

“Geshe” Su-Zhi Hsing (1916-2014)

Roger Croston

‘Master’ Su-Zhi Hsing, also known as Po You Hsing, Ven Bi-Song and in Tibetan as Losang Zhengzhu, whose death at 97 has just been made known, was one of only two Han Chinese to gain a “Geshe” Buddhist doctorate in Lhasa, Tibet. He spent eight years in Tibet and was in Lhasa in 1940 when the Dalai Lama was enthroned. On several occasions he was instrumental in diffusing serious tensions between Tibetans and Chinese. He once survived ‘barbarians’ armed with poison arrows on a great pilgrimage. Turning to a secular life, he was a successful headmaster of a primary school in Lhasa and made friendships with key Tibetan officials, lamas, aristocrats and the Dalai Lama’s family. His richly illustrated book published in 2003 in China, took scholars of Tibet by surprise as he had been in retreat late in life, almost forgotten. His recollections and photographs form a unique record of a Han Chinese who had great insight, sympathy and dedication to the final days of a still culturally mediæval Tibet in the mid 20th century.

Hsing was born into a Buddhist family in Gao-You County, near Nanking, Jiangsu Province, where his uncle was Abbot of Fa-Jing Monastery and his elder brother was Abbot of Chao-An Monastery in Zhenjiang. Aged 9, he was ordained as Ven Bi-Song in Yangzhou and began learning the “Confucian Four Books” and poetry, plus major and minor tenets and insight meditations of Buddhist traditions under the tutelage of leading Chinese ‘Master’ scholar-monks. A speech by the 13th Dalai Lama, related by an influential teacher, that the Tibetan “Middle Way” was worthy, gave Hsing an interest in Tibet. His encounter with Vajrayana teaching led him on a great westward journey in pursuit of ever-greater knowledge. In 1934, Hsing was accepted by the Han-Tibetan Institute of Buddhist Studies, Chungking, where he learned to speak Tibetan and a little English. His exceptional talent was quickly recognised and so he was ‘crammed’ in language studies, following which he began translating the deeper meanings of important Tibetan texts into Mandarin, of which some were widely published.

In 1937, Hsing was sponsored by the Chinese government to study in Tibet. His journey there was interrupted due to the premature death of

the 9th Panchen Lama in 1937. *“A great lama donated 5,000 Chinese dollars to me, so I bought a camera and prepared for my long journey. I needed a horse and yaks to transport my books and myself, but none were available, as, many months after the prelate’s passing, all had been drafted into a caravan to return his body to Tashilhunpo, his monastery, west of Lhasa. However, I got lucky in Kantze where a series of chance meetings led to a military officer accompanying the Panchen’s body, giving me animals.”* In Kantze, Hsing, with his translation skills, diplomacy and Buddhist knowledge, brokered a peace deal in a dispute that had become a protracted expensive burden to both Chinese and Tibetan sides. Travelling to Chamdo, he was well received by the Governor General, Surkhang [Surkhang senior, not to be confused with his son, also Surkhang, who became a government minister] who provided important letters of introduction (Chinese having been prohibited to travel to Tibet proper), and Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme, then a Tibetan military supply officer who, in 1950 as Governor of Kham, was instrumental in Tibet’s capitulation to the Red Army. *“In Chamdo, in summer, government officials held a great picnic banquet which lasted days. We played Mah-jong and listened to gramophones and I greatly enjoyed noodles made from refined Indian flour – much better than Tibetan stone-ground, which was full of sand.”*

After stopping in Derge for ten months to learn 200 empowerments and secret teachings, he crossed the Jinsha river into Tibet, spending two months on the northern trail to Lhasa, crossing high mountain tracts, deeply dissected by the headwaters of great Asian rivers, accompanied by two students. He arrived in the capital in August 1938, being admitted to Drepung monastery – ‘The Rice Heap’ - one of three great monasteries in Lhasa, under the name of Losang Zhengzhu. *“I needed a sponsor. The 13th Dalai Lama when visiting the Emperor in Peking had seen an orphaned boy from Lanzhou whom he took as a servant to Lhasa. He, Ngawang Gyaltzen Lama was now very senior and was my guarantor. Normally you had to make a large donation to the monastery to avoid heavy daily chores such as serving tea to hundreds of monks, I had little money, but he only requested a pot of yoghurt.”* Hsing’s teachers were masters of Buddhist learning and included Ling Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama’s senior tutor whom Hsing met once a week in the Potala Palace. There were great annual inter-college debates in Drepung, where Hsing’s deep knowledge of sacred texts often settled doctrinal disputes.

