

# If the Sky Could Live Forever:

## In Memory of Xiong Bingming

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I heard that Mr. Xiong was in the hospital even before I had returned to Beijing. Three days after I arrived, Li Chuan, a friend of mine in Paris, told me on the phone that Mr. Xiong had passed away. I still remember how Li Chuan and I took a special trip just to visit him early last summer. He didn't live close to Paris, more than an hour by car. He was in good spirits that day. I remember we had tea, cakes, and a nice conversation. In the stillness of early afternoon, a pot of flowers blossomed intensely. Suddenly, he brought up aging and how to face death without fear. He said to die requires knowledge that everyone has to eventually learn, especially in your later years. Death must be treated seriously. He even wanted to start a new class in China so he could discuss these issues with students. He said all this with the calmness of a sage. I spontaneously recalled that face when I heard of his death.



All his friends in Paris called him "Mr. Xiong." Has the word "Mr." become overused lately? Interestingly, Chinese people overseas are more careful with their wording than people in China, especially in such a feminine city as Paris. So "Mr. Xiong" is a proper title, but it is more friendly than it would be to call him "Master" every time one refers to him.

I cannot remember exactly when we met. It must have been around the summer of 1987, when my family and I lived in Britain. We traveled around Paris during summer break. For me it was an unforgettable time, a poor time yet also

an idle one. I can still remember when we had a symposium in Mr. Xiong's wife's travel agency, which included the art critic Chen Laide, the sculptor Wang Keping, and Mr. Xiong himself. Later Wang Keping gave us a ride to visit Mr. Xiong. Back then, he lived in the suburbs of Paris. His studio was in his backyard, which was full of sculptures stacked in every which way. The thing that impressed me the most was an iron-clad crow and a bust of Lu Xun made up of multiple layers of cardboard. Keping told me he had been very active in the French art scene since the early 1950s and had won many awards in exhibitions in France as well as in the rest of Europe.

Later I learned that Mr. Xiong was not just a sculptor but also a poet, a calligrapher, a scholar, and a philosopher as well. Humble, indifferent to fame and wealth, he is the best combination of a traditional Chinese scholar and a liberal Western intellectual; one of a very few generalists still alive after the May Fourth Movement.<sup>1</sup> The term *generalist* refers to those who not only have extensive knowledge and profound scholarship in their own fields of study but possess a thorough understanding and a deep concern toward history and life in general. In contrast to the generalists, the so-called specialists are everywhere in today's society. Their fields become more and more specialized and their roads narrower by the day. The specialized knowledge they have acquired is simply used to make a living. Look at those technocrats who govern the world; they are the result of the expansion of specialists into the ruling class. From top to bottom, almost everyone is an expert, but no one has any spirit.



In the early 1990s, I lived in Paris for a while. After that I came back to visit often. However, Mr. Xiong and I didn't see each other often, especially after he moved away from Paris. His poor eyesight didn't allow him to drive, so he seldom came back to Paris. Last summer, he cordially invited me to stay with him for a few days of good conversation. In the end I was unable to go; the regret! Before he passed away, I always thought there would still be other opportunities to see him. In fact, life is like subtraction: getting together once means one less meeting left.



The spring before last, my father was hospitalized due to a serious illness. Mr. Xiong was so concerned that he called Mr. Yang Zhenning and asked him to arrange a trip for me to return to China.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Yang's and Mr. Xiong's families have been friends for generations. Both of their fathers were math professors at Tsinghua University. They were the same age and in the same class. This deep friendship has endured up to the present. At the time I was teaching at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. I was lucky to know Mr. Yang and became his good friend. Feeling the weight of Mr. Xiong's expectations, Mr. Yang worked very hard on this ordeal. In the end I was allowed to go back to visit my father on his deathbed in Beijing. Mr. Xiong was always concerned about my trip to China and often asked me about my father. How can I even begin to say "thank you" for such compassion?

Because he lived far away, Mr. Xiong was always in a hurry, so we usually didn't have much time to talk. I seldom drank with him, just a few cups of light tea. Tea brings very different memories than alcohol—fresh and clear—just like his personality. Mr. Xiong was quite talkative. His style changed quite often too. He either walked on a narrow, winding path or wandered freely in the open sea. At one point, he politely criticized my poems. I then began to argue with him in a pretty disrespectful manner. He only replied with generous smiles. Another time, he asked me to read one of my recent poems to him. The ending was "if the sky could live forever." He said, with genuine feeling, that this line reminded him of the years of his

youth. At that moment, I did not understand how he made such a connection, but now I finally get it: that sentence harbors a paradoxical tension deep within, "It seems the sky in youth will never die." But the subjunctive mood questions its certainty. It is the confusion of adolescence.



In the last year of the last century, Mr. Xiong had a touring exhibition titled *Xiong Bingming's Art—Drift and Return* in Beijing, Shanghai, Kunming, Taipei, and Kaohsiung. It is a good title—I think Mr. Xiong came up with it himself. Just take a look at a chronology of his life, which resembles an itinerary punctuated by historical events, the chaos of wars, and internal struggles. He was born in Nanjing in 1922. His father, Xiong Qinglai, was a famous mathematician. His father went to teach at Tsinghua University in 1927, so his whole family followed him to Beijing. After the July 7th Incident of 1937, his family moved to Kunming.<sup>3</sup> After he graduated with a degree in philosophy from Southwest Associated University, he drifted farther and farther away, until he finally crossed the border. In 1947 he won a government scholarship to go to France and did not come back until 1972—a quarter-century later. By that point, his father had already become a casualty of the Cultural Revolution. Later he began to drift back toward China by holding exhibitions, teaching classes, and publishing books there. *Drift and Return*—this refers not only to space and time but to the journey of his heart as well. He recently said that even after living in France for more than fifty years, he saw no need to assimilate into French society. Mr. Xiong's French had reached perfection, yet he never wrote in French. I believe he holds his Chinese heritage deep within his bones. This pride accompanied him as he drifted away and accompanied him upon his return.

Mr. Xiong is gone. The world becomes bleaker still. Are we left alone to face a sky that has already died, in this time of indifferent, if highly efficient, bureaucracy? ■

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Translation from the Chinese  
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<sup>1</sup> The May Fourth Movement (五四運動) was a cultural and political movement that began on May 4, 1919, as both an anti-imperialist movement (in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles) and a challenge to traditional Confucianism as well [*translators' note*].

<sup>2</sup> Yang Zhenning won the 1957 Nobel Prize for his work in particle physics [*translators' note*].

<sup>3</sup> The July 7th incident refers to the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident" (盧溝橋事變) or battle between the Chinese Nationalist Army and the Japanese Army initiating the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) [*translators' note*].