



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR TIBETAN STUDIES

For Elliot from a friend

It is with a profound sense of disbelief that I try to come to terms with the fact that Elliot is no more. Elliot, no one can even think that you are gone.

Grief is overwhelming. I find it painful to jot down these notes but, at the same time, I feel it is my duty to pay homage to a close friend who is no more. My apologies go to anyone who will read these notes for not sticking to an outline of facts in his life. My words will not be a sort of CV or a Wikipedia entry.

I vividly remember the first time Elliot and I met. He came close and began talking to me as if we had been friends forever. As if we had always known one another and shared pieces of life. The warmth of his approach overcame my innate shyness and I felt there was an instant empathy between us.

Elliot was mythical for his witty style. Everyone remembers how funny he was capable of being: his sense of humour was irresistible. He had a knack for talking about serious things in the most hilarious manner, but always with great respect and a capacity to find a human side to everything. Those who were intimate to him know all too well that he had an undercurrent of benevolence which made him indispensable.

His wish to see freedom for Tibet made him a valiant and uncompromising advocate of *rangzen*. He thought it was a matter of ethics to aspire to freedom for Tibet without conceding an inch to the Chinese. The declaration of Strasbourg was in his view a turning point that emptied the diaspora of its function and debased the moral approach of the Tibetan resistance against the oppressor. "No compromise" was his attitude throughout his life in which the Tibetan issue had a prominent part. One can go through his literary output to realise how much he dedicated himself to identify a way to repair the tragedy of the loss of the country.

To lead him into the depth of Tibetan culture and to an uncompromising dedication to the freedom of Tibet was his great master Taktser Rinpoche, His Holiness's elder brother who held a different view from the Dalai Lama on the destiny of their land. Elliot was a very close disciple of his and they stood side by side in the pursuit of their common dream.

His fluency in Chinese led him to have an encompassing vision of the Tibetan cause and its possible way-out by engaging the Chinese in order to understand the issue from all sides. When dealing with that, he used to put aside his proverbial sense of humour, taken as it was by the importance of the matter.

He extended his contributions to the cause by participating, from the '80s onwards until recently, in hearings of Governments, such as the American and the French, in order to advise on these nations' policies for Tibet.

His position was not exclusively intellectual. His heart burnt for the Tibetans and he had an immoderate passion for the cause many shared with him. Jamyang Norbu was his great pal, given the common goal: a future of freedom in Tibet. Peter Brown was his old friend from the early Dhassa days, when everything began and the sympathy for the Tibetans grew spontaneously in them.



His engagement in the promotion of the Tibetan cause was not second to anyone. He was assiduous in his care and concern for all his friends on the front line in the struggle for a free Tibet and anyone else's freedom. He always stood firmly by his people.

Almost daily he supported, sympathised with and encouraged Woser in Beijing to keep on standing on the side of matters where human dignity for the Tibetans and true values are respected.

During his visits to Beijing he came in contact with dissidents, not only those struggling for Tibet. This led him to become a second father to Jewher Ilham, the daughter of his jailed friend Ilham Tohti, who is serving a life sentence in a Chinese jail for the only reason that he advocates human rights for his Uighur people. He worked hard for his friend's ordeal to be recognised internationally.

His unsparing criticism of the CTA's policy was not always taken kindly by the officials. Perhaps it was not understood that his was an attempt to stimulate them in order to find a more pro-active stance towards the search for a new Tibet without Chinese control. This was suggested to him by both rational thinking and his love for the country and its people. His critical attitude was expressed with utmost honesty and integrity, and I wish his point of view to be understood now that he is no more.

Then there was Elliot the teacher. He followed and guided his students with all the passion and vision about their future that he was able to conceive. Mutual devotion linked Elliot and his students. He loved and cared for them. I know that his students bear the same unbearable pain I feel—this is not an over claim—now that they realise he is no more here to lend them support. The divide between a teacher and students was unknown to him for he had a special empathy for them.

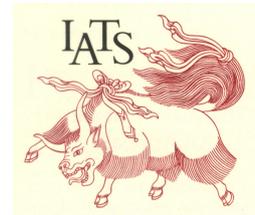
His classes were sheer enjoyment. It was culture with a sense of happiness. I used to accompany him and his beagle Sophia—she was always with him at the University—when I was a guest at his Department in Bloomington, and I waited for him to finish his class while reading or writing something I wished to. I could hear next door how delightful it was for his students to learn from him. Sophia was a story apart. She quietly attended to his classes for some solid eighteen years. I used to tease him by saying that she was his best student and a distinguished member of the Tibetological community.

He told me that Dan Martin used to listen to his classes with great intensity and to come out with stunning thinking. I don't hesitate to believe it was so. Yael Bentor, too, left a deep mark upon him owing to her brilliance and human disposition.

Elliot kept having close scholarly and friendship contacts with his students after they had defended their PhD dissertations. Most of them remained his steady friends. This was, for instance, the case of Federica Venturi and her family, with whom he entertained a close relationship.

Back again in his Bloomington days and from the outset of his long permanence at the local University he used to meet his friend Thubten Anyetsang at the latter's restaurant. It was a lasting friendship in front of a plate of momo.

His students enjoyed gathering at Elliot's beautiful house in Bloomington, built with ecological criterions, which was nestled within tree groves. Deers used to graze in its meadow and almost came inside. The students joined for evening gatherings that strengthened their camaraderie with their teacher. Gedun Rabsal was his Tibetan language assistant who nurtured an immense devotion for him. It was



hard for him when Elliot moved back to New York a few years ago and could no more stand by his side. I let you imagine what he is going through now.

