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MACALESTER

# Obituary | Elliot Sperling (1951-2017)



Elliot Sperling at the Latse Library, New York City

(Jane Stein, 2015)

Tenzin Dorjee

Professor Elliot Sperling's death was a colossal tragedy by every measure. He was only 66 years old, and he exuded life, health, and purpose—the antithesis of death. After retiring from a long professorship at Indiana University in 2015, where he was director of the Tibetan Studies program at the department of Central Eurasian Studies, Sperling moved back to his native New York. He bought an apartment in Jackson Heights, where he converted every wall into meticulously arranged bookshelves—only the windows were spared. He was clearly looking forward to a busy retirement, living in what was basically a library pretending to be an apartment.

Sperling was the world's foremost authority on historical Sino-Tibetan relations. For his landmark work “on the political, religious, cultural, and economic relations between Tibet and China from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries,” he was awarded a MacArthur genius grant at the age of 33.<sup>1</sup> He accumulated a compact but enduring body of work that defined and shaped Tibetan studies over the last three decades. No less important, he was also a phenomenal teacher, storyteller, entertainer, whiskey

connoisseur (he delighted in teaching us how to enjoy the peaty Scotch whiskies), and a passionate advocate for Tibetan and Uyghur causes.

Through his seminal writings on Tibet's relations with China during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, he became arguably the first historian to use both Chinese language archives and Tibetan language sources extensively, bringing to light the separation and independence that characterized the relationship between the two nations. Until he came along, most Western academics viewed Tibet through Chinese eyes, largely because they could not access Tibetan sources. Sperling, fluent in Tibetan as well as Chinese, upended the old Sino-centric narrative and transformed the field. Roberto Vitali, who organized a festschrift for Sperling in 2014, writes that Sperling's work “will stay as milestones” in Tibetan studies.<sup>2</sup> His writings have become so central to the field that any scholar who writes a paper about historical Sino-Tibetan relations cannot do so without paying homage to Sperling's work. He is, so to speak, the Hegel of Sino-Tibetan history.

One can imagine the joy many of us felt when Professor Sperling chose to make his home in Jackson Heights, the second (if unofficial) capital of the exile Tibetan world—after Dharamsala, India. We saw him at demonstrations at the Chinese consulate, art openings at Tibet House, poetry nights at Little Tibet restaurant, and sometimes at dinner parties in the neighborhood. At every gathering, he held court as the intellectual life of the party. His friends and students bombarded him with questions on topics ranging from art to politics to linguistics, for his erudition was not limited to history alone. Unfailingly generous and eloquent, he supplied the most intriguing, insightful and exhaustive answers to every question. Each conversation with him was a scholarly seminar. Among the circle of Tibetan activists and artists living in New York City, Sperling quickly fell into a sort of second professorship, an underground tenure without the trappings of university. We weren't about to let him retire so easily.

Some of Professor Sperling's most influential early works include: *The 5th Karma-pa and Some Aspects of the Relationship Between Tibet and the Early Ming* (1980); *The 1413 Ming Embassy to Tsong-ka-pa and the Arrival of Byams-chen chos-rje Shakya ye-shes at the Ming Court* (1982); *Did the Early Ming Emperors Attempt to Implement a 'Divide and Rule' Policy in Tibet?* (1983); and *The Ho Clan of Ho-chou: A Tibetan Family in Service to the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (1990) among others.

One of my personal favorites in his corpus is *The 5th Karma-pa and Some Aspects of the Relationship Between Tibet and the Early Ming*. In this text, Sperling argues that in the early years following the collapse of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1367, the Ming rulers of China adopted a non-expansionist foreign policy, displaying greater interest in drawing clear boundaries to keep the 'barbarians' out of China than in expanding its boundaries to encroach into non-Ming territories. Ming China was initially conceived more as an inward-looking state than an outward-looking empire, partly in critique of the ruthless expansionism of their predecessors, the Mongol Yuan rulers. In fact, Sperling quotes from the very proclamation carried by the first mission that Ming Taitsu, or the Hongwu Emperor, sent to Tibet:

Formerly, the *hu* people [i.e. the Mongols] usurped authority in China. For over a hundred years caps and sandals were in reversed positions. Of all hearts, which did not give rise to anger? In recent years, the *hu* rulers lost hold of the government.... Your Tibetan state is located in the western lands. China is now united, but I am afraid that you have still not heard about this. Therefore this proclamation [is sent].<sup>3</sup>

Sperling goes on to write that this "first mission is acknowledged by Chinese records to have met with no success," and that necessitated the dispatching of a second mission.<sup>4</sup> In *Did the Early Ming Emperors Attempt to Implement a "Divide and Rule" Policy in Tibet?*<sup>5</sup> Sperling defies decades of conventional wisdom with a bold argument when he writes:

The Chinese court was never, in fact, able to mount a military expedition beyond the Sino-Tibetan frontier regions. This fact becomes strikingly obvious as one glances through both Tibetan and Chinese sources for the period in question.... Unable to protect its embassies or even to retaliate against attacks on them, China was hardly in a position to manifest the kind of power needed to implement a policy of "divide and rule" in Tibet.

For many Tibetans who care about seemingly inconsequential details of the murky Sino-Tibetan relations from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, a historical period that has become a domain of highly charged information battles between Dharamsala and Beijing, Sperling's writings are like a constellation of bright lamps illuminating the tangled web of Sino-Tibetan history. He excavated critical pieces of Tibet's deep past from the forbidding archives of antiquity, arranged them in a coherent narrative, and virtually placed in our hands several centuries of our own history.

Elliot Sperling's academic stature would have allowed him to be an ivory tower intellectual. Instead, he chose to be a true ally of the Tibetan people and an unwavering champion of Tibetan freedom. While he studied with Taktser Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, he maintained lifelong friendships with the people he met in Dharamsala: Tashi Tsering (the preeminent Tibetan historian), Jamyang Norbu (the rebel intellectual and award-winning author), Peter Brown (the 'American Khampa' and a brother in the Tibetan struggle). Sperling joined many of us in the trenches of activism, always encouraging us to embark on bigger and bolder advocacy campaigns for Tibet. Speaking in his Bronx-accented Tibetan, he told us that if only Tibetans studied our history more seriously, we would be able to believe that Tibet will be free again.

A sharp and fearless critic of Beijing, Sperling neither minced his words nor censored his writings under fear of being banned from China. Even when he taught in Beijing for a semester, where he developed a close friendship with the Tibetan poet Woesser, he successfully avoided the trap of self-censorship that has neutered so many scholars in

our time.<sup>6</sup> While railing against Beijing's atrocities in Tibet, he managed to be critical of Dharamsala's excessively conciliatory stance toward Beijing.<sup>7</sup> His provocative critiques of the Tibetan leadership sometimes made us uncomfortable, but that was exactly the impact he was seeking as a teacher who cared deeply about Tibet: to awaken and educate us by pushing us into our discomfort zone.

"Having a teacher like Sperling was a bit like having access to a genius, a father, and some sort of *bodhi* all in one," says Sara Conrad, a doctoral student at Indiana University who studied with Sperling for many years. "A walking encyclopedia, I felt I could learn a lot just being near him—and he took every opportunity to teach me. I benefited learning from him about Tibet and Tibetan of course, but also about parenthood and morality, music and comedy. In terms of academia he told me I must be able to live with myself after I write, and therefore it is always best to be honest."

In recent years, Sperling took up the case of Ilham Tohti, the Uyghur intellectual sentenced to life imprisonment by Beijing. He played a key role in raising Tohti's profile as a prisoner of conscience, nominating him for human rights awards. He took Tohti's daughter, Jewher, under his wing and oversaw her wellbeing and education. In Jewher's own words, Elliot Sperling became "like a second father" to her. His friendship with Ilham Tohti and Jewher exemplified the compassion and generosity with which he treated everyone. Sure, he made his mark in this world as a scholar, but his monumental intellect was matched by his unbounded kindness, altruism, and humanity.

"Professor Sperling was the moral compass of Tibetan studies," said fellow historian Carole McGranahan at Sperling's March 11 memorial in New York. His untimely death has left an abyss in our hearts and a chasm in the world of Tibetology. Christophe Besuchet, a fellow activist, remarked that it is "as if a whole library had burned down." Even so, it is worth remembering that Sperling has already done far more than his fair share of good in the world, and he deserves a rest (or a break, if you consider it from a Buddhist perspective). In the course of 66 years, he lived multiple lifetimes—as a taxi driver, hippie, scholar, mentor, activist, father—each one more productive and meaningful than the last. He has engraved his spirit so deeply in the lives of so many of us that, in a way, he is still alive. And while one library has burned down, there are thousands of libraries where his words still live and breathe.

**Tenzin Dorjee** is a writer, activist, and a researcher at Tibet Action Institute. His monograph *The Tibetan Nonviolent Struggle: A Strategic and Historical Analysis* was published in 2015 by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. His writings have been published in various forums including *Global Post*, *Courier International*, *Tibetan Review*, *Tibet Times*, and the CNN blog. He is a regular commentator on Tibet-related issues for Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and Voice of Tibet. He served as the Executive Director of Students for a Free Tibet from 2009 to 2013. An earlier version of this obituary was published in the Huffington Post <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/remembering-elliott-sperling-personal-reflections-on\\_us\\_5899c990e4b0985224db59cb](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/remembering-elliott-sperling-personal-reflections-on_us_5899c990e4b0985224db59cb)>.

## Endnotes

1. MacArthur Foundation, <<https://www.macfound.org/fellows/236/>> (accessed 6 March 2017).
2. Roberto Vitali, "For Elliot from a Friend," *International Association for Tibetan Studies*. Also see *Trails of the Tibetan Tradition: Papers for Elliot Sperling*, edited by Roberto Vitali (Amnye Machen Institute: 2014).
3. Elliot Sperling, "5th Karmapa and Some Aspects of the Relationship Between Tibet and the Early Ming," in Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, eds., *Tibetans Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, Warminster, 1980 (published in translation as Shiboling, "Wushi Gamaba yiji Xizang he Mingchu de guanxi yaolue," in *Guowai Zangxue yanjiu yiwenti*, vol. 2, Lhasa, 1987), pp.279-289.
4. Ibid.
5. Elliot Sperling, "Divide and Rule Policy in Tibet," in Ernst Steinkellner, ed., *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History and Culture. Proceedings of the Csoma de Koros Symposium Held at Velm-Vienna, Austria, 13-19 September 1981, Vienna, 1983*, pp.339-356.
6. See Tsering Woeser, "A Chronicle of Elliot Sperling," in *Trails of the Tibetan Tradition: Papers for Elliot Sperling*, Roberto Vitali eds., (published by Amnye Machen Institute, 2014).
7. He has criticized the Dalai Lama's 'Middle Way Approach' to dealing with China as too conciliatory. See his article *Self-Delusion*, <[http://info-buddhism.com/Self-Delusion\\_Middle-Way-Approach\\_Dalai-Lama\\_Exile\\_CTA\\_Sperling.html#f1](http://info-buddhism.com/Self-Delusion_Middle-Way-Approach_Dalai-Lama_Exile_CTA_Sperling.html#f1)>.