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# Frederick W. Mote 1922–2005

WILLIAM S. ATWELL

**F**rederick W. Mote, professor emeritus of East Asian Studies at Princeton University, has died on 10 February 2005 after a long illness in Denver, Colorado, at the age of 82. Regarded even among leading scholars in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China as one of the twentieth century's preeminent students of traditional Chinese civilization, Professor Mote wrote, edited, and translated numerous books, scholarly articles, and essays on subjects that ranged from classical Chinese philosophy to military history, and from the study of great cities such as Suzhou and Nanjing to the ways in which poetry, painting, and other of the arts could be used to gain a fuller understanding of Chinese economic, social, and cultural history. Mote was one of a very small number of academic pioneers who were instrumental in transforming the study of China and East Asia in the United States from a neglected backwater at most colleges and universities to a mature field with high standards and a distinguished record of scholarly achievement. He effected this important change through his publications, his teaching at Princeton and the University of Washington, and his years of service to organizations such as the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, of which he was a founding member, the Chinese Advisory Committee of the Modern Languages Association, the Inter-University Board for Chinese Language Studies in Taiwan, which he chaired from 1961 to 1964, the Committee on Studies of Chinese

Civilization of the American Council of Learned Societies, which he chaired from 1974 to 1978, the editorial board of the journal *Asia Major*, the Smithsonian Council, and the Visiting Committee of the Freer Gallery of Art.

The fourth in a family of ten children, Frederick Wade Mote was born on 2 June 1922 in Plainview, Nebraska. During the Great Depression, the family moved to Denver, where Wade, as he was known to his family and classmates, received most of his early education and where he graduated from the city's South High School in 1940. It also was in Denver as a member of the celebrated choir at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral that Mote developed a deep love for classical and religious music, one that he maintained for the rest of his life.

Following his graduation from high school, Mote found employment first in Denver and then in Washington, D.C. before enlisting in the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) early in 1943. Although he did not qualify for flight training for medical reasons, a Chinese language course that he had taken during the summer of 1942 at George Washington University caused his superiors to transfer him to a military unit at Harvard University where he participated in a special language program that was directed by the eminent Sinologists Y. R. Chao and Lien-sheng Yang. Thus began Mote's intensive involvement with a language and a civilization that he came to love, admire, and, for all intents and purposes, make his own. After completing his work at Harvard, Mote's first assignment was as an interpreter for Chinese nationals who were undergoing military training in the United States. He then was selected to join the newly-established Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as a noncommissioned officer. After completing parachute, demolition, and other training, Mote was sent with other OSS personnel to the China-Burma-India Theater in 1944. Working closely with Chinese commandos in southwest China, he was scheduled to parachute into Guangdong province's Leizhou Peninsula on 16 August 1945 to begin a guerilla campaign that was designed to prevent Japanese forces from transferring troops or other resources to disrupt the allied invasion of Japan that was planned for later that year. The surrender announcement by Japan's Showa emperor on 15 August 1945 caused the parachute drop and the mission to be cancelled.

Mote continued to serve in China until early in 1946 when he was transferred back to the United States. Discharged from the military in April of that year, he was admitted to Harvard where, having been given credit for his earlier intensive work in Chinese there, he originally intended to complete his undergraduate studies. However, the call of China proved to be too strong and Mote soon decided to leave the United States and sail for Shanghai. Arriving there at the end of 1946, he was introduced by Chinese friends to the dean of admissions at Nanjing University. After a series of interviews and a Chinese language test, he was admitted with junior standing and thus became one of the first Westerners ever to enroll as an undergraduate there. At the university, he specialized in the history of pre-modern China under the direction of the eminent historian and member of Academia Sinica, Wang Chongwu, who, as Mote later remembered with gratitude, was one of the few scholars in Nanjing who was willing to work with a foreign student. Mote received his B.A. degree from the university in 1948, probably the first Westerner ever to do so. It was during his time in Nanjing that he also met his future wife Ch'en Hsiao-lan and his lifelong friend and fellow 1948 Nanjing graduate Ch'en Ta-tuan, who later became a treasured colleague at Princeton in the university's Oriental Studies and East Asian Studies departments. As a fellow of the Fulbright Program, Mote did graduate work in Peking and Nanjing in 1948–1949 before accepting a position as a language officer in the Political Section of the American Embassy in the weeks immediately following the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. Just before leaving China for the United States in 1950, he and Ch'en Hsiao-lan were married in Nanjing.

