

Victor Mair, East Asian Languages & Civilizations

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Victor Mair

Victor Henry Mair, a professor of Chinese language and literature in the department of East Asian languages and civilizations in the School of Arts & Sciences, died on June 28, 2026 from complications of urinary tract cancer. He was 83.

Dr. Mair was born in East Canton, Ohio. He attended Dartmouth College, where he was a member of the basketball team, and graduated in 1965. He then served in Nepal for two years in the Peace Corps. Upon his return to the U.S., he enrolled in the Buddhist studies program at the University of Washington. He then earned an MPhil at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, funded by a Marshall Scholarship in 1974, and again returned to the U.S., where he earned a PhD at Harvard University in 1976. For his dissertation, Dr. Mair conducted pioneering studies on vernacular stories (bianwen, or

“transformation texts”) found in the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang, China.

After three years on Harvard’s faculty, Dr. Mair joined Penn’s Faculty (now School) of Arts & Sciences in 1979 and taught courses on Buddhist popular literature and on the vernacular tradition of Chinese fiction and the performing arts. In 1990, Dr. Mair led a faculty push to rename Penn’s department of Oriental studies to the department of Asian and Middle Eastern studies (*Almanac* October 16, 1990 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/v37pdf/n08/101690.pdf>)). The same year, he was inducted into the newly-formed Phi Beta Delta honor society for distinguished international scholarship. In 2007, he was inducted into the American Philosophical Society. He researched, lectured, and published peer-reviewed articles on the influence of Sanskrit meter on Chinese poetry, the tangled relation between oral Chinese and its script, and the multifaceted history of tea.

During the 1990s, Dr. Mair organized an interdisciplinary research project, partly funded by Penn’s University Research Council, on the Bronze Age and Iron Age mummies of Eastern Central Asia. His efforts resulted in three television documentaries, a major international conference, numerous articles, and a book, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* (2000). Dr. Mair also edited the *Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (2004) and consulted on the curation of the Penn Museum’s landmark exhibition *Secrets of the Silk Road* in 2010 (*Almanac* February 22, 2011 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/archive/volumes/v57/n23/silkroad.html>)). He also founded the journal *Sino-Platonic Papers* and edited the *ABC Chinese Dictionary Series* of the University of Hawaii Press. He held visiting professorships at the University of Hong Kong, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, the Institute for Research in Humanities at Kyoto University, and Duke University.

“Victor was a teacher whose entertaining and inquisitive intelligence shaped not just his undergraduate and graduate students, but the world of Sinology, far beyond the classrooms of Penn,” said Dr. Mair’s colleagues in an online tribute (<https://ealc.sas.upenn.edu/news/victor-mair-beloved-colleague-passes-away>).

In addition, reminiscences of Dr. Mair from his brother Denis Mair can be found here (<https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2026/07/02/in-memorial-victor-henry-mair/>).

To Report A Death

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