The child incarnate 14th Dalai Lama arrived at a special camp at Rigya, two miles east of Lhasa on 6th October 1939, to be greeted with

great ceremony by delegations from the Tibetan government and representatives from China, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Kashmir and Great Britain. On the third, final day of the camp, Hsing took a photograph of His Holiness seated on a dais after a "Pandita's Hat" had been placed on his head, with a camera hidden up the broad sleeve of his monk's robe, which was published in *The Times* [London] on 5th March 1940 [page 12]. The new Dalai Lama was enthroned on 22nd February 1940, [Hsing was not at the ceremony]. Over time, Hsing came to know the Dalai Lama's family and also made friends at the British Mission at the Dekyi Lingkha when they invited Chinese officials to tennis parties.

In 1944, Hsing made a pilgrimage to the great monasteries at Tashilhunpo and Sakya. *"I had no money, but was taken there by a noble in exchange for Buddhist teaching."* That year he became only the second Han known to have passed examination in the doctorate 'Lharamgpa Geshe' degree. Later in 1944, Hsing undertook a once in 12 years extreme pilgrimage - held in the 12 year cycle of the Year of the Monkey - to the sacred "Pure Crystal Mountain" of Dakpa Sheri (18,815 feet) in the Tsari district of southwest Tibet. The 94 mile, dangerous, life-threatening, clockwise circumambulation of the "Landscape Mandala of Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava" - if survived - was reputed to absolve all sins, including murder; lasted longer than 20 days. During it, the more than 20,000 pilgrims were attacked by the Loba 'barbarian' aboriginal people, armed with swords and poison arrows, at whose hands scores perished. Hsing survived being lost for days in bamboo jungle, *"we could not even see the sky"*, low, rotting food supplies, water shortages, biting insects, drenching rainstorms and tropical disease. He was the only Han Chinese ever to have survived the pilgrimage's rigours. *"The semi-naked tribes had no writing, no high culture, I was curious about them. They had to be paid big tributes in exchange to open a specially built 'symbolic ceremonial door' and for oaths not to attack us, but they cheated. At first, we had no fear, if we died, we gained great merit for the next incarnation. Nevertheless, I was still young and even though a Buddhist, I carried a revolver for protection because the more the tribesmen could kill, the more merit they would gain in their religious belief. Moreover, they were avenging wrongs and two deaths from 12 years earlier. The trail ran single-file through deep sub-tropical forested ravines - coming from cold mountains we were not used to the heat. Huge queues built up crossing narrow rickety bamboo bridges - some fell into the fast-flowing rivers and were swept away. We scrambled*

up slippery log ladders and slithered up slimy cliffs, often while Loba tribesmen would shoot poison arrows or roll boulders down at us. My Mongolian student got an arrow in the head, luckily not poisoned. I led a group of a hundred people and if I saw Loba hiding behind a tree, I would shoot into the air. I took a photograph of dozens of dead pilgrims lying in a river below me who had been knocked off a precarious ledge along which we scrambled, by the barbarians above us. Once, I passed a pilgrim still alive, whose four limbs had been hacked off. At night, they came to kill us, even killing families hiding in rivers. We saw the dead from both sides every day. Our 250 Khampa soldier bodyguards had rushed ahead and could not help anybody behind on that narrow trail. After ten days, we had no food and our clothes rotted; we had nowhere to sleep. It was 'a once and only' total ritual of a lifetime. Never so bad a place. No more! No more!"

After two months' recuperation in Lhasa, Hsing travelled with a bandit merchant's group for four months, south-west to Kunning, Yunnan, travelling 25 miles a day between pack animals' pastures. "We went slowly, crossing many high snowy mountains and every day, overhead, could see American warplanes flying "The Hump" from India. We crossed a major river, the Lantsang (Rdza Chu), sliding across on a long bamboo rope. It sometimes fatally broke - I had to drink wine to get enough courage! One day a group of 16 men armed with knives and guns lay in wait to kill the bandit trader who had murdered several of their friends. He was very scared and sent the servants another way, but asked me to go ahead because I was a Gelugpa Yellow Hat Buddhist which would protect me. If I did not go, he said I would be a Chinese with a small heart. This was very dangerous. Luckily, they mistook me for a "Rinpoche" - a high incarnate lama - and asked who was following. I said, "my servant". They failed to recognise him and slaughtered a yak for a feast. He said I saved his life that day. True!"

