

Remembering Chunde Dai 1986-2010

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I learnt the tragic news from Professor Yongbo Xiao through visiting student Yifan Dou in the evening of Monday November 29, 2010. Earlier in the evening, Yongbo at Tsinghua was frantically calling around the world, trying to determine if the phone call from Chunde's roommate was a joke. Unfortunately, the news was true. Still I was not willing to accept it. Only a few weeks ago, Chunde and I met at Austin INFORMS conference and were making plans to visit Georgia Tech.

The day before the INFORMS conference that started on Sunday November 7, 2010, I received an email (the last one) from Chunde telling me that he would present a paper with René [Caldentey] at the conference and asking to meet with me. I was a little surprised by his email. Even though I learnt from Josh [Reed] and Mor [Armony] on several occasions about Chunde's impressive performance at Stern, I was not expecting any second year Ph.D. student would have research paper to present at this conference. Chunde and I met on Sunday afternoon. I learnt about his work and he graciously thanked my teaching at Tsinghua on optimal control of Brownian inventory models. He also requested to visit Georgia Tech for a few months. We agreed to make a detailed plan at a later time after some coordination with his advisors at Stern. I was looking forward to working with this exceptionally talented student, but this plan now could never be fulfilled. This turned out to be our last conversation. The next day, we ran into each other one more time. He passed Yongbo's greetings to me and, with big smiles, he walked away. This was the last time I saw him and that big smile will always be with me.

I know many friends cannot be here today. I would like to mention a particular group, the group of professors, students and friends at the Research Center for Contemporary Management (RCCM) in the School of Economics and Management of Tsinghua University. Although Chunde was a student in the department of automation, Chunde spent an important part of his Tsinghua life at this center, working with Professors Jian Chen and Yongbo Xiao. Chunde made many close friends there including Yifan Dou, Lei Guan, and Peng Wu. He joined the regular seminars there almost every week. According to Yongbo "He had showed great interest in academic research and was always ready to share his ideas with the speaker and other students. In my opinion, he was far more active than many of the Ph.D students."

I first met Chunde at Tsinghua in June 2008 when I was visiting School of Economics and Management. At that time, Chunde was a junior in the automation department, but he was thinking of doing a masters degree in operations management with Professor Chen. Although we did not interact much at that time, I soon learnt that he was a top student.

He always had some sharp questions to ask. When he learnt that doing a masters degree at Tsinghua is not a possibility, he decided to apply for top Ph.D. programs in U.S.

The following year, in June 2009, Chunde enrolled in a course that was co-taught by David Yao from Columbia and myself. Although the course was intended for Ph.D. students and June was the busiest time for a graduating senior, Chunde did very well in the course. I knew at that time he was looking forward to joining Stern Ph.D. program. That June, we interacted a lot; talking to him was a fun. One time, we talked about family tree. Chunde and I shared the same last name “Dai” , which is not a common name. We wondered if our two families could be related even though his was in Jiang Xi and mine was in Jiangsu. Eventually we concluded that there was no evidence supporting it.

Anyone who interacted with Chunde knows his kindness and generosity. In an email on Nov 29, 2008, exactly two years ago, Chunde and I exchanged Thanksgiving greetings. On January 1, 2009, I received his New Year greetings. On June 8, 2009, Chunde emailed, telling that he would be 45 minuts late for my class due to an exam. Upon arriving NYU, he told me that he was adjusting new life in US well and that it was really nice to talk to Professors Mor Armony and Rosh Reed. Quoting his email on Jan 2, 2010, “Dear Jim, I won’t forget your wonderful class in the past year. It’s really enjoyable and helpful. Thank you for your hard work and patience. Thank you for all you have done for me. Wishing you good health, good luck and much happiness throughout the year! Chunde.’’

It saddens me that I will not be able to receive another new year greetings from him. It saddens me that I lost a talented student, a future colleague, most importantly a dear friend. Chunde was and will always be special. I share the sorrow with friends, colleagues and Chunde’s family. But equally important, I share your pride in Chunde for his inspiration and kindness.

May Chunde rest in peace.