

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
ELLIOT SPERLING
(January 4, 1951 – January 29, 2017)

Elliot Sperling passed away unexpectedly in his apartment in Queens, New York City, in late January 2017. The very symbol of activity and vivaciousness, Elliot's passing at the tender age of sixty-six shook everyone who knew him. He was one of world's leading historians of Tibet and Tibet-China relations, a MacArthur Fellow, and a relentless advocate for human rights. Elliot retired from IU in December 2015, having spent nearly forty years at Indiana University as a graduate student and faculty member in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, seven of which as department chair.

Born and raised in New York City to a family that, not unlike many of the city's middle-class Jewish families, underscored the importance of education, hard work, modesty, and social responsibility, Elliot developed a political and social awareness from a very young age. Attending Queens College in the early 1970s at the height of the Counterculture era only served to kindle in him a youthful idealism that was never extinguished. While in college, Elliot traveled widely. Among other itineraries, an overland journey from Istanbul to Delhi with stops in the fabled cities of Erzurum, Tabriz, Tehran and Herat fueled his passion for the study of faraway lands. A short sojourn in India developed into something of a love affair with that country and culture; Elliot would revisit India numerous times later (including as a Fulbright fellow). Upon his return from Delhi, having encountered for the first time Tibetans in exile, Elliot decided to change his major to East Asian Studies.

Equipped with knowledge of Chinese made stronger by an overseas study of the language in Taiwan, Elliot matriculated at Indiana University's Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies (renamed Central Eurasian Studies in 1993), where his career would be shaped and developed for the next four decades. The Department was already internationally renowned, in part owing to the presence on the faculty of Taktser Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama's eldest brother. Elliot studied modern and classical Tibetan, perfected his knowledge of modern and classical Chinese, and completed his doctoral dissertation, *Early Ming Policy Toward Tibet*, in 1983. The dissertation has been widely acknowledged as the most influential study on the subject and is still (!) cited frequently.

A genuine product of the public education system, Elliot took his first faculty position also at a public institution, the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). Shortly after arriving in Hattiesburg, he received the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1984-89). After a short spell at USM, Elliot returned to IU in 1987, as a faculty member. He would remain at the university, a much-loved and inspiring teacher, until December 2015, with occasional visiting professorships elsewhere, including Harvard University (1992-93) and the University of Delhi (1994-95). Over the years, Elliot mentored numerous graduate students who have pursued both academic and nonacademic careers in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. His signature courses and seminars included "The Civilization of Tibet"; "Tibet and the West"; "Sino-Tibetan Relations"; "Chinese Sources for Tibetan Studies", and many others.

In his research, based predominantly on original primary sources in Tibetan and Chinese, Elliot focused on questions of sovereignty and boundaries; on types of political, social and familial authority; on Chinese policy toward Tibet; and on the complicated roles of Tibetan officials in the service of both Tibetan and Chinese governments. He wrote about bureaucrats, monks, mediators, and envoys to the Tangut, Yuan, Ming and Qing courts, and his research covered many periods, ranging from the ninth century to the present. In addition to his focus on the Ming period, Elliot is especially recognized for

his interventions on the study of the Tanguts, on Mongol presence in and influence on Tibet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama and other eminent personalities of his era, and on Tibet's status under the Qing. Elliot served on, consulted, or directed numerous professional boards and associations.

In his work, Elliot was a judicious voice in increasingly less discerning times. He censured the Chinese government's oppressive policies in Tibet, a rebuke he was unafraid to repeat in public while in China. He also criticized the Dalai Lama and Tibet's government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, (including during his own visits to India) for giving up on Tibetan independence and for their ignorance of China's actual policies toward Tibet. He rejected the Tibetophiles' view of Tibet as an unspoiled bastion of pure spirituality. And he never had much patience for scholars who easily become groupies of academic fashions.

Elliot was a champion of human rights. Most recently, his public engagement was exemplified in the case of Ilham Tohti. Tohti, a Uyghur professor of economics at Minzu University in Beijing, was to spend a year at IU – at IU's invitation – in 2014 as a visiting professor. He was detained in the Beijing airport, just prior to boarding his flight to Indianapolis, on charges of "separatism" (charges that were characterized as completely made up by the U.S. State Department, the European Union, and many other international bodies) and has since been sentenced by the Chinese government to life imprisonment. Despite – and perhaps also because – the display of silence on the matter by the IU administration, Elliot became one of the most outspoken individual voices arguing for Ilham Tohti's innocence and release. This endeavor was not new for Elliot. He had served on the Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad for the U.S. Department of State (1996-1999), and he testified before the Groupe d'information du Sénat sur le Tibet (France), the Parliamentary Human Rights Group (United Kingdom), the Congressional-Executive Committee on China, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, and many others. His expertise was particularly requested on matters of human rights in Tibet, Tibet-China relations, ethnic minorities in China, and U.S.–China relations. His opinion pieces and commentary were published in venues such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Times of India*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, and *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, among others.

Shortly after his death in late January 2017, services and symposia were held in his memory in the U.S., Europe and Asia, with obituaries and special websites announced in his honor. Elliot is survived by his daughter, Coline.

We request that this memorial resolution be presented in the Bloomington Faculty Council and be preserved within its archives. We also ask that copies of the resolution be sent to Elliot's daughter, to the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, and to the Dean of the School of Global & International Studies.

Ron Sela
Associate Professor
Department of Central Eurasian Studies