Obituary

Prof. Xi Zezong 席泽宗

(1927-2008)

Professor Xi Zezong, an outstanding historian of science, astronomer and academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and former director of the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, passed away due to a brain haemorrhage on December 27, 2008, at 11:50 PM. He was 82.

Xi Zezong was born in 1927 in Yuanqu County, Shanxi. In 1951, he graduated from Zhongshan University’s Department of Astronomy. In 1957, he participated in the establishment of the Research Office of the History of Natural Sciences, the predecessor of the Institute for the History of Natural Science, where he served as director from 1983 to 1988. After having been selected as an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1991, he became a member of the International Academy of the History of Science in 1993 and a member of the International Eurasian Academy of Sciences in 1995. He also acted as President of the Chinese Society for the History of Science and Technology and a
member of the Steering Committee of the National Program for the Compilation of Ancient Books. He was also principal investigator for the Ministry of Science and Technology’s “95” program on the chronology of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties and vice director of the editorial committee of the Great Compendium of Chinese Culture led by the General Administration of Press and Publication. In 1955 Professor Xi published “A New Catalogue of Ancient Novae”. In cooperation with other scholars he also published the very influential “Ancient Novae Records of China, Korea and Japan and its Significance for Radio Astronomy”, which provided important historical evidence for research on the mechanism of star evolution and nova-supernovae. In the 1970s, Professor Xi finished a critical philological study on the excavated silk manuscript “Five Planets Divination of the Han Period”. He later systematically studied star charts, astrological texts and star poetry in the Dunhuang manuscripts and proposed many important ideas and insights concerning ancient Chinese cosmology. In 1981, Professor Xi published “Gan De and His Discovery of Jupiter’s Satellite, Two Thousand Years before Galileo”. Based on experimental observations, he demonstrated that it is possible that Gan De from the Warring States Period (403-221 BC) had observed Jupiter’s third moon with the naked eye.

Professor Xi Zezong was a founder and leading light in the field of Chinese history of science. He was also one of the establishers of the Institute for the History of Natural Science and participated in drafting the history of science program of the “National Science and Technology Twelve Years Long Term Plan”. In the endeavour to restore China’s proper place in the international history of science community, Professor Xi made a great contribution by representing the Chinese Society for the History of Science and Technology at the International Congress for the History of Science in 1981. As Director of the Institute for the History of Natural Science, Professor Xi was wholly devoted to the promotion of research on the history of science and technology, the training of future generations of scholars, and international academic exchange. In 1983, he became the first doctoral supervisor in the field of the history of Chinese astronomy. The establishment of history of science departments at Shanghai Jiaotong University and the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei, Anhui province, greatly benefitted from his support. In his last years he was still directing a research project on the “Compilation of the Astronomy and Calendar Section of the History of the Qing Dynasty”.

Professor Xi received a Ho Leung Ho Lee Foundation Advancement Prize for Science and Technology in 2000. In May 2001, as one of the leading scientists spearheading the “Chronology of Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties” project, he won a Prize for Significant Progress in Science and Technology, jointly issued by the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Finance, the State Planning Commission, and the State Economic Commission. Under his editorship, the “History of Science and Technology in China: Scientific Thought” obtained the second place in the third Guo Moruo Award for Chinese History in 2007. In the same year, the Nomination Committee for Small Celestial Bodies of the Interna-
tional Astronomical Union named a small planet after him in honour of his significant contributions in astronomical history research.

Professor Xi was meticulous and thorough in his research, and respectful of, and tolerant towards, academic opinions differing from his own. Kind, benevolent and high-minded, he was committed to academic pursuit, unaffected by fame and material gains, and devoted to public service.

Professor Xi inaugurated a new era in research in the history of science and technology in China and has influenced generations of scholars in this field. His achievements and virtues constitute an enduring monument in the history of science and technology in China.

Professor Xi will be long remembered by all of us!

The funeral service for Professor Xi was held at Babaoshan Funeral Parlour in Beijing at eleven o’clock on December 31, 2008.

Prof. Gao Jie
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