So then there was Elliot the scholar. I shared with him the view that the studies should be carried out within the many mainstreams of Tibetan traditions and literature and that advancements should be pursued within those lines rather than attempting to superimpose western conceptual formulations upon them and use Tibetan culture as a container. Perhaps Elliot and I should be classified as traditionalists, but there is so much the Tibetan traditions and literature offer that is unimaginable at present.

Owing to his brilliant work since the early days of his career he was able to attract the respect and consideration of the doyens of the generation of scholars before his own. He soon became an established historian, the field of work he concentrated on. His writings will stay as milestones in the studies. His domain, as is well-known, were perspectives on Sino-Tibetan relations seen from both literary sides of these cultures.

Personally my favourite works of his are some of his Tibetological articles on the Tangut, including Tsa mi, and the 'Ba' rom pa. His learning gave his friends and colleagues—including me—the pleasure to discuss with him a wide range of topics on which he may have not written but of which he had remarkable mastery. He knew what he talked about.

Elliot's presentations were always well attended. I recall being impressed by the utmost reverence with which the organisers used to introduce him to the audience. On a personal dimension, besides common scholarly interests, seminars were occasions to meet, and we spent virtually all free time together and in the company of other friends.

His works on history were invariably based on original literary material. He always published the sources from which his elaborations were drawn. His friendship with Tashi Tsering went beyond their common love for Tibetan literature. Elliot had a veneration for this other great pal of his, and for Tashi's personality and knowledge.

Other individuals in the studies were special to him. From being one of his colleagues, Agata Bareja-Starzynska became one of his closest friends. She mattered very much to him. Ron Sela was his dear friend in Bloomington, with whom he shared many points on how the studies should be run. Ron and his wife's house was home to Elliot.

When he returned to New York—he was a proud New Yorker who grew up in the Bronx—and moved to Jackson Heights in Queens, where he felt at home, surrounded as he was by Tibetans, Sardars and Nepalis, Bollywood movies and music he loved so much, and bogus gurus advertising their services in the street, he was busy writing a book. Throughout his years of engagement as teacher and freedom fighter he never found enough mental space to write a book. One can see in his CV that he was a prolific author, but only after his recent retirement from the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Bloomington he began to write a monograph on *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*. He had great pleasure dedicating himself to this major opus but destiny has baffled him.



Thinking of his move to Queens, I found it extraordinary that he was able to arrange the huge library he had in the big Bloomington house into his tiny Jackson Heights apartment. Its walls were literally covered with shelves crowded with volumes without a square inch left empty. His large collection was neatly ordained in different section by topics. Recently he told me at the phone, with much chagrin, that the recent cash crisis in India would have prevented him from buying the latest publications issued in the sub continent when he would have joined his friends in Dharamshala.

McLeod Ganj was very important to him. He was supposed to come once again in March 2017 and everything was arranged for his arrival. Strangely enough every time he was on the way to Dhasa something unexpected happened to him. Either a *bandh* in Punjab obliged his train to wander to every small railway station in the region under a scorching heat before he could get off of it, or his bus left him down in the middle of nowhere. This gave him the opportunity to embellish those hassles into adventures peppered with hilarious details.

One of his favourite jokes was that he wanted to shoot a movie staged in Dhasa, with himself as its director, screenwriter and actor protagonist. Every time he talked about it he added some new incidents to the plot. Despite having heard him speak about his future movie a number of times, there was always something new that made it funny.

Thinking of our friendship and long association I decided to dedicate a Festschrift to him. I worked on it for two years, calling twenty-seven authors (and me) to contribute. People told me he must have come to know that a volume was being prepared for him. Others said that a surprise was essential to preserve the spirit of the enterprise. I was torn between whether to tell him or try to keep it a secret. When I finally called, for I wished him to come for a first release of the volume in Dhasa—a second one was held in New York for those who could not make it to the Himalayas—I played a trick on him in order to keep the real motive behind the invitation a secret. He fell for it. We kept on joking about the episode and he could never hide his delight that so many distinguished authors had worked with devotion for him.

In terms of the posts he held, besides having been a Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, Elliot was one of the senior most standing members of the IATS board. Perhaps the senior most. Throughout the decades he felt he had to contribute with work and ideas to the Association in the same way as he was a charismatic inspirer for the people of the *rangzen* movement. But he never wished to have the primary position in the Association. About IATS, his preference was that the next seminar should be convened in Prague so that he could spend the spare hours with a mug of good beer and talking ideas with friends and colleagues.

Before I write the final lines of this note my thoughts go to his daughter Coline, who he loved dearly without being an obsessive father, and to his second wife Mika Natif, with whom he had an extraordinarily mature relationship. I know that their sorrow is immense.

It's sadness all around the world. In Dhasa, New York and Bloomington ceremonies to mourn his passing have been held in the Tibetan community and its aficionados, and with the participation of local organisations.

I apologise to his many dear ones I may have forgotten to mention or do not know. I'm sure there are a lot of individuals who were important to him. I feel sorry for my negligence.



And, after all, there was Elliot the friend, another side of his personality with no less importance. It's hard to think for those who have been graced by his friendship that he is no more. We have to struggle hard to live up to his human and scholarly standard.

Be with us Elliot, wherever you have gone. We miss your humour, intelligence and humanity.

Roberto Vitali