Elliot Sperling

One of the world’s leading historians of Tibet and Tibet-China relations, a MacArthur Fellow, and a relentless advocate for human rights, Elliot Sperling is retiring from IU after 29 years on the faculty in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, seven of which he served as department chair.

Born and raised in New York City to a family that 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 movement only served to kindle in him a youthful idealism that was never extinguished. While in college, Elliot traveled widely. 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 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 changed 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 wrote his doctoral dissertation, *Early Ming Policy toward Tibet*, in 1983. The dissertation has been widely acknowledged as the most influential study on the subject.

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 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 has mentored numerous graduate students who pursue both academic and nonacademic careers all over the world.

In his research, based predominantly on original, primary sources in Tibetan and Chinese, Elliot has 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 has served on, consulted with, or directed numerous professional boards.

In his work, Elliot has been a judicious voice in increasingly less discerning times. He has censured (including during appearances in China) the Chinese government’s oppressive policies in Tibet. He has criticized the Dalai Lama and Tibet’s government-in-exile (also during appearances in India) for giving up on Tibetan independence and for their ignorance of China’s real positions. He has 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 has also been a champion of human rights. Most recently, his public engagement has been 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. Elliot has become one of the most outspoken individual voices arguing for Ilham Tohti’s innocence and release. This endeavor was not new for Elliot. He has served on the Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad for the U.S. Department of State (1996–99), and he has 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*.

Elliot’s departure from IU marks a loss of one of the jewels in the university’s crown.

Ron Sela