Shortly after the Motes arrived in the United States, he entered the graduate program of the Far Eastern and Russian Institute at the University of Washington in Seattle. Among the distinguished East Asian specialists with whom he studied and worked early in the 1950s were George E. Taylor, Franz Michael, Vincent Y. C. Shih, Hellmut Wilhelm, Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, and Li Fang-kuei, the last of whom served as Mote's dissertation director. In 1953, a Ford Foundation Fellowship enabled Mote to spend a semester at Stanford University's Hoover Institution where he compiled and edited a volume entitled *Japanese-Sponsored*

*Governments in China, 1937–1945: An Annotated Bibliography*. Published in 1954 by Stanford University Press, that work is still being used by students of modern East Asian history today. In the spring of 1954, Mote's Ford Fellowship allowed him to travel to Japan where he did research at Kyoto University and published his first scholarly article on Chinese history ("Notes on the Life of T'ao Tsung-i") in a publication celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of that university's famed Institute for Humanistic Studies. It also was in 1954 that he completed his doctoral work in Sinology at the University of Washington with a dissertation on the political and cultural history of mid-fourteenth-century China entitled "T'ao Tsung-i and his *Cho keng lu*." The period encompassed by this study—the momentous transition from the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1367) to the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644)—was one to which Mote would return frequently in his later work.

After spending the 1954–1955 academic year doing post-doctoral research at National Taiwan University and 1955 to 1956 serving as a Fulbright Exchange Lecturer in Chinese at the University of Leiden, Mote was appointed assistant professor of Chinese studies in Princeton's Oriental Studies Department in 1956. Except for two leaves of absence from the university during which he served first as an advisor on Chinese education to the Ministry of Education for the government of Thailand (1964–1965) and later as a visiting professor at the University of Washington (1971–1972), Princeton remained his academic home until his retirement from teaching in 1987. His first few years at Princeton were spent establishing a rigorous Chinese-language program and working with the noted librarian James Shih-kang Tung to improve the facilities and expand the holdings of the university's Gest Oriental Library. These time-consuming tasks were aided greatly by the encouragement and support he received from faculty colleagues such as sociologist Marion J. Levy, Chinese art historian Wen Fong, and political scientist William W. Lockwood.

The arrival on the Princeton campus in 1959 of his old friend from Nanjing Ch'en Ta-tuan and of Marius B. Jansen, with whom Mote had become friends in Seattle early in the 1950s, provided further support for his efforts. In addition to teaching graduate courses in Qing-dynasty

history, Professor Ch'en took over much of the Chinese language teaching work at Princeton, thus gradually freeing Mote to offer more of his own courses in Chinese history and culture. Although Professor Jansen was a specialist in Japanese history, he too had a deep interest in China, in improving the teaching of Chinese and Japanese at the university, in the further development of Gest Library, and in establishing an interdepartmental undergraduate program in East Asian Studies, the last of which was formally accomplished in 1961. Jansen thus proved to be a key ally in the great expansion in East Asian Studies that occurred at Princeton during the 1960s and 1970s. With their offices side-by-side, first in Firestone Library and then in Jones Hall, Mote and Jansen were successful in securing financial support from the John D. Rockefeller and Ford Foundations in 1961, the Carnegie Corporation in 1963, and the United States Department of Education in 1965. During the decade of the 1960s, that support enabled the university to acquire a wealth of new materials for Gest Library, to establish a highly-regarded Chinese Linguistics Program which Mote directed from its inception in 1966 until 1974, and to add a number of new East Asian specialists to the faculty. In the mid-1960s, Mote, Ch'en, and Princeton also were instrumental in the establishment of a summer Chinese Language School at Middlebury College which, under Ch'en's direction, quickly became recognized as one of the finest summer language programs in the country.

Mote was a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961, and early in the 1960s, he published four highly-acclaimed works on the history and culture of fourteenth-century China. Perhaps the most famous of these was his 1961 article "The Growth of Chinese Despotism—A Critique of [Karl] Wittfogel's Theory of Oriental Despotism as Applied to China," but probably the closest to his heart was *The Poet Kao Ch'i, 1336–1374*, which was published by Princeton University Press in 1962. In that elegant and path-breaking biography, which he dedicated to the memory of his teacher, friend, and academic advisor in Nanjing during the late 1940s, Professor Wang Chongwu, Mote demonstrated just how important a careful study of poets and their poetry could be to an understanding of the intellectual, cultural, and political worlds of late-imperial China. As he wrote of Kao Ch'i, "Through him we are enabled

to see much of his time and his place, his society, and his civilization. In his poetry we find a marvelously sensitive record, of what the great and small affairs of his daily life, as well as some of the larger issues of his time, meant to a man like him.”

After eight busy years at Princeton, in 1964 Mote took a leave of absence from the university to serve as an advisor on Chinese education for the Thai government. Mote was long interested in the ethnic, cultural, and other connections between southwestern China and northern Southeast Asia, and his time in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and other places in Thailand enabled him to research and write three articles that proved to be very important to the study of early Thai history. Using a variety of Chinese sources, Mote demonstrated that the origins of the Thai people and many of their political institutions were not, as was widely believed by Thai historians at the time, to be found in the Nanzhao Kingdom that had dominated parts of southwestern China and northern Southeast Asia during the eighth and ninth centuries. During his time in Thailand, Mote also worked on a scholarly project that he had begun in 1958 and that would occupy him off and on for the rest of his life: an English translation of Hsiao Kung-ch'üan's monumental history of Chinese political thought *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi*. Mote regarded this work by his former teacher at the University of Washington as “one of the masterpieces of modern literary Chinese” and wrote, with typical modesty, that he had undertaken its translation because he wanted to immerse himself in “a rigorous continuing course in classical Chinese, in philosophy, in history, and in Western political concepts and methods from . . . a master.” The first volume of the translation was published by Princeton University Press in 1979, and Mote was working on the second at the time of his death.

Following his return to Princeton in 1966, Mote, Jansen, and other colleagues were successful in persuading the university to convert the East Asian wing of the Department of Oriental Studies into an independent Department of East Asian Studies. Once that department was formally established in 1969 with Jansen as its first chairman, Mote oversaw the continued development of an academic program that both allowed and encouraged undergraduate and graduate students interested in China to explore the linkages between history, literature, art history,

religion, sociology, international relations, and contemporary politics. Along with Jansen, Levy, Fong, Lockwood, Ch'en, Kao Yu-kung, James T.C. Liu, T'ang Hai-t'ao, T'ang Nai-ying, and others, Mote helped to build an academic community at Princeton that not only approached the study of Chinese civilization from a rich interdisciplinary perspective but also saw China in a broad regional context. Many of Mote's graduate students did minor fields in Japanese history, and most graduate students in Japanese history also did work on China. Those graduates have gone on to pursue careers involving East Asia not only in the academic world but in government, law, and business, as well.

Although Mote had been deeply involved with library matters since his arrival at Princeton in 1956, he used his chairmanship of the American Council of Learned Society's (ACLS) Committee on Studies of Chinese Civilization to argue forcefully for the need to strengthen existing Chinese library holdings on a national level. In 1968, he became a member of the Executive Group of the Committee on East Asian Libraries. An Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Center for Chinese Research Materials was established, and at several points over the ensuing years, Mote and colleagues at Princeton and other universities were able to secure foundation grants to support the center. This early effort was followed in 1973 by the establishment, under the auspices of the ACLS and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), of the Task Force on Chinese Libraries and Research Materials, which Mote chaired until 1975. Back at Princeton, Mote obtained funding from the ACLS and from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton to support the preparation of a revised catalogue of the Chinese rare books held in the Gest Library collection. Prepared by Ch'ü Wan-li, who then was a professor in the Department of Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University and who, following his stay at Princeton, later referred to Mote in lectures and in print as the leading Sinologist in the western world, that catalogue was published in 1974. It was followed by additional catalogues and by the acquisition of microfilms of rare Ming- and Qing-dynasty materials held in Taiwan and Japanese collections.

Despite his busy committee and administrative work at the university and national levels, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw Mote continue to work on a wide range of scholarly projects. In addition to writing



thirteen meticulously researched entries for the *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (Columbia University Press, 1976), in 1968 he published a widely-acclaimed article on Chinese political thought in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. That was followed in 1971 by his second book *The Intellectual Foundations of China*, which grew out of lectures he had prepared for his undergraduate course on Chinese thought, a course that was so highly regarded on the Princeton campus that it drew graduate-student and faculty auditors from a wide range of academic fields. These years also saw Mote return to an area of research in which he long had been interested: Chinese urban history. In 1973, he gave a series of lectures on that subject at Rice University, which were published later that year in *Rice University Studies* as “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow.” That was followed in 1977 by a seminal article on what was perhaps Mote’s favorite Chinese city, Nanjing. Somewhat misleadingly titled “The Transformation of Nanking, 1350–1400,” that article published in the volume *The City in Late Imperial China* made creative use of a dazzling array of primary and secondary materials to introduce readers to key aspects of the city’s social and cultural history, not just late in the fourteenth century but throughout the Ming period. The mid- and late 1970s also saw Mote produce articles on military history; on the ways in which Chinese poets, artists, reformers, and others had used “the past” in their art and political programs; and on the important role played by food in the social, religious, and cultural life of China during the Yuan and Ming periods.

Although he had been involved in the planning for the Cambridge History of China since the mid-1960s, Mote’s contributions to that project increased significantly when he agreed, at the request of Professor Denis Twitchett, who joined him on the Princeton faculty in 1981, to co-edit the two volumes of that series that were dedicated to the history of the Ming dynasty. With financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Mellon Foundation, Mote and Twitchett organized and directed two Ming History Workshops that were held at Princeton in the summers of 1979 and 1980. Bringing together Ming specialists from around the world, those workshops enabled participants

to discuss common problems and, of great importance to the successful completion of the project, to use the unparalleled resources on Ming history in Gest Library in their research and writing. In addition to editing both Ming volumes, Mote himself wrote two chapters, one on the rise of the dynasty in the mid-fourteenth century and a second on the period from 1465 to 1505. He also contributed a chapter entitled “Chinese Society under Mongol Rule, 1215–1368” to Volume 6 in the Cambridge series *Alien Regimes and Border States*, 907–1368.

In 1981, Mote’s former student and then Princeton colleague Gilbert Rozman published a volume on the *Modernization of China* for which Mote wrote two chapters, one, co-authored with Princeton colleague Lynn T. White III, dealing with changes in the political structure of China over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That was followed by twenty-three entries on Ming history in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of China* (1982), a spirited debate with Professor William Theodore de Bary on Chinese intellectual history which appeared in two issues of the journal *Ming Studies* (1984 and 1986), and a two-volume *Research Manual for Ming History*, which he co-authored with Howard L. Goodman (1985). In the mid-1980s, Mote was instrumental in the launch of the *Gest Library Journal* (later renamed the *East Asian Library Journal*), a publication of which he was especially proud and for which he wrote no fewer than five articles between 1986 and 1990. The first of those articles, “The Oldest Chinese Book at Princeton” (1986), dealt with the So Dan *Daode jing* scroll (ca. 270 CE), which is part of the John B. Elliott Collection in the Princeton University Art Museum. Widely commented upon and for some time regarded as a likely forgery, the scroll now is considered by a number of experts to be authentic and thus, much to Mote’s delight, Princeton may well house one of the oldest Chinese books in existence. Mote’s interest in the So Dan scroll grew out of his longstanding interest in “the history of the book” in China, a subject to which he returned in several later articles including “Chinese Rare Books in the Modern Research Library,” which appeared in the *Gest Library Journal* in 1989. In May of that same year, Mote collaborated with Professor Wen Fong to organize an exhibition entitled “Calligraphy and the East Asian Book” for the university’s art museum. The exhibition

catalogue, which Mote co-authored with his former student Chu Hung-lam, was published first in a special edition of the *Gest Library Journal* (1988) and a year later by Shambhala Press.

Following his retirement from Princeton in 1987, Professor and Mrs. Mote moved permanently to their mountain home in Colorado where they had spent most summers and sabbaticals since the mid-1960s. There, surrounded by scenery he loved and by his own formidable library, Mote continued to work on the Cambridge History of China and to write on a wide range of topics. In 1988, he briefly left the world of the Ming to publish an article on “The Intellectual Climate of Eighteenth-Century China,” a subject to which he returned a decade later in an article for a conference volume on *Imperial Authority at the Qing Court* published by the Denver Museum of Natural History (1998). In connection with the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to the New World, Mote contributed an article on “China in the Age of Columbus” to the catalogue for an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art entitled *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (1991).

Although he continued to publish on a variety of subjects, much of Mote’s time during the 1990s was spent working on his last book *Imperial China, 900–1800*, which was published by Harvard University Press in 1999. Like his earlier *Intellectual Foundations of China*, this book grew out of one of his undergraduate courses at Princeton, in this case his legendary “Later Chinese Empire.” Unlike the earlier book, which was a tightly condensed version of his lectures on Chinese thought, *Imperial China* grew from a 125-page, double-spaced manuscript eagerly read by Mote’s students in the 1960s and 1970s to more than one thousand one hundred pages in its published form. Based on a lifetime of study and reflection, the book’s thirty-six chapters contain the most comprehensive and sophisticated survey of this period of Chinese history in any language. It was written, at least in part, because of Mote’s deeply-held belief “that ignorance of China’s cultural tradition and historical experience is an absolute barrier to comprehending China today. The ‘Sinological’ approach to the study of China, the approach by way of serious language study and humanistic investigation of the cultural tradition in historical depth does not conflict with but strengthens the

modern ‘disciplines’ by which our field organizes research on China today.” (Mote, “Preface,” *Imperial China*, p. xv.) *Imperial China* is a stunning achievement that is unlikely to be superseded for decades to come. It is fitting that shortly after the work appeared in print, Mote was elected to the American Philosophical Society.

Mote had battled serious health problems since early in the 1980s, but even after the publication of *Imperial China* he continued to pursue both old and new projects. In 2002, for example, he published yet another article on Ming poets and their poetry, and at the time of his death he was working on the second volume of his translation of Hsiao Kung-ch’üan’s *magnum opus* and on a personal memoir about the momentous changes he had witnessed in the study of China’s history during the twentieth century.

Although most of his friends and academic colleagues knew him as Fritz, that was a name most of Mote’s students had great difficulty bringing themselves to use. That was not because they feared they would offend him by doing so—to the contrary, he often urged them to call him Fritz—but rather because they held him in such high esteem that anything less than “Professor Mote” somehow seemed inappropriate. Whether it was in his undergraduate lecture courses, his graduate seminars, his extraordinarily thoughtful and detailed comments on papers and dissertation chapters, or his warm and witty notes and letters from Princeton or the mountains of Colorado, his students found him to be the model Confucian scholar and teacher that he himself had found so appealing in the Chinese classics. Like the poet Kao Ch’i, Professor Mote “found delight in the company of his students.” They, in turn, were keenly aware of how very privileged they had been to be included in that company.

For more than fifty years, Mote was ably supported in everything he did by his wife Ch’en Hsiao-lan. A gifted painter, ceramicist, and according to her husband, a truly inspired tier of trout flies, Mrs. Mote also is known by friends, students, and colleagues as a fabulous cook and an extraordinarily warm and gracious hostess. As one of Mote’s closest friends on the Princeton faculty, Professor Norman Itkowitz, has put it, “Dinners at their home prepared by her were the equivalent for those

who shared in them of partaking in the highest levels of Chinese salon society.” When China was in turmoil during the “Cultural Revolution” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, another friend and Princeton colleague, the late Marion J. Levy, was overheard to remark that he was not overly concerned about the possibility that Chinese civilization might soon collapse. If that were to happen, he went on to say, he would just “call Fritz and Hsiao-lan and ask them to put it back together again.”

Memorial services for Professor Mote were held in Beijing on 26 February 2005 and in Taipei on 5 March 2005. A conference in honor of Professor Mote was held at Princeton University from 6 to 8 October 2005.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This obituary was first published in *Ming Studies* 50 (Fall 2005), pp. 1–11, and a complete bibliography of Professor Mote's publications will appear in volume 51 of that same journal.