the scholarly journal *Asia Major*; he sponsored the publication of an important series of monographs on China published by the Cambridge University Press, where he also served as a syndic; and he collaborated with colleagues in the United States to organize international conferences and to edit the influential volumes that ensued. These several strands of activity came together in the late 1960s when he famously joined with John Fairbank at Harvard to plan a *Cambridge History of China* which would "provide . . . a bench mark for the Western

history-reading public” in six volumes. The series now has twelve volumes in print (not counting Chinese translations), with three more on the way. Denis Twitchett was the organizer and general editor of the *Cambridge History of China*, the editor or co-editor of five of its volumes, and author, co-author, and unacknowledged co-author of a significant fraction of the chapters in those five volumes. He brought the *Cambridge History of China* project with him when he came to Princeton in 1980, and Princeton University still hosts the ongoing effort.

As a member of the Princeton University faculty, Denis brought his other activities and interests with him as well. He supervised a steady stream of dissertations on middle-period Chinese history, and his students went on to academic positions in Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States, including at Princeton. He revived the publication of *Asia Major*. He continued to pursue his special interests in cartography, climatology, wood-block printing, and playing the piano. His publications brought him recognition in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Europe.

Denis’s detailed knowledge of Tang history was legendary. Lecturing without notes, looking at his cupped fingernails held at arm’s length, he could convey a vivid sense of real life—the persons, events and intrigues—in the Tang capital of Chang’an. Occasionally an undergraduate would infer that Professor Twitchett was describing what he had personally witnessed. When he retired from our faculty in 1994, he was still the most eminent historian of the Tang period.

Denis’s self-declared goal was to “present first-rate research in a form that will persuade non-specialists of its importance.” That remains a goal for all of us who follow him.

This memorial was presented to the Princeton University faculty, 6 November 2006 on behalf of Martin C. Collcutt, Benjamin Elman, Willard Peterson, and Stephen F. Teiser.