Hsing was en route to Chunking with a personal gift and letter from the Taktra Regent of Tibet to General Chiang-Kai-Shek who granted him an interview. In a desire to promote good relationships between China and Tibet, Chiang-Kai-Shek appointed Hsing headmaster of the new National Chinese Elementary School, Lhasa, and to a representative position in the Commission of Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs (re-established in Lhasa, 22nd March 1940, on the remnants of General Huang's mission of 1934 which was now represented only by a lone radio officer), as one of seven staff and the only fluent speaker of Tibetan. Under such circumstances, Hsing disrobed from holy orders, returning to Tibet in 1948. "The school had 300 pupils, funded by 100,000 Chinese dollars a year. Everyone sent their children

to me; it was so successful that the British school run by Mr Parker soon had no pupils and closed! Running the primary school were the happiest days of my life. I now had a salary which meant life was much better.” Having visited India for medical treatment in 1947, Hsing was invited by the Government of Nepal to view schools in Kathmandu, which much impressed him, which he hoped to replicate.

Before returning to Lhasa, as he was no longer a monk, his mother arranged his marriage to a neighbour, who was a poor orphan, “it worked out very well. We had four children - the first of whom I had to deliver in Lhasa as there was no doctor. They later grew up in America and made good professional careers. We were married 20 years, but she had had a divination of a short life, and died aged 37, in 1965. With my family, I had the Buddha’s blessing.” Later in America, after his children had left home, he took a second wife – a Chinese herbal doctor – as a companion.

In July 1949, with the threat of a Communist take over in China, the Tibetan Kashag government, falsely fearing possible embedded Communist agents, set a deadline for the expulsion of all Chinese officials and their families from Lhasa under the threat of force. Hsing was able to defuse the tension and negotiated a calm, safe, dignified exit, under Tibetan military protection to the Indian border. “I was just a monk, so all would listen to me. I asked the Tibetan Foreign Service to provide for safe passage to India or east to China. I knew for certain from my last visit to China that Communists would take over, but I had to keep quiet to allow a smooth exit for all of us.”

Having sojourned in Sikkim awhile, Hsing moved to Hong Kong in 1950 where he lived for ten years teaching and translating Tibetan Buddhist works, including “Graded Stages of the Path” by Tsongkhapa, which was widely published in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. To support his family, he took to trading truck tyres and quality British woollen cloth. “I liked Hong Kong because everyone was free and there were no taxes. I did not return to Mainland China because I knew nothing about Communism and I saw that my contemporaries from the Commission, fully loyal to China, who did return, suffered severely. I did not go to Taiwan as I would have had to compete with so many for a government job.”

Next, he was recruited by Dr T.V. Wylie, Dean of Eastern Languages at the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1959, to teach Tibetan and to work for the State Department as a special advisor on Tibetan Affairs. Hsing again met the Dalai Lama on the latter’s first visit to the USA in New Jersey, where he presented him with a copy of his translation of Tsongkhapa.

In 1987, he was invited by the Chinese government to an International Tibetology Conference in Peking, *“they wanted me to go to Lhasa, this was very important for them, but on reaching Chengdu I did not want to be exploited, so turned back to visit my family in Shanghai whom I had not seen since 1948.”* He also met Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme, whom he had known many years earlier. Later, in 1993 however, he did visit Lhasa, *“I liked the old fashioned Tibet, the Chinese had changed so much, I felt no good, so I stayed only two days.”*

In 2003, his memoir *“To Seek Buddhist Dharma in the Snow Land. An Oral History by a Han Chinese Lama.”* was published in Peking, in which he vividly describes his experiences as a Buddhist scholar and documents the historical, geographical and ethnographic events of his long journey. The book is an invaluable, neutral account of Chinese – Tibetan relationships of the 1930s and 40s, yet to be translated into English. *“I saw things from both sides, I wanted to take the stable Buddhist ‘middle way’ view. In the old Tibet everyone was only looking for money, both the monasteries and the nobles; nobody was caring for the country, nobody was much interested in politics. It was backward and nearly everyone was poor, the easterners were over-taxed and there was need of reform. However, the departure of the British who were great benefactors to Tibet, upon India’s independence in 1947 and the take over by the Chinese Communists in 1950, turned Tibet upside-down; otherwise, Tibet would be totally different today. Historically the Chinese have always wanted to be Tibet’s best patron, but too often they do things the wrong way.”*

Late in life he retreated to focus on religious practices, but still found time to translate Dharma texts and teach disciples into his late 90s and was working on accounts of his time in Sikkim and his pilgrimage to Tsari at the time of his death. His lifelong modesty and humility were constant as he applied himself to teaching the need of compassion to the benefit of all. Only with reluctance and reserve late in life did he grant a few interviews about his unique experiences on The Roof of the World. There was a minor earthquake near his home on the day of his passing.

Geshe Su-Zhi Hsing is survived by four children from his first marriage, his second wife and a stepdaughter, together with several dedicated disciples.

Born 19th November, 1916, Nanking, China.

Died 6th March 2014, aged 97, Rowland Heights, California